Cullum Ridgwell

The Son of his Father

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Cullum R.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
UNREPENTANT

"To wine, women and gambling, at the age of twenty-four – one hundred thousand dollars. That's your bill, my boy, and – I've got to pay it."

James Carbhoy leaned back smiling, his half-humorous eyes squarely challenging his son, who was lounging in a luxurious morocco chair at the other side of the desk.

As the moments passed without producing any reply, he reached towards the cabinet at his elbow and helped himself to a large cigar. Without any scruple he tore the end off it with his strong teeth and struck a match.

"Well?"

Gordon Carbhoy cleared his throat and looked serious. In spite of his father's easy, smiling manner he knew that a crisis in his affairs had been reached. He understood the iron will lying behind the pleasant steel-gray eyes of his parent. It was a will that flinched at nothing, a will that had carved for its owner a great fortune in America's most strenuous financial arena, the railroad world. He also knew the only way in which to meet his father's challenge with any hope of success. Above everything else the millionaire demanded courage and manhood – manhood as he understood it – from those whom he regarded well.

"I'm waiting."

Gordon stirred. The millionaire carefully lit his cigar.

"Put that way it – sounds rotten, Dad, doesn't it?" Gordon's mobile lips twisted humorously, and he also reached towards the cigar cabinet.

But the older man intercepted him. He held out a box of lesser cigars.

"Try one of these, Gordon. One of the others would add two dollars to your bill. These are half the price."

The two men smiled into each other's eyes. A great devotion lay between them. But their regard was not likely to interfere with the business in hand.

Gordon helped himself. Then he rose from his chair. He moved across the handsome room, towering enormously. His six feet three inches were well matched by a great pair of athletic shoulders. His handsome face bore no traces of the fast living implied by the enormous total of his debts. The wholesome tan of outdoor sports left him a fine specimen of the more brilliant youth of America. Then, too, in his humorous blue eyes lay an extra dash of recklessness, which was probably due to his superlative physical advantages. He came back to his chair and propped his vast body on the back of it. His father was watching him affectionately.

"Dad," he exclaimed, "I'm – sorry."

The other shook his head.

"Don't say that. It's not true. I'd hate it to be true – anyway."

Gordon's face lit.

"You're – going to pay it?"

"Sure. I'm not going to have our name stink in our home city. Sure I'm going to pay it. But – "

"But – what?"

"So are you."

The faint ticking of the bracket clock on the wall suddenly became like the blows of a hammer.

"I – I don't think I – "

Young Gordon broke off. His merry eyes had suddenly become troubled. The crisis was becoming acute.

For some moments the millionaire smoked on luxuriously. Then he removed his cigar and cleared his throat.

"I'm not going to shout. That's not my way," he said in his easy, deliberate fashion. "Guess folks have got to be young, and the younger they're young – why, the better. I was young, and – got over it. You're going to get over it. I figure to help you that way. This is not the first bill you've handed me, but – but it's going to be the last. Guess your baby clothes can be packed right up. Maybe they'll be all the better for it when you hand 'em on to – your kiddie."

The trouble had passed out of the younger man's eyes. They were filled with the humor inspired by his father's manner of dealing with the affair in hand.

"That's all right," he said. "I seem to get that clear enough."

"I'm glad." The millionaire twisted the cigar into the corner of his mouth. "We can pass right on to – other things. You've been one of my secretaries for three years, and it don't seem to me the work's worried you a lot. Still, I put you in early thinking you'd get interested in the source of the dollars you were handing out in bunches. Maybe it wasn't the best way of doing it. Still, I had to try it. You see, it's a great organization I control – though you may not know it. I control more millions than you could count on your fingers and toes, and they've cost me some mental sweat gathering 'em together. Some day you've got to sit in this chair and talk over this 'phone, and when you do you'll be – a man. You see, I don't fancy my pile being invested in cut flowers and automobiles for lady friends. I don't seem to have heard that thousand-dollar parties to boys who can't smoke a five-cent cigar right, and girls who're just out for a good time anyway, are liable to bring you interest on the capital invested, except in the way of contempt. And five-thousand dollar apartments are calculated to rival the luxury of Rome before its fall. Big play at 'draw' and 'auction' are two diseases not provided for amongst the cures in patent med'cine advertisements, and as for the older vintages in wines, they're only permissible in folks who've quit worrying to scratch dollars together. None of these things seem to me good business, and in a man at the outset of his career some of 'em are – immoral. You've had your preliminary run, and I'll admit you've shown a fine turn of speed. But it smacks too much of the race-track, and seems to me quite unsuited to the hard highroad of big finance you're destined to travel.

"Just one moment," he went on, as, with flushing cheeks and half-angry eyes, his son was about to break in. "You haven't got the point of this talk yet. This bill you've handed me don't figure as largely in it as you might guess. I've thought about things these months. I don't blame you a thing. I'm not kicking. The fact you've got to grab and get your hind teeth into is that there comes a time when two can't spend one fortune with any degree of amicability. It's a sort of proposition like two dogs and a bone. Now from a canine point of view that bone certainly belongs to one of those dogs. No two dogs ever stole a bone together. Consequently, the situation ends in a scrap, and it isn't always a cert. that the right thief gets the bone. How it would work out between us I'm not prepared to guess, but, as 'scrap' don't belong to the vocabulary between us, we'll handle the matter in another way. Seeing the fortune – at present – belongs to me, I'll do the spending in – my own way. My way is mighty simple, too, as far as you're concerned. I'm going to stake you all you need, so you can get out and find a bone you can worry on *your own*. That's how you're going to pay this bill. You're going to get busy quitting play. We are, and always have been, and always will be, just two great big friends, and I'd like you to remember that when I say that the life you're living is all right for a boy, but in a man it leads to dirty ditches that aren't easy climbing out of, and – you can't do clean work with dirty hands. When you've shown me you're capable of collecting a bone for your own worrying – why, you can come right back here, and I'll be pleased and proud to hand over the reins of this organization, and I'll be mighty content to sit around in one of the back seats and get busy with the applause. Now you talk."

Gordon began without a moment's hesitation. Something of his heat had passed, but it still remained near the surface.

"Quite time I did," he cried almost sharply. "Look here, father, I don't think you meant all you said the way your talk conveyed it. To me the most important of your talk is the implied immorality of my mode of life. Then the inconsistent fashion in which you point my way towards – big finance."

His eyes lit again. They had suddenly become dangerously bright.

"Here, we're not going to quarrel, nor get angry," he went on, gathering heat of manner even in his denial. "We're too great friends for that, and you've always been too good a sportsman to me, but – but I'm not going to sit and listen to you or anybody else accusing me of immorality without kicking with all my strength!"

He brought one great fist down on the desk with a bang that set the ink-wells and other objects dancing perilously.

"I'm not angry with you. I couldn't get angry with you," he proceeded, with a suppressed excitement that added to his father's smile; "but I tell you right here I'll not stand for it from you or anybody. My only crime is spending your money, which you have always encouraged me to do. From my university days to now my whole leisure has been given up to athletics. A man can't live immorally and win the contests I have won. I don't need to name them. Boxing, sculling, running, baseball, swimming. You know that. Any sane man knows that. The money I've spent has been spent in the ordinary course of the life to which you have brought me up. You have always impressed on me the great position you occupy and the necessity for keeping my end up. That's all I have to say about my debts, but I have something to say on the subject of the inconsistency with which you censure immorality in the same breath as you demand my immediate plunge into the mire of big finance."

He paused for a moment. Then, as abruptly as it had arisen, his heat died down, and gave place to the ready humor of his real nature.

"Gee, I want to laugh!" He sprang from his seat and began to pace the floor, talking as he moved. His father watched him with twinkling, affectionate eyes. "Immorality? Psha! Was there ever anything more immoral than modern finance? You imply I have learned nothing of your organization in the three years I've been one of your secretaries. Dad," he warned, "I've learned enough to have a profound contempt for the methods of big corporations in this country, or anywhere else. It's all graft – graft of one sort or another. Do you need me to tell *you* of it? No, I don't think so. Twenty-five millions wouldn't cover the fortune you've made. I know that well enough. How has it been made? Here, I'll just give you one instance of the machinations of a big corporation. How did you gain control of the Union Grayling and Ukataw Railroad? Psha! What's the use? You know. You hammered it, hammered it to nothing. You got your own people into it, and sat back while they ran it nearly into bankruptcy under your orders. Then you bought. Bought it right up, and – sent it ahead. Immoral? It makes me sweat to think of the people who must have lost fortunes in that scoop. Immoral? Why, I tell you, Dad, any man can make a pile if he sticks to the old saw: 'Don't butt up against the law – just dodge it.' It's only difficult for the fellow who remembers his Sunday-school days. So far, Dad, I've avoided immorality. I'm waiting till I start on big finance to become its victim. That's my talk. Now you do some."

His father nodded. Then he said dryly, "This carpet cost me five hundred dollars, that chair fifty. Try the chair."

Gordon laughed at the imperturbable smile on his father's face, but he flung his great body into the chair.

James Carbhoy deliberately knocked the ash from his cigar. It was many years since he had received such a straight talk from any man. Some of it had stung – stung sharply, but the justice or injustice of it he set aside. His whole mind and heart were upon other matters. He took no umbrage. He swept all personal feeling aside and regarded the boy whom he idolized.

"We've both made some talk," he observed, "but I think the last word's with me. I don't seem to be sure which of us has put up the bluff. Maybe we both have. Anyway, right here and now I'm going to call your hand. I offered you a stake. You say it's easy to make a pile. Can you make a pile?"

Gordon shrugged.

"Why, yes. If I follow your wish and embark on – big finance. And – forget my Sunday school."

The millionaire gathered up the sheaf of loose accounts on the desk and held them up. His smile was grim and challenging.

"One hundred thousand dollars these bills represent. The cashier will hand you a check for that amount. Say, you've shown your ability to spend that amount; can you show your ability to make it?"

For a moment the boy's blue eyes avoided the half-ironical smile of his father's. Then suddenly they returned the steady gaze, and a flush spread swiftly over his handsome face. Something of his father's purpose was dawning upon him. He began to realize that the man who had made those many millions was far too clever for him when it came to debate. He squared his shoulders obstinately and took up the challenge. There was no other course for him. But even as he accepted it his heart sank at the prospect.

"Certainly," he cried. "Certainly – with a stake to start me."

His father nodded.

"Sure. That goes," he said.

Then he laid the papers on the desk, and his whole manner underwent a further change. His eyes seemed to harden with the light of battle. There was an ironical skepticism in them. Even there was a shadow of contempt. For the moment it seemed as if he had forgotten that the man before him was his son, and regarded him merely as some rival financier seeking to beat him in a deal.

"I'll hand you one hundred thousand dollars. That's your stake. This is the way you'll pay those bills. You'll leave this city in twenty-four hours. You can go where you choose, do what you choose. But you must return here in twelve months' time with exactly double that sum. I make no conditions as to how you make the money. That's right up to you. I shall ask no questions, and blame you for no process you adopt, however much I disapprove. Then, to show you how certain I am you can't do it – why, if you make good, there's a half-share partnership in my organization waiting right here for you."

"A half-share partnership?" Gordon repeated incredulously. "You said – a half-share?"

"That's precisely what I said."

All of a sudden the younger man flung back his head and laughed aloud.

"Why, Dad, I stand to win right along the line – anyway," he exclaimed.

The older man's eyes softened.

"Maybe it's just how you look at it."

The change in his father's manner was quite lost upon Gordon. He only saw his enormous advantage in this one-sided bargain.

"Say, Dad, was there ever such a father as I've got?" he cried exuberantly. "Never, never! But you're not going to monopolize all the sportsmanship. I can play the game, too. I don't need one hundred thousand dollars on this game. I don't need twelve months to do it in. I'm not going to cut twelve months out of our lives together. Six is all I need. Six months, and five thousand dollars' stake. That's what I need. Give me that, and I'll be back with one hundred and five thousand dollars in six months' time. I haven't a notion where I'm going or what I'm going to do. All I know is you've put it up to me to make good, and I'm going to. I'll get that money if – if I have to rob a bank."

The boy's recklessness was too much for the gravity of the financier. He sat back and laughed. He flung his half-smoked cigar away, and in a moment father and son had joined in a duel of loud-voiced mirth.

Presently, however, their laughter died out. The millionaire sprang to his feet. His eyes were shining with delight.

"I don't care a darn how you do it, boy," he cried. "As you say, it's up to you. You see, I've got over my Sunday-school days, as you so delicately reminded me. That's by the way. But there's more in this than maybe you get right. You're going to learn that no graft can turn five thousand dollars into one hundred thousand in six months without a mighty fine commercial brain behind it. It's that brain I'm looking for in my son. Now get along and see your mother and sister. You've only got twenty-four hours' grace. Leave these bills to me. You're making a bid for the greatest fortune ever staked in a wager, and things like that don't stand for any delay. Get out, Gordon, boy; get out and – make good."

He held one powerful hand out across the desk, and Gordon promptly seized and wrung it.

"Good-by, Dad, and – God bless you."

CHAPTER II
IN CHASTENED MOOD

Of course, the whole thing was ridiculous. Gordon knew that. No one could know it better. The more he thought about it the more surely he was certain of it. He told himself that he, personally, had behaved like a first-class madman over the whole affair. How on earth was he to make one hundred thousand dollars in six months? It couldn't be done. That was all. It simply couldn't be done. What power of mischief had driven him to charge his highly respectable father with graft? It was a rotten thing to do anyway. And it served him right that it had come back on him by pointing the way to the present impossible situation.

He was perfectly disgusted with himself.

But after a while he began to chuckle. The thing was not without an atmosphere of humor – of a sort. No doubt his friends would have seen a tremendous humor in the idea of his making one hundred thousand dollars under any conditions.

One hundred thousand dollars! What a tremendous sum it sounded viewed from the standpoint of his having to make it. He had never considered it a vast sum before. But now it seemed to grow and grow every time he thought of it. Then he laughed. What stupid things "noughts" were. They meant so much just now, and, in reality, they mean nothing at all.

Oh, dear. The whole thing was a terrible trouble. It was worse. It was a tragedy. But – he mustn't give his friends the laugh on him. That would be the last straw. No. The whole thing should remain a secret between his father and himself. He almost broke into a sweat as he suddenly remembered the Press. What wouldn't the Press do with the story. The son and heir of James Carbhoy, the well-known multi-millionaire, leaving home to show the world how to make one hundred thousand dollars in record time! A stupendous farce. Then the swarm of reporters buzzing about him like a cloud of flies in summer time. The prospect was too depressing. Think of the columns in the Press, especially the cheaper Press. They would haunt him from New York to – Timbuctoo!

It couldn't be done. He felt certain that in such circumstances suicide would be justifiable. Thoughts such as these swept on through his disturbed brain as he sped up Broadway on his way to say good-by to his mother and sister. He had been lucky in finding his father's high-powered automobile standing outside the palatial entrance of the towering Carbhoy Building. Nor had he the least scruple in commandeering it.

His visit to the east side of Central Park was in the nature of a whirlwind. He had no desire to be questioned, and he knew his young sister, Gracie, too well to give her a chance in that direction. Their friends were wont to say that, for one so young – she was only thirteen – she was all wit and intellect. He felt that that was because she was his father's daughter. For himself he was positive she was all precocity and impertinence. And he told himself he was quite unprejudiced.

As for his mother, she was one of those gentle Southern women who declare that no woman has the right to question the doings of the male members of her household, and, in spite of the luxury with which she was surrounded, and which she never failed to feel the burden of – she was originally a small farmer's daughter – still yearned for that homely meal of her youth, "supper" – a collation of coffee, cakes, preserves and cold meats.

Experience warned him that he must give her no inkling of the real facts. She would be too terribly shocked at the revelation.

So, for an hour or more, in the little family circle, in his mother's splendid boudoir, he talked of everything but his own affairs. Nor was it until he was in the act of taking his leave that he warned them both that he was leaving the city for six months. He felt it was a cowardly thing to do, but,

having fired his bombshell in their midst, he fled precipitately before its stunning effect had time to pass away.

Off he sped, the automobile urged to a dangerous speed, and it was with a great sense of relief that he finally reached his own apartment on Riverside Drive.

Letting himself in, he found his man, Harding, waiting for him.

"Mrs. Carbhoy has been ringing you up, sir," he said in the level tones of a well-trained servant. "She wants to speak to you, sir – most important."

Gordon hardened his heart.

"Disconnect the 'phone then," he said sharply, and flung himself into a great settle which stood in the domed hall.

"Very good, sir."

The man was moving away.

"If my mother or sister should come here, I'm out. Send word down to the office that there's no one in."

The valet's face was quite expressionless. Gordon Carbhoy had his own way of dealing with his affairs. Harding understood this. He was also devoted to his master.

"Yes, sir."

He vanished out of the hall.

Left alone a great change came over Gordon. The old buoyancy and humor seemed suddenly to fall from him. For once his eyes were perfectly, almost painfully serious. He stared about him, searching the remoteness of his surroundings, his eyes and thoughts dwelling on the luxury of the apartment he had occupied for the last three years. It was a two-floored masterpiece of builder's ingenuity. It was to be his home no longer.

That splendid domed hall had been the scene of many innocent revels. Yes, in spite of the accusation of immorality, his parties had been innocent enough. He had entertained the boys and girls of his acquaintance royally, but – innocently. Well, that was all done with. It was just a memory. The future was his concern.

The future. And that depended on his own exertions. For a moment the seriousness of his mood lifted. Surely his own exertions as a business man was a broken reed to – What about failure? What was to follow – failure? He hadn't thought of it, and his father hadn't spoken of it.

Suddenly the cloud settled again, and a sort of panic swept over him. Did his father intend to – kick him out? It almost looked like it. And yet – Had he intended this stake as his last? What a perfect fool he had been to refuse the hundred thousand dollars. Then, in a moment, his panic passed. He was glad he had done so – anyway.

He selected a cigar from his case and sniffed at it. He remembered his father's. His handsome blue eyes were twinkling. His own cigars cost half a dollar more than his father's, and the fact amused him. He cut the end carefully and lit it. Then he leaned back on the cushions and resigned himself to the reflection that these things, too, must go with the rest. They, too, must become a mere memory.

"Harding!" he called.

The man appeared almost magically.

"Harding, have you ever smoked a – five-cent cigar?" he inquired thoughtfully.

The valet cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to say, sir, I haven't."

"Sorry?" Gordon's eyes were smiling.

"A mere figure of speech, sir."

"Ah – I see. They must be – painful."

"Very, I should think, sir. But, beg pardon, sir, I believe in some – ahem – low places, they sell two for five cents!"

"Two? I – I wonder if the sanitary authorities know about it."

Gordon smiled into the serious face of his devoted henchman. Then he went on rapidly —

"What baggage do you suggest for a six months' trip?"

"Europe, sir?"

"No."

"South, sir?"

"I – haven't made up my mind."

"General then, sir. That'll need more. There's the three large trunks. The steamer trunk. Four suit cases. Will you need your polo kit, sir, and your – ?"

Gordon shook his head.

"Guess your focus needs adjusting. Now, suppose you were getting a man ready for a six months' trip – a man who smoked those two-for-five cigars. What would you give him?"

Harding's eyelids flickered. He sighed.

"It would be difficult, sir. I shouldn't give him clean under-garments, sir. I should suggest the oldest suit I could find. You see, sir, it would be waste to give him a good suit. The axles of those box cars are so greasy. I'm not sure about a toothbrush."

"Your focus is adjusting itself."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir."

"And the five-cent-cigar man?"

Harding's verdict came promptly.

"A hand bag with one good suit and ablutionary utensils, sir. Also strong, warm under-garments, and a thick overcoat. One spare pair of boots. You see, sir, he could carry that himself."

"Good," cried Gordon delightedly. "You prepare for that five-cent-cigar man. Now I want some food. Better ring down to the restaurant."

"Yes, sir. An oyster cocktail? Squab on toast, or a little pheasant? What about sweets, sir, and what wine will you take?"

"Great gods no, man! Nothing like that. Think of your five-cent-cigar man. What would he have? Why, sandwiches. You know, nice thick ones, mostly bread. No. Wait a bit. I know. A club sandwich. Two club sandwiches, and a bottle of domestic lager. Two things I hate – eternally. We must equip ourselves, Harding. We must mortify the flesh. We must readjust our focus, and outrage all our more delicate susceptibilities. We must reduce ourselves to the requirements of the five-cent-cigar man, and turn a happy, smiling world into a dark and drear struggle for existence. See to it, good Harding, see to it."

The man withdrew, puzzled. Used as he was to Gordon's vagaries, the thought of his master dining off two hideous club sandwiches and a bottle of *domestic* lager made his staunch stomach positively turn.

His perfect training, however, permitted of no verbal protest. And he waited on the diner with as much care for punctilio as though a formal banquet were in progress. Then came another violent shock to his feelings. Gordon leaned back in his chair with a sigh of amused contentment.

"Do you think you could get me a – five-cent cigar, Harding?" he demanded. "Say, I enjoyed that food. That unique combination of chicken, hot bacon and – and something pickly – why, it's great. And as for *domestic* lager – it's got wine beaten a mile. Guess I'm mighty anxious to explore a – five-cent cigar."

Harding cleared his throat.

"I'll do my best, sir. It may be difficult, but I'll do my best. I'll consult the clerk downstairs. He smokes very bad cigars, sir."

"Good. You get busy. I'll be around in my den."

"Yes, sir," Harding hesitated. Then with an unusual diffidence, "Coffee, sir? A little of the '48 brandy, sir?"

Gordon stared.

"Can I believe my ears? Spoil a dinner like that with – '48 brandy? I'm astonished, Harding. That focus, man; that five-cent-cigar focus!"

Gordon hurried off into his den with a laugh. Harding gazed after him with puzzled, respectful eyes.

Once in the privacy of his den, half office, half library, and wholly a room of comfort, Gordon forgot his laugh. His mind was quite made up, and he knew that a long evening's work lay before him.

He picked up the receiver of his private 'phone to his father's office and sat down at the desk.

"Hello! Hello! Ah! That you, Harker? Splendid. Guess I'm glad I caught you. Working late, eh? Sure. It's the way in er – big finance. Yes. Got to lie awake at nights to do the other feller. Say. No. Oh, no, that's not what I rang you up for. It's about – finance. Ha, ha! It's a check for me. Did the governor leave me one? Good. Five thousand dollars, isn't it? Well, say, don't place it to my credit. Get cash for it to-morrow, and send it along to – Let me see. Yes, I know. You send along a bright clerk with it. He can meet me at the Pennsylvania Depot to-morrow, at noon – sharp. Yes. In the waiting-room. Get that? Good. So long."

"That's that," he muttered, as he replaced the receiver. "Now for Charlie Spiers."

He turned to the ordinary 'phone, picked up the receiver, gave the operator the number, and waited.

"Hello! Hello, hello, hello! That you, Charlie? Bully. I wasn't sure getting you. Guess my luck's right in. How are you? Goo – No, better not come around to-night. Fact is, I'm up to my back teeth packing and things. I've got to be away awhile. Business – important." He laughed. "Don't get funny. It's not play. No. Eh? What's that? A lady? Quit it. If there's a thing I can't stand just about now it's a suggestion of immorality. I mean that. The word 'immoral' 's about enough to set me chasing Broadway barking and foaming at the mouth. I said I'm going away on business, and it's so important that not even my mother knows where I'm going. Yes. Ah, I'm glad you feel that way. It's serious. Now, listen to me; it's up to you to do me a kindness. I'm going to write the mater now and again. But I can't mail direct, or she'll know where I am, see? Well, I can send her mail under cover to you, and you can mail it on to her. Get me? Now, that way, you'll know just where I am. That's so. Well, you've got to swear right along over the wire you won't tell a soul. Not the governor, or the mater, or Gracie, or – or anybody. No, I don't need you to cuss like a railroader about it. Just swear properly. That's it. That's fine. On your soul and honor. Fine. I'm glad you added the 'honor' racket, it makes things plumb sure. Oh, yes, your soul's all right in its way. But – Good-by, boy. I'll see you six months from to-day. No. Too busy. So long."

Gordon hung up the receiver and turned back to his desk with a sigh. He opened a drawer and took out his check-book, and gave himself up to a few minutes of figures. There was not a great deal of money to his credit at the bank, but it was sufficient for his purposes. He wrote and signed three checks. Then he tore the remaining blanks up and flung them into the waste-basket.

After that he turned his attention to a systematic examination of his papers. It was a long, and not uninteresting process, but one that took a vast amount of patience. He tore up letter after letter, photographs, bills, every sort of document which a bachelor seems always to accumulate when troubled by the disease of youth.

In the midst of his labors he came across his father's private code for cable and telegraph. It brought back to him the memory of his position as one of his father's secretaries. He smiled as he glanced through it. It must be sent back to the office. He would hand it to the clerk who brought him his money in the morning. So he placed it carefully in the inside pocket of his coat and continued his labors.

Half an hour later Harding appeared.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said. "I had some difficulty, but" – he held up an oily-looking cigar with a flaming label about its middle, between his finger and thumb – "I succeeded in obtaining one. I

had to take three surface cars, and finally had to go to Fourth Avenue. It was a lower place than I expected, sir, seeing that it was a five-cent cigar."

"That means it cost me twenty cents, Harding – unless you were able to transfer."

Gordon eyed the man's expressionless face quizzically.

"I'm sorry, sir. But I forgot about the transfer tickets."

Gordon sighed with pretended regret.

"I'm sure guessing it's – bad finance. We ought to do better."

"I could have saved the fares if I'd taken your car, sir," said Harding, with a flicker of the eyelids.

"Splendid, gasoline at thirteen cents, and the price of tires going up."

Gordon drummed on the desk with his fingers and became thoughtful. He had a painful duty yet to perform.

"Harding," he said at last, with a genuine sigh, his eyes painfully serious. "We've got to go different ways. You've – got to quit."

The valet's face never moved a muscle.

"Yes, sir."

"Right away."

"Yes, sir."

Then the man cleared his throat, and laid the oily-looking cigar on the desk.

"I trust, sir, I've given satisfaction?"

"Satisfaction?" Gordon's tone expressed the most cordial appreciation. "Satisfaction don't express it. I couldn't have kept up the farce of existence without you. You are the best fellow in the world. Guess it's I who haven't given satisfaction."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh – you agree?"

"Yes, sir. That is, no, sir."

Harding passed one thin hand across his forehead, and the movement was one of perplexity. It was the only gesture he permitted himself as any expression of feeling.

"I'm going away for six months – as a five-cent-cigar man," Gordon went on, disguising his regret under a smile of humor. "I'm going away on – business."

"Yes, sir." The respectful agreement came in a monotonous tone.

"So you'll – just have to quit. That's all."

"Yes, sir."

"Ye-es."

"You will – need a man when you come back, sir?" The eagerness was unmistakable to Gordon.

"I – hope so."

Harding's face brightened.

"I will accept temporary employment then, sir. Thank you, sir."

Gordon wondered. Then he cleared his throat, and held out two of the checks he had written.

"Here's two months' wages," he said. "One is your due. Guess the other's the same, only – it's a present. Now, get this. You'll need to see everything cleared right out of this shanty, and stored at the Manhattan deposit. When that's done, get right along and report things to my father, and hand him your accounts for settlement. All my cigars and cigarettes and wine and things, why, I guess you can have for a present. It don't seem reasonable to me condemning you to five-cent cigars and domestic lager. Now pack me one grip, as you said. I'll wear the suit I've got on. Mind, I need a grip I can tote myself – full."

"Very good, sir. Thank you, sir. Anything else, sir?"

"Why, yes." Gordon was smiling again. "Hand this check in at the bank when it opens to-morrow, and get me cash for it, and bring it right along. That's all, except you'd better get me another disgusting sandwich, and another bottle of tragedy beer for my supper. There's nothing else."

With a resolute air Gordon turned back to his work, as, with an obvious sigh of regret, Harding silently withdrew.

CHAPTER III
GORDON ARRIVES

Gordon Carbhoy sat hunched up in his seat. His great shoulders, so square and broad, seemed to fill up far more space than he was entitled to. His cheerful face showed no signs of the impatience and irritability he was really enduring. A seraphic contentment alone shone in his clear blue eyes. He was a picture of the youthful conviction that life was in reality a very pleasant thing, and that there did not exist a single cloud upon the delicately tinted horizon of his own particular portion of it.

In spite of this outward seeming, however, he was by no means easy. Every now and again he would stand up and ease the tightness of his trousers about his knees. He felt dirty, too, dirty and untidy, notwithstanding the fact that he had washed himself, and brushed his hair, many times in the cramped compartment of the train devoted to that purpose. Then he would fling himself into his corner again and give his attention to the monotonously level landscape beyond the window and strive to forget the stale odor so peculiar to all railroad cars, especially in summer time.

These were movements and efforts he had made a hundred times since leaving the great terminal in New York. He had slept in his corner. He had eaten cheaply in the dining-car. He had smoked one of the delicious cigars, from the box which the faithful Harding had secreted in his grip, in the smoker ahead. He had read every line in the magazines he had provided himself with, even to the advertisements.

The time hung heavily, drearily. The train grumbled, and shook, and jolted its ponderous way on across the vast American continent. It was all very tedious.

Then the endless stream of thought, often fantastic, always unconvincing, always leading up to those ridiculous cyphers representing one hundred thousand dollars. If only they were numerals. Nice, odd numerals. He was a firm believer in the luck of odd numbers. But no. It was always "noughts." Most disgusting "noughts."

He yawned for about the thousandth time on his two days' journey, and wondered hopelessly how many more times he would yawn before he reached the Pacific.

Hello! The conductor was coming through again. Going to tear off more ticket, Gordon supposed. That tearing off was most interesting. He wondered if the ticket would last out till he reached Seattle. He supposed so.

Seattle! The Yukon! The Yukon certainly suggested fortune, the making of a rapid fortune. But how? One hundred thousand dollars! There it was again.

His eyes were following the movements of the rubicund conductor. The man looked enormously self-satisfied, and was certainly bursting with authority and adipose tissue. He wondered if he couldn't annoy him some way. It would be good to annoy some one. He closed his smiling eyes and feigned sleep.

The vast bulk of blue uniform and brass buttons bore down upon him. It reached his "pew," dropped into the seat opposite, and tweaked him by the coat sleeve.

Gordon opened his eyes with a pretended start.

"Where are we?" he demanded irritably.

"Som'eres between the devil an' the deep sea, I guess," grinned the man. "Your – ticket."

Gordon began to fumble slowly through his pockets. He knew precisely where his ticket was, but he searched carefully and deliberately in every other possible place. The man waited, breathing heavily. He displayed not the slightest sign of the annoyance desired. At last Gordon turned out the inside pocket of his coat. The first thing he discovered amongst its contents was his father's private code book, and the annoyance was in his eyes rather than in those of the conductor. His resolve to return it had been entirely forgotten.

He forthwith produced his ticket.

"The devil's behind us, I s'pose," said Gordon. "Anyway, we're told it's the right place for him. I'll be glad when we reach the sea."

The conductor examined the ticket, while Gordon returned the code book to his pocket.

"Ah, Seattle," the brassbound official murmured. Then he looked into the now smiling face before him. "You ain't for Snake's Fall?"

"Guess I shouldn't have paid for a ticket to Seattle if I were," Gordon retorted with some sarcasm.

"That's so," observed the official, quite undisturbed. "I knew one guy was for Seattle. I was kind o' wondering 'bout him. Se-attle," he murmured reflectively.

"On the coast. A seaport. Puget Sound," said Gordon objectionably.

"A low down sailor town on the side of a hill, wher' if you ain't climbin' up you're mostly fallin' down. Wher' it rains nigh six months o' the year, an' parboils you the rest. Wher' every bum going to or coming from the Yukon gets thoroughly soused and plays the fool gener'ly."

The man's retort was as pointedly objectionable as Gordon's had been, and the challenge of it stirred the latter's sense of humor.

"Guess I'm one of the bums 'going to,'" he said cheerfully. The man's fat-surrounded eyes ceased to grin.

"Startin' fer the Yukon in – July? Never heard of it," he said, with a shake of the head. "It's as ridiculous as startin' fer hell in summer time. You'll make Alaska when she freezes up, and sit around till she opens next spring. Say – "

"You mean I'll get hung up for – ten months?" cried Gordon aghast.

"Jest depends on your business."

"Yes, of course."

Gordon's heart sank as the man grunted up from his seat, and handed him back his mutilated ticket. He watched him pass on down the car and finally vanish through the doorway of the parlor-car beyond. Then his eyes came back to his surroundings. He stared at the heads of his fellow travelers dotting the tops of the seats about him. Then his eyes dropped to his grip on the opposite seat lying under his overcoat, and again, later, they turned reflectively towards the window. Ten months. Ten months, and he only had six before him in which to accomplish his purpose. Was there ever a more perfect imbecile? Was there ever such a fool trick?

A smile of chagrin grew in his eyes as he remembered how he had arrived at the Pennsylvania Depot, and had studied the list of places to which he could go, seeking to find in the names an inspiration for the accomplishment of his purpose. There had been so many that his amazed head had been set whirling. There he had stood, wondering and gawking like some foolish country "Rube," without one single idea beyond the fact that he must go somewhere and make one hundred thousand dollars in six months' time.

Then had come that one illuminating flash. He saw the name in great capital letters in an advertisement. "The Yukon." Of course. It was the one and only place in the world for quick fortunes, and forthwith he had booked his passage to Seattle.

Nor was he likely to forget his immense satisfaction when he heard Harding's respectful "Yes, sir," in response to his information. Now he certainly was convinced that he was own brother to the finest bred jackass in the whole wide world. However, there was nothing to be done but go on to Seattle. He had paid for his ticket, and, Providence willing, to Seattle he would go.

But Providence had its own ideas upon the matter. Furthermore, Providence began at once to set its own machinery working in his behalf. It was the same Providence that looks after drunken men and imbeciles. Half an hour later it impelled him to gather up his traps and pass forward into the smoker, accompanied by one of his own big, expensive cigars.

He pushed his way into the car through the narrow door of communication. A haze of tobacco smoke blurred his view, but at once he became aware of a single, melancholy, benevolent eye gazing steadily at him.

It was an amiable eye and withal shrewd. Also it was surrounded by a shaggy dark brow. This had a fellow, too, but the eye belonging to the fellow was concealed beneath what was intended to be a flesh-tinted cover, secured in place by elastic round its owner's head.

The surrounding face was rugged and weather tanned. And it finished with a mop of iron-gray hair at one end, and an aggressively tufted chin beard at the other. But the thrusting whisker could not disguise the general strength of the face.

Below this was a spread of large body clad in a store suit of some pretensions, but of ill fit, and a heavy gold watchchain and a large diamond pin in the neckwear suggested opulence. Furthermore, One Eye suggested the prime of middle life, and robust health and satisfaction.

There was only one other occupant of the car. He was two or three seats away, across the aisle. He promptly claimed Gordon's attention. He was amusing himself by shooting "crap" on a baize-covered traveling-table. Both men were smoking hard, and, by the density of the atmosphere, and the aroma, the newcomer estimated that they, unlike himself, were not five-cent-cigar men.

He paused at the dice thrower's seat and watched the proceedings. The man appeared not to notice his approach at all, and continued to labor on with his pastime, carrying on a muttered address to the obdurate "bones."

"Come 'sev,'" he muttered again and again, as he flung the dice on the table with a flick of the fingers.

But the "seven" would not come up, and at last he raised a pair of keen black eyes to Gordon's face.

"Cussed things, them durned bones," he said briefly, and went on with his play.

Gordon smiled.

"It's like most things. It's luck that tells."

The player grinned down at the dice and nodded agreement, while he continued his muttered demands. Gordon flung his traps into another seat, and sat himself down opposite the man. Crap dice never failed to fascinate him.

The melancholy benevolence of One Eye remained fixed upon the pair.

The seven refused to come up, and finally the player desisted.

"Sort of workin' calculations," he explained, with an amiable grin. "An' they don't calc worth a cent. As you say, the hull blamed thing is chance. Sevens, or any other old things 'll just come up when they darned please, and neither me nor any other feller can make 'em come – playin' straight."

The man bared his gold-filled teeth in another amiable grin. And Gordon fell.

His unsuspicious mind was quite unable to appreciate the obvious cut of the man. The rather flashy style of his clothes. The keen, quick, black eyes. The disarming ingenuousness of his manner and speech. These things meant nothing to him. The men he knew were as ready to win or lose a few hundred dollars on the turn of a card as they were to drink a cocktail. The thought of sharp practice in gambling was something which never entered their heads.

He drew out a dollar bill and laid it on the table. The sight of it across the aisle made One Eye blink. But the black-eyed stranger promptly covered it, and picked up the dice. He shook them in the palm of his hand and spun them on the baize, clipping his fingers sharply.

"Come 'sev,'" he muttered.

The miracle of it. The seven came up and he swept in the two dollars. In a moment he had replaced them with a five-dollar bill. Gordon responded.

"I'll take two dollars of that," he said, and staked his money.

The man spun the dice, and a five came up. Then it was Gordon's turn to talk to the dice, calling on them for a seven each time the man threw. The play became absorbing, and One Eye, from across the aisle, craned forward. The seven came up before the five, and Gordon won, and the dice passed.

The game proceeded, and the luck alternated. Then Gordon began to win. He won consistently for awhile, and nearly twenty dollars had passed from the stranger's pocket to his.

It was an interesting study in psychology. Gordon was utterly without suspicion, and full of boyish enthusiasm. His blue eyes were full of excited interest. He followed each throw, and talked the jargon of the game like any gambler. All his boredom with the journey was gone. His quest was thrust into the background. Nothing troubled him in the least. The joy of the rolling dice was on him, and he laughed and jested as the wayward "bones" defied or acquiesced to his requirements.

The stranger was far more subtle. For a big powerful man he possessed absurdly delicate hands. He handled the dice with an expert touch, which Gordon utterly lacked. He talked to the dice as they fell in a manner quite devoid of enthusiasm, and as though muttering a formula from mere habit. He grumbled at his losses, and remained silent in victory, and all the while he smoked, and smoked, and watched his opponent with furtive eyes.

One Eye watched the game from the corner without a sign.

A stranger, on his way through the car, paused to watch the game. Presently he passed on, and then returned with another man.

After awhile Gordon's luck began to wane. His twenty dollars dropped to fifteen. Then to ten. Then to five. The stranger threw a run of "sevens." Then the dice passed. But Gordon lost them again, and presently the five dollars he was still winning passed out of his hands.

From that moment luck deserted him entirely. The stranger threw a succession of wins. Gordon increased his stakes to five-dollar bills. Now and again he pulled in a win, but always, it seemed, to lose two successive throws immediately afterwards. There were times when it seemed impossible to wrest the dice from his opponent. Whenever he held them himself he lost them almost immediately.

"Seventy-five dollars, that makes," he said, after one such loss. "They're going your way, sure."

"It's the luck of things," replied the stranger laconically.

One Eye across the aisle smiled to himself, and abandoned his craning.

Gordon plunged. He doubled his bets with the abandon of youth and inexperience. And the stranger never failed to tempt him that way when they were his dice. He always laid more stake than he believed his opponent would accept.

The hundred dollars was reached and passed in Gordon's losses. Still the game went on. He passed the hundred and fifty – and then Providence stepped in.

By this time a number of onlookers had gathered in the car. The place was full of smoke. They were standing in the aisle. They were sitting on the arms of the seats of the two players. One or two were leaning over the backs of the seats.

Suddenly the speeding train jolted heavily over some rough points. It swayed for a moment with a sort of deep-sea roll. The onlooker seated on the arm of the stranger's seat was jerked from his balance and sprawled on the player. In his efforts to save himself he grabbed at the table, which promptly toppled. The gambler made a lunge to save it, and, in the confusion of the moment, a second pair of crap dice, identical with the pair Gordon was about to shoot, rolled out of his hand.

Just for an instant there was a breathless pause as Gordon pounced on them. Then one word escaped him, and his face went deathly white as he glared furiously at the man across the table.

"Loaded!"

One Eye again craned forward. But now the patch was entirely removed from his second eye.

The next part of Providence's little game was played without a single word. One great fist shot out from Gordon's direction, and its impact with its object sounded dull and sodden. The gambler's head jolted backwards, and he felt as though his neck had been broken. Then the baize-covered table

was projected across the car by Gordon's other great hand, while the spectators fled in the direction of the doorways, and pushed and scrambled their ways through.

Then ensued a wild scene. The animal was stirred to offense with a sublime abandon.

One Eye remained in his corner, his eyes alight with an appreciation hardly to have been expected, contemplating humorously the tangle of humanity as it moved, with lightning rapidity, all over the car. Once, as the battle swayed in his direction, he even moved his traps under the seat, lest their bulk should incommode the combatants.

For a moment, at the outset, the two men appeared to be a fair match. But the impression swiftly passed. The youth, the superb training, the skill of Gordon became like the sledge-hammer pounding of superior gunnery in warfare. He hit when and where he pleased, and warded the wilder blows of his opponent with almost unconcern. But the narrowness of the aisle and the presence of the seats saved the gambler, and both men staggered and bumped about in a way that deprived Gordon of much of the result of his advantage.

The train began to slow up. One Eye glanced apprehensively out of the window. He gathered up his belongings, and picked up the litter of money scattered on the floor.

Then he sat watching the fight – and his opportunity.

The men had closed. Regardless of all, they fought with a fury and abandon as cordial as it now became unscientific. The gambler, clinging to his opponent, strove to ward off the blows which fell upon his features like a hailstorm. Gordon, with superlative ferocity, was bent on leaving them unrecognizable. It was a bloody onslaught, but no more bloody than Gordon intended it to be. He was stirred now, a young lion, fighting for the only finish that would satisfy him.

One Eye's opportunity came. He made a run for the door as the train pulled up with a jolt.

But the fight went on. The stopping of the train conveyed nothing to the fighting men. Neither saw nor cared that one of the doors was suddenly flung open. Neither saw the rush of men in uniform. The invasion of their ring by the train crew meant nothing to them.

Then something happened.

CHAPTER IV
GORDON LANDS AT SNAKE'S FALL

Gordon sat up and rubbed his eyes. Then one blood-stained hand went up to his head, and its fingers passed through his ruffled hair. It smoothed its way down one cheek, and finally dropped to the ground on which he was sitting.

Where was he?

Suddenly he became aware of the metal track in front of him, and – remembered. He glanced down the track. Far in the distance he could see the speeding train. Then his eyes came back to his immediate surroundings, and discovered that he was sitting on the boarded footway of a small country railroad depot.

How did he get there? How on earth did he get there?

As no answer to his mute inquiry was forthcoming he explored further. He discovered that his grip and overcoat were beside him, also his hat. And some distance away a number of loungers were idly watching him, with a smile of profound amusement on every face.

The latter discovery filled him with a swiftly rising resentment, and, grabbing his hat and thrusting it on his head, he leaped to his feet. He had no intention of permitting amusement at his expense.

"I guess you sure had some good time," said a deep, musical voice at his elbow.

Gordon swung about and stood confronting the man, One Eye, whom he had seen in the train. For a moment he had it in mind to make some furiously resentful retort. But the man's appearance held his curiosity and diverted his purpose. The patch had been removed from his second eye, which now beamed upon him in company with its fellow.

"Guess these are yours," the man went on, thrusting a roll of bills out towards him. "That 'sharp' dropped his wad during the scrap. I hated to think a grafting train boss was goin' to collect it. You see, I guessed how that scrap would end."

"Are they mine?" Gordon was not quite sure he wasn't dreaming.

"Mostly."

The stranger's reply was full of dry humor. Suddenly Gordon's eyes lit.

"Where is that 'sharp'? I haven't done with – "

The stranger pointed after the train.

"You'll need to hustle some."

The anger died out of Gordon's eyes and he began to laugh. With some diffidence he accepted the money.

"Say, it's – mighty decent of you," he cried cordially. Then, for want of better means of expression, "Mighty decent."

The two men stood steadily regarding each other. Tall and broad as Gordon was, the stranger was no less. But he added to his stature the massiveness of additional years.

Gordon's feelings were under perfect control now. His eyes began to brighten with their native humor. He was longing to solve the mystery of that eye-shade which had disappeared from his companion's face, but was constrained to check his curiosity.

"You said you guessed how the scrap would end?" he said. "There's a sort of blank in my – memory. I mean about the finish."

The big stranger began to rumble in his throat. To Gordon the sound was comforting in its wholesome enjoyment.

"It don't need a heap of guessing when a train 'sharp,' who's got the conductor grafted from his brassbound cap to the soles of his rotten feet, gets into a scrap how things are going to end. I'd sort

of hoped you'd 'out' him before the crew come along. Guess you'd have done it if there'd been more room. That's the worst of scrappin' in a railroad car," he added regretfully. "That train boss got along with his crew and threw you out – on your head. They kept the 'sharp' aboard, being well grafted, and figgered to hold up your baggage. I guessed diff'rently. That all your baggage?" he inquired anxiously.

Gordon gazed down at the grip and coat.

"That's all," he said. Then he impulsively threw out a hand, and the stranger took it. "It's decent – mighty decent of you." Again his buoyant laugh rang out. "Say, I surely do seem to have had some good time."

The twinkling eyes of the stranger nearly closed up in a cordial grin.

"Seems to me you're fixed here till to-morrow, anyway. There ain't any sort of train west till then. You best come along over to the hotel. They call it 'hotel' hereabouts. I'm goin' that way."

Gordon agreed, gathered up his property, and fell in beside his companion.

They moved across the track, and as they went he caught some impression of the ragged little prairie town at which he had so inadvertently arrived. There seemed to him to be but a single, unpaved street, consisting of virgin prairie beaten bare and hard by local traffic. This was lined on one side by a fringe of wooden houses of every size and condition, with gaps here and there for roads, yet to be made, turning out of it. These houses were mostly of a commercial nature. Back of this he vaguely understood there to be a sparse dotting of other houses, but their purpose and arrangement remained a mystery to him. Still farther afield he beheld the green eminence of foothills, and still farther on, away in the distance, the snowy ramparts of the Rocky Mountains. The town seemed to occupy only one side of the track – the south side. The depot was beyond it, on the other.

They picked their way across the track and debouched upon the Main Street, the name of which Gordon discovered painted in indifferent characters upon a disreputable signboard. Then they turned westwards in the direction of an isolated building rather larger than anything else in the village.

After awhile, as his companion made no further effort at conversation, Gordon's interest and curiosity refused to permit the continued silence.

"What State are we in?" he inquired.

"Montana."

Gordon glanced quickly at his companion.

"What place is this?"

"Snake's Fall."

The announcement set Gordon laughing.

"What's amiss with Snake's Fall?" inquired the other sharply.

"Why, nothing. I was just thinking. You see, the conductor told me 'most everybody was making for Snake's Fall on the train. I'm sorry that 'sharp' wasn't. Say – "

"What?"

Gordon laughed again.

"I remember you in the smoker, only – you seemed to have a – a patch over your left eye."

"Sure."

"Now you haven't got it?"

"No."

"I'm not curious, only – "

The stranger's eyes lit ironically.

"Sure you ain't. That's the hotel. Peter McSwain's. He's the boss. He's a friend of mine, an' I guess he'll fix you right for the night."

The snub was decided but gentle. The man's deep, musical voice contained no suggestion of displeasure. However, he had made the other feel that he had been guilty of unpardonable rudeness.

He was reduced to silence for the rest of the journey to the hotel, and gave himself up to consideration of this new position in which he now found himself. The one great fact that stood out

in his mind was that he had gained another day on the wrong side of his ledger, and, however wrong he had been in his first attempt at fortune, his course had been hopelessly diverted into a still more impossible channel. The absurdity of the situation inclined him to amusement, but the knowledge of the real seriousness of it held him troubled.

As they neared the hotel his curiosity further made itself felt. The place was an ordinary frame building with a veranda. It was square and squat, like a box. It was two-storied, with windows, five in all, and a center doorway. These were dotted on the face of it like raisins in a pudding. Its original paint was undoubtedly white, but that seemed to have long since succumbed to the influence of the weather, and now suggested a hopeless hue which was anything but inspiriting.

Leaning against the door-casing, in his shirt-sleeves, was a smallish, florid man with ruddy hair. His waistcoat was almost as cheerful as his face, and, judging by the sound of his voice as he talked to a number of men lounging on the veranda, the latter quite matched the pattern of his violently checked trousers.

"That's Peter," remarked One Eye, the name, failing a better, Gordon still thought of his companion by. "He's a bright boy, is Peter," he added, chuckling.

"The proprietor of the – hotel?" said Gordon, interested.

"Sure."

Then a hail reached them from the veranda.

"Got back, Silas?" cried the loud-voiced hotel-keeper.

"Just what you say yourself," retorted Silas amiably. "Seems to me I bought a ticket and just got off the train. Still, ther' ain't nothing certain in this world except – graft."

"That's so," laughed the other. "Still, ther' ain't much of a shadow 'bout you, so we'll take it as real. Who's your friend?"

The hotel-keeper eyed Gordon with a view to trade. The man called Silas laughed and turned to Gordon.

"Guess I didn't get your name. Mine's Mallinsbee – Silas Mallinsbee. I'm a rancher, way out ther' in the foothills."

Gordon thought for a moment. Then he decided to use two of his given names in preference to his father's.

"Mine's Gordon Van Henslaer. Glad to meet you."

"Van Henslaer?" Mallinsbee's eyes twinkled. "Guess the first and last letters on your grip are spare. Kind of belong back east. How-do?" Then, without waiting for a reply, he turned to McSwain and the men on the veranda who were interestedly surveying Gordon. "This is Mister Gordon Van Henslaer from New York. Thought he'd like to break his journey west and get a look around Snake's Fall."

Gordon laughed.

"I was persuaded at the last minute," he added. "Can you let me have a room?"

McSwain became active.

"Sure. Guess we're pretty busy these times, with the town gettin' ready to boom. But I guess I ken fix any friend of Silas Mallinsbee. Ther's a room they calculated makin' into a bathroom back of the house, but some slick Alec figured the boys of Snake's Fall were prejudiced, so cut it out. It's small, but we got a bed fixed ther', an' you ken clean yourself at the trough out back. Come right along in."

Gordon was half inclined to protest, but Mallinsbee's voice came opportunely —

"I told you Peter 'ud fix you right. I've slept in that room myself, and you'll find it elegant sleepin', if you don't get a nightmare and get jumping around. We'll go right in."

Gordon's protest died on his lips. Mr. Mallinsbee had a persuasion all his own. There was a humorous geniality about him that was quite irresistible to the younger man, nor could he forget the

manner in which he had helped him after the debacle on the train. He felt that it would have been churlish to refuse his good offices.

They passed into the building. The office was plainly furnished. A few Windsor chairs, a table, an empty stove, a few nigger pictures on the walls, and a large register for guests' names. This was the whole scheme.

Gordon flung down his grip.

"Well, I'm thankful to be off that train, anyway," he said. "Sign here, eh?" as Peter threw the book towards him. "Say," he added, glancing at the list of names above his, "you sure are busy."

Peter grinned complacently, while Mallinsbee looked on.

"You've hit this city at the psychological moment in its history, sir," he declared expansively. "You've hit it, sir, when, if I ken be allowed to use the expression, the snow's gone an' all the earth's jest bustin' with new life. You've hit it, sir, when fortunes are just going to start right into full growth with all the impetus of virgin soil. Snake's Fall, sir, is about to become the greatest proposition in the Western States, as a sure thing for soaking dollars into it. And here, sir, standing right at your elbow, is the courage, enterprise and intellect that's made it that way. Mr. Silas Mallinsbee is the father of this city, sir; he's more – he's the creator of it. And, sir, I congratulate you on the friendship of such a man, a friendship, sir, in which I have the honor to share."

He grabbed a filthy piece of blotting-paper and dabbed it cheerfully over Gordon's name in the book, while the latter smiled at the monument of enterprise himself.

"I was quite unaware – " he began. But Mallinsbee cut him short.

"Peter's a good feller," he declared, "but some seven sorts of a galoot once told him he ought to go into Congress, and he's been talking ever since. Ther's jest one thing 'll stop Peter talking, and that's orderin' a drink. Which I'm doin' right now. Peter, you'll jest hand us two cocktails. Your specials. And take what you like yourself."

Peter accepted the order with alacrity. His admiration of and friendship for Mallinsbee could not be doubted for a moment. And somehow Gordon felt it was a good sign. He returned in a few moments with the cocktails, and a glass of rye whiskey for himself.

"I know a better play than my special cocktails," he said, a huge wink distorting most of his ginger-hued features. "They're all right for customers, but I ain't no use fer picklin' my liver. How?"

"Here's to the extermination of all 'sharps,'" said Mallinsbee in his deep, rolling voice, and with a meaning glance in Gordon's direction.

Gordon nodded.

"And here's to the confusion of graft and grafters."

All three drank and set their glasses down.

"Graft?" said Mallinsbee thoughtfully. Then he shrugged his massive shoulders and laughed. "It's not a heap of use blaming grafters for their graft. They can't help it, any more than you can help scrappin' when a feller hits your wad on the crook. Graft – why, I just hate to think of the ways of graft. But you can't get through life without it; anyway, not life on this earth. I used to think graft a specialty of this country, but guess I was wrong. I'd localized. It don't belong to any one country more than another. It belongs to life; to our human civilization. It's the time limit of life causes the trouble. Nature makes it a cinch we've all got to be rounded up in the get-rich-quick corral. We start life foolish. Then for a while we get a sight more foolish. Then for a few mousy years we take on quite a nice bunch of sense. After that we start getting foolish again, and then the time limit comes right down on the backs of our necks like an ax. Well, I guess those years of sense are so mighty few we've got to get rich quick against the time we start on the foolish racket again, and graft, of one sort or another, is the short cut necessary.

"You see, there's every sort of graft. All through life we're looking around for something we ain't got. Did you ever see a kid around his parents? Graft; it's all graft. No kiddy ever acted right because he fancied that way. He's lookin' ahead fer something he's needing, and his pop or his momma

are the folks to pass it along to him. Did you ever know a kid take his physic without the promise of candy, or the certainty it would come his way? That's graft. Say, ain't the gal you fancy the biggest graft of all? You don't get nowhere with her without graft. She'll eat up everything you can hand her, from automobiles and jewels down to five-cent candy. Then when you've started getting old and sick and foolish again, having grafted a pile out of life yourself, don't every grafter you ever knew come around an' hand you cures and listen to your senile wisdom just as though they thought you the greatest proposition ever and hated to see you sick? That's graft. You've got a pile and they're needin' it."

The twinkle in the big man's eyes while he was talking found a joyous response in Gordon's. The tongue in the cheek of this native of Snake's Fall pleased him mightily. But the wide-eyed sunset of Peter McSwain's features was one of sober earnestness and admiration.

"Gee!" he cried, with prodigious appreciation. "He orter write a book!"

CHAPTER V
A LETTER HOME

The bathroom proved to be a veritable rabbit hutch, though clean. But Gordon was astonished to find how far the old life had fallen away behind him. The bareness of the room did not disturb him in the least, and, after a wash in the trough at the back of the hotel, and having dried himself on a towel that may have seen cleaner days, and refused to be inveigled by the attraction of an unclean comb, securely tied to a defective mirror in the passage to the back door, he came back to his bedroom with an added appreciation for its questionable luxury.

Mallinsbee had ridden off on a great chestnut horse, nor, until Gordon saw him in the saddle, was he definitely able to classify him in his mind. Big as the amiable stranger was, he sat in the saddle as though he had been born in it, and he handled his horse as only a cattle man can.

At supper-time he had an opportunity of studying something of his fellow guests in the house. They were a mixed gathering, but every table in the dining-room was full to overflowing. Certainly McSwain was justified in his claim to a rush of business.

It was quickly obvious to Gordon that these people were by no means natives of the place. The majority were undoubtedly business men. Shrewd, keen men of the speculative type, judging from the babel of talk going on about him. As far as he could make out the whole interest of the place was land. Land – always land – and again land.

In view of Mallinsbee's friendship Peter McSwain had requested him to sit beside him at his especial table. And he forthwith began to question his host.

"Seems to be a big talk of land going on," he said, as he ate his macaroni soup.

Peter gulped violently at a long tube of macaroni and nearly choked.

"Sure," he said, his eyes wide with an expression the meaning of which Gordon was never quite certain about. It might have meant mere astonishment, but it also suggested resentment. "Sure it's land. What else, unless it's coal, would they talk in Snake's Fall? Every blamed feller you see settin' around in this room is what Silas Mallinsbee calls a ground shark. Which means," he added, with a grin, "they're out to buy or steal land around Snake's Fall. We guess they prefer stealing. The place is bung full with 'em."

Gordon's interest deepened.

"But why, if you'll forgive me, around – Snake's Fall?"

"Young man," said Peter severely, "you're new to the place, and that's your excuse for such ignorance." He pushed his half-finished soup aside and adopted an impressive pose with both elbows on the table, his hands together, and one finger describing acrobatic gyrations to point his words. The manner of it fascinated his hearer. "Let me tell you, sir, that Snake's Fall is the new coalfield of this great country. Sir," he added, with great dramatic effect, "Snake's Fall is capable of supplying the coal of the *world*! There's hundreds of billions of tons of high-grade coal underlying these silly-lookin' hummocks they call the foothills. All this land around Snake's Fall was Silas Mallinsbee's ranch, and he found the coal. That's why I said Silas Mallinsbee was the father of Snake's Fall. He sold this land to a great coal corporation, and bought land away further up in the hills, where he still runs his ranch. He's a great man with a pile of dollars. And he's clever, too. He's kep' for himself all the land either side of the railroad, except this town. And that's why all these land pirates, or ground sharks, are around. The railroad ain't declared their land yet, and everybody's waiting to jump in. The coal's five miles west of here, and the railroad has got to say if they'll keep the depot where it is, or build a new one further along, right on the coal seams. That's the play we're all watching. We want to buy right. We want to buy for the boom. These guys here are out to get in on the ground floor, and see prices go sky high – when they've bought. There'll be some dandy piles made in this play – and lost."

By the time he had finished Gordon was agog with excitement. It had stirred as the man began to talk, without his fully understanding the meaning of it. Then, as he proceeded, it grew, and with its growth came enlightenment. Vaguely he saw the hand of Providence in the affairs of the last few days.

He had planned his own little matters, or rather he had drifted into them, and then the gods of fortune had taken a hand. And the way of it. He began to smile. A strangely impish mood must have stirred them. His journey. His discovery of the absurdity of his own plans in the nick of time. His visit to the smoker. His play with a "sharp." His fight, and his sudden and uncalculated arrival at Snake's Fall. Here he was, quite without the least intention of his own, landed into the only sort of place in which it could be reasonably hoped he might pick up a fortune quickly. He wondered how he was likely to fare in competition with these ground sharks about him. And the thought made him begin to laugh.

McSwain eyed him doubtfully.

"Amusin', ain't it?" he said, without appreciation.

Gordon shook his head.

"If you only knew – it is."

Peter went on with his food for a few moments in silence.

"I s'pose the boom will come big when it does start?" hazarded Gordon presently.

"Big? Say, you ain't got a grip on things yet. Snake's Fall could supply the whole – not half – world with high-grade stove coal. Does that tell you anything? No? Wal, it jest means that when the railroad says the word, hundred-dollar plots 'll fetch a thousand dollars in a week, and maybe ten thousand in a month or less. I tell you right here that in six months from the time the railroad talks there'll be fifty thousand speculators right here, and we'll most of us rake in our piles. We only got to jump in at the start, maybe a bit before, and the game's right in our hands. Get me? I tell you, sir, this is bigger than the first Kootenay rush and nigh as big as the Cobalt boom in Canada."

Gordon was impressed.

"And to think I came here by accident."

"Accident?"

"You see, I was persuaded – against my will."

His eyes were twinkling.

"Ah, Mallinsbee persuaded you – being a friend of his."

"No. As a matter of fact I think it was the train conductor who persuaded me."

"He's a wise guy, then."

"Ye-es. I don't guess I'll see him again. I surely owe him something for what he did."

Peter nodded seriously as he gazed at the humorous eyes of his companion.

"He's given you the chance of – a lifetime, sir. And that's a thing ther' ain't many in this country yearning to do."

After that the meal progressed in silence until the pie was handed round.

Gordon was thinking hard. He was wondering, in view of what he had heard, what he ought to do. Land. What did he know about land? How could he measure his wits against the wits of such land speculators as he saw about him? He studied the faces of some of the clamorous crowd in the dining-room. They were a strangely mixed lot. There were undoubtedly men of substance among them, but equally surely the majority were adventurers looking to step into the arena of the coming boom and wrest a slice of fortune by hook, or, more probably, by crook. What did he know? What could he do? And his mind went back to the sharp on the train, and the way he had fallen to the man's snare. Again he wanted to laugh. He had counted the bills which Mallinsbee had handed him, in the privacy of his bathroom. He only remembered to have lost about two hundred dollars to the gambler. The dollars handed to him amounted to well over three hundred. The miracle of it all. He had nearly killed the gambler, and, instead of losing, he had made over a hundred dollars on the deal. The miracle of it!

"Do you believe in miracles?" he laughed abruptly.

Peter glanced up from his plate suspiciously. Then he promptly joined in the other's amusement. He always remembered that this newcomer was a friend of Silas Mallinsbee.

"Meracles?" he said reflectively. "I can't say I always did. But one or two things have made some difference that way. Takin' one extra drink saved my life once. The takin' of that drink wasn't jest a meracle," he added dryly. "It was more of a habit them days. Still, it was a meracle in a way. Me an' my brother wer' on a bust. We were feeling that good we was handin' out our pasts in lumps to each other, same as if we was strangers, and wasn't raised around the same cabbige patch. Wal, he'd borrowed an automobile and left the saloon to wind it up, and get things fixed. While he was gone the boys handed me another cocktail. Then the bartender slung one at me, an' I hadn't no more sense than to buy another one myself. Then some damn fool thought rye was the best mix for drinkin' on top o' cocktails, an' so they put me to bed. Guess I never see my brother get back from that joy ride." He sighed. "I allow they had to bury a lot of that automobile with him, he was so mussed up. Sort o' meracle, you'd say? Then there was another time. Guess it was my wife. She was one o' them females who make you feel you want to associate with tame earthworms. Sort o' female who never knew what a sick headache was, an' sang hymns of a Sunday evening, and played a harmonium when she was feelin' in sperits. Sort o' female who couldn't help smellin' out when you was lyin' to her, an' gener'ly told you of it. A good woman though, an' don't yer fergit it. Wal, I got sick once an' when I got right again she guessed it was up to 'em to insure myself in her favor. Guess I'd just paid my first premium when she goes an' takes colic an' dies. I did all I knew. I give her ginger, an' hot-water bags, an' poultices. It didn't make no sort o' difference. She died. I ain't paid no premiums since. Sort o' meracle that," he added, with a satisfied smile. "Then there's this coal. I hadn't started this hotel six months when Mallinsbee gets busy an' makes his deal with the corporation. You ain't goin' to make a pile out of a bum country hotel without a – meracle."

The man's gravity was impressive, and Gordon strove for sympathy.

"Yes," he declared, with smiling emphasis. "There are such things as miracles. One has happened this day – and here. My arrival here was certainly a miracle. A peculiarly earthy miracle, but, nevertheless, a – miracle. Say, I'll have to write some in the office. See you again."

Gordon pushed back his chair and hurried away through the crowded room towards the office. But here again was a crowd. Here again was "land" – always "land." And in desperation he betook himself to his bathroom. He felt he must write to his mother. He felt that on this his arrival in Snake's Fall he could do no less than reassure her of his well-being.

Mrs. James Carbhoy sighed contentedly as she raised her eyes from the last of a number of sheets of paper in her lap. Her husband turned from his contemplation of the scorching streets, and the parched foliage of the wide expanse of trees beyond the window.

"Well?" he inquired. "Where is the boy?"

There was the faintest touch of anxiety in his inquiry, but his face was perfectly controlled, and the humor in his eyes was quite unchanged.

Mrs. Carbhoy sighed again.

"I don't know. He doesn't say. Nor does he give the slightest clew." She examined the envelope of the letter. "It was mailed here in New York. It's a rambling sort of letter. I hope he is all right. This hot weather is – Do you think he – "

Her husband laughed.

"I guess he's all right. You see I don't fancy he wants us to know where he is. That's come through some friend, I'd say. Just read it out."

Gordon's mother leaned back in her chair again. She was more than ready to read her beloved boy's letter again, in spite of her misgivings. Besides, there was a hope in her thoughts that she had missed some clew as to his whereabouts which her clear-sighted husband might detect.

"DEAREST MUM:

"Destinations are mighty curious things which have a way of making up their minds as to whom they are terminals for, regardless of the individual. Most of us think the matter of destination is in our own hands. We make up our minds to go to the North Pole; well, if we get there it's because no other terminal on the way has made up its mind to claim us. I've surely arrived at my destination, a place I wasn't going to, nor had heard of, nor dreamed of – even when I had nightmare. I guess this place must have said to itself, 'Hello, here's Gordon Carbhoy on the train; he's every sort of fool, he don't know if it's Palm Sunday or Candlemas, he hasn't got more sense than an old hen with kittens, let's divert him where we think he ought to go.' So I arrived here quite suddenly this afternoon and, in consequence, have wasted some fifty odd dollars of passage money. It's a good beginning, and one the old Dad 'll surely appreciate.

"Talking of the old Dad, I'd like you to tell him from me that I don't think graft is confined to – big finance. This is a discovery he's likely to be interested in. Also, since he's largely interested in railroads, though not from a traveling point of view, I would point out that much might be done to improve accommodation. The aisles are too narrow and the corners of the seats are too sharp. Furthermore, the best money-making scheme I can think of at the moment is a billet as a conductor of a transcontinental express.

"However, these things are just first impressions.

"There are other impressions I won't discuss here. They relate to arrival platforms of depots. When a fellow gets out on his own in the world, there are many things with which he comes into contact liable to strike him forcibly. Those are the things in life calculated to teach him much that may be useful to him afterwards. I have already come into contact with such things, and though they are liable to leave an impression of soreness generally, their lessons are quite sound.

"On the whole, in spite of having lost fifty odd dollars on my railroad ticket, my first two or three days' adventures have left me with a margin of profit such as I could not reasonably have expected. I mention this to show you, presuming that the Dad has told you the object of my going, that my eye is definitely focused on the primary purpose of my ramblings.

"I am keeping my eyes well open and one or two of my observations might be of interest to you.

"I have discovered that the luxurious bath is not actually necessary to life, and, from a hygienic point of view, there's no real drawback to the kind of soap vulgarly known as 'hoss.' Furthermore, the filtration of water for ablutionary purposes is quite unnecessary. All it needs is to be of a consistency that'll percolate through a fish net. Moreover, judging from observations only, I have discovered that a comb and brush, if securely chained up, can be used on any number of heads without damaging results.

"Observation cannot be considered complete without its being turned upon one's fellow-creatures. I have already come into contact with some very interesting specimens of my kind. Without worrying you with details I have found some of them really worth while. Generalizing, I'd like to say right here that man seems to be a creature of curious habits – many of which are bad. I don't say this with malice. On the contrary, I say it with appreciation. And, too, I never realized what a general hobby amongst men the collecting of dollars was. It must be all the more interesting that, as a collection, it never seems completed. I'd like to remark that view points change quickly under given circumstances, and I am now bitten with the desire to become a collector.

"Furthermore, my focus had readjusted itself already. For instance, I feel no repulsion at the manners displayed in the dining-room of a small country 'hotel.' I feel sure that the man who eats with his mouth open and snores at the same time is quite justified, if he happens to be bigger and stronger than the man who hears and sees him. I also feel that a man is only within his rights in having two or even three helpings of every dish in a hotel run on the American plan, unless the limit to a man's capacity is definitely estimated on the printed tariff. Another observation came my way. Honesty seems to be a matter of variable quality. A nice ethical problem is suggested by the following incident. A man robs his victim; a righteously indignant onlooker sees the transaction, and his honesty-loving

nature rebels. He forthwith robs the robber and hands the proceeds of his robbery to the original victim. This seems to me to open up a road to discussion which I'm sure the Dad and I would enjoy – though not at this distance.

"I have already learned that there are plenty of great men in the world whose existence I had never suspected. I have a feeling that local celebrities have a greater glory than national heroes. George Washington never told a lie, it is true, and his birthday forms an adequate excuse for a certain stimulation in the enjoyments of a people. But he never discovered a paying field for speculation by the dollar chasers. Until a man does that he can have no understanding of real glory.

"I hope you and Gracie are well. I think it would be advisable to check Gracie's appetite for candy. I am already realizing that luxury can be overdone. She might turn her attention to peanuts, which I observe is a popular pastime amongst the people with whom I have come into contact. I would suggest to the old Dad that five-cent cigars have merits in spite of rumor to the contrary. I feel, too, that the dollar ninety-five he would thus save on his smoke might, in time, become a valuable asset.

"Your loving son,

"GORDON."

CHAPTER VI
GORDON PROSPECTS SNAKE'S FALL

It was a blazing day. The dust of the prairie street smothered boots and trouser-legs with a fine gray powder which even rose high enough to get into the throats of pedestrians, and drive them headlong to the nearest place where they could hope to quench a raging thirst.

There was no shelter from the sun, unless it were to be found upon the verandas with which many of the Snake's Fall houses were fronted. Gordon's face was rapidly blistering as he idly wandered through the town. Great streams of perspiration coursed from beneath his soft felt hat. His double collar felt sticky, and suggested imminent collapse. To all of which discomforts were now added a swarm of flies buzzing about his moist face with a distracting persistence which tried even his patience.

Gordon was abroad fairly early. He was abroad for several reasons. He possessed a haunting dread of the rapid passing of time. He had slept healthily, if not altogether comfortably. Nor had he yet made up his mind whether the floor of his room would not be preferable to his bed for the passing of future nights. The floor was smooth, there were no hummocks on it. Then, too, the sorely tried and thoroughly slack bed-springs would be avoided, and the horrible groans of a protesting frame would remain silent. It was a matter to be given consideration before the day ended, and, being really of a very thorough nature, he decided to consider it after supper.

He had lain awake for a long time that first night under the shelter of Peter McSwain's hospitable roof, and in the interim of dodging the flock hummocks he had closely considered his future movements.

He argued, if things were as he had been told they were in Snake's Fall, he did not see how he could do better than throw his lot in with the crowd of "ground sharks" awaiting the boom. Having convinced himself in this direction, he felt that at the very earliest opportunity he must reassure himself of Peter McSwain's veracity. He felt that no member of the get-rich-quick brigade could dare to ignore the claims of a great coal discovery about to boom. Besides, the whole thing had been pitched into his lap; or rather it was he who had been pitched. Nor did the roughness of the method of his arrival detract from the chances spreading out before his astonished eyes.

Now he was searching the place for those signs which were to tell him of the accuracy of his information. Nor was it long before he realized that such a search on his part was scarcely likely to prove productive. His knowledge of coal had never been more intimate than the payment of certain fuel bills presented to him at intervals in the past by the faithful Harding. While as for indications of a boom – well, he had heard that a boom came along, everybody robbed everybody else, and in the end a number of widows and orphans found themselves deprived of their savings, and a considerable body of attorneys had increased their year's income out of all proportion to their just deserts. He felt his weakness keenly. However, he persisted. He felt the only thing was to attack the problem with an open mind. He did so, and it quickly became filled with a humorous interest that had nothing to do with his purpose.

Surveying his surroundings, he thought that never in his life had he even imagined such a quaint collection of habitations. The long, straight street, running parallel to the railroad track suggested a row of jagged, giant teeth. Each building was set in its own section of jawbone, distinct from its nearest neighbor. Then they reared their heads and terminated in a pointed fang or a flat, clean-cut edge of high boarding. Sometimes they possessed a mere sloping roof, like a well-worn tooth, and, here and there, a half-wrecked building, with its roof fallen in, stood out like a severely decayed molar.

Most of the stores – and he counted a dozen or more – suggested a considerable trade. In this direction he noted a hardware store particularly. A drug store, too, with an ice-cream soda fountain,

seemed to be in high favor, as also did several dry-goods stores, judging by the number of females in attendance. But the small candy stores were abandoned to the swarming flies.

The people were interesting. There certainly was a considerable number about, in spite of the heat. They, anyway the men, all looked hot like himself, but seemed to be surcharged with an energy that appeared to him somewhat artificial. They hurried unnecessarily. They paused and spoke quickly, and passed on. Here and there they fell into groups, and their boisterous laughter suggested the inevitable funny story or risque tale. There were a great number of vehicles rattling about – buggies, buckboards, democrat wagons – while several times he was passed by speeding saddle-horses which smothered him in the dust raised by their unshod hoofs.

At last he came to the end of the street, and turned to retrace his steps. It was all too interesting to be readily abandoned on this his first day beyond the conventions of life as his father's son.

Just outside a large livery barn he came to an abrupt halt, and stood stupidly staring at the entrance of the largest dry-goods store in the street. The whole thing had caught and held him in a moment. He seemed to remember having seen something of the sort in a moving picture once; perhaps it was years ago. But in real life – never.

A great chestnut saddle-horse had dashed up to the tying-post outside the store. It had reined up with a jerk, and its rider had flung out of the saddle with the careless abandon he had read about or seen in the pictures. Hooking the reins over a peg, the rider hurried towards the store. It was then Gordon obtained a full view.

In a moment the flies were forgotten and the heat of the day meant nothing to him. What a vision was revealed! The coiled masses of auburn hair, the magnificent hazel eyes and the delightful sun-tanned oval of the face, the trim figure and perfect carriage, the costume! The long habit coat and loose riding-breeches terminated in the daintiest of tan riding-boots and silver spurs. Splendid! What a picture for his admiring eyes! A picture of grace, and health, and beauty.

But the vision was gone in a moment. The girl had passed into the store, and it was only left to the enthusiastic spectator to turn to the magnificent chestnut horse she had so unconcernedly left waiting for her.

Almost immediately, however, his attention was diverted into another direction. A dark, sallow-faced man had promptly taken up his position at the entrance of the store, and stood gazing in after the vanished figure of the girl.

For some absurd reason Gordon took an intense dislike to the man. He looked unhealthy, and he hated that look in a man. Besides, the impertinence of standing there spying upon a lady who was doubtless simply bent on an ordinary shopping expedition. It was most exasperating. All unconsciously he straightened his great figure and squared his shoulders. It would not have required much to have made him go and ask the man what he meant by it.

He was rapidly working himself up into a superlative rage, when the girl in the fawn riding-costume reappeared. A delightful smile broke over his good-looking face, but only to be promptly swallowed up in a scowl. The girl had paused, and was speaking to the anæmic creature whose presence he felt to be an outrage.

He noted her smile. What a delightful smile! Yes, he could distinctly make out two dimples beyond the corners of her pretty mouth. His dislike of the favored man merged into a regret for himself.

Hello! The smile had gone from the girl's face. Her beautiful hazel eyes were sparkling with resentment. The man was looking angry, too. Gordon rubbed his hands. Then he began to grin like a revengeful and malicious schoolboy. The girl had moved on to her horse, and in doing so it almost looked as if she had deliberately pushed past the white-livered creature attempting to detain her.

She leaped into the saddle and swung the horse about almost on its haunches. The next moment she was lost in a cloud of dust as she raced down the street.

"Mighty fine horsemanship that," said a voice, as Gordon gazed open-mouthed after the girlish vision. "A smart gal, too, eh?"

Gordon turned. A small man was sitting at the open doors of the livery barn upon an upturned box. He was leaning forward lazily, with his elbows on his knees and his hands clutching his forearms. His towzled, straw-colored hair stuck out under the brim of his prairie hat, and a chew of tobacco bulged one thin, leathery cheek. His trousers were fastened about his waist with a strap, and his only upper garment was a dirty cotton shirt which disclosed an expanse of mahogany-colored chest below the neck.

"Smart gal?" retorted Gordon enthusiastically. "That don't say a thing. She might have stepped right out of the pages of a book." Then he added, as an afterthought, "And it would have to be a mighty good book, too."

"Sure," nodded the other in agreement.

"Who is she?"

The man grinned and spat.

"Why, that's Miss Hazel. Every feller in this city knows Miss Hazel. If you need eddication you want to see her astride of an unbroken colt. Ther' never was a cowpuncher a circumstance aside o' her. She's the dandiest horseman out."

"I'd say you're right, all right."

"Right? Guess ther' ain't no argument. Hosses is my trade. I was born an' raised with 'em. It don't take me guessin' twice 'bout a horseman. I got forty first-class hosses right here in this barn, an' I got a bunch runnin' on old Mallinsbee's grazin'. Y'see, a livery barn is a mighty busy place when a city starts to think o' booming. All them rigs an' buggies you see chasin' around are hired right here," he finished up proudly.

Gordon became interested. He felt the man was talking because he wanted to talk. He was talking out of the prevailing excitement which seemed to actuate everybody on the subject of the coming boom. He encouraged him.

"I'd say a livery barn should be a mighty fine speculation under these conditions," he said, while the keen gray eyes of the barn proprietor quietly sized him up. "There ought to be a pile hanging to it."

"Ye-es."

The man's demur roused the other's curiosity.

"Not?" he inquired.

"'Tain't that. Ther's dollars to it, but – they don't come in bunches. Y'see, I'm out after a wad – quick. We all are. When the railroad talks we'll know where we are. But it's best to be in before. See? Oh, I guess the barn's all right. 'Tain't that. Say, I'd hand you this barn right here, every plug an' every rig I got, if you could jest answer me one question – right."

"And the question?" Gordon smiled.

"Wher' is the bloomin' depot to be? Here, or yonder to the west at Buffalo Point? Answer that right, an' you can have this caboose a present."

The little man sighed, and Gordon began to understand the strain of waiting for these people looking for a big pile quick. He shook his head.

"I'm beginning to think I'd like to know myself. Say, I s'pose you figure this is a great place to make money? I s'pose you fancy it's a sure thing?"

The man unfolded his arms and waved one hand in a comprehensive gesture.

"Do you need to ask me that?" he inquired, almost scornfully. "What does them big coal seams tell you? Can you doubt? Hev' you got two eyes to your head which don't convey no meaning to your brain? Them coal seams could stoke hell till kingdom come, an' shares 'ud still be at a premium. That's the backbone. Wal, we ain't got shares in that corporation, but the quickest road to the pile o' dollars we're yearning for is in town plots. An'," he added regretfully, "every day brings in more sharps, an'

every new sharp makes it harder. It's that blamed railroad we're waiting for, an' that railroad needs to graft its way in before it'll talk."

"Graft? Graft again," laughed Gordon.

"Why, cert'nly." The livery man opened his eyes in astonishment. "Folks don't do nothin' for nix that I ever heard. Specially railroads. That depot 'll be built where their interests lie, an' we'll have to go on guessin' till they get things fixed."

"I see."

"Which says you ain't blind."

"No, I don't think I'm blind exactly. It's just – lack of experience. I must get a peek at those seams. Mallinsbee's the man who'll know about things as soon as anybody, I s'pose. He owns all the land along the railroad, doesn't he?"

The man rubbed his hands and grinned.

"Sure. He'll know, an' through him us as he's let in on the ground floor. Say, he's a heap of a good feller – an' bright. Y'see, him an' us, some of us fellers who been here right along before the coal was found, are good friends. There's some of us got stakes down Buffalo Point way as well as up here. See? O' course, our pile lies Buffalo Point way, an' we're hopin' he'll fix the railroad corporation that way. If he does, gee! he's the feller we're gamblin' on."

Gordon's interest had become almost feverish as he listened. He was gathering the corroboration he needed with an ease he had never anticipated.

"I suppose one hundred thousand dollars would be nothing to make if – things go right?"

"If things go our way, I'd say a hundred thousand wouldn't be a circumstance," cried the man enthusiastically. "I'd make that out of a few hundred dollars without a worry – if things went right. But it ain't the way of things to go right when you figger up."

"No, I s'pose it's a matter of chance. The chance comes, and you've just got to grab it right and hold it."

"Sure. Chance! If chance hits you, why, don't go to hit back. Jest hug it – same as you would your best gal."

Gordon laughed and peered into the shadowy interior of the barn.

"Guess that's good talk," he said, "and I'm going to listen. I've got right hold of that chance, and I'm hugging it. Seems to me I'll need to get out and get a peek at Silas Mallinsbee's coal. Can you hire me a rig?"

"I got a dandy top buggy an' team," cried the man, now alert and ready for business. "Ten dollars to supper-time. How?"

Gordon nodded, and the man vanished within the barn.

Left alone, he reflected on the rapidity of the movement of events. He had had a luck that he surely could not have anticipated. Why, under the influence of the prevailing enthusiasm of the place, he seemed to feel that the whole thing was too utterly simple. He wondered what his father would have said had he been there. It would be a glorious coup to return home with that one hundred thousand dollars well before the expiry of his time limit.

From the dark interior of the barn came the sounds of horses' hoofs clattering on the boarded floor.

Presently his thoughts drifted from the important matters in hand to a far less consequent matter. It was not in his nature to be long enamored of the hunt for fortune, no matter what the consequences attached to it.

He began to think of the vision in fawn-colored riding-costume. So her name was Hazel. Hazel – what? he wondered. A pretty name, and well suited to her. Hazel. Those eyes, and the gorgeous masses of her hair! He sighed. For a moment he thought of inquiring of the livery man her other name. Then he smilingly shook his head and decided to let that remain a secret for the present. It added to the romance of the thing. Of one thing he was certain: he must contrive to see her again, and

get to know her. Fortune or no fortune, if his father were to cut him off with the proverbial shilling as a spendthrift and waster, if he never saw a partnership in the greatest financial corporation in the United States, that girl could not be allowed to flash into his life like a ray of spring sunshine, and pass out of it again because he hadn't the snap to get to know her.

He had known so many women in his own set at home. He had admired, he had flirted harmlessly enough, he had shed presents and given parties, but somehow he felt that amongst all those society beauties there had not been one comparable to this wild rose of the foothills.

"Say, it's a bright team an' 'll need handlin'," said the doubtful voice of the livery man.

"Don't worry," returned Gordon, shocked into the affairs of the moment by the anxious voice.

"Good." The man sounded relieved.

"Which is the best way?"

"Why, chase the trail straight away west. You can't miss it. I'll take that ten dollars."

Gordon paid and climbed into the buggy. The next moment the vehicle rolled out of the barn.

CHAPTER VII
"MISS HAZEL"

Gordon was in no mood to take things easily. Something of the atmosphere of the place had already got into his blood. His was similar to the mood of those whom he had seen hurrying unnecessarily in the town. Those whom he had seen exchanging hurried words and passing on.

Although he lived in the age of automobiles and aeroplanes, nothing of his education had been forgotten by his father. He was a perfect whip with a four-in-hand, and now, as he handled a "bright" team of livery horses, it was child's play to him. He bustled his horses until he had left the ragamuffin town behind him, then he settled down to a steady, round gait, and gave himself up to the prospect of the contemplation of those scenes of industry which he shortly hoped to discover.

Within ten minutes of leaving the town he discovered the first signs. Men and horses appeared in the distance upon the hills. At one point he discerned a traction engine hauling a string of laden wagons. It was the first breaking up of the monotonous green of the low hills. And it promptly suggested that, in the hidden hollows, he would probably discover far more energetic signs of the work of the coal corporation, which doubtless must have already begun in real earnest.

Things were becoming interesting. He wondered how much work had been done. There was no sign of the coal itself yet. He remembered to have visited coal mines once, and then everything had been black and gloomy. Vast heaps of slack had been piled everywhere, and the pit heads had been surmounted by hauling machinery. There had been great black wastes dotted by houses and streets, which seemed to have taken to themselves something of the hue of the deposits which had brought them into existence. Even the men and women, and particularly the children, had been living advertisements for the great industry which supported them. Here, as yet, there were no such signs. However, doubtless further on there would —

All in a moment his thoughts of coal were broken off, and all his interest vanished like a puff of that coal's smoke in a gale. Coal no longer meant anything to him. He didn't care if the whole wide world starved for coal for all eternity. A chestnut horse was on the trail ahead, and a figure was stooping beside it examining its nearside forefoot. The figure was clad in a *fawn-colored riding-costume*.

The electric current of his feelings communicated itself to his team through the whip as its conductor. The team reared and plunged, then, under his strong hands, they bowled merrily along the dusty trail at a great though well-controlled speed towards the distant figures.

The girl dropped the horse's hoof and straightened herself abruptly. She turned with a quick movement, and gazed back over the trail, her eyes alert and questioning. Her wide prairie hat was thrust slightly from her forehead, and a coil of abundant auburn hair was displayed beneath its brim. Her finely penciled eyebrows were drawn together in an unmistakable question, and her pretty eyes were obviously speculative.

She waited while the buggy drew nearer. She recognized the team as from Mike Callahan's barn, but the occupant of the vehicle was a stranger to her.

The latter fact drew her attention more closely. For a moment she had hoped that it was someone she knew. She needed someone she knew just now. Anyway, a stranger was always interesting, even though he could not afford her the assistance she just now happened to need.

She descried a boyish, eager face on the top of a pair of wonderful shoulders. But that which made a strong appeal to her was the manner in which he was handling his horses. There was nothing here of the slovenly prairie teamster. The stranger, whoever he was, was a master behind a good team of horses. She delighted in a horseman, whether he were in the driving-seat or the saddle.

But all of a sudden she became aware that her regard had been observed, and, with a little smile twinkling in the depths of her hazel eyes, she picked up her horse's forefoot again, and once more probed with her gauntleted finger for the cause of the desperate lameness with which he had been suddenly attacked.

She heard the buggy come up. She was aware that the team had swung out to avoid collision. Then a cheery voice greeted her ears with its pleasant and welcome inquiry —

"You seem to be in a fix. Can I help any?"

Before the girl looked round she was aware that the teamster had alighted. Then when she finally released her hold of the injured hoof, and stood up, she found herself confronted by Gordon's smiling blue eyes, as he stood bare-headed before her.

Somehow or other a smiling response was unavoidable.

"That's real kind of you," she said, "but I don't guess you can. You see, poor Sunset's dead lame with a flint in his frog, and – and I just can't get the fool thing out."

Gordon endeavored to look serious. But the trouble was incomparable in his mind with the delightful charm of this girl, in her divided riding-suit. However, his effort to conceal his admiration was not without some success.

"I don't guess we can stand for any old thing like an impertinent flint," he said impulsively. "Sunset must be relieved. Sunset must be put out of pain. I'm not just a veterinary surgeon, but I'm a specialist on the particular flint which happens to annoy you. Just grab these lines while I have a look."

The frank unconventionality of the man was wholly pleasing, and the girl found herself obeying him without question.

"It's the nearside," she explained.

Then she remained silent, watching the assured manner in which the stranger set about his work. He picked up the hoof and examined it closely. Then he drew out a folding button-hook from a trouser pocket. Then, for a few moments, she watched his deft manipulation of it.

Presently he stood up holding a long, thin, sharp splinter of flint between finger and thumb.

"Say," he remarked, as he returned the buttonhook to his pocket, while his eyes shone merrily, "I believe if some bright geologist were to set out chasing these flints to their lair, I've a notion he'd pull up in – in – well, aspirate a certain measure in cloth and I'd guess you get the answer right away. It's paved with 'em. That's my secret belief. I could write a treatise on 'em. I've discovered every breed and every species. I tell you if you want to study these rocks right, you need to run an automobile, and find yourself in a hurry, having forgotten to carry spare tires. Ugh!" He flung the stone away from him and turned again to the horse.

Still watching him, the girl saw him deliberately tear off a piece of his handkerchief, and, with the point of his pocket-knife, stuff it into the jagged gash in poor Sunset's frog.

"That'll keep out some of Snake's Fall," he observed, returning the rest of his handkerchief to his pocket. "We'll take it out when we get him home." Then he deliberately turned to his team and tied Sunset alongside. After that, in the most practical manner, he moved the wheels of the buggy apart. "Jump right in. Guess you know the way, so you can show it me. You see, I'm a stranger. Say, it's an awful thing to be a stranger. Life's rotten being a stranger."

The girl was gazing at him with wide, wondering eyes that were half inclined to resentment. She was not accustomed to being ordered about in this cavalier fashion. She had no intention of being incontinently swept off her feet.

"Thanks," she said, with an assumption of hauteur. "If you'll untie Sunset I'll ride home."

"Ride home? Say, you're joking. Why, you can't ride Sunset with that gash in his frog. Say, you couldn't be so cruel. Think of the poor fellow silently suffering. Think of the mute anguish he would endure at each step. It – it would be a crime, an outrage, a – a – " He broke off, his eyes twinkling merrily.

The girl wanted to be annoyed. She told herself she was annoyed, but she nevertheless began to laugh, and Gordon knew he was to have his way.

"I really couldn't think of accepting your – Besides, you weren't going to Buffalo Point. You know you weren't."

"Do I?" Gordon's eyes were blankly inquiring. "Now how on earth do I know where I was going? Say, I guess it's true I had in my mind a vision of the glinting summer sun, tinting the coal heaps with its wonderful, golden, ripening rays – though I guess it would be some work ripening stove coal – but as to my ever getting there – well, that just depended on the trail I happened to take. As I said, I'm a stranger. And I may as well admit right here that I've a hobby getting mussed up with wrong trails."

The girl's laughter dispelled her last effort at dignity.

"I knew you were a stranger. You see, I get to know everybody here – by sight."

Gordon made a gesture of annoyance.

"There," he exclaimed in self-disgust, "I ought to have thought of that before. How on earth could I expect you to ride in a stranger's buggy, with said stranger on the business end of the lines? Then the hills are so near. Why, you might be spirited off goodness knows where, and your loving relatives never, never hear of you no more, and – Say, we can easily fix that though. My name's – Van Henslaer. Gordon Van Henslaer from New York. Now if you tell me – what's the matter?"

A merry peal of laughter had greeted his announcement, and Gordon looked on in pretended amazement, waiting for her mirth to subside.

"Oh dear, oh dear," the girl cried at last. "I might have known. Say, of course I ought to have known. You came here yesterday on the train – by mistake. You – "

"That's so. I'd booked through to Seattle, but – some interfering pack of fools guessed I'd made a – mistake,"

The girl nodded. Her pretty eyes were still dancing with merriment.

"Father came by the same train, and told me of someone who got mixed up in – in a fight, and they threw – "

"Don't say another word," Gordon cried hurriedly. "I'm – I'm the man. And your father is – ?"

"Mallinsbee – Silas Mallinsbee!"

"Then you are Hazel Mallinsbee."

"How do you know my first name?"

"Why, I saw you in town, and the livery man told me you were 'Miss Hazel.' Say, this is bully. Now we aren't strangers, and you can ride in my buggy without any question. Jump right in, and I'll drive you – where is it?"

Hazel Mallinsbee obeyed without further demur. She sprang into the vehicle, and Gordon promptly followed. The next moment they were moving on at a steady, sober pace.

"It's Buffalo Point," the girl directed. "It's only four miles. Then you can go on and enjoy your beautiful pathetic picture of the coal workings. But you won't have much time if we travel at this gait," she added slyly.

Gordon shook his head.

"It's Sunset," he said. "We must consider his poor foot."

There was laughter in Hazel's eyes as she sighed.

"Poor Sunset. Perhaps – you're right."

"Without a doubt," Gordon laughed. "He might get blood poisoning, or cancer, or dyspepsia, or something if we bustled him."

Hazel pointed a branching trail to the north.

"That's the trail," she said. "Father's at home. He'll be real glad to see you. Say, you know father ought to know better – at his age. He – he just loves a scrap. He was telling me about you, and saying how you 'hammered' – that's the word he used – the 'sharp.' He was most upset that the train crew spoiled the finish. You know father's a great scallywag. I don't believe he thinks he's a day

over twenty. It's – it's dreadful – with a grown-up daughter. He's – just a great big boy for all his gray hair. You should just see him out on the range. He's got all the youngsters left standing. It must be grand to grow old like he does."

Gordon listened to the girl's rich tones, and the enthusiasm lying behind her words, and somehow the whole situation seemed unreal. Here he was driving one of the most perfectly delightful girls he had ever met to her home, within twenty-four hours of his absurd arrival in a still more absurd town. Nor was she any mere country girl. Her whole style spoke of an education obtained at one of the great schools in the East. Her costume might have been tailored on Fifth Avenue, New York. Yet here she was living the life of the wonderful sunlit prairie, the daughter of an obscure rancher in the foothills of the Rockies.

"Say, your father is just a bully feller," he agreed quickly. "He didn't know me from – a grasshopper, but he did me all sorts of a good service. It don't matter what it was. But it was one of those things which between men count a whole heap."

The girl's enthusiasm waxed.

"Father's just as good as – as he's clever. But," she added tenderly, "he's a great scallywag. Oh dear, he'll never grow up." A few minutes later she pointed quickly ahead with one gauntleted hand.

"That's Buffalo Point," she said. "There where that house is. That's our house, and beyond it, half a mile, you can see the telegraph poles of the railroad track."

Gordon gazed ahead. They still had a good mile to go. The lonely house fixed his attention.

"Say, isn't there a village?" he inquired. "Buffalo Point?"

The girl shook her head.

"No. Just that little frame house of ours. Father had it built as – a sort of office. You see, we're both working hard on his land scheme. You see, it's – it's our hobby, the same as losing trails is yours."

Gordon laughed.

"That's plumb spoiled my day. I'd forgotten the land business. Now it's all come over me like a chill, like the drip of an ice wagon down the back of my neck. I s'pose there'll always be land around, and we've always got to have coal. It seems a pity, doesn't it. Say, there hasn't been a soul I've met in twenty-four hours, but they've been crazy on – on town sites. They're most ridiculous things, town sites. Four pegs and four imaginary lines, a deal of grass with a substrata of crawly things. And for that men would scrap, and cheat, and rob, and – and graft. It's – a wonder."

Hazel Mallinsbee checked her inclination to laugh again. Her eyes were gazing ahead at the little frame house, and they grew wistfully serious.

"It isn't the land," she said simply. "The scrap, and cheat, and rob, and graft, are right. But it's the fight for fortune. Fortune?" she smiled. "Fortune means everything to a modern man. To some women, too, but not quite in the way it does to a man. You see, in olden days competition took a different form. I don't know if, in spite of what folks say about the savagery of old times, they weren't more honest and wholesome than they are now. However, nature's got to compete for something. Human nature's got to beat someone. Life is just one incessant rivalry. Well, in old times it took the form of bloodshed and war, when men counted with pride the tally of their victories. Now we point with pride to our civilization, and gaze back in pity upon our benighted forefathers. Instead of bloodshed, killing, fighting, massacring and all the old bad habits of those who came before us, we point our civilization by lying, cheating, robbing and grafting."

Gordon smiled.

"Put that way it sounds as though the old folks were first-class saints compared with us. There's a deal of honesty when two fellers get right up on their hind legs and start in to mush each other's faces to a pulp. But it isn't just the same when you creep up while the other feller isn't wise and push the muzzle of a gun into his middle and riddle his stomach till it's like a piece of gruyère cheese."

Hazel shook her head. Her eyes were still smiling, but Gordon detected something of the serious thought behind them. He vainly endeavored to sober his mood in sympathy.

"Guess it's the refinement of competition due to the claims of our much proclaimed culture and civilization. I think civilization is a – a dreadful mockery. To call it a whitewash would be a libel on a perfectly innocent, wholesome, sanitary process. That's how I always feel when I stop to think. But – but," her eyes began to dance with a joyous enthusiasm, "I don't often think – not that way. Say, I just love the battle, I mean the modern battle for fortune. It's – it's almost the champagne of life. I know only one thing to beat it."

Gordon had forgotten the team he was driving, and let them amble leisurely on towards the house, now so rapidly approaching.

"What's – the real champagne?" he inquired.

The girl turned and gazed at him with wide eyes.

"Why," she cried. "Life – just life itself. What else? Say, think of the moment your eyes open to the splendid sunlight of day. Think of the moment you realize you are living – living – living, after a long, delicious night's sleep. Think of all the perfect moments awaiting you before night falls, and you seek your bed again. It is just the very essence of perfect joy."

"It's better after breakfast, and you've had time to get around some."

The ardor of the girl's mood received a sudden douche. Just for a moment a gleam of displeasure shadowed her eyes. Then a twinkling smile grew, and the clouds dispersed.

"Isn't that just a man? Where's your enthusiasm? Where's your joy of life? Where's your romance, and – and spirit of hope?"

A great pretense of reproach lay in her rapid questions.

"Oh, they're all somewhere lying around, I guess," returned Gordon simply. "Those things are all right, sure. But – but it's a mighty tough proposition worrying that way on – on an empty stomach. It seems to me that's just one of life's mistakes. There ought to be a law in Congress that a feller isn't allowed to – to think till he's had his morning coffee. The same law might provide for the fellow who fancies himself a sort of canary and starts right in to sing before he's had his bath. I'd have him sent to the electric chair. That sort of fellow never has a voice worth two cents, and he most generally has a repertoire of songs about as bright as Solomon's, and a mighty deal older. Sure, Miss Mallinsbee, I haven't a word to say against life in a general way, but it's about as wayward as a spoilt kid, and needs as much coaxing."

Hazel Mallinsbee watched the play of the man's features while he talked. She knew he meant little or nothing of what he said. The fine, clear eyes, the smiling simplicity and atmosphere of virile youth about him, all denied the sentiments he was giving vent to. She nodded as he finished.

"At first I thought you meant all – that," she said lightly. "But now I know you're just talking for talking's sake." Then, before he could reply, she pointed excitedly at the house, now less than a hundred yards away. "Why, there's father, standing right there on the veranda!" she exclaimed.

Gordon looked ahead. The old man was waving one great hand to his daughter.

CHAPTER VIII
AT BUFFALO POINT

To Gordon's mind Hazel Mallinsbee attached far greater importance to her father's presence on the veranda than the incident warranted. It did not seem to him that there was the least necessity for his being there at all. Truth to tell, the matter appeared to him to be a perfect nuisance. He had rather liked Silas Mallinsbee when he had met him under somewhat distressing circumstances in the town. Now he felt a positive dislike for him. His strong, keen, benevolent face made no appeal to his sympathies now whatsoever.

Besides, it did not seem right that any man who claimed parentage of such a delightful daughter as the girl at his side should slouch about in a pair of old trousers tucked into top-boots and secured about his waist by a narrow strap. And it seemed positively indecent that he should display no other upper garment than a cotton shirt of such a doubtful hue that it was impossible to be sure of its sanitary condition.

However, he allowed none of these feelings betrayal, and replied appropriately to Hazel's excited announcement. He was glad, later, he had exercised such control, for their arrival at the house was the immediate precursor of an invitation to share their midday meal, which had already been placed on the table by the silent, inscrutable Hip-Lee, the Chinese cook and general servitor in this temporary abode.

The horses had been housed and fed in the temporary stable at the back of the house, and a committee of three had sat upon Sunset's injury and prescribed for and treated it. Now they were indoors, ready for the homely meal set out for them.

Hip-Lee moved softly about setting an additional place at the table for the visitor. Silas Mallinsbee was lounging in the doorway, looking out across the veranda. Hazel was superintending Hip-Lee's efforts. Gordon was endeavoring to solve the problem of the rapid and unexpected happenings which had befallen him since his arrival, and at the same time carry on a conversation with the rumbling-voiced originator of Snake's Fall boom.

"At one time I guessed I'd bumped right into the hands of the Philistines," he said. "That's when I was – er arriving. Since then a Samaritan got busy my way and dumps me right down in the heart of the Promised Land, which just now seems to be flowing with milk and honey. I set out to view the dull black mountains of industry, and instead I arrive at the sparkling plains of delightful ease. Mr. Mallinsbee, you certainly have contrived to put me under enormous obligation."

Gordon's eyes were pleasantly following the movements of the girl's graceful figure about the plain but neat parlor. "I suppose all offices in the West are not like this, because – "

Mallinsbee rumbled a pleasant laugh.

"Office?" he said, without turning. "That's jest how Hazel calls it. Guess she's got notions since she finished off her education at Boston. She's got around with a heap of 'em, includin' that suit she's wearin'. Y'see, she's my foreman hoss-breaker, and reckons skirts and things are – played out. Office? Why, it's just a shack. Some time you must get around out an' see the ranch house. It's some place," he added with simple pride.

Hazel went up to her father and pretended to threaten him by the neck.

"See, Daddy, you can just quit telling about my notions to – folks. Anyway" – she turned her back to Gordon – "I appeal to you, Mr. Van Henslaer, isn't an office a place where folks transact big deals and make fortunes?"

"That's how folks reckon when they rent them," said Gordon. "Of course, I've known folks to sleep in 'em. Others use 'em as a sort of club smoking lounge. Then they've been known to serve some men as a shelter from – home. I used to have an office."

Silas Mallinsbee turned from his contemplation of the horizon. He was interested, and his shrewd eyes displayed the fact.

Hazel clapped her hands.

"And what did you use it for?" she demanded quizzically.

"I – oh, I – let's see. Well, mostly an address from which to have word sent to folks I didn't want to see that – I was out. I used to find it useful that way."

Mallinsbee's chuckle amused Gordon, but Hazel assumed an air of judicial severity.

"A spirit not to be encouraged." Then, at the sound of her father's chuckle, "My daddy, you are as bad as he. Now food's ready, so please sit in. We can talk easier around a table than when people are dreaming somewhere in the distance on the horizon, or walking about a room that isn't bigger than the bare size to sit in. Anyway, Mr. Van Henslaer, this office is for business. I won't have it disparaged by my daddy, or – or anyone else. It serves a great purpose so far as we're concerned." Then she added slyly, "You see, we're in the throes of the great excitement of making a huge pile, for the sheer love of making it. Aren't we, Daddy, dear?"

Silas Mallinsbee looked up from the food he was eating with the air of a man who only eats as a matter of sheer necessity.

"Say, Mr. Van Henslaer," he said in his deep tones, "I've been a rancher all my life. Cattle, to me, are just about the only things in the world worth while, 'cept horses. I've never had a care or thought outside 'em, till one day I got busy worrying what was under the ground instead of keeping to the things I understood above the ground. Y'see, the trouble was two things," he went on, smiling tenderly in his daughter's direction. "One was I'd fed the ranch stoves with surface coal that you could find almost anywheres on my land, and the other was the fates just handed me the picture of a daughter who caught the dangerous disease of 'notions' way down east at school in Boston. Since she's come along back to us I've had coal, coal, coal all chasin' through my head, an' playing baseball with every blamed common-sense idea that ever was there before. Wal, to tell things quick, I made a mighty big pile out of that coal just to please her. We didn't need it, but she guessed it was up to me to do this. But that didn't finish it. This gal here couldn't rest at that. She guessed that pile was made and done with. She needs to get busy in another direction. Well, she gets to work, and has all my land on the railroads staked out into a township, and reckons it's a game worth playing. The other was too dead easy. This time she reckons to measure her brains and energy against a railroad! She reckons to show that we can match, and beat, any card they can play. That's the reason of this office."

Hazel laughed and raised an admonishing finger at the smiling face and twinkling eyes of her father.

"What did I tell you, Mr. Van Henslaer?" she cried. "Didn't I say he was just a scallywag? Oh, my great, big daddy, I'm dreadfully, dreadfully ashamed and disappointed in you. I'm going to give you away. I am, surely. There, there, Mr. Van Henslaer, sits the wicked plotter and schemer. Look at him. A big, burly ruffian that ought to know better. Look at him," she went on, pointing a dramatic finger at him. "And he isn't even ashamed. He's laughing. Now listen to me. I'm going to tell you my version. He's a rancher all right, all right. He's been satisfied with that all his life, and prosperity's never turned him down. Then one day he found coal, and did nothing. We just used to talk of it, that was all. Then another day along comes a friend, a very, very old friend and neighbor, whom he's often helped. He came along and got my daddy to sell him a certain patch of grazing – just to help him out, he said. He was a poor man, and my big-hearted daddy sold it him at a rock-bottom price to make it easy for him. Three months later they were mining coal on it – anthracite coal. That fellow made a nice pile out of it. He'd bluffed my daddy, and my daddy takes a bluff from no man. Well, say, he just nearly went crazy being bested that way, and he said to me – these were his words: 'Come on, my gal, you and me are just goin' to show folks what we're made of. If there's money in my land we're going to make all we need before anyone gets home on us. I'm goin' to show 'em I'm a match for the best sharks our country can produce – and that's some goin'.' There sits the money-spinner.

There! Look at him; he's self-confessed. I'm just his clerk, or decoy, or – or any old thing he needs to help him in his wicked, wicked schemes!"

Mallinsbee sat chuckling at his daughter's charge, and Gordon, watching him, laughed in chorus.

"I'm kind of sorry, Mr. Mallinsbee, to have had to listen to such a tale," he said at last, with pretended seriousness, "but I guess you're charged, tried, convicted and sentenced. Seeing there's just two of you, it's up to me to give the verdict Guilty!" he declared. "Have you any reason to show why sentence should not be passed upon you? No? Very well, then. I sentence you to make that pile, without fail, in a given time. Say six months. Failing which you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you have assisted in the ruin of an innocent life."

In the midst of the lightness of the moment Gordon had suddenly taken a resolve. It was one of those quick, impulsive resolves which were entirely characteristic of him. There was nothing quite clear in his mind as to any reason in his decision. He was caught in the enthusiasm of his admiration of the fair oval face of his hostess, whose unconventional camaraderie so appealed to his wholesome nature; he was caught by the radiance of her sunny smile, by the laughing depths of her perfect hazel eyes. Nor was the manner of the man, her father, without effect upon his responsive, simple nature.

But his sentence on Silas Mallinsbee had caught and held both father's and daughter's attention, and excited their curiosity.

"Why six months?" smiled Hazel.

"Say, it's sure some time limit," growled Mallinsbee.

Gordon assumed an air of judicial severity.

"Is the court to be questioned upon its powers?" he demanded. "There is a law of 'contempt,'" he added warningly.

But his warning was without effect.

"And the innocent's ruin?" demanded Hazel.

The answer came without a moment's hesitation.

"Mine," said Gordon. And his audience, now with serious eyes, waited for him to go on.

Hip-Lee had brought in the sweet, and vanished again in his silent fashion. Then Gordon raised his eyes from his plate and glanced at his host. They wandered across to and lingered for a moment on the strong young face of the girl. Then they came back to his plate, and he sighed.

"Say, if there's one thing hurts me it's to hear everybody telling a yarn, and my not having one to throw back at 'em," he said, smiling down at the simple baked custard and fruit he was devouring. "Just now I'm not hurt a thing, however, so that remark don't apply. You see, my yarn's just as simple and easy as both of yours, and I can tell it in a sentence. My father's sent me out in the world with a stake of my own naming to make one hundred thousand dollars in six months!"

He was surprised to witness, the dramatic effect of his announcement. Hazel's astonishment was serious and frankly without disguise. But her father's was less marked by outward expression. It was only obvious from the complete lack of the smile which had been in his shrewd eyes a moment before.

"One hundred thousand dollars in six months!" Hazel exclaimed. She had narrowly escaped scalding herself with the coffee Hip-Lee had just served. She set her cup down hastily.

"Guess your father's takin' a big chance," said Mallinsbee thoughtfully.

But their serious astonishment was too great a strain for Gordon. He began to laugh.

"It's my belief life's too serious to be taken seriously, so the chance he's taken don't worry me as, maybe, it ought," he said. "You see, my father's a good sportsman, and he sees most things the way every real sportsman sees 'em – where his son's concerned. Morally I owe him one hundred thousand dollars. I say morally. Well, I guess we talked together some. I – well, maybe I made a big talk, like fellows of my age and experience are liable to make to a fellow of my father's age and experience. Then I sort of got a shock, as sometimes fellows of my age making a big talk do. In about half a minute I found a new meaning for the word 'bluff.' I thought I'd got its meaning right before that. I

thought I could teach my father all there was to know about bluff. You see, I'd forgotten he'd lived thirty-three more years than I had. Bluff? Why, I'd never heard of it as he knew it. The result is I've got to make one hundred thousand dollars in six months or forfeit my legitimate future." Then he added with the gayest, most buoyant laugh, "Say, it's a terrible thing to think of. It's dead serious. It's as serious as an inter-university ball game."

The lurking smile had returned to Mallinsbee's eyes, and Hazel frankly joined in Gordon's laugh.

"And you've come to Snake's Fall to – to make it?" she cried.

"I can't just say that," returned Gordon.

"No." Mallinsbee shook his head, and the two men exchanged meaning glances. Then the old man went on with his food and spoke between the mouthfuls. "You had an office?"

"Sure. You see, I was my father's secretary."

"Secretary?" Mallinsbee looked up quickly.

Gordon nodded.

"That's what he called me. I drew the salary – and my allowance. It was an elegant office – what little I remember of it."

The old man's regard was very nearly a broad laugh.

"Say, you made a talk about an 'innocent's' life gettin' all mussed up?"

Gordon nodded with profound seriousness.

"Sure," he replied. "Mine. I don't guess you'll deny my innocence." Mallinsbee shook his head. "Good," Gordon went on; "that makes it easy. If you don't make good I lose my chance. I'm going to put my stake in your town plots."

The rancher regarded him steadily for some moments. Then —

"Say, what's your stake?" he inquired abruptly.

Gordon had nothing to hide. There was, it seemed to him, a fatal magnetism about these people. The girl's eyes were upon him, full of amused delight at the story he had told; while her father seemed to be driving towards some definite goal.

"Five thousand dollars. That and a few hundred dollars I had to my credit at the bank. It don't sound much," he added apologetically, "but perhaps it isn't quite impossible."

"I don't guess there's a thing impossible in this world for the feller who's got to make good," said Mallinsbee. "You see, you've got to make good, and it don't matter a heap if your stake's five hundred or five thousand. Say, talk's just about the biggest thing in life, but it's made up of hot air, an' too much hot air's mighty oppressive. So I'll just get to the end of what I've to say as sudden as I can. I guess my gal's right, I'm just crazy to beat the 'sharps' on this land scoop, and I'm going to do it if I get brain fever. Now it's quite a proposition. I've got to play the railroad and all these ground sharks, and see I get the juice while they only get the pie-crust. I'm needing a – we'll call him a secretary. Hazel is all sorts of a bright help, but she ain't a man. I need a feller who can swear and scrap if need be, and one who can scratch around with a pen in odd moments. This thing is a big fight, and the man who's got the biggest heart and best wind's going to win through. My wind's sound, and I ain't heard of any heart trouble in my family. Now you ken come in in town plots so that when the boom comes they'll net you that one hundred thousand dollars. You don't need to part with that stake – yet. The deal shall be on paper, and the cash settlement shall come at the finish. Meanwhile, if need be, for six months you'll put in every moment you've got on the work of organizing this boom. Maybe we'll need to scrap plenty. But I don't guess that'll come amiss your way. We'll hand this shanty over for quarters for you, and we'll share it as an office. This ain't philanthropy; it's business. The man who's got no more sense than to call a bluff to make one hundred thousand dollars in six months is the man for me. He'll make it or he won't. And, anyway, he's going to make things busy for six months. You ain't a 'sharp' now – or I wouldn't hand you this talk. But I'm guessin' you'll be mighty near one before we're through. We've got to graft, and graft plenty, which is a play that ain't without attractions to a real bright feller.

You see, money's got a heap of evil lyin' around its root – well, the root of things is gener'ly the most attractive. Guess I've used a deal of hot air in makin' this proposition, but you won't need to use as much in your answer – when you've slept over it. Say, if food's through we'll get busy, Hazel."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.