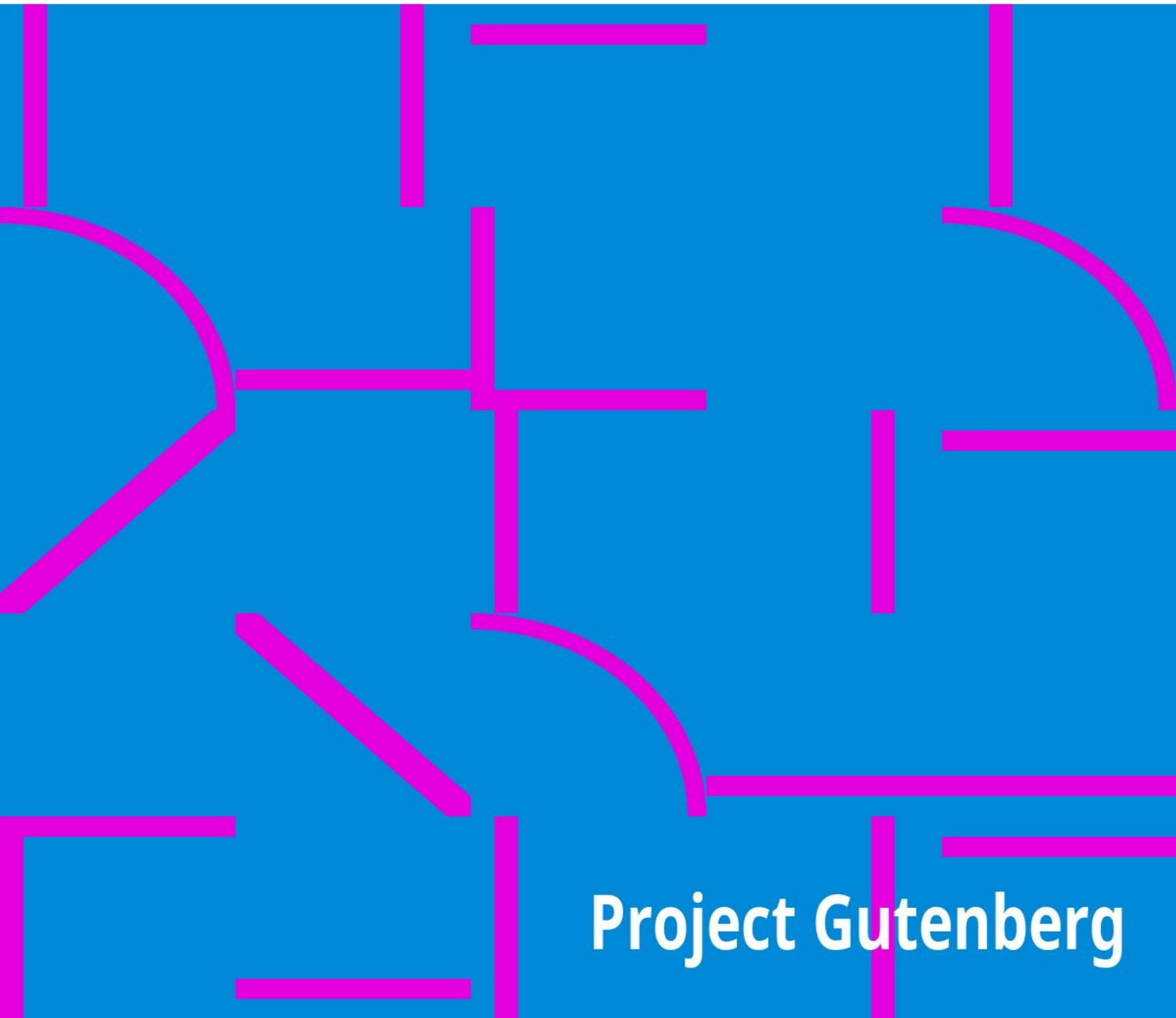
The Girl in the Mirror

Elizabeth Garver Jordan



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THE GIRL
IN THE MIRROR

BY

ELIZABETH JORDAN

Author of "The Wings of Youth," "May Iverson—Her Book," "Lovers' Knots," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY

PAUL MEYLAN

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TODAY'S HOUSEWIFE

Published, October, 1919

TO

MRS. HENRY FERRE CUTLER

WITH HAPPY MEMORIES
OF FLORENCE

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THE GIRL IN THE MIRROR

CHAPTER I

BARBARA'S WEDDING

The little city of Devondale, Ohio, had shaken off for one night at least the air of aristocratic calm that normally distinguished it from the busy mill towns on its right and left. Elm Avenue, its leading residence street, usually presented at this hour only an effect of watchful trees, dark shrubbery, shaded lamps, and remote domestic peace. Now, however, it had blossomed into a brilliant thoroughfare, full of light, color, and movement, on all of which the December stars winked down as if in intimate understanding.

Automobiles poured through the wide gates of its various homes and joined a ceaseless procession of vehicles. Pedestrians, representing every class of the city's social life, jostled one another on the sidewalks as they hurried onward, following this vanguard. Overwrought policemen barked instructions at chauffeurs and sternly reprimanded daring souls who attempted to move in a direction opposite to that the crowd was following. For the time, indeed, there seemed to be but one destination which a self-respecting citizen of Devondale might properly have in mind; and already many of the elect had reached this objective and had comfortably passed through its wide doors, down its aisles, and into its cushioned pews.

The Episcopal church of St. Giles was the largest as well as the most fashionable of Devondale's houses of God, but it had its limitations. It could not hold the entire population of the town and surrounding counties. The chosen minority, having presented cards of admission at the entrance, accepted with sedate satisfaction the comfortable seats assigned to it. The uninvited but cheerful majority lingered out in the frosty street, forming a crowd that increasingly blocked the avenue and the church entrance, besides wrecking the nervous systems of traffic men.

It was an interested, good-humored, and highly observant crowd, pressing forward as each automobile approached, to watch with unashamed curiosity the guests who alighted and made their way along the strip of carpet stretching from curbstone to church. Devondale's leading citizens were here, and the spectators knew them all, from those high personages who were presidents of local banks

down to little Jimmy Harrigan, who was Barbara Devon's favorite caddie at the Country Club.

Unlike most of his fellow guests, Jimmy arrived on foot; but the crowd saw his unostentatious advent and greeted him with envious badinage.

"Hi, dere, Chimmie, where's yer evenin' soot?" one acquaintance desired to know. And a second remarked solicitously, "De c'rect ting, Chimmie, is t' hold yer hat to yer heart as y' goes in!"

Jimmy made no reply to these pleasantries. The occasion was too big and too novel for that. He merely grinned, presented his card of admission in a paw washed clean only in spots, and accepted with equal equanimity the piercing gaze of the usher and the rear seat to which that outraged youth austerely conducted him.

There, round-eyed, Jimmy stared about him. He had never been inside of St. Giles's before. It was quite possible that he would never find himself inside of it again. He took in the beauty of the great church; its blaze of lights; its masses of flowers; its whispering, waiting throng; the broad white ribbon that set apart certain front pews for the bride's special friends, including a party from New York. Jimmy knew all about those friends and all about this wedding. His grimy little ears were ceaselessly open to the talk of the town, and for weeks past the town had talked of nothing but the Devons and Barbara Devon's approaching wedding. Even now the townspeople were still talking of the Devons, during the brief interval before the bridal party appeared.

In the pew just in front of Jimmy, Mrs. Arthur Lytton, a lady he recognized as a ubiquitous member of the Country Club, was giving a few intimate details of Miss Devon's life to her companion, who evidently was a new-comer to the city.

"You see," Mrs. Lytton was murmuring, "this is really the most important wedding we've ever had here. Barbara Devon owns most of Devondale, and her home, Devon House, is one of the show places of the state. She hasn't a living relative except her brother Laurie, and I fancy she has been lonely, notwithstanding her hosts of friends. We all love her, so we're glad to know she has found the right man to marry, especially as we are not to lose her ourselves. She intends to live in Devon House every summer."

The new-comer—a Mrs. Renway who had social aspirations—was politely attentive.

"I met Laurence Devon at the Country Club yesterday," she said. "He's the handsomest creature I've ever seen, I think. He's really *too* good-looking; and they say there's some romantic story about him. Do you know what it is?"

Her friend nodded.

"Mercy, yes! Every one does."

Observing the other's growing attention, she went on expansively:

"You see, Laurie was the black sheep of the family; so the Devons left all their great fortune to Barbara and put Laurie in her care. That infuriated him, of course, for he is a high-spirited youngster. He promptly took on an extra shade of blackness. He was expelled from college, and sowed whole crops of wild oats. He gambled, was always in debt, and Barbara had to pay. For a long time she wasn't able to handle the situation. They're both young, you know. She's about twenty-four, and Laurie is a year younger. But last year she suddenly put her mind on it and pulled him up in a rather spectacular way."

Mrs. Renway's eyes glittered with interest.

"Tell me how!" she begged.

The raconteur settled back into her pew, with the complacent expression of one who is sure of her hearer's complete absorption in her words.

"Why," she said, "she made Laurie a sporting-proposition, and he accepted it. He and she were to go to New York and earn their living for one year, under assumed names and without revealing their identity to anybody. They were to start with fifty dollars each, and to be wholly dependent upon themselves after that was gone. Laurie was to give up all his bad habits and buckle down to the job of self-support. For every dollar he earned more than Barbara earned, she promised him five dollars at the end of the year. And if he kept his pledges he was to have ten thousand dollars when the experiment was over, whether he succeeded or failed. He and Barbara were to live in different parts of the city, to be ignorant of each other's addresses, and to see each other only twice."

She stopped for breath. Her friend drove an urgent elbow into her side.

"Go on!" she pleaded. "What happened?"

"Something very unexpected," chuckled Mrs. Lytton. (For some reason,

Barbara's friends always chuckled at this point in the story.) "Barbara, who is so clever," she went on, "almost starved to death. And Laurie, the black sheep, after various struggles and failures fell in with some theatrical people and finally collaborated with a successful playwright in writing a play. Perhaps it was partly luck. But the play made a tremendous hit, Laurie kept his pledges, and Barbara has had to pay him a small fortune to meet her bargain!"

The hearer smiled sympathetically.

"That's splendid," she said, "for Laurie! But is the cure permanent, do you think? The boy's so young, and so awfully good-looking—"

"I know," Mrs. Lytton looked ominous. "He is straight as a string so far, and absorbed in his new work. But of course his future is on the knees of the gods, for Barbara is going to Japan on her honeymoon, and Laurie will be alone in New York the rest of the winter. Barbara found her husband in New York," she added. "He's a broker there, Robert Warren. That's what *she* got out of the experiment! She met him while she was working in the mailing-department of some business house, for seven dollars a week—" Mrs. Lytton stopped speaking and craned her head backward. "They're coming!" she whispered excitedly. "Oh, dear, I hope I sha'n't cry! I always *do* cry at weddings, and I *never* know why."

From the crowd outside there rose a cheer, evidently at the bride's appearance. The echoes of it accompanied her progress into the church.

"The mill people adore Barbara," whispered Mrs. Lytton. "She built a big club-house for them two years ago, and she's the president of most of their clubs."

In his seat behind her, Jimmy Harrigan, who had given his attention to the conversation, sniffed contemptuously. If the dame in front was goin' to talk about Miss Devon, why didn't she tell somethin' worth while? Why didn't she tell, fer ins'ance, that Miss Devon played the best golf of any woman in the club, and had beaten Mrs. Lytton to a frazzle in a match last month? An' why didn't she say somethin' about how generous Miss Devon was to caddies in the matter of skates and boxing-gloves and clothes? And why didn't she say what a prince Laurie Devon was, instead of all dat stale stuff what everybody knew?

But now Mrs. Lytton was exclaiming over the beauty of the bride, and here Jimmy whole-heartedly agreed with her.

"How lovely she looks!" she breathed. "She's like Laurie, so stunning she rather

takes one's breath away! Oh, dear, I'm going to cry, I know I am! And crying makes my nose actually purple!"

The excitement in the street had communicated itself to the dignified assemblage in the church. The occupants of the pews were turning in their seats. The first notes of the great pipe-organ rolled forth. Friends who had known and loved Barbara Devon since she was a little girl, and many who had known her father and mother before her, looked now at the radiant figure she presented as she walked slowly up the aisle on her brother's arm, and saw that figure through an unexpected mist.

"What a pair!" whispered Mrs. Renway, who had a pagan love of beauty. "They ought to be put in one of their own parks and kept there as a permanent exhibit for the delight of the public. It's almost criminal negligence to leave that young man at large," she darkly predicted. "Something will happen if they do!"

Mrs. Lytton absently agreed.

"The bridegroom is very handsome, too," she murmured. "That stunning, insolent creature who is acting as matron of honor, and looking bored to death by it, is his sister, Mrs. Ordway, of New York. The first bridesmaid is another New York friend, a Russian girl named Sonya Orleneff, that Barbara met in some lodging-house. And *will* you look at the Infant Samuel!"

An expression of acute strain settled over the features of Mrs. Renway. She hurriedly adjusted her eye-glasses.

"The *what?*" she whispered, excitedly. "Where? I don't see any infant!"

Mrs. Lytton laughed.

"Of course you don't! It's too small and too near the floor. It's a thirty-months-old youngster Barbara picked up in a New York tenement. She calls him the Infant Samuel, and she has brought him here with his mother, to live on her estate. They say she intends to educate him. He's carrying her train and he's dressed as a page, in tiny white satin breeches and lace ruffles. Oh, *don't* miss him!"

A little ripple stirred the assemblage. Three figures in the long advancing line of the bridal party held the attention of observers. Two were the bride and her brother. The third, stalking behind her, with her train grasped in his tiny fists, his round brown eyes staring straight ahead, and his fluffy brown hair flying out as if swept backward by an eternal breeze, was obviously the Infant Samuel Mrs.

Lytton had mentioned.

From a rear pew the Infant's mother watched her offspring with pride and shuddering apprehension. It was quite on the cards that he might suddenly decide to leave the procession and undertake a brief side excursion into the pews. But Samuel had been assured that he was "taking a walk," and as taking a walk happened to be his favorite pastime he kept manfully to this new form of diversion, even though it had features that did not strongly appeal to him. His short legs wabbled, and his tiny arms ached under the light weight of the bridal train, but Something would happen if he let that train drop. He did not know quite what this Something would be, but he abysmally inferred that it would be extremely unpleasant. He held grimly to his burden.

Suddenly he forgot it. The air was full of wonderful sounds such as he had never heard before. His eyes grew larger. His mouth formed the "O" that expressed his deepest wonder. He longed to stop and find out where the sounds came from, but the train drew him on and on. With an unconscious sigh he accompanied the train; bad as things were, they might have been worse, for he knew that somewhere in advance of him, lost in a mass of white stuff, was the "Babs" he adored.

When the train stopped, he stopped. In response to an urgent suggestion from some one behind him, he dropped it. In obedience to an equally urgent inner prompting, he sat down on it and gazed around. The walk had been rather a long one. Now the big house he was in was very still, save for one voice, saying something to Babs. It was all strange and unfamiliar, and Babs seemed far away. Nothing and nobody looked natural. Samuel became increasingly doubtful about the pleasure of this walk. The corners of his mouth went down.

A flower fell into his lap, and looking up he saw Sonya Orleneff smiling at him. Even Sonya was a new Sonya, emerging from what Samuel dimly felt to be pink clouds. But the eyes were hers, and the smile was hers, and it was plain that she expected him to play with the pink flower. He pulled it to pieces, slowly and absorbedly. The task took some time. From it he passed to a close contemplation of a pink slippered foot which also proved to be Sonya's, and then to a careful study of a black pump and black silk sock that proved to be Lawwie's. Lawwie was smiling down at Samuel, too, and Wobert was standing beside Babs, saying something in a voice that wabbled.

Samuel sighed again. Perhaps by and by Lawwie would take him out for a real

walk in the snow. All this pink-and-white display around him might be pretty, but there was nothing in it for a small boy. He gazed appealingly at Sonya, who promptly hoisted him to his fat legs. The man at the railing had stopped talking to Babs and the walk was resumed, this time toward the door. Again that especially precious part of the white stuff was in Samuel's keeping.

The sounds that now filled the air were more wonderful than ever. They excited Samuel. His fat arms waved, and the light train waved with them. A compelling hand, Sonya's, quieted them and it. There was absolutely nothing a little boy could do in this queer walk. Gloomily but sedately the Infant Samuel continued his promenade.

"Here he is," murmured Mrs. Lytton to her friend. "You can see him now, can't you?"

Mrs. Renway gurgled happily. She could.

"Rodney Bangs, the playwright who collaborated with Laurie, is sitting in the front pew," continued her informant, "and the fat little bald man next to him is Jacob Epstein, the New York manager who put on their play."

At the same moment Epstein was whispering to his companion, as the two watched Barbara and her husband start down the aisle in the first little journey of their married life.

"Say, Bangs, if ve could put this vedding into a play, just like they done it here, ve could vake up Broadvay a little—ain't it?"

Bangs nodded, vaguely. His brown eyes were alternately on the bride and on his chum and partner, her brother. He was conscious of an odd depression, of an emotion, new and poignant, that made him understand the tears of Barbara's women friends. Under the influence of this, he spoke oracularly:

"Weddings are beastly depressing things. What the public wants to see is something cheerful!"

Epstein nodded in his turn. His thoughts, too, were busy. Like many of those around him, he was mentally reducing the spectacle he was watching to terms that he could understand. A wedding conducted on this scale, he estimated, probably represented a total cost of about ten thousand dollars. But what was that to a bride with thirty or forty millions? It was strange her family had left them all to her and none to the boy, even if the boy had been a little wild. But the

boy was all right now. He'd make his own fortune if life and women and the devil would let him alone. He had made a good start already. A few more successes like "The Man Above" would make Epstein forget several failures he had already and unwisely produced this season. If he could get Bangs and Devon to start work at once, on another good play—

Epstein closed his eyes, lent his Jewish soul to the spell of the music, and dreamed on, of Art and Dollars, of Dollars and Art.

A little later, in the automobile that whirled him and Epstein out to the wedding-reception at Devon House, Rodney Bangs briefly developed the wedding theme.

"I suppose the reason why women cry at weddings and men feel glum is that they know what the bride's in for," he remarked, gloomily.

Epstein grunted. "You an' me is bachelors," he reminded the momentarily cynical youth. "Ve should vorry!"

"What I'm worrying about is Laurie," Bangs admitted.

Epstein turned to him with awakened interest.

"Vell," he demanded, "what about Laurie? He's all right, ain't he?"

"His sister has always kept a collar and leash on Laurie," Bangs reminded him, "and Laurie has needed them both. Now she's off for Japan on a four-months' honeymoon. The leash and collar are off, too. It's going to be mighty interesting and rather anxious business for us to see what a chap like Laurie does with his new freedom. His nature hasn't changed in a year, you see, though his circumstances have," he added, slowly. "And all his promises to Barbara are off. His year of probation is over."

Epstein grunted again. He was fond of saying that he loved Bangs and Laurie as if they were the sons he had never had; but he was not given to analysis of himself or others, and he had little patience with it. His reply showed a tolerance unusual in him.

"Vell, ve keep an eye on him, don't ve?" he predicted.

Bangs frowned.

"We'll have to do it mighty carefully," he muttered. "If Devon catches us at it, he won't leave us an eye to keep on anything!"

Epstein grunted again.

"Ve keep him busy," he suggested, eagerly. "Start him right avay on another play. Eh? That's the idea!"

Bangs shook his head.

"That's it," he conceded. "But Laurie has decided that he won't work again, just yet. He says he's tired and wants a few months' rest. Besides, he thinks America will declare war before the winter's over. He's going to volunteer as soon as it does, and he doesn't want any loose ends dragging here, any half-finished plays, for example."

Epstein looked worried. This was serious news. Without allowing him time to recover from it, Bangs administered a second jolt.

"And of course, in that case," he added simply, "I'd volunteer, too."

Under the double blow Epstein's head and shoulders went down. He knew in that moment what even he himself had sometimes doubted, that his boasted love for the boys was deep and sincere. Few fathers could have experienced a more poignant combination of pride and pain than that which shook him now. But he remained, as always, inarticulate.

"Oh, vell," he said vaguely, "I guess ve meet all that if it comes, eh? Ve needn't go to it to-day."

At Devon House they found the congestion characteristic of wedding-receptions. A certain line had been drawn at the church. Seemingly no line at all had been drawn in the matter of guests at the reception. All Barbara Devon's protégés were there, and they were many; all the young folks in her clubs; all the old and new friends of her crowded life. Each of the great and beautiful rooms on the main floor of Devon House held a human frieze as a background for the throng of new-comers that grew rather than lessened as the hours passed.

As Bangs and Epstein entered the main hall Laurie Devon saw them over the heads of the crowd and hurried to meet them, throwing an arm across the shoulder of each. He was in a mood both men loved and feared, a mood of high and reckless exhilaration. He liked and approved of his new brother-in-law. The memory of his own New York triumph was still fresh enough to give him a thrill. He was devoted to his partners, and proud of his association with them and their work. But most of all, and this he himself would loyally have denied, deep in his

heart he was exulting fiercely over his coming freedom.

Laurie loved his sister, but he was weary of leading-strings. Henceforth he could live his own life. It should be a life worth while, on that he had decided, and it should continue free from the vices of gambling and drinking, of which he was sure he had cured himself in the past year. He had come into a full realization of the folly of these and of the glory of the work one loves. He hadn't the least notion what he was going to do with his independence, but a boundless delight filled him in the prospect of it. Whatever life held he was convinced would be good. Looking down from his slender height on the plump Epstein and the stocky Bangs, he smiled into the sober face of each, and under the influence of that smile their momentary solemnity fell from them like dropped veils.

"Come and see Barbara," Laurie buoyantly suggested. "She wants to say good-by to you, and to tell you how to tuck me into my crib every night. She's going to slip away pretty soon, you know. Bob and I have got her off in an alcove to get a few minutes' rest."

He led them to this haven, of which only fifty or sixty other guests seemed aware, for the room was but comfortably filled. They found Barbara sitting in a high-backed Spanish chair, against which, in her bridal array and her extraordinary beauty, she made a picture that unaccountably deepened the new depression in Rodney's soul. On her train by the side of the chair, the Infant Samuel slumbered in peace, like an exhausted puppy.

Warren, hovering near his wife, shook hands with the new-comers and responded to their congratulations. Then, slipping his arm through Laurie's, he drew him across the room to where his sister, Mrs. Ordway, was languidly talking to several of the bride's old friends. He knew that Barbara wanted a final and serious word with her brother's partners. Laurie knew it, too, and winked at the pair like an impish child as he permitted himself to be led away.

Young Mrs. Warren, whose title was still so new that she looked startled when they addressed her by it, greeted them warmly and indicated the sleeping Samuel with an apologetic smile.

"His mother is lost somewhere in the crowd," she explained. "He has had two glasses of milk, four fat cakes, and three plates of ice-cream; and he's either asleep or unconscious, I'm not sure which." Her manner sobered. "I'm so glad to have a moment with you two," she said gently. "You know what I want to talk about."

"We can guess it." Bangs smiled at her with the odd wistfulness his smile always took on when he spoke to Barbara. To Bangs, Barbara had become a temple at whose portal he removed his earth-stained shoes. "You want us to look after Laurie," he added, quietly. "Well, you bet we're going to do it."

She smiled again, this time the rare smile that warmed her face like a light from within.

"Then I shall go away happy," she told them. "And there's nothing more to be said; for of course you both understand that I don't distrust Laurie. How could I, after he has been so wonderful all this year? It's only—" she hesitated—"I suppose it's life I'm afraid of," she confessed. "I never used to be. But—well, I learned in New York how helpless we are, sometimes."

Rodney's nod was understanding.

"I know," he robustly agreed. "But it's going to be absolutely all right. Be sure of that."

Epstein added his well-meaning but none too happily chosen bit.

"Laurie can't get into no scrape ve can't get him out of," he earnestly assured Laurie's sister.

Barbara laughed. A circle of new-comers was forming around them.

"We'll let it go at that," she said, and extended a hand to each man. "Good-by. I won't try to thank you. But—God bless you both!"

Under the influence of this final benediction, Epstein waddled over to the corner where Warren, very pale, and Louise Ordway, very much bored, stood surrounded by a group that included Sonya Orleneff. Firmly detaching the bridegroom from this congenial assemblage, Epstein led him to one side.

"Varren," he said solemnly, "I got to congratulate you all over again. You got von voman in a million—No, you got von voman in eighty million!"

Warren laughed, rather shakily. Over the heads of the crowd his eyes caught his wife's and held them for an instant.

"Make it a million million," he suggested joyously, and led Epstein to the supper room.

Laurie was there with Bangs and a group of friends, who, having patronized young Devon a year ago, were endeavoring to wipe out the memory of this indiscretion by an excess of friendly attention. Laurie's brilliant eyes, filled with the excited glitter they had taken on to-night, saw through the attempt and the situation. Both amused him. In his clubs, or anywhere but here, he might have indulged himself to the extent of having a little fun with these people. But not in his own home, while he was acting as host at his sister's wedding. Here his manner was perfect, though colored by the exhilaration of his mood.

"No," Warren and Epstein heard him say to Mrs. Lytton and Mrs. Renway, "there's nothing I'd like better than to come, thank you. But I'm going back to New York to-morrow. You see," he added, "this business of marrying off a sister, and attending to all the details and seeing that she conducts herself properly as long as she's in my care, is a bit of a strain. I've got to get back to town and recuperate."

"I suppose you will rest your mind by writing another play?" gushed Mrs. Renway.

Laurie shook his black head.

"Not a bit of it!" he asserted. "Don't even suggest such a thing before Epstein, there. It sounds abhorrently like work."

Mrs. Renway's curiosity had a brief and losing struggle with her good breeding.

"Then what *are* you going to do?" she demanded coquettishly.

The young man pondered, as if considering the question for the first time.

"Well," he said at last, "between you and me, I'm going in for adventure. I intend to devote the next four months to discovering how much excitement a worthy youth can crowd into his life if he makes a business of going after the gay bird of adventure, and finding it, and putting salt on its tail!"

The puzzled countenance of Mrs. Renway cleared.

"Oh, I see," she said brightly, "you're joking."

Laurie smiled and turned to greet a late guest who had come up behind him. In the little group that had overheard him, three pairs of eyes met in startled glances.

"Humph!" said Warren. "Hear that?"

"Nice prospect for us!" muttered Rodney Bangs.

Jacob Epstein looked harassed. A little later he joined the throng in the main hall, and watched the showers of rice fall harmlessly from the polished sides of Barbara's limousine as the bride and groom were whirled away from the brilliant entrance of Devon House.

"She's gone," he said to Bangs as the two men turned and reëntered the still crowded yet suddenly empty house. And he added solemnly, "Believe me, Bangs, on that job she left us you an' me 've got our hands full!"

CHAPTER II

RODNEY LOSES A BATTLE

Rodney Bangs, author of "The Black Pearl" and co-author of "The Man Above," was annoyed. When Mr. Bangs was annoyed he usually betrayed the fact, for his was an open nature.

He was betraying it now. His clear, red-brown eyes were clouded. The healthy pink of his youthful cheeks had deepened to an unbecoming flush. His wide, engaging grin, the grin of a friendly bulldog, was lacking, and his lips were set tight. Even his burnished red pomadour added to the general pugnaciousness of his appearance. Standing up at its most aggressive angle, it seemed to challenge the world.

Sitting on a low chair in the dressing-room of the bachelor apartment he and Laurence Devon occupied together, Rodney drew on a shoe and stamped his foot down into it with an emphasis that shook the floor. Devon, fastening his tie before the full-length mirror set in the door leading to their common bath-room, started at the sound, like a high-strung prima donna. This was one of Laurie's temperamental mornings.

"What the devil's the matter with you, Bangs?" he demanded, but without ill humor. "Can't you get on a shoe without imitating the recoil of a seventy-five centimeter gun?"

Bangs grunted, drew on the other shoe, and drove his foot into it with increased energy. Laurie looked at him, and this time there was a spark in his black eyes. Very quietly he turned, crossed the small room, and, planting himself in front of his chum, resentfully stared down at the dynamic youth.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "Are you deliberately trying to be annoying?"

Rodney did not raise his head. His fingers were busy with a complicated knot.

"Oh, shut up!" he muttered.

Laurie, his hands in his pockets, remained where he was. Under his continued inspection, the fingers of Bangs grew clumsy. He fumbled with the knot, and,

having unfastened it, prolonged to the utmost the process of lacing his shoes. He knew what must come as soon as he settled back in his chair. It had been coming for days. He was in for an unpleasant ten minutes. But the situation was one he had deliberately created as the only possible way of bringing about a serious talk with his friend. Now that it was here, he was anxious to make the most of it. With head bent and thoughts busy he played for time.

At last, the shoes laced and his campaign mapped out, he sat up and met Laurie's eyes. Their expression of antagonism, temporary though he knew it to be, hurt him. Devon, when he had his own way, and he usually had it, was a singularly sweet-tempered chap. Never before, throughout their year of close association, had he looked at Bangs like that. Rodney knew that he deserved the look. For days past he had deliberately subjected his companion to a series of annoyances, small but intensely irritating.

"Well?" demanded Laurie. "What's the answer?"

"What answer?" Rodney was in the position of a small boy challenged to combat in cold blood. He was experiencing some difficulty in working himself up to the necessary heat for an engagement. But Laurie's next words helped him out.

"You've been making a damned nuisance of yourself for the last week," he said deliberately. "I want to know why."

Bangs squared his stocky shoulders and rose to his feet. His brown eyes were below the level of his chum's black ones, but the two glances met sharply and a flash passed between them. Under the force of his rising excitement the voice of Rodney shook.

"The reason I've been a damned nuisance," he said curtly, "is because you've been acting like an infernal fool, and I'm sick of it."

Laurie's lips tightened, but the other rushed on without giving him a chance to reply. The moment was his. He must crowd into it all he had not dared to say before and might not be given a chance to say again.

"Oh, I know what you'll say!" he cried. "It's none of my business, and you're your own master, and all that sort of rot. And I know you're not drinking, and God knows I'm not ass enough to take on any high moral tone and try to preach to you, whatever you do. What gets my goat, Devon, and the only thing I'm worrying about, is this damnable waste of your time and mine."

Laurie grinned, and the grin infuriated Bangs. He whirled away from it. A footstool impeded his progress, and he kicked it out of his way with large abandon. It was his habit to rush about a room when he was talking excitedly. He rushed about now; and Laurie lit a cigarette and watched him, at first angrily, then with a growing tolerance born of memories of scenes in their plays which Bangs had threshed out in much this same manner. The world could never be wholly uninteresting while Rodney pranced about in it, cutting the air with gestures like that.

"Here I am," snapped Rodney, "ready with my play, the best plot I've had yet. You won't let me even mention it to you. Here's the new season. Here's Epstein, sitting on our door-mat with a check-book in each hand, waiting to put on anything we give him. You know he's lost a small fortune this fall. You know it's up to us to give him a play that will pull him out of the hole he's in. Here's Haxon, the best director in town, marking time and holding off other managers in the hope that you and I will get down to business. And here you are, the fellow we're all counting on—" He stopped for breath and adjectives.

"Yes," Laurie politely prompted him. "Here I am. What about it? What am I doing?"

"You know damned well what you're doing. You're loafing!" Bangs fired the word at him as if it were a shell from a Big Bertha. "You're loafing till it makes us all sick to look at you. We thought a week or two of it would be enough, when you realized the conditions; but it's gone on for a month; and, instead of getting tired, you're getting more and more into the loafing habit. You abuse time till it shrieks in agony."

"Good sentence," applauded Laurie. "But don't waste it on me. Put it into a play."

Bangs seemed not to hear him. He was standing by the room's one window, now, staring unseeingly out of it, his hands deep in his pockets, taking in the knowledge of the failure of his appeal. Under the realization of this he tossed a final taunt at his partner over his shoulder.

"I can forgive the big blunders a man makes in his life," he muttered; "but, by God, I haven't much patience with a chap that lies around and shirks at a time like this!"

Laurie removed the half-smoked cigarette from his mouth, and not finding an

ash tray within reach, carefully crushed out its burning end against the polished top of the dressing-case. He had grown rather pale.

"That will be about all, Bangs," he said quietly. "What you and Epstein and Haxon don't seem to remember is just one thing. If you don't like matters as they are, it's mighty easy to change them. It doesn't take half a minute to agree to dissolve a partnership."

"I know." Bangs returned to his chair, and, dropping limply into it, his hands still in his pockets, stared despondently at his outstretched legs. "That's all it means to you," he went on, morosely. "Our partnership is one in a thousand. It's based on friendship as well as on financial interest. If I do say it, it represents a combination of brains, ability, backing, and prospects that comes only once in a lifetime, if it comes at all. Yet in one year you're sick of it, and tired of work. You're ready to throw it all over, and to throw over at the same time the men whose interests are bound up with yours. You're dawdling in cabarets and roadhouses and restaurants, when you might be doing Work—" Bangs's voice capitalized the word—"real work," he added fiercely, "work other fellows would give their souls to be able to do."

He ended on a flat note, oddly unlike his usual buoyant tones, and sat still as if everything had been said.

Laurie lit a fresh cigarette, drew in a mouthful of smoke, and exhaled it in a series of pretty rings. In his brief college experience he had devoted some time to acquiring this art. Admiringly watching the little rings pass through the big rings, he spoke with studied carelessness.

"It was a pretty good scene, Bangs," he said, "and it showed careful rehearsing. But it would be a lot more effective if you had a real situation to base it on. As it is, you're making a devil of a row about nothing. I worked like a horse all last year, and you know it. Now I'm resting, or loafing, if you prefer to call it that, and"—he bit off the words and fairly threw them at his friend—"it will save you and Epstein and Haxon a lot of mental wear and tear if you will mind your own business and let me alone."

Bangs raised his eyes and dropped them again.

"You *are* our business," he somberly reminded his partner. "I've got so I can't work without you," he added, with a humility new to him. "You know that. And you know I've got the plot. It's ready—great Scott, it's boiling in me! I'm crazy to

get it out. And here I've got to sit around watching you kill time, while you know and I know that you'd be a damn sight happier if you were on the job. Good Lord, Laurie, work's the biggest thing there is in life! Doesn't it mean anything at all to you?"

"Not just now." Laurie spoke with maddening nonchalance.

"Then there's something rotten in you."

Laurie winced, but made no answer. He hoped Bangs would go on talking and thus destroy the echo of his last words, with which the silent room seemed filled. But nothing came. Rodney's opportunity had passed, and he was lost in depressed realization of its failure. Laurie strolled back to the mirror, his forgotten tie dangling in his hand.

"We'll let it go at that," he said then. "Think things over, and make up your mind what you want to do about the contract."

"All right."

Bangs replied in the same flat notes he had used a moment before, and without changing his position; but the two words gave Laurie a shock. He did not believe that either Rodney or Epstein would contemplate a dissolution of their existing partnership; but an hour ago he would not have believed that Rodney Bangs could say to him the things he had said just now.

He was beginning to realize that he had tried his partners sorely in the month that had passed since his return to town; and all for what? He himself had brought out of the foolish experience nothing save a tired nervous system, a sense of boredom such as he had not known for a year, and, especially when he looked at Bangs, an acute mental discomfort which introspective persons would probably have diagnosed as the pangs of conscience. Laurie did not take the trouble to diagnose it. He merely resented it as a grievance added to the supreme grievance based on the fact that he had not yet even started on the high adventure he had promised himself.

He was gloomily considering both grievances, and tying his tie with his usual care, when something in the mirror caught and held his attention. He looked at it, at first casually, then with growing interest. In the glass, directly facing him, was a wide studio window. It was open, notwithstanding the cold January weather, and a comfortable, middle-aged, plump woman, evidently a superior type of

caretaker, was sitting on the sill, polishing an inner pane. The scene was as vivid as a mirage, and it was like the mirage in that it was projected from some point which itself remained unseen.

Laurie turned to the one window the dressing-room afforded—a double French window, at his right, but a little behind him, and reaching to the floor. Through this he could see across a court the opposite side of his own building, but no such window or commonplace vision as had just come to him. In his absorption in the phenomenon he called to Bangs, who rose slowly, and, coming to his side, regarded the scene without much interest.

"It's a cross projection from a house diagonally opposite us," he said, after studying the picture a moment. "It must be that old red studio building on the southwest corner of the square. If we had a room back of this and looking toward the west, we could see the real window."

"As it is," said Laurie, "we've got a reserved seat for an intimate study of any one who lives there. I wonder who has that studio?"

Bangs had no idea. He was grateful to the little episode, however, for spreading over the yielding ground beneath his feet the solid strip on which he had crossed back to his chum. He threw an arm across Laurie's shoulders and looked into his face, with something in his expression that reminded young Devon of a favorite collie he had loved and lost in boyhood.

"All right now?" the look asked, just as the dog's look had asked it of the little chap of ten, when something had gone wrong. Rodney's creed of life was held together by a few primitive laws, the first of which was loyalty. Already he was reproaching himself for what he had said and done. Laurie carefully completed the tying of his tie, and turned to him with his gayest smile.

"Hurry up and finish dressing," he cheerfully suggested, "and we'll go out to breakfast. Since you insist on waiting 'round for me like Mary's little lamb, I suppose I've got to feed you."

Rodney's wide grin responded, for the first time in many days. He bustled about, completing his toilet, and ten minutes later the two young men started out together with a lightness of spirit which each enjoyed and neither wholly understood. Both had a healthy horror of "sentimental stuff" and a gay, normal disregard of each other's feelings in ordinary intercourse. But in the past half-hour, for the first time in their association, they had come close to a serious

break, and the soul of each had been chilled by a premonitory loneliness as definite as the touch of an icy finger. In the quick reaction they experienced now their spirits soared exultantly. They breakfasted in a fellowship such as they had not known since Barbara's marriage, the month before.

If Bangs had indulged in any dream of a change of life in Laurie, however, following this reconciliation, the next few days destroyed the tender shoots of that hope. Laurie's manner retained its pleasant camaraderie, but work and he met as strangers and passed each other by. The routine of his days remained what they had been during the past five weeks. He gadded about, apparently harmlessly, came home at shocking hours, and spent most of the bracing January days wrapped in a healthful slumber that infuriated Bangs, who wandered in and out of their apartment like an unhappy ghost. On the rare occasions when he and Rodney lunched or dined together, Laurie was entirely good-humored and when Epstein was with them seemed wholly impervious to any hints thrown out, none too subtly, by his producing partner.

"Listen, Laurie," said that disgusted individual, almost a month after the new year had been ushered in, "the new year's here. That's a good time for a young fella to get busy again on somethin' vorth while. Ain't I right?"

Laurie suppressed a yawn and carefully struck off with his little finger the firm ash of an excellent cigarette. He was consuming thirty or forty cigarettes a day, and his nerves were beginning to show the effect of this indulgence.

"I believe it is," he courteously agreed. "It has been earnestly recommended to the young as a good time to start something."

"Vell," Epstein's voice took on the guttural notes of his temperamental moments, "don't that mean nothin' to you?"

Laurie grinned. He had caught the quick look of warning Bangs shot at the producer and it amused him.

"Not yet," he said. "Not till I've had my adventure."

Epstein sniffed.

"The greatest adventure in life," he stated dogmatically, "is to make a lot of money. I tell you vy. Because then you got all the other adventures you can handle, trying to hold on to it!"

Bangs, who was developing a new and hitherto unsuspected vein of tact, encouraged Epstein to enlarge on this congenial theme. He now fully realized that Devon would go his own gait until he wearied of it, and that no argument or persuasion could enter his armor-clad mind. The position of Bangs was a difficult one, for while he was accepting and assimilating this unpleasant fact, Epstein and Haxon—impatient men by temperament and without much training in self-control—were getting wholly out of patience and therefore out of hand. Haxon, indeed, was for the time entirely out of hand, for he had finally started the rehearsals of a new play which, he grimly informed Bangs, would make "The Man Above" look like a canceled postage-stamp.

Bangs repeated the comment to his chum the next morning, during the late dressing-hour which now gave them almost their only opportunity for a few words together. He had hoped it would make an impression, and he listened with pleasure to a sharp exclamation from Laurie, who chanced to be standing before the door mirror in the dressing-room, brushing his hair. The next instant Bangs realized that it was not his news which had evoked the tribute of that exclamation.

"Come here!" called Laurie, urgently. "Here's something new; and, by Jove, isn't she a beauty!"

Bangs interrupted his toilet to lounge across the room. Looking over Laurie's shoulder, his eyes found the cynosure that held the gaze of his friend. The wide-open studio window was again reflected in the mirror, but with another occupant.

This was a girl, young and lovely. She appeared in the window like a half-length photograph in a frame. Her body showed only from above the waist. Her elbows were on the sill. Her chin rested in the hollows of her cupped hands. Her wavy hair, parted on one side and drawn softly over the ears in the fashion of the season, was reddish-gold. Her eyes were brown, and very thoughtful. Down-dropped, they seemed to stare at something on the street below, but the girl's expression was not that of one who was looking at an object with interest. Instead, she seemed lost in a deep and melancholy abstraction.

Laurie, a hair-brush in each hand, stared hard at the picture.

"Isn't she charming!" he cried again.

Bangs's reply revealed a severely practical side of his nature.

"She'll have a beastly cold in the head if she doesn't shut that window," he grumpily suggested. But his interest, too, was aroused. He stared at the girl in the mirror with an attention almost equal to Laurie's.

As they looked, she suddenly stirred and moved backward, as if occultly warned of their survey. They saw her close the window, and, drawing a chair close to it, sit down and stare out through the pane, still with that intent, impersonal expression. Bangs strolled back to the dressing-case and resumed his interrupted toilet. Laurie, fumbling vaguely with his brushes, kept his eyes on the girl in the mirror.

"Do you suppose we could see her if we went out on the street?" he asked, suddenly.

"Her? Oh, you mean that girl?" With difficulty Bangs recalled his thoughts from Haxon's new play. "No, I don't think so," he decided. "You see, we're up on the tenth floor, so she must be fairly high up, too."

"She's a wonder." Laurie was still gazing into the mirror. "Prettiest girl I've ever seen, I think," he reflected aloud.

Bangs snorted.

"She's probably a peroxide," he said. "Even if she isn't, she can't hold a candle to your sister."

"Oh, Barbara—" Laurie considered the question of Barbara's beauty as if it were new to him. "Babs is good-looking," he handsomely conceded. "But there's something about this girl that's unusual. Perhaps it's her expression. She doesn't look happy."

Bangs sighed with ostentation.

"If you want to study some one that isn't happy, look at me," he invited warmly. "If that play of mine isn't out of me pretty soon, I'll have to have an operation!"

Laurie made no reply to this pathetic prediction, and Bangs sadly shook his head and concluded his toilet, meditating gloomily the while on the unpleasant idiosyncrasies of every one he knew. To see Devon turn suddenly into a loafer upset all his theories as well as all his plans.

Laurie, for some reason, dawdled more than usual that morning. It was after

eleven before he went to breakfast. An hour earlier Bangs departed alone for their pet restaurant.

The girl in the mirror remained at her window for a long time, and Laurie watched her in growing fascination. It was not until she rose and disappeared that he felt moved to consider so sordid a question as that of food.

He joined Bangs just as that youth was finishing his after-breakfast cigar. Even under its soothing influence, he was in the mood of combined exasperation and depression with which his friends were becoming familiar.

"If we had begun work as soon as we got back to town after your sister's wedding," he told Laurie, "we'd have had two acts ready by now, in the rough."

"No reason why you shouldn't have four acts ready, so far as I can see," murmured Laurie, cheerfully attacking his grape-fruit. "All you've got to do is to write 'em."

Bangs's lips set.

"Not till I've talked 'em over with you and got your ideas," he declared, positively. "If you'd just let me give you an outline—"

Laurie set down his cup.

"Do I get my breakfast in peace, or don't I?" he demanded, coldly.

"You do, confound you!"

Bangs bit off the end of a fresh cigar and smoked it in stolid silence. He was a person of one idea. If he couldn't talk about the play, he couldn't talk at all. He meditated, considering his characters, his situations, his partner's and his own position, in a mental jumble that had lately become habitual and which was seriously affecting his nerves. Laurie, as he ate, chatted cheerfully and at random, apparently avoiding with care any subject that might interest his partner. Bangs rose abruptly.

"Well, I'm off," he said. "See you at dinner time, I suppose."

But Laurie, it appeared, had engagements. He was taking a party of friends out to Gedney Farms that evening, in his new car, and they might decide to stay there for a day or two. Also, though he did not confide this fact to Bangs, he had an engagement for the afternoon, at a place where the card rooms were quiet and

elegant and the stakes high.

He had been there half a dozen times, and had played each time. He had been able to keep himself in hand. In fact, a great part of the fascination of the game now lay in the study of its effect on himself and its test of his new-born will power. Thus far, he had played exactly as much as he had planned to play, and had secretly exulted in the fact. What he intended, he told himself, was to learn to do things in moderation; neither to fear them nor to let them master him.

The attraction of these diversions filled his mind. He quite forgot the girl in the mirror, and it was no thought of her that drew him back to New York that night. The plans of his guests had changed, that was all. The change brought him home at eleven o'clock. Bangs was in his own room, finding in sleep a wall of unconsciouness that separated him from his troubles. Laurie decided upon the novel pleasure of a long night of slumber for himself.

He fell asleep with surprising ease, and immediately, as it seemed, he saw the girl in the mirror. She was walking toward him, through what appeared to be a heavy fog. Her hands were outstretched to him, and he hurried to meet her; but even as he did so the fog closed down and he lost her, though he seemed to hear her voice, calling him from somewhere far away.

He awoke late in the morning with every detail of the dream vivid in his mind, so vivid, indeed, that when he approached the mirror after his morning plunge, it seemed almost a continuation of the dream to find the girl there.

He stopped short with a chuckle. The curtains of his French window were drawn apart, and in the mirror he saw the reflection of the girl as she stood in profile near her own uncurtained window and slowly dressed her hair.

It was wonderful hair, much more wonderful down than up. Laurie, who had a sophisticated notion that most of the hair on the heads of girls he knew had been purchased as removable curls and "transformations," stared with pleasure at the red-gold mass that fell down over the girl's white garment. Then, with a little shock, he realized that the white garment was a nightdress. It was evident that, high in her lonely room, the girl thought herself safe from observation and was quietly making her toilet for the morning.

Well, she should be safe. With a quick jerk, Laurie drew together the heavy curtains that hung at the sides of the long window. Then, smiling a little, he slowly dressed. His thoughts dwelt on the girl. It was odd that she should be

literally projected into his life in that unusual fashion. He had never had any such experience before, nor had he heard of one just like it. It was unique and pleasant. It was especially pleasant to have her so young and so charming to look at. She might have been a disheveled art student, given to weird color effects, or an austere schoolma'am, or some plump and matter-of-fact person who set milk bottles on the sill and spread wet handkerchiefs to dry on the window-panes. As it was, all that disturbed him was her expression. He wished he knew her name and something more about her. His thoughts were full of her.

Before he left the room he parted the curtains again to open the window wide, following his usual program. As he did so he glanced into his mirror. He saw her open window, but it was lifeless. Only his own disappointed face confronted him.

CHAPTER III

LAURIE MEETS MISS MAYO

Laurie thought much that day about the girl in the mirror, and he was again home at eleven that night, to the wonder of Mr. Bangs, who freely expressed his surprise.

"Something pleasant been coming your way?" he tactfully asked.

Laurie evaded the question, but he felt that something definitely pleasant had come his way. This something was a new interest, and he had needed a new interest very much. He hoped he would dream of the girl that night, but as he and Bangs unwisely consumed a Welsh rabbit before they went to bed, he dreamed instead of something highly unpleasant, and was glad to be awakened by the clear sunlight of a brilliant January day.

After breakfast he strolled across the square into the somber hall of the studio building on its southwest corner. The hall was empty, but he found and rang a bell at the entrance of a dingy elevator shaft. The elevator descended without haste. When it had reached the floor, the colored youth in charge of it inhospitably filled its doorway and regarded the visitor with indifference. This young man was easy to look at, but he was no one he knew.

Laurie handed him a dollar and the youth's expression changed, first to one of surprise, then to the tolerance of a man who is wise and is willing to share his wisdom. The visitor went at once to the point of his visit.

"A young lady lives here," he began. "She is very pretty, and she has reddish hair and brown eyes. She has a studio in one of the upper floors, at the front of the house. What's her name?"

The boy's face showed that he had instantly recognized the description, but he pondered dramatically.

"Dat young lady?" he then said. "Dat young lady mus' be Miss Mayo, in Twenty-nine, on de top flo'. She jes' moved in here las' Tuesday."

"Where does she come from, and what does she do?"

The boy hesitated. What did all this mean? And was he giving up too much for a dollar? Laurie grinned at him understandingly.

"I don't know her," he admitted, "and I don't expect to. I'd like to know something about her—that's all."

The youth nodded. He had the air of accepting an apology.

"I reckon she come fum some fur'n place. But I dunno what she *do*," he reluctantly admitted. "Mebbe she ain't doin' nothin' yit. She's home mos' de time. She don' go out hardly 'tall. Seems like she don' know many folks."

He seemed about to say more, but stopped. For a moment he obviously hesitated, then blurted out what he had in mind.

"One t'ing got me guessin'," he muttered doubtfully. "Dat young lady, she don' seem t' *eat* nothin'!"

"What do you mean?" Laurie stared at him.

The boy shuffled his feet. He was on uncertain ground.

"Why, jes' what I said," he muttered, defensively. "Folkses here either eats *in* or dey eats *out*. Ef dey eats in, dey has stuff *sent* in—rolls an' eggs an' milk and' stuff like dat. Ef dey eats out, dey *goes* out, reg'lar, to meals. But Miss Mayo she don' seem to eat in *or* out. Nothin' comes in, an' she don' go out 'nough to eat reg'lar. I bin studyin' 'bout it consider'ble," he ended; and he looked unmistakably relieved, as if he had passed on to another a burden that was too heavy to carry alone.

Laurie hesitated. The situation was presenting a new angle and a wholly unexpected one. It began to look as if he had come on a sentimental errand and had stumbled on a tragedy. Certainly he had blundered into the private affairs of a lady, and was even discussing these affairs with an employee in the building where she lived. That thought was unpleasant. Yet the boy's interest was clearly friendly, and the visitor himself had invited revelations about the new lodger. Still, not such revelations as these! He frankly did not know what to make of them or how to act.

There was a chance that the boy might be all wrong in his inferences, although this chance, Laurie mentally admitted, was slight. He knew the shrewdness of this youth's type, the precocious knowledge of human nature that often

accompanies such training and environment as he had had. Probably he suspected even more than he had revealed. Something must be done.

Laurie drew a bill from his pocket

"How soon can you leave the elevator?" he asked.

"'Bout one o'clock."

"All right. Now here's what I want you to do. Take this money, go over to the Clarence restaurant, and buy a good lunch for that lady. Get some hot chicken or chops, buttered rolls, vegetables, and a bottle of milk. Have it packed nicely in a box. Have them put in some fresh eggs and extra rolls and butter for her breakfast. Deliver the box at her door as if it came from some one outside. Do that and keep the change. Understand?"

"Yaas, sah!" The boy's eyes and teeth were shining.

"All right. Go to it. I'll drop in later this afternoon for your report."

Laurie turned and walked away. Even yet the experience did not seem real. It was probably all based on some foolish notion of the youth's; and yet he dared not assume that it was a foolish notion. He had the dramatist's distaste for drama anywhere except in its legitimate place, on the stage; but he admitted that sometimes it did occur in life. This might be one of those rare occasions.

Whatever it was, it haunted him. He lunched with Bangs that day, and was so silent that Bangs was moved to comment.

"If you were any one else," he remarked, "I'd almost think you were thinking!"

Laurie disclaimed the charge, but his abstraction did not lift. By this time his imagination was hard at work. He pictured the girl in the mirror as stretched on her virginal cot in the final exhaustion of starvation; and the successful effort to keep away from the studio building till four o'clock called for all his will power. Suppose the boy blundered, or wasn't in time. Suppose the girl really had not eaten anything since last Tuesday! These thoughts, and similar ones, obsessed him.

At four he strolled into the studio hall, wearing what he hoped was a detached and casual air. To his annoyance, the elevator and its operator were lost in the dimness of the upper stories, and before they descended several objectionable

persons had joined Laurie, evidently expecting to be taken to upper floors themselves. This meant a delay in his tête-à-tête with the boy, and Laurie turned upon the person nearest him, an inoffensive spinster, a look of such intense resentment that it haunted that lady for several days.

When the elevator finally appeared, he entered it with the others who were waiting. He looked aloofly past the elevator boy as he did so, and that young person showed himself equal to the situation by presenting to this new-comer a stolid ebony profile. But when the lift had reached the top floor and discharged its passengers, the two conspirators lent themselves to the drama of their rôles.

"Well?" asked Laurie eagerly. "Did you get it?"

"Yaas, sah."

"What happened?"

The boy stopped his descending car midway between two floors. He had no intention of having his scene spoiled. He bulged visibly under the news he had to impart. "I got de stuff you said, and I lef' it at dat young lady's do'," he began impressively.

"Yes."

"When I looked de nex' time, it was gone."

"Good! She had taken it in." Laurie drew a breath of relief.

"No, sah. Dat ain't all." The boy's tone dripped evil tidings. "She brung it back!"

"What!" His passenger was staring at him in concern.

"Yaas, sah. De bell rung fum her flo', an' when I got up de young lady was standin' dere wid dat basket in her hand."

He paused to give Laurie the effect of the tableau, and saw by his visitor's expression that he had got it fully.

"Yes? Go on!"

"She look at me mighty sharp. She got brown eyes dat look right *thoo* you," he interpolated briskly. "Den she say, 'Sam, who done lef' dat basket at my do'?' I say, 'I done it, miss. It was lef' in de hall, an' de ca'd got yo' name on it. Ain't you order it?' I say.

"'No,' she say, 'dis yere basket ain't fo' me. Take it, an' ef you cain't find out who belong to it, eat dis yere lunch yo'self.'"

He paused. Laurie's stunned silence was a sufficient tribute to his eloquence, but Sam had not yet reached his climax. He introduced it now, with fine effect.

"Bimeby," he went on unctuously, "I took dat basket back to her. I say, 'Miss Mayo,' I say, 'I done foun' out 'bout dat basket. 'T was lef' by a lady artis' here what got a tergram an' went away sudden. She want dat food et, so she sent it to you.'"

Laurie regarded him with admiration.

"That was pretty good for extemporaneous lying," he commented. "I suppose you can do even better when you take more time to it. What did the lady say?"

Sam shook a mournful head.

"She jes' look at me, an' she kinda smile, an' den she say, 'Sam, dis yere basket 'noys me. Ef de lady wants it et, Sam, you eat it yo'self." He paused. "I et it," he ended, solemnly.

Laurie's lips twitched under conflicting emotions, but he closed the interview with a fair imitation of indifference.

"Oh, well," he said carelessly, "you must have been mistaken about the whole thing. Evidently Miss Mayo, if that's her name, wasn't as hungry as you were."

The boy nodded and started the car on its downward journey. As his passenger got off on the ground floor, he gave him a new thought to carry away with him.

"She'd bin cryin', dough," he muttered. "Her eyes was all red."

Laurie stopped and regarded him resentfully.

"Confound you!" he said, "What did you tell me that for? *I* can't do anything about it!"

The boy agreed, hurriedly. "No, sah," he assured him. "You cain't. I cain't, neither. None of us cain't," he added as an afterthought.

Laurie slowly walked away. His thoughts scampered around and around, like squirrels in a cage. The return of the basket, of course, might mean either of two

conditions—that the girl was too proud to accept help, or that she was really in no need of it. Laurie had met a few art students. He knew that, hungry or not, almost any one of them would cheerfully have taken in that basket and consumed its contents. He had built on that knowledge in providing it. If the girl *had* taken it in, the fact would have proved nothing. Her refusal to touch it was suspicious. It swung the weight of evidence toward the elevator boy's starvation theory.

Laurie's thoughts returned to that imaginative youth. He saw him consuming the girl's luncheon, and a new suspicion crossed his mind. Perhaps the whole business was a bit of graft. But his intelligence rejected that suggestion. If this had been the explanation, the boy would not have concluded the episode so briskly. He had got the strange young man where he might have "kept him going" for days and made a good income in the process. As it was, there seemed nothing more to do. And yet—and yet—how the deuce could one let the thing drop like that? If the girl was really in straits—

Thus the subconscious argument went on and on. It worried Laurie. He was not used to such violent mental exercise. Least of all was he in the habit of disturbing himself about the affairs of others. But this affair was different. The girl was so pretty! Also, he had recurrent visions of his sister Barbara in the position of his mysterious neighbor. Barbara might easily have gone through such an experience during last year's test in New York. In that same experiment Laurie himself had learned how slender is the plank that separates one from the abyss that lies beneath the world's workers.

He dined alone that night and it was well he did so. His lack of appetite would certainly have attracted the attention of Bangs or any other fellow diner, and Bangs would as certainly have commented upon it. Also, he passed a restless night, troubled by vaguely depressing dreams. The girl was in them, but everything was as hopelessly confused as his daytime mental processes had been.

The next morning he deliberately kept away from the mirror until he was fully dressed, but he dressed with a feeling of tenseness and urgency he would have found it difficult to explain. He only knew that to-day he meant to do something definite, something that would settle once for all the question that filled his mind. But what could he do? That little point was still unsettled. Knock at the girl's door, pretend that it was a blunder, and trust to inspiration to discover in the brief encounter if anything was wrong? Or put money in an envelop and push it

under her door? If he did that, she would probably give the money to Sam, as she had given him the food.

What to do? Laurie proceeded with his toilet, using the dressing-case and carefully avoiding the long mirror. He experienced an odd unwillingness to look into that mirror this morning, based partly on delicacy—he remembered the nightdress—but more on the fear of disappointment. If he saw her, it would be an immense relief. If he didn't, he'd fancy all sorts of things, for now his imagination was running away with him.

When he was fully dressed he crossed the room in three strides and stopped before the mirror with a suddenness that checked him half-way in the fourth.

Miss Mayo's window was open. He could see that. He could see more than that, and what he saw sent him rushing through the study and out into the hall of the big apartment building, where he furiously rang the elevator bell. He had not stopped for his hat and coat, but he had caught a vision of Bangs's astonished face and half of his startled exclamation, "What the dev—"

The elevator came and Laurie leaped into it.

"Down," he said briefly.

The operator was on his way up to the twelfth floor, but something in the expression of his passenger made him change his plans. Also it accelerated his movements. The car descended briskly to the ground floor, from which point the operator was privileged to watch the progress of the temperamental Mr. Devon, who had plunged through the main entrance of the building and across the square without a word to the hall attendants, or a backward glance.

As he reached the studio building Laurie recalled himself to a memory of the conventions. He entered without undue haste, and sought the door of the waiting lift. It was noon, and an operator he had not seen before was on duty.

"Top floor," directed Laurie, and stepped into the car. The operator hesitated. He did not remember this tenant, but he must belong to the house, as he wore no hat or coat. Probably he was a new-comer, and had run down-stairs to mail an important letter, as the old building held no mail-chute. While these reflections passed slowly through his mind, his car rose as slowly. To the mentally fuming young man at his side its progress was intolerably deliberate. He held himself in, however, and even went through the pantomime of pausing in the top-floor hall

to search a pocket as if for a latch-key.

Satisfied, the attendant started the elevator on its descent, and as it sank from sight Laurie looked around him for Number Twenty-nine. He discovered it in an eye-flash, on the door at the right. The next instant he had reached this door and was softly turning the knob.

The door did not yield. He had not expected it to give, and he knew exactly what he meant to do. He stepped back a few feet, then with a rush hurled his shoulder against the wood with the full force of his foot-ball training in the effort. The lock yielded, and under the force of his own momentum the visitor shot into the room. Then, recovering his equilibrium, he pushed the door into place and stood with his back against it, breathing heavily and feeling rather foolish.

He was staring at the girl before him, who had risen at his entrance. Her expression was so full of astonished resentment, and so lacking in any other emotion, that for a sickening moment he believed he had made an idiot of himself, that he had not really seen what he thought he had seen in the glass. A small table separated him from the girl. Still staring at her, in the long seconds that elapsed before either spoke, he saw that she had swept her right hand behind her back, in a swift, instinctive effort to hide what it held. His self-possession returned. He had not been mistaken. He smiled at her apologetically.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I'm afraid I frightened you."

"You did." She spoke tensely, the effect of overstrained nerves revealing itself in her low voice. "What do you mean by it? What are you doing here?"

Laurie's brilliant eyes were on hers as she spoke, and held them steadily. Under his expression, one that few had seen on his face, her look of antagonism softened a little. He advanced slowly to the table between them.

"It will take a few minutes to explain," he said. Then, as she waited, he suddenly formed his plan, and followed the good old Devon principle of going straight to the point.

"I live diagonally across the square," he said quietly, "and I can see into your window from one of mine. So it happened that just now I—I saw what you were going to do."

For an instant she stood very still, looking at him, as if not quite taking in the meaning of his words. In the next her face and even her neck crimsoned darkly

as if under the rush of a wave of angry humiliation. When she spoke her voice shook.

"You forget," she said, "that you have no right either to look into my room or to interfere with what you see there."

"I know," he told her, humbly, "and I beg your pardon again. The looking in was an accident, the merest chance, which I will explain to you later. The interference—well, I won't apologize for that. Surely you realize that it's—friendly."

For the first time her eyes left his. She looked around the room as if uncertain what to do or say.

"Perhaps you mean it so," she muttered at last. "But I consider it—impertinent."

A change was taking place in her. The fire that had flamed up at his entrance was dying out, leaving her with the look of one who is cowed and almost beaten. Even her last words lacked assurance. Watching her in puzzled sympathy, Laurie for the first time wished himself older and wiser than he was. How could he handle a situation like this? Neither then nor later did he ask himself how he would have handled it on the stage.

For a moment the two young things gazed at each other, in helplessness and irresolution on his side, in resentful questioning on hers. Even in the high tension of the moment Laurie subconsciously took in the picture she made as she stood there, defying him, with her back to the wall of life.

She was very lovely, more lovely than in the mirror; for now he was getting the full effect of her splendid coloring, set off by the gown she wore, a thing of rich but somber shades, lit up by a semi-barbaric necklace of amber and gold, that hung almost to her knees.

Yes, the girl was a picture against the unforgetable background of that tragic situation. But what he admired most of all was the dignity that shone through her panic and her despair. She was up in arms against him. And yet, if he had not come, if that vision had not flashed into his mirror five minutes ago, she might now have been lying a huddled, lifeless thing on the very spot where she stood so proudly. At the thought his heart shook. The right words came to him at last.

"I've had—impulses—like yours," he said. "I've had them twice. Fortunately, both times there was some one around to talk me out of them." He had caught

her attention. She showed that by the way she looked at him. "The argument that impressed me most," he went on, "was that it's quitting the game. You don't look as if you were a quitter," he ended, thoughtfully.

The girl's eyes blazed. He had aroused her once more, and he was glad of it. He didn't know at all what to do or say, but he dimly felt that almost any emotion in her would be better than the lethargy she had just revealed.

"I'm not a quitter!" she cried. "But I've got dignity enough to leave a place where I'm not wanted, even if that place happens to be the world. Go away!" she added fiercely. "Go away and leave me alone!"

Resting one hand on the table between them, he held out the other.

"Come, let me have that," he suggested, imperturbably. "Then we'll talk things over. I'll try to make you realize what I was made to realize myself—that we were both on the wrong track. I'll tell you what others think who are wiser than we are."

As she did not move, he added, more lightly: "You see, what we were going to do isn't done much nowadays. It's all out of date. Come," he repeated, gently, "let me have it."

With a movement of irritation the girl swept her hand forward and tossed on the table between them the small revolver she had been holding.

"Take it," she said, almost indifferently. And she added, "Another time will do as well."

"You see, what we were going to do isn't done much nowadays"
"You see, what we were going to do isn't done much nowadays"

He picked up the little weapon and put it into his pocket.

"There isn't going to be any other time," he predicted buoyantly. "Now, slip into a coat while I run across the street and get my hat and coat and order a taxicab. We're going out to luncheon, and to tell each other the stories of our lives, with all the grim and gory details."

"I don't know you," muttered the girl. She had dropped into a chair beside the table, and was sitting with her chin in her hand, in what seemed a characteristic

attitude, watching him with an expression he could not analyze.

Laurie seemed surprised. "Why, so you don't!" he agreed. "But you're going to now. We're going to know each other awfully well before we get through. In the meantime, you can see by the merest glance at me how young and harmless I am. Where's the coat?"

He turned and began a vague, masculine search for it. The girl wavered. His rising spirits were contagious, and it was clear that she dreaded being left alone.

"I warn you," she said at last, "that if you have anything to do with me you will be sorry for it."

Laurie stopped his search, and, turning, gave her one of his straight looks.

"Why?" he demanded.

"Because I'm in a net," she said. "And every one who tries to help me gets caught in it, too. Oh, don't smile! You won't smile afterward."

He picked up a coat he discovered in a corner, and held it for her to slip into.

"I like nets," he remarked lightly, "especially if they're bright-colored, large, roomy, comfortable nets. We'll have some great times in ours. Come along."

She shrugged her shoulders, and in the gesture slipped into the garment.

"I'll go," she said, in a low voice. "But don't forget that I warned you!"

CHAPTER IV

A PAIR OF GRAY EYES

On their way to the restaurant Laurie had selected he chatted to his companion in his buoyant, irresponsible fashion, but he had put through the details of the episode with tact and delicacy. He knew that in front of a club two doors away from the studio building a short line of taxicabs was always waiting, with the vast patience of their kind. A gesture brought one of these to the door, and when it had squawked its way around the corner, the girl remained in its shelter until Laurie had briefly reëntered his own building and emerged again, wearing his coat and hat.

To the selection of the restaurant he gave careful thought. They drove to a quiet place where the food and service were excellent, while the prices were an effective barrier against a crowd. When he and his companion were seated on opposite sides of a table in an isolated corner, Laurie confided his order to the waiter, urged that willing individual to special haste, and smiled apologetically at the lady.

"I'm hungry," he said briskly. "I haven't had any breakfast this morning. Don't be surprised if I seem to absorb most of the nourishment in the place."

He studied her as he spoke. It was easy to do so, for she seemed almost to have forgotten him and her surroundings. She sat drooping forward a little in her pet attitude, with her elbows on the table, and her chin in her hand, staring through the window with the look he had seen in the mirror. The lethargy he dreaded again enveloped her like a garment.

His heart sank. Here was something more than the victim of a mad but temporary impulse. Here was a victim of a sick soul, or of a burden greater than she could bear, or perhaps of both. He decided that whatever her trouble might be, it was no new or passing thing. Every curve in her despondent figure, every line in her worn, lovely face, suggested a vast weariness of flesh and spirit. He had not seen those lines in the mirror, and he looked at them now with understanding and solemn eyes, as he had looked at the new lines in his sister's face when Barbara had been passing through the worst of her ordeal last year.

In this moment of realization he almost forgot the girl's beauty, though, indeed, it was not easy to forget. It seemed enhanced rather than dimmed by the haze of melancholy that hung over it, and certainly there was nothing dim in the superb red-gold coloring of her hair. Her eyes seemed red-gold, too, for they were reddish-brown with flecks of yellow light in them, quite wonderful eyes. He told himself that he had never seen any just like them. Certainly he had rarely seen anything to equal the somber misery of their expression. There was a remoteness in them which repelled sympathy, and which was intensified by the haughty curve of the girl's short upper lip. She was proud, proud as the devil, Laurie told himself. Again, and very humbly, he wondered how he was to handle a situation and a personality so outside his own experience. In truth, he was afraid. Though he did not know it, and perhaps would have vigorously denied it, Laurie still looked at women through stained-glass windows.

When the food came, her expression changed. She shot a quick look at him, a glance at once furtive and suspicious, which he saw but ignored. He had dismissed the waiter and was serving her himself. In the simple boyish friendliness of his manner she evidently found reassurance, for she suddenly sat up and began her breakfast.

Laurie exhaled the breath he had been holding. Up till the last moment he had feared that she might see through his subterfuge in taking her there, and even now refuse the food he offered. But if in that fleeting instant she felt doubt, it had died as it was born. She drank her coffee slowly and ate her eggs and toast as deliberately, but her characteristic air of intense preoccupation had departed. She looked at her companion as if she really saw him. Also, she apparently felt the stirring of some sense of obligation and need of response to this friendly stranger. She was answering him now, and once at least she almost smiled.

Watching the little twitch of her proud and perfect upper lip, Laurie felt his heart-beats quicken. She was a wonder, this girl; and with his delight in her beauty and her pride came another feeling, almost as new as his humility—an overwhelming sympathy for and a desire to help another.

These sentiments served as needed balance to his spirits, which, as always, mounted dangerously when he was interested. He held himself down with difficulty.

This was no time for the nonsense that he loved to talk. One doesn't rescue a lady from suicide and then try to divert her mind with innocent prattle. One

gives her a decent time to pull herself together, and then, with tact and sympathy, one gets to the roots of her trouble, if one can, and helps to destroy them. Despite his limited experience with drama off the stage, Laurie knew this. Because he was very young and very much in earnest, and was talking to a young thing like himself, though in that hour she seemed so much older, he instinctively found the right way to approach the roots.

They had finished breakfast, and he had asked and received permission to smoke. When he had lighted his cigarette and exhaled his first satisfying puff of smoke, not in rings this time, he took the cigarette from his mouth, and with his eyes on its blazing end expressed his thought with stark simplicity.

"When we were over in your studio," he said, "I admitted that twice in my life I had tried to—make away with myself. Only two other persons in the world know that, but I'd like to tell you about it, if you don't mind."

She looked at him. There were strange things in the look, things that thrilled him, and other things he subconsciously resented, without understanding why. When she spoke there was a more personal note in her voice than it had yet held.

"You?" she asked; and she added almost lightly, "That seems absurd."

"I know."

Laurie spoke with the new humility he had found only to-day.

"You think that because I'm so young I couldn't have been desperate enough for that. But—you're young, too."

He was looking straight at her as he spoke. Her eyes, a little hard and challenging, softened, then dropped.

"That's different," she muttered.

He nodded.

"I know the causes were different enough," he agreed. "But the feeling back of them, that pushes one up against such a proposition, must be pretty much the same sort of thing. Anyway, it makes me understand; and I consider that it gives me a claim on you, and the privilege of trying to help you."

Her eyes were still cast down, and suddenly she flushed, a strange, dark flush that looked out of place on the pure whiteness of her skin. She had the

exaggerated but wholesome pallor of skin that often goes with reddish hair and red-brown eyes. It does not lend itself becomingly to flushes, and this deep flush lingered, an unwelcome visitor, throughout her muttered, almost ungracious words.

"Oh, please don't talk about it," she said, brusquely. "It's no use. I know you mean to be kind, but you can't do anything."

"Oh, but that's just where you're wrong." Laurie spoke with a cheerful assurance he did not feel. "If I hadn't been there myself, I'd talk all sorts of twaddle to you, and do more harm than good; and I'd probably let you go on thinking you were facing a trouble that no one could help. Instead of that, you and I are going to hold your bugaboo up to the light, and see just what it is and how small it is. And then—" he smiled at her—"we're going to get rid of it together."

She echoed his words, vaguely, as if not knowing quite what to say.

"Get rid of it?"

"Yes. Tell me what it is, and I'll show you how it can be downed."

She pushed back her chair, as if anxious to put a greater distance between them.

"No," she exclaimed, nervously, "it's impossible; I can't talk about it." Then, in an obvious effort to side-track the issue, "You said you wanted to tell me about your—experience."

"I do, but it isn't a nice story. Fortunately, it won't take long." He spoke reluctantly. It was not easy to hook two such memories out of the darkest pool of his life and hold them up to a stranger.

"Oh, I was a young idiot," he rushed on, "and I suppose I hadn't the proper start-off. At least I like to think there's some excuse for me. My father and mother died when I was in knickerbockers, and I grew up doing very much as I pleased. I—made a bad job of it. Before I was twenty-one I was expelled from college and I had worked up a pretty black reputation. Then I gambled and lost a lot of money I didn't have, and it began to look as if about the only safe place for me was the family vault.

"I made two efforts to get there. The first time a wise old doctor stopped me and never told any one about it. The second time one of my chums took a hand in the game. I don't know why they did it. I don't suppose either my pal or the doctor

thought I was worth saving. But they talked to me like Dutch uncles, and my chum kept at it till I gave him my word that I'd never attempt anything of the sort again."

"You were just an unhappy boy," she said, as if thinking aloud, "with all life before you and many friends to back you up."

"And you," he suggested, "are just an unhappy girl with all life before you. I don't know anything about your friends, but I'll wager you've got a lot of them."

She shook her head.

"Not one," she said, slowly. "I mean, not one I dare to call on, now."

"I like that! You've got me to call on, right here."

This time she really smiled at him. It was a pathetic little smile, but both lips and eyes took part in it. He waited, but she said no more. He began to fear that his confidence had been given to no purpose. Evidently she had no intention of making a confession in return. He resumed his attack from a new angle.

"You've been disappointed in something or some one," he said. "Oh," as she made a gesture, "don't think I'm belittling it! I know it was something big. But the finish you chose wasn't meant to be, or it would have come off. You see that, don't you? The very sun in its course took pains to show you to me in time to stop it. That means something, Miss Mayo."

She seemed slightly startled.

"It is Miss Mayo, isn't it? That's the name the elevator boy gave me, yesterday."

"It will do." She spoke absently, already on the trail of another thought. Suddenly she caught it.

"Then you brought the basket, or sent it?" she cried. "It was *you!* How dared you!"

She had half risen from her chair. Bending across the table, he gently pushed her back into it.

"Sit down," he said, imperturbably.

She hesitated, and he repeated the command, this time almost curtly. Under the new tone she obeyed.

"I'm going to tell you something," he went on. "I've exhausted my slender resources of experience and tact. I don't know what any one else would do in this situation; but I do know what I'm going to do myself. And, what is a lot more important, I know what you're going to do."

She laughed, and he winced at the sound.

"That's easy," she said. "I'm going to finish the act you interrupted."

"Oh, no, you're not!"

Her lips set.

"Do you imagine you can prevent me?"

"I know I can."

His quiet assurance impressed her.

"How?" she asked, half mockingly.

"Very easily. I can take you from this restaurant to the nearest police station, and have you locked up for attempted suicide. You know, it's a crime here."

The word they had both avoided was out at last. Although he had spoken it very softly, its echoes seemed to fill the big room. She shrank back and stared at him, her hands clutching the sides of her chair.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I? I'll do it in exactly fifteen minutes, unless you give me your word that you will never make another attempt of the kind." He took his watch out of his pocket and laid it on the table between them. "It's exactly quarter-past twelve," he said. "At half-past—"

"Oh!—and I thought you were kind!"

There was horror in the brown eyes now and an antagonism that hurt him.

"Would it be kinder to let you go back to that studio and—"

She interrupted.

"How dare you interfere in my affairs! Who gave you the right?"

"Fate gave me the right. I'm its chosen specialist on the job, and you may take my word for it, my dear girl, the job's going to be done, and done up brown."

He lit a fresh cigarette.

"It will be mighty unpleasant for you," he went on, thoughtfully. "There's the publicity, you know. Of course, all the newspapers will have your pictures—"

"Oh!"

"And a lot of romantic stories—"

"Oh—you—you—"

"But of course you can avoid all that," he reminded her, "by giving me your promise."

She choked back her rising fury, and made an obvious effort at self-control.

"If I agree to these terms of yours," she asked, between her teeth, "may I be sure that you will leave me in peace and that I shall not see you again?"

He looked at her reproachfully.

"Dear me, no! Why, you'll have to see me every day. I've got to look after you for a while." At her expression his tone changed. "You see," he said, with smiling seriousness, "you have shown that just for the present you can't be trusted to guide your own actions. So I'm going to 'stick around,' and guide them for a few days, until I am sure you are yourself again!"

"This—" again she choked on the words—"this is intolerable!"

"Oh, I don't think so. You can see for yourself that I mean well, and that I'm going to be a harmless sort of watch-dog. Also, you can depend on me to go off duty as soon as it's safe. But for the present you're going to have a guardian; and it's up to you to decide whether that guardian shall be Laurence Devon, very much at your service, or the police force of the city of New York."

She had her chin in her hands now, in her characteristic pose, and was regarding him without resentment. When she finally spoke, it was without resentment, too, but coldly, as one states an unpalatable fact.

"You," she said, "are a fool."

Laurie flushed, then smiled.

"That is not a new theory," he admitted.

"Two hours ago," she said, "I warned you that it would be dangerous for you to interfere in my affairs. Did I not?"

"You did."

"I warn you again. It may be a matter of life or death. Put your watch in your pocket, pay your bill, and take me home. Then go away and forget me."

Laurie glanced at the watch.

"We have used up eight minutes since I gave you your choice," he reminded her.

"You are like a child," she muttered, "spinning his top over a powder-magazine."

Laurie frowned a little.

"Too melodramatic," he murmured.

"I tell you," she said fiercely, "you are acting like a fool! If you interfere with me you will be drawn into all sorts of trouble, perhaps into tragedy, perhaps even into disgrace."

"You're forgetting the net," he reminded her, "the nice net you mentioned this morning, with room for two. Also—" again he looked at the watch—"you're overlooking the value of time. See how fast these little hands are moving. The nearest police station is only two blocks away. Unless you give me that promise, you will be in it in—" he made a calculation—"in just about four minutes."

She seemed to come to a decision.

"Listen to me," she said, rapidly. "I cannot be frank with you—"

"I've noticed that," Laurie interpolated, "with regret."

She ignored the interruption.

"But I can tell you this much. I am not alone in my—trouble. Others are involved. They are—desperate. It is because of them that I—you understand?"

Laurie shook his head. He did not understand, at all; but vague and unpleasant memories of newspaper stories about espionage and foreign spies suddenly

filtered through his mind.

"It sounds an awful mess," he said frankly. "If it's got anything to do with German propaganda—"

She interrupted with a gesture of impatience.

"No, no!" she cried. "I am not a German or a propagandist, or a pacifist or a spy. That much, at least, I can tell you."

"Then that's all right!" Laurie glanced at his watch again. "If you had been a German spy," he added, "with a little round knob of hair on the back of your head and bombs in every pocket, I couldn't have had much to do with you, I really couldn't. But as you and your companions are not involved in that kind of thing, I am forced to remind you that you'll be headed toward the station in just one minute."

"I hate you!" she said between her teeth.

He shook his head at her. "Oh, no, you don't!" he said kindly. "But I see plainly that you're a self-willed young person. Association with me, and the study of my poise, will do a lot for you. By the way, you have only thirty seconds left."

"Do you want to be killed?"

She hissed the words at him.

"Good gracious, no!" Laurie spoke absently, his eyes on the watch. "Twenty seconds," he ended.

"Do you want to be maimed or crippled, or—or kidnapped?"

He looked up in surprise.

"I don't know why you imagine I have such lurid tastes," he said, discontentedly. "Of course I don't want any of those things. My nature is a quiet one, and already I'm dreading the excitement of taking you to the station. But now I must ask you to put on your gloves and button up your coat for our little journey."

"The journey you make with me," she said, with deep meaning, "may be a long and hard one."

He stood up.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," he told her. "But we'll have to postpone it. Our journey to the station comes first."

She sat still, looking at him.

"I know your type now," she said suddenly. "You live in your little groove, and you think that nothing happens in the world except what you see under your nose."

"Something awfully unpleasant is going to happen under my nose right now," announced her companion, disconsolately. "Come along, please. It's time to start."

She stood up, faced him for a second, and then dropped back into her chair with a gesture of finality. Her expression had changed back to the lethargy of her first moments in the restaurant.

"Very well," she said. "Have it your way." She added significantly, "This may be the last time you have your way about anything!"

"You have a depressing outlook," grumbled Laurie, contentedly sitting down again. "It isn't playing the game to spoil my triumph with such predictions as that, especially as I'm going to have my way about a lot of things right now. I have your word," he added.

"Yes."

"Good! Now I'll give you my program. First of all, I'm going to be a brother to you; and I don't think," he ended thoughtfully, "that I've ever offered to be a brother to any girl before."

"You're a nice boy," she said abruptly.

He smiled at her.

"A nice boy, though a fool. I hoped you would notice that. You'll be dazzled by my virtues before you're through with me." He went on conversationally: "The reason I've never offered to be a brother to any girl before is that I've got a perfectly good sister of my own. Her one fault is that she's always bossed me. I warn you from the start of our relations that I'm going to be the boss. It will be the first time I've ever bossed any one, and I'm looking forward to it a lot."

The faintest suggestion of a smile touched her short upper lip. Above it, her red-

brown eyes had softened again. She drew a deep breath.

"It's strange," she said. "You've let me in for all sorts of things you don't realize. And yet, somehow, I feel, for the time at least, as if I had been lying under the weight of the world and some one had lifted the wretched thing off me."

"Can't you, by a supreme effort of the imagination, fancy that I lifted it off?" suggested Laurie, mildly.

This time she really smiled.

"I can," she conceded. "And without any effort at all," she added somberly, "I can fancy us both under it again."

He shook his head.

"That won't do!" he declared. "The lid is off. You've just admitted it. You feel better for having it off. So do I. As your big brother, and self-appointed counselor, I choose this opportunity to tell you what you're going to do."

She pursed her lips at him. It was the gesture of a rebellious child. Her entire manner had changed so suddenly that Laurie felt a bewilderment almost equal to his satisfaction in it. For the first time throughout the interview he experienced the thrill she had given him in the mirror.

"Yes?" she prompted.

"In the first place—" He hesitated. The ground that stretched between them now was firmer, but still uncertain. One false step might lose him much of what he had gained. "There's the question of your future," he went on, in a brisk, matter-of-fact tone. "I spent two months last year looking for a job in New York. I was about down to my last cent before I found it. It occurred to me that, perhaps, you —" He was beginning to flounder.

"That I am out of work?" she finished, calmly. "You are right."

Laurie beamed at her. Surely his way was clear now!

"I had a streak of luck last year," he resumed. "I collaborated on a play that people were foolish enough to like. Ever since that, money has poured in on me in the most vulgar way. I clink when I walk. Dollars ooze from my pockets when I make a gesture. Last week, at the bank, the cashier begged me to take some of my money away and do something with it. He said it was burdening the

institution. So, as your adopted brother, I'm going to start a bank-account for you," he ended, simply.

"Indeed you are not!"

"Indeed I am!"

"I agreed to live. I did not agree to—what is it you Americans say?—to sponge!"

He ignored all but one phrase of the reply.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded with quickened interest. "Aren't you an American?"

She bit her lip.

"N-o—not wholly."

"What, then?"

She hesitated.

"I can't tell you that just yet," she said at last.

"Oh-h!" Laurie pursed his lips in a noiseless whistle. The girl's voice was musically English, and though her accent was that of London, up till now she had spoken as colloquially as any American. Indeed, her speech was much like his sister's. He was puzzled.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"That I am not wholly American?" She was smiling at him ironically, but he remained serious.

"Yes. And—oh, a lot of things! Of course you know I am all at sea about you."

The familiar shadow fell over her face.

"When one is within an hour or two of the next world," she asked indifferently, "why should one tell anybody anything?"

"How long have you been in America?"

"All my life, off and on."

This at least was reassuring. He imagined he saw a gleam of light. The girl had declared that she was not a spy, nor involved in war propaganda; but it was quite possible, he reasoned, that she was enmeshed in some little web of politics, of vast importance to her and her group, of very little importance to any one else.

"I suppose," he suggested cheerfully, "that net you've said so much about is a political net?"

They had been speaking throughout in low tones, inaudible at any other table. Their nearest fellow diners were two middle-aged women at least thirty feet away. But she started violently under his words. She made a quick gesture of caution, and, turning half-around, swept the room with a frightened glance. Laurie, his cigarette forgotten in his fingers, watched her curiously, taking in her evident tension, her slowly returning poise, and at last the little breath of relief with which she turned back to him.

"I wish I could tell you all you want to know," she said, "but—I can't. That's all there is to it. So please let us change the subject."

His assurance returned.

"You're not a crowned head or an escaped princess or anything of that kind, are you?" he asked politely.

This time she really laughed, a soft, low gurgle of laughter, joyous and contagious.

"No."

"Then let's get back to our bank-account. We have plenty of time to run over to the Fifth Avenue branch of the Corn Exchange Bank before the closing-hour. What color of check-book do you prefer?"

"I told you," she declared with sudden seriousness, "that my bargain did not include sponging."

For the first time in the somewhat taxing interview her companion's good humor deserted him.

"My dear girl," he said, almost impatiently, "don't beat the devil around the bush! You've got to live till we can find the right work for you, and that may take some time. You have intelligence enough to see that I'm neither a gay Lothario nor a

Don Juan. In your present state of mind you're not fit to decide anything. Make up your mind, once for all, that I'm going to decide for you. It will save us both some trouble."

He stopped. He had discovered that she was not listening to him. She was sitting absolutely still, her head a little turned. Her lips were slightly parted, and her eyes, wide and staring, were fixed on some one across the room.

Laurie's eyes followed hers. They focused on a man sitting alone at a little table. It was clear that he had just entered, for a waiter stood by his side, and the new-comer was giving judicious attention to the bill of fare.

He was a harmless-looking person, of medium height and rather more than medium stoutness, carelessly dressed in a blue-serge suit. His indifference to dress was further betrayed by the fact that his ready-made black four-in-hand tie had slipped the mooring of a white bone stud, leaving that useful adjunct of the toilet open to the eyes of the world. His face was round, smooth-shaven, and rather pale. He had dark brown hair, surprisingly sleek, and projecting, slightly veiled gray eyes, which blinked near-sightedly at the menu. Altogether he was a seemingly worthy person, to whom the casual observer would hardly have given a second glance.

While the two pairs of eyes across the room stared at him, he confided his order to the waiter. It seemed a brief order, for the brow of the latter clouded as he wrote it down and detachedly strolled off. The new-comer leaned back in his chair, and, as he did so, glanced around the room. His projecting eyes, moving indifferently from table to table, suddenly rested, fixed, on the girl. They showed interest but no surprise. He bowed with a half-smile—an odd smile, bland, tolerant, and understanding. Then, disregarding her lack of response, he fixed his eyes on the wall facing him and waited patiently for his luncheon to be served.

Laurie's attention returned to the girl. She was facing him again, but her eyes looked past him as if he were not there.

"He has found me, even here," she muttered. "Of course he would. He always does."

Laurie looked at her.

"Do you mean," he asked crisply, "that that chap across the room is following you around?"

She looked at him, as if abruptly recalled to the fact of his presence. Her eyes dropped.

"Yes," she muttered, dully. "I may escape him for a time, but he always learns where I am. He will catch me when he chooses, and roll me about under his paws for a while, and then—perhaps—let me go again."

"That sounds like a certain phase of domestic life," commented Laurie. "Is he by any chance your husband?"

Her eyes held a rising anger.

"He is not," she said. "I am not married."

Laurie dropped his dead cigarette into the ash tray, and rose with a sigh.

"It's all very confusing," he admitted, "and a digression from the main issue. But I'm afraid I shall have to go to the exertion of reasoning with him."

She started up, but before she could protest or restrain him, he had left her and crossed the room to the stranger's table.

CHAPTER V

MR. HERBERT RANSOME SHAW

The man in the shabby blue-serge suit detached his absent gaze from the opposite wall, and looked up quickly when Laurie stopped at his side. He was clearly surprised, but courteous. He half rose from his chair, but the new-comer waved him back and dropped easily into the vacant seat opposite him. He was smiling. The man in blue serge was not. He looked puzzled, though vaguely responsive. A third person, watching the two, might almost have thought the episode the casual reunion of men who frequently lunched together.

Laurie leaned forward in his chair, rested one elbow on the table, and, opening his cigarette-case, extended it to the stranger. The latter rejected it with a slight bow.

"Thank you, but not before lunch," he said, quietly. His voice and manner were those of an educated man. The quality of his tone was slightly harsh.

Laurie lit a cigarette, blew out the match, and looked straight into the stranger's projecting gray eyes. He had acted impulsively. Now that he was here, he was anxious to put the job over concisely, firmly, but, above all, neatly. There must be nothing done that would attract the attention of the few persons in the big room.

"I came over here," he said casually, "to mention to you that you are annoying the lady I am with. I want to mention also that the annoyance must stop."

The glance of the stranger held. Laurie observed with interest that the veiled look of the projecting eyes had changed a little. The change did not add to the stranger's charm.

"Before I answer you, tell me one thing," he said, formally. "By what right do you act as the lady's protector?"

Laurie hesitated an instant. The question was embarrassing.

"Has she authorized you to act?"

"In a way, but—"

"How long have you known her? How well do you know her?"

Command of the interview was slipping from the younger man. He resolutely resumed it.

"Look here," he said, firmly, "I came to this table to tell you something, but I will decide what that is to be. I am not here to answer questions. It is enough for you to know that circumstances have given me the right to protect the lady from annoyance. I want to make it clear to you that I shall exercise that right. Hereafter you are to let her alone. Do you understand? Absolutely alone. You are not to follow her, not to enter places where she is, not to bow to her, nor to be where she can see you," he recklessly ended.

The stranger looked at him through the light veil which seemed again to have fallen over the projecting eyes.

"I should really like to know," he said, "when and where you met her. I saw you starting off together in the taxicab, but I am not quite sure whether your first encounter occurred this morning."

"And you won't be." Laurie stood up. "I've warned you," he said curtly. "I don't know how well you understand our laws in this country, but I fancy you know enough of them to realize that you cannot shadow a lady without getting into trouble."

"She admitted that?" The stranger appeared to experience a tepid glow of emotion. "She must know you better than I thought," he added reflectively. "Doris is not the type to pour her confidence into every new ear," he mused, seeming to forget the other's presence in his interest in this revelation.

"Have I made myself quite clear?"

Laurie was staring at him with a mingling of resentment and interest. The other nodded.

"You have, my young friend," he said, with sudden seriousness, "and now I, too, will be clear. In return for one warning, I will give you another. Keep out of matters that do not concern you."

Laurie grinned at him.

"You forget that I have made this matter my concern," he said, lightly. "Try to remember that."

The other man rose. His manner had changed to a sort of impatient weariness.

"Get her out of here," he said abruptly. "You are beginning to irritate me, you two. Take her home, and then keep away from her, unless you are looking for trouble."

He delivered the last words so clearly and menacingly that the waiter who had appeared with his luncheon heard them and fell back a step. Looking into the veiled eyes, Laurie also felt a sense of recoil. The fellow was positively venomous. There was something serpentlike in the dull but fixed look of those goggling eyes, in the forward thrust of the smooth brown head.

"I've said my say," he retorted. "If I ever catch you around that studio, or in any way annoying the lady, I'll thrash you within an inch of your life; and then I'll turn what's left of you over to the authorities. Understand?"

He nodded and strolled back to Miss Mayo's table. For an instant the other man stood looking after him, as if tempted to follow. Then, with a shrug, he dropped into his chair and began the luncheon the waiter had placed before him.

Laurie found the girl standing by the table, ready for the street, her coat fastened, her gloves buttoned.

"Oh, how could you!" she gasped. "What did he say?"

Laurie summoned the waiter with a gesture and asked for his account.

"Sit down a minute," he suggested, "and tell me who he is."

"Not here," she urged. "I couldn't breathe here. Hurry, please. Let us get away!"

She was so obviously in earnest that he yielded. He paid the bill, which the waiter had ready, accepted that appreciative servitor's help with his overcoat, and escorted his guest from the room.

"But, for heaven's sake, don't run!" he laughed. "Do you want the creature to think we're flying before him?"

She flushed and moderated her pace. Side by side, and quite deliberately, they left the restaurant, while the stranger watched them with his dull, fixed gaze. He

seemed to have recovered his temper, but it was also plain that the little encounter had given him something to think about. When he resumed his luncheon he ate slowly and with an air of deep abstraction, as if working out some grave problem.

"What's his name?" asked Laurie, as he helped Miss Mayo into a waiting taxicab.

She looked startled. Indeed, his most casual questions seemed to startle her and put her, in a way, on her guard.

"Shaw," she answered, unwillingly.

"Is it spelled P-s-h-a-w?"

Laurie asked the question with polite interest. Then, realizing that in her preoccupation she did not follow this flight of his mercurial spirits, he sobered. "It's a perfectly good name," he conceded, "but there must be more of it. What's the rest?"

"He calls himself Herbert Ransome Shaw."

Laurie made a mental note of the name.

"I shall call him Bertie," he firmly announced, "to show you how unimportant he really is. By the way,"—a sudden memory struck him—"he told me your name —Doris."

He added the name so simply that he seemed to be calling her by it. A faint shadow of her elusive smile touched her lips.

"I like it—Doris," Laurie repeated, dreamily.

"I am so glad," she murmured.

He ignored the irony in her tone.

"I suppose you have several more, like our friend Bertie, but you needn't tell them to me. If I had to use them every time I spoke to you, it might check my inspiration. Doris will do very nicely. Doris, Doris!"

"Are you making a song of it?"

"Yes, a hymn."

She looked at him curiously.

"You're a queer boy. I can't quite make you out. One minute you're serious, and the next—"

"If you're puzzled over me, picture my mental turmoil over you."

"Oh—me?" With a gesture she consigned herself to the uttermost ends of the universe.

The taxicab had stopped. They had reached the studio building without observing the fact. The expression on the features of the chauffeur suggested that if they wanted to sit still all day they could do it, but that it would not be his personal choice. Doris held out her hand.

"Good-by," she said gently. "And thank you. I'm really more—appreciative—than I seem."

Laurie's look expressed more surprise than he had ever really experienced over anything.

"But we haven't settled matters!" he cried. "We're going to the bank—"

"We are not."

She spoke with sharp decision. Then, relenting at the expression of his face, she touched the heavy gold-and-amber chain around her neck.

"I can pawn this," she said briefly. "It didn't seem worth while before, but as I've got to go on, I promise you I will do it. I will do it to-day," she added hurriedly, "this afternoon, if you wish. It is valuable. I can get enough on it to keep me for a month."

"Till we find that job for you," he suggested, brightening.

She agreed, with a momentary flash of her wonderful smile.

"And you will let me drop in this evening and take you to dinner?"

"No, thank you. But—" again she relented—"you may come in for an hour at eight."

"I believe you *are* a crowned head," murmured Laurie, discontentedly. "That's just the way they do in books. When I come I suppose I must speak only when

I'm spoken to. And when you suddenly stand up at nine, I'll know the audience is over."

She laughed softly, her red-brown eyes shining at him. Her laughter was different from any other laughter he had ever heard.

"Good-by," she repeated.

He helped her out of the cab and escorted her into the studio building, where he rang the elevator bell and waited, hat in hand, until the car came down. When it arrived, Sam was in it. Before it stopped he had recognized the waiting pair through the open ironwork of the door. To Laurie, the elevator and Sam's jaw seemed to drop in unison.

The next instant the black boy had resumed his habitual expression of indifference to all human interests. Dead-eyed, he stared past the two young things. Dead-eared, he ignored their moving lips. But there was fellowship in the jocund youth of all three. In an instant when Laurie stepped back into the hall as the car shot upward, the eyes of negro and white man flashed a question and an answer:

In Sam's: "You done took her out an' fed her?"

In Laurie's: "You bet your boots I did!"

CHAPTER VI

LAURIE SOLVES A PROBLEM

Laurie walked across the square to his own rooms. A sudden gloom had fallen upon him. He saw himself sitting in his study, gazing remotely at his shoes, until it was time to dress for the evening and his formal call on Doris.

The prospect was not attractive. He hoped Bangs would be at home. If so, perhaps he could goad him into one of the rages in which Bangs was so picturesque; but he was not sure of even this mild diversion. Rodney had been wonderfully sweet-tempered the past three days, though preoccupied, as if in the early stages of creative art. Laurie half suspected that he had begun work on his play. The suspicion aroused conflicting emotions of relief and half-jealous regret. Why couldn't the fellow wait till they could go at it together? He ignored the fact that already the fellow had waited six weeks.

Bangs was not at home. The square, flat-topped mahogany desk at which the two young men worked together blinked up at Laurie with the undimmed luster of a fine piece of furniture on which the polisher alone had labored that morning. Without taking the trouble to remove his hat and coat, Laurie dropped into a chair and tried to think things out. But the process of thinking eluded him, or, rather, his mind shied at it as a skittish horse might shy if confronted on a dark road with shapes vaguely familiar yet mysterious.

Frankly, he couldn't make head or tail of this mess Doris seemed to be in. His memory reminded him that such "messes" existed. He had heard and read of all sorts of plots and counter-plots, in which all types of humans figured. His imagination underscored the memory. But, someway, Doris—he loved to repeat the name even to himself—someway Doris was not the type that figured in such plots.

Also, there were other things hard to understand. She had let herself starve for four days, though she wore around her neck a chain that she admitted represented a month's support. And this fellow, Herbert Ransome Shaw—where the devil did he come in? A fellow with a name like that and with snaky eyes like his was capable of anything. And yet—

Young Devon had the intolerance of American youth for the things outside his personal experience. The sort of thing Doris was hinting at didn't happen here; that was all there was to it. What *was* happening seemed pretty clear. The girl was, or fancied herself, in the power of an unscrupulous scamp who was using that power for some purpose of his own. If that was it—and this thing, Laurie handsomely admitted, really did happen sometimes—it ought to be fairly easy for an athletic chap of twenty-four to put an end to it. He recalled the look in Shaw's projecting eyes, the snakelike forward thrust of his sleek head; and an intense desire seized him to get his hands on the fellow's throat and choke him till his eyes stuck out twice as far as they did now. If that were duty, then duty would be a delight.

Having reached this edifying point in his reflections, he rose. Why delay? Perhaps he could find the chap somewhere. Perhaps the waiter at the restaurant where they had lunched knew where he lived. But, no, of course not. It was not the kind of restaurant his sort patronized. Shaw had simply followed him and Doris there; that was all there was to it. He, Laurie, would have to wait for another encounter. Meantime he might run around to the club and box for an hour. He had been getting a bit out of condition this month. A bout with McDonald, the club trainer, would do him good. Or, by Jove, he'd go and see Louise Ordway!

He had promised his new brother-in-law, Bob Warren, to keep an eye on Bob's sister while Warren and Barbara were in Japan, and Laurie had kept the promise with religious fidelity and very real pleasure. He immensely liked and admired Mrs. Ordway, who seemed, strangely, to be always at home of late. He had formed the habit of running in several times a week. Louise not only talked, but, as Laurie expressed it, "she said things." He had spent with her many of the afternoons and evenings Bangs checked up to the cabarets.

He glanced at his watch. For an hour he had been impersonating a gentleman engaged in profound meditation, with the sole result that he had decided to go to see Louise. It was quite possible he could enlist her interest in Doris. Now, that was an inspiration! Perhaps Mrs. Ordway would understand Doris. Every woman, he vaguely believed, understood all other women. He smoothed his hair, straightened his tie, and hurried off.

He found Mrs. Ordway reclining on a *chaise longue* before an open fire, in the boudoir in which his sister Barbara had spent so many hours of the past year, playing the invalid to sleep. She wore a superb Mandarin coat, of soft and

ravishing tints, and her love for rich colors was reflected in the autumnal tones of her room and even in the vari-colored flames of her driftwood fire. To Louise these colors were as definite as mellow trumpet-tones. She had responded to them all her life. She was responding to them still, now that she lay dying among them. Something in their superb arrogance called forth an answering note from her own arrogant soul.

She greeted her brother's young brother-in-law with the almost disdainful smile she now turned on everything, but which was softened a little for him. Ignorant of the malady that was eating her life away, as indeed all her friends were ignorant of it, save Barbara and her doctors, Laurie delighted in the picture she made. He showed his delight as he dropped into a chair by her side. They fell at once into the casual banter that characterized their intercourse.

"I wonder why I ever leave here?" he mused aloud, as the clock struck six. He had been studying with a slight shock the changes that had taken place in the few days since he had seen her. For the first time the suspicion crossed his mind that she might be seriously ill. Throughout their talk he had observed things, trifles, perhaps, but significant, which, if they had occurred before, had escaped him.

Susanne, Mrs. Ordway's maid, though modestly in the background, was rarely out of sight; and a white-capped nurse, till now an occasional and illusive vision in the halls, blew in and out of the sick-room like a breeze, bringing liquids in glasses, which the patient obediently swallowed. Laurie, his attention once caught, took it all in. But his face gave no hint of his new knowledge, and the eyes of Louise still met his with the challenge they turned on every one these days—a challenge that definitely forbade either understanding or sympathy.

"The real problem is why you ever come." She spoke lightly, but looked at him with genuine affection. Laurie was one of her favorites, her prime favorite, indeed, next to Bob and Barbara. He smiled at her with tender significance.

"You know why I come."

"I do," she agreed, "perfectly. I know you're quite capable of flirting with me, too, if I'd let you, you absurd boy. Laurie,"—for a moment or two she was almost serious—"why don't you fall in love?"

"And this from you?"

"Don't be foolish. You know I like your ties," she interpolated kindly. "But,

really, isn't there some one?"

Laurie turned his profile to her, pulled a lock of hair over his brow, clasped his hands between his knees, and posed esthetically.

"Do you know," he sighed, "I begin to think that, just possibly, perhaps, there's a slight chance—that there is!"

"Be serious. Tell me about her."

"Well, she's a girl." He produced this confidence with ponderous solemnity. "She lives across the square from me," he added.

"Things brighten," commented Louise, drily. "Go on."

"She's mysterious. I don't know who she is, or anything about her. But I know that she's in trouble."

"Of course she is! I have never known a mysterious maiden that wasn't," commented the woman of the world. "What's her particular variety of trouble?"

Laurie reflected.

"That's hard to say," he brought out at last. "But it appears to be mixed up with an offensive person in a crumpled blue suit who answers to the name of Herbert Ransome Shaw. Have you ever heard of him?"

Louise wrinkled her fastidious nose.

"Never, I'm happy to say. But he doesn't sound attractive. However, tell me all about them. There seems a good chance that they may get you into trouble."

"That's what she said."

"It's the one gleam of intelligence I see in the situation," commented his candid friend. "Is she pretty?"

"As lovely in her way as you are. Think you could help her any?" wheedled Laurie.

"I doubt it. I'm too selfish to be bothered with girls who are in trouble. I'll tell you who *can* help her—Sonya Orleneff."

"Of course!" Laurie beamed at her. "Wonder why I didn't think of that."

"Probably because it was so obvious. Sonya is in town, as it happens, stopping at the Warwick. She has brought the Infant Samuel to New York to have his adenoids cut out. Samuel made a devastating visit here this morning. He's getting as fat as a little pig, and when he walks he puffs like a worn-out automobile going up a steep grade. He came up my stairs on 'low,' and I'm sure they heard him on the avenue. I almost offered him a glass of gasolene. But he is a lamb," she added reflectively. Oddly enough, Samuel, late of New York's tenements, was another of her favorites.

Laurie was following his own thoughts. Sonya was in town! Then, however complicated his problem, it was already as good as solved.

"My dinner will be up soon," suggested Louise. "Are you dining with me?"

He glanced at his watch, reproachfully shook his head at it, and rose.

"Three hours of me are all you can have this time. But I'll probably drop around about dawn to-morrow."

"Nice boy!" Her hot hand caught his and held it. "Laurie, if—if—I should send for you suddenly sometime—you'd come and—stand by?"

All the gaiety was wiped from his face. His brilliant black eyes, oddly softened, looked into her haughty blue ones with sudden understanding.

"You bet I will! Any time, anything! You'll remember that? Send for me as if I were Bob. Perhaps you've forgotten it," he added, more lightly, "but I happen to be your younger brother."

For a moment her face twisted. The mask of her arrogance fell from it.

"Bob didn't know," she said. "If he had felt the least suspicion he wouldn't have gone so far, or for so long. I thought I had three or four months—"

Laurie bent and kissed her cheek.

"I'm coming in every day," he said, and abruptly left the room.

In the lower hall he stopped to take in the full real realization of what he had discovered. Louise, superb, arrogant, beautiful Louise, was really ill, desperately ill. A feeling of remorse mingled with his sense of shock. He had believed her a sort of nervous hypochondriac. He had so resented her excessive demands on Barbara that it was only since he had seen much of her in this last month that he

had been able whole-heartedly to like and admire her.

As he stood silent, he became conscious of another presence—an august, impressive one, familiar in the past but veiled now, as it were, in a midst of human emotion. It was Jepson, the butler. He coughed humbly.

"Hexcuse me, sir," he faltered. "But Mrs. Hordway h'ain't quite so well lately, sir. 'Ave you hobserved that?"

Laurie nodded. "I noticed it to-day," he admitted.

"She's losin' strength very fast, sir. Hall of us 'as seen it. Cook says she don't eat nothink. And Susanne and the nurse says it's 'ard work to get 'er from the bed to 'er chair—"

Laurie checked these revelations.

"Has the doctor been here to-day?"

"Yessir, two of 'em 'ave been 'ere. Doctor Speyer comes hevery day. This morning 'e brought Doctor Hames again. Hit's very hupsetting, sir, with 'er brother away and hall."

The man was genuinely anxious. Laurie tried to reassure him.

"She may be better in a day or two," he said, more buoyantly than he felt. "But I'll come in every day. And here's my telephone number. If anything goes wrong, call me up immediately. Leave a message if I'm not there."

"Yessir. Thank you, sir." Jepson was pathetically grateful and relieved. He had the English servant's characteristic need of sanction and authority.

When Laurie reached his rooms, he called Sonya on the telephone. Like Jepson, he was feeling rather overwhelmed by his responsibilities. It was a relief to hear Sonya's deep, colorful voice.

"Didn't know you were here till just now," he told her. "I'm coming to see you in the morning. I want to talk to you about a lot of things."

"Including Mrs. Ordway?" suggested Sonya.

"Yes. You saw her to-day. You noticed—"

"Of course. Samuel is to be operated on to-morrow. I'll send him back to Devon

House with his mother in a few days, as soon as he can safely travel, and I shall stay right here."

"That's splendid of you!"

"It's what Barbara and Mr. Warren would wish. And Mrs. Ordway, too, I think, though she would never suggest it."

"I'm sure it is."

Laurie hung up the receiver with a nervous hand. To a youth of twenty-four it is a somewhat overpowering experience to discover that destiny is especially busy over the affairs of two women for whom he has assumed a definite responsibility. As he turned from the instrument its bell again compelled his attention. He took up the receiver, and the voice of a girl came to his ear. A week or two ago he had rather liked that voice and its owner, a gay, irresponsible, good-hearted little creature who pranced in the front row of an up-town pony ballet. Now he listened to it with keen distaste.

"Hello, Laurie," it twittered. "Is that you? This is Billie. Listen. I gotta plan. A bunch of us is goin' out to Gedney to supper to-night. We're goin' to leave right after the show. Are you on?"

Laurie got rid of the fair Billie. He did it courteously but very firmly. A rather unusual degree of firmness was necessary, for Miss Billie was not used to having her invitations refused. She accepted the phenomenon with acute unwillingness and very lingeringly.

Bangs was not at home, to divert his chum's mind with his robust conversation. As he dressed for his call on Doris, the sharp contrasts of life struck Laurie with the peculiar force with which they hit the young and the inexperienced.

But were they really contrasts? On the one side were Louise, dying, and Doris, seemingly eager to die. On the other were Billie and her friends—foolish little butterflies, enjoying their brief hour in the secret garden of life, eternally chattering about "good times," playing they were happy, perhaps even thinking they were happy, but infinitely more tragic figures than Louise and Doris. Yet a week ago he had thought they amused him!

Pondering on these and other large problems, he absently removed the bloom from three fresh white ties.

CHAPTER VII

GRIGGS GETS AN ORDER

At eight o'clock Laurie found Doris sitting under the shade of a reading-lamp in her studio, deep in the pages of a sophisticated French novel and radiating an almost oppressive atmosphere of well-being.

Subconsciously, he resented this. His mood was keyed to tragedy. But he returned her half-serious, half-mocking smile with one as enigmatic, shook hands with grave formality, and surveyed with mild interest a modest heap of bank-notes of small denominations that lay on the table, catching the room's high lights. Following his glance, Doris nodded complacently.

"I left them there for you to see," she remarked.

"Did the kind gentleman under the three balls give you all that?"

"He did. Count it."

Laurie frowned.

"Don't be so arrogant about your wealth. It's fleeting. Any copy-book will tell you so."

She opened a small drawer in the table, swept the bills into it, and casually closed it. Laurie stared.

"Are you going to leave it there? Just like that?"

She looked patient.

"Why not?"

"I begin to understand why you are sometimes financially cramped."

He took the bills, smoothed them out flat, rolled back the rug to the edge of the table, laid the money under it, and carefully replaced the rug.

"That's the place to put it," he observed, with calm satisfaction. "No one

connected with a studio ever lifts a rug. Bangs and I used to throw our money under the furniture, and pick it up as we needed it; but others sometimes reached it first. This way is better. How lovely you look!" he added. As he spoke he comfortably seated himself on the other side of the reading-lamp, and moved the lamp to a point where it would not obstruct his view of her.

She did look lovely. She had put on an evening gown, very simply made, but rich in the Oriental coloring she loved. She was like Louise in that. Laurie's thoughts swung to the latter's sick-room, and his brilliant young face grew somber. The girl lounging in the big chair observed the sudden change in his expression. She pushed a box of cigarettes toward him.

"Smoke if you like," she said, indifferently. "All my friends do."

He caught the phrase. Then she had friends!

"Including Herbert Ransome Shaw?" he asked, as he lit a match.

"Don't include him among my friends! But—he was here this afternoon."

"He was!" In his rising interest Laurie nearly let the match go out. "What did he want?"

"To warn me to have nothing to do with you."

"I like his infernal cheek!"

Laurie lit the cigarette and puffed at it savagely. Then, rising, he drew his chair forward and sat down facing her.

"See here," he said quietly, "you'd better tell me the whole story. I can't help you much if I'm kept in the dark. But if you'll let me into things—And before I forget it," he interrupted himself to interject, "I want to bring a friend of mine to call on you. She will be a tower of strength. She's a Russian, and one of the best women I know."

She listened with a slight smile.

"What's her name?"

"Miss Orleneff, Sonya Orleneff, a great pal of my sister's and an all-round good sort. I'd like to bring her in to-morrow afternoon. Will five be convenient?"

"No." She spoke now with the curtness of the morning. "In no circumstances,"

she added, decisively.

"But—why?"

He was dazed. If ever a knight errant worked under greater difficulties than these, Laurie told himself, he'd like to know the poor chap's name.

"I have no wish to meet Miss Orleneff."

"But she's an ideal person for you to know, experienced, sympathetic, and understanding. She did a lot for my sister last year. I must tell you all about that sometime. She could do more for you—"

"Mr. Devon!" The finality of her tone brought him up short. "We must understand each other."

"I should like nothing better." He, too, was suddenly formal.

"This morning you projected yourself into my life."

"Literally," he cordially agreed.

"I am grateful to you for what you did and what you wish to do. But I will not meet any more strangers. I will not meet Miss Orleneff, or any one else. Is that clear?"

"Oh, perfectly!" Laurie sighed. "Of course you're a crowned head," he mused aloud. "I had forgotten. Would you like my head on a charger, or anything like that?"

She studied him thoughtfully.

"There is someone outside that door!" she whispered

"There is someone outside that door!" she whispered

"Almost from the first," she said, "and except for an occasional minute or two, you have refused to be serious. That interests me. Why is it? Aren't you willing to realize that there are real troubles in the world, terrible troubles, that the bravest go down under?"

"Of course." He was serious now. He had begun to realize that fully. "It's my unfortunate manner, I suppose," he defended himself. "I've never taken anything

seriously for very long. It's hard to form the habit, all of a sudden."

"You will have to take me seriously."

He made a large gesture of acceptance.

"All right," he promised. "That brings us back to where we were. Tell me the truth. If there's anything in it that really menaces you, you'll find me serious enough."

Before answering, she rose and opened the studio door, on which, he observed with approval, a strong new lock and an inside bolt had already been placed. He saw her peer up and down the hall. Then she closed and bolted the door, and returned to her chair. The precaution brought before him a mental vision of Herbert Ransome Shaw prowling about the dim corridors. He spoke incredulously.

"Are you really afraid of that chap?"

"I have good reason to be," she said quietly. She sat down in her chair again, rested her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, in the pose already so familiar to him, and added quietly, "He is the source of all my present trouble."

She stopped and turned her head to listen.

"Do you hear anything moving in the hall?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"No. Shall I look?"

She shook her head. "Don't unbolt the door."

"You're nervous. I'm sure there's nothing there. Please go on," he urged. "Our little friend Bertie—"

Seeing her expression, he stopped short. "Forgive me," he said, humbly. "But the plain truth is, it's awfully hard for me to take that fellow seriously. Oh, I know he's venomous," he conceded, "but I can't help feeling that he hasn't as much power over you as you think he has."

He realized that she was listening, but not to him.

"There *is* some one outside that door!" she whispered.

Laurie leaped to the door as noiselessly as a cat, unbolted it, and flung it open.

The hall was empty. He had an instantaneous impression that something as silent as a moving shadow had vanished around the staircase at the far end, but when he reached the spot he saw nothing save the descending iron spirals of successive stairways. He returned to his companion, smiling reassuringly.

"It's our nerves," he said. "In a few minutes more I shall be worrying about Bertie, myself."

"Bolt the door again," she directed.

He obeyed. She went on as if there had been no interruption to their talk.

"It isn't what he is," she admitted. "He himself is nothing, as you say. It's what is back of him that—that frightens me! Why don't you smoke?" she interrupted herself to ask.

Laurie automatically selected and lit another cigarette.

"I know what's going to be back of Bertie pretty soon," he darkly predicted. "Whoever he is, and whatever he is doing, he has a big jolt coming to him, and it's coming fast."

He laid down the cigarette and turned to her with his most charming expression, a wonderfully sweet smile, half shy, wholly boyish. Before this look, any one who loved Laurence Devon was helpless.

"Come," he said gently, "tell me the whole story. You know it's not curiosity that makes me ask. But how can I help you when I'm working in the dark?"

As she hesitated, his brilliant eyes, so softened now, continued to hold hers.

"And I want to help you," he added. "I want that privilege more than I want anything else in the world."

For a long moment she sat still, as if considering his words, her eyes on her hands, folded in her lap. The strange, deep flush he had noticed once before again stained her face. At last she straightened up with a quick movement, throwing back her shoulders as if to take on again some burden they had almost cast off.

"I am sorry to seem so mysterious," she said, "and so unresponsive. I will tell you this much, and it is more than I ought to say. In the situation we are in I am in his power, horribly so. He can crush me at any time he chooses."

"Then why doesn't he?"

The gentleness of her caller's voice softened the brusqueness of his words.

"Because—" She stopped again. For the first time she had become embarrassed and self-conscious. She made her climax in a rush: "Lately he insists that he has fallen in love with me!"

Laurie uttered an ejaculation. It was not a pretty one, but it nicely fitted the emergency.

"He has hoped that to save myself, and others, I will marry him, the contemptible, crawling snake!"

The listener was impressed by her comparison. Certainly there was something ophidian about Shaw. He himself had noticed it.

"Then, for the time being, you're really safe?" he suggested.

"No. His patience is exhausted. He is beginning to realize that I'd rather die."

"The police can stop all this nonsense." But Laurie spoke without his customary authority.

"Don't imagine that. The police know nothing about this matter, and they never will." A sudden thought struck her and she rose almost with a spring. He rose, too, staring at her in bewilderment. She caught his shoulders and held them tightly, in a grip wholly free from self-consciousness.

"If you warn the police," she said swiftly; "if you draw them into this, you will ruin everything. You will do me a harm that could never be undone. Give me your word that you won't. Please, *please*!"

She was almost shaking him now. Under the clasp of her hands on his shoulders Laurie paled a little, but his black eyes held hers steadily.

"Of course I promise," he said, slowly, "as you make such a point of it."

She removed her hands and stepped back.

"Please go now."

"So soon? Why, I've only just come!"

"I know—but I'm tired."

There was no mistaking the sincerity of this. It was a poignant outcry. Clearly, she was at the breaking-point. He took both her hands.

"This whole experience gives me the oddest feeling," he told her gently. "In one way, I seem to be dreaming it. Under it all there's a conviction that I'm on the track of the mystery; that everything will be cleared up, for us both, in another minute or two. It's merely an instinct. I can't explain it. But one thing I know. Sooner or later—sooner, I hope—I shall be able to work it out for you."

She seemed suddenly to remember that he was holding her hands. Flushing, she gently withdrew them. Then she turned, and with a brusque gesture walked away from him.

"I'm sorry I got you into this!" she cried.

"Don't worry about me." He smiled at her from the door he was holding open. "May I come and take you to lunch to-morrow?"

"Not to-morrow. The next day, perhaps."

"We've got to look for that job, you know."

"With all this?" She indicated with the toe of her slipper a significant spot on the rug.

Laurie regarded the slipper with approval. It was a beautiful slipper, on a charming foot. It so diverted his mind from the main issue of the conversation that he was in the elevator and half-way down to the ground floor before he recalled that issue. He was not disturbed. Doris had enough to go on with; and certainly he himself had sufficient scope for thought in the revelations she had just made.

As he walked down the outer steps of the studio building and emerged on the sidewalk, a figure detached itself from the shadow of a low iron fence and stealthily followed him. It was a short figure, overcoated out of recognition. It carried its hands in its pockets, and its head was thrust forward in a peculiar way. It kept a dozen feet behind him, until he reached the pretentious entrance of the apartment building where he dwelt.

Here, in the glaring light of two huge electric globes, conveniently held aloft for

him by a pair of bronze warriors, Laurie turned suddenly, warned by the inner sense that tells us we are watched. The figure behind ducked modestly into the background, but not until he had recognized the round face and projecting eyes of Herbert Ransome Shaw.

Laurie checked a passionate impulse to hurl himself upon that lurking and unpleasant shape. Slowly but surely he was learning self-control. Martin, the elevator operator, and Griggs, the night hall man, were already bidding him good evening and regarding him with friendly and interested eyes. To see him suddenly fall upon and beat a shabby stranger would surprise and pain them, besides unpleasantly stirring up the neighborhood. A better opportunity would present itself, or could be made.

In the meantime, however, he must convey to Herbert Ransome Shaw some idea of the utter contempt in which he held him. Taking Griggs confidentially by the arm, Laurie pointed out the skulking shadow.

"See that?" he asked in ringing tones.

Griggs was a Goliath in proportions and deliberate in his movements. He took his time to discover the object young Devon indicated. In the shadow the object stirred restlessly.

"Yessir," Griggs then said, uncertainly. "It's—it's a man, sir."

"Is it?" asked Laurie with interest, and still in loud, clear tones. "I'm afraid you're mistaken. But whatever it is, *step* on it!"

He entered the elevator after this crisp instruction, and was wafted up to his rooms. The hall man moved hesitatingly down the building's three steps to the sidewalk. One never knew exactly what young Devon was getting at. Still, if he really wanted Griggs to step on anything—

Griggs stopped. A slight sensation of disappointment swept over him. He was a conscientious man who desired to do his duty. But there was absolutely nothing for him to step on, except the snow-covered and otherwise inoffensive pavement.

CHAPTER VIII

SAMUEL PLAYS A NEW GAME

The next morning Laurie awoke from troubled dreams with a vague feeling that life was getting a rise out of him, a feeling that the absent morning greeting of Rodney Bangs did not help to dissipate.

Without realizing it, young Devon had rather sunned himself in the adulation of his chum. When this adulation was removed, he missed it; and for the present, at least, there was no question that adulation was lacking.

Not that Bangs failed in any of the outward forms of friendship, but his manner had changed. He was increasingly preoccupied. When Laurie spoke, Bangs had the effect of coming to him from a long distance, and even of having one foot extended, as it were, for the return journey.

The two young men breakfasted together, for the first time in several days; and over their coffee and cigarettes Laurie confided to his friend his new anxiety about Mrs. Ordway.

Bangs at once became human. Indeed, he showed a degree of solicitude that surprised his friend. It was suddenly clear that Rodney was vastly interested in Louise. He had even ventured to call on her, though Laurie did not yet know this; for the first call was made, as it happened, on the afternoon of the day when the two young men had indulged in their first serious quarrel.

Bangs, usually the most modest and self-conscious of youths, had abruptly lost his shyness under the urge of a need to talk about his chum to some one who would understand. And Louise had understood, quite surprisingly. Recalling the long talk he and she had had, the help she had given him, the plans they had made, Rodney grew very serious.

"It's lucky Sonya's in town," he said, when this further fact had been revealed. "Let's go over to the hotel and see her right after breakfast. Perhaps we ought to cable to Warren. Sonya will know."

He spoke with such studied carelessness that Laurie flashed a sudden look at

him. Under it Bangs flushed to the roots of his burnished pompadour.

"Well, well," murmured Laurie, "this *is* interesting! Odd I didn't notice it before."

Whatever "it" was, he gave his whole attention to it now. Leaning forward, he ostentatiously studied Bangs, with an expression at once indulgent and amazed.

"A flush on his cheek, too," he mused aloud.

"Shut up!" Bangs clenched his teeth, while the flush deepened.

"Easily irritated; respiration slightly irregular, all the familiar symptoms."

"For God's sake, Laurie, don't be an ass!" begged Bangs.

"All the familiar symptoms—of a heavy cold," murmured Laurie, sympathetically. "A hot bath and a dose of quinine might help at this stage. But if it gets worse—" Laurie reflected, anxiously shaking his head—"if it gets worse I'll send for Sonya," he finished brightly.

He rose, dodged the roll Rodney hurled at him, and strolled out of the room, opening the door again to add an afterthought that suddenly occurred to him.

"Don't risk your life by going to the hotel, old man," he added, kindly. "Take your quinine, and I will call on Sonya."

"She'll tell us whether or not to cable for Warren," repeated Bangs, with great dignity.

But Sonya, when she came into her hotel sitting-room an hour later, did not immediately solve this problem. For the moment her mind was wholly on the Infant Samuel, who was to have his adenoids cut out that morning, and who had been encouraged to look forward to the experience as a new delight. While they were expressing fitting interest, Samuel himself entered the room, alone, but with all the effect of a juvenile procession. By the left leg he dragged his most cherished possession, a battered and dim-featured rag doll. Hospitably greeting the two young men, he solemnly presented the doll to Bangs.

"What's this?" asked Rodney, with a friendly impulse to adapt his conversation to the young.

"Hullen," affirmed Samuel, "Hullen, R. J."

"What does that mean?" Bangs appealed to Sonya.

"It's the doll's name. He gave it to her himself. 'Hullen,' I suppose, means Helen, and Mr. Warren's initials, you know, are R. J. Evidently Samuel liked the sound of them."

Samuel retrieved Hullen R. J.

"Hullen R. J. go hos'tl wiv Sammy," he further announced.

"She will," corroborated Sonya. "He never stirs without her, and she sleeps in his bed every night."

Laurie turned a shocked gaze on Samuel, and Sonya laughed, then gulped.

"I'm horribly nervous this morning," she admitted. "I wish it were over. You see, a certain cherub isn't going to like matters at all after they really begin at the hos'tl. And his mother will be more of a burden than a help."

Bangs had an inspiration.

"Suppose I go with you," he suggested. "Then if you need a strong man to hold the cherub—"

"Two strong men," corrected Laurie. "Do you imagine that I'm going to desert Samuel in his hour of need? Besides, I've got to keep an eye on Bangs," he added sweetly, and was rewarded by a glare from that overwrought young man.

"Noticed anything odd about Bangs lately?" Laurie asked Sonya.

She turned on Rodney the dark gaze of her serene eyes.

"Why, no."

"You will," Laurie predicted, with a mournful shake of the head. "Watch him closely, and call on me if there are alarming symptoms that you don't understand."

Bangs rushed into confused speech.

"He thinks I've got a cold," he gulped. "His nonsense, of course. Nothing in the world the matter with me. Er—how soon do we start?"

Laurie, helpless with laughter, rolled the ecstatic Samuel on the floor. Samuel's voice took on an added note of jubilation. Sonya, his mother, Hullen R. J.,

"Lawwie" and "Misser Bangs" all going with him to the hos'tl—it was almost too much pleasure! Samuel became slightly intoxicated.

"He wants to sing," remarked Laurie, with masculine understanding of a fellow heart. "All right, old man," he encouraged. "How about that beautiful hymn I taught you at Bab's wedding?"

With considerable help Samuel recalled the ditty:

"Hey, hey, ve gangsall here,
Whalahaloo we care,
Whalahaloo we care,
Now—*wow*—wow—WOW—*WOW*!"

"Laurie!"

Sonya spoke with sudden austerity. "It's a relief from his mental strain," Laurie explained. "Any doctor will tell you that."

In the hos'tl, however, things assumed a different aspect. Still firmly holding Hullen R. J. by the leg, and keeping a steadfast eye on the surgeon, Samuel took in his immediate surroundings with a dawning suspicion in his soul. Having two men throw lights on his face and look down his throat had lost its novelty, though Sonya had assured him that wonderful views were to be seen there which he alone could reveal. Also, the men seemed hurried, and didn't want to look at Hullen R. J.'s throat, though Samuel warmly recommended this variety in the entertainment.

In short, the situation had become sinister. The smiles around him were dreadful-looking things, all except Laurie's. With an appalling howl Samuel detached himself from the surgeon's grasp and fled to Laurie, who picked him up and held him firmly and comfortably in his lap until a lady in white came with something nice for Samuel to smell.

The next thing Samuel knew was that he was in bed in a strange room. He gulped and discovered that his throat was sore. He sat up, distended his mouth for a yell, and then very slowly closed it.

From every corner of the room familiar figures were hastening to his side. The

lady in white, Sonya, and his mother all reached him at the same moment. On the pillow beside him Hullen R. J. awaited the honor of his attention like a perfect lady. No howls from her, as Sonya immediately pointed out. As she thus soothed, Sonya was kissing him. The lady in white was offering him something pleasant to drink. His mother was patting his back.

For a long instant Samuel took in the gratifying fact of these activities. Then he assorted his features, grabbed Hullen R. J., exchanged his yell for a large smile, and permitted himself to be waited on. Deep in his masculine consciousness he had realized that his world was normal again.

Bangs and Laurie walked up Fifth Avenue together, stopping at a florist's to purchase the man's entire supply of roses for Mrs. Ordway. Bangs also discovered some masses of poinsettia and chrysanthemums that, as he said, "looked like her." Laden with these spoils, they took a taxicab to the Ordway house, where they found Jepson exuding an atmosphere of reassurance.

Yessir, Mrs. Hordway seemed better. She 'ad a more restful night, han' Susanne said was quite bright this morning. Hof course she'd see Mr. Devon, hand prob'bly Mr. Bangs, halso. Jepson would harsk at once.

Jepson moved ponderously away to do so, while Rodney, opening his big box in the hall, drew out the poinsettia and chrysanthemums and proceeded to arrange them in a gorgeous armful. Bangs had unexpected taste in color and arrangement, as Epstein's stage-directors had discovered in the past. Laurie watched him with polite interest.

"Making a picture of yourself, aren't you?" he asked. "Going into the sick-room with your little hands full of flowers?" But even as he scoffed he was unwrapping his own flowers. Bangs was right. The act of handing a pasteboard box to a sick friend lacked esthetic value.

Jepson returned with a cordial message. Mrs. Ordway would be charmed to see both young men, but she received only one visitor at a time. Would Mr. Bangs come up now? And perhaps Mr. Devon would drop in again during the afternoon or evening.

Rodney grasped his floral offerings and mounted the stairs two steps at a time. He was excited and his brown eyes showed it. It was most awfully good of Mrs. Ordway to let him come up in this informal way. Standing by the *chaise longue* where she lay, he told her so, his auburn head shining among the flowers he

carried, like a particularly large chrysanthemum. Then, selecting some empty vases, he sat down on the floor beside her and began to arrange his flowers, while she watched him, at first with surprise, then with growing admiration.

Rodney had no social airs and graces, no parlor tricks. If he had been formally sitting on a chair, holding his hat, he would have been a self-conscious and unhappy young man. As it was, with hands and eyes busy, and wholly at his ease, he talked his exuberant best.

"How about Laurie's romance?" Louise asked at once.

Bangs told her about the vision in the mirror. As he did so, luncheon was served, and he was casually invited to share it. Susanne, moving shuttle-like between the table in the sick-room and the dumb-waiter in the upper hall, presently confided to a young footman a surprising piece of news, which he in turn confided to the incredulous Jepson. Young Mr. Bangs, who was lunching with Mrs. Ordway, must be as amusing as young Mr. Devon himself. He had actually made the mistress laugh both times he came. She was laughing now, as Susanne had not heard her laugh for weeks. To be sure, this was one of her good days. But it wasn't easy to amuse Mrs. Ordway at any time.

Jepson summed up the situation in an oracular utterance:

"Henny one that's a friend of Mr. Devon's his hall right."

When Rodney was leaving, Jepson's mistress expressed the same thought to her guest in a different way.

"Come often," she said. "You have given me a new interest. I don't think you can quite realize what that means to me."

When Sonya arrived at five that afternoon, she found Jepson still exuding reassurance. With two doctors within call, a nurse in the house, and Mr. Devon and Miss Orleneff to telephone to at a moment's notice, "nothink much could 'appen." So reasoned Jepson. He beamed approvingly on Sonya, informed her that Mr. Devon was in the sick-room now, and waved her through the hall with an effect of benediction.

She found Laurie just leaving, and they had a moment's chat on the upper landing. Mrs. Ordway, he told her, was rather restless this afternoon, but she seemed better than she had been yesterday. However, he didn't like her looks at all, and he fancied the nurse was disturbed. Suppose Sonya sounded Louise

about cabling for Warren? Surely Warren would want to know, Laurie thought.

For the moment Laurie's striking good looks were slightly dimmed. He was hollow-eyed, almost haggard. Things were coming just a bit too fast for him. The habit of carrying the burden of others had been taken on too suddenly. Under the strain of it, his untrained mental muscles ached.

It was the irony of fate that Sonya, looking at him with the clear brown eyes that were so much softer than Bangs's, and so much less beautiful than Doris's, should misinterpret his appearance, his emotion, and his reaction from the high spirits of the morning. He was again going the pace, she decided; and, mingled with her pity for him, rose the scorn of a strong soul that was the absolute master of the body in which it dwelt.

His newly aroused perception carried some hint of this scorn to the boy, covered though it was by the friendliness of Sonya's manner. The knowledge added to his wretchedness. He had a childish desire to explain, but he conquered it and hurried away. Some day, if not now, Sonya would understand.

What he himself did not understand was the long stride he had taken in the moment when he felt and resented her unspoken criticism. Heretofore his attitude had been one of expressed and sincere indifference to the opinions others held of him. He wanted them to like him, but he didn't care a hang whether or not they approved of him. Now, suddenly, he wanted Sonya's respect as well as her liking. The discovery added to his mental confusion.

If Sonya, when she entered the sick-room, was shocked by the change in the appearance of her new friend, she showed no sign of it. Sitting down beside the *chaise longue*, she entered briskly upon a description of the recent experiences of Samuel. When she left the hospital the house surgeon was obediently endeavoring to look down the throat of Hullen R. J., and every nurse on Samuel's floor was scuttering in and out of his room. Nevertheless the Infant, though graciously accepting these attentions, had demanded and received Sonya's personal assurance that the particular game of the morning was not to be repeated. There was an unpleasant element in that game which grown-ups might not notice but which he, Samuel, had caught on to.

Louise laughed and expressed a hope that Samuel would now be able to breathe without disturbing his neighbors. Sonya came to the real purpose of her visit.

"He and his mother are going back to Devon House Saturday," she said, "but I've

got to stay in New York for a few months, on account of my literary galumphings. I wondered if you—if it would be convenient for you—to put me up. I hate hotels and—"

Louise lay silent for a moment. Then she reached out and took Sonya's hand.

"Yes, you unskilful prevaricator," she said. "You may come—and see me through."

Sonya held the hand tightly in her own.

"There's one thing more," she went on, hesitatingly. "Laurie and Mr. Bangs and I wondered if perhaps you wouldn't feel more comfortable if Mr. Warren came home. You know he himself would want to—"

Louise closed her eyes.

"Yes," she said, "Bob would want to, if he knew."

She was silent for so long that Sonya began to think she was not to have the answer to her question. Perhaps Mrs. Ordway was leaving the decision to her.

But to leave to others decisions that concerned herself was not Louise Ordway's habit. Instead, she was fighting a battle in which the lifelong devotion of a supremely self-centered nature was struggling with a new-born unselfishness. Though new-born, it was strong, as the invalid's next words showed.

"If I were calling him back from anything but his honeymoon," she said at last, "I'd do it. But he's utterly happy. His letters show that, in every line. I want him to stay so, as long as he can. I want his honeymoon to be long drawn out and perfect." Her manner changed.

"I have an idea that perhaps, after all, I'll be here when he gets back," she added more lightly. "Life still has its interests. But, if I happen not to be here, tell him why I didn't cable."

"I will tell him," Sonya promised.

Neither of them referred to the subject again.

CHAPTER IX

AN INVITATION

That evening Laurie walked across the square to Doris's studio with a decision in his stride which definitely expressed his mental attitude. He had come to the conclusion that something must be done. What this something would be was still hazy in his mind, but the first step at least seemed clear. Doris must move.

He was so convinced of the urgency of this step that he brought up the subject almost before the greetings of guest and hostess were over. Tossing his hat and coat on a convenient chair, he stood facing Doris, his hands in his pockets, his black eyes somber.

"We've got to get you out of this, you know," he abruptly announced.

Her eyes, which had brightened at his entrance, grew as somber as his own. Without replying, she turned, walked across the room to the window, and stood looking down into the street.

"Is he there?" she asked at last, and without moving her head.

"Shaw? Great Scott, no! At least I didn't see him. I suppose he takes a few hours off now and then, during the twenty-four; doesn't he?"

"Oh, yes, he comes and goes, sometimes secretly, sometimes openly. I did not see him at all to-day until late this afternoon. Then he took up his post across the street just opposite this window, and stood there for almost an hour."

Laurie ground his teeth.

"What does he expect to gain by that performance?"

"Several things, I suppose. For one, he wants to get on my nerves; and he does," she added somberly, and still without turning.

Laurie made a vague tour around the room and brought up by her side.

"You know," he confessed, "I haven't really taken this thing in yet. Even now, this minute, it doesn't seem possible to me that Shaw could do you any real

harm."

She nodded. "I know. Why should it? Even to me it is like a nightmare and I keep hoping to wake up. There are hours, even days, when I convince myself that it isn't real." She stopped. "It must be very hard for any one else to understand," she ended, when he did not speak.

"Nevertheless," admitted Laurie, "I can't forget it. I can't think of anything else."

She took this as naturally as she had taken his first remark.

"It's going to be very hard for you. I was wrong to draw you into it. I am realizing that more and more, every minute."

"You couldn't help yourself," he cheerfully reminded her. "Now that I am in it, as I've warned you before, I intend to run things. It seems to me that the obvious course for you is to move. After you're safely hidden somewhere, I think I can teach Herbert Ransome Shaw a lesson that won't react on you."

She shook her head.

"If I moved, how long do you think it would take him to find me?"

"Weeks, perhaps months."

Again she shook her head.

"I moved here a few days ago. He appeared exactly forty-eight hours later. If I moved from here it would only mean going through the game of hare and hounds again."

"But—" he began. She interrupted him.

"I've reached the point where I can't endure that any more." For the first time her voice broke. "Can't you imagine what that sort of thing would be? To get up in the morning and wonder if this is the day I'll see him under my window? To go to bed at night and ask myself if he is lurking in the shadows below, or across the street, or perhaps outside my very door? To know that sooner or later he will be there, that his coming is as inevitable as death itself—" She broke off.

"I sometimes think I'd rather see a boa-constrictor crawling into my room than see Shaw down on the sidewalk," she ended. "And yet—I know you can understand this—there's a queer kind of relief in the knowledge that at last, and

finally, he has got me."

She whirled to face Laurie and threw out her hands. There was nothing theatrical in the gesture, merely an effect of entire finality.

"We have come to the end of things," she finished. "Since you would not have them end my way, they must end his way. Whatever happens, I shall not run and hide any more."

For a moment silence hung like a substance between them. Then the visitor resolutely shook off the effect of her words.

"I promise you I will get to the bottom of this," he quietly told her. "In the meantime, will you try to forget it, for a little while? You know you said you could do that, occasionally."

He was clearing the table as he spoke. Now he proceeded to unpack a basket he had sent over an hour before by Griggs, and which, he observed, had not been opened. Dropping back into her big chair, she watched him with an odd look. If he had seen this look it would have sorely puzzled him, for it held not only interest but an element of apprehension, even of fear.

"In the past two days," she said, after an interval, "you have sent me five baskets of food, four baskets of fruit, six boxes of candy, and three boxes of flowers. What do you suppose becomes of them all?"

"I know what becomes of the flowers." He cast an appreciative glance around the transformed room. "And I hope," he mildly added, "that you eat the food."

She broke into her rare laugh, soft, deep-throated, and contagious. Under it his spirits rose dizzyingly.

"You are feeding half the people in this building," she said, "not to mention Sam and his home circle. Sam has absorbed roast chicken, cold partridge, quail, and sweetbreads till he is getting critical. He asked me this morning if I shouldn't like ham and eggs for a change!"

Laurie felt slightly aggrieved.

"Do you mean to say that you're not eating any of the stuff yourself?" he demanded.

"Oh, I eat three meals a day. But I don't keep boarders, you know; so I give the

rest to Sam to distribute. He feeds several dozen art students, I infer, and staggers home every night under the burden of what's left."

"There won't be anything left this night."

She had risen now and was helping to set the little table. Laurie looked at her with shining eyes. One of her rapid changes of mood had taken place, and she was entering into the spirit of the impromptu supper as cheerfully as if it were a new game and she a child. She had become a wholly different personality from the tragic-eyed girl who less than ten minutes ago had somberly announced that she was making her last stand in life. Again, as often before, Laurie felt overwhelmed by the rush of conflicting emotions she aroused.

"Shall we have this big bowl of roses in the center, or the four little bowls at the corners?" she asked absorbedly.

As she spoke, she studied the flowers with her head on one side. For the moment, it was clear, the question she had asked was the most vital in the world.

"The little ones," decided the guest. "The big one might shut off some of you from my devouring eyes." He was mixing ingredients in a chafing-dish as he spoke, and he wore the trying air of smug complacency that invariably accompanies that simple process.

"No," he objected, as she tried to help him, "I will do the brain-work. Your part is to be feminine and rush briskly back and forth, offering me things I don't want. And at the last moment," he added gloomily, "you may tell me that there isn't a lemon in the place." He looked about with the hopelessness of a great artist facing the failure of his chef-d'œuvre. "I forgot the lemons."

She went across the room to a small closet. Even in the strain of the moment he observed the extraordinary grace and swiftness of her movements. She was very slender, very lithe, and she moved like a flash of light.

"Fancy my being caught without a lemon!" she scoffed, as she returned with the fruit. "Your brain-work stops abruptly sometimes, doesn't it?"

She handed him the lemons with a little gesture expressing amusement, triumph, and a dash of coquetry. Laurie's eyes glowed as he looked at her. For the second time, in her actual presence, a sharp thrill shot through him. Oh, if she were always like this!—gay, happy, without that incredible, unbelievable background of tragedy and mystery! He turned his mind resolutely from the intruding

thought. This hour at least was hers and his. It should be prolonged to the last moment.

What he longed for was to hear her talk, but that way, he knew, lay disaster to the little supper in swift-returning memory. If she began to talk, the forbidden topic, now dormant, would uncoil its hideous length and hiss. He must hold her attention to other things.

He plunged at random into chatter. For the first time he told her about Bangs, his chum, and about Epstein, their manager; about their plays and their experiences in rehearsals and on the road. Being very young and slightly spoiled, he experienced some chagrin in the discovery that she seemed alike ignorant of the men and the plays. Worse yet, she seemed not even aware that she should have known who Bangs and Epstein were. She did not recall having heard the title of "The Black Pearl." She was not only unaware that "The Man Above" had broken all box-office records; she seemed unconscious that it had ever been written. Observing his artless surprise, she gravely explained. "I have been interested in other things," she reminded him.

The forbidden topic was stirring, stretching. To quiet it, Laurie leaped into the comedy scenes of "The Man Above." They delighted her. Her soft, delicious laughter moved him to give her bits from "The Black Pearl," and, following these, the big scenes from the latter play. This last effort followed the supper; and Laurie, now in his highest spirits, added to his effects by the use of a brilliant afghan, and by much raising and lowering of the light of the reading-lamp.

He was a fine mimic. He became by turns the star, the leading lady, the comedian, and the "heavy" of the big play. It was only when he had stopped for a moment's rest, and Doris demanded a description of the leading lady's gowns, now represented by the afghan, that his ingenuity failed.

"They're so beautiful that most people think I made them," he said, serenely. "But I didn't, really, so I can't give you any details, except that they're very close-fitting around the feet."

He was folding up the afghan as he spoke, and he stopped in the act, leaving one end dangling on the floor. From the street below the sound of a whistle came up to him, sharp and penetrating, repeating over and over the same musical phrase, the opening notes of the Fifth Symphony. At first he thought the notes were whistled by some casual passer-by. Then, glancing at the girl's face, he knew

better. The sharp, recurrent phrase was a signal.

He finished folding the afghan, and carefully replaced it on the divan from which he had borrowed it. As he did so, he prattled on. He had suddenly decided not to hear that signal. Doris, sitting transfixed and staring at him, slowly became convinced that he had not heard it.

He glanced at his watch.

"A shocking hour!" he ejaculated. "Ten o'clock. If I go now, may I come back for breakfast?"

"You may not." She made an effort to speak lightly.

"To take you to luncheon, then, at one?"

"No, please."

He shook his head at her.

"This is not the atmosphere of hospitality I am used to, but I shall come anyway. I'll be here at one. In the meantime, I suddenly realize that we are not using all of our opportunities. We must change that."

He looked around as he spoke, and, finding what he sought, picked it up. It was a small scarf, a narrow bit of Roman silk carrying a vivid stripe. He held this before her.

"Something may happen some day, and you may want me in a hurry," he said. "I have observed with regret that you have no telephone in this room, but we can get on without one. My mirror reflects your window, you know," he added a little self-consciously. "If you need me, hang up this scarf. Just drape it over this big window-catch. If I ever see it, I'll come prancing across the square like a knight to your rescue."

"Thank you."

She gave him her hand and the enigmatic smile that always subtly but intensely annoyed him. There was something in that smile which he did not understand, but he suspected that it held an element of amused understanding. So might Doris, years hence, smile at her little son.

"She thinks I'm a reed," Laurie reflected as he waited in the outer hall for the

elevator. "I don't blame her. I've been a perfectly good reed ever since I met her friend Bertie."

His thoughts, thus drawn to Shaw, dwelt on that ophidian personality. When the elevator arrived he was glad to recognize the familiar face of Sam.

"Yaas, sah," that youth affably explained, with a radiant exhibition of teeth, "it's Henry's night *off*, so I has to be *on*."

They were alone in the car. Laurie, lighting a cigarette, asked a casual question.

"There's a plump person in blue serge who hangs around here a good deal," he remarked, indifferently. "Does he live in the building?"

"The one wid eyes what sticks out?"

"That's the one."

Sam's jaw set.

"No, sah, dat party don' live yere. An' ef he don' stop hangin' 'round yere, somethin's gwine t' happen to dat man," he robustly asserted.

"What's he after?"

"I dunno. I only seen him twicet. Las' time he was sneakin' fum de top flo'. But I cert'n'y don' like dat man's looks!"

Nothing more was to be learned from Sam. Laurie thoughtfully walked out into the square. He had taken not more than a dozen steps when a voice, strange yet unpleasantly familiar, accosted him.

"Good-evening, Mr. Devon," it said.

Laurie turned sharply. Herbert Ransome Shaw was walking at his side, which was as it should be. It was to meet and talk with Herbert Ransome Shaw that he had so abruptly ended his call.

"Look here," he said at once, "I want a few words with you."

"Exactly." Shaw spoke with suave affability. "It is to have a few words that I am here."

"Where can we go?"

Shaw appeared to reflect.

"Do you mind coming to my rooms?" Laurie hesitated. "I live quite near, and my quarters, though plain, are comfortable."

Anger surged up in the young man beside him. There was something almost insulting in Shaw's manner as he uttered the harmless words, and in the reassuring yet doubtful intonation of his voice.

"Confound him!" Laurie told himself. "The hound is actually hinting that I'm afraid to go!" Aloud, he said brusquely, "All right."

"You have five minutes to spare? That's capital!"

Shaw was clearly both surprised and pleased. He strode forward with short steps, rapid yet noiseless, and Laurie adapted his longer stride to his companion's. He, too, was content. Now, at last, he reflected, he was through with mysteries, and was coming to a grip with something tangible.

CHAPTER X

THE LAIR OF SHAW

The walk was not the brief excursion Herbert Ransome Shaw had promised. It was fifteen minutes before he stopped in front of a tall building, which looked like an out-of-date storehouse, and thrust a latch-key into a dingy door. The bolt was old and rusty. Shaw fumbled with it for half a minute before it yielded. Then it grudgingly slipped back, and Laurie followed his guide into a dark hall, which was cold and damp.

"They don't heat this building." The voice of Shaw came out of the darkness. He had closed the door and was standing by Laurie's side, fumbling in his pocket for something which proved to be a match-box. "They don't light it, either," he explained, unnecessarily, as the blaze of his match made a momentary break in the gloom. "But it's quite comfortable in my room," he added reassuringly. "I have an open fire there."

As he spoke he led the way down the long hall with his noiseless, gliding steps. Laurie, following close behind him, reflected that the place was exactly the sort the ophidian Shaw would choose for a lair, a long black hole, ending in—what?

The match had gone out and he could see nothing. He kept close to his guide. He almost expected to hear the creature's scales rattle as it slid along. But snakes like warmth, and this place—Laurie shivered in the chill and dampness of it. The next instant Shaw pushed open a door and, standing back, waved his guest into a lighted room.

On first inspection it was a wholly reassuring room, originally intended for an office and now turned into a combination of office and living-apartment. A big reading-lamp with an amber shade, standing on a flat writing-desk, made a pleasant point of illumination. Real logs, large and well seasoned, burned with an agreeable crackle in the old-fashioned fireplace. Before this stood two easy-chairs, comfortably shabby; and at the arm of one of them a small table held a decanter, glasses, a siphon, and a box of cigars.

As he took in these familiar details, Devon's features unconsciously relaxed. He was very young, and rather cold, and the quick reaction from the emotions he

had experienced in the outer hall was a relief. Also, Shaw's manner was as reassuring as his homely room. He dropped the visitor's coat and hat on a worn leather couch, which seemingly served him as a bed, and waved a hospitable hand toward an easy-chair. Simultaneously, he casually indicated a figure bending over a table on the opposite side of the room.

"My secretary," he murmured.

The figure at the table rose and bowed, then sat down again and continued its apparent occupation of sorting squares of paper into a long, narrow box. In the one glance Laurie gave it, as he returned the other's bow with a casual nod, he decided that the "secretary" was arranging a card-catalogue. But why the dickens should Shaw have a secretary? On the other hand, why shouldn't he?

Laurie began to feel rather foolish. For a few moments, in that hall, he had actually been on the point of taking Shaw seriously; and an aftermath of this frame of mind had led him to turn a suspicious regard on a harmless youth whose occupation was as harmless as he himself looked. Laurie mentally classified the "secretary" as a big but meek blond person, who changed his collars and cuffs every Wednesday and Sunday, and took a long walk in the country on Sunday afternoons.

However, the fellow had pursuing eyes. Evidently his work did not need his whole attention, for his pale blue eyes kept returning to the guest. Once Laurie met them straight, and coolly stared them down. After this they pursued him more stealthily. He soon forgot them and their owner.

Despite Shaw's hospitable gestures, Laurie was still standing. He had chosen a place by the mantel, with one elbow resting upon it; and from this point of vantage his black eyes slowly swept the room, taking in now all its details—a type-writer, a letter-file, a waste-paper basket that needed emptying, a man's worn bedroom slipper coyly projecting from under the leather couch, a litter of newspapers.

It was all so reassuringly ordinary that he grinned to himself. Whatever hold this little worm had on Doris—Shaw had even ceased to be a snake at this point in Laurie's reflections—would be loosed after to-night; and then she could forget the episode that had troubled her, whatever it was.

At precisely this point in his meditations Laurie's eyes, having completed a tour of the room and returned to the fireplace, made two discoveries. The first was

that the room had no windows. The second, and startling one, was that it contained Doris's photograph. The photograph stood on the mantel, in a heavy silver frame. It was a large print and a good one. The girl's eyes looked straight into his. Her wonderful upper lip was curved in the half-smile that was so familiar and so baffling.

"Well," the smile asked, "what do you think of it all, now that you are here? Still a bit confusing, isn't it? For you didn't expect to find *me* here, seemingly so much at home; did you?"

In the instant when his eyes had found the photograph, Laurie had been about to light the inevitable cigarette. The discovery arrested his hand and held him for an instant, motionless. Then, with fingers that trembled, he completed the interrupted action, threw the match into the fire, and with blind eyes stared down into the flames.

In that instant he dared not look at Shaw. He was shaken by an emotion that left him breathless and almost trembling. What was Doris's photograph doing in this man's room? In the momentary amazement and fury that overwhelmed him at the discovery, he told himself that it would not have been much worse to find her actual presence here.

All this had taken but a moment. Shaw, hospitably busy with his decanter and siphon, had used the interval to fill two glasses, and was now offering one to his guest.

"No, thanks." Laurie spoke with abrupt decision.

"No?" Shaw looked pained. Then he smiled a wide smile, and Laurie, seeing it and the man's pointed teeth, mentally changed him again from the worm to the serpent. He understood Shaw's mental process. The fellow thought he was afraid to drink the mixture. But what did it matter what the fellow thought?

"Perhaps, then, you will have a cigar, and sit down comfortably for our chat?"

Shaw himself set the example by dropping into one of the easy-chairs and lighting a fat Perfecto. His smooth brown head rested in what seemed an accustomed hollow of the chair back. His wide, thin lips were pursed in sybaritic enjoyment of his cigar. He stretched himself in the warmth of the fire, sleek, torpid, and loathsome.

"Mr. Shaw."

"Y-e-s."

Still standing, with his elbow braced against the mantel, the visitor tossed his cigarette into the fire and looked down into his host's projecting eyes. It appeared that Shaw roused himself with difficulty from the gorged comfort of the moment. There was a perceptible interval before he gave his guest his whole attention. Then he straightened in his chair, and the projecting eyes took on their veiled but watchful look.

"Yes," he repeated, more briskly.

In the brief interval Laurie had planned his little campaign. He would address this creature as man to man; for perhaps, after all, there was more of the man in him than he revealed.

"I am going to ask you to be frank with me."

"Yes?" Shaw let it go at that.

"When we met on the street it appeared that you were as anxious as I am for this interview. Will you tell me at once why you brought me here, and what you wish to say?"

"Willingly." Shaw flicked the ash off his cigar, and kept his eyes on its lighted end as he went on: "I brought you here because I want you out of the way."

"Why?"

"Because, my temperamental young friend, you are a nuisance. You are interfering with my plans. I can't be bothered with you."

The sudden spark that in the old days would have warned Devon's friends of an impending outburst appeared now in his black eyes, but he kept his temper.

"Would you mind confiding these plans to me?" he suggested. "They would interest me, profoundly."

Shaw shook his sleek brown head.

"Oh, I couldn't do that," he said, with an indulgent smile. "But I have a proposition to make to you. Perhaps you will listen to it, instead."

"I'll listen to it," Laurie promised.

"It is short and to the point. Give me your word that you will stop meddling in Miss Mayo's affairs, which are also my affairs," he added parenthetically, "and that you will never make an effort to see her again. As soon as you have given me this promise, I will escort you to the front door and bid you an eternal farewell, with great pleasure."

"I'm looking forward to that pleasure, myself," confessed the visitor. "But before we throw ourselves into the delights of it, suppose you outline the other side of your proposition. I suppose it *has* another side."

Shaw frowned at his cigar.

"It doesn't sound pretty," he confessed, with regret.

"I'll judge of that. Let's have it."

"Well,"—Shaw sighed, dropped the cigar into the tray at his elbow, and sat up to face the young man with an entire change of manner—"The rest of it," he said, calmly, "is this. Unless you make that promise we can't have the farewell scene we are both looking forward to so eagerly."

"You mean—" Laurie was staring at him incredulously—"you mean you don't intend to let me leave here?"

Shaw shrugged deprecating shoulders.

"Oh, surely! But not immediately."

His guest turned and addressed the fire.

"I never listened to such nonsense in my life," he gravely assured it.

Shaw nodded.

"It does seem a little melodramatic," he conceded. "I tried to think of something better, something less brusque, as it were. But the time was so short; I really had no choice."

"What do you mean by that?" Laurie had again turned to face him.

"Exactly what I say. Think it over. Then let me have your decision."

Laurie moved closer to him.

"Get up," he commanded.

Shaw looked surprised.

"I am very comfortable here."

"*Get up!*" The words came out between the young man's clenched teeth.

Shaw again shrugged deprecating shoulders. Then, with another of his wide, sharp-toothed grins, he rose and faced his visitor. At the desk across the room the big blond secretary rose, also, and fixed his pale blue eyes on his employer.

"Now," said Laurie, "tell me what the devil you are driving at, and what all this mystery means."

"What an impulsive, high-strung chap you are!" Shaw was still grinning his wide grin.

"You won't tell me?"

"Of course I won't! I've told you enough now to satisfy any reasonable person. Besides, you said you had something to say to me."

He was deliberately goading the younger man, and Laurie saw it. He saw, too, over Shaw's shoulder, the tense, waiting figure of the secretary. He advanced another step.

"Yes," he said, "I've got three things to say to you. One is that you're a contemptible, low-lived, blackmailing hound. The second is that before I get through with you I'm going to choke the truth out of your fat throat. And the third is that I'll see you in hell before I give you any such promise as you ask. Now, I'm going."

He walked over to the couch and picked up his hat and coat. The secretary unostentatiously insinuated himself into the center of the room. Shaw alone remained immovable and unmoved. Even as Laurie turned with the garments in his hands, Shaw smiled his wide smile and encircled the room with a sweeping gesture of one arm.

"Go, then, by all means, my young friend," he cried jovially, "but *how*?"

Laurie's eyes followed the gesture. He had already observed the absence of windows. Now, for the first time, with a sudden intake of breath, he discovered a

second lack. Seemingly, there was no exit from the room. Of course there was a door somewhere, but it was cleverly concealed, perhaps behind some revolving piece of furniture; or possibly it was opened by a hidden spring. Wherever it was, it could be found. In the meantime, his manœuver had given him what he wanted—more space in which to fight two men. With a sudden movement Shaw picked up the silver-framed photograph, and ostentatiously blew the dust off it. This done, he held it out and looked at it admiringly.

"You will stay here, but you will not be alone," he promised, with his wide, sharp-toothed grin. "This will keep you company. See how the charming lady smiles at the prospect—"

He dropped the picture, which fell with a crash on the tiled flooring around the fireplace. The glass broke and splintered. Shaw gasped and gurgled under the strangling hold of the powerful fingers on his throat. Lamp and table were overturned in the struggle that carried the three men half a dozen times across the room and back.

Laurie, fighting two opponents with desperate fury, could still see their forms and Shaw's bulging eyes in the firelight. Then he himself gasped and choked. Something wet and sweet was pressed against his face. He heard an excited whisper:

"Hold on! Be careful there. Not too much of that!"

A moment more and he had slipped over the edge of the world and was dropping through black space.

CHAPTER XI

A BIT OF BRIGHT RIBBON

When Laurie opened his eyes blackness was still around him, a blackness without a point of light. But as his mind slowly cleared, the picture he saw in his last conscious moment flashed across his mental vision—the dim, firelit room, the struggling, straining figures of Shaw and the blond secretary. He heard again the hissed caution, "Not too much of that!"

He sat up, dizzily. There *had* been "too much of that." He felt faint and mildly nauseated. His hands, groping in the darkness, came in contact with a brick floor; or was it the tiling around the fireplace? He did not know. He decided to sit quite still for a moment, until he could pull himself together.

His body felt stiff and sore. There must have been a dandy fight in that dingy old room, he reflected with satisfaction. Perhaps the other two men were lying somewhere near him in the darkness. Perhaps they, too, were knocked out. He hoped they were. But no, of course not. Again he remembered the hurried caution, "Not too much of that."

He decided to light a match and see where he was, and he fumbled in his pockets with the first instinct of panic he had known. If those brutes had taken his match-box! But they hadn't. He opened it carefully, still with a lingering suggestion of the panic. If he had been a hero of romance, he reasoned, with a dawning grin, that box would have held exactly one match; and he would have had to light that one very slowly and carefully. Then, at the last instant, the feeble flicker would have gone out, leaving it up to him to invent some method of manufacturing light.

As it was, however, his fat match-box was comfortably filled, and his cigarette-case, which he eagerly opened and examined by touch, held three, no, four cigarettes. That was luck! His spirits rose, singing. Now for a light!

He lit a match, held it up, looked around him, and felt himself grow suddenly limp with surprise. He had expected, of course, to find himself in Shaw's room. Instead, he was in a cellar, which resembled that room only in the interesting detail that it appeared to have no exit. With this discovery, his match went out.

He lit another, and examined his new environment as carefully as he could in the brief interval of illumination it afforded.

The cellar was a perfectly good one, as cellars go. It was a small, square, hollow cube in the earth, not damp, not especially cold, and not evil-smelling. Its walls were brick. So was its floor, which was covered with clean straw, a discovery that made its present occupant suddenly cautious in handling his matches. He had no wish to be burned alive in this underground trap. The place was apparently used as a sort of store-room. There was an old trunk in it, and some broken-down pieces of furniture. The second match burned out.

Affluent though he was in matches, it was no part of the young man's plan to burn his entire supply at one sitting, as it were. For half an hour he crouched in the darkness, pondering. Then, as an answer to certain persistent questions that came up in his mind, he lit a third match. He greatly desired to know where lay the outlet to that cellar, and in this third illumination he decided that he had found it. There must be some sort of a trap-door at the top, through which he had been dropped or lowered. Those wide seams in the whitewashed ceiling must mean the cracks due to a set-in door. Undoubtedly that door had been bolted. Also, even assuming that it was not fastened, the ceiling was fully eight feet above him. There was no ladder, there were no stairs. His third match burned out.

In the instant of its last flicker he saw something white lying on the straw beside him. He promptly lit another match, and with rising excitement picked up the sheet of paper and read the three-line communication scrawled in pencil upon it:

> Out to-morrow. Flash-light, candles, cigarettes, and matches in box at your left. Blankets in corner. Be good.

The recipient of this interesting document read it twice. Then, having secured the box at his left—a discarded collar box, judging by its shape and labels—he drew forth the flash-light, the cigarettes, the matches, and the candles it contained. Lighting one of the candles, he stuck it securely on a projecting ledge of the wall. By its wan light, aided by the electric flash, he took a full though still dazed inventory of his surroundings. The ophidian Shaw had puzzled him again.

He had handled Shaw very roughly for a time. He could still feel—and he recalled the sensation with great pleasure—the thick, slippery neck of the creature, and the way it had squirmed when he got his fingers into it. Yet the

serpent evidently bore no malice. Or—a searing thought struck Laurie—having things his own way, he could afford to be generous. In other words, he was now perfecting his plans, while he, Laurie, was out of the way.

The promise of release to-morrow could mean, of course, only one thing—that those plans, whatever they were, would be carried out by then. And yet—and yet — The boy put his head between his hands and groaned. What was happening to Doris? Surely nothing could happen that night! Or could it? And what would it be? Only a fool would doubt Shaw's power and venom after such an experience as Laurie had just had, and yet—Even now the skeptical interrogation-point reared itself in the young man's mind.

One fact alone was clear. He must get out of this. But how? Flash-light in hand, he made the short tour of the cellar, examining and tapping every inch of the wall, the masonry, and the floor-work. Could he pile up the furniture and so reach the door in the ceiling? He could not. The articles consisted of the small, battered trunk, a legless, broken-springed cot, and a clock whose internal organs had been removed. Piled one on the other, they would not have borne a child's weight. Laurie decided that he was directly under Shaw's room. Perhaps the creature was there now. Perhaps he would consent to a parley. But shouts and whistles, and a rain of small objects thrown up against the trap-door produced no response.

He began to experience the sensations of a trapped animal. So vivid were these, and so overpowering, as he measured his helplessness against the girl's possible need of him, that he used all his will power in overcoming them. Resolutely he reminded himself that he must keep cool and steady. He would leave nothing undone that could be done. He would shout at intervals. Perhaps sooner or later some night-watchman would hear him. He would reach that trap-door if the achievement were humanly possible. But first, last, and all the time he would keep cool.

When he had exhausted every resource his imagination suggested, he sat in the straw, smoking and brooding, his mind incessantly seeking some way out of his plight. At intervals he shouted, pounded, and whistled. He walked the floor, and reëxamined it and the cellar walls. He looked at his watch. It was three o'clock in the morning. He was exhausted, and his body still ached rackingly.

Very slowly he resigned himself to the inevitable. Morning would soon come. He must sleep till then, to be in condition for the day. He found Shaw's blankets,

threw himself on the straw, and fell into a slumber full of disturbing dreams. In the most vivid of these he was a little boy, at school; and on the desk before him a coiled boa-constrictor, with Shaw's wide and sharp-toothed grin, ordered him to copy on his slate an excellent photograph of Doris.

He awoke with a start, and in the next instant was on his feet. He had heard a sound, and now he saw a light falling from above. He looked up. A generous square opening appeared in the ceiling, and leading down from it was the gratifying vision of a small ladder. Up the ladder Laurie sprang with the swiftness of light itself. Subconsciously he realized that if he was to catch the person who had opened that door and dropped that ladder, he must be exceedingly brisk about it. But quick as he was, he was still too slow. With a grip on each side of the opening, and a strong swing, he lifted himself into the room above. As he had expected, it held no occupant. What he had not expected, and what held him staring now, was that it held not one stick of furniture.

Bare as a bone, bleak as a skeleton, it had the effect of grinning at him with Shaw's wide white grin.

His first conscious reflection was the natural one that it was not Shaw's room. He had been carried to another building. This room had a window, which, of course, might have been concealed behind the letter-files. Yet, bare as it was, it looked familiar. There was the fireplace, with its charred logs. There, yes, there were the splinters of the glass that had protected Doris's photograph. And, final convincing evidence, there, forgotten in a corner, was the worn bedroom slipper he had noticed under the couch the night before.

With eyes still bewildered, still incredulous, he stared around the empty room. Before him yawned an open door, showing an uninviting vista of dingy hall. He stepped across its threshold, and looked down the winding passage of the night before. But why hadn't he seen the door? He moved back into the empty room. A glance explained the little mystery. The room had been freshly papered, door and all. The surface of the door had been made level with the wall. When it was closed there was no apparent break in the pattern of the wall-paper.

If there had been a chair in the room, young Mr. Devon would have sat down at this point. His body wanted to sit down. In fact, it almost insisted upon doing so. But just as he was relaxing in utter bewilderment, he received another gentle shock. Above the old-fashioned mantel was a narrow, set-in mirror, and in this mirror Laurie caught a glimpse of the features of a disheveled young ruffian,

staring fixedly at him. He had time to stiffen perceptibly over this vision before he realized that the disheveled ruffian was himself, a coatless, collarless self, with shirt torn open, cuffs torn off, hair on end, features battered and dirty, and bits of straw clinging to what was left of his clothing.

For a long moment Laurie gazed at the figure in the glass, and as he gazed his mingled emotions shook down into connected thought. Yes, there *had* been a dandy fight in this room last night, and he had the satisfaction of knowing that his two opponents must have come out of it as disheveled as himself. He had "had them going." Beyond doubt he could have handled them both but for their infernal chloroform. Again he recalled, with pleasure, the feeling of Shaw's thick, slippery neck as it choked and writhed under the grip of his fingers. Incidentally he had landed two blows on the secretary's jaw, sending him first into a corner and the next time to the floor. It was soon after the second blow that the episode of the chloroform occurred.

Straightening up, he began the hurried and elemental toilet which was all the conditions permitted. He removed the pieces of straw from his clothing, smoothed his hair, straightened his garments to conceal as much of the damage to them as possible, and gratefully put on his coat, which lay neatly folded on the floor, with his silk hat resting smugly upon it. It required some courage to go out into the clear light of a January morning in patent-leather pumps and wearing a silk hat. He would find some one around the place from whom he could borrow a hat and get the information he needed about the late tenants of this extraordinary office. He looked at his watch. It was half-past seven. He had slept later than he had realized. He had slept while Doris was in peril. The reminder both appalled and steadied him.

With a last look around the dismantled room, he closed its door behind him and went out into the winding hall. He hurried up and down its length, poking his head into empty store-rooms and dusty offices, but finding no sign of life.

At last a cheerful whistle in the lower regions drew him down a flight of stairs to what appeared to be an underground store-room. Here a bulky, overalled individual, looming large in the semi-darkness, stopped in his labor of pushing about some boxes, and regarded Laurie with surprise.

"Are you the watchman?" asked the latter, briskly.

"I am, that."

"Were you here last night?"

"I was."

"Was any one else here?"

"Divil a wan."

"Did you hear any noise during the night?"

"Divil a bit."

"Were you asleep?"

"I was," admitted the watchman, simply. His voice was Hibernian, and rich with tolerant good humor.

"I want to make a trade with you." The new-comer held out his silk hat. "Will you give me your hat, or any old hat you've got around the place, for this?"

"I will," said the watchman calmly. Though good-humored, he seemed a man of few words. "And who might you be?" he added.

"I came in last night with Mr. Shaw, and I spent the night here. When I woke up," added Laurie drily, "I found that my host had moved."

The watchman sadly shook his head.

"You're a young lad," he said, with friendly sympathy. "'Tis a pity you've got into these habits."

Laurie grinned at him. He had discovered that his money, like his watch, was safe in his pockets. Taking out a bill, he showed it to his companion.

"Do you like the looks of that?" he inquired.

"I do," admitted the watchman, warmly.

"Tell me all you know about Shaw, and take it for your trouble."

"I will," promptly agreed the other, "but 'tis not much you'll get for your money, for 'tis little enough I know. The man you're talkin' about, I suppose, is the fat fella with eyes you could hang yer hat on, that had the back room on the ground floor."

"That's the one."

"Then all I know is, he moved in three days ago, and he moved out two hours ago. What he did between-times I don't know. But he paid for the room for a month in advance, so nobody's mournin' his loss."

"Didn't he say why he was going, or where?"

"Divil a word did he say. He was in a hurry, that lad. He had a gang of three men with him, and they had the place empty in ten minutes. I lent 'em a hand, an' he give me a dollar, and that's the last I saw of him."

A sudden thought struck the watchman. "Where was you all the time?" he asked with interest.

"In the cellar."

The watchman nodded, understandingly.

"You're too young for that sort of thing, me boy. Now, I'm no teetotaler meself," he went on argumentatively. "A glass once in a while is all right, if a man knows whin to stop. But—"

"How about that hat?" interrupted the restive victim of this homily. "Have you got one handy?"

"I have."

The watchman disappeared into a shadowy corner and returned with a battered derby.

"An' a fine grand hat it is!" he earnestly assured the new owner, as he handed it over.

Laurie took the hat and put it on his head, where, being too small for him, it perched at a rakish angle. He dropped the bank-note into his own silk hat, and handed them to his companion, who accepted them without visible emotion. Evidently, brief though his stay in the building had been, Herbert Ransome Shaw had accustomed its watchman to surprises. Laurie's last glimpse of the man as he hurried away showed him, with extreme efficiency and the swift simultaneous use of two well-trained hands, putting the silk hat on his head and the bill in his pocket.

Laurie rushed through the early East Side streets. He was not often abroad at this hour, and even in his anxiety it surprised him to discover how many were abroad so early in the morning. The streets seemed full of pretty girls, hastening to factories and offices, and of briskly stepping men and women, representing types that also would ordinarily catch the attention of the young playwright. But now he had neither thought nor eyes for them.

His urgent needs were first the assurance that Doris was safe, and next the privacy of his own rooms, a bath, and a change of clothing. Obviously, he could not present himself to Doris in the sketchy ensemble he presented now; or could he? He decided that he could, and must. To remain in his present state of suspense a moment longer than he need do was unthinkable.

In a surprisingly short time he was in the studio building, facing the man Sam had called Henry, a yawning night elevator man who regarded him and his questions with a pessimism partly due to the lack of sleep and fatigue. These combined influences led him to make short work of getting rid of this unkempt and unseasonable caller.

"No, sah," he said. "Miss Mayo don' receive no callers at dis yere hour. No, sah, Sam don' come on tell eight o'clock. No, sah, I cain't take no messages to no ladies what ain't out dey beds yit. I got to perteck dese yere folks, I has," he ended austerely.

The caller peeled a bill from his ever-ready roll, and the face of the building's guardian angel changed and softened.

"P'raps I could jes' knock on Miss Mayo's do'," he suggested after a thought-filled interval.

"That's all I want," agreed Laurie. "Knock at her door and ask her if Mr. Devon may call at nine and take her out to breakfast. Tell her he has something very important to say to her."

"Yaas, sah."

The guardian was all humility. He accepted the bill, and almost simultaneously the elevator rose out of sight. The interval before its return was surprisingly short, but too long for the nerves of the caller. Laurie, pacing the lower hall, filled it with apprehensions and visions which drove the blood from his heart. He could have embraced Henry when the latter appeared, wearing an expansively

reassuring grin.

"Miss Mayo she say, 'Yaas,'" he briefly reported.

Under the force of the nervous reaction he experienced, Laurie actually caught the man's arm.

"She's there?" he jerked out. "You're sure of it?"

"Yaas, sah." Henry spoke soothingly. By this time he had made a diagnosis of the caller's condition which agreed with that of the night-watchman Laurie had just interviewed.

"She say, 'Yaas,'" he repeated. "I done say what you tol' me, and she say, 'Tell de genman, Yaas,' jes' like dat."

"All right." Laurie nodded and strode off. For the first time he was breathing naturally and freely. She was there. She was safe. In a little more than an hour he would see her. In the meantime his urgent needs were a bath and a change of clothing. As soon as he was dressed he would go back to the studio building and keep watch in the corridors until she was ready. Then, after breakfast, he would personally conduct her to the security of Louise Ordway's home. Louise need not see her, if she did not feel up to it, but she would surely give her asylum after hearing Laurie's experiences of the night.

That was his plan. It seemed a good one. He did not admit even to himself that under the air of sang-froid he wore as a garment, every instinct in him was crying out for the sound of Doris's voice. Also, as he hurried along, he was conscious that a definite change was taking place in his attitude toward Herbert Ransome Shaw. Slowly, reluctantly, but fully, he had now accepted the fact that "Bertie" represented a force that must be reckoned with.

He inserted the latch-key into the door of his apartment with an inward prayer that Bangs would not be visible, and for a moment he hoped it had been granted. But when he entered their common dressing-room he found his chum there, in the last stages of his usual careful toilet. He greeted Laurie without surprise or comment, in the detached, absent manner he had assumed of late, and Laurie hurried into the bath-room and turned on the hot water, glad of the excuse to escape even a tête-à-tête.

That greeting of Bangs's added the final notes to the minor symphony life was playing for him this morning. As he lay back in the hot water, relaxing his stiff,

bruised body, the thought came that possibly he and Rodney were really approaching the final breaking-point. Bangs was not ordinarily a patient chap. He was too impetuous and high-strung for that. But he had been wonderfully patient with this friend of his heart. If it were true that the friendship was dying under the strain put upon it, and Laurie knew how possible this was, and how swift and intense were Bangs's reactions, life henceforth, however full it might be, would lack an element that had been singularly vital and comforting. He tried to think of what future days would be without Bangs's exuberant personality to fill them with work and color; but he could not picture them; and as the effort merely added to the gloom that enveloped him, he abandoned it and again gave himself up to thoughts of Doris.

As he hurried into his clothes a strong temptation came to him to tell Bangs the whole story. Then Bangs would understand everything, and he, Laurie, would have the benefit of Rodney's advice and help in untying Doris's tangle.

Doris! Again she swam into the foreground of his consciousness with a vividness that made his senses tingle. He was sitting on a low chair, lacing his shoes, and his fingers shook as he finished the task. He dressed with almost frantic haste, urged on by a fear that, despite his efforts, was shaping itself into a mental panic. Then, hair-brushes in hand, he faced his familiar mirror, and recoiled with an exclamation.

Doris was not there, but her window was, and hanging from its center catch was something bright that caught his eye and instantaneous recognition.

It was a small Roman scarf, with a narrow, vivid stripe.

CHAPTER XII

DORIS TAKES A JOURNEY

Within five minutes he was in the studio building across the square, frantically punching the elevator bell. Outwardly he showed no signs of the anxiety that racked him, but presented to Sam, when that appreciative youth stopped his elevator at the ground floor, the sartorial perfection which Sam always vastly admired and sometimes dreamed of imitating. But for such perfection Sam had no eyes to-day.

At this early hour—it was not much more than half-past eight—he had brought down only two passengers, and no one but Laurie was waiting for the upward journey. When the two tenants of the building had walked far enough toward its front entrance to be out of ear-shot, Sam grasped Laurie's arm and almost dragged him into the car. As he did so, he hissed four words.

"She gone, Mist' Devon!"

"Gone! Where? When?"

Laurie had not expected this. He realized now that he should have done so. His failure to take in the possibility of her going was part of his infernal optimism, of his inability even now to take her situation at its face-value. Sam was answering his questions:

"'Bout eight, jes' after Henry went and I come on. An aut'mobile stop in front de do', an' dat man wid de eyes he come in. I try stop him fum takin' de car, but he push me on one side an' order me up, like he was Wilson hisself. So I took him to de top flo'. But when we got dere an' he went to Miss Mayo's do', I jes' kep' de car right dere an' watch him."

"Good boy! What happened?"

"He knock an' nuffin' happen. Den he call out, 'Doris, Doris,' jes' like dat, an' she come an' talk to him; but she didn't open de do'."

"Could you hear what else he said?"

"No, sah. After dat he whisper to her, hissin' like a snake."

Laurie set his teeth. Even Sam felt the ophidian in Shaw.

"Go on," he ordered.

"Den I reckon Miss Mayo she put on a coat, an' dat man wait. I t'ought he was gwine leave, an' I sho' was glad. But he stood dere, waitin' an' grinnin' nuff to split his haid."

Laurie recognized the grin.

"'Bout two-three minutes she come out," Sam went on. "She had a big fur coat an' a veil on. She look awful pale, an' when dey got in de el'vator she didn' say a word. Dey wasn' nobody else in de car, an' it seem lak I couldn't let her go off no-how, widout sayin' somethin'. So I say, 'You gwine away, Miss Mayo?' De man he look at me mighty cold an' hard, an' she only nod."

"Didn't she speak at all?"

"No, sah. She ain't say a word. She jes' stood stiff an' still, an' he took her out to de car, an' dey bofe got in."

"Was it a limousine, a closed car?"

"Yaas, sah."

"Did the man himself drive it?"

"No, sah. He sat inside wid Miss Mayo. The man what drove it was younger."

"What did he look like?"

"I couldn't see much o' him. He had a big coat on, an' a cap. But his hair was yallah."

Laurie recognized the secretary.

"Which way did they go?"

"East."

They were standing on the top landing by this time, and Laurie strode forward.

"I'll take a look around her rooms. Perhaps she left some message."

Sam accompanied him, and though he had not desired this continued companionship, Laurie found a certain solace in it. In his humble way this black boy was Doris's friend. He was doing his small part now to help her, if, as he evidently suspected, there was something sinister in her departure.

Entering the familiar studio, Laurie looked around it with a pang. Unlike the quarters of Shaw, it remained unchanged. The room, facing north as it did, looked a little cold in the early light, but it was still stamped with the impress of its former occupant. The flowers he had given her only yesterday hung their heads in modest welcome, and half a dozen eye-flashes revealed half a dozen homely little details that were full of reassurance. Here, open and face down on the reading-table, was a book she might have dropped that minute. There was the long mirror before which she brushed her wonderful hair and, yes, the silver-backed brushes with which she brushed it. On the writing-table were a pencil and a torn sheet of paper, as if she had just dashed off a hurried note.

In short, everything in the room suggested that the owner, whose presence still hung about it, might return at any instant. And yet, there in the window, where he had half jokingly told her to place it, hung the brilliant symbol of danger which he himself had selected.

He walked over and took it from the latch. In doing this, he discovered that only half the scarf hung there, and that one end was jagged, as if roughly and hastily cut off. He put the scarf into his pocket. As he did so, his pulses leaped. Pinned to its folds was a bit of paper, so small and soft that even the inquisitive eye of Sam, following his every motion, failed to detect it. Laurie turned to the black boy.

"We'd better get out of here," he suggested, trying to speak carelessly and leading the way as he spoke. "Miss Mayo may be back at any moment."

Sam's eyes bulged till they rivaled Shaw's.

"You don' t'ink she gone?" he stammered.

"Why should we think she has gone?" Laurie tried to grin at him. "Perhaps she's merely taking an automobile ride, or an early train for a day in the country. Certainly nothing here looks as if she had gone away for good. People usually pack, don't they?"

Sam dropped his eyes. His face, human till now, took on its familiar, sphinxlike

look. He followed "Mist' Devon" into the elevator in silence, and started the car on its downward journey. But as his passenger was about to depart with a nod, Sam presented him with a reflection to take away with him.

"She didn' *look* lak no lady what was goin' on no excu'sion," he muttered, darkly.

Laurie rushed back to his rooms with pounding heart and on the way opened and read at a glance his first note from Doris. It was written in pencil, seemingly on a scrap of paper torn from the pad he had seen on her desk.

> Long Island, I *think*. An old house, on the Sound, somewhere near Sea Cliff. Remember your promise. *No police.*

That was all there was to it. There was no address, no signature, no date. The writing, though hurried, was clear, beautiful, and full of character. In his rooms, he telephoned the garage for his car, and read and reread the little note. Then, still holding it in his hand, he thought it over.

Two things were horribly clear. Shaw's "plan" had matured. He had taken Doris away. And—this was the staggering phase of the episode—she seemed to have gone willingly. At least she had made no protest, though a mere word, even a look of appeal from her, would have enlisted Sam's help, and no doubt stopped the whole proceeding. Why hadn't she uttered that word? The answer to this, too, seemed fairly clear. Doris had become a fatalist. She had ceased to hide or fight. She was letting things go "his way," as she had declared she would do.

Down that dark avenue she had called "his way" Laurie dared not even glance. His mind was too busy making its agile twists in and out of the tangle. Granting, then, that she had gone doggedly to meet the ultimate issue of the experience, whatever that might be, she had nevertheless appealed to him, Laurie, for help. Why? And why did she know approximately where she was to be taken?

Why? Why? Why? Again and again the question had recurred to him, and this time it dug itself in.

Despite his love for her (and he fully realized that this was what it was), despite his own experience of the night before, he had hardly been able to accept the fact that she was, must be, in actual physical danger. When, now, the breath of this realization blew over him, it checked his heart-beats and chilled his very soul. In the next instant something in him, alert, watchful, and suspicious, addressed him like an inner voice.

"Shaw will threaten," this voice said. "He will fight, and he will even chloroform. But when it comes to a show-down, to the need of definite, final action of any kind, he simply won't be there. He is venomous, he'd *like* to bite, but he has no fangs, and he knows it."

The vision of Shaw's face, when he had choked him during the struggle of last night, again recurred to Laurie. He knew now the meaning of the look in those projecting eyes. It was fear. Though he had carried off the rest of the interview with entire assurance, during that fight the creature had been terror-stricken.

"He'll have reason for fear the next time I get hold of him," Laurie reflected, grimly. But that fear was of him, not of Doris. What might not Doris be undergoing, even now?

He went to the little safe in the wall of his bedroom, and took from it all the ready money he found there. Oh, if only Rodney were at home! But Mr. Bangs had gone out, the hall man said. He also informed Mr. Devon that his car was at the door.

The need of consulting Rodney increased in urgency as the difficulties multiplied. Laurie telephoned to Bangs's favorite restaurant, to Epstein's office, to Sonya's hotel. At the restaurant he was suavely assured that Mr. Bangs was not in the place. At the office the voice of an injured office boy informed him that there wasn't never nobody there till half-past nine. Over the hotel wire Sonya's colorful tones held enough surprise to remind Laurie that he could hardly hope that even Rodney's budding romance would drive him to the side of the lady so early in the morning.

He hung up the receiver with a groan of disgust, and busied himself packing a small bag and selecting a greatcoat for his journey. Also, he went to a drawer and took out the little pistol he had taken away from Doris in the tragic moment of their first meeting.

Holding it in his hand, he hesitated. Heretofore, throughout his short but varied life, young Devon had depended upon his well-trained fists to protect him from the violence of others. But when those others were the kind who went in for chloroform—and this time there was Doris to think of. He dropped the revolver into his pocket, and shot into the elevator and out on the ground floor with the expedition to which the operator was now becoming accustomed.

His car was a two-seated "racer," of slender and beautiful lines. As he took his

place at the wheel, the machine pulsated like a living thing, panting with a passionate desire to be off. Laurie's wild young heart felt the same longing, but his year in New York had taught him respect for its traffic laws and this was no time to take chances. Carefully, almost sedately, he made his way to Third Avenue, then up to the Queensboro Bridge, and across that mighty runway to Long Island. Here his stock of patience, slender at the best, was exhausted. With a deep breath he "let her out" to a singing speed of sixty miles an hour.

A cloud had obscured the sun, quite appropriately, he subconsciously felt, and there were flakes of snow in the air. As he sped through the gray atmosphere, the familiar little towns he knew seemed to come forward to meet him, like rapidly projected pictures on a screen. Flushing, Bayside, Little Neck, Manhasset, Roslyn, Glenhead, one by one they floated past. He made the run of twenty-two miles in something under thirty minutes, to the severe disapproval of several policemen, who shouted urgent invitations to him to slow down. One of these was so persistent that Laurie prepared to obey; but just as the heavy hand of the law was about to fall, its representative recognized young Devon, and waved him on with a forgiving grin. This was not the first time Laurie had "burned up" that stretch of roadway.

At the Sea Cliff station he slowed up; then, on a sudden impulse, stopped his car at the platform with sharp precision and entered the tiny waiting-room. From the ticket window a pretty girl looked out on him with the expression of sudden interest feminine eyes usually took on when this young man was directly in their line of vision. With uncovered curly head deferentially bent, he addressed her. Had she happened to notice a dark limousine go by an hour or so before, say around half-past eight or nine o'clock? The girl shook her head. She had not come on duty until nine, and even if such a car had passed she would hardly have observed it, owing to the frequency of the phenomenon and her own exacting responsibilities.

Laurie admitted that these responsibilities would claim all the attention of any mind. But was there any one around who might have seen the car, any one, say, who made a specialty of lounging on the platform and watching the pulsations of the town's life in this its throbbing center? No, the girl explained, there were no station loafers around now. The summer was the time for them.

Then perhaps she could tell him if there were any nice old houses for rent near Sea Cliff, nice old houses, say, overlooking the Sound, and a little out of the town? Laurie's newly acquired will power was proving its strength. With every

frantic impulse in him crying for action, for knowledge, for relief from the intolerable tension he was under, he presented to the girl the suave appearance of a youth at peace with himself and the hour.

The abrupt transitions of the gentleman's interest seemed to surprise the lady. She looked at him with a suspicion which perished under the expression in his brilliant eyes. What he meant, Laurie soberly explained, was the kind of house that might appeal to a casual tourist who was passing through, and who had dropped into the station and there had suddenly realized the extreme beauty of Sea Cliff. The girl laughed. She was a nice girl, he decided, and he smiled back at her; for now she was becoming helpful.

Yes, there was the Varick place, a mile out and right on the water's edge. And there was the old Kiehl place, also on the Sound. These were close together and both for rent, she had heard. Also, there was a house in the opposite direction, and on the water's edge. She did not know the name of that house, but she had observed a "To Let" sign on it last Sunday, when she was out driving. Those were all the houses she knew of. She gave him explicit instructions for reaching all three, and the interview ended in an atmosphere of mutual regard and regret. Indeed, the lady even left her ticket office to follow the gentleman to the door and watch the departure of his chariot.

Laurie raced in turn to the Varick place and the Kiehl place. Shaw, he suspected, had probably rented some such place, just as he had rented the East Side office. But a very cursory inspection of the two old houses convinced him that they were tenantless. No smoke came from their chimneys, no sign of life surrounded them; also, he was sure, they were not sufficiently remote from other houses to suit the mysterious Shaw.

The third house on his list was more promising in appearance, for it stood austerely remote from its neighbors. But on its soggy lawn two soiled children and a dog played in care-free abandon, and from the side of the house came the piercing whistle of an underling cheerily engaged in sawing wood and shouting cautions to the children. Quite plainly, the closed-up, shuttered place was in charge of a caretaker, whose offspring were in temporary possession of its grounds. Laurie inspected other houses, dozens of them. He made his way into strange, new roads. Nowhere was there the slightest clue leading to the house he sought.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon when, with an exclamation of actual anguish,

he swung his car around for the return journey to the station. For the first time the hopelessness of his mission came home to him. There must be a few hundred houses on the Sound near Sea Cliff. How was he to find the right one?

Perhaps that girl had thought of some other places, or could direct him to the best local real-estate agents. Perhaps he should have gone to them in the first place. He felt dazed, incapable of clear thought.

As the car swerved his eye was caught by something bright lying farther up the road, in the direction from which he had just turned. For an instant he disregarded it. Then, on second thought, he stopped the machine, jumped out, and ran back. There, at the right, by the wayside, lay a tiny jagged strip of silk that seemed to blush as he stared down at it.

Slowly he bent, picked it up, and, spreading it across his palm, regarded it with eyes that unexpectedly were wet. It was a two-inch bit of the Roman scarf, hacked off, evidently, by the same hurried scissors that had severed the end in his pocket. He realized now what that cutting had meant. With her hare-and-hounds' experience in mind, Doris had cut off other strips, perhaps half a dozen or more, and had undoubtedly dropped them as a trail for him to pick up. Possibly he had already unseeingly passed several. But that did not matter. He was on the right track now. The house was on this road, but farther up.

He leaped into the car again and started back. He drove very slowly, forcing the reluctant racer to crawl along, and sweeping every inch of the roadside with a careful scrutiny, but he had gone more than a mile before he found the second scent. This was another bit of the vivid silk, dropped on a country road that turned off the main road at a sharp angle. With a heartfelt exclamation of thanksgiving, he turned into this bypath.

It was narrow, shallow-rutted, and apparently little used. It might stop anywhere, it might lead nowhere. It wound through a field, a meadow, a bit of deep wood, through which he saw the gleam of water. Then, quite suddenly, it again widened into a real road, merging into an avenue of trees that led in turn to the entrance of a big dark-gray house, in a somber setting of cedars.

Laurie stopped his car and thoughtfully nodded to himself. This was the place. He felt that he would have recognized it even without that guiding flame of ribbon. It was so absolutely the kind of place Shaw's melodramatic instincts would lead him to choose.

There was the look about it that clings to houses long untenanted, a look not wholly due to its unkempt grounds and the heavy boards over its windows. It had been without life for a long, long time, but somewhere in it, he knew, life was stirring now. From a side chimney a thin line of smoke curled upward. On the second floor, shutters, newly unbolted, creaked rustily in the January wind. And, yes, there it was; outside of one of the unshuttered windows, as if dropped there by a bird, hung a vivid bit of ribbon.

Rather precipitately Laurie backed his car to a point where he could turn it, and then raced back to the main road. His primitive impulse had been to drive up to the entrance, pound the door until some one responded, and then fiercely demand the privilege of seeing Miss Mayo. But that, he knew, would never do. He must get rid of the car, come back on foot, get into the house in some manner, and from that point meet events as they occurred.

Facing this prospect, he experienced an incredible combination of emotions—relief and panic, recklessness and caution, fear and elation. He had found her. For the time being, he frantically assured his trembling inner self, she was safe. The rest was up to him, and he felt equal to it. He was intensely stimulated; for now, at last, in his ears roared the rushing tides of life.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HOUSE IN THE CEDARS

Less than half a mile back, along the main road, Laurie found a country garage, in which he left his car. It was in charge of a silent but intelligent person, a somewhat unkempt and haggard middle-aged man, who agreed to keep the machine out of sight, to have it ready at any moment of the day or night, and to accept a handsome addition to his regular charge in return for his discretion. He was only mildly interested in his new patron, for he had classified him without effort. One of them college boys, this young fella was, and up to some lark.

Just what form that lark might take was not a problem which stirred Henry Burke's sluggish imagination. Less than twenty hours before his seventh had been born; and his wife was delicate and milk was seventeen cents a quart, and the garage business was not what it had been. To the victim of these obsessing reflections the appearance of a handsome youth who dropped five-dollar bills around as if they were seed potatoes was in the nature of a miracle and an overwhelming relief. His mind centered on the five-dollar bills, and his lively interest in them assured Laurie of Burke's presence in the garage at any hour when more bills might possibly be dropped.

While he was lingeringly lighting a cigarette, Laurie asked a few questions. Who owned the big house back there in the cedar grove, on the bluff overlooking the Sound? Burke didn't know. All he knew, and freely told, was that it had been empty ever since he himself had come to the neighborhood, 'most two years ago.

Was it occupied now? No, and Burke was sure of that. Only two days before he himself had driven past it and had noted its continued closed-up, deserted appearance. It was a queer place, anyhow, he added; one couldn't get to it from the main road, but had to follow a blind path, which he himself had blundered into by chance, when he was thinking about something else. He had heard, he now recalled, that it was owned by some New Yorker who didn't like noise.

Laurie strolled out of the garage with a well-assumed air of indifference to the perplexities of life, but his heart was racked by them. As he hesitated near the entrance, uncertain which way to turn, he saw that behind the garage there was a

tool shed, and following the side path which led to this, he found in the rear of the shed a workman's bench, evidently little used in these cold January days. Tacitly, it invited the discoverer to solitude and meditation, and Laurie gratefully dropped upon it, glad of the opportunity to escape Burke's eye and uninterruptedly think things out. But the daisied path of calm reflection was not for him then.

Theoretically, of course, his plan would be to wait until night and then, sheltered by the darkness, to approach the house, like a hero of melodrama, and in some way secure entrance. But even as this ready-made campaign presented itself, a dozen objections to it reared up in his mind. The first, of course, was the delay. It was not yet two o'clock in the afternoon, and darkness would not fall until five, even unwisely assuming that it would be safe to approach the place as soon as darkness came. In three hours all sorts of things might happen; and the prospect of marking time during that interval, while his unbridled imagination ran away with him, was one Laurie could not face.

On the other hand, what could he do in broad daylight? If he were seen, as he almost certainly would be, Shaw, careless now, perhaps, in his fancied security, would take precautions which might make impossible the night's work of rescue. That, of course, assuming that Shaw was still at the house among the cedars.

Was he? Laurie pondered that problem. Undoubtedly he had personally taken Doris there, he and the secretary. But the chances seemed about even that, having done this, he would leave her, for the day at least, either in charge of the secretary or of some caretaker. In that case—in that case—

The young man sprang to his feet. He would waste no more time in speculation. He would *know*, and at once, who was in that house with Doris. He swung back to the garage with determination in his manner, and entered the place so unexpectedly that Burke, who had fancied him a mile away, started at the sight of him. Then, with a contented smile, he stilled his nerves and kept his eyes on the bill the visitor held before him.

"See here," said the latter, "I want to do a tramp act."

"Sure you do!" Burke promptly acquiesced.

"Can you find me some ragged trousers and an old coat and cap? The worse they look, the better I'll like it. And while you're about it, get me some worn-out shoes or boots. How soon can you have them here?"

"I—I dunno." Burke was looking somewhat overwhelmed. "You're pretty big," he mentioned. "Nothin' o' mine 'd fit you."

"Great Scott!" exploded the other. "I don't want 'em to *fit*! I'm not going to a pink tea in them."

"But you want to get 'em *on*, don't you?" Burke demanded, with some coldness.

"I do."

"Well, look at yerself; young fella, and then look at me."

Laurie obeyed the latter part of the injunction. The father of seven was at least five inches shorter than he, and his legs and shoulders were small in proportion. No coat or trousers he wore could possibly go on the young Hercules before him.

"Oh, well," urged the latter, impatiently, "get some, somewhere. Here. Take a run into town. Use my car if you like. Or go to some one you know who's about my size. Only, mum's the word."

Five-dollar bills were in the air, fluttering before the eyes of the garage-owner like leaves in Vallambrosa. He clutched them avidly.

"And hurry up," added his impatient patron. "Let's see you back here in five minutes."

"Who'll look after the garage? Not that any one's likely to stop," the proprietor gloomily admitted.

"I'll look after it. Come, get a move on!"

"Oh, all right! But I can't be back in no five minutes, nor in thirty minutes, neither. I gotta go over to Nick Swanson's. He's about your size."

"All right, all right! Go to it."

The impatient youth was fairly shooing him out of his own garage, but with the sweet memory of those five-dollar bills to sustain him, Burke was patient, even good-humored. One thing he could say about them college lads: they was usually ready to pay well for their nonsense. With a forgiving grin he hurried off.

Left alone, Laurie removed his coat and cap, searched the garage successfully for grease, oil, waste, and shoe-blacking, and then, establishing himself in front

of a broken mirror in Burke's alleged office, removed his collar and effected a startling transformation in the appearance of his head, face, hands, and shirt.

Beginning in his college days, and continuing throughout his more recent theatrical experiences, the art of make-up had increasingly interested him. The people in his plays owed something to his developing skill, and even one of the leading ladies had humbly taken suggestions from him. But never in any stage dressing-room had young Mr. Devon secured a more extraordinary change than the one he produced now, with the simple aids at hand.

When Burke returned he found his garage in charge of an unwashed, unkempt, unprepossessing young ruffian whom he stared at for a full minute before he accepted him as the man he had left there. The ragged trousers, the spotted "reefer" buttoned high around the neck, the dirty cap pulled over the eyes, and the wholly disreputable broken shoes Burke had brought with him completed the transformation of an immaculate young gentleman into a blear-eyed follower of the open road.

Clad in these garments, Laurie took a few preliminary shuffles around the garage, while the owner, watching him, slapped his thigh in approval. So great was his interest in the "act," indeed, that when the impersonator left the garage and started off, Burke showed a strong desire to follow him and see the finish of the performance, a desire that recalled for a fleeting instant the determined personality of the young gentleman hidden under the tramp disguise.

At the last moment before leaving, Laurie took from his pocket the tiny revolver he had brought with him, and holding it in his palm, studied it in silence. Should he take it, or shouldn't he? He hesitated. Then habit mastered caution. He dropped it among the discarded heap of clothes, and picked up in its stead a small screw-driver, which he put into his ragged pocket. That particular tool looked as if it might be useful.

Lounging up the country road, with his cold, bare, dirty hands in the pockets of the borrowed reefer, he looked about with assurance. He believed that in this unexpected guise, he could meet even Shaw and get away with it; but he meant to be very careful and take no unnecessary chances.

He cut across half a dozen fields, climbed half a dozen fences, was fiercely barked at by a dozen dogs, more or less, and finally reaching the grounds of the house in the cedars, approached it from the rear in exactly the half-sneaking, half-cocky manner in which the average tramp would have drawn near a

shuttered house from one of whose chimneys smoke was rising. It was a manner that nicely blended the hope of a hand-out with the fear of a rebuff. Once he fancied he saw something moving among the trees. He ducked back and remained quiet for some time. Then, reassured by the continued silence, he emerged, sauntered to the back entrance, and after a brief preliminary study of the shuttered windows, assailed the door with a pair of grimy knuckles.

He had expected a long delay, possibly no response at all. But the door opened as promptly as if some one had been standing there awaiting his signal, and on its threshold a forbidding-looking woman, haglike as to hair and features but cleanly dressed, stood regarding him with strong disapproval. In the kitchen range back of her a coal fire was burning. A tea-kettle bubbled domestically on its top, and cheek by jowl with this a big-bellied coffee-pot exhaled a delicious aroma.

The entire tableau was so different from anything Laurie had expected that for an instant he stared at the woman, speechless and almost open-mouthed. Then the smell of the coffee gave him his cue. He suddenly remembered that he had eaten nothing that day, and the fact gave a thrill of sincerity to the professional whine in which he made his request.

"Say, lady," he begged urgently, "I'm down an' out. Gimme a cup o' cawfee, will yuh?"

Her impulse, he saw clearly, had been to close the door in his face. Already her hand was automatically responding to it. But he whipped off his dirty cap and, shivering on the door-step, looked at her with Laurie's eyes, whose beauty no amount of disguise could wholly conceal. There was real appeal in them now. Much, indeed almost everything, depended on what this creature would do in the next minute. She hesitated.

"I ain't had a mouthful since yesterday," croaked the visitor, pleadingly and truthfully.

"Well, wait there a minute. I'll bring you a cup of coffee."

She turned from the door and started to close it, evidently expecting him to remain outside, but he promptly followed her in, and her face, hardening into quick anger, softened a little as she saw him cowering over the big hot stove and warming his dirty hands. In silence she filled a cup with coffee, cut a thick slice from a loaf of bread, buttered it, and set the collation on the kitchen table.

"Hurry up and eat that," she muttered, "and then clear out. If any one saw you here, I'd get into trouble."

Laurie grunted acquiescence and wolfed the food. He had not sat down, and now, as he ate, his black eyes swept the room while he planned his next move. Drying on a stout cord back of the stove were several dish-towels. They gave him his first suggestion. His second came when he observed that his hostess, evidently reassured by his haste, had turned her back to him, and, bending a little, was examining the oven. Noiselessly setting down the cup and the bread, he crept behind her, and, seizing her in one powerful arm, covered her mouth with his free hand. He could not wholly stifle the smothered shriek she gave.

For the next moment he had his hands full. Despite her wrinkles and her gray hair, she was a strong woman, and she fought with a violence and a false strength due to overwhelming fury and terror. It was so difficult to control her without hurting her that all his strength was taxed. But at last he brought her slowly down into a chair under the row of dish-towels, and seizing two of these useful articles, as well as the cord that held them, securely bound and gagged her. As he did so he dropped his rôle and looked soberly into her furious eyes.

"Look here," he told her. "I'm not going to hurt you; be sure of that. But I've got something to say, and I want you to stop struggling and listen to it."

Under his quiet tones some of the frenzy died out of the eyes staring up at him.

"I'm here to get Miss Mayo," he went on. "She's in the house, isn't she? If she is, nod." There was a long moment of hesitation. At last the head nodded. "Is there any one else in the house?" The head shook negatively. "Is there no one here but you and Miss Mayo?" Laurie could hardly take in this good luck, but again the head shook negatively. "Where is she? Upstairs?"

The head nodded. He stepped back from the bound figure.

"All right," he said cheerfully. "Now I'm going to unbind you and let you take me up to her. As a precaution, I shall leave the bandage on your mouth and hands. But, being a sensible woman, of course you realize that you have absolutely nothing to fear, unless you give us trouble. If you try to do that, I shall have to lock you into a closet for a few hours."

As he spoke he was unfastening the cord.

"Lead on," he invited, buoyantly.

There was an instant when he thought the struggle with her would begin all over.

He saw her draw herself together as if to spring. But she was evidently exhausted by her previous contest. She was also subdued. She rose heavily, and, taking her time to it, slowly led the way out of the kitchen and along a hall to the front of the house.

"No tricks, remember," warned Laurie, keeping close behind her. "Play fair, and I'll give you a year's salary when I take Miss Mayo out of this."

She turned now and looked at him, and there was venom in the glance. Violently and negatively, she shook her head.

"Don't you want the money?" he interrupted, deeply interested in this phenomenon. "I'm glad to have met you," he politely added. "You're an unexpected and a brand-new type to me."

She was walking forward again, with no sign now that she heard his voice. Reaching a wide colonial staircase that led to the second floor, she started the ascent, but so slowly that the young man behind her uttered another warning.

"No tricks, remember," he repeated, cheerfully. "I'm afraid you're planning to start something. I believe you're capable of falling backward, and bowling me over like a ten-pin. But don't you do it. A dark, musty closet is no place for a kind-hearted, sensible woman to spend twenty-four hours in."

She ignored that, too, but now she moved more quickly, and her companion, close at her heels, found himself in an upper hall, approaching a door at the front of the house. Before this door his guide now planted herself, with much of the effect of a corner-stone settling into place.

Keeping a careful eye on her, he stretched out a long arm and tapped at the panel. There was no answer. He tapped again. Still no answer. He glanced at the enforcedly silent woman beside him, and something in her eyes, a gleam of triumph or sardonic amusement, or both, was tinder to his hot spirit.

"Have you led me to the wrong door?" he asked. He spoke very quietly, but the tone impressed the woman. The gleam faded from her eyes. Hastily she shook her head.

"If you have—" He nodded at her thoughtfully. Then he raised his voice.

"Doris," he called. "Doris!"

He heard a movement inside the room, an odd little cry, half exclamation, half sob, and hurried steps approaching. The next minute her voice came to him, in breathless words, with a tremor running through them.

"Is it you?" she gasped. "Oh, is it you?"

"Yes, open the door."

"I can't. It's locked."

He stared at the unyielding wood before him.

"You mean they've locked you in?"

"Yes. Of course."

It would be, of course, Laurie reflected. That was Shaw's melodramatic method.

"We'll change all that, in a minute." He stepped back from the door.

"What are you going to do?" The voice inside was anxious.

"Break it down, if necessary. Breaking down doors to get to you is my specialty. You haven't forgotten that, I hope." He turned to the woman beside him. "Have you the key to this?" She shook her head. "If you have, you may as well hand it over," he suggested. "I shall certainly break down the door if you don't; and it's a perfectly good door, with a nice polish on it."

He saw her hesitate. Then, sullenly, she nodded.

"You have it, after all?" He spoke with the natural relief of an indolent young man spared an arduous job. Again she nodded. "Where is it?" She could make no movement with her bound hands, but with an eye-flash she indicated the side of her gown. "In your pocket? Good. I'll get it."

He got it, as he spoke. Holding it in his hand, he again addressed his reluctant companion.

"When I unlock the door, you will go in first, and walk over to the nearest corner and stand there with your back to the room. Also, here's my last warning: I should be very sorry to do anything that would hurt or inconvenience you. If you behave yourself I will soon take off that gag. If you don't, I shall certainly lock you up. In either case, you can't accomplish anything. So take your choice."

He unlocked the door, and the deliberate figure preceded him into the room. In the next instant he saw nothing in the world but the eyes of Doris, fixed on his. Then he knew that he was holding her hands, and listening to her astonished gasp as she took in his appearance.

"My disguise," he explained. "I couldn't ride up as publicly as young Lochinvar, though I wanted to. So I got this outfit." He turned around for her inspection, deliberately giving her and himself time to pull up under the strain of the meeting. At the first glimpse of her all his assurance had returned. He was excited, triumphant. But as he again met her eyes, something in their expression subdued him.

"It took longer to get here than I expected, but of course you knew I was on the way," he said.

Her response was unexpected. Dropping into a low chair, she buried her face in her hands and burst into a passion of tears. Aghast, he stared at her, while from the corner the hag stared at them both. Laurie dropped on his knees beside Doris and seized her hands, his heart shaking under a new fear.

"They've been frightening you," he muttered, and was surprised by the intensity of his terror and anger as he spoke. "Don't cry. They'll pay for it."

She shook her head. "It isn't that," she sobbed at last.

"Then what is it?"

"I've brought you here. And I—I think it was a horrible thing to do. I—I can't forgive myself."

Laurie groped vaguely amidst sensations of relief and the mental confusion with which, someway, she always filled him.

"You're—all right, aren't you? And you expected me, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—Oh, don't make me talk! Let me cry."

She was crying as she spoke, rackingly, and every sob tore his heart. Again, as so often before, he felt dazed and helpless before the puzzle she presented. Yet, as always, there seemed nothing to do but obey her, since she, and not he, invariably held the key to the strange situations in which she placed him. Her tears made him feel desperate, yet he dared not continue to hold her hands, and

he did not know what to say. Rising, but keeping his position beside her, he waited for her to grow calmer, and as he waited he subconsciously took in the room.

It was a big front chamber, furnished as a sitting-room. Its broad windows, with their cushioned window-seats, faced east. Besides the window, it had two exits, the door by which he had entered, and another door, half open, apparently leading into a bedroom. Its comfortable easy-chairs were covered with gay chintz, its curtains were of the same material, its reading-table held books and newspapers, and in its big open fireplace fat logs were blazing. Shaw "did" his prisoners well. Laurie remembered the cigarettes, matches, and blankets so thoughtfully provided for himself. Like Shaw's own room, the chamber breathed simple comfort. It was impossible to take in the thought of anything sinister in connection with it until one observed the gagged woman in the corner, and remembered the locked door.

"Well, Princess," he said at last, still trying to speak lightly, "this isn't much of a donjon tower, is it?"

Her sobs, hysterical and due to overwrought nerves, had given place to occasional sharp catches of the breath, like those uttered by a little child whose "crying-spell" is almost over. She did not speak, but she put out her hand to him, and he took it and held it closely, conscious of a deep thrill as the small palm touched his.

"I want to talk to you," he said gently, "but I'd feel a lot more comfortable if our chaperon were a little more remote. Can we put her into this inner room?"

Doris nodded, and he waved the woman across the threshold of the bedroom. She would be safe there. He had observed that the windows of the inner room were still barred and shuttered. Seemingly, in all the big house, this up-stairs sitting-room alone had opened its heart to the sun.

"Are you really alone in the house?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so; I'm almost sure of it."

"Then there's no mad rush about leaving?"

"No—I—I think not."

He observed her hesitation but ignored it. He drew two big chairs close to the

open fire, and, leading Doris to one, seated her in it, and took the other himself, turning it to face hers. As he did so, she recoiled.

"You look so dreadful!" she explained with a shudder.

"I suppose I do. But forget that and tell me something. When did Shaw leave?"

"Within half an hour of the time he brought me here."

"When is he coming back?"

"To-night, I think."

"And he's left you here alone, with no one around but this woman?" Laurie asked, incredulously. Here was another situation hard to understand.

"His secretary is somewhere around, a wretched jackal that does what he's told."

"Oh!" This was news. "Where is he?"

"Out in the garage. He has a room there. I heard him say he had no sleep last night, and that he expected to get some to-day."

Laurie rose.

"I'll take a look around and see where he is," he suggested. "We can't have him catching on to my little visit and telephoning to Shaw, you know."

As he spoke he was walking toward the door that led into the hall, and now he confidently put out his hand and turned the knob. His expression changed. He gave the knob a violent twist, then, setting his shoulder against the jamb, tried to wrench the door open. It did not yield. Doris, watching him wide-eyed, was the first to speak.

"Locked?" she whispered.

"Locked," corroborated Laurie. He nodded thoughtfully. Several things, small in themselves, which had puzzled him, were clearing up. Among others, the housekeeper's persistent efforts to gain time were now explained. Shaw had not been so careless as he had seemed. The meek blond secretary with the pursuing eyes and the chloroforming habit was certainly in the house.

CHAPTER XIV

LAURIE CHECKS A REVELATION

Laurie shook his head.

"That was rather stupid of him," he remarked, mildly. "It's almost as easy to force open a locked door from the inside as from the outside."

"I know." Doris was again breathless. "But in the meantime he's telephoning to Shaw."

"I don't think so." Laurie, his hands in his pockets, was making a characteristic turn around the room. "What has he to gain by telephoning? Shaw's coming back anyway in a few hours; and in the meantime the secretary has got me safely pocketed, or thinks he has. I have an idea he'll stand pat. You see, he doesn't know about my talent for opening locked doors."

He strolled back to the door as he spoke and examined the lock. Then, appreciatively, he drew from his pocket the screw-driver he had thoughtfully brought from the garage.

"I fancied this might be useful. It will take me just about four minutes to open that door," he announced. "So get on your things and be ready to start in a hurry."

"Do you imagine that we can get away now, in broad daylight?" She seemed dazed by the suggestion.

"Why not? You want to get out of here, don't you?"

"Yes—I—of course I do!"

"You don't seem very sure of it."

Laurie was smiling down at her with his hands still in his pockets, but there was an expression in his eyes she had never seen there before, an expression keen, cold, almost but not quite suspicious.

"Yes, but—you don't understand. Shaw has other men on watch, two of them."

"Where?"

"In the grounds. One in the front and the other in the back."

The new-comer mentally digested this unwelcome information.

"If we wait till it's dark," said the girl, "we'll have a better chance."

"Unless Shaw gets back in the meantime." He was still watching her with that new look in his eyes. Then, briskly, he returned to his interest in the doorlock.

"In any case," he casually remarked, "we don't want to be jailed here."

She said no more, but sat watching him as he worked, deftly and silently. In little more than the time he had predicted he opened the door and held it wide.

"Any time you would like to pass out," he invited, then checked himself and vanished in the dimness of the hall. The girl left behind heard the sounds of running feet, of a sharp scuffle, of a few words spoken in a high, excited voice. Then Laurie reëntered the room, pushing the secretary before him. At present the youth looked anything but meek. His blond hair was on end, his tie was under one ear, his pale eyes were bright with anger, and he moved spasmodically, propelled by jerks from behind.

"I don't like this young man," said Laurie, conversationally. "I never have. So I'm going to put him where for a few hours he can't annoy us. Is there a good roomy closet on this floor? If there is, kindly lead us to it."

"Say, hold on!" cried the blond youth, in outraged tones. "I'm sick of this."

"Shut up." Laurie shook him gently. "And cheer up. You're going to have a change. Lead on, please."

Thus urged, and further impelled, the secretary obediently led the way to a closet at the far end of the upper hall. It was fairly commodious, and full of garments hanging on pegs and smelling oppressively of camphor. It afforded an electric-light fixture, and Laurie, switching on the light, emphasized this advantage to the reluctant new occupant, who unwisely put up a brief and losing fight on its threshold.

"You may read if you like," Laurie affably suggested, when this had been suppressed. "I'll bring you some magazines. You may even smoke. Mr. Shaw and I always treat our prisoners with the utmost courtesy. You don't smoke?

Excellent! Safer for the closet, and a fine stand for a worthy young man to take. Now, I'll get the magazines for you."

He did so, and the blond secretary accepted them with a black scowl.

"I'm afraid," observed Laurie regretfully, "he has an ungrateful nature."

He locked the door on the infuriated youth, pocketed the key, and faced Doris, who had followed the brief procession. The little encounter had restored his poise.

"What next?" he asked, placidly.

Her reply was in the nature of a shock.

"I'd like to have you wash up."

He raised his eyebrows.

"And spoil my admirable disguise? However, if you insist, I suppose I can get most of the effect again with ashes, if I have to. Where's a bath-room?"

She indicated a door, and returned to her room. He made his ablutions slowly and very thoughtfully. There were elements in this new twist of the situation which did not tally with any of his former hypotheses. Doris, too, was doing some thinking on her own account. When he returned to the sitting-room she wore the air of one who has pondered deeply and has come to a conclusion.

"What do your friends call you?" she abruptly asked.

"All kinds of things," admitted the young man. "I wouldn't dare to repeat some of them." Under the thoughtful regard of her red-brown eyes his manner changed. "My sister calls me Laurie," he added soberly.

"May I?"

"By all means, if you'll promise *not* to be a sister to me."

"Then—Laurie—"

"I like that," he interrupted.

"So do I. Laurie—I—I'm going to tell you something."

He waited, watching her; and under the renewed friendliness of his black eyes

she stopped and flushed, her own eyes dropping before his. As if to gain time she changed her position in the chair where she sat, and leaned forward, an elbow on its arm, her chin in one hand, her gaze on the fire. His perception sharpened to the knowledge that something important was coming, and that it was something she was afraid to tell. She had keyed herself up to it, but the slightest false move on his part might check the revelation. Therefore, though every impulse in him responded to her first intimate use of his name, he dropped negligently into the chair facing hers, tenderly embraced his knees with both arms, and answered with just the right accent of casual interest and interrogation.

"Yes?" he said.

"Please smoke." Again she was playing for time. "And—and don't look at me," she added, almost harshly. "I—I think I can get it out better if you don't."

His answer was to swing his chair around beside hers, facing the blazing logs, and to take out his case and light a cigarette.

"I'm going to tell you everything," she said in a low tone.

"I'm glad of that."

"I'm going to do it," she went on slowly, "for two reasons. The first is that—that you've lost faith in me."

This brought his eyes around to hers in a quick glance. "You're wrong about that."

She shook her head. "Oh, no, I'm not. You showed it almost from the moment you came, and there was an instant when you thought that my suggestion to wait till dark to get away meant a—a sort of ambush."

He made no reply to this, and she said urgently, "Didn't you? Come, now. Confess."

He reflected for a moment.

"The idea did cross my mind," he admitted, at last. "But it didn't linger. For one reason, it was impossible to reconcile it with Shaw's desire to keep me out of the way. That, and this, are hard to understand. But no harder to understand," he went on, "than that you should willingly come here and yet send for me, and then quite obviously delay our leaving after I get here."

Again her eyes dropped before his brilliant, steady glance.

"I know," she muttered, almost inaudibly. "It's all—horrible. It's infinitely worse than you suspect. And that's why I'm going to tell you the truth, big as the cost may be to me."

"Wait a minute," he interrupted. "Let's get this straight. You're telling me, aren't you, that any revelation you make now will react on you. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"You will be the chief sufferer by it?"

"Yes."

"Will it help you any to have me understand? Will it straighten out the trouble you're in?"

She considered her answer.

"The only help it will give me will be to know that you do understand," she said at last; "to know that—that—you're not suspecting things about me."

"And it will make things hard for you, otherwise, to have me know?" he persisted.

"Yes." This time her answer was prompt. "It will end everything I am trying to do, and destroy what I have already done."

Laurie threw his half-burned cigarette into the fire, as if to lend greater emphasis to his next words.

"That settles it," he announced. "I won't listen to you."

She turned to look at him.

"But you must," she faltered. "I'm all ready to tell you. I've been working myself up to it ever since you came."

"I know. I've watched the process, and I won't have another word." He lit a second cigarette, drew in a mouthful of smoke, and sent it forth again in a series of widening rings. "Your conversation is extremely uninteresting," he explained; "and look at the setting we've got for something romantic and worth while. This cozy room, this roaring fire,"—he interrupted himself to glance through the

nearest window—"a ripping old snow-storm outside, that's getting worse every minute, and the exhilarating sense that though we're prisoners, we've already taken two perfectly good prisoners of our own; what more could one ask to make an afternoon in the country really pleasant?"

He stopped, for she was crying again, and the sight, which had taxed his strength an hour earlier, overtaxed it now. She overwhelmed him like a breaker. He rose, and going close to her, knelt beside her chair.

"Doris," he begged, brokenly. "Don't, don't cry! I can't tell you how it makes me feel. I—I can stand anything but that." He seized her hands and tried to pull them away from her face. "Look at me," he urged. "I've got all sorts of things to say to you, but I won't say them now. This isn't the time or the place. But one thing, at least, I want you to know. I *do* trust you. I trust you absolutely. And whatever happens, whatever all this incredible tangle may mean, I shall always trust you."

She wiped her eyes and looked into his, more serious in that moment than she had ever seen them.

"I will stop," she promised, with a little catch in her voice. "But please don't think I'm a hysterical fool. I'm not crying because I'm frightened, but because—because—Laurie, you're so splendid!"

For a moment his hands tightened almost convulsively on hers. In the next instant he rose to his feet, walked to the fireplace, and with an arm on the mantel, stood partly turned away from her, looking into the fire. He dared not look at her. In that moment he was passionately calling on the new self-control which had been born during the past year; and, at his call, it again awoke in him, ready for its work. This, he had just truly said to Doris, was not the time nor the place to tell her what was in his heart. Only a cad would take advantage of such an opportunity. He had said enough, perhaps too much. He drew a deep breath and was himself.

"I told you you'd find all sorts of unexpected virtues in me," he lightly announced; and it was the familiar Laurie who smiled down at her. "There are dozens more you don't dream of. I'll reveal them to you guardedly. They're rather overwhelming."

She smiled vaguely at his chatter, but it was plain that she was following her own thoughts.

"The most wonderful thing about you," she said, "is that through this whole experience, you've never, for one single instant, been 'heroic.' You're not the kind to 'emote'!"

"Great Scott!" gasped Laurie, startled. "I should hope not!"

He could look at her now, and he did, his heart filled with the satisfying beauty of her. She was still leaning forward a little in the low chair, with her hands unconventionally clasped around one knee, and her eyes staring into the fire. A painter, he reflected, would go mad over the picture she made; and why not? He himself was going mad over it, was even a little light-headed.

She wore again the gown she had worn the first day he saw her, and the memory of that poignant hour intensified the emotion of this one. Taking her in, from the superb masses of hair on her small head to the glittering buckles on her low house-shoes, Laurie knew at last that whoever and whatever this girl might be, she was the one whose companionship through life his hungry heart demanded. He loved her. He would trust her, blindly if he must, but whatever happened fully and for all time.

There had been a long silence after his last words, but when she spoke it was as if there had been no interval between his chatter and her response.

"Almost any other man would have been 'heroic,'" she went on. "Almost any other man would have been excited and emotional at times, and then would have been exacting and difficult and rebellious over all the mystery, and the fact that I couldn't explain. I've set that pace myself," she confessed. "I haven't always been able to take things quietly and—and philosophically. The wonderful thing about you is that you've never been overwhelmed by any situation we've been in together. You've never even seemed to take them very seriously. And yet, when it came to a 'show-down,' as Shaw says, you've been right there, always."

He made no answer to this. His mind was caught and held by the phrase "as Shaw says." So she and Shaw had talked him over! He recalled the silver-framed photograph of her on Shaw's mantel, the photograph whose presence had made him see red; and a queer little chill went down his spine at this reminder of their strange and unexplained association. Then, resolutely, he again summoned his will and his faith, and became conscious that she was still speaking.

"You're the kind," she said, "that in the French Revolution, if you had been a victim of it, would have gone to the guillotine with a smile and a jest, and would

have seen in the experience only a new adventure."

At that, he shook his head.

"I don't know," he said slowly, and with the seriousness he had shown her once or twice before. "Death is a rather important thing. I've been thinking about it a good deal lately."

"*You* have!" In her astonishment, she straightened in her chair. "Why?"

"Well," he hesitated, "I haven't spoken about it much, but—the truth is, I'm taking the European war more seriously than I have seemed to. I think America will swing into the fight in a month or two more; I really don't see how we can keep out any longer. And I've made up my mind to volunteer as soon as we declare war."

"Oh, Laurie!"

That was all she said, but it was enough. Again he turned away from her and looked into the fire.

"I want to talk to you about it sometime," he went on. "Not now, of course. I'm going in for the aviation end. That's my game."

"Yes, it would be," she corroborated, almost inaudibly.

"I've been thinking about it a lot," he repeated. There was an intense, unexpected relief in this confidence, which he had made to no one else but Bangs, and to him in only a casual phrase or two. "That's one reason why it has been hard for me to get down to work on a new play, as Bangs and Epstein have been hounding me to do. I was afraid I couldn't keep my mind on it. All I can think of, besides you—" he hesitated, then went on rather self-consciously—"are those fellows over there and the tremendous job they're doing. I want to help. I'm going to help. But I'm not going into it with any illusions about military bands and pretty uniforms and grand-stand plays. It's the biggest job in the world to-day, and it's got to be done. But what I see in it in the meantime are blood and filth and stench and suffering and horror and a limitless, stoical endurance. And —well, I know I'm going. But I can't quite see myself coming home."

Save for his revelation on the morning they met, this was the longest personal confidence Laurence Devon had ever made to another human being except his sister Barbara. At its end, as she could not speak, he watched her for a moment

in silence, already half regretting what he had said. Then she rose with a fiercely abrupt movement, and going to the window stood looking at the storm. He followed her and stood beside her.

"Laurie," she said suddenly.

"Yes?"

"I can't stand it."

"Can't stand it?"

He repeated her words almost absently. His eyes were on a stocky figure moving among the trees below. It kept in constant motion and, he observed with pleasure, it occasionally stamped its feet and swung its arms as if suffering from the cold.

"I can't stand this situation."

"Then we must clear it up for you." He spoke reassuringly, his eyes still on the active figure. "Is that one of our keepers, down there?"

She nodded.

"He has instructions to watch the front entrance and windows. There's another man watching the rear."

"He didn't watch very closely," he reminded her. "See how easily I got in." He studied the moving figure. "Doris," he said slowly, "I'd bet a thousand dollars against one doughnut that if I walked out of the house and up to that fellow, he'd run like a rabbit. I don't know why I think so, but I do."

She shook her head.

"Oh, no, he wouldn't!"

"What makes you think he wouldn't?"

"Because I heard Shaw give him his orders for just that contingency."

Her companion took this in silence.

"May I ask what they were?" he said at last.

"No, I can't tell you."

"I hope he hasn't a nice little bottle of chloroform in his overcoat pocket, or vitriol," murmured Laurie, reflectively. "By the way," he turned to her with quickened interest, "something tells me it's long after lunch-time. Is there any reason why we shouldn't eat?"

She smiled.

"None whatever. The ice-box contains all the things a well regulated ice-box is supposed to hold. I overheard Shaw and his secretary discussing their supplies."

"Good! Then we'll release Mother Fagin long enough to let her cook some of them."

He strolled to the bedroom door. On a chair facing it the woman sat and gazed at him with her fierce eyes.

"Would you like a little exercise?" he politely inquired. There was no change of expression in the hostile face. "Because if you would," he went on, "and if you'll give me your word not to cry out, give any kind of alarm or signal, or start anything whatever, I'll take that bandage off your mouth, and let you cook lunch for us and for yourself."

The fierce eyes set, then wavered. He waited patiently. At last the head nodded, and he expeditiously untied the bandage.

"The very best you've got, please," he instructed. "And I *hope* you can cook. If you can't, I'll have to do it myself. I'm rather gifted that way."

"I can cook," avowed the old woman, sullenly.

"Good work! Then go on your joyous way. But if you feel an impulse to invite into your kitchen any of the gentlemen out in the grounds, or to release the secretary, restrain it. They wouldn't like it in here. They wouldn't like it at all."

A strange grimace twisted the woman's sardonic features. He interpreted it rightly.

"I'm glad you agree with me," he said. "Now, brook-trout, please, and broiled chickens, and early strawberries and clotted cream."

She looked at him with a return of the stoic expression that was her habitual one.

"We ain't got any of those things," she declared.

"We ain't?" Her guest was pained. "What have we got?"

"We got ham and eggs and lettuce and milk and coffee and squash pie."

He sighed.

"They will do," he said resignedly. "Do you think you could have them ready in five minutes?"

The luncheon was a cheerful meal, for Laurie made it so. When it was finished he went to the kitchen window, opened it, and carefully arranged several hot ham sandwiches in a row.

"For the birdies," he explained. "For the cold little birdies out in the grounds."

He even chirped invitingly to the "birdies," but these latter, throughout his visit, showed a coy reluctance to approach the house. He caught another odd grimace on the features of the old woman, who was now washing the dishes.

"We won't confine you to any one room this afternoon," he told her. "Wander where your heart leads you. But remember, you're on parole. Like ourselves, you must forego all communication with the glad outer world. And leave the secretary where he is, unless you want him hurt."

"This storm will be a good thing for us," he mentioned to Doris, when they had returned to the up-stairs sitting-room. "It will be dark soon after four, and the snow will cover our footsteps. But I'm inclined to think," he added, reflectively, "that before we start I'd better go out and truss up those two birds in the grounds."

She showed an immediate apprehension.

"No, no! you mustn't think of that!" she cried. "Promise me you won't."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"As you wish, of course. But if they interfere when we're getting started, surely you'll let me rock them to sleep, won't you?"

"I—I don't know. Something may happen! Oh, I wish you hadn't come!" She was clearly in a panic, a genuine one. It seemed equally clear that her nerves, under the recent strain put upon them, were in a bad way. All this was Shaw's work, and as he realized it Laurie's expression changed so suddenly that the girl

cried out: "What is it? What's the matter?"

He answered, still under the influence of the feeling that had shaken him.

"I was just thinking of our friend Bertie and of a little bill he's running up against the future. Sooner or later, and I rather think it will be sooner, Bertie's going to pay that bill."

She did not move, but gave him a look that made him thoughtful. It was an odd, sidelong look, frightened, yet watchful. He remembered that once or twice before she had given him such a look. More than anything else that had happened, this glance chilled him. It was not thus that the woman he loved should look at him.

Suddenly he heard her gasp, and the next instant the silence of the room was broken by another voice, a voice of concentrated rage with a snarl running through it.

"So you're here, are you?" it jerked. "By God, I'm sick of you and of your damned interference!"

He turned. Shaw was standing just inside the door. But he was not the sleek, familiar, torpid figure of recent encounter. He seemed mad clean through, fighting mad. His jaws were set; his sleek head and heavy shoulders were thrust forward as if he were ready to spring, and his protuberant eyes had lost their haze and held a new and unpleasant light.

But, angry though he appeared, Herbert Ransome Shaw was taking no chances in this encounter with his undesired guest. Behind him shone the now smug countenance of the blond secretary, and on each side he was flanked by another man. Powerful fellows these two seemed, evidently Italian laborers, gazing at the scene uncomprehendingly, but ready for any work their master set them. In stupefaction, Laurie stared at the tableau, while eight eyes unwinkingly stared back at him. Then he nodded.

"Well, Bertie," he said pleasantly, "you're outdoing even yourself in the size of this delegation. Four to one. Quite some odds." His voice changed. "You contemptible coward! Why don't you take me on alone? Have you got your chloroform cone?"

The complexion of Shaw, red with cold, darkened to an apoplectic purple.

"You'll soon find out what we've got," he barked, "and what's coming to you. Now, are you going to put up a fight against four, or will you go quietly?"

"I think," said Laurie thoughtfully, "I'd rather go quietly. But just where is it I'm going?"

"You'll soon know." Shaw was carrying a coil of rope, light but strong, and now he tossed it to one of the Italians.

"Tie him up," he curtly ordered.

"Oh, no," said Laurie, backing a step. "Tut, tut! I wouldn't advise that. I really wouldn't. It would be one of those rash acts you read about."

Something in his voice checked the forward stride of the Italian with the rope. He hesitated, glancing at Shaw. With a gesture, the latter ordered the two men through the door.

"Wait just outside," he directed. He turned to Laurie. "Out you go!" he ordered brusquely.

Laurie hesitated, glancing at Doris, but he could not meet her eye. At the window, with her back to the room, she stared out at the storm. Even in that moment her attitude stunned him. Also, he felt an unconquerable aversion to anything in the nature of a struggle before her. Perhaps, once outside the room, he could take on those ruffians, together or in turn.

Without another word, he crossed the threshold into the hall. Before him hurried the two Italians. Behind him crowded Shaw and the secretary. He walked forward perhaps six strides. Then, as the side railing of the stairway rose beside him, he saw his opportunity. He struck out right and left with all his strength, flooring one of the Italians and sending the second helpless against the wall. In the next instant he had leaped over the slender rail of the stairway, landed half-way down the stairs, and made a jump for the front door.

As he had expected, the door was locked. Shaw, if he had entered that way, had not been too hurried to attend to this little detail. Laurie had just time to brace his back against it when the four men were upon him.

The ten minutes that followed were among the most interesting of young Devon's life. He had always liked a good fight, and this episode in the great dim hall brought out all that was bloodthirsty and primitive in him. For in the room

above was Doris, and these men, whoever they were, stood in the way of her freedom and happiness.

If he could have taken them on one by one he could have snapped their necks in turn, and he would have done so without compunction. As it was, with four leaping at him simultaneously, he called on all his reserve strength, his skill in boxing, and the strategy of his foot-ball days.

His first blow sent the blond secretary to the floor, where he lay motionless. After that it was hard to distinguish where blows fell. What Devon wanted and was striving to reach was the throat of Shaw, but the slippery thing eluded him.

He fought on with hands and feet, even drawing, against these odds, on the *savate* he had learned in Paris. Blood flowed from his nose, his ear and his lip. Shaw's face was bleeding, too, and soon one of the Italians had joined the meek young secretary in his slumbers on the floor. Then Laurie felt his head agonizingly twisted backward, heard the creak of a rusty bolt, and, in the next instant, was hurled headlong through the suddenly opened door, to the snow-covered veranda.

As he pulled himself up, crouching for a return spring, Shaw, disheveled and breathless on the threshold, jerkily addressed him.

"Try it again if you like, you young devil," he panted, "but remember one thing: the next time you won't get off so easily."

The door slammed, and again the bolt shot into place. Laurie listened. No sound whatever came from the inner hall. The old house was again apparently dead, after its moments of fierce life. He slowly descended the steps, and, bracing himself against the nearest tree, stared at the house, still gasping from the effects of the struggle.

He was out of it, but he had left Doris behind. The fact sickened him. So did the ignominy of his departure. He was not even to be followed. His absence was all the gang desired. His impulse was to force the door and again face the four of them. But he realized that he could accomplish nothing against such odds, and certainly, as a prisoner in the house, trussed up with Shaw's infernal rope, he would be of no use to either Doris or himself. He decided to return to the garage and get his car and the weapon he had left there. Then, if the four still wanted to fight, he would show them something that might take the spirit out of them.

Having arrived at this sane conclusion, he turned away from the silent house, and, hatless and coatless as he was, hurriedly made his way through the heavy snow-drifts toward the public road.

CHAPTER XV

MR. SHAW DECIDES TO TALK

At the garage he found Burke faithful to his trust and with an alert eye out for more five-dollar bills. The proprietor temporarily lost sight of these, however, in his sudden and vivid interest in the new patron's appearance.

Laurie answered his questions with a word that definitely checked the further development of curiosity. Then, huddling over the stove, and warming his icy, soaked feet, he curtly outlined his intentions. He was going to change back into his own clothes, he explained, and he would want his car at five o'clock sharp. This, he intimated, would give Burke a little more than half an hour in which to get his mental processes started again and to have the car ready.

Burke whistled inaudibly. Obviously the joke the lad had played had not panned out to the young man's taste. Burke was sorry for that. His experience had been that with these young "rounders" generosity went hand in hand with success and its attendant exhilaration; and that when depression set in, as it obviously had done in this instance, a sudden paralysis numbed the open palm.

However, even granting that this was so, he had already been largely overpaid for anything he had done or might still be expected to do. He nodded his response to the young man's instructions, and though he was not a subtle person, he succeeded in conveying at the same time a sense of his sympathy with the natural annoyance of a high-spirited practical joker whose joke had plainly miscarried. Ordinarily his attitude would have amused Devon, but Laurie was far from his sense of humor just now. Still whistling softly, Burke departed, to make a final inspection of the car, leaving Laurie the sole occupant of the cramped and railed-in corner that represented the private office.

That young man was in the grip of a characteristic Devon rage, and as he rapidly got back into his own clothing his fury mounted until the blood pounded at his temples. He dared not let himself sum up the case against Shaw, though the manner in which he had been kicked out savored strongly of contempt. Evidently Shaw didn't care where he was, so long as he was outside of the house.

Neither dared he sum up the case against Doris, though he could not for a

moment banish from his mind the picture of her as she had stood with her back to him and his four assailants. Why had she stood thus? Because she was indifferent to any fate that befell him? Or because she was numbed by her own misery? Crowding forward with these questions was a sick fear for her, alone in that sinister house with four thugs and an old hag whose sole human quality seemed to be a sardonic sense of humor exercised at his, Laurie's, expense.

What might happen to her? What might be happening even now? And what assurance had he that even if he again succeeded in entering the house, a very remote possibility, he could accomplish anything against Shaw and his companions? Oh, if only he had waited and brought Rodney with him! Together, he felt, the two of them could have met and overcome a regiment of men like Shaw and his secretary.

A wild impulse came to him to take Burke with him in his second effort, but an appraising look at that seedy individual checked it. He was convinced that Burke could neither fight nor keep his mouth shut. Owing to his promise to Doris, police help, of course, was out of the question. No, he must go back alone. But this time there would be no semi-ignominious departure. He would either bring Doris away, or he would remain there with her. And if Shaw wanted trouble, he'd get it, and it would be the real thing.

That afternoon, on his first visit to The Cedars, his new instinct of caution had made him leave behind him the little revolver he had brought. He knew his own hot temperament too well to risk carrying it, and he had an arrogant faith in his own physical strength which, as a rule, had been justified. Now, however, he retrieved the weapon, and with a sudden tightening of the lips dropped it into his overcoat pocket.

When he was dressed he went out to look over his car. Burke, who was evidently fascinated by the slender racer, rose from an admiring inspection of the engine as its owner approached.

"She's ready any minute now," he reported. "She's had gas, oil, and air, and I've put on the chains. Thought you'd want 'em, in this storm."

Laurie nodded and glanced out at the window. The storm had developed into a blizzard. His optimism, somewhat numbed in the past hour, reasserted itself to suggest that nature was helping him to meet the odds against him in the old house down the road. He glanced at his watch. It was not yet quite five, but certainly there was darkness enough for his purposes. He could safely take the

car into the side wood road near The Cedars, and leave it there among the trees until he needed it. He handed Burke his final offering, the size of which wholly dispelled that philosopher's pessimistic forebodings. Jumping into his car, he backed it out into the storm.

"Hey, there! what about these clo'es?" demanded Burke, indicating with a thumb the abandoned heap of garments in the office.

"Eat 'em," briefly advised the occupant of the disappearing car. Burke shook his head. Garage men are used to hectic human types and strange happenings, but this particular type and incident were new to Burke. He was also interested in the discovery that the young fella wasn't going to New York, now that his joke was played. He was going straight up the road, in the wrong direction, and driving like the devil. Well, anyway, Burke had made a tidy bit on that joke, whatever it was. Gazing affectionately at the latest crisp bill, he thought of his wife and the seventh, and nobly decided to forgive them both.

Laurie, his hot head cooled by the storm that beat against him, raced through the gathering darkness. He had the road to himself. In weather like this no one was abroad who could stay at home. He turned off into the country road, already deep in snow-drifts, and swept on, through the little wood whose leafless birches now looked unfamiliar, even spectral, in the increasing gloom. Save for the soft purr of his engine, his progress made no sound. He drove as far as he dared, then stopped the car off the road, in a clear space among the trees, and continued his way on foot. He must leave the car there, and take the chance of having it discovered. In the storm and darkness that chance seemed very remote.

He plunged on toward the house, knee-deep, now, in the drifts that swept across the narrow road. Soon the building was visible in its somber setting, and as he stared at its dim outlines his heart leaped. In the right-hand corner, on the second floor, a light showed faintly through drawn shades. The sight filled him with an overwhelming relief. Until he saw it, he had not realized how great his inner panic had been. He stopped, drew a deep breath, and stood staring up at it.

The rest of the house looked black and uninhabited, but somewhere within it, he was sure, Shaw and the blond secretary watched and waited. To the Italians he gave no thought. He was convinced that neither of them cared to come alone to close quarters with him; and this conviction was so strong that the prompt retreat of the fellow with the rope had not surprised him, either at the moment or in retrospect, though both men had fought well under Shaw's eyes. If the Italians

were again on guard in the grounds, it would be his job to choke them off before they could warn Shaw of his presence. Warning Shaw, he hoped, was about all they were good for.

His plan, fully made, was very simple. He had no intention of risking another encounter if it could be avoided. His purpose was to get Doris out of that house, back to New York, and in Louise Ordway's care with the least possible difficulty and delay. That done, he could take up his little affair with Shaw. Even against the blond secretary he felt no personal rancor. The youth with the pursuing eyes and the chloroform was merely a wretched pawn in Shaw's game.

In Shaw's game! The phrase stuck, burning into his consciousness like the vitriol he believed the beast would use if he dared. What *was* Shaw's game? Why was he so smugly sure of it? And why, oh, why, *why*, was Doris seemingly numb to its danger, yet anxious for his help? For the first time he gave definite shape to a reflection that for hours had been trying to catch his attention, and from which he had restively turned. It was this:

When those four men, headed by Shaw, had entered that upper room, Doris had not been surprised. She had expected them. Moreover, she had not been really afraid. Instead, she had worn a look of flaming anger and of sudden resolution. She had stepped forward as if to speak. Her very lips had been parted for speech. Then, Shaw had looked at her, and slowly she had turned away and stood staring out at the window, her back to the room and its tableau. In short, with one glance of his veiled, protruding eyes, Shaw had conquered her, and Laurie himself had seen, what no one could have made him believe, her instantaneous and complete submission.

It was this revelation which had added the smoke barrage of doubt to the situation, clouding his faculties and temporarily stifling his faith. In the face of this, how could he still trust? Yet he had promised to trust, to believe, "whatever happened." Those had been his own words, and she had wept and told him he was "wonderful"!

The deep breath he had drawn ended in a sigh. He was fighting more than one storm, and in this instant he felt an indescribable weariness of soul and body. But not for a second did he hesitate in the course he had decided on. Later, when Doris was safe, perhaps things would clear up. For the moment there was one thing, and one alone, to be done.

The trees around the house made the approach under their cover a fairly easy

one. However, he moved slowly, missing no precaution. He hardly believed the zeal of the Italians would keep them out in the storm, but they might have rigged up some sort of shelter, or, more probably, they might be doing sentry-work at some of those dark windows.

Clinging close to the trees, he skirted the house, then approached it from the rear, and slipped along the side of the building, hugging the wall. As he noiselessly moved he listened, but no sound came from inside. When he reached the front right wing he stopped, and, looking up, verified his swift impressions of the afternoon.

A wide veranda swung around the front and side of this wing, supported by substantial pillars, up any one of which he knew he could climb like a cat. The roof of the veranda opened on the low French front windows of the up-stairs sitting-room. There was no question that within a few moments he himself could enter that sitting-room.

The real question, and again he carefully considered it, was how, once in the room, he could get the girl out of it. *She* could not climb railings and slide down pillars. There was a window on the rear end of the wing, above what plainly served in summer-time as a veranda dining-room. This end of the veranda was glassed in, and over it a trellis afforded a support for frozen vines that now shivered in the storm. If he could get Doris out at that window, he might be able to get her down to the ground with the help of the trellis. But from what room did the window open, and how much of the upper hall would they have to traverse before reaching it? Not much, he fancied.

Again he looked around, and listened. There was no sound or motion, save those caused by the storm. The next instant he was climbing the pillar toward the dimly lighted window. The ascent was not so easy as he had pictured it. To his chagrin, he made several unsuccessful efforts before he finally drew himself over the top of the veranda roof, and, lying flat in the snow, slowly recovered the breath exhausted by his efforts.

Lying thus, and stretching out an arm, he could almost touch the nearest window with his fingers, almost, but not quite. Still lying flat, he dragged himself a yard farther. His head was now in line with the window, but the close-drawn shade shut out all but the suggestion of the inner light. He hesitated a moment, then, very cautiously, tapped on the frosty pane.

There was no response. He tapped again, and then a third time, twice in

succession and more compellingly. This time he thought he heard a movement in the room, but he was not sure.

He waited a moment, then softly signaled again. There was no question now about the movement in the room. He heard it distinctly, heard it approach the window, heard it cease, then saw the curtain slowly drawn. The face of Doris looked out, at first vaguely, as if she had fancied the noise some manifestation of the storm. But in the next instant she glanced down, saw him, and obviously checked an exclamation. In another moment she had opened the window, and without straightening up he had slipped across the sill.

Neither spoke. Laurie was looking about the room, reassuringly empty, save for those two. He closed the window, drew the shade, and became conscious that she held his hand and was drawing him urgently toward the fire. At the same time she answered his unasked question.

"They're all down in the kitchen, I think. Listen!"

She opened the door leading to the hall, and, going out, leaned over the stair-rail.

"Yes, they're still there," she reported when she came back. "All but one of the Italians. They're eating now, and after that I *think* they're planning to leave."

"Where's the hag?"

"Waiting on them."

She spoke detachedly, almost dully. As in the morning, she was not surprised; but to-night there was in her manner a suggestion of repressed excitement which it had not held before.

"Have you a heavy coat?" he asked her.

"Yes."

"Get it and put it on, quick. Don't waste any time." He indicated the buckled house-shoes she still wore. "And put on some real shoes, if you have them."

Without replying, she disappeared. He followed her into the bedroom in which, during the hours of his presence that afternoon, the hag had found uneasy asylum. He indicated a door.

"Where does that lead?"

"Into a bath-room."

"There's a back window over the veranda. What room does that mean?"

"A bedroom off the hall."

"Good!"

She followed his thought. "But I don't think we can risk that. One of the Italians is patrolling the hall. That's why they haven't locked the door. I caught a glimpse of him just now, coming toward the foot of the stairs."

He stared at her frowningly, then, walking to the bed, stripped it with an arm-swing and seized the sheets.

"Then it's simply a question of lowering you from the front," he cried, curtly. "I'll lower you as far as I can, and we'll have to risk a drop of a few feet. Snow's safe."

As he spoke, he was hurriedly tearing and roping the sheets. "Used to do this at school when I was a kid," he explained. "Quite like old times. Now get on the coat and shoes, please."

She needed the reminder. She was staring at this visitor, who had the face of the man she knew and the voice and manner of a stranger. All trace of young Devon's debonair indifference was gone. He had the cold eyes and set jaw of a determined man, busy at some task which would assuredly be done, but his air of detachment equaled her own.

When she was ready, and still with his new air of businesslike concentration on the job in hand, he adjusted the linen ropes, and after a preliminary survey of the grounds, led her through the window and out on the veranda roof. Here he briefly told her what to do, suiting action to words with entire efficiency, and assuming her unquestioning obedience as a matter of course.

The lowering was not the simple exercise he had expected, any more than the upward climb had been. Light as she was, it was clear that her unsupported weight would be a heavy drag upon a body resting insecurely on a slippery roof with nothing more substantial than snow and ice to cling to. But eventually she was down, a little shaken but unhurt, and he was beside her.

"Now, let's see how fast you can run," he suggested; and for the first time his

whispered voice held a ring of the youth she knew. "Shaw's watchers may suddenly begin to watch, or even to see something."

She responded to his changed tone with an uncontrollable gasp of relief, which he attributed to excitement.

"Don't worry. All right now, I think," he said, with an immediate return to curtness. It steadied her as no other attitude on his part could have done.

"Can you drive a Pierce Arrow?" he asked, as they plunged ahead through the snow-drifts.

"Yes."

"That's fine. That's great. I was afraid you couldn't." This was Laurie again. He went on urgently. "If we're stopped or separated, do exactly as I say. Don't lose an instant. Rush to my car. It's over there, among the trees. See?—there at the right. It's turned toward the road." He indicated the spot. "Get in, go to the left at the first turn, drive full speed to a garage a quarter of a mile down the main road. No matter what happens, don't stop till you reach it. Go into the garage, and wait half an hour for me. If I'm not there then, drive on to New York and go to this address." He gave her a penciled slip he had prepared. "Mrs. Ordway is a good friend of mine. She'll take you in and look after you. Will you do that?"

"Yes." The word was so low that he had to bend his head to catch it. His voice softened still more.

"Don't worry. It will be all right. Only, some way, I can't believe that Shaw is letting us off as easily as this."

She stumbled, but he caught her. For a moment he supported her, and in that moment, under the sense of her nearness and dearness and helplessness, the hardness of the past hour disappeared. He did not understand her. Perhaps he would never understand her. But whatever she was, she was all right.

Half leading, half carrying her, he got her to the car and into it. He had actually raised one foot to follow her when something stirred in the shadows near them, and the familiar, squat figure of Shaw stepped forth.

Though in his sudden appearance he had followed the dramatic instinct that seemed so strong in him, he had wholly lost the effect of unleashed fury he had worn in the afternoon. He was even smiling with an affectation of good-humored

tolerance. He had the air of a man who, with the game in his hands, can afford to be patient and affable.

"Oh, come now," he said easily, "don't leave us quite so soon! Since you've come back for another visit, we've decided to keep you a while. You know, I warned you of that."

Laurie made a sign to Doris, which she instantly obeyed. Even before the indolent voice had finished speaking, she was at the wheel and the car had started. Shaw, springing forward with goggling eyes and dropped jaw, found his way blocked by a man as new to him as he had been to Doris, a Laurence Devon who all in an instant had taken on the black rage he himself had dropped. In the hands of this stranger was a revolver which neatly covered Shaw's plump chest. Before this apparition, Shaw backed away precipitately.

"Stand exactly where you are." Devon's voice was very quiet, but there was a quality in it which added to the icy chill of the night. "I know you're not alone, but if any of your pals shows himself, I'll shoot him dead. If you move or utter one word, or cry out, I'll kill you. Do you understand?"

Shaw did understand. The look in his protruding eyes proved that. Those eyes shifted wildly, turning this way and that, as if in search of the help which lurked among those spectral trees. He himself stood as motionless as one of them, and as he stood he moistened his thin lips with the tip of a trembling tongue.

"Now," said Laurie, "I'm going to have the truth. I'm going to have it all, and I'm going to have it quick. If you don't tell it, I'll kill you. Probably I shall kill you anyway. But first you will answer two questions. What power have you got over Miss Mayo? And what are you trying to do?"

Shaw hesitated. Again his protruding eyes turned wildly to the right and left, as if in search of help. Still holding the revolver in his right hand, Laurie slowly reached out his left and seized the other's throat in the grip of his powerful young fingers.

"Keep still," he warned, as the other started to raise his hands. "You think the game isn't up, but it is. Now talk, and talk quick."

He tightened his grip on the thick, slippery throat. "I'm enjoying this," he rasped. "If you were anything but the snake you are, I'd give you a fighting chance. But a creature that uses chloroform and hires three thugs to help him in his dirty jobs

—"

He increased the pressure on the thick neck. Shaw's face began to purple. His eyes bulged horribly. He choked, and with the act gave up.

"Hold on," he gurgled. "Listen."

The pressure on his throat slightly relaxed. With eyes closed, he collapsed against the nearest tree-trunk. Laurie followed him, expecting some treacherous move; but all the fight seemed out of the serpent. He was clutching at his coat and collar as if not yet able to breathe.

"I've had enough of this," he finally gasped out. "I'll tell you everything."

Even as he spoke, Laurie observed that one of the clutching, clawing hands had apparently got hold of what it was seeking.

Doris, feeling her way through the blackness of the storm on the unfamiliar country road, heard above the wind the sound of a sharp explosion which she thought meant a blown-out tire. She did not stop. Before her, only a short distance away, was the garage to which she was hastening and where she was to wait for Laurie. To go on meant to take a chance, but she had been ordered not to stop. There was a certain exhilaration in obeying that order. Crouched over the wheel, with head bent, and guessing at the turns she could not see, she pressed on through the storm.

CHAPTER XVI

BURKE MAKES A PROMISE

Burke, dozing over the fire in his so-called office, was aroused from his dreams by the appearance of a vision. For a moment he blinked at it doubtfully. Then into his eyes came a dawning intelligence, slightly tinged with reproach.

Burke was an unimaginative man, who did not like to be jarred out of his routine. Already that day several unusual incidents had occurred; and though, like popular tales, they ended happily, they had been almost too great a stimulus to thought. Now here was another, in the form of a girl, young and beautiful, and apparently blown into his presence on the wings of the wild storm that was raging.

Somewhat uncertainly, Mr. Burke arose and approached the vision, which, standing at the threshold of his sanctum, thereupon addressed him in hurried but reassuring human tones.

"I've had a blow-out," the lady briefly announced. "Will you put on a 'spare,' please, and take a look at the other shoes?"

This service, she estimated, would take half an hour of the proprietor's time, if he moved with the customary deliberation of his class, and would, of course, make superfluous any explanation of her wait in the garage, and of her nervousness, if he happened to be sufficiently observant to notice that.

It was really fortunate that the blow-out had occurred. Surely within the half-hour Laurie would have rejoined her. If he did not, she frankly conceded to herself, she would go mad with suspense. There was a limit to what she could endure, and that limit had been reached. Thirty minutes more of patience and courage and seeming calm covered the last draft she could make on a nervous system already greatly overtaxed.

Burke drew his worn office chair close to the red-hot stove, and was mildly pained by the lady's failure to avail herself of the comfort thus offered. Instead, she threw off her big coat, and, drawing the chair to the corner farthest from the stove, seated herself there and with hands that shook took up the local newspaper

which was the live wire between Burke and the outer world. Her intense desire for solitude was apparent even to his dull eye.

Burke sighed. In his humble way he was a gallant man, and it would have been pleasant to exchange a few remarks with this visitor from another sphere. Undoubtedly they would have found interests in common. This, it will be remembered, was January, 1917, three months before America's entry into the world war, and women able to drive motors were comparatively rare. Any girl who could drive a car in a storm like this, and through the drifts of country roads —Mr. Burke, having reluctantly removed himself from the lady's presence, was now beside her car, and at this point in his reflections he uttered an exclamation and his jaw dropped.

"It's the lad's car!" he ejaculated slowly, and for a moment stood staring at it. Then, still slowly, he nodded.

It was the lad's car, which, only a short time before, he himself had put in perfect order for a swift run to New York. Now this girl had it, but 'twas easy to see why. He had been wrong in his college-prank theory. Here was something more serious and much more interesting. Here was a love-affair. And, he handsomely conceded, it was going on between a pair of mates the like of which wasn't often seen. In her way the girl was as fine a looker as the boy, and that, Mr. Burke decided, was "going some, for them both."

As his meditations continued he was cursorily glancing at the tires, looking for the one that had sustained the blow-out. He was not greatly surprised to find every tire perfect. There had been plenty of mysteries in the lad's conduct, and this was merely another trifle to add to the list. Undoubtedly the lady had her reasons for insisting on a blow-out, and if she had, it was no affair of his. Also, the price for changing that tire would be a dollar, and Mr. Burke was always willing to pick up a dollar.

Whistling softly but sweetly, he removed a rear shoe, replaced it with one of the "spares" on the car's rack, and solemnly retested the others. The task, as Doris had expected, took him almost half an hour. When it was completed he lounged back to the lady and assured her that the car was again ready for service.

The lady hesitated. There was no sign of Laurie, and she dared not leave. Yet on what pretext could she linger? With the manner of one who has unlimited time at her disposal, she demanded her bill, a written one, and paid it. Then, checking herself on a casual journey toward the big coat, she showed a willingness to

indulge in that exchange of friendly points of view for which Burke's heart had longed.

The exchange was not brilliant, but Burke made the most of it. No, he told her, they didn't often have storms as bad as this. One, several years ago, had blocked traffic for two days, but that was very unusual. He hoped the young lady knew the roads well. It wasn't easy driving when you couldn't see your hand before your face. He hoped she wasn't nervous about getting back; for now he had discovered that she was intensely nervous about something.

With a gallant effort at ease, the lady took up the theme of the storm and embroidered it in pretty colors and with much delicate fancy. When the pattern was getting somewhat confused, she suddenly asked a leading question.

"Which shoe blew out?"

Burke stared at her. He wished he knew what was expected of him. Did she want the truth, or didn't she? He realized that momentarily she was becoming more excited. He had not missed her frequent glances through the window, up the road, and he knew that for the past five minutes she had been listening for something wholly unconnected with his words. In reality Doris was in the grip of an almost unconquerable panic. What had happened? Why didn't Laurie come?

Burke decided to let her have the truth, or part of the truth. She'd get it anyway, if she examined the replaced "spare" on the car's rack.

"There wasn't no blow-out," he stated, defensively.

"There wasn't! What do you mean?"

He saw that she was first surprised, then startled, then, as some sudden reflection came to her, actually appalled.

"I mean that there wasn't no blow-out."

"No blow-out? Then—then—what did I hear?" She asked the question of Burke, and, as she asked it, recoiled suddenly, as if he had struck her.

"P'raps you got a back-fire," he suggested, reassuringly. "You come down the steep hill up there, didn't you?"

Doris pulled herself together, shrugged her shoulders, and resolutely smiled at him. She knew the difference between the sound of a blow-out and the back-

firing of an irritated engine. But some abysmal instinct made her suddenly cautious, though with that same instinct her inner panic developed. *What had she heard?*

"I put on a 'spare,' anyway," Burke was saying. "The rear right looked a little weak, so I changed it."

He was tacitly explaining the bill he had submitted, but Doris did not hear him. *What had she heard?* Insistently the question repeated itself in her mind. She turned dizzily, and went back for the coat. As she did so she heard Burke's voice.

"Why—hel-lo!"

Even in that moment she observed its modulation. It had begun on a note of cheery surprise and ended on one of sharp concern. Turning, she saw Laurie.

He had nodded to Burke, and was obviously trying to speak naturally.

"What you been doin' to yerself?" he gasped
"What you been doin' to yerself?" he gasped

"All ready?" he asked.

The remark was addressed to them both, but he looked at neither. There was an instant of utter silence during which they took him in, Burke with insistent, goggling eyes, Doris with one quick glance, soul-searching and terror-filled. Burke spoke first.

"What you been doin' to yerself?" he gasped.

The question was inevitable. Laurie was hatless and disheveled. His coat was torn, and across one pallid cheek ran a deep cut, freshly bleeding.

"Fell," he said, tersely.

He was breathing hard, as if he had been running. He had not yet looked at Doris, but now he abruptly swung into the little office and emerged, bringing her coat. Without a word, he held it for her. In equal silence, she slipped into it. He retrieved the cap from the pile of discarded garments still lying on the office floor, put it on, and indicated the waiting car.

"Get in," he commanded.

She obeyed and he followed her, taking his place at the wheel.

"You're hurt," she almost whispered. "Shall I drive?"

"No—Burke!"

The word was like a pistol shot.

"Y-yessir!" Burke was stammering. In his excitement he was hardly conscious that another bill had found its way into his hand, but his hand had automatically reached for and closed on it.

"Keep your mouth shut."

"Y-yessir."

"Keep it shut till to-morrow morning. You haven't seen anything or anybody at all to-day. Understand?"

"Y-yessir."

"After to-night you can talk about me all you like. But you're to forget absolutely that you ever saw the lady. Is that clear?"

"Y-yessir!"

"Thank you. Good-by."

He started the car and swung it out into the storm. As it went Burke saw the girl catch the boy's arm and heard something that sounded partly like a cry and partly like a sob.

"Laurie!"

"H-ush!"

The car was tearing through the storm and drifts at fifty miles an hour, and this time it was headed down the road for New York.

Burke's eyes followed it, as far as he could see it, which was not far. Then he retreated to the "office," and, dropping heavily into his desk chair, stared unseeingly at a calendar on the wall.

"That lad's been up to somethin'," he muttered. "I wonder what my dooty is."

It was a long moment before he remembered to open his hand and look at the bill he was holding. As he did so his eyes widened. The bill was a large one. It amounted to much more than the combined value of the bills dropped into that willing palm during the day. Briskly and efficiently it solved the little problem connected with Mr. Burke's "dooty." With a quick look around him, he thrust it into his pocket.

"I ain't really *seen* nothin'," he muttered, "an' I ain't sure of nothin', anyhow."

"What has happened? Oh, Laurie, what has happened?"

For a time Laurie did not answer. Then she felt rather than saw his face turn toward her in the darkness.

"Doris."

"Yes."

"Will you do something for me?"

"Yes, Laurie, anything."

"Then don't speak till we reach New York. When we get to your studio I'll tell you everything. Will you do that?"

"But—Laurie—"

"Will—you—do—it?" The voice was not Laurie's. It was the harsh, grating voice of a man distraught.

"Yes, of course."

Silence settled upon them like a substance, a silence broken only by the roar of the storm and the crashing of wind-swept branches of the trees that lined the road. The car's powerful search-lights threw up in ghostly shapes the covered stumps and hedges they passed and the masses of snow that beat against them. Subconsciously the girl knew that this boy beside her, driving with the recklessness of a lost soul, was merely guessing at a road no one could have

seen, but in that half-hour she had no thought for the hazards of the journey. Her panic had grown till it filled her soul.

She wanted to cry out, to shriek, but she dared not. The compelling soul in the rigid figure beside her held her silent. Her nerves began to play strange tricks. She became convinced that the whole experience was a nightmare, an incredible one from which she would wake if that terrible figure so close to her, and yet so far away, would help her. But it wouldn't. Perhaps it never would. The nightmare must go on and on. Soon all sense of being in a normal world had left her.

Once, in a frantic impulse of need of human contact, she laid her hand on the arm nearest her, over the wheel. The next instant she withdrew it with a shudder. For all the response she had found she might have touched a dead man. Something of the look of a dead man, too, was in the boy's face and eyes as he bent forward, motionless as a statue, his features like stone and his eyes as unhuman as polished agate, staring fixedly at the road before them.

A low-bending, ice-covered branch whipped her face and she shrieked, fancying it the touch of dead fingers. Several times huge shapes from the roadside seemed to spring at them, but their progress was too swift even for spectral shapes. Or was it?

It was on a stretch of road through the woods that the obsession in her mind took its final and most hideous form. Close behind them, and ringing in their ears, she fancied she heard a cry in the voice of Shaw. It was not Shaw's human voice. She would not have known it in a human world. It had passed through the great change; but it was recognizable, because she, too, had passed through some great change. Recognizable, too, was the sound of Shaw's running feet, though she had never heard them run, and though they were running so lightly on the top of the snow.

He was just behind them, she thought. If she turned she knew she would see him, not as she had known him, plump, sleek, living and loathsome, but stark, rigid, and ready for his grave, yet able to pursue; and the new, unearthly light of his bulging eyes seemed burning into her back.

She groaned, but the groan brought no response from the tense figure beside her. The only sounds were the howls of the wind, the frenzied protests of the tortured trees, and the fancied hail of a dead man, coming closer and closer.

CHAPTER XVII

LAURIE MAKES A CONFESSION

The lights of Long Island City greeted them with reassuring winks through the snow. Seeing these, Doris drew a deep breath. She had let her nerves run away with her, she subconsciously felt. Now, rising from the depths of her panic to a realization of contact with a living world, as they crossed the bridge to Manhattan, seeing hurrying men and women about her, hearing the blasts of motor horns and the voices of motor drivers, she fiercely assured herself that she had been an hysterical fool.

In the first moments of reaction she even experienced a sense of personal injury and almost of resentment toward her companion. He had put her through the most horrible half-hour of her life. It seemed that no service he had rendered could compensate her for such suffering. On the other hand, he *had* brought her safely back to New York, as he had promised to do. Surely, it was not for her to cavil at the manner in which he had done it. Something, of course, had happened, probably a racking fight between the two men. Laurie was exhausted, and was showing it; that was all.

With their arrival at her studio, his manner did not change. He assisted her from the car, punctiliously escorted her to the elevator, and left her there.

"I have some telephoning to do," he explained. "I shall not leave the building, and I expect to be with you again in about fifteen minutes. With your permission, I am asking my two partners to meet me in your studio, Rodney Bangs and Jacob Epstein. What I have to tell must be told to all three of you, and"—his voice caught in a queer fashion—"it is a thing I don't want to tell more than once. I think I can get them right away. They'll probably be in their rooms, dressing for dinner. May they come here?"

"Of course."

Her panic was returning. His appearance in the lighted hall was nothing short of terrifying, and not the least uncanny feature was his own utter unconsciousness of or indifference to it.

"Thanks. Then I'll wait for them down here, and bring them up to your studio when they come."

He left her with that, and Henry, the night elevator man, who went on duty at six o'clock, indifferently swung the lever and started his car upward.

In the studio, with her door shut against the world, Doris again resolutely took herself and her nerves in hand. She summoned endless explanations of Laurie's manner and appearance, explanations which, however, turn and twist them as she would, always left something unexplained.

There was, she realized, a strong probability that he had forced the truth from Shaw. But even the truth would not make Laurie look and act like that. Or would it? She tried to believe it would. Anything would be better than the thing she feared. She set her teeth; then, springing from the chair into which she had dropped, she turned on the studio lights and busied herself with preparations for her visitors. She simply dared not let her thoughts run on.

Five minutes passed—ten—fifteen—twenty. Save during the half-hour of that return journey from Sea Cliff, she had never known such dragging, horror-filled moments. A dozen times she fancied she heard the elevator stop at her floor, and the sound of voices and footsteps approach. A dozen times she went to her windows and wildly gazed out on the storm. As she stared, she prayed. It was the same prayer, over and over.

"Dear God, please don't let it be that way!" The aspiration was the nearest she dared come to putting into words the terror that shook her heart.

The second fifteen minutes were almost up when she really heard the elevator stop. Quick footsteps approached her door, but there were no voices. The three men, if they were coming, were coming in utter silence. Before they had time to rap she had opened the door and stood back to let them enter. As they passed her she looked into their faces, and as she looked the familiar sense of panic, now immeasurably intensified, again seized her in its grip.

Laurie, usually the most punctilious of men, made on this occasion an omission extraordinary for him. He did not present his partners to their hostess. But not one of the three noticed that omission. Rodney Bangs, pale but carrying himself with a palpable effort at control, shouldered his way into the room in his characteristic fashion, as if he were meeting and hurling back a foot-ball rush. Epstein, breathless and obviously greatly excited, actually stumbled over the

threshold in his unseeing haste. Laurie, slowly following the two, alone wore some resemblance to a normal manner. He was very serious but quite calm.

He took off his coat, methodically folded it, and laid it on a near-by chair. To the brain back of each of the three pairs of eyes watching him, the same thought came. He had something appalling to tell them, and, cool as he seemed, he dared not tell it. He was playing for time. The strain of even the brief delay was too much for Epstein's endurance. High-strung, his nerves on edge, almost before Laurie had turned he sputtered forth questions like bullets from a machine-gun.

"Vell! vell!" he demanded, "vot's it all about? Vot's it mean? Over the telephone you say you got to see us this minute. You say you got into trouble, big trouble. Vell, vot trouble? Vot is it?"

Laurie looked at him, and something in the look almost spiked the big gun. But Epstein was a man of action, and, notwithstanding his nervousness, a man of some nerve. The expression in the boy's black eyes had stunned him, but with only an instant's hesitation he finished what he had meant to say.

"I guess it ain't nothing ve can't fix up," he jerked out, trying to speak with his usual assurance. "I guess ve fix it up all right."

Laurie shook his head. None of the thirty minutes he had spent on the ground floor had been devoted to improving his appearance. His black curly hair, usually as shining as satin, was rough, matted, dirty. Across his left cheek the sinister cut still ran, raw, angry-looking, freshly irritated by the ice-laden wind.

"Sit down," he said, wearily. All the life had gone out of his voice. It had an uncanny effect of monotony, as if pitched on two flat notes. To those three, who knew so well the rich beauty of his speaking tones, this change in them was almost more alarming than the change in his looks.

They sat down, as he had directed, but not an eye in the room moved from his face. Epstein, still wearing his hat and heavy coat, had dropped into the big chair by the reading-lamp and was nervously gnawing his under lip. Bangs had mechanically tossed his hat toward a corner as he came in. He took a chair as mechanically, and sat very still, his back to the window, his eyes trying vainly to meet his friend's. Doris had moved to the upper corner of the couch, where she crouched, elbows on knees, chin on hands, staring at a spot on the floor. Though in the group, she seemed alone, and felt alone.

Walking over to the mantel, Laurie rested an elbow heavily upon it, and for the first time looked squarely from one to the other of his friends. As he looked, he tried to speak. They saw the effort and its failure, and understood both. With a gesture of hopelessness, he turned his back toward them, and stood with sagging muscles and eyes fixed on the empty grate. Epstein's nerves snapped.

"For God's sake, Devon," he begged, "cut out the vaits! Tell us vot you got on your chest, and tell it quick."

Laurie turned and once more met his eyes. Under the look Epstein's oblique eyes shifted.

"I'm going to," Laurie said quietly and still in those new, flat tones. "That's why I've brought you here. But—it's a hard job. You see,"—his voice again lost its steadiness—"I've got to hurt you—all of you—most awfully. And—and that's the hardest part of this business for me."

Doris, now staring up at him, told herself that she could not endure another moment of this tension. She dared not glance at either of the others, but she heard Epstein's heavy breathing and the creak of Rodney Bangs's chair as he suddenly changed his position. Again it was Epstein who spoke, his voice rising on a shriller note.

"Vell! vell! Get it out! I s'pose you done something. Vot you done?"

For the first time Laurie's eyes met those of Doris. The look was so charged with meaning that she sat up under it as if she had received a shock. Yet she was not sure she understood it. Did he want her to help him? She did not know. She only knew now that the thing she had feared was here, and that if she did not speak out something in her head would snap.

"He killed Herbert Shaw," she almost whispered.

For a long moment there was utter silence in the room, through which the words just spoken seemed to scurry like living things, anxious to be out and away. Laurie, his eyes on the girl, showed no change in his position, though a spasm crossed his face. Epstein, putting up one fat hand, feebly beat the air with it as if trying to push back something that was approaching him, something intangible but terrible. Bangs alone seemed at last to have taken in the full meaning of the curt announcement. As if it had galvanized him into movement, he sprang to his feet and, head down, charged the situation.

"What the devil is she talking about?" he cried out. "Laurie! What does she mean?"

"She told you." Laurie spoke as quietly as before, but without looking up.

"You—mean—it's—true?"

Rodney still spoke in a loud, aggressive voice, as if trying to awaken himself and the others from a nightmare.

"Take it in," muttered Laurie. "Pull yourselves up to it. I had to."

An uncontrollable shudder ran over him. As if his nerve had suddenly given way, he dropped his head on his bent arm. For another interval Bangs stood staring at him in a stupefaction through which a slow tremor ran.

"I—I *can't* take it in," he stammered at last.

"I know. That's the way I felt."

Laurie spoke without raising his head. Bangs, watching him, saw him shudder again, saw that his legs were giving under him, and that he was literally holding to the mantel for support. The sight steadied his own nerves. He pushed his chair forward, and with an arm across the other's shoulder, forced him down into it.

"Then, in God's name, why are we wasting time here?" he suddenly demanded. "Your car's outside. I'll drive you—anywhere. We'll get out of the country. We'll travel at night and lie low in the daytime. Pull yourself together, old man." Urgently, he grasped the other's shoulder. "We've got things to do."

Laurie shook his head. He tried to smile. There was something horrible in the resulting grimace of his twisted mouth.

"There were only two things to do," he said doggedly. "One was to tell you three. I've done that. The other was to tell the district attorney. I've done that, too."

Bangs recoiled, as if from a physical blow. Epstein, who had slightly roused himself at the prospect of action, sank back into a stunned, goggling silence.

"You've told him!" gasped Rodney, when he could speak.

"Yes." Laurie was pulling himself together. "We're friends, you know, Perkins and I," he went on, more naturally. "I've seen a good deal of him lately. He will make it as easy as he can. He has taken my parole. I've got—till morning." He let

them take that in. Then, very simply, he added, "I have promised to be in my rooms at eight o'clock."

Under this, like a tree-trunk that goes down with the final stroke of the ax, Rodney Bangs collapsed.

"My God!" he muttered. "My—God!" He fell into the nearest chair and sat there, his head in his shaking hands.

As if the collapse of his friend were a call to his own strength, Laurie suddenly sat up and took himself in hand.

"Now, listen," he said. "Let's take this sensibly. We've got to thresh out the situation, and here's our last chance. I want to make one thing clear. Shaw was pure vermin. There's no place for his sort in a decent world, and I have no more regret over—over exterminating him than I would have over killing a snake. Later, Miss Mayo will tell you why."

Under the effect of the clear, dispassionate voice, almost natural again, Epstein began to revive.

"It was self-defense," he croaked, eagerly. He caught at the idea as if it were a life-line, and obviously began to drag himself out of a pit with its help. "It was self-defense," he repeated. "You vas fighting, I s'pose. That lets you out."

"No," Laurie dully explained, "he wasn't armed. I thought he was. I thought he was drawing some weapon. He had used chloroform on me once before. I was mistaken. But no jury will believe that, of course."

His voice changed and flatted again. His young figure seemed to give in the chair, as if its muscles sagged under a new burden. For a moment he sat silent.

"We may as well face all the facts," he went on, at last. "The one thing I won't endure is the horror of a trial."

"But you'll get off," choked Epstein. "It's self-defense—it's—it's—"

"Or a brain storm, or temporary insanity!" Laurie interrupted. "No, old chap, that isn't good enough. No padded cell for me! And I'm not going to have my name dragged through the courts, and the case figuring in the newspapers for months. I've got a reason I think you will all admit is a good one." Again his voice changed. "That would break my sister's heart," he ended brokenly.

At the words Bangs uttered an odd sound, half a gasp and half a groan. Epstein, again in his pit of wretchedness, caught it.

"Now you see the job ve done!" he muttered. "Now you see how ve looked after him, like she told us to!"

Bangs paid no attention to him.

"What are you going to do?" he heavily asked Laurie.

"I'll tell you, on one condition—that you give me your word, all three of you, not to try in any way to interfere or to prevent it. You couldn't, anyway, so don't make the blunder of trying. You know what I'm up against. There's only one way out."

He looked at them in turn. Doris and Epstein merely stared back, with the effect of not taking in what he was saying. But Bangs recoiled.

"No, by God!" he cried. "No! No!"

Laurie went on as if he had not spoken.

"I promised Perkins to be in my rooms at eight o'clock to-morrow morning," he muttered, and they had to strain their ears to catch the words. "I did *not* promise to be—alive."

This time it was Doris who gasped out something that none of them heard. For a moment Laurie sat silent in his chair, watching her with a strange intentness. Then, in turn, his black eyes went to the faces of Bangs and Epstein. Huddled in the big chair he occupied, the manager sat looking straight before him, his eyes set in agony, his jaw dropped. He had the aspect of a man about to have a stroke. Bangs sat leaning forward, staring at the floor. The remaining color had left his face. He appeared to have wholly forgotten the presence of others in the room. He was muttering something to himself, the same thing over and over and over: "And it's all up to us. It's—all—up—to us."

For an interval which none of the three ever forgot, Laurie watched the tableau. Then, rising briskly, he ostentatiously stretched himself, and in loud, cheerful tones answered Rodney's steady babble.

"Yes, old chap, it's all up to you," he said. "So what do you think of this as a climax for the play?"

Grinning down at his pal, he waited for a reply. It did not come. Epstein was still unable to speak or move. Doris seemed to have heard the words without taking them in. But at last Bangs rose slowly, groped his way to his chum as if through a fog, and catching him by the shoulders looked wildly into his eyes.

"You mean—you mean," he stuttered at last, "that—that—this—was—all—a—hoax?"

"Of course it was," Laurie admitted, in his gayest voice. "It was the climax of the hoax you have played on me. An hour ago Shaw confessed to me how you three arranged this whole plot of Miss Mayo's adventure, so that I should be kept out of mischief and should think I was having an adventure myself. I thought a little excitement was due you in return. How do you like my climax, anyhow? Pretty fair, I call it."

He stopped short. Rodney had loosened his grip on his shoulders and stumbled to a chair. Now, his arm on its back and his head on his arm, his body shook with the relentless convulsion of a complete nervous collapse. Epstein had produced a handkerchief and was feebly wiping his forehead. Doris seemed to have ceased to breathe. Laurie walked over to her, took her hands, and drew them away from her face. Even yet, she seemed not to understand.

"I'm sorry," he said, very gently. "I've given you three an awful jolt. But I think you will all admit that there was something coming to you. You've put me through a pretty bad week. I decided you could endure half an hour of reprisal."

None of the three answered. None of the three could. But, in the incandescent moments that followed, the face of Epstein brightened slowly, like a moon emerging from black clouds. Bangs alone, who had best borne the situation up till now, was unable to meet the reaction. In the silence of the little studio he wept on, openly and gulpingly and unrestrainedly, as he had not wept since he was a little boy.

CHAPTER XVIII

A LITTLE LOOK FORWARD

"So Shaw told you!" muttered Epstein a few moments later.

"You bet he did!" Laurie blithely corroborated. "He had to, to save his skin. But he was pretty game, I'll give him credit for that. I had to fire one shot past his head to convince him that I meant business. Besides, as I've said, I thought he was reaching for something. I suppose I was a little nervous. Anyway, we clenched again, and—well—I'd have killed him, I guess, if he hadn't spoken."

He smiled reminiscently. All three were tactfully ignoring Bangs, who had walked over to the window and by the exercise of all his will-power was now getting his nerves under control.

"Shaw didn't do the tale justice, he hadn't time to," Laurie continued, "and I was in such a hurry to get back to Miss Mayo that I didn't ask for many details. But on the way to the garage it occurred to me that I had a chance for a come-back that would keep you three from feeling too smug and happy over the way I had gulped down your little plot. So I planned it, and I rather think," he added complacently, "that I put it over."

"Put it over!" groaned Epstein. "Mein Gott, I should think you did put it over! You took twenty years off my life, young man; that's von sure thing."

He spoke with feeling, and his appearance bore out his words. Even in these moments of immense relief he looked years older than when he entered the room.

"You'll revive." Laurie turned to Rodney, who was now facing them. "All right, old man?"

"I guess so," gulped Rodney. There was no self-consciousness in his manner. He had passed through blazing hell in the last twenty minutes, and he did not care who knew it.

"Then," urged Laurie, seeking to divert him, "you may give me the details Shaw had to skip. How the dickens did you happen to start this frame-up, anyhow?"

"How much did Shaw tell you?" Rodney tried to speak naturally.

"That the whole adventure was a plant you and Epstein had fixed up to keep me out of mischief," Laurie repeated, patiently. "He explained that you had engaged a company to put it over, headed by Miss Mayo, who is a friend of Mrs. Ordway, and who has a burning ambition to go on the stage. He said you promised her that if she made a success of it, she was to have the leading rôle in our next play. That's about all he told me."

He did not look at Doris as he spoke, and she observed the omission, though she dared not look at him. Also, she caught the coldness of his rich young voice. She hid her face in her hands.

"That's all I know," ended Laurie. "But I want to know some more. Whose bright little idea was this, in the first place?"

"Mrs. Ordway's."

"Louise's!" Unconsciously Laurie's face softened.

"Yes. I went to see her one day," Bangs explained, "and I mentioned that we couldn't get any work out of you till you'd had the adventure you were insisting on. Mrs. Ordway said, 'Well, why don't you give him an adventure?' That," confessed Rodney, "started me off."

"Obviously," corroborated his friend. "So it was Louise's idea. Poor Louise! I hope she got some fun out of it."

"You bet she did!" corroborated Bangs, eagerly. "I kept her posted every day. She said it was more fun than a play, and that it was keeping her alive."

"Humph! Well, go on. Tell me how it started." Laurie was smiling. If the little episode just ended had been, as it were, a bobolink singing to Louise Ordway during her final days on earth, it was not he who would find fault with the bird or with those who had set it singing.

"The day we saw the caretaker in the window across the park," continued Rodney, "and I realized how interested you were, it occurred to me that we'd engage that studio and put Miss Mayo into it. Miss Mayo lives in Richmond, Virginia, and she had been making a big hit in amateur theatricals. She wanted to get on the legitimate stage, as Shaw told you; so Mrs. Ordway suggested that Epstein and I try her out—"

"Never mind all that!" interrupted Laurie. "Perhaps later Miss Mayo will tell me about it herself."

Bangs accepted the snub without resentment.

"Epstein thought it was a corking idea," he went on, "especially as we expected to try out some of the scenes I have in mind for the new play. But the only one you let us really get over was the suicide scene in the first act. You balled up everything else we attempted," he ended with a sigh.

Laurie smiled happily.

"Were your elevator boys in on the secret?" he asked Doris.

"No, of course not."

"Now, what I meant to do was this—" Rodney spoke briskly. He was recovering poise with extraordinary rapidity. His color was returning, his brown eyes were again full of life. And, as always when his thoughts were on his work, he was utterly oblivious to any other interest. "The second act was to be—"

He stopped and stared. Epstein had risen, had ponderously approached him, and had resolutely grasped him by one ear.

"Rodney," said the manager, with ostentatious subtlety, "you don't know it, but you got a date up-town in five minutes."

His voice and manner enlightened the obtuse Mr. Bangs.

"Oh, er—yes," stammered that youth, confusedly, and reluctantly got to his feet.

"Wait a minute," said Laurie. "Before you fellows go, there's one more little matter we've got to straighten out." They turned to him, and at the expression of utter devotion on the two faces the sternness left young Devon's eyes. "I was pretty mad about this business for a few minutes after Shaw explained it," he went on. "You folks didn't have much mercy, you know. You fooled me to the top of my bent. But now I feel that we've at least broken even."

"Even! Mein Gott!" repeated Epstein with a groan. "You've taken ten years—"

"You've got back ten already," the young man blithely reminded him. "That's fine! As I say, we're even. But from this time on, one thing must be definitely understood: Henceforth I'm not in leading-strings of any kind, however kindly

they are put on me. If this association is to continue, there must be no more practical jokes, no more supervision, no more interference with me or my affairs. Is that agreed?"

"You bet it is!" corroborated Epstein. Again he wiped his brow. "I can't stand the pace you fellas set," he admitted.

Bangs nodded. "That's agreed. You're too good a boomerang for little Rodney."

"For my part," continued Laurie, "I promise to get to work on the new play, beginning next Monday."

"You will!" the two men almost shouted.

"I will. I've got to stand by Louise for the next two or three months, and we'll write the play while I'm doing it. Then, whether America enters the war this spring or not, I'm going to France. But we'll talk over all that later. Are you off?"

He ushered them to the door.

"And it's all right, boy?" Epstein asked wistfully. "You know how vell ve meant. You ain't got no hard feelings about this?"

"Not one." Laurie wrung his hand. Then, with an arm across Rodney's shoulders, he gave him a bearish hug. "I'll see you a little later," he promised.

Rodney suddenly looked self-conscious.

"Perhaps then you'll give me a chance to tell you some news," he suggested, with a mixture of triumph and embarrassment. Epstein's knowing grin enlightened Laurie.

"Sonya?" he asked eagerly.

"Yep. Great, isn't it?"

Laurie stared at him.

"By Jove, you *have* been busy!" he conceded. "Between manufacturing a frame-up for me, and winning a wife, you must have put in a fairly full week even for you." His arm tightened round his chum's shoulders. "I'm delighted, old man," he ended, seriously. "Sonya is the salt of the earth. Tell her she has my blessing."

When he reëntered the room he found Doris standing in its center, waiting for

him. Something in her pose reminded him of their first moments together in that familiar setting. She had carried off the original scene very well. Indeed, she had carried off very well most of the scenes she had been given.

"You'll be a big hit in the new play," he cheerfully remarked, as he came toward her.

"Laurie—" Her voice trembled. "You have forgiven the others. Can't you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," he quietly told her. "You saw a chance and you took it. In the same conditions, I suppose any other girl would have done the same thing. It's quite all right, and I wish you the best luck in the world. We'll try to make the new play worthy of you."

He held out his hand, but she shrank away from it.

"You're *not* going to forgive me!" she cried. "And—I don't blame you!"

She walked away from him, and, sinking into the chair Epstein had so recently vacated, sat bending forward, her elbow resting on its broad arm, her chin in her hand. It was the pose he knew so well and had loved so much.

"I don't blame you," she repeated. "What I was doing was—horrible. I knew it all the time, and I tried to get out of it the second day. But they wouldn't let me."

She waited, but he did not speak.

"Can't you understand?" she went on. "I've hated it from the start. I've hated deceiving you. You see—I—I didn't know you when I began. I thought it was just a good joke and awfully interesting. Then, when I met you, and you were so stunning, always, I felt like a beast. I told them I simply couldn't go on, but they coaxed and begged, and told me what it would mean to you as well as to me—They made a big point of that."

He took his favorite position by the mantel and watched her as she talked.

"Don't feel that way," he said at last. "You were playing for big stakes. You were justified in everything you said and did."

"I hated it," she repeated, ignoring the interruption. "And to-day, this afternoon, I tried to tell you everything. Don't you remember?"

"Yes, I remember." He spoke as he would to a child, kindly and soothingly. "Don't worry about it any more," he said. "You'll forget all this when we begin rehearsing."

She sprang to her feet.

"I don't want the play!" she cried passionately. "I wouldn't appear in it now under any conditions. I don't want to go on the stage. It was just a notion, an impulse. I've lost it, all of it, forever. I'm going back home, to my own people and my—own Virginia, to—to try to forget all this. I'm going to-morrow."

"You're excited," said Laurie, soothingly. He took her hands and held them. "I've put you through a bad half-hour. You understand, of course, that I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been made to realize that your whole thought, throughout this experiment, has been of the play, and only of the play."

She drew back and looked at him.

"What do you mean?"

"Why—" It was hard to explain, but he blundered on. "I mean that, for a little time, I was fool enough to hope that—that—some day you might care for me. For of course you know, you've known all along—that I—love you. But when I got the truth—"

"You haven't got the truth." She was interrupting him, but her face had flashed into flame. "You haven't had it for one second; but you're going to get it now. I'm not going to let our lives be wrecked by any silly misunderstanding."

She stopped, then rushed on.

"Oh, Laurie, can't you see? The only truth that counts between us is that I—I—adore you! I have from the very first—almost from the day you came here—Oh, it's dreadful of you to make me say all this!"

She was sobbing now, in his arms. For a long moment he held her very close and in utter silence. Like Bangs, but in a different way, he was feeling the effects of a tremendous reaction.

"You'll make a man of me, Doris," he said brokenly, when he could speak. "I'm not afraid to let you risk the effort. And when I come back from France—"

"When you come back from France you'll come back to your wife," she told him

steadily. "If you're going, I'll marry you before you go. Then I'll wait and pray, and pray and wait, till you come again. And you will come back to me," she whispered. "Something makes me sure of it."

"I'll come back," he promised. "Now, for the first time, I am sure of that, too."

Four hours later Mr. Laurence Devon, lingeringly bidding good night to the lady of his heart, was surprised by a final confidence.

"Laurie," said Doris, holding him fast by, one button as they stood together on the threshold of the little studio, "do you know my real reason for giving up my ambition to go on the stage?"

"Yes. Me," said young Mr. Devon promptly and brilliantly. "But you needn't do it. I'm not going to be the ball-and-chain type of husband."

"I know. But there are reasons within the reason." She twisted the button thoughtfully. "It's because you're the real actor in the family. When I remember what you did to the three of us in that murder scene, and so quietly and naturally, without any heroics—"

She broke off. "There are seven million things about you that I love," she ended, "but the one I think I love the best of all is this: even in your biggest moments, Laurie darling, you never, never 'emote'!"

CHAPTER XIX

"WHAT ABOUT LAURIE?"

From the *New York Sun*, January 7, 1919:—

"Among the patients on the hospital ship *Comfort*, which arrived yesterday with nine hundred wounded soldiers on board, was Captain Laurence Devon, of the American Flying Forces in France.

"Captain Devon was seriously injured in a combat with two German planes, which occurred only forty-eight hours before the signing of the armistice. He brought down both machines and though his own plane was on fire and he was badly wounded, he succeeded in reaching the American lines. He has since been in the base hospital at C——, but is now convalescent.

"Captain Devon is an American 'ace,' with eleven air victories officially to his credit. He was awarded the French *Croix de Guerre* and the American Distinguished Service Medal for extraordinary heroism on August 9, 1918, when he went to the assistance of a French aviator who was fighting four Fokker planes. In the combat the four German machines were downed and their pilots killed. The Frenchman was badly hurt but eventually recovered.

"Captain Devon is well known in American social and professional life. He is the only son of the late Horace Devon, of Devondale, Ohio, and the brother-in-law of Robert J. Warren, of New York. Before the war he was a successful playwright. Just before sailing for France last year, he married Miss Doris Mayo, daughter of the late General Frederick Mayo, of Richmond, Virginia. On reaching his New York home to-day he will see for the first time his infant son, Rodney Jacob Devon."

Transcriber's note:

Inconsistencies in spelling and hyphenation are as in the original.

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