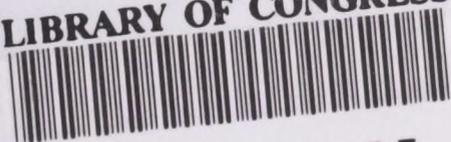


PHAROS

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PHAROS

ELLERY H. CLARK

Author of

“Loaded Dice,” “The Carlton Case,”

“If I ever did a man any good in their sense, of course it was something exceptional and insignificant compared with the good or evil I am constantly doing by being what I am.”

Thoreau.



RICHARD G. BADGER

The Gorham Press

BOSTON

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TO
V. M. C.

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PHAROS

CHAPTER I

THE NATIVES

THE year was nineteen hundred and seven; the month, November; the time, late afternoon. Daylight was fading; nightfall, like some stealthy shadow, came creeping in from sea. Yet in Bayport Harbor, all was bustle and excitement, for the herring, despaired of and long overdue, had struck at last.

Straight in from sea they came, on the sweep of the flooding tide; converging gradually from east and west, until at length, from the Spindle to Whitehead, the narrow depths of the channel gleamed suddenly alive with glitter and flash of silvery flame. By tens and hundreds and thousands the current bore them onward,

until the harbor's mouth was reached; there, again dividing, they dashed away in all directions, now out by the lobster cars, now to the right by the float stage and to the left by the wharves, now inland toward the cove. Behind them, a wake of swirling ripples marked their trail; while here and there, as the harbor shallowed, they broke the water, churning it to foam, or splashing it skyward, in glistening showers of feathery spray.

Over the whole aspect of the afternoon hovered something unrestful and vaguely menacing. The sun, now nearing the horizon, seemed to hang suspended, a motionless red disc, standing grimly out against the lowering lee set, fast gathering in the western sky. Around the edges of the harbor, the white cottages stood silent and still, each reflected to the very life in the smooth, clear mirror of the water's calm. From the steeple of the old church on the village green, the deep tones of the town clock, striking the hour of four, boomed inland toward the shadow of the Beechwoods, reverberating with solemn insistence; then sweeping

outboard, at length died away amid the mighty silences of the open sea. Yet as the echoes ceased, the smallest sounds still came to the ear with a distinctness portentous and unreal. The shrill voices of the children trooping out from school, the hammering of the carpenters, at work upon some distant barn, the monotonous, re-iterant *putt-putt-putt-putt-putt* of a belated power boat far out from shore—all spoke with a strength and significance beyond their own. From the hills above the village, a flicker's bold call, and the scream of a bluejay, came floating down, sharp and clear, from the shelter of the wooded slopes, where scarlet and gold were blended now to a somber russet brown; while here and there through the dropping leaves the dark green pines stood forth like faithful sentinels, giving mute warning that summer, her glory ended, was now at last, in one brief final battle, to be stripped and shorn of all her brave show of strength, before the first wild, whirling gusts of the great November gales.

Beyond the harbor, to the right, the brown of the marsh swept in a broad half moon toward

Southeast point, where the tall black spindle marked the channel's bank. Across, to the left, beyond the swiftly flowing eddies, loomed old Whitehead, huge and grim, towering sheer and stark, two hundred feet from sea-girt base to wind-swept pinnacle, looking far out over the broad blue waters of the Atlantic to where, along the distant horizon, sea and sky met together in a gray and brooding mist, seeming to beckon even as it repelled, to warn and yet to lure, with all the charm and mystery of the broad ocean's everlasting spell — the ancient, world-old longing — the mighty magic of the eternal sea.

Below the big rock, looking down, for some three miles to the eastward, and for an even greater distance along the shore, lay scattered the treacherous reefs which in years gone by had given to the coast its evil name for shipwreck and disaster. At high tide, scarcely a dozen or so of the largest would rear their massive heads above the sea, yet now, at the young flood, full forty of them showed from the westward down, like some brood of giant reptiles, creeping

stealthily forth, at the approach of night. Ugly and sinister, dark with floating kelp and clinging rockweed, they lurked there in the twilight; outposts difficult of conquest, guarding from the angry sea the mainland which lay beyond, rock-bound as well, but ever and again broken with long, peaceful stretches of marsh and meadow, and beaches of pebbles or of smooth white sand. And still, above them all, old Whitehead gazed out beyond the distant ledges, to where the great stone lighthouse reared itself from the sunken reef, taking up each night the task the wearied sun laid down, and flashing through the darkness, on its broad and luminous rays, its message of safety and good cheer, alike to ocean liner and hardy fisherman, to pilot boat and tug, to tramp and coaster, even to brave, adventurous little power boats, poised hovering on the crests of the huge Atlantic swell, careless of danger as the stormy petrels that skimmed and circled in their wake.

In by the float stage, Tom Nickerson, clad in oilskins, rubber boots and sou'wester, rose from

his seat in the stern of his dory, laid aside the dip net he had been mending, and with a shake of his big shoulders stretched himself leisurely to his full height, and stood erect, a brawny and stalwart figure, sweeping sky and sea with the keen glance of a critical and experienced eye.

“H’m,” he muttered at last, with questioning lip and wrinkled brow; then, raising his voice, he called, “Man’l — Joe — come up here! Let’s see what you make of things.”

Forthwith, his two mates emerged from the cabin. Both were dark and swarthy Portuguese; Manuel short, stout and smiling; Joe tall, thin and grave. Both were thorough seamen, renowned alike for their courage and their skill. Neither was given to boasting, either of past or future exploits, but seeing certain things before them, waiting to be done, they did them, simply, deftly, and without display; in every sense and meaning of the term, men of action, and not of words.

Each in turn swept the horizon, as Nickerson had done, hesitating long and discerningly in their study of ripple, swell and cloud. Man-

uel was the first to speak. "How's th' glass?" he asked.

"She's dropping," Nickerson answered; "been dropping ever since noon. Twenty-nine and eight-tenths, now."

Manuel shrugged his shoulders. "Looks easterly," he pronounced at length; "looks like we might have a rip-snorter from the no'th-east. Pretty quick, too. Ain't that right, Joe?"

Joe waved his hand toward the already darkening west. "Easterly," he assented; "that's what that lee set means. Easterly, sure. Hell of a blow."

Nickerson nodded. "That's what I thought," he said. "Guess we'd better get started, right away. How's the engine?"

"Goin' fine," Manuel answered; "fires first crack, every time. She never was goin' as good as now. But then—" he added, more cautiously, "I ain't braggin' none, at that. Engines is like women. You can't never be sure of 'em."

Joe grinned appreciatively, but Nickerson,

though he smiled, did so only out of compliment to Manuel's joke. For one woman, he reflected, he *could* be sure of; one woman would be true to him, through joy and sorrow, all his life long; and at the thought of her, he drew his watch from his pocket, and under pretense of seeking for the time, snapped it open, to look once more at the picture of the girl who smiled up at him, holding her baby in her arms. And as he gazed, suddenly, in place of the harbor, the boats, and the lowering sky, he saw, instead, the tiny, low-studded kitchen of his home, the mellow lamplight flooding the room, and at the window, the faces of his wife and of his baby boy, watching through the darkness for his return. With a quick catch of his breath, he thrust his time-piece back into his pocket, and half ashamed, turned quickly to his comrades. "How's the torch, Joe?" he asked.

"Oh, torch is all right," Joe answered. He spoke with confidence, for the preparation of the light which was to draw the bewildered herring in shoals about their bow, was something of a specialty with him. "Torch'll go,"

he repeated; "you don't have to worry none about that. If Man'l makes th' engine act as good as the torch does, he'll be doin' well."

"Then I guess we're ready," rejoined Nickerson; "engine's all right; torch is all right; and I've fixed the net as good as new. Which'll it be now, Man'l — harbor or channel?"

Manuel gazed thoughtfully out at the lobster cars, and the score of boats which lay grouped around them, waiting for darkness to fall. Two thirds of them were their own rivals from the village, the rest the big, high-bowed Italian dories, whose skippers, in some mysterious way, had learned of the coming of the herring, and had hastened down from the city, eager for their share of the spoils. The scene was a lively one; Americans, Irish and Portuguese, usually sufficiently concerned with their own rivalries, now joined in a common cause, and waging a good-natured battle of words with their bright-jerseyed, gesticulating invaders.

Even as they looked, old Frank Antoine, Manuel's father, still active and vigorous in spite of his seventy years, leaped on the house

of his dory, brandishing his dip net in pretended rage. "Jesu Christa Maria," he shrieked, "we no want you spoil our feesh. We no want you dagoes come. You getta to hell out o' here!"

Laughter, shouts of applause, and immediate and eloquent counter attack followed his words. Manuel gave Nickerson a shrewd glance.

"Harbor *looks* the best," he said slowly, "but those fellers'll stick to each other now, just out o' deviltry, an' that'll split up the fishing. Fifteen or twenty boats is all the harbor's going to stand, anyhow. We better take the channel, till the tide slacks, an' then, if we're lucky, we can out lights an' slip for town the first o' the bunch. Hey, Joe?"

Joe nodded in silence, and Nickerson, well aware of the value of their counsel, with a shove of his foot pushed the dory's head toward mid-stream. At the action, Joe, without a word, went forward, and Manuel dived down into the cabin.

"All right below?" called Tom.

“All right below,” echoed Manuel; “all clear?”

“All clear,” came the answer, “let her go,” and true to Manuel’s boast, at the first turn of the wheel, the engine caught quick and true, the propeller churned the shallow water into foam, and a moment later, forcing their way against the current of the stream, they had left the harbor behind.

And now the sun, though still clear of the horizon, had sunk below the line of trees which fringed the channel’s bank, and the mass of dull gray clouds, creeping in from the eastward, seemed to give promise that the interval between sunset and dark would be but of the briefest. Manuel, coming again on deck, stood gazing, now at the sky, now at the ever-blackening surface of the water. Suddenly, with quick decision, he turned to Nickerson. “All right,” he said, “light her up, Joe.”

Under the shelter of the house, Joe turned the torch upside down, until the wick was saturated and dripping with oil; then deftly lit a match, and in an instant the whole scene about

them was changed. The dim outline of shore and sea and sky was blotted out as one would snuff a candle, and all to be seen in the dazzling brilliance of the crackling flame, was the boat itself, and the black water, flecked with foam, streaming past, like a mill race, on either hand. Then fell silence, deep and unbroken, save for the steady, throbbing rhythm of the pulsing engine. Nickerson, at the tiller, peered tensely forward into the darkness, as he sought to follow each turn and twist of the narrow channel. Far up in the bow, Joe, feet braced like a rock against the curve of the house, stood motionless as a statue, holding the torch so that its light fell always full and clear upon the flying water. Manuel sat amidships, dip net in hand, crouched like a tiger for his spring, rigid and expectant; now and again, without turning his head, calling out to one or the other of his mates a sharp, quick word of command.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed. Then Nickerson, jamming his helm hard down, swung the dory in a wide half circle, and pointed her bow for home. Far ahead of them, like a

swarm of giant fire-flies, a score of gleaming lights flashed and floated in the gloom; and from the distance the shouts and cries of the fishermen came faintly to their ears. To themselves they seemed strangely outcast, isolated and forlorn. Just for a moment, Manuel straightened up, and rubbed his aching, smoke-blinded eyes with a stiffened hand. Then, with wrinkled forehead, he turned, and with the philosophy of the man of many successes, and many disappointments as well, gazed half humorously at Nickerson. "Damn," he said, simply and inclusively, and turned again to his task.

Part way back to the harbor, moody and depressed, they had made their way; when suddenly there came a half-imperceptible movement from Manuel, and on the instant Nickerson felt, rather than saw or knew, that the fish were near. Cautiously Manuel extended the net, plunged it deep into the water, and the next moment, as he dragged it inboard, the bottom of the boat gleamed suddenly alive with the silver of the leaping herring.

And then, and then only, the real work of

the night began. On and on they toiled, Manuel bailing until the cramped muscles in his sturdy arms failed him, and he was forced to give way to Joe, and Joe, in turn, to Nickerson. Steadily the dory settled deeper and deeper in the water, as their glittering cargo was piled higher and higher still. Always the torch flared, always the engine throbbed, and everywhere the glistening scales of the fish flew hither and thither, covering boat and fishermen alike, as with armor of silver mail.

Twice only did they pause from their toil. Once when Manuel, finding the torch harder and harder to control, and feeling the wind puff fresh and cool against his face, pointed for a moment to the eastward, where even in the blackness they could see the line of crested breakers driving in across the bay. "Breezing on! Breezing all the time!" he called, and the others, too spent for words, nodded in mute assent. Again, an hour later, a dim, black shape crossed their bow in the darkness, and for a moment the mellow chant of foreign voices struck pleasantly on their ears. Joe, crouched

in the stern, rose quickly to his feet. "Singin'," he observed; "them damned Eytalians are feelin' good. Got a load and bound for home."

Nickerson nodded. "They're lucky," he said; "it can't be more'n ten o'clock, now. Give us another hour, though, and we'll be after 'em."

Once more they fell to their task. Steadily, as the minutes passed, the work grew more and more difficult of accomplishment. The rising wind flared the torch like some flaming comet; even in the channel, the water grew rough and choppy, each new oncoming wave slapping more spitefully than the last against the dory's side. Once, half an hour later, they lost the fish altogether; then, with the turning of the tide, they found them again; and finally, at half past eleven, the boat was full, every inch of standing room chock-a-block and running over.

Through the darkness came a sudden hail, and a rough voice called, "Goin' to try it?"

"Bill Collier," said Nickerson, under his breath.

“Sure,” he shouted back, “guess we can make it, can’t we?”

A moment’s silence; then from Collier’s dory, “Don’t believe it. None o’ the others are goin’ to start. It’ll be pretty nasty outside. Better hold on till mornin’.”

With a downward sweep of his arm, Nickerson extinguished the hissing torch. “Here’s our chance,” he cried; “herring two and a half a barrel, and only one boat ahead of us. We’ve *got* to make it,” and with the word he put the dory’s head for the open sea.

Once fairly out of the channel, however, the veriest landsman could have seen at a glance that the night promised to be a wild one. Even though they were still protected from the full sweep of the waves by the shelter of Gull Ledge, the sea had a short, ugly chop; the wind, no longer coming in gusts, now blew steadily and with ever-increasing force; above them, the flying cloud-rack, sweeping straight in from the eastward, passed low overhead, and when the lighthouse flashed, the spot where each reef and ledge should have been, showed white in a

smother of churning foam and dashing spray.

Instinctively the three looked at one another. Joe raised his eyebrows. "Bad," he said shortly, with compressed lips. Manuel nodded. "Bad," he agreed, "but like as not they'll be three dollars a barrel in the morning, and they'll drop like a shot when the crowd gets in. What think, Tom?"

Once more, before replying, Nickerson glanced long and earnestly at the ragged skyline and the field of leaping white crests, springing up far to the northeast of them. He knew, as well as his mates, that a thirty foot dory is no ocean liner, and that twenty barrels of herring will never help her in her struggle to rise to that chance sea which may come roaring down, towering higher and higher as it gathers impetus, a solid wall of translucent green, with the white curl of foam above. All this he knew, and yet deep within him some strange feeling stirred, and remorselessly spurred him on. Not the thought of the money they would gain, welcome enough as the just reward of their toil, but something so

far deeper that he never stopped to analyze it, and would perhaps not have recognized it, if he had — the old, old spirit of his Norse forefathers, the ancient, elemental warfare of man the sailor, man the voyager, against the mighty anger of the cruel sea. His lips tightened, and his nostrils expanded like those of an animal; but when he spoke, it was quietly enough, and without bravado, as one who welcomes the fight, yet knows his foreman's worth. "We'll run her up under the point," he said, "stop at the shanty, and fill the tank; and then we'll head her nor'-nor'-west, and let her go."

Up under the lee of the point they made their way, until their bow grounded sharply against the slope of the steep pebble ridge. Dimly, a stone's throw up the beach, they could see the outline of Nickerson's home, and the skipper, relinquishing his hold on the tiller, made his way forward, and leaped ashore. As his feet struck the shingle of the beach, he turned. "I won't be but a minute," he called; "we'll feel safer with extra cans aboard.

Don't want to have our gasolene give out, no matter what happens," and an instant later, his form had vanished in the darkness.

Manuel turned to Joe. "I reckon 'tain't so much th' gasolene," he observed, "as wantin' to see how th' family's gettin' along. He ain't been home since noon." He paused, chuckling reminiscently. "An' that's the way it goes," he added. "I was like that onct, when I was married fust. An' my ol' woman, too; I believe she was wuss'n me. But nowadays — Gee, she wouldn't care if I *never* came back. Guess more'n likely she'd be glad of it. An' that's the way it goes."

"Yes, you're dead right, Man'l," Joe assented; "it's kind o' funny, ain't it? An' the same with the kids, too. What a lot a feller thinks o' the fust one. An' then, when they keep a comin' an' a comin', why, it seems like they'd eat you out o' house an' home, an' as if they actually wore their cloes through o' purpose. An' *fresh*, too. Soon as they start growin' up, they fergit all about their old dad, that used to walk 'em up an' down, nights, in

his bare feet, with nothin' but his ni'gown on; an' if you say anythin' to 'em they don't like, why, they'll up an' sass you, right to your face. Yes, sir, it's funny. You wait another three or four years, an' you won't find Tom worryin' so 'bout his family. Anyway, there's nothin' to be scared of to-night. The old man's home. Reckon he can take care o' Edie an' the kid."

At the mention of Jim Nickerson's name, Manuel, perhaps merely by coincidence, spat vigorously over the rail. "Hell!" he rejoined, "I reckon the old man could take care o' anythin'. Ain't he the cuss, though? As long as he kep' workin', he warn't so bad, but sence he got too old to fish, seems like he just naturally takes delight in rubbin' folks the wrong way. Sets an' reads them discouragin' ol' books o' his, an' then comes around an' explains to a feller how the Bible's all a lie, an' there ain't no Heaven, an' life's nothin' but a mean, miserable cheat. Actually, there ain't no standin' him. It's curious, too, ain't it, when you come to think of it, that Tom should be a son of his?"

“Certainly is,” Joe agreed; “Tom’s a good square feller, right through. He’s all for doin’ right by folks, Tom is. Kind o’ strange, though, how Edie come to marry him. I should sort o’ thought she’d a hitched up with some younger feller, ’stead o’ Tom.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Manuel rejoined, “he ain’t so old.”

“Well, maybe not,” retorted Joe, “but he ain’t so damn *young*, neither. I s’pose Tom’s thirty-five, anyway, an’ Edie ain’t a day more’n twenty. An’ that’s some difference, Man’l, now I can tell you.”

“Yes,” Manuel acknowledged, “I s’pose ’tis; but it don’t make no odds, Joe. If a feller an’ a girl loves each other, they’ll git along all right, an’ I reckon Tom an’ Edie married for love, an’ nothin’ else. Far as Tom’s concerned, I c’n answer for *him*, an’ I guess ’twas the same with the girl, too. Leastways,” he added humorously, “I’m mighty sure o’ one thing. She didn’t marry him for his money.”

“No,” Joe assented, “I reckon not; Tom ain’t got none too much cash. An’ still he’s

what you might call a risin' man, for all that. He'll be 'lected S'lectman, at March meetin', sure as shootin', an' you'll find lots o' folks'll tell you he won't stop there, neither. I guess Edie took all that into c'nsideration, when she married him. It's better to have a solid feller like Tom for a husband than one o' these young chaps that parts his hair in the middle, 'n' uses cologne, 'n's afraid o' dirtyin' his hands. Anyway, she didn't marry him for lack o' chances. I s'pose no girl on the shore ever had more beaus 'n she did. She's certainly handsome; there's no denyin' it."

"Yes, she's a pretty girl," Manuel answered, "a mighty pretty girl," and having thus exhausted the subject, they sat silent, with no sound to be heard about them save the lapping of the waves along the beach, the rushing wind, and the tumult of the storm.

In the meantime, Nickerson had reached the house, and closed the kitchen door behind him. The fire was still burning in the stove, his supper was ready for him on the table, but Edith herself had evidently grown tired of waiting,

for her chair was empty, the room deserted. Yet not quite deserted, either, for presently, from their basket behind the stove, two brown and white spaniel puppies crept sleepily forth, and with a great wagging of tails came whimpering across the floor to greet him. Nickerson stooped, picked them up, one in either hand, caressed them for a moment, and then gently put them down again. "Well, Emperor; well, Fluffy," he whispered, "late hours for small dogs. You better get to bed again," but the pups, now thoroughly awakened, shook themselves vigorously, and under a mistaken impression that it was morning, began to tumble hilariously about the floor.

Nickerson, looking back at them with a smile, made his way toward the bedroom. His wife roused herself sleepily to ask, "Did you have good luck?" then, as he bent to kiss her, she suddenly drew back. "Oh, *Tom*," she cried, "do get away from me. Why, you're dripping wet. Can't you remember to leave your things in the kitchen?"

Nickerson good-humoredly retreated to the

center of the room. "Haven't time to get dry, Edith," he responded, "an' 'twouldn't do me any good if I had. I'll be wetter'n this 'fore morning. We've got a load, an' bound to town with 'em. I'll be back to-morrow, sometime. Thought I'd stop and let you know."

Edith Nickerson nestled down again luxuriously among the pillows. "All right," she answered; "take care of yourself, Tom." But as she listened to the fury of the storm, she added quickly, "Ought you to try it? Isn't it blowing too hard to go?"

Nickerson smiled grimly. "Well, it ain't what you'd call *calm*," he answered, "but I guess we'll make it, somehow. I've got Man'l and Joe with me, so we ought to get by."

As he spoke, he started, as quietly as heavy boots and crackling oilskins would permit, toward the crib across the room. "Boy all right, Edith?" he asked.

"Yes, he's fine," she answered, "and he's so cunning, Tom. He had on his blue dress

to-day. And he was calling for 'daddy,' all the afternoon."

Nickerson had reached the side of the crib. A flash from the lighthouse, piercing the open window, dimly revealed the baby, fast asleep, one hand firmly grasping a battered white rabbit, with a faded pink ribbon about its neck, and one vacant and expressionless pink eye.

The fisherman stood in silence, looking down at his boy. Outside, the drunken wind shrieked, rioting; within, in strange and significant contrast, the clock in the corner ticked off the seconds, decorously and without haste; yet behind its seeming deliberation, veiling the steady, relentless tide of time, resistless and remorseless as the fate of man. Reluctantly, at length, Nickerson turned toward the door. The night without seemed colder now, harsher and more cruel. Wind and wave called to him, not as foemen, to be met on equal terms, but as masters, stern, imperious, exacting, not to be gainsayed. With a whispered good night

to his wife, and one swift backward glance across the room, he closed the door behind him, and went out.

As he re-entered the kitchen, he heard the steady creak — creak — creak — of footsteps on the kitchen stairs. Something in the sound seemed to alarm him, for he stole forward, as noiselessly as possible, toward the outer door. Yet he was too late. Before he could reach it, Jim Nickerson's stooping figure, half dressed, candle in hand, rounded the turn in the stairway. "Tom!" he called commandingly, "Tom!" and as Nickerson, pretending not to hear, kept on his way, he cried angrily again, "Tom, you damn fool, hold still."

Nickerson turned. "What's the matter, Father?" he asked. "Can't stop now. I'm in a hurry."

"Hurry!" the old man repeated with contempt, putting down the candle on the table, "Yes, hurry to git drowned. Hurry to come home with yer ears full o' sand. That's what you're in a hurry for. You take off your things, an' git to bed. She's a blowin' great

guns. I never see an easterly come up quicker in my life. There, listen to her —”

A savage gust, as he spoke, howled vengefully about the house, but Tom only answered, “Don’t you worry, Father. It’s all right. We can make it,” and before the old man could prevent him, he went hastily forth into the darkness and the storm.

For a moment, Jim Nickerson hesitated. Then, realizing that his protest had been vain, he pulled a chair up to the window, and sat down, a pathetic and incongruous figure, in his scanty attire, his long white beard sweeping to his waist, muttering anxiously to himself with the impotent solicitude of old age. Presently the puppies came across to him, whimpering for attention; and not unkindly he stooped and lifted them on his knee. “She’s a cat,” he muttered, half to himself, half to the dogs, as his eye swept the whitening bay; “that’s what she is — a big cat — ugly an’ treacherous an’ fierce. There’s times she’ll be quiet; times she’ll purr, like, jus’ to fool yer; an’ there’s other times, like to-night, when she’ll spit an’ snarl

an' fight. An' she'll git yer, too, 'fore she's done. You stick to her long enough, an' one way or another, she'll git yer, sure as Fate. An' you can bet on that, every dollar you own."

The dogs, as if mindful of his warning, peered forth into the blackness with wondering, half-human glances; then, as if feeling safe in the shelter of their home, they curled up contentedly, and went to sleep. But the old man still sat watching, until he heard the rattle of the pebbles underneath the scraping bow, and saw, in the dim, murky flashes from the lighthouse, the dory's dark shape rise and fall, rise and fall, to the rhythm of the heaving seas. And it was not until long after the boat had disappeared, that he at last arose, and still listening to the spiteful howling of the wind, and the roaring of the angry sea, slowly remounted the creaking stairs.

Meanwhile, once clear of the beach, the *Edith Nickerson* made her way easily enough out by Whitehead, and past Sutton Rock Hole; then, against an ever roughening

sea, she fought her way, more slowly and with increasing effort, toward the point of Black Ledge. Once, off the Buckthornes, the wind seemed suddenly to increase, and Nickerson, hesitating for an instant, turned once more to Manuel. "What think?" he cried again.

Manuel shrugged his broad shoulders. "'Tween the Hardings an' the light," he shouted back; "that's all I'm worryin' 'bout. It'll be hell out there; that's where you might catch one big sea would settle the argument quick. How you figure it, Joe?"

On the instant, before Joe could answer, a big black shape seemed to rear itself suddenly out of the darkness, crashing by them to the northeast, not a dozen lengths away. Two men were bailing, while a third, bare-headed, his lank black hair plastered about his face, peered at them over the rail. He raised one warning hand in air as the dory swept by. "No good," he shouted; "no good; too rough," and in another moment they were lost to sight.

Joe turned. "Ain't singin' as much as they were," he observed, and said no more.

Nickerson, at the helm, with infinite skill and patience, nursed the dory along. "We can make it," he cried; "we'll be the only boat in."

Neither of the others gainsayed him, but in answer a big white-crested sea bore gaily down upon them, splashing half a dozen buckets of water among their shining cargo. Nickerson dashed the spray from his eyes. "We can make it," he said doggedly again, and held the dory on her course.

And dogged courage, indeed, was needed in that next hour; and endurance as well. Cold, cramped, and in spite of their oil-clothes, wet to the skin, they held her straight for the beacon on Green Island point, and nobly and well that night did the *Edith Nickerson* bear herself. Steadily the pulsing engine hummed its song; steadily the long, high bow managed somehow to clear sea after sea; steadily Bayport fell further and further behind, and the light on Green Island drew nearer and nearer still — and then, midway between the Hardings and the beacon, Manuel's prophecy of the chance comber came true. All at once, they

seemed to linger overlong in the trough of a big sea, in a momentary serenity which threatened vaguely with its very calm; then sudden and sharp came Manuel's warning cry, "Head her up! Head her up!" and huge and black and grim, towering higher and higher until for a moment they seemed to lie at the very base of some great mountain, silently, smoothly, the monster wave bore down. For one agonized moment the dory lay there, motionless, helpless, in the mighty ocean valley. God! Would she never rise? There — there at length she started; up — up — up — but never fast enough to stem the cruel, treacherous speed of the advancing sea. All too soon came the moment of impact. Crash! The dory, as if alive, with one final desperate effort seemed to leap straight into the air, her bow pointed toward the heavens, and then — a deafening roar, a whirl of black water and curling foam and flying spray — and the huge wave hurtled past, leaving behind it a crew half stunned, half blinded, bailing for their very lives, but still afloat, and with the *Edith Nickerson* once more

staggering gallantly onward — trembling, beaten, buffeted — but safe.

It was a quarter of an hour later when they weathered the point, and with comfort succeeding to danger, and with water calming at every revolution of the wheel, bore away to the westward, with shrieking tempest and crashing sea thundering in vain behind. It was three o'clock in the morning when they tied up at the wharf, and half-past three when they began their attack on the coffee and doughnuts in Leary's all-night eating house. It was five o'clock when the doors of the fish market were thrown open; it was seven when the last of the herring had been transferred from the dory's hold; and it was shortly after nine when, with a dying sea and wind, and some rays of sunlight filtering through the rifts in the broken clouds, Nickerson threw on the switch, and started the engine for the long journey home.

All three were weary and sleepy, but happy as well, for their fish had sold for a price even better than they had hoped for. Joe stretched himself contentedly on the deck. "Well, we

done well," he observed; "the old boat certainly acted fine."

Manuel yawned. "Yes, we made good money," he agreed, "but damned if we didn't earn it, all right. This fishin's a hard game, an' don't you forget it. Ain't that so, Tom?"

For a moment or two, Nickerson did not reply. He too had been thinking of the night's adventures, but from a different view-point. They had summoned all their skill and experience to their aid, had braved the anger of the storm — and they had won. And when he answered, it was something of all this that he strove to put into his words. "Yes," he said slowly, "it's hard work, all right, but so's most things, I guess, that amounts to much. The old man was readin' me out o' one of his books t'other day —"

But Manuel promptly interrupted him. "Oh, for God's sake," he cried, "don't tell us nothin' 'bout what the old man's been readin'. Jus' look at that; the sun's goin' in already. You'll spoil the whole trip yet, if you ain't careful."

But Nickerson persisted. "Oh, well," he said defensively, "the old man don't read all discouragin' books. He reads nice ones, too. That is," he added honestly, "sometimes he does. He gets 'em out by mistake, I reckon. But anyway, this was a real good one. Wrote by a feller named Stevens, I think it was — Robert L. Stevens, if I ain't mistook. An' he said 'twas his idea that a feller's work was the principal thing to the whole business — it warn't so much what he got out of it as 'twas his doin' his very damndest at the thing he happened to be pluggin' at. I thought 'twas a real good, comfortin' kind of an idea."

But the others shook their heads. "Well, I call it a punk idea," said Joe, with decision. "A feller that would want to work, jus' for the sake o' workin', would be a hell of a feller. They got special places for folks like that."

"Yes," Manuel agreed, "a man that works when he don't have to is a fool. I wisht I had a half million dollars. I'd show you fellers how much I thought o' workin' then. Still, we got to keep at it. But if they'd only run

that 'lectric road through town, an' set the stock to boomin', 'twould help us out considerable. When you git to be S'lectman, Tom, maybe you c'n do somethin' to fetch it here."

Nickerson shook his head. "Well, I'm not elected yet," he answered, "an' even if I was, I don't believe there'd be a chance to do much. They say Greenfield's got the road cinched. And anyway, Man'l, you're wrong about the money part of it. You wouldn't be any better off with a half a million dollars than you are now."

Manuel grunted vigorously. "Like ducks I wouldn't," he retorted, and Joe laughed aloud. "I love to work," he parodied, "but oh, you greenbacks. No, no, Tommy, money's what we're after, the whole of us. And you know it as well as we do."

But Nickerson, outvoted, remained unconvinced. He was thinking of his wife, and of a little boy in a blue dress who watched at the window and called for "daddy." He was thinking of his gear, his nets, his line of traps. He was making an honest living; the dollars

were piling up slowly in the bank; and behold, he was content. "Doin' your damnedest at what you're pluggin' at," he repeated, "I call that kind of a nice, comfortin' idea," and as he spoke the sun, for the first time that day, blazed bravely forth from behind the fast scattering clouds. And home lay now but two short hours away, and all was well.

CHAPTER II

THE SUMMER COLONY

MRS. WILLIAM MORTIMER, whose mother was a Russell, of Philadelphia, sat enthroned behind the punch bowl, on the Country Club veranda. She was the leader of Bayport's summer colony, haughty of manner, chilly of demeanor; yet for the time being, she had so far unbent as to be verging on a mood distinctly affable, almost polite.

The reasons for her satisfaction were three in number. In the first place, she was conscious that she was looking her best. She was tall and dark, and to the taste of those who deem it impossible to have too much of a good thing, most prepossessing in appearance. Her gown, though it fitted her somewhat too closely for comfort, was a recent importation; ultra

fashionable, extremely expensive, and really so becoming that the suffering it cost her seemed hardly more than a kind of pleasant martyrdom, to be borne not only smilingly, but gratefully as well.

Next, after the glories of her dress, she had been able, by a revolution of fashion, to wear for the first time in many years a necklace and earrings of coral, rescued from long retirement at the bottom of her jewel case, and belonging, in days gone by, to her mother, who had been a Russell, of Philadelphia.

And finally, as a crowning pleasure, Mrs. Mortimer was graciously satisfied with the afternoon itself. She was, to be sure, a "religious" woman, a regular attendant at church, at the village guild and the sewing circle, yet for all that she had a firm conviction that the beauty of the day was not owing wholly to the favor of Heaven, but was due in part to the fact that she herself had chosen it for the giving of the tea. She felt, in short, a pleasant sense of joint responsibility, as if her own ideas of weather, and the Almighty's, had merely

chanced, with perfect propriety, exactly to coincide.

If such, indeed, were the case, the taste of either could scarcely have been impeached. The afternoon, though the month was November, was warm, with the languorous warmth of Indian summer; and the waning sunlight fell pleasantly on the low, square clubhouse, perched on the summit of a slope of rising ground, and looking far off down the valley, over the rolling green of the links. Pleasantly, too, it fell on the little army of carriages and motors, waiting to bear home the patrons of the tea; and softly and with sympathy it fell on the figure of good old Colonel Nettleton, kindest and most unfortunate of golfers, wearily playing thirteen — or fourteen, he had forgotten which — out of the big bunker at the foot of hope-deferred hill, on the long sixteenth. Dame Nature had surely done her best, and was doubtless quite repaid by the bland appreciation of Mrs. Mortimer.

The tea itself — for a golf tea, of course — had been remarkably successful, though Mrs.

Mortimer had long ago made up her mind that an affair of this sort was one of those things which could not be properly "done." To begin with, at least half the girls in Bayport were foolish enough to want to play a round before coming in to tea, and the result, in the way of flushed cheeks and tumbled hair, was something which Mrs. Mortimer had often described, with some heat, as "simply disgusting." And while this was bad enough, the case of the men was still worse; for these benighted creatures, almost as a unit, chose to regard the tea merely as a minor incident in the afternoon's play; and to have them dash thirstily toward the piazza, between rounds, sleeves rolled to the elbow, clubs in hand, and if the day chanced to be warm, even vulgarly perspiring, like so many laborers, was a sight which never failed to rouse Mrs. Mortimer's ire.

And thus, for any hostess with a decent regard for good form, it was evident that the giving of a golf tea in Bayport was a task to be approached with caution; yet on this special afternoon, Mrs. Mortimer had moved Heaven

and earth to make the affair a success, and the result had been a triumph. To begin with, Mrs. "Jeff" Wyndham, and Kitty Hastings had poured, officiating with that professional cordiality which deceives no one, yet which is none the less essential, if the occasion is to go down in social history as "*simply wonderful*" or "*an awfully jolly time.*" Of more importance still, fully three-quarters of the girls, at Mrs. Mortimer's urgent bidding, had come dressed in their best, and fearing temptation, had not allowed their eyes to wander even as far as the first teeing-ground. Many of the younger men, in turn, taken vigorously in hand by the ladies, had also appeared in proper raiment, and had stood about with a certain gloomy resignation, gorging tea and lemonade, sandwiches and cake, as if they felt, by doing so, that they were somehow helping to revenge themselves upon their hostess. The older men, to be sure, by this time hardened and reckless offenders, had for the most part stayed away altogether, but this perhaps really rather helped than hindered the general appearance of things, and if

their course of conduct was satisfactory to themselves, it was doubtless still more so to Mrs. Mortimer.

Not for an instant, however, must it be imagined that the good lady was unduly elated by the manner in which the tea had progressed. Victory in this direction, as in everything else she undertook, she had become accustomed to regard merely as her due. Nor was this, indeed, greatly to be wondered at, in view of the fact that her husband was Mr. William Mortimer, of railroad fame. Mr. Mortimer was one of those venturesome mortals who dare to soar dizzily in the realms of modern high finance, and after a career of varied ups and downs, he had at last "made good" in earnest. In seven years he had accumulated seven millions, and it had not taken Mrs. Mortimer seven weeks to accustom herself to the idea that the world was very much honored by the presence of herself and her husband, and that their triumphs in every department of life were to be regarded as perfectly natural phenomena, at

which no one had the slightest reason to feel surprised; merely, in fact, as a kind of fair and equitable *quid pro quo*. Thus, the beauty of the day was one fractional part of this equivalent, the success of the tea was another, and in addition, her son Robert, and her daughter-in-law, who before her marriage had been Mary Harmon, of Brooklawn, had reached the final round of the November mixed foursomes. Billy Whitfield and Dorothy Lawrence were their antagonists, but Robert and Mary were the favorites, and Mrs. Mortimer felt that a family victory would now bring her day to a most pleasant and fitting close.

Just at the moment, however, the result of the game was in doubt. Over beyond the valley, a quarter of a mile away, the players and their attendant "gallery" were making their way from the green of the short seventeenth over to the eighteenth tee. At the sixteenth, the Mortimers had been one up, but on the seventeenth Whitfield had driven a hundred and ninety yards to the green, and Mortimer, in

an endeavor to do likewise, had topped his ball into the swamp; and thus they came all even to the eighteenth.

No other hole on the course furnished a fairer test of good golf. Starting from the low rock which served as a natural teeing-ground, a tangle of briars extended for fifty yards or more, a just, but most uncomfortable resting place for a topped drive. Next came a stretch of splendid turf, with no chance for anything but a perfect lie, and thence the ground sloped downward to a brook, guarded by a strip of marsh, rose for an equal distance on the further side, crossed another swampy depression, and ended, directly in front of the clubhouse, on the big eighteenth green. An undulating four hundred yard hole, made up of three hills and two valleys; after the first hundred and fifty yards inclining to be narrow, with woods to the left, and to the right, rocks and a ravine. Well satisfied the man who made it in five strokes, and justly proud the hero who made it in four.

Dorothy Lawrence, bare headed, slender and

graceful, looking extremely pretty, and in her short golf skirt and crimson sweater, exceedingly business-like as well, teed her ball with care, pushed back her dark hair from her flushed cheeks, and coolly enough made ready to drive. Her swing, perhaps, was a trifle quick, the swing that is apt to denote a nervous temperament, yet if this were so, her follow through was none the less most workmanlike and clean. Crack! The club met the ball as squarely as a die, and sent it skimming, low and on the line, fairly over the brow of the hill. She stepped back, and Whitfield, with a smile on his round, chubby face, hastened, in dumb show, to applaud her shot.

Immediately Mary Mortimer stepped forward in her turn. Compared with her adversary, she appeared pale, petite, almost doll like, with much of a doll's too flawless prettiness of feature. Her manner, as she addressed the ball, seemed to show something of apprehension — a feeling, indeed, well justified, with her husband standing beside the tee, gazing at her with the customary scowl on his black brows. A

bad drive at this crisis in the game would inevitably be followed by a scene; that she knew only too well; and it was doubtless the thought of Robert and his temper which now caused his wife partly to top her drive, her stroke just managing to clear the brambles, and stopping well short of the brow of the hill.

As Mortimer neared the ball, however, his mutterings ceased, his eyebrows straightened, and he even condescended a smile. It had stopped, by mere chance, on the top of a little hillock of wiry grass, as perfect a lie as golfer could desire; and at the sight, Mortimer, suddenly put into excellent humor, gave a sigh of anticipation. The topped drive on the seventeenth still rankled in his soul. "I'm going," he said softly to his wife, "to knock the everlasting stuffing out of that damned ball," and Mary Mortimer nodded, only whispering warningly, "Don't press, Bob; that's all."

And this, indeed, Mortimer did not do. His stroke was true and clean in every way, save that somehow he managed to stand the fraction of an inch too near his ball, and caught it,

in consequence, just that same fraction too near the heel of his club. Of the length of his shot there could be no question. Amid a little chorus of "ohs" and "ahs" from the gallery, it started low and straight, like a rifle ball; then, midway in its course, began to curve to the left, at first gradually, then more and more quickly; and finally, as it struck the hill beyond the brook, on the one bound which might have saved it had it come to the right, it kicked perversely still further to the left, and to the accompaniment of a hearty curse from the angry Mortimer, disappeared in the tangled underbrush on the outskirts of the wood.

Billy Whitfield managed to stifle the involuntary exclamation which rose to his lips, and though his eyes told a far different story, he contrived, when he spoke, to throw into his voice just the right amount of friendly sympathy. "Oh, too bad," he condoled; "tough luck, old man; the hardest ever; that's a shame."

His opponent's lips tightened, and his brows contracted. The Mortimer temper was coming to the fore. "Oh, go to hell," he muttered,

none too guardedly, and hurried on ahead to join in the search.

Jauntily and complacently, Whitfield in his turn made ready to play. His ball lay on the side hill, in something of a hanging lie, yet good enough to make him hesitate for a moment between the choice of brassie or midiron. His partner, observing him, spoke impulsively. "Oh, Billy," she cried, "not your brassie — now. Take your iron, and play safe. That's the only thing to do."

The remark was just enough to bring Whitfield to a decision. He pushed his iron back into the bag, and with a grin of pleasure at venturing on a shot which the laws of good golf really forbade, drew forth his brassie in its stead. "Right on the green," he said challengingly, and the words brought with them the retribution they merited; for at once his mental vision became fixed on the far off hole, and the imaginary ball rolling smoothly down toward the imaginary flag, with the inevitable result that an instant later the real ball was lost for a moment in a shower of dirt and flying turf,

shortly to be revealed some twenty yards away, hanging desperately to the very edge of the brook. From the top of the hill Mortimer laughed gratingly, making a trumpet of his hands. "Oh, too bad, Billy," he mocked; "hardest kind, you know. Guess an iron would have been the thing. Too bad, old man, too bad."

Whitfield did not vouchsafe a reply. To Dorothy he said penitently, "I'm awfully sorry."

The girl looked at him without reproach, but without forgiveness. "Well, it can't be helped now," she said, "but the iron was the club, Billy, and you knew it," and forthwith taking her stand ankle deep in mud and water, she shortened her grip on her mashie, and sent the ball skimming up the hill, well out of danger, leaving Whitfield to play four, an iron shot from the green.

In the meantime, Mortimer and his wife, with their two caddies, were hunting vainly for their ball in the bushes that lined the course. Their opponents ascended the hill to aid in the

search, Whitfield, now in the happiest of humors, whistling cheerfully as he walked along. There were a number of reasons for his good nature. For one thing, he liked to beat Mortimer, and for another, he enjoyed having Dorothy Lawrence for a partner. Also, he coveted the handsome cup which he hoped to receive, a little later, from Mrs. Mortimer's reluctant hand; and last of all, with a selfish man's narrow breadth of view, he was glad of anything which contributed to the success or advancement, mental, spiritual, or material — with the accent on the material — of Mr. William Whitfield, Esquire. Thus so pleasant was his mood, that he was about to enliven the proceedings by attempting still further to rouse the Mortimer temper, when his adversary proceeded to give unmistakable signs that it was already sufficiently close to the boiling point. One of the caddies, tired by his all-day tramp, with a golf bag almost taller than himself over his bent little shoulders, had ceased his search for a moment, just as Mortimer happened to glance in his direction. Instantly the auto-

crat's brows contracted. "Get to work there, you young runt," he called roughly, hardly taking pains to moderate his voice, "or I'll have you fired off the links. Get to work now, and find that ball, or I'll know the reason why."

Dorothy overheard him. She was standing near the boy — in reality, he was scarcely more than a child — and as he turned to his task again, she saw his lip begin to quiver. "Robert," she called indignantly, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself. To talk that way to a little boy. I'd rather *give* you the match. I don't call that being manly a bit."

Mortimer, scowling savagely, made no reply. Whitfield, however, heard with dismay. He knew his partner's impulsive nature, and feared that she might do something to rob them of their victory. Also he had no fondness for scenes; and so walked over to her side. "Better not talk to Robert," he whispered; "you know what he's like, when he's mad," and then, with a kindness born of many different emotions, he called to the caddie, "Come

on with me, kid; we'll look over by the edge; maybe we've got in too far."

That he spoke the truth, and that the ball by any chance lay in the direction he had named, was probably the last thought in Whitfield's ingenious mind. Yet a moment later, as he glanced idly down at the ground, an unexpected, and most unwelcome sight met his eye. There, nearly under his feet, lay the ball, and worst of all, with the perversity of fate, it was neatly teed up on a little elevation of twigs, in a lie almost as good as if it had been out on the fair green. Whitfield looked cautiously about him. Mortimer and his wife were searching vainly in the depths of the wood; Dorothy Lawrence was far over to the right, near the clubhouse; between them, the caddie was slowly approaching, his interest in the hunt evidently at the lowest possible ebb. Very quietly Whitfield touched the ball with the toe of his boot, so that it rolled off into the mass of dead leaves and decaying vegetation. Then, pressing gently down on it with his foot, he sauntered over toward the caddie.

“Keep your eyes open now, kid,” he warned; “I think that ball’s right around here somewhere. If you find it, maybe Mr. Mortimer’ll be so pleased he’ll give you a dollar. So watch out.”

He chuckled to himself at his own joke. The idea of Bob Mortimer’s giving a dollar to anyone struck him as distinctly amusing. But on the boy, unacquainted with Mortimer and his peculiarities, the irony of the speech was lost. A dollar! The idea was all that his small head could contain at one time; and the thought of it, looming large and bright and round to the bigness of the full moon, once more spurred on his weary limbs, and made him forget the ache in his eyes, as very hopefully now he renewed his search. And then suddenly — wonder of wonders — there all at once the ball lay before him; Mortimer, muttering profanely to himself far back in the woods, heard a shrill cry, “Here it is, mister; I’ve got it,” and a moment later the four contestants stood grouped together about the ball.

“Pretty bum lie, old man,” said Whitfield

cheerfully; "still, you were mighty lucky to find it at all."

Mortimer, considering the problem, grunted abstractedly. "Here," he commanded at length, "take your niblick, Mary, and paste it straight out. Don't try for distance; knock it out at right angles; and whatever else you do, don't top it. Hit behind it, for Heaven's sake."

Mary Mortimer, with the calmness of despair, took her stand among briars and brambles, and with a kind of blind nervous energy — she confessed afterward to Dorothy that she had shut her eyes — she struck with all her strength behind the ball. A shower of leaves and mold darkened the air, but the heavy niblick cut cleanly through it all, and the ball, shooting out clear of trouble, and catching the slope of the hill to perfection, rolled slowly down and stopped at the bottom, just clear of the trap bunker to the left of the brook. Mortimer said nothing — praise of others, and especially of his wife, was something he did not believe in — but walked leisurely down the

hill, figured thoughtfully for a moment on slopes and angles, and then, with a low half iron, a favorite approach with him, rolled the ball neatly up to within ten feet of the flag.

Whitfield, viewing the two shots with extreme disgust, walked slowly up to his own ball. "Confound it all," he muttered under his breath, "that's always the trouble with me. I'm too easy-going altogether. Why didn't I put my foot on a little harder; I didn't know the ground was so soft. Or I could have kicked it under a bush, I suppose, if I'd thought. I'm a fool. There's such a thing as being *too* good-natured. It serves me right."

Eyeing the flag, whose top just showed beyond the hill, he hesitated for a moment between a half iron and a three-quarters mashie, finally decided on the latter, and hit a hard, clean ball, with a bit of turf along with it, high into the air. It looked good all the way, and falling practically dead, with scarcely a bound or kick, it lay still, a couple of feet nearer than their opponent's to the hole.

Whitfield drew a breath of relief. "There," he said, turning to his partner, "that's a little better. Now I guess it's up to you."

The girl nodded. "Playing the like, aren't we?" she answered, and walked quickly forward toward the green.

Down from the piazza flocked the attendants at the tea, Mrs. Mortimer herself sailing slowly and majestically along in the rear of the procession. Mary Mortimer, already nervous and dreading the presence of the crowd, instantly made up her mind to put, and have it over with. She took her stand, ran her eye along the line of her stroke, and had even drawn back her club, when all at once her husband's anxiety overcame him. "Don't put too quick," he cried, and the words effectually settled his wife's chances of successfully pulling off the shot. Straightening up, she looked at him with a gaze that needed no accompaniment of words. After that, even Mortimer knew enough to keep still. And then, as she once more made ready to play, someone in the crowd moved, and a long shadow quivered across

the green; someone else coughed nervously, and altogether the put, weak and uncertain, stopped a good foot short of the hole. Mortimer, fearing to meet his wife's further glance, felt a dread still greater when she turned away without so much as a look in his direction. At once, he foresaw what would happen later, and blustering bully though he was, he shivered at the thought of the scene which awaited him for that evening, in the privacy of their home.

In the meantime, Dorothy Lawrence had stepped quickly forward, and had played in her turn. Her stroke was a trifle hard, but the green, though fast, was true, and the ball, traveling at a speed that made it, as it reached the further side of the cup, first jump into the air, and then hang there for an anxious fraction of a second, dropped quietly into the hole. The game was won.

Then followed the pressing in of the crowd, the buzz of congratulations and commiserations, and then the adjournment to the clubhouse, where Mrs. Mortimer imposingly, if

not over enthusiastically, presented the winners with their cups. Ten minutes later the guests had departed, and Whitfield, coming out of the locker room a moment or so ahead of Mortimer, chanced upon the caddie, patiently waiting outside. Whitfield smiled at him benevolently. "Strike him for that dollar yet, kid?" he asked.

The boy, gazing solemnly back at him, shook his head. "No, sir," he answered; "I'm waitin' for him now."

"That's right," said Whitfield heartily; "he has it for you, I guess. He was so pleased you found the ball," and he passed quickly on, to get Dorothy's dogcart from the stable.

A moment or two later, Mortimer himself hastily emerged. The boy came forward to meet him. "Please, sir," he said, "were you goin' to give me a dollar?"

Mortimer found himself unable to believe his ears. "Give you *what?*" he demanded, his frown deepening as he glared wrathfully at the boy.

The caddie, though evidently staggered by the autocrat's manner, nevertheless stuck manfully to his guns. "A dollar," he repeated, "for findin' your ball up there in the woods. The other gentleman said —"

Mortimer's smoldering wrath burst suddenly and volcanically into flame. He made a quick step forward, almost as if he would have laid violent hands on the boy. "What do you mean, you young whelp?" he cried. "Get out of here, before I break your neck for you. Haven't you any sense —" and the boy, really terrified, turned and fled.

A few minutes later, Whitfield and Dorothy, bowling along in the dogcart through the woods, overtook a little figure, plodding along on his way toward home. The boy, stepping to one side to let them pass, at once recognized Whitfield. "Say, mister," he called, "he didn't give me no dollar. He got mad, too."

Whitfield turned as they sped by. "Too bad," he called back over his shoulder, in mock sympathy; "I thought he'd give it to you, sure. That's too bad."

Puzzled, Dorothy turned to him. "What did he say about a dollar, Billy?" she asked. "Wasn't that the caddie Robert was so horrid to?"

Whitfield chuckled. He rather prided himself on his sense of humor. "Yes, that's the boy," he answered. "I told him Bob would probably want to give him a dollar for finding his ball on the eighteenth; and the little fool believed me. I'd have given the dollar for a look at Bob's face, when he got it through his head what the boy was asking for. Oh, I guess it's been Bob's happy day, all right."

The girl's face clouded. "Oh, Billy," she said reproachfully, "I think that's mean. The poor little fellow. He must have been awfully disappointed."

But Whitfield hastened to reassure her. "Now don't you worry," he said easily; "he's only a caddie. He can stand it. They're a crowd of young robbers, the whole of 'em. He won't think of it again."

For a moment, the girl hesitated. Her purse was in her pocket, and a sudden impulse

prompted her to rein in the horse, wait until the boy overtook them, and give him his promised reward. But the hour was late, the horse was restive; she must be in time for dinner; and thus she finally allowed herself to be persuaded by Whitfield's words, and relaxed her hold on the reins. "Yes, they *are* cheats, aren't they?" she answered, though more to soothe her conscience than because she really believed what she was saying; "I don't suppose he does deserve it," and they swept on, at unchecked speed.

Behind them, through the gathering dusk, the caddie trudged along, revolving many things in his perplexed and puzzled brain. Something was surely wrong. He had been promised a dollar; he had found the ball which had been lost; and then, when he had asked for his reward, Mr. Mortimer had been angry, and had frightened him. Yet wherein he had offended, he could not see. And the more he thought of it, the lower his spirits grew, so that when he finally reached his home, and his mother asked him, as usual, "Did you have a

good day, dearie?" he only answered, "Yes, pretty good, Mother," ate his supper soberly, and afterward went to bed more soberly still, for of all trials to be met with in this life, the sense of injustice is perhaps the hardest to bear; and there are things of greater value than a dollar, even in a caddie's world.

CHAPTER III

BILLY WHITFIELD REVEALS THE EXISTENCE OF A MYSTERY

MEANWHILE, the high-stepping cob was carrying the dogcart along at a rattling pace, first leaving the woodpath behind, then, more slowly, following the wagon track across the fields, and finally, with a joyful whinny, swinging out into the freedom of the firm, straight country road. All at once, however, he slackened speed, stood motionless for a moment, and then leaped forward with such a sudden bound that Dorothy had hard work to keep her grip upon the reins. Behind them sounded a mad clatter of hoofs, and an instant later two riders dashed by, their horses stretched to racing speed; the woman slender, erect, well groomed; the man stout, red faced, "horsey" from cap to spur. Their pace was terrific, and presently a faint haze of

shimmering dust was all that remained to show where they had passed.

“Whe-e-e-w,” whistled Billy, “some class there, all right. Say, Dorothy, who was the beaut?”

Dorothy was gazing thoughtfully after the vanished riders, and when she answered, there was a trace of envy in her tone. “That was Sally Wyndham,” she said. “I never saw anyone like her. She does the — well, you know what I mean — the *queerest* things. Why, she’s really almost — well, you know — she isn’t quite what you’d call — oh, you understand what I mean, Billy. And yet she goes with the very *niciest* people, everywhere. She’s most *unusual*, Billy; she really is. She’s what I call an *exceptional* woman. It’s not everyone that can do — well, such *peculiar* things, and still be considered perfectly good form. I think it’s because of her magnetism. She’s really *wonderful*, Billy. You’ve no idea.”

“Sally Wyndham,” Billy repeated, as if seeking to recall something to mind. Then suddenly he began to laugh. “Oh, sure,” he

ejaculated, "Sally Wyndham! Of course; now I remember; she's Mabel Atherton's cousin. Say, she *is* a hummer, isn't she? That wasn't her husband she was with, I'll bet a dollar."

Dorothy shook her head. "Oh, dear no," she rejoined. "No one would bet with you about that, Billy. Mr. Wyndham is in business, poor man. He never comes home until late. And then he doesn't ride horseback, anyway. That was that Blaisdell man — you know who I mean — the one there was all the scandal about. His wife divorced him —"

"Oh, sure," said Billy again, "I know Blaisdell. He was stuck on that little soubrette in 'The Girl From India' — the one who had to be so careful about not getting in draughts. Oh, sure; Blaisdell's an awful sport."

He was silent, as if still reflecting. "Sally Wyndham," he repeated thoughtfully. And then, in triumph, "There, I knew I'd get it. I really have an awfully good memory, Dorothy; I can always remember things like that, if I try. She was the one who started the Anti-Stork Society, and it got into all the papers, and made

such a lot of talk. Say, Dorothy, do you remember the motto —”

“Billy,” the girl observed warningly, and Whitfield did not finish his sentence. He continued, however, to chuckle spasmodically to himself, and presently broke forth again, “And she was the one who told that awful vaccination story at Mrs. Schuyler’s dinner. You know the one I mean. About the washerwoman. They asked her —”

“*Billy,*” said the girl again, even more warningly than before; then, partly to change the subject, partly because she really meant it, she cried suddenly, “Oh, do look at the water! Isn’t it splendid?”

Gradually, as they had sped along, the whole feeling of the air had changed with them. The soft fragrance of the woods was gone; in its place the crisp, salt breeze from the ocean struck sharply on their faces; and at the summit of the last steep hill they heard the distant murmur of the surf, and saw before them the glory of the open sea.

Far away to left and right, and far beyond —

far as the eye could reach — stretched the broad expanse of level blue, sparkling in the sunset's fading light, here and there, about the ledges and at the base of the cliffs, breaking lazily into foam. In the west, a broad arch of rosy clouds lay banked against the sky; and beneath them the whole horizon flamed and glowed in a dazzling splendor of gold and crimson. Already, in the far-off east, the dull, blending shadows of the night came creeping in from sea, and the first flash of the lighthouse, signal of sunset, cast its broad path cheerily shoreward across the bay.

Billy surveyed the scene without emotion. "Well, I guess it's all right," he answered, "if people like that sort of thing. Can't say I was ever stuck on this landscape game myself; too dead and alive for *my* blood. I want action for mine, like this afternoon, Dorothy. We beat 'em in good style, didn't we? And it made the old lady pretty mad, too. She didn't care much for giving us those cups, now did she?"

"Indeed she didn't," the girl replied, "it was simply *tragic*, Billy; that's the only word to de-

scribe it. She was really *jarred*. I could see it in her face. Because she always wants to be *everything*; and I know she was sure Robert and Mary would win. It was a dandy joke on her."

Billy began to chuckle. "Say, Dorothy," he remarked, "your saying that Mrs. Mortimer wants to be everything reminds me of an awfully funny story I heard the other day. There was a man once who was like that, and they used to say about him that whenever he went to a wedding, he wanted to be the bridegroom, and whenever he went to a funeral, he wanted to be the —"

"*Billy!*" the girl interrupted, with a shudder, "please don't be so vulgar. You're *awful*, really you are."

Billy grinned, unabashed. Like most youths in their early twenties, he did not resent the phrase, for though he might have chosen other adjectives to describe it, to be "awful" was in reality one of his chief ambitions. "Oh, well," he answered jauntily, "I didn't mean any harm. There's no use taking life too seriously, Dorothy. These people that preach all the time

make me tired. We might as well have a little fun as we go along. And if you didn't like that story, here's another that's a corker. I told it to Jimmy Mason going up on the train this morning, and I honestly thought he'd have a fit, he laughed so. It's a peach. Want to hear it?"

Dorothy looked somewhat doubtful. "Well, I don't know, Billy," she parried, "if it's like most of the ones you tell —"

"It is," Billy confessed frankly, "it's like 'em, only a little more so. But then, what's the odds? Everything goes these days, you know. And we're grown up; we're not kids any more. Once there was a girl —"

But at his tone, and at the manner in which the story began, Dorothy became alarmed. "Oh, I don't think, Billy," she said hastily, "that I care to hear it. Honestly, I don't know what to make of you lately. You're growing so hard, and cynical, and *everything*."

Billy, under a mask of lofty indifference, strove to conceal his delight. To be called "awful" was pleasant enough, but to be de-

scribed as "hard and cynical — and everything" came as the very acme of praise. "Oh, well —" he began again, but Dorothy cut him short.

"So," she declared, "I won't listen to your horrid old stories. You can either be nice, and talk about golf, and about what a good time you had this afternoon, or else — you needn't talk at all. There now, Billy Whitfield."

Billy grinned amiably; the choice she gave him not proving in the least disquieting. To keep silent, indeed, would have been a trial, but to talk about himself, and the good time he had had, was a pleasure second only to the telling of "funny" stories. And at once, therefore, he proceeded to be "nice."

"Well, we did have a bully time, didn't we, Dorothy," he rejoined; "and didn't I get off some screaming old drives, though? That one on the seventeenth — Gee, that was a pippin. And that midiron on the eighth. Wasn't that a dream, though?"

"Indeed it was," Dorothy agreed, "it was *heavenly*, Billy, it really was. I shall think of

that match all winter long. We had a wonderful day to end the season with."

Something in her words seemed to affect Billy's spirits adversely. "It is the end of the season, isn't it?" he replied. "When do you go back to town, Dorothy?"

"Next week," she answered; "almost everyone goes then, or else the week after. I don't suppose you'll stay as long as that, even. Just think — you've been here almost a month, Billy. I don't see how you've endured it at Mrs. Stiggins' boarding-house."

"Well, it hasn't been bad," Billy rejoined; "I haven't been there a great deal, anyway, except to sleep nights. People have invited me around so."

"Yes, that makes a difference, of course," she agreed; then added casually, "How much longer do you suppose you *will* stay, Billy?"

Whitfield looked decidedly uncomfortable. "Well, I don't exactly know," he responded; "I might — well, I might spend the whole winter here."

The girl's amazement was absolute and un-

feigned. Billy Whitfield, the lover of comfort and ease, and all the delights of city life — Billy Whitfield to think of spending a winter in Bayport, in Mrs. Stiggins' boarding-house — it was incredible, preposterous; of course it was not true. "Now, Billy," she said reproachfully, "I think you're mean to joke. I really believed you."

Billy heaved a despondent sigh. "Oh, there's no joke about it," he retorted; "it's the truth, confound it all." He paused for a moment, then continued with bitterness, "Gee, but I love the country. It's so nice and quiet; they say Bayport's awfully restful in winter. And then there are the dicky birds, you know, and the wild flowers, and all that sort of thing. Oh, I tell you, it's simply great."

The girl gazed at him in sudden alarm. "Dicky birds," she repeated, "and wild flowers. In winter! Billy," she asked anxiously, "do you feel all right? Your head doesn't trouble you, does it?"

Billy sighed again. "Oh, I know you think I'm crazy," he replied, "but I'm not. That

is," he added, "not intentionally crazy. It's not my doing, at all. You understand what I mean."

Dorothy's expression wholly belied his last statement. "Crazy, but not intentionally," she repeated again, "and spending the winter in Bayport. Oh, Billy —"

Billy tried once more. "Now look here, Dorothy," he said peering warily over his shoulder as if on the watch for some aerial eavesdropper, "I oughtn't to tell you this, but if you won't give me away — if you won't breathe a word to anyone —"

He paused, as if unable to proceed. Dorothy's glance was sympathy itself. "About your — about your being —" she hazarded.

Billy reddened. "Oh, the devil, no," he snapped; "I should think you might manage to understand. If I tell you why I'm staying here in Bayport, I want you to promise you won't repeat it to a soul."

There could be, naturally, but one answer to the question. "Why, of *course* I won't," said Dorothy, glibly; "I *never* repeat things," and

Billy, having thus satisfied his conscience, turned his head still further in her direction, and in a low and mysterious voice, announced, "Well then, I'm down here on a mission."

Yet he had once more failed to make himself understood, for Dorothy's conception of a "mission" was a wholly ecclesiastical one. Concluding, therefore, from Whitfield's preternaturally solemn expression that the whole affair was a piece of elaborate buffoonery on his part, she burst into a peal of laughter. "Oh, you're *too* funny, Billy," she cried, "you really are. *A mission!* And you haven't been inside a church for years. You're *terrible*, Billy, to joke about such things."

But Billy, instead of joining in her mirth, grew suddenly irritated. "Confound it all," he cried, "where were you educated, Dorothy? It doesn't make any difference how hard I try; I can't seem to get an idea through your head. I don't mean that kind of a mission —"

The girl, vexed in her turn, ceased laughing. "I wish, Billy," she said icily, "that you'd try just once, to express yourself clearly. If you're

not talking about a church mission, then please tell me what you do mean."

But Billy, with his opportunity thus fairly presented, failed miserably to take advantage of it. "Why, you see —" he began slowly, then hesitated, and finally concluded, lamely enough, "Well, the fact is, Dorothy, I don't really know myself."

The girl's exasperation was complete. There was a momentary pause, before she observed, with dangerous sweetness, "I want to apologize, Billy, for thinking you were crazy —"

Billy's resentment began to thaw. "Oh, that's all right," he interrupted, but she kept steadily on, "because, if a person is crazy, I suppose that means they have to have some sort of a brain, to go crazy with."

Billy winced. Reflections upon himself were extremely distasteful to him. "Oh, well, look here," he exclaimed in desperation, "you know my Uncle Staunton, of course. Well, he's the man who sent me here."

At last the girl understood him, for the Honorable Staunton Whitfield was famous through

the length and breadth of the State. "Oh, your uncle," she exclaimed; "then it's business, Billy."

Billy nodded. "Yes, I suppose so," he assented, "but I wish he'd let me know what sort. He made me come down to Mrs. Stiggins' last spring, you know, and board there for a week — to establish a legal residence in Bayport, I think he said. That was the last I knew of it till a month ago; then he told me to engage my room at Mrs. Stiggins' again, and to come down here, right away. He didn't say why — just told me to go around and get acquainted with the Bayport crowd, and to be careful not to make any enemies. And he didn't set any limit on my visit either. So now you know as much as I do, Dorothy. I'm here, but I don't know for how long; I don't even know what for. Probably it's interesting, though; the things Uncle Staunton mixes up in generally are."

The girl was visibly impressed. "Why, Billy," she exclaimed in an altered tone, "I call that positively *thrilling*. I always *did* love a

mystery; and it shows that your uncle must have great confidence in you. But have you done as he told you? Have you been around much in the village?"

Billy looked his guilt. "Well, I'm afraid I haven't," he confessed; "you see, I've been pretty busy. Playing all these foursome matches has taken a lot of time, and I've had to go out to dinner a lot, besides. But I'm going to start now, and pitch right in. Because, if I could make a hit with the old gentleman, it would help a lot."

"Of course it would," the girl agreed; "why, it's a great opportunity, Billy. And you haven't an idea what it's all about?"

Billy shook his head. "You can search me," he answered, "though they're talking a lot in town about some confounded street railway or other — it's the principal topic of conversation at Mrs. Stiggins'. And that looks suspicious, because of course street railways are Uncle Staunton's particular pets — he's got 'em trained to come and eat out of his hand. But where I come in is still a mystery. Perhaps," he

added hopefully, "he's going to give me a job as motorman."

Dorothy smiled. "That's it, of course," she answered, "but seriously, Billy, I'm awfully interested. You're very nice to tell me about it. And I hope you'll make a great success."

Billy's usual good temper was now completely restored. "Well, I hate to talk about myself," he began modestly, and then suddenly stopped. "Say, Dorothy," he cried excitedly, "just look at that!"

While they had been talking, they had drawn gradually nearer the water, until now, at the turn near the point, they were only a stone's throw distant, and at the sight of the power boat which lay below them, tossing off the headland, everything else vanished instantly from Billy's volatile mind. "Look at that," he repeated, "see where that fool of a lobsterman is hauling his traps. He'll come piling in on one of those ledges, if he doesn't take care."

The girl glanced quickly toward the water. Close to the rocks, a white power dory was ris-

ing and falling to the sweep of the waves; amidships, a stalwart figure pulled steadily, hand over hand, on the black-tarred lobster line. As they watched him, the head of the trap emerged from the water; the fisherman, stooping, hauled it aboard, opened the wooden door, drew forth one — two — three — snapping, struggling lobsters, picked up a piece of bait, thrust it on the wire, and with the mechanical skill born of long practice, shoved the trap over the side, and bent once more to start his engine.

As he did so, a receding wave showed the brown, venomous looking head of one of the smaller reefs, not ten feet from the dory's stern. "There," Billy exclaimed, "just look. He'll get wrecked, you see if he doesn't."

The girl laughed at his anxious tone. "You needn't worry, Billy," she said; "the lobstermen know the shore as well as we know the golf links. See, he's all right —"

The fisherman had thrown on his switch, given his wheel a turn, and with a sudden *putt-putt-putt* the dory leaped forward toward the

next trap in line. Dorothy touched the cob lightly with the whip, and as they sped on again, she added, "I know who that was, too. He's one of the best fishermen in town. His name is Nickerson."

"Well, that's a good old Bayport name," Billy commented idly. "I don't believe I've met him yet. How does it happen that you know him, Dorothy?"

"Through his wife," she answered; "she used to do sewing for me, before she was married. She was the belle of Bayport, Billy; really an awfully pretty girl. They live out on the marsh, beyond the harbor — all alone. And they have the dearest little boy; I'm honestly in love with him."

Billy smiled. "Gee," he began with feeling, "I wish" — and then stopped, the remark being somewhat too obvious, even for him — "I — I wish I could see him," he concluded, a trifle lamely.

Dorothy's eyes twinkled. "Yes," she replied sweetly, "I know how fond you are of children. I'll take you over sometime. But

there's another member of the family you'd like even better than the baby, Billy."

"Yes," Billy responded guilelessly, "I dare say I should. That is, if she's as pretty as you say she is —" but Dorothy let him proceed no further. "*Billy,*" she cried, "you mustn't say such things. I don't mean Mrs. Nickerson at all; I mean Tom Nickerson's father; he lives with them, you know. And he's the most awful old man you ever saw; he's so perfectly impossible that he's actually fascinating. When I went to see Mrs. Nickerson and the baby, he insisted on coming into the room, and asking me who I was, and where I lived, and what my father's business was, and all such questions as that. And finally he started talking religion. Just fancy, Billy. He wanted to know if I believed in God, and whether I thought people had immortal souls; and when I told him I did think so, he said, in the most disagreeable way, "And so you imagine, young woman, that when you die, you'll enter into a state of eternal bliss?" I thought it was time to squelch him, so I answered that that was just

what I expected to do, but that I thought he might manage to find something much pleasanter to talk about. And at that, the horrid old thing began to laugh so hard that he choked, and Mrs. Nickerson made him leave the room. I never knew such an old cynic. That's why I think you'd like him, Billy."

Billy grinned. "Well, he listens pretty good to me, I confess," he answered; "I'd like to go over and give him a jolly, some day. But see here, Dorothy," he added, "what about Nickerson himself? How did the belle of Bayport come to marry *him*, out of all her suitors? Is he the village oracle, or anything like that?"

"Why, not exactly," rejoined Dorothy, "but he's a very nice man, Billy; the kind that everyone likes. I imagine, as far as that goes, that she was the lucky one, and not he. Of course she's a very attractive girl, but she's awfully young to be married, and a mother, and I've heard one or two things about her lately — well, not exactly what you'd call unpleasant things — but I think it must be hard for any girl who's

been fond of a good time, and had so much attention, to settle right down, all at once, to cooking and washing and mending and looking after a baby. I sometimes think —”

But the sentence remained unfinished. The cob, with a sudden start of fright, shied, jumped half across the road, and then, lowering his head, prepared to bolt, but the girl's firm grasp on the reins steadied him, and the next moment he was again under control. “There, there, old boy,” she soothed him, “that's all right; no one's going to hurt you”; then turning to Whitfield, “What is it, Billy?” she asked. “What made him shy?”

Billy, glancing behind them into the dusk, saw some white object by the roadside, near the spot where the cob had taken fright. “Looks like a poster on a tree,” he answered. “Pull him up, Dorothy, and I'll go back and rip it off. That's no place for a thing like that. Any horse would run.”

A moment later, he returned, chuckling, with the offending paper in his hand. “Good for the old nag, Dorothy,” he observed, as he swung

himself into the cart; "I don't blame him a particle. I'd shy myself. Just listen to this, will you?" And he read, with infinite gusto, the huge capitals on the flaring placard, "'A Message For You! Jesus Is Coming! Are You Watching?'" and below, in somewhat smaller type, "'Come one, come all! Town Hall, to-night. Admission free. Brother, are you saved?' There, Dorothy," he cried, "now what do you know about that? Do you blame the cob? That's what they mean by horse-sense. 'Jesus is coming!' Say, wouldn't that get your goat?"

Dorothy felt a trifle shocked at the freedom of his speech, but vastly more so by the language of the circular. "You mustn't be *profane*, Billy," she chided; "it's not nice. But it is fearful, isn't it? Such an utter want of taste. Such shockingly bad form. And yet the whole of Bayport will turn out, to listen to some awful evangelist, I suppose. I wonder, Billy —"

But Whitfield interrupted with a sudden exclamation. "By Golly, Dorothy," he cried, "the very idea. For Heaven's sake, do me

a favor, and go to the town hall with me to-night."

She gazed at him in astonishment. "Don't joke, Billy," she began, but he cut her short once more.

"No, no," he cried eagerly, "don't you see? It's a wonderful chance to get acquainted. Everyone will be there, and it will be thoroughly respectable, being a church affair, and all that. You'll introduce me to all the people you know. Nickerson will be there. And the pretty wife," he added flippantly; "perhaps even the baby. I don't suppose they'll get the old man. He must be past saving. Come on, Dorothy, be a sport; say you'll go."

As he finished speaking, they reached the entrance to the driveway of the Lawrence's home. Dorothy, hesitating, brought the horse to a standstill. "Well," she said at last, "if you really want me to go, Billy, I will. But I can't drive you the rest of the way, because I'll have only just time to dress for dinner. Do you mind?"

In a twinkling, Billy had jumped down into

the road. "You're a brick, Dorothy," he cried; "I'll call for you at a quarter of eight," and lifting his cap, he strode away toward Mrs. Stiggins', looking forward, with relish, to the combination of duty and pleasure which the evening held in store.

The revivalists had done their work well. The poster at which Dorothy Lawrence's horse had shied was but one of hundreds, scattered broadcast through the town; and Billy Whitfield was not the only one to be impressed, in one way or another, with the eloquence of their appeal. At the very hour, indeed, that Whitfield was nearing home, Tom Nickerson had beached his dory, and was walking up the path toward the cottage. As he entered the kitchen, he beheld his father standing near the stove, gloomily stirring the contents of a sauce-pan with a long-handled spoon. Nickerson smiled. "Turned cook, Father?" he queried. "Where's Edith?"

"She's puttin' your boy to bed," the old man responded, "and she told me to keep a' stirrin' this cussed mess till she come back again.

She's been gone 'most half an hour, seems to me," he added vindictively; "heard her fussin' with him 'bout his prayers. A kid two years old sayin' prayers! I'll bet she done it to keep me stirrin' here. There she comes now. 'Bout time," and he glared at his daughter-in-law, as she hurriedly entered the room, and relieved him of his unwelcome task. "Pretty nigh busted my arm for me, Edie," he grumbled, and hobbled over to his chair by the window.

Edith Nickerson smiled covertly at her husband. "I'm sorry, Father," she said; "the baby was so lively; he didn't want to go to bed at all," and then, to Nickerson, "Any luck, Tom?"

"First class," Nickerson answered; "that easterly the other day stirred them up fine. I wouldn't take fifteen dollars for the lot I caught to-day. Ought to do well to-morrow, too, I should think. I baited with flounders; three to a pot, all around"; then, abruptly changing the subject, he added, "Say, Edith, want to go over to the village to-night? Father'll stay home and take care of the boy."

Before she could answer, the old man glanced up eagerly at his son. "What's goin' on in the village?" he queried. "'Tain't minstrels, is it? If 'tis, I'm goin' myself, an' you an' Edie can tend your boy between you."

Nickerson's eyes twinkled with amusement. He produced a poster from his pocket, crossed the room, and handed it to his father to read. There was a moment's silence, and then the old man gave a snort of disgust. "Another o' them damn sky-pilots," he ejaculated, throwing the placard on the table with no very respectful hand; "you an' Edie can go, Tom. Babies is bad enough, but there's one thing that's a darn sight worse, an' that's these gospel shouters, consarn 'em. Oh, I'll stay home, an' glad enough to do it, too."

Mrs. Nickerson crossed quickly to the table, and read the notice through. She, too, was disappointed. "I thought you meant some kind of a show, Tom," she said; "that sounds just like church."

"Well, everyone's going," rejoined Nickerson, "and it's all free. I like to hear them

fellers, myself. I guess we better take it in, Edith."

Edith had returned to her cooking. "Oh, all right," she replied indifferently; "I'll go. It's better than nothing. It's too early for shows, anyway, I suppose. And I can wear my pink dress."

Two hours later, the evangelists appeared on the platform of the town hall, to find the building packed to the doors. The first performers were a male quartette, who sang nasally, but with gusto, of the advantages to be gained by those who served the Lord. These fortunate individuals were represented as coming before their Creator with a long list of requests, none of which could be refused, since the petitioners were all worshipers at the tabernacle, and in the best of standing. The chorus especially emphasized the sound business character of the whole transaction.

*"He listens with ap-proving glance,
And grants them all their wa-a-a-nts."*

Thus reassuringly sang the male quartette,

and an audience must have been hard to suit which did not yield to the pleasant spell of such a comfortable and practical presentation of the rewards of righteousness. After which, there came prayer, then a quavering solo from a faded soprano, and finally the address itself.

It was at this point that Billy Whitfield, as he told Dorothy afterward, "began to sit up and take notice." For the evangelist was a man to compel attention. It was not so much that he was young, and extremely good looking, or that he spoke with ready eloquence, but it was soon apparent that he possessed two traits which seemed wholly out of keeping in a modern minister of the gospel. In the first place, he was in deadly earnest in what he said, and in the next, he showed a tolerant breadth of view which made the "church folks" in the audience fairly gasp. The first half of his sermon was reasonably within bounds, but at this point he stopped short, and when the pause had lengthened almost to embarrassment, and every eye in the hall was riveted on him, he recommenced in a very different vein. "I have been speaking," he

went on, "of religion; trying to tell you that rightly understood, it is, and always must be, the greatest force in the world. But I should be a foolish man if I thought, or expected, that everyone in this hall to-night would agree with what I say. Many of you, of course, believe, as I do, in the divinity of Jesus Christ. Others believe in him, but consider that he was merely mortal, like ourselves. Others still not only do not believe in Christ, but do not believe in the Church, do not believe in religion, do not even believe in a God."

There was not an inattentive listener in the hall, for here was the bald and naked truth, straight from the shoulder; and while the virtuous waited expectantly, foreseeing a fiery denunciation of the unbelievers, the doubters braced themselves for a vivid picture of the bottomless pit, and the horrors of eternal damnation. But equally to the surprise of both factions, the speaker continued, "I have said that religion is the greatest force in the world. Yet I am the first to admit that comparing actual results with all that might be accomplished, religion

to-day seems little better than a failure. And the reason lies here. There is too much dissension, too much controversy, too much bitterness; and because of this we cannot unite on a common ground. And yet — here is the pity of it —” He advanced, in his eagerness, to the very edge of the platform, and stood with arms outstretched and upraised — “away down in our hearts, however much we may differ about beliefs and creeds, we all wish one thing — to see good, and not evil, triumph in this world. What we need more than all else to-day, is a simpler standard — a broader vision —”

He paused, seeking for the words which would best serve to drive his meaning home; then went on, “You fishermen of Bayport know every inch of this coast; you know each rock and reef and ledge; each eddy and tide and current; you know the dangers and the hardships; and you know that through the blackest night and through the wildest gale, north and south and east and west, there flashes the gleam from your lighthouse, to guide you on your way.

“And so, call it by what name you please — God, Duty, Right — in the heart of every man, amid the storms of the world, the beacon flashes, and every action, every word, every thought, is judged in that clear flame. Follow it, for it is the light eternal — the wonder and the mystery of the world.”

He ceased abruptly, and resumed his seat. The male quartette, after a proper pause, again discoursed sweet music, this time warbling of pearly gates and harps of gold; a local clergyman prayed drearily, in a whining sing-song, and the meeting was at an end.

With the fling out of the audience, came Billy's opportunity. He spoke to all the people he knew, and to some he did not, and through Dorothy's assistance, was introduced to many others, Nickerson and his wife among the rest. So that when he finally left the hall, it was in a thoroughly satisfied frame of mind. “Say, Dorothy,” he observed, as they walked along toward home, “you were awfully good to go. It helped a lot, meeting all those old guys. If Uncle Staunton asks me any questions now, I'll

be able to throw a great bluff that I know everyone in town. Yes, sir, that helps a lot."

They walked along for a few moments in silence. Then Dorothy asked, "What did you think of the affair itself, Billy?"

"Liked it," Whitfield promptly rejoined; "the singing was something fierce, of course, but the shouter was all right. He let 'em have it, right in the solar plexus."

"Yes," Dorothy somewhat vaguely assented, "but isn't it *dangerous*, Billy, to be so *broad*? I thought it was most *unusual* for a minister to talk like that."

Billy chuckled. "It *was* unusual," he rejoined; "I thought it was hot stuff, myself. I do like to see a parson that isn't looking for a chance to lick the dust off someone's shoes. This fellow had the straight dope, Dorothy. Don't bother too much about religion, but just go ahead and do what's right. That's what I call sensible."

Dorothy looked doubtful. "But it isn't as easy as that, Billy," she objected; "we don't do right, really, any of us."

“Oh, nonsense,” Billy retorted briskly; “of course we do right. That’s a cinch. Think of the murderers, and the bank robbers, and all those chaps. I guess, compared to them, we’re right there with the bells on, every time.”

Dorothy pondered. It seemed to her that Billy disposed of the problem almost too easily, yet his argument appeared sound, and so comforting that she decided to accept it as final. “Yes, I suppose you’re right,” she answered, and they walked on up the road.

In the meantime, Nickerson and his wife were rowing out from the harbor, toward the island. Edith, reclining in the stern of the skiff, was reviewing the evening in her mind, and the two persons most prominent in her thoughts were Dorothy Lawrence and Billy Whitfield. She remembered with envy how beautifully Dorothy had been dressed, how gracefully she had carried herself; how charming her manners had been; and she thought with admiration of Whitfield, well groomed, suave, polite, and of how courteously he had helped her down the steps, with one steady and reassuring hand upon

her arm. Tom would never have thought of that. And Tom's clothes — how shabby they had appeared —

Nickerson's voice broke the silence. "Enjoy it, Edith?" he asked.

"Oh, pretty well," she answered indifferently, "for that kind of a time. The singing was awful, though."

"Yes, I s'pose 'twas," Nickerson assented, "but what did you think of the preacher? I guess he surprised a lot of 'em in that hall, all right."

Edith hesitated. "Well," she confessed at length, "I didn't pay much attention to what he was saying. Sermons are all the same, you know. Tom," she broke off suddenly, "*did* you notice the dress Dorothy Lawrence had on?"

Nickerson, accustomed to his wife's sudden and violent changes of conversation, patiently shook his head. "No, I didn't notice," he answered.

Edith shrugged her shoulders. "Of course not," she rejoined; "you never do. But it was

a dream, Tom; it looked simple, but I'll bet it cost a lot, just the same. It was awfully stylish. It must be fine to be able to dress like that."

"Yes, fine," Nickerson answered absently, but his thoughts, as he spoke the words, were far away. For as they rowed along, the gleam of the lighthouse flashed and glowed over the quiet water, revealing dimly the shoals, and the sullen, lurking ledges. "Queer now," he reflected, "I never thought of that before. That's what it is to be educated. But I'll remember it, though; that's the kind of idea might help a man sometime —" and under the steady dip of the oars, the skiff drew nearer and nearer to the beach.

CHAPTER IV

STAUNTON WHITFIELD PLANS TO DO THE PUBLIC GOOD

THE Honorable Staunton Whitfield sat in his office, and pondered. He was a man, now well past middle age, whose business career had been divided into two main parts. All the earlier portion of his life — up, indeed, to the last dozen years — he had toiled incessantly, and a half million dollars had been his reward. Then, perhaps feeling that he had earned a rest, he had announced his retirement from active work, and had taken to pondering instead. Apparently the change had been a happy one, for simply and without display — seemingly without effort, even — the half million had increased ten fold, and the pondering still went on.

In his half century of business life, he had been interested in many things. He had not

been infallible. He had failed in some undertakings; he had been "sold" in others; and once or twice, at the outset of his career, his affairs, for a time at least, had been seriously involved. In the main, however, for a self-made man of adventurous disposition, working out his theories for himself, and playing, as it were, a lone hand in the game, he had been wonderfully successful. When luck had been with him, he had pressed it to the limit; when he had scored a failure, he had hunted for the reason until he found it, and had then given others the benefit of his experience with such skill that in the end even his worst defeats had been transformed into profitable and triumphant victories. To do him justice, however, he cared little for gold for its own sake, regarding it merely as the outward and visible sign, to show that he worshiped, in common with all true Americans, at the shrine of the great American idol — the God of Business Success.

If you had chanced to halt the first man of standing whom you met down town, and had questioned him concerning Mr. Whitfield, his

answer would have been something like this: "Staunton Whitfield? Oh, yes, he's mixed up in lots of things. Street railways, mostly; and real estate; and politics, too, of course. He does 'em all three, and he does 'em all mighty well." And to this reply he might have added a footnote, explaining that Mr. Whitfield's real estate lay wholly in the city; that his street railways were largely suburban; and that his political interests were somewhat in the nature of a post-graduate course. For the Honorable Staunton had served in turn as Representative, State Senator and Congressman, and had then decided, once and for all, that the office-holding part of the game was scarcely worth the candle, and that to be the lobbyist, the "man behind," was the rôle which in reality paid the largest, as well as the most direct and satisfactory, returns. And as a lobbyist, no man in the State was shrewder or more resourceful than this quiet looker-on, who now for twenty years had annually tabled and "sized-up" the crop of lawmakers at the Capital, calculating to a nicety when he might, and when he might

not, be able to bend and fashion them to serve his ends.

In appearance, the Honorable Staunton, without being in any way conspicuous, was nevertheless distinctly a noticeable man. He was of medium height, stoutly and heavily built, and ruddy of complexion; his eyes were pale blue, set far back in his head, and gleaming coldly underneath shaggy brows; his hair was dark, though heavily streaked and sprinkled with gray; his face clean-shaven, save for a thick, closely-cropped mustache, which lent to his face a look somewhat aggressive and forbidding. "The old fox" was the name by which he had long ago been honored on the "street." Among his associates, he was universally admired and envied; sometimes, when the occasion seemed absolutely to demand it, even trusted — about to the distance of the nearest corner.

On this particular morning, his desk, considering its usual neat appearance, seemed to be somewhat in disorder. A dozen volumes from the office of the Railroad Commissioners, the

Town Reports of Bayport and Greenfield, many sheets of typewritten memoranda, other miscellaneous papers in abundance — altogether the materials for much pondering were clearly present. And now their owner, having absorbed as much of their contents as he desired, sat tilted back in his cushioned swivel chair, gazing meditatively forth at the ragged sky line of roof and weather vane and chimney top, his forehead wrinkled into a little frown, not at all of displeasure, but merely of deep and earnest thought.

Presently he rose and walked over to the table, its polished surface, for the time being, completely hidden by some dozen maps, large and small, portraying the different street railway systems of the State. At these the expert gazed long and critically, before he finally nodded, as if in confirmation of some previous judgment. “A very pretty problem,” he murmured aloud; “very pretty, quite unusual, and with just enough difficulties to make it decidedly interesting.”

For some moments longer, he stood motion-

less, as if debating various matters in his mind; then leisurely resumed his seat, rang the bell for his clerk, and as the man entered, glanced up with a curt nod. "Good-morning, Smith," he said; "will you kindly ask Mr. William to step this way?"

Billy Whitfield sat in his own compartment of the office suite, tilted back in his chair at the angle of perfect comfort; a cigar revolving in the corner of his mouth, a smile of contentment on his rosy, unlined face. With him were his two bosom friends, Philip Holmes and Bartlett Anderson. The three, indeed, were generally to be found together, the term "business hours" being with all of them a phrase of somewhat elastic meaning.

Holmes was nominally a lawyer, but his income was ample, and he spent the greater part of his time in playing golf, boat racing, shooting, and riding to hounds. He was tall and lank; his pleasant, smooth-shaven face tanned to the darkest of browns. His long legs decorated the top of Whitfield's desk, and his eyes,

keen and humorous, traveled slowly down the columns of the morning paper's sporting page.

Anderson, whose fortune was even more sufficient to his needs, was a short, red, stout young man, not over gifted with intellect, and good-humoredly aware of the fact. As he himself tersely expressed the situation, "I'm a fool, all right, but thank God, I'm wise to it." His principal occupation was "looking after his estate," a beautiful country place some twenty miles from town; and here, at least, was something which he did superlatively well. In many ways, he reminded one of a modernized and Americanized old English squire; blunt, conservative, practical; living from day to day; casting a suspicious eye on anything savoring of the arts, his whole soul bound up in horses, cows, and crops, and all the innumerable details of keeping his place in order. Occasionally, officious friends had taken it on themselves to suggest, somewhat vaguely, that he ought to "do something," and to these he always made the same pleasant reply. "Me do something," he would repeat very gently. "Why, if I did,

I'd only make an ass of myself — more so than usual, I mean. *I* didn't choose the brains I was born with; if they'd asked me, I should probably have picked a different brand. But as long as they didn't, I've got a mighty nice farm, I'm living in peace with my neighbors, I vote, pay my taxes, and keep out of rows. But if I ever started to 'do something,' the Lord himself couldn't tell where I'd fetch up, before I got through." And since there was much of truth in what he said, and a pleasant candor in his way of saying it, his critics, after listening to his explanation, generally refrained from further suggestions regarding the way in which he should spend his time.

Anderson was just finishing the story he had picked up at the club, the night before. Though lacking the faculty of creating humor, yet his appreciation of it was excellent, and in his many journeys from dinner to dinner, and from club to club, he was pretty sure to have the latest "good" story, the latest slang phrase, the refrain of the latest song, all at his command. "So this morning," he was concluding, "the

doctor had got pretty anxious about Jim, and he rides over to the cabin in a hurry. There's the nurse, waiting for him at the door. 'Well,' he says, 'and how's Jim's temperature this morning? No higher, I hope?' The nurse stands and looks at him without cracking a smile. By and by she up and answers him, speaking slow and thoughtful, with a kind of a drawl. 'Well, Doctor,' she says, 'I was kind of worrying about that same thing myself. You see — Jim died last night.' ”

Holmes, looking up from his paper, smiled his slow, humorous smile, while Billy laughed uproariously. “Died last night,” he repeated, when he could speak. “Oh, Gee, Bart, that's a good one; that's certainly a peach.” He cast a furtive look about the office, and lowered his voice a trifle. “Say,” he said, “I heard one the other day to beat that. Once there was a girl —”

A sharp tap sounded on the door, accompanied by the entrance of the decorous Smith. “Mr. Whitfield would like to see you, Mr. William,” he announced, and took his departure.

Billy rose with great promptness. "Don't hurry, you chaps," he said; "cigars in the top drawer, left hand side. I'll be back pretty soon," and he was gone.

Holmes glanced at Anderson. "Mr. William," he repeated; "something kind of funny about that. Hey, Bart?"

Anderson nodded. "Mr. William," he repeated in turn. "Oh, Gee, yes, that's funny, all right. Quite a lot of ballast for a light craft. I don't see how he gets along with the Honorable, anyway, if the old fellow *is* his uncle. I shouldn't think Billy would suit for a damn."

If he had been able, however, to witness his friend's entrance into the inner office, he might have grasped the secret of the mystery. For the simple act of crossing a threshold transformed a joyous, care-free and eminently self-satisfied young man into the "Mr. William" of office hours, serious, humble, and respectful to the verge of servility; an utterly reformed Billy Whitfield, whose combined dignity and desire to please would wholly have astonished his friends. And now he stood waiting, his gaze

fixed upon his uncle's face, until an invitation to be seated was presently forthcoming. For some moments, the Honorable Staunton sat eyeing him in silence; then asked pleasantly, "Well, William, how are things going in Bayport?"

Billy tried hard to assume a cheerful air. "Oh, very nicely, sir," he answered; "very nicely, indeed. It's quiet, of course, but awfully healthy. Fine air, and all that sort of thing."

An observant onlooker might have detected a faint twinkle of amusement in the Honorable Staunton's eyes. But he merely observed, "Yes, I understand the climate is excellent. And you say it is very quiet, William?"

Billy nodded with conviction. "Yes, *sir*," he responded, "quiet's the word. Why, you can't tell the graveyard from the rest of the town; there's just as much doing one place as another."

The Honorable Staunton pondered. "I imagine, William," he said at length, "that we are about to change all that. Is the name of

the Bayport & Southern Street Railway, by any chance, familiar to you? ”

On the instant, Billy recalled his conversation with Dorothy Lawrence on the way home from the links. So the railroad, as he had surmised, was the cause of his presence in Bayport. “ Why, yes, sir,” he responded glibly; “ that’s what they’re all talking about around town. That, and how Seth Ellis’ pig got run over by an automobile.”

His uncle showed evident signs of interest. “ And what do they say? ” he queried. “ Referring of course to the railroad, not to the pig.”

Billy thought hard. “ Well,” he returned at length, “ as far as I can remember it, they talk like this. There’s a road going to be built, either through Bayport or through Greenfield, which is the adjoining town. Both towns want it, and only one can get it, because there’s no room for two parallel lines. All the old farmers in Bayport hold stock in this Bayport & Southern Company, and of course they want to see their town win. But they don’t know

whether the Legislature will grant them the franchise, or let Greenfield have it. If they get it, they say their stock will go booming; if they lose, it won't be worth the paper it's written on. I think that's the situation, sir, as I hear it in Bayport."

The Honorable Staunton nodded approval. "You have described it exactly, William," he rejoined; "just a moment — let me show you on the map —"

He rose and walked over to the table, Billy obediently following. "There," he continued, pointing with his pencil to the largest sheet of all, "that shows the present state of affairs. Two converging lines of road, with either Bayport or Greenfield as the connecting link to the whole. What that means — well, I needn't waste time on that, William. You can see for yourself."

Billy's eyes glistened. "I see," he answered; "it's a cinch for one of them, isn't it? Just a question of two routes. If Bayport gets the plum, Greenfield gets the lemon; and vice versa. It's a great game, isn't it?"

The Honorable Staunton led the way back to his desk. "It is a very pretty fight, William," he admitted, "and you can gauge the importance of the affair by looking at the stock market end of it. Neither stock has been quoted at anything higher than a dollar a share, for several years, but to-day Greenfield and Northern is selling at six and a quarter, and Bayport and Southern, which is popularly supposed to have the inside track, is nine and a half bid, with practically no stock offered near that figure. So it's really a very pretty gamble — only a question of picking the winner, the road which the Legislature thinks possesses the best location — and it's a very simple matter to make money. Merely a question of being on the inside."

The guileless tone in which the last sentences were uttered might well have deceived anyone not intimately acquainted with the Honorable Staunton. Billy, however, sat silent and expectant, feeling sure that the fortunes of the Bayport and Southern railway were probably very far from being the "simple matter" described

by his uncle. And presently the financier continued, "I am interested in this whole affair, William, as you may have guessed; interested, I may say, to a very considerable extent. Others are interested with me — men of means and of ability. We all have our part to play, and we have decided, after due deliberation, to include you in our councils; to assign to you, in fact a rôle which may prove to be of the utmost consequence. I am assuming, of course, that this meets with your approval?"

Billy, for perhaps the first time in his life, was struck nearly speechless with delight and astonishment. "Yes, *sir*," he managed to ejaculate; "yes, indeed, *sir*. I should say it did."

The Honorable Staunton leaned forward in his chair, and spoke with impressive deliberation. "Kindly pay attention, William," he said, "because this is of great importance. You are supposed to be delighted with Bayport; you think it's the most beautiful spot on earth; winter or summer, it's all one to you. As for Mrs. Stiggins' boarding-house, you consider it second only to the Saint Regis or the Waldorf;

if you heard a man say a word against the food, or criticize the heating facilities, you'd knock him down. In a word, Bayport is your very existence, William. Do you follow me?"

Poor Billy felt that he had followed too far, and his attempt to retain an expression of good cheer was not conspicuously successful. He had never had his uncle's political training. Yet he did his best, and his "Yes, sir; I understand perfectly, sir," was a very fair imitation of genuine enthusiasm.

"Next," continued the Honorable Staunton remorselessly, "your greatest ambition in life is to serve the town by being elected to the Board of Selectmen. You are prepared to work incessantly, spend money, interview voters, make speeches, all to — I beg your pardon, William —"

For Billy, utterly overcome, had made a choking sound of protest against his fate, and now, as his uncle paused, he exclaimed faintly, "Good God, sir! Me? *Me* a Selectman? And live in Bayport all my life —"

The Honorable Staunton seldom laughed,

but he did so now, and with much enjoyment, at his nephew's horrified expression. "Excuse me, William," he hastened to explain, "I fear I have been a trifle abrupt. Let me make the situation clearer —"

Billy's cheeks were gradually regaining their normal color. "Yes, sir," he murmured faintly; "the situation — clearer — yes, sir —"

"It is like this," his uncle continued; "if the Legislature acts favorably on the Bayport petition, it will then become necessary to obtain the consent of the Bayport Board of Selectmen. The Chairman of the Board, Deacon Hezekiah Wentworth, is a friend of mine, and he will surely support the road. Unfortunately, however, we have reason to believe that Rogers, the other Selectman whose term holds over, may be a more difficult man to handle. And thus, for the third member of the Board, we must have a man who will be absolutely safe. The present incumbent, Mr. Michael Sweeney, has decided that his chances for re-election are slim, and he is to retire at the end of his term. Accordingly, as things look now, that clears the

way for you. You needn't worry about your official duties; you won't have to take them seriously, because, as a matter of fact, the Bayport Board of Selectmen is a one man affair, and Hezekiah Wentworth is the man. As soon as this railway matter is out of the way, you're free to resign, and leave town whenever you please. But for the present, William, you must bend all your energies toward making yourself a popular person in Bayport. You will need money later, of course, and you shall have all you want. But for the present, go around and get acquainted with your future constituents; establish friendly relations; as an old friend of mine used to put it, 'mix and licker' with them. I suppose fishing is their principal occupation. Why don't you fish, William?"

Billy paled. With the wind from the sea, the aroma of the herring fleet enveloped Mrs. Stiggins' boarding-house like a pestilence. Moreover he had stood on the wharves and gazed down into the lobster dories, laden with ghastly cod-heads to be used in baiting, and at the sight his stomach had writhed within him.

So it took all his courage to answer, "Yes, sir, I could fish, I suppose," and then, suddenly remembering, he added quickly, "They shoot a lot, too. Sea ducks, you know, and that sort of thing."

"Very well," replied his uncle, "go shooting, then. Anything to get in touch with the crowd. And I repeat once more, William, that this is an important matter, and I shall expect you to do your best."

Billy rose with alacrity. "Indeed I will, sir," he responded earnestly; "I'll do everything I can. And I won't delay, either. I'll start and get busy, right away."

He had nearly reached the door when his uncle spoke again. "Of course, William," he said, "you will remember one thing. Both in business and in politics, nothing is ever sure. I *hope* to see Bayport get the road, or I should not have laid the plans I have, but if we should lose, and the Greenfield crowd should win their fight, why we must accept defeat with philosophy. Legislatures, as you know, are uncertain things."

Billy, as he listened, could not help admiring his uncle's gift of humor. The idea of Staunton Whitfield not knowing how the Legislature would act on the question of a street railway franchise was positively side-splitting; but he restrained his mirth, discreetly answered, "Yes, sir; I understand, sir," and this time had his hand fairly on the latch when his uncle added a final word. "As regards the value of these roads in the stock market, William," he observed, "that is another matter of uncertainty. I should not wish anyone to think that I favored the purchase either of Bayport & Southern, or of Greenfield & Northern, at the present time. The whole matter is too unsettled as yet. I should strongly advise keeping out of the market, William, altogether."

Billy's expression was that of an injured cherub. "Oh, really, sir," he protested, "I should never have thought of doing anything like that," and forthwith took his leave, managing to retain his pose of dignified self-possession until the door had closed behind him. Then, in a flash, his whole bearing changed.

His eyes grew bright with excitement, and a smile of happiness overspread his rosy face, for one of the dreams of his life had come true, and he was on the "inside" of a big deal at last. How best to use his knowledge was the one thought uppermost in his mind. "Isn't he the wise old guy, though?" he reflected. "He knows darned well that Bayport's going to get that road. And yet he's such a good business man that he won't commit himself, in so many words, for fear someone might try to come back at him for giving them wrong advice. Oh, he's a dandy, all right. 'We must accept our defeat philosophically.' 'Legislatures are uncertain things.' You couldn't beat that if you tried. Why, it's a cinch for Bayport; any fool could see that. If I don't make a mint out of this, then my name is Mud."

Returning to his office, he found Holmes and Anderson seated as he had left them, their attitudes unchanged, except that Holmes had completed his reading of the paper, and was leaning lazily back, hands clasped about his knees, while Anderson had finished his cigar,

and was lighting another, as Billy entered the room.

Holmes looked up, smiling. "Quite a confab," he observed; "hope the old gentleman wasn't lecturing you, Billy. Let's have the story you were going to tell us. That's what we've been waiting for."

But greatly to the surprise of both, Whitfield shook his head, and made straight for his desk. "Not now," he said shortly; "there isn't time. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you chaps to get out of here. My uncle has just put me in charge of a whacking big deal, that's going to keep me busy for the next six months. Sorry, but business is business. And this is a great chance; so of course I want to make good."

Both his friends stared at him, impressed, in spite of themselves, yet half doubtful as well. "Ah, go on," said Anderson at last, "you're stringing us." And Holmes added, "You're a corker, Billy. If a fellow didn't know you, you could make him believe black was white. But Bart and I are onto you. You can't fool us, so don't try to bluff."

Billy smiled — the tolerant, condescending smile of superior knowledge. “You boys mean first-rate,” he answered easily, “but of course you don’t understand these things. You’re all right in your way — both of you — but compared with a business man like myself, you’re only light-weights, you know — a big thing like this is too much for you to grasp. This takes brains — ability — skill —”

He sat regarding them coolly, while the twain, struck dumb with amazement at his effrontery, gazed, first at him, then at each other. Anderson was the first to find his tongue. “Will you listen to him?” he cried. “Hasn’t he the nerve? Billy Whitfield a business man! Billy Whitfield talking about brains, and ability, and skill! And we’re only light-weights — we can’t understand —”

Words failed him. Holmes said nothing for some moments; then, shaking his head commiseratingly, he tapped his forehead with the forefinger of his right hand. “Sad,” he observed; “very sad indeed. I’ve read of such cases. But I never saw one before. There’s

no danger, you know; he's not violent. Hallucinations — all that sort of thing. Still, it's pathetic, just the same. And so young, too."

Billy reddened. "Oh, shut up," he cried, "you think you're funny. This is on the level, I tell you," and then, as if seeking how best to convince them, he added impressively, "Look here, do you fellows want a straight tip, right from the inside? Or had you rather be funny, and go without?"

They grew serious at once. "Oh, well, that's different," answered Anderson, and Holmes added, "Why, yes, if you've really got anything like that, put us on. We thought you were only fooling."

"Well, I wasn't," Billy returned relentingly; "I never joke, in business hours. It's not dignified. And if I tell you this, I want you to promise you won't repeat it to anyone. That's understood, of course."

"Oh, of course," they chorused, and Billy, leaning forward, his face grave, whispered mysteriously, "This is the dope. Buy Bayport and

Southern. It's in for a big rise, and you'll make a lot of money. But don't you tell a soul."

They stared back at him, as if uncertain whether to credit what he said. "But look here, Billy," rejoined Holmes, lowering his voice, as Whitfield had done, to a conspirator's whisper, "I thought all the talk was the other way. Why, I had a tip that the Greenfield and Northern crowd had the votes all pledged, already. I got it so straight that I took a flier yesterday, and bought five hundred shares."

Billy, superbly scornful, gave his friend a withering glance. "And haven't you learned, by this time," he demanded, "that when the talk is all one way on a stock, that's the time to get busy playing the other end? You're pretty verdant, Phil. You want to sell that five hundred, right away, and lay in a nice little line of Bayport and Southern, instead. You won't regret it; it's a chance in a hundred, and you don't want to let it go by. And now, gentlemen," he added, with a conscious assumption of his uncle's manner, "I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me, for I'm tremendously busy.

I've got to get a lot of things started right away. I'll send you word when the worst of the rush is over, and if I should hear anything new in the meantime, I'll let you know."

Too deeply impressed for further levity, they rose and took their departure. Whitfield, however, left alone in the office, seemed to be in no great hurry about "starting things," for after consulting a time-table of the Bayport trains, he placed upon his desk a card inscribed, "Gone for the day," and blithely took his leave.

On his way to the station, he stopped at the office of Raymond and Allen, stockbrokers. Allen, the junior partner, was a young man, not many years out of college, yet cynical and blasé, with the air of one who has drained the cup of life to the dregs. Billy pulled a chair up to his friend's desk. "Look here, sport," he began. "I want to play a sure thing. What's the smallest margin you'll carry me on?"

Allen gave a sardonic grin. "If it's the customary sure thing," he answered, "I should say we'd like about twice the usual deposit.

But you'd better tell me the whole story, Billy, and if there's anything to it, why of course we'll treat you right."

It was Billy's turn to grin. "Oh, of course," he mocked; "that's a broker's main object in life. You're all philanthropists. But if you'll keep this to yourself, Ned, why I don't mind putting you wise."

He leaned forward in his chair, and for some minutes talked rapidly. At the end of that time, he straightened up, and gazed triumphantly at his friend. "So you can see," he concluded, "what a cinch it is. Why, there's nothing to it; just a dead open and shut; that's all. It's really a shame to take the money."

Allen leaned back in his chair, reflected, consulted various files of market reports, and finally rejoined, "Well, seeing it's you, Billy, we'll carry you on a four point margin. Though that's stretching things, of course. We wouldn't do it for an ordinary customer."

Billy groaned. "Oh, what bluffs you chaps are," he observed; "honestly, you make me sick. It's punishment enough for gambling to

have to associate with such a gang. Still, I'm going to give this a go," and he drew a check from his pocket, hastily filled it out, and handed it to the broker. "Buy me a thousand Bayport & Southern, at the market," he said, and departed to catch his train.

Allen looked after him curiously. "I believe he's in right, for once," he muttered, and filling out two slips of paper instead of one, he strolled over to the order clerk's window. "Buy two thousand B and S., at market, Martin," he said, and walked back to his desk.

Billy, meanwhile, serenely happy, strode cheerfully along toward the station, repeating at intervals to himself, "A cinch. A lead pipe cinch," and already spending, in imagination, the profits to be soon forthcoming from the Honorable Staunton's tip.

If he could have been present, however, in his uncle's office, about four o'clock, that same afternoon, and could have seen the Honorable Staunton and Deacon Hezekiah Wentworth seated together in earnest consultation, his confidence in the future might have received some-

thing of a shock. The "big man" of the city and the "big man" of the town furnished an interesting study as they sat facing each other across the mahogany table. Outwardly, they presented a striking contrast; the capitalist fashionably dressed, carefully groomed, his smooth-shaven face ruddy with health, a young man still, despite his years; the Deacon clad in sober black, with clerical tie, broad, square-toed shoes, and benevolent side-whiskers redolent of respectability. Yet these outward differences were more apparent than real; the expression of both men, under the surface, was much the same; and a shrewd observer might well have hazarded the guess that the financier and the churchman had plenty of tastes in common, after all.

"I saw my nephew this morning," the Honorable Staunton had just observed, "and he is perfectly willing to run."

Wentworth, almost as thrifty with words as he was with dollars, made no reply, and after a pause the capitalist continued, "What are his chances, Deacon, for being elected?"

The Deacon meditated; then answered guardedly, "Pretty fair."

Whitfield frowned. He had expected a more enthusiastic response. "Pretty fair," he echoed sharply. "No better than that?" And then, as a shake of the head was the Deacon's only response, he queried again, "Why not?"

Wentworth, for the first time, became loquacious. "There's a lot of the boys," he responded, "want Tom Nickerson to run."

Staunton Whitfield's expression of displeasure deepened, and question and answer followed each other in rapid succession.

"Nickerson? Who's Nickerson?"

"Fisherman."

"What do they want him to run for?"

"Boys like him."

"Able?"

"Not especially."

"Honest?"

"Far as I know."

"Will he run?"

"Think he will."

A pause. Then, "Anything he wants?"

"Not that I know of."

"No way to stop him, then?"

"Don't think there is."

The Honorable Staunton pondered, sure sign of trouble for someone. At length he asked, "Why do they like Nickerson?"

The Deacon again waxed diffuse. "Nice feller," he responded; "he ain't a hog. Kind of an obligin' sort of a cuss."

"Ah," was the Honorable's only comment, and he pondered again. Then, "Plenty of excitement, I suppose, in town, wondering which crowd's going to get the road?"

"You bet there is," the Deacon assented; "they've called a meeting about it, in Lighthouse Hall, to try to make up their minds whether to sell their stock in Bayport & Southern, or to stand pat, where they are. Oh, there's excitement enough. No trouble about that."

Something in this information appeared to please the capitalist greatly. "Ah," was again his only comment, but his tone spoke volumes,

and after a moment, he added with decision, "Get Nickerson to make a speech in Lighthouse Hall, advising everyone to sell — have him tell them that Greenfield is going to get the franchise, and that Bayport stock is in for a disastrous break. Give this your best attention, Deacon, right away."

Wentworth's expression seemed to indicate that he thought the capitalist was taking leave of his senses. "Why, Nickerson wouldn't do that," he rejoined tartly; "never in God's world."

"Why not," queried the Honorable Staunton, urbanely; "I thought you said he was an obliging kind of a man?"

"I did," retorted the Deacon, "but that don't prove nothin'. A man can be obligin', an' still not be a darn fool."

For reply, the financier leaned forward, selected pen and paper, and wrote with care and deliberation. Then, as he blotted the page, he asked, "Who is this lieutenant of yours, you think so much of? Savanarola? Tortoni? What is the man's name?"

The Deacon grinned. "Guess you mean Torella," he suggested; "Sarvy Torella. He's the feller I told you about."

The Honorable Staunton nodded. "That's the man," he said. "Give him this note; let him get at Nickerson his own way; but see that the note comes back to me at once or there'll be trouble for Mr. Torella. Read it, Deacon; it may interest you."

The Deacon read, and immediately his expression changed to one of the most unaffected amazement. For the first time in many years, he lapsed into the vigorous and unregenerate speech of his boyhood, before he became a pillar of the church, and as he spoke, even his whiskers seemed to lose something of their odor of sanctity. "*Hell*, you say!" he ejaculated. "Why, I thought the road was comin' to Bayport, sure as a gun."

The capitalist's expression was inscrutable. "It's hard to tell about things, isn't it?" was his somewhat evasive answer, and immediately he added, "Well, Nickerson will make that speech, won't he?"

Wentworth nodded with conviction. "Sure thing," he assented; "that's strong enough for anyone. Pretty good authority to make a speech on, I should say."

The Honorable Staunton paid no heed to the compliment. "See that he does it, then," he commanded; then, less brusquely, "I'll keep you informed, Deacon; don't give yourself any uneasiness. And if you're not successful with Nickerson, let me know at once."

The Deacon rose. "I'll do my best, Mr. Whitfield," he responded, and his tone seemed to convey the impression that Deacon Hezekiah Wentworth's best was very good indeed. After which, he took his departure, marveling at what he had heard, and leaving the Honorable Staunton to ponder in peace.

CHAPTER V

BILLY MINGLES WITH THE NATIVES

ANDERSON had completed the process of unpacking; sweater and rubber-boots, oilskins and cartridges, littered the floor of Mrs. Stiggins' living room. With a shove of his foot, he kicked bags and suit-cases under the table, and began fitting his gun together.

Billy extended his hand. "Let's look at her, Bart," he said, and as Anderson complied with his request, he threw the gun to his shoulder, sighting swiftly at the lamp on the wall. "She comes up nice," he remarked, "and I'll bet she shoots hard, too. You'll get some ducks with her, if you point her straight."

Anderson, without replying, rose, walked over to the window, and pulled aside the curtain. It was a perfect December night; a clear, cold moon shone high in the heavens, piercing

the naked branches of the trees, and patching the white ribbon of the road with quivering arabesque of light and shade. Through the loose sash, the wintry air crept penetratingly in. Anderson shivered and turned away. "Billy," he remarked with feeling, "it's going to be a *damn* cold morning."

Billy, living serenely in the present, drew closer to the stove. "Oh, well, maybe it will warm up by then," he suggested hopefully; "anyway, it won't be so bad after we're once started. Getting up — that's the worst of it. They say a cold bedroom is healthy, but I know one thing — I'd trade mine, even, for a nice steam-heated flat."

Anderson, forsaking the frigid for the temperate zone, crossed the room and stretched out his hands towards the fire. "I wonder if it's going to pay us, Billy?" he inquired anxiously. "I'd hate to freeze to death, just for the sake of a few old ducks."

Billy surveyed his friend's robust proportions, not without envy. "Oh, the devil," he retorted; "*you* won't freeze. You're too blamed

fat," but Anderson's courage was clearly on the ebb.

"Well, I don't know, Billy," he demurred; "I've got my doubts about this trip. I wish you'd tell me the programme, and let me see what I'm really up against. I don't want to die just yet. I'm too young, for one thing, and I'm not good enough, for another. So if you want me along for company, Billy, you'll have to tell me what we're going to celebrate."

Billy grinned. "Why, the programme," he answered, "is delightfully simple. At four A. M., we hear the cheerful buzz of the alarm. Eager for the day's sport, we leap from bed, descend with all possible speed to this region of comparative warmth, clothe ourselves, and proceed to enjoy what the newspapers term a 'substantial repast.' Then —"

Anderson's face had brightened visibly. "Ah, the eats," he observed; "that's the first pleasant thing you've mentioned, Billy. Do we get a good square feed?"

"Do we?" echoed Billy. "Well, rather. A real old New England breakfast — that's

what we get. Milk and doughnuts and jelly-cake; chocolate pie, mince pie, molasses cookies —”

Anderson, for the first time since his arrival, showed signs of enthusiasm. “Fine!” he ejaculated, “Great! There’s nothing like starting the day right, is there, Billy? And what happens after the feed?”

“Well,” rejoined Billy, “there’s no use in deceiving you. Then comes the disagreeable part. We pile on all the clothes we haven’t on already, grab our guns, and hike it down to the beach. There’s no disguising it — that walk is bad. It’s the worst ten minutes in the whole trip. Then we launch our boat, row out into the bay, surround ourselves with a flock of wooden decoys, and when the ducks approach, we take a mean advantage of their trusting natures, and shoot as many of ’em as we can. Along about noontime, we come ashore, have dinner, loaf around the house in the afternoon, and in the evening attend the dance at the town hall. That’s what I call a darn good programme — the simple life, and yet not *too*

simple. And if you back out, after I've invited you down here, why then you're a bluff, and all your talk about loving the country is nothing but rubbish. Come now, Bart, don't be a quitter."

Anderson, instead of replying, sat staring at his friend — stared so long and so fixedly that Billy became restless. "Well," he queried, "what do you say? Will you go, or not?"

Anderson nodded. "Oh, sure," he responded amiably, "I'll go, all right. I wasn't worrying about that, Billy. I was just thinking what a joke this is, anyway. For a fellow like you, who's always lived in the city — who's never seen the sun rise except when he was going to bed — who either plays bridge or shows up at some function, every night of his life — to see you *here*" — he waved his hand comprehensively about the room — "to have you going shooting, at four in the morning, and taking in dances at the Bayport Town Hall — why Billy, old man, it's — well, damn it, you know, it's *preposterous* — that's what it is. It's a knockout; it's a scream."

Billy flushed. "Oh, well," he defended, "it's all up to the Honorable Staunton. If he wants me to do it, that settles it. There is a funny side to it, I'll admit, but I can't help that. I'd do anything to get in right with my uncle, to say nothing of picking up some coin on the side. Isn't that right, Bart?"

"Oh, sure," Anderson agreed, "you've got to do it. Still, it's humorous, just the same. But look here, Billy," he added, with an upward glance at the clock, "if we're going to start our day at four o'clock, and wind up at a dance in the evening, we'd better beat it for the hay, while we have a chance."

Billy rose, with a sigh. "Yes, you're right, Bart," he replied, "you're always right. But if you knew what it was like upstairs, you'd certainly hate to leave this stove behind. Come on, though; it's got to be done," and ten minutes later, half smothered beneath blankets, quilts and comforters, they had sunk peacefully to sleep.

Billy's prophecies regarding the events of the morning proved correct. True to his predic-

tion, the alarm exploded, with a frightful clamor, exactly on the stroke of four. Nor had he exaggerated the temperature of bed room and hallway; and two shivering, white-robed figures, each bearing aloft a flickering candle, came leaping down the stairs at breakneck speed. Huddled close to the friendly stove, they fairly flung themselves into their clothes, then foraged the refrigerator for their morning meal, and proceeded to wreak fearful havoc on cookies, cake and pie.

The next stage of their journey, however, was far more agreeable than they had imagined, and indeed, after the first shock was over, they experienced a feeling of positive exhilaration. The morning was calm and still; the moon had set; the stars shone clear and bright against the background of the dark. Far inland, a cock crowed valiantly to greet the dawn. A faint white light was slowly spreading in the east; around them an invisible, intangible essence — the spirit of all living things — seemed hovering, spreading, each moment gaining in power, as if the whole vast earth, like themselves, had

awakened, strengthened and refreshed, from a restful, dreamless sleep.

Once arrived at the beach, they dragged their boat down to the water's edge, crushing and grinding the pebbles beneath her keel, and launched her over the rim of kelp and sea-weed which fringed the shore. Then, to the steady dip-dip-dip of the oars, they rowed straight out to sea, until the outline of the land first grew dim, then vanished, and they seemed to be floating in space, with only an occasional flash from the lighthouse to guide them on their way.

Presently Anderson broke the silence. "Say, old sport," he observed, "this is all very fine, but how in blazes are we to tell where the ducks are coming from? How do we know where to anchor? Every part of this old Bay looks alike to me. They ought to set out some buoys and things, to show a fellow the way."

"Yes, they ought," Billy agreed. "I was asking about that, up in town, a couple of nights ago, but I couldn't seem to find out much. One old fellow said that you rowed right out and anchored on the line, but what on earth he meant

by that, I don't know. I suppose he was jolly-ing me. There couldn't be any kind of a line out here, could there?"

Anderson gazed around him into the darkness. "Well, if there is, we'll never find it," he answered. "I vote we wait right here, Billy, until we can see something. If we keep on rowing, we'll get lost, first thing we know."

Billy drew in his oars. "All right, then," he assented, "we'll anchor here; and I suppose, while we're about it, we might as well set out the decoys. Then, if any birds come along, we'll be ready for 'em."

One by one, they tossed the wooden ducks over the side; then, anchoring, they loaded their guns, and sat straining their eyes through the gloom, eager for the first glimpse of their game. Inky blackness still enveloped them; the sun seemed to be a long time in rising; the minutes dragged intolerably. Presently a faint breeze struck from the northeast, and Anderson, with chattering teeth, shrank down into the bottom of the boat. "B-r-r-r," he shivered, "this is great, Billy. I'd give a five dollar note to be

home again. You'd never — hullo, what's that? ”

Through the darkness, the sound of oars came faintly to their ears, and a moment later they could distinguish the shadowy outline of another boat, coming toward them. “Someone else after ducks,” remarked Billy; “he'd better look out and not spoil our shooting. I suppose, when he finds we're here, he'll sheer off and go somewhere else.”

The oarsman, however, continued to approach, and it soon became evident that instead of trying to avoid them, it was directly toward their boat that he was making his way. Presently they could make out an old, slab-sided dory, with a tall, lanky figure, seated amidships, rowing a remarkably vigorous stroke at the oars. Nor did their visitor slacken speed until he was nearly upon them, when he dexterously turned the dory, almost on her own axis, and without wasting time on the preliminary courtesies of the morning, proceeded to hail them in a high-pitched and strident voice.

“Look a here,” he queried shrilly, “what in

the name o' *God* do you think you're doin'? Comin' out here an' settin' where you be? Ain't you got no common-sense, nor nothin'?"

For some seconds, Billy sat speechless, in stupefied amazement. Then the blood rushed suddenly to his head, he leaped to his feet, and hastened to make eloquent and sarcastic rejoinder. "Cut that out, old top," he cried; "I guess you haven't any mortgage on this Bay. Has a fellow got to have a permit from you, before he can set decoys? Who the devil do you think you are, anyway?"

A contemptuous grunt was the reply. "You think you're smart, don't yer, young feller?" the shrill voice responded. "Well, I'll tell you this, right now. I ain't got no mortgage on no Bay, but every feller that goes duckin' out o' Bayport Harbor sets on the line, an' don't you fergit it. There's six boats there, this mornin', already, and you've gone and set out plumb in front of 'em. You want to haul up your 'coys, an' come back where you b'long, or else you'll be gittin' into trouble, mighty quick."

The gunner's tone rang true, and in spite of

himself, Billy wavered; but while he hesitated whether to comply or to stand his ground, the less impetuous Anderson put in a word. "We're strangers here," he observed; "what's all this talk about a line? How can you tie your boat to a line out here in the middle of the Bay?"

A hoarse chuckle penetrated the darkness. "*Hell*, but you boys are green," came the unflattering response; "the gunnin' line ain't no line to tie to; it's a 'maginary line, Bates' flag-staff over Tower's barn. My gran'father, he gunned on that line for sixty years; my father, he gunned on it for fifty an' I've been goin' it for pretty nigh forty, myself. So you young whippersnappers want to pick up, an' move back, quick's you can. There's a berth inside o' Si Pratt, you can take. But you want to hurry. Birds'll be flyin' pretty soon." The oars dipped again, and the dory receded in the darkness.

Anderson shouted after him, "Where is your old line, anyway?"

The gunner rested on his oars. "'Bout a

quarter of a mile, straight to the east'ard," he shouted back; "you can't miss it. But you want to git a move on yer. You take that berth inside Si Pratt."

Silence reigned. At length, Billy heaved a sigh. "Well, damn his impudence," he ejaculated. "I suppose we've got to do it, Bart, but I'll be hanged if I enjoy being ordered around by an old hayseed like that. I guess it can't be helped, though. You row, and I'll take in these blamed decoys."

But the time the wooden ducks were once more piled neatly in the bow, the dawn was close at hand, and they could see the six boats lying at anchor on the "'maginary line," each surrounded by its little flock of decoys. Billy removed his gloves, blew on his numbed fingers, and rejoined his companion at the oars. "We'd better hurry, Bart," he said, "or we'll miss the shooting. The ducks fly early, you know. What was it that old cuss said about a berth?"

Anderson chuckled. "He said there was a berth inside Si Pratt that we could have," he

replied, "whatever that means. Sounds to me as if Si must be a cannibal."

Billy pondered. "Oh, I know," he suddenly exclaimed, "a berth — that's the position on the line, of course. And these chaps always say 'inside' when they mean 'inshore.' 'A berth inside Si Pratt,' — that means that Pratt's in the inshore boat, and that we're to go next to him. But how can we tell whether it's a good place or not. Confound their rules and regulations, anyway. They make me tired. I don't believe —"

"Billy! Billy!" Anderson interrupted, in an agonized whisper, "look at the ducks — look at 'em. Going right for old Hayseed there — what do you know about that —"

Billy turned, and overcome by his feelings, burst into eloquent profanity. Their friend in the dory had regained his anchorage just in time to draw in his oars, seize his gun, and crouch low in the bottom of the boat, as a flock of a dozen big black sea-ducks came winging in from out to sea, straight toward the decoys. Whitfield and Anderson gazed, fascinated.

Presently the birds set their wings, scaled gracefully down within an easy gunshot of the dory, and made as if to light; then all at once seemed suddenly to change their minds, and flew on again, drawing compactly together in the air. Instantly the gunner rose to his knees, and threw his gun to his shoulder. There was a moment's suspense — then the hollow “plop! plop!” of the smokeless powder, and three of the flock folded their wings, and splashed heavily into the water, their earthly pilgrimage abruptly at an end. Anderson cried out sharply. “By Cricky!” he ejaculated, “old Hayseed's some shooter, Billy, isn't he? Didn't he give it to 'em, though?”

But Billy's thoughts were working in a different direction. “Gosh darn his soul!” he exclaimed vindictively, “I see what he's up to, Bart. He's got the best place — berth, or whatever it is they call it — that's why he wants us to go inshore, where we won't bother him, and won't get any shooting, either. I'll bet a dollar that's his game. But we're not as easy as he thinks we are; we'll put a crimp in him,

all right. We'll go offshore of everybody, and the next flock that comes along like that, why we'll get the first shot at 'em, and he'll get left. See?"

"Sure thing," Anderson assented with enthusiasm. "You've got a great head, Billy; you're all right. Gee, but I'd like to see a big bunch coming in to us. We wouldn't do a thing to 'em; what?"

"You betcher," responded Billy, the ardor of the chase bringing the slang of his boyhood to his lips, "we'd sting 'em good. Let's dig now, Bart, and get ready before any more come along. We're going to have some fun, before we're through."

Accordingly, they "dug" with all their might, and under their vigorous strokes their boat was soon occupying the offshore position among the little fleet. "Now then," Billy cried, "you get the decoys over, quick, and I'll do the rowing. Guess they can't find any fault with us now, confound 'em. They're a fussy old gang of sea-lawyers; that's what they are."

The words, however, had scarcely passed his

lips when their lanky neighbor hailed them once more. "Hey, there!" he shouted, "git further offshore." He pointed one long arm to make his meaning clear. "Offshore," he repeated; "you ain't fur enough out."

Billy became almost inarticulate. With a jerk, he pulled in the oars, and leaped quickly to his feet. "What's the matter now," he cried, in no uncertain tone; "aren't we on your blamed old line? Didn't you tell us this was the place to come?"

But the gunner appeared in no wise disconcerted. "Sure you're on the line," he shouted back, "but you ain't took a fair berth. You ain't more'n a gunshot away from me, now. You want to go 'bout twice as far, straight offshore. Then you'll be all right."

Anderson stood hesitating, a decoy poised in either hand. "Well, what shall we do, Billy?" he asked. "Move again?"

Billy resumed his place at the oars, his face flushed, his usually placid brow contracted. "Move? Not on your tintype," he retorted angrily, "that old fool would keep us moving

all day, if he could. No, sir, we stick right where we are, and if he doesn't like it, he can go to blazes. Sling over the decoys, Bart, and we'll anchor."

Anderson complied, and the man in the dory making no further protest, they proceeded to settle themselves comfortably in the bottom of the boat, waiting with impatience for another flock to appear. Presently Anderson reached for his gun. "Gosh, Billy," he cried, "here's all creation coming; and straight for us, too."

Billy thrust the muzzle of his gun over the rail, and crouched still lower in the boat; then looked eagerly for the ducks, and as he saw them, gasped. A flock of at least a hundred, strung out in a wide, irregular crescent, was bearing straight down upon them, not more than a dozen gunshots away. So steady was their course, indeed, and so swift was their flight, that they were almost within range before they even caught sight of the decoys. What followed was kaleidoscopic in its effect. The older birds, scenting danger, kept on, veering quickly out to sea; the younger ones, less

experienced in the dangers of the southward voyage, turned, wheeled, dipped and fluttered in a dozen different directions, in their haste to alight among the decoys. The whole air seemed filled with ducks. Billy rose to his knees, and sighted quickly at the nearest; but as he did so, another crossed his line of vision, and he swung on the latest comer instead. Then, seized with a kind of "buck fever" he kept pointing his gun at bird after bird, but without the will to pull the trigger, until the report of Anderson's twelve gauge brought him to his senses, and he discharged both barrels so rapidly that he took no aim at all, and sent both loads of shot into the empty air. Anderson had done no better, and as they fumbled hurriedly for fresh cartridges, they had the crowning mortification of seeing some half dozen stragglers, who had splashed in among the decoys, take wing, and fly stolidly past the boat, so close that the gunners could see their eyes, and note the broad patches of white on their wings. By the time they had reloaded their guns, the last bird was safely out of shot,

and they were left staring blankly into each other's faces, disconcerted and ashamed.

The whole fleet appeared to take a kindly interest in their performance. The query as to how many they had killed was passed along from boat to boat, and their friend in the dory obligingly communicated the details to the rest. "Get any?" they heard him shout. "No, not a damn duck. Guess they was too excited. Near enough? Oh, God, yes, they was tryin' to fly into the boat. I never see worse shootin' in my life; somethin' fierce. No, I don' know who they be; couple of greenhorns, I reckon. Anyhow, they act that way."

Billy gritted his teeth, yet the fortune of war, at least for the time being, seemed to be with the enemy; no fitting retort came to hand. But presently their chance to redeem themselves appeared, in the shape of a trio of ducks, flying close to the water, in Indian file, half way between their decoys and those of their rival inshore. Billy, with glaring eyes and compressed lips, waited until it was evident that the birds had no intention of altering their

course, then brought his gun deliberately to his shoulder. So intent was he, indeed, on making a successful shot, that he failed to allow for one trifling circumstance — at the moment he pressed the trigger, their neighbor in the dory was brought directly into range. Anderson foresaw the result, and strove to anticipate it by giving vent to an involuntary yell of alarm. But he was too late. “Bing! Bing!” spoke Billy’s ten bore, the ducks flew on, unscathed, and in the vicinity of the dory there sounded a sharp and sudden rattle, like the beating of hailstones on a cottage roof. “Judas Priest, Billy,” cried Anderson, “you’ve done it now.” There was a moment of brooding, ominous silence, and then their adversary rose majestically to his feet, shaking his clenched fist in the air. “Jumpin’ Jerusalem!” he began, the shrill voice at least an octave higher than usual in the scale; and then, as if realizing that his words were wholly inadequate to the occasion, he stopped short, and began again, in a nobler strain. “Hell an’ damnation!” he shrieked, and for the next five minutes held forth, graphic-

ally and in language quite unfit for print, on the subject of the offshore boat, sketching in vivid outline the lives of its occupants, their antecedents, their characters, and their ultimate destination, upon their decease.

At length he subsided, and resumed his seat. Anderson turned to his companion. "Billy," he observed, "you're certainly the limit. Peppering a man full of bird shot like that. Who could blame him for getting mad? That was the devil of a thing to do."

Billy nodded with unusual meekness. "I know it was," he admitted; "my mind was on the ducks; I never thought about Mark Antony there being in the way. And I'll say this much, too," he added generously: "I don't like that old geezer, and his voice gets on my nerves, but I'll give him credit for being as good a cusser as I ever heard. I can't remember anyone — not even when we were in college — that could swear any better than he did. Why, confound him, he made me feel like an amateur; he's a peach."

"Yes," Anderson agreed, "he can certainly

sling the English. He's beaten us swearing, and beaten us shooting, too. The next bunch that comes, Billy, we've got to get a duck. We can't go home skunked."

Billy was gazing fixedly toward the westward. "There's a flock now," he said; "see 'em? Way up there, off the beach?"

Anderson studied the horizon. "That's not a flock," he objected; "that's a lonesome one. You can't call one bird a flock."

Billy snapped open his gun to make sure that he had reloaded it, then glanced up again at the approaching duck. "You're right," he acquiesced, "but don't you care; it makes our chances better. That was the trouble with the first bunch — there were too darn many of 'em — we'll concentrate on this fellow, and knock the stuffing out of him."

Anderson surveyed the oncoming bird with some misgivings. "He seems to be coming just as the three did," he observed anxiously. "For Heaven's sake, Billy, don't shoot anybody this time."

"No danger," retorted Billy, "the others

were flying close to the water. This chap's away up in the air. We couldn't hit old Hayseed, if we tried."

Nearer and nearer came their quarry, all unconscious of the danger awaiting him; his neck outstretched, his wings beating the air with swift, powerful strokes. Keeping straight on his course, he passed midway between the two boats, but as Billy had predicted, so high in the air that all danger of "peppering" their neighbor was averted. The critical moment had come; it was evident that the game would approach no nearer. Billy rose hastily to his knees. "Soak him, Bart! Soak him!" he shouted, and together they levelled their guns and fired. "Bing! Bing!" sounded their right-hand barrels; "Bing! Bing!" echoed their lefts. The duck crumpled in the air, as if struck by lightning. His long neck jerked back over his body, his wings relaxed, and with a splash he fell, stone-dead, into the quiet waters of the Bay.

Billy leaped forward, with a whoop of triumph, to cast off the buoy. "Hurray for

us," he cried; "who says we can't shoot ducks? Get out your oars, Bart; we'll go pick him up."

Anderson obeyed; then, throwing a glance over his shoulder to ascertain the direction, he gave a start of surprise. "What the devil does that mean, Billy?" he exclaimed. "Old Hayseed's rowing, too."

Such, indeed, was the case. Their neighbor had tossed his buoy over the side, and was rowing slowly toward the dead bird. Billy rubbed his eyes in bewilderment; then choked with rage. "By *Gosh!*" he ejaculated, "if that doesn't beat the devil. That old chap's a regular pirate. Going to steal our bird. We'll stop him, though. Give it to her, Bart; we'll get there first," and thrusting out his oars, they swept forward toward their prize.

But their rival was not to be outdone. Quickening his pace in turn, he made the dory fairly jump, and the distance between the two boats decreased with the utmost rapidity. Both reached the goal at the same moment; both were going too fast to stop; and at the same instant

Billy and the "Hayseed" drew in their oars, and leaned forward to grasp the duck. There was a mighty crash, as the boats collided; for a moment, they careened dangerously, then righted themselves; and behold, so close had been the race, that Billy found himself grasping one wing of the duck, his antagonist the other, while their crimsoning faces were almost touching across the rail.

Billy, thoroughly enraged, was the first to speak, his voice sounding utterly unlike his own. "Let go my duck," he hissed; "let go my duck, or I'll smash your face in."

But the villager only tightened his grip. "Your duck be damned," he squeaked; "you couldn't hit a duck in a month o' Sundays. I killed that feller. You folks fired at him right after I did, but you never touched him. So leggo of him, 'cause he's mine."

If it be true, indeed, that possession is nine points of the law, the advantage in the struggle suddenly shifted to the stranger, for altering his hold on the duck, he gave such a mighty pull that a second later, Billy found himself hold-

ing desperately to one wing, wrenched off in the fray, while the gunner, with a snort of triumph, tossed the remainder of the bird into his dory's stern.

For an instant, Billy sat motionless, a figure midway between the ridiculous and the tragic, still grasping the wing of the innocent victim, whose blood was spattered freely over Billy's face. Then, utterly losing control of himself, he reached for the first weapon in sight, which happened to be the boat's tiller, and screaming frantically to Anderson, "Hold on to his boat, Bart; hold on to his boat," he leaped to his feet, and smote his antagonist a vigorous blow in the ribs.

Immediately retribution followed. The gunner had jumped up in a twinkling, boat hook in hand, and first swinging it as if to use it as a cudgel, he suddenly shifted his plan of attack, and lunging forward as if executing a bayonet drill, caught Whitfield fairly in the pit of the stomach.

There was no withstanding such an onslaught. Billy, with an agonized grunt, stag-

gered backward, lost his footing, and fell, his head striking smartly on the rowboat's rail, a trail of fiery meteors circling and whirling before his eyes. Then, like a shot, the victor turned on Anderson, and though Billy's friend stood his ground nobly, and dodged the attack as best he might, at length a shrewd stroke caught him squarely on the thumb, and his yell of pain marked the conclusion of the battle. Yet tragedy might still have been added to comedy, for Billy, rising dizzily to his feet, and half drunk with rage, had actually reached for his gun, when a third boat shot between those of the combatants; a voice called, "Well, what you folks celebratin', anyway?" and Billy, coming to himself with a gasp, laid down his weapon, and found himself confronted by the stalwart figure of Tom Nickerson.

The gunner from Bayport was the first to answer the question. "These fellers was goin' to take my duck —" he began, but Billy, still angry enough for anything short of murder, cut in, "Nothing of the sort. We killed the duck, and this man comes along and swipes it.

I never knew such nerve in my life. He thinks he owns the ocean, too —”

Here the possessor of the duck struck in once more. “That’s about enough o’ that cheap talk, young feller —” he began, when Nickerson himself took a hand in the discussion.

“Oh, come, now,” he said mildly, “I wouldn’t have no hard feelin’s ’bout a duck. ’Tain’t wuth it. But you ought to be able to tell who shot him, anyway. Let’s see him, ’Bije.”

The gunner reached toward the stern of his dory, picked up the mangled body of the victim, and tossed it to Nickerson, who caught it adroitly, at the same time asking, “Which way did he come? From the west’ard, I suppose.”

“That’s what he did,” responded Billy’s antagonist.

“Sure thing,” echoed Billy; and Nickerson proceeded to place the duck in the attitude of flight, with head pointing to the east; then, after a moment’s investigation, he turned to Billy. “’Bijah’s duck, Mr. Whitfield,” he said; “ain’t no doubt of that at all. You look a’ here.”

That side of the bird which had been toward

Whitfield when the shots were fired was unmarked, while on the other side, just back of the neck, there was a gaping hole, the soft feathers stained and matted with blood. The deduction was so apparent as to leave no room for argument, and even Billy made no protest as Nickerson tossed the bird back into the dory, and the victorious 'Bijah, with a satisfied grin on his hairy face, rowed slowly back toward his anchorage.

In the rowboat, gloom prevailed. Billy, beginning to experience the reaction from his fit of rage, sat limp and white on the forward thwart, feeling guardedly of his head, which was throbbing painfully. Anderson, in the stern, nursed his injured thumb, heroically refraining from speech, but with the liveliest agony depicted on his features. Nickerson regarded them with sympathy. "Too bad, boys," he condoled; "guess 'Bijah was a mite too rough, even if 'twas his duck. I tell you what you do. You pick up them 'coys o' your'n, an' I'll give you a tow home, an' get my wife to give you a bite of breakfast. Cup of hot coffee goes good on

a morning like this. What do you say? Give it a try? ”

No invitation ever received a more prompt acceptance. The thought of breakfast would have been sufficient, but joined to this was an earnest desire to get out of range of 'Bijah's caustic tongue; and hastily hauling in the decoys, they made fast the rope which Nickerson threw them, and a moment later were being towed rapidly along toward Bayport Harbor.

CHAPTER VI

BILLY CONTINUES TO MINGLE

AS Billy and Bart left the "line" behind them, their spirits began to mend. The day itself made for cheerfulness. The sun, now fairly risen, began to diffuse a genial warmth; the blue water stretched away to the eastward, far as the eye could see; inshore, the village, with its white-walled houses, its harbor, its fleet of boats, gave the needed touch of human activity and companionship. Billy, reclining at full length, his feet gracefully decorating the rowboat's rail, heaved a sigh of contentment, and gave vent to what for him was a genuine burst of poetic feeling. "Hot stuff, Bart," he observed; "back to Nature, and all that kind of thing. Damn the ducks. We'll leave 'em to old Hayseed. This is better fun, any day."

Anderson, possibly owing to his twinging

thumb, was hardly able to attain such lyrical heights. "Sure, this is great," was the extent of his contribution, but he added longingly, "Think of the eats, Billy; think of the eats."

"Well, don't get your hopes too high," Billy cautioned; "Nickerson's wife is quite young, you know; probably she can't cook for a darn. But I'll tell you one thing, Bart," he supplemented, "she's mighty easy to look at. Pretty as a picture, and a perfectly ripping figure. It beats me how she ever married *that* —" and he motioned contemptuously toward Nickerson — "a damn shame, I call it, for such a good looking girl. I only wish —"

But whatever the wish might have been, he did not complete it aloud. Anderson frowned uneasily, for being somewhat old-fashioned in his views, he punctiliously observed respect for all women, and it appeared to him that Billy's attitude toward both their host and his wife was decidedly unbecoming. Yet knowing the futility of remonstrance, he held his tongue, and presently, passing the Buckthornes and the

Suttons, the island lay before them; Nickerson shut off his power; and both dory and rowboat grounded gently against the slope of the beach.

Immediately, the door of the cottage burst open, and a little boy, flanked on either side by a frisking puppy, came toddling down the path, his arms outstretched toward his father. "Daddy, daddy," he cried, and Nickerson, stepping quickly ashore, caught him up in his arms and held him high above his head, while the boy kicked and struggled, shrieking with delight, his golden curls shining in the sunlight, his big brown eyes dancing with merriment. But when Nickerson, with fatherly pride, bade him "say good-morning to the gentlemen," he became suddenly mute, and burying his head on his father's shoulder, peered shyly forth, finger in mouth, at the mysterious strangers. Nickerson turned to his guests. "Come on up to the house," he said, "and we'll give you something to eat. Like as not Edith's seen us coming, and got things all ready for us. So come right ahead."

His guess proved correct, and five minutes later they were seated at the kitchen table, devouring codfish steaks, baked beans and coffee at a rate which kept Edith Nickerson busy looking after their wants. The meal was eaten for the most part in silence, for Nickerson, with a long day's fishing still ahead of him, was anxious to set forth again, while Anderson, finding the food to his liking, and with his appetite sharpened by the morning air, was too busy to waste valuable time in conversation. Billy, the connoisseur in feminine loveliness, was the only one of the three whose mind was not on his breakfast, and casting many a covert glance at Edith Nickerson as she passed to and fro about the room, he soon came to the pleasant conclusion that she was even prettier than he had thought, from their casual meeting on the night of the sermon in the Town Hall. To himself, he kept up a running comment, appraising her various charms with the skill of long and varied experience. "She's really a pippin," he mused; "bully eyes, nice hair, a corking mouth, and golly, what a shape.

Carries herself well, too; and by Jove, what a smile. Come, old scout, this looks interesting; better map out your campaign, while you have a chance. Pretty! Gee, where have my eyes been? Pretty isn't the word for it. She's a beauty, that's what she is; she's a peach. And what in blazes could she see in Nickerson. Hullo, feed's over, confound it —"

For while he was thus meditating, Nickerson had pushed back his chair and had begun pulling on his oilskins. "Now then, gentlemen," he asked, "what's it going to be? I've got to go off to the Tree Ground to haul a string of pots, but I'll tow you over to the harbor first, if you say so. Or I'll fetch you back to the line, so's you can see 'Bijah, or better yet, I'll set you out off Gull Ledge, all by yourselves, and you'll get some good shooting 'fore dinner time, and I'll stop on my way in, and pick you up. Anything you say. All you've got to do is to make your choice."

Anderson spoke up quickly. "Gull Ledge sounds good to me," he replied; "I wouldn't go near that fiend with the boat hook and the

whiskers again for a thousand dollars, but a quiet little shoot by our lonesomes would just about fill the bill. What say, sport?"

But Whitfield shook his head. "I'm sorry," he answered, "but to tell the truth, I don't feel quite up to it. That old pirate whacked me pretty hard, and I'm just beginning to feel the effects now. But I wouldn't spoil your fun for anything, Bart. You let Mr. Nickerson tow you out, and if I won't be in the way, I'll just loaf around the Island here, and sit in the sun, till you come back. Probably I'll feel better by that time."

Nickerson rose. "Sure thing," he responded heartily; "make yourself right at home. And you'll excuse me for hurrying off, but I've got a lot to do. Come on, Mr. Anderson; I'll fit you in a place where you'll have a dozen shots before twelve o'clock, or I'm a liar. Good-by, Edith; back about noon," and with Anderson at his heels, he went striding down the path, while Billy, lighting a cigar, strolled away toward the cliffs to the eastward of the house.

As Nickerson pushed the dory's bow from shore, he gave a sudden exclamation. "There, I forgot," he cried; "just a minute, Mr. Anderson," and once more dropping the anchor, he hurriedly retraced his steps to the cottage. "How's the old gentleman, Edith?" he asked. "I clean forgot about him, havin' these folks come home with me like this. Is he feelin' any better to-day?"

Edith Nickerson shook her head. "No, he's worse than ever," she answered; "that last book — 'Shopping Hour,' or some name like that — was too much for him. He wouldn't eat his breakfast, and he's gone over on the rocks to finish reading it. There'll be no living with him, by night."

Nickerson sighed. "Too bad," he replied. "I thought he acted yesterday as if he had one of his times coming on. Still, he'll get over it, I suppose, after a while. Cheer him up if you can, Edith," and he hastened away again for the beach.

In the meantime Billy, as he sauntered along toward the cliffs, frowned to himself as he re-

viewed the events of the morning. His shooting trip had scarcely resulted as he had planned it, and he was dreaming vengefully of "getting square" with the pugnacious 'Bijah, until a still more unpleasant thought drove the memory of his personal humiliation from his mind. For in the excitement of the struggle, he had completely forgotten what the real purpose of the expedition had been, and now it suddenly flashed upon him that besides acquiring a bruised stomach and an aching head, he had made a serious tactical blunder by incurring the wrath of 'Bijah, and very likely of the entire "line" as well. And as the enormity of what he had done became clearer to him, he could feel himself flushing with mortification. "What a fool," he cried aloud; "what an ass I've been. Uncle Staunton said to make friends of these guys, and look at the way I've done it. Gee, what a rotten break; I'll have to square myself somehow. Well, the next old fossil I meet, I'll treat as smooth as silk; just see if I don't. Hullo, who the devil's this? Here's one of 'em, now —"

As he spoke, he had reached the top of the cliff, and to his surprise discovered in front of him an elderly native, seated with his back against a rock, and gazing intently out to sea, a book lying open across his knees. He made no response to Billy's "good-morning," but regarded him for some moments in silence, and then gravely inquired, "Young man, do you believe in God?"

Unhappy Billy! If his mind had been more on the Nickerson family, and less on his own troubles, he might perhaps have remembered what Dorothy Lawrence had told him concerning old Jim Nickerson and his ways, but as it was, the stranger's identity never so much as occurred to him, and there was something so venerable in his appearance, and such a ring of sincerity in his tone, that Billy felt sure he had come across either a minister, or failing that, at least an elder or deacon of the church. Therefore, with his newly made resolve fresh in mind, he answered blandly, "Oh, yes, indeed, sir. I should rather say I did," and then, harking back to his boyhood's days, when attendance at

Sabbath school had been compulsory, he added confidently, "and the means of grace, you know — and the hope of glory — and all such things as that."

The stranger's expression did not alter in the slightest. For some moments, he continued to stare fixedly at Whitfield; then uttered the single disconcerting monosyllable, "Why?"

Immediately Billy experienced the unpleasant shock of the victim who has walked unguardedly into a trap. Yet it was still possible, he reflected, that the old gentleman might be merely seeking for information, and even if he should turn out to be an unbeliever, it was now unfortunately too late for Billy to shift his ground. In any event, the question was certainly an open one, and he therefore responded glibly, and with an effort at sanctimonious reproof in his tone, "Why? Because the Bible says so."

At once the old man's calm deserted him. His eyes gleamed, and he sawed the air with one bony arm. "Bible!" he shouted, "don't you talk no Bible to me. It's nothin' but a pack o' lies. Do you b'lieve Adam was made out o'

dust, an' Eve was made out o' one o' Adam's ribs? B'lieve the ravens fed 'Lijah? Do you b'lieve Joshuay made the sun stand still? Do you stand for that Jonah stuff, that any seafarin' man could tell you was all humbug, from beginnin' to end? No, sir, don't you talk Bible to me. You show me a man that takes stock in them stories, an' I'll show you a goldarn fool."

Billy reddened. The attitude of these rustics toward the nephew of the Honorable Staunton Whitfield appeared to him to be inappropriate in the extreme. Yet since the controversy was begun, he concluded that to keep on fighting was better than to beat an inglorious retreat, and therefore retorted, "Oh, I wasn't talking about the Old Testament at all. That *is* confusing, in spots. But I meant the New Testament. If you read that carefully, why it makes everything clear."

The old man fairly snorted his defiance. "Clear!" he ejaculated. "Oh, sure; clear as mud. How 'bout the 'Maculate Conception? Ain't that a likely story, to start with? An' how 'bout the miracles, an' bringin' the dead to life?"

Do you cal'late them things happened? No, sir; that stuff's for women an' kids; 'tain't for men. I'll tell you a story 'bout the Bible; there was a real smart chap down here last summer, an' he 'xplained to me how he was fixin' up his library, an' arrangin' all his books under Religion an' History an' Jography an' Bography an' Fiction an' so on. Finally he comes to the Bible, an' where do you s'pose he puts it, young man? Where do you s'pose he puts this Holy Bible you're braggin' about? Now you answer me that!"

Billy, aghast at the fervor of this ruthless iconoclast, could only murmur faintly, "Why, I don't know. Under Religion, I suppose, or maybe under History —"

The unbeliever cut him short. "No, sir," he exclaimed, triumphantly, "nothin' o' the sort. He put it under Fiction — light an' amusin' Fiction — that's what he done. An' you can bet he was a smart feller, too."

Billy decided that for the present he would let the Bible argument alone. "Well, never mind about that," he said; "I believe in God,

just the same," and then, as the memory of a famous phrase came to his mind, he waved his hand dramatically toward the sea. "How can there be a world without a Creator?" he demanded. "When we see a table, we know there must have been a carpenter. When we see a picture, we deduce the existence of an artist. And when we look at the world, we infer the presence of God."

The old man gazed at him grimly. "Ah, poppycock," he retorted; "stuff an' nonsense. We seen carpenters workin', an' we know they make tables; we seen damfool artists with velvety coats on paintin' damfool pictures, when they ought to ben at work. But we never seen no Gods turnin' out no worlds, nor never will. It's nothin' but a cheat—the whole business. It's pretty to look at—mighty pretty"—and he motioned toward the water in his turn—"but that's all. Lots o' trouble, an' a little fun, an' then—six feet o' earth, an' it's over. That's the hell of it, young man; it's such a mean kind o' joke to play. It all *seems* so real—we sweat so *damn* hard over it—an'

then to find out, after all, 'tain't nothin' but a joke. Some fine day you fergit to breathe, an' that's the end of it; six feet o' earth, an' you're done."

Billy sat silent, gazing forth over the blue and sparkling sea. The conversation had shifted unexpectedly; theoretical argument had changed to stern reality; and Billy suddenly found himself filled with a lively hatred for this gloomy old gentleman, with his most depressing views. For supposing he were right — supposing that six feet of earth *was* the end — it seemed hardly fair that he, Billy Whitfield, nephew of the Honorable Staunton Whitfield, and a person of so much interest and attraction to himself — should thus all at once cease to be. And the more he thought of it, the more the idea annoyed him, until at length he exclaimed dogmatically, "Oh, you can't tell anything about it, anyway. You can say what you please, but I believe in God, and I believe I've got an immortal soul, and that I'm going to live forever, and you can't stop me from thinking so, either —"

He proceeded no further, for his adversary fell upon his words like a hawk swooping on its prey. "Immortal soul!" he cried. "Gosh, that's good. Jus' for argument, now, I'll let you have a God, if you want him, but that don't prove nothin' about souls. If there *be* a feller up there in the sky, there must be times when he most busts his sides a' laffin'; an' I'll bet he never laffs no more than when he hears folks talkin' about livin' forever. I reckon that's the cream o' the whole blame thing. Why, jus' look at the common sense of it. You say, now, you got an immortal soul?"

Billy nodded, with compressed lips. "Yes, sir," he replied doggedly; "that's what I've got."

The old man could hardly articulate fast enough. "Then when d'you git it?" he cried. "Notice now, I'm allowin' you everythin'. I'm not askin' you *where* d'you git it; I'm givin' you the benefit o' all doubts. I'm only askin' you, *when* d'you git it? That's what I want to know."

Reference to his soul as if it had been an ob-

ject of purchase, like an automobile or a set of golf clubs, somewhat staggered Billy. "I don't understand you," he replied; "how do you mean — *when* did I get it?"

"Jus' what I say," responded his inquisitor. "When did you git this immortal soul o' your'n? Yesterday, or the day before, or last month. That's all I'm askin'. How long you had it?"

There seemed but one answer to this, and Billy made it. "That's a fool question," he returned with spirit. "A man's soul is born with him, of course; he has it from the beginning."

But his adversary, instead of being disconcerted at his reply, seemed to welcome it with rejoicing. "Oh, he has, has he?" he cried; "you had this soul o' your'n when you was a kid? Say when you was ten years old?"

Billy stuck to his guns. "That's what I did," he retorted manfully; "surest thing you know."

"And you had it when you was one year old?" continued his inquisitor.

Billy paused as if seeking to remember; then,

scarcely perceiving where the line was to be drawn, again answered in the affirmative.

“An’ when you was a day old?” pursued the old man.

The pause was longer this time, and Billy’s reply, when it came, took the form of a nod, in place of audible speech.

At once the old gentleman advanced toward him, shaking a long forefinger in Billy’s face to emphasize his argument. “An’ if you had it then,” he cried, “you had it before then — most a year before; you had it from the time you was started on your way. Can’t you *see*, young man? Ain’t you got the sense to tell what nonsense this soul stuff is? You an’ me began our lives like lots o’ other animals; when we was a’ makin’ inside our mothers there was a spell you couldn’t a’ told us from a puppy or a kitten or a pig. They ain’t got no soul. Why in blazes *you* got one? Jus’ see where it brings you out, young man. If somethin’ happens to a baby ’fore it once gits into the world, you got to say that pore little objec’, what never knowed nothin’ — never *sensed* nothin’ — is a’ goin’ straight

up to Heaven, to be a angel with God. C'n you stand here an' tell me you b'lieve that? Such things ain't in Nature. Can't you see the point to it? There ain't no God — no soul — no nothin'. We're animals; that's all we be. Born like 'em; live like 'em; die like 'em. An' you stand here, an' undertake to tell me you got an immortal soul —" his voice rose almost to a shriek. "Hell an' damnation, young feller; I wouldn't give ye five cents for it; an' that's an' hones' fact. Here, hold on a minute! Where you goin' —" for Billy, completely routed, had suddenly taken refuge in precipitate flight down the path, and the old man, gazing after him for a moment in huge disdain, slowly reseated himself, re-opened his "Studies in Pessimism," and once more resumed his reading.

Billy, half-way back to the house, removed his cap and wiped the moisture from his brow. "Well, of all the joyful days," he murmured; "what have I struck, anyway? Either I'm crazy, or everyone else is. I don't have to try to get in bad — just open my mouth and stick my foot in it. Damn that old rascal — how

could I tell what he was driving at? He's spoiled my day for me anyway. Confound him, I believe he's right, at that. It's a devil of a mean world —" and for almost five minutes he let his fancy play gloomily over the final act in the tragic drama of Man. At length, however, he heaved a long sigh, and shook himself as if awakening from a dream. "Oh, well, to hell with it," he murmured; "it's a long ways off, anyway; I can have a lot of fun before then," and whistling cheerfully to restore his spirits, he continued on his journey toward the house.

Presently, indeed, he brightened visibly as Edith Nickerson's trim figure emerged from the house, a cloud of snow-white pigeons fluttering around her as she scattered their breakfast on the ground. "Now then, old top," he observed more hopefully, "here we go again. We've been turned down twice already this morning, but what do we care for that. 'Never say die,' is our motto; 'Redeem the pennant; charge again,' as Kipling says. The odds are with us, too; here's the stage all set for the hero's entrance. The village beauty, young, pretty, fond

of attention, feeding the doves — say, can you beat it? And then the distinguished stranger, also youthful, rich, handsome — how can a flirtation be avoided? Answer, it can't; it's a lead pipe cinch. Still, if my luck holds, she'll probably hit me with an axe. However, here goes —” and an instant later, cap in hand, he was saying, with his most engaging manner, “Mrs. Nickerson, if there's anything I can do around the place, I wish you'd let me know. I'm feeling much better now, and I'd like to make myself useful if I can.”

Edith Nickerson turned to him with a smile. “Oh, thank you,” she answered demurely; “I was just wishing I had someone to help me. I don't suppose you can iron very well, but I haven't had time to do the dishes, and the chickens have to be fed, and the pig —”

Mischief sparkled in her eye, but Billy, in pursuit of the feminine, balked at nothing. “Great!” he exclaimed with enthusiasm, “just the sort of things I like to do. Let's start with the dishes. We'll do 'em together —” and with confidence in himself once more restored, he

set to work to make himself agreeable with such effect that two hours later, when Anderson came rowing in toward the beach, he found Billy standing outside the open window, conducting what he afterward described to his friend as "one of the neatest little monologue stunts a girl ever listened to." Edith Nickerson's replies were inaudible, but Billy's share of the conversation was being carried on with much spirit. "Ah, go on, Mrs. Nickerson, say you'll come — ah, please — you won't? — Yes, you will too. It's going to be a corking dance — everyone will be there — you'll have a dandy time. Tom doesn't go to dances? Now look here, Mrs. Nickerson, who's talking about Tom? He hasn't got to go if he doesn't want to. We'll let him stay home and rest. No one to dance with an old married woman — oh, say, Edith — I beg your pardon, Mrs. Nickerson — but don't make me laugh. No one to dance with you? Well, just for a starter, I'd like the first waltz, and the last, and supper, and that walk around the Church they talk about — joking? Well, you bet I'm not. Come now,

say you'll go — you won't — say, do you think it's quite the square thing to break a man's heart? Stop talking foolishly? I'm not; I mean every word of it. If you don't come to-night, I'll be found dead in bed to-morrow morning, and everyone will blame Mrs. Stiggins' doughnuts. Silly? Well, I can't help it — confound it, here's the boat — yes, coming, Bart. All right. Be sure, now. Don't forget the dances you've promised me. Fine — we'll have a dandy time — good-by —” and at last he had torn himself from the window, and was on his way toward the boat, and his waiting friend.

By evening, Billy was fairly in his element. Immaculate in what was referred to, in Bayport, as a “full dress suit,” he spared no pains to make a favorable impression on his future constituents. He talked lobsters with Manuel Antoine; farming with Cy Tilden; finance with Ezra Newcomb; and by way of reasonable compensation, he danced exclusively with Edith Nickerson, who in her white muslin and crimson ribbons was by all odds the prettiest woman

in the room. Twelve o'clock found him again at Mrs. Stiggins', retiring with exuberant self-approval. "Bart," he confided to his sleepy friend, "I hate to talk about it, but I certainly made one hell of a hit. I guess I take after Uncle Staunton, after all. He's great for pulling out of a tight place, and that's what I did today. We made a bum start, but oh, golly, what a finish. These folks are *for* me, Bart; you just take it from me. I'll be elected Selectman by the biggest plurality in the history of the town. And say, the funniest joke of all — what do you think I heard to-night? Nickerson is going to run, too. Isn't that the limit? Just think how I'll put it over the poor guy. Honestly, it will be a shame. Tell me straight now, Bart, don't you think we put in a great old day?"

But Anderson, with his broader experience of life in country towns, was scarcely as enthusiastic as his friend. "Oh, I don't know," he yawned; "I guess you're putting it rather strong, Billy. And speaking of Nickerson, I'll tell you one fool thing you did, and that was to

dance so much with Nickerson's wife. If you knew what a hotbed of gossip a country village is, you wouldn't have made your admiration quite so evident. It's not fair to her, and it's damned unfair to Nickerson himself, and it's mighty poor policy, as far as you're concerned. So I give you fair warning, if you're going to make a hit in Bayport, cut out this Mrs. Nickerson stuff, right away."

But Billy only laughed. "Oh, don't worry," he retorted; "you're a good fellow, Bart, but you've got some queer ideas about things — especially about the ladies. Gee, but I had a swell time with Edith — I'm calling her Edith now — how's that for one day's acquaintance? Slow, I guess — not. Bart, she's a little peach. And dance — why she's as light on her feet as thistledown. Oh, she's certainly all right, and say, Bart, talk about your shapes —"

But Anderson cut in upon him. "Damn you, Billy," he cried; "for God's sake cut it out. I believe you're crazy about girls. But if you've got to have 'em on the brain, why in Heaven's name can't you stick to the unmarried

ones. You'll raise the devil, some day, just as sure as we're standing here; you can't help it, if you go on like this. I tell you again, cut it out."

Whitfield was a trifle sobered at his friend's unwonted earnestness. "All right, I will," he answered; then added, with a complacent grin, "that is, if she'll let me. Anyway, Bart, we had one grand old day of it, and now we'll indulge in a little sleep. Good night and happy dreams," and within a minute he had fallen into a tranquil and peaceful slumber.

Ignorance, they say, is bliss. And doubtless Billy was much happier for not overhearing various conversations regarding himself, carried on in the village on this same evening. For up in Beechwoods, 'Bijah the hunter was rehearsing the story of the morning to an interested group in Litchfield's grocery store, winding up by an illustration of the punch which had laid Whitfield low, and the scathing comment, "Cal'late we don't need no city dudes teachin' us our business, down *this* way; not yet awhile, we don't"; over on the Island, old Jim

Nickerson was saying to his son, "What you say his name was? Whitfield? Well, he's a fool, whoever he be. He's loose as ashes, Tom; ain't got no head-piece to him at all"; and finally, in the sanctity of their virgin chamber, Miss Lucretia Bates was saying to her sister, Heppy, "Yes, they did; an' he walked around the Church with her too. What Tom Nickerson can be thinkin' of is more'n *I* can see. It's a scandal for Bayport; an' *I* believe there's a duty on folks to see that such goin's on is put a stop to."

And Billy slept.

CHAPTER VII

TOM NICKERSON GETS A STRAIGHT TIP

DUSK was falling over Bayport Harbor. The flaming colors of the winter sunset still streaked the west; and a breeze from the north, keen and cold, whistled through the branches of the leafless trees. In the center of the harbor, Tom Nickerson, his dory lashed fast to the lobster cars, was bringing his day's fishing to an end. One by one, from the box amidships, he drew forth his struggling victims, throwing the larger ones into the car, and permitting the "snappers"—those too small to be legally captured—a return to life and liberty.

Gradually the box was emptied. The last "counter" was plunged into the car; the last "snapper" hurled high in air, to fall seaward with a mighty splash, and doubtless much perplexed in mind, to seek for shelter at the har-

bor's rocky bottom. Locking the car, Nickerson moored his boat, bailed and cleaned her, and five minutes later had sculled his skiff ashore, and hauled her up on the float stage for the night. Old Bill Reed, Bayport's veteran fisherman, contentedly angling away for one sculpin more, glanced up at him with mild interest in his gaze. "What yer doin' over here, Tommy?" he drawled. "Ain't it time yer was gittin' home?"

"I'm goin' to stay with Joe to-night," Nickerson answered; "there's a meetin' up in Lighthouse Hall, 'bout the railroad. But I got to find Torella first. He sent word by Man'l he wanted to see me 'bout somethin' or other, so I'm goin' to try an' git a hold of him now."

"So Sarvy wants to see you, does he?" the old man repeated; then, evidently considering that subject at an end, he asked, "Haow'd they crawl fur ye to-day, Tommy? Pretty fair?"

"Yes, pretty fair," Nickerson responded; "no kick comin' this week. How'd they do to the east'ard?"

“They done good,” rejoined Reed, spitting with science, as he jerked in a big, white-bellied sculpin, with staring eyes and gasping mouth. “Man’l he got sixty-seven; Joe”—he stopped to whack the luckless fish against the float stage until, with a shudder of mortal agony, it stiffened, glassy-eyed, into death—“Joe”—he spat again—“got upwards of fifty; Peterson, he done about the same; Harry got forty-two. Yes, most of ’em done well to-day; you keep any count yourself?”

Nickerson nodded. “Yes, kind of a rough count,” he answered; “’bout the same as Man’l, I guess; they were crawlin’ pretty good. Well, good night, Bill; see you to-morrow,” and leaving the float stage, he started on his way toward the village.

Up the path and down the road, he strode steadily along; stopping, through force of long habit, at the corner, to take one last look, in the gathering darkness, at the harbor, and the open sea beyond. Behind him, the lights of the village were beginning to shine out, one by one. The afterglow still lingered in the western sky;

the road was crisp underfoot; the wind cut fresh and keen across his face. For a moment he stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the distant horizon; then, rousing himself, walked briskly on.

As he passed Harry Atwood's cottage, two little boys, tow-headed, sturdy and brown, ran out to meet him. "Hullo, Tom," they cried in shrill chorus; "how many d'ye get to-day? Pa got forty-two. Pa, he got one old rip-snorter — said he guessed he'd weigh nigh on to ten pounds. Bet you didn't get none as big as that, now did you, Tom?"

Nickerson shook his head. "No," he answered mournfully, "I can't catch lobsters. I hauled a hundred pots, and I got two snappers, and a sculpin, and"— he paused to make his climax more effective—"just about fourteen thousand crabs. How was that for high?"

But the little boys, trotting along at his side, were not to be deceived. "Ah, go on," they chorused again, glancing shrewdly up at him, "you can't fool us that way," and then, from the elder of the two, "No, sir, pa says when it

comes to fishin', there ain't no one in Bayport got nothin' on you. You c'n ketch lobsters like the very devil — that's what pa says."

The younger added his testimony. "Yes," he cried accusingly, "you got somethin' besides nasty ol' crabs; an' we watched you a' throwin' 'em in, too. We counted up to most sixty, 'fore it got too dark to see. You can't fool us, Tom; not s' easy as that."

Nickerson laughed. "Oh, you know too much, both of you," he rejoined; "you ought to go lobstering yourselves. You're too smart to waste your time ashore. I'll tell you this much, if you want to know so bad. Suppose a man had a hundred pots, and caught a lobster and a quarter to a pot. Then how many would he have? Can you figure that?"

As they computed, their eyes grew big with admiration. "Gee!" cried the elder, "pretty darn good. You beat 'em all to the east'ard, an' you got pa skun a mile," and they scampered away for home, to report the news.

As he ascended the hill, Nickerson perceived the portly form of Torella, standing on the

doorsteps of his house. Richly, indeed, did "Sarvy" deserve his nickname. He was tall, stout and ingratiating, with an ever-present smile which Joe Surado had once described as "most too damn good to be true." "Hullo, Tom," he hailed, "glad to see you. Come over a minute, won't you?"

Nickerson crossed the road, and came to a halt at the foot of the steps. "Well," he responded, "what's the trouble now?"

Torella leaned his elbows on the railing, and gazed downward through the gloom, speaking low and confidentially. "Say, Tom," he whispered, "'bout this S'lectman business. What do you think o' your chances? Right on the level, now; how do things look to you?"

But Nickerson showed no desire to commit himself. "Oh, I don't know," he answered; "it's pretty early yet, Sarvy; most three months to 'Lecture Day. There's lots o' things could happen 'tween now an' then. Why, what do you want to know for?"

"Oh, nothin'," Torella evaded in his turn; "I was jus' figurin' who's goin' to be in the field.

There's more'n a dozen of 'em claim they're goin' to try, but you know how 'tis. Some of 'em are hopin' to be bought off, an' there's others wants to see their names in the paper, an' one or two of 'em are crazy. But I'll tell you what 'tis, Tom"—and he lowered his voice again to the politician's most seductive whisper — "*I think you got a corkin' show, an' if we could fix things up satisfactory, you understand, why I'd like mighty well to be on your side. You kinder think it over, Tom, an' then lemme know.*"

"Thank you, Sarvy," Nickerson responded, with apparent candor; "it's mighty kind of you, I'm sure. Because the solid Portugee vote would certainly help a feller a lot."

Torella gazed keenly down at him, as if striving to read from his face the manner in which he meant his words to be received. For "Sarvy" the year previous had made a name for himself in the annals of Bayport politics. Playing both ends and the middle at the same time, he had pledged the "solid Portugee vote," an expression of his own coining, in turn to the

Republicans and to the Democrats, and had finally wound up by again "delivering" to the candidate of the Independence League. The result had been that the Portuguese of the village, possessing a sturdy common sense of their own, had voted, in Manuel Antoine's phrase, "as customary, about as they damn pleased," while "Sarvy," creator and proprietor of the "solid Portugee vote," had ridden around town for the rest of the winter, to the envy of his friends, in a new buggy, drawn by a neat little bay mare, with his portly form enveloped to the chin in a magnificent overcoat, currently reported to be a genuine black bearskin. Yet his countrymen felt no real resentment; but rather, a certain admiration for his nerve, as if a man who could successfully work such a monumental bluff deserved the good luck to "get away with it." So now, still desirous of being taken seriously, and seeing no signs of undue levity in Nickerson's eye, he responded, "Why, Tom, 'twould be a cinch. If you had me with you, you'd be as good as elected. There ain't no doubt of it at all. We could fix things up, you

understand, so's I could show you a hundred and fifty votes, on election day, sure as shootin'."

Nickerson, inwardly amused, at the same time realized that this interest in his plans was to be interpreted as a favorable sign, for Sarvy, whatever one might think of his methods, had a marvelous knack for "picking the winner" in Bayport politics. So he answered guardedly, "Why, sure, if we could fix things up, Sarvy, I'd be glad to have you with me. I want to win if I can."

Torella bent downward from the porch until his mouth was almost touching Nickerson's ear. "Say, Tommy," he observed, "you ever hear of strikin' while the iron was hot. You come on inside a minute. I got somethin' I want to tell you."

Nickerson mounted the steps, and they entered Torella's tiny parlor, where the politician drew two chairs close together, and as they seated themselves, placed a plump hand confidentially on Tom's knee. "It's like this, Tommy," he began; "you ain't had no great experience campaignin'; this runnin' for S'lect-

man is kinder your first political offense. Now I been foolin' with the game for quite some time, an' you c'n take it from me, it ain't no cinch. Don't go to misunderstandin' me now. I b'lieve you got a swell chanst, but I don't want you to think you got no walkover, 'cause you ain't. One way or 'nother, I cal'late to know most everythin' that's goin' on, an' so I git hold o' lots o' things that more'n likely you'd never hear 'bout at all. F'r instance, I know that Jim Litchfield bet Lafe Turner fifty cents this very noontime that you wouldn't be 'lected next March. Of course, that's only a straw, but straws show how the wind's a blowin'. An' I'll tell you right now, Tom, what the boys got against you that's goin' to hurt you most. No one claims but what you're honest, an' no one says but what you're tolerable smart; but what they *do* say is, Tom, that you don't stand in with the big fellers; that you don't know no men in the city; an' that you ain't got 'nough of a pull. You're lucky that's all they *are* sayin' — usually a feller has to take it harder'n that — but that's what they're talkin', an' that's

what we got to stop, right away. Jus' git rid o' that, Tommy, an' you're a winner."

Nickerson's face had lengthened. "But I don't see what we can do, Sarvy," he answered; "it's true enough. I *ain't* acquainted much, outside o' town. If they're lookin' for a man with a pull, I guess they don't want *me*."

Torella smiled. "Oh, shucks," he responded; "you give up too easy, Tom; you ain't got enough fight to you. It's all a game, anyhow, this blame politics, an' a feller has to go ahead an' play it. Why, we can stop this talk in five minutes, and we'll do it, too. You're goin' to the meetin' to-night, ain't you?"

"Sure," answered Nickerson; "I don't own but ten shares o' stock, but I'd like darned well to know whether to sell it or to hold on."

Torella's shrewd eyes twinkled, and his grip on Nickerson's knee tightened. "Just what every other feller in the hall wants to know," he cried, "but there's only one man in Bayport that's got the tip, Tommy, and that man"—he added, with dramatic emphasis—"that man, Tommy, is *me*."

Nickerson gazed at him, impressed yet skeptical. "You know which town's goin' to git the road," he repeated; "that straight, Sarvy?"

Torella could see the effect which his words had produced, and was quick to follow up his advantage. "That's straight, Tom," he answered; "you might hear some folks in town blamin' me for playin' the game the way I do, but I c'n tell you this—it pays, every time. An' I'm goin' to put you wise to things, Tommy. Make a guess, now. Who's goin' to git the road? Bayport or Greenfield?"

Nickerson reflected. "Well," he hazarded at length, "most everyone seems to think Bayport's got the best show."

Sarvy chuckled. "An' what most everyone thinks, Tom," he responded, "is mighty apt to be wrong. No, sir, it's Greenfield that gits the franchise, an' it's you that's goin' to git right up in meetin' to-night, an' tell folks so. An' you're goin' to let 'em see that you stand right in solid with the big fellers, too. I guess maybe that won't stop this talk 'bout your not havin' any pull; an' I guess maybe after that we won't

'lect you S'lectman, easy as rollin' off a log. An' lemme tell you, Tommy," he added, with his best and oiliest smile, "there won't be no one in Bayport that'll be any gladder to see it than me."

Nickerson's heart beat faster at his words, for granting that the information was true, there could be no doubt of its value. Not only would it mean the prompt sale of his own shares in Bayport & Southern, but as Sarvy had suggested, the imparting of this knowledge to the rest of Bayport would surely smooth his path toward the office of Selectman. Yet despite all this, he hesitated, for first of all, he had only Torella's word for the truth of the story, and in addition to this, "running other folks' affairs" was something he always shrank from. And thus he answered, "Much obliged for tellin' me, Sarvy, an' I ain't no doubt it's so; but when it comes to gittin' up in the hall an' givin' advice to the rest of the crowd, why that kinder goes ag'in the grain. I don't believe I'll do it, Sarvy; it's takin' too big a risk."

Torella laughed. "Why, you don't get me,

Tom," he rejoined smoothly; "it ain't a case of *advice*. I ain't *guessin'* on the thing. This is the *goods*. Why, see here —"

He fumbled in his pocket, drew forth his wallet, and produced a letter, which he handed to Tom. "See what you think o' *that*," he remarked; "maybe you'll feel some different when you look that through."

Nickerson took the envelope from Torella's hand. It bore the politician's name and address, and was marked "Personal." So far, so good, but it was the contents of the note itself which made the fisherman gasp. The heading read "Confidential," and there followed in crisp, brief sentences the information that "the writer," replying to Mr. Torella's favor, &c., begged to state that in his opinion the franchise for an extension of its road would undoubtedly be awarded to the town of Greenfield. Most remarkable of all, there followed the flowing signature of Staunton Whitfield, millionaire and recognized authority on the subject of street railways; and immediately, Nickerson felt that he had wholly underestimated his host; for a

man who could receive a letter like this was no "four-flusher" in the political game. Torella sat looking at him with a satisfied expression on his face. "Well?" he queried, "what say now?"

Nickerson hesitated. The temptation was certainly strong. To be elected Selectman would mean much to him. There was the salary — there was the influence — there was the pleasant knowledge that for his wife it would mean a step upward socially and that his boy would be known as "S'lectman Nickerson's son." There was the call of an honest ambition, the desire to help his town by doing what he could toward a proper administration of its affairs. And yet — this counseling others was foreign to his nature, and half to gain time, half because he honestly meant it, he said, "But look here, Sarvy, why don't you spring this yourself? Seems like you ought to be the feller to git the credit."

Torella's sigh was humility itself. "Tommy," he answered, "for one thing, that letter's marked 'confidential'; but there's an-

other reason besides that. I just told you it paid to be a politician. In one way, that's true — in another, it ain't. It helps your pocket-book tremendous, but it raises hell with your reputation. If I got up in that hall to-night, with a telegram from God Almighty, the folks in Bayport wouldn't take no 'count of it at all. You know the way they talk, Tom; they don't b'lieve I'm on the level. So what would be the use o' my tellin' 'em anythin'? They'd turn right around an' do the opposite. No, Tommy, this is your chanst, an' you're welcome to it. You'll help yourself, an' you'll be doin' a big favor to your friends besides."

It was well and skillfully put, and Nickerson hesitated no longer. Here, as Torella said, was a genuine chance, with everything in its favor, and nothing against it. And thus he said simply, "All right, Sarvy, I'll do it; an' I'm much obliged to you," and as Torella rose to conduct his guest to the door, the politician's fat face fairly beamed with unselfish joy.

"Tom," he said, with the utmost sincerity, "you don't know how darn glad I am to hear

you say them words," and Nickerson went on his way, wondering greatly at this unexpected turn of fortune's wheel.

An hour later, men of Bayport, to the number of two hundred, were assembled in Lighthouse Hall, standing around the room in small knots and groups, and fervently pursuing a single topic of conversation. All ranks were there; Bayport's best; Bayport's average; possibly Bayport's worst, as well. In the center of the room was old Ezra Newcomb, Bayport's town clerk for twenty years; gaunt, erect, clad in sober black; his hair white as snow; his ruddy face lined and seamed with wrinkles; in repose, grave with a stern uprightness of purpose; when he smiled, eloquent with a gentle and kindly mirth. For fifty years of the town's history, whatever the question, whatever the ultimate decision, Ezra Newcomb had always been "on the square." Many others like him were scattered about the hall, but among them other types as well. Drunken New England, with flushed face and rambling tongue; shiftless New England, collarless, out at elbows, down at

heels, lounging on the outskirts of the crowd, from time to time covertly spitting a stream of tobacco juice on the floor; youthful New England, aggressive and superior, attending the meeting largely as a joke, with tongue in cheek, enchanging winks of infinite wisdom. Nor was the meeting of New England alone; Ireland, Portugal, Norway and Sweden, Italy, Africa — all were represented; men of all nations, and all ranks of life, meeting on an equal footing and with a common interest at stake; differing perhaps in every other way, and yet alike in being, to a greater or less degree, the owners of the blue and gold certificates of the Bayport and Southern Street Railway Company.

Presently, above the noise of the discussion, the clock in the corner wheezed out the hour of eight. It was the time for which the meeting had been called, and Ezra Newcomb, walking over to the table at the end of the room, began pounding vigorously for order; then, waiting until the stockholders had taken their places on the benches around the room, he seated himself and began his address.

“Fellow townsmen,” he said, “the purpose of this meeting is known to all of us. Every man in this hall is a holder of Bayport and Southern stock. This stock, for more years than we care to remember, has been considered worthless, but within a month we’ve seen it advance again, and I dare say everyone of us has had ideas of getting out whole, and maybe making a dollar besides. Now comes the rumor that the advance in the stock isn’t warranted; that it’s due merely to stock market manipulation; and that it’s Greenfield, and not Bayport, that finally’s going to get the road. The question’s a simple one, but we want all the light on it we can get. Do we sell, or do we hold on? I declare the subject open for discussion.”

Instantly Manuel Antoine, leader and spokesman of the Portuguese fishermen, was on his feet, and duly recognized by the chair. “Mr. Newcomb and gentlemen,” he began; “I’m in favor of sellin’ out, an’ I’ll tell you why. In the first place, this whole business is mighty uncertain, an’ a bird in the hand, as the feller says, is

worth two in the bush, an' maybe a damn sight more. In the second place, speakin' for myself an' I guess for a few others as well, it ain't no secret that it's been a terrible bad year for fishin'. Men that could put their hands in their pants pockets, a while back, an' find five hundred dollars there, can't find nary a cent to-day. Ready money 'round Bayport has got to be an awful scarce thing. Of course, we ain't so bad off but what 'twould be a shame to sell, if we thought the old stock was goin' higher; but is it? For my part, I don't believe it. I've been fooled once; I'd hate like time to see us get caught again. An' the bad part is, there ain't no one can really find out how the blame Legislature's goin' to vote. So I say there ain't nothin' so bad but what it might be worse, an' I vote we sell out, an' get part of our money back, anyway, while we got the chance."

Amid a general murmur of approval from the fisherman, he took his seat; but in a moment, old Caleb Eldredge had arisen in his place. Bent and withered, he leaned heavily on his stick, his

hard old eyes flashing from under his thatched brows as he gave vehement expression to his views. "Don't agree, Mr. Chairman," he cried; "don't agree with the gentleman at all. I cal'late this whole thing, from beginnin' to end, ain't nothin' but a bunco game — a reg'lar plain swindle. When we fell all over ourselves to buy the stock, we heard 'twas goin' to twenty-five dollars a share — maybe fifty — an' what happened? Why, inside a year she was sellin' at fifty cents. Now we hear Greenfield's goin' to git the road, an' Bayport stock's no good, an' I should think we might have sense enough to draw our own c'nclusions. All the 'xperience I've had out o' life — an' I've had *some* — has taught me that when there's any money lyin' around, there ain't a man on earth but what'll lie his head off if he thinks that's goin' to help him git it. If ever I hear any talk 'bout any stock that's a' goin' *down*, then's the time I'm willin' to gamble my shirt she's a' goin' *up*. If there's insiders that knows so much about what she's a' goin' to do, do you s'pose they're takin' the trouble to come 'round an' let us fellers in

on a good thing, when they could just as well keep it to themselves? You c'n bet they ain't. Folks ain't so damn generous as that comes to. I'll tell you what it puts me in mind of. There was one time, right here in Bayport, when all the fathers an' mothers gits dredful worked up 'bout the marks their kids was a' gittin' in school. Johnny Bates has eighty-five, an' his ma an' pa go 'round braggin' 'bout it, till Mary Jones gits ninety, an' then it's her pa and ma's turn. An' so it goes, till one mornin' Bob Tilden comes down t' the wharf, all smiles, tellin' how his boy Bill has broke all records, an' come home with a mark of *a hundred an' ten*. Well, that settles that argument. No more talk 'bout percentages for a spell; but they say Bob can't see where the joke come, to this day.

“So now, Mr. Chairman, that's the trouble with this stock market crowd. They're just like Bill Tilden's hundred an' ten; most too good to believe. It ain't sense, Mr. Chairman; you can bet there's a bug under the chip, somewheres. We've held this stock a good while; let's stick

a little longer, and see if these fellers don't change their tune."

He sat down, only a few scattered hand-claps giving faint endorsement to his views, for Eldredge was one of those men who have only to espouse a cause in order to bring forth immediate and enthusiastic opposition. There followed a half-dozen other speakers, some lengthy, some brief, none particularly to the point, until finally Sarvy Torella arose. "Mr. Chairman," he began, with his most ingratiating smile, "there's a gentleman present that we ain't yet had the pleasure of hearin' from. I consider he's pretty well posted on things in general, an' I know he's got the interests o' the town at heart. In fact, there's a good many of us hope that by March meetin' he'll be somethin' more than a plain ordinary citizen o' Bayport; we 'xpect to see him occupyin' one o' the seats o' the mighty. You all know who I mean; an' I'd like to hear a few words from neighbor Tom Nickerson."

Nickerson rose, a hearty burst of applause

testifying to his popularity among his townsmen, and giving him time to recover from a momentary feeling of embarrassment. "Mr. Chairman and gentlemen," he said; "we all seem to be in the same boat on this question, and I cal'late we're all anxious to git our bearings, so's we'll be able to steer a straight course, if we can. I ain't much on givin' advice to other folks, as I guess most of you know, but I'm willin' to go this fur. I've happened to get hold of some information that comes so straight, an' comes in such a way, an' comes from such a man, that I ain't got the least doubt, in my own mind, but what we oughter sell out our Bayport stock, an' buy Greenfield instead. I ain't at liberty to say no more than this; but I'll tell you straight out that I'm a' goin' to do it, no matter what the rest o' the crowd does; an' if this meetin' should decide to do the same thing, all in a body, why I don't believe they'll be makin' any mistake. Further'n that, I ain't got nothin' to say."

As he resumed his seat, the prolonged applause and the buzz of conversation which im-

mediately sprang up around the hall, showed the interest which his speech had awakened. But instantly old man Eldredge, like some ancient Jack-in-the-box, bobbed up again in his place. "Don't agree, Mr. Chairman," he once more protested; "don't agree at all. I got a pretty good idea who this man is that Tom's referrin' to, an' it don't make me think a bit better o' the whole scheme. Jus' because a feller makes a few millions, more or less, without bein' any too partic'lar how he makes 'em, folks think they got to lie down in the dust an' lick his boots, like he was a reg'lar tin God on wheels. I remember when Washin'ton G. Jimson, the copper magnet, come down here fust to live. Everybody tickled to death that such a great man had come to town. One mornin', he sends for old Captain Ben Allen. 'Cap'n Ben,' he says, 'I want you to take me fishin' some mornin' next week.' Ol' Cap'n Ben, all nervous and flustered, he says, 'Any time you say, Mr. Jimson; any time you say.' 'Let's make it Thursday, then,' says Jimson; 'what hour's the best to start?' 'Any time you say, Mr. Jimson,' say

Cap'n Ben; 'any time you say.' 'Well,' says Jimson, 'when's the tide high?' 'Oh,' says Cap'n Ben, 'any time you say, Mr. Jimson; any time you say.'

"Now then, Mr. Chairman, what's the use o' bein' as foolish as that? Rich or poor, I cal'late we're all human, an' these fellers we call the 'big men' ain't apt to run such a great lot better'n the average. Tom Nickerson, he thinks he's got some val'ble information from one o' these fellers. Maybe he has, an' maybe he hasn't. But I'll tell you ag'in, from my 'xperience o' life, an' I've took my bumps with the rest, a man can't go broke much quicker an' slicker than he can by nosin' 'round after 'inside information,' as they call it, from the chaps that's s'posed to know. The only time suckers like us c'n really be on the inside is after we're swallowed up; an' that ain't no joke, either. So when we hear o' one o' these kindly fellers sendin' us special word as to what's goin' to happen, I b'lieve in askin' ourselves what's the object he's got in view, by doin' it. I never take things for granted no more; nor men neither.

I b'lieve in treatin' folks like Eph Tower treated the new parson when he come to town. Real nice young feller he was — 'Piscopal — good clean young man, an' preached so powerful he'd git all het up an' excited 'bout it. Kind of a sportin' man, too, he was — great on ridin' a bicycle — an' that led to his developin' a fault. The streets was in awful bad shape that year, an' the preacher, he *would* ride on the sidewalks. Don't imagine he knew there was any harm in it, an' bein' the minister, no one seemed to like to tell him that the S'lectmen had forbidden it, more'n a year ago. So one day he comes skimmin' along, as usual, I s'pose bound on some errand o' mercy, when Eph Tower spies him. Eph was sittin' in front o' the post office, smokin' an' spittin' an' enjoyin' himself generally. Now he warn't no respecter o' parsons — not by a damn sight — an' when he sees the minister goin' by, he up an' hails him. Minister pulls up, not suspectin' nothin'; he don't know Eph; an' I reckon he thinks here's another poor soul in need o' savin'. So he comes prancin' up, all smiles, an' Eph just a

layin' for him all the time. 'Be you the new parson?' says he. 'I be,' says the Reverend. 'B'lieve in doin' good, don't ye?' says Eph. 'I certain do,' says the parson, lookin' kind o' puzzled. 'An' in settin' a good example to the young?' says Eph. 'I certain do,' says the parson again. 'Then *why*,' hollers Eph, poundin' the ground with that old stick o' his, an' yellin' so outrageous loud you could hear him most down t' the Station, 'why in *hell* don't you stop a' ridin' your bike on the side-walks o' this town?'

"An' that's the way it goes, Mr. Chairman. Good an' holy men are scarce. I ain't never see one, old as I be. An' I don't care who this feller is that Tom's been hearin' from. The more he knows, the slipperier he's apt to be. The whole thing's a bluff, an' if we sell out, we'll be makin' a passel o' fools of ourselves. Hang on a spell; that's what I say."

As he sat down, all eyes were turned instinctively on Nickerson, and after a brief pause, the fisherman rose slowly to his feet. "Mr. Chairman," he rejoined, "it kinder seems to me

as if neighbor Eldredge was takin' most too gloomy a view of things in general. As I said before, I ain't at liberty to mention names, but the information I'm bankin' on comes from a man that *is* rich, an' from a man that's always been interested in the Bayport & Southern Street Railway. But I don't figure that's any reason why he's givin' us wrong information now. In fact, I figure it t'other way, an' I think considerable better of human natur' than Mr. Eldredge does. If a man's rich, an' knows that a crowd of other fellers are pretty tarnation poor, it don't seem sensible to me that he'd want to git what they got away from 'em. 'Twould seem like such a darn mean trick that the man that done it would sorter despise himself for the rest of his days, an' the money part wouldn't scarcely make up for it. Now I cal'late that this feller knows that the crowd of us here in Bayport got soaked pretty hard when the stock busted, an' I cal'late further that he knows we need the money, an' don't want to see us git stuck again. I b'lieve, neighbor Eldredge to the contrary, that folks ain't as mean-spirited as he makes out, an' I

stick to what I say — I b'lieve if we sell, an' buy Greenfield & Northern stock instead, we'll all git square for what we lost, an' make a dollar besides. But of course nothin's certain in this world, an' it all comes down to bearin' in mind that a feller can't most generally always sometimes tell."

The applause made it clear that practically everybody in the hall, for one reason or another, agreed with Nickerson, and after brief further debate, it was unanimously voted, Eldredge alone dissenting, to sell every share of Bayport & Southern stock held in the town, and to buy Greenfield & Northern in its place.

At the doorway of the hall, amid the crowd of departing citizens, Eldredge laid a heavy hand on Nickerson's arm. "You're a fool, boy," he snorted; "a plain damn fool. When you're as old as I be, you'll know better than to go around givin' away free advice, the way you done t'night. You're goin' to git skun — the whole of ye — an' then they'll say, ' 'Twas all Tom's fault for tellin' us to do it.' You wait

an' see, boy; jus' you wait an' see," and to Nickerson, as he passed out into the winter's night, there seemed to be about the old man's utterance an ominous and prophetic ring.

CHAPTER VIII

SHOWING THE UNCERTAINTY OF THINGS IN GENERAL

BARTLETT ANDERSON, seated in the living room of his big country house, scowled savagely to himself, with an air of utter disgust. "This sure beats the devil," he muttered; "I'm a lemon at this 'break the news to mother' game. I certainly hate to tell him —"

He rose and walked over to the window, shading his eyes with his hand as he gazed forth into the gathering darkness. "Where is he, anyway?" he added. "I told him not to take the mare too far. There, I guess that's him coming now —" for as if in answer to his question the sound of galloping hoofs smote on his ears, and presently the dim outline of horse and rider could be seen turning in at the gate, slackening their speed to a walk as they came to a halt out-

side the barn. Anderson, lighting a cigarette, resumed his seat, and a moment later Billy Whitfield burst into the room, bringing with him a general air of outdoor exercise, fine spirits and good health. He made at once for the open fire, drawing off his gloves and rubbing his hands briskly together. "Bart, old man," he cried, before his friend could speak, "you were a brick to ask me out here. This has Bayport beaten to a crisp. Golly, but that's a swell little mare; she's a flier; we had a corking time. And what do you suppose for dinner, old top—I came in through the kitchen. Turkey! Do you get me, Steve? Turkey! Oh, what's the use! And cranberry sauce. Say Bart, I hate to talk so much about myself, but on the level, cranberry sauce is my *middle* name. What do you say? Something to tell me? Ah, can it, Bart; can it. Why the gloom? Act young and happy, like me. Do you know where I'm going to tell my uncle I was to-day? I'm going to say I was down in Bayport, hunting votes. He'd kill me if he knew I was loafing out here. Say, Bart, he's keen as

mustard on this railway business. We'll all make a fortune, some day —"

"Billy! Billy!" cried Anderson again, his anguish increasing as Whitfield continued to rattle on, "for Heaven's sake, listen a minute. That confounded Legislature has gone and done it now. They've given the franchise to Greenfield. Everyone's talking about it. They say it's a big defeat for your uncle — buck up, old man" — for Billy had turned a greenish white in the face — "I hope you didn't plunge —"

Billy did not answer. "Rot," he managed to ejaculate, "it isn't true, Bart; it *can't* be true —"

Anderson sighed. "Oh, it's true enough," he rejoined, "there's no doubt of that. It's all they're talking about down town."

Billy braced himself as if to withstand a shock. "How — how low did the damn stuff go?" he asked.

Anderson hesitated. "I hate to tell you, Billy," he replied, "but she broke like the very old Nick. She didn't act right all the morning, and then when the news came out, she busted

right down to two and a half, and closed there."

Billy's jaw dropped. "Two and a half," he repeated. "Oh, no, Bart. She never went that low. You've got that wrong."

Anderson shook his head. "I'm mighty sorry," he answered, "but that's where she went. They run off awfully fast, you know, when they start to whack 'em. Did you have a big line of it?"

Billy groaned. "Enough to put me in the devil of a hole," he responded, "if this is all so. Excuse me, Bart; I'm going to telephone."

Five minutes later he returned, his lips puckered painfully. "Well, you're right," he said shortly; "she closed two and a half asked, and no bids. If that isn't the limit, I'd like to know what is."

"It's the devil," Anderson agreed. "I'm darned sorry, Billy, and I'm sorry for your uncle, too. There's been so much talk about this scrap. They say there was a lot more to it than appeared on the surface; that it was a kind of test of strength between your uncle and

the other crowd. And they certainly got him, Billy; they did him up brown."

But Billy was not wasting much sympathy upon his uncle. As he stood gazing into the fire, a great sense of the unfairness of life swept over him. "Don't it beat hell, Bart," he cried; "here's a man that's right ninety-nine times out of a hundred, and the hundredth time of course has to be the one I'm in on. I can't understand it, Bart; I swear I can't. Why, just look at the whole thing — his sending me to Bayport, and all the rest of it. Why, I was positive; I figured *I couldn't* lose —" then suddenly remembering that he had "tipped off" his friends, he added remorsefully, "And, Lord, Bart, I told you and Holmes to buy it too. And now you're stung. Oh, I've done a great job, all around —"

But Anderson, the soul of good-nature, hastened to comfort him. "Don't you care, Billy," he sympathized, "it's not your fault. I'll tell you what we'll do. I don't suppose you'll have to stick around Bayport any longer, so we'll go down to my gun club in Virginia next week, get

some good duck shooting, and forget all about this darned money game. What do you say?"

"I say bully," was Billy's prompt response, but he did not dwell on the trip with his customary enthusiasm, and presently added, "Oh, Gee, Bart, but I feel like a sick cat. I guess I won't do as much damage to your dinner as I thought I should," and true to his predictions, his trencher work was of the lightest, and his night's sleep restless, broken by uneasy tossings and vain regrets for the dollars vanished beyond recall.

Early the next morning, almost, in fact, before the doors were fairly open, he appeared at the offices of Raymond and Allen. The junior partner greeted him with elaborate sarcasm. "Well, that was a corking tip," he observed bitterly; "you weren't quite as far on the inside as you thought you were. It was the rottenest break in a stock that *I* ever saw. She went all to pieces in five minutes; everyone trying to unload at once."

Billy sighed. "It must have been fierce," he answered; "lucky we had those stop orders

in, Ned. I suppose I got out a lot better than most of the crowd."

"Humph," the broker retorted contemptuously, "stop orders! A lot of good *they* did. Suppose a dike bust, and you stood there with a pail and a mop, and said you'd stop the water coming through. That's just what a stop order amounted to yesterday, my son. Here, look at this," and he tossed Billy a typewritten statement of his account.

Billy read it, and at once experienced a sense of physical nausea. "Good Lord above us," he cried, "I didn't think it was as bad as that. Why, it's darned near broke me, Ned."

"Serves you jolly well right," said the broker remorselessly, "and you're not the only one that's in bad, either. I thought you had this so straight that I advised a lot of my customers to buy, and now they're every one of 'em cleaned out. It ought to be a lesson to you, Billy; just look at the harm you've done. I couldn't sleep last night for thinking about it."

He spoke with an air of conscious virtue, as if the welfare of his customers was the one thing

nearest his heart, wholly omitting to state that it was the fact of his own losses which had caused him all his agony. But this display of hypocrisy was too much for Billy; the worm turned; and he blazed forth, "Ah, cut it out, Ned. There never was a broker yet who ever cared a hoot about his customers —" and then, perpetrating the one brilliant epigram of his career, he added triumphantly, "If he did, why damn it, he wouldn't be a broker —" and forthwith he rose and took his way back to the office of the Honorable Staunton Whitfield.

Outside his uncle's door, he paused. "What was that fool story they used to tell us at school about the Spartan boy and the fox?" he muttered to himself. "I know just how the poor guy must have felt. Bayport & Southern is gnawing *my* vitals, all right, and I suppose the Honorable feels a lot worse than I do. I guess the respectful sympathy gag is the one best bet to-day. 'Only wish there was something I could do to help you,' and rot like that. Well, here goes —" and with solemn visage he crossed the threshold of his uncle's room.

He had expected to find an old and broken man, crushed under the burden of defeat, and mourning his ruined plans and the loss of his prestige as the foremost street railway man in the State; but to his surprise, the financier had never appeared to be in better form. He was working busily at his desk, as alert, as keen and as vigorous as ever; from the red carnation in his buttonhole, up to the healthy, ruddy face, with the look of power in the pale blue eyes, nothing was changed. Billy felt his respect for his uncle increase. "He's a game old sport, all right," he thought to himself; and then, according to his plans, he said aloud, "I'm awfully sorry, sir; sorry as I can be. I hope, if there's anything I can do —"

But his uncle cut him short. "Thank you, William," he rejoined; "you will remember that I told you we must be prepared. It is a great triumph, of course, for my adversaries. I understand that Greenfield & Northern is positively buoyant this morning; that the buying, according to the brokers, is of the very best sort; evidently accumulation by the insiders for

permanent investment. Yes, it has been a crushing defeat for me; and the singular thing about it is that, as it now appears, newspapers and individuals alike,—everyone, in fact, but myself,—foresaw the outcome of the matter from the very start. Interesting, isn't it?"

Billy had never seen him so loquacious; evidently the blow had cut deep; for there was an air almost of vindictiveness in the way the capitalist phrased his words. And Billy, as he proceeded to the next question in order, felt an admiration for his uncle's nerve and coolness even greater than before. "I suppose, sir," he said, after a moment's pause, "there's no use in my staying in Bayport any longer."

The Honorable Staunton was looking out of the window, his fingers beating a gentle tattoo on the arm of his chair. "Why, I think I wouldn't leave just yet, William," he observed mildly; "when I feel that there is no further use in your remaining, I will notify you."

Billy's heart sank like lead. Yet there was but one thing to do, and he answered dutifully, "Very well, sir; just as you say." Then, re-

remembering Anderson's invitation, he added, "I've not been feeling very well lately, sir; do you mind if I take a short vacation; not more than a couple of weeks or so?"

The Honorable Staunton's brows were raised ever so slightly. The casual way in which modern youth referred to vacations of "a couple of weeks or so" invariably annoyed him. And thus he answered somewhat more stiffly than usual, "I imagine that a week will be sufficient to restore your shattered health, William. Let us call it a week, and I think that you had better start at once."

Billy, alarmed at his uncle's manner, hastened to agree. "Oh, yes, indeed, sir," he said quickly; "a week will do, I'm sure. Thank you, sir," and regaining his own office, he sat for a long time immersed in thought. "There's something wrong," was the upshot of his musing; "he was acting awfully spry for a man that's just had the stuffing knocked out of him. That was one queer thing, to begin with. And then why in the name of common sense does he want me to stay in Bayport? That's what I can't get

through my bean. There's a nigger in the woodpile, somewhere; I'd bet money on it," and after further meditation, he consulted his bank account, stood for a moment irresolute, and then closed the door of his office behind him. "Might just as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb," he muttered. "Damned if I don't try it," and for the second time that day he betook himself to the brokerage house of Messrs. Raymond and Allen. As he neared their doors, he grinned sardonically to himself. "Well, here I go," he said, "good title for a play — 'You can't kill a sucker,' or 'They always come back for more,' " and entering, he demanded of the junior partner, "What's Bayport & Southern selling for now?"

"One and a quarter," Allen answered promptly; "she's been to a dollar flat, and now she's rallied the large amount of twenty-five cents. That's the only comfort to it; she hasn't got much further to go."

Billy was figuring his resources. "Well, I'll tell you what you can do," he observed;

“you can buy me two thousand B. & S., at the market right away now.”

The broker stared. “Say, you crazy?” he demanded. “What’s the matter with you? Want to get stung twice in the same place?”

Billy reddened. “I’m not asking for advice,” he responded icily; “I’m giving you an order to execute. If you don’t want it, I can probably find someone else that does.”

At the horrid vision of losing a customer’s business, the broker at once changed his tone. “Oh, sure, I’ll execute it,” he said, more amiably, and hastened to the window to write the order before Billy might change his mind, while Whitfield, already half inclined to regret the step he had taken, returned to his office, repeating to himself, “There’s something mighty funny about all this. I’ll bet the Honorable has an ace up his sleeve right now, that nobody knows about but himself. And if he has, I’ll be wearing diamonds yet.”

Curiously enough, there was one other man in Bayport who shared Whitfield’s views and this was old Caleb Eldredge. It took courage,

moreover, to maintain his position, for when the news of Greenfield's victory came to Bayport, Nickerson, as Torella had predicted, became a hero, while Eldridge had to endure an unmerciful amount of rough "jollyng." "Pretty good stuff, Caleb — that Greenfield —" "When they going to levy an assessment on you —" "Honest men ain't as scarce as you think they be —" These were a few of the witticisms dinned into his ears. Yet he stood his ground without flinching, hung tenaciously to his Bayport stock, and in the privacy of his home reasoned with himself as follows: "Somebody," he meditated, "went an' tipped off everyone in town. An' everyone in town — 'ceptin' me — is feelin' fine, an' stickin' to their Greenfield & Northern at sixteen dollars a share, 'cause the insiders are predictin' twenty-five for it within three months, an' fifty within a year. If you c'n believe what these fellers are tellin' yer, gittin' rich is so easy there ain't no fun in it. An' that ain't accordin' to natur'; it can't be possible that everyone in this town — 'ceptin' me — is a' goin' to git away with it jus' like

rollin' off a log. If they do, then I'll turn Church Member an' sign the pledge, an' jus' set down an' wait for the Milendum to come along. That's all there is to that. But these fellers might wake up some mornin', jus' the same, laffin' on t'other side of their mouths. 'Cause a thing like this ain't possible, without the world turns upside down."

Yet ten days passed; the world still maintained its normal position; and so did the stock of the Bayport & Southern Street Railway; and the morning of the eleventh day found Billy Whitfield, returning from his shooting trip, seated at breakfast on the sunny side of the dining car, and gazing contentedly forth, between mouthfuls, at the flying landscape. He had had a capital vacation. He had killed his share of ducks, and had won more than his share at bridge. Only the memory of his disastrous "flier" in the stock market oppressed him; but like old man Eldredge, he refused to be utterly cast down, and still clung stubbornly to the belief that some mystery lurked behind the action of the traction shares, and that Bayport & South-

ern, at the price he had paid for it, would some day prove to have been a most successful "buy." And if it ever *did* go up — Billy smacked his greedy lips at the thought of the "line" he was carrying. Why, at five dollars a share — at ten — at twenty — "Lord above us," cried Billy under his breath, "but wouldn't I be coining it, though."

He was still dreaming in this pleasant vein, and weighing in his mind the respective merits of a speed launch and a touring car, when the train halted at a station, and as it started again, a clamorous newsboy came swaying down the aisle, vigorously declaiming his list of "mornin' papies," magazines, and "best sellers." The familiar name of the *Journal* struck on Billy's ear, and he took the paper from the boy's hand with that thrill of interest which the city man is bound to feel as he returns, after a stay in the wilderness, to the accustomed routine of business life. Huge black letters stared at him from the top of the folded page, and Billy muttered cynically to himself, "More trouble, I suppose. A motor turned turtle, or a bi-plane

smashed a wing. Or maybe another heiress run away with her riding master." Then, settling back comfortably in his chair, he began to read. And as he did so, he gasped, and in a twinkling the color had faded from his face, for nothing else in the world could have caused him quite such a shock as this. "A Day of Surprises," the headlines ran, "Unexpected Action of the Legislature causes Lively Flurry in Traction," and below, in comparatively smaller type, "The original charter of the Greenfield & Northern Road has been found hopelessly defective. In consequence, the proposed extension cannot legally be granted. Stock slumps ten points in as many minutes. Bayport & Southern now has clear field, and rush of buying orders sends stock to seven and three-quarters, where it closes, with every prospect of a further gain to-morrow. The Honorable Staunton Whitfield is credited with having pulled off a master stroke — the shrewdest and most successful 'raid' of his long career."

Billy leaped hastily to his feet, tipped the waiter a dollar, and leaving the remainder of

his breakfast uneaten, strode hastily back to the parlor car. Over and over again he read the splendid news, though in his joy and excitement the letters dimmed and danced before his eyes, and the meaning of much that he saw scarcely penetrated his brain. The main facts, however, were gloriously clear. At a special hearing before the Legislature, concerning the petition of the Greenfield & Northern Railway, Messrs. Smith, Brown, Jones, Robinson and White, Attorneys for the Bayport & Southern, had succeeded in proving, with a vast display of technical learning, that the original franchise of the Greenfield & Northern had contained a hidden flaw, and that their charter, in the eyes of a Court of Law, was not worth the paper upon which it was written — void *ab initio* was the phrase — certainly a terrifying one to the hapless holders of Greenfield & Northern stock. The petition of Bayport & Southern, which had lain dormant among the Street Railway Committee's files, had then been brought promptly forward, and now, unless disapproved by the Bayport Board of Selectmen, the franchise was

as good as granted to the Bayport Road. If, by some unexpected chance, the Selectmen should not approve, then the Greenfield & Northern crowd, after due re-petitioning, re-granting and re-everything else, could eventually regain their lost franchise and their lost ground at the same time. This, however, the paper seemed to regard as most improbable; and scattered through the entire article were complimentary references to the Honorable Staunton, and his "fine Italian hand." He was pictured as a Napoleon, as a Machiavelli, and in more jocular vein, there were allusions to the difficulty of keeping a squirrel on the ground or of catching a weasel asleep.

How Billy endured the remainder of the ride without "busting something," as he afterwards described it to Holmes, he never knew. Affection and respect for his uncle fairly gushed from his heart. "The wise old guy," he meditated. "Isn't he a bird? And I thought he was growing feeble. Oh, this is too good to be true. This is a scream —"

But when he was finally seated in the Honor-

able Staunton's office, he found his uncle not unduly elated by his victory, but the same careful and resourceful man of business as before. He received his nephew's congratulations with a curt word of acknowledgment; then, after a brief pause, observed, "It is the future which concerns us now, William, and not the past. There is one thing still before us — to elect you Selectman — and until that is accomplished, we must beware of overconfidence. Although," he added, "I imagine that by this time our friend Nickerson isn't the factor in Bayport politics that he was. I understand that there is even a possibility that he may decide to withdraw from the contest altogether. If he should do so, of course you would then be left with a clear field, and we should be relieved of all further worry."

But Billy's face, instead of brightening at the prospect of easy victory, grew troubled. "I hope he doesn't pull out," he answered, "I want the fun of licking him. I never liked that fellow; he's not my sort at all."

The Honorable Staunton sighed. It took all

his powers of imagination, and a little more besides, to see in Billy a worthy successor to himself and his many interests; for modern days and modern ways seemed to be producing a different breed of young men from those of forty years ago. "This is a business proposition, William," he replied somewhat severely; "a matter of dollars and cents; not a case of wishing to defeat anyone, unless that should become a necessary part of the transaction."

Billy hastened to assent. "Oh, yes, sir," he replied dutifully; "of course," but once in his own office, recounting the news to Holmes and Anderson, he repeated vengefully, "Gee, I hope he doesn't duck now. I'd like to put it all over that guy, for fair."

The Honorable Staunton's prophecy that Nickerson would find himself a discredited man in Bayport struck near the mark; for on the afternoon of that same day, Tom, coming to anchor off the island, found Caleb Eldredge waiting for him at the moorings, seated in a leaky skiff, and positively incoherent with excitement. "Told ye so, Tommy," he began crying, as soon

as Nickerson came fairly within hearing; "told ye so all the time. P'raps ye won't talk so much now 'bout your 'fluential friends that don't need the money, an' want to help out the poor folks in town. P'raps ye won't think now honest men is quite as thick as you s'posed they was. P'raps —"

Nickerson stared at the gesticulating figure. "What you talkin' about?" he began, but before he could proceed further, Eldredge jumped to his feet, and in imminent danger of capsizing the skiff, shrieked out, "What am I talkin' about? Why, all the papers is full of it. Bayport is a' goin' to git the road; the stock's a kitin', an' Greenfield & Northern is a' bustin' plumb to hell. Every man in town but me is broke, Tommy. I told ye — I told ye —"

But Nickerson cut him short. "'Tain't possible," he cried; "Greenfield got the franchise. Why, you're crazy, Caleb —"

Eldredge fairly snorted. "'Tis possible," he rejoined in an even higher key. "Don't you know *anythin's* possible to them damn lawyer chaps? They got six of 'em a' workin' on this

franch-ice, an' they knocked her higher'n a kite. Oh, you'll find out who's crazy, an' you'll find out pretty darn quick, too. The gang is a waitin' for you at Bates' store, now. You got to come over an' take your medicine, Tommy, an' I tell ye, ye'll git it smokin' hot; if you don't come to them, they'll be comin' to you. An' don't you forgit that part of it, neither."

Nickerson's face darkened. "Oh, I'll come, all right," he returned. "What do they think? That I'm afraid? I've got nothin' to be ashamed of. If I've been lied to, then we're all in the same fix, an' I've lost every cent I had in the blame stock, same as the rest of 'em. But if anyone thinks I got anythin' to be scared of, you tell him not by a damn sight. I'll be over soon as I've had a bite to eat, an' listen to anythin' they got to say."

He rowed hastily ashore; but found that his desire for supper had vanished; and if, at this same hour, he could have looked into Hezekiah Wentworth's parlor, where the Deacon and Sarvy Torella sat talking together, doubtless his appetite would have been smaller still.

“Now’s the time, Sarvy,” the Deacon was saying; “in scripture language, now is the appointed time. For to tell the truth, if this thing ever gets down to a real fight for S’lectman, I ain’t so certain sure that young Whitfield could win. He’s got great backing, but it would be a job for the Angel Gabriel himself to jump into a town, run for office when he’d been there scarcely a year, an’ then expect to win out. An’ young Whitfield don’t bear no such startlin’ resemblance to the Angel Gabriel that they’d ever be mistook for one another. But — if we can bluff Tom into withdrawin’, then we’re all right. And I think, Sarvy, we can do it. Tom’s one o’ these pious chaps that b’lieves in doin’ right, an’ all that, an’ if he once gets the idea that he ain’t wanted for S’lectman, he’ll drop like a shot. You soak it to him good, Sarvy — here, listen to this —”

He fumbled in his pocket, and produced a clipping from one of the city papers. “Here’s what they say about a feller that’s running for Alderman,” he observed: “‘He is temperamentally unfit, and the good of the city demands

his defeat.' How's that? You tell Tom Nickerson, right before all the crowd, that he's temperamentally unfit to be a S'lectman o' this town, an' that the good of Bayport demands him to withdraw, an' I bet you've got him. What do you say?"

"Gosh, that's great," responded Torella, "if I can only remember it, when the time comes. That ought to sting him good. Shall I call him a liar, too?"

The Deacon nodded with emphasis. "Sure," he rejoined; "and you do as you like about it, Sarvy, but if *I* were you, I'd hit him. You're big and husky, and if you should knock him down, right before all the crowd —"

Torella looked doubtful. "Well, I don't know," he temporized; "Tom's awful strong —"

"Yes, he is," the Deacon cut in quickly, "but no stronger than you be, Sarvy, and as I tell you, he's *pious*; that's where you got the advantage of him. He's pious, and you ain't. Why, if you call him them names, and knock him down, and he don't hit back, he's *done* — that settles

that. He'll never have a show for nothing in Bayport again. And 'twould make you," he added craftily, "even a bigger man than you be already. Might even put you in line for S'lectman, when Whitfield gets through."

Torella's eyes glistened. "You're pretty sure he wouldn't hit back?" he questioned.

"Pretty darned sure," the Deacon affirmed earnestly; "he's one of these 'turn the other cheek also' fellers, Tom is. No, I don't b'lieve you'd run no risk at all."

Sarvy thoughtfully doubled up his arm, felt of his biceps, and was apparently satisfied with the result. He drew a long breath. "I'll do it," he said.

An hour later, Nickerson, pausing outside Bates' store, could hear the sound of fervid oratory, and applying one eye to a crack in the door, beheld Sarvy "speechifying" to an interested audience perched on counter, hogs-heads, cracker barrels, wherever they could find a seat. "I tell ye," cried Torella, "Nickerson was *paid* for this. He's got the whole town in bad, an' there's only one way for us to pull out.

Vote for Whitfield, and Bayport gits the road. Then we all —”

But here Manuel Antoine interrupted. “Yes, but if we elect Tom, he’ll vote ag’in the road, an’ Nat Rogers says he’s ag’in it, ’cause there’s been trickery an’ lyin’. An’ if them two vote ag’in it, then Greenfield gits the road again, an’ our stock’s just as good as ever it was. How about that, Sarvy?”

Torella sawed the air with his fist. “But you can’t *’lect* him,” he declaimed. “He ain’t no man for S’lectman. *You* know it, an’ *I* know it, an’ *he* knows it, too. No, sir, you want to buy Bayport stock —”

“With what?” Joe Surado interjected ruefully, but Sarvy did not heed him, and continued, “That’s the battle cry now, boys. Whitfield for S’lectman, an’ the road for Bayport. An’ as for Tommy Nickerson —”

But at that moment the door opened, and Nickerson himself strode into the room. Somehow his attitude was not particularly suggestive of peace. His face was flushed, his voice scarcely under control. “Boys,” he cried;

“I’ve heard about enough; I don’t propose to stand by an’ let no man go on about me like this. Sarvy here is the feller that showed me a letter, signed by young Whitfield’s uncle, statin’ that Greenfield was goin’ to git the franchise. An’ now he’s tryin’ to make me out to be wrong.” He wheeled upon Torella. “You’ve said I was paid for sayin’ what I did,” he shouted; “you’ve said I got the town in bad. Now you want to apologize pretty quick, or there’ll be somethin’ doin’.”

The great moment had come. No stage could have been more skillfully set. Nickerson stood in shadow; Sarvy, close to the window, in what would have corresponded to the strongest lime-light; the audience, silent and breathless, leaned forward, enthralled with delight. “He’s bluffing,” thought Sarvy to himself, and forthwith he raised his hand and shook it dramatically. “Tom Nickerson,” he began, and then, as the words of his great speech blurred in his mind, he went on desperately, “you got to git out of this fight. You’re temporarily unfit to be a S’lectman of this town,

an' I demand you to withdraw, Tom Nickerson; I demand you to withdraw."

Nickerson, naturally enough astonished at this outburst, stood motionless, and Sarvy, mistaking his inaction for awe and terror, made bold to pursue his advantage and cried accusingly, "I never showed you no letter. There warn't no letter. You was paid —"

Nickerson stepped forward, but his hands, to Torella's relief, hung motionless at his sides, and his voice had subsided to utter calm. Yet his words were ominous. "Sarvy," he said slowly and distinctly, "you're a damn liar —"

It was Torella's cue. He felt all the joy and power of a great actor at the climax of the play. And before Nickerson knew what was coming, Sarvy's beefy fist had caught him full in the eye, and he went sprawling backward into the darkness, to the accompaniment of breaking boxes and rattling tins.

There was a howl from the audience. And Sarvy, the hero, stood there, exactly as he had planned it, the conqueror, perhaps the future Selectman — for one moment he experienced the

exultation of a glorious victory — and then, alas for human plans and human frailties, with a bellow like that of a bull, Nickerson had regained his feet, and had rushed headlong at his adversary. He struck but one blow, but it is talked of, with bated breath, in Bayport to this day. Square on Torella's chest it landed, and before its crashing impact Sarvy staggered backward, and with a yell of pain and fright, disappeared bodily through the window, carrying pane and sash with him in his fall.

With one impulse, the crowd surged toward the door. "You've killed him," cried Lafe Turner, but as he reached the sidewalk, he burst into a great shout of laughter, for half-way down the street Torella's bulky figure was traveling toward his home at a rate of speed well nigh incredible in its swiftness. "Hi," yelled Turner, "look at him. A hundred yards in ten seconds," but Manuel Antoine hastened to correct him.

"Ten seconds be blamed," he exclaimed; "five's nearer. 'Cause to have got where he is

now, he must 'a' gone the first fifty yards in *nothin' at all.*"

But as they turned back into the store, they sobered again. Nickerson raised a hand for silence, and in spite of his rapidly swelling eye, there was dignity in his poise, and in his words. "Boys," he cried, "I'm mighty sorry 'bout this, but everything's just as I've told you. We've all been fooled together, but I ain't a quitter. I'm in this fight to stay, and in it to win, and if you'll b'lieve I'm tellin' the truth, an'll back me up, by golly, we can lick 'em yet."

Joe Surado leaped to the top of a cracker barrel, and waved an arm above his head. "Hurray for Tom," he cried; "Nickerson for S'lectman, an' the Road for Greenfield," and his words brought forth such an answering shout that Sarvy Torella, already nearing his house at the other end of town, heard it, and as he entered, hastily bolted the door behind him.

"Wonder if I'm all here?" he muttered ruefully, and then, as he thought suddenly of the Deacon and his counsel, he added grimly, "Pious! Pious be damned!"

CHAPTER IX

BAYPORT ELECTS A SELECTMAN

PROMPTLY on the morning following the meeting at Bates' store, began the bitterest political battle that Bayport had ever known. It was not a fight between rival factions, on a squarely defined issue, but on the contrary, so many different considerations entered into the struggle that within a week the entire village was by the ears; neighbor was arrayed against neighbor; friend against friend; and for the first time in its history, Bayport had become a town divided against itself.

In the first place, even on the question of the right and wrong of the affair, sentiment was hopelessly mixed. Tom Nickerson, indeed, had called Sarvy Torella a liar, but Sarvy had retaliated by applying the same epithet to Tom; and while Tom's reputation for truth was good, and Sarvy's extremely dubious, and though the

manner in which Nickerson had sent his adversary through the window in Bates' store seemed to lend additional weight to his side of the controversy, yet on the other hand, whether innocently or not, Tom had certainly "made the wrong guess;" had "gotten his friends in wrong," and according to the claims of his enemies, now had to face the old, and extremely unpleasant dilemma of choosing to be regarded either as a knave or a fool.

Yet to be perfectly frank, it was not so much the problem of right and wrong which agitated the voters of Bayport as it was the question of practical expediency. Nor was this to be wondered at. Even the best of us, with nothing at stake, find it hard enough, in the matter of an election, to put all prejudice aside and come out squarely and flat-footedly for the best man. And now the citizens of Bayport found themselves touched in a spot even more sensitive than their consciences — to wit, in their pocket books. Never, indeed, was a contest more perplexing. At first sight, it might have seemed that the advantage lay with Nickerson, for a clear majority

of the voters had followed his lead in selling their Bayport stock and buying Greenfield, and now had no hope of seeing their money again, unless Nickerson's election, and his vote against the road, should bring about the defeat of the Bayport & Southern franchise. Yet this advantage was more apparent than real, for on the whole, Billy appeared to have by far the stronger backing in the fight, and it was still possible for anyone believing that Whitfield would be elected to re-sell his Greenfield stock and buy back Bayport instead. And thus, for those cautious individuals who like to be on the safe side, and hesitate to come out openly for one candidate in the fear of antagonizing the other, should he be successful, the situation was one of agony. There was no such thing as a "hedge"; under one banner or the other, each citizen of Bayport must enroll his convictions and his dollars. It was the familiar problem of "picking the winner," and never was a winner more difficult to pick.

Billy, to be sure, had most of the "big men" in the campaign behind him, and in addition to

this he himself was far from being a weak candidate. His speech, of course, was not the speech of Bayport; his ways were not Bayport's ways; yet in the main, after his first disastrous experience on the coot line, his demeanor had been uniformly affable and polite, and he had gone about the business of making friends so assiduously that he had gained for himself the general verdict that "for a city feller, young Whitfield was all right." As for the fact that he was openly admitted to be merely his uncle's representative in the town, while Nickerson's supporters made the most of this, and talked bitterly of "colonizing" and of "carpet baggers," there were plenty of others who praised the Honorable Staunton for "knowing how to play the game," and in spite of boasted Yankee independence, perhaps both sides were secretly not ill-pleased that a man of the capitalist's wealth and reputation had chosen their town as a battle ground, and was "helpin' to put Bayport on the map."

At the head of Billy's forces was Deacon Hezekiah Wentworth, he of the side-whiskers,

wily, suave, and with all the prestige of his long years of leadership behind him. Sensibly enough, he spent little time in attacking Tom, but instead urged the great benefit of the road to Bayport, and with all his eloquence appealed to local patriotism and pride.

Next in importance to the Deacon were his two lieutenants. The first of these was Mr. Michael Sweeney, faithful adherent to the Deacon and his policies, and leader of a band of followers who were as "solid" as if they had hailed from some well-organized city ward. Theirs not to reason why — theirs not to argue, or to trouble themselves over the merits of the campaign — but theirs to vote, promptly and with care, according to the instructions of Mr. Michael Sweeney.

The post of second lieutenant was ably filled by Sarvy Torella. Anywhere and everywhere, on the street, in the stores, down by the wharves and the float-stage, he would buttonhole the unwary voter. "For God's sake, don't disgrace yourself by votin' for Nickerson," was the burden of his song; "you can't tell what a feller

like that is apt to go and do. He's got most of the town in bad already, and now he goes an' cries baby over it. He ain't to be trusted, Tom ain't. If a man fools you once, then *he's* to blame, but if he fools you twice, then *you're* to blame. 'Twon't do no good to vote for him, expectin' he'll stick to what he says; 'cause all he wants is to git elected, an' then he'll sell to the highest bidder. Why, he won't even *stay* bought, Tom won't."

Besides these able directors of his campaign, Billy had another advantage in the presence on the voting list of some two score "Summer Residents," men of substance who preferred the tax rate of Bayport to that of the city. These personages, in ordinary years, did not deem it necessary to appear at the polls, but now, under the influence of much vigorous urging from the Honorable Staunton Whitfield, they promised to attend in a body, and rebuke "a common lobster fisherman" for his temerity in daring to run against "a gentleman" by administering a crushing defeat to him, and thus "teaching him to know his place."

Thus, by the Whitfield-Wentworth faction, Billy was extolled as the pattern of all the virtues, and Nickerson's character was torn to shreds; but on the other hand, Tom and his friends refused to lie meekly down to be trampled on. On the contrary, they showed a most militant and unregenerate spirit, and Nickerson himself, with his career in Bayport politics and his reputation as a Bayport citizen, both hanging in the balance, went about his fight with a grim and dogged determination justly irritating to the other party. He called a spade a spade, and he called Sarvy Torella and the Honorable Staunton Whitfield a good deal worse than that, so that the Deacon was forced to revise his estimate of Tom as a "pious" individual, and to dub him a "backslider" instead. Shoulder to shoulder with Tom fought those true friends, Manuel and Joe, and though Sarvy Torella, according to his custom, claimed that the "Portugee vote" was solidly in line of Whitfield, friends and foes alike derided him, well knowing that the fishermen of Bayport were nine out of ten for Tom. Old Mr. New-

comb, too, lent the weight of his standing among the more conservative dwellers in the village to Tom's cause, and 'Bijah Higgins, of Beechwoods, who had never forgotten or forgiven Billy's actions on the sacred "coot line," now proved an unexpected tower of strength, and as he possessed more influence among the farming portion of the community than any other two men, Billy's loss of temper on that cold December morning now bade fair to cost him dear.

So the battle raged, and before it ended every known expedient in the political calendar had been brought into play. Rallies, torchlight processions, oyster suppers, house to house canvassing, nothing was left untried. And as for money, not only did the Honorable Staunton furnish it in such sums that Sarvy Torella's eyes almost started from his head at the sight of it, but the "Greenfield Interests," untiring in their support of Nickerson, matched it, dollar for dollar, until the market price of votes reached a figure hitherto undreamed of, even by the most mercenary, and the delighted Sarvy,

bursting with justifiable pride, exclaimed exultantly. "A new high record for Bayport. By Gee, they can't keep us down. Pretty soon, we'll be famous all over the country, like Reno and Oyster Bay."

And now at length arrived the crucial "night before." Billy's supporters rallied in the town hall, and packed it to the very doors. A city orator, imported for the occasion, told humorous stories which, though they had not the slightest bearing on the campaign, were none the less most joyously received. The Deacon himself made a "good, old-fashioned speech," letting the eagle scream, and linking, in startling juxtaposition, the names of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, U. S. Grant and William Whitfield; while Billy, with a combined eloquence and mendacity which amazed even himself, told of his love for the town of Bayport, and of the happy days he had spent at the establishment of the hospitable Mrs. Stiggins.

Altogether, it was a most inspiring occasion, and the odds certainly seemed to be swinging in Billy's favor; yet all that night Tom,

Joe, Manuel and Mr. Newcomb, seated in executive session in the hose house, worked over the voting lists, and up in the distant Beechwoods 'Bijah Higgins, wasting his substance riotously in a farewell oyster supper, and nearly capsizing from the platform of the schoolhouse in his excitement, gave a spirited reproduction of the morning on the coot line. "So I punched him in the belly," he declaimed, ramming home an imaginary boathook, "an' then I smashed t'other feller over the knuckles, an' made 'em quit. He's a pore, mean-sperrited cuss, young Whitfield is, an' we c'n run things in Bayport a spell longer, I cal'late, 'thout him a buttin' in. We'll mind our affairs, and let him 'tend to his'n," and though the applause which greeted him was not as noisy as that which echoed through the town hall, sundry grunts and solemn nodding of heads signified that the men of Beechwoods had made up their minds that 'Bijah Higgins was right, and that henceforth no power on earth could change them.

The morning of election day dawned clear and bright. Almost as soon as the polls were

open, 'Bijah and his followers put in an appearance — three huge barge loads in all — and on the side of each barge a huge cloth sign, lettered in 'Bijah's own hand "VOTE ERLY AND OFFEN." It was his final contribution to the campaign, and Billy, standing at the door of the hall, and watching these grim, unsmiling men file by him, each reaching forth a calloused hand for a ballot, groaned in spirit, and felt that he would give half his fortune to be able to blot out that black day when he had incurred 'Bijah's wrath upon the coot line.

Yet later he brightened again, for as the morning progressed, the "city folks" swung nobly into line for Billy and the road. Holmes and Anderson, knowing nothing of the merits of the controversy, but delighted to assist at a "scrap" of any kind, had lent their runabouts to aid in getting out the vote, while no less a person than Mrs. William Mortimer, knowing that electioneering was considered "perfectly good form" on the "other side," graced the scene by appearing in *the* Mortimer motor, and observing Nickerson standing on the steps of

the hall, surveyed him witheringly through her lorgnette, and then announced, quite audibly and with extreme disapproval, that he “appeared to be a very common sort of person indeed.” One other triumph she accomplished also, for Ben Lothrop, the oldest voter in town, who lived at the end of the Point, and who had steadfastly refused to be moved by the entreaties of either party, could not withstand the spell of the big red machine, and was captured and brought in triumph to the polls to mark his cross upon the ballot. Later, in the tremulous voice of a very old man, he told his tale to Joe Surado. “Lady asked a lot of questions,” he confided, “an’ I purtended to act a leetle might foolisher’n what I really be, an’ kep’ a’ noddin’, an’ not sayin’ nothin’, ’cause I wanted a ride in that pesky big m’bile. So finally she gits it in her head that I’m for Whitfield, an’ I comes aboard. Go? God! I sh’d say we *did* go. Never seen nothin’ to beat it. Hadn’t even no time to *spit* — an’ the funny part was,” he concluded, “that when I gits inside the booth, my conscience up an’ says

to me, 'Now, Ben, you mustn't do nothin' wrong,' an' so I votes for *Tom*."

And thus, through the long day, the tide of battle swayed, now this way, now that; as Manuel Antoine phrased it, "Apparently, in the long run, 'bout a case o' hoss an' hoss." The Portuguese voters, to be sure, though gladly accepting Sarvy's hand-shake and proffered cigar, marched up to the polls in solid phalanx, and cast their ballots for Nickerson. But this was offset, about noontime, by the advent of Mr. Michael Sweeney, at the head of his gallant band. Their line of march, indeed, was scarcely as imposing as it might have been, for most of them had been exceedingly drunk the night before, but though staggering, they could still hear their master's voice, and lurching unsteadily through the gateway, each of them managed to mark a sprawling "X" in the space opposite Whitfield's name.

By four o'clock, the predicted "biggest vote in the history of the town" had become actual fact, and the polls were closed. The heavy balloting made it evident that the result would

not be known until six o'clock, at least, and the hall, in consequence, was for the time being deserted. Yet the voters made no move to go to their homes, but stood grouped around the doors and on the village green, for though Elmer Sedgwick, moderator of the meeting, had announced that no "leak" in the counting of the votes would be permitted, no one for a moment believed him, and it was for the thrill of receiving this forbidden news that the crowd remained at the polls.

Tom and his supporters took their stand near the Church, while Billy and his lieutenants strolled away toward the pond; and at precisely half past four Manuel Antoine's nephew suddenly appeared, running at full speed toward Nickerson, while at the same moment Sarvy Torella himself was seen hastening toward the camp of the enemy.

Tom unfolded the paper which the boy handed him, and amid a breathless silence, read, "First 200 votes; Whitfield, 114; Nickerson, 86."

There was a silence. Then Manuel whistled

sharply. "Gee," he cried, "thought we'd do a little better than that."

Nickerson nodded. "Not so awful good, is it?" he answered and as 'Bijah Higgins came hurrying up to hear the news, he called to him, "Your friend's goin' strong, 'Bijah; 28 votes ahead out of 200. Guess you Beechwoods fellers must have voted the wrong way."

Higgins brandished his fist in the air. "Never you mind, Tommy," he cried encouragingly; "keep up your courage, boy. I 'xpected he'd git the lead at the start. Them votes is all the rich folks that come late; don't you see; they was the last to go into the box, an' the fust to come out of it. You wait till old Beechwoods is heard from. We'll put a crimp in this feller yet, Tommy; just you watch and see. An', if we don't," he added, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll tie crape to my whiskers, an' leave town on the jump. Keep up your spunk, Tommy; we'll git him yet."

The next bulletin, however, brought little consolation, and Tom, as he read it, shook his head, while from the group near the pond they

could hear a cheer, for the message ran, "400 votes; Whitfield, 218; Nickerson, 182."

Amid the general atmosphere of discouragement, only 'Bijah contrived to keep his courage. "Never mind," he cried again; "ain't got to Beechwoods yet," but Tom only answered ruefully,

"You're a good feller, 'Bije, an' I like your grit, but I guess this is the time they got us."

And now the big hour hand on the town clock seemed to drag more and more slowly, until as it pointed to half past five, the messengers once more appeared. For a moment, Tom held the paper unopened in his hand, nerving himself for the worst, then quickly unfolded and read it; and as he did so, the figures danced before his eyes, "600 votes; Whitfield, 301; Nickerson, 299; about thirty ballots left to hear from."

There was a wild yell, and then, with one accord, everyone started at once, pell-mell, for the hall, realizing that the result might now be announced at any moment. Never before had such a crowd assembled in the old building.

Every inch of floor space was occupied, and even the ladies' gallery above was thronged, conspicuous in the front row being Mrs. William Mortimer, and Edith Nickerson, with Thomas Nickerson, Jr., held firmly in her arms. And now Elmer Sedgwick, the moderator, stepped to the edge of the platform, and clearing his throat impressively, announced, "For the office of Selectman, 626 votes have been cast. Of these William Whitfield has received 311, and Thomas Nickerson has received 315. Thomas Nickerson is accordingly elected Selectman of the town of Bayport —"

But the rest of his speech was lost. For while in the left of the hall, where Billy's friends were grouped, there was utter silence, from the right, where the Nickerson crowd were seated, there sounded a mighty cheer. And then, as the noise died away, it remained for Thomas Nickerson, Jr., to add the needed human touch, for catching sight of his father standing on the platform, he suddenly reached out his arms toward him, crying, "Daddy! He'yo, Daddy!" in such a tone of honest affection and good-will

that the tension was momentarily relieved, and from friend and foe alike there burst forth a great shout of good-humored and sympathetic laughter.

Immediately Mrs. William Mortimer rose majestically and stalked away from the gallery, while in her wake trailed burning words of indignation, among which could be heard, "Disgrace — outrage — a common lobster fisherman —" Yet Edith Nickerson scarcely heeded her, for her heart was beating high with pride. She was "Mrs. Selectman Nickerson," now; those who had snubbed her in the past would have to pay for it, and as she watched her husband taking the oath of office, she applauded her own good judgment, feeling that she had chosen wisely, after all.

But Billy Whitfield, hastily departing, felt no such joy — only the bitterest despair and disappointment. And as if for the crowning touch of all, just outside the doorway he came upon the hairy 'Bije, recounting to a fresh audience for perhaps the fiftieth time the events of the morning on the coot line. "And so,"

Billy heard him say, "I gave him a punch in the belly —"

With averted face, he hurried on, filled with vain regrets and cursing the tricks which Fate had played him. "I'm busted now, for fair," quoth Billy Whitfield.

CHAPTER X

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

ON the morning following the election, Billy appeared at his uncle's office in a most unhappy frame of mind. Nor did the Honorable Staunton's attitude tend to cheer him, for Billy had never seen him in a less amiable mood, and he ruthlessly cut short his nephew's speech of apologies and regrets. "I cannot conceive, William," he remarked icily, "how a campaign, from beginning to end, could have been more stupidly or ignorantly conducted than yours. If Hezekiah Wentworth, by any chance, *did* manage to omit anything which could help Nickerson's cause, that blundering lieutenant of his — Tortoni, if that's his name — immediately jumped into the breach, and did it for him. And of course this had to happen for the first time in all the twenty

years I've known the Deacon. He has always proved himself a reliable man, but now, when I really need him, he has to go and inject into the fight some of his own ideas of Bayport diplomacy. It is extremely disheartening —”

Billy sat listening in silence, feeling that the capitalist's strictures were unjust and undeserved, yet since he feared that his own turn must be near at hand, lacking the spirit to defend his friends. Nor was he mistaken, for at length, after his uncle had to some extent exhausted his subject, he passed on to the misdemeanors of the luckless Billy. “As for you, William,” he began, “I will simply say this. If anyone *could* have outdone the Deacon and his friend Salvini in going directly contrary to all my plans, which appears, indeed, to be doubtful, that honor certainly belongs to you. How, in the name of all that's wonderful, after I had told you that the one essential thing was to make friends with these people — how you could then proceed to engage in a fist fight with one of Bayport's prominent citizens, over the ridiculous question as to which of you shot a duck — why William,

it simply passes comprehension. I take it, of course, that what I have heard is true?"

Billy was studying the pattern of the carpet beneath his feet. "Yes, sir," he admitted unwillingly enough, and without raising his eyes from the ground; "yes, sir, it's all true. I got excited —"

"Exactly," broke in his uncle; "but men who are running for office shouldn't allow themselves to get excited. And further than that, William," he continued remorselessly, "as long as you were going to fight, why didn't you win? That might have put the matter in a little better light. But as I understand it, you let this Higgins get the better of you — both of you and your friend —"

Billy crimsoned. "Well, he had a boathook —" he began, but his uncle did not allow him to proceed.

"That's of no importance," he interrupted, "a boathook is mere matter of detail. The point is that he bested you, and I feel sure that this one circumstance alone was enough to turn victory into defeat. And why, William —" he

went on, "why, in the name of sober common sense, did you begin paying attention to Nickerson's wife? Really, not to put it too harshly, of all the utterly asinine performances —"

Billy raised his flaming face. "I didn't mean that to have anything to do with the election," he answered, "that was just — well, sort of a side issue, as you might say."

His uncle sighed. "Well, as matters turned out," he rejoined; "it *did* have something to do with the election, whether you meant it to or not. From what I hear, I don't doubt that your flirtation at the ball cost you a dozen votes, at the very least. Oh, the whole thing seems inconceivable, William; if you had actually set to work to lose, I can't imagine how you could have proceeded any differently. You've made a pitiful showing —"

Billy's eyes were once more upon the ground. For the first time in many years, he was suspiciously near the crying point. And there was nothing to say — that was the worst of it. He gulped spasmodically, and muttered under his breath, "I'm awfully sorry, sir —"

At last the financier appeared to take pity on his distress. "Well," he observed, more philosophically, "of course it's over with now —"

Billy raised his eyes. "That's the devil of it, sir," he cried; "if there was only something I could do to square myself. But it's just as you say. The whole thing's over with —"

The Honorable Staunton rose quickly to his feet, and began to pace the room with short, nervous steps. "God bless my soul, William," he exclaimed at length, "I can't understand you modern young men; you're altogether beyond me. You're *soft*, William; that's the only word for it. You lack resourcefulness. You're not the fighters that we were in our day. I didn't mean that the whole affair was over with — I only meant the election part of it. Why, the real fight has only just begun. We'll beat these fellows yet."

A great hope dawned in Billy's heart. "Do you mean it, sir?" he cried. "Why, I thought this settled everything. Rogers and Nickerson are both against the road —"

The capitalist had resumed his seat. "That,

of course, is just the point," he replied. "If Rogers and Nickerson both vote against the road, there's no hope for us. Consequently, that's the very thing we must prevent. A vote of two to one kills us. We must have either a deadlock — one man opposed to the Deacon, and the other not voting — or better still, a vote of two for the road, and one against it. Either way, we win. It is only an express disapproval, under the Statute, shown by a majority vote of the Selectmen, that can defeat us."

But his words seemed to bring Billy no comfort. "Yes," he rejoined, "but how are we going to change 'em? You know what Nickerson is. And Rogers, if anything, is worse. He's one of these narrow, straight-laced New Englanders, who's got the idea that there's been what he calls 'trickery and false dealin's', about the road, and so swears he'll never vote for it. I don't see how it's possible to change either of them."

The Honorable Staunton smiled indulgently. "William," he observed, "you should take nothing in this world for granted. For illustra-

tion, let us consider your theory that both Nickerson and Rogers are honest. It is true they have that reputation, but that is just what handicaps so many men. They somehow acquire the name of being honest, the world assents to it as a matter of course, and thus they are deprived of their chance of ever pulling off a really big thing. They're honest, because they have no opportunity of doing anything that isn't honest. And moreover, William, there are all degrees of honesty. A man may be what is sometimes called 'personally honest,' and yet he'd lie his head off for his family's sake. Now Rogers has a daughter, and Nickerson has a wife and baby. That puts us in a good position to start with. Why, we can get one of their votes, William, so easily that when it's done, you'll laugh at yourself for ever having doubted it. And I'll tell you how we'll do it, too."

Billy gazed, fascinated, at this genial iconoclast, and felt hope spring once more to life. And as his uncle proceeded with the outline of his plan, he became every moment more optimistic. "We must put our pride in our pockets,

William," the capitalist went on, "and everything considered, I think we had better begin with Nickerson. Once more, in spite of your former failures, you are to be entrusted with a mission. And I hope that this time —"

But the enthusiastic Billy could not wait for the completion of the sentence. "Oh, I'll do anything," he cried; "just give me a chance to square myself — that's all."

His uncle nodded approval. "That's the right spirit," he remarked; "and I rather think, William," he added drily, "that your present task presents a splendid field for the exercise of your somewhat peculiar talents. For what I want you to do is to go over to the Island with a message for Mrs. Nickerson."

Billy crimsoned once more. "Are you — are you serious, sir?" he at length managed to ask.

"Absolutely," replied his uncle. "I am not in a humorous mood, William — and while we are on the subject," he added, "and since you happen to be something of an authority, let me make sure this time that my information is cor-

rect. I understand that this Mrs. Nickerson, is young, pretty and attractive. Is that so?"

"Yes, sir," Billy replied, not without shame, "that's so."

"And I understand further that Nickerson is devoted to her."

"Yes, sir, that's right, too."

"And that she isn't a woman of any remarkable intelligence."

"No, sir; about like the rest of them."

"And that she's fond of a good time, and of pretty things."

"Yes, sir; about like the rest of them."

"Very well." The Honorable Staunton had concluded his cross-examination, and now continued, "You are to tell her this, William. That her husband has given us a beating, and that in exchange for it we're going to befriend him, and take him into our camp. He is going to vote for the road, and we are going to make him our local representative of the Bayport & Southern, at a salary of three thousand dollars a year. Don't of course speak as if there were any possibility of his refusing — simply con-

gratulate her, and tell her how lucky she is — you can put on the artistic touches as they may occur to you. Do you understand?”

Billy nodded dutifully, but it was easy to see that he did not relish his task. “What a cinch for Nickerson,” he could not help remarking.

The Honorable Staunton raised his eyebrows. “To the victors —” he quoted, and Billy hastened to agree.

“Yes, sir, that’s right,” he answered; then added, “Excuse me, sir, if I’m asking a stupid question, but where is Nickerson supposed to be, all this time I’m calling on his wife?”

His uncle rose, as if to conclude the interview. “Nickerson,” he responded, “will be in this office, listening to my proposal. And while he’s considering it, and turning it over in his mind, he goes home to his wife, and finds her in the seventh heaven of happiness, under the impression that the whole matter is already settled. If she’s as charming as she’s reported to be, how much chance has he got? I should say a very slim one, indeed. If he has any doubts at all,

he ought to relinquish them for his wife's sake. How does it look to you, William?"

Billy gazed at this wily man of affairs with a feeling akin to reverence. "Uncle Staunton," he rejoined, "you're a wonder. I know you don't like slang, but all I can say is that I've certainly got to hand it to you — there's no other way of expressing what I mean. And if I miss fire this time, I'll tie a rock around my neck, and jump off the Bayport dock. Good night, sir; I'm going to start for the Island now."

The town clock was striking eleven as Tom Nickerson rowed slowly home across the harbor, yet as he drew near shore, he could see that in spite of the lateness of the hour, the kitchen was brilliantly lighted, and a sudden fear assailed him. "Hope the boy isn't sick," he muttered, but as he beached the skiff and walked quickly toward the house, it became evident that the illumination was not one of danger, but of rejoicing, for through the window he could see the table spread with a bountiful sup-

per, and as he opened the door, his wife, dressed in her best, and looking her prettiest, fairly threw herself into his arms, kissing and embracing him with a fervor which she had not displayed for many a day. "Oh, Tom," she cried, "isn't it *splendid!* I'm so delighted, I don't know what to do. I could hardly *wait* for you to get home. Just think of it. They had to come to you, and beg you. And the money — oh, Tom —"

Nickerson stood gazing at her in amazement. "Who's been here?" he asked shortly.

But she did not appear to notice his manner. "Billy Whitfield," she answered; "and he was awfully nice about it, Tom. He told me how you'd beaten them, and how they'd got to have you with them, and about the position you're going to have. He says there'll be a lot for you to do; and a great deal of responsibility; and just think of the money, Tom — three thousand dollars a year. And he says there'll be other chances, too. That anyone who's in with his uncle —"

Nickerson held her from him at arm's length,

gazing at her sternly as though seeking to discover whether her delight was real, or whether she was acting a part, and had entered into league with the Whitfields to make the ordeal too hard for him. Yet as he looked into her eyes, he felt at once that his suspicions were unfounded, for she glanced back at him fearlessly, and with a joy too genuine to be assumed. "Just think, Tom," she chattered on; "think of all we can do. We can move to town — we can keep a maid to do the work and look after the baby — and now that you're getting ahead, Tom, I really ought to dress better — I haven't any clothes at all —"

"Stop, Edith! Stop!" he cried; "you've got this all wrong. I'm not going to take the job, and I've told them so to-night."

If he had dealt her a blow in the face, he could not have surprised her more. She stood staring at him, incredulous. "Why, Tom," she stammered at length, "you don't mean that. You *can't* mean that. Not take the job —"

He pulled a chair in front of the fire, and sat down, as if physically spent and exhausted. "I

can't do it," he said again; "I can't vote for the road. I gave my word the other way, and I can't go back on it now."

She sank on her knees beside his chair, and like a person pleading for life itself, she took his hand in both of hers. "But, Tom," she entreated, "it isn't wrong to change your mind. Everyone does that. It isn't as though you were harming anyone. Billy Whitfield told me especially — that every man who lost money through your changing your vote would get it back from his uncle, cent for cent. Nothing could be any fairer than that. Why, you must do it, Tom; it's the greatest chance we've ever had. And there's nothing wrong about it," she repeated; "you're not harming anyone at all."

Nickerson, as though scarcely heeding her, sat gazing straight before him. "No *money* harm," he answered at length, "but here's the trouble, Edith; this crowd ain't honest. We been goin' over the whole thing — me and Staunton Whitfield — for the last three hours, straight from beginnin' to end, an' what do you s'pose? He owns right up to it, that he wrote

that letter to Sarvy, an' he says he ain't ashamed of doin' it, either — that he told the truth, that Greenfield *was* goin' to git the franchise. As to what was goin' to happen after that, he claims he didn't say, an' that if I went an' chose to jump at c'nclusions, that was my own foolishness. He says a fisherman like me ought to know better'n to bite at a bare hook, an' that that's just what I went an' did. An' of course, in one sense of the word, he's right —”

His wife broke hastily in upon him. “Why yes, of course,” she cried eagerly; “I don't suppose he meant any harm. Everyone does like that in business, Tom; it's not the same as other things —”

“That's just what he said,” returned Nicker-son. “He said I had a lot of queer ideas — that New England consciences had gone out of date, an' ought to be cut out, just like peoples' 'pendixes. He claims that everything's a fight, these days, and that it's pleasanter to eat than be eaten — better be a sparrow-hawk, he says, than a sparrow. But 'tain't so, Edith —” he continued vehemently. “Here he is, with all his

money, an' here's the rest of us in Bayport, needin' every cent we c'n scrape together, an' yet he went an' deliberately schemed to fool us out o' what we had. You can argue, much as you please, but that ain't right — a lie's a lie, same as a pill's a pill, whether you take it plain or go an' fix it up with a sugar coatin' on th' outside of it. An' that's all there is to that."

"But, Tom," she cried, "it's all past and gone now. Probably they're sorry for what they did; but anyway they'll fix things right for everyone. And it's only fair that you should have something, Tom, for working the way you have. Why, just think of it; look at what you've done. You've fought them all — the Deacon, and Sarvy Torella, and Michael Sweeney, and now a man as big as Mr. Whitfield has to come and ask a favor of you. Why, it's the greatest compliment, Tom —"

But he interrupted her in his turn. "Well, that's how I felt, first," he acknowledged, "but the more I came to think of it, the less like a compliment it 'peared to be. I cal'late really it's t'other way around. Why didn't they go

to Nat Rogers, to git him to vote for the road? 'Cause they know he's a good square feller that's always been ag'in trickery, an' everythin' like that, an' 'twouldn't do 'em no good to try. So they come to me instead. I reckon, as I say, 'tain't a compliment, after all. An' I won't give in to 'em, neither, 'cause they been crooked from the start, an' damned if I'll sell my vote for a job nor nothin' else."

There was a silence, and then the woman, as if deciding to abandon this ground of argument, rose and seated herself on his knee, twining her arms about his neck. "But Tom dear," she whispered, "even if it isn't — not exactly what you'd call right — still I think you ought to do it, for all our sakes. We've got to look out for ourselves first — everyone has to do that. And think of the difference it would make. Your father's pretty old, Tom — you could do a lot for him — and there's the boy, Tom. And I ought to count for a little something."

She pressed her lips against his, and the ardor of her caress seemed to be somewhat greater

than the occasion warranted. "Please, dear," she murmured, "please do. We'll be so happy, Tom —"

There was silence in the kitchen, unbroken save for the singing of the kettle on the stove and the measured ticking of the clock. And in that moment Tom Nickerson took a long look ahead through the years — saw all that he would lose, saw all that he would suffer, thought of everything his wife had urged — then fought his fight, and won. He gently disengaged her arms from around his neck, and rose to his feet. "I'm sorry, Edie," he said, "but I guess I can't do it. Though I hate mighty bad to disappoint you."

She walked over toward the window, and stood for a moment looking out into the night. When she turned, her face was very cold and hard. "I'm not going to tell you this won't make a difference, Tom," she said, "because it will. A man can't understand. I want so many things — things that 'most every woman in the world has except me — things I've dreamed about all my life — and now my chance

comes, and you won't take it, Tom. I thought you loved me more than that. I wish I'd known, before I married you."

The words cut deep, and perhaps she saw the change in his expression, for at once, as if still hopeful of victory, she murmured, in a very different tone, "Oh, Tom, can't you *see* — it isn't much to ask — you've only to say 'yes' instead of 'no.' "

He stood gazing at her, and very beautiful she looked in the mellow lamplight, against the background of the darkened pane. Yet stealing across the water, and glimmering faintly through the room, flashed the gleam from the distant lighthouse, and Nickerson, with a sigh, slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry, Edie," he said again, "but I guess it's got to be 'no.' "

CHAPTER XI

NAT ROGERS MAKES UP HIS MIND

THE morning of the thirteenth of September dawned calm and clear over Bayport. Joe Surado, churning out from the harbor, a half hour before day-break, from time to time glanced anxiously at the dim outline of the Island. "Hope he ain't gone yet," he muttered; "if he has, I s'pose I'll have to chase all over the bay to find him. Serves me right for not startin' sooner," but a moment later, as the light in the east grew stronger, he perceived Nickerson in the act of boarding his dory, and with an exclamation of relief, he shoved his helm to port, and presently, as he neared the beach, stopped his engine and let his boat run. "Hullo, Tom," he hailed; "thought I'd missed you. I reckon you ain't on time, neither, this mornin'."

Nickerson's answering tone was not quite as genial as customary. "You bet I ain't," he responded; "had to git my own breakfast. Edie's gone visitin'."

Surado, knowing how matters were going at Nickerson's home, could read between the lines. "That so?" he queried with interest. "Has she gone for long, Tom?"

"No, not for long," Nickerson answered; "back in a couple of days, I guess. Took the boy an' went to stop with Bill Lincoln's girl, over to the Point. Damn this engine"—he added with unusual warmth, as he cranked vigorously without getting a response,—“she was goin' great yesterday. Wonder what's struck her now?"

"Oh, she'll go in a minute," Joe replied comfortingly; "they always act funny, this time in the mornin', 'fore they git warmed up. Prob'ly there's some gasolene in the base of her. Say, Tom," he broke off abruptly, "how things goin' 'bout the road? You got to vote on it day after to-morrow, ain't you?"

"Sure," Nickerson assented; "that's the time

we meet, 'cause it's the time we *got* to meet. It's the last day for takin' action, under the Statute. We'd ought to have done it long before, but the Deacon's been away, so we kept puttin' it off. Don't make no difference, though; we'll settle it now, in short order. They say old Hezekiah's madder'n a wet hen, but I don' know what he c'n do 'bout it. Nat an' I are ag'in the road, till hell freezes; so I guess that fixes it. It's a sure thing, unless," he added humorously, "one of us drops dead, or breaks a leg."

Surado reflected in silence. "Sure things is awful scarce, Tommy," he remarked at length; "a feller can see that, from watchin' all this business 'bout the franchise. An' speakin' of hell freezin', Tom, are you so certain positive you c'n count on Nat?"

Nickerson, knowing from experience that Joe was not given to talking without a purpose, glanced sharply up at him. "What you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Oh, nothin'," Joe replied non-committally, "only I was wonderin', if he was so all-fired sot

ag'in the road, what young Whitfield was doin' up t' his house last night?"

Nickerson rose quickly to his feet. "Whitfield," he repeated incredulously, "was at Nat's house last night? Like ducks he was."

But Joe was not to be shaken. "He was there, all right," he reiterated. "I know it for a fact, 'less my eyes ain't what they used to be."

Nickerson's face grew troubled. "What time was he there?" he queried. "An' how d'you happen to see him, Joe?"

"'Twas 'bout nine o'clock," Joe responded. "I'd put the cat out, an' 'twas such a pretty night I kinder strolled down far as them big high-draingers 'longside the gate. Fust thing I knew, I see a man come walkin' along the road, down from Nat's house. He stops right in front of where I was standin', fumbles 'round in his pocket a spell, an' then strikes a match, an' goes to lightin' one o' them pesky cigarettes. Match makes quite a flash out there in the dark, an' I see the feller is Whitfield."

Nickerson's frown deepened. "That's

funny," he muttered to himself; "darn funny. You dead sure it was him, Joe?"

"Certain sure," Joe answered; "an' look here, Tom," he added impressively, "this was what set me to thinkin'. I got a good look at him when he was lightin' up, *an' he had a grin on his face, from ear to ear.*"

The words were not lacking in effect. "The hell you say," cried Nickerson; then added quickly, "Whereabouts is Nat hauling, Joe?"

Joe pointed to the north. "Fog Ledge," he answered, "an' another string off the Tree Ground. He's got out a hundred an' fifty pots, this year. So he starts dretful early in the mornin'. I expect he's out on Fog Ledge now."

Nickerson once more cranked viciously at his wheel, and this time the engine responded. "There," he exclaimed, "got her goin', anyway. Well, I'm much obliged, Joe. Nat's all right about this railroad business, but if I get a chance by and by, I'll run out an' speak to him, just to make sure there's nothin'

wrong. But you needn't worry, Joe; Nat Rogers, he's straight as a string."

Joe shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe he is," he answered, "but you know what old man Eldredge said up t' the hall. 'Good men is scarce,' an' hanged if I ain't comin' 'round to his way o' thinkin'," and both starting their engines at the same moment, they sped seaward, side by side.

Off Gull Ledge, Joe waved his hand, gave his tiller rope a jerk, and shifted his course to the eastward, while Nickerson bore away in the opposite direction, to haul his Black Rock string. Yet his mind was not on his work, for what Joe had told him disturbed him more than he cared to own. At first, he tried to ridicule himself for his fears. "Pshaw, Nat's all right," he repeated a dozen times, yet the doubt would not leave his mind. What was Whitfield doing at the house? That was the hard question to solve; and Joe's significant words, "He had a grin on his face, from ear to ear," did not furnish a satisfactory answer to the problem. And thus he argued and worried until, about half

way through his string, he came to a sudden resolve. "Confound it all," he muttered to himself, "I've got to see him. I can't stand this," and with the words turned the dory's head toward the open sea.

Far out on Fog Ledge, a tiny spot against the blue showed where his fellow Selectman was hauling, but as he approached, the distance between the two boats did not seem to diminish, and it soon became evident that Rogers was also under way, heading straight to the northeast. Somehow, the manœuver struck Nickerson with disfavor; for though Joe had said that Rogers had a string of pots on the Tree Ground, and though it was plainly in that direction that he was bound, at the same time the impression that the dory was avoiding him grew stronger in his mind. He set his jaw stubbornly. "We'll see," he remarked, "I reckon I c'n travel about three feet to his two; an' at that rate I ought to git him somewhere this side o' the Cape"; and he renewed the oil in the cup, gave the engine a trifle more gasolene, and held the *Edith Nickerson* steady on her course.

But if Rogers had had any idea of escape, he now abandoned it, and when he reached the Tree Ground, went methodically to work hauling his string. His greeting, too, as Nickerson drew alongside, was cordial. "Hullo, Tom," he hailed, "what you doin' away out here? You ain't got no pots out this fur, have you?"

Nickerson allowed his dory to drift alongside, and laid hold of the other's rail. "No, I'm further inshore," he replied; "I just ran out to have a word with you, Nat. We got to vote on the road, you know, the day after to-morrow. I s'pose of course you're still ag'in the Deacon?"

Rogers was in the act of hauling a pot over the side, and as he bent forward to take out the big lobster struggling within, his answer was lost. Yet his low tone, and his averted eyes, did not tend to reassure Nickerson, and he repeated his question sharply, "You're still ag'in the Deacon, I s'pose, Nat?"

Rogers had shoved the trap over the side, but still his eyes did not seek Tom's. "Why, yes," he answered unconvincingly; "far as I

know now, I cal'late I'm ag'in the Deacon, Tom."

His words said one thing; his tone another; and Nickerson felt no further doubts. "Far as you know now," he repeated. "That seems a funny thing to say." Then, determined to come to the point at once, he added, "Look here, Nat, what was Whitfield doin' at your house last night?"

Rogers made no answer. A dull flush mounted in his thin cheeks, and drops of sweat, not due to his exertions in hauling, stood out on his forehead. "Wh-wh-what's that?" he stammered; and then, not daring to risk a denial, he struggled to throw an air of nonchalance into his reply. "Whitfield?" he repeated. "Why yes, Tom, he *was* up to the house a little while. Just a friendly call, Tom; that's all; just a friendly call."

His embarrassment was obvious, but Nickerson showed no mercy. "Just a friendly call," he repeated in his turn; "well, that's interestin'. An' did you happen to talk railroad, Nat?"

Rogers gasped; for a lie was something

wholly beyond him, and even dissimulation came hard. And thus, with an attempt at indifference half humorous, half pathetic, he conceded, "Well, maybe we did jus' speak of it, Tom. Nothin' special, though. We was talkin' other things, too, you understand. Gunnin', an' boatin', an' such."

Nickerson was thinking hard. "Oh, sure," he assented, though scarcely aware of what he was saying; "gunnin', an' boatin', an' such. Sure. Of course." And there was a moment's silence before he continued, "An' so, on the whole, Nat, you ain't made up your mind just how you *are* goin' to vote, after all. You don't quite know whether you're ag'in the road or for it?"

Rogers, brought fairly to bay, nerved himself for the struggle. "Well, now, look here, Tom," he began; "that road would certainly boom things in Bayport. Everyone says that. You can't deny it yourself, now can you?"

Nickerson assented patiently to the time-worn argument. "No, I can't deny it, Nat," he responded, and Rogers, emboldened, went

on, "An' I got a right to vote the way I please, anyway. I ain't never made no regular promise to no one, same as you done, Tom; an' I never went an' gave folks no tips, neither. So if I want to think things over, an' then decide what's the right way to vote, why that's my business, an' nobody else's. An' I don't see where there's anyone got a kick comin', Tom; not you, nor no one else."

As he listened, Nickerson's heart sank and his courage ebbed. Clearly, Joe's suspicions had been correct, and here, at the very last moment, the balance of power appeared to have shifted to the enemy. And after a further pause, he asked, "What did he offer you, Nat?"

At once, Rogers bristled with indignation. "He didn't offer me nothin'," he rejoined. "You ain't got no call to insult a feller, by sayin' a thing like that."

But Nickerson was not to be denied. "Oh, I don't mean he pulled out a roll," he replied, "an' told you to peel off what you wanted. That ain't the way them fellers do things. But

you can't tell me that Whitfield never promised you nothin' but friendship, if you could see your way clear to votin' for the road. There was somethin' more than kind words to it, now warn't they, Nat?"

But Rogers had evidently had one idea drilled firmly into his mind, and he clung to it desperately. "You got things all wrong. Tom," he declared; "there ain't no bargain to this at all —"

Nickerson broke in upon him. "No, no," he interrupted, "of course there's no bargain. You're going to vote as you see fit. If you happen to vote for the road, that's your business, as you say. And if the Whitfield crowd are lookin' for a man they want to give a job to, and happen to hit on you, why that's another matter altogether. That's about the way it stands, ain't it, Nat?"

He spoke with thinly veiled irony, but Rogers, relieved at this pleasant way of putting the situation, hastened to assent. "Sure," he agreed; "that's just how 'tis, Tom," and as if to re-assure himself, he repeated with a some-

what pitiful childishness, "There ain't no bargain to it at all."

Nickerson considered. "What kind of a job will they give you, Nat?" he queried. "Some-thin' pretty good?"

For the first time, Rogers looked him squarely in the eye, and the expression of his face was so eager, so bright with hope, that Nickerson felt no anger, but only pity. "Good?" he repeated, "I should say it was, Tom. Three thousand a year, an' scarcely nothin' to do at all. Why, see here, Tom," and with a rush he hastened to unburden himself of all the thoughts and arguments that had been seething in his brain since Whitfield's call of the night before. "I got a right to think a little about myself. Here I be, fifty-five years old, an' I been a haulin' these old pots, steady, the whole of my life. Why, Tom, I'm fair sick of it. Sick of rotten bait, an' poisoned hands; sick of calms in summer and storms in winter; sick of goin' home at night, with such an everlastin' pain in my back that I can't straighten up to walk like other folks does. But that ain't all of it; if 'twas,

maybe I could manage to stick it out a spell longer; but there's my girl, Tom; I got her to think about. We don't none of us last forever, an' what am I goin' to leave her, when I git through? Plaguey little; there ain't no money in lobsters, Tom. An' with t'other job, I c'n stay on shore; ain't never got to launch another skiff unless I darn please. An' I ain't doin' nothin' wrong, Tom; ain't doin' no one no harm —"

Nickerson, listening to his defense, could read Whitfield's skillful arguments between the lines, and could feel that his cause was almost lost. It was all so human — so natural — there was so much truth in all that Rogers had said. Only — there was the price. Money, and comfort, and the looking out for his little girl — and in exchange — here was the pity of it — a man's self-respect, a soldier who had fought worthily deserting the standard, and laying down his arms. And Tom, though having to struggle against the New Englander's reserve in speaking of serious things, yet girded himself for what he had to say.

“Nat,” he began, “we always been mighty good friends, an’ that’s why I’m goin’ to ask you to listen to me now. I want you to remember just one thing, an’ ’twas your sayin’ that we don’t last forever that put it in my mind. Sometimes, I guess we’re so busy livin’ we don’t think about the dyin’ part at all. But just consider it, Nat. You c’n vote for the road, an’ git your job, an’ you might leave your girl money enough so’s she could wear a silk dress, an’ hire a maid to do the cookin’, an’ maybe even go scootin’ ’round in a second-handed motor car; but still folks would say, ‘She’s the daughter of old Nat Rogers, that sold out to Whitfield, an’ voted for the road.’ That’s one thing you c’n do, Nat, an’ t’other is to vote ag’in the road, as you was meanin’ to, all along, an’ — you’ll have to go on as you be, an’ when you die, your girl might have to work her fingers to the bone; but still folk’ll say, ‘Who was her pa? Why, old Nat Rogers, that warn’t afraid to stand right up in his boots, an’ tell them Railroad fellers they could go plumb to hell.’ I kinder think, Nat, that this whole business is

more important than you 'magine 'tis. It's the sort of thing every feller has to tackle 'bout once in his life — I reckon it's *meant* that way. You will or you won't — that's all there is to it — but it means an awful lot, Nat. An' I hope you'll think pretty serious, 'fore you go in with these fellers, 'cause if you do hitch up with 'em, I b'lieve you're goin' to be sorry for it, long as you live."

He paused, feeling that he had done his level best; but Rogers still clung stubbornly to his argument. "It ain't sellin' out, Tom," he replied; "that's where you're wrong. There ain't no trade," and then, more aggressively, "an' I don't see why you got a call to chase me way out here, an' stop my haulin', to preach to me; 'cause it's my business, Tom, after all; an' 'tain't yours nor no one else's."

Yet Nickerson was too much in earnest to be angered. "That ain't quite so, Nat," he returned patiently; "it ain't only yourself you're hurtin' when you go an' do a thing like this. There's two camps in the world, an' I s'pose there always will be. A feller has to fight, to-

day, same as his great-great-granddaddy did. 'Twas Britishers then. Now it's fellers like Whitfield and his kind, that's after money an' things like that, 'stead of tryin' to do what's right. An' every time a feller gives in to 'em, Nat, it's just like he was firin' on his own troops. You know how it'll be, right here in Bayport. 'Gee,' they'll say, 'we thought Nat Rogers was a hell of a good feller, but he ain't.' An' someone else'll think, 'Well, I guess if Rogers did that, I ain't got to be so pertic'lar 'bout things myself.' So I wish you wouldn't do it, Nat; I'd feel mighty pleased to have you stick. An' I guess that's 'bout all."

Rogers had been gazing fixedly out to sea; yet now, as if drawn by an irresistible power, he slowly turned his head until his eyes met Nickerson's. And strangely enough, for a man of his unimaginative nature, it seemed to him that the voice to which he had been listening was not the voice of the Nickerson he knew; and that in the bearded, patient, kindly face, there lurked a likeness to another face which in his childhood had hung upon the wall of the room where

he had slept and played. It may have been this remembrance that gave an added force to the simplicity of Nickerson's appeal; but in any event Nat Rogers, as he heard, attained a detachment from himself and a breadth of view which he had never reached in his life before. And thus, standing apart, he surveyed, with all the philosophy he possessed, the past, the present and the future; and looking backward through the years, he knew that he had made mistakes; had sinned and repented, like his fellow men; and yet, in all humility of mind, it appeared to him that in his own homely language, "takin' things by an' large, he'd done pretty near right by folks." So much for the past, but facing the present, the matter of the road was different. Argue, shift, dodge as he might, the man's innate sense of honesty was too much for him. There *was* a wrong — perhaps to be glossed over — yet something apart from anything else he had yet done — his first deliberate sin, risking the consequences for the reward. "No, 'tain't right," was his unwilling conclusion, and yet — there was the future to

be reckoned with — those pleasant years ashore, the monthly pay envelope, the cessation from active toil, the balance in the bank —

The sun shone down upon the glassy sea, and the smell of the rotting bait rose up and struck him like a blow, typifying the long, long years — all the dreary toil he would have to go through over and over again. He could see himself, going down hill with each succeeding season; could see the pots he would build, and head up, and brick, and rig, and set, and finally lose in some great gale; and his soul groaned. So he stood and thought, and there the two dories lay, two tiny specks on the broad sweep of sea, amid the vast silence, two men fighting the eternal struggle of right and wrong. And finally he turned to Nickerson. There was no rhetorical flourish — no magnificent words to go echoing down the ages — there was nothing of the orator or of the statesman about Nat Rogers. Nor did he renounce temptation with scorn and stern indignation — it was far too real for that — and he put it from him, feeling that the chance of his life went with it. Yet

for all that, the victory was his, and though it was with a heartfelt sigh, he said, "All right, Tom; I'll stick," and then, though again the words lacked the heroic eloquence of the stage, he added, "You're a pretty darn good feller, Tom."

Nickerson drew a long breath of relief. "Nat," he responded with feeling, "I'm mighty glad. I know it ain't no cinch," and with a quick return to the practical side of things, he asked, "What are you goin' to say to Whitfield?"

Rogers sighed. "Guess I won't say nothin' to him," he replied somewhat petulantly; "he'll know what I'm doin' when he hears me vote."

"But he prob'ly expects you're goin' to vote for the road, don't he?" Nickerson demurred. "He'll call you everythin' under the sun, if you don't let him know."

"Yes, I s'pose he will," Rogers assented, "an' he can, for all I care. I ain't goin' chasin' around after him, you bet."

Nickerson reflected. "Tell you what I'll do," he said at length; "we better go square

with these fellers, an' give 'em no chance at any come-back at us. You write a line to Whitfield now, an' tell him you're goin' to vote ag'in the road, an' I'll go back to the harbor, jump a train to town, an' give it to him. Then he can't say nothin' against you, when it's all over. Ain't that the best way, Nat?"

"Well, maybe 'tis," Rogers assented, though without any great show of spirit, "but what c'n I write it on, Tom?"

Nickerson fumbled in his pocket. "Here's a pencil," he answered, producing a stub, "an' here," he added, tearing a piece of brown paper from the wrapping which enclosed his lunch, "is stuff to make a letter of. You just write a line tellin' him what you're goin' to do, an' that'll settle things."

Rogers complied, folded the paper clumsily, and handed it across the dory's rail. "Hope they'll keep away from me now," he said; "guess I've had about all the temptation racket I'm lookin' for, for one while. I don't want that smooth-tongued young Whitfield comin' foolin' around me no more; I'll tell you that."

His words awakened new thoughts in Nickerson's brain. "Tell you what we'll do, Nat," he replied; "we're both in the same box on this thing, an' we might as well keep each other company till it's over. We ain't but human, an' I guess each one of us will feel easier to know the other feller's standin' by. You come stay with me to-night, an' we'll haul together to-morrow, so if they want to tackle us, they'll have to take the pair of us to once."

"That's a good idea, Tom," Rogers assented, but almost immediately added, "How about my girl, though? I can't leave her alone."

"No, of course you can't," Nickerson responded. "I'll stop an' see her, on my way to town, an' tell her to spend the night at Joe's. An' then I'll stop at Joe's, an' tell him to expect her. That'll fix that all right."

Rogers nodded, evidently much relieved. "Good again," he commented. "I'll be at your place by supper time, Tom," and with an anxious glance at the rapidly rising sun, he set to work

on his long string of pots, while Nickerson headed the dory's bow for shore.

As he churned smoothly along, his mind was filled with a medley of different thoughts. Nickerson, the idealist, was filled with joy at Nat Rogers' triumph over himself; Nickerson, the practical man of affairs, dwelt with unrighteous satisfaction on the defeat of the Whitfields; and Nickerson, the human being, gazed about him at cloudless sky and unruffled sea with the feeling that he had come close to the stark, bare test of something brave and fine, that he was not poet enough to put in words. A half dozen times he tried to formulate his thought, and a half dozen times he failed; then, falling back upon the concrete instance, "Bully for Nat!" said Tom Nickerson.

CHAPTER XII

STAUNTON WHITFIELD RESORTS TO FIRST PRINCIPLES

SHORTLY after noon, the Honorable Staunton and his nephew sat closeted in the capitalist's office. Billy looked tired and anxious, while his uncle, for once, had lost his expression of calm, and had now the appearance of a man thoroughly aroused, fighting a hard fight, and with his mind bent on victory. Evidently, his nephew had not made sufficient progress to satisfy him, for as Billy concluded his story, he frowned and shook his head. "A definite answer, William," he observed, "was what I wished. The time is too short for any more backing and filling. I hoped very much that you would succeed in obtaining a definite promise."

Billy had hard work to keep his temper. "But that's just what I couldn't do, sir," he re-

plied; "you know what these old fools of countrymen are like. If you ever ask them to meet you anywhere, at a certain time, they'll never say they'll be there. They'll 'be there if nothin' happens to prevent,' or 'they'll try to git around to it,' but you can't drag a promise out of them. And so when it comes to anything as important as this, you can imagine what old Rogers was like. He'd think it over, he said; he didn't like to make up his mind in a hurry; and a lot of that sort of talk. But I'm pretty sure, sir," he added, "that we've got him. I could see how excited he was, though he tried his best not to show it. But when he picked up the lamp to see me out, his hand shook so that he nearly dropped it. I believe the more he thinks it over, the more he'll feel disposed to accept. It's just as you put it, sir; the man's honest because he was never offered anything really good before. And you were right about his daughter, too. She's a squint-eyed, freckled-faced little thing, with her hair in pig-tails, but old Rogers thinks the sun rises and sets on her. He made her play a piece for me

on an old dishpan of a piano, and left me to go upstairs with her, to hear her say her prayers, and all that sort of bunk —” he added thoughtlessly.

The Honorable Staunton gazed at him politely. “I beg your pardon,” he remarked.

Billy came suddenly to himself. “I beg yours, sir,” he responded quickly; “slang, sir. I forgot myself. Prayer business was silly, I meant; you know; rot — piffle —”

“Ah, yes,” his uncle assented, “I see. Well, William, as I say, we can’t delay on this. I think I’ll go to Bayport myself, and talk with this man. Of course, it’s a good sign that he’s considering the matter at all; if he were like Nickerson, we wouldn’t have got him even that far. Have you a time-table, William. Thanks. Yes — come in —” he broke off, as a discreet knock sounded at the door, and a moment later Smith entered, glancing, in spite of his training, with poorly concealed curiosity at the singular missive which he held in the very ends of his fingers. “A letter for Mr. William, sir,” he volunteered. “The gentleman asked me to de-

liver it at once, or I shouldn't have interrupted you, sir."

The sheet of brown paper diffused a strong and mingled atmosphere of its own, and its character left small doubt in Billy's mind as to whence it came. He rose from his chair, and in his eagerness almost snatched the letter from the clerk's hand, managing, however, to restrain his impatience until the door had closed again. Then, with trembling fingers, he opened it, and with difficulty at length succeeded in deciphering its contents.

The effect upon him was positively electrical; and for the first time in his life he forgot, in his uncle's presence, that pose of humility and of decorous politeness which he had hitherto so scrupulously observed. With a sudden gesture, he crumpled the paper into a ball, and hurled it into the waste paper basket; then, more to himself than to his uncle, he cried in a voice high-pitched and quivering with emotion, "Oh, damn that old Rogers! Damn his mean, miserable soul! There he goes back on everything — says he won't vote for the road — oh, God,

if I had him here for a minute —” and he began pacing up and down the office, fists clenched, his face crimsoning with anger.

At any other time, the Honorable Staunton might have seen fit to administer a stern reproof, but as it was, the situation itself was so acute that he had little time to consider the actors in it. “What do you say?” he queried sharply. “Rogers won’t vote for the road?”

“No, sir,” Billy responded vehemently, “the silly old fool. Though it’s not his doing; I’ll bet money on it. More than likely it’s some of Nickerson’s work. Oh, these farmers make me sick and tired —” and he was preparing himself for another outburst when his uncle forestalled him.

“One moment, William,” he observed; “calm yourself, please, and give me your best attention. I have been prepared for something like this, all along; and though the situation is difficult, I think we shall still be able to meet it.”

But for once Billy looked incredulous; for it seemed to him that a crisis like the present was

too much even for the Honorable Staunton.

“Well, I don’t see how,” he muttered.

“Then I’ll tell you,” was his uncle’s urbane response. “You know, of course, that to-morrow night is the final date on which the Selectmen of Bayport may meet and express their disapproval of the road. Without the disapproval of a majority of the Board, Bayport secures the franchise, and we are free to proceed at once. That is clear, is it not?”

“Of course it is,” Billy replied, “but I can’t see how that helps us out. I knew very well that old Wentworth was staying away to delay the meeting as long as he could; but what good does it do now? The Board’s been called together, and Nickerson and Rogers are going to vote against the road. There’s your majority, and we’re dished; that’s all there is to that.”

In his disappointment, he spoke almost rudely; yet his uncle did not see fit to notice it. “But suppose,” he suggested, “for the sake of the argument, that Rogers shouldn’t be present at the meeting. Then the vote would be one to

one; the necessary majority against the road would be lacking; and instead of being dished, as you express it, we should be in exactly the position we desire. It really hinges, I should say, on whether Rogers is there or not."

Billy stopped short in his tracks, and stared at the impassive face of the Honorable Staunton. Light was beginning to dawn upon him. "Whether he's there or not," he repeated. "Why, you don't mean —"

He did not finish his sentence, and his uncle spared him the trouble. "I mean just this," he said, and his face was that of a man who will not accept defeat; "I mean that you must get Rogers out of Bayport to-night. Find some good man to help you — Torella, for instance — go to Rogers' house; gag him, blindfold him, tie him; carry him off somewhere and keep him there till the meeting's over, and his chance to vote is gone. Then bring him back, and turn him loose in the dark again. He'll never know who did it; no one will believe him, anyway; and — Bayport gets the road."

Billy could scarcely believe his ears. Yet

his uncle was clearly in earnest; and indeed, for the days of pirates and freebooters, the plan would have been an excellent one. But to try it now — Billy could see plenty of complications in the way. “Wouldn’t it be illegal?” he ventured. “Aren’t there laws about force and duress, and all that sort of thing?”

The Honorable Staunton smiled grimly. “In regard to that, William,” he replied, “I have consulted eminent counsel, and I find that the legal aspect of the matter rather favors us than otherwise. In the first place, Rogers will be rather a discredited man in town, and we ought to find it an easy matter to soothe his feelings in some tactful way. But if not, it appears that the burden is on the town to show why a majority vote of the Selectmen was not recorded against the road, and even if we fail in adjusting things with Rogers, we can so delay and complicate matters by appeals and exceptions that by the time the case is finally disposed of, he will have come up for re-election, and since he’s no fighter, like his friend Nickerson, we should have no trouble in defeating

him, and getting in a man favorable to our interests. So there is nothing to fear from the law, which somewhat curiously, William, appears to be on our side."

With this disposed of, Billy turned his attention to a still more practical consideration. "And if we're caught?" he asked.

The capitalist shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, anything at all," he replied; "practical joke; temporary insanity; anything will serve. But let me tell you this, William," he added, and his glance was hard and cold as steel, "you don't want to think about being caught. You need to have but one object in view; and that is to succeed. Men are judged by results, these days; the reasons for their failures don't interest people in the least. And your record in Bayport, so far, William, has been conspicuously unsuccessful. You have failed in your fight for Selectman; failed to persuade Nicker-son; failed to win Rogers over to our side. This time, William, you must remember that another failure will seriously impair your prospects as a successful business man."

Billy's heart sank, for in plainer English, he could read a dismissal from his uncle's employ. "I'll do my best, sir," he responded, and left the office with a feeling of the gambler who stakes his fortune on the turn of a card.

From the Bayport Station he went straight to Torella's home, and there, closeted with "Sarvy" in the privacy of the woodshed, he made haste to put the situation before him. "We've *got* to do it," he concluded; "there's no other way. It won't be hard, and it means a fifty dollar bill in your pocket. What do you say?"

Torella, without replying, sat stolidly looking into space, with no sign of animation on his fleshy countenance. "Beats hell, don't it," he observed at last, "how things can sometimes happen?"

Billy heard him with a foreboding of evil. "What do you mean?" he cried anxiously. "What do you mean by the way things happen?"

"I mean this," Sarvy replied ponderously; "I mean that Nat ain't goin' to be home to-

night. He's goin' to sleep over on the Island, at Nickerson's."

Billy's jaw dropped; his face grew white. "Good Lord!" he groaned; then added quickly. "How do you know he is, Sarvy? Are you sure?"

Torella nodded. "Dead sure," he responded. "I was over to the p'int, this noon, clammin', an' comin' home, I see Nat's little girl settin' on the doorsteps, cryin' to beat the cars. Asked her what the matter was, an' she says her pop warn't comin' home to-night, so she'd got to sleep with Joe's young ones, an' she didn't want to go there, 'cause they're always teasin' her 'bout her freckles. So I asks her where her pa was goin' to be, an' she says over to Tom Nickerson's, on the Island. An' that," he concluded, "is why I say it beats hell how things can sometimes happen."

But Billy, though staggered by the news, still stuck to his guns. "All right, then," he cried, "we'll go to the Island for him. We can get him there just as well as we could at home."

Torella spat into the sawdust. "Oh, yes,"

he retorted scathingly, "like ducks we could. We'd make a noise, sure, an' wake Tom up, an' I'd as soon tackle a grizzly as I would Tom, when's he mad. There'd be some new little faces in Heaven in the morning; I can tell you that, Mr. Whitfield."

Billy shivered, but stood firm; for with so much at stake, retreat was impossible. "We'll get him, just the same," he insisted; "all we need is more help. You could find two or three good fellows, Sarvy. We won't need them, probably, but if we should happen to wake up Nickerson, they could stand him off till we got Rogers away, and then they could soak him and run for it. Why isn't that all right?"

Torella reflected. He saw a chance to do an excellent stroke of business, but he could see also the possibility of disaster. "Well, I don't know, Mr. Whitfield," he temporized; "I'm 'fraid it's pretty risky. We don't want to get mixed up in no State's Prison business, now do we?"

Billy waxed more vehement still. "Risk nothing," he exclaimed; "I tell you we've *got* to

do it. If I don't pull this off right, there'll be hell to pay; and that's no dream, either."

"Well, I don't know," Sarvy repeated; "I s'pose maybe we might manage it, but I'm 'fraid the boys would want a lot of money — prob'ly more'n you'd feel like payin'."

Billy rose to the bait like a hungry fish. "Money be damned," he cried; "I'll pay 'em whatever they want. Fifty dollars apiece — a hundred. Whatever you say is right."

Sarvy, seeing the chance for a handsome "rake-off" for himself, listened with inward joy, yet managed to keep his head, and responded without enthusiasm, "Oh, I s'pose I might get some of the boys for a hundred, p'rhaps. Still, it's an awful risk, an' if I'm goin' to find 'em, an' boss the job, why I should think I ought to have an extra fifty for that."

"Sure thing," Billy assented; "that's fair. And now who can you get? We want good men."

Torella ruminated. "First of all," he announced at length, "I'll get Buster Rafferty —" But Billy broke in excitedly, "Not on your life,

you won't. Why, he's as big as an elephant. He can't get out of his own way. What good would he be in a fight? "

Torella grinned. "What do you think we're goin' to celebrate?" he asked. "Make a ring, an' challenge Tom to a sparrin' match? Not much. If there's any fightin' done, it's goin' to be good old rough an' tumble, an' that's where weight's apt to count. If Buster ever sits down on a man, it's all off for that evenin', now I tell *you*."

Before this display of superior knowledge, Billy yielded. "All right, then," he agreed; "who else? "

Torella pondered further. "Pete Latenda," he finally answered; "he's a nervy little cuss in a fight."

Billy frowned. He knew of Latenda's reputation. "He the man that knifed the sailor?" he inquired.

"Sure," Torella responded; "that was good grit for you. He was goin' for the sailor, an' the feller stood him off with a revolver. So Pete drops his hands, an' begins to laugh, makin'

a bluff 'twas all a joke; but the minute the feller turns his back an' begins to walk off, Pete jumps on him from behind, an' carves him up so bad he don't leave the hospital for pretty near a month. Oh, Pete's game, he is."

Billy felt a cold shudder running up his spine. "Well, tell him to leave his knife at home, this trip," he cautioned; "we don't want any carving done."

"Oh, no," Sarvy assented; "course we don't. But if it comes to a mix-up, why he's a valuable man to have along. He knows lots o' cute little tricks to do a man up."

In spite of himself, Billy could not help feeling that he was getting into strange company. "Anyone else?" he queried.

"Well, one more wouldn't do no harm," Sarvy replied. "I'll try Jim Hunter; he ain't particular what he does, so long as there's money in it. That'll be two to attend to Nat, an' three more to look after Tom, if he butts in. I guess that's good."

"There's the old man, too," Billy reminded him, "and confound it all," he added, suddenly

remembering, "there are those damn pups. They'll bark, I suppose, and spoil everything."

Torella shrugged his shoulders. "The old man don't count for much," he answered, "an' as for the dogs, why we'll have to trust to luck on them. Can't have things built to order, as you might say. This ain't no picnic party we're goin' on."

As he spoke, he pulled out his big silver watch, and rose quickly to his feet. "Didn't know it was so late," he observed; "I better get busy, right away. Where'll we meet you, Mr. Whitfield? Why don't we say Simmons' Cove, t'other side o' Whitehead? I'll tell the fellers to come there, an' I'll row my dory 'round, soon as it gets dark. How's that?"

"Fine," Billy answered; "and how about disguising ourselves? Do we need masks?"

Torella shook his head. "No, they're no good," he returned, "sure to be in the way, an' if there's a fight, someone rips 'em off you, an' sees who you are. Burnt cork's the best; I'll bring some along in the boat."

He departed, and Billy, waiting until he was

out of sight, walked slowly back toward the village. Now that the plan had actually been set in motion, he felt a sense of the most unpleasant excitement. A sensation of guilt oppressed him, and from time to time he cast furtive glances over his shoulder, like a man in dread of pursuit. At dinner, moreover, he found that his appetite had forsaken him; and the intervening time before darkness came was the worst of all. At last, however, dusk fell over the village, and pulling his hat down over his eyes, Billy strode away in the direction of Simmons' Cove.

He found Rafferty already waiting; a moment later, Latenda's rat-like figure slunk toward them through the gloom; and after a longer wait, the ragged and disreputable Mr. Hunter made the party complete. Except for the barest greetings, no one seemed disposed toward conversation, and they stood in silence, on the top of the beach, until presently Latenda observed, "Here comes Sarvy."

Billy looked and listened, without perceiving any sign of Torella's approach, until suddenly

the dory's dim shape loomed up, close at hand. "He's muffled his oars," Hunter whispered, and Billy felt his sense of unwholesome excitement increase.

Torella stepped ashore. "All here?" he questioned, and drew from his pocket a flashlight and a number of smaller objects, which he hastened to distribute among the party. "Rub on the cork, now," he directed; "I don't need much, myself; I'm black enough, to start with, but I'll keep you company," and a moment later the light flashed on as grimly ludicrous a circle of faces as imagination could portray. Billy began to laugh hysterically. "We look like a damn minstrel show," he cried, but no one joined in his mirth, and Torella retorted, "A devil of a minstrel show, if Tom Nickerson ever gets after us. Come on now, everybody; it's all dark on the Island; get into the dory, and for God's sake, keep quiet."

There was small need of the injunction, and without a sound the boat crept out through the mouth of the cove. Billy, seated in the stern, had hard work to keep a grip on his nerves.

His heart jumped and throbbed; the very slowness of the dory's advance added to the strain; and it was a positive relief when the dim outline of the Island came into view. Torella, taking pains to avoid the pebbly beach, skirted the shore until they reached a long strip of rushes. These opened silently before the pressure of the dory's bow, then closed behind her with scarcely a sound, and in a moment they were hidden from sight, and were fairly within the enemy's lines.

Torella, who seemed to be the natural leader of the expedition, turned to the others. "Now then," he said, "we've got to go at this right. The game's to get hold of Nat without waking Tom or the old man. Pete was just saying, Mr. Whitfield," he added, addressing Billy, "that if he could once get into the room where Nat was without anyone's hearing him, the easiest way would be to give Nat a little dose of chloroform. Not to hurt, you understand; just to stop him from making a row."

Billy, not without further misgivings, assented. "All right," he agreed; "but how are

you going to know what room Rogers is in?"

"We can't tell, for sure," Torella replied, "but we can make a pretty fair guess. Tom sleeps in the front room; the old man sleeps upstairs. There ain't no spare room, an' Nat bein' one of these fellers that never wants to make trouble for no one, I imagine will be sleepin' on a couch in the kitchen. Anyway, we'll try it that way, an' see how near we come."

"Are we all goin'," asked Hunter, "or shall someone stay here to look after the boat?"

Torella again addressed himself to Billy. "This is my idea, Mr. Whitfield," he said: "We'll sneak up as far as the barn, an' then all the rest of you, except me an' Pete, will lay low, an' watch what happens. We'll go on up to the house, an' make a try for Nat. If we get him, all right; if there's a rumpus, you three fellers will have to mix in lively and 'tend to Tom, while we get Nat tied up and carried down to the boat. How's that strike you?"

"First rate," Billy agreed, and forthwith the five advanced in single file, keeping to the shel-

ter of the reeds, as long as they could, then crouching and stealing quietly along until they had reached the protection of the barn. Here they stopped, while Torella coiled the rope around his arm. "All ready, Pete?" he whispered.

"Wait a minute," Latenda answered, "till I get my shoes off. There," he added a moment later, "now I'm all right," and the two forms crept away toward the house.

Billy watched them with a feeling of dread for which he could have given no explanation, yet feeling perfectly sure that something evil was to come of the venture. But there was small time left for speculation; the crisis was at hand. He could see the two figures pause at the door; then, evidently finding it locked, they passed on to a window. Here they remained, and presently, though Billy could hear no sound, he was aware that the smaller of the two had vanished into the shadow of the house. An instant later, and the second and larger figure had disappeared as well. There followed utter silence, and then, just as Billy was

beginning to think that all was going well, there broke forth, sharp and clear against the stillness of the night, the very sound he had been dreading — the quick, frenzied barking of the dogs, and in another instant the house had awakened to a medley and tumult of sounds — shouts, cries, crash upon crash, as if the combatants were stumbling over the furniture of the kitchen — a shrill voice was shrieking, “What’s the matter, Tom? What’s the matter?” and Nickerson’s deeper tones were audible, “Get a light, Father; get a light,” while still another voice was crying, “Help! Murder! Help!” with a ghastly suggestion of violence and bodily injury. Then, almost before the three watchers at the barn could move from their concealment, the door of the kitchen burst suddenly outward, and a group of struggling figures, a confused blur in the darkness, came reeling forth into the night.

Whether by accident, or of their own volition, their course was toward the stable, until another figure, with the dogs barking at his heels, leaped forth and started in pursuit.

“Nickerson,” thought Billy to himself, with a gasp of dismay, and a second later the solitary warrior had overhauled the others; there was a moment’s struggle; then a yell of pain from someone, and then Torella’s voice, calling loudly, “Come on, boys! Quick, now, quick!”

The summons had a varying effect on each member of the reënforcing troops. Hunter proved himself the fastest runner, but it was still the safety of the boat which seemed to be uppermost in his mind, for in spite of Billy’s indignant remonstrance, he bounded away, like a jack-rabbit, in the direction of the reeds. Rafferty, with the blood of Irish kings pulsing in his veins, lowered his head, and with a mighty roar, charged full upon Nickerson, while Billy, with the best of intentions, but wholly out of place in such an encounter, followed at his heels, scarcely knowing how or where he was expected to mingle in the fray.

In the darkness, indeed, it was hard to distinguish friend from foe. Billy had a confused impression that Sarvy was crying, “I’ve got Nat, boys; pile on to Tom”; the dogs were

leaping about, barking frantically; Nickerson was still calling for a light, until Rafferty closed with him, and his voice was no longer audible; and most curious and dream-like of all, a ghostly figure, clad in streaming white, seemed all at once to flit by them in the blackness, toward the barn.

A moment later, as Billy's brain grew somewhat clearer, it was evident that the fortune of war was with the invaders. Rogers' cries for help sounded faint and smothered, as if a strong hand were grasping his mouth, and Sarvy was hustling him rapidly away toward the reeds. On the ground, Rafferty was on top of Nickerson, who was struggling desperately, and while Billy stood looking for an opportunity to join in the struggle, Latenda's form slipped by him, and made straight for the combatants. His eyes were blazing, and Billy could see that blood was streaming down his face. With a bestial sound, half whine, half cry, he sank on his knees, feeling with his hands for Nickerson's face. Billy gave a gasp of horror. "No, no," he screamed, and in the same instant, Nicker-

son, in desperation, shouted to the dogs for help. "Take him, Emperor!" he cried hoarsely; "take him, Fluffy!" and his voice died in a choking gurgle, as Latenda's fingers found his throat.

And thus, upon the dogs, and upon one instant of time, hung the fate of the battle. And nobly did they meet the emergency, for in that one fateful second they heard, understood, and leaped bravely into the struggle. Fluffy, from in front, snapped at the Frenchman's face, while Emperor, from the rear, fastened upon his naked foot, and the next second the sharp, white teeth met, almost to the bone. It was too much for human endurance. Latenda released his hold, and with an oath turned savagely to shake off his assailant. There was one piteous yelp, then silence again, but that moment was enough, and before Latenda could return to his task, Nickerson was on his feet, and had closed again with Rafferty. Billy, in an agony of indecision, stood helpless, watching Latenda approach them from behind, biding his time to spring, but before he could do so, a

light shone out from the direction of the barn, and the same ghostly figure, now plainly human, approached the group, an ancient lantern in one hand, a rusty pitchfork in the other. Perhaps old man Nickerson had engaged in similar contests in the bygone days of his youth, for his tactics were swift and decisive. Placing the lantern on the ground, he leaped silently forward, and with all his force, drove his weapon into Latenda's back. The tragi-comedy had changed to grim and deadly earnest. The Frenchman rolled, shrieking, on the ground, and at the same moment, Nickerson, wrenching free from Rafferty, landed a blow that sent the huge Irishman reeling backward, both hands clasped to his face. The tide of battle was turned, and Billy, only half conscious of what he was doing, picked Latenda up in his arms, and started for the reeds, with Rafferty at his heels. Behind them, Jim Nickerson shrieked, "Wait, Tom; I'll get the gun," and at the unwelcome sound they redoubled their speed. But before they had reached the reeds, they heard Tom's voice, stern and menacing, "Let

Nat go, or I'll shoot." Torella, struggling along ahead of them, heard and heeded the warning. With a curse, he loosed his hold on Rogers, and in a mad scramble the invaders somehow launched the boat, and gave way desperately at the oars. In the bottom of the dory, Latenda groaned and blasphemed; Rafferty, in the bow, wiped the grime of cork and blood from his face; Billy, pulling like a crazy man, felt that the end of the world had come. The last chance had failed; everything had gone wrong; perhaps a death would be at his door, for old Nickerson's thrust had been a shrewd one, and Pete Latenda was not the man to give way as he was doing for anything short of a serious injury. And thus they headed their boat for the cove, disheartened, panic-stricken, and dismayed.

Behind them, on the Island, Nickerson unwound the rope from Rogers' arms. The Selectman was pale and trembling, and half frightened out of his wits. "I never done nothin' to no one, Tom," he kept repeating; "I don't see why they handled me so rough. I'm

all shook up; my heart's goin' like a trip-hammer."

Nickerson, making no answer, retraced his steps toward the house. Now that the danger was over, he felt physically faint and ill. By the light of the lantern, they found the old man, bending over something white on the ground. As he looked up at them, he brushed at his eyes with his hand, and his voice was unsteady. "Look what they done, Tommy," he mourned; "look what they done."

In the flickering light, Emperor's body lay outstretched upon the sand. His soft coat was dabbled with crimson, his bright eyes were closed forever. He had won his master's fight, and this had been his reward. Nickerson picked the limp body up in his arms, and raised his eyes to the darkened Heavens. "God," he cried, "if there's justice in this world, I ask it for the man who did this thing. May your curse be on him, for the rest of his days; may he be done by, as he has done this night."

His voice ceased; and the group slowly retraced their steps toward the house. From far

out on the water, the faint dip of oars came to their ears; but save for this, all was again silent over Bayport Harbor.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WAGES OF SIN

ON the morning after the meeting of the Selectmen in the town hall, Billy Whitfield stood on the platform of the Bayport Station, awaiting the arrival of the train. Contrary to his usual custom, he stood wholly apart from the crowd, and the expression on his face was morose and subdued. Inwardly, his wrath consumed him like a flaming furnace, and whenever the blaze burned low, he kindled it afresh from a store of bitter memories, with a running accompaniment of silent profanity which if it had become audible, would have created a sensation on the Bayport platform.

Over and over again, as he had turned and tossed through the long, wakeful night, the events of the past twelve months had been pass-

ing through his mind. Certainly, there was little at which he could look back with pleasure. From the very first day, when his uncle had taken him into his confidence, things had seemed to go systematically wrong. He had seen fit to jump at a conclusion, and the result had been disaster. He recalled the eagerness with which he had purchased his Bayport & Southern stock, and the rapidity with which it had gone crashing downward, bringing shrinkage and disaster to his balance in the bank. Even more maddening had been his second loss, for here his guess had almost proved the right one. If every card in the pack of Fate had not lain against him, Bayport & Southern would have come into its own again, and Billy himself would have made a fortune. First had come the campaign for Selectman, lost by the margin of four votes; then the failure to win over either Nickerson or Rogers to his side; and last of all, the miserable attempt at kidnapping Rogers, ending in crushing defeat. And now all was over. He had stood, the evening before, in the rear of the town hall; had heard Nicker-

son and Rogers successively cast their votes against the road, transforming the certificates of Bayport & Southern into mere waste paper, for all time to come. Greenfield had secured the road; there remained only the last humiliation of being dismissed from his uncle's office. And almost worse than his money losses, there was the sting of being beaten — and always in the same way. It was Nickerson who had confronted and thwarted him at every turn. "Damn him," he muttered, "I'd like to even up with him. And I could do it, too, if I wanted to take a chance —" and while he stood debating the question with himself, he heard Mr. Newcomb's voice saying, "Hullo, Tom, bound for town?" and from the corner of his eye he could see that the man whom he wished to wrong was standing at his elbow.

The Selectman's face was grave; he held a telegram in his hand. "Yes," he answered, "my father's sick. He caught cold, night before last, and I made him go to town yesterday to see the doctor. But when they came to look him over, they weren't any too well pleased, so

they sent him to the hospital, and told him he'd better stay there for a while. I'm going up to see how he is."

At his words, the thoughts which had been flashing through Billy's brain took actual shape; by the time he had heard Nickerson say, "No, I shan't be back till late; I've some business of my own to attend to," he had made his resolve; and when, a moment later, the train came thundering in, instead of mingling with the crowd which rushed for the steps, he turned on his heel, and walked away in the direction of the boat shop.

Cy Perkins, the proprietor, looked up at him as he entered. "Hullo, Mr. Whitfield," he observed, "I was cal'latin' to take your launch in this afternoon. Ain't in no hurry 'bout her, be ye?"

"No," Billy answered, "that was what I came over to see you about. I think I'll take one more cruise in her. Start the engine for me, will you, while I go over to the hotel and change my clothes?"

An hour later, Edith Nickerson, busily en-

gaged in restoring her disordered kitchen to a semblance of order, heard the throb of Billy's launch, and looking out of the window, saw him come to anchor and start to row ashore in the skiff. The intervening time, though brief, was spent to advantage, and the girl who came to the door in answer to Whitfield's knock had never looked prettier or more charming. So that at sight of her, Billy felt his pulses quicken, and though his lips asked the question, "Want to go for a little sail?" the message in his eyes was a far different one.

Whether she understood him or not, she showed no wish to decline. "Oh, I'd love to go," she answered, but at once added discontentedly, "I suppose, though, I oughtn't to leave the baby."

There was little force, however, to the words, and Billy hastened to make light of her objection. "Oh, nonsense," he cried, "he'll be all right. Just lock him in the house till we come back. We won't be gone long, anyway — out to the Seal Ledges and back. It's a dandy day, and I've got a bully lunch along — bottle of fizz

and everything. Regular city style. Come on, Edith, please; I'll be awfully disappointed if you don't. I gave up going to town, and all that, just to come over and see you. There's a lot I want to talk to you about. Say, you might be nice to a fellow, Edith —"

He had drawn nearer to her as he spoke, and now she could not have failed to read the meaning in every look and gesture. For a moment she hesitated, then yielded. "Well, all right," she assented; "wait here, please," and she left the room, while Billy, a fierce sense of exultation thrilling him, took a seat by the window, and sat gazing out over the quiet surface of the bay. He had never seen a more beautiful day, he thought again, though the sky seemed faintly overcast now, and around the horizon extended a curious brazen band, hard to define. The air was absolutely still.

"Great old morning for a sail," he muttered to himself, and at the thought of Nickerson, speeding away toward the city, he smiled. Presently, as he sat waiting, there sounded behind him soft footfalls on the kitchen floor, and

before he could turn, something moist touched his hand. He drew it quickly away, and looking down, saw that it was Fluffy, who was gazing up at him out of her big brown eyes, her tail wagging a tentative greeting. Billy's smile changed to a frown. He had no desire to be reminded of the events of that night. "Get out, damn you," he muttered, and Fluffy, with drooping ears, retreated to her basket.

Presently, from the next room, sounded a protesting wail, as if the baby were being awakened from sleep, and Billy could hear Edith's voice seeking to pacify him. All in vain. The wail changed to a cry; the cry to a shriek; and presently Edith opened the door, her cheeks flushed, and called the dog to her. "Here! Get in there!" she commanded, pointing to the door; and then, to the baby, "Now then, stop your crying and be good. You're a bad, naughty boy. You can play with Fluffy till I come back. Now good-by; and be good."

She closed the door quickly, snapped the key in the lock, and turned to Whitfield, her expres-

sion of assumed anger changing to a smile. "All right," she whispered; "he'll be good now. Come on," and like two conspirators, they tiptoed softly across the kitchen floor. In the narrow passageway outside, Edith fumbled in the lock for the key, and as Billy hastened to help her, their hands met. On the instant, flashes of electricity seemed to shoot through his whole being, and he reached toward her in the darkness, but with a glance backward toward the house, she repulsed him, whispering, "No, no, not here —" and in whatever sense she meant the words, Whitfield chose to read in them a promise, and for the moment was content. Presently the key snapped to, and they were on their way to the beach. At the margin of the shore, before stepping into the skiff, Edith paused to listen; no sound was audible in the house. "Good," she said in a tone of relief; "he's quiet now. I won't have to worry about him at all."

"Of course you won't," Billy laughed; "he's all right," and rowing quickly to the launch, he boarded her, cranked his engine, and a moment

later they were gliding smoothly away toward the distant Ledges.

Billy stood at the wheel, steering, but as the shore receded, he paid less and less attention to his course, and more and more to his companion. "Look here," he said at length, "I'm not going to do all the work. Come aft here, and I'll teach you how to steer."

With a laugh, she rose and came slowly toward him. "Teach me what?" she asked.

Her whole manner was one of provocation, and Billy had released his hold on the wheel, and had taken a quick step forward, when suddenly her expression changed. "No, no," she cried; "be careful. Look at the boat."

Billy stopped short, and casting a quick glance about him, turned back to the wheel. The Shag Rocks lay off their starboard beam, and close against the frowning sides of the ledge a fishing dory was anchored. Its occupant, a swarthy Portuguese, surveyed them with interest as they passed. Billy whistled under his breath. "What do you know about *that?*" he observed. "Lucky you saw him."

The girl was frowning. "Oh, isn't that mean?" she exclaimed petulantly. "That's Joe; the one that fishes so much with Tom. Now he'll tell him, and I suppose there'll be a scene. Oh, well," she added defiantly, "I don't care. I'll do as I please," but in spite of her words, the incident seemed to have a depressing effect upon her, and presently, with a glance at the distant Island, she murmured, "I don't believe this is going to be a lucky cruise. I hope the boy's all right."

Billy's face darkened in his turn. "Oh, for Heaven's sake," he cried, "can't you think of something beside the kid? Of course he's all right. Get your mind on someone else, for a change. If it isn't too hard work, get it on *me*. Don't spoil a good time, Edith; life's short. The boy's probably happy as a clam, with no one to bother him."

His words appeared to reassure her. "Yes, I suppose I'm foolish to worry," she said, and the dory sped onward out to sea.

Yet if Edith Nickerson's eyes could have traversed the space between her and the shore, she

would scarcely have continued so light-heartedly upon the voyage. For a time, after her departure, both boy and dog had resigned themselves to their lot. Gradually the baby's sobs had ceased, as the gentle Fluffy, with sympathetic tongue, had licked his hand to comfort him, and presently they were playing away together as merrily as possible. Yet the four walls of the room made at best an unsatisfactory enclosure; and the thought of freedom soon became uppermost in their minds. First the child, standing on tiptoe, tried the door, while the dog sniffed and scratched at the crack above the threshold. These attempts naturally enough resulting in failure, they turned their attention elsewhere, and presently, the boy, shoving sturdily at the low window, was rewarded by the sound of a sharp click, far above his head, and a moment later, pushing upward as he had seen his mother do, gave a cry of joy as the sash ascended, and an avenue of escape lay ready at hand.

Both together, they wriggled joyfully through, and made off together down the beach,

the dog barking frenziedly, and racing around in wide circles over the sand, the boy laughing and crowing with delight at this unexpected release. Before them, the broad flats, left bare by the ebbing tide, glistened in the sunlight; here and there, in the hollows, shallow pools lay waiting to be explored. Further out, low ledges, their sides brown with rockweed, furnished a point to aim for, and thither the boy toddled, smiling, and stretching out his hands. "Pret-ty, pret-ty," he cried softly, and then, as if suddenly remembering, he stopped short and listened. "Muvver," he called, but hearing no response, went on again. And when the ledges were reached, what a treasure house they proved. White barnacles lined their sides; in the puddles among the rockweed tiny minnows darted to and fro; crabs scurried away to hide; and Fluffy, investigating the depths of a miniature cavern, barked furiously at sight of the projecting claw of some ancient giant of the lobster clan, and wisely enough decided on retreat. The sun rose higher and higher in the sky; the flats were warm and pleasant under its rays; and

at last, with a sigh of happiness, the boy lay down upon the sand, his head pillowed on a cushion of rockweed, Fluffy curled herself beside him, and it was not long before both were fast asleep.

In the meantime, far out at sea, the launch drew steadily nearer the Ledges. As they approached, the seals scattered in alarm, and the sleek, shining bodies slid off, one by one, into the water, until presently on all sides of the boat their dog-like heads could be seen, rising and disappearing again in the waves. Billy made the launch fast to leeward, and landing, they picked out a broad natural shelf of rock, prepared the lunch, and ate and drank their fill. And here, alone on a bit of ledge — miles from land — with the blue waves lapping at the cliff below them — the white gulls soaring above — the warm sun enfolding them in its embrace — they talked of themselves and of their future; Billy's tongue playing the old, hateful game; and with small pretext at love or romance, speaking grossly, almost in so many words, of bargain and of sale. For feel-

ing that he understood this woman whom he desired, he saw no need of finer methods, and it was always of things that he spoke — of money, and what it could buy — of suppers, motors, clothes — and when the girl, shrinking not from the sin, but from the risk of its detection, hesitated, he reassured her by telling her of the ease with which such matters could be arranged — of a flat in the city — of someone to look out for the boy while she was gone; until gradually, still filled with bitterest resentment against her husband, and thirsting for the “fun” to be so cheaply bought, she had yielded hand to hand, and lip to lip, until suddenly she wrenched herself free from Billy’s clasp. “Listen!” she cried. “What’s that?”

At her words, Billy had jumped to his feet with an exclamation of alarm, and now clambered hastily to the top of the rocks. One glance to windward was enough. Straight down from the North swept a solid wall of black, beneath it a gray curtain of driving rain, the sea a mass of leaping, boiling white, and audible above all else the mighty roaring of the

wind. In an instant, he had descended again. "A squall!" he cried. "A hell of a squall! What shall we do? Stay here, or take to the boat?"

Her face went white. "The boat," she cried; "we can't stay here. The rocks are covered at high water. The boat's the only chance. Oh, why did I come?"

Billy hauled the launch toward them with all the speed he possessed, jerked the anchor from the rocks, and in a twinkling both had jumped aboard. Instantly the boat paid off to leeward, before the first sharp puffs of wind, pitching and rolling, as the sea began to roughen. "We'll be all right," Billy cried, and stooping, attempted to start the engine. But to his horror, there was no response. Again and again he tried, until his hands were a mass of blisters and his arms were aching, but always without success. And now a wave came flying over the rail; then another; and Billy motioned desperately toward the wheel. "Keep her away," he shouted; "don't let her get broad-side on."

The girl obeyed him, and not an instant too soon, for in another moment the storm had enveloped them, and the launch leaped forward at terrific speed, before the impact of wind and sea. Yet her course was parallel with the shore, not toward it, and it was plain that if she continued as she was going, they would be swept miles to leeward of Bayport. All Edith's courage was gone. Limp, bedraggled, buffeted by the wind and the rain, she crouched trembling in the stern. "Oh, why can't you make her go?" she wailed. "Why did you make me come?"

Billy gritted his teeth; the storm had greatly cooled his ardor; and he could scarcely realize that it was this whimpering, snivelling woman whom he had so longed for such a short time ago. So that finally, as she continued to revile him, he rose to his knees, face and hands streaked with oil, grimy, unlovely to look upon, and swore roundly at her. "Shut up!" he cried fiercely; "damn you, shut up!" and then, putting all further thought of her from his mind, he set to work, with a calmness born of

desperation, to think of every possible ailment which the engine might have contracted. First he tried one thing, then another, until at last, to his infinite relief, there came an explosion, faint and muffled, to be sure, but still the first sign that the machinery was in working order; and thus encouraged, he cranked like a demon, until a steady, regular throb rewarded him, and stepping hastily aft, he headed the launch for home. Immediately, however, he saw the utter impossibility of pursuing such a course, for sea after sea came crashing into them, full abeam, and reluctantly he paid her off once more. "What shall we do?" he cried. "We can't make the Island that way."

With the starting of the engine, the girl's self-possession had in part returned. "You can head for the creek, down beyond the point," she answered, "and then we can get back to the Island through the channel in the marsh. It will take longer, of course, but it's the only way."

Billy nodded, and glanced covertly at his watch. The shore was scarcely visible, and it

did not seem that they could reach the Island before dark. Yet perhaps, he reflected, the advantage was after all upon his side. Apart from physical violence, he had nothing to fear, and to see his wife coming home in such a plight might cause Nickerson an added pang. And thus he kept the launch on her course, and after what seemed an eternity, rounded the point by the cliffs, and started back through the winding channel in the marsh. The rain had ceased, but the wind blew more fiercely than ever, and the chill of it, as it now struck fairly in their faces and whistled through their rain-soaked garments, made their discomfort seem doubly keen. They sat in absolute silence, and the thoughts of either could scarcely have been more bitter or morose. "This is a hell of a note," Billy reflected; "I might have known how it would end. Just like everything else in the whole blamed business. It's been a hoo-doo, from start to finish," while Edith Nickerson, cowering under the hood, and shivering with cold, could not rid her mind of a picture of the boy and the dog, as the storm howled

around the house, and the shadows lengthened across the room. "He'll be frightened," she thought miserably to herself, and with a sudden revulsion of feeling, she thought with loathing of this man who had cursed her, comparing him with her husband, patient, kindly, brave; and all at once, a great regret smote her to the heart, and she saw herself as she was. Rising quickly to her feet, her eyes sought the dim outline of the Island, looming black against the sky, and instinctively she clasped her hands together. "Oh, God," she prayed, "forgive me. I'll do better; indeed I will."

For almost an hour, boy and dog had slept together, until at length, as the mutterings of the storm increased, Fluffy awoke, sniffed the air, looked around her, and feeling instinctively that something was wrong, began whining anxiously and looking toward the shore. But the boy, tired out, slept on, and it was not until the dog resorted to vigorous tugging at his dress that he awoke in his turn, and after a moment's bewilderment, suddenly remembered where he was, and struggled to his feet. The

tide, no longer on the ebb, had turned, and the waves came creeping in with ever quickening speed as the wind from the north swept them shoreward across the bay. Around each side of the rock crept a line of water, and presently, as they converged, the baby looked down and saw them meeting at his feet. Instantly he laughed with delight; for here was a new and delightful game, and he splashed gaily about among the ripples, while the dog, with greater wisdom, ran on ahead, barking and trying to entice him to follow her. He did so, indeed, but slowly and unwillingly, charmed with the excitement of the adventure, until the water, rising more and more rapidly, made him look about him in wonder; and then all at once, with a rush of rain and a roar of wind, the storm swept down upon the marsh. For an instant, the boy's lip quivered, and he glanced toward the ledges to find his friend. "F'uffy! F'uffy!" he called despairingly, but the dog had done her utmost, and now, panic-stricken, was fleeing for dear life toward the shore. And as he started to follow, suddenly the flats had vanished, and

there was nothing about him but a leaping sea. A great wave, waist high, hurled itself against him, nearly sweeping him from his feet, yet he struggled bravely on, his golden curls flying in the wind, his white dress clinging to his baby form, his hands outstretched imploringly before him. Then another wave — and another — and he spent his last strength in one imploring cry, “Oh, daddy, daddy!” Before him, the sand sloped downward into a treacherous hollow; he reached it; the baby feet slipped, and he fell.

CHAPTER XIV

PHAROS

IT was mid-afternoon when Nickerson swung off the train at the Bayport Station, glancing anxiously up at the lowering sky, and quickening his pace as he strode along toward the harbor. The change from the beauty of the morning was absolute. The sunshine was gone; the clouds were dark and threatening; and although it still lacked an hour of sunset, nightfall seemed already close at hand. Even through the sheltered streets the wind blew savagely, and Nickerson shook his head. "Bad chance for the gear," he muttered, "I wish 'twas all ashore." Then, with an attempt at cheerfulness, he added, "Maybe it isn't blowing so hard, though, after all. Probably it's the change from morning makes it seem worse than it really is."

As he neared the harbor, however, it became

evident that the storm was even more severe than he had feared. The boats, anchored in the lee of the point, were pitching and rolling mightily, as they strained at their cables, while out at sea the old, familiar lines of white were sweeping shoreward across the bay. Nickerson shrugged his shoulders. "This is a bad one," he said; "might as well say good-by to thirty or forty pots, for sure. And it's going to be a stiff row to the Island, too. I can never make it in the skiff; I'll have to take the dory."

As he spoke, he pushed his boat from the float-stage, and gave way strongly for his moorings. About him, the remainder of the fleet, lashed doubly fast, with their hoods pulled back over their engines, gave to the harbor a deserted and storm-ridden air. Only Joe, his oilskins glistening and dripping with spray, was just leaving his dory for the night, and as Tom stepped aboard the *Edith Nickerson*, he pulled alongside in his skiff, and grasped the dory's rail.

Tom hailed him jovially, as he approached. "Say," he cried, "you must like rough water

awful well. Mean to tell me you've been tryin' to haul in a time like this?"

But Joe paid no heed to what he was saying. His grave face was more than usually stern. "Tom," he said, "I just come from your place. An' I'm 'fraid your folks is in trouble."

"What do you mean?" asked Nickerson quickly. "Are they sick?"

Joe shook his head. "No, 'tain't that," he answered, "but young Whitfield come by me, 'bout 'leven o'clock this mornin', out by the Shags, in that gingerbread launch o' his, an'— I ain't tryin' to make no trouble, Tom— but he had Edie 'long with him. An' they ain't come back."

For an instant Nickerson stood gazing at him, a great fear clutching at his heart; then cast a quick glance out to sea. But immediately he turned once more to his friend. "The boy?" he cried. "Did she have the boy along?"

"Must have," Joe answered, "'cause there's no one home. Door's locked tight; an' I yelled, an' no one answered. So I s'pose they must have took him along, too."

Without a word, Nickerson tried his engine; then leaped forward, as if to cast off. Joe watched him with alarm. "Tom," he cried, "you ain't goin' out there? You can't live in that sea — never in the world."

Nickerson had come aft again, and now his answer was the same as he had made a year ago, on the night when they had gone torching for the herring. "I can make it," he replied; "let go the dory, Joe."

Surado hesitated. There was but an instant for decision. He knew the risk — knew that the chance was ten to one against them — knew that wife and children were waiting for him in the cottage on the point. Yet Tom Nickerson was his friend, with whom he had fought the sea, shoulder to shoulder, all these long years. And thus, without a word, he rose to his feet and gripped the dory's rail, to leap aboard.

But Nickerson was too quick for him. As well as his mate, he knew the task that lay before him, and starting the engine, he reached the rail in one bound, and grasped Joe by the

shoulders, shoving him toward the skiff. "Get back, Joe," he cried; "I'll make this cruise alone."

There was a moment's battle, as eager and fierce as if it had been prompted by enmity instead of sacrifice, while the dory, lacking a helmsman, staggered aimlessly across the harbor, until Tom, feeling the struggle going against him, drew a quick breath, as if nerving himself for what he had to do; then, drawing back his fist, struck his friend full in the face, and dazed with the pain and the surprise, Surado reeled and fell headlong in the bottom of the skiff. An instant later, and Nickerson had grasped the wheel, and the dory, swinging on her course, with the spray dashing over her in clouds, had started on her voyage.

As he passed the Island, Tom cast a quick glance toward his home. As Joe had said, everything was dark, and the outline of the cottage could scarcely be distinguished against the cloud-swept sky, and the black void of the marsh beyond. With lips compressed, and

heart benumbed with anguish, he turned again toward the open sea.

And now he had come to the point of Gull Ledge, and must leave its friendly shelter behind him. To the westward, he could see the lights of the village, looming faintly through the mist; before him stretched the waste of storm-tossed waves. And as he cleared the Ledge, and the great seas came sweeping down upon him, he rose quickly to his feet, dashed his sou'wester from his head, and standing there, stalwart, brave and resourceful, every inch a man, he raised his face to the sky. "God," he prayed, "bring me there safe," and after a moment, as if fearful lest he should be misunderstood, he added, "'Tain't for me I'm askin' it; I ain't afraid o' nothin'. It's for Edie an' the boy"; and with the dory's bow pointed toward the distant ledges, he held her on her course.

Back in the harbor, Joe had rowed hastily ashore, and scaling the summit of Whitehead, stood gazing out to sea, shading his eyes with

his hand. From time to time, though the dory's dark shape was scarcely visible, he could see the clouds of spray which marked her course; but suddenly, as his eyes wandered toward the Island, he gave a gasp of amazement, for another boat, her white hull conspicuous against the background of the marsh, was slowly approaching from the eastward, under the shelter of the land. "The launch!" he cried; "they're saved." And then, though knowing it was too late, he turned again toward the dory. "If he could only see them," he groaned, and as though Nickerson could have heard him above the tumult of the storm, he shouted, "Tom! Look behind you! Look!"

But Nickerson, gazing steadfastly before him, was fighting his way, inch by inch, into the very teeth of the gale — creeping on and on, with but one thought uppermost in his mind — to reach the Ledges, and to find the launch there, safely anchored in the lee. And now, as the darkness deepened, more and more fiercely blew the wind; rougher and rougher grew the sea; and Joe, despairing, at last abandoned hope.

“He’ll never make it,” he muttered; “never in the world,” and then, raising his eyes to the heavens, he cried accusingly, “’Tain’t right, God; ’tain’t fair; he never done no wrong.”

Around him, the drunken wind shrieked, rioting. Against the cliffs below, the breakers crashed and foamed, like madmen escaped from their chains. Above him, the storm clouds, in strange, contorted shapes, streamed, in vast procession, athwart the sky. And now, as he cast one last glance seaward — whether because of the darkness, or because some huge wave had overwhelmed her, he could not tell — the dory was no longer to be seen. Everywhere darkness, over all the world. Only, from where the great stone lighthouse reared itself amid the flood, the gleam of the beacon still flashed across the night — serene and undismayed.

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