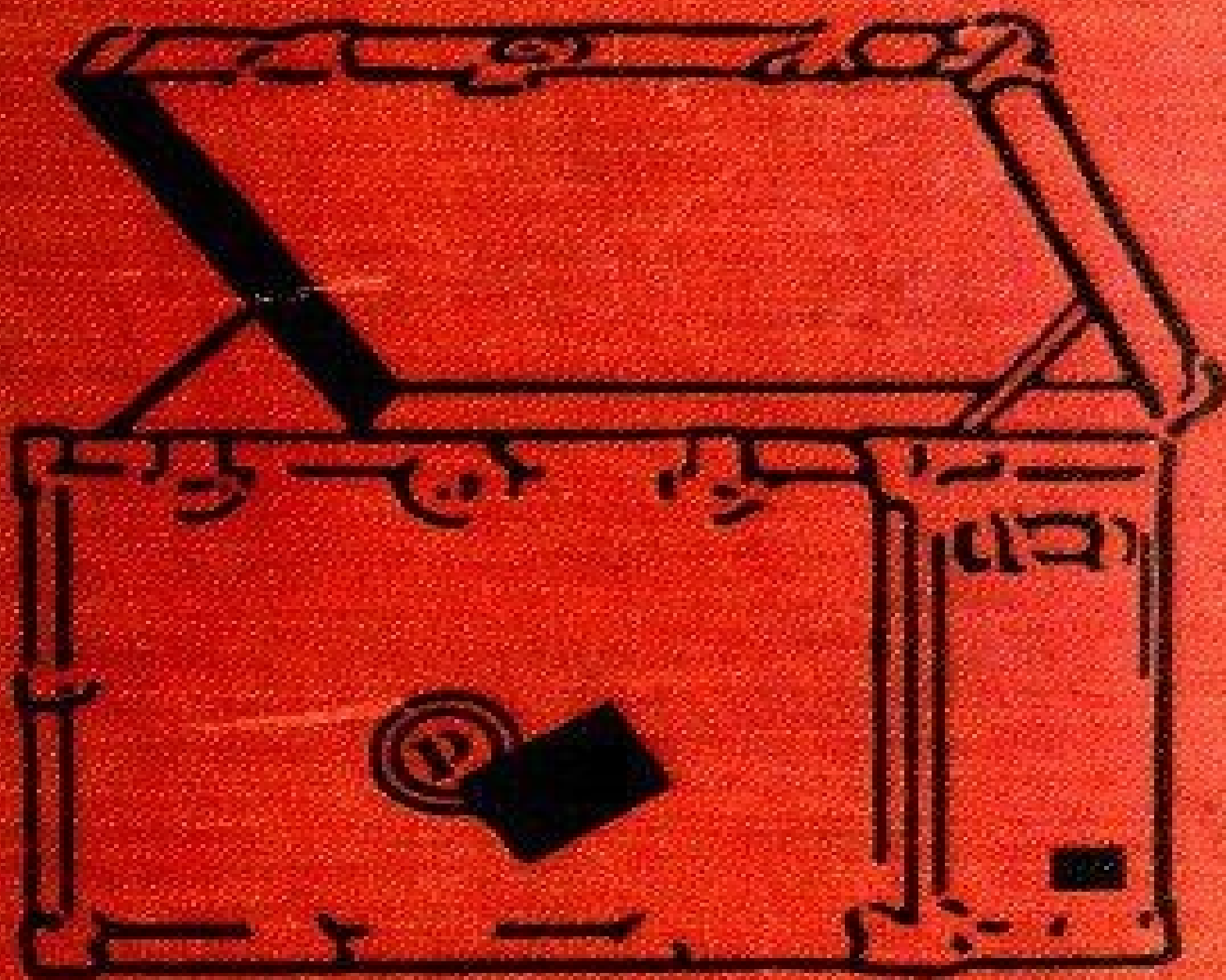


IN & OUT



EDGAR FRANKLIN

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IN AND OUT

BY EDGAR FRANKLIN

Frontispiece by PAUL STAHR

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**The girl weighed, perhaps, one hundred and twenty pounds, and
handling that amount of weight was a mere joke to Wilkins**

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IN AND OUT



CHAPTER I

THE GREAT UNRECOGNIZED

Up in the ring, the long-nosed person who had been announced as Kid Horrigan was having things much his own way with the smaller person billed as the Bronx Tornado.

It was the wont of Kid Horrigan to step forward lightly, to rap the Tornado smartly on the bridge of the nose, and thereafter to step back as lightly and wait until the few wild blows had fanned the air and the Tornado had returned to his meaningless and somewhat bewildered crouch.

Thereupon, in almost preoccupied fashion, the Kid stepped forward once more—and when he had done it again and again the performance began to grow monotonous and, down in Box B at the ringside, Johnson Boller yawned aloud.

The yawn finished, he leaned over wearily and addressed Anthony Fry.

"If that little wheeze had the pep of a dead mosquito," said Johnson Boller disgustedly, "he'd take that big stiff when his hands are up like that and slip him an uppercut that would freeze him solid!"

Anthony Fry's intellectual features relaxed in a faint smile.

"He's had several chances, hasn't he?" he mused.

"Several? He's had fifty! He gets three a minute and—well, look at that!"

"Yes, he missed another opportunity then, didn't he?" said Anthony. "Curious!"

Johnson Boller's cigar rolled to the other side of his mouth and he hunched down farther in his chair.

"And nine more rounds of it to go!" he sighed.

Anthony Fry merely smiled more pensively and nodded, removing his nose-glasses and tapping his teeth reflectively—and, among other things, causing the red-faced, partially alcoholized trio behind them in Box B to wonder what he was doing at a prize fight anyway.

As externals go, there was some ground for the wonder. Anthony Fry at forty-five was very tall, very lean in his aristocratic way, and very, very dignified, from the crown of his high-held head to the tips of his toes. In dress he was utterly beyond criticism; in feature he was thin, austere, and impressive. At first glance one might have fancied him a world-famous surgeon or the inscrutable head of the Steel Trust, but the fact of the matter was that Anthony, these fifteen years gone, had inherited Fry's Imperial Liniment, with all that that implied.

It implied a good deal in the way of income, yet even among his friends Anthony did not care to have the liniment phase of his quietly elegant existence dwelt upon too insistently. Not that he regarded the business—run by a perfect manager and rarely visited—as a secret shame exactly, but unquestionably Anthony would have preferred that his late father and his two dead uncles, when starting their original pursuit of wealth, had corraled the world's diamond supply or purchased Manhattan Island at a bargain.

Just now, perhaps, Anthony's more striking features were emphasized by the nearness of Johnson Boller, one of his few really intimate friends.

Johnson Boller's age was just about the same, but there the similarity between them stopped short.

Johnson Boller was plump, one might almost say coarse. Where Anthony walked with slow dignity, Johnson swaggered. Where Anthony spoke in a measured undertone and smiled frigidly, Johnson thumped out the words and laughed with a bark. About most things except food he was inclined to be gloomy and pessimistic, and this evening the gloom within was even thicker than usual, because Johnson Boller's wife had left him.

She was a new wife and his first—a beautiful and spirited wife, all of fifteen years younger than Johnson Boller. She was in love with him and he with her, tremendously—and now she was gone. After only six months of unalloyed happiness in the five-thousand-dollar apartment on Riverside Drive, Mrs. Johnson Boller had left for her annual visit of one month to the sister whose accursed husband owned great chunks of Montreal, Quebec, and insisted on living on one of them.

One vast hour Johnson Boller had roamed the vacuum that had been their ideal home; then he had packed his grip and gone to stay with Anthony Fry, in that utter ultimate of everything impeccable and expensive in the way of bachelor apartments, the Hotel Lasande—and even the sight of the fight tickets, when

Anthony's invaluable Wilkins had returned with them, had failed to bring more than a flitting smile to Johnson Boller.

Now they were watching the second preliminary bout, and could he but have traded one thousand of these bouts for a single hour with his beloved Beatrice, Johnson Boller would have gladly.

"In the main," said Anthony Fry, "that absurd little chap up there typifies my whole conception of opportunity."

"Huh?" Johnson Boller said.

"The chance for that fatal uppercut is there—it was there a minute ago and it will be there a minute hence, and probably two minutes hence. Our Tornado hasn't seen it yet; he may go to the end of the ten rounds and never see it, and yet, unless this Horrigan chap changes his tactics, it will be repeated again and again. Would he see it if the bout ran twenty rounds?"

"How the dickens should I know?" Johnson Boller muttered.

"I'd be quite willing to wager," Anthony smiled thoughtfully, "that he *would* see it!"

Johnson Boller surveyed his friend narrowly. It was obvious that Anthony's attention had strayed from the alleged battle—and small wonder! It was equally obvious that Anthony's mind was wandering off into the abstract; and not infrequently these little journeys—provided they went not too far—were quite entertaining.

Johnson Boller, therefore, with an impulse he was to regret bitterly in the very near future, gave a prod to discussion by smiling in his own unhappy way and saying:

"What's the idea, Anthony? You're wrong, but—what is it?"

"My idea," said the proprietor of Fry's Imperial Liniment slowly, "is merely this, Johnson: that the whole proposition of the man who is a dire failure, the man who is a tremendous success, is vastly exaggerated."

"Meaning?"

"That failure does not of necessity imply incapacity or ineptitude—or success any tremendous capability, in many cases, for that matter. Taken by and large,

we are all made of much the same stuff, you know. The trouble lies in the failure of the plain, average, reasonably stupid citizen to recognize opportunity's one solitary knock!" Anthony smiled, growing himself more interested by the second. "Now, if opportunity were but decent enough to knock twice, at least double the number of striving humans would recognize her nearness and grasp her. If she could bring herself to knock three times, say, our successes would be tripled. If——"

"And if she knocked a thousand times in succession, everybody'd be a millionaire," Johnson Boller suggested.

"Something like that," smiled Anthony. "The chap who does know opportunity, recognizes her mainly by accident, I honestly believe. Now, if we could but take each man and place opportunity before him and hold her there until he fully understood that she was present, the word failure would be omitted from the dictionaries a generation hence."

Anthony Fry winked rapidly, which in itself was rather a bad sign because it indicated that the theorizing portion of his cultured brain was growing quite rapt. At another time, very likely, Johnson Boller would have heeded the warning and turned Anthony's attention gently back to the fight; but to-night Boller sought refuge from the haunting loneliness that Beatrice had left behind.

"I don't agree with you!" he said flatly.

"Eh?"

"Nix!" said Johnson Boller. "Any guy who can come face to face with a regular honest-to-goodness opportunity, Anthony, and not know her inside of one second, could have her tied to his right leg for two hundred years and never know she was there."

"You really believe that?"

"Oh, I know it!" said Johnson Boller. "I have several millions of years of human experience to prove that I'm right."

Anthony leaned closer, causing the largest of the red-faced trio behind to growl senselessly as he was forced to shift for a view of the ring.

"Let us assume, Johnson, the individual A," said Anthony. "A wished to become a lawyer; he had his chance and missed it. We will assume him to be peculiarly

stupid; we will say that he had opportunity for the second time—and again failed to grasp her. Can you think that, deliberately led up to his third opportunity of becoming a lawyer, A will turn his back for the third time?"

"Certainly," said Johnson Boller, without thought and solely because Anthony's precise driveling interested him a little more than the affair of the ring.

"Pah!" Mr. Fry said angrily.

Just here Mr. Horrigan slipped while making his —nth jab at the Tornado's nose—slipped and fell upon the Tornado's fist and thereafter reeled about for a few seconds. Johnson Boller emitted his first real laugh of the evening; Anthony Fry, who had not seen the incident, failed even to smile.

"It would be interesting," he said crisply, "to select a subject, Johnson, and try the experiment."

"What experiment?"

"That of learning just how many times opportunity must be presented to the average individual to secure full recognition of her presence and her beauties."

"Wouldn't it?" mused Johnson Boller absently.

"I mean, to reach haphazard into the six millions that go to make up New York, to pick just one individual and segregate him, and then show him—*opportunity!* To take him aside, where there is nothing else to distract him, and thrust opportunity in his very face—the opportunity, whatever it might be, that he has always desired. It seems to me, Johnson, that watching that experiment might be distinctly worth while!"

"Aha!" yawned Johnson Boller.

"So, therefore," Anthony said placidly, "we will find our subject and make the experiment."

This time, and with a considerable jar, Johnson Boller awoke to the fact that danger was at his elbow!

He sat bolt upright and stared at Anthony Fry, and in the queerest way his flesh crawled for a moment and his hands turned cold, for he knew that expression of Anthony's all too well. Intent, wholly absorbed, that expression indicated that, however ridiculous the proposition might be, its fangs had fastened in Anthony's

very soul!

This was the expression which recalled—oh, so clearly—the dread time when Anthony Fry had become obsessed with the idea that crime is a matter of diet and external impression, when he had secured the two yeggmen and established them where he could watch and feed them; when, eventually, he had been forced to pay for their crowning crime or go to jail as an accomplice!

This was the expression that brought back the period in which Anthony had cherished the theory that music's true germ lay in the negro race, properly guided and separated from all outside influences and—well, this was the expression, fast enough, and Boller's throat tightened. He had not even found words of protest when Anthony pursued:

"And upon my soul! See how the thing has been prearranged for us!"

"What?"

"Look here, Johnson," the owner of Fry's Liniment hurried on, quite excitedly. "Have you noticed how packed the house is to-night?"

"What? Yes, and——"

"Every seat in the place is sold—*except this one seat in our box!*"

"What of it?"

"It's fate!" chuckled Mr. Fry. "It is fate and nothing else, Johnson. Out of all the millions in New York, one man—absolutely unknown to, unsuspected by, either you or me—is coming to take this seat, doubtless for the star bout."

"But——"

"To that man," said Anthony, "I shall offer opportunity!"

"What d'ye mean? Money?" Johnson Boller asked incredulously.

"It will involve money, doubtless; I can afford a little."

"Well, you go and poke a handful of bills into a man's face and all you're going to prove is that——"

"I have no idea of doing anything of the sort," Anthony said impatiently. "What I purpose doing is simply this: I shall——"

Johnson Boller had recovered from the first shock. He drew a long, deep breath, and, leaning over to his old friend, placed a firm, strong hand on his knee and looked soothingly into his kindled eye.

"Listen, Anthony!" said he. "*Don't!*"

"Eh? You've no notion of what I mean to do," Anthony said briefly.

"No, but I can guess enough to dope it out pretty well, and—don't do it!" Johnson Boller said earnestly. "This theory stuff is all right, Anthony; I like to sit and chatter about it as much as you do. On the level, I do! I like to talk with you about these things, and wonder what would happen if this was thus and the other thing was otherwise. But when you come to pulling it on a perfect stranger at a prize fight, Anthony, try to remember that everybody may not understand you as well as I do."

"My dear chap!" Anthony laughed.

"Don't laugh; I know what I'm talking about," Mr. Boller went on, feverishly almost. "You wait till we get home, Anthony, and we'll talk over all this about opportunity and get it settled. For the matter of that, I can see now that you're dead right!" Johnson Boller said, and there was something almost pathetic in his voice. "You're dead right, Anthony! All you have to do is to stick opportunity before a man long enough and he's bound to chuck a hammerlock into her and slam her down to the mat for keeps! So that's settled, and we don't have to do any experimenting with human subjects. Or if you do have to have a live one to work on, wait till we get home and we'll take Wilkins, Anthony! That'd be better, anyway."

He paused, eying his old friend with deep anxiety. Anthony Fry, having thrown back his head, laughed heartily.

"Johnson," said he, "the whole trouble with that poor old head of yours is that it is absolutely without the power of visualization! It knows the wool business; it makes thousands and thousands of dollars out of the wool business; but to save its very life it cannot reach out into the abstract!"

"It doesn't want to reach into the abstract!"

"Well, it should, because it will grow more and more stodgy if it doesn't," Mr. Fry said complacently. "Good gracious, Johnson! Coming to life! Just consider what may be coming to this seat!"

"I don't dare!" Johnson Boller said honestly.

"An old man, perhaps—one who fancies his opportunities all past and done for. What more vitally interesting than thrusting opportunity upon such a man, Johnson?"

"So far as I'm concerned, anything under the sun and——"

"Or perhaps a middle-aged failure," Anthony rambled on. "A man just past the age when hope is richest—a man who has seen his chances come and go. I don't know, Johnson, but I rather believe that I'm hoping for a middle-aged man."

"Yes, one that's weak enough to gag before he can yell for the police," Johnson Boller grunted. "Now, Anthony, before you——"

"Or best of all, perhaps, an average young man," smiled the experimenter. "That would really be the most interesting sort of subject, Johnson—just a plain chap, not fully matured, not soured by disappointment nor rendered too sophisticated by contact with the world. On the whole, I really hope that a young man is coming!"

And now, for a time, Johnson Boller said nothing at all. There was always the chance that Anthony might work it out of his system in talk—there was the other chance, growing rosier and rosier by the minute, that the odd chair had not been sold at all.

It was rather queer, when one considered that seats for this particular star bout had been at a premium for a week, but it was nevertheless the fact that the preliminary arguments were over and the announcer spinning his megaphoned tale for the big battle, and the seat still unoccupied. To Johnson Boller it even hinted at the existence of a special Providence designed to watch the doings of such as Anthony Fry.

The minutes were wearing along, too. The cheering was done with and the megaphone had left the ring. Seconds and trainers were climbing down through the ropes, and the principals were listening boredly to the final words of instruction. And now the gong had struck and they were at it—and still the odd chair in Box B remained unoccupied.

"Opportunity!" mused Anthony Fry. "The Great Unrecognized!"

"Eh?"

"The Great Unrecognized," Anthony repeated complacently. "Not a bad term for her, eh?"

Johnson Boller made a last survey of the neighborhood, permitted himself a sigh of relief, and grinned broadly at his old friend.

"Great term, Anthony!" he agreed genially. "He isn't coming!"

"He'll be here yet," Anthony smiled.

"Not now," Boller chuckled. "No man gives up ten or fifteen dollars for one of these seats and then stays away for any reason save death. Your victim was hit by a motor-truck on the way here—and at that he may be getting off easier than if you'd caught him and tried some psychological experiments on him."

And here Mr. Boller stretched and removed his cigar, so that his grin might spread from ear to ear.

"It only goes to show you, Anthony, that there's some power watching over people like you and governing their affairs, that is past our understanding. Now, if that poor unknown devil had ever turned up and——"

He stopped short.

In Anthony Fry's eye the blue-white fire of enthusiasm glinted out suddenly. Half rising, Mr. Fry gazed down the vast place, and then, with a smile, sat back again and eyed his friend.

"Something's wrong with your power, Johnson," said he. "Here he comes now!"



CHAPTER II

THEORY'S VICTIM

Johnson Boller looked. And, looking, the pleased grin which had so lately suffused his features faded out swiftly—because the unknown really seemed to be with them.

Far down the mob, an attendant of the place was indicating their general direction to a shortish man in a long storm-coat; and now he of the coat had nodded and was pushing his way down the narrow aisle toward them, staring at the sea of faces as he moved along slowly and seeming a little uncertain in his movements.

"Anthony!" Johnson Boller said suddenly.

"Well?"

"Don't speak to this guy! I don't like his looks!"

"Bah!"

"And this gang behind us is doing everything but watch the fight," Mr. Boller whispered on. "If you try anything funny on this fellow that's coming, he's likely to put up a yell of some kind—and once a fight starts in this box these three behind are coming in."

"Johnson, don't be absurd," Anthony smiled. "Get over in the odd seat; I want the chap next to me so that I can have a good look at him."

"Will you remember that I said you were going to start trouble?" Johnson inquired hotly.

"I'll remember anything you like, only get over into that odd seat," Mr. Fry muttered, as the stranger came closer. "Ah, he's hardly more than a boy."

"Yes, he's a young thug!" Johnson Boller informed him in parting. "He's a young gang-leader, Anthony—look at the walk! Look at the way he has that cap pulled down over one eye! Look at——"

Anthony Fry, obviously, would have heard him as well had he been seated on the steps of Colorado's State capitol. Intellectual countenance alight, the mildly eccentric Anthony—really the sanest and most delightful of men except when these abstract notions came to him—was wholly absorbed in the newcomer.

Rather than stare directly he turned toward the ring as the young man in the long coat crowded into the box and settled down with a little puff, but one who knew him as well as Johnson Boller could feel Anthony's eyes looking past his lean right cheek and taking in every detail of theory's prospective victim.

Not that he was a particularly savage-looking creature on closer inspection, however. The cheap cloth cap and the shabby long coat—heavy enough for a typhoon when there was the merest suggestion of drizzle outdoors—gave one that impression at first, but second examination showed him to be really rather mild.

He seemed to be about twenty. His clothing, from the overcoat to the trousers and the well-worn shoes, indicated that he came from no very elevated plane of society. His features, which seemed decidedly boyish among some of the faces present, were decidedly good. His hair needed cutting and had needed it, for some time, and he was tremendously interested in the star bout. Elbows on the rail, cap pulled down to shade his eyes, the youngster's whole excited soul seemed centered in the ring.

So at a rather easy guess Mr. Boller concluded that he was a mechanic or a janitor's assistant or an elevator boy or something like that. The buyer of his seat, finding himself unable to come at the last moment, had given the kid his ticket and he was having the time of his life.

Johnson Boller hunched down again with a sad little grunt. He had meant to enjoy this star bout; only a week ago, in fact, before the Montreal horror loomed up, he had been considering just how an evening might be snatched from the happy home life without disturbing Beatrice—who, ignorant of modern pugilism, disapproved prize-fighting on the ground of brutality. And now it was ruined, because Johnson Boller's next half hour would have to go to the devising of means by which Anthony could be steered from his idiotic experiment, whatever it might be in concrete form.

Anthony meant to offer this youngster opportunity—how or in what form Anthony himself doubtless did not know as yet. But he did intend to speak to him and, unless Johnson Boller's faculty for guessing was much in error, he

meant to lead the youngster hence, perhaps to feed him in a restaurant while he talked him full of abstract theory, perhaps even to take him home to the Lasande.

But whatever he intended, it wouldn't do. Johnson Boller really needed Anthony this night. He needed Anthony to listen while he talked about the absent Beatrice, and recalled all her beauty, all her fire, all her adorable qualities; he needed Anthony at the other side of the chessboard, over which game Johnson Boller could grow so profoundly sleepy that even Beatrice *en route* to Siam would hardly have disturbed him. And he needed no third person!

Toward the end of the fifth round, however, Johnson Boller grew painfully conscious that he had as yet concocted no very promising scheme. Indeed, the lone inspiration so far included whispering to the kid that the gentleman on his other side was mildly insane and that flight were best, should the gentleman address him; but Anthony persisted in leaning so close to the youngster that whispering was impossible.

Also, it occurred to Johnson Boller that he himself might be taken violently ill—that he might clutch his heart and beg Anthony to lead him to the outer air. There was little in that, though; the chances were more than even that Anthony, if his enthusiasm as to the victim still persisted, would request the youngster's assistance in getting him out.

And the enthusiasm seemed enduring enough. They were in the tenth and last round now and Anthony, with his strange smile, was turning to the young man and—ah, yes, he was speaking:

"Pardon me!"

The boy started with undue violence and stared at him, drew back a little and even looked Anthony up and down as he said:

"Speaking to me?"

"I am speaking to you, young man," Anthony smiled benignly. "May I speak to you a little more?"

This, very evidently, was a sensitive boy, unaccustomed to chatting with really elegant, palpably prosperous strangers. The startled eyes ran over Anthony again and a frown came into them.

"What's the idea?" he asked briefly.

"There is a very large idea, which I should like to make clear to you," Mr. Fry went on smoothly. "I should like to have a talk with you, young man—not here, of course, but when the fight is over—and it will be to your considerable advantage——"

"I don't want to buy anything," the canny young man informed him.

"And I don't want to sell you anything," Anthony laughed, "but I do wish to present to you a proposition which will be of much interest."

This time, possibly not without warrant, the boy shrank unmistakably from him, hitching his collar a little higher and his cap a little farther down.

"It wouldn't interest me," he said with some finality. "I'm—just a poor lad, you know, and I haven't a cent to invest in anything."

"But you have an hour to invest, perhaps?" Anthony smiled.

"Nope!"

"Oh, yes, you have," the owner of Fry's Imperial Liniment persisted. "It is for no purpose of my own, save perhaps to justify a small contention, but I wish you to come home with me for a little while."

"WHAT?" said the boy.

As Johnson Boller observed, sighing heavily and shaking his head as he observed it, the young man was downright scared now. An older citizen would have spoken his candid thoughts to Anthony Fry, doubtless, and chilled him back to reason; but this one drew away from Anthony until he bumped into Johnson Boller, turned hastily and asked the latter's pardon and then gazed at Anthony with eyes which, if not filled with terror, certainly held a quantity of somewhat amused apprehension.

He shook his head determinedly and seemed to be seeking words, and as he sought them a new element entered the situation. The red-faced person just behind Anthony Fry, having gazed suddenly from the youngster to the maker of theories, lurched forward suddenly and spoke:

"Let that kid alone!"

"Eh?" Anthony said amazedly.

Johnson Boller leaned forward quickly.

"Stop right there, Anthony!" he hissed. "Don't answer him!"

"Why on earth shouldn't I answer him?" Anthony snapped.

"You keep out of it, young feller!" the red-faced one told Johnson Boller, and one saw that his honest rage was rising fast. "He's gotter let that kid alone!"

"Well, confound your impudence, sir!" Anthony began. "I——"

"None o' that stuff!" the total stranger said hotly. "You cut out picking on the kid or I'll step on your face."

And here his redder-faced companion leaned forward and demanded thickly:

"Woddy do ter kid, Joe? Huh? Wozzer matter—huh? Wozzer trouble 'th you—huh?"

Johnson Boller was on his feet and in the aisle, perturbed and still able to see how the unexpected had been planned for his especial benefit.

"This is where we get off, Anthony," he said briefly, "I could smell it coming. Come along."

"Is there going to be a fight here?" the boy in the chair between asked, with a quantity of eager excitement.

"If I know the signs, ten seconds hence this spot is going to look like a detail of the Battle of the Marne," said Mr. Boller. "And you want to get out of it quick or you'll be hurt, kid. You scoot right down that way, the way you came, and get clear of the crowd before it starts."

He pointed. He waited. But the boy did not start.

Who, in the calmer afterward, shall explain just how these gunpowder situations develop, grow instantaneously incandescent, and explode?

The atmosphere was one of physical battle; the red-faced gentlemen were filled with alcoholic spirits; yet who shall say just why the red-faced man, his friend stumbling against him, gained the impression that Anthony Fry had struck him a coward's blow from behind? Or why, with a roar of incoherent fury, he aimed a dreadful punch at Anthony himself, standing there quite collected if somewhat paler?

That is what happened, although by no means all that happened. The unfortunate spot came three seconds later when Anthony, side-stepping the alcoholized jab, threw up his hands to fend off the jabber's whole swaying person—threw them, all unwittingly, so that his right fist settled squarely on a red nose, drawing therefrom a magic spurt of blood!

After that, for a little, nothing was very clear. Three sets of fists began to hammer in Anthony's general direction; three throats shouted—and three hundred took up the shout.

Men came tumbling toward Box B and into it. A large person in bright blue shirt-sleeves, with a derby on the back of his head, received the third blow intended for Anthony and returned it with interest, just as that startled person was jammed against the rail.

From three different points, high-held night-sticks were pushing through the surging crowd; and Johnson Boller, looking quickly at the storm center, counted no less than eleven separate couples pounding one another, and smiled as he jerked Anthony bodily over the rail and hissed:

"Come on, you poor lunatic! Come on!"

"Johnson, upon my soul——" Anthony began.

"Never mind your soul! Get your body out of here before the cops find it and club it to death for starting this rumpus!" Mr. Boller cried agitatedly. "Look at that sergeant, Anthony! He's got his eye on you and he's fighting his way over here! Now, you scoot down there, kid! Move! Quick, before——"

"No! Come with us, boy!" Anthony said, somewhat disconcertingly.

"What for?" the boy inquired. "I want to watch this."

"You stay and watch it by all means!" Johnson Boller smiled quickly. "You're perfectly safe, youngster; I was only fooling. Now you come this way, Anthony, and——"

Anthony, unperturbed, laid a kindly hand on the youngster's shoulder.

"You'd better come with us, my son," said he. "They'll run you in for a witness and you may be locked up for a week unless you have friends to get you out."

This time he had startled the young man. Wide eyes turned and stared at him and there was a distinct note of fright in the voice that said:

"What do you mean? Arrest me?"

"Of course, if you stay here," Anthony said. "Come with me and I'll take care of you."

And then Johnson Boller had caught his arm and was dragging him away; and Anthony, catching the willing arm of the boy, was dragging him after. Around the side of the ring they sped, where an interested group of fighters and trainers watched the mêlée; and, veering, on through a small side door and into the night.

"Here's where the taxis wait," Mr. Boller said quickly. "Now, you beat it straight down the street, kid, and——"

"We'll take this one," Anthony interrupted, as he jerked open the door and thrust his bewildered charge inward. "Tell the man to take us home, Johnson."

Johnson Boller complied with a grunt, slamming the door viciously as he plumped into his own seat. The kid, prospective victim of Anthony's latest notion, was still with them—and he seemed contented enough to be there for the present. The possibility of arrest had jarred the youngster more than a little, and he hunched down on the little forward seat and breathed quite heavily. And now Anthony's deep, kindly voice was addressing him with—

"You'll come home with me for a little while, youngster?"

Mr. Boller drew a long, resigned breath and prepared to back the boy in every objection his doubtless normal mind should offer—but they chanced to pause by an arc lamp just then and he caught the boy's expression.

It was really a queer thing to see. No fear was there at all now, but only the overwhelming, innocent curiosity of youth, mingled with an inscrutable something else. One might have called it a daredevil light, breathing the young craving for adventure, but Johnson Boller, with an unaccountable shudder, felt that it was not just that.

To save him, he could not have named the quality; he sensed it rather than actually saw it, but it was there just the same—an ominous, mocking, speculative amusement that had no place at all in the eye of an elevator boy when looking at the wealthy, dignified Anthony Fry. The boy's fine teeth showed

for a moment as he asked:

"Pardon me, but what's it all about? Why under the sun should I go home with you?"

"Because I want to talk confidentially to you for an hour."

"You're not judging from these togs that I'm a criminal, are you?" the boy grinned, and it seemed to Johnson Boller that the tone was far too cultivated for the clothes.

"What?"

"I mean, you don't want any one murdered, or anything of that kind?"

Anthony laughed richly.

"By no means, my dear boy. As to what it is all about I'll tell you when we get there. You'll come?"

"I think not," the boy said frankly.

"But——"

"Nix! I don't know why, but I don't like the idea. I think it's a little bit too unusual. Who are you, anyway?"

"My name is Fry, if that tells you anything," smiled its owner.

"Fry?" the boy repeated.

"Anthony Fry."

"Eh?" the youngster said, and there was a peculiarly sharp note in his voice.

"He makes Fry's Liniment," Johnson Boller put in disgustedly, yet happily withal because it was plain that the boy would have no part in spoiling his chess game and the little chat about Beatrice. "He has a lot of theories not connected with the liniment business, kid, and he wants to bore you to death with some of them. They wouldn't interest you any more than they interest me, and you're perfectly right in refusing to listen to them."

"Umum," said the boy oddly.

"And now I'll tell you what we'll do," Johnson Boller concluded quite happily.

"You tell me where you live, and when the man drops us I'll pay your fare home. Some class to that, eh? Going home in a taxicab after sitting in a ten-dollar seat at a big fight! You don't get off on a jamboree like that very often, I'll bet!"

"No," the boy said thoughtfully.

"So here's the little old Hotel Lasande where Mr. Fry lives," Mr. Boller finished cheerfully, "and where shall I tell the man to set you down, kid?"

He had settled the matter, of course. Never in this world could the little ragamuffin resist the temptation of returning to his tenement home, or whatever it was, in a taxi. Johnson Boller, rising as the vehicle stopped, laid a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"Now, you sit over in my seat and stretch your legs while you ride, kid—and here! Have a real cigar and feel like a real sport! Don't you know how to bite off the end?"

"I—I don't want to bite off the end yet," the boy muttered.

"Sink your teeth in it. Now I'll get you a match."

He felt for one, did Johnson Boller, and then ceased feeling for one. That sudden low laugh of the young man's was one of the oddest sounds he had ever heard; moreover, as the Lasande doorman opened the door of the taxi, he caught the same odd light in the boy's eye—and now he, too, had risen and pulled the disreputable cap a little lower as he said:

"I won't smoke it now, thanks. I'm going upstairs and listen to Mr. Fry for a while, I think."



CHAPTER III

OPPORTUNITY

The Hotel Lasande deserves a word or two. In the strict sense it is no hotel at all, being merely a twenty-story pile of four and five—and even seven and eight—room bachelor suites of the very highest class. Moving into the Lasande and assuming one of its breath-stopping leases is a process not unlike breaking into the most exclusive sort of club. One is investigated, which tells it all. The Lasande, catering to the very best and most opulent of the bachelor class, has nothing else beneath its roof.

Silent men servants, functioning perfectly despite their apparent woodenness, flit everywhere, invisible until needed, disappearing instantly when the task of the moment is done. There are dining-rooms for the few who do not dine in the privacy of their own apartments, and there is a long, comfortable lobby where, under the eagle eye of the clerk in the corner, only tenants or guests of tenants may lounge.

Into this latter area came Anthony Fry and Johnson Boller and the boy, and as the peculiarly intelligent eyes of the latter darted about it seemed to Mr. Boller that their twinkle turned to a positive glitter.

It was absurd enough, it hailed doubtless from the nervous loneliness within himself, yet Johnson Boller felt that the youngster was a downright evil force, swaggering along there, tremendously conscious of his own importance! He should have been sedate and subdued, to put it mildly, yet he grinned at the impeccable night clerk from under his cap and sent his impudent eyes roving on, to alight finally on the big chair near the north elevator.

"Who's the party with the big specs and why the prolonged stare?" the youngster asked irreverently.

"Eh? Oh, that's Mr. Hitchin, a neighbor of mine," Anthony smiled.

"He's an amateur detective, kid," Johnson Boller added significantly. "He knows every young crook in town. He's coming here to give you the once over."

"I should worry," murmured the self-possessed young man.

"Johnson, don't be idiotic," Anthony said, as he laid a hand on the boy's arm. "I'll have to introduce you. What's your name, my lad?"

"Eh?" asked the unusual boy, staring hard at Anthony.

"Your name! What is it?"

"Well—er—Prentiss," the youth admitted.

"Is that your first name or your last name?"

"That's just my last name," the boy smiled. "First name's David."

"David Prentiss, eh?" Anthony murmured with some satisfaction, for it had a substantial sound. "Well, David—er, Hitchin, how are you? Mr. Hitchin, my young friend, Mr. David Prentiss."

The boy's hand went out and gripped Hitchin's heartily enough. Mr. Hitchin held it for a moment and peered at David—and one saw what a really penetrating stare he owned.

It bored, as a point of tempered ice, wordlessly accusing one of murder, counterfeiting, bank burglary and plain second-story work. Frequently deep students of the higher detective fiction grow this stare, and Hobart Hitchin was one of the deepest. But now, having pierced David in a dozen places without finding bomb or knife, the stare turned to Anthony and grew quite normal and amiable.

"Prentiss, eh?" said Hitchin. "Not the Vermont branch?"

"New York," David supplied.

"Mr. Prentiss is staying with me for a little," Anthony smiled as they moved toward the elevator again.

"Staying with you, eh?" Hitchin repeated, with a careful survey of David's well-worn storm-coat; and added, with characteristic bluntness: "Working for you, Fry?"

"My guest," Anthony said annoyedly; and then the car came down and the door opened and they left Mr. Hitchin, but the boy cocked an eye at Anthony and asked flatly:

"What was the idea of that—staying with you? I'm not staying with you."

"You may decide to stay for a little."

"Not me," said David.

"We shall see," Anthony chuckled. "This is our floor."

Wilkins—the priceless, faultless Wilkins who had been with Anthony for sixteen years—opened the door and, even though he were Wilkins, started a trifle at the sight of David and his cap. He flushed for the start, to be sure, as his master moved into the big living-room with his superb dignity, but when he had taken cap and coat and examined the suit beneath, Wilkins shook his head mentally. One shock had come that evening in the knowledge that Johnson Boller, whom Wilkins did not approve, was to be with them—but this young ruffian!

"Make yourself at home, David," Anthony smiled. "We'll shed our coats and find our smoking jackets."

Johnson Boller with him, he moved to the corner bedroom, to face his old friend with:

"Well, what do you think of him?"

"He's a bad egg," Johnson Boller said readily. "I don't like his eye and the way he swaggers would get him six months in any court in town. Say whatever it is the devilish impulse prompts you to say and then fire him before he pinches the silver."

"Bosh!" Anthony said testily. "The boy's awed and self-conscious—the swagger is assumed to cover that, of course. I mean what, in your decidedly inferior judgment, is his fitness as a subject for experiment? Will he know opportunity when she is first set before him or will it be necessary to present her repeatedly?"

Johnson Boller laughed harshly and stared hard at his old friend. Under certain conditions, even the empty apartment on Riverside Drive might not be so bad.

"Say!" he demanded. "Are you going to keep that little rat here and argue with him till he admits that he recognizes whatever opportunity you're going to thrust at him?"

"Essentially that."

"Well, if it's an opportunity to earn an honest living, he'll never see it—and if the chatter takes more than an hour I'm going home!" Johnson Boller snapped. "I'd have stayed there if I'd known you were going off into the abstract, Anthony. I wanted to talk to you and have a little game of chess and a bottle of ale and——"

Anthony smiled serenely.

"And the mere fact that a train of thought, only slightly unusual, has entered your evening, has upset your whole being, hasn't it? Well, it'll do you good to hear and watch something different. This boy will see opportunity before I'm done with him, Johnson, and the longer it takes the sounder my general hypothesis will have been proven."

Curiously enough, David had lost much of his grinning assurance when they rejoined him. The impudence had left his eye and the boy seemed downright uneasy. He started and rose at the sight of them, and his quick, nervous smile lingered only a moment as he said:

"I think I'd better be going after all, Mr. Fry. It's pretty late and——"

"Just a minute or two, and perhaps you'll change your mind," Anthony said quietly, as he dropped into his pet chair. "You'll permit a personal question or two, David?"

"I suppose so."

"Then—how old are you?"

"Twenty."

"Ah! Parents living?"

David nodded.

"And in rather humble circumstances, perhaps?"

This time David glanced at him keenly, queerly, for an instant—opened his lips and shut them again and ended with a mere jerk of a nod.

"How about schooling, David? You've been through high school?"

"Er—yes."

"And have you a profession?" Anthony pursued.

"No, I haven't any profession?" the boy muttered.

"But you're working, of course?" Mr. Fry asked sharply.

"What? Oh, yes," said David.

"At some mechanical line?"

"Oh, yes," David said.

"In just what line, then?"

And now, had Anthony but been watching, some of Johnson Boller's suspicions must have seemed justified. There was no question about the way David's very intelligent eyes were acting now; they darted furtively, wildly almost, from side to side, as if the boy were seeking escape. They darted toward Anthony and away from him and back to David's shabby suit and worn shoes.

"I'm a—plumber's helper!" the boy said gustily.

"Wait a second, kid!" Mr. Boller put in. "Let me see those hands!"

"Well, they—they haven't had time to get roughened up yet!" David said quickly. "I just went to work yesterday."

"The boy's lying, Anthony!" Mr. Boller said bluntly.

"I don't lie, Mr.——"

"Boller," Anthony supplied. "And please don't badger the boy, Johnson."

"I'm not badgering him," said Johnson Boller; "only that kid's hands look more like a society queen's than an honest workingman's."

"They may be hands designed for better things. David! Tell me, are you quite satisfied to be a plumber's helper, or was it the only thing you could find in the way of employment?"

"It was all I could find," David muttered, glancing at the door. And then, with his quick smile, he rose again. "I'd like to sit here and answer questions, Mr. Fry, but I'll have to run along and——"

Anthony beamed at him over his glasses, fidgeting there with the impatience of youth, standing on one foot and then on the other. Anthony turned and beamed at

the bookcase beside him, and selecting a volume, beamed at that, too.

"David," said he, "will you be seated long enough to hear a little poem?"

"What?"

"It is a very short poem, and one of my favorites," Anthony mused, and his stare at David grew quite hypnotic. "Ah, here it is—a little, wonderfully big poem by the late Senator John Ingalls. It is called—'Opportunity.'"

"Aha!" David said rather stupidly.

"And now, listen," said Anthony, clearing his throat.

"Master of human destinies am I!"

He paused and sent the hypnotic smile drilling into David.

"*Master of human destinies!*" he repeated. "That, in itself, means a very great deal, does it not?"

"I guess so," David muttered dazedly, and, however briefly, Johnson Boller almost liked him for the look he directed at Anthony's bowed head.

"Fame, love, and fortune on my footsteps wait,
Cities and fields I walk; I penetrate
Deserts and seas remote, and passing by
Hovel and mart and palace, soon or late
I knock unbidden once at every gate!"

"Once," concluded Anthony, "at every gate. *Once*, David!"

"Yes, I've heard that poem before," said David, who was examining the rug.

Johnson Boller laughed in a rich undertone. Anthony flushed, and his voice rose a little as he continued:

"If feasting, rise; if sleeping, wake before
I turn away. It is the hour of fate
And they who follow me reach every state
Mortals desire, and conquer every foe
Save death...."

The owner of Fry's Imperial Liniment looked over his glasses and discovered that David, having poked open the door of the little-used cellarette with his foot, was looking in at the bottles with mild interest.

"Every foe save death!" Anthony rapped out. "Did you hear that, David?"

"Yes, of course," David said hastily. "Do you know what time it is, Mr. Fry?"

"No! Hear the rest!" said Anthony.

"... But those who doubt or hesitate,
Condemned to failure, penury, or woe,

Seek me in vain and ceaselessly implore;
I answer not and I return—no more!"

Almost reverently the book closed.

"Have you quite assimilated the full meaning of that little poem, David?" he asked gravely.

"Er—yes."

"Quite?" Anthony persisted.

"Why, I guess so," David said, eyes opening again. "Yes, I know I have—only don't look at me like that and——"

"Then hear the rest of what I have to say," Anthony went on quickly and impressively, "for now we come to my reason for bringing you here. David, you are poor. You are without a profession—without a business of your own. Your brightest hope at present is to become a plumber."

"Say——" David began.

"I should have said, your brightest chance," Anthony corrected. "But your *ambition*, David, is altogether different. Your ambition is to become—*what?*"

And now, before the penetrating, hypnotic eye, David seemed, not without warrant, to have grown downright frightened. He glanced swiftly at Anthony and at the door.

"I don't know," he said breathlessly. "What's the answer?"

"Well, what do you want to become? A doctor? A lawyer? A teacher? An electrician? A journalist? A clergyman? A painter? An architect? A mining engineer? A civil engineer? A——"

It was plain to Johnson Boller that the situation was getting beyond David's doubtless nimble, doubtless criminal, mind. The boy held up an unsteady hand and stayed the flow.

"That's it!" he said hoarsely. "A civil engineer! You got it out of me, didn't you? And now I'd better go and——"

His quick, scared grin showed all his teeth, and he nodded in the most ridiculous

fashion—really much in the fashion one might nod at a hopeless lunatic when agreeing that, as a matter of course, he is the original Pharaoh. His mental state fairly glowed from him; all that David wanted was to leave the Hotel Lasande.

David, in short, was doing just what ninety-nine per cent. of the human race insists on doing; even at the hint of opportunity, he was trying to face about and escape. But more than that, David, obviously one of the lower classes, was treating Anthony Fry with a tolerance that was more than mere disrespect. He was causing Johnson Boller to chuckle wearily over his cigar—and in spite of his purely abstract interest, Anthony's color grew darker and his voice decidedly sharper.

"Sit still," he commanded, "and listen to me. David, up to this evening you had no real hope of attaining your ambition. In fine, opportunity to make the goal was not yours. Now opportunity is yours!"

"Is it?" David said throatily, albeit he did not resume his seat.

"Because this is what I mean to do for you, David; I mean to take you out of your present humble situation and educate you. I mean to have you here to live with me."

"What?" David gasped.

"From this very evening!" Anthony said firmly, and also astonishingly. "I shall outfit you properly and supply you with what money you need. I shall have you prepared for the best engineering college we can find, and entered there for the most complete engineering course. If you are helping in the support of your family, I shall pay to them a sum equivalent to your wages each month—or perhaps a little more, if it be essential to removing all anxiety from your mind. You follow me?"

David merely clutched the edge of his coat and gulped, staring fascinatedly at Anthony.

"I am reasonably wealthy, and I shall bear every expense that you may incur, David. When you have graduated, and everything that can be taught you has been taught you, I shall establish you in proper offices and use my considerable personal influence to see that you are supplied with work, and again until you are self-supporting I shall bear all the expense. In short, David," Anthony concluded, "I am holding *opportunity* before you—opportunity to do, without

trouble or worry or delay, the thing you most desire. Well?"

Even Johnson Boller was mildly interested, although only mildly, and with a deprecatory smile on his lips. He knew exactly what the boy would do, of course, but it had no connection with Anthony's crack-brained notion.

David would grab with both hands at this kind of opportunity and settle down to a life of ease, and the chances were that he'd get Anthony to sign something that would cost him thousands when he had waked up and lost interest in the opportunity proposition.

To Johnson's sleepy and suspicious eye David looked like a crafty little devil, if one ever walked.

Yet after a silent thirty seconds opportunity, in her gaudiest and most conspicuous form, had made no visible impression on David Prentiss. His bewildered eyes roved from Anthony to Johnson Boller. Once he seemed about to laugh; again he seemed about to speak; he did neither.

And the clock struck twelve.

And had a bomb exploded between his poorly shod feet, the effect on David Prentiss could hardly have been more striking. He started, and his eyes, dilating, lost their bewilderment and showed plain, overwhelming horror. His mouth opened with a shout of:

"Was that midnight?"

"Very likely," Anthony said impatiently. "But as to——"

"Where's my cap and coat?" David demanded.

"Never mind your cap and coat. I——"

"But I do mind 'em!" David cried. "I've got to have them—quick! Where are they? Where's the man who took them?"

Anthony merely smiled with waxing curiosity.

"So you are really rejecting opportunity at the first knock, eh?" he mused.

And now David stilled his rising excitement only with a huge effort. He gripped his chair and looked Anthony in the eye.

"Opportunity be—hanged!" he cried shrilly. "Give me my cap and coat! I want to go home!"



CHAPTER IV

THE RELUCTANT ONE

One knew Anthony Fry for two or three decades before quite understanding him. David's great disadvantage, of course, was that he had met Anthony only an hour or so before. To David, doubtless, the quiet, mysterious, speculative smile seemed sinister, for he repeated thickly:

"I want my—my cap and my coat and——"

"Well, what are you going to do if you don't get them?" Anthony laughed.

"What did you say?" David asked quickly.

"What if you don't get your coat?"

"Does that mean that you're going to keep me here, whether I want to stay or not?" the boy asked quickly.

"Not just that, perhaps, but it does mean that I'm going to keep you here for a little while, David, until you've come to your senses and——"

"I'll yell!" David stated.

"Eh?"

"If you try to keep me here I'll yell until everybody in the house comes in to see what's happening!"

Anthony laughed quietly.

"Don't be ridiculous, David," he said. "I've lived here for years, and they will know perfectly well that I'm not injuring you in any way."

"Oh!" gasped David.

"So just sit down again and consider what I have offered you. Sit still for just one minute and consider—and then give me your answer."

Finger-tips drumming, benevolent gaze beaming over his glasses, the unusual

Anthony waited. David's scared eyes roved the room, wandered over Johnson Boller, reading his paper, and finally settled so steadily on that gentleman that he looked up and, looking, read David's mind and shrugged his shoulders.

"Your own fault, kid," said he. "I wanted to give you a free ride, but you had to come up and hear what he had to say."

"Johnson!" Anthony said sharply, "Just let the youngster's mental processes work the thing out in their own way."

Half a minute dragged along—yet before it was gone one saw clearly that the mental processes had taken their grip. An extremely visible change was coming over David Prentiss. He gulped down certain emotions of his own, and presently managed to smile, uneasily at first and then with a certain confidence. He cleared his throat and, with a slight huskiness, addressed Anthony:

"Er—do I understand that you want me to stay here until I fully appreciate all you've offered me, Mr. Fry?"

"Virtually that."

"Well, I appreciated that all along; but—but I was sort of worried about it getting so late, you know," David said brightly. "I certainly do appreciate it, and I thank you very much. Now can I have my coat?"

"Really decided to grip the opportunity, eh?" Anthony asked keenly.

"You bet!"

Johnson Boller laid aside his paper.

"Now chase him, Anthony!" he said. "He's standing up and holding the sugar on his nose. Slip the kid a five-dollar bill and let Wilkins——"

"Do you really imagine that I'd rouse all the boy's hopes and then play him a shabby trick like that?" Anthony asked sharply.

"Huh?"

"Most emphatically not!" Mr. Fry said. "I'll play no such shabby trick on the youngster. He shall have exactly the chance I promised, and I shall watch the working out of the idea with the most intense interest. David, I'm going to keep you here from this minute!"

"Keep me here?" David echoed blankly.

"Certainly."

David gazed fixedly at the electrolier.

"Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Fry," he said. "I'd like to stay to-night, but I can't—not to-night. You see, I have to go home to my father. He's an—an invalid."

"We'll telephone the good news to him," Anthony smiled.

"You can't," said David. "We're too poor to have a telephone."

"Very well. Then we'll wire him."

David shook his head energetically.

"That wouldn't do, either," said he. "Father's sick, you know. His heart's very weak. Just the sight of a telegram might kill him."

"Unfortunate!" Anthony sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "Very well, David. Then you shall write him a note, and I'll have Wilkins take it to him."

David swallowed audibly and smiled a wild little smile.

"Oh, no! Not that, sir!" said he. "That might be even worse than a telegram, I think."

"Why?"

"Well, father would be likely to think that I'd been—been injured and taken into some swell home, you know, and that I was writing like that just to reassure him. No," David said firmly, "that would be the worst possible thing. I'll have to go myself and talk it over with father and—now if I can have my cap and my coat?"

It came as a familiar refrain. It caused Anthony's eye to darken suddenly as he sat back and stared at the boy.

"Confound your hat and coat!" he rapped out. "See here, David. You write the note, and I myself will take it to your father and explain—and be sure that he will rejoice. There is the desk. Where do you live?"

His tone was not nearly so benevolent. Opposition, as always, was rousing Anthony's unfortunate stubbornness; with or without reason, had David but

known it, every mention of that cap and coat was diminishing his chances of walking out of the Lasande—and it is possible that he sensed something of the kind, for his smile disappeared abruptly, and the assurance that had been with him was no more.

"I can't tell you where I live!" he said hoarsely.

"In the name of heaven, why not?" Anthony snapped.

"Because—because—well, you may not understand this, sir, but I promised father I wouldn't tell any one where we live."

"What?"

"I did, and I can't break a promise!" David insisted. "You see, father was rich once, and he's terribly proud. He doesn't want any one to know we live in such a poor place, because somebody he used to know might hear of it and try to help him, and that would break father's heart."

"His heart's in pretty bad shape, isn't it?" Johnson Boller muttered.

"Frightful!" said David. "And that's why I'll have to go now and explain to him and think it all over and——"

"Why think it over?" Anthony rasped. "Isn't your mind made up now?"

"Of course it is," the boy said hastily. "Only I'll have to tell father and then come back here in the morning, Mr. Fry; only—*I have, to go home now!*"

His voice broke strangely.

Anthony Fry looked him over with a quantity of sour curiosity.

If the golden opportunity before his very eyes was making even the trace of an impression on David Prentiss, the boy's faculty for masking his true emotions was downright amazing. That bright, rather attractive young countenance told of absolutely nothing but the heartfelt desire to escape from the gentleman who wished to improve his condition.

It was the same old story, world-old and world-wide. David, once he was out of this apartment, would never return; with opportunity fairly pushing against him, he turned from her in terror, refusing to know that she was there.

Well, then, he *should* see her!

Anthony's square chin set. He rose with a jerk and stood surveying the nervous David, a tall, commanding, rather fearsome figure. Some little time he transfixed the lad with his cold, hard eyes, while David grew paler and paler; then he walked down upon David, who cringed visibly, and seized his shoulders.

"David," he said sternly, "you have no conception at all of what I am trying to offer you. I'm going to keep you here until you have."

"Keep me—here?" David faltered.

"Just that."

It was in Johnson Boller's mind to rise and deliver a little speech of his own, pointing out the legal rights of David Prentiss and the chance that, at some later date, interested parties might hear of this evening and use it in moving Anthony toward an insane asylum. Yet he did not speak, for he grew interested in David himself.

That bewildered youngster was shrinking and shrinking away from Anthony. He was wilting before the stem eye, and he was smiling in the sickliest, most ghastly fashion. And now he was nodding submissively and speaking:

"Yes, I'll stay, Mr. Fry."

"Ah!" said Anthony.

"I—I'm glad to stay," David assured him.

Then, looking at Anthony, he contrived another smile and yawned; and having yawned once, he yawned again, vastly, and stretching the second time.

"The—the trouble with me is that I'm sleepy," David stated, in a strange, low voice. "I get that way because I'm not used to late hours, and when I do get sleepy I—I can't think or talk or do anything. I'll be myself in the morning, Mr. Fry; but if I'm going to stay here, I'd like to go to bed now."

He yawned again and still again, quite noisily and eying Anthony in an odd, expectant, pleading way. Anthony, after a puzzled moment, shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Go to bed if you like, David," he said. "There are one or two things I want to say to you first."

"Yes, sir," David said obediently.

"To-morrow, when you have slept on it, I'm confident that you will see the huge opportunity that I have offered you, and that you will stay with me as one of my little household. It is not an exacting position, but there are one or two laws you must remember. For the first—no dissipation. You don't drink, David?"

"Not a drop, sir."

"And for another," Anthony said gravely, "no women!"

"Eh?" said David.

"Absolutely no women in this Hotel Lasande!" Anthony repeated, with a fanatic force that caused Johnson Boller to snort disgustedly and throw up his hands. "This is, perhaps, more strictly than any other house in New York an all-man establishment. There are not even women servants here, David, and other sorts of women *don't* run in and out of here. In fact, the ladies who do come—relatives of the tenants, of course—are so very few that they're all known to the clerks. So, while you may have a sweetheart, David, and while she may be all very well in her place—keep her out of here!"

"But——"

"That's the unwritten law of the house, and it makes for profound peace," Anthony concluded. "You'll appreciate it more fully when you have lived here for a time."

David, facing Mr. Fry, gazed at the floor and yawned again.

"I guess I'll go to bed," he said weakly.

"And before that we'll start you on the right track," Anthony said with a gentle smile. "You'll take a good, hot bath."

He pressed the button and Wilkins appeared.

"The guest-chamber for young Mr. Prentiss, Wilkins," said Anthony. "You will outfit him with pajamas of my own and the gray bathrobe I used last year. To-morrow we'll get you something that fits, David."

David nodded numbly.

"And, Wilkins," said his master, "you will assist Mr. Prentiss with his bath."

David's nod broke in two.

"I don't want any help," he said.

"But Wilkins——"

"Wilkins or anybody else; I don't want any help with a bath. I know how to take a bath, at least. I don't know how you swells take yours, but I take mine alone; I don't want any one pottering around me, and I won't have it!"

His countenance flushed angrily, and Anthony favored him with an indulgent smile. After all, he was very young.

"As you please, David. Show him to the north bathroom, Wilkins. That is all."

But he tapped Wilkins's shoulder and held him back a moment to add:

"And get his wretched togs, Wilkins. I'll dress him properly to-morrow; but get those rags away from him."

"Very good, sir," said Wilkins, as he glided down the corridor after David.

The proprietor of Fry's Imperial Liniment watched him go and smiled softly, returning to his chair to grin at Johnson Boller in a perfectly human fashion. Johnson Boller, on the other hand, did not grin at all. He merely gazed at his old friend until, after a minute or two, Anthony asked:

"Well—what do you think?"

"I think you're a nut!" Johnson Boller said with sweet candor. "I think you're a plain da—well, I think you're unbalanced. You know what that young thug will do to you, don't you?"

"Eh?"

"If he's the crook he looks, he'll light out of here about three in the morning with everything but the piano and your encyclopædia. If he isn't a crook, just as soon as he gets loose and talks it over with his friends, he'll have you pinched for detaining him here against his will; and I'll give you ten to one that he collects not less than twenty-five hundred dollars before he's through. You scared him stiff with your eagle eye and your crazy notions, and he pleaded guilty so he could go to bed and get away from you. I'll have to testify to that if he calls on me."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Anthony Fry.

"Is it? Wait and see, Anthony," Johnson Boller said earnestly. "That kid spells trouble. I can feel it in the air."

"You can always feel it in the air," Anthony smiled.

"Maybe so; but this feeling amounts to a pain!" Boller said warmly. "This is a hunch—a premonition—one of those prophetic aches that can't be ignored. Why, he had a fight started before you had spoken ten words to him, and——"

"Oh, rot!" Anthony said.

Johnson Boller drew a deep, concerned breath.

"On the level," he said, "are you going to keep this kid imprisoned here?"

"By no means," Anthony laughed. "As a matter of fact, all I want to do is to talk to him in the morning. I want to know, Johnson, whether he will actually persist in fighting off the chance I'm offering him—because it's so confounded characteristic of the whole human race. If he's as obstinate in the morning as he is now—well, I suppose I'll turn him loose with a ten-dollar bill, and look around for another subject. I'd really like to approach a dozen men, picked haphazard, and write a little paper on the manner in which they greet opportunity."

"Yes, but not while I'm with you," Johnson Boller said. "Anthony, do this—get the kid aside in the morning and tell him you'd been drinking heavily all day and didn't know what you were doing to-night. See? Make a joke of it and slip him fifty to keep quiet, and then——"

"Ah, Wilkins," Anthony smiled. "Got his togs, did you?"

The invaluable one bowed and held the shabby garments at a distance from his person.

"He passed them out to me through a crack in the door," he reported disgustedly. "What shall I do with them? They're hardly worth pressing, sir."

"Of course not. Don't bother with them," Anthony smiled, and waved his man away. "Johnson, turn intelligent for a moment, will you?"

"Why? Intelligence has no place in this evening."

"Oh, yes it has. Let's examine the case of this David youngster and try to reconstruct his emotions and his mental impressions when confronted with opportunity such as——"

"Damn opportunity!" said Johnson Boller, rising with a jerk. "I'm going to bed!"

Only once had Johnson Boller tarried in Montreal, and on that occasion the thermometer had ranged about ninety in the shade. Yet now, as he slumbered fitfully in Anthony's Circassian guest-chamber, childhood notions of Canada came to haunt his dreams.

He saw snow—long, glistening roads of snow over which Beatrice whizzed in a four-horse sleigh, with driver and footman on the box, and beside her a tall, foreign-looking creature with a big mustache and flashing eyes and teeth. He talked to Beatrice and leaned very close, devouring her beauty with his eyes; and Johnson Boller groaned, woke briefly, and drifted off again.

He saw ice; they were holding an ice carnival in Montreal, and everybody was on skates. Beatrice was on skates, ravishing in white fur, leading some sort of grand march with the Governor General of Canada, who skated very close to her and devoured her beauty with his bold, official eyes, causing Johnson Boller to groan again and thresh over on his other side.

He saw a glittering toboggan slide; laughing people in furs were there at the head of the slide, notably Beatrice, chatting shyly with a blond giant in a Mackinaw, who leaned very close to her as they prepared to coast and devoured her beauty with his large, blue eyes. Now they settled on the toboggan, just these two, although Johnson Boller's astral self seemed to be with them. The blond giant whispered something, and they slid down—down—down!

And they struck something, and Johnson Boller was on his feet in the middle of the Circassian chamber, demanding:

"What's that? What was that?"

Somewhere, Anthony was muttering and moving about. Somewhere else, Wilkins was chattering; but the main impression was that the roof had fallen in—and Johnson Boller, struggling into his bathrobe, stumbled to the door and

burst into the brilliant living-room.

In the center of the room, flattened upon the floor, was Anthony's substantial little desk. Papers were around it and blotters and letters without number, and the old-fashioned inkwell had shot off its top and set a black streak across the beautiful Oriental carpet.

Two chairs were on their sides, also, but the striking detail of the picture was furnished by David Prentiss. That young man was sprawled crazily, just beyond the desk, and beside him, holding him down with both hands, was Wilkins, tastefully arrayed in the flowered silk pajamas Anthony had discarded last year as too vivid.

"I've got him, sir!" Wilkins' pale lips reported, as his master appeared. "I have him fast."

"What'd he do?" Johnson Boller asked quickly. "Pull a knife on you, Wilkins?"

"He'd not time for that, sir," Wilkins said grimly. "I think he stumbled over a chair and took the desk along with him, trying to get out. I always wake just as the clock strikes two, and stay awake ten minutes or more, and that's how I came to hear him and get him. He was just getting to his feet when I ran in and turned on the lights, and he——"

"Let him up!" Anthony said sharply.

"But don't let go of him!" Johnson Boller said harshly. "I missed the time by an hour, but I was right otherwise, Anthony. He's got the silver and your stick-pins and rings on him, and—what the dickens is he wearing?"

Silence fell upon them for a little, as David struggled to his feet and looked about with a strange, trancelike stare—for there was some reason for Mr. Boller's query.

David, apparently, had dressed for the street. He wore shoes not less than five sizes too long; he wore a bright brown sack coat which came almost to his knees, and blue trousers which were turned up until they all but met the coat. He had acquired a rakish felt hat, too, which rested mainly on the back of his neck.

"He got them clothes out of the junk-closet at the end of the corridor, sir," Wilkins said quite breathlessly. "He must have been roaming the place quite a bit, to have found them, and——"

"What were you trying to do, David?" Anthony snapped.

"I don't know, sir," David said vaguely, passing a hand over his eyes in a manner far too dramatic to be convincing.

"Where did you get those clothes?"

"I have no idea, sir," David murmured.

"Don't lie to me!" Anthony snapped. "What——"

"I'm not lying, sir," David said in the same vague, far-away tone. "I must have been asleep, Mr. Fry. I remember having a terrible dream—it was about father and it seemed to me that he was dying. There were doctors all about the bed and father was calling to me, and it seemed to me that I must get to him, no matter what stood in the way. I remember trying to go to him, and then—why, I must have fallen there, sir, and wakened."

For an instant the vagueness left his eyes and they looked straight at Anthony.

"May I go to father now?" he asked. "That—that dream upset me."

"Morning will do for father," Anthony said briefly.

"But I have a feeling that something terrible's going to happen if I don't go——"

Anthony Fry laid a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"Get back to bed, youngster," he smiled. "You're nervous, I suppose, being in a strange bed, and all that sort of thing. And incidentally, get off those clothes and give them to Wilkins."

David gulped audibly.

"I'll pass them out to Wilkins, if I must, sir," he said in the queerest, choking voice—and he turned from them and shuffled down the corridor to the north bedroom of Anthony Fry's apartment.

"Curious kid!" Anthony muttered.

"Not nearly as curious as you are," said Johnson Boller. "You didn't even go through his pockets and get out the stuff while he was here, and we could see just what he'd taken! You let him go in there and dump the pockets before he gives up the clothes and——"

Anthony permitted himself a grin and a yawn.

"My dear chap, go back to bed and forget it," he said impatiently. "The boy was stealing nothing. He may have been trying to escape; he may have been walking in his sleep. Consciously or subconsciously, he's certainly giving us a demonstration of humanity's tendency to dodge its opportunities."

Johnson Boller gave it up and returned, soured, to his Circassian walnut bedstead—soured because, if there was one thing above all others that he abominated, it was being routed out in the middle of the night.

Five minutes or more he spent in muttering before he drifted away again, this time to arrive at somebody's grand ball in Montreal. It was a tremendous function, plainly given in honor of Beatrice's arrival in town, yet she was not immediately visible. Johnson Boller's dream personality hunted around for some time before it found her in the conservatory.

Behind thick palms, Beatrice sat with a broad-shouldered person in the uniform of a field-marshal; he had a string of medals on his chest, and he was devouring her beauty with his hungry eyes. Nay, more, he leaned close to Beatrice and sought to take her hand, and although she shrank from him in terror, there was a certain fascinated light in her own lovely black eyes; she clutched her bosom and sought to escape, but——

"Oh, my Lord!" said Johnson Boller, awakening to stare at the dark ceiling.

Somewhere a window slammed.

He listened for a little and heard nothing more; then, having the room nearest the elevators, he heard one of them hum up swiftly and heard the gate clatter open. And then there were voices and some one knocked on the door of the apartment with a club, as it seemed. Somebody else protested and pressed the buzzer—and by that time Wilkins had padded down the hall and was opening the door.

Johnson Boller caught:

"Police officer! Lemme in quick! You've got a burglar in there!"

CHAPTER V

THE WEE SMA' HOURS

Wilkins, in his official black, was a wonderfully self-contained person; roused from slumber in pink-rosed silk, his self-control was not so perfect, for as he struggled out of bed again Johnson Boller caught:

"God bless my soul, officer! What——"

"Hush!" interrupted an unfamiliar, horrified voice. "Come inside quickly and close that door."

Anthony was in motion, too. Johnson Boller, stumbling out of his Circassian apartment, met him just entering the living-room from his own chamber, and for an instant they stared at one another as they knotted bathrobe cords about them.

"You see?" Johnson Boller said, with acid triumph. "I was right, eh?"

"What?"

"The cops have tracked the little devil down for his last job, whatever that may have been, and they've found him *here!* Now you've got a nice scandal on your hands, haven't you? A tenth-rate kid crook found hiding in the flat of Mr. Anthony Fry, with the full knowledge and consent of——"

"Upon my word, Johnson, I think you've lost your senses to-night!" Anthony snapped. "Whatever is wrong, Wilkins?"

The silk-pajamaed one indicated their visitors with a hand that was none too steady.

"It's Mr. Dodbury, the night manager, sir, and this policeman that says——"

"I'm afraid you have a burglar in here, Mr. Fry," the manager put in agitatedly. "I can't understand how it occurred; nothing of the kind has ever happened to us before, and the mouth of that alley is constantly under the eye of the firemen on that side of the boiler-room. Moreover, there is a high gate from the street and I cannot believe that any one——"

The burly officer halted him.

"Well, however he got there, he was on the fire-escape and coming down when I see him from the street," he said energetically. "When he seen me he turned into this north window and closed it after him, and my partner'd have given me the whistle if he'd come out again. Which room will it be, now?"

Wilkins glanced significantly at his master.

"If it's the north room on the fire-escape, sir, it must be the room young Mr. Prentiss has to-night."

"And the burglar is supposed to have gone in there?" Anthony said calmly.

"He ain't supposed—he went. I seen him!" stated the law. "And the longer we stand here and talk about it, the more chance he has to kill whoever's in there!"

"Well, as it happens, he isn't killing any one, because he isn't there," Mr. Fry said patiently and with just a touch of contempt. "Any one entering that room must have wakened Mr. Prentiss, and he certainly hasn't called for help. For that matter, I should have heard the window myself, because I sleep very lightly. Nevertheless, if you wish, we will go in there."

Impressively dignified even in his bathrobe, Anthony led the way down the side corridor, with the four trailing after him. They came to the door, and the officer pushed forward, club raised grimly over his right shoulder as he laid his left hand on the knob.

"Where's the light-switch in there?" he whispered.

"Right by the door," Wilkins supplied.

"Duck in the second I turn the knob, throw on the light, and then dodge along the wall," the law commanded briefly. "Are you ready?"

The invaluable one muttered his assent. The knob turned soundlessly and the door flew open. Wilkins, with a distinctly terrified little wheeze, pushed in, jabbed at the button, and scurried down the room on his hands and knees, eyes shut to shield his brain from the horrible impression.

Yet there was no hint of anything horrible. With all four corners of the room in plain sight, with the empty closet partly open and its interior fully visible, no burglar crouched, pistol in hand—no masked malefactor leaped forward to stun

the officer with his padded lead-pipe. Only David Prentiss was in the room, and David slumbered sweetly in the bed, the covers pulled tight up around his young chin, a gentle dream-smile upon his regular features.

"Well, wotter yuh know about——" the officer began.

"Hush!" Anthony said gently.

"What?"

"Don't wake the youngster!" Anthony whispered sharply. "There's no need for that, officer. Look around if you like and then let us get out of here."

He folded his arms and waited, while the officer, visibly puzzled, poked about the room, and Wilkins, on his feet and smiling sheepishly, tip-toed to the door—while the night manager of the Lasande stepped in and looked about with a mixture of perplexity and relief, and Johnson Boller stood and stared at the sleeping David.

"Are you quite sure it was this window, officer?" the manager asked.

"I am that, if this is the one next to the corner of the house."

"But are you quite sure that you didn't imagine it?" Anthony asked tartly.

The policeman looked him over gravely.

"Boss, when I can see a man in black clothes staring down at me, letting off a little howl of fright, and then turning around and going into a window—when I can see that and it ain't there, I'll turn in my tin and go back to the docks. The guy came in this window and——"

"Well, since it is quite evident that he didn't, he couldn't have come in," the manager of the faultless hotel said hastily, as he caught Anthony's expression. "You've made a mistake in the window, officer. We'll go down and look up from the street again and see just what window you do mean."

"But——"

"We will not bother the gentlemen further," Mr. Dodbury said firmly.

Anthony nodded.

"Show them out, Wilkins. Come, Johnson."

"Wait a second," Johnson Boller said softly, as the others filed out of sight.

"Wait for what?"

"I want to admire this little cherub, sleeping here so soundly," Mr. Boller muttered.

"Don't be absurd! Come and——"

This thing of losing sleep rendered Johnson Boller uglier than could anything else in the world.

"Are they out of hearing?" he said. "All right. Somebody did close a window in here. I heard it close!"

"When?"

"Five minutes before the last excitement," said Mr. Boller. "How many pair of pajamas did Wilkins give this kid?"

"What? One pair, I suppose. Why?"

Johnson Boller grinned almost wickedly.

"Because there's a pajama suit under that chair and it's been worn!" said he. "What's the kid wearing in bed there?"

He stepped forward suddenly and jerked back the covers, and Anthony stepped forward with a sharp little exclamation, for David Prentiss, although he seemed to slumber between the sheets, wore a suit of black clothes and a pair of black shoes, and beside him a black felt hat was crumpled!

"Maybe that cop wasn't the idiot he seemed, eh?" Johnson Boller asked.

"I don't understand it," Anthony said angrily. "I—David!"

The boy merely sighed in his sleep and turned on his back.

"*David!*" Johnson Boller snapped, thrusting a hard forefinger directly into the pit of David's stomach.

"Good gracious!" gasped David Prentiss, sitting up and staring about with eyes wide open. "What—I must have been asleep and——"

Anthony's gaze was growing keener and angrier by the second.

"Never mind that artistic amazement, David," he said sourly. "What were you trying to do?"

"Trying?" echoed David. "To do?"

"Those are Wilkins's clothes. Where did you get them?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do!" Anthony snapped. "You must have found them in his room. Well?"

David gazed up at him with the same unfathomable look that had so disturbed Johnson Boller in the taxicab.

"Very well—I did find them in his room," he said. "I put them on because I couldn't find my own clothes, and I—I wanted to get to father."

"Yes, and now you're going to father!" Johnson Boller said decisively. "Better let him go, Anthony."

David was on his feet with one swing.

"That's the only thing to do with me," he said heartily. "I'm too much of a nuisance to keep around, Mr. Fry; I'm so worried about father that I can't think of anything else. So now I'll go and——"

"So now you'll stay right here!" Anthony said fiercely.

"Why?" Boller asked.

"Because I've undertaken to show this kid the opportunity of his lifetime, and I'll drive it into his infernal little skull if I have to chloroform him and have a surgeon drill a hole to let it through!" Mr. Fry said quite irresponsibly.

David collapsed hopelessly on the edge of the bed.

"I—I should think you'd be so out of patience with me——" he began mournfully.

"I am, but I'm not going to drop the job on that account," Anthony said grimly. "Shed those clothes, David."

"I'll shed 'em when you go out," David said monotonously. "I—I'd rather undress

alone."

Johnson Boller's plump hands were on his plump hips and he surveyed his old friend darkly.

"Are you actually going to keep the youngster here against his will?" he demanded.

"I am!" snapped Anthony Fry.

Johnson Boller swallowed his wondering rage.

"I hope you get all that's coming to you!" he said. "I hope he sues you for a million dollars and collects every penny of it!"

And he turned and thumped out of David's chamber, down the corridor, and into the living-room, across the living-room, and into his own bedchamber—and there for a little he sat on the edge of the bed and swore aloud.

Presently he heard Anthony come through from David's room, muttering to himself; he heard the switch snap, and the streak of light under his door vanished.

With a long, weary groan, Johnson Boller slipped back to slumberland, and presently he was again in Montreal. It was still winter, and they were holding a skiing contest. Beatrice was there at the top of the slide, and beside her stood a tall, foppish youth with a little blond mustache. He leaned very close to Beatrice as he spoke, and devoured her beauty with his hungry eyes.

In the east the first gray light of dawn was streaking the skies.

In Anthony Fry's living-room, ever so faintly, objects just took shape in the gloom, coming foggily out of the inky blackness that had been, even ten minutes ago. Down the corridor a door creaked, and for a minute or more after the creak the stillness was even more pronounced.

Then, had one been awake and listening, the softest, lightest shuffle came from the corridor—paused—moved on again. There was a sharp intake of breath and the almost inaudible sound of a hand feeling along the corridor wall, feeling along and feeling along, until it touched the curtains of the living-room.

In the wide doorway of the dusky place an indefinite, strange figure appeared and stopped. It wore slippers, several sizes too large. It wore a bathrobe of gray,

so long that its owner held it up from the floor to avoid tripping. It wore pajamas, too, and of these the legs were upturned almost one foot—for they were Anthony's pajamas.

Warily the figure gazed about, squinting through the gloom for half a minute, listening intently. Its frowzy brown head nodded then and the bathrobed one tip-toed on, now with a definite idea of direction. Past Anthony's door it went and past Johnson Boller's without a sound, without a slip—stopped to listen again, and then scuffed on toward the far corner, where stood the little telephone table.

And now, trembling, the figure settled on the stool, and shaky hands gripped the instrument itself. The receiver went to its ear and the figure whispered into the transmitter—trembled the harder and waited through minutes that were hours, while from behind Johnson Boller's door came an irregular snore and an occasional groan, as some new fiend sought to capture Beatrice's slender hand.

Suddenly a visible shock ran through the stealthy figure at the telephone. The trembling ceased abruptly and the figure stiffened, leaning forward eagerly and cupping a hand about the transmitter. Thrice it whispered shrilly, nodding desperately at the uncomprehending instrument; and at last the listener at the other end seemed to understand, for the figure pressed lips even closer and spoke swiftly.

A full two minutes of sharp whispering and it waited—listened and nodded animatedly—spoke again, enunciating each word clearly and still so softly that one across the living-room could not have heard.

Without the suggestion of a click, the receiver was returned to its hook. The figure rose cautiously and peered all about, through the shadows, getting its bearings once more. Again the bathrobe was gathered high above the grotesquely slippered feet; again the figure shuffled along, moving toward the doorway.

Without a stumble it threaded its mysterious way between chairs and little tables, divans and cases and pedestals, until it came safely to the corridor. There it paused for an instant, and in the gloom the faintest, excited giggle issued from beside the curtains. Then the corridor doorway was empty, and Johnson Boller snored on and groaned.

At the end of the corridor David Prentiss's door closed and utter stillness rested upon the apartment again.

After the skiing contest, although Johnson Boller did not seem to be present at the end, all hands trooped off to a clubhouse of some kind and there was a general jollification. Lovely women, handsome men grouped about a long table, and waiters rushed hither and thither, bearing viands and wine—although mostly wine.

He of the little blond mustache sat beside Beatrice, and as the champagne came around for the second or third time he leaped from his chair. Glass high held, he pointed to Johnson Boller's lovely wife with the other hand; he was beginning a toast, the temperature and intimacy of which caused Johnson Boller's fists to clench, and—he woke with a violent jerk and stared at the ceiling.

It was daylight—had been daylight for some time, apparently, because an early sun was reflected from the high building on the other side of the street. Wilkins seemed to be moving around, too, which indicated that it was at least six o'clock.

Johnson Boller stretched and snarled; he had had a wretched night of it! He was tired all through, as he was always tired when his rest had been broken. He was ugly as sin, too, and almost at once he found his ugliness focusing on young David Prentiss.

If Anthony Fry had carried his obsession over into the daylight, if he still persisted in poking his idiotic opportunity at David and the end of it did not seem to be in sight, Johnson Boller decided that the empty flat on Riverside should know its master's presence hereafter and—Boller sat up in bed, listening.

That was certainly Wilkins's voice, raised in horror—ah, and Wilkins was hurrying, too. Or no, it couldn't be Wilkins; that was somebody a good deal lighter, rushing along the corridor. And now the oddest babel of voices had risen, with Wilkins thrusting in an incoherent word here and there—and now the voices were growing fainter, all of a sudden, and he could hear Anthony Fry stirring in the next room.

Something new had happened! Johnson Boller, swinging out of bed, jammed his feet into his slippers and snatched up his bathrobe. Another night like this, and he'd be ready for emergency drill with a fire company.

Not that there was any need for haste, though. By the time he had opened the door and stepped into the living-room the little excitement seemed to have

quieted down again. Anthony, bathrobed also, was just issuing from his bedroom, and again, for a moment, they gazed at one another.

"What was it that time?" Johnson Boller asked.

"I've no idea. Did you hear it, too?"

"Naturally. I——"

"Why, Wilkins!" Anthony Fry all but gasped, as his servitor appeared in the doorway. "What under the sun's the matter with you?"

"My—my eye, sir!" choked the faithful one. "It's downright scandalous, Mr. Fry!"

"What is?"

"The—the woman, sir! The woman that's come to see him!"

His jaw sagged senselessly and his blank eyes regarded his master quite fishily; and Anthony, after a wondering second or so, scuffed over to him and snapped:

"What's wrong with you, Wilkins? What woman came?"

"A—a young Frenchwoman, I should judge, sir," Wilkins stammered. "She came to the door here, getting past the office I don't know how. At any rate, she came, sir, and said some gibberish about Mr. David Prentiss, and with that she was past me and inside, Mr. Fry."

"Where is she now?"

"Well, she—she's in his bedroom, sir!" Wilkins stated. "The young chap came flying out like a madman, Mr. Fry, and threw his arms around her, speaking French as I suppose. And she—she threw her arms around Mr. Prentiss, sir, and with that they—well, they're in there now, sir."

Johnson Boller laughed unpleasantly.

"Picked off a live one, didn't you, Anthony?" said he. "There's nothing slow about David. He comes here and settles down at midnight, and his lady friends are calling by six the next morning. When you——"

Anthony had passed him, chin set and lips rather white.

There are some places where the questionable may be passed over quite lightly. The Hotel Lasande is not one of these places. There are thousands upon thousands of bachelors who would merely have grinned interestedly at the news; Anthony, being impeccable and a genuine woman-hater at heart, was not of these thousands. Hence, even his lean and aristocratic cheeks were white as he rattled at the knob of David's door.

He had expected to find it locked, and in that he was disappointed. The door gave quite readily, admitting Anthony and Johnson Boller as well—and for a matter of seconds they stood transfixed before the picture.

Beyond question, the woman was there!

She was little and very dark, decidedly pretty, for that matter, and obviously fond of David Prentiss; she sat at David's side on the edge of the bed and her arms were about David—while young Mr. Prentiss himself held her fast and seemed in a high state of excitement.

Even as the door opened, they had been speaking, both at the same time and both in French, in itself rather an astonishing phenomenon; but as the bathrobed gentlemen stopped beside them they ceased speaking. They merely clutched each other the tighter and looked at Anthony.

"Well?" Anthony Fry said slowly, and his voice was a terrible thing to hear.

"Well?" David said faintly.

His pretty little friend broke into a torrent of French, of which, unfortunately, neither Anthony nor Johnson Boller could make anything at all. David, with a long, gasping intake of his breath, muttered something to her, and that proving futile, put a gentle hand over her mouth. The girl, looking at Anthony, burst suddenly into loud and hysterical weeping!

"For Heaven's sake, shut her up!" gasped the master of the apartment.

"You started her—it was the way you looked at her!" David said thickly.

"Well, you stop her or I'll wring your neck!" Anthony panted. "You can hear that over half the house."

He turned his eye back to the unfortunate and froze her into sudden silence. Shaking, the girl crouched closer to David Prentiss, and Anthony drew breath

once more.

It was a horrible thing that had happened, of course—this coming of a strange woman into his apartment. It was likely to take a good deal of explaining to the management of the Lasande, too, later on. But he had brought it upon himself, and the realization caused Anthony's white fury to glow.

"This—this woman is a friend of yours?" he choked.

"One of the—best friends I have!" David faltered.

"How does she come to be here?"

"I—I sent for her," David confessed. "I telephoned and——"

"All right. That's enough," Anthony Fry said, composure returning in some degree. "Can she speak English?"

"Not one word."

"Positively," the master of the apartment said slowly, "the thing to do is to have you both arrested, David. Don't start like that and don't speak! There is a certain presumption that this woman is some sort of accomplice, David—not much, perhaps, but one strong enough to hold you until both of you had learned a lesson!"

David, himself, white to the lips, was beyond words.

"Nevertheless," Anthony pursued, only a trifle more gently, "I shall go to no such length, because of the character of the house and the personal reflection such a mess would cast upon myself. Tell the woman to go, David, and then you and I will have a little chat."

"But——" David whispered.

"Tell her to go this instant!" Anthony thundered.

The boy in the oversize bathrobe looked at his girl friend with stricken eyes—looked at Anthony for an instant, and turned away as swiftly. He swallowed, and, lips trembling, addressed the little French girl; and she started from him and threw out her hands in horror, pouring out a torrent of words. David spoke again, however, and she rose, swaying.

"Show the woman to the door, Wilkins, and to the back stairs," Anthony ordered,

restraining himself with a considerable effort. "Be sure she doesn't go near the elevators. Quick!"

David spoke again, in French and in a strange, low, forlorn wail. The girl, as if at an eternal parting, thrust out the expressive hands once more and gurgled hysterical Gallic snatches; and then Wilkins had laid a hand on her shoulder, turned her about, and she was gone.

Johnson Boller looked after them and at his old friend.

"Aren't you going to send the youngster after her?" he asked with the superior air of a man who has proved his case beyond a doubt.

"Quite possibly," Anthony said, smiling a dangerous little smile. "But I mean to have a chat with David first."

Johnson Boller gazed at David for a moment and smiled himself, almost happily. Unless indications were highly deceptive, Anthony, with his precious reputation all mussed up by the pretty little French girl, was mad enough to beat up David.

But Johnson Boller had no idea of sitting around and watching it, later to waste days in a police court for David's wretched sake. Hence he thumped out of David's room and back to his own.

Alone with his find, Anthony said not a word for a full minute, nor did David. The boy, hunched on the edge of his bed, had passed the capability of motion and even of thought; he merely stared at Anthony with dazed, thunder-struck eyes that were very far from being intelligent.

"David," Anthony said savagely, "however slightly unusual the circumstances may have been, I brought you to this apartment for your own good."

"Um," David said numbly.

"And last night I laid down for you the rule that you were to have no women here."

David said nothing at all.

"Yet even before we've dressed this morning, you manage to worm an infernal woman in here and—what the devil do you mean by it, anyway, you infernal little whelp?" Anthony cried, as his temper snapped. "Don't sit there and shiver! Answer me!"

Still David said nothing.

"Answer or I'll shake some wits into you!" Anthony cried.

And by way of doing this he seized David's thick brown hair and gave a first, threatening shake.

And having shaken—Anthony Fry, the chilly and self-contained, emitted one rattling, half-shrieking gasp and reeled backward!



CHAPTER VI

JOHNSON BOLLER PROPOSES

The whole head of brown hair had come free in his hand, and from David's cranium, billow upon billow of red-gold glory floated down about the bathrobed shoulders.

David, in fine, with no warning at all, had turned into a decidedly pretty young woman!

Through Anthony's astounded brain, impressions pursued one another so rapidly, those first few seconds, that the room danced crazily. There were two or three Davids and oceans of reddish-gold hair; there were several pairs of somber, deep-blue eyes as well, whirling around and mocking him, regarding his quite steadily and all packed with new significance.

Yet in the tumult several details, which had rather puzzled Anthony Fry, grew painfully clear. Very fully now did he understand that delicacy of feature—the small, beardless chin and the fine, regular little nose, which he had ascribed to good blood somewhere in David's family. He understood also the slenderness of David's hands and the curious, high-pitched shrillness that had come into the voice once or twice in moments of excitement.

But these were minor, insignificant realizations; he understood them and passed them, forcing his brain to some sort of calm; and now, with only one David in the room and the furniture quite steady again, he stood face to face with what was really one of the most horrible facts of his whole life; a pretty young woman, of whose identity he was utterly ignorant, was in his guest chamber now, in pajamas and bathrobe—and she had been there all night!

Out of Anthony's limp fingers the wig dropped, landing on the floor with a soft thump. He sought to speak and found that words would not come as yet; he gripped at one of the little chairs and presently discovered that his weak knees had lowered him into it, so that he sat and still stared at David and——

"I wish you wouldn't kick that wig around," said his guest. "I only hired it for the night, you know."

The owner of Fry's Imperial Liniment pulled at the loose collar of his pajamas.

"You—er—you——" he said intelligently.

"I wouldn't faint," the girl said coolly. "I'm not going to bite you, you know. And please don't make those silly faces, either, Mr. Fry. You've brought it on yourself. I'm not here by my own choosing. I've done my level best to get out and——"

Anthony's voice returned explosively.

"Why," he cried thickly, "*why* didn't you tell me?"

"That I was a girl?"

"Yes!"

The lovely little mystery had kicked off her slippers and was looking pensively at her bare feet. They were pink and tiny; as feet, however, they belonged anywhere in the world but in Anthony Fry's bachelor home, and he turned suddenly from them and looked at their owner, who smiled faintly.

"You look a lot saner when you're scared," she mused.

"Why didn't——"

"I'm coming to that, just because you do look saner," the girl explained. "I didn't tell you because I didn't dare. I thought you were crazy."

"What?"

"Who wouldn't, when you were talking that way about opportunity and insisting that I stay here and all that sort of thing?" the young woman inquired tartly. "It was plain enough that you were a crank, at the best of it, and I didn't know—well, it seemed better to take a chance of getting out during the night."

Second by second, normal cerebration was returning to Anthony, and although it caused him to grow colder and colder with plain apprehension it also rendered his perspective more true, for he burst out with——

"Why in Heaven's name did you, a girl, ever come here in the first place?"

"What?" The girl smiled flittingly and ruefully. "Oh, there was a reason for that, too."

"What was it?"

She of the Titian hair eyed him thoughtfully and shook her head.

"Perhaps I'll tell you some other time," she said.

"Why not now?" Anthony snapped.

"You wouldn't be any happier for knowing, just now," the girl said mysteriously.

Her pajamaed legs, swathed in the mighty bathrobe, crossed comfortably Turkish fashion, and she considered Anthony with her calm, quizzical eyes—and of a sudden an overwhelming helplessness surged through Anthony Fry and he had more than a little difficulty in concealing the slight tremble of his limbs.

For if the boy David had been a nervous, frightened creature, the lady who had succeeded him was almost anything else! David had been timorous and given to shrinking; the girl was all quiet assurance. David's eyes had been frightened and round; these eyes were just as round, but, as much as anything else, they seemed to express mild amusement at Anthony's discomfiture.

And that was the way of the whole sex, Anthony reflected bitterly. Having enmeshed mere man and entangled him, hands, feet, and everything else, it was woman's habit to sit and stare calmly, just as this one was sitting and staring, wordlessly inquiring just what he meant to do about it.

"Who are you?" he asked dizzily.

"Um," said the girl meditatively. "Well, if you find it necessary to call me anything, call me—er—Mary."

"Mary what?"

"Just Mary."

"But your other name——"

"You wouldn't be any happier for knowing that either," the girl assured him serenely.

"What on earth does that mean?" Anthony demanded, with almost a return of his old imperious manner.

Mary gazed fixedly at him for a moment, deeply and inscrutably and with that in

her eyes which, although he could not name it, caused Anthony's chilly blood to drop several more degrees.

"Don't ask me what it means, because I might tell you, and you wouldn't be any happier for knowing *that!*" the girl said quietly.

"But the Frenchwoman?" Anthony essayed, lunging off in another direction. "Who was she?"

"Well, she was my personal maid—at least it won't hurt you to know that much," Mary dimpled. "I sent for her and asked her to bring my bag and—there's the bag."

One pink foot indicated it, and for many seconds Anthony's dumfounded eyes stared at the thing. There was an intricate monogram on one end, which he could not decipher; otherwise, it impressed him. The bag was a very, very expensive bit of luggage and his failing heart thumped a trifle harder.

No stray young woman owns a bag like that and a French maid to carry it around; no adventurous female waif of the type one might expect to find wandering about in masculine raiment speaks in the unquestionably cultivated tone that Mary was using now. And no clear-eyed, clear-skinned young female friend of Mary's type ever belonged to the demi-monde!

Mary was a person of parts and position. How she had appeared at the fight, Anthony, if he had wonderful luck, might never learn; but the fact remained that he had detained her against her will in his apartment, and possibilities loomed so swiftly and numerous before his mental vision that his throat tightened.

"You—you're a respectable young woman!" he said hoarsely.

"Thank you, unquestionably," Mary smiled dryly.

"And—er—as such, the thing to do is to get you out of here as quickly and as inconspicuously as possible."

"I've been trying to get out inconspicuously myself," Mary suggested.

Anthony rose and his sickly smile appeared again.

"I can—can only apologize and assume all the blame," he said unsteadily. "I will have Wilkins bring you your clothes, and as soon as you are dressed we will _____"

"You mean those men's clothes?" Mary asked sharply.

"Of course."

"And go out in them in *daylight*?"

"Certainly."

"I wouldn't do that for an even million dollars!" Mary informed him.

"But you'll have to do that!" said Anthony.

"But I will not have to do it, because I won't do it!" the girl said flatly and with considerable warmth. "Why, every man, woman, and child in the street would know, the very second they looked at me, and I—oh, no! I won't do that!"

"There's nothing else to do!" Anthony cried desperately. "You—er—you don't understand this hotel, young woman. A woman seen leaving one of these apartments and going out of the house, more especially at this time of the day—er——"

He flushed angrily.

"Yes, I know," Mary said helpfully. "But I'm not going out in those clothes if I stay here and die of old age."

And here, from the end of the corridor, Johnson Boller's deep, carrying voice came:

"Has he kicked the kid out yet, Wilkins?"

"Not yet, sir," said Wilkins's grave tone.

"What? Is he going to keep him here after all?"

"I should judge so, sir. There's been no disturbance down that way."

"Well, what," Johnson Boller muttered audibly, "do you know about that?"

"It's most distressing, sir!" Wilkins replied.

Anthony Fry's pupils dilated.

"He's coming down here, I think!" he said. "Get on that wig again!"

"Why?" Mary inquired, pausing in the process of knotting up her wonderful hair.

"Because Boller—Boller——" Anthony stammered wildly. "There is no need of his knowing that you're a—a young woman, now or in future. I am speaking for your own sake, you know. You may meet him a thousand times elsewhere in years to come, and there's a mean streak in Boller which——"

"Is there?" Mary asked, with what was really her very first touch of concern since resuming her proper sex. "Give me the wig, then."

Fortunately, at the living-room end of the corridor, Johnson Boller devoted a good five minutes to meditation. He had finished his usual lightning morning tub and resumed his bathrobe in a more cheerful frame of mind, quite confident that David Prentiss was no longer in their midst. He had even prepared a peppery line of chaffing for the breakfast table, the same dealing with the visit of a pretty little French girl to the irreproachable apartment and the various methods by which Anthony Fry could explain the matter to the management, should he be requested to explain.

Yet David was still with them and—if quiet down there meant anything—with them to stay. Anthony's trouble remained with him this morning; even now, undoubtedly, he was sitting in there and hurling opportunity again and again at David's invulnerable armor—and if the idiotic idea had taken as firm a grip as that the end might be days away, just as it had been in the case of the yeggmen.

It giped not at all with Boller's plans for his visit to Anthony. He caressed his chin and scowled for a little; later, he smiled grimly. After all, there are more ways of killing a cat than by drowning the animal in champagne—and David was a tender shoot as yet.

Johnson Boller flexed his muscles and examined his smile in the mirror. It was a broad, genial expression, all warm and friendly; and without permitting one of its curves to slip from place he strode down the corridor and threw open the door of David Prentiss's chamber.

Hunched up in his big bathrobe, the boy was sitting on the edge of the bed, while Anthony stood across the room with his back wisely to the light. It was entirely plain that the trouble had gone up in smoke and that the presumably angry interview had flattened out to a love feast; David had not been and, so far as concerned Anthony, would not be ejected—yet instead of protesting Johnson Boller said jovially:

"Licked him into shape, eh?"

"Ah—David has explained," Anthony managed.

"Got the trouble all smoothed over, eh?"

"Yes."

Johnson Boller laughed mightily and winked at David. Further, he stepped over and slapped David's back—no mere friendly tap, but a whack that nearly sent him from the bed.

"Who was the squab, kid?" he cried. "Who——"

"Don't hit him like that!" Anthony gasped.

"What?"

"The boy——"

"Tap like that won't hurt him!" Johnson Boller chuckled as David, suppressing a shriek, managed to grip the bed and regain his balance. "Who was the Gallic chicken, my lad?"

"A—a friend of mine," David said weakly.

"I betcher!" said Johnson Boller significantly. "I got a line on her the second I laid eyes on her, kid. Now, I want to tell you something. You're a young sport and these things look different to you now, but the long and the short of a dizzy little——"

"Johnson!" Anthony broke in.

"What now?"

"It—it is not necessary to advise David," said David's captor, quite thickly, for he was familiar with Johnson Boller's views on many subjects and his manner of airing them. "The boy has—er—explained the—ah—young woman and——"

He could get no farther. Johnson Boller eyed him with an amused and quizzical grin.

"Going to keep this kid with you?"

"For a time, yes."

"You know, you're a funny character, Anthony," Boller mused. "If your great-grandmother came to this joint to have a cup of tea with you, you'd want her to stop at the desk and show her pedigree and the family Bible, just so they'd be sure she was your great-grandmother, and your lovely reputation wouldn't have a spot of suspicion on it as big as a pinpoint. But you go and rake this kid off the streets and when his lady friends come in——Where did she come from, kid, and how did she get up here?"

His smile broadened happily as he observed that David had not yet ceased wiggling his back in search of broken bones.

"I explained all that to Mr. Fry," David said rather sulkily.

"I know, Davy, but that doesn't count for anything," Mr. Boller chuckled. "You see, Mr. Fry's a bachelor——has been all his life and expects to be if he lives to be a hundred. What he doesn't know about females in general would fill a string of libraries from here to Battery Park and half way across to Staten Island.

"You've probably told him the squab was your sister and he fell and said what a pretty sister she was. But as for *me*, Dave——you couldn't put that stuff over if you tried a month. I'm the original specialist in everything female; I've got a kind of sixth sense that tells me all about them before I've even seen 'em and after I've looked at 'em once I can tell you where they were three weeks ago last Saturday night. You can't fool me when it comes to women."

"Well, now, suppose we drop the subject and——" Anthony began agitatedly.

"Let me slip this kid some real advice," said Mr. Boller. "Davy, I know all sorts of women——good and bad and the kind you think are all right, but aren't! Get me? You're only a boy, and offhand I'd say that this French damsel belonged in the latter class. At a guess, you met her——"

"Stop!" cried Anthony Fry in pure terror.

Johnson Boller gazed mildly at him.

"If you're going to adopt this kid, Anthony, you might better let me put him wise to some of his past mistakes and tell him how to avoid 'em in his new life. I don't know what lie he put over on you, but you know as well as I do that the just-right kind of boy isn't receiving mysterious calls before seven in the morning from a highly affectionate——"

"*Stop!*" gasped Anthony. "Whatever—whatever advice David needs I shall give him myself!"

Johnson Boller sighed and shrugged his shoulders, as if casting aside a responsibility he had assumed only because of a strong sense of duty. It was a little disappointing, because he had figured fully on rousing David—who must be a white-livered, spiritless little whelp, by the way—and having David rush to the defense of his mysterious lady. He had counted fully on David's voice rising and then upon raising his own, in spectacular anger, so that a real noisy rumpus would develop in Anthony's flat and send David's stock a little farther down.

Instead, he had only roused Anthony; and Anthony certainly was a curious cuss, when one came to think of it! He was standing over there now, almost dead white, not trembling but looking as if he would like to tremble with rage.

And for what?

Because, ostensibly, his oldest friend had tried to advise the boy he had snatched from a prize-fight. Johnson Boller shook his head. That opportunity business had been queer, but still it had been quite like Anthony in his eccentric moments—but this continuation of the queerness was bad! Before sixty, Anthony Fry would have settled down in some nice, comfortable sanitarium.

These things, however, were not the moment's chief concern. It behooved Johnson Boller to try the second section of his hasty little plan, if David were to be ousted from the flat. Hence, he allowed his benevolent, genial grin to return; he flashed it upon Anthony and then upon the boy.

"As you please," said he, "although I don't know how much good he'll get out of the kind of advice you're able to give him. However—that's your lookout. Going to turn him into a man, eh?"

"Yes," Anthony said thickly.

Johnson Boller yawned, by way of demonstrating unconcern.

"Well, kid, it's pretty soft for you, but since Mr. Fry's determined on the job I'll be around for the first month to offer whatever assistance may be within my power," said he. "Good meals—early hours—regular habits—all that sort of thing. And then, of course, a proper amount of athletic work to keep you fit."

"Yes," David agreed.

"Don't be so hellish surly about it," smiled Mr. Boller. "How are you, David—pretty athletic?"

"Athletic enough," David submitted.

"That means, I suppose, that you never raise a hand unless somebody pays you to do it. That'll never do, boy. Regular, scientific training means everything to a man who wants to keep his health. Look at me! Ten years ago I weighed fifty pounds more than I do now—sick half the time and disgusted with life the other half. I got over it and to-day I feel like a two-year-old. What did it?"

David was looking at Anthony.

"Exercise did it!" stated Johnson Boller. "Stand up here?"

"What for?" David asked quickly.

"I'm going to teach the first principles of bounding health to you."

"If David needs any training, it can be arranged for later," Anthony put in hastily. "You see, Johnson, although——"

"Anthony," his friend interrupted firmly, "you'll have to pardon me, but there are some things about which you know no more than an unborn kitten and one of them is physical training. I, on the other hand, have paid out about five thousand dollars to different specialists, and what I don't know about keeping fit hasn't been discovered yet. You do your share for the kid and I'll do mine, and later on he'll thank me more than he does you, Stand up, David."

"But——"

"Stand up and I'll show you the elementary ideas of boxing," smiled Johnson Boller. "Come! Don't be a mollycoddle!"

He waited, fists clenched loosely, smiling artlessly—although it was a bitter, cowardly thing that was in his heart.

Johnson Boller, be it admitted, intended to beat up David Prentiss; with the youngster's good as his shallow pretext, he meant to bruise David's young anatomy—and when this bruising was over to contrive another occasion and bruise it further—and after that to discover additional excuses and continue the bruising—until David Prentiss should flee the flat in sheer terror.

Hence, he smiled again and said:

"Come, kid! Come! Stand up or I'll soak you right there!"

"Johnson!" Anthony said sharply.

"Like that!" said Johnson Boller, jabbing suddenly before the protest could take form.

And now Anthony cried aloud, for the boy had toppled over backward—and almost immediately Anthony's teeth shut with a click. Because young David, eyes flashing, had bounced up again and was on his feet. One of his small fists, tight shut, had whisked out and met Johnson Boller's countenance with a loud crack.

And Mr. Boller, expelling his breath with an amazed hiss, had lost his balance and was sitting on the floor!



CHAPTER VII

THE BUTTERFLY

One bad feature of having passed one's earlier days in the remote fastnesses of New England, in the era before the automobile and the telephone came to complicate life, is that one's ideas of womanhood are likely to be definite and rooted.

Part of Anthony's boyhood had been spent in a Massachusetts hamlet nine miles from the nearest railroad, and at forty-five he had not fully recovered from some of the effects.

Even after decades of New York, Anthony's notion of woman embodied a prim creature, rather given to talking of her sorrows, able to faint prettily on occasion, and, unless born to the coarser form life, a little fatigued after dusting the parlor.

She was a creature, lovely and delicate, who played croquet as the extreme of exercise and never even watched more violent sports. She did not golf; she did not swim or shoot. She was, in a word, one hundred per cent. feminine—and about the most scandalous thing that could be suggested about her was that she savored, even one per cent., of the masculine.

So, while another type of citizen, possessed of all the facts, might have thrown up his hands in glee and laughed merrily at the sight of Johnson Boller sitting there on the floor, Anthony Fry merely stood frozen.

Minute by minute, he was understanding more fully just what manner of individual his insistence had inducted into his chaste home. She was a female in sex only! She was no timid little thing, swooning and weeping at her terrible predicament; she was the sort that dons trousers and goes to prize-fights—but what was infinitely worse, if one judged by that resounding whack, she was herself a prize-fighter!

Anthony, you see, was a mild enthusiast about the fighting game; when he saw a genuine short-arm jab he recognized it instantly.

And going further—for he could not help doing that—what was to be the end of

the mess? Last night, could his addled head but have permitted it, she would have gone away gladly as a boy. Now that the truth was out, she was making no effort to escape; far worse, just at this minute, she seemed bent on continuing the fistic battle, for she stood and fairly glared down at Johnson Boller.

Ten seconds had passed since the resounding thump which proclaimed that heavy gentleman's meeting with the floor, and still he had not risen. Five of them he spent in staring blankly up at David; three he spent in gathering a scowl; the final two found his plump countenance turning to an angry red—and Johnson Boller was struggling to his feet, breathing hard.

"Say, kid——" he began gustily and threateningly.

Anthony Fry came to life and, with a bound, was between them.

"Let this thing stop right here, Johnson!" he said ringingly. "No more of it—do you understand? No more!"

"No more, your eye!" panted Johnson Boller. "Get out of the way before I knock you out!"

"Johnson, I refuse to permit you——" Anthony cried, and with both lean hands pushed back on Mr. Boller's heaving chest.

"Look here, Anthony," said Johnson Boller, with plainly forced calm; "when a dirty little guttersnipe like that hits me a foul blow, something happens!"

"There wasn't anything foul about that blow," David said calmly. "That was a nice clean jab, and nothing like the one you gave me without warning and while I was sitting down."

"That's enough, David!" Anthony said.

"He started it," David submitted.

Anthony pushed on. Johnson Boller was against the bureau now—had been there for some seconds, indeed—and his expression was changing. Young David, to be sure, had rendered him slightly ridiculous for a bit, but getting mad about it was not likely to help in eliminating David.

"It's all right, Anthony," Mr. Boller said with a sudden grim smile. "Don't shove me through the wall. I won't hurt the kid."

"You'll not lay hands on him?"

"No."

"That's a promise?"

"Why, of course it is!" Johnson Boller said heartily.

Anthony Fry heaved a great, shaky sigh and stood back. It had not happened that time. David's wig was still in place, and David was still David. Yet, all other things apart, what if David's wig had slipped? What if, during the thirty or forty years he still had to live, Anthony must have cut out Johnson Boller's really stimulating friendship, or have listened, day in and day out, night in and night out, at every meeting and on every sly occasion, to a recital of what had happened this morning?

The strain was really growing too much. Johnson Boller would have to get out of here now and—although why was Johnson Boller smiling so sweetly?

"Quite a little boxer, kid, aren't you?" he was asking in the most friendly fashion.

"I've boxed with my brother," David said.

"Made a study of it, eh?"

"So-so," said David.

They were going to have a little conversation now, which gave Anthony a minute or two for thought. First he would get Johnson Boller out of here on the plea that it was time to dress; then he would have David's man-clothes brought, and, in one way or another, he would persuade David to don them. It could be worked, the calmer Anthony assured himself, and then—

"Well, if you're inclined that way, there's nothing like keeping in shape for it," Mr. Boller was saying as he fumbled at the knot of his bathrobe. "I'll show you my back muscles and then show you how——"

"*Johnson!*" Anthony exploded.

"Well, what in the name of common sense is the matter with you?" Mr. Boller cried.

"I—that is to say, David—your confounded back muscles don't interest him, Johnson. Not one particle! Do they, David?"

"Not a bit!" David said faintly from the corner toward which he was backing.

"So let this physical-training rot rest!" cried the master of the apartment. "Go and dress and——"

"My dear fellow," Johnson Boller broke in mildly, "you are, so far as physical training goes, a nice old lady. But for Heaven's sake, if you're going to keep this boy, don't try to bring him up along similar lines. Go look over your bean-pole anatomy, and you'll need no further argument. This kid is young and supple, and fit to be whacked into a real man and—say, get out of here for fifteen minutes, Anthony, will you?"

"Why?"

"I'm going to strip this youngster and look him over, and then start him on the right track," Mr. Boller said with an unconscious and affectionate glance at his fist.

"Mr. Fry!" gasped David.

"Well, has this mollycoddle stuff in the air infected you, too?" Johnson Boller asked tartly. "Don't you want to be a man?"

"No!"

Johnson Boller laughed scornfully.

"Anthony, I think your presence is a bad influence," he said. "Will you please get out of here? Shed that bathrobe, kid, and let's see if there's anything to you but pulp!"

"No!" said David.

"Well, I say yes, and I say it for your own good!" Johnson Boller said firmly as he advanced. "I'm going to make a man of you!"

"You can't!" said David thinly.

"I can, boy! Believe me, I can!" Mr. Boller smiled. "Get out of that robe!"

He was advancing. Ten seconds more and he would lay violent hands on David, and Anthony Fry, with a wrench that racked his very soul, hurled back every emotion and contrived a really quiet smile. More, even; when he spoke it was in

the tone of one merely amused and slightly tried in patience.

"You mean well, old chap," he said, laying a firm hand on Johnson Boller's arm, "but you're a crank on this gymnastic business. Don't be absurd, please—you're fairly frightening the boy. Later on, perhaps, when he is more accustomed to you and the surroundings, and all that sort of thing, you may take him in hand. Just now it is well past seven o'clock, and I'm hungry. Come to your senses and get dressed, Johnson, if only as a favor."

His eye was firm and steady; and having faced it for a moment, Johnson Boller shrugged his shoulders again. And yet he had not inflicted even one bruise on David, but pressing the matter now was likely to do no more than excite Anthony, and there was still time.

As head of his particular woolen concern, Johnson Boller could well spend the whole morning away from the office, so that it gained him the chance of hammering the boy to a jelly and ousting him from Johnson Boller's temporary home. Mr. Boller, therefore, sighed a little in disappointment as he said:

"If you insist. I'd rather put the kid through his first paces naked, of course, because then one——"

"Yes, some other time, doubtless," Anthony said hastily. "Get along now, Johnson and dress."

They were alone again, Anthony and David.

David's color was decidedly higher, and his eyes burned with a mixture of fright and indignation, while the bathrobe was clutched defensively about his throat. Anthony himself had lost his pallor, and on his high, thoughtful forehead a glistening glaze had come into being. He dabbed it away with his handkerchief and glanced fearfully toward the door.

"This is—er—most embarrassing!" he breathed.

"It is for me!" said the apparent David. "What's the matter with that man?"

"He has his own ideas about most things," Anthony said with a shudder. "However, he is out of the way now and—er—the next thing is to get you out, also."

"Well?"

"I am sorry, Miss Mary, truly sorry if it displeases you," Anthony went on carefully; "but there is really only one way for you to leave quite safely. This house, you see, is rather different from other houses. It would be possible to send for your—ah—proper clothing and have you leave as the doubtless prepossessing young woman that you are; but to do that you would have to pass through the office downstairs, and the elevator men would know that you came from this apartment."

"Ah?" said Mary, without expression.

"And inasmuch as every one here knows that I'm not married, and that I have no female relatives or even friends of your age, the—ah—very painful inference _____"

"I see," said Mary, as he paused and flushed. "Go on."

She was not exactly helpful, sitting there and staring at Anthony with her great, deep-blue eyes. They were very beautiful eyes, doubtless, but they caused Anthony's mind to stagger as he labored on.

"There are the back stairs, of course, but to pass them it would be necessary to meet servants and employees of the house in half a dozen places; I believe there is even a gate-keeper of some sort below and—oh, the back stairs would not be at all possible!" said Anthony as he pushed the button for Wilkins. "I deplore the necessity of sending you out as you came, Miss Mary, but—er—Wilkins! Mr. Prentiss's clothes, if you please."

"What of them, sir?" Wilkins asked blankly.

"Bring them here."

"But I can't do that, Mr. Fry."

"Why not?" Anthony asked crisply.

"You told me to dispose of them last night, sir. I've thrown them out!"

Anthony caught his breath.

"Where have you thrown them?"

"Out with the other refuse of the day, sir—on the dumbwaiter."

"Then—well, never mind. That is all, Wilkins," said Anthony Fry, his voice

thickening somewhat.

The invaluable one retired, with a last disapproving glance at the frowsy David, and Anthony's forehead wrinkled. David, the while, sat hunched on the bed and seemed altogether unaffected by the disaster.

"Well, you'll have to make the best of some of my wardrobe, I fear," the master of the apartment smiled.

"*Yours?*" Mary cried.

"They will be a trifle large, but you'll have to hitch them up in spots and in in other spots and make the best of it," Anthony pursued firmly. "It's too bad, of course, but it is unavoidable. Those togs of yours were decidedly shabby and I had meant, while supposing you to be a boy, that to-day we'd have some shopping done for you. Just a moment, please."

He left the room with a nervous stride altogether unlike his usual dignified glide. He turned, wildly almost, into the nearest closet in the corridor and switched on the light. There was the dark gray suit, which was too loose even for Anthony, and the dark brown suit, which happened to be too long for him; but the old blue suit—ah, that was the one!

Very earnestly, Anthony tried to assure himself that it had been both far too tight and far too short in every detail, at its last wearing; almost pathetically he sought to tell himself that David in the old blue suit would look quite like a young man wearing his own clothes—and with the old blue suit over his arm and a pair of shoes in the other hand, he tip-toed back to David.

"This is the next best thing to the clothes you wore, and I'm sure you'll find them quite all right," said he.

"Me get into those?" Mary murmured with the same strange apathy.

"Most certainly, and I've thought out the rest of it—there while I was locating this suit," Anthony pursued, with what was meant for a reassuring smile and making his jerky way to the little desk in the corner of the guest chamber. "I shall give you a note, David, addressed to a mythical person and unsealed."

"What for?"

"So that, on the remote chance of any one in this house questioning your

presence, you can show that you're merely delivering a grip—your own—for me!" smiled Fry, as he scribbled. "Rather clever, that, eh?"

"Horribly clever!" Mary said enigmatically.

Two long minutes the pen scratched on, while Mary watched his back with the same inscrutable, almost unwinking stare. Then Anthony turned with a smile.

"This is to Mr. J. Thurston Phillips at the Astor Hotel," said he. "If I were you, I'd carry it rather conspicuously; it's quite possible that the clerk downstairs may want to know who you are. And, also if I were you, I'd explain that you're the son of an old friend of mine and a stranger in the city and that I put you up overnight—something like that. You understand?"

"I hear you say it," said Mary.

Anthony's countenance darkened a little as he rose.

"Then please pay strict attention to what I say!" he said. "I am doing my best to undo an absurd piece of business. I'm quite ready to admit that it is just that, but the blame isn't quite all my own. You should have told me the truth. Now, when you're dressed and ready—simply leave! Just walk down the corridor to the door, please, open it and go. There's no need of risking another inspection by Mr. Boller; you look decidedly less like a boy in daylight, believe me. Is everything clear?"

"I suppose it is," sighed Mary, with a significant glance at the door.

Anthony allowed himself a single sigh of relief.

"This, then, is our parting," he said, with a faint, kindly smile. "I ask your pardon and the best thing I can wish you is a safe return home. Good-by."

"Au revoir," Mary said, with another glance at the door.

She seemed to have accepted the situation, blue suit and all; she was a sensible little thing, Anthony reflected almost comfortably, as he hurried back to his own room and his bath.

And now he would rush through the dressing process himself, as he had never rushed before, and by some means he would manage to keep Johnson Boller in his own room and out of sight of the corridor, until the telltale closing of the door assured him that one of his life's most painful episodes was over.

It had not been entirely without humor. Later on—much later on—Anthony assured himself that he would have many a good laugh in private over the youth upon whom he had tried to thrust opportunity—laughs that would be the richer and more enjoyable because he alone possessed the key to the joke. That would be after the shock had passed, of course; enough for the present to sigh again and again and think gloriously that each second brought David that much nearer to leaving.

Yet David had not departed, even when Anthony had given the last twitch to his morning coat and the last dab to his thin, rather prim hair. He listened, as he entered the living-room, and then risked a quiet trip across and looked down the corridor; David's door was closed tightly and—yes, even though it caused Anthony's hair to rise and his cheek to flush angrily, David was singing a faint little snatch of song in a perfectly indubitable soprano!

The little fool should have had more sense; Anthony listened, started down to halt the song and turned back as quickly, to head for Johnson Boller's room and engage that citizen in conversation, for that was the important thing just now. He turned the knob and would have entered rather breezily, but that Johnson Boller, fully groomed and ready for the day, walked out suddenly and resistlessly and looked around with:

"Where's the kid?"

"Er—dressing," said Anthony.

"Where's breakfast?" Mr. Boller pursued.

Inspiration came swiftly to Anthony.

"I breakfast in here as a rule," said he, "but—just this morning, you know—I thought we might go below. It's not so quiet down there and there's more to see, Johnson, and——"

Johnson Boller sprawled comfortably in a chair near the corridor and grinned.

"Nix!" said he, with a shake of the head. "We'll eat right here; I'm all done with that noisy stuff, Anthony, and this is more homelike. And then, another thing," he added more seriously, "I want to cross-examine that little shaver in private, as it were. This idea of settling him in the house without knowing anything about him is downright crazy. I want to ask him about that French doll and——."

He stopped. The window at the end of the corridor was open and the fresh morning breeze was blowing lightly past him. Also, he sniffed.

"Who's using perfume around here?" asked Johnson Boller.

"What?"

"Strong—rank!" said Anthony's guest. "Don't you smell it?"

"I smell nothing," Anthony said, as an expensive pungence tickled his nostrils suddenly, "but I'll see——"

He started for the corridor and stopped short. David had left his room and was coming down—and still, it did not sound like David! David, in Anthony's shoes, six or seven sizes too large, should have been thumping clumsily; these footsteps were firm little pats, with the sharp rap of a heel once or twice on the polished floor beside the runner. More still, with no regard at all for caution, David, using his soprano voice, was humming the same little tune.

And just as pure premonition had sent Anthony's skin to crawling, just as his scalp was prickling and his eyes narrowing angrily, David was with them.

By way of raiment, David, the grip emptied, wore the daintiest tailored walking-gown, short of skirt and displaying silken stockings and patent leathers, with high, slender French heels. David's slim, round, girl-throat suggested the faintest powdering; David's abundant hair was dressed bewitchingly, with little reddish-blond curls straying down about the temples—and had one spent a morning on Fifth Avenue it would really have been rather difficult to find a more thoroughly attractive or better gowned girl than David!

Yet, in spite of her charms, Johnson Boller, who had bounced instinctively from his chair, could do no more than stare at David with the general expression of a fish new-snatched from water. Second after second he gaped before his thick:

"Who's that?"

"That's David!" Anthony said weakly.

"The—the boy was a girl?"

"It would seem so."

"Then——" Johnson Boller stopped, teeth shutting suddenly. He stared at the

young woman and he stared at Anthony Fry, who smiled faintly and hopelessly. His face grew red and then purple and then black.

"Hah!" he cried savagely. "I've got it! I've got it, you—you——"

"Hey?" said Anthony.

"I see it now!" Mr. Boller vociferated surprisingly. "You framed this thing up on *me!*"



CHAPTER VIII

SCORNED

Anthony's brain, accustomed to the most precise and unexciting of routines, was tired—not nearly so tired as it was destined to become, yet too tired to grasp at once the significance of that flaming countenance. He could no more than stand limply and look at Johnson Boller, as that gentleman, ignoring Mary altogether, strode down upon him with clenched fists.

"You did it, but you'll never get away with it!" he cried.

"Johnson——"

"Never in the world! I've got Wilkins as a witness and——"

"Witness for what?"

Johnson Boller, albeit he trembled with fury, controlled himself.

"Don't try that baby-stare stuff on me, Fry," he said. "I understand now. Last night I thought you were off on one of your eccentric spells, but you were crazy like a fox, you were! But don't think for one minute that Beatrice is fool enough to drop into such a trap!"

Anthony himself did a little controlling.

"What are you talking about?" he cried.

"The thing you've tried to put over, to get me away from Beatrice!" Johnson Boller thundered. "That's enough! Don't deny it! I know you don't approve of matrimony; I know you never wanted me to get married; I know that we haven't traveled around as much this last six months as we did in the twenty years before it—and I suppose you've been lonely, because nobody else in the world would stand for you. But by Heaven, Anthony, I never thought you'd try to break up my family by——"

"Try to do what?"

Johnson Boller dashed the sweat of fury from his eyes.

"I come to stay with you, when Beatrice goes," he said tremblingly. "And although there's no woman in this flat ordinarily, a woman's here last night——"

"Stop there!" Anthony Fry cried savagely. "Do you mean that I brought this woman here deliberately? Do you mean that I *knew*?"

"Knew!" Johnson Boller jeered.

"Then I tell you that you're an infernal ass, sir, and I decline to defend myself!" Anthony snarled fiercely. "You! You lovesick fool and your crazy imagination! You're too much in love to reason, but—what about *me*?"

"Well, what about you?" Johnson Boller sneered.

"I," said Anthony, "have borne the reputation of a decent man! No women have ever been in this apartment before, save one or two relatives! No woman of any description has ever passed the night here before. And yet now, when this infernal thing has happened, your poor addled wits—oh, bah! Bah, sir!"

"Don't bah at me!" Mr. Boller said dangerously, although not quite so dangerously, because Anthony's emotion had carried its own conviction.

Then, for a little, these two old friends stood and trembled and glared at each other, Johnson Boller contemplating a swift and terrible uppercut to Anthony's lean jaw, which should stretch him unconscious perhaps for hours—Anthony meanwhile wondering superheatedly whether, once his long fingers had wound about Johnson Boller's plump throat, he could hold on until wretched life was extinct.

They were angry, terribly angry and almost for the first time in their lives, and had they stood and glared for another fifteen seconds it is possible that one or the other might have ended his days in Sing Sing's electric chair—but as it happened Mary's voice came upon the vibrating, pregnant air, clear and cool and full of warranted acerbity.

"While all this talk of reputations is going on," said Mary, "what about mine?"

Anthony Fry's tension snapped. Johnson Boller, it seemed, was of no mind to relinquish his rare fury so easily, for he stood with his fists clenched and trembled a little even now and his color was no lighter than scarlet; but Anthony turned and bowed almost humbly.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Mary," he said bitterly.

"Miss Mary!" echoed Boller. "You know her, hey?"

"She told me to call her Mary," Anthony said stiffly.

"When? When you hired her for this job?" Johnson Boller persisted, although quite weakly.

"When I discovered—not half an hour back—that she was—er—what she is," Anthony said coldly. "And let that be an end to your comments, please. You saw me meet this young woman for the first time, as you will know when you recover your senses. You know for what purpose and under what misapprehension I brought her to this apartment. Don't make a bad matter worse by injecting your personal brand of asininity."

He turned his back on Johnson Boller and walked away.

Johnson Boller, however, turned his whole attention to Mary, perched on the arm of a chair, distressed enough but self-contained, pretty as a picture. And slowly reason climbed upon her throne again in Johnson Boller's brain, possessed though it was by Beatrice, loveliest of wives.

He smiled suddenly, because Beatrice in far-off Montreal would never know; he even grinned after a few seconds; and then, the enormity of the joke on Anthony Fry overcoming him suddenly, Johnson Boller opened his mouth and laughed—not a mere, decent expression of mirth, but a roar which suggested a wild bull in acute agony.

A Niagara of sound left Johnson Boller and ended in a deep, happy wheeze—and the torrent broke loose again and he hugged his fat sides and rocked and roared again, until Wilkins, genuinely startled, entered the living-room, and stopped, more genuinely startled, and regarded the altered David with mouth wide open.

"God bless my soul!" Wilkins said frankly. "What——"

"Wilkins!" Anthony snapped.

"I—I beg pardon, sir!" the faithful one choked. "The young lady——"

"The young lady," said his master, and his voice had the edge of a razor blade, "is—here by accident, Wilkins. She came here last night, under a misapprehension, while masquerading as a boy. You will forget immediately that

I have told you this."

"Very good, sir," Wilkins said; and being one of those rare, model creatures we read about but rarely meet, he straightened up and forced his tone back to the matter-of-fact mumble. "As to breakfast, sir?"

Anthony glanced at Mary.

"Yes, I'm quite human," she said crisply. "I eat breakfast."

"For three, Wilkins," said Anthony.

And now, with Wilkins moving incessantly in and out, a peculiar, almost silent constraint came upon them. Anthony, at the window gazed at the distant street and tried his best to think; there was just one awful thought that obtruded itself upon his mind and, although he thrust it away again and again, the thought came back and mocked at him. Mentally, he lashed at it—yet ever and anon it returned and mocked a little more and made impish faces at him.

Johnson Boller, recovering in a long, delighted series of wheezes, merely ambled to a corner and gazed at Mary, who affected to read unconcernedly. She was certainly pretty and watching a pretty girl had never wearied Mr. Boller; but far beyond her prettiness was the terrific joke on old Anthony.

This was Anthony who, year in and year out, avoided even social gatherings where women predominated. This was Anthony, who abominated the whole sex and could be goaded into actual rage by repeated suggestions that one of his wealth and standing should marry! This was Anthony, who had threatened to leave the Lasande that day, long ago, when the pretty little woman canvasser had flitted past the office and made her way to this very living-room.

Well, it was one on Anthony! Nay, it was a million on Anthony! From this day forth, Johnson Boller reflected in the depths of his perverted, amusement-loving mind, he had such a grip on Anthony Fry that, should he order that distinguished citizen to walk down Fifth Avenue with a lump of sugar on his nose, he would have no choice but obedience.

And how Anthony would writhe and how that austere countenance could be colored with the blush of helpless anger! A quantity of the savage, merciless little boy had survived in Johnson Boller and this wait for breakfast was really one of the happiest periods of his life.

Wilkins, quite himself again, worked deftly. The service elevator from the pantry, one of the Lasande's features, whined softly to the Fry apartment and stopped, and presently, silently, Anthony motioned them to the table.

Johnson Boller came shaking pleasantly, albeit with countenance grave enough. Mary came daintily and thoughtfully. But Anthony Fry came as one going to his doom—because the inescapable thought had fastened in his brain and every new, terrible second held less hope than had the one before.

Coffee was poured then and food served and Wilkins moved out.

"Is he gone now?" Mary asked quietly.

"Yes," sighed Anthony.

"Then, without wasting any more time, wouldn't it be as well to decide just what we are going to do?"

Anthony sighed bitterly.

"Now that you have elected to change into a very charming young woman, I have no idea of what we're going to do, if you mean by way of getting you out unnoticed."

Mary's head went a little higher.

"That's exactly what I mean, of course," said she. "As for my getting into my own clothes, what else was there to do? I couldn't wear those ridiculous things you gave me; nothing in the world could have tempted me to go on the street in them, even if I could have worn them. I telephoned for Felice and had her bring my things because I—I wanted to feel sane again, I think, and if she hadn't made such a wretched disturbance, poor child, I'd have been into them and out of here long ago."

"And I," escaped Anthony, "should have had to explain."

"You're very precious of that good name of yours, aren't you?" Mary asked tartly.

"I have always been," said Anthony.

And then, all unaware that Mary's pretty lips had compressed and that her eyes were flashing opinions which caused Johnson Boller fairly to quake with glee, Anthony's head dropped lower and he stared at his untouched plate. The thought

was there still—the awful, menacing thing, coming nearer each instant, growing stronger and stronger.

"It must be lovely to be such a thoroughly good and proper man," Mary said sweetly. "Couldn't you possibly forget yourself for a moment and tell me how you plan to get me out of here? Couldn't you spend just five minutes trying to think just what I'm going to tell my people?"

"Eh?" gasped Anthony.

"Oh, yes, I have people—a mother and a father and then some more," Mary informed him. "Nice people, almost as proper in their notions as you are."

Anthony merely stared at her numbly. Unconsciously, perhaps, she had driven the last, long nail into his coffin. Her people! Momentarily, he had forgotten that she might have people and might have to explain to them just where last night had been passed. But now that she mentioned a father, it seemed to Anthony that he could see a mighty man, a man of wrath and muscle and perhaps a man who could slay with one blow and—oh, there was no other way!

All his life, Anthony had shied from woman. All these last twenty-five years he had thanked his lucky stars that one of them had never snared him! He had been alone, to live as he pleased and act as he pleased and think as he pleased; married men do not do that, as witness Johnson Boller, ensnared by Beatrice, a decent enough young woman but his ruler.

Yes, up to the age of forty-five he had been alone and contented, year in and year out, indulging every little foible without a soul to question, going as he liked and coming as he liked.

But that was over now! That was over and done with, forever! Anthony Fry, with a tiny groan, looked up from his plate and faced Mary.

"Young woman," said he deeply, solemnly enough to cause Johnson Boller to stop quaking and take to staring, "I have avoided women all my life."

"Yes?" Mary said.

"I have done so," Anthony went on steadily, marching to the gallows as a brave man should, with never a falter once he was started, "because to my—possibly eccentric—mind, matrimony has no attractions. The bachelor state, I fondly imagined, was to be my chosen state until death."

Mary looked him over rather too critically, examining the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and considering the extreme width of his part.

"That was a good enough idea," she said heartily. "What has it to do with getting me out of here?"

"It has a great deal to do with it, as you will see," Anthony said, with a great, quivering sigh. "For the fact of your presence I alone will take the blame."

"Thanks," said Mary.

"And since the blame is mine, I will make what amends I can," Anthony Fry concluded, and nerved though he was, his voice broke. "I will consent to marry you!"

"Huh?" cried John Boller.

Mary, for the moment, said nothing at all. The intake of her breath was audible, though, and her color rose—not in embarrassment, plainly in anger. Mary's eyes snapped, too, and she leaned a little toward him questioningly, as if incredulous of her own hearing.

"You'll do *what*?" said Mary.

"I will consent to marry you!" Anthony repeated, and it seemed to him that his voice was coming hollowly and from a great distance, presumably from the caverns of a matrimony-infested Hades. "It will be simple—painfully simple. The ceremony can be performed this morning and in New Jersey. We will leave at once and without notifying either your friends or mine, on an extended wedding tour—I should say of six months' duration at the least," Anthony went on brokenly, while Johnson Boller gazed at him in pure fascination. "In a week or so we can write everywhere, giving the impression that it has been an elopement, the ceremony having been performed yesterday. Then——"

"Stop!" Mary cried. "Stop that—that planning!"

"Eh?"

The girl was sitting bolt upright, eyes snapping, and Anthony regarded her in astonishment. Also, she thumped the table with her small clenched fist as she looked straight at him and gasped:

"Why, I—I wouldn't marry you if you were ten times the last man in the world!"

"But——"

"No!" Mary said quite wildly.

"There is not another thing to do," Anthony informed her, with a forlorn, heart-broken smile. "Your good name——"

"You'll find some other way of preserving my good name!" Mary said warmly. "I'm engaged now to the very finest man in the whole world!"

"You're engaged!" Anthony cried intelligently.

"Yes, and he's a sane man, too, and he doesn't cry over the prospect of marrying me!" the young woman hurtled on. "He's a *real* man, and if he ever finds out that you made me stay here all last night, he'll ignore the circumstances and shoot you just as sure as you're sitting there!"

She stopped, breathing hard, and shook her head at Anthony Fry, so that the red-gold curls tumbled about quite riotously. Anthony, blinking, said nothing at all, but his friend Johnson Boller took to muttering, rather like a perturbed hen.

As a matter of fact, Boller was downright fond of Anthony, and the prospect of having him slain in cold blood was very distressing. Turning helpful for the first time, Johnson Boller was on the point of trying to think up ways and means of getting Mary out—but Mary herself was speaking again.

"And don't think that that ridiculous proposal lifts any responsibility from your shoulders, either!" she said, energetically. "It doesn't!"

"I had not meant to imply that it did," Anthony said dully.

"You got me here and you've kept me here," said Mary, and it was plain that her even temper had not yet returned. "You'll have to devise the way to get me out of here and what to say when I do get home."

"Yes," murmured Anthony.

"And if it will help any in rousing you out of that apathetic state," the girl concluded, "you may as well know that there isn't the slightest doubt in the world that the police have a general alarm for me long before this!"

"Wow!" said Johnson Boller.

"I am—trying to think!" Anthony said with difficulty.

So far as posture went, he looked it. His lean hands were gripping the edges of the table nervously, and his head was bent again; he scowled and then shook his head as if to dispel the scowl. He cleared his throat repeatedly; he glanced at Johnson Boller, whose expression was divided between irrepressible amusement and some concern—and he cleared his throat once more and stared his fried egg fixedly in its lone eye.

Thus he was sitting after five silent minutes, which both Mary and Boller had improved gastronomically, when Wilkins entered.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Fry," said he. "A gentleman to see you."

"I can't see him," Anthony said quickly.

Wilkins smiled.

"But this gentleman's on his way up now, sir," he said. "He's one of your friends, and the office allowed him to come up and merely 'phoned that he was coming. It is Mr. Robert Vining, sir!"

Anthony shook his head.

"Well, I cannot see even Mr. Vining this morning," he said. "Say, when he comes to the door, that—good gracious!"

This last being quite justified, because Mary, with one small shriek, had bounded from her chair like a frightened fawn! The chair, toppling over, bumped about the floor for a bit until Wilkins caught it, and Mary, both hands clutched upon her bosom, stood poised for a full second, eyes round and horrified, lips parted.

Then, as the lightning flashes, Mary had turned, and it seemed that she floated through the air to the corridor and into the corridor and down the corridor. In rather less than another second the door of the recent David's chamber closed with a slam.

At the door the buzzer was buzzing.

"Will you see him, sir?" asked Wilkins.

"What? Yes," said Anthony. "Take away that chair and that extra plate before you open the door."

Johnson Boller stood with lips pursed gravely until Wilkins was gone.

"Are you going to let him—er—know?"

"Hardly," said Anthony. "Although—I don't know. Bob's level-headed and resourceful and reliable. Do you suppose it would be possible to—ask his aid?"

"Think of the girl!" said Johnson Boller. "Think what——"

He stopped, for Mr. Robert Vining was with them—a tall, broad-shouldered, person of a year or so past thirty, bright and steady of eye, and with the flush of health upon his carefully shaven cheek. He entered like the muscular paragon he was, lithely and easily as a tiger; and it seemed to Anthony that, if he did nothing else, fifteen minutes of his conversation might serve to restore normal thought.

Robert Vining was all of the pleasant every day that had been before their visit to the fight, and the very sight of him was stimulating.

So he clasped Vining's hand and said heartily:

"Good morning, Bob! You've breakfasted?"

"Long since," grinned young Mr. Vining. "I—who uses perfume around here?"

"No one," Anthony said, paling slightly. "Possibly——"

Vining's eyes twinkled.

"Guess I imagined it," he said. "There's a reason! Well, it's early, but I thought I'd drop in for a moment in passing and see what you thought of the alleged battle last night. Hello, Johnson! Heard you were here. Did you go, too?"

"Yep," said Johnson Boller, gazing at his old friend and wondering whether Anthony thought he was looking and acting like himself.

"It was one grand lemon, Anthony, was it not?" asked Mr. Vining, sprawling comfortably for a stay and pinching the end of his cigarette.

Anthony himself settled down in his pet chair for a normal quarter-hour.

"It was all of that," he agreed almost cheerfully. "I've seen the so-called Kid in pretty bad form before; he was a howling outrage when he fought Morr two years ago, but last night——"

His voiced trailed away oddly and for cause. Wilkins, coming from nowhere in

particular, was standing in the corridor. He looked straight at his master and with great meaning, and having caught his attention he rolled his eyes toward David's room and nodded slightly. Again he looked at Anthony, again he nodded; and Anthony rose abruptly.

"You—excuse me for a moment, Bob?" he asked, in the same low, husky voice that had afflicted him before this morning. "Wilkins—ah—Wilkins wishes——"

He hurried across the room and followed Wilkins as he backed into the shadows of the corridor.

"She wishes to see you, sir," the invaluable one whispered. "She rang for me and she says it's urgent."

"But——"

"I'd go at once, sir!" Wilkins breathed fervently. "I really would, Mr. Fry. She seems in a bit of a temper, if I may say so."

Anthony passed him without further comment or protest, and hastened to David's door. Apprehension filled him suddenly, not so much because there was any reason for apprehension as because he was nervous. Anger went up, too, that the wretched girl should have upset the first calm and peaceful moment of the morning, so that it is quite possible that Anthony failed to smile as he entered the chamber.

For that matter, Mary was not smiling either. She stood at the foot of the bed, clinging to it, and her bosom heaved and her eyes bored into Anthony Fry.

"That—that man!" she whispered quite dramatically.

"He is merely an old friend of mine, Miss Mary," Anthony said impatiently. "I have no idea of mentioning your existence, far less of——"

"Did your man say *Robert Vining*?"

"Of course."

"Is that the Robert Vining of Vining & Dale, lawyers, in Wall Street?" Mary cried softly.

"Of course," said Anthony. "It isn't possible that you know him?"

"*Know* him?" Mary echoed wildly. "That's the man I'm going to marry!"



CHAPTER IX

CRIME?

Entering, the Owner of Fry's Imperial Liniment had been justifiably annoyed. Twenty seconds after entering, Mary's obvious excitement had caused the annoyance to give place to not very interested wonder; but now Mary had claimed all his attention and the annoyance was all gone. Indeed, as a quantity to claim one's whole attention Mary had been a success from the very beginning.

Anthony Fry, then, scowled flitting incredulity at her; and the absurdity of being incredulous of one who panted and shook as did Mary becoming at once apparent, Anthony paled somewhat.

"I cannot—believe that such an astonishing coincidence——" he began.

"What you believe or don't believe doesn't interest me!" Mary said swiftly. "Did I hear him talking about that wretched fight last night?"

"Er—yes."

"He was there?"

"Of course."

"Well, it's the same Robert Vining!" Mary whispered. "Get him out of here!"

"But——"

"Don't argue about it! Get him out of here!" said Mary. "Do you suppose I want him to come wandering down this way and *find me*?"

"He will not do that, because——"

"How do you know whether he will or not?" Mary demanded hotly. "Why did he have to come here? It's all his fault—the whole thing's his fault! If he hadn't refused to take me to that beastly old fight and made such a time about it, I'd never have made up my mind to go, anyway!"

"So that's what happened?" Anthony muttered.

"That is what happened. Now get him out of here!" Mary directed. "And do it quickly!"

After all, the unlucky little coincidence was not nearly so serious as she seemed to think. Anthony smiled quite calmly.

"He will not stay very long," said he, "and when he is ready to go I will not detain him, of course. But I can't very well go in and order him out, you know."

Mary, bosom heaving still, looked straight at him with burning eyes.

"Mr. Fry," she said solemnly, "I've always lived too much out doors and boxed and shot and paddled and ridden too much to be given to hysterics. The only time I ever had hysterics was the night they thought dad had been killed—but *that* night, once I started, the neighbors came out on the street two blocks away to see what was the matter!"

"I don't understand?"

"You will," Mary said, controlling herself with visible difficulty. "You've made me stand enough since last night, and there are some things I cannot—some things I will not even try to stand! I tell you honestly that if Bob isn't out of this flat in two minutes, I'm going into a fit of hysterics that will have the reserves piling into this sanctified hotel just as surely as the sun is shining!"

"Miss Mary——" faltered Anthony Fry.

Mary's hands clenched in the most peculiar manner.

"Hadn't you better make the best of those two minutes?" she asked breathlessly.

His quiet smile was gone now; lines appeared in Anthony's countenance as he looked at her—and then, wasting no further time in aimless comment, he turned and tottered into the corridor. Mary meant just what she said.

Robert Vining and Johnson Boller were sprawling in the deep chairs, opposite one another, smoking comfortably and giving every evidence of having settled down for a considerable session. Young Mr. Vining grinned through the smoke at his older friend.

"Sit down, Anthony," said he. "We're just going over the thing round by round, to see if either of us can remember a worse fight for the money. We're working on round two, just now."

Anthony smiled strangely and laid a dramatic hand upon his brow.

"I will not join the discussion," he said.

"Eh? What's the matter?" Robert asked, sitting up.

"Headache! One of the—er—headaches that make my life a burden!" Anthony groaned.

"I never knew you had 'em," young Vining said with a mystified smile.

"Neither did I," Johnson Boller contributed healthfully.

"Did you have it before you talked to Wilkins, there?" pursued Robert, who owned a really keen mind.

"Er—it was just coming on."

"No bad news, old chap?" Vining said, crossing his legs the other way.

Anthony shook his head and smiled again, indicating suffering that was not all simulated.

"No, just the—er—headache," he said. "Comes on suddenly, you know, and settled in the back of my head and neck. There is only one thing that can be done for it and that is a steady massage. Perhaps you'd do that for me, Johnson?"

"Sure," said Johnson Boller, whose eyes shot two questions to the second. "Sit down and we can go on talking while I rub."

"Well, I have to lie down for this," Anthony explained. "On the bed, you know, and it's—well, it is likely to take an hour or more. You wouldn't care to wait around, Bob?"

Mr. Vining gazed steadily at him. No refined intuition was necessary to tell Anthony that it was not his morning for tactful dismissals. This effort, evidently, had carried the delicate touch of a blow from a baseball bat, for Robert, flushing slightly, spoke with unpleasant crispness:

"No, I couldn't wait, I'm sure. And while I don't understand it, of course, I'm sure I'm sorry to have intruded. Good-by."

"You—haven't intruded," Anthony cried. "Only——"

"Well, don't bother explaining," said young Mr. Vining. "I beg your pardon for breaking in and—good morning."

Wherewith he stalked out to the corridor, removed his hat from the rack without the assistance of Wilkins and, opening the door himself, closed it after him with a careful lack of force that was more expressive than any slam.

"Gone off mad!" Johnson Boller said.

"I can't help it!" Anthony said miserably.

"Nice chap, too! Too bad to offend him that way," Mr. Boller pursued meditatively. "Friends are few and far between in this sad old world, Anthony, and a queer dick like you—rich or poor—has trouble hanging on to the few he makes. Oh, I don't mean to be nasty, you know; I'm just telling you. Well, come and have your head rubbed."

Anthony collapsed into his chair.

"There's nothing wrong with my head," he said. "That was the first lie I could think of, Johnson, to get him out of here. He had to go!"

"Why?"

"She said so," Anthony informed him, with a ghastly little smile. "She's engaged to him!"

"To Bob Vining?"

"Yes!"

Johnson Boller whistled softly and, elevating his eyebrows, thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and looked at Anthony with new commiseration.

"Too bad, that!" said he. "Too bad for you that it should have been a chap of the Vining type."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, sooner or later, he may find out. The chances are that he *will* find out just what you've done to that girl," Boller went on contemplatively. "It's just about as she says, too. If he was a fool, you could fool him, one way or another. Or if he was a little snide, Anthony, you could talk him off or bribe him off—but it'll never be like that with Bob. He'll never take any account of the circumstances;

he'll just snatch out the gun and let fly!"

"Rot!" Anthony said thinly.

Johnson Boller's face grew grave and more grave. He sighed and looked over Anthony's head for a little and then, reaching a decision, he looked at him suddenly.

"Old chap," he said kindly.

"Well?"

"I don't want to worry you, but perhaps it is better for you to know—now. And I wish you wouldn't mention it, because Bob told me once, two years ago, and showed it to me in a sort of burst of confidence."

"Showed you what?"

"Down at the base of his thumb, Bob Vining's got *the murderer's cross!*" Johnson Boller said huskily.

"Nonsense!" Anthony said sharply.

"It's a fact! The little mark is there, clear as if it had been drawn in with a knife!" said Mr. Boller. "And for another fact—I don't know whether you know this or not, but virtually every murderer who has been executed in the last twenty years in this State, has shown that cross in some form and——"

He stayed the pleasant flow abruptly. From the direction of David's doorway a rustle was coming, very softly and cautiously, yet quite distinctly. It paused in the corridor while Mary drew aside a corner of the curtain and looked in—and then Mary was with them and asking:

"Is he gone?"

"Yes," Anthony sighed.

"Was he excited while he was here?"

"Not at all, apparently."

"Then he doesn't know yet that I've disappeared," Mary said calmly, returning to her place at the cleared table. "Isn't he a darling?"

"He is—a very charming fellow," Anthony muttered, thinking of the murderer's cross.

"Did your man take my coffee away?" Mary pursued.

Silently, Anthony rang for his servitor. Silently, Wilkins brought back pot and cup and the little plate of toast; and Mary, a very pleasing little figure indeed, sipped and munched and asked:

"Well, have you determined how I'm to leave?"

Anthony merely stared moodily at her at first. Johnson Boller, though, found his sense of humor overcoming him again. He gazed at Anthony, hair ruffled, eyes fogged with anxiety such as he rarely knew, and presently Johnson Boller was vibrating again. One merry little wheeze escaped and earned a glare from Anthony, another followed it—and after that Johnson Boller sat back and haw-hawed frankly until Anthony spoke.

"So far, I have been thinking of the ways in which you cannot leave," he admitted tartly. "If you'd consent to try my clothes and——"

"Umum," said Mary, shaking her head. "No, no!"

"Then frankly, I don't know what to suggest," said the master of the apartment. "You are not invisible. You cannot walk through the office without being seen, Miss Mary—and once you have done that be sure that your face will be registered in the memory of the employees. You have no idea of moving from New York, I take it?"

"Hardly."

"Then since you will be about town for years, may I point out that each man who sees you will remember, also for years, that you left one of these apartments and ——"

He paused, partly in distress and partly because it seemed to him that Wilkins was whispering to somebody. He sat up then, because Wilkins was talking and there was another voice he could not at first place. He had heard it before, many times, and it was very calm, very clear, very determined; and now Wilkins' tone came distinctly and resignedly.

"Well, of course, if he's expecting you, sir——"

The door closed. Steps approached the living-room. And with Mary sitting at the table, coffee-cup in hand, furnishing just the homelike touch a bachelor apartment must normally lack, Hobart Hitchin was with them!

One glance settled the fact that the amateur detective had attained a high state of nervous tension. Behind his spectacles, the keen eyes flashed about like a pair of illuminated steel points; his face seemed tired, but the rest of him was as alive as a steel spring, and his right hand held a fat brief-case.

Had he been more intimately acquainted with Hobart Hitchin, Anthony Fry would have trembled. As it was, he felt merely keen annoyance—and then utter consternation, because Hitchin had stopped with a jerk and was looking straight at Mary.

"I—er—didn't know," he said.

Poor little Mary, be she who she might, was in a decidedly ticklish position, however perfectly her outward calm was preserved. Everything that was chivalrous in Anthony surged up and told him to protect her; and coming out of the nowhere at the very last second, merciful inspiration reached his brain and he stared so fixedly, so warningly at Johnson Boller that that gentleman's chronic quiver ceased.

"Only—ah—Mrs. Boller!" Anthony said quietly. "My dear Mrs. Boller—Mr. Hitchin, one of our neighbors here."

Johnson Boller himself started out of his chair, gripping its arms; and then, the general sense penetrating his cranium, dropped back with a puff. His mouth opened, as if to protest; his eye caught the eye of Anthony Fry. With a gasp and a flush, Mr. Johnson Boller subsided for the time, and Anthony was saying suavely:

"Mr. and Mrs. Boller were with me overnight, you know—decorators have captured their place and they were good enough to take the edge off my loneliness for a little."

"I never knew you minded it; I've heard you say you liked it," Hobart Hitchin smiled as he took Mary's hand and favored her with his drill-point stare. "But when you are alone again I'm quite sure that you'll know how lonely you are! My dear Mrs. Boller, I am honored!"

Mary, after one startled and one thankful glance at Anthony, dimpled charmingly. Mr. Hitchin dropped her hand and ceased his inspection, and immediately he turned more tensely solemn than upon his entrance.

"Ah—Fry," said he. "I suppose we can have a few minutes' chat?"

"An hour if you like," Anthony smiled, quite happily, too, because he was rather proud of his quick-wittedness.

Hobart Hitchin gazed straight at Mary.

"And Mr. Boller will remain with us?"

"What's the mystery?" Johnson Boller asked.

"There is not, I fear, much mystery," Hitchin said, looking straight at Anthony. "But there is a little matter I'd like to discuss with—er—you two gentlemen."

Mary rose hastily.

"I'd better go?" she smiled.

"If it would not inconvenience you, dear lady," Hitchin said unsmilingly and with a stiff bow.

Chin squared, he stood in silence until she had vanished down the corridor. He crossed the room and listened intently, dramatically; he held up the curtains and looked for the sliding doors which had been taken out five years before.

"No way of shutting up this room, Fry?" he asked crisply.

"No need of shutting it up, either," said Anthony. "There is no one to listen. What seems to be the trouble, Hitchin?"

Hitchin wheeled suddenly and turned his remarkable eyes upon Anthony.

"*You* don't know, eh?" he shot at him.

"I'm sure I do not."

"And whether he does or not, what do you think you're doing?" Johnson Boller asked impatiently. "Acting a moving picture or——"

"Mr. Boller, may I trouble you to keep out of this for a little?" the crime student asked amazingly. "Later on I may wish to ask you a question or two, and if you will answer them it will serve me and—Mr. Fry. Just now, suppose we draw up around the table here, so that it will not be necessary to shout?"

Anthony was there already, scowling. Johnson Boller, with a grunt, shuffled over and took a chair; because this Hitchin creature, on the face of him, was the morning's latest full-blown freak, and Johnson Boller did not wish to miss anything.

Also, if the chance came, he meant to inform Hitchin that Mary was not Mrs. Boller at all, if it could be contrived without casting too much of a slur on Mary—although that could wait until they learned the cause of Hitchin's pale cheek and his keen, excited eye.

Hitchin, however, had relaxed in the most curious fashion; he was smiling

whimsically at Anthony now and, although his eye was across the room, one felt that it could turn with one one-thousandth of a second's warning and peer through Anthony's soul.

"Fry," he said thoughtfully, "I have been interested in crime for a good many years. I have, as it were, dabbled in it partly for the love of the thing and partly because, on one occasion or another, it has been possible for me to extend help that would not otherwise have been extended."

"That's a mysterious statement," Anthony said.

"Crime—some of it—is mysterious," smiled Mr. Hitchin. "Motives are usually more mysterious. Mistaken motives—motives formed under misapprehension—are most mysterious of all. But the consequences of crime," said Mr. Hitchin, whirling suddenly on Anthony, "are inevitable, inescapable as the rising of the sun."

Johnson Boller shook his head. The man had always been queer; now, overnight, he, too, had gone crazy! Anthony, who was largely nerves this morning, asked:

"What the devil are you talking about, anyway? I'm not trying to be unpleasant, Hitchin, but I'm not myself this morning and this rambling discourse about crime is rather trying."

"You are not yourself this morning?" Hitchin repeated slowly, with a very keen smile at Anthony.

"No."

"Why are you not yourself this morning, Fry?"

"What? Because I lost some sleep last night, I suppose."

"Ah!" Hitchin cried softly. "And why did you lose some sleep last night?"

Anthony's patience snapped.

"See here, Hitchin!" he cried. "I like to be polite and hospitable as possible, but why on earth I should sit here and answer your ridiculous questions I cannot see."

Hobart Hitchin laughed, a low, rippling, sinister laugh that chilled the hearer without giving a clue to the reason for the chill.

"Shall I show you why it were better for you to answer, Fry?" he purred.

"No!"

"Oh, but I'd better," insisted the crime student. "Fry, let us go back a few hours. You returned home last night about midnight, I think—fifteen or twenty minutes before the hour?"

"Yes."

"There was with you a young man named David Prentiss?"

"Of course."

"Then here is the reason for my questions!" cried Hobart Hitchin, and his whole personality seemed aflame. "Anthony Fry, *where is David Prentiss?*"



CHAPTER X

THE WEB

Just the manner of the man startled Anthony and caused him to hitch back in his chair and stare for an instant. Johnson Boller was not so affected.

"Say, what's the matter with you, Hitchin?" he asked. "Are you a plain nut?"

Hitchin snapped his fingers at him angrily and continued his stare at Anthony Fry.

"Well?" he said tensely.

"Well, upon my soul, Hitchin!" Anthony stammered. "I believe Boller's right!"

"Oh, no, you don't," Hobart Hitchin said quietly. "You know a great deal better and Boller knows a great deal better, but he has a good deal more self-control than you have. Fry, where is David Prentiss?"

"Gone home, of course!" Anthony snapped.

"When did he go?"

"What? Last night!"

"And can you give me an idea of the hour?"

"Oh—half-past twelve, perhaps."

"At half-past twelve last night, David Prentiss left this apartment. He went down in the elevator?"

"I suppose so."

"And—just be patient, Fry." Hitchin smiled disarmingly. "Did the young man wear from this apartment the clothes he wore into this apartment?"

It was perfectly apparent to Anthony that the wretched fool had taken what he fancied to be a scent of some sort; it was equally clear that, in his present state of mind, Anthony would answer perhaps three more questions and then, losing

himself completely, would smash the flower-vase over Hobart Hitchin's shining bald head solely as salve for his nerves!

Doubtless the long coat and the down-pulled cap had started him off—they were sufficiently mysterious-looking to impress a less sensitive imagination than Hitchin's. Whatever troubled the crime specialist, David Prentiss would have to be lied out of here in detail, lied home and lied to bed.

"Hitchin," said Anthony, "Heaven alone knows what concern of yours it can be, but the Prentiss boy—the son of an old friend of mine who has seen better days—came back here with me last night for some things, cast-offs, I had promised his unfortunate father. We met him on the street on the way home."

"Just around the corner," supplied Johnson Boller, who was growing steadily more anxious to speak his mind to Anthony about the Mrs. Boller matter.

"And having come upstairs with us and having selected the things he thought his father would like best," Anthony went on, "they were wrapped in a bundle or ordinary brown paper, tied up with ordinary, non-mysterious, crime-proof string and carried out by David, who, I have no doubt at all, reached home within half an hour, gave the clothes to his father, said his prayers and went to bed without further ado. If there is anything else you'd like to know, ask!"

Hobart Hitchin had not blinked. Now he smiled strangely and shrugged his shoulders.

"At least," said he, "you have perfected the story, haven't you?"

"I——"

"And now," Mr. Hitchin broke in incisively, "let us consider the facts! We will take them, one by one, and I beg that you will listen. Item one: I sat in the lobby downstairs until seventeen minutes of one o'clock this morning, Fry. No David Prentiss passed me, going out. Nobody left this hotel with a bundle or a bag!"

"You didn't see him," Anthony said.

"Because he was not there! Listen, please, and do not interrupt, Fry. I like you, or I should not be here. I wish to help you, if such a thing is possible, or I should have gone at once to the police," said the remarkable Mr. Hitchin. "You, like many a man before you, forget perfectly plain details. In this case, you have forgotten that my apartment is directly beneath yours—that the elevators here

have latticed gates, so that one can see from any floor whoever may be passing in one of the cars—that sound travels perfectly in this building when the street is quiet, as at night. So to get to item two. About two o'clock this morning there was the sound of a heavy fall in this very room!"

Johnson Boller was grasping the trend more rapidly than was Anthony, and he was growing less comfortable.

"I fell!" he said.

"Did you really?" asked the demon detective. "Yet—you're in that room, I take it? Yet you got out of bed immediately after and walked in here; I heard your step. Don't flush, Boller! It takes practice to carry out a thing of this kind and whatever the motive may have been, you gentlemen are not old hands. And so to item three: it must have been about four when a policeman came to this door. *Why?*"

"There was supposed to be a burglar here. It was a false alarm," Anthony said, less collectedly.

Hitchin lighted the pipe he had filled and smiled.

"That is the tale they tell in the office," he said. "I confess that that detail puzzles me and as yet I haven't had time to get inside information from my good friend our police captain. However, we can well call this detail immaterial and pass to item four."

He gazed into the blue cloud of smoke and smiled again.

"The woman in the case!" he said in a deep, bass voice.

"There was no woman!" Anthony exploded. "And——"

"The Frenchwoman, Fry!" Hitchin corrected.

"Well, she——"

"Don't explain her," said Hobart Hitchin. "Let us see just what happened when she was about. She came after daylight. She passed through the office downstairs so suddenly that nobody was able to stop her, and she knew where to come. She was in the elevator naming her floor to the man—who supposed her to have been passed by the office—perhaps two seconds after she entered the house itself. She came directly to this apartment, Fry, and almost immediately she burst into

hysterical weeping!"

His eyes were boring again and Hobart Hitchin also pointed the stem of his pipe accusingly at Anthony.

"Fry," he said, "what did that girl *see*, evidently at the end of the corridor, which produced that outburst of grief?"

"Nothing," Anthony said thickly.

"There was nothing to cause her acute grief?"

"No, and——"

"Wait! She wept all the way down in the elevator; I saw her myself! She wept so violently when she reached the street that an officer approached her—and she fled from him and disappeared."

It was high time to say something and to say it well. Dignity had always served Anthony, and while it was an effort he eyed Hobart Hitchin coldly.

"Hitchin," said he, "it would be quite possible, believe me, to soothe your feverish mind by telling you the perfectly simple errand on which that girl came, but I'm damned if I'll do it! Some things are too ridiculous, and you're one of them. If there are any further questions you wish to ask about my personal affairs, will you please leave them unasked? And if there are other things over which you wish to rave, don't let me detain you here."

He fastened his best majestic gaze on Hobart Hitchin, yet Hitchin only laughed his low, sinister laugh.

"You're a curious customer, Fry," he said, leaning back comfortably. "I had hoped before this that your nerve would have broken and—however, listen to this little theory of mine. The boy knew something, I can't say what, about *you*, something which had to be suppressed at any cost. You brought him here, I can't say on what pretext, but the boy fancied that all was well. Perhaps you promised him money; I'm inclined to believe that, for the girl came, evidently by appointment, ready to travel. Doesn't take much deduction to guess that they were going to be married with the money you gave him, does it? She came and she saw what happened, and then——"

"Well, what had happened?" Anthony almost shouted.

"That's what I'm waiting for you to tell me, so that I can give you a helping hand," said the crime student. "And while I'm waiting, and while you're still plainly convinced that I know nothing at all, let me ask you one question again: did the Prentiss boy leave here with the clothes he wore when he entered?"

"Yes!" Anthony said wearily.

With a sudden startling slap, the fat brief-case was placed upon the table and its straps undone. And there was another slap and Hobart Hitchin cried:

"Then explain these, Fry! Explain *these!*"

There can be no denying that Anthony's mouth opened and that his eyes grew rounder. Before him, spread upon the table, lay David's trousers!

"Well, those—those——" he stammered. "Where did you get them?"

"From the dumbwaiter, where you placed them so very quietly, so very cautiously, so very early this morning!" said Hobart Hitchin, with his devilish laugh. "You even went so far as to run the thing down, so that it would be emptied at once, didn't you? But you *didn't* happen to look down! You didn't see me take the whole suit from the dumbwaiter as it passed my door."

He leaned back triumphantly and puffed his pipe and for a little there was a thick tangible silence in Anthony's living-room.

More than once, like most of us, Johnson Boller had wondered just what he would do if accused of a murder of which he was entirely innocent. In a fond and confident way he had pictured himself sneering at the captain of police, impressing him despite himself as Johnson Boller not only established his alibi in a few crisp sentences, but also directed the stupid detective force toward the true criminal.

At present, however, he discovered that he was downright scared. Unless one of them rose up and told about Mary and then called her in to verify the truth, it seemed that Hobart Hitchin, idiot though he might be, had established something of a case. And instead of sneering, Johnson Boller grew redder and redder, until Hitchin said:

"Ah, you know all about it, eh? I had wondered!"

"Well, cut out your wondering!" Johnson Boller said roughly. "Because——"

"I wouldn't talk now, if I were you," said Hitchin, kindly enough. "I'm devoting myself to Fry. Well, Fry?"

As yet Anthony had not found the proper line of speech.

"The boy, a stranger, comes here at midnight," Hitchin purred relentlessly. "There is a heavy fall at two. There is weeping before seven, the weeping of a strange woman. There are the boy's clothes—the rest of them are downstairs. So, once more—*where is David Prentiss?*"

He waited, and Anthony Fry drew a long breath. All his life he had been painfully addicted to the truth; it was part of his cherished and spotless reputation. All his life he had shunned fiction, and was therefore ignorant of plot technique. So he did fairly well in smiling sourly and saying, calmly enough:

"So far as I know, David is about starting for his work, Hitchin. The thing had slipped my mind altogether, but I remember now that the boy took a suit—a blue suit—for himself and changed into it while here. That outfit was decidedly shabby. After that he left, and as to the French girl, you may theorize and be hanged, for she happens to be none of your infernal business, and she has no connection with David."

"None, eh?"

"None whatever!"

Mr. Hitchin grinned without humor and examined the trousers in silence, thinking, and later humming to himself. He smoothed them out and then folded them carefully, finally replacing them in his brief case. After that he looked at Anthony.

"If I were you, Fry, I should tell the truth, and let me help you. You know, and I know, that the boy never left this apartment. Well?"

"Well?" snapped Anthony.

"And you know and I know that what remains of him is still here, and——"

"Are you accusing me of murder?" Anthony demanded savagely.

"I have been doing that for some time."

"Hitchin, you're the most utter ass that ever breathed! You——"

"Doubtless, but at the same time murder is murder, and murder will out, Fry!" the extraordinary crime student said steadily, as he arose, "Now hear me quietly. I shall do nothing—you understand, *nothing*—until afternoon, unless circumstances render action imperative. You know where we stand; I know where we stand. I want to help you, to come to the unfortunate end quietly if nothing else. I shall be in my apartment all morning. Think it over. Talk it over with Boller. Then, when you have decided that you need help, come and see me." He took up his case and faced Anthony squarely. "At least I can see that you obtain a privilege or two in the local prison," he concluded. "Good-by."

"Good Lord!" breathed Anthony Fry.

"And in going," said Hobart Hitchin, "let me leave just one caution behind me, Fry. Have nothing shipped from this apartment until we have talked again!"

Then Mr. Hitchin, courageously turning his back upon the pair, moved out of the flat, leaving Johnson Boller and his oldest friend in a state of partial paralysis. Anthony recovered in perhaps three seconds.

"That—that infernal idiot!" said Anthony. "Why, the lunatic asylums have saner people in strait-jackets!"

"Maybe they have," Johnson Boller said hoarsely, "but all the same, many a good man has sat in the electric chair on the strength of circumstantial evidence not nearly so good as he made out!"

"Well, are you afraid of sitting there?" Anthony snapped.

Johnson Boller mopped his brow.

"Maybe not," he said. "But with the things he's pieced together he can go to the police and have 'em around here in ten minutes! That son-of-a-gun can have you and me locked up without bail, and—*that'd* be nice, huh?"

"He can do nothing of the sort!"

"He can unless you show him a David Prentiss!" Mr. Boller urged. "He can unless we have the girl out and tell him the truth and have her corroborate it! Are you going to do that?"

Anthony Fry hugged his head for an instant; it was really aching now.

"No!" he said.

"It's better than being jugged, Anthony," suggested Johnson Boller. "You know, I've got some reputation as well as you, and—say, what did you mean by introducing her as my wife?"

"Was there anything else to do?"

"Why not as your sister?"

"Because Hitchin knows perfectly well that I haven't a sister, of course. Don't fume and thresh around like that, Johnson; it bothers me."

"But if my wife ever hears of it——"

"She never will," said Anthony, without great concern, "unless you have Hitchin for dinner some night and ask him to tell about it."

"And Wilkins—he heard it, too!"

"Well, I shall instruct Wilkins not to mention it, later on," Anthony sighed. "Now quiet down, will you, and let us think how——"

"Have you decided how to get me out of here?" Mary asked brightly, entering without a sound.

Anthony stayed the bitter words that were in his very throat.

"We have been accused of murdering David Prentiss!" he said.

"Really?"

"Very really indeed!"

"Isn't that funny?" Mary laughed. "Isn't it perfectly ridiculous?"

"It's a scream!" said Johnson Boller. "About the time we both get pinched it may be up to you to——"

"Tell the truth?" Mary said quickly.

"Just that!"

"I'll never do it!" the girl cried passionately. "No! Not even to save both of you! I'm not here through any fault of my own, and—and—why, a man who could suggest such a thing——"

"He's not suggesting it; he's just excited," Anthony said miserably, "Now, suppose we try, just once more, to sit down sanely and devise the way of getting you safely home, Miss Mary?"

"And soon!" said the girl, somewhat feverishly. "If I could have gotten home while it was dark Felice could have smuggled me in and—and lied about it, if necessary. But it isn't night any longer; it's nine o'clock or past nine, and——"

She said no more. Lips parted, and eyes, all in an instant, thoroughly horrified, she stood and listened; and from the door of Anthony's apartment a thumping sounded once more and a voice said:

"Hurry up! Open that door!"

"Robert again!" Mary gasped.

"Is that possible?" Anthony gasped, bouncing to his feet.

It was not only possible. It was the solid fact, for Wilkins, muttering as he fumbled at the latch, was mentioning Mr. Vining's name and bidding him be patient for an instant—and Mary, with a little scream, had made another of her projectile disappearances down the corridor—and into the room came Robert Vining!

He was far from being the same collected young man. His whole person seemed to have been towed by some overwhelming excitement. His eyes belonged in the head of a madman, and his hands waved irresponsibly as he rushed at Anthony Fry and clutched his coat and panted:

"Fry! You'll have to help me!"

"Help you—how?"

"You know more people than I—you know people everywhere, Anthony! You'll have to help me by calling them up and having them call up their friends, you know. That—that may do some good. I—I don't know! I don't know what I'm talking about, Anthony! I feel as if I'd gone crazy!"

"You act very much that way," Anthony said quietly. "What's wrong?"

Robert Vining gaped at him and then laughed quite insanely.

"Wrong!" he shouted. "Wrong! *Mary's disappeared!*"

"Mary——"

"You don't know Mary—no, of course not!" young Mr. Vining rushed on. "She—she's the girl I'm going to marry, Anthony! Yes, I'm engaged, although it hasn't been announced yet. I've been engaged for a week now, and we—great Heaven! I can't think. I—why, Anthony, I was talking to her even at dinner last night and there was never a hint that she even meant to go out of the house. In fact, when we parted, she seemed rather bored at the idea of staying home and—why, not a soul knows even when she left the house! She's gone, Fry! She's just *gone!*"

A coarse nature ever, Johnson Boller winked at Anthony and turned his back!

"Mary! Why, my little Mary out alone at night——" young Robert choked. "She's just twenty, Anthony—a delicate, beautiful girl like that disappearing from the most beautiful, the happiest home in all New York! Why, from the day she was born, Dalton never spared her a penny to——"

"Eh? What Dalton?" Anthony asked suddenly.

"What? Theodore Dalton, of course. He's her father—Dalton, the patent-medicine man, Anthony. You must have met him? You know Theodore Dalton?"

Curiously, fortunately enough, sheer nervous tension jerked him away from Anthony Fry just then and set him to pacing the floor, a man distracted, a man unseeing, a man who recked of nothing on earth beyond his terrible and immediate grief.

And this was very well indeed, for Anthony was making himself conspicuous!

Anthony took three backward steps and looked at the unconscious Robert much as if the young man had branded himself a leper. He looked at Johnson Boller, too, although his eyes were blank—and then, one hand on his head, Anthony staggered straight out of the room and into the corridor; and, having gone that far, he turned and staggered down to the window at the end of the window-seat, where he collapsed much as if the bones had been whisked from his long, slender legs!

Here Johnson Boller, following, found him five seconds later. Mr. Boller, who was beginning to feel downright peculiar himself with Vining threshing about the living-room and babbling incoherent agony, shook his old friend with no gentle hand as he demanded:

"Say, you! What is it now? What in blazes got you that time, Anthony? Are you going to have a fit?"

"Johnson!" Anthony said feebly, clutching coldly at Mr. Boller's plump hand. "Oh, Johnson!"

"*What?*"

"Her father! She's the daughter of Theodore Dalton, Johnson! She's the daughter of the man they call the liniment king!"

"Yes?" said Johnson Boller.

The icy hand closed tighter about his own, rousing something almost akin to sympathy in Johnson Boller's bosom and causing him to lay a soothing hand on Anthony's shoulder—for so do men cling to a raft in mid-ocean.

"Johnson," Anthony Fry said piteously. "I've kidnaped the daughter of the only man in the world who can ruin me, and he'll do it!"



CHAPTER XI

THE OTHER LADY

It was plain enough to Johnson Boller.

Anthony, poor devil, was raving at last! Since there was no one likely to ruin Anthony, the strain had developed the illusion that—or was it an illusion? Anthony had calmed these last few seconds, clinging childlike to his friend; his eyes denoted the general state of mind of a hunted doe, but there was nothing more abnormal.

"Say, kid," Johnson Boller began kindly. "You——"

"You don't understand," Anthony said hoarsely but more quietly. "I've never told you about the Dalton matter, because I've tried my best to forget the interview—but Dalton is the man who controls virtually the whole proprietary liniment market, barring only Fry's Imperial. My—my liniment," said Anthony, and there was an affectionate note in his voice which Johnson Boller had never heard before in connection with the Imperial, "is the only one he has failed to acquire."

"Yes?" said Johnson Boller, with rising interest.

Anthony smiled wanly, dizzily.

"Well, Dalton came to the office one day about five years ago, having made an appointment to meet me personally there. He wanted to buy us out, and I wouldn't hear of it—partly sentiment and partly because he didn't want to pay enough. Then he tried his usual tactics of threatening to drive Imperial off the market, and I sat down and pointed out to him just what it would cost and what it would gain him. He's a hard devil, Johnson, and he was pretty angry, yet he saw the reason in what I told him."

"Go on," said Johnson Boller.

"We parted on rather curious terms," groaned Anthony. "One might call it an armed truce, I suppose. He seemed to be willing to let matters rest as they were, and he has done just that ever since; but he told me in so many words that if ever I tried to break into his particular market, if ever, for any cause, I offended him

in any way, he'd sail in and advertise me out of business."

"Can he do it?"

"He can do it," Anthony said, with pained conviction. "He can do it, because he's able to spend a million where I spend ten thousand, and once he starts Fry's Imperial Liniment is as dead as Julius Cæsar. And when he learns about this thing——"

"He—he might never learn," Johnson Boller said, without even trying to be convincing.

Anthony laughed forlornly.

"Hell learn; I'm done for!" said he. "It's as good as done and over with now, Johnson. Almost every cent I have in the world is invested in the firm, you know, and once that goes to pieces I—why, great Heaven, Johnson! I'll have to get out and work for a living!"

Johnson Boller, for a little, said nothing at all. Coming from another man, he would have fancied the statements largely exaggeration and imagination; coming from Anthony he knew that they were mostly solid truth.

"Well, I told you in the first place that kid meant trouble," he muttered.

"You have a prophetic soul!" Anthony sighed.

"Trouble isn't the word!" Mr. Boller mused further. "If you tell the truth, according to your figuring, the old gentleman will ruin you—but that doesn't matter much, because when you've told the truth it's a dead sure thing Vining will let the daylight through you, so that you'll have no need for money anyway. And if you go on trying to keep it all dark and succeed in doing it, that Hitchin idiot will have us both jailed for murder—*and we'll have to produce a David Prentiss before we get out!*"

Anthony, gazing fixedly at him, felt hope that hardly dared to be creeping into his eyes.

"Johnson, could we get hold of a boy somewhere and bribe him?" he asked.

"To do what?"

"To go into a police court and swear that he was David Prentiss and that he came

here last night and left again about half-past twelve," said the model citizen, without even reflecting that it involved perjury. "If we could manage that it might be best of all to let Hitchin go ahead."

"Stick you and me in jail?" Johnson Boller asked harshly.

"Better that than risk——"

"I don't see it!" the less chivalrous gentleman snapped. "There's nothing inside urging me to go to jail for anybody's sake, even overnight. And another thing, I've got a wife, Anthony! Just consider where this would put me with Beatrice, and how dead certain it would be, with Hitchin airing his views and conclusions, that he'd mention the lady you introduce as Mrs. Boller!"

"But——"

"But nothing!" Johnson Boller said, his personal trouble coming uppermost again. "That's the worst break you've made so far, Anthony! That Mrs. Boller business is likely to cause me——"

He shut his teeth on the end of the sentence. Wilkins, white and distressed, was coming down the corridor with what looked rather like kangaroo leaps. He came to David's door and stopped, turning the knob. He entered—and immediately he left the room again and sped to Anthony.

"She wishes to see you again, sir!"

Anthony jerked obediently to his feet and laid a cold hand on Johnson Boller's.

"Get up there and keep Vining busy," he said. "That's all. Hurry!"

Johnson Boller shuffled back to the living-room, where the unfortunate paced up and down and wrung his hands. Anthony, waiting tremulously until he heard both their voices, hurried into Mary's room—and looked at her with a new, dreadful terror. She was no longer a merely unfortunate, unknown young woman whose good name he had placed in considerable jeopardy; Mary, by now, had become the potential stick of dynamite that bade fair to blast him out of the Lasande, out of his regular life, out of everything but the chance to sally forth and hunt a job!

"Well? Well?" she asked swiftly.

"Yes?"

"Is he gone? Is he gone?" Mary cried.

"He will—go shortly!" Anthony said thickly. "You—you are Theodore Dalton's daughter!"

Mary stared at him.

"So you've discovered that?"

"He—in a business way——" Anthony muttered vaguely.

"Yes, that was my reason for coming here," Mary said, cheerfully enough. "I've heard him speak of you—oh, no, not very flatteringly; I don't think he likes you. I've heard him say that some day he'd wreck you, when he was ready; and I was very curious indeed to see what sort of man you were and whether you were nice enough to plead for, if he ever started. I don't like dad to wreck people."

Anthony nodded.

"And that was another reason why I was afraid to tell the truth last night," said Mary. "If you were business enemies—bitter ones, I mean—and you found out that you had father's daughter here—well, that has nothing to do with getting Bobby away, has it?"

"He'll go presently."

"Presently isn't soon enough!" Mary informed her captor. "I sent for Wilkins to tell you that he must go *now!*"

"But the boy is distracted and——"

"About me?"

"Yes."

"Is he really suffering?" Mary asked.

"I think so."

The girl considered very thoughtfully indeed.

"Maybe I'd better go out there and quiet him, poor little boy!" she said staggeringly. "He'll believe me if I tell him the truth and——"

"I wouldn't do that!" Anthony exploded. "He's wildly excited now, and the truth

might not appeal to him as reasonable."

Again Mary hesitated, causing his blood to congeal.

"Very well. Then get rid of him now!" she said sharply. "If he ever came down here and found me, all the explaining in the world would never help!"

"He will not," Anthony said impatiently. "Bob isn't the sort to stray about one's apartment and——"

And from the corridor came:

"She's gone, Boller! Johnson, she's gone!"

And steps came in their direction, too, and while Mary Dalton turned to flame, Anthony Fry turned to ice! He was coming and coming steadily, and the door was open fully two inches. He was abreast of them now and faithful Johnson Boller apparently was with him, for they heard—

"Well, I wouldn't go wandering around like that, old man. Come back and sit down and we'll talk it over."

"I'll sit here on the window-seat!" Robert Vining panted.

"Don't do that," Mr. Boller protested. "No, not there, Bobby! That's weak and likely to go down in a heap with you!"

The steps ceased. Through ten terrible seconds Anthony Fry and lovely Mary stood listening to the panting of the afflicted youth. Then:

"My God, Johnson!" he cried wildly. "I—I want to look over the whole world at once for her! I want to look into every room in New York! I want to look into every room in this place and then tear out and look——"

"Yes, but you couldn't do that," Johnson Boller assured him soothingly. "Now, cut out the mad-house talk, old man, and come back. Have one of Anthony's good, strong cigars and I'll dig out that brandy he keeps for his best friends. Don't go nosing around these rooms!" said Johnson Boller, and simultaneously they caught the shiver in his voice and saw the door move as Vining's hand landed on the knob. "Just control yourself and come back."

Robert Vining laughed hideously and helplessly.

"I suppose I'm making an ass of myself!" said his weak voice. "I can't help it! On

my soul, I can't help it. Give me a shot of the brandy, though, and maybe I'll steady a bit!"

Something like one hundred years passed; then the hand slid from the door and they could hear Johnson Boller leading the sufferer gently away from the shock of his whole lifetime. Mary, her eyes closed for a moment, gripped herself and spoke very softly:

"Mr. Fry, if—if you don't get that boy out of here and then find a way of sending me home—if you don't do it instantly, I'm going out there to Bob and tell him that you brought me here and kept me here all night against my will! After that, whatever happens, happens!"

Life returned to Anthony's frozen legs.

"I will go!" he managed to say, and he went.

The brandy was already within Robert Vining, yet it seemed to have made small difference in his condition. The young man's eyes were wild and rolling; they rested on Anthony for a moment as if they had seen him before but could not quite place him.

"You—you've been telephoning," he said.

"Not yet," said Anthony, "but if you'll run along and do your share, I'll think up ways of helping you."

"My share?" Vining echoed.

Mentally, he was not more than half himself. Anthony Fry, therefore, grew very firm and very stern, pleasantly certain that Robert was paying no heed to his pallor or the uncontrollable shake that had come to his hands.

"If the girl has really disappeared," he said steadily, "your part is not to be sitting here and whining for help, Robert. Why don't you get out and hustle and see if you can't get track of her? Have you gone to all her friends?"

"Eh? No!"

"Then go now!" said Anthony Fry. "You know her girl friends? Get after the most intimate at first—and get about it!"

Here he scowled, and Robert Vining, rising, shook himself together.

"You're right, Anthony," he said. "I'm an ass; I've lost my head completely this last hour. I—I caught it from her father, I think; the man's going about like an infuriated bull, swearing to kill everybody in the world if Mary isn't returned and—but you're right, old chap. Thank you for steadying me." Robert concluded bravely. "Where's my hat? I've been wearing it all this time, eh? Good-by, Anthony. Good-by, Johnson."

He tried to smile at them—and he fled. This time it was Johnson Boller who turned weak at his going. Mr. Boller, smiling at his old friend in a sickly, greenish way, dropped into a chair and mopped his forehead.

"Narrow squeak, Anthony!"

"Yes!" Anthony agreed, with some difficulty.

"I was never so scared as that in all my life!" Johnson Boller went on faintly. "I thought sure I'd have to watch it and—Anthony, it turned me so sick I could hardly stand on my feet!"

"What did?"

"The idea of seeing you shot down there," Mr. Boller said with a shudder. "Gad! I could picture the whole thing, Anthony! I could see him start and look at you both—I swear I could see him pull a gun from his pocket and shoot! I could see the blood spurting out of your forehead, Anthony, and hear the chicken screech, and it turned me so infernally sick——"

"Didn't think of any of my sensations, did you?" Anthony asked caustically.

"As a matter of fact—no, I didn't!" muttered Johnson Boller, with another great shiver. "What do your confounded sensations matter, anyway? This whole affair is your fault, not mine! You deserve whatever you get—I don't! You've got nobody in the world to worry over you, but I've got a *wife*, Anthony!"

"You have mentioned it before."

"And I'm likely to mention it again!" said Mr. Boller savagely. "You know, Anthony, I'm about through with this thing! I'm a nervous man, and I can stand about so much suffering of my own, but I don't see the idea of taking on yours as well. And what is more, this thing of introducing this girl as my wife is——"

"Well? What is it?" Mary herself asked very crisply, appearing in her

disconcertingly and silent fashion.

Johnson Boller smiled feebly.

"It's very flattering in some ways, Miss—Miss Dalton, but for a man like me, who loves his wife, you know, and all that sort of thing——"

His voice thinned out and died before the decidedly cold light in Mary's eye. It seemed to Johnson Boller that she had a low opinion of himself; and when she looked at Anthony he noted that she had a low opinion of Anthony as well.

"Have you settled it yet!" she snapped.

"The—er—means of getting you out?"

"Is there anything more important?"

"Ah—decidedly not," Anthony said wearily. "Several times, I think, we've attempted a council of war, and we may as well try it again. There will be no interruptions this time, I think, and if we all put our minds to it——"

That was all. As on several other similar occasion, he halted because of sounds from the doorway. It seemed to Anthony, indeed, that he had heard Wilkins muttering at the telephone a moment ago, too; and now the faithful one was at the door and working over the latch.

Mary's ears were preternaturally keen, too; Mary had acquired a way of standing erect and poising every time sounds came from that door. She did it now, remaining on tiptoe until the oddest little giggle brought Anthony and Johnson Boller to their feet also.

"That's a woman's voice!" Mary whispered.

And she looked about wildly, and, since there was no hope of escape unseen by the corridor, her eyes fell upon the open door of Johnson Boller's room. Mary, with a bound that would have done credit to a young deer, was across the room, and the door clicked behind her just as Wilkins, smiling in a perturbed and mystified way, appeared to announce:

"A lady, sir, who——"

Then the lady had passed him, moving with a speed almost equal to Mary's own—a lovely lady, indeed, with great, flashing black eyes and black hair—a lady

all life and spirit, her face suffused just now with a great joy. Wilkins, perceiving that neither gentleman protested after gazing at her for one second, backed away to regions of his own, and the spell on Johnson Boller broke and his soul found vent in one great, glad cry of:

"Bee!"

"Pudgy-wudgy!" cried the lady, and flew directly into Johnson Boller's arms!

Anthony Fry steadied himself, mentally and physically, and the little smile that came to his lips was more than half sneer—because Johnson Boller and his lovely wife were hugging each other and babbling senselessly, and the best that Anthony could make of it at first was something like:

"And was it lonely? Oh, Pudgy-wudgy, was it lonely?"

Whereat Johnson Boller burbled:

"Lonely, sugar-plum? Lonely, sweetie? Oh, Beatie-girl, if Pudgy-wudgy could tell you how lonely——"

Here they kissed again, three times, four times, five times!

"Hell!" said Anthony Fry.

"And did it come back?" the imbecile that had been Johnson Boller gurgled.

The dark, exquisite head burrowed deep on Boller's shoulder.

"Oh, Pudgy!" a muffled voice protested, almost tearfully. "I couldn't do it! I thought I could, but I couldn't, sweetest!"

"And so it came back to its Pudgy-wudgy!" Johnson Boller oozed ecstatically. "So it turned around and came back to its Pudgy!"

Mrs. Boller regarded him solemnly, holding him off for a moment.

"At some awful, awful place north of Albany," she said. "I couldn't go any farther and I—I was going to wire you to come for me, Pudgy! And then I thought I'd stay at their terrible hotel and come down and surprise you, and you weren't home and they said you'd come here!"

"Yes!" Johnson Boller agreed.

"How could you leave our home, Pudgy-wudgy?" his darling asked reprovably.

"If I had stayed there another hour without my little chicky-biddy, I'd have shot myself!" said Pudgy-wudgy. "Ask Anthony!" And here he looked at Anthony and demanded: "Ain't we silly? Like a couple of kids!"

"You certainly are!" Anthony Fry rasped.

"You don't have to screw your face all up when you say it!" Mr. Boller informed him, disengaging himself.

Beatrice laughed charmingly.

"You'll overlook it, Mr. Fry?" said she. "We've never been separated before in all the——"

"Six months!" beamed Johnson Boller.

"—that we've been married!" finished his wife, squeezing his hand.

Followed a pause. Anthony had nothing whatever to say; after witnessing an exhibition like that he never had anything to say for an hour or more that a lady could hear. He stood, a cold, stately, disgusted figure, surging internally, thanking every star in the firmament that he had never laid himself open to a situation of that kind—and after a time the inimical radiations from him reached Beatrice, for she laughed uneasily.

"May I—may I fix my hair?" she asked. "And then we'll go home, Pudgy?"

"Yes, my love," purred Johnson Boller.

"Which is your room, pigeon-boy?" his bride asked.

So far as concerned Johnson Boller, Mary had been wafted out of this world; all aglow with witless happiness, he pointed at the door as he said:

"That one, Beatie-chicken."

Beatrice turned—and ten thousand volts shot through Anthony and caused his hair to stand on end. His laugh, coming simultaneously, was a loud, weird thing, splitting the still air.

"Your bedroom, Johnson!" he cried. "She means your *bedroom!*"

"Well—of course?" Beatrice said wonderingly.

"Well, that's down at the end of the corridor, dear madam," Anthony smiled wildly, and went so far as to stay her by laying hands on her arm. "Right down there—see? The open door. That's Johnson's room!"

Beatrice, distinctly startled, glanced at him and nodded and left. Anthony, drawing the first real breath in a full minute, glared at his friend in silence; but the morning's dread situation had slid from Johnson Boller's shoulders as a drop of water from a duck's back. For a second or two he had been slightly jarred at the magnitude of the break he had made—but that was all over now.

"My mistake, old scout," he chuckled softly. "You saved the day—what are you glowering about?"

"Clod!" gasped Anthony.

"Clod your necktie!" Johnson Boller said airily. "Well, did you ever see the like of it? Did you ever see anything like the little squeezicks, Anthony! She's back, bless her little heart! She couldn't stand it."

"Umph!" said his host.

"And so I'm let out of it!" Mr. Boller chuckled on. "We'll just scoot along to the little dove-cote, old vinegar-face, and see how she looks after all this time. I can get my things later on. Well—I'm sorry to leave you with the problem on your hands, you know."

"Don't let it disturb you!" Anthony snapped.

"But at that, you know, fate's doing the kind, just thing by snatching me out," Mr. Boller concluded earnestly and virtuously. "It wasn't my muddle in the first place, and somehow I feel that you haven't acted just on the level with me about any of it."

Anthony's mouth opened to protest. Yet he did not protest. Instead, he jumped, just as one jumps at the unexpected explosion of a fire-cracker—for down the corridor a scream, shrill and sharp, echoed suddenly.

And after the scream came a long, choking gasp, so that even Wilkins appeared in the doorway and Johnson Boller darted forward to learn what had overtaken his only darling. He was spared the trouble of going down the corridor, however.

Even as he darted forward, Beatrice had rejoined them; and having looked at her just once Johnson Boller stood in his tracks, rooted to the floor!

Because Beatrice, the lovely, the loving, Beatrice of the melting eyes and the high color, had left them. The lady in the doorway was white as the driven snow and breathing in a queer, strangling way; and whatever her eyes may have expressed, melting love for Johnson Boller was not included.

For this unpleasant condition the hat in her hand seemed largely responsible. It was a pretty little hat, expensively simple, but it was the hat of a lady!

And, looking from it to Johnson Boller, Beatrice finally managed:

"This—this! This hat!"

Johnson Boller moved not even a muscle.

"Who is the woman?" Beatrice cried vibrantly. "*Who is she?*"

And still neither Anthony nor Johnson Boller seemed able to canter up to the situation and carry it off with a blithe laugh. Anthony was making queer mouths; Johnson Boller was doing nothing whatever, even now; and when three seconds had passed Beatrice whirled abruptly on the only other possible source of information present, which happened to be Wilkins.

"You were here!" she said swiftly. "You answer me: who was the woman?"

"The—the woman, ma'am!" Wilkins repeated.

Beatrice came nearer and looked up at him, and there was that in her eyes which sent Wilkins back a full pace.

"You—you creature!" Beatrice said. "What woman was in this apartment last night?"

Now, as it chanced, Wilkins was far more intelligent than he looked. Give him the mere hint to a situation and he could lumber through somehow. Only a little while ago, when Hobart Hitchin came upon them, he had caught the key to this affair—so he smiled quite confidently and bowed.

"There was no woman here last night, ma'am," said Wilkins, "only Mrs. Boller, the wife of that gentleman there!"



CHAPTER XII

THE CRASH

Now it was the turn of Beatrice to become rigid.

She did not even wink, those first few seconds. She looked straight at Wilkins, searching his soul; and Wilkins, pleasantly conscious of having done the right thing well, preserved his quiet, respectful smile and wondered just which lady this newest might be.

He was telling the truth. He was telling the horrible, the incredible truth—and although those eyes of Mrs. Boller's might have suggested that she was capable of passionate murder if goaded far enough, they belied her actions just now. One slim, white hand went to her throat for a moment, as if to ease her breathing, but when she spoke her tone was very low, very quiet indeed:

"Mrs. Boller was here?"

"Yes, madam!" Wilkins responded in round tones.

"All last night?"

"Er—yes, madam. She——"

Johnson Boller returned to life! Johnson Boller, with a thick, senseless shout, bounded forward and landed directly between Wilkins and his beloved as he snarled:

"Say, you—you lying dog! You——"

"Let him alone!" his wife said quickly. "Permit him to tell me the truth!"

"He's not telling you the truth!" cried Johnson Boller. "He's lying! He—why, Wilkins, I'll smash your face into so many nasty little pieces that——"

"I beg pardon, sir!" Wilkins said hastily. "The—the lady was here——"

"There was no lady here!" Mr. Boller shouted.

Wilkins put up his hands.

"Well, the lady that was eating breakfast, sir, after a manner of speaking," he stammered. "Her that was introduced as Mrs. Boller, which caused me to take it, sir, that she——"

"Say! I said there was no lady here and there was no lady here! Get that, you putty-faced idiot!" Johnson Boller cried frantically, for he was beyond reason. "What do you mean by standing there and lying and babbling about some woman——"

Again Wilkins's intelligence manifested itself. To be a perfect servant, one's teeth must remain in place and one's face must be free from bruises. Wilkins, after a brief, intent look at Johnson Boller's fists, turned and fled!

"So this," said Mrs. Johnson Boller with deadly calm, "is what happens when you think I've gone away!"

Her husband turned upon her and threw out his hands.

"Beatrice!" he cried. "I swear to you——"

"Don't touch me, you filthy creature!" said his Beatrice. "I—I couldn't have thought it. You seemed different from other men!"

"This woman——" Johnson Boller floundered, and then caught Anthony's cold eye. It was an amused eye, too, and the sneer was in it; and Johnson Boller pointed at its owner suddenly and said: "If—if there was a woman here, blame him!"

Beatrice Boller looked Anthony Fry up and down, and her lips curled.

"I do—a little!" she said bitterly. "I've never cared very much for you, Mr. Fry, but—oh, why did you do that? You know as well as I know that Johnson isn't that—that sort of a man! If he wanted to come here and stay with you, couldn't you have been, just for once—*decent*?"

"*Madam!*" thundered Anthony Fry, when breath came to him.

There was no music in Beatrice's laugh; an ungreased saw goes through hardwood more sweetly.

"Spare yourself the effort of that righteous rage," she said. "I know your saintly

type of man so well, and I've begged Johnson to have nothing to do with you."

"And I give you my word——" Johnson Boller began.

"That he brought the woman here?" his wife asked.

"Yes!"

"And you remained!" finished Johnson Boller's better half. "Where is she?"

"She isn't here now!" came almost automatically from Anthony.

Once more Beatrice laughed.

"Isn't she, though?" said she. "That sort doesn't leave a twenty-dollar hat behind, Mr. Fry—nor a bag worth perhaps five times as much. She had moved in quite cozily, hadn't she? If I hadn't appeared, her trunk would have been along—or perhaps it is here now? If I hadn't——" Mrs. Boller continued, and her voice broke as the unearthly calm splintered and departed.

"*Where is she?*" And, her whole mien altering in an instant, Mrs. Boller's hands clenched tightly and her face flamed with outraged fury. "*Where is she?*"

Johnson Boller looked around wildly and helplessly.

"I tell you, she isn't here!" he began. "You see——"

"And I tell you that that's a lie!" said his wife. "I'll find her, and when I *do* find her, Johnson Boller, some one will pay on the spot for the home I've lost! Do you hear? I'll suffer—suffer for it, perhaps! *But she'll pay!*"

The Spanish grandmother had risen in Beatrice and declared herself! Cold-blooded assassination shook the air of Anthony's apartment. His head spun; he wondered hysterically if there would be much screaming before it was all over—if the police and the Lasande employees would break in before the ghastly finish of the affair. There would be just one finish, and it was written in those flaming eyes, written more clearly than any print!

And afterward? Well, there would be no afterward for Anthony. He understood that perfectly, yet he was too numb to grieve just now. Fifteen minutes after the worst had happened, the Lasande would present him with a check covering the balance of his lease and would request him to go: such was the procedure here and it had proved court-proof. Although he could afford to laugh at them. He had

merely to sit down and wait until the news had traveled a bit; Mary's father or Robert Vining would attend to the rest—and there would be the end of Anthony Fry's stately, contented existence.

Beatrice was gone!

Flaming eyes, heaving bosom, pathetic little hat—all had vanished together, but they had vanished down the corridor, and life leaped suddenly through Anthony's veins. Even now there was a chance—faint and forlorn, but still a chance to save Mary's life at least! He turned, did Anthony Fry, just as Johnson Boller flew after his demented spouse, and glided into Johnson Boller's bedroom.

Mary, very white indeed, was waiting for him.

"Where is she now?" she panted.

"You heard?"

"Of course I heard!"

"Miss Mary," said Anthony, "I'm afraid that the time has come when we'll have to stop planning and act. The lady is—er—essentially crazy just now. It is painful enough, but you'll have to leave as you are. Yes, even without a hat, for she has that. Simply leave!"

"And if I'm recognized?"

"It is unavoidable."

Mary stamped her foot.

"Well, it isn't, and I think you're the stupidest old man I ever knew!" she said flatteringly, as she sped to the closet. "Here! Give me a hand with it!"

"With what?"

"The wardrobe trunk, of course. I've been looking at it and trying to get it open, but I cannot do it in there. I'm going out in that trunk!"

"Eh?" said Anthony, tugging at it quite stupidly.

"Open it!" Mary commanded.

Anthony opened it.

"Yes, there's room and to spare, if you'll take out those drawers and things!" the girl said quickly. "No! Pile them in the closet neatly; she'll look in there! Now, about your man; is he strong?"

"Very, I believe."

"Get him here, quick!" said Mary.

She seemed to have taken matters into her own hand; more, she seemed to know what she was about. Anthony, after an instant of blank staring, pushed four times on the button of Johnson Boller's room, which signal indicated that Wilkins was needed in a hurry.

Some four or five seconds they stood, breathing hard, both of them, and listening for the sounds of disaster which might echo any minute from the corridor. They had not echoed when Wilkins appeared.

"You! Wilkins is your name?" Mary said. "Wilkins, I'm going to get into the trunk! Have you grasped that?"

"Why—yes, Miss!"

"And you, instantly, are going to take the trunk, with me in it, to my home—you know where that is? You don't, of course. Well, load the trunk into a taxi and tell the man to go across to West End Ave!"

"And the corner of Eighty—th Street!" Anthony supplied.

"Exactly!" said the girl. "Go to the side door and take in the trunk, through the yard, of course, and say it is for Felice—Felice Moreau, my maid? Have you the name, Wilkins?"

"Felice Moreau, miss. Yes, miss," said the blunderer.

"And then take it to her room and get out!" Mary concluded. "Don't lock the thing. Load it into the back of the cab with yourself and try to get it open a little so that I'll have air, when we've started!"

Saying which, Mary Dalton, who knew a really desperate situation when she saw one, and who also inherited much of her father's superb executive ability in a genuine emergency—Mary gathered her skirts and stepped into the trunk,

huddling down as prettily and gracefully as if it had been rehearsed for weeks!

She looked at Wilkins, and Wilkins, with a sweep, had closed the lid; and with a great emotional gulp Wilkins looked at his master and said:

"*My eye, sir!* A bit of all right, that, Mr. Fry!"

Anthony Fry nodded quickly and thrust several bills into his hand.

"Don't stand there talking about it!" he said. "Get your hat and hustle, Wilkins! Take the first taxi you see and—and handle her gently! Felice Moreau, Wilkins—remember that."

"I shall, indeed, sir!" said the faithful one; and, delicate consideration in every finger, he lifted the trunk and walked into the living-room, while Anthony Fry held his breath and followed every move with fascinated eyes.

Through the room, then, went Wilkins and trunk together and to the door. The sober black felt affair he had used these three years was on Wilkins's head now, and he lugged the trunk onward—turned in the outer hall and lugged it to the freight elevator—and now, as Anthony watched from the doorway of his lately peaceful home, onto the freight elevator.

The door closed on the little car. The door closed on Anthony's apartment, with Anthony inside—and again he was that stately, dignified, reticent and austere being; the Anthony Fry of yesterday!

A trifle stiffly, perhaps, he moved to his pet armchair, and into it he sank with an undeniable thud, grasping the arms fondly as one might grasp a friend returned from a long and perilous journey, and staring straight ahead.

Amazing! More than that, dumfounding!

Five minutes back he had been seriously resigned to ruin and death. Now he was quite utterly all right once more!

Anthony looked about at all the familiar things; it seemed to him that he had not seen them for a long, long time, and that they stretched out welcoming hands to him. Weakly, he smiled and rested his head in the well-worn spot on the back.

What a wonderfully capable little person she was! Why had none of them thought of a trunk before? Or—what matter if none of them had, so that Mary had gained the inspiration? She had saved herself and she had saved Anthony—

bless her little heart! She had saved everything, because she was gone!

And she was perfectly safe in Wilkins's hands. Wilkins, faithful, powerful soul, would carry her tidily into the room of the maid Felice, wherever that might lie in Dalton's absurdly ornate pile, and between Felice and Mary a story would be arranged to cover everything. Momentarily, Anthony frowned, for he disapproved of mendacity in any form—but there are some lies so much better than the truth that shortly he smiled again and hoped from the bottom of his heart that Mary's lie would be a winner.

And now that all was well—Anthony sat upright quite abruptly. All was not exactly well as yet; Johnson Boller and his wife were coming down the corridor and, almost as he heard them, the lady passed him.

She said nothing. Beatrice had passed the talking stage. Cheeks white again and eyes blazing, she threw open the door of Anthony's chamber and shot inward! One felt the pause as she looked around; one heard the door of the closet open—and then the door of the other closet. Then one saw the pleasing Beatrice again as she shot out, hat still in hand.

One lightning, searing glance whizzed over the calm Anthony and the purple, perspiring Johnson Boller. Then Beatrice had turned and hurtled into Johnson Boller's room itself, and Johnson Boller dropped into the chair beside Anthony and whined.

"It's over!" said he. "It's over!"

"Oh, no," Anthony said.

"And you listen to this!" Johnson Boller thundered suddenly, sitting up and pointing one pudgy finger at his friend. "The poor kid's crazy! I can't stop her! She'll kill the little skirt as sure as there's a sky overhead, and she'll go to the chair for it, laughing! And when she has gone, Fry, when it's all over, *I'm* going to shoot you full of holes and then kill myself! Get me? This world isn't big enough for you to get away from me, now! I swear to you——"

"You might better dry up," said Anthony with his incomprehensible calm.

Boller turned dully. Beatrice was with them again, and yet there had been no scream, no crash. There was about Beatrice nothing at all to suggest a woman who has tasted the sweet of revenge. White lips shut, she sailed past them, on her way to Wilkins's pantry and his humble bedroom beyond.

"Didn't she find her?" choked Boller.

"She didn't!"

"Why not?"

"She isn't there."

"Where'd she go?"

Anthony smiled cynical condescension.

"Once in a while I'm able to manage these things if I'm left alone," he said, assuming much credit to which he had no title.

"Well, is she out of this flat?" Johnson Boller asked hopefully.

"She certainly is, you poor fool," said his host.

Beatrice had finished her unlovely hunt. Even again, she was with them, and now she looked straight at Johnson Boller, ignoring the very existence of Anthony Fry.

"I haven't found her," said Beatrice. "She's hidden somewhere, or else she's with *other* friends in this wretched, sanctimonious hole."

"Beatrice——" Johnson Boller began, with a great, hopeful gasp.

"But I *will* find her!" the lady assured him, "and when I do—I'm going now."

"Home?"

Momentarily, Beatrice's eyes swam. It seemed a good sign, and Johnson Boller rose hurriedly. The eyes ceased swimming and blazed at him!

"I am never going there again," Beatrice informed him, with the old, chilling calm. "I shall go to a hotel, and later, I hope, back to father and mother. You will hear from my lawyers, Johnson, within a day or two."

"But, Beatrice——" Johnson Boller protested. "That doesn't mean that you're crazy enough to—to try divorcing me?"

"I am not crazy, and there will be very little trouble about it, Johnson," the lady said gravely. "That is what it means. Good-by."

A moment she paused before Johnson Boller, looking him up and down with a scorn so terrible that, innocent or otherwise, he cringed visibly. Another moment her eyes seemed to soften a little, for they were deep and wonderful, maddeningly beautiful, but millions of miles from the unworthy creature who had once called them his own. This, apparently, was Beatrice's fashion of saying an eternal good-by to one she had once loved—for having looked and thrilled him, she moved on, and the door closed behind her.

"She means it!" croaked Johnson Boller.

"She'll cool down," said Anthony.

"She will not, and—she means it!" cried his friend, wrath rising by great leaps. "She's going to sue me for divorce—*me*, that never even looked a chicken in the eye on the street. She's going to bust up our happy little home, Anthony, and it's your fault!"

"Poppycock!" said his host.

"That be damned!" stated Johnson Boller, and this time he actually howled the foul words. "That's what she wants to do, and I don't blame her! But she'll never do it, Anthony! Your reputation's all right—it's unfortunate for the girl, of course, but I'm going to stop her!"

"How?"

"I'm going to tell the cold truth and make the girl back it up!"

"Hey?"

"I owe something to myself and to Beatrice, and I don't owe anything to you or the Dalton girl! Where's my hat?"

Anthony gripped him suddenly.

"Are you cur enough," said he, angrily, "to sacrifice Miss Dalton simply to——"

"You bet I am!" said Johnson Boller. "If it comes down to that, *the truth* can't hurt her, and any little odds and ends of things that happen before all hands understand the truth will happen to you—not me!"

Anthony smiled wickedly.

"Just listen to me a moment before you start!" he said curtly.

"Listen to what?"

"Something I have to say which will interest you very much! This trifling family affair of yours isn't nearly so serious as you fancy. In a day or two or a week or two it will all blow over—and if it doesn't you may thank your lucky stars to be rid of a woman so infernally unreasonable," said Anthony. "But I'm hanged if I'll permit you to sacrifice that girl!"

"Ho!" said Johnson Boller derisively. "How are you going to stop it?"

"In just this way!" Anthony continued suavely. "You breathe just one word of the truth, Johnson, and *I* will tell a story which involves *you* and, while there will not be a word of truth in it, it will get over in great shape, because everybody knows that I'm a man whose word is as good as his bond. I'll tell such a story about you as will raise the very hair on your head and have an infuriated mob after you before the papers have been on the street for twenty minutes! Do you understand?"

"The mysterious woman will be an innocent country girl, I think, who came here to make a living and lift the mortgage on the old farm, and whom you approached on the street and finally dazzled with a few lobster palaces. She'll be beautiful and virtuous, Johnson, and I think she'll tell me, in tears, how you fed

her the first cocktail she ever tasted! She'll——"

"Wait!" Johnson Boller said hoarsely.

"That is the merest outline of the story I shall tell, and when I've had time to work out the details, I'll guarantee that Beatrice will never even consent to live in the same city with you—even if you bring sworn proofs of the story's falsity! I'll represent you to be a thing abhorred by all half-way decent men and even shunned by self-respecting dogs! Don't think I'm bluffing about it, either, Johnson! I mean to protect Mary Dalton!"

There is a vast difference between the coarse, rough character, however blusteringly impressive he may be, and the truly strong one. Frequently, the one is mistaken for the other, but under the first real stress the truth comes out.

Johnson Boller for example, looking into his friend's coldly shining eye, did not draw himself up and freeze Anthony with his conscious virtue. He did puff out his cheeks defiantly, to be sure, and mutter incoherently, but that lasted for only a few seconds.

Then the eye won and Johnson Boller, dropping into his chair again, likewise dropped his head into his hands and groaned queerly.

Anthony, looking contempt at him, fancied that he wept.

Anthony sneered and smiled.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE BOX

Now, for a little, let us watch the movements of the intelligent servant, Wilkins.

Getting the trunk to the street was no trouble at all. The girl weighed, perhaps, one hundred and twenty pounds, and the trunk itself another fifteen or twenty, and handling that amount of weight was a mere joke to Wilkins. Therefore, he stood in the side street beside the Lasande, having carefully deposited his burden, and looked about for a taxi—and presently one of these bandit vehicles rolled up to the curb and the hard-faced little man behind the wheel barked:

"Taxicab?"

"Yes," said Wilkins. "I wish——"

"Stick the box up front!" snapped the driver. "I kin give you a hand."

"I'm taking the box in back with me," said Wilkins.

"Nothing doing!" said the driver. "What d'ye think that paint's made of—steel?"

It was entirely possible that Mary was stifling by this time. Wilkins used his wits as he fumbled in his pockets and asked:

"Your cab, old chap?"

"Company's!"

"Put this five-dollar bill into your pocket and give me a hand setting the box in the back," said Wilkins. "It's packed with delicate stuff, and the master instructed me particular to keep a hand on it."

So, while the hard-faced one smiled brightly and, the bill in his pocket, reflected that a murder must have been committed but that it was none of his business in any case, Anthony's wardrobe trunk was stood erect and the taxicab rolled off swiftly, headed for the palatial home of Theodore Dalton.

A block or two and, in the most uninterested way, Wilkins managed to open the

lid for an inch or more, and in the space appeared a little pink nose and, presently, as the nose withdrew, a brilliant blue eye.

"Can you open it a little more?" asked Mary.

Wilkins opened it a little more.

"I trust you're quite comfortable, miss?" he asked politely.

"Lovely!" said Mary. "Did any one—seem to notice when we left?"

"Not a soul, miss."

Mary, cramped though she might be, sighed vast relief.

"Tell Mr. Fry, when you get back, that I'll send for the things I left behind," she said softly.

"Yes, miss."

"And Wilkins, when you get to the house," said Mary, "be absolutely sure that you take me to Felice's room!"

"I understand," purred Wilkins, just above the rumble of traffic.

Here Mary's whole face almost appeared.

"I want you to be very sure about that indeed!" she urged. "Never mind what the other servants say or where they want you to leave the trunk. You insist that it is for Felice, and has to be delivered to her personally; and if you have a chance to give her some sort of sign to accompany you to the room, do it. I think she'll understand."

"Yes, miss," Wilkins agreed.

"And above and beyond all things, keep your face perfectly expressionless when you meet Bates, Wilkins. Bates is our butler, you know, and he's the most inquisitive creature in the world. Is this trunk marked?"

"Only with Mr. Fry's initials, miss—'A. F.'"

Mary frowned up at him through the crack.

"That'll have to be explained too," she sighed. "Well—let's see. Do you think of anything plausible, Wilkins?"

The perfect treasure glanced at the driver, who was quite intent on his own affairs and apparently not listening—and Wilkins smiled quite complacently.

"If I might make so bold as to suggest it, miss," he said, "why not say that the trunk comes from—well, the cousin of this Felice, perhaps? Has she a female cousin?"

"Nobody knows it if she hasn't."

"Then it might be said that this comes from her cousin—er—Aimee Fourier. That sounds rather well for a name?"

"Great, Wilkins!" said Mary.

"And it might further be said that this cousin, a person perhaps in the trade of making gowns and the like, since I believe that such use these trunks quite a bit—it might be said that the cousin, having no further use for this trunk, is sending it to your maid, miss."

Sheer admiration shone in Mary's visible eye.

"Wilkins, you're a jewel!" said its owner. "Where are we now?"

"On West End Avenue, miss, within a block or two of your home."

Mary disappeared.

"Shut the trunk, Wilkins," her voice said softly, "We're safe!"

She, who had suffered so many shocks since last night, seemed assured that at last all was well; and as a matter of fact Wilkins felt much the same about the whole affair. He gazed placidly at the sign on the corner and, closing the trunk, leaned forward to the driver.

"The big limestone place over there, I think it is," said he. "Go to the side gate, old chap."

Seconds only, and they rolled to a standstill at the curb. Anthony's priceless personal servant lifted out his burden and set it on the sidewalk with no effort at all.

"Wait a bit and take me back," he smiled at the driver, as he started for the handsome black iron gate in the cream-colored brick wall that shut the Dalton back yard from the passing throng. There was a little electric push beside it, and

Wilkins, having laid a finger on it, waited serenely.

Offhand, it seemed to him, he had saved the day for Anthony Fry. A smaller, weaker man must have passed up the job of carrying out the trunk single-handed. Yes, he had saved the day and, also offhand, the saving should be worth about twenty dollars when he returned to Anthony and reported. Or possibly, considering the really horrible features of the case as Wilkins understood them, even fifty dollars.

That was not too much. In fact, the more he thought of it, the more Wilkins felt that his return would be marked by the sight of a crisp yellow note from Anthony's prim, well-stocked wallet. Thirty-two of this should go into the black-and-white pin-checked suit he had been considering enviously in a Broadway window for nearly a month; ten more should go into Wilkins's savings-bank account, which was quite a tidy affair; and he thought that the other eight might as well be sent to his nephew, who was working his way through a veterinary college in Indiana.

And here the houseman opened the door and looked at Wilkins; and Wilkins picking up his trunk, stepped through and into the back yard, and then, the door of the basement laundry being open, into the laundry itself.

Only the under-laundress was present, which caused him to stiffen as he said coldly:

"For Felice!"

"The—the poor young lady's maid!" said the laundress, with a sudden snivel.

"I'll take it to her room," Wilkins said. "Where will that be, and where will I find the young woman herself?"

The under-laundress dried her eyes on one corner of her apron.

"I dunno about Felice," she said uncertainly. "Mebbe Mr. Bates—oh, here comes Mr. Bates now."

Round, red, highly perturbed, the Dalton butler bustled into the laundry and looked Wilkins up and down.

"Trunk for the master?" he asked crisply.

"For Felice, the young lady's maid, as I understand," Wilkins said quietly.

"Where shall I find her? It's for herself."

His calm and superior smile warned Bates not to question an affair that could not possibly concern him—yet the warning missed Bates somehow. He looked sharply at Wilkins and laughed.

"You'll not find her here!" said he.

"I mean Felice, the maid of——"

"I know the one you mean," Bates said briefly. "She's not here and she'll not be here again! She's been dismissed!"

"What?" said Wilkins.

Bates looked him over sternly, as if to suggest that if he happened to be a friend of Felice he had passed beneath contempt.

"She's *went!*" Bates said sourly. "This here house is no place for young Frenchies that wanders the streets at night, believe me. She sneaked in—I dunno what hour this early morning, and she was able to give no account at all of where she'd been. There wasn't no further questions asked; she went, bag and baggage!"

One of those mental clouds which had been troubling Anthony since last night came now to engulf the complacent Wilkins. He looked at Bates, as if refusing to believe a word of it. He looked at the trunk and his expression was a study.

"Well, as to where this young person has gone," Wilkins said. "You see, this trunk being, as it were, her personal property, I've been asked to see that she gets it herself and——"

"Where she's gone is no concern of ours. We don't know and we don't want to know!" said Mr. Bates. "The hussy went without a character and that's all we can tell you about her. And this here house is too full of trouble for me to be bothering with you about her trunk," concluded Mr. Bates. "Anything belonging to her gets out!"

"Out!" Wilkins muttered.

"Out!" said Mr. Bates, and pointed at the door.



Let us not forget what Anthony altogether forgot, to wit: the sinister warning of Hobart Hitchin in regard to shipping boxes, trunks or other containers that might well have held a dismembered body.

For one of Hitchin's strange temperament and habits of thought, his own apartment could not have been situated more happily, if an affair of this kind were to involve Anthony Fry.

Room for room, the home of the prosperous crime-student was directly below that of Anthony; they used the same dumbwaiter, and they were served by the same service elevator, so that if Hitchin had so elected he could even have inspected the meals that went to Anthony's table. Still more, they were in the old wing of the Lasande, where the rooms are larger, but where the floors—laid long before the days of sound-proof concrete filling—permit the unduly inquisitive to hear much of what goes on above and below.

According to his own reasoning, Hitchin had struck upon the investigation of his whole lifetime. Surely as he wore spectacles, murder had been done in the flat of the impeccable Anthony Fry.

What the motive could possibly be, Hobart Hitchin could only guess, as he had already guessed; but it was a fact that he had been suspicious ever since Anthony's appearance last night with the slim boy of the heavy storm coat and the down-pulled cap. These, failing to harmonize with anything that went in and out of the Lasande ordinarily, had twanged every responsive string in Hitchin's consciousness, and not by any manner of means had the strings ceased twanging after his unusual interview with Anthony.

Hence, having returned to his own flat, he waited tense and expectant. With straining ears he heard the coming of Beatrice Boller and the subsequent excitement, and to him her peculiar cries signified another friend of David Prentiss's who had come suddenly upon the grisly thing that had once been the young boy.

And now those processes of deductive reasoning which are used so successfully in fiction and so infrequently in real life, informed Hobart Hitchin that the crime's next step was almost at hand. Accustomed to murder or otherwise, an intelligent man like Anthony Fry would risk no more of these disturbances; whatever his original plans, he would seek very shortly to get the body out of the Lasande—hardly in grips, Hitchin fancied, probably not in a packing case, rather in that reliable actor in so many sensational murders, a trunk.

Here, on the floor above him, some one moved and bumped what was unquestionably a hollow, empty trunk!

As the veteran fireman responds to the gong, so did the brain of Hobart Hitchin respond to that bump! Fifteen seconds and he had visualized the whole of the next step; the trunk to the freight elevator, thence to the street, thence to the waiting motor express wagon, thence—

Again, after a time, came the bump, indicating that the trunk was in the living-room now—and then, absolutely true to the hypothesis, Anthony's door opened and the bumps went to the hall, while the freight elevator came up the shaft!

The brief-case containing the trousers of David Prentiss had not left Hobart Hitchin's cold hand. It did not leave now as, snatching a hat, he sped down the back stairs of the Lasande—a proceeding likely to save five seconds at least when one considered the slow response of the elevators—cut through the second floor and came down to the side entrance, just beyond the office and the desk.

There was a taxicab as usual at the curb just here. Without leaving the vestibule, Hobart Hitchin signaled it to wait for him; and then, ever so charily, he thrust forward his eagle eyes and directed their merciless beam through the side panel of the glass. Hobart Hitchin all but lost his self-control and laughed excitedly, for there, just down the block, Anthony's personal servant was lugging a wardrobe trunk to the curb.

Ah! And he planned to use the safer taxicab, apparently, rather than the truck; and it seemed to Hobart Hitchin that the driver knew his full errand and demanded his share in advance, because Wilkins handed him money. After that, without effort, because David Prentiss had been light and slender in life, Wilkins took his ghastly burden into the back of the cab and drove away.

But Hobart Hitchin, the relentless, was just twenty yards behind, and his driver, spurred by a ten-dollar bill, bent forward and watched every turn of the wheels as he followed. Thus they left the region of the Lasande—and since we all have our personal dreams, it was right enough for Hobart Hitchin to sit back and indulge his own.

As a millionaire now and then makes himself part and parcel of the local fire-department, following faithfully to every blaze, answering every alarm, so Hobart Hitchin, with a patrimony that rendered real work absurd, dreamed of the day when he should be recognized as the most eminent private expert in crime

these great United States have ever held.

Mistily, he had been able time and time again to visualize himself, spectacles and all, surrounded by perturbed policemen who had come to the end of their rope in crime detection, who listened respectfully while he expounded the elements of the particular case in hand. But the mists were almost gone now; this brilliant morning, for the very first time, Hobart Hitchin had picked off a live one.

Yes, and it grew more and more live every second, for instead of heading downtown, and trying—as Hobart Hitchin had fully expected—to ship the trunk by express to some out-of-town point, Wilkins had made his way to West End Avenue!

This in itself was very curious; it did not even suggest that Wilkins was headed out of town with the remains; and it did not even hint at the astounding thing which followed, several blocks farther uptown! As the taxi stopped at Theodore Dalton's side gate, Hitchin all but fell from his cab as he craned forward!

By some lucky accident, he knew that house, and knew, in a general way, of its owner. This was the liniment king—and Anthony Fry was the owner of Fry's Imperial Liniment; there was a link as of solid steel, made of liniment only, yet utterly unbreakable!

What did it mean? What *could* it mean?

Hitchin leaned back for an instant and closed his eyes, giving his mighty brain the freest rein of its existence, urging it with every fiber in him to hit upon the correct theory.

And then, eyes opening, it almost seemed that he had hit upon it! These two, Dalton and Fry, were doubtless associated in business, whatever the supposed rivalry. Was it not thinkable that the devilish messes of one or the other had ruined the health of the Prentiss boy? Was it not possible that Anthony, luring him to his home, had been trying to buy him off from a threatened suit—get a quit-claim or something of that kind? For that matter, could it be anything else? The boy had refused and—big business had wiped out another individual!

He might well enough be wrong, but if wrong he were, why was Wilkins taking the trunk straight into the premises of Theodore Dalton? He had done that now, and now the gate had closed upon him, and Hobart Hitchin, suddenly determined on the most spectacular act of his life, tapped his driver on the shoulder.

"Go around to the front of this house—yes, the corner one!" he said, and there was a little shake in his voice.

His path was clear enough. Anthony Fry would not seek to escape as yet; they never did at this stage when they fancied the crime itself safely out of the way. Anthony would be there when wanted—and single-handed, Hobart Hitchin meant to take into custody the two most sensational murderers of their generation!

It was a tremendous thing. By the time he had stepped up to the spacious door of Theodore Dalton's home, the tremendousness of it had so overcome Hobart Hitchin that he could not have reasoned out the two times two multiplication table! He was for the time a man bereft of what most of us consider senses, so that he walked straight past Bates and said:

"Mr. Dalton!"

"You're bringing word, sir?" Bates cried.

"I wish to see Mr. Dalton. He is at home," said Hitchin.

Bates considered for a moment and then nodded; it was no morning for quibbling.

"In here, sir!" he said, pattering off quickly to Dalton's study.

He pattered out again as quickly, and Hobart Hitchin, having taken a chair, rose from it at once and took to walking, brief-case still clutched in his hand and an exalted smile on his lips. So Theodore Dalton found him when he entered, fifteen seconds later—a mighty man, deep of chest, savage of eye, square of chin, with great hairy hands and a shaggy gray head. Not more than a single second did Dalton look at Hitchin before he barked:

"Well? Well? You are bringing word of her?"

"Her?" smiled Hobart Hitchin, with unearthly calm.

"My daughter!" Theodore Dalton thundered. "What——"

"I know nothing about your daughter, Dalton," Hitchin said, with his icy smile. "Will you be seated?"

"No!" said the master of the house. "What the devil do you want here, if it isn't

about my daughter?"

"I want just five minutes conversation with you, on a matter which concerns you most vitally."

Theodore Dalton closed his hairy fists.

"Look here, sir," he said, with a calm of his own which was decidedly impressive. "If you're jackass enough to come in here on the morning when my daughter—*my daughter*—has disappeared—if you're clown enough to try to sell me anything——"

"I'm not trying to sell you anything; I'm trying to tell you something!" Hitchin said, and there was something so very peculiar about his smile that even Theodore Dalton postponed the forcible eviction for a few minutes.

"Tell me what?"

"Dalton," said Hobart Hitchin, "the game is up!"

"*What?*" rasped Mr. Dalton.

"The boy, David Prentiss—or what remains of the boy, David Prentiss—has just been brought into your house. *And I know!*"

Theodore Dalton said nothing; for a moment he could say nothing. Hitchin's teeth showed in a triumphant smile.

"Murder will out!" said he. "Murder——"

"*Murder!*" Theodore Dalton snarled. "What the——"

"David Prentiss, who was murdered last night, has been brought here!" the palpable lunatic pursued. "Don't shout! Don't try to strike me! *Look!*"

Already he had opened the brief-case; now, with a dramatic whisk, he spread the trousers on the table.

And if he looked for an effect upon Dalton, the effect was there even in excess of any expectation! Theodore Dalton, after one quick downward glance, cried out queerly, thickly, far down in his throat! His eyes seemed to start from his head; his hands, going out together, snatched up the trousers and held them nearer to the window. With a jerk, Theodore Dalton turned one of the rear pockets inside out and looked swiftly at the little linen name-plate sewed therein by the tailor

who had made them.

The trousers dropped from his fingers and Theodore Dalton collapsed!

Gray, gasping, unable to speak at first, he crumpled into the chair beside the table and stared up numbly at Hobart Hitchin, who smiled just as he had always meant to smile in the event of such a moment coming before his death.

"You—you!" Dalton choked. "You say—the wearer of those trousers has been *murdered*?"

"As you know," said Hobart Hitchin. "The boy——"

"A boy about twenty-two, smooth shaven—a nice kid—a boy with a shock of brown hair and—and——" Theodore Dalton cried, in a queer, broken little voice, as he gripped the table. "No! No! Not that boy!"

"That boy!" said Hitchin. "David Prentiss!"

Dalton's whole soul seemed to burst!

"It was no David Prentiss!" he cried. "My—my daughter's gone and now my only son has been murdered!"



CHAPTER XIV

CONCERNING THREE GROUPS

For the first time, Wilkins looked at Mr. Bates and thought swiftly. Having thought for half a minute, he had accomplished a complete circle and was exactly where he had started. It was plain that the maid Felice was somewhere else; equally plain was it that, for the purpose of the moment, the maid Felice could satisfactorily be in but one place—and that right here!

Had she merely been out for a little time he could have taken the trunk to her room and, opening the lid a bit, could have fled with his task accomplished; she was, however, out permanently—so that the very best Wilkins had accomplished at the end of a full minute was:

"Out? Quite so. But where has the young person gone, if you please?"

Mr. Bates scowled angrily.

"We don't know, I've told you!" he said sharply. "When one of the help's dismissed under circumstances like that, we don't trouble to ask where she's going and we don't keep her address."

"But she might be having mail to forward——" Wilkins essayed hopefully.

"Any mail that comes for her'll be handed to the carrier again," Bates snapped. "And now will you get her box out of here, you? I can't have it about, and I've no time this morning to argue with you. The master's daughter's disappeared and we're all on edge."

"And not a soul in the world knowing where she's gone, poor lamb!" sniveled the under-laundress, laying a hand on the trunk that held Mary. "And her that home-loving she never——"

"Hush!" said Mr. Bates.

The woman subsided into her apron.

"Whatever's taken her, she's trying to get home! She's trying——" she sobbed.

"Well, whatever's taken her, get that trunk out of here!" the Dalton butler snapped.

Was there anything else to do? Wilkins, having thought until his head ached, could not see it. If the girl had a friend among the help, it might be left with the friend; but the only woman of the household present had taken pains to look properly scandalized at each mention of Felice. Or if Mary hadn't cautioned him particularly against this Bates, he would have risked taking Bates aside and communicating the astounding truth.

But since things were as they were, and not as they might have been; since Bates was actually glaring at him now, and would, in another minute, be banging the trunk back to the street himself, there was really nothing left for Wilkins but to grip the wide handle and start slowly for the door again.

It was bad! Oh, it was very bad, with Mary in there and very likely stifling to death, but Wilkins shuffled slowly back to the taxicab with his burden, slowly and carefully put it aboard once more.

"What's wrong?" asked the driver.

"The party it was for had left!" said Wilkins.

"Where to?"

Wilkins pondered heavily.

"Back again where we came from," he sighed. "But you might go rather slow, I think. Like enough I'll change my mind and decide to take it somewhere else. I can't say at the moment."

Clambering after himself, he looked about while the man hopped out and cranked his motor. Failure had leaped out and blasted the flower of success, just as every petal had opened wide! Utter failure was the portion of Wilkins—and the policeman on the far corner was watching him in the most disconcerting way.

Squinting over there in the sunshine, the blue-coat's instinct was telling him that there was something wrong about the trunk. He moved to the other side of the lamp-post and stared on; and Just here his sergeant appeared from the side street and the officer addressed him, even pointing with his club at the taxi!

Faithful Wilkins's heart stopped! When an officer approaches and asks one to

open a trunk or bag, one opens it or goes up. Having opened this one, it was almost a certainty that one would go up also—and with that one would go Mary Dalton, and in the evening papers one of the most startling stories of the year would be featured.

We all of us have a peculiar way of seeing our own side of any given case before examining the others; so it was with Wilkins. Wilkins saw himself dismissed from what was really a very excellent, very well-paid, very easy job; he saw Anthony cursing himself and his stupidity and ordering him out of his sight forever!

"Can't you start?" he shot at his driver.

"Well, I'm just sitting down," that person stated acidly.

"Well, get her a-going and then turn around; don't go over there, but go back up this block! And start!" said Wilkins.

The cab started and turned, and he did not look behind. He had not need for that; he could feel the official eyes boring through the back of the cab and into himself; he could hear running feet; once he was quite sure he heard the pounding of a club on the curb, which meant that every officer in hearing would flock into sight. Wilkins, becoming stony of countenance after a struggle, shut his teeth and sat back, quite forgetting that Mary might welcome a breath or two of the outer air.

It was possible, after a little, if the police did not appear and stop the machine, that he would order the cab into the country and there release Mary, hat or no hat—but somehow Wilkins doubted whether he would make that decision.

What he craved more than anything else just now was security behind brick and stone walls—like the Lasande's.



Be it said that Hobart Hitchin had regained enough of his normal senses to feel distinctly startled. His vision cleared considerably as he looked at Theodore Dalton, crouching behind his table. He felt, in spite of himself, that Dalton's grief was perfectly genuine, but the utter mystery of the thing swept over him, too, and he leaned forward and asked:

"What did you say, sir? Your son?"

"These—these!" Dalton said, clutching the trousers. "My son Dick's—his fishing suit."

"And your son, where is he supposed to be?"

"In the north woods, somewhere, although I haven't heard from him for a week," Dalton choked; and then, being a powerful character, he threw off the hideous numbness and straightened up. "What did you say? What were you trying to tell me? Where did you get—these?"

"From the dumbwaiter where——"

"What dumbwaiter?"

"In the Hotel Lasande."

"When?"

"Very early this morning."

"How did you come to——"

"I saw a young man when he went into the house last night; I live there, you know. I had reason to think that something happened to him overnight, and this morning I managed to snatch this suit from the dumbwaiter as it passed my door. Further——"

"What was he doing there?"

"He came home last night with a gentleman you know," said Hobart Hitchin. "One Anthony Fry!"

"The liniment Fry?" cried Theodore Dalton.

His gray face turned white and then purple. He rose and ran one hand through his shaggy gray mop.

"The liniment Fry," Hitchin said.

"My boy—my Dicky went home with that man?"

"A boy was introduced to me as David Prentiss."

Dalton's hands clutched his forehead for a moment and the grinding of his teeth was audible.

"You were saying—what were you saying about a trunk?"

"I said that the remains of the boy had been brought here by Fry's personal servant, sir. I saw them taken into the side gate not ten minutes ago and——"

"Come!" said Theodore Dalton.

He reached out and, gripping Hitchin's arm, decided that gentleman's course for him. As Theodore Dalton strode to the back of the house and to the back stairs, as he went straight down and into and through the kitchen, Hobart Hitchin merely went along, partly in stumbles, partly in little jumps; and so they came to the laundry and, nerving himself until the veins stood out on his temples, Dalton faced his butler and spoke thickly:

"The—the trunk!"

"Beg pardon, sir?" said Bates humbly.

"The trunk which was brought here! Where is it?"

"Oh, that trunk, sir. It was took away again, Mr. Dalton. The person that brought it said it was for Felice, the maid we dismissed this morning, sir."

"*For Felice?*" Dalton echoed.

"Quite so, sir."

"Why was it sent to Felice?"

"I couldn't say, sir," said Bates, stepping to the gate and opening it. "There it goes, sir, on the cab. Shall I send after it?"

Dalton leaned heavily against Hobart Hitchin.

"Goes—where?"

"Well, I'm not sure as it was his voice, sir, but I think, standing out here, I heard him tell the man to go back where they came from."

Followed quite a tableau.

Bates stared respectfully at his master. Hobart Hitchin, who had not as yet had

time to form a complete new set of theories, merely stood and frowned. But although Theodore Dalton did not move, he did not seem still.

His face, in fact, mirrored the whole gamut of human emotions of the darker sort; overwhelming sorrow was there at first, and then, succeeding slowly, amazement and unbelief, and after them trembling anger. Black fire shot from his deepset eyes, as they switched to Hitchin; his lips became a ghastly white line; his mighty chest rose and fell; and now he had taken Hobart Hitchin's arm again and led him back to a dusky corridor.

"You!" said Dalton. "I don't know who you are and why you came here; but this I ask you, and if you don't answer truthfully, God help you! Does that trunk, to your belief, contain the body of the boy you call Prentiss?"

"To my almost certain knowledge!"

"And he was murdered in the apartment of *Anthony Fry*?"

"He was, sir, and——"

"Come!" said Theodore Dalton, once more, and they returned to the study in a series of stumbles and little jumps.

Once in the dark, handsome room Theodore Dalton walked straight to the cabinet in the corner and, with a key, opened the topmost drawer. He extracted therefrom a heavy automatic pistol and slipped out its magazine. He opened a box of cartridges and filled the little box; and when it had clicked into the handle of the automatic, and the pistol itself was in his pocket.

"There was a cab leaving the door when you came," he said quietly. "Did you dismiss it?"

"I—I believe so," said Hobart Hitchin, who as an actual fact liked neither the sight of the weapon nor the sight of Dalton just now.

"Bates!" Dalton spoke into the little interior telephone. "My car!"

"If you're going somewhere——" escaped Hobart Hitchin.

"I am going to see Anthony Fry. You are going with me. You are going to accuse him, in my presence, of the crime," said Theodore Dalton, with the same ominous calm. "And when you have accused him, I shall do the rest! Sit down!"

Anthony Fry, because there was more relief in him than flesh and blood, leaned back in his pet chair and gazed at the ceiling, long, steadily, happily. He would have liked to smoke, yet he declined to make the effort which would break the delicious lassitude that possessed him. He would have liked to sing, too, and clap Johnson Boller on the back and assure him that all was well in the best possible world—but for a little it was enough to sneer smilingly at Boller's bent head.

He, poor fool, fancied that all was over because his infernal wife had threshed around a bit and gone off clutching poor little Mary's hat—a funny thing in itself. Instead of getting up and cheering at his prospective freedom from the matrimonial yoke, Johnson was groaning there and clawing into his hair; and now, by the way, he was raising his head and turning toward his old friend.

"Anthony!" Johnson Boller said faintly.

"What is it?"

"You wouldn't pull a thing like that on me?"

"I certainly shall, if you ever try to tell the truth about Miss Dalton."

"But what did she ever do for me, to let her confounded reputation wreck my life? All she ever did was to make a female ass of herself by wearing pants and going to a prize fight and then listening to you. Why should a thing like that bust up my home?"

Anthony shrugged his shoulders.

"It may not," said he.

"It has!" Johnson Boller said feverishly. "And listen, Anthony! You and I have to stand together, old man. The girl's out of the way, so that clears your skirts for a while, but what about Hitchin? What if he calls in the police this afternoon?"

Anthony laughed; with Mary out of the way he was another man.

"We'll let that take care of itself. For that matter, why not go down and tell Hitchin the truth and show him what a fool he's making of himself? He's a gentleman, I suppose; if we swear him to secrecy he's not likely to talk."

"And if we call him off, then we'll find Bee and tell her the truth, too?" Johnson

Boller asked eagerly. "She's a lady, Anthony. If we swear her to secrecy, she'll never talk—and maybe we could explain it to the girl and have her verify what we say, hey?"

Anthony actually yawned and stretched as he arose.

"We'll settle Hitchin first," he smiled. "Come along!"

He lounged out of the flat and to the stairs, Boller hugging close to his side. He yawned again as he pressed the buzzer of the Hitchin apartment, and he even smiled condescendingly at the inscrutable Japanese who answered.

"Mr. Hitchin," said Anthony. "Say that Mr. Fry and Mr. Boller wish to see him, if you please."

The Japanese shook his head.

"He no home!"

"Out?" said Anthony in some astonishment.

"Yes, sir, li'l while ago," the Oriental said. "He go very quick."

"And he will be back—when?"

"Mr. Hitchin no say, sir!" the Japanese sighed.

Therefore they turned back to the stairs; and as they came to the foot of the flight Johnson Boller gripped his friend's arm suddenly and looked whitely at him.

"It's all over!" he said.

"What?"

"The trunk! The trunk she went out in! Didn't he say something about not sending out anything?"

"That has no connection with his going out!" Anthony snapped, although some of his insouciance fled.

"Hasn't it, though? Well, it has every connection! He's chased Wilkins and, long before this, he's called a cop and had him taken in! The whole thing's over, Anthony. That trunk's in a police station now and they've opened it—and your Dalton man's daughter is behind the bars as a suspicious character before this."

Anthony Fry's scowl turned black.

"Can't you see me peaceful, without trying to smash it by babbling a lot of rot like that?" he demanded angrily. "Wilkins must have the girl inside her home by this time and——"

"Why should you be peaceful and happy when my home's wrecked?" Johnson Boller asked hotly.

"We will not discuss it out here," said his host, leading the way upstairs again.

Dismally he trailed through the door he had left so cheerfully a moment ago. Johnson Boller trailed after him even more dismally, albeit with some grim satisfaction at his altered mien.

"We can sit down here and wait now," he stated. "We don't have to do anything more than that, Anthony. We can figure it all out. Either he has had the trunk and Wilkins taken in, or he's just determined that our guilt is cinched. If the former, all creation knows by this time that Dalton's daughter was up to something—queer. If there's a general alarm out for her, they'll recognize her when she comes out of that trunk. On the other hand, if Hitchin has let the trunk go, he's having warrants sworn out by this time and they're dusting off the seats in the nearest patrol-wagon. Either Dalton gets you and probably me, too, or the police get us. That's all that can happen and——"

"Stop!" Anthony barked. "I don't care a rap what happens, so long as the girl is not laid open to suspicion, and I don't believe Hitchin or anybody else is going to contrive that, once Wilkins started to deliver the trunk. That is my sole concern now—to shield her!"

Having delivered with commendable sentiment, Anthony demonstrated his entire calm by rising with a nervous jerk, by listening, and finally by striding to the door of his apartment, which he opened.

Thereafter he stepped back suddenly, for with one searing glance at him a woman had passed.

She was in the living-room even now, and smiling horribly at Johnson Boller. She was, in a word, Johnson Boller's wife, and her black eyes snapped more ominously than before.

"Don't touch me!" she was saying, as Johnson Boller approached with hands

outstretched. "I've come back, but only to tell you!"

"To tell me that you've changed your mind, little pigeon?" Johnson Boller cried brokenly. "You're going to let Pudgy-wudgy——"

"Faugh!" said the lady, and from her radiated the Spanish grandmother and all the strain implied—blood lust, vengeance! "No, I've come to tell you that I mean to make that woman's name a scandal and a byword from end of town to the other. Not *some* woman's name, but *the* woman's name!"

"But——"

"How can I do it?" laughed the different Mrs. Boller. "I've found out who she is!"



CHAPTER XV

THICK AND FAST

However faint the appeal it made to Johnson Boller, Anthony's statement had been the literal truth—his sole concern just now was the shielding of Mary Dalton.

More and more, these last calmer minutes, the ghastly aspect of the case as viewed from the woman's side had appealed to him. It is entirely possible that a little real mental suffering had rendered Anthony Fry less selfish and more considerate of the rest of the human race—Johnson Boller always excepted—than he had been for many years.

Whatever the cause, the weight of his own guilt was bearing down harder and harder, and he was prepared to go to extreme lengths if necessary in the way of keeping Mary's adventure an eternal secret.

But like many another plan and resolve of this bedeviled night and morning, the latest had been blasted to flinders!

Beatrice Boller, standing there with Mary's hat still clutched tight and partly broken, was not smiling the smile of a woman who fancied herself on the right track. She smiled the smile of one who knew exactly where she stood. Her lips curled now as she examined the worm that had been her husband, and she perched on the edge of the center-table.

"Unfortunate, isn't it, that you didn't pick some poor drab from the streets?" she asked, significantly and triumphantly. "Unfortunate for you and unfortunate for her!"

"Well, this—well, this——" Johnson Boller tried.

"Don't talk to me, please. I want to talk to you—oh, not for my sake or for your sake, to be sure. I don't know how much real man may be left in either of you; not very much, I imagine. But if you do want to save two innocent women from a good deal of embarrassment, you shall have the chance."

She laughed again as she watched the effect of the cryptic statement. She sat

down, then, and having opened her hand-bag and drawn therefrom a little slip of paper, she resumed her inspection of the silent pair.

"You don't understand at all, do you? Well, you shall! Your lady friend made one mistake, gentlemen. Any young woman off on that sort of adventure should be cautious enough to destroy marks of identification. This hat, as it happens, came from Mme. Altier, just uptown."

"The little blonde?" escaped from Johnson Boller.

"The little blonde," sneered his wife. "The little blonde is quite a friend of mine; I lent her the money that started her in business up this way, in fact, and I've been buying hats there for five years. Therefore, I went and interviewed the little blonde, and her memory and her methods of bookkeeping are alike commendable. She might not have told another woman, but she was very glad to tell me."

Beatrice gazed at the slip briefly.

"Mrs. Henry Wales!" she said very suddenly indeed, and sent her eyes straight through both of them at once.

Innocent for once, Anthony and Johnson Boller merely frowned at Beatrice, and after a little she shrugged her shoulders.

"Not Mrs. Henry Wales, evidently," she mused. "Very well; I was right about her. I've met her, I think, and she seemed a little bit too nice for that sort of thing. Er—Laura Cathcart!"

Once more the word was hurled straight into them. Once more Anthony and his old friend stared innocently—but they did a little more this time. They turned and stared at one another, and all the air between them vibrated with a wordless message!

Beatrice had made one grave tactical error in not reading the right name first; Anthony and his friend understood now and were quite prepared for anything—and it seemed almost as if Beatrice sensed the message, for she frowned a little as she said:

"Mary Dalton!"

Blankly, innocently as babes unborn, and still not too innocently withal, Anthony

and Johnson Boller stared back, and the latter even had assurance enough to say:

"What's the idea, Bee? Is it a roll-call?"

"It is the names of the three women in New York who have bought that particular style of hat from Sarah," said Mrs. Boller. "She made up just three, as is her custom, and when they were sold she made no more. So that in spite of your extreme wonder at hearing the names, and although I had rather hoped to guess which one it might be, one of that trio was in this flat last night. Which one?"

Johnson Boller shook his head vigorously.

"None of 'em!" he said flatly.

"What do *you* say?" Beatrice asked Anthony.

"Madam, I decline to say anything whatever!" Anthony said stiffly.

"Really?" smiled Beatrice, and gazed at them pensively for a little while. "I do not know intimately any of these ladies. They have, doubtless, a husband and fathers and, I hope, a few big brothers, too, to take care of them properly. And since they have, I may as well tell you just what I mean to do. I'm going to Mrs. Wales first."

It produced no visible shock.

"I'm going to accuse her, in so many words, of passing last night in this apartment, and I'll say you confessed!" pursued Beatrice. "Perhaps she can clear herself by showing me the duplicate of this hat; perhaps she cannot. In any event, it seems probable that her husband and the rest of her male relatives will make a point of coming here and beating you two to a jelly."

It did seem rather likely, and Johnson Boller glanced at his old friend and received no aid at all.

"Unless she confesses, Miss Cathcart receives the next call," said Johnson's wife. "The procedure will be the same; the results to you, I sincerely hope, will be the same. After that, if necessary, I shall go to the Dalton woman's home and repeat the performance, and doubtless *her* father and *her* brothers will——"

"Say! Do you want to have us killed?" Johnson Boller gasped.

"Yes!" hissed the Spanish strain in Beatrice. "Well?"

Anthony shook his head quietly.

"None of the ladies you have mentioned——" he began.

"One of them was here, and I'll soon know which one!" Beatrice corrected quickly. "Do you wish to save the other two?"

Anthony said nothing.

"Nope!" Johnson Boller said doggedly.

Beatrice rose slowly and looked them over.

"Do you know," said she, all withering contempt, "I had been fool enough to fancy that there was man enough in one or the other of you to spare the innocent women a very distressing quarter of an hour. Even if that failed, I had fancied that one or the other would have sufficient intelligence to avoid a thrashing if possible. I was wrong! There isn't a spark of manhood or an ounce of brain matter in either of you—and to think that I married *you!*"

She had risen. She was getting ready to go upon her fell mission; and the calm contempt slid away from Anthony and cold terror crawled up his spinal column. Just when he had fondly imagined that all was well, Beatrice had come and proved that all was anything else in the world!

Just when he had fancied that Mary was safe at home and, with her doubtless capable maid, was devising a convincing tale to account for her absence, Beatrice must needs appear and show that, tale or no tale, Mary was to be accused.

And there wasn't a flaw in her program, by the way. She held the hat as a man might cling to a straw in mid-ocean; and the lady who could show a similar hat would clear herself and then start her male relatives after Anthony; and the lady who could not show a similar hat—was Mary!

Obviously the fine resolve he had made was to avail little enough, but Anthony could think of no way of staying the lady. Physical force leaped up as a possibility in his tortured mind and leaped out again as quickly.

One suggestion of that sort of thing and instinct told him that Beatrice, in her present unlovely mood, would scream until the rafters echoed, if they happened

to have rafters in the Hotel Lasande. Moral suasion, honeyed talk were still farther from the possibilities. No, Beatrice would have to go!

She was ready now. Habit superseding circumstances, Beatrice had stepped to the mirror and tucked up a few stray locks of hair. The little hat was under her arm, and the arm had shut down tight on it.

"You two *curs!*" Beatrice said, by way of farewell, and turned away from them with a sweep.

It was no apartment in which to do what one expected to do. Beatrice, one step taken, stopped short. Out at the door some one was hammering in a way oddly familiar. Anthony, rising again, hurried to answer the summons—and the door was hardly open when young Robert Vining hurtled in and gripped him by both arms.

"It's no use, Anthony!" he gasped. "There's not a trace of her yet!"

"No?"

"She's gone! She's *gone!*" cried Robert, breaking into his familiar refrain. "I've just had the house on the wire, and there's no news of her at all as yet. I've had police headquarters on the wire, and they haven't heard or seen a thing. Miriam—that's one of her chums—has just finished going over Bellevue, and there's no sign of Mary down there!"

By now they were in the living-room, and Beatrice, somewhat startled at the sign of a being in agony equal to her own stood aside.

"She's gone!" said Robert Vining. "And I've been around to Helène's—that's another of her chums, Anthony—and she's going to telephone all the girls. That takes that off my hands and leaves me free to go over all the hospitals that haven't been covered yet. That's what brings me here, old man. You'll have to come with me."

"Very well!" Anthony said swiftly. "We'll start now."

"Because I haven't got the nerve to do it alone!" Robert cried. "I—somebody has to go to the Morgue, too! And suppose we should go down there—I was there just once and I had the horrors for a month—suppose we should go down there and find her, Anthony, all——"

"Hush!" said Anthony. "Don't go into the possibilities; there's a lady present, Bob."

Vining almost came to earth for a moment.

"What?"

"To be sure. Mrs. Boller—Mr. Robert Vining."

He spoke directly at her, so that Robert, out of his emotional fog, gained an idea of her location, and turned dizzily toward her. There was upon his countenance a strained, heart-broken, half-apologetic smile as he faced Beatrice Boller. He bowed, too, perfunctorily.

Then Robert raised his stricken eyes.

And as he raised them, a great shock ran through Robert, and after it he stiffened. His eyes popped, as if he could not quite believe what he saw, and his body swayed forward. Robert, with a hoarse, incoherent scream, ran straight at Beatrice Boller and snatched away the hat from under her arm.

"That's Mary's! That's Mary's!" he cried hysterically. "That's Mary's hat, because I was with her the day she bought it, and I'd know it among ten thousand hats! Yes, and it's torn and broken—it's all smashed on this side!"

Greenish white, jaw sagging, Robert looked from one to the other of them.

"You—you're afraid to tell me!" said he. "She—there was an accident! I can see that by the hat. There was an accident and she was hurt and—where is she now? Where is she now? Good God! Is she—dead?"

"She isn't dead," Anthony said queerly, because he had been looking at Beatrice and feeling his flesh crawl as he looked.

"Then where is Mary? Why don't you tell me about it?" Robert stormed on. "What's the matter? Is she badly hurt? Doesn't she want me? Hasn't she tried to send for me?" And whirling upon Beatrice, the unfortunate young man threw out his hands and cried: "You tell me, if they will not! What has happened to her? Where did you get the hat?"

Normally, Beatrice Boller was the very last mortal in the world to inflict pain upon a fellow-being; but the normal Beatrice was far away just now.

As Anthony noted with failing heart, it was a big moment for the outraged creature before Robert Vining, for she was about to make another of the accursed sex to suffer. It did not seem humanly possible that she could communicate her personal view of Mary to Robert; but certainly Beatrice was accomplishing a very dramatic pause, and in it her lips drew back and showed her beautiful teeth.

"The young lady is a friend of yours, too?" she asked very sweetly.

"Friend!" cried Robert. "She's the girl I'm going to marry! Where is she, madam? Can't you tell me what has happened?"

Beatrice's laugh was blood-curdling.

"Mrs. Boller!" Anthony cried. "I protest——"

"Do you really?" Beatrice smiled and turned directly to Robert. "So you're going to marry her?"

"What? Yes."

"Or perhaps you're not!" Mrs. Boller mused, "You think her a very worthy young woman?"

Robert looked blankly at her.

"But she is not," Beatrice said softly. "And you look like a decent sort, and however much it may hurt for a little, you shall have the truth. You asked me where I found this hat. Well, it was in the bedroom at the end of that corridor—Mr. Boller's room!"

She waited vainly for a little, because Robert simply did not comprehend. He frowned at Beatrice and then shook his head.

"What—what do you say?"

"It had been there all night, Mr. Vining," Beatrice purred on. "So had she!"

"Mary—*my Mary*? Mary Dalton?" Robert gasped.

"Mary Dalton!"

"But that—that's all damned—pardon me!—nonsense! That——"

He turned on Anthony; and then, quickly as he had turned, he gasped and stared

with burning eyes.

View him as one chose, there was nothing about Anthony to indicate that it was nonsense. He was biting his lips; his eyes were upon the floor; had he rehearsed the thing for months he could not possibly have looked more guilty.

"Why—why——" choked Robert Vining.

Beatrice laid a slender hand on his arm.

"Come with me," she said quickly. "Come and see her bag and her little toilet case and several other of her things. Perhaps you'll recognize them, too, and they'll convince you that she really settled down here for a visit. Come!"

As a man in a dreadful dream, Robert Vining followed her blindly into the corridor and out of sight. Johnson Boller smiled a demon smile and thrust his hands into his trouser-pockets.

"Here's where *he* gets *his*!" he stated. Anthony could no more than speak.

"That—that woman!" he contrived. "What an absolutely merciless thing——"

"Huh? Bee?" the remarkable Boller said sharply. "She's all right; she's acting according to her own lights, isn't she? Why the devil shouldn't Vining suffer, too? D'ye think I'm the only man in the world that has to suffer?"

"I think you're in luck if she divorces you!" Anthony stated feelingly. "A woman capable of that is capable of anything!"

Johnson Boller stayed the angry words upon his lips and smiled grimly. More, after a moment he thrust out his hand.

"I guess it doesn't matter much what you think now, Anthony," said he. "Good-by!"

"What?"

"Good-by, old man! You're going to leave this world in about three minutes, you know—just as soon as he's convinced and able to act again, Anthony. So long I'll be sorry to think of you as missing—sometimes, I suppose, but not when I think what you've put over on me."

Anthony laughed viciously.

"Don't use up all your sympathy," he said. "You may need a little for yourself, Johnson. The things are in what's supposed to be *your* room, you know."

"What?" gasped Johnson Boller. "That's true! That——"

Out at the entrance, a key was scraping in the latch; and when it had scraped for the second time Anthony smiled forlornly.

"Wilkins," he said. "Back to report that the girl's safe at home—whatever good that may do now. Is that you, Wilkins?"

"That's—that's me, sir!" Wilkins puffed.

And the door closed and in the foyer bump—bump—bump indicated that Wilkins was carrying something, a trunk one might almost have thought from the sound. Rather red, gleaming perspiration that had not all come from exertion, Wilkins appeared, moved into the room, gazed feelingly at his master, was about to speak and then caught the sound of voices from David's room.

"The—the parties couldn't attend to the trunk to-day!" said Wilkins.

"*She*—isn't in there?" Anthony whispered.

"I have no reason to think otherwise, sir," said the faithful one.

"You didn't leave her?"

"There was no one to leave her with, sir, and I was ordered out with the trunk," Wilkins said, smiling wanly. "There wasn't nowhere to come but here, sir, with the police after me."

From down the corridor issued—

"Yes! I'm—Heaven help me—I'm convinced!"

"I'll be taking her into your room, sir," Wilkins said hastily. "She must be needing a breath of air by this time, poor young lady!"

Another nightmare figure, he lumbered across the living-room and into Anthony's chamber; and regardless of possible consequences Anthony followed and snatched open the trunk.

Mary had not expired. Her face was decidedly red and her eyes rather bewildered, but she struggled out with Anthony's assistance, breathed deeply

several times, glanced at her hair in the mirror and then, being a thoroughly good sport, Mary even managed a small, wretched laugh.

"Back again!" she said simply. "They'd discharged Felice."

"Was there—nobody else?" Anthony asked.

"Dorothy, our little parlor maid, would have done, I suppose, but Wilkins didn't know about her," said the girl, facing him. "It's pretty awful, isn't it?"

Even now she had not lost her nerve! The chivalrous something in Anthony welled up more strongly than ever; the precise, rather old-maidish quality of his expression vanished altogether—and for the very first time Mary almost liked him.

"It's very awful, indeed," he said quickly. "More awful than you imagine, but—we'll try to believe that all is not lost even now. One way or another, I'll get you out of it, Miss Mary, if I have to lie my soul into perdition. I don't know how at the moment, but the way will indicate itself; I decline to believe anything else! You'll have to stay here and keep your ears wide open and take your cue from whatever I'm saying. I hope——"

"Psst!" said Johnson Boller.

Anthony left the room with a motion that was more twitch than anything else, and he left it none too soon. The shock, or the first of it, was over; Robert Vining was coming back to them, not like a nice young man, but rather like a Kansas cyclone! Three thuds in the corridor, and he appeared before them.

Robert's countenance was gray-white; his white lips, parted a little, seemed to be stretched over his teeth; his eyes blazed blue fire! And behind Robert—and be it confessed that there was a certain indefinite atmosphere of fright about her—Beatrice smiled.

"So you—you—you beastly scoundrel!" Robert began, his hands working as he looked straight at Johnson Boller and ignored the very existence of Anthony Fry. "I don't know whether a thing like you can pray, but if you can, pray quick!"

"Me?" Johnson Boller gulped.

Robert laughed dreadfully.

"Don't waste your time gaping!" he said, thickly. "Pray if you want to, because

you're going to die! D'ye hear? I'm going to choke out your nasty life as I'd choke the life out of a mad dog."

"Not my life!" Johnson Boller protested, with pale lips, as he pointed at Anthony. "He——"

"Whatever he may have had to do with luring her here I can settle with him afterward!" Robert cried. "My concern is with *you*; and if you want to say anything, hurry about it. I can't hold myself more than another second or two!"

By way of proving it, he stalked down upon Johnson Boller—not rapidly, but with a deadly slowness and deliberation which suggested the tiger coming down upon its prey. His flaring eyes had fascinated the victim, too, for Johnson Boller could not move a muscle. Once he tried to smile a farewell at Beatrice; his eyes would not remain away from Robert even long enough for that. Once he tried to look at Anthony, but it was quite useless.

And from that ominous region of the doorway came Wilkins's warm tones:

"Well, that's all right, gentlemen, but he's busy now."

"He's not too busy to see me," said an entirely strange voice, and heavy steps passed by Wilkins.

Into the large room which had already seen so much suffering, the distinctly scared person of Hobart Hitchin was propelled by a large, hairy hand. The owner of the hand glanced at him for an instant; and then for five terrific seconds stared at Anthony Fry, who after the first violent start had turned immobile as Johnson Boller himself.

"Mr.—what's your name?—Hitchin!" Dalton barked.

Hobart Hitchin straightened up with an effort.

"Fry," said he, "we—er—that is, I accuse you of the—ah—murder of Theodore Dalton's only son, Richard, alias David Prentiss!"



CHAPTER XVI

THE LIE

Even Robert Vining halted his death march. A man of but one idea in the world just a second ago, he jerked about suddenly and cried:

"Dick?"

Dalton a strong man half-benumbed by mental agony, turned slowly upon him.

"Are you—here, too, Robert?" he muttered. "Yes, Dicky!"

And slowly he turned back to Anthony and, slowly also, he drew forth the automatic in all its steely-blue nastiness.

"Well, Fry?"

Anthony Fry merely shook his head. The mood that was come upon him now passed any explanation; he was neither frightened nor excited. He heard the latest absurd accusation without even forming an opinion on it. Either he had passed the point where one may feel the sensation of astonishment or infinite desperation had blessed him with a calm past any understanding. He did not know which and he did not care; it was enough that he could look straight at Dalton and not even change color!

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Dalton," he said quietly.

Beatrice leaped into action.

"Dalton!" she cried. "Mary Dalton's father?"

"What?" Dalton, momentarily sidetracked, whirled upon her. "You've heard something from Mary, madam? You know——"

"I know all about Mary!" said Beatrice Boller.

"Madam!" Anthony broke in. "I forbid you to say one word of your ridiculous and unjustified——"

Beatrice simply ignored his presence and favored Theodore Dalton with her unspeakable smile.

"Mary Dalton passed the night in this apartment," she said quickly.

"Mary——" Dalton cried, just as Robert hurried to his side and clutched his arm.

"They say she was here!" he panted. "The woman says so, and Mary's hat—see! She's holding it even now! And Mary's bag is in a room there, and her comb and brush and two of her handkerchiefs and——"

"But it wasn't a woman, whatever she's left!" Hobart Hitchin contributed. "It was a boy, about twenty or twenty-two—a boy Fry introduced to me as David Prentiss, and who was Dalton's son. Look! We have his trousers, and Dalton has identified them as his son's!"

Dalton's attention was still upon Beatrice.

"You say that—that my daughter——"

"I say that she was here and that she left suddenly when I came, so suddenly that she hadn't even time to take her hat!" said Boller's charming wife. "Where she is now I don't know; not in this apartment because I've searched it; probably somewhere else in the house, because she would be unlikely to leave without a hat. But she was here, and if you doubt it, *ask those men!*"

Slowly, Dalton turned back to Anthony Fry. One glance he sent down at the automatic and his finger settled over the trigger.

And still the calm held Anthony.

It was one of the most curious things he had ever experienced, that calm, and more curious than the calm itself was the astounding capacity for thought that had come to his tired brain. Except for this last inexplicable accusation, which he discarded, he was thinking lucidly, and swiftly and, by the way, along a single line. Mary was all that mattered just now.

And to some extent, if Fate remained kind, he saw his way to saving Mary, should the girl have sense enough to remain quiet in his room. He smiled, did Anthony, and looked so confidently, so directly at Dalton that the latter scowled in bewilderment.

"I know nothing whatever about your son, Dalton," said he. "I did not even know

that you had a son. Are you sure he is not at home?"

"He has not been at home for weeks," Hitchin put in. "That's what puzzles us; how did you get him to the city?"

"From what point?"

"Hillcombe, in the Adirondacks," Dalton said. "He——"

"Is it possible to get Hillcombe on the long distance?"

The unfathomable self-possession made its own impression on Dalton.

"Very likely," he muttered.

"Then if you will give my man the number or the name of the hotel, or whatever it may be, he will put in the call," said Anthony Fry. "Let us hope that you'll be able to talk to your son shortly. If he doesn't answer, wire him," Anthony pursued, impatiently. "That is the very best I can suggest."

Theodore Dalton's hand passed through his hair, pausing to clutch it for a moment; Wilkins, waiting attentively, met his eye and Dalton, having cleared his dry throat, mumbled the name of a camp and turned back to Anthony.

That remarkable figure was quite erect and merely waiting for a chance to speak again. So far as the general theme was concerned, his mind was fairly well settled; it meant certain ruin for him, if Dalton was kind enough to believe; it was likely enough to mean even criminal prosecution, but it bade fair to save Mary. Anthony even smiled composedly as he tacked on new details; thus does suffering refine us!

Apparently, several of them were about to speak at once. Anthony held up his lean, commanding hand for silence.

"One moment, please!" said the amazing Anthony. "There is no cause for any further excitement, any further speculation. The thing has gone too far now; it has passed beyond me and—I have failed."

"What?" Robert rasped.

Anthony drew a deep breath.

"Will you all be seated?" he asked. "I—I wish to confess the truth!"

"You mean that you——" Dalton exploded.

"I mean that nobody has been injured, to the best of my knowledge, and that your daughter Mary is perfectly safe," Anthony smiled sadly. "Put the gun away, Dalton, and hear me through at least. Later on, if you feel inclined to use it, I don't know that I shall object greatly. I quite understand what is likely to happen to me when you have heard what I have to tell and—in spite of that the whole affair seems to have tangled itself so terribly that there is nothing to do but tell it!"

He himself was sitting behind the table now, and he certainly claimed their attention. Dalton perched on the edge of a chair; Robert took one of its arms. Beatrice seemed at first unwilling to leave the center of the stage, but presently she, too, was seated—and Johnson Boller shuffled to a chair and went into it quite limply, gazing at Anthony and breathing hard.

Unless Anthony was lying, he meant to tell the truth; and while some of those present might believe the truth, Beatrice Boller was not among the number.

"I don't know, Dalton," Anthony began evenly, "that I have anything to say in extenuation of what I have done. Evidently I lost my head, even to the point of downright insanity; some of us do that occasionally, you know. Brooding over the business was responsible, I suppose. Your Celestial Oil has been cutting pretty heavily into Imperial Liniment this last year."

"Humph!" said Dalton.

"Cutting in so heavily that whatever efforts I have been able to put forth have been of no avail whatever," Anthony pursued. "Last week—all day last Saturday, in fact—I went over the year's business and it fairly maddened me to see the falling off. I spent Sunday thinking and I am frank to say, Dalton, that by Sunday night I was all but ready to murder you. Toward midnight I conceived what seemed to be a means of forcing you into some sort of mutual contract, by which each of us could do business with the assurance that the other wasn't coming over to take away what didn't belong to him."

"*You* get away with a thing like that?" Dalton demanded.

"It was a wild notion," Anthony sighed. "I knew that talking was useless, I knew that fighting you openly was equally useless, because once I became too conspicuous I knew that you'd sail in and wreck me. At the same time something

had to be done and that in mighty short order, or Fry's Imperial was likely to die a natural death. Therefore, Dalton, I perfected the scheme of kidnaping your daughter and holding her until you'd come to terms."

"Great——"

"Rest easy!" Mr. Fry smiled. "Part of it succeeded, but she hasn't been injured and I ask you to believe, at least, that I never had any idea of injuring her. What I did mean to do was to threaten you, through a third person I met most unfortunately and who is, not to put too fine a point upon it, one of the slimiest crooked lawyers in the world—what I meant to do was to make you understand that, unless you came to terms, the girl would be killed!

"If the details interest you I'll confess that I had a note sent to the girl last evening, by a messenger who succeeded in telephoning her and having her meet him just outside your home. The note informed Miss Dalton that Vining here—oh, sit still, Vining, you may settle with me when I've finished—that Vining here was engaged, if not actually married, to another girl. It was a very convincing note indeed, and the messenger was instructed to tell Miss Dalton, should the note make its impression, that he would take her to a place where she would be able to observe with her own eyes the faithlessness of one she was on the point of trusting with her whole life!"

"Well, by the holy——" Robert began.

"Every little twist and turn of this story I had perfected beforehand; I could not see the possibility of a slip and there was no slip. It was made plain to Miss Dalton that, if she wished to see Robert under the unpleasant conditions, she would have to attire herself as a man, for she was likely to spend some time at least in the back room of a saloon. My messenger even took her a wig I had provided for the purpose, and she was informed that, if she wished to take along her own proper clothing, it would be quite possible to return in that."

Utter admiration possessed Johnson Boller; yet Beatrice, as he knew, was watching him narrowly.

"You—you contemptible scoundrel!" Johnson Boller said pleasantly.

Him, too, Anthony ignored.

"She took the bait, Dalton, just as I had planned. The man brought her to me at a point—er—outside this hotel, and she was dressed in her brother's clothing, as it

appears now. It was agreed between us that she should take the name of David Prentiss for the evening, and under that name she was introduced to Hitchin here. After that she was brought to this apartment."

Anthony paused and sighed heavily and impressively, an erring man borne down by his guilt.

"Miss Dalton, even as a boy, did not look very much like a boy," he pursued. "It seemed better to me that she change to her own clothes, and I requested her to do so, on some pretext which, I am frank to say, slips my mind at the moment. She came into this room afterward and, as I had planned, a little luncheon was waiting for us. She drank a cup of coffee and—it had been drugged."

"Where was Johnson Boller all this time?" Beatrice asked.

Although Johnson Boller held his breath, Anthony Fry batted never an eyelash. Dignified, austere exponent of the rock-ribbed truth that he had once been, all his sails were set now and the rudder lashed in place for the sinful course. It would have been a downright effort just then for Anthony to have told the truth about anything whatever.

"Johnson never came until an hour after it was over," he said. "He went to a prize fight, Mrs. Boller, and after that met some out-of-town people in the woolen trade and worked until nearly two this morning winding up a contract."

"D'ye see?" said Johnson Boller, when his breath came back. "D'ye see? You had me down for everything that was worst in the world, kid, and now you hear the truth."

All unaware was Anthony Fry of the sharp start of Hobart Hitchin. All unaware was he that the crime-student, rousing from his partially scared state, had smiled suddenly. All unaware, in fact, was Anthony, of the terrible slip he had just made.

"That is almost all of the story," he said, with a miserable little smile at Dalton. "The young lady was taken, in an automobile, half-stupefied, to—a certain town in New Jersey, Dalton. She is unharmed and has been unharmed; that at least I am able to guarantee you."

"And she's there now?" Dalton cried.

"She is there now and——"

"What town?"

"That I will not tell you, because it will involve several poor devils I've hired in connection with this mad affair," said Anthony. "But if you will permit me, I will go for the young lady myself—stipulating only that I shall not be followed—and I will return her to your house before three o'clock this afternoon. After that, Dalton," said Anthony, drawing himself up, "I'm willing to take my medicine. I know that it's coming and I'm willing——"

"You'll get it, never fear," snarled Mary's father. "But about Mary! Tell me the name of this town or——"

"I shall tell you nothing whatever!" Anthony said firmly. "I shall tell you only that, under the conditions I have named, I will very gladly go to Jersey and get her."

"You're sure she's there now?" Robert said hoarsely.

"I am absolutely sure," said Anthony, "that she is now in New Jersey under guard."

And now, with Dalton's murderous impulses stilled at least, with many things fairly well explained and new minutiae coming into his head every second should this, that or the other question be asked, just as Anthony leaned back, two new quantities must needs enter. The first was Hobart Hitchin. The second was a strong breeze, which always came through the living-room when Wilkins left open the door and the window of his pantry.

"Fry," said the crime-student, and if a snake owned a voice it would be as slithery and oily as the voice of Hobart Hitchin just then, "Fry, you say that Boller came in several hours after you came in last night? Didn't I see you both downstairs?"

"Eh?" Anthony said.

"And Fry," the reptilian voice added, "you haven't told us what was in the trunk you sent to Dalton's house, you know."

Anthony straightened up again. Two seconds were passed, and still he had not the answer; three, and he was still silent; four, and he had not yet spoken. And the playful breeze saved him all the trouble of speaking. The latch of Anthony's bedroom door was not caught, and the breeze, striking it squarely, sent it open

suddenly and cleanly as if jerked back by a wire!

And leaning forward in her chair, even now listening intently, Mary Dalton was revealed!

Anthony Fry did not move; this was because he could not. But with a single motion Theodore Dalton and Robert Vining, Johnson Boller and Johnson Boller's wife, were on their feet and staring at her. With a single plunge, Dalton and Vining went forward, and the former winning, he snatched Mary to him and wrapped the great arms around her, mouthing and mumbling and shouting all at once!

Still Anthony did not move. He had not moved when, through the swirl that was before his eyes, Mary and her father came into the room. The girl had disengaged herself and she was rather pale—ah, and she was speaking to her father.

"Dad," she said very quietly, "have I ever told you a lie?"

"You'd be no daughter of mine if you had," Dalton said simply.

"Then what happened is just this: I wanted to go to that fight last night and Bob wouldn't take me. He was so awfully uppish about it that I decided to go myself; I like a good fight, you know. I didn't dare go as a girl, so I put on Dicky's fishing suit—the old one—and sneaked out the back door, after you thought I was in bed. Then I got a messenger boy and managed to find a ticket for the fight. And I went," said Mary, "and I happened to sit next to Mr. Fry."

"You went alone to a prize fight?" her father gasped.

"It was horribly tame," said Mary, "but some men started a fight behind us, because Mr. Fry spoke to me, I think, and that wasn't tame at all. For a minute it scared my wits out, because I thought we were all going to be arrested. So when Mr. Fry and Mr. Boller decided to escape in a taxicab, I was mighty glad to go with them. After that Mr. Fry—turned queer," Mary dimpled. "He thought I was a boy and he wanted to offer me the opportunity of a lifetime.

"I don't know just what it meant, but I was curious enough to come up here and listen; and when I didn't appreciate what he was offering, Mr. Fry got mad. He told me he'd keep me here until I did, so I—I just went to bed and counted on getting out overnight, somehow. I tried it and I missed fire, and this morning he discovered that I was a girl. That's the whole story; we've all been trying to get

me out of here ever since—and I'm still here!"

"But the trunk——" Hobart Hitchin put in doggedly.

"I was in the trunk," said Mary. "We thought I could get to Felice's room that way, but Felice was gone, so Wilkins brought me back." She looked at her father steadily and almost confidently. "That weird tale about having me drugged was just to save me, dad, and maybe if the door hadn't blown open I'd have been home about three and swearing to it. That's all. Mr. Fry—Mr. Boller, too—have been too nice for words," concluded Mary, stretching a point. "There isn't a thing to blame them for—and I never could have believed that Mr. Fry was capable of a lovely lie like that."

Since seven that morning, at which time Mary's absence had been discovered, Theodore Dalton had been breathing in terrible, spasmodic gasps. Now, as he faced Anthony, he breathed deeply—breathed deeply again—and turned Anthony's tottering world quite upside down by suddenly thrusting out his hand.

"Well, by gad, Fry!" he bellowed. "I knew you were crazy, but I never suspected you were man enough for that! I'd swallowed that tale almost whole and I'd made up my mind to wipe you and your bottled mess off the map together."

"I know," said Anthony.

"But if there's one thing that hits me right where I live," vociferated Dalton, "it's a man who will chuck his own every earthly interest aside to save a woman's name and—put it there, Fry! You're a man!"

A little uncertainly, because he was dazed and dizzy, Anthony grasped the hairy hand. It was not so, because it was impossible, but—he and Dalton were friends!

Beatrice was within a yard of her husband.

"Then there was—was nothing——" she faltered.

"There was nothing to get excited about—no," Johnson Boller said stiffly. "Not at any time."

"Pudgy!" Beatrice said chokily, because her volatile nature was whizzing breathlessly down from the exalted murder-state to the depths of contrition.

"Well? What?" Johnson Boller said coldly.

"Pudgy-wudgy, can you ever forgive me?" Beatrice cried, burying her head on his shoulder.

"I don't know," Johnson Boller said frigidly, and did not even put an arm around her. "I don't know, Beatrice. You have wounded me more deeply this day than I have ever been wounded in all my life before. I shall try in time to forgive you, but—I do not know."

They were all gone now, all but Anthony and his old friend, Johnson Boller.

It was in fact nearly noon, for with the tension removed Mary had gone into the details of last night; and after a little even Robert Vining had laughed. He at least knew Anthony Fry and he believed Johnson Boller to be one of the most harmless fat men in existence, so that when he had heard it all even Robert fell to chuckling.

And now they were gone with Mary, leaving behind a conviction in Anthony's bosom that Mary was really a very charming young girl; leaving an impression, too, that, could twenty years have been swept from his forty-five, he might even have undertaken to win her away from Robert! This last impression was transitory in the extreme, however; it endured for perhaps forty-five seconds.

Hobart Hitchin was gone; he had vanished somewhere about the middle of the session, leaving Richard's trousers, and for a long time nobody even noticed that he was among the missing. To the best of Johnson Boller's memory, he left just after Richard answered the long distance call and assured his father that all was well.

Beatrice was gone, too. She had left all wreathed in smiles, since the idiot that was her husband could not maintain his chilliness for more than five minutes. In a dusky corner, Johnson and his cyclonic lady had kissed eighteen times, lingeringly, and then she had left him to pack up and follow, while she went personally to the five-thousand-dollar apartment to prepare the things he most liked for luncheon.

And now Johnson Boller had packed the grip, while Anthony lounged, tired out, weak in knees and hands, trembling every now and then and gazing into the blue cigar smoke above him.

"The next time I come to stay with you I'm going to bring a chaperon," Boller mused.

"Do."

"You came pretty near wrecking my home that time, Anthony."

"Pah!" snarled Anthony.

Johnson Boller pursued the strain no further. Instead, with a shrug of the shoulders, he picked up a book from the top of the case and turned its pages idly. After which he smiled suddenly and said, with the utmost alertness.

"You have a lot of poetry, haven't you?"

"I'm fond of it," said Anthony, absently.

"Here's a pretty little thing," Johnson Boller pursued in his very gentlest voice. "This is awful pretty. Listen:

"Master of human destinies am I;
Fame, love and fortune on——"

Here he ceased abruptly. He shrieked gleefully, did Johnson Boller, and ducked almost down to the floor.

This was as well, because Anthony's little blue vase, for which he had paid sixty dollars in Canton, had splintered on the wall, just where Johnson Boller's head had been!

THE END.

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