

THE ROAD *of* AMBITION



Elaine Sterne

Marguerite E. Beard
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THE
ROAD OF AMBITION

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THE ROAD OF AMBITION

BY
ELAINE STERNE

Illustrated by
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MOTHER

I want you to accept this, my first novel, as your own. Your quick sympathy has made me put forth my best efforts—your warm interest from the moment it was conceived helped its growth and development as nothing else would have done.

—*Elaine Sterne.*

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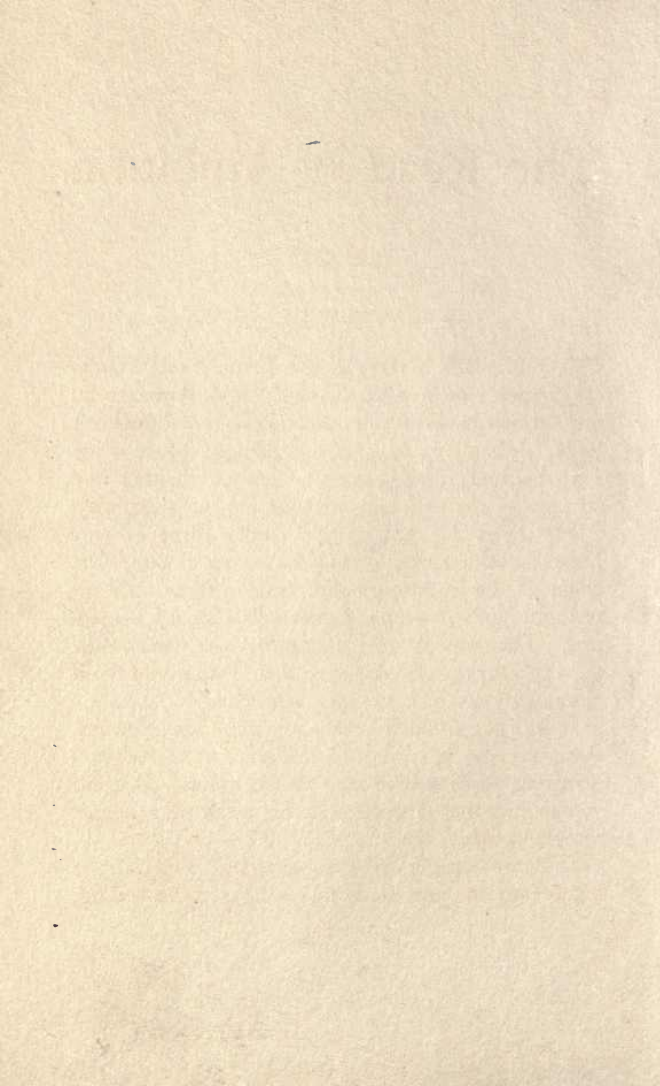
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The Road of Ambition

CHAPTER I

THE WORKSHOP OF VULCAN

TO Big Bill Matthews the Bethel Steel Works spelt Power with a capital "P"—Power to fill one's stomach—to warm one's home—to clothe one's body. That row of grimy buildings, whose chimneys belched forth flame-shot smoke thrilled him strangely—thrilled him without his knowing why.

He loved the roar of the hungry furnaces—the little flame tongues, curled venomously about the edges of the iron doors shut fast on them—always trying to get out—those flames—like something captive. That was it—the feeling that you had bottled up with your own two hands a devil that would finish you mighty quick if ever you let it loose!

It was not unlike a beast—beautiful, treacherous, sleek—ready to spring at the hand that fed it—watching its chance to tear you to pieces—to grind you to bits, but cowering at the touch of a finger, the glance of an eye.

Danger—danger—always danger. You felt its hot breath on your cheek as you neared the boiling,

seething steel. You heard its deafening voice in the crash of the seven-ton hammer. You saw its monstrous strength as it flattened out a glowing ingot, sixteen hundred pounds of white heat, at the hammer driver's touch.

Power—power—more power. Even the pigmy men thrilled to it and grinned in the face of the death that lurked imminent in the rigid glowing bar they tossed about like a plaything—or at the heats of the great basic furnace.

That was fireworks for you! Free for all! The gush of blood-red lava—sparks flying skyward—a molten river of death from which the men sprang back with an oath, but which they guided unerringly.

It gripped Bill anew each time he saw it. It gave him the feeling of triumphal strength. It proved conclusively that man could do anything—anything he set his mind to! If he could control steel, he could control the world—for steel *was* the world when you came to think of it! Given your two fists and the thing that made you know when to use them—a man had everything!

Long ago he had honestly tried to hate the big industry. It was on the first day he had seen the Works. He was but a boy then. His father had been hurt, they said—his great, strong father. He had followed his mother whimpering with a fear of something—he knew not what, but half eager to see, half ashamed of his eagerness.

They had found his father stretched out close to the furnaces he had tended so faithfully. In the glare of the fire the deep gash on his forehead glowed like a thing alive. Bill, trembling, and sobbing, had heard the men whisper—"It's got him. It most always does." He had seen his mother fling herself on the still form and he had wanted then with all his heart to despise the Thing—the cruel, merciless Thing which had crushed out his father's life.

But even as he tried, he knew he could not. He knew he would some day come to love it—to answer its voice when it called him.

He heard his mother weakly cursing it, but instead of echoing her words, he had raised wondering eyes to the blazing fires. Above the crashing tumult he had heard in his heart the song it sang to the clanging of iron against iron. "Power—power—more power. . . ." He never forgot it.

This was fifteen years ago. Fifteen years of back-breaking toil—toil that stretched even his tremendous strength to the snapping point. Toil that reddened his face from the fire's glare, that knotted his muscles like great bands on his bare arms, that flung him staggering and weary to his bed at nights; toil that did not drag him down as it had a thousand others, but which moulded him into the giant frame, the iron nerves, the superb physique that made men fear and love him.

He liked to think he had served his mistress well; that he had never missed a minute of his twelve hours a day for seven days in the week, except when his mother had answered the Great Call. After that he went back to work with redoubled vigor, for from that moment steel had become his one love.

And as he gave to it all of himself, unstintingly, it yielded one by one, its precious secrets to him. With infinite labor he set to work testing—discarding—searching for the Great Process he would some day discover—the Process which would be his just reward for years of passionate devotion.

Each day held for him a revelation—and that, in short, is the Lure of Steel. You think you've solved its limitations—its mysteries—only to find you know nothing about it—nothing whatever! There's a challenge in a game like that—a game with a new twist to it every day—a game that flirts with death—that a man who's half a man will answer—and Big Bill was biding his time—some day, he grinned to himself, he'd show 'em. . . . !

When Big Bill became foreman of the cogging, his men looked to it sly—no shirking in that crew—no grumbling about spells. They liked him too well and they feared him too much to slur their work. All save Ole, the "Big Swede," who sulked and slipped as much of his task as he dared on his fellows' shoulders.

Ole stood six feet four in his bare feet—a blond viking. He had come but recently to the Works. He boasted he was not afraid of man or beast—and he hated with a fierce, sullen intensity those weaker than himself. As the men left him more and more alone in his moroseness, he took his spite out on Tony—Tony Dufrano—the white-faced boy who somehow stuck at his work in spite of a racking cough.

Between Big Bill and the boy was a bond. The foreman lived in the same rooming house with the Dufranos—and Tony had a sister, Nedda. Some whispered that the Big Boss was “stuck on her,” but others shook their heads—he loved his work too well. In any case, he was often at Tony’s side, helping him, encouraging him, and the crew waited. Some day Big Bill and the Swede would have it out, and when they did it would be a scrap worth seeing.

It happened on an evening when the men were working overtime—bending breathless—tense—to their tasks—stripped to the waist—faces black—with sooty streams of sweat coursing down.

Big Bill had left the building for a moment. Tolifsky, the little Polish Jew, latest recruit to the ranks, had caught his hand in the press and ran about screaming that he would have the law on them—that he was a poor man with a wife and five children—that the pain was driving him mad—— It was

Big Bill who had carried him off to the hospital shack. Then the trouble broke loose.

Tony's spell of work was over. Gasping and coughing, he wiped his forehead and moved back. It was time for the Swede to take up the task where he had dropped it, but Ole, his face heavy, brooding, did not move from his corner.

Tony nodded toward the men leaping forward, springing back—leaping forward again like gnomes in some fantastic fire dance, as they shot the ingot along the anvil.

"Get busy!" he called, dropping down, "you're on now——"

The Swede growled something and stood up, his shoulders hunched, his head set between them.

"No my turn," he muttered.

The men watched. The air vibrated with a heavy tension.

Tony, pulling a shirt over his head, did not glance up.

"Sure it is," he said easily, "don't be scared to work, you big stiff."

The Swede spat through his teeth and with a growl reached out his arm and flung Tony to the ground. The boy, gasping from the suddenness of the blow, staggered up, wiping away the blood which trickled down his cheek.

"You—you——" he sobbed, then choking, fell to coughing.



He Loved the Roar of the Hungry Furnaces

But Ole, his little eyes, red points of hate, raised his fist as though to crush the boy into a thousand pieces—when an arm shot out against his head with a sound like the crack of a whip. The Swede reeled and stumbled. The men sent up a shout, but it died in their throats as they saw Big Bill's face—black, threatening, terrible.

The Swede turned slowly, staggering, and stared at Bill. Then, with a cry, he launched himself forward with all the weight of his great body. His swing barely missed Bill's jaw, and Bill, with a swift left, flung his head backward.

Ole, drunk with madness, came back with the roar of a beast, but he could not reach Bill. Only once he struck him—a mere shoulder tap. His blows fell impotent before the Big Boss' strength.

Bill met him quietly—unconquerable—his arm shot out. The Swede's head rocked on his shoulder, each sledgelike blow told. Blind from the blood on his face he sank down—the desire to murder quenched.

Bill regarded him quietly.

"Next time you touch the kid," he said slowly, "I guess I'll have to kill you," and he turned away.

Tony crouched gasping in a corner, staunching the flow of blood from the ugly gash on his forehead.

"What hit you when you fell?" asked Bill as he approached. "The Swede couldn't a cut you up like that."

Tony shook his head.

"Piece o' scale, I guess," said he, finally.

Bill stooped down and picked up a handful of it.

"Queer stuff. Ain't no feather bed to fall on; hard as rocks."

"Might as well fall on a piece of pure steel—couldn't cut no deeper."

"That's right," said Bill, suddenly, as if struck with the idea, "It had ought to be hard, hadn't it? It's peeled off of pure steel——"

"Hurts like the Old Nick," sniffed Tony.

Bill dropped the pieces in his pocket.

"Come on," he said. "Time for all hands to knock off."

Silently, the men dropped their tools and stared after him. The Swede stumbled to his feet, his battered face strangely grotesque in the red, wavering light.

"Gawd!" whispered old Mack, the hammer driver, "that weren't no fight for the Boss—that were play for him. He ain't even winded. You're mighty lucky, Swede, that you've got a whole rib in your carcass!"

The Swede did not answer.

"Some fight," nodded Eddie, his assistant—"wish't it had been longer though. Say, if the Boss ever loosened up for fair he could lick the whole works with one hand tied behind him!"

The men nodded solemnly.

"He's got a punch that would put the champ out of business!" Eddie stretched, and yawned, the tension at an end.

"He's all right, the Boss is, eh, fellers?"

The men agreed gravely—those who did not understand the words caught the meaning. They watched the Swede slink away like a whipped dog and were silent.

Tony dragged his cap over his eyes and, still limping, followed Big Bill down the muddy black path, across the network of tracks to the gate. Once outside, Bill waited for him.

"He'll leave you alone after this," was all he said.

Tony nodded.

"If you hadn't come along, Bill——" he began, then stopped. Bill smiled.

"Go on! If I hadn't come along most likely Mack or some other fellow would have trimmed the Swede in half the time—eh?"

Tony drew a long breath.

"It ain't the first time you've helped me neither."

Bill patted the boy's shoulder.

"Have to help my A-1 workers, don't I? They're mighty scarce."

But Tony shook his head.

"Oh, I know you always say that," he answered swiftly, "but it ain't true—it ain't true. I don't do half a man's work and instead of firing me, along

you come and give me a hand—that's what you do—and I ain't the only one."

Bill's laugh was a deep rumble.

"Awful wise tonight, ain't you, kid, just because you got beat up a bit!"

Tony smiled, but suddenly he stopped short.

"Say, Bill, honest, why do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You know what I mean—the other bosses don't."

"You pin a feller down so, Tony," he laughed.

"Well, since you ask me, I'll hand it to you straight. You're doing your levelest, ain't you?"

"Yes— but——"

"Well, your levelest ain't mine by a long shot, is it? But is it your fault that you ain't got a constitution like a bull? No, of course not. You do the best you can with what you've got, don't you? The Lord don't expect no more of any of us."

Tony stared at the big man beside him.

"Bill," he said at length, "you're different from the rest. It ain't only that you're bigger and stronger, but you kind of talk like you saw ahead—do you?"

"Sure. I see that Nedda's got fried onions for dinner—and wait a minute—Irish stew—but it's my nose telling me that. Tony, I won't lie to you."

Tony laughed, then glanced ruefully down at his stained clothes.

"I look a sight!"

Bill nodded.

"That's right, you do. Won't it give her a scare though to see you cut up that way! I tell you what, I'll go ahead and break it to her easy." And he plunged up the stairs of the little frame house, three steps at a time.

Nedda was tiny and dark and colorful. Long hours of stitching garments by the light of a flickering lamp had not robbed her cheeks of their red glow, nor her eyes of their deep, warm glint. There are some eyes blurred like a misty pane. There are others in which a thousand lights dance and sparkle and leap. Those were Nedda's—brown pools.

Her mother had gasped out her life when Nedda was still a spindly waif and Nedda had confidently assumed charge of Tony. She had slaved for him from the days that he clung to her hands trying to balance himself on his unruly little legs. There had been nothing else in her life until Big Bill loomed.

She had heard Tony speak of his Boss. The boy had kept her awake when her heavy lashes drooped, telling her tales of Bill's kindness, of his strange power over the men. She had smothered her yawns and listened to him trying to respond to his eagerness—loving this big man who seemed in his quiet way bent on helping her brother—loving him for Tony's sake. Then, quite suddenly, she loved him for his own.

It was the winter that Tony came down with pneumonia. You cannot forever sweat at a blazing furnace and then face a cutting north wind without feeling it, and Tony, whimpering like a child, crawled home one night with a pain like a knife-stab in his lungs. But greater than the pain was the fear that he'd lose his job. Night and day he prayed and begged and raved for his place in Big Bill's crew, and at last, because it was the only thing that would save his life—she snatched up her shawl and ran through the chill of a gray, frosty morning to the Works.

She halted the first man she met and asked him to point out the Boss, and she lifted her eyes to see a great giant leap forward and hurl back a man before a flying chip of burning steel crushed out his life.

That was Big Bill. He heard her stumbling message and smiled at her.

"The kid's worrying about his job, is he?" he boomed. "He couldn't lose it if he tried! Tell him that for me, will you? He couldn't lose it if he tried! not while I'm boss here! I'll run over myself to-night to gas with him," and he turned back to his work.

There were long evenings after that when Tony, white and fretful, propped up by his pillows, waited only for the heavy tread outside his door—evenings when Nedda's heart pounded in her throat and the

quick color stung her cheeks. Bill's big presence seemed to fill the little room with a warm sense of security. Tony was not to worry, he thundered. He was to get well if it took all winter! and the talk of the Works flew back and forth between them, with Nedda forgotten, but hovering close to hear the music of Big Bill's voice broken by the deeper rumble of his laugh.

After a while he moved there.

"Guess I'm gettin' too used to your cookin', Nedda. Can't seem to choke down food nowhere else," he had said, and the dream that lay close to her heart stirred faintly and whispered that she might hope.

Tony scraped the dirt from his cheeks and followed Bill slowly. Nedda turned as the door swung open, and, seeing Bill, cried eagerly:

"Hello! Look what I got for supper."

Bill nodded.

"I guessed it downstairs. Smells awful good."

Nedda's glance passed him.

"Where's Tony?"

"Coming," said Billy easily; "but he sent me up ahead to tell you not to mind his black eye. He's been tryin' to lick the Swede, that's all."

"Fighting! Tony? Is he hurt?"

"Not much," laughed Bill; "but the Swede's considerable banged up."

"Where is he now?"

"Who, the Swede? Oh, I reckon——"

"No, no—Tony——".

"There," said Bill, waving a hand toward the door, and Nedda ran to her brother.

"Why'd you do it, Tony?" she cried. "Ain't I nursed you through everything from teethin' to typhoid without your startin' a scrap?"

Tony grinned at her.

"I dunno what Bill's been handin' you, but take it from me, if it wasn't for him it would have been 'lights out' so far as I'm concerned."

She turned swiftly, her hands clasped.

"You didn't tell me," she cried.

Bill shook his head.

"Ain't nothin' to tell now, besides I'm out o' talk. Got a kind of an idea hummin' round in my head all of a sudden, and I want to figure it out soon as I get filled up."

"Oh, but you saved him——" she began eagerly, then stopped. "Come on, Tony," she called. "I'll fix you up before we set down."

Soon they drew up their chairs, Tony bubbling over with talk, but Bill, silent, pushed back his plate.

"Ain't you hungry?"

He shook himself together.

"Sure I am. Just thinkin', that's all; queer, how a little idea gets stirrin' around and won't give a feller no rest."

"What's your hunch now?" asked Tony. Bill shook his head.

"It's that there scale's got my goat."

"It almost got mine," laughed Tony. Nedda raised her head.

"What is it?"

"Oh, the stuff the hammer knocks off them ingots. I struck a piece of it when I fell."

"Here's some," said Bill, passing her a chip. She turned it over.

"What's it good for?" she asked slowly.

"You've got us there, Nedda," grinned Tony. "Ain't worth nothin' much; used in makin' glass, ain't it, Bill?"

Bill nodded.

"Four pounds for a cent. But what I want to know is, why ain't it worth more?"

"Ask me somethin' easy," jeered Tony; "like why they don't build battleships with slag. The answer's 'cause it's junk."

"But it ain't. Here's stuff that comes off of steel and yet don't seem to be no good. There had ought to be some process to make that stuff valuable."

"Well, professor, when you discover it ask me out in your auto; meantime, don't waste good food frettin' over it. Gee! there's no tellin' what you'll think of next."

Big Bill shook his head. He said no more, but he could not throw off the spell it had cast upon him.

No small, still voice whispered in his ear that Fate is a capricious dame who plays strange pranks on her unsuspecting puppets. He could not know that because one Tony Dufrano had chanced to enrage a sullen Swede, he, Big Bill, was at last, after years of unremitting toil, about to discover the Great Process—the Process toward which he had bent all his energies—toward which his soul had reached and yearned. Instead, he slipped the pieces of scale into his pocket and arose.

"I'll hike along now," he said.

Tony yawned.

Nedda smiled at them both.

"You'll wish you'd come to the Mission with me when I tell you about the nice music they're going to have."

Tony laughed.

"The only music for me is the whistle at seven A. M.—ain't that right, Bill?"

But Bill was already pounding down the stairs.

"Ain't he a pippin, though!" sighed Tony. "Don't nothin' ever tire him—don't nothin' ever faze him. He's like one of them dinky engines—a-puffing along the rails. Don't matter how big his load is or how steep the grade, he makes a bee-line for wherever he sets out—and, what's more, he gets there, too!"

Nedda shook her head.

"Wonder if I put too much salt in that stew?" she said, slowly; "he ain't never passed it up before."

CHAPTER II

NEDDA OF THE TENDER HEART

BILL, his hand on the knob of his door, paused at the sound of a song which drifted to him from across the hall:

“Work, for the night is coming,
Work through the morning hours;”

it quavered. Not much of a voice, as voices go, but Bill smiled. He knew whose it was. He knew the little gray lady with the heart of a child, who fought her grim battle with life alone. “Miss Ida M’Farlane, Seamstress,” read the card on her door: but it failed to tell of her skill in taking up the threads of a frayed life—of drawing them together with infinite labor and pains—of forming them into a pattern—a drab, homely pattern, but one of rarest beauty just the same.

He tiptoed softly toward the sound. At length he rapped. The song ended abruptly. A sharp something clattered to the floor; there came the quick patter of footsteps and the door flew open.

“Oh!” breathed the little old lady, who peered up

at him through her thick glasses; "oh—it's Bill!"

"Sure it is," he laughed, "was you expectin' Mister Caruso to join you in a duet?"

"Did you hear me!" she gasped, her cheeks pink. "I didn't mean to sing so loud—I——"

"You bet I heard you," nodded Bill; "stayed outside listenin'. I tell you it sounded mighty good to me—that song."

"Did it?" she asked eagerly. "I don't know why I sang it to-night, except that, that I had so much to do I thought maybe it might help."

He shook his head.

"Got so much to do, eh? Well, look here, Mis' M'Farlane, I ain't goin' to have you mendin' any more of my socks an' usein' up your eyes on them, let me tell you!"

"Oh!" she cried, with a quick catch in her breath; "oh, but I *like* to!"

Still he scowled.

"Well, don't you hurry none with them. It don't make no difference how long you take, understand?"

"Pretty soon I'll be able to have a sewing machine and then the work will fly," she said, cheerily.

"Ain't you been going' to have a machine for near on to ten years?" he asked. She patted down her black apron before answering.

"I'll get one some day," she said at length.

"You sure will," he growled, "if I have to buy one myself!"

She laughed, but her eyes were tender.

"Won't you—won't you come in?" she asked.

"Can't do it. Got to work to-night same as you. Just wanted to tell you to keep up that song—sounds all right to me."

"Do you mean it?" she asked, tremulously. "Do you really mean it?"

"Sure," he nodded; "turn on the music—it'll help me think."

And he left her framed in her doorway—a little gray silhouette, with eyes like burned out coals. She watched his door close behind him. Still she did not move. She waited until she heard him strike a match, until a thin ray of light crept out from beneath his door, then she re-entered her room. With eager hands she dragged her rocker closer to the hallway, and drew the work table, with its lamp, beside her. Then she picked up the filmy net, on which she had been working, all traces of weariness vanishing as if by magic. All at once she paused, dropped the work, as the light of determination sprang to her eyes. She thrust its clinging daintiness away from her as though its beauty cloyed. She fumbled in a workbag beside her and drew out a pair of worsted socks—socks with jagged holes in heel and toe. She slipped one of them over her hand—slowly—caressingly—then with a gesture of defiance she flung back her head.

"Work, for the night is coming!" Her voice

rang loud with a new, exultant note as her needle flew in and out—"Work through the morning hours!"

Bill, sunk deep in his chair, smiled as he heard. She was right—the little gray lady—"Work"—that was the keynote of life and success! He had never been afraid of it. He had answered to its spur like a thoroughbred. He had taken the road at a fast clip. He had never slowed down his gait.

He tried to remember just when he had first come to believe he would accomplish things—would some day climb out of the pit into the sunlight and to regard his crushing hours of work as a means to an end. It was his enormous strength that gave him the first warm glow of confidence. Men shrank from his warmth and fawned for his favor, and as he saw them with compassion, a stoop-shouldered army of toilers, it was borne in upon him that he was of different calibre. He could pass them in the race if he tried.

He had set the coveted foremanship as the pinnacle of his desire. He had fought every inch of the way toward it—sweated blood. He had thrust men aside and won the promotion through sheer dint of his own untiring labor. And when the great day arrived, the day on which the crew looked to him for orders, he had found with dismay that the thrill was gone, that he was already reaching out for something new, something bigger.

"Power, Power, more Power!" shrieked the voice of the Works, and the answering chord in his soul echoed it. He raised his face grimly toward the Heights. Man had scaled them before. Why not he!

Nedda returning later from the Mission, plunged through a cold drizzle, head bent against the storm. She was glad to reach home; to pull off her damp coat and hurry up the stairs.

On the second landing a lamp, dying fast, flickered desperately in a last frantic effort to live, then went out. It was late. The corridor plunged into blackness, but beneath Big Bill's door shone forth a yellow ray of light. Nedda, shivering, hesitated, then knocked softly. There was no answer. At length she turned the handle.

Bill, in his shirt sleeves, sat hunched at his table. Through the open window behind him a chilly rain poured. Like one in a trance he bent above the pieces of scale spread out before him. Nedda, with a cry, sprang forward.

"I just might 'a' guessed you'd sit there and freeze!" she chided as she snapped down the window. Still Bill did not look up; instead, he turned the chips over and over.

"You're most chilled through!" said Nedda, gently; "ain't men got no sense at all!"

She bent over him and as he felt her warm presence behind him he turned with a start.

"Nedda!" he cried, "what you doin' here?"

She laughed.

"Oh, I expected you'd be wet through without knowing it if you had one of your spells on."

He caught her hands.

"I think I've got it this time," he cried; "I think I've got it!"

"I know what you'll get if you don't think of yourself none, and it'll be the pneumonia same as Tony had—that's what you'll get!"

But he shook his head impatiently as though her voice were an unintelligible sound which did not penetrate his absorption.

"You see," he whispered, "it's a matter of heat—that's all—a matter of heat. The fusing point'll be higher than for regular steel, of course; now if I can find an alloy——"

But Nedda drew her hand away gently.

"Yes, I'm listenin'," she said, moving cautiously toward the cot in the corner; "go on, Bill, I'm listenin'," and she whipped off the faded quilt, and, moving behind him, wrapped it about his shoulders. But Bill shook his head.

"You wouldn't understand—not yet. Wait until after I've tested it, then I'll tell you, but not now, not now——"

Nedda smiled.

"You'd better turn in, Bill," she said softly; "you can't do no work to-morrow if you're all in."

He did not reply. Instead he drew the quilt closer about him and bent over the chips. Nedda moved to the door.

"Good night, Bill," she called.

She waited for his reply, but none came. She smiled. "I don't believe you even know I've been here," she said, softly, "blest if I do!" and she closed the door gently behind her.

Big Bill lived with his theory. It was beside him day and night. It gave him no rest. There were days when he did not eat, nights when he did not sleep. At times he threw himself down exhausted, only to be seized with the idea of a process yet untried. He would drag his weary body to the Works, where the men, toiling carelessly before the red furnaces, seemed to him a disordered fancy of his brain. They stared at him.

"Ain't you got enough to do, Bill, without stayin' up all night?" they'd call, half-curious. But he did not heed them. With that grim oneness of purpose which, from the start, had distinguished him from the others, he would set to work testing his latest theory before the gigantic heat that shriveled men and drove them back gasping. He would wait breathless for a result, unconscious of the fire—watching that Thing which *must* be Steel because it came from Steel, and yet for some baffling reason Was Not—watching it with a fierce, jealous intensity that brooked no interference.

"You'll blow up the Works one of these days," the men cautioned him; "you don't know what you're handling half the time——"

That was it. He didn't. Again and again he cursed the environment in which he had been born, the environment whose denizens counted education as an unnecessary evil; who thrust their sons at the helm without giving them a chart or compass—shipwrecks, of course; why not? You can't bring a boat through strange waters without a guide, so why a man?

Education, education. . . . As he sweated and gasped and struggled before the searing fires night after night he whispered fiercely to himself, through clenched teeth, what he might have accomplished had he known the rudiments of chemistry—of physics—had he but had the access to the great company laboratories instead of sneaking back to the Works after hours like a thief in the night. But he'd find it; he'd find that process if it took the rest of his life! Haggard and white and dulled he would at length stumble home, the will o' the wisp which he pursued as gayly elusive as ever.

Benson, chief superintendent of the great plant, noticed him one night as he went the rounds.

"Isn't that Big Bill?" he asked. The men answered him uneasily. They were afraid for Bill—they even whispered among themselves their suspicions—he was cracked, poor old bloke—came back

every night and worked like a trooper—too bad; he'd croak himself soon. To Benson's questions they replied in monosyllables. "Yes, sir, that were Bill." Benson sensed from their manner that something was amiss.

"What's he doing there at that furnace?" he questioned.

The men shrugged. They did not know. They wished they could warn Bill, but dared not. Benson was even then threading his way toward him.

"Evening, Bill," he said.

The big man, dragging a ladle from the flame, did not reply. Some one touched his arm.

"It's the Chief," was whispered in his ear.

Bill turned and rubbed an arm across his eyes, Benson, moving back from the sweep of heat, cried out sharply:

"What are you doing? Do you want to be burned alive?"

Bill shook his head.

"I'm all right, sir," he answered brusquely and turned back, but Benson took his arm.

"Better come over here and talk a bit."

Bill shook off his hand.

"Can't. Can't stop watching it a minute—don't you see it's the watchin' that's goin' to prove it to me."

Benson turned to one of the men standing by, mute, terrified.

"What's he talking about?" he demanded shortly.

Severance, foreman of the basic furnace, shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a process he's trying to prove, sir. Nobody don't know what it is. He works at his job all day and comes back here at night to try it out."

"How long has this been going on?" he asked.

Severance hesitated.

"I don't know, sir," he said at last.

"Well, tell him I want to see him at my office in the morning, will you?"

Severance nodded. "I'll tell him, sir" he said.

Bill, heavy-eyed, roused himself with an effort. His muscles ached. His back ached. His hands were blistered. His face stung and burned. He turned over and tried to slip back into the realm of dreams—but he could not. Something tore down the walls of sleep—pounded relentlessly at his consciousness—something he had to do—some one he had to see. "To blazes with everybody!" he whispered through cracked lips to his pillow. He would not move for the best of them! Not for old Benson himself!

That was it! He sat up with a jerk and winced at the pain in his neck and shoulders—he, who had laughed at pain; but he was awake now, blinking at the gray sky which merged into giant smokestacks and the roofs of furnaces as he sat up higher.

Benson! He was to see Benson! Who had told him? Why did Benson want to see him? He tried to remember—to still the pounding in his head—the roaring in his ears. What was it? Then he remembered. It was Severance.

He must have dreamed it. What could the superintendent want with him unless—he drew a long breath—unless he meant to fire him! That was it! They had caught him at the furnace last night. He fought back the haze which was slipping over him again. Some one had spoken to him—could it have been the Chief himself! If that was what Benson wanted, just as he was winning out, just as the first glorious test had succeeded, as the theory proved itself. Well—you didn't get another job easily, either; no chance to be foreman, no chance to work at the furnaces at nights—no chance of anything. All wasted; every hour that his body had cried aloud for sleep—wasted—wasted.

A sob tore his throat. He'd show them they couldn't discharge a man who was on the job from seven to seven! He'd like to see Benson or any other man fire him! He dragged on his clothes with trembling hands and pulled his cap over his eyes. He wasn't afraid of Benson.

But when he tried to walk across the room the floor rocked treacherously and the door seemed a thousand miles away. Nonsense, that, just nerves—that was all. He wasn't afraid of Benson, he whis-

pered through white lips as he lurched forward.

Some one met him in the hall. He knew it was Nedda, and yet it did not look like her; it was an image indistinct and blurred, only the eyes black—and round with fear—held him.

“Hello, Nedda,” he tried to say. “Hello.”

He felt her catch his arm, and it steadied him a trifle. Things settled down a bit. She was talking, but he did not hear all she said. He caught a word here and there.

“Bill—— Oh, Bill! No breakfast—you must—you *must!*”

That was the worst of Nedda. She was so used to ordering around that half-sick brother of hers that she tried it on every one. Blamed if he would have her telling *him* he must! He tore his arm loose.

“Nothin’ doin’,” he growled; “get out of my way,” and he shoved her aside. He was glad he had left her behind, and yet he had an indistinct impression that she was following him, calling him. He turned once and saw her dark eyes, but he laughed to himself. She’d not boss *him!*

He staggered up the steps of the superintendent’s house and kept his finger on the bell. A startled maid opened the door and fell back at the man’s appearance.

“Mr. Benson,” he said, thickly; “Mr. Benson’s expectin’ me?”

She fled, and he dropped in a chair and waited,

his head in his hands. From far off came the peal of a bell again. He heard hurried voices and one, not unlike Nedda's, pleading and sobbing. What was it she was saying?

"No sleep—not for nights and nights—working all the time on the process—hasn't eaten—not a mouthful——"

He felt his head jerked back suddenly and the burning sting of brandy smote his throat. It cleared his head. He sat up.

"Where am I?" he said, then tried to scramble to his feet.

"Sit tight," said a voice. It was Benson's—Benson's big warm voice. "You're all right, Bill—a trifle shaky."

He stared about him. He was in the great wainscoated, tapestried library of a mansion—embers of last night's fire glowed like red eyes in the hearth. He turned his head slowly. Beside him stood Nedda, her face white and drawn. Near her, Benson and his wife. They were not dressed—that was queer. He shook his head.

"I must a made an awful fool of myself, sir—I must——"

"Not at all," said Benson, kindly. "You're just played out. Don't try to talk. Just wait a bit."

But Bill shook his head.

"I remember comin'. Yes, you'd sent for me, that was it—and I was afraid—I was afraid——"

Then his voice broke. Benson patted his shoulder.

"Of course, I sent for you. Heard you'd been working on a process to turn scale back into steel. Wanted to hear all about it. Always interested in our men's discoveries."

Bill stared at him, fighting off the approaching blackness.

"An' you wasn't goin' to fire me?"

"Fire you!" laughed Benson; "of course not. You're the best man we have in the Works."

Bill held out his hand.

"You're all right," he whispered, huskily, "an' I don't mind tellin' you that my process is A No. 1—I've proved it—I——"

"Hold on," said Benson, "you can tell me all about it when you've had a square sleep. Lie down here on this couch and don't think about waking up until to-morrow, at least."

Bill spoke with difficulty.

"I hadn't ought to be here," he muttered, "I hadn't ought to do this—I——" but his head fell forward on his chest and Benson caught him. Nedda sprang to his side.

"Is he dead?" she whispered.

Benson shook his head.

"Nothing wrong with him, but he's dog tired. He'll come around all right. Don't worry."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Seen them that way many a time. Don't worry. He deserves a rest, and he'll get it right here and now."

Nedda rose. "Oh, thanks," she whispered; "thanks."

CHAPTER III

A DREAM OF GREAT RICHES

LATE that afternoon Big Bill opened his eyes, and after his first startled glance, settled back to a luxurious survey of his surroundings. He was all alone in the great lamp-lit library of the mansion! He—Big Bill—stretched out like a king on a divan of intoxicating softness. Slowly his eyes traveled to the warm red splotches of light cast by the lamps on the rugs, and from thence to the walls, studded with books, books of all sizes and shapes; shadowy volumes which breathed prosperity—prosperity! He drew a sharp breath. He'd have them some day, too, rows of them like that reaching from floor to ceiling. You didn't need to read them, not much, just to own them gave you class.

His head, though clear, felt a trifle light, and he dropped back on his pillows. Some one stirred behind him. It was a butler in livery.

"Beggin' pardon, sir, but Mr. Benson said as how you were to have some refreshment."

Bill stared at him.

"Hello, pard," he grinned. "Grub, did you say? I could bolt hardtack and take it for ice cream!"

He ate from a dainty tray wheeled in to him. He was glad the butler had left him alone. It is one thing to juggle a knife at home and quite another to handle it in the Chief's house. The coffee set him up and he flung himself to his feet pacing. That was what money could do for a man! Books and couches and food, concrete luxuries; rugs that felt like moss beneath your feet, lamps that cast a warm, rosy glow; pictures. Money—money! if you could only get your two hands on it there was nothing you couldn't have!

He drew near the shelves. He studied the titles and spelled them out with difficulty: "Plutarch's Lives," "The Fall of Rome," and he reached up and stroked the satiny covers gingerly. No, you didn't need to read them, but a gentleman had to have them on his shelves. No doubt about that. He turned. Some one was behind him. It was Benson.

"Well, Bill," he said, quietly, "you look ready for business."

Bill flushed. What would the Chief think of his fingering the books.

"I was just feelin' them. Ain't they soft, though?"

Benson smiled. "Yes, nice edition—but pretty well thumbed, I'm afraid."

"You mean," said Bill, slowly, "you mean that you've read them?"

Benson laughed. "Of course."

Bill stared at him. That, then, was the cause of

the intangible something which gave men of means such quiet assurance—there it was again—education.

“I didn’t just think you did.”

Benson pushed forward a chair. “Sit down,” he said.

Bill seated himself uncomfortably on the edge of it and waited.

“I suppose you think it’s a bit unusual—my having you here.”

“Yes, sir; I reckon it is.”

“Fact is, Bill, I’m interested in this discovery of yours—very much interested.”

Bill looked up quickly.

“More so in view of the fact that the men up at the lab have been plugging away for the last year trying to find just what you say you have succeeded in unearthing.”

“You don’t mean that them experts couldn’t line it up?”

“That’s just what I mean, so that’s why I wanted to hear all about it, to have it tested, to put it up to the board.”

Bill shifted.

“You must a thought I was clean off my base last night,” he said; “but when I seen it comin’ things went red—I couldn’t think of nothin’ else.”

Benson nodded. “I knew that. A man doesn’t work overtime night after night unless he believes he has struck something. I liked your grit, Bill; you

struck me as precisely the sort of man who would succeed at whatever he undertook."

Bill gripped the arms of his chair.

"And—and if this proves out—what'll it mean, sir?"

Benson did not answer for several minutes. He stared at the ceiling, and at length spoke.

"I don't want to raise your hopes, Bill, as it may mean nothing. But should it prove—should it prove, mind you—it looks to me as though you might become a very rich man."

Bill threw back his head.

"Me, rich!" he roared.

Benson nodded. "Other men have made their fortunes through discoveries of this kind—most of them have worked in the drafting rooms or labs, but now and then a laborer puts one over."

Still Bill was unconvinced.

"You don't mean rich like you are, Chief—you mean I can own my own place on Factory Street, maybe, and buy some lots."

"I mean more than that. There may not be a penny in it, and there may be a million."

Bill sprang to his feet.

"A million!" he shouted. "A million!"

"Exactly," said Benson. "That is a conservative estimate. Don't count on it, though. Knock off work to-day, and to-morrow's Sunday; so you'll be in fine shape by Monday, and we can take the

matter up. Remember, you've got a big job as foreman, and if this doesn't pan out you won't be the first one to lose a bet."

"A million!" whispered Bill. "There ain't nothin' I couldn't have."

Big Bill found Nedda awaiting him at the gates of the mansion. Her face was pinched and white, and she rubbed her hands together—rather as though she were chilled through. He ran to meet her.

"What is it, Bill?" she cried. She could tell from his stride—from the way in which he flung back his shoulders that something had occurred—something tremendous.

"Nedda!" he shouted, "I'm goin' to be rich—do you hear, Nedda? I'm goin' to be rich!"

She blew on her fingers and stared at him.

"Bill," she said at length, "you feel all right, don't you?"

He laughed. "All right ain't no word for it! Tip-top! Rich. Old man Benson himself said so——"

"Benson!" she gasped. "Benson!"

"Sure. Puttin' it up to the Board. Kind o' scared I ain't got the goods—tryin' to let me down easy—but I know I've got 'em, Nedda! I know I've got 'em!"

"You mean," she whispered, trying to follow him; "that he thinks you're goin' to make a pile out of your process?"

He nodded. "Bet you half a buck old Benson 'll be around with the news any day!"

"But, Bill," she breathed, "Bill, what are you goin' to *do* with it?"

He stopped and stared at her as though she had rudely jerked him to earth after a golden flight among the clouds.

"Do? Do? Why, everything!" Then, as his imagination soared: "There's nothin' I can't do! I'll buy—I'll buy—why, I'll buy you anythin' you want."

"You'll buy me anythin' I want?" she whispered.

He nodded. "Yep, you and Tony and anybody else that's given me a hand."

"Oh," she said, "I thought——"

Suddenly he stared down at her. He seemed to see her for the first time.

"You're cold, ain't you—say, Nedda, what are you doin' here, anyway? Your place ain't closed yet."

She shook her head.

"No, not yet."

"Well, how'd you come to be here—outside?"

She did not answer for a moment.

"I was scared, Bill."

"Scared? What of?"

"Scared you might—might—need me. You was awful queer this morning."

"Yes; but—why, Nedda, you ain't been hangin' 'round here all day on account of me!"

She nodded.

"I was afraid you might need me," she repeated, slowly.

He took her hand and patted it.

"Why'd you do it?" he asked; then, without waiting for her reply, he drew her along.

"You won't be sorry you did. Leave it to me. I'll get you the swellest ring or pin or whatever you want just as soon as them directors come across with the coin." He was seized with a sudden idea: "Let's you and me go to Levenstein's and see what they got. What do you say?"

She went with him, keeping up to his big swinging stride with difficulty. He glanced down at her.

"And a warm coat, too, Nedda—and shoes what *are* shoes—Gee! to think of your standin' out there all day for a big stiff like me!"

"I didn't mind," she said, slowly; "I wanted to."

Levenstein's window flashing a hundred lights, shone out brilliantly against the gathering dusk. Factory Street, its stores yet unlighted, formed a dim background. It was, perhaps, Levenstein's greatest moment—a moment begotten of his shrewdness—this glare of colored bulbs shining boldly, wantonly, coaxing one to gaze at the glittering array of precious and semi-precious stones he displayed.

He had arranged his window with great cunning—*Gorgeous Diamond Ring—Special Price—Step Inside and Try It On Your Hand; or, Something*

Extra Fine in Scarfpins—How Would You Like to See This Diamond in Your Necktie?

Each night could be found the moths drawn to the flame, pushing and shoving good-naturedly for a view of the coveted jewels.

As Bill drew near he turned to Nedda with a grin.

"You can have it all," he said. Nedda smiled, her cheeks flushed. "Come on," urged Bill, eagerly; "let's look 'em over."

She entered into his gaiety with an effort.

"Ain't it late?" she protested, as he seized her arm.

"Late, nothin'. You're shoppin' now with Bill what's got a pile. Nothin's too good for you, Nedda, what'll it be?"

She stared down at the dazzling display, but did not reply.

"Come on," he urged, "quick!"

She straightened up.

"All right, then, Bill; would that bracelet there be too much?"

He scoffed at her.

"Too much! Ain't I told you I'm rich—no; you're goin' to have that beauty down in front."

Nedda drew her breath sharply. Twinkling up at her from its bed of purple velvet lay a brooch of diamonds—Levenstein's *piece de resistance*—a rare piece for so garish a window, but one which Lev-

enstein knew would draw the crowd. It was his bait. Once they feasted their eyes upon it they would let their gaze drift to the least costly articles. He never expected to sell it, but it served its purpose.

"Oh, not that!" gasped Nedda, as though she feared Bill, in his new madness, would charge the store and purchase it then and there. "Not that!"

"Sure!" he cried, delighted. "Just the thing!"

In an instant he was tired of this game and ready for something new. He turned away. "Look over there at the Bee Hive—they're lighting up. Dresses—let's see what kind you want."

Nedda followed him, tolerant of his bubbling enthusiasm—humoring him tenderly.

"Pipe the red one!" he cried. "You'd look great in that!"

She shook her head. "Not much, I wouldn't."

But he nodded. "I'd like to see you in it. It's just the color of the steel at the big heat—red as blazes—swell color, that!"

But the mood passed and he caught her arm.

"Come on, let's hurry home and tell Tony—he ain't heard it yet—nor Mis' M'Farlane. Nedda, you think I'm crazy, but just you wait."

Tony listened with shrieks of excitement—with a torrent of eager questions, but Nedda left them shortly after supper and ran downstairs. It was cold

out. The wind whipped a sharp color to her cheeks and tore at her skirts. She hurried to the little dry goods store on the corner of Factory Street.

"I'm goin' to make a dress," she said breathlessly to Annie, who waited on all customers; "a red one."

Annie measured out the lengths of glowing cloth without comment.

When Nedda reached home Bill had gone, but Tony, his eyes still shining, hugged his knees delightedly.

"Ain't it immense?" he cried; "Bill puttin' one over on the big guys—he's goin' to be rich, Nedda."

"Well, he ain't yet," she said, slowly; "he ain't yet."

"And he says we're goin' to walk to-morrow—the three of us—guess where."

Nedda snapped the cord of her parcel and refused to guess.

"We're goin' *across the tracks!*"

She stared at him. "You're crazy!" she said, sharply.

He shook his head. "Nope. Bill says we are, and what's more, he's goin' to pick the place where he's goin' t' build his house."

"Don't he know the rich folks over there don't want us factory hands trampin' over their grounds?"

Tony chuckled.

"Don't make no difference to Bill. Do you

know what he says? He says: 'Why can't we go there, I'd like to know! Them swells would have mighty few gardens and houses to look at if it wasn't for us sweatin' day and night to make 'em rich'—and he's right, too.'

Nedda threaded a needle.

"He's just talkin'," she said; "he won't really go."

"Sure he will," said he, confidently; "he always does what he sets out to."

Nedda spread the goods on her knees.

"What's that for?" asked Tony, curiously. She folded it deftly.

"Oh, only a dress——"

"You ain't never had one that color before. What made you get it?"

"It's the color of the steel at the big heat," she said softly. "I like it."

Next morning Bill called for them.

"Are you ready?" he shouted.

Tony swung the door open. "Sure," he nodded. "Come on in."

But Bill shook his head. "Ain't got time. We've got a long tramp ahead of us."

"Hear that, Nedda?" called Tony over his shoulder. Then he whispered to Bill: "Wait until you see her dress. It's a new one. She sat up all night makin' it."

Bill laughed. "She'll need it to-day."

At that moment Nedda appeared. She stood framed in the doorway, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shy with a warm, deep gladness.

"Oh, Bill!" she cried; "ain't it too early to start?"

He turned and stared at her—at the dress flaunting its daring poppy color—at the soft coil of her hair—black as night against the smooth whiteness of her throat. She had tucked a flower at her breast. Its petals trembled as her bosom rose and fell with quick breaths.

"Do you like it?" she asked, eagerly.

Bill caught her hands.

"*Do* I? Why, Nedda, it's like—it's like what I told you last night—the furnaces at full blast!"

She tossed her head. "As if I wanted to look like an old furnace! I think it's more the color of the sunset at closin' time—you know, when the sky is so soft and red you'd like to—well, to reach up and stroke it!"

Bill laughed. "I guess you're right. Sunsets beat furnaces all hollow, don't they?"

He led the way down the stairs and out into the cool, sweet air. Nedda spoke shyly. "I know an awful pretty place over by the Duck Pond."

Bill shook his head. "No Duck Pond for us to-day," said he, squaring his shoulders as a diver does before a plunge. Tony grinned.

"What did I tell you?" he whispered. Still she was unconvinced.

"To Cranfort?" she asked. Bill shook his head.

"No, not there."

"To Baker's Woods?"

"No."

"To Livingston?"

"No—I guess you know where we're goin', all right. Tony told you, didn't he?"

"Sure I did," cried Tony, "only she won't believe it."

"Well, it's true. It's across the track for us today—forward, march!" But Nedda hung back. "I don't want to," she said, at length. "Let's go to the Duck Pond instead—it's a real pretty walk there."

Bill laughed at her and drew her hand through his arm.

"It's 'cause you're scared of the swells, ain't it? You think we ain't got a right to walk around their streets, seein' as we're factory folks? Well, you might as well get used to it—you'll be visitin' up there pretty regular once I get my house built!"

Nedda shook her head.

"You're foolin', Bill—you know, same as I do, that Mr. Colt's got a sign at the Works sayin' as it's private property over there and that he'll send any one up for trespassin'."

"Well, walking along the sidewalk ain't trespass-

in', is it? You'll like it once you get there—you know you will."

"Sure she will," echoed Tony. "Don't you want to see the houses that belong to them black and white awnings?"

"And the folks that belong to the houses?" finished Bill. Then he smiled at her. "There won't be one of them can hold a candle to you, though—not the best of 'em won't!"

She did not answer.

As though crossing the Rubicon, they stepped over the grass-grown tracks. A flush of excitement crept into Tony's pale cheeks.

"Once, when I was a kid, I come over here. It was when Pop and the other men brought a petition to Judge Van Steer to sign—he was the whole cheese then, before the Big Four squeezed him out. Well, I followed them. I don't remember the road 'ceptin' it was steep and awful dark—but the Judge's house—I'll never forget that."

"His little girl was havin' a party, wasn't she?" broke in Nedda. Tony nodded.

"You bet she was. When the front door opened I could see inside. I could see a bunch of kids all dressed up sittin' at a big white table covered with flowers and ribbons—and at the head of the table was the prettiest little girl I ever laid eyes on."

"It was Miss Daphne," said Nedda.

"Yep. It was her party, and she was just cuttin'

cake—a whopper of a cake—all silver and pink—with candles on it. Her father was sittin' 'longside of her all dressed up, too; but when they told him the men was outside he come out to talk with them, and they went into another room, but they forgot about me, an' I stays there watchin', an' when they begins pullin' out them paper caps and makin' the snappers go bang I claps my hands—gee! but I certainly wanted to mix with that crowd."

"An' the judge's little girl seen you," prompted Nedda.

"Sure. She pipes me peekin', and she says: 'Who's that little boy?' I guess them swell gents servin' would a give a whole lot to chuck me out, only she stops them. 'He's come to my party, too,' she says; 'so you're to give him cake and ice cream same as the rest.' They tries to sidetrack her, but a queen had nothin' on her. At last she got mad and stamps her foot at them, and, cuttin' a big hunk of cake, climbs down from the table and brings it to me herself. I was so scared I couldn't say a word—you know how kids are—but I just keeps my eyes glued on that little fairy. 'Here, boy, this is for you—you can have as much as you like.'

"Just then the meetin' was over and Pop, he catches sight of me and makes a grab for me. I must have hollered, but it didn't do no good; Pop wasn't strong for havin' me mix with the 'ristocrats, and I never did get that ice cream."

Bill laughed. "Only shows what I've always held—that rich folks ain't so hard-hearted given a fair chance—it's just that they're different from us. They ain't never been poor, or cold, or hungry, or wet, so you can't expect 'em to know how it feels." But Nedda was not listening. "Ain't that pretty!" she cried, suddenly. They had reached Bethel proper.

Bethel's Main Street was bathed in a warm, rich, Sunday morning sunlight. The shades of its shop windows drawn, like discreet eyes, veiling their curiosity behind lowered lids. A comfortable hush hung over all—a hush betokening work well done—rest deserved—a luxurious hush.

The street lost itself in a sharp ascent, screened by an avenue of maples which arched overhead and through whose leaves the sun, with a royal prodigality, spilled a million tiny replicas of himself.

Bethel proper, in the last analysis, was not unlike any other small city in the East. On the Upper Ridge perched the mansions of the First Families—the stucco Clubhouse—the eighteen-hole course.

On the Lower Ridge settled the be-cupola-ed, be-eaved homes of the Old Families—a generation of Bethelites behind them.

And across the track—a blot on the landscape—sprawled the Works—the Works, whose dust-laden grime was the food on which Bethel had thrived. Out of its squalidness—its smoke—its slums, out of

its cinders—its slag—its soot—had risen the proud city on its hillside.

The Upper Ridge sported underslung roadsters which shot down the hill both morning and evening and congregated in a gaudy group before the doors of its office buildings. The Lower Ridge still drove to market in open victorias and pony phaetons, but across the tracks one was content to walk to work and back again—day in and day out, until the beginning and the end of the world was reckoned by the shriek of the whistle at dawn and at sundown.

Verily, heaven and earth were never so far apart as these three——.

Bill stared about him. He threw back his shoulders. He flung up his head. He had always wanted to come there. He had always promised himself that some day—some day before he was too old—he would gaze at the homes of the Big Four—the men who controlled the Works—the town—the country—Cyrus P. Colt and the rest. But he hadn't come. He had put it off from year to year as though he were unconsciously waiting for something that would turn his footsteps there—But now he knew why he had waited—it was in preparation for this golden day when he could come to gaze at this coveted place and know that it might be a possible home for him—Bill Bill—! He must be asleep! You read about folks who strike it rich now and then, but you never were the lucky bloke yourself!

He grinned appreciatively at the people passing by—respectable folks—all togged out for Sunday. They drew away from him with sidelong glances. Sure, why shouldn't they? he chuckled. He was tremendous, uncouth, shabby—but they'd be speaking to him soon, he told himself, every last one of them!

Then he jerked himself up. He was dreaming—he must be! Why should he suppose he could mix with them—it took something else—breeding. But whatever it was money could buy it—money could do anything——

He'd have a house—Jiminy! he'd have a house like the big white one they were passing. He heard Tony shout back to them to look at it, and he nodded—Gleaming white pillars—a spread of lawn that looked like velvet—a cluster of orange marigolds—great, that! How would it feel, he wondered, sucking in his breath sharply, to walk up that long avenue, to know that every inch of it was yours—every tree—every shrub—every blade of grass—and yet—there was something lacking—something vital—what was it?

As he gazed, a woman with a little boy clinging to her hand stepped out on the porch. The child threw a ball and the woman sprang after it, laughing. Bill stopped short—a woman, by God! that was just what that big white barn of a house needed! A woman—and a little tyke in knickers! He had never thought of that before—never!

"She must be his mother," whispered Nedda.

The woman, stopping in the midst of the play, had suddenly swept the little boy with fierce tenderness to her heart—her lips against his fair hair. "Ain't they happy, though!"

He looked at Nedda and his heart beat a trifle faster—Nedda—in her dress of warm red—her little black head—her slender throat—her eager, parted lips—yes, you needed a woman. He made up his mind in a flash.

"I'm a-goin to have a house just like that," he declared.

"Are you, Bill?" said she, without turning. She was still watching the woman and the little boy.

"It'll be a big house, Nedda," he said, slowly, "an'—an'—I reckon it'll be a lonely one—unless—unless——" he stopped. She turned quickly, and her eyes leaped to meet him. In them he read his answer.

"Unless—what, Bill?" she whispered, her hands clasped. But at a sudden shout from Tony, Bill whirled.

"Come here, quick," he called. "Machine stuck in the mud—want your help—hurry——"

Nedda laid a hand on his arm. "Wait, Bill," she pleaded; "you can go after—after you finish."

But the spell was broken and he shook his head.

"Not now, Nedda," he said, brusquely. "Some one's in trouble—come on."

A turn in the road disclosed a long gray touring car—tipped to one side, its rear wheel caught in a rut. About it fussed an anxious little chauffeur in livery. Tony was offering useless advice.

There was a woman in the car, but her face was averted, rather as though the slight mishap were beneath her notice and entirely for menials to adjust. Tony greeted Bill with: "He's waitin' for a tow—don't many cars come up this hill."

Bill examined the wheel carefully, then he turned to the chauffeur:

"Have you tried backin'. You had ought to pull out."

The chauffeur gulped and nodded. "Everything that could be done's been done—it just won't budge."

Then a voice came to them—a cool, measured voice. "You'll *have* to budge it, Johnson. I told you I must be there by one." That was all, but Nedda had caught a glimpse of the cheek, turned toward them for an instant to deliver the ultimatum—and she gave a gasp.

"I know who that is," she said, breathlessly. Bill laughed.

"So do I. It's the Empress of Inja——"

But Nedda shook her head. "It's Miss Van Steer—Miss Daphne Van Steer—I seen her pictures in the papers."

Bill straightened up. Miss Van Steer! The

daughter of the dethroned Steel King—the steel princess! She *was* like a princess, when you came to think of it—her chin uptilted, her slim little shoulder toward the group. Bill grinned to himself. He was going to speak to her—to make her answer him—to make her thank him. He approached.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he said; “but did I hear you say you had to be somewhere by one?”

She turned, and Bill drew a quick breath. He had never known a woman could be so beautiful—it was not only her eyes and coloring and hair—it was the royal poise of the little head beneath its tiny blue hat—the white transparency of her skin—the moulding of her lips—the long slenderness of her fingers.

“If there is anything you can do,” she was saying, a bit patronizingly, “you will be well repaid.”

At that Bill grinned, though something gripped him, held him fast. That was a woman for you! With blue blood in every vein—a woman who could look at a man through half-shut lids as though she did not see him—could speak to him with freezing politeness which meant nothing. He wondered what her smile must be like—her laugh.

He was conscious of his intense stare by her words: “Do you intend doing anything—or are you merely—impertinent?”

He smiled. Impertinent! No—no—a thousand times no! It was as though he had looked upon a

shrine—as though a marble statue had spoken. That would be a woman worth possessing!—a woman worthy of the house of the gleaming pillars—that was the sort of woman a man needed—a woman with ice in her voice—a voice as mellow and rich as the tone of an organ. He whipped off his coat—do anything? He'd show her!

“You can't lift it, you're crazy!” protested Tony. Bill did not heed him. He saw only level green eyes—and tendrils of hair the color of melted gold—he did not hear Nedda's voice—

“Bill, remember, you ain't strong yet—you——” Strong! Why, he'd never been so strong in his life as he was with this new fire of purpose coursing through his veins. Here was his chance to prove himself to the woman beautiful.

“Get out of my way,” he heard himself saying to the little chauffeur, and then Miss Van Steer spoke:

“You'd better not try to lift it alone—you may hurt yourself.”

She was afraid for him—for one minute in her life she had paused to be afraid for him—Big Bill. He put his shoulder to the car, caught his breath, and exerted all the force of his tremendous strength. Slowly the car moved—he lifted it—it cleared the ground. He set it down again on the dry road. He stepped back, breathing fast, mopping his forehead.

The chauffeur was the first to break the silence.

"You must be some strong," he gasped; "I never did see no one do a thing like that before!"

Miss Van Steer was fumbling in her gold bag.

"I can't tell you how much I thank you," she said, earnestly. He shook his head.

"'Twasn't nothin'."

She held out a coin and he moved forward. He'd take it—some day he'd show it to her. She dropped it in his hand and he felt her cool fingers. Then she smiled!

The car shot forward with a sudden impulse. She turned and glanced back. Bareheaded in the road stood the great giant of a man—staring after her as one in a dream!

CHAPTER IV

NEWS FROM BENSON

A WEEK passed by—and then two. Big Bill had become a familiar figure in the chief's outer office. The force were very cordial to him. They assured him the matter was before the Board. A few more days—a little patience—No, Mr. Benson could not see him just then—he was in conference—those things took time.

Time! Bill clenched his fist. Time! Did they expect a man to wait forever? Couldn't they give him an answer—a hint of an answer—Of course, he told himself, it would be all right—it would all come out O. K.; but there was always that little gnawing in one's heart of hearts—that teasing fear lest something go amiss—of course, it wouldn't—and yet—

Nedda saw the strain beneath which he labored—saw it and was afraid for him, but he laughed at her.

"I ain't worryin', so why should you? I'm lucky to have them give it the once over, ain't I? Don't you suppose I know it'll take a blamed long time?"

And yet each night he found some excuse to pass the office—to pause irresolute, half hoping Benson would come out—half fearing what news the chief

would bring him if he did. He didn't sleep well, either. You couldn't exactly, with so much hanging in the balance—and he tried to forget by plunging into work each day with a snap that left him limp at nights. He decided that the thing to do was to work until he was dog-tired—then he would be able to sleep—that was his system—but he reckoned without his host.

It was on Monday of the third week—a week that found him grimly determined to beard Benson in his den—to learn the best—or the worst—a black Monday. His legs felt heavy—his arms felt heavy—his head was like lead. He tried to buoy himself up with the hopes on which he had lived, but he could not.

He was in an ugly mood. The noise of the Works jarred on his ragged nerves. The heat made his head swim. There was a big job on hand—a rush order. He took his place at the head of the crew and drove his men as he had never driven them before. Choking from the dust-filled air—the bursts of heat—the grime—they scurried to and fro at his sharp commands—whipped to action by the note in his voice—harsh—rough. There was a new man in the gang—a man to replace Polifsky, of the severed hand. The man was slow—cautious. Big Bill watched him with an irritation that he tried in vain to conquer. Every man was slow at first—he'd soon get the hang of it—but his resentment swelled—the

fellow was a drag—held back the work when there was so much to do. They must hurry—hurry—the fever in his blood demanded speed—speed—speed—more speed.

He watched the man with growing anger. He spoke to him gruffly.

“What you scared of?”

The man did not understand English, but he shrank back from the glare in Bill’s eyes—bloodshot—heavy. Bill scowled. “You’re no good, savez?—no good. Here!” he growled; “give me that. I’ll show you.”

He seized the tongs roughly from the man’s hands and thrust him aside.

“Do like this, do you get me? Or I’ll knock your bloomin’ block off. Think the company’s payin’ you for loafin’?”

The man’s drawn white face infuriated him—his blank stare—his effort to speak which ended with a rapid moistening of his lips. Bill swore at him. Why the devil couldn’t they talk English instead of jabbering gibberish?—*he’d* make him understand!

“Don’t look at *me!*” he thundered. “Look at *this!*” He pointed to the tongs—the man dropped his eyes with an effort. Bill sprang forward. He wished his arms did not tremble so—that his head was clearer. The crane, with leisurely nonchalance, was swinging its glowing bar directly above him.

“Now, watch me!” he shouted, raising the tongs,

and then it happened—his knees gave way under him—he heard Eddie's shriek.

"Jump—jump—for God's sake ju——"

He felt a brand of fire sear his shoulder—he pitched forward, grateful for the darkness which closed in on him from all sides.

When he opened his eyes it was dusk—there was a sharp pain in his neck and shoulder. Some one was bending over him. It was Nedda—no; it was Miss M'Farlane—no—it was the Beautiful Lady of the gray touring car.

"I knowed you'd come," he whispered; "when I showed you how strong I was—— It wasn't nothin' to lift that car—gee! but you're a queen, all right—only when you smiled——"

She seemed to recede. He heard a voice—tense—full of agony.

"It's me, Bill—it's me—don't you know me—it's Nedda——"

He thrust her away—now the Beautiful Lady was returning.

"I'll build you a house," he told her; "same as the one I saw—did you think I wanted your money?—do anything! I'll show you!"

And he lapsed back once more into unconsciousness.

Nedda was not afraid. He would not die. He could not! She would fight for his life with her last breath. He had burned his shoulder cruelly,

and that, together with the strain of the past weeks, had brought on the fever. She was strong. She had nursed Tony through many illnesses—and now, for the space of a few days or weeks, Big Bill would be hers. During the day she reluctantly surrendered him to Miss M'Farlane—jealous even of her care—but at night it was Nedda's voice that answered when he called the woman of his dreams—her hand that soothed him. Hers—hers! No one could take him away from her now—this great, helpless man who shouted another woman's name in his delirium—but was quieted not by that woman's voice but by hers—Nedda's!

And at last the day came when he was once more himself. Weak, and gaunt, and white, he had opened his eyes on a normal world. He had lain quiet a long while trying to remember—to think—and he had at length turned his head a trifle—but enough to see Miss M'Farlane beside him—bending over her work—her needle flying in and out at a twitch of her wrist. He smiled.

“Ain't had to do my socks for some considerable time, have you?” he managed to whisper.

She sprang up and ran to him.

“Bill!” she cried; “Bill! You're better!”

Then she would allow him to say no more, but in answer to the question in his eyes she told him he had been ill for many long weeks—that Nedda had nursed him at nights—that there had been no news

from the Works—none at all. He closed his eyes. After all, it did not matter. Nothing mattered much when a fellow was so all-fired weak.

Along toward supper time he saw Nedda. It seemed to him that she looked unusually white, with dark shadows under her eyes, but when he spoke of it she laughed. "I'm all right," she assured him. Then she drew her chair close to his bed and told him all he had been longing to hear—that the men had blundered along as best they could without him—were impatient for his return.

"Benson?" he whispered. She did not meet his eyes.

"Not yet," she said. He went to sleep with a sigh.

It was a slow process—getting well. He came to hate the four walls of his little room with a fierce intensity. He hated the crack in the ceiling that he must perforce stare at as he lay on his back. He hated the dark square of wallpaper where a previous tenant's picture had hung. He hated the blistered window-sill—the warped door. And as the strength ebbed once more through his veins he resented the doctor's orders. He pleaded with Tony to send word to Benson that he must see him. Tony evaded him. Benson was away. No one knew when he would return. Bill was to get strong and worry afterward.

Get strong—worry afterward—did they take him

for a blamed kid! The Company doctor grinned at his impatience. "You're not going to see any one until that shoulder of yours has healed, so cheer up."

If it had not been for Nedda, he told himself over and over, he could never have lived through the dark hours of his convalescence. She, at least, could let a man talk things over with her without choking him off—she could sympathize—could understand.

At last the day came when he could sit up in a chair—an easy chair—borrowed from the landlady—a chair filled with cushions. Bill flung the cushions to the floor—but Nedda smiled at him.

"Leave 'em back of you for a while," she coaxed; "just to please me."

He did—with a growl. He would not have admitted for the world that they felt good—that they eased the pain.

Nedda and Tony had gone to work. Miss M'Farlane had hurried away to match some materials, and he was left alone. Nothing to do. Wasn't even to read! He'd show them if he'd sit there like a mummy in a case! But his legs would not bear his weight—and he dropped back with the angry tears stinging his eyes. If they'd only tell him what had happened—if Benson would only drop around even if it were only to break it to him that his process was a frost—if some one would only end the suspense one way or the other he could bear it.

He drew in his breath sharply. Some one was

mounting the stairs. Some one with a measured stride. Not Nedda's patter, or the doctor's brisk tread—no—some one else. The footsteps paused outside his door. There was a moment's silence—then a rap.

Bill swallowed. "Come in," he said. The door swung open. Bill gave a cry, and then stared at the man before him.

"Benson!" he whispered.

Benson entered. He shut the door carefully behind him. He came forward with a smile, and yet his eyes were grave.

"Well, Bill," he said, slowly, "you've pulled out at last."

Bill did not reply. He kept his eyes on the man's face—watching—watching for a sign one way or the other. He wished he did not feel so weak—— If he could only fling himself up from his chair and stamp up and down the room—anything but sit there and wait. Benson dropped into the little straight-back chair opposite him.

"Suppose you wonder why I didn't come before this."

What did it mean, this evasion of the subject. Did you have to play a game before getting down to brass tacks? Well, if you did—by Jiminy, he'd play it! He wouldn't be the first to call the hand.

"No, sir," he heard himself say; "Tony said you'd been away."

"Tony was told to say that," said Benson; "I've been here all along."

What was that a cue for? Was he supposed to ask point-blank what had happened—or was it simply a letting-down process? He waited. Benson looked him over critically.

"I suppose you know you've been pretty sick."

He had to say something. "I guess I'm all right now, sir." The chief nodded.

"That's what the doctor told me. 'You can go around and see him,' he said; 'only make him take things slowly.'"

Slowly—slowly—what did they suppose he had been doing all these long, blank weeks?

"So at last I've come to tell you——"

He stopped. Bill knew in a flash what had happened. This man before him was struggling to spare him—afraid the shock might set him back—but more afraid to keep it from him longer. He gave a groan.

"Go on!" he snapped through his teeth. "It ain't a-goin' to hurt me. Get it over with. You come to say the process wasn't no go—didn't you? See, I knowed it all the time——"

He dropped his head in his hands. He wasn't going to see the pity in the chief's eyes—not by a jugful. But Benson was speaking—speaking in a crisp, cheerful tone:

"On the contrary, Bill—your process has proved itself beyond our greatest expectations."

Proved itself! *Proved itself!* Bill drew in his breath with a sob and stared at him.

"Say that over!" he gasped. "Say that over!"

Benson smiled. "Not unless you calm down a bit. It was just what we were afraid of—you're getting too excited, I mean. It's as bad one way as the other."

But Bill did not hear him. "Proved itself!" he whispered; "and you kept me guessin' and stewin'——"

"Had to," said Benson briskly; "doctor's orders. Didn't even tell your friends. Afraid they might not be able to keep it. They know it now, though. It's all over the Works by this time!"

Bill caught his breath. "And I'll be rich?"

Benson nodded. "It looks that way."

Bill stared at him. Rich! Rich! The golden dream had come true! He wanted to shout—to laugh—to toss his pillows in the air. But he could not. Men didn't do that sort of thing. Instead he steadied his voice and leaned toward Benson.

"You ain't stringin' me?" he asked, suddenly; "are you?"

When Benson left him he sat like one turned to stone. From a distance was borne to him the long screech of the whistle—the calls and cries of men released from work—and closer, the whining of the puny baby on the floor above—a woman's voice be-

neath his window, shrilly bickering with a huckster—life surging about him with its close-of-day tumult—but leaving him unmoved—untouched. Power—Power—more Power—everything would be his now—everything his heart desired—and the vision of a woman, her cheek averted, sprang before his eyes. “Yes,” he said through his teeth, “even you!”

He heard a chorus of voices below—shrill—eager—they were calling him. “Bill—Bill”—they shouted. He sat erect. The men were coming—Benson had said the news was all over the Works by this time—they knew.

“What’s the matter with Big Bill?” yelled a voice—only to be lost in the swelling clamor; “He’s all right!”

They pounded up the stairs, Tony at the head. They tore open the door and poured into his room. His own crew, grimy and black from work—their teeth shining white as they stared at him for an awkward moment.

“Gee! Bill, how does it feel to be rich?”

“Don’t forget your old friends, Bill!”

“Always knew you’d put one over!”

“Say, Bill, you ain’t quittin’ the Works——”

He grinned at them—at Eddie, wiping his face on his ragged shirt sleeve in an agony of embarrassment—at old Mack, still panting from the long climb—at Tony, whose eyes were startlingly like Nedda’s in their snapping excitement.

"How did you find out?" he asked them.

The answer was a confused roar—still the men flocked in. Severance and his gang—the boys from the rolling mills—Bill could see their bobbing heads as far as the eye could reach, and the hum of voices told him of more below.

"You tell him, Tony," shouted Eddie above the tumult.

Reluctantly, they yielded the floor to Tony—Tony perched on top of the table.

"It was this mornin', Bill—when word come from the chief's office—kind of slipped out, I guess——"

"Donohue tol' me——"

"He wasn't to say nothin' until after the chief had been over here——"

"Shut up!" stormed Tony; "ain't I elected speaker?"

They laughed good-naturedly.

"Anyway, everybody was sayin' as how the company had took up your process. I said they was crazy—didn't I know that Benson had turned it down——"

"An' you went over to the office——"

"Who's tellin' this?" cried Tony; "the meetin' will please come to order. I says to the fellers, I says, I'll pike over to the office——"

"An' you did——"

"An' they says it was straight——"

"Yes—O. K.—chief himself payin' his respects

to the new inventor, Mr. William Matthews—other-wise Big Bill——”

“Three cheers for him, fellers——”

“And three more after that!”

Their voices shook the walls—heads flung back—shouting—but in the midst of their cheer they heard a woman’s voice—shrill—commanding:

“Say, is the whole bunch of you crazy! Do you want to kill Bill just when he makes good? Ain’t you got no brains at all, crowdin’ in on him this way——”

It was Nedda. Her eyes flashing, her breath in gasps. They fell back before the fury in her eyes.

“I should think the whole lot of you would have better sense than to start a rough house here.”

Eddie approached her sheepishly.

“Aw, say, we didn’t mean no harm——”

But she shook her head. “Don’t make no difference—it’s out you go—no back talkin’, neither.”

They grinned at her commanding them—a little, willowy sprite, no taller than a man’s shoulder, and they backed out of the room slowly.

“Guess we’re in wrong, Bill!” they shouted.

“We’ll call again when the nurse ain’t here.”

“S’long, Bill—tickled to death to see you——”

Nedda turned to Tony, hanging behind. “An’ you can get, too,” she said, severely. “You’re worse than all the rest put together, ’cause you know how sick he’s been.”

Bill was glad they had gone—glad of the peace which stole over the little room like a cool breath. Nedda stirred about softly. She poured out his medicine and held it to his lips. "Drink this," she said. He took it slowly. She patted the pillows behind him and drew the quilt over his knees. He did not have to see her to know she was setting the room to rights—he heard the brisk swish of her broom as she swept out the last grimy footprint. She flung open the window.

"A breath won't hurt you," she said. There was the sharp fall tang to the air. He sniffed it hungrily.

"That's great," he said.

She drew up a footstool beside him and dropped on it. He noticed for the first time that she had not removed her little worn jacket, or her green hat with its stiff black quill, or even her gloves——

"Ain't you goin' to stay awhile?" he teased.

She did not answer. Instead she dropped her chin into the palm of her hand and stared through the little window at the darkening sky. All at once she seemed very tired—there was infinite weariness in the droop of her red lips—the slouch of her shoulders. He did not notice.

"Nedda," he whispered, eagerly; "it's come true—it's all come true——"

She did not reply. He doubted if she had heard. He leaned back and closed his eyes. After a long

silence she raised her head and gazed at him—at the smile which touched the corner of his lips. She laid her hand lightly over his.

“I’m glad, Bill,” she said, and her voice was like a caress. “I’m awful glad—for your sake.”

CHAPTER V

DAWN OF A NEW LIFE

WHEN the first check arrived Bill, after a hurried glance at it, let it flutter to the ground. It lay, a little spot of green, on the floor. He did not touch it; instead, he shook his head confusedly and brushed a hand over his eyes. There was some mistake, he told himself—there must be. They could not possibly mean to send him that much money. At length he picked it up and stared once more at the slip of paper bearing his name right enough—at the figures in the bookkeeper's cramped hand!

He had often wondered how it would feel to handle it—to scratch his name boldly across the back of it—and now that he held it—now that it was actually in his fingers, he was conscious only of that aloof sensation—as though something were happening—something stupendous—but it was not happening to him—it was all very confusing.

He glanced at the little clock on the shelf—it would be hours before Nedda and Tony would return—hours before he could show it to them and have them convince him that it was he, Big Bill, for whom it was intended. He thought of Miss M'Far-

lane—he would tell her about it—would flash it before her eyes. Then he stopped short, delighted with a new idea that occurred to him. Why not go out? Why not surprise them all?

There was plenty of time; besides, he felt much stronger now. There was nothing to keep him there, staring like a ninny at a check that Fortune had dumped in his lap. He had been out on one or two occasions with Nedda and Tony on either side of him helping him walk—it certainly got you the way you forgot how to use your legs—had to be taught all over again. He was perfectly able to go out alone, and if he felt tired he could hire a hack like a gentleman!

He grinned at himself in the cracked glass on his wall—*hire a hack!*—why, he could buy a whole one—coachman thrown in for good measure—with that slip of green paper in his hand!

There was no cab stand near Factory Street—its residents, except at funeral times, being unaccustomed to any mode of transportation save by foot. But before the swinging door of a Factory Street saloon might occasionally be found an old horse, hitched to its dingy wagon, head down, resting wearily.

There was none in sight. But at the station Bill discovered a line of them drawn up awaiting the afternoon train. He hailed one. He was not sure how one did it, but he whistled and beckoned, and the driver flicked his whip over the horse's thin

flanks and drove toward him at high speed. He hesitated when he saw the big man in his rough clothing.

"You don't want a ride, do you?" he asked, suspiciously. Bill laughed.

"Sure, I do, partner; want to hire you by the hour—maybe by the day—money ain't no object," and he waved his hand.

The driver scowled and gathered up his reins.

"Aw, cut the comedy!" he growled; "I've lost my place now just on account of you!"

But Bill shook his head.

"I ain't stringin' you. I mean it. I'm rich—real money—an' I want you to drive me to—well, I reckon to the Bethel bank first of all."

The driver stared at him. "You—to the Bethel bank!"

Bill nodded. "Sure. Straight ahead. Full speed."

He climbed in and sank down on the old cushions—the driver, still distrustful, chirped to his horse, and Big Bill, with a chuckle, leaned back luxuriously. To spin along the street on wheels—to see the pedestrians scurrying out of your way—to know you have enough money in your pocket to pay a thousand times over for your pleasure—this was life—glorious—rich—thrilling! The driver drew up abruptly and turned his head.

"This here's the bank," he said. Bill stepped down, then he looked back over his shoulder.

"I'll be back in a jiff," he said with a grin.

He had no difficulty in the bank. The officials had heard of him—had heard of the foreman at the Works who, rumor had it, would clean up a big fortune with his process, and when word spread that he was there the clerks hurried from their books to peer at him, whispering and snickering. But Bill did not heed them. He was fingering the fresh notes which had been paid him—fingering them with trembling hands. He had never in all his life seen so much money as that which he held in his two fists—green crisp.

"Got quite a pile there," said the cashier; "what you going to do with it?" That's what Nedda had asked him—almost her words. Bill did not answer. He could not have spoken just then—not for the life of him—something within him welled up and threatened to choke him. All the money he wanted—had ever dreamed of wanting—what would he do with it—he'd show them!

He stuffed the bills into his pockets. His cabby was awaiting him anxiously. Bill waved a goldback beneath his nose.

"Drive me to Levenstein's and maybe you'll get this!" he shouted.

The driver became action electrified—he snapped his whip, he clucked through his teeth; the horse sprang forward—already Big Bill was to learn the power of money.

Levenstein himself waited on him—little and bent and sallow.

“Something nice in scarfpins?” he whined; “or maybe a ring, yes?” Bill shook his head.

“No; none o’ that junk,” said he. “Let’s have a look at that sparkler.” He pointed to the brooch in the window. Levenstein hesitated, his eyes little pinpoints of shrewdness. He concluded he could not have heard aright.

“You mean dis von in de case——”

Bill was impatient. “I mean the one down in front there—that daisy——”

Levenstein shook his head. “Oh! dat’s not for sale—I mean, it’s very dear—it——”

“I don’t give a shoot how much it costs,” Bill growled; “I want it, and I want it quick!”

Levenstein lifted it from its place and laid it on the counter. “I’m glad to show it to you, sir, but——”

Bill drew out a handful of bills. “What’s the price?” he asked. Levenstein sucked in his breath and spread out his hands.

“Oh, if you pay cash, it vill be——” he hesitated.

“I know it’s comin’ steep,” said Bill, easily; “but I’ll take it at any price.”

When Levenstein had wrapped it up for him Bill turned to go. But the little Jew, his eyes full of eagerness, tried to keep him.

“Chust a minute,” he pleaded; “here’s somethin’ fine——”

But Bill shook off his grip. "Nothin' doin'," he said, gruffly; then he paused. Beneath the glass counter lay a bracelet—coiled snakes—their two heads of jade—green, lustrous.

"I like that," said he suddenly. "Let's see it." But Levenstein was out for bigger game—

"That ain't no good—chust imitation jade—now over here——"

But Bill shook his head.

"Ain't nothin' else in your whole joint I want except that."

Levenstein lifted it out protestingly and laid it in Bill's hand.

"If you let me show you vat I've got——" But Bill dropped it in his pocket.

"This'll do," he said, shortly; but his face was alight with eagerness. "Queer, ain't it—that color?" He paid Levenstein and left the shop.

Nedda, hurrying home from work, paused at Bill's door and called softly. There was no answer, and she turned the handle, only to fall back with a cry. "He's gone!" Tony, behind her, stared at the empty room. She whirled on him: "We've got to find him!" she cried; "he ain't fit to be out—he ain't stronger than a baby—go get Miss M'Farlane—quick—she may know."

But Miss M'Farlane did not. She returned with Tony, her face pinched with anxiety. "He's not well

by any means," she said, slowly. Nedda shook her head.

"He hadn't no business to go out alone—he may be off his head again."

She picked up the quilt he had dropped to the floor and an envelope fell from its folds. "Wait a minute," cried Tony; "let's see it."

Nedda looked over his shoulder. "It's from the Works," she said. "I hope there ain't nothin' wrong." But Tony shook his head.

"He'll turn up, all right."

She moved to the window. It was dark out—a misty night. The lamp at the foot of Factory Street cast its eerie glow—a circle of light on the damp earth. Nedda shivered. Then she leaned forward tensely.

"What's that?" They hurried to her side. A hack was turning the corner—a hack drawn by an old white horse—and as it passed for an instant beneath the light Nedda gave a cry.

"It's Bill," she whispered, "ridin' in it all by himself!"

Tony whistled. "Pipe the new overcoat—and hat—and——"

As the hack drew up at the door he turned to her eagerly:

"I'll beat it down and help him up—maybe you'd better come, too."

But Nedda did not stir from her post at the win-

dow. She pressed her cheek against the pane. She saw Bill enter with his arms full of bundles. Miss M'Farlane fluttered excitedly about the room.

"Where'll he put all the things?" she said; "do you suppose his money could have come?"

Nedda shrugged: "I don't know," she said, dully, "I expect it has."

They heard Tony's shout as he greeted Bill:

"Well, what are you all dressed up for?"

They heard the shrill voice of the cabby thanking Bill again and again for something—and then came Bill's roar:

"All ready for a surprise up there? Where's Nedda? Where's Miss M'Farlane?"

At the sound of his voice Nedda drew herself up rather as though she was bracing herself for a shock—but Miss M'Farlane ran to the banisters and leaned over.

"Tony's got his arms full of parcels, too," she cried. "My! my! if this isn't exciting!"

Nedda drew back when she saw Bill, but Tony burst out eagerly:

"Hat—shoes—overcoat—suit—ain't nothin' that ain't brand-new! What do you think of him? He's a gent, now—that's what he is—a *real gent!*"

Bill grinned sheepishly. "They're all right, ain't they?" he asked, anxiously. Tony dropped his bundles on the table and stood back, head cocked on one side admiringly. "Immense, so far. Regular swell.

Got a check this mornin', and what does he do but go right out and blow himself good and proper."

Nedda smiled through stiff lips at the big man before her—it was Bill, and yet it was a stranger, this well-dressed gentleman. He was speaking: "And I won't be the only swell, either; open her up, Tony."

Tony whipped out his penknife and cut the strings. Miss M'Farlane clasped her hands: "Well, if it isn't another overcoat——"

"For you, Tony," said Bill; "ain't goin' to have you freezin' to death this Winter."

"For me!" gasped Tony.

Bill nodded. "Try it on," said he. And Tony slipped his arms into it. His pale face had gone a shade whiter. "Gee, Bill, you hadn't ought to do this."

Bill laughed. "What do you suppose a guy wants money for unless he can?" he said. He cut the strings of another package. He patted it. "Yours, Miss M'Farlane," he said.

She opened it with shaking hands: "What can it be?" Her fingers told her before the last fold fell away. Her hands dropped to her sides, slowly she turned her face toward Bill. It was aglow with eager light. She spoke softly:

"I won't have to ruin my eyes any more." Then, without warning, she caught his hand and pressed her lips to it.

"Say," he growled, dragging his hand away;

"you'd think I'd given you a house and lot instead of a hand sewin' machine!"

Her eyes were full of tears. "To think after waiting all these years——" she said at last.

"Yes, an' it ain't the only thing you're goin' to get, either," he cried. "See how you like this!" His voice was exultant, his cheeks flushed. He could give them what they wanted now—these friends who had stood by him. He could gratify their whims. He'd like to meet the poor bloke who said money was a curse—a curse! Why, it was the greatest blessing a man could have—the only thing on earth that could give you that feeling of almighty power—of happiness.

Tony was tearing at the wrappings, holding up the warm coat—the sets of furs.

"I don't know what all's there," said Bill; "I just told them to throw in the stuff girls were strong for." Then he turned to them eagerly:

"To-morrow we're goin' to celebrate for fair—every one dressed up—and dinner at a restaurant—no food-slinger—but the real thing!"

But Tony shook his head. "Aw, say, Bill, we wouldn't know how to act!"

"Don't have to know how," said Bill, "as long as you can pay the bill." Then he turned to Nedda. "I've got something for you, too."

She came toward him. She moistened her lips. "I wish you hadn't of," she said.

Bill laughed. "You'll like it"—and he drew from his pocket the box.

"It's jewelry!" cried Tony. Miss M'Farlane dropped the muff she was stroking and ran to Nedda's side. "Open it, quick!"

But Nedda held it in her hand and her fingers closed over it. "I can't," she said; "I just can't."

"Let me, then," said Bill.

She gave it to him, her eyes on his face—eager—boyish—carried away by the enthusiasm of this new game he was playing—the game of benefactor.

"It is *jewelry!*" shouted Tony. "It's from Levenstein's!" the blue velvet case lay revealed. Bill held it out.

"Go ahead," he urged. But Nedda shrank back.

"I can't, Bill—I can't—you hadn't ought to have got it for me."

Tony stared at her. "Are you crazy? Why don't you open it and see what it is?"

Bill pressed the spring. Tony fell back with a cry, but Nedda stood motionless, her bosom rising and falling quickly—her eyes on the sparkling treasure in his hand. Bill smiled at her.

"It's for you," he said, gaily; "didn't I tell you I'd get it?"

Still she did not move, and Tony jerked her elbow sharply. "Take it," he whispered.

She shook her head. "I don't want it," she said, quickly; "it's too grand for me—it's——"

"It's what I said you'd have—and what I say goes!" grinned Bill. He lifted it from its bed of white satin and held it by its chain of platinum. "I'll put it on you—come here."

She moved toward him and lifted her chin. He clasped the chain about her white throat and let the splendid cluster of diamonds rest in the hollow of her neck. Suddenly she caught his arm.

"Bill," she said, breathlessly; "Bill, you want me to have it, don't you?"

"Sure," he laughed; "ain't I been tellin' you so—"

"Yes; but—you want me to have it because—because—well, why *do* you?"

He was frankly puzzled. "Why does any one give presents like that?—first of all, because I said I would—and I wanted to make good—and then because I—well—I knew it would look great on you—and then because you hadn't never had anythin' like that before—and I thought you had ought to have the best—I don't know no other reasons."

"Well," said Tony, "that ought to be enough to please anybody!"

But Nedda was silent, fingering the brooch thoughtfully. Miss M'Farlane gathered up her new possessions.

"I'll get my sewin' done in half the time," she said, eagerly. "God bless you, Bill." Tony picked up her machine.

"Let me carry it over for you," he said. He led the way into the hall, chatting eagerly. Bill turned to Nedda.

"It looks fine," he said. She nodded.

"It's beautiful, Bill—but I'm afraid of it—I wish I knew——"

"Knew what?"

"Knew if you'd given it to me, because——" she stopped, her cheeks crimson.

"Ain't I told you why I did?"

She nodded; "Yes—only you didn't say you gave it to me because—you—liked me——"

He stared at her. "Well! I'll be blowed! I don't need to tell you *that*, do I Nedda? Don't you know you're the greatest pard a feller ever had? *Like* you! Why, you know blame well I do!"

She caught her breath. "Then I'll keep it, Bill," she said, "and—I'll love it!" Turning abruptly, she ran from the room.

He drew off his overcoat and stroked its rough, warm cloth—he turned his new hat over. He had never hoped to possess a coat and hat like these. He dropped his hand in his pocket—plenty of loose change jingling through his fingers—and a soft roll of bills—and something else—what was it?—oh, yes—the bracelet. Queer color, that. He drew it out—and gazed at it. Just the color of a pair of eyes—the eyes of the lady of his dreams. He'd keep it just to remind himself of her.

Then he flung himself down in his chair and stretched luxuriously. A hack was certainly the only way for a man to travel—he might even take a taxi some day—who could tell?

CHAPTER VI

CARES OF THE RICH

THESE followed weeks of festivities such as Nedda and Tony had never dreamed of seeing—as Miss M'Farlane vaguely remembered in a hazy, distant past. Dinner at the restaurant had not proved altogether successful—had been too great a strain on the four, and it was abandoned after the first attempt. After all Nedda's cooking was better than any you could buy. But there were rides and theatres. Nedda's anxious fear lest he spend too much was quickly hushed. What did a fellow want with money if not to spend it! There was plenty more coming—Benson had said so. And yet, with all the revelry, with all the exhilaration of the sport, something began to go wrong. They had visited Bethel Parkway—they had driven into the country—but Bill found himself suddenly tired of it—that was nonsense, of course—one didn't get tired of spending money—and yet—if there were only something *new* for a man to do—new people—new places——

He had resigned from the Works—resigned amid a tumult of protest—his men crowding about him de-

manding he stay—and he found the time dragging heavily on his hands—you couldn't keep on buying eternally—you couldn't always ride around the country with Nedda and Tony and Miss M'Farlane. What the devil was it he wanted?

To quell the rising restlessness he set out on another exploration tour of the shops—he bought quantities of furniture—rugs—pictures—he would fix up his place. For a time it amused him tremendously—Nedda's ecstatic joy at each new treasure delighted him; her eager suggestions as to the placing of them—but when it was finished—when the rug was laid, the pictures hung—his enjoyment of it vanished. Queer, too, that it should not please him—the best stuff in Smith's Furniture Shop—but it didn't. He pondered over it, gazing at the new buffet, with its punch bowl and glasses. Suddenly he knew what grated. It wasn't like Benson's—that was it—that was what he wanted—something rich and handsome—and homelike—not this glaring oak—these blatant lamps—that table full of glassware—did a man ever know what it was he desired? What under the sun was wrong with him!

He sought Nedda. She was making over a dress. She dropped her sewing in her lap when he entered, her cheeks flooded with color.

“Want to go out?” he said.

She shook her head. “Not to-night, Bill, it's so nice to sit here and think.”

He moved restlessly. "Wish I thought so."

"Don't you?" she asked, quickly.

He shook his head. "Can't seem to settle down to nothin'. Seems every morning when I hear the old whistle as if I ought to hop out of bed and be off to the Works. I hate to see the men startin' out—won't look at 'em."

She smiled. "You'll get over that."

"Not as long as I stay here."

She looked up quickly. "You weren't thinkin' of goin' away, were you?"

"Why not?" he asked.

She did not reply. He slipped his hands in his pockets.

"Seems sort of queer, a feller like me gettin' what he wants and bein' so all-fired sore about everythin'. Nedda," he said, suddenly, "what's wrong with me?"

She raised her head and her dark eyes met his, but she did not answer him.

"Reckon every one feels this way that's worked all his life," he went on. "Sittin' 'round twirlin' your thumbs ain't no cinch. Think I'll go 'way somewheres—only I don't know where to go—and it wouldn't be fun—alone!"

"What is it you want to do?" she asked at length.

He tried to put it plainly: "I want to do big things, and see big places, and know big people. I reckon that's it, Nedda; only I don't know how to go about it."

She was silent a long time. Then she straightened her shoulders. "I suppose when you do," she said, "you'll forget all about—us."

"How can I? Ain't you my best friends—don't I come to you with all my troubles——"

"You do—now," she said.

He smiled: "And always will. I'll get hold of myself soon, then it will be clear sailin'." He turned toward the door. "Well, if you won't go out I reckon I'd better go alone."

She let him go. She listened to his footsteps, growing fainter, and when they had died away she sat idly, the work in her lap, her hands loosely clasped; then, with a shudder, she pushed the dress away from her and covered her face with her hands. Tony found her thus, but when he asked her what was wrong she did not answer. At length, as he persisted, she said it was her eyes—they were always bad at rush season, and she went to her room.

When Bill received a summons to appear at Benson's office he felt the first thrill of returning interest. Perhaps the chief had a big job for him—was going to put him to work again—was going to forget that he was making money from a process which seemed to be steeped in gold.

He set out eagerly. He was admitted at once. It was good to see the chief again. Benson held out his hand.

"How goes it?" he inquired.

Bill grinned. "Can't get the hang of it yet," he said; "but reckon I'll pull out all right—only I wish I had something to do."

Benson regarded him thoughtfully. "I knew you would—I proposed to give you three weeks of play and see what happened."

Bill glanced up quickly. "You mean you doped it all out that I'd be sick of it that soon?"

Benson nodded. "Feeling kind of restless, weren't you? Ready for something else?"

Bill leaped up. "How'd you guess it, chief? Holy smoke, I didn't think I could stand it another day—honest—I've went out and blowed myself to everythin' I ever wanted—but it didn't do no good—nothin' did—and here you are sizin' me up right off the bat."

Benson smiled. "Sit down, he said; "I have something to say to you."

Bill dropped in his chair.

"I once told you," said Benson carefully, choosing his words, "that you would be a very rich man." Bill nodded. "I didn't tell you how rich—I couldn't, then; but I can now. Bill, you will have so much money that it would not be safe for you to be the sort of citizen you are at present."

"What do you mean?" asked Bill, shortly.

Benson puffed his cigar in silence, then he leaned forward.

"I mean just that. Men with fortunes in this country must know how to manage them—to meet other rich men. Education—that's it, Bill, education."

"Well!" he growled; "how can I get it now?"

Benson smiled. "Men who make a big pile do it as a rule gradually—get time to soak in the things a man has to know; but yours has come in a rush—and left you floundering—you've done all you can with your money so far, and yet you aren't satisfied. Why not? Because you want those other things, too—you want to be one of the big men, to be able to talk and walk and act like one—why shouldn't you? You're a born leader."

Bill stared at him. "Well," he said, "all this talk don't get me nowheres."

Benson smiled. "That's where you're wrong. I'm going to undertake to make you one of the biggest figures in this country, Bill Matthews!"

Bill drew in his breath.

"I mean it," Benson continued; "I've watched you sail ahead of other men at the Works; I've watched you boss big jobs; I've seen men jump to do what you tell them to. That means you've got power, Bill—and power with money is a dangerous thing, unless you have education besides—get me?"

Bill nodded.

"You're going to put yourself in my hands for a period of one year—yes, I think I can do it by then.

By the end of that time you are going to be one of the men that make history. I'm not saying this without thinking it out first—but I've seen what you can do, and I'm willing to stake my last dollar on you."

Bill stared at him—at the big man puffing his cigar—tipped back in his chair smiling at him, and as he gazed he felt a thrill steal over him—his blood pounded in his veins—to do—to conquer—to be worthy of this trust placed in him—command men? Of course he could! A power—a money king—that was what this man proposed to make him—that was what he had wanted. What a fool not to have guessed it long before. He held out his hand. "I'm on," he said, huskily. Benson gripped it.

Nedda heard the story that he told with stumbling haste—heard it without speaking.

"I'm goin' to Benson's—for a while—and then——"

"Then—what?" she asked, her eyes on his face.

He caught her hands. "Then I'm goin' to lick the money pirates at their own game—sail in and show them a thing or two. I'll make you proud of me."

He drew her after him to his room. "You can have all this," he said. "Pictures, rugs—everything. Gee, Nedda, to think the Big Chief himself is goin' to do this for me!"

"Bill," she said, breathlessly; "you will come back and see us—you will, won't you?"

He nodded. "Sure. I'll tell you everythin' that's happenin'. Reckon I'll have to learn a lot, and I'll teach it to you, too. Benson says money's a responsibility. Nedda, Nedda—that's what was wrong with me—and I didn't know it—there I was just achin' to get into the big game—and couldn't find the way."

"That's all you wanted, ain't it, Bill?"

He nodded. "Everything in the world. Wasn't I crazy not to know it."

"And there wasn't nothing else you'd like to have?"

"What else *is there?*" he cried. "Tell me that!"

But she did not answer. Instead, she moved to the window, her back to him.

"You'll need some new things, Bill," she said, slowly, "if you're goin' there. Suppose I make out a list for you."

"Great idea!" he cried. "Nedda, you sure are a pal for a feller."

"Am I, Bill?" she whispered, as she drew a pad and pencil toward him.

He nodded. "Now, then, what do I need in a swell house like that?"

She looked at him with a half-smile, as though she were about to say something, but she changed her mind.

"Let's start from the beginnin', Bill," she said, abruptly, and they set to work.

CHAPTER VII

MAY LARABEE'S DIPLOMACY

BETHEL'S Old Families regarded the hilltop dwellers as Upstarts. True, the Upstarts lived in palatial homes, with sweeps of velvet lawn and long avenues of trees—but this, if anything, was an added count against them. The Old Families could never quite forgive them for wresting from them the wealth that was once theirs.

In the days when Bethel's swamp was first converted into farm land—when the Works consisted of a small shack full of rusty machinery—Andrew Van Steer ruled the land. There was no question as to his power in the growing community. He came from the South, with a formidable host of ancestors behind him; but that did not deter him from marrying the daughter of Bethel's innkeeper.

What one needed in those days was a strong, healthy woman—a woman able to work side by side with you—after that she might be pretty—yes, and of good birth. Brains were not essential. The man of the house did all the thinking for the family.

But as Van Steer's wealth grew by leaps and bounds his wife ceased dressing in calico and driving

to market behind a jogging old horse, and endeavored to recline, as though she were accustomed to it, on the satin cushions of a victoria, behind the smartest team of Kentucky-bred bays in the country.

It was said she acquired a certain amount of poise—along with her Paris stays and bonnets—but her cleverness lay in never opening her pretty mouth in public except to say “yes” or “no”—Van Steer did the rest with an eloquence equalled by few and surpassed by none.

Great days, those—when the old Van Steer house was ablaze each night with a thousand candles—when the door swung wide to admit a stream of gaily clad folk—when the swish of silk skirts whispered through the long hallways and the tapping of high heels rang out on the stone corridors.

Van Steer's dinners were famed throughout the countryside. It was said that his tables groaned beneath their load of good things; that his wine flowed like water; certain it was that Van Steer, flushed and triumphant, would stagger to his feet, waving his glass, and urging his guests to stay as long as they chose.

“Open house!” he would cry. “Open house—and room for all! Eh, darling? Room for all!” And his wife, nodding and smiling, would whisper “Yes.” And stay they did—for weeks at a time.

Van Steer and his shrewd side-partner, Wilbur Newcomb, held the town in the hollow of their

hands, and the second generation of Van Steers and Newcombs were ushered into the world with the proverbial golden spoons in their mouths.

The Van Steers delivered a son to the Bench—an impractical dreamer, who had inherited his mother's golden gift of silence; who shrank with terror from the tumult of the great throbbing industry his father loved. The boy stumbled through law school, hating briefs with a passion only surpassed by his father's indomitable ambition for him.

As for Newcomb's son—at an early age he showed signs of possessing all his father's coarseness and none of his brains. It was to these two youths that Bethel looked for a continuance of its brilliant social life. But the Judge soon retired ingloriously from the Bench and settled down to his books and his cards—quite content to let the family fortune drip through his slender, aristocratic fingers.

As for young Newcomb, he sold out his interest in the Works and flung all the money on the Street in a wild orgy of speculation—was wiped out in the course of one memorable afternoon—and wound up the day by shooting himself before the eyes of his wife and two children.

It was right there that the First Families stepped in. With an eye on the Works as the coming steel center of the country, Cyrus P. Colt and his three henchmen, Ellsworth Decker, Isaac Pattison and Nathaniel Rogers, swept up what little stock the Judge

still held—assuring him it was worthless—and after enlarging the Works, proceeded to clean up a volume of business and swing gigantic deals that left Bethel gasping, and poured a shower of gold into their coffers. It did more than that—it earned for them in the world of finance the name of “The Big Four.”

It was a matter of pride with them that they clung to Bethel—no—they were fond of assuring each other—flushed with their success—they were not snobs. Some men, when they made a pile, pulled up stakes and moved to a colony of millionaires—but not they—no, sir! Bethel was the place where they had made their money—and Bethel was good enough for them and theirs! And to prove their devotion Colt presented Colt Park to the township, while Decker followed with Decker College, and Pattison gave the stately Library and fountain which bore his name. As for Rogers, he built the Rogers Memorial Church, whose organ had the largest number of stops east of Salt Lake.

And as Bethel grew and waxed exceeding strong its social life became gayer—madder. Its house parties consisted of trainloads of guests from neighboring cities—gaily-sweatered folk, with nervous, high-pitched voices and tired eyes—and the music of the First Families' dances lasted until late into the mornings.

With its social life, its financial life grew—the

controllers of great industries joined their women folk for week-ends and left them to their own devices, while they smoked the Big Four's cigars and lounged in their deep leather chairs, thrashing out the cornering of a stock, the purchase of a railroad, the crushing of a competitor—to the faint strains of a waltz, or to the laughter of young voices.

And, like a dank weed springing up in soil too rich—a political life crept into Bethel. There were twenty thousand voters. They might swing the State in any election—a big factor—and there were rich men standing ready to back a party which offered enough inducements—until at last the Boss himself—Dugan, the man who ruled the party—found his way there.

He lived very quietly in a rambling old house set back from the road—but his great, pudgy fingers were ever on the pulse of his Party—sensing every throb—prescribing for every ill—curing or killing as he saw fit. He was occasionally seen at the tables of the Big Four, but more often on Bethel's links, serenely pursuing a little white ball. Never talked much, did Dugan—didn't have to—a citizen whom the Big Four's wives heartily detested as an outsider who dared know too much—but whom they feared too greatly to offend.

Socially and financially Bethel was on the map—Dugan's being there put it on politically—in big letters.

Wilbur Newcomb's grandson, Monty, still lived in Bethel. Not in the old house, though—that had been torn down to build Bethel Inn—but in an obscure little cottage, half way up the hill, Monty existed on past glories. He seemed to have been born hating all people of means. He lived over the days his father had told him about—the days when the name of Newcomb was a signal for the turning of heads and craning of necks. Monty had gone through forty years in this manner.

He was able to foster his dislikes to the exclusion of all other forms of labor by the aid of a slender income from some timber lands which Newcomb pere, in his mad fever of speculation, had entirely overlooked and neglected to sell.

Once or twice Monty had roused himself to the point of beginning a biography of his paternal grandfather—had even sharpened pencils and laid in a supply of paper for the Herculean task; but his sister discouraged him.

"Grandfather was a mighty rough specimen," she assured him. "Brains, yes; culture, no! I remember him well; used to swear more in one minute than any other man in a hundred years. Better leave his history unwritten—too many people in this part of the country know too much about it."

May, along with the Newcomb nose and feet, had inherited all the brusqueness of her father's side of the house; but unlike Monty, she did not hate wealth,

she courted it—prayed for it—determined grimly to go out after it and get it by hook or crook.

She would stare in the mirror at her sharp little face for hours at a time.

“Not bad,” she would say. “If I didn’t look so much like a fox!”

She had married Jim Larabee—a man twenty years older than herself—only to discover that the money he had told her about was not his—that as his wife she would be even more wretchedly hard up than before. She did not hesitate. She left him inside of a week. Later, when he inherited a fortune, she endeavored to make it up, but he refused to see her, and shortly afterward died, having willed every penny to the monastery of St. Ignatius—“which,” he added spitefully in that biting document, “is at least one place where a man can be sure his money will not be squandered on the Useless Sex.”

“I was a fool once,” she remarked bitterly at the time; “but if I ever get my two hands on money again they’ll have to kill me first to rescue it!”

The brother and sister lived in the little house she had coaxed Monty to buy, hoping against hope that the First Families would take her up and that she might thereby improve her chances—but they had not, although for a time Colt’s only son and heir, Philip, took to dropping in on his way to and from the center. He even got to the point of confiding his follies to her when his father learned of his calls

and forbade him to put his foot in Newcomb's house.

"Do you suppose I want you to get mixed up with that blood!" he thundered; "if you must go making a fool of yourself over the Old Families in this town run after Van Steer's daughter—at least there's breeding there!"

That ended May's chances as far as the First Families were concerned. As for Monty, he grew more sullen and difficult to live with day by day, and her daring gowns became a trifle shabby, while the Newcomb feet, of which she was inordinately proud, were clad in oft-resoled shoes.

And then, at the ebb of their fortunes, when Monty had been unusually trying and fretful—when she had been forced to contemplate selling a vase or two to make her Winter wardrobe presentable, Benson, manager of the Works, stopped his car before their door and asked to see her brother.

May heard the big red roadster chugging at the curb and her heart leaped with hope. She hid behind the portieres to better catch what he was saying. She knew Monty would make a fool of himself if it came to a proposition that required an answer, and it was just as well that she be within listening distance.

Monty, in a saffron dressing gown, received Benson. He liked Benson as an efficient employee, who respected him as the grandson of a great man. He bowed him into a chair. Benson smiled at him.

"Well, Mr. Newcomb, how goes it?"

There was really no need to inquire. One had only to glance at the patched curtains, the faded rugs, the general air of decadence, but Monty flicked the ash from his cigarette and crossed his knee.

"Splendid, Benson; never better. What would you expect?"

Benson nodded. "Glad to hear it."

There was a pause. Benson was very evidently struggling to say something—was not exactly sure how best to begin. Newcomb waited indifferently.

"By the way," said Benson, clearing his voice; "have you heard about Big Bill Matthews?"

Newcomb raised his eyebrows. "Really, I don't think so," said he, wrinkling his forehead. "Who is he?"

Benson smiled. "Every one's talking about him. You know, the foreman at the Works, who played around with scale until he found a process to turn it back into steel."

Monty nodded. "Sure enough. Did hear something about him. Quite remarkable, wasn't it?"

Benson brought his fist down on the arm of his chair. "Remarkable isn't the word—stupendous! The man's made a pile already, but that's nothing to what he's going to make! He's slated to clean up a fortune or I lose my bet!"

Monty's thin lips compressed. "A fortune, eh? A laborer?"

Benson nodded. "More money than he knew was in the world. Think of that, will you! A fellow who has worked for us since he was a boy—and he can buy and sell most of us now!"

A note in Benson's voice irritated Monty. It was as though he were trying to rouse some sort of enthusiasm for this man who had by some lucky twist stumbled upon a fortune he was wholly unfit and incapable of managing—a fortune that Monty, as a Newcomb, knew he was essentially qualified to handle with dexterity and skill. Most annoying, those things—always happening, though. He shrugged and dismissed the subject.

"And how are things going with you, Benson?" he inquired generously. Benson must not be made to feel that he was an inferior. Good brain there—fine superintendent—just the man for the place.

But Benson was growing red—actually stammering his embarrassment.

"Look here, Mr. Newcomb," he exploded; "I'm going to come right out with it!"

Newcomb turned to survey him. "Really, Mr. Benson, I don't understand you. Come out with *what?*"

"With my reason for calling," he said; "for speaking about this man, Bill Matthews."

"I can't see," said Monty shortly, "what this man can have to do with your coming to see me."

Benson gripped the arms of his chair. "It's this

way: Matthews will have a lot of money—it may run up into the millions. He hasn't had much schooling. He can't even talk correctly; but he's a tremendous force—a tremendous power. The boys under him recognized it and worked like slaves for him. We men higher up saw it and promoted him. Now, then, with all this power and all this wealth I'm afraid he'll run amuck unless he has the training necessary to a man of means and——”

But Monty had risen. “I'm sorry to cut this short, Mr. Benson,” he said, “but the man's welfare is of no faintest interest to me—none whatever. Men of that calibre are most distasteful to me—can't talk of them—boors. If you want some one's advice as to what to do with him, I would suggest you go elsewhere—my time——”

“I don't want anyone else's advice,” said Benson, with a dogged persistence, though the red stained his face, “I want yours—I want to know if you will undertake making this man into a gentleman——”

“If I——” Monty choked with an anger he scarcely knew he was capable of feeling. “If I—the grandson of Wilbur Newcomb—will undertake the education of a laborer——”

“Wait just a moment,” pleaded Benson. “The man has fine instincts—he's clever; he's eager to learn; I haven't time or I'd take him in hand myself; but since I can't, he's willing to pay any amount you name, if you will——”

Monty's face was livid. "Pay!" he shrieked. "Pay! And you think that for his dirty, miserable roll of bills he can buy what I——"

This was May's cue, and dashing back the curtain she entered breezily.

"Mr. Benson," she cried, with outstretched hand, "how delightful!"

Monty stared at her suspiciously, then straightened up.

"Mr. Benson and I," he snapped through white lips, "are concluding a little interview—you will excuse us——"

But May shook her head. "Indeed not," she said gaily; "for I couldn't help hearing part of what he said as I came through the other room—you shouted so, Monty, dear—and I do think it's a most charming idea of Mr. Benson's——"

"Charming idea!" cried Monty; "charming idea to——"

"To educate a millionaire in the rough—think of moulding a man of the people——"

"You don't know what you're saying," Monty ripped out. But she nodded:

"Indeed I do—and I consider it very nice of Mr. Benson to think of us in this matter—oh, it's no use raving, Monty," she laughed, as he opened his mouth to protest. "It would be perfectly ridiculous to pretend in this town, where every last person knows us, that we had a cent of money—and that we should not

be grateful for Mr. Matthews' bounty in return for—shall I say social polish?"

Benson turned to her. "At least, think it over," he said.

She held out her hand. "Think it over—nothing! Consider it settled. Monty'll calm down once you're gone," and she followed him to the door. "I'll write you when he may come," she whispered as he left her.

Monty awaited her with blazing eyes.

"How dared you——" he breathed, but she snapped her fingers.

"Nonsense, Monty—save your temper for some one who will be properly impressed. I'm on my way to look over the house linen so that Mr. Matthews' room will be in the pink of condition for him."

"You mean that you'll have that—that—factory hand sleeping in our beds—eating at our table——"

"I'll do more than that," said May, her foot on the stairs; "I'll marry him——"

"Marry him!" gasped Monty. She laughed.

"Oh, not until he's well able to write, dear—until he can sign checks without a quiver—don't worry about that!" and she ran up the stairs.

CHAPTER VIII

FORTUNE RESHAPES THREE LIVES

BILL arrived on an afternoon when Monty was out. May arranged that. She also arranged a fragrant wood fire that leaped in the grate—indeed, in the warm, red glow of the flames the shabby little room appeared quite cheerful and cozy.

She had dressed with infinite care in a close-fitting black gown—a gown that emphasized her slenderness, and she had slipped her feet into her one remaining pair of black satin slippers. Behind her chair a basket of American Beauties reared their splendid heads—she was perfectly conscious of the rich background the flowers afforded her dark little face.

At four-thirty the bell rang. She dropped down in the low rocker close to the fire and drew toward her the tea table, lighted the wick beneath the copper kettle and signalled her maid to open the door.

She heard the rumble of men's voices—the maid's low replies—and she turned to greet them. But she was not prepared for the great bronzed giant who followed Benson into the room—no—she had never dreamed he would look like that—that his head

would be so fine, his eyes so deep set—his mouth so splendid—his shoulders so broad. Benson might have told her. She gathered herself together and held out her hand——

“Well,” she said, smiling, because she knew her teeth were extremely pretty and well-shaped; “so you’ve come at last.”

Benson caught her hand and turned to Bill—“This is Newcomb’s sister, Bill— This is Mrs. Larabee.” But Bill was staring at her—rather as though he were examining a work of art—a rare painting—this little, dark woman, with her gown whipped close about her form—with her white hands and smiling lips—this was the sort of woman he was henceforth to know. From now on he would meet only women whose voices were soft and rich—whose manner was one of utmost ease and elegance. At Benson’s nudge he rubbed his hand on his coat and held it out.

“Glad to meet you, ma’am,” and his hand closed over hers.

“Sit here,” she said to Bill, and he dropped obediently into the chair beside her, endeavoring not to gaze too hard at her—at the tiny feet, no bigger than a man’s fist, thrust out beneath the hem of her skirt—at the flowers behind her. Great, those—must have cost a penny—they were the kind you saw in the florists’ windows—roses—that was it—roses. She followed his gaze.

“You like them?” she asked.

He nodded. "Sure," he said, then wondered what one did with one's hands, if it were not gentlemanly to slip them in one's pockets. But he forgot his hands in listening to the music of her voice as she chatted with Benson.

"I almost gave you up—it was growing so dark—doesn't it grow dark early these days, Mr. Matthews? But then I knew you would have called me up if you hadn't been coming. Tea, Mr. Matthews?"

Bill moistened his lips. "No, ma'am," he said. "I guess not."

She was all regret. "You don't like it? How stupid of me. You like something stronger. There, I know you do!"

But Bill protested: "Don't want nothin', ma'am; just had a big feed—I mean lunch—Mr. Benson, he blew me."

She laughed. "So that's why you're not hungry. Very well, but you won't mind watching us eat, will you?"

Mind watching her! He could hardly tear his eyes from her—he was completely captivated by the skillful manner in which she handled the teapot, the fragile cups. At last, she leaned back.

"So you're going to stay with us awhile, Mr. Matthews?"

He hesitated. "I'd a great deal rather you called me Bill, ma'am, if it's all the same to you—that Mr. Matthews' stuff don't sound real to me."

She smiled. "I'd a great deal rather call you Bill," she nodded. "Now, then, Bill, you're going to teach us some things we don't know, and in exchange we are going to teach you some things we do know—is that it?"

He shook his head, puzzled. "Teach you things? There ain't nothin' I could teach you——"

She laughed. "Oh, yes, there is. Just heaps. You can teach me about the Works and the men—I've always wanted to know a great deal more about them—you see, my grandfather was a business man, and ever since I can remember I've wished I'd been born a boy instead of a girl. Then I could have rolled up my sleeves and gone to work."

Bill looked at her admiringly—at the round white arms, veiled by a film of chiffon. He shook his head.

"Hadn't ought to be sorry," he said at last, "bein' a girl just about seems to suit you."

"I only wish I had had Monty's chances," and she sighed. Suddenly she turned to Bill and leaned toward him confidentially. "You musn't mind, Monty," she said. "Mr. Benson may have told you what an old bear he is—he'll probably say the most dreadful things to you, but he doesn't mean them—not a word of them."

Benson smiled. "I've prepared him," he said.

Bill nodded. "I don't scare easy," he grinned, "reckon I'll take him as he comes. It's mighty nice of him to have a rough like me mussin' up his house."

May smiled at him. "We're going to love having you here," she said as Benson rose.

"It looks as though I were leaving you in safe hands, Bill," he said. Bill nodded. "I reckon I'll make out first rate."

After Benson had gone, May led the way to the library and flung herself on a *chaise* lounge, a pile of pillows under her tiny head.

"Now then, Bill," she said, leaning her chin on her hand, "let's talk."

She looked very charming in the dim light, the fire's red glow on her slender body, her face half in shadow.

"I'd a heap rather look," he said, blushing at his own daring, but she shook her head.

"No—talk. Or at least I'm going to, for Monty'll be here any minute. Of course you understand, Bill, that this is something we have never done for any other person."

He nodded. "I figure you'll be glad to back out of it in no time."

She smiled at him. "I don't believe so, but it's going to be hard at first. Hard for you to take the criticism—hard for us to offer it, but it will be worth it in the end—and you'll learn so quickly—why, even since you've been in this room you've unconsciously caught Mr. Benson's manner. When you first came in you were nervous and ill at ease, weren't you? I knew it by the way you moved your hands and sat

on the edge of your chair, then you watched him and saw that the thing to do was to lean back and cross your knees and fold your arms—and here you are doing it!"

He sat up with a jerk. "Holy Jiminy! How did you figure all that out?"

She laughed. "I was watching you and I saw. That was right, Bill. That told me that you had a mind—a quick one. Oh, teaching you is going to be great fun—I wonder if you'll enjoy teaching me as well."

He caught his breath. "You make a man feel so ding-fired easy," he grinned. "I guess that's part of bein' a lady. . . ."

But she shook her head. "Nonsense. It's just that I like you and that we're going to be good friends. Now then, tell me when you began working at the factory."

And he found himself, before he knew it, unfolding his life to her—his vague hopes and ambitions—his desire to help the men who had worked for him—to better their condition—things he had never breathed aloud before—had scarcely defined to himself. He did not reckon time, he was conscious only of the hope that the dim firelight would last—that he might see the quick curve of her lips when she smiled—the warm flash of her eyes. He told her all his dreams—dreams that were rudely shattered by a man's voice.

"Well," it drawled, "has your laborer turned up yet?"

It was Monty.

May sprang to her feet. "Mr. Matthews has come . . ." she said quickly. Monty switched on the light. Bill rose slowly and faced him—took in at a glance the sallow, nervous face—with a tracery of blue veins on the forehead—the light eyes, the lips as colorless as marble. He caught the curt nod and grinned.

"I'm here all right," he said, suddenly at ease. After all that little pup—gentleman or no gentleman—could not tell him what was what and get away with it. "Howdy."

May sprang between them. "I'll ring for tea. I'm sure you're starving, Monty," she said swiftly. Her brother shook his head, his eyes still on the man before him.

"Don't want anything. Going to my room. Send up my dinner," and he turned on his heel.

"Monty," she cried, and her voice was close to tears, "Monty—I wish you'd wait—I want you to hear what Mr. Matthews has to say about——"

But Monty cut her short, "Business to attend to. Very sorry. You'll excuse me," and he was gone. May faced Bill with flaming cheeks.

"You see," she cried, "he makes everything impossible!"

But Bill was smiling. "Oh, I don't know," he

said slowly, "if he don't want to parley with me, I reckon I'm satisfied as long as you ain't backin' out of the bargain."

She moved toward him; she laid her hand on his arm.

"How can I thank you?" she said softly; "you don't know how hard my life has been with him—he is always like that. . . . I am glad you have come."

Bill smiled at her. "So am I," said he.

He did not sleep well that night. He lay in a bed of delicious softness, between sheets that felt like satin—sheets about which hung a faint fragrance which reminded him of May Larabee. He closed his eyes and tried to conjure up a picture of her as she had looked in the firelight, but he could not, and at length he rose and drew a chair close to the window.

Outside a sharp frost lay like a veil of snow on tree and shrub. He smiled to himself as he thought of the view from Factory Street—the rubbish heap—the corner saloon—the cobble stones—— He had no trouble in calling those scenes to his mind—they were stamped there indelibly. With a shudder he turned back to the room in which he sat—soft rugs—tinted walls—vases of flowers. He was there to stay, too—it was not just for a night—no—it was to go on and on and other wonders were to come—wonders he had never dreamed of possessing.

He was to learn to talk like these people—to be

one of them—no, more than that, he was to become the friend of the little dark woman who had confided her loneliness—her unhappiness to him. . . . What would Nedda say to all this? Nedda. . . . ! He stopped short. He had not thought of her since the day he had left them all—since the day he had driven away in Benson's car. He remembered her now—how little and white she had looked—how bravely her lips had smiled. He wondered if she missed him—after all, he reflected, she had Tony—she would soon forget him. . . . He turned back to his bed. He stroked the pillows—the soft quilt—“and it's only the beginning,” he told himself as he crept beneath the covers.

May had followed her brother to his room. She shut the door carefully behind her and stood with her back to it.

“The next time you make such a fool of yourself, Monty,” she snapped, “I'll spoil your whole game by clearing out for good—do you hear me?”

He dropped the book he was reading and stared at her—a little white fury, with clenched hands.

“And you know what that'll mean—your income cut in half—in *half*—what'll you live on then? Tell me that. You'll have to blow out your brains just as papa did—there won't be anything else for you to do! Either you treat this man decently or I leave—and when I go I won't come back!”

Monty yawned. “Trot along to bed,” he said,

stretching. "You've had your way, haven't you? Your foreman is sleeping in the guest room—you've made us the laughing stock of Bethel—what more do you want?"

She moved toward him. "You know what I want," she said through her teeth. "I want you to treat him properly or I'll do as I say—as for Bethel knowing—who gives a hang for us or for what we do? But they *will* care when I bring him back!"

"Bring him back?"

She nodded.

"I'm going to travel first—anywheres—everywheres—see things—places—people—spend money—throw it away. . . . Don't you suppose I want to get out of this hole? Well, here's my chance to do it—and yours, too. Are you going to take it or are you going to act like a fool and lose what little you have?"

He gazed at her thoughtfully. "Suppose I'll have to come around," he said at last, "anything for peace sake. Now, do clear out and let me read."

She left him. Once outside the door, she raised her voice—it was soft and tender.

"Good night, Monty dear," she whispered. "Don't read too late, will you?—you know you haven't been well. . . ."

Monty sneered, but Bill hearing, opened his eyes. Great little woman that! She was going to be his friend. He smiled to himself as he turned over.

CHAPTER IX

THE EDUCATION OF "BIG BILL"

MAY found her heaven on earth sooner than she expected. It was New York. The Newcomb fortune had dwindled before she was old enough to travel, and while all Bethel was in the habit of flying to the great metropolis for its holidays. May had been forced to remain at home. So this, her first taste of real metropolitan life, was exhilarating to the point of intoxication. The lights—the bustle—the noise—thrilled and entranced her—the alluring shop windows—the parade of fashion—stimulated her like wine. She determined to lift the cup and drink deeply ere it be snatched away.

She decided after a brief survey of hotels, to take a small apartment. It was better to keep Bill away from the women who turned on the street and in the lobbies to gaze after him. Hotels, she concluded, were not safe. Monty had become quite manageable. The new sport of having enough loose change in one's pocket to be worthy the name of Newcomb, pleased him. As for Bill, he was amenable to any suggestion. He was dazed—that was it—May hoped the state would last long enough to enable her

to purchase all the hats and gowns and furs she had ever dreamed of owning. It rather looked as though someone had rubbed an Aladdin's lamp and set all the unemployed genii to work. She told herself repeatedly it was too good to last.

From the moment Bill walked aboard the train, occupied a drawing-room fit for a king and discovered that men flew to do his bidding, from cleaning his boots to fetching his drinks, he had passed into a state of complete bewilderment. He was not himself. The fact was, May did not give him time to think. She swept him along in her own whirlwind of enthusiasm—never forgetting for an instant that he was to be ultimately hers—that in time she was to flash him before the eyes of an amazed and envious Bethel—that he must be made ready for the Great Day when a Newcomb should return to Her Own.

Bill learned quickly. In a few months he had acquired what May called "the essentials"—that one did not say "ain't" and "hadn't ought to"—that one kept one's coat on and one's feet down in the presence of ladies. He learned with a rapidity which was amazing, but May was not content. Bethel was to crawl—and to make it crawl abjectly—on its stomach, so to speak—she must have by her side a man who could play the game with the best of them—thus his education in sports began.

Monty, after much persuasion, consented to do his share by teaching Bill the drinks a gentleman

drank—to show him the art of mixing a cocktail—of perusing a wine list—but further than that he would not go. May was just as glad. She wanted Bill to depend upon her—to feel he must turn to her with all his problems. He did. Day by day he marvelled anew at her knowledge of life—her keenness to grasp a situation—her tact in covering up his blunders. He felt overwhelmingly grateful to her—precisely as she intended he should feel. And when one day she suggested it was high time he learned to dance—to drive a car—to ride a horse—to swing a golf stick—to wield a racquet, he was prepared to start his several courses at once.

Tennis he never acquired and his golf was bad. He snapped too many clubs in his tremendous drives lost too many balls, but he liked to dance and he handled a car like a veteran. He loved to feel it leap beneath him—to swing it at break-neck speed through traffic—to bring it to a quivering stop at the shrill of the whistle.

"Man-sized sport—that!" he'd chuckle, wiping the streaks of dust from his face. "Gee, it's most as good as cogging, ain't it?" But at May's light touch he was all contrition. "I forgot that time—I mean, it's got any other game beaten to a standstill—is that the way you say it?" and she would nod.

Riding was harder to master. A man who's never seen a horse at close range is apt to shy at mounting one, but Bill allowed himself to be hoisted into the

saddle and once he felt the firm, sleek back beneath him, he knew he would never be afraid.

"We'll get on first rate," said he, patting his horse's neck. "What can he do but chuck me off—and it'll take a heap of chucking to finish me!"

His education was by no means complete. May dragged him through the galleries which he loathed, to lectures which he could not understand and to the opera. This he found strangely alluring. "It ain't so much the story," he said, on his return from his first visit, "or them people standin' round shoutin' hallelujah at you—but it's somethin' gets inside o' you and grips you by the throat—the music, I reckon—queer, too, 'cause you can't follow the tune. . . ."

He read, too—anything he could lay his hands on—good books—bad books—indifferent books—books of pleasure—of travel—"anything with two covers and reading in between," he'd say.

He could not seem to get his fill of them. His thirst for knowledge was unquenchable. He read late at nights, sleep banished, drowsiness forgotten, in the story unfolding before his very eyes. He marvelled that men could juggle their words with such skill. He studied sentences that sounded well in his ears. He tried to form better ones. He played with words as with a delicate instrument. He was like a thirsty traveller who has journeyed long through the desert and has at length reached an oasis—there to find a spring of life-giving water.

May encouraged him delightedly. This passion for books was just what he needed to give him the polish that lasted. It was more than she had dared hope for, but she took all credit for it unto herself. She told herself repeatedly that it was due to her skill as a teacher. She was not afraid to proceed with his education at a swift pace.

The theatres—the races—the churches—the restaurants—May always by his side, breathless, eager, animated, delighting in the heads that turned to gaze at her smart frocks and daring hats. It was elixir to her—the wine of life. Her eyes sparkled like twin flames—her lips were always curved—her thin, little face was intensely alive—enchanted with the present—dreaming of the future when she would be mistress of a mansion in Bethel. "I'll show them what it is to spend money," she would whisper to herself, her little hands clenched. "I'll make them sit up and take notice. He'll let me, too—he'll have to. I've made him and I'll never let him forget it—never! . . ."

She never did. A thousand times a day in a thousand different ways he was brought face to face with the fact that he had the tiny dark woman at his side to thank for everything. She had given up all her time—all her thought to him—she had left home to travel with him—she was doing it because she believed in him. Oh, no, he did not forget it—she saw to that!

And as he became accustomed to the strange, exotic life he was leading—a life whose creed seemed to be, “Play—play—for tomorrow we grow old,” the sense of bewilderment passed. He began to find himself. To delight in his new command of his language—his skill in tipping—his ability to buy good seats for a show—to arrange a party. Swept along on the wave of his enthusiasm for this new game, he did not heed the passing of the months—the fact that the winter was over and spring at hand, but was content to bask in the sunshine of each succeeding day—his senses drugged by the luxury in which he was steeped. Then he awoke.

They were leaving the theatre. May had worn a new gown—a thing of scales—green, shimmering, clinging. About her forehead she had clasped a chain, with a single emerald between her eyes. She had never looked so wickedly beautiful—so entirely desirable. Around her shoulders she had flung a wrap of crimson velvet with a high collar of white fur, above which her dark little face appeared singularly elf-like and sharp. Bill tucked her arm in his as they left the theatre. He pressed her fingers.

“You’re wonderful!” he whispered eagerly.

She smiled and swept him with her eyes—this big man beside her—his head so sleek and smooth, his face so closely shaven—his manner so easy—could this have been the man who entered her living-room in Bethel six months ago!

"I'll wait here. See if you can find the car," she told him.

He hurried forward and she watched him elbow his way through the crowd—head and shoulders above the rest—sweeping men aside like so much chaff. Outside a fine rain was falling. The lights of the motor lamps were blurred and dim—the horns shouted in a hundred hoarse keys. A fog, like a gray curtain, hung low. Bill wormed his way to the curb, scanned the long line of cars, paused, as he heard a low whine.

"Ain't you got a penny for an old man?"

He swung about and in the dim light saw the beggar.

"Gee!" he whistled through his teeth, "if it ain't Old Mack."

The man was even then holding out his palm to a woman in furs who swept by him, but her escort halted before the old man.

"Out of the way," he growled. "Can't you see the lady wants to get by?" and with the cane he carried he thrust the old man back and hurried toward his machine.

Something surged up in Bill—a desire to thrash the youth in evening clothes who had dared lay a hand on his friend. The words that rushed to his lips he fought back, but with an oath he flung himself at the man.

"What do you mean by knocking an old fellow

out of the way?" he cried. The man staggered back, his face purple.

"Let me go!" he shouted, "or I'll call the police!"

"You won't be able to, when I get through with you," snarled Bill, as he drew back his arm, but someone caught it. It was May.

"Bill—Bill," she gasped, "you mustn't—you mustn't . . ." He dropped his hand and the man scrambled into his car and slammed the door. The crowd moved back, smiling, and Bill turned to her.

"Lucky for him you came along," he began, then stopped short at the sight of her face. "Anything wrong?"

She nodded. "In front of all these people, Bill—what will they think?"

He grinned. "I reckon they'll think he didn't get half what was coming to him! . . ."

Still she clung to his arm. "Bill," she said, "let's go home at once."

He patted her hand. "Soon as I get hold of Mack."

He felt her grip tighten. "You aren't—you couldn't mean that you will take that man—that beggar——"

He stared at her. "Why not?"

She faced him suddenly. "You don't know what you're doing," she said swiftly, her face very pale. "You can't know—starting a quarrel—with a gentleman. Let's get away, Bill. Now——"

He shook his head. "You don't understand. Mack's my friend—the best hammer driver in the Works." He smiled as he drew his arm away. "Wait here," he cautioned.

"Bill," she cried tensely, "for my sake I ask you not to——"

He turned for a minute, his face puzzled. "You don't mean that," he said at last, "you couldn't," and he was gone.

The old man had moved away from the crowd, shoulders hunched against the storm, his cap over his eyes. He had passed out of the gay circle of lights and was plodding toward the avenue when Bill caught up with him.

"Mack!" he shouted. "Oh, Mack!"

The old man turned and stared up into the face of the gentleman behind him—stared quizzically, his eyes narrowed, his thin lips pinched, at length he shook his head.

"I don't know you, sir," he said and turned away, but Bill caught his hands.

"Don't know me? Don't know Bill Matthews! Didn't think you'd forget me this soon, Mack! Blest if I did!"

The old man fell back, staring. Suddenly he reached out a hand and touched Bill's sleeve.

"I'm crazy," he muttered, "I'm just dreamin' it!"

Bill patted his shoulder. "Dreaming nothing! It's Bill—same as ever."

"And you saw me—beggin'——"

"Saw a big stiff shoving you out of the way and I mixed up with him a bit."

"You!" gasped Mack. "Was that you?"

Bill nodded. "Almost forgotten how to use my fists—but not quite."

Mack shook his head.

"Wanted to know what you meant by stopping a lady, did he? Well, he pretty near found out!"

Mack shook his head. "You're Bill, an' yet you ain't—don't know what to make of it!"

Bill laughed. "I'm Bill all right, and you're coming home with me to tell me all about it. Down on your luck, eh?"

Mack nodded. "You said it." Still he hung back. "You don't want me this way," he said slowly.

Bill took his arm. "I want you any way."

May awaited them, muffled to her eyes. As she saw them approaching she stiffened, but she did not speak. Bill greeted her eagerly.

"Mack didn't want to come, but I made him!"

The old man shook his head. "I'd sooner not. In the mornin', maybe——" The machine drew up to the curb and Bill helped her in. "You next," he said to Mack, then leaped in himself. May drew herself into a corner as far away as she could from the little old man who sat stiffly on the edge of his seat, sensing her displeasure. Bill turned to her suddenly, his face alight with eagerness.

"Think of bumping into Mack here of all places. Doesn't it beat all? How did it happen?"

The old man hesitated. "Got turned off at the Works—had to do somethin' so I drifted here."

Bill smiled. "All in, aren't you? Bet you're wet though. I'll fix you up, though. Gad! it does my eyes good to see you!"

When they reached the apartment, May broke her silence.

"I'm very tired, Bill," she said swiftly. "You and Mr.—Mack—want to talk over old times—you won't mind if I run along." She did not wait for his answer. Before he could frame a reply, she had gone. Mack shifted uneasily.

"I reckon she don't like it—my bein' here——" he began, but Bill's laugh interrupted him.

"You've got her dead wrong, Mack, if you think that. She's not that kind—why, if she were, you don't suppose she would have wanted to have a rough like me around, do you?"

Mack shook his head. "It's different with you, Bill—you've got the coin."

Bill stared at him.

"What's that got to do with it?" he asked quickly, then he smiled. "You're crazy, Mack—you don't know these high-class folks—they don't do things for the money that's in it—they're above that sort of thing."

"Then they ain't human," said Mack.

Bill led the way to his den, and the old man paused at the doorway.

"Do you mean to say you live here, Bill?"

Bill nodded. "And what's more I can juggle a knife and fork with the best of them. I tell you, Mack, life's immense!"

Mack shook his head. "I wouldn't 'a' believed you could run in such luck if I hadn't seen it with my two eyes!" Bill poured him out a drink and flung him a dressing gown. "Put that around you," he said. "Then talk."

But Mack was staring at him, his eyes round with wonder.

"And you act like you was used to it!"

Bill laughed. "Well, I'm not—you know that! Pretty soft, this, for a fellow raised on hard work. That's what I'm used to, Mack—hard work—and that's what I'm getting ready for."

"I don't get you."

"It's just this. There are two kinds of work—the work we fellows did with our hands and the work the men over us did with their heads. Well, I can do the first, can't I?—but to do the second I had to have training—and I'm getting it—I'm about prime to go back into the game the right way."

Mack shook his head. "If you think of goin' to Bethel, you'll find it changed."

"Changed? How?"

"Ain't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"About the way the Big Four are runnin' the Works—war orders comin' so fast they can't fill 'em—lower wages—new men—turning off us old fellers——"

Bill stared at him. "They are, are they?"

Mack nodded. "All different now—new buildin's put up for makin' arms—workin' night and day—ten-hour shifts and even at that the boys don't begin to turn out as much as they used to—they won't do it—ain't nobody there can make them—they've pushed 'em and swore at 'em and coaxed 'em, but six heats is the most the men'll give—six!—why, you know we used to make it seven and sometimes ten! I tell you the men are sore, an' when they turned us old hands off they threatened to strike. 'Go ahead,' says the bosses, 'we don't care. Plenty of scabs to take your place!'"

Bill caught his breath. "Talking that way, are they? Well, that won't get them anywheres. Just filthy with money—that's their trouble—and the more they have the more they want. Do they think the men will work on starvation wages while they scoop in the gold—say, Mack, are they crazy? Don't they know they can't get grade A work that way?"

Mack shook his head. "Seems like they've lost their senses. I got my notice with the rest. Too old, they told me—me what's given forty years to turnin'

out the best work I knew how—too old. . . So I went around huntin' a job, but you know, Bill, once you've worked at the factory, ain't nothin' else you can do. Nobody'd have me, so I come here after a while. Couldn't get much—sometimes made a little mindin' folks' autos, but I wasn't spry enough—the youngsters beat me to them—and then when I didn't have nothin' left I had to—beg—and that's how you found me, although I'd 'a' cut off my right hand rather than have you see me do it!"

Bill caught his arm. "Well, you won't beg any more—get that through your head! I need you, Mack, and I'm going to use you. Do you think I'm going to stand by and see the old Works turned into a machine to grind out lives? Not if I can help it! I love every brick of the old place—why shouldn't I? Didn't I get my start there—every dollar I own comes from it—why, Mack, just talking about it makes me wonder how I've stayed away so long from the smell of hot steel! . . . "

Mack gazed at him. "You're a swell yourself, Bill," he said slowly. "You won't go back."

Bill grinned at him. "Won't I though," he cried. "You watch me! . . . "

Suddenly he turned to Mack. "What's become of Tony—Tony Dufrano?"

"He got fired long with the first lot."

Bill started. "Fired? Where'd he go? What became of him?"

Mack shook his head. "Don't no one know. He and his sister give up their rooms and dropped out—that's all I ever heard."

Bill's face was dark. "Gone, eh?" he said slowly, then he roused himself. "Mack," he said huskily, "something tells me that when I go back there, there's going to be the deuce to pay."

CHAPTER X

THE AWAKENING OF MR. MATTHEWS

MAY'S maid had orders to wait up. It was the same order she had received for many weeks past, so it was not altogether surprising that she dozed in her chair. May caught her napping—it was just the spark she needed to set off the flame of her pent up fury.

The girl, whimpering, shrank back from the torrent of abuse poured down upon her, but at May's sharp command she approached and with shaking hands tried to unfasten the hooks—her fingers grown stiff and bungling in her fright. She struggled nervously with a hidden catch, and May, whirling, struck her. "You little fool," she cried, "get out before I kill you!" The girl fled and May tore the gown from her white shoulders and flung it into a corner.

She wanted to scream and stamp and swear. She wanted to shriek aloud all the things she had heard her grandfather Newcomb rip forth at his stormiest—but instead, she bit her lips until they bled and clenched her hands until the nails cut deep into her flesh.

Did Bill expect to drag in beggars from the street to share his home! What could she say to him—how could she tell him! She was afraid of him—that was it. Afraid of a look in his eyes—a look as though he saw her for the first time in a new light—an ugly one. True, in a second this had given place to his old, tender deference—but she dared not risk rousing it again.

She paced the floor—softly though—very softly, for Monty was in the next room, sucking contentedly at his pipe. How he would crow over her if he knew! Would point out that this might have been expected—would insist that as Bill's wife she must prepare to have dinner guests of peddlers and ladle-scullers. Suddenly she stopped short. A slow wave of color sweeping up into her face—there were other ways of bringing a man around. . . . Bill had refused her nothing, there was no reason to suppose he would because a ragged old man from the past had crossed his path. She dropped into a chair before her dressing table. She studied her face, intently; suddenly she lifted her arms and tore at the pins that bound her hair. It fell, a long, black coil over her shoulder. Then she drew a soft gown about her and rang.

Her maid, still sniffing, entered timidly. May turned toward her, her rage had vanished, her lips curved sweetly—her eyes were dangerously soft beneath the cloud of hair.

"Tell me, Stella, do I look as though I had been angry?" she whispered.

The maid—too frightened to speak—shook her head. May waved her hand.

"Go to the den and tell Mr. Matthews I want to see him—tell him it is important."

Stella nodded and disappeared and May turned back to the mirror, her chin on her hand, gazing steadily into her half-closed eyes.

Bill heard the summons with surprise, but Mack was plainly distressed. "If I've made trouble, I'll hike along," he said, but Bill patted his shoulder.

"You're here to stay as long as you want to."

The corridor was plunged in darkness, except for the ray of light beneath May's door. Bill hesitated, wondering, and at length approached and knocked. He heard the soft rustle of silk and then her voice close to the door.

"Bill, is that you?"

He answered, and she opened the door. He did not enter, but his eyes travelled beyond the tiny figure in white to the room itself, bathed in the warm glow of shaded candles. The flowered spread flung back from the bed was pink—the rugs—the hangings—the flowers—it was like a bower of roses. Bill had never before seen it at night—he drew his breath sharply. She watched his face as she spoke.

"I wanted to see you—I wanted to ask you to forgive me——"

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"Forgive you?" his voice was a trifle husky. He tried to collect his thoughts, but the warm, sweet perfume of the flowers was all he was conscious of—that, and the tiny figure before him, a coil of blue-black hair over her shoulder. She was speaking.

"I was so impatient with you to-night—when your friend came with us—I am sorry . . . "

He did not want her to be sorry. He did not want to do anything as long as he lived to make her sorry. What right had he to let her ask his pardon—this sprite with her background of pink? He shook his head.

"You couldn't do wrong—you couldn't——"

It was not what he meant to say. He meant to tell her that Mack was a good fellow and that she would be sure to like him, but the words did not come, instead, he gazed at her—at her timid smile, her anxious eyes.

"I couldn't sleep until I knew—you forgave me."

He stared at her. "I've never seen you look like this before," he said, heavily. "You're a little girl—and yet—you're a woman!"

She laid a hand on his arm. "You do understand then, that it was because I was tired?"

Her warm breath fanned his cheek—he was strangely stirred—she could not know how she was moving him—she could not guess it. He was afraid for her—for himself. Afraid of the semi-darkness—the scent of the roses—the touch of her fingers.

"May—May," he heard himself saying. "I'd better go now—I'd better——"

Still she clung to him. She trusted him—that was it!—she knew he would not harm a hair of her head—he must live up to her trust—he must battle with this desire to crush her in his arms—to kiss her hair—her eyes—her lips.

"Bill," she whispered, "Bill, you do love me—a little."

How fragile she was—how white—except her eyes, burning black—like coals with a light behind them.

"Yes, yes," he breathed. "You know I do—you——"

"Then you'll do as I ask you to—you will, won't you?"

"Anything!" he cried. If he could only go—he must tear himself away from those clinging hands—he must remember that above all she trusted him—he must keep hold of himself.

"Then take me away from here, Bill——"

Away from here! His head cleared suddenly as from a breath of cool air. Then she wanted it, too—was sick of the sight and sound of the big city—sick of this life of indolence. What a beast he had been to keep her there though the whisper of Spring was in the air. Away from here! He caught her hands.

"Do you want to go, too?"

She nodded, quick to catch the inflection in his voice—something had happened—she had said the wrong thing—in some way the spell had been broken—what had she done?—she moved close to him, her voice was like a caress.

“Away, Bill—far, far away—West, perhaps—somewheres where I can rest—where we can study and read and play together.”

But he shook his head. “I’ve got a better plan—a much better plan—we’ll go back to Bethel.”

He felt her fingers tighten on his arm. “Not there, Bill—I don’t want to go there—yet.” She waited, breathless, for his reply. She sought to hold his eyes with her own, but he plunged on.

“Fact is, I’m homesick for it—that’s it—homesick. Queer, you’re wanting to get away, too, just when I was ready to move on—but Mack—Mack showed me what it was I was aching for—it was to get back to the Works——”

She was so startled she forgot her rôle. Her voice was sharp and crisp. “The Works? I don’t understand.”

He laughed boyishly. “Of course you don’t. It seems things have been going dead wrong—all sorts of profit for the bosses and none for the men. Of course, the grade of work has run down——”

“But what has all this to do with you?”

“That’s just it. I know the men. I know every last one of them. I know what they can do—and

what they *will* do—and what's more I'm going to make it clear to the bosses what *they've* got to do. It'll be a job, I tell you—but I've a hunch I'm the man to tackle it!"

She thought quickly. There was no time to lose. She must keep him away at all costs. He would ruin all her plans. He would ruin himself. Try to teach the Big Four! Why, it was madness! She faced him.

"Bill," she said softly, "you've trusted me—you've left your welfare in my hands—I've tried so hard to help you——" her voice trembled.

He stared at her, dismayed. "May, I've hurt you! I've said something I shouldn't have! I'm a brute. I am! I am!" His voice was full of contrition but it lacked the throb of passion. She was not discouraged.

"I'm afraid for you," she went on, "so afraid—these men—these big men are so powerful—so cruel—they have played a winning game so long they hold all the cards. How can you hope to meet them—yet? They'll conquer you, Bill—they cannot help but do so—then where will you be? This is madness—this going back. I know. I tell you they will crush you—and rob you of every penny you have—do you think for a minute they will let an—upstart—tell them how to run their business? No—no—listen to me—Bill—to me—not to the ravings of a crazy beggar. . . ."

He shook his head—his teeth clinched—his jaw firm. “Sure they’ll fight me,” he said grimly, “why shouldn’t they? They’re not going to stand for my interference or any one else’s—but do you think that will stop me? Not by a big sight! I’m not afraid of them—I’m not afraid to meet any of them now. I said I’d show them some day—and I will, by Jove!”

She stared at him. “But, Bill—if I want you to go with me—if I ask you to—you won’t refuse—you can’t——”

He patted her hand. “Don’t fret about me, little woman. I tell you you’ve given too much of your time to me as it is. That wasn’t part of the bargain we made. If you and Monty want to take a run to the coast, why go ahead—stay as long as you like—but I’m going back to Bethel—the boys need me—that’s it—they need me!”

She did not answer. She was struggling for a mastery of herself—of him. She would make him bend to her will—she must. All at once she knew she could not—that her pleading would not change him a whit. She was suddenly resolved.

“I won’t go without you, Bill. I can be more help to you by staying.”

He smiled down at her—tiny—dark—tense—no taller than his shoulder.

“You won’t be sorry you’ve done all this for me!”

She managed to smile and he caught her hand. "Goodnight," he said softly, "Goodnight."

She heard his tread grow fainter and she re-entered her room. She closed the door softly and dropped in a chair by the bed. She had lost. She had lost by some strange twist of fate when he was almost hers—nothing tangible—no mistake in her technique—but because of a beggar—a spectre of his former life. She clenched her hands.

"I'll marry him," she said through her teeth. "I'll marry him and then he'll do things differently—he'll have to!"

Monty's door opened. He regarded her curiously.

"Sparking with your factory hand?" he inquired lazily. She did not answer. He waited a reasonable length of time, then ventured another remark. "What's the row? Must have turned down some pet scheme of yours to make you so blamed sore. Let's hear about it."

She hitched her shoulder and he grinned.

"Cheer up, May," he said, "there's one thing in your favor. You've spent more of his money in the past six months than he ever knew he had!" and with a chuckle he closed the door between them, before she could reach him—her hands like claws—her eyes blazing.

CHAPTER XI

A RISING STORM

IT was early June. Bethel's sun-dappled lawns were fresh with the green of the new grass—its hedges were flowering—its tree-tops a lace-work of young leaves. Its old and new families agreed that it was the one season of the year which must not be lived elsewhere—the city was so exquisitely lovely in the fulfillment of Spring's promise.

On the Colt place the gardeners—and under gardeners and under-under gardeners plied their spades—their hoes—their rakes, turned the ground—weeded the paths—trimmed the bushes. But for the whirr of the lawn mower, the sharp snap-snap of the clippers, the lazy shout of one gardener to another—no sound broke the heavy June peace which lay on the great estate.

Indoors it was different. Colt had locked himself in his library with his son Philip. The library was his sancto-sanctorum. In it his papers—his books—his ledgers were inviolate. No hand save his own and that of Jenkins, his secretary, touched so much as a scrap. To enter here, the story ran, was harder than getting into heaven itself.

Colt paced the floor. He paced with long strides. He ran his fingers through his mop of bristly reddish hair. He was an imposing man—heavy—well built, accustomed to instant obedience—you could tell it by his chin—aggressive, square—by his lips, thin, finely cut, by his eyes, uncompromising, alert. He breathed energy—he emanated energy—he was all his son was not.

Philip, slight and graceful and indolent, watched his father in amused silence. At length Colt, plunging his hands into his pockets, whirled on him.

“What do you mean by coming around to-day? Haven’t I told you the meeting’s at one?”

Philip shrugged. “Never can see you these days, governor, unless I break in this way.”

Colt strode the length of the great room and back, then stopped before his son and scowled at him.

“Well, what is it? Give you ten minutes.” He dragged out a heavy gold watch from his pocket—peered at it and turned back to his son. “Go on.”

Philip drew forward a chair. “Sit down, pater, you know it’s important or I wouldn’t blow in on you this way.”

Colt grumbled, glanced over his shoulder—jerked up his coat and sat down. “Eight minutes left.”

Philip smiled. “It’s just this. You want me to marry, don’t you? You’ve been driving at it a long time, haven’t you?—making me swear I’d do it before the year was out.”

Colt, senior, nodded. "Time you did. Every young man ought to. Make you settle down. No more nonsense. Paid enough for your fool scrapes."

Philip replied, "Exactly. Well, I'm going to."

"Eh? What's that?" said Colt, staring at him, "what'd you say?"

Philip laughed. "I said I'm going to—that is, if the girl's willing—you have to have her consent you know."

Colt shook his head. "Stuff! Any girl'd be glad to get a Colt."

Philip nodded. "That's what I thought—but there's one who isn't—and that's the one I want."

"Who is it?" shot Colt.

Philip paused. "Queer, but it's the girl you told me to go after—it's——"

"Not old Van Steer's daughter?"

Philip nodded.

Colt sprang from his chair. "And you mean to say she refused you—refused my son—that pauper's daughter!"

Philip raised his hand. "Hold on. Not so strong, gov, she just couldn't see me in the role of husband—that's all."

Colt stared at him. "The girl must be a fool—a blind little fool. She couldn't have refused you—she couldn't have. What has she got to refuse you on? Van Steer hasn't a dollar left—not a dollar—refused you! Why, she ought to get down on her

knees and thank God she had a chance of taking you!"

"Well, she doesn't—on the contrary, she seems quite relieved that I've quit proposing to her. Lets me come around again but if I open my mouth to pop it's all off. Absolutely all off."

Colt shook his head. "Something's wrong there. Isn't natural. She's playing with you. She's so sure of you, she's playing with you."

"That's what I thought—but when I started rushing some of the other girls she was nice to me again—as nice as she ever is."

Colt scowled. "What do you want me to do?"

Philip smiled. "Why, pater, I don't quite know. It's this way. I marry her or no one. Understand? That goes. Now if you can think up a good way to make her see me as a suitor, why, I'll take your tip and settle down, otherwise it's the bright lights for mine."

Colt turned on him. "Don't be a fool," he growled. "Of course you can marry her if you want to. Any man can marry any woman. That's what women are for, aren't they?—to be married. Let's get down to facts. What's her objection to you?"

Phil laughed. "Awfully sorry to say it, gov, but she says it's because I'm your son. Rough on you, I know, but you see you did turn a rather shabby trick on her old man."

Colt stared at him. "You don't know what you're talking about. Shabby trick! If we hadn't taken away his stock someone else would have—he's a born idiot—and idiots were never intended to handle shares of Bethel Steel. What we did was an act of charity. Yes," he chuckled, "an act of charity." He stopped short. "So that's her objection, is it—well, she's never worked, has she—she's never used those Van Steer hands for anything but embroidery and golf—or whatever women do. Fortune's been pretty good to her—plenty of friends among the Old Families and among the New. What would she do if it were all swept away—if she didn't have a red cent left—would she turn down my son because he *was* my son—I wonder!"

Philip protested. "Oh, I say, gov—don't do anything like that—you know that would put me in all wrong——"

Colt whirled on him, "Get out of here—leave me alone. Didn't I tell you I'd give you ten minutes and you've taken twelve. Thinks she's too good for a Colt, does she? Well, we'll see."

Philip rose languidly. "Whatever you plan to do, gov, go slow—remember I suggest nothing."

Colt nodded, his hand on the bell. Jenkins appeared.

"Show the gentlemen in," he said curtly, and to Philip, "Now then, clear out!"

When the Big Four convened in Colt's library, it

was said the nation shook. Colt, with that strange, unwritten etiquette of the magnate, never called on any of his henchmen—the man who ruled steel was a king, just as the man who ruled oil or copper—with unlimited authority and power over the lives and fortunes of his subjects. When there were questions to decide, laws to make, his lieutenants came to him—always to him. He stirred only from his throne room to meet—on a common ground, say at the club—some equally powerful sovereign of finance.

The rule went down the line. Decker and Pattison and Rogers, each in turn, weighed his own importance and refused to move from his office except at a summons from his chief. It was meet and right so to do. America has no kings save money-kings—has no lords save the lord of the dollar and the men who stand first in round figures, in dividends—in gilt-edge securities, are the men who deserve the adulation and homage of the lesser magnates—a just tribute to their greater skill and shrewdness and proficiency in piling up gold.

Jenkins flung open the door. "Mr. Decker, Mr. Pattison, Mr. Rogers."

Colt nodded to them, and called Jenkins aside. "Tell Benson to wait until I send for him." Jenkins bowed and vanished.

The three men dropped in chairs about the round table at which Colt had seated himself. Decker,

small, with a sharp little beak and no hair to speak of—chewed the corner of a cigar that had gone out and drummed on the table. Pattison, who was mighty in size and capacity for work alike—was figuring on the back of an envelope, with the stub of a pencil. Rogers, the youngest of the Big Four, nicknamed “the Dude” by the men under him, glanced at his well-kept nails, polished them on the sleeve of his coat, then leaned back, his knees crossed, and waited for Colt to speak.

Colt did. “Well, what have you got to say?” Decker, who was all nerves and on the edge of a breakdown, jumped, but Rogers ventured nothing. Pattison smiled comfortably and scratched a match before replying.

“Someone’s been getting the stock for him—several agents it seems—slickest thing I’ve seen put over on Bethel Steel in many a day.”

Colt turned on him with a snarl. “So you think it’s a joke?”

Pattison shrugged. “What can you do? He’s got a foothold now with the stock he holds—but that isn’t all he has by a long shot——”

Rogers leaned forward, suddenly alert. “You bet it isn’t. Why, he has every man in the Works swearing by him, ready to lay down their tools and walk out at the lifting of his finger—goes down and talks to them like a regular fellow—it isn’t the stock he owns that I’m afraid of—or the fact that he’s put-

ting up a barn of a house next door to mine—although heaven only knows what we're coming to—but it's his influence over the hands that makes him dangerous."

Colt glared at him. "What can he do—it's just talk—talk—made a lot of money and wants to show the men he's got education besides. Show off his new clothes and his new manners—run him out of town, I say——"

Decker stirred nervously. "If I may say a word, Colt," he ventured. Colt swung around on him.

"Say a word—of course you can. What do you suppose I asked you to come here for?"

Pattison grinned, but Decker flushed painfully—cleared his throat. "I heard him speak two nights ago. I was passing Union Hall when sounds of cheering reached me—such cheering as I'd never heard before. I really thought the roof would come off—I stopped my car a short distance up the road and turned up my collar and pulled down my hat."

"The devil you did?" cried Colt. "Well, that was very bright of you, Decker—very. Never knew it was in you to mix with the *hoi polloi*."

Decker flushed again, and continued. "I climbed the stairs to the room above, which was packed—men everywhere—on window ledges—on chairs—never saw so many—and this fellow was speaking to them—shouting at them—calling them to follow him."

"Well, what did he say, Decker, what did he say?"

"He said a share of the profits should be theirs—that they were fools to let us pay them a low scale of wages for the work they did—I remember one thing he said that struck me as very potential. 'Are you doing good work?' he asked them, and they shouted, 'No! no!' and then he asked them: 'Are you turning out good steel?' and again they shouted, 'No!' I thought it exceedingly illuminating—they are evidently very slack over at the Works—the foremen, I mean—I think a few changes——"

Colt brought down his fist. "Haven't we changed and changed—and weeded until only a handful of the old men remain—haven't we put in efficiency experts to see where the leaks were—and what's happened—less work done than ever before—years behind with orders—complaints that the workmanship isn't up to par—goods shipped back—that's what we're up against—cancelled orders—broken contracts—and there isn't a foreman in the whole plant can make the men buck up—and now this—this ex-workman arrives in Bethel—and instead of settling down with the money he's made out of us—instead of trying to live down his past and act like a gentleman—he goes straight to the Works——"

"He does more than that," broke in Pattison, "he jumps in now and then and shows the green men how to handle their tools—why, they idolize him down

there—they tell stories about his kindness—of his gifts to the poor, to the accident cases—dangerous—why, the man is a menace—a menace to the whole plant—and to cap it all he goes ahead and buys Bethel through a dozen different channels so that he'll have some say if it comes to a show-down."

Colt flung himself to his feet.

"We can't have a strike now—it would mean ruin—ruin! With the Great Crucible snapping up all our cancellations as it is—it's Benson's fault—he's the one who started this man upwards—might have known the scoundrel would bite the hand that fed him—we'll see about this."

He rang. Jenkins appeared. "Send in Benson," he shouted.

Benson entered slowly. The Big Four turned to regard him. Colt leaned back, his eyes half shut.

"Well," he snarled, "you've got us in a nice fix." Benson stood respectfully before his chief, and Colt leaned forward.

"What have you got to say for yourself—eh? What have you got to say about this factory hand who is trying to ruin the Bethel Steel Works—trying to stir up trouble to show his authority—impudent and ungrateful, I call it—but it's dangerous, too—dangerous at this time and you know it. What do you mean by letting it go on?"

Benson shook his head. "Do you want to know what I really think, sir?"

"Do I?" sputtered Colt. "Of course I do—why am I sitting here—why is Mr. Decker and Mr. Pattison and Mr. Rogers sitting here—why have we sent for you to come here to-day? Go on, go on—before I lose my temper."

Benson bowed. "Very well, sir. Then my opinion is that Bill Matthews has no intention of stirring up trouble."

Pattison stared at him. "What!" he gasped, "what!"

Decker's thin little face became more pinched. "Surely Benson, you have not come under this man's curious spell. You can see with your two eyes what damage he is causing. Surely you did not expect when you took his education in hand, that he would come back here and try to instigate revolt among the men."

Benson shook his head. "No, sir, I didn't dream he'd do it. There is not a man in ten thousand that would."

Colt regarded him closely. "Just what do you mean by that?" he snapped.

Benson turned to him. "I mean, sir, that no man I know would have the courage or the ambition or the sympathy for his fellowmen to do what he's doing. He has money now—he knows the good things of life from the bad—he's worked hard since he was a boy and he can rest and play and take no chance of being ruined if he wants to—but instead of

that, what does he do—he casts aside this idle life he's been leading—he puts on old clothes and goes down to the Works—a place where none of us ever expected to see him again and starts in to help the men as they've never been helped before——”

“He's posing—looking for political power——”

Benson shook his head. “Any other man but Big Bill might—but not he—just loves them, that's all—you can't keep him away from the Works—and as for his money—he sees in it a way of helping the men——”

Rogers leaned forward. “And you can say this, Benson, knowing he is firing the men with all sorts of dangerous notions?”

Benson hesitated. “You won't agree with me, sir, I know, when I tell you I don't think them dangerous notions.”

Colt swung around. “Benson,” said he crisply, “you're discharged. We'll look for your resignation at the end of the week. We don't want a superintendent at this plant who holds any of that fellow's radical ideas.”

Benson bowed. “Very well, sir,” he said. Then he turned to Rogers. “I should suggest, sir, you're having a talk with him. You'll see I'm not wrong,” and he walked out.

There was a long silence—a silence broken only by the sharp click of Decker's nails on the table—a heavy silence. At last Colt turned on him.

"For God's sake, stop that," he shouted. Decker sat up, startled. Pattison was frowning.

"I think you did wrong to fire Benson," he said at length. "He is the best man we've ever had on the job."

Colt did not answer. Suddenly, Rogers leaned forward.

"Not a bad idea of Benson's to see this fellow, eh?"

Pattison nodded. "I shouldn't wonder if we could do something with him—pay him off—what do you say?"

Decker hesitated. "I saw him, you know—he's—he's very powerful——"

Colt whirled. "The next thing you know, Decker, you'll be telling us you believe his rot about profit sharing—profit sharing, of all the tom-foolishness—how could you make a system of that kind; in one department, quality counts, in another, quantity, in another, economy and efficiency—can you make a system to fit them all? I say no—no—*No!*"

Rogers persisted gently, "Let's have him over! It's better to give him the facts straight. What do you say?"

Colt glared at him. "Have him over! Have that puddler—or whatever he was—think we believe him of sufficient importance to interview—no—he's bad enough—but once he gets it into his head that the Big Four are afraid of him, he'll strut around like

a peacock for the rest of his life—no, ignore him—ignore him and the men who follow him! Kick them out of the Works—chase them and their families out of town—he's a revolutionary—a socialist—a disturber of the peace—this is the worst thing we've ever encountered—something must be done at once!"

Pattison shook his head. "I'm afraid Benson's going will make trouble, a new superintendent coming in just at this time will start the very dickens of a row. I agree with Rogers, we ought to see this man and have it out with him."

"So do I," said Decker, suddenly. "It's the only thing to do."

Colt glared at them, his shoulders hunched, his face ugly.

"Very well, have him over—have him over," he growled.

Pattison rose. "Between us we ought to be able to make him keep his meddling fingers out of Bethel Steel for all time," said he.

Rogers nodded, but Colt turned on them.

"It's a mistake—understand—a mistake, and you'll find it out, mark my words—but have it your own way——" and he dismissed them.

Bill's office was a shabby group of rooms in a loft on Factory Street. May had pleaded with him to take a suite in the new office building erected in

Bethel Proper—had tried to argue him into living at the Bethel Inn, but had failed as signally as she had in all matters pertaining to his business. It was curious—his manner of refusing her—he did it with a charm, a deference—considering all her arguments carefully—but telling her with a firmness which brooked no argument that he was going to do what he had set out to—to help the men—not only the laborers but the bosses—turn out the best the plant was capable of—a best which no other works in the country could hope to equal—a best which would make the nation point to Bethel as its proudest steel center.

May's first fury—first rage of disappointment—was rapidly vanishing. In place of it came a sort of astonished realization that she was regarded by Bethel's First Families—still at a distance to be sure—as a sort of heroine; the discoverer of a great figure—a giant of industry. Bill's name crept into Bethel's newspapers—his exploits—his charities. He paid to keep it out—and even that was duly recorded by a zealous reporter.

Bethel, indignant at first, became feverishly interested in this newest seventh wonder—a man who had cleaned up a fortune but who scorned spending it on himself—who did not fawn for favors—nor seek the society of the First Families—who was content to live in Newcomb's house while a mansion fit for a king was rising for him on Bethel's hilltop.

There was something arresting about a figure of this sort—something which made Bethel's jaded matrons nudge and whisper as he passed them on the street—on horseback or in his motor, or more often on foot. He was certainly big and good to look upon—he answered quietly and correctly when spoken to. He was neither afraid nor anxious to be addressed. He was without question making history. It was even rumored the Big Four feared him—were ready to come to terms.

May's comfortable pride gave way gradually to a feeling of uneasiness—uneasiness lest this golden prize—a prize now ten times worth the winning—should escape her. That he was regarded in Bethel as her property without question she knew—but she was afraid—always afraid of some woman in his past rising and confronting him again—calling him to her—claiming him as hers.

Benson found Bill at an old-fashioned rolltop desk, piled high with papers—estimates—embryo schemes. Old Mack beside him sorted and destroyed them at his command. When Benson entered, Bill pushed back the letters and sprang up.

"Well, what did they want?"

Benson smiled. "They're worried about you, Bill—going to run you out of town—and the whole Works with you—fact is, you've got them guessing and they want to see you."

Bill grinned. "Want to see me, do they? Well,

it's because of something you've said to them. I'll bet on that. How about it?"

Benson shook his head. "It's the complaints they've been getting that's scaring them."

Bill smiled. "So they want me to come to them, do they? To put me through a third degree—with Colt himself as the judge and jury. Well, Benson, I won't go! No, sir! if they want to see me—if they want to learn what I and my men mean, Colt and the rest of them will come here. I can talk to them then. I can be myself—but in a mahogany office—with Turkish rugs—why, Benson, I couldn't speak my mind, if I did the paper'd peel off the walls!"

Benson stared at him. "You don't mean that, Bill. The Big Four never come to a man—that's expected of you——"

Bill nodded. "Of course it is. They think I'll crawl to them—lick their boots. They think I'm a four-flusher, and you know it. But I'm not afraid of them—I'm not afraid of them because I've got a system worked out that's going to help them just as much as it's going to help every last man in the Works, and if it's worth hearing—it's worth coming here to hear. Do you get me?"

Benson shook his head. "Don't go it too strong, Bill. Colt's got it in for you. I'd hate to see you lose out."

But Mack broke in with a chuckle. "The guys in Big Bill's crew used to say as how there weren't

nothin' he'd set out to do he didn't put through. Blest if I don't think the whole four of 'em 'll be pilin' down here afore a week's out."

Bill slapped his shoulder. "Sure they will, Mack. Why not? This may not be up to their Board room, but we'll be glad to see them for all that. The point is, we have something to tell them they want to hear. They'll come!"

Benson shook his head. "They'll try to smash you, Bill, just as they're trying to smash me——"

"You!" shouted Bill.

Benson bowed his head.

Bill caught his breath. "So they've canned you—have they? Canned the best man they ever had at the Works—and just because you stood by me, eh? Well, by Jiminy, they'll take you back. Yes, take you back with an increase in salary. That's the first thing they'll do. Don't worry about it—don't think about it—you'll be on the job inside of ten days."

Mack rubbed his hands together. "Don't worry, Mr. Benson," he echoed, "it'll come out as Bill says, wait and see if it don't!"

CHAPTER XII

A BATTLE OF WITS

THE thing that made the Big Four come to Bill was the Rosinoff cancellation. They cursed his impertinence for a week—they ordered changes at the Works, which went into effect at once—they gave the new superintendent full authority to drive the men to the limit—all of which resulted in the fifteen thousand hands of the Bethel Steel Works, for the first time in the history of the plant, laying down their tools on Friday evening and assuring their respective bosses they had no intention of returning to work if they stayed out all of the fall, winter and spring.

This overwhelming catastrophe, in the face of a mountain of unfilled orders, plunged the Big Four and the men under them into a sweeping panic and sent the stock tumbling. A strike at this time spelled ruin—in capital letters, too—and to cap it all, the Rosinoffs—agents of the Russian government—cancelled the largest order ever placed with Bethel—a loss which ranged somewheres in the neighborhood of seventy millions—cancelled on the ground that arms shipped had proved of inferior steel—to quote

their American representative, "were of rotten stuff."

Something had to be done—and done at once, but it became evident that armed violence would meet any attempt of the strikebreakers, the police, or the Citizens Committee of Vigilantes to re-light the furnaces, now smoking ashes—to start the mighty machinery, now stilled for the first time since the opening of the Works.

The Big Four called a meeting of its directors and laid before them the conditions, not forgetting to denounce the man whose influence they felt was responsible for the revolt. Colt addressed them crisply.

"A committee of laborers called on Acting Superintendent Brady, and as spokesman, chose this man Matthews. Brady, in accordance with our orders, refused to deal with him or with any committee while he was present, saying that Bethel Steel would not recognize any outsider in dealing with its own employees. The committee withdrew and the men became more threatening—more unmanageable. We concluded to see this man Matthews alone, and find out what he wanted, so we sent for him, but instead of coming, he refused—refused point blank—told us to come to him, instead."

"And what did you do?" Archibald Coxe, the largest stockholder in three states, had shouted. "What did you do?"

"Do," thundered Colt, purple of face. "Why, told him to go to the deuce, of course!"

Coxe rose. "Gentlemen," he said, "the sooner you get off your high horse and look facts in the face, the better. If the one way to save Bethel Steel from devastation is to see this fellow—go see him. You admit he's a power—you admit he's the man behind the guns—very well, then, the thing to do is to find out what he wants—and to give it to him, whatever it is! Are you going to stand around like a lot of sulky school boys and refuse to admit you're beaten? Beaten! Why, you're licked to a pulp—and what's more—he's got the whip handle! Forget who you are—and remember only that the Bethel Steel Works of America have got to resume business or go to the wall! Go to him. . . . ! Why, you're lucky he'll see you at all, after the way you've treated him, if you want my opinion!"

Rogers sprang to his feet. "I'm with you there, Coxe," he said. "I'll go for one."

"And I," shouted Pattison.

"And I," echoed Decker.

Colt glared at them, his eyes bloodshot, his breathing heavy.

"Go!" he shrieked. "I'd rather see the Works in smoking ruins than put my foot inside that pup's office!"

Coxe rose. "If you three gentlemen will proceed at once, you can, I believe, meet his requests with the

sound judgment you have shown in all matters. My car's at the door."

Mack ushered them into the shabby little office.

"Here's three of 'em, Bill," he whispered shrilly. Bill rose and faced them. Pattison came forward.

"I'm Pattison. This is Mr. Rogers and Mr. Decker. Mr. Colt was detained in conference and unable to come."

Bill smiled a trifle. "I am very glad to see you, gentlemen," he said simply. "Won't you be seated?"

They were a little taken aback at his manner. They had expected something quite different—what, they scarcely knew—a certain coarseness and swagger which was not there.

"You wished to see me?" he prompted. Pattison cleared his throat.

"Matthews," he said, "the men have gone out. It's the most serious situation we've ever faced. It may mean ruin for us all—you along with us. Have you thought of that?"

Bill shook his head. "I don't believe I have," said he. "There have been so many other things to consider."

"What do you mean?" Bill leaned forward.

"Has it occurred to you, Mr. Pattison, that this has been the most prosperous year you and your partners have ever known? That the money you'll

make once your orders are paid in full will put you in a class by yourselves as money kings?"

Pattison shrugged. "What of it?"

"Just this. You haven't stopped to figure, have you, that every dollar you'll make depends not so much on your own work as on the labor of some man in your factory?—a cog in the machinery—but an essential part just the same."

Pattison frowned. "What are you driving at?"

"Don't you suppose that these men you employ—the Greeks and Polocks and Russians and Germans and Scandinavians all know that you are piling up gold—nobody tells them—but they guess by the extra pressure put on them—eleven-hour shifts—always the cry for work—work—more work——"

"We pay for overtime."

"Yes, you pay for overtime, but you don't stop to consider that the unskilled workman can't live on his wages to-day. Do you know that during the past year the cost of food—of clothing—of household effects, have gone up forty per cent—and that wages have gone up only twenty-five? Why, the cost of living has jumped so high that your men can barely exist on the money they are receiving!"

Pattison shrugged. "That's Socialism—rank Socialism."

Bill swung about. "Then I'd like to ask you what you call blacklisting workmen—forbidding them to organize—forbidding them to write and speak their

opinions—forcing them to vote against their convictions—denying them the due process of the law—what do you gentlemen call *that*? I call it plain anarchy!”

Pattison stared at him. “We resent that, Mr. Matthews; we have always tried to be fair to our hands——”

Bill laughed, but his face was dangerous. “Fair! Do you call it fair to pay the men who slave for you the same amount at the end of the week as you pay the slackers? Do you call it fair to turn off old and tried workmen—yes, throw them into the gutter—fellows who have served you faithfully for a lifetime?”

“There is so much to be done,” said Rogers, crisply; “we must have men who are able to do it——”

Bill sprang to his feet. “Men, did you say? That’s you’re trouble, Mr. Rogers—yours and the rest of your crew—you *have* men—though you’d like to forget it—men with bodies and brains, that can stand so much and no more—and because they *are* men they see the injustice of your methods!

“I tell you, they’re sick of living in three-room tenements with the only furniture a bed, three chairs and a stove and a table—sick of being herded together like cattle—nine or ten of them in a room—— Have you ever thought of that, Mr. Rogers? Have you ever wondered how they got water to wash with

—you, with your luxurious baths and pools—well, I'll tell you—there's a pump—a pump three flights down—that's how they live. Why in God's name don't you provide decent homes for your workmen? I'll tell you why—because you forget they are men. Yes, Mr. Rogers, that's your mistake—yours and the rest of the owners'—*that you employ men to do your work instead of iron and steel—*”

Rogers stared at him. “Well,” he said, heavily, “what do you want us to do?”

Bill brought down his fist. “There's just one thing to do—one thing that will send every man back on his job and make him work as he has never worked before—share your profits—I'll show you how—and you'll find the result will be a grade of work that will force you to enlarge your plant again to fill your orders—and when you are through with that, clean up the Factory Street slums—and turn your workmen into human beings instead of swine!”

“You seem mighty sure of it!” growled Pattison.

Bill smiled. “Why shouldn't I be? I worked at the mill for fifteen years—I tell you I'd give my life for Bethel Steel—why, it's the greatest plant in the country—and there's one way to keep it that—let every man, from your moulders' apprentice to your president, feel he's a real part of the organization—that he'll be paid, and paid well, for doing twice, or three times as much as the next fellow—let him

have something to show for the product he turns out skillfully with his hands, or with his brain—do you know what the result will be? The men will go back to work with a snap that'll put Bethel Steel on top of the heap again—and, what's more, keep it there!" He drew in his breath sharply. "My God! I wish I had the chance to do it!" Then he shook his head. "I'm through," he told them; "that's all I've got to say."

Their silence was impressive. At last Pattison rose. "We will report on your plan to the directors. They will act on it. Should it be adopted we shall ask you to demonstrate its practicability; should it be rejected, we shall consider the matter closed."

Bill bowed. After they had gone, he stood a long while by the window staring at the Works—a black silhouette against a vivid sky—shot with the red of a June sunset. Strangely still they appeared—no glow from the furnaces—no spiral of smoke from their chimneys—but before them, pacing back and forth like tired sentinels, tramped the pickets on guard—their gun-barrels now and then catching the glint of the sun.

Mack touched his arm. "Comin'?"

Bill nodded.

They turned down the stairs and into the street without speaking. The sky had deepened into a purple haze. A group of men hurried up to Bill with eager questions. He shook his head.

"You'll know before long, boys," he said; "leave it to me."

At the corner he collided sharply with some one—a big man, his hat pulled well down over his eyes. When he had gone on his way with a mumbled apology Bill turned to Mack. "Who was that?"

Mack grinned. "Didn't you see, Bill? That were Dugan—the Party Boss himself."

Bill stared after him. "So it is. What's he doing around here, I wonder?"

Mack chuckled. "They say there ain't nothin' Dugan don't know about. Looks to me like he's got his eye on you!"

Bill laughed. "You'll have him making me President next," he said.

Mack wagged his head wisely. "Dugan don't never come round for nothin'," said he; "not if I know what's what, he don't!"

Exactly ten days after the men had marched out of the yard of the Bethel Steel Works in a body they returned to their jobs. Benson was reinstated as superintendent and the newspapers all over the country gave unlimited space and scare headlines to the amazing concessions which had been granted by the Company.

But the eyes of all Bethel were fastened upon the man who had wrought the miracle—who had brought about a system which made it possible for a me-

chanic—given a certain piece of work to do and an allotted time to do it—to make his regular wage and to receive a bonus as well for completing it according to schedule—even wheeling a barrow or handling a shovel, came under the new profit-sharing plan.

In the departments where quality counted—the open-hearth work, for instance, or the treating of armor plate—the men were paid by basing the computations on tests of steel.

Nor was that by any means the end of the system which revolutionized Bethel Steel. The men who got results with less than the regular amount of fuel—the men who handled their machines so that the item of repair was very low, profited accordingly.

And those higher up came in on the scheme as well—every penny saved from the normal cost of operation was shared—the more money the Works made the more its employees gained.

Its effect was colossal. The Big Four, skeptical and bitter—forced by tremendous pressure on all sides to yield to Matthews—grew hourly more dazed by the amazing results his method secured. Their confidence in him became so supreme that they gave him unlimited power to carry his reforms into effect—were forced to bow to a man who could put through a plan so gigantic and far-reaching that one and all waxed rich on it.

CHAPTER XIII

MAY PLAYS HER TRUMPS

MAY found herself all at once the center of Bethel's social whirl—the woman whom Bethel's Old and First families expected to share the Matthews fortune and name—Matthews, now a national figure! She had never dreamed of a triumph so great. She wished with all her heart that Bill would, for an instant, forget the business which seemed to possess him, body and soul—would forget the thousand-and-one questions he was called upon to answer—disputes to settle—problems to solve—and remember that it was high time he asked her to marry him.

The house on the hill was rising majestically. Rogers no longer grumbled about its proximity—was proud at the prospect of having Matthews for a neighbor—proud to know a man who could muster an executive ability that galvanized those about him like an electric battery.

The invitation to the Colt Charity Ball for Bethel's poor came in the early mail. It was the great Colt's open acknowledgment of the wisdom of the new move—it was more than that—it was planned

for the purpose of securing for his son Philip the woman he desired—but that, of course, was not in evidence upon the engraved cards.

May read it with an anxious frown. Bill would undoubtedly be the center of attraction at the brilliant affair—would be sought after by all the women of Bethel as the man of the hour. She concluded that her only safety lay in securing him once and for all—not that he had ever so much as looked at another woman—but you never could tell.

She accepted for Bill and herself, and set herself to the absorbing and fascinating task of planning her costume. She came to the conclusion that it must be something costly, yet simple—something that would fitly represent the triumph which would be hers—— Oh, yes, she would bring Bill to the point. He had dallied long enough.

Bill sent word to her that he would not be home until late—not to wait up for him. She did, nevertheless. She let him in herself and had a tasty supper spread out for him.

He ate it gratefully, his face pinched and a bit drawn from the strain of the past weeks—but his eyes full of an eager, boyish light.

“It’s great, May—simply great—— Think of old Colt and the rest of the pirates coming across like kings! We’ve got a group of model houses planned—— I’ve been working with the architect all afternoon——”

May was distinctly bored. She wondered if he would ever talk of anything save his renovated slums. She shrugged:

“Well, they need them badly enough, although I doubt if the creatures I saw on Factory Street the day you dragged me down there will know enough to look after them.”

She regretted the words the second they had passed her lips.

Bill stared at her; then he smiled.

“You’re tired, May, sitting up for me. That’s what ails you. Just let me tell you about the plans for——”

But she raised her hand. “Not another word until you’re through. I have something I want to say to you then.”

When he had finished she led the way to the library—the room he had entered for the first time almost a year ago. It showed marks of prosperity, just as the woman by his side bore the sign of the dollar. The hangings were rich, the furniture costly, the curtains of exquisite lace—it was as though a wand had touched the run-to-seed room and transformed it into a bower.

Bill dropped into a deep chair with a sigh and closed his eyes. She studied him intently—curled up on the corner of the divan, her foot tucked under her, her sharp little chin in her hand, her lips snapped shut.

He looked tired—terribly tired. There were shadows beneath his eyes and new lines on his face—lines of power, to be sure—but lines just the same. He was working too hard—that was it—working when he no longer needed to. He was rich beyond all his dreams or hers—he was general manager of the Works—and yet, not content with accomplishing what he had set out to do, he must tear down row after row of grimy tenements for the benefit of a lot of vacant-eyed foreigners. What could he hope to gain by such a course? It never occurred to May that his motive might be one of humanity. That was not in her creed.

Well, she concluded, whatever he intended doing—she was going to have him for hers—to end this suspense—then she would at least be mistress of the house on the hill, and he could delve among his deserving poor as much as he pleased!

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. "It's good to be home," he sighed, stretching luxuriously; then: "Well, what's on your mind, May?"

She traced a pattern on her gown. "Colt's giving a ball," she said, without looking up.

He laughed. "Is that all? I suppose you're going, eh?"

She nodded. "And so are you."

But Bill shook his head. "No parties for me. I've got just about all I can do as it is without getting into evening clothes yet awhile."

She looked up quickly. "Oh, but you must—you don't understand. Colt is giving it for you—for your work—it's a Charity Ball for Bethel's poor."

He clapped his hand on his knee. "No!" he cried; "you don't mean it! For Bethel's poor? Well, I call that immense! Think of the chief doing that for me! I tell you, May, the Big Four are all right—I always said the trouble with the rich was not so much that they were wilfully deaf as that they were born with cotton wadding in their ears to avoid hearing all unpleasant sounds. Once they take out the stuffing and listen to the needs of the people they're princes!"

May nodded. "Yes, I think it is very nice of him—I suppose all Bethel will be there."

He nodded, and a silence fell. May clasped her hands tightly, her lithe little body suddenly tense. "They're so interested in everything you do here, Bill,"—he laughed, but she insisted—"They are, and you know it—and, naturally, in me, too—I mean, simply because you live here."

She watched him closely, but he was staring over her head at the wall, no doubt figuring the cost of some beastly improvement or other! She bit her red lips. Probably hadn't heard half she was saying when she was trying so hard to tell him—tell him what? That he must marry her! But how?

"Of course," she continued, in a low voice; "of course, it's embarrassing for me at times——"

"Embarrassing?"

At last! He had caught that. She sighed with relief. It was going to be easy, after all.

"They ask so many questions," she said, plaintively. "They take so much for granted——"

He frowned. "I don't understand. Take *what* for granted?"

She smiled and, leaning forward, laid a hand on his knee—

"Dear, stupid, old Bill!—— That you're going to marry me, of course!"

He started. "May! Do you mean—can it be that those impertinent busybodies——"

She smiled and laid her hand on his lips. "After all, why shouldn't they suppose so, Bill? They see us everywhere together—they know you go nowhere else."

He flung himself to his feet—pacing: "To think you've been annoyed by these——"

"But what if I'm *not* annoyed——"

He whirled. "Not annoyed! Oh, May, May——" he stopped short.

She smiled again and shook her head. "I really think it would be rather nice, on the whole."

"You mean——" he stammered, growing red as a schoolboy; "you mean that you'd—you'd——"

She nodded. "Of course, I would! Don't you suppose I'm fond of you—and you will need some one to take care of your house——" She stopped,

struck by something in his face—consternation—

“May,” he said, swiftly, the words tumbling over one another; “May, I’ve—I’ve never thought of this before—I’ve been stupid—blind—engrossed in my affairs—while you—— I supposed our friendship could go on forever—I never dreamed——”

She ran to him and laid her hand on his arm. “Dear old Bill,” she said, “don’t look so alarmed. I’m merely telling you what Bethel expects you to do—what it has made very plain to me—don’t think another thing about it, though—it just popped out before I knew it. You have so much else to trouble you—it’s different with a woman, isn’t it? Nothing else really matters to her but that—— I shouldn’t have bothered you—indeed I shouldn’t—except that—I can’t bear to meet their questioning looks and shrugs—I simply can’t—unless——”

And, whirling, she ran from the room.

He stood like one turned to stone. “May,” he whispered through dry lips—but she was gone.

What a blind fool he had been—what a colossal fool! Of course, her position was open to question—it had never dawned upon him before—little May, who had stood by him all these months—was this the way to repay her? Why under the sun had he hesitated—why hadn’t he swept her to him—— What was the matter with him, anyway? He had read the confession in her eyes, why had no answering light sprang to his?

He plunged his hands in his pocket—his fingers touched something—some thing he always carried with him as a sort of talisman. He drew it out. It was the bracelet with the jade clasp. He stared at it grimly. What right had he to hold fast to an image—a dream-woman—when the place in his heart should be May's—and yet——

He slipped the bracelet back. There was one thing to do. He must do his duty by the woman who had helped him—the woman who now shrank from sharp questions—from raised eyebrows—poor little May—he'd settle it here and now—— He raced up the stairs—he rapped on her door—she flung it open—and he held out his hands.

“I've been a brute, May, if you'll take me I'll try to make you happy to the end of your days!”

She slipped her arms about his neck. “Dear Bill,” she whispered.

CHAPTER XIV

COLT SETS A TRAP

COLT issued but one command in regard to the ball: No expense was to be spared—aside from that he washed his hands of it. It was a command which delighted the ears of Bethel's matrons—it gave them free rein to produce the affair on the superlative scale they desired—to make the grounds and the house, both inside and out, as flagrantly gorgeous as the decorator's art could achieve.

Bethel's Younger Set—the daughters of the Old and First Families, hoisted the flag of truce and entered into the spirit of the great occasion with all the snap of youth. It was to be a dream of Arabian nights and of Babylon—come true—a Charity Ball which should have no equal.

The hothouses of Bethel yielded their treasures—that Colt's home might be transformed into a bower, and Colt Senior, grimly watching the men at work, and hearing the hum of young voices in his rooms—the laughter and shouts as rehearsals proceeded, felt eminently satisfied. Since Bethel's poor was to be the fad of the season—due to the interference of one of its sons—it was meet and right that the brains of the Big Four should lead the movement.

But Colt guarded his reflections well—no one should ever guess that he hated with all his soul the big man who had brought it about—hated him, yes, but feared him as well, and that made the score against Big Bill roll even higher. Cyrus P. Colt had never feared another man since the day he was born!

When Judge Van Steer received a letter from Colt his feeling was one of amazement— That was it—overpowering amazement. It was the first letter from that source in many a year—the only one in Colt's own unspeakable scrawl.

“Dear Friend,” it ran, in the queer, cramped, little hand. “It is my desire to make this occasion the greatest in Bethel's history; for that reason I am asking a few of Bethel's most prominent citizens to serve with me on the executive committee—I want you to head it. You know what Van Steer stands for in this community—I'd be proud to have you accept.”

The Judge read the note over twice. He was puzzled. Frankly puzzled at its contents; nothing of the sort had ever before reached his desk during the reign of the Big Four. But he was touched as well—it was decent of Colt—that little line about the Van Steer name—— He could do next to nothing for Bethel—if serving as chairman would help——

He decided not to mention it to Daphne—she might raise a host of objections. Instead, he wrote a formal and eloquent reply in the round, beautiful hand which had not progressed one whit beyond the Civil War period. He dispatched it and took up Colt's note again. "Dear Friend," he re-read. It was really very thoughtful of Colt, but, after all, a Van Steer was a Van Steer—even the Big Four had to grant that—he had forgotten how many years they had overlooked the fact.

The letter acted precisely as Colt hoped it would, and when he summoned Van Steer to a committee meeting—or, rather, begged him to drop in and give a valuable hint or two—the Judge donned his best suit, took up his hat and cane, and set out for Colt's house—the house in which he had sworn never to set foot so long as he lived.

Colt was awaiting him in his library. There was no one else present. The Judge looked about him with polite surprise, but Colt waved him to a chair.

"I believe we two can decide this," he said comfortably. "Too many cooks spoil the broth. What I want is your opinion, Van Steer—and once you've given it to me, I'll pass it on to the committee as settled. What I say is, pick a man of brains for chairman and he'll do the thinking for the rest."

The Judge was subtly flattered. He enjoyed the insinuation—he enjoyed the warm luxury of Colt's library—he inhaled the aroma of the fine cigar

he held poised in his fingers. Colt was speaking.

"We want an address made—an address to the members of the Laborers' Union—something about the new workmen's village to be built in Bethel—no more tenements—no more filth—six-room houses—bath and electric lights—won't cost 'em a cent more than they're paying, either—six dollars a month—electricity, four cents a kilowatt—garden thrown in for good measure. How's that for philanthropy, Van Steer? Can't say we drive 'em now, can they? Can't say we crush 'em under our heel?" He paused, smugly satisfied.

Van Steer stirred.

"Magnificent, Colt, magnificent! It's this Matthews' idea, isn't it?"

Colt frowned. "Yes," he conceded, with an effort. "His—and mine."

A brief silence fell, then he continued, evenly: "The address must be made by the right man—some one who stands for something—who will stir the people by his presence—some one influential—magnetic—cultured——" He stopped and waited, then: "Who could you suggest?" he flung at the Judge.

Van Steer leaned back, his fingers joined. It was very evident that he had some one in mind, but modesty forbade his naming him. To his way of thinking there was but one eminently fitted for the honor of addressing the factory hands of the Bethel Steel Works—he shook his head.

"I couldn't say off hand," he parried.

But Colt leaned forward. "I can," he said, shortly. "There's just one man to do it——" He stopped and waited.

"Who?" ventured the Judge.

Colt brought down his fist: "You, Van Steer—just you!"

Van Steer started. "Really, Colt, I don't believe——"

"It doesn't matter *what* you believe—it's what you *are* that counts. You're Bethel's leading citizen—yes, you are—we all know it. We've come in and done a thing or two for the place, but you're of the stock that started it—put it on the map—that's what the people want—what they look up to—I tell you I'd like to have you do it as a favor to me, Van Steer, if not for the other reasons."

Van Steer was rigid. Into his pale lean cheeks the color leaped, the blue veins at his temples throbbed, his eyes glowed with a warm, deep light.

"Colt, I assure you I'm honored," he brought out huskily; "you've made me very proud this afternoon that I *am* a Van Steer—prouder, I should say, than usual."

Colt nodded. "You ought to be proud—finest name in the countryside; what's more, it ought to be kept up—kept up in the old style."

"I have often wished it were possible," Van Steer began.

Colt rose suddenly, thrust his hands in his pockets and scowled. He took one or two quick turns up and down the room, then stopped abruptly before the Judge. "I shouldn't wonder if it would be, Van Steer," he shot at him, brows drawn together; "shouldn't wonder at all!" Then: "That's a mighty fine daughter you have."

Van Steer looked up, startled. "Oh, Daphne? Yes—Yes."

Colt smiled. "Don't mention this to her—not for the world; but I believe she's given my boy hope—my boy Philip, you know."

"Philip—Daphne——" gasped Van Steer. "Oh, I hardly think so—she would have spoken to me—she——"

Colt shook his head. "No; she wouldn't—not yet—it's rather new, the whole thing—my boy has only just hinted to me—he's my only chick, Van Steer—he'll have all I possess."

The Judge rose, too. He was not sure what to say. He was a little afraid of this powerful man before him—afraid of something he implied—it sounded like a bribe, that hint of the wealth to come. He drew himself up.

"If Daphne loves him—if it will make her happy—I shall be happy, also," he said.

Colt wrung his hand.

"Fine—fine—but don't say a word to her—you know how young things are—easily frightened—

she'll come to you about it before long—they always do. Now, if she had had a mother, why you'd have known about it by this time—but with men, they're queer——”

The Judge nodded. Colt no doubt was right. Now that he came to think of it, he *had* seen Philip around a good bit. He was under the impression that Daphne had said she disliked him—but that may have been fancy—there were so many others, it was no doubt one of those.

“Little Daphne with a secret from me?” he mused.

Colt nodded. “We old folks mustn't spoil it, eh, Van Steer? Just keep mum till she says the word, then tell her you knew it all the time.”

He patted the Judge's arm affectionately. “I tell you, it takes our kiddies to work out our destiny for us, doesn't it?”

Van Steer nodded, a bit dazed by it all.

Colt continued, warmly: “That makes things between us different, doesn't it? Very different. I suppose the girl will want a big wedding.”

“Of course—of course,” the Judge agreed, rather too hastily.

Colt nodded. “I tell you when a Van Steer marries, it's something of an occasion in Bethel——” The Judge bowed.

“The Van Steers have always done things on a big scale.”

“That's what I've heard,” cut in Colt. “Costs a

lot to get a daughter married off in good style these days—regular fortune——” He stopped, smiling broadly at the Judge. But Van Steer was not smiling. His particularly fine, thin lips were tightly compressed, as though a phantom had been rudely raised—a phantom he had resolutely banished. Colt took up the thread where he had dropped it.

“A girl must have clothes, and plenty of them—but that’s not all—no, indeed—parties galore, and money for bridesmaids’ presents—take it all and all, it’s cheaper to have a son.”

Van Steer stiffened. “Daphne shall have as fine a wedding as I can give her.”

Colt had moved to the window, his face partly turned from Van Steer, for which the Judge was grateful. It was tender ground on which they were treading—he hoped to find a plausible way of leading the conversation into more agreeable channels. Colt toyed with the shade tassel and spoke over his shoulder.

“Do you know what I’d like to do, Van Steer? I’d like to speak out my mind to you without fear of offense.”

Van Steer looked up quickly. “I don’t think I quite understand,” he said.

Colt turned abruptly. “It’s just this: I want you to feel free to call upon me—absolutely free—should you need any financial support. Now do you understand?”

The Judge remained rigid as a bar of iron. "I'm afraid not," he replied slowly.

Colt laid his hand on his shoulder.

"You see, Van Steer, I can't help knowing how things stand with you—and they shouldn't stand that way, not by a long sight! I know that you want to do things in tip-top style—the way Van Steer always put across an affair. Now, then, your daughter is going to marry my son, and that places me in a position where I can talk frankly. What I want to say is this: You can call on me for any amount that will see you through comfortably. I know your pride, so we'll call it a loan—I'll take your note for it—do it any way you please—but let me help you."

That was all.

Van Steer felt the hot color stinging his cheeks. He moistened his lips—he tried to speak, but the words would not come—he was stunned by this burst of generosity—by this sudden lifting of his burden. He had wondered how on earth he was to see the matter through—how on earth—with nothing left but a house mortgaged to the last beam—and here was Colt offering him money—on preposterous terms—knowing that he could never repay it, and yet pouring it into his hands—it was immense of him—it was princely!

"I can tell you, Colt——" he managed to whisper through stiff lips. "This is mighty fine of you—mighty fine!"

"Stuff!" said Colt, his checkbook in hand. "How much shall it be?"

And Van Steer, vaguely aware of what had taken place, conscious only that Colt's check for five thousand dollars reposed in his pocket—a check for which he had given a worthless scrap of paper—came away from the great house with the memory of Colt's heavy hand on his shoulder—Colt's deep voice calling him friend. . . .

CHAPTER XV

COLT SHOWS HIS COLORS

DAPHNE, the Bethel *Courier* in her hand, awaited her father on the steps of her home. She had come in from a ride across country, and the flush of the exercise was still in her cheeks—the sparkle in her eyes. She radiated youth and health—buoyantly, vividly alive. Van Steer, as he approached, thought he had never seen her look so lovely as she did framed in the doorway, her form slight and boyish in its well-cut habit.

She held the paper toward him. "What does this mean, Daddy?" she demanded.

He smiled on her tenderly. So he was to lose her soon—lose her, but gain a Colt for a son-in-law. He scarcely noticed the paper she handed him in his intense study of her.

"Little Daphne," he said softly. She stared at him.

"What's the matter? You look as though you'd seen me for the first time. What I want to know is this: Is it true you're serving as chairman of the Executive Committee of the Ball?"

He glanced down at the sheet in his hand. There

was his name in bold type, heading the list of prominent men. He felt a glow of pride—as Philip Colt's father-in-law he could hope to head many such lists. He nodded.

"But I don't understand," she insisted. "Colt's on it, too, and the rest of the Big Four. You didn't know that, did you, Daddy, when you accepted?"

He smiled at her—so she was going to keep up the farce until the last minute. He shot a question at her: "Whom were you riding with to-day?"

"Philip Colt. But why——"

"Ah!" he teased, wagging his finger at her; "so you can play with a Colt, but not I—is that it?"

She frowned. "It's different with you, isn't it? Colt has hurt you in every possible way—as for Philip—he isn't responsible for his father, and he rides well—and he has stopped proposing, so I can't see what harm my going with him does."

"He's stopped proposing," chuckled the Judge—he thought it an exceedingly clever way of putting it. "Well, well, you may be wrong about Colt Senior—a man in his position is often forced to do unpleasant things that are not of his own choosing—pressure brought to bear shapes his course for him—at heart he may be all right."

"Why, Daddy?" she said, anxiously; "you've never talked this way before. What's he been saying to you? What's happened to change you this way?"

He pinched her cheek. "Nothing, Daphne, nothing. Can't I do my bit toward serving Bethel as well as you youngsters? Aren't you to be in some tableaux or other?"

"Of course; but you, Daddy; you—why you said yourself you would rather be hung than be seen speaking to him!"

Van Steer drew himself up. "Which proves that I'm a very hasty, bad-tempered old man, I'm afraid. Never jump to conclusions, Daphne, it's a sad business," and he left her staring after him, her eyes clouded with a fear she could not put into words.

Late that night, Philip, returning from a stag at the club, found a message from his father. It requested him to stop in at the library before retiring. It was in the nature of a command—and Philip studied the slip anxiously. There were any number of reasons why he did not particularly desire an interview with Colt Senior just then. He went, nevertheless. His father, clad in a dressing gown of flaming Oriental silk, was hunched in his chair, puffing thick clouds of smoke ceilingward. This was a good sign. Colt never puffed unless he were deeply pleased at some achievement of his own. Philip straightened up and closed the door softly behind him. Colt lowered his gaze and fixed it on his son.

"Well, Philip," said he, with his nearest approach to a smile; "you can sleep well to-night."

Philip waited, shifting from one foot to the other. He knew better than to interrupt.

"Yes, sir, you can sleep well—no more trouble so far as that Van Steer girl is concerned—I've fixed her father."

Philip started. "Fixed her father? What have you done?"

Colt took the cigar from his mouth and scowled at his son.

"None of your business!" he snapped; then his good humor returned. "If she doesn't say yes next time you ask her just let me know."

Philip took a step nearer. "I think it's only fair that I should——"

Colt shook his head. "That's all," he replied, placidly; "good night."

Philip hesitated, his lips parted; then, whirling on his heel, was gone.

Colt relaxed. He eased his shoulders down farther into the soft leather of his chair with a deep grunt of satisfaction, crossed his knees. He slipped the cigar into the corner of his mouth, and, sending a cloud of smoke upward, shut his eyes.

As May dressed for the Colt Ball, she reflected that the past weeks had been full of a thousand delights. There was first of all the announcement in the *Courier*. It was a three-column affair, with cuts of herself and Bill and a view of the new house on

Bethel's hilltop. It was no modest account, but a spread which told in full the history of the Newcomb family and gave a brief sketch of Bill's rise. That was the beginning of May's triumph.

She enjoyed her new position as Bill's fiancée in countless ways. She delighted in the whispers of the clerks which her presence in the shops occasioned. They were all eager to serve her—to present their finest stock to her—their subtle assumption that nothing would be too costly for her, was music in her ears.

Then one after another, the wives of the Big Four had called upon her. It was whispered that Bill was soon to be made a partner of the great concern—their visits confirmed the rumor—as a first step he had been taken into the Bethel Steel Club—a luncheon club whose membership was limited to the money-kings and their brothers—a club which was known to be a mighty board of trade whose unrecorded transactions ran into huge figures. Where deals were made and contracts signed as carelessly as the lunch check.

May played her hand carefully. She knew the string by which she held Bill was of the slenderest—his overwhelming gratitude to her alone had won him. She refused his most lavish gifts—he was amazed at her—but she insisted gently that he must save—the house would cost so much—the furnishings—she had quite enough to thank him for.

She was reckless only in the ring she chose. This, her badge of conquest, to be flashed before the eyes of Bethel—was a single pigeon-blood ruby, simply set, but it glowed on her hand like a drop of blood.

As she stood beneath the soft glow of the shaded candles, she turned it on her hand, this way and that, catching the glint of the lights—the spark of fire in its depths.

“And it’s only the beginning,” she sighed in an abandonment of content.

She permitted her maid to draw over her shoulders the gown of which she had dreamed. It was a reality now of sheerest white chiffon and filmy lace—simple, but breathing richness from every soft fold. It was a triumph of dressmaker’s art and May, gazing at herself in the mirror, knew she had never looked so well in her life. She studied her face—leaning on her hands—her tiny body bent toward the reflection—then she smiled.

“Mrs. Matthews,” she nodded to herself. “*The* Mrs. Matthews—yes, I think you’ll do——”

Even then Bill was rapping at her door. She flung her cloak over one bare shoulder and called to him to enter. She met his grave eyes with a smile.

“Dear old Bill—why so solemn?”

He straightened up. “I was thinking, May, that’s all—I don’t get a chance to often—but downstairs waiting for you——” he stopped. She watched him.

"Yes," she prompted. He shrugged.

"I was thinking that life has a deuce of a way of teasing a man—hasn't it? Dangling a bunch of grapes above him until he makes the supreme effort to get them—only to find they are sour."

She hid her alarm and slipped her arm through his. "You're working too hard, Bill—that's all that ails you—if you don't stop before long, you'll be quoting Dante's *Inferno* to me!"

His face—somewhat tense, relaxed and she turned him around.

"Look at me," she commanded. "Tell me I am perfectly enchanting and utterly ravishing—or *I shall scream!*"

Suddenly he swept her to him.

"You're a witch," he whispered roughly, "a black and white witch."

She lay for a minute in his arms, then freed herself, panting.

"Heavens—my hair——" she gasped. But her eyes were hard. She could call him to her by that age-old appeal—she felt vastly relieved.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

He nodded and she glanced back once more at her mirror—she smiled boldly at herself this time—triumphantly.

"Forward march," she sang out gaily, then: "Do try to be adoring, Bill, dear; all Bethel will be watching tonight to see how you act."

He nodded: "I know," as he followed her to the door.

Colt's mansion was ablaze with lights—from all over Bethel its windows might be seen gleaming through the darkness. As one approached, the house, boldly outlined against a pillow of blackness, was not unlike a stage set—startling—urbanesque—the long avenue of giant poplars—the smooth terraces rolling up to the very steps—the spray of the fountains, whose drops caught the flash of the lights like diamonds flung skyward.

Bill drew his breath sharply, as their machine paused behind a string of cars ahead, and stopped for one quivering moment at the gateway. He leaned toward May—she, too, was stirred—her eyes were unnaturally bright and her quick breathing reached his ears.

"A year ago I'd have said any man was a fool who told me I'd be Colt's guest tonight."

"Yes," she whispered, "and tonight there's no man here of such importance as Big Bill Matthews."

The car leaped forward beneath an archway of dancing lights and crept up the long hill—one of the endless snake line which paused for an instant at the white steps to disgorge its load.

Bill felt his heart leap faster—a pulse throbbed in his temples. The scene was like some rare wine—it fired one's blood—it intoxicated—the heavy sweetness of the night air—the beckoning lights—the

words May had said to him went to his head like strong drink—they seemed burned on his brain—he repeated them softly.

“And tonight there’s no man here of such importance as Big Bill Matthews.”

This, then, was the fulfillment—the moment for which he had striven so hard—the day when these aristocrats would welcome him among them—would make him one of them. “I said they would—and they have,” he breathed heavily.

Yes—he was one of them now—his house and his fortune equalled theirs—but money had done more than that for him—much more—it had given him work—work—it had made it possible for him to help his fellows—he wasn’t half through yet! There were ten—twenty times more to do for the *white-faced* hands at the plant. What man would not give his right hand for such a chance as was his!

And now—to cap it all—he had a woman—a woman who would grace his house—who would be worthy the fortune he would lavish upon her. He glanced at May. He was proud of her smartness—the poise of her little head—a Newcomb, too—a Newcomb to marry Bill Matthews, whose mother had spent all her days over a washtub; whose father gasped out his life at the Works. A year ago he would have shouted at the suggestion that he could ever touch the hem of such a woman’s skirt—and now she was giving herself into his keeping for bet-

ter or worse—oh, life was wonderful—wonderful—and yet—*yet he was not satisfied.*

He moved uncomfortably. What was the matter with him anyway—was there nothing that could fill him with that warm sense of peace—of rest? He caught his lip between his teeth. "I'm a fool," he muttered angrily, "a fool. . . ."

The car brought up before the steps. A footman swung wide the door. Bill leaped out and gave his hand to May. She was nodding brightly to a group who were just entering—her hand still possessively on his arm. He smiled down at her. Gad! It was something to be able to make her happy—she had had a hard time of it with Monty and that husband of hers—he was going to make her forget it—forget everything but the joy of living—and then all at once it struck him as peculiarly humorous that he should essay to teach her that which he had so signally failed to learn for himself.

"I've got to work harder," he growled fiercely, as he followed her into a hall transformed into an Egyptian temple. "It's work that keeps a man from thinking. It's work that makes him happy—nothing else." And he was caught upon the whirl of voices and out-stretched hands.

CHAPTER XVI

DAPHNE VAN STEER

MEN he knew and scarcely knew—pushed their way to his side with a word about his work—with an unmistakable eagerness to claim friendship—women—women in costumes—in evening gowns—young girls with baskets full of flowers—of favors—stared at him—or smiled shyly—whispering eagerly. “There he is—look quick—the big one over there.”

He returned their smiles—he bought their flowers *for his buttonhole*, he answered their questions briefly. May had passed her arm through his, she stopped him now and then to call out to a friend—to chat with an acquaintance. But all—all of them gazed at him with that strange degree of awe—as though a seventh wonder had been suddenly dropped in their midst. “And to think he was a laborer at the Works a year ago,” a shrill voice rang out in a sudden lull. “Oh, I don’t think it could have been he,” another voice replied. “He looks *so* like a gentleman——” and at the embarrassed ripple of laughter the two guilty ones turned crimson and fled.

But Bill laughed easily. "It's true, every bit of it," he said. "Isn't it, May?" She did not answer. She saw Colt coming toward them—Cyrus P. Colt himself. Beside him was Philip—the son who was too good for her. She nodded to Philip slightly and Colt, senior, bowed to her and turned to Bill.

"Found your way here, did you?—shouldn't wonder if anyone got lost in this maze of petticoats—never saw such persistent girls in my life—or such pretty ones, eh, Matthews?"

They flocked about them—the flower girls—waving their baskets—vieing for more money from the two men—hoping for one of Bill's smiles—the smiles that made his face so remarkably boyish—his eyes so young.

"Run along," shouted Colt, waving his hand, "run along, every one of you." Then he appealed to his son, "Take them away, Philip," and the bevy turned to him as Colt drew Bill and May after him.

"They tell me we've cleared twenty thousand already," he grunted; "most of it by subscription—but Bethel's pouring out money—great night this, Matthews—they have no more cause for complaint, have they?"

Bill looked at him quizzically—at the man feared and hated by so many underlings. Colt was a good six inches shorter than he—and Colt was not a small man—but there was a slight stoop to his shoulders—from counting money—Bill decided with grim

amusement—"Can't bend over a pile of gold forever without getting a crook in your back," he told himself. Colt spoke affably.

"After the tableaux and dancing, I want you and Mrs. Larabee to join us in the supper room."

May flushed with eagerness. "How nice, we'd like to so much," said she; and with a bow Colt left them—stopping now and then to shoo away a group of chattering girls who forced their wares on him—to speak to a man—rarely to a woman—to give a command. Bill watched him, smiling.

"And so that's the Big Chief we were in terror of," he mused. "If the men could only realize that Colt is a human being just as they are—two ears, a nose and mouth—and a body that burns and freezes and bleeds just as theirs does—— By George! if they could get that through their heads, how quickly his tyranny would be at an end."

May, half hearing—and wholly absorbed in the excitement of the moment, nodded and led him on through the crowd—and wherever they passed a whisper like a breath followed them—"There he goes—that one—head and shoulders above the rest—yes—isn't he a regular giant?—but so good-looking——"

Bill did not seem to hear. He had never before seen so wonderful a sight—he had never before moved in such an atmosphere of extreme wealth and fashion—at the theatre he had glimpsed these exotic

women awaiting their carriages—May was one of them—but he had never before seen them thus at home—these gay young matrons—these flower-like girls—these queenly dowagers with gowns as low and figures as svelté as their daughters—yes, and granddaughters.

May was chatting to a girl in flaming orange—the girl talked gaily, her head flung back and her white teeth flashing—but her eyes were on Bill.

“May,” she said, “I haven’t met your man yet—I’m dying to—we all are.” May turned to Bill. He thought there was a flash of annoyance in her eyes.

“This is Mr. Rogers’ daughter, Rosalie,” she said. “Little Rosalie Rogers who is quite grown up now.”

“Oh, quite,” said the girl, “and so thrilled at meeting a real celebrity.” She held out her hand. Bill took it and smiled.

“Tell me,” she cried eagerly, “tell me about it—I mean how you began to think of discovering your process—I’m simply dying to hear——”

May patted the girl’s hand. “We can’t stop now,” she said sweetly, “you nice, enthusiastic kiddie—I wish we could.”

“I know you do,” sighed the orange girl, but her smile was for Bill. “Please,” she said to him, “please do come back—you haven’t bought a thing from me—have you? I’d love so to hear all about it.”

May drew him away.

"What a pretty child," he remarked to her. May shot him a quick glance.

"Child!" she snapped. "She's been out three seasons and is trying her best to land a husband."

It wasn't like May—this retort. Bill studied her face, but her lips were curved sweetly—and her eyes were guileless.

"Dear old Bill, taken in by a bit of fluff—I'll have to marry you soon to rescue you from Bethel's baby vampires," she sighed. Then she gave a cry.

"The fashion show—that's what I must see, of course—come on," and she hurried to a white door—guarded over by two small flaxen-haired pages.

It was Colt's music room turned into a model theatre. The seats were already filled. The stage—a raised platform—was hung with a startling curtain—a futuristic effect of blue and gold pomegranates on a background of deep purple.

The buzz of conversation was high pitched—nervous—the women's voices floated lightly above the low rumble of the men's. At first glance it seemed as though every seat were taken, but at Bill's entrance a man leaped to his feet. It was Pattison. And the pretty little woman at his side, who was desperately fighting approaching old age, was his wife. At his whisper she, too, rose.

"Do sit here," she called to them. "We'll all move up." Pattison had reached Bill's side.

"You're coming to Colt's supper afterwards, aren't you?" he asked with lowered voice.

Bill nodded. May was tugging at his arm. "Some one has slipped in two chairs for us there in front, Bill—see, close to the stage—hurry, or they'll be gone."

Bill hesitated. There were several matters he would like to run over with Pattison—now was a good time—Pattison urged him eagerly.

"Let Mrs. Larabee have my seat—you and I'll go outside and smoke. Blamed nonsense dragging men here—it's bad enough to pay for the clothes without having to look at them! Come on, Matthews."

Mrs. Pattison smiled her mirthless smile—she had heard somewhere that laughter brought lines—she had never been known to laugh.

"Yes, run along, Patty," she urged. "Mrs. Larabee can squeeze in here."

But May shook her head.

"They've placed those seats for us—we really should take them—besides, Mr. Matthews wants to stay I know, don't you, Bill?"

He was about to reply negatively when he felt the pressure of her fingers on his arm—a touch—no more—but in an instant he had caught her meaning. What a boor he was—planning to run off with Pattison and talk business—of course, she wanted him to stay—wasn't she showing him off to Bethel—

what had he been thinking of! He laughed, as he turned to Pattison.

"You couldn't drag me away," he said, with an affectionate glance at her. "See you later."

May flashed a smile at him and moved down the aisle—her chin well up, her shoulders back. Bill smiled to himself—he wouldn't hurt her for the world—he wished for one swift moment that she attracted him irresistibly—that he could not tear himself from her because of the spell she cast over him—then he shook his head—that sort of thing one read about in books did not happen outside of their covers—his relationship with May was a much more comfortable thing—those gusty passions never lasted—burned themselves out—it was far better to admire a woman immensely than to love her—perhaps after all he *did* love May—how was one to tell? His way of loving and another man's was bound to differ—there were moments when she thrilled him—when the nearness of her body—her clinging arms—and red lips sent his pulses leaping—of course he loved her—but he wished to goodness she had let him have a minute or two with Pattison before the supper.

They had reached the seats and even as May dropped into one of them the lights grew dim and the heavy curtains parted. She laid her hand over his—the hand on which the ruby gleamed dully, like a red eye.

"You lamb," she whispered. "I sha'n't keep you here through the *long, stupid thing*—we'll escape after the first few exhibits."

So she did understand. He patted her hand and smiled—then remembering she had particularly requested him to be adoring, he closed his fingers over hers, she moved closer to him, her arm touched his. The fragrance of her hair reached him, his fingers tightened over hers. Of course he loved her—dear little May——

"Look," she was crying eagerly. "Isn't Betty Welch too cunning for words?"

Betty Welch—the tiny daughter of one of Bethel's foremost bankers—clad as a woodland nymph, darted from behind a papier mâché rock—blew a wealth of kisses to her delighted audience and clapped her dimpled hands. Immediately the stage was plunged into darkness, then the lights flashed up, revealing the interior of a smart dressmaking shop. A little play began to unfold itself—a bride-to-be—greeted enthusiastically by her friends in the audience—entered and chose her trousseau with many a sidelong glance at the adoring youth in the front row. One after another bewitching model was paraded before her.

Bill moved uneasily—after all it wasn't the sort of thing a man would enjoy—he smiled to think of himself there—Big Bill at a fashion show. He wondered, with a grin, what the boys would say. He

glanced at May. She was leaning forward eagerly—her cheeks flushed—noting with that microscopic skill of women, the cut and texture of each gown displayed.

He felt immensely relieved at her absorption—he could slip back to his problems—to the delightful contemplation of how much might be accomplished with the twenty thousand dollars in hand. Building could be started at once—twenty thousand. . . .

They were clapping wildly. Bill, brought back to his surroundings by the outburst of noise, looked about him with amused interest. It was one of the things that amazed him most—the warm enthusiasm, the almost childlike eagerness with which these surfeited darlings of the gods greeted their pleasures. Surely they had seen just such shows a hundred times. It was rather nice, he thought, that they were far from being jaded fools they were believed to be.

They were exclaiming extravagantly—leaning toward one another—eyebrows raised, lips parted.

“Isn’t she wonderful?—isn’t she gorgeous?—I’ve never seen her look half so lovely—never——”

He found more amusement in watching them than in the pet of society who for the moment was mannikin—suddenly they burst into a storm of applause.

“Superb!” bawled a rosy-cheeked old man behind him. “Good girl, Daphne! You look like your Grandpa Van Steer,” and he clapped noisily and stamped his feet.

Bill's heart leaped to his throat. His body stiffened as from an electric shock. Daphne—Van Steer—— He was conscious of a sudden weakness—a trembling—he who was so strong—he wanted to turn his head—with all his soul he wanted to turn his head—and yet he could not. . . .

May was tapping his arm with her fan. "Bill," she whispered, "for goodness' sake sit around—what will people think of you?"

He did—glad of an excuse. Still he could not raise his eyes. But he had to. He simply had to. If the pounding of his heart would only cease. He wondered if May could hear it. . . . ! He looked up, and saw before him the woman of his dreams. He could not tear his eyes away—he was as one turned to stone—the world was rocking—he saw her through a haze.

In a gown of filmy tulle—a transparent cloud—kept from floating entirely away by the black straps on her delicately molded shoulders, she paraded saucily before the enraptured audience. He noted with a fierce delight that his mental picture of her had been correct—yet he had never attributed that mother-of-pearl whiteness to her skin—or that eager light to her green eyes—he had never seen her lips smiling so warmly, so frankly—he had not remembered that her hair was so like a skein of pure gold.

Over the footlights the velvet-clad pages were

handing her sheafs of flowers. The bride-to-be pouted a trifle and glanced reproachfully at her stricken suitor. But the old man behind Bill applauded vociferously. Bill heard the quick whisper that ran from lip to lip.

"From Phil Colt. He's simply mad about her."

A woman on his left went a bit farther. "He's there morning, noon and night."

He wheeled about and glared at her, but she returned his look with cool amusement. Philip Colt! he stormed, though his lips were mute—that worthless son of a slave driver—Philip Colt—and that Goddess——

"No!" he heard himself saying, "no—it can't be true!"

"What?" asked May, then promptly forgot her question in the thrilling excitement of seeing a basket of roses borne up the aisle to the popular Miss Van Steer.

"She'll need a dozen cars to get them home," laughed the crowd.

But Bill did not laugh—he was wildly jealous—consumed with fury because no flowers of his were among those which Daphne, helpless and protesting, endeavored to carry from the stage—tormented at the thought that she would thank another for the blossoms—that idiot of a Colt. . . .

He scowled darkly—scowled, when in answer to the shouts and stamping she emerged once more

from behind the curtains—ran to the footlights and nodded brightly at the sea of faces.

“Speech!” shouted someone eagerly, but she shook her head in sudden panic—retreated, and the curtain fell.

“Well,” gasped the old man behind Bill, “she’s certainly the reigning queen of Bethel.” Bill wanted to turn and grasp his hand, but a woman’s voice cut in.

“Just think what a duck of a hostess she’ll make when when she marries Phil. There’ll be no end of parties. What a mistress for Colthenge!”

“Just like her grandfather,” mused the old man. “Gad! I wish I were young, then Phil wouldn’t have a ghost of a chance!”

May was smiling, but Bill rose. “Let’s get out of here,” he said thickly. She opened her lips to protest, but something in his face arrested her and she followed him without a word. Once they had reached the ballroom she questioned him.

“What was it, Bill?—you looked as though you had seen a ghost.”

He stared at her with unseeing eyes. “Nothing,” he answered brusquely. “Nothing at all.”

The music crashed into a syncopated melody—it cleared the atmosphere—it lifted the tension. After all, what right had he to think of her? He was in love with May—he had assured himself of it earlier in the evening—he told himself so now with a fierce-

ness that would brook no argument from that tormenting inner voice—yes—in love with May—engaged to marry her—to make her mistress of his home—what did he mean by getting cold and hot and angry and jealous at the sight of Daphne Van Steer—was that playing the game squarely? By Jove! he was in love with May—he'd like to see anyone deny it—and all the while that cruel inner voice taunted him—jeered at him. "She'll wear Colt's flowers," it said. "Her smile will be for him." "Well, it was for me once," sprang to his lips, but he crushed it down with an oath.

"Let's dance," said May, impatiently. He took her in his arms. She smiled up at him.

"We'll give a big house warming as soon as we move in," she was saying, "and ask all these people."

Ask the Colts—Philip and his new wife! Bill danced well as a rule, although he detested it—but at the stabbing thought, he lost step, trampled on May's foot—stopped short—red with embarrassment. May's irritation was tinged with pain.

"For heaven's sake," she snapped, "can't you keep time?"

He was very humble. "I'm sorry—sorry as the deuce. I'm a fool, May, a clumsy fool. Let's watch the others."

He drew her to one side of the ballroom, and dropped down beside her on a divan. An old ad-

mirer caught sight of her, and came forward with an offer to dance. She accepted gratefully and left Bill crushed and ashamed. He watched her whirl from sight. Then he rose. He would have time enough to return before the dance was over—but he had to walk—to move about—to do something. He wished he were at the Works again—that there were rush orders to fill—that he might plunge into the task with his whole soul until he dropped from sheer weariness—too tired to think.

“So you’ve played hookey, too,” said a voice cheerily. It was Pattison. Bill looked up with relief he did not know he could feel. “Mighty slow show,” grunted Pattison, “although the little Van Steer girl did stir things up some—distinctly in the peach class, isn’t she?”

Bill resented his tone—his words. “Come on,” said Pattison, unconscious of his danger, “Let’s have a drink.”

CHAPTER XVII

MAY'S EYES ARE OPENED

WHEN they came back to the ballroom—the music was dropping into its closing bars. Bill turned to Pattison.

“I’ll run over and find May.”

Pattison, intensely genial and slightly flushed, slapped him on the shoulder. “My wife’s in the far corner—bring Mrs. Larabee over there.” Bill bowed, turned away, then stopped short. . . . Directly in his path was a crowd of men—a crowd of men clamoring for dances—and in their midst stood Daphne. She wore the daring, bizarre costume of the Fashion Show—and to her corsage she had pinned a bunch of flaming roses. At her side hovered Philip Colt, a light of annoyance in his eyes at the persistent requests of the others.

The scene was indelibly printed on Bill’s mind—photographed there so that in after years he was always able to recall at will the girl in her gown of green chiffon—her beauty enhanced by her excitement, flushed and radiantly lovely—her eyes full of eager amusement at the men’s struggles to outbid each other—of Philip, like some dark shadow—at

her side, his face clouded with a lover's jealousy.

Bill determined to go—to go at once—even then the music was rising to its last grand crescendo—it stopped amidst a thunder of applause—and rose once more in a reluctant encore. There was yet time—for what? . . . His mind worked in flashes. He swung about. "Pattison!" he called. Pattison, already several paces away, turned at the sound of his name and ambled back amiably. Bill tried to speak very calmly, to keep the tremor from his voice.

"Miss Van Steer . . ." he said swiftly; "I'd like to meet her. . . ."

Pattison glanced at him shrewdly. "You hit, too?" he chuckled. "Hang it! if she doesn't bowl over every man in sight!"

Bill did not resent this. He did not resent anything that would permit him to grasp her hand—to take her attention from that crowd of yapping youths. Pattison was drawing him forward.

"Daphne," he sang out, "behold the conquering hero—— This is the famous Mr. Matthews."

The men moved back—with frank curiosity in their gaze—and that same degree of awe—even Phil's face lost its petulance in a flash of interest—but Bill did not see them, he saw nothing but the smile that touched her lips—and the warm welcome in her eyes as she held out her hand.

"I'm so glad to meet you," she was saying; "you've done so much for Bethel . . ."

He dropped her hand in an instant, but he tingled from head to foot—he struggled for a trite phrase—he knew they were waiting for him to speak—he had never felt this way before—tongue-tied—awkward—Pattison came to his rescue with his elephantine humor:

“He wants to ask you to dance, Daphne, but he doesn't dare.”

Bill turned to him gratefully:

“That's just about it,” he nodded.

Daphne smiled again. “Of course I'll dance with you,” she said. “I shall be proud to—the very next one,” and the youth to whom she had promised the waltz sulked in silence. Bill bowed himself away. He was afraid to stay—afraid of himself—Pattison still lingered about the bright flame, bantering with the ease of long friendship.

“Lucky boy,” he called out to Bill as he retreated. Bill nodded and tried to smile.

He could not return to May—he didn't dare meet her torrent of questions—he was afraid of what his answers might be—he wanted to think—and, curiously enough, thought was pushed aside—crowded out by the pounding of his heart and the leaping of his pulses as he imagined himself guiding her. Then he turned on himself angrily—what sort of man was he—to ask one woman to marry him and to make a fool of himself over another—was there no honor in him?—did he not owe it to

May to tear himself away from this girl who had stamped her image on his heart? That was it—tear himself away—go—before it was too late—— He turned on his heel—his face grim—his lips tight shut—it was only fair to May—to little May. . . .

The music swung into the plaintive measure of the waltz—the 'cello called softly—the violin coaxed—the rhythm of the music beat like a quickened pulse. Bill paused. After all—just this once—perhaps never again so long as he lived would this chance come—no—he told himself—it musn't—he would see that it didn't—he would sell the house on the hill—they would go away from Bethel—far away—But just this once. . . . He made up his mind in a flash—he thrust the crowd aside. He found Daphne waiting, surrounded by her admirers; she came to him at once, with a little smile of welcome; he drew her after him, then she rested her hand in his—he hoped he could dance—he hoped he could keep time—hoped with all his soul he would not make a fool of himself there before all Bethel—but he was acutely conscious only of her cool fingers in his own—the nearness of her head to his shoulder—a great light smote him—— This, then, was being in love. . . .

They danced well together. Bethel's matrons raised their lorgnettes and eyebrows. "A handsome couple—I wonder how dear May likes it."

May didn't. Having captured the old admirer,

she thought to tease Bill by his presence, and had returned with him triumphantly in tow—only to find Bill gone. She was uneasy a minute—a picture of Rosalie Rogers' provocative smile rising—but seeing Rosalie whirl past on the arm of an elderly beau she settled back content—he had met some men, no doubt—still she blamed herself a trifle uncomfortably for having left him alone. Then her partner gave a low whistle—

“By Jove, there's Daphne dancing with your man—stunning couple, aren't they?”

May's spine shot to an intent vertical—the color leaped to her cheeks—her eyes were little balls of fire.

“Where?” she snapped. She did not need to ask. They swung into her line of vision—she noted with fury that they kept step perfectly—Bill did not seem awkward or bungling—but his face, above all, she observed—it was radiant. At something Daphne said he laughed with boyish eagerness. May bit her lips and clenched her little hands until the nails cut into the flesh—so that was it. . . Daphne Van Steer. . . She was not content with snapping up Philip, but she must needs try to capture Bill, too. May's face was white with the raging fury within—with the effort to suppress it—she told herself that she'd marry Bill that very night if it became necessary—then the ugly thought flashed upon her that he might not agree—something in his face told her so.

Her partner blundered on unconsciously: "Daphne comes to his shoulder. Gad! he's a giant, isn't he—everyone's looking at them. Wonder if he knew her before?"

The same query flashed across her mind. She remembered suddenly Bill's perturbation at the Show—after Daphne had appeared—was it possible? But she laughed the thought to scorn—she had been with him every instant—it was simply the infatuation of the minute. . . . Stop it! she would stop it if it took her right hand. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WOMAN OF HIS DREAMS

THE music whispered plaintively—Bill answered Daphne's questions in a voice a trifle husky—he marvelled that he answered them at all, he did not half hear what she said—what he noted in his intense absorption, was the proud tilt of her chin—the green light in her eyes—the smooth beauty of her brows—he replied with an effort more obvious every minute. She noticed it anxiously. She wondered if it were difficult for him to talk while dancing—she resolved to settle it.

“We can't chat very well this way, can we? I wonder if we couldn't sit out the rest?”

He leaped at the suggestion. She was a trifle regretful. He danced so well and she was pleasantly conscious of admiring glances cast at them—she had never seen a man so big—so well set up. He followed her like one in a dream—he was not at all sure it wasn't a dream—perhaps he would wake to find himself once more in Factory Street.

The decorators, with an eye to aiding proposals—of all kinds—had erected tiny alcoves, had screened them with flowers and left them in delicious semi-

darkness. They found one of these. Daphne sank down on a bench, her chin in her hand.

She turned puzzled eyes on him. "Do you know," she said, "I've been wondering where I've met you before."

He did not answer, and she continued thoughtfully: "I can't seem to remember—it's stupid of me, isn't it?—but when I saw you to-night I felt sure it wasn't the first time——" Then she straightened up. "I must have mistaken you for someone else—we couldn't have met, could we—and yet . . ."

He nodded briefly. "You're right. I've spoken with you just once before."

"I knew it!" she cried. "I can't recall when or how—I was certain of it. Where was it?" she asked suddenly. "At the club?"

He shook his head, he did not trust his voice in the exaltation of the thought that she remembered him! That would have been enough for him yesterday—an hour ago—but now—now—he wanted to force her to recall it all bit by bit. She caught his intention and laughed.

"Do I have to guess?" He nodded, and she puckered her forehead. "No—not at the club or at parties, or any place like that. Maybe it was on some visitors' day at the Works—you were superintendent, weren't you? Or was it draftsman?"

He grinned. "Draftsman! I never saw the inside of a drafting room until after I'd left the plant.

As for being superintendent—I'd sooner have believed I could be Emperor of India!"

She was suddenly confused—afraid she had offended him—had made an error. "I thought—I understood that you used to be there—of course, if I've made a horrible mistake and you were a director or something——"

"Director!" he shouted, "Director! The nearest I came to being a director was when I was made foreman of the cogging."

"You . . . a foreman . . ."

He nodded eagerly. "Yes, foreman of the best gang in the Works, and before that a day laborer—for fifteen years—and before *that* a little tyke who used to help my father stoke furnaces."

"Help your father stoke furnaces? . . ." She stared at him blankly—stared at his hands—his well-kept nails—at his clothes—his face. He did not see her. His eyes were full of the past—his heart singing a song of joy. . . . He had never dreamed this day—this hour—would come when he could tell her of his life. He heard her voice—cool, direct, persistent:

"But you say you met me—spoke with me—I don't see how——"

He drew from his pocket his watch. From its chain swung a piece of money. "See this?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Do you remember it?"

She shook her head, her eyes on his face.

He leaned forward eagerly, his voice vibrating in the deep organ notes of a great moment:

"Do you remember a Sunday—a Sunday morning—you were in a motor—a long, gray car caught in a rut—your chauffeur couldn't move it——"

She sprang to her feet, her face a trifle pale—her hands twisting her handkerchief nervously. "Yes—yes—now I know! Now I remember! It *was* you!" Then she shrank from him suddenly. "But it couldn't have been—it simply couldn't have been!"

He was speaking eagerly: "It was queer meeting you that day—I had just heard I might be rich—I'd never crossed the tracks before—and when I saw Bethel proper—saw the houses on its hillside, I made up my mind I'd own one—I made up my mind that I'd make myself fit to live in it—to have those people for my friends—and then I found you—I knew who you were—I had heard your name a hundred times as the granddaughter of the Van Steer who started the Works—you were as high above me as the stars in the sky—just about as remote—I had never seen anyone half so beautiful—I had never seen anyone half so proud—and I knew—I knew from that moment——" He stopped short. What was he saying? What in God's name trembled on the tip of his tongue! He was engaged to May—May Larabee. . . .

She was staring at him. "There was another man with you—and a girl—a girl in a dreadful red dress"—he winced at that, but she continued breathlessly, as though something impelled her to speak against her will: "You pushed Johnson aside and lifted the car yourself—it didn't seem at all hard for you to do." Suddenly she shuddered. "But you're not the same—you can't be—the man who did that was a giant—a great, uncouth, insolent giant—and you—you——"

He studied her curiously. "Did you think I was always this way?"

She avoided his eye. "I didn't know—I had heard so little about you—just a word here and there—naturally, I supposed as long as you were here—as long as you were engaged to May Larabee, that you were—that you had always belonged to her set."

He laughed a bit at this. "Her set! I? Up to a year and a half ago I was a factory hand working from seven in the morning until seven at night—with no prospect of a raise beyond foremanship. I couldn't speak English correctly—nor read much—nor write decently. The fact that I'm square I owe to my mother, who spent all the days of her life over a washtub—and to my father, who died at the side of the furnace he tended a life-time. What I've learned since the money came is due to May Larabee; before she took me in hand I was the man you met on the road—I'm the same man still, but I know

enough to say aren't instead of ain't—and that's about the only difference—it doesn't seem to get you anywheres, though—this culture—the only reason I'm glad I've acquired this much is that I seem to be able to help the boys a bit more—aside from that I reckon I'd be happier if I'd stayed the man I was when I met you. I shouldn't wonder."

She stared at him, her breath coming quickly. She did not know what to say. She did not know what to do. Here was a man whom she had paid for a service rendered—who had accepted her money—a man she had regarded as an inferior a few months ago. Did he expect her to greet him as an equal simply because by a lucky twist of fortune he was now rich? She had to say something. He was waiting, his face tense, his jaw set.

"I'm sure it's very interesting," she ventured. Then stopped. He was smiling—but she saw that his eyes were hurt—she had seen just that look in the eyes of wounded animals. She did not want to make him suffer—she wondered resentfully that she should have the power of doing so. She wanted to run away—to escape the awfulness of the situation—but she could not. He was waiting. . . . She moved toward him—and at that moment both Philip and May Larabee entered and took possession of the scene.

Philip nodded to Bill and strode to Daphne's side.

"This is our dance," he growled. She gasped with

relief and took his arm. She glanced at Bill. He had not moved. He did not seem to see May—or Philip—or even herself. He still stared through rather than at her with that curious half-smile hovering about his lips and the pain in his eyes. May greeted Daphne warmly, then she laid her hand on Bill's arm. Seeing her, he recovered himself abruptly.

"I'm going home," she announced; "I have such a headache." Bill followed her silently and Daphne looked after him with distress.

"I've been a beast!" she cried; "but what on earth could I do?"

May did not address Bill directly until after they had left the Colt house. She made her excuses to Colt, senior, she spoke of her concern at having to go—at having to drag dear Bill away. Pattison tried to persuade her to remain—to corner Bill and ask him why the dickens he didn't take her home and come back. But Bill was strangely unresponsive. Pattison concluded with a shrug that they had had a row—after all, what could one expect of May Larabee?—by Jove, perhaps she had seen Bill and Daphne together—the idea was too delicious to keep to himself—he spread it broadcast. "Gad! but she'll never let him hear the end of it—Newcomb temper, you know—poor Bill!"

May settled herself in the machine, tucked the

robe under her knees, and waited. Of course he would say something, now that they were alone—would attempt an apology which she would accept—after a time—but he did nothing of the sort. Instead, he sat erect—his lips tightly shut—his face rather grim, she thought.

She waited a reasonable length of time—she tapped her foot impatiently—then she decided on the best method of attack, and said softly:

“Why, Bill, I didn’t know you knew Daphne Van Steer—why didn’t you tell me?”

He smiled at her—but even in the darkness—she could see that his eyes did not smile—she had seen them look just that way when he was making up his mind to do something—something tremendous.

“It happened a long time ago—when I was at the Works—I was able to do a slight service for her—for which she tipped me liberally—that was all.”

But May was intensely alarmed—alarmed and angry and determined. So that was it. He had not forgotten Daphne—perhaps he had thought of her often—planned to see her—and now—now it had happened—she resolved to be careful—oh, so careful—but her voice was sharp.

“That’s positively romantic, Bill—it’s rather too bad that she’s engaged to Colt, isn’t it—and that you’re engaged to me?”

“Don’t, May, not now,” he whispered through white lips.

She was glad that matters had taken this turn—he was hard hit, of course—but he had evidently decided to go through with things as planned—she had said enough—she did not dare anger him—not yet! She moved closer, dropped her hand lightly on his, her voice was thrillingly soft, her eyes like bright, hard little diamonds.

“Do you know, Bill, when I saw you together—I was afraid for a moment—she is younger than I, and so beautiful——” She paused. He did not speak, and she hurried on: “I was afraid. . . It was silly of me, of course, wasn’t it? But she has so much to make her happy—so much admiration—so many friends—and now Colt, with all his millions, at her feet—and I—I have only you.”

She felt him stiffen beneath her light fingers—felt him brace himself to rise to her appeal. He moistened his lips:

“I won’t fail you, May,” he said slowly; “I won’t fail you. . . .”

She settled back with a little sigh—she had really managed that rather well. She snuggled down comfortably and yawned. It was too bad to have had to miss the Colt supper!

CHAPTER XIX

DISILLUSION

COLT and his court left the dancing mob below and adjourned to the Jacobean suite—the superb chain of rooms of which the “State Dining Room” was the crown jewel. It was a hallowed spot, set apart for the exclusive use of the Big Four. Around its board were held banquets to visiting potentates—across its table their wives entertained the wives of neighboring money kings—in the shelter of its four walls their daughters had announced their engagements and made their bow to society. It was an unwritten law that it was never to be used except for an occasion of importance. And the guests who crowded into it eagerly were all agog with curiosity—certain that Colt was about to inform them that Daphne, after much dangling, had at last taken his son—the catch of Bethel.

They were all there. Decker, pinched and nervous—his wife who had grown plump on the Bethel Steel dividends—and their cub of a son, Archie, who was fast acquiring an avoirdupois equalling that of his mother. Pattison had left his wife’s side to hover with a group of men about Rosalie Rogers.

She was enjoying her little triumph—stood close to her father, whom she affectionately dubbed “Nat,” and who looked ridiculously like an elder brother.

“Aren’t we ever going to eat?” she complained, with a glance at the tempting table.

“We’re waiting for the blushing couple,” averred Pattison. “Wonder what’s keeping them.”

Colt wondered, too—with a heavy scowl he shot commands at his servants—and pulled out his watch.

“Seen Phil?” he snapped at Decker, who was laboriously measuring out the drops of his digestive medicine. Decker, startled, dropped the bottle and an angry red stain crept over the cloth. “Ellsworth!” gasped his wife. The servants sprang forward and Decker, mopping his face, shook his head. “No,” he mumbled. “Haven’t . . .” Then the confusion gave way to poignant regret. “That’s the last drop of pepsin I have,” he mourned.

The suppers were always served on the instant set. They were stupendously dull affairs which the younger set dreaded and escaped from as soon as possible. Colt presided over them, invariably turning the conversation into the channels of his own choosing—heavy discussions of stock transactions made endurable only by a spicy undercurrent of gossip—far more thrilling than usual because of the great caution required to keep voices lowered and faces grave. Invitations to the suppers were pearls

of great price—coveted by the Great Uninvited of Bethel who yearned for a chance to sit about the Round Table and wondered enviously what bacchanalian sports were indulged in behind the great carved doors by the Inner Circle.

Colt never drank after twelve, but Rosalie ecstatically spied bottles of iced wine.

“Nothing short of a wedding could make corks pop here!” she cried. “Why under the sun can’t we start?”

Colt paced angrily—then he wheeled on his guests.

“Sit down,” he commanded. “I’ll find out what’s keeping Phil.”

“I know,” said Rosalie, pertly, a cigarette between her red lips. “I saw him a-courting Daphne in one of those nice little cubby holes downstairs, and judging from the sounds I heard, it was a rather stormy proceeding.”

Colt frowned and Rogers nudged his daughter to silence, but she only laughed. “Phil was red and wrathful and Daphne cool and haughty. What the dickens could they have been scrapping about?”

Pattison, seated opposite, roared at her insolence. She was the only person who did not in the least fear Colt’s anger. She smiled at Pattison brightly and rattled on. “I do hope they’ve made it up and will be here soon—I’m starving, aren’t you, Patty?—and Nat’s mouth is watering for the wine.” Her

father glared at her—the rest of the table listened, entranced, to her chatter. “Really, if Daphne knew that I was pining to ask her how she got that nice Matthews man away from May Larabee long enough to dance with, I know she’d hurry. I heard her call Phil a brute—isn’t that too silly, think of poor, dear Phil being a brute to anyone, least of all——”

“Rosalie!” shouted her father. She turned innocent eyes upon him, and upon Colt’s purpling face. “Oh, dear,” she pouted, “I can’t see what you’re all so solemn about. Thank goodness, Patty’s here. He always laughs at my jokes.”

Pattison did, then he pointed to the door. “There they are—no—by Jove! It’s Phil all alone!”

Rosalie turned swiftly to regard Colt’s son. She noticed in a flash his dark scowl—his flushed face.

“Well, what under the sun have you done with Daphne?” she shot at him before her father could stop her.

“She’s gone home,” muttered Phil, without raising his eyes.

There was an instant’s silence, then Colt, senior, rapped out sharply:

“Gone home! You mean——”

Phil nodded. “I’m off to bed,” he said shortly and turned on his heel. No one spoke. Rosalie and Pattison exchanged glances which Pattison’s wife, seated far down the table, caught with cynical amuse-

ment. Colt rose heavily. "I'll be back directly."

He went to his telephone cabinet. His hand trembled a trifle. His voice was hoarse. He asked for a number, then cleared his throat.

"That you, Van Steer?" he demanded. "Great speech of yours. Wanted to tell you so myself. I knew you were the man to do it." Then he proceeded with a degree of caution:

"Daphne home yet?" She wasn't and Colt breathed more easily. "She'll have some news for you tonight, Judge—some big news—we tried to keep her here but she wouldn't stay—said she wanted to race home and tell you. Yes, it's all right between her and Phil—you can tell her you knew it all the while—yes—yes—I'm immensely pleased. And, oh, about that money—forget it. She'll need every penny of it—dressmakers—tailors—milliners—hairdressers—and what not! You can tear up the note yourself if you like next time you come here—oh, it's nothing—absolutely nothing—of course, if she had turned Phil down—I should have been ugly. The Colts are used to having their way—but it's come out splendidly—splendidly. Oh, she's there, is she? Well, tell her I send her my love."

He hung up slowly. His face was flushed. He did not return at once to his guests—he sat with his hand clinched—rather as though he were crushing something in his powerful grip. Then he flung back his shoulders and sauntered in to them.

Van Steer looked up from the telephone to see his daughter swiftly crossing the room to his side. Her face looked strangely white—and tense.

“Daddy!” she cried, when she saw him, “I’m so glad you’re home.”

Van Steer rose and took her in his arms.

“Tell me all about it,” he said tenderly. He could not conceal the proud ring to his voice. “Not that I haven’t known it all the time.”

She started back from him. “Known what?—how could you know, when it only happened—tonight.”

He laughed at her, but he wondered a little that she seemed so deeply moved. He took her face between his hands and smiled down at her.

“And so it happened tonight! Come! Come! It’s time you stopped playing with me and told me the truth. I’ve guessed it, though—and Colt himself just called up to say it was all settled!”

“Colt just called up—all settled—what *are* you talking about?”

He humored her. “You tell me in your own way, from the beginning.”

She spoke rapidly, breathlessly. “Tonight when Philip and I were alone—he began again—I suppose he thought he had a right to—he had sent me a great many flowers—and then I think he had been drinking—a little. You know he had promised he would not ask me again—I told you that—but he

did—I tried to stop him—to get away—but he wouldn't let me—he caught me in his arms—he—oh—I can't bear to think of it." She covered her face with her hands and began to sob softly. Van Steer did not move—he continued staring at her stiffly, awkwardly as though he had not heard—she raised her head at length and met his gaze.

"As soon as I knew—realized that he was a beast—I—fought with him—I freed myself somehow—and then I ran—of course, he couldn't follow me there in front of all those people—so he let me go. Someone called my carriage for me and here I am." Then as if aware for the first time of the heavy silence, she glanced at her father. "What is the matter?" she asked quickly. "What's happened?"

He shook his head in a dazed fashion. "I don't understand. Colt telephoned. He said you and his son were to be married—that you had come home to tell me."

"That I had come home to tell you *that!* . . . Oh, you couldn't have heard right—you couldn't have—what did you say to him?"

Van Steer did not answer her, instead he shot another question at her. "But you *have* been engaged to Philip?"

"I—to Philip! Didn't I tell you I'd never marry him, never so long as I lived!"

"But he—I——" Then he groped his way to

his chair. "I don't understand," he whispered, sinking down. She stared at him.

"What was it Colt said? You haven't told me all. I was afraid of him—afraid of your going there—it happened then, didn't it? The day he sent for you?"

Van Steer rubbed his hand across his eyes and spoke dully. "Colt said it was a secret—that you yourself would tell me later. I was not to mention it—and so I haven't. And just before you came in—he telephoned me that it was all settled—and now you say it isn't true—none of it——"

Suddenly he pushed her away.

"My God!" he cried. "What am I to do! What am I to do!"

She stared at him. "What difference does it make what he said—what can he hope to have gained by telling you—it isn't as though he had lent you money or——" Something in her father's face stopped her short. She drew her breath in sharply. "So that's it—and from Colt. . . ."

Her father bowed his head. "He said it would buy your trousseau—I had so little—he made everything easy——"

She shook her head impatiently—her face white as marble.

"Yes—yes—he would of course—it's a trap—a trap to force me to marry Philip. How much did he lend you?"

Van Steer's lips moved. "Five thousand," he whispered.

"You still have most of it, haven't you?"

He shook his head. "There were so many debts—it seemed like a godsend—Colt said there would be more whenever I wanted it—I couldn't know that he—that you——"

"Oh, but you should have told me this!" she cried. "You should have told me this!" She paced the room restlessly, swiftly, then she stopped before her father. He was hunched in his chair, his head bent, his fingers plucking at his lips. He looked like a very old man.

Her eyes filled with quick tears and she flung her arms about his shoulders.

"Don't worry!" she said gently. "I'll get it somehow—find something left to sell—or—or marry someone who will pull us out of this hole—I'd rather take a day laborer than Colt's son."

She stopped short—and laughed a little as though the idea struck her as rather humorous. "No," she amended half to herself, "I don't believe I'd do that either," and she laid her cheek against her father's head. "There must be some other way."

May did not again broach the subject of Daphne. When they reached home she said a few words about the abominable pain in her head, which she remembered she was supposed to have—told Bill not to sit

up late as he was tired out, then ran lightly up the stairs, leaving him to himself for what she knew would be a fight to the finish.

He started after her almost as though he intended calling her back. He did not want to remain below alone. He thought, a trifle resentfully, that she might have sensed his unhappiness and stayed to cheer him up—to help him through the dark hours before him. And yet that was unreasonable. Why should he suppose she could know what he was passing through—she must not guess it—never—she must be forever shielded from the knowledge that he had discovered too late he loved another. If he were only free! free to bring Daphne to her knees!

He flung himself up and down the room with great strides, his hands clasped behind him. So he wasn't good enough for her—once she learned his origin!—somehow it had never occurred to him that she might take the news that way. No one else had. All the men and most of the women of Bethel knew his history. They had accepted him, but she shrank from him because he had stoked furnaces—he'd like to make her sorry for that—there was but one way to do it—one glorious way—to make her love him, as he loved her—to make those proud lips become tender, pleading—to press his own against them when they surrendered—that would be a triumph!—that would be snatching a star from heaven and bringing it to earth!

He paused before the window, breathing fast, his hands clinched. If he were only free . . . !

He flung open the window, as though the very air stifled him, he leaned far over and drank in the sweet, cool of the night. It brought him back to his senses with a shock that set him to trembling—it soothed his overstrung nerves like a balm.

He sank down in a chair and gripped its arms fiercely—he'd have it out with himself then and there—and settle it—he ground out angrily, between his teeth—settle it, so that he would never again be tortured by visions of what might have been his had he won the woman of his dreams.

He forced his mind to think, when his senses cried aloud to him—he went over each minute of his interview with Daphne—reviewed it coldly—save that his hands shook and his heart beat like a drum in his ears. In the first place the Colt man was to marry her—every one said it—Colt had family—position, and she as the last Van Steer had chosen this man for her mate. How yielding her body had felt in his arm! . . . How cruelly tempting her soft white throat and the splendid sweep of her shoulders! . . . He called himself up with a jerk.

Secondly, he resumed, with grim intensity, she had shown her aversion to him the instant he had told the truth about himself—it was her blood speaking—what in heaven's name had he expected her to do?—wasn't it enough that he had danced with her once—

hadn't he sworn that would satisfy him? Why did the mere thought of her send the color flaming into his face?

Thirdly—thirdly, there was May. May, to whom he owed everything—who had suffered humiliation for months because he had not known enough to ask her to marry him—who had been forced to broach the subject herself. He had told her he would make her happy—he had even planned an alluring future for them both—a future full of work and accomplishment and friendship—if only he had not seen Daphne—or seeing her had known enough to avoid her. Still, he argued with himself, how could he have guessed that the mere touch of her fingers would kindle his soul to sudden flame—that was it—a burning desire to go to her—to be with her—to make her care for him in spite of the fact that he was not of her world—if he was only free! . . .

He sprang to his feet with horror—would his mind ever travel in any save that eternal circle—a circle that spelled unhappiness for himself—for May—he wished May were there beside him. He felt sure that the pressure of her little hands might awaken in him the honor which seemed suddenly swept away—he wanted her—he would tell her what he was passing through—no, that would never do—he would make her talk of casual things—of their plans—of their hopes—just the sound of her voice would bring him back to himself.

He hurried up the stairs. He remembered, with a sharp stab, how he had raced to her door to tell her he was to make her happy as long as she lived—he wondered if men—other men he met and talked with passed through such crises as these—he wondered if Pattison, for instance—or Decker—— He had reached the top of the stairs and paused a minute collecting himself, steadying his nerves.

Then he found himself listening to a voice. It was May's and yet he was not sure—it was so strident—so full of venom. He listened—rooted to the spot, unable to move, his fingers on the handle of the door.

“I tell you he's wild about the woman—didn't I see his face when he danced with her—do you think I'm a fool!”

Monty's voice interrupted with a tormenting drawl, “Well, what of it? You can't prevent him falling in love with another woman, can you?—take my advice and tie him up hand and foot before he gets wise to you——”

She answered him shrilly, “Shut up, Monty. I've handled this business pretty well, haven't I? I'm not going to let him get away from me now, am I? Do you think I put up with a factory hand for nothing? I told you before he came that I was going to marry him and I will! Once we're back from the altar he'll find he's lucky to have any of his own money to spend.”

Bill staggered back. His face was white. He groped his way down the stairs. He stumbled back to his room he had just left and dropped into the chair beside the window. He was still there when day broke.

CHAPTER XX

THE AFTERMATH

MAY rose early to join Bill at breakfast. It was her theory that there was nothing like giving a man a taste of what he might reasonably expect afterwards as a steady diet, and however unpleasant the task, she made it a point to be on hand in a dainty negligee to pour his coffee. The fact that she knew herself to be at her best in billowy chiffon and lace may have had something to do with it.

After they were married, she assured herself repeatedly, when slipping reluctantly from beneath the warm covers to stand shivering under the sting of a cold shower—after they were married, she'd stay in bed as long as she pleased—all day if she chose—but now——

She selected a filmy gown of shell pink, with its froth of lace at neck and wrist. She bound her black hair tightly about her small head—she never wore boudoir caps—her head was entirely too well shaped. Then she surveyed herself in the glass.

“Even Daphne couldn't look better at eight A. M.,” she yawned, and flinging open her door, ran downstairs.

Bill was awaiting her in the breakfast room. She nodded to him brightly and re-arranged the roses on the table. It was one of her beliefs that a woman who played with flowers and children appealed to a man as charmingly maternal—she never failed to make the appeal when possible. She dropped into her place and waved her hand to his chair.

"Fruit's all ready," she called—then glanced up. He was standing in the doorway, his hands in his pockets. His face rather terrible, she thought, haggard—that was it—with blue shadows under his eyes and an ominous tenseness about his jaw.

"Bill!" she cried, leaping to her feet, "Are you ill? You look—you look——"

"No," he said slowly. "No, I'm not ill. I haven't slept, that's all."

"Oh!" she cried, "you poor boy! Let me get you some coffee—or—or——"

He shook his head. "I don't want anything. I'd like to talk with you—that's all."

She stared at him, a sudden fear gripping her heart. "Oh, Bill!" she gasped, "has anything gone wrong? Has the money you invested——"

He smiled. "Not that—it's something else."

She dropped back and hid the relief in her eyes by lowering them. She wished to goodness he would hurry and get it over with. It was so unpleasant and inconsiderate to start a discussion before having had a mouthful of food to sustain one.

"May," he said heavily, "I won't beat around the bush. There's no reason to. I heard what you said about me last night."

She sprang to her feet. "You heard——!" Then she recovered herself and laughed. "Oh, my fiendish temper makes me say such monstrous things! You mustn't mind me, Bill. I never mean a syllable of them!—never——"

He shook his head impatiently, as though she were interrupting a speech he had rehearsed a hundred times.

"I heard you last night. I didn't intend to listen. I was coming to ask you if you'd mind sitting up a bit with me. I was having a rocky time of it down here alone, and I wanted you. I was just about to knock when I heard your voice—I stayed, when I found out it was I you were talking about—and now I want to tell you that I'm going away——"

"Going away!" she shrieked, "going away! You can't do that! You can't do that! You've promised to marry me——" She caught her breath, and her eyes widened. "I'll sue you—that's what I'll do—I'll ruin you! I'll——" She was trembling and sobbing, her face distorted with fury. He regarded her with a cool impersonal interest that maddened her—it was as though she were a curious specimen of something he had heard about but never before encountered.

"I've been thinking it over. At first I decided to

leave at once—but I couldn't do that, and now I'm prepared to pay you any amount in reason—for your services to me in the past. If you do not accept it—if you insist upon dragging this matter into court I shall have to repeat what I heard you say. If you are sensible you will take the money and go away."

Her face was livid. "Take the money—go away!" she screamed. "Do you think I am a fool! Do you think I am blind! It isn't what you heard me say that's making you do this! I know what it is—yes, I do! It's that Van Steer girl. You want her now—you want to dangle your fortune and your house and your motors before her eyes—you—who couldn't use a knife and fork decently until I showed you how!"

He gripped the back of a chair. His fingers were white. "Take care!" he rapped out, "I haven't been a gentleman very long, and if you drag her name into this I'll treat you exactly as the men I came from treat a woman who's proved false to them!"

She shrank from him but her lips would not be stilled. "You think she'd take you—you think she'd put up with what I have! I tell you she wouldn't look at you if she knew where you came from! She's stone! she's ice! But that's not all! She's as bad as I am—yes, she is—for she hates Phil Colt, but she's marrying him for his money all the same! You think you can buy her, don't you? You think because you have money you can have any thing

you please! Well, you'll find she'll have you ordered off the place when she discovers that you and your father and his father before him were poor ignorant folks who didn't know enough to write their own names!"

The chair back snapped beneath his fingers and he flung it from him. He took one step toward her, then his clinched hands dropped to his side, his white face relaxed a trifle and he straightened up.

"I will mail you a check for any amount you name in reason," he repeated slowly. "You can send my things to my office," and he was gone.

May stared after him. She did not move for a long while—it was as though at a signal every nerve in her body had suspended action. Even her power to think coherently seemed suddenly to have deserted her. She remained inert—immovable. The maid venturing in, bent over her.

"Are you feelin' sick, ma'am?" she whispered.

May moistened her lips. "All right," she managed to say, "leave me alone."

The girl tiptoed out and May turned her head slowly. Bill's grape fruit in its cup of ice stood awaiting him. His tumbler was filled with cold water, his chair half drawn out. A slow smile curved the corner of her lips—an ugly smile. She leaned confidently toward the empty chair as though he were there, then she spoke.

"I'm not through with you yet," she said with a

little laugh and nod. "Not through with you yet. . . . !"

As far as the public were concerned, the engagement between May Larabee and Big Bill Matthews was broken off by mutual consent. A few of the older members of the Old Families clung to the belief that May, being a Newcomb, found she couldn't possibly marry a man of the people when it came to a showdown. But Bethel's younger set, knowing May for what she was, speculated wildly on the cause of the break. In fact, all Bethel hummed with the news which the crisp little column in the *Courier* announced. There was no answer to the thousand and one questions on every lip, for the Newcomb house was closed over night and the old caretaker installed knew only that May and Monty had left for parts unknown. As for Bill, he lived in an ante-room of his dingy office—a room rigged up with a cot and bureau, until the palace on the hill should be ready for his solitary occupancy.

The matrons of Bethel with marriageable daughters, passing the huge pile of stone and marble, gazed upon it covetously and returning home peppered Bill with invitations to their dinners and dances. He did not accept, however. He replied to their impassioned telephones briefly—the new row of workingmen's houses was going up on Factory Street and he had to be there himself night and day

to see that the job was well done—Bethel's matrons were discouraged, but they did not despair.

Mack noticed the change in him. Noticed it and shook his head.

"It don't do to work all the time," he cautioned, but Bill did not heed him. He rejoiced in his work. It gave him no time to think—to remember the vile torrent of words that had fallen from May's lips—the distorted hatred of her face—the sudden aversion in Daphne's eyes.

His faith in these women of his new world was cruelly shaken—shaken from its very foundation. These creatures, with soft, modulated voices which were in themselves a caress—said things they did not mean and meant things they did not say—how was one to trust them? Was that playing the game squarely? No, he did not believe in them. They were all alike. And he retreated into a shell of stern indifference, which rebuffed all attempts at friendliness.

Pattison alone invaded his office and gossiped about things in general. He had a keen curiosity to find out just what it was that had changed Bill. He could not believe it was the break with May—a man should offer a prayer of thanks for that! He was determined to ferret it out. Something had hurt the big man incalculably. What the dickens could it have been?

And because he saw his one salvation in work—

in gruelling—unsparing work—Bill plunged anew into the whirl. There were problems arising each day—no longer the old one of filling orders at the Works—never had its laborers turned out such quantity and quality of steel as under the new system. The imminent question was one of shipment—it was that which started in Bill's mind the plan which resulted in forming the Bethel Transatlantic Company—a company which came to astound the world by its very magnitude and daring. It began simply. Bill had asked Pattison to drop around—had something to talk over with him, and Pattison, knowing Bill's summons meant business, came.

It was an evening in fall. Pattison found Bill at his desk, still deep in work.

“Well,” he said, “what's up?” Bill dismissed the yard superintendent who had brought his report for O. K., told Mack to admit no one and pushed back his chair.

“A little proposition I've framed up. Just want to run over it with you.”

Pattison settled himself to listen and Bill waved his hand toward a pile of papers before him. “See them,” he said, “stack of complaints—that's what they are—about supplies being held up—kicks all around—more of them every day. I've been getting so many that I've tried to figure out something to meet the difficulty. I've smoked over it and slept over it and I've come to one conclusion——”

"Which is——?" prompted Pattison.

"Which is that the thing to do is to charter some old boats, and have our own little independent transatlantic delivery service which can ply back and forth, no matter who's at war with who."

Pattison reflected. "There was some talk about it, but we concluded we'd always let the foreign lines take care of our stuff, so why not continue?"

Bill hitched his shoulders impatiently. "There's a good reason. The best in the world. Aren't the powers abroad calling in more and more of their ships every day—they're probably grinning at us by this time for a lot of fools who are content to sit back cheerfully and let them kill our business for us instead of getting out and lining up a bunch of vessels of our own."

"Well, how do you know you could get hold of any boats that would carry a good sized cargo?"

"I know, because I've been in touch with some ship brokers who have tipped me off to some lake steamers. In fact, I'm going to take a run up to the Great Lakes and look them over as a starter."

Pattison considered. "Why not build your own boats?"

"Can't. The conditions in the shipyards are such they couldn't lay down a ship inside of two years."

Pattison whistled. "Looks as if you're not the first one to think of this. What are you going to do next?"

"If the proposition looks good to me, I'm going to form a company that will make the whole world sit up and take notice—provided I can get one thing I'm after. No, I won't tell you yet. Once the company's formed, and I find the Lake boats all right, I'll bring them down the St. Lawrence and put them in shape?"

"How do you mean?"

"Knock out their condensers and boilers. Can't use fresh water engines in salt water."

"That's right," nodded Pattison. "Displacement's greater, isn't it? You'll have to change the plimsoll, too. It'll take more cargo in salt."

Bill nodded. "They tell me the boats have a big cargo hold—made for carrying freight, and we can board up the state rooms."

"They sell by tonnage, don't they?"

"Yes," said Bill, "so much per gross ton."

"What do they run by, gasoline?"

"No, crude oil engines—full rigged ships you know, and the engine allows them to get in and out of port without being towed—reduces towing charges right there—just start your engine up and chug into any harbor."

Pattison was intensely interested. "By George! you certainly have gone into the thing, haven't you?"

Bill nodded. "It's been coming a long time and from the looks of things now the sooner I put it over the better."

"What do you figure doing? Buying the ships outright?"

Bill shook his head. "Not at present. Price is too high. You can charter right now for about a hundred thousand a month—the owner stands the expense of the crew and feeding and the company puts up the money for coal, port charges, insurance and wharfage."

"Look here," said Pattison. "Care if I come along when you run up to the Lakes?"

Bill smiled. "I was going to ask you to. I'm leaving in a few weeks."

"Right!" said Pattison. "There'll be no trouble about raising capital for that little scheme—it listens good."

"I haven't told you all of it," Bill concluded, "but I will as soon as I line it up."

Pattison sprang up. "Look here, I've got to meet Decker for dinner at the club—why not come along and slip it to him?"

Bill shook his head. "Not yet; besides I've got a lot of work to clean up here tonight."

Pattison laid his hand on his shoulder. "Don't go it too hard, old man—ruins your disposition and digestion. Think of Decker and his tablets—think of Colt and his grouch!"

Bill smiled. "If hard work's responsible for that, here's where I retire."

Pattison shook his head. "It isn't hard work

that's souring Colt so much as it is that scrapegrace son of his. He's in no end of hot water just now."

Bill started. "Why, I thought—I understood he was to marry——"

Pattison laughed. "Oh, haven't you heard? I mean about Daphne Van Steer throwing him and his millions down flat! Just like her, too. Plucky little thing. Hasn't a cent to her name—the old man let it slip through his fingers—and in spite of it she won't marry the only son and heir of the Colts. I call that ripping!"

Bill stared at him. "Thrown him over! You mean that in spite of all his money she has sent him away!"

Pattison grinned with delight. So he had struck it at last. It was Daphne the man wanted.

"I don't know what the dickens she's going to do now. She has had everything all her life, but it seemed the Judge has become mixed up in some way with Colt. Owes him a lot of money. I'd like darn well to help her out, but she won't take it from me, says she'll work. Isn't it immense the way women like her face a thing—no squirming—look it smack in the eye—even if it's a knock out!"

Bill sprang to his feet and whirled on Pattison, his eyes filled with a warm, glad light—the tired lines—the hardness about his mouth had vanished as though by magic. He grinned boyishly.

"I've been a fool, Pattison!" he shouted, "a

fool and I've you to thank for proving it to me! God bless you!" and he grasped his hand eagerly.

Pattison stared. "I don't get you," he lied, "but whatever it is, you're welcome. Coming?"

Bill smiled. "No, I can't. I'll look you up tomorrow, but not——"

"Oh, all right," nodded Pattison as he picked up his hat, "but remember that all work and no play——"

Bill laughed. "I'll remember," he promised.

Once outside Pattison shook his head. "Oh, Lord!" he sighed, "I suppose I should have stopped him. It's a shame to think what she'll do to him! Bill Matthews—and Daphne Van Steer! Why won't men with heads on their shoulders know their own limitations? Poor Bill!"

Bill remained a long while at his desk, his chin on his hand. Then he rose slowly. He squared his shoulders as a diver does before a plunge. He drew on his coat and switched off the light. He was not precisely sure just what he intended doing—it did not much matter—he was like a man who is drugged—who floats blissfully on the crest of the waves of thought—he would let his footsteps guide him. He was so happy he wanted to shout and laugh and sing. Instead, he plunged his hands in his pockets and ran down the stairs. He was not surprised to find himself moving toward Bethel proper. He wondered if she would be at home. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

MAN PROPOSES

BILL mounted the steps of the Van Steer home slowly. Even as he noted the beauty of its colonial simplicity, he observed its genteel shabbiness. It needed paint badly, and yet, without it, it rose stately and arresting. He rang the bell. An old butler in dingy livery flung open the door. He hesitated at Bill's impetuosity. He drew back mumbling that he was not sure if Miss Van Steer was in. He'd see. He admitted him grudgingly. There was a quality about Bill which the old man resented, he was too intensely alive—too vital—he had no business to come to Judge Van Steer's. They had done with energy there——

He left Bill in the massive library, the handsome room whose books had once been ranked among the world's greatest volumes. Bill gazed about eagerly. So this was her home. The place where she had played at being grown up and had finally emerged into the splendid creature he knew. It was like her—this room—beautiful but cold—but full of unexplored wonders—its volumes containing tears and laughter and warm, throbbing passions——

On the table a cluster of golden rod reared their yellow heads—that was like her, too—the unstudied simplicity. May would have chosen sunset roses, or white orchids, but golden rod. . . .

“Did you wish to see me?” He turned with a guilty start to find Daphne behind him. He was almost afraid she might read his thoughts.

She faced him gravely. He thought she looked pale and very tired—but her lips smiled cordially and she held out her hand. He took it in an agony of embarrassment. What could he say to her, to this princess in her castle? He did not know how to begin—if only one did not need words—if one could but cast them to the four winds——

She dropped in a low chair and nodded to another.

“I am very glad you have come, Mr. Matthews. I don’t know why you should or what your errand may be, but it gives me the opportunity to say something I have been wanting to say for a long while—ever since that night——”

He waited and she continued earnestly, her eyes on the window behind him:

“You were kind enough to tell me a little about yourself that evening. I don’t know why you did. I suppose it all came about through my recognizing you, and after you had told me—all, I—I didn’t quite know what to say,” she smiled at him. “I had never met any one—like you before and I thought—I supposed—oh, what I want to say

is that I'm sorry I acted as I did and that I admire you very much for all you have accomplished." Her eyes met his, and she was smiling frankly now. "There. Now you must tell me what you want. I know you won't mind if I don't give you a great deal of time because my father is not well, and can do so little toward helping with the packing, so I——"

"Packing!" he cried. "Are you going away?"

She nodded without meeting his eye. "Yes, I think it best. Father's health . . . so we're closing the old house and——" she stopped suddenly.

"But you're coming back?" he pursued.

She shook her head. "No, I don't think so. You see we are selling the things—we won't have any place for them—where we are going, and the house is so large it would be foolish to keep it, wouldn't it?" Again she paused, her head bent, then she raised it quickly. "But here I am talking about myself and you haven't said a word, have you? Now then, Mr. Matthews, what is it you want?"

He looked at her gravely—she was so slight—so beautiful. She was fighting this battle so bravely—her kind of women always did—thoroughbreds to the backbone. He resolved on a desperate step. "There is just one thing I want, Miss Van Steer," he said slowly—"and that is yourself."

She stared at him with startled eyes. "I don't understand," she said at length. He leaned forward.

"I know you don't. I scarcely understand my own

courage in telling you this. I don't believe I would dare except that I am afraid you may slip away somewhere before I can say it. I started to tell you that night. Then I stopped. I stopped because I was bound to May Larabee, and I had heard that you were to marry Colt's son. It seemed then that you were further away than ever and yet something told me that all obstacles would be swept aside—that we would come face to face this way some day and that I would be able to ask you to become my wife——” He waited for her to speak but she did not, so he plunged on boldly: “In spite of the fact that my people have always worked for yours—that I am nothing to you but a laborer who has a smattering of education—in spite of that—in spite of everything I'm going to have you. Yes, I am. You can't say no. You can fight against it any way you choose, but you are the woman I want. And what's more I'm going to make you proud to be——”

He stopped before the horror in her eyes. “How dare you! she gasped. “How dare you say such things to me!”

He smiled at her. He was not afraid now. No, he was carried on by something that swept fear aside. He wished he could take her in his arms, just once.

She had leaped to her feet. “I want you to go!” she was crying, her face scarlet. “I have done

nothing to let you suppose you could say—could think——”

“You are going to marry me!” he cut her short. “I always get what I set out to, and from the moment I saw you in your car I wanted you. I wanted you first of all because you were the sort of woman I felt I could never have—because you would be an ornament to the house I planned to build, because I could be proud to have you beside me in the motors I planned to own. But now I want you for one reason—and nothing this side of heaven will stop my getting you. I want you because I love you——”

“Oh,” she panted. “Oh——!” then she burst into tears, covering her face with her arm like a little girl. He took a step toward her, then stopped, his face white.

“I wouldn’t make you cry for the world. I wouldn’t hurt you for all the gold in creation. I don’t want to frighten you. If you come to me I swear I’ll never touch you until you ask me to. Never—but you will—and when you do—*when you do!* . . .”

He stopped, but she did not speak; and turning on his heel he left her. He did not dare remain another instant. When he reached the door he looked back. She seemed so little and alone in the cold shelter of the great room. “Don’t be afraid,” he whispered, “remember always I love you too well to hurt you.”

Somehow he gained the street—he tried to remember what he had said—but he could not—it was all confused—strange.

In the days that passed, his mind was in a state of turmoil. For the first time in his life he was not sure how to proceed. He was not sure of anything save that he must let her know that he was in earnest—that he wished to help her. A dozen times a day he framed a letter to her that would explain his outburst—only to tear it to pieces. A dozen times he lifted the receiver to speak the words that burned on his lips—but dared not. There were moments when he was grimly amused at himself. He had believed that love was a state which existed in books alone—well, he was learning each day what it meant to want a woman with one's whole heart and soul—to want her on any terms, so long as she came. . . .

Once he had caught sight of her in Bethel Proper. Had hurried toward her with a thumping heart, but she averted her head—he was not sure she had seen him—not sure until the sweep of crimson that flooded her throat and cheeks gave her away.

He wondered how under the sun he was to approach her!—if there were only someone to intercede for him! Then as though in answer to his unspoken prayer, he remembered Pattison's words—her father was in money difficulties with Colt—the thing to do was to see Van Steer—gain his confidence.

He wasted no time. He learned from Pattison that the Judge might be found at the Bethel Steel Club, where he had gone in search of Colt.

Bill hurried around. Yes, a page assured him Mr. Colt was there with Judge Van Steer. They had gone upstairs—he guessed they were in conference. Bill brushed the boy aside. He knew that Van Steer had come there for just one reason—to beg for mercy—Colt would refuse and that was the psychological moment to step in.

He found the room. He could hear Colt's curt growl—the words he did not catch, but he gathered from the tone that Colt was ugly—ugly and exceedingly irritated. He waited impatiently for the interview to end. It did. Rather more suddenly than he had expected. Colt flung open the door.

"Don't come here again, understand," he was snarling, when he caught sight of Bill. For an instant his eyes narrowed—but the moment's suspicion was swept aside. "Well, Matthews," he said pleasantly, "want to see me?"

"No," said Bill, quietly, meeting his eyes squarely. "Judge Van Steer."

Colt studied him a minute without speaking, then he bowed. "He's inside."

Bill waited until Colt had begun to descend the stairs—he did not wish an eavesdropper—then he entered the room and slowly closed the door behind him.

Van Steer was huddled in his chair. His face was gray. His lips dry. He mopped his forehead with nervous taps. Bill stood before him and the Judge raised his eyes. They were bloodshot—hunted.

When he saw it was a stranger he scrambled to his feet.

“You—you want Mr. Colt, don’t you?” he began hurriedly. “He was here a minute ago—he——”

Bill shook his head. “I’ve come to talk to you, Judge,” said he.

Van Steer hesitated. “I don’t know you.” He wondered with fluttering heart what this big man wanted of him. He wondered if he owed him money. But the man was smiling and Van Steer, miserable and ill at ease, waited.

“I reckon you know me, Judge,” he said slowly. “I’m Bill Matthews, of Bethel Steel.”

The Judge peered up at him with anxious eyes. “To be sure,” he said. “My eyes are so bad—I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do for you, Mr. Matthews.” He was pitifully anxious to get away—away from his bitter humiliation, but Bill was speaking.

“Well, perhaps there is something I can do for you,” he said easily. “I thought so or I wouldn’t have come around.”

“I don’t see——” broke in the Judge, but Bill cut him short.

“It’s this way. I can’t help having heard a thing

or two in Bethel about your being tied up with a deal that's going wrong. I'm not offering sympathy—nothing like that, but I've come here to say I want to help you."

The Judge had drawn himself up, his thin cheeks flushed.

"I can't see, sir, why you as a stranger should—suppose I would—accept assistance from you!"

"You can, when I tell you that I am doing this because I care for your daughter—I want to marry her—that gives a man a right to come to a woman's father in time of trouble, doesn't it?"

The Judge stared at him. "You say you care for my daughter?" he repeated, then he shook his head. "There must be some mistake, sir. I have never heard her speak of you."

Bill smiled. "I didn't expect her to—you see, my people and yours are as far apart as the poles."

"Your people? I don't understand——"

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm as proud of my ancestors as you are of yours—the only difference is that mine worked as wage earners in the factory that yours built and owned. Your daughter won't overlook that fact."

"But there is nothing I can do if she——"

"You're wrong there. You can. You can tell her what she will not give me a chance to say—you can tell her that the one reason I want her is because she is the only woman I ever have cared for. Because

I am certain that I can make her care for me—— You can tell her that I want her now because she is in trouble and it will be my right to shield and help her—you can tell her that as my wife she will be absolutely free to live her own life until she is content to give herself to me. My record is clean—I've worked hard all my life—and I'm not ashamed to come to her or to you——”

He stopped suddenly. After all, what reason had he to suppose Judge Van Steer would care—there were other men in Daphne's life. Had he aimed too high—was she beyond him? He flung himself to his feet.

“Look here,” he shot out passionately, “if you loved a woman it wouldn't matter how you went about it so long as you got her, would it?—well, that's about the size of it. I'm going to have her and I want you to help me—what's the answer?”

The Judge was staring at him—he was amazed—bewildered—but he was also impressed—impressed and carried away by relief. What in heaven's name did Daphne want? Here was a man whose name was on every lip—a genius of finance—a steel wizard—a man who *was* a man!

“I can promise nothing,” he found himself saying. “She has a mind of her own in these matters.”

Bill's face flushed eagerly. “Then you will talk to her—tell her what I have said?”

The Judge bowed. “I see no reason why she

should not hear what you have just told me," and he held out his hand. Bill grasped it warmly.

"Thank you," he cried boyishly. "Thank you."

Daphne was amazingly non-committal as she listened with flaming cheeks to her father's recital. Then she turned on him.

"The man's impudence is monstrous—if he weren't an upstart—if he weren't——"

The Judge's thin face was pinched with anxiety.

"Well, what are we to do?" he demanded, querulously.

She faced him. "I said I would work. Once we're away from Bethel I shall find a place—there must be a hundred things for a girl to do."

"Yes, but you haven't thought what will become of me all the long days that you are away from me, have you? You haven't thought how I shall manage to exist in some little room in a lodging house—hour after hour alone—I, a Van Steer—you haven't thought of that, have you? Surely, Daphne, it's time you considered someone beside yourself!"

"Someone beside myself!" she gasped. "Oh, father!" then stopped short. The weak tears of old age were coursing down his cheeks.

"Here is a chance—an honorable chance, to save us—but you won't take it—no, you'd rather rob me of my home—my books—my very life—do you think I can live that way—it's not as though I were

young—I'm an old man—and now—now—I shall have to give up all this. It's too hard—too hard."

She was breathing rapidly. It seemed as though she could not bear to see him weep—as though the sound of his broken sobs would wrench her heart—suddenly she flew to him and flung her arms about his neck.

"Don't—don't!" she cried. "I'll do anything—anything to make you happy—you shall stay in Bethel—you shall stay here. It would kill you to go—yes—yes—I know it would. I'll marry him—do you hear me, I'll marry him. He has promised to let me live my own life—you heard him say so—all he wants is to boast that he has been able to—to buy me. I know his kind—but he is better than Phil—or the others—they wouldn't promise—yes, I'll do anything you want me to—Daddy, write to him—tell him I'm ready—nothing matters but you——"

Bill received the Judge's letter next morning. He did not open it until he had read his others—he did not dare. At length he broke the seal. He turned it over and stared at the signature, "Trowbridge Van Steer." His hand trembled a trifle as he straightened it out and began at the beginning. It was in the Judge's graceful hand—an unparalleled opportunity for a rhetorical outburst.

"I have the honor to inform you that my daughter Daphne has reconsidered her decision——"

Bill dropped it and stared before him. Reconsidered—then that meant—everything. . . . She was to be his after all—his—— He leaped up—he thrust his papers aside—he did not answer Mack's questions—he caught up the letter and pulled on his hat—he could not remain indoors—the sky alone could bound his feelings. He wanted to be alone—to think——

The crisp chill in the air filled his lungs—he breathed deeply—his eyes alight. Oh, it was good to be alive! . . .

"I have the honor to inform you that my daughter Daphne——" His heart sang loud in his ears—he struck out—he did not care where. He must think—that was it—think of this new wonder.

It seemed to him as though all his life had been a preparation for this event. The grilling years of his youth—the tremendous struggle to survive had made his body strong—his mind alert—proved his fitness to live and conquer.

This was his triumph. All he had striven for—wealth—position—all was but paving the way for the time when she would join her hand in his. He and Daphne Van Steer. . . ! He a slave at the plant, she the daughter of a man who had never worked in his life. . . !

He wondered what May would say when she heard. "She's stone! She's ice! She'll never look at you when she knows where you come from!"

But she had! She had!

He wondered what Nedda would say—little Nedda of whom he had not thought of for many a long month! She would be happy for him. She would listen with eager eyes and folded hands while he told her about it all—she had always rejoiced in his triumphs——

He found his footsteps turning toward the Works—he was not surprised—he wanted to go there—it called him as a parent her child. He wanted to confide his joy to the roaring furnaces—the shrieking saws. . . .

He entered the yard—he smiled at the grimy men who scuttled back and forth—each intent on his little task—perhaps they, too, had hopes and dreams of power. He drew near the great basic furnaces—the sparks were red—a sheet of flame—the wave of heat reached out and enveloped him—he luxuriated in its fierceness—it was like a parent's arms folding him close.

He grinned as the men sprang back—he could stand the scorching—he had stood it for fifteen long years without a quiver—he wasn't going to flinch before it now! It seemed to call to him—to whisper to him as in the old days—a refrain which set his pulses leaping—— “Power—power—more power——” That was it! He had set a goal for himself in the clouds—and he had reached it—he had said a man who could control steel could control

the world! He had proved it! That was what steel taught her sons—to be fearless—to be strong—or go under . . .

His breath quickened—his heart beat rapidly in answer to the thunder of the hammer as it crashed on white hot steel—“Power—power—more power,” he shouted, then quite suddenly he shut his eyes, “God make me good to her—always,” he prayed. He was not sure what made him do it. He had not prayed for a long while.

Two weeks later they were quietly married in the library of the Van Steer home, and at nightfall Bill and his bride set out for the great house on the hill which shone its welcome to them from every window.

CHAPTER XXII

THE HOMECOMING

THERE was a staff of eager servants awaiting them, headed by Mrs. Kemble—the house-keeper—a round-faced, cheery little woman. She was fairly a-tiptoe with excitement.

The machine drew up at the door—his door. The servants ran down to assist with the robes—his servants—and he leaped out and gave his hand to the woman who had come to rule over his house—the exquisite creature of snow and fire who had given herself into his keeping.

She let her hand rest on his arm—so lightly he scarcely felt it. Her eyes were weary as though she had not slept for many nights but her face lightened and her lips smiled as she greeted the servants—all curious for a glimpse of their new mistress. Mrs. Kemble bustled forward importantly.

“You’ll be wanting to go to your room, Mrs. Matthews, and take your things off before you look around.”

“Yes, please,” she said almost eagerly, and then as though fearing her voice had betrayed her, she turned to Bill.

"Shall I do that?" she asked, without meeting his eyes. He nodded.

"Yes—and I'll join you at supper—afterwards we'll stroll through the rooms, if you like."

She did not answer but followed Mrs. Kemble to the lift. He watched her regal bearing—the chiseled beauty of her white face. She was glorious—superb—and she was his. . . .

He hurried to his own room—he wanted to dress—dress for their first supper together. He had chosen the east wing—and had given her the south. She was to be free until she came to him. He wondered if he could wait for the woman of ice to melt—would it not be best to sweep her to him—to make her feel at once the strength—the fire of his love? He shook his head. She had come to him for one reason only—to save her father from ruin—he had given her his word—if she were only not so beautiful . . .

He met her at the foot of the great stairway. She had dressed in a gown of pale green that made her look like a sea sprite—it was a liquid color—which offset the red lights in her hair—the whiteness of her throat and arms. He stared at her for a minute and she returned his gaze with eyes a trifle wide. She was afraid—he told himself—afraid of him . . .

"Shall we go in?" he said abruptly. She nodded; he thought she seemed relieved, but she did not answer.

He had built two dining-rooms—one a splendid affair of beamed ceilings and carved wainscoting—a place for banquets and feasting. The other, a tiny bower of blue tinted walls and soft hangings—a room created solely for the delectation of a bride and groom. He entered eagerly—the glow of shaded candles—the gleam of silver and glass-ware—the sheen of damask—all seemed to him charmingly intimate. But she hung back, as though distrusting its warm coziness—its dainty comfort. Then she recovered herself and took her place at the table.

The butler served them, and withdrew discreetly. Neither spoke—it was almost as though they were an old, staid couple, completely at ease in each other's company. Bill was content to look at her—he rejoiced in the colors and lights in her hair—the sweep of her dark lashes—the slenderness of her throat—the rise and fall of her bosom.

She did not touch her food, she toyed with it, but at length laid down her fork.

“Let them bring you something else,” he urged.

But she shook her head. “Nothing,” she replied. Her voice was so low he scarcely heard. She was frightened, he concluded—and what was more she wouldn't show it—not for the world!—blue blood that!—scared to death—but going through with it like a thoroughbred!—yes, by George! game to the backbone! He leaned toward her.

"This house is yours—these servants are yours—you are to do whatever you please—see whom you please, understand?"

She raised her eyes to his.

"I shall do whatever you wish," she answered him.

Whatever he wished! By George! if she did that she would let him catch her in his arms—let him press his lips to her hair—her lips—her throat—whatever he wished! How was he going to live in the same house with this woman and keep a sharp hold on himself—— He had given her his word. . . .

She must have read something of this in his eyes, for she lowered her own and waited.

"You will be free to come and go as you choose—I shall be busy—very busy for a time—big scheme on with Pattison—there'll be days and weeks when I shall have to be away—I shall never interfere with you—but I want to say this now—and then we'll drop the subject forever. You're going to care for me some day—and when you do—I shall tell you all the things I should like to say to you tonight."

A warm flame of color leaped to her face but she did not reply.

"You are very kind," she answered him. "I shall always do as you wish," and they spoke no more.

After supper he took her through the chain of rooms. She followed him quietly.

She was like a guest—a guest who is rather diffident, only when she came face to face with the great Van Dyck, "Mary, Duchess of Norfolk," which had been purchased for him at a fabulous price from the Earl of Wrexall's collection—only then did her manner change.

"Oh, how splendid," she cried, "how wonderful to own a painting like that!"

He was pleased. Personally, he preferred a little study by an unknown artist—a thing of warm color and bold strokes showing the dirt-streaked face of a stoker in the red glare of a furnace fire.

They entered the music room. It was a beautiful room, rising to a lofty ceiling—a room in which rich brown tones entered largely into the walls and furnishings. A fire leaped in the hearth, the only light. Before it was spread a white bear rug—an enormous shaggy skin, fully ten feet long. She dropped on a couch back from the fire's glare—half in shadow—but he stood before the fireplace facing her. She seemed unconscious of him except for a certain tension about her lithe body—her hands were so tightly clasped that the fingertips and nails showed white.

He smiled a trifle. She did not trust him—that was it—she was on her guard—he didn't blame her either—he scarcely trusted himself. At last he spoke.

"There is one thing I'd like you to do for me."

She looked up, startled. He could see the quick fear in her eyes. He fumbled in his pocket.

"I want you to wear this——"

She smiled in sudden relief—as he dropped into her hand the bracelet whose green stones so curiously matched her eyes.

She examined it without comment.

"I bought it for you long ago—very long ago—I hoped some day I might give it to you—it's of no great value but I should like to see it on your arm."

She slipped it over her fingers and wrist—she nodded.

"I shall be glad to wear it."

A long silence fell. The fire had changed to the deep crimson glow that turns to embers—the shadows in the room had lengthened. He could not see her face—though her neck and arms gleamed like snow and the firelight played fitfully on her skirt—her ankles.

Suddenly she rose. "May I go—now," she said. "I'm very tired."

He bowed—he did not trust his voice. He must hold on to himself. He was going to have a bad time of it if his heart thumped every time she spoke—if his hands trembled . . .

"I hope you will be happy here—I hope you will not regret——" he said stiffly—then stopped—she had reached the door—she stood framed there—a startled, slender creature with parted lips and stormy

eyes—never had she seemed so adorable—so utterly desirable. He called himself a fool to let her go from him thus—on their bridal night—did she think that water ran in his veins instead of blood—did she think . . .

“Wait,” he commanded hoarsely—he reached her side.

“After all, you *are* my wife——” he heard himself crying, “after all the law permits——”

She had not moved, only her breath fluttered—then she spoke swiftly—desperately.

“The law permits you to do as you choose—but if you touch me—if you touch me after what you have promised, I shall hate you—hate you—hate you as long as I live——”

Her voice startled him. The flush in his face receded—he bowed.

“Of course,” he said, “you are quite right—I forgot for a moment—the darkness—your beauty—it was like wine. I shall not forget again. Good-night——” and he turned back to the fire. When he looked around she was gone.

He paced the room swiftly—it seemed narrow—oppressive. He must have wide spaces and the slap of cold air on his face. He went outdoors.

The first frost of fall lay like a mesh of silver on the ground. The moon clear and liquid rose above the trees.

A night for love—a night supreme—and he was

alone—alone with the tormenting vision of her. He started quickly down the long driveway—his head flung back—his lips grim. . . .

Late that night he returned and let himself in—all was still, but the warm, heavy fragrance of flowers smote him—he reached his room. His valet had laid out his smoking jacket—his slippers—so he was to be a bachelor—a bachelor with the one woman beneath his roof who set him on fire—he must be patient—that was it—patient—she'd come to him and when she did . . . That time would be well worth waiting for!

Bethel was thunderstruck by the news. At first it flatly refused to believe it. What else would they credit that Matthews man with doing? Marry a Van Steer! Anyone knew it was ridiculous—going a bit too far. But when the license bureau confirmed the story—when the Reverend Dr. Thomas admitted having tied the knot, then and only then, did Bethel sit back—aghast—wondering with varying degrees of trepidation—what Bill Matthews would tackle next—what else was there left for him to do? Had not Daphne refused Colt's son—Cyrus P. Colt's only heir—what was there about this big man from Factory Street that had conquered where Phil had failed?

The group that met at the Golf Club talked the

matter over eagerly before the leaping fire in the billiard room—Pattison was there, his golf bag beside him—and Rosalie, a flash of triumph in her eyes.

“Poor Phil,” she grinned. “Won’t it be a knock-out for him?”

Pattison shook his head. “By Jove!” he muttered, “It’s uncanny the way Bill sails in and gets things—only the other day I laughed at the idea of his playing around Daphne and now——”

“Well, what’ll he do next?” shouted one of the men. Pattison looked up.

“That’s the question. What *will* he do next? He’s just begun, hasn’t he?—just feeling his wings—if he doesn’t get drunk with power—or lose his head—there’s no telling where he *will* land up.”

“Think of May Larabee when she reads this,” sighed Rosalie, her chin in her hand. “I’d give my brand new, blue satin, go-to-meeting dress to see her!”

The men laughed, but deep in the heart of each was a certain resentment toward having in their midst a force—so fearless and of such colossal assurance. Sometimes power was destructive as well as constructive—who knew in what direction Bill’s next drive might lie. They were not sure they precisely liked associating with a man who conquered life’s crushing forces so magnificently—who succeeded in spite of the crushing disadvantages under

which he had been born. They had read of such men—these sons of established fortunes—their grandfathers and great-grandfathers had been specimens of this type—but it was a different matter to find one in their very midst—they were a little afraid of him—a little uncomfortable in his presence—and hang it all—they didn't want to feel uncomfortable—it was not a part of their pampered existence to bow the knee to anyone—granted he was a wizard—why the dickens couldn't he have been a remote one! They shook their heads and stared into the fire. What next?

Colt received the news in black silence—Perkins read it to him with averted eyes and lowered voice. It was his custom to summarize Bethel's news while Colt smoked his after breakfast cigars. Colt made no remark beyond, "What's the outlook for the British loan?" and Perkins withdrew. When he was alone Colt picked up the sheet and skimmed the announcement, then he dropped his lighted cigar and stared with half shut eyes at the wall.

So he'd done it!—he'd walked off with the woman who had rejected his son—he had made the Colts the laughing stock of Bethel—but more than that he had saved the pride of the Van Steers—the pride that Colt had planned to lay low in the dirt—to grind beneath his heel. Well, there'd be some way to get even—some way—he must think—

think—how to pierce this man's armor—his damned impudence—his tremendous energy. Colt flung himself to his feet and paced. He had said this man was a menace—but they had not listened to him—no, instead, they deferred to his judgment—accepted his plans—hung on his very words before taking action—this man was a giant—a giant who had the Big Four under his thumb—was actually forcing them to take him into partnership. It was inevitable—the other three wanted it—the Board of Directors wanted it—the whole town of Bethel wanted it!

Man alive! Were they mad! Blind! Hypnotized by this man who walked rough shod over the difficulties that crushed other men on the way! That should by right have crushed him! The laborers adored him—the tradespeople adored him—the very hill-top aristocrats adored him. Colt clenched his fist—the whole town of Bethel was on its knees to him because he had renovated a street of slums—there must be an end to his increasing power—his growing following. . . .

And now he had won this woman—by that stroke he had settled all doubts as to his abilities—he was no longer a ruler of men—but of women as well—he had chosen the only daughter of Bethel's oldest family. How he would crow over his conquest—how proud of her he would be! Colt knew why she had done it. To spite him. That alone had driven her into this man's arms—she would soon be sick

of the bargain—and when she was—if Philip could but be on hand . . .

He rang for Perkins.

“Send Mr. Phil here,” he ordered. Philip’s valet returned with the news that his master was sleeping. He did not meet Colt’s eyes, but Colt knew.

“Drunk again?” he snapped. The valet cleared his throat.

“Oh, no, sir, not that—just resting—he came in late.”

“Wake him up,” thundered his father, “and send him to me.”

Philip appeared somewhat later, white of face and dull of eye, his green dressing gown flapping about his bare ankles.

“Well, what is it now?” he grumbled. “Can’t you let a fellow sleep?”

His father regarded him coldly and concluded he had not heard the news. He launched the blow. “That Van Steer girl’s married.”

Phil started. “Married? Who said so?”

Colt waved his hand to the paper. “There it is. She married Matthews—Bill Matthews.”

Phil flung back his head and roared. “Come off, Dad,” he shouted. “Who’s been stringing you?”

For answer, Colt thrust the sheets between his son’s hands. Phil glanced at them and the smile on his face suddenly froze.

At length he looked up.

"What made her do that?" he demanded slowly.

Colt could have answered that it was another evidence of the man's strange power; instead, he shrugged.

Philip dropped the sheet. "I don't believe it!" he cried. "It's a lie—they make mistakes sometimes—they——"

"Believe it or not—it's true."

Philip turned on his father with a snarl. "It's your fault—yes, it is—he's probably pulled her out of the hole you got her into—I told you to keep out of it—I told you you'd queer it."

Colt dropped into his chair and crossed his knees.

"Well, it's done now so there's no use growling about it. Why don't you marry Rosalie and show Daphne you don't give a hang——"

"Show her," cried Phil. "Do you suppose she'd even take the trouble to notice who I married?"

His father reflected. "I don't believe it will last," he said, watching his son closely. He was repaid. Phil's face suddenly cleared.

"What makes you say that?" he asked in a voice he tried to make casual.

"Why," said Colt, "I figure he did it to show Bethel he can have what he wants. He'll get tired of her. She's not his kind. He won't know how to handle her—she'll get on her uppers—then there'll be a row. He'll go in for politics or something as soon as the novelty wears off."

"That would leave her alone a good bit, wouldn't it?" demanded Phil, suddenly.

Colt bit off the end of a cigar. "Yes," he said, striking a match. "I expect it would."

CHAPTER XXIII

BILL PLANS A TEST

DUGAN, the party Boss, chose a stick from his bag, grinned at his caddie and turned to his secretary, Loomis, who followed him slowly over the links.

"Pretty drive, wasn't it?" he demanded. Loomis nodded, his face dark. "I tell you," continued Dugan with unusual loquacity, "it takes a strong arm and a steady eye to play this game—I've told ye countless times, Loomis, that it will be the makin' of ye—come now, try a stroke."

Loomis shook his head. "Foggarty'll be on the wire at twelve. It's quarter of now."

"Tush," grunted Dugan, frowning. "It's interferin' with me game, he is! Didn't you tell him I was busy?"

"He says Gardner isn't strong enough to run—after that graft he pulled off when he was district attorney—he says——"

"Is that what's bothering ye?" inquired Dugan. "Why didn't ye say so?"

"If Gardner doesn't go up on the ticket—who will—who else *is* there?"

Dugan winked. "Sure, an' I've got a little surprise for the party."

Loomis whirled. "A black horse?"

Dugan nodded. "Yep. Had my eye on him for two years—he's a great little proposition, Loomis—a great little proposition—I picked him for a winner way back—and what has he done but proved it to me again this mornin'."

"Who is it? Dixon?"

Dugan shook his head. "No, somebody that's got seventy thousand votes to start with—and no end of money to go on with."

"Is he in the game?" asked Loomis, puzzled. Dugan laughed.

"He is not. He's like a babe unborn where politics are concerned, but we'll educate him, Loomis, we'll educate him."

"Who is it?" demanded Loomis, bluntly. "I ought to know."

"In time," said Dugan, nodding. "Ye shall." Then as though dismissing the subject he remarked, lightly, "Did ye read in the mornin' paper that Judge Van Steer's girl had married Bill Matthews?"

Loomis was quick to understand.

"Bill Matthews," he gasped. "Bill Matthews! Well, I'll be——"

"Come on," cut in Dugan, sharply, "or I'll never finish this hole before lunch."

The Matthews household moved on oiled wheels.

Mrs. Kemble managed the staff with a degree of efficiency amazing in so small and amiable a body. Daphne, in accordance with Bill's wish, planned a series of dinners which inaugurated Bethel's fall season. They passed off quietly and the guests who came, thrilled with the prospect of seeing a cowed Daphne or a brusque Bill, found the affairs altogether commonplace in their very smoothness and elegance.

Daphne was a charming hostess—lovely—gracious—at ease. She fitted into the beauty of the big house—like a jewel in its setting. As for Bill, he was the same great, quiet man they had always known. When he spoke he spoke convincingly and to the point, but he preferred to listen and as Pattison put it, "Keep his eye on his wife. If any man ever had a hobby, she's his!"

No, Bethel's watchful matrons could detect no flaw in the happiness of the Matthews. Daphne was evidently radiant—perhaps she had married him for love after all. Who knew?

But beneath her sweetness, her consideration for his wishes, her yielding to his slightest command, Bill felt the growing certainty that she would never change. That she tolerated him simply because she had agreed to—that she would see the bargain through as long as he kept to his end of it, but that the instant he crossed the line drawn by her, she would leave him.

Never since the night of her arrival had he lost his grip on himself. She had helped him by surrounding herself with friends. She brought them home to luncheons—to dinners—she was simply determined to keep up the looks of the thing—to foil Bethel in its effort to scent a break—but as he became more and more absorbed in his marine plans, he urged her to go—and at length she went, but never without his consent and knowledge. Oh, she was playing the game squarely enough—all the cards on the table—but even at that it looked as though he might hold a losing hand.

He loaded her with gifts—the things women of her world expected as their tribute and she accepted them quietly with a studied thanks which had to satisfy him. She wore the splendid jewels he gave her dutifully. He was increasingly proud of her—filled with a fierce joy when men whispered to him that he was a lucky boy and women sighed in his ear that they could not expect him to look at them with such a wife!

He wondered at times, a trifle cynically, what they would say if they knew that she was a stranger to him—that he had never held her in his arms—never felt the glory of her surrender. True, she was no longer afraid and there were times when he wished she were—it looked so much as though her active dislike of him were turning to passive indifference—anything but that!

He seldom saw her until dinner and then often in the company of others. Only when driving home from some function—when alone with her in their car—her warm presence stirring him—was he resentful and shaken. How long? he would mutter fiercely. How long?

He had a great hold on himself these days. He even trusted himself with tucking the robes about her knees, with adjusting the window, which necessitated his leaning close to her and inhaling the tantalizing fragrance of her hair. How long? his soul cried out in torment.

As for his business—his new business of chartering ships—of interesting capital—of issuing stock—it absorbed every minute of his waking hours. The Bethel Transatlantic was materializing—the skeptics were completely carried away by his boundless enthusiasm and eagerness—he planned—he figured—he acted. The work was a safety valve for his emotions—he gave to it all of himself unstintingly.

He and Pattison left for the Great Lakes, inspected the boats—paid down their ten per cent deposit and took an additional option on a group of river barges. They chartered a fleet of wooden schooners—the auxiliary type with the semi-Deisel engines—boats that could make nine knots an hour. They did not stop there. They chartered a fifteen-hundred ton dead-weight cargo steamer—and a number of ore-collectors—prime boats for their purpose.

It was about that time that Pattison was suddenly smitten with panic.

"Look here," he cried. "What are we going to do about a pier?"

Bill grinned. "I've thought of that already. Got one I can lease from the European Dock Company. We'll have to have more than one—shouldn't be surprised if we have another at Newport News—maybe at Baltimore and Boston later—depends on how things go."

And one day, flushed with triumph, he called an informal meeting of the officers—and laid before them the crowning effort of his entire scheme.

"Do you remember," he said to Pattison, "my telling you the proposition would be a great one provided I could get one thing I was after?"

Pattison nodded.

Bill smiled at him. "Well," he said, "I've got it!"

"Let's hear it," prompted the committee.

"It's just this," Bill told them. "Now that we have our own boats we can get our stuff across the water without any trouble—no delay there—but it's when it reaches the other side that the check comes. Supplies tied up for months waiting a chance to dock."

"Everyone's up against that, aren't they?" put in Decker. "It's one thing you can't get around."

"You can," Bill flashed, "and what's more I have. I figured that what we needed was a foreign port of

our own—an exclusive port, open only to vessels flying the Bethel Transatlantic colors, so I felt around, and after a time opened negotiations with France.” He paused.

“Well?” they caught him up.

“Well,” he continued, “It looks very much as though she’d consent.”

“Consent to closing a harbor to all ships but ours——” exploded Decker. “It doesn’t seem reasonable.”

“Wait a minute. It’s provisional, of course. In return for the use of her port, we are to agree to develop it—make a center of it—take over our own engines and trains—lay our own tracks—build our own buildings—make a city of it in short. It’ll work both ways. The people over there buying things from us will be guaranteed delivery—they’ll turn all their orders our way to save time.”

They stared at him, and Decker—his voice trembling a trifle—leaned forward. “It would mean that we could dictate our own terms to any other company desiring to use our port?”

“Exactly,” agreed Bill. “We’ll have the one and only direct route and harbor rights in the world!”

“Great!” gasped Pattison. “That’s immense!”

The meeting broke up late. Pattison lingered to add his word of praise. “It’ll make a world power of you, Bill,” he said. “Think you can stand it?”

Bill smiled. "I'll try."

Pattison shook his head. "I don't know how you get hold of such schemes. You were born thinking great things. What does your wife say to it? I'll have to ask Daphne how it feels to be married to a genius."

Then as Bill did not answer, Pattison saw in a flash the truth, and cursing his stupidity, plunged on, "Or maybe you're like I am—never discuss business after hours. Mrs. Pattison wouldn't know a gilt-edge security from a hole in the wall!"

Bill turned his head away. "I'm glad it strikes you O. K.," said he abruptly.

Pattison nodded. "Right between the eyes—it's a knock-out!"

When Bill reached home, the butler informed him that Mrs. Matthews was serving tea in the library. He was glad she was at home. He felt all at once very tired. He would talk to her, perhaps he would tell her a very little of his plan—he had never ventured to before—he had always felt she would not care to hear—but perhaps she might. . . .

He parted the curtains and glanced in. Then he dropped them with a quick exclamation. Leaning toward her, his dark, sleek head bent close to hers, was Philip Colt. . . .

He hesitated, battling with the sweep of emotion that overwhelmed him. He was astonished at see-

ing him there—he was alarmed. He had looked upon this man's friendship with Daphne as a closed chapter of her life. What was he whispering to her? How often had he been there before? He was afraid to remain alone with his thoughts. He was afraid to enter. He did, however, and greeted Phil, cordially. Daphne made room for him beside her. If it surprised her to have him return home early she made no comment.

Phil held the floor. He was describing a race he had seen. He did it with animation and charm. Bill moved uneasily. Phil, with his easy, polished way, made him feel his own crudeness—no, not crudeness, but his size—his comparative awkwardness—his deliberateness in speech—Bill had never developed any degree of fluency in talking with Daphne. How could he?

He observed her closely. She seemed glad to see Phil. Not flagrantly glad, but deeply contented as one is to welcome back an old friend.

After he had gone Bill determined to allude to it, but could not. He found himself tongue-tied—mute. He was not sure he knew what it was he wanted to tell her—certainly not that he objected to Phil—he had given her free rein to choose her own friends—he couldn't retract that!

And as he struggled silently for an opening wedge, she left him with a word about dressing for dinner and he was alone—the tea things scattered about

him. Two empty cups—Phil's and hers—two plates of half eaten cakes. He shook himself together and called himself a fool—didn't he trust her? Was he afraid of a man like Philip Colt taking her from him?—and then the ugly thought crept in, in spite of him. She *had* been reported engaged to Colt. Why had she broken it off? What was the real reason? Perhaps she still cared for him. . . . He sneered at himself—jealous—well, he *was* a fool! and he strode angrily to his room.

The next time he saw them together was in Phil's racer. It was from a window of the Bethel Steel Club. He was to meet Pattison there for lunch and was awaiting him, when the long, red car shot around the corner of Dumont Street and came to a stop opposite the club. There was no mistaking the occupants. Daphne's laughing face was turned toward him, but she did not glance up at the club. Bill's heart contracted suddenly—how young she looked—how happy. All the wealth he had poured into her lap could not make her smile thus—could not win for him a laugh from her lips.

That night at dinner she explained it. Not that he asked it of her, but rather as a topic of conversation.

"I was walking to town this afternoon and Phil happened along. Wasn't it good of him to give me a lift? It is such a long mile!"

He made no comment but he was glad she had told him—absurdly glad. At least she was hiding nothing—holding nothing back. Then in the same instant he was blindly, toweringly furious—furious with himself. Why in thunder didn't he tell her he objected!—tell her he wouldn't have that whelp around!—tell her it was high time she stopped trifling and became his wife in earnest! He didn't. Instead, he left her abruptly to a group of friends who had arrived—and locked himself in his study.

He was in a savage mood—a mood that chafed at restraint—a mood that longed for the days when a man went out and slew a poacher. He was letting her make a fool of him—he was letting her surround herself with a bodyguard of friends that kept him at arm's length—oh, yes, it was all deliberate—all cunningly planned. Something he could not contend with—a phase of higher civilization as successful in guarding one's person as the thick walls and moats of old.

If she wanted Colt, why the deuce hadn't she taken him when she had the chance? Phil was courteous where he was rough—thoughtful where he was heedless—quiet where he was noisy—— Why hadn't she taken him. . . . !

Perhaps in the forced, unnatural life one lived, hedged in by wealth, that was the sort of man a woman loved—that weakling. He wondered, with a grim laugh, just how Colt would seem once he

were removed from the environment in which he had been born—once he came face to face with nature—once he stood the test of the survival of the fittest. For that matter, he wondered what Daphne would do, snatched from the shallow frivolity of her daily life. By Jove! if he had but lived in the days when a man and a woman met simply—primitively—he would have been able to woo her as woman was never wooed before—to win her by sheer strength—by right of his size and power. If only—suddenly he leaped to his feet. “Well,” he cried, “why not?”

He became action electrified—his heart pounding, his pulses leaping—but he did not falter—what if he failed? his inner voice pleaded, but he crushed it ecstatically. “I won’t—I can’t,” he shouted.

He called his secretary to the phone. “I’m going to Benson’s shack in the hills—Davis, yes—— He’s been wanting me to use it. I’ll clean up everything I can before I go and take what’s left over with me. It’ll give me a chance to map out some plans. Find out if the place is in good shape and send down a camp outfit—some of the servants to cook. Yes, horses, of course. I want everything to be tiptop so I can leave a week from today, understand?”

He rang off and sat staring into the darkness—exultantly—jubilantly. At last he had done something—something definite toward winning the snow woman. Colt thought to gain her favor. Well, by Jiminy, he’d show him!

He waited until after the guests had gone, then he ran down and met Daphne at the doorway. He spoke casually.

"I've just had word I must leave for the hills in a week—a sudden call—can you be ready to go with me then?"

For a second her eyes held his. There was a challenge in them—a warm defiance, but he met them coolly. It was his look that disarmed her.

"Yes," she said. "If you wish me to go I shall be ready." Then, as though compelled, she asked, "Shall we be away long?"

He shrugged. "That depends," he replied vaguely, "that greatly depends——"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SHACK IN THE HILLS

DAPHNE awoke with a start. Where was she? She sat up and stared about her. Then she remembered. Benson's shack in the hills! It was a bare little room, with its cot and bureau—its chair and table, but there was a certain fresh cleanliness about it that appealed to her; the rag rug on the floor—the enlarged snapshots on the wall.

The chill of the night still hung in the air, but through the open window a rosy haze cut the darkness like a knife. Daybreak. She turned her head, sniffing the sharp sweetness of growing things.

They had arrived the night before—very late. She had been unutterably tired—the strain—that was it—the wondering why he had brought her—what he meant to do. She had not questioned him, but she dreaded the trip and yet she no longer feared him. He had been very gentle to her—very good.

She flung on her clothes and slipped her arms into a heavy sweater, then she wound her hair about her head and drew a knitted cap over it. She would move about softly so as not to awaken her maid sleeping in the next room—she would go out and see

the sunrise! She never remembered having seen a sunrise in all her life! and here in the hills! . . . She felt a sudden sense of exhilaration—of freedom—it was good to be away from the wearying round of pleasures—from the constant effort to entertain—to be far up on the side of a mountain!

She opened her door carefully and listened. All was still. She tiptoed along the silent hall, into the living room. The fire, which upon their arrival had been leaping in the great stone hearth, was a heap of gray ashes. Stretched out before it was a rangy pup—all legs—answering to the name of Scamp. He stirred lazily and wagged his tail at her. She stroked his head and called him softly. He ambled out after her.

The sharp air challenged her. She caught her breath and looked about her. To the east a ball of fire was rolling up—the sky was aflame—the maples—the oak—the poplars catching its radiance on their upturned leaves.

The laurels—the rhododendrons—the blueberry bushes were bowed down beneath their weight of dew—it glistened on every leaf like a perfect diamond.

To the west, almost melting into the skyline, stretched the mountains—purple—hazy—shot with pink in the light of the rising sun.

She had never seen anything so beautiful! She flung back her head and breathed deeply. She

wanted to dance—to sing—to run. The dog sniffing with muddy nose, yapped joyfully at an imagined prey. She hushed him and moved along the path, then turning, regarded the cabin itself. It was built of rough logs—but its size was unusual. It sprawled out like a bungalow—room for a dozen men—a shack in the woods that was meant for pleasure. She smiled to herself. What a glorious place!

She struck off on a narrow trail, thrusting aside the drenched bushes, whose dew drops clung to her skirt. Beneath her feet the ground gave softly. Suddenly she paused beside a rock. Far below her lay a valley—a valley of homes—of planted fields—of tiny houses and barns. She seated herself on the rock, and stared down. Little spirals of smoke rose from the house chimneys—gray—misty—blending into the blueness of the lightening sky.

They were simple homes—homes where men and women lived and loved and toiled—a community of farmers. She found the white church somewhat set apart from its neighbors—and the little school house—a square, many-windowed building, whose every pane of glass flashed red.

A smile touched her lips as she gazed. Here was life reduced to its simplest form. Here were rugged, sturdy men content each year to plow the fields and gather their harvest—asking of life only fair weather for their crops. Here were calm-browed, firm-breasted women who guided the home—year in

and year out, unmindful of aught save the welfare of their men, and of the bare-legged, tow-headed youngsters tugging at their skirts.

She stared down restlessly. "Oh," she whispered at length, "how happy they should be!"

She felt suddenly lonely and restless—she wished she were back in Bethel's whirl where she had no time to think—to reflect. She had taken her step and the past was behind her. The man who called himself her husband had kept his end of the contract—she had kept hers. Why had he uprooted her and brought her here?—set her down amidst strange surroundings and given her time to dream!

Someone was coming. The dog beside her bristled and growled. She rose to meet the stranger face to face, then the quick color stung her cheeks, for she saw it was Bill.

"Hello," he called. "You're up early, too."

She nodded. He did not seem surprised to see her—had he been following her? He had reached her side and was gazing down at the valley. He seemed absorbed and she stole a glance at him.

He was bareheaded, his brown hair rumped as though he had run his fingers through it. She noticed that the sunlight gave it a glint of gold. He seemed to belong to the rugged beauty of the scene—this big man with his square jaw—his fine, mobile lips—his straight, large-nostriled nose—his steady, grey eyes. Yes, he belonged there.

He was patting the dog, who nosed him affectionately.

"Old rascal. So you waited for the lady, instead of coming out with me!"

"Oh," said she. "You were up before I?"

He nodded. "Yes, it was still dark—I wondered if you could sleep when all this was happening. Then I saw you come out and I knew the magic of it had called you, too."

"It's a beautiful sight," she said quickly to hide her surprise. "But I believe I'm hungry."

"So am I," he agreed. "Let's rouse the cook and rustle some coffee and bacon and cakes——"

"With maple syrup!" she interrupted eagerly, then remembered herself. "You go along and tell them what we want. I'll wait here."

What was the matter with her?—she asked herself angrily—why should she want to romp and play with this big man beside her?—to laugh and sing—was it the morning enchantment?—was it the joy of dropping the fetters of civilization?

"All right," he shouted, half way down the path. "I'll call you when it's ready."

She dropped back on the rock and stared once more at the valley. How big he looked with his shoulders flung back—how boyish. It was not right to bring such a man into the cramped space of cities—he belonged outdoors, just as the oaks and poplars and pines did—yes, he was built like them, too

—sturdy and straight and tall. Then she recalled herself sharply. What had come over her? She switched her train of thought deliberately—almost petulantly—she was glad when he halloed to her that breakfast was ready—what she needed, she told herself, was something to eat—that would knock the nonsense out of her.

During the week that followed she was much alone. Bill set out early each day on horseback for parts unknown and did not return until late. She asked no questions because it was part of her code to show no interest in his coming or going, but with nothing to do all day—with all her playthings and baubles torn from her—with long hours of enforced idleness and solitude—her thoughts followed him resentfully. What right had he to go off and leave her without a word! He might at least have inquired if she cared to go along. Did he expect her to stay there indefinitely twirling her thumbs?

True, she tramped through the woods with Scamp at her side, or rode the little gray mare he had bought for her—but the vague uneasiness—the restlessness which began with his departure in the morning was not allayed until his return at night alarmed her. She told herself it had nothing to do with him—it was simply that she had become accustomed to him—that she felt he should amuse her. He did not. He left her more and more alone and at length she spoke.

They had finished supper and were seated before a roaring fire in the living room. It was a big room—in deep reds—its couch piled with pillows and spread with a Navajo blanket—its walls hung with crossed snowshoes—with old pistols in their holsters—with antlers.

The dog, Daphne jealously noted, nosed his muzzle into Bill's hand. That was like a dog—to give her his full allegiance during the day, and at the master's return, desert her flat. Bill had dropped on the rug before the fire, his pipe in his mouth. She was curled up in a deep armchair.

The fire cracked cheerily—spitting bright sparks—the puppy growled good-naturedly as Bill rolled him over. The very warm coziness of it all irritated her—she wanted to run away—do anything rather than sit there with that man who seemed scarcely aware of her presence.

"How long before we can go home?" she flung at him. He looked up sharply.

"Why? Don't you like it here?"

"Like it?" she cried, "of course I don't like it! I'm alone all day with nothing to do—I have never been alone in my life—I'm—I'm sick of it!"

Bill shook his head. "I don't see my way clear to leaving just yet," he began. Then he smiled.

"Look here, I had a surprise for you—I wasn't going to tell you but if it'll make you any happier, why——" He stopped and gazed into the fire—

he seemed almost to have forgotten what he had begun to say—she tapped her foot impatiently and he turned.

“You see, I figured I’d have to be away a good bit during the next few days—and I gathered you weren’t altogether satisfied, so I invited Phil Colt up here.”

She stared at him. “You invited Phil Colt? . . .”

He nodded. “Yes, I knew you were old friends and his having nothing in the way of business to keep him from accepting decided me. It didn’t seem right to leave you alone so much and he’s good company.”

Still she stared at him—a flash of fear in her heart. Why had he done this thing? Why had he wired Phil—of all people? What was he planning? What did he hope to accomplish by such a course? She could not see his face, it was turned toward the fire. She spoke swiftly.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have done that!”

“Why not?” he asked, “don’t you want him?”

She did not answer. What could she say? She did want him. She wanted anyone who would fill her days—her thoughts—who would make her forget when her husband left her in the morning and when he returned at night.

Bill was speaking. “I can easily wire him in the morning that it’s all off. I never thought of asking you—I happened to be at the station in the valley

telegraphing Pattison—and it suddenly struck me that I'd have so much to do for the next week or so—that it would make it hard for you—so I sent him word—but if you don't want him——”

She tried to fathom his meaning—to read between the lines—but she could not. It was like Bill to do something of the sort. After all, why not? Phil was a great comrade—now that he knew his place. They would walk and talk and read together—he at least spoke her language—was of her world—she leaned back.

“As long as you've sent for him, he might as well come,” was all she said. He did not reply. She was glad he was silent, and then with sudden perverseness she wished he would speak—she moved uneasily—after all, just what was he thinking—planning? Business, no doubt—business—that was all he lived and breathed for—a mysterious realm which interested her not a bit—she was glad it absorbed him—and yet on that first morning it had almost seemed as though he might prove a comrade—a playmate. Impatient with herself, she rose.

“I'm turning in,” she called over her shoulder. He glanced up.

“So soon? Well, good night.”

She left him, half glad to get away, but before she blew out her lamp she stole back for a glance into the living room. He was still there before the fire. In the dim light she could see the puppy—an inde-

terminate ball, huddled close to his side—she could see the black smoke curling from his pipe—she could see his fine head and shoulders silhouetted against the dying flames. She drew back and closed her door softly. She was glad Phil was coming—very glad—it would give her something else to think about.

CHAPTER XXV

PHILIP COLT ARRIVES

PHIL received the summons with a joy bordering unto triumph. So she had sent for him. She had made Bill wire him. She was sick of the farce already and eager for the people she had known—grown up with.

He wired his acceptance and called his father on the private wire direct to his rooms.

"I'm leaving for the hills," he announced. Colt, senior, hid any surprise he may have felt with a grunt. "Going up to Benson's place. Daphne's there."

His father interrupted, "What for?"

"She sent for me. Made her husband telegraph me to come. What do you know about that?"

"Humph!" grunted Colt, "I figured she'd be sick of him by this time." Then he added a word of warning. "Go slow. No scandal. Understand?"

"Sure," grinned Phil. "Isn't it immense?"

Bill met him at the station with an old buckboard. Phil was rather taken aback. Somehow he had expected Daphne to be there, but Bill greeted him warmly.

"I wouldn't let her come down," he explained. "It's such a long drive from the top to the valley. Jump in, we've a good ways to go."

Phil obeyed. He wondered what the dickens he could talk about to this man—what possible subject to pursue, but Bill relieved him of the burden of conversation by plunging into a description of some scheme for improving dynamos at the Works. Phil had no opportunity for speech.

"Just rotten with business," was his mental verdict. "No wonder Daphne wants me if she has to listen to this sort of thing all day!"

It was dark when they reached the shack. Its lights gleamed warmly through the dusk—Phil stared about him curiously.

"You certainly are far enough from mankind," said he.

Bill nodded. "I think so."

Daphne met them at the door. To Phil's quick gaze she appeared unusually well and happy—the faint lines of weariness—the pallor—the droop to her shoulders that he had noticed in Bethel seemed to have vanished. She greeted him with outstretched hand.

"Welcome to the house in the woods!" she cried. He leaped out. The servants relieved him of his bag—he caught her hand in a hard grip.

"This is back to nature for fair," he said, trying to keep his voice casual.

"Wait until you've tasted Brenda's cooking," she laughed, "and you'll think that you're dining at the club!"

He followed her in. The warmth and color of the room stirred him. By Jove! What a spot for a man and woman—what a garden of Eden!—the sort of place you read about in books, but rarely found on earth. He hid his emotion with a laugh. "Do you dress for dinner?"

She shook her head. "We're barbarians here. Put on old clothes in the morning and take them off at night. Hurry now—everything's ready—you must be half-starved."

They sat down to an excellent meal—served by the efficient Jenks. A meal which, as Daphne said, might have graced the club table. Phil's spirits rose in leaps and bounds—the novelty of it all—a dinner fit for a king—in a low-ceilinged room—a room of rough boards—its very chairs made of native wood—the glimpse of black woods without and within the silverware—the candles and the best of all the hostess—in a gown of turquoise blue—which made her look even more ethereally lovely than ever—like a queen, her very hair bound in coronet braids about her head—yes, it was strangely stirring. . . .

He had never seen her so brimming over with life—she answered his gay banter eagerly—he wondered what had wrought the change in her. He concluded that the light in her eyes—the color of her

cheeks was due to the enforced rest—but the buoyancy—the sparkle he attributed to his presence.

Bill spoke but little during dinner. Surly, Phil decided. Engrossed in his own affairs. No wonder Daphne unfolded like a flower before his attentions. Bill, in his selfishness, was no doubt unendurable—it was possible he did not even scent the inevitability of a break—these fellows who were all for business never could understand a woman—too busy figuring their profit and loss.

After dinner Daphne led the way to the living room. Bill lounged in a corner, drawn occasionally into the conversation—but he seemed to prefer to remain silent. Daphne dropped on a couch beside Phil—questioning him about friends in Bethel. He watched her closely. By Jove! how could she keep so fit—so beautiful.

He was glad when Bill left them—with palpable excuses—there were some papers to run over—something Pattison wanted at once—business was a nuisance in the woods—but what could one do?

After he had gone, Daphne's spirits rose precipitously. It seemed to Phil almost as though she were defiant—as though she were deliberately flinging her charms at him. Had she been in love with her husband, he would have attributed it to pique—in this instance he was convinced it was simply her unconscious relief at having Bill out of the way. Phil responded to her mood.

"By George!" he cried, "you're wonderful, Daphne—you're stunning! How do you do it?"

She flashed a smile at him. "Early to bed and early to rise——"

He shook his head. "I've never seen you look so fit. You're not going to hurry back, are you?"

She did not answer for a minute, then she frowned. "I did think I wanted to—until——"

"Until——?" he prompted.

"Until you came," she finished. "Bill is so busy. I find it rather hard to know what to do with myself all day."

"Do you mean that he goes off and leaves you in this wilderness?"

She laughed a little. "Oh, it isn't quite as bad as all that. The servants are here if I want anything, and I do love the freedom of it. In fact, I was sure I'd love it at first. Think of being at liberty to do exactly as you choose for the first time in your life! But I soon found I didn't want so much time on my hands—it isn't good for anyone, is it? Least of all for me! I simply mustn't have long hours in which to think!"

Phil's face flushed—he had come at just the right time—bored to death with her husband—sick of her own company—there was a new Daphne—a thousand times more alluring!

"I'm mighty glad you sent for me," he began.

"Oh, but I didn't."

"You didn't?"

"No, Bill did that all himself—without a word to me until afterwards—I think he saw I wasn't altogether happy."

"That's queer! How did he happen to pick me out?"

"I don't know, unless it was that he had heard me speak of you quite often."

Phil smiled—so she had spoken of him. "Well," he said, with a new note in his voice, "I don't care how I got here so long as I did." She did not reply.

He continued, "I suppose he's so blamed anxious to plug at his work that he's glad to get you off his hands!"

She spoke slowly. "I suppose he is."

Phil grinned. "Oh! what a fool he is, giving his love to iron and steel when he can give it to flesh and blood instead—he doesn't look like a man who's a machine either—that's the queer part of it—but did you know, Daphne, that's exactly what he is—a machine!"

She flushed. "You're wrong there. He's not. He's fine in countless ways—yes he is—look at all he has done for Bethel's poor—no machine could have done that! He raised their wages and built them real homes—he worked night and day over them—no, he's not a machine—I know, because——"

She stopped with flaming cheeks. What had

prompted her to leap to this man's defense! What madness made her sing his praises to Philip Colt! These things about Bill she had never even admitted to herself. Had she been thinking them all the while, that they tripped off the tip of her tongue so fluently!

But Phil was smiling. Gad! Daphne was true blue! No gainsaying that! Married to a man who was a boor—a man who ignored her—who in his anxiety to rid himself of her presence summoned an old lover to her side!—married to a selfish fool! Yet she defended him—too proud to let even her best friends know how she loathed him!

"I understand," he said. "I understand!"

She had risen. "It's getting late, Phil—and you must be tired." He sprang to his feet. He saw through her—she was putting him off—she simply didn't feel up to defending her husband again. He rose to the occasion.

"All that see-the-sunrise stuff again—do you mean it?"

She studied him, smiling. "No, of course not, Phil. You get up just whenever you like—there are no rules here."

He held out his hand. "It's going to be wonderful," he told her. "I'm glad you let me come."

She passed slowly along the hall to her own room. Her maid hurried to help her—but she waved her

away. When she had gone, Daphne loosened her hair and it rippled in a golden shower to her waist. She slipped off the dress she wore and drew on a soft gown. Then she settled herself in a chair by the table and resolutely studied the magazines before her—re-read a group of letters from friends in Bethel—and when at length she found she could no longer fight against the memory of things she wished to forget, or shut out the turbulent thoughts clamoring for utterance—she flung aside the paper with an exclamation of impatience and switched off the light.

She moved to the window. She pressed her cheek against the pane—then not content, she flung it up, closing her eyes to the rush of cool air—to the poignant sweetness of the laurel—to the night fragrance of the ferns. Blackness—stillness—and above the treetops the sharp twinkle of stars in a frosty sky. She stared out, shivering a little, she drew her hair about her shoulders like a cloak—a cloak of gold.

She did not know when she first became aware of someone watching her—a shadow darker than the rest seemed to detach itself from the group close to her window. She felt her heart beat swiftly at the sudden consciousness of eyes upon her. Who was out there alone—beneath her window, staring? She leaned forward a trifle—trying to pierce the darkness—still there was no sound save the hum of

insects and the wind's voice in the trees. She caught her breath and spoke softly, "Who's there?"

She heard the rustle of leaves beneath a foot and the sudden scratch of a match. "It's Bill. Did I frighten you?" He held the flame to his face that she might see. She did not reply, but leaned against the window, her hand on her heart. He had come close. She saw that Scamp was beside him, snapping at his heels. "I'm afraid I gave you a turn. I didn't mean to. I came out here for a smoke before my stroll."

"Your stroll?" she heard herself saying in a voice unlike her own. "Where are you going?"

She could see his face indistinctly—a white blur beneath her—all save his eyes, they were dark—luminous. He laughed softly.

"Anywheres—under the stars to the top of the hill—or straight down to the old creek that runs by the fork—Scamp leads the way—I follow—want to come along?"

She drew back. "Do you go—every night?"

"Yes. It's great before bed to fill your lungs with God's fresh air. Somehow things look different—don't you think so?—the sky seems nearer—and the trees old friends you've known forever. Sometimes we light a fire and sit close to it—sometimes we take a run across a plateau—doesn't much matter—whatever Scamp wants to do—eh, old boy?"

She did not speak, and he moved away. "Well,

since the lady won't join us, we're off." He waved his hand to her—and then the darkness swallowed him as completely as though by the wave of a wand. Still she did not move. She was fighting with all her strength against the desire surging up in her—the overwhelming—sweeping desire to go with him—to feel the closeness of the sky—the friendship of the trees—to sit in a fire's glow—to race across a field. She was mad! mad! she had married this man because her father wanted her to—she had done it knowing she would never care for him—never so long as they lived—and yet she permitted herself to think such thoughts—feel such desires—why?

She turned on her light angrily. She dragged her reading lamp close to the bed. She opened a book at random and read fiercely—aggressively—until her eyelids drooped and the page became a blur.

Then she switched off the light and lay staring up at the darkness. She would show Phil the valley in the morning—she would show him the North Fork—she would show him—and resolutely she shut her eyes, but sleep was long in coming. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

A PARTING OF THE WAYS

IN the days that followed Daphne flung herself into the task of entertaining Phil. She planned the walks, the rides together—and even as she arranged each hour of the day so that he would be at her side constantly, she was fighting the growing evidence of his devotion.

She argued with herself stubbornly. Since Bill had seen fit to throw them together—since his business was such that it excluded all thought of her—she would amuse herself with this toy he had put in her hands—and the consequences be on his head. . . .

At the same time she knew she was playing a dangerous game—a game of fire—a game that required all her skill to stem the rising passion. There were times when she resented the position in which Bill had placed her—she was not sure she wanted to play with Phil at all—she was not sure of anything, that was the worst of it, except that it was better to have Phil there to occupy her time than to be alone.

There were moments when she felt impelled to tell him she hated her husband—regretted her marriage

—and her pride alone did not stop the torrent of words—but rather an innate honesty. *Did* she hate him? *Did* she regret? She was in a whirl of doubts, she questioned every impulse of her own—and found no answer.

And all the while, Phil's attentions were becoming more marked. His hands trembled when they chanced to touch hers—his cheeks flushed. She wished to heaven she could send him away—she thanked goodness he was there. Her nights were a torture. It was only toward daybreak that she fell into troubled sleep.

They rode each morning, but she no longer chose the wild paths through the trees. She clung to the broad trails, where they were in plain view. She told herself she was not afraid of Phil—if not, why did she do this?

She had spent a night beside her window and the morning found her drawn and irritable. Her maid announced that the horses were at the door, and Daphne gazed at her face in the mirror. There were dark shadows under her eyes. She had looked well enough before Phil came—she had been fairly content—not disturbed by this gnawing uncertainty. She blamed Bill. Why hadn't he left things alone?

She drew on her coat and gloves and picked up her crop. She never wore a hat when she rode. With her hair down her back in a thick braid, she looked like a child—a slim, boyish youngster.

Phil was examining the girths. Daphne nodded to him. His face lighted up at the sight of her—a slow flush crept up from beneath his collar.

“Shall we ride to Baldwin’s Creek?” she called, as she sprang unassisted to the saddle. He shook his head.

“We’ve been there almost every day. Why not cut through the trees to that little knoll?”

“I don’t know the way very well,” she evaded. “Let’s make it the creek and back by luncheon.”

But he persisted. “It’s just as short to the knoll—I remember the path—come on, just this once.” Suddenly he grinned, “What’s the matter, are you afraid?”

She looked up quickly. “Afraid? Why should I be?”

He shrugged. “I dare you!”

She accepted the challenge. After all, why not? If her husband did not care where she went with this man, why should she? She touched the horse lightly with the spur and they were off.

“Good girl!” he shouted. “Always takes a dare!”

They thundered across a little bridge and down a brown strip of road—sending a pair of rabbits frisking in alarm across their path.

“Here’s where we turn off!” cried Phil, and Daphne swung her horse with the twist of her wrist from the beaten track into the woods.

Phil's horse plunged after her, then as the underbrush became thicker, they drew rein—panting—cheeks flushed—eyes shining from the exercise.

"Your little mare can certainly set the pace," laughed Phil. "Leave it to a lady every time!"

She pushed aside a tangle of bushes before them. "The knoll's ahead," she called over her shoulder. "Come on."

They found it—a clearing that jutted out like a tiny platform above the sweep of land—valleys—hills—mountains.

They drew the horses to a stand and shoulder to shoulder stared out over the immensity of the country before them—the hills were aflame with color. The red of the maples, the gold of the oak, the ruby of the sumac and ivy, and the rusty brown of the fields—the unfailing earmarks of late fall.

"Let's dismount," he said at last. She shook her head, wheeling her horse—then stopped. After all, why not? The spirit of defiance with which she had met the past few days, persisted. What could be better than to sit there staring over miles of rolling land—of stooping sky. She swung herself to the ground and let her horse graze. Phil was beside her.

"Daphne," he said huskily, "Have you played with me enough?"

She turned, startled. "What do you mean?"

He laughed. "You know what I mean—leading

me on—knowing I am burning to hold you in my arms again as I did that night——”

“Phil!” she gasped, “what are you saying? If I hadn’t trusted you—I would never have come here with you—alone.”

“That’s not so. You knew when you came here with me I’d break loose—I saw it in your eyes when you took my dare. You knew it, didn’t you?”

He caught her wrists. “Didn’t you?” She shrank back. “Why, no, Phil—how could I—how——”

“Didn’t you?” he insisted harshly. She tried to free herself.

“I knew—I knew you cared for me. I thought you had put this sort of thing behind—I believed——”

“You’re lying,” he said quietly. “Ever since I came here you’ve been deliberately leading me on. Why have you done it? Because you cared for your husband and wanted to make him jealous?—No.—Because you cared for me and couldn’t help showing it? Yes—that’s what I’ve supposed—what’s led me to say this—because you’ve discovered what an ignorant fool your husband is and——”

“Stop!” she cried through white lips, “if you say that again I’ll——”

He laughed. “By Jove! standing up for him still. I’ll believe you really care for him first thing you know—fancy your caring for that sort of man—why, if I imagined that——”

She tried to turn the trend of his thoughts.

"This is madness, Phil—you don't know what you're saying—you don't mean it. Let's get back. It was wrong of me to come. I didn't want to——"

"It's not madness," he cried, gripping her more tightly. "It's bigger than either of us and now the time has come for you to speak the truth. Do you care for me or are you playing some woman's game to set me on fire?"

She shook her head. "You don't understand, Phil. I couldn't know you felt like—like this. I didn't dream——"

"You knew every move of the game. Just like every other woman. They all try their little bag of tricks and if one won't work the other will—and when they have us just where you have me—they call a halt and want to stop playing. Well, if you're that sort, I'll show you I won't be trifled with!"

"Yes, I'll tell you the truth if you like. I didn't love the man I married—but I took him rather than let your father ruin mine! And after it was all over I felt sorry for you—I supposed you couldn't help caring for me—I saw no harm in our being friends and when my husband brought you here I thought you knew that there was a line you could not cross!"

Suddenly his manner changed. "I won't hurt you, Daphne," he whined. "It's only that I love—don't you know that when a man loves a woman——"

"When a man loves a woman——" she caught

him up, her eyes on his, "he waits until she comes to him—until she cares for him in just the same way!"

"No man would do that," he insisted. "He'd take her when he has the chance and let her learn to love him afterwards. There's no man on earth who would leave her free if——"

"Yes, there is," she flashed at him, "my husband has done it!"

He stared at her. "Left you free?"

She nodded and his face flushed suddenly. "Well, he's more of a fool than I took him for. Now I'll show you what a man——" and he leaped forward, but not before she had swung her crop and he staggered back under the blow—a trickle of red coursing down his cheek.

Before he could recover, she sprang to her saddle and wheeling her horse crashed through the underbrush.

Sobbing and cursing, he caught his bridle, fumbled for his stirrup and mounting, flung himself after her. The branches whipped his face, but he did not seem to heed them so long as he kept her in view. . . .

Bill rode home earlier than usual. He called Daphne's maid to him.

"Has your mistress returned yet?" She shook her head anxiously. "She has never been gone this long before, sir," she declared. "I was told to order luncheon, but she has not come back." He dismissed

her, his face grave. So it had reached the point where Daphne forgot time—forgot everything in this man's company—and yet—he trusted her. She could do no wrong. But Phil had had all the innings coming to him—henceforth, they were to play the game shoulder to shoulder—and the woman to the better man.

He told Jenks to summon all the servants. They assembled before him, by the living room fire, their faces full of curiosity.

They were all there—Brenda, the cook, her kitchen maid, the laundress, Daphne's maid and Jenks. Bill regarded them thoughtfully.

"There's a train leaving here tonight at seven thirty. I will pay you in full for your work here and you will return to the house in Bethel where Mrs. Kemble will see that you are established in your old places. I think the wagon will hold you all."

They stared at him blankly. "Go!—tonight!" He nodded. Jenks broke the silence.

"But who'll cook for you, sir?—who'll serve?"

Bill smiled. "I've handled a stove or two and as for serving, I doubt if there'll be much of it done—you had better start packing at once—the boy will bring around the carriage in plenty of time."

"But sha'n't I start dinner——?" gasped the cook.

"Or set the table?" ventured Jenks.

Daphne's maid was sniffing. "I'm sure I've always tried to please."

Bill rose, the interview at an end. "I have no fault whatever to find with you. You are excellent servants. You will take charge in the house at Bethel as you have always done. That will be all," and he left them staring at one another in bewildered amazement.

An hour later the wagon rolled away with them all and Bill seated himself before the fire, his face grim—his eyes dark. He drew out his watch. It was after four. Suddenly he rose to his feet, pacing. Then as the silence became unendurable—as the clock ticked off the minutes relentlessly, he caught up his hat.

"Something's wrong!" he muttered fiercely. "If he's hurt her——" and he flung out of the house.

His horse was still saddled and he was half glad—it saved a little time. He mounted and swung him into the path. The ground was hard and he could find no trace of fresh hoof prints, but he saw a break in the bushes in the direction of the knoll and guessed they had passed that way. He spurred his horse through the woods. At the knoll he again found fresh trace of them. A horse had pawed the ground while grazing—that was all. He wheeled impatiently. Why had he let the servants go—they might have aided in the search. Where could they be in that wilderness—why had they chosen a trackless path?

He studied his surroundings in the growing dusk.

The bushes had been trampled by horses at full swing—it was not difficult to follow the path of beaten shrubs—if only night did not fall—he cursed the deepening shadows and spurred his horse.

Suddenly he drew rein, clinging to a bush was a wisp of white cambric—a torn shred—he examined it closely—his face suddenly grim—what did it mean—he raised his voice:

“Daphne,” he shouted. “Oh, Daphne!”

There was no answer and he pressed forward, the ascent was steeper—the underbrush a thick tangle of thorns—why had they come this way?—if he had harmed her——

“Daphne,” he shouted. He rose in his stirrups, calling—and the answer came—a faint halloo. He sank back—his hands trembling—she was safe—she was near—she had heard him. . . .

In a clearing beside a stream, he found them—Phil lay with his eyes closed, and Daphne crouched beside him. She looked like a child kneeling there, the long yellow braid over her shoulder, her face white as snow. She did not rise, but she pointed to Phil.

“See if he’s—alive,” she whispered.

Bill leaped from his horse and ran to the man’s side. He examined him closely. There was a deep cut on his forehead which she had tried to bind with shreds torn from her handkerchief. He questioned her crisply.

"When did it happen?"

"Early this morning." She stooped and leaned toward Bill, suddenly. "Oh," she breathed, "I'm so glad you've come—I knew you would——"

He was examining the wound. "Something struck him—what was it?"

She did not answer for a moment and then her eyes were lowered.

"A bough—it snapped back, he fell from his horse and I tried to help him—but there was so little I could do—just bathe it—and I didn't know the way, we had come so far—and I couldn't leave him—I was afraid to—so I called and called until——" She covered her face with her hands. Bill stared at her, his face white with sudden relief.

"Steady now," he said, "he's had a nasty cut—but I've seen many a worse one at the Works——" He drew from his pocket the piece of torn cambric. "I found this on a bush back a ways—I was afraid—I thought something had happened to you."

She raised her head—her eyes met his—then she lowered them.

"No," she whispered. "I'm all right."

Bill rose. "I'll put him over my shoulder if you'll lead the horses. Think you feel up to it?"

She nodded.

"You'd better mount. I'll bring them to you."

He lifted her into the saddle without further comment, then turned to Phil again. He tore his own

handkerchief into strips, dipped them in the stream and bound the wound anew. Then he forced some brandy between the man's lips. Phil opened his eyes, with a flicker of a smile.

"So you found us," he whispered. "Well, I'm glad of it," and he drifted off again.

Bill swung him easily over his shoulder and ordered her to follow.

"I'll go slow and you come along behind," he called. "Take all the time you need—ready?"

She nodded. She could not have spoken just then.

CHAPTER XXVII

DAPHNE'S DECISION

THE shack was in darkness—Daphne, swaying in her saddle from weariness, straightened with a gasp.

"The servants!" she cried. Bill paused to answer.

"They're gone—all of them."

"Gone!" she cried.

"Yes. Bag and baggage." He vouchsafed no more. He carried Phil into the living room, stirred the fire and left her to follow. She entered, dazed, numb. The logs were beginning to blaze. Scamp, delighted at their return, pranced and fawned before them. Bill nodded his head toward the figure on the couch.

"He'll come around in a little while. Don't worry about him—get your things off—I'll start dinner."

Still she faced him. "I don't understand. The servants were satisfied. What made them leave this way? What shall we do without them? I am so tired I——"

He smiled a trifle. "You'll feel better after dinner. Go lie down until I call you."

He noticed a sudden tenseness about her—as

though she were bracing herself for something. He waited.

"And Phil—won't—won't die—or——"

So that was what troubled her! Fear for this man! He smiled to himself—what a fool he had been to mistake the warmth in her voice—her manner—to think they were for him alone!

"No," he said abruptly. "He's not badly hurt. Takes more than that to kill a man."

She sighed with relief. "Oh, I was so afraid—he lay so still—I thought help would never come——"

He shut his lips tightly. So her joy in seeing him—that glad light that had leaped to her eyes was only for Phil. He straightened his shoulders.

She was studying him. "What made you come after me?" she demanded suddenly.

He shook his head. "I don't know. I had no real reason to, I suppose, except that it grew late and I became restless—I thought perhaps you had been hurt——"

"And—and—was that all you thought?" She waited, breathless, for his answer. He laughed.

"Wasn't that enough? That was the worst thought in all the world to me."

"Was it?" she said softly, and seemed about to add something when he broke in gruffly:

"You'd better get some rest. I'll start things going," and left her.

He found the kitchen immaculate. Brenda, in spite of her orders, had left the steak on the broiler—had peeled the potatoes. He wondered if he had lost his knack—it was months since he had turned his hand to anything of this kind. He rolled up his sleeves and shook the fire until the flames leaped high. He rejoiced in their heat on his face. He was glad when the tempting odor of cooking meat smote him. He turned the steak on its other side—the cloud of choking smoke arose—he grinned at it—there was no time to think now. That was what God gave a man two hands for—to keep his mind from mischief. He wondered grimly what would have happened in the week he had planned—had mapped out—perhaps she might have learned to care for him after all. . . .

He shook himself together impatiently—he was wrong from the start—the sort of thing he had set out to do wasn't practicable—you couldn't transplant a hothouse flower into rugged soil and expect it to thrive—no—keeping her there with him—with a man she detested was killing her—he had never seen her look so frail—so white. True, she had been happy at first—but not for long. She had begun to wilt and droop—and yet she had been game—not a complaint had crossed her lips—but now he saw it plainly. She had married him, loving Phil—and he had thrown Phil in her path—and even at that she had played square, although it was telling on

her—no—he would send her back to Bethel—back to the life she loved—to the people she loved. Was it her fault that she could not care for the man she had married. . . . !

He turned at the whisper of silk behind him. She was there. Her face very white—her eyes green pools—she had dressed in the gown she had worn at the window on the magic night when he had watched her unobserved—had trembled that a woman so beautiful—a woman of marble—and gold—should belong to him.

She approached him timidly. "I tried to rest, but I couldn't—I'd rather stay in here with you—if I may."

He clenched his fists—yes, he would send her away—he would not keep her with him—not when his whole soul cried out for her—he had been strong—but he had reached the snapping point.

"I'm afraid you'll have a bad time of it here without the servants—it will be hard to get others out here. Perhaps you had better go back to Bethel when Colt goes."

Her eyes widened, but she did not speak. He did not look at her. He shrank from seeing the relief in her eyes—he turned his back.

"I've got a lot of work to do. I'll manage all right with the stable boy to look after the horses and start the fire, but there's nothing to keep you here—now."

She caught her breath—so he wanted to get rid of her as badly as that! was sending her away like a troublesome child. Perhaps he had even discharged the servants to precipitate such a move—to give himself a legitimate excuse for dismissing her.

“So you sent them away!” she flung at him. He whirled on her.

“What do you mean?”

“You sent the servants away yourself, didn't you?”

He bowed his head. Her eyes were flashing.

“Well, I'll go—I'll go tomorrow! Do you think I'd stay a minute—an instant after this? Did you think you needed to do this to drive me away? I would have gone long ago had you let me!”

He stared at her dully. “You can go in the morning if you like—or whenever you choose.”

She left him, with flaming cheeks. She raged at herself for her anger. After all, that was what she wanted—she had desired all along to return to Bethel—this was a golden opportunity. Phil's words rang in her ears, “I suppose he's glad to get you off his hands.” Glad! of course he was glad!

He had married her to gratify his pride—to crown his series of achievements—now that she interfered with his work she was summarily dismissed.

Philip was right. The man was a machine—a machine that ground out business—that throve on iron and steel. She would find Phil and tell him so.

He was sitting on the edge of the couch, feeling his head tenderly.

"Phil," she cried, approaching him, "I'm sorry—I'm sorry for everything I said—everything I did——"

He stared at her stupidly. "What's happened, Daphne? What's he done?"

She shook her head. "He doesn't know that you—that I—quarreled. He thinks the bough struck you—I couldn't tell him——"

Phil nodded. "That's right." Then he looked at her curiously.

"Something's up. What is it?"

"I'm going back with you tomorrow to Bethel——"

"Going back—you mean, Daphne——"

"I mean that you were right—and I was wrong——"

He tried to question her but she moved away. She wanted to be alone—and that in itself was irony—she had shrunk from her own company for the past week—and now her mood demanded solitude. She went to her room and shut her door. So this would be her last night in the woods with her husband. She shrank from the darkness—from the very night sounds she had loved—she wished passionately that the long, black hours were over—that she might go—and again the torturing voice whispered—did she want to go? Did she want to leave

the side of the man she had vowed to hate—the man she could not banish from her thoughts?

Someone was rapping softly. She sprang up with alarm. If Philip had dared—but it was Bill. He had brought her a tray.

"It isn't much. But you'd better take a bite. Here, let me light up."

She pushed it away and shook her head. But he would not be gainsaid.

"Sit down," he said. "Now you're going to eat."

She found herself obeying. He lighted the lamp. He treated her like a disobedient child—she wondered if he had treated his workmen that way—if they had done his bidding as quickly as she did. She ate silently and found she relished the food. He had dropped down on a chair beside her. He did not seem to know he was intruding—he waited quietly until she had finished. At length she pushed away the tray, and he rose.

"There. You'll feel better." He took it from her. "You'll find everything in good shape back home. I'll be detained here a while longer—don't worry about me, though—I like it here." He smiled, but his eyes were on the wall—he would not meet hers.

"Thank you," she said softly. "You have been very kind."

When he had gone she sat as he had left her, her hands clasped in her lap. She fell asleep that way—

and the sun in her eyes, flooding her window, awakened her. She started up—what had happened? She was stiff from her cramped position. Why had she slept that way? Then she remembered—she was going away—the morrow had come—she was free to return—and because she was free—because the cage door was open, she unaccountably dropped her head on her arm and sobbed. That was no way to greet her release—she stormed to herself—and because she could not feel glad in spite of all her efforts—she cried the harder—it was her pride that was hurt, she concluded. It was one thing to go because you wished to and quite another to be sent away.

The hours passed in a haze. She felt as though she were a spectator of a scene in which someone resembling herself played a leading part. This someone who tumbled things together hastily into a grip—who endeavored to dress with shaking hand—to eat the food set before her.

Phil was in high spirits. A good sleep had set him up again and he was eager to be off.

As they sat about the spotless table in the long kitchen, she found herself watching Bill's face. He looked as though he had not slept—his eyes were lustreless—profoundly tired—but there was a grim purpose in them. She wondered what made his jaw so tense—his lips so stern.

Philip alone seemed unaware of the cloud which

had fallen over them both—he talked of trains—of time tables—of things to be done on his return—and Bill, when appealed to, responded in monosyllables—but Daphne found she could not—her only safety lay in silence.

Phil insisted that in order to make connections and reach Bethel by nightfall they must leave at once. She did not seem to hear. She saw Bill's hand clench suddenly as though from a spasm of pain. She wondered what his thoughts were—was he anxious to be rid of her?—to shut himself up with his work. . . .

At last Phil's insistence penetrated. She must get ready. The wagon would be there in a few minutes. It was a good two-hours' drive. She moved away reluctantly. Bill was stirring his coffee—now that she thought of it, he had drunk none—not a drop. She thought his hand trembled, but she could not be sure.

The stable boy knocked at the door. He would take her bag—her wraps—but Bill thrust him aside roughly, and lifted them into the wagon himself. She followed slowly, for an instant she lingered in the living room—the glowing fire in the hearth—the splotch of yellow sunshine on the wall—the pillows piled on the couch—tugged at her heart strangely—she crushed back the words on her lips. He did not want her. He was sending her away. She would not humble her pride to plead—not though she were

torn at leaving—for she knew it now—she admitted it to herself proudly.

He helped her into the wagon. Philip had run back for his gloves and she waited for Bill to speak.

“If you need me at any time, wire me,” was all he said. She nodded. Phil hurried out—watch in hand—and sprang in. The boy gathered up the reins and the horses leaped forward.

She did not look back, but she knew he was standing there bareheaded in the road—just as he had done the first time he had seen her. He waited until the carriage was lost to sight around a bend in the road—then turned abruptly. A thrush was singing on a bough close by—a full-throated morning song—the sky’s blue was deepening into turquoise—the very air was crisp and sweet in its newness—but he did not seem to see nor hear. He moved like a sleep walker—he stumbled into the shack. The dog pawed him affectionately—but he thrust him aside.

He went to her room. He flung open the door. He found it cold—bare—impersonal—the little trinkets that made it hers—the slippers peeping from beneath the bed—the brush and comb on the bureau—the tea gown limp on its hook—were gone.

He stood awkwardly in the doorway, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. She had been there last night. In that very chair—the lamp’s glow on her hair—only last night—why, it seemed an eternity ago! And now there was nothing left—not one

small thing . . . Nothing—and as he turned to go, his eye caught something—something sheen and filmy that lay in a huddled heap on the floor. He leaped toward it with a cry. It was the gown she had worn—the gown he loved!

He caught it up in his arms—he laid his cheek against its cool silkiness—and as its faint aroma reached him—elusive—sweet—he crushed it to him.

“Daphne,” he cried. “I want you. . . . I need you. . . .” It was a strong man's cry to his mate—but there was no answer.

The train was puffing in the station. Phil tossed the boy a coin and leaped out. Daphne followed with dragging steps. She hated the station—she hated the train panting like a thing alive—tugging at its leash to be off—but most of all she hated the man beside her—who drew her forward, unresisting—who gave her no opportunity—no excuse for protest.

The boy lifted the grips aboard and grinned at her.

“I'll look after the master,” he said. “Guess I'd best go now.”

She watched him turn the horses. Saw him speak to a village acquaintance, leaning over the dashboard. She wanted to cry out to him to wait—to take her back with him—but she could not. Instead, she let Phil help her aboard. She was glad when he

left her for a few minutes. She settled down on the red plush cushions and stared out.

Over and over again she told herself that Bill wished her to go—but a thought persisted in spite of her—suppose she were wrong—suppose he wanted her after all—suppose—— She straightened up with a start—her hands clasped—her lips parted—for in that minute it flashed on her that she had to know—at any cost *she had to hear from his own lips that he was banishing her!* . . .

She rose to her feet impulsively. Phil had not yet returned. She was very glad of that. She was afraid her determination would not survive his objections.

There were yet a few minutes before the train left—a few minutes in which to act. She spied the brakeman near the door. She turned to him. "I'm going to get off," she said, "and when the gentleman returns tell him I have made up my mind to go back—just that—I have made up my mind to go back."

He looked at her, puzzled. But she continued quickly. "He is not to follow me—it would be useless—tell him I had to go, do you understand?"

He stared at her curiously and moved aside to let her alight. At the far end of the station, she saw Phil. He was dickering about baggage and checks. She moved back in the shadow of the station. She waited—her heart beating in her ears.

Then came the sharp scream of the whistle—the

train jerked forward. Phil leaped aboard and clambered up the steps. She stepped inside the little station as the train rumbled by—soon it was a mere speck of black on two gleaming tracks. She drew a quick breath. Well, she had done it!

She came forth cautiously—almost as though she feared someone might stop her—question her—but the little group that gathered at train times had disbanded. The village street lay calm—serene—deserted beneath the cloudless sky. No—there was nothing to hinder her return—nothing on earth. . .

She passed from the Main Street with its row of little shops, into the dusty road that wound upwards. Somewheres—miles distant—she knew it would reach the door of the shack. She began the climb.

She felt suddenly carefree and ridiculously happy—as though a burden had rolled from her shoulders—as though she were coming into her own. She drew off her hat—and let the soft wind whip the tendrils of her hair about her face. She rejoiced in the air's freshness—in the wildness of the little road. She found herself humming, and laughed at the sound. How did she dare—when she knew not what lay in store for her at her journey's end? But that did not stem her song—she would at least see him—be near him. She thought of unconsidered trifles—the strength of his arms. . . .

The road became steeper, but she loved its very steepness. It sent the color into her cheeks—she

laughed at her own exhaustion and plodded on. She half hoped no wagon would pass—she would like to return to him thus, on foot every step of the way.

The song she hummed became louder as she pressed forward. There was still a long ways to go—and at the end—what?

She was forced to stop more often as the morning changed into early afternoon. She was dust covered—hungry—tired—but the eager light still sparkled in her eyes.

She lay down beside a little stream and bathed her face and hands. She did not move for a long while. She was suddenly acutely aware of her weariness—the tension of the past weeks—the sleeplessness—the mental torture. She closed her eyes. When she awoke it was growing dark. She started up in dismay. The sun—a red globe—was slipping down behind the trees. She scrambled to her feet. Why had she slept when there was yet a long ways to go! It would be dark in a little while—very dark.

It was late when she reached the shack. She moved forward slowly. She was overpoweringly weary—and suddenly afraid—afraid of him—of herself—what would he think of her?—what could she say?

She shivered a little as she approached. There was no light within, but the door was unlocked. She pushed it open. She listened for Scamp's bark—for Bill's gruff voice—but there was only silence.

"Bill!" she whispered, suddenly alarmed. "Bill—it's I—Daphne—I've come—home!"

Still silence . . . and she knew he was out tramping in the woods. Suppose he should not come back! Suppose she should have to spend the night alone in that black cottage. She shuddered and ran out. "I'll find him!" she whispered. "I'll find him. . . ."

In a clearing, surrounded by a circle of trees, Bill had built a fire—he had built it partly as shelter against the approaching frost but largely because a fire is a friendly thing—and he did not wish to be alone in the darkness with his thoughts. Scamp, having tramped at his heels all day, lay down gratefully before the crackle of wood, content to drop his head between his paws. But the man moved about restlessly—now staring grimly into the flames—now into the velvety darkness. He would stay there all night. Sleep by the fire—he could not go back to the shack that shouted aloud her presence—nor to the house in Bethel—perhaps he would go abroad—plunge himself in work over there—he must do something to distract his mind—to make him forget her.

"Daphne," he groaned. "I want you. . . . I need you. . . ."

Suddenly Scamp stiffened and growled. And Bill sprang to his feet. He heard the snap of a twig beneath a foot. Perhaps it was the boy with a mes-

sage—perhaps she had sent for him. Scamp leaped forward with a snarl that changed to a yelp of delight. Bill whirled—and seeing, staggered back. . . .

It was Daphne—alone—coming toward him with a timid smile on her lips—a question in her eyes. He stared at her. He brushed a dazed hand across his brow—surely he was dreaming it—dreaming it all. “Daphne!” he whispered. “You came——” He saw in her eyes a light he had never before seen.

“Did you want me, Bill? I couldn’t know——”

“Want you!” he cried. “Want you . . . !”

Still she waited, eyeing him gravely—but with a deep brooding tenderness.

“I had to know,” she whispered. “I had to know——”

He took a step toward her and then paused. “But you—I don’t understand—why have you done this?”

She raised her head and her eyes met his fearlessly.

“Because I love you,” she said simply.

And with a cry he opened his arms. . . .

They sat long before the fire, her cheek against his hand. . . .

“I was afraid,” she whispered, “I thought you cared for those other things—that they meant more to you than I——”

He caught her to him. “No,” he cried, “it was

because I dared not dream of this that I bound myself up in my work—but now with you to help me—with you at my side—I can rise to any heights—there's nothing I can't do—nothing."

She smiled a trifle at the confidence in his voice—the glad, leaping confidence.

"You're so strong," she said slowly. "I've always felt you needed no one really—you've done so much alone. Are you sure I sha'n't—be in your way?"

He laughed tenderly. "I shall need you always."

"But if you don't," she insisted, "if I find I am hindering you—holding you back—I promise to go away."

"Hush!" he said sternly, "you will never leave me for an instant!"

He rose. "Come, child," he said, "it's time for us to go home." He gave her his hand and they stood together—smiling softly, their hearts beating high with emotion.

"I must tell you something first—something about Phil!"

"Well?" he said, stiffening.

She moved closer to him. "It's about his wound—it was I who struck him!"

"You!" he cried. She nodded.

"He had said something against you—I couldn't bear it so I struck him—then he came after me and a bough snapping back cut deeper into the wound—that's how—that's why——"

But Bill bent down suddenly and lifted her in his arms.

"Little Snow Woman," he cried, "you did it because of me?"

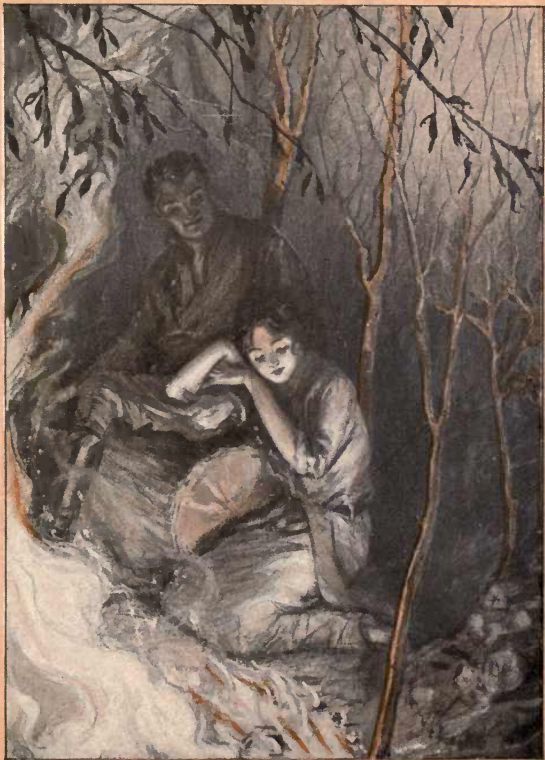
She nodded, her cheek against his shoulder, her hair brushing his lips.

And as she lay in his arms, curiously enough the prayer he had uttered at the Works, sprang once more to his lips.

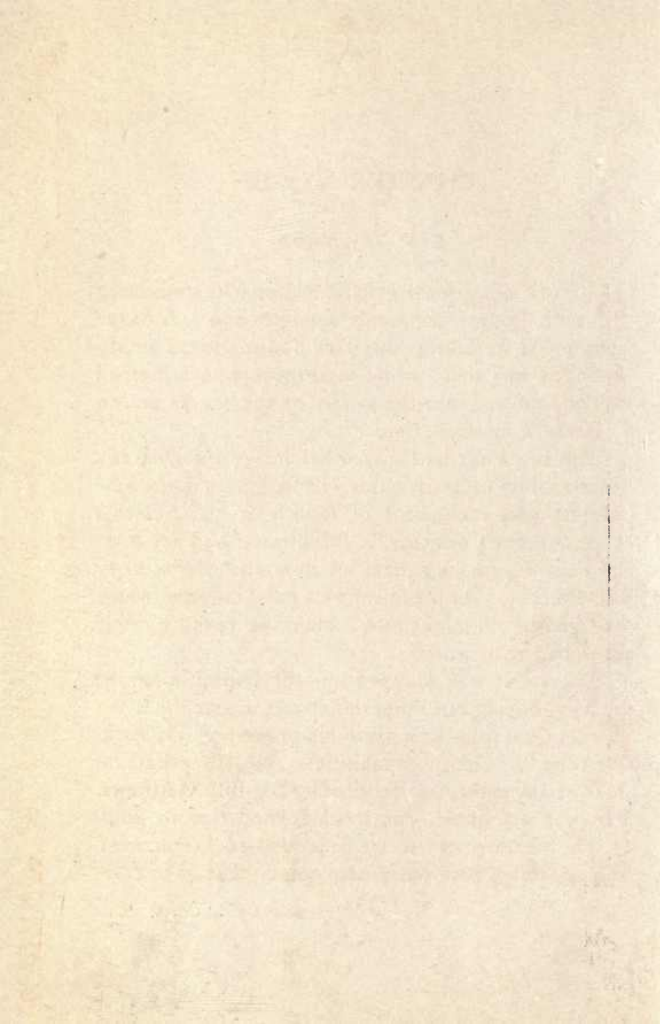
"God make me good to her—always," he whispered.

She stirred comfortably and sighed in an abandonment of content, and he smiled down at her tenderly—she had come to him—he had conquered again—how supremely wonderful was life!

Then he flung back his shoulders and strode forward through the black woods swiftly—easily—triumphantly.



*They Sat Long Before the Fire, Her Cheek
Against His Arm*



CHAPTER XXVIII

NEW TRIUMPHS

BETHEL lay in the grip of winter—its trees hung with icicles—its roads snow-choked. A large number of its hilltop dwellers had migrated southward, as was their wont—and those who remained behind, entered into the gayety of the winter season—Bethel's merriest time.

The Big Four had stayed behind—even Decker's susceptibility to heady colds was forgotten in the new interest and excitement of launching "The Bethel Transatlantic Company." Bill himself had not foreseen the enormous profits which would accrue in so short a time. As president of a baby industry which had grown overnight into a giant, he found himself swamped with work.

The stock was snapped up—he himself plunged heavily, buying ten thousand shares at par, on a ten per cent. margin—a margin his brokers gladly took, knowing the man's capabilities. No, they had no fear of any enterprise handled by Big Bill Matthews. He was a Cræsus—his touch turned clay to gold.

The venture was so tremendous—so far surpassing anything previously attempted, that the *Asso-*

ciated Press, pouncing upon the news, featured the progress of the new company in glaring type. Photographs of its docks—its ships—its crews were seized upon. Pictures of the French port in construction—nearing completion—were reproduced, and due homage paid the man whose genius had again pushed American initiative to the front.

Bill, as the fifth partner, became the center of a system which he himself had built up. He directed it like a general. Where he could not be on hand himself, he saw that first class men were installed. He knew the need of buying brains, and paid huge sums for them. He was after "end figures"—and he got them!

Desperately busy with his thousand and one plans, he spent long hours in conference—investigating ways and means, debating new methods of attack. There was little time for play these days, but he loved the work. He attacked it with a vim and snap that amazed him. He never seemed to tire. It was his giant strength, the body that steel had built up—the superb thing of muscle and sinew that years of labor had hardened.

And the woman he loved stood by his side. In the first months after their return from the hills she had been afraid of the endless tasks which took him from her—but with a determination whose root lay in her love for him, she began to acquaint herself with the problems that beset him—timidly at first—

she knew so little of such things—but gradually finding an absorbing interest in the great game he was playing—the game of life.

He shrank from her help at the start—afraid it would tire her—a little impatient of explaining his business to her, as all men are—but when he found her able to grasp the phrases he used—saw the quick conclusions she drew—the directness with which she reached a point—he took her more and more into his confidence. He poured out his hopes to her. It was a new Daphne that Bethel came to know.

“She’s really in love with him!” they told one another. “What *is* the secret of his power?”

It was at her suggestion that Bill secured the *Bethel Courier*.

“Newspapers are such important allies,” she had urged. “Why not have one of your own in which all you wish to say will be set down—plans for the Works—for the men—anything you care about having published.”

He negotiated and took over the paper, installed his own editor, then turned to the next problem in hand.

It was right there that Dugan stepped in. He did it through Daphne. He had the most profound admiration for her. He saw in her a perfect wife for the future Governor—a helpmate—a social queen.

He began his skirmishing cautiously. He was a

frequent guest at Matthews' home, where Daphne had established a salon—a meeting place for the Big Four and their fellows. They accepted her invitations because in her lovely rooms they found an unexcelled opportunity to talk with people who held the same views—or shared the same interests. Scarcely a night passed that the great house on the hill was not alight—its door flung open to a stream of guests. Perhaps half a dozen to dinner and afterward an occasional concert—a song bird on tour—a famous musician—then a comfortable dividing up into groups.

Daphne, with her extraordinary beauty and charm, was eminently fitted to preside over her little court. If at times she had sharp moments of regret that the golden happiness which had been theirs in the hills, could not continue, she concealed it and plunged anew into the gay whirl which she knew would further Bill's interests.

Dugan had watched his man long enough. It was the best bet of his life. Governorship was only a step—if the man wanted to, he could go higher—much higher. Nothing daunted him, nothing stopped him—his conquests were colossal—his progress cyclonic!

It was on a window-rattling, wind-whistling evening that Dugan took the first step toward the consummation of the plan at which he had hinted on Bethel's links.

Matthews' music room was filled with men and women who had come to hear a pianist play—a famous, much courted artist from over the sea—they had listened to his music with polite interest—they were glad when it was over and they could drift into corners—the men, smoking and laughing—exchanging stories of the day, the women with a group of younger men seated about the fire—the pianist, surrounded by a crowd of admirers, running his fingers lightly over the keys.

Dugan, a cigar in the side of his mouth, watched the scene through half shut eyes—watched it with a keen sense of appreciation. Here was an exquisite home—ablaze with light—fragrant with flowers—the center of Bethel's social and financial life. Its hostess a creature radiant, superb—the pride of race in the poise of her head—the tilt of her chin—the slenderness of her blue veined hands. Its host a giant—steady of eye—strong of jaw—head and shoulder above the rest—dominating by sheer force of his personality—a man who had risen from the people—and fought every inch of the way.

Dugan smiled to himself—that was a fellow for you! Commanding respect from any gathering—magnetic—simple—four-square. Dugan studied him. Bill was frowning. Waiting impatiently for one of his group to finish a statement—bound to disagree with him. Once the man had concluded, Bill leaped in and scattered his reasoning to the four

winds, the man, chagrined, stirred uncomfortably, but the others laughed and nodded their heads.

Dugan wondered if they really agreed with Bill, or if his sweeping assurance, that brooked no argument, carried them along in spite of themselves. Whatever it was, Dugan admired it. It was just the quality he wished in his man—it was so exactly what he desired that he was almost afraid to broach the subject. What if Bill refused? He had already seen Bill in the gubernatorial chair—heard his inaugural address. Who could say that Dugan, the Practical, the Calculating, was devoid of imagination?

He sought Daphne. He found her the center of a lively discussion. Graves, the new editor of the *Bethel Courier*, a slight, pale youth with an air of profound wisdom, emphasized by the horn rimmed glasses he wore, was propounding his theory that all men were atoms—a theory violently disputed by the women, challenged by them. Graves clung tenaciously to his point.

“Read the Russian or Polish folk stories,” he pleaded in his nervous, high-pitched voice. “Joseph Conrad—Dostoievsky or some of the things James Huneker has said of them in his latest reviews—there is fascinating mysticism in them—the falling of a leaf or the crumbling of a dynasty being of equal importance.”

They disagreed noisily—and Dugan, a smile on

his lips, turned to Daphne, what had she to say? She was sitting close to Graves, her chin on her hand, but Dugan saw that her attention was wandering, once or twice her glances stole to the hilarious group of which her husband was the center.

He saw her eyes rest on him and become suddenly tender—he saw the smile in them lighten to quick eagerness as Bill, catching sight of her above the heads of the men, nodded.

She turned back to her own group with a new enthusiasm—a new spirit. Dugan shook his head. If the man could do that to his wife—a woman of such spirit of pride as Daphne—he could rule a nation.

He approached her. She smiled her welcome, and they made room for him, but he shook his head.

“It’s off for home I am,” he said, “but before I go will ye be showin’ me the picture ye promised to last time I was here?”

She knew she had promised nothing of the sort and that the man before her had something to say to her of deepest importance.

“Indeed I’ll be glad to,” she said.

The gallery was in semi-darkness and Dugan begged her to let it remain so.

“It won’t be distractin’ me mind from what I have to say.”

She laughed and waited—tingling with an eagerness she would not show—what could he be planning? What new triumph for Bill?

Dugan stroked his chin.

"It's fishin' for an invite to dinner I am," he began, smiling at her. He enjoyed watching her—watching changes of expression flashing over her lovely face—yes—she was certainly the lady to fill the bill.

"You can come any time you like," she said. "You know that."

"Yes," he said, "but I mean alone—no table full of millionaires to cut me out."

Then he was suddenly serious.

"Your husband's been doin' big things," he said. She clasped her hands and leaned forward.

"Indeed he has," she nodded. Dugan admired that sudden earnestness—that ring of pride in her voice. She was the first woman he had ever seen to his entire liking. He wondered if Bill appreciated her.

"I'd like to see him interested in politics," was his next move.

"Politics?" she said, wrinkling her forehead. "What sort?"

He smiled. Women, he had found, unless trained, were always vague along these lines. Politics spelled corruption to them—they abhorred them—well, he would soon put her right.

"I mean, I'd like to see him governor of the state."

"Governor——!" she breathed. "Bill—governor——!"

He nodded. "Just that. And what's more it's in my power to put him there."

She did not seem to hear.

"Governor——!" she repeated softly.

He watched her delightedly.

"There's no need to say that ye'll make the finest governor's lady in the country."

She flashed him a smile for that, but it was plain that her thoughts were centered on Bill alone.

"And you think he could get the nomination?"

"Get it!" grinned Dugan. "Sure, it's his for the askin'—an' that's only one step, mind you. He's a great man, your husband, there's few like him, pullin' himself up from nothin' by his own boot straps—and makin' the very kings of finance sit up and take notice. Sure, he's a born ruler!"

She nodded. "Yes, he is, he is——"

She sat silent a long while—her eyes deeply reflective—but her breath came swiftly through her parted lips.

"And may I tell him what you have said?" she asked at length. He nodded.

"Sure, all of it. It's for you to persuade him if it's hesitatin' he is. Tell him Dugan never puts up a man unless he's a sure winner, and that he's the one man I've picked for the job."

She held out her hand impulsively.

"Oh, how can I ever thank you!" He laughed.

"By makin' him say yes."

She told Bill when they were alone before the fire and he had drawn her into his arms. He listened gravely and when he did not speak she drew his face close to hers until he was forced to meet her eyes.

"Well?" she asked, impatiently. He folded her close.

"I don't know," he said gravely. "I don't know——"

"But you can," she urged. "Dugan says you're just the man for the place. Oh, Bill," she cried, breathlessly, "I'm so proud of you!"

He smiled at her. "And so you want me to try for it?"

She did not answer at once, she was content to feel the strength of his arms about her, the roughness of his coat brushed her cheek—the rise and fall of his breathing—if only he had more time for this—these precious minutes—they were few enough as it was, but if he plunged into this new game—what then?

She flung up her head. She had said she would never hold him back—never for an instant!

"I want you to—you're made for big things, Bill—and this is one of them—yes—yes—I want you to!"

"Governor——" he repeated slowly, just as she had done—suddenly he bent his head and kissed her.

"Little Snow Woman," he whispered, "I love you—love you—love you!"

She sighed happily, but when she raised her eyes to his she found him staring into the fire—his cheeks flushed.

“Do you remember the day in the woods when we——” she began softly—then paused; his lips were framing the words again—slowly—almost reverently.

“Governor!” he whispered. “Me—Big Bill Matthews——!”

She did not interrupt, but lay in his arms watching the play of firelight on his face.

Dugan received Bill’s acceptance with a roar of approval.

“Keep it under our hat, though,” he cautioned. “There ain’t goin’ to be no slip up if I can help it!”

It was right there that Bill’s course in practical politics began—the a-b-c’s which Dugan was such a past-master at teaching. There was a rich joy in handling a man of Bill’s calibre—a man so well known from one end of the country to the other—no need of cheap exploitation for him—no need of booming his name in various cities—of appointing him head of a State Commission to enforce Labor Laws—by Jiminy! he had enforced them right there in Bethel without the faintest hope of nomination—that was a record for you! A man who didn’t need to draft a bill to become famous!

Dugan chuckled to himself and confided in Loomis. “They’ll be so dumfounded when his

name goes up that they'll pass him cold on the first ballot—but I bet me new hat he'll get in on the second! An' say, when he pitches into them soulless corporations and tries to make 'em come across with the system he's put into Bethel Steel, the public'll go batty! People's governor—that's what he'll be—he ain't only talkin' practical politics—he's livin' them."

No, Dugan had no fears as to the outcome and Bill, carried along on a new wave of enthusiasm that swept him forward at a high speed, found less and less time to be alone with Daphne. He was not conscious of it—indeed, he would have denied it hotly—he would have declared they were together evenings—but he forgot that the evenings were full conferences behind closed doors—Benson reporting on the new locomotive cranes with their lifting magnet—computing the saving in handling scrap—the rapidity with which it was worked—Mack discussing cases of workmen's widows—presenting an estimate of allowances necessary to them in order to keep their families intact—Pattison noisily announcing he had secured an option on a barge in Seattle—or a dead weight cargo steamer—figuring the cubic cargo capacity—the number of hatches—the size of tanks for oil storage.

Details that forced themselves upon his attention—that must be cleaned up—and Daphne, her eyes on the hearthstone, prayed it might some day be

over—prayed he might have his fill of the grinding work which raised a barrier between them—that he might again live for her alone as he had in those poignantly sweet days in the hills. But she did not speak of her hopes. She did not breathe them aloud. Instead, she watched over him—aided him where she could—enlarged his circle of friends—made peace with his enemies—smoothed his path in a hundred little ways—and when he wanted her, was ready to go to him at a moment's notice.

The winter slipped into spring, and the new danger, still but a whisper—the danger of a ruthless submarine warfare—whipped Bill to new energy.

"Get small calibre guns," was his command. "Have them ready to mount. Get the fleet into shape so that we can mobilize into a trade navy for coast defence. If these old tubs can't do anything else, they can lay and sweep mines. Won't wait until we need them—we'll be ready ahead of time!"

The Bethel *Courier* announced his policy and the news was snapped up by the papers of the nation—here was a man who believed in preparedness—practical preparedness—who neither paraded nor orated—who acted. The result was that a host of individuals offered the government their motor boats and yachts for defense in event of hostilities.

Dugan read, and reading, sat back and rubbed his hands together.

"Good boy!" he grinned. "That's the stuff. You couldn't do better if you tried!"

On a soft morning—with a haze of green on the treetops and a whisper of summer in the air, Daphne sought Bill in his office. Mack grinned at her and waved his hand at the waiting men, but she would not be put aside.

"I'm going to see him," she insisted and followed Mack to Bill's door. Bill, behind a pile of documents, looked up with a frown of impatience. "Didn't I tell you——" he began, then as he saw her, he smiled. "Oh, well, if it's you——" Mack closed the door behind them and she ran to him.

"Bill," she cried eagerly, "I've a splendid plan—it came to me this morning when I woke up and found the sun pouring through my window. You've been working too hard and so I've come to—to run away with you—to make you take a holiday—I've got the new car at the door and——"

He laughed at her as he drew her into his arms.

"Run away! It's spring fever, dearest; the farthest I'll run will be from here to the club for lunch and back."

She sighed in his arms, the eager light in her eyes fading.

"Just for a little while, then—a few hours—it wouldn't matter——"

He kissed her, and his smile held a gentle tolerance.

"Think of planning to kidnap me when there are two conferences slated for this afternoon, beside a dozen men waiting to see me by appointment."

Suddenly he caught her to him—did she feel well? She was a bit pale—why not see the doctor—why not run away for a few days?

"I'd rather not," she said. "Unless you go too."

"No chance," he laughed. She slipped from his arms and arose.

"You'll be home early, won't you? You remember it's the theatre tonight."

He was already attacking the pile of papers before him.

"If I can—Mack will let you know."

She left him, and with a sigh of relief and a smile of tenderness as he thought of her warm arms about his neck—her cheek against his—he plunged anew into work.

He cleared up the pile before him, and pressed a button. Davis, his secretary, appeared and Bill nodded to him.

"Let Thomas come in," he commanded, then paused as the telephone tinkled at his elbow. Davis lifted the receiver, spoke, and turned to Bill, covering the mouthpiece with his hand.

"It's a lady, sir. She says she wants to speak with you."

"Name?" snapped Bill, glancing up for an instant from his papers. Davis inquired, then turned back.

"She won't give it to me, sir; says she must speak to you alone."

Suddenly Bill laughed. "It's Mrs. Matthews—she's probably forgotten to tell me something."

He took the instrument from Davis, a smile still on his lips.

"Well?" he inquired, "what's up?" Then he stiffened suddenly—his face set in stern lines—as a voice reached him:

"I knew you'd answer. I've something I want to ask you—something very important—oh, but first of all, do you know who I am?"

He did not reply for a moment—he couldn't—but he knew in a flash that it was May Larabee. . . .

CHAPTER XXIX

MAY LARABEE TURNS A TRICK

BILL waved his hand to Davis. "I'll ring when I want you," and turned back to the telephone. "Yes," he said shortly, "I know."

She hurried on. "I'm here in Bethel—at the Inn—I want to see you—I'm in trouble, Bill—in a dreadful fix and I don't know which way to turn. I simply had to ring you up; you will forgive me, won't you?"

He tried to collect his thoughts—to ask her when she had returned—what she was doing there—to remember she was a calculating woman who had almost wrecked his life—but at the note of pleading in her voice—at the appeal for help, he weakened.

"If there is anything I can advise you about——" he began, and she broke in eagerly:

"Oh, how good you are! But then that's like you. Shall I come to your office? Or—no, I think it would be better for you to drop in on me here, wouldn't it? I'll do whatever you say."

He tried to plan quickly, but the suddenness with which she flung her suggestions at him, left him confused. She was talking animatedly. "Suppose we

say here, then. You can stop in on your way home. I'll be in the reading room. Bill, you know I should never ask you to come unless I really needed you—you understand, don't you?"

He tried to put her off—to think of an adequate excuse, but before he had framed the words, her bright, "Thank you a thousand times—I'll be waiting!" reached him, with a click that told him she had rung off.

The instant she had gone, he regretted his impulsiveness. What right had she to expect his help—to appeal to his pity—she had forfeited all claim to it, when she had shown her true colors. He called Bethel Inn, and asked for her, but the clerk informed him she had gone out directly after telephoning. No, he was sorry, but no one knew where, and Bill hung up angrily.

All day he fought the irritation that beset him, endeavoring in vain to banish the thought that she would be waiting for him—that he had practically promised to meet her. Why hadn't he told her up and down he would not see her? Why . . .

The conferences lasted until late—he had scarcely time to fling a command to Mack, "Get Mrs. Matthews on the wire. Tell her not to wait dinner. I'll meet her at the show."

It was after seven when the last appointment was fulfilled—when he donned his hat and bid Mack a curt good night. His car stood at the door, but he

dismissed it and told himself he wanted to walk. He knew what he really wished was to fence for time—to give himself an opportunity to plan for the coming interview.

He was glad it was so late. The chances were that May had tired of waiting and had gone elsewhere for help. He hoped so. That would let him out, still since he had offered his help he must make some sort of an attempt to see her.

He felt better after his brisk walk through the soft twilight. May seemed less of a problem. After all, it was natural she should turn to him—there was no harm in finding out what it was she wanted.

He entered the brilliantly lighted lobby of Bethel Inn, nodded to a group of men and women he knew, and strolled past them to the reading room. If she were not there he could leave at once. He would then have done his part—fulfilled his contract. Next time she rang up he would have Davis tell her he was out—or busy. . . .

He entered the long room, with its subdued lights and soft rugs. For a minute his eyes, unaccustomed to the dim glow, could not distinguish its occupants, but once used to the semi-darkness he saw May, and beside her a man—there was no mistaking him—it was Phil. He drew back, endeavoring to escape—furious that she should have appealed to him, when she so obviously had others to turn to, but before he could go, she saw him and hurried toward him.

"I knew you'd come!" she cried.

He greeted her stiffly and she flashed a smile at Phil.

"How lucky you happened in here—I should have had a long wait alone." Bill met Colt's frank stare, and acknowledged his, "I haven't seen you for some time, Matthews," with a short bow. It was true, since the days in the shack he and Phil had not exchanged a dozen words. There was a short silence, then Phil straightened up. "Well, I'll be trotting along," he said. She did not try to keep him, indeed, she seemed relieved when he had gone. She turned to Bill, eagerly.

"Shall we sit down?" He followed her to a couch, in a dim corner, and waited. She leaned toward him.

"Bill, I hated to call you up—I hated to send for you—but I had to—I simply had to—there's no one else I could ask—no one in the world."

She waited—watching him closely, through half closed lids. He cleared his throat.

"If there is anything I can do—I shall, of course, be glad to do it, but why not ask Colt—he——"

"Oh, Phil——" she cried, shrugging. "He's no friend—he never has been—we just happened to meet in here tonight. Phil can't advise me—no one can but you."

He knew that soft note in her voice—he had often thrilled to it—now he stiffened—his face set.

"Perhaps you'd better tell me about it——"

She sighed and clasped her hands in her lap and allowed her shoulders to droop with a suggestion of fatigue.

"It's money," she said, plaintively. "You know you gave me plenty—much more than I deserved—oh, how I've hated myself for those dreadful words you heard me say—but when I read that you had married Daphne I was glad—yes, I was—I knew she'd make a far better wife for you than I. So Monty and I went away—and he gambled—I couldn't stop him—I didn't even try to—I was so broken up—you know, Bill, a woman can't get over these things all at once—and I didn't notice that the money was going—until—until——" she stopped to fumble for her handkerchief. Bill watched her with a cynical admiration—how dramatically she carried it off—always a consummate actress—even this pause was effective—heightening the suspense—"until I found that I had overdrawn! Think of it, Bill—all the money you gave me gone! and I haven't a penny left except the little drop that comes from the estate. . . . I must manage to live on that for the rest of my life!"

She stopped altogether. He stirred uncomfortably—she was waiting for him to say something—anything.

"And what is it you want my advice about?"

"Just this—what can I do with the bit I have left?"

I must enlarge it—you see that—don't you? I wouldn't ask you this unless I were desperate—but you spoiled me—gave me a taste of the good things of life—clothes—travel—everything—and I can't bear—I simply can't bear to be respectably poor after that—and that's what I am now—respectably poor—I'd—I'd rather lose all—every penny—in a gamble—than struggle along this way—I'd rather take a chance to be rich than go on knowing I can never afford another suit like this—or hats or furs."

He was sure she was not acting now—there was a ring of sincerity in her voice which one could not mistake. With all her luxury-loving soul, she abhorred the genteel poverty to which she had once more returned. He doubted her story of Monty's gambling—she had probably squandered the money on clothes—but whatever had happened she was heartily sick of it. All at once he felt sorry for her—after all, her temper was an inherited affair—she was not entirely responsible for its unleashing. He thought of her as he had known her—her tiny self clad in filmy clinging silks—her little arched feet thrust into absurdly extravagant slippers—her rooms always heavy with the perfume of flowers.

She saw the softening in his eyes and waited for him to speak.

"Better buy Bethel Steel," he said crisply; "it ought to go up." She clasped her hands.

"Oh—I shall—I shall—but isn't there some—some less widely known stock that you hold—where I can get in on the ground floor—something good which I can be sure of?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing else I know of—I never go in for the war babies—steer clear of them. Bethel Steel is safe, though, that's why I've put all my money in it—unless you want some shares of Transatlantic—those two are sound investments."

She nodded. "That Transatlantic's yours, isn't it? You started it—built it up. Oh, Bill! what things you have accomplished since first we met!"

He did not answer. He would not respond to the chord of sentimentality she was striking. He rose.

"If you want to get in on Bethel, drop a line about it and I'll have Hanlon, my broker, buy it for you. However, if I were you, I'd leave the money just where it is—even the best tip is only a gamble."

She had risen too and was facing him, her hands clasped.

"You understand my sending for you—don't you? I haven't a soul to turn to—no one who cares—and you are such a wizard—such a prince of—of finance that I could not resist consulting you—forgive me, won't you? And let me thank you."

He bowed. "Remember, I'm merely suggesting an investment, you can do as you please about it;

personally, I believe in letting well enough alone."

She shook her head. "No—no—I'd rather lose all, I tell you." She stopped short and studied him a minute, her head on one side. "You've changed, Bill. I scarcely knew you. You're so sure of yourself—so strong." Then she held out her hand, "Well, I mustn't keep you, must I? Goodbye and thank you."

When she was sure he had gone, she hastened to a telephone booth, and called a number. After a time a voice answered.

"Is that you, Phil?" she asked. Then she spoke softly, almost as though she were afraid someone might overhear. "Yes, I got him talking—no—he didn't suspect a thing—not a thing—tell your father all his money's in Bethel Steel and Transatlantic. What? Yes, I'm sure—positive—you don't need to—I'm glad of the chance—— Yes, goodbye," and she hung up slowly, a little smile still on her lips.

Daphne set out for the theatre alone. Bethel's playhouse was a gorgeous affair—its facade of white marble. It occupied a place of prominence on Main Street's busiest corner. All the hits of the great cities sent their best road companies there. It was a favorite stand—a colony of millionaires.

The play on the boards was a popular farce—an amusing thing which Bethel flocked to see. Daphne

entered the crowded lobby, glanced about at the sea of friendly faces, and wished she might have remained at home—feeling all at once strangely alone. Why wasn't Bill there with her? Why couldn't he tear himself away from his work as well as other men?

She caught sight of Pattison and his wife—true, his eyes were wandering gleefully over the crowd in search of a more agreeable companion—but he was at least there. She saw Decker edging his way nervously to the box office, and Rogers—distinguished looking—shoulders flung back, chin up, with Rosalie, a dream in rose, clinging to his arm. Yes, they were busy men, all of them, but they managed to find time to be on hand with their wives and families before the curtain rose.

“What! Not alone!” She turned, a flame of red sweeping into her cheeks as she beheld Phil Colt. She resented his tone, his manner, his smile, and nodded to him curtly. But he remained at her side.

“I shouldn't think your husband would let you prowl about the streets of Bethel at night—I wouldn't.”

She answered coldly, “I wanted to start ahead. I hate to miss the opening. He's coming later.”

Phil smiled. “Funny, I ran into him not so long ago.”

She did not reply, so he went on; “Up at the Inn—in the reading room.”

"Reading room?" she said, puzzled. "Oh, I think not. You must have mistaken someone else for him." Phil admitted that readily. "I might have thought so, if I hadn't chatted with him, but I didn't stay long. I saw he and Mrs. Larabee had something to say to each other, so I——"

"Mrs. Larabee!" cried Daphne, before she could collect herself.

Phil nodded. "Yes. May said she was expecting him—or maybe I'm wrong—I don't know—at any rate, it seems nice to have her back here again. She's a good sort."

Daphne drew herself up. "I remember now," she said; "he told me something about it—that's why he's late."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Phil.

She sat tensely in her seat—eyes straight ahead—her lip caught between her teeth. May Larabee! What could he have to see her about?—to meet her by appointment? May Larabee. Then she shrugged. After all, he would explain. They had probably met by accident—but that did not satisfy her—no. Phil had said the reading room. One never went there unless for a purpose. May Larabee! the woman he had come within an ace of marrying! She clenched her hands. What if he cared for her still! Then she relaxed with a laugh. Nonsense! He was hers—all hers! She knew that.

The curtain had risen. The farce was in full swing. The audience rocked with laughter, but Daphne sat rigid—white. Toward the end of the act, Bill came. He dropped beside her with a whisper:

“Sorry as the dickens, but held up on all sides.”

She nodded understandingly, a warm glow about her heart now that he was there, and she felt his shoulder against hers. She slipped her hand into his and he smiled as his fingers closed over it.

When the lights flared again, he left her—had something to say to Pattison—would be back directly. She told herself she could not expect him to explain then, but when they reached home. . . .

After the performance, Rogers insisted upon their joining a party bound for the Club House. He promised a supper fit for a king. Bill was eager to go. She saw it. He had cast aside the day’s anxiety and was entering into the gayety of the evening like a boy. She went gladly for his sake.

It was late when they reached home. She waited for him on the stairs, and they mounted together, his arm about her. When they reached her little sitting room, she turned, expectantly—now he would tell her all about it! But he suppressed a yawn and smiled at her.

“Be glad to turn in,” he said. “Big day ahead of me.”

She stared at him with quick alarm. Was it pos-

sible he would say nothing? She determined to help him.

"Can't you tell me what you've done today?"

He took her face in his hands and gazed into her eyes.

"I've worked for you, Little Snow Woman," he said, smiling, "and now I'm going to get my well earned repose. Don't make me talk shop at two A. M., will you?"

She drew back suddenly. "No," she said slowly, "if you've nothing special to tell me."

"Nothing," he laughed, gathering her into his arms, "except that you are the most wonderful woman in the world!"

Long after he slept, she lay wide-eyed—tense—her hands clenched at her side. May Larabee—what if he preferred her?—wished he had married her instead? Daphne drew a quick breath. Well, if she ever found he did not want her—need her—if she ever found she hindered him—— Then she closed her eyes. "I couldn't leave him!" she cried with a sob, "I couldn't——"

CHAPTER XXX

FRIENDS FROM THE PAST

THE Transatlantic prospered—prospered out of all proportion to the golden promises held out by even its most optimistic promoters. “It’s Matthews’ luck!” they cried—and as though to affirm the report, Bethel Steel rose steadily—its contracts so enormous that it was forced to borrow huge sums to fulfill them.

Red hot days those—midsummer, but not even the blistering sky overhead—nor the heat mists that wavered up from the pavements could stem the staggering load of work that fell on Bill’s shoulders. He carried it with an ease—a supreme confidence which left his fellows amazed, incredulous. Dugan, standing behind, watched him with anxious eyes.

“You’re puttin’ over big things, Bill, me boy,” he said, “but go easy—this weather ain’t fit for a dog to wag his tail in—save yourself—we’ll be needin’ ye whole this fall!”

And Bill, grinning at him, wiped the perspiration from his forehead. “This isn’t work, you old croaker—it’s fun! And you’d better clear out and let me tackle it before I throw you out!”

Down at his desk by nine in the morning and there until late at night, he shouldered his way through a mass of work that would have snowed under another man. He revelled in it. This was the joy of life raised to the nth power. You saw things grow—develop under your very eyes—felt the pulse of a country under your fingers—always something new to do—something bigger! Dugan wanted a candidate with a record behind him. Well, by heaven! he'd have one worthy the name! And when he was governor—governor . . . here the blood would pound through his veins—and his muscles knot. He'd show them!

He saw Daphne only at moments—moments in the morning, before he swallowed his coffee and jumped into his car—interrupted moments to be sure, for the newspaper must be skimmed—the condition of the blockade—the news from Washington—the outlook on the Street for the day—ascertained before reaching the office.

Daphne understood—he was not afraid of that. But he did not like her paleness—the shadows beneath her eyes. He wished she would run away into the hills and escape Bethel's heat.

“Why not take Benson's shack—perhaps I can get up there for a week end.”

But she told him quietly she preferred to stay—that she was all right—that he must not worry about her. And he didn't. He had no time to just then.

When he returned home at nights—when at length he dropped the yoke of labor—he was too tired to talk. Often he fell asleep in his chair—but there were other nights when there was figuring to do—when he would carry his records off to his room and pour over the long columns of unintelligible numbers, which pleased or angered him as it happened.

There were times, when conscious of her presence, when feeling her eyes upon him from the doorway, he would glance up to find her there—a soft gown emphasizing her slenderness—her hair over her shoulder in two long braids.

“You up?” he would say, his finger on the place. “Better get your beauty sleep, hadn’t you, dear? Don’t fret about me, though. I’ve got to work this thing out. I’ll turn in soon.”

One night when she seemed more frail—more flower-like than usual, she broke down.

“Bill!” she cried, her voice full of wild longing, “Bill, can’t you see you’re not living—can’t you see that all this—this slavery is drying up your heart—your soul?”

He had looked up at her, startled, and because he saw tears in her eyes, he pushed his papers aside and caught her to him.

“Nonsense,” he cried. “You’re tired—or you wouldn’t speak that way—why, this *is* life, Daphne—all that I’m doing and trying to do—it’s creating,

isn't it? What else *is* there to life? You wouldn't have me a dreamer, would you? I won't be as hard at it as this for long—I'll be through the worst part of it soon, then we can run off together—next month, perhaps—or maybe sooner."

But he didn't, for the work piled up—the great pressure continued, and Daphne, lying awake night after night, stared into the blackness.

"He doesn't care for me. He doesn't need me," she would repeat dully again and again—until the words became meaningless and sleep came.

It was on a day of colossal work that Mack stumbled into Bill's office unheralded. Gray, of the Interstate Commerce, was in the midst of a wordy discussion when the door opened. Bill looked up sharply. He saw that Mack was unusually stirred.

"Well?" snapped Bill. "What is it?"

Mack rubbed his hands. "I thought you was through, sir. I thought the gentleman had gone, so I came to tell you there's someone to see you——"

"Ask him to wait—unless it's Mr. Pattison——"

"No, it ain't him, sir, it's—it's—an old friend."

Gray's lips were set in a smile, but his foot tapped impatiently and he half drew out his watch. Bill, on edge, sensing his restlessness, turned on Mack.

"Whoever it is, keep him away. You know better than to break in on me this way."

Mack's smile vanished. He nodded and fumbled for the door handle. There was something so forlorn about the droop of his thin shoulders, that Bill was moved.

"Wait. Who is it?"

Mack turned. "It's Tony Dufrano, sir."

"Tony!" shouted Bill, a ring of eagerness in his voice. "Well, well!" Then recalling himself, he changed his tone. "Take him into the directors' room and ask him to wait."

Mack grinned. "I knowed you'd want to see him!" he said.

After Gray had gone, Bill rose quickly and smiled to himself. So Tony had come from out the past. What a life time it seemed since the old days!—since he had climbed from Factory Street to the hill-top. What a full life he had lived since then!

In the directors' room he found a tall, pale youth, fumbling his hat in nervous hands.

"Tony!" he cried, his hand outstretched. "It's good to see you again!"

Tony took his hand shyly and dropped it quickly. He seemed miserably ill at ease—painfully conscious of his shabby suit—his frayed cuffs.

"Why haven't you been here before?"

Tony swallowed; he was evidently struggling for the proper form of address.

"I wanted to, Mr. Matthews—but——"

Bill laughed. "My name's still the same—did you think that had changed, too?"

Tony shook his head. "No, sir. Nedda said for me to call you Bill like I used to—but—but when I seen you—I couldn't—I just couldn't."

Bill laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Nedda was right—she always was, as I remember. Now tell me all about her and about yourself—and, oh yes, and about little Miss M'Farlane who used to darn my socks."

Tony sat on the edge of his chair. "There ain't much to tell. She's dead—bronchitis got her. Nedda, she nursed her, but it wasn't no good."

"Start from the beginning, Tony. What happened after I left?"

"Nothin', only I took sick and they turned me off at the Works. I guess Mack told you."

Bill nodded. "I wanted to find you when I came back here, but no one knew where you had gone."

"Nobody cared. I couldn't get a job in Bethel, so we sold the things you give Nedda—only she didn't want to—and went away."

"But why didn't you write me—you heard I'd come back."

"Sure. Nedda cuts out all about you in the papers—she reads 'em to me sometimes, but she didn't want to let you know how bad off we was—'he'll have so many folks askin' for help, we ain't a-goin' to bother him,' she'd say."

"She shouldn't have felt that way," said Bill. "She was my little sister—my friend—my pal."

Tony shrugged. "I wanted to ask you, but she said no—she wouldn't a-given in yet only her eyes've gone back on her."

"Eyes," Bill caught up sharply. "You don't mean——"

"Oh, she ain't blind, or nothin'—but she can't sew no more for a while, and I couldn't make enough for both of us, so I worked my way back here and brought her along. I told her I was comin' to you—I told her maybe you was stuck on yourself now that you'd made a pile and wouldn't want to see me—but I'd take the chance—she didn't want me to, but what else was there to do?"

"You did the right thing," said Bill, heartily. "I wish you had done it long ago. Mack will find a place for you here—you can start in as soon as you like."

Tony's pale face flushed. "Is that straight?" he gasped.

Bill laughed. "Here's my hand on it."

Tony grasped it eagerly. "Gee, that's great—that's immense—thank you, sir—Bill——"

"That's better. Now then, tell Nedda I want to see her—that I will the very first chance I get. You'll find this a busy place, Tony—we don't keep track of the time—there's too much to do—but you'll like it."

Tony nodded. "So long as I'm in your crew I don't give a shoot how hard I work!" he cried.

Bill returned to his office slowly, a smile of pity on his lips. What if it had been his lot to remain at the foot of the ladder—to beg the men higher up for work!

No, that was not for him, he had set out on the road, and the path had wound ever upward until he neared the summit—or was there a summit? There seemed always more to do—much more.

He had cried out for wealth—for power—for love and they had been given him—and still he was eager—groping. He stretched his arms above his head in an ecstasy of triumph. That very unrest was what gave life its flavor—what spurred him on. He loved it.

Then he settled down to work. There was the Wilson report to check up—the labor and material bills to go over—why the dickens didn't Davis come when you rang for him! Didn't he know there were only twenty-four hours in the day?—worst luck!—there should have been at least forty-eight!

Tony hurried to the boarding house on Factory Street where he had left Nedda. He ran most of the way and arrived breathless and panting. Nedda heard his step on the stair and hurried out to meet him.

"Well?" she said. "Did you see him?"

Tony nodded, delighting in withholding for a few seconds the wonderful news. Nedda—her white face a shade whiter—caught his hands. "He was angry—he——"

Tony grinned. "Like fun he was! He said we'd ought to have come to him before—he said we'd ought to have knowed he'd want to help us—and he give me a job, Nedda, right off the bat. I'm going to work in his office!"

She caught a chair to steady herself. "Tony—tell me quick—how did he look? Well? Happy?"

"Look?" said Tony, wrinkling his forehead, "gee, I don't know. He's all dolled up—and talks like a regular gent—but he's the same old Bill on the inside—wouldn't let me call him mister——"

"Yes, yes—but did he smile much—did he seem glad of—everything?"

"Sure. He laughed and jollied like he used to."

"Did he—did he speak of his—wife? Did he tell you if he——"

Tony shook his head. "You ask the blamedest questions—here I am tellin' you about my job and you want to know about his wife. Sure, he didn't talk about her, but you could see he was crazy about everythin' he was doin'—he said he was comin' to see you."

"No, no," she cried, "he mustn't do that!"

Tony stared at her. "What's got into you,

Nedda? Don't you want to see him? I should think you'd like to talk over old times."

She rose. "No, Tony. He mustn't see me. He thinks of me as a good friend—a dear friend, perhaps—but if he'd see me he would find how much he'd changed—how far behind him I am."

Tony laughed. "Well, you wouldn't think so if you'd heard him callin' you his pal—his little sister——"

"Did he say that? What else did he say, Tony? think—think——"

He shrugged. "Nothin'." Then he burst out, "Nedda, we'll be able to have a swell place ourselves—and you won't have to work except at the Mission if you want to. Maybe I'll be rich myself some day. Didn't I tell you we'd ought to go to him?"

She did not answer for some time. "And he looked happy?" she said at length. "You're sure of that, Tony?"

He nodded absently, and she smiled. "I'm glad," she said. "I'm awfully glad!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BATTLE ROYAL

FOR the first time in his life Tony Dufrano knew what it was to have a full stomach and a mind at rest—for the first time in his life he wore good clothes, slept in good lodgings—and the adoration he had felt from boyhood for the big man—was turned into a dumb worship which needed nothing to feed it—which grew daily of itself.

Mack had given him a place as clerk—with a whispered assurance that he'd do better soon. But Tony, so long as he could be near Bill, serving him, aiding him, asked no more of life.

At nights he raced home to tell Nedda what Bill had said—had done—of the great men who came to his office—of the vast sums which changed hands each day.

“And say, when he's through tellin' Nathaniel Rogers or some other money grabber what he'd ought to do about the other's ships—in he comes to my office and stands back of me. ‘Well, Tony,’ he says, puttin' his hand on my shoulder, ‘Makin' out all right—or do you need any help?’” Believe me, there's nothin' I wouldn't do for him from kickin'

the bucket, down—and the rest feel the same.”

And Nedda, silent—tense—drank in every word.

They rented a little house on Factory Street—one of the model houses Bill had put up—and Nedda plunged into the work she loved—for which she had always prayed she might have time. She became known as the Angel of Hope Mission.

Tony, full of news, bubbling over with stories of the great with whom he daily rubbed shoulders, spoke no more of Bill's coming to see her. She was glad he had not come—she told herself so repeatedly—no—he must not see her again—never—never. And when the longing rose up within her—when her heart cried out passionately for a sight of him—she crushed its voice—fighting her fight sternly—with clenched hands and steady eyes. It was better—far better they should never meet again. He was happy—that was all that mattered.

It was on the morning of August thirty-first, that Colt, glancing at the *Bethel Courier*, shot a command at Jenkins, his secretary.

“Send Mr. Philip to me at once—don't let anyone disturb us.”

He read the news again, eagerly, his hands trembling a little. Then he rose and paced—quickly—lightly, like a caged beast longing to be free that it might destroy—kill—ah, well, the key of the cage was his at last!

Phil entered slowly. "What's up?" he said.

Colt paused in his stride to growl: "Paper—read it!"

Phil picked it up.

"My God!" he cried, "six Transatlantic ships sunk—so you think——"

"Think!" shouted Colt, "I don't think—I know—I know that what we've been waiting for has come at last. I tell you we've got him, Phil—we've got him now! He can't go over my head with his systems—or over my son's with his love affairs and get away with it this time! No, I've been sitting tight for three years—three long years—waiting for just such a chance as this and now, by Jove! I'm going to break him! . . ."

His eyes were red—his lips drawn back in a snarl. "Break him! do you hear? Clean him out—wipe him off the map—there won't be a ghost of a chance for him to come back! Not a ghost of a chance!"

Phil stared at his father—at the distorted face—the shaking hands.

"What can you do?" he asked sharply.

"Do! I can send Bethel Steel tumbling—I can unload on the market till it drops far enough to wipe him out."

"Yes—but I don't see——"

"Don't you? Don't you know he's bought Transatlantic on a margin—got a million dollars' worth of stock for a hundred thousand—and now that the

ships have gone down, what will happen? Why, Transatlantic will drop—the stockholders will be panicky—they'll unload as soon as the market opens—Matthews will have to cover his margin, won't he? And how will he do it? By selling Bethel, of course, and feeding it to his brokers—but he won't have a chance for Bethel is going down so fast that there won't be any of his money left to protect him—do you see? Do you think I don't know just how much stock he holds. Why, I've kept count of every share waiting for this chance—and now I'm ready—ready. You'll see the greatest bear market in the history of the street—you'll see a big man wiped out clean as a whistle—he can't meddle with a Colt and go scot free—not by a long shot!"

Phil caught his arm eagerly. "And Transatlantic's first annual and directors' meeting is slated for tomorrow night at five—you can step in and——"

"And depose him as president!" cut in Colt. "Kick him out—that's what I'll do. I'll get plenty of proxies. I'll go everywhere to get them. I'll have him grovelling—begging for mercy. I'll have him back where he started. He'll be glad to take his old job at the mills!"

Phil grinned. "You can't punish him badly enough to suit me. Anything I can do?"

"Yes, get hold of that Larabee woman; she can help. Tell her to sell the steel stock he bought for

her as soon as the market opens—tell her to go to his brokers and stay around there—keep her ears open—she may not hear a thing and she may pick up a word here and there that will let us know just how hard they're hammering him. It's a chance, and they won't suspect her. Now clear out. Leave word where I can get you at any moment. Jenkins," he bawled, "put Myers on the wire—order the car here in twenty minutes—get Ditson on my private line—ring up Ship News—find out if the sinking's authentic. Can't cross a Colt," he muttered to himself grimly. "Can't cross a Colt!"

Bill had learned the news the night before. With white face and clenched hands he had listened to the message ticked out over the wires—the message which Davis read off to him: "Six ships lost—struck mine." What did it matter how they went down—what did anything matter—but the fact that there were lives on board? He waited an interminable space of time for the words in answer to his query—they came at last—yes—the men had all been saved—picked up by passing vessels. Ah! that was good! He wiped the sweat from his forehead and lit a cigarette—now then, what was to be done?

Stockholders would be badly scared at the news—no doubt about that—and his brokers would be shouting for money—but he had Bethel! He'd sell it—every last share of it to protect them. Well,

there was nothing more to do before morning—he dismissed Davis and set out for home.

He felt shaken as though the firm ground on which he stood had suddenly given way—as though he teetered on the edge of a precipice. Then he laughed away his misgivings—he was done up—that was it—he had had a nasty half hour of it before he knew the men were safe—a good night's sleep was what he needed! And his mind sprang to the morning—he'd get hold of his brokers the first thing—lucky he had steel—nice mess he'd be in if he hadn't! By Jove! Perhaps his unloading would send steel down a ways, too—might knock the wind out of a few beggars who had put their last cent in it! With a shock he thought of May Larabee.

It was the first time she had crossed his mind since the morning he had received her brief note and turned her over to his broker—like a flash her words came back to him. “I haven't a penny except the little drop that comes from the estate. I must manage to live on that for the rest of my life!” He couldn't let her lose it—it was all she had! He'd call her up—he'd tell her to unload early. Six ships—great guns! What if he had put all his money in Transatlantic!

Daphne was awaiting him—her eyes eager, her lips smiling.

“I have a surprise for you—and you're not to try to guess.” He drew her to him with a sigh.

How good it was to be home—to be away from the strife of the office—to feel the arms of the woman he loved about his neck—to find her warm lips raised to his own.

“It’s something for your dinner—something you like better than—— Why, Bill,” she broke off sharply, “what’s wrong? You look so tired—so drawn—has anything happened?”

He laughed at her. “No—only it’s been a busy day—an extra busy day—and I’m glad to be here with you.”

He would spare her—she would worry so if she knew—he must not let her share his anxiety. Thank goodness he was there to save her from just such things!

“You go wash up and change into something cool. We’ll have a bite in the little rose garden.”

He smiled. “Sounds great—I *am* a bit grimy—I’ll be down in a jiff.”

He mounted the steps. He would call up May now—there was just a chance of catching her. Daphne, remembering all at once something she wished to tell him, followed him—but she paused in the doorway as she heard his voice at the phone.

“Is this Bethel Inn? Yes, I want Mrs. Larabee—no—no name—it’s important—very.”

Daphne recoiled as though from a blow. May Larabee! So that was why he looked so white—so haggard—the pain of the thought was too great

for her to bear and she crushed it back. "Oh, no," she whispered. "Oh, no—it can't be that——"

She heard him speaking softly, insistently. "She's not in her room? Well, page her, I must speak to her—no—I'll hold the line."

Daphne tried to go—to tear herself away—but she could not—she was as one turned to marble—
—at last she heard his impatient exclamation:

"She isn't? You're sure?—no—never mind—I'll call up again."

She stepped back as he rose—she saw him hesitate—frowning—then he ran up the stairs. She did not stir for a long while—but she felt suddenly calm—as though she had found the answer to a question long troubling her—as though she had learned the truth at last—slowly she moved across the porch and down the steps.

When Bill joined her, he found her seated at the little table by the rose bushes—she was unusually quiet, but he was glad—it gave him an opportunity to think—to plan. He toyed with his food and she leaned toward him suddenly.

"Bill, you're not eating a thing."

He looked up with a laugh. "Had a late lunch, dear, not a bit hungry—rather sit and look at you—you're a feast for the eyes."

She did not answer, but she drew a quick breath, almost as though from a stab of pain. When they had finished, he rose abruptly.

"I've got to call a number. I'll be back directly," and he left her. She waited a long time—her hands idly in her lap—her body relaxed, her eyes closed, as though listening to the noisy twittering of nesting birds—the low measured hum of the insects—as though drinking in the earthy sweetness of the moistening ground—the heavy perfume of honeysuckle. As she saw him coming toward her she became suddenly rigid. She caught her lip between her teeth—but she did not alter her position. When he had come quite near she opened her eyes lazily.

"Get your number?" She saw that a straight line crossed his forehead.

"No," he said abruptly. "They don't answer."

"Was it someone—you wanted to speak with—very much?"

He was tempted to tell her all about it—to ask her advice—but he checked the impulse—once she knew that he was troubled about money matters she would have no rest—she had stood a fiery summer in Bethel to be at his side—he would not make her carry his business burdens as well. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Someone I'd like to get hold of."

"Were they stopping here in town?" she asked, after a pause.

He nodded. "Yes, at Bethel Inn. It's just a matter of business, but it's the deuce that I can't locate them."

She shivered suddenly. "Bethel Inn." Then she rose. "I'll run along in, Bill," she said, "it's getting chilly out here."

He nodded. "So it is—I'll be with you presently—soon as I have my smoke."

He watched her as she passed into the house—his eyes soft—his lips smiling. There was no one like her in the world—no one with that quick sympathy—that warm tenderness—other women posed—or acted a part—she was just herself. If May had been like that—and the thought of her brought back his plight. Well, if he couldn't get her—he couldn't—he'd make it up to her somehow—no woman would lose money through his advice if he could help it. Then he dismissed her, abruptly. By Jove! if Transatlantic started down hill what a fight there'd be—well—he wasn't afraid—not much! and he drew a long breath—*he'd* pull out on top!

Daphne opened her eyes and turning her head, glanced at the little enameled watch by her bed. It was ten o'clock. She sat up with a start. What had made her sleep so late? Then she remembered she had heard the clock strike four—five—six—before she had closed her eyes. What a night it had been! The blackness charged with vague doubts—fears—uncertainties. She rang, and her maid appeared.

"Has Mr. Matthews left yet?"

"He left about eight o'clock, Ma'am."

"About eight?"

The maid nodded. "He went out walkin' at six and when he came in Mr. Davis was waitin' for him with the car."

Daphne lay back on her pillows. Bill had never before left home in the morning without waking her for a brief chat—something was wrong—she was sure of it! Her pride battled fiercely with her overwhelming anxiety—if he chose to keep it from her—if he preferred to face an issue alone she could not prevent it! He, no doubt, had other confidants—and in a flash she thought of May Larabee—he had hurried to speak with her the moment he had reached home—and when he failed to find her in he had tried again. Well, Daphne whispered through closed teeth—whatever happened she would not let him see how much she cared. She spread open the morning paper which lay on a chair beside her—she glanced at its headlines through a blur of tears—she let it fall from her hands with a cry, but the words danced before her eyes!

"Six Transatlantic Steamers Sunk Without Warning!"

Her maid ran to her side—but she pushed her away—no—no—she must dress—she must go to him at once—all her grievances swept aside in a rush of pity. He would be stunned by the news—broken. His heart and soul was wrapped up in Transatlantic—this would be a cruel blow for him.

She waved aside the breakfast tray her maid brought her—but at her plea swallowed some coffee. “Poor boy,” she whispered to herself. “Poor boy!”

The car awaited her at the door and she leaped in. “Mr. Matthews’ office,” she called.

They sped down the long drive and on to the highway. The haze of midsummer hung in the air. The trees by the roadside were bowed down with the weight of their leaves—a meadow of freshly cut hay flung her its heavy sweetness as she flashed by. She breathed deeply—after all, it might not be so bad. Surely Bill could cope with this situation as he had with so many others. He was strong.

Outside the office building was gathered a crowd. They eyed her curiously as she entered. She wondered what they were doing there. She hurried to the elevator. The car was full, but they made room for her. She was glad when it came to a stop at his floor. She stepped out. The hallway seemed choked with people—men who spoke in loud, harsh voices. Women, who listened silently—intently.

She forced her way through them until she reached the outer office. She paused, staring in the doorway. The place was in an uproar—office boys flew back and forth with messages—telephones tinkled—a mass of men and women battled fiercely with the clerks to gain entrance—close to the gate were several sharp-eyed youths—glancing about shrewdly—taking notes.

She saw old Mack, his face white and set, driving them back—begging them to be patient—but they pressed forward, a string of questions on their lips. There was something sinister about their quiet persistence in the face of so many rebuffs.

“Who are they?” she whispered to a woman beside her—a little shriveled creature—who had thrown a shawl over her head, but who, in her haste, had forgotten to change her worn carpet slippers for shoes.

“Them’s the reporters, I guess,” she replied; then sweeping Daphne’s smart costume with her sharp eyes, she whispered:

“Is your money in it, too?”

“In what?” gasped Daphne—fearing the answer—feeling herself suddenly plunged into the heart of a tragedy.

“In Transatlantic. All mine is and my man’s, too. He worked at the plant under Big Bill—he swore by him and when they started this here company he put all our savin’s in—every cent we’d put away for twenty years. If it goes down any lower we’ll be wiped out. Do you suppose any of us will get a chance to see the boss?”

Daphne shrank back. “Wiped out.” Then she caught the woman’s hand impulsively. “Oh, don’t be afraid—he’ll never let that happen to you——”

“But he can’t help it,” said the woman monotonously. “It’s them boats sinkin’ that’s done it—it

isn't him—don't I know he's as good as gold to everyone?"

"Yes, yes," cried Daphne. "He is—he won't let you suffer. He'll find some way to save you."

The woman looked at her curiously. "Do you know him well, Ma'am?"

Daphne nodded. "He's my husband."

The woman's voice rose to a shriek. "Your husband! Oh, please, Mrs. Matthews, go to him—tell him every penny we have——"

The crowd stilled at the shrill cry—whirled and turned to stare at Daphne—the reporters were the first to reach her side. Then the mob closed in—fighting—cursing—imploring her to intercede for them—to save them from ruin. She faced them—her cheeks white as snow—her eyes wide with horror.

"Don't be afraid," she cried out. "He'll take care of you all—he'll take care of you all."

Old Mack, with the aid of the clerks, fought his way through and reached her side.

"Leave her alone, you pack of hounds," he shouted. "Don't one of you dare lay hands on her—can't you see she's ready to faint?"

He drew her away from them, but they caught her dress—beseeking her to say a word for them—just a word—and she promised breathlessly through white lips—her strength almost gone.

She followed Mack into his office and sank down.

Faintly she could hear the murmur of the mob—the voices of the clerks commanding—soothing—threatening. She covered her ears with a shudder.

“You shouldn’t have come down here, Ma’am,” Mack told her, his voice trembling—his face still flushed with horror. “Heaven only knows what they would have done to you if we hadn’t got you out—they’re stark crazy, most of ’em—poor devils.”

“Tell me,” she cried, “is it as bad as they say—is it true they will lose their money?”

Mack shook his head. “It’s a shame—that’s what it is. Someone’s out to break Bill and the sinkin’ has given them their chance.”

“Is it Colt?” she whispered. Mack nodded.

“Yes—the snake—I knew he had it in for Bill ever since the first time the three of ’em come to the old office—but Colt, he wouldn’t come—wouldn’t have no dealin’s with Bill—but he ain’t forgot that what Bill said went with the three—no—and he ain’t forgot that the reason Bethel Steel didn’t go to the wall was because Bill put it on its feet—he’s had a grudge of long standin’—Colt has—and now’s his chance to smash the feller what put it all over him—and he’s a-goin’ to do it if he can!”

Daphne sprang to her feet. “I must see my husband!” she cried.

Mack shook his head. “Don’t do it, Mrs. Matthews,” he begged. “There’s nothin’ on earth you can do for him now—and it would weaken him to

have you here—he's got to put up the fight of his life and he needs all his strength."

She caught his arm. "But I want him to know that I don't care what happens—I don't care if he loses everything—so long as I have him—he must know that——"

"Time enough to tell him later," said Mack. "He's got to go through with his scrap to the end—if they lick him he'll need you to stand by him—he's tied up now—I'm afeared to break in."

She looked about helplessly. "Then I'd better go."

"I think so, Ma'am."

"Oh, if there were only something I could do!"

"Nothin' could save him now, unless Colt would stop unloadin'."

She did not seem to hear. "Remember, Mack, if you can only see him—just for a minute—tell him that nothing matters but him—nothing in the world."

"Yes'm—God bless you—I'll tell him. You'd best go out this way, Ma'am—and don't talk to none of them reporter fellers."

She hesitated. "If he should need me—or want me—let me know—let me know at once—promise."

Mack patted her hand. "I'll promise on my word of honor."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE ONLY WAY

SWIFTLY she ran down the stairs to her waiting car.

A huge crowd had gathered before the building—a noisy, turbulent, threatening crowd. She caught a word here and there.

“He’s swamped.” “Bit off more than he can chew.” “What’s the last quotation?”

She moved through them unnoticed. They were too absorbed to observe the white-faced woman in their midst—the chauffeur, talking with an eager group—saw her coming and sprang to his feet. The crowd stared at her sullenly and someone yelled.

“That’s Mrs. Matthews.” But before they could surround her, she had leaped in and slammed the door behind her—and the car glided away, leaving a shouting mob behind.

She sat huddled—staring—so Bill was facing ruin alone—and they would not let her go to him! Mack had believed it was Colt’s doing—Colt!

Perhaps it was on her account that they were hammering Bill—perhaps Philip had come home from the hills with ugly stories that had set Colt’s smolder-

ing hatred on fire—perhaps she herself was to blame for it all!

The thought was too staggering to contemplate—she pressed her hand to her heart—if it were her fault she must do all in her power to rectify it before it was too late—she must see Philip—she must plead with him to stop his father—she was not entirely sure just what it was Colt, senior, was doing—but she knew that if he kept on Mack had said Bill would be smashed. She cried out sharply, “Stop here!”

The car slid to the curb and she leaped out and entered Bethel’s National Bank. They knew her there. They would let her telephone.

She heard the shrill whisper that ran from lip to lip at her appearance:

“That’s Matthews’ wife.”

They were courteous, but their eyes were full of hungry curiosity. At her request, they led her to a booth.

She called up Colt’s house and the butler informed her that Mr. Philip had gone to Bethel Inn. Yes, he was sure, because Mr. Colt, senior, had left word that his son should notify him throughout the day as to his whereabouts. Bethel Inn—yes, Ma’am.

She hurried out. “Bethel Inn,” she whispered through white lips.

She looked about the lobby, dazed, wondering

where she could find him. A page passed and she called to him.

"Have you seen Mr. Philip Colt here?"

"Yes, Madam, he's in the reading room—this way."

Philip, deep in a chair, his paper before him, was evidently awaiting someone, but at her low whisper, he sprang to his feet.

"Daphne!" he cried. "By Jove! you're the last person I expected to see!"

She faced him quietly. "Phil, I must talk to you—can't we go somewhere—where——"

He shrugged. "This is as good a place as any. What's the trouble?"

She dropped in the chair he had vacated and he drew up another facing her and seated himself. She leaned toward him.

"Phil, I don't know how to tell you—I don't know how to begin—but your father is ruining Bill and I've got to stop it somehow."

"What makes you say that?" he asked sharply.

She ignored his question. "I've got to stop it," she repeated dully. "I can't let Bill go down without trying to help. I've got to stop it."

"What makes you think my father is back of this?" he demanded.

"I know he is!" she cried. "He's always hated Bill—and he's always hated me. Don't tell me that what he's doing is part of the game they're all play-

ing—and the best man wins—because Bill's played hard—and he's played square. I won't see him lose!" Phil did not answer for a minute. At length he said, "Well, what did you think I could do?"

She shook her head. "I didn't know—I thought perhaps because of—of our friendship you would—help me."

He studied her closely. "Granted what you say is true, I suppose you know that when the governor starts hammering a chap he generally goes through with it!"

"But there must be some way," she cried—"some way——"

Phil shook his head. "Nothing could save him now short of a pile of money—he's probably done for—he——"

She caught his arm. "I haven't money, Phil—that is—only a little—but I have jewels—would they do?—do you think I could use them?—do you think——?"

He laughed. "You *are* in earnest, aren't you? Never thought you could care for a man as much as that—didn't believe you had it in you."

She did not half hear. "I can go to the bank and get them now—at once—if you think it will do any good."

"No," he said suddenly. "I have a better scheme—I admire your pluck—can't help it—so perhaps I'll give you a helping hand after all."

"Phil!" she cried. "If you would—if you would——"

"What would you do?"

"Anything," she cried, recklessly. "Anything to save him."

"Sh," he cautioned, "not so loud! You can't do a thing today—the market will close too soon, but tomorrow with plenty of cash we might be able to jump in and pull him out of this hole. I don't promise anything, remember, so don't raise your hopes. Now then, get your jewels and as much money as you can scrape together and if you are in dead earnest about this thing—if you really mean to stand by him—come what may—bring them to me late this afternoon. I'll go over them with you and if you have enough we'll turn it over to his brokers the first thing in the morning—they can use it as margin."

"Go to you this afternoon?" she whispered. "I don't understand——"

He spoke impatiently. "I can't explain the whole deal to you now—I'm in a rush as it is—expect to meet someone here any minute—but I can't go to your place, can I? If your husband should by any chance find me there he'd raise a row—you know that—he'd never let you risk losing your jewels for him, would he?"

She shook her head. "I suppose not—but——"

"Well, I have to go over them to see if you have enough to make it worth while—my father will not

be home until late—there's the stockholders' meeting which will last until six and the directors' meeting which will be over by half past, but Dad's going to a conference after it—so if you drive over at—say five o'clock and ring twice I'll have you admitted immediately. We can run through the things you bring and you can hurry home. Your husband's due at the meeting, too—and he'll be tied up there. You needn't say a word to him, and next day he'll find he has a stack of money back of him. He won't question where it comes from, so long as it is there. After it is all over, and you have saved him, you can tell him. Now then, how about it?"

She tried to catch his eye—but he was glancing at his watch. "Yes or no—I must be off."

"Phil, if I told you what I have——"

"Nonsense," he cut her short. "If you're afraid to come, that's different—we'll call the matter off. I'm not keen for it, anyway—it's going against my own father—but I always liked you, Daphne, you know that, and I'm willing to do my best to help you out—if you think I've got any little scheme——"

"Oh, no, Phil," she cried. "I don't, I don't—I only wondered—I only thought——"

He shrugged. "Perhaps we'd better not attempt it—it may fail, you know."

But she clung to his arm. "No, no, I must try—I must! I'll come. I'll bring them. I'll do whatever you say if you will only help me."

"Very well," he said abruptly. "I'll expect you."

After she had gone, a shadow detached itself from the surrounding darkness and came toward Phil. It was May Larabee.

"Well," she said, "I thought she'd never go. What did she want?"

He looked at her sharply and wondered how much she had heard.

"She wanted me to rush in and save her husband—came to me for help."

May nodded. "I see."

Phil moved uneasily. "I'd almost given you up. What's the news?"

"I got to Hanlon's office the first thing this morning, sold out and asked if they'd mind my watching the ticker. The whole place had gone mad and when steel started to drop they forgot everyone in the scramble. I never saw such a riot. I stuck close and listened with both ears—but as for picking up anything—I might as well have been at home crocheting!"

"You'd better go back," he told her. "There's no telling what may come up before the market closes."

"All right," she said, "if you think it's worth while."

Bill, his lips white, his jaw squared, faced Patti-son and Benson.

"No," he ground out. "No, not on your life! I won't take your money—either of yours—do you suppose Colt will stop short of slaughter now? If I go down, I go down alone—I don't drag my friends with me—now for the last time—No!"

Pattison tried another tack. "Don't be a fool, Matthews. We all know what Colt's doing."

"Yes," broke in Benson, his voice trembling. "Yes—I told you he'd do it—I told you he'd lay for you—and smash you when the time came——"

"Look here," shouted Pattison. "Do you suppose Decker or Rogers are standing for this—they asked me to come to you—to put it to you straight—they want to loan you——"

Bill pacing, whirled. "If my brokers will carry me over I'll pull out. If not, I'll go down. I'm not afraid to face failure. I'm not afraid to be a poor man again—but the only thing I *am* afraid of is to take money from you men who are big enough fools to lend it to me—on a straight proposition that I believed in—that I knew was a winner, I'd be glad to have you stake in, you know that,—but on a speculation—no!—I wouldn't let you risk a red cent to get me out of this—not if I were ten times worse off than I am—not if——"

"You can't be worse off," broke in Pattison. "How much longer do you think your brokers can hold out?"

Bill squared his shoulders. "I figure they'll see

me through—they've got to! The rumors that Transatlantic's in bad condition are lies—you'll find at the meeting tonight that the earnings are big—that the cash on hand is big. I've told them——"

The telephone tinkled. Davis sprang to it and lifted the receiver. He held his hand over the mouthpiece and turned a white face to Bill. "It's Hanlon. He says they can't hold out."

"I knew it," cried Pattison, "tell him we'll——"

But Bill caught up the instrument. "Hanlon," he cut in, "you've got to carry me through! Understand? You've *got* to carry me through! It's my only chance. No, don't talk. I won't listen. I'm coming over there. Yes, to your office—now."

He hung up and leaped to his feet, but Pattison blocked his path. "They can't do it, Bill. Listen to reason. It's against the rules of their house——"

"Rules be damned," he grinned. "This is one time they'll go in the discard, Pattison. Hanlon's going to stand by me, do you hear? And what's more, he's going to *want* to——!"

Benson sprang to his side. "You're crazy, Bill; you don't know what you're doing!"

"Sorry," snapped Bill. "No time to argue. Is the car at the door?"

Davis nodded, as Dugan, his face purple, burst in. "Bill," he cried, "what are ye thinking of, lad? Why haven't ye called on me? Don't ye know we stand ready——"

"He won't take help," Pattison shot out. "He has some fool notion in his head that brokers are human beings—expects them to see him through."

"Bill," gasped Dugan, "ye ain't thinking *that*?"

Bill nodded. "I have to, Dugan. I've never borrow another man's money on a stock deal of this kind—too much chance of his being cleaned out."

"Don't say it," shouted Dugan, seizing his arm. "Don't say it when it's not meanin' it ye are. What's got into Bill that ye're treatin' yer friends this way—come here till I show ye reason."

Bill flung him aside. "Can't talk now," he called over his shoulder, and was gone.

In the outer office of Hanlon & Sears a crowd of shrieking men fought their way to the ticker—shouting an order in one breath—recalling it in the next—cursing—praying—raving—as the stock leaped down.

Transatlantic had dropped twenty points—Bethel Steel had dropped twelve.

May, on the outskirts of the crowd, turned with a shrug of disgust from the sight of wild-eyed, dishevelled men—from the sound of their voices—hoarse and cracked. She wanted to go home. She was sick of the sight of them. She had done her share for Colt and she was through. She wondered if the settlement he had promised her would be forthcoming. She smiled to herself—at least she had paid

Bill back—she had said she would and she had done it.

At this juncture a chalky-faced man created a mild disturbance by attempting to blow out his brains.

For a minute the shrieking mob turned its attention to him—wrested the revolver from him—then, as though resenting the interruption, hurried back to the tape, snarling and fighting like so many terriers over a bone, leaving him to grope his way, whimpering, to the door.

May watched him with cold eyes. Just so would Bill be broken—crushed. She clenched her hands. She had waited long for this hour and it had come at last.

She glanced at her watch. It lacked fifteen minutes of closing time. She would get to Hanlon if she could manage it—perhaps she might learn from him how badly Bill had fared. She approached a clerk. She asked if she might see the senior partner.

“It would be impossible just now,” he told her. Then because she was smartly dressed—because she seemed to have none of the fever of the crowd—he wondered if she might not be someone of importance—he opened the gate. “But if you will come into his waiting room you can speak with him as soon as the trading for the day is over.”

She smiled at the youth, and followed him. Certainly Colt could have no complaint to make now—she had not shirked her duty in any way. She chose

a deep leather chair and leaned back. The boy left her with a slight bow, and she gave herself up to the delightful task of spending the money Colt had promised her. Suddenly she heard a sound of voices behind her, and whirling, she beheld two men—one of them was Harris, the broker who had done her business for her, and behind him, flushed, hatless—but with head thrown back and shoulders squared, was Big Bill!

She caught her breath and stared at him, fascinated. When his eyes fell on her, he gave a cry: "Have they cleaned you out, too?"

She did not answer. She could not. Instead, she gazed at him wide-eyed—her breath coming in gasps—she had never been so afraid in her life—if he knew he would kill her!—if he but dreamed she had betrayed him! She had seen him snap a chair back in two—she moistened her lips.

She heard him speaking. "I swear I didn't know this could happen when I told you to buy—I tried to reach you last night—I couldn't——"

Harris patted Bill's arm. "Don't worry about Mrs. Larabee," he said. "She was one of the lucky ones. She was down here the first thing this morning with an order to sell."

Bill's relief was tremendous. "Good!" he cried. Still, she did not speak, measuring her distance to the door, wondering if she could escape before he had time to think—to suspect. Harris turned to him:

"I'll tell Hanlon you're here—just a second."

He left them alone. Bill was pacing.

"To think you were saved! They've got me down on my back, but I'm fighting yet! I couldn't foresee this thing—nobody could! There was no way on earth to foretell it unless you knew Colt's game—that's how so many were swamped—that's why——" Suddenly he stopped. She stiffened, as she saw the sudden suspicion dawning in his eyes—as though a new idea had occurred to him—an idea born of his very words—he spoke gruffly:

"How did you happen to sell out before the panic?"

She shook her head. "Just luck, Bill," she heard herself saying. "Just pure luck. I wanted to get in on another stock I'd heard of and I——"

She faltered and stopped—she tried to go on, "and I——" but her voice drifted off. He took a step toward her.

"That's a lie," he ripped out. "You knew it all the time, didn't you? I believe you're in the very game with him—that's why you played safe."

She recovered herself and faced him—a white fury.

"Well, why shouldn't I?" she shrieked. "Who's going to look after me, if I don't look after myself? What have you ever done to expect me to run to you and tell you that Colt has planned to bear the market?"

"But you did come to me for help! You came with some cock and bull story about having no one else to go to—yes—I remember now you were talking with Phil Colt at the time—probably framing the whole thing up between you—if I thought that——"

"Well, what would you do?" she cut in. "You're trying to bully me because you're beaten. I told you long ago to leave the Big Four alone—I told you long ago they'd never let an upstart come in and show them how to run their business—but you wouldn't listen to me, would you? No—I wasn't good enough for you—once you'd met Daphne Van Steer—not after——"

"Stop!" he cried sharply. "Don't bring her name into this."

"Why shouldn't I?" she flashed at him. "Is she so much better than I? Is she such a good woman—such a saint——!"

"I tell you—stop!" he commanded, drawing his breath quickly through his teeth, but she was not afraid now. She moved toward him.

"I'll stop, but not before I'm through—not before I tell you one thing—one thing about your wife—I heard it today—oh, you needn't believe it—no—but it's true. I heard her talking to Phil Colt—yes, Philip Colt—the son of the very man who's ruining you—and she arranged to go to him late this afternoon—when she knew you'd be away—when

she felt sure it would be safe. Oh, you think I'm lying, do you? Well then, if she's not home at five o'clock, you'll know where to look for her."

He sprang at her, as Harris, ripping open the door, flew to his side.

"Matthews!" he shouted, "are you mad!"

May, in her corner, grinned at him. "Yes—he's mad—he wants to tear me to bits because I have told him the truth—he wants to——"

Harris turned on her. "I don't know what you've been saying—but you'd better go—you'd better go at once."

May smiled at him, her eyes snapping like little flames. "I'll go," she said and glanced at Bill—but she shrank back before his gaze—his face was white, but his eyes blazed like fire—she cast a startled look at him and fled.

Harris caught Bill's arm. "Come this way, Mr. Matthews, Hanlon's waiting—he——" But Bill did not move—only his hands twitched. Harris shook him.

"Get hold of yourself," he said sharply. "Hanlon's waiting—everything's at stake—you can't afford to let that woman make you see fire just now—that's what she'd like to do—here, brace up."

Bill nodded. He straightened up—but his eyes were still dangerous—his hands clenched. "I'm all right now," he said slowly. "I'm all right now," and he followed Harris from the room.

CHAPTER XXXIII

DAPHNE LEARNS THE TRUTH

AT three o'clock to the minute, Cyrus P. Colt dropped the tape he held in his shaking hand, and brought his fist down on the table with a bang.

"I've done it, Jenkins!" he shouted. "I've done it! What do you think of that, eh? What do you think of that?"

He cast aside the chewed butt he had gripped between his teeth, patted his forehead with his handkerchief, and straightened his tie. He was eminently satisfied. He rubbed his hands together with a deep chuckle.

"Tell Pattison I couldn't see him?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Decker?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Rogers?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's right, Jenkins, that's right. Many in the office?"

Jenkins nodded. "It's full, sir; they all want to see you."

"Myers there? And Ditson?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll see them, Jenkins, I'll see them in ten minutes. Keep everyone out of here for ten minutes. I want that much time to myself—understand?"

Jenkins bowed and Colt dragged out his watch and laid it on the table. "Get rid of as many of them as you can, and don't let any one in who has not an appointment. I'll ring when I want them."

"Very well, sir," and he withdrew.

A great stillness settled over the office. Colt breathed deeply, his muscles relaxed, then he arose. To him came faintly the sound of many voices from the street below—a swelling sound—with an occasional shrill note. He marched to the window and flung it up. His office faced the Bethel *Courier* Building. Before it an eager crowd struggled for a view of the Bulletin Board. Colt glanced down at them with a quick breath. That was a sight for a man! Hundreds of black heads bobbing excitedly, darting here and there in hopes of a better view.

A youth in shirt sleeves, perched on a ladder, spelled out with many flourishes of his brush, the latest returns. To the numberless questions asked him—to the sea of eager, upturned faces, he remained superbly indifferent—his hand hung poised over the white sheet—then he began to write:

STEEL TUMBLES

Colt dug his hands into his pockets and smiled as he read—smiled with a touch of self-consciousness—an author of a great work who sees before his very eye a multitude hungrily devouring the words he has penned.

WILDEST PANIC AS PRICES DROP

He nodded his head—he tingled from head to toe—he felt a warm glow of pride in the thought that he had caused it—he alone—a man just as they were—but with a mind that made him a master while they were serfs. He listened to their mutterings tolerantly.

TRANSATLANTIC DROPS TWENTY
POINTSMARKET CLOSES AT LOWEST PRICE
OF DAY

The youth in shirt sleeves descended from his ladder, gathered it up, and departed, unmoved, through the crowd—the black heads closed in more closely about the board. The men pushed and elbowed desperately for a glimpse of the glaring letters.

Colt turned back to his office with a shrug. He would have liked someone to share his triumph—to acclaim his cleverness—but he contented himself with the thought of a deed well done. He had set out to smash a man—and he had made a good job of it!

He smiled to himself, supremely pleased. But that was not all. There still remained the little matter of the meeting where he and Matthews would come face to face. Where he would have the pleasure of deposing Matthews as president—of heckling him with points of law his attorneys were prepared to raise.

He stretched luxuriously and dropped into a chair. It had been a great day! A great day! He chose a cigar from his case, sniffed it appreciatively, and lighting it, leaned back; then he puffed deeply and closed his eyes.

Two minutes later, he straightened up, his face alert, calculating, his body tense, ready for action. He drew the papers on his desk toward him, glanced them over, cast them aside, then he pressed a button. Jenkins appeared.

"All right. Send 'em in," Colt growled; "see if Ditson has that contract ready. Did you write a letter to Walsh? Call up Bagby and ask him to come over as soon as he can—for heaven's sake, Jenkins, don't stand there with your mouth open—move!"

And Jenkins fled. Colt settled down in his chair, the cigar in the corner of his mouth, a deep scowl on his forehead. He was business again to his fingertips. He greeted the first man who entered with a curt nod.

"Sit down," he said; "be with you in a minute."

Ditson, the greatest corporation lawyer in the country, retained by the Big Four at a tremendous fee, dropped like an obedient school boy in a chair. At last Colt turned to him:

"Everything ready, Ditson?"

Ditson nodded. "Yes, everything."

"No slip ups," snapped Colt. "Understand that, don't you?"

"I understand," said Ditson. "Matthews hasn't a chance."

Colt rubbed his hand together. "That's right, Ditson. No loopholes."

Ditson drew up his chair. "If you have time to run over the facts——"

"Plenty," said Colt. "Let's hear them." He smiled to himself. He had Matthews in the hollow of his hand now. What chance had he to prove the Transatlantic in satisfactory legal condition with Ditson there to confuse him! He leaned toward the attorney.

"Now then, what's the first point?"

When Daphne reached home, she went straight to

her room. She wanted to be alone—to have time to think—but when she had locked her door, had closed herself in with her own thoughts, she shrank in terror from them. She was afraid! Afraid! Where was Bill? What had happened to him? Why had he sent her no message?

She rang up his office, only to learn he was not there. She moved away from the telephone, dazed, confused, wondering which way to turn. She paced swiftly. Surely Bill knew she would want to learn what had taken place—surely he must have thought of her at some time during the day—have torn his mind from the big battle he was waging to plan for her—he cared for her—yes—in spite of his absorption in his business—his problems—in spite of everything—she felt confident of that—but she must find out at all costs—she must know the truth!

She thought of Graves at the *Courier* office. Perhaps he had talked with Bill. She called him up and questioned him, endeavoring to keep the burning anxiety from her voice.

"Things are in bad shape," he told her reluctantly. "No, I don't know how bad. It's hard to say. I've tried to reach Mr. Matthews, but he won't give out any statement. I wish to heaven he would. He hasn't said anything to you that we could use?"

Her lips smiled at that, but her eyes were full of pain. To her! Why, she had not even entered his thoughts throughout that long ghastly day!

"No," she said quietly; "nothing!"

She glanced at her watch; it was still early—there might yet be time to think of something which would save her from going to Phil Colt! That was it! With startling suddenness she knew that the seed of her terror was this man. The fact staggered her. She had shrunk from facing it. Trying to reassure herself in a dozen different ways—assuring herself that throughout the interview, he had been impersonal—his manner thoroughly indifferent—that she herself had forced him into the rôle of conspirator.

But her reasoning could not still her horror of him. She had trusted him once—and to cap it all Bill hated him—would rather have her seek help from any other source. But to whom could she turn?

She thought of her father. She would fly to him. Pour out her story—her fears—but even as she planned what she would say, she shook her head. She could not tell him—that same pride which had kept her lips mute through the long months, held her back—no, he must never know that all was not well between herself and her husband.

In her panic she decided to consult Pattison. She called his office. He was there and answered her stiffly.

"Have you seen Bill today?" she asked quickly, afraid of his answer.

"Yes." He vouchsafed no more.

"Does he seem to be—bearing up? Oh!" she cried, her pride breaking down beneath the strain of the past hours—"oh, can't you tell me something about him? I haven't been able to see him—— I haven't heard from him—I don't know what to think——"

"He was all right so far as I could see," said Pattison shortly.

There was a pause, while she struggled for self-control—suddenly she burst out impulsively: "Isn't there some way that you—that his friends can help him?"

She waited, breathless, for his answer.

"We have done everything we could."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that all of us have offered him all we have——"

"Oh!" she cried, the immensity of her relief leaving her limp. "Oh, I might have known you would! I——"

"You don't understand," he cut short. "He has refused it!"

"Refused your help?"

"Yes."

"Even though he knew——"

"Even though he knew it spelled ruin."

"But what can he be thinking of?"

"Heaven only knows," said Pattison. "None of us do."

She turned away with tears of disappointment in her eyes. Here was an honorable avenue of escape offered Bill—and he had refused it! He would have been the first one to spring to his friends' aid had the cases been reversed. Why had he done this thing? She brushed her hand over her eyes. She was immeasurably weary—she felt all at once as though she could not go on—could not battle for him thus in the dark. And yet there was nothing else to do. Money might save him. If she could only speak to him—ask him——

She called his office again. No, they told her, Mr. Matthews had not returned. She asked for Mack, and he answered her evasively.

"We can't none of us tell how bad things are, ma'am—no, I don't know where he's gone."

He was plainly distressed at having no good news to tell her—plainly anxious to escape her questions.

"But tomorrow," she pleaded. "Isn't there a chance things will be better tomorrow? Suppose he should find plenty of money to back him, what then?"

Mack smiled in sheer pity, as he answered her: "Money's always a help—but where'll he find it, if he won't take none of it from his friends?"

She hung up and clasped her hands loosely in her lap. Then it *was* true. There might be a chance for him, provided he had sufficient security. She studied her jewels again, tumbling them out on the

bed. A splendid, glittering collection. She examined each piece critically. Yes, they were undoubtedly of great value—a small fortune. She would give them all up—all save the jade bracelet he had asked her to wear, and a tiny locket with a snapshot of him inside. She clasped its chain about her throat. The rest she would give up gladly—everything—if it would only save him! Why didn't he call her up? Why hadn't he left word where she could reach him? She struggled desperately against the dread in her heart—the dread lest he feel no need of her in this crisis—this black hour—if she could only hear his voice, she knew all would be well.

Philip gave his orders carefully. "A lady will come here this afternoon to see me. Bring her to my study. Don't let anyone disturb us. Is that perfectly clear?"

It was. The bill he pressed in the butler's palm made it even clearer. The servant bowed himself out. He would see that madam was not kept waiting.

After he had gone, Philip gave himself up to a close survey of himself in the mirror. His face was a shade whiter than usual—his lips a bit tense—his eyes unnaturally bright, but he had hold of himself—no doubt about that. If she were coming, it was almost time for her to be there. He doubted if she would appear at all. She distrusted him. In a mo-

ment of despair she had come to him for help. She probably regretted the impulse by this time. . . .

The minutes passed slowly. He waited impatiently, drumming on the arm of his chair. Would she or would she not come? He poured himself out a drink—to steady his nerves, he told himself. He felt better after it. Even if she didn't show up, the hour of keen anticipation had been something!

He caught a cigarette up in his fingers and held it poised, when suddenly he heard a light footstep in the corridor. The match burned his fingers, but he did not know it. The color surged into his face. He answered the soft knock with a curt "Come in."

The butler entered. "The lady's come, sir," he said. "Shall I show her in?"

Phil nodded. He did not trust his voice. So she was there at his very threshold! By Jove! that meant Bill was ruined for fair.

She never would have come, otherwise—never in the world!

The servant stepped back and beckoned and Daphne entered, her eyes on Philip's face.

"I'd almost given you up," he said. She nodded, but did not speak. She looked very white, he thought—and her hands fluttered to her throat and fell at her sides. She seemed waiting for his next move—poised as though for flight at the first threatening step.

He felt his way.

"Things looked pretty bad at the close of the market. Worse than I thought."

She took a step toward him. He saw that she had forgotten her fear in her concern for Bill.

"Oh, it must be that," she cried; "nothing else would keep him silent—nothing else—I can't believe he would let me suffer——" she stopped as though she feared she had said too much.

He raised his eyebrows. So Matthews had not posted her as to how matters stood—had kept her in the dark. That was queer. He wondered what it meant. He saw her distress and spoke casually.

"Suppose we run through the things you've brought, what do you say?"

She did not meet his eyes, she felt suddenly ashamed of her fears, her imaginings. She laid the bag on the table and fumbled with the silk cord.

"I'll open it," he said quickly, leaping forward. Their fingers touched. She moved back, her heart pounding—then she straightened up with a flush—what had she to fear? This man was doing her a kindness—that was all. He seemed unconscious of her action. He drew out a necklace of curious design—a beautiful piece—of matched emeralds.

"That ought to be good as a starter," he said, holding it off. "When did you get that?"

"Bill had it made for me when we came back from the hills——"

She regretted the words as soon as they had passed her lips—why had she alluded to that time? He laid the necklace on the table, stroking it lightly. “Oh, yes,” he said, “that reminds me. I never did hear just what happened that day you ran away from me. What made you do it, Daphne. Why did you go back? Was it for the looks of the thing?”

She stared at him, trying to read his thoughts—breathing quickly.

“What does it matter, Phil, now that it is over and done with?”

He shrugged. “I was only curious. Who wouldn’t be? There I was prepared for a nice long trip to the city with you and when I came back from helping our bags aboard I found you gone, and a half-witted brakeman mumbling some message or other. Why did you do it?”

She shook her head. “Let’s not talk about it,” she evaded. Still he persisted: “Was it because you didn’t want to come back to Bethel with me—afraid of questions and all that sort of thing?”

She shook her head and her eyes met his squarely. “No, it wasn’t that. You know very well it wasn’t—it was simply because I discovered I cared for my husband as I—as I never knew I could care for any man,” she ended softly, half to herself.

“Must have found it out just about train time—if I remember correctly, you let me think you’d married him to help you out of a hole.”

She shook her head. "I wasn't sure—I wasn't sure until——"

"Until you saw us together, eh?—until you proved that in a tight place I didn't come up to scratch and he did. Was that it?"

"No, no, Phil," she cried. "You're different, of course—you are—it's your nature to——"

"To make love to a woman I care for—exactly. I wasn't sure you recognized that fact. It helps matters, though——"

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"I mean if I can't get what I want in one way I take it in another!"

She shrank from him. "And all this talk about helping him——"

"Was the only way I could get you here. It worked, too—you must admit that!"

She backed away from him. "I don't believe you mean what you say—you are doing it to frighten me—you wouldn't—you couldn't mean——"

He shrugged, but his hands trembled. "Do you imagine for one minute that I really proposed saving the man who took you from me? If he hadn't stepped in just when he did—you would have taken me in the end. I wasn't such a bad bargain—I might have forgiven him for going over my father's head—for anything else, in fact—but for taking you—never!"

She darted toward the door, but he blocked her

path. "You can't get away," he said easily. "If you call for help, no one will hear you—they are very deaf this afternoon. I saw to that. Now then, what are you going to do about it?"

The mask was off. She stared at him, her hand on her heart—stared at the face of the man she had known since childhood—at the face—strangely distorted—stained with a deep red flush—at his lips drawn into a tight smile—at his eyes, cool, appraising.

"I've wanted you ever since we were small," he continued in a level voice. "There were always little boys around you—swarms of them—and I hated them—every last one of them. I hated them when you chose them for partners at dancing school—I hated them when they pulled you on your skates or dragged you on their sleds! I remember wishing I were big so that I could carry you off and keep you away from them—so you would always have to dance and skate and coast with me—me—me!"

"Phil!" she cried—"I didn't know—I never dreamed——"

"When I saw you in some fellow's car or canoe—I felt the same way—only it was worse—much worse. I wanted to kill him, but instead, I'd smash things—anything I could get my hands on—tear them to bits—ride my horse until he dropped under me. . . ."

She caught his arm. "Phil, if you cared for me

that way, surely you will help me now—you——”

But he went on as though he had not heard her. “Then we grew up and you came out. I asked you that night, do you remember, and you told me you’d never marry a Colt—I left you—drove my car into the west wall. I didn’t care what I did. I told my father I’d have you or no one—and he thought it was clear sailing. He always had gone out and gotten what he wanted—it did look as though I’d get you in the end—but Matthews stepped in—a man from nowhere—what did he have to offer that I could not give you? Nothing! And I thought it wouldn’t last—I didn’t see how it could—no one did. So I waited, but instead of leaving him you turned around and began to care for him. I couldn’t believe it at first—but I proved it today—I know you’re afraid of me—yes, you are—I know you hated coming here alone—but you came just the same—because you wanted to save *him*—you risked everything for that man’s sake—I could have stood the rest—but not this—not this—he’s had enough of you—and now I’m going to take you myself——”

He caught her in his arms with a suddenness that gave her no time to escape—and as she battled with him she felt his hot breath on her cheek, his face close to her own—his lips—— She turned her head away.

“Phil,” she cried, “Phil—you’re mad—you’re——”

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE ROAD OF AMBITION

SOMEONE knocked at the door. She felt his hold loosen and she wrenched herself free. He turned to seize her, but the rap sounded again—in-sistent—sharp.

“Get out!” he flung over his shoulder. “What the devil do you mean by——?”

The butler’s voice came to him in a shrill whisper:

“There’s a man here to see you, sir—he won’t take no for an answer—he says if you don’t say as how you’re at home—he’ll—he’ll break down the door——”

“Who is it?” snapped Phil.

“Mr. Matthews, sir.”

“Matthews!”

“Bill!” she cried, with a sob in her voice. “Thank Heavens . . .”

Phil flew to the door. “Tell him I’m out—tell him I *was* here but that I’ve gone—tell him—tell him——” Suddenly he whirled on her, his face livid. “You told him you were coming—it’s a trap——”

But he read the relief in her face. "No, no!" she cried, "I didn't know—I didn't dream he would come." He did not doubt her.

"Go down and tell him I've gone——"

"Won't do any good, sir. He said he'd give me five minutes' start—he said if I wasn't back by that time, he'd come after me himself—he said——" There was a sudden silence, charged with tension. The butler's voice rose to a scream: "He's coming now. . . ."

Phil stared at her. "He mustn't find you here," he whispered. "He'd kill you—kill me——"

"I'll tell him!" she cried. "He'll understand——"

"Don't be a fool!" he ripped out. "No one could understand this—you and I here alone—I tell you he wouldn't believe you—get behind that curtain and if you come out for any reason whatever I'll make up a story that will settle you for all time as far as he's concerned."

He stuffed her bag of jewels into her hands. "Quick!" he commanded.

He heard the sound of Bill's voice. "If you don't take me to him at once, I'll break your arm—there—now will you do it?"

There came a sharp cry of pain from the servant and the door was flung open. Phil, breathing heavily, braced himself, but fell back a pace beneath Bill's glare.

His eyes were bloodshot and he panted as though he had run a long ways. His glance swept the room and returned to Phil. Suddenly the tremendous strain under which he labored seemed to ease a bit; he straightened up.

"Well," he said abruptly, "I see you're alone."

Phil regarded him coolly. "What do you want, Matthews? What do you mean by bullying my servants this way?"

Bill squared his shoulders. "My mistake, Colt," he said shortly. "I saw red. Someone lied to me—someone I might have known would have lied. I'm sorry to break in on you this way—I'll go now."

But Phil took a step toward him. "No, you won't," he said. "Not until you've explained just who you expected to find here."

Bill flushed. "I've apologized, Colt, that's more than I've ever done to any man. We'll let it go at that. It's a bad blunder on my part. That's all I'll say."

"Well, then," said Phil coolly, "I'll tell you—you expected to find your wife here! You——"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say. What else would make you break in on me this way? What else would explain your relief at finding me alone? Did you think she'd heard you were cleaned out and that she'd come to me?—did you think——?"

"Stop!" Bill's face was white, his voice hoarse.

"Leave her name out of this! do you hear me? Leave her name out of this or I'll finish you! Yes! and I'd like to do it, too! I've done a thing or two to one Colt today and I'm just about ripe to tackle another!"

And he brought down his fist upon the table—his face ugly. Phil shrank from him, then with a start he saw the change in his expression—for Bill had glanced down at an object under his hand—a sudden curiosity—a dazed incredulousness—then a swift, sharp suspicion flashing across his face. . . .

Philip moved nearer to see—but he stopped short, as Bill held up to his gaze the emerald necklace.

"Where did this come from?"

Phil shook his head. He moistened his lips and waited.

Bill spoke again, slowly, with a tremendous effort. "Where did this necklace come from?"

Still Philip did not move, his eyes fixed on the man's face. Bill approached him, he leaned close. "I've asked you twice where this came from—I'm going to ask you once more—just once more—understand? Three times is my limit. Now then, for the last time—what is my wife's necklace doing here?"

Phil whirled on him. "I'll tell you! You want to know, do you? You think I was lying when I said she turned from you when she heard you were broke and came to me. Well, it's true—every word of it—she came here of her own accord. May Lara-

bee told you you'd find her here, didn't she? Well, she gave it to you straight—she——” Bill leaped for him. He wound his fingers about Phil's throat and flung him backwards, smiling at his futile struggles—his clawing fingers. But he stopped short at a woman's shriek—his arms fell to his sides.

Philip, choking and gasping, slunk to a corner, but Bill, his face gray, stared at the girl who stepped from behind the curtain—stared at her as though he had seen her for the first time in his life.

“Bill,” she whispered, “it isn't true—it——” but the words died on her lips at the look in his eyes.

He turned and glanced at Phil, cowering in his corner—and at her—then he shook his head, as though trying to collect his thoughts.

“Bill,” she cried, running to his side, “I came here to save you—I came here thinking perhaps——”

But he flung off her hand—he studied her again with that strange detachment. Then whirling on his heel, was gone. She stood motionless where he had left her. She heard the sound of footsteps, the faint bang of a heavy door. Phil, feeling his throat tenderly, whispered:

“By Heaven! I thought I was a goner that time!”

His voice broke the spell! She did not answer. She did not look in his direction, instead she flew to the window and flung it wide.

“Bill!” she cried, “wait—wait—I'm coming—I'm coming——”

There was no answer. She turned and ran down the stairs, tore open the front door.

"Bill," she sobbed, "wait for me—wait——"

Stumbling in her haste, she flew after him. The road was black. The sharp stones cut through the thin soles of her slippers, she was panting for breath, but she struggled on. Once they were alone, she told herself, she would make him listen—she would tell him all from the beginning—he could not have meant to leave her there with Phil—to cast her off. He had looked at her so strangely—she was afraid—perhaps the day's strain had unbalanced him—perhaps losing all had unnerved him—that—and finding her there. . . .

"Bill!" she cried, "just let me tell you—just let me tell you——"

She stopped at the foot of the hill leading to their home—she stood there staring—the house was ablaze with lights. She caught her breath. She brushed her sleeve over her eyes, what could it mean—what could have happened? She approached slowly—avoiding the squares of light on the grass—pressing close to the bushes. Through the open windows she heard, as she drew nearer, the sound of men's voices.

She reached the porch. That was at least in darkness. She crept to an open window and looked in. The room was full of men. Pattison, Decker, Rog-

ers, Benson—the managers of the Works—Dugan—Graves—Old Mack—and there in their midst stood Bill, his face still white and strangely tense, but his lips smiling as they crowded about him.

“Surprise party, Bill,” sang out Pattison. “Waited the deuce of a long time. Where did you go after the meeting adjourned? We thought you’d make straight for home on this great old night!”

Great old night! What were they talking about? She leaned closer to hear.

“Colt thought he’d cleaned you out, eh? Picked your feathers. Never occurred to the old boy that your brokers would see you through. You had me going, too! Why didn’t you let on that Transatlantic was reeking with money?”

Rogers broke in: “Did you see Colt’s face when the proxies were counted and you had a hundred shares majority? Elected your entire board—gad! that was worth the price of admission!”

Decker shook his head. “But that thirty per cent. cash dividend! I never dreamed we could declare it—you kept the secret pretty close, Bill! Not one of us knew the earnings were so big!”

“Wait until you read my editorial in tomorrow’s paper,” shouted Graves. “It’s a masterpiece of——”

Pattison interrupted with a roar of delight. “But what finished Colt was when Ditson got up on his hind legs and tried to worry you with the points he

raised—and to think you met them all—yes, and beat them, too! You weren't satisfied to have the business end of Transatlantic in A-One condition, were you? Had to have the legal end of it satisfactory, too!"

Daphne shrank back, staring. So he had been saved—by some miracle—he had been saved—all she had done had been for nothing. If he had but let her know—she straightened up. He should have done that. He would have had he cared—and now when she had sacrificed everything—everything—he doubted her—turned from her. She moved away cautiously—she crept to a small French window opening into the music room. She entered softly—no one would come in there. She dropped on a chair. She felt very weak—very faint.

She could hear the bursts of laughter—Pattison's voice rising in a bellow of mirth. Bill was silent—but they did not seem to notice that in their elation.

After a long while they began to depart. She heard their shouted farewells—their cheers—the boom of the heavy front door—then there fell a thick, warm, enveloping silence. . . .

She rose to her feet—she felt giddy and dazed, but she moved forward—she must know the truth tonight—she had always said if he did not want her—did not need her. . . . She came face to face with him in the hall. He started back, and she saw the recoil in his eyes. She waited for him to speak.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded harshly. She shook her head.

"Bill," she said softly, "will you let me tell you about it—will you listen——?"

He turned on her. "No, no!" he said sharply. "I will hear nothing——"

She drew herself up. "Very well," she said, "you need not."

She passed him and mounted the stairs. Half-way up, she turned. He was standing where she had left him, his head bowed.

"Bill!" she cried, a sob in her voice.

He stiffened. "I want to hear nothing," he repeated dully.

The color flamed into her face, but she did not speak again. Instead, she hurried to her room. She groped blindly for the light—she was afraid of the darkness—a sudden trembling seized her.

It was strange that in that black moment Phil's words should flash before her—words she had scarcely heard: "May Larabee told you you'd find her here." May Larabee. That meant Bill had seen the woman—talked with her—had found time in the midst of the panic to listen to her evil tales! There was something this woman could give him that she could not—something that made him turn to her instead of to his wife. . . .

She dragged a heavy coat from her closet and pulled it on with trembling fingers—she found her

purse—go! She would go to the ends of the world if necessary! He had not needed her throughout his struggle, he had not needed her in his hour of triumph—but, May Larabee . . .

She switched off the light and waited, listening. There was no sound from below. She moved down the stairs and through the dim hallway. She found the window unlocked through which she had entered. She stepped out into the clear moonlight. For a moment she wavered, then she shook her head. "He doesn't need me," she whispered. She ran down the steps. . . .

Tony burst in upon Nedda. "He beat him—he beat old Colt to a standstill—and Mack took me with the rest up to his house—everyone was there—you never heard such shoutin'—Pattison carryin' on like a kid——"

"Tell me more!" cried Nedda. "What did Bill say—what did he do?"

"He let *them* do the sayin'—they was as tickled about it as if they'd done it themselves."

She clasped her hands, her eyes eager. "And his wife, Tony, was she glad, too—was she proud and happy and——"

Tony paused and shook his head. "His wife? Why, that's funny, Nedda. I didn't see her anywheres around."

"Are you sure, Tony?"

"Yep, there were only men there."

Nedda caught her breath. "I hate her," she said swiftly.

Tony stared at her. "Hate who?" But Nedda shook her head.

"Nothin', Tony. Tell me more—was Benson there? What did he say? Go on—tell me from the beginning—everythin' that happened to Bill."

And Tony, delighted to have an audience, plunged eagerly into the story.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DARK HOUR

BILL paced his room with swift strides. The darkness was intolerable. With shaking hands, he switched on the light. It flooded the room. He stared about dully. The very chairs and tables—the pictures on the wall seemed unreal. Perhaps they were part of this nightmare from which he would soon awake—he would open his eyes to find Daphne waiting for him—her eyes tender, her lips smiling. . . .

His world had tumbled about his ears. He was powerless to do aught but stare at the ruins. . . . He would have staked his life on her love. . . .

He clenched his hands. Perhaps he had been to blame. Perhaps he had left her too much alone—given too much of himself to his work, and yet it was all for her that he battled each day—all for her. . . . His heart, brutally honest, challenged this. *Was* it for her? Was it not the love of the game itself that kept him at his desk day and night, week in and week out? Yes—he must face the thing squarely—he must not shrink from the truth!

Suddenly he wondered what they would do with

their lives from now on. There were long years stretching ahead. He could not conceive a life apart from her. He was all at once poignantly aware of what she had come to mean to him—her sympathy—her tenderness—and he had forfeited them, for what? . . .

The triumph he had won that day was a bitter thing. He had hoped to bring her news of his victory. He had thought of her as he struggled. He had hurried home, May's ugly words forgotten. But Daphne had not been there and the first stab of surprise—of fear—pricked him. She was not at her father's—nor any of her friends!

"I think I saw her turning into Colt's," someone had volunteered.

At the words his mounting passion became a red flame that destroyed his power to reason—that left him a helpless creature of impulse. He had gone straight to Colt. But strangely enough the meeting was indistinct—all he remembered was Daphne's face as she stepped from behind the curtain—that was stamped indelibly on his mind—she had looked so white—so helpless—her eyes fixed on his in an agonized appeal. . . .

What was it she had said? "I came here to save you. . . ." What did she mean by that? She wanted to tell him something, but he would not listen—he had been afraid to—but what if he had misjudged her! The hope leaped up within him like a

ray of light in darkness—he must hear the truth from her lips! now—at once!

He crossed the hall. He rapped on her door. There was no answer. He opened it. The room was empty. He called her maid.

“I saw her go out not ten minutes ago, sir,” she told him. He stared at her. Out! . . . Then seizing her, he questioned her roughly, until, frightened by his manner, she began to sob. He flung her from him and ran down the stairs.

The maid, her curiosity overcoming her fear, leaned over the bannister, staring after him. She motioned the butler to stop him, but Bill thrust the man aside and plunged down the steps.

Colt! Colt! He must get hold of Colt! That was where she had gone—that was where he would find her—and when he did . . .

Once outside, he stared about him. He would make no mistake this time. . . . He should never have let Colt go! That was where he had blundered. He hurried down the road muttering to himself. . . .

Colt's big house—a palace of white granite—loomed before him. Bill turned in at the gate. He started up the drive. Suddenly he stopped short, staring. Before the door stood a red racer—Phil's—there was no other car like it in Bethel. . . . So he had come in time! They were about to take flight. He grinned to himself—just in time. He ran for-

ward, fearing they might be off before he reached it. But it was empty. He pressed back in the shadow of a clump of bushes. They could not escape him now!

He had not long to wait. The front door was flung open, and Phil ran down the steps, behind him appeared the butler.

"Hurry as quick as you can, sir," he called as he shut the door.

Phil sprang to the seat, but not before Bill had leaped to his side.

"No you don't!" he growled. "Not so fast."

Philip turned with a cry, shrinking back, then he tried to thrust him away, but Bill pinioned his arms in a vise-like grip.

"For Heaven's sake, Matthews, let me go—my father's been taken ill—he——"

"Your father!" grinned Bill; then his voice changed to a snarl. "Where is she? What have you done with her?"

Phil stared at him. "Done with who? I tell you, Matthews, every minute counts—I'm on my way to the doctor's now—get in if you want to talk, but let me go——"

Bill shook his head, as though he had not heard. "Where is she?" he repeated thickly, "quick!"

Phil caught his breath. "Daphne?—do you mean Daphne?"

Bill watched him narrowly. "If you don't tell me

where I can find her I'll finish what I started this afternoon! . . ."

Phil shrank back, his face white. "So help me, Matthews, I haven't seen her—she left right after you did and a few minutes later father came home. He was all in—but he had a bad turn just now. Wants the doctor—that's where I'm off to now——"

"I don't believe you," said Bill quietly; "you're on your way to meet her—but I'll give you a chance. If you're telling the truth get out and ring your bell, and let me question the butler."

Phil sprang from the car and hurried up the steps. The butler appeared. When he saw Colt, he fell back.

"Good Heavens, sir, ain't you gone yet? Your father'll be dead before help comes!"

Philip turned to Bill. "Now, do you believe me?" he cried. "Now will you?"

"If she hasn't come to you, where has she gone?" Bill cut him short.

Phil shook his head. "If she thought you doubted her she'd go anywhere rather than stay with you."

Bill caught his arm. "Colt," he said, "what made her come to you in the first place—tell me the truth and I'll let you go."

"On your word of honor?"

"Yes."

"And you'll keep your hands off?"

"Yes."

"She came to me because I promised to help her if she did."

"Help her?"

"Yes. Can't you see? She'd heard you were being smashed, that my father was doing it. She came to ask me to pull you out of the hole. She brought her jewels, thinking I could turn them into money for her. I couldn't stand seeing her plead for another man—so I lost my head—then I saw I could make trouble between you by lying—and I did—that's the truth, Matthews—so help me—that's the truth! Now then, can I go?"

Bill flung him from him. "Yes—go," he whispered.

He heard the hum of the motor as the car shot forward, but he did not move. He was stunned—dazed—Daphne had gone! he had driven her away! . . . Never until that moment did he know how much he loved her—it came to him with a blinding force. He must find her—must beg her to forgive him—could she ever forget that he had doubted her?

He hurried home, perhaps she had already returned, but in answer to the question in his eyes the butler shook his head. No, she had not come—he ordered the car, then he caught up the telephone. There would be some way to find her—he must think—think——!

He called her father first of all. Judge Van Steer,

sensing the tenseness in Bill's voice, inquired if anything were wrong. No, Daphne was not there. Bill reassured him and hung up.

He tried Rosaline Rogers, but her maid informed him that Miss Rogers was away for the week end—no, Mrs. Matthews had not rung up.

Pattison! Perhaps he had seen her. Pattison answered jovially, but at Bill's sharp questions, his tone changed.

"What's the trouble, Matthews? You're not really anxious, are you? She'll be in any minute. You're like an old hen with her only chick! Can't you let her out of sight for an instant?" Then, recalling her conversation of the afternoon, he went on: "By the way, she rang me up and asked if I couldn't do something to help you. She seemed awfully cut up about it. Why didn't you keep her posted?"

Bill answered heavily. "I didn't know she'd hear about the panic. I wanted to wait until things came out O. K.—I'm a fool——"

"Oh, cheer up," grinned Pattison; "can't the lady be out when you get home without your telephoning all the neighbors?"

Bill rang off—his hands were trembling—where had she gone? Suddenly he caught up the receiver. "Give me the station," he whispered.

He did not know what impelled him to do it. He was certain Daphne would never leave Bethel alone

at night. And yet—Phil's words rang in his ears. "If she thought you doubted her she'd go anywhere rather than stay with you. . . ."

The station-master answered. "This is Mr. Matthews," said Bill quickly. "You know my wife when you see her, Miller; did she leave by the night express? I've just come home from a meeting and have learned she was called away."

There came a long pause, and Bill waited tensely, then he straightened up with relief. The station-master was speaking.

"No, sir, I haven't seen Mrs. Matthews buy a ticket here this evening and I know her well by sight."

"Thank goodness!" breathed Bill, so she had not left Bethel!

"Wait a moment," came Miller's voice, "my clerk says he heard her ask a little boy to purchase a ticket for her—yes—he's sure—he says he spoke to her, and that she didn't answer. What's that, sir? Oh, the first stop is Winston—train gets there eight fifteen."

Bill dropped the receiver and sprang to his feet. She had left by the night express! alone! Where was she going? . . . What could he do before it was too late?

The first stop was Winston—Craver lived there—head of the Winston Bank—Craver would do it for him. He called Winston and waited impatiently

for the connection—would they never get Craver on the wire? Craver was at home—he was eager to serve Bill—yes, anything he could do—of course.

“Go down to the station, meet the Express. My wife’s on board, you know her, Craver. Go to her and tell her there’s been a mistake. That’s all—ask her to get off and wait at the Winston House for me. . . . I’m starting for there by motor now. Tell her I’m coming to get her—yes—yes—Craver, don’t fail to meet that train! . . .”

He rang off. His motor was at the door. He leaped in. He gave a sharp command to the chauffeur; then he sank back on the cushions—the rest of his life would be an atonement if only she would forgive him. “She will!” he cried, “she must. . . .”

The train rushed through the night. It sped by black fields and valleys—it rumbled across long bridges with dark, sluggish water beneath. Inside, the lamps were lighted, and above the click of the wheels rose the chatter of voices—the whine of a baby—the noisy rustle of papers.

Daphne, hunched in her corner, staring out, neither saw nor heard. Twice the conductor asked for her ticket, and at length touched her arm. She looked at him with unseeing eyes, as she fumbled for it. He studied her with kindly curiosity—that woman was in trouble or his guess was wrong. . . . He’d seen them that way before. . . .

She turned back to the thoughts from which there was no escape—Bill had refused to listen to her—had thrust her away. Never for an instant had she dreamed he would doubt her. How could he, when her surrender had been so complete—when she had again and again proved her love for him!

She tried to recall the beginning of the change in him. It was an insidious thing—gradual accumulation of work which thrust her more and more into the background. She had fought valiantly for her place—had striven to keep pace with his thoughts—his interests—but while he tolerated her, he had not seemed to need her. His work was his first love—not she—she was second—or was it third? . . .

She shuddered and pressed her cheek to the cool pane. The window served as a mirror, in it she could glimpse a vague outline of her head—of her long, white throat—her curved lips, her deep-set eyes—he had said she was beautiful—and yet that had not satisfied him.

She did not know where she was going. Conscious only of one desire—to be off—to feel the distance between them widening—she had taken the first train that left Bethel—yes, though the pain of the thought stabbed her like a knife, she was determined never to return—never . . . and quite suddenly her lips formed a prayer, "God!" she prayed, "Make him miss me—make him want me!" She fell to crying softly.

It was at that moment that the crash came . . . with such overpowering suddenness—with such a grinding of brakes—a crashing of wood—a splintering of glass that it snapped off her consciousness for the instant. When she opened her eyes she saw darkness—all about her—heavy darkness, pressing her down like a weight.

Then she heard cries—inarticulate sounds—from nowhere. She tried to rise, but she was held fast by something solid—she struggled against it, but in vain—from its polished surface she felt it was wood—she understood in a flash—the collision had turned the car over—her one hope lay in finding the window—where was it—beneath her? Above her?

She set her teeth and beat at the wood that imprisoned her—dragging her gloves from her hands—turning her face up—battling for air—and as she strained there came to her the sharp, acrid odor of burning wood. She shrank back—trembling—she was conscious of a sudden pain in her side—it was curious she had not felt it before—would they never come!—would they never let her out! Suddenly she raised her voice in a cry—it was but one of the many strange sounds—no one would hear her—she made another effort—beating her fists against the wood—then she sank back—the pungent smell of smoke set her choking—she shut her eyes—after all, what did it matter? . . .

The lights of Winston gleamed rosily through the

darkness. . . . Bill, his muscles relaxed for an instant, leaned back. "At last!" he whispered through white lips, "at last! . . ." He glanced at his watch. It was after twelve—the street seemed strangely full of people—hurrying this way and that—he wondered where they were bound—then he forgot them in the fear that had tortured him each minute of the way—had she waited for him—would she be there? . . .

"Which way, sir?" asked the chauffeur, slowing down. Bill waved his hand to the left. . . . What if Craver had failed to meet her . . . had missed connections? . . .

He did not wait for the car to stop, but leaped out and ran up the steps of the Winston House.

"Daphne!" he cried softly, "Daphne!"

The lobby was choked with men—little knots of them talking in hushed, tense voices. He scanned their faces for a view of Craver—a sudden relief swept over him and left him weak as he glimpsed him at a far corner of the room. He pushed his way through the crowd and reached Craver's side.

"Well, I got here at last!" he shouted to hide his terror.

Craver turned. He was a round-faced little man with a ready smile, but he was not smiling now. Instead, his face was a pasty white, his eyes round with horror. He looked particularly small and ineffective in his panic. He stared at Bill without speaking

and Bill, a sudden fear crushing him, caught his arm. "You didn't miss her, did you?"

Craver shook his head; he seemed totally unable to make a sound—little round beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead and on his upper lip.

Bill shook him. "What is it, Craver? Wouldn't she wait? Wouldn't she listen?"

"No," said Craver dully, "it isn't that, Matthews—it's——"

"Well, what is it?" he cried. "What is it?"

Craver moistened his lips. "There's been an accident," he said.

Bill stared at him. "An accident" . . . then the pent-up suffering of the past hours gave vent in a cry, "Craver, say she's not hurt——"

Craver shook his head. "No—she's not hurt."

Bill caught his arm eagerly. "Not hurt—then take me to her—where is she—where——"

Craver patted Bill's hand—he seemed struggling desperately for words—at length he shrugged helplessly, "I don't know how to tell you——"

Bill stared at him. "She's dead!" he cried suddenly, "she's dead!"

The men who had been listening, moved away with lowered eyes. Craver, as though the spell had been broken, spoke hurriedly—jerkily:

"There was a fire after the wreck—that made it worse—you couldn't identify them—but we found her purse—and this——"

Bill stared down at Craver's outstretched hand. In it lay the jade bracelet. He took it mechanically, turning it over and over.

"That's all," said Craver, then he burst out, "I'd give ten years of my life to have spared you this! . . ."

Bill did not reply—he examined the bracelet with a curious intentness—one side had been cruelly dented, but the jade was intact—two little serpents with green heads entwined—just the color of her eyes . . . just the color of her eyes. . . .

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE CRISIS

BETHEL lay crushed beneath the tragedy that had befallen Big Bill Matthews. The new day dawned—a day which found men stern of face, with heads averted, which found women wrung with pity for the man who had returned alone to the great house on the hill.

The morning papers told the story of the wreck, and Bethel, reading, was stirred to its very depths. Incongruously enough on the same page blazed the news of Transatlantic's triumph—a detailed account of its earnings which would send the stock bounding—which would more than insure the man's fortune.

And as though not content with juggling tragedy and triumph thus grotesquely,—fate had given him yet another gift—he had received the nomination for governor of the state. . . .

In glowing phrases the press praised him—a man who had appeared repeatedly in the public eye as a friend of labor—a candidate who was not only a trained business man but beloved by the people as well—a man who had lived up to his ideals!—Di-

rectly beneath was an eyewitness' account of the wreck at Winston—a two-column spread which spared no details—the cries of women—the shouts of men . . .

A wave of boundless sympathy flowed toward Bill. The men at the Works who loved him as a comrade drew near with wet cheeks and dumb lips—rough, shabby men who scarcely knew what it was to weep.

“Didn’t he help me when my kid had typhoid?—come down himself to see she had proper care and feedin’——”

“What would we have done last winter without him?”

“Many’s the night I seen him talkin’ to the boys—listenin’ to their troubles——”

Yes, they were profoundly grieved in an awkward, helpless way—wishing with all their souls he would call on them to serve him—hoping for a chance to thereby prove their devotion.

But no one could reach him—the rich—the poor—the middle class—an unending stream of friends that stormed his door—all met with the same response.

“No, he won’t see you—it’s no use—he won’t see any one—I’ll tell him you called.”

Pattison, his face flushed, his heart full of the deepest emotion he had ever known, alone persisted in an effort to reach Bill, he even stooped to bribery.

"I've got to see him!" he stormed. "Some one has to—we can't let him face this thing alone."

But the servant was firm. "He said no one was to be admitted, sir—perhaps later—I'll let you know——"

The morning sun, a flagrantly brilliant sun—crept beneath the drawn shade of Daphne's room—it fell, a yellow patch upon her rug. In the gloom of the darkened room it seemed a joyous thing—a spirit of outdoors—telling of blue skies—of fresh fields.

Bill, seated there alone—his arms folded, stared dully at the sunlight—stared with a flash of resentment—it seemed so vividly alive—dancing saucily on the rug—suddenly he arose, moved by a quick impulse—flung up the shade—letting in a rush of light.

"She loved it," he said impatiently. "It was part of her—yes, it was part of her."

He moved about softly—there stood his picture on the dressing table—another of him on the wall where she could see it from her bed—and yet another on the bureau—a snapshot taken of him in the woods—— In the woods!—that was where they had first come to know each other—she had wanted to go back but he would not—there had been too much to do. Too much to do. . . .

The thought was a torture to him—he stared about with hot eyes, then flung himself from the

room . . . but each corner of the house called up an image of her. The music room—he could see her beneath the lamp surrounded by her gay court—his study—he could almost fancy her curled up on his couch—her chin in her hand, listening to his plans—his dreams—the entrance hall—here she greeted him at nights with arms outstretched and eager lips. . . . Each room held the whisper of her presence—the sound of her voice. He could not stay there—he could not stay there. And yet he could not drag himself away. . . .

This was madness—he must find something to do—something at once—then he thought of his work—that was it. Work. He had always said it made the world go round—that would save him—he must get back to it at once!

Next day he sent for Pattison. He did not seem to see his friend's flushed face, nor feel the extra pressure of his fingers.

"Feel up to taking a bit of a spin?" asked Pattison, awkwardly, to bridge the sudden silence.

Bill nodded. "Yes, I think I'd like that."

Pattison marvelled at his calm—at his level voice and quiet manner—he did not quite know what he had expected to find but surely not this. Bill was bearing up splendidly—no doubt of that! Once outdoors, Bill spoke casually of business, of returning to his office—asked careful questions about matters that had arisen in his absence.

"He's not going to let this thing crush him," thought Pattison, with infinite relief. At length he broached the nomination.

"You got it, Matthews, on the second ballot," he said, half afraid he should not have spoken, but Bill nodded. "I thought I would—Dugan seemed pretty sure," was all he said.

Pattison left him at his door. He felt much easier about him. After all Matthews had always been devoted to his work—there was no getting away from that! Well, it was going to be his salvation in this crisis.

Bill watched him out of sight with the little smile still on his lips, then he entered the house. He passed the butler with a casual word, an inquiry about a caller. He mounted the stairs, his shoulders straight, his step firm. He entered Daphne's room, and shut the door.

Suddenly he covered his face with his hands. "Daphne!" he cried aloud, "I can't go on—I can't——" and he began to sob with the deep racking sobs that tear a man's soul.

He accepted the nomination with the same quiet gravity—he listened to Dugan's words of praise. He went to his desk each day and toiled until late—he met men with whom he had to do business—he did not shrink from interviews—he planned anew—they must make steel helmets—the army was going to

need them—not a steel helmet in America—let Bethel be the first to turn them out.

He learned, of Colt's collapse—of May Larabee's hurried departure for parts unknown—to all questions he responded fitly, and yet it seemed at times as though what he heard passed over him—as though he brought his attention to a focus with a distinct effort.

Mack and Tony watched over him with anxious eyes. They saw the change in him—a change so subtle that there was no putting your finger on it. It was merely that he smoked incessantly, that his hands trembled, that his eyes looked as though he had not slept.

Mack ventured to speak of it. "You ain't gettin' the proper rest, Bill," he said, his old face quivering with anxiety. Bill laid a hand on his shoulder, "Don't worry about me, Mack. You know I never did need much sleep—there's too much to be done——"

"Yes," said Mack, "but you ain't in no fit shape to do it!"

It was at the end of two weeks that Pattison, calling at the Transatlantic office on a matter of great importance, found Bill's desk deserted, and Davis, his secretary, consumed with anxiety. "He never fails to let us know if he expects to be detained—I can't imagine what's keeping him."

Pattison determined to find out, and hurried to the house on the hill.

Bill welcomed him with smiling lips, but with a certain tenseness about his jaw.

"I thought you'd come," he said, leading the way to his study. "Sit down."

Pattison did, wondering a little at his manner. "Was afraid you might be laid up," he said gruffly.

Bill shook his head, "No, I'm not laid up. I'm through."

"Through?" shouted Pattison, "through what?"

"Through with work. I'm not going back to the office, except to clean things up."

Pattison stared at him. "Great Heavens, Bill, you don't mean that?"

Bill nodded. "I do—just that."

"What's the matter? You aren't sick, are you—you——"

Bill shook his head. "No, I'm not sick. I'm better than I was. That's the reason I'm sure of myself—those first few days I couldn't be—I really thought that what I needed was an overdose of business to make me forget. I've tried, Pattison, I've honestly tried my best—but I can't stick it out any longer—I'm like a fire that's gone out—the spark that set me off is missing—I can't rekindle without it—I'm—well, I'm ashes. . . ."

Pattison sprang to his feet. "You're talking rot, Matthews; it's because you've been alone too much

—you've had a chance to think—hang it all—that's bad for a man at a time like this! Look here, you've had a knock-out—we all know that—you've been living on your nerves—what you need is company—come up to my place for a while, let me take you away somewhere—a rest——”

“That won't help me. Nothing will. I tell you, the spark's gone, Pattison. At first I struggled along with a notion that work would satisfy the cravings of any man—that I could fill up any gap in my life with a sufficient amount of it. Well, I was wrong. But I couldn't know better, because work has been a sort of passion with me all my life. I couldn't seem to get fed up on it—always wanted more—and then I married, and after a few weeks I found I was ready to go back to the game again—but with a difference—— It seemed as though I had never worked so well before—as if I had never gone after such big things and gotten them, too! And I, in my ignorance, didn't know that it was because I had a woman's love and strength as my spark—my incentive to get out and do things—no—I never dreamed it! I thought it was all myself—

“It's queer, isn't it, that I should have to wait until I had lost her to find it out,—but I have, Pattison—and nothing you can say—nothing anyone can say will change me—you see, I'm through—through for all time. . . .”

“But the nomination——” breathed Pattison.

Bill shook his head. "I'm sorry for Dugan, but I can't help that. I've already sent him a note telling him I shall have to refuse it—it isn't too late—as for the Transatlantic, it's in good shape now, and with you at the helm it will be clear sailing—Benson can take my place as general manager of the Works—I couldn't choose a better time to step out."

"But Matthews," pleaded Pattison, "you won't always feel this way—it's just for the time being—you're passing through this thing now—you've lost perspective—you'll see it differently once you get away——"

Bill smiled. "I'll give that theory a test, Pattison—that's only fair—but I tell you the spark's gone."

Tony, with old Mack at his heels, waited at the door of the Hope Mission for Nedda.

As she stepped outside, she caught sight of them. Tony, his face troubled, caught her arm.

"Nedda," he cried, "we've got to do something about Bill—we've come to ask you——"

She drew in her breath sharply, "What is it, Tony? What's the matter?"

Tony told her, tumbling out his words in a breathless fashion. "Bill's quitting work—selling all his stock—selling his house—don't nothin' matter to him no more—all his rich friends have tried to bring him around, but it didn't work. The first we heard

of it was when he come in today and says goodbye to us—tells us things will go on just the same as usual and that we mustn't mind his going off—he wouldn't look at us though, when he said it—would he, Mack? We asked him where was he going, but he wouldn't say—he wouldn't say nothin' only that we was not to forget that it was up to us to see that the men at the Works had a square deal—and that Bethel kept on turning out the best steel in the country—but we can't let him go like that—he don't know what he's doin'! He's cuttin' loose from everythin' he loves and just driftin'—he won't listen to us—but he might listen to you—Nedda, can't *you* do something to keep him anchored?"

"Me!" she breathed. "What could I do?"

Old Mack shook his head, there were tears in his eyes. "The boy ain't been himself since the day his wife was took—and I knew it—I says, mark my words he's sufferin' inside of him—and that's the worst kind—like a worm at the heart of an apple—but they wouldn't none of them listen to me—but now they know I was right—why, there ain't no surer way of killin' himself than droppin' everythin' in the prime of life with the whole world ahead of him—it isn't natural—it isn't right, and Tony says he'd listen to you—why don't you go to him, Nedda, and kind of talk to him—make him see that there's somethin' left in life."

"And he don't think there is?"

"No," said Tony. "I tell you he don't care a shoot about nothin'—all the things he was buildin' up, he turns over to someone else—all the big deals he was puttin' over he cuts loose from—he needs somebody at a time like this—and if his old pals don't stick by him and see him through, who's goin' to?"

Nedda drew herself up. "All right, Tony," she whispered, "I'll go. . . ."

"I knew you would!" he cried. "I knew you would!"

Nedda approached the big house. She scarcely heard Tony's whispered admonitions, or Mack's mumbled prayers. With eyes straight ahead, with chin raised, her lips were framing a song—a song that filled her with a throbbing eagerness—a tumultuous joy—"I'm going to see him. . . . I'm going to see him" . . . the voice within sang silently again and again.

"Talk to him like you used to," pleaded Tony. "If *you* don't make him see it—no one can."

She nodded and they left her. She mounted the steps, still with that sense of deep elation—of brooding tenderness—she had wanted to come to him from the minute she had heard of his trouble—but he did not seem to need her—she had learned how quickly he took up the reins once more—this indeed was the Bill of old—self-reliant—strong—but now—now—

the gates were down—he was bruised—w weary—and she was going to him. . . .

She rang the bell. The butler, at the sight of another strange face, drew back. "Mr. Matthews isn't seeing anyone, ma'am," he announced monotonously. Still she pressed forward.

"He'll see me," she said. "Tell him it's Nedda."

The butler shook his head. "My orders are——"

"Tell him it's Nedda," she repeated softly and something in her voice made him pause—it was so infinitely gentle—like a caress.

He left her in the great entrance hall, wondering at himself as he did so. She waited, her eyes fixed on the door through which he had vanished—she did not see the splendid room in which she stood—the walls hung with tapestries, the carved staircase——

"He'll see me," she whispered, almost as though it were a prayer.

At length the butler reappeared. Her eyes searched his face for a sign. Had Bill refused? Had he shut himself away from her, too?

The butler was speaking, "Come this way, please."

She did not move for an instant—in the flush of gladness that swept over her, then she nodded. "I'm coming," she said.

Bill was awaiting her in the doorway of his study. She scarcely knew him, he had changed so greatly since the Factory Street days. She raised her eyes

to his face—could it be possible that this great quiet man with haggard eyes and grim lips was her old playmate? For an instant her courage failed her—she drew back.

“Nedda!” he said, and at the sound of his voice, she gave a cry:

“Bill! Bill! what’s come over me to stare at you this way,” and she laid her hands in his.

The butler withdrew and Bill, smiling a trifle, held her off at arms’ length.

“Little Nedda,” he mused; “it seems as though it were only yesterday that I left you all! . . . ”

He drew her into the study and seated her in a chair. He stood before her, smiling down at her, and she searched his face quickly. He was older, yes, with a great weariness in his eyes and in the droop of his shoulders—but he was the same Big Bill for all that.

“It was good of you to come,” he said slowly. “I’m glad, Nedda—do you know, I’m glad. . . . ”

“I thought you might need me,” she said simply.

He caught her hands again. “Nedda! Nedda! I do need you—I do——” he cried, his voice full of pain, then he recovered himself. He drew up a chair beside her. “You haven’t changed,” he told her, “not a bit—just the same little flower girl—how good it is to see you!”

But she would not let him talk of her. “Bill,” she said, “Tony tells me you’re goin’ away.”

He nodded.

"Where are you goin'?" she demanded.

He shook his head, he seemed all at once profoundly tired. "I don't know, Nedda, anywhere—it doesn't greatly matter."

She leaned forward. "Why do you say that, Bill? Isn't there nothin' left you want to do?"

He did not meet her eyes. "Nothing, Nedda," he replied.

She insisted gently, "That ain't like you, Bill—you've always loved work—ever since the beginnin'—you have to—just as a framework of steel girders becomes a fine buildin'—you became a big man—you're of the stuff big things are made of—you can't get away from that!"

He smiled at her. "You always believed in me, Nedda, didn't you?"

She nodded. "That's why I know you can't stop now—you'll have to go on doin' big things to the end. . . ."

He flung himself to his feet. "Not now, Nedda—not now—I'm not the man you used to know—he was a good fellow who deserved to succeed—and—but I don't—I——"

"Why don't you?" she asked slowly.

He rose, pacing restlessly, his hands in his pockets. "How can I explain, Nedda? It's something inside of me that tells me so——"

"No, it ain't," she cut him short; "you're worryin'

about somethin'—that's what makes you say it——”

He whirled on her. “How did you know that?”

“I know,” she said.

He did not speak for a long while; she waited, her hands loosely clasped. At length he paused before her.

“You're right, Nedda,” he burst out—“I *do* know—I was a fool who threw away the greatest gift on earth—who thought that other things in life counted more—do you know what I mean—Nedda? Can you guess——”

“You mean love,” she said quietly; “that's the greatest gift on earth.”

“Yes, yes,” he cried. “I mean love—but I know better now—only it's too late—oh, Nedda, don't ever make that mistake—no matter what they tell you—hold it and keep it and guard it—for it's the one thing that counts——”

She moved her lips, her eyes on his face. “Yes,” she whispered, “it's the one thing that counts. . . .”

He strode to the window, his back to her. “You see,” he flung at her, “that feeling as I do I can't go on—I can't keep on doing the things that took me from her—that built up a wall between us——”

“No,” she said softly, “but there's other things to do.”

He whirled. “What? What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “When you're ready, I'll tell you.”

But he insisted. "No—tell me now—now."

But she would not. "No—go away for awhile—and see new people and places and when you are tired of that come back to me—and I'll tell you——"

"Nedda!" he cried, "if you think that will help—if you think there is really something left for me——"

She smiled. "You were made to do big things, Bill—don't ever forget that. . . ."

The winter passed, and spring came again—a tender, fragrant season—calling the crocuses from the ground—swelling the buds—giving the earth a mantle of green—but instead of answering to its call—its wide-flung invitation, Bethel neither saw nor heard—wraapt as it was in its own misery.

War was in the air—War! . . . and with it came its forerunners—a soaring of prices—a blockade of foodstuffs. With the breaking off of diplomatic relations, traffic on the high seas had been suspended—and in the shipyards of the country lay thousands of tons of munitions—in its terminals trainload upon trainload of product——

And the men of the country waited—wondering dumbly what would happen next in the game of diplomacy—a game in which they were the pawns—wondered what would become of their families if the call to arms came—if the prices rose still higher——

Bethel suffered keenly—it lay so close to great

wealth—it could not fail to hear of the First Families' follies—their banquets—and dances—while with its dwellers across the track—the purchasing of bread—of milk—became a grave problem.

There were small riots—and public gatherings—a spirit of sharp unrest prevailed—of waiting which had almost reached the limit of endurance.

Pattison watched the surliness of the men with rising uneasiness—he knew not how to cope with it—he had been a rich man all his life—— They resented his advances on that very ground. The barrel-top speakers that shouted nightly to the gatherings in Factory Street spoke bitterly against him and his kind—the listening crowd became more sullen—more difficult to manage——

Pattison, at his wit's end, breathed a sigh, "I wish to heavens Matthews were here, he'd know what to do!"

Mack and Tony took their fears to Nedda. "There's goin' to be trouble—no gettin' away from it—a crowd broke into a bakery on Factory Street today and cleaned out the place—you couldn't arrest them, neither, because most of 'em was mothers with babies in their arms—there's no one can handle 'em—I wish to God Bill was back!"

Benson, surveying the sullenness of his men at the Works, was alarmed; he had never seen them that way before—it was an outgrowth of the inflammatory words to which they had been listening each

night—trouble was brewing—it wasn't that they were dissatisfied—it was that they were distrustful—they were growing more and more convinced that the men who owned the Works were not their friends—were waiting for a chance to double-cross them—take back the powers granted them. The poison of the instigators had done its work—it colored their thoughts—there was no dislodging it.

“There's only one man they'd believe in, and that's Big Bill,” he told himself; “if I knew where to reach him!”

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY

IT was an evening in April—the air for all its softness, held a chill, and Nedda, a coat about her shoulders, sat on the steps of the little house on Factory Street. Tony and Mack had gone to a meeting—it was to be a fiery affair—intended to whip the crowds to greater unrest. Why couldn't they get wheat and flour as well as the rich folk!—why did they sit back and do nothing!—Were they going to let their children starve before their very eyes!

Nedda pleaded with Tony to stay away, but he would not. "We've got to hear what they're sayin'—we won't know how to handle them, if we don't."

She watched for their return, leaning her head against the railing—her body relaxed. Suddenly her breath quickened, she sat up, staring at a figure that was approaching—a man who walked slowly—heavily. She sprang to her feet—her cheeks flaming, her lips parted, but she did not move—she waited until he came close to her, until he raised his eyes.

"Bill! Bill!" she cried with a sob, "you've come at last! . . ."

He stared at her. He looked white and drawn as though he had fought a battle with himself and lost.

"Nedda!" he cried, "to think you should be here—just as though you were waiting for me——"

"I was!" she cried, "every day—every hour I've prayed you would come back. . . ."

"I've come," he said, "but only to tell you it's no use—that I've tried and failed—Nedda, tell me what am I good for?"

She clasped her hands. "Bill, do you know why you've come—do you know what's brought you here—now—at this time?—it's because you heard them calling you—the men, I mean—because they knew you were the only person in all the world who could save us from a strike—a revolution——"

"What do you mean, Nedda?"

She laid her hand on his arm. "Bill, I've been praying and praying for you to come back. I told you there was work for you to do—big work—I would not tell you what it was—do you remember?"

He nodded.

"Well," she went on, "it's the biggest work in the world, Bill—not a desk in Bethel proper—but right here in Factory Street where you came from—it's the kind of work you can do better than any one else—it's the kind of work that will make you forget yourself because you'll be so busy thinkin' of the men you're helpin'."

He caught her hands in his, crushing them.

"Nedda—do you mean that the boys have been asking for me——?"

She nodded, crying softly. "For you—yes—yes—a hundred times—wishin' you were here—hopin' you'd come back. What with trouble stirrin' in the Works and with mothers who can't find food for their babies—they don't know what to do——"

His eyes lightened. "And this is what you meant, Nedda?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes—only I couldn't know they'd need you so bad—— Oh, Bill," she cried, breathlessly, "with you to help here—with you at the helm—there's nothin' we can't do!"

He caught her eagerness—he laughed suddenly, his eyes full of light.

"Stirring up trouble, are they, poor beggars—well, we'll build them milk stations—yes, and soup kitchens—we'll give them food cheaper than they've ever had it——"

"Oh, Bill!" she cried, the tears on her cheeks. "You've come back! You've come back!"

Bill Matthews had returned! Bethel thrilled with the news—scarcely believing it—eager for a glimpse of him—suddenly reassured by his presence.

Pattison was the first to reach the little house on Factory Street.

"Come back with me," he pleaded. "Make your headquarters in Bethel proper; Gad! but it does my

eyes good to see you—guess you knew we'd needed you in the worst way——”

Bill smiled and shook his head. “I'm going to stay right here, Pattison; there's plenty to do. Here's where I came from—and where I belong——”

And through the weeks that followed he worked day and night—and while he was often silent, his eyes regained their old light, he was eager for more.

The men turned to him like children to a parent—pitifully glad that he had returned. They shouted aloud to their families that all would be well now that Big Bill was back. They hissed the street speakers from their stands—they broke up meetings and scattered the mutterers—all was well now——!

And Nedda, close by his side, helped him with his plans for the men—he would not proceed without her advice—and she dreamed of a golden future, with her hand joined in his.

Tony spoke of it to her, “Nedda, it's you that brought Bill back—he's got you to thank.”

But she shook her head. “He would have come back anyhow, it might have took longer—it might not 'a' been to Bethel—but it would 'a' been somewhere—he couldn't have lived unless he worked—and he'd have found sooner or later that the people needed him.”

But Tony persisted. “Still he's always sayin' he has you to thank.”

"Is he, Tony?" she asked. Tony nodded.

"Yes—he says he leaves it to you to decide what he's to do next——"

She smiled, but did not answer.

When Tony had gone she went to her room. From a shelf she lifted a box. She unfastened the cord that bound it and opened it. In it lay a red dress—faded and creased—and a tiny velvet case. . . .

She shook out the dress with a smile on her lips—and stroked its folds gently, then she laid it back—but at the velvet case she did not smile—instead, her lips became tender, her eyes full of dreams—she opened it and lifted out the diamond brooch he had given her. She laid it against her cheek—then she clasped its chain about her neck—no one could see it beneath the coarse fabric of her dress, but she felt it against her throat and the quick tears sprang to her eyes. . . .

It was her night to teach at the Mission. She would be late. She drew down the cover of the box and thrust it out of sight beneath her bed. For a minute she paused, studying herself in the glass. . . . Was she worthy? . . . Did she dare hope that at last the dream which lay close to her heart might be fulfilled? . . . Tony's words rang in her ears.

"He says he leaves it to you to decide what he's to do next. . . ."

She smiled—and closed her hand over the brooch. She would decide then—and she would try to make him glad she had done so as long as she lived! . . .

It was damp out, with a chill drizzle. She shivered and buttoned her coat close about her throat. She gathered up her skirt and moved forward, her head lowered against the storm. She saw the lights of the mission gleaming mistily through the fog. She hurried toward them, when suddenly she collided sharply with someone. She looked up. It was a shabby, shifty-eyed man, who, recovering himself, reached down swiftly for something that lay gleaming in the gutter.

Quick as a flash she picked it up. It was a gold locket.

“Give it to me,” he snapped; “it’s mine.”

She glanced down at it. It had fallen open—by the light of the lamp overhead she could see that there was a picture inside. She looked again. Then she closed her hand over it swiftly, her lips set in a hard line—there was no mistaking the picture inside—it was of Bill. . . .

“You’ve stole it!” she shot at him. He seized her arm roughly, but she flung him off. A woman was running toward her.

The thief, seeing her, made off with a curse, and Nedda braced herself—no doubt this was the locket’s owner—Nedda waited for her—so this woman had

Bill's picture—how had she come by it? By what right did she wear it? Nedda determined not to give it up without good reason—the woman called to her.

“Did you stop him—he snatched it before I had time to think—he——”

The woman had come beneath the rays of the lamp, and Nedda raised her eyes, then she fell back with a cry—the world rocked beneath her feet—for the woman waiting breathless for her to speak was Daphne. . . .

“I saw you pick it up,” she was saying, “did you give it to him—did you——?”

Nedda did not move, she scarcely breathed—her eyes fastened on the woman's face. His wife . . . his wife. . . .

“Did you give it to him?” she insisted. “I value it very greatly——”

Nedda thrust her hand behind her.

“I gave it to him,” she said.

The woman with a cry turned in pursuit, but Nedda caught her arm.

“He's got away with it,” she said; “you won't never catch him now.”

She studied the woman's face, the sharp fear in her eyes—the quick intake of her breath.

“Oh, but I must get it back!” she cried. “I can't lose that . . . it's all I have—it's . . .”

She stopped. Nedda was speaking. “I think I

know who he was," she lied. "If you tell me your name and where you live maybe I can get it back for you——"

"Oh, if you could!" said the woman, then she hesitated, but only for an instant. "I visit the missions to see how they are conducted, I will only be here in Bethel tonight—but if you should find it you can reach me, care of the headquarters in New York." Then, as though as an afterthought, she added, "My name is Miss Dale."

Nedda nodded. "I'll remember," she said.

The woman smiled. "Thank you," she said; "I would lose everything I own, rather than that," and she was gone—gone—there was nothing to assure Nedda that it had not been an illusion—a fancy of her brain—except the locket in her hand. . . .

She felt numbed—cold—dazed. . . . Daphne was alive—by some strange twist of fate—she was alive! Suddenly she flung off the spell that held her motionless—she clenched her hands—what right had this woman to reappear—in this, the supreme hour of her life—this hour for which she had waited so long, the wife he mourned as dead had come back . . . but he did not know . . . need he ever know? This woman seemed content to be apart from him—and yet Nedda could not forget the look in her eyes when she learned the locket was gone—she loved him too. . . . She loved him too. . . .

The rain beat down on her face, but she heeded it



*Nedda Did Not Move . . . Her Eyes Fastened
on the Woman's Face*

not . . . what must she do? What must she say? After all, he was hers now—hers—she had brought him back from the valley of despair—she had found for him an interest in life. . . . What had this woman done to deserve him?—“It’s for you to say what he will do next!”—for her to say. . . . Should she send him back to his wife? Or should she keep him? . . .

The woman had said she was going to be there but one night—that meant she would disappear again—just as she had vanished into the fog—no, the chance was scant that he would ever meet her—would ever learn the truth. Nedda’s fingers tightened about the locket—she had waited so long! so long! . . .

She whirled sharply and set out toward home. She hurried up the steps and unlocked the door. With shaking hands, she pushed it open and entered. In the hallway she came face to face with Bill—she started back, slipping her hand quickly into her pocket, but he came toward her. He looked tired, but at the sight of her his face lighted up.

“Nedda!” he cried, “you’re drenched through—where have you been?”

She did not speak, her eyes on his face—how she loved his voice—his smile—his strong brown hand chafing hers—loved him—loved him—loved him—

“What’s the matter?” he asked, but she wrenched her hand away.

"Nothing," she told him, as she ran past him up the stairs. . . .

She closed her door—she must fight this thing out to the end—She would never give him up—never. . . . The woman was content to let him believe her dead—well, then he should believe it! She studied the face in the locket hungrily—she valued it, did she? Why, then, had she thrown his love away? With a sudden fear, she ran to her bureau and searched about until she found a little box—she dropped the locket inside, and tied it up—she thrust it far back out of sight—then impulsively dragged it out, and thrust it in the blouse of her dress. If he should ever find it he would ask her where it had come from—she had lied to the woman—but could she lie to him? . . . She shivered suddenly, and flung open her door. She would tell him tonight how much she loved him—he was lonely—well, with her arms about him he need be lonely no more. . . . She was young—vital—eager, her lips were warm—could she not give him as much as the woman she had met in the fog? . . .

She descended the stair softly, the little study he called his own was in darkness. She hesitated in the doorway—had he gone out? She entered and when her eyes were used to the shadows, she saw him. His back was turned toward her, but she could see that his head was bowed in his hands. For an

instant the yearning to go to him was so great it seemed as though she could not hold it in leash—to stroke his head with her fingers, to let him draw her hand to his cheek—she closed her eyes in an ecstasy of longing. . . . She reached out her arms to him. . . .

He stirred, and she heard him catch his breath sharply—she waited, listening—unashamed—then she caught the words he whispered brokenly:

“Daphne—I want you so—I need you. . . .”

After a time she leaned toward him and touched his shoulder. He sprang up.

“Nedda!” he cried. “I did not know you were there!”

She smiled a little. “There is something I want you to do for me, Bill.”

“Anything,” he said. “Anything.”

She drew from her waist the little package and laid it in his hands.

“It’s a locket I found—it belongs to a Miss Dale at the Star Mission. Would you take it to her for me?”

“Why, of course,” he said, then he took her hand in his. “You’re tired, Nedda, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she said. “A little.”

He patted her hand. “I’ve been making you work too hard. That’s the trouble. I’ll be back soon,” he called, as he left her.

But she did not reply. She heard the bang of the front door, then silence. . . .

"It's for you to tell him what he'll do next——" Well, she had told him. . . . She reached out her hand and stroked the back of the chair against which his head had rested. . . .

The Star Mission was a low, rambling building. Its chapel windows were flung open—little shafts of light piercing the mist—and on the night air came voices singing—a warm, rich volume of sound.

Bill, approaching, was strangely stirred. It was like a scene from a play—the building's harsh outlines softened and rounded by the mist—its lights dim, unreal, the voices ringing out with their martial rhythm. . . .

It moved him—and he waited until the music had ceased—until the droning of a voice took up the story another had dropped, before he approached.

He mounted the steps and entered the rough little chapel full to overflowing with the flotsam and jetsam of the tide—men who had come there as a refuge from the wet streets—frowsy women with tired eyes—children who stared at him frankly.

On a raised platform at the far end of the room, a thin-lipped man was extolling the virtues of work—glorifying the laborer—and his audience listened, for the most part stolid—unmoved—the women hushing the babies in their arms—the men stamping their feet to get them dry.

Bill smiled to himself. Why talk to them of work—that was their daily diet—their curds and whey—why not tell them of the things they longed to hear without knowing it—of flowers—of trees—of wind-swept hilltops—work had its place in the world, but there were other things infinitely finer! He had come to know that at last—it seemed to him almost as though he had been born again.

The smile still lingered in his eyes as he glanced about him—they were types—all of them—the rabbit-faced little woman at the piano fumbling the leaves of a hymn-book—the portly deaconess beside her—the—suddenly he paused, stiffening—were his eyes playing him a trick? He rubbed them and stared at a woman whose back was toward him. She was slender and tall, with a trick of up-tilting her chin that he had seen but one woman do—one woman in all the world. . . . He felt his pulses pounding—he must see her face! He must see her face! And as though she felt his eyes upon her she moved restlessly away and speaking a word to the pianist passed from view through a low door.

He must see her! he must! he almost cried the words aloud. The thin-lipped speaker, having concluded his address, was making his way toward him. He saw in him a possible donator, but Bill gave him no chance to speak. "That young lady in black, who was here a minute ago," he burst out. "Can you tell me her name?"

The thin-lipped man glanced about, puzzled, then he nodded.

"Oh, yes, I think you must mean Miss Dale." Dale! So that was her name! Of course, it had been just fancy—then he recalled his errand.

"I would like to see her for a moment—I have something for her."

"The locket?" inquired the thin-lipped man, "she will be so glad."

He pointed eagerly to the little door. "She's in the office, shall I call her?"

But Bill shook his head. "No, you needn't," he said. "I'll take it to her myself."

It was a small, bare room with a square desk in its center and a green light directly above it, the rest of the room was full of shadows.

The woman stood by the window. In the half light Bill saw the sweep of her white throat. He entered softly.

"Miss Dale," he said, "I have brought you your locket."

She turned, and Bill, seeing her, fell back with a cry.

She had not moved, but he saw the throb of a pulse in her throat—the rise and fall of her quick breathing.

He stared at the woman before him—the woman with Daphne's hair—Daphne's eyes—Daphne's curved red lips—but who could not be she because

she was dead . . . he was dreaming—that was it—he was dreaming!

She came toward him. She reached out her hand and touched him.

“You——!” she cried. “You——!”

She was flesh and blood—flesh and blood! She lived! She lived! She had been given back to him. . . .

“Daphne,” he whispered through white lips, “are you real—are you—you——?”

He did not wait for an answer, but with a cry he swept her to him. . . .

After a time he spoke, “Why did you do it? Why did you let me think I had lost you?”

She answered softly, her eyes on his face. “After the wreck, I was ill—very ill—the sisters at the mission nursed me, but for a long while I could not tell who I was or where I came from—and when I grew better there were long hours in which to think—and think. . . . One day I heard them talking about you—I heard them say that you believed me dead—but that you had gone on with your work as before—and when I heard all this I felt sure you did not need me——”

“Need you,” he cried. “Daphne! Daphne!”

She drew his head close to her cheek. “Tell me you do,” she whispered. “Oh, tell me you do! I can never hear it enough. . . . It took so much

courage to go on without you—and I have so little left—I am afraid—afraid——”

He caught her face between his hands and gazed deep into her eyes.

“You need never be afraid again,” he said slowly. She clung to him.

“I am afraid of the big things you will do—the things that will take you from me——”

He shook his head. “The biggest thing in the world will be making you happy,” he told her.

She was content then to feel his arms about her. She did not speak again for a long while. . . .

THE END

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