
An HEIR
AT LARGE

John T. McCutcheon



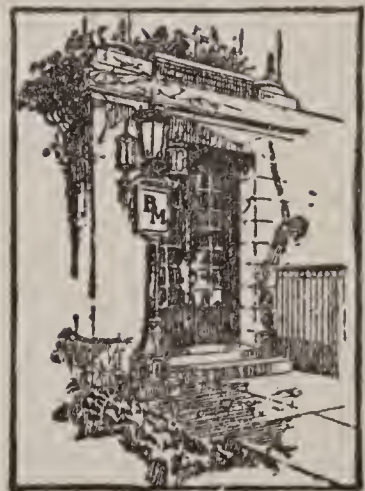
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AN HEIR AT LARGE





Harry found himself uncomfortably stranded.

An Heir At Large

By

JOHN T. McCUTCHEON

Author of

IN AFRICA, THE RESTLESS AGE,
ETC.

With Illustrations

BY THE AUTHOR



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AN HEIR AT LARGE

An Heir at Large

CHAPTER I

YOUNG Henry Livingston Bacon sat hunched up in a deep chair dazed by the change in his fortunes.

Yesterday he wondered where he was to get the money to pay his room rent. To-day he could buy the whole apartment-house, grounds and furnishings, together with all the neighboring property for a couple of blocks in both directions.

It was incredible.

As though reconstructing an elusive dream, he recalled the even tones of his lawyer whose office he had so recently left.

“You have received the entire fortune of your late uncle. At his death the principal and interest became yours by virtue of a trust

agreement between the settlor and the trustees made nearly four years ago. After transferring the estate to you he retained the income during his lifetime.

“Aside from half a dozen of his closest business associates, no one knew the extent of your uncle’s operations or the magnitude of his fortune. He was very secretive.”

Bacon remembered how he had been struck by the word “magnitude.” It was unexpectedly impressive.

“Having disposed of his fortune by trust agreement before his death he has circumvented the inheritance tax, for there is no will to be probated, and the size of the estate does not become public. In recent years the property has been converted almost wholly into tax exempt securities, which by reason of an old decision—the McCulloch against Maryland decision—are not taxable by the Federal Government.

“You will be interested, I’m sure, in hearing that, after the payment of all taxes, claims, and

debts, the fortune you inherit will reach very close to——”

The lawyer paused here to note the effect. He then added evenly:

“Fifteen million dollars.” He allowed himself the shadow of a smile. “It ought to be enough to keep the wolf from the door.”

Fifteen millions! Instead of keeping the wolf from the door it would probably draw many to it.

Young Bacon never dreamed that his uncle, living in hermit-like seclusion, was so rich—far less that *he* might some day be his heir. In fact, he supposed himself to be in disfavor.

In college, and later in his regiment, he had won the honor of being the best amateur boxer in the one hundred and seventy pound class, a distinction which could hardly have appealed to his cold, reserved uncle.

So certain was he of his uncle's disapproval that he had not appealed to him for help when he started to work nearly three years before. He had plugged along to his present position,

paying two thousand five hundred dollars a year, without benefit of pull. During those three years he had seen little of his uncle, but evidently an appraising eye had been upon *him*.

“This—this fortune,” he finally regained composure enough to ask, “is it to remain in the hands of the trustees?”

“Your uncle seems to have had faith in your judgment and character,” the lawyer answered. “He did not tie up his estate with conditions. There are no strings leading from the grave. You are at liberty to squander every cent and ruin yourself as far as he is concerned. Of course, we all hope you will be sensible and rise to the responsibilities which such a fortune entails. Don’t let it spoil you, as inherited money has spoiled so many other young men.”

“You mean,” said Bacon in a faint voice, “you mean that it is mine now; that I can get money now?”

“Certainly. There is a considerable sum in

the bank at this moment that has not been re-invested yet.”

Together they walked to the bank, where the young man was introduced and his signature deposited. A check-book—visible evidence that he was not dreaming—was now in his pocket.

As the lawyer bade him good-by he asked in a kindly tone if there was anything more he could do.

“There is only one thing,” Bacon had answered, a vague idea rising in the back of his mind. “Can all this be kept secret for some time—perhaps a few weeks, or months? Is that possible?”

“Certainly. No one need know except ourselves and the bank. You will not be obliged to file an income tax return for several months.”

And now—back in his room, gazing at the check-book with its limitless possibilities, his thoughts turned to Miss Muriel Lannard.

Would she still refuse him, he wondered.

Would Miss Muriel Lannard look with more favor upon Mr. Henry Livingston Bacon, heir to fifteen million dollars, than she had upon young Harry Bacon, struggling along on two thousand five hundred dollars a year?

This was the hypothetical question which that young man, still staggered by the fact of his inheritance, put to himself as he sat in his room.

Heretofore he could offer her nothing but love and a well established proficiency in pugilism—not a useful asset in married life!—but now he could offer a wealth of things sufficiently overwhelming to make even her ambitious mother gasp.

He recalled that lady's chilling politeness. By numberless acts, trivial but subtly expressive, she had indicated her active disapproval of his attentions to her daughter.

How would she act now? Would the magic of that huge figure impel her to graciousness? The thought gave him considerable pleasure.

He spent some time rolling it around in his mind. He pictured himself gazing into her frigid, unfriendly eyes and saying: "By the way, Mrs. Lannard, had you heard that my uncle has just left me fifteen million dollars?" He wondered what else she would do besides fall off her chair.

It was certainly an impressive sum. Reduced to terms within his comprehension, it was equivalent to three hundred thousand weeks' pay at his present salary. Much could be done with that amount of money, much good or much bad.

He thought of other rich young men, and decided they used little imagination in the use of their opportunities. Some had been ruined by the destruction of all incentive to effort. Others had plunged madly into the pointless scramble to double their wealth.

Bacon resolved to follow neither. But it became increasingly important that the fact of his sudden accession to money be kept secret.

Along that course lay the only hope of success in the plan which was dimly forming in his brain.

The vast power that was now his must be withheld from the knowledge of those whose attitude would change the instant his money eclipsed himself in their minds.

With this plan of campaign, he called up the residence of Mr. E. Johnstone Lannard. Miss Lannard was at home.

“This is Harry. I want to see you very much. May I come over?”

“Oh, I’ve such ‘a headache. I’m awfully sorry.”

“How about to-night? You may be feeling better. May I call you up again later?”

There was a long silence. When she spoke again there was a faint suggestion of irritation.

“What is it, Harry? The same old thing, or something else? You know how mama feels.”

“But this is important—a great secret that I’m dying to tell you.”

There was another strained silence.

“Oh, well—come this afternoon—about five.”

The receiver was hung up on a young man who had many more things to say. He smiled a little bitterly.

At five o'clock, when the avenue was thronged with aristocratic cars, a second-hand Ford drew up before the Lannard stately mansion.

Harry Bacon leaped out and was soon greeting Muriel jubilantly.

“My car is outside,” he announced. “I just bought it to-day and I want you to be the first to ride in it with me.”

Her eyes lighted up. This was interesting!

“Your car, Harry!” she exclaimed. Since when could he afford a car?

“Oh, it isn't a very grand car,” he answered modestly, “but it goes.”

“And so do I. I'm dying to see it.”

She hurried away and soon reappeared in her smartest hat and coat.

“Let’s go up the avenue and through the park,” she said gaily.

Muriel Lannard stopped abruptly when she saw the lowly flivver standing at the curb.

“That!” she exclaimed. “Is that your car?”

“Absolutely! Why not?” responded Harry Bacon, opening the door with an elaborate flourish. “My lady, the car awaits! Let us away through the lovely parks and teeming boulevards.”

Her face reflected a tumult of angry emotions. She had an impulse to fly back into the house. How *could* she ride up the boulevard at this fashionable hour in that thing! A hundred acquaintances were certain to recognize her.

The cranking of the car took some time, during which the occupants of passing motors looked on with curiosity and amusement. Miss Lannard was conspicuously dressed for a Rolls-Royce, not for an humble flivver. She was deeply chagrined, and held her fur high about her face. If Harry was conscious of her

anger, he gave no sign. Glancing quickly from right to left, she hurriedly entered the car.

"We'll not go up to the park," she said abruptly.

He smiled.

"Not ashamed of my car, are you?"

She flushed.

"I just remembered that I must go down to the Day Nursery."

He smiled again. The way to the nursery lay through obscure streets into the heart of the tenement district. She would never be recognized in those sections.

Soon the little car was rattling busily over cobblestones instead of asphalt.

"Don't you think she runs nicely for her age?" asked Harry cheerfully, apparently unaware of the smoldering resentment at his side.

"I got it cheap," he continued, steering between the crowds of children playing in the streets. When the car grazed one group he heard her exclaim irritably:

“How annoying! Why don’t they keep their miserable children at home!”

At that moment Harry suddenly hated the girl.

After a time they drew up before a neat building bearing a sign “Day Nursery.” He had been there before. It was Miss Lannard’s pet charity, to which she gave an occasional hour of service when social demands were slack.

A pleasant-faced but rather harassed matron greeted them, and was presently pouring out the woes of the institution into Miss Lannard’s unheeding ear. The expenses were still nearly double pre-war ones, and she knew people were less than ever inclined to give to charities. But unless supplementary funds were raised at once, she would either have to turn away tired mothers who each day, on the way to the factory or shop, brought their pale children for the clean food and wholesome attention of the nursery, or else cut down mercilessly on that very food and attention.

One little girl looked wistfully into Miss Lannard's face, which suddenly showed a glow of tenderness.

"You poor little dear!" she exclaimed, kneeling and catching the shy little thing in her arms.

Harry's eyes softened as he watched her. The impulsive action, so appealingly maternal, struck a chord deep in his heart.

"You're wonderful, Muriel," he said, so low that only she heard. "You love children, don't you?"

She shot a quick glance at him. There was no mistaking what he was thinking of, and she flushed uncomfortably. Again on their way home, he spoke of her love for children and how they must adore her, but her beautiful profile was now tight-lipped and set.

And once again Harry puzzled over the question that was growing in his mind. Which was the real Muriel Lannard—the one who was irritated by children playing in the street, or the one whose arms had tenderly caressed the

little unfortunate in the Day Nursery? One was hateful, the other adorable.

Their arrival at Muriel's home was tragically ill-timed.

Mrs. Lannard had just alighted from her limousine as the flivver rattled up to the curb.

Harry felt a restraining hand on his arm as Muriel sought to prevent discovery by her mother. But too late. He was out of the car and holding the door open for her to descend.

Then Mrs. Lannard saw him. She stopped abruptly, a questioning look in her eyes. Glancing at the muffled figure in the flivver, she asked in a hard voice:

"Is that you, Muriel?"

"Yes, mother," said the girl, slowly stepping out.

Harry was conscious of a high tension. Mrs. Lannard had not yet even bowed to him.

"Where have you been, Muriel?" she asked coldly.

"Mr. Bacon and I have been down to the Day Nursery."

“I’m sorry. The count came just after you left the house. He waited for you.” Then, turning to Bacon, she said with pointed distinctness: “If Mr. Bacon will excuse you, I would like to speak to you inside.”

That young man was not unprepared for the cold douche, but it aroused in him the impulsive desire to tell her at once that he had just fallen heir to a great fortune for the pure fun of seeing her inevitable reaction. With difficulty he restrained himself. This was not the moment for such a disclosure. So, bowing, he took his leave, and later in his room reviewed the situation in all its aspects.

CHAPTER II

SINCE the beginning Mrs. Lannard had never for one moment allowed Harry to forget that his attentions to her daughter were unwelcome. He was naturally always very uncomfortable in her presence. A decent, healthy young man whose record in college and in the war had been creditable, whose ancestors had been highly respectable, he perceived that his chief drawback, from Mrs. Lannard's point of view, was his modest social standing.

She was obviously ambitious for a brilliant marriage for Muriel, one that would read well in the society columns. Perhaps she was right; certainly she was normal in wishing to see her daughter married to a man who could sustain her in the scale of living to which she had been accustomed.

Consequently he knew that if she even suspected the fact of his fifteen millions her whole manner would undergo an abrupt and favorable change.

But was she only mercenary? This count, he couldn't even support Muriel. He would be a barnacle on the family fortunes. If Mrs. Lannard approved of a fortune-hunting foreigner merely because his title, shared by her daughter, would give her a pleasant thrill, that revealed her motives as being snobbish, too—as putting a higher valuation upon an empty title than upon her daughter's permanent welfare.

After all, who were the Lannards, anyway, he wondered cynically. They had come from a small town in Pennsylvania where Mr. Lannard's extensive factories were still located. No doubt they were ordinary people enough before riches had come to them and they had moved to the great city. It would be interesting to know something about their antecedents and connections, if only to discover what license they had to look down on him.

This reflection gave him food for a new line of thought and action. In the meantime he wrote a polite note to Mrs. Lannard asking for a private interview.

A brief response came the following day. She would see him. No doubt her ready acquiescence was due to her wish to finish once and for all Bacon's unwelcome attentions. She seemed convinced of her ability to dispose of the matter definitely.

At the appointed hour Harry was sitting in the little reception room of the Lannard house, where Mrs. Lannard kept him waiting twenty-five minutes. Under other circumstances he would have been miserably nervous, but now the consciousness of possession of a vast fortune gave him that sense of power and confidence which great wealth always brings.

He knew Mrs. Lannard considered him only a poor young man, worthy no doubt as to habits and health, but not one whose name would look impressive on a wedding invitation. It amused him to speculate how quickly he could

—if he wished—change what he knew would be her attitude in the forthcoming interview.

At five minutes before three Mrs. Lannard entered the room. She bowed coldly. Hardly had she seated herself when a maid brought a message. Mrs. Van Ormonde was expecting her at three.

“I will be there at once.”

To Bacon it looked like a prearranged piece of strategy to insure a brief interview.

“I have only a few minutes, Mr. Bacon. I’m sorry, but I must ask you to be brief.”

“I have come to speak about Muriel, Mrs. Lannard.” He saw her lips tighten.

“As I supposed, although I was not aware that the state of affairs between you and my daughter had advanced so far.” It was evident Mrs. Lannard was not disposed to make things easy.

“That is quite true, Mrs. Lannard. As you may know, I have asked her many times to marry me, but she has refused. Sometimes, however, I have been encouraged to think her

refusals were becoming less positive, but this may be due to a hopeful imagination." He paused, but there was, as he expected, no glint of sympathy in her eyes.

"Mr. Bacon, what I must say is best said frankly and without equivocation. Muriel is aware of your visit and is, I may say, amazed at your action. She does not love you and assures me she has no desire or intention of ever marrying you. You will be sparing yourself much trouble if you recognize this as definite and final."

She stood up to end the interview. As Bacon arose he said evenly, in a voice quite free from nervousness or emotion.

"Mrs. Lannard, you have never concealed your disapproval of my attentions to your daughter. No doubt you have reasons which seem excellent to you. May I ask you to be still more frank with me and tell me why you object to me?"

Mrs. Lannard regarded him for a moment. It had just struck her disconcertingly that there

was the faintest gleam of amusement in his eyes.

He continued pleasantly: "Is it my personality, my poverty, or my pedigree?"

There was now no doubt that his eyes were twinkling. It annoyed her intensely. Stung to sudden fury, she lost her studied poise.

"Mr. Bacon, I can not prolong this futile discussion! I can only say you are quite impossible! I trust that is frank enough for you to comprehend." Then, as if to reinforce her statement, she added: "I am speaking the sentiments of my daughter as well as those of her father and myself when I say that your pretensions to enter the Lannard family have been regarded as absurd."

Bacon bowed. The discussion had taken exactly the line he foresaw. He had realized perfectly the worldliness of Mrs. Lannard and the value she placed upon a high-sounding marriage for her daughter.

What he did not know was that Mrs. Lannard was not speaking the exact truth when

she quoted the sentiments of her daughter. Muriel knew nothing of this visit. At the moment she was out motoring with a nobleman from a Slavic republic who had come to this country to recoup the fortune he had lost at Monte Carlo in the "good old days" of the czar.

Bacon left the Lannard house feeling that a disagreeable but necessary job had been disposed of. He would leave Muriel to her nobleman, this girl who inspired in him waves of alternating hate and love. He was tired of being looked down upon. Some time it might prove interesting to investigate the roots of the Lannard family tree to see where "they got that haughty stuff."

That night he wrote a note to Muriel.

"You have often refused me, but I was hoping to go on giving you opportunities to reverse your decision, just for variety. However, your mother, in quoting your feelings this afternoon, showed me how utterly futile it will be for me to inflict myself upon you any more. May I mark my withdrawal by a little act of

appreciation for the splendid work you are doing in connection with your pet charity, the Day Nursery? Won't you please give the enclosed check to the nursery—with the one condition that you do not reveal the name of the donor?"

He enclosed his check for twenty-five thousand dollars.

With Miss Muriel Lannard's breakfast tray, which came to her bedside at ten o'clock, was her morning mail neatly arranged by her maid.

She glanced idly through the letters—invitations, advertisements, club announcements, and two or three that looked as though they might be interesting.

"One from Harry. What in the world is on his mind to-day?"

She saved it for the last.

As she slit the envelope she was conscious of the little thrill she always felt at his letters. It was her heart arguing with her head. Oh, why was he so hopelessly poor! His income would hardly pay her bridge losses.

She wanted to be independent of her father, whose generous allowance was being given more grudgingly as his business affairs were becoming more disturbing. There were constant labor troubles at his factories. Strike after strike! Where the strikers got enough money to hold out was more than he could understand.

Conditions had become so unsatisfactory that at times her father seriously considered the advisability of moving his family back to Adamant, Pennsylvania, where the factories were located, a prospect which Mrs. Lannard viewed with consternation.

These family secrets were much in Muriel's mind these days, and they arose again unpleasantly as she opened Harry Bacon's letter. If only he were rich how simple everything would be.

A slip of paper dropped from the folds of the letter. It looked like a check. She opened it quickly and her eyes dilated with amazement.

It was a check for twenty-five thousand dollars, drawn to the order of the Day Nursery, her pet charity, and was signed by Henry Livingston Bacon.

What silly joke was this? Had he lost his mind? Hastily she read his letter—a few brief lines of farewell. There seemed no joke about this.

In an instant she was out of bed and in her mother's boudoir, her face agitated, and was thrusting the letter and check into that astonished lady's hands.

“What does this mean?” she exclaimed.

“Mean?” repeated Mrs. Lannard. “It means that he's crazy, or else it's his notion of a joke. I thought he acted queerly yesterday. He seemed amused, and you may be sure I said nothing amusing.”

It wasn't at all like Harry to do a thing like that. As for his farewell, she didn't take that seriously.

Mr. Lannard was promptly informed of the

“joke” that evening, Muriel’s mother being pleased at any opportunity of discrediting the young man.

“It looks perfectly regular,” he said. “Bacon is playing a dangerous sort of joke. I’ll see the bank about it to-morrow.”

But the following day more disturbing reports from his factory manager drove the matter from his mind until his wife telephoned.

“Hadn’t we better drop it?” he suggested. But the fact that he rather liked young Bacon and hesitated to get him into trouble only made her more insistent. So with some reluctance Mr. Lannard went to the bank.

“This check—” he said, handing it to the president. “I’ve come to ask about it.”

The president glanced at it.

“What about it?” he asked pleasantly.

“Do you know the young man?”

“Certainly,” responded the banker calmly.

“The check’s perfectly good.”

“But—but——” stammered Lannard, now greatly agitated. “Has Bacon so much money



E. McCutcheon

"Bacon is playing a dangerous sort of joke."

that he can afford to give this large sum to charity?"

The president looked grave.

"You understand, Lannard, that I can not discuss our clients' affairs. It is enough to say that the check is quite good."

Mr. Lannard hurried back to his office and telephoned his wife.

"The bank reports that Bacon's check is good. I'm perfectly amazed!"

The excitement at the other end of the wire was electric. Mrs. Lannard was stunned. It was she who proposed that her daughter send at once for Mr. Bacon. There had been some unbelievable misunderstanding.

Mr. Lannard departed from his usual custom of spending the afternoon playing bridge at the club and hurried home to find his wife and daughter in a highly wrought state of emotion. Muriel was accusing her mother of having offended Harry Bacon so outrageously that he was practically driven from the house.

"Nonsense, child! I simply repeated what

you have told him yourself—that you had no intention of marrying him.”

Then turning abruptly she asked:

“What does it mean, Edward? The bank says his check is good. How does it happen that he has money enough to give such a large sum to charity?”

“It’s quite mystifying,” answered Mr. Lannard. “I talked with Virden, the president of the bank. He merely said the check was good, but when I tried to get further details he froze up. Bank ethics, you know.”

“Has he been speculating successfully or”—here she shot a glance at her daughter—“is he in some crooked business?”

“Mother! How can you say such a thing? You know Harry has never done a thing that warrants you in making such an insinuation.”

Mr. Lannard interposed.

“He’s evidently all right. Virden’s attitude convinced me of that. He’s probably made a successful stock deal of some sort, although

where he got the money to margin it is beyond me."

"Well, if he got it speculating," said Mrs. Lannard, "he won't have it long. I'm going out now."

She paused in the doorway as a thought struck her.

"Perhaps, Muriel, you would feel better if you talked with the young man."

"But, mother, he won't come back after the way you treated him."

"Oh, yes, he will. Blame it on me if you wish. Tell him I was suffering from a severe headache. I have no doubt he will tell you all about his financial windfall—if you go about it cleverly."

Having planted these suggestions, Mrs. Lannard departed, serene in the belief that Bacon would be camped on the door-step when she returned.

Muriel acted quickly. She at once called up the office where he was employed. A quiet voice reported that Mr. Bacon had resigned

two days before and had not been in the office since.

At the house where he roomed a less quiet voice reported that Mr. Bacon had given up his room and had left no forwarding address.

It was all most mysterious. After an agitated half-hour at the telephone she had exhausted every avenue of communication. He had vanished completely.

CHAPTER III

THIS realization brought her a poignant sense of loss. Her vanity also suffered. If Harry Bacon had been there at that moment his suit would have prospered.

Instead he was seated in the private office of one of the trustees of his estate. For several days he had spent similar hours being initiated into the ramifications of what had been his uncle's property.

While thus engaged he encountered in the long list of holdings a name that commanded instant attention.

The Lannard Steel Mills—forty thousand shares!

“What's that?” he exclaimed.

“Your uncle made considerable investments in steel properties,” answered the trustee, “but,

with the exception of this holding, all have been converted into other securities."

"Why did he retain this?"

"Since the period of war prosperity it has declined so much in market value that he was unwilling to sell until better prices prevailed. Mr. Lannard formerly gave his personal attention to the property. Of late he has delegated the management to others and has spent his time in the city, largely engrossed in social pursuits. The property has suffered. There is bitter discontent among his workmen and, consequently, constant labor difficulties."

"How many shares of stock are there in all?" asked Bacon.

"One hundred thousand, of which Mr. and Mrs. Lannard hold fifty-one thousand, unless they have been obliged to let some of them go."

Bacon thought for a moment.

"I wish you would endeavor to get as many additional shares as you can," he said quietly. "And do it in a way that my name does not appear in the transaction."

“It can be done by the estate,” said the trustee, “but you would do well to avoid getting deeper in a property that is on the down grade.”

“I believe in steel,” answered Harry, “and the time to buy is when the stock is down. A steel company that is well run is bound to prosper—or else this country will go broke.”

Mrs. Lannard observed with alarm that her daughter was idealizing the absent Harry Bacon as a broken-hearted victim of unrequited love. The glamour about that rôle might prove fatal to her own plan of marrying her daughter to a title.

She must solve the mystery of Bacon’s check.

Finally a newspaper item gave her a clue. “Dempsey’s share was three hundred thousand dollars.”

Why, of course! Here was the answer. Here also was the means of destroying Muriel’s romantic fancies. She brought up the subject that evening.

“I believe I’ve discovered the secret source of Mr. Bacon’s surprising check.”

Muriel was instantly attentive.

“Haven’t I heard you say he was a champion pugilist in college?”

“He was the best boxer—he wasn’t a professional, of course. But why?”

“Well, I happened to think to-day that pugilists receive very large sums for a single fight.” She paused impressively. “I believe Bacon is doing professional fighting under an assumed name!”

Muriel gasped.

“He’s doubtless ashamed,” her mother went on, “and knows you would be. So, between you and the money to be made prize-fighting”—she emphasized the words—“he chose the latter.”

Panic-stricken, Muriel defended her friend.

“But, mother, that’s an honest way to earn money. Some fighters are fine men.”

“Muriel! It’s a brutal profession.”

“You were crazy about Carpentier!”

“Ah, he was a gallant Frenchman, with a *croix de guerre*. He was received into society. Our American prize-fighters—they are impossible!”

A flash of fighting spirit rose in the girl.

“Mother, what a snob you are! You think everything with a European tag on it is better than our own. You would have been a royalist when George Washington and his army were in rags and tatters——”

“Muriel!” remonstrated her father.

She burst into angry tears and fled from the room.

“Do you really think young Bacon got his money that way?” Mr. Lannard asked his wife.

“Of course I don’t know,” she said, “but it’s a plausible explanation, and, at any rate, it will cure Muriel.”

And she was right. To a girl of Muriel’s social standards, being wife of “‘Kid’ Bacon, the prize-fighter,” as her mother contemptuously taunted, could not appeal.

And her mother urged: “You have the great

opportunity of becoming a countess of an old and distinguished Russian family. Shall it be Countess Kolnokoff or Mrs. 'Kid' Bacon?"

Muriel was sick with indecision. She didn't love the count, but she was conscious of his social charm. A life of idleness in European capitals, familiarity with the polite arts of society, long experience with women had given him the superficial graces which make the European of his class superior in love-phrasing and love-making to the young American who has not made it a study or a pastime.

Finally, piqued by Harry Bacon's continued neglect, and driven by ceaseless maneuvers of her mother, Muriel Lannard accepted the proposal of Count Boris Kolnokoff.

Then followed prolonged ante-nuptial discussions. The count demanded that a certain sum be settled upon him, to which proposal Mr. Lannard demurred. He had no ready money. The demands of the steel mills had obliged him to borrow to the limit of his resources.

“But I have ten thousand shares of the mill stock,” argued his wife.

“We can’t let that get out of our hands!” exclaimed Mr. Lannard. “They are necessary to our control of the business. We have only fifty-one thousand shares—a bare majority.”

“But, settled on the count, they would still be in the family for voting purposes.”

“Can’t we persuade him to wait for a settlement till business conditions are better?” he asked.

“I’m afraid not. It’s the European custom, you know. We have to conform to it.”

Mr. Lannard did not answer, but she saw by the tightened lips that he would not consent to parting with any stock that might jeopardize his control of the mills. Meantime Muriel, sickened by the sordid commercialism of the whole transaction, was a prey to alternating fits of depression and flattered vanity. How her girl friends would envy the Countess Kolnokoff! And the family relations back in

Adamant and Somber City, Pennsylvania—how impressed they would be!

Finally the wedding date was set for a time some weeks ahead, and to satisfy the count's insistent demands, Mrs. Lannard agreed to turn over to him just before the wedding her ten thousand shares of Lannard Steel. She exacted his promise that this agreement be kept a secret between them until such a time as she should later indicate.

It was more property than the count had dreamed of since the "good old days of the czar," when a large income came from the toil of the patient drudges who worked the family estates—estates conferred by Catherine the Great on a handsome favorite.

While the Lannards were struggling with the arrangements preliminary to the marriage of Muriel Lannard to Count Boris Kolnokoff, Harry Bacon had put many leagues between himself and that family.

Before leaving, he gave the manager of his

estate a private telegraphic code, as well as certain explicit directions.

“I’ll probably communicate with you before long,” he added, “but do not worry if you don’t hear. Meanwhile, try to pick up as much Lannard Steel as you can.”

A few hours later he was driving his second-hand Ford along the Jersey roads. His attire was that of a workman, and included a cap and an army shirt. In his coat lapel was a service button.

He carried a sum of money in a wallet, which he kept in the inside pocket of his coat. Beneath his vest was another and much larger sum.

It was his first move in the plan of action which for some time had been revolving in his mind. His eyes were glowing as he faced the late afternoon sun, and if the slightest ache of disappointed love lurked in his heart there was no sign of it in his face. The rhythmic throb of the motor conduced to reflectiveness.

“Here I am,” he thought, “suddenly deluged by a huge fortune. Most men unused to money are ruined by sudden riches. I wonder if I will be an exception? If I lose my head I am gone.

“Many young men in my position would start in and get as much action on the money as possible—a yacht, a town and country house, de luxe automobiles, a racing stable, two or three scandals, a few breach of promise suits, and wind up with a staggering bill for alimony. There would be a thousand greedy vultures on my trail. I could never tell who were my real friends. I couldn’t marry a girl without fearing it was not me, but my money that she wanted.

“One thing sure, I’m going to keep this fortune a secret as long as I can. On the other hand, my agent would like to see me settle down and double the estate. Not for me. Why get caught on the treadmill of money making? That disease is worse than not having anything.”

Ahead of him, walking wearily along the road, was a man. Bacon slowed down.

“Want a ride?” he called.

“Sure,” answered the man, climbing in. “I’ve hiked about a thousand kilometers since noon and my ‘dogs’ are beginning to fret.”

He was somewhat over thirty, shabbily dressed, and with trembling hands.

“Now, if I had a cigarette I’d be happy.”

Bacon produced one, and asked:

“How far you going?”

“No particular objective. A man named Greeley advised me to go west, and beyond that I haven’t plotted out my itinerary.”

“Are you a college professor?”

The man laughed.

“Nope. I’m what you might call a hobo. I’m a wayfarer who has lost his way.”

Before Harry could reply the stranger seized the initiative.

“Where are you bound for?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m out on the trail of a job.”

“Do you always go job hunting in your

car?" inquired the stranger with exaggerated politeness.

"You're a queer bird," answered Harry. "Are you broke?"

"One hundred per cent. If rubles were down to a dollar a million, I couldn't scare up a kopeck."

They rode on in silence for a time. At length Bacon said:

"I think I can help you if you stick along with me."

"Thank you, brother. I'm the Le Page brothers. I'll stick."

Darkness overtook them as they drove into a little town. Running the car into the yard of a small, ill-favored hotel, the two men presently asked for a room.

The hotel-keeper sized them up suspiciously.

"Our terms are two dollars—in advance," he announced, unpleasantly.

Bacon drew out his wallet and extracted two one dollar bills from an impressive roll.

The attitude of the hotel-keeper became in-

stantly obsequious. As for the stranger, his eyes bulged as he saw the size and color of the roll.

After a miserable meal the two men were shown to a double room, where the stranger soon was in bed.

Bacon spent a few moments writing on a slip of paper, which he thrust into his wallet. He then flung his coat on a chair and was presently fast asleep.

The stranger lay awake, staring up into the darkness.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Harry Bacon woke up daylight was streaming through the window. He looked across to the bed whereon the shabby stranger had rested the night before. It was empty.

“Poor devil, I guess the temptation was too great for him. Perhaps I was wrong to subject him to it.”

Leisurely Bacon arose and looked into the pocket of his coat where the night before he had placed the wallet containing a sum of money and a folded slip of paper.

As he suspected, both were gone.

That slip of paper was destined to give his absent companion food for bitter thought.

By the dim light in a stuffy east-bound day coach he discovered it, and, as he read, his amazement grew.

To My Companion of To-day:

You have made a great mistake in stealing my wallet. I hoped you would be strong enough to withstand the temptation. It was my way of determining whether you had character and could be relied upon. I liked you and helped you. You repay me with ingratitude and dishonesty. They say opportunity knocks at every man's door at least once in a lifetime. Opportunity knocked on your door to-day, although you did not know it. There is nothing I could not have done for you in a material way. But I could not remake your character. You now have my money. Keep it and use it as you wish, for I shall not endeavor to recover it. The fleeting pleasure it gives you will be a small return for the golden happiness your ingratitude has cost you.

Yours very truly,

HARRY L. RASHER.

The shabby stranger, now trembling with a curious agitation, read and reread the letter. He felt he was dreaming, but as he furtively examined the wallet and counted the money the reality of the situation was impressed upon him. There were the green and yellow bank

notes—nearly three hundred dollars in all. Yet for some reason the joy of possession was gone. “Harry L. Rasher? Harry L. Rasher?” he repeated to himself. “It sounds vaguely familiar. Where have I heard it before?”

He stared unseeing out of the car window into the blackness as the haunting name ran through his thoughts. He groped in his memory for clues, and it was not until a long time had passed that a queer look of enlightenment flashed in his eyes.

“Harry L. Rasher! Haroun-al-Raschid!” he exclaimed. “That’s the name I was reminded of. Have I run across a reincarnated Haroun? A man who can calmly let me run off with a large sum of money!”

His heart was full of bitterness. Yes, it was just his luck to make a mess of the only good chance that had come his way for many months. The worst of it was that he could not find Rasher to return the money, and, even if he did return it, his motives in doing so would always have been open to suspicion.

He reached New York in the forenoon and plunged into a reckless round of dissipation and forgetfulness.

Henry Livingston Bacon, now traveling under his newly assumed name of Harry L. Rasher, continued westward in his flivver and at nightfall entered the town of Adamant, Pennsylvania, where he put up at a cheap hotel.

From his window he looked out upon the flaming chimneys of the Lannard Steel Mills and heard the subdued roar of the ponderous machinery as it worked on through the night.

Before he went to bed he took out a little note-book and wrote down two words:

Snobbishness.

Ingratitude.

Before the latter he put a check mark.

The next morning he went out to see if Adamant was well named.

He saw a depressing picture. Sodden streets and sodden people. A murky pall of smoke

hung over the huddled shacks and the grimy buildings of the steel plant. Unfamiliar as he was with conditions in industrial towns, he sensed the absence of enlightened management, of conscientious efforts to brighten the living conditions of the workers.

The great mills and the sullen toiling thousands seemed to exist only for the purpose of maintaining the dividends necessary to maintain the luxurious scale of living of the Lannard family in New York.

There was no sense of brotherhood between the mills and the workers.

Industrial strife was inevitable.

Rasher stopped to talk to a gateman, who was only too ready to express himself.

“It’s a great property,” said he, “but they’re running it in the ground. Old Lannard don’t give his attention to it. A lot of grafting managers run it for him, and there’s no love lost between the workers and the plant. Nothing but strikes here for months, and if something ain’t done to modernize the mills they’ll bu’st.

Between the bull-headed manager and the bunch of labor agitators the mills are on the toboggan."

Rasher resolved to discover the grievances of the workers, and to do this he must become one of them.

A short time later he was in the ante-room of the manager of the plant. A young woman at a desk asked his business.

"I'm looking for a job."

"In what department?"

Rasher was suddenly conscious that she had kindly eyes—the first cheerful impression he had experienced since arriving in Adamant.

"Any department," he replied. "I'm not a skilled steel worker, but I must have work."

Her eyes rested for an instant on his service button, and after a moment of hesitation she said she would ask if the manager, who never saw job hunters, would make an exception in his case.

"That's a real girl," reflected Rasher as he

waited. "How she ever preserved her cheerfulness in these surroundings is beyond me."

"I'm sorry," she announced, reappearing, "but he will not see you."

"Don't they need men here?" he asked. "I understood they did."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Did you tell him I'm an ex-service man who is willing to work and strong enough to work?"

She smiled faintly. "Yes, I did. But he said he wouldn't see you. I'm sorry. Perhaps if you try one of the foremen ——"

A buzzer sounded, but before she could answer it the manager, a hard-faced man with sharp, steely eyes, came out. He shot an ill-natured glance at Rasher, and then turned arrogantly to his secretary.

"I think I told you, Miss Brook, that I am not to be disturbed by job hunters. You ought to know that by this time."

The girl, humiliated, said nothing.

Ignoring the manager, Rasher spoke to the girl:

“I want to thank you for your efforts in my behalf. And I’m sorry if I have caused you any trouble.”

He turned to go.

The manager flushed angrily. “Hold on, young man. That kind o’ stuff won’t get you anywhere if you want to work in this plant.”

Rasher controlled his temper. “I’m a stranger here. I don’t know your rules and I had no intention of disregarding them. I wanted a job and naturally came to the man who could give it to me if he wanted to.”

The manager paused, his anger suddenly arrested by an idea. “Come into my office,” he said shortly. Shutting the door, he continued: “You look like an intelligent man, and if you are intelligent I can use you. Do you know anybody here?”

“Not a soul.”

“Are you a union man?”

“No. I’m not a skilled worker and don’t think I could get into a union.”

“Are you willing to make some money?”

“Certainly. That’s what I’m after. I want a job.”

“I think I can use you if you are willing to follow my instructions.”

“What do you want me to do?”

The manager then outlined the work he wished done, while Rasher, boiling inwardly, listened without betraying the slightest emotion.

“You say you don’t know anybody here and don’t belong to a union. Good. You will suit my purpose exactly if you have sense enough to keep your mouth shut and do as I tell you.”

“I sure want a job,” Rasher answered.

“All right. This won’t be hard work either. All I want you to do is to go round among the men and find what they’re talking about. My own men are too well known, and, as for getting one of the workmen, I wouldn’t trust ’em. They would either double-cross me or else feed me on the kind of dope they think I want to hear. Besides,” he added bitterly, “they wouldn’t stay bought.”

His eyes, hard as the steel he had worked with, rested for a gloomy moment on the factory chimneys seen through the window. Several were idle.

“We’ve had no end of trouble in this plant. There’s a bunch of crooks here that pull a strike for no reason at all. They want me to hand ’em a bunch of coin. Nothing doing! I’ll fight ’em and I’ll smash ’em!” His fist struck the table savagely. “I’ll show ’em who’s running this plant!”

The manager was now talking more to himself than to Rasher, who judged that long sustained labor conflicts had so warped his thoughts into one groove that he could think of nothing else. How else could be explained his talkativeness to a stranger?

Rasher’s mind was working swiftly. The work outlined for him was repugnant, and yet for his purposes it might prove to be the one thing most desired. It would enable him to learn something of both sides and why it was

that affairs in this particular steel plant had been so badly run.

The points of view of both employers and employees were essential to a fair understanding of the situation.

As for acting the part of a spy in the workers' camp, he made a strong mental reservation. Whatever he did was to be for the ultimate good of both the workers and the plant.

"As I get it," he finally said, "you want me to mix with the men, get all the dope, and report to you?"

"That's it," said the manager. "I'll shift you about in the various departments, and, mind you, if you try to put anything over on me you'll never want to do it twice."

"I'm willing to try it, though I won't promise anything." He emphasized these words. "I'm a stranger. They may not talk before me."

"It will take a little time and," the manager smiled, "a little moonshine. Then they'll talk all right."

It was settled that Rasher should begin work as a truck driver.

“You are not to come here with your reports unless I send for you,” said the manager. “I’ll arrange to have you deliver them to my secretary at her home. You must not be seen around here more than necessary.”

He then rang for his secretary.

“Miss Brook, this man is to go on as a truck driver,” he announced. “He will make some special reports for me and deliver them at your house. Add his name to the pay-roll.”

“What is the name, please?” asked the secretary.

“Harry L. Rasher.”

The name struck her as vaguely familiar. It arrested her attention for a brief instant, after which Rasher spelled it out. No, she must be mistaken, she thought. She had never seen that name before.

Rasher made a mental note that he would take an early occasion to report to her. She

was the only ray of sunshine he had yet found in the Lannard Steel Mills.

That night he installed himself in a laborer's boarding-house and the next morning early he reported for work.

Thus he began the rôle he was to enact in the dissension-torn affairs of the plant, a rôle which was destined to reach a dramatic climax.

CHAPTER V

HARRY L. RASHER, hair clipped close up to the top of his head, where a heavy black thatch remained, began as a truck driver in the Lanard steel mills. His work took him to the various departments of the plant and at times across the river to Somber City and its coal yards.

At night, dog tired, he returned to a laborer's boarding-house. In common with the other day workers, a lunch was put up for him each morning by an over-worked harassed landlady in whom, for some strange reason, the milk of human kindness had not entirely soured.

Three of his fellow boarders were Americans, the rest were of various races broadly classified as "hunkies." The latter spoke little or no English. They appeared at their meals, silent and tired, and then disappeared to bed or

to their twelve-hour night shift. An air of sullen resignation marked them at all times. In their eyes Rasher could see no trace of sunlight.

By degrees he became acquainted with those who spoke English. He noticed that they did not inquire into his past. The fact that he had arrived in town in a battered Ford, which he later sold for eighty-five dollars, was particularly a matter not to be closely inquired into!

He himself talked little until he had acquired some of the tricks of language common to his associates, and thus avoided emphasizing the superiority of his education.

The knowledge that he could quit at any moment and go back to the refinements and luxuries of civilization made it possible for him to endure with cheerfulness what others endured resentfully from grim necessity.

During the brief times of leisure between work and sleep he frequented a smoky, ill-smelling pool room. Here, stimulated by poisonous mixtures, the men talked, and Rasher began to learn something of their grievances.

He contrasted their lot with that of the Lannards in New York, negotiating for a title for their daughter. No wonder they did not live in Adamant, where the sights would tend to cloud their gaiety!

After Rasher had been at work for two weeks he addressed in a scrawly, feminine hand a number of soiled envelopes, which he sent to the trustee of his estate. "When you communicate with me, use one of these," he instructed, and asked for a full account of the next directors' meeting of the Lannard Steel Company. Mr. Lannard had been informed that the forty thousand shares, although left to a relative in the West, would continue to be voted by the trustee, as formerly—an arrangement that was satisfactory to him.

At the end of his third week Harry L. Rasher wrote his first report for James Stabb, manager of the mills, and took it one evening to the home of his secretary, Miss Brook.

The house was an old-fashioned brick one, up on the hill overlooking the great mills,

which sprawled, black and grimy, along the river's edge. Bordering the brick walk, under venerable trees now bare of leaves, were the remnants of flower beds which were doubtless cheerful patches of color in summer. The place bore the look of faded gentility common to old houses whose original occupants have been replaced by others in much more moderate circumstances.

He was admitted by a sweet-faced elderly woman with tired eyes and shown into the parlor. The furniture dated back many years, the carpets were worn but clean, and a fresh neatness marked the simple white curtains. Two old-fashioned family portraits hung on the wall. As Rasher waited he was conscious of a keen eagerness to see again the girl whose face had struck him as being the one ray of sunshine in the entire steel plant.

A photograph on the mantel arrested Rasher's attention. It was one of Mrs. Lannard evidently taken years ago. He was regarding it curiously when Miss Brook came in.

As she recognized him her eyes lost their friendliness.

As he handed her his report she made no effort to disguise her contempt, and in the strained silence that followed he realized that he was not expected to prolong his stay. Embarrassed and ashamed, he awkwardly withdrew.

From the disappointment he now felt, he realized how eagerly he had looked forward to seeing her—how much the prospect of association with her had influenced him in undertaking the distasteful work of a spy among the workmen. Even the consciousness that this work was designed to help clear the troubled atmosphere in the relations between employers and employed did not lessen his present humiliation.

Perhaps the manager's secretary felt a little of the same disappointment. She had hoped better things of this young man with the honest-appearing face.

For a long time she sat before her window,

looking down on the sprawling mills along the river's edge, the huddled shacks that crouched on the slopes, and reflecting on the discontent and ill-feeling that had grown so strong among the Lannard Steel employees. Why, she wondered, could not masters and men live and work together in peace and harmony instead of poisoning their lives with strife and hatred? Who was at fault? The ones who ordered or the ones who obeyed? Oh, that some one could find the magic cure for this distressing sore that was slowly and surely killing the Lannard Mills!

Next morning she delivered Rasher's unopened envelope to the manager and was requested to put it in typewritten form. As she read the report her astonishment grew.

"Dear Sir: I herewith submit my report. In the three weeks during which I have collected the material from which I draw these conclusions I have talked with men in every department. These conversations convince me that the essential obstacle to harmony in the plant is the deep hostility the workers feel toward

you. They regard your attitude as narrow, unsympathetic, and overbearing. They quote so many instances to support this belief that I could not escape, if I wished, the conviction that their grievances are well founded. Anything they want you are against.

“It would seem that a friendlier and more tolerant attitude on your part would cure most of the difficulties. Your entire code, as they see it, is one of unyielding domination; your own watchword is ‘Smash ’em!’ They regard your tactics as old-fashioned—not belonging to these times. My impression is that harmony in these mills can never be secured as long as you and your theories of management are in control. I have not heard a good word spoken of you in three weeks. They consider this plant the worst managed of any they have worked in.

“Respectfully submitted,

“HARRY L. RASHER.”

It was some minutes before Miss Brook recovered from her surprise. The report put into words so many things she had longed to say herself, but dared not. It revived at once her respect for and a very keen interest in the young man whose name reminded her so much of Haroun-al-Raschid. Who was he, that he

could write a report indicative of education and unusual boldness?

She laid the typewritten sheets before Mr. Stabb and retired in anticipation of a storm. As she expected the buzzer soon rasped impatiently.

She was startled by the surging wrath in the manager's face. Bloodshot eyes and purple veins swollen to bursting! His hands were clutching and unclutching in a frenzy of rage.

"Send for this man!" he shouted.

Miss Brook left hastily to execute his order. She was happier than she had been for months.

Rasher appeared in course of time; his expression, naturally pleasant, became very cheerful when he observed the renewed friendliness in her eyes.

"The manager wishes to see you," she said in a tone that carried "good luck to you." And then she did a thing that surprised her when she afterward thought of it.

"Be careful! I'm afraid he's very angry,"

she cautioned as he serenely walked into the lion's den. And as he did so Miss Brook was suddenly aware of a distinct interest in him. In spite of her warning, he had betrayed no anxiety. Presently he would come out, pale and terrified, as she had seen so many others. She had something of the feeling of one who watches a Christian martyr going in among the lions.

Rasher closed the door and stood before the manager.

“You sent for me, sir?”

The manager glanced up and then resumed working. It was part of his strategy to keep his victims waiting. Ten minutes usually reduced the stoutest to a state of nervous panic. But when, at the end of this time, Rasher's face continued serene the manager's smoldering anger exploded. He snatched up a typewritten page and waved it menacingly at the young man.

“You damned ungrateful pup! What do

you mean by sending me this insulting report?" He smashed the desk with his fist. "That's what I get for hiring one of you crooks."

Rasher started to speak.

"Don't deny it!" shouted Stabb. "I've got your number. I know you came here in an auto and sold it for eighty-five dollars. Don't tell me you didn't steal it."

"I didn't steal it," answered Rasher quietly.

"Rot! What do you think I am? Of course you stole it, and now you lie about it. But I'm having you investigated." Here he shook a threatening finger while narrowly watching Rasher's face for the betraying start of guilt.

But when Rasher showed no signs of guilty nervousness the manager concluded he must be either a remarkably clever crook or as honest as he looked. To Mr. Stabb all men were crooked until proved straight.

He rose and paced angrily back and forth, clenching and unclenching his hands. Certain features of the case complicated his course of action. A subconscious instinct warned him



"Of course you stole it, and now you lie about it."

against discharging Rasher at once, for Rasher's pleasant face and agreeable manners, he had learned, had won for him many friends in the plant. And, besides, he knew that Rasher's report of his unpopularity was true.

Consequently it might be poor politics to discharge him without a very good reason. Denouncing him as a spy would discredit Rasher sufficiently, but also reveal the fact that he, Stabb, made a practise of employing spies. He could not afford to stir up new depths of resentment among the men.

These things called for discretion. He must—and could—give them cool judgment. But there was another angle of which he could not think coolly. Rasher's report in which the manager's dignity and vanity had been so harshly assailed, had been read by Miss Brook, in whom he had more than an official interest. To tolerate this criticism would, he thought, weaken him in the esteem of that young lady. He turned savagely toward the serene Rasher.

“Well, what are you standing there for? What have you got to say for yourself?”

“You wanted me to report what the men were saying. I’ve tried to do that—leaving out the profanity.”

Mr. Stabb’s eyes narrowed.

“You talk as though you agreed with them!”

“Absolutely!”

“What! Why, you infernal whelp! Do you realize what you’re saying?” He strode threateningly toward Rasher.

“Mr. Stabb, in the half-hour I’ve been here you’ve demonstrated the truth of every statement in the report.

“Your display of temper toward me, an employee, explains their hostility. You ask me to do the dirty work of a spy among them and then curse me for honestly reporting what I hear. That proves you are narrow and overbearing. You try to frighten me. That shows you are domineering. You call me a thief and a liar without giving me a chance to defend myself. That shows you are unjust.”

Mr. Stabb glared. "I didn't say you stole the car. I said I thought you stole it—and I do."

"You said I stole it, Mr. Stabb."

"What! You mean to say I lie!" His voice was raised to a pitch. He saw red. Never in his experience had he been talked to like this. With an oath he rushed at Rasher and swung heavily at him.

The next instant he was on the floor, his senses dazed. Confusedly he saw Rasher standing, unruffled, a few feet away, and heard his calm voice:

"Will you want me any more to-day, Mr. Stabb?"

The latter, before whose anger men had trembled, arose slowly and sank into a chair. He was breathing heavily. Something inside of him had broken—something that was not physical. He gazed uncertainly at Rasher, who bowed politely and left the room.

In the outer office Miss Brook's eyes were shining with surprise and relief.

“Goodness! You’re still smiling! Aren’t you discharged?”

“I’m not sure,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

That night in his room Harry L. Rasher took out his little book and added another word to the two already there. He then checked it off:

Snobbishness.

X Ingratitude.

X Arrogance.

CHAPTER VI

“You surprised me,” said Mary Brook, as she and Harry L. Rasher slowly climbed the hill road toward her home. “I was certain you would come out of Mr. Stabb’s office a complete wreck. If you knew him as I do, you would be surprised, too. He must have been furious with you.”

“Oh, we had some words. At first he was mad, but before I left he had quieted down.”

“Well, it’s a miracle, that’s all.” She looked up into his eyes. “And he didn’t even discharge you?”

“To tell the truth, I’m not sure.” With a quizzical smile he abruptly changed the subject: “Have you worked here very long?”

She hesitated a moment before replying. To him she was only one of the workers, a cog in a big machine, and of course his question was a natural one.

“This is the only place I have ever worked,” she answered.

“Is this your home?”

“I was born here.”

“But how in the world have you kept your cheerfulness—in the face of all this?”

He pointed to a row of grimy houses, depressingly shabby and as colorless as the mud in the yards. A few windows had white curtains, making a brave but pitiful fight against the squalid surroundings.

“These people are all my friends,” she said simply.

A shrill whistle sounded in a yard ahead. “That’s a signal,” she exclaimed, her eyes shining. “Now see what happens.”

A group of dirty children charged out of a gate and, farther ahead, from each gateway, other children of assorted sizes came rushing out to the sidewalk. They waved their hands to Miss Brook. Rasher noted their wide-eyed admiration, now somewhat restrained because of him.

"These are my friends," she said. "They do this every morning and every evening."

"They must love you."

"They would love anybody who treats them kindly."

"They don't seem unhappy," he remarked, indicating the smiling faces.

"That's because they are children," Miss Brook answered. "It's natural for children to be happy if they are not actually suffering. They don't know any life but this. The little ones hardly ever see their fathers, and when they do their fathers are too dog tired to feel like playing with them."

"Why do you stay here?" Rasher asked. "Wouldn't you be happier in more cheerful surroundings? You could get a position any place."

She flushed uncomfortably. She was disappointed that he could ask the question. When she answered there was reproof in her tone.

"Perhaps I may find some happiness in helping these poor children to be happy."

“I’m sorry,” he hastened to say. “I think you are wonderful, Miss Brook. It’s wonderful that there are people in the world like you. Most people, I’m afraid, like to get away from sights that are unpleasant.”

At that moment the thoughts of both Mary Brook and Harry Rasher flashed to the Lannards, steeped in the luxury of fashionable New York life. No sight of drab drudgery clouded their happiness. They did not have to see the silent files of men going or returning from their twelve-hour shift in the winter darkness of early morning or evening.

“The president of the mills—he doesn’t live here, does he?” asked Rasher.

She had the feeling he had read her thoughts.

“No.”

“Does he ever visit the mills?”

Again she paused, but attributing his inquisitiveness to a natural curiosity, she found herself answering without resentment.

“Very seldom. I think he may be coming here before long, however. His daughter,

Miss Lannard, is to be married, and before she goes abroad the family is to come here for a day."

Rasher was staring straight ahead. Many questions rushed to his lips, but he forbore voicing them. A procession of memories paraded in his thoughts, and it was some time before he ventured to speak.

"Is she attractive?" he asked, so solemnly that Miss Brook burst out laughing.

"She's very pretty," she said, at last. "No one can deny that Muriel is pretty."

"You know her?" Rasher exclaimed, stopping.

"Yes, I know her," she answered, with a queer smile.

Rasher's walk with Mary Brook was the first of many. When his hours of work permitted he went with her up the long hill to her gateway, where he said good night and turned back to his boarding-house with its smell of grease and stale tobacco smoke.

If the secretary to the manager felt a differ-

ence in their station she gave no sign. She accepted him at his face value—a pleasant young man about whom there was a glamour of mystery.

“Are you wise in seeing so much of him?” asked her mother. “You don’t know anything about him, do you?”

“No, mother, hardly anything, but I’m convinced he’s decent and honest. I like him and believe in him”—an answer that increased rather than allayed her mother’s concern.

Rasher’s acceptance into the full fellowship of friendship came when she asked if he would care to go with her to visit some of the poor families she was helping.

“You will see the insides of the lives many of these people live,” she said. Together they went, and in time he began to share with her, though to a lesser degree, their kindly regards.

Mysterious events followed these visits.

Mrs. Levinsky, distressed to a shadow by the illness of one of her seven children, was made

happy by an unexpected visit from a strange doctor who effected a cure and asked no pay.

The little Rashky girl, condemned by a tedious illness to a miserable bed overlooking a muddy courtyard, was restored to health by the same unknown doctor.

Old Biskoff, broken down after years of service, was amazed one day to find near his door-step a purse containing considerable money, the owner of which could not be found.

Gradually there grew among the people of the mills a curious, half superstitious belief in Harry Rasher. By mysterious means which baffled understanding his personality became invested in their simple minds with strange attributes.

“Do you know,” said Mary Brook one day, “they are beginning to look upon you as a symbol of good fortune. Why? You never give them anything or help them much.”

Rasher shrugged his shoulders.

“I’d like to do a lot for them—if I could,” he answered. “They are so grateful. Mrs.

Levinsky offered to patch my coat to-day, and yesterday when my room rent was overdue the landlady whispered that if I was hard up not to worry about the rent."

Miss Brook noted the worn coat and her eyes softened. It was the only one she had ever seen him wear. He must be very poor. She had an impulse to supplement Mrs. Levinsky's kind offer, but feared she might wound his pride.

Impressions spread swiftly in a community whose interests are bound up in a single concern. Workmen began quietly observing Rasher. From their families came queer stories about the good luck that followed his visits.

These stories soon reached Mr. Stabb. Ever since the day when, his head still swimming from the blow Rasher had struck, he had seen his secretary and the truck driver go off together he had nursed a double grievance. That he had not discharged the man was something he could not explain even to himself.

Now, however, Mr. Stabb determined to act. Rasher must be got out of town before his hold upon the imagination of the people became a menace. But first he must be discredited, humiliated, and stripped of his glamour. Mr. Stabb sent for a man who had in the past executed many devious commissions for him.

“Tony,” he said, “you know this man Rasher who drives a truck?”

“Sure,” answered Tony; “he loafs around the Popular Pool Room in the evenings. A quiet duck.”

“Well,” said Mr. Stabb, “there’s something queer about him. I don’t know what he’s up to, but I believe he’s dangerous. He must be run out of town.”

“What you say goes,” remarked Tony confidently. “That bird will be glad to get out of town before I’m through with him.”

CHAPTER VII

THE morning after Mr. Stabb talked with Tony Romisky, a note was thrust into the hand of Harry L. Rasher by a boy who ran away quickly.

“Look out big tony romisky say hill get yu and chas you outa town. Keep yur eyse open tonys a bad man. A friend.”

Rasher studied the note. It was written on a soiled piece of wrapping paper and unaddressed. Evidently the boy had been told where and to whom it must be delivered, for he had chosen a time and place where the act was unobserved.

“Well,” thought Rasher; “let’s figure this out. Stabb must have sicked Romisky on me. I can’t think of anybody else who has a reason

for wanting me run out of town. But why Romisky?"

Romisky was the leader of a considerable element of the workmen and was supposed to be a bitter foe of the company. He had been pointed out to Rasher soon after the latter had begun work in the plant.

"That's Tony Romisky. He's the big boss among the men. What he says goes. If anybody disputes him, that guy's outta luck. Nobody roun' here gets gay with Tony."

Romisky's word was law, and by domineering leadership, as well as a powerful physique, he compelled obedience to his rule. Rasher had often observed the hushed awe his occasional appearance produced at the Popular Pool Room. He was a big man with a thick neck, and when in good humor had a certain robust joviality that appealed to his followers. At other times, his face was the incarnation of brutality.

By evening Rasher had received three other notes in the same vein. He was pleased by the

thought that he had friends here who were concerned about him. At his boarding-house a fellow workman took him aside.

“Say, I understand Tony Romisky is after you. Don’t know what for, but I just thought I’d tip it off to you. Look out for him. Tony’s a nasty man to have against you.”

It was Rasher’s usual custom to go to the Popular Pool Room after supper, for there he heard much of the grievances of the men. It was their only club-room, thick with cheap tobacco smoke, and often noisy with the intemperate words of men inflamed by the proprietor’s moonshine. But this evening he did not go. Instead he wrote a letter to his trustee in New York and sent it special delivery.

“Send at once all information concerning a labor leader here named Tony Romisky. His name has doubtless come up in the directors’ meeting of the Lannard Steel Company. Use one of the envelopes I sent you.”

The next day while doing his routes with the truck as usual, three different men quietly

warned him that Tony Romisky was looking for him and there was trouble in the air. One advised him to go while the going was good.

“You’d better beat it, kid. Take it from me, the sooner you go the better it’ll be for you. Tony’s a tiger when he’s mad.”

Rasher was peculiarly struck by these successive warnings. They indicated the widespread knowledge of Romisky’s purpose. Either he had deliberately revealed his intentions in order to intimidate Rasher to flight, or else he wished to brand Rasher with the crushing weight of his disfavor, before which no one had ever stood for long. His strategy was that of the cat with the mouse in its paws—the slow torture of mental suffering before the final crushing stroke. Obviously he could have found him at once had he wished.

By the third day, wherever he went, he was conscious that he was regarded with new interest, and in some faces he saw sympathy. A group of women busily gossiping on the sidewalk quieted suddenly as he approached and

stood silently regarding him until he had passed out of hearing.

“Well, this *is* calculated to get on a man’s nerves!” he thought. “A little more and even my morale will be shot full of holes. I suppose everybody is wondering why I haven’t taken to the woods.”

That night a soiled, poorly written envelope, postmarked New York, awaited him at the boarding-house.

It was from his trustee.

By the dim light in his squalid room, Harry L. Rasher read the letter from his trustee.

“Romisky’s name has often come up in directors’ meetings. Although outwardly the bitterest agitator in the mills, he is really one of Mr. Stabb’s most trusted henchmen. He is on the secret pay-roll as Antonio Robinson and his checks are deposited under that name in the Titanic Trust Company in this city. His double relation with the company has been the cause of much dissension in the meetings, as several of the directors are bitterly opposed to double dealing of this kind. It is only because

of Stabb's insistence that Romisky's services are invaluable that he has been retained.

"I do not know what you have in mind, but I should be failing in my duty did I not warn you to go slow in controversy with him. He is a dangerous man and had a criminal record in St. Louis about fifteen years ago, where, if I recollect correctly, he was known as Dave Rattsnick."

Rasher wrote at once requesting that Romisky's criminal record be traced and reported as soon as possible.

"This bird is going to be sorry he started anything."

After a while Rasher's failure to put in his usual appearance at the Popular Pool Room was attributed to fear. It was recalled that he frequently accompanied Miss Brook on her little expeditions of helpfulness, and this was now interpreted as evidence of softness.

"He's only a sissy," one man said, "chasin' round with a dame and carryin' baskets!"

It was not long before the undercurrent of comment about Rasher and Romisky reached

the ears of Mary Brook. From the women came various versions, but all agreed on the essential fact that Romisky was for some reason determined to run Harry Rasher out of town.

She knew Tony Romisky. Upon rare occasions he came to the manager's office. As he was the leader of a considerable element in the labor party, she assumed that these visits had something to do with labor disputes.

She now recalled that he had been with Mr. Stabb only a few days before. He had come out smiling. She wondered if that visit had anything to do with Rasher, but dismissed the idea as unlikely. Had she known what had happened in Mr. Stabb's office when Rasher himself had been there three weeks before she would have thought differently.

For several days she had missed the evening walk with Rasher up the long hill to her gate. Was he afraid to appear on the streets? Or had he already left town? The thought disturbed her so much that she could not bear to

remain in doubt. A telephone call to his boarding-house informed her that he had been there at breakfast and that his things were still in his room.

She resolved to send for him.

That evening all the men not on duty would be at a big meeting in an unused movie theater. It was a particularly important meeting, called by Romisky for the purpose of formulating certain demands on the company, and intimations had gone forth that anybody failing to attend for reasons other than work would regret it.

Under the circumstances Mary Brook reasoned that Rasher would not attend, but her messenger, a devoted little boy, brought back word that he had gone out. She dismissed at once the thought of danger to him. With Romisky and most of the other unoccupied men busy, he could go out safely. So she spent the evening with mind at ease.

CHAPTER VIII

AT the meeting hall five or six hundred men had gathered. Romisky was on the platform. Dense clouds of tobacco smoke hung over the audience. When, finally, the business before the meeting had been concluded, Romisky did not dismiss them as usual. Instead, he rose to speak, and a dead silence followed.

“There’s a man in this town that don’t belong here,” he announced, and every one knew to whom he referred. “He ain’t one of us. He’s a crook and he’s afraid to show his face among us honest men.” Thus began his speech, and as he worked himself into a thunderous rage he was suddenly conscious that every eye before him had turned and was staring at one side of the stage.

He swung around and beheld Harry L. Rasher approaching from the wings.

"I understand you are looking for me, Mr. Romisky," said Rasher.

The coughing and throat clearing that characterize a crowded theater ceased abruptly. Six hundred rough mill-hands stared at the stage wild-eyed and rigid, for there before them was the promise of tragedy.

He whom the speaker had just called a coward, afraid to show himself, was composedly facing the big man whose threats against him had stirred the town. The inevitable showdown had come with dramatic suddenness.

Romisky, his unfinished sentence dead on his lips, his hand arrested in its gesture, stared at Rasher as though disbelieving his eyes. Then the significance of the situation struck him, and his mouth tightened in a hard line. This was defiance. To tolerate it meant the bending of the rod of iron with which he ruled his followers.

"You've got a nerve to come here!" he said hoarsely. "Why, you damned rat, don't you know what's gonna happen to you?"

“That’s what I’ve come to find out,” Rasher responded.

Romisky leveled a blunt finger at him and turned to the crowd.

“This is the dirty crook I’m gonna drive out o’ town,” he shouted. “He’s the tool of the comp’ny and he’s sneakin’ round here double-crossin’ us men——” He paused an instant.

“That sounds pretty good coming from you, Robinson,” said Rasher, distinctly emphasizing the name Romisky used in his secret checking-accounts with Mr. Stabb.

Romisky’s threatening finger fell suddenly. Rasher turned to the audience.

“When Mr. Romisky, alias Robinson, gets through telling you about me, I want to tell you a few things about him. Go ahead, Mr. Romisky. That’s fair, isn’t it?”

There was no sign of anger in his face as he tossed his overcoat on a chair, but Romisky noted with narrowed eyes that neither was there nervousness nor timidity. The reference to “Robinson” had been a body blow. Had

Stabb double-crossed *him*? Even so, Rasher must not be allowed to tell what he knew. He must be beaten up and shipped off before he could talk. There seemed no alternative. But first he must be saddled with the blame in case anything serious happened. Romisky was already framing a plea of self-defense.

“Say,” he exclaimed, “what do you mean coming here in a peaceful meeting, trying to insult me? What’s the big idea?”—

“You started the insulting,” said Rasher evenly. Again he turned to the crowd. “This man says I’m a crook. He can’t prove it because it isn’t true. I say *he’s* a crook and I *can* prove it.” He pointed at Romisky who was struggling to conceal his uneasiness. “Look at that guilty face!”

Romisky rushed at him with an oath. He *must* silence this man if he had to kill him. His whole future in the Lannard Mills was at stake.

Rasher expected the onslaught, and had weighed his chances. Romisky, a powerful brute, was thirty pounds heavier. In roughing

it, he would have the advantage. It would be like clinching with a grizzly. Rasher knew he must avoid that and trust to his greater speed and science.

The crowd swarmed forward. Chairs were overturned and crushed as heavy feet battered through them. Nobody attempted to climb on the stage or wished to interfere with the fight.

The stage, about twenty feet square, was empty save for a table and two chairs. Romisky's first mad rush was sidestepped. He turned quickly, gauged his distance, and lunging forward, swung a terrific blow. It fell short by a few inches. Infuriated to the point of murder, he yelled:

“Why don't you fight, you damned coward?”

“Don't worry, Mr. Romisky, alias Robinson——”

Romisky saw red. If he could only get his hands on Rasher, he'd bend his head back till his neck cracked; he'd twist his arms till they snapped; he'd choke that throat till the eyes popped out! But this was like a bull fighting a

panther. A maniac of fury, he rushed to his doom.

What happened was not clear. A chair whirled out into the crowd, the table crashed over the footlights, a figure leaped, and Romisky reeled as though struck by a thunderbolt.

Instantly Rasher was upon him, driving blow after blow into the swaying face. Then Romisky's head shot back, his body lifted on its toes, and he crashed to the floor. He tried to rise, failed, then fumbled for his pocket. A second later Rasher had twisted an automatic from his hand.

Tony Romisky was a sad-looking object. Both eyes were black and swollen, his nose was bleeding and two front teeth were gone. Henceforth the late czar of the Lannard Mills would talk with a lisp.

In silence the crowd saw him regain his feet and disappear unsteadily through the wings. Then a clamor of voices arose.

“Wow! What a wallop!” shouted one man

above the hubbub and a burst of laughter sounded the knell of Romisky's power.

"Say, kid, you're all right!" "Atta boy!"
"Oh, baby!"

Rasher was putting on his overcoat. He turned and the noise ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

"I hope I haven't mussed up your program," he said, "but I'm not sorry to have mussed up your chairman. He got what was coming to him. He's been double-crossing you and getting rich at it. He's on Stabb's secret payroll under the name of Antonio Robinson. I can prove this if anybody doubts. That's why you haven't been getting anywhere with your leader!"

Romisky's star had set, and that night Harry L. Rasher wrote and crossed off another word in his book:

Snobbishness.
X Ingratitude.
X Arrogance.
X Brutality.

Early next morning nearly everybody in Adamant and Somber City had heard of the sensational fight. Of course the story grew or was distorted in a hundred different ways. Romisky's henchmen tried to start a backfire with tales that Rasher had pulled a gun, and wore brass knuckles, and had struck without warning. These versions led to several more fights and very soon Romisky's men realized the futility of circulating them.

Had the fight been in private, Romisky's reputation would have outweighed Rasher's word, but the latter, knowing this, picked a time and place where all could see and testify to his fairness.

Romisky did not appear next day, and people wondered whether he had fled from Adamant or retired until his face regained something of its normal appearance.

Harry L. Rasher, however, drove his truck on a triumphant course through the town. In a single hour he had won the admiration and respect of the mill workers to a degree that he

could have attained in no other way than by the display of physical prowess. These men lived by their muscles, and strength was something they understood and worshipped. No triumph of intellect could have impressed them so deeply. Perhaps Rasher had this in mind when he staged the dramatic show-down. Already he had captured their imaginations, now their admiration, and he hoped soon to win their confidence.

Miss Mary Brook, walking down the hill from her home, was surrounded by an excited throng of children.

“Have you heard about Mr. Rasher?” they cried, and her heart stood still.

“He had an awful fight!” They were all talking at once and from their scrambled exclamations, she could only gather that something terrible had happened. Seizing the eldest boy, she commanded the others to be still.

“Now, Milko, what happened? Is he hurt?”

“Oh, he had an awful fight, Miss Brook, an’ ever’thing! My father said so.”

"But who fought? Tell me at once!"

"Mr. Romisky and Mr. Rasher. He knocked him all over and he couldn't get up. His teeth were all knocked out. It was terrible."

Miss Brook was suddenly sick with apprehension.

"The brute!" she exclaimed.

"An' he's beat it," Milko hurried on, eager to give all the details. "I guess he's afraid to show himself in town any more."

So Rasher was gone! The clear cold day with the ruddy sunshine filtering through the smoke pall became dull for her. It never occurred to her that the slighter, mild-looking newcomer, unknown and penniless, would have any chance against such a well-known powerful bully as Romisky.

"Did you hear how badly Mr. Rasher was hurt, Milko?" she asked in a tired voice.

"Oh, he wasn't hurt at all, Miss Brook."

"What? What do you mean? Mr. Rasher wasn't hurt?"

"Naw, it was Tony Romisky that was hurt.

I just saw Mr. Rasher driving his truck.
Everybody's cheering him down-town."

The sun burst out and flooded the world.
And Mary Brook knew that she was in love
with Harry Rasher.

CHAPTER IX

POWER, whether for good or evil, always commands a following. It is not yielded lightly, and the more wicked it is the more unscrupulous will be the methods to retain it. Also the longer such power has been exercised by an individual or group of men the more extensive will abuses become.

In Adamant and Somber City power had long been centered in the hands of James Stabb, manager. As time went on and resistance had been beaten down, the methods of mill management had grown less and less responsive to the dictates of common decency and progress.

But as long as he was successful he had his supporters, open or secret—men who did not care to inquire too closely into his methods as long as dividends were maintained—others

who found it profitable to participate in the various side-issues promoted by him.

There was the Building and Loan Association, devised by Stabb but headed by a local banker named Henry Hornblend, whereby workmen were induced to invest in a house on the installment plan, with the result that they could not strike or quit work without seeing the meager savings of years wiped out. Few ever reached the final payment, and the property reverted to the Association. This scheme yielded big profits, which were shared by Mr. Stabb and his associates.

Another of Stabb's creations was a chain of local stores from which the workmen were obliged to purchase most of their food and clothing. Healthful competition being thus eliminated, prices were arbitrarily fixed by men who were decidedly not in business for their health. Insiders commonly believed that certain town officials were beneficiaries in the profits of these ventures. Even the local con-

gressman, it was whispered, had more than an altruistic interest in their welfare.

This congressman was of a type which is happily disappearing. He was a quick and ready speaker, a hale fellow well met, a waver of the flag, and as devious as a fox. His friends, for favors rendered, called him "Honest John" Harpy.

A look into the Honorable Harpy's safe deposit box would have revealed many secrets unsuspected by his constituents.

Such conditions could not exist in an enlightened community. But Adamant and Somber City were far from being enlightened. James Stabb believed enlightenment generated discontent.

Thus it came about that when Harry L. Rasher rose above the dead level, following his spectacular overthrow of one of the cogs in Stabb's machine, he began to be taken seriously by the higher-ups.

In response to a telephone call, Mr. Harpy

and Mr. Hornblend hurried over to Mr. Stabb's office. When they were seated, Stabb began:

"This man Rasher is getting too much influence. We must counteract it at once."

"Can't you fire him?" asked Harpy.

"Yes, I can, but I'm not sure that's the best way to destroy his influence with the men. It might make him stronger. I should have fired him before this affair with Romisky. Now it's too late. He's got to be discredited."

"What do you know about him?"

"Practically nothing except that he turned up here some weeks ago in a machine which he sold for eighty-five dollars. I have no doubt he stole it."

"In that case," said Harpy, "there should be no difficulty. We can get somebody to identify the car, and, perhaps, after I have a little talk with him he will be glad to leave town."

Mr. Hornblend interposed.

"It's my experience that men will do almost anything for money. Perhaps if I can interest

him in some investment he might be induced to get in over his head."

Mr. Stabb did not seem impressed by this proposal. He looked at Hornblend sourly.

"I don't care how it's done, just so he goes. Romisky's method was evidently wrong."

"Can Tony recover his influence?" asked Harpy.

"Not while Rasher's around. The workmen worship a winner, and six hundred of 'em saw him lick Tony. You two know how to handle these things, but don't play him for a fool."

The Honorable Mr. Harpy smiled confidently, and Mr. Hornblend said:

"I'll try first. If I can get him into a financial transaction I know I can land him."

"Go to it, old man," replied Harpy, slapping him on the back. "You've landed a lot of 'em in your day."

Hornblend frowned. He knew this was too true to be complimentary.

Henry Hornblend, one of the local bankers, was about sixty years old, and for over forty

of these he had given his time and thought to money making. It was his only interest in life. He never went on vacations, and such pleasure as life gave him came from the steady accretion to his fortune.

A nice profit from an investment was his greatest happiness, a loss depressed him for weeks. It was seldom, however, that his investments were attended by losses, for he was shrewder than those with whom he dealt, and long indulgence in money getting had dulled his ethics and stimulated his greed.

He owned many of the houses occupied by the workmen in the Lannard Mills, and there was no tender-heartedness in the way he handled them. He was one of those who say "Business is business, and you can't mix it with sentiment." No one ever accused him of sentiment.

Mr. Hornblend invariably occupied a prominent place on the platform when distinguished visitors came to Adamant, but among the people he was despised.

Not without justification he believed in the power of money to do almost anything, and naturally he turned to it as the weapon with which to dispose of Harry L. Rasher.

One day the latter was surprised to find himself being greeted cordially by Mr. Hornblend.

“Well, young man,” exclaimed the money-lender affably, “you are becoming one of our well-known citizens. I want to make your acquaintance.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hornblend.”

“I think you have quite a future ahead of you here, my son, and I hope you will let me help you. You’ll be getting married one of these days and will want a home. When that time comes you must let me advise you.” His clammy fingers were massaging Rasher’s hand and his thin lips were stretched to what he considered a fatherly, benevolent smile. “There’ll be no charge. Drop in any time. I can make you some money.”

Mr. Hornblend then pursued his way to the bank, rubbing his hands.

“I’ve planted the seed,” he thought.

Two days later Harry L. Rasher received a note asking him to call at the bank. Mr. Hornblend, when he received Rasher, was beaming with affability.

“My son,” he said, “since I saw you the other day I’ve had an idea. You go about among the mill-hands a great deal. I think I can put you in the way of making some money without interfering with your regular work. Are you interested?”

“Yes, indeed, sir. What is the work you want done?”

“I’ll explain. I own a good many of the houses occupied by the workmen. I’m willing to sell them at a certain price and anything you can get over that price will be yours. For some reason they don’t like to deal with me, but they like you and might be induced to go in. I’ll make the terms of payment easy.”

“That sounds fair,” said Rasher, displaying a deep interest.

The banker then brought forth a plat and

indicated a number of houses, the prices of which he listed on the margin.

“I’ve had no experience in real estate,” said Rasher, “but, of course, I’m willing to try. Just make out your agreement, with the prices, and we’ll sign it.”

Hornblend frowned slightly. “He’s no fool.” However, there could be no harm in it, so the agreement was drawn up and signed, and witnessed by a clerk.

“Now,” said Hornblend, in the presence of the clerk, “you will probably need a little money to pay any expenses you may have in making your sales. Entertaining, you know.” He winked expressively as he counted out a number of bills.

“Oh, no,” demurred Rasher. “If I need any I’ll let you know.” He allowed himself to look wistfully at the money, a symptom not lost by the watchful money-lender.

All the details of the house-selling campaign being settled, Rasher turned to go, and again looked hungrily at the bills.

“It’s working,” thought Hornblend, rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

Two days later a plainly dressed man got off the train, and, with Rasher, was observed to be inspecting a number of houses.

Henry Hornblend, seated at his desk, allowed himself the luxury of a smile. He was thinking of young Rasher’s efforts to sell the Hornblend lots on commission.

“At the price I’ve set he won’t sell one in a thousand years. Pretty soon he’ll come to borrow money, and then, if I’m any judge, he’ll skip out rather than pay it. That’s the way it generally works with these roving mill-hands, ’specially the ones that are not tied down by a family.”

In view of this conviction, Mr. Hornblend was most astonished when Rasher came in a couple of days later with the joyous announcement that he had sold a lot.

“Cash, too!” he exclaimed gleefully.

“What did you get for it?” asked the money-lender quickly.

“Fifteen fifty! I make fifty dollars commission. Pretty good, eh?”

Hornblend breathed again. Rasher was not making much on the deal, particularly as the house and lot were not worth over twelve hundred at the outside.

“My boy,” he exclaimed, “I congratulate you. I knew you were a clever chap.”

The deed was prepared and the property transferred to a plainly dressed man who looked like a workman.

“I may move here,” said the man. “Anyway, I think the lot is a good buy.”

Mr. Hornblend had a momentary pang when he received the money and saw Rasher carefully fold up fifty dollars for himself. This first deal established a precedent. Hornblend was now on record as having indorsed the working agreement.

Two days later Rasher burst into the banker’s office.

“Another!” he shouted.

“What!” exclaimed Hornblend, starting

from his chair. One crazy man might buy a lot, but surely there were not two crazy men who would!

“Yep! And I make eight hundred dollars on this one! I’ll get rich at this rate, Mr. Hornblend.”

The latter’s emotions were stirred to the depths. All the avarice and cupidity of his nature cried out. In spite of his own enormous profit, it was unbearable that Rasher would retain so much. A damp perspiration started on his forehead. Panic-stricken, he sought means to avoid paying this huge commission, but there was no way out, the legality of their compact having been established by the first transaction. With a leaden heart he saw Rasher count out the money and pocket his eight hundred dollars.

All that night Mr. Hornblend tossed about, and the next morning could not eat his breakfast.

But this was just the beginning.

CHAPTER X

RASHER'S next transaction was the sale of twenty-four houses and lots on the road leading up from the mill toward Mary Brook's house. He gave Mr. Hornblend in cash the amount originally agreed upon between them, but would not tell his own share until the lots were deeded and transferred.

"I made over sixteen thousand dollars on them, Mr. Hornblend," he then confided.

Sixteen thousand dollars! My God! If Mr. Hornblend suffered the other night, this one was torture. Sixteen thousand dollars lost! What a fool he had been? The fact that he was receiving more than the land had ever been worth brought him no consolation. Somebody else was making too much, and that hurt him to the depths of his soul. With each throb of his heart an arrow pierced the tenderest spot in his make-up—his greed and avarice.

When Rasher again appeared with the announcement that he had found a purchaser for the miserable shacks along the river-front known as Devil's Dump, Hornblend was on the verge of apoplexy. The fact that Rasher refused to reveal his own share, the amount above the agreed purchase price, ate into his heart like acid. He was sick with the fear that Rasher had made another big amount, and the doubt was more deadly than the actual knowledge would have been.

"I've cleaned up quite a sum, Mr. Hornblend, and I can't thank you enough." Rasher offered his hand, but Hornblend waved it away with a grimace.

It was soon after that Mr. Hornblend received a wire from one of the trustees of the Lannard Steel Company.

"Must have river frontage known as Devil's Dump. Will pay your own price. Answer at once."

Mr. Hornblend, suffering a stroke, was found unconscious at his desk, and that night

Harry L. Rasher wrote in his little book another word which he crossed off.

- Snobbishness.
- X Ingratitude.
- X Arrogance.
- X Brutality.
- X Greed.

James Stabb and the Honorable John Harpy, known as Honest John, were seated in the former's office. Stabb's face was serious.

"John, I don't mind telling you this man Rasher is getting on my nerves."

"You're overworked, Jim. What you need is a rest. I'll take care of him."

"Yes, that's what Romisky said, and see what happened! That's what Hornblend said, and now he's a hopeless invalid eating his heart out because some money got away from him."

It was on Mr. Stabb's lips to tell Harpy of his own encounter with Rasher—that he had been knocked down in his own office—but his pride rebelled. Since the incident he had never heard mention of it, so he presumed that Rasher, for

some reason known only to himself, had never told. Instead, he remarked:

“You know the mill people have the notion that there’s something—well, unusual about Rasher. They say he brings good luck. Take that row of shacks up the street here. The man from Pittsburgh who bought ’em from Rasher has painted ’em, cleaned up their yards, and made ’em fit to live in, and now rented ’em again at the same old price. What’s the result? A lot of expense to the company fixing up the houses *we* own! They attribute all this to him. I tell you, John”—Stabb got up and paced the room nervously—“I tell you, he’s got my goat!”

“Forget it, Jim. I know how to handle this sort of case. Besides, with the money he made on those real-estate trades, he’ll probably get the swell head and pull out.”

There was a tap at the door and Miss Brook entered.

“A man to see you, sir.”

“Who is it?”

“Mr. Rasher.”

Both men started and exchanged significant glances which were not lost on Miss Brook.

“Send him in,” said Stabb shortly.

Rasher entered.

“I’ve come to resign my job, Mr. Stabb,” he announced.

“What do you mean?” exclaimed the manager, striving to disguise the relief he felt. “Why do you come to me with your resignation? Tell the truck foreman. Good day.”

“I thought, sir, you might like to know why I’m leaving.”

“Well, why?”

“I’m going into the grocery business here in Adamant. I’ve made some money and I think there’s a good opening here for a concern that is satisfied with decent profits.”

“What the—er—what’s that got to do with me?”

“Not much, sir. I just wanted to let you know that the Pioneer chain of stores is going to have some live competition, that’s all.”

Rasher bowed pleasantly and went out before Stabb got his breath. He swung around to Harpy.

“Of all the damned impertinence! Well, what do you make of it?”

“All bluff! He expects you to buy him off. I know the type.” Harpy waved his hand expressively.

“But, John, competition *would* be bad for our stores. Besides, I can’t afford to have my connection with the stores become known. It would embarrass me with the company.”

“How much money has he?”

“I don’t suppose more than the twenty or twenty-five thousand he made on those land sales.”

“Why, you can skin him at his own game. Undersell him and break him. Your stores can stand the gaff ten times longer than he can.” John Harpy arose to leave. “Don’t give it another thought. Just sit tight and watch me!”

Stabb’s mind was considerably eased by

Harpy's confidence. Obviously Rasher was trying to shake him down for some money. The threat to open a competing store must be part of a blackmailing scheme. He was therefore disagreeably astonished next morning to see the following half-page advertisement in the *Adamant Advertiser*:

“The building at the corner of Mill and Lannard Streets, formerly occupied by the Elite Buffet, will soon be opened as an up-to-date grocery and meat market. Cash and carry. Eight per cent. profit on all sales. It will be the cheapest and best place in town. Watch our prices and compare them with the prices you have been paying in other local stores. You will be surprised. Harry L. Rasher.

“Proprietor of the ‘Eight Per Cent. Store.’”

Furiously Mr. Stabb called up the editor of the *Advertiser*.

“Say, Clipper, what do you mean by printing that Rasher ad this morning?”

Mr. Stabb, at his phone, snapped out the words that threw the editor of the *Adamant Advertiser* into a panic.

“Why—why, Mr. Stabb, I don’t know what you mean.”

“You know all right what I mean. Another line of that stuff and your relations with me are through. Understand?”

There was a shocked silence at Mr. Clipper’s end of the wire.

“But I’ve made a contract for twenty half-pages!”

“All right, go ahead! But you know what it will cost you!” Stabb banged down the receiver.

Clipper gazed blankly at his unfinished editorial on the freedom of the press. Here was a crisis in his affairs! Before him lay the contract with Rasher for twenty such advertisements to be run daily at fifty dollars an insertion, and, worse, in his pocket was half the total amount. He himself had insisted on cash in advance. And now this crushing threat from Stabb, whose power in the community he dared not oppose.

Stabb’s anger convinced him of a fact which

up to this time he had only suspected, namely, Stabb's connection with the Pioneer Stores, although the company was on record as opposing such connections by its employees.

In an agitated frame of mind, Mr. Clipper hurried out only to find that Rasher had left town for a few days, leaving no address. This compounded the editor's predicament. He had to choose between the complete rupture of good relations with Stabb, or become liable for damages by breaking his contract.

In his distress he sought the Honorable John Harpy.

"Do?" echoed that gentleman. "Why, nothing, of course. Don't print the ads."

"But won't I be liable?"

"Don't worry about that," said Harpy contemptuously. "If he wants to go to court, we'll appeal it and appeal it, till he's drained of his last cent in court costs and attorney fees."

So the editor, soothed in mind, scrapped the Rasher advertisements, and Mr. Stabb smiled as he noted their omission.

CHAPTER XI

THREE days later Rasher returned and at once sought Clipper.

“Why haven’t my ads been appearing? You’ve been paid for ten of them.”

“I’ve decided not to print them,” answered the editor stiffly. “Your money will be returned.”

“Of course it will, and maybe more, too, if I sue you for violation of contract.”

“You’ll have to see my attorney, John Harpy, about that,” said Clipper as he turned to his desk.

Rasher gone, he at once called up the Honorable Harpy, who remained unruffled.

“Let him come. He’s trying to shake you down for a compromise.” Harpy had barely hung up his receiver when Rasher entered, and stated his case.

“And you’re thinking of suing him?” asked Harpy, when he had finished.

“I may. I’ve not decided.”

“Ah! Perhaps you would rather compromise on a cash basis?”

Rasher’s answer was not what he expected.

“I have no thought of compromising.”

Harpy was puzzled, but kept on smiling cynically.

“My advice to you, son, is to drop it. Your grocery venture here is doomed to fail. You can’t buck old established concerns like the Pioneer Stores.”

“That’s the company controlled by Mr. Stabb?”

“Oh, no,” hastily exclaimed “Honest John.”
“Mr. Stabb has no interest in it.”

“I was led to think he had. However, that will be decided if the case comes to trial.”

Harpy winced at this. He knew Stabb had good reason to fear disclosure. But Rasher’s next words caused his heart to skip several beats.

“Mr. Stabb perhaps would not like that, any more than you would care to have your connection with the steel company itself made public.”

“I have no connection with the steel company,” he said harshly, and pointed to the door. “Now you get out of here.”

Rasher arose. “I was under the impression that you received a substantial sum from the company when you supported a certain bill affecting their interests that came up in Congress a few years ago. In May, 1913, to be exact. Perhaps I’m mistaken.” He then departed, bowing pleasantly.

Harpy’s forehead was damp and cold. Rasher was not mistaken. But how in the name of God did he know? Only the innermost circles of the company knew, and it was as much to their interest as to his that a financial transaction of this kind be kept secret.

Suddenly a gleam of light struck him.

Mary Brook, secretary to James Stabb, hav-

ing typed the morning's dictation, laid the letters before him.

"Just a moment, Miss Brook." He seemed in an amiable mood, unusual for him these days. "You have been seeing something of this young man Rasher, haven't you?"

"Why, yes, sir. He has helped me several times in my visits to some of the poor families."

"What do you think of him?" Mr. Stabb was idly balancing a tortoise shell paper knife on his finger, a habit of his lighter moods. "Or rather, what do you know about him?"

"Why, Mr. Stabb, I hardly know what to say. He seems very nice, but he never talks about himself. I really know nothing."

"Not even where he comes from or what he has worked at before?"

"I've inferred that he has lived in New York, but as he has never volunteered any confidences, I have never asked any questions."

Mr. Stabb nodded and indicated a chair.

"Please sit down, Miss Brook. You always

treat me so formally. As you must know, I have your interests very much at heart, and at the risk of seeming to concern myself too much with your personal affairs I feel that I should warn you about Rasher."

She had not taken the chair, and there were danger signals in her eyes. He knew he must proceed circumspectly.

"Since he has become conspicuous here we have tried in vain to find out about him. He makes a point of avoiding all references to the past. His name is not in the directory of any large city. Why should he maintain secrecy about these things unless he has a reason? Doesn't it strike you as suspicious?"

"I have no doubt he would answer questions if I asked them."

"He arrived in an automobile which he sold for practically nothing. He has shown the skill of a professional fighter. He has made some money in a real-estate transaction with Mr. Hornblend, and now he threatens to start

a grocery store. I believe he desires to be bought off by the Pioneer Stores. In other words, I'm convinced he is a very clever adventurer, if not a dangerous blackmailer. I wish you wouldn't see any more of him—Mary. In a way I feel responsible to your mother for you."

She bit her lip.

"Is that all, Mr. Stabb?"

"Now don't be angry. I am thinking only of your own good."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Stabb. I don't want to seem ungrateful, but—well, I feel that my choice of associates is something I must decide for myself. I may be mistaken, but Mr. Rasher seems like a decent man, and as long as he does nothing to destroy that impression I see no reason for declining to see him—that is, if he wants to see me."

Mr. Stabb noted the polite defiance and his lips tightened.

"Well, really, Miss Brook, I shall hardly

know what to do if my secretary continues to associate with some one I have reason to distrust. You may go now."

In the outer office she might have yielded to the temptation to cry had not John Harpy burst open the door.

"Anybody with Stabb?" he asked harshly.

She shook her head and he strode into the inner office.

"My goodness! What's up?" thought Mary Brook.

The Honorable John whisked a chair up close to the startled manager and spoke in a tense whisper.

"Rasher!" he panted. "Just left my office. He knows your connection with the Pioneer Stores—threatens to bring it out in a suit against the *Advertiser* for violation of contract." Stabb grasped his arm. "But that's not all. He knows about our deal when I was fighting that bill in Congress. Even knows the date of the payment!"

Rasher—Rasher—always this man Rasher!

All Stabb's own apprehensions returned tenfold at sight of Harpy's shaken bearing.

"But—but how does he know all this?"

Harpy threw a quick glance toward the door and drew closer.

"Stabb, your secretary's been blabbing!" This was the gleam of light that had struck the Honorable John Harpy.

"Good lord! But she doesn't know anything about the deal in Congress, even though she may suspect about the stores."

"Well, we've got to get rid of her. And we've got to head off this suit. Tell Clipper to print his ads. Anything to keep it out of court. Your stores will have to freeze him out by undercutting even if you take a loss yourself."

After Harry L. Rasher's interview, in which he disclosed a damaging knowledge of the Honorable John Harpy's activities in Congress, he again disappeared from Adamant for several days.

This was awkward for Mr. Harpy, who spent those days in extreme uneasiness. He worried about the possible use Rasher might make of this knowledge and the devastating effect its disclosure would have upon his career. Therefore it was important that he see Rasher and adjust matters in order to keep them out of court, for even with a friendly judge such a trial might bring to the surface many compromising circumstances which he and Mr. Stabb preferred to keep secret.

He saw the editor of the *Advertiser* and told him to print the advertisements for Rasher's grocery venture.

"I've talked with Stabb," he assured Mr. Clipper, "and it's all right. See Rasher. Make any excuse offer him anything."

"I'll see him to-morrow," said Clipper, inwardly contrasting Harpy's previous contemptuous disposition to ride rough shod over Rasher and break him with prolonged and costly litigation with his present obvious anxiety to placate him.

“Something has jarred the Honorable John,” he thought.

But “to-morrow” was too late. In the night the bill-boards of Adamant and Somber City blossomed with bright posters about the new Eight Per Cent. Store to open the following week, explaining that the *Advertiser* had refused to print the advertisements of the new rival of the “Pioneer Stores, Limited.” Hand-bills in three languages were given to every housewife in the two towns and other notices came in the mails.

The Pioneer Stores, long intrenched and prosperous, sniffed and scoffed, but kept an eye on the old Elite Buffet, which, after two years of disuse, still showed no signs of activity. Nothing short of a miracle could convert it into a presentable store within the few days remaining before the date of the announced opening.

CHAPTER XII

THEN the miracle happened.

All the carpenters and plasterers and painters in the vicinity were rounded up and, night and day, in three shifts, they transformed the old building into an up-to-date grocery and meat market. Eight heavy trucks rolled into town, and shelves were weighted with such a stock as was never seen in Adamant before.

A big sign, "The Eight Per Cent. Store," blazoned from above the door. "Cash and carry," "Come in and convince yourself," "Our prices will sell our goods," "We're in business for profit but not for profiteering," and many other similar placards adorned the windows.

The day of the opening found the new store ready for business, with clerks in clean white behind the counters. And prices were astoundingly low—twenty, sometimes fifty, per cent.

lower than those the people had been used to paying.

The first day the store was thronged with curious visitors. The next day more came to buy than to look.

From across the street the old established Pioneer Store watched and was seized with panic. Scouts reported the rival's prices and hurried calculations revealed ghastly effects on their profits if they cut to meet them. But there was no help for it. So they cut and cut.

"It's war to the hilt!" they said.

They began a vigorous campaign of advertising in the two local papers, whose self-interest dictated allegiance to the Pioneer crowd. "Patronize home industry!" was the keynote of their appeal. "Favorable crop reports enable us to reduce our prices. The high cost of living is going down!" "We have just received a large stock of a bankrupt house and can sell it at a price lower than the original cost."

In their campaign they were careful not to attribute their cuts to the lead set by the Rasher

store. That would have been an admission that their previous prices had been too high. As soon as Rasher had been forced to the wall they wanted the road clear for a resumption of their old and highly profitable scale of prices.

Rasher imported a complete printing outfit, installed in a truck, and flooded the town with hand-bills. He referred to the Pioneer Stores, Limited, as the Profiteer Stores, Unlimited, and the people, with the recollection of high prices fresh in their minds, swarmed to his store. The sympathy of the townspeople was with him.

Thus Harry L. Rasher brought an era of fair food prices, and in the minds of many the belief was strengthened that he possessed strange powers that brought them luck.

This trade war absorbed the interest of Adamant and soon spread beyond the limits of the local community.

Certain dramatic features of the conflict attracted the attention of newspaper editors in neighboring towns. Articles appeared chron-

icling the details. "Young Mill Worker Fights Powerful Combine," "Novel Experiment in Adamant," "The David and Goliath Grocery Fight."

Harry Rasher watched this expanding circle of publicity with uneasiness. For his purposes it was essential to conceal his real identity for a while longer, and publicity rendered this increasingly difficult, both for himself and for his trustee in New York.

When a photographer for a Pittsburgh paper arrived he refused positively to see him. He could not yet risk having his picture seen and recognized in New York. But the act was quickly seized upon as good ammunition by his rivals.

"Why?" they asked significantly. "What's he afraid of?" "Why doesn't he want his picture printed?"

Rasher volunteered no explanation, and even when the editor of the *Advertiser*, in a moment of spirituous uplift, came boldly off his neutral perch and insinuated quite crudely that there

were doubtless people in other cities on the watch for his picture, he remained silent.

Emboldened, the editor followed with other queries charged with poisonous innuendo, and, their fear of the lawsuit eclipsed by more immediate troubles, Stabb and Harpy egged him on.

But Rasher's only concern on this score was how it would affect Mary Brook.

He was determined to remain Harry L. Rasher until certain things were accomplished, chief of which was the acquisition of ten thousand additional shares of Lannard Steel stock, which would give him control of the company. His trustee had already increased his holdings up to forty-one thousand shares; the Lannards held or controlled fifty-one thousand and eight thousand were scattered among a group of small stockholders.

Rasher's position was, of course, strategically strong. Through his trustee he had legitimate access to all the inner secrets of the steel company, which fact would have completely

stunned the group of men ranged against him in Adamant. They assumed that he was a nameless adventurer, who, by a lucky real estate transaction, had acquired certainly not more than thirty thousand dollars. With this limited capital he could not hope to stand the pressure of a cut-rate battle for long. His collapse as a competitor, therefore, would be a matter of only a few weeks.

Each day they watched him for signs of distress or weakening. The cuts had gone below cost, but the Eight Per Cent. Store was maintaining a brave front. Truck loads of fresh goods arrived and were sold. If the war occasioned anxiety it was chiefly reflected in the faces of the Pioneer party, who, accustomed to sure, fat profits, found the daily losses increasingly unpleasant to stomach.

“He can’t stick it out much longer,” they reassured themselves. “He can’t buck us without bu’sting!”

One enthralled observer of this unequal warfare was Mary Brook, and her heart was filled

with compassion for Rasher's inevitable end. In her mind's eye she saw him, his limited resources exhausted, stripped of his last cent, go down in ignominious defeat before the powerful combine opposing him.

She longed to help him, but there was nothing she could contribute except whole-hearted sympathy and half-hearted encouragement.

"You must be terribly overworked," she wrote him in a little note. "Won't you come up and have supper with mother and me and forget for an evening the anxieties you must be undergoing?"

Rasher arrived, beaming and care-free.

"Poor boy!" she thought, "he doesn't realize what he's up against."

She wished she could tell him many things which her confidential position in Mr. Stabb's office enabled her to know, but this was contrary to her code of honor.

It was Harry Rasher's first meal in the house of Mary Brook, although he had entered it once before when he delivered his first and only re-

port for Mr. Stabb. Many times he had come with her to the gate, but invariably declined to come in. She thought it was because he was foolishly sensitive about his working clothes.

“At last you have accepted my invitation!” was her greeting.

She noted that he wore a white soft shirt, but his suit was the same one she knew so well. His brief moment of prosperity, she thought, had little effect on his simplicity of apparel, and somehow she liked him better for it.

They went into the parlor, where again his eyes rested on the photograph of Mrs. Lanard. He remembered that Miss Brook had told him she knew Muriel and that the Lanards had once lived in Adamant before success had lured them away to the wider horizons of life in the fashionable circles of New York.

Mrs. Brook greeted him kindly. She was nice and old-fashioned in her manner, and, although he was utterly unconscious of it, she studied him with the keen appraisal of a mother who has a marriageable daughter.

“You have given us much to think about since you came to Adamant,” she said.

“I’ve found my work here very interesting, Mrs. Brook. More interesting than anything I’ve ever done.”

It was upon Mrs. Brook’s lips to question him about what he *had* done before, but Mary had cautioned her not to be inquisitive. “Now please, mother,” she had said, “don’t ask questions. I don’t think he likes to talk about himself, and you might embarrass him. He never asks questions of me.”

So Mrs. Brook merely glanced at the service button in his lapel and decided that later she could properly comment upon it, and that might lead naturally to other phases of his life.

Supper was served in a cheerfully old-fashioned dining-room. The chairs and sideboard were those of fifty years ago. Two time-darkened paintings hung on the walls and several prints of a later period. Chintz curtains added a gayer note.

“Well, how is the grocery business?” began Mary vivaciously.

Rasher smiled.

“The people have been very kind,” he said. And they discussed the pros and cons of the situation, including the unaccountable shift in the attitude of the *Advertiser* and its evident desire later to avoid a lawsuit over the violation of contract.

With her confidential knowledge of most of Mr. Stabb’s affairs, Mary was able to explain to herself these matters, and she wished with her whole heart that she might give him the facts, when suddenly she was amazed to find her own thoughts being spoken.

“Mr. Stabb naturally does not want his connections with the Pioneer Stores to become known to the directors,” Rasher was saying. “It might cost him his position. It might come out in a trial, so he saw fit to change his tactics.”

He resumed eating in order not to embarrass

Miss Brook by observing her astonishment. Her face was a study. How in heaven's name did he know? Her bewilderment grew with his next remark.

“Mr. Stabb does not like me, Miss Brook. He thinks I am—well, to put it mildly, an adventurer. The fact that I arrived in town in a car and sold it at a low price is convincing, in his mind, that I stole it.” He smiled amiably and looked at Mary. “I have been afraid that my acquaintance with you might embarrass you in your work as his secretary.”

So this was the reason he had avoided the development of their friendship!

“You are very thoughtful, Mr. Rasher,” exclaimed Mrs. Brook, who was in her turn puzzled by Mary's behavior. “But you need give yourself no concern on that score. No one in Adamant would think of doubting Mary.”

Mary found her voice again.

“He is right, mother. Mr. Stabb has already intimated that my position depends upon my no longer seeing Mr. Rasher.”

Mrs. Brook stared.

Rasher spoke eagerly:

“Well, Miss Brook, as long as my grocery venture survives you need never lack a job!”

It struck her that his offer was actuated by compassion, even as her encouragement of him had been. Her eyes dropped before his, and there was silence in the room.

Harry Rasher walked home from Mary Brook's house raging inwardly.

“So Stabb has been threatening to take her job away, has he! Trying to scare her away from me!” He glared at the mills sprawled far and wide in the town below, at the ruddy glare on the smoke clouds, and his eyes finally rested on the dark mass wherein was located Mr. Stabb's office.

“He'll find that two can play at that game!” he thought. “I'll give him a scare he won't forget very soon.”

CHAPTER XIII

THAT night he wrote a letter to his trustee.

“At the next meeting of the Lannard steel directors I wish you would propose the dismissal of James Stabb as manager of the mills, and vote my shares in a block to that end. The Lannard holdings can outvote us in a show-down, but I want the movement for his dismissal started for various reasons. First, he is secretly, and in defiance of the rules of the company, one of the big men in control of the Pioneer Stores in Adamant and Somber City. He has made a lot of money this way, for the stores have maintained a monopoly and have robbed the workmen pitifully. Secondly, his autocratic methods are the chief cause of the labor disturbances which have so seriously interfered with business for the last two years. Thirdly, his working agreement with Romisky and Congressman Harpy is an evidence that he is ready to adopt dishonorable means which a decent stockholder can not condone. Make your opposition to him so apparent and so forceful that the other directors will be im-

pressed. The mills can never regain their prosperity as long as Stabb controls their operation.”

By a strange coincidence a letter from Stabb, addressed private and confidential and written by his own hand, went out on the same train to E. Johnstone Lannard.

“Dear Mr. Lannard: I am deeply pained to be obliged to write this letter. Circumstances of policy require me to dismiss Miss Brook, who as you know, has been my secretary for three years. The information, highly confidential, which her position has enabled her to acquire, is being used to the detriment of the company’s affairs. I realize the gravity of this charge, and I fear it will not be received kindly by you, but I am compelled to make it. Certain secrets of our company, known only to those inside, are in the possession of the man Rasher, in whom she has taken an unaccountable and dangerous interest. I have had occasion to write to you before about this man. He is a clever adventurer of the type likely to appeal to an unsophisticated, unsuspecting girl like Miss Brook. And he does not scruple to use the information gained from her in various blackmailing ways.

“It would be well if you could arrange to come down to the mills, at which time I can go more fully into this matter. You will appreciate that my action is taken only after serious and disturbing thought, and is inspired only by consideration of the company’s welfare. I hope Mrs. Lannard may see the matter in a reasonable light and will realize that I have nothing personal in mind when I ask the dismissal of her neice.”

Mr. Lannard read this letter to his wife, expecting an explosion, but she heard it calmly.

“If Mary has been playing the fool, by all means let her go. I’ve done my part in trying to help her, and if she abuses our confidence she deserves no further consideration.”

Thus was the matter dismissed from the mind of Mrs. Lannard, for she was more occupied with the details of the approaching marriage of her daughter Muriel to Count Kolnokoff.

“I guess I’ll have to go down to the mills,” said Mr. Lannard gloomily. “Things are going from bad to worse.”

His wife’s thoughts came back.

“Maybe the count would like to see them,” she said. “We might make up a party and go down in a private car. I positively refuse to stay in one of those miserable hotels.”

Mr. Lannard went to his office with rather a disagreeable duty to perform. Calling his stenographer, he dictated a letter to Mr. Stabb:

“Regarding Miss Brook, you may feel free to act as your judgment dictates. If she has forfeited your confidence, by all means discharge her. Her aunt, Mrs. Lannard, quite agrees with me in this. Personally I confess to being surprised that the very high opinion you have hitherto so frequently expressed of her character and ability has undergone such an abrupt change. However, you are on the spot and better able to judge than we. You have my complete confidence.”

When the manager of the mills received this letter he smiled with grim satisfaction, for it was a weapon which he thought he could use effectively in furthering his purposes. Mr. Lannard continued in his letter:

“I am planning an early visit to the mills, and shall bring my wife and daughter and also

my daughter's fiancé, who desires to familiarize himself with the mills, as in future he will have a direct interest in their prosperity."

Having signed this letter, Mr. Lannard proceeded to the directors' room, where as chairman of the board he presided at the meetings of that body and where his will invariably prevailed. The holdings of Mr. Lannard, forty-one thousand shares, and those of his wife, ten thousand shares, constituted a majority of the stock and was always voted as a block.

In addition the forty-one thousand shares of the estate of Henry Livingston, lately deceased, were voted by Andrew MacFall, the trustee, in harmony with the desires of Mr. Lannard.

In matters of controversy Mr. Lannard's views prevailed by at least ninety-two thousand shares. The remaining eight thousand shares of the company were scattered among smaller holders, among whom there had grown a spirit of protest, vociferous but impotent.

Of late this minority group had become increasingly active in its insistence that drastic

changes be made in the operating policy of the company.

When Mr. Lannard entered the directors' room the other directors had already assembled. The fact that Mr. MacFall was talking earnestly to Mr. Jackson, one of the most active of the insurgent group, was passed unnoticed by the chairman, whose mind was still upon the matter of Miss Brook's dismissal.

The directors took their accustomed places at the long table. The room, rich in its dark paneling, looked out over the sky-piercing buildings of lower New York, each towered pinnacle crowned by floating plumes of steam and smoke.

Immediately after the routine preliminaries were disposed of Mr. Jackson, leader of the group which Mr. Lannard was accustomed to call the recalcitrants, launched out in a spirited speech.

"We've just heard the report and the affairs of the company show no improvement. At each meeting improvement is promised, but it

doesn't come. Things are getting worse rather than better and my conviction is strengthened that something is radically wrong in the management of the company."

Mr. Lannard stirred impatiently. "He's a chronic disturber," he thought, "but I suppose we'll have to let him blow off steam." With this thought he settled back in his chair. Mr. Jackson continued:

"I'm convinced we can expect no improvement under the present management. I don't like to seem a disturbing element in our meeting, but I think it's time somebody spoke out."

He paused belligerently.

"I'm convinced, gentlemen, that Mr. Stabb is not the right man to be managing the steel mills."

Mr. Lannard glanced from the corner of his eye toward the honest face of Andrew MacFall, who sat in the seat adjoining, but that gentleman, instead of meeting his eye, stared solemnly at the table before him. Sure of support

from this quarter, he interrupted the indignant Jackson.

“We know your feeling toward Mr. Stabb, Mr. Jackson, but I’m certain I voice the sentiment of the majority of our directors when I say we have implicit confidence in the discretion and ability of Mr. Stabb. I can see no good in prolonging our discussion along these lines. Mr. Stabb has our complete confidence.”

As he spoke these words with an air of finality he again glanced at Mr. MacFall for the expected nod of approval. The latter betrayed no sign, but still stared stolidly at the table before him.

“I’m sure Mr. MacFall will agree with me,” continued Mr. Lannard, certain of his ground.

Mr. MacFall’s bushy eyebrows were working convulsively, characteristic when his emotions were agitated. He cleared his throat and with his first words Mr. Lannard felt that a faithful prop upon which he leaned had suddenly been jerked from beneath him.

“I quite agree with Mr. Jackson,” said Mr. MacFall. “I have tried to share Mr. Lannard’s confidence in Mr. Stabb, but I can do so no longer. I’m convinced the company can not prosper under Mr. Stabb’s management, and at the next directors’ meeting, unless something is done in the meantime, I shall vote in favor of his dismissal.”

Having tossed his bombshell, Mr. MacFall resumed his contemplation of the table. Mr. Lannard, white-faced and incredulous, was staring at MacFall as though disbelieving his senses.

Harry L. Rasher received from his trustee a report of the directors’ meeting of the Lannard Steel Company. Andrew MacFall wrote:

“As you requested, I announced that the Livingston estate holdings would be voted for the removal of Stabb as manager of the mills. Mr. Lannard was dumfounded. It is the first time his will has been seriously opposed, and, of course, he will fight. With his forty-one thousand shares and his wife’s ten thousand shares,

constituting a majority of the stock, we can not hope to win. He expects to visit the mills within a few days, and I understand Mrs. Lannard and Miss Muriel Lannard, accompanied by the latter's fiancé, Count Boris Kolnokoff, will make the trip with him. The wedding will take place soon after they return to this city."

So Muriel was coming to Adamant. The situation held interesting possibilities and Rasher gave many moments to its contemplation.

Suppose she should see him. She would recognize him at once as Henry Livingston Bacon, and his pleasant rôle of Harry L. Rasher, the village Haroun-al-Raschid, would abruptly end. He was not quite ready to abandon the strong strategic advantage his alias afforded him.

There were still many things to do. He must work fast.

CHAPTER XIV

THE next day he went to a bank, known to be closely associated with the Pioneer Stores, and requested a loan. He had a motive in registering financial distress.

“I have some urgent bills coming due,” he said, “and if they are not met I shall be seriously embarrassed. I want the money for thirty days, and can offer my store and its contents as security.”

The loan was refused, politely but firmly. Before noon the Pioneer Stores were discussing his difficulties.

“He’s bu’sted,” they agreed. “We’ve frozen him out.”

Mr. Stabb was particularly elated. The news of Rasher’s distress reached him quickly, as Rasher intended it should.

At last things were coming his way. Rasher, who had been a thorn in his flesh, was on his last legs. A few days more would see his store in the hands of the sheriff and the old Pioneer outfit would be relieved from a troublesome rival.

With the Lannards' permission to discharge Miss Brook in his pocket, he now felt that he controlled the situation. He could compel her to give up her association with Rasher, and with this in mind he acted immediately.

"By the way, Miss Brook, your friend Rasher is headed for disaster in his grocery venture. I understand he's been trying to raise money." He smiled. "He won't get a cent from any bank in Adamant. In another week he'll be on the street looking for a job."

Miss Brook's eyes flashed.

"Why do you tell me this?" she asked.

"I thought you might be interested. You used to like him, I believe, and see something of him."

"I still like him, Mr. Stabb, and"—her voice

rushed on—"I still expect to see something of him."

Stabb's lips tightened. For a brief moment their eyes met defiantly. The time had come to play his trump card.

"You understand, Miss Brook, that you shall do so at the cost of your position. You are aware that we have reason to distrust Rasher, and any one associating with him is open to the same suspicion. The fact that you are Mrs. Lannard's niece will not save you."

There was a tense silence. She was the first to speak.

"May I use your telephone?"

And as he nodded she took the instrument and called a number.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Rasher."

Stabb was staring in amazed anger.

"This is Mary Brook," she said. "Do you remember offering me a position in your store?"

The answer, audible even to Mr. Stabb, came quickly:

“I most certainly do. Why? Are you considering it?”

“If the offer is still open, I’ll take it.”

There was a pause. Rasher was thinking fast.

“The offer is always open for you, Miss Brook. Nothing would please me more than to have you here. But I hope you realize that this venture may not succeed. I don’t want you to leave an assured place for one that may last only a little while.” He then added a remark that surprised both the listeners. “Mr. Stabb will be able to tell you that I am trying to raise money and have been turned down by the local banks.”

“I’m willing to take the risk if you——”

Stabb, pop-eyed, jerked the receiver from her ear.

“Here, here!” he exclaimed. “Think what you’re doing. I can’t let you go.”

“Too late, Mr. Stabb. My mind is made up. I leave to-day.” She opened the door.

A hard light flashed in the manager’s eyes.

“Very well, Miss Brook. I trust you will not regret this crazy impulse.”

After she had gone he stared at his desk, his lips moving. Rasher, Rasher, always this infernal Rasher.

A spirited and defiant Mary Brook left the office of James Stabb. She had voluntarily thrown over the best position possible in Adamant because the manager had attempted to dictate her choice of friends. She was leaving that hotbed of smug greediness to cast her lot with the fair-priced grocery venture of Harry L. Rasher, even though it seemed foredoomed to failure.

Mary Brook at this moment was tingling with the fire of the crusader. But as she hurried along other disquieting thoughts arose to cool the fire and retard her steps. Had she been forward in offering her services to Rasher? Would she be a help or a hindrance in his fight? Perhaps his earlier offer of a position had been an expression of sympathy not to be taken literally.

Almost at the door of the Eight Per Cent. Store she lost the momentum of her impulse, hesitated, halted, and then turned homeward.

Her mother greeted her with anxious concern.

“Mary! You’re home early. Are you ill?”

“No, mother. I’ve resigned my place. I’ve quit.”

Mrs. Brook’s heart sank, but, mother fashion, she concealed it and restrained a flood of questions. She merely said, “I’ve suspected you were unhappy there,” and put her arm around Mary’s shoulder, and in a moment Mary was sobbing in her arms.

“Oh, mother,” she cried, “it all happened so suddenly. Mr. Stabb threatened to dismiss me if I saw any more of Harry Rasher—said Mr. Rasher couldn’t be trusted—and I flared right up and quit. I then and there, right before him, telephoned Mr. Rasher that I would take that job in his store that he offered the night he was here for dinner. Of course he said to come, but on the way I got scared.

How can he afford another salary if he is likely to fail at any minute? It might embarrass him terribly."

"You like Harry Rasher, don't you, Mary?"

"Yes, I do. Why shouldn't I? He's really trying to do some good in this town, first exposing that bully Romisky, and now trying to give the people food at decent prices. Goodness knows I'd rather work for him for nothing than for the men who are trying to ruin him!"

Her mother patted her hand sympathetically and strove to conceal her misgivings. Mary's salary had been their mainstay. Another position as good might mean another town and—for her—the breaking of all home ties.

Their evening meal was one of alternating forced gaiety and brooding silence.

Neither was surprised at Harry Rasher's appearance soon after, but Mary, apprehensive herself, interpreted his cheerful greeting as a brave attempt to disguise a sense of impending disaster.

"We were cut off to-day," he said, "and

later you had left. What's the trouble? Has Stabb had the nerve to——”

“Oh, no, Mr. Rasher. We had no trouble. I just decided to leave.”

“And you're really going to work for me?”

“I—I'm afraid you don't need me, Mr. Rasher. I telephoned before I thought. I'm sure you won't be wanting to increase your expenses now.”

“Why 'now?' ” he asked.

“But aren't you—Mr. Stabb said your store would surely fail in a week.”

“By jove! And you left him to come to me with that prospect! But”—he looked at her searchingly—“but you didn't turn up. You thought better of it, and now you've burned your bridges——”

“Mr. Rasher! Please!” Mary leaned forward eagerly. “If I thought I could help the least bit, and not be a burden, I'd come instantly.” Then she added hastily, “I—my whole sympathy is with the Eight Per Cent. Store in this fight.”

Rasher looked at her thoughtfully. He remembered his first impression of her, the only bright spot in Adamant. And it took no great imagination to perceive that her friendship with him had caused the break with Stabb. With the courage of her ideals, she had been willing to exchange an assured place for one on a sinking ship—to sink or swim with the side in which she believed.

Mary's eyes dropped before his steadily softening gaze.

“Miss Brook,” he said, “my venture may not succeed. The Pioneer Stores are now selling at far below cost, but if I am frozen out they will return to their old exorbitant prices. I will not sell below cost because, in the first place, it isn't sound economics, and, in the second, I believe a business is entitled to a fair profit. I feel I'm entitled to eight per cent. on capital invested. Their profits have heretofore been very unfair. That is what I've been fighting to correct. It would naturally seem that I must fail, but, if you will come, your support and

encouragement will be wonderful assets, and if you're willing to take a fighting chance——”

“Of course I'll come.”

Mary couldn't help smiling, though she wanted to cry at his pathetic optimism. But the twinkle in his eye was deep-seated. It came from the ineffable glow about his heart, stirred by her unselfish friendship—true friendship, because she knew nothing of his fifteen million dollars.

Mary Brook's appearance as an employee in the Eight Per Cent. Store caused a flurry of comment. Had she left the Lannard Company voluntarily or had Stabb discharged her?

Most people were only too willing to blame the unpopular manager, and Rasher benefited by their sympathy. But soon a mysteriously inspired rumor spread to the effect that Rasher had acted unfairly toward Miss Brook in inducing her to leave a good position for a precarious one with a doomed venture. This soon reached Rasher's ears.

“They are blaming me for luring you away

from a good position," he said to her one evening as they walked toward her home.

She smiled.

"If I'm willing to take the chance, why should other people concern themselves?"

"You don't regret your action?" he asked.

"You know I don't." She looked up at him with unwavering frankness. It seemed a long time before he spoke.

"Even if I should fail to-morrow, you wouldn't regret?"

"No."

"You're sure?" He was very much in earnest, and stopped and looked into her eyes as though trying to read the depths of her mind. She met his gaze.

"Yes," she said, "I'm sure."

"I hope you never will, Mary." With an effort he withheld the words at his tongue's end. Not yet, he thought, not yet. He took her arm within his, and they resumed their way up the hill. There was something in the



“Even if I should fail to-morrow, you wouldn't regret?”

action that filled her with happiness. Words seemed unnecessary.

A soft breath of spring was in the air, and the hills across the valley were purple in the twilight. Each was conscious of a sudden electric tenseness between them. He laughed awkwardly.

“I’m glad I came to Adamant,” he said.

“I often wonder why you came, when there are so many more attractive places.”

“The attractive places aren’t always the interesting ones. It’s what you do in a place that makes it interesting.”

The tension was relieved and each spoke naturally again.

“You’ve surely done interesting things here!” she said.

“There are still lots of things to be done here. First, there’s the question of the store. The Pioneer people will continue selling below cost until they break me. Then prices will gradually creep up, and they’ll attribute it to crop

failures, or high freight rates or anything convenient."

"If the people understood, I'm sure they would trade with you in spite of the prices. They've always liked you, and I'm sure they sympathize with you in this fight."

"You would think so after the way the Pioneer people have robbed them. But I have no illusions. People will trade where things are cheapest, regardless. They will forget that I'm trying to help them, and I'll have to do it in spite of them." There was a touch of bitterness in his voice. Then he laughed. "But we're not broke yet! So please promise not to lose heart if things seem to go very badly in the next few days."

She promised unhesitatingly, although his words puzzled her.

At her gate they lingered, each reluctant to part. Down in the town lights were appearing in the cottages, and beyond, the dark masses of the steel plant arose under lurid smoke clouds.

The river was a band of silver between the hills.

She was looking down over the valley, the ugliness of which was mercifully veiled in soft twilight tints. Her lips were parted in a contented smile. A nicer profile than Muriel Lannard's, he thought, and a nicer girl, too!

"What are you thinking about?" he asked softly.

Her answer startled him. Had it been daylight his astonishment could not have escaped her.

"I was thinking of my cousin, Muriel Lannard——"

"Your cousin! Muriel Lannard your cousin? You never told me——"

"Why should I? Small cause I have to be proud of it! My father was her mother's brother. I'm the poor relation of the family." She was frankly enjoying his surprise. "She's coming in a few days, and I may introduce you. Only be careful not to lose your heart to her,

for she's very much engaged. I warn you she's pretty—and can be most attractive when she wants to.”

“When is she coming?” he asked gravely.

“The paper didn't say. It merely announced the coming visit of Mr. and Mrs. Lannard, Muriel and her fiancé, Count Boris Kolnokoff of the ancient Kolnokoff family of Kichenef. He sounds very grand, doesn't he? Aren't you thrilled?”

Rasher had not seen the announcement, but most of the people in Adamant and Somber City had read it with interest. In one household it was read with excited interest.

The approaching visit of the Lannards to Adamant meant, without doubt, the disclosure of Harry L. Rasher's real identity.

CHAPTER XV

FROM his store window he watched the steady stream of thrifty buyers entering the Pioneer Stores, across the street, to take advantage of the special sale, at prices below cost, and therefore below his prices. He took up the telephone and called the rival manager.

“This is Rasher speaking. I see you’re selling below cost. How long do you propose to abstain so nobly from profiteering?” There was a dry laugh.

“Not getting worried, are you?”

“That depends on your answer.”

“Well, Mr. Rasher, since you ask, I’ll say that we shall sell at any price we please for as long as we please. Is that all?”

“Still determined to freeze me out?”

“Don’t forget, Rasher, you started this fight.”

“All right. And don’t you forget that I’ll win it.”

“You’ll win it! Ha, ha! Where do you get that stuff?” But Rasher did not stop to listen to the laughter at the other end of the wire.

The Pioneer people were still chuckling when their attention was caught by a large placard that Rasher himself was placing in his window. It read:

“The Eight Per Cent. Store Closes To-night. Our prosperous rival across the street is selling below cost to freeze us out. We decline to sell below cost. Customers have no right to expect it. As we can not make a fair profit, we shall close—

BUT

the minute the Pioneer Stores raise their prices above what is fair and reasonable THIS STORE WILL REOPEN. THIS IS NOT A BLUFF.”

A similar notice was also distributed to every home in Adamant, together with a list of comparative prices—the Pioneer’s original price, Rasher’s reduced price, and the Pioneer’s “below cost” price.

“Study these prices and see how soon the Pioneer people attempt to work back to their old scale!”

All this had a very disturbing effect on some of the Pioneer crowd.

“Perhaps we’d better buy him off,” they urged.

But James Stabb, the silent partner, read the notice with characteristic contempt.

“Pure bluff,” he said. “Rasher’s bu’sted. He can’t open his confounded store again, and is trying to hold us up with his damned black-mailing scheme. I’ll see him in hell before I’d offer him a cent. Pay no attention to him. Only, be careful not to advance our prices too suddenly. Continue the present cut rates for two or three days and tell the people we’re taking a loss on some overstock. Then boost them gradually.”

Three days later the prices were raised above cost, and by the end of the week they had edged up above Rasher’s scale of what was fair. The Pioneer people were giving glib reasons for the

advance, and the indignant townspeople realized for the first time the significance to themselves of the fight that Rasher had been making.

In many a household sorrow was expressed that Rasher had been frozen out. Probably many a prayer was uttered in lowly homes, and, as though in answer, there came in the night the rumbling of heavy trucks to replenish the stock of the Eight Per Cent. Store, and bright and early Monday morning its doors stood open again.

This entirely unexpected move struck consternation to the hearts of the rival store. His confidential agent lost no time in reporting to Stabb, who for once found himself shaken. It was his habit to make quick decisions and stick to them, right or wrong. He was amazed now to find himself uncertain and irresolute. He took refuge in anger.

“He’s crazy!” he exclaimed. “He can’t keep up this opening and shutting his confounded place every few days like a Jack-in-the-box!”

It takes money to play that game, and he hasn't got it."

"But you said he wouldn't open it this time," protested the agent.

Stabb glared at him.

"We'll have to reduce our prices again," he asserted. "He's putting us in an awful hole with the people."

As a result of this conference the Pioneer prices were again cut and placards announcing the fact were posted. But the people only read and laughed, and then went across to the Eight Per Cent. Store to buy. Rasher had once more assumed in the eyes of the people the symbolism of good luck, and success was assured to his store.

The Pioneer people began gloomily to contemplate certain ruin, no matter what their prices, when, suddenly and without any warning, Rasher closed his store for a second time.

When Rasher closed his store for this second time everybody was thunderstruck, Mary

Brook perhaps the most of all. She observed him closely.

"I'm not crazy," he said, cheerfully. "It's the only way to impress upon the people of this town that the Pioneer people are pirates, incorrigible profiteers. I may have to go through this performance two or three more times before they are thoroughly convinced."

"But the people are all with you," urged Mary.

"All?" he asked, quickly, looking directly into her eyes.

She blushed furiously.

"All but the Pioneer people," she countered, smiling. "But, seriously," she added, "I think you owe it to the people who believe in you to tell them why you are closing."

Rasher agreed, and that evening word was spread that he would speak at the old Arcade theater the following night.

A big crowd, among which were over two hundred women, assembled to hear him.

There was no delay. Harry L. Rasher

walked out on the stage and stood on the same spot where he had fought Tony Romisky a few weeks before and crushed him before the amazed eyes of six hundred workmen.

Rasher wasted no words. He said he had come to tell the truth about the Pioneer Stores. He reviewed their wolfish record up to the time he had opened his store and the cut-rate war since that had supposedly frozen him out. The audience gave him close attention.

Then he said: "The man behind the Pioneer Stores is James Stabb, manager of the Lannard Mills." Expressions of indignant surprise swept through the audience. "He is the secret power, and his connection is in direct violation of the rules of the Lannard Company. He's deceiving the owners as well as you, the workers. Nearly all the misfortunes and distress in this town can be laid directly at that man's door." This remark was greeted by a roar of approving voices.

"James Stabb is old-fashioned in his ideas. Other plants have adopted modern methods in

their treatment of employees, but Stabb stubbornly clings to his old theories. And what are those theories? He says he doesn't believe in pampering his men. He says his only obligation to the workers is to pay them their wages. Their obligation is to do a full day's work, from twelve to fourteen hours. That ends it, in his opinion.

"Other great industrial concerns, more enlightened than this plant, are trying to promote a harmonious relationship with their men. They realize that the nation's greatest need is the establishment of a spirit of real cooperation between employers and employed. They're trying to improve working conditions, make sanitation better, make homes more cheerful, make good schools that teach children how to be good Americans, proud to be Americans, so that the working families do not have a blank wall to look forward to, but are given a share of the sunlight as they go along.

"That is what wise employers are doing, but

you see none of it here. And you will have none of it as long as James Stabb is here to practise his moth-eaten policies and bull-headed prejudices. He kills hope!"

As Rasher shouted these last words a burst of applause sprang from the crowd. His arraignment of Stabb had struck a responsive chord. Rasher raised his hand for silence.

"The president of these mills is coming to Adamant next Monday," he said in conclusion. "Let him know how you feel about James Stabb, and if your action results in Stabb's dismissal not only you but the stockholders of this plant will have reason to thank God that he's gone."

When he concluded a great crowd surrounded him. And that night the matter was discussed earnestly in many humble homes.

In the morning a committee of workmen came to see Rasher. They did not indicate what program they had decided upon, but they asked if he would be their spokesman in any

meeting they might arrange with Mr. Lannard. Rasher assured them of his willingness to act, provided no "rough stuff" was pulled.

"Your strength lies in being temperate," he counseled. "Rough stuff will put you at a disadvantage and defeat your purpose. Call on me if you think I can help."

During the ensuing three days the mill foremen were conscious of a hushed excitement among the men.

The train on which the Lannards were to come was due to arrive at the station at four the next afternoon. James Stabb, his fighting blood aroused by the report of the Rasher speech, determined to go up the line several stations and join the Lannard private car for the remainder of the journey to Adamant.

CHAPTER XVI

JAMES STABB boarded the Lannard private car several stations down the line. Rasher's attack worried him and he was now desperately eager to get the ear of Mr. Lannard before the latter reached Adamant.

After being introduced to Count Boris Kolnokoff, who was suavely polite, he and Mr. Lannard withdrew to a compartment, while the count and Mrs. Lannard resumed their seats in the observation room.

"Mr. Stabb seems to be a very forceful man," remarked the count with an amused smile.

Mrs. Lannard lowered her voice.

"He's an odious person. But he is necessary and we have to be polite to him."

The count smoked thoughtfully, his half closed eyes on the receding landscape. Mrs. Lannard yawned wearily.

“I can’t tell you how I dread this wretched inspection trip. It’s so tiresome and depressing, listening to the troubles of other people, and if it weren’t a matter of policy I don’t think I should ever come again. However, I wanted you to see the plant, now that you are a big stockholder in it.”

After a slight pause she continued, a trace of nervousness in her voice.

“I have not yet informed Mr. Lannard of the stock transfer. He’s so irritable of late and so obstinately opposed to a prenuptial settlement in Lannard Steel stock that it would precipitate a family crisis to tell him of it now. However, I hope he will be reasonable. It was my stock and by transferring it to you we are still keeping it in the family for all voting purposes.” The count bowed gravely.

“I shall regard it as a sacred trust,” he said. “You will never regret having signed the transfer.” His eyes lighted. “Do you know what happiness you are giving to Muriel and me? You are restoring my ancient family estates in

Russia, and some day, not too far distant, I believe, this Russian madness will burn itself out and the old families will come into their own again. Then you must visit us. You will love the old castle. It is very picturesque, a present from Catherine the Great to the founder of our family. And the peasantry! You will love them. They used to be so docile."

Mrs. Lannard's eyes glistened. There was magic in the words "estates," "ancient family," "castle," and "peasantry."

At this moment Muriel appeared. She tossed a book aside.

"What a stupid novel!" she cried. "I'd rather come out and talk to you. Well, mother, what have you and Boris been talking about?"

Boris, instantly arising, kissed her hand.

"There is only one thing I talk or think about," he said softly.

Muriel laughed. "Well, there will soon be a lot of other things. You will presently be on exhibition in the old home town. People will stare at you, committees will follow you with

stupid addresses of welcome, you will have to shake hands with loads of queer people, and you will have to look as though you enjoyed it. We always have to pretend it's perfectly fascinating, sloshing through those wretched streets and groping through grimy buildings with a lot of sweaty, half naked men staring at you."

She flung herself into a chair.

"It's a gay life if you don't weaken," she cried rather hysterically, and only the practised ear of her mother detected the faint catch in her voice. "I suppose papa and the amiable Mr. Stabb are deep in a confab. Mr. Stabb is such a lovely gentleman."

"Muriel, do be careful," cautioned her mother.

"But, mother, you know he's unspeakable. You've said so yourself ever so often."

"Quite true, my dear, but don't forget that he's very useful to us, too. I don't know what we should do without him. And besides I expect to marry him to Mary Brook if that be-



"You will presently be on exhibition in the old home town."

nighted girl has a grain of sense left. She's been acting the perfect fool of late."

Muriel's eyes sparkled.

"But you forget, mother, that Mary is in love with the truck driver gentleman, Mr. What's His Name."

"Perhaps. But that can be cured when I have a little talk with her."

Mr. Lannard and Mr. Stabb now joined the party.

"Well," announced the latter briskly, "we'll soon be there. Adamant's the next stop." He turned to the count, but, somewhat confused as to how he should address him, he broadcasted his next remarks. "I've been telling Mr. Lannard about conditions in the plant. Production is going up and conditions are greatly improved. The men are all at work, and except for the activity of one or two radical agitators there is complete harmony. This fellow Rasher that I've been telling Mr. Lannard about is trying to stir up trouble, circulating all kinds of lies about me and so on. But I should worry."

He affected a contemptuous laugh which only served to emphasize his uneasiness.

“Rasher?” exclaimed Muriel. “Why, that’s the man Mary is interested in.”

Stabb frowned unpleasantly.

“He’s a bad egg. I’m afraid he’s exercising some sort of hypnotic influence upon Miss Brook.”

“Leave her to me,” said Mrs. Lannard crisply. “And Edgar will have a word with the young man. If I am not mistaken he will listen to reason.” She rubbed her thumb and forefinger together expressively, a foreign gesture implying money.

“Here we are at Adamant,” said Mr. Stabb as the train slowed down. Suddenly the forward door of the car burst open and an excited man rushed in and whispered a few agitated words to James Stabb, whose face turned a ghastly white.

“Impossible!” exclaimed Stabb hoarsely; “they wouldn’t dare!”

“But they have!” whispered the excited messenger. “They’ve all laid down their tools and are waiting at the station.”

The Lannards, with Count Kolnokoff, had proceeded to the platform and did not witness the manager’s agitation.

A great crowd thronged the approaches to the station—men packed together in front, and hundreds of women pressing forward on the outskirts. A smile of gratified surprise lighted Mr. Lannard’s face. He thought they had come to welcome him, but as no burst of cheering arose he instantly sensed more serious business. He hesitated, then turned to wait the appearance of Mr. Stabb. That sea of silent sober faces staring at him was appalling.

A moment later the manager stepped on to the platform and a great clamor burst out.

“Down with James Stabb! Down with James Stabb!”

So that was their game! He turned a sickly white, wavered a moment, and then, regaining

control of himself, his features became set and stony. His eye swept the crowd for a leader.

“Down with Stabb! Down with Stabb!”

It was an ominous chant, and Stabb realized that now or never he must assert his authority.

“What does this mean?” he shouted. “Why aren’t you at work?”

“Down with Stabb!” came the resounding answer. “We’ll work no more under James Stabb!”

The little group on the platform paused, undecided whether to descend or to reenter the car.

“This is no time for weakness!” muttered Mr. Lannard. “Follow me!” He descended, and beckoned to the chauffeurs of a couple of cars that were waiting.

“Count, you go with the ladies,” he ordered. “Drive on through the town. Stabb and I will follow.”

Not a hand was raised against them. The car drove slowly up a lane that opened through

the mass of people, who, except for their deadly chant, might have been carved from stone.

Stabb, his arms raised threateningly, started to speak, but Mr. Lannard restrained him.

“Let me do the talking,” he said, and stepped forward. “Now, men, what’s the trouble? Don’t be afraid to speak out.”

There was no answer.

“Who is your leader? Let him come forward.”

“What are you afraid of?” shouted the infuriated Stabb.

“Shut up!” Lannard commanded. “Well, men, I’m ready to hear your grievances. I’ll be in town to-day and to-morrow. Go back to work, and send your spokesman to see me.” With coolness and dignity he walked across to the waiting automobile, followed closely by Stabb.

The car threaded its unmolested way out and caught up with the other machine, which had been halted on the edge of another smaller crowd at the intersection of the two main

streets, where stood the statue of William Lannard, founder of the steel plant.

Across the street like a barrier stood a row of men and women, holding a number of banners, upon which were written phrases in Russian. There was no hostility in their manner, but they were evidently determined that the foreign inscriptions should not be ignored nor passed with contemptuous indifference.

The count sat pale and tight-lipped, for the inscriptions referred to his checkered past. Muriel eyed him doubtfully. Her recent lessons in Russian only partly helped to make out the meaning. The others gazed blankly.

After what seemed an age, a voice called a command, the barrier parted, and the cars were allowed to proceed. They passed swiftly between the silent mill buildings, from which came no clamor of industry, no drone and whir of great machinery. The silence was foreboding.

At the edge of town, and beyond the grim faces which had confronted them ever since

their arrival in Adamant, the two cars stopped, and the men alighted to join the ladies and the count.

“Well, what does this extraordinary performance mean?” exclaimed Mrs. Lannard nervously. “Hadn’t we better leave at once?”

“It’s that fellow Rasher’s work!” cried Stabb. “I told you he had a personal grudge against me, but I didn’t know he could handle people like this ——”

“Oh, he’s Mary’s friend, isn’t he?” asked Muriel.

“Why, where is Mary?” interrupted Mrs. Lannard. “She usually meets us.” Her face hardened. “If she’s helping him——! Have her come to the car at once!”

By a roundabout way the party returned to the car, which now stood deserted on a side track, where it would remain while they stayed in Adamant. An automobile was despatched for Miss Brook, and Mrs. Lannard seized the first opportunity to question Muriel.

“Could you make out those dreadful banners?”

“I could guess,” answered Muriel in a tired voice. “They were about Boris’ past!”

“Good gracious! Well, don’t allow yourself to be influenced by such trash. Besides, you must remember that European customs are different. The morals of the high nobility must not be judged by our narrow standards.”

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Mary Brook.

CHAPTER XVII

MARY BROOK'S reception in the Lannard private car was what she expected—the usual condescension from her aunt and from Muriel a cousinly kiss in which their cheeks touched ever so lightly.

“Well,” exclaimed Muriel, “you’ve been having a romance, I hear! It becomes you, Mary. You look positively blooming.”

Mrs. Lannard interposed. There were weightier matters on her mind.

“Now, Mary, sit down and explain a few things. In the first place, I hear you’ve left Mr. Stabb’s office. And that you’ve taken up with some queer person—er—a—a—truck driver or something of that sort.” Her foot was tapping nervously. “What have you to say?”

Mary's eyes flashed and Mrs. Lannard shrewdly discerned that this was a new Mary. Here was spirit instead of humility.

"There isn't much to tell, Aunt Isabel. I left the company because I couldn't endure Mr. Stabb——"

"Or rather because you liked this—this Rasher person. Isn't that nearer the truth?"

"I do like him—very much."

Mrs. Lannard bit her lip.

"Tell me about him. Who is he, where does he come from, who are his people?"

"His name is Rasher, I think he lived in New York for a time, and I haven't the faintest idea who his people are."

"Humph! A pretty mess. He seems to have influence with the workers here. A kind of bolshevist, isn't he?"

"The men believe in him. I think he has a great deal of influence."

"Now, Mary, listen. I suppose he likes you and would do anything for you. I want you to send for him at once. If he has any serious

intentions toward you I think he can be useful to us."

"Oh, aunt, you wouldn't dare!" exclaimed Mary.

"Dare! The idea. Here's a sheet of paper."

"But, Aunt Isabel, I'm sure he wouldn't come."

"And why?" Exasperated, her voice rose, and Mr. Lannard came in.

"What's the matter?" he asked, looking from one to the other. Then, remembering, he shook hands with his niece.

"Mary is a friend of this Rasher. I've asked her to send for him. She declines."

"But why send for him?" asked Lannard.

"Mary says he has influence with the men. He might be persuaded to use this influence."

"Nonsense. I'll have nothing to do with him. He's not even employed in the company. I've already sent word to some of the older employees to send a representative to talk with me."

Mrs. Lannard looked at him steadily for a

moment and then left abruptly. In the observation room she found Count Kolnokoff, deep in a chair, gazing gloomily out over the silent mill town. Since the episode of the accusing banners he had been conscious of a marked coolness on the part of Muriel and her father. He felt that he must do something to restore himself to favor.

“Our niece is here,” began Mrs. Lannard. “She declines to send for this Rasher, who has such influence with the men.”

The count brightened. Here was a chance to redeem himself.

“Isn’t there something I can do?” he asked. “If he will not come here, I’ll go to see him. I’ve handled many such cases in Russia.” He smiled significantly.

Mrs. Lannard reflected.

“Perhaps,” she said. “Mr. Lannard refuses to see him or have anything to do with him.”

Mr. Lannard, with Muriel and Mary Brook, now joined them. In Mr. Lannard’s hand was an open note.

“Well,” he said slowly, “I may have to deal with Rasher, after all. This note says he has been chosen as their spokesman. George,” calling the porter, “I wish you would bring Mr. Rasher here. Miss Brook will tell you where he is to be found.”

During the porter's absence Mrs. Lannard stared rigidly out of the window, deep in thought. The count was effusively polite, and Muriel and Mary, on a couch, were talking in undertones. It was significant that Muriel directed the conversation to Mary's affairs and tactfully diverted it from her own. Mary thought this strange. It was unlike Muriel.

The porter soon returned, but without Rasher.

“I shall be glad to talk with you,” wrote the latter, “but not in private. If you will indicate a time and place where our meeting may be an open one I'll be only too pleased to meet you.”

Lannard lost his studied calm. His face

flushed angrily. Mrs. Lannard spoke sharply to her niece.

“You must send for him, Mary, at once, and see that he comes!”

Mary shook her head. “I can’t do it, Aunt Isabel.”

The count now spoke up.

“Let me see him,” he urged. “I may be able to manage the affair without Mr. Lannard’s help.”

Lannard shrugged his shoulders, which the count accepted as approval. He turned to Mary.

“If you will tell me where he lives, I’ll see him this evening.”

She gave him the address, and the count was vaguely conscious of an amused gleam in her eyes.

Shortly after eight o’clock Count Kolnokoff arrived at Harry Rasher’s boarding-house, shrugged his shoulders with disgust, and, after a time, was shown up to Mr. Rasher’s room. He knocked at the door indicated by the land-

lady and was admitted by Rasher in shirt-sleeves. The count bowed slightly.

“You are Mr. Rasher?” And when Rasher nodded, he folded his gloves neatly, laid his cane on the table, and sat down.

“I am Count Kolnokoff,” he announced, pausing for effect. “No doubt you know of me.”

“I have heard you are to marry Miss Lan-nard.”

Kolnokoff bowed stiffly. Rasher’s expression had remained unmoved, though his thoughts were racing. So this was the man Muriel had chosen!

“You wonder at my call,” said the count. “I shall come to the point directly. Mr. Lan-nard has been informed that you are the spokesman for the men. I am here to see if you can not be persuaded to use your influence with the men to get them back to work.”

“I don’t doubt your interest, Count, but this must be discussed with some one with authority.”

“I come with Mr. Lannard’s authority.” To amplify his importance the count was tempted to go further. “I also speak as one of the large stockholders of the company.” And he was gratified at Rasher’s startled expression. The name of Boris Kolnokoff had certainly never appeared on the official list of stockholders.

“You—what?”

“You doubt my word?” exclaimed the count. Rasher collected himself.

“I didn’t mean to express doubt, but I must be sure of your authority.”

“Let me convince you,” and drawing from an inner pocket a large, flat leather folder, he extracted a paper. “My credentials,” he said. “Mrs. Lannard has duly signed and transferred ten thousand shares to me. Are you now satisfied that I speak with authority?” He smiled and rather pointedly exposed a considerable package of bills. This maneuver confirmed Rasher’s suspicion concerning the count’s object, but it was not yet time to be insulted. Lannard’s majority almost within

reach! It was too good to be true, but he must play safe.

"I wrote Mr. Lannard I could not discuss this in private," he said smoothly.

"But, Mr. Rasher, you are an intelligent man. You must know matters of this kind are much better arranged quietly. The question is, will you help us?"

Rasher smoked thoughtfully. He appeared to be wavering. The count began to feel sure of his ground. If he could enlist Rasher's aid the deadlock in the mills would be broken and his success as mediator would restore him to favor with Muriel and her father. Since the afternoon's episode of the banners, they had been distinctly cool. It was imperative that he succeed in this negotiation.

"Count, the affairs of the company will continue in a bad way as long as Stabb directs them. Does Mr. Lannard expect to keep him?"

"Why, Mr. Lannard maintains it is his right to employ whom he wishes. I doubt if he will yield in a matter of that kind."

“Then you as a stockholder should know that the company will be bankrupt within three months.”

This was an angle the count had overlooked. The perspiration started on his brow. “You mean—?”

Both men were thinking of the ten thousand shares.

“To-day your stock is worth considerable money. Three months from to-day you’ll have a hard time selling it.”

The count became visibly agitated.

“Mr. Rasher, you have got to help us.” He glanced around the poorly furnished room. “You need money, and I am confident measures will be adopted later to better your friends’ condition. Come, you can make more in five minutes than you could in five years.”

Rasher again deliberated. The count took it as a good sign and drew out the heavy folder.

“The men trust me,” said Rasher finally, speaking slowly as though to himself. “I

would be selling them out. What would you do if you were in my place?"

The count flushed uncomfortably. It was an awkward thing to admit, yet he had so much to gain!

"You express it unfortunately," he said. "However, I will tell you. I should act as a practical man. With the world as it is, one must look out for himself. I should take it."

"Then you admit that you could be bought?" asked Rasher calmly.

"Sir! You mean to insult me?"

"If you consider it an insult, you must remember you have already insulted me."

An angry light flashed in Kolnokoff's eye as he realized he had been tricked. Rasher went on:

"With your philosophy of life, as you outline it, am I to infer that you have been bought in your forthcoming marriage to Miss Lannard and that this ten thousand shares of Lannard Steel is your price? You see, Count, you do not come to me with very clean hands."

Reason, which must have told him to avoid a quarrel, was routed and the count's eyes blazed with a fire that had been kindled generations ago in his Tartar ancestors. Discretion and diplomatic restraint were likewise gone.

"You are impossible!" he exclaimed, rising. "This is what I get for trying to deal with creatures like you! Out of my way!" And the count, cane in hand, struck out as his forebears struck petty human obstacles from their paths in days gone by. The cane, a heavy one, sent Rasher reeling, and a trickle of red stained his cheek.

If Count Kolnokoff thought he could angrily brush Harry L. Rasher aside with the same imperious impatience he formerly used on the *muzhiks* of his estate, he was mistaken. His hand was on the door-knob when Rasher, recovering his balance after the blow of the cane, was at his side.

"One moment," said Rasher. "Our interview is not ended."

The count paused.

“Not ended? What do you mean?”

“I mean that you are not to leave until you have apologized to me.”

The count's eye ran contemptuously up and down the slighter figure of Rasher.

“Bah!” His lip curled and he turned the knob. The next instant he was jerked violently back to the middle of the room. It was the first time in his life that he had been manhandled. An ungovernable rage blazed in his eyes. Without a second's hesitation he raised his cane to strike. One could not use one's fists in fighting an inferior. But the cane fell harmless to the floor.

Rasher's first blow crushed the count's nose, from which welled a crimson flood. The next two blackened the eyes, and another sent him floundering to the floor. He lurched to his feet in time to meet an uppercut that sent him crashing over a chair and against the slop jar, the contents of which completed the devastation of his appearance.

Rasher was standing above him.

“When you see Mr. Lannard, tell him you tried to bribe me. Now get out.”

The commotion had drawn a number of other boarders to the door.

“This man has tried to bribe me to sell out the men,” explained Rasher. “Let him out.”

Kolnokoff, a battered spectacle, glared at Rasher, and, with a final attempt at dignity, pushed his way through the group at the door.

Rasher was thinking fast. Would the count, in that condition, go back to the Lannard car? He decided not.

“Quick!” he whispered to one of them. “Follow him and tell me where he goes.”

An hour later he received a report that the count, without going into the station to buy a ticket, had boarded a train for New York.

Rasher hurriedly secured an automobile and from a neighboring town telephoned his trustee in New York. He was taking no chance that anybody in Adamant should overhear his conversation.

“Count Kolnokoff left Adamant on the nine-thirty train for New York. He has ten thousand shares of Lannard Steel, given him by Mrs. Lannard. Meet him at the station without fail and buy that stock. I think he will be in a mood to dispose of it to the first bidder who offers cash.”

Rasher emphasized the necessity for instant action.

His next move was to despatch a note to Mr. Lannard suggesting noon of the following day for a conference. Lannard agreed. He was anxious to have it over, get the labor situation adjusted, and return to New York, a sentiment heartily seconded by his wife.

“I’ll never come back here again,” she vowed.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT WAS not a cheerful group in the Lannard private car. Muriel sat deep in a big chair, gazing unseeingly out of the window. Mrs. Lannard attempted to read, but long moments passed without the turning of a single page. Her husband, hands behind him, paced back and forth, a habit he had when nervously disturbed.

The nine-thirty train had come and gone. Ten o'clock came, and with it the note from Rasher suggesting the meeting for noon of the next day. At eleven o'clock there was a growing concern about the count's continued absence which Mr. Lannard was the first to voice.

"I suppose your count has run into trouble," he said cynically. "For one, I'll not be sorry if he never comes back."

Mrs. Lannard became very pale. She seemed terribly agitated. Muriel was silent. If she resented her father's remark, she gave no evidence of it.

"Edgar!" exclaimed Mrs. Lannard, "you don't really think he's gone ——?"

"Well, where is he? There's nothing in this town that would keep a man up until this hour."

Mrs. Lannard's agitation swiftly reached a state of panic. The count had the stock, of the transfer of which her husband knew nothing. She burst into tears.

"Oh, Edgar, I should have told you! I transferred my ten thousand shares to the count."

Mr. Lannard, open-mouthed, glared wildly at her.

"You—what?" he gasped hoarsely.

"I transferred them yesterday. The marriage was only a few days off, and ——"

Mr. Lannard waited to hear no more. Pushing her aside, he rushed out of the car and,

bareheaded, ran to the ticket office, muttering to himself.

The office was closed.

“Quick!” to the porter: “Find the ticket agent and bring him here. Hurry!”

After an agonized wait of half an hour the porter returned with the agent.

“No, the count hadn’t gone on the nine-thirty train. At least he didn’t buy a ticket,” stammered the agent, catching something of Lannard’s alarm.

Hastily writing a despatch to his secretary, Lannard thrust it into the agent’s hand.

“Here! Get this off at once.” He waited as the words were clicked off. “Kolnokoff unexpectedly left. Has probably gone to New York. May have taken nine-thirty train. Meet him and prevent at any cost sale of Lannard stock which he has. Wire acknowledgment.”

It was about eight-thirty when Count Kolnokoff left Rasher’s room and started for the Lannard private car, but he stopped as he

neared the station. He knew his appearance must be terrible, for he could feel the swollen eyes and the sticky blood that smeared his clothes and face.

He could not confront Muriel in this condition. Pride and discretion alike warned him against revealing the miserable part he had played as mediator. He looked back at the town, where a somber silence hung over the mills—not a picture to cheer a timid stockholder.

He turned and walked out beyond the limits of the town until he found a little stream, in which he washed.

“Now what?” thought he, seating himself on the coping of the bridge. He was at the fork of the road, and he must choose which way to go. The day in Adamant had been unfortunate from start to finish. First the outbreak of the strike. Then those damnable banners! Who could have held such a grudge against him? He cursed softly. Sonia and Maria, mere paragraphs in the story of his

life, had arisen fatefully from the past to exact payment for their wrongs. Since the episode Muriel had scarcely spoken to him and her father had been frigid. And now this last miserable fiasco with Rasher! When they heard of that, all hope of his restoration to favor would be gone. He shrugged his shoulders, smiled bitterly, and looked at his watch.

It was after nine. Swiftly he walked back to the station, from the shadow of which he gazed at the lighted windows of the Lannard car, standing alone on its siding, until the ninety-three train came in, and then, waiting until it resumed its course, he boarded the forward coach.

And Rasher's man, who had followed him unobserved, took back his report.

Inside the car, the count paid a cash fare.

"Automobile accident," he explained to the conductor, who eyed him curiously but made no comment. "When do we get to New York?"

"Seven forty-five in the morning."

He pulled up his collar and slouched deep in his seat, gloomily facing the prospect of a long night on a local which carried no sleepers.

Cigarette after cigarette vanished as his mind restlessly went over the situation. Of course, the Lannards would try to recover the stock. But he did not feel in honor bound to return it. The compact had been a cold-blooded one. They knew he was marrying for money, and he knew they wanted his title. If some one must suffer, why should it be he? Besides, rich Americans were legitimate prey. Dollar chasers themselves, how could they complain when beaten at their own game?

The count found himself speculating on the value of his ten thousand shares of Lannard Steel. Figured in francs, it would be enough to keep him in Paris and Monte Carlo the rest of his life. Figured in rubles——! Colossal!

Late in the night he fell into a troubled doze, and was still asleep when a man, walking through the train and scanning each face, sat down beside him.

Back in Adamant, Mr. Lannard's slumber was equally disturbed. After sending his telegram he returned to his wife.

"I wired Benson to meet him and get the stock at any cost," he said coldly. "Does any one else know of the transfer?"

"I haven't even told Muriel."

"Well, it may work out all right. We will leave directly after the meeting to-morrow."

"What could have happened to the count to-night? Why should he leave without a word?" Mrs. Lannard, somewhat reassured by her husband's confidence, had regained her poise.

"God knows!" he answered curtly.

He felt that if worse came to worse he could probably buy more stock from the indifferent Livingston estate. But at best it would mean a big financial sacrifice to recover control. He finally fell asleep cursing the count and Rasher.

In the morning he tore open a telegram, but it was merely his secretary's delayed acknowledgment of the receipt of his own message. Efforts to reach the secretary by telephone

were futile. He had not appeared at the office that morning, nor could he be located at his own apartment.

Seriously disturbed, Mr. Lannard prepared to go to the hall designated by Rasher as the meeting place. Mr. Stabb arriving, the two men started at once for what was destined to be an eventful conference.

Mr. Lannard approached the conference with Rasher with two thoughts—one, to get it over as quickly as possible, the other, and dominant one, the imperative necessity of recovering from the vanished count the ten thousand shares of stock. He assumed no outsider knew of the transfer and that his secretary would have a clear field in his efforts to secure them. Unfortunately, he had not heard from his secretary.

He was, therefore, in no mood for cool deliberation. He was irritable and nervous, with moments of complete abstraction.

Several workmen were already seated in the conference room when Mr. Lannard and Mr.

Stabb arrived. The door was open to any others who might care to hear the discussion.

“I don’t like this,” said Lannard testily. “Matters of this kind should be conducted privately. Which of these men is Rasher?”

“Here he comes now,” answered Stabb in a low voice.

Into the room walked Harry L. Rasher. Lannard stared, speechless, rooted to his chair.

“Why—why——” he stammered. “What does this mean? This man’s name is Bacon. I know him. Explain yourself, young man.”

“My name is Rasher here, Mr. Lannard,” replied Rasher coolly.

“But why the alias? Stabb, this is most irregular. Am I expected to deal with a man who hides his real name?”

Lannard’s mind, over its first bewilderment, ran swiftly backward. The twenty-five-thousand-dollar check, Bacon’s abrupt disappearance, and now his presence here in the Lannard mills under an alias. It certainly looked suspicious. He scanned Rasher’s face for telltale

marks of crime, but all he saw was a pleasant young man, wholly intent upon the matter in hand.

Stabb, nonplussed at first, took his cue from Lannard and gloated openly. His early suspicions that Rasher was a crook seemed now confirmed.

Rasher's associates, too, were gaping. An assumed name? Already known to Lannard? Was he double-crossing them?

"My friends here will agree"—Rasher included them in his glance—"I could hardly have accomplished what I have tried to do for them, without interference from yourself, had I worked under my own name. Shall we begin, gentlemen?"

His assurance won out, thanks, possibly, to Lannard's uncertainty and preoccupation.

"Very well," said the latter. "Let's get it over with. What are your demands?"

"First, the dismissal of James Stabb as manager of this plant. The new manager must have a sympathetic appreciation of the prob-

lems of life that confront the working people. He must enforce here the more enlightened industrial policies now being adopted by an increasing number of intelligent employers. Temperamentally Mr. Stabb could never readjust his point of view. His dismissal is the first requisite to better relations.”

Stabb flushed angrily.

“Mr. Bacon,” said Mr. Lannard coldly, “you are using to me the language of a dictator. Do you expect me to surrender my right to run my own property as I deem best?”

“Conditions here, Mr. Lannard, are largely the fault of Mr. Stabb. I doubt if your determination to keep him and thus prolong an unprofitable business will be wholly approved by the other stockholders.”

Lannard flinched. He recollected vividly the strong anti-Stabb sentiment at the last directors’ meeting, when his will prevailed by only a small majority. And now—without those ten thousand shares? He cursed mentally.

“Well,” he said, “what else? Profit sharing; workers’ council; eight-hour day; tea-rooms?”

Rasher looked at him steadily.

“I am sorry you find this a matter for jest, Mr. Lannard.”

The quiet reproof made the latter flush uncomfortably. Rasher continued: “The second point is the improvement of living conditions here. I suggest that you and your family try them for a while if you doubt me.”

Lannard began an angry retort, but just then a telegram was handed him. The words, “Stock transferred and registered before he left for Adamant,” struck him like a blow. That hope was killed, then, and fear drove all else from his mind. My God, why didn’t Benson wire! Rasher noted his nervousness with something like relief. He himself had not heard from MacFall, but at least he could guess that Lannard’s people had not recovered the stock.

Lannard hastily looked at his watch, then arose. “I—I must go. Very important business,” he mumbled, indicating the telegram.

“There can be no business, Mr. Lannard, more important than settling this matter. The men are out and will not return until Mr. Stabb is dismissed. This situation, if prolonged, may lead to trouble, certainly financial loss.”

Stabb backed Lannard quickly.

“Let 'em stay out. We can stand it longer than they, and if they get rough we'll have the constabulary here at once.”

“I'm sorry, Rasher, but you'll have to tell your men we'll finish this discussion later,” and Mr. Lannard hurried out, half running. From Stabb's office he called his secretary in New York, but again in vain. On the verge of a nervous collapse, he returned to his car.

“Where are the ladies?” he cried to the alarmed porter.

“They've gone up to Miss Brook's for luncheon, sir. They didn't expect you back so soon.” Lannard threw up his hands in a gesture of despair and rushed out to resume his efforts to reach Benson.

CHAPTER XIX

AT THIS same moment Harry Rasher was climbing the hill to Mary Brook's house, in response to a note she had sent. "I've a surprise for you," she had scrawled hastily.

Mary Brook met Rasher at the door.

"As I wrote you, I've a surprise," she whispered; "but first, how did the conference turn out?"

"Nothing definite. Mr. Lannard seemed very much worried about something else."

He pressed her hand, and for an instant two misty eyes looked up into his. "But come," she said.

The front room, old-fashioned and comfortable, seemed dark as Rasher entered from the bright sunlight, and for a moment he was not conscious that others were there. Mary had begun, "This is Mr. Rasher——" when a sharp cry startled him.

“Why—why, it’s Harry Bacon! For goodness’ sake what are you doing here?” Muriel Lannard was shaking both his hands.

Mrs. Lannard was gaping wide-eyed. “Bacon—Rasher!” she cried, bewildered. “Mary, what is the meaning of this?”

Mary, the most surprised of all, stared from one to the other. Her cousin greeting Rasher as an old friend, and by a strange name! “I—don’t—know!” she faltered.

“So you are this Rasher person we’ve been hearing so much about!” exclaimed Muriel. “Why, it’s like a scene from a movie. I’m burning with curiosity! Why Rasher? And why the rôle of labor agitator?”

Mrs. Lannard was tapping her foot nervously. Her face was like a thunder-cloud.

“I assure you I didn’t know you were to be here,” Rasher said. “Mary spoke of a surprise, but I didn’t dream——”

Muriel still held him by the hand. “Sit down and explain a lot of things. First, that check! Mercy, how amazed we were! And we don’t

know yet where you got it. Mother said you won it prize-fighting; didn't you, mother?"

"At least that way," her mother answered stiffly. "I hope it was not acquired in a still more unworthy manner!"

Rasher laughed good-naturedly.

"I hope the money did some good," he said.

"But, Harry, you must have given all you had! And now you're here slaving in this hole."

Muriel's animation, unusual these days, and her evident enjoyment of the situation, was intensely displeasing to Mrs. Lannard.

"I think Mr. Bacon owes us an explanation of his extraordinary behavior, and why it is necessary to travel under an alias." She turned to the still wide-eyed Mary, and, quick to act upon a suddenly determined plan, led her from the room. "I must speak with you, Mary."

Muriel pushed Rasher, laughing, into a chair.

“Alone at last!” she exclaimed. “And now for a heart-to-heart! First, are you engaged to Mary?”

“No.”

“Of course you hate us, don’t you?” she asked. “Is that why you are making trouble for us here in the plant? And why did you leave New York that way—and where *did* you get that twenty-five thousand dollars?”

“One at a time!” he cried. “I don’t hate you in the least. I think you can be very nice sometimes—most of the time, if left to yourself. I left because I didn’t seem to be very necessary around your house. And the money was—well, given me by a good fairy. Anything else?”

“But why are you working against us here?”

“I’m not. I’m only trying to help some very poor and hard working people who need a friend.”

“You’ve become quite a power, I hear. Mary says you have great influence with these people. Have you?”

“A little, I hope.”

She studied him with a new interest. Yes, he had developed. There was a certain air of quiet mastery about him. It might be well to capture that influence.

“Well, why don’t you ask me some questions? Aren’t you interested—any more?”

“Your engagement interested me. You’re to be a countess, I believe.”

Her face sobered.

“The count left last night—quite suddenly. He went to see you, didn’t he? What happened?”

“The count was unfortunate in his tactics. We had words, and, I’m sorry to say, there were blows. I assume he didn’t return to your car.”

“No. Father and mother are worried.”

“And you?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Let’s not talk of it,” she said in a low voice; and yet when he did not press for an explanation she was conscious of intense disappointment. It piqued her to think that Harry Ba-

con, once her slave, could now be indifferent; and at that moment in her capricious heart was born a vow to hurt him as much as his indifference was hurting her.

But Mrs. Lannard and Mary now returned, one stern and aggressive, the other pale and subdued, and Muriel's new formed plan of action was deferred.

"Come, Muriel," said her mother; "we shall return to the car. We can not remain longer with one who is conspiring against our interests——"

"On the contrary, Mrs. Lannard," Rasher interrupted, "I wish the greatest prosperity for the mills. If I am representing the workers, it is because it is to their interests also that the plant prosper. A failing business means distress and worry for them. Can't you understand?"

Mrs. Lannard pointedly ignored him.

"Come, Muriel! And you, Mary, unless you act exactly as I advised, you must expect no

more favors from us! I trust your mother will soon be out again. I'll have some flowers sent up." And she walked haughtily out. Muriel lingered.

"Shall I see you again?" she said softly.

"I hope so," and he added quickly, "It's a small world—as you've no doubt heard before."

"Now, what did he mean by that?" she thought uneasily.

When Mrs. Lannard and Muriel reached the car they found Mr. Lannard engulfed in heavy gloom. He scarcely looked up at his wife's anxious inquiry, but indicated a telegram on the table.

She seized it and read: "The Livingston estate has bought the count's ten thousand shares."

The consequences of her wilful folly came home to Mrs. Lannard with crushing force as she saw her husband, broken-spirited, gray-faced, and suddenly aged. Why had she been such a fool to disregard his admonition and

trust a fortune-hunting nobleman? Desperately, she cast about in her mind for some way out of the miserable impasse.

“But, Edgar, the Livingston estate has no reason to want control,” she exclaimed. “They’ll surely sell it back to you! They’ve always been perfectly friendly and voted just as you wished, haven’t they?”

“At the last meeting,” answered her husband dully, “MacFall stood out against me for the first time—in favor of throwing over Stabb.”

“Then, for heaven’s sake, throw him over!” she counseled. “Don’t let any absurd sense of obligation to Stabb ruin your chance of regaining control. Telegraph MacFall right away and see where he stands. He’ll be reasonable. He doesn’t want control.”

Mr. Lannard, thus urged and reassured, sent the telegram to the trustee of the Livingston estate. Mrs. Lannard then prompted his next action.

“Now go to the second meeting with Bacon

or Rasher or whatever his name is. Be conciliatory. Agree to anything that will adjust matters so you can take back a good report and justify your recovery of control and your continuance as president. And don't lose your temper, no matter how insufferable he may be."

CHAPTER XX

IN THIS spirit Mr. Lannard went, and was greeted so pleasantly by Rasher that he decided there might be a chance of gaining his ends without the humiliation of yielding in the matter of Stabb.

“Mr. Rasher, I have decided to make all reasonable concessions to meet your demands. But, of course, I can not yield my right to choose my own manager.”

“Mr. Lannard, you forget that the dismissal of Mr. Stabb is the only demand we have made. We feel that better conditions will follow naturally.”

Lannard, his temper rising, recalled his wife's parting injunction and diverted the discussion from Stabb.

“What do you mean by better conditions?”

“Wages, hours, living conditions, cost of living—they are all closely related.”

“Living costs have gone down.”

“Yes, but only after an independent grocery curbed the Pioneer Stores.”

Mr. Stabb stirred uneasily.

“And hours and wages,” continued Mr. Lannard, to Stabb’s relief, “are determined by custom and the law of supply and demand. The twelve-hour day in steel mills is traditional. To change it would dislocate the industry. And you will admit we paid high wages during the abnormally prosperous war period.”

“It was to your advantage then,” answered Rasher. “You were operating on a cost plus basis. The government paid the bills. The more you made your product cost the greater was your percentage of profit.”

Mr. Lannard smiled sourly.

“Yes, and the government took it away in taxes. Those high war wages spoiled the working man. He got a taste of silk shirts and pianos and it’s like pulling teeth to bring him to his senses.”

“Everybody who got a taste of fat profits

or fat wages hates to come down," said Rasher.

"Young man, don't you realize what business has been through in the last two years? You come here, only a spokesman with little at stake. It is with our money that you would be generous. If you were the head of this plant instead of me you'd change your generous notions. If you people could occasionally see matters from our standpoint—you would be more tolerant."

"There!" exclaimed Rasher, "you've touched the big point. If the employer and employee could see things from the other's standpoint, and understand the hard problems, industrial relations would improve enormously. At present each wants to get the most out of the other. You have no conception of the workman's problems; he has none of yours."

At this point a telegram was handed Rasher. He read it with unmoved features.

"Fake telegram," whispered Stabb to Mr. Lannard—"to impress us. You got one yes-

terday—he has one delivered to himself today.”

Rasher abruptly brought the discussion back to the immediate issue.

“This plant is the most backward of all the independent steel plants,” he said. “We want to see it the most progressive and the most prosperous. There are still unskilled workmen here who work twelve hours a day at twenty-five cents an hour fifty-two weeks a year. Add eight hours’ sleep, an hour and a half to and from work, another to eat, and there are left only two hours of fatigued leisure for recreation, the duties of citizenship and home life. Fatigue and efficiency don’t go together, Mr. Lannard.”

“To be operated economically, these mills must cover a twenty-four-hour day with two shifts. Three shifts would destroy all hope of profit!”

“England, France, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Spain have abandoned the twelve-hour shift. Twenty steel plants in this country, Mr.

Lannard, are now running on three shifts," replied Rasher.

"But the men want to work the extra hours for the extra money."

"Not want to—have to!" exclaimed Rasher, "to support their families. If you and your family tried to live on twenty-five cents an hour, at the present cost of living, working twelve hours a day, your view-point would change."

This remark intensely irritated Mr. Lannard.

"Stabb, this man's talking like a lunatic!"

For the first time Rasher's eyes glittered angrily.

"Within a short time, Mr. Lannard, I predict——"

Lannard leaped up.

"What are your predictions to me? Come on, Stabb, we're wasting time on this—this drivel." Seizing his hat, he started out, followed by Stabb, who was plainly exulting.

"One moment, Mr. Stabb," cried Rasher.

“You are discharged. A check will be sent for your services to date.”

The two men halted and stared in amazement. Then Stabb tapped his forehead significantly.

“Crazy as a loon!” he exclaimed. “I knew all along there was a screw loose somewhere!”

“Crazy or not,” answered Rasher hotly, “your office must be vacated by Saturday. And I must have Mr. Lannard’s resignation by the same time.”

Rasher’s associates were looking at him with anxious concern. Such ravings could only be explained by the fact that he had collapsed under the strain. Even Lannard was affected. It is not pleasant to see a fellow man’s reason give way.

“This is awful!” he gasped. “It’s the first time I’ve ever seen a sane man suddenly crack.”

“It’s our salvation,” cried Stabb triumphantly. “In an hour the whole town will know their champion is a crazy nut. I’ll arrange it so he’ll be confined. His friends will testify.

He's got what alienists call delusion of grandeur."

The suggestion did not displease Mr. Lannard. It might be the best way out after all. And Stabb, jubilant, felt that luck had at last changed to his favor.

"I tell you," exclaimed Stabb to Mr. Lannard, as they hurried away from the conference with Harry L. Rasher, "our troubles are over. I'll have a commission of lunacy act at once—and thoroughly, believe me." He rubbed his hands eagerly. Rasher gone and his old unquestioned sway would be renewed! Rasher in an asylum and Mary Brook yet within his reach.

Mr. Lannard listened with mixed feelings. Except for the last few words spoken by Rasher in the conference there had been no evidence of an unbalanced mind. He had seemed composed and sane. However, it might be just as well to let Stabb go ahead and have a troublesome influence put beyond the power of causing further mischief.

The two men separated, Stabb to put his plan into effect and Lannard to go to his private car.

“What success?” asked his wife eagerly.

Muriel dropped her book and hurried forward to hear first-hand the verdict that might mean so much in their lives.

Mr. Lannard poured himself a stiff drink, swallowed it neat, and sank into a chair.

“Most extraordinary!” he gasped. “Muriel, did you ever notice anything queer about that young man?”

“Why, no, I don’t think so,” she answered, mystified.

“Well, he’s insane,” exclaimed her father. “I was never so shocked in my life.”

“For mercy’s sake, don’t keep us in suspense,” cried Mrs. Lannard. “What happened?”

“Well, we talked matters over. He acted perfectly sane, except for some of his arguments, which were the half-baked sort one might expect. It was only at their end, due to

the strain of the discussion, I suppose, that he suddenly blew up, talked like a madman, discharged Stabb, demanded my resignation at once, and—well, if it weren't so tragic, it would have been ludicrous.”

“There, Muriel!” Mrs. Lannard turned triumphantly. “I hope you will give me credit for good judgment. I never wanted you to marry him. I always knew there was something wrong.”

Muriel snapped back:

“Yes, mother dear, you wanted me to marry Boris, who has run off with ten thousand shares of your steel stock.”

It was a deadly blow, and her mother actually reeled. Recovering, she turned to her husband.

“Stabb is now preparing to have a commission of lunacy act. He is confident that he can exert influence enough to have the young man sent to an asylum at once.”

“Good!” exclaimed Mrs. Lannard, while Muriel cried angrily:

“Mother, you’re perfectly horrible. I’m going to see Harry at once.”

“You’re not! You stay here. Can’t you see how fortunate this turn of affairs is for us? Your father can now go back to New York, explain that the troubles in the plant are due to the pernicious meddlings of a madman, and he will have no trouble in justifying himself and Mr. Stabb to the trustee of the Livingston estate. He can then repurchase control of the company.”

Muriel bowed before this masterful summing up of the matter. After all, the main thing was to regain control. Why quarrel with the means of arriving at the desired end?

“But how about Mary?” she asked. “Are we to sit by and see her hurt? Shouldn’t I go up and console her?”

“Mary must marry Mr. Stabb,” announced her mother coldly. “He’s a strong man. He can keep her in her place. She won’t be running around with every crack-brained adventurer that comes along.”

"I'm going up there just the same," Muriel said with finality. "She likes Harry Bacon, though how much I don't know, and will be terribly cut up when she hears he's unbalanced."

Mrs. Lannard shrugged her shoulders.

"You'd better not meddle in the affair. Mary got herself into this mess, let her get out of it the best she can."

Muriel shot an unpleasant glance at her mother and put on her hat.

"And keep away from Bacon," her mother commanded. "There's no telling what a man in his state of mind might do. Goodness knows we don't want the scandal of tragedy just as things are looking so promising."

Muriel left the car and started for Mary Brook's home. Her mind was in a whirl of emotions, pity for Bacon, anger at her mother's heartlessness, a faint glow of satisfaction that she would be the first to impart the bad news to Mary.

As she walked quickly up the path she was panic-stricken to see the well remembered



“If he should ever ask you to marry him, don’t, don’t, don’t!”

figure of Harry Bacon, alias Rasher, in the act of ringing the bell. Muriel hesitated, irresolute, and then something urged her forward to join the unsuspecting young man. She reached the step before he heard her, and he swung around, startled. She shrank back in alarm, and the look in his eyes became even more startled.

They were thus facing each other when Mary Brook opened the door and confronted this amazing tableau. Muriel edged by Rasher and, seizing Mary, hurried her into an alcove in the hall.

“Quick,” she whispered, “in here! I’ve just heard something terrible about—about him! I can’t tell you now, but, Mary, if he should ever ask you to marry him, don’t, don’t, don’t! As you love your mother, as you love your happiness, don’t.” She whispered the tense words in great agitation. “Come down as soon as he goes.” And before Mary could stop her Muriel hurried out, casting an apprehensive glance at the astonished Rasher as she passed.

CHAPTER XXI

MURIEL LANNARD was sincere in warning Mary Brook against Harry L. Rasher. She thought him insane, and, although the belief was one born only since her father had related the amazing climax that had occurred at the conference, she now found herself remembering other things which seemed to support it. The twenty-five-thousand-dollar check given to charity at a time when he could have had but little if any more, his mysterious disappearance from New York, and his reappearance in the Lannard mills as a common workman under an assumed name—these things now assumed a different aspect, explainable only as the workings of an unbalanced mind.

Her throat tightened. To think of Harry Bacon, or Rasher, in an asylum! He who had

always been so nice and friendly! For once in her life Muriel was really stirred, and at the moment pity for Bacon was dangerously approaching love.

“What an irony of fate! Poor Harry,” she reflected, and then, with quivering lips, “and poor me! Heavens, I mustn’t fall in love with him now!”

Hurrying down from Mary’s, she soon reached the private car. Her father was slumped in a chair, staring blankly at the floor; her mother had been weeping. Muriel never remembered having seen her mother in tears before. A sudden sense of foreboding seized her.

“What in the world——?” she began, but her mother cut her short.

“Of all the damnable tricks of fate! How could we have been such stupid fools? Of all the——” Her voice wavered and she broke again into angry tears.

“Mother, mother! what in the world has happened?”

Mrs. Lannard dabbed her handkerchief to her eyes and with an effort controlled her voice.

“Have you seen Mary?” she asked.

“Yes; I just left her.”

“Did you tell her about—about Mr. Bacon?”

“He was there when I arrived. There was no chance to talk, but I managed to warn her not to marry him if he should ask her.”

“Do you think he intends to ask her?” said Mrs. Lannard in a queer voice.

“I really do, mother. He seemed dressed with more care. But I think I was in time to save Mary.”

“I hope so, my dear. I hope you were in time to prevent her becoming engaged to him.”

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll wait before giving a definite answer. I asked her to come here as soon as he leaves. But why all this sudden concern on Mary’s account? You didn’t feel that way when I went up. And you haven’t explained all this gloom and tragedy. What’s happened?”

Her mother paused a moment, and when she

spoke her voice again trembled with bitterness. She looked at her husband.

“Tell her,” he muttered.

“Muriel, Harry Bacon is the heir of the Livingston estate.” For a moment Muriel stood riveted, and then her knees gave way and she sank into a chair. Her mother, calm now, continued: “He is not insane. He controls the Lannard Steel Company and has the power to remove Mr. Stabb and your father if he chooses.”

“Impossible!” cried Muriel. “Father, it isn’t true?”

“It’s true enough,” he answered. “MacFall wired me not half an hour ago. There’s the telegram.” Muriel seized it. The words fairly burned into her consciousness.

“For all information concerning the attitude of the Livingston estate I refer you to Mr. H. L. Bacon, now in Adamant. He is the Livingston estate.”

Muriel threw her head back and a shriek of hysterical laughter, unpleasant to hear, burst

from her, laughter without mirth, laughter that made her parents look with alarm. Shriek followed shriek.

“Oh, what a joke!” she gasped. “What a—what a divine——” And then, quite as suddenly, she collapsed in a storm of tears.

“I love him, mother,” she sobbed. “I never knew it until this afternoon. And now—this!”

“It may not be too late, dear,” said her mother meaningly, as she stroked Muriel’s hair. “Mr. Bacon must, of course, not marry Mary. It would be a mistake for both of them. With her inexperience, she could not adjust herself to the responsibilities of the position his wealth will entail.”

“Over fifteen millions!” said Mr. Lannard.

“And now I suppose you want me to marry him!” Muriel leaped up and pushed her mother from her. “It’s in your mind, mother, and it’s perfectly abominable! Besides, he’s in love with Mary. We are getting exactly what we deserve, and it serves us right for the rotten way we’ve acted!”

Mrs. Lannard did not lose her temper. She was astute enough to know that this was a moment for repression rather than coercion. She knew her daughter and how to deal with her moods.

“Let’s get away from this place!” cried Muriel wildly. “I can’t stand it another minute. I’m sick of it all, and I’m sick of myself.”

“We’ll soon be going, dear. Go in and rest. If Mary comes, I will see her.”

Mary Brook at that moment was undergoing the most painful ordeal of her life. She had been profoundly agitated by Muriel’s whispered warning, “As you love your mother, as you love your happiness, don’t marry him!” The words were too horrid in their implication to be disregarded and she paused to regain a semblance of composure before facing Harry L. Rasher.

He came to her at once.

“What’s the matter, Mary? You’re as pale as a ghost.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “Why, you’re trembling all over!”

“I’ll be all right in a minute.” Her voice was hardly above a whisper, and her effort to steady it was apparent. She made a brave attempt to turn the conversation. “How did your conference with Mr. Lannard come out?”

“Please tell me, Mary. Did Muriel say something—or your mother, she isn’t worse, is she?”

“No, Harry, it isn’t that. It’s really nothing—much. Just something that upset me for a moment.” She tried gently to disengage his hands.

“If there is anything I can do, Mary—You know I would do anything for you.”

Her eyes fell, and she made no further effort to withdraw from his hold.

“You know that, Mary, don’t you?” he persisted. “You surely know I love you.”

She wrenched free from him then, and flung herself into a chair.

“Oh, please, Harry, not now—please wait—come to-morrow, or this evening,” she cried, her face buried in her hands.

He knelt beside her and put his arm about her shoulder.

“Mary, I worship you. You’ve been pure sunshine in my life since I’ve known you. I love you with every beat of my heart—with my whole soul, and I never want to be away from you as long as I live.” His voice was now trembling with deep emotion. “Please, dear, let me share whatever it is that troubles you.” He felt her shoulders quiver and knew she was sobbing.

“Please, Harry,” she murmured, “I’m so unstrung to-day. Won’t you leave me now—and—wait just a little while?” She looked up, and he saw tenderness in her eyes. If he could have looked into her heart at that moment he would have read all he hoped to find written there. She longed to yield herself to him, every fiber of her body ached for his embrace, but against this impulse of her heart arose in her mind Muriel’s imploring warning, unmistakably sincere, implying some dreadful thing the nature of which she could not even guess. She

could love him in spite of any crime he may have committed in that veiled past before he came to Adamant. But there might be other things—barriers too great to be overcome. She must hear from Muriel's own lips whether there was any real reason why she must never marry Harry L. Rasher.

These thoughts agonized her, and the man kneeling beside her saw that she was suffering deeply. He knew it would be the merciful thing to leave her now. But he had already foolishly delayed too long. Unfortunately he must have her decision this afternoon. To-day she thought him poor; to-morrow she would know that he was the heir of the Livingston estate, the possessor of a vast fortune. If she accepted him now, it would be an expression of pure love, unalloyed by the faintest shadow of a mercenary motive.

He was foolish, perhaps, but he was determined. It must be to-day; to-morrow would be too late. He groped in his mind for the words

to express this, and when he spoke he was conscious they were crudely inopportune.

“Mary, I want you to marry me. Under other circumstances I would be willing to wait years for you to decide, but to-day things have come up which make me hope you will say yes now.”

His words had a sobering effect on Mary. Unwelcome thoughts crowded forward. Why must he know to-day? Why should a delay of a few hours matter? This insistence upon an immediate answer vaguely gave support to Muriel’s warning. She took his hands and looked searchingly into his eyes.

“Why must you know to-day?” she asked in a low voice.

“I can’t tell you, Mary. It seems queer, I know, but you will understand soon. You trust me, don’t you?”

For a long time she was silent. Up to half an hour ago she would have trusted him implicitly. But if he really loved her, and there

were no real obstacle, what could a short delay matter?

“Harry, I can’t give my answer to-day. You, too, must think it queer, for I do love you—so deeply that I am frightened. You are never out of my mind. I think of you first in the morning, and with my last conscious thoughts at night. I’m sure you have known this”—she smiled faintly—“I’m not good at dissembling.” Then her face sobered. “But we seem to be in the same awful dilemma. Something came up to-day which makes it impossible for me to give you my answer now. To-morrow perhaps. I’m sorry—more sorry than I can say.”

She laid a gentle hand on his hair, and for a moment longer he remained on his knees, helpless, inwardly cursing whatever had made him leave so small a margin of time for the settlement of this all-important part of his affairs. Then, after an awkward pause, he left the house.

CHAPTER XXII

HARRY L. RASHER, after leaving Mary Brook, struck off into the hills to be alone, and did not turn back until long after dark. Little did he dream that beneath the faint glow far down the valley, which was Adamant, excited people were searching for him, or that his name was leaping from lip to lip.

Mrs. Lannard, like a capable general, was marshaling her forces to retrieve victory from defeat. After learning the crushing truth of his identity she planned and acted quickly. She sent for Mr. Clipper, the local editor, long a faithful cog in the Lannard-Stabb machine. He arrived flurried by the unexpected honor. She was friendly and serene.

“I have some news for you,” she announced; “I think you pressmen might call it a ‘scoop’ or a ‘beat.’ ”

Mr. Clipper assented eagerly.

“There is now no further necessity for its remaining a secret,” she went on.

“Ah, an engagement?” asked the editor quickly.

“Don’t jump at conclusions!” Mrs. Lannard wagged a deprecating finger, but her smile suggested confirmation rather than denial. “Of course, you know Mr.—the young man known as Mr. Rasher?”

“Why, yes, of course,” said Clipper, his speculations adrift.

“Well, he merely assumed the name of Rasher while playing a diverting rôle. His real name is Henry Livingston Bacon, and—this will interest you, I’m sure—he is the heir of the Livingston estate, which has such great holdings in these mills. He and Muriel, my daughter, have been friends”—she smiled significantly—“for years.”

“Ah,” exclaimed Mr. Clipper, “this is most interesting! But I thought Miss Lannard was engaged to Count—to that Russian nobleman.”

“Mr. Clipper, you have much to learn about the young ladies of to-day. Count Kolnokoff has been devoted to her, it is true, but the engagement—if one might so call it—has ceased to be. He has left, and is doubtless pleasantly engaged elsewhere.”

“Well, really, Mrs. Lannard, we never cared much about seeing Miss Lannard marry a foreigner, anyway! We preferred some good young American.”

Mrs. Lannard continued as though she had not heard his last words:

“Mr. Bacon is of an excellent family, and served admirably in the war. He is a splendid young American who will not be spoiled by wealth.”

She expanded the subject with many more details of young Mr. Bacon's life, and ended:

“His great holdings in these mills led him to come here quietly to study conditions, so that he might gain a first-hand knowledge of the property he may some day direct.”

Mr. Clipper sat up.

“Direct?” he exclaimed. “Is he to direct the plant?”

Mrs. Lannard shrugged her shoulders.

“He is young and energetic. Mr. Lannard is getting along, and will no doubt be glad to have younger shoulders take up the burden. He has been hoping to arrange matters so that we may take a long deferred trip abroad, where he can spend some months at a cure.”

Mr. Clipper looked concerned.

“I didn’t realize——” he said. “I thought Mr. Lannard was in excellent health.”

“Only lately has he seriously considered the necessity of taking life more quietly.”

“And Mr. Stabb?” inquired the editor with a faint smile.

“Why do you smile?” she asked.

“Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Stabb was in to see me not an hour ago. He told me he had arranged to have a commission of lunacy act upon Rasher—Mr. Bacon—and that by tomorrow he’d have him in an asylum. After

what you have just told me, his energy in this matter has its droll aspects.”

“Mr. Stabb could use the commission with benefit on himself! He will doubtless soon leave the plant,” said Mrs. Lannard coldly, and added quickly: “Mr. Lannard has been contemplating a change of managers for some time.” Mr. Clipper arose to go.

“May I ask, Mrs. Lannard, if I may safely intimate that a romantic attachment exists between Mr. Bacon and—your daughter?”

“There you go again, leaping at conclusions!” she smiled. “But seriously, Mr. Bacon *has* been devoted to Muriel for a long time. At first I opposed an engagement, in the face of his repeated proposals, and then he and Muriel had a misunderstanding, some trifling matter—you know how that happens with young people—and she, in a pique, became engaged to Count Kolnokoff, and I presume Harry has had his little fling in some other direction. Now that they have come together again—well—who knows? I hardly think it would be cor-

rect to say that they are engaged. At any rate, Muriel has not told me—though she saw him this afternoon and did seem quite excited this evening.” She sighed. “I suppose I’ll hear in good time.”

Mr. Clipper bowed, and, bursting with the whale of a story, tore up the street to see Rasher, who could not be located anywhere. The search widened, and the story flew from lip to lip, until the town was rocking with the sensation. Mr. Stabb heard it as a condemned man hears his sentence.

Mary Brook did not know until she picked up the paper at her door next morning and read the flaming head-lines: “Harry Rasher Identified.” Faintness seized her, and dread. Sick at heart, she nerved herself for the blow and unfolded the paper.

“HARRY RASHER IDENTIFIED AS
HEIR OF VAST ESTATE.”

Incredulous astonishment succeeded Mary’s fear. Breathless, she read on:

SOLE HEIR TO GREAT LIVINGSTON FORTUNE!
FASCINATING ROMANCE REVEALED.

Yesterday afternoon the identity of Harry L. Rasher became known in Adamant. His real name is Henry Livingston Bacon, nephew of the late Henry Livingston, who left a fortune conservatively estimated at fifteen million dollars. Mr. Bacon is the sole heir to this vast estate.

This astounding revelation will be good news to the people of this city, among whom, as Rasher, the young man won deserved popularity by his fine qualities. His friends will further rejoice to learn that Mr. Bacon's fortune includes large holdings in the Lannard Steel Mills, and it was to familiarize himself quietly and at first hand with the problems of this industry that Mr. Bacon came here incognito.

He has displayed such an intelligent interest in local affairs that he is certain to take a place of high leadership in promoting the future progress and welfare of this city.

Still gasping with astonishment, Mary's first reaction was one of indignant disgust at the sudden change of tone in speaking of him now that he was rich. Then it came over her in a

sort of despair that *this* was why he had wanted her answer at once. How could she accept him now? He would distrust her always! But the next words sent her heart pounding in a different fear:

Adamant will be doubly interested in the romance revolving about Mr. Bacon. For years he has been devoted to the beautiful and charming daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Lannard, who is here with her parents, and, while it may be premature to announce the engagement of this favored couple, yet their romance has been a subject for interested gossip in New York society for some time.

The glow was gone for Mary. Harry and Muriel old sweethearts? Surely he would have told her—it was incredible that he had been merely amusing himself! Suddenly her brows contracted. Had this anything to do with Muriel's frantic warning? Had it been a ghastly trick to save him for herself? Hurt and heavy-hearted, she scanned the lines which now were blurred. Little details of his earlier life, his splendid college career, his brilliant war

record, his likable qualities, his exemplary character, his love of adventure—all duly chronicled to the editor by Mrs. Lannard, whose name, at her request, was not given as the source of information.

Only a casual reference was made to the Kolnokoff affair:

Since Miss Lannard's arrival here, and her meeting again with Mr. Bacon, a tentative engagement with the distinguished nobleman, Count Boris Kolnokoff, has been terminated and the count has left. The significance of this can not be mistaken and all Adamant will hope that the Lannard and Bacon interests in this great steel plant will fittingly be united in a romantic as well as a business relationship.

Mary, seated on the door-step, gazed seriously across the town sprawled along the river's edge. Subconsciously she noticed that the mills were again in full operation, the steady drone of machinery reaching her ears with accustomed volume, the smokestacks and steam jets waving their usual black and white plumes above the grimy buildings.

And she had refused to give him an answer yesterday! She drew a deep breath and went up to her mother's room.

“Can you stand something quite exciting, dear?” she asked, and, handing the paper to her mother, went into her own room.

CHAPTER XXIII

DOWN in the streets of Adamant the sensation caused by the newspaper article can be likened only to that produced by an air raid on a sleepy inland town hitherto unmolested.

In consequence of a press association despatch, Adamant leaped suddenly into the fierce limelight of national interest. For the first time it became a news center of the first magnitude. Special correspondents began arriving by train and motor, and a special writer and photographer planed in from New York.

Miss Lannard was interviewed. When was she to marry Mr. Bacon? How long had she known him? When did she first learn he was rich? Why did she break with Count Kolnokoff. Did she break the engagement or did he? Blanket denials were in vain. A snapshot caught her at the car window. At first violent-

ly indignant at this invasion of her private affairs, she gradually came to find a certain sense of pleasant importance in being the center of such persistent interest. Her denials became less positive. Down in her heart she knew she should yield the heroine rôle to Mary Brook, but the intoxicating glamour of sudden celebrity was too sweet. It was incense to her vanity. Her engagement to a title had caused a mere ripple of public interest compared to this stupendous splash. There sprang up in her heart a fierce hope that Harry Bacon might yet confirm her right to all this alluring publicity.

By evening the corps of correspondents had increased and the alarming development of the day was the fact that Mr. Bacon had not been seen by any one since the evening before.

While the wires sizzled with telegraphic demands from impatient editors to get full interviews with Bacon, "world's richest bachelor," the corps of resourceful special correspondents launched a sweeping campaign to locate that

young man. The neighboring towns and country roads were combed by search parties, who questioned every lonely household, but who had no picture to work from. People in Adamant then recalled that he had always refused to be photographed.

One correspondent flashed his office: "Bacon missing since yesterday. Foul play feared."

Adamant, stirred to its center by the sensational revelation of Bacon's identity, was now convulsed with the exciting rumors developed by his mysterious disappearance.

Muriel alone knew that he had been last seen by Mary Brook, and said so to her mother.

"Could he be there still?" asked Mrs. Lanard. "He might have wanted to add excitement and increase his publicity." She knitted her brows. "I think you'd better run up to see Mary. But don't let the reporters know. They mustn't under any circumstances interview Mary. Find out what she knows"—here a thought struck her—"and I think Mary had better leave Adamant. Ask her and her mother

to return to New York with us. Tell Mary she owes it to her mother's health. Put it strong."

With these instructions Muriel departed on her mission. By a roundabout way she eluded the newspaper men and was relieved to find her arrival at the Brook house was unobserved.

Mary greeted her coldly.

"I don't blame you for hating me, Mary, but please believe me when I tell you I acted for what I thought was your own good. Father told me Harry had suddenly shown unmistakable signs of insanity, and we knew he had acted queerly several times before, so I thought it was true and came to warn you. Of course he wasn't, but all that explanation came out afterward. But where in the world is he? The whole town is agog!"

"I haven't the faintest idea," was the short response, and Muriel, sensing the futility of persisting, changed the subject.

"Mary, is your mother any better? Wouldn't a few weeks at our place in the Adirondacks restore her completely? Mother is worried

about her and told me positively that you were both to leave with us to-day. I'm sure it will mean health to your mother—the best air, the best food, a splendid doctor, and absolute quiet in the most beautiful surroundings.”

Mary hesitated, and Muriel, guessing the cause, added at once:

“We can leave your address, so that your friends will know where you are. You don't think anything has happened to Harry, do you? How did he act when he was here yesterday? Did he propose to you?”

But Muriel's curiosity was not to be satisfied. All Mary said was:

“I don't believe anything has happened to him. He probably anticipated and wished to avoid all this conspicuousness.”

“Weren't you terribly surprised to hear that he was so rich?” Muriel tried again.

“Certainly. Weren't you?”

Muriel equivocated easily. “I suspected it. You see, we're old friends, Harry and I.”

“So I gather from the paper this morning.

I knew you had met, but why did you never tell me—the rest?”

“Oh, those dreadful papers!” exclaimed Muriel. “They print the most outrageous things! But seriously, you must bring your mother with us. I know you want to stay here, but do you think it would be right to do so at the expense of your mother’s health?”

It was a powerful appeal, the only one which could have influenced Mary. Before Muriel left it was arranged that Mary and Mrs. Brook were to join the Lannards on their car and go east that afternoon.

“Good,” was the only comment Mrs. Lannard made when she heard.

“Have the reporters been here while I was away?” asked Muriel.

“No; they’re all scouring the country for Mr. Bacon. It’s most extraordinary. I should have thought a young man who has always been so obscure would delight in all this sudden glory. The mayor and all the prominent citizens of Adamant are preparing a reception

for him when he does come back. There's to be a parade, speeches and all the frills. They wanted your father to preside, but he declined."

Muriel laughed. "They ought to ask Mr. Stabb." This drew a faint smile from her mother.

"Poor Stabb! MacFall has just wired asking that he be discharged and that the wages of all the common steel laborers be raised to thirty-six cents an hour. I think I see the hand of your Mr. Bacon in this, so he must be alive and well somewhere!"

Which was true. Although somewhat changed from the shabby young man who had first appeared in Adamant in a battered flivver, Harry Bacon was swiftly approaching the town for the second time in an automobile.

It might have been expected that Henry Livingston Bacon, alias Harry L. Rasher—the Haroun-al-Raschid of to-day—would make his reappearance in the streets of Adamant a spectacular event in contrast to his first and very humble entrance several months before. But

he did not yield to this temptation. This time, as before, he came in a lowly flivver, but he was no longer shabby. His old clothes, which by long usage were familiar to the people of Adamant, were now replaced by new ones.

He drove at once to the home of Mary Brook, but it was closed. There were indications that it had been shut up in preparation for a considerable absence. The shades up-stairs and down were closely drawn. Mystified and disturbed, he drove slowly down the crooked hill street and stopped before the cottage of one of the workmen. A number of children rushed out and, instead of greeting him with the usual clamorous friendliness, they stared at him in wonderment. They were abashed and awed. The story of his wealth had reached them. From behind window curtains peered excited faces, and Harry Rasher sensed with sadness the new relation in which he stood in their eyes. Gone was the pleasant comradeship that existed when he was supposed to be poor. A

barrier had arisen. He was now of the other and, to a degree, distrusted class.

“Hey, there!” he shouted. “What’s the matter with you kids? Don’t you know me?”

Solemn eyes regarded him. The smaller ones edged off, but presently one of the larger boys answered.

“Yes, sir, you are Harry Rash—Mr. Bacon,” he stammered awkwardly.

“Well, what’s the matter anyway? What’s happened?”

“We read about you in the papers.”

Rasher smiled a little sadly.

“Have any of you boys seen Miss Brook?”

They crowded forward.

“Yes, sir, she went in an automobile—her mother, too, and a trunk. She stopped to say good-by to us. She’s going on a train.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

Now there was silence. No one ventured a guess, so he drove on down the hill. He was conscious of amazed eyes following him as he

drove through the town. Where formerly he had been greeted with friendly nods, there was now respectful silence. People rushed to windows and doorways to regard him with absorbed interest. A millionaire—a multimillionaire? But why was he in that old car, with all his millions? It defied their understanding.

As he stopped to telephone to the railway station a crowd quickly gathered and watched him with gaping interest. His romantic story was now public property. For nearly two days his name had been upon the lips of every one. As he arose from the phone the proprietor of the store came up, smiling effusively.

“Just drop in any time, Mr. Bacon, when you want to use the phone. Always glad to see you.”

Bacon thanked him. This was one of the men who had been afraid to be civil to him in days gone by for fear of displeasing the Pioneer crowd. He was now unctuously affable.

From the station master Bacon learned that Mrs. Brook and her daughter were on the

Lannards' private car, which was now attached to the east-bound train and was due to leave at once. Bacon leaped into the flivver and dashed madly toward the station. Already the excited station agent had rushed out on the platform shouting wildly, "Bacon is in town! He's on his way down!"

The commotion caused by this announcement was electric. A crowd of correspondents and photographers were present to see the Lannards leave. Miss Lannard was posing on the back platform for a final picture, and as she posed the reporters were firing a volley of questions at her. When was the engagement to be announced? Had she heard from Mr. Bacon? Was he to join her at some station farther along? Wasn't it true that she knew all along where he was? Was it true that they were already married? And a score of other questions which she parried with pleasant evasiveness.

It was in the midst of this rapid-fire interview that the station master's shout exploded

like a bomb: "Bacon is in town! He's on his way down!" A tearing rush of correspondents dashed away to meet the mysterious Bacon, a battery of cameras swung away from Miss Lannard to catch the arrival of that young man, and from the interior of the car came the pretty girlish figure of Mary Brook, cheeks flaming with excitement and heart pounding at the thought that Harry Rasher—Mr. Bacon—was coming.

The conductor was impatiently looking at his watch.

"Shall I hold the train?" he asked Mr. Lannard, but was answered quickly by Mrs. Lannard.

"No," she said, "it is not necessary."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE train was in motion when a flivver shot up to the platform and Harry Bacon leaped out against a wall of special correspondents and photographers. From both sides hands were seizing him and a hurricane of questions bombarded his ears. Struggling through the barrier, he sprang upon the platform of the car. And then, to the amazement of the reporters, he pressed by Miss Muriel Lannard and was seen to intercept a second young lady who was endeavoring to reenter the car. For a moment he held her hand and spoke tensely and earnestly. Miss Lannard hastily disappeared, and as the train swiftly receded only the two figures of Mr. Bacon and Mary Brook remained on the platform.

“My Gawd!” exclaimed a reporter. “Now what do you make of that?”

On the back platform of the moving train, the click of the rails steadily increasing, Harry Bacon held the hands of Mary Brook in a determined clasp while he raised his voice in appeal.

“Mary, you know I love you! Won’t you—can’t you tell me you will marry me?”

She avoided his eyes, fearing to trust herself, her heart singing with the happiness of hearing his words but her thoughts swirling in a panic of emotions. She had not accepted him when she thought he was poor. To do so now might be forever misunderstood. In a calmer moment he would surely think of it, and the thought would always be in the background of his mind.

“Please answer me, Mary.” And as she remained silent he went on: “Is it the fact that I am rich that makes you hesitate? Remember, I was rich all the time I was falling in love with you.”

He seemed to have read her thoughts, and she was startled into words.

“But, Harry, how would you know that it was you I loved and not this great fortune? I wouldn’t give you my answer the other day before I knew. What must you think of me if I accepted you now?”

“But you said you loved me then,” he answered. “That is all I want to know.”

“I hesitated because they said you were insane——”

He laughed. “I am—about you! Who gave you that information?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to answer, but she forbore. She looked off down the receding tracks. Why complicate matters by telling the part Muriel had played?

“Of course they thought I was crazy,” he continued. “I wanted them to. I purposely discharged Mr. Stabb when neither he nor Lannard knew I had a cent. That certainly sounded like the ravings of a lunatic.”

A sudden fear assailed her. Even now he was talking oddly. How could he discharge Stabb? She did not realize the extent of his

Lannard Steel holdings. Again he answered her thoughts.

“You are surprised. You perhaps don’t know that I have the controlling interest in the mills now.” And then, as though regretting his words, he hurried on: “But this isn’t what I want to talk about, Mary. I want you to be my wife. Can’t you understand? My money made no difference in my feeling toward you in Adamant. Why should it hereafter?”

“I believe you, Harry,” she said, deeply moved, “and I do love you. Please believe me, Harry. I have for a long time. Mother knows, and I thought you must have known, too. But”—she hesitated—“now you are so rich a great world of possibilities is open to you. I want you to be sure of your feeling. In Adamant there were no other girls. Mere propinquity might make you think you cared for the only one you knew while there. In New York it will be different. There will be lots of them. You are a great catch—every door will be open to you. How soon will you dis-

cover that I am a very plain, simple person compared to those you will meet?"

"Mary, that's all nonsense, and being a 'catch' is just what I want to avoid. I'm old enough to know what I want, and I want you!"

"But—Muriel?" she questioned. "I think she loves you, too, and you used to love her, didn't you?"

"Yes, I thought I did, but never like this."

She smiled faintly, and felt herself driven to her last defenses.

"Harry, if you love me six months from now and still want me to marry you, I will, but if in that time you waver even the least bit you must be free to do as you wish. You see," she said wisely, "I know what temptations you are to meet. Until then—any thought of me must not influence you."

He looked at her for a moment, then his eyes twinkled with a sudden decision.

"It's a bargain," he said. "And now good-by till I come back for you."

The platform was swaying as the train, now

at high speed, swung dizzily around a curve. To her horror Harry calmly placed his hands on the rail preparatory to vaulting over it—to certain death, she thought.

“Harry!” she screamed, and clutched him wildly. He turned, smiling at the success of his ruse, and in an instant she was in his arms, and with misty, half closed eyes was yielding to the happiness of his kisses.

“You’re engaged to be married, Mary. Now let’s go in and break the news to your relatives and get it over with!”

Instantly her face sobered. She pushed him from her and he saw tears standing in her eyes.

The abrupt change in Mary Brook’s demeanor alarmed Harry Bacon. “Mary!” he exclaimed. “You’re crying! Why, what have I said—or done? Please look at me.” He had her shoulders in two firm hands. With an effort she controlled herself and looked up into his troubled eyes.

“I’m sorry, Harry. I didn’t mean to act

this way. You'll think me very silly, but"—her voice wavered—"Harry, I'm frightened to death at the mere thought of living up to the responsibilities of being your wife. When you were just Harry Rasher it was different. Now that you are Mr. Bacon, so vastly rich and with a great position in life to fill—why, I'm just petrified—somehow I don't see myself fitting in at all."

His seriousness relaxed and he smiled.

"You need never worry about that, Mary. You'd fit in any place that a real girl would fit. Would you have married me in Adamant when you thought I was poor?"

"I would have married you at any moment in the last six months—if you had asked me."

"Then it's because I'm rich that you now hesitate?"

She smiled whimsically. "I suppose I should be jumping at the chance of marrying you—most girls would, I'm sure, but now that you have become so—so eligible in the eyes of the world I'm afraid"—her voice trembled and she

now voiced the fear that was uppermost in her heart—"I'm afraid I couldn't hold you."

He laughed at the very idea and pressed her hands reassuringly.

"No, Harry, don't laugh. I'm serious. I don't think you quite realize what lies ahead of you. You will be moving in a world that I don't know. I'm afraid I'll be dreadfully out of place—and I don't want you to be hampered. You have in your power to do such wonderful things and you've made such a perfectly splendid beginning. Oh, Harry, I wish you could understand how I feel! And there are still great problems that you can help solve. The biggest of all is the relationship between employers and employed. You are in a position to know both sides, to understand something of the two points of view, for you have been an employee and now you are to be an employer. You are rich enough to be unselfish and young enough to have ideals. Why, Harry, a wonderful world opens up to you if you remain as strong and as fine as you've been."

She spoke very earnestly. It was of him she was thinking and not of herself, and he saw in it the expression of the highest form of love.

“Everything you say makes me want you more and more,” he answered. “You could help so much.”

“You may feel that way now, Harry—and it makes me very proud to have you say it—but the real test is yet to come. Now that people know you are rich there will be such temptations which even you may find hard to resist—and you will meet beautiful and fascinating girls who, by comparison, will make me seem very plain and unattractive.”

One by one she was marshaling up the possible objections to their married happiness.

“I think you should wait until you are absolutely sure—and besides,” she hurried on, “there’s another reason. My mother is now very ill. I must stay with her until she is well or much better. That’s why we came on this trip.”

He put his arm around her.

“I’d like to get off at the next station and get married. That’s the way I feel about you, Mary. But if you want me to wait a while, of course I will. Only remember this, we’re engaged from now on. Aren’t we?”

The happiness in her eyes was his answer.

Behind them the door opened and the porter came out with a wrap for Miss Brook.

“Mrs. Lannard thought you might be cold,” he said. “She also wishes you to ask Mr. Bacon to stay to dinner.”

“Come, Harry, we must go in. And please be polite to Aunt Isabel,” she whispered as she led the way into the car. He was very uncomfortable at the thought of again facing the people who had been so unkind to him.

Mrs. Lannard, who had been a smoldering volcano of anger since leaving Adamant, instantly masked her feelings behind an exterior that was *sauve* and dignified.

“We hope you will stay for dinner, Mr. Bacon, and go on to New York with us if you desire. There are doubtless many business mat-

ters which you and Mr. Lannard will wish to discuss. Please make yourself quite at home. Mary's friends are my friends."

Mr. Lannard, less skilled in dissembling, remained in his stateroom, but Muriel presently appeared, and if there was an ache of disappointment or humiliation in her heart it was not reflected in her eyes.

"Well, have you two fixed it up?" she asked gaily.

It was young Mr. Bacon who answered quickly.

"Mary and I are engaged," he said. "We are to be married as soon as her mother is better."

It was a bitter moment for Mrs. Lannard, but, true to her code, she concealed it. Except for a slight twitching of her lips there was no sign of the raging emotions within. She kissed Mary with a show of warmth, and after a moment, pleading weariness, she went unsteadily to her stateroom.

Later in the evening as Harry and Mary sat

in the friendly darkness of the observation platform he smiled at the thought that if only he remembered what he had done with his little note-book he could now put an X before "snob-bishness."

CHAPTER XXV

HARRY BACON did not go on to New York in the Lannards' private car. He said good night to Mary Brook at a town from which he planned to catch a later train due in the city the following forenoon.

"I'll call you up as soon as I get in," he whispered. "Please thank Mrs. Lannard for her kind invitation to go on with you to-night, and say I shall hope to thank her myself to-morrow."

He watched the train pull out, waving as long as the graceful figure on the back platform was distinguishable, and then settled down for a weary period of waiting.

His thoughts followed the Lannard car, which when midnight came, he imagined as being darkened, with its occupants wrapped in slumber. He did not dream that upon four

pillows in that car lay restless heads that vainly courted sleep.

Mr. Lannard, rudely jolted out of his smug complacency by the events of the last few days, lay staring up into the darkness, a prey to gloomy thoughts. What fateful changes those days had wrought!

He had lost control of the Lannard Steel Mills and could no longer order the direction of its destinies. This was a bitter blow to his pride. It would be interpreted as a symbol of failure. He could foresee the waning regard among those of his club associates whose friendship warms pleasantly under the glow of financial solvency and cools perceptibly when financial distress appears. He would be pitied! It was intolerable!

In an adjoining compartment Mrs. Lannard lay wide-awake, with lips tightly compressed. By nature unyielding, she had not yet given up hope that out of this wretched mess her resourceful mind might find a way. It infuriated her to think of Bacon's vast wealth and

power being wasted on a girl like Mary Brook—a country mouse, who would never rise above babies, church socials, and the suburbs. It was unthinkable! Under her guidance, and married to Muriel, he could have had a brilliant social position among the people who really counted. Such maddening thoughts as these doomed Mrs. Lannard to a night of wakefulness.

Muriel, like her parents, was also a victim of the demon of insomnia which brooded over the Lannard car. A reading light glowed by her pillow and an open book on the counterpane showed that she had tried in vain to read herself to sleep. A tiny handkerchief, damp and crumpled in her closed hand, revealed the trend of her thoughts.

“Oh, what a mess I’ve made!” she sobbed, “and it’s all mother’s fault—she with her wretched ambition for a title. How I ever allowed myself to be led into this mess is beyond belief.” In the ash-tray by her side were the crushed stumps of many cigarettes, mute evidence of her tortured nerves. “Oh, well, you

got what was coming to you," she smiled wearily. "You got yours and it serves you jolly well right—for not having a mind of your own. Hereafter I'll marry—I'll marry whoever ——" And then she swallowed hard and buried her face in the pillow.

Mrs. Brooks, tired and ill, had overcome the unusual noises and motions of the train and was asleep, but in the other bed her daughter was awake. She was reviewing the bewildering procession of events that had culminated in the last few days. She lingered upon the avowals of Harry's devotion, his eagerness for an immediate marriage, and yet, try as she would, she could not now think of him as the same simple boy with whom she had so naturally drifted into love. It all seemed so unreal. Into the foreground of her thoughts always leaped the consciousness of that vast fortune, which meant complications, readjustments, and responsibilities to which she feared she was temperamentally unfitted. Happiness and doubt,

exaltation and misgivings—thus passed the dragging hours for Mary Brook.

And Harry Bacon, watching the slow march of the minute hand as it made its rounds on the station clock, thought they were all peacefully asleep!

He had read all the newspapers he could buy. They contained long articles about himself and the dramatic events of yesterday. There was much about Muriel but no mention of Mary.

“They fooled themselves there,” he thought. He was glad he had not been photographed. He realized that when his features became familiar to millions of newspaper readers there would be an end to future adventures requiring concealment of his identity.

“I must keep my picture out of the papers,” he decided, “at least until after I’ve married.” A warm glow swept over him. “I hope her mother gets well in a hurry. I’m already impatient.”

By leaving the Lannard car he eluded the waiting photographers in New York and arrived unnoticed.

Mary's voice was happy when he telephoned.

"Aunty and Muriel have been perfectly lovely to us," she said, "and——"

"How is your mother this morning?" he quickly asked.

"She says she feels splendidly, but, poor dear, she looks dreadfully tired. I'm so worried. Aunty thinks I should take her to Nauheim. And, Harry," she hesitated, "prepare for a blow! Aunt Isabel wants us for dinner tonight."

"Complication number one," he thought, but, "Hooray!" he exclaimed. "We can announce our engagement!"

Harry Bacon went to the Lannards' expecting a small family dinner. Instead, there were sixteen guests, and he was the only one in a dinner coat. The others, all young people, were dressed for a formal occasion. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Lannard was there.

"I managed to get them all since morning," whispered Muriel. "One came 'way from Southampton! Aren't you impressed?"

Harry was more than impressed—he was painfully uncomfortable. He found barely a moment to speak to Mary Brook, whose simple dress was in glaring contrast to the beautiful gowns of the other girls. Muriel constantly interrupted to present new rivals.

"This is my cousin, Mary Brook——"

"Why, Muriel, you never told me about your cousin! You don't live in New York, do you, Miss Brook?"

After cocktails, dinner was announced and Harry found himself placed between Muriel and a languid, exotic young lady who had arrived late. After waving and calling to friends around the table, she whispered to her other neighbor in an audible tone:

"Who are these people?"

Harry did not hear the answer, but he smiled rather grimly at the languid young lady's brief comment:

“Never heard of ’em.”

Muriel was talking with the man on her left, and Harry found himself uncomfortably stranded.

The languid young lady shifted her interest to a youth across the table.

“She’s certainly doing her best to make me feel out of it,” thought Harry. He longed to get up, smite the table with a startling bang, and call out, “Muriel, who is this damned stick you’ve wished on me?” It would create a merry scene, but even if it marked the end of his social career he would feel amply repaid. However, he subdued the impulse and endured the situation.

“I didn’t catch your name.” The young lady had turned to him.

“Bacon.”

“Not the Boston Bacons?”

“No, not the Boston Bacons.”

“Oh—the Philadelphia Bacons?”

“No, not the Philadelphia Bacons.”

Her eyes ranged along the table to other

couples who interested her more. Harry had the feeling that as she talked to him her ears were tuned to the scraps of a conversation across the table.

“Oh, I remember—Artie Haswell told me you were from the West.”

She allowed her gaze to linger upon him for the fraction of a second, but evidently she had never heard of him. The recent head-lines had escaped her.

“I presume you live in New York?” he said, after a pause.

She stared at him. It wasn't possible *he* had never heard of *her*!

“What a day!” she grunted. “I've motored all the way from the other end of Long Island—and for this dinner!” There was undisguised disgust in her tone. “Do you know anybody in Southampton?”

“No,” he answered.

“Have you ever been there?”

“Never. I'm afraid, Miss Barberry, you will find I am quite an outsider.” He added

brightly: "For some months I drove a truck in a Pennsylvania steel mill—then I got into the retail grocery business for a while."

She glared at him. At last he had arrested her attention. She felt that he was laughing at her! Why was he here—in the seat of honor? Was he some freak or genius that Muriel had picked up to exhibit to her friends? A truck driver! Mercy!

"You see," he was saying pleasantly, "I'm quite willing to tell you all about myself, if there's nothing else to talk about." He caught Mary Brook's eye, and his own fluttered in an almost imperceptible wink.

"Who are you winking at?" exclaimed Miss Barberry, exasperated.

Muriel interposed.

"Careful, Gwennie! You will find Mr. Bacon a difficult subject to trifle with. I tried it, didn't I, Harry?" He flushed painfully. "Haven't you been reading the papers lately, Gwen?"

“I haven’t seen a paper for a week.” Her voice was apprehensive. “Why? Was there something about Mr. Bacon?”

“Wait!” cried Muriel as she arose and lifted a glass of champagne. “I’m going to make a speech,” she called out, and the chatter was instantly hushed—“a very important speech,” she continued, with a little catch in her voice. “You’ve read the papers the last few days, all except Gwennie here, and she doesn’t know what it’s all about. You’ve seen pages of silly stuff about Harry Bacon and me. Well, it’s all fiction!” She looked down the table at Mary. “I want you to rise and drink to the health of my cousin, Mary Brook, and my dear friend, Harry Bacon. I am announcing their engagement.”

A sudden impulse led her on, and only Harry Bacon saw the faint contraction of her lips. “Mr. Bacon is now the controlling owner of the Lannard Steel Company, the position so long held by my father.”

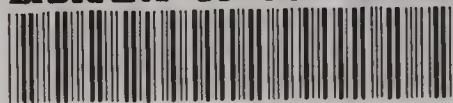
There was a smile on her lips, but at the cost of what an effort! Muriel had risen to the heights!

Thus was the engagement of Mary Brook and Harry Bacon made public.

THE END

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