Lynde Francis

The Real Man

Francis Lynde
The Real Man

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23158907
The Real Man:

Содержание

Lynde Francis
The Real Man

I
Host and Guest

It is conceivable that, in Noah's time – say, on the day before the heavens opened and the floods descended – a complacent citizenry of Antediluvia might have sat out on its front porches, enjoying the sunset over Mount Ararat and speculating upon the probable results of the next patriarchal election, all unsuspicious of chaotic cataclysms. Under similar conditions – fair skies, a good groundwork of creature comforts, and a total lack of threatening portents – there was no reason why the two men, smoking their after-dinner cigars on the terrace of the Lawrenceville Country Club, should suspect that the end of the world might be lying in wait for either of them just beyond the hour's relaxation.

They had been dining together – Debritt, a salesman for the Aldenguild Engraving Company of New York and the elder of the two, as the guest, and Smith, cashier of the Lawrenceville Bank and Trust, as the host. After banking hours, Smith had taken the engraving company's salesman in his runabout for a

drive through the residence district and up the river road; and business, the business of printing a new issue of stock-certificates for the local bank, had been laid aside. The return drive had paused at the Country Club for dinner; and since Debritt's train would not leave until eight o'clock, there was ample leisure for the tobacco burning and for the jocund salesman's appreciative enthusiasm.

"Monty, my son, for solid satisfaction and pure unadulterated enjoyment of the safe-and-sane variety, you fellows in the little cities have us metropolitans backed off the map," he said, after the cigars were fairly alight. "In New York, believe me, you might be the cashier of a bank the size of the Lawrenceville B. and T. – only you wouldn't be at your age – for a thousand years and never get a glimpse out over the top of things; never know the people who lived next door to you. Here you know everybody worth knowing, drive your own motor, have more dinner invitations than you can accept, and by and by – when you get deliberately good and ready – you can marry the prettiest girl in town. Am I right?"

The carefully groomed, athletically muscled younger man in the big wicker lounging-chair laughed easily.

"You are not so far wrong, Boswell," he conceded. "I guess we get all that is coming to us, and I get my share. Since we have only one multimillionaire we can't afford to be very exclusive, and my bank job answers the social purpose well enough."

"I'll bet it does!" the jocose one went on. "I've been piping you

off ever since we left the hotel. It's "lo, Monty-boy,' everywhere you go, and I know exactly what that means in a town of this size; a stand-in with all the good people, a plate at anybody's table, the pick of partners at all the social dew-dabs. Tell me if I'm wrong."

Again the younger man laughed.

"You might be reading it out of a book," he confessed. "That is the life here in Lawrenceville, and I live it, like thousands of my kind all over the land. You may scoff at it if you like, but it is pleasant and harmless and exceedingly comfortable. I shouldn't know how to live any other kind."

"I don't know why you should want to live any other kind," was the prompt rejoinder. "To be a rising young business man in a rich little inland city, beloved of the gods and goddesses – especially of the goddesses… Say, by Jove! here comes one of them, right now. Heavens! isn't she a pomegranate!"

A handsome limousine had rolled silently up to the club carriage entrance, and the young woman in question was descending from it. Only a miser of adjectives – or a Debritt – would have tried to set forth her triumphant charm in a single word. She was magnificent: a brown-eyed blonde of the Olympian type, exuberantly feminine in the many dazzling luxuriances of ripe-lipped, full-figured maidenhood. The salesman saw his companion make a move to rise, but the beauty passed on into the club-house without looking their way.

"You know her, I suppose; you know everybody in town," Debritt said, after the cashier had again settled himself in the

lounging-chair.

Smith's nod was expressive of something more than a fellow townsman's degree of intimacy.

"I ought to," he admitted. "She is Miss Verda Richlander, the daughter of our one and only multimillionaire. Also, I may add that she is my very good friend."

Debritt's chuckling laugh proved that his prefigurings had already outrun the mere statement of fact.

"Better and more of it," he commented. "I'm going to congratulate you before you can escape – or is it a bit premature?"

"Some of the Lawrenceville gossips would tell you that it isn't; but it is, just the same. Mr. Josiah Richlander has but one measure for the stature of a man, and the name of it is money. The fellow who asks him for Miss Verda is going to have a chance to show up his bank-account and the contents of his safety-deposit box in short order."

"In that case, I should imagine you'd be lying awake nights trying to study up some get-rich-quick scheme," joked the guest.

"Perhaps I am," was the even-toned rejoinder. "Who knows?"

The round-bodied salesman broke an appreciative cough in the middle and grew suddenly thoughtful.

"Don't do that, Monty," he urged soberly; "try to take any of the short cuts, I mean. It's the curse of the age; and, if you'll take it from me, your chances are too good – and too dangerous."

The good-looking, athletic young cash-keeper planted in the

opposite chair met the salesman's earnest gaze level-eyed.

"Having said that much, you can hardly refuse to say more," he suggested.

"I will say more; a little more, anyway. I've been wanting to say it all the afternoon. My job takes me into nearly every bank in the Middle West, as you know, and I can't very well help hearing a good bit of gossip, Montague. I'm not going to insult your intelligence by assuming that you don't thoroughly know the man you are working under."

The cashier withheld his reply until the Olympian young woman, who was coming out, had stepped into her limousine to be driven away townward. Then he said:

"Mr. Dunham – our president? Oh, yes; I know him very well, indeed."

"I'm afraid you don't."

"I ought to know him," was the guarded assumption. "I've been with him six years, and during that time I have served a turn at every job in the bank up to, and now and then including, Mr. Dunham's own desk."

"Then you can hardly help knowing what people say of him."

"I know: they say he is a chance-taker, and some of them add that he is not too scrupulous. That is entirely true; true, not only of Mr. Dunham, but of nine out of every ten business men of to-day who make a success. The chance-taking is in the air, the Lawrenceville air, at any rate, Debritt. We are prosperous. The town is growing by leaps and bounds, and we've got the money."

The ash had grown half an inch longer on the salesman's cigar before he spoke again.

"They say worse things of Mr. Watrous Dunham than that he is a chance-taker, Montague. There are men, good, solid business men, in the neighboring cities and towns who tell some pretty savage stories about the way in which he has sometimes dropped his friends into a hole to save himself."

"And you are a good enough friend of mine to want to give me a tip, Boswell? I appreciate that, but I don't need it. It may be as you say. Possibly Mr. Dunham does carry a knife up his sleeve for emergencies. But I wasn't born yesterday, and I have a few friends of my own here in Lawrenceville. My only present worry is that I'm not making money fast enough."

The salesman waved the subject aside with the half-burned cigar. "Forget it," he said shortly; "the Dunham end of it, I mean. And I don't blame you for wanting to assemble money enough to call Mr. Richlander's hand." Then, with the jocose smile wrinkling again at the corners of his well-buried eyes: "You've got all the rest of it, you know; even to the good half of a distinguished name. 'Mrs. J. Montague Smith.' That fits her down to the ground. If it were just plain 'John,' now, it might be different. Does she, too, call you 'Monty-boy'?"

The young man whose name pointed the jest grinned good-naturedly.

"The 'J' does stand for 'John,'" he admitted. "I was named for my maternal grandfather, John Montague, and had both halves of

the good old gentleman's signature wished upon me. I stood for it until I grew old enough to realize that 'John Smith' is practically nothing but an *alias*, and then I dropped the 'John' part of it, or rather, let it shrink to an initial. I suppose you can count all the Debritts there are in the country on your fingers; but there are millions of indistinguishable Smiths."

The fat salesman was chuckling again when he threw the cigar end away and glanced at his watch.

"I don't blame you for parting your name in the middle," he said; "I'd have done it myself, maybe. But if you should ever happen to need an *alias* you've got one ready-made. Just drop the 'Montague' and call yourself 'John' and the trick's turned. You might bear that in mind. It'll come in handy if the big ego ever happens to get hold of you."

"The big what?"

"The big ego; the German philosophers' 'Absolute Ego,' you know."

Smith laughed. "I haven't the pleasure of the gentleman's acquaintance. I'm long on commercial arithmetic and the money market; long, again, Lawrenceville will tell you, on the new dancing steps and things of that sort. But I've never dabbled much in the highbrow stuff."

"It's a change," said the salesman, willing to defend himself. "I read a little now and then, just to get away from the commercial grind. The ego theory is interesting. It is based on the idea that no man is altogether the man he thinks he is, or that others think

he is; that association, environment, training, taste, inclination, and all those things have developed a personality which might have been altogether different if the constraining conditions had been different. Do you get that?"

"Perfectly. If I'd been brought up some other way I might have been cutting meat in a butcher's shop instead of taking bank chances on more or less doubtful notes of hand. What's the next step?"

"The German hair-splitters go a little farther and ring in what they call the 'Absolute Ego,' by which they mean the ego itself, unshackled by any of these conditions which unite in forming the ordinary personality. They say that if these conditions could be suddenly swept away or changed completely, a new man would emerge, a man no less unrecognizable, perhaps, to his friends than he would be to himself."

"That's rather far-fetched, don't you think?" queried the practical-minded listener. "I can see how a man may be what he is chiefly because his inherited tastes and his surroundings and his opportunities have made him so. But after the metal has once been poured in the mould it's fixed, isn't it?"

Debritt shook his head.

"I'm only a wader in the edges of the pool, myself," he admitted. "I dabble a little for my own amusement. But, as I understand it, the theory presupposes a violent smashing of the mould and a remelting of the metal. Let me ask you something: when you were a boy did you mean to grow up and be a bank

cashier?"

Smith laughed. "I fully intended to be a pirate or a stage-robber, as I remember it."

"There you are," drawled the travelling man. "The theory goes on to say that in childhood the veil is thin and the absolute ego shows through. I'm not swallowing the thing whole, you understand. But in my own experience I've seen a good man go hopelessly into the discard, and a bad one turn over a new leaf and pull up, all on account of some sudden earthquake in the conditions. Call it all moonshine, if you like, and let's come down to earth again. How about getting back to town? I'd be glad to stay here forever, but I'm afraid the house might object. When did you say Mr. Dunham would be home?"

"We are looking for him to-morrow, though he may be a day or two late. But you needn't worry about your order, if that is what is troubling you. I happen to know that he intends giving the engraving of the new stock-certificates to your people."

The New York salesman's smile had in it the experience-taught wisdom of all the ages.

"Montague, my son, let me pay for my dinner with a saying that is as old as the hills, and as full of meat as the nuts that ripen on 'em: in this little old round world you have what you have when you have it. This evening we've enjoyed a nice little five-course dinner, well cooked and well served, in a pretty nifty little club, and in a few minutes we'll be chasing along to town in your private buzz-wagon, giving our dust to anybody who wants

to take it. Do you get that?"

"I do. But what's the answer?"

"The answer is the other half of it. This time to-morrow we may both be asking for a hand-out, and inquiring, a bit hoarsely, perhaps, if the walking is good. That is just how thin the partitions are. You don't believe it, of course; couldn't even assume it as a working hypothesis. What could possibly happen to you or to me in the next twenty-four hours? Nothing, nothing on top of God's green earth that could pitch either or both of us over the edge, you'd say – or to Mr. Dunham to make him change his mind about the engraving job. Just the same, I'll drop along in the latter part of the week and get his name signed to the order for those stock-certificates. Let's go and crank up the little road-wagon. I mustn't miss that train."

II
Metastasis

It was ten minutes of eight when J. Montague Smith, having picked up the salesman's sample cases at the town hotel, set Debritt down at the railroad station and bade him good-by. Five minutes later he had driven the runabout to its garage and was hastening across to his suite of bachelor apartments in the Kincaid Terrace. There was reason for the haste. Though he had been careful, from purely hospitable motives, to refrain from intimating the fact to Debritt, it was his regular evening for calling upon Miss Verda Richlander, and time pressed.

The New York salesman, enlarging enthusiastically upon the provincial beatitudes, had chosen a fit subject for their illustration in the young cashier of the Lawrenceville Bank and Trust. From his earliest recollections Montague Smith had lived the life of the well-behaved and the conventional. He had his niche in the Lawrenceville social structure, and another in the small-city business world, and he filled both to his own satisfaction and to the admiration of all and sundry. Ambitions, other than to take promotions in the bank as they came to him, and, eventually, to make money enough to satisfy the demands which Josiah Richlander might make upon a prospective son-in-law, had never troubled him. An extremely well-balanced young man his fellow

townsmen called him, one of whom it might safely be predicted that he would go straightforwardly on his way to reputable middle life and old age; moderate in all things, impulsive in none.

Even in the affair with Miss Richlander sound common sense and sober second thought had been made to stand in the room of supersentiment. Smith did not know what it was to be violently in love; though he was a charter member of the Lawrenceville Athletic Club and took a certain pride in keeping himself physically fit and up to the mark, it was not his habit to be violent in anything. Lawrenceville expected its young men and young women to marry and "settle down," and J. Montague Smith, figuring in a modest way as a leader in the Lawrenceville younger set, was far too conservative to break with the tradition, even if he had wished to. Miss Richlander was desirable in many respects. Her father's ample fortune had not come early enough or rapidly enough to spoil her. In moments when his feeling for her achieved its nearest approach to sentiment the conservative young man perceived what a graciously resplendent figure she would make as the mistress of her own house and the hostess at her own table.

Arrived at his rooms in the Kincaid, Smith snapped the switch of the electrics and began to lay out his evening clothes, methodically and with a careful eye to the spotlessness of the shirt and the fresh immaculacy of the waistcoat. There were a number of little preliminaries to the change; he made the preparations swiftly but with a certain air of calm deliberation, inserting the

buttons in the waistcoat, choosing hose of the proper thinness, rummaging a virgin tie out of its box in the top dressing-case drawer.

It was in the search for the tie that he turned up a mute reminder of his nearest approach to any edge of the real chasm of sentiment: a small glove, somewhat soiled and use-worn, with a tiny rip in one of the fingers. It had been a full year since he had seen the glove or its owner, whom he had met only once, and that entirely by chance. The girl was a visitor from the West, the daughter of a ranchman, he had understood; and she had been stopping over with friends in a neighboring town. Smith had driven over one evening in his runabout to make a call upon the daughters of the house, and had found a lawn-party in progress, with the Western visitor as the guest of honor.

Acquaintance – such an acquaintance as can be achieved in a short social hour – had followed, and the sight of the small glove reminded him forcibly of the sharp little antagonisms that the hour had developed. At all points the bewitching young woman from the barbaric wildernesses, whose dropped glove he had surreptitiously picked up and pocketed, had proved to be a mocking critic of the commonplace conventions, and had been moved to pillory the same in the person of her momentary entertainer. Smith had recalled his first tasting of a certain French liqueur with perfume in it, and the tingling sense of an awakening of some sort running through his veins as an after effect not altogether pleasant, but vivifying to a degree. Some

similar thrillings this young person from the wide horizons had stirred in him – which was his only excuse for stealing her glove.

Though he was far enough from recognizing it as such, the theft had been purely sentimental. A week later, when he would have courted a return of the thrills, he had learned that she had gone back to her native wilds. It was altogether for the best, he had told himself at the time, and at other times during the year which now intervened. Perfumed liqueurs are not for those whose tastes and habits are abstemious by choice; and there remained now nothing of the clashing encounter at the lawn-party save the soiled glove, a rather obscure memory of a face too piquant and attractive to be cheapened by the word "pretty"; these and a thing she had said at the moment of parting: "Yes; I am going back home very soon. I don't like your smug Middle-West civilization, Mr. Smith – it smothers me. I don't wonder that it breeds men who live and grow up and die without ever having a chance to find themselves."

He was recalling that last little thrust and smiling reminiscently over it as he replaced the glove among its fellow keepsakes: handkerchief boxes, tie-holders, and what not, given him on birthdays and Christmases by the home-town girls who had known him from boyhood. Some day, perhaps, he would tell Verda Richlander of the sharp-tongued little Western beauty. Verda – and all sensible people – would smile at the idea that he, John Montague Smith, was of those who had not "found" themselves, or that the finding – by which he had understood the

Western young woman to mean something radical and upsetting – could in any way be forced upon a man who was old enough and sane enough to know his own lengths and breadths and depths.

He had closed the drawer and was stripping off his coat to dress when he saw that, in entering the room in the dark, he had overlooked two letters which had evidently been thrust under the door during his absence with Debritt. One of the envelopes was plain, with his name scribbled on it in pencil. The other bore a typewritten address with the card of the Westfall Foundries Company in its upper left-hand corner. Smith opened Carter Westfall's letter first and read it with a little twinge of shocked surprise, as one reads the story of a brave battle fought and lost.

> "Dear Monty," it ran. "I have been trying to reach you by 'phone off and on ever since the adjournment of our stockholders' meeting at three o'clock. We, of the little inside pool, have got it where the chicken got the axe. Richlander had more proxies up his sleeve than we thought he had, and he has put the steam-roller over us to a finish. He was able to vote fifty-five per cent of the stock straight, and you know what that means: a consolidation with the Richlander foundry trust, and the hearse and white horses for yours truly and the minority stockholders. We're dead – dead and buried.
>
> "Of course, I stand to lose everything, but that isn't all of it. I'm horribly anxious for fear you'll be tangled up personally in some way in the matter of that last loan of $100,000 that I got from the Bank and Trust. You will

remember you made the loan while Dunham was away, and I am certain you told me you had his consent to take my Foundries stock as collateral. That part of it is all right, but, as matters stand, the stock isn't worth the paper it is printed on, and – well, to tell the bald truth, I'm scared of Dunham. Brickley, the Chicago lawyer they have brought down here, tells me that your bank is behind the consolidation deal, and if that is so, there is going to be a bank loss to show up on my paper, and Dunham will carefully cover his tracks for the sake of the bank's standing.

"It is a hideous mess, and it has occurred to me that Dunham can put you in bad, if he wants to. When you made that $100,000 loan, you forgot – and I forgot for the moment – that you own ten shares of Westfall Foundries in your own name. If Dunham wants to stand from under, this might be used against you. You must get rid of that stock, Monty, and do it quick. Transfer the ten shares to me, dating the transfer back to Saturday. I still have the stock books in my hands, and I'll make the entry in the record and date it to fit. This may look a little crooked, on the surface, but it's your salvation, and we can't stop to split hairs when we've just been shot full of holes.

"Westfall."

Smith folded the letter mechanically and thrust it into his pocket. Carter Westfall was his good friend, and the cashier had tried, unofficially, to dissuade Westfall from borrowing after he had admitted that he was going to use the money in an attempt to buy up the control of his own company's stock. As Smith

took up the second envelope he was not thinking of himself, or of the possible danger hinted at in Westfall's warning. The big bank loss was the chief thing to be considered – that and the hopeless ruin of a good fellow like Carter Westfall. He was thinking of both when he tore the second envelope across and took out the enclosed slip of scratch-paper. It was a note from the president and it was dated within the hour. Mr. Dunham had evidently anticipated his itinerary. At all events, he was back in Lawrenceville, and the note had been written at the bank. It was a curt summons; the cashier was wanted, at once.

At the moment, Smith did not connect the summons with the Westfall cataclysm, or with any other untoward thing. Mr. Watrous Dunham had a habit of dropping in and out unexpectedly. Also, he had the habit of sending for his cashier or any other member of the banking force at whatever hour the notion seized him. Smith went to the telephone and called up the Richlander house. The promptness with which the multimillionaire's daughter came to the 'phone was an intimation that his ring was not entirely unexpected.

"This is Montague," he said, when Miss Richlander's mellifluous "Main four six eight – Mr. Richlander's residence" came over the wire. Then: "What are you going to think of a man who calls you up merely to beg off?" he asked.

Miss Richlander's reply was merciful and he was permitted to go on and explain. "I'm awfully sorry, but it can't very well be helped, you know. Mr. Dunham has returned, and he wants me

at the bank. I'll be up a little later on, if I can break away, and you'll let me come… Thank you, ever so much. Good-by."

Having thus made his peace with Miss Richlander, Smith put on his street coat and hat and went to obey the president's summons. The Lawrenceville Bank and Trust, lately installed in its new marble-veneered quarters in the town's first – seven-storied – sky-scraper, was only four squares distant; two streets down and two across. As he was approaching the sky-scraper corner, Smith saw that there were only two lights in the bank, one in the vault corridor and another in the railed-off open space in front which held the president's desk and his own. Through the big plate-glass windows he could see Mr. Dunham. The president was apparently at work, his portly figure filling the padded swing-chair. He had one elbow on the desk, and the fingers of the uplifted hand were thrust into his thick mop of hair.

Smith had his own keys and he let himself in quietly through the door on the side street. The night-watchman's chair stood in its accustomed place in the vault corridor, but it was empty. To a suspicious person the empty chair might have had its significance; but Montague Smith was not suspicious. The obvious conclusion was that Mr. Dunham had sent the watchman forth upon some errand; and the motive needed not to be tagged as ulterior.

Without meaning to be particularly noiseless, Smith – rubber heels on tiled floor assisting – was unlatching the gate in the counter-railing before his superior officer heard him and looked

up. There was an irritable note in the president's greeting.

"Oh, it's you, at last, is it?" he rasped. "You have taken your own good time about coming. It's a half-hour and more since I sent that note to your room."

Smith drew out the chair from the stenographer's table and sat down. Like the cashiers of many little-city banks, he was only a salaried man, and the president rarely allowed him to forget the fact. None the less, his boyish gray eyes were reflecting just a shade of the militant antagonism in Mr. Watrous Dunham's when he said: "I was dining at the Country Club with a friend, and I didn't go to my rooms until a few minutes ago."

The president sat back in the big mahogany swing-chair. His face, with the cold, protrusive eyes, the heavy lips, and the dewlap lower jaw, was the face of a man who shoots to kill.

"I suppose you've heard the news about Westfall?"

Smith nodded.

"Then you also know that the bank stands to lose a cold hundred thousand on that loan you made him?"

The young man in the stenographer's chair knew now very well why the night-watchman had been sent away. He felt in his pocket for a cigar but failed to find one. It was an unconscious effort to gain time for some little readjustment of the conventional point of view. The president's attitude plainly implied accusation, and Smith saw the solid foundations of his small world – the only world he had ever known – crumbling to a threatened dissolution.

"You may remember that I advised against the making of that loan when Westfall first spoke of it," he said, after he had mastered the premonitory chill of panic. "It was a bad risk – for him and for us."

"I suppose you won't deny that the loan was made while I was away in New York," was the challenging rejoinder.

"It was. But you gave your sanction before you went East."

The president twirled his chair to face the objector and brought his palm down with a smack upon the desk-slide.

"No!" he stormed. "What I told you to do was to look up his collateral; and you took a snap judgment and let him have the money! Westfall is your friend, and you are a stockholder in his bankrupt company. You took a chance for your own hand and put the bank in the hole. Now I'd like to ask what you are going to do about it."

Smith looked up quickly. Somewhere inside of him the carefully erected walls of use and custom were tumbling in strange ruins and out of the débris another structure, formless as yet, but obstinately sturdy, was rising.

"I am not going to do what you want me to do, Mr. Dunham – step in and be your convenient scapegoat," he said, wondering a little in his inner recesses how he was finding the sheer brutal man-courage to say such a thing to the president of the Lawrenceville Bank and Trust. "I suppose you have reasons of your own for wishing to shift the responsibility for this particular loss to my shoulders. But whether you have or haven't, I decline

to accept it."

The president tilted his chair and locked his hands over one knee.

"It isn't a question of shifting the responsibility, Montague," he said, dropping the bullying weapon to take up another. "The loan was made in my absence. Perhaps you may say that I went away purposely to give you the chance of making it, but, if you do, nobody will believe you. When it comes down to the matter of authorization, it is simply your word against mine – and mine goes. Don't you see what you've done? As the matter stands now, you have let yourself in for a criminal indictment, if the bank directors choose to push it. You have taken the bank's money to bolster up a failing concern in which you are a stockholder. Go to any lawyer in Lawrenceville – the best one you can find – and he'll tell you exactly where you stand."

While the big clock over the vault entrance was slowly ticking off a full half-minute the young man whose future had become so suddenly and so threateningly involved neither moved nor spoke, but his silence was no measure of the turmoil of conflicting emotions and passions that were rending him. When he looked up, the passions, passions which had hitherto been mere names to him, were still under control, but to his dismay his restraining hold upon them seemed to be growing momentarily less certain.

"I may not prove quite the easy mark that your plan seems to prefigure, Mr. Dunham," he returned at length, trying to say it calmly. "But assuming that I am all that you have been

counting upon, and that you will carry out your threat and take the matter into the courts, what is the alternative? Just what are you expecting me to do?"

"Now you are talking more like a grown man," was the president's crusty admission. "You are in a pretty bad boat, Montague, and that is why I sent for you to-night. It didn't seem safe to waste any time if you were to be helped out. Of course, there will be a called meeting of the bank board to-morrow, and it will all come out. With the best will in the world to do you a good turn, I shan't be able to stand between you and trouble."

"Well?" said the younger man, still holding the new and utterly incomprehensible passions in check.

"You can see how it will be. If I can say to the directors that you have already resigned – and if you are not where they can too easily lay hands on you – they may not care to push the charge against you. There is a train west at ten o'clock. If I were in your place, I should pack a couple of suitcases and take it. That is the only safe thing for you to do. If you need any ready money – "

It was at this point that J. Montague Smith rose up out of the stenographer's chair and buttoned his coat.

"'If I need any ready money,'" he repeated slowly, advancing a step toward the president's desk. "That is where you gave yourself away, Mr. Dunham. You authorized that loan, and you meant to authorize it. More than that, you did it because you were willing to use the bank's money to put Carter Westfall in the hole so deep that he could never climb out. Now, it seems, you are willing

to bribe the only dangerous witness. I don't need money badly enough to sell my good name for it. I shall stay right here in Lawrenceville and fight it out with you!"

The president turned abruptly to his desk and his hand sought the row of electric bell-pushes. With a finger resting upon the one marked "police," he said: "There isn't any room for argument, Montague. You can have one more minute in which to change your mind. If you stay, you'll begin your fight from the inside of the county jail."

Now, as we have seen, there had been nothing in John Montague Smith's well-ordered quarter century of boyhood, youth, and business manhood to tell him how to cope with the crude and savage emergency which he was confronting. But in the granted minute of respite something within him, a thing as primitive and elemental as the crisis with which it was called upon to grapple, shook itself awake. At the peremptory bidding of the newly aroused underman, he stepped quickly across the intervening space and stood under the shaded desk light within arm's reach of the man in the big swing-chair.

"You have it all cut and dried, even to the setting of the police trap, haven't you?" he gritted, hardly recognizing his own voice. "You meant to hang me first and try your own case with the directors afterward. Mr. Dunham, I know you better than you think I do: you are not only a damned crook – you are a yellow-livered coward, as well! You don't dare to press that button!"

While he was saying it, the president had half risen, and the

hand which had been hovering over the bell-pushes shot suddenly under the piled papers in the corner of the desk. When it came out it was gripping the weapon which is never very far out of reach in a bank.

Good judges on the working floor of the Lawrenceville Athletic Club had said of the well-muscled young bank cashier that he did not know his own strength. It was the sight of the pistol that maddened him and put the driving force behind the smashing blow that landed upon the big man's chest. Two inches higher or lower, the blow might have been merely breath-cutting. As it was, the lifted pistol dropped from Mr. Watrous Dunham's grasp and he wilted, settling back slowly, first into his chair, and then slipping from the chair to the floor.

In a flash Smith knew what he had done. Once, one evening when he had been induced to put on the gloves with the Athletic Club's trainer, he had contrived to plant a body blow which had sent the wiry little Irishman to the mat, gasping and fighting for the breath of life. "If ever yez'll be givin' a man that heart-punch wid th' bare fisht, Misther Montygue, 'tis you f'r th' fasht thrain widout shtoppin' to buy anny ticket – it'll be murdher in th' first degree," the trainer had said, when he had breath to compass the saying.

With the unheeded warning resurgent and clamoring in his ears, Smith knelt horror-stricken beside the fallen man. On the president's heavy face and in the staring eyes there was a foolish smile, as of one mildly astonished. Smith loosened the collar

around the thick neck and laid his ear upon the spot where the blow had fallen. It was as the Irish trainer had told him it would be. The big man's heart had stopped like a smashed clock.

Smith got upon his feet, turned off the electric light, and, from mere force of habit, closed and snap-locked the president's desk. The watchman had not yet returned. Smith saw the empty chair beside the vault door as he passed it on his way to the street. Since the first impulse of the unwilling or unwitting homicide is usually sharply retributive, the cashier's only thought was to go at once to police headquarters and give himself up. Then he remembered how carefully the trap had been set, and how impossible it would be for him to make any reasonable defense. As it would appear, he had first taken the bank's money to help Westfall, and afterward, when exposure had threatened, he had killed the president. No one would ever believe that the blow had been struck in self-defense.

It was at the hesitating instant that Debritt's curiously prophetic words came back to him with an emphasis that was fairly appalling: "To-morrow we may both be asking for a hand-out, and inquiring, a bit hoarsely, perhaps, if the walking is good. That is just how thin the partitions are." With one glance over his shoulder at the darkened front windows of the bank, Smith began to run, not toward the police station, but in the opposite direction – toward the railroad station.

This was at nine o'clock or, perhaps, a few minutes later. Coincident with J. Montague Smith's dash down the poorly

lighted cross street, a rather weak-faced young man of the sham black-sheep type of the smaller cities was lounging in the drawing-room of an ornate timber-and-stucco mansion on Maple Street hill and saying to his hostess: "Say – I thought this was Monty's night to climb the hill, Miss Verda. By Jove, I've got it in for Monty, don't y' know. He's comin' here a lot too regular to please me."

"Mr. Smith always puts business before pleasure; haven't you found that out yet, Mr. Jibbey?" was the rather cryptic rejoinder of the Olympian beauty; and after that she talked, and made the imitation rounder talk, pointedly of other things.

III
The Hobo

For J. Montague Smith, slipping from shadow to shadow down the scantily lighted cross street and listening momently for the footfalls of pursuit, a new hour had struck. Psychology to the contrary notwithstanding, the mental mutations are not always, or of necessity, gradual. In one flaming instant the ex-cashier had been projected across the boundary lying between the commonplace and the extraordinary; but for the time he was conscious only of a great confusion, shot through with a sense of his own present inability to cope with the strangenesses.

In the projecting instant, time and the graspable realities had both been annihilated. Was it conceivable that this was the evening of the same day in which he had entertained Boswell Debritt at the Country Club? Was it remotely thinkable that, only an hour or such a matter earlier, he had been getting ready to call upon Verda Richlander? – that, at this very moment, his dress clothes were lying on the bed in his rooms, ready to be put on?

It was all prodigiously incredible; in the collapse of the universe one scene alone stood out clearly cut and vivid: the railed space in the bank, with the shaded drop-light and the open desk, and a fleshy man stretched out upon the floor with his arms flung wide and a foolish smile of mild astonishment fixed, as for

all eternity, about the loosened lips and in the staring eyes.

Smith hurried on. The crowding sensations were terrifying, but they were also precious, in their way. Long-forgotten bits of brutality and tyranny on Watrous Dunham's part came up to be remembered and, in this retributive aftermath, to be triumphantly crossed off as items in an account finally settled. On the Smith side the bank cashier's forebears had been plodding farmers, but old John Montague had been the village blacksmith and a soldier – a shrewd smiter in both trades. Blood will tell. Parental implantings may have much to say to the fruit of the womb, but atavism has more. Smith's jaw came up with a snap and the metamorphosis took another forward step. He was no longer an indistinguishable unit in the ranks of the respectable and the well-behaved; he was a man fleeing for his life. What was done was done, and the next thing to do was to avert the consequences.

At the railroad station a few early comers for the westbound passenger-train due at ten o'clock were already gathering, and at the bidding of a certain new and militant craftiness Smith avoided the lighted waiting-rooms as if they held the pestilence. Nor was it safe to pass beyond the building. The May night was fine, and there were strollers on the train platform. Smith took no risks. A string of box cars had been pushed up from the freight unloading platforms, and in the shadow of the cars he worked his way westward to the yard where a night switching crew was making up a train.

Thus far he had struck out no plan. But the sudden shift from the normal to the extraordinary had not shorn him of the ability to think quickly and to the definite end. A placed road-engine, waiting for the conclusion of the car sorting, told him that the next train to leave the yard would be a westbound freight. He would have given much to know its exact leaving time, but he was far too clear-headed to give the pursuers a clew by asking questions.

Keeping to the shadows, he walked back along the line of cars on the make-up track, alertly seeking his opportunity. If worst came to worst, he could select a car with four truss-rods and crawl in on top of the rods after the manner of the professional ride-stealers. But this was a last resort; the risk was large for his inexperience, and he was very well aware that there must be some sort of an apprenticeship, even to the "brake-beamer's" trade.

Half-way down the length of the train he found what he was looking for: a box car with its side-door hasped but not locked. With a bit of stick to lengthen his reach, he unfastened the hasp, and at the switching crew's addition of another car to the "make-up" he took advantage of the noise made by the jangling crash and slid the door. Then he ascertained by groping into the dark interior that the car was empty. With a foot on the truss-rod he climbed in, and at the next coupling crash closed the door.

So far, all was well. Unless the start should be too long delayed, or the trainmen should discover the unhasped door, he was measurably safe. Still cool and collected, he began to cast about

for some means of replacing the outside fastening of the door from within. There was loose hay under-foot and it gave him his idea. Groping again, he found a piece of wire, a broken bale-tie. The box car was old and much of its inner sheathing had disappeared. With the help of his pocket-knife he enlarged a crack in the outer sheathing near the door, and a skilful bit of juggling with the bent wire sufficed to lift the hasp into place on the outside and hook it.

Following this clever removal of one of the hazards, he squatted upon the floor near the door and waited. Though he was familiar with the schedules of the passenger-trains serving the home city, he knew nothing of the movements of the freights. Opening the face of his watch, he felt the hands. It was half-past nine, and the thrust and whistle of the air-brakes under the cars gave notice that the road engine had been coupled on. Still the train did not pull out.

After a little he was able to account for the delay. Though his knowledge of railroad operating was limited, common sense told him that the freight would not be likely to leave, now, ahead of the ten o'clock passenger. That meant another half-hour of suspense to be paid for in such coin as one might be able to offer. The fugitive paid in keen agonies of apprehension. Surely, long before this the watchman would have returned to the bank, and the hue and cry being raised, the pursuit must now be afoot. In that case, the dullest policeman on the force would know enough to make straight for the railroad yard.

Smith knelt at the crack of the car door and listened, while the minutes dragged slowly in procession. Once, through the crack, he had a glimpse of the smoky flare of a kerosene torch in the hands of a passing car-inspector; and once again, one of the trainmen walked back over the tops of the cars, making a creaky thundering overhead as he tramped from end to end of the "empty." But as yet there was no hue and cry, or, if there were, it had not reached the railroad yard.

Keenly alive to every passing sound, Smith finally heard the passenger-train coming in from the east; heard the hoarse stridor of the engine's pop-valve at the station stop, and the distance-diminished rumblings of the baggage and express trucks over the wooden station platform. The stop was a short one, and in a few minutes the passenger-train came down through the yard, its pace measured by the sharp staccato blasts of the exhaust. It was the signal of release, and as the quickening staccato trailed away into silence, Smith braced himself for the slack-taking jerk of the starting freight.

The jerk did not come. Minute by minute the interval lengthened, and at last the listener in the "empty" heard voices and saw through the crack of the door a faint nimbus of lantern light approaching from the rear of the train. The voices came nearer. By the dodging movements of the light rays, Smith knew instantly what was coming. His pursuers were out, and they were overhauling the waiting freight-train, searching it for a stowaway.

He hardly dared breathe when the lantern-bearers reached his

car. There were a number of them, just how many he could not determine. But McCloskey, the Lawrenceville chief of police, was one of the number. Also, there was an Irish yardman who was carrying one of the lanterns and swinging it under the cars to show that the truss-rods and brake-beams were empty.

"'Tis not the likes of him that do be brake-beamin' their way out of town, Chief," the Irishman was saying. "'Tis more likely he's tuk an autymobile and the middle of the big road."

"There's no automobile missing, and his own car is still in the garage," Smith heard the police chief say. And then: "Hold your lantern up here, Timmy, till we see if this car door is fastened shut."

It was a measure of the distance that the bank clerk and small-city social leader had already travelled on the road toward a complete metamorphosis that the only answer to this threat of discovery was a tightening of the muscles, a certain steeling of thews and sinews for the wild-beast spring if the door should be opened. One thought dominated all others: if they took him they should not take him alive.

Happily or unhappily, as one may wish to view it, the danger passed. "The door's fastened, all right," said one of the searchers, and the menace went on, leaving Smith breathing hard and chuckling grimly to himself over the cunning forethought which had prompted him to grope for the bit of wire bale-tie.

Past this there was another interval of waiting – a brief one, this time. Then the long freight began to move out over the

switches. When he could no longer see the sheen of the city electrics in the strip of sky visible through his door crack, Smith gathered up the leavings of hay on the car floor and stretched himself out flat on his back. And it was another measure of the complete triumph of the elemental underman over the bank clerk that he immediately fell asleep and did not awaken until a jangling of draw-bars and a ray of sunlight sifting through the crack of the door told him that the train had arrived at some destination, and that it was morning.

Sitting up to rub his eyes and look at his watch, the fugitive made a hasty calculation. If the train had been in motion all night, this early morning stopping-place should be Indianapolis. Getting upon his feet, he applied an investigative eye to the crack. The train, or at least his portion of it, was side-tracked in a big yard with many others. Working the pick-lock wire again, he unhasped the door and opened it. There was no one in sight in this particular alley of the crowded yard, and he dropped to the ground and slid the door back into place.

Making a note of the initials and number, so that he might find the car again, he crawled under three or four standing trains and made his way to a track-side lunch-counter. The thick ham sandwich and the cup of muddy coffee eaten and drunk with the appetite of a starved vagrant set up another mile-stone in the distances traversed. Was it, indeed, only on the morning of yesterday that he had sent his toast back because, forsooth, the maid at Mrs. Gilman's select boarding-house for

single gentlemen had scorched it a trifle? It seemed as incredible as a fairytale.

Beyond the quenching of his hunger and the stuffing of his pockets with two more of the sad sandwiches, he went back to his box car, knowing that, in the nature of things, his flight was as yet only fairly begun. His train, or some train in which his car was a unit, was just pulling out, and he was barely in time to slide the door and scramble in. Once inside, he made haste to close the opening before the train should emerge from the shelter of its mate on the next track. But before he could brace himself for the shove, a hand came down from the car roof, a brakeman's coupling-stick was thrust into the riding-rail of the door, and the closing operation was effectively blocked.

Smith stood back and waited for a head to follow the hand. It came presently; the bare, tousled head of a young brakeman who had taken off his cap and was lying on his stomach on the car roof to look under the eaves into the interior. Smith made a quick spring and caught the hanging head in the crook of his elbow. "You're gone," he remarked to the inverted face crushed in the vise of forearm and biceps. "If you turn loose, you'll break your back as you come over, and if you don't turn loose, I can pull your head off."

"Leggo of me!" gasped the poor prisoner, drumming with his toes on the roof. "Wha – whadda you want with my head? You can't do nothin' with it when you get it!"

"I have got it," said Smith, showing his teeth. "By and by, when

we get safely out of town, I'm going to jump up and bite you."

The brakeman tried to cry out that he was slipping; that the fall would kill him. Smith felt him coming and shifted his hold just in time to make the fall an assisted somersault, landing the man clumsily, but safely, inside of the car. The trigging stick had been lost in the scuffle, and Smith's first care was to slide the door.

"Say; what kind of a 'bo are you, anyway?" gasped the railroad man, flattening himself against the side of the car and struggling to regain his suddenly lost prestige; the time-honored authority of the trainman over the ride-stealer. "Don't you know you might 'a' killed me, pullin' me off'm the roof that way?"

"I can do it yet, if you feel that you've missed anything that was rightfully coming to you," Smith laughed. Then: "Do you happen to have a pipe and a bit of tobacco in your clothes?"

"My gosh!" said the brakeman, "I like your nerve!" Nevertheless, he rummaged in his pocket and handed over a corn-cob pipe and a sack of tobacco. "Maybe you'll want a match, too."

"No, thanks; I have one."

Smith filled the pipe, lighted it, and returned the tobacco. The nickel mixture was not quite like the Turkish blend in the humidor jar on the Kincaid Terrace mantel, but it sufficed. At the pipe-puffing the brakeman looked him over curiously.

"Say; you're no Weary Willie," he commented gruffly; "you're wearin' too good clothes. What's your lay?"

More and more Smith could feel the shacklings of the

reputable yesterdays slipping from him. Civilization has taken its time ambling down the centuries, but the short cuts to the primitive are neither hard to find nor long to traverse.

"My 'lay' just now is to get a free ride on this railroad," he said. "How far is this 'empty' going?"

"To St. Louis," was the reply, extorted by the very matter-of-fact calmness of the question. "But you're not goin' to St. Louis in it – not by a jugful. You're goin' to hop off at the first stop we make."

"Am I? Wait until I have finished my smoke. Then we'll open the door and scrap for it; the best man to stay in the car, and the other to take a chance turning handsprings along the right of way. Does that appeal to you?"

"No, by jacks! You bet your life it don't!"

"All right; what's the other answer?"

If the brakeman knew any other answer he did not suggest it. A few miles farther along, the train slowed for a stop. The brakeman felt his twisted neck tenderly and said: "If you'll tell me that you ain't runnin' away from some sheriff 'r other…"

"Do I look it?"

"I'm dogged if I know what you do look like – champeen middle-weight, maybe. Lemme open that door."

Smith took a final whiff and returned the pipe. "Suppose I say that I'm broke and haven't had a chance to pawn my watch," he suggested. "How does that strike you?"

The trainman slid the door open a foot or so as the train ground

and jangled to a stand at the grade crossing with another railroad.

"I'll think about it," he growled. "You pulled me off'm the roof; but you kep' me from breakin' my back, and you've smoked my pipe. My run ends at Terre Haute."

"Thanks," said Smith; and at that the tousle-headed young fellow dropped off and disappeared in the direction of the caboose.

Smith closed the door and hooked it with his wire, and the train jogged on over the crossing. Hour after hour wore away and nothing happened. By the measured click of the rail joints under the wheels it was evident that the freight was a slow one, and there were many halts and side-trackings. At noon Smith ate one of the pocketed sandwiches. The ham was oversalted, and before long he began to be consumed with thirst. He stood it until it became a keen torture, and then he found the bit of wire again and tried to pick the hasp-lock, meaning to take advantage of the next stop for a thirst-quenching dash.

For some reason the wire refused to work, and he could not make it free the hasp. After many futile attempts he whittled another peep-hole, angling it so that it pointed toward the puzzling door hook. Then he saw what had been done. Some one – the somersaulting brakeman, no doubt – had basely inserted a wooden peg in the staple in place of the hook and the empty box car was now a prison-van.

Confronting the water famine, Smith drew again upon the elemental resources and braced himself to endure. When night

came the slow train was still jogging along westward somewhere in Illinois, and the box-car prisoner was so thirsty that he did not dare to eat the meat in the remaining sandwich; could eat the bread only in tiny morsels, chewed long and patiently. Still he would not make the outcry that the tricky brakeman had doubtless counted upon; the noise that would bring help at any one of the numerous stops – and purchase relief at the price of an arrest for ride-stealing.

Grimly resolute, Smith made up his mind to hang on until morning. Every added mile was a mile gained in the flight from the gallows or the penitentiary, and the night's run would put him just that much farther beyond the zone of acute danger. Such determination fights and wins its own battle, and though he dreamed of lakes and rivers and cool-running brooks and plashing fountains the greater part of the night, he slept through it and awoke to find his car side-tracked in a St. Louis yard.

One glance through the whittled peep-hole showed him that the imprisoning peg was still in its staple, so now there was no alternative but the noise. A brawny switchman was passing, and he came and unhasped the door in response to Smith's shower of kicks upon it.

"Come down out o' that, ye scut! 'Tis the stone pile f'r the likes of yez in this State, and it's Michael Toomey that'll be runnin' ye in," remarked the brawny person, when the door had been opened.

"Wait," said Smith hoarsely. He had caught sight of a bucket

of water with a dipper in it standing by the door of the switch shanty, and he jumped down and ran for it. With the terrible thirst assuaged, he wheeled and went back to the big switchman. "Now I'm ready to be run in," he said. "But first, you know, you've got to prove that you're the better man," and with that he whipped off his coat and squared himself for the battle.

It was joined at once, the big man being Irish and nothing loath. Also, it was short and sweet. Barring a healthy and as yet unsatisfied appetite, Smith was in the pink of condition, and the little trainer in the Lawrenceville Athletic Club had imparted the needful skill. In three swift rounds the big switchman was thrashed into a proper state of submission and hospitality, and again, being Irish, he bore no grudge.

"You're a pugnayshus young traithor, and I'm fair sick for to be doin' ye a fayvor," spluttered the big man, after the third knock-out. "What is ut ye'll be wantin'?"

Smith promptly named three things; breakfast directions, a morning paper, and a railroad man's advice as to the best means of getting forward on his journey. His new ally put him in the way of compassing all three, and when the westward faring was resumed – this time in the hollow interior of a huge steel smoke-stack loaded in sections on a pair of flat cars – he went eagerly through the newspaper. The thing he was looking for was there, under flaring headlines; a day late, to be sure, but that was doubtless owing to Lawrenceville's rather poor wire service.

ATTEMPTED MURDER OF BANK PRESIDENT

Society-Leader Cashier Embezzles $100,000 and Makes Murderous Assault on President

Lawrenceville, May 15. – J. Montague Smith, cashier of the Lawrenceville Bank and Trust Company, and a leader in the Lawrenceville younger set, is to-day a fugitive from justice with a price on his head. At a late hour last night the watchman of the bank found President Dunham lying unconscious in front of his desk. Help was summoned, and Mr. Dunham, who was supposed to be suffering from some sudden attack of illness, was taken to his hotel. Later, it transpired that the president had been the victim of a murderous assault. Discovering upon his return to the city yesterday evening that the cashier had been using the bank's funds in an attempt to cover a stock speculation of his own, Dunham sent for Smith and charged him with the crime. Smith made an unprovoked and desperate assault upon his superior officer, beating him into insensibility and leaving him for dead. Since it is known that he did not board any of the night trains east or west, Smith is supposed to be in hiding somewhere in the vicinity of the city. A warrant is out, and a reward of $1,000 for his arrest and detention has been offered by the bank. It is not thought possible that

he can escape. It was currently reported not long since that Smith was engaged to a prominent young society woman of Lawrenceville, but this has proved to be untrue.

Smith read the garbled news story with mingled thankfulness and rage; thankfulness because it told him that he was not a murderer, and rage, no less at Dunham's malignant ingenuity than at his own folly in setting the seal of finality upon the false accusation by running away. But the thing was done, and it could not be undone. Having put himself on the wrong side of the law, there was nothing for it now but a complete disappearance; exile, a change of identity, and an absolute severance with his past.

While he was folding the St. Louis newspaper and putting it into his pocket, he was wondering, half cynically, what Verda Richlander was thinking of him. Was it she, herself, who had told the newspaper people that there was nothing in the story of the engagement? That she would side with his accusers and the apparent, or at least uncontradicted, facts he could hardly doubt. There was no very strong reason why she should not, he told himself, rather bitterly. He had not tried to bind her to him in any shackling of sentiment. Quite the contrary, they had both agreed to accept the modern view that sentiment should be regarded as a mildly irruptive malady which runs, or should run, its course, like measles or chicken-pox, in early adolescence. That being the case, Miss Verda's leaf – like all other leaves in the book of his past – might be firmly pasted down and forgotten. As an outlaw with a price on his head he had other and vastly more important

things to think about.

Twenty-four hours beyond this final decision he reached Kansas City, where there was a delay and some little diplomacy to be brought into play before he could convince a freight crew on the Union Pacific that he had to be carried, free of cost, to Denver. In the Colorado capital there was another halt and more trouble; but on the second day he found another empty box car and was once more moving westward, this time toward a definite destination.

During the Denver stop-over he had formulated his plan, such as it was. In a newspaper which he had picked up, he had lighted upon an advertisement calling for laborers to go over into the Timanyoni country to work on an irrigation project. By applying at the proper place he might have procured free transportation to the work, but there were two reasons why he did not apply. One was prudently cautionary and was based on the fear that he might be recognized. The other was less easily defined, but no less mandatory in the new scheme of things. The vagabonding had gotten into his blood, and he was minded to go on as he had begun, beating his way to the job like other members of the vagrant brotherhood.

IV
The High Hills

Train Number Seventeen, the Nevada through freight, was two hours late issuing from the western portal of Timanyoni Canyon. Through the early mountain-climbing hours of the night and the later flight across the Red Desert, the dusty, travel-grimed young fellow in the empty box car midway of the train had slept soundly, with the hard car floor for a bed and his folded coat for a pillow. But on the emergence of the train from the echoing canyon depths the sudden cessation of the crash and roar of the shut-in mountain passage awoke him and he got up to open the door and look out.

It was still no later than a lazy man's breakfast time, and the May morning was perfect, with a cobalt sky above and a fine tingling quality in the air to set the blood dancing in the veins. Over the top of the eastern range the sun was looking, level-rayed, into a parked valley bounded on all sides by high spurs and distant snow peaks. In its nearer reaches the valley was dotted with round hills, some of them bare, others dark green to their summits with forestings of mountain pine and fir. Now that it was out of the canyon, the train was skirting the foot of the southern boundary spur, the railroad track holding its level by heading the gulches and rounding the alternating promontories.

From the outer loopings of the curves, the young tramp at the car door had momentary glimpses of the Timanyoni, a mountain torrent in its canyon, and the swiftest of upland rivers even here where it had the valley in which to expand. A Copah switchman had told him that the railroad division town of Brewster lay at the end of the night's run, in a river valley beyond the eastern Timanyonis, and that the situation of the irrigation project which was advertising for laborers in the Denver newspapers was a few miles up the river from Brewster.

For reasons of his own, he was not anxious to make a daylight entry into the town itself. Sooner or later, of course, the scrutiny of curious eyes must be met, but there was no need of running to meet the risk. Not that the risk was very great. While he was killing time in the Copah yard the day before, waiting for a chance to board the night freight, he had picked up a bit of broken looking-glass and put it in his pocket. The picture it gave back when he took it out and looked into it was that of a husky young tramp with a stubble beard a week old, and on face and neck and hands the accumulated grime of two thousand miles of freight-train riding. Also, the week's wear and tear had been, if anything, harder on the clothes than on the man. His hat had been lost in one of the railroad-yard train-boardings and he had replaced it in Denver with a workman's cap. It was a part of the transformation, wrought and being wrought in him, that he was able to pocket the bit of looking-glass with a slow grin of satisfaction. When one is about to apply for a job as a laboring

man it is well to look the part.

As the train swept along on its way down the grades the valley became more open and the prospect broadened. At one of the promontory roundings the box-car passenger had a glimpse of a shack-built construction camp on the river's margin some distance on ahead. A concrete dam was rising in sections out of the river, and dominating the dam and the shacks two steel towers, with a carrying cable stretched between them, formed the piers of the aerial spout conveyer for the placing of the material in the forms.

A mile or more short of the construction camp the railroad made another of the many gulch loopings; and on its next emergence the train had passed the site of the dam, leaving it fully a mile in the rear. Here the young man at the car door saw the ditch company's unloading side-track with a spur branching away from the main line and crossing the river on a temporary trestle. There were material yards on both sides of the stream, and in one of the opposing hills a busy quarry.

The train made no stop at the construction siding, but a half-mile farther along the brakes began to grind and the speed was slackened. Sliding the car door another foot or two, the young tramp with the week-old stubble beard on his face leaned out to look ahead. His opportunity was at hand. A block semaphore was turned against the freight and the train was slowing in obedience to the signal. Waiting until the brakes shrilled again, the tramp put his shoulder to the sliding door, sat for a moment in the wider

opening, and then swung off.

After the train had gone on he drew himself up, took a deep chest-filling breath of the crisp morning air, and looked about him. The sun was an hour high over the eastern mountains, and the new world spread itself in broad detail. His alighting was upon one of the promontory embankments. To the westward, where the curving railroad track was lost in the farther windings of the river, lay the little intermountain city of Brewster, a few of its higher buildings showing clear-cut in the distance. Paralleling the railroad, on a lower level and nearer the river, a dusty wagon road pointed in one direction toward the town, and in the other toward the construction camp.

The young man who had crossed four States and the better part of a fifth as a fugitive and vagrant turned his back upon the distant town as a place to be avoided. Scrambling down the railroad embankment, he made his way to the wagon road, crossed it, and kept on until he came to the fringe of aspens on the river's edge, where he broke all the trampish traditions by stripping off the travel-worn clothes and plunging in to take a soapless bath. The water, being melted snow from the range, was icy-cold and it stabbed like knives. Nevertheless, it was wet, and some part of the travel dust, at least, was soluble in it. He came out glowing, but a thorn from his well-groomed past came up and pricked him when he had to put the soiled clothes on again. There was no present help for that, however; and five minutes later he had regained the road and was on his way to the ditch camp.

When he had gone a little distance he found that the wagon road dodged the railroad track as it could, crossing and recrossing the right of way twice before the construction camp came into view. The last of the crossings was at the temporary material yard for which the side-track had been installed, and from this point on, the wagon road held to the river bank. The ditch people were doubtless getting all their material over the railroad so there would be little hauling by wagon. But there were automobile tracks in the dust, and shortly after he had passed the material yard the tramp heard a car coming up behind him. It was a six-cylinder roadster, and its motor was missing badly.

He gave the automobile passing room when it came along, glancing up to note that its single occupant was a big, bearded man, wearing his gray tweeds as one to whom clothes were merely a convenience. He was chewing a black cigar, and the unoccupied side of his mouth was busy at the passing moment heaping objurgations upon the limping motor. A hundred yards farther along the motor gave a spasmodic gasp and stopped. When the young tramp came up, the big man had climbed out and had the hood open. What he was saying to the stalled motor was picturesque enough to make the young man stop and grin appreciatively.

"Gone bad on you?" he inquired.

Colonel Dexter Baldwin, the Timanyoni's largest landowner, and a breeder of fine horses who tolerated motor-cars only because they could be driven hard and were insensate and fit

subjects for abusive language, took his head out of the hood.

"The third time this morning," he snapped. "I'd rather drive a team of wind-broken mustangs, any day in the year!"

"I used to drive a car a while back," said the tramp. "Let me look her over."

The colonel stood aside, wiping his hands on a piece of waste, while the young man sought for the trouble. It was found presently in a loosened magneto wire; found and cleverly corrected. The tramp went around in front and spun the motor, and when it had been throttled down, Colonel Baldwin had his hand in his pocket.

"That's something like," he said. "The garage man said it was carbon. You take hold as if you knew how. What's your fee?"

The tramp shook his head and smiled good-naturedly.

"Nothing; for a bit of neighborly help like that."

The colonel put his coat on, and in the act took a better measure of the stalwart young fellow who looked like a hobo and talked and behaved like a gentleman. Colonel Dexter was a fairly shrewd judge of men, and he knew that the tramping brotherhood divides itself pretty evenly on a distinct line of cleavage, with the born vagrant on one side and the man out of work on the other.

"You are hiking out to the dam?" he asked brusquely.

"I am headed that way, yes," was the equally crisp rejoinder.

"Hunting a job?"

"Just that."

"What sort of a job?"

"Anything that may happen to be in sight."

"That usually means a pick and shovel or a wheelbarrow on a construction job. We're needing quarrymen and concrete handlers, and we could use a few more rough carpenters on the forms. But there isn't much office work."

The tramp looked up quickly.

"What makes you think I'm hunting for an office job?" he queried.

"Your hands," said the colonel shortly.

The young man looked at his hands thoughtfully. They were dirty again from the tinkering with the motor, but the inspection went deeper than the grime.

"I'm not afraid of the pick and shovel, or the wheelbarrow, and on some accounts I guess they'd be good for me. But on the other hand, perhaps it *is* a pity to spoil a middling good office man to make an indifferent day-laborer – to say nothing of knocking some honest fellow out of the only job he knows how to do."

Colonel Baldwin swung in behind the steering-wheel of the roadster and held a fresh match to the black cigar. Though he was from Missouri, he had lived long enough in the high hills to know better than to judge any man altogether by outward appearances.

"Climb in," he said, indicating the vacant seat at his side. "I'm the president of the ditch company. Perhaps Williams may be able to use you; but your chances for office work would be ten to one in the town."

"I don't care to live in the town," said the man out of work, mounting to the proffered seat; and past that the big roadster leaped away up the road and the roar of the rejuvenated motor made further speech impossible.

It was a full fortnight or more after this motor-tinkering incident on the hill road to the dam, when Williams, chief engineer of the ditch project, met President Baldwin in the Brewster offices of the ditch company and spent a busy hour with the colonel going over the contractors' estimates for the month in prospect. In an interval of the business talk, Baldwin remembered the good-looking young tramp who had wanted a job.

"Oh, yes; I knew there was something else that I wanted to ask you," he said. "How about the young fellow that I unloaded on you a couple of weeks ago? Did he make good?"

"Who – Smith?"

"Yes; if that's his name."

The engineer's left eyelid had a quizzical droop when he said dryly: "It's the name he goes by in camp; 'John Smith.' I haven't asked him his other name."

The ranchman president matched the drooping eyelid of unbelief with a sober smile. "I thought he looked as if he might be out here for his health – like a good many other fellows who have no particular use for a doctor. How is he making it?"

The engineer, a hard-bitten man with the prognathous lower jaw characterizing the tribe of those who accomplish things,

thrust his hands into his pockets and walked to the window to look down into the Brewster street. When he turned to face Baldwin again, it was to say: "That young fellow is a wonder, Colonel. I put him into the quarry at first, as you suggested, and in three days he had revolutionized things to the tune of a twenty-per-cent saving in production costs. Then I gave him a hack at the concrete-mixers, and he's making good again in the cost reduction. That seems to be his specialty."

The president nodded and was sufficiently interested to follow up what had been merely a casual inquiry.

"What are you calling him now? – a betterment engineer? You know your first guess was that he was somebody's bookkeeper out of a job."

Williams wagged his head.

"He's a three-cornered puzzle to me, yet. He isn't an engineer, but when you drag a bunch of cost money up the trail, he goes after it like a dog after a rabbit. I'm not anxious to lose him, but I really believe you could make better use of him here in the town office than I can on the job."

Baldwin was shaking his head dubiously.

"I'm afraid he'd have to loosen up on his record a little before we could bring him in here. Badly as we're needing a money man, we can hardly afford to put a 'John Smith' into the saddle – at least not without knowing what his other name used to be."

"No; of course not. I guess, after all, he's only a 'lame duck,' like a good many of the rest of them. Day before yesterday,

Burdell, the deputy sheriff, was out at the camp looking the gangs over for the fellow who broke into Lannigan's place last Saturday night. When he came into the office Smith was busy with an estimate, and Burdell went up and touched him on the shoulder, just to let him know that it was time to wake up. Suffering cats! It took three of us to keep him from breaking Burdell in two and throwing him out of the window!"

"That looks rather bad," was the president's comment. Colonel Dexter Baldwin had been the first regularly elected sheriff of Timanyoni County in the early days and he knew the symptoms. "Was Burdell wearing his star where it could be seen?"

The engineer nodded.

"What explanation did Smith make?"

"Oh, he apologized like a gentleman, and said he was subject to little nervous attacks like that when anybody touched him unexpectedly. He took Burdell over to Pete Simm's shack saloon and bought him a drink. Perkins, the timekeeper, says he's going to get a megaphone so he can give due notice in advance when he wants to call Smith's attention."

The colonel pulled out a drawer in the desk, found his box of diplomatic cigars and passed it to the engineer, saying: "Light up a sure-enough good one, and tell me what you think Smith has been doing back yonder in the other country."

Williams took the cigar but he shied at the conundrum.

"Ask me something easy," he said. "I've stacked up a few guesses. He's from the Middle West – as the Bible says, his

'speech bewrayeth' him – and he's had a good job of some kind; the kind that required him to keep abreast of things. If there's anything in looks, you'd say he wasn't a thief or an embezzler, and yet it's pretty apparent that he's been used to handling money in chunks and making it work for its living. I've put it up that there's a woman in it. Perhaps the other fellow got in his way, or came up behind him and touched him unexpectedly, or something of that sort. Anyway, I'm not going to believe he's a crooked crook until I have to."

Colonel Baldwin helped himself to one of his own cigars, and the talk went back to business. In the irrigation project, Williams was a stockholder as well as the chief of construction, and Baldwin had more than once found him a safe adviser. There was need for counsel. The Timanyoni Ditch Company was in a rather hazardous condition financially, and the president and Williams rarely met without coming sooner or later to a threshing out of the situation.

The difficulties were those which are apt to confront a small and local enterprise when it is so unfortunate as to get in the way of larger undertakings. Colonel Baldwin, and a group of his neighbors on the north side of the river, were reformed cattlemen and horse breeders. Instead of drifting farther west in advance of the incoming tide of population following the coming of the railroad, they had availed themselves of their homestead rights and had taken up much of the grass-land in the favorable valleys, irrigating it at first with water taken out of the river in private or

neighborhood ditches.

Later on came the sheep-feeding period, and after that the utilization of larger crop-raising areas. The small ditches proving inadequate for these, Colonel Baldwin had formed a stock company among his neighbors in the grass-lands and his friends in Brewster for the building of a substantial dam in the eastern hills. The project had seemed simple enough in the beginning. The stock was sold for cash and each stockholder would be a participating user of the water. Williams, who had been a United States reclamation man before he came to the Timanyoni, had made careful estimates, and the stock subscription provided money enough to cover the cost of the dam and the main ditch.

After some little bargaining, the dam site and the overflow land for the reservoir lake had been secured, and the work was begun. Out of a clear sky, however, came trouble and harassment. Alien holders of mining claims in the reservoir area turned up and demanded damages. Some few homesteaders who had promised to sign quitclaims changed their minds and sued for relief, and after the work was well under way it appeared that there was a cloud on the title of the dam site itself. All of these clashings were carried into court, and the rancher promoters found themselves confronting invisible enemies and obstacle-raisers at every turn.

The legal fight, as they soon found out, cost much money in every phase of it; and now, when the dam was scarcely more than half completed, a practically empty treasury was staring them

in the face. This was the situation which called for its regular threshing out in every conference between Colonel Baldwin and his chief of construction. There was no disguising the fact that a crisis was approaching, a financial crisis which no one among the amateur promoters was big enough to cope with.

"We've got to go in deeper, Colonel; there is nothing else to do," was the engineer's summing up of the matter at the close of the conference. "The snow is melting pretty rapidly on the range now, and when we get the June rise we'll stand to lose everything we have if we can't keep every wheel turning to get ready for the high water."

Baldwin was holding his cigar between his fingers and scowling at it as if it had mortally offended him.

"Assessments on the stock, you mean?" he said. "I'm afraid our crowd won't stand for that. A good part of it is ready to lie down in the harness right now."

"How about a bond issue?" asked the engineer.

"Lord of heavens! What do we, or any of us, know about bond issues? Why, we knew barely enough about the business at the start to chip in together and buy us a charter and go to work on a plan a little bit bigger than the neighborhood ditch idea. You couldn't float bonds in Timanyoni Park, and we're none of us foxy enough to go East and float 'em."

"I guess that's right, too," admitted Williams. "Besides, with the stock gone off the way it has, it would take a mighty fine-haired financial sharp to sell bonds."

"What's that?" demanded the president. "Who's been selling any stock?"

"Buck Gardner, for one; and that man Bolling, up at the head of Little Creek, for another. Maxwell, the railroad superintendent, told me about it, and he says that the price offered, and accepted, was thirty-nine."

"Dad burn a cuss with a yellow streak in him!" rasped the Missouri colonel. "We had a fair and square agreement among ourselves that if anybody got scared he was to give the rest of us a chance to buy him out. Who bought from these welshers?"

"Maxwell didn't know that. He said it was done through Kinzie's bank. From what I've heard on the outside, I'm inclined to suspect that Crawford Stanton was the buyer."

"Stanton, the real-estate man?"

"The same."

Again the president stared thoughtfully at the glowing end of his cigar.

"There's another of the confounded mysteries," he growled. "Who is Crawford Stanton, and what is he here for? I know what he advertises, but everybody in Brewster knows that he hasn't made a living dollar in real estate since he came here last winter. Williams, do you know, I'm beginning to suspect that there is a mighty big nigger in our little wood-pile?"

"You mean that all these stubborn hold-ups have been bought and paid for? You'll remember that is what Billy Starbuck tried to tell us when the first of the missing mining-claim owners began

to shout at us."

"Starbuck has a long head, and what he doesn't know about mining claims in this part of the country wouldn't fill a very big book. I remember he said there had never been any prospecting done in the upper Timanyoni gulches, and now you'd think half the people in the United States had been nosing around up there with a pick and shovel at one time or another. But it was a thing that Starbuck told me no longer ago than yesterday that set me to thinking," Baldwin went on. "As you know, the old Escalante Spanish Grant corners over in the western part of this park. When the old grants were made, they were ruled off on the map without reference to mountain ranges or other natural barriers."

Williams nodded.

"Well, as I say, one corner of the Escalante reaches over the Hophras and out into the park, covering about eight or ten square miles of the territory just beyond us on our side of the river. Starbuck told me yesterday that a big Eastern colonization company had got a bill through Congress alienating that tract."

The chief of construction bounded out of his chair and began to walk the floor. "By George!" he said; and again: "By George! That's what we're up against, Colonel! Where will those fellows get the water for their land? There is no site for a dam lower down than ours, and, anyway, that land lies too high to be watered by anything but a high-line ditch!"

"Nice little brace game, isn't it?" growled Baldwin. "If we hadn't been a lot of hayseed amateurs, we might have found out

long ago that some one was running in a cold deck on us. What's your notion? Are we done up, world without end?"

Williams's laugh was grim.

"What we need, Colonel, is to go out on the street and yell for a doctor," he said. "It's beginning to look as if we had acquired a pretty bad case of malignant strangle-itis."

Baldwin ran his fingers through his hair and admitted that he had lost his sense of humor.

"It's hell, Williams," he said soberly. "You know how recklessly I've waded into this thing – how recklessly we've all gone into it for that matter. I'll come down like a man and admit that it has climbed up the ladder to a place where I can't reach it. This Eastern crowd is trying to freeze us out, to get our dam and reservoir and ditch rights for their Escalante scheme. When they do, they'll turn around and sell us water – at fifty dollars an inch, or something like that!"

"What breaks my heart is that we haven't been able to surround the sure-enough fact while there was still time to do something," lamented the ex-reclamation man. "The Lord knows it's been plain enough, with Stanton right here on the ground, and probably every one of the interferences traceable directly to him. He has begun to close in on us; his purchase of the Gardner and Bolling stockholdings is the beginning of the end. You know as well as I do, Colonel, what a contagious disease 'the yellows' is. Others will get it, and the first thing we know, Stanton will own a majority of the stock and be voting us all out of a job. You'll

have to come around to my suggestion, after all, and advertise for a doctor." It was said of the chief of construction that he would have joked on his death-bed, and, as a follower for the joke, he added: "Why don't you call Smith in and give him the job?"

"Smith be damned," growled the colonel, who, as we have seen, had become completely color-blind on the sense-of-humor side.

"I wouldn't put it beyond him to develop into the young Napoleon of finance that we seem to be needing just now," Williams went on, carrying the jest to its legitimate conclusion.

Baldwin, like other self-made promoters in their day of trouble, was in the condition of the drowning man who catches at straws.

"You don't really mean that, Williams, do you?" he asked.

"No, I didn't mean it when I said it," was the engineer's admission; "I was only trying to get a rise out of you. But really, Colonel, on second thought I don't know but it is worth considering. As I say, Smith seems to know the money game from start to finish. What is better still, he is a fighter from the word go – what you might call a joyous fighter. Suppose you drive out to-morrow or next day and pry into him a little."

The rancher president had relapsed once more into the slough of discouragement.

"You are merely grabbing for handholds, Bartley – as I was a minute ago. We are in a bad row of stumps when we can sit here and talk seriously about roping down a young hobo and putting

him into the financial harness. Let's go around to Frascati's and eat before you go back to camp. It's bread-time, anyway."

The chief of construction said no more about his joking suggestion at the moment, but when they were walking around the square to the Brewster Delmonico's he went back to the dropped subject in all seriousness, saying: "Just the same, I wish you could know Smith and size him up as I have. I can't help believing, some way, that he's all to the good."

V
The Specialist

Though the matter of calling in an expert doctor of finance to diagnose the alarming symptoms in Timanyoni Ditch had been left indeterminate in the talk between Colonel Baldwin and himself, Williams did not let it go entirely by default. On the day following the Brewster office conference the engineer sent for Smith, who was checking the output of the crushers at the quarry, and a little later the "betterment" man presented himself at the door of the corrugated-iron shack which served as a field office for the chief.

Williams looked the cost-cutter over as he stood in the doorway. Smith was thriving and expanding handsomely in the new environment. He had let his beard grow and it was now long enough to be trimmed to a point. The travel-broken clothes had been exchanged for working khaki, with lace boots and leggings, and the workman's cap had given place to the campaign felt of the engineers. Though he had been less than a month on the job, he was already beginning to tan and toughen under the healthy outdoor work – to roughen, as well, his late fellow members of the Lawrenceville Cotillon Club might have said, since he had fought three pitched battles with as many of the camp bullies, and had in each of them approved himself a man of his hands who

could not only take punishment, but could hammer an opponent swiftly and neatly into any desired state of subjection.

"Come in here and sit down; I want to talk to you," was the way Williams began it; and after Smith had found a chair and had lighted a gift cigar from the headquarters desk-box, the chief went on: "Say, Smith, you're too good a man for anything I've got for you here. Haven't you realized that?"

Smith pulled a memorandum-book from his hip pocket and ran his eye over the private record he had been keeping.

"I've shown you how to effect a few little savings which total up something like fifteen per cent of your cost of production and operation," he said. "Don't you think I'm earning my wages?"

"That's all right; I've been keeping tab, too, and I know what you're doing. But you are not beginning to earn what you ought to, either for yourself or the company," put in the chief shrewdly. And then: "Loosen up, Smith, and tell me something about yourself. Who are you, and where do you come from, and what sort of a job have you been holding down?"

Smith's reply was as surprising as it was seemingly irrelevant.

"If you're not too busy, Mr. Williams, I guess you'd better make out my time-check," he said quietly.

Williams took a reflective half-minute for consideration, turning the sudden request over deliberately in his mind, as his habit was.

"I suppose, by that you mean that you'll quit before you will consent to open up on your record?" he assumed.

"You've guessed it," said the man who had sealed the book of his past.

Again Williams took a little time. It was discouraging to have his own and the colonel's prefigurings as to Smith's probable state and standing so promptly verified.

"I suppose you know the plain inference you're leaving, when you say a thing like that?"

Smith made the sign of assent. "It leaves you entirely at liberty to finish out the story to suit yourself," he admitted, adding: "The back numbers – my back numbers – are my own, Mr. Williams. I've kept a file of them, as everybody does, but I don't have to produce it on request."

"Of course, there's nothing compulsory about your producing it. But unless you are what they call in this country a 'crooked' crook, you are standing in your own light. You have such a staving good head for figures and finances that it seems a pity for you to be wasting it here on an undergraduate's job in cost-cutting. Any young fellow just out of a technical school could do what you're doing in the way of paring down expenses."

The cost-cutter's smile was mildly incredulous.

"Nobody seemed to be doing it before I came," he offered.

"No," Williams allowed, "that's the fact. To tell the plain truth, we've had bigger things to wrestle with; and we have them yet, for that matter – enough of them to go all around the job twice and tie in a bow-knot."

"Finances?" queried Smith, feeling some of the back-number

instincts stirring within him.

The chief engineer nodded; then he looked up with a twinkle in his closely set gray eyes. "If you'll tell me why you tried to kill Burdell the other day, maybe I'll open up the record – our record – for you."

This time the cost-cutter's smile was good-naturedly derisive, and it ignored the reference to Burdell.

"You don't have to open up your record – for me; it's the talk of the camp. You people are undercapitalized – to boil it down into one word. Isn't that about the way it sizes up?"

"That is the way it has turned out; though we had capital enough to begin with. We've been bled to death by damage suits."

Smith shook his head. "Why haven't you hired a first-class attorney, Mr. Williams?"

"We've had the best we could find, but the other fellows have beaten us to it, every time. But the legal end of it hasn't been the whole thing or the biggest part of it. What we are needing most is a man who knows a little something about corporation fights and high finance." And at this the engineer forgot the Smith disabilities, real or inferential, and went on to explain in detail the peculiar helplessness of the Timanyoni Company as the antagonist of the as yet unnamed land and irrigation trust.

Smith heard him through, nodding understandingly when the tale was told.

"It's the old story of the big fish swallowing the little one; so old that there is no longer any saving touch of novelty in it,"

he commented. "I've been wondering if there wasn't something of that kind in your background. And you say you haven't any Belmonts or Morgans or Rockefellers in your company?"

"We have a bunch of rather badly scared-up ranch owners and local people, with Colonel Baldwin in command, and that's all. The colonel is a fighting man, all right, and he can shoot as straight as anybody, when you have shown him what to shoot at. But he is outclassed, like all the rest of us, when it comes to a game of financial freeze-out. And that is what we are up against, I'm afraid."

"There isn't the slightest doubt in the world about that," said the one who had been called in as an expert. "What I can't understand is why some of you didn't size the situation up long ago – before it got into its present desperate shape. You are at the beginning of the end, now. They've caught you with an empty treasury, and these stock sales you speak of prove that they have already begun to swallow you by littles. Timanyoni Common – I suppose you haven't any Preferred – at thirty-nine is an excellent gamble for any group of men who can see their way clear to buying the control. With an eager market for the water – and they can sell the water to you people, even if they don't put their own Escalante project through – the stock can be pushed to par and beyond, as it will be after you folks are all safely frozen out. More than that, they can charge you enough, for the water you've got to have, to finance the Escalante scheme and pay all the bills; and their investment, at the present market, will be only thirty-

nine cents in the dollar. It's a neat little play."

Williams was by this time far past remembering that his adviser was a man with a possible *alias* and presumably a fugitive from justice.

"Can't something be done, Smith? You've had experience in these things; your talk shows it. Have we got to stand still and be shot to pieces?"

"The necessity remains to be demonstrated. But you will be shot to pieces, to a dead moral certainty, if you don't put somebody on deck with the necessary brains, and do it quickly," said Smith with frank bluntness.

"Hold on," protested the engineer. "Every man to his trade. When I said that we had nobody but the neighbors and our friends in the company, I didn't mean to give the impression that they were either dolts or chuckleheads. As a matter of fact, we have a pretty level-headed bunch of men in Timanyoni Ditch – though I'll admit that some of them are nervous enough, just now, to want to get out on almost any terms. What I meant to say was that they don't happen to be up in all the crooks and turnings of the high-finance buccaneers."

"I didn't mean to reflect upon Colonel Baldwin and his friends," rejoined the ex-cashier good-naturedly. "It is nothing especially discrediting to them that they are not up in all the tricks of a trade which is not theirs. The financing of a scheme like this has come to be a business by itself, Mr. Williams, and it is hardly to be expected that a group of inexperienced men could

do it successfully."

"I know that, blessed well. That is what I said from the beginning, and I think Colonel Baldwin leaned that way, too. But it seemed like a very simple undertaking. A number of stockmen and crop growers wanted a dam and a ditch, and they had the money to pay for them. That seemed to be all there was to it in the beginning."

Smith was leaning back in his chair and smoking reflectively.

"Did you call me in here to get an expert opinion?" he asked, half humorously.

"Something of that kind – yes; just on the bare chance that you could, and would, give us one," Williams admitted.

"Well, I'm hardly an expert," was the modest reply; "but if I were in your place I should hire the best financial scrapper that money could pay for. I can't attempt to tell you what such a man would do, but he would at least rattle around in the box and try to give you a fighting chance, which is more than you seem to have now."

The construction chief turned abruptly upon his cost-cutter.

"Keeping in mind what you said a few minutes ago about 'back numbers,' would it be climbing over the fence too far for me to ask if your experience has been such as would warrant you in tackling a job of this kind?"

"That is a fair question, and I can answer it straight," said the man under fire. "I've had the experience."

"I thought so; and that brings on more talk. I'm not authorized

to make you any proposal. But Colonel Baldwin and I were talking the matter over yesterday and your name was mentioned. I told the colonel that it was very evident that you were accustomed to handling bigger financial matters than these labor-and-material cost-cuttings you've been figuring on out here. If the colonel should ask you to, would you consider as a possibility the taking of the doctor's job on this sick project of ours?"

"No," was the brief rejoinder.

"Why not?"

Smith looked away out of the one square window in the shack at the busy scene on the dam stagings.

"Let us say that I don't care to mix and mingle with my kind, Mr. Williams, and let it go at that," he said.

"You are not interested in that side of it?"

"Interested, but not to the point of enlisting."

"You don't think of anything that might make you change your mind?"

"There is nothing that you could offer which would be a sufficient inducement."

"Why isn't there?"

"Because I'm not exactly a born simpleton, Mr. Williams. There are a number of reasons which are purely personal to me, and at least one which cuts ice on your side of the pond. Your financial 'doctor,' as you call him, would have to be trusted absolutely in the handling of the company's money and its negotiable securities. You would have a perfect right to demand

any and every assurance of his fitness and trustworthiness. You could, and should, put him under a fairly heavy bond. I'll not go into it any deeper than to say that I can't give a bond."

Williams took his defeat, if it could be called a defeat, without further protest.

"I thought it might not be amiss to talk it over with you," he said. "I don't know that the colonel will make any move, but if he does, he will deal with you direct. You say it is impossible, and perhaps it is. But it won't do any harm for you to think it over, and if I were you, I shouldn't burn all the bridges behind me. There ought to be considerable money in it for the right man, if he succeeds, and nothing much to lose if he should fail."

Smith went back to his work in the quarry with a troubled mind. The little heart-to-heart talk with Williams had been sharply depressive. It had shown him, as nothing else could, how limited for all the remainder of his life his chances must be. That he would be pursued, that descriptions and photographs of the ex-cashier of the Lawrenceville Bank and Trust Company were already circulating from hand to hand among the paid man-catchers, he did not doubt for a moment. While he could remain as a workman unit in an isolated construction camp, there was some little hope that he might be overlooked. But to become the public character of Williams's suggestion in a peopled city was to run to meet his fate.

In a way the tentative offer was a keen temptation. One of the lustiest growths pushing its way up through the new soil of

the metamorphosis was a strong and mounting conviction that J. Montague Smith, of the Lawrenceville avatar, had been only half a man; was, at his best, only a pale shadow of the plain John Smith to whom accident and a momentary impulse of passion had given birth. With a clear field he would have asked for nothing better than a chance to take the leadership in the fight which Williams had outlined, and the new and elemental stirrings were telling him that he could win the fight. But with a price on his head it was not to be thought of.

That night, when he rolled himself in his blankets in the bunk tent, he had renewed his prudent determination and it was crystallizing itself in words.

"No, not for money or gratitude or any other argument they can bring to bear," he said to himself, and thereupon fell asleep with the mistaken notion that he had definitely pushed the temptation aside for good and all.

VI
The Twig

It is said that the flow of a mighty river may owe its most radical change in direction to the chance thrusting of a twig into the current at some critical instant in the rise or fall of the flood. To the reincarnated Smith, charting his course upon the conviction that his best chance of immunity lay in isolation and a careful avoidance of the peopled towns, came the diverting twig in this wise.

On the second morning following the unofficial talk with Bartley Williams in the iron-sheeted headquarters office at the dam, a delayed consignment of cement, steel, and commissary supplies was due at the side-track a mile below the camp. Perkins, the timekeeper, took the telephone call from Brewster giving notice of the shipment, and started the camp teams to meet the train, sending a few men along to help with the unloading. Later, he called Smith in from the quarry and gave him the invoices covering the shipment.

"I guess you'd better go down to the siding and check this stuff in, so that we'll know what we're getting," was his suggestion to the general utility man; and Smith put the invoices into his pocket and took the road, a half-hour or more behind the teams.

When the crookings of the tote-road let him get his first sight

of the side-track, he saw that the train was already in and the mixed shipment of camp supplies had been transferred to the wagons. A few minutes sufficed for the checking, and since there was nothing more to be done, he sent the unloading gang back to camp with the teams, meaning to walk back, himself, after he should have seen the car of steel and the two cars of cement kicked in at the upper end of the side-track.

While he was waiting for the train to pull up and make the shift he was commenting idly upon the clumsy lay-out of the temporary unloading yard, and wondering if Williams were responsible for it. The siding was on the outside of a curve and within a hundred yards of the river bank. There was scanty space for the unloading of material, and a good bit of what there was was taken up by the curving spur which led off from the siding to cross the river on a trestle, and by the wagon road itself, which came down a long hill on the south side of the railroad and made an abrupt turn to cross the main track and the siding fairly in the midst of things.

As the long train pulled up to clear the road crossing, Smith stepped back and stood between the two tracks. A moment later the cut was made, and the forward section of the train went on to set the three loaded cars out at the upper switch, leaving the rear half standing on the main line. From his position between the tracks there was a clear view past the caboose at the end of the halted section and beyond, to the road crossing and the steep grade down which the dusty wagon road made a rough gash in

the shoulder of the mountain spur which had crowded it from the river-bank side of the railroad right of way. At the bottom of the steep grade, where the road swerved to cross the two tracks, there was a little sag; and between the sag and the crossing a sharp bit of up-grade made to gain the level of the railroad embankment.

One of the men of the unloading gang, a leather-faced grade shoveller who had helped to build the Nevada Short Line, had lagged behind the departing wagons to fill and light his pipe.

"Wouldn't that jar you up right good and hard f'r a way to run a railroad," he said to Smith, indicating the wholly deserted standing section of the freight with the burnt match-end. "Them fellies 've all gone off up ahead, a-leavin' this yere hind end without a sign of a man'r a flag to take keer of it. S'pose another train 'd come boolgin' 'round that curve. Wouldn't it rise merry hell with things 'long about this-away?"

Smith was listening only with the outward ear to what the pipelighter was saying. Somewhere in the westward distances a thunderous murmur was droning upon the windless air of the June morning, betokening, as it seemed, the very catastrophe the ex-grade-laborer was prefiguring. Smith stripped his coat for a flag and started to run toward the crossing, but before he had caught his stride a dust cloud swept up over the shoulder of the wagon-road hill and the portentous thunderings were accounted for. A big gray automobile, with the cut-out open, was topping the side-hill grade, and Smith recognized it at once. It was Colonel Dexter Baldwin's roadster, and it held a single occupant

– namely, the young woman who was driving it.

Smith stopped running and transferred his anxiety from the train and railroad affairs to the young woman. Being himself a skilful driver of cars – and a man – he had a purely masculine distrust of the woman, any woman, behind a steering-wheel. To be sure, there was no danger, as yet. Turning to look up the track, he saw that the three loaded cars had been set out, that the forward section of the train had been pulled up over the switch, and that it was now backing to make the coupling with the standing half. He hoped that the trainmen had seen the automobile, and that they would not attempt to make the coupling until after the gray car had crossed behind the caboose. But in the same breath he guessed, and guessed rightly, that they were too far around the curve to be able to see the wagon-road approach.

Still there was time enough, and room enough. The caboose on the rear end of the standing section was fully a hundred feet clear of the road crossing; and if the entire train should start backward at the coupling collision, the speed at which the oncoming roadster was running should take it across and out of danger. Nevertheless, there was no margin for the unexpected. Smith saw the young woman check the speed for the abrupt turn at the bottom of the hill, saw the car take the turn in a skidding slide, heard the renewed roar of the motor as the throttle was opened for a run at the embankment grade. Then the unexpected dropped its bomb. There was a jangling crash and the cars on the

main track were set in motion toward the crossing. The trainmen had tried to make their coupling, the drawheads had failed to engage, and the rear half of the train was surging down upon the point of hazard.

Smith's shout, or the sight of the oncoming train, one of the two, or both, put the finishing touch on the young woman's nerve. There was still time in which to clear the train, but at the critical instant the young woman apparently changed her mind and tried to stop the big car short of the crossing. The effort was unsuccessful. When the stop was made, the front wheels of the roadster were precisely in the middle of the main track, and the motor was killed.

By this time Smith had thrown his coat away and was racing the backing train, with the ex-grade-laborer a poor second a dozen yards to the rear. Having ridden in the roadster, Smith knew that it had no self-starter. "*Jump!*" he yelled. "Get out of the car!" and then his heart came into his mouth when he saw that she was struggling to free herself and couldn't; that she was entangled in some way behind the low-hung tiller-wheel.

Smith was running fairly abreast of the caboose when he made this discovery, and the hundred feet of clearance had shrunk to fifty. In imagination he could already see the gray car overturned and crushed under the wheels of the train. In a flying spurt he gained a few yards on the advancing menace and hurled himself against the front of the stopped roadster. He did not attempt to crank the motor. There was time only for a mighty heave and

shove to send the car backing down the slope of the crossing approach; for this and for the quick spring aside to save himself; and the thing was done.

VII
A Notice to Quit

Once started and given its push, the gray roadster drifted backward from the railroad crossing and kept on until it came to rest in the sag at the turn in the road. Running to overtake it, Smith found that the young woman was still trying, ineffectually, to free herself. In releasing the clutch her dress had been caught and Smith was glad enough to let the extricating of the caught skirt and the cranking of the engine serve for a breath-catching recovery.

When he stepped back to "tune" the spark the young woman had subsided into the mechanician's seat and was retying her veil with fingers that were not any too steady. She was small but well-knit; her hair was a golden brown and there was a good deal of it; her eyes were set well apart, and in the bright morning sunlight they were a slaty gray – of the exact shade of the motor veil she was rearranging. Smith had a sudden conviction that he had seen the wide-set eyes before; also the straight little nose and the half boyish mouth and chin, though where he had seen them the conviction could give no present hint.

"I sup-pup-pose I ought to say something appropriate," she was beginning, half breathlessly, while Smith stood at the fender and grinned in character-not with the ex-leader of

the Lawrenceville younger set, but with the newer and more elemental man of all work on a desert dam-building job. "Wha-what *is* the proper thing to say when you have just been sus-snatched out of the way of a railroad train?"

As J. Montague, the rescuer would have had a neatly turned rejoinder at his tongue's end; but the well-mannered phrases were altogether too conventional to suggest themselves to a strapping young barbarian in ill-fitting khaki and leggings and a slouch felt. Being unable to recall them, he laughed and pushed the J. Montague past still farther into the background.

"You don't have to say anything. It's been a long time since I've had a chance to make such a bully grand-stand play as this." And then: "You're Colonel Baldwin's daughter, aren't you?"

She nodded, saying:

"How did you know?"

"I know the car. And you have your father's eyes."

She did not seem to take it amiss that he was making her eyes a basis for comparisons. One William Starbuck, a former cattleman and her father's time-tried friend, paid Miss Corona the compliment of saying that she never allowed herself to get "bogged down in the haughtinesses." She was her father's only son, as well as his only daughter, and she divided her time pretty evenly in trying to live up to both sets of requirements.

"You have introduced me; wo-won't you introduce yourself?" she said, when a second crash of the shifting freight-train spent itself and gave her an opening.

"I'm Smith," he told her; adding: "It's my real name."

Her laugh was an instant easing of tensions.

"Oh, yes; you're Mr. Williams's assistant. I've heard Colonel-da – my father, speak of you."

"No," he denied in blunt honesty, "I'm not Williams's assistant; at least, the pay-roll doesn't say so. Up at the camp they call me 'The Hobo,' and that's what I was a week or so ago when your father picked me up and gave me a lift to the dam in this car."

The young woman had apparently regained whatever small fraction of self-possession the narrow escape had shocked aside.

"Are they never going to take that miserable train out of the way?" she exclaimed. "I've got to see Mr. Williams, and there isn't a minute to spare. That is why I was breaking all the speed limits."

"They are about ready to pull out now," he returned, with a glance over his shoulder at the train. "I'm a sort of general utility man up at the camp: can you use me in any way?"

"I'm afraid you won't do," she replied, with a little laughing grimace that made him wonder where and when in the past he had seen some young woman do the same thing under exactly similar conditions. "It's a matter of business – awfully urgent business. Colonel-da – I mean my father, has gone up to Red Butte, and a little while ago they telephoned over to the ranch from the Brewster office to say that there was going to be some more trouble at the dam."

"They?" he queried.

"Mr. Martin, the head bookkeeper. He said he'd been trying to get Mr. Williams, but the wires to the camp were out of order."

"They're not," said Smith shortly, remembering that Perkins had been talking from the camp to the Brewster railroad agent within the half-hour. "But never mind that: go on."

Again she let him see the piquant little grimace.

"You say that just as if you *were* Mr. Williams's assistant," she threw back at him. "But I haven't time to quarrel with you this morning, Mr. Real-name Smith. If you'll take your foot off the fender I'll go on up to the dam and find Mr. Williams."

"You couldn't quarrel with me if you should try," was the good-natured rejoinder, and Smith tried in vain to imagine himself taking his present attitude with any of the young women he had known in his cotillon days – with Verda Richlander, for example. Then he added: "You won't find Williams at the camp. He started out early this morning to ride the lower ditch lines beyond Little Creek, and he said he wouldn't be back until some time to-morrow. Now will you tell me what you're needing – and give me a possible chance to get my pay raised?"

"*Oh!*" she exclaimed, with a little gasp of disappointment, presumably for the Williams absence. "I've simply *got* to find Mr. Williams – or somebody! Do you happen to know anything about the lawsuit troubles?"

"I know all about them; Williams has told me."

"Then I'll tell you what Mr. Martin telephoned. He said that

three men were going to pretend to relocate a mining claim in the hills back of the dam, somewhere near the upper end of the reservoir lake-that-is-to-be. They're doing it so that they can get out an injunction, or whatever you call it, and then we'll have to buy them off, as the others have been bought off."

Smith was by this time entirely familiar with the maps and profiles and other records of the ditch company's lands and holdings.

"All the land within the limits of the flood level has been bought and paid for – some of it more than once, hasn't it?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; but that doesn't make any difference. These men will claim that their location was made long ago, and that they are just now getting ready to work it. It's often done in the case of mining claims."

"When is all this going to happen?" he inquired.

"It is already happening," she broke out impatiently. "Mr. Martin said the three men left town a little after daybreak and crossed on the Brewster bridge to go up on the other side of the Timanyoni. They had a two-horse team and a camping outfit. They are probably at work long before this time."

The young woman had taken her place again behind the big tiller-wheel, and Smith calmly motioned her out of it.

"Take the other seat and let me get in here," he said; and when she had changed over, he swung in behind the wheel and put a foot on the clutch pedal.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to take you on up to the camp, and then, if you'll lend me this car, I'll go and do what you hoped to persuade Williams to do – run these mining-claim jokers into the tall timber."

"But you can't!" she protested; "you can't do it alone! And, besides, they are on the other side of the river, and you can't get anywhere with the car. You'll have to go all the way back to Brewster to get across the river!"

It was just here that he stole another glance at the very-much-alive little face behind the motor veil; at the firm, round chin and the resolute, slaty-gray eyes.

"I suppose I ought to take you to the camp," he said. "But you may go along with me, if you want to – and are not afraid."

She laughed in his face.

"I was born here in the Timanyoni, and you haven't been here three weeks: do you think I'd be afraid to go anywhere that you'll go?"

"We'll see about that," he chuckled, matching the laugh; and with that he let the clutch take hold and sent the car rolling gently up to the level of the railroad embankment and across the rails of the main track.

On the right of way of the paralleling side-track he steered off the crossing and pulled the roadster around until it was headed fairly for the upper switch. Then he climbed down and recovered his coat which had been flung aside in the race with the train.

Resuming his place behind the tiller-wheel, he put the motor in the reverse and began to back the car on the siding, steering so that the wheels on one side hugged the inside of one rail.

"What in the world are you trying to do?" questioned the young woman who had said she was not afraid.

"Wait," he temporized; "just wait a minute and get ready to hang on like grim death. We're going across on that trestle."

He fully expected her to shriek and grab for the steering-wheel. That, he told himself, was what the normal young woman would do. But Miss Corona disappointed him.

"You'll put us both into the river, and smash Colonel-daddy's car, but I guess the Baldwin family can stand it if you can," she remarked quite calmly.

Smith kept on backing until the car had passed the switch from which the spur branched off to cross to the material yard on the opposite side of the river. A skilful bit of juggling put the roadster over on the ties of the spur-track. Then he turned to his fellow risk.

"Sit low, and hang on with both hands," he directed. "*Now!*" and he opened the throttle.

The trestle was not much above two hundred feet long, and, happily, the cross-ties were closely spaced. Steered to a hair, the big car went bumping across, and in his innermost recesses Smith was saying to his immediate ancestor, the well-behaved bank clerk: "You swab! *you* never saw the day when you could do a thing like this … you thought you had me tied up in a bunch

of ribbon, didn't you?"

If Miss Baldwin were frightened, she did not show it; and when the crossing was safely made, Smith caught a little side glance that told him he was making good. He jerked the roadster out of the entanglement of the railroad track and said: "You may sit up now and tell me which way to go. I don't know anything about the roads over here."

She pointed out the way across the hills, and a four-mile dash followed that set the blood dancing in Smith's veins. He had never before driven a car as fast as he wanted to; partly because he had never owned one powerful enough, and partly because the home-land speed laws – and his own past *métier*– would not sanction it. Up hill and down the big roadster raced, devouring the interspaces, and at the topping of the last of the ridges the young woman opened the small tool-box in the dividing arm between the seats and showed her reckless driver a large and serviceable army automatic snugly holstered under the lid.

"Daddy always keeps it there for his night drives on the horse ranges," she explained. But Smith was shaking his head.

"We're not going to need anything of that sort," he assured her, and the racing search for three men and a two-horse team was continued.

Beyond the final hill, in a small, low-lying swale which was well hidden from any point of view in the vicinity of the distant dam, they came upon the interlopers. There were three men and two horses and a covered wagon, as Martin's telephone message

had catalogued them. The horses were still in the traces, and just beyond the wagon a long, narrow parallelogram, of the length and breadth of a legal mining claim, had been marked out by freshly driven stakes. In one end of the parallelogram two of the men were digging perfunctorily, while the third was tacking the legal notice on a bit of board nailed to one of the stakes.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.