Marbourg Dolores, Eggleston George Cary

# Juggernaut: A Veiled Record

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**Dolores Marbourg**

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# Содержание


| | |
|---|---|
| I | 4 |
| II | 11 |
| III | 15 |
| IV | 22 |
| V | 31 |
| VI | 34 |
| VII | 40 |
| VIII | 52 |
| IX | 64 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 69 |

# Eggleston George Cary, Marbourg Dolores Juggernaut: A Veiled Record

## I

Edgar Braine was never so blithe in all his life as on the morning of his suicide.

Years after, in the swirl and tumult of his extraordinary career, the memory of that June morning, and of the mood in which he greeted it, would rush upon him as a flood, and for the moment drown the eager voices that besought his attention, distracting his mind for the briefest fraction of an instant from the complex problems of affairs with which he wrestled ceaselessly.

In the brief moment during which he allowed the vision of a dead past thus to invade his mind, he would recall every detail of that morning with photographic accuracy, and more than photographic vividness.

In such moments, he saw himself young, but with a mature man's ambition, and more than the strength of a man, as he strode sturdily down the streets of the little Western city, the June sunshine all about him in a golden glory, while the sunshine within exceeded it a hundredfold.

His mood was exultant, and with reason. He had already conquered the only obstacles that barred his way to success and power. He had impressed himself upon the minds of men, in a small way as yet, to be sure, but sufficiently to prove his capacity, and confirm his confidence in his ability to conquer, whithersoever he might direct his march.

Life opened its best portals to him. He was poor, but strong and well equipped. He had won possession of the tools with which to do his work; and the conquest of the tools is the most difficult task set the man who confronts life armed only with his own abilities. That accomplished, if the man be worthy, the rest follows quite as a matter of course, – an effect flowing from an efficient cause.

Edgar Braine had proved to himself that he possessed superior capacities. He had long entertained that opinion of his endowment, but his caution in self-estimate was so great that he had been slower than any of his acquaintances to accept the fact as indisputably proved.

It had been proved, however, and that was cause enough for rejoicing, to a mind which had tortured itself from boyhood with unutterable longings for that power over men which superior intellect gives, – a mind that had dreamed high dreams of the employment of such power for human progress.

His was not an ambition achieved. It was that immeasurably more joyous thing, an ambition in sure process of achievement.

But this was not his only cause of joy. Love, as well as life, had

smiled upon him, and the woman who had subdued all that was noblest in him to that which was still nobler in her, was presently to be his wife.

And so Edgar Braine's heart sang merrily within him as he strode through the cottonwood-bordered streets toward his editorial work-shop.

He entered the composing-room in front, and greeted the foreman with even more of cordiality than was his custom, though his custom was a cordial one.

He tried not to observe that Mikey Hagin, the Spartan-souled apprentice of the establishment, was complacently burning a hole in the palm of his hand, in a heroic endeavor to hide the fact that he had been smoking a cigarette in risk of that instant discharge which Braine had threatened as the fore-ordained punishment of that crime, if he should ever catch the precocious youth committing it again.

He saw the cigarette, of course, – it was his habit to see things, – and the blue wreath floating upward from the hand in which a hasty attempt had been made to conceal it, was perfectly apparent. But his humor was much too joyous for him to enforce the penalty, though he had decreed it with a fixed purpose to enforce it. Somehow the grief of Mrs. Hagin, Mikey's mother and Braine's laundress, at the discharge of her not over hopeful son, was much more vividly present to his imagination this morning than when he had promulgated the decree. He was too happy a man to be willing to make any human being needlessly unhappy.

And yet he was too strict a disciplinarian to overlook the offence entirely. He turned to the boy and said:

"It is lucky for you that I didn't catch you smoking the cigarette you have in your hand. As it seems to be smoking you instead, I don't so much mind."

With this, as the lad threw the burning roll into a barrel of waste paper – which he presently extinguished with a bucket of water – Braine took the over-proofs from their hook, and passed on into the back room, which served as the editorial office of the Thebes *Daily Enterprise*.

The four men sitting there presented but one bodily presence. They were: the Local Editor, the River Editor, the Society Editor, and "Our Reporter," and their name was Moses Harbell, or, if universal usage is authority in nomenclature, "Mose" Harbell.

Mose was a bushy-haired man of fifty, who had been Local Editor, River Editor, Society Editor, and "Our Reporter" on the newspapers of small river towns from a time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.

He had never once dared aspire to a more independent position as his own master. Perhaps the fact that he had imprudently married early, and now had a family consisting of a mother, a mother-in-law, an imbecile sister, a shrewish wife, nine children in various stages of progress toward grown-up-hood, and four dogs of no recognized breed, had dampened the ardor of his ambition, and inclined him to the conservative view that to draw a salary from somebody else, even though it be not a

munificent one, is on the whole safer for a prudent family man, than to take ambitious risks on his own account.

Mose was known all up and down the river by his first name in its abbreviated form, and by no other on any occasion. He was never spoken of in print without the adjective prefix "genial," and he never omitted to call anybody "genial" whom he had occasion to mention in his own paragraphs, from the morose curmudgeon who invited everybody in town to his parties except Mose himself, to the most ill-natured mud clerk who stood in the rain on the levee at midnight to check freight received by the steamboat that employed him in that capacity, at nothing a month and his board.

Life had dealt rather hardly with Mose, but it had not succeeded in curdling any of the milk of human kindness mingled with his blood.

His notion of newspaper editing, apart from calling everybody "genial," was to mention everybody on every possible occasion, to praise everybody without regard to the possibility or impossibility of the occasion, and to chronicle the personal happenings of the town after the following fashion:

> "Ned Heffron, the genial ticket dispenser of the Central Railroad, borrowed a boiled shirt yesterday, got his boots blacked on tick, and started on a free pass to Johnsonboro, there to wed the acknowledged belle of that young and thriving city, Miss Blankety Blank, who will henceforth be a chief ornament to the society of Thebes."

Mose was a thorn in the flesh of his young chief, who was a very earnest person, possessed of a conviction that a newspaper owes some sort of duty to the public, and that its province is to discriminate somewhat in the bestowal of praise and blame. But Mose was necessary to the Thebes *Daily Enterprise*. Braine could not afford to dispense with his "geniality" as a part of the newspaper's equipment; for Mose knew everybody within the *Daily Enterprise's* bailiwick and everybody knew Mose. Everybody made haste to tell Mose all the news there might be; and, although there was not much of importance in what he gathered, still it was news, and the news seemed to Braine a necessary part of a newspaper. Thus it happened that Mose went on calling everybody "genial" in the news department, even when his chief was excoriating the same persons in the editorial columns for conduct wholly inconsistent with Mose's imputation of unbounded geniality.

On this particular morning, however, – the morning of Edgar Braine's suicide – even Mose's presence, recalling, as it always did, his exasperating methods, could not ruffle the young man's exultant spirits. He was so exuberantly happy that he omitted to remonstrate with Mose about anything, and that tireless manufacturer of praise, observing the omission, immediately wrote and sent to the composing-room an elephantinely playful paragraph in which he said:

> "Our genial chief was so much pleased this morning over the impression made yesterday by his apparently severe, but

> really good-natured leader on the recent defalcation of our genial city clerk, Charley Hymes, that he took the local to his arms and stood treat to a number-one mackerel, and the ever appreciative local picked the bones of the aforesaid saline preserved denizen of the deep, in the bosom of his family at dinner to-day."

That was Mose Harbell's idea of humor. It was not Braine's idea of humor at all, and so Mose was greeted with the harshest reproof he had ever received in his life when he next met his chief. He accepted it "genially."

Having sent out the offending paragraph, Mose went out himself to gather river news, and such gossip as he might, concerning the genial folk of Thebes.

Then Abner Hildreth entered the office, and for two hours was closeted with Braine.

Then Braine committed suicide.

Then he wrote his own obituary, to be printed in that evening's *Enterprise*.

Then he went supperless to his room over a store, where he paced the floor till dawn.

Then began the man's extraordinary career.

# II

When Braine returned to his bare little room after his suicide, he was in a strange, paradoxical mood. His thought was intensely introspective, and yet, with a whimsical perversity, his mind seemed specially alert to external objects, and full of fantastic imaginings concerning them.

The bareness of the room impressed him, and he likened it to a cell in some prison.

"Never mind," he said to himself, "I may have to sleep in a cell some time, and the habit of living here will come handy."

Then, with a little laugh, in which there was no trace of amusement, he stood before his desk, and added:

"But I believe they don't put strips of worn out carpet by the prison beds; and I never heard of a cell having a desk in it surmounted by empty collar-boxes for pigeon holes. Let me see – six times five are thirty. What an extravagant fellow I have been, to use up thirty boxes of paper collars in a year! Ten in a box, that's three hundred – almost one a day! I might have done with half the number by turning them, as I had to do at college before paper collars came in. Psha!" and he seemed to spurn the trivial reverie from him as a larger recollection surged up in his mind, and he began to pace the little room again with the purposeless tramp of a caged wild beast, whose memory of the forest is only a pained consciousness that it is his no more.

The June twilight faded into darkness, and the evening gave place to midnight, but the ghost-walk went ceaselessly on.

In those hours of agonizing thought, the young man – to be young no more henceforth – recalled every detail of his life with a vividness which tortured him. He was engaged, unwillingly, in obedience to a resistless impulse, in searching out the roots of his own character, and finding out what forces had made him such as he knew himself to be.

In the process he learned, for the first time, precisely what sort of man he really was. He saw his own soul undressed, and contemplated its nakedness. One's soul is an unusual thing to see *en déshabillé*, and not always a pleasing one.

He remembered a letter his mother had written him at college – that mother of half Scotch descent, and touched with Scottish second-sight, who had silently studied his character from infancy, and learned to comprehend it not without fear. He could repeat the letter word for word. It had given him his first hint that he had a character, and a duty to do with respect to it. He had cherished the missive for years, and had read it a thousand times for admonition. Alas! how poor a thing is admonition after all!

"There is one danger point in your character, my son" – he recalled the very look of the cramped words on the page of blue-ruled letter paper – "where I have kept watch since you lay in my arms as a baby, and where you must keep watch hereafter. You have high aims and strong convictions, and you mean to do right. You will never be led astray by others – you are too obstinate for

that. If you ever go astray, you must take all the blame on your own head.

"You are generous, and I never knew you to do a meanly selfish thing in your life. And yet your point of danger is selfishness of a kind. I have observed you from infancy, and this is what I have seen. Your desire to accomplish your purposes is too strong. You are not held back by any difficulty. You make any sacrifice in pursuit of your ends. You use any means you can find to carry your plans through, and you are quick at finding means, or making them when you want them.

"I was proud of the pluck you showed in doing almost a slave's work for two years, because you had made up your mind to go through college. But I shuddered at the thought of what such determination might lead to.

"Oh! my son, you will succeed in life. I have no fear of that. But how? Beware the time when your purpose is strong, your desire to succeed great, *and the only means at command are dishonest and degrading*. That time will come to you, be sure. When it comes you must make a hard choice – harder for you than for another. You will then sacrifice a purpose that it will seem like death to surrender – or you will commit moral suicide! I shall not live to see you so tried; but if I see you practise giving up a little and trying to keep guard at this weak place, I may learn before I die to think of that hour of your trial without the foreboding it gives me now."

That letter was the last his mother ever sent him. It had been

a consolation to him that before death summoned her, she had at least read his reply, assuring her of his determination to maintain his integrity in all circumstances.

"You say truly," he wrote, "that I never surrender a purpose or fail to carry it out. Reflect, mother dear, that the strongest purpose I ever had is this – to preserve my character. I will not fail to find means for that when the time comes, as I never fail to accomplish objects of less moment."

"The prophecy of the dear old mother is fulfilled," he muttered, while his nails buried themselves in his unconscious palms. "The time she foresaw has come, and I have committed suicide. Thank God the mother did not live to see! Thank God her vision was no clearer! She had hope for me at least. She did not *know*."

# III

As he called up pictures there in the dark, Edgar Braine saw himself a little country boy in Southern Indiana, growing strong in the sweet, wholesome air of the river and the hills, and torturing his young mind with questions to which he could not comprehend the answers.

At first his questioning had to do with nature, whose wonders lay around him. He wanted to know of the river. Whence it came, and how; he asked Wherefore, of the hills; he made friends of all growing things, and companions of those that had conscious life.

Then came his father's death to turn his mind into new and darker chambers of inquiry, and for a time he brooded, disposed, in loyalty to that wisdom which age assumes, to accept the conventional dogmas given to him by the ignorance about him, as explanations of the mysteries, but unable to conceal their absurdity from a mind whose instinct it was to stand face to face with Doubt and to compel Truth to lift her mask of seeming.

The loneliness of his life was good for him for a time. It taught him to find a sufficient companionship in his own mind – a lesson which all of us need, but few learn. But the time came when his wise mother saw the necessity of a change, and, scant as her resources were, she took him to the little city of Jefferson, where the schools were good and companionship was to be found.

The city was at that time a beautiful corpse. It had just died,

and had not yet become conscious of the fact. Ten or fifteen years before, a railroad running from the State capital had made its terminus at Jefferson, making the river town the one outlet of the interior. A great tide of travel passed through the place, and a large trade centred there. But the course of railroad development which gave the city life, destroyed it later. Other railroads were built through the interior to other river outlets, and Cincinnati and Louisville took to themselves what had been Jefferson's prosperity.

And so when Edgar Braine first knew the town, it had lost its hold upon life, though it had not yet found out what had happened to it. The great rows of warehouses along the levee, with the legends "Forwarding and Commission," "Groceries at Wholesale Only," "Flour, Grain and Provisions," "Carriage Repository," and all the rest of it, staringly inscribed upon their outer walls, were empty now, and closed. In West Street, two only of the once great wholesale houses maintained a show of life. In one, an old man sat alone all day, and contemplated three bags of coffee and two chests of tea, for which no customer made inquiry. In the other there remained unsold half a ton of iron bars, and a few kegs of nails, to justify the assertion of the signboard that the proprietors were dealers in "Iron and Nails." The two partners who owned the place appeared there every morning, as regularly as when their sales were reckoned in six figures. They were always scrupulously neat, always courteously polite to each other, and always as cheerful and contented a pair of business partners

as one need desire to see. Why not, seeing that they both liked the game of checkers, and had nothing to do but sit in the doorway and play from the beginning to the end of "business hours" every day?

But the town did not realize its condition yet. Weyer & McKee were putting up a new and imposing building for the better accommodation of their wholesale grocery business, inattentive to the fact that their wholesale grocery business had ceased to be. Polleys & Butler were still issuing their *Market Bulletin* for the information of their "customers," not having yet realized that their customers had permanently transferred their custom to Cincinnati. In this interesting little sheet they had not yet begun to discuss "The Present Depression in Trade – Its Cause and Cure." That came a little later.

The city was very well satisfied with itself. It had water-works and gas, broad streets, and comfortable houses in such abundance that every family might have had two for the asking. The people did not greatly mind their loss of prosperity. Those who did mind had already gone away; those who remained had succeeded, during the days of activity, in getting out of other people enough to live on comfortably, and were content to enjoy leisure and occupy themselves with church work and the like for the rest of their lives.

The boy did not discover that anything was amiss with Jefferson until two or three years after his arrival there. Having seen no other city he did not observe that there was anything

peculiar in the condition of this one, until he saw a "to let" notice on the gorgeously decorated front of Fred Dubachs' "Paintery" and learned that Fred was about to remove to Keokuk. Fred was a notably expert painter, and the front of his shop had always a strong fascination for Edgar. Fred had lavished his best skill and industry upon its ornamentation during the two or three years since he had ceased to have any painting to do for others. Now he had given up and was going away.

The thing set the boy thinking. He reflected that it would be a sad waste of time and labor for Fred to paint any more signs for a town which already had some thousands no longer serving any useful purpose. As he followed out this suggestion it dawned upon him that perhaps Jefferson was a city in decay, and when he had questioned the matter a little further, the evidence all about him left no room for doubt.

Then he went home and said to his mother: "I will not live in Jefferson after I finish at Hanover. This town is done for. I must have opportunities, and there will never be any here."

But Jefferson's condition had been educating him all the time, and shaping his character in ways which affected all his future. He saw this clearly now as he paced his room in Thebes that night after the suicide, and recalled it all.

Among his schoolmates in Jefferson there were some, the sons of vulgar people who had grown rich in the rapid rise of the town. These were mainly stupid and arrogant, and their insolence was unceasing. At first it had stung the sensitive boy to that kind of

protest which involves blows and bloody noses.

He was lithe of limb and strong, and he usually managed to get a sufficient revenge in that way to satisfy him. But something occurred at last to spoil the enjoyment he got out of pommelling the young bullies, and to show him that, with all his strength and agility, he was meeting his adversaries on unequal terms. He accidentally saw his mother toiling late at night over the clothes in which he had that day fought Cale Dodge to a finish. Cale, he knew, would simply put on a new suit next day.

"I will have no more fights of that kind," he said to himself. Then, after a period of silent thought, he said aloud:

"I have better weapons. I will show them in class who is master."

From that hour the inattention to books which had given his mother some uneasiness, ceased. He mastered every lesson days before it was assigned to him, and when an opportunity offered he submitted himself to examinations in advance, and passed into the higher grades of the high school, leaving his adversaries behind.

In this process he acquired two unquenchable thirsts – the one for knowledge, the other for power. He searched the town library for books that might supplement the meagre instruction of the schools. In his search for knowledge he found culture. General literature opened its treasures to him, and he read everything, from Shakespeare to Burke's Works, that the library could supply.

But while all this went on, his delight in his superiority to the youths who had been insolent to him, and were so still, crystallized more and more into a great longing for power, and a relentless determination to achieve it. Cost what it might he must be great, and look down upon these his foes. His ambition became a passion, wild and unruly, but he resolutely curbed it as one controls a spirited horse, and for the same reason. He did not mean to let the ambition run away with his life and wreck it before the destination was reached.

In the little college ten miles away, when at last he entered there, he was said to have no ambition, because he lightly put aside the petty prizes and honors for which others struggled so eagerly. His mates did not dream how ambitious he was. He was thinking of larger things. There was a scholarship to be won, and he took that, because it would spare him his tuition fees; but for the class and society "honors" he cared not at all.

He made his own all of value that the college libraries held and when the senior examinations were over he was without a rival near him on that record of achievement which determines who shall be valedictorian. But he placed no value on the empty honor so coveted by others. A month remained before Commencement, and he had no mind to lose a month. He said to the President:

"I am going away to-morrow. If you choose to give me my degree please take care of the diploma for me, if it is not too much trouble. Perhaps I shall send for it some day."

"But you are surely not going to leave before

Commencement?"

"Why not? I have got all I can out of college. I can't afford to waste a month for nothing."

"But you are first-honor-man, Braine!"

"Yes, so I hear. Give that to some one who cares for it. I don't."

The next morning Edgar Braine quitted the village on foot, and without returning to Jefferson, passed out of the little world of youth into the great world of manhood. His equipment consisted of his character, his education, and fifty dollars.

He thought the character a good one then. He revised his opinion as he paced the little room in Thebes, and remembered.

# IV

The youth's sole thought when he walked out into the world was to find opportunities – for exactly what, he neither knew nor greatly cared. He knew himself possessed of power, and he sought a chance to make it felt. He was ambitious beyond measure, but he believed his ambition to be safely under a curb bit. He would achieve great things, but their greatness should minister to the good of his fellow men.

His selfishness was of that kind which looks for its best satisfaction in self-sacrifice. He would spend himself in the service of mankind, and take his reward in seeing the results of his labor. He had been bred to high conceptions of human conduct, and had filled his mind with exalted principles.

It was for the exercise of powers thus directed that he sought opportunities. He would know what to do with them, he was very sure, when they came. He selected Thebes as the scene of his first endeavors because it presented the completest possible contrast to Jefferson. As Jefferson was a city that had ceased to thrive, so Thebes was one that was just about to begin to thrive, as its citizens took pains to notify the rest of the world. Braine wanted to help it thrive, and share its thrift.

The bread-and-butter problem gave him no trouble. Thebes had plenty of work to do in getting ready to prosper, and Braine was prepared to do any work. The shrewd speculators who

were engineering the town's scheme of greatness, were quick enough to discover the youth's capacities, as the race-course speculator is to see the fine points of a horse. In whatever fell to him to do he acquitted himself so well that faith in "young Braine" soon gave place to respectful admiration, and Mose Harbell wrote numberless paragraphs in the Thebes *Daily Enterprise* concerning "our genial and gifted young townsman, Edgar Braine," in which, for reasons that Mose could not have explained, there was notably less of the "genial" insolence of familiarity than was common in Mose's literary productions. When some one mentioned this in Mose's presence, his reply was:

"Well, somehow Braine isn't the sort of fellow you feel like slapping on the back."

It was Abner Hildreth who first drew Braine into relations with the *Enterprise*.

There was "one of Thebes's oldest and most genial citizens" – Jack Summers by name – who, in addition to a mercantile business, carried on a bank of the kind that opens in the evening by preference, while Abner Hildreth, in all his career as a banker, had preferred daylight hours for business.

Jack Summers corrupted the youth of the town, and when one promising young clerk in the Express office was caught opening money packages, his fall was clearly enough traced to his losses in Summers's establishment.

Hildreth, as a banker and business man, objected to gambling

– of that kind. He saw how surely it must undermine the other kind by destroying the trustworthiness of clerks and cashiers. He deprecated it, also, as a thing imperilling the young prosperity of Thebes, in which his investments, as merchant, banker, hotel proprietor, mill owner and the like, were greater than those of any other ten men combined, while even with the other ten he was a silent partner so far as their ventures seemed to him sound.

"The town mustn't get a hard name," he said; "Jack Summers must shut up his gambling shop, or get out of Thebes."

Then he sent for Edgar Braine.

"That young fellow," he reflected, "knows how to write with vim, force, pathos, and energy" – a favorite phrase with Hildreth – "and he has sand in him too. He can skin Summers, and rub *aqua fortis* into the raw, and he ain't afraid to do it."

This latter point Hildreth knew to be important. Jack Summers was a reckless person of whom most men in Thebes were inclined to be somewhat in awe. He had lived in the place when the only law there was the will of the boldest, enforced with a pistol, and he had not yet reconciled himself to milder methods.

"I want you to score Jack Summers in the *Enterprise*, Edgar." It was Hildreth's habit to go straight to the marrow of his undertakings. "I want you to drive him out of town, or compel him to shut up his den. He is ruining all the boys, and giving the town a bad name."

"But will Podauger let me?" asked Braine.

"Podauger" was the sobriquet by which old Janus Leftwitch

– "Editor and Proprietor of the Thebes *Daily Enterprise*" – had come to be known, by reason of the ponderous unreadableness of his disquisitions.

"Podauger be – blessed! (I never swear, Braine.) I *own* Podauger. I can shut up his office to-day if I want to, and assign him a room in the poorhouse. He will print what I tell him to, and Mose Harbell will keep quiet too, when I tell him not to call Jack Summers 'our genial fellow citizen' again. The only question is, will you write the articles?"

"I will, on one condition."

"I didn't think you would be afraid."

"I'm not."

"What is the condition then?"

"That I am to be let alone. I won't begin a thing of that kind, and have it hushed up. It must go clear through if I undertake it."

"That's right. I knew you had sand. You may go ahead, and you shan't be stopped by anybody – unless Summers prepares your corpse for the coroner. Have you thought of that?"

"I am not afraid. The cause is a good one. That's all I ask."

"Very well. Now these articles must be editorials. They'll have more weight that way. Salivate the rascal every day, and I'll back you up. You'd better go armed, though, in case Summers suspects who it is."

"I will take care of that. The first article shall be ready in an hour."

And it was. Braine was too fresh from college not to begin it

with an allusion to Roman history, but the people of Thebes were not sufficiently familiar with the classics to resent a reference of the kind. Besides, the allusion was an apt one. It was a reference to the Roman method of dealing with persons who made themselves enemies of the State, and it named Jack Summers as one who bore precisely that relation to Thebes.

There was something like an earthquake in the town that night. Never before had the *Enterprise* been known to say a harsh thing or a vigorous one. Podauger was never harsh in utterance, lest he offend a subscriber or advertiser; he was never vigorous, because he did not know how to be so. The terror of Jack Summers's displeasure was something that nobody in Thebes had ever before ventured to brave, and what with surprise, apprehension, and a looking-for of sensational results, the little city was in a ferment throughout the night.

Podauger had shut himself up in his room, and barred his door before the newspaper appeared on the streets. Not satisfied with these precautions, he determined to send a flag of truce to the enemy without delay. He wrote in his tangled fashion:

> "Dear Mr. Summers:
>
> "I cannot rest till I have acquitted myself of all responsibility for the outrageous assault upon the good name and repute of a fellow-citizen for whom I entertain so high a respect as I trust I have always manifested toward you, which appeared – or I should say, was made this afternoon upon you – in the newspaper of which I am the unhappy, though till now the happy, Editor and Proprietor.

I cannot explain my situation in this affair without a breach of confidence which would imperil my present and future prosperity; but I can assure you that I had no more power to prevent this dastardly outrage, or to shut the noisome stuff out of columns which I take pride in remembering have always been courteous in their treatment of my fellow Thebans, than you are – I mean than you had.

"I am deeply agitated, and perhaps my diction is not as perspicuous as it is my proud endeavor to make it when I am inditing matter for publication, but you can make out this much, my dear and highly esteemed friend, that I shall not seek my couch with any hope or prospect of repose, until I receive from you an assurance that you acquit me of responsibility, and won't ask me to make an apology in the *Enterprise*, for reasons to which I have already alluded in reference to my present and temporary inability to control the conduct of that journal in matters relating to this outrageous affair.

"*Do* I make myself clear in this the hour of my agitation and humiliation?"

Janus Leftwitch's habit of writing in this fashion was so fixed that he could not write simply, even when he was scared. Summers understood him well enough, however, and wrote him in reply:

"Don't be scared, Pod. Nobody'll ever suspect you. You couldn't write that way if you tried. – Jack."

The next morning excitement was at fever heat. Curiosity to

know who had written the article, was the dominant emotion. Excited apprehension of its author's speedy assassination came next.

Summers was in and out of various places of business all the morning, and in each he declared that if ever he learned who had written the article, he would "shoot him like a dog." Nobody doubted the sincerity of the threat, or the certainty of its execution.

About noon Summers was saying something of the kind in a little crowd of business men in front of Hildreth's bank, when Edgar Braine came up the street. He cheerily greeted the company with "Good morning, gentlemen," and then placed himself in front of Summers, and in a very quiet tone said:

"I hear you are going to shoot the writer of that article about you, as soon as you find out who he is. It would be a pity to let you shoot the wrong man by mistake. I should never cease to regret it, because I wrote the article myself, and have just finished a much severer one for to-day's paper."

This unexpected speech fell like a bombshell into the crowd, and Jack Summers was the one worst stunned by it.

He stood staring at Braine, apparently unable to comprehend what had happened. Nobody had ever confronted him in that daring fashion before, and in the novel circumstances he did not know what to do. He did nothing in fact, until Edgar turned to some one else in the crowd, and made pleased comment on the news that land had been purchased by some Pittsburg people for

a new rolling mill in Thebes. Then Summers walked away.

While this was going on, Janus Leftwitch was in the bank parlor, talking earnestly with Abner Hildreth. Podauger was in a panic. Jack Summers, he said, had many friends in town, and they would ruin the *Enterprise*.

"I don't see how that can be," replied Hildreth. "The plant of the paper isn't worth more than three thousand dollars; I've lent you money on it up to five thousand dollars already, and you're in debt up to your eyes still. It looks to me as if you had already done all the ruining in sight."

"But, Mr. Hildreth, that ought to make you the more cautious. You have money in the *Enterprise*. I have been careful to make everybody its friend, as much in your interest as mine."

"Yes, and I'm short a pile of money in consequence."

"That will come around right all in good time. Thebes is growing, Mr. Hildreth; her wonderful natural resources, situated as she is – "

"Oh, stop that! I've read that in your editorials every day for three years. Look here, Pod, I'm not ill disposed toward you. I'm willing to go on supporting you, but I must find some cheaper way of doing it. I'll foreclose the cut-throat mortgage on the *Enterprise* now, and give you a place as clerk on the wharf-boat."

"But, my dear Mr. Hildreth – " broke in the editor, with consternation and despair in every line of his countenance.

"There, don't thank me, old fellow," said Hildreth, interrupting; "you know I don't like thanks, and I know you're

grateful. The fact is, I ought to have closed out the *Enterprise* business long ago, but I didn't want the town to be without a paper, and I didn't know anybody to edit it. I know the man now. I'll put Braine in charge to-morrow, and you can print as affectionate a card of farewell this afternoon, as you please. Run along and write it. I'm too busy to talk longer now," and with that he bowed the fallen editor out of the bank, and forever out of a profession which suited no part of his nature, except his vanity.

# V

The arrangement between Hildreth and Edgar Braine, by which the young man came into control of the Thebes *Daily Enterprise*, was a much less definite one in its terms than Abner Hildreth was accustomed to make, except in those cases in which indefiniteness was to his advantage.

This was one of those cases.

He simply said to Braine:

"Take the establishment and see what you can make of it. You can make it of some good to the town, at any rate, and that's all I care for. I'll pay you a salary if you like, or you can pocket any profits there are instead, if you prefer that."

"I'll take the profits," said Edgar.

"Suppose they turn out to be losses?"

"Then the quicker I find out my unfitness the better. I don't want you to pay me a salary for losing your money."

"You've good grit, Edgar," exclaimed the elder man, admiringly, "and you've got 'go'! I'll stand by you and see you win. You'll need money for a little while to pay running expenses, and you can have it on your own notes till you get the old hulk afloat again. I'll back you. Go in and win!"

That was all there was of contract between these two. Obviously the education Edgar Braine had received at Hanover College was deficient in certain particulars.

The change in the *Enterprise* was immediate. Everybody bought it at first to see what more the young editor would have to say in scarification of Jack Summers, and everybody continued to buy it, because the young editor at once ceased to scarify Summers, flinging him contemptuously aside as something done for, and turning his attention to a more important aspect of the same matter.

He wanted to know why Jack Summers had been allowed to maintain a gambling house in Thebes, without disguise and without molestation. He called the public prosecutor by name, and asked him what excuse he had to make for his neglect of his sworn duty. He named the respectable men who had served on the last Grand Jury, and requested them to say why they had omitted to indict so flagrant an offender.

By this time – and it was within the first week of Braine's editorship – the languid contempt hitherto felt for the lifeless newspaper had changed to an eager impatience throughout the town for its appearance each day.

At first there was anger everywhere. Two libel suits were brought, but nothing was ever done about them; they were meant to intimidate, and they failed to do it.

After awhile the community caught something of the editor's enthusiasm. Clergymen preached from the pulpit on the duties of citizens as Grand Jurors and public officers. Finally, a new Grand Jury was assembled, and its first act was to indict Jack Summers, who promptly fled the city.

This was but a beginning. Braine struck at wrong whenever he saw indications of it. He introduced the element of detection into his work, and followed up clews in a way to which the good people of Thebes were wholly unaccustomed.

He did many things merely to excite curiosity and interest. These were harmless fooleries for the most part, and Braine justified them on the ground that they made people read his paper, and thus gave him opportunity for the good work he was doing.

It was this that gave him joy. He had power, and he was using it for the public good. He had borrowed little from Hildreth, and had repaid it easily. His newspaper was profitable, and the job printing establishment connected with it was doing all the business of that kind which the city afforded, now that he had added large supplies of type, a ruling-machine, and a steam press to its equipment.

At the end of two years of hard work Edgar Braine believed that he had conquered the tools of fortune and power. He regarded himself as the owner of a prosperous and influential newspaper. He had an income sufficient to justify a marriage to which he looked forward with eager longing. He saw no obstacle now between him and fortune.

# VI

## [From Helen's Diary.]

Edgar left me an hour ago. After he said good night, I came up to my room, took down my hair, put on a wrapper, and sat by the open window, not to think, but to feel.

After all these months of uncertainty – no, not uncertainty, for Edgar was destined to succeed – after all these months of waiting, we have reached the time when separation will soon be at an end.

I seem about to be entering on a new life, as a new woman. I *am* a new, an unfamiliar woman, to myself. I have not realized it until to-night. The change has been so gradual that I have not realized any difference in myself. My love has passed through so many phases.

I remember, to-night, a time when my love contained but one element – trust. I remember a particular day when love was young with me, – I went into the *Enterprise* office with Aunt's chronic "want," – "A girl to do general housework – references required." It was immediately after Edgar had offered himself for a target to Jack Summers. There is something glorious in a man's inviting another man to attack him – if he dares. I was thinking about it as

I went up the *Enterprise* steps. When I entered the office Edgar sat at a funny desk with peculiar pigeon holes – he has said since that he had used it before he took the *Enterprise*, and though he could have had one that would have been an improvement on it, in point of beauty, he had a sort of sentimental feeling in regard to the old one. He says in times of prosperity it will be quite wholesome to look at those collar boxes, and remember the time when he was very thankful to get paper collars.

We laugh a great deal over this, and I am going to have the desk put in our – well, *yes*, in *our* room.

He sat that day by the desk, and Mose Harbell had his feet on the white-washed part of the stove, – Edgar says he always does it after his dinner, while he is preparing his most "genial" paragraphs.

A sunbeam glanced across the room, and made the frayed edge of Edgar's coat stand out beautifully, but he looked terribly clean. He didn't see me at first, and I watched him a minute as he wrote. I loved him first, for the way in which he grasped his pen. He was finishing an editorial on the lack of energy in his esteemed fellow citizens in putting down immoral enterprises that were wrecking the universe in general, and Thebes in particular. I *knew* what kind of an article it was, by the expression of his elbows on the desk, and the way he held his chin.

There, in the office of the Thebes *Daily Enterprise*, with fifty cents in one hand, and Aunt's *want* in the other, with Mose Harbell's feet on the stove, and the frayed edge of Ed's coat

looming up in the sunlight, I, Helen Thayer, loved Edgar Braine, in the year of our Lord, 18 – . Amen.

I always feel like pronouncing the benediction when I think of that minute. It was the close of an eventless, careless, tiresome period. I sang the doxology in my heart – I said, "and thus endeth the first lesson," and a number of other appropriate, religious things like that. Well, after that, things drifted.

That evening there was a good deal about love for your neighbor – or sentiment after that pattern, in the end of that editorial. Edgar said he was three-fourths done with it when he looked up and saw me.

As the days went by, the *Enterprise* seemed more and more filled with the milk of human kindness. I take a great deal of credit to myself for the present exalted tone of the Thebes *Daily E* —. Edgar says that I have always inspired him with one great desire – to be good and honorable. He says that no good woman ever lived who did not make the best man in the world feel ashamed of himself. I am glad of this. There is something delicious in making one feel ashamed of himself.

All that time I felt a peculiar reverence for him. It was a feeling almost enervating. I felt as though walking on a tight-rope – mentally. I used to look with awe upon the dignity of those frayed coat bindings, and the bits of white where the button holes were worn – Ed called it "the towel" showing, I believe.

Then *that* period passed, and there came a day when he stopped in on his way from the office to see if Aunt wanted

to put in her chronic want again the next evening. That day we sat in front of the fire talking for a little minute about Ed's schemes for advancing the universe generally, and Thebes, again, in particular.

Though I was feeling, as usual, on a great mental strain – as I always did when with him, and indulging in an extraordinary deference for the "towel" around the button holes, I became so enthused, and had such a desire to have a hand in advancing something, too, that I leaned forward, and he leaned forward, and – well, that ended the third lesson. We kissed each other. I have never since felt the mental strain that I did before that, when with him. Since then, we have seemed just like two human beings who lived every moment of the time when together.

There is something terribly *equalizing* in a kiss. With it, there came a great tenderness for him, and as we no longer seemed to be two distinct and separate beings, but just one, that tenderness extended to myself. It seemed to grow to a universal tenderness. I have even, at moments, felt tender toward Mose Harbell when passing his house, and happening to see his wife, nine children, and four dogs, his sister and his mother-in-law.

We will be married next month, – Ed and I, not Mose Harbell and I!

Ed will take to linen collars next week, and buy a new desk for the editorial sanctum; and when I am able to have a "girl," I can put in my "want" for nothing. Ed says that for a time we can put on a great deal of style in the manner of serving our

meals, and therefore won't have to have so much to eat. One thing is decided; we are to have *some* kind of a house to live in by ourselves, instead of boarding.

Ed declares that it is but a question of time when he shall put on a fresh linen collar every day, and we shall be able to furnish four rooms of a house. At present, the editor will be very well satisfied with three – and me.

I am at once to become a member of the *staff*. I am going to "do" the society items. Ed says I am capable of working into such things beautifully. I am so thankful that at last I may be an assistant in *advancing* things. I feel that it is half the happiness of life to be able to be a co-worker with him. Last night I suggested the points for an editorial. He was amazed at its force, and delighted. I was amazed and delighted myself. I think, together, we shall be able to make Thebes something to be proud of yet. The editor says it will be *such* a relief to have some society notes that are not strictly "genial."

I wonder if a new thought that has taken possession of me is unmaidenly? I think not. At any rate, if it is not maidenly it is very womanly. I have a sudden longing to rear six children. I make this the limit, but I want six. A half dozen. I want to teach six children to be great and good as their father is, and I want to show their father how well I can do this. I want to instil the idea of advancement into six embryonic men and women, that in after years, when I am old, I can say to the world: "You owe me something; look at these six citizens." I think six would be a

very commendable showing. I think I could feel that I had paid my debt to humanity.

I am suddenly seized with all sorts of exalted aspirations. It makes a strange difference in one, this deciding to be married.

I solemnly vow this night, that my life shall be spent in an earnest effort to emulate my husband, Edgar Braine, for so good a man does not live.

# VII

This was the situation of affairs with Edgar Braine when he graciously spared the cigarette-smoking apprentice, and passed into his editorial sanctum on the morning of his suicide.

He was putting the sunshine of his own hopefulness into an article on the practical means of promoting Thebes's prosperity, when Abner Hildreth entered.

"You're a worry to me, Braine, when I think of you," said the banker, after a greeting.

"Why, how's that? I'm sure – "

"Oh, don't let it trouble you. It's this way. As a banker, I pride myself on knowing how to size a man up. The man who can't do that, to a hair, had better let banking alone and devote himself to some quiet business, like preaching the gospel, or running a sawmill. I thought I'd sized you up to a fraction when I put you in here, and as to the paper I had. I knew you'd make it the livest sheet in the Mississippi Valley, and you've done it; I knew you'd make it push Thebes with a forty horse-power, and you've done that too. But I missed badly on one point, and it bothers me. It undermines my confidence in my judgment."

"In what particular have I disappointed you, Mr. Hildreth?"

"Well, that's hardly what I mean. I'm not disappointed. But I missed badly as to your business capacity. I knew you were smart at writing, and all that, but I didn't know you had such a head for

business on your shoulders. I expected to have to lift you out of money holes every six months or so, and was ready to do it, but bless me, if you haven't made a business go of the thing from the start. You're not in debt much, are you – for the office I mean?"

"Not a cent, for the office or myself. I get enough to live on out of the paper, and have bought new type, a new steam press, a ruling-machine, and other things besides. The paper will pay me a good income now."

"That's splendid!" said the banker, in admiration; "that means you've put the shop ten thousand dollars to the fore. Good! You've been worth a hundred thousand to me, and the laws only knows what, to Thebes. Now, such a business head as you've got oughtn't to be wasted on a single little business like this, and I've made up my mind to take you into bigger things. That's what I'm here for to-day."

Edgar expressed his gratitude for the banker's appreciation and good will, and declared his willingness to take hold of larger things whenever opportunity should offer.

"Well now, there's this special election. The Common Council will order it, you know, for the twenty-fifth. There's only one thing to be voted on, and that is the proposition to give the Central Railroad the right to run down the levee to the Point, and take the Point for a depot and wharf."

"Yes, I know. I have an article ready on the subject. I haven't discussed it yet, because I want to kill it at one blow and see that it stays dead."

"But I think you don't understand it just right, Braine, and I want to talk to you about it."

"Certainly I understand it. You and I talked it over three days ago, you remember. I understand perfectly that the thing is a trick to rob Thebes of her most fruitful source of revenue, by giving the levee, and with it the exclusive right to collect wharfage, to this railroad crowd. I know the resolution to be voted on has been drawn so as to make it seem nothing more than a grant of right of way, but that it really authorizes the Common Council to give away the levee and the wharfage rights absolutely. I have found out that our rascally aldermen intend to do just that, and I mean to find out how much they have been paid for doing it and who has paid them. But in the mean time, I intend to defeat the whole rascally scheme at the polls, by exposing it."

"Now, wait a minute, Braine, and don't go off half-cocked. Really, that's your one fault, and you must cure it. Let me tell you about this thing. I felt as you do about it, but since we talked it over, I've had more light. I've been in correspondence with the railroad people, you know, and I understand their plans better now. I have a letter from Duncan this morning, in which he says, – let me see," glancing over the letter, and finding out the part he wanted to read. "Oh, yes, here it is: 'You quite understand me now. You're one of us' – no, that isn't it – that refers to another matter. Ah! I have it: 'We depend upon you to see the thing through in that charter election. Young Braine will certainly kill it if he isn't gagged. Why not let him in on the ground floor a

little? He may be of great use to us in carrying out the other matter, and if we don't control him, he's sure to do us a great deal of damage. Can't you explain the thing to him, and make him see it in its right light?' There, I oughtn't to have read the letter to you because I can't read it all. Some of it's confidential, and hearing only a scrap that way, the expressions seem blind and misleading to you."

"I think I understand better than you suppose, Mr. Hildreth. This man Duncan has bought your favor for his scheme; you have been fighting the ring, not to break it, but to break into it, and you've succeeded. Now the fellow wants to buy me. He can't do it, that's all."

"Very well, only don't think Abner Hildreth a fool. I didn't blunder into reading that part of the letter to you. I did it on purpose. I wanted you to understand the lay of the land; and decide for yourself. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to expose the whole criminal conspiracy. I'm going to fight this greedy gang of speculators, and I'm going to beat them at the polls."

"How will you go about all that?"

"In the *Enterprise*."

"But I *own* the *Enterprise*, you remember Braine, and naturally you can't do it in my paper. I've never asked you to help me in any of my enterprises, but I shan't let you use the paper to hurt the biggest one I ever engaged in. You can't do this in any other paper, because you've driven the *Argus* out of town, and I

took pains to buy the *Item* this morning early, on the chance of its being turned against me. I've got a bill of sale of the whole concern, stock, lock, and barrel, in my pocket now!"

"My God!" exclaimed Braine, for the first time realizing his helplessness, and the consequences it involved with respect to his marriage and his future.

"Don't swear, Edgar. It's immoral. I'm a religious man myself, and might put the matter in a stronger way; but you're not a professor of religion, and so I only say its immoral."

Edgar sat thinking for ten minutes, during which neither man spoke. Then Hildreth said:

"You mustn't take an unbusiness-like view of this thing, Edgar – "

"Call me by my last name, please – somehow I like it better," interrupted the young man.

"Oh, all right. As I was saying, you oughtn't to look at this thing in your high and mighty way. It's unbusiness-like. It isn't practical. Let me explain a little. This is a great business enterprise, far-reaching, and sure to make Thebes great. The men who are engineering it and putting their money into it, naturally want some return. They ask this right of way – "

"And intend to steal the whole levee under cover of a swindling document," broke in Braine.

"Now don't get excited, and use harsh terms. These men want certain privileges in return for making Thebes a great railroad centre, and the Common Council is willing to make the grant as

soon as the people, by a vote, give them authority under the law. You have thought it would be your duty to oppose the thing, but I have shown you its nature, and asked you to change your opinion. You can carry this election by the influence of the *Enterprise*. We ask you to do it, and tell you that if you do you shall be let in on the ground floor. I'll make that more definite. If you help us, on the day after the election the *Enterprise*– good-will, business, presses, type, and everything, shall be Edgar Braine's, absolutely, to do what he pleases with, and in any political, or other aspirations he may have, he will enjoy the support of the moneyed interest of the State. If you refuse to help, why, naturally, I must put a man in charge of the *Enterprise* who will. He is at my office now."

Braine said nothing for a long time. He was taking account of his situation. He had thought himself prosperous. In fact, if he broke with Hildreth, he had scarcely more than the fifty dollars with which he had come to Thebes several years before. He might have saved a few thousands from the earnings of the *Enterprise*, but he had preferred, in his eagerness to make the paper successful, to spend the money in improvements. All his plans had been laid with reference to his continuance in his present position, with the certain income it secured. But Abner Hildreth held all his prospects and all his plans in the hollow of his hand, to do what he would with them.

It was a choice between certain ruin on the one hand, and practically limitless success on the other, for he saw more

clearly than Hildreth did, how potent a lever the influence of the "moneyed interest" might be made, and how much more perfectly he could command its aid than Abner Hildreth dreamed.

The temptation was frightful. The horror of such iniquity in his soul was not less so.

"This craze of speculation, which seems to dominate everything of late years in our money-cursed country, is a very Juggernaut," he said at last, in bitterness of spirit, and less to Hildreth than to himself.

"Juggernaut?" responded the banker, "that's the Hindoo car that runs over people and crushes 'em, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Yes. Well now, let me call your attention to an interesting fact about that car. Did you ever observe that it never runs over the people that ride on it?"

"Yes. I've observed that. I'm not so sure that the analogy will hold, however. One might get jostled off, and fall under the wheels. But I seem to be almost under now." He hesitated a moment more, and then – "For safety I'll get on, and trust to my grip to hold on. I'll favor the proposal, Mr. Hildreth, and I'll carry it through at the polls."

Then changing his tone to one a little less grim and more cheerful, he went on: "But our contract has been rather indefinite in the past. Would you mind signing an agreement now as to the transfer of the *Enterprise* to me on the day after the election?"

"No, certainly not. I'll write it."

He wrote hurriedly and signed. Braine looked over the paper and tore it up.

"That's worthless," he said. "A contract without consideration can't be enforced. I want a legally binding agreement this time. I'll draw it."

He did so, and then read it to the banker, who assented to its terms, and was about to sign it when Braine stopped him.

"Wait a moment" he said; then raising his voice he called: "Mikey!"

The apprentice appeared, trembling lest judgment day had come for the sin of smoking cigarettes.

"I want you to see Mr. Hildreth and me sign this paper. Never mind reading it," he said, laying a blotting pad over the lines, as he saw the boy's eyes wandering curiously over the document. When the two had signed, he turned to Mikey and said:

"Now, write the word 'witness' in that corner, and sign your own name under it."

When the lad had finished, Braine turned to Hildreth, who was beamingly about to shake hands with him, and said in a strangely cold and haughty tone:

"I believe that finishes our business, Mr. Hildreth, and as I have some matters to discuss with Mikey, I beg you will excuse me. Good morning, sir."

Hildreth passed out of the office, astonishment, vexation, and triumph struggling for mastery in his mind.

"He's a cool hand, sure," he muttered, "to bow me out in that fashion, just when I'd bought him, body and breeches! Somehow I can't feel quite easy about this thing yet. He didn't act as though he thought he belonged to me. Wonder if he's going to burst the whole thing up after all! By – George! I haven't got a scrap of writing to hold him by! I haven't got a line binding him to anything!"

With that he stopped short in the street, and after a moment's reflection, muttered again:

"Abner Hildreth, you're a fool! You have sized that fellow up, and you know he is too honorable to go back on his promise. Well, of course, there ain't so much to be said about his honor now – but he won't lie, that's certain. He'll keep his part of this bargain."

Braine when left alone with Mikey, said to the lad:

"Mikey, how far did you go in arithmetic at school?"

"Clear troo, sir."

"What did you get on examination?"

"Eighty-six, sir."

"Well, here's a sum I want you to work out for me. If a boy, fourteen years old, smokes a dozen cigarettes a day at five cents a dozen, allowing compound interest on the money, how much will the smoking cost him by the time he's twenty-one? It will be a long sum to do. If you get tired while working at it, here's a good Havana cigar to smoke for a rest. Do the sum to-night, and bring me the answer in the morning. Go along to your work now."

Then Edgar Braine sat down to write, for the first time in his life, in advocacy of what he believed to be iniquity. The article was the most difficult one he had ever tried to write, but when done, it was almost startling in its vigor and persuasiveness.

When he had read it over, he thought:

"It almost convinces me that the thing is right, and *I* know better. It will surely convince men who don't know better. It's a strange experience for a man who has conscientiously written for the public instruction, to turn about and write with a deliberate purpose to deceive the public and wrong it. But the Edgar Braine who worked for the good of his fellow-men is dead. He committed suicide to-day. By the way, he ought to have a good obituary. I'll write it."

And he did. The article began:

"There died in this town to-day, a young man much esteemed by his fellow-citizens. The young man was known to all our readers as Edgar Braine, the editor. He died by his own hand, and no cause for the deed is known to the public."

It went on to give a sketch of the suicide's life, and an analysis of his character, and the purposes which had animated him in his work.

When the foreman got the obituary with "must" written upon it, he was thrown into a panic, and rushed into the editorial room to remonstrate.

"I can't believe you mean to kill yourself, Mr. Braine – "

"Be perfectly easy in your mind, Snedeker," replied Braine,

with a smile, "I'm not going to do myself any further harm."

The foreman wanted to ask what the thing meant, but was not encouraged by the look on Braine's face to indulge his curiosity. He "set" the article himself, thinking that should the editor change his mind about it, it would be just as well not to give the journeymen a chance to talk. But Braine did not recall it. He corrected the proof slip, and went on with his work.

When the *Enterprise* came out with the obituary of its editor staring at its readers between turned rules, the little city was thrown into something like a convulsion. It was soon learned at the newspaper office that Braine was not dead – Abner Hildreth was the first to make the inquiry – and the good news spread rapidly through the excited community. But what did the obituary mean?

Conjecture busied itself with an effort to find a solution for the mystery; for wildly, personal and audacious as journalism was in small western towns at that time, the effrontery of this stroke startled the community. One wise one suggested that Mose Harbell must have done the thing for a joke, as he had manifestly done the mackerel story in the same issue of the paper; but that theory was unanimously rejected as soon as it was observed that the article did not once call Braine "genial."

Finally the community settled down to the conviction that this was only another of Braine's devices – a trifle more startling than the others – for exciting interest in the paper, and making it a subject of universal talk.

Abner Hildreth alone understood, and he was satisfied to be silent.

# VIII

As the sun rose after his night of tramping and troubled reminiscence, Edgar Braine resolutely put the past out of his mind, and turned to the future.

"The old Edgar is dead," he said; "let us see what we can do for the new Edgar."

But before attacking that problem, he cleared his head by going out to the little shed that served him for a bath house, filling his home-made shower-bath with fresh water and drenching himself in the chill air of the June morning. When dressed, all the weariness of watching was gone, his pulse was full and his mind clear.

He called across the street and bade the negro caterer bring him a cup of coffee, and not until it came did he permit himself to think of anything more important than the beauty of the morning, and a pet scheme he had of persuading the aldermen of Thebes to offer citizens some sort of inducement to plant more permanent trees among the quick growing and quick decaying cotton-woods of the streets.

When the coffee came, he dismissed all these things, and set himself to work out some problems.

"Hildreth thinks he has made himself my master," he thought, "and Duncan and the Boston crowd are sure of it. They intend to make me serviceable to them, and kindly mean to toss a

financial bone or two to me now and then. Thank you very much, gentlemen, but the relation you propose doesn't suit me. I prefer to occupy the place of master myself. It suits my peculiar temperament better."

Saying this in imagination, he began to think earnestly of means.

His first task was to discover as accurately as possible what the plans of the speculative combination were, – to spy out the camp which he meant to conquer.

The levee, which the Common Council was about to cede to the Central Railroad, covered the whole water-front of Thebes available for steamboat-landings, wharfs, grain-elevators, warehouses, and the like. To Thebes, the loss of the ground-rents and wharf-charges would be a great sacrifice, but the value of the privilege in that way was clearly not enough to account for the eagerness of the railroad people to secure it. They had other things in mind-indeed, there had been a reference to other things in Duncan's letter. It was Edgar Braine's first care to find out what those other things were.

He reflected that another railroad – the Northern – was in process of extension to Thebes. Upon consideration, he saw that the grant of the levee to the Central would effectually cut off the Northern from a terminus on the river. "That," he said to himself, "will enormously depress Northern stock, as soon as the effects of the cession are understood. Then, this crowd will buy it up for a song, consolidate with the Central and make a Union

Depot at the Point. Yes – I see. That's the first part of the game. Then there's the Southern connection. They mean to build the twenty-five miles of road between here and Columbia on the other side of the river, and probably lease the whole system from that point, south. That will give them complete control of a vast system all centring here in Thebes. They'll establish a railroad ferry across the river, of course. Oh, by Jove!" he cried, starting up in excitement, "*There are two sides to this river!*"

With that he hastily finished his toilet by putting on a paper collar, thinking, as he did so: "I must take to linen, I suppose, now that I am to be a great financier."

After he was dressed, he hastily wrote a note to Helen, which began with the greeting he sent her every morning, and continued with a few loving words as to their approaching marriage.

> "I have leased the little cottage, with the bed of sweet-williams in front, dear – by the way, I expect you to call them sweet Edgars in your splendid loyalty – with an option of buying it at the end of two years. It will be good property to own, but you shall not live there long, dear. I have grown ambitious since you consented to be my partner. I shall make money and reputation, and surround you with every luxury – for which you do not in the least care. I shall place you where your superior intellectual and social gifts will have play. You don't care for that either? Ah! but you will, when you find how greatly your social supremacy will aid me in my more masculine ambitions. When you are my wife, I shall be not twice, but ten times the man I am

now. But first, I must teach you to appreciate yourself, dear, and convince you that I am not the infatuated lover you think me, when I tell you how superior you are to other women. Abner Hildreth told me yesterday that I have a remarkable head for business; well, the best justification my vanity has for accepting his opinion, is that I have had the shrewdness to recognize your worth, and to secure you for my partner. That's a joke not to my taste, Helen dear, but I haven't time to write this sheet over. You *know* I marry you simply because I love you, and that I would not profane my thought of you by associating you, even in my mind, with the things of this world. But I do want to see you shine. I want everybody to know your superiority as well as I do. I am ambitious *for you*, because I love you and wish to exalt you."

A little later, Edgar Braine, with a gun and game-bag, crossed the river in a skiff. It was his custom to shoot a little in the woods beyond the great stream twice or thrice a week, for exercise and for love of the woodland odors that brought back memories of his boyhood. But he was not thinking of exercise or odors this morning, or of the squirrels with which his sport usually filled his bag. When he landed, he walked immediately to the cabin occupied by Waverley Cooke. There he was greeted by Waverley, a tall and once very fine-looking man, whose broad brow was now marked with blotches which had run over as it were, from his brandy-pimpled nose.

Waverley Cooke was a Virginian, whose dignified courtesy

of manner had been inherited from ancestors of the old stately school. In his youth he had been promising far beyond the common; in his young manhood he had quickly won distinction as an advocate whose eloquence was singularly persuasive. All doors to success had seemed open to him once; now, all were forever closed. Drink had mastered him before he reached his thirtieth year, and now at fifty, he was old, broken, and hopeless. His patrimony had been wasted, and he had come some years before to live upon the wild waste lands he owned opposite Thebes.

It had been his hope to develop this property, to build up a city there, which should share with Thebes the prosperity that had always been predicted for that town, and was now at last approaching.

But fortune had tarried too long for Waverly Cooke. Hope deferred had made his heart sick, and sorrow and solitude and drink had made wreck of his once buoyant nature. He had no longer any capacity to hope, and all the plans he had cherished lay dead now in his enfeebled hands.

Among these plans had been one to make the river his toll-gate whenever commerce should begin to cross it. In anticipation of that time he had secured in perpetuity the ferry franchise from his own miles of desolate river front to the shore where Thebes had then stood, a half-drowned hamlet waiting to become a city.

In the conviction that some day railroads from the north would meet railroads from the south at this place, he had seized upon

this strategic point; this ferry franchise should make him rich, while the building of a town upon his land – it must be there, because there alone was a landing possible for many miles – should make his wealth princely.

But Waverley Cooke had not been able to wait, and all that remained of his project was the plying of his skiff – sometimes rowed by his own hands, and sometimes by a negro man, once his slave, who had remained his faithful attendant in his decay, – to carry infrequent passengers across the stream for hire.

It was to purchase this ferry franchise that Edgar Braine had crossed the river that morning. When the matter was mentioned to Cooke, a sad, dreamy look came into the poor fellow's face, and for a time he said nothing. He poured and drank some undiluted spirit – courteously motioning an invitation to his guest, for he could not speak – and then passed into the rear room of his house.

After a few moments he returned, erect, and with a touch of his old stateliness in his manner, and said: —

"Pardon me, Braine, but it is not a pleasant thing for a man to contemplate a wrecked life, when that life is his own. I quite understand the value this franchise will have some day, and until this hour I have hoped myself to reap the advantage of its possession. It was weak and foolish to cherish such a delusion, but until now I have never frankly admitted to myself the completeness of the ruin I have wrought. I know now that if there were a dozen railroads seeking ferry accommodations here,

I could not arrange to provide them. I should have to go to Thebes to negotiate for the means, and I should get helplessly drunk there and part with everything to the first man that found out I had anything. I would rather sell to you, an honest man, and better still, a brave one. I have loved you with a knightly admiration, boy, ever since that affair with Summers. We Virginians cherish our inherited respect for personal courage, Braine. We hold it the chief virtue of manhood. This money-grubbing age laughs at our chivalric folly and mocks it; but our chivalric folly scorns this money-grubbing age, and so we are quits with it."

After a little further conversation, the wrecked Virginian took another drink, and said:

"Why not face the facts? That is my master" – pointing to the bottle. "I drink whiskey before breakfast; I get up in the night to drink it. I cannot go on in that way much longer, and I should go off at once if I quitted it. It's a sorry thing to joke about, isn't it? No matter. What I have in mind is this: I'm a wreck. I shall never do any good to myself or anybody else. My wife is buried out there in the swamp that poisoned her with its miasms. My children lie by her side. There remains for me only a brief period of wretchedness, and then death and oblivion. Why should I stay here in this pestilential wilderness? Why not sell out the whole thing to you, – land – there's seven thousand acres of it – all worthless at present – ferry franchise, railroad charter, and all? You are young and vigorous. You will make something of it. You will realize my dreams, and I have a sentimental pleasure in

thinking of that. Sentiment is out of fashion, I know, but never mind. I'm out of fashion too."

"But I haven't money enough for so large a transaction, Mr. Cooke," said Braine.

"Money? It won't take much. If you were to pay me a thousand dollars now, or five thousand, do you know what I would do? I would go over to Thebes, get drunk and die probably. What would be the use of giving me money in large sums? I can't be helped in that way. But I'll tell you how you can buy me out, and at the same time do the best thing there is to be done for me. The home of my fathers in Virginia is vacant – abandoned as worthless since the war. The man who owns it will let me have the use of it, he says, for a song, and the offer has brought a great longing over me. *I want to go home again.*"

Here the poor fellow broke down completely, tears streaming from his eyes and his utterance choking. Braine turned and walked apart in respectful sympathy. After a time he returned, and Cooke, having recovered himself, resumed:

"I want to take my wife and children out of the swamp and bury them in the little graveyard back of the garden at home, where the sweet-briar roses grow. I want to sit there by them every day till I die, trying to tell them how I repent me of my sin that ruined their lives. Who knows? Perhaps the wife's spirit might smile upon me then, as she smiled when she believed in me. Perhaps the little ones might remember in their graves the stories I used to tell them, and learn to love me again. I want to

live in the old home till I die, and I want nothing else in the world. Edgar Braine, you can make that possible. Do it, and all these accursed possessions of mine, which will be golden possibilities to you, are yours!"

Braine was too deeply moved to speak for a time. Broken down drunkard that this man was, he had a certain nobility of character yet – it was all that remained to him of his inheritance from his fathers. It was a reviving glow of the old inherited courage and love of truth that prompted him thus to face his own condition, and assume the responsibility of his folly without an attempt to excuse or palliate the wrong he had done.

"What do you want, Mr. Cooke?" at last Braine asked.

"I want to go back to the old home to die. I want you to pay my passage and *theirs*" – motioning toward the graves – "and to pay me enough every month after I get there to provide me with food and clothes – and this," seizing the bottle and hurling it into the corner angrily. "You are not to send the money to *me*, mind. That would end all at once. You are to send it to some one I will name. A hundred dollars every month will be ample, and it won't be for long, as your debt is to cease with my death. Will you do this? Oh! *will* you do this, Braine? Will you have pity on me, and give me one breath of the old air, one look at the old hills, one little rest under the old trees, before I die?"

In the great longing that had taken possession of his imagination, the broken man was in panic lest his proposal should be refused.

"The land will be valuable some day, Braine, and so will the ferry franchise. It is absolute and exclusive, and the railroad commerce of this region *must* cross the river here. Then there is the railroad franchise."

"What is that?" asked Braine. "You mentioned it before, but I do not understand."

"Why, I have a special charter, granted years ago, for a railroad from here to Columbia – and on to the State line, for that matter, but as there is already a line from Columbia south, it is this twenty-five miles that are important. The charter will be very valuable whenever anybody is ready to build the connecting link, as they will be some day, because it grants valuable, exclusive privileges which can't be had under the present constitution. I drew the charter myself with an eye to the future, and legislatures in those days were ready to grant anything, in their eagerness to encourage railroad-building. I can't recall all the legal points now – my head isn't clear – but I'll show you the charter. You'll see for yourself that whoever builds any railroad to connect the lines centring at Thebes with the Southern system, is absolutely obliged to have this charter."

He took the document from his desk, and Braine read it through carefully. Then he said:

"Mr. Cooke, this is a very valuable piece of paper."

"Then you will grant what I have asked?" eagerly interjected the other, almost in accents of prayer.

"I will if you insist. But as an honest man, or one who tries

to be tolerably honest" – he remembered his suicide – "I cannot accept your offer without telling you that you are giving greatly more than you imagine. This twenty-five miles of road must be built, and men of enormous means will build it."

"Will they buy the charter *on my terms, and now*? A month hence it may be too late."

"They would buy it now, and on better terms than I am able to offer, if they knew of its existence," said Braine.

"I tell you there are no better terms possible. I won't have money paid me for it. I should get drunk and die, and never get home with *them*," again pointing to the graves. "Now listen to me, Edgar Braine. I must start home in three days, with *them*, or I must drown myself. I cannot live if this thing is not carried out. It is impossible to make better terms for *me*. All other terms would be worse, infinitely worse."

"Could I not execute a mortgage to you for a sum fairly representing the worth of this?" holding up the paper.

"No! I should trade it off for liquor and die the sooner. I tell you I want one thing and no other. There is nobody to come after me to inherit anything I might leave."

"Very well. Take to-day to think over the matter. You're excited now. If you adhere to your proposal to-morrow, I will accept it."

"No, no, no! It must be *now*, I tell you. I will execute the papers now, and begin to get ready for home!"

And so it was arranged. Excitement seemed to clear the head

of the inebriate, and though his hand trembled, he wrote without a pause until every detail of the transaction was covered in legal form. Then he directed the negro boy, Sam, to harness the horse to the rickety buggy, and drove his visitor to the county seat, ten miles away, where the necessary legal forms of acknowledgment, record, etc., were completed.

When Edgar Braine walked into Hildreth's bank parlor late that afternoon, he said quite carelessly:

"I have come into a little property, and have some payments to make in the settlement. I may have to borrow a few hundred dollars to-morrow on a thirty days' acceptance."

"You can have a few thousands if you want it," said the banker, "any time you like. Now that you're one of us, I'll take care that your credit is good."

"Now that I'm one of you," replied Braine, "perhaps I shall be able to look after that a little myself. You say I have a good head for business."

With that he strolled out and bought a copy of the *Enterprise* to see if Mose Harbell had read his proofs carefully in his absence. As he passed a shop he paused and said to himself:

"As there really are two sides to the river, I may as well take to linen collars at once." And he went in and bought a supply.

# IX

## [From Helen's Diary.]

*June 5, 18 –* . Received a short note from Edgar at noon. It was a peculiar, unnatural note in some respects. It seemed a mechanical affair, instead of an impulse of the heart. He did not call this evening. *I am much worried* over it.

*June 6, 18 –*. Edgar is just now gone. This morning I received a note from him as usual, saying that he had secured a cottage just at the edge of town for us. He called at eight. He was in the wildest spirits. I have never seen him in this way before. His happiness infected me. He has had a wonderful stroke of good fortune, by which he has come into the proprietorship of the *Enterprise*, as well as the editorship, and he has just engaged in a land speculation – which I am not to mention – that is going to be worth a fortune to him, – something about a railroad grant, or *something*. I don't understand it exactly.

The cottage has seven rooms, and we are going to furnish them *all*. Ed laughed, and observed that he had already reached the linen collar period of his existence. There was a certain grim ring in his laugh to-night. I feel anything but grim. My entire person feels like a perpetual smile of joy. This stroke of fortune is

glorious. Ed said that I must say absolutely nothing about affairs. That he had some people in his hands, and that we must be very discreet. I can't bear *discretion*. It always seems to suggest something to be ashamed of. Of course, it doesn't in this instance, because Edgar is the one who enjoins it. There is something glorious in this feeling of absolute faith. To *know* that for the rest of my life I shall never know the responsibility of having to decide *anything*. To know that I can place myself entirely in his hands, and be confident of always being counselled aright. I could never have loved him if I could not have felt this. It is my temperament. I do not feel this because I love him, but I love him because of this feeling. A good and honorable man – a man above the petty meanness of his fellows – inspires one almost with reverence.

There is a certain magnificent assurance of superiority in Edgar Braine, so that at times the thought of his marriage with a woman like me seems almost outrageous. I feel so inferior, morally and intellectually. I fear being a drag upon him; an obstacle in the road of his advancement. I am determined to keep up with him as far as it lies in my power. He said to-night that he lived for but two things – power, and my love. I can satisfy the latter, and will never hinder the former. I realize how dear this wish for power is to him; how he longs to be able to better the condition of those people whom he comes in contact with. His ideas are constantly broadening. To-night he talked a little wildly, but in a tone and with a manner that in some way carried

conviction with it, of becoming a power not only among his immediate associates but among the people in general; a power in the nation.

When I think of the noble aims of this man that I love, I cannot help feeling that such a situation would vastly benefit the country. With such a spirit at the helm, there could be no danger of wreck. Heigho! What speculations.

I found myself smiling at the absurdity of my thoughts just now. If I believed that such a thing could be, I should not be so supremely happy as I am now. I could sacrifice my feelings, if it were to the interests of the country, or Edgar. I should even enjoy sacrificing them, I think. But there will never be any question of that. It seems to me that all has come to the point that I have longed for. We are to be married; never separated; live comfortably, without the necessity for anxiety as to the practical things of life, and love each other unmolested by anyone or anything. This is absolute and perfect happiness. To love and live with no ambition save to do right, and feel that the world may be a little better for two loving people having lived in it.

When I teased Ed to-night about not taking me to New York for our wedding trip, he actually looked unhappy, and as though he thought I meant it. It made me laugh to see the miserable expression on his face for a moment, when I have been thanking Heaven all this time that we could not afford to go further than Chicago, and so would get back here to Thebes and our little home in half the time. Besides, I hate travelling. It covers me with

dust till I feel as if I could never be clean again. The dust seems to get even into my mind and soul. It isn't so with Edgar. There is a halo of immaculateness about him: cleanliness is in the very atmosphere when he is near. He is absolutely an indescribable man. He walks down the street, and if one but gets a glimpse of his shiny coat-tails rounding the corner, one is impressed with the superiority of the manner those coat-tails have of rounding that corner. One *knows* that they belong to a man who is worth knowing. One would be impressed that the proprietor of those shiny coat-tails had accomplished some great thing.

If I don't stop right here, I shall get to elaborating on this subject until I shall not get to bed at all.

Good night, Edgar. I hold up my face to be kissed.

*June 19th.* I have not written in this diary for days. There has been plenty to write about – plenty of emotions, not many incidents.

Edgar has reached what, to me, seems the pinnacle of fame and honor – though he only laughs when I say so, and says, with almost a touch of contempt in his tone – "Wait!"

I am a thousand times more elated over the situation than he is – and yet I hardly know whether I am quite as happy as I was before, or not. When I am overwhelmed with exaltation and admiration for his wonderful achievements, Edgar smiles indulgently, and the other night he turned suddenly and said:

"Listen, dear! When I was a young boy, I used to become frenzied at times with certain indignities that other boys with only

half my brains compelled me to endure, because they happened to be situated more advantageously than I as regards material things. While I had perfect contempt for them, I felt a wild desire to convince them of my superiority, as I was convinced of it. I decided that brute force was the only thing at my command at first, and one morning, went out and whipped that one of them whose prestige was such in the town that victory over him meant reverence for me from the rest in the set. It was this very respect which I had whipped the fellow to gain, and which these little ruffians accorded me afterward, that disgusted me. I found I didn't value the respect of a lot of little loafers who could appreciate superiority of that kind only. That evening, when I saw my mother patching those clothes that had been torn in the fight, I discovered that there was no longer even the flavor of satisfaction left me. I said then, 'I will adopt a larger plan.' I did. I had then no thought that – that just this would be the outcome," and here he looked out of the window for a time, with the strange, determined, ominous look that I have seen in his face so often lately.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.