EARL BIGGERS

SEVEN KEYS TO BALDPATE

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
"WEEP NO MORE, MY LADY"

A young woman was crying bitterly in the waiting-room of the railway station at Upper Asquewan Falls, New York.

A beautiful young woman? That is exactly what Billy Magee wanted to know as, closing the waiting-room door behind him, he stood staring just inside. Were the features against which that frail bit of cambric was agonizingly pressed of a pleasing contour? The girl's neatly tailored corduroy suit and her flippant but charming millinery augured well. Should he step gallantly forward and inquire in sympathetic tones as to the cause of her woe? Should he carry chivalry even to the lengths of Upper Asquewan Falls?

No, Mr. Magee decided he would not. The train that had just roared away into the dusk had not brought him from the region of skyscrapers and derby hats for deeds of knight errantry up state. Anyhow, the girl's tears were none of his business. A railway station was a natural place for grief – a field of many partings, upon whose floor fell often in torrents the tears of those left

behind. A friend, mayhap a lover, had been whisked off into the night by the relentless five thirty-four local. Why not a lover? Surely about such a dainty trim figure as this courtiers hovered as moths about a flame. Upon a tender intimate sorrow it was not the place of an unknown Magee to intrude. He put his hand gently upon the latch of the door.

And yet – dim and heartless and cold was the interior of that waiting-room. No place, surely, for a gentleman to leave a lady sorrowful, particularly when the lady was so alluring. Oh, beyond question, she was most alluring. Mr. Magee stepped softly to the ticket window and made low-voiced inquiry of the man inside.

"What's she crying about?" he asked.

A thin sallow face, on the forehead of which a mop of ginger-colored hair lay listlessly, was pressed against the bars.

"Thanks," said the ticket agent. "I get asked the same old questions so often, one like yours sort of breaks the monotony. Sorry I can't help you. She's a woman, and the Lord only knows why women cry. And sometimes I reckon even He must be a little puzzled. Now, my wife – "

"I think I'll ask her," confided Mr. Magee in a hoarse whisper.

"Oh, I wouldn't," advised the man behind the bars. "It's best to let 'em alone. They stop quicker if they ain't noticed."

"But she's in trouble," argued Billy Magee.

"And so'll you be, most likely," responded the cynic, "if you interfere. No, siree! Take my advice. Shoot old Asquewan's rapids in a barrel if you want to, but keep away from crying

women."

The heedless Billy Magee, however, was already moving across the unscrubbed floor with chivalrous intention.

The girl's trim shoulders no longer heaved so unhappily. Mr. Magee, approaching, thought himself again in the college yard at dusk, with the great elms sighing overhead, and the fresh young voices of the glee club ringing out from the steps of a century-old building. What were the words they sang so many times?

> "Weep no more, my lady,
> Oh! weep no more to-day."

He regretted that he could not make use of them. They had always seemed to him so sad and beautiful. But troubadours, he knew, went out of fashion long before railway stations came in. So his remark to the young woman was not at all melodious:

"Can I do anything?"

A portion of the handkerchief was removed, and an eye which, Mr. Magee noted, was of an admirable blue, peeped out at him. To the gaze of even a solitary eye, Mr. Magee's aspect was decidedly pleasing. Young Williams, who posed at the club as a wit, had once said that Billy Magee came as near to being a magazine artist's idea of the proper hero of a story as any man could, and at the same time retain the respect and affection of his fellows. Mr. Magee thought he read approval in the lone eye of blue. When the lady spoke, however, he hastily revised his

opinion.

"Yes," she said, "you can do something. You can go away – far, far away."

Mr. Magee stiffened. Thus chivalry fared in Upper Asquewan Falls in the year 1911.

"I beg your pardon," he remarked. "You seemed to be in trouble, and I thought I might possibly be of some assistance."

The girl removed the entire handkerchief. The other eye proved to be the same admirable blue – a blue half-way between the shade of her corduroy suit and that of the jacky's costume in the "See the World – Join the Navy" poster that served as background to her woe.

"I don't mean to be rude," she explained more gently, "but – I'm crying, you see, and a girl simply can't look attractive when she cries."

"If I had only been regularly introduced to you, and all that," responded Mr. Magee, "I could make a very flattering reply." And a true one, he added to himself. For even in the faint flickering light of the station he found ample reason for rejoicing that the bit of cambric was no longer agonizingly pressed. As yet he had scarcely looked away from her eyes, but he was dimly aware that up above wisps of golden hair peeped impudently from beneath a saucy black hat. He would look at those wisps shortly, he told himself. As soon as he could look away from the eyes – which was not just yet.

"My grief," said the girl, "is utterly silly and – womanish. I

think it would be best to leave me alone with it. Thank you for your interest. And – would you mind asking the gentleman who is pressing his face so feverishly against the bars to kindly close his window?"

"Certainly," replied Mr. Magee. He turned away. As he did so he collided with a rather excessive lady. She gave the impression of solidity and bulk; her mouth was hard and knowing. Mr. Magee felt that she wanted to vote, and that she would say as much from time to time. The lady had a glittering eye; she put it to its time-honored use and fixed Mr. Magee with it.

"I was crying, mamma," the girl explained, "and this gentleman inquired if he could be of any service."

Mamma! Mr. Magee wanted to add his tears to those of the girl. This frail and lovely damsel in distress owning as her maternal parent a heavy unnecessary – person! The older woman also had yellow hair, but it was the sort that suggests the white enamel pallor of a drug store, with the soda-fountain fizzing and the bottles of perfume ranged in an odorous row. Mamma! Thus rolled the world along.

"Well, they ain't no use gettin' all worked up for nothing," advised the unpleasant parent. Mr. Magee was surprised that in her tone there was no hostility to him – thus belying her looks. "Mebbe the gentleman can direct us to a good hotel," she added, with a rather stagy smile.

"I'm a stranger here, too," Mr. Magee replied. "I'll interview the man over there in the cage."

The gentleman referred to was not cheerful in his replies. There was, he said, Baldpate Inn.

"Oh, yes, Baldpate Inn," repeated Billy Magee with interest.

"Yes, that's a pretty swell place," said the ticket agent. "But it ain't open now. It's a summer resort. There ain't no place open now but the Commercial House. And I wouldn't recommend no human being there – especially no lady who was sad before she ever saw it."

Mr. Magee explained to the incongruous family pair waiting on the bench.

"There's only one hotel," he said, "and I'm told it's not exactly the place for any one whose outlook on life is not rosy at the moment. I'm sorry."

"It will do very well," answered the girl, "whatever it is." She smiled at Billy Magee. "My outlook on life in Upper Asquewan Falls," she said, "grows rosier every minute. We must find a cab."

She began to gather up her traveling-bags, and Mr. Magee hastened to assist. The three went out on the station platform, upon which lay a thin carpet of snowflakes. There the older woman, in a harsh rasping voice, found fault with Upper Asquewan Falls, – its geography, its public spirit, its brand of weather. A dejected cab at the end of the platform stood mourning its lonely lot. In it Mr. Magee placed the large lady and the bags. Then, while the driver climbed to his seat, he spoke into the invisible ear of the girl.

"You haven't told me why you cried," he reminded her.

She waved her hand toward the wayside village, the lamps of which shone sorrowfully through the snow.

"Upper Asquewan Falls," she said, "isn't it reason enough?"

Billy Magee looked; saw a row of gloomy buildings that seemed to list as the wind blew, a blurred sign "Liquors and Cigars," a street that staggered away into the dark like a man who had lingered too long at the emporium back of the sign.

"Are you doomed to stay here long?" he asked.

"Come on, Mary," cried a deep voice from the cab. "Get in and shut the door. I'm freezing."

"It all depends," said the girl. "Thank you for being so kind and – good night."

The door closed with a muffled bang, the cab creaked wearily away, and Mr. Magee turned back to the dim waiting-room.

"Well, what was she crying for?" inquired the ticket agent, when Mr. Magee stood again at his cell window.

"She didn't think much of your town," responded Magee; "she intimated that it made her heavy of heart."

"H'm – it ain't much of a place," admitted the man, "though it ain't the general rule with visitors to burst into tears at sight of it. Yes, Upper Asquewan is slow, and no mistake. It gets on my nerves sometimes. Nothing to do but work, work, work, and then lay down and wait for to-morrow. I used to think maybe some day they'd transfer me down to Hooperstown – there's moving pictures and such goings-on down there. But the railroad never notices you – unless you go wrong. Yes, sir, sometimes I want to

clear out of this town myself."

"A natural wanderlust," sympathized Mr. Magee. "You said something just now about Baldpate Inn – "

"Yes, it's a little more lively in summer, when that's open," answered the agent; "we get a lot of complaints about trunks not coming, from pretty swell people, too. It sort of cheers things." His eye roamed with interest over Mr. Magee's New York attire. "But Baldpate Inn is shut up tight now. This is nothing but an annex to a graveyard in winter. You wasn't thinking of stopping off here, was you?"

"Well – I want to see a man named Elijah Quimby," Mr. Magee replied. "Do you know him?"

"Of course," said the yearner for pastures new, "he's caretaker of the inn. His house is about a mile out, on the old Miller Road that leads up Baldpate. Come outside and I'll tell you how to get there."

The two men went out into the whirling snow, and the agent waved a hand indefinitely up at the night.

"If it was clear," he said, "you could see Baldpate Mountain, over yonder, looking down on the Falls, sort of keeping an eye on us to make sure we don't get reckless. And half-way up you'd see Baldpate Inn, black and peaceful and winter-y. Just follow this street to the third corner, and turn to your left. Elijah lives in a little house back among the trees a mile out – there's a gate you'll sure hear creaking on a night like this."

Billy Magee thanked him, and gathering up his two bags,

walked up "Main Street." A dreary forbidding building at the first corner bore the sign "Commercial House". Under the white gaslight in the office window three born pessimists slouched low in hotel chairs, gazing sourly out at the storm.

"Weep no more, my lady,
Oh! weep no more to-day,"

hummed Mr. Magee cynically under his breath, and glanced up at the solitary up-stairs window that gleamed yellow in the night.

At a corner on which stood a little shop that advertised "Groceries and Provisions" he paused.

"Let me see," he pondered. "The lights will be turned off, of course. Candles. And a little something for the inner man, in case it's the closed season for cooks."

He went inside, where a weary old woman served him.

"What sort of candles?" she inquired, with the air of one who had an infinite variety in stock. Mr. Magee remembered that Christmas was near.

"For a Christmas tree," he explained. He asked for two hundred.

"I've only got forty," the woman said. "What's this tree for – the Orphans' Home?"

With the added burden of a package containing his purchases in the tiny store, Mr. Magee emerged and continued his journey

through the stinging snow. Upper Asquewan Falls on its way home for supper flitted past him in the silvery darkness. He saw in the lighted windows of many of the houses the green wreath of Christmas cheer. Finally the houses became infrequent, and he struck out on an uneven road that wound upward. Once he heard a dog's faint bark. Then a carriage lurched by him, and a strong voice cursed the roughness of the road. Mr. Magee half smiled to himself as he strode on.

"Don Quixote, my boy," he muttered, "I know how you felt when you moved on the windmills."

It was not the whir of windmills but the creak of a gate in the storm that brought Mr. Magee at last to a stop. He walked gladly up the path to Elijah Quimby's door.

In answer to Billy Magee's gay knock, a man of about sixty years appeared. Evidently he had just finished supper; at the moment he was engaged in lighting his pipe. He admitted Mr. Magee into the intimacy of the kitchen, and took a number of calm judicious puffs on the pipe before speaking to his visitor. In that interval the visitor cheerily seized his hand, oblivious of the warm burnt match that was in it. The match fell to the floor, whereupon the older man cast an anxious glance at a gray-haired woman who stood beside the kitchen stove.

"My name's Magee," blithely explained that gentleman, dragging in his bags. "And you're Elijah Quimby, of course. How are you? Glad to see you." His air was that of one who had known this Quimby intimately, in many odd corners of the world.

The older man did not reply, but regarded Mr. Magee wonderingly through white puffs of smoke. His face was kindly, gentle, ineffectual; he seemed to lack the final "punch" that send men over the line to success; this was evident in the way his necktie hung, the way his thin hands fluttered.

"Yes," he admitted at last. "Yes, I'm Quimby."

Mr. Magee threw back his coat, and sprayed with snow Mrs. Quimby's immaculate floor.

"I'm Magee," he elucidated again, "William Hallowell Magee, the man Hal Bentley wrote to you about. You got his letter, didn't you?"

Mr. Quimby removed his pipe and forgot to close the aperture as he stared in amazement.

"Good lord!" he cried, "you don't mean – you've really come."

"What better proof could you ask," said Mr. Magee flippantly, "than my presence here?"

"Why," stammered Mr. Quimby, "we – we thought it was all a joke."

"Hal Bentley has his humorous moments," agreed Mr. Magee, "but it isn't his habit to fling his jests into Upper Asquewan Falls."

"And – and you're really going to – " Mr. Quimby could get no further.

"Yes," said Mr. Magee brightly, slipping into a rocking-chair. "Yes, I'm going to spend the next few months at Baldpate Inn."

Mrs. Quimby, who seemed to have settled into a stout little

mound of a woman through standing too long in the warm presence of her stove, came forward and inspected Mr. Magee.

"Of all things," she murmured.

"It's closed," expostulated Mr. Quimby; "the inn is closed, young fellow."

"I know it's closed," smiled Magee. "That's the very reason I'm going to honor it with my presence. I'm sorry to take you out on a night like this, but I'll have to ask you to lead me up to Baldpate. I believe those were Hal Bentley's instructions – in the letter."

Mr. Quimby towered above Mr. Magee, a shirt-sleeved statue of honest American manhood. He scowled.

"Excuse a plain question, young man," he said, "but what are you hiding from?"

Mrs. Quimby, in the neighborhood of the stove, paused to hear the reply. Billy Magee laughed.

"I'm not hiding," he said. "Didn't Bentley explain? Well, I'll try to, though I'm not sure you'll understand. Sit down, Mr. Quimby. You are not, I take it, the sort of man to follow closely the light and frivolous literature of the day."

"What's that?" inquired Mr. Quimby.

"You don't read," continued Mr. Magee, "the sort of novels that are sold by the pound in the department stores. Now, if you had a daughter – a fluffy daughter inseparable from a hammock in the summer – she could help me explain. You see – I write those novels. Wild thrilling tales for the tired business man's tired

wife – shots in the night, chases after fortunes, Cupid busy with his arrows all over the place! It's good fun, and I like to do it. There's money in it."

"Is there?" asked Mr. Quimby with a show of interest.

"Considerable," replied Mr. Magee. "But now and then I get a longing to do something that will make the critics sit up – the real thing, you know. The other day I picked up a newspaper and found my latest brain-child advertised as 'the best fall novel Magee ever wrote'. It got on my nerves – I felt like a literary dressmaker, and I could see my public laying down my fall novel and sighing for my early spring styles in fiction. I remembered that once upon a time a critic advised me to go away for ten years to some quiet spot, and think. I decided to do it. Baldpate Inn is the quiet spot."

"You don't mean," gasped Mr. Quimby, "that you're going to stay there ten years?"

"Bless you, no," said Mr. Magee. "Critics exaggerate. Two months will do. They say I am a cheap melodramatic ranter. They say I don't go deep. They say my thinking process is a scream. I'm afraid they're right. Now, I'm going to go up to Baldpate Inn, and think. I'm going to get away from melodrama. I'm going to do a novel so fine and literary that Henry Cabot Lodge will come to me with tears in his eyes and ask me to join his bunch of self-made Immortals. I'm going to do all this up there at the inn – sitting on the mountain and looking down on this little old world as Jove looked down from Olympus."

"I don't know who you mean," objected Mr. Quimby.

"He was a god – the god of the fruit-stand men," explained Magee. "Picture me, if you can, depressed by the overwhelming success of my latest brain-child. Picture me meeting Hal Bentley in a Forty-fourth Street club and asking him for the location of the lonesomest spot on earth. Hal thought a minute. 'I've got it', he said, 'the lonesomest spot that's happened to date is a summer resort in mid-winter. It makes Crusoe's island look like Coney on a warm Sunday afternoon in comparison.' The talk flowed on, along with other things. Hal told me his father owned Baldpate Inn, and that you were an old friend of his who would be happy for the entire winter over the chance to serve him. He happened to have a key to the place – the key to the big front door, I guess, from the weight of it – and he gave it to me. He also wrote you to look after me. So here I am."

Mr. Quimby ran his fingers through his white hair.

"Here I am," repeated Billy Magee, "fleeing from the great glitter known as Broadway to do a little rational thinking in the solitudes. It's getting late, and I suggest that we start for Baldpate Inn at once."

"This ain't exactly – regular," Mr. Quimby protested. "No, it ain't what you might call a frequent occurrence. I'm glad to do anything I can for young Mr. Bentley, but I can't help wondering what his father will say. And there's a lot of things you haven't took into consideration."

"There certainly is, young man," remarked Mrs. Quimby,

bustling forward. "How are you going to keep warm in that big barn of a place?"

"The suites on the second floor," said Mr. Magee, "are, I hear, equipped with fireplaces. Mr. Quimby will keep me supplied with fuel from the forest primeval, for which service he will receive twenty dollars a week."

"And light?" asked Mrs. Quimby.

"For the present, candles. I have forty in that package. Later, perhaps you can find me an oil lamp. Oh, everything will be provided for."

"Well," remarked Mr. Quimby, looking in a dazed fashion at his wife, "I reckon I'll have to talk it over with ma."

The two retired to the next room, and Mr. Magee fixed his eyes on a "God Bless Our Home" motto while he awaited their return. Presently they reappeared.

"Was you thinking of eating?" inquired Mrs. Quimby sarcastically, "while you stayed up there?"

"I certainly was," smiled Mr. Magee. "For the most part I will prepare my own meals from cans and – er – jars – and such pagan sources. But now and then you, Mrs. Quimby, are going to send me something cooked as no other woman in the county can cook it. I can see it in your eyes. In my poor way I shall try to repay you."

He continued to smile into Mrs. Quimby's broad cheerful face. Mr. Magee had the type of smile that moves men to part with ten until Saturday, and women to close their eyes and dream of Sir

Launcelot. Mrs. Quimby could not long resist. She smiled back. Whereupon Billy Magee sprang to his feet.

"It's all fixed," he cried. "We'll get on splendidly. And now – for Baldpate Inn."

"Not just yet," said Mrs. Quimby. "I ain't one to let anybody go up to Baldpate Inn unfed. I 'spose we're sort o' responsible for you, while you're up here. You just set right down and I'll have your supper hot and smoking on the table in no time."

Mr. Magee entered into no dispute on this point, and for half an hour he was the pleased recipient of advice, philosophy, and food. When he had assured Mrs. Quimby that he had eaten enough to last him the entire two months he intended spending at the inn, Mr. Quimby came in, attired in a huge "before the war" ulster, and carrying a lighted lantern.

"So you're going to sit up there and write things," he commented. "Well, I reckon you'll be left to yourself, all right."

"I hope so," responded Mr. Magee. "I want to be so lonesome I'll sob myself to sleep every night. It's the only road to immortality. Good-by, Mrs. Quimby. In my fortress on the mountain I shall expect an occasional culinary message from you." He took her plump hand; this motherly little woman seemed the last link binding him to the world of reality.

"Good-by," smiled Mrs. Quimby. "Be careful of matches."

Mr. Quimby led the way with the lantern, and presently they stepped out upon the road. The storm had ceased, but it was still very dark. Far below, in the valley, twinkled the lights of Upper

Asquewan Falls.

"By the way, Quimby," remarked Mr. Magee, "is there a girl in your town who has blue eyes, light hair, and the general air of a queen out shopping?"

"Light hair," repeated Quimby. "There's Sally Perry. She teaches in the Methodist Sunday-school."

"No," said Mr. Magee. "My description was poor, I'm afraid. This one I refer to, when she weeps, gives the general effect of mist on the sea at dawn. The Methodists do not monopolize her."

"I read books, and I read newspapers," said Mr. Quimby, "but a lot of your talk I don't understand."

"The critics," replied Billy Magee, "could explain. My stuff is only for low-brows. Lead on, Mr. Quimby."

Mr. Quimby stood for a moment in dazed silence. Then he turned, and the yellow of his lantern fell on the dazzling snow ahead. Together the two climbed Baldpate Mountain.

CHAPTER II
ENTER A LOVELORN HABERDASHER

Baldpate Inn did not stand tiptoe on the misty mountain-top. Instead it clung with grim determination to the side of Baldpate, about half-way up, much as a city man clings to the running board of an open street-car. This was the comparison Mr. Magee made, and even as he made it he knew that atmospheric conditions rendered it questionable. For an open street-car suggests summer and the ball park; Baldpate Inn, as it shouldered darkly into Mr. Magee's ken, suggested winter at its most wintry.

About the great black shape that was the inn, like arms, stretched broad verandas. Mr. Magee remarked upon them to his companion.

"Those porches and balconies and things," he said, "will come in handy in cooling the fevered brow of genius."

"There ain't much fever in this locality," the practical Quimby assured him, "especially not in winter."

Silenced, Mr. Magee followed the lantern of Quimby over the snow to the broad steps, and up to the great front door. There Magee produced from beneath his coat an impressive key. Mr. Quimby made as though to assist, but was waved aside.

"This is a ceremony," Mr. Magee told him, "some day Sunday

newspaper stories will be written about it. Baldpate Inn opening its doors to the great American novel!"

He placed the key in the lock, turned it, and the door swung open. The coldest blast of air Mr. Magee had even encountered swept out from the dark interior. He shuddered, and wrapped his coat closer. He seemed to see the white trail from Dawson City, the sled dogs straggling on with the dwindling provisions, the fat Eskimo guide begging for gum-drops by his side.

"Whew," he cried, "we've discovered another Pole!"

"It's stale air," remarked Quimby.

"You mean the Polar atmosphere," replied Magee. "Yes, it is pretty stale. Jack London and Doctor Cook have worked it to death."

"I mean," said Quimby, "this air has been in here alone too long. It's as stale as last week's newspaper. We couldn't heat it with a million fires. We'll have to let in some warm air from outside first."

"Warm air – humph," remarked Mr. Magee. "Well, live and learn."

The two stood together in a great bare room. The rugs had been removed, and such furniture as remained had huddled together, as if for warmth, in the center of the floor. When they stepped forward, the sound of their shoes on the hard wood seemed the boom that should wake the dead.

"This is the hotel office," explained Mr. Quimby.

At the left of the door was the clerk's desk; behind it loomed a

great safe, and a series of pigeon-holes for the mail of the guests. Opposite the front door, a wide stairway led to a landing half-way up, where the stairs were divorced and went to the right and left in search of the floor above. Mr. Magee surveyed the stairway critically.

"A great place," he remarked, "to show off the talents of your dressmaker, eh, Quimby? Can't you just see the stunning gowns coming down that stair in state, and the young men below here agitated in their bosoms?"

"No, I can't," said Mr. Quimby frankly.

"I can't either, to tell the truth," laughed Billy Magee. He turned up his collar. "It's like picturing a summer girl sitting on an iceberg and swinging her open-work hosiery over the edge. I don't suppose it's necessary to register. I'll go right up and select my apartments."

It was upon a suite of rooms that bore the number seven on their door that Mr. Magee's choice fell. A large parlor with a fireplace that a few blazing logs would cheer, a bedroom whose bed was destitute of all save mattress and springs, and a bathroom, comprised his kingdom. Here, too, all the furniture was piled in the center of the rooms. After Quimby had opened the windows, he began straightening the furniture about.

Mr. Magee inspected his apartment. The windows were all of the low French variety, and opened out upon a broad snow-covered balcony which was in reality the roof of the first floor veranda. On this balcony Magee stood a moment, watching the

trees on Baldpate wave their black arms in the wind, and the lights of Upper Asquewan Falls wink knowingly up at him. Then he came inside, and his investigations brought him, presently to the tub in the bathroom.

"Fine," he cried, "a cold plunge in the morning before the daily struggle for immortality begins."

He turned the spigot. Nothing happened.

"I reckon," drawled Mr. Quimby from the bedroom, "you'll carry your cold plunge up from the well back of the inn before you plunge into it. The water's turned off. We can't take chances with busted pipes."

"Of course," replied Magee less blithely. His ardor was somewhat dampened – a paradox – by the failure of the spigot to gush forth a response. "There's nothing I'd enjoy more than carrying eight pails of water up-stairs every morning to get up an appetite for – what? Oh, well, the Lord will provide. If we propose to heat up the great American outdoors, Quimby, I think it's time we had a fire."

Mr. Quimby went out without comment, and left Magee to light his first candle in the dark. For a time he occupied himself with lighting a few of the forty, and distributing them about the room. Soon Quimby came back with kindling and logs, and subsequently a noisy fire roared in the grate. Again Quimby retired, and returned with a generous armful of bedding, which he threw upon the brass bed in the inner room. Then he slowly closed and locked the windows, after which he came and looked

down with good-natured contempt at Mr. Magee, who sat in a chair before the fire.

"I wouldn't wander round none," he advised. "You might fall down something – or something. I been living in these parts, off and on, for sixty years and more, and nothing like this ever came under my observation before. Howsomever, I guess it's all right if Mr. Bentley says so. I'll come up in the morning and see you down to the train."

"What train?" inquired Mr. Magee.

"Your train back to New York City," replied Mr. Quimby. "Don't try to start back in the night. There ain't no train till morning."

"Ah, Quimby," laughed Mr. Magee, "you taunt me. You think I won't stick it out. But I'll show you. I tell you, I'm hungry for solitude."

"That's all right," Mr. Quimby responded, "you can't make three square meals a day off solitude."

"I'm desperate," said Magee. "Henry Cabot Lodge must come to me, I say, with tears in his eyes. Ever see the senator that way? No? It isn't going to be an easy job. I must put it over. I must go deep into the hearts of men, up here, and write what I find. No more shots in the night. Just the adventure of soul and soul. Do you see? By the way, here's twenty dollars, your first week's pay as caretaker of a New York Quixote."

"What's that?" asked Quimby.

"Quixote," explained Mr. Magee, "was a Spanish lad who was

a little confused in his mind, and went about the country putting up at summer resorts in mid-winter."

"I'd expect it of a Spaniard," Quimby said. "Be careful of that fire. I'll be up in the morning." He stowed away the bill Mr. Magee had given him. "I guess nothing will interfere with your lonesomeness. Leastways, I hope it won't. Good night."

Mr. Magee bade the man good night, and listened to the thump of his boots, and the closing of the great front door. From his windows he watched the caretaker move down the road without looking back, to disappear at last in the white night.

Throwing off his great coat, Mr. Magee noisily attacked the fire. The blaze flared red on his strong humorous mouth, in his smiling eyes. Next, in the flickering half-light of suite seven, he distributed the contents of his traveling-bags about. On the table he placed a number of new magazines and a few books.

Then Mr. Magee sat down in the big leather chair before the fire, and caught his breath. Here he was at last. The wild plan he and Hal Bentley had cooked up in that Forty-fourth Street club had actually come to be. "Seclusion," Magee had cried. "Bermuda," Bentley had suggested. "A mixture of sea, hotel clerks, and honeymooners!" the seeker for solitude had sneered. "Some winter place down South," – from Bentley. "And a flirtation lurking in every corner!" – from Magee. "A country town where you don't know any one." "The easiest place in the world to get acquainted. I must be alone, man! Alone!" "Baldpate Inn," Bentley had cried in his idiom. "Why, Billy – Baldpate Inn

at Christmas – it must be old John H. Seclusion himself."

Yes, here he was. And here was the solitude he had come to find. Mr. Magee looked nervously about, and the smile died out of his gray eyes. For the first time misgivings smote him. Might one not have too much of a good thing? A silence like that of the tomb had descended. He recalled stories of men who went mad from loneliness. What place lonelier than this? The wind howled along the balcony. It rattled the windows. Outside his door lay a great black cave – in summer gay with men and maids – now like Crusoe's island before the old man landed.

"Alone, alone, all, all alone," quoted Mr. Magee. "If I can't think here it will be because I'm not equipped with the apparatus. I will. I'll show the gloomy old critics! I wonder what's doing in New York?"

New York! Mr. Magee looked at his watch. Eight o'clock. The great street was ablaze. The crowds were parading from the restaurants to the theaters. The electric signs were pasting lurid legends on a long suffering sky; the taxis were spraying throats with gasoline; the traffic cop at Broadway and Forty-second Street was madly earning his pay. Mr. Magee got up and walked the floor. New York!

Probably the telephone in his rooms was jangling, vainly calling forth to sport with Amaryllis in the shade of the rubber trees Billy Magee – Billy Magee who sat alone in the silence on Baldpate Mountain. Few knew of his departure. This was the night of that stupid attempt at theatricals at the Plaza; stupid in

itself but gay, almost giddy, since Helen Faulkner was to be there. This was the night of the dinner to Carey at the club. This was the night – of many diverting things.

Mr. Magee picked up a magazine. He wondered how they read, in the old days, by candlelight. He wondered if they would have found his own stories worth the strain on the eyes. And he also wondered if absolute solitude was quite the thing necessary to the composition of the novel that should forever silence those who sneered at his ability.

Absolute solitude! Only the crackle of the fire, the roar of the wind, and the ticking of his watch bore him company. He strode to the window and looked down at the few dim lights that proclaimed the existence of Upper Asquewan Falls. Somewhere, down there, was the Commercial House. Somewhere the girl who had wept so bitterly in that gloomy little waiting-room. She was only three miles away, and the thought cheered Mr. Magee. After all, he was not on a desert island.

And yet – he was alone, intensely, almost painfully, alone. Alone in a vast moaning house that must be his only home until he could go back to the gay city with his masterpiece. What a masterpiece! As though with a surgeon's knife it would lay bare the hearts of men. No tricks of plot, no —

Mr. Magee paused. For sharply in the silence the bell of his room telephone rang out.

He stood for a moment gazing in wonder, his heart beating swiftly, his eyes upon the instrument on the wall. It was a house

phone; he knew that it could only be rung from the switchboard in the hall below. "I'm going mad already," he remarked, and took down the receiver.

A blur of talk, an electric muttering, a click, and all was still.

Mr. Magee opened the door and stepped out into the shadows. He heard a voice below. Noiselessly he crept to the landing, and gazed down into the office. A young man sat at the telephone switchboard; Mr. Magee could see in the dim light of a solitary candle that he was a person of rather hilarious raiment. The candle stood on the top of the safe, and the door of the latter swung open. Sinking down on the steps in the dark, Mr. Magee waited.

"Hello," the young man was saying, "how do you work this thing, anyhow? I've tried every peg but the right one. Hello – hello! I want long distance – Reuton. 2876 West – Mr. Andy Rutter. Will you get him for me, sister?"

Another wait – a long one – ensued. The candle sputtered. The young man fidgeted in his chair. At last he spoke again:

"Hello! Andy? Is that you, Andy? What's the good word? As quiet as the tomb of Napoleon. Shall I close up shop? Sure. What next? Oh, see here, Andy, I'd die up here. Did you ever hit a place like this in winter? I can't – I – oh, well, if he says so. Yes. I could do that. But no longer. I couldn't stand it long. Tell him that. Tell him everything's O. K. Yes. All right. Well, good night, Andy."

He turned away from the switchboard, and as he did so Mr. Magee walked calmly down the stairs toward him. With a cry the

young man ran to the safe, threw a package inside, and swung shut the door. He turned the knob of the safe several times; then he faced Mr. Magee. The latter saw something glitter in his hand.

"Good evening," remarked Mr. Magee pleasantly.

"What are you doing here?" cried the youth wildly.

"I live here," Mr. Magee assured him. "Won't you come up to my room – it's right at the head of the stairs. I have a fire, you know."

Back into the young man's lean hawk-like face crept the assurance that belonged with the gay attire he wore. He dropped the revolver into his pocket, and smiled a sneering smile.

"You gave me a turn," he said. "Of course you live here. Are any of the other guests about? And who won the tennis match to-day?"

"You are facetious." Mr. Magee smiled too. "So much the better. A lively companion is the very sort I should have ordered to-night. Come up-stairs."

The young man looked suspiciously about, his thin nose seemingly scenting plots. He nodded, and picked up the candle. "All right," he said. "But I'll have to ask you to go first. You know the way." His right hand sought the pocket into which the revolver had fallen.

"You honor my poor and drafty house," said Mr. Magee. "This way."

He mounted the stairs. After him followed the youth of flashy habiliments, looking fearfully about him as he went. He seemed

surprised that they came to Magee's room without incident. Inside, Mr. Magee drew up an easy chair before the fire, and offered his guest a cigar.

"You must be cold," he said. "Sit here. 'A bad night, stranger' as they remark in stories."

"You've said it," replied the young man, accepting the cigar. "Thanks." He walked to the door leading into the hall and opened it about a foot. "I'm afraid," he explained jocosely, "we'll get to talking, and miss the breakfast bell." He dropped into the chair, and lighted his cigar at a candle end. "Say, you never can tell, can you? Climbing up old Baldpate I thought to myself, that hotel certainly makes the Sahara Desert look like a cozy corner. And here you are, as snug and comfortable and at home as if you were in a Harlem flat. You never can tell. And what now? The story of my life?"

"You might relate," Mr. Magee told him, "that portion of it that has led you trespassing on a gentleman seeking seclusion at Baldpate Inn."

The stranger looked at Mr. Magee. He had an eye that not only looked, but weighed, estimated, and classified. Mr. Magee met it smilingly.

"Trespassing, eh?" said the young man. "Far be it from me to quarrel with a man who smokes as good cigars as you do – but there's something I haven't quite doped out. That is – who's trespassing, me or you?"

"My right here," said Mr. Magee, "is indisputable."

"It's a big word," replied the other, "but you can tack it to my right here, and tell no lie. We can't dispute, so let's drop the matter. With that settled, I'm encouraged to pour out the story of why you see me here to-night, far from the madding crowd. Have you a stray tear? You'll need it. It's a sad touching story, concerned with haberdashery and a trusting heart, and a fair woman – fair, but, oh, how false!"

"Proceed," laughed Mr. Magee. "I'm an admirer of the vivid imagination. Don't curb yours, I beg of you."

"It's all straight," said the other in a hurt tone. "Every word true. My name is Joseph Bland. My profession, until love entered my life, was that of haberdasher and outfitter. In the city of Reuton, fifty miles from here, I taught the Beau Brummels of the thoroughfares what was doing in London in the necktie line. I sold them coats with padded shoulders, and collars high and awe inspiring. I was happy, twisting a piece of silk over my hand to show them how it would look on their heaving bosoms. And then – she came."

Mr. Bland puffed on his cigar.

"Yes," he said, "Arabella sparkled on the horizon of my life. When I have been here in the quiet for about two centuries, maybe I can do justice to her beauty. I won't attempt to describe her now. I loved her – madly. She said I made a hit with her. I spent on her the profits of my haberdashery. I whispered – marriage. She didn't scream. I had my wedding necktie picked out from the samples of a drummer from Troy." He paused and

looked at Mr. Magee. "Have you ever stood, poised, on that brink?" he asked.

"Never," replied Magee. "But go on. Your story attracts me, strangely."

"From here on – the tear I spoke of, please. There flashed on the scene a man she had known and loved in Jersey City. I said flashed. He did – just that. A swell dresser – say, he had John Drew beat by two mauve neckties and a purple frock coat. I had a haberdashery back of me. No use. He out-dressed me. I saw that Arabella's love for me was waning. With his chamois-gloved hands that new guy fanned the ancient flame."

He paused. Emotion – or the smoke of the cigar – choked him.

"Let's make the short story shorter," he said. "She threw me down. In my haberdashery I thought it over. I was blue, bitter. I resolved on a dreadful step. In the night I wrote her a letter, and carried it down to the box and posted it. Life without Arabella, said the letter, was Shakespeare with Hamlet left out. It hinted at the river, carbolic acid, revolvers. Yes, I posted it. And then – "

"And then," urged Mr. Magee.

Mr. Bland felt tenderly of the horseshoe pin in his purple tie.

"This is just between us," he said. "At that point the trouble began. It came from my being naturally a very brave man. I could have died – easy. The brave thing was to live. To go on, day after day, devoid of Arabella – say, that took courage. I wanted to try it. I'm a courageous man, as I say."

"You seem so," Mr. Magee agreed.

"Lion-hearted," assented Mr. Bland. "I determined to show my nerve, and live. But there was my letter to Arabella. I feared she wouldn't appreciate my bravery – women are dull sometimes. It came to me maybe she would be hurt if I didn't keep my word, and die. So I had to – disappear. I had a friend mixed up in affairs at Baldpate. No, I can't give his name. I told him my story. He was impressed by my spirit, as you have been. He gave me a key he had – the key of the door opening from the east veranda into the dining-room. So I came up here. I came here to be alone, to forgive and forget, to be forgot. And maybe to plan a new haberdashery in distant parts."

"Was it your wedding necktie," asked Mr. Magee, "that you threw into the safe when you saw me coming?"

"No," replied Mr. Bland, sighing deeply. "A package of letters, written to me by Arabella at various times. I want to forget 'em. If I kept them on hand, I might look at them from time to time. My great courage might give way – you might find my body on the stairs. That's why I hid them."

Mr. Magee laughed, and stretched forth his hand.

"Believe me," he said, "your touching confidence in me will not be betrayed. I congratulate you on your narrative power. You want my story. Why am I here? I am not sure that it is worthy to follow yours. But it has its good points – as I have thought it out."

He went over to the table, and picked up a popular novel upon which his gaze had rested while the haberdasher spun his fabric of love and gloom. On the cover was a picture of a very dashing

maiden.

"Do you see that girl?" he asked. "She is beautiful, is she not? Even Arabella, in her most splendid moments, could get a few points from her, I fancy. Perhaps you are not familiar with the important part such a picture plays in the success of a novel to-day. The truth is, however, that the noble art of fiction writing has come to lean more and more heavily on its illustrators. The mere words that go with the pictures grow less important every day. There are dozens of distinguished novelists in the country at this moment who might be haberdashers if it weren't for the long, lean, haughty ladies who are scattered tastefully through their works."

Mr. Bland stirred uneasily.

"I can see you are at a loss to know what my search for seclusion and privacy has to do with all this," continued Mr. Magee. "I am an artist. For years I have drawn these lovely ladies who make fiction salable to the masses. Many a novelist owes his motor-car and his country house to my brush. Two months ago, I determined to give up illustration forever, and devote my time to painting. I turned my back on the novelists. Can you imagine what happened?"

"My imagination's a little tired," apologized Mr. Bland.

"Never mind. I'll tell you. The leading authors whose work I had so long illustrated saw ruin staring them in the face. They came to me, on their knees, figuratively. They begged. They pleaded. They hid in the vestibule of my flat. I should say, my

studio. They even came up in my dumb-waiter, having bribed the janitor. They wouldn't take no for an answer. In order to escape them and their really pitiful pleadings, I had to flee. I happened to have a friend involved in the management of Baldpate Inn. I am not at liberty to give his name. He gave me a key. So here I am. I rely on you to keep my secret. If you perceive a novelist in the distance, lose no time in warning me."

Mr. Magee paused, chuckling inwardly. He stood looking down at the lovelorn haberdasher. The latter got to his feet, and solemnly took Magee's hand.

"I – I – oh, well, you've got me beat a mile, old man," he said.

"You don't mean to say – " began the hurt Magee.

"Oh, that's all right," Mr. Bland assured him. "I believe every word of it. It's all as real as the haberdashery to me. I'll keep my eye peeled for novelists. What gets me is, when you boil our two fly-by-night stories down, I've come here to be alone. You want to be alone. We can't be alone here together. One of us must clear out."

"Nonsense," answered Billy Magee. "I'll be glad to have you here. Stay as long as you like."

The haberdasher looked Mr. Magee fully in the eye, and the latter was startled by the hostility he saw in the other's face.

"The point is," said Mr. Bland, "I don't want you here. Why? Maybe because you recall beautiful dames – on book covers – and in that way, Arabella. Maybe – but what's the use? I put it simply. I got to be alone – alone on Baldpate Mountain. I won't

put you out to-night – "

"See here, my friend," cried Mr. Magee, "your grief has turned your head. You won't put me out to-night, or to-morrow. I'm here to stay. You're welcome to do the same, if you like. But you stay – with me. I know you are a man of courage – but it would take at least ten men of courage to put me out of Baldpate Inn."

They stood eying each other for a moment. Bland's thin lips twisted into a sneer. "We'll see," he said. "We'll settle all that in the morning." His tone took on a more friendly aspect "I'm going to pick out a downy couch in one of these rooms," he said, "and lay me down to sleep. Say, I could greet a blanket like a long-lost friend."

Mr. Magee proffered some of the covers that Quimby had given him, and accompanied Mr. Bland to suite ten, across the hall. He explained the matter of "stale air", and assisted in the opening of windows. The conversation was mostly facetious, and Mr. Bland's last remark concerned the fickleness of woman. With a brisk good night, Mr. Magee returned to number seven.

But he made no move toward the chilly brass bed in the inner room. Instead he sat a long time by the fire. He reflected on the events of his first few hours in that supposedly uninhabited solitude where he was to be alone with his thoughts. He pondered the way and manner of the flippant young man who posed as a lovelorn haberdasher, and under whose flippancy there was certainly an air of hostility. Who was Andy Rutter, down in

Reuton? What did the young man mean when he asked if he should "close up shop"? Who was the "he" from whom came the orders? and most important of all, what was in the package now resting in the great safe?

Mr. Magee smiled. Was this the stuff of which solitude was made? He recalled the ludicrous literary tale he had invented to balance the moving fiction of Arabella, and his smile grew broader. His imagination, at least, was in a healthy state. He looked at his watch. A quarter of twelve. Probably they were having supper at the Plaza now, and Helen Faulkner was listening to the banalities of young Williams. He settled in his seat to think of Miss Faulkner. He thought of her for ten seconds; then stepped to the window.

The moon had risen, and the snowy roofs of Upper Asquewan Falls sparkled in the lime-light of the heavens. Under one of those roofs was the girl of the station – weeping no more, he hoped. Certainly she had eyes that held even the least susceptible – to which class Mr. Magee prided himself he belonged. He wished he might see her again; might talk to her without interruption from that impossible "mamma."

Mr. Magee turned back into the room. His fire was but red glowing ashes. He threw off his dressing-gown, and began to unlace his shoes.

"There *has* been too much crude melodrama in my novels," he reflected. "It's so easy to write. But I'm going to get away from all that up here. I'm going – "

Mr. Magee paused, with one shoe poised in his hand. For from below came the sharp crack of a pistol, followed by the crash of breaking glass.

CHAPTER III
BLONDES AND SUFFRAGETTES

Mr. Magee slipped into his dressing gown, seized a candle, and like the boy in the nursery rhyme with one shoe off and one shoe on, ran into the hall. All was silent and dark below. He descended to the landing, and stood there, holding the candle high above his head. It threw a dim light as far as the bottom of the stairs, but quickly lost the battle with the shadows that lay beyond.

"Hello," the voice of Bland, the haberdasher, came out of the blackness. "The Goddess of Liberty, as I live! What's your next imitation?"

"There seems to be something doing," said Mr. Magee.

Mr. Bland came into the light, partially disrobed, his revolver in his hand.

"Somebody trying to get in by the front door," he explained. "I shot at him to scare him away. Probably one of your novelists."

"Or Arabella," remarked Mr. Magee, coming down.

"No," answered Bland. "I distinctly saw a derby hat."

With Mr. Magee descended the yellow candlelight, and brushing aside the shadows of the hotel office, it revealed a mattress lying on the floor close to the clerk's desk, behind which stood the safe. On the mattress was the bedding Magee had

presented to the haberdasher, hastily thrown back by the lovelorn one on rising.

"You prefer to sleep down here," Mr. Magee commented.

"Near the letters of Arabella – yes," replied Bland. His keen eyes met Magee's. There was a challenge in them.

Mr. Magee turned, and the yellow light of the candle flickered wanly over the great front door Even as he looked at it, the door was pushed open, and a queer figure of a man stood framed against a background of glittering snow. Mr. Bland's arm flew up.

"Don't shoot," cried Magee.

"No, please don't," urged the man in the doorway. A beard, a pair of round owlish spectacles, and two ridiculous ear-muffs, left only a suggestion of face here and there. He closed the door and stepped into the room. "I have every right here, I assure you, even though my arrival is somewhat unconventional. See – I have the key." He held up a large brass key that was the counterpart of the one Hal Bentley had bestowed upon Mr. Magee in that club on far-off Forty-fourth Street.

"Keys to burn," muttered Mr. Bland sourly.

"I bear no ill will with regard to the shooting," went on the newcomer. He took off his derby hat and ruefully regarded a hole through the crown. His bald head seemed singularly frank and naked above a face of so many disguises. "It is only natural that men alone on a mountain should defend themselves from invaders at two in the morning. My escape was narrow, but there is no ill will."

He blinked about him, his breath a white cloud in the cold room.

"Life, young gentlemen," he remarked, setting down his bag and leaning a green umbrella against it, "has its surprises even at sixty-two. Last night I was ensconced by my own library fire, preparing a paper on the Pagan Renaissance. To-night I am on Baldpate Mountain, with a perforation in my hat."

Mr. Bland shivered. "I'm going back to bed," he said in disgust.

"First," went on the gentleman with the perforated derby, "permit me to introduce myself. I am Professor Thaddeus Bolton, and I hold the Chair of Comparative Literature in a big eastern university."

Mr. Magee took the mittened hand of the professor.

"Glad to see you, I'm sure," he said. "My name is Magee. This is Mr. Bland – he is impetuous but estimable. I trust you will forgive his first salute. What's a bullet among gentlemen? It seems to me that as explanations may be lengthy and this room is very cold, we would do well to go up to my room, where there is a fire."

"Delighted," cried the old man. "A fire. I long to see one. Let us go to your room, by all means."

Mr. Bland sulkily stalked to his mattress and secured a gaily colored bed quilt, which he wound about his thin form.

"This is positively the last experience meeting I attend to-night," he growled.

They ascended to number seven. Mr. Magee piled fresh logs on the fire; Mr. Bland saw to it that the door was not tightly closed. The professor removed, along with other impedimenta, his ear tabs, which were connected by a rubber cord. He waved them like frisky detached ears before him.

"An old man's weakness," he remarked. "Foolish, they may seem to you. But I assure you I found them useful companions in climbing Baldpate Mountain at this hour."

He sat down in the largest chair suite seven owned, and from its depths smiled benignly at the two young men.

"But I am not here to apologize for my apparel, am I? Hardly. You are saying to yourselves 'Why is he here?' Yes, that is the question that disturbs you. What has brought this domesticated college professor scampering from the Pagan Renaissance to Baldpate Inn? For answer, I must ask you to go back with me a week's time, and gaze at a picture from the rather dreary academic kaleidoscope that is my life.

"I am seated back of a desk on a platform in a bare yellow room. In front of me, tier on tier, sit a hundred young men in various attitudes of inattention. I am trying to tell them something of the ideal poetry that marked the rebirth of the Saxon genius. They are bored. I – well, gentlemen, in confidence, even the mind of a college professor has been known to wander at times from the subject in hand. And then – I begin to read a poem – a poem descriptive of a woman dead six hundred years and more. Ah, gentlemen – "

He sat erect on the edge of his great chair. Back of the thick lenses of his spectacles he had eyes that still could flash.

"This is not an era of romance," he said. "Our people grub in the dirt for the dollar. Their visions perish. Their souls grow stale. Yet, now and then, at most inopportune times, comes the flash that reveals to us the glories that might be. A gentleman of my acquaintance caught a glimpse of perfect happiness while he was in the midst of an effort to corner the pickle market. Another evolved the scheme of a perfect ode to the essential purity of woman in – a Broadway restaurant. So, like lightning across the blackest sky, our poetic moments come."

Mr. Bland wrapped his gay quilt more securely about him. Mr. Magee smiled encouragement on the newest raconteur.

"I shall be brief," continued Professor Bolton. "Heaven knows that pedagogic room was no place for visions, nor were those athletic young men fit companions for a soul gone giddy. Yet – I lost my head. As I read on there returned to my heart a glow I had not known in forty years. The bard spoke of her hair:

> "'Her yellow lockes, crisped like golden wyre,
> About her shoulders weren loosely shed'

and I saw, as in a dream – ahem, I can trust you, gentlemen – a girl I supposed I had forever forgot in the mold and dust of my later years. I will not go further into the matter. My wife's hair is black.

"And reading on, but losing the thread of the poet's eulogy in the golden fabric of my resurrected dream, it came to me to compare that maid I knew in the long ago with the women I know to-day. Ah, gentlemen! Lips, made but for smiling, fling weighty arguments on the unoffending atmosphere. Eyes, made to light with that light that never was by land or sea, blaze instead with what they call the injustice of woman's servitude. White hands, made to find their way to the hands of some young man in the moonlight, carry banners in the dusty streets. It seemed I saw the blue eyes of that girl of long ago turned, sad, rebuking, on her sisters of to-day. As I finished reading, my heart was awhirl. I said to the young men before me:

"'There *was* a woman, gentlemen – a woman worth a million suffragettes.'

"They applauded. The fire in me died down. Soon I was my old meek, academic self. The vision had left no trace. I dismissed my class and went home. I found that my wife – she of the black hair – had left my slippers by the library fire. I put them on, and plunged into a pamphlet lately published by a distinguished member of a German university faculty. I thought the incident closed forever."

He gazed sorrowfully at the two young men.

"But, gentlemen, I had not counted on that viper that we nourish in our bosom – the American newspaper. At present I will not take time to denounce the press. I am preparing an article on the subject for a respectable weekly of select circulation.

Suffice it to record what happened. The next day an evening paper appeared with a huge picture of me on its front page, and the hideous statement that this was the Professor Bolton who had said that 'One Peroxide Blonde Is Worth a Million Suffragettes'.

"Yes, that was the dreadful version of my remark that was spread broadcast. Up to the time that story appeared, I had no idea as to what sort of creature the peroxide blonde might be. I protested, of course. I might as well have tried to dam a tidal wave with a table fork. The wrath of the world swept down upon me. I was deluged with telegrams, editorials, letters, denouncing me. Firm-faced females lay in wait for me and waved umbrellas in my eyes. Even my wife turned from me, saying that while she did not ask me to hold her views on the question of suffrage, she thought I might at least refrain from publicly commending a type of woman found chiefly in musical comedy choruses. I received a note from the president of the university, asking me to be more circumspect in my remarks. Me – Thadeus Bolton – the most conservative man on earth by instinct!

"And still the denunciations of me poured in; still women's clubs held meetings resolving against me; still a steady stream of reporters flowed through my life, urging me to state my views further, to name the ten greatest blondes in history, to – heaven knows what. Yesterday I resolved I Could stand it no longer. I determined to go away until the whole thing was forgotten. 'But', they said to me, 'there is no place, on land or sea, where the reporters will not find you'. I talked the matter over with my

old friend, John Bentley, owner of Baldpate Inn, and he in his kindness gave me the key to this hostelry."

The old man paused and passed a silk handkerchief over his bald head.

"That, sirs," he said, "is my story. That is why you see me on Baldpate Mountain this chill December morning. That is why loneliness can have no terrors, exile no sorrows, for me. That is why I bravely faced your revolver-shots. Again let me repeat, I bear no malice on that score. You have ruined a new derby hat, and the honorarium of professor even at a leading university is not such as to permit of many purchases in that line. But I forgive you freely. Even at the cannon's mouth I would have fled from reputation, to paraphrase the poet."

Wisely Professor Bolton blinked about him. Mr. Bland was half asleep in his chair, but Mr. Magee was quick with sympathy.

"Professor," he said, "you are a much suffering man. I feel for you. Here, I am sure, you are safe from reporters, and the yellow journals will soon forget you in their discovery of the next distorted wonder. Briefly, Mr. Bland and myself will outline the tangle of events that brought us to the inn – "

"Briefly is right," broke in Bland. "And then it's me for that mountainous mattress of mine. I can rattle my story off in short order, and give you the fine points to-morrow. Up to a short time ago – "

But Billy Magee interrupted. An idea, magnificent delicious, mirthful, had come to him. Why not? He chuckled inwardly, but

his face was most serious.

"I should like to tell my story first, if you please," he said.

The haberdasher grunted. The professor nodded. Mr. Magee looked Bland squarely in the eye, strangled the laugh inside him, and began:

"Up to a short time ago I was a haberdasher in the city of Reuton. My name, let me state, is Magee – William Magee. I fitted the gay shoulder-blades of Reuton with clothing from the back pages of the magazines, and as for neckties – "

Mr. Bland's sly eyes had opened wide. He rose to a majestic height – majestic considering the bed quilt.

"See here – " he began.

"Please don't interrupt," requested Mr. Magee sweetly. "I was, as I have said, a happy carefree haberdasher. And then – she entered my life. Arabella was her name. Ah, Professor, you lady of the yellow locks, crisped liken golden wire – even she must never in my presence be compared with Arabella. She – she had – a – face – Noah Webster couldn't have found words to describe it. And her heart was true to yours truly – at least I thought that it was."

Mr. Magee rattled on. The haberdasher, his calling and his tragedy snatched from him by the humorous Magee, retired with sullen face into his bed quilt. Carefully Mr. Magee led up to the coming of the man from Jersey City; in detail he laid bare the duel of haberdashery fought in the name of the fair Arabella. As he proceeded, his enthusiasm grew. He added fine bits that

had escaped Mr. Bland. He painted with free hand the picture of tragedy's dark hour; the note hinting at suicide he gave in full. Then he told of how his courage grew again, of how he put the cowardice of death behind him, resolved to dare all – and live. He finished at last, his voice husky with emotion. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced triumphantly at Bland. That gentleman was gazing thoughtfully at the blazing logs.

"You did quite right," commented Professor Bolton, "in making up your mind to live. I congratulate you on your common sense. And perhaps, as the years go by, you will realize that had you married your Arabella, you would not have found life all honey and roses. She was fickle, unworthy of you. Soon you will forget. Youth – ah, youth throws off its sorrow like a cloak. A figure not original with me. And now – the gentleman in the – er – the bed quilt. Has he, too, a story?"

"Yes," laughed Mr. Magee, "let's hear now from the gentleman in the bed quilt. Has he, too, a story? And if so, what is it?"

He smiled delightedly into the eyes of Bland. What would the ex-haberdasher do, shorn of his fictional explanation? Would he rise in his wrath and denounce the man who had stolen his Arabella? Mr. Bland smiled back. He stood up. And a contingency that had not entered Mr. Magee's mind came to be.

Mr. Bland walked calmly to the table, and picked up a popular novel that lay thereon. On its cover was the picture of a very beautiful maiden.

"See that dame?" he inquired of the professor. "Sort of makes a man sit up and take notice, doesn't she? Even the frost-bitten haberdasher here has got to admit that in some ways she has this Arabella person looking like a faded chromo in your grandmother's parlor on a rainy afternoon. Ever get any notion, Professor, the way a picture like that boosts a novel in the busy marts of trade? No? Well – "

Mr. Bland continued. Mr. Magee leaned back, overjoyed, in his chair. Here was a man not to be annoyed by the mere filching of his story. Here was a man with a sense of humor – an opponent worthy his foe's best efforts. In his rôle of a haberdasher overcome with woe, Mr. Magee listened.

"I used to paint dames like that," Bland was saying to the dazed professor. He explained how his pictures had enabled many a novelist to "eat up the highway in a buzz-wagon." As he approached the time when the novelists besieged him, he gave full play to his imagination. One, he said, sought out his apartments in an aeroplane.

"Say, Professor," he finished, "we're in the same boat. Both hiding from writers. A fellow that's spent his life selling neckties – well, he can't exactly appreciate our situation. There's what you might call a bond between you and me. D'ye know, I felt drawn to you, just after I fired that first shot. That's why I didn't blaze away again. We're going to be great friends – I can read it in the stars."

He took the older man's hand feelingly, shook it, and walked

away, casting a covert glance of triumph at Mr. Magee.

The face of the holder of the Crandall Chair of Comparative Literature was a study. He looked first at one young man, then at the other. Again he applied the handkerchief to his shining head.

"All this is very odd," he said thoughtfully. "A man of sixty-two – particularly one who has long lived in the uninspired circle surrounding a university – has not the quick wit of youth. I'm afraid I don't – but no matter. It's very odd, though."

He permitted Mr. Magee to escort him into the hall, and to direct his search for a bed that should serve him through the scant remainder of the night. Overcoats and rugs were pressed into service as cover. Mr. Bland blithely assisted.

"If I see any newspaper reporters," he assured the professor on parting, "I'll damage more than their derbies."

"Thank you," replied the old man heartily. "You are very kind. To-morrow we shall become better acquainted. Good night."

The two young men came out and stood in the hallway. Mr. Magee spoke in a low tone.

"Forgive me," he said, "for stealing your Arabella."

"Take her and welcome," said Bland. "She was beginning to bore me, anyhow. And I'm not in your class as an actor." He came close to Magee. In the dim light that streamed out from number seven the latter saw the look on his face, and knew that, underneath all, this was a very much worried young man.

"For God's sake," cried Bland, "tell me who you are and what you're doing here. In three words – tell me."

"If I did," Mr. Magee replied, "you wouldn't believe me. Let such minor matters as the truth wait over till to-morrow."

"Well, anyhow," Bland said, his foot on the top step, "we are sure of one thing – we don't trust each other. I've got one parting word for you. Don't try to come down-stairs to-night. I've got a gun, and I ain't afraid to shoot."

He paused. A look of fright passed over his face. For on the floor above they both heard soft footsteps – then a faint click, as though a door had been gently closed.

"This inn," whispered Bland, "has more keys than a literary club in a prohibition town. And every one's in use, I guess. Remember. Don't try to come down-stairs. I've warned you. Or Arabella's cast-off Romeo may be found with a bullet in him yet."

"I shan't forget, what you say," answered Mr. Magee. "Shall we look about up-stairs?"

Bland shook his head.

"No," he said. "Go in and go to bed. It's the down-stairs that – that concerns me. Good night."

He went swiftly down the steps, leaving Mr. Magee staring wonderingly after him. Like a wraith he merged with the shadows below. Magee turned slowly, and entered number seven. A fantastic film of frost was on the windows; the inner room was drear and chill. Partially undressing, he lay down on the brass bed and pulled the covers over him.

The events of the night danced in giddy array before him as

he closed his eyes. With every groan Baldpate Inn uttered in the wind he started up, keen for a new adventure. At length his mind seemed to stand still, and there remained of all that amazing evening's pictures but one – that of a girl in a blue corduroy suit who wept – wept only that her smile might be the more dazzling when it flashed behind the tears. "With yellow locks, crisped like golden wire," murmured Mr. Magee. And so he fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV
A PROFESSIONAL HERMIT APPEARS

Every morning at eight, when slumber's chains had bound Mr. Magee in his New York apartments, he was awakened by a pompous valet named Geoffrey whom he shared with the other young men in the building. It was Geoffrey's custom to enter, raise the curtains, and speak of the weather in a voice vibrant with feeling, as of something he had prepared himself and was anxious to have Mr. Magee try. So, when a rattling noise came to his ear on his first morning at Baldpate Inn, Mr. Magee breathed sleepily from the covers: "Good morning, Geoffrey."

But no cheery voice replied in terms of sun, wind, or rain. Surprised, Mr. Magee sat up in bed. About him, the maple-wood furniture of suite seven stood shivering in the chill of a December morning. Through the door at his left he caught sight of a white tub into which, he recalled sadly, not even a Geoffrey could coax a glittering drop. Yes – he was at Baldpate Inn. He remembered – the climb with the dazed Quimby up the snowy road, the plaint of the lovelorn haberdasher, the vagaries of the professor with a penchant for blondes, the mysterious click of the door-latch on the floor above. And last of all – strange that it should have been last – a girl in blue corduroy somewhat darker than her eyes, who

wept amid the station's gloom.

"I wonder," reflected Mr. Magee, staring at the very brassy bars at the foot of his bed, "what new variations on seclusion the day will bring forth?"

Again came the rattling noise that had awakened him. He looked toward the nearest window, and through an unfrosted corner of the pane he saw the eyes of the newest variation staring at him in wonder. They were dark eyes, and kindly; they spoke a desire to enter.

Rising from his warm retreat, Mr. Magee took his shivering way across the uncarpeted floor and unfastened the window's catch. From the blustering balcony a plump little man stepped inside. He had a market basket on his arm. His face was a stranger to razors; his hair to shears. He reminded Mr. Magee of the celebrated doctor who came every year to the small town of his boyhood, there to sell a wonderful healing herb to the crowds on the street corner.

Magee dived hastily back under the covers. "Well?" he questioned.

"So you're the fellow," remarked the little man in awe. He placed the basket on the floor; it appeared to be filled with bromidic groceries, such as the most subdued householder carries home.

"Which fellow?" asked Mr. Magee.

"The fellow Elijah Quimby told me about," explained he of the long brown locks. "The fellow that's come up to Baldpate Inn

to be alone with his thoughts."

"You're one of the villagers, I take it," guessed Mr. Magee.

"You're dead wrong. I'm no villager. My instincts are all in the other direction – away from the crowd. I live up near the top of Baldpate, in a little shack I built myself. My name's Peters – Jake Peters – in the winter. But in the summer, when the inn's open, and the red and white awnings are out, and the band plays in the casino every night – then I'm the Hermit of Baldpate Mountain. I come down here and sell picture post-cards of myself to the ladies."

Mr. Magee appeared overcome with mirth.

"A professional hermit, by the gods!" he cried. "Say, I didn't know Baldpate Mountain was fitted up with all the modern improvements. This is great luck. I'm an amateur at the hermit business, you'll have to teach me the fine points. Sit down."

"Just between ourselves, I'm not a regular hermit," said the plump bewhiskered one, sitting gingerly on the edge of a frail chair. "Not one of these 'all for love of a woman' hermits you read about in books. Of course, I have to pretend I am, in summer, in order to sell the cards and do my whole duty by the inn management. A lot of the women ask me in soft tones about the great disappointment that drove me to old Baldpate, and I give 'em various answers, according to how I feel. Speaking to you as a friend, and considering the fact that it's the dead of winter, I may say there was little or no romance in my life. I married early, and stayed married a long time. I came up here for peace and

quiet, and because I felt a man ought to read something besides time-tables and tradesmen's bills, and have something over his head besides a first and second mortgage."

"Back to nature, in other words," remarked Mr. Magee.

"Yes, sir – back with a rush. I was down to the village this morning for a few groceries, and I stopped off at Quimby's, as I often do. He told me about you. I help him a lot around the inn, and we arranged I was to stop in and start your fire, and do any other little errands you might want done. I thought we ought to get acquainted, you and me, being as we're both literary men, after a manner of speaking."

"No?" cried Mr. Magee.

"Yes," said the Hermit of Baldpate. "I dip into that work a little now and then. Some of my verses on the joys of solitude have appeared in print – on the post-cards I sell to the guests in the summer. But my life-work, as you might call it, is a book I've had under way for some time. It's called simply *Woman*. Just that one word – but, oh, the meaning in it! That book is going to prove that all the trouble in the world, from the beginning of time, was caused by females. Not just say so, mind you. Prove it!"

"A difficult task, I'm afraid," smiled Magee.

"Not difficult – long," corrected the hermit. "When I started out, four years ago, I thought it would just be a case of a chapter on Eve, and honorable mention for Cleopatra and Helen of Troy, and a few more like that, and the thing would be done. But as I got into the subject, I was fairly buried under new evidence.

Then Mr. Carnegie came along and gave Upper Asquewan Falls a library. It's wonderful to think the great works that man will be responsible for. I've dedicated *Woman* to him. Since the new library, I've dug up information about a thousand disasters I never dreamed of before, and I contend that if you go back a ways in any one of 'em, you'll find the fluffy little lady that started the whole rumpus. So I hunt the woman. I reckon the French would call me the greatest *cherchez la femme* in history."

"A fascinating pursuit," laughed Mr. Magee. "I'm glad you've told me about it, and I shall watch the progress of the work with interest. Although I can't say that I entirely agree with you. Here and there is a woman who more than makes amends for whatever trouble her sisters have caused. One, for instance, with golden hair, and eyes that when they weep – "

"You're young," interrupted the little man, rising. "There ain't no use to debate it with you. I might as well try to argue with a storm at sea. Some men keep the illusion to the end of their days, and I hope you're one. I reckon I'll start your fire."

He went into the outer room, and Mr. Magee lay for a few moments listening to his preparations about the fireplace. This was comfort, he thought. And yet, something was wrong. Was it the growing feeling of emptiness inside? Undoubtedly. He sat up in bed and leaning over, gazed into the hermit's basket. The packages he saw there made his feeling of emptiness the more acute.

"I say, Mr. Peters," he cried, leaping from bed and running

into the other room, where the hermit was persuading a faint blaze, "I've an idea. You can cook, can't you?"

"Cook?" repeated the hermit. "Well, yes, I've had to learn a few things about it, living far from the rathskellars the way I do."

"The very man," rejoiced Mr. Magee. "You must stay here and cook for me – for us."

"Us?" asked the hermit, staring.

"Yes. I forgot to tell you. After Mr. Quimby left me last night, two other amateur hermits hove in view. One is a haberdasher with a broken heart – "

"Woman," cried the triumphant Peters.

"Name, Arabella," laughed Magee. "The other's a college professor who made an indiscreet remark about blondes. You won't mind them, I'm sure, and they may be able to help you a lot with your great work."

"I don't know what Quimby will say," studied the hermit. "I reckon he'll run 'em out. He's against this thing – afraid of fire."

"Quimby will come later," Mr. Magee assured him, drawing on a dressing-gown. "Just now the idea is a little water in yonder tub, and a nice cheerful breakfast after. It's going to pay you a lot better than selling post-cards to romantic ladies, I promise you. I won't take you away from a work for which the world is panting without more than making it up to you financially. Where do you stand as a coffee maker?"

"Wait till you taste it," said Peters reassuringly. "I'll bring you up some water."

He started for the door, but Mr. Magee preceded him.

"The haberdasher," he explained, "sleeps below, and he's a nervous man. He might commit the awful error of shooting the only cook on Baldpate Mountain."

Mr. Magee went out into the hall and called from the depths the figure of Bland, fully attired in his flashy garments, and looking tawdry and tired in the morning light.

"I've been up hours," he remarked. "Heard somebody knocking round the kitchen, but I ain't seen any breakfast brought in on a silver tray. My inside feels like the Mammoth Cave."

Mr. Magee introduced the Hermit of Baldpate.

"Pleased to meet you," said Bland. "I guess it was you I heard in the kitchen. So you're going to cater to this select few, are you? Believe me, you can't get on the job any too soon to suit me."

Out of a near-by door stepped the black-garbed figure of Professor Thaddeus Bolton, and him Mr. Magee included in the presentation ceremonies. After the hermit had disappeared below, burdened with his market basket and the supplies Mr. Magee had brought the night before, the three amateurs at the hermit game gathered by the fire in number seven, and Mr. Bland spoke feelingly:

"I don't know where you plucked that cook, but believe me, you get a vote of thanks from yours truly. What is he – an advertisement for a hair restorer?"

"He's a hermit," explained Magee, "and lives in a shack near the mountain-top. Hermits and barbers aren't supposed to mix.

He's also an author, and is writing a book in which he lays all the trouble of the ages at the feet of woman. Please treat him with the respect all these dignified activities demand."

"A writer, you say," commented Professor Bolton. "Let us hope it will not interfere with his cooking abilities. For even I, who am not much given to thought about material things, must admit the presence of a gnawing hunger within."

They talked little, being men unfed, while Jake Peters started proceedings in the kitchen, and tramped up-stairs with many pails of water. Mr. Magee requested warm water for shaving; whereupon he was regarded with mingled emotions by his companions.

"You ain't going to see any skirts up here," Mr. Bland promised him. And Mr. Peters, bringing the water from below, took occasion to point out that shaving was one of man's troubles directly attributable to woman's presence in the world.

At length the hermit summoned them to breakfast, and as they descended the broad stair the heavenly odor of coffee sent a glow to their hearts. Peters had built a rousing fire in the big fireplace opposite the clerk's desk in the office, and in front of this he had placed a table which held promise of a satisfactory breakfast. As the three sat down, Mr. Bland spoke:

"I don't know about you, gentlemen, but I could fall on Mr. Peters' neck and call him blessed."

The gentleman thus referred to served them genially. He brought to Mr. Magee, between whom and himself he recognized

the tie of authorship, a copy of a New York paper that he claimed to get each morning from the station agent, and which helped him greatly, he said, in his eternal search for the woman. As the meal passed, Mr. Magee glanced it through. Twice he looked up from it to study keenly his queer companions at Baldpate Inn. Finally he handed it across the table to the haberdasher. The dull yellow sun of a winter morning drifted in from the white outdoors; the fire sputtered gaily in the grate. Also, Mr. Peters' failing for literature interfered in no way with his talents as cook. The three finished the repast in great good humor, and Mr. Magee handed round cigars.

"Gentlemen," he remarked, pushing back his chair, "we find ourselves in a peculiar position. Three lone men, knowing nothing of one another, we have sought the solitude of Baldpate Inn at almost the same moment. Why? Last night, before you came, Professor Bolton, Mr. Bland gave me as his reason for being here the story of Arabella, which I afterward appropriated as a joke and gave as my own reason. I related to Mr. Bland the fiction about the artist and the besieging novelists. We swapped stories when you came – it was our merry little method of doubting each other's word. Perhaps it was bad taste. At any rate, looking at it in the morning light, I am inclined to return Mr. Bland's Arabella, and no questions asked. He is again the lovelorn haberdasher. I am inclined to believe, implicitly, your story. That is my proposition. No doubts of one another. We are here for whatever reasons we say we are."

The professor nodded gravely.

"Last night," went on Mr. Magee, "there was some talk between Mr. Bland and myself about one of us leaving the inn. Mr. Bland demanded it. I trust he sees the matter differently this morning. I for one should be sorry to see him go."

"I've changed my mind," said Mr. Bland. The look on his thin face was not a pleasant one. "Very good," went on Mr. Magee. "I see no reason why we should not proceed on friendly terms. Mr. Peters has agreed to cook for us. He can no doubt be persuaded to attend to our other wants. For his services we shall pay him generously, in view of the circumstances. As for Quimby – I leave you to make your peace with him."

"I have a letter to Mr. Quimby from my old friend, John Bentley," said the professor, "which I am sure will win me the caretaker's warm regard."

Mr. Magee looked at Bland.

"I'll get Andy Rutter on the wire," said that gentleman. "Quimby will listen to him, I guess."

"Maybe," remarked Magee carelessly. "Who is Rutter?"

"He's manager of the inn when it's open," answered Bland. He looked suspiciously at Magee. "I only know him slightly," he added.

"Those matters you will arrange for yourselves," Mr. Magee went on. "I shall be very glad of your company if you can fix it to stay. Believe it or not – I forgot, we agreed to believe, didn't we? – I am here to do some writing. I'm going up to my room

now to do a little work. All I ask of you gentlemen is that, as a favor to me, you refrain from shooting at each other while I am gone. You see, I am trying to keep crude melodrama out of my stuff."

"I am sure," remarked Professor Bolton, "that the use of firearms as a means of social diversion between Mr. Bland and myself is unthought of."

"I hope so," responded Magee. "There, then, the matter rests. We are here – that is all." He hesitated, as though in doubt. Then, with a decisive motion, he drew toward him the New York paper. With his eyes on the head-lines of the first page, he continued: "I shall demand no further explanations. And except for this once, I shall make no reference to this story in the newspaper, to the effect that early yesterday morning, in a laboratory at one of our leading universities, a young assistant instructor was found dead under peculiar circumstances." He glanced keenly at the bald-headed little man across from him. "Nor shall I make conversation of the fact," he added, "that the professor of chemistry at the university, a man past middle age, respected highly in the university circle, is missing."

An oppressive silence followed this remark. Mr. Bland's sly eyes sought quickly the professor's face. The older man sat staring at his plate; then he raised his head and the round spectacles were turned full on Magee.

"You are very kind," said Professor Bolton evenly.

"There is another story in this paper," went on Mr. Magee,

glancing at the haberdasher, "that, it seems to me, I ought to taboo as table talk at Baldpate Inn. It relates that a few days ago the youthful cashier of a bank in a small Pennsylvania town disappeared with thirty thousand dollars of the bank's funds. No," he concluded, "we are simply here, gentlemen, and I am very glad to let it go at that."

Mr. Bland sneered knowingly.

"I should think you would be," he said. "If you'll turn that paper over you'll read on the back page that day before yesterday a lot of expensive paintings in a New York millionaire's house were cut from their frames, and that the young artist who was doing retouching in the house at the time has been just careless enough not to send his address to the police. It's a small matter, of course, and the professor and I will never mention it again."

Mr. Magee threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"We understand one another, it seems," he said. "I look forward to pleasant companionship where I had expected solitude. You will excuse me now – there is the work to which I referred. Ah, here's Peters," he added as the hermit entered through the dining-room door at the side of the stairs.

"All finished, gentlemen?" he asked, coming forward. "Now, this is solid comfort, ain't it? I reckon when you get a few days of this, you'll all become hermits, and build yourselves shacks on the mountain. Solid comfort. No woman to make you put on overshoes when you go out, or lecture you about the effects of alcohol on the stomach. Heaven, I call it."

"Peters," said Mr. Magee, "we have been wondering if you will stay on here and cook for us. We need you. How about it?"

"Well – I'll be glad to help you out," the hermit replied. "I guess I can manage to give satisfaction, seeing there ain't no women around. If there was, I wouldn't think of it. Yes, I'll stay and do what I can to boost the hermit life in your estimation. I – "

He stopped. His eyes were on the dining-room door, toward which Mr. Magee's back was turned. The jaw of Peters fell, and his mouth stood wide open. Behind the underbrush of beard a very surprised face was discernible.

Mr. Magee turned quickly. A few feet inside the door stood the girl of the station, weeping no more, but radiant with smiles. Back of her was the determined impossible companion of yesterday.

"Oh, mamma," laughed the girl, "we're too late for breakfast! Isn't it a shame?"

Mr. Bland's lean hands went quickly to adjust his purple tie. Professor Bolton looked every inch the owl as he blinked in dazed fashion at the blue corduroy vision. Gingerly Mr. Peters set down the plates he had taken from the table, still neglecting his open mouth.

Mr. Magee rose from the table, and went forward with outstretched hand.

CHAPTER V
THE MAYOR CASTS A SHADOW BEFORE

"From tears to smiles," said Mr. Magee, taking the girl's hand. "What worked the transformation? Not the Commercial House, I know, for I passed it last evening."

"No, hardly the Commercial House," laughed the girl. "Rather the sunshine of a winter morning, the brisk walk up the mountain, and the sight of the Hermit of Baldpate with eyes like saucers staring at a little girl who once bought his postal cards."

"Then you know Mr. Peters?" inquired Magee.

"Is that his name? You see, I never met him in private life – he was just the hermit when I knew him. I used to come to Baldpate in the summers, and send his cards back to the folks at home, and dream dreams of his love-story when from my window I saw the light of his shack at night. I'm so glad to meet Mr. Peters informally."

She held out her hand, but Peters, by long practise wary of women, had burdened himself with breakfast plates which prevented his clasping it. He muttered "How d'ye do?" and fled toward the door, narrowly averting what would have proved a serious collision with the large woman on the way.

"Mr. Peters meets so few of your sex in winter," Magee

apologized, "you must pardon his clumsiness. This gentleman" – he indicated the professor, who arose – "is Thaddeus Bolton, a distinguished member of a certain university faculty, who has fled to Baldpate to escape the press of America. And this is Mr. Bland, who hides here from the world the scars of a broken heart. But let us not go into details."

The girl smiled brightly. "And you – " she asked.

"William Hallowell Magee," he returned, bowing low. "I have a neat little collection of stories accounting for my presence here, from which I shall allow you to choose later. Not to mention the real one, which is simple almost to a fault."

"I am so happy to meet you all," said the girl. "We shall no doubt become very good friends. For mamma and I have also come to Baldpate Inn – to stay."

Mr. Bland opened wide his usually narrow eyes, and ran his hand thoughtfully over his one day's beard. Professor Bolton blinked his astonishment. Mr. Magee smiled.

"I, for one, am delighted to hear it," he said.

"My name," went on the girl, "is Mary Norton. May I present my mother, Mrs. Norton?"

The older woman adopted what was obviously her society manner. Once again Mr. Magee felt a pang of regret that this should be the parent of a girl so charming.

"I certainly am pleased to meet you all," she said in her heavy voice. "Ain't it a lovely morning after the storm? The sun's almost blinding."

"Some explanation," put in Miss Norton quickly, "is due you if I am to thrust myself thus upon you. I am perfectly willing to tell why I am here – but the matter mustn't leak out. I can trust you, I'm sure."

Mr. Magee drew up chairs, and the two women were seated before the fire.

"The bandits of Baldpate," he remarked flippantly, glancing at the two men, "have their own code of honor, and the first rule is never to betray a pal."

"Splendid!" laughed the girl. "You said, I believe, that Professor Bolton was fleeing from the newspapers. I am fleeing for the newspapers – to attract their attention – to lure them into giving me that thing so necessary to a woman in my profession, publicity. You see, I am an actress. The name I gave you is not my stage name. That, perhaps, you would know. I employ a gentleman to keep me before the public as much as possible. It's horrid, I know, but it means bread and butter to me. That gentleman, my press-agent, evolved the present scheme – a mysterious disappearance."

She paused and looked at the others. Mr. Magee surveyed her narrowly. The youthful bloom of her cheek carried to him no story of grease paint; her unaffected manner was far from suggesting anything remotely connected with the stage. He wondered.

"I am to disappear completely for a time," she went on. "'As though the earth had swallowed me' will be the good old phrase

of the reporters. I am to linger here at Baldpate Inn, a key to which my press-agent has secured for me. Meanwhile, the papers will speak tearfully of me in their head-lines – at least, I hope they will. Can't you just see them – those head-lines? 'Beautiful Actress Drops from Sight'." She stopped, blushing. "Every woman who gets into print, you know, is beautiful."

"But it'd be no lie in your case, dearie," put in Mrs. Norton, feeling carefully of her atrociously blond store hair.

"Your mother takes the words from my mouth," smiled Mr. Magee. "Guard as they will against it, the newspapers let the truth crop out occasionally. And this will be such an occasion."

"From what part of Ireland do you come?" laughed the girl. She seemed somewhat embarrassed by her mother's open admiration. "Well, setting all blarney aside, such will be the head-lines. And when the last clue is exhausted, and my press-agent is the same, I come back to appear in a new play, a well-known actress. Of such flippant things is a Broadway reputation built."

"We all wish you success, I'm sure." Mr. Magee searched his memory in vain for this "actress's" name and fame. Could it be possible, he wondered, at this late day, that any one would try for publicity by such an obvious worn-out road? Hardly. The answer was simple. Another fable was being spun from whole cloth beneath the roof of Baldpate Inn. "We have a New York paper here," he went on, "but as yet there seems to be no news of your sad disappearance."

"Wouldn't it be the limit if they didn't fall for it?" queried the

older woman.

"Fall for it," repeated Professor Bolton, not questioningly, but with the air of a scientist about to add a new and rare specimen to his alcohol jar.

"She means, if they didn't accept my disappearance as legitimate news," explained the girl "That would be very disappointing. But surely there was no harm in making the experiment."

"They're a clever lot, those newspaper guys," sneered Mr. Bland, "in their own opinion. But when you come right down to it, every one of 'em has a nice little collection of gold bricks in his closet. I guess you've got them going. I hope so."

"Thank you," smiled the girl. "You are very kind. You are here, I understand, because of an unfortunate – er – affair of the heart?"

Mr. Bland smoothed back his black oily hair from his forehead, and smirked. "Oh, now – " he protested.

"Arabella," put in Mr. Magee, "was her name. The beauties of history and mythology hobbled into oblivion at sight of her."

"I'm quick to forget," insisted Mr. Bland.

"That does you no credit, I'm sure," replied the girl severely. "And now, mamma, I think we had better select our rooms – "

She paused. For Elijah Quimby had come in through the dining-room door, and stood gazing at the group before the fire, his face reflecting what Mr. Magee, the novelist, would not have hesitated a moment in terming "mingled emotions".

"Well," drawled Mr. Quimby. He strode into the room. "Mr. Magee," he said, "that letter from Mr. Bentley asked me to let you stay at Baldpate Inn. There wasn't anything in it about your bringing parties of friends along."

"These are not friends I've brought along," explained Magee. "They're simply some more amateur hermits who have strolled in from time to time. All have their individual latch-keys to the hermitage. And all, I believe, have credentials for you to examine."

Mr. Quimby stared in angry wonder.

"Is the world crazy?" he demanded. "Any one 'd think it was July, the way people act. The inn's closed, I tell you. It ain't running."

Professor Bolton rose from his chair.

"So you are Quimby," he said in a soothing tone. "I'm glad to meet you at last. My old friend John Bentley has spoken of you so often. I have a letter from him." He drew the caretaker to one side, and took an envelope from his pocket. The two conversed in low tones.

Quickly the girl in the corduroy suit leaned toward Mr. Magee. She whispered, and her tone was troubled:

"Stand by me. I'm afraid I'll need your help."

"What's the matter?" inquired Magee.

"I haven't much of any right here, I guess. But I had to come."

"But your key?"

"I fear my – my press-agent – stole it."

A scornful remark as to the antiquated methods of that mythical publicity promoter rose to Mr. Magee's lips, but before he spoke he looked into her eyes. And the remark was never made. For in their wonderful depths he saw worry and fear and unhappiness, as he had seen them there amid tears in the station.

"Never mind," he said very gently, "I'll see you through."

Quimby was standing over Mr. Bland. "How about you?" he asked.

"Call up Andy Rutter and ask about me," replied Bland, in the tone of one who prefers war to peace.

"I work for Mr. Bentley," said Quimby. "Rutter hasn't any authority here. He isn't to be manager next season, I understand. However the professor wants me to let you stay. He says he'll be responsible." Mr. Bland looked in open-mouthed astonishment at the unexpected sponsor he had found. "And you?" went on Quimby to the women.

"Why – " began Miss Norton.

"Absolutely all right," said Mr. Magee. "They come from Hal Bentley, like myself. He's put them in my care. I'll answer for them." He saw the girl's eyes; they spoke her thanks.

Mr. Quimby shook his head as one in a dream.

"All this is beyond me – way beyond," he ruminated. "Nothing like it ever happened before that I've heard of. I'm going to write all about it to Mr. Bentley, and I suppose I got to let you stay till I hear from him. I think he ought to come up here, if he can."

"The more the merrier," said Mr. Magee, reflecting cheerfully

that the Bentleys were in Florida at last accounts.

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