

**SAMUEL
MERWIN**

THE
TRUFFLERS

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The Trufflers

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Samuel Merwin

The Trufflers / A Story

CHAPTER I – THE GIRL IN THE PLAID COAT

PETER ERICSON MANN leaned back in his chair and let his hands fall listlessly from the typewriter to his lap.

He raised them again and laboriously pecked out a few words.

It was no use.

He got up, walked to one of the front windows of the dingy old studio and peered gloomily out at the bare trees and brown grass patches of Washington Square.

Peter was a playwright of three early (and partial) successes, and two more recent failures. He was thirty-three years old; and a typical New Yorker, born in Iowa, he dressed conspicuously, well, making it a principle when in funds to stock up against lean seasons to come. He worried a good deal and kept his savings of nearly six thousand dollars (to the existence of which sum he never by any chance alluded) in five different savings banks. He wore large horn-rimmed eyeglasses (not spectacles) with a heavy black ribbon attached, and took his Art almost as seriously as himself. You know him publicly as Eric Mann.

For six months Peter had been writing words where ideas were imperatively demanded. Lately he had torn up the last of these words. He had waited in vain for the divine uprush; there had come no tingle of delighted nerves, no humming vitality, no punch. And as for his big scene, in Act III, it was a morass of sodden, tangled, dramatic concepts.

His theme this year was the modern bachelor girl; but to save his life he couldn't present her convincingly as a character in a play – perhaps because these advanced, outspoken young women irritated him too deeply to permit of close observation. Really, they frightened him. He believed in marriage, the old-fashioned woman, the home.

It had reached the point, a month back, where he could no longer even react to stimulants. He had revived an old affair with a pretty manicure girl without stirring so much as a flutter of excitement within himself. This was Maria Tonifetti, of the sanitary barber shop of Marius in the basement of the Parisian Restaurant. He had tried getting drunk; which made him ill and induced new depths of melancholy.

No one ever saw his name any more. No one, he felt certain, ever would see it. He could look back now on the few years of his success in a spirit of awful calm. He felt that he had had genius. But the genius had burned out. All that remained to him was to live for a year or two (or three) watching that total of nearly six thousand dollars shrink – shrink – and then the end of everything. Well, he would not be the first...

One faint faded joy had lately been left to Peter, one sorry reminder of the days when the magical words, the strangely hypnotic words, "Eric Mann," had spoken, sung, shouted from half the bill-boards in town. Over beyond Sixth Avenue, hardly five minutes' walk through the odd tangle of wandering streets, the tenements and ancient landmarks and subway excavations and little triangular breathing places that make up the Greenwich Village of to-day, there had lingered one faded, torn twenty-four-sheet poster, advertising "The Buzzard, by Eric Mann."

When he was bluest lately, Peter had occasionally walked over there and stood for a while gazing at this lingering vestige of his name.

He went over there now, in soft hat and light overcoat, and carrying his heavy cane – hurried over there, in fact – across the Square and on under the Sixth Avenue elevated into that quaint section of the great city which socialists, anarchists, feminists, Freudian psycho-analysts of self,

magazine writers, Jewish intellectuals, sculptors and painters of all nationalities and grades, sex hygiene enthusiasts, theatrical press-agents and various sorts of youthful experimenters in living share with the merely poor.

He stopped at a familiar spot on the curb by a familiar battered lamp-post and peered across the street.

Then he started – and stared. Surprise ran into bewilderment, bewilderment into utter dejection.

The faded, torn twenty-four-sheet poster had vanished.

A new brand of cut plug tobacco was advertised there now.

Ragged children of the merely poor, cluttering pavement and sidewalk, fell against him in their play. Irritably he brushed them aside.

It was indeed the end.

A young woman was crossing the street toward him, nimbly dodging behind a push cart and in front of a coal truck. Deep in self, he lowered his gaze and watched her. So intent was his stare that the girl stopped short, one foot on the curb, slowly lowered the apple she was eating, and looked straight at him.

She was shaped like a boy, he decided – good shoulders, no hips, fine hands (she wore no gloves, though the March air was crisp) and trim feet in small, fiat-heeled tan boots. Her hair, he thought, was cut short. He was not certain, for her “artistic” tarn o’shanter covered it and hung low on her neck behind. He moved a step to one side and looked more closely. Yes, it was short. Not docked, in the current fashion, but cut close to her head, like a boy’s.

She stepped up on the curb now and confronted him. He noted that her suit was of brown stuff, loosely and comfortably cut; and that the boyish outer coat, which she wore swinging open, was of a rough plaid. Then he became aware of her eyes. They were deep green and vivid. Her skin was a clear olive, prettily tinted by air and exercise... Peter suddenly knew that he was turning red.

She spoke first.

“Hadn’t we better say something?” was her remark. Then she took another bite of the apple, and munched it with honest relish.

“Very likely we would better,” he managed to reply – rather severely, for the “had better” phrase always annoyed him.

“It seems as if I must have met you somewhere,” he ventured next.

“No, we haven’t met.”

“My name is Mann.”

“Yes,” said she, “I know it.”

“Then suppose you tell me yours?”

“Why?”

Peter could not think of a reason why. Deeply as he was supposed to understand women, here was a new variety. She was inclined neither to flirt nor to run away.

“How is it that you know who I am?” he asked, sparring for time..

She gave a careless shrug. “Oh, most every one is known, here in the Village.”

Peter was always at his best when recognized as *the* Eric Mann. His spirits rose a bit.

“Might I suggest that we have a cup of tea somewhere?”

She knit her brows. “Yes,” she replied slowly, even doubtfully, “you might.”

“Of course, if you – ”

“Jim’s isn’t far. Let’s go there.”

Jim’s was an oyster and chop emporium of ancient fame in the Village. They sat at a rear table. The place was empty save for an old waiter who shuffled through the sprinkling of sawdust on the floor, and a fat grandson of the original Jim who stood by the open grill that was set in the wall at the rear end of the oyster bar.

Over the tea Peter said, expanding now – “Perhaps this is reason enough for you to tell me who you are.”

“Perhaps what is?”

He smilingly passed the toast.

She took a slice, and considered it.

“You see,” he went on, “if I am not to know, how on earth am I to manage seeing you again?”

She slowly inclined her head. “That’s just it.”

It was Peter’s turn to knit his brow’s.

“How can I be sure that I want you to see me again?”

He waved an exasperated hand. “Then why are we here?”

“To find out.”

At least he could smoke. He opened his cigarette case. Then, though he never felt right about women smoking, he extended it toward her.

“Thanks,” said she, taking one and casually lighting it. Yes, she *had* fine hands. And he had noted when she took off her coat and reached up to hang it on the wall rack, her youth-like suppleness of body. A provocative person!

“I’ve seen some of your plays,” she observed, elbows on table, chin on hand, gazing at the smoke-wraiths of her cigarette. “Two or three. *Odd Change* and *Anchored* and – what was it called?”

“*The Buzzard?*”

“Yes, *The Buzzard*. They were dreadful.”

The color slowly left Peter’s face. The girl was speaking without the slightest self-consciousness or wish to offend. She meant it.

Peter managed to recover some part of his poise.

“Well!” he said. Then: “If they were all dreadful, why didn’t you stop after the first?”

“Oh.” – she waved her cigarette – “*Odd Change* came to town when I was in college, and – ”

“So you’re a college girl?”

“Yes, and a crowd of us went. That one wasn’t so bad as the others. You know your tricks well enough – especially in comedy, carpentered comedy. Theatrically, I suppose you’re really pretty good or your things wouldn’t succeed. It is when you try to deal with life – and with women – that you’re...” Words failed her. She smoked in silence.

“I’m what?” he ventured. “The limit?”

“Yes,” she replied, very thoughtful. “Since you’ve said it.”

“All right,” he cried, aiming at a gay humor and missing heavily – “but now, having slapped me in the face and thrown me out in the snow, don’t you think that you’d better – ” He hesitated, watching for a smile that failed to make its appearance. “That I’d better what?”

“Well – tell me a little more?”

“I was wondering if I could. The difficulty is, it’s the whole thing – your attitude toward life – the perfectly conventional, perfectly unimaginative home and mother stuff, your hopeless sentimentality about women, the slushy, horrible, immoral Broadway falseness that lies back of everything you do – the Broadway thing, always. Ever, in your comedy, good as that sometimes is. Your insight into life is just about that of a hardened director of one-reel films. What I’ve been wondering since we met this afternoon – you see, I didn’t know that we were going to meet in this way...”

“Naturally.”

“... is whether it would be any use to try and help you. You have ability enough.”

“Thanks for that!”

“Don’t let’s trifle! You see, if it is any use at all to try to get a little – just a little – truth into the American theater, why, those of us that believe in truth owe it to our faith to get to work on the men that supply the plays.”

“Doubtless.” Peter’s mind was racing in a dozen directions at once. This extraordinary young person had hit close; that much he knew. He wondered rather helplessly whether the shattered and scattered remnants of his self-esteem could ever be put together again so the cracks wouldn’t show.

The confusing thing was that he couldn’t, at the moment, feel angry toward the girl; she was too odd and too pretty. Already he was conscious of a considerable emotional stir, caused by her mere presence there across the table. She reached out now for another cigarette.

“I think,” said he gloomily, “that you’d better tell me your name.”

She shook her head. “I’ll tell you how you can find me out.”

“How?”

“You would have to take a little trouble.”

“Glad to.”

“Come to the Crossroads Theater to-night, in Tenth Street.”

“Oh – that little place of Zanin’s.”

She nodded. “That little place of Zanin’s.”

“I’ve never been there.”

“I know you haven’t. None of the people that might be helped by it ever come. You see, we aren’t professional, artificialized actors. We are just trying to deal naturally with bits of real life – from the Russian, and things that are written here in the Village. Jacob Zanin is a big man – a fine natural man – with a touch of genius, I think.”

Peter was silent. He knew this brilliant, hulking Russian Jew, and disliked him: even feared him in a way, as he feared others of his race with what he felt to be their hard clear minds, their vehement idealism, their insistent pushing upward. The play that had triumphantly displaced his last failure at the Astoria Theater was written by a Russian Jew.

She added: “In some ways it is the only interesting theater in New York.”

“There is so much to see.”

“I know,” she sighed. “And we don’t play every night, of course. Only Friday and Saturday.”

He was regarding her now with kindling interest. “What do you do there?”

“Oh, nothing much. I’m playing a boy this month in Zanin’s one-act piece, *Any Street*. And sometimes I dance. I was on my way there when I met you – was due at three o’clock.”

“For a rehearsal, I suppose.”

She nodded.

“You won’t make it. It’s four-fifteen now.”

“I know it.”

“You’re playing a boy,” he mused. “I wonder if that is why you cut off your hair.” He felt brutally daring in saying this. He had never been direct with women or with direct women. But this girl created her own atmosphere which quite enveloped him.

“Yes,” said she simply, “I had to for the part.” Never would he have believed that the attractive woman lived who would do that!

Abruptly, as if acting on an impulse, she pushed back her chair. “I’m going,” she remarked; adding; “You’ll find you have friends who know me.”

She was getting into her coat now. He hurried awkwardly around the table, and helped her.

“Tell me,” said he, suddenly all questions, now that he was losing her – “You live here in the Village, I take it?”

“Yes.”

“Alone?”

She nearly smiled. “No, with another girl.”

“Do I know her?”

She pursed her lips. “I doubt it.” A moment more of hesitation, then: “Her name is Deane, Betty Deane.”

“I’ve heard that name. Yes, I’ve seen her – at the Black and White ball this winter! A blonde – pretty – went as a Picabia dancer.”

They were mounting the steps to the sidewalk (for Jim’s is a basement).

“Good-by,” said she. “Will you come – to-night or to-morrow?”

“Yes,” said he. “To-night.” And walked in a daze back to the rooms on Washington Square.

CHAPTER II – THE SEVENTH-STORY MEN

NOT until he was crossing Sixth Avenue, under the elevated road, did it occur to him that she had deliberately broken her rehearsal appointment to have tea with him and then as deliberately, had left him for the rehearsal. He had interested her; then, all at once, he had ceased to interest her. It was not the first time Peter had had this experience with women, though none of the others had been so frank about it.

Frank, she certainly was!

Resentments rose. Why on earth had he sat there so meekly and let her go on like that – he, the more or less well-known Eric Mann! Had he no force of character at all? No dignity?

Suppose she had to write plays to suit the whims of penny-splitting Broadway managers who had never heard of Andreyev and Tchekov, were bored by Shaw and Shakespeare and thought an optimist was an eye doctor – where would *she* get off!

During the short block between Sixth Avenue and the Square, anger conquered depression. When he entered the old brick apartment building he was muttering. When he left the elevator and walked along the dark corridor to the rooms he was considering reprisals.

Peter shared the dim old seventh-floor apartment with two fellow bachelors, Henry Sidenham Lowe and the Worm. The three were sometimes known as the Seventh-Story Men. The phrase was Hy Lowe's and referred to the newspaper stories of that absurd kidnaping escapade – the Esther MacLeod case, it was – back in 1913. The three were a bit younger then.

Hy Lowe was a slim young man with small features that appeared to be gathered in the middle of his face. His job might have been thought odd anywhere save in the Greenwich Village region. After some years of newspaper work he had settled down to the managing editorship of a missionary weekly known as *My Brother's Keeper*. Hy was uncommunicative, even irreverent regarding his means of livelihood, usually referring to the paper as his meal ticket, and to his employer, the Reverend Doctor Hubbell Harkness Wilde (if at all) as the Walrus. In leisure moments, perhaps as a chronic reaction from the moral strain of his job, Hy affected slang, musical comedy and girls. The partly skinned old upright piano in the studio was his. And he had a small gift at juggling plates.

The Worm was a philosopher; about Peter's age, sandy in coloring but mild in nature, reflective to the point of self-effacement. He read interminably, in more than one foreign language and was supposed to write book reviews. He had lived in odd corners of the earth and knew Gorki personally. His name was Henry Bates.

Peter came slowly into the studio, threw off coat and hat and stood, the beginnings of a complacent smile on his face.

"I've got my girl," he announced.

"Now that you've got her, what you gonna do with her?" queried Hy Lowe, without turning from the new song hit he was picking out on the piano.

"What am I gonna do with her?" mused Peter, hands deep in pockets, more and more pleased with his new attitude of mind – "I'm gonna vivisect her, of course."

"Ah, cruel one!" hummed Hy.

"Well, why not!" cried Peter, rousing. "If a girl leaves her home and strikes out for the self-expression thing, doesn't she forfeit the consideration of decent people? Isn't she fair game?"

Over in the corner by a window, his attention caught by this outbreak, the Worm looked up at Peter and reflected for a moment. He was deep in a Morris chair, the Worm, clad only in striped pajamas that were not over-equipped with buttons, and one slipper of Chinese straw that dangled from an elevated foot.

"Hey, Pete – get this!" cried Hy, and burst into song.

Peter leaned over his shoulder and sang the choppy refrain with him. In the interest of accuracy the two sang it again, The third rendition brought them to the borders of harmony.

The Worm looked up again and studied Peter's back, rather absently as if puzzling him out and classifying him. He knit his brows. Then his eyes lighted, and he turned back in his book, fingering the pages with a mild eagerness. Finding what he sought, he read thoughtfully and smiled. He closed his book; hitched forward to the old flat-top desk that stood between the windows; lighted a caked brier pipe; and after considerable scribbling on scraps of paper appeared to hit upon an arrangement of phrases that pleased him. These phrases he printed out painstakingly on the back of a calling card which he tacked up (with a hair-brush) on the outer side of the apartment door. Then he went into the bedroom to dress.

"Who is she?" asked Hy in a low voice. The two were fond of the Worm, but they never talked with him about their girls.

"That's the interesting thing," said Peter. "I don't know. She's plumb mysterious. All she'd tell was that she is playing a boy at that little Crossroads Theater of Zanin's, and that I'd have to go there to find her out. Going to-night. Want to come along?"

"What kind of a looking girl?"

"Oh – pretty. Extraordinary eyes, green with brown in 'em – but green. And built like a boy. Very graceful."

"Hm!" mused Hy.

"Do you know her?"

"Sounds like Sue Wilde."

"Not – "

"Yes, the Walrus's child."

"What's *she* doing, playing around the Village?"

"Oh, that's an old story. She left home – walked right out. Calls herself modern. She's the original lady highbrow, if you ask me. Sure I'll go to see her. Even if she never could see me."

Later, Hy remarked: "The old boy asked me yesterday if I had her address. You see he knows we live down here where the Village crowds circulate."

"Give it to him?"

"No. Easy enough to get, of course, but I ducked... I'm going to hop into the bathtub. There's time enough. Then we can eat at the Parisian."

Peter settled down to read the sporting page of the evening paper. Shortly the Worm, clad now, drifted back to the Morris chair.

They heard Hy shuffle out in his bath slippers and close the outer door after him. Then he opened the door and came back, He stood in the doorway, holding his bathrobe together with one hand and swinging his towel with the ether; and chuckling.

"You worm!" he observed. "Why Bolbo *ceeras*?"

The Worm looked up with mild eyes. "Not bolboceeras," he corrected.

"Bolboeseras. As in cow."

"But why?"

The Worm merely shrugged his shoulders and resumed his book.

Peter paid little heed to this brief conversation. And when he and Hy went out, half an hour later, he gave only a passing glance to the card on the door. He was occupied with thoughts of a slim girl with green eyes who had fascinated and angered him in a most confusing way.

The card read as follows:

DO NOT FEED OR ANNOY!

BOLBOCERAS AMERICANUS MULS

HABITAT HERE!

CHAPTER III – JACOB ZANIN

THE Crossroads Theater was nothing more than an old store, with a shallow stage built in at the rear and a rough foyer boarded off at the front. The seats were rows of undertaker's chairs, But the lighting was managed with some skill; and the scenery, built and painted in the neighborhood, bordered on a Barker-Craig-Reinhardt effectiveness.

Peter and Hy stood for a little time in the foyer, watching the audience come in. It was a distinctly youthful audience – the girls and women were attractive, most of them Americans; the men running more foreign, with a good many Russian Jews among them. They all appeared to be great friends. And they handled one another a good deal. Peter, self-conscious, hunting copy as always, saw one tired-looking young Jewish painter catch the hand of a pretty girl – an extraordinarily pretty girl, blonde, of a slimly rounded figure – and press and caress her fingers as he chatted casually with a group.

After a moment the girl drew her hand away gently, half-apologetically, while a faint wave of color flowed to her transparent cheek.

All Peter's blind race prejudice flamed into a little fire of rage. Here it was – his subject – the restless American girl experimenting with life, the selfish bachelor girl, deep in the tangles of Bohemia, surrounded by just the experimental men that would be drawn to the district by such as she...

So Peter read it. And he was tom by confused clashing emotions. Then he heard a fresh voice cry: "Why, hello, Betty!" Then he remembered – this girl was the Picabia dancer – Betty Deane – her friend! There was color in his own face now, and his pulse was leaping.

"Come," he said shortly to Hy, "let's find our seats."

The first playlet on the bill was Zanin's *Any Street*.

The theme was the grim influence of street life on the mind of a child. It was an uncomfortable little play. All curtains were drawn back. Subjects were mentioned that should never, Peter felt, be even hinted at in the presence of young women. Rough direct words were hurled at that audience.

Peter, blushing, peered about him. There sat the young women and girls by the dozen, serene of face, frankly interested.

Poor Hy, overcome by his tangled self-consciousness, actually lowered his head and pressed his handkerchief to his fiery face, murmuring: "This is no place for a minister's assistant!" And he added, in Peter's ear: "Lord, if the Walrus could just see this – once!"

Then a newsboy came running on the stage – slim, light of foot – dodged cowering in a saloon doorway, and swore at an off-stage policeman from whose clutches he had escaped.

There was a swift pattering of applause; and a whisper ran through the audience. Peter heard one voice say: "There she is – that's Sue!"

He sat erect, on the edge of his chair. Again the hot color surged into his face. He felt it there and was confused.

It was his girl of the apple, in old coat and knickerbockers, tom stockings, torn shirt open at the neck, a ragged felt hat over her short hair.

Peter felt his resentment fading. He knew as he watched her move about the stage that she had the curious electric quality that is called personality. It was in her face and the poise of her head, in the lines of her body, in every easy movement. She had a great gift..

After this play the two went outside to smoke, very silent, suppressed even. Neither knew what to think or what to say.

There Zanin found them (for Peter was, after all, a bit of a personage) and made them his guests.

Thus it was that Peter found himself behind the scenes, meeting the youthful, preoccupied members of the company and watching with half-suppressed eagerness the narrow stairway by which Sue Wilde must sooner or later mount from the region of dressing-rooms below.

Finally, just before the curtain was rung up on the second play, he was rewarded by the appearance of Betty Deane, followed by the tam o'shanter and the plaid coat of his apple girl.

He wondered if her heart was jumping as his was.

Surely the electric thrill of this meeting, here among heaps of scenery and properties, must have touched her, too. He could not believe that it began and ended with himself. There was magic in the occasion, such magic as an individual rarely generates alone. But if it touched her, she gave no outward sign. To Zanin's casual, "Oh, you know each other," she responded with a quite matter-of-fact smile and nod.

They went out into the audience, and up an aisle to seats in the rear of the hall – Betty first, then Sue and Peter, then Hy.

Peter felt the thrill again in walking just behind her, aware through his very nerve-rips of her grace and charm of movement. When he stood aside to let her pass on to her seat her sleeve brushed his arm; and the arm, his body, his brain, tingled and flamed.

Zanin joined them after the last play and led them to a basement restaurant near the Square. Hy paired off with Betty and made progress. But then, Betty was evidently more Hy's sort than Sue was.

In the restaurant, Peter, silent, gloomy, watched his chance for a word aside with Sue. When it came, he said: "I'm very glad you told me to come."

"You liked it then?"

"I liked you."

This appeared to silence her.

"You have distinction Your performance was really interesting."

"I'm glad you think that."

"In some ways you are the most gifted girl I have ever seen. Listen! I must see you again."

She smiled.

"Let's have a bite together one of these evenings – at the Parisian or Jim's. I want to talk with you."

"That would be pleasant," said she, after a moment's hesitation.

"To-morrow evening, perhaps?" Peter suggested.

The question was not answered; for in some way the talk became general just then. Later Peter was sure that Sue herself had a hand in making it general.

Zanin turned suddenly to Peter. He was a big young man, with a strong if peasant-like face and a look of keenness about the eyes. There was exuberant force in the man, over which his Village manner of sophisticated casualness toward all things lay like the thinnest of veneers.

"Well," he said, "what do you think of Sue here?"

Peter repeated his impressions with enthusiasm.

"We're going to do big things with her," said Zanin. "Big things. You wait. *Any Street* is just a beginning." And then an impetuous eagerness rushing up in him, his topic shifted from Sue to himself. With a turbulent, passionate egotism he recounted his early difficulties in America, his struggles with the language, heart-breaking summers as a book agent, newspaper jobs in middle-western cities, theatrical press work from Coast to Coast, his plunge into the battle for a higher standard of theatrical art and the resulting fight, most desperate of his life thus far, to attract attention to the Crossroads Theater and widen its influence.

Zarin was vehement now. Words poured in a torrent from his lips. He talked straight at you, gesturing, with a light in his eye and veiled power in his slightly husky voice. Peter felt this power, and something not unlike a hatred of the man took sudden root within him.

“You will think me foolish to give my strength to this struggle. Like you, I know these Americans. You can tell me nothing about them. Oh, I have seen them, lived with them – in the city, in the small village, on the farm. I know that they are ignorant of Art, that they do not care.” He snapped his big fingers. “Vaudeville, baseball, the girl show, the comic supplement, the moving picture – that is what they like! Yet year after year, I go on fighting for the barest recognition. They do not understand. They do not care. They believe in money, comfort, conformity – above all conformity. They are fools. But I know them, I tell you! And I know that they will listen to me yet! I have shown them that I can fight for my ideals. Before we are through I shall show them that I can beat them at their own game. They shall see that I mean business. I shall show them their God Success in his full majesty... And publicity? They are children. When I have finished they – the best of them – will come to me for kindergarten lessons in publicity. I’m hoping to talk with you about it, Mann, I can interest you. I wouldn’t bring it to you unless I *knew* I could interest you.”

He turned toward Sue. “And this girl shall help me. She has the talent, the courage, the breeding. She will surprise the best of them. They will find her pure gold.”

Hushed with his own enthusiasm, he dropped his hand over one of Sue’s; took hers up in both of his and moved her slender fingers about as he might have played absently with a handkerchief or a curtain string.

Hy, across the table, took this in; and noted too the swift, hot expression that flitted across Peter’s face and the sudden set to his mouth.

Sue, alter a moment, quietly withdrew her hand. But she did not flush, as Betty had flushed in somewhat similar circumstances a few hours earlier.

Peter laid his hands on the table; pushed back his chair; and, lips compressed, got up.

“Oh,” cried Zanin – “not going?”

“I must,” Peter replied, slowly, coldly. “I have work to do. It has been very pleasant. Good night.”

And out he went.

Hy, after some hesitation, followed.

Peter did not speak until they were nearly across the Square. Then he remembered —

“The Walrus asked you where she was, did he?”

“He sure did.”

“Worried about her, I suppose!”

“He’s worried, all right.”

“Humph!” said Peter.

He said nothing more. At the rooms, He partly undressed in silence. Now and again his long face worked in mute expression of conflicting emotions within. Suddenly he stopped undressing and went into the studio (he slept in there, on the couch) and sat by the window, peering out at the sights of the Square.

Hy watched him curiously; then called out a good night, turned off the gas and tumbled into bed. His final remark, the cheery observation – “I’ll tell you this much, my son. Friend Betty is some pippin!” drew forth no response.

CHAPTER IV – A LITTLE JOURNEY IN PARANOIA

HALF an hour later Peter tiptoed over and closed the door. Then he sat down at his typewriter, removed the paper he had left in it, put in a new sheet and struck off a word.

He sat still, then, in a sweat. The noise of the keys fell on his tense ears like the crackling thunder of a machine gun.

He took the paper out and tore it into minute pieces.

He got another sheet, sat down at the desk and wrote a few hurried sentences in longhand.

He sealed it in an envelope, glancing nervously about the room; addressed it; and found a stamp in the desk.

Then he tiptoed down the room, softly opened the door and listened.

Hy was snoring.

He stole into the bedroom, found his clothes in the dark and deliberately dressed, clear to overcoat and hat. He slipped out into the corridor, rang for the elevator and went out across the Square to the mail box. There was a box in the hall down-stairs; but he had found it impossible to post that letter before the eyes of John, the night man.

For a moment he stood motionless, one hand gripping the box, the other holding the letter in air – a statue of a man.

Then he saw a sauntering policeman, shivered, dropped the letter in and almost ran home.

Peter had done the one thing that he himself, twelve hours earlier, would have regarded as utterly impossible.

He had sent an anonymous letter.

It was addressed to the Reverend Hubbell Harkness

Wilde, Scripture House, New York. It conveyed to that vigorous if pietistic gentleman the information that he would find his daughter, on the following evening, Saturday, performing on the stage of the Crossroads Theater, Tenth Street, near Fourth: with the added hint that it might not, even yet be too late to save her.

And Peter, all in a tremor now, knew that he meant to be at the Crossroads Theater himself to see this little drama of surprises come off.

The fact developed when Hy came back from the office on Saturday that he was meditating a return engagement with his new friend Betty. “The subject was mentioned,” he explained, rather self-consciously, to Peter.

The Worm came in then and heard Hy speak of *Any Street*.

“Oh,” he observed, “that piece of Zanin’s! I’ve meant to see it. You fellows going to-night? I’ll join you.”

So the three Seventh-Story Men ate at the Parisian and set forth for their little adventure; Peter and Hy each with his own set of motives locked up in his breast, the Worm with no motives in particular.

Peter smoked a cigar; the Worm his pipe; and Hy, as always, a cigarette. All carried sticks.

Peter walked in the middle; his face rather drawn; peeking out ahead.

Hy swung his stick; joked about this and that; offered an experimentally humorous eye to every young woman that passed.

The Worm wore the old gray suit that he could not remember to keep pressed, soft black hat, flowing tie, no overcoat. A side pocket bulged with a paper-covered book in the Russian tongue. He had an odd way of walking, the Worm, throwing his right leg out and around and toeing in with his right foot.

As they neared the little theater, Peter’s pulse beat a tattoo against his temples. What if old Wilde hadn’t received the letter! If he had, would he come! If he came, what would happen?

He came.

Peter and the Worm were standing near the inner entrance, waiting for Hy, who, cigarette drooping from his nether lip, stood in the me at the ticket window.

Suddenly a man appeared – a stranger, from the casually curious glances he drew – elbowing in through the group in the outer doorway and made straight for the young poet who was taking tickets.

Peter did not see him at first. Then the Worm nudged his elbow and whispered – “Good God, it’s the Walrus!”

Peter wheeled about. He had met the man only once or twice, a year back; now he took him in – a big man, heavy in the shoulders and neck, past middle age, with a wide thin orator’s mouth surrounded by deep lines. He had a big hooked nose (a strong nose!) and striking vivid eyes of a pale green color. They struck you, those eyes, with their light hard surface. There were strips of whiskers on each cheek, narrow and close-clipped, tinged with gray. His clothes, overcoat and hat were black; his collar a low turnover; his tie a loosely knotted white bow.

He made an oddly dramatic figure in that easy, merry Bohemian setting; a specter from an old forgotten world of Puritanism.

The intruder addressed the young poet at the door in a low but determined voice.

“I wish to see Miss Susan Wilde.”

“I’m afraid you can’t now, sir. She will be in costume by this time.”

“In costume, eh?” Doctor Wilde was frowning. And the poet eyed him with cool suspicion.

“Yes, she is in the first play.”

Still the big man frowned and compressed that wide mobile mouth. Peter, all alert., sniffing out the copy trail, noted that he was nervously clasping his hands.

Now Doctor Wilde spoke, with a sudden ring in his voice that gave a fleeting hint of inner suppressions. “Will you kindly send word to Miss Wilde that her father is here and must see her at once?”

The poet, surprised, sent the message.

Peter heard a door open, down by the stage. He pressed forward, peering eagerly. A ripple of curiosity and friendly interest ran through that part of the audience that was already seated. A young man called, “What’s your hurry, Sue?” and there was laughter.

Then he saw her, coming lightly, swiftly up the side aisle; in the boy costume – the knickerbockers, the torn stockings, the old coat and ragged hat, the tom shirt, open at the neck. She seemed hardly to hear the noise. Her lips were compressed, and Peter suddenly saw that she in her fresh young way looked not unlike the big man at the door, the nervously intent man who stood waiting for her with a scowl that wavered into an expression of utter unbelief as his eyes took in her costume.

Hy came up just then with the tickets, and Peter hurried in after Doctor Wilde; then let Hy and the Worm move on without him to their seats, lingering shamelessly. His little drama was on. He had announced that he would vivisect this girl!

He studied her. But she saw nothing but the big gray man there with the deeply lined face and the pale eyes – her father! Peter noted now that she had her make-up on; an odd effect around those deep blazing eyes.

Then the two were talking – low, tense. Some late comers crowded in, chatting and laughing. Peter edged closer.

“But you shouldn’t have come here like this,” he heard her saying. “It isn’t fair!”

“I am not here to argue. Once more, will you put on your proper clothes and come home with me?”

“No, I will not.”

“You have no shame then – appearing like this?”

“No – none.”

“And the publicity means nothing to you?”

“You are causing it by coming here.”

“It is nothing to you that your actions are a public scandal?” With which he handed her a folded paper.

She did not look at it; crumpled in in her hand.

“You feel, then, no concern for the position you put me in?”

Doctor Wilde was raising his voice.

The girl broke out with – “Listen, father! I came out here to meet you and stop this thing, settle it, once and for all. It is the best way. I will not go with you. I have my own life to live, You must not try to speak to me again!”

She turned away, her eyes darkly alight in her printed face, her slim body quivering.

“Sue! Wait!”

Wilde’s voice had been trembling with anger; now, Peter thought, it was suddenly near to breaking. He reached out one uncertain hand. And a wave of sympathy for the man flooded Peter’s thoughts. “This is where their ‘freedom,’ their ‘self-expression’ leads them,” he thought bitterly. Egotism! Selfishness! Spiritual anarchy! It was all summed up, that revolt, in the girl’s outrageous costume as she stood there before that older man, a minister, her own father!

She caught the new note in her father’s voice, hesitated the merest instant, but then went straight down the aisle, lips tight, eyes aflame, seeing and hearing nothing.

The stage door opened. She ran up the steps, and Peter caught a glimpse of the hulking Zanin reaching out with a familiar hand to take her arm and draw her within... He turned back in time to see Doctor Wilde, beaten, walking rapidly out to the street, and the poet at the door looking after him with an expression of sheer uncomprehending irritation on his keen young face. “There you have it again!” thought Peter. “There you have the bachelor girl – and her friends!”

While he was thus indulging his emotions, the curtain went up on Zanin’s little play.

He stood there near the door, trying to listen. He was too excited to sit down. Turbulent emotions were rioting within him, making consecutive thought impossible. He caught bits of Zanin’s rough dialogue. He saw Sue make her entrance, heard the shout of delighted approval that greeted her, the prolonged applause, the cries of “Bully for you, Sue!”... “You’re all right, Sue!”

Then Peter plunged out the door and walked feverishly about the Village streets. He stopped at a saloon and had a drink.

But the Crossroads Theater fascinated him. He drifted back there and looked in. The first play was over. Hy was in a dim corner of the lobby, talking confidentially with Betty Deane.

Then Sue came out with the Worm, of all persons, at her elbow. So *he* had managed to meet her, too? She wore her street dress and looked amazingly calm.

Peter dodged around the corner. “The way to get on with women,” he reflected savagely, “is to have no feelings, no capacity for emotion, be perfectly cold blooded!”

He walked up to Fourteenth Street and dropped aimlessly into a moving-picture show.

Toward eleven he went back to Tenth Street. He even ran a little, breathlessly, for fear he might be too late, too late for what, he did not know.

But he was not. Glancing in at the door, he saw Sue, with Betty, Hy, the Worm, Zanin and a few others.

Hurriedly, on an impulse, he found an envelope in his pocket, tore off the back, and scribbled, in pencil —

“May I walk back with you? I want vary much to talk with you. If you could slip away from these people.”

He went in then, grave and dignified, bowing rather stiffly. Sue appeared not to see him.

He moved to her side and spoke low. She did not reply.

The blood came rushing to Peter's face. Anger stirred. He slipped the folded envelope into her hand. It was some satisfaction that she had either to take it or let them all see it drop. She took it; but Still ignored him. Her intent to snub him was clear now, even to the bewildered Peter.

He mumbled something, he did not know what, and rushed away as erratically as he had come. What had he wanted to say to her, anyway!

At the corner he turned and came part way back, slowly and uncertainly. But what he saw checked him. The Worm was talking apart with her now. And she was looking up into his face with an expression of pleased interest, frankly smiling. While Peter watched, the two moved off along the street.

Peter walked the streets, in a fever of spirit. One o'clock found him out on the high curve of the Williamsburg bridge where he could lean on the railing and look down on the river with its colored splashes of light or up and across at the myriad twinkling towers of the great city.

"I'll use her!" he muttered. "She is fair game, I tell you! She will find yet that she must listen to me!" And turning about on the deserted bridge, Peter clenched his fist and shook it at the great still city on the island.

"You will all listen to me yet!" he cried aloud. "Yes, you will – you'll listen!"

CHAPTER V – PETER TREADS THE HEIGHTS

HE walked rapidly back to the rooms. For his bachelor girl play was swiftly, like magic, working itself out all new in his mind, actually taking form from moment to moment, arranging and rearranging itself nearer and nearer to a complete dramatic story. The big scene was fairly tumbling into form. He saw it as clearly as if it were being enacted before his eyes... Father and daughter – the two generations; the solid Old, the experimental selfish New.

He could see that typical bachelor girl, too. If she looked like Sue Wilde that didn't matter. He would teach her a lesson she would never forget – this “modern” girl who forgets all her parents have done in giving and developing her life and thinks only of her own selfish freedom. It should be like an outcry from the old hearthstone.

And he saw the picture as only a nerve-racked, soul-weary bachelor can see it. There were pleasant lawns in Peter's ideal home and crackling fireplaces and merry children and smiling perfect parents – no problems, excepting that one of the unfilial child.

Boys had to strike out, of course. But the girl should either marry or stay at home. He was certain about this.

On those who did neither – on the bachelor girls, with their “freedom,” their “truth,” their cigarettes, their repudiation of all responsibility – on these he would pour the scorn of his genius. Sue Wilde, who so plainly thought him uninteresting, should be his target.

He would write straight at her, every minute, and a world should hear him!

In the dark corridor, on the apartment door, a dim square of white caught his eye – the Worm's little placard. An inner voice whispered to light a match and read it again. He did so. For he was all inner voices now.

There it was:

DO NOT FEED OR ANNOY

BOLBOCERAS AMERICANUS MULS

HABITAT HERE!

He studied it while his match burned out. He knit his brows, puzzled, groping after blind thoughts, little moles of thoughts deep in dark burrows.

He let himself in. The others were asleep.

The Worm, in his odd humors, never lacked point or meaning. The placard meant something, of course... something that Peter could use...

The Worm had been reading – that rather fat book lying even now on the arm of the Morris 'chair It was *Fabre, on Insect Life*.

He snatched it up and turned the pages. He sought the index for that word. There it was – *Bolbuceras*, page 225. Back then to page 225!

He read:

“... a pretty little black beetle, with a pale, velvety abdomen... Its official title is *Bulbuceras Gallicus Muls*.”

He looked up, in perplexity. This was hardly self-explanatory. He read on. The *bolbuceras*, it began to appear, was a hunter of truffles. Truffles it would, must have. It would eat no common food

but wandered about sniffing out its vegetable prey in the sandy soil and digging for each separate morsel, then moving on in its quest. It made no permanent home for itself.

Peter raised his eyes and stared at the bookcase in the corner. Very slowly a light crept into his eyes, an excited smile came to the corners of his mouth. There was matter here! And Peter, like Homer, felt no hesitation about taking his own where he found it.

He read on, a description of the burrows as explored by the hand of the scientist:

“Often the insect will be found at the bottom of its burrow; sometimes a male, sometimes a female, but always alone. The two sexes work apart without collaboration. This is no family mansion for the rearing of offspring; it is a temporary dwelling, made by each insect for its own benefit.”

Peter laid the book down almost reverently and stood gazing out the window at the Square. He quite forgot to consider what the Worm had been thinking of when he printed out the little placard and tacked it on the door. He could see it only as a perfect characterization of the bachelor girls. Every one of those girls and women was a *Bolboceras*, a confirmed seeker of pleasures and delicacies in the sober game of life, utterly self-indulgent, going it alone – a truffle hunter.

He would call his play, *The Bolboceras*.

But no. “Buyers from Shreveport would fumble it,” he thought, shrewdly practical. “You’ve got to use words of one syllable on Broadway.”

He paced the room – back and forth, back and forth. *The Truffle-Hunter*, perhaps.

Pretty good, that!

But no – wait! He stood motionless in the middle of the long room, eyes staring, the muscles of his face strained out of shape, hands clenched tightly. He was about to create a new thing.

“The Truffler!”

The words burst from his lips; so loud that he tiptoed to the door and listened.

“The Truffler,” he repeated. *“The Trifler– no The Truffler.”*

He was riding high, far above all worldly irritations, tolerant even toward the little person, Sue Wilde, who had momentarily annoyed him.

“I had to be stirred,” he thought, “that was all. Something had to happen to rouse me and set my creative self working. New people had to come into my life to freshen me. It did happen; they did come, and now I am myself again. I shall not have time for them now, these selfish bachelor women and their self-styled Jew geniuses. But still I am grateful to them all. They have helped me.”

He dropped into the chair by the desk, pulled out his manuscript from a drawer and fell to work. It was five in the morning before he crept into bed.

Four days later, his eyes sunken perceptibly, face drawn, color off, Peter sat for two hours within a cramped disorderly office, reading aloud to a Broadway theatrical manager who wore his hat tipped down over his eyes, kept his feet on the mahogany desk, smoked panatelas end on end and who, like Peter, was deeply conservative where women were concerned.

At five-thirty on this same afternoon, Peter, triumphant, acting on a wholly unconsidered impulse, rushed around the corner of Broadway and Forty-second Street and into the telephone room of a glittering hotel. He found Betty Deane’s name in the telephone book, and called up the apartment.

A feminine voice sounded in his ear. He thought it was Sue Wilde.

It was Sue Wilde.

He asked if she could not dine with him.

There was a long silence at the other end of the wire.

“Are you there?” he called anxiously. “Hello! Hello!”

“Yes, I’m here,” came the voice. “You rather surprised me, Mr. Mann. I have an engagement for this evening.”

“Oh, then I can’t see you!”

“I have an engagement.”

He tried desperately to think up conversation; but failed.

“Well,” he said – “*good-by.*”

“Good-by.”

That was all. Peter ate alone, still overstrung but gloomy now, in the glittering hotel.

The dinner, however, was both well-cooked and hot. It tended to soothe and soften him. Finally, expansive again, he leaned back, fingered his coffee cup, smoked a twenty-cent cigar and observed the life about him.

There were many large dressy women, escorted by sharp-looking men of two races. There were also small dressy women, some mere girls and pretty, but nearly all wearing make-up on cheeks and lips and quite all with extreme, sophistication in their eyes. There was shining silver and much white linen. Chafing dishes blazed. French and Austrian waiters moved swiftly about under the commanding eye of a stern captain. Uniformed but pocketless hat boys slipped it and out, pouncing on every loose article of apparel. . . . It was a gay scene; and Peter found himself in it, of it, for it. With rising exultation in his heart he reflected that he was back on Broadway, where (after all) he belonged.

His manager of the afternoon came in now, who believed, with Peter, that woman’s place was the home. He was in evening dress – a fat man. At his side tripped a very young-appearing girl indeed – the youngest and prettiest in the room, but with the make-up and sophistication of the others. Men (and women) stared at them as they passed. There was whispering; for this was the successful Max Neuerman, and the girl was the lucky Eileen O’Rourke.

Neuerman sighted Peter, greeted him boisterously, himself drew up an unoccupied chair. Peter was made acquainted with Miss O’Rourke. “This is the man, Eileen,” said Neuerman, breathing confidences, “Wrote *The Truffler*. Big thing! Absolutely a new note on Broadway! Eric here has caught the new bachelor woman, shown her up and put a tag on her. After this she’ll be called a truffer everywhere. . . . By the way, Eric, I sent the contract down to you to-night by messenger. And the check.”

Miss Eileen O’Rourke smiled indulgently and a thought absently. While Peter lighted, thanks to Neuerman, a thirty-cent cigar and impulsively told Miss O’Rourke (who continued to smile indulgently and absently) just how he had come to hit on that remarkable tag.

It was nearly nine o’clock when he left and walked, very erect, from the restaurant, conscious of a hundred eyes on his back. He gave the hat boy a quarter.

Out on Forty-second Street he paused to clear his exuberant but confused mind. He couldn’t go back to the rooms; not as he felt now. Cabarets bored him. It was too early for dancing. Irresolute, he strolled over toward Fifth Avenue, crossed it, turned south. A north-bound automobile bus stopped just ahead of him. He glanced up at the roof. There appeared to be a vacant seat or two. In front was the illuminated sign that meant Riverside Drive. It was warm for February.

He decided to take the ride.

Just in front of him, however, also moving toward the bus, was a young couple. There was something familiar about them. The girl – he could see by a corner light – was wearing a boyish coat, a plaid coat. Also she wore a tam o’shanter. She partly turned her head. . . . his pulse started racing, and he felt the colour rushing into his face. It was Sue Wilde, no other!

But the man? No overcoat. That soft black hat! A glimpse of a flowing tie of black silk! The odd trick of throwing his right leg out and around as he walked and toeing in with the right foot!

It was the Worm.

Peter turned sharply away, crossed the street and caught a south-bound bus. Wavering between irritation, elation and chagrin, he walked in and out among the twisted old streets of Greenwich Village. Four distinct times – and for no clear reason – he passed the dingy apartment building where Sue and Betty lived.

Later he found himself standing motionless on a curb by a battered lamp-post, peering through his large horn-rimmed eye-glasses at a bill-board across the street on which his name did not appear.

He studied the twenty-four-sheet poster of a cut plug tobacco that now occupied the space. There was light enough in the street to read it by.

Suddenly he turned and looked to the right. Then he looked to the left. Fumbling for a pencil, he moved swiftly and resolutely across the street. Very small, down in the right-hand corner of the tobacco advertisement, he wrote his name – his pen name – “Eric Mann.”

Then, more nearly at peace with himself, he went to the moving pictures.

Entering the rooms later, he found the Worm settled, in pajamas as usual, with a book in the Morris chair. He also found a big envelope from Neuman with the contract in it and a check for a thousand dollars, advanced against royalties.

It was a brown check. He fingered it for a moment, while his spirits recorded their highest mark for the day. Then, outwardly calm, he put it in an inside coat pocket and with a fine air of carelessness tossed the contract to the desk.

The Worm put down his book and studied Peter rather thoughtfully.

“Pete,” he finally said, “I’ve got a message for you, and I’ve been sitting here debating whether to deliver it or not.”

“Let’s have it!” replied *the* Eric Mann shortly.

The Worm produced a folded envelope from the pocket of his pajamas and handed it over. “I haven’t been told what’s in it,” he said.

Peter, with a tremor, unfolded the envelope and peered inside. There were two enclosures – one plainly his scribbled note to Sue; the other (he had to draw it partly out and examine it) – yes – no – yes, his anonymous letter, much crumpled.

Deliberately, rather white about the mouth, Peter moved to the fireplace, touched a match to the papers and watched them burn. That done, he turned and queried:

“Well? That all?”

The Worm shook his head. “Not quite all, Pete.”

Words suddenly came from Peter. “What do I care for that girl! A creative artist has his reactions, of course. He even does foolish things. Look at Wagner, Burns, Cellini, Michael Angelo – look at the things they used to do!..”

The words stopped.

“Her message is,” continued the Worm, “the suggestion that next time you write one of them with your left hand.”

Peter thought this over. The check glowed next to his heart. It thrilled him. “You tell your friend Sue Wilde,” he replied then, with dignity, “that my message to her – and to you – will be delivered next September across the footlights of the Astoria Theater.” And he strode into the bedroom.

The Worm looked after him with quizzical eyes, smiled a little and resumed his book.

CHAPTER VI – THE WORM POURS OIL ON A FIRE

PETER came stealthily into the rooms on the seventh floor of the old bachelor apartment building in Washington Square. His right hand, deep in a pocket of his spring overcoat, clutched a thin, very new book bound in pasteboard. It was late on a Friday afternoon, near the lamb-like close of March.

The rooms were empty. Which fact brought relief to Peter.

He crossed the studio to the decrepit flat-top desk between the two windows. With an expression of gravity, almost of solemnity, on his long face, he unlocked the middle drawer on the end next the wall. Within, on a heap of manuscripts, letters and contracts, lay five other thin little books in gray, buff and pink. He spread these in a row on the desk and added the new one. On each was the name of a savings bank, printed, and his own name, written. They represented savings aggregating now nearly seven thousand dollars.

Seven thousand dollars, for a bachelor of thirty-three may seem enough to you. It did not seem enough to Peter. In fact he was now studying the six little books through his big horn-rimmed glasses (not spectacles) with more than a suggestion of anxiety. Peter was no financier; and the thought of adventuring his savings on the turbulent uncharted seas of finance filled his mind with terrors. Savings banks appealed to him because they were built solidly, of stone, and had immense iron gratings at windows and doors. And, too, you couldn't draw money without going to some definite personal trouble... It is only fair to add that the books represented all he had or would ever have unless he could get more. Nobody paid Peter a salary. No banker or attorney had a hand in taxing his income at the source. *The Truffler* might succeed and make him mildly rich. Or it might die in a night, leaving the thousand-dollar "advance against royalties" as his entire income from more than a year of work. His last two plays had failed, you know. Plays usually failed. Eighty or ninety per cent, of them – yes, a good ninety!

Theoretically, the seven thousand dollars should carry him two or three years. Practically, they might not carry him one. For he couldn't possibly know in advance what he would do with them. Genius laughs at savings banks.

Peter sighed, put the six little books away and locked the drawer.

Locked it with sudden swiftness and caution, for Hy Lowe just then burst in the outer door and dove, humming a one-step, into the bedroom.

Peter, pocketing the keys carefully so that they would not jingle, put on a casual front and followed him there.

Hy, still in overcoat and hat, was gazing with rapt eyes at a snap-shot of two girls. He laughed a little, self-consciously, at the sight of Peter and set the picture against the mirror on his side of the bureau.

There were other pictures stuck about Hy's end of the mirror; all of girls and not all discreet. One of these, pushed aside to make room for the new one, fell to the floor. Hy let it lie.

Peter leaned over and peered at the snap-shot. He recognized the two girls as Betty Deane and Sue Wilde.

"Look here," said Peter, "where have you been?"

"Having a dish of tea."

"Don't you ever work?"

"Since friend Betty turned up, my son, I'm wondering if I ever shall."

Peter grunted. His gaze was centered not on Hy's friend Betty, but on the slim familiar figure at the right.

"Just you two?"

“Sue came in. Look here, Pete, I’m generous. We’re going to cut it in half. I get Betty, you get Sue.”

Peter, deepening gloom on his face, sat down abruptly on the bed.

“Easy, my son,” observed Hy sagely, “or that girl will be going to your head. That’s your trouble, Pete; you take ‘em seriously. And believe me, it won’t do!”

“It isn’t that, Hy – I’m not in love with her.”

There was a silence while Hy removed garments.

“It isn’t that,” protested Peter again. “No, it isn’t that. She irritates me.”

Hy took off his collar.

“Any – anybody else there?” asked Peter.

“Only that fellow Zanin. He came in with Sue. By the way, he wants to see you. Seems to have an idea he can interest you in a scheme he’s got. Talked quite a lot about it.”

Peter did not hear all of this. At the mention of Zanin he got up suddenly and rushed off into the studio.

Hy glanced after him; then hummed (more softly, out of a new respect for Peter) a hesitation waltz as he cut the new picture in half with the manicure scissors and put Sue on Peter’s side of the bureau.

The Worm came in, dropped coat and hat on a chair and settled himself to his pipe and the evening paper. Peter, stretched on the couch, greeted him with a grunt. Hy appeared, in undress, and attacked the piano with half-suppressed exuberance.

It was the Worm’s settled habit to read straight through the paper without a word; then to stroll out to dinner, alone or with the other two, as it happened, either silent or making quietly casual remarks that you didn’t particularly need to answer if you didn’t feel like it. He made no demands on you, the Worm. He wasn’t trivial and gay, like Hy; or burning with inner ambitions and desires, like Peter.

On this occasion, however, he broke bounds. Slowly the paper, not half read, sank to his knees. He smoked up a pipeful thus. His sandy thoughtful face was sober.

Finally he spoke.

“Saw Sue Wilde to-day. Met her outside the Parisian, and we had lunch together.”

Peter shot a glance at him.

The Worm, oblivious to Peter, tamped his pipe with a pencil and spoke again.

“Been trying to make her out. She and I have had several talks. I can’t place her.”

This was so unusual – from the Worm it amounted to an outburst! – that even Hy, swinging around from the yellow keyboard, waited in silence.

“You fellows know Greenwich Village,” the musing one went on, puffing slowly and following with his eyes the curling smoke. “You know the dope – ‘Oats for Women!’ somebody called it – that a woman must be free as a man, free to go to the devil if she chooses. You know, so often, when these feminine professors of freedom talk to you how they over-emphasize the sex business – by the second quarter-hour you find yourself solemnly talking woman’s complete life, rights of the unmarried mother, birth control; and after you’ve got away from the lady you can’t for the life of you figure out how those topics ever got started, when likely as not you were thinking about your job or the war or Honus Wagner’s batting slump. You know.”

Hy nodded, with a quizzical look. Peter was motionless and silent.

“You know – I don’t want to knock; got too much respect for the real idealists here in the Village – but you fellows do know how you get to anticipating that stuff and discounting it before it comes; and you can’t help seeing that the woman is more often than not just dressing up ungoverned desires in sociological language, that she’s leaping at the chance to experiment with emotions that women have had to suppress for ages. Back of it is the new Russianism they live and breathe – to know no right or wrong, trust your instincts, respond to your emotions, bow to your desires... Well, now, here’s

Sue Wilde. She looks like a regular little radical. And acts it. Breaks away from her folks – lives with the regular bunch in the Village – takes up public dancing and acting – smokes her cigarettes – knows her Strindberg and Freud – yet... well, I've dined with her once, lunched with her once, spent five hours in her apartment talking Isadora Duncan as against Pavlova, even walked the streets half a night arguing about what she calls the Truth... and we haven't got around to 'the complete life' yet."

"How do you dope it out?" asked Hy.

"Well" – the Worm deliberately thought out his reply – "I think she's so. Most of 'em aren't so. She's a real natural oasis in a desert of poseurs. Probably that's why I worry about her."

"Why worry?" From Hy.

"True enough. But I do. It's the situation she has drifted into, I suppose. If she was really mature you'd let her look out for herself. It's the old he protective instinct in me, I suppose. The one thing on earth she would resent more than anything else. But this fellow Zanin..."

He painstakingly made a smoke ring and sent it toward the tarnished brass hook on the window-frame. It missed. He tried again.

Peter stirred uncomfortably, there on the couch. "What has she told you about Zanin?" he asked, desperately controlling his voice.

"She doesn't know that she has told me much of anything. But she has talked her work and prospects. And the real story comes through. Just this afternoon since I left her, it has been piecing itself together. She is frank, you know."

Peter suppressed a groan. She was frank! "Zanin is in love with her. He has been for a year or more. He wrote *Any Street* for her, incorporated some of her own ideas in it. He has been tireless at helping her work up her dancing and pantomime. Why, as near as I can see, the man has been downright devoting his life to her, all this time. It's rather impressive. But then, Zanin *is* impressive."

Peter broke out now. "Does he expect to marry her – Zanin?"

"Marry her? Oh, no."

"Oh, no! Good God then –"

"Oh, come, Pete, you surely know Zanin's attitude toward marriage. He has written enough on the subject. And lectured – and put it in those little plays of his."

"What *is* his attitude?"

"That marriage is immoral. Worse than immoral – vicious. He has expounded that stuff for years."

"And what does she say to all this?" This question came from Hy, for Peter was speechless.

"Simply that he doesn't rouse any emotional response in her. I'm not sure that she isn't a little sorry he doesn't. She would be honest you know. And that's the thing about Sue – my guess about her, at least – that she won't approach love as an experiment or an experience. It will have to be the real thing."

He tried again, in his slow calm way, to hang a smoke ring on the brass hook.

"Proceed," said Hy. "Your narrative interests me strangely."

"Well," said the Worm slowly, "Zanin is about ready to put over his big scheme. He has contrived at last to get one of the managers interested. And it hangs on Sue's personality. The way he has worked it out with her, planning it as a concrete expression of that half wild, natural self of hers, I doubt if it, this particular thing, could be done without her. It *is* Sue – an expressed, interpreted Sue."

"This must be the thing he is trying to get Pete in on."

"The same. Zanin knows that where he fails is on the side of popularity. He has intelligence, but he hasn't the trick of reaching the crowd. And he is smart enough to see what he needs and go after it."

"He is going after the crowd, then?"

"Absolutely."

"And what becomes of the noble artistic standards he's been bleeding and dying for?"

“I don’t know. He really has been bleeding and dying. You have to admit that. He lives in one mean room, over there in Fourth Street. A good deal of the little he eats he cooks with his own hands on a kerosene stove. Those girls are always taking him in and feeding him up. He works twenty and thirty hours at a stretch over his productions at the Crossroads. Must have the constitution of a bull elephant. If it was just a matter of picking up money, he could easily go back into newspaper work or the press-agent game... I’m not sure that the man isn’t full of a struggling genius that hasn’t really begun to find expression. If he is, it will drive him into bigger and bigger things. He won’t worry about consistency – he’ll just do what every genius does. he’ll fight his way through to complete self-expression, blindly, madly, using everything that comes in his way, trampling on everything that he can’t use.”

Peter, twitching with irritation, sat up and snorted out:

“For God’s sake, what’s the *scheme!*”

The Worm regarded Peter thoughtfully and not unhumorously, as if reflecting further over his observations on genius. Then he explained:

“He’s going to preach the Greenwich Village freedom on every little moving-picture screen in America – shout the new naturalism to a hypocritical world.”

“Has he worked out his story?” asked Hy.

“In the rough, I think. But he wants a practical theatrical man to give it form and put it over. That’s where Pete comes in... Get it? It’s during stuff. He’ll use Sue’s finest quality, her faith, as well as her grace of body. What I could get out of it sounds a good deal like the Garden of Eden story without the moral. An Artzibasheff paradise. Sue says that she’ll have to wear a pretty primitive costume.”

“Which doesn’t bother her, I imagine,” said Hy.

“Not a bit.”

Peter, leaning back on stiff arms, staring at the opposite wall, suddenly found repictured to his mind’s eye a dramatic little scene: In the Crossroads Theater, out by the ticket entrance; the audience in their seats, old Wilde, the Walrus himself, in his oddly primitive’, early Methodist dress – long black coat, white bow tie, narrow strip of whisker on each grim cheek; Sue in her newsboy costume, hair cut short under the ragged felt hat, face painted for the stage, her deep-green eyes blazing. The father had said: “You have no shame, then – appearing like this?” To which the daughter had replied: “No – none!”

Hy was speaking again. “You don’t mean to say that Zanin will be able to put this scheme over on Sue?”

The Worm nodded, very thoughtful. “Yes, she is going into it, I think.”

Peter broke cut again: “But – but – but – but...”

“You fellows want to get this thing straight in your heads,” the Worm continued, ignoring Peter. “Her reasons aren’t by any means so weak. In the first place the thing comes to her as a real chance to express in the widest possible way her own protest against conventionality. As Zanin has told her, she will be able to express naturalness and honesty of life to millions where Isadora Duncan, with all her perfect art, can only reach thousands. Yes, Zanin is appealing to her best qualities. And, at that, I’m not at all sure that he isn’t honest in it.”

“Honest!” snorted Peter.

“Yes, honest. I don’t say he is. I say I’m not sure... Then another argument with her is that he has really been helping her to grow. He has given her a lot – and without making any crude demands. Obligations have grown up there, you see. She knows that his whole heart is in it, that it’s probably his big chance; and while the girl is modest enough she can see how dependent the whole plan is on her.”

“But – but – but” – Peter again! – “think what she’ll find herself up against – the people she’ll have to work with – the vulgarity.”

“I don’t know,” mused the Worm. “I’m not sure it would bother her much. Those things don’t seem to touch her. And she isn’t the sort to be stopped by conventional warnings, anyway. She’ll have to find it out all for herself.”

The Worm gave himself up again to the experiment with smoke rings. He blew one – another – a third – at the curtain hook..The fourth wavered down over the hook, hung a second, broke and trailed off into the atmosphere. “.Got it!” said the Worm, to himself.

“Who’s the manager he’s picked up?” asked Hy.

“Fellow named Silverstone. Head of a movie producing company.”

Peter, to whom this name was, apparently, the last straw, shivered a little, sprang to his feet, and for the second time within the hour rushed blindly off into solitude.

CHAPTER VII – PETER THINKS ABOUT THE PICTURES

WHEN Hy set out for dinner, a little later, he found Peter sitting on a bench in the Square.

“Go in and get your overcoat,” said Hy. “Unless you’re out for pneumonia.”

“Hy,” said Peter, his color vivid, his eyes wild, “we can’t let those brutes play with Sue; like that. We’ve got to save her.”

Hy squinted down at his bamboo stick. “Very good, my son. But just how?”

“If I could talk with her, Hy!.. I know that game so well!”

“You could call her up – ”

“Call her up nothing! I can’t ask to see her and start cold.” He gestured vehemently. “Look here, you’re seeing Betty every day – you fix it.”

Hy mused. “They’re great hands to take tramps in the country, those two. Most every Sunday... If I could arrange a little party of four... See here! Betty’s going to have dinner with me to-morrow night.”

“For God’s sake, Hy, get me in on it!”

“Now you just wait! Sue’ll be playing to-morrow night at the Crossroads, It’s Saturday, you know.”

Peter’s face fell.

“But it gives me the chance to talk it over with friend Betty and perhaps plan for Sunday. If Zanin’ll just leave her alone that long.”

“It isn’t as if I were thinking of myself, Hy...”

“Of course not, Pete.”

“The girl’s in danger. We’ve *got* to save her.”

“What if she won’t listen! She’s high-strung.”

“Then,” said Peter, flaring up with a righteous passion that made him feel suddenly like the hero of his own new play – “then I’ll go straight to Zanin and force him to declare himself! I will face him, as man to man!”

Thus the two Seventh-Story Men!

At moments, during the few weeks just past, thoughts of his anonymous letter had risen to disturb Peter; on each occasion, until to-night, to be instantly overwhelmed by the buoyant egotism that always justified Peter to himself. But the thoughts had been there. They had kept him from attempts to see Sue, had even restrained him from appearing where there was likelihood of her seeing him; and they had kept him excited about her. Now they rose again in unsuspected strength. Of course she would refuse to see him! He slept hardly at all that night. The next day he was unstrung. And Saturday night (or early Sunday morning) when Hy crept in, Peter, in pajamas, all lights out, was sitting by the window nursing a headache, staring out with smarting eyeballs at the empty Square.

“Worm here?” asked Hy guardedly.

“Asleep.”

Hy lighted the gas; then looked closely at the wretched Peter.

“Look here, my son,” he said then, “you need sleep.”

“Sleep” – muttered Peter, “good God!”

“Yes, I know, but you’ve got a delicate job on your hands. It’ll take expert handling. You’ve got to be fit.”

“Did you – did you see Sue?”

“No, only Betty. But they’ve been talking you over. Sue told Betty that you interest her.”

“Oh – she did! Say anything else?”

“More or less. Look here – has anything happened that I’m not in on? I mean between you and Sue.”

Peter shivered slightly. “How could anything happen? I haven’t been seeing her.”

“Well – Sue says you’re the strangest man she ever knew. She can’t figure you out. Betty was wondering.”

Hy was removing his overcoat now. Suddenly he gave way to a soft little chuckle.

“For Heaven’s sake, don’t laugh!”

“I was thinking of something else. Yes, I fixed it. But there’s something up – a new deal. This here Silverstone saw *Any Street* last night and went dippy over Sue. Betty told me that much but says she can’t tell me the rest because it’s Sue’s secret, not hers. Only it came out that Zanin has dropped the idea of bringing you into it. Silverstone bought supper for the girls and Zanin last night, and this afternoon he took Zanin out to his Long Beach house for the night, in a big car. And took his stenographer along. Everybody’s mysterious and in a hurry. Oh, there’s a hen on, all right!”

“So I’m out!” muttered Peter between set teeth. “But it’s no mystery. Think I don’t know Silverstone?”

“What’ll he do?”

“Freeze out everybody and put Sue across himself. What’s that guy’s is his. Findings is keepings.”

“But will Sue let him freeze Zanin out?”

“That’s a point... But if she won’t, he’ll be wise in a minute. Trust Silverstone! He’ll let Zanin *think* he’s in, then.”

“Things look worse, I take it.”

“A lot.”

Hy was undressing. He sat now, caught by a sudden fragrant memory, holding a shoe in midair, and chuckled again.

“Stop that cackle!” growled Peter. “You said you fixed it.”

“I did. Quit abusing me and you’ll realize that I’m coming through with all you could ask. We leave at eleven, Hudson Tunnel, for the Jersey hills – we four. I bring the girls; you meet us at the Tunnel. Zanin is safe at Long Beach. We eat at a country road house. We walk miles in the open country. We drift home in the evening, God knows when!.. Here I hand you, in one neat parcel, pleasant hillsides, purling brooks, twelve mortal hours of the blessed damosel, and” – he caught up the evening paper – “‘fair and warmer’ – and perfect weather. And what do I get? Abuse. Nothing but abuse!”

With this, he deftly juggled his two shoes, caught both in a final flourish, looked across at the abject Peter and grinned.

“Shut up,” muttered Peter wearily.

“Very good, sir. And you go to bed. Your nerves are a mess.”

Into Peter’s brain as he hurried toward the Tunnel Station, the next morning, darted an uninvited, startling thought.

Here was Zanin, idealist in the drama, prophet of the new Russianism, deserting the stage for the screen!

What was it the Worm had represented him as saying to Sue... that she would be enabled to express her ideals to millions where Isadora Duncan could reach only thousands?

Millions in place of thousands!

His imagination pounced on the thought. He stopped short on the street to consider it – until a small boy laughed; then he hurried on.

He looked with new eyes at the bill-boards he passed. Two-thirds of them flaunted moving-picture features... He had been passing such posters for a year or more without once reading out of them a meaning personal to himself. He had been sticking blindly, doggedly to plays – ninety per

cent, of which, of all plays, failed utterly. It suddenly came home to him that the greatest dramatists, like the greatest actors and actresses, were working for the camera. All but himself, apparently!.. The theaters were fighting for the barest existence where they were not surrendering outright. Why, he himself patronized movies more often than plays! Yet he had stupidly refused to catch the significance of it... *The Truffler* would fail, of course; just as the two before it had failed. Still he had, until this actual minute, clung to it as his one hope.

Millions for thousands!

He was thinking now not of persons but of dollars.

Millions for thousands.

He paused at a news stand. Sprawled over it were specimens of the new sort of periodical, the moving-picture magazines. So the publishers, like the theatrical men, were being driven back by the invader.

He bought the fattest, most brightly colored of these publications and turned the pages eagerly as he descended into the station.

He stood half-hidden behind a pillar, his eyes wandering from the magazine to the ticket gate where Hy and the two girls would appear, then back to the magazine. Those pages reeked of enthusiasm, fresh ideas, prosperity. They stirred new depths within his soul.

He saw his little party coming in through the gate.

The two girls wore sweaters. Their skirts were short, their tan shoes low and flat of heel.

They were attractive, each in her individual way; Sue less regular as to features, but brighter, slimmer, more alive. Betty's more luxurious figure was set off almost too well by the snug sweater. As she moved, swaying a little from the hips, her eyelids drooping rather languidly, the color stirring faintly under her fair fine skin, she was, Peter decided, unconscious neither of the sweater nor of the body within it... Just before the train roared in, while Sue, all alertness, was looking out along the track, Peter saw Hy's hand brush Betty's. For an instant their fingers intertwined; then the hands drifted casually apart.

CHAPTER VIII – SUE WALKS OVER A HILL

PETER joined them – a gloomy man, haunted by an anonymous letter. Sue was matter-of-fact. It seemed to Hy that she made some effort to put the well-known playwright more nearly at his ease.

They lurched, an hour's ride out in Northern New Jersey, at a little motorists' tavern that Hy guided them to. They sat on a shaded veranda while the men smoked cigars and the girls smoked cigarettes. After which they set forth on what was designed to be a four-hour tramp through the hills to another railroad – Sue and Peter ahead (as it turned out); Hy and Betty lagging behind.

The road curved over hills and down into miniature valleys. There were expanses of plowed fields, groves of tall bare trees, groups of farmhouses. Robins hopped beside the road. The bright sun mitigated the crisp sting in the air. A sense of early spring touched eye and ear and nostril.

Peter felt it; breathed more deeply; actually smiled.

Sue threw back her head and hummed softly.

Hy and Betty dropped farther and farther behind.

Once Sue turned and waved them on; then stood and laughed with sheer good humor at their deliberate, unrhythmical step.

“Come on,” she said to Peter “They don't get it – the joy of it. You have to walk with a steady swing. It takes you a mile or two, at that, to get going. When I'm in my stride, it carries me along so I hate to stop at all. You know, you can't pick it up again right off – the real swing. Walking is a game – a fine game!”

Peter didn't know. He had never thought of walking as a game. He played golf a little, tennis a little less. It had always been difficult for him to hold his mind on these unimportant pursuits. But he found himself responding eagerly.

“You've gone in a lot for athletics,” said he, thinking of the lightness, the sheer ease, with which she had moved about the little Crossroads stage.

“Oh, yes – at school and college – basket ball, running, fencing, dancing and this sort of thing. Dancing especially. I've really worked some at that, you know.”

“Yes,” said he moodily, “I know.”

They swung down into a valley, over a bridge, up the farther slope, through a notch and out along a little plateau with a stream winding across it.

Peter found himself in some danger of forgetting his earnest purpose. He could fairly taste the fresh spring air. He could not resist occasionally glancing sidelong at his companion and thinking – “She is great in that sweater!” A new soft magic was stealing in everywhere among what he had regarded as his real thoughts and ideas. Once her elbow brushed his; and little flames rose in his spirit... She walked like a boy. She talked like a boy. She actually seemed to think like a boy. The Worm's remark came to him, with an odd stabbing effect... “We haven't got around to ‘the complete life' yet!”

She quite bewildered him. For she distinctly was not a boy. She was a young woman. She couldn't possibly be so free from thoughts of self and the drama of life, of man and the all-conquering urge of nature! As a dramatist, as a student of women, he knew better. No, she couldn't – no more than “friend Betty” back there, philandering along with Hy, The Worm had guaranteed her innocence... but the Worm notoriously didn't understand women. No, it couldn't be true. For she *had* broken away from her folks. She *did* live with the regular bunch in the Village. She *did* undoubtedly know her Strindberg and Freud. She *had* taken up public dancing and acting. She *did* smoke her cigarettes – had smoked one not half an hour back, publicly, on the veranda of a road house! ... He felt again the irritation she had on other occasions stirred in him.

He slowed down, tense with this bewilderment. He drew his hand across his forehead.

Sue went on a little ahead; then stopped, turned and regarded him with friendly concern!

“Anything the matter?”

“No – oh, no!”

“Perhaps we started too soon after lunch.”

She was babying him!

“No – no... I was thinking of something!..”

Almost angrily he struck out at a swift pace. He would show her who was the weakling in *this* little party! He would make her cry for mercy!

But she struck out with him. Swinging along at better than four miles an hour they followed the road into another valley and for a mile or two along by a bubbling brook.

It was Peter who slackened first. His feet began hurting: an old trouble with his arches. And despite the tang in the air, he was dripping with sweat. He mopped his forehead and made a desperate effort to breathe easily.

Sue was a thought flushed, there was a shine in her eyes; she danced a few steps in the road and smiled happily.

“That’s the thing!” she cried. “That’s the way I love to move along!”

Apparently she liked him better for walking like that. It really seemed to make a difference. He set his teeth and struck out again, saying – “All right. Let’s have some more of it, then!” And sharp little pains shot through his insteps.

“No,” said she, “it’s best to slow down for a while. I like to speed up just now and then. Besides, I’ve got something on my mind. Let’s talk.” He walked in silence, waiting.

“It’s about that other talk we had,” said she. “It has bothered me since. I told you your plays were dreadful. You remember?”

He laughed shortly. “Oh, yes; I remember.”

“There,” said she, “I did hurt you. I must have been perfectly outrageous.”

He made no reply to this; merely mopped his forehead again and strode along. The pains were shooting above the insteps now, clear up into the calves of his legs.

“I ought to have made myself plainer,” said she. “I remember talking as if you couldn’t write at all. Of course I didn’t mean that, and I had no right to act as if I held myself superior to a man of your experience. That was silly. What I really meant was that you didn’t write from a point of view that I could accept.”

“What you said was,” observed Peter, aiming at her sort of good-humored directness, and missing, “the difficulty is, it’s the whole thing – your attitude toward life – your hopeless sentimentality about women, the slushy horrible Broadway falseness that lies back of everything you do – the Broadway thing, always.’... Those were your words.”

“Oh, no!” She was serious now. He thought she looked hurt, almost. The thought gave him sudden savage pleasure. “Surely, I didn’t say that.”

“You did. And you added that my insight into life is just about that of a hardened director of one-reel films.”

She was hurt now. She walked on for a little time, quite silent.

Finally she stopped short, looked right at him, threw out her hands (he noted and felt the grace of the movement!) and said —

“I don’t know how to answer you. Probably I did say just about those words.”

“They are exact... and of course, in one sense, I meant them. I do feel that way about your work. But not at all in the personal sense that you have taken it. And I recognize your ability as clearly as anybody. Can’t you see, man – that’s exactly the reason I talked that way to you?” There was feeling in her voice now. “I suppose I had a crazy, kiddish notion of converting you, of making you work for us. It was because you are so good at it that I went after you like that. You are worth going after.” She hesitated, and bit her lip. “That’s why I was so pleased when Zanin thought he needed you for our big plan and disappointed now that he can’t include you in it – because you could help us and

we could perhaps help you. Yes, disappointed – in spite of – and – and don't forget the other thing I said, that those of us that believe in truth in the theater owe it to our faith to get to work on the men that supply the plays... Can't you see, man!"

She threw out her arms again. His eyes, something of the heady spirits that she would perhaps have called sex attraction shining in them now, could see little more than those arms, the slim curves of her body in the sweater and short skirt, her eager glowing face and fine eyes. And his mind could see no more than his eyes.

An automobile horn sounded. He caught her arm and hurried her to the roadside. There were more of the large bare trees here; and a rail fence by which they stood.

"You say Zanin has given up the idea of coming to me with his plan?" He spoke guardedly, thinking that he must not betray the confidences of Betty and Hy.

"Yes, he has had to."

"He spoke to me about it, once."

"Yes, I know. But the man that is going to back him wants to do that part of it himself or have his own director do it."

Pictures unreeled suddenly before his mind's eye – Sue, in "a pretty primitive costume," exploited at once by the egotistical self-seeking Zanin, the unscrupulous, masterful Silverstone, a temperamental, commercial director! He shivered.

"Look here," he began – he would fall back on his age and position; he would control this little situation, not drift through it! – "you mentioned my experience. Well, you're right. I've seen these Broadway managers with their coats off. And I've seen what happens to enthusiastic girls that fall into their hands."

He hesitated; that miserable letter flashed on his brain. He could fairly see it. And then his tongue ran wild.

"Don't you know that Broadway is paved with the skulls of enthusiastic girls!.. Silverstone? Why, if I were to give you a tenth of Silverstone's history you would shrink from him – you wouldn't touch the man's ugly hand. Here you are, young, attractive – yes, beautiful, in your own strange way! – full of a real faith in what you call the truth, on the edge of giving up your youth and your gifts into the hands of a bunch of Broadway crooks. You talk about me and the Broadway Thing. Good God, can't you see that it's girls like you that make the Broadway Thing possible!.. You talk of my sentimentality about women, my 'home-and-mother-stuff,' can't you see the reason for that home-and-mother stuff, for that sentimentality, is the tens of thousands of girls, like you and unlike you who wanted to experiment, who thought they could make the world what they wanted it!"

He paused to breathe. The girl before him was distinctly flushed now, and was facing him with wide eyes – hard eyes, he thought. He had poured out a flood of feeling, and it had left her cold.

She was leaning back against the fence, her arms extended along the top rail, looking and looking at him.

"Silverstone!" he snorted, unable to keep silence "Silverstone! The man's a crook, I tell you. Nothing that he wants gets away from him. Understand me? Nothing! You people will be children beside him... Zanin is bad enough. He's smart! He'll wait you out! He doesn't believe in marriage, he doesn't! But Zanin – why, Silverstone'll play with him!"

Her eyes were still on him – wide and cold. Now her lips parted, and she drew in a quick breath, "How on earth," she said, "did you learn all this! Who told you?"

He shut his lips close together. Plainly he had broken; he had gone wild, cleared the traces. Staring at her, at that sweater, he tried to think... She would upbraid Betty. How would he ever square things with Hy!

He saw her hands grip the fence rail so tightly that her finger-tips went white.

"Tell me," she said again, with deliberate emphasis, "where you learned these things. Who told you?"

He felt rather than saw the movement of her body within the sweater as she breathed with a slow inhalation. His own breath came quickly. His throat was suddenly dry. He swallowed – once, twice. Then he stepped forward and laid his hand, a trembling hand, on her forearm.

She shook it off and sprang back.

“Don’t look at me like that!” his voice said. And rushed on: “Can’t you see that I’m pleading for your very life! Can’t you see that I *know* what you are headed for – that I want to save you from yourself – that I love you – that I’m offering you my life – that I want to take you out of this crazy atmosphere of the Village and give...”

He stopped, partly because he was out of breath, and felt, besides, as if his tonsils had abruptly swollen and filled his throat; partly because she turned deliberately away from him.

He waited, uneasily leaning against the fence while she walked off a little way, very slowly; stood thinking; then came back. She looked rather white now, he thought.

“Suppose,” she said, “we drop this and finish our walk. It’s a good three hours yet over to the other railroad. We may as well make a job of it.”

“Oh, Sue,” he cried – “how can you!..”

She stopped him. “Please!” she said.

“But – but – ”

“Please!” she said again.

“But – but – ”

She turned away. “I simply can not keep up this personal talk. I would be glad to finish the walk with you, but...”

He pulled himself together amid the wreckage of his thoughts and feelings. “But if I won’t or can’t, you’ll have to walk alone,” he said for her.

“Yes, I did mean that. I am sorry. I did hope it would be possible.” She compressed her lips, then added: “Of course I should have seen that it wasn’t possible, after what happened.”

“Very well,” said he.

They walked on, silent, past the woods, past more plowed fields, up another hillside.

She broke the silence. Gravely, she said: “I will say just one thing more, since you already know so much. Zarin signs up with Silverstone to-morrow morning. Or as soon as they can finish drawing up the contracts. Then within one or two weeks – very soon, certainly – we go down to Cuba or Florida to begin taking the outdoor scenes. That, you see, settles it.”

Peter’s mind blurred again. Ugly foggy thoughts rushed over it. He stopped short, his long gloomy face working nervously.

“Good God!” he broke out. “You mean to say – you’re going to let those crooks take you off – to Cuba! Don’t you see...”

There was no object in saying more. Even Peter could see that. For Sue, after one brief look at his sputtering, distorted face, had turned away and was now walking swiftly on up the hill.

“Wait!” he called. “Sue!”

She reached the top of the hill, passed on over the crest. Gradually she disappeared down the farther slope – the tam o’shanter last.

CHAPTER IX – THE NATURE FILM PRODUCING CO. INC

THEN Peter, muttering, talking out loud to the road, the fence, the trees, the sky, turned back to retrace the miles they had covered so lightly and rapidly. His feet and legs hurt him cruelly. He found a rough stick, broke it over a rock and used it for a cane.

He thought of joining Hy and Betty. There would be sympathy there, perhaps. Hy could do something. Hy would have to do something. Where were they, anyway!

Half an hour later he caught a glimpse of them. They were sitting on a boulder on a grassy hillside, some little distance from the road. They appeared to be gazing dreamily off across a valley.

Peter hesitated. They were very close together. They hardly seemed to invite interruption. Then, while he stood, dusty and bedraggled, in real pain, watching them, he saw Betty lean back against the boulder – or was it against Hy's arm?

Hy seemed to be leaning over her. His head bent lower still. It quite hid hers from view.

He was kissing her!

Blind to the shooting pains in his feet and legs, Peter rushed, stumbling, away. In his profound self-pity, he felt that even Hy had deserted him. He was alone, in a world that had no motive or thought but to do him evil, to pervert his finest motives, to crush him!

Somehow he got back to that railroad. An hour and a half he spent painfully sitting in the country station waiting for a train. There was time to think. There was time for nothing but thinking.

And Peter, as so often when deeply stirred either by joy or misery, found himself passing into a violent and soul-wrenching reaction. It was misery this time. He was a crawling abject thing. People would laugh. Sue would laugh...

But would she! Would she tell? Would Hy and Betty, if they ever did get home, know that she had returned alone?

Those deep-green eyes of hers, the strong little chin... She was Miss Independence herself.

Zanin was signing with Silverstone in the morning! Or as soon as the contracts could be drawn.

The train came rumbling in. Peter, in, physical and spiritual agony, boarded it.

All these painful, exciting experiences of the day were drawing together toward some new unexpected result. He was beaten – yet was he beaten! A news agent walked through the train with a great pile of magazines on his arm.

Peter suddenly thought of the moving-picture periodical he had dropped, so long, long ago, in the Tunnel Station. He bought another copy; and again turned the pages. Then he let it fall to his knees and stared out the window with eyes that saw little.

Zanin – Silverstone – Sue walking alone over a hill!.. Peters little lamp of genius was burning once more. He was thrilled, if frightened, by the ideas that were forming in that curious mind of his.

Shortly after seven o'clock of the same evening Jacob Zanin reached his mean little room in Fourth Street, after a stirring twenty-four hours at Silver-stone's house at Long Beach and an ineffectual attempt to find Sue in her rooms. Those rooms were dim and silent. No one answered his ring. No one answered his knock when he finally succeeded in following another tenant of the building into the inner hall. Which explains why he was at his room, alone, at a quarter to eight when Peter Ericson Mann called there.

Peter, pale, nerves tense, a feverish glow in his eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses, leaned heavily on a walking stick in the dark hallway, listening to the sound of heavy footsteps coming across the creaking boards on the other side of the door. Then the door opened; and Zanin, coatless, collarless, hair ruffled over his ears on either side of his head, stood there; a hulking figure of a man,

full of force, not untouched with inner fire; a little grim; his face, that of a vigorously intellectual Russian peasant, scarred perceptibly by racial and personal hardship.

“Oh, hello, Mann!” said he. “Come in.” Then, observing the stick: “What’s the matter?”

“A little arch trouble. Nothing at all.” And Peter limped in.

Peter, as on former occasions, felt the power of the fellow. It was altogether in character that he should exhibit no surprise, though Peter Ericson Mann had never before appeared before him at that door. (He would never know that it was Peter’s seventh call within an hour and a half.)

Peter was at his calmest and most effective.

He looked casually about at the scant furniture, the soap boxes heaped with books, the kerosene stove, symbol of Zanin’s martyrdom to his art.

“Zanin,” he said, “two things stuck in my mind the other night when you and I had our little talk. One was the fact that you had got hold of a big idea; and that a man of your caliber wouldn’t be giving his time to a proposition that didn’t have something vital in it... The other thing is Sue Wilde.”

Zanin was tipped back in an armless wooden chair, taking Peter in with eyes that were shrewd and cold, but not particularly hostile.

“I didn’t realize at the time what an impression that girl was making on me. But I haven’t been able to shake it off. She has something distinctly unusual – call it beauty, charm, personally – I don’t know what it is. But she has it.”

“Yes,” said Zanin, “she has it. But see here, Mann, the whole situation has changed since then –”

“Yes,” Peter broke in. “I know.”

“You know?”

Peter nodded, offhand. “Betty Deane has talked to Hy Lowe about it, and Hy has told me. I’m pretty well informed, as a matter of fact.”

“You know about –”

“Silverstone? Yes. Tell me, have you closed with him?”

“Well” – Zanin hesitated.. He was disturbed. “Not in writing, no.”

“Don’t you do it, then.”

Zanin pursed his lips, hooked his feet around the legs of his chair and tapped on the front of the seat with his large fingers.

“It’s regular money, Mann,” he said.

“You said you could interest me. Why don’t you try?”

“Regular money is regular money.”

“Not if you don’t get it.”

“Why shouldn’t I get it?”

“Because Silverstone will. And look what he’ll do to your ideas – a conventional commercialist!” Zanin considered this. “I’ve got to risk that. Or it looks so. This thing can’t possibly be done cheap. I propose to do something really new in a feature film – new in groupings, new in lighting, new in the simplicity and naturalness of the acting. It will be a daring theme, highly controversial, which means building up publicity. It will take regular money. Sue is in just the right frame of mind. A year from now God knows what she’ll be thinking and feeling. She might turn square against our Village life, all of a sudden. I’ve seen it happen... And now, with everything right, here the money comes to me on a platter. Lord, man, I’ve got to take it – risk or no risk!”

They were about to come to grips. Peter felt his skin turning cold. His throat went dry again, as in the afternoon.

“How much” – he asked, outwardly firmer than he would have dared hope – “how much do you need?”

Zanin really started now, and stared at him.

“See here,” he said, “I’ve gone pretty far in with Silver stone.”

“But you haven’t signed?”

“No.”

“Nor taken his money?”

“No.”

Peter laughed shortly. “Do you think *he* would consider himself bound by anything you may have said! Silverstone!”

This was a point. He could see Zanin thinking it over.

“How much do you need?” he asked again.

“Well – ”

“What do you think will happen the minute Sue really discovers the sort of hands she’s in? Even if she would want to stick to you!”

This was another point.

“Well” – said Zanin, thinking fast – “it needn’t be lavish, like these big battle films and such. But it will take money.”

“How much money?”

“Three or four thousand. Maybe five or six. It means going south for the outdoor scenes. I want tropical foliage, so my people won’t look frozen. And publicity isn’t cheap, you know.”

Peter gulped; but plunged on. “I’ll tell you what you do, Zanin. Get another man – a littler producer than Silverstone – and have him supply studio, operators, and all the plant necessary, on a partnership basis, you to put in some part of the cash needed.”

“Great!” said Zanin. “Fine! And where’s the cash to come from?”

“From me.”

The front legs of Zanin’s chair came to the floor with a bang.

“This is new stuff, Mann.”

“New stuff. I’m not rich, but I believe you’ve got a big thing here, and I stand willing to put up a few thousand on a private contract with you. This can be just between ourselves. All I ask is a reasonable control of the expenditure.”

Zanin thought – and thought. Peter could see the shifting lights in his cold clear eyes.

He moved over to the window and stared out into the area-way, where electric lamps and gas flames twinkled from a hundred other rear buildings. He came back to his chair and lit a cigarette.

“You’re on!” he finally said. “If you want to know, I *am* worried about Silverstone. And I’m certainly in no position to turn down such an offer as this.”

Which was the genesis of The Nature Film Producing Co., Inc., Jacob Zanin, Pres’t. They talked late, these new partners.

It was nearly one o’clock in the morning when Peter limped into the rooms.

He found Hy pitting by the window in his pajamas, gazing rapturously at a lacy handkerchief.

“Aha!” said Hy, “he comes! Never mind the hour, my boy! I take off my hat. You’re better than I am – better than I! A *souçon* of speed, ol’ dear!”

Peter dropped limply into the Morris chair. “What’s the matter?” said Hy, observing him more closely. “You look done. Where’s Sue?” Peter composed himself. “I left Sue a long while ago. Hours ago.”

“What on earth have you been doing?”

“Exactly what I promised you I’d do.”

This was a new, an impressive Peter.

“I don’t get you – ”

“You said Sue might not listen to my warning.”

“Oh – and she didn’t?”

“She did not.”

“And you – oh, you said you’d go to Zanin...”

“As man to man, Hy.”

“Good lord, you haven’t... Pete, you’re limping! You didn’t fight!..”

Peter solemnly shook his head. “It wasn’t necessary, Hy,” he said huskily; then cleared his throat. “What was the matter with his throat to-day, anyway?”

He sank back in his chair. His eyes closed.

Hy leaned forward with some anxiety. “Pete, what’s the matter? You’re white!”

Peter’s head moved slowly. “Nothing’s the matter.” He slowly opened his eyes. “It has been a hard day, Hy, but the job is done.”

“The job...?”

“I have saved her, Hy.”

“But the pictures?”

“They will be taken under my direction.”

“And Silverstone?”

“Silverstone is out. I control the company.” He closed his eyes again and breathed slowly and evenly in a deliberate effort to calm his tumultuous nerves. “Well!” said Hy, big-eyed. “Well!”

“Something to drink, Hy,” Peter murmured. “I put it over, Hy! I put it over!” He said this with a little more vigor, trying to talk down certain sudden misgivings regarding six thin little books with pasteboard covers that lay at the moment in the middle drawer of the desk, next the wall.

Hy got slowly to his feet; stood rubbing his head and staring down in complete admiration at the apparently triumphant if unmistakably exhausted Peter.

“It’s a queer time for them,” Hy remarked, solemn himself now. “But in this case cocktails are certainly indicated.”

He picked up the telephone. “John,” he said to the night man below, “some ice!”

Then he shuffled to the closet, struck a match and found the shaker.

In the amber fluid they pledged the success of The Nature Film Producing Co., Inc., these Seventh-Story Men! Dwelling, the while, each in his own thoughts, on the essential nobility of sacrificing one’s self to save another.

CHAPTER X – PETER THE MAGNIFICENT

IF she strikes you as a girl you'd like to kiss, I should say, as a general principle – well, kiss her.”

Thus Hy Lowe, musingly, seated on the decrepit flat-top desk between the two windows of the studio, swinging his legs.

Peter Ericson Mann met this observation with contempt. “Right off, I suppose! First time you meet her – just like that!”

The expert waved his cigarette. “Sure. Kiss her.”

“She murmurs her thanks, doubtless.”

“Not at all. She hates you. Won't ever speak to you again.”

“Oh, really!” Peter was caustic.

“She didn't think you were that sort; and won't for a minute permit you to think she's that sort.”

“And then?”

Another wave of the cigarette. “Slow down. Be kind to her. If she's a cross old thing, forgive her. Let her see that you're a regular fellow, even if you did start from third base instead of first. Above all, keep cool. Avoid tragedy, scenes. Keep smiling. When she does swing round – well, you've kissed her. There you are!”

Peter surveyed his apartment mate with gloomy eyes. “Sue and Betty are two very different girls,” said he.

“My son,” replied Hy, “I am not discussing persons. I am enunciating a principle. What may have passed between friend Betty and me has nothing to do with it.” He glanced at his watch. “Though I'll admit she is expecting me around this evening. She doesn't hate me, Pete... Funny thing about Betty – she was telling me – there's a man up in her town pestering her to death. Letters and telegrams. Wants to marry her. He makes gas engines. Queer about these small-town fellows – they can't understand a free-spirited woman. Imagine Betty cooped up like that!”

“I'm not likely to be kissing Sue,” growled Peter.

“My son, you've as good as done it already. From your own admission. Asked her to marry you. Right off, too – just like that! Can't you see it's the same thing in principle – shock and reaction! She'd have preferred the kiss of course – ”

“You don't know that?”

“The trouble with you, Pete, is that you don't understand women. According to your own story again, you startled her so that she left you on a country road and walked ten miles alone rather than answer you. I tell you, get a woman real angry at you just once, and she can't be indifferent to you as long as she lives. Hate you – yes. Love you – yes. Indifferent – no... You've started something. Give her time.”

“Time!” snorted Peter. “Time!” He paced the long room; kicked the closet door shut; gave the piano keys a savage bang.

Hy watched Peter with growing concern. His eyes roved about the smoke-dimmed, high-ceiled studio. They had lived well here – himself, Peter and the Worm. Thanks to some unknown law of personality, they had got on, this odd trio, through the years. Girls and women had drifted into and out of their individual lives (for your New York bachelor does not inhabit a vacuum) – but never before had the specter of marriage stalked with disruptive import through these dingy rooms.

“Look here, Pete,” he said, “why be so dam' serious about it!”

Peter paused in his pacing and stared at Hy... “Serious!” He repeated the word under his breath. His long face worked convulsively behind the large horn-rimmed glasses (not spectacles) and their black ribbon. Then abruptly he rushed into the bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

Hy sighed, glanced out at the weather (it was April), picked up hat, stick and gloves and sauntered forth to dine comfortably at his club as a ritualistic preliminary to a pleasant evening.

That, he thought now, was the great thing about bachelor life in town. You had all the advantages of feminine companionship – in assorted varieties – and then when you preferred or if the ladies bored you you just went to the club.

Peter sat on the edge of the bed, all nerves, and thought about Sue Wilde. Also about six little bank books.

They had been his secret inner life, the bank books locked away in the middle drawer of the desk on the side next the wall. Nearly seven thousand dollars were now entered in those books – Peter’s all. He was staking it on a single throw. He had rushed in where a shrewder theatrical angel might well have feared to tread. It was the wild outbreak of a cautious impractical man.

He thought it all over, sitting there on the edge of the bed. It was terrifying, but stirring. In his plays some one was always saving a girl through an act of personal sacrifice. Now he was acting it out in life. Indicating the truth to life of his plays... He was risking all. But so had Napoleon, returning from Elba, risked all (he did not pursue the analogy). So had Henry V at Agincourt. After all, considered in this light, it was rather fine. Certain persons would admire him if they knew. It was the way big men did things. He was glad that Sue didn’t know; it was finer to take the plunge without so much as asking a return. It was magnificent.

The word, popping into his thoughts, gave Peter a thrill. Yes, it was magnificent. He was doing a magnificent thing. All that remained was to carry it off magnificently.

He dragged his trunk from the closet. The lower tray and the bottom were packed with photographs and with letters tied in flat bundles – letters in various feminine hands. He stirred the bundles about. Some were old – years old; others less so.

Peter regarded them with the detachment of exaltation. They could not possibly mean anything to him; his life had begun the day he first saw Sue Wilde.

He carried them into the studio, great armsful, and piled them about the hearth. In the bottom drawer of the bureau were other packets of intimate documents. He brought those as well. Then he set to work to burn, packet by packet, that curiously remote past life of his. And he smiled a little at this memory and that.

Closely packed papers do not burn easily. He was seated there on the floor before the fireplace, stirring up sheets at which the flames had nibbled, when Jacob Zanin came in.

Zanin stared and laughed.

“Bad as that?” said he.

Peter met this sally with dignified silence. He urged his caller to sit down.

Zanin dropped his hat on the desk and disposed his big frame in the Morris chair. His coat was wrinkled, his trousers baggy. Under his coat was an old gray sweater. The head above the sweater collar was big and well-poised. The face was hard and strong; the eyes were alight with restlessness.

“I’m dog tired,” said Zanin. “Been rehearsing six hours straight.” And he added: “I suppose you haven’t had a chance to go over my scenario.”

“I’ve done more than that,” replied Peter calmly; “I’ve written a new one.” And as Zanin’s brows came down questioningly he added: “I think you’ll find I’ve pointed up your ideas. The thing was very strong. Once I got to thinking about it I couldn’t let go. What it needed was clarifying and rearranging and building for climaxes. That’s what makes it so hard for our people to understand you Russians – you are formless, chaotic.”

“Like life,” said Zanin.

“Perhaps. But not like our stage traditions. You wanted me to help you reach a popular audience. That’s what I’m trying to do for you.”

“Fine!” said Zanin doubtfully. “Let me take it along. I’ll read it to-night – go over it with Sue, perhaps.”

Peter shook his head.

“But I’ll have to see it, Mann.”

“I’ll read it to you – to you and Sue,” said Peter.

Zanin looked at him, faintly surprised and thinking.

Peter went back to the hearth, dropped on his knees and threw another bundle of letters into the fire.

“The fact is,” said Zanin, hesitating, “I had some work planned for Sue this evening.”

“No hurry,” remarked Peter.

“Ah, but there is.” Zanin hitched forward in his chair. The eager hardness came again into his eyes. His strong, slightly husky voice rose a little.

“Why? How so?” Peter settled back on his heels and poked the fire.

“Look here, Mann – everything’s just right for us now. I’ve interested the Interstellar people – that’s partly what I came to say – they’ll supply studio stuff for the interior scenes and a camera man. Also they’ll stand a third of the expense. They’re ready to sign whenever you are. And what’s more important – well, here’s the question of Sue.”

“What’s the question?”

“It’s delicate – but I’ll be frank.”

“Better be. You and I are going into this as business men, Zanin.”

“Exactly. As business men. Well – Sue’s a girl, after all. In this thing we are staking a lot on her interest and enthusiasm – pretty nearly everything.”

“Of course.

“Well, she’s ready – eager. I know her pretty thoroughly, Mann. I’ve studied her. We have no real hold on her. She isn’t a professional actress, to be hired at so much a week. Her only reason for going into it at all, is that she believes, with you and me, that the thing ought to be done. Now that’s all right. It’s fine! But it’s going to take delicate handling. A girl acts as she feels, you know. Right now Sue feels like doing my Nature film with all her might.” He spread out his hands. In his eyes was an eager appeal. “God, Maun, that’s all we’ve got! Don’t you see? Just Sue’s feelings!”

“I see,” Peter replied. He threw the last heap of photographs on the fire. “But what was the frank thing?”

Zanin hesitated; drummed nervously on the chair-arm. “I’m coming to that. It’s a bit awkward, Mann. It’s – well, I am more or less in Sue’s confidence, you know. I’m with her so much, I can sense her moods... The fact is, Mann, if you’ll let me say so, you don’t seem to understand women.”

“So I’ve been told,” remarked Peter dryly. “Go on with it.”

“Well, Sue’s got it into her head that you don’t get the idea of intelligent radicalism. That you’re...

“That I’m a reactionary.”

“Yes – that you’re a reactionary. She’s worried about the scenario – afraid you’ll miss the very point of it.” Again he spread out his large strong hands. “So don’t you see why I’m eager to get hold of it and read it to her” – he hesitated again, and knit his brows – “so I can reassure her... You see, Mann, Sue just doesn’t like you. That’s the plain fact. You’ve hit her all wrong.” He raised a hand to ward off Peter’s interruption. “Oh, we’ll straighten that out all right! But it’ll take delicate handling – just now, while we’re working out the scenario and planning the trip south – and so, meantime...”

“You would like me to keep out of Sue’s way as much as possible.”

“And leave everything to me, Mann. As it stands now, here she is, keen, all ready, once she’s solid in her mind about the right spirit of the scenario, to start south with me...”

Peter waved the poker in a series of small circles and figure eights; then held it motionless and sighted along it with squinted-up eyes.

“Why go south?” he asked.

Zanin gave a start and stared at him; then controlled himself, for the expenses of that little trip, two-thirds of them, at least, must be paid out of the funds entered in Peter’s six little bank books.

“Why go south?” Zanin repeated, gropingly; then came back at Peter with a rush of words. “Good lord, Mann, don’t you see that we’re putting over a big piece of symbolism – the most delicate and difficult job on earth. This isn’t *Shore Acres!* It isn’t the *Doll’s House!* It’s a realized dream, and it’s got to be put across with such quality and power that it will fire a new dream in the public mind. I propose to spring right out at ‘em, startle ‘em – yes, shock ‘em; and all the time keep it where they can’t lay their vulgar hands on it. We can’t show our Nature effects – primitive, half-nude people – against a background of a New Jersey farm land with a chestnut tree and a couple of oaks in the middle distance!”

“Pretty fine trees, those!” observed Peter.

“Not for a minute!” Zanin sprang to his feet; his voice rang. “Got to be remote, exotic – dream quality, fantasy all through. Florida or California – palm trees and such. Damn it, the thing’s a poem! It’s got to be done as a poem.”

He strode down the room and back.

Peter got up, very calm, rather white about the mouth and watched him... Dream quality? His thoughts were woven through and through with it at this moment. A voice at his inner ear, a voice curiously like Hy’s, was murmuring over and over: “Sure! Kiss her.”

“Don’t you see?” cried Zanin, confronting him, and spreading out those big hands. Peter wished wildly that he would keep them in his pockets, put them behind his back – anything to get them out of sight!.. “Lets be sensible, Maun. As you said, we’re business men, you and I. You let me take the scenario. I’m to see Sue this evening – I’ll read it to her. I’m sure it’s good. It’ll reassure her. And it will help me to hold her enthusiasm and pave the way for a better understanding between her and you.”

Quite unforeseen by either, the little matter of reading the scenario had struck up an issue between them. All was not harmony within the directorate of The Nature Film Producing Co., Inc., Jacob Zanin, Pres’t.

“No,” said Peter. “I won’t let you have it now.”

“But – good lord! – ”

“I will think it over.”

Magnificent was the word. Zanin gulped down a temperamental explosion and left.

Peter, as he came slowly back from the elevator to the apartment, discovered that he still held the poker tightly in his right hand, like a sword. He thought again of Napoleon and Henry V.

He stood motionless, by the window, staring out; moved by the histrionic emotionalism that was almost his soul to stiffen his shoulders like a king’s. Out there – beyond old Washington Square where the first buds of spring tipped the trees – beyond the glimpse, down a red-brick vista of the Sixth Avenue Elevated – still beyond and on, were, he knew, the dusty wandering streets, the crumbling houses with pasts, the flimsy apartment buildings decorated in front with rococo fire escapes, the bleak little three-cornered parks, the devastating subway excavations of Greenwich Village. Somewhere in that welter of poverty and art, at this very moment (unless she had walked up-town) was Sue Wilde. He tried to imagine just where. Perhaps in the dim little rear apartment she shared with Betty Deane, waiting for Zarin.

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