

PROSE AND CONS

IRVIN S. COBB

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BY IRVIN S. COBB

FICTION

PROSE AND CONS
ON AN ISLAND THAT COST \$24.00
ALIAS BEN ALIBI
GOIN' ON FOURTEEN
SNAKE DOCTOR
J. POINDEXTER, COLORED
SUNDRY ACCOUNTS
FROM PLACE TO PLACE
THOSE TIMES AND THESE
LOCAL COLOR
OLD JUDGE PRIEST
BACK HOME
THE ESCAPE OF MR. TRIMM
FIBBLE, D.D.

WIT AND HUMOR

MANY LAUGHS FOR MANY DAYS
“HERE COMES THE BRIDE”—AND SO FORTH
A LAUGH A DAY KEEPS THE DOCTOR AWAY
A PLEA FOR OLD CAP COLLIER
ONE THIRD OFF
THE ABANDONED FARMERS
THE LIFE OF THE PARTY
EATING IN TWO OR THREE LANGUAGES
“OH WELL, YOU KNOW HOW WOMEN ARE!”
“SPEAKING OF OPERATIONS—”
EUROPE REVISED
ROUGHING IT DE LUXE
COBB'S BILL OF FARE
COBB'S ANATOMY

Cobb's America Guyed Books

MAINE

NEW YORK

KENTUCKY

NORTH CAROLINA

INDIANA

KANSAS

MISCELLANY

STICKFULS

THE THUNDERS OF SILENCE

THE GLORY OF THE COMING

PATHS OF GLORY

“SPEAKING OF PRUSSIANS—”

NEW YORK: GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

PROSE AND CONS

BY
IRVIN S. COBB

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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PROSE AND CONS
—A—
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO
MY FRIEND

John E. Lewis

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Prose and Cons

CHAPTER I

THE CHOCOLATE HYENA

From the manuscript which he had just finished revising, the author now read aloud to an audience composed of himself. As author, he sought to inject into his rendition a proper and conscious pride of creatorship. He gave unctuous uplift to the lines; he paused frequently for signs of appreciation. As audience, he strove mightily to be entertained. But a dual rôle nearly always is a difficult rôle, and the progress of this one was marked by mounting difficulties—the author could but be doubtful of his best flights and the audience remained cold, skeptical, unstirred. Nevertheless, for a spell, it did progress.

The reading, which started from the beginning, to include title headings and all, went forward thus:

STRICKELY ORIGINAL TALKN AND SINGN ACT

Entitled

FRANK AND URNEST

Specially Wrote To Order For

PURDUE AND MINGLE

by

ROSCOE C. FUGATE

(“*His Hits Always Does So!*”)

Arthor Composer Playwrite and Dramatizer

Sole Arthor and Composer

of

The Supreme Imperial Seasons Success

“THEM BLACK AND BLUE BLUES”

Etc. Etc. Etc.

Stage set in one for Street scene music cue three bars of Them Black and Blue Blues enter Purdue from lowr right enter Mingle from lowr left they comes down and bumps together Mingle falls over own feet falls down gets right up and brushes self off with brush broom brushes ashes off cigar

*Seems like they both is susprised meeting up with one another this way
(business of registring susprise)*

MINGLE— hello nothin substracted from nothin what your doin here

PURDUE— that is my busness sir

MINGLE— have you got any other busness

PURDUE— are you tryn to be funny with me

MINGLE— ha ha you is funny to me without tryn

PURDUE— excuse me seems like I has seen your face some place

MINGLE— I aint susprised at that my face has always been right here in the same place

PURDUE— anyways I guess you aint so many

MINGLE— I guess you aint counted me lately

PURDUE— well let us dont quorl lets be frank and urnest

MINGLE— hello Frank

PURDUE— how are you my old college chum Urnest
(Business of shakn hands as they finishes shakn hands
MINGLE *kind of stumbles and steps back and goes up*
against back drop)

MINGLE— this sure is a mighty loose street now over in Brooklin our streets is more statunery then what these is

PURDUE— oh you live over in Brooklin now eh but why should you move over to Brooklin wen this great city of New York has everything

MINGLE— you poor ignunt we has somethin over in Brooklin wich you hasn got in New York

PURDUE— what is that pray

MINGLE— the other end of the Bridge *(wait for laugh)* by the way you big simp speakn of mariage is you married

PURDUE— friend I persume I is probly one of the most haply married men they is to be found in all this great city

MINGLE— whoode you mary

PURDUE— a woman of coarse who ever herd of anybody maryin a man

MINGLE— well my mother did well if your married I got anothr questun to ast you stoopid

PURDUE— purceed purceed I is all atenshun

MINGLE— all feet you mean well what was . . .

The reader-hearer broke off, raising an irritated face. He was aware of noises without. There was a sound of rapping, a sharp, intensive play of knuckles against a panel of his door. Had the door been locked, as usually it was these latter days, his course would have been clear. But to-day the door, by oversight, was not locked. Moreover, his voice, uplifted in declamatory dialog, must have been clearly audible to any eavesdropper in the hallway.

He was saved the embarrassment, though, of confessing his presence. As he eyed it with an apprehensive squint the knob turned and the door opened and on the threshold was revealed an aggressive looking person of a very dark color and of a mien to match his prevalent pigmentation—a mien at once somber and foreboding. This person was wide, tall and tolerably deep. He had three chins and the makings of a fourth, which gave to his face the appearance of a face that had refused to jell and now was threatening to run down on its owner's shirt-front. Without invitation he entered, looking about him.

“Where all the crowd gone at, Conk?” he asked. “Sound’ lak you wuz holdin’ a caucus in yere.”

The interrupted one disregarded the question. He countered with one of his own, delivered icily:

“Mebbe you tuck notice of a do’mat jest outside my do’?”

“Tuck notice of it? Ain’t I been wearin’ my feet down to the quick, standin’ on it these last three-fo’ days?”

“Then you mebbe also noticed that they ain’t no word signifyin’ ‘Welcome’ embroidered on it?”

“Ain’t no receipt sign say in’ ‘Paid fur in Full’ on it neither, so fur ez I seen.”

There was a menacing purr in the words of the broad intruder. This, likewise, the literary man chose to pass over without seeming to give it heed.

“The p’int is,” he said, “that w’en a author is settin’ in his private offices authorizin’, he ain’t s’posed to be in widout he says he’s in. Pussons w’ich come callin’ on him is s’posed to wait on the outsides till they is requested to enter in or otherwise not, ez the case may be.”

“*Umph huh*, an’ me freezin’ to death out yonder in that cole hall whilst you’s decidin’ you ain’t in. Or else dyin’ of ole age.”

“Yore dyin’ of any thin’ wouldn’t cause me to brek down an’ start mournin’. An’ say, lissen, my name ain’t Conk ’ceptin’ to close frien’s w’ich you suttinly is not numbered amongst ’em. My name, to you, is the same w’ich it’s printed out on my do’ right behind you.”

“All right wid me. Way ’tis wid me, a deadbeat by any other name smells jest ez rancid. You could call yo’s’e’f a rosy red rose an’ still I could deteck you acrost a ten acre lot. ’Cause frum long practice I got a educated nose fur all sich . . . You wuz speakin’ jest then of p’int’s? Well, the main p’int, ez I sees it, is does you know whut day of the week ’tis?”

“Thursday—Thursday of this present week.” It pleased the heckled dramatist to be heavily sarcastic. He tried glowering through his large and ornamental spectacles but the glower broke down before the visitor’s hostile glare.

“Naw suh, you is wrong ez customary. So fur ez my books shows an’ so fur ez you is concerned, it’s Thursday of two weeks hence. ’Cause Thursday of this week wuz postif’ly the day w’en you promised to have my money ready an’ waitin’ fur me. An’ Thursday of this week is done already become Thursday of week befo’ last an’ yere ’tis henced along till it’s Thursday of week after next. You wuz past due on the fifteenth of the month an’ you wuz gittin’ kind of brackish on the twenty-fust an’ now you has done gone plum’ stale . . . The amount, wid ’cumulated interest and recruded penalty charges, comes to twenty-eight twenty—I’ll be mos’ pleased to have it now—in my hand!”

“Say, whut kind of a skinflint is you anyways?” The debtor’s tone turned plaintive—plaintive and placating. “Does you ’spect a man jest newly started up in a new line of biz’ness to be upholstered all over wid ready money? Litachure ain’t lak peddlin’ fish—you got to wait fur the trade to grow. You didn’t tawk this yere way, neither, we’n you wuz connin’ me into buyin’ all these yere office fixtures. Naw suh, yore voice wuz soft an’ pleadin’, then. All you could do wuz jest smile lak a ole possum an’ keep on sayin’: ‘Five dollars down an’ the balance in cornvenient ’stallmints—sign on the dotted line—five dollars now an’ five dollars twic’t a month—you furnishes the bird, we furnishes the nest’; that wuz the song you wuz singin’ then. Did I need ary framed engravin’ of the Death of Lawd Nelson, whoever he wuz, ef at all? Naw suh, I wuz petted into it. An’ look a-there at that there mangy lookin’ thing on the flo’ w’ich you called it a genuwine easy paymint Purgin’ rug.”

“Not Purgin’—Persian. An’ guaranteed genuwine.”

“Well, all I got to say is that the Persianism an’ the guarantee is both started frazzlin’ out of it. In ’bout two weeks mo’ whut’s goin’ be left is jest a scrap of ole raggetty rag carpet.”

“Hole on, boy, don’t need you should strain yo’s’e’f peerin’ into the future. Whut that rug’s goin’ look lak two weeks from now you ain’t goin’ be able to see account of you an’ hit bein’ miles apart. Widout you got my money fur me now, all w’ich is goin’ be left in this yere private office of your’n by this time to-morrer is you an’ the bare flo’ and the number on the do’.”

“Now lissen yere, frien’, whut’s yore rush? I wants to tell you somethin’ fur your own good—you is too dadburn’ spiteful to be in the ’stallmint business. Tawkin’ the brash way you does is liable to lose custom fur you. ’Sides, ain’t I tellin’ you I ’spects to come clean? It’s mos’ highly prob’le that by to-morrer I’ll have the money fur you—I mout even have it by this evenin’. I’s jest now completin’ a ack fur refine’ vaudyville. ’Course I may have to tech it up yere an’ there but it’s the same ez done now an’——”

“Wait! Lemme tell *you* somethin’ ’bout to-morrer. In the mawnin’ ’bout nine o’clock ef you hears the sound of automobile wheels down yere in the street you need’n’ be runnin’ to the winder ’spectin’ the Messrs Keith an’ Albee is come to tek you fur a ride an’ sign you up to write all the refine’ vaudyville acks they is in this town. It’ll jest be the truck backin’ up to the do’ fur this yere office plunder—tha’s all it’ll be!”

There was a grim finality in the collector’s tone. His debtor put desperate entreaty, desperate persuasion, into his further argument:

“But I’m tellin’ you that by to-morrer or the next day, at the latermost, I’m practically suttin to have yore money fur you.”

“Whut fav’rite uncle you ’spectin’ to die in the meanw’ile an’ leave you twenty-eight twenty?”

“Not a-tall. I’s ’spectin’ to collect the sum of one hund’ed dollars this ver’ day, ef all goes well. I got a coupler cash customers comin’ in yere at fo’ clock this evenin’—black-face singin’, dancin’ an’ tawkin’ comedians. I tells you ag’in I jest is got done finishin’ up writin’ up a sketch fer ’um.”

“Huh!” The grunt was an incredulous grunt. “Whut’s these yere cash customers’ names, ef any?”

“Purdue an’ Mingle.”

“Purdue?—seems lak I places him. I does—ef he’s the same tall limber blabby feller w’ich acked ez interlocker fur the minstrel fust part of the Cullid Letter Carriers’ Fo’th Annual Benefit over yere at the Lenox Coleseum week ’fo’ last.”

“Tha’s him—J. Earl Purdue—come yere frum Inninaplis.” The author spoke up hopefully. “An’ the Mingle end of the ack, he’s frum down Raleigh, same ez where I comes frum—kind of a secont cousin of mine, someway. Happy Rastus Mingle—tha’s goin’ to be his stage name on the program. Reg’lar entitled name, though, is Henry.”

“Goin’ be—you sez ‘goin’ be’? Ain’t they wukkin’ already?” There was a quickened suspicion in the query.

“Well, you see they is jest lately teamed up together. An’ so tha’s how come they come yere to me fur suitable material.”

“*Umph huh!*—I gits you! Coupler stage-strucken cullid amachures hopin’ they goin’ git a job in vaudyville on the stren’th of the stuff you writes fur ’em? An’ you thinkin’ they goin’ be feeble-minded ’nuff to pay you a hund’ed iron men fur sich stuff ez you natchelly would write fur ’em.” To the cynic a new thought came: “Say, wuz that this yere new ack w’ich I hearded you spoutin’ out loud to yo’s’e’f w’en I wuz standin’ out yonder in that hall ’w’ile ago tryin to mek you ’knowledge to my knockin’? ’Twuz, huh? All right ’en, gimme a sample of it an’ after I hears it I’ll tell you how I feels ’bout the chances of me gettin’ my money an’ you keepin’ yore furnishin’s.” He waved an authoritative arm. “Go on an’ shoot!”

“But you’s a bizness man—you wouldn’t git the artistic feelin’s.”

“Nummine that. I’s artistic enough to keep frum bein’ swindled out of my back teeth by ever’ slick-tawkin’ nigger man ’at comes along. It’s only my artistic feelin’s w’ich is kep’ me out of the porehouse up to now. Besides w’ich, don’t I patternize vaudyville myse’f? I does, frequent.” He took a chair. “Fire me off some pieces an’ lemme set in judgment.”

“Well, ez you come bustin’ in yere, I wuz right at the place where they been blim-blammin’ an’ cross-firin’ back an’ fo’th ’bout fust one thing an’ then ’nuther, an’ the subjec’ of marriage is been led up to; an’ Mingle, w’ich he is the low comedy part, he says to Purdue, w’ich plays straight an’ does the feedin’—he says to him: ‘What wuz yore wife’s name befo’ you married her?’ An’ Purdue, he says: ‘Helen French.’ An’ Mingle comes right back at him an’ says: ‘Whut wuz it in English?’—jest lak that. An’ then he says to him: ‘Is you got any chillen?’ An’ Purdue says it’s a kinder funny thing, him

astin' him that, 'cause only this mawnin' w'en he got home the clock struck three jest ez he comes in at the do', an' there wuz three little triplers layin' in the crib. An' Mingle says: 'It's a good thing you didn't git home at twelve o'clock.' An' then Mingle goes on an' says: 'Whut's the matter wid yore finger?' An' Purdue says he's got a splinter in it; an' Mingle says: 'You must a' been scratchin' yore haid.' An' then Purdue, he . . ."

"You sez ample," broke in the critic. He rose to his feet with such decision that all four of his dewlaps quivered violently.

"Ample an' then some."

"Don't you lak them gags?"

"Well, heretofore I most always gin'ally has."

"Whut you mean? Ain't them my own 'riginal gags w'ich I thought 'em up out of my own haid? Them lines can't fail to git over."

"They rarely has—I'll say that fur 'em—they rarely or seldom has failed. But ef you thought 'em up out of yore own haid you is suttinly whut they calls a delayed thinker; 'cause more'n forty others done beat you to 'em. Save yore breath, boy, save yore breath. I done got the complete pitcher of that ack in my mind now. I knows already how it goes, jest the same ez ef I'd wrote it up myse'f—pasted it up, I means. They'll pull some mo' of them bran' new gags, fresh laid right out of yore card index, an' then they'll hoof it a spell an' they'll wind up singin' one of these yere mammy songs 'bout bein' homesick fur somebody to tote 'em back to them dear ole Dixieland cotton patches—w'en all the time, the chances is that this yere Purdue, bein' frum Indiana, thinks cotton grows on a cottonwood tree an' you picks it frum off a stepladder. An' ef this yere Mingle boy is kinfolks of your'n an' has the same fambly failin's, they ain't nobody goin' tote him back to Dixieland widout it's a sheriff wid some reckerzition papers.

"But that ain't the thing. Ef these yere Jew boys w'ich writes all the mammy songs thinks them is true cullid sentiments, I ain't blamin' no Jew boys fur writin' 'em nur no cullid boys fur singin' 'em, neither one. The thing is that w'ile you mout fool yore cousin—an' I reckon even you could fool anybody that'd name hisse'f Rastus—w'ich it's a name I's heard more'n a million of these yere Nawthe'n w'ites call a cullid boy by, but never befo' has I heard of a cullid man delibe't'ly callin' hisse'f by it—still, you ain't goin' fool that Purdue into givin' you a hund'ed dollars in real money fur no sech junk ez that is. Not w'en he kin walk right 'round the corner an' buy him a Joe Mulligan's Standard Gag Book fur fo' bits, an'

thereby save hisse'f ninety-nine fifty. Naw suh, you ain't goin' fool him an' you ain't foolin' me. . . . Well, I guess I better be movin'."

"Jest one minute mo'," begged the bankrupt. "You're makin' up yore mind too quick. This ack's got the stuff in it, I tells you. Lissen, now—mebbe you'll lak this next gag better. This yere one is a sho' fire hit, ef I do say so myse'f. Mingle, he says to Purdue that he's feedin' his ole hen tacks now—gives her a paper of tacks ever' mawnin' reg'lar. An' Purdue says to him whut does he do that fur? An' Mingle says: 'So she'll lay carpets.' An' . . ."

A stifled moan halted him. His crowd was walking out on him and speaking as it went—speaking from the heights of a vast sophistication:

"Conk," said the creditor, "you ain't no author—you is a loose leaf system."

At the door he paused for a final crippling shot:

"The truck *may* be yere ez early ez eight-thirty."

He was gone and behind him, where he had been, gloom abode. Alone again, the tenant sought to recapture the protean mood. But his soul was not in it and carking care possessed him and the effort died aborning. With the dulled eye of disillusionment he studied the concluding pages of his work and shook his head and uttered low sounds betokening despondency.

Truly, the departed pessimist had spoken facts. His words might have been unnecessarily cruel but merely because of that the verdict was not to be impugned. Think what one pleased of his harsh manners, his usurious soul, his hard and calloused heart with cockles on it that never felt warmth, nevertheless the man knew—was a patron of the arts, a veteran critic of the drama—and, doggone him, he knew!

And the author knew he knew. It had needed but this outside judgment entirely to cure him of his own paltry attempts at self-deception. To be sure, the lightsome patter intended for Purdue and Mingle had sounded fine enough when he was putting it to paper. In the sweat of production he had felt the transient uplift which is the main reward of the creative mood wherever found. But the fine pure joy of composition had begun to flicker within him before ever he was done, and had died to a spark as he reread to himself what had been written down. And now the flame utterly was extinguished; the lamp of his muse was smoky in the chimney and smelled of the wick.

To-morrow, or at the latest the day following, Afro-American Harlem would know the lamentable worst of him. By popular estimation he would even be poorer off than in those humble days of his creative beginnings when, during odd moments stolen from his duties as caretaker and basement lord of the Mandoline Apartments, he had turned out "Them Black and Blue Blues." At least, those times he had kinged it over the paying lessees, had been referred to as a promising young musician. But within forty-eight fleeting hours, at most, he no longer would be Roscoe C. Fugate, the dignified professional author, with an office and a slogan and a pair of shell-rimmed glasses and a mounting ambition and all. He merely would be Conk Fugate, an ex-flat janitor out of a job. The voice of envy, temporarily diminished but never entirely stilled, would be lifted anew to his scorning. In connection with his one published masterpiece malicious gossip already had it that he plagiarized his theme from one dependable source, his air from another. For thus it is that scandal treads ever on the heels of genius. But hereafter those who conceded to him that "Them Black and Blue Blues" really was his would look upon him as expert poultry fanciers might look upon a pullet which, in the first adolescent flush of aspiration, lays one double-yolked egg, but in the effort so over-strains herself that she never lays another.

He felt that he was stifling; that he needed air. The atmosphere of this room seemed to pant with the very breath of failure; it exhaled the acrid aromas of six weeks' unpaid rent; stifling dye-reeks rose from the easy payment rug that had not been easy. He left the discredited manuscript where it rested in a sheaf of scrawled sheets upon the table top. He rose up from his chair and he put on his partially velour hat and his practically fur overcoat, both purchased in a splendid flare of early optimism with the slender royalties which had flowed—but flowed no longer—from the accounting department of an uptown song publisher. He went out the door and through the hall and down two flights of narrow and littered steps into West One Hundred and Thirty-Fifth Street.

This street, ordinarily athrob with life, was to-day bleak and almost empty. A shrewd February wind funneled into it off the Sound, bringing the threat of snow squalls. A low and dingy sky seemed to rest, like a pewter dish cover, almost on the copings of its taller buildings. There was ice on its north side, abundant slush on its south side. Those who passed along it went swiftly and well wrapped, their faces wearing that peculiar hue of damp wood ashes which the skins of the race take on when the thermometer drops down among the twenties. One or two bumped into the slender misanthrope, jostling him out of his stride as though in a common conspiracy to add

physical buffets to the spiritual jolt he just now had suffered. None so much as slowed up to pass the time of day with him.

He craved company, too; conversation with his social equals might serve for the moment to distract him from thoughts of his present insolvency. Besides, there was the chance—a faint and spectral one but nevertheless a chance—that someone (he tried vainly to visualize that someone into a recognizable shape) might be beguiled into loaning him a fund sufficient for lightening him over the imminent financial shoals. The sight of U. S. G. Petty advancing in his direction caused him to conjure up a false air of buoyancy. This was the distinguished U. S. G. Petty who led the orchestra at the Sang Soucy colored motion picture palace; therefore was this Petty artistically allied to him.

“ ‘Lo, Lissis,” he hailed jauntily, putting himself in the path of the other. “Kind of a tough weather, ain’t it?”

“Ain’t heared a kind word fur it sence I got up this mawnin’,” answered Lissis shortly. He halted but his feet shuffled in their impatience to bear him further.

“Looks kind of lak more snow, don’t it?”

“Huh?”

“I sez it looks lak it mout snow ag’in befo’ night.”

“Well, does you speck me to stand yere in the cole an’ git myse’f all numbed up, arguin’ it wid you?” There was irony in the speech; there almost was a savor of contempt. “Is you got anythin’ else of pressin’ impo’tance on yore mind?” he added unsympathetically.

“Oh! nothin’ special,” admitted the abashed Fugate, regretting his choice of an opening subject. This line of talk didn’t promise to get him anywhere. “I wuz only jest fixin’ to say it’s been a long winter—tha’s practically all.”

“Oh, you thinks so, does you? Well then, all I got to say is that you sh’d ‘a’ give a ninety day note fur three hund’ed dollars at the bank long ‘bout Thanksgiving Day, same ez I done.”

With that the orchestra leader brushed past. He didn’t know it but he had burst a thin bubble of hope in a brother’s breast. Had the circumstances appeared in the least propitious, the fellow professional had meant to advance the idea of a temporary loan. Now this poor and pale prospect of borrowing was gone; indeed, every imaginable prospect for succor was gone. A prey to brooding, the author mooned aimlessly along the slippery

pavement, stepping with the purposeless gait of one who has no errand to perform nor destination to reach. That other folks had troubles of their own was to him no consolation. Surely, in all the visible chilled world there was nothing but proofs and portents of troubles and discomforts and selfish strivings.

For instance, right here and now, in this very instant, evidence offered to the fact. Abreast of him the doors of the Idlewild Chile Parlors opened suddenly and the sinewy proprietor launched violently forth a short, shabby, broadfaced youth who, barely missing the startled Fugate, slid on his own keel, as it were, clear across the skiddy pavement and brought up at an icy anchorage with both feet out on the asphalt. For his part the proprietor said nothing; having completed the act of ouster he conferred a lowering look upon his victim and withdrew into his establishment.

It was the ejected individual who gave utterance to personal feelings. As he righted himself, amazingly he laughed. He lifted himself up and clung to a convenient letter box and continued to laugh. He beat himself on the chest and laughed the more. He drew a frayed coat sleeve across his face and wiped his eyes, including the nose in the same deft operation, without missing a beat of his laughter. He was thinly clad for this climate. He had just been thrust bodily, rudely and on the small of his back, from a place of public victualing. It was plain that he lately had contracted a very bad cold. Undeniably he was trashy looking. But he laughed.

It was an infectious, a contagious, a catching and irresistible laugh. It had started with a pleased gurgling, it rose now to a great rocketing, shrieking explosion, anon sank to rumbles, then rose and expanded and burst again. It seemed to fill all the earth and the heavens above the earth. Halfway down the block, hurrying pedestrians spun about in their tracks to harken in admiration and wonderment; then went on again in ignorance of the cause for this gorgeously incomparable outbreak, but laughing themselves in sympathy with it.

Alone, of all within earshot, the dramatist did not laugh. Having the secret of this stranger's sudden advent into the open spaces, he marveled at the phenomenon of laughter under such a reaction; but, as we know, he was in no fit mood for merriment himself. He stood waiting with a dour patience until the heavy cannonading died down to an intermittent skirmish fire of snorts and giggles, of chuckles and cackles, of curious aborted sounds suggestive of the last pint of suds in a sink.

“Seemin’ly don’t tek so very much to mek you happy,” he said, sourly.

“Who, me?” The stranger bent double again, with difficulty choking back the guffaws which strove within him for liberation on the air. “It don’t tek nothin’ to mek me happy—I jest natchelly is. . . . *Whoe-e-e!* Joke suttinly is on that there snack-stand man.”

“You mean him w’ich jest now flang you out of this yere resta’raw?”

“Tha’s the one. Me driftin’ in there a minute ago aimin’ to git me a bait of somethin’ ’r’other to stay my stomach wid—an’ him mistekin’ me fur somebody else w’ich, seems lak, bilked him out of a ration of vittles las’ night—an’ grabbin’ holt of me an’ bouncin’ me out lak I wuz one of these yere rubber balls! An’ me jest landed this mawnin’ early off the Nawfawk packet steamer. An’ never been in this town befo’ in my whole life. An’ never set eyes on him befo’, neither. Joke suttinly is on the snack-stand man. Strong, lakly man, ain’t he?”

He chuckled in deep appreciation. It would appear, in his more restrained moments, that chuckles were what he punctuated his speech with.

“Well, frien’, I’ll say this fur you—you laffs easy,” said Fugate.

“I does. I reckins I is the easies’ laffer they is anywheres.”

“I’ll say you is.”

“Laffin’ is whut’s ’sponsible fur me bein’ yere in this town right now. Laffin’ also is whut is got me all the pet names w’ich I goes by.”

“All—how many is they?”

“Well, my reg’lar bapdismal name is Lonnie Lee. But down where I is lived at, up to now, I ain’t hearin’ it often. Sometimes they calls me Chawk and then ag’in sometimes w’en they’s in a special hurry they jest calls me Hy.”

“*Huh*—whar you hails frum they must suffer frum cullur blineness. They ain’t nuthin’ ’bout you w’ich suggest chawkiness to me. You favors mo’ a bottle of ink.”

“Name ain’t got nothin’ to do wid my complexion. Chawk and Hy—them both is jest shortenin’s. My full onshortened nickname is the Chawklate Hyena.”

“Tha’s understan’able—leas’wise, in a way ’tis,” said the dramatist, interested in spite of himself by this marvel. “In a good strong light you does sort of put me in mind of a batch of chawklate that’s been left too long in the

hot pan an' got kind of scorched 'round the aidges. But whuffur they calls you the Hyena part of it?"

"Ain't you never heard tell 'bout the hyena? Seems lak he has the roughes' time of anybody they is in the whole caboodle. They knows whut mek the wildcat wild—that's been specified fully—an' they knows w'y the lion is the boss of the tall timber. But they ain't nobody knows whut 'tis meks the hyena laff. He ain't so purty for lookin'-at pupposes, they tells me, an' he lives off the leavin's of the rest of 'em—necks an' the tip of the wing is the best he gits, I jedges—an he slinks round kind of hangdawggish an' he ain't got no close frien's 'mongst man or beast. But he laffs. Yas, suh, all the time he's laffin' fit to split hisse'f wide open. Meks me laff to think 'bout him laffin'."

He did so, at length, and his eyes and his nose ran until he had riparian rights.

The resident bided while the roaring of the alien's surf subsided to a gentled purling sound where the little sniffling ululations of his lesser mirth washed to and fro over his tonsils like ripples against a beach. It seemed inevitable that sooner or later this person would be swept away and sucked under by his private undertow. When finally the tide, so to speak, was out, Fugate jumped in, again so to speak, between two of the ebbing wavelets.

"Hole!" he urged. "Hole! You is liable to drownd yo'se'f some day in yore own pussonal juices! Git under corntrol, git ca'm. . . . Tha's better. Now, how wuz it you sez you happen' to travel this way?"

"I jest natchelly laffed myse'f out of a home—tha's how. I got a half sister name of Luella May an' yere some weeks back she went up to Lynchburg to wuk in a tobacker stemmery. An' she fell into a argumint over there, an' one of them strange Lynchburg niggers got to wukkin' on her haid wid a hatchet. They tuck an' stitched her scalp back on so it wouldn't slip off on her an' then ships her home. But on the way back the train w'ich wuz fetchin' her teks a notion to run off the track an' she gits bunged up an' peeled off in some fresh places. She's so glad to git back she's glad she went—she 'lows so herse'f soon ez they totes her into the house an' gits her baided down.

"But w'en I comes 'long a little later an' teks a look at her, wid her haid all tied up 'twell she looks lak a week's washin' an' one rovin' eye peepin' out frum onder all that there cotton battin', she's so dadburn' comical lookin' that I jest goes out of one peal into another. I reckon you could 'a'

heard me a mile off, laffin'. *Whee-e-e-e!* Oh that Luella May! I wisht you could 'a' seen her!

“Well, seems lak that urritated her; she’s kind of fretful w’en she’s urritated. She jest riz up out of that baid, bandages an’ all, an’ she tuck an’ run me plum’ off the place. Last thing I heard her yellin’, ez I lit out down the road, she wuz sayin’ ef I ever come back she aimed to lay me out cole—sayin’ it lak she meant it, too. Luella May ain’t a bit lak whut I is—seemin’ly she teks after the other half. She’s a powerful hand to pack a gredge. So I jedges ’twon’t be right healthy fur me to be havin’ any mo’ truck wid her, ’twell she kind of cools out. So I hangs round town some an’ late that night I slips back up to the house. I cracks the do’ a little ways an’ looks in wid care. She’s settin’ by the fire nursin’ somethin’ in her arms. She sees me peepin’ in, an’ ez she up an’ straightens I sees that whut she’s been settin’ there fondlin’ is a flat-iron. I dodges an’ it hits the do’ jamb not more’n a inch frum my nakid temples. So that’s a sign to me that she ain’t got over bein’ peevish yit. So I figgers that ef she ain’t furgive me I better be hidin’ plum’ out of her sight ’twell she feels mo’ lak so doin’. So I drifts over to Nawfawk an’ ketches the boat. An’ that’s how-come I come to come on up yere. . . . Say, after Nawfawk an’ Roanoke this yere suttinly is a mouty funny lookin’ town—*whee-e-e!* ain’t she funny, though!”

Once more the visiting Virginian was out neck-deep in his ocean. To the fascinated Fugate it seemed that not only could he hear but almost could see the groundswells rising from where they had started in some bottomless reservoir of risibility far down below the Chocolate Hyena’s larynx—almost could see them come surging up and up, dashing to spindrift against the coral reefs of his front teeth, and finally cascading, tumbling, spraying tumultuously from the harbor mouth of those widely parted jaws, to spend themselves upon the ether. Stepping a pace closer, the better to study this natural wonder, he found himself infected by that epidemic laugh. He now was laughing—who had thought that possibly he might never laugh again! Subconsciously he analyzed the thing even as he mingled his somewhat more restrained notes with those of the stranger. If the Chocolate Hyena could make him laugh in his existing mood, who in all the world was there that might resist the temptation?

At this a great thought burst upon him—and hope, lately crushed to the frozen earth, rose up again. By the simple expedient of encasing the Chocolate Hyena’s lower face in both his gloved hands he abated the latter’s outflow to a muffled gargling.

“Come ’long wid me a minute, ole Chawklate,” he said. “Le’s git in somewhars out of this chillin’ breeze. I got a lil’ bizness to speak wid you ’bout.”

He led the way into a public entry abutting upon the street alongside the Idlewild Chile Parlors. The Chocolate Hyena obediently followed him.

“Now lissen,” he bade him, “an’ foller me clos’t. It looks lak they mout be a small piece of money in this fur you.”

The Chocolate Hyena shrank slightly away from him. For the first time since their meeting his countenance sobered.

“Jest ez much oblige’ to you,” he said uneasily, “but—but I wuzn’t figgerin’ on seekin’ no job of labor ’twell I’d done look’ this town over.”

“This don’t call fur no labor,” said Fugate; “this only jest calls fur laffin’. You laffs fur nuthin’—how’d you lak to try laffin’ fur pay onc’t?”

The other’s mobile face rebrightened.

“Don’t tek money to mek me laff—I does it ez a freewill offerin’.”

“I done found that out widout yore tellin’ me so. Ef laffs wuz a dime a dozen you’d have the intire Rockinfeller fambly wukkin’ fur you. You must have funny bones all over you, same ez a shad fish has ’em. All the same, though, ef they wuz, say, ’bout two dollars in it fur you I reckon ’twouldn’t cripple you down none in yore powers, would it? Wait!” By swiftness of speech he thwarted an evident impending outburst of delight. “Wait till I ’splains the layout to you. You see, I got a coupler clients——”

“Clients! You must be a lawyer then?” The Chocolate Hyena regarded him with enhanced respect.

“No, I thought right serious one time of tekkin’ up lawin’ fur a trade but someways I never went th’ough wid it. I is whut they calls a author.”

“Arthur who?”

“ ’Tain’t a name, it’s a bizness. I is a dramatizer—I writes fur the stage. An’ so——”

“Then whut you doin’ wid clients?”

These interruptions, when his project hung in the balance, were annoying.

“Does you know whut a client is?” he demanded, somewhat sharply.

“Suttinly I does.” The shabby one smiled so engulfingly that only the ivory barriers saved his face from falling in. “Client is a cotehouse name fur a nigger that’s fixin’ to go to the pen’tentiary. Speakin’ of cotehouses, I ’members one time, down Roanoke, the w’ite folks had two nigger boys, both of ’em frien’s of mine, up fur murder or somethin’ an’ right in the middle of the trial—I like to died laffin’—right in the middle of it they”—a preliminary convulsion strangled him—“they—*whee!*—they——”

“Nummine,” commanded the playwright, cutting in abruptly. “Them pleasin’ remerniscences of yore happy chilehood kin wait. This is mo’ impo’tant. These two clients of mine—w’ich you mout also call ’em customers—is two black-face comedians. An’ I jest is been writin’ ’em a patter ack fur a show, git me? They is due at my private offices this evenin’ at fo’ o’clock fur to hear me read it off to ’em. An’ after w’ich if ever’ting goes well an’ they is satisfied wid the way it’s went, they pays me cash down on the spot. Now, yere’s where you comes into the propersition: You’ll be loafin’ round the premises wid a broom or somethin’ in yore hand, same ez ef I’d hired you to sweep out the place. Mebbe I mention’s you, sort of casual, ez my new cleanin’-up boy. But you ain’t sayin’ nuthin’ yo’s’e’f. You jest backs up ag’inst the wall an’ lissens w’ile I starts in readin’. An’ ’en, jest ez soon ez you hears anythin’ read w’ich it strikes you ez bein’ laffable you start laffin’ an’ you keeps right on laffin’ till you is plum’ exhaustified. I ain’t keerin’ how much you laffs nur how long you laffs. ’Cause I don’t keer how cole they is at the beginnin’, they is bound sooner or later to ketch the laffin’ disease frum you. I knows they will, frum my own case. An’ once’t they gits to laffin’ good they is my middlin’ meat.”

“An’ jest fur that I gits two dollars?”

“You has the right notion.”

“Mister, you done hired yo’s’e’f a field hand. Seem lak to me, though, I oughter be the one w’ich does the payin’.”

“You’ll kinely let me decide that part. Ef I chooses to be gen’rous to you wid my own money, tha’s my lookout. Lemme give you a idee of how the piece is wukked up, so’s you’ll be purpared to do yore sheer. These yere two comedians, they comes out on the stage, one comin’ frum that side an’ the other comin’ frum this side—see?—an’ they meets up together in the middle. An’ jest then one of ’em steps on his own foot—he’s wearin’ a big shoe wid a long limber toe to it—an’ he meks out lak he thinks it’s somebody else w’ich has trodden on him an’ he tries to step back an’ git his foot loose frum under. But he trips on his own laigs an’ falls down——”

Again, expeditiously, by his former device of using his hands for a gag, he checked the threatened volley.

“Hole on,” he begged, “hole on! You ain’t come to the real comical part yit.”

“Don’t tell me that, man!” sputtered the Chocolate Hyena. “This yere show done started to git funny already. Fool nigger standin’ on his own feets an’ not knowin’ it—*whee!*” Admiration shone in his look and his voice. “An’ you thought up that there ketch yo’se’f? Man, you must be a natchel-born burlizer!”

“Well, I ain’t denyin’ but whut I has my gifts.”

The wholesome flattery was as salve and balm to the artiste’s bruised sensibilities. He felt himself warming inside. Maybe that opus of his was better than he lately had deemed it. Certainly, with the complicity of this hired claquer to make it compelling, it must ring a winning chime in the ears of his patrons. It was just bound to. Still, a further test might now be worth trying—a sort of rough rehearsal before the main performance. Seeking material for experimentation he swiftly conned in his mind the more outstanding passages of his whimsicality:

“Heed me, pal,” he said; “see how this yere gag hits you; they’s plenty mo’ jest ez good ez it is. They is cornfabbin’ along together an’ one of ’em says to the other he’s a hopeless case, an’ the other one comes right back at him an’ says to the fust one: ‘I bet you five dollars you don’t know yo’se’f whut is a hopeless case.’ So they both puts up the money an’ the fust one he says: ‘Now then, sence you knows so much, tell me whut is a hopeless case?’ An’ the other one says: ‘A hopeless case is twenty-fo’ empty bottles.’”

Happily stricken in all his members, the Chocolate Hyena slanted up against a side wall of the hallway. He beat his two hands together violently and the clamor of his whooping, with its echoes and its reverberations, filled all the upper wards and chambers of that tall building. To joy he now utterly abandoned himself—but a door behind them down the corridor was jerked open and an indignant brown face thrust itself out:

“Say, man,” the resident shouted, “they’s another lady sick in baid on the top story of this house, five flo’s up. Better git on out of yere wid that crazy yellin’, ’fo’ somebody come down frum upstairs an’ skins yo’ haid.”

“Skin my haid, woman!” the Chocolate Hyena managed to get out between paroxysms. “Skin my haid, but lemme git my laff out fust—tha’s

all I asts you! Twenty-fo' empty bottles is a hopeless case—I'll say 'tis!" As his volume increased, all faculty for coherent speech failed him.

The housekeeper came out from her room and as she came a growing smile chased her frowns up over her forehead into her scalp.

"Whut's the joke betwixt you two, anyways?" she asked, expectantly, looking from the gratified author to his writhing companion and back again. "Ef it's so funny ez all that I craves to tek a hand in the merrimint my ownse'f."

The hour was four forty-five. The author's reading just now was concluded. Delay in bringing it to a close was due to the boisterous conduct of a rather ravelly young man who had been presented to the callers as the new office boy. This person had broken in with joyous uproar each time a point was scored. His interruptions were, in their nature, cumulative; they grew in scope and length and strength. But he attained an incredible and deafening climax when the reader came to the concluding page wherein—but perhaps it would be better to quote the bantering word-play in its entirety:

PURDUE— well speakn of famblies I want to tell you my father was the king of our house

MINGLE— yes indeedy I was there the night yore maw crownd him

PURDUE— I hears you has been traveln abrode lately where in special has you been tourn at

MINGLE— oh Eurupp asia affica Hoboken all them forn places everywheres

PURDUE— I persume you visited the leadn forn cities then such as Londen rome and gay Parea

MINGLE— yes sir Rome and utica and Albany all of them I was at

PURDUE— I persume you touched Florence whilst in Eurupp

MINGLE— no but I got two dollars off of Lizzie (*wait for laugh*) speakn of gals does you know why old maids always likes to go to church

PURDUE— why does old maids always like to go to church

MINGLE— on acct of the hymns (hims) say I want to ast you somethin else why does you always find water in a watermeln

PURDUE— well friend why does we always find water in a watermeln

MINGLE— because they plant the seed in the spring.

At this point the strange youth altogether had collapsed. He lay now in a corner, a limp helpless heap which quivered and gave off weak broken sounds in which the words “watermelon” and “spring” might occasionally be distinguished, as between gasps he repeated them over and over.

To this refrain the author concluded his recital. He lifted an anxious face from the manuscript, studying the faces of the prospective purchasers. Mingle, who was squatty and coal-black, patted his own heaving side and opened his mouth to speak. But his associate, who was slim and long and of the color rather of burnt cane syrup, checked him with a look and a gesture.

“Wait!” he said. “Seems lak to me I is the bizness manager of this team. W’en the tawk is financial I tawks it.” He turned to the waiting dramatist. His expression afforded no clew to his feelings. It might have been a mask fashioned from petrified sorghum. It was what, technically, is known as a

poker face. “Us two—my partner an’ me—us withdraws to that there hall yonder fur a confrince.”

Outside, with the closed door between them and the pair in the office, Mingle spoke up promptly:

“Say, Earlie, whut’s the use of ary confrince? I’se satisfied.” He grinned extensively. “Us two suttinly is goin’ clean up big wid that air ack.”

“Us two? *Huh*, you better say ‘us three.’”

“How come you nominates three?” asked the puzzled Mingle. “He don’t git no cut-in on the wages we draws down, does he?”

“Who you tawkin ’bout?”

“This yere Conkey Fugate, of c’ose. Wuzn’t the agreemint wuz that he do the job fur cash?”

“Who say he don’t?”

“Well, tha’s whut I thought you meant. Anyways, he done deliver’ the goods—I’ll say that much fur him, even if he is my fur distant kinfolks. Look how well them fumdiddles of his’n went over wid all three of us in there an’ him jest readin’ ’em along sing-songy at that! But jest you wait till I wrops my pair of comical lips round ’em—jest wait, tha’s all I asts you—an’ then’s the time w’en you’ll see me knockin’ em out of they seats.”

“Spoke lak a low comedian, w’ich I reckins that’s the lowest thing they is in this world, ’scusin’ it’s mine-worms.” There was profound contempt in the towering Purdue’s tone. “I gits to wonderin’ sometimes where all you low comedians would be, ef anywheres, widout us straight men to feed you yore lines an’ build up yore laffs fur you an’ mos’ of all to purtect you frum yore own ign’ance. Now, that there ack—it’s lousy—tha’s whut ’tis!”

“W’y, man, didn’t you laff at it? And didn’t I laff? An’ ez fur that there young stumpy nigger, didn’t he mouty nigh bust hisse’f wide open?”

“Us all done so, jest lak you sez, brother. An’ purty soon I’m goin’ to tell you w’y us two laffed so hard. But fust I’m goin’ tell you ’bout that ack. I repeats, it’s p-e-rlum lousy. I only wishes it wuz lousier ’en whut ’tis—’cept that ain’t possible. I only wishes I could dig up some bumper gags somewheres to stick ’em into it—only I can’t think of none, off-handed.”

“But you p’intedly specify jest a minute ago that they wuz three of us w’ich would——”

“So I done so, an’ stands by it. But I ain’t meanin’ that there skinny li’l’ con man wid the cole frames over his face, w’ich he’s wearin’ ’em, I reckon, hopin’ to hothouse hisse’f into full man’s-size. I is speakin’ of that there countrified nigger wid the broom.”

“Who—him? Whut’s he got to do wid it?”

“He’s got ever’thing they is to do wid it—tha’s merely all. You thinks I laffed at them bum gags? Huh! Reason I laffed was ’cause that there nigger boy laffed in sich a way he med me laff—my ribs is still sore. An’ tha’s also the reason w’y you laffed, only you ain’t got gumption enough to see it. . . . You tek it frum me, Mingle, he’s goin’ to be in this yere team, or else they ain’t goin’ be no team.”

“But—but——”

“You is wastin’ yore butts,” said the masterful Purdue. “Save ’em up fur sometime w’en you mout need ’em. Now hark yere to me and try to onduce whut passes wid you fur a brain to receive whut I’m ’bout to cornfur. We got the promise of two try-out pufformences next Monday over yere at the Orpheus Cullid Vaudyville Theater—ain’t we? Well, yere’s the way it’s goin’ be: Fur the matinée jest the two of us alone goes on an’ speaks them lines jest lak they has been wrote for us—an’ you goin’ see us both die the deaths of a dawg. Tha’s whut goin’ happen—at the matinée. But fur the night show, jest as we steps on, that there li’l’ sawed-off laffin’ nigger is goin’ come ramblin’ out frum the wings dressed up in a set of overhalls lak he wuz one of the stage hands or somethin’, an’ he’s goin’ ramble hisse’f up ag’inst one of the torminters an’ start lissenin’ at the stuff we pulls. Ef he kin furgit they’s a lot of people out front lookin’ at him, an’ ef he kin laff lak he laffed jest now, you goin’ see a houseful of cullid audience go plum’ crazy. An’ w’en it comes to laffin’, w’ite folks ain’t no diff’ent frum cullid ef you gives ’em the right kind of a excuse—you’ll find that out w’en I gits you signed up wid me on the Big Time.

“Fur I’m tellin’ you that jest so long ez that li’l’ nigger kin keep on laffin’ at them cheesy gags—laff honest an’ lak he means it, I means—an’, ef I’m any jedge, he alluz will—w’y, jest fur so long us is goin’ to mop up wid the best black-face novelty ack they is in vaudyville. . . . Come on back yere wid me an’ keep yore mouth clamped shut an’ watch me close, ’cause I’m goin’ to show you now whut a intelleck is w’uth to a man w’ich has one.”

Majestically he stalked into the room, his dumb and dumfounded follower reëntering behind him. Ignoring, for the moment, the nervous

Fugate, he addressed himself to the lumpy stranger who, with his back against the wall jog and his heels beating a tattoo on the floor boards, still gurgled rhythmically.

“Pull yo’se’f together, son, an’ look me in the eye,” commanded the sagacious Purdue. “Now tell me—how much did this yere so-call’ scribe pay you fur this evenin’s job?”

The reviving Chocolate Hyena was honest. Or possibly he merely was guileless.

“Two dollars,” he answered frankly, “but I ain’t got it yit. But I ain’t worryin’ none ef I don’t never git it. I claims I done had the full values of my money—*whee-e-e-e!*”

“Don’t fret—you’ll git it. Now then, I got somethin’ else to ast you—does you crave reg’lar wuk wid me?”

“W’ich?” The Chocolate Hyena’s eye rolled toward the door as though he meditated flight.

“I sez how’d you lak to have a job—a stiddy job?”

If he flinched from the noun, literally he quivered at the speaking of the adjective.

“Not—not ef I kin git anythin’ else to do,” he faltered.

“Mebbe I stated it wrong. This yere job don’t call fur yore puttin’ any strain on yore pusspiration pores. All your muscles is goin’ live a carefree life of ease ’ceptin’ yore jaw muscles—an’ I figgers they don’t never tire. All whut you got do frum now is jest laff twice’t a day, twenty minutes on a stretch.”

“My blessed Maker!” whooped the stranger. He scrambled to his feet. “You folks in this town sho is got a cu’ious idee of whut is wuk. Lead me to it, mister, lead me to it!”

“They’s plenty time. Look yere.” From a slender packet of bills the straight man peeled the outer wrapper. “Yere’s five dollars to bine the bargain ontwell we kin git the papers drawed up, puttin’ you under my ’sclusive corntrol an’ managemint. Don’t pester none ’bout this yere bank roll bein’ kind of slimsy lookin’ at the present,” he went on, misinterpreting the meaning in the youth’s kindling eye; “they’ll shortly be plenty mo’ fur you where this comes frum.”

“Boss man,” stated the Chocolate Hyena earnestly, “you an’ me is done tied up fur the life everlastin’.”

“Tha’s the language! Foller after me, an’ all whut you’ll wear is jewelry an’ silk underclothes.” He delivered it as a prophecy; then swung about and faced the stricken and apprehensive dramatist.

“Brashness,” he said, “this is prob’ly the first case on *reccord* where a pusson obtained money under false pretenses, an’ yit earned it. Yere’s yore hund’ed. Now, hand this yere new boy of mine them two bucks w’ich you promised it to him fur he’ppin’ ’long your li’l’ bunco game an’ then you keep the lef’-over ninety-eight wid my blessin’s. . . . Now tha’s done. Come on yere wid me, Mingle. Come on yere, too, you whut-ever-yore-name is. Us is bound to the nighest cullid lawyer’s office to git the teamin’ papers drawed up. Fugate, I wishes you well, but cornfidential, I fears the wu’st. Sooner ur later the police force is goin’ overtake yore ambitions!”

Now, every sweet dish must have its dreggy sourness, and as the poet in slightly different language has put it, there is no rose but has its thorn. The enormous success instantaneously scored and still being scored by the comedy trio of Purdue, Mingle & Company is known and reverently is spoken of wherever high class vaudeville is played—Eastern Circuit, Western Wheel, Southern Territory. Yet this success has its other sides.

Take, for example, the case of J. Earl Purdue. Here is one who knows exactly what it is that makes the tired business man still more tired. His associate, Happy Rastus Mingle, lives up to the name. He is happy as the *two-a-day* is long. He is well content with his repute, his gold-filled front teeth, his ornate wardrobe, his diamonds, his salary, his touring car, his place in the billing. But Purdue, that canny executive, has his hours of distress. In the midst of his prosperity, at the very pinnacle of his prominence, he is possessed by horrid fears which come unbidden to harass him. He cannot but dwell on the dread possibilities that one of these days the Chocolate Hyena may fall ill, or may lose his voice or—most dire contingency of all—may lose his zest for the ancient wheezes at which each afternoon and again each evening, he almost laughs his head off.

Or, take the Chocolate Hyena. Affluent and famous though he be, and each week enriched anew beyond his wildest dreams of wealth, his lot nevertheless has its sorrows. Practically, he is in close confinement. He is under heavy bonds that never, in his hours of leisure, shall he frequent any place of public amusement—the thoughtful Purdue long ago attended to that detail—and he, who so dearly loves to laugh, is denied the opportunity ever

of seeing or hearing any act whatsoever other than the act of which he is the prop and the backbone. When not actually before the footlights, his dressing room is his prison place; he's a bird in a gilded cage.

And finally and most distressful of all, take Roscoe C. Fugate. That morbid misanthrope walks the highways of Harlem's Little Africa repeating to such as will harken to him a lament which does not vary, save that it grows more passionately bitter with each time of its telling:

“Who wuz it wrote them boys the best ack they is or ever has been in refine' vaudyville—w'ich don't it stand proven ez the best one 'cause in all the goin'-on fo' yeahs they been usin' it, they ain't been nary line changed in it? 'Twuz me! Who wuz it dug up that there Chawklate Hyena w'en he didn't have a cent to his back an' they wuz tossin' him out of cheap resta'raws all up an' down One Hund'ed an' Thirty-fifth Street? Me, tha's who! Who wuz it seen the possibilities in him an' brang 'em all three together right there in my own pussonal offices? Me ag'in! An' now they is drawin' down six hund'ed an' fifty a week an' they next contract's goin' to call fur seven hund'ed flat. But is I gettin' my nourishin' li'l' weekly commission out of it? Does a pleasin' piece of royalties come floatin' my way ever' Monday? Naw, suzz, that it do not! They tekken advantage of my pressin' necessities—they bought me out fur one measly li'l' hund'ed bones wi'ch the bigges' part of it went to pay fur the sorriest lot of furnishin's junk ever you seen. Tha's the way it goes, though, in this world—them w'ich is up they tromples an' stomps on them wi'ch is down. Seems, sometimes, lak 'tain't no use tryin'. Seems lak, once't in a w'ile one of them boys would of slipped me a li'l' somethin' fur gratitude an' ole times' sake? But no!”

At times the depression of Roscoe C. Fugate borders on actual melancholia.

CHAPTER II

PLASTER OF PARIS

We have here a story of a feud. If you could not get interested in a story of a feud, turn the pages. If you could, then bear with us. The story naturally divides into three parts, namely—the beginning of the feud, next its progress, and third and last, its conclusion.

The beginning was back yonder in the time of beginnings of a number of things. Old things were beginning to change, new things beginning to merge in with the altered old ones. The place was a rich and a typical forcing bed for these transitions. It was the open range in northern Wyoming.

The pack trains of the free traders, with a long-haired “Mizzoo” and a rifle-toting “Kintuck” in every outfit, or else it wasn’t complete, had gone long before. But every bunch of bull-whackers, to be characteristic, must muster at least one youth called “Tex” for short; and sun-cured punchers answering to the pet name of “Oklahomy” were no longer uncommon, for the Indian Territory had been rechristened and the opening of the Cherokee Strip was fading into history. Over to the West, beyond the mountains, a buster of broncs might be a buckaroo, and generally was, but here he was a buster when he wasn’t just a plain hand.

Tom Horn, that painstaking man, was abroad in the land potting sheep-herders for the cattle barons and leaving a white stone under the head of each newly deceased as proof he had earned another five hundred—“Tom Horn’s due bills,” they called those white pebbles. And there were no wire fences yet, and the nester still was a rare bird, and branding chutes hadn’t been dreamed of, nor dude ranches nor mail order cowboys, and four saloons and one general store made a live town, and altogether it was good to be healthy and out of jail.

Now Austin Wingo, approaching the chuck wagon of the Lazy Prong’s trail crew, was healthy and out of jail, but otherwise had little to be grateful for, excepting his sense of humor and his appetite. On second thought eliminate the appetite. At this present moment it was to him a curse rather than a blessing seeing that, for twenty-four hours before, he’d had no means of gratifying it.

Likewise he felt himself to be, and was, that most awkward and self-conscious of all creatures on God’s green hassock—a cowhand afoot. A

cowhand's proper place to sit is in a saddle; his proper use for his legs is to grip a pony's girth. Howsoever, there was one consolation. Nobody at this present moment would be likely to take him for a cowhand.

Or, for that matter, for a Texan.

Though he altogether and exclusively was Texan. His father, whose chief regret in life had been that he never got a shot at Old Santa Ana, had four sons and these four he had respectively named with the names of Houston, Dallas, Waco—Waco Wingo; how's that for real poetry?—and Austin. Whereof Austin, the youngest among these, was in certain respects the spryest. When he forked a horse that horse stayed forked. And with a rope he almost could write his monogram on the air.

It was early of a morning when he approached the Lazy Prong bunch. He had been east and north—all the way east and all the way north to Chicago, as a deputy chaperon to a trainload of steers. In Chicago divers things had befallen him. A Jewish gentleman specializing in the stockyards trade had beguiled him to buy a modish wardrobe for city use; a derby hat at one end of him, a pair of button shoes at the other and between these terminal adornments such intermediate accessories as a lightish blue suit—almost a robin's egg blue—and a hard-boiled shirt and an agate-ware collar and a made-up four-in-hand tie of a slick and shellacked aspect.

Wearing these, he had looked, with his brackett legs and his golden-oak tan, like something out of a comic supplement, but he had believed, before the nap of the glamour rubbed off, that he looked pretty good. It rubbed off fast, various causes and effects contributing. After a hectic evening on South Clark Street, he got separated from his own crowd, which was due to wine, woman and song, but not so very much singing at that; and, what was more serious, he also got separated from his bank roll and his return pass on the railroad. But that was due to a pickpocket. Chicago once upon a time abounded in such great minor tragedies.

For a day and a night the youth wandered about the Levee district, feeling himself a lost and a forlorn figure, both of which he was, and wishing he had his wardrobe back; and then, moved by a great longing to regain a more familiar clime, he stole a ride on a west-bound freight. Any freight would do just so it headed west. He hoped though that this particular freight would bear west by south. His bad luck prevailing, it bore west by nor'west.

For three days he was a free passenger, subsisting mainly on air and coal soot. At Cheyenne, through the hard-heartedness of a flagman, he lost

passage on this train but immediately rebooked on another. At least he was getting into an open country and, what was better still, a beef country. One night out of Cheyenne, when the freight had halted on a siding in the sagebrush, he slid out of an empty. Half a mile from the tracks he had seen by early sunrise that which he was seeking, that for which he had pined with a vast and a homesick pining—a herd and its herders.

He had lost his water-proofed tie in transit and had freed his throat of the hateful bondage of that embossed collar, but he still wore the derby hat and the button shoes and the stiff shirt—only now its bosom was a pearlish gray tint—and the light blue suit of the far Eastern fashion marts. As to the last-named, its azure shades were toned with dust and polka-dotted with burnt holes where hot cinders had seared in. He was the spittin' image of a country boy turned hobo while wearing his Sunday go-to-meetings.

He limped into the circle behind the chuck wagon and everybody couched there looked at him and then leaned back and laughed. The mocking echoes of their mirth saluted the desert for a hundred yards around. It was then and there and on the instant that young Austin decided to get even for that laugh. But first he would eat. No one in his right senses would even try to get even on a stomach as empty as his was.

“Well, bub,” inquired a tall young man, when the rest had had their fun and its noise was dying down, to be revived by occasional giggles and snorts, “well, bub, what’s on your mind?”

The tall young man spoke with a certain quiet authority; plainly the foreman here. Austin knew the type, having been raised with it on ranges far remote from this spot. But the “bub,” coming from one not five years his senior, scorched his soul as with a branding-iron. If there was any choice to be had he would get even with this *hombre* first.

“I’d like to get me a snack of breakfast,” he said with just the crafty proper tone of a bucolic humility in his voice; “and then after that I’d like to talk with some of you gentlemen about me gettin’ a job of work with you all.”

So they fed him, as they would have fed any wayfarer those times. The food was his kind of food. It was bull-meat, fried hard, and dough-gods—not those light chaffy bisquets of Chicago but dependable solid stuff that would stay by you half a day—and whistleberries piled high on the tin plate; and the hands regarding him appraisingly while he went to it, he sitting cross-legged on the earth to do so. Having eaten deeply and drunk of hot coffee, the temptation was strong within him to ask somebody for the

makings and a match. But he put it from him. Smoking a cigaret, much less rolling one, could not be a part of his present rôle.

The foreman now strolled up and gravely eyed him over.

“Looks like you’ve been off of rations quite a spell,” he said.

“Yes, suh,” like that, very respectfully, almost with reverence.

“Thought so. Where you from?”

“Down Arkansaw way.” Which was the truth. Austin truly was from down Arkansaw way, only from sundry hundreds of miles on beyond.

“Strayed a long ways from home, ain’t you?”

“Yes, suh, I certainly have.” An unidentified person behind him gurgled at the plaintive earnestness which the wily young actor poured into the reply.

“Let’s see, you said something about wantin’ to get a job?” The foreman’s manner was almost solicitous. “Know anything about the cow business?”

“Oh, yes, suh. We had three cows back home and I uster milk all three of ’em, night and mornin’.”

Under cover of his hat brim the foreman frowned about him for silence. A fresh outbreak from the happy audience might at this stage spoil everything.

“How about hosses—can you ride hosses?”

“Yes, suh.”

“Sure of it?”

“Oh, yes, suh. Paw, he’s got a work team on our farm and a buggy-mare besides the team, and I’ve rid them plenty times.”

“Think you could ride any horse, do you?”

“Yes, suh, if he’d ever been rode by anybody else, I could.”

“Well, I reckon we’d better try you out before we go any further. If you make good the job’s yours. Workin’ this line a hand has to do considerable ridin’.” He addressed an expectant underling: “Pink, lay a rope on Smoky Mountain, will you? And bridle and saddle him and fetch him here.”

The person addressed hastened to obey, the wings of his chaps slapping as he loped off on the pleasant errand. Others present began hugging themselves in eager anticipation.

“Just one minute, Jop,” said a middle-aged, mustached hand. He drew the foreman aside. “Say, Jop,” he continued when the pair of them were beyond earshot of the intended victim. “Kiddin’ is kiddin’, but if I was you, I don’t believe I’d stake that pore little greenhorn to the snakiest bronc we’ve got in the whole string. That Smoky hoss is liable to empty him so quick and so hard he’ll break in two when he hits the grit.”

“I’m runnin’ this, Toms,” said the foreman. “You heard that sawed-off bum make his bluff, didn’t you? Well, I’m callin’ it, that’s all.”

The older man shrugged his shoulders to indicate that so far as he was concerned the subject was closed. He stood back and watched. The object of his recent solicitude got on his feet.

“If you don’t mind, I expect one of you gentlemen better lend me some of them iron spurrers like you-all got on,” he said. “Seems like everybody out here rides with them spurrers on.”

A generous soul unstrapped his rowels and tendered them. The innocent put them on upside down and the owner counseled him to reverse them, choking into his shirt-front.

The one called Pink came back now from the rope corral, mounted and holding the official man-killer snubbed close up. The stranger approached. The spectators closed in. Smoky Mountain stood quietly enough. Your practiced buckner often will wait until the victim has both feet in the stirrups before starting operations. To start sooner would spoil the sport. With his Roman nose cocked high and the maniacal glint of a born murderer that was in his eye well masked, Old Smoky waited, biding his time.

Once again and only once the man who had intervened in Austin’s behalf spoke up. Dave Thompson was his name.

“Hold on there, son!” he bade the newcomer sharply. “You don’t want to try to climb that cayuse Injun-way. Come over here on the left side of him to git on.”

“I thought he’d probably be the same on both sides,” said Austin guilelessly. But he clunked around the horse’s rump to his other flank.

He feared that in mounting he must expose his hand. He was glad he had the Smoky horse and Pink and Pink’s horse between him and the foreman over on the right. The latter had stationed himself there purposely—a tenderfoot frequently was flung off a bad one from left to right, completing a round trip, as it were, and as chief jester, the foreman meant not to miss any part of the entertainment. But all in one comprehensive instant, Dave

Thompson saw how deftly the youngster's bent leg flipped over the back and how sweetly his body swung up in unison with the beast's first forward lunge and suddenly he was grinning as broadly as any of them. The real secret was his before it was theirs.

Never once did the boy go down with his free hand for leather.

Yet Smoky Mountain offered all he had in stock and even thought up a few extra wrinkles. But when at the end of five illuminating minutes, his new master—almost the only master he ever had acknowledged too—brought him back to the chuck wagon, both of them breathing hard, he was one tamed outlaw. Judge how tamed he was. The Kid, sliding off, set his ignoble derby on Smoky Mountain's bent submissive head—and Smoky Mountain let it stay there and blinked piteously with his tired eyes from under the dinky brim.

“Nice friendly pony, ain't he?” said young Wingo, addressing the company between pants. “Only”—he added this as though in afterthought—“only he certainly does lope kind of high.” He faced the foreman. “Well, suh, I'm ready to start in with that there job, if you are.”

The foreman nodded his affirmative. His emotions—chiefly rage at having been so beautifully hoaxed, succeeding now to the first swift flash of amazed and baffled understanding—kept him from speaking. Which was just as well. Because nobody could have heard him had he spoken. One and all, the members of his force were whooping their appreciation of the back-fired stratagem, were beating themselves on their breasts, beating one another on their backs; even rolling in the alkali, one or two were.

For a joke that's on the joker is the loveliest joke of all. The whole world will agree on that.

You might say that a thing so small as this was a very small thing indeed to be the starting of a feud. A buster in disguise had stayed in the middle of the baddest horse of the bad string, continuing to stay there until he gentled the bad one, thereby turning the laugh on the other fellow. But the point was that the other fellow was Lew Joppa. If you had known Lew Joppa you probably wouldn't have said it. You would understand.

With a different introduction these two—Joppa and Wingo—might very well have been friends. In their ages they were not very far apart. They both were top men at their somewhat hazardous calling. Each had spirit and initiative. Lacking the seeds of a grudge between them, they might have

been rivals, although this was doubtful too, for their ambitions took opposite angles. Joppa wanted to get ahead, Wingo merely craved to hold his own. But it is not at all likely that they would have been enemies. Each could have seen admirable qualities in his fellowman.

Joppa might have taken to Wingo for his companionable ways, for his jestful turns of speech, for his adaptability, for his blithe and graceful competency at handling the four-footed beasts. Wingo would have respected in Joppa a genius of leadership, a determination, an even and unfailing courage in emergencies. It would have been respect without envy. The youngster had no leisure for mulching jealousies. He was too busy enjoying the cardinal facts of a dangerous and highly elemental existence.

Altogether, as far as Wingo was concerned, there was no reason why they should become enemies. He got the job—having passed his word, Joppa was not the man to break it—and he bought him a saddle on time and borrowed, a bit here and a bit there, a suitable costume, and within forty-eight hours was as much at home among the Lazy Prong punchers as though he had been born and brought up in the shadow of a red butte instead of on the live-oak breaks away down yonder by the Brazos.

Under Joppa's skin, though, the thorn of his discomfiture rankled. Before long it festered into a lively distaste which was the more active for being outwardly suppressed. After a little it was sore enough to be a downright hatred; then he no longer could suppress it. The story spread of what had happened that morning alongside the U.P.'s right-of-way—willing tongues wagging it hither and yon—and it came back to him adorned with derisive and barbed enlargements.

He began to despise Wingo for his quizzical upward quirk of a sandy eyebrow. Sometimes he felt he could kill him just for that eyebrow. Privately he translated Wingo's heavy-handed flights of whimsy into covert satire that was aimed at him. He showed what he felt; he couldn't help showing it, even though by nature he was of a secretive sort. And he found additional causes for disliking the lad, catching them out of the air, digging them up out of the ground.

For instance: Joppa was Northern born and bred. His father, a Union soldier from Ohio, had taken up a homestead claim in Nebraska and Joppa had grown up believing that U. S. Grant and the fighting McCooks ranked considerably higher than the angels. Still it was not until it came out, which it speedily did, that Wingo was of Confederate stock and rather proud of it, that Joppa chose to be offensively patriotic on Civil War issues. Immediately

he was an outspoken partisan, dropping remarks upon the advisability of hanging Jeff Davis to a sour apple tree and of disfranchising all unreconstructed Rebels and their get as well.

To him the son of a Rebel was also another sort of a son; he said so in Dave Thompson's hearing; and if old Dave had been the kind to make trouble and had carried the hostile saying to Wingo, the issue might have been forced to an open rupture. But Thompson kept his mouth shut. Dour and moody and disapproving, Joppa at times damped the spirits of all the outfit. It was as though he blew a gloomy smoke of sectionalism into their eyes when all they craved was to enjoy the comforting warmth of the camp-fire in peace. Wingo gave no heed, though, seeming to avoid a breach rather through sheer good temper than because of any fear of the outcome.

About a month after Wingo had joined on, the young foreman almost had his wish. A loose-jointed hand called Lengthy, because that was what he was, having come in from night-herding, spent most of the daylight hours which he should have given over to catching up with his sleep, in drinking upwards of a commercial quart of exceedingly potent rye that had been purchased the evening before for purely personal enjoyment. Having selfishly indulged his appetite, he crawled under the bed-wagon and immediately was snoring, with his swollen face turned upwards.

Now Lengthy was exceedingly fearful of snakes. Likewise in this particular place those vicious little ground-rattlers abounded. At once young Wingo's instinct for primitive humor stirred him to take steps. From his bed-roll he produced a patent clothes-pin. Heaven only knows what need a cowhand had for a patent clothes-pin in his bed-roll. But there it was—a new kind of clothes-pin, with two wooden jaws held to a tight pressure by a small stout spring. To the butt of this device the joker fastened a yard-long strip of green rawhide, first soaking it in water to make it slick and slimy. On the free end of the thong he strung loosely six horn buttons that he stripped from an old pair of overalls and then, behold, he held aloft a creditable imitation of a side-winder all complete, head, body and tail.

He got down on his fours and, cautiously reaching in between two wheels, he sprang the pin firmly upon the congested varicose end of the sleeper's nose, then rose nimbly and stepped back. His reward was prompt.

The drunkard stirred, grunted drowsily, slapped with a comatose hand at his squeezed nostrils and then all at once was awake all over. As he rose up with a yell his head struck a kingbolt in the wagon-bed and the knob tore a gash in his scalp at the hair line. Still on his back, he whirled rather than

crawled out beneath the single-trees and rose up then and, with both arms outstretched and his frenzied fingers clawing at the high dry atmosphere of Wyoming, he dashed through the cook's supper pans and ran on the dead straightaway, with a yell for every step, for perhaps fifty yards before the clamp relaxed and the twisting, whipping tormenter slipped from him to the earth.

The dazed Lengthy took one look at it and then, turning about, he returned through the ring of happily hysterical men as swiftly as he had gone hence. He leaped up into the wagon, bent and rummaged among its contents with a swift pawing motion and straightened, a fearsome spectacle, with his staring eyes and his mottled face that was all dead-white except where the blood from his cut forehead ran down on it.

A cocked Winchester carbine was in his grip. The guffawing died in a quick gasping.

He glared about him and there was a deadly insane rage in his look and he said, very quietly, as he swept with the muzzle so as to cover these exceedingly silent mates of his:

“Now, just let somebody laugh! As a favor to me, just let somebody seem like he ever knowed how to laugh in his whole gordam rotten life!”

Naturally, nobody did. Each pair of lips there had fitted into a prim and solemn lock. And nobody so much as whispered, so much as moved an inch. They were like that many frozen men.

The homicidal eyes focused on Wingo with a paralyzing intent in them and the black barrel of the repeater began to straighten down.

“Was it you?” asked Lengthy, almost whispering it. But his words seemed to cut across intervening space like feathered arrows. “Was it you done it? It'd be like you to do it. And I think it was you. Well, then, by——”

He went over sideways, floundering in the wagon litter, and where he had stood the foreman stood, with the weapon in his hands. Creeping in from the rear, that efficient person had vaulted a wheel behind Lengthy, had seized and disarmed Lengthy and had pushed him from his feet; and all done in two shakes.

Joppa wasn't even breathing hard. He glanced down at the scrambling night-herder.

“That will be about all now, Lengthy,” he bade him sharply. “Behave yourself. Still, at that, I don't much blame you for goin' on the prod this-a-

way.”

Thereafter ignoring Lengthy, Joppa faced toward Wingo, addressing him with a passionless, contemptuous lack of emphasis.

“We’ve had enough playin’ in this outfit for the present day,” he stated. “Fact, we’ve had enough to last us for several days. That’s an order from me and it goes as it lays. And if you don’t like the way I’m sayin’ it, what’re you goin’ to make of it?”

“Nothin’ at all,” answered Wingo, finding his voice. “I reckon you maybe saved me from gettin’ plugged.”

“Don’t thank me,” said Joppa with bitter enmity in every dragged syllable. “If I did I didn’t save much. And I ain’t specially proud of myself for doin’ it.”

The taunt was deliberately provocative and the Texan, stung hard, took a forward step, all tensed. Then his clenched hands relaxed to dangling hands again and with them he made a gesture of helplessness and walked over to the fire, with his head down, and kicked moodily at a charred stick. Almost surely Joppa had preserved him. He couldn’t resent an insult from a man who a minute before had preserved his life. Perhaps later—if the insult were repeated; but not now. There was such a thing as gratitude.

He took early occasion, though, to make his peace with the outraged Lengthy, begging his pardon and mollifying him with honest comradely words. And Lengthy forgave him and grinned sheepishly in token that the truce perpetually was cemented. Lengthy was not constituted to stay mad for long. He was not cut after the Joppa pattern.

The situation, peaking up once in the while to the serrated edge of a clash and then again sloping off to an amity which on the surface at least almost was glossy and certainly was polite, endured between the pair of them for upwards of two months more. There came along then a week when the prospect absolutely was saw-toothed with the menace of a gun-play by one or both. During each waking hour there was the maintenance of a mutual courtesy which, at the risk of being too aptly alliterative, might only be described as painful, perilous and highly polished.

When Joppa spoke to or at or through Wingo his words were fletched with a smooth and silken irony. He managed to be overbearing and at the same time forbearing. If Wingo replied he began or ended each sentence with a “suh” that was elaborately stressed; his chronic grin had a sneer at

either end of it and his left eyebrow cocked itself higher than ever and stayed cocked. He stepped stiffly like a belligerent bantam cock, whetting figurative spurs. Pranking was far from his thoughts.

It couldn't last much longer; something had to part under the strain and what the rest of the Lazy Prongers feared was that the parting would be punctuated with pistol shots. The condition bred among them an irritation which expressed itself in sporadic warfare. Thompson, usually an easy-going person, exchanged threats with Pink Sallee, the wrangler, after a harsh debate over the demerits of a perfectly worthless zebra dun pony bearing the highly appropriate name of Satan's Stepson. Ed. Mills and Homely Harker the cook, who had been close allies until then, hyphenated one quarrelsome evening for practically no reason and before they were pried apart Mills made a mortar of Harker's dish face and a pestle of his own knobbed fist and braised the adversary's features to a scandalous extent. Until the mauled countenance regained its original contours Harker went about his duties making to himself bloodthirsty promises touching on what he expected to do to his late partner. Lengthy became a morose and solitary bottle drunkard, taking no sides with anybody in anybody's row. Discipline was going, good will almost was gone. To look back on afterwards, that week to all involved was like a bad dream.

So on Saturday night Wingo asked for his time and made a pack of his belongings and paid off certain small indebtednesses and got on a pinto which he had bought, and with no words of explanation and very few words of farewell, he rode off. When his diminished figure was a bobbing black dot against the sunset, like a bug flying into a red-hot fire, Dave Thompson spoke the verdict for them all:

"I'll miss him plenty but I'm glad he's pulled out and went. Mebbe now the climate round here won't be so itchy. I only hope he keeps driftin' a long ways. Because, hear me tell it, if their trails ever cross again, there'll be a jam, shore. Tex might forget but Jop won't—nor forgive neither. He ain't that kind."

This prophecy differed from many prophecies by being a true prophecy. The Kid drifted but not far enough and in the early part of the following year the trails crossed. For the sake of picturesqueness, the writer wishes he could tell how, across a poker table or up against a bar, the two enemies came to their long-delayed grapple; and how in the meantime a flower-like slip of a prairie girl had entered into their lives, giving an added and romantic cause for malice; and how Joppa saw his foeman's form as through a red mist and how Wingo's hand crept to his hip as stealthily as a lynx's paw; and how one

of them, like Billy the fabulous Kid, was so lightning fast on the draw that the eye could not follow the shift as the heavy gun leaped from the holster; and how the other, like Doc Halliday, never wore a glove on his right hand because of his trigger finger and how, like King Fisher, he fired from the hip; how the bystanders jumped aside or flattened on the floor in the sawdust; how the two reports seemed as one, so closely were they blended; how the villain passed with a bullet through his heart and a querulous look on his face as death wiped out the malignant scowl from it, while the hero, whose skull only was creased—heroes in fiction nearly always have to be thick-headed—groped back out of the blackness to behold bending above him the loving face of his Nellie. She rode forty-five miles bareback to get there and never turned a hair.

Alas, that nothing of the sort is to be recorded. There was no winsome wind-blossom of the plains to figure in the equation; and if this scribe is one to judge, there neither was villain nor hero to the piece, but only a brace of misguided and peppery young men. And oh, lack-a-day! not a soul got plugged. There was no shooting whatsoever. This tale will never get into the movies.

Finally it might as well be confessed that when they met, Joppa positively did not see red. This statement alone will lead to my being blackballed if ever I come up for membership in the Story-writers' Union, Western Branch. But he didn't see red. He saw Wingo's paint pony standing where it was hitched in front of a prosaic harness shop in Logan City and recognized it, and then he saw Wingo step out of the shop carrying a mended saddle on his arm, and so clear was his vision that, across the street, he made out one pearl button missing from the twin row on Wingo's double-breasted blue shirt.

He hailed him. Having hailed him, he went over to Wingo's side of the road, where Wingo stood waiting. He had the day before heard a certain thing from a Meddlesome Mattie of a horseshoer, who dearly loved to pack and peddle gossip and, being disposed to believe it, he had. He was frowning until the thick eyebrows made a level black line, like an accent mark, beneath the shadow cast across his forehead by his hat brim. It underscored his anger that was mounting and fuming in a strong tippie to his brain; and in the forward thrust of his shoulders there was aggression.

His intent was plainly to be interpreted. Reading it, Wingo slipped his arm free of his saddle but made no overt move. He merely backed up against an awning post, the posture being easy and casual, and, confronting the approaching man, he hooked his thumbs into his belt.

Joppa halted ten feet away. "I've been lookin' for you," he said. His throat was a little bit choky.

"That so?" countered Wingo. "Well, I ain't so hard to find. As a usual thing I'm almost somewhere or elsewhere."

"I've been hearin' things you said about that—that time when—well, anyhow, things about me," challenged the ex-Nebraskan. "I've heard it before and this time I've heard it enough. I rode in here to-day specially to find you."

"Yes?" The pitch of Wingo's voice was bantering. He had opened his mouth to deny the charge, then had changed his mind.

"Yes! And now us two are going to settle up. Our account's been unbalanced on the books too long. I'm set and I'm givin' you fair warnin'. If you're ready let's go—this is as good a place as any, looks like to me."

He started his hand toward his flank, but still Wingo kept his thumbs in his belt.

"I can't go you," said the latter. "I ain't heeled to-day."

"Where is your gun, then? Go get it wherever it is and I'll wait for you to get back."

"I don't happen to have a gun. I don't aim to tote a gun on me much these times."

"Go borrow one then."

"Now listen to me a minute——" began Wingo, but Joppa wouldn't let him finish.

"No, you listen. Get you a gun on your hip and keep it there. Because I serve due notice that the next time we meet us two are goin' to shoot it between us. An hour from now, or a day from now, or a year or twenty years—it don't make any difference. Here or anywheres else on top of this earth, that don't make any difference, either. Whenever and wherever it is, then and there we shoot it out. I'm passing my sworn word and my word is one thing I keep. Is that plain enough, or must I write you a letter?"

"I got you the first time," said Wingo. "I ain't exactly deaf."

"Good," stated Joppa. "I'm tickled to death you understand." He turned and walked away and disappeared around a corner.

There had been one witness to this encounter and curiously enough this one also had been a witness to their first encounter. It was the middle-aged Thompson. He had accompanied Joppa to the spot. He now spoke for the first time and his manner was regretful, likewise apologetic.

“Here, boy,” he said, “get me right. You seen me just now with Jop but I want you to know that I didn’t have no notion of what was on his mind or I’d ’a’ tried to argue him out of it and if I’d ’a’ failed there, and probably I would because he ain’t the feller to let a thing drop, I’d ’a’ tried to slip you the word that he was after you, honest I would.”

“I know that, Toms, without you tellin’ me,” said Wingo. “You always was a square shooter. I ain’t blamin’ you.” He went to his pony and began resaddling. With a dry little smacking sound a cinch tightened. He looked across the cayuse’s withers into Thompson’s distressed face, with a suggestion of his old light-hearted grin on his own.

“You know what I aim to do?” he asked. “Well, I’ll tell you Toms, old timer. I aim to climb up on this here animule and drift. If you want to remember me, you better take a good squint now, for likely you won’t see me again for quite a spell, if ever.

“Yes, suh, Toms,” he went on gaily, “I’m gone from here. I ain’t exactly in love with the job I’ve got now out at Crosby’s ranch and all of a sudden seems like I’m gettin’ hungry for the sight of Texas and the old folks at home. I’ll stop by Crosby’s bunk-house and check out, and that won’t take me but a mighty few minutes.”

“You mean you’re goin’ without waitin’ to run into Joppa again?”

“That’s the identical idea. If he aims to overtake me he’ll have to travel fast. I’ve had time this past winter to think this here proposition over. I reckon”—he looked into space before finishing it—“I reckon’ maybe you think I’m sort of out of sand, lopin’ off this way, but I can’t help it if you do.”

“No, I won’t neither, kid,” declared Thompson with a fervent sincerity, “nor nobody else that knows you will feel that way. I kin lick the man that says you’re a quitter.”

“I come from a killin’ country,” said Wingo. “I’ve seen some killin’s in my day. But someway I never hankered to kill anybody without I had to. And I’m the same way about havin’ somebody else killin’ me—or even more so. I’m funny that way.”

“You’re sensible that way, what I claim. But say, kid, Lord knows I don’t want to see you in no shootin’ mess and I’m endorsin’ what you’re fixin’ to do now—slidin’ out while there’s time—but say, from now on you have a gun on you. Joppa won’t follow you, I’m shore of that, but just the same you might run into him somewheres or other. It’s a mighty small world, kid, as the feller says.”

“Don’t worry. From now on, I wear me a fusee. I’ll wear it so constant that I’ll be liable to catch cold if I ferget and leave it off. Because just as you say, it’s a small world, Tomps.” Above the saddle he extended his hand. “Well, so long, Tomps, and don’t take in any wooden money.”

“Same to you, kid, and many of ’em.”

They never saw each other again and Wingo never again saw Wyoming.

There wasn’t any range any more. It was a docile captive, enmeshed in a barbed-wire netting, and its present name was acreage when it wasn’t town lots.

Where the pronghorn antelope had cavorted and, with an eloquent rump fringe, heliographed fraternal messages to his kind beyond the misty canyon, the tin-can tourists strewed their calling cards on the community parking space—Free Water and Lights, Welcome to Automobile Parties, Come Again and Watch Desertopolis Grow, (Signed) Desertopolis Chamber of Commerce, Sidney A. Rosenberg, President. Oskar Oskarson, Secretary.

The good cowboys, those that were left, escorted strings of babbling nature-lovers along the improved pathways of Yellowstone and Glacier; and they wore the irksome chap and the flapping neckerchief only because the visitor from Eastern points, such as Emporia and Des Moines, expectantly desired a touch of local color here and there. But the bad ones all died and went to Hollywood.

And the great open spaces were first-rate locations for wide-awake directors and some men were men and others were fillum idols.

And it was the spring of the year after Armistice and Mr. Lewis Teasdale Joppa of Bear Rib Springs, Colorado, aged fifty-nine, weight 210, sat on a bench under the flowering horse-chestnuts of the beautiful Bois de Boulogne and cursed the flowering horse-chestnuts of the beautiful Bois de Boulogne from the lowermost depths of a lonesome soul. In case he had been twins he possibly could have been more lonesome than he was. But not otherwise.

With a bilious eye he regarded Paris as it passed and what he thought of Paris as it passed might only be denoted for publication in a book passing

through the United States mails by a row of those naughty little black dots. Then all of a sudden, weaving aimlessly in and out through the giddy mess and mass of all those French people and all the rest of the foreigners, he beheld coming towards him a man with a misanthropic air about him of a man who is going somewhere because he has nowhere to go. Furthermore and unmistakably it was the air of a man who is a stranger in a strange land and sorry for it.

This man continued to come nearer, and now he revealed a set of bowed legs in stiff black trousers which seemed to fret them and next he revealed a tufted palish reddish eyebrow that resisted an inclination to droop and habitually persisted in quirking upward. Mr. Joppa got nimbly on his feet, and this time—let the fictioneers of the violent school make a note of it—he did see red. He saw Red, White and Blue.

Filled with an emotion which expressed itself in the swelling of an already rotund shape, he charged toward the other, having both his arms outspread; and the other detected his advance and quickened his gait likewise, with hoarse grunting sounds.

Adjacent residents of the Capitol City of our sister republic, observing what followed, could understand why these twain should after such and such a fashion so warmly embrace. What could not be understood was why, having embraced, they did not proceed to the second step in the ritual of masculine affection, to wit—the exchanging of the salute upon the cheek, first the right cheek, then the left, thus.

* * *

The above asterisks are to indicate the passing of an hour.

Across a devastated luncheon table on the second floor of a cozy establishment on a bye-boulevard hard by the Placé d'Opera, Mr. Wingo spoke to Mr. Joppa: "How did you ever come into this lovely little shebang?" He sniffed appreciatingly at the satisfying domestic odors which filled the dining-room.

"Just as you might say by accident. Somebody told me a couple of young mustered-out boys from God Almighty's side of the ocean had rigged up a little deadfall where you could stock up on shore 'nuff United States vittles. But they couldn't tell me exactly where it was and I couldn't seem to locate it from their loose directions. All these *roos* look alike to me. Crazy way to name a street anyhow, callin' it a *roo*! But I got the general neighborhood fixed in my mind and here one morning last week I went on a scout. I was loafin' along on the far sidewalk yonder, hungry as a she-wolf

and sniffin' the air, when all at once I caught a smell that just naturally had to be the right smell and I come to a point like a pointer dog and my eyes looked over here where my nose was aimin' at and then I knew I had discovered her."

"Some discovery!"

"I'll say it was!"

"You bet! Probably old Christopher Columbus is still turnin' over in his grave. All he discovered was a hemisphere. Slide that plate of hash along, will you?"

"I'll have 'em rastle us another double order. This one's runnin' low."

The dialog proceeded by fits and starts:

"When I seen you moonin' along all by yourself I mighty near dropped dead. I've been lookin' for some Americans until I thought I'd strained my eyesight lookin'. I hoped yestiday I'd run onto one. I was wrong, though. He turned out to be a New Yorker."

"Same here. Only my disappointment was from Boston, Massachusetts . . . Well suh, I was sayin' to myself, sort of prayin' it: 'Good Lord, please send me somebody that can talk my kind of language before I go plum' loco from this homesickness,' when I happened to glance ahead and there you was, bulgin' at me right out of a clear sky. Was I tickled? Say!"

"Me, I come here regular maybe two-three times a day anyhow. Mother and the girls, they're dead set on these here native restauraws and cafes and things. But I got my neck bowed and I told 'em, I says: 'You go where you please and I'm goin' where I please. Because I'm goin,' I says, 'where the eatin' is real eatin'.' Oh, I'm onto the ropes here now. To-day it's corned-beef hash and hot waffles. To-morrow it's baked beans and brown bread. And Friday it's fish balls and hot bisquets. Fish balls—that's real Yankee fixin's, Tex."

"Yep, but the hot bisquets is Southern. Kind of a North-and-South combination, same as us two are. It's sort of sym-sym—what is that stylish derved word that sounds somethin' like 'cymbals'? Well anyhow, that's what it is."

“Cymbals, hell! For honorin’ this kind of grub they ought to bring out not only the cymbals and the bass drum but the whole brass band.”

“You said it again! Did you mention it would be baked beans tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll both be here.”

“But for breakfast they give you ham and eggs. The eggs is laid locally but the ham’s brought on.”

“Then we’ll be here for that too. We’ll just push back when we’ve through and let ’em clear away the breakfast leavin’s and reset for the beans. I’ve got a lot of ketchin’ up to do in the chow line.”

“And they’ve got ice-cream every day. And you notice they bring you ice water without waitin’ for an order from the Supreme Court authorizin’ it.”

“Notice it? You bet!”

“In the excitement you didn’t mention how you come to be here in this town?”

“Well, my oldest boy—Lew Junior’s his name—he was a captain in the Expeditionary Force; and my wife and daughters, they decided it would be a kind of a nice thing if we came on over and met him when they let him out of the service and all went back together. But, hang it, they didn’t let him out. They sent him up into Germany with the bunch that went on there after the fightin’ ended. And so we’ve been hangin’ round and hangin’ round this Paris for goin’ on four months. Four months and until to-day it’s seemed like four hundred years to me! While we’re on the subject, what fetched you across?”

“Purty much the same thing that brought you, only in my case it was a nephew instead of a son. My sister’s second boy. Only he ain’t goin’ back—he’s over here to stay. His mother wants it that way. She’s reconciled to lettin’ him stay on. She thinks like I do, that he bought the right to a little piece of French ground, seein’ he paid for it with his life. But I knew she’d feel easier in her mind afterwards if she knew his grave was fixed up right—you know how women are about these things? And she’s a widow; so I came over for that.”

“Purty good lot of kids we sent over here to this man’s war, sizin’ ’em all round.”

“You bet!”

“Say Jop, what you doin’ for a livin’ now? You look well fed.”

Mr. Joppa made the admission as though he confessed the murder of a gentle, gray-haired old grandmother.

“They’ve got me plum’ civilized,” he bemoaned him. “Service station and garage; also exclusive Ford agency; accessories, supplies and parts.” He seemed to be quoting from memory the lettering of an abhorrent sign-board. Then he added, for extenuation: “Biggest garage in town, though. What’s your line these days?”

In humiliation Mr. Wingo’s head likewise was averted, his face bent down toward his plate.

“My shame’s greater than yours,” he owned up. “I’ve got me a ranch in Arizona. But it’s a dude ranch. Dealin’ out table board and ridin’-hosses to a lot of funny-lookin’ Easterners that’re out to rough it, at nine dollars a day apiece. Roughin’ it, hell! They think they’re seein’ the Wild West. Oscar Wilde West; that’s what I call it on the quiet . . . Slip me the maple syrup, will you? This here last waffle has dried out and I want to puddle her up a little bit more.” It was evident that Mr. Wingo would change the subject.

“Well, we’ll all have our sins to answer for in the hereafter. Chase that sweetenin’ back this way, will you?”

“Well, let’s go and give that there waiter a chance to get rested up.”

“Where’ll we go?”

“How do I know? There must be somethin’ worth seein’ or doin’ in this town, though I ain’t never been able to find it yet. Huntin’ together, we might have better luck. We’ll just ramble and let nature take her coarseness, as the sayin’ is.”

“I ain’t got nothin’ but time and paper money. Where you lead me I will follow. Only let’s find us a saloon first.”

“. . . And the evening and the morning were the first day.”—
Genesis: Chapter 1 and eighth verse.

It was at a latish hour of the morning in question when Mr. Joppa cracked a reluctant eyelid upon unfamiliar surroundings in a bedroom of

what he took to be a French family hotel. But beyond peradventure it was not the hotel where his family abode. The bed upon which he lay also was unfamiliar; at least he had no recollection of how he had reached it.

“Whee—e!” he cried and pressed both hands to an aching skull.

“That’s the boy! I’ve been layin’ here waitin’ for you to come out of it.” Mr. Wingo, looking rather spry considering, sat up in the bed across the room and beamed upon him.

“What time of the day has it got to be anyway?” demanded Mr. Joppa. He fumbled in a pocket of his waistcoat which, it would seem, he had failed to remove upon retiring and excavated a watch, then whistled in a doleful treble. “I certainly will catch h—— from my feminine folks,” he lamented, but immediately after, on a thought pitched retrospectively, he noticeably brightened. “Well, it certainly was worth it. Besides which, I ain’t figurin’ on seein’ them for quite a spell yet. The impendin’ future may be dark but the recent past shore was colored up a nice bright pink—what of it that I can remember.”

“Yes, suh, you certainly were goin’ strong when you passed out of the picture,” agreed Mr. Wingo. “You needn’t have any regrets on the way you helped carry the burden of the fray. That hack-driver we picked up, now—that fellow had the makin’s of a genuine human bein’ in him, give him a chance in a white man’s country.”

“I don’t seem to place any hack-driver,” admitted Mr. Joppa. “Was he the tall, dark-complexed pilgrim that wanted to sing all the time?”

“No, that there one was the piano-player out of that honky-tonk joint down in this place, More Mortar,” explained his companion. “We lost that sucker early—’long about three o’clock. He couldn’t stand the pace. Funny you don’t recall the hack-driver. We called him Rutherford B. Hayes for short. Now me, I remember everything just as clear as a bell. I always do. The only time I ever got kind of hazy was one time coming back from an Elks’ Convention in Salt Lake. I remember gettin’ on the cars. I even remembered tryin’ to kiss the Pullman porter good night. But blamed if I ever could remember gettin’ my head all snarled up in that little green hammock. I liked to choke to death! But you take last night——”

He broke off, for with a decisive movement Mr. Joppa had unhoodled himself and was upon his feet in the middle of the floor, looking for his hat. He found it almost at once; it was jammed down on its owner’s head.

“Come on with me, you,” commanded Mr. Joppa.

“I don’t believe it would be wise for us to venture out yet—better give this town time to get ca’med down,” counseled Mr. Wingo. “Somebody might recognize us and go blabbin’ to the Chief of Police.”

“We’ve got to go and get this thing all straightened out and settled,” insisted Mr. Joppa.

“Get what thing straightened out?”

Mr. Joppa replied to this question with one of his own which seemingly was in nowise related: “Have you got a gun on you?”

“Shore have.” Mr. Wingo, who also was fully clothed, tapped where a shoulder holster made a bulge under his left armpit. “It’s got to be a fad with me. Been nursin’ one and practicin’ up on it ever since that time away back yonder in Logan City when you——” He checked in confusion.

“That’s the time I’m thinkin’ about,” stated Mr. Joppa. “Well, I’m heeled myself. Been goin’ heeled for you for nearly thirty years, must be.”

“But——”

“Wait till I’m done tellin’ you.” He had grown very stern. “I warned you, didn’t I, that if us two ever met up with each other anywheres on the face of this creation we was goin’ to shoot it out? Well, I just now remembered about that. Well, I always keep my word. I said it and I meant it.”

“But I sort of figured, us meetin’ up this way ’way over here in Paris, France, that we’d got that old foolish kids’ feud sort of plastered up and healed over——”

“Wait, I tell you! I always keep my word. Us two are goin’ to shoot it out like I promised you. Come on with me!”

“Well, if it’s got to be it’s got to be, I reckon’,” said Mr. Wingo, sadly resigned. “But you can’t damage this carpet much, bleedin’ on it. Then why go outside?”

“We ain’t goin’ far,” announced Mr. Joppa. “We can get there in a cab easy unless this dump is further from everywheres than I figure ’tis. Just down two doors below the ham-and-eggs place is a little to-do of a shootin’ gallery that an ex-sergeant out of our army opened up here some two or three months back, hopin’ to get some trade off of our boys. I’ve been pow-wowin’ with him, off and on. He’s just about starvin’ to death. But now he’s goin’ to do some business.”

He came over, grinning broadly, and laid a compelling clutch on Mr. Wingo's coat lapel.

“Tex, you derved kettle-bellied old bald-headed son-of-a-Rebel, you and me are goin’ to stand up there side by side and shoot it out—at them little tin rabbits and those little glass balls! And the one that loses pays the bills for everything to-day. Go you fifty on the side you lose.”

“You bet!” said Mr. Wingo, meaning that *he* would.

CHAPTER III

THE SILENT PARTNER

As the lady who had been calling upon him left his office, Mr. Fructor pressed the palms of his hands to his temples and from him there issued sincere moans. Leaving, as she did, in what has often been spoken of, but never adequately described, as a high dudgeon, she punctuated her parting speech with a terrific slam of the door that was like the farewell thunder clap of a violent storm. The calm which followed was as the calm after the storm, and so intense a calm that, by contrast with what had gone before, it seemed almost unnatural.

The above simile will serve further: It is said by returned travelers that frequently, in the exact heart or core of a South Sea typhoon, is a small static area of comparative quiet. Mr. Fructor just now had played the core. All through the late excitement he had cowered in his chair with a fixed and placating smile upon his face, and at intervals uttered little soothing, mooring sounds, while about him the wild and whipping wind of her discontent went swirling, and the forky-tailed lightning of her metaphors played and the drum-drum-drum of her gloved fists on his pounded desk top was as the beat of a tropic downpour.

Immediately, though, that the mistreated door was between them the departing visitor recaptured a more customary mood. Magically and instantaneously the gusty passion lifted from her. With a fluffy pad from her vanity bag she retouched the complexion here and there, and with the tip of a tiny red pencil lined the lips; then, with swift deft movements, did that to her hair which, when a bird does it to its feathers, is known as preening; next then, shook her bracelets, all of them, down into place upon her wrists. Except that she breathed hard, she was quite altogether her radiant and incomparable self as languidly she moved, outward bound, along the corridor of Fructor & Finn's suite of offices. A moment before she had been flouncing, but now, for her exit, she would float. Her floating exits were nationally admired.

Young Drain, publicity man for the firm, rose to his feet as she came abreast of his room. For ten minutes or more, ever since he returned from luncheon, he had been harkening to the sounds of tumult filtering to where he sat, through two sets of dividing partitions and a cross-hall. But the etiquette of the place demanded of him that he carry on as though he heard

nothing and suspected nothing. He hailed her, simulating a pleased surprise at sight of so fair a transient passing his threshold.

“Oh, good afternoon, Miss Palfrey,” he said.

She checked, poisoning lightly in the doorway.

“Oh, good morning,” she answered.

Ethically, both of them were right; chronologically, only one. Drain, being newly weaned away from the reporting trade, still thought of tomorrow morning as beginning sometime yesterday evening and lasting until after the last regular city editions of to-day’s morning papers had been succeeded by the first regular morning mail editions of to-day’s evening papers; so to him this present time was approximately two hours past midday of even date. But to members of Miss Palfrey’s profession it is always morning until it’s almost evening, barring matinée days, when the afternoon properly begins with the rise of the curtain. Happen upon an actor at his club at 3 P.M.—at breakfast—and as he pours out his coffee he bids you a cheerful good morning, but when he rises from the table after finishing, he may remark that it looks as though we might be going to have a nice fair afternoon, after all. For him, the flexible meridian line comes somewhere between the grapefruit and the second poached egg.

“I didn’t know you’d dropped in on us,” said Drain, still continuing the little pretense of ignorance. “Anything I can do for you, Miss Palfrey?”

“No,” she said, and down in her slim lily stem of a throat she laughed in the fluty, gurgling way which, with other charms and other graces, helped so to endear this gifted artist to the paying public. “No, there’s nothing you can do for me. But since you mention it, there’s something you can do for that fat boss of yours. You can go on in yonder and fan him with your hat until he comes to.”

She lilted again, sweetly, and was gone, leaving behind her in the passage and in the anteroom beyond a haunting whiff of some very expensive and doubtless an imported scent and a memory picture of a beauty confused but glamorous—a glint of spun gold plaits coiled tightly about a gracious little head, a slender swaying body in the blended colors of fine housings, the sheeniness of silken hose, the twinkle of a narrow jeweled anklet seen above the crossed straps of a small, trim street slipper, the assured and level glance out of a pair of the most famous and most glorious brown eyes on this hemisphere; altogether a harmonious vision subtly conveying the conception of a perfect peace of mind, interfluxed with a

perfect taste in dress and the superimposed perfections of a placid and a generous nature.

Drain decided to take up the lady's suggestion. As yet, these noteworthy dramatic interludes in the dramatic industry continued to excite his curiosity. Anyhow, he had business with the senior member of the firm. As he entered the presence of his employer, having first rapped for admittance, that gentleman raised his head, showing an apprehensive front and a beaded forehead.

"*Uh*, so it's you, is it, Drain?" he said. He sighed despondently and yet with relief. "For a minute I thought it maybe might be that Palfrey was coming back again to call me something special extra which she chuss had thought up fresh." He shrugged his hunched shoulders. "You hear it, *huh*?"

"Not being exactly stone deaf, I did," said Drain. "What seems to be ailing our star to-day?"

"How should I know?" Mr. Fructor wagged his hands in a gesture betokening a state hopeless and helpless. "Temperament, I guess. Maybe she ain't feeling just right when she wakes up to-day. Maybe she gets brooding about them bum notices she got this here last bust she was in. With me, Drain, what's bygone six weeks already is bygoned forever. After we've red-inked a loss of twenty-nine thousand two hundred eight-five for production and costumes and all, off the books, I should try to think about something more pleasant, like maybe a good season this coming fall. Otherwise in this business you regular could go crazy three-four times a year. But her, it's different with. So right away she gets up out of bed in what for her is the middle of the night, pretty near it, and she puts on a couple hundred thousand dollars' worth of clothes and comes down here and breaks in on me like I ain't got nothing else to worry about only her former troubles, and she rides me the same I am one of these here Coney Island merry-go-rounds.

"Temperament—that's it." Mr. Fructor's tone was rising to a badgered wail, while the perspiration sprayed from him in little freshets. "Do you maybe know, Drain, what is temperament? Well, I'm telling you now what it is. With one of these here high-salaried leading ladies temperament is what temper is with a union bricklayer when he beats up his wife or a policeman or something. For the bricklayer it's sixty days, hard labor, Blackwell's Island, take him away, officer. For the lady it is a chance to have some of these *histerics*—and the higher she can sterrick 'em the better it suits her.

"For her it is some poor sucker of a producing manager like me what has got to sit here on a hot day and look pleasant, please, while she is calling me

names which, positively, without any question, I give you my woid of honor, Drain, I never even heard some of 'em before, let alone I should know what they mean. Foreign woids—get what I mean?—French, maybe. The goil's educated up swell, I got to say that for her. Three separate and distinct languages she speaks in. But that's all I could say for her, absolutely, the way I am feeling toward her now. For my part, she could stick to plain United States and I wouldn't have no trouble figuring out her poisonal feelings. No need she should put herself out my account. . . . Temperament!

“And me, I got to sit and take it and act happy. If it ain't one thing it's yet another. Only yesterday it is Salem coming down and leaning up against me and crying on me until I am all over damp and to get rid of her I would promise anything. That's a good system, too, Drain, if you're a woman star—crying for what you want. And to-day it is Palfrey with her French swearing words and her roughhouse stuff.

“If ever you yourself should get to be a producing manager, God forbid, don't never make the mistake of tying up with long-term contracts two popular emotional stars. If people should tell you they are the two best women box office attractions in the country and you should get 'em both quick on your string, even if it is true what they say, don't listen to 'em. That's the mistake I made. And now look at me, with the hair turning white on the head from worry before your eyes. What is money in the box office and the speculators all out front if you must go dippy? There ain't no speculators out front a lunatic asylum, I bet you good money on it!

“If you please one of 'em, which for your part it would be an accident, right away the other one gets jealous. If you please both of them—that's a joke, only, excuse me, I can't laugh—it means you could yourself go broke and crazy the same time doing it. A prospect for a man with a family and a touch of insipid Bright's—*huh?* Most of the time I am wishing they was dead. Then I would be out of their misery and there couldn't no other manager come snooping around trying to grab them off. And all the time I almost am wishing I was dead.

“Ida, she is maybe two years younger than Madge, so naturally Madge has to hate her for that. Madge, she is chuss a little bit the best looking and gets invited out by swell society people, so Ida, such account, hates Madge something unbelievable. To each other's face they must smile and be friendly, but behind both of 'em's back I am the punching bag. With one of 'em on our list, like formerly it was, it wouldn't be so bad maybe. But with both of 'em together and especially Palfrey—well from other people's temperament, Drain, I am practically speechless, like what you see me now, Drain.

“Is it my fault them critics this past spring should hand her out roasts? I ask you? Do I own those critics?—a notion! If I owned those critics I would drown ’em and have the reviews all wrote here in the office. Is it my fault the public wouldn’t stand for one of them old-fashioned rumantic costume plays which, I told everybody here before even ever we put it on, not only would it flop sure on the road but also the foist night in town? Which it did, didn’t it, just like I said? And yet to hear her now, you could easy suppose it’s exclusively altogether my fault it ain’t all this summer playing Broadway, capacity, sold out eight weeks ahead, S. R. O., even matinée days, unparallel hit, instead of being in the warehouse eating its head off for storage charges—them fancy hangings and that line of expensive periodical clothing, besides one antique tapestry and one lot, four suits of armor for the second act set, which you remember, Drain, it costs us thirty-nine hundred seventy-five for only chuss those two items alone. And all because it had to be the imported genuwine guaranteed stuff from the time of—time of——” He snapped his fingers petulantly. “What’s that foreign sucker’s name, Drain—a king or something?”

“Henri Quatre,” answered Drain, proud of his French.

“Sure, that’s the fellow.” Mr. Fructor’s voice rose to an indignant squeal. “For second-handed junk from a guy named Ornerly Cat—would you believe it’s possible?—we must pay out, one lump sum, thirty-nine hundred seventy-five. If you ask me, I say that for the same money we should ’a’ got Krazy Kat at the very least. And now then, six weeks after the thing dies on us the death of a dog, I must get blamed by this here Madge Palfrey. Nice—*huh?* Sweet life—yes? No? *No!* And still there’s people would tell you us producing managers has got it soft . . . Well, I couldn’t sit here all day listening to you, Drain, no matter if you are a bright young fellow. Was there something else, maybe, you wanted to talk to me about it? Otherwise I’m busy.”

“Mr. Gibney’s secretary called up a few minutes ago,” said Drain. “Miss Palfrey was in here with you, so I took the message.”

“There’s a life wire for you—Pete Gibney!” exclaimed Mr. Fructor, at mention of his favorite dramatist becoming once more an optimist. “A business man right clear down to the ground and yet as a playwright a sure fire hit. Well, anyhow, as sure fire a hit as there is in this dam’ business—say two times out of three he puts it over. That’s a high average; I don’t kick. Fights with you like tigers over royalties and can himself frame up a better contract than all the lawyers in town, but once that’s done you could write your own ticket. Always delivers his script on time, always he’s reasonable

about cuts, always he's ready to stick in some new lines or a couple new scenes if they would be needed. Well, what's detaining?—why don't you tell me, Drain, what does Gibney have to say?"

"The secretary said to tell you, for him, that the parts for the new piece went to the copyist's this morning, so the whole thing should be ready for you to read by the end of the week."

"Aha, what was I chuss saying? Punctual—that's him! Only, I don't need I should read it but maybe only chuss glance through it. He told me the story—a peach! The lead is a good-looker what has married brilliant—get what I mean?—into the swellest society. But she's got some bad news in her past life. But honest, it ain't her fault. She's unherited them tough habits from her father's side of the family, which they was all a lot of no-good bums. But now she's covering up and getting by with it the best way she can. But always, chuss when her stuff is going over big, some nosey guy what knew her, early times, turns up and starts going round giving everybody the low-down on the poor dame. Well, that's the way it is. So finally in the fourth act the whole woiks goes blooie on her. The finish is swell. Just before the last curtain she kills herself—suicides—get what I mean? And there you are. Beautiful? *Huh?* . . . Well, did the secretary say something about a title?"

"Yes, he did. I gathered from what he said that you didn't care for the one Gibney suggested when he was in on Monday—'This Mortal Coil.' "

"Soitainly I didn't care for it. That's the only thing about it what I don't care for. 'Gibney,' I says to him, 'the public would never care for a play with a name what sounds like something to do with a rope. It ain't got no box office value to it,' I says. 'For Will Rogers, maybe yes. But for us,' I says, 'no!'"

"It's from Shakspere, you know," said Drain; "part of a line out of Hamlet's soliloquy."

"No, I don't know," said Mr. Fructor, with slight signs of heat. "I ain't got time to know. It's enough I must about once in so often be bunked into losing money reviving this Shakspere without I should have to memorize everything he ever wrote. Before now, Drain, I have in my time made successful productions which I couldn't even pronounce 'em. Smart fellows like you and Pete Gibney I could get to do the fancy pronouncing. I ain't no grammartist, I'm a producing manager. That's what I says to Gibney last Monday when he also mentions Shakspere. 'Gibney,' I says to him, 'forget this here Hamlet business. With me,' I says, 'that classical stuff, even for a name for a play, is the bunk. Get busy,' I says, 'if you please will be so

good, and think me up some titles which up in electric lights on a sign above a theater they should sound like they mean something.’ ”

“That’s what he’s done, then,” said Drain. “Over the wire I took down these alternative suggestions. Mr. Gibney would be satisfied with either one, his secretary says, but he can’t make up his mind which of them he likes better and he wants your judgment.” He glanced at a piece of paper in his hand. “One of them is: ‘Who Giveth This Woman?’ and the other is: ‘The Sins of the Father.’ ”

“I like ’em both; they’re catchy—get what I mean? I wish only we could use ’em both——”

Mr. Fructor broke off and his brow clouded. When Mr. Fructor’s brow clouded the process was plainly visible, the background being practically hairless. There were sounds of crossing voices without—that of his partner, Mr. M. A. Finn, uplifted in gentlemanly expostulation, and another—this latter a voice flexible and rich and intoned, with a ’cello note in its deeper inflections and a plaintive liquid sub-quality to it, as though a countless number of unvented sobs ebbed at the base of the owner’s throat.

“But, dearie, listen,” the pleading Mr. Finn was being heard to say, “I’m givin’ you my paralyzed oath you got the wrong steer altogether. It’s a dirty shame you should be conned into breakin’ off your packin’ just when you’re fixin’ to get away to them cool mountains and come down here in all this hot weather when——”

“Uncle Mikey, it breaks my heart to have to contradict you, but I do know exactly what I’m talking about. I tell you once more that it’s a thing which must be settled definitely here and now or——” There was a quick interrupting catch in that heavenly vocalization, the threat of weeping.

The door was thrust open. At sight of her who stood before him, eagerly posed for her entrance, Mr. Fructor shrank back slightly into the loose embraces of a black alpaca coat, used exclusively for office wear. Yet an outsider would have said there was nothing about the newcomer that was calculated to make a man flinch away from her.

On the contrary—oh, most decidedly on the contrary!

Here was indeed an exquisite creature, yet different in all outward respects from the equally personable caller of half an hour gone by. Here were no jingling gauds on wrists or neck, no shrewd comminglings of pastel shades. In the terms of plain black and white and in chaste yielding lines, a wise and beautiful simplicity expressed itself. Shaded under a girlish hat was

hair like lustrous ebony; a coloring which explained why roses sometimes hang their heads—'tis in vain envy that they hang them; two great, soft, melting eyes of a prevalent violet, tasseled about with incredibly long lashes. It was Drain's predecessor who had won the unwilling admiration of his brother press agents by getting into print the story that Fructor & Finn had Miss Ida Salem's eyelashes insured against loss or damage in the sum of \$20,000.

This lovely person stayed for a moment framed within the oak casings, thereby gladdening lintel and jamb as ordinary woodwork rarely is gladdened. Then, as she fluttered, rather than walked, to the center of the room, she cried out as though it had been months or at least weeks since she last had seen him: "Oh, you dear Daddy Fructor!" and snuggled her slim figure against him as he rose from where he sat. Becoming aware of Drain, she gave him the brightest little nod over one shoulder and a greeting:

"Oh, hello, Cousin Ollie!"

They were not cousins, indeed they had known each other for a short time only and purely in their respective professional capacities. But then, Miss Salem claimed a trustful and affectionate relationship with so many. It was as though she would be a little kinfolk body to all the wide and kindly world.

"Am I breaking in on one of those horrid conferences you people down here are always having?" she asked. "Well, I shan't stay long—that is to say, I shan't stay long unless I have to stay long in order to get my just rights. And, anyhow, you're always glad to see me, aren't you, Daddy Fructor?"

He gave a grunt, a somewhat labored and artificial grunt, but meant, evidently, to be accepted as denoting hospitality. One of his welcoming arms had found its way about her, and the uneasy fingers of the hand on that arm began mechanically playing the stops upon a row of fascinating little buttons that ran down her back.

She shook him playfully.

"Now there, I knew you'd be glad, even if that cruel Uncle Mikey there did try to shoo me away." Sidewise, she shot a softly reproachful glance at the impenitent offender who had followed in behind her.

The preliminaries were over; Miss Salem had a canny appreciation of psychologies. She bored straight to actualities:

"Daddy Fructor, Madge Palfrey has just been here. And if you care to know, that's why I'm here again."

“No, now, goilie, now, goilie, no——”

“Why, Daddy Fructor, how can you be such a fibber? Not half an hour ago a little bird called me up on the telephone and whispered to me that she had just that very minute left. What do you say to that?”

For the moment, Mr. Fructor said nothing to that. From his expression, as seen by the two bystanders, it might have been interpreted, though, that if Mr. Fructor found out the identity of the little bird in his employ who had been whispering—and he certainly would try to find out—why then, promptly, he would open the cage and to that particular little bird give, as the saying is, the air. Looking into his face, they could, in their imaginations, already behold one little bird winging away into the great open spaces, looking for another job.

“Sure, she was here, since you mention it,” he admitted in the explicit manner of one whose memory agreeably has just been refreshed. “She did drop in for chuss a little while. That ain’t no crime, is it?—paying a sociable visit?”

“Sociable visit—*ha-ha!*” In such a one as this one, all so cuddlesome and artless as she was, shrewishness seemed impossible, yet a mere trace of a sound suggesting the thin and distant humming of a wasp somehow did now, and at times thereafter, creep into the mellow singing tones. “I happen to know, Gus Fructor, that Madge Palfrey was blessing you out for everything she could lay her tongue to, until everybody on this whole floor of this building stopped to listen.”

“Well, if she should feel herself a little bit put out about something, am I responsible?”

“Of course not, you old precious! I’m not scolding you, only telling you I heard about everything that occurred, so you needn’t waste your breath trying to deceive me. By the merest chance I also happen to know that Peter Gibney has the script for a new play almost ready for you.” Mentally, Mr. Fructor wrung the little whispering bird’s neck and derived a peculiar personal comfort from so doing. “And yet no longer ago than yesterday, when I was feeling overwrought—when I felt that I must just pour out my soul to somebody and I came down here—*Gus Fructor, for Heaven’s sake leave those buttons alone!*—came down here to you, just as a child might come to a parent—*Now you’re patting my hand! Don’t you see how nervous you’re making me when I’m trying to keep my emotions under control?*—came, just as a young daughter might come to her own father, and told you that as a matter of plain justice I expected to have first choice of the first

good strong play that you boys might get hold of for the fall, you didn't mention Gibney's name to me once.

“Was that fair? Was that keeping the faith?—when you know Gibney has been just dying for years to furnish me with a suitable starrng vehicle? No, you just soothed me down with soft words and vague promises that didn't mean anything. Oh, it's lucky for me I found you out! But I wouldn't have found you out if I hadn't happened to be so fortunate as to have somebody for a friend who has my best interests at heart—even if you haven't. Oh, darling Daddy Fructor, how—how—how—could you?”

She winked the fringing lashes and two great tears detached themselves from a bottomless reservoir and rolled down those faultless cheeks. She winked again and Mr. Fructor, apprehensive for his crisply starched white linen waistcoat, strove surreptitiously but also unavailingly to draw himself in at the waistline.

“Oh, Daddy Fructor, you of all persons!” It was becoming an agonized outcry.

“But goilie, listen; say, listen here, goilie,” he protested. “I pletch you my dying woid Palfrey didn't all the time she was here once mention that Gibney piece. Her being here ain't got nothing to do with you nor Gibney neither. I assure you that.”

“Silly! Of course she didn't mention it.” Miss Salem lifted her flowered face to his, mastering her agitation. “She wouldn't mention it for a while—she's entirely too deceitful.” With a compassionate little intake of the breath she corrected herself. “What I mean to say is that Miss Palfrey is too subtle to come right out and show you what's in her mind, yet. She may sometimes forget she's a lady but she never forgets her own selfish ends. Why, can't you see, you poor stupid things, that this tantrum she had here a little while ago was all carefully worked out beforehand; that she's merely trying to frighten you—intimidate you would be a better word—so as to pave the way to demanding exactly what she wants out of you two boys and, what is more, getting it? Don't you suppose she knows what is afoot? Don't you suppose she has heard about Gibney's play? Do you expect to keep any secrets from certain people? Why, I wouldn't be surprised to learn she actually was paying somebody to keep her privately posted on what goes on inside this office. I've heard of such things being done before now by unscrupulous, conniving, cattish, malicious——”

Again she caught herself up, and from this on her tone was mindfully sympathetic.

“Not that I altogether blame Miss Palfrey. I wouldn’t have any of you think that, not for worlds. She’s not so young as she was—poor old jealous dear! She must realize that she is losing her following, remembering that distressing failure of hers just a few weeks ago. Still, what could you expect of such an old-fashioned actress in such an old-fashioned piece? Although I always will think that with the lead properly cast the thing might have been pulled through! She can see that, at her age, it’s only a question of a very short time until she must quit playing leads and do minor character rôles—mother parts and things like that. So, naturally, she’ll fight with any weapons she can lay her hands on. As I say, I don’t really blame poor middle-aged Madge Palfrey; but I’m ashamed of you, Daddy Fructor, for not reading her motives better, when they’re plain as print.

“I know what the trouble with you boys is! I’ve always been so open and frank and aboveboard with you, you suppose all other women are the same. Misplaced confidence—that’s your trouble. But there, I’ve said enough about fussy, disagreeable things, haven’t I? I think we understand one another, don’t we?” She comprehended all three with a confident, slightly tremulous little smile. “I’ll be going now. Only, it’s agreed, of course, that I am to have the chance to star in Gibney’s new play—if I like it and choose to, after reading it? If I don’t choose, why, then, that’s another matter. But I feel somehow I’m going to like it. I may be too young and too inexperienced to know how to protect myself in this business, but I’m thankful I have a grown-up woman’s intuition.”

With a seeming reluctance, as though craving the continued pressure of those protecting arms about her, she disengaged herself from Mr. Fructor’s somewhat limp and spiritless clasp, and flitted, a graceful black and white butterfly, to the door. There she paused for a brief space apparently unconscious of the wistful charm of the posture.

“Oh, yes, there was just one thing more—a little teeny-weeny favor! I know you’re going to grant it. If I do like the play you’ll send the director and the supporting members of my company—after I’ve passed on who they’ll be—up to my camp at Placid, won’t you? I live on my nervous resistance, as all of you know. I just couldn’t go through the strain of rehearsing here in this stifling, dusty, old city; my specialist says I couldn’t. Really, it won’t be much trouble. They can stay at one of the hotels in the village and motor out to my place every morning. It’s only eleven miles and a very good mountain road part of the way. Mind now, that’s a promise—I’m going to hold you to it.”

She blew innocent kisses at them and was gone from their sight. Down the hallway they could hear her humming a happy, contented snatch of song.

There ensued among those she had quitted a short portentous silence which ended when Mr. Finn, pursing up his lips, whistled in imitation of a feathered wild-woods songster, at the same time favoring the others present with a slow and an understanding wink.

“I give you right, Mike,” assented Mr. Fructor heavily. “Seemingly, what we have been running here, without our knowing it, is a downtown branch, Bronnox Zoo.” He emerged from behind his desk and made figurative gestures of rolling up his sleeves. “That one on the switchboard—she’s the foist one goes!”

“You’d not can the kid just on suspicion?” asked Mr. Finn.

“Say, Mike, listen—if I was any more suspicious than what now I am, with only my bare hands I would kill that blondine. She’s lucky she gets out of here with her life!”

“That can wait—the murderin’ can,” stated Mr. Finn. “We’ll do it together, once we get the guilty gal located. Right now there’s something a blamed sight more important for us to be thinkin’ about.” He grunted mournfully. “I suppose you realize, Gus, that we’re in the middle of a blamed serious fix. That there little human cloudburst that just left here, she had the right dope, being smarter in these things than we are. It’s a petrified cinch that Palfrey is on to us too, bigger’n a house. Why we went ahead and signed up with Gibney for a single play when, if we’d stopped to think, we might ’a’ knowed both them hell-cats would want first grab at it, is what beats me. That ain’t all that’s got me beat, neither. To begin with, why did we ever hook up with two stars that’re so much alike in their work that what fits one for a part will fit the other? If we hand over the Gibney show to Palfrey—and it goes across—why then, Salem will wash the foundations of this building up by the roots and make life a wet misery for the pair of us. If we give it to Salem—and that’s what you’ve already as good as promised to do—we’re worse off. Because Palfrey is liable to tear out the office fixtures and throw ’em at us. And there you are, boys!”

“You said sufficient,” agreed Mr. Fructor morosely. “You ain’t telling me no news whatsoever. Things keep on going this way, what we’ll need won’t be no office nor no office fixtures neither—chuss a nice padded cell apiece and some paper dolls to play with. One show is all we got to divide between ’em—one show only; but with two swell titles to pick from, I’ll say that much.” He cheered up slightly as a drowning man might show cheer at a

brace of straws within reach. “Let’s see, now, one of them titles is called ‘Who’s Giving This Woman Away?’—ain’t that a peach, Finn?—and the other one also is approp—approp—suitable. It’s called——”

There was a rapping without on the door panels. In spasmodic rage Mr. Fructor clutched his wilted collar.

“What is this, anyhow?” he demanded. “Grand Central Toiminal?” He raised his choked voice to a satiric roar. “Well, come on in, everybody that ain’t already been here! Come right on into the public waiting room and make yourselves at home! Always we are glad here to receive company.”

The door was drawn slightly ajar and a red-headed youth showed a cautious face in the cranny.

“’Scuse me, Mr. Fructor,” he said apologetically, “but that there Miss Trixie Saybrook is back here again.”

“Again? Again?”

“Don’t you remember, sir? She’s the one was in the other day, askin’ would you give her a chance’t at the ingénue part in the new Jack Dawson farce. Left her photographs and press notices for you to look at ’em.”

“*Uh—her?* Well, didn’t I tell you to tell her she wasn’t the type?”

“Yes, sir, you did. And I told her. And she says to tell you how do you know she ain’t the type when you ain’t never seen her?”

“Because they ain’t never the type!” Mr. Fructor threw both his arms aloft in an abandon of rage. “Twenty years, man and beast, have I been in this business and they ain’t none of ’em ever the right type. As a favor to me, tell her to go away, quick, please. Tell her I’m in conference. Tell her to go to——”

“Yes, sir, I told her all that. And she says she ain’t goin’ away. Says she’s goin’ to stick right there in the outside office till she can talk with somebody besides office boys. Says she supposes that when she starves to death here in Noo York tryin’ to get a job, and goes to Heaven, Saint Peter won’t let her in because she ain’t the type. Says she’s gettin’ sick and tired of not never bein’ the type. Says——”

“That’ll do! Drain, would you please go out yonder and talk with this here goil?”

“Yes, Drain,” put in Finn, adding a supplementary clause, “tell her we say she’s too blamed fresh for her own good.”

“Drain, you positively wouldn’t do nothing of the sort,” snapped Mr. Fructor. “Instead, you should tell her me and Mr. Finn would ourselves talk with her one half-hour from now. With a good spunky goil like that, Finn, you soitably got to make room for her somewheres.”

“Well, but——” began Mr. Finn.

“Listen, I beg you,” cried Mr. Fructor, “what am I round here—a silent partner? Couldn’t I once in a while get a woid in edgeways? Couldn’t I once in a while have my own way about some little something? Drain, go do like what I chuss told you.”

Left alone with his partner, Mr. Fructor lost his temporary masterful attitude. Gloom once more enveloped him.

“Where was I at, Mike?” he asked. “Oh, yes.” He sighed deeply. “You’re younger than what I am, Mike, so maybe you’ll be able to stand it a few years longer. But for a man with a blood pressure like I got, what’s the chance? I’m asking you? Right now I must run the chance of sunstroke prostrations trying to figure an out for us in this here present situation—two leading ladies and one firm of producers; two poifectly good titles but only one show; the summer going, the fall coming, and pretty soon it would be winter and we——”

He spun about on his heels, swiftly, as dervishes are supposed to spin:

“Mike!” he cried, “an idea comes to me. Listen while I tell it, and don’t tell me it’s crazy until I’m through telling it. Here’s what we do. We let both them goils have the Gibney show. Only, each don’t know the other one has got it—get what I mean?”

“No, I’m blamed if I do,” said the puzzled Mr. Finn.

“Keep on listening then. Under different titles we get two full sets of script made. We hire two companies—one company for Palfrey, one company for Salem. We hire two directors, one for each. We send one company up yonder to them Adiron—Adiron—they mountains to rehearse with Salem like she herself chuss suggested. Palfrey won’t rehearse in town neither when she finds out Salem ain’t—she’ll yell for the same privileges, too. That’s good for us, only we don’t let on to her it’s good. We’ll say since we made an exception in Salem’s case we naturally would be quite willing to make exceptions the same for Palfrey.

“She’s got a cottage rented down the Joisey coast for the season, ain’t she? Alright, we ship her company down there to suffer where she is. We don’t have no try-outs; this one time, we get along the best we can without

any those out-of-town performances. We keep both companies busy polishing up their lines right up to the very last minute, pretty near it. We hold the dress rehearsals in places two-three hundred miles apart. We don't bring the companies in until late in the afternoon the day they open. And then—follow me close now, Mike—and then on the same night they both open cold at separate theaters here—Salem, say, at the Alcazar, Palfrey at the Fructor, or vicy voisa as the case may be.

“Think of the novelty of it, Mike—think of the talk it'll make! A double-barrel sensation! A riot! The same indetical show opens twice at once, on the same first night, on Broadway—woid for woid, scene for scene, mind you. But the two stars don't know it beforehand and the two companies don't know it, and the critics or the public they don't know it, neither. Not until the next morning or maybe late that night does anybody at all know it, except me and you and maybe one or two others what we got confidences in. Well, Mike, for a swell idea, how does that strike you?”

“Strikes me dumb, mighty near,” said the astounded Mr. Finn. “You ain't in earnest, are you?”

“Mike, my boy, only I wish I would be so sure I live to be one hundred as I am in earnest now.”

“But what's the good of it? We spend all that good money making two separate productions of the one show and yet, even if we could keep the thing a secret right up to the first night, where do we get off?”

“Where do we get off? Once more I ask you, listen.” Mr. Fructor gave a fair imitation of a middle-aged, two hundred and forty pound pitcher winding up to deliver a curve ball. “Here's where we get off. If both Palfrey and Salem should flop, it ain't our fault, is it? They had their chance, didn't they? If one of them should flop and the other should go across big, anyhow still we have got us a success running, ain't we? We break fifty-fifty on the investment, don't we?”

“Ye-es, of course——”

“Wait, I ain't through yet. If one flops and the other don't flop, the one which flops would be so sore at herself she would try to take it out on us. Right away she would say that we played a low-down trick on her, wouldn't she? You bet you she would! Doubtless she would try to break off her contract with us, such grounds, and if she couldn't do that it's yet more doubtless she would play off sick and wind up by asking us to release her so she could go under other management when she gets her health back; which

that would be a big favor to us, only naturally, for business reasons, we would act otherwise until after we got rid of her without losses to the firm—get what I mean? Then we wouldn't have the two of 'em on our hands driving us crazy with their w'ims—but only chuss the one. And with one we maybe could get along. Finally, if both of them should make a sensational hit they'll each one be working so hard, trying to outdraw and outlast the other, they won't neither of 'em get time off to be picking on us, the way it is now. Also, in such case, all over the country people will be talking about the firm what had the big idea in the first place. For the free advertising alone I wouldn't take fifty thousand cash."

"But how about Gibney?" asked Mr. Finn, still in the doubtful column. "You can't keep him out of the secret. S'posen now, for instance that he wouldn't be willin' to stand for all this here monkey business with his play? And even if he would be willin' won't the fact it'll look like, on the surface, that he's wrote two shows for us this season be an awkward thing?—makin' them two dames suspicious, likely as not, and what's just as likely, startin' some of these here talky troupers comparin' notes?"

Mr. Fructor wagged a plump admonishing finger in his associate's face.

"Mike, when did ever you know me to think up the front half of a notion without at the same time or even sooner I hadn't already thought up the last half of it? With one of these fussy young authors maybe it couldn't be done. But with an old experience' head like Pete Gibney and him a smart business man besides—well, you see for yourself if he don't act reasonable when I have outlined the proposition to him the same as I chuss have to you. Here, right now, I start proving it to you."

He wriggled a globular form between the snug-fitting arms of his swivel chair and lifted the receiver off the prongs of the desk telephone.

"Oh, Boidie?" he said with a dulcet significance. "Is that you, Boidie?"

"What talk have you now?" asked Mr. Finn, astonished. "You know our private exchange gal's name ain't Birdie—it's Sadie."

"*Sh-h-h,*" Mr. Fructor cupped his free hand over the rubber mouthpiece and spoke in an aside. "Even in all this new excitement, Finn, I don't forget we got some detectative work to do here. Watch—I am trying something." He removed the cupped palm and again put his lips close to the transmitter: "Say, Jennie Wren, if still you feel like doing a little more whispering to-day, suppose you whisper long distance I would like to speak with Mr. Peter Gibney at his house in Greenwich right away. In case you got so tired from

your own private business you forget the number, here it is: Greenwich four *ugh ugh* seven . . . That's all now, please. Ring me back when you get him—Boidie!”

He replaced the instrument on its hook and readdressed the younger man:

“Give me credit, Mike—even over the wire I could feel that Sadie Fineshriber jump when I called her by them pet names. . . . Now about Gibney. To begin with, he wants to go away to Europe for a rest—himself, he told me so here last Monday. All right then, with a script from Gibney we know it will be in good shape when he hands it in. Let him go along off to Europe. Then we stick on them two swell titles which he sent 'em in to-day. We give it out that Palfrey's new play for this season and also Salem's new play is both of 'em the works of unnamed authors; or else we stick on for the authors' names two fancy imagination names which Drain thinks up for us out of his head—whatever Gibney decides is best, we do in this regards. Then, after the first night, if both shows should flop, we let it go at that. But if we got a hit, or by any chance a couple hits, why, we make announcement in the papers that Gibney is really the fellow what wrote the show. One way he gets his regular royalties and the other way he gets double sets of royalties and all for the same job of work. And yet a minute ago you was standing there saying to me maybe Gibney might kick on the idea! *Huh!*”

The telephone tinkled its little bell. Mr. Fructor, by now all humid enthusiasm, snapped up the receiver and thrust it to his ear.

“Gibney?” he called. “Say, is that you, Gibney? . . . Fructor speaking. Say, Gibney, how quick, please, would it take you to get down here to the office? . . . What for? . . . For a very important conference, that's what for . . . What you say, Gibney? . . . No, I couldn't tell you over this line what all it's about. We got too many these here little yellow-headed canaries round here. But say Gibney, listen, believe me, positively you're going be surprised when I tell you what it is when you get here . . . Hey? . . . Coming on the five-three? . . . Fine! I assure you, Gibney, you wouldn't never regret it, coming . . . Good-by, Gibney.”

Among the Broadway wiseacres—and the Broadway wiseacreage is heavy—there was a synonym: “The luck of a Fructor.” It signified a traditional sequence of achievements, seemingly due only to the constancy of a continuing good fortune. To account for the attained prominence of

other master showmen there were various popular theories. For each of these the knowing ones had a pet formula.

There was Cabot Endicott Byng, who was so scholarly that the truly cultured patronized his productions on the belief that if he made them they must be worth while. Part of the time the Byng clientele might be puzzled, but all the time it was possessed with a herd-consciousness of its own intellectual superiority. There was Colahan, whose output never was over the heads of the multitude but very often seemed to strike in just at the altitude of their hearts. Some among the special classes called this man vulgar, but meanwhile the masses were fattening his bank account for him.

There was Friedman, of Friedman Brothers, playing the part of a benevolent despot and making it pay; and, coupled with him for the sake of the contrast, was timid-looking little Rupertus, going about his managerial affairs like a small quiet mouse, an ingratiating smile on his face and the air upon him of hoping for just a few of the left-over crumbs of the cheese. There was Firdell, whose word was as good as his bond, but the trouble here was his bond wasn't worth anything. His career had been marked by three lucrative liquidations and one enormous successful bankruptcy. There was Silver, who specialized in what by the terms of the business are called the Home and Mother Brands, and did very well at it, too, possibly because there still were some sentimentalists left in the world—persons who persisted in cherishing such institutions as motherhood and home ties, although by Broadway standards these hopelessly were old-fashioned. There was Splain, personally with very little sex appeal for anyone at all, but managing to pack his plays with a strong line of this commodity.

There was Trinner, who was gifted with an almost superhuman knack for smelling out a failure before ever it failed, and in such cases always could dig up an accommodating being, technically known as an angel, meaning by that the affluent amateur willing to pay cash, sight unseen, for a slice in a forthcoming dramatic offering. Trinner's private purgatory was full of fallen angels.

And there was Fructor. With puzzled shakes of crafty heads the volunteer diagnosticians said repeatedly they didn't understand how he did it. They just could not see their way clear to giving him endorsement for foresight or for daring or even for an instinctive sapience. They agreed, using the language of the trade, that he got by, dragging his partner along with him, only because he carried a horseshoe in every pocket and wore a necklace of rabbits' feet under his shirt.

Be this as it might have been, it must be set down on the record that in the notable matter of Fructor & Finn's two-starred première of the masquerading drama by Peter Gibney, the proverbial Fructor luck justified its proverbial self. No untimely intimation as to the nature of the contemplated surprises seeped out in advance. They crept in on rubber shoes and burst on an unsuspecting metropolis—*bango!*—at approximately the same hour, to wit, 8:45 P.M. on a given date in the early part of October. By midnight, everybody who stays up until midnight knew, or should have known, of the amazing phenomena that simultaneously had come to pass.

What, for the final editions of the morning papers, otherwise would have been theatrical intelligence became on a sudden Front Page Stuff. For these double-stranded and interlocking openings made news, not meet for bored reviewers to deal with in the stock terms of their jargon, but rather, red and juicy stuff for real reporters to set their eager teeth in. Overnight, with the spread of the tidings, two opposing cliques sprang up—one group being committed to the contention that in the rôle of Martha Fairways in "The Sins of the Father" Miss Madge Palfrey was unapproachably magnificent, the other equally certain that not for years had an emotional actress scored so pronouncedly a triumph as Miss Ida Salem, playing Martha Fairways in "Who Giveth This Woman?"

Likewise overnight, the town seized on and proceeded to perpetuate a new fad: You bought a pair of tickets for paralleling performances and you divided your evening between them; at the Alcazar Theater you saw Miss Salem for Acts I and II, then, leaving and hurrying to a house four blocks distant, you there saw Miss Palfrey and her supporting company for Acts III and IV; or the reverse way about, according to your own election.

But this is pushing ahead a bit too fast. On the forenoon of the day following the accouchement of his twin first nights, Mr. Fructor sat at the desk where, back at the beginning, the reader discovered him. For a man whose brain had whelped so original and so epochal a coup, Mr. Fructor appeared strangely out of sorts. With his toe he thrust at a rumple of early afternoon editions which littered the floor about him, as though he were irked by the sight of his own name staring up at him here, and again there, out of blazoning headlines. If ever a kick connoted an abiding depression, this kick did.

At this juncture, while the spurned news sheets still fluttered at his feet, Mr. Finn entered. Here, likewise, was one from whom you would have expected the radiation of a heartsome exuberance. But—most curious of coincidences—he also seemed beset with melancholia. Indeed, he bore

himself as a man might who, within his soul, was ridden and roweled by distressing reflections.

He grunted a brief greeting. Mr. Fructor grunted back.

“Passin’ Forty-seventh Street I seen a line stretchin’ outside the Fructor,” announced Mr. Finn, chewing with malignant energy on a defenseless and sodden cigar.

“Treasurer from the Alcazar telephoned in a big advance sale already is started down there,” stated Mr. Fructor, but there was no joy in his stating of it.

Like a prisoner in a cell Mr. Finn took short turns to and fro across a rug.

“Mike,” said Mr. Fructor irritably, “couldn’t please you stop that walking? I am noivous this morning.”

“I was just thinkin’,” said Mr. Finn.

“I would suggest then you could chuss as easy think setting down.” For politeness’ sake, presumably, Mr. Fructor followed up the lead: “Well what was you thinking?”

“I was thinkin’ that, anyway, there’s still somebody round here that’s in fifty-fifty on a couple of smashin’ knock-outs.”

Mr. Fructor gave a violent start.

“What—what—do you mean—somebody round here is in fifty-fifty?” he demanded in a strained voice.

Mr. Finn halted in his tracks. A great guiltiness looked out from his wan eyes.

“Gus, I gotta kind of a confession to make to you. It’s like this: That day two months or so ago when you first sprung this here big scheme of yours on me, you kind of swept me off my balance. So I trailed along with you, just yessin’ everything you said. But after we got the thing under way I begun to sort of get cold feet on the whole layout of it. It seemed like it was so—well, so kind of revolutionary. I didn’t say nothin’ to you, though, about what I had on my mind. It was your suggestion in the first place; it didn’t seem like ’twould be right for me to bust up your confidence in your own proposition.”

“So-o-o! You was sparing my feelings—*huh?* Well, don’t spare ’em no longer. Quit beating round like a bird in the bush and tell me what’s the answer.”

Being thus brutally prompted, Mr. Finn blurted out his main disclosure:

“Well, to slip you the plain truth, last week I told Jody Silver just what we had afoot—strictly on the dead q.t., of course. And—and I peddled off my interest in the both of these here two shows on to him.”

“That was a smartness!” Mr. Fructor shook a condemning hand at the drooped and remorseful figure of his partner. “You should feel proud of yourself.”

“I do—about as proud as a guy that’s gettin’ dressed to go to the electric chair. For my bit—for just my share back out of the total expense—I hand Silver over a half of a property that’ll be worth a clean clear seventy-five thousand to him if it’s worth a cent!”

“But you shouldn’t never ’a’ done it!” Mr. Fructor screeched like a flinty slate pencil on a faulty slate. “What business did you have going off by yourself, without advice from nobody, and doing a fool thing like that?”

“Now wait! I ain’t tryin’ to make excuses for bein’ foolish, but if it comes down to the rights of the case, you ain’t got no kick comin’, Gus. Ain’t it always been a rule between us, when we was splittin’ even on production costs same as in this case, that either one could get all or any part of his interest underwrote outside the shop so long as ’twas a reputable manager he was dealin’ with? Ain’t half the firms in town been doin’ the same thing for years? Ain’t the two of us done it ourselves before, half a dozen times?”

“Tut, tut, tut, tut!” This was Mr. Fructor making clucking sounds against the roof of his mouth.

“Don’t set there tuttin’ at me like a brokedown switch engine,” begged the anguished Mr. Finn. “Ain’t I feelin’ bad enough already without that?”

But Mr. Fructor seemed not to hear him. With sadness, with resignation, he wagged his head. Then, half musingly, as though addressing himself, he murmured a judgment:

“Such a pity it is that, in a firm like this, there shouldn’t be somebody what ain’t a plum’, dam’ idiot!”

“Say, hold on!” The worm was beginning to turn. “Don’t rub it in.”

“I am not rubbing it in, Mike,” said Mr. Fructor gently.

“What’s the reason you ain’t—callin’ me an idiot?”

“Mike, when I use those woids I am not altogether thinking of you alone. I am thinking in partnership terms—get what I mean? In fact, Mike, I am thinking close to home.” He patted himself on the bosom. “Mike, an honest confession also is sauce for the gander. Now, I tell you something: I been sitting here since long before you come, thinking how I would break it to you. Mike, I got cold feet, chuss the same as you did. Only, I didn’t get mine until after I seen Salem at the dress rehearsal night before last up at Ro-chester. I give her woik the once-over and to me it seemed like if she sure would be a flop. I didn’t get such good reports from the Palfrey outfit, neither. Coming back on the sleeper I begun thinking, same as what you did, that the untire proposition was too revolu—revolu—unregular. I couldn’t sleep a wink. So—listen, Mike—yesterday morning I slipped out and I sold outright my fifty percents to Sol Goldrimmer, of Goldrimmer & Glick. I got his certified check here in my vest pocket, and I assure you, Mike, it weighs now like lead on my heart.”

For a pregnant quarter-minute Mr. Finn, before speaking, stared at his woe-stricken partner.

“Then, the way it stands, we’ve both unloaded, and all we get for ourselves out of what’s goin’ to be one of the biggest hits of the season—two of the biggest hits, I should say—is the trouble we’ve went through and the pleasure of bein’ known as the original producers?”

“You said it all.” Mr. Fructor shrugged in the manner of one clearing his shoulders of a load. “Well, in this business, Mike, we got to be good gamblers. If you couldn’t be a sport you might chuss as well shut up shop and get out of it—*huh?* I’m asking you? Besides, in every cloud we should look for the golden eggs.” He summoned up the wraith of a philosophic smile. “We don’t have to worry awhile about them two goils—they’ll be busy all this coming year trying to cut each other’s throat. And it ain’t like we didn’t have no other hits on. That there young Trixie Saybrook, which you remember I picked her up, absolutely unknown, is running away with the Dawson farce. And the new musical show is doing for us eighteen thousand a week—don’t forget that!”

“That’s so,” assented Mr. Finn, and shook himself as though to get rid of the plaguing little jockeys of regret that had bestraddled him.

Mr. Fructor continued:

“Anyway, Mike, I been thinking to myself here of late that it’s about time we was easing ourselves up on these here trashy modern dramas of the

Gibney school and go in once in a while at least for something which you might say it's really artistic."

"Where d'ye get that Gibney school stuff?" asked Mr. Finn. "What highbrow nut have you been listenin' to now?"

"Not none, I assure you. It's practically exclusively all my own idea, Mike. What you say that between now and Christmas we make a real, modern, high-grade, number one, up-to-the-minute production of—*Hamlet*?"

"*Hamlet!* Well, for the love of——" Language failed the dumfounded Mr. Finn.

"It's been a success from away back, ain't it? It ain't like we're taking chances on something which ain't ever been tried out."

"I ain't kickin' on the play itself—understand," Mr. Finn hastened to explain. "It takes all sorts of people to make up the world and for them that likes that kind of a thing, why, that's the kind of a thing they likes. But what's got me wingin' in my own mind is guessin' out how you ever come to light on to *Hamlet*?"

"I'll tell you how. Back yonder the end of August—by Chove, I remember now! It was the same indential day when I had the big notion—yes sir, back yonder that very day in August, something which Drain said here in this office got me thinking about that play *Hamlet*." He grinned, rather shyly. "I sent out for a copy. Here it is now——" He rummaged in a desk drawer and produced a volume from a set of one of the standard editions of the Bard's complete works.

"And you been readin' it, I s'pose, on the sly?"

"God forbid! Look at it, how many pages it is, all fine print, too! It's enough the actors we hire it should read it; that's their business. I only glanced through the list of characters—that's sufficient."

"Well, who've you got in mind for *Hamlet*?"

"A question? We could get *Hamlets* like flies. Every sterling actor in the world—and plenty actresses—thinks they can play *Hamlet*. They got *Hamlet* on the brain—them that's got a brain. We could try out a new *Hamlet* every Monday night and in a whole year solid I bet you we wouldn't once run out of a steady supply. What I have been thinking about on the private, Mike, is the right parties for some of the other parts. Very quiet I've been looking round. Right now I got my eye on two boys. You wouldn't

know 'em—a talking act in vaudeville. But you'd like 'em—good, smart, funny boys. And, Mike, they got a line of this here Yiddish patter which it would make you laugh your sides off to hear 'em. Nice boys, too. I went back behind after they come off the other night and talked with 'em.”

“You mean Hebrew impersonators?” Mr. Finn’s jaw dropped in amazement on the question.

“Yes—I should say, no,” Mr. Fructor corrected himself swiftly. “These boys don’t need to impersonate—they already are!”

“But what talk have you—there can’t be no place in *Hamlet* for a team of Jew boys?”

“Is that so?” Mr. Fructor wagged his head sagely. “Since you then are so wise, would you please be so good and read what it says in the book?”

He turned the forward leaves and found a certain page. His forefinger ran down the printed lines. “Ah-h—see it here, Mr. Know-it-all—‘Rosencrantz’ foist, and chuss below him, ‘Guildenstern.’”

“Well, what d’ye know about that!” said Mr. Finn, wonderment in his tone mingling with conviction. “Lemme look at it myself.” He possessed himself of the volume. “And say, looky here, Gus, right up above them two is ‘Cornelius.’” With racial pride his voice rose: “Guess you know, without my tellin’ you, what fighting nation that there name Cornelius comes from? All three of 'em set down as ‘Courtiers,’ too—guess that means they work in a court-room scene. Well, say, who’d 'a’ thought it, that away back yonder a hundred years ago or maybe a hundred and fifty years, for all I know, when old man Shakspeare was alive and kickin’, they was stickin’ Irish and Jew comedy bits into straight shows. Well, it only goes to prove there’s nothin’ new under the sun, not even in the show business, eh, partner?”

“Except the idea of opening two temperamental stars the same night in the same show the same town,” said Mr. Fructor softly. “For that, Mike, I would ask the credit—since we ain’t neither one of us going to take down none the cash!”

CHAPTER IV

WHO LAUGHS LAST

It was funny, the way the party was formed in the first place. In the East it probably would not occur. Along that coast people are more likely to be stand-offish toward strangers. Even in the West it took an emergency to bring it about.

Here were six persons shipwrecked, as you might say, in the mountains; or seven, counting the chauffeur who didn't count, he being under displeasure and incapacitated besides. To begin with, there was Miss Greta Cave of New York City, and there was her maid, by name Lena Honig and by nationality Alsatian; and she the only foreign-born one in the lot of them. Then there were Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Ware, a very nice, very loving young couple from Council Bluffs. Next was a certain Mr. Hilary Talbott who never did say where he was from but who, judging on his manner and bearing, might very well belong to the planet at large. That makes five. The sixth and last called himself Claypool. Inevitably in any such company he would be the last. He was a native of these parts, as was plain to be seen; a sluggish dull-looking man who wore the wave-brimmed hat of the country and dusty store clothes. From start to finish he had very little to say and that little he said with a marked reticence. He was like a miser of words who saves them up.

The cloudburst that descended on the Great Divide, seeming to make that national hump its especial target, caught them at Lewis' Hotel on Lake McDonald. Miss Cave's big seven-passenger car ran in just ahead of the weather with her man wobbly and deathly sick at the wheel. But the others were already there, the Wares winding up their bridal tour, Mr. Talbott apparently engaged in a round of rather disinterested sightseeing, and this Claypool man taking up space in the background. Any background, just so it was unexciting, made protective coloration for him. They were the only transient guests, this being practically the end of the tourist season.

The storm was the equinoctial storm operating several days ahead of schedule. It lasted for two days and nights and when in the second night it wore itself out and died in a violent spasm of clearing showers, the word came that the Great North's main road-bed was scoured out by the roots beyond Wilton, which meant travelers moving in any direction must track around a detour to where trains were being routed over a connecting branch

line. In the Rockies detours are sometimes of considerable length. This one, measuring from the head of the lake, would be a hundred and twenty miles, going by way of Finfish, Pony Falls and Cree City.

So the morning of the third day, with the pleasant September sun coming up on a well-rinsed world, found the castaways at Lewis's in this fix. Their predicament thickened as the cloud-rack riddled and lifted off the tall tops above them. For, to crown all else, the resident agent of the bus line plying between the lake camps and the Wilton station reported that one of his big red carry-'em-alls had gone out of commission from carburetor trouble of a serious nature and for the time being the remaining two were stranded on the farther side of the washout.

After their marooning the sojourners were quite ready to be stirring; in fact, their various belongings were packed. Forty-eight hours of enforced sequestration had made them acquainted with one another, more or less, and the hotel had been cozy and comfortable and cheered as to its lobby by a vast and hospitable log fire, but now a common restlessness beset the victims of the late siege.

The local product was the lone exception. He had the air about him of having followed his nose into this friendly refuge, likewise the air of being prepared to follow the crowd out or to bide on with them or to stay on by himself, as the case might be. But Miss Cave meant to catch a steamer sailing from New York on Saturday of the present week and this was a Monday; and the Wares had a shining new house-keeping nest waiting for them in Council Bluffs, and now it developed that Mr. Talbott also had important business impending elsewhere.

“If only the idiot hadn't gorged himself on ptomaines, or whatever it is he's got, there'd be no bother about it,” stated Miss Cave, invading a sort of conference which had ensued at the clerk's desk on receipt of the latest bad news. She was speaking, and rather bitterly, of her driver. “I warned him mountain-trout three times a day for three days in a row would upset even a chauffeur's stomach. As it is, he'll not be fit for duty before to-morrow or next day, if then. And I'm afraid I'm not up to driving my car, it's so heavy, over these winding narrow roads. I might be willing to risk my own neck but I'm not going to risk anybody else's. And it's a foreign car, an Espagne—that complicates things. I could easily give the rest of you a lift on to this junction town, whatever its name is, if only there was somebody——” She looked about her, canvassing them.

“I’ll try,” said Mr. Talbott when her eyes reached him. He smiled a little competent smile. It previously had been impressed upon them, but with no effort on his part, that here was a competent person. “I used to own a car of that make,” he explained; “drove her myself. I don’t think I’ve forgotten how.”

The Wares, standing by and holding hands, said that would be just perfectly splendid, wouldn’t it?

“Rastlin’ a flivver’s about my limit,” admitted the Claypool man and then modestly merged into the furnishings as though fearful he had committed himself too far.

“Then that’s settled,” agreed Miss Cave and sent her maid to get the key to the car from her invalided employee. “Your heavy luggage can be expressed along to you later. There’ll be room on the running-board to strap on your hand luggage if you’ll agree to limit yourselves to one suitcase apiece and one bag. That’s what I’m doing. And the car can be left at a garage after we strike the railroad and Gustav will pick it up there when he gets well. So please pay your bills, if you haven’t paid them, and leave your forwarding addresses and be prepared to go”—she glanced at her wrist watch—“in, let’s say, not later than fifteen minutes from now. It’s only about a hundred and twenty miles as I understand it, but there’s no telling what condition the roads will be in after all this downpour.”

There was a brisk bustling about then to readjust final preparations for departure. But the bridal pair took no part in this. Their bill was receipted. They retired to an alcove and embraced, remaining happily clinched until the time limit expired.

To avoid any possible confusion let us recapitulate touching on the personnel of the group who, prompt on the dot of the quarter hour, drew out from the log-built hotel on this fragrant September morning.

At the steering place, Mr. Talbott, the cosmopolite, an efficient and mannerly man of forty or thereabouts, smartly but quietly dressed.

Alongside of him, the owner of the car, Miss Greta Cave, distinguished bachelor maid of New York, heiress and horsewoman of note and former amateur tennis champion, dressed for rough traveling in breeches and boots and a riding coat.

In the rear seat the Newly Weds.

In the small convertible seats amidships, Lena Honig, ladies’ maid, and . . . Claypool (initials and place of residence unknown), she being on the

right and he on the left, immediately behind Mr. Talbott.

In this order they were off; the same order was maintained through the journey.

They made excellent time, considering. At noon when they lit a fire at the roadside and ate the lunch which the fore-thoughted wife of the proprietor had put up for them, the village of Finfish at the half-way point was nearly an hour's run behind them. Already the more hazardous part of the trip was over and done with. At their backs the main range reared, making Glacier Park's steep and daunting side-fence. The expedition had slid along and down the slope of the continental backbone; now to negotiate a few of the lesser processes of that stupendous spinal column of limestone and quartz and thereafter the coasting would be dead easy. They'd soon be out on the high plains and, presently then, in a placid valley. The map which Mr. Talbott had been conning proved that; it was a good map, giving altitudes and grades.

By now the thing had ceased to be an undertaking and an adventure; it had become a lark. Miss Cave felt almost as though she had known Mr. Talbott for long. He talked well and soundly, the traveled man. The maid was beginning to cast discreet sheep's-eyes sidewise toward the taciturn Mr. Claypool, who either did not observe her advances or else chose to ignore them, preferring, one would guess, the company of his own meager thinking. But under the gloss of her European training for domestic service, the buxom Lena was an incurable coquette. Her broken English came forth from her cooingly and with dulcet grace notes in it. She must flirt with this unsuitable material if only for the sake of practice.

As for the Wares, they frittered off almighty few of the precious golden moments on landscape or waterscape. They were fed up on mountains but not on loving, and their fleeting honeymoon still rode in glory. The scenery they did not see but they saw each other, which was sufficient, and in their unrestrained Corn Belt way they billed and twittered like a pair of cage finches, as Mr. Talbott remarked in a tolerant whisper to Miss Cave, or like two idealistic young idiots, as Miss Cave remarked back to him, keeping her voice down.

All the same and all the time, though, a sort of temporary amiable comradeship was enmeshing at least five out of the six of them, and an average of $83\frac{1}{3}$ percent is a good enough average for nearly any social purpose. Miss Cave spoke for the majority when she said:

“We thought we were going to run into dangers. Instead of that we’re having a perfectly corking excursion together. I move we do something to celebrate our deliverance from the peril that wasn’t there. Who says Yes?” Substantially by acclamation the Ayes had it.

She said this about half past one, as they were approaching Pony Falls which from above and across a small prairie they could see where it dappled the flat with the houses of its thousand and odd inhabitants.

“See yonder!” she went on. “When we get there we’ll have covered ninety-seven miles and except for a little skidding in the mud nothing has happened that wasn’t agreeable. From now on we can just loaf along. So let’s think up something we can do—something that’s funny or unusual or exciting. You know, something that will give us a thrill or the inhabitants hereabout a shock. It might do them good to be waked up. From the looks of things nothing ever happens around here except morning, noon and night. That’s what we’ll do.”

“For instance, what?” asked Mr. Talbott. He seemed to be entering into the spirit of the mood.

“That’s just it,” confessed Miss Cave. “All I can furnish is the broad general initial idea. Well, after all that’s what an executive mind is for, isn’t it?” She laughed at the conceit. “Only when I expect mine to be fertile it immediately becomes futile. One of the rest of you will have to work out the details, I’m afraid.”

“Gregory’s awfully quick at charades and things like that,” boasted Mrs. Ware with the pride of a brand-new wife in a brand-new husband’s accomplishments. “And anagrams and guessing matches too. Gregory’s awfully quick that way.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t believe we could do much with charades in a car or in a strange town,” interposed Miss Cave with the emphatic snap of decision which, even on this short acquaintance, they could tell was quite a part of her. “Perhaps you can suggest a notion, Mr. Talbott?”

Mr. Talbott squinted into space speculatively. Evidently he intended to frame his proposition before he described it.

“As I understand it,” he said then, “the scheme is to contrive a sensation, either just among ourselves or one that we can share with the people in these parts. That being the case, why not make a competition of it? We’ll club in and buy some trifle or other to go to the winner——”

"I'll donate the trophy." Miss Cave touched a small gold pin modeled in the shape of a riding-crop that was caught thwartwise of her smart man's tie. She unfastened it and stuck it in the upholstery of the seat-back behind her.

"Then the matter of the prize is settled," went on Mr. Talbott, openly pleased with the easy progress that was being made. "Thanks to Miss Cave's generosity." He bowed an acknowledgment on behalf of the group. "By votes afterward we'll decide who the lucky one is. Now, then, let's see? Oh yes, now I've got it! I make a motion that the contest starts as soon as we pull into this town here and halt the car. Each one will be allowed a half-hour—no, better make it an hour—from the time we stop, in which to frame up his or her surprise.

"If you go in for any striking effects in the way of fancy costumes, you can use anything you've brought along with you, or anything you can find on short notice in any shop or store—in short, anything you can beg, buy, steal or borrow—is that agreeable? Good! And the same rule, I take it, applies to any other device you choose to follow. Whatever resources the peaceful village of Pony Falls provides are ours, eh?

"At the end of one hour we'll meet at the principal corner and journey along to this next town of what's-its-name? Oh yes, Cree City. If anyone chooses to save up a surprise for Cree City instead of springing it here, that's to be allowed. We can give Cree City an eyeful, as they say out here, or not, just as we individually choose. Five or ten miles on the other side of that town we'll stop again and pick the winner. The second best gets honorable mention and a box of cigars if a man, a box of candy if a woman. I'll be responsible for that part of it."

"Oh, goody!" exclaimed plump little Mrs. Ware, dimpling like a pond in a shower. "Doesn't it sound just splendid, Gregory? And whatever we do, dear, we'll do it together, won't we? Can't we two do something together, Mr. Talbott, if we want to?"

"I don't think there could be any objection to that," assented the gentleman gravely. "Oh yes, one thing more. I think it's only fair that if one of us elects to make somebody else a party to his or her particular stunt or plant or whatever you please to call it, the party of the second part must go under pledge to play up to it, and all the rest must back up the trick too and help it off successfully. Is that also agreed to?"

It was and unanimously, so far as the prevailing five were concerned. Neither yea nor nay came from the dull Mr. Claypool. He was with the sport but not of it.

“Set your wits to working then, everybody. This road threatens to show signs of turning into a street around the next turn and pretty soon I expect to be slowing her up in front of the post office.”

Probably less of concentrated mental effort has been devoted to affairs of statecraft involving the destinies of nations than was expended in that onrolling automobile during the ensuing four or five minutes. You almost could hear brains creaking under the strain.

It would be like Miss Cave to finish plotting her campaign with expedition. It was. She did.

“Isn’t that a hotel just across the way?” she asked, pointing towards a principal corner as the car slowed for a swing into what evidently was the communal center—a trampled little common with a band-stand in the middle and hitching racks for horses along two faces of it. “Yes, it is, I see its sign. Drop me there, please, Mr. Talbott.”

Obediently he dropped her there, she taking with her a small square case in dull leather which during the ride she had been balancing upon her knees. No porter came forth to aid her; but a Blackfoot half-breed, lounging on the sidewalk under the skimpy marquee at the entrance, graciously deigned to accept a half-dollar tip and in return therefor untied at her direction a mammoth English kit-bag from the running-board and carried it in. She told the clerk she wanted the use of a room for an hour or so and vanished up the stairs, her boot heels twinkling to her speed and the burden-bearer close behind her, grunting under his load and probably wondering why there should be so great a hurry about it.

Meanwhile at least three of the remaining contestants were scattering. Lena bounced out and darted very briskly into a dry-goods store, by good fortune finding there a Jewish woman manager who spoke German and who on being addressed in that language showed a prompt and wide-awake understanding of what was wanted, and what for Lena’s purposes was better still, offered assistance of needlecraft. Chattering like a mated brace of Teutonic magpies, the two of them repaired to a workroom at the rear from whence at once issued sounds of cloth being hastily rent and pleased exclamations.

The Wares quested in an opposite direction. They invaded a little shop announcing itself as one dealing in stationery, notions and novelties. Inside they also were lucky in enlisting the somewhat puzzled but entirely friendly

coöperation of a giggling girl clerk. Swiftly they set to picking and purchasing and before they were done with this, their volunteer aide, apparently convinced that while these hilarious and slightly incoherent customers might be light-headed, nevertheless they were honest and could be trusted with the stock, ran at their behest next door to solicit divers loans from the shipping-clerk of the Pony Falls Wholesale Grocery and Supply Company.

With an interest quickening into curiosity, the clerk accompanied the messenger back, bearing his marking-pot and brushes and bits of planking and some large plain sheets of cardboard. On being taken into the patrons' confidence he immediately caught the point and, between fits of laughter, became their ardent helper too. He said it looked to him like this was going to be an awfully funny business, anyway you took it. And he liked a joke as well as the next one and said so repeatedly, while at work on his share of the job, which was in a measure technical.

Mr. Talbott was in no such rush as these others. After he was on the sidewalk he cast a glance over his shoulder. Mr. Claypool still sat in his place, stolid and rumped, a ruminative mass, slowly masticating in a manner common to certain of the larger herbiferous animals.

"Ain't you declaring yourself in on this?" inquired Mr. Talbott.

"Not yit." The sluggish one seemed to begrudge giving up the two words.

"Saving up your little bundle of secrets for later on—is that it?"

"You might *putt* it that way," conceded Claypool and went on chewing.

"Suit yourself then. I'm not springing my own little game for a while either," vouchsafed Mr. Talbott. "He laughs best who laughs last, eh?"

Claypool made no answer to this. Anyhow Mr. Talbott was out of easy earshot by now. From under the brim of his sombrero and without so much as stirring save as to his slowly working jaws, the present lone tenant of the car languidly watched Talbott as the latter went into a shop specializing in hardware, harness and undertaking goods. In a very few minutes he emerged and a little farther along the square, climbed a flight of stairs to the upper floor of a squatty brick building. His errand aloft, whatever it might be, engaged Mr. Talbott for upwards of half an hour. So he missed the best part of the show.

As Miss Cave had been the first to disappear so was she the first to reappear, and give such residents as chanced to be abroad in the business

district the initial shock of a series of pleasant shocks which they were to sustain this Monday afternoon. Stepping out into daylight, she still carried her little square leather case. This though was almost the only essentially feminine touch about her. Her coat had been left behind. The sleeves of her white silk blouse were rolled to the elbow; its collar was unbuttoned and laid back. About her throat was knotted a silk handkerchief of vivid purple and inflammatory red. On her bobbed head she wore an enormous cowboy's hat of white plush, it having the customary peaked crown and a gaudy beaded band encircling the lower circumference of the same.

Her legs were incased in a pair of magnificent Angora chaps, dyed black and yellow in alternating blotches of color—chaps with much embossing and many large silver studs in their belting. Below the flaring bottoms of these garments her small neatly-booted feet seemed by the contrast to be even smaller than they were; and on each of them jingled a handsome Mexican spur, elaborately strapped and vastly roweled. Jauntily oblivious of the wondering and admiring stares that focused upon her, she promenaded up one short strip of concrete pavement and, crossing over, promenaded down another. Her make-believe was a work of perfection.

Shortly thereafter the astonished populace had a refreshment of additional eye-filling spectacles presented for its free entertainment. For next Miss Cave's maid divided attention with her mistress, and next in order two more strangers were claiming their multiplying share of public comment. It surely was a notable afternoon for the Pony Fallians. What with first one thing and then another Pony Falls had about all it could stand for one day.

By a sorcery of quick seamstressing the blooming Lena had been transformed, with a cord-laced bodice of black stuff and a flouncy short skirt of outstanding white stuff and an improvised lace cap, into a most creditable semblance of a Savoyard peasant maid. Her buttery tawny hair was plaited in two long braids which hung either side of her face and her eyes demurely were downcast as she rambled along very slowly with mincing steps—a picture fit for any musical comedy stage. At least three hypnotized gallants fell into step six paces in her rear.

The Wares were tethered together with bands of broad white satin ribbon tied on in wide bows. Little Mrs. Ware, blushing with embarrassment but resolute in her commitment to the rôle, was bestrewing her husband and herself with confetti plucked from a deep paper bag; and Mr. Ware, who constantly smiled a fixed mechanical smile, was with one hand ringing a clamorous dinner bell and with the other he proudly bore aloft, so that all

and sundry might read what was lettered thereon, a cardboard banner inscribed as follows:

JUST MARRIED
DON'T WE LOOK IT?
WE DO!

But the proclamation was absolutely unnecessary. Without it anybody would have known.

Thus embellished, these twain marched and counter-marched and there was frequent applause; but to these outbursts they gave no heed, being silent except for their advertising bell.

The hour allotted for the edification of Pony Falls almost was up when Mr. Talbott rejoined his companions where the car stood by the curb in front of the leading and only hotel. To reach them he had to wedge his way through a close-packed ring of citizens who continued to gape although the late masqueraders now were shorn of their fanciful housings. A delusion that the recent display must have been but preliminary to the vending of medicine persisted in the mind of one warped octogenarian. He had pressed close alongside and with his whiskers bristling forward almost in Miss Cave's face was asking when the sale would start and whether she had on hand anything that was good for the inflammatory rheumatism.

She showed astonishment at sight of the approaching member. He still was quite conventionally clad—smartly but not conspicuously.

“Why where's your rig-out?” she asked. “We four here have all made idiots of ourselves to grace a Roman holiday while you are just as you were before.”

“Oh, I'm still in the race, I hope,” he told her. “You'll remember there's plenty of time left yet. And I have my paraphernalia right here in my pocket.”

He climbed in and took his station at the steering-wheel and the crowd made way, but reluctantly, as though hopeful of witnessing more whimsicalities on the part of these eccentric visitors; and they rolled out of a town that buzzed behind them.

In the automobile there likewise was a lesser buzz of conversational cross-fire.

“Honestly,” Miss Cave was saying, “I don’t believe I’m qualified. You see, I had the advantage—having that buckaroo’s outfit in my kit-bag. I’m taking it East as a present to my fourteen-year-old nephew in Buffalo and all at once back yonder up the road I remembered about it. It was jolly though, parading about in all that picturesque Wild Western toggery. One inquisitive individual—I think it must have been the local newspaper publisher from the way he acted—stopped me and wanted to know if I wasn’t Cyclone May Sutherland the Champion Lady Broncho Buster of the World. He thought he recognized me as the celebrated original from pictures he had seen and he cordially invited me to stay over and give an exhibition. He seemed to think the rest of you belonged to my troupe.”

“I expect it appeared that way to a good many others,” little Mrs. Ware was saying. “Really, Miss Cave, I think you made the real hit. I kept saying to Gregory all along that you were making the real hit. Didn’t I, Gregory? I kept saying you’d showed more ingenuity than anybody. Didn’t I, Gregory? But you were awfully cute-looking, too.” She indicated that she meant Lena. “You know—cute. I told Gregory how cute you were, didn’t I, Gregory? I haven’t even decided yet who we’ll vote for.”

“Dose beeg clothoppers—three off them,” Lena was saying with a gentle smile. “They chust came glumping along be’ine me. I tink dey vanted maybe I should marry von off them.” It was clear that Lena highly esteemed her prospect of winning first prize.

Mr. Claypool was saying nothing at all, and nobody was saying anything to him. He appeared quite content to be ignored. As for Mr. Talbott, he occasionally chuckled to himself. There was a finely restrained confidence in his look. This look became enhanced some time later when he swung the heavy machine from the center of the highway and brought it to a standstill. Slightly below them and, in that clear air plainly visible across perhaps two intervening miles, Cree City was nestled down under the rocky convolutions of an off-jutting terminal vertebra of the range—an overgrown foothill, putting on airs and pretending to be an authentic peak and wearing, as their map told them, the humorously vulgar name of Tailbone Mountain.

“Well,” he said gaily, “I figure it’s about time for me to undo my small box of tricks. First, I dropped into a hardware store back yonder. And here’s what I got there.”

From a side pocket of his coat he brought out a star-shaped silver-plated policeman’s badge and a pair of steel handcuffs. The handcuffs he placed on the seat cushion at his side. The badge he pinned to the breast of his

waistcoat so that two of its points showed beyond the slanted line of his coat lapels.

“Then I visited a job-printer’s shop. The owner was in. I got him to turn me out a rush job. And while he was doing that I borrowed the use of a typewriter that he had in his so-called office and on a plain sheet of letter cap that he gave me I wrote out a communication and signed it—with a fictitious name. But this is what the printer chap turned out for me.”

While he was speaking another pocket had yielded a largish square of glazed paper which, on being unfolded, proved to be covered on one side with printing.

“Read this, please, Miss Cave,” he bade her and passed it over. “It concerns you. Read it aloud, if you don’t mind. Be careful though or you’ll get your fingers smudged. We dried the ink as well as we could but it may still be a bit damp in spots.”

So Miss Cave, in a tone of wonderment, began reading. First she read the staccato headings, then the body of the text:

\$500 REWARD!
WANTED FOR ROBBERY

“The above reward will be paid for information leading to the apprehension and conviction of Catherine Spencer, alias Toledo Kate, professional shoplifter and store-thief, wanted for the larceny of furs valued at \$9,000.00 from the firm of Blumenthal Brothers, Denver, Colorado, on or about the ninth day of August of this year. Accused is 27 years old, blue eyes, brown hair cut short, fair complexion, straight nose, medium height, weight about 120 pounds; athletic-looking and speaks like an educated person. Is fond of wearing men’s clothes and in conversation shows familiarity with sports. Officers are advised to use care in effecting arrest as suspect is dangerous. Distinguishing marks: This woman has a small scar shaped like a crescent on the left cheek and——”

A sharp little cry of amazed comprehension interrupted the further reading of the handbill.

“Why, that’s me!” exclaimed Miss Cave. “That’s my description.”

“Exactly so,” stated Mr. Talbott, his smile broadening as a bewildered babble arose from at least three of those present. “Such was the intention, my dear young lady. My only regret was that I could not make it more

flattering. Still, you know how those police circulars are—they so rarely deal in compliments. And I'm glad you recognized the likeness so quickly. That perhaps may serve to simplify matters in another quarter."

"But I don't see the motive——"

"You will, very shortly." He assumed a manner of mock gravity. "Catherine Spencer, alias Toledo Kate, I arrest you for grand larceny and warn you that anything you say may be used against you!" He faced about, his voice at its natural pitch now but sharpened with emphasis. "You'll bear witness, everybody, that we all solemnly promised to play up to any hocus-pocus that anyone among us undertook."

"Oh, I quite understand that—we all do," Miss Cave said. "If you are going to pose awhile as an officer, I'm perfectly willing to pose as your prisoner—provided that's what you have in mind. And I'm sure all the rest will follow our lead. That's no more than fair to you. Only tell me what you expect me to do." On the last words she cast a quick glance downward at the seat beside her and made a grimace.

"You've guessed it," he said, reading her thought. "Kindly hold out both your hands, close together, palm to palm. I'm depending on these things"—he jingled the cuffs by their chain—"to give just the proper melodramatic touch."

"Yours to command," she assented and made as though to obey. "No, wait just one moment, please."

She lifted the small leather box from its perch upon her legs and passed it over to the maid.

"You're to look after this for a while, Lena," she said. "Now I'm ready for the next act of the farce."

Resignedly she extended her hands then and Mr. Talbott fitted the cuffs to her wrists and locked them fast and slipped the key into one of his pockets.

"Not very uncomfortable, I hope," he ventured gallantly.

"Not very," she assented; "although a trifle embarrassing and apt to be inconvenient for continued wear—I might want to powder my nose, you know." She dropped the linked hands in her lap. "And now if I might ask, what's next expected of me and the supporting company?"

"That's simplicity itself." By a gesture he included all hands in the conspiracy! "We'll drive on ahead now into this town of Cree City. It's a

town of three thousand population—this map says so—bigger than either of the two towns we’ve passed through. That means it’ll have some sort of a lockup in it. We’ll drive in and inquire the whereabouts of his majesty, the city marshal. I’ll introduce myself to him as an operative for a big private detective agency in Denver. I’ll present you. He’ll get the thrill of his life, meeting the famous criminal character, Toledo Kate. So will the innocent bystanders when they see you get out of this car with those bracelets on you. I warrant you that.

“I’ll tell him that I’ve just landed you after a long chase across country and am now on the track of a supposed accomplice who’s believed to be over the line in Idaho. I ask him to take care of you until I’ve delivered these friends of mine”—he indicated their fellow passengers—“at the junction; then I’ll be back to pick you up as soon as I can make the run.”

“And then what?” Strangely enough it was Mr. Claypool who asked the question.

“Why, then we dust on out of Cree City for a few miles—you recall I suggested that.”

“For why?” Mr. Claypool was actually growing conversational.

“Because we agreed to that part—that’s why.” Mr. Talbott was very firm and very serious about it. “Because we’re going to live up to the rules; it spoils the fun if we don’t. You see that, don’t you? As I was saying, we run on beyond for the appointed distance—I believe I specified five or ten miles. Then we take a vote to decide who wins the contest. Miss Cave, being temporarily detained, can give her proxy privately to Mrs. Ware here. Well, we take the vote. Then we turn right around and hustle back and break the news to the marshal. We’ll tell him it was a practical joke, or that Miss Cave was paying an election bet—we’ll tell him something foolish and plausible. I’ll guarantee to square him. Slipping him a twenty-dollar bill will help.

“Anyhow, it’ll be no trouble for Miss Cave or any of us, for that matter, to identify ourselves as perfectly reputable citizens. If, after that, he still has any lingering doubt, he has only to call up Lake McDonald on the long-distance. The people there will vouch for all of us. Or he can call up the printer and get confirmation of the truth of the real situation. In any event, he wouldn’t dare risk his job and his reputation by keeping a well-known Eastern visitor locked up when it had been proven to him that she was exactly who she claimed to be. He gives her up and we go ahead, all of us, and catch our train.”

“But look here a minute,” the stubborn Claypool persisted. “Suppose this here Cree City chief, bein’ maybe a careful man, should want to see your authority in the first place?”

“Thanks for the suggestion, Brother Inner Guard,” replied Mr. Talbott with a tinge of satire; “that detail has already been attended to. That was what I borrowed Mr. Printer Man’s typewriter for—to dash off my credentials. I’ve got them right here on my person,” and he tapped that same breast pocket of his to which he just restored his counterfeit reward notice. “Believe me, everything’s quite in order—no, it’s not either.” It was as though a new thought had popped into his mind. “For regularity and the appearance of things I ought to be armed. I don’t expect to have to exhibit a weapon but the bulge of it ought to show under my coat tails. I don’t suppose anybody in this car is carrying a pistol, by any chance?” He made a query of the sentence and broadcast it generally.

“I am,” said Mr. Claypool, semi-apologetically.

“Is that so?” Mr. Talbott’s eyebrows lifted.

“Yep, just sort of happened to be carryin’ a six-gun.” It almost was a shamefaced admission.

“Would you mind letting me have it for the next half-hour or so?”

“Not at all. She’s hitched onto a belt around my waist under my vest. You better drive on slow-like while I’m gettin’ her loose. Seems like to me I hear a car comin’ from the other side of that turn in the road behind us and this is kind of a narrow place for anybody to try to pass us without somebody bein’ crowded off into the ditch.”

So Mr. Talbott drove on at a reduced gait and at his rear Mr. Claypool, whose fingers seemed to be all awkward thumbs, fumbled intermittently, first at his flank and then at his girth-line. Eventually though he handed up a heavy revolver in a holster swung on a strap broad enough for a surcingle and Mr. Talbott checked and buckled on the belt and bestowed the bolstered clump against his hip, then speeded up again.

Ten minutes later Cree City was having its excitement too. It was fitting that this excitement, although specialized and confined to one spot, should be a greater excitement even than Pony Falls had experienced. Cree City was nearly twice the size of Pony Falls and moreover a county-seat.

Getting away from there the big strong car fairly burned up the grit. Mr. Talbott let her out and let her show what she could do. Their bodies all swayed in unison to the swing of the machine.

Presently Lena, who vaguely was apprehensive that somehow or other this hoax would terminate disastrously for her mistress, pecked with a nervous forefinger at Mr. Talbott's shoulder.

"Uf you please, Meester," she pleaded, raising her voice to be heard above the roaring motor. "I sink we go too far now. And too fast ulso. It iss more as fifteen miles already."

"Yes, and if I'm not badly mistaken we're off the main route," called out young Mr. Ware. "We got switched off four or five miles back, according to my guess."

"Gregory, you *are* so quick about noticing things," murmured young Mrs. Ware, content to go anywhere at any speed so long as she might snuggle against her chosen man.

"I'm sure of it," continued the bridegroom. "Look where we are, away up here, heaven knows where, in this lonely hollow!"

Sure enough, they were roaring into a densely wooded and extremely precipitous canyon.

"By Jove, I believe you're right." Mr. Talbott answered back while looking straight ahead. "Well, we'll remedy that immediately."

He throttled down and stopped her. Facing her around though would be a task and no mistake. The road had shrunk until it was no more than a double tire-track and on one side its shoulder dropped down precipitately to a creek and on the other the wall of the gulch rose steeply. He wriggled out from behind the wheel and climbed down on the pebbly footing as though to study the problem from earth level.

And then, all at once, with a swiftness that was astounding, that was incredible, he had them covered with that heavy blued-steel pistol.

"Slide out of there!" he ordered and in his words and in his eye and in the menacing swing of the gun-barrel there was revealed a great and poisoned viciousness. "Slide out—one at a time on this side, the whole bunch of you and line up here, in front of me. And you"—he signaled with an upward flirt of the muzzle at the dazed Lena—"you be sure to bring along that jewelry box that you've been nursing so carefully since we lost

your boss. There, that's it—bring it along. I know what's in it without looking—sparklers among other things, and a nice bunch of emeralds.”

Pressing upon one another and stumbling and shambling, the occupants dismounted and minding his sign manual, they single-filed to a certain spot in the narrowed byway just astern of the car and stood in a ragged formation, the four of them abreast, confronting their captor.

“Step forward and slip me the junk,” he commanded of Lena. She performed automatically, her entranced China-blue eyes staring out of a piteously white face at the lethal tool in his hands. “Now fall back and join your squad.”

Lena fell back, trembling.

With the mask off, this jaunty crook relapsed into the finer argot of crookdom.

“Well, well!” he exulted and simultaneously he managed to be malignant and lowering and yet happily triumphant. “Well, you sure do make a lovely school of poor fish, standing there! And you're going to be some tired fish too before you get back to civilization. Because you're nearly six miles off the state road and even farther than that from a telephone. It'll be a long hard walk for you and while you're plugging along I'll be lamming on through this short cut to parts unknown, as the bulls say. Tell the skirt we left behind in the rube hoosegow that she'll find her car up the line somewhere, maybe.”

He edged past them, holding all of the row under dominion of the leveled gun and carrying the spoils of his successful stratagem in the bend of his left elbow; but then he paused alongside the opened door for a final taunt. It was a temptation he could not resist, he being what he was.

“Wowie!” He gloated on their discomfiture. “How you mob of simps have played into my mitt, right from the start. You sit and let me frame up the trap that gets rid of the only one of the lot except me who can drive this buzz wagon. Anyhow, she was the one I had to get rid of, to make this play safe and easy—she's the only one that might have sand and savvy enough to give me a battle. But she falls for my stuff and the rest of you fall for it—Oh say, ain't it just too rich? And on top of that you, you big dumb cheese, you let me con you out of your gun—the only other gun in the outfit, by gosh! That reminds me!” His grin broadened. “I guess I win the first prize of the surprise party. No, it's second money now; first prize is here under my arm. It's been first prize all along if only you saps had been wise——”

It was Lena who expelled from her throat the involuntary screech which gave the rogue his warning. Not that the latter needed any special warning, though. He too had been amply cognizant of the sudden forward lunge and rush of the man Claypool.

One second Claypool was slouched there between Lena and young Ware, a figure of impotence, and in the next, yes, in the fractional part of the next, he was leaping forward with an unexpected agility; and what had seemed furrows of fat across a broad back showed beneath his clothing as ridgy and bunching muscles.

Talbott threw down on him pointblank and pulled trigger. The gun snapped. He pulled again, it snapped again. He triggered the empty cylinder round, six futile snaps all told, then flung the useless pistol away and with the oncharging man almost upon him, he jammed his free hand into his right side coat pocket—and brought it out empty.

And now Claypool had closed with him and had wrapped both his arms around him and was squeezing him, shaking him, wrestling him, slapping him—actually slapping him—into gasping, choking helplessness. In what seemed to these breathless spectators no time at all, to speak of, the struggle was over. The victor, looking up from where he knelt on the prostrate form of the slighter man, addressed them in commonplace language. He was not panting. He said to them, calmly:

“He never had a chance. Better come here, one of you, and gather up this joolry. Some of it seems to have got spilt on the ground.”

He climbed upon his feet and dragged the vanquished one up upon his, which were unsteady under their owner. He seemed to think further explanation was perhaps desired. He pondered momentarily and spoke in the general direction of the yet paralyzed onlookers:

“Yes, sir, he never had a chance. You see, behind his back I emptied all the shells out of my gun before I handed her over to him. And when he raised up to get out of the car that last time there in front of the jail, I lifted his own gun out of his side pocket—nice little automatic it is. A friendly pickpocket that I ran in one time, he taught me how. I thought then to myself it might come in handy some day. It did—to-day. So you see I had him whenever I got ready to grab holt of him. But naturally, I was going to let him play his string out.”

“Then you suspected something all the time? How marvelous!” trilled the bride, regaining her powers of utterance.

“Say, that’s wonderful!” exclaimed her husband, likewise recovering from his palsy and advancing to gather up the scattered contents of the gaping jewelry box. “Who are you, anyhow?”

“Me? I’m sheriff of Quartz County, this state. And there wasn’t no suspectin’ about it. I knowed about him—in fact, I been campin’ on this party’s trail for quite some time.” He made, as it were, a combination gesture at and with his half-strangled victim. That is to say, he bodily swung the prisoner about so the audience might have a better look at him and then gently rocked him to and fro as though for punctuation of the maneuver. “This here, young folks, is what they call an international criminal. His real name’s Trainer, Vic Trainer.

“Well”—he appeared to be casting about for concluding words—“well, it’s about time we was findin’ a place to turn around and start back, ain’t it?”

“But who’s going to drive now—now that——” began little Mrs. Ware.

“Oh, he’ll drive us,” said Mr. Claypool reassuringly and imparting some more waving motions to his mute subject. “I’ll be setting right alongside of him, goin’ back!” He had an afterthought: “I’ll hitch him by one hand to the steering-wheel with them cuffs that he was so accommodatin’ as to buy.”

Mrs. Ware had an inspiration. She ran forward and plucked the first prize from the forward seat and thrust it into Sheriff Claypool’s shirt-front. For he was not wearing a tie.

CHAPTER V

THE PARKER HOUSE ROLL

On the whole, the fawn-colored stranger had dash and sprightliness; still and undeniably there was something about him. Marking him from a place among the bystanders on the edge of the group clustered over the crap table in the inner room of the Idlewild Chile Parlors on West One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street, 'Stallmints Stickney remarked inwardly that there certainly was something about him.

It wasn't that the party under observation lacked for assurance. Of that he had a-plenty and then to spare. Nor was his conversation open to criticism, nor yet his general bearing. Even so, he somehow betrayed that he wasn't altogether city-wise. A seasoned metropolitan, such for instance as 'Stallmints Stickney was, could tell without being told that this engaging young man had not quite the New York manner. There were unsophisticated touches to his wardrobe, there were words in his vocabulary which marked him for one lately arrived out of the provinces.

The dark watcher kept on watching. The stranger kept on shooting. He faded no bets but when his turn came to roll the dice he backed his plays with smallish sums. So doing, his air would indicate that it was the sport of the thing which interested him rather than the trifling amounts involved. But beneath that jaunty indifference the observer was sure he detected an undercurrent of nervousness as though the haunting wraith of a financial stringency occasionally rose to breathe through this airy surface.

"Risks six bits," chanted the alien. "Who's cravin' to ride wid me? An' kindly git yore side-bets down befo' the harrycane starts." He blew on the cubes and addressed that ardent habitué on his right who had staked against him.

"You don't know how lucky you is off," he said. "S'posn' I'd been playin' big money instid of this yere chicken-feed—whar would you be w'en I flang the magic points, w'ich I'm now fixin' to do so?"

"Go on an' th'ow 'em," urged his skeptical opponent. "I never seen you befo', that I knows of, but you don't seem lak to me you's so feverish warm."

“I guess you ain’t felt my pulse lately. An’ don’t hurry me none, black boy. Lemme cuddle these lil’ playmates an’ warm ’em an’ breathe on ’em till they reckernizes the master’s te’ch. Lissen—they’s whisperin’ to me—they says they’s right. Here they comes—*bam!* Read ’em, friend, read ’em an’ moan!”

But when the bones stopped rolling they showed six multiplied by two. The winner scooped in the cash. The loser made his next cast. On the second trial he ran a half up to a dollar, the dollar to a brace of dollars, the brace to a quartet, then fell off. This had happened before.

“Look like these yere snake-eyed babies don’t aim to acknowledge their own dear popper,” he admitted. “But, gen’elmen, the evenin’s young. They’s bound to quit goin’ ag’inst orders befo’ long.”

But they didn’t quit. As once more the ivories went the circuit and were passed to him, he glanced down at his own flank and spoke in a tone of whimsical apology: “’Scuse me, Mister Pocket, I got to trouble you ag’in.”

A solitary quarter came forth and at the first disastrous cast was transferred to other custody. The stranger wriggled out of the ring of devotees.

“Somethin’ seems to tell me ’tain’t my night,” he confessed. “But, gamboliers, I gives you fair warnin’: Ef ever I does git rightsome, you better git the wimmen an’ child’en to a place of safety in the cyclome cellar—tha’s all.” He set his tan fedora on the extreme left slope of his dome and went out sauntering.

At the cigar stand by the street door he halted. ’Stallmints Stickney, who had followed, checked at the partition which divided the public business department at the front from the private social department at the back. If the departing one knew he was being stalked he gave no sign of it.

“Lemme have one of yore best ten-centers,” he commanded. His mien was opulent; it bordered on the lofty.

The owner of the Idlewild produced a box from within a showcase and the patron made a choice and paid. He lit his purchase and drew deeply on it, then puffed forth the intake with a cough.

“An’ so in this town they gits a dime apiece for these yere things?” he commented softly, as though in reverie. “An’ the Great War been over so long, too.

“Whut did you say they called this yere seegar?” he inquired. Awaiting the answer he seemed still to muse.

“I ain’t never said,” stated the seller, “but they calls it the ‘Sweet Perfection’ brand.”

“Does they? Well then, all I got to say is ’twuzn’t no smoker named it.”

Before the outraged caterer could frame a retort ’Stallmints Stickney had waddled down stage, projecting his pachydermic bulk between these two and making a broadened group picture of it. He laid a hand of the size and general color of a well-cured venison ham upon the shoulder of the smoker. If the latter secretly was pleased by this—and secretly he was—he chose not to admit the fact. His glance was oblique.

“ ’Scuse me,” he said, “but seems lak I don’t place you.”

“Quite sich is most doubtless the case,” replied the overstuffed man, employing stylish language, “but tha’s a misfortune I’m aimin’ to git corrected. I been overheedin’ whut’s jest went on yonder”—he flirted rearward with a baked plantain of a thumb—“an’ I lak the cut of yore jib. You is my kind of folks.” He extended the haunch-like hand. “The name is Isaiah Stickney, better knowed ez ’Stallmints Stickney. I don’t know ez I ketched youm?”

“Git yore ketchin’ mask on then an’ yore laigs spraddled. Mine’s Royal Arcanum Watts.”

The large man jerked so that his dewlap quivered slightly.

“Tha’s—tha’s a name fur a secret order, ain’t it?”

“I knows that fully well.” The visitor’s manner still was distant. “But my mammy didn’t w’en she wuz namin’ me it. She wuz great on fancy book-names. Got a sister named Filet Mignon . . . Wuz they anything else?”

“Well, Mist’ Watts, I jest wants to say I’m most highly pleased to meet up wid you. Jest furgit the Isaiah part. ’Cause, ez I wuz sayin’, I’se better knowed ez ’Stallmints Stickney account of me bein’ sole perpriotor of Stickney’s Strictly One Price to All Installmint Store. Motto: ‘You Furnishes the Bird, We Furnishes the Nest.’ Yere’s one of my perfessional cards. You muster heered of my ’stablishment even ef you ain’t heered of me?”

The debonair Watts regarded the card casually. “Well, Brother Stickney, any time I sh’d be needin’ a few nestin’ materials I’ll try to remember yore number.” He made as though to go.

“Hold yore hosses.” The smile of the ponderous merchandiser was wide and winning. “I ain’t hopin’ to git you on the books. I sorter got it in the back part of my haid that you mout he’p me out, gittin’ other folks’ names on the books an’ keepin’ ’em there reg’lar.”

“Meanin’ w’ich?”

“Come over yere w’ile I specify.” He drew the other aside, beyond earshot of the glowering restaurant keeper. “I tek it you is a newcomer yere?”

“Well, natchelly I has passed th’ough New Yawk—sev’el times.”

“Most doubtless.” Tone of conviction on this point was well counterfeited.

“But I never stopped off befo’.”

“Oh, I could tell soon ez I seen you that you’d done a heap of travelin’ pro and con. But the main notion wid me is, you ain’t been yere long ’nuff to get gin’elly acquainted. You’s still whut we mout call a transom—ain’t it so, now?”

“In a way of speakin’—yas.”

“Well now, tha’s kinder whut I’m lookin’ fur—a live wire that ain’t got tangled up yit wit too much friendliness in this part of our city. I requires sich a live wire in my business, w’ich it seems lak frum whut I seen standin’ off studyin’ you to-night, that you mout fill the bill. I ain’t needin’ somebody so much fur the sellin’ end. Sellin’ the stuff is my main holt, my own se’f. But w’en it comes to goin’ round collectin’ the Easy Weekly Paymints, tha’s wherein I been goin’ shy lately fur a feller that kin keep ’em in good humor wid his funny sayin’s an’ all, an’ yit at the same time bring home the change. ’Cause, confidentially, ’tween you an’ me, Watts, them Easy Weekly Paymints seems a heap mo’ easy to ’em w’en they’s contractin’ fur new household plunder then they does w’en the ’stallmints starts fallin’ due.”

“Prob’ly mebbe the same feller routined ’em thus w’ich also named painless dentists painless.”

“You done grab the words right out of my mouth!” cried the other admiringly. “So I jest now sez to myse’f that ef you could prove to me you is dependable in money matters most doubtless we mout hook up together. Speakin’ of money, you yo’se’f ain’t none too well-cushioned wid ready cash at this yere present moment, is you?”

“How come you come to think that?” A cleverly simulated hostility sharpened the younger man’s voice.

“My son, don’t git huffy. In the ’stallmint furniture line you got to be a mind reader. You got to look right th’ough a thick pair of wool britches an’ tell how much coinage the pusson that’s wearin’ same is got in his britches pocket. Watsy, whut say we goes off to some quieter place then whut this is, an’ tawk it over? ’Cause tha’s me frum who laid the rail—once’t my mind is made up I acks speedy.”

“I’m ’bliged to you fur yore interest in my privacy but, ez things is, I ain’t in no position to consider yore application.”

“Don’t say it till you heahs me fu’ther.”

“Wait an’ heah me. I has lately give up jest plain business. I’s come yere to this town ez a sportin’ permoter.”

“Whut kinder sportin’?—they’s many diffe’nt kinds.”

“The best kind they is. You is now tawkin’ wid the ’sclusive manager of a prizefightin’ pugilist name of K. O. Broadus . . . Well, wuz they anything else you wished fur to know ’bout my pussonal affairs?” Again he appeared politely desirous to terminate the interview, seeming not to have noticed the quick start of surprise which, on his latest disclosure, had stirred the elephantine shape alongside him.

“Well, ain’t that estonishin’!” exclaimed the installment dealer. “Tackle a man on one angle an’ lo an’ behole, it turns out he’s got some other angle w’ich it mebbe’ll lead to mo’ or less real doin’s.” He shifted so as to block the route of exit. “Pardner, detain yo’se’f a lil’ bit longer. My reasons will be made manifested shortly. Tell me somethin’ mo’ about this yere—this yere K. O. Broadway.”

“Broadus is the name—Knock Out Broadus, but K. O. fur short.”

“Whom is he?”

“Oh, practically nobody much to speak of. He’s only jest the Middleweight Cullid Champion of Kintucky, Tennessee and Nawthe’n Alabama. He’s only jest the on-comin’ Cullid Champion of the Ontire South. He’s only jest the Black Hope of Dixieland, w’ich has now been fetched up yere by me to mop up wid some of these yere local pufformers whils’t the moppin’-up is good. Tha’s all he is.”

“Whut’s he ever done an’ whut’s he got to justify them swell entilemint?”

“You asts me whuts he’s done? You asts a mouthful! Whut did he do to the Memphis Kid? One biff on the jaw an’ they wuz takin’ the sad news home to the Memphis Kid’s folks ’count of him bein’ still sound asleep. Whut did he do to Gingersnap Gentry, the Fightin’ Waiter of the Pendennis Club, Loueyville? Changed that side-steppin’ fool to a soft snap befo’ the openin’ round had went one-ha’f minute. Whut did he do to Home Brew Hennessy, the Demon Jew of Evansville? Only he had to cros’t the line to New Albany, Indiana, to do it, by reason of Hennessy’s bein’ a w’ite boy. Whut’s he done to ever’body that wuz reckless ’nuff to trust theyselves inside the same ring wid him?”

“Then you asts me whut’s he got? Ever’thing, tha’s all. Speed an’ the wallop! A right lak a mule kickin’ an’ a left lak the Judgmint Day! Foot work an’ haid work! Bag punchin’ in all its branches an’ insomnia cured in one easy lesson!”

“Well, an’ good,” quoth his audience as this well-rehearsed orator paused for a fresh breath. “You tawks prizefight poetry from the soul. But how ’bout tekin’ punishment ’long wid givin’ it out? Kin your entry stand up an’ swap ’em?”

“You wants to know kin he?” Scorn for the ignorance of one who would put such a question appeared to dam the gush of memorized eloquence. “Huh! Tha’s all I answers, huh! . . . Well, confabbin’ is pleasant pastime but I got to be gittin’ ’long back to the hotel where we’s stoppin’ an’ see ef ole K. O. ain’t gittin’ lonesome. I ain’t interested in the ’stallmint business and you natchelly ain’t interested in the pugilism business.”

“How you know I ain’t? You’s smart, yeller boy, I kin tell that, but you don’t know ever’thing on earth. Say, has you ever et a mess of this yere chop suey?”

“Not right recently.”

“An’ not right never, I bet you. Come on wid me acrost the street. Wattsy —yere’s where yore chop suey education gits started off right. An’ w’ile so doin’ I’m goin’ tell you somethin’ w’ich it’ll prove to you a kind Providence must ’a’ directed this yere meetin’ betwixt us to-night.”

An hour and a half later and six blocks distant, on farther Fifth Avenue, Royal Arcanum Watts sat him down in a furnished room, but one not over-furnished. He occupied the one rickety chair provided with the lodgings, and it was tilted back against the cracked wall and his legs were twined inward

where its front rung should have been. Across the chamber and somewhat dimly revealed by the light of a lone electric bulb as he hunched in bed, was a chunky ink-complected person wearing the greater part of a night-shirt. The newly-returned was speaking, his tone being exultant:

“’Member, don’t you, whut it wuz the dove brung back that time old Cap’n Noah sent her out frum the Ark? She brung back the long green. Well then, does I put you in mind of a dove? Or don’t I?”

“Losin’ seven dollars an’ twenty-five cents in a craps game, lak you jest now wuz owin’ up to about, don’t sound to me none lak fetchin’ home no long green,” murmured K. O. Broadus morosely. “’Specially w’en we’s needin’ ever’ cent we got.”

“Battler,” rejoined his manager, “a pessimist is a pest w’ich has taken the higher degrees in the lodge. Kindly bear that in mind an’ govern yo’se’f accordin’ly. Droppin’ that there money wuz jest my openin’ work an’ don’t count. Natchelly, I’d ruther winned but the main thing wuz that the way I carried on ketched the eye of that big barrel of lard w’ich that wuz my intention frum the start-off. Ef purty soon he hadn’t braced up to me I wuz goin’ brace up to him; but w’en I sees he’s fixin’ to beat me to it I holds back.”

“Let the other feller lead an’ then bust him one w’ile he’s standin’ there wide open,” said his listener technically.

“Now you’s whistlin’! So I spars fur my advantage an’ gits it. So we blimblams back and fo’th an’ after a spell I feeds him the bait—tells him kind of keerless ’bout you bein’ yere lookin’ fur matches an’ ’bout me bein’ yore manager an’ all. His eyes stick out but I ain’t lettin’ on.

“My play is jest to keep on actin’ lak I don’t know nothin’ ’bout him bein’ gittin’ ready to organize a cullid sportin’ club. Five minutes frum that time he’s got me settin’ ’crost a table frum him eatin’ a mess of this yere chop suey w’ich it may be Chineese vittles, lak he sez, but suttinly is got a kind of a cullid flavor to it. An’ he’s cuddlin’ up to me lak a sick kitten to a hot brickbat. An’ he’s pourin’ out his innermost thoughts same ez he’d knowed me from the cradle up. Lawsy me, I shore drawed that stout man on lak a boot. He even takes an’ sends out fur a coupler slugs of popskull licker costin’ four bits apiece.”

“I could relish a lil’ drink right now.” The couchant gladiator licked an ample underlip.

“Naw suh, you’s in trainin’. Leastwise you soon will be. Anyway, you ain’t missed much. Whew! I still kin feel that licker searchin’ me all over. Well, it all pours fo’th frum him—how he’s got the influence framed up to git a license fur a all-cullid athletical club frum the w’ite folks’ gov’mint yere; an’ how he’s got the follerin’ an’ the money backin’ an’ the hall picked out an’ all; but how whut he ’specially needs to git over wid big at the start-off is some new talent—somebody that ain’t never done no fightin’ round this town. So the upcome is that to-morrer mawnin’ I teks you to him an’ you shows him whut you got.”

The knocker-out flexed a set of sinewy shoulder muscles. “I’ll bet he ain’t never seen no shadow-boxin’ lak whut I’ll show him,” he exulted.

“Well, I’ll say this fur you,” stated his roommate; “you kin lick any shadow you ever seen. So go on an’ show him. But lemme do the tawkin’. You dazzle him wid yore strong p’intns an’ I’ll cover up the weak ones. The schedule is fur you fust to go up ag’inst some of these yere easy marks—whut he calls set-ups. You slaps ’em flat an’ that gives you the rippertation.”

“Tha’s shoutin’! All I kindly asts is fur somebody else to line ’em up befo’ me an’ I’ll lay ’em out.”

“See you does so. Then we matches you up fur the real money.”

“Who wid?”

“Well, he spoken kind of favorable of Kid Maxey.”

“The Bermuda Bear Cat, huh? Suits me. I hears tell he ain’t nothin’ only jest a shell of whut he used to be. Jest a shell. Still, he oughter draw money in at the do’.”

“Tha’s whut friend Stickney thinks. Well, I’m waitin’?”

“Waitin’ fur whut?”

“You ain’t said nothin’ ’bout my puttin’ you over so slick wid this prominint man.”

“Huh!” The future champion grunted ungraciously. “Tha’s whut you gets your split out of the purses fur so doin’.” He grunted again and hoisted his legs in beneath the coverlids. “I’se gittin’ sleepy.”

Long after his protégé was snoring the promoter remained awake. With his outer garments he appeared likewise to have shed some measure of his abounding confidence. Huddled in the lee of his sprawled bedfellow on the far slope of a wavy mattress, he soliloquized into the darkness:

“Tha’s the trouble wid ’em: Middle-weight or heavy-weight, it don’t mek no diffe’nce—the weight is all frum the neck down. Whut you tells one of ’em don’t turn to sense inside his brain, ef any. It jest clabbers an’ turns to stuckuppishness. . . . An’ then that there Human Detour w’ich we is aimin’ to team in wid—I ain’t so shore ’bout him, neither. He gits overpowerin’ so soon!

“One minute astin’ me whut I’m aimin’ to do wid this yere helpin’ of dark meat tha’s tryin’ now to shove me clean out on the flo’, an’ next minute suggestin’ whut *we* better do, an’ in ’nother minute mo’ statin’ whut *he* intend to do! Frum ‘you’ to ‘us’ to ‘me’—tha’s advancin’ too brisk to suit me. I hates bein’ crowded—*dad burn you, Broadus, move over an’ gimme room!* I figgers I’d better be lookin’ spry else some of these days I’s liable to wake up an’ find myse’f ditched. . . . The most pizen’ snakes is ’most gin’elly always the fattest ones; ain’t that the truth?”

A prophet was addressing the void of that top-floor chamber in that buggy rooming-house, but unlike some prophets he did not know yet that he was one.

The reader is invited to flutter the pages here to indicate the passage of nine weeks. Having done this he will find the curtain re-raised upon a brilliant scene, to wit: the arena of the new Egyptian Athletic & Boxing Club, and the same is both agog and aglow, being on this night of all nights in its history, as a jeweled buckle to that famous Black Belt which by its prevalent hues—but never by its ways—suggests a wide mourning belt drawn across the bust of Northern Manhattan at that precise point where geographically the island grows narrow but socially remains broad and bright and liberal.

Everybody who was anybody in the Afro-American sport coteries of Uptown-on-the-Harlem was present this gala night, along with thousands who, as yet, were dingy nobodies but had their ambitions. San Juan Hill, away down yonder to the westward of Columbus Circle, sent a delegation three hundred strong. Leaders, male and female, in the gay life of Brooklyn’s exclusive dark colony had made the long pilgrimage by subway from the back side of the sister borough. Representatives of the colored wings of vaudeville and the music-hall stage, of the professions, the arts, the crafts, and a large leisure class, crowded the pit of the house in the higher-priced seats flanking the ring. Here and there were white customers, and their upturned faces, under the calcium batteries made palish polka-dots

against a deeper background of blacks and browns and yellows which flowed on and away through the tiered benches to mingle with a dense stippling of dim uncelebrated forms up where the rafters of the roof met the gallery walls.

The big moment of the evening's program impended; its approach was being heralded by an increasing and mounting uproar of pleasant anticipation. The preliminary bouts were over. They had been satisfactory enough but merely were as whets to an universal appetite. At the focal center of things there was an enhanced bustle. The special referee—a lone Caucasian among a score of brisk functionaries—climbed through the ropes and leaned against them, his arms folded, his manner nonchalant.

Lesser bureaucrats, all in a high fever of authority, cleared the aisles for the advent of the star attractions. 'Stallmints Stickney, he being overlord to all these, strutted down and at the foot of the squared stage gave final instructions to the official announcer. In the black-and-white of full dress he loomed vast and important, a majestic puffin. But he suggested the pouter pigeon, too. A wag of the upper Lenox Avenue younger set, more a humorist than a faunalist, had his own theory to account for the hybridized aspect of the chief sponsor and voiced it to an appreciative audience in a front row:

“Looks lak to me he's one of these yere ole penguins, only his maw muster been skeered by a peacock jest befo' hatchin'-time!”

The laughter which greeted this whimsy was swallowed up in a deafening tumult. For Knock Out Broadus was making his entrance. He made it dramatically. He strode into view from a passageway leading to the dressing-rooms. He moved at the head of an impressive entourage; his bathrobe was of silk done in purple and tan stripes. He wore that kingly garment in a most kingly way and his walk was that of a conqueror and his melon-shaped head but slightly was bent to acknowledge the welcoming shouts of seven-tenths of the multitude.

One would have looked in vain though for the slim figure of Royal Arcanum Watts among the backers, handlers, seconds, assistant seconds, deputy assistant seconds, thirds, bottle-holders, towel-bearers, rubbers, trainers, volunteer advisers, well-wishers and unclassified supernumeraries who trooped along in their hero's wake. It is probable that no one did look. For the time being all worshiping eyes were for the new-risen favorite of local fistiana. The confederated members of his train merely were part of the processional effect. But absolutely their name was Legion.

There was no such pageantry for the reception, two minutes later, of the rival fisticuffer—no pageantry whatsoever and not a great deal of enthusiasm. He shambled into view almost apologetically, being clad in a frayed gray sweater and convoyed only by that large dour-looking white man named Skip O’Grady who through all the years of his public career had guided his destinies for him. The day had been when this whole assemblage, or any other of like spirits, would have risen up to do the Bermuda Bear Cat honor. But that was when he was quite the rose and expectancy of his race and of his pugilistic class.

He was slipping back now; he was getting older and he was going stale; he was hippodroming about over the land, meeting ambitious contenders for small purses; and while none of these upstarts had knocked him out, several of them lately had knocked him about. It lamentably is true that in the gay world of sportdom, as elsewhere, a champion deposed very soon and nearly always becomes an ex-champion decried. To paraphrase the language of the newspaper when it deals diagrammatically with charts and maps, the “ex” shows where vanished popularity was last seen.

So now some cheered for him but not very many—a parasitic minority whose loyalty was dubious and fickle. They came mainly from the British West Indies and the Bear Cat once also had been a subject of King George. Therefore they cheered him sketchily and some few, lured by the odds, had bets on him. But even these held hisses on reserve in case that proud prodigy of a K. O. Broadus should round out the winning streak which recently had so stirred the local sporting elements by winning a still greater triumph here this night.

Let us with one brief paragraph—and here it is—dismiss the dedicatory phases of a fight afterward to be historic in the annals. The introduction of the principals; the announcement of their respective weights; the brief appearances of various challengers, each craving to meet the victor on some agreeable future date; the taking of flashlight photographs for the neighborhood press; the confidential remarks of the referee to the two men and their backers; the purely formal request that everybody quit smoking, which nobody did—all these traditional details were carried out according to the ritual. Then the battle ground was cleared of non-participants, then the gong rang.

Round one was a Broadus round all the way. Knock Out skipped in and skipped out, as light on his toes as a dancing master. His shoe soles made

little slithering music against the gritty canvas. He clouted swiftly, with dainty cattish dabs, at the rocking bobbing nodding target which fell back in slow circles from before him. Throughout, Kid Maxey gave territory steadily. There was a troubled look on his broad chocolate-colored face the while he retreated with a flat-footed gait. When maneuvered into close quarters he sank his bullet head between his massive shoulders and hunched down to take punishment, but otherwise showed little generalship and scarce a trace of his ancient science.

Darting attacks landed on his arms and his brisket and once on his flattened nose. More blows glanced off the slopes of his skull, which was an elusive mark, being contoured like a pineapple cheese. Thrice, being in seeming difficulties, he wallowed forward into clinches, embracing his hampered antagonist with every evidence of affection and clinging fast until pried loose by the sweating referee. Not until just before the bell sounded did the discredited Bear Cat really offer any return strategy and then his swings were high, wide and unhandsome. Shrill derisive cries arose, and conflicting advice:

“Look at ’im now—telegraphin’ his licks!”

“Go on, you Broadus—he can’t lay a glove on you. Bore in, boy, bore in!”

“Don’t pay no ’tenshun to them haymakers, Knock Out—jest stand off an’ jab him plum’ to death!”

“Tha’s the ticket—land ’em amongst the giblets!”

“Lead fur the stomach—hit’s his tender place!”

“Umph huh, see ’im flinchin’ erway frum that one!”

It was the opinion of many seasoned judges that the bell reprieved the Bear Cat from actual disaster. He shuffled back to his post and drooped there upon a stool while Mr. O’Grady spewed mouthfuls of water upon his charge’s perspiry torso and fanned him in a perfunctory and mechanical way. That solitary attendant appeared also to be accepting the inevitable.

Above the bent backs of half a dozen zealous cornermen who massaged his legs and laved his chest, Knock Out raised a jubilant countenance in answer to the plaudits of the house.

“Nothin’ but a mere shell,” he proclaimed, with a jovial gesture of one monstrous padded mitt. “Sence all the time I been fightin’ I ain’t never seen one that wuz mo’ mere.” (Tremendous applause mingled with laughter.)

Round two was in its essentials a duplication of its predecessor. Again the gallant Southerner took the offensive; again his senior fended, ducked, swayed, dodged, fled, hugged, replied to hammering assaults with inconsequential side-swipes, or, in emergencies, accepted a battering. There was a crude impotency in the Kid's attempts to land an occasional counterwallop. There was a visible discouragement which stared out of his blinking and saddened eyes.

Critics agreed that only his favorable configuration had thus far saved him from destruction—the shoulders shielded his jaws, the abnormally long arms gave partial protection to his vulnerable midriff. But sooner or later youth must be served. Such was the consensus of views as loudly expressed from every side. See how the veteran was panting for wind. See how slow he was and how awkward. See how now his elderly nose dripped red.

But in the interval between the end of this round and the beginning of the third one, strange words passed between the venerable one and his manager, what they said being inaudible to those nearby by reason of the joyous clamor which rocked the building.

“Mist’ Skippy,” said the Bear Cat, “I’se gittin’ tired of this foolishness. This yere brash boy ain’t got nothin’. Has they had a run fur they money yit? Or ain’t they had it?”

“They have that,” answered the director. “Besides, we’ve got to catch the eleven o’clock train for Buffalo.”

“A’ right, suh, we ketches her,” said the Bear Cat and under cover of his gloves he smiled to himself.

Round three was ushered in with a fierce and bounding onslaught by the still unmarked Broadus. But all at once, and transpiring so quickly that the eye scarce could follow it, something happened. From the crouching, swaying Bear Cat was a lightning-fast parry and feint. He wove a daunting geometric puzzle with those two dangling arms of his. He shifted on his hips in a workmanlike way, stepped back and stepped in, and then one which he seemed to take out of his hip pocket whistled upward and was buried deep in the Black Hope's belly at the identical point where the naked skin met the waistband of a pair of royal purple trunks.

This was done with the right. As the recipient bent double, with a loud moan of intense and anguished surprise, the left fist was hooked deftly over in a sickle-like twist. The Bear Cat had his choice of locations. But curiously, the second thrust landed neither on the button of the chin nor yet

in that coy little nest of nerves which they call the solar plexus. A great general gasp of astonishment burst forth as, with the thud of a ripe canteloupe falling from a tall building, it landed squarely upon the woolly peak of his opponent's skull. Plainly the intent had been that it should land upon that most unlikely area.

This supplementary blow uncurled its prey magically. He staggered back, and through the sudden hush which had fallen upon all and sundry, as such a hush always does fall when a multitude has been dazed by a sudden and totally unexpected shock, there cut in one taunting commentary from a point near at hand:

“Nothin’ only a shell! But the shell’s loaded wid high explosives, ain’t it?”

Even in the physical agony of that moment Knock Out Broadus heard the gibe and knew who spoke it. And through his own great mental distress Stallmints Stickney likewise recognized that voice for the voice of a recent ally and felt the pangs of an added foreboding.

And now the silence had ended and a vast shriek went up. For still another incredible event was coming to pass. Knock Out Broadus was stumbling backward. Kid Maxey was charging into him and flailing, with chopping downward licks, not into his victim's exposed front but again and again and again upon the crown of the head. As well as might be told, the Bear Cat desired no other bull's eye than this.

So the tortured Knock Out turned and ran. He ran like a hunted roebuck. And like a relentless orang-outang the Kid pursued him around and around the ring. And the Kid still aimed for the pate and Knock Out, with both gloves outspread upon his smitten scalp, still sought to cover it up. It was a foot race and it lasted for four circuits of the roped-in track.

Twice, as he sped by his corner, the fugitive glared with despairing eyes to where his petrified staff huddled just beyond the angle, and toward them, in passing, he flung an order. If they heard it, which was doubtful, their stupefaction was such that they disregarded it. On his next whirl he repeated it, only now it was no command but a desperate plea. Still they made no move, being temporarily comatose. So, as he came near for the fourth time, which was the last, he lunged forward, plucked a towel from the limp grasp of the nearest aide-de-camp and flung it over his shoulder so that it whirled high into the air.

It was a world's record which perchance will stand forever—a prizefighter, acting in his own behalf, had thrown up his own sponge!

A pastel-shaded damsel in a ringside seat fainted dead away. She was Knock Out Broadus's most cherished lady friend and her mortification bade her swoon and stay swooned awhile.

Local attention though immediately was shifted from her limber form to a spot diagonally across the stage. From this point and above the excited hubbub, issued a loud strong voice saying:

“Brethren an’ sistren, le’s take a vote. That there se’f-retired fo’flusher”—the speaker, who was none other than Royal Arcanum Watts, pointed upward to indicate who he meant—“he suttinly needs a new name. The one he’s been wearin’ don’t fit him no longer. Le’s see, whut is it that’s got a kind of a soft dent right in the middle of its top crust?”

“A new baby,” suggested one gay bystander.

“Naw, somethin’ to eat. I got it! Friends, it’s my painful duty to announce to you that the late Knock Out Broadus jest committed suicide wid a wet towel. In his place we has now the Parker House Roll! An’ there he stands!” He re-aimed his forefinger at the stricken object of his remarks. “All in favor of the motion will kindly respond by sayin’ ‘Aye’.”

And by acclamation the ayes had it. Even some of the sycophants who lately had formed the official bodyguard of the fallen idol paused in the very act of deserting him to join in the hearty chorus of assent. Then they moved on in mass formation to offer their congratulations to the victor.

’Stallmints Stickney shoved through the press and shook an infuriated abdomen in his former associate’s face.

“You sold me out!” he shouted. “You done double-cross me! You done trick me!”

“Who started the double-crossin’ business fust, you busted turkey-gobbler? Who th’owed me out of the pardnership on my uppers wid Zero about to ketch up wid me? Who stole my meal-ticket, sich ez he wuz, away frum me?”

Without offering to rise from where he sat, Royal Arcanum now addressed the surrounding group: “Won’t somebody please move this here quiverin’ mess of chitterlin’s out frum under my nose? He’s had a puncture or a blow-out, one. You kin see him goin’ down befo’ yore very eyes, but even so he interferes wid my pleasant view of that other false alarm tha’s

moanin' up yonder. Go way frum me, swindler, befo' I slaps the rest of yore map loose frum about ten pounds of wattles!"

He fell into a tone of cheerful banter. "I wonder"—he said dreamily—"I wonder how-come Kid Maxey could 'a' found out that yere wuz the one fool jigaboo in all this world tha's got a tender spot whar all other jigaboos is the hardest? I wonder who it wuz mentioned it to him an' his manager that the best place to play on wuz the top of that perticular nigger's skull? It had to be somebody that knowed the secret. It must 'a' been the same pusson w'ich only yistiddy wrote a unanimous letter to the Boxin' Commission tellin' 'em this thick crook yere wuz bustin' the rules by backin' a fighter on the sly w'ile at the same time runnin' a athletical club." He bowed in mock sympathy as the discomfited enemy shrank under this new wound. "I trusts, ole settler, that you is doin' well in the 'stallmint line, because you's shortly due to git jolted plum' out of pugilisms.

"But I ain't got no time to be wastin' on bankrupts an' pore black trash." He rose from his seat. "Frum now on I'll be movin' amongst the ready money classes. W'en I buttons my coat to-night I'm lockin' up my trunk but watch my smoke to-morrer!"

He brushed past the diminishing hulk of the fat foeman. "You, Parker House," he commanded, "look yore last upon me now. 'Cause w'en next you sees me, ef at all, I ain't goin' be able to recall that I ever met you befo'. At that, I oughten' bear you no grudge. Ef it hadn't 'a' been fur you I wouldn't have all the dough w'ich I'm goin' collect frum the stake-holders in the mawnin' by reason of my havin' put up ever' last cent I could rake an' scrape together by pawnin' the rest of my clothes an' my watch an' chain an' all.

"You mout be interested in knowin' that I done my bettin' two ways. Yas suh! I bet you wouldn't win an' I bet they wouldn't be no knock-out yere this evenin', w'ich that part of it wuz a mortal cinch an' it's a shame to take the money. Fur I knowed you couldn't knock out Kid Maxey wid an ax. An' I knowed he wouldn't git no chance to knock you out onc't he'd clipped you good an' hard on that unfinished bean of yourn, lak I told him to."

Lolling plaintively over the ropes, the rechristened ex-phenomenon muttered what evidently was intended for an excuse.

"Whut's that?" demanded Royal Arcanum Watts. "You sez he half-brained you? Well, then, friend, yore loss is total. 'Cause half a brain is all you ever had!"

CHAPTER VI

THE LAST OF THE BOURBONS

From where he sat alongside the door of his office, the ex-circuit judge could look diagonally across Legal Row into the doors of the court-house. Above his head swung a small sign-board bearing the words:

William Pitman Priest
Attorney at Law

It was a new sign; the paint on it still shone with the freshness of fresh paint. It made a bright spot of white and blue—white letters on a blue background—up under a limb of a big sycamore that brushed the face of the squatty little building. The sunlight shuttled through the interlacings of this friendly bough and wove a checkered pattern of light and shadow across the dull red overlay of the wall. The sunlight had the softened and blurry quality of early October; it seemed to sift down billions of powdery yellow motes, like fine gold dust. Some leaves that were prematurely bronzed or browned also floated down to lie and rustle on the pavement. The sycamore, being first among the shade trees lining the county square to surrender before the approach of the real fall, already was striking its colors. There was just enough of a breeze to stir the fallen leaves and make them whisper among themselves. You might say they were telling one another good-by.

Judge Priest sat in a chair tilted back against the brickwork, with his heels hooked over the front crosspiece, and he drew on his corncob pipe, and about once in so often tamped down the smolder in it with a short broad thumb. He had a newspaper spread across his knees, but he was not reading. He was taking an Indian Summer air-bath.

A battered-looking automobile with the top up, turned out of Franklin Street and came through the Row and stopped at the beginning of the concrete walkway leading inward over the yard to the court-house. The Judge watched the halted car, his eyes puckered and squinting behind their spectacle lenses. A young man who wore a blue uniform coat and a uniform cap, but whose garb otherwise was of a civilian sort, wriggled from behind the steering-wheel and got out briskly and motioned to the occupants of the rear seat likewise to get out. Emerging from beneath the top they revealed

themselves as a pair of elderly negroes—a man and a woman. The woman was bareheaded.

They appeared confused or frightened. They were awkward, too, and got in their own way and in each other's way. A special reason for this was at once apparent. They were handcuffed together. The watcher saw that was the case as soon as the brace were afoot. The white man waved an order, then followed them, directing his charges from the rear as they shambled reluctantly along the pathway, their shamed heads hanging. They stumbled up the broad steps and went in at the main door between its white imitation-stone columns, and several men who had been idling beneath the portico turned in behind the prisoners and their herder.

Judge Priest stayed where he was for possibly five minutes longer, still looking toward the court-house. He forgot to smoke, and the tobacco lost its live ember. He got up, tapped out the dead ash against his door-jamb and crossed the graveled street and disappeared where the rest had gone. Waddling over, he carried his eighty-one years fairly well. Perhaps that was because they were sheathed and cradled in an accumulation of healthy fat.

He was away for some ten or fifteen minutes more. Coming back, then, he found his deserted doorstep had acquired, during his absence, an occupant. Sergeant Jimmy Bagby perched there with his ancient legs spraddled out before him and his black slouch hat jauntily perched on one side of his head. The sergeant had much style about him in his youth, and age had not taken it from him by any manner of means.

“Mornin’, Judge,” he hailed the returning one. “Whut kind of a way is this to be practicin’ law? S’pose I’d been a client instid of just loafin’ by killin’ time.”

“I’ve been practicin’ somethin’ besides law this mornin’,” said Judge Priest, speaking with the ungrammatical whine which always he employed excepting in a court-room.

“Whut?”

“Philanthropy—you might call it that. And I’ve got me some clients, too. I got tired of waitin’ fur business to come to me, so I skirmished acros’t over yonder a short spell ago and picked me up a little. Yes suh, Jimmy, I’ve just took whut’ll be my first case since I resumed the legal purfession.”

“Whose case is it?”

“A couple of old niggers—man and his wife. I went bail fur ’em too, while I was about it.”

“Whut’d they been doin’—killin’ somebody?”

“No, this is serious. Bob Sweet, the pious and efficient chief of our new county patrol force, he brought ’em in. They’re dangerous malefactors, too, jedgin’ by the way Bob was handlin’ ’em. Besides, he caught ’em redhanded—in actual possession of mighty nigh a full quart of home-made corn licker containin’ considerably more’n one-half of one percent alcohol. Think of that! I don’t know how I’ll make out defendin’ ’em. It certainly looks like they’ve got the goods on my clients shore—reg’lar desperadoes, they must be. Still, ez a member of our local bar, I reckon I’ll have to do my sworn duty by ’em. We’ll make a fight of it, anyway.”

His bantering tone slipped from him: “I declare, Jimmy Bagby, I don’t know when I’ve been more outdone! Grabbin’ holt of two poor old country darkies and skeerin’ ’em half to death and draggin’ ’em into town all shackled up like they’d been committin’ murder; and then this here brash little whipper-snapper of an Oliphant that we’ve got now a county judge gittin’ ready to stick ’em away to await the action of the next grand jury, and in the meantime let their little scrap of a farm go plum’ to rack and ruin on ’em.

“He’d ’a’ done it, too, ef I hadn’t walked in just about that time and offered to go their bond, and on top of that, to represent ’em ef it comes to a trial. They live out back of Unity schoolhouse somewheres. I didn’t place ’em, but the old man tells me I used to know him when he worked fur Daz Futrell twenty years ago. Maybe I did—my mind ain’t whut it was.”

“Your mind’s all right,” stated his friend, with seeming impatience. “You’re behind the times, that’s whut ails you—you’re filled up with a false and old-fashioned sentimentalness. And you’ll be kept toler’ble busy, too, ef that’s the way you’re aimin’ to celebrate openin’ up this here new law office of yours. The county jail is bustin’ full of those white mule cases already—men and women both. Why, they’ve got one sickly old white woman that’s been locked up in a cell fur goin’ on two months. And she wasn’t peddlin’ the stuff nor makin’ it, neither. They found a pint vial of it hid under her bed-tick—anyhow, that’s whut I hear. It looks like the criminal classes are just naturally runnin’ away with this county, don’t it?”

The sergeant grunted vehemently in token of his real feelings; then, looking off into space, he added a casual remark apparently unrelated to the subject recently under discussion: “I learn that Mr. John Henry Larkin, our new federal enforcement officer, has just bought himself a big tourin’-car

and two front lots out in that Arcadian Park development. He's fixin' to put up a residence there. At least, that's accordin' to gossip goin' around."

"Shows whut a smart feller can do on a salary of fifteen hundred a year or thereabouts ef he saves his money," said Judge Priest. "But on the other hand, you take Bob Sweet. He's one of 'em, anyway, that they can't accuse of takin' graft. He's doin' the Lord's work ez he sees it, that boy is—ridin' the roads night and day, smellin' out evil. Well, there's plenty of it fur him to smell, I'll say that much. In some neighborhoods you can't scarcely pass a woodlot or a tobacco barn or a corn crib any more without you ketch that sour, rank, moonshiny stink comin' to you acros't-country. I noticed it last Sunday, out ridin' in the river bottoms. And I remember when instid of that poisonous stuff you'd be smellin' clover hay and cows, and apples gittin' ripe in the orchards, and the weed curin' in the sheds—good honest smells that made a feller glad he was alive and able to sniff 'em up his nose."

The old Judge settled himself in his chair, that creaked protestingly under his weight.

"Lawsy, lawsy!" he mused. "What a magnificent witch-finder that young Bob Sweet would 'a' made back in old Salem! And County Judge Oliphant would 'a' been the right one to pass sentence and light the fires under 'em after Bobby'd fetched the wretches in. It purty near broke both their hearts this mornin' when I snatched those two black law-breakers out of the clutch of outraged justice."

Judge Priest took off his hat and rubbed his round bald forehead, like a man perplexed. His companion regarded him whimsically, waiting for the next word.

"Well, suh," said the Judge at length, "maybe it was a good thing I declined to run fur reëlection four years ago. Fact is, I know it was a good thing. Remember, don't you, whut I said in my card to the public?—'retiring from the bench owing to the infirmities of age'—'having served six terms it is time to make way for a younger and more active man'—and so on and so forth."

"I remember," answered Sergeant Bagby. "I likewise remember how I laughed right out when I read it. You and your infirmities of age! Why, right now you're as good ez you ever was—maybe a little bit too fat," he added critically.

"You ain't lookin' so very peaked yourself," retorted Judge Priest. "Jimmy, I'm goin' to let you in on a little secret. I'm goin' to tell you the

main reason why I retired. I couldn't face the kind of docket that was pilin' up on me without quarrelin' with my own private convictions. I was raised to have reverence for the law and the statutes. I believed in 'em and I flattered myself I knew a good many of 'em. Maybe that was because, in my time, there wasn't so many laws to keep track of as they've got now on the books.

"But, Jimmy, just between you and me, I couldn't git used to the notion of sendin' some other poor errin' thirsty devil over the road fur violatin' this here Eighteenth Amendment when I had a full jimmyjohn waitin' fur me at home. I might keep on havin' licker on my pussonal breath, but I wasn't goin' to have it on my official conscience—no, suh! Ef I kept my appetite—and I have—I likewise figgered on keepin' my self-respect, which I done so by steppin' down and out.

"They say Judge Fifeman, over in the second district from this one, is specially severe on the bootleggers after he's had a hard night of it down in his own cellar. And that noble young reformer upstate, Congressman Trafer, he can't make a real good Prohibition enforcement speech until he's about two-thirds licked up. But I reckon my own soul wasn't constituted limber enough for modern judicial purposes. So I just up and quit."

"Yes, you up and quit," said the sergeant, and gave a satiric grunt. "You was goin' to lean back and take things easy, wasn't you? And whut did you do then? Went traipsin' off all over the world fur goin' on three years, leavin' me and yore other regular standbys here all by ourselves—dern, but it was lonesome without you, Billy! And then you come back and start up in the law business like a young kid beginner. I know whut the trouble was—you can't git along without the smell of these here rusty musty old law books in your snoot."

"There was one other reason," confessed the Judge. "I just naturally couldn't stay away. I thought Denver, Colorado, was goin' to be all right. And it was fur a spell. My married niece that I was stayin' with done her best to make me comfortable—her and her husband both. But I got restless; and I tried Southern California, ez you know. But doggone a country where they don't have anything but climate all the time! Once in a while I like a little weather in mine.

"And Bermuda wasn't so bad at first. Those English people are so blamed stupid and so reactionary and so stubborn and all that that they still hang on to their personal liberty. I know it'll be hard fur you to believe that, you bein' an unreconstructed Rebel and havin' lived all your life in a free

country like this—except for the four years when you was tryin’ to bust it up. But it’s the truth.

“Why, they’re actually so old-fashioned down there in those West Indian Islands that it never seems to occur to them that their neighbors’ private business is their business—poor, ignorant subjects of the Crown! At the start-off it was kind of pleasin’ to be able to take a drink without havin’ to lock all the doors and windows first and turn out the lights fur fear some policeman would come breakin’ in, with a warrant or without one. But livin’ under a tyrannical monarchy palled on me after a while, Jimmy. I got homesicker and homesicker. And now here I am, but I still don’t feel somehow like I’m at home. This town certainly has changed in a whole lot of ways while I’ve been gone—this whole Southern country has, fur that matter.”

“Whut’s the use of broodin’ over the past? Whut’s done with is done with.” Mr. Bagby set forth his epigram with a fine mock gravity. But an undertone of regret was there, too.

“I ain’t broodin’, I’m just thinkin’ back, that’s all,” explained the other. “Besides, Jimmy, when a feller gits along in life to where we are, the past is about all he’s got to look forward to. And things these days are in a powerful sweat and turmoil, you can’t deny that. Take this paper now.”

He picked it up from where it had been dropped by the doorstep, and respread it out on his lap, and a blunt finger moved upon the page, shifting from head-line to head-line.

“Just listen to this, will you? ‘High School Head Claims Boy Pupils Ply Young Girls from Hip Flasks During Class Parties’ . . . ‘Forty Illicit Stills Raided in One County’ . . . ‘More Spirits than Ever Coming in, So Port Authority Declares’ . . . ‘Physicians’ Prescriptions for Intoxicants Swamping City Druggists.’ ”

“I wish you’d hush your mouth,” interjected the sergeant. “I’m spittin’ cotton now.”

“Wait,” said the Judge, topping the interruption. “Hark to this biggest one: ‘Hijackers Prey on Hooch Runners—Three Shot, One Fatally, When Gunmen Waylay Bootleggers En Route from Rum Fleet.’ ” He tossed the sheet aside. “A lot of new words creepin’ into the language, and not such purty words, neither, I claim.”

“You want to git up to date—we’re now usin’ ’em in our daily social conversation down here,” expounded Sergeant Bagby. “There was a crowd

of mighty enterprisin' local bootleggers from the beginnin', and now we've got our own troops of hijackers. That Budge Willingham—you recall him; used to be a deputy sheriff—he's supposed to be headin' the gang. Oh, no, the modern improvements ain't altogether escaped us. There's over two thousand barrels under guard over yonder acros't town in the Shadymead bonded warehouse, but I'm told on the quiet that most of 'em are full of water. The original contents all seeped out somehow. And forged withdrawal certificates ain't exactly unknown amongst us.

“And there've been some mysterious robberies, too—burglars with a good taste in beverages breakin' in and totin' off the stuff. The Old January distillery has been a chronic sufferer. They tell me there's only just a few dozen cases left out of all the prime sour mash that used to be down there, and I wouldn't be surprised to hear it had mysteriously disappeared, come the next dark of the moon. Still, Ben Schwartz, that owns the Old January plant now, is bearin' up nobly under his losses. He's seemin'ly more prosperous than ever. Benny always was a forehanded feller, though.” He spoke this last dreamily.

“Discussing the customary morbid topic of the present day, I observe!” A third speaker had broken in on them. Having approached the conference without being observed, the venerable Doctor Lake was propped upon his cane regarding them with a dry smile on his lean face. “Well, as a favor to me, I wish you'd drop it. Let's confab about something that's not so sordid and more cheerful.”

“Fur instance, whut?” asked Sergeant Bagby.

“For instance, going fishing.”

“Where?” inquired the Judge, a pronounced eagerness in his voice.

“Over to Cottonwood Lake, across the Tennessee. There's just enough frost in the air these nights to make 'em snappish. We won't be getting many more chances this year, boys.”

“You've landed one customer, right now,” said Judge Priest heartily.

“Make it two,” amended Mr. Bagby. “When do we start?”

“How about fixing it up for day after to-morrow?—that'll be Thursday,” suggested the veteran. “We can take Uncle Ike Matthews with us to do the cooking. He must be nearly ninety—you can't tell about the age of these old darkies—but he's still a master hand at a fish fry.”

“Tell you whut,” proposed the sergeant. “Let’s ask Major Woodward—he’s about the last able-bodied member of Gideon K. Irons Camp that’s left except us three—I mean that’s spry enough to git about on his pins. Ef he’ll come along we kin make a kind of an outdoor reunion of it—swap old soldier lies and drink maybe a few sweetenin’ drams and so on.”

“Now you’re whistlin’, pardner!” declared Judge Priest, he having got laboriously on his feet. “Only, by rights, we ought to be holdin’ our celebration up in New York City or the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island, say.” His tone was cryptic.

Sergeant Bagby gave a violent start. “Whut business would we have projectin’ around amongst Yankees?” he demanded.

“Don’t call ’em Yankees, Jimmy,” pleaded his crony. “Didn’t you know that way up yonder is mighty nigh the only section left where they hold by the beliefs that us boys fit and bled fur? Yes, suh, New England and points adjacent is the last remainin’ stronghold of the ancient and honorable Southern doctrine of State Rights. I wouldn’t be astonished any day to hear they’d h’isted the Confederate flag in Hartford, Connecticut. And ez fur New Jersey——”

“There you go again,” Doctor Lake interposed. “I steer you off your favorite subject and you go right back to it. Haven’t you learned yet, you two, that whiskey is a bad thing for some people?”

“And a blamed sight too good fur lots of the others!” It was the sergeant who rounded out the sentence. “Speakin’ of licker, now——”

“I was just coming to that,” Doctor Lake hastened to say. “Personally, I’d rather have Prohibition than not to be able to get a drink whenever I feel like it. How about strolling over to my back room and letting me rig up a few long toddies from my private stock? As a physician, I’d say we all three need to stimulate our appetites—it’ll be dinner time in two or three hours from now. Hold on, Billy,” he said, as his stout friends fell into wallowing alignment on either side of his sparse and rickety figure. “Aren’t you going to lock up shop before we start?”

“Leave her be,” said the Judge carelessly. “There ain’t much that’s inside this shebang of mine that’s worth totin’ off. Let’s hurry him along, Jimmy, before he changes his mind.”

They trudged away from the gaping door, marching three abreast, and their combined ages were not so very far short of two hundred and forty years.

Time had been when Judge Priest, going fishing, would have depended for transportation upon a prehistoric white mare called Mittie May, and his aged side-bar buggy. That time was past. Mittie May had long been transported to that paradise of everlasting oats which is the reward of self-respecting white mares; and in the locked-up carriage room the buggy was falling into pieces for the resident rats to make nests out of; and black Jeff Poindexter, once the overlord of the stable, and the one who carried the mare and washed down the buggy—when he felt like it—was now thrivingly established as a business man on West One Hundred and Thirty-fourth Street, New York City.

Occasionally Jeff came home on a visit, a seasoned and dapper metropolitan, and full of strange but fascinating jargon; for instance, referring to persons of his own color as “jigaboos” and, behind their backs, speaking of those of the other race as “ofays.” But he never stayed long; very soon Manhattan would be calling him back to her throbbing breast.

Getting up on that following Thursday morning, in his shabby white house out on Clay Street, Judge Priest missed Mittie May and he missed Jeff—especially the last-named. Even though Doctor Lake’s big touring car would carry him to the ferry and thence, after crossing, on to Cottonwood, in one-sixth the time which in those olden years would have been required for the journey, he longed for the two vanished ones. Life nowadays appeared largely to be made up of missing things and mourning their lack and the loss of them. It was the penalty to be paid, along with creaky joints and store teeth that didn’t fit you, for outliving your own times.

Shuckins, though!—nobody could feel down-spirited for very long on a morning like this. Filtering through the autumnal motley of the front yard maples, the sunbeams seemed to catch their color, like a light strained through stained glass; and the air everywhere was surcharged with a golden pollen; and the cobwebs in the grass—of which there were any number—had netted and held many big drops of dew, so that each was a silken purse full of glittering diamonds. But it was warm enough, almost, for summer.

The party was smaller than had been expected. At the very last minute, Major Woodward’s loving but tyrannical guardian, his married granddaughter, put her determined heel down on the idea of letting him make the trip. It would be just like him, she said, to go and get his feet wet and then she knew what there’d be next—rheumatism, that’s what; more rheumatism than he already had. So the Major stayed behind, cursing his octogenarian legs for their treachery to him.

It turned out that Uncle Ike Matthews couldn't go, either. He had another engagement. In bed in his tumble-down cabin out on Plunkitt's Hill, he was entertaining a long-delayed visitor called Old Mortality. The visitor would stay on for a day or two, and when he went Uncle Ike's soul would go with him, leaving an empty, worn-out husk behind.

So only Judge Priest and Sergeant Bagby went with Doctor Lake, with the doctor's middle-aged man-of-all-work, Dick Gaspar, doing the driving, and four long canes lashed to one of the running-boards, and two full minnow pails sloshing on the ankles of the pair who sat in the rear seat. For these sturdy sportsmen none of your jointed bamboo rods, none of your deceitful artificial lures, gaudy with paint and dangling with hooks, would do. If the perch family spurned an honest bait, all right; at least there would be no false pretense about it. Anyway, Dick Gaspar would surely catch a mess of eating sizes even though his white patrons failed. There was known to be an affinity existing between a colored man and a pan-fish.

No angler went unrewarded, though. In the middle part of the forenoon they bit well; in the latter part of the afternoon they bit better. Every minute or two somebody's varnished cork would be bobbing its head under; somebody's cackling laugh would rise in exultation as a silversides was jerked out of water.

They had a pool on the day's catch—half a dollar for the first fish, half a dollar for the biggest fish, a whole dollar for the most fish. It was a sweepstakes for Sergeant Bagby, although Dick would have won handily had he been included in the gambling feature. Dick was high pole all day and especially he was during the morning session. His string furnished most of the meat that went into the skillet at midday when they laid off to eat and rest up.

They made a long lazy nooning of it. Where they sat on fading wild grass under a sour-gum tree that wore a jack-pudding coat of bright crimson and bright green, Dick supplied them with fried perch and hot corn-bread and hot strong coffee, and the rich smells blew across the clear yellow lake to the opposite bank, and probably made the bullfrogs over there hungry. They kept bellowing as though they were mighty hungry. Before the food, they had drafts from Doctor Lake's deep flask to give them zest—not that they needed it—and afterwards, while Dick ate a full-sized meal and then tidied up the camp place, they lay back on the soft dry turf which was thick and cushiony under their backs and they smoked and they talked, and the Judge dozed off for a spell and snored zealously.

About three o'clock the other two nudged him awake and they boarded the skiffs again, two fishermen to a boat; but first Doctor Lake's flask passed from hand to hand, winding up, with just one good long dram in it, in the welcoming grasp of the black man.

"That's powerful good-tastin' whiskey," commented Sergeant Bagby, after his turn had come and was gone. "*Whew-e-e!* I kin feel it strokin' me all the way down!"

"It ought to be good," said the donor, with the silver measure poised just off his own underlip. "It's been aging in the wood ever since the spring of the year when Alton B. Parker ran on our ticket. It's out of the supply I laid in just before the Big Drought started. That's some of the original Old January, and they never made any better Bourbon than that here in this town or anywhere else in this whole state."

"To think it's almost gone, and when it is, there won't be no more like it never again!" There was a true Kentuckian's true lament in the sergeant's dolorous philosophy. "That'll be a sorrowful day, Lew."

"I reckon your day of grief is pretty close at hand, then, from all I hear," said Doctor Lake, sinking his voice and glancing toward his servant thirty feet away.

"How so?" His two hearers cocked their ears.

"Well, strictly between ourselves, I heard rumors yesterday—on the dead q.t., of course—that Benny Schwartz is about due to suffer from another one of those mysterious robberies down at the Old January plant. It'll make his third in less than a year, and it ought to clean out the remnants of his stock. Benny's a depositor with us, you know." The doctor was vice-president and a director of the Planters' National. "And so I'm more likely than some to hear what's drifting idly about in certain confidential circles. Well, that's scandal enough for one dose. Come on, boys, let's get adrift, because gassing here we're wasting the precious hours."

It was almost dark and their arms were all played out before the fishermen called it a day and quit. They came ashore, matching strings and bragging, and they were three weary old codgers but happy and well content; though the thoughts of home and a crackling hearth-fire and a hot supper and a soft bed were beginning to appeal to them with a great appeal. Here, though, the first setback of a hitherto perfect day intervened between them and their wishes.

Doctor Lake's Dick couldn't induce the car to start. He pressed buttons vainly and he juggled unresponsive levers, after which he got out and he cranked and he cranked her, but no heartening roar from the mechanism rewarded this labor. She only panted and coughed in a debilitated way. So then he unlatched the hood and in a light which momentarily failed on him, he tried to find out what ailed her insides. His passengers stood about and offered advice and suggestions and diagnoses. The clinic threatened to turn into an autopsy. She quit gasping under treatment; she apparently was as dead as Cæsar.

Still the odd-jobs man thought that, given a little more time, he could nurse back the breath of life to the seeming corpse. So, in the gathered twilight, they sat down again in their former places near the skiff landing. The foliage above their tired heads no longer showed its brilliant piebald of a circus-clown's jacket, but was like a thick black tabard over the broad shoulders of the sour-gum tree, and the evening chill came briskly into the air, and a crescent of young moon climbed in the sky. The colored man contrived for them a snack from the leavings of dinner, then went back to his patient, kindling a bright fire alongside to give him light to work by. Time passed, and they grew drowsy, and Judge Priest's pipe went out. A lot of time passed—whole hours; maybe they dozed off altogether.

Finally Doctor Lake stirred himself. He threw away a stale stub of cigar which he had found nestling in his bosom and he struck a match and fumbled his watch out and looked at it.

"Hey, you two!" he exclaimed. "Know what time it is? Well, it's twenty past ten and for one, I'm getting cold."

"Well, what you goin' to do about it?" demanded the sergeant, who was sleepy and therefore cross.

"There's only one thing to do. Leave my man here with that baulky she-devil and start on afoot. If he gets her going he can overtake us. If he don't, we'll telephone in to town from the ferry and send out some help for him. If he has to stay here all night he can bunk on the seat cushions with the robe over him. But we can't—I'd have two disreputable old ruffians sick on my hands in the morning."

"But it's over three miles back through the slashes to the river, and not a house of any kind in between. It's the loneliest stretch in the whole county, purty near it."

“Somebody might happen along with a rig and pick us up. Come on, *roust* yourselves!”

The doctor had his own way about it. Stiffly they hobbled up through the low ground to the small ridge fringed with pecans and scrub-oaks that marked the highway; and trudging along very slowly they set their faces toward civilization. The empty winding road became a causeway built up out of the swamp lands, and on either side cypress knees showed dimly where they rose out of stagnant pools.

The prospect was for a not very cheerful journey. Traveling at a rate of not exceeding two miles an hour—that would be a flattering estimate—they had covered perhaps half the distance to the ferry, which would serve in the emergency for a relief station, when from on ahead of them, and not far away either, came a succession of noises at which instantly they checked and stiffened. It was a sharp rapid staccato of crackling sounds. It was *bang, bang*, like that, then a pause, then another *bang*, then several of the reports merging together; and at the end, as though for punctuation to a running skirmish, one solitary *bang*, spaced off.

“Must be a car back-firing,” said Doctor Lake, but his explanation was pitched in a dubious key.

“Where are your ears?” snapped Judge Priest excitedly. “You must ’a’ furgotten your war days, too! Boys, that’s pistol-shootin’, shore as you live. Somethin’s doin’ round that next bend.”

Something was doing around the bend. Or at least something had been doing. On the ensuing instant proof of it was offered to them. Out of the gloom in front of them was the *pad-pad* of pelting feet, approaching swiftly. Instinctively the three veterans took the roadside, vacating its middle. By them, and so close they could hear his forced choky breathing, ran somebody, a man, and one traveling at top speed. Passing, he almost brushed against Doctor Lake.

“Hold on, there!” commanded that gentleman.

The runner ducked and gave so convulsive a jerk that his hat flew off. But he neither slowed nor looked aside; rather he put on a burst of added speed. As he ascended a slight rise a few rods on beyond, in the direction from which the trio had tramped, they saw his shadowgram outlined for one fleeting bit against the open between two flanking lines of timber, the head tucked in, the back hunched, the arms swinging like flails, and then he was gone from sight behind them.

“Come on,” bade the Judge, and moved forward. The others obeyed, but first Doctor Lake retreated a pace or two and picked up the fugitive’s abandoned hat, and thereafter carried it along.

Cautiously the three of them advanced into the curve. As they rounded it they were aware of the bulk of a heavy motor vehicle standing in the center of the road at a distance from them of no more than thirty yards or so, and of a stir about it which betokened human presence. Two shapes made a little huddled clump by a front wheel; one might guess that they were watching, waiting, before progressing to the next step in a contemplated operation.

A third was a little in the rear, its posture vigilant, suspicious; a fourth was clambering up into the car, doing something with great haste; the vague silhouette of the body shifted and one arm seemed to rise and fall as though that one wielded a tool or a weapon. Accompanying these movements, was a brisk hammering thud, then the shriek of a nailed board being pried loose, and a tinkle and jangle of breaking glass. With that the wind brought to the nostrils of the old men a reek that was strong and unmistakable for what it was.

“Stiddy!” warned Judge Priest in a taut whisper. “Foller my lead, you boys. I’m goin’ to yell somethin’. Wait till I’m done; then you start whoopin’ and thrashin’ about like all possessed, makin’ ez much rumpus ez you kin.”

He cupped his hands to his mouth, and his comrades, knowing him for most of their lives as they had, were startled that from his throat should issue now, so full and so lusty and with such deceiving mimicry, the voice of an able-bodied youthful man—a voice which even in that tense moment they recognized and marveled at.

“Ready, men!” he shouted. “We’ve got ’em redhanded and outnumbered. Rogers, close in from your side! Turley, you and Husbands cut ’em off down the road! And don’t be afraid to shoot, either—the law’s on your side! Shoot to kill! Now rush ’em!”

On cue, as he finished, his confederates joined efforts. There arose a great hullabaloo of commingled outcries, a shuffling and rush of shod feet on the gritty gravel underfoot, a tumultuous crackling of roadside shrubbery—the convincing simulation of a spirited and determined charge.

It was surprising to note how beautifully the ruse succeeded—how beautifully and how instantaneously. In the dimness the three conspirators caught a fleeting suggestion of the stiffening of astonished figures, the

relaxing of those figures, their leaps this way and that, and a precipitate unanimous flight off sidewise into the bottoms. There was a crashing of bodies through thickety undergrowth, a great swishing and smashing down of horseweed stalks, a splashing in water, growing faint and fainter, and the thing was done.

The members of the surprise party closed in on their prize. All at once, after the excitement, the night seemed very quiet and very peaceful. Judge Priest was chuckling to himself, and Sergeant Bagby was puffing and blowing for wind to fill his lungs with, but the very next thing the old doctor did was to go up and study the contour of the captured vehicle at close range.

“Does this truck seem familiar to anybody?” inquired the investigator.

“I should say so!” Sergeant Bagby bit off a vigorous intake to make reply. “It’s Justus Hooper’s—little old Justus, our leadin’ bootlegger, and none other, by granny! *Ah hah*, now I begin to see daylight.”

“A blind man could if he wasn’t feeble-minded,” Doctor Lake grunted. “Just piece the thing together: Justus and his outfit are moving this job lot of the synthetic poison that he deals out to the retail suicide trade over this end of the state.” He tapped the side of the truck. “The estimable Budge Willingham and his troupe of hijackers get on to it that the convoy will be going through to-night. Maybe Justus has a traitor in his camp. There’s honor among thieves I guess, but then thieves have some self-respect and nobody that’d associate with Justus Hooper could have any.

“Anyhow Budge’s tough bunch slip out here to this uninhabited neighborhood and lie in wait and when the truck comes helling along they jump out of cover and hold her up and turn loose a fusillade in the air. Justus probably thought he’d driven into the Battle of the Marne by mistake. So he and his gang, being lily-livered anyhow, hop down and light out in every direction.”

“It must ’a’ been one of ’em that tore past us back yonder,” supplied the sergeant.

“I ain’t so shore of that,” said Judge Priest.

“Whut’s the reason you ain’t?” countered the sergeant. “Who else could it ’a’ been? Here, hold on, Lew, and lemme finish stringin’ the tale together: Then, just at the identical minute when Budge’s gang of scoundrels are pawin’ over the load to see whut ’tis they’ve captured so nice and easy, along come you and me and Billy Priest, hoofin’ it in. Talk about your

coincidences! And we slip up on 'em unbeknownst and Billy here cuts loose, makin' out like he's County Chief Bob Sweet with a whole posse of deputies at his back. I'll swear, Billy, you'd 'a' fooled me ef I hadn't been standin' there right alongside, listenin' at you while you done it. So you couldn't blame Budge and his pardners fur bein' fooled, especially they bein' overtook by surprise that way.

“Moreover they knew that Bob Sweet would count it a blessed privilege to plug a hijacker; besides which, I reckon they hadn't took time to reload after emptyin' their guns. So they also tear the bushes down gittin' away same ez the others had done five minutes before. Judgin' by the way they were travelin' when they left, all four of 'em must be a couple of miles from here by now.”

“I doubt if they had to go that far,” surmised Doctor Lake. “You noticed they all went off in this quarter.” He waved his right arm. “Well, my guess is that they left their own car hidden over on the Otter Ford road—that's less than a mile east of here—and then waded across to this ambushing point. So naturally when we disturbed them they hustled back the same way they'd come. But Justus's crowd will have to walk in, I expect.”

“I wish sore feet fur 'em,” said Sergeant Bagby. “Well, the next question is whut are we goin' to do with this jag of p'izen that's fell into our hands so providential-like? How 'bout bustin' it open and pourin' it out on the ground, boys?” He inhaled deeply and with profound disgust. “Ketch the vile and sickenin' stink frum that broken bottle up there on top—bound to be just pure deadly rot-gut!”

“Jim Bagby,” quoth Judge Priest severely, “your nose must be defective along with your eyesight. Or else you're lettin' your imagination run away with your reason. That ain't a stink you smell—it's a fragrant perfume.”

In the darkness the other two stared at him, puzzled. Then Doctor Lake sniffed and sniffed again.

“By the Lord Harry I believe you're right!” he proclaimed. Very nimbly, considering his years, he mounted by a wheel and striking matches took hasty inventory of the piled-up spoils of war. “You *are* right!” he cried, after further brief examination. “Wait till I check 'em up. Let's see!” He felt the corners of the small boxes. “Six across, five deep, two extra ones on top—thirty-two packages in all, by rough count, and one dozen quarts in each package.”

He descended from the hub and even through the gloom his associates could see the startled gleam in his eyes. “Boys, by some miracle that I can’t fathom yet, we’ve come into possession of thirty-two cases of the real Old January, and every drop of it old enough to vote! Just priceless, that’s all—just absolutely priceless.” He added this description reverently. “But Billy, how did you come to guess what it was? Was it by the odor?”

“ ’Twasn’t so much guesswork ez it was merely figgerin’ things out,” said Judge Priest, with due modesty. “Lew, ef I’m not too inquisitive, whut become of that hat you picked up back yonder?”

“Here it is.” The old doctor hauled it, crumpled, from a coat pocket into which he had wadded it.

“Lemme have a look at it? You scratch a light fur me.”

Three white heads were bent toward a common center where a burning match made a tiny circumference of radiance.

“Look!” said the Judge. “See those initials in the sweat-band. Gentlemen, do the letters ‘B. S.’ convey any meanin’ to your intellects?”

“Benny Schwartz! But what would Benny Schwartz be doing——” Bewildered, Doctor Lake left the question unfinished.

“I thought I knew who ’twas when he skelped that rise on past behind us just now,” said Judge Priest. “I only wanted to wait and make shore, that was all.”

“Now that you mention it, I remember too,” declared Doctor Lake. “I knew there was a sort of something familiar about the cut of that back. But what would——”

“It ain’t such a hard riddle to solve, the way I see it. Boys, on the strength of the available evidence let’s frame a hypothetical question ez us court-house folks put it. Let’s s’pose, fur the sake of argument, that Benny Schwartz has been in cahoots all along with that accommodatin’ but chicken-hearted expressman, Mr. Justus Hooper—in other words, that he’s been helpin’ to slip his own property out of his own warehouse. Assume further that they’re runnin’ the consignments up to some quiet spot on the river and transferrin’ ’em to motor boats.

“Assume that to-night when they clean the distillery out of the last batch that’s left, Benny comes along to make sure it’s all delivered to its proper destination—that none of it don’t go astray on the way. Maybe it’s because he don’t exactly trust Justus’s boys. Maybe it’s just because he’s a careful

businessman. At any rate he takes the chance. And then Budge's gang bobs up and the fireworks start and Benny gits panicky—well, I don't much blame him fur that—and he lights out and runs out frum under his hat. I'll bet you Benny's wishin' he had his hat back right this minute, wherever he is. But he's still lopin'—I'll bet that too!"

"A regular vicious circle sure enough—and you supply the missing links in it," commented Doctor Lake. "Judge, I congratulate you—you're not only a great mimic but a first-rate detective!"

"An imitatin' fool, that's whut I'd call him," stated Sergeant Bagby worshipfully. "But say, that ain't settlin' the question I ast a minute ago. Now that we've got it, whut're we goin' to do with it?" The sergeant had his practical side. "The case is altered since we found out this ain't just a passel of that there sympathetic stuff. I'd as soon think of smashin' up my grandma's tombstone as pourin' out sich noble licker ez this is."

"Well, we couldn't carry it back to Benny even ef we had any way of gittin' it into town," mused Judge Priest. "Under the circumstances and everything considered, such a kindness would be highly embarrassin' to Benny. He wouldn't thank us. And I judge Justus Hooper would also find difficulty in explainin' ef it were returned to him in broad daylight, and by dustin' off so abrupt Budge Willingham certainly forfeited any proprietary rights he might have."

"I'd hate mightily to have it on my soul afterwards that through our interference it had fell into unappreciative hands." This was from the sergeant. "Why, ef it was turned over to Bob Sweet that conscientious idiot actually wouldn't have no better sense than to destroy it utterly!"

"On the other hand, ef it was committed to the keepin' of Enforcement Officer Larkin I'm afraid it would escape from custody. They do say contraband goods have a way of gittin' away frum him bottle by bottle when he ain't lookin'."

"And the matter is plainly outside the jurisdiction of our city police department."

"Besides which them boys kin git all they need to swig frum the sorry stuff that's confiscated in town."

"Still, ef we leave it here it'll all be toted off. Somebody's shore to come along. There won't be an ounce of it left by mornin'."

"Ethically it wouldn't be proper for us to divide it among ourselves for our own private purposes. That would be condoning at law-breaking—and

worse.”

“I regret to have to say it, but there you’re right, Lew!” So confessing, Judge Priest reached up and gave the side of the truck a sad, caressing pat of the hand. “It does seem such a terrible pity, though, to think of the last of the Old January goin’ to waste. When I think of people I know—old fellers like us, some of ’em, and needy folks too—people that are just perishin’ fur a few daily rations of decent spirits like they’d been used to havin’ all their lives and now can’t git; people that are too poor to buy at present rates or else skeered to drink the kind of dangerous stuff that’s mainly bein’ peddled on the sly; well, when I think of them——” Judge Priest broke off and looked into space dreamily.

“Which reminds me that I’ve got some patients who need alcoholic stimulant regularly and can’t afford to pay prescription prices at the drug store. They aren’t toppers, either. Some of them were total abstainers when they had their health. And they’re really suffering too.” All of a sudden Doctor Lake snapped out of his reverie: “Say, you old chin-whiskered rascal, what in thunder are you hinting at anyhow?”

“I see you git my drift.” It was as though the Judge, in advance of further discussions, acquitted his potential fellow plotters of any lack of ready perception. “We could be makin’ up the list of the favored few while we were totin’ it in—a case to this one and a case to that one. A beneficiary wouldn’t need to know where the gift came frum or how or why. But I reckon he’d know enough to keep his mouth shut about it afterwards. I know I’d keep mine shut ef I was to wake up to-morrow mornin’ and find out that durin’ the night whilst I was wrapped in peaceful slumber parties unknown had come by and left an even dozen bottles of Old January on my back doorstep. It’d restore my faith in Santy Claus, that’s whut ’twould do to me.”

“I ain’t sleepy,” declared Sergeant Bagby enthusiastically. “Speakin’ personally I couldn’t think of no more pleasant way of spendin’ the rest of the night. I’m recallin’ the names of three or four worthy candidates of my own right this minute. But there’s the problem of transportation unsettled—don’t you two philanthropists go leavin’ that out of your calculations.”

“That’s a fact, Jimmy,” admitted the Judge. “How about it, Lew—got any suggestion about movin’ our liquid freight?”

The doctor seemed not to have heard. He threw up a hand for silence.

“Hark!” he bade them. “Don’t I hear a car coming this way frum back yonder?” They listened. “It’s a car, sure enough. What’s more, it’s my car or

I miss my guess—I know that snort the engine gives on a grade. My man must have got her to start finally. Everything seems to have been timed to a minute here in these bottoms to-night.”

“How about him, Lew—kin he be trusted?” queried Sergeant Bagby anxiously.

“Who—Dick? Absolutely. He’s the closest-mouthed darkey in seven counties. He can be deaf, dumb and blind when I tell him to. I guarantee Dick. Besides, I aim to bind him to secrecy with a couple of quarts for himself out of that broken case. We’d better save out a bottle or so for the ferry-keeper, too.”

Oncoming, the car made the turn in the road and as she straightened the headlight picked up the three figures on ahead and brought them out in strong relief. Dick stopped her fifteen feet from them, his eyes widening as he flung a side glance toward the truck. He sniffed appreciatively but said nothing.

“Dick,” said his master, “we’ve got a little job for you. Do you think you could transfer what’s in this machine to yours and still leave room enough for us to ride?”

“Yas, sah,” assented Dick, and his lips split in an understanding grin, “that is ef you gen’elmen didn’t mind bein’ cramped fur room fur yore laigs.”

“We’ll risk that. Now hop out and start shifting! It must be midnight already and we’ll have a lot to do after we hit the city limits.”

Judge Priest drew Sergeant Bagby aside and embraced him.

“Jimmy,” he said and chuckled happily between words, “when I think of a lot of our poor but deservin’ friends goin’ round town with rich and expensive breaths; and when I think whut Benny Schwartz is goin’ to think to himself in private and how Justus Hooper is goin’ to feel and whut private regrets Budge Willingham is goin’ to have and mebbe one or two others I might name but won’t—why, Jimmy, I could bust right out cryin’ on your shoulder!”

CHAPTER VII

LONG PANTS

Where I came from, they were not “trousers” nor yet were they “breeches,” as counter-distinguished from “knee breeches.” They were long pants—and putting them on did something to a boy. Something seemed to happen inside him. After that he was a different person and it was a different world. Perhaps I can come near to explaining the difference when I say that in his own eyes he became a more important person than he had been before, whereas, relatively speaking, the world became of less importance. It still was an interesting world; it shortly would become a romantic world, swimming in a tender, glowing mist edged with rainbow trimmings; but it no longer was an overpowering and an unconquerable world. It could be beaten by one coming at it in the right spirit and long pants. You felt that. You showed it.

As though it were yesterday I remember my own sensations, my own experiences on the date of the dedication of my young legs to long pants. One experience in particular do I remember. I’ll come to that in a few minutes.

I remember that beforehand, from the hour when I won the parental consent for the great change, I was filled, like the fabled chameleon that got on the piece of Scotch plaid, with conflicting emotions. I was in a fever of joy over the approach of the promised event, and at the same time I was in a chill of apprehension, for I knew that until the novelty of my transformation had worn off I should be the victim of scandalizing remarks on the part of my contemporaries. For such was the ribald custom among us. The occasion of the first pair of long pants was likewise the occasion for gibes and scalding criticism. It took a very strong-minded boy to pass, without suffering, through this period. To check the floods of juvenile ridicule at their sources took a boy with the reputation of being ready with his fists. I was neither; so in advance I was torn between dread and yearnings.

Encysted in my ointment was one considerable insect. I had set my heart upon an entire shift of wardrobe, including a mannish shirt with a separate collar. Crossing the line, I desired to cross all the way over and be at once on the farther side, a grown-up in outward appearance if not in years. I already had chosen the model I wished to pattern myself on, sartorially.

This model was a person very much older than I. To me he seemed almost incredibly old. He must have been all of thirty-five. But in the sunset of his days, when properly he should be through with the gauds and vanities of this life, he plainly had springtime in his soul. He advertised it by his dress.

I once had been privileged to see him in the act of disrobing. He was put together so beautifully, with so many fascinating hitches and catches and snaps. His cuffs—detachable and therefore doubly desirable—fastened to his sleeves with cunning metal devices having levers and tiny springs to them and notched jaws. The button-holed tab at the lower end of his shirt bosom was not a mere superfluous adornment as with so many adults of our town. With him it served a purpose. It latched to the top button of a certain undergarment.

His watch-chain was of woven horse-hair and passed twice about his neck, being confined in front with a clasp of precious gold. His scarf was kept snugly down by a toothed mechanism which bit into the center plait of his shirt and which also might be employed at meal times for retaining the napkin on the bosom. In the knot of the tie itself was a splendid gorgeous horseshoe studded with diamonds, and for further security a little gold chain ran from this blazing clump to a gold safety pin that was set in the edge of the waistcoat vest. Nobody would ever get his jewelry away from him without a struggle. His key-ring, his pen-knife, and his match-safe were attached to a much longer chain than the above—a chain which practically encircled him amidships and disappeared into a fob pocket. He had a yoke-shaped appliance of whalebone which slipped under the lapel of his coat, holding it firmly to the breast. His gold-mounted private toothpick was kept, when not in use, in a decorative little gold case. His collar was of a sort never encountered nowadays. Glossy and white and glistening, it reared to a vast height at the back, but was sharply divided at the front to give the Adam's apple a chance. You cannot find such a collar in this age. Practically the only way to get the effect would be to have the tails starched and then put your shirt on upside down. His sleeve garters had genteel rosettes and tiny fluted edges on them. For a crowning touch his suspenders were of broad and embroidered webbing with magnificent buckles and shining bosses set in the elastic parts, and there were pendent chains instead of the conventional leather straps affected by the plain people.

My hero's mind also was brilliant, to match his costume. I recall that it was he who said to me:

“Bud, did you get that letter?”

And when I, wriggling in a pleased embarrassment, pretended I had never heard the answer to the catch and, with an attempt to counterfeit innocence, said, "What letter?" he did not reply by saying, "Let her go, Gallagher!" according to the regular formula. No, instead of that, he instantly retorted, "Let her go, postal card!"

It left me, as you might say, stunned. The man was one of our leading drug clerks. He was the first person in town to wear a "chestnut bell" and ring it when somebody got off an old one. He would be!

So I envied him for all that he was and for all that he had on him, and particularly I envied him for his noble suspenders and the detachable cuffs. For the other manly ornamentations—the silver and gold contrivances and the whalebone dingus and the personal toothpick—I could wait; but it seemed to me that I must have a pair of those cuffs and a set of those suspenders to signalize my utter emancipation from the last lingering traces of a vanished juvenility. But the cuffs were denied me, becoming a fond future hope and dream. Nor, at the outset, was I given a complete "long-pants suit," with a vest and all; that lack was the chief dead fly in my Balm of Gilead. I still owned a roundabout jacket or two—scorned relics of a repugnant childhood—which must be worn out first. How I strove, by fair means and foul, to wear them out that autumn! But on me was bestowed a pair of long pants, built of gray jeans, very stiff and warranted to last out any season, and with them suspenders—not, 'tis true, the costly and luxurious suspenders I coveted, but nevertheless suspenders. The jeans was a sort of cloth very hard to wrinkle, but once wrinkled, guaranteed to remain so.

On a great day in the morning, a day destined forever after and forevermore to be marked in my mind with a bright-red asterisk, I drew on my long pants and, thrilled by the thought that never again would I button on breeches to the meridian of a "shirt-waist," I snapped my suspenders into place upon my shoulders; and then, leaving off my coat so that all might observe what wondrous thing had come to pass, I went forth, being proud and yet ashamed.

Through the forenoon I endured the stings and arrows of outrageous acquaintances. In the afternoon, immediately following the principal or midday meal, I met a boy who lived in the next street to ours. Across the years I see him haloed about with affectionate regards. Whatever became of him I cannot tell, but to-day I look on him as Damon looked on Pythias, as Jesse looked on Frank. Alone out of all my group, he did not make fun of me that day. He accepted me without comment.

Another thing serves to solder the boyhood picture of him firmly in my memory. He was one of the most appropriately named persons I have known. Names do not often match their wearers. Take Sing Fat, now—of only moderate value to a Chinese merchant in San Francisco, but a perfect name for almost any grand opera tenor. This boy's name was Speck—Oliver Speck—which was suitable to start with, but had been elaborated by us into All-over Speckles, which was better, because he was the most vividly and extensively freckled human being I ever saw. You would have said that he must have been down in a freckle-mine when it blew up, and was one of the main victims.

Speckles suggested that evening we should visit a trained animal exhibition then showing on a vacant lot in the outskirts of town. This suited me. Earlier in the week, this being a Saturday, I had come into possession of a large sum of money. I had earned a whole dollar for folding circulars at Mr. Jim Terrell's tobacco warehouse, and I had been spending my fortune, a dime at a time, on the tented attraction in question. In the light of maturer years I know now that originally it must have been a menagerie which had sloughed off from a circus that got into difficulties somewhere.

There was a performing elephant, and there was an educated ostrich—not highly educated, but of some surface culture—and a pet bear; and there were several cages containing animals that had never enjoyed the advantages of much learning. Some of them, you might almost say, were downright unrefined. In one large cage, though, was a trained lion, his mate being in an adjoining cage with her three newly-born cubs.

This lion had a special fascination for me. At the climax of the performance the dauntless keeper would enter the den and, forcing the great beast to squat on his haunches, would wrest the massive jaws apart and thrust his head into the vast mouth. Night after night the prospect of witnessing the feat brought me back. There was an even greater lure—I did so hope to be there the night the lion sneezed!

So I fell in with my good friend Speckles' plan. Then he superimposed on it a daring and revolutionary suggestion: Suppose we took a girl apiece along with us? He named the girls. One of them he had been squiring; the other I had from time to time looked upon with the distant and diffident eye of favor.

On any previous day I should instantly have rejected the proposition. Indignantly I should have asked him if he thought I was one of these here sissies, to be running around with girls? But the enclosing of my lower half

in long pants was beginning to work a change in me all over. Already I could feel within me a gentle, insidious stirring, a motive mysterious and vague but by no means unpleasant. It was a thing which, by instinct, I felt might grow on me. I was willing to have it do so. Nay, experimentally I was ready to meet it half-way. Long pants were giving me courage. The suspenders helped, too.

All at once—thus quickly was the yeasty leaven at work in my being—it seemed to me a fitting thing that we two should escort two girls to the show that night. But I left it to my companion, he having had prior experience in these delicate matters, to make arrangements.

At eight o'clock, by secret appointment, we met these young ladies on a corner near the home of one of them. I was grateful for the fact that darkness and large shade trees sheltered the place of rendezvous. Few words were exchanged, none at all being offered by me. Four abreast, but keeping our distances, we started for the show grounds. When we met or overtook other pedestrians, Speckles and I would fall a few paces to the rear and march in a stiffened and stolid silence, leaving the paired-off girls to precede us and temporarily creating the impression that we were not with that giggling twain at all, but merely chanced to be going the same way that they were, merely happened to be walking just behind them. Then, when the danger passed, we would catch up and again make a carefully-spaced-off quartet of it. By such wise strategy we avoided detection until we were inside the tent, and after that, since the attendance was large, we merged with the other patrons, maintaining a loose sort of group formation which was not calculated to arouse suspicion touching on our relationships.

For a special Saturday night feature the management had augmented the program. The official announcer stated that the lion cubs would be taken from their mother's side and passed among the members of the audience, which, after growled protests from the lioness, was done. A few bolder spirits fondled the infant whelps—three woolly, smelly, awkward bundles of tawny fur, each being no longer and not much heavier than a full-grown house cat.

But the two girls shrank and shuddered. With one voice they declared that if one of these awful baby lions should so much as touch them they'd just die on the spot.

"Shuckins!" said Speckles valiantly. "I wouldn't be skeered to have one for a pet and teach him to do tricks and ever'thing. Would you be skeered, Corn-Cob?" ("Corn-Cob" was my nickname for intimates.)

I did not answer; my thoughts were elsewhere. My eyes had fallen on a yellowish fur boa which a cousin of mine, a young matron who stood with her husband a few yards away, was wearing over her shoulders, and at the sight a splendid whimsical inspiration had popped, full-born, into my brain. Why not do something to prove my resourcefulness as a practical joker, and at the same time cure these timorous lady friends of ours of their silly fears and, to top all, exhibit my native brilliancy and fertility of intellect before the opposite sex? In knee-breeches I scarcely should have dared entertain the bare thought of it, even. In the dignity and estate of long pants I felt I dared do anything that avowedly and radically was advanced or masculine. You see how swiftly the spell continued to work in my blood.

Unobserved by my party, I slipped over and asked my cousin to let me borrow her neck-piece for just a minute. She eyed me curiously, but surrendered it. Rolling it into a compact bundle, hairy side out, I crept up behind that one of the two girls who was my guest, and thrust the wadded pelt against her face and uttered a quick, snarling, yelping, cat-like sound.

I learned about women from her! Also, in the next instant, from her female companion. She screamed. The second one screamed. They kept on screaming, both of them. It hardly seemed possible that two young girls, neither being more than twelve or thirteen years old, could scream so piercingly, so continuously, so rapidly, so calliopiously.

Neighbors of their own sex immediately caught the contagion; these likewise, without reason, began screaming. Somebody—but I think that stupid creature was a man—shouted out, “The lions is loose!” Somebody else—and this one undoubtedly was a man—yelled “Fire!” Somebody, as I now know, always does yell “Fire!” in such cases. At this moment, also, the elephant was so ill-advised as to start trumpeting in a strident and disconcerting manner.

Now the close-packed crowd was milling; now it was radiating from its common center, and now, above all those other nightmarish sounds of pain and terror and panic, there arose sharp sounds of tearing and rending, which were the sounds made by the canvas sidewalls as they were ripped from their moorings. The maddened multitude fell over guy ropes and tripped over tent stakes and became entangled in choking, baffling tarpaulin folds. People ran into one another and fell down and got up again and fell some more. And some there were who were painfully trampled upon, and many lost their hats and had their garments damaged, and all were distracted and unhappy. Once outside, they scattered in every direction, carrying the alarm with them, and the word spread that the wild beasts had escaped and also

that a conflagration raged on the Trimble Street commons; and the fire department turned out, adding to the confusion, and the police force came, and with the police a number of courageous citizen volunteers bearing firearms and other weapons.

But of these latter details I learned only by hearsay. For I no longer was present on the scene. I had been among the very earliest to go away from there. I was barely past my fourteenth birthday, but I knew enough to go and to keep on going. Hours later, on undressing, I found sandy loam in one of my pants pockets. I must have been leaning well over to the inner side when I turned that corner just below the show grounds.

In some quarters, after the excitement had abated, there was a disposition to blame me. At home, I was for days more or less of a pariah; abroad I was shunned by some and by some regarded as an outcast. I shall pass over the spanking that I got. It struck me as an impiety, indeed a thing bordering on the sacrilegious, that while wearing my first new pair of long pants I should be spanked. Still, it were better to have them on at the time than to have them off.

But among my own particular coterie I was lionized and made much of. By them it was felt that I had accomplished something noteworthy. No other boy in our town had signalized his advent into long pants by busting up a trained animal show and bringing out the full strength of the uniformed divisions of our city government. I trust I bore my honors modestly.

On that point, though, I am not sure. I probably became quite the swaggering bravo. What I am sure of is that thereafter I was increasingly more at ease among the fair. My recent exploit may have given me confidence of myself before my own kind, but it was those long pants which conferred social assurance. Infancy and the ways of infancy were behind. Deeds of adventure and derring-do beckoned me on. Very soon I must have been buckling a very wicked swash. I recall that I gave away a toy pistol which theretofore had been a treasured possession. I gave it away because it was a toy.

Coincidentally with these things I began paying more attention to my personal appearance. Of my own accord—without being ordered to do so, mind you—I shined my shoes, thus establishing a precedent. I went further than that. When performing my toilet I always had been content to stop at the regular water line, where the chin met the throat, thence following the angles of the jaw bones and cheeks on up to the temples; but one day, rather to my own surprise, I found the washrag venturing into strange fields. Until

then my neck and ears had ample justification for thinking that for some reason or other I didn't like them. Now I quit slighting them and they paled out considerably. Nor did I fight off the regular every-other-monthly visit to the barber. I went willingly to yield myself to his clippers and shears. The call at his establishment became a rite instead of a penance.

As though it were yesterday I remember how my psychology operated under the new influence. Previously my ambitions had been nebulous, inchoate; they were void and without form. From this on they began to take on shape and density. Not that they didn't keep on shifting and changing, for they did do just that. The desire might alter with the passing moment, but in each mood I designed to give destiny a wrestle rather than to let destiny have her way with me. The most significant part of all was that I no longer craved glory for the sake of glory alone. I now craved it partly for the sake of the effect upon the feminine world. I was not the crass materialist I had been. A spiritual side to my nature was developing, and invariably that spiritual quality was the envelope for a shifting vision of womanhood—a womanhood entranced and lured by the courtliness of my customary manner, by the dash and abandon of my behavior in the bright face of danger.

Did I envisage myself as a gallant fire laddie, it invariably was an imperiled maiden that I rescued, at the risk of my own life, from an upper window of Friedman's Vinegar Factory and fetched in my arms down a ladder while the angry flames crackled about me and the black smoke belched forth. I thought of Friedman's Vinegar Factory in this connection because it was the loftiest building in town. It was four stories tall.

If I saw myself in the buckskins of a Wild West scout shooting redskins, there inevitably was a second chapter in which I returned home to lay my reeking trophies of a hundred scalp-locks at the feet of some flattered damsel. If I became a world famous minstrel man and sat on the end tickling a banjo and cracking jokes at the expense of the interlocutor, there would be a moment when I'd cast off the humoristic rôle and, advancing to the footlights, sing a sentimental ballad—this, of course, was before our popular music was either canned or Africanned, as is largely the case at present—a sentimental ballad of the nature of "White Wings" or "Sweet Evalina," composed by me and dedicated to the reigning lady of my dreams. I had my heroes. Buffalo Bill, Nick Carter, Colonel Mosby, Billy Emerson, John Paul Jones, Paul Boynton—these were some of them. But mainly I was my own hero, with an assisting heroine apparent somewhere in the immediate background. It never occurred to me then that eventually I should adopt so

prosaic and unspectacular a vocation as writing pieces for magazines. Had it occurred to me that I should become one of our most outstanding literary figures—when viewed sideways—I'd have put the picture from me as one utterly distasteful.

It is lamentable that so rarely do we realize in late life the ideals of youth; it equally is lamentable that we likewise fall short of our maturer expectations. My present aspiration is some day while in undress to resemble, even remotely, one of those splendid creatures you see used for the illustrations in the underwear ads. Yet I know I shall never attain it. These young Greek gods never existed in real life; the artists must think them up out of their own heads. Adonis himself would have flopped in a union suit.

But in boyhood it is glorious that we have these visions, one crowding on another's heels. Disillusionment and disappointment will come later, but at fourteen, in his first long pants, a boy's anticipation is bright with success, never blurred by forebodings of any possible failure. I know mine was, and am glad I lived through that bygone age when kids were kids and not wise, jaded, world-weary, scornful, sophisticated little old gentlemen, such as so frequently I encounter these times. Particularly do I encounter them in hotel lobbies. I find them aboard steamships, too, and sometimes in railroad trains, but they seem to thrive most thickly in lobbies. If all the parents who live by preference in hotels should go away sometime, leaving their offspring to the mercies of the transient stranger, and if on the same date the closed season on hotel-bred small boys was lifted, there would ensue a massacre which would make the best efforts of the late King Herod seem by comparison but the puny endeavors of a semi-pro.

Harking back again to my own times, I might add that all our days were not days of gladnesses and romantic enterprises. There were tragedies which were all the more terrific for being boyhood tragedies. Not long ago a friend, of approximately my own age, told me of what once happened to him. Epics of heartbreak, sagas of melancholy, have been fashioned by poets from less material.

“On my thirteenth birthday,” he said, “two world-shaking things came to pass. My sweetheart—I had just acquired a sweetheart—gave me a necktie which she had knitted especially for me. It was the first necktie I had owned, and it was a bright red necktie. And on top of that, my mother bought me a single-barreled shotgun with a red pine stock and a pot-metal lock.

“It cost four dollars, and to me it seemed the finest fowling-piece that had ever been manufactured. For months past I had been dreaming of it. Where my mother got the four dollars that bought it I never knew. To this day I don’t know, but I can appreciate what stintings, and what sacrifices, what hoardings of her butter-and-egg money, were represented in that birthday present. For she was a widow and we were poor, and in the family were several children younger than I was.

“My birthday came in the fall. Bright and early in the morning of it I set out for the country, wearing my new necktie and carrying my new shotgun on my shoulder. I told my mother I was going out to shoot something for her supper that night, and before I started she kissed me and hugged me and told me to be sure not to hurt myself.

“I hoped to kill a rabbit, and I saw several rabbits, but the trouble was that none of them stayed still long enough for me to draw a bead. Rabbits on the move were beyond me. My hope was to find one sitting still. I hunted for hours and never got a shot.

“In a corner of a rail fence I saw a rabbit trap. It was sprung. I laid down my gun and stooped down and cautiously lifted the slide door. Hunched up in the long box-like interior was a big buck rabbit. I laid firm hold on his hind-quarters and drew him forth, he kicking and quivering. The ethics of the situation did not concern me; the fact that this trap belonged to someone else meant nothing at all.

“Here was my rabbit. But he must be shot, for I had promised my mother game killed by my own hand. I had a boy’s twisted moralities, you see. I stood for a moment considering, and with my struggling captive jerking in my grip, and then a great notion came to me.

“With my free hand I unhitched that cherished necktie of mine from under my shirt collar and still using that hand, I managed to fasten one end of it around one of Br’er Rabbit’s long hind-legs. The other end I tied fast about the trunk of a sapling.

“I put the bunny down on the earth. He jerked at his tether, then squatted flat. Except for his wriggling ears he was motionless. He looked as big as a house. I couldn’t have asked for a better target.

“I backed off fifteen paces, took careful aim, shut both eyes and pulled the trigger.

“The rabbit darted off into a brier patch. I had missed him clean, but I hadn’t missed him far—I’d shot my precious necktie right in two.

“I cried on the way home. I was still crying when I got there. It’s been thirty years since then, but when I think about it I still feel like crying.”

I, too, had my disappointments, but I had my triumphs as well. Sitting here writing this down, I recreate the picture of a certain outstanding triumph. It was not an individual achievement though, like my stroke of genius that time with my married cousin’s fur neck-piece. I shared it with three others of the newly long-panted fraternity.

A German resident imported a new kind of dog to those parts. This was a different dog from any of the local species. Theretofore among us there had been only four or five or perhaps six standard varieties of dogs, to wit: bird dogs for hunters, pug dogs for fashionable folks—by the way, where did all the pug dogs in this country vanish to when the vogue for owning them passed?—country dogs or hound dogs or shepherd dogs for farmers, and just plain dogs for colored people. But this dog was a dachshund. She was the first of her family to be brought to our end of the state, and she created a sensation, being a low rakish black craft. Indeed, I think the six-syllable dog must have been rare everywhere in America in those ancient days, although probably quite numerous in Germany where, as science tells us, this quaint animal was bred by crossing the rat-terrier on a German compound word.

One day shortly after her arrival the dachshund ran, as the saying goes, amuck. She bit our most prominent banker in the leg and then, dashing up the street like an infuriated tapeworm, in rapid succession she bit two more citizens. At once the cry of “mad dog” was raised, and a mob formed, and with sticks and stones the frantic little beast was pelted and pursued until she darted under a livery-stable floor.

To me, looking back on the scene, it appears strange that no calmer-minded person figured out the correct diagnosis. It appears all the stranger since nearly everybody in town knew the principal victim either by reputation or through having had financial dealings with him. He was one of the original ten-per-centers; modern loan sharks are pale pink imitations of his sort. Undoubtedly the truth was that the long-waisted dog, having in a moment of pique bitten our banker, was biting those other men in an effort to get the taste out of her mouth. However, at the moment this perfectly plausible explanation occurred to no one.

Late that afternoon four of us, scouting aimlessly across back lots, came upon the harried fugitive where she was crouched in a forlorn, bruised heap in a dark recess of a tumble-down cow barn in a rear yard behind the livery

stable. She had crawled out of her first hiding place and taken refuge there under a manger. At a glance we knew she was not mad; she merely was a badly-frightened, badly-mistreated little alien, not knowing the language or understanding the customs of this strange land to which she had been brought, and craving sympathy and kindness. These we gave her, and she emerged from her corner on her belly and whimpered her gratitude and licked our hands. So we brought food to her, and water in a tin can, and petted her, and then we fastened the rickety door by which she had entered this retreat, and stopped up the holes in the walls, and went away and left her for the night.

But, boy-like, one of us must have revealed the secret of our discovery, and the tidings must have spread, because next morning her owner came to the stable and broke in on our conclave and demanded custody of his pet and took her away with him. She was wagging not only her tail but all three of her terminal continuations in her joy. The editor of the paper got hold of the news, and in that evening's issue he printed a piece telling how four bright boys had found the runaway and had recognized that she was not rabid and had ministered to her and cared for her. The item went on to praise us for our philanthropy and our intelligence. It mentioned the names of all four of us, too, and thereby we were made famous throughout the community, and many people congratulated us, one or two even going so far as to come right out and admit that after all they might have been wrong and maybe we'd live to grow up and amount to something instead of being hanged, which was what they had been predicting for us all along before that.

So none of us ever told the real truth about it, which was that we already had prepared a sign reading "Hydryphoby Dog, Part Caterpillar. 10 Grays or 5 Potters to Get In," and were going to keep the little beast as our own property and run a show and become marble magnates from the division of the admission fees. We took credit for a good deed and went on our ways rejoicing.

The long pants age, generally speaking, was a time for rejoicing. If only we could reclaim it again!

CHAPTER VIII

“UNACCUSTOMED AS I AM—”

Again, as in a dream, do I behold, stretching before me, the sea of upturned faces—only sometimes, when the attendance fell off, it wasn't a sea, but a small lake or pond; and once in a while was but a tiny puddle entirely surrounded by wide shore lines of empty red plush seats, with the upturned faces scattered here and there on its surface, like infrequent lily pads.

Again and again, in my mind's eye, I see the audience streaming in, pausing on their way past the ticket window to gaze in a rapt, almost a stupefied manner at the posters of myself on display in the lobby; then turning to one another and murmuring: “Is it possible?” During the course of the tour I gave away a good many of those posters to persons who came and asked for copies. I believe in doing my mite for the Home Beautiful Movement in this country; for too long have the walls of our houses been adorned with examples of effete Old World portrait gravure. The crying need is for our more rugged native American art.

Abraham Lincoln was not pretty to look at but his likeness is popular. In the matter of personal beauty Benjamin Franklin sinned and came short. Andrew Jackson, with that long head of his and that unroached forelock, looked a good deal like a neglected horse in the face. And I am proud to think that I have done my unselfish share too. So I gave away a good many of my posters. Their intrinsic value was not great, I grant you; it was the association, the unusualness of the subject, and all that. And the only drawback to their artistic success was that they looked a good deal like me. Otherwise I cannot think of a thing to be said against those pictures.

Again do I behold the yawning stage as set for the entertainment, with one lone table and one lone chair; on the table a pitcher of ice water, perspiring profusely with stage fright; and, hovering in the wings, me, obeying a similar law of Nature. Again I hear the last words of the graceful concluding paragraph of the introductory remarks of the official announcer. Again I see myself setting forth on that eternally long journey from my shelter behind the scenes to the center of the stage. Sometimes it seemed two miles; sometimes no more than a mile and a quarter.

Again, when the affair is over, I catch a glimpse of myself running to catch a train for our next one-night stand. We spent so many nights aboard sleeping cars during those crowded months that when, by any chance, we laid over for twenty-four hours in one town, I couldn't sleep unless I put a cinder in my eye before retiring, and arranged with a bell hop to come in from time to time and shake the bed violently. If only we could have hit upon some attachable device whereby my skull could be jammed against the headboard with great abruptness about once in so often, I am certain I might have enjoyed perfect rest.

Again, after six or seven hours on the Pullman, I see our train rolling into our destination. We flit past the most outlying real-estate development, a wide expanse of what was recently a cornfield, but gridironed now with new streets leading to nowhere in particular, and dotted over with model homes, which look as though they had been put together according to cut-out patterns published in the Sunday paper; and marked by a pair of large and impressive gateposts, with no gates and no fence; and set off with a nifty sales office, designed something like a lodge house for a lunatic asylum and something like a betrayed Japanese bungalow, and decorated, for a hundred feet along the side nearest the tracks, with a mighty blue billboard bearing in red letters nine feet tall the modest legend: Touchwood Manor—Do You Notice the Air of Undoubted Refinement About This Suburb? But if the outfit happened to be down in a deep hollow it would be called Something-or-Other Heights.

We pass next the serried rows of domiciles inhabited by those who are too rich or too poor to go out half a mile beyond where the trolley tracks end and own their own homes. We catch a whiff from the stockyards by the right-of-way and the soap factory on beyond; and so, informed and warned by these unfailing signs, we arise and collect our belongings, leaving behind us in our berth only our pyjamas, our tooth brush, our watch, and a few other small articles, and presently are disembarking in a smoke-filled station shed, to be cordially greeted by the warm-hearted and hospitable taxi driver, who meets all the trains, even though the trains don't always meet him. And so begins—in memory—another day.

Always, though, my mind reverts to the momentous afternoon when the whole thing started. On the street I met a friend who was in the theatrical business.

“Well,” he said—taking my hand in his and holding it firmly to prevent my escape—“well, everything is as good as settled.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said. “I don’t quite get you.”

“Don’t be startled,” he said. “I’m trying to break the news gently. You are going out lecturing and my firm is going to manage you.”

I was startled, though. Who wouldn’t have been? If a man met you on the street and, in an offhand kind of way, said that you were going into the lion-taming business, and that he had already arranged for a cageful of Nubian lions direct from the jungle, I figure it that you would be startled into betraying some passing surprise. So it was with me.

“Who was telling you?” I said when I had in part rallied from the shock.

“Nobody’s telling me,” he said. “I’m telling you. It’s all settled, I tell you.”

So saying, he fixed a hypnotic eye upon me. Now it is a constitutional shortcoming of mine that I just naturally hate to say “No” to anybody. In my heart I may think it, but my tongue refuses to take hold of the word.

“But what am I going to lecture about?” I inquired almost timidly.

“About the war, of course,” he said briskly; “the war and anything else that you can think of.”

“And who,” I inquired, “is coming to hear me lecture?”

“Anybody who has the price. We play no favorites beforehand and assume no liabilities afterward.”

Yet still I demurred: “But I don’t know anything about lecturing!”

“And we,” he retorted, “don’t know a thing in the world about handling a lecturer. So it’s as fair for one as it is for the other. Besides, who’s taking all the risks and doing all the work? We are—that’s who! Where does your kick come in? All you’ve got to do is put on your cute little head-waiter’s suit and your granite-ware shirt, and get out there and lecture.”

“But the public——”

“As for the public,” he said, “*Caveat emptor!* That’s Latin. A lawyer handed it out to me the other day. That and some more dead language cost me seventy-five bucks. It means C.O.D., without privilege of examination—the *Caveat* part does; and *emptor* is Latin for ‘I should worry!’ Call it a dead language if you want to—it looks to me like those Latinites were the live boys when it came to putting a whole lot of meaning into just two or three words. Better drop by the office this afternoon or to-morrow and we’ll fix up a contract—I suppose you’ll want some money for yourself; you writing

guys are sure a grasping lot—and we'll lay out the billing and go over the route as far as it's made up. Well, I'm in a hurry. So long!"

Then, after he had moved off a few paces, he halted, taken with a new idea.

"Say, you know how a lecture goes, don't you? How you get it started and how you get it stopped, and everything like that?"

I shook my head. I hadn't attended a lecture since I was a small boy; the only one I could recall offhand was given in the basement of the Sunday school and dealt with the Holy Land, and was illustrated with colored magic-lantern slides. I said so. He shook his head.

"Magic lanterns is absolutely nix. We've got to be up to date to get the money. You'd better stop in at Carnegie Hall the next night or two and pick up a few pointers from one of those travelhog boys. And if it's absolutely necessary we can arrange it probably so it won't cost you much to take a few quick lessons from a teacher of elocution—get you a special rate, you know."

He left me in a daze. My days of daze were merely starting. They followed for a while one right behind the other. As one under the influence of subtle drugs I signed contracts, O.K.'d designs for posters and three-sheets, and conferred with the impressive gentleman who, it seemed, had contracted to do my advance press work.

He was attired as a real advance agent should be—in a glossy and pampered high hat answering to the name of Ponto, and an overcoat with dead animals sewed on its collar; and a great glittering in his necktie showed where he had been kicked in the chest by a jeweler's mule. He guarded his jewelry and his overcoat very zealously, but especially his overcoat. I guess he was afraid somebody might leave the door open and it would go back to the Zoo.

Fondling his horseshoe pin the while, he dismissed from consideration all thought of possible difficulties arising in connection with our venture. It seemed he had been out ahead of a trained-animal act during the past season, and the season before that had managed a Polish dancer who, starting life at the back of a Tenth Avenue tenement, three flights up—ring Finnigan's bell—had eventually acquired a foreign accent, a stage name that had seven syllables and a sneeze in it, and a new husband every little while. He said that as a genuine imported Polish dancer his star had been historically and traditionally correct in every respect.

And as for the true artistic temperament—well, he said she couldn't have had more of that if she had been born and brought up at the Pole. Every time the present incumbent—meaning by that her then husband—came hurtling out of a door of the lady's apartment—or out of a window, if handier—with a flight of gold-mounted hairbrushes and scrapbooks of clippings and things circling about his head, he said to himself—the manager did—that as a finished artiste she certainly was there or thereabouts.

So, with all this valuable experience behind him, he didn't feel the least hesitancy about undertaking the advance work for a simple little thing such as a course of lectures. An earthquake, really, or a comet to manage during its cross-country engagement, would have been more in his line. If somebody had engaged him to go out ahead of the fabled Dinosaur, or the resurrected Thunder Lizard, say, he would have been referring to his attraction as Dinah or Big Liz before the end of the second week. He had reverence only for box-office receipts and his fur overcoat.

To aid him in preparing his press matter for the papers, I suggested that I give him a few salient details of my career. But it appeared they were not exciting enough for his purposes; they lacked thrill and the emotional quality. He waved aside my offer of collaboration and furnished me with a really interesting life history right out of his own head. So that part of it was all settled without any trouble or prolonged mental strain for either of us.

I took a hint from my manager and attended a travelog. The speaker came out, rippling gracefully inside his form-fitting evening clothes, and spoke at length, with beautiful modulations and appropriate gestures. I was envious of his ease of manner and his perfect stage presence as each succeeding view was flashed upon the screen and he, standing alongside of it, said, "And now we find ourselves in Edinburgh"; or, "So this is the Nevskii Prospekt"—as the case might be and was if you stayed long enough. Later I caught him sitting in one of my audiences—it was, as I recall, at Baltimore; but I could tell from his expression that he was not greatly alarmed at seeing what the opposition had to offer.

I decided not to patronize the gentleman who taught elocution by note and ear. I did, however, purchase a handbook on the subject of this justly revered art. But after glancing through its pages I dropped it, without a regret, over the side of the boat. Among other things it contained charts of a little figure engaged in different gesticulations, variously labeled Rage, Hate, Regret, Despair, Murderous Frenzy, Resignation, and so on. As I said to myself at the time:

“It will be all very well for those who pay out money for my lecture to express these emotions physically; but I’m no gymnast. If I undertake to mix up my remarks with a lot of difficult and complicated bodily evolutions, I might as well buy me a set of pink silk fleshings and rig up a horizontal bar to start with. No; one who is naturally simple should strive, I take it, to be simply natural. I shall endeavor to be sartorially correct without being Delsartorial.”

It was in a city which we chose purposely, on account of a reputation for forbearance and Christian virtues on the part of its inhabitants, that I made my timorous début. I shall not describe my personal sensations on that occasion. I am not of a morbid nature, I trust, and I likewise assume that the reader is not of a morbid disposition, either; so why should I harrow up the feelings of both of us with the horrible details?

I shall merely state briefly, in passing, that when the curtain rolled up before an assemblage of hardy adventurers who had gathered in out of the night, I was crouched back behind the protecting shadows of the proscenium arch. And I was perfectly calm and collected, except that I had already swallowed nine miles of Adam’s apples, and was still swallowing them at the rate of thirty or forty a minute. And my tongue knocked together and my knees clove to the roof of my mouth, and my hands and feet were giving me a great deal of annoyance on their account—no matter where I put them, they kept getting in the way.

And every time the gentleman who was introducing me mentioned my name I quivered from head to foot like a frightened doe—only my sex prevented me from being more of a frightened doe than I was. But somehow I lived through it; and, what was even more important, the audience lived through it—at least, all of them were able to leave the building unaided at the conclusion of the entertainment. Indeed, some of them, after getting out, almost ran.

After that first plunge things went easier and easier. I lost some of that hunted-fawn look out of my eyes and I quit feeling so much like the hunted hind, and my complexion became, as it were, less spotty and more stable. And at each appearance I learned things. For one thing, I learned the difference that exists in the minds of the auditors between a crowd listening to an after-dinner speaker who is working for nothing, and a crowd listening to a platform performer who is getting paid for his performance.

Some time ago I happened on the great lesson that the less an after-dinner speaker has to say and the shorter the time he takes to say it, the more

grateful to him is the audience. Haven't you ever heard the outburst of hearty and prolonged applause that goes ringing out on the smoke-laden air of the banquet hall when the toastmaster reads a telegram of regret from a distinguished orator who was asked to be present and found at the last minute he couldn't come?

Any after-dinner speaker who made a habit of just sending a signed photograph of himself, and never appeared in person, would be in enormous demand for public dinners. Evening after evening he could remain quietly at home, enjoying the company of his wife, with his little ones prattling at his knee. By the way, why do little ones always pick out a knee as a suitable place about which to do their prattlings? And meanwhile, at a point perhaps miles away, the gratified company that had invited him to address them would be bursting into cheers, and between cheers exclaiming in terms of the warmest admiration regarding his kindness, his charity and his consideration for his fellowman. I throw out this suggestion for what it may be worth.

But with the audience that gives up its money to hear somebody speak, the situation is exactly the opposite. This audience always is made up of sturdy souls who are beggars for punishment. It possesses incredible powers of endurance. It is prepared to stay with you to the bitter end; it is fortified and resolute. Or possibly those who compose it aren't expected home until ten-forty-five and find it more comfortable to be indoors than outside. Anyhow, it hangs on until the finish, and has even been known to applaud, in an exhausted sort of way, the concluding words.

I learned that in the opening periods of my wanderings; and I learned, too, that, in a way of speaking, the platform performer has an advantage over an actor in a play. Between the actor and his audience a wall of radiance is interposed; the footlights make it. All beyond that curtain of hard white brilliance is, to him, a blur. He hears it, of course, and he feels it; but he cannot see it. But the lecturer, if he knows the first rudiments of his trade, has the footlights shut off altogether; and he looks his audience in the eye, so to speak.

From the mass certain faces always stand out. He may focus his attention upon them and, bridging the gap between by the powers of mental telepathy, or whatever it is, make friends with the owners of those particular faces. By thought transference he says to them even as he utters the patter of his memorized discourse:

“You can see for yourselves, dear ones, that I am out here doing my feeble best; and you down there—you are plainly a kindly and a forgiving and an understanding lot. Therefore, let us forget for the moment all these strangers who have somehow managed to get inside this place, and as kindred beings, having something in common, just commune together in the spirit for an hour or so.”

Scattered over this continent I have a large number of soulmates whose names and residence addresses I do not know.

I picked up a considerable knowledge of acoustics and the necessity of pitching the voice at varying angles to accommodate itself to the surroundings; for, you see, we played theaters, halls, skating rinks, opera houses, academies, armories, concert places, converted gymnasiums, auditoriums, coliseums—we played nearly everything except vacant lots and circus tents.

I remember one place, a big barnlike arena, with galleries, which, through some freak of construction, was an exercise ground for echoes. If you spoke above a whisper there your voice would go away and, after rambling about among distant crannies for a spell, return to you and repeat your own words in your own ear—which was disconcerting. I know, in my own case, it made me feel like an anthem, whereas I had started off with the intention of being a solo.

I might have endured appearing as a duet—I have that kind of figure and am often spoken of in reports of social events as being one of the most prominent couples present—but I do not care to be a whole choral society all by myself. The proprietors of that building could draw off half of the acoustics and put it—or them—up in bottles for the export trade to the silent spots on the world’s surface, and still have left a plenteous supply for all their purposes.

A small cyclone was raging—outside—on the night when I made my modest appearance in this arena—and the tin roof overhead was rippling and snapping like a stage sea; and every now and then somebody’s factory chimney in the vicinity came down with a fierce clattering. Despite the opposition from the elements, I was going along at a pretty fair clip when, looking upward toward the top balcony, I saw a large, carelessly dressed gentleman in the act of entering by a rear door.

He was having some difficulty with his legs—in handling them, I mean. Either there were too many of them or not enough; at that distance I couldn’t tell which. But I could see plainly enough that he was intoxicated in a

reserved, dignified and gentlemanly sort of fashion. Fascinated, I watched him. Something told me that unwittingly he was going to create a diversion. He did.

At the head of a steeply slanting aisle he tripped over one of his feet. He started falling down the steps. He never exactly lost his balance; he never exactly kept it, either. Not a word did he utter—he was too busily engaged in falling to waste any of his energies in idle conversation; but if he had worn sleigh bells on his ankles, and had been carrying a bass drum and a kitchen range in his arms, he couldn't have made more noise and more different kinds of noises than he did make. The wall at the front of the gallery alone prevented him from coming on down and joining me informally on the stage. He struck that barrier with a crash, spread-eagled himself across it, half on one side and half on the other, and hung there, flapping gently, like a loose-furled sheet in a fair breeze.

Everybody stood up then—everybody except him. The audience already was disturbed by the sound of the storm; I suppose they figured that Sousa's Band had just come through a skylight. A policeman came hurrying down the aisle; another policeman joined the first policeman. Between them they heaved the intoxicated one upright. It seemed to me he would feel more natural if decanted; but they thought differently. So they upended him and, leading him back over the perilous route he had just traversed, he meantime explaining to them in dumb show exactly how the accident had occurred, they all three vanished through the doorway.

Things were just quieting down again to normal, when our overladen friend appeared, wavering and wobbly, at the extreme back of the main floor. Evidently, having been ejected from the balcony, he had come quietly round to the principal entrance and purchased a downstairs seat. I was bound to admire his determination to enjoy a treat of intellect and eloquence, though at the same time internally deploring the possible consequences.

He made fair headway toward the front rows of seats, creating no more confusion than a medium-sized switch engine could be expected to create under similar circumstances, until he came to where a black shadow fell across the aisle. He eyed it doubtfully for a long, pregnant half minute. Then he stooped, turned up his trousers at the bottoms, and, measuring the distance, undertook to step over it. But he miscalculated and landed right in the middle. With a mighty effort he flung himself across—I presume he was a poor swimmer at best—and the lunge carried him clear to the orchestra railing, where he repeated, with tremendous success, his previous imitation of a sail at half-mast.

Again the two policemen removed him and his parcel from our view, he continuing, to the last glimpse of him, to maintain his air of apologetic rectitude. But when the lecture was over and I, on the heels of the departing audience, went forth to catch a train, he was propped against the closed window of the box office, with a crumpled bill clutched in one hand, dumbly entreating somebody to sell him admission for the third time. Probably he wanted to witness the janitor in his specialty of turning out the lights. Or maybe he wished to enjoy the echoes, which were still arguing with the acoustics.

At the outset we arranged in each city with some person of prominence to introduce me. It is a rule that a lecturer must always be introduced by somebody. But we encountered frequent snags here. We found often that, between the local introducer and myself, we were giving too much for the money. He became the star and I merely the supporting company. He would start off by speaking of me, and then, finding the subject uncongenial, would turn to speaking of himself; and so doing would be reminded first of one thing and then of another, until presently he would be flying down the main line forty miles an hour, passing all the way stations and dodging all the terminals, leaving me backed far up a siding, twenty minutes behind time and with my right-of-way gone glimmering.

So, after the second week, we carried along a regular introducer—one willing to work by the week instead of by the piece—who introduced me in a few sentences of suitable and well-merited encomiums. I know his encomiums were suitable and well-merited because I wrote them myself with great care, and he memorized them.

Aside from the fact that I didn't have a single trick of the trained lecturer in my tool-chest, we offered to the public only one small departure from the regulation lecture. When I and the ice-water pitcher had arrived simultaneously at a state of practical emptiness I would invite questions from the house touching on any angle of the war that I might or might not have mentioned in the mutual endurance trial then drawing to its close; provided, however, that I should answer only if I knew something of the subject.

In a city near the Eastern seaboard, I saw in an afternoon audience an individual who had all the earmarks of being a trouble hunter. In almost the same moment that I came out and made my little bow I discovered him, where he sat in a seat almost directly beneath me. He had a long neck, a long face, a long nose and long hair.

He fixed a baleful, glittering eye on me and held it focused there.

I could see that he didn't like me or my statements or the fit of my clothes or anything about me. And his unwinking glance held me as the eye of the cobra holds the helpless guinea pig.

In the afternoon séance he asked no questions; but when that night, at eight-fifteen, I found him back in his old place, I knew he was primed and loaded and aimed, and that I was his meat.

I got through with what I had to say and invited questions. Up he straightened—he was well over six feet in height—and pointed an accusing finger that was like one section of a jointed fishing pole at me; and he demanded to know something or other—I forget now just what it was.

His words were not particularly offensive, but his manner was—distinctly so; and so was the rasping tone of his voice. I didn't answer him; I didn't need to. The audience answered for me. They hissed and they booed him into silence; and some impetuous partisans of mine even went so far as to yell "Throw him out!"

And right there I found out something I never knew before; and that something was this:

The sympathy of an American audience—ninety-nine times out of a hundred—is with the paid performer, no matter how poor or how feeble his efforts to entertain or instruct may be, provided only the audience believes he is doing his best to earn the money he gets.

The person who tries to embarrass or annoy him may be the most popular individual and the most powerful and the most respected and the most feared in the community; the interruption may be crafty and pertinent; the retort from the speaker may be lame and halting and ineffectual—but, just the same, the sentiments of the crowd will be with the stranger and against their fellow townsman.

To my own satisfaction I have analyzed the psychology of this. I believe it is based on the realization that the lecturer, or whatever he may be, is all alone on the stage, a plain and easy target for chance shots, with nothing to hide behind from sudden attacks except his own shirt-front; whereas his opponent takes advantage of the fact that he is on home ground, among home people.

In other words, I believe it is based on the American spirit of fair play, of tolerance for the under dog so long as the under dog shows an inclination to bite back.

CHAPTER IX

THE THRILL OF A LIFE-TIME

The greatest thrill I ever had, and beyond peradventure the greatest I ever expect to have, came to me when I was in that impressionable period intervening between my tenth birthday and my earlier teens.

There were two of us who shared it. The other, my partner and confederate, being a boy slightly younger than I was. Offhand, I should say I was between eleven and twelve and that he was my junior by a few months. His parents and mine were neighbors on the same street in the same town. Concurrent strokes of good fortune, descending jointly upon us, had sent us on a visit to a household in another town a few miles from the one where we lived. There promptly we made the acquaintance of a pair of gay and adventurous spirits whose ages roughly corresponded to our own. They were brothers. For convenience, I shall call them the Hemming boys, which was not their real name although somewhat resembling it.

One Saturday morning there came to us, through strictly private and confidential sources, an invitation to join the Hemming boys in an undertaking which promised to provide excitement for all concerned. It seemed, the evening before they had rounded up a stray dog, and now held him closely incarcerated in a disused cow barn behind their stable out on the edge of the town. It was their intention to give a dog-canning, and we were bidden to assist in the ceremony and to share in the sport ensuing.

I do not know whether the American small boy of this generation still keeps up the ancient rite of dog-canning. Among us it was practiced clandestinely, because it was among those things parentally forbidden as cruel and mischievous, by reason of this very fact becoming to our youthful fancies all the more alluring and fascinating a pastime. The procedure was simplicity itself: First, you caught your dog. Any friendless, homeless dog would do, although experts favored a large rangy dog. Having a dog at hand, you securely fastened to his tail, by a short length of rope or stout twine, a tin can or an abandoned saucepan, or any vessel of metal which could be depended upon to give off loud clattering sounds when dragged rapidly from place to place.

You then released your dog; he and the can did the rest. His first movement upon being freed—a drawing in of his hind-quarters preparatory

to his departure, or even a gratified wag of his tail—was sure to bring the can with a bang and a rattle against his legs. Naturally, he would undertake to get away from the immediate vicinity of the annoying object, and then, to his surprise and horror, would discover that the thing insisted on accompanying him. The faster he moved, the faster, also, did it move. In this instance, panic inevitably would envelop that dog's whole being, and he would set out to run away from that which first had disturbed and now sorely affrighted him.

Ensued then the spectacle, so gratifying to thoughtless youth, of a dog trying to out-travel a can which for the time being had become as definitely a part of him as though it had grown on him. One of two things resulted: Either the connecting cord frayed in two before the dog collapsed utterly, or the dog collapsed utterly before the cord frayed in two. I don't suppose any dog ever succeeded in running entirely out of his own skin, but as an actual eye-witness to numerous attempts on the part of dogs to accomplish this enterprise while attached to cans, I bear witness that they always appeared to be trying hard to do it.

Having reached the Hemming boys' home, we were taken by them to the cow shed and allowed to inspect the uneasy captive and the paraphernalia forethoughtedly prepared by them for the purposes contemplated. The dog was a long-bodied, loose-limbed animal, part cur and part hound, of the type commonly known among us as "just one of those old country dogs." He eyed us apprehensively, as though instinct warned him that our intentions toward him might be fraught with unpleasant possibilities.

Nor were his apprehensions ill-founded, for the Hemming boys, both adepts at dog-canning operations, had gone to unusual pains to make sure this particular dog should be thoroughly canned. For fashioning the torture instrument they had taken a discarded metal coffee-pot and, to the end that the resultant clamor might be enhanced when once the dog stampeded, they had placed within the pot several pebbles of a suitable size, and then with stones had hammered the opening shut. Also, with scraps of a stout clothesline, surreptitiously borrowed from a neighbor's drying yard, they had prepared a rather elaborate harness, with one loop to be drawn about the dog's neck and another loop to be fastened about his middle, and, finally, a length of cord designed to pass over his withers, and to be knotted hard and fast at the base of his tail, so that his main adornment would abide with him permanently and might not be shaken loose by any convulsive contortions on the part of the victim. Heartily did we, the guests of honor, approve of the

ingenious perfection of these plans. So far as we could note, no essential detail had been overlooked by the original promoters.

But suddenly a discordant factor threatened seriously to interfere with the successful launching of the project. The factor to which I have reference was the father of the Hemming boys who, instead of remaining at his place of business, had for some reason elected to return home in the middle of the forenoon. None of us was aware, however, of this upsetting and disturbing equation until we had far advanced with the preliminaries. One youthful conspirator held the flinching dog by the scruff of the neck, and a second stroked his ears and sought to soothe him with falsely friendly words as the remaining two wove him into his sacrificial housings.

At this point, discovery was made that Mr. Hemming was on the premises. We waited and waited, hoping the business which had brought him back to his house might shortly be concluded, and that he would betake himself away again. It was wearisome and vexatious to the spirit, this phase. It became necessary for the chief plotter to simulate a Judas-like affection for the dog the while he embraced him, and for another carefully to nurse upon his knees the appended coffee-pot, thereby guarding against any untoward movement which might set the imprisoned pebbles to jangling, and prematurely alarm the prisoner.

Even after this lapse of tune I distinctly and circumstantially recall, also, the incidental detail of fleas. Indeed, the mere recollection sets up a sort of reminiscent itching which only may be allayed by a vigorous mental scratching. The fleas undoubtedly came along with the dog. If fleas may be said to have any settled habitat or residence, undoubtedly they regarded the dog as their regular domicile. He may have been the only home some of them ever had had, yet they showed no reluctance about transferring themselves from him to us, exhibiting in this manner a broad catholicity of taste, and by their activities adding a fresh element of annoyance through the dragging hours of a long summer forenoon so impatiently endured by us.

Eventually we heard the sounding of the noon whistle on the planing-mill some distance away. To my fellow guest and me this was a warning that we straightway must depart in order to arrive at the house where we were staying in time for the midday meal. Indeed, there was a probability, amounting almost to a certainty, that, no matter how hurried our footsteps might be, we would be late, since a distance of fully a mile stretched between us and the dinner table. Reluctantly, then, we departed, first extorting a promise from the Hemming boys that they would postpone the

climax of the canning until we could return. With briskened gait we set out along the dusty gravel turnpike.

Now, in order to make clear what thereafter eventuated, it devolves upon me to offer a detailed description of the adjacent terrain. East of the slight elevation whereon the Hemming domicile stood, and marking the boundaries of the town proper, a brown and muddy creek, which now was shrunken to a puny runlet, pursued its tortuous course. The road, crossing the creek bed at right angles, had been built up across the hollow through which it ran. This road was narrow—almost too narrow for two broad vehicles to pass at any given point—and the steep and precipitous sides of the fill were marked at left and right by stout wooden railings. Where it spanned the creek was an arched brick-lined culvert.

Moving eastward, we had advanced between the twin guard railings almost as far as the culvert when, coming toward us from the opposite direction, we beheld a slowly moving column of dust, and simultaneously there came to our ears the melodic sounds of a mournful measure. Almost immediately through the dust screen we made out the forms of marchers afoot and of white horses, and behind these the suggestions, in glinting wheels and nodding horses' heads, of an extensive cavalcade.

At once, then, understanding came to us, for the daily paper of the town had for two days past been printing long columns regarding that which now, plainly, was transpiring. Likewise, there had been much discussion by word of mouth touching on the impending event.

Some forty-eight hours earlier, a local notable, affectionately known as Old Doc Wheeler, had been called to his reward as the tragic outcome of a kick by a mule. For many years this person had been the leading veterinarian of the district. In a county where practically every male adult, excluding ministers of the gospel, school-teachers, and paupers not taxed, either owned horses, bred horses, or was interested in horses, being the leading veterinarian meant distinction, both social and professional.

Moreover, the late lamented had enjoyed other claims to fame: He had been the most persistent, the most consistent joiner of fraternal organizations and secret societies and civic bodies and communal organizations in that end of the state. He had been an exempt fireman and a Democratic committeeman. He had been a war veteran. He had been a Mason and an Odd Fellow and a Knight of Pythias and a member of the Junior Order of American Mechanics. He had been active in the affairs of the Stockbreeders' Association and the County Fair Association.

Since all the bodies to which he belonged at the time of his death had turned out, along with many citizens not officially attached, to do him honor at his burial, it may be figured that the funeral cortège now approaching, with Doc Wheeler as its central figure, was indeed, a thing of pomp and circumstance.

Beholding its approach, we were filled with anticipation of witnessing a pageant of rare impressiveness—of witnessing it, too, from a position of vantage, since the cemetery lay over the hill behind us, on past the Hemming home, and to reach it the procession must traverse the road along the causeway above the creek. Moving slowly and majestically to the notes of a brass band playing “The Dead March,” with muffled drums, it came on nearer and nearer. In front marched the musicians; behind them bulked the glass-walled hearse, drawn by two white horses and driven by no less a personage than the principal undertaker, he wearing his official high hat of state. At either side of the hearse plodded the active pallbearers and the honorary pallbearers and, back of them, we could make out banners and uniforms and mysterious devices, where the Masons and the Odd Fellows in full regalia, and the Confederate Veterans and the Mayor and the Common Council and all the rest of the foot passengers, uniformed and otherwise, advanced in solid ranks. We knew that the largest Mason would hold in one hand a slender staff bound about with crape, and that the smallest Mason would be carrying, poised upon his abdominal muscles, a ponderous book of Holy Writ, for before now we both had seen lodge funerals, and our experience in the matter told us that in obedience to some secret law, the largest Mason would bear the lightest burden and the smallest Mason would bear the heaviest one. At the rear, trailing away into the distance, followed closed carriages bearing the relatives and close friends of the deceased, and public and private equipages of all the varieties known to livery stable and family barn.

The head of the procession was almost upon us. At that precise instant, directly behind us we heard a hideous uproar—a compound of metallic clatterings and frenzied *ki-yies*. As we spun about on our heels, the unhappy cur whom we had last seen immured in the Hemming cow barn clamorously passed us by at a rate of speed exceeding any rate of speed ever developed by any other dog coming under my personal observation. His belly seemed to be not five inches above the road, so desperately fast he traveled. His tail stood out behind him stiffly, like a ramrod, and at the farther end of it there jounced and bounced and crashed and rattled and rattled again, a battered tin coffee-pot containing immured pebbles. The Hemming boys had broken their plighted word, but surely the dog was living up to every expectation.

I am certain that neither of us cried out to voice the suggestion upon which we acted. Simultaneously and instantaneously, and moved by the same impulse, we darted through the fence and down the sloped embankment, he on the one side of it and I on the other, and dived into hiding at the opposite mouths of the culvert. We felt that it were well for us to be concealed in that moment of direful portent, for we, alas, had been accessories before the fact to the canning of that dog, and intuition warned us of what inevitably must now result, since the funeral procession could not turn aside, and the dog, most plainly, did not mean to turn aside.

But we didn't stay there. Impelled by a frightful presentiment, we poked two small heads out of the culvert, and with eyes stretched and popped by pressure of dreadful emotion from within, we saw the dog, bearing his distracting decoration, flash right between the hearse horses and under their dancing hooves. One frightened horse shied to the right, the other to the left. The hearse roughly was skewed about upon its wheels. The traces snapped, and the hearse, jerked backward, slipped off the gravel footing and its rear end struck with a shivering impact against a stout wooden post of the guard rail. Under the jar the hearse doors flew open, and out of the opening slid the long black box, balanced upright, with its silver handles and its silver nameplate gleaming in the sun.

It struck with tremendous emphasis upon one end. And then—oh, crowning dire and gruesome stroke!—the top of it came off, and in his funeral habiliments, wearing a large white tie and with his long side-whiskers neatly combed back, Old Doc Wheeler emerged full view before us, wearing upon his face an expression—or so it seemed to us—of chagrin not unmingled with surprise.

For what appeared to us an awful eternity, but what in reality could have been no more than a second or two, he stood there stiffly upon his feet, and then he toppled over forward upon his face, betraying the fact that the undertaker had seen fit to encase him in one of those half-shell shrouds. By reason of horror, most of my subsequent impressions were, as one might say, scrambled. But from the confused mass stood out one picture of a swerving hearse horse butting the bass drummer right over the embankment, and another picture of two of the pallbearers, with commendable presence of mind, running to turn Doc Wheeler over and dust him off, and yet a third picture of a portly Knight Templar being flopped flat in the road, as a tin coffee-pot, proceeding meteor-wise as the tail of a canine comet, caught him squarely upon the ankles. And after that the dog passed from our view, but for a brief time after he had vanished his progress might be marked by

runaways starting far down the line as he sped through that wrecked and distracted funeral cortège from end to end.

We saw no more. We felt that we could bear to see no more. In a stricken silence, filled with most daunting thoughts, we fled away through the creek bed and up across the hollow and by a circuitous route arrived at the home where we were guests. We did not enter by the front way. We realized that there would be something about our demeanor and bearing calculated to cause comment and invite embarrassing inquiries. Normally we were of excellent appetite, both of us, but now we did not care to eat. Indeed, we felt that never again would we care to eat. Above all things, we desired completely to sever active contact with the world. We craved to have no share whatsoever in the excitement which by now must be filling the whole town. We yearned to withdraw from organized society, from all communion with our fellow beings.

So, as I said, we did not enter the house by the front door. We did not enter it by any door. In an unostentatious manner, we climbed over the back fence and we crawled in at a rear window of the stable, and we immured ourselves deep in the hay mow, and there we remained, shaken and miserable, for hours and hours. It was hot there in the hay—stiflingly hot—but we were not hot; we were not even warm. We were chilled clear down to our toes, and at times our teeth chattered. We said but little; there was but little that could be said. It was long after nightfall before reawakening pangs of hunger drove us forth. Prudence bade us stay where we were, even at the peril of starvation; but not even remorse can, for too long a time, numb a growing small boy's gastric juices.

When we crept out, public indignation was somewhat abated. Undeniably, though, Doc Wheeler's funeral practically had been spoiled for all concerned, including the remains. It had started forth with every prospect of being a glittering success. It had turned out a disheveled and disorganized failure. But for what had occurred during the period of our retirement we had no visible concern—or at least we sought, by dissembling, to betray not such secret concern as we felt. Our main desire was that our visit might be cut short and that we might return to our own homes. This we accomplished. We said we didn't feel well, that something had disagreed with us, which was the truth—we didn't, and something had.

We left without again seeing either of the Hemming boys. Years and years elapsed before I saw either of them. Then, by chance, down in New Orleans, I ran into the elder of the brothers. He told me that up to the outbreak of the Spanish War, when he and his brother enlisted, his father had

whipped them every time he saw them. It had not been necessary, he said, for his father to explain why he whipped them.

In my own case, I know that fully ten years elapsed before I quit dreaming dreams of a grievously interrupted funeral; and I was nearing my thirtieth birthday before I began to perceive any humor in the event which I have just narrated. And now, when I look back on various outstanding experiences of my life, some of them startling to me even in retrospect, and nearly all of them interesting, I know that the greatest thrill I ever had was when for the first, last, and only time in my life I met Old Doc Wheeler face to face.

CHAPTER X

SHAKSPERE'S SEVEN AGES AND MINE

FIRST AGE

Jaques: All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.

As You Like It—Act II, Scene VII.

It was not often that Shakspeare slipped a cog. He wrote not only for his own period but for posterity. Take his remark now on the subject of comedians, where Hamlet, fondling a property skull, says: "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him well, a fellow of infinite chest."

In its application to comedians in general that was probably true in Hamlet's time and in Shakspeare's time; and undeniably it is true in this day and generation.

Next to a leading man, I know of no one in the entire theatrical profession, from the members of the stagehands' union clear on down to the managers, who throws such an infinite chest as the average comedian!

So it goes all through the works of Shakspeare. But I must say that when he began speaking of infants the divine sparkplug of the bard's prophetic apparatus missed a few times. Probably when Shakspeare was alive the infant in the nurse's arms behaved as just stated. Shakspeare had no way of knowing that in the twentieth century the first stage of infantile life would be intrusted to the Genie Twins—Eu and Hy; so, of course, we cannot blame him for failing to predict the correct details. But at least we may, as we go along, point them out.

For no longer do we raise the child by hand—anyway, in the best regulated families we do not. We raise him out of a book. He is born

according to estimates and reared by plans and specifications. And though the nurse is competently on the job, just as in Shakspeare's day, she works under a different system. As modernly constituted she is a combination of Simon Legree, King Solomon, William the Silent, the iron-jawed lady at the circus, a night watchman, a train dispatcher, and a food specialist.

Nor does she take the cooing firstborn on her lap and call him foolish pet names, and jounce him up and down according to a formula that, until here just recently, has been in vogue since one morning just outside of Eden Mother Eve took a good look at the little pink Cain and decided that he got his nose from his father and the rest of his features from her side of the family—the nose, as may be recalled by those who have seen pictures of Cain, being faulty.

The nurse does not do these things, and for very good reasons. In the first place, she is too busy sending the infant along on a schedule as exact as the running time of the fast train to Chicago, to be indulging in idle sports and pastimes with him. And in the second place, even if she were so inclined, she knows better than to be chucking him up and down in her arms and calling him Coochie-coo! and singing nursery songs to him.

From her voluminous readings of the standard works on the subject, by profound German scientists who were so busy writing about it they never found time to be parents themselves, she knows that such performances are so wrong as to border actually upon the criminal. Jouncing the child upon the human knee is bad for his spine—oh, very, very bad indeed; and as for singing, that excites the infant's mind unduly and has a damaging effect upon his nervous system subsequently.

I often wonder how those of us who were born and raised according to the old, antiquated methods ever lived through it! Probably we should not have lived through it had we realized how the mistaken kindness of our parents was cutting down our chances. Discouraged at the outset, we should have just curled up and quit. But we didn't know; so we hung on—anyhow I did, and so did a number of others I might name. If it was our parents' ignorance that imperiled us it was our own ignorance that saved us; so we pulled through—somewhat deficient in spines and nervous systems it is true, but able to take nourishment and manifest interest in bright-colored objects. To-day some spine-crippled, nerve-wrecked wretches among us are really quite robust-looking with their clothes on.

There is no telling how good a spine George Washington might have had if he had not been jounced on the knee in his infancy. Probably it would

have been five or six feet longer than he was, and would have stood up out of the back of his neck like a flagpole; and before going into battle he could have tied a flag to it. And Julius Cæsar, and Oliver Cromwell, and John L. Sullivan, and Hans Wagner, and Theodore Roosevelt—what spines they might have had if they had been permitted to grow up out of babyhood unjounced! At that, some of them had rudimentary spines which were plainly discernible to the eye.

Yes, indeed; when we look back on it it is surely wonderful to think what we went through with and yet lived! And yet, somehow, to those of us who may have known the ministrations of an old-fashioned, pillow-bosomed, snuff-dipping nurse, or the gentle tyranny of an old black mammy with an ebony skin and a golden soul, the childhood prospect does not loom up in our memory as such a dismal and distressing thing after all.

A good many of us had mothers who fussed over us. If we mewled, as no doubt we did, our mothers did not consult the authorities for the proper and scientific course to pursue. They took us up in their arms and rocked us, and sang to us, and mothered us, and humored us, and otherwise behaved very unscientifically toward us. I imagine we liked it at the time too—not knowing how injurious it was.

Actually some of those mothers reared six or eight children apiece with less trouble seemingly than it now takes to rear one. I do not understand this at all. They violated all the rules and regulations as laid down for mothers by the writers of the German and Italian schools. They considered themselves competent to minister to their own offspring. They actually kissed their children—yes, sir; kissed them freely and copiously! And worse than that, one of them would sometimes go so far as to nuzzle her face in the folds at the back of her helpless young one's neck.

There used to be a lot of people—mothers mostly—who thought the sweetest-smelling, best-tasting spot on earth was the back of a nice, hearty, clean baby's neck. And they would sing those foolish and meaningless lullaby songs to their babies; and when the babies yowled they would take them up in their arms and jounce them. As I remarked before, it is absolutely incredible that any of us survived!

In my own case I recall it was at my mother's knee, long before I was old enough to have read *Trilby*, even if it had been written then, that I learned how the news was broken to Ben Bolt in regard to Sweet Alice's demise, and also about the Frog Who Would A-Wooing Go, and Billy Boy, Charming Billy—and a number of other interesting characters who were

popular at that period. But the book-raised baby is preserved from such deleterious influences. He waits until he reaches the cabaret age, I guess, and then he learns the details in regard to the untimely taking off of Sweet Alice, as rendered in the version jazzed by Franklin P. Adams:

Don't you remember?

Yes, yes! Remember what? Remember who?

Sweet Alice with the brown, brown hair.

I should worry! I should care!

Believe me, kid, she was there

With the hair! With the hair! She was there! Wow! Wow!

She'd cry—oh, my!—when you slipped her a smile.

And she'd shiver like Salome when you looked at her cross, old hoss!

She's gone! She's gone! Are you on? Are you on?

Get me right! Grab me tight! Oh! Oh, this is some night—

Doing that scary, obituary, cemetary ra-ha-ag!

No—on second thought, I take back a part of what I have just said. I reckon that, even in these days of intensive infanticulture, it has not been possible to educate all the parents and all the babies up to a rightful appreciation of what each group owes to the other. I'm willing to risk any amount within reason that, tucked away here and there in odd and obscure corners of this country, there are a few old-fashioned mothers who bring up their children in the old-fashioned way, crooning over them and coddling them, regardless of what a lot of persons in Hamburg or Metz, with impenetrable whiskers and mezzanine foreheads and double-lensed spectacles, may think of it.

Anyway when all is said and done, babies, whether reared scientifically or just so, remain much the same in their intrinsic value—being priceless treasures to those immediately responsible for their presence in the world, but a drug on the market elsewhere. Babies are worth more to their owners and less to other people than any commodity I know.

Generally speaking, another man's baby is like another man's boil. You meet a friend who is carrying his head on one side as though he had been hanged recently, and he has his throat tied up. You inquire what's ailing him and he tells you he has a boil on his neck. You do not sympathize with him—you congratulate him! You tell him cheerily that he must not mind that—that a boil on the neck is a fine thing for clearing impurities out of the system; that a plain, medium-sized boil, at the very lowest possible figure, is worth ten dollars to him; and that if it should develop into one of the large, golden-russet, hothouse varieties of boil it will be worth twenty-five dollars

easily. But if he tried to make you a present of his boil you would hit him in the eye.

In this regard babies grade up much as boils do—being of value to their proprietors, but having few attractions for the casual outsiders. This was so in Shakspeare's day, I warrant. It is so to-day.

To everybody else a newborn baby is merely a small, noisy object, slightly fuzzy at one end, with no distinguishing marks to speak of except a mouth; and in color either a salmon pink or a deep sorrel, depending on whether it is going to grow up a blonde or a brunette. But to its immediate family it is without question the most phenomenal, the most astonishing, the most absolutely unparalleled thing that has yet occurred in the entire history of this planet.

"I don't want to make a pest of myself by talking about my own child," begins the father as he starts unrolling the flannel labyrinth that enmeshes his offspring; "but I will say this: He's a wonderful child! He's the most wonderful child I ever saw!" He unreefs seven or eight yards more of wrappings and reveals to your gaze something of a prevalent reddish tint, considerably resembling a large sore thumb. The spectacle naturally startles you—especially if you have had no experience in this line before.

"Heavens alive, man!" you exclaim. "Turn it—him—round the other way! You've got him upside down!"

"No such thing," he says—"that's his head you're looking at!"

"Tut, tut!" you say. "You're joking!"

"I'm not joking!" he exclaims. "Honestly now," he asks, "did you ever see anything in your life like that child's head?"

And you truthfully reply that in your whole life you never did.

"Just look at that brow!" goes on the infatuated man. "Just observe how that forehead slopes up, will you?"

"Yes," you admit—"it does slope up, doesn't it!" And then to yourself inwardly you say: "Right up to a point, like a lemon!"

"See how wide he is between the eyes!" says the proud young father.

"He is that!" you agree, thinking to yourself that he is even wider between the gums.

Silently marveling, you gaze down the yawning chasm and you reflect that, even though it is not ornamental, such a mouth must be a useful and

handy thing for a child to have, because if anything should go wrong with his interior they can reach right down into him and treat it by local applications; the main drawback is that he will suffer so from drafts.

“I think he’s got my nose!” burbles on the parent, critically examining a lump about the size of a shirt stud that is imbedded in the midst of the new arrival’s ostensible face. And again you remark to yourself that he might have got a little more of it without serious injury to either party to the transaction.

You come away wondering why, when the stork brings such an incomplete and faulty specimen, the parents do not return it and ask for credit on the books. But they—poor deluded creatures—are convinced that the only possible improvement would be for it to have been twins.

The marvel of the whole thing is that very often it turns out they were right and you were wrong. After a while the young person gives up as a bad job trying to swallow his own toes, and his features fill out until they provide a background for his smile, thus giving him more of a human aspect; and he begins to talk the language that only a baby talks and only a mother understands—or at least the old-fashioned mother did; she always understood it, every word, and could talk right back to her son in his native tongue.

As regards the up-to-date mother who is having her child reared antiseptically and hygienically, and according to formula, and who feeds him on proteids and carbonates and things instead of just victuals, as was formerly the case, I would not presume to say. However, I suspect, even in the case of a chemically pure infant and a highly specialized domestic system, that sometimes his mother—in the privacy of the nursery—is inclined to revert to Nature and for a little while be just a mother. I should not be surprised to hear that this happened quite often. No doubt she hides it and is ashamed of her weakness afterward, but, just the same, I’ll bet she does it.

Undeniably it is an age of uplift and advancement in which we live. We are gradually eliminating the human equation from the affairs of life. The colored man is a race issue and the servant girl is a problem—though sometimes I think she might be happier and feel better satisfied with her job if we quit treating her as a problem and tried treating her as a person.

On the Pacific side of this continent the little brown ex-brother is a burning question, and a baby used to be an experiment, but is now a scientific fact. All these things are admitted—one has to admit them. They

do not permit of argument or contradiction; but it seems to me, with all our progress along these lines and particularly along the line of babies, there is one possible reform that has not been given its proper consideration by the persons in charge of the improvements. I refer to the lax custom now in vogue in the matter of naming children. It strikes me that more serious mistakes are made there than in any detail pertaining to the young of our species; and in my humble opinion something ought to be done about it right away.

It must be conceded that a hand-embroidered name, with ornamental flutings on it and Battenberg edgings, is eminently proper for one who was born in the purple—only I personally have known of but one creature in this country that was born in the purple. It was a chicken that hatched out of a hand-painted Easter egg. And it takes several generations of unrestrained culture to bear up under a name with patent couplings in it. Those through-vestibuled names may do very well for the English aristocracy—some of them would have little pleasure in life if it were not for their hyphens—but in our own land we are not yet educated up to them; and some among us, I fear, will never be.

I once knew an unfortunate wretch who was born Dobbs and christened Walsingham Clavinghouse Montgomery by a foolishly fond parent—a parent who was fond and even more foolish. The victim of this outrage went through life dragging a name that sounded like getting on the Twentieth Century Limited and being thrown off at a flag station. He never recovered from it—never even rallied from it. It practically ruined his career. People started laughing when they heard his name, before they had met him; and after they met him they kept right on laughing—which was fatal. Besides he did not look like a Walsingham Clavinghouse, even when he was dressed up.

It seems to me the safest course is to pick out a good durable name for the boy and take a chance. The name Bill, now, fits a president and a piano mover equally well. John and Pete are equally suitable for poets, peasants and press agents. Henry cannot be improved on, in my opinion. No matter how the boy Henry turns out, whether he runs for Congress or for Sweeney—whether he becomes a coal baron or a coal heaver—he has a name he can offer in any company and be unashamed.

Besides there is precedent for it. Turn the pages of our history. Was it a group of Clarences and Alphonsos who carved civilization out of the wilderness and the daylights out of the Indians? I wot not. Was it not a Tom who penned the Declaration of Independence and a John who signed it first?

It was and they were. Was it not another John who fashioned the Constitution and a James who promulgated the Monroe Doctrine? I pause for a reply.

And what of those stalwart Pilgrim Fathers, who ate their pie and scalped the Pequot with the same knife? Were they a race of Cecils and Cyrils, or were they mostly Jonathans and Joshuas and Jacobs? Did they get their first names out of the Old Testament or Walter Scott? The question answers itself; besides which, Walter Scott was not born for a century or so after that.

Would George Washington have been the Father of His Country if his name had been Reggie Washington? He might have, but the strain upon him would have been much more intense. As Reggie Washington it is likely he would have been the father of his country's first bracelet watch. Perhaps an Algie Lincoln might have saved the Union and freed the slaves. Possibly I gainsay you, but by reason of the popular prejudice it would have taken an Algie much longer than it took a plain Abe.

Do you visualize a Percival Henry saying: "Give me liberty or give me death!" or do you think of him as calling for a lemon ice—not too strong of the lemon? Andy Jackson was Old Hickory, but as Harold Harcourt Jackson he might never have been anything more rugged than Old Point Lace.

Mind you, I am not saying anything against the Percys and the Harolds. We have had some great and some notable men of these names, and are liable to have a great many more as time goes on. A man who has the goods in him to begin with will deliver them, regardless of what his folks may have named him at an age when he was not in position to assert himself and protect himself, and demand a fair deal; but he starts under a handicap. The staple John L.s and the reliable Thomas J.s have the advantage of him. They are off to a flying start, whereas he is fifty yards up the stretch, with both legs snarled up in his front name.

Those arbiters of our national destinies—those true sons of the people who spend their afternoons between April fifteenth and October sixth at the ball park—they know best about these matters. You may safely trust the great throbbing heart of the bleachers to beat in truest accord with the public will. They are on! You cannot deceive the boys sitting out in the sun just back of left field. They would tell you, if you asked them, that a player named, let us say, Basil St. Cyr, should by rights have a batting average like the temperature chart of a typhoid patient—ranging from 98 to 106.

It would be necessary to rechristen him as Tubs or Big Six, or something else equally homely and fetching, before he could hope to qualify for companionship in the nation's Hall of Fame with such immortals as Eddie Collins and Ty Cobb and Walter Johnson.

Conceive of a pitcher bringing the name of Bertie into the box with him? Think you for one moment the brave lads in the fifty cents section would endure him? Not if he hurled the ball in a way to make the opposing batsman think he was facing one descended from Molly Pitcher on one side, and Oliver Twist on the other, with a slight admixture of the Bender family of Kansas somewhere back in the strain! Either they would rename him appropriately or he would go back to the minors and hide in the bushes forevermore.

And suppose—just suppose—that a white hope named Battling Lancelot were to enter the ring to fight for the heavy-weight championship! There would be a riot!

Perhaps you think me bitter on this subject. I am! The writer is one who had a fancy named sawed off on him in his helpless infancy. It does not match me—nor my figure either. I consider that I have never done anything to deserve it. I am very bitter—I admit it.

SECOND AGE

. . . Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school.

As You Like It—Act II, Scene VII.

As one has had occasion to remark before, pants are the most humanizing symbols of our civilization. Incase the barbarian in pants and you domesticate him; for soothing the savage breast pants beat music every time. Putting pants on the ancient warrior invariably softened his rugged nature.

Consider the Romans now: Wearing the free-flowing toga and the loose and airy tunic, and other things of that general nature, the Roman of old conquered the known world—all except a few outlying districts. But about that time along came the German hordes, introducing into the Roman midst such novelties as the German broadsword, the German measles, the German

clarinet solo and the German pancake. Also, those Germans wore pants of a sort; and from them the Roman contracted the pants-wearing habit and was never the same afterward. The result was much the same with our own Indian. Once we backed him into a pair of pants and harnessed a pair of suspenders over his bronzed and sinewy shoulders, we had him! He became tame and docile. He quit the warpath for the boardwalk.

There is but one exception to this rule—the small boy! The small boy comes along and upsets all the traditions of history, smashes all its precedents, destroys all its theories. He may be somebody's angel child as long as he is in frocks or kilts or rompers, or what-not; but the moment he reaches the age for pants, and begins to wear pants, a complete change transpires in his nature. He is no longer a child—he is a boy, a regular boy; and he has his credentials to prove it.

Understand me, I do not mean to include in this category that unhappy little imitation of a boy you sometimes see in a city park, who is the color of a sprig of bleached celery, and wears—Heaven help him!—gloves and an Eton jacket and a flat collar, and is being led about by an earnest-minded tutor with an English accent, mother-of-pearl ears and a pair of large-rimmed glasses.

This unfortunate never was a regular small boy and the chances are he never will be. He is a little old man before he comes out of the nursery; and if he ever breaks his shackles and becomes a small boy the event usually occurs after he has passed his fortieth birthday, which begets complications and sometimes divorce suits.

I am referring to the genuine article in the line of small boys—preferably a country small boy—or, anyway, a small-town small boy, with an intimate knowledge of swimming holes and haymows and stable lofts and lumber piles and birds' nests.

Nearly every time a group of gray patriarchs of an average age of forty convenes it is customary for some one or another of the assembled sages, looking back from the heights of antiquity through the dim and shadowy vistas of about four decades, to remark, half sadly, that nowadays boys do not have anything like as good times as they had in that far-distant past when he, the speaker, was a small boy himself.

About the time I achieved the maturity of owning my first derby hat I used to think that too; in fact, I seem to recall having said it once or twice in company—in the company of other venerable persons. But it is a lie and a libel. Personally I am convinced that small boys have just as good times as

they ever had—if not better. They are still finding robbers' caves in sandbanks; still launching pirate ships on duck-ponds; still secreting forbidden literature in haylofts. They are just as conversant with apple orchards and berry patches as we ever were.

The small boy's ideals may have changed slightly with time. But the nature of the boy does not change; in principle he remains the same. What Shakspeare said of him applies yet and always will apply, I judge. He is still the same complex organism he always was—at once the cruelest and the kindest creature alive; hard as flint and soft as putty; angelic in some of his emotions and demoniac in all the rest.

And, take it from me, he has just as good a time as you or I ever had; but he does not tell us about it. Why should he? In the first place, being in a way of speaking grown up, we should not understand him. And, in the second place, we might laugh at him.

Next to the man who rumples up his hair and calls him Bub a small boy hates the man who wheedles him into baring his secret thoughts and then pokes fun at them. The man who laughs at a small boy has bruised a tender soul and made a bitter enemy. So the small boy takes no chances.

Here only the other day I came upon three small boys keeping a stand in a fence corner. I slowed up, dazed with surprise. In the Stygian gloom of my own ignorance I supposed this custom had died out with the birth of the Boy Scout movement. The sight started my memory spinning backward. I remembered how the thing used to come to pass several thousand years ago, when I was a small boy and the craze for keeping a stand and selling things recurred annually, as due part and parcel of an appointed cycle. It was one curve of an orbit. Certain pursuits preceded it and certain pursuits succeeded it, always in a regular order.

Early in March top season arrived. Nobody made the preliminary forecast—nobody announced it in the papers. The instinct came to us as surely as the migrating instinct comes to the robin and the curlew and the tramp. All of a sudden, on a day in early spring, tops appeared. Every boy owned a top—either a humming top or a plug top, or both. For a period of weeks we spun tops, we talked tops, we traded and gambled in tops.

Then, as abruptly as a stage sunset, tops passed out. In the evening all boys had owned tops and were concerned in tops; the next morning tops had vanished utterly. There were no tops to be seen. Tops were as obsolete as celluloid collars in Hades; marbles, as the saying went, were in season.

Marbles prevailed mightily until it was time for something else—fishing, I think it was. The dogwood bloomed in the bottoms and by that infallible sign we knew the fish would be biting in Perkins' Creek—or, anyway, the chiggers would. One way or another, we were absolutely sure of getting a certain number of bites. So we went fishing.

Along toward the fag-end of summer, when vacation had lost its savor and poison ivy had had its fling at us, the commercial instinct suddenly blazed up. For the time being we quit being cowboys or detectives or freebooters and went into trade. Customarily we started with peepshows.

To make a peepshow you took a shoebox and pasted in it, sitting up on edge, pictures cut from colored advertisements or filched from old valentines. You dug out an eyehole in one end of the box and inserted a candle for illuminating purposes at the other end and charged five pins a look. I don't remember now whether we made a special rate to one-eyed boys or not. The pins had no real value—or sentimental value either; they were a fiat currency, having no purchasing power except at other peepshows; but they represented a business transaction, and for the time being they satisfied an instinct.

Soon, though, we got beyond peepshows—outgrew them, in fact. We went into business in earnest. We kept a stand alongside the front fence, with a plank for a counter and a soapbox for a showcase. We sold parched meal at so many marbles a pinch, and lickrish water—a delicious dark compound of licorice, sugar and water—at so many marbles a sip; or we engaged in commerce on an even larger scale.

We took the money we were saving up to buy a rifle and invested in prize boxes and soda pop—lemon, strobbry and sassprilla flavors—buying at wholesale and selling at retail. And what we could not sell we consumed ourselves; so there was no tare and no loss, and altogether it was a splendid life to lead—until the novelty wore off.

For years and years I had not seen a fence-corner stand and I had supposed it was a vanished industry; then here all unexpectedly I walked right into one! It had two proprietors—equal partners both, as was fitting; and a younger brother of one of the proprietors was acting as assistant clerk—acting without pay and glad to have the job; if necessary he would have paid for the privilege.

The old-time prize box of blue-glazed paper, with gold letters on it, and pink sugar-coated popcorn of undoubted antiquity showing through a gauze inset in the front of it—which was supposed to contain prizes of value, but

never did—had vanished. A more modish article in the line of gumdrops had succeeded it; but the lickrish water was there, in a bottle that had formerly contained household ammonia, and the parched cornmeal.

Overcome by a flood of recollections, I halted and, after making some casual inquiries regarding the state of trade, I invested. But the parched meal did not appear to be up to its one-time tastiness. Perhaps it had not been parched properly or perhaps my palate had been corrupted by table d'hôtes and quick lunches. And the lickrish water, also, was in the nature of a disappointment. It seemed to have lost the zip and flavor it once possessed.

Besides, the situation was growing strained. I could not describe it in words, but I could feel it—an intangible permeating thing that affected all of us. The proprietors were embarrassed and so was I. They accepted my custom, but they resented my presence—and I knew it; so I paid the score and went away.

Nevertheless, the experience was of value to me; it helped me to realize that small boys had not changed materially from the aspects they bore and the ambitions they nurtured away back yonder in the early history of this planet when we were boys ourselves.

In this day and generation small boys do not carry water for the elephant; and they never did either. They do not come home from the river, after having been forbidden to go in swimming, with their stockings on inside out and their hair betrayingly wet. Boys never were that foolish in any period of the world's history! They might be criminals, but they hid the evidences of crime.

Bulldogs guarding apple orchards no longer bite the seats out of small boys' trousers; nor was this ever a common custom among bulldogs. If a bulldog must stick to the dark meat he prefers the drumstick to the second joint.

All these are but figments of an adult imagination—pure romances, originally devised by grown men and repeated by other grown men, until most grown men have come to believe they really happened. They did not happen in our day and they do not happen in this day. But in all the essentials I am sure small boys remain unchanged and as they were, and as they ever will be. Only, as I remarked before, they do not feel called upon to tell us about it.

Any boy knows better than to tell! After we have grown up we do not understand boys, and they don't understand us while they are growing up. A

wide and a gaping gulf divides us, and they, at least, have sense enough not to try to bridge it. Through bitter experience and oft-repeated disillusionment a boy comes to know that his motives are sure to be misconstrued by the world at large.

The entire universe is in a conspiracy to thwart his proper ambitions. A false standard of manners and morals stamps as wrong whatever is pleasant, and as proper whatever is unpleasant. He may rebel against this—certainly to himself he questions its wisdom; but he does not undertake to argue it out with you.

I do not blame him either. No creature on earth—not even a Mammoth Cave fish—is so perversely blind as a parent. Take a parent's attitude now in the matter of babies: Any small boy knows that a baby is of no account whatsoever; yet, in the regard of its gulled mother and its deluded father, it is priceless.

And, contrariwise, all the time that a small boy is enlarging his scope of activity and becoming of more and more value to himself and to his gang he is, in the publicly expressed estimation of grown persons, undergoing a constant shrinkage in intrinsic value. The quotations on him may fluctuate, but in general the tendency is downward. In my own juvenile life I recall but one instance of a bull movement.

The man who lived next door to us and had cherry trees in his yard climbed up on the dividing fence and said openly he would give ten dollars in cash for the privilege of taking my young life! Declining his offer, I retired hastily to the hayloft; and it was not more than a week before my commercial judgment was vindicated.

The man who lived on the other side of us, and who was trying to raise pigeons, offered twenty-five dollars for a chance to skin me alive! You see? My hide alone would now fetch more than twice as much as my entire person had been worth but a few short days before. And yet at that very minute I was worth to myself, in the capacity for enjoying life, at least a million dollars a day! A million is a mighty low estimate.

Most of the things that grown persons do and think and say are non-understandable to small boys anyway. The whining schoolboy, with his satchel and his more or less shining face, creeping like a snail toward the schoolhouse, is filled with an immense though unspoken distrust of the notions of his parents and of the adult world generally. He realizes—if they do not—the absolute futility of burdening his young mind with bothersome matters of no consequence, such as the intricacies of the greatest common

divisor, and that vicious, useless, deceitful thing, the past participle, when he knows his lifework is going to consist in walking across Niagara Falls in a pair of pink tights on a high wire in the summer time, and shooting Indians in the winter time.

Of what use to a boy are fractions—improper fractions or the other sort either—when in his own mind he has definitely arranged to grow up to be a gallant fireman and wear a double-breasted flannel shirt, open at the throat, and chew fine-cut tobacco, and play old sledge, and have that delightful smoky fireman smell on him, and at night go to sleep with his pants on, waiting for the alarm, to come, and then slide down a brass pole into a pair of gum boots and go curving away on a gaudy hosecart to rescue lovely maidens from the devouring elements?

What have fractions and Easy Lessons in English History to do with such a career? They can never be a help; they can never be anything but a hindrance.

However, all regular boys, I think, had regular boys' ideals. All about them were horrible examples of the effects of always knowing your lessons, and always washing your neck and ears, and always wiping your feet before coming into the house, so as to avoid tracking mud on the carpet. The boy who did those things only qualified for the despised and horrid rôle known as Teacher's Pet; and when he grew up he was put in a bank or a store, or some other stuffy and unattractive place, and had to stay there the rest of his life.

Whereas, on the other hand, the boy who was careless in such details, and who spent his Saturdays practicing high dives in the sawdust pile down back of the planing-mill, ran away from home, and after years came back again with a circus to the scenes of his childhood; and he wore fancy clothes now, and drove the band-wagon, and lived in the company of the elect of the earth.

Shakspeare was wise. In considering man in the secondary or schoolboy stage of life he dismissed him in three brief lines, dealing with his outward aspect solely and not touching on the psychology of the subject.

THIRD AGE

. . . And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow . . .

As You Like It—Act II, Scene VII.

I hate like the deuce to be continually calling attention to the mistakes of this man Shakspeare. It might make some people think I was conceited. But when a man who was in the writing business for a living—the same as I am—committed a serious sin of omission, it becomes a duty to put him right without loss of time. That is how I look at it.

Shakspeare advances his subject in one leap from the schoolboy, with his shining morning face, crawling snail-like toward school, to the lover, sighing like a furnace—sighing, I take it, like a furnace on the point of going out on a cold morning, which, I may say, is one of the most mournful sighs in the world—and inditing woeful ballads to the eyebrow of his lady fair. But, in so doing, Shakspeare jumps entirely over one of the most important periods in the life of man. I refer to the graduation or commencement-day period, which sometimes is coupled with the dear-old-college-days period.

Up to a certain point in his life the average member of the male sex has little or no use for girls. About the time he attains the mature age of fifteen he becomes certain that he can never bring himself to care for a woman except in the most Platonic way. He is convinced that the creation of woman was a grievous error in the first place—the utter ruination of what was probably a pretty fair article of rib—and, regardless of the fact that the family tree of his descendants will bear a lopsided appearance in consequence, he resolves that he will never allow woman to enter his life.

As a great detective, or a gallant airman, or a distinguished movie hero, he may, on occasion and merely to comply with the ethics, rescue maidens from imminent peril; but that positively is as far as the matter shall be allowed to go. His life is to be dedicated to great, stirring deeds of daring and heroism, and in it there will be no place for the other sex; those females who presume upon his kindness toward them to make overtures of a tender nature will do so at their own risk. Tucked away in the inner fastnesses of the haymow, he confides these sentiments to a sworn comrade, who feels exactly as he does about it.

Later a change comes stealing over him, softening his rugged nature. It is a sign that calf-love is about to claim him for its own. Love's young dream glides into his life, stealing away his brain and making him happy in

its loss. He now does fool things and is secretly proud of them. He dreams the happiest dreams when he is dreaming, and awakens with the awfullest jolts when he does waken. He can soar higher and fall harder than any other creature could—and live. He is brutally mistreated, and he goes humbly back, craving more punishment—and getting it too. One hour he is floating about amid rose-tinted clouds, touched along their downy edges with the golden glow of the virgin sun—and the next he is in a coal mine back of Pittsburgh on a foggy day.

To-day he hears the songbirds sing and smells the springtime flowers; to-morrow he is caught out in a blizzard far worse than any that the oldest inhabitants can remember. For him the effulgent moon beams down its softest glow; for him, also, the chute into the subcellar is greased and always waiting. Rosebuds and unfeeling parents uplift for him their respective pedals. Along his pathway spring up asters and disasters, daffodils and daffy deeds, the morning-glory and the nightshade, the hollyhock and the henbane.

In the morn he is traveling—dizzy, delirious and entranced—on a merry-go-round of joy, snatching the gilded rings of delectation off the hook at every turn; but when the chill of evening comes he has been run over by a steam roller and flattened out until he looks like a colored supplement.

To-morrow it will be an even-money proposition whether he is called for by a Ben Hur chariot or the Black Maria. He has been led to believe that all the world loves a lover; but by bitter experience he discovers this to be a gross misstatement of fact. What all the world loves is a chance to laugh at a lover.

We have his own word for it that a book of verse, a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and a nice cozy little Thou under a leafy bough suited old Omar clear down to the ground; but we do not know how the Thou felt about it! If we could get her side of it we should probably learn that a small leather-backed book showing a nourishing balance in the bank would hold her attention much longer than one containing merely a number of club-footed quatrains; and leafy boughs always did breed caterpillars, just as the earth beneath them is prolific of red ants of an inquiring turn of mind.

Generally speaking it is a wise dispensation of Providence that we rarely win the soulmates we picked out for ourselves in youth's roseate dawn. If any considerable number of us had done so it would probably be necessary for every divorce court to hold its sessions in a building about as large as Madison Square Garden; and even then there would be overflow meetings

going on outside in the street. Wise Nature steps in and saves us from ourselves; and, what is better, saves us from those we had thought would make ideal life companions for us.

Take, for example, the budding maiden just out of the finishing school, who has quit wearing middy blouses and has begun bobbing her hair; and has attended her first supper dance; and is learning to walk in the new fashion, with a forward tilt from the hips, so that she is practically in two places at once. Such a one as this delights to take a pound of caramels and a novel by Michael Arlen and steal away to some secluded spot and there work out the main problem. Time was—and not so long before either—when she felt that only a football hero, with a bushel of hair and two yards of shoulders, could fill her life; but now she knows better.

The man who will claim her heart must be tall and slender, with graceful, unstudied gestures; and he must have piercing black eyes that seem to burn into her very soul, and ebon curls drooping negligently athwart his marble brow; and he must be very cold to others, but must quiver with suppressed emotion at the sound of her voice, heard afar; and he must have a secret sorrow and a sash belt—and possibly a touch of lung trouble; and he must know how to play the guitar and call her Spanish love names. If he drank hard before he met her, so much the better!

However, as time passes on she revises her ideals. And it is perhaps just as well for all concerned that she does. Gradually a riper experience teaches her that young men who can strum the guitar acceptably and at the same time earn as much as thirty dollars a week are so rare as to be almost an extinct species. Strumming as a regular pursuit is not so popular as it was in the days of the troubadours.

Moreover, troubadours, as a rule, have not made the best husbands—at least that is the report that comes down to us from the Middle Ages. Likewise it dawns on her that the daily use of Spanish love names has gone out of fashion, except for naming new brands of all-Havana cigars.

The available statistics on the subject show that the girl of this type must frequently effect a compromise by hitching up for life with an unemotional but steady provider in, let us say, the wholesale egg-and-poultry business. This gentleman may have had those ebon curls drooping athwart his brow at some period of his life, but they have long since retreated over the brow of the hill. Now when he wants to brush his hair he has to take his collar off. His waistline curves out prominently in front, and he has large and well-

filled feet, which look as if internal injuries might ensue if he should mash one of them.

He is not up on guitar culture, his favorite instrument being a double-entry ledger. His idea of a pleasant evening is to put his slippers on and read about the produce market in the evening paper, after which a pleasant, open-faced nap is enjoyed as a preliminary to going to bed and sleeping in earnest. And so they live happily together ever after.

Then there is the girl who feels instinctively that she was intended for the rôle of the clinging vine. She has a mental picture of herself going through life looking trustfully up to a stalwart Hercules, who will ever interpose his rugged front between her and the rude buffets of the world; but often, so very often—in Chapter XVII—we find her engaged in raising a family with one hand and taking in boarders with the other, while the husband of her choice sits behind the showcase at the corner drug store pointing out the mistakes of the Coolidge Administration.

Perhaps she is just as happy as she would have been had she wed the sturdy oak. Certainly she is busier.

Howsomever, in a majority of the cases these things appear to turn out for the best. Those of us who do not get the ones we wanted for our helpmates very often get the ones who wanted us, and the general result averages up very satisfactorily.

Meanwhile we may safely let the lover sigh his sighs and dream his dreams. There will be ample time later on for him to ascertain the great truth about this matrimonial proposition—which is, if it is love that makes the world go round, it is common sense that is on the job when the world stops for meals, as it surely must once in a while. Romance is a lovely thing, but in the long run not so filling as a steak with fried onions.

One steady provider in the hand is worth two guitar pickers in the bush—as our fair maid will one day learn if she does not already know it. And if three X's in a row mean kisses in the happy, happy days of courtship, but stand for a barrel of family flour later on—why, both symbols are entirely proper in their respective places; the kisses are apt to keep their flavor better if the flour comes along at regular intervals.

FOURTH AGE

. . . Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous of honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. . . .

As You Like It—Act II, Scene VII.

Back there in those days there was more need for soldiers than at the present time of writing. Kings regulated wars instead of financiers, and the spoils of combat went to the warrior instead of the moving-picture operator; but now the paths of glory lead but to the film; and, for compiling the bubble reputation mentioned above, a politician's mouth has superior terminal facilities to any mouth I can recall.

Hence soldiers have come to be more or less a drug on the market—except when there's fighting to be done. To be sure, we have our standing army. It was so called back in the time of General Winfield Scott—mainly, I suppose, because the Indians did not give it a chance to sit down very long on a stretch—and it is still so called.

However, to provide an outlet for the military cravings of our young men in peace times we have the National Guard. I have a tremendous admiration for the National Guard—but as an onlooker solely. Personally I could never get all worked up over the prospect of caparisoning myself with a load of accouterments that no humane man would ask a mule to tote, and getting out in the hot sun and going through a series of complicated and laborious calisthenics with my arms and legs every time a young sapling officer looked at me and went Hum-p-p-h! 'way down in his throat. To me it would be an extremely distasteful thing to be called Hum-p-p-h! at frequent intervals all the afternoon by a young officer to whom I had not been introduced.

Where we live now we have a neighbor who is very active in the National Guard and from him I have learned a great deal about it. He just exists from day to day for the dear old National Guard. Duty seems to call him nearly every night. If it is not battalion drill, or regimental inspection, or target practice, or school for non-coms, or brigade muster, it's something else.

On holidays, such as Memorial Day and the Fourth of July, when everybody else has gone to the seashore or the country, he puts on all his things and a pair of white cotton gloves and parades eight or nine miles. And

about once in so often, if he has any luck, he turns out and marches to the cemetery to attend the funeral of somebody he did not know—and comes home in the dusk of evening walking on the sides of his feet, with his shoe soles turned up on edge like a pair of flatirons.

Then, too, there is a frequent occasion down at the armory—full-dress review, I think is the name for it—which calls for his harnessing himself up in his fanciest trappings. The word is passed round then and all the folks on the street come out on their front porches to enjoy the spectacle. We stand and watch for him just as a few years ago people used to watch for Halley's comet. Presently he goes by, all embossed with brass and enmeshed in gold braid. His coat fits him faultlessly in the back, and his brain is not giving him any trouble either. After he has gone the street seems dark and sad. You know how gloomy the heavens always look just after a shooting star has passed!

Once in a while he has an afternoon off, and then he has his photograph taken in full regalia. He has not yet assisted in the taking of a walled city, but he has been present at the taking of more photographs than any man in the state, I guess. I do not believe so many of our leading photographers would own automobiles if it were not for young babies, national guardsmen and members of the uniform rank of the Knights of Pythias.

Our military friend spent an evening with us recently. I do not know how he came to have an evening to spare—the colonel must have been sick or something—but anyhow he came over to see us and put in three solid hours telling me about the big row over the election of the new second lieutenant of L Company. It seems this was one of the most important and significant things that had occurred in this country in years! That affair between Hayes and Tilden is not to be mentioned in the same breath with it. I am really surprised that the newspapers have not taken it up.

Jorgenson has ambitions himself. I gathered from what he said that if he hangs on for about five years longer, and never is tardy or absent on drill nights, and never misses an inspection, he is liable to be promoted to fourth corporal. His voice trembled with emotion when he spoke of this to me. Even now he enjoys certain perquisites. He is exempt from jury service—that's one thing—and if war should break out he will be the first to go. He will—if I have any say in the matter.

That is not all either. Every summer he goes to the encampment with his regiment. Oh, but he has the glorious outing then! He spends weeks getting ready for it. He takes his rifle with him, and his cartridge belt, and his

sidearms, and his blanket roll, and a canteen and a service kit, and a first-aid package, and some collapsible cooking utensils, and an extra shirt and a change of underwear, and his other shoes, and a lot of miscellaneous tinware and hardware and truck and stuff. He does not haul these things in a wagon—he takes them! And he and all the others go upstate to the camp and stay ten days there. No stuffy Pullmans for them—they travel on a jolly old daycoach, two in a seat.

In the morning he gets up early—about three o'clock I think it is, or maybe it's three-thirty—and drills all day except when he is tidying up round the camp or acting as orderly to some very prominent officer, who is a shipping-clerk when in town. He eats off a tin plate and drinks his coffee without any cream in it out of a tin cup. And at night he sleeps in a tent—except that about every other night he is on guard duty and walks a post with his gun on his shoulder. It is a nice gun, but a mite heavy along toward breakfast-time.

When he comes home you would not know him for the sunburn and the blisters and the mosquito bites. He has to walk with a cane for a week. It is simply great, he tells me. He would not take any amount of money for the experience. Neither would I—and I need the money too.

One summer two or three years ago Jorgenson played in splendid luck. He participated in the big maneuvers. There were national guardsmen from several states in attendance, and regulars from the army posts and batteries of coast artillery. The secretary of war—the one who was made secretary of war because he was such a good corporation lawyer—came all the way from Washington on a private car to be present at the maneuvers.

There were two armies—the Red Army and the Blue Army. Jorgenson belonged to the Red Army. I have forgotten now how many miles he crawled on his abdomen—but it ran up into figures—and it rained most of the time; and he got separated from his command and had to sleep out. The commissary failed to arrive, and he did not eat anything to speak of, except a concentrated emergency ration, which refused to uncoil when he tried to cook it in his collapsible saucepan.

He was chased round a good deal, too, over rough country; and took part in some delightful forced night marches, and was captured several times and killed once or twice—figuratively killed, of course. No person, no matter how brutal and bloodthirsty by nature, would kill Jorgenson intentionally. And the very day they broke camp and started out they met the commissary department coming in!

Jorgenson had a perfectly corking time all the way through and was in bed for a week after he got home, suffering from stone bruises on his stomach. If he is strong enough, and if the physician who is treating him for fallen arches and the rheumatism will let him, he means to go to the next maneuvers. He says they have an excellent hardening effect on a chap and toughen him up for actual campaigning. I judge he is right. One more experience of this sort ought to fit Jorgenson for traveling exclusively on the abdomen without making him footsore there; and when it comes to living on and on indefinitely, without eating anything, he will be able to laugh in a chameleon's face.

We smile at Jorgenson and his gaudy trappings. Universal disarmament is lurking just round the corner. The dove of peace coos in the portico of the League of Nations temple. The dog of war is picking the coverlid; and when he dies we are going to have him stuffed and set up in the natural-history museum along with the dodo, the great auk and other extinct creatures. All is serenity and quietude.

And then something cracks—somebody's foot slips! The dog of war emerges from the mausoleum. He appears to be as lusty as ever. He looks as though he had just dined heartily. He is wiping a few dove feathers off his upper lip; that pleasant cooing sound is no longer heard in the portico. Sudden unpopularity descends upon the congressmen who killed off the bills for the new battleships and better coast defenses, in order that Pilot Oak might have a new million-dollar post office, and Mink Pond an appropriation for a dredger, so that it could be made navigable for bathing parties all summer.

The flag begins to mean something more than a scrap of painted bunting. Primeval instincts, long buried, come to life. A million or two of young men drop whatever they are doing and depart for the barracks and the camp. We do not snicker at Jorgenson now. We cheer for him—the hero!—as he marches to the transport, and we weep for him after he is gone. The soldier has his day again.

I have purposely refrained until now from mentioning the enlisted man. He is not in the picture and never was, except for the few minutes immediately following the moment when he halted in front of the lithograph showing Private Jones hobnobbing with Brigadier Blank, and harkened to the siren song of the recruiting sergeant. In times of peace we do not see him. We hear of him only if he deserts. He is back of Officers' Row somewhere, in a pair of overalls, currying the general's horse, or mowing

the major's lawn, or minding the adjutant's baby, or doing plain washing and ironing for the second lieutenant's family.

And when war comes—if it does come—we do not feel called upon to cheer for him. He is not a gallant volunteer—he is only a regular. It is his business to fight. That is what he is hired to do! Do not we taxpayers pay him some large sum, such as sixty or seventy cents a day, to do our fighting for us? Certainly we do! Cheer for him? We rather guess not! He is no hero—he works by the month!

FIFTH AGE

. . . And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. . . .

As You Like It—Act II, Scene VII.

There now, in an instantaneous pen-picture, we have him, the justice—his fair round belly and all. You know that kind of frontispiece. It juts well out, with a gradual, billowy bulge to it; and it sways at its moorings, so to speak, like a captive balloon. Taking a nap after dinner, he holds it on his lap with both hands; and when he is in a hurry and walking fast it makes you seasick to watch him.

He is lined with good capon—and with other good rich things too. His eyes are severe—why shouldn't they be when he disapproves of nearly everything he sees?

He is full of wise saws. They are not necessarily wise saws—we merely accept them as embodying wisdom because the generation ahead of us gave them currency. If we only stopped to think about it proverbs are very much overdone anyhow. Many mickles do not always make a muckle. Very often it is a mucker. The rolling stone gathers no moss—quite true; but it sees the world—does it not? And, besides, did you ever stop to think that the market for stones with moss on them is very limited?

Soft words butter no parsnips. Granted. Buttered parsnips are not so awfully popular either. I can think of several things I should rather have for a steady diet than parsnips, with or without butter. But coming from the

justice's mouth these remarks have a sonorous, convincing sound, and we accept them unthinkingly.

As Shakspeare intimates, all these things help him to play the part. He does play it too. He is satisfied with himself. Looking back on his life from the calm reflective altitude of, say, his fiftieth birthday, he cannot see where he has made any serious errors. From time to time others may have been guilty of mistakes—but not he. He is acquainted with the one perfect work of Nature—namely himself.

He is egotistical—not with the blatant and vociferous egotism of youth, but with the settled and immovable egotism of middle age. He has traded most of his early ideals off for symptoms; but they are important and impressive symptoms—else he would not have them. He does not talk as much as he did. He realizes that a dignified silence often goes further than a loud roaring sound; the Sphinx preserves its air of mystery through all the ages, but Mammoth Cave has no secrets from any one.

Semper Edam! is his motto—signifying: At all times the whole cheese! He removes his high hat with the air of one unveiling a monument. His way of buttoning his frock coat makes you think of closing up the court-house for the day. At breakfast he orders his eggs fried on both sides in a tone of voice suggesting Mark Antony beginning that funeral oration to the Roman populace. He takes himself as seriously as a funeral. He has no fears for the future. His position is fixed, secure, unassailable! So long as he keeps his health, all must necessarily be well with the universe. And then—thud.

Another of the old English writers has treated of this same subject. I refer to Mother Goose. She carried it further than Shakspeare did. He rested content with picturing man in his Fifth Age. She went to ultimate conclusions and described his frequent finish. She did this in those immortal verses of hers dealing with Humpty-Dumpty.

In the versions of both writers the central figure is of a circular aspect—rotund, egg-shaped, self-satisfied. She has him sitting on a wall; Shakspeare visualizes him seated on the bench as a justice. Each, I take it, indulged in an allegory to show that undoubtedly he sat in high places. Shakspeare leaves him there. She tells what happened to him. You remember the deathless lines:

“Humpty-Dumpty sat on the wall;
Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall;
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Can't put Humpty-Dumpty back again!”

Believe me, they did not try! I will not be positive as to the king's horses, though I have a shrewd suspicion that immediately after the catastrophe they went hurriedly away to take part in the inaugural parade of the late Humpty-Dumpty's successor; but I am in a position to speak with authority as regards the actions of the king's men—because, after all, they were men. So we know what they naturally did under the circumstances. They dusted round the corner to be ready to whoop for the new administration when the band-wagon should pass; and if any of them lingered upon the spot at all it was for the purpose of dancing on the fragments.

These distressful tragedies occur daily—the front page of the paper is always full of them; but it seems to me they occur most numerous to the person who has been so busy studying his own graceful proportions that he failed to look behind him.

There are several morals to be deduced from these mournful affairs. One—and an old hackneyed one—is that the higher you climb, the harder you drop. The second is that, before undertaking to climb at all, you should be sure the life-net is properly rigged. And the third is that while sitting on the wall it is well to cast a glance toward the rear. It is bad luck to see the new moon over the left shoulder. It is worse luck not to—because nobody ever yearns to give you a fatal shove until you have clambered to an elevation where you will make a pleasant splashing sound when you hit. That fatal plunk is music to many an ear then; and the more pieces there are the greater the satisfaction.

Yet how very few climbers there are who take these precautions! During the best years of your life you strive to scale that cloud-piercing wall called success and perch upon its tallest pickets. If necessary you will trample on the form of your best friend to get there. You tear your clothes and you damage your reputation maybe. You get stains on your hands and scrape the skin off your knees.

Finally, though, you achieve it. You reach the top. You shove a previous arrival off into space and scrouge into the place he has left vacant. To be sure, it is not altogether as comfortable a roosting-place as it appeared to be when viewed from below. It is jagged and rough, and there is broken glass on it, and rusty nails and sharp splinters. Your conscience pains you too, perhaps.

There are compensations though. Far, far down below you behold the masses of the population wriggling about in a foolish, futile sort of fashion.

By straining the eyes you can make out their admiring faces—they remind you of ants; and, as with ants, you prefer them at a distance. You say to yourself that this thing of sitting on the wall has its attractions. There is a lot of personal satisfaction in being up there under any circumstances. The company is small but exclusive, and—thank Heaven!—there is elbowroom. One is not annoyed by the proximity of ordinary, common people.

The limelight flickers on your face, its calcium beams lighting up your distinguished lineaments. Somewhere in the distance a brass band is playing: “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow!” Bouquets are dropping in your lap. The sun is shining upon you, warmly yet softly. You have a pleasant taste in your mouth. You fetch a deep breath, and one by one the buttons pop off your vest.

Under the pressure from within your hatband slowly splits asunder. You can scarcely look over your own bust development now; the crawling multitudes below are barely visible. A playful breeze—but a soothing one—touches with caressing fingers your front hair. You light a good cigar, cross your legs, put your thumbs in the armholes of your waistcoat and lean back to enjoy the bracing and buoyant view from these pleasant altitudes.

If you did but peek over your own shoulder you would see something. You would see a group of determined conspirators stealing up behind you, treading the pickets with pussy-footed care—all animated by a common impulse. Did you but glance downward you might observe a determined person, with covetous eyes, reaching up a greedy hand to grip you by your silk-shod ankles. But, as a rule, you look neither backward nor downward. Why should you? The applause is all coming from other directions—also the floral offerings, the musical selections and the requests for autographs.

Besides, in response to the popular demand, it is time to have your photograph taken again. You assume an attitude of easy grace, with a thoughtful expression in the eyes, and the forefinger of the right hand pressing against the pulsing temple of your massive brow. This is an effective pose, but leaves the back of the neck exposed.

There is a sudden jarring impact under the butt of the left ear. There is a low, muffled report, as if a sledgehammer had fallen on a ripe watermelon. There is a flash, a crash, and you know no more. And it is not necessary that you should either; for you are now but another mussy job for the janitor. The king’s horses are nickering and the king’s men are cheering—nickered and cheering for the assassin who gave you the lethal wallop, and who is even

now settling himself in the cozy spot on the wall which you unwittingly have warmed for him.

The Humpty-Dumpty Brotherhood has a large membership. It is a family that is constantly growing. It includes many famous names. It stretches all the way from Julius Cæsar to ex-Kaiser Wilhelm II; from the year 1 B.C. to Washington, D. C. Every page of history drips sadly with the lamentable annals of those who sat on a wall and had a great fall. A few survived the dread experience, but they were very few indeed. A former champion rarely comes back except as perishable freight. Many people can stand adversity—they just naturally have to stand it; but not so many can stand sudden prosperity, and fewer still the abrupt slump from prosperity to adversity again. Generally the fall results fatally. In a vast majority of cases Humpty-Dumpty is a total loss—with no insurance.

Every stratum of society furnishes its recruits to the league.

Take financial circles for an example. About once in so often, out of the West or somewhere comes tearing a new Napoleon of finance, accompanied by his family, his touring cars, his press agent—who later becomes his suppress agent—his ego and his bank-roll. New York is his destination. His native state has grown too tight for him round the chest. He needs air; he needs the inspiration of the metropolis. Wall Street calls to him as a mother to a favored child. Willing hands boost him to the top. Behold him there, with his head in the clouds, o'ertopping the pygmies of the Stock Exchange, as he inhales the rarefied atmosphere of higher finance! He can think now only in large sums of money. When he gives out an interview it is so full of upper-case I's that it looks as if it had a picket fence round it.

He has his plans all worked out for revolutionizing the existing financial systems, and incidentally shoving the old school of financiers into the umbrella closet under the back stairs and turning the key on them, when—kerplunk! Somebody has shoved him right off the wall. He drops into the welcoming arms of a Federal grand jury. His next imitation is that of a pet zebra, with a close hair-cut, learning how to make chair-bottoms in a large dark building enclosed by stone walls.

The actor and the artist; the opera singer; the author and the playwright—these, too, are particularly subject to the kind of vertigo that comes of sitting in a high place, with the feet hanging over and the torso swelling. So long as they are humble beginners they are in no peril. But when your young leading man or your young dramatist rears himself on the skyline, shutting out most of the horizon from the purview of lesser mortals; when he begins

to speak of his audiences and his following; when he starts cultivating idiosyncrasies; when he forgets the friends of other days—it is time to stand by for the fatal concussion.

You might as well be ascertaining the glove-sizes of the honorary pallbearers, and ordering the broken columns and the gates ajar, because the obsequies are about due and the remains will be ready.

Taking it on the whole, though, politics probably furnishes more candidates for the Humpty-Dumpty Club than any other calling. At an early age a young man qualifies for the career of a statesman by being born of poor but honest parents in a log cabin or an earthen dugout. Once in a while a man succeeds in politics who was born in a clapboarded house; but he is rarely found and starts under a severe handicap. A log cabin is, after all, the only proper place for a future statesman to be born in.

Having thus laid the foundations for a life of political preferment, the ambitious youth, while still in his teens, strengthens his hold by whipping the village bully—see the published life of any prominent American statesman. He rounds out the preliminary course by teaching a district school, spending his evenings reading law by the light of a tallow dip. Electricity or gas will answer, but a tallow dip is much better, as more nearly conforming with the traditions. Sometimes I wonder what our public men would have done without district schools to teach, and village bullies to lick, and tallow dips to read law by. It does not seem possible that there were enough bullies to go round—but there must have been. History attests it and you cannot go behind those returns.

Anon he enters the arena and the forum, not to mention the caucus and the convention. He wears the customary habiliments of his profession, including the limp string tie and the long-tailed coat. He has cultivated the deep rolling voice, the eagle eye and the majestic yet democratic manner. The people have become, indeed, very dear to him. He speaks of them as My Pe-pull!

Step by step he climbs higher and higher. Honors crowd thick upon him. He learns how to wear a halo, a high hat and a laurel wreath—all on the same head. He feels that he is old Mr. Destiny's favorite son. The fevered dreams of youth have abated, but the rewards of a ripened maturity beckon him ever on and on.

The halls of Congress have heard him in debate and the loosened plastering is still falling. One step farther is the Senate Chamber and on beyond that is the White House. He is up on the wall, nine hundred miles

from his constituents and nine thousand miles above them. They have shrunk until he can hardly discern them with the naked eye. What boots it? His mind is fixed upon a more attractive and a more congenial subject—the same being himself.

In the distance is heard a low, rumbling sound; but he thinks it is the applause starting all over again. There is a cloud in the sky, but it seems no larger than a man's hand. A significant whisper is borne on the breeze, but to him it sounds like the far-off music of lutes and harps. Slander has bared its forked tongue mayhap; jealousy, green-eyed and baleful, has cast its poisoned darts. To-morrow will be election day too; but what cares he? He is safely enthroned on the top of the wall—safely enshrined in the hearts of his grateful countrymen. He inclines his Jovelike head to pin another medal on his breast.

But hark! What means that quick, agonized bleat of distress, followed by a low, muffled sound—as of something soft and squashy dropping from a great height? Mark you how the curious crowds gather to view the shattered bits of shell, the spilt yolk, the caved-in high hat and the broken umbrella. 'Tis no matter! When Congress convenes again a new brave of the White-Tie Tribe marches up to the speaker's desk to be sworn in, and back home in Oscaloosa there's a fallen idol commenting bitterly upon the proverbial ingratitude of republics, wondering whether any of the small consular places are left—and the list of prominent members of the Humpty-Dumpty Fellowship has been increased by the name of one more patriot out of a job.

Persons who have made a scientific study of the human race say man reaches his greatest pinnacle of efficiency between fifty years and sixty. Some scientists say that and other scientists disagree with them—if they did not disagree with them they would not be scientists; but if a majority of men climb the highest during that decade it is equally sure that a large number fall the hardest along about then. This appears to be the period chosen by a good many for making cross-barred, star-spangled spectacles of themselves.

Up to then the average man has been too busy rearing a family and getting it launched, or gathering a competence and getting it hived up, or making a name for himself—one of these things or all three—to give much time to the job of making himself conspicuously foolish. Now, though, there comes a glorious opportunity of which he often takes advantage.

Those mushy, squashy love-letters that are written to the trusting, yielding damosel—put the accent on either the first syllable or the last—who later comes to court with a broken heart and a smart lawyer, craving

damages, are they generally written by a young, sappy person? The records say not. The records disclose the distressful fact that in most instances they were written by a gentleman rising of fifty.

A gentleman rising of fifty who falls in love should not be allowed to write. He should prosecute his courtship with both hands tied behind his back. If he were also gagged and hobbled so much the better; for the preponderance of the evidence shows he is not to be trusted with pen and paper. He may still be keen in business, still dominant in his profession, still competent to draw a contract or quarter a client; but when the honey-bee of love stings him in his tender middle-aged susceptibilities he begins using the swollen place to do his thinking with instead of his head.

He is not satisfied to say it over the telephone, which is still reasonably safe; or on the parlor sofa, which was tolerably safe, too, until the dictaphone came into such general domestic use. He just will commit his softest and most sentimental yearnings to black and white!

And so very many bright young women have a tidy habit of saving up the documents, which explains why there is frequently such interesting reading for jury, press, and public when the case goes to trial.

After a certain age skittishness is not especially becoming to the male of the species. There are only about so many skits apiece anyhow, and the elderly imitation rarely fools anybody. Skittishness is all right in a colt. It is a natural trait and we expect him to show it; but when the family carriage horse develops it we trade him off.

Man, however, never seems to learn any lessons from the dumb creatures—else he would acquire fidelity from the dog, the gift of silence from the oyster, and dignity from the hoot-owl. If after fifty he is still shy on these virtues there is not much hope for him. Particularly there is not much hope for him if, all of a sudden, he discovers that he is suffering from the complaint which comes to all of us who live long enough to catch it—age—and tries to cure himself by self-treatment.

We see him wriggling in misery on the stand during the breach-of-promise proceedings. We see him wearing clothes that a minstrel show would hesitate to adopt for the street parade through fear of causing runaways. We see him taking gymnastic exercises. We see him riding horseback in the park. He is not doing this for fun. Using his own spinal column as a weapon to beat his own brains out is not pleasure to a man who has spent most of his earlier life in a revolving office chair. No; he is trying to reduce his waistline. He wants to be youthful; he wants to be gay and

gallus and carefree; he is a melancholy spectacle. And if we were not all so busy laughing we should be sorry for him.

After fifty appears to be a dangerous age for women too. This is the age when many of them take up the newest cults and the freshest fads. They crave to get back to Nature, forgetting that Nature is getting back at them. They wear fillets about their hair, and loose draperies; then discard corsets, and still wonder why they do not look more like the Grecian maidens one sees dancing on a frieze!

They become disciples of long-haired teachers of weird doctrines. Long hair appears to go with a new cult—I judge the first cultist had a feud with his barber. If they are widows some of them seem particularly prone to fall in love with underdone youths. Some don war-paint and feathers to give old age a battle. One of the sweetest sights in the world is a sweet woman growing old gracefully; and one of the saddest is an old woman becoming prematurely young. Also it is one of the commonest.

After fifty I guess a man's place in the scheme of life is pretty well fixed. He is either a headpin or a pinhead. If you are a pinhead nobody takes you seriously, and if you are a headpin you are stood up as a target and the world bowls at you.

LAST AGES

. . . The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion—
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

As You Like It—Act II, Scene VII.

Again it becomes necessary in the interests of truth to call attention to a few discrepancies between the sixth age of man as Shakspeare observed it and the sixth age of man as we observe it; for, with us, old Mr. Pantaloon is not so very likely to be lean and slippered. He is more apt to be plump and

pumped—plump as to figure and patent-leather-pumped as to feet; and his pouch, if he has one, is generally worn in front, with a silken waistcoat buttoned over it. His hose is youthful though; likewise his clothes and his hat—not to mention his manner. Old young men are common in these times; but young old ones are just as common—if not more so.

There was always one thing about old gentlemen I could never understand: Country life is supposed to be a healthier life than city life. Take two boys—a country boy and a city boy—at the same age. Always in fiction and quite often in fact the country boy is a sturdy, broad-beamed, normal youngster—bronzed, bare-legged and full-breasted. On the contrary, his city cousin—unless the popular conception errs—is scrawny and thin and pale-bleached, with weak eyes and pipestem legs.

With the license that belongs to all historical writers we now skip lightly over forty or fifty intervening years and take a look at the same contrasting pair when they are grandsires. Exhibit A is frequently noted to be a caved-in and wheezy figure, kinked into a human pretzel by rheumatism and feeble on his pins. Exhibit B, meaning by that the city-raised specimen, is very often an erect and light-footed old gentleman carrying his age with an air, stepping out briskly, sound in wind and limb.

One has lived close to Nature. Throughout his life he has been eating simple food, sleeping eight hours a night, going to bed early and getting up early, never indulging in excesses—and he is a wreck. The other all these years has been taking all manner of chances with himself. He has lived under artificial and enervating conditions, whetting his mind on constant excitement, burning up his energies in feverish pursuits of business and pleasure, eating and drinking whatever was distinctly not good for him, going home when he did not have anywhere else to go. He never went to bed with the chickens because he much preferred to stay up for the larks.

By all the rules he should have died seven or eight times before he reached middle age. And here he is at sixty-five or seventy or seventy-five, pink and pert, and all primed up. I wish somebody would explain to me why this is so. It is not reasonable, and it is not natural, and it is not normal; but it keeps right on occurring.

Be all that as it may and generally is, when a man gets along toward the sixth stage of life he has in a great majority of cases either made his pile or else he has quit trying. If, like most of us, he set out to accumulate a million he either has it or he knows he is never going to have it, and is probably as well satisfied as if he had it.

Some people think baseball is the national pastime of this country; it is not. The game that everybody plays, the game that never loses its fascination, that is as absorbing in winter as in summer, is the game of wondering what you would do if you only had a million dollars. Some play it with their eyes open—some while sleeping on their backs.

There are a hundred and ten million people, more or less, in this country, and I'll venture that some time during the past month all of us except a few have sat in thought and wondered what we would do if we only had a million dollars of our own. The exceptional few are those who have their million. They have quit wondering. Some of them have quit thinking too—some of the younger ones, who inherited theirs. Have you been reading the society columns of the New York papers lately?

Probably the man who gets the most enjoyment out of his million is the man who earns about a hundred dollars a month, and knows that a hundred dollars a month is as much as he ever will earn; so in his spare time he just hops in and spends his million on mental automobiles and figurative champagne, with an utter disregard for expense. He is the one who gets the worth of his money every pop, because that kind of automobile never runs over anybody and that kind of champagne never leaves a sealing-wax taste in the mouth on the morning after the night before, nor puts a nap on the tongue that would be entirely suitable for a plush album but is distinctly out of keeping for a tongue.

I wish I had a dollar for every time I have played the national game myself. I should have my million by now. And if so be I did have it I presume I should do with my million what most people do with their millions. If a man got his million by working for it, the weight of the evidence shows that he will probably break down his health trying to double or even treble it. If somebody died and left it to him, the chances are that he will break down his health just the same—trying to spend it.

After all, there are only two kinds of money in the world—the kind that is hard to get and easy to keep, and the kind that is easy to get and hard to keep. This, I take it, helps to explain why fortunes swell up so rapidly and shrink away so expeditiously here among us. The first generation collects the fortune; the second spends it; the third repines because it is spent; and the fourth starts in to reassemble it again.

In playing the fascinating game of wondering what we would do if we had a million, most of us follow the same general rules. We start in by setting aside a large sum for charity and good deeds. That is the first move

on the board. Then we reconsider; we cut down the charity allowance somewhat. We shall still be philanthropists, but we shall not be downright foolish and reckless about it. Instead of supporting four poor families and one touring car we shall support four touring cars and one poor family.

Charity, we reflect, begins at home anyway; so we proceed to draw a brain-picture of the home. It is built of marble and has about eighty rooms in it, and an art gallery, and a Roman bath of white marble, and a shooting preserve adjacent, and a few other trifling facilities that are lacking in the modest home we occupy at present. Naturally, with a place such as this to maintain and private yachts to buy, and other expenses of a similar nature to be met, we cannot afford to engage in miscellaneous philanthropy on too gorgeous a scale—can we? It would not be right, would it?

We owe something to ourselves and to society, and to our position in life. Wealth—the ownership of wealth—certainly entails its responsibilities; already it is giving us splitting headaches to figure out everything properly, and, after all, what is one million? One million does not go so very far when you come to think it over. We shall need at least two millions, and very possibly three—and just about that time the alarm clock goes off and it is time to get up and go to work.

There is one point, though, on which we are all agreed in our own minds: Each of us says to himself that when he gets his million he is not going to behave as so many of those who have already got their millions are behaving. And yet I have no doubt that almost any one of us would measure up to the accepted standards.

If we had collected that gratifying million by living on well water and hickory nuts, by skinning our fellow man down to his suspender buckles, by stuffing our ears with cottonwool and currency every time the cry of affliction was raised in our vicinity, we should imitate the horrible examples offered by those who acquired theirs according to that formula. We should be desperately miserable because somebody else had made five millions—or ten—in the time it took us to make one; and we should work like dogs trying to close up the gap.

With the job still unfinished we should die, disappointed and broken-hearted. And then we should be laid away, after a spirited argument for the defense by the officiating clergyman.

Our heirs would erect above us a mausoleum about the size of a county jail and about as pretty looking. With the utmost regret the papers would dig

up all the hidden chapters of our lives and print them in full, with large headlines.

The extra family, that so often turns up in Oregon or Texas—or somewhere—would begin suing the regular and orthodox set of relatives to break the will; or some dissatisfied legatee would undertake to prove that we had been congenitally weak-minded during the last twenty years of our lives. And the lawyers would get all the estate except the core and the peelings.

If we only paused long enough to think it over—there is not a chance in the world that we will pause and think it over, but if only we did—we might be brought to realize that some of the biggest successes of this world did not have much money.

I never heard that Benjamin Franklin left a large fortune behind him; but in his old age, his mind being salted by experience—salted but not soured—he gave to posterity the legacy of a soothing philosophy that has endured longer than any fortune of dollars would have endured.

Abe Lincoln was not a rich man, as rich men go. Very probably he would not have been a rich man had he lived out his allotted years; he was not built for a moneygetter or a moneykeeper. Homer died a beggar and Æsop was a slave; and Edgar Allan Poe went lean and hungry most of his days.

Shakspeare, dying, bequeathed to the world very little except a shelf of badly spelled plays. And yet if ever I heard the name of the richest man of Shakspeare's day it has escaped me; while there is not an actor alive to-day who does not aspire to play Hamlet some of these times.

Reflections such as these should be very comforting to the great majority of us who will never be rich in our old age. On the other hand, very few of us in our old age, or even before that, will write a Poor Richard's Almanac, or a Gettysburg Address, or an Iliad—at least, my publishers do not expect any large output of such works from me.

Still, we can at least all hope and pray that when we pass from the Sixth Age into the Seventh and last—sans teeth, perhaps, and sans eyes, sans taste—we shall still have retained our own self-respect and the respect of our fellowmen.

The richest old man I ever knew had trouble sometimes when paying his poll tax. His check would have come back from the bank, but his face was good for any amount among children; for he had mastered the art of getting

old gracefully and gently—or else it came to him naturally. People were happier for his having lived among them; and he was the happier for it too.

He had been a soldier, and his was the side that lost too; but I never heard him speak a harsh word or a bitter one against the winners. He belonged to no church, but he preached the broadest and the kindest and the lovingest doctrine that one might hope to hear. I do not mean to imply by this that he lacked convictions, for he had them and the courage of them; but he conceded that other people had a right to their opinions.

In time those afflictions of age that Shakspeare has described came upon him. His figure, which had been arrow-straight, bent under the burden of his three-score and ten years; yet, seeing him so, you thought of the simile of a kindly old tree drooping, with each recurring season, ever nearer and nearer the earth that had nurtured it. His brain stayed clear—the old tree was not dying at the top first.

His eyes grew dim, but the fires of an unquenchable youthfulness of spirit still flickered genially in them. His voice cracked, but became as certain bells that chime all the sweeter for having cracks in them. He was alone in the world, but he was not lonely. A whole community loved him.

Finally one day he fell asleep. When he woke he was in the company of those kindly and tolerant old philosophers whose sayings he had so loved to repeat. I remember that it snowed on the day of his funeral. Through the whirling white flurries the sorrowing town came to see him laid away, and the snow had covered the mound with a soft white covering almost as soon as the spade of the sexton shaped it and smoothed it. A millionaire might have envied him then, for his funeral was another one of the things that money cannot buy.

Second childhood is not such a grievous burden if we have kept some of the spirit of our other childhood to sweeten and savor it.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Prose and Cons* by Irvin S. Cobb]