

Isham Frederic Stewart

Nothing But the Truth



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Содержание

CHAPTER I – THE TEMERITY OF BOB	5
CHAPTER II – A TRY-OUT	9
CHAPTER III – AN INAUSPICIOUS BEGINNING	14
CHAPTER IV – A CHAT ON THE LINKS	20
CHAPTER V – TRIVIALITIES	24
CHAPTER VI – DINNER	29
CHAPTER VII – VARYING VICISSITUDES	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

Frederic S. Isham

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CHAPTER I – THE TEMERITY OF BOB

“It can’t be done.”

“Of course, it can.”

“A man couldn’t survive the ordeal.”

“Could do it myself.”

The scene was the University Club. The talk spread over a good deal of space, as talk will when pink cocktails, or “green gardens in a glass” confront, or are in front of, the talkees. Dickie said it couldn’t be done and Bob said it was possible and that he could do it. He might not have felt such confidence had it not been for the verdant stimulation. He could have done anything just then, so why not this particular feat or stunt? And who was this temerarious one and what was he like?

As an excellent specimen of a masculine young animal, genus homo, Bob Bennett was good to look on. Some of those young ladies who wave banners when young men strain their backs and their arms and their legs in the cause of learning, had, in the days of the not remote past, dubbed him, sub rosa, the “blue-eyed Apollo.” Some of the fellows not so euphemistically inclined had, however, during that same glorious period found frequent occasion to refer to him less classically, if more truthfully, as “that darn fool, Bob Bennett.” That was on account of a streak of wildness in him, for he was a free bold creature, was Bob. Conventional bars and gates chafed him. He may have looked like a “blue-eyed Apollo,” but his spirit had the wings of a wild goose, than which there are no faster birds – for a wild goose is the biplane of the empyrean.

Now that Bob had ceased the chase for learning and was out in the wide world, he should have acquired an additional sobriquet – that of “Impecunious Bob.” It would have fitted his pecuniary condition very nicely. Once he had had great expectations, but alas! – dad had just “come a cropper.” They had sheared him on the street. The world in general didn’t know about it yet, but Bob did.

“We’re broke, Bob,” said dad that very morning.

“That’s all right, Gov.,” said Bob. “Can you get up?”

“I can’t even procure a pair of crutches to hobble with,” answered dad.

“Never mind,” observed Bob magnanimously. “You’ve done pretty well by me up to date. Don’t you worry or reproach yourself. I’m not going to heap abuse on those gray hairs.”

“Thanks, Bob.” Coolly. “*I’m* not worrying. You see, it’s up to you now.”

“Me?” Bob stared.

“Yes. You see I believe in the Japanese method.”

“What’s that?” Uneasily.

“Duty of a child to support his parent, when said child is grown up!”

Bob whistled. “Say, Gov., do you mean it?”

“Gospel truth, Bob.”

Bob whistled again. “Not joking?”

“Pon honor!” Cheerfully.

“I never did like the Japanese,” from Bob, sotto voce. “Blame lot of heathens – that’s what they are!”

“I’ve got a dollar or two that I owe tucked away where no one can find it except me,” went on dad, unmindful of Bob’s little soliloquy. “That will have to last until you come to the rescue.”

“Gee! I’m glad you were thoughtful enough for that!” ejaculated the young man. “Sure you can keep it hidden?”

“Burglars couldn’t find it,” said dad confidently, “let alone my creditors – God bless them! But it won’t last long, Bob. Bear that in mind. It’ll be a mighty short respite.”

“Oh, I’ll not forget it. If – if it’s not an impertinence, may I ask what *you* are going to do, dad?”

“I’m contemplating a fishing trip, first of all, and after that – *quien sabe?* Some pleasure suitable to my retired condition will undoubtedly suggest itself. I may take up the study of philosophy. Confucius has always interested me. They say it takes forty years to read him and then forty years to digest what you have read. The occupation would, no doubt, prove adequate. But don’t concern yourself about that, dear boy. I’ll get on. You owe me a large debt of gratitude. I’m thrusting a great responsibility on you. It should be the making of you.” Bob had his secret doubts. “Get out and hustle, dear boy. It’s up to you, now!” And he spread out his hands in care-free fashion and smiled blandly. No Buddha could have appeared more complacent – only instead of a lotus flower, Bob’s dad held in his hand a long black weed, the puffing of which seemed to afford a large measure of ecstatic satisfaction. “Go!” He waved the free hand. “My blessing on your efforts.”

Bob started to go, and then he lingered. “Perhaps,” he said, “you can tell me *what* I am going to do?”

“Don’t know.” Cheerfully.

“What *can* I do?” Hopelessly.

“Couldn’t say.”

“I don’t know *anything*.”

“Ha! ha!” Dad laughed, as if son had sprung a joke. “Well, that is a condition experience will remove. Experience *and* hard knocks,” he added.

Bob swore softly. His head was humming. No heroic purpose to get out and fight his way moved him. He didn’t care about shoveling earth, or chopping down trees. He had no frenzied desire to brave the sixty-below-zero temperature of the Klondike in a mad search for gold. In a word, he didn’t feel at all like the heroes in the books who conquer under almost impossible conditions in the vastnesses of the “open,” and incidentally whallop a few herculean simple-minded sons of nature, just to prove that breed is better than brawn.

“Of course, I could give you a little advice, Bob,” said the governor softly. “If you should find hustling a bit arduous for one of your luxurious nature, there’s an alternative. It is always open to a young man upon whom nature has showered her favors.”

“Don’t know what you mean by that last,” growled Bob, who disliked personalities. “But what is the alternative to hustling?”

“Get married,” said dad coolly.

Bob changed color. Dad watched him keenly.

“There’s always the matrimonial market for young men who have not learned to specialize. I’ve known many such marriages to turn out happily, too. Marrying right, my boy, is a practical, not a sentimental business.”

Bob looked disgusted.

“There’s Miss Gwendoline Gerald, for example. Millions in her own name, and – ”

“Hold on, dad!” cried Bob. His face was flaming now. The blue eyes gleamed almost fiercely.

“I knew you were acquainted,” observed dad softly, still studying him. “Besides she’s a beautiful girl and – ”

“Drop it, dad!” burst from Bob. “We’ve never had a quarrel, but – ” Suddenly he realized his attitude was actually menacing. And toward dad – his own dad! “I beg your pardon, sir,” he muttered contritely. “I’m afraid I am forgetting myself. But please turn the talk.”

“All right,” said dad. “I forgive you. I was only trying to elucidate your position. But since it’s not to be the matrimonial market, it’ll have to be a hustle, my boy. I’m too old to make another fortune. I’ve done my bit and now I’m going to retire on my son. Sounds fair and equitable, doesn’t it, Bob?”

“I’d hate to contradict you, sir,” the other answered moodily.

Dad walked up to him and laid an arm affectionately upon son's broad shoulders. "I've the utmost confidence in you, my boy," he said, with a bland smile.

"Thank you, sir," replied Bob. He always preserved an attitude of filial respect toward his one and only parent. But he tore himself away from dad now as soon as he could. He wanted to think. The average hero, thrust out into the world, has only a single load to carry. He has only to earn a living for himself. Bob's load was a double one and therefore he would have to be a double hero. Mechanically he walked on and on, cogitating upon his unenviable fate. Suddenly he stopped. He found himself in front of the club. Bob went in. And there he met Dickie, Clarence, Dan the doughty "commodore" and some others.

That Impecunious Bob should have said "It could be done" to Imperial Dickie's "It couldn't" and have allowed himself to be drawn further into the affair was, in itself, an impertinence. For Dickie was a person of importance. He had a string of simoleons so long that a newspaper-mathematician once computed if you spread them out, touching one another, they would reach half around the world. Or was it twice around? Anyhow, Dickie didn't have to worry about hustling, the way Bob did now. At the moment the latter was in a mood to contradict any one. He felt reckless. He was ready for almost anything – short of an imitation of that back-to-nature hero of a popular novel.

They had been going on about that "could" and "couldn't" proposition for some time when some one staked Bob. That some one was promptly "called" by the "commodore" – as jolly a sea-dog as never trod a deck. Dan was a land-commodore, but he was very popular at the Yacht Club, where something besides waves seethed when he was around. He didn't go often to the University Club where he complained things were too pedagogic. (No one else ever complained of that.) He liked to see the decks – or floors – wave. Then he was in his element and would issue orders with the blithe abandon of a son of Neptune. There was no delay in "clapping on sail" when the commodore was at the helm. And if he said: "Clear the decks for action," there was action. When he did occasionally drift into the University, he brought with him the flavor of the sea. Things at once breezed up.

Well, the commodore called that some one quick.

"Five thousand he can't do it."

"For how long?" says Dickie.

"A week," answered the commodore.

"Make it two."

"Oh, very well."

"Three, if you like!" from Bob, the stormy petrel.

They gazed at him admiringly.

"It isn't the green garden talking, is it, Bob?" asked Clarence Van Duzen whose sole occupation was being a director in a few corporations – or, more strictly speaking, *not* being one. It took almost all Clarence's time to "direct" his wife, or try to.

Bob looked at Clarence reproachfully. "No," he said. "I'm still master of all my thoughts." Gloomily. "I couldn't forget if I tried."

"That's all right, then," said Dickie.

Then Clarence "took" some one else who staked Bob. And Dickie did likewise. And there was some more talk. And then Bob staked himself.

"Little short of cash at the bank just now," he observed. "But if you'll take my note –"

"Take your word if you want," said the commodore.

"No; here's my note." He gave it – a large amount – payable in thirty days. It was awful, but he did it. He hardly thought what he was doing. Having the utmost confidence he would win, he didn't stop to realize what a large contract he was taking on. But Dan, Dickie, Clarence and the others did.

"Of course, you can't go away and hide," said Dickie to Bob with sudden suspicion.

"No; you can't do that," from Clarence. "Or get yourself arrested and locked up for three weeks! That wouldn't be fair, old chap."

“Bob understands he’s got to go on in the even tenor of his way,” said the commodore.

Bob nodded. “Just as if nothing had happened!” he observed. “I’ll not seek, or I’ll not shirk. I’m on honor, you understand.”

“That’s good enough for me!” said Dickie. “Bob’s honest.”

“And me!” from Clarence.

“And me!” from half a dozen other good souls, including the non-aqueous commodore.

“Gentlemen, I thank you,” said Bob, affected by this outburst of confidence. “I thank you for this display of – this display – ”

“Cut it!”

“Cork it up! And speaking of corks – ”

“When does it begin?” interrupted Bob.

“When you walk out of here,”

“At the front door?”

“When your foot touches the sidewalk, son.” The commodore who was about forty in years sometimes assumed the paternal.

“Never mind the ‘son.’” Bob shuddered. “One father at a time, please!” And then hastily, not to seem ungracious: “I’ve got such a jolly good, real dad, you understand – ”

The commodore dropped the paternal. “Well, lads, here’s a bumper to Bob,” he said.

“We see his finish.”

“No doubt of that.”

“To Bob! Good old Bob! Ho! ho!”

“Ha! ha!” said Bob funereally.

Then he got up.

“Going?”

“Might as well.”

The commodore drew out a watch.

“Twelve minutes after three p.m. Monday, the twelfth of September, in the year of our Lord, 1813,” he said. “You are all witnesses of the time the ball was opened?”

“We are.”

“Good-by, Bob.”

“Oh, let’s go with him a way!”

“*Might* be interesting,” from Clarence sardonically.

“It might. Least we can do is to see him start on his way rejoicing.”

“That’s so. Come on.” Which they did.

Bob offered no objection. He didn’t much care at the time whether they did or not. What would happen would. He braced himself for the inevitable.

CHAPTER II – A TRY-OUT

To tell the truth – to blurt out nothing but the truth to every one, and on every occasion, for three whole weeks – that’s what Bob had contracted to do. From the point of view of the commodore and the others, the man who tried to fill this contract would certainly be shot, or electrocuted, or ridden out of town on a rail, or receive a coat of tar and feathers. And Bob had such a wide circle of friends, too, which would make his task the harder; the handsome dog was popular. He was asked everywhere that was anywhere and he went, too. He would certainly “get his.” The jovial commodore was delighted. He would have a whole lot of fun at Bob’s expense. Wasn’t the latter the big boob, though? And wouldn’t he be put through his paces? Really it promised to be delicious. The commodore and the others went along with Bob just for a little try-out.

At first nothing especially interesting happened. They walked without meeting any one they were acquainted with. Transients! transients! where did they all come from? Once on their progress down the avenue the hopes of Bob’s friends rose high. A car they knew got held up on a side street not far away from them. It was a gorgeous car and it had a gorgeous occupant, but a grocery wagon was between them and it. The commodore warbled blithely.

“Come on, Bob. Time for a word or two!”

But handsome Bob shook his head. “The ‘even tenor of his way,’” he quoted. “I don’t ordinarily go popping in and out between wheels like a rabbit. I’m not looking to commit suicide.”

“Oh, I only wanted to say: ‘How do you do,’” retorted the commodore rather sulkily. “Or ‘May I tango with you at tea this afternoon, Mrs. Ralston?’”

“Or observe: ‘How young she looks to-day, eh, Bob?’” murmured that young gentleman suspiciously.

“Artful! Artful!” Clarence poked the commodore in the ribs. “Sly old sea-dog!”

“Well, let’s move on,” yawned Dickie. “Nothing doing here.”

“Wait!” The commodore had an idea. “Hi, you young grocery lad, back up a little, will you?”

“Wha’ for?” said the boy, aggressive at once. Babes are born in New York with chips on their shoulders.

“As a matter of trifling accommodation, that is all,” answered the commodore sweetly. “On the other side of you is a stately car and we would hold conversation with – ”

“Aw, gwan! Guess I got as much right to the street as it has.” And as a display of his “rights,” he even touched up his horse a few inches, to intervene more thoroughly.

“Perhaps now for half a dollar – ” began the commodore, more insinuatingly. Then he groaned: “Too late!” The policeman had lifted the ban. The stately car turned into the avenue and was swallowed up amid a myriad of more or less imposing vehicles. They had, however, received a bow from the occupant. That was all there had been opportunity for. Incidentally, the small boy had bestowed upon them his parting compliments:

“Smart old guy! You think youse – ” The rest was jumbled up or lost in the usual cacophony of the thoroughfare.

“Too bad!” murmured the commodore. “But still these three weeks are young.”

“Three weeks!” observed Dickie. “Sounds like plagiarism!”

“Oh, Bob won’t have that kind of a ‘three weeks,’” snickered Clarence.

“Bob’s will be an expurgated edition,” from the commodore, recovering his spirits.

“Maybe we ought to make it four?”

“Three will do,” said Bob, who wasn’t enjoying this chaffing. Every one they approached he now eyed apprehensively.

But he was a joy-giver, if not receiver, for his tall handsome figure attracted many admiring glances. His striking head with its blond curls – they weren’t exactly curls, only his hair wasn’t straight,

but clung rather wavy-like to the bold contour of his head – his careless stride, and that general effect of young masculinity – all this caused sundry humble feminine hearts to go pit-a-pat. Bob's progress, however, was generally followed by pit-a-pats from shop-girls and bonnet-bearers. Especially at the noon hour! Then Bob seemed to these humble toilers, like dessert, after hard-boiled eggs, stale sandwiches and pickles.

But Bob was quite unaware of any approving glances cast after him. He was thinking, and thinking hard. He wasn't so sanguine now as he had been when he had left the club. What might have happened at that street corner appealed to him with sudden poignant force. Mrs. Ralston was of the *creme de la creme*. She was determined to stay young. She pretended to be thirty years or so younger than she was. In fact, she was rather a ridiculous old lady who found it hard to conceal her age. Now what if the commodore had found opportunity to ask that awful question? Bob could have made only one reply and told the truth. The largeness of his contract was becoming more apparent to him. He began to see himself now from Dan's standpoint. Incidentally, he was beginning to develop a great dislike for that genial land-mariner.

"How about the Waldorf?" They had paused at the corner of Thirty-fourth Street. "May find some one there," suggested Clarence.

"In Peek-a-Boo Alley?" scornfully from Dickie.

"Oh, I heard there was a concert, or something upstairs," said Clarence. "In that you've-got-to-be-introduced room! And some of the real people have to walk through to get to it."

Accordingly they entered the Waldorf and the commodore hustled them up and down and around, without, however, their encountering a single "real" person. There were only people present – loads of them, not from somewhere but from everywhere. They did the circuit several times, still without catching sight of a real person.

"Whew! This *is* a lonesome place!" breathed the commodore at last.

"Let's depart!" disgustedly from Clarence. "Apologize for steering you into these barren wastes!"

"What's your hurry?" said Bob, with a little more bravado. Then suddenly he forgot about those other three. His entranced gaze became focused on one. He saw only her.

"Ha!" The commodore's quick glance, following Bob's, caught sight, too, of that wonderful face in the distance – the stunning, glowing young figure – that regal dream of just-budded girlhood – that superb vision in a lovely afternoon gown! She was followed by one or two others. One could only imagine her leading. There would, of course, always be several at her either side and quite a number dangling behind. Her lips were like the red rosebuds that swung negligently from her hand as she floated through the crowd. Her eyes suggested veiled dreams amid the confusion and hubbub of a topsyturvy world. She was like something rhythmical precipitated amid chaos. A far-away impression of a smile played around the corners of her proud lips.

The commodore precipitated himself in her direction. Bob put out a hand as if to grasp him by the coat tails, but the other was already beyond reach and Bob's hand fell to his side. He stood passive. That was his part. Only he wasn't passive inwardly. His heart was beating wildly. He could imagine himself with her and them – those others in her train – and the conversation that would ensue, for he had no doubt of the commodore's intentions. Dan was an adept at rounding up people. Bob could see himself at a table participating in the conversation – prepared conversation, some of it! He could imagine the commodore leading little rivulets of talk into certain channels for his benefit. Dan would see to it that they would ask him (Bob) questions, embarrassing ones. That "advice" dad had given him weighed on Bob like a nightmare. Suppose – ghastly thought! – truth compelled him ever to speak of that? And to her! A shiver ran down Bob's backbone. Nearer she drew – nearer – while Bob gazed as if fascinated, full of rapturous, paradoxical dread. Now the commodore was almost upon her when —

Ah, what was that? An open elevator? – people going in? – She, too, – those with her – Yes – click! a closed door! The radiant vision had vanished, was going upward; Bob breathed again. Think of being even paradoxically glad at witnessing *her* disappear! Bob ceased now to think; stood as in a trance.

“Why *do* people go to concerts?” said the commodore in aggrieved tones. “Some queen, that!”

“And got the rocks – or stocks!” from Dickie. “Owns about three of those railroads that are going a-begging nowadays.”

“Wake up, Bobbie!” some one now addressed that abstracted individual.

Bob shook himself.

“Old friend of yours, Miss Gwendoline Gerald, I believe?” said the commodore significantly.

“Yes; I’ve known Miss Gerald for some time,” said Bob coldly.

“‘Known for some time’ – ” mimicked the commodore. “Phlegmatic dog! Well, what shall we do now?”

“Hang around until the concert’s over?” suggested Dickie.

“Hang around nothing!” said the commodore. “It’s one of those classical high-jinks.” Disgustedly. “Lasts so late the sufferers haven’t time for anything after it’s over. Just enough energy left to stagger to their cars and fall over in a comatose condition.”

“Suppose we *could* go to the bar?”

“Naughty! Naughty!” A sprightly voice interrupted.

The commodore wheeled. “Mrs. Ralston!” he exclaimed gladly.

It was the gorgeous lady of the gorgeous car.

“Just finished my shopping and thought I’d have a look in here,” she said vivaciously.

“Concert, I suppose?” from the commodore, jubilantly.

“Yes. Dubussy. Don’t you adore Dubussy?” with schoolgirlish enthusiasm. Though almost sixty, she had the manners of a “just-come-out.”

“Nothing like it,” lied the commodore.

“Ah, then you, too, are a modern?” gushed the lady.

“I’m so advanced,” said the commodore, “I can’t keep up with myself.”

They laughed. “Ah, silly man!” said the lady’s eyes. Bob gazed at her and the commodore enviously. Oh, to be able once more to prevaricate like that! The commodore had never heard Dubussy in his life. Ragtime and merry hornpipes were his limits. And Mrs. Ralston was going to the concert, it is true, but to hear the music? Ah, no! Her box was a fashionable rendezvous, and from it she could study modernity in hats. Therein, at least, she was a modern of the moderns. She was so advanced, the styles had fairly to trot, or turkey-trot, to keep up with her.

“Well,” she said, with that approving glance women usually bestowed upon Bob, “I suppose I mustn’t detain you busy people after that remark I overheard.”

“Oh, don’t hurry,” said the commodore hastily. “Between old friends – But I say – By jove, you *are* looking well. Never saw you looking so young and charming. Never!” It was rather crudely done, but the commodore could say things more bluntly than other people and “get away with them.” He was rather a privileged character. Bob began to breathe hard, having a foretaste of what was to follow. And Mrs. “Willie” Ralston was Miss Gwendoline Gerald’s aunt! No doubt that young lady was up in her aunt’s box at this moment.

“Never!” repeated the commodore. “Eh, Bob? Doesn’t look a day over thirty,” with a jovial, freehearted sailor laugh. “Does she now?”

It had come. That first test! And the question had to be answered. The lady was looking at Bob. They were all waiting. A fraction of a second, or so, which seemed like a geological epoch, Bob hesitated. He had to reply and yet being a gentleman, how could he? No matter what it cost him, he would simply have to “lie like a gentleman.” He —

Suddenly an idea shot through his befuddled brain. Maybe Mrs. Ralston wouldn't know what he said, if he – ? She had been numerous times to France, of course, but she was not mentally a heavy-weight. Languages might not be her forte. Presumably she had all she could do to chatter in English. Bob didn't know much French himself. He would take a chance on her, however. He made a bow which was Chesterfieldian and incidentally made answer, rattling it off with the swiftness of a boulevardier.

“Il me faut dire que, vraiment, Madame Ralston parait aussi agee qu'elle l'est!” (“I am obliged to say that Mrs. Ralston appears as old as she is!”)

Then he straightened as if he had just delivered a stunning compliment.

“Merci!” The lady smiled. She also beamed. “How well you speak French, Mr. Bennett!”

The commodore nearly exploded. *He* understood French.

Bob expanded, beginning to breathe freely once more. “Language of courtiers and diplomats!” he mumbled.

Mrs. Ralston shook an admonishing finger at him. “Flatterer!” she said, and departed.

Whereupon the commodore leaned weakly against Dickie while Clarence sank into a chair. First round for Bob!

The commodore was the first to recover. His voice was reproachful. “Was *that* quite fair? – that parleyvoo business? I don't know about it's being allowed.”

“Why not?” calmly from Bob. “Is truth confined to one tongue?”

“But what about that ‘even tenor of your way?’” fenced the commodore. “You don't, as a usual thing, go around parleyvooing – ”

“What about the even tenor of your own ways?” retorted Bob.

“Nothing said about *that* when we – ”

“No, but – how can *I* go the even tenor, if *you* don't go yours?”

“Hum?” said the commodore.

“Don't you see it's not the even tenor?” persisted Bob. “But it's your fault if it isn't.”

“Some logic in that,” observed Clarence.

“Maybe, we *have* been a bit too previous,” conceded the commodore.

“That isn't precisely the adjective I would use,” returned Bob. He found himself thinking more clearly now. They had all, perhaps, been stepping rather lightly when they had left the club. He should have thought of this before. But Bob's brain moved rather slowly sometimes and the others had been too bent on having a good time to consider all the ethics of the case. They showed themselves fair-minded enough now, however.

“Bob's right,” said the commodore sorrowfully. “Suppose we've got to eliminate ourselves from his agreeable company for the next three weeks, unless we just naturally happen to meet. We'll miss a lot of fun, but I guess it's just got to be. What about that parleyvooing business though, Bob?”

“That's got to be eliminated, too!” from Dickie. “Why, he might tell the truth in Chinese.”

“All right, fellows,” said Bob shortly. “You quit tagging and I'll talk United States.”

“Good. I'm off,” said the commodore. And he went. The others followed. Bob was left alone. He found the solitude blessed and began to have hopes once more. Why, he might even be permitted to enjoy a real lonely three weeks, now that he had got rid of that trio. He drew out a cigar and began to tell himself he *was* enjoying himself when —

“Mr. Robert Bennett!” The voice of a page smote the air. It broke into his reflections like a shock.

“Mr. Bennett!” again bawled the voice.

For the moment Bob was tempted to let him slip by, but conscience wouldn't let him. He lifted a finger.

“Message for Mr. Bennett,” said the urchin.

Bob took it. He experienced forebodings as he saw the dainty card and inscription. He read it. Then he groaned. Would Mr. Robert Bennett join Mrs. Ralston's house-party at Tonkton? There were a few more words in that impulsive lady's characteristic, vivacious style. And then there were two words in another handwriting that he knew. "Will you?" That "Will you?" wasn't signed. Bob stared at it. Would he? He had to. He was in honor bound, because ordinarily he would have accepted with alacrity. But a house-party for him, under present circumstances! He would be a merry guest. Ye gods and little fishes! And then some! He gave a hollow laugh, while the urchin gazed at him sympathetically. Evidently the gentleman had received bad news.

CHAPTER III – AN INAUSPICIOUS BEGINNING

Mrs. Ralston's house-parties were usually satisfactory affairs. She was fond of people, especially young people, and more especially of young men of the Apollo variety, though in a strictly proper, platonic and critical sense. Indeed, her taste in the abstract, for animated Praxiteles had, for well-nigh two-score of years, been unimpeachable. At the big gatherings in her noble country mansion, there was always a liberal sprinkling of decorative and animated objects of art of this description. She liked to ornament her porches or her gardens with husky and handsome young college athletes. She had an intuitive artistic taste for stunning living-statuary, "dressed up," of course. Bob came distinctly in that category. So behold him then, one fine morning, on the little sawed-off train that whisked common people – and sometimes a few notables when their cars were otherwise engaged – countryward. Bob had a big grip by his side, his golf sticks were in a rack and he had a newspaper in his hand. The sunshine came in on him but his mood was not sunny. An interview with dad just before leaving hadn't improved his spirits. He had found dad at the breakfast table examining a book of artificial flies, on one hand, and a big reel on the other.

"Which shall it be, my son?" dad had greeted him cordially. "Trout or tarpon?"

"I guess that's for you to decide," Robert had answered grumpily. Dad, in his new role, was beginning to get on Bob's nerves. Dad didn't seem to be at all concerned about his future. He shifted that weighty and momentous subject just as lightly! He acted as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"Wish I *could* make up my mind," he said, like a boy in some doubt how he can best put in his time when he plays hooky. "Minnows or whales? I'll toss up." He did. "Whales win. By the way, how's the hustling coming on?"

"Don't know."

"Well, don't put it off too long." Cheerfully. "I guess I can worry along for about three weeks."

"Three weeks!" said Bob gloomily. Oh, that familiar sound!

"You wouldn't have me stint myself, would you, my son?" Half reproachfully. "You wouldn't have dad deny himself anything?"

"No," answered the other truthfully enough. As a matter of fact things couldn't be much worse, so he didn't much care. Fortunately, dad didn't ask any questions or show any curiosity about that "hustling" business. He seemed to take it for granted Bob would arise to the occasion and be as indulgent a son as he had been an indulgent dad – for he had never denied the boy anything. Bob softened when he thought of that. But confound dad's childlike faith in him, at this period of emergency. It made Bob nervous. He had no faith in himself that way. Dad *did* lift his eyebrows just a little when Bob brought down his big grip.

"Week-end?" he hazarded.

"Whole week," replied Bob in a melancholy tone.

"Whither?"

"Tonkton."

Dad beamed. "Mrs. Ralston?"

"Yes."

"Aunt of Miss Gwendoline Gerald, I believe?" With a quick penetrating glance at Bob.

"Yes."

"Sensible boy," observed dad, still studying him.

"Oh, I'm not going for the reason you think," said Bob quite savagely. He was most unlike himself.

"Of course not." Dad was conciliatory.

"I'm not. Think what you like."

"Too much work to think," yawned dad.

“But you *are* thinking.” Resentfully.

“Have it your own way.”

Bob squared his shoulders. “You want to know really why I’m going to Tonkton?”

“Have I ever tried to force your confidences, my son?”

“I’m going because I’ve got to. I can’t help myself.”

“Of course,” said dad. “Ta! ta! Enjoy yourself. See you in three weeks.”

“Three – !” But Bob didn’t finish. What was the use? Dad thought he was going to Tonkton because Miss Gerald might be there.

As a matter of fact Bob’s one great wish now was that she wouldn’t be there. He wanted, and yet didn’t want, to see her. What had he to hope now? Why, he didn’t have a son, or not enough of them to count. He was to all practical intents and purposes a pauper. Dad’s “going broke” had changed his whole life. He had been reared in the lap of luxury, a pampered son. He had never dreamed of being otherwise. And considering himself a favored child of fortune, he had even dared entertain the delirious hope of winning her – her, the goddess of his dreams.

But hope now was gone. Regrets were useless. He could no longer conceive himself in the role of suitor. Why, there were few girls in the whole land so overburdened with “rocks” – as Dickie called them! If only she didn’t have those rocks – or stocks! “Impecunious Gwendoline!” How well that would go with “Impecunious Bob!” If only her trustees would hit the toboggan, the way dad did! But trustees don’t go tobogganing. They eschew the smooth and slippery. They speculate in government bonds and things that fluctuate about a point or so a century. No chance for quick action there! On the contrary, the trustees were probably making those millions grow. Bob heaved a sigh. Then he took something white from his pocket and gazed at two words, ardently yet dubiously.

That “Will you?” of hers on Mrs. Ralston’s card exhilarated and at the same time depressed him. It implied she, herself, did expect to be at her aunt’s country place. He attached no other especial importance to the “Will you?” An imperious young person in her exalted position could command as she pleased. She could say “Will you?” or “You will” to dozens of more or less callow youths, or young grown-ups, with impunity, and none of said dozens would attach any undue flattering meaning to her words. Miss Gerald found safety in numbers. She was as yet heart-free.

“Can you – aw! – tell me how far it is to Tonkton?” a voice behind here interrupted his ruminations.

Bob hastily returned the card to his pocket, and glancing back, saw a monocle. “Matter of ten miles or so,” he responded curtly. He didn’t like monocles.

“Aw!” said the man.

Bob picked up his newspaper that he had laid down, and frowningly began to glance over the head-lines. The man behind him glanced over them, too.

“Another society robbery, I see,” the latter remarked. “No function complete without them nowadays, I understand. Wonderful country, America! Guests here always expect – aw! – to be robbed, I’ve been told.”

“Have the paper,” said Bob with cutting accents.

“Thanks awfully.” The man with the monocle took the paper as a matter of course, seeming totally unaware of the sarcasm in Bob’s tone. At first, Bob felt like kicking himself; the rustle of the paper in those alien hands caused him to shuffle his feet with mild irritation. Then he forgot all about the paper and the monocle man. His thoughts began once more to go over and over the same old ground, until —

“T’nk’n!” The stentorian abbreviation of the conductor made Bob get up with a start. Grabbing his grip – hardly any weight at all for his muscular arm – in one hand, and his implements of the game in the other, he swung down the aisle and on to the platform. A good many people got off, for a small town nestled beneath the high rolling lands of the country estates of the affluent. There

were vehicles of all kinds at the station, among them a number of cars, and in one of the latter Bob recognized Mrs. Ralston's chauffeur.

A moment he hesitated. He supposed he ought to step forward and get in, for that was what he naturally would do. But he wanted to think; he didn't want to get to the house in a hurry. Still he had to do what he naturally would do and he started to do it when some other people Bob didn't know – prospective guests, presumably, among them the man with the monocle – got into the car and fairly filled it. That let Bob out nicely and naturally. It gave him another breathing spell. He had got so he was looking forward to these little breathing spells.

"Hack, sir?" said a voice.

"Not for me," replied Bob. "But you can tote this up the hill," indicating the grip. "Ralston house."

"Dollar and a half, sir," said the man. "Same price if you go along, too."

"What?" It just occurred to Bob he hadn't many dollars left, and of course, tips would be expected up there, at the big house. It behooved him, therefore, to be frugal. But to argue about a dollar and a half! – he, a guest at the several million dollar house! On the other hand, that dollar looked large to Bob at this moment. Imagine if he had to earn a dollar and a half! He couldn't at the moment tell how he would do it.

"Hold on." Bob took the grip away from the man. "Why, it's outrageous, such a tariff! Same price, with or without me, indeed! I tell you –" Suddenly he stopped. He had an awful realization that he was acting a part. That forced indignation of his was not the truth; that aloof kind of an attitude wasn't the truth, either.

"To tell you the truth," said Bob, "I can't afford it."

"Can't afford. Ha! ha!" That was a joke. One of Mrs. Ralston's guests, not afford – !

"No," said Bob. "I've only got about fifteen dollars and a half to my name. I guess you're worth more than that yourself, aren't you?" With sudden respect in his tone.

"I guess I am," said the man, grinning.

"Then, logically, I should be carrying your valise," retorted Bob.

"Ha! ha! That's good." The fellow had been transporting the overflow of Mrs. Ralston's guests for years, but he had never met quite such an eccentric one as this. He chuckled now as if it were the best joke. "I'll tell you what – I'll take it for nothing, and leave it to you what you give me!" Maybe, for a joke, he'd get a fifty – dollars, not cents. These young millionaire men did perpetrate little funnyisms like that. Why, one of them had once "beat him down" a quarter on his fare and then given him ten dollars for a tip. "Ha! ha!" repeated the fellow, surveying Bob's elegant and faultless attire, "I'll do it for nothing, and you –"

Bob walked away carrying his grip. Here he was telling the truth and he wasn't believed. The man took him for one of those irresponsible merry fellows. That was odd. Was it auspicious? Should he derive encouragement therefrom? Maybe the others would only say "Ha! ha!" when he told the truth. But though he tried to feel the fellow's attitude was a good omen, he didn't succeed very well.

No use trying to deceive *himself*! Might as well get accustomed to that truth-telling habit even in his own thoughts! That diabolical trio of friends had seen plainer than he. *They* had realized the dazzling difficulties of the task confronting him. How they were laughing in their sleeves now at "darn fool Bob!" Bob, a young Don Quixote, sallying forth to attempt the impossible! The preposterous part of the whole business was that his role *was* preposterous. Why, he really and truly, in his transformed condition, ought to be just like every one else. That he was a unique exception – a figure alone in his glory, or ingloriously alone – was a fine commentary on this old world, anyhow.

What an old humbug of a world it was, he thought, when, passing before the one and only bookstore the little village boasted of, he ran plump into, or almost into, Miss Gwendoline Gerald.

She, at that moment, had just emerged from the shop with a supply of popular magazines in her arms. A gracious expression immediately softened the young lady's lovely patrician features and

she extended a hand. As in a dream Bob looked at it, for the fraction of a second. It was a beautiful, shapely and capable hand. It was also sunburned. It looked like the hand of a young woman who would grasp what she wanted and wave aside peremptorily what she didn't want. It was a strong hand, but it was also an adorable hand. It went with the proud but lovely face. It supplemented the steady, direct violet eyes. The pink nails gleamed like sea-shells. Bob set down the grip and took the hand. His heart was going fast.

"Glad to see you," said Miss Gwendoline.

Bob remained silent. He was glad and he wasn't glad. That is to say, he was deliriously glad and he knew he ought not to be. He found it difficult to conceal the effect she had upon him. He dreaded, too, the outcome of that meeting. So, how should he answer and yet tell the truth? It was considerable of a "poser," he concluded, as he strove to collect his perturbed thoughts.

"Well, why don't you say something?" she asked.

"Lovely clay," observed Bob.

The violet eyes drilled into him slightly. Shades of Hebe! but she had a fine figure! She looked great next to Bob. Maybe she knew it. Perhaps that was why she was just a shade more friendly and gracious to him than to some of the others. They two appeared so well together. He certainly did set her off.

"Is that all you have to say?" asked Miss Gwendoline after a moment.

"Let me put those magazines in the trap for you?" said Bob, making a desperate recovery and indicating the smart rig at the curb as he spoke.

"Thanks," she answered. "Make yourself useful." And gave them to him. But there was now a slight reserve on her part. His manner had slightly puzzled her. There was a constraint, or hold-offishness about him that seemed to her rather a new symptom in him. What did it mean? Had he misinterpreted her "Will you?" The violet eyes flashed slightly, then she laughed. How ridiculous!

"There! You did it very well," she commended him mockingly.

"Thanks," said Bob awkwardly, and shifted. It would be better if she let him go. Those awful things he might say? – that she might make him say? But she showed no disposition to permit him to depart at once. She lingered. People didn't usually seek to terminate talks with her. As a rule they just stuck and stuck around and it was hard to get rid of them. Did she divine his uneasiness? Bob showed he certainly wasn't enjoying himself. The violet eyes grew more and more puzzled.

"What a brilliant conversationalist you are to-day, Mr. Bennett!" she remarked with a trace of irony in her tones.

"Yes; I don't feel very strong on the talk to-day," answered Bob truthfully.

Miss Gwendoline pondered a moment on this. She had seen young men embarrassed before – especially when she was alone with them. Sometimes her decidedly pronounced beauty had a disquieting effect on certain sensitive young souls. Bob's manner recalled the manner of one or two of those others just before they indulged, or tried to indulge, in unusual sentiments, or too close personalities. Miss Gerald's long sweeping lashes lowered ominously. Then they slowly lifted. She didn't feel to-day any inordinate endeavor or desire on Bob's part to break down the nice barriers of convention and to establish that more intimate and magnetic atmosphere of a new relationship. Well, that was the way it should be. It must be he was only stupid at the moment. That's why he acted strange and unlike himself.

Perhaps he had been up late the night before. Maybe he had a headache. His handsome face was certainly very sober. There was a silent appeal to her in that blond head, a little over half-a-head above hers. Miss Gwendoline's red lips softened. What a great, big, nice-looking boy he was, after all! She let the lights of her eyes play on him more kindly. She had always thought Bob a good sort. He was an excellent partner in tennis and when it came to horses – they had certainly had some great spurts together. She had tried to follow Bob but it had sometimes been hard. His "jumps" were

famous. What he couldn't put a horse over, no one else could. For the sake of these and a few kindred recollections, she softened.

"I suppose men sometimes do feel that way the next day," she observed with tentative sympathy. One just had to forgive Bob. She knew a lot of cleverer men who weren't half so interesting on certain occasions. Intellectual conversation isn't everything. Even that soul-to-soul talk of the higher faddists sometimes palled. "I suppose that's why you're walking."

"Why?" he repeated, puzzled.

"To dissipate that 'tired feeling,' I believe you call it?"

"But I'm not tired," said Bob.

"Headache, then?"

"No." He wasn't quite following the subtleties of her remarks.

"Then why *are* you walking?" she persisted. "And with that?" Touching his grip with the tip of her toe.

"Save hack fare," answered Bob.

She smiled.

"Man wanted a dollar and a half," he went on.

"And you objected?" Lightly.

"I did."

Again she smiled. Bob saw she, too, thought it was a joke. And he remembered how she knew of one or two occasions when he had just thrown money to the winds – shoved it out of the window, as it were – orchids, by the dozens, tips, two or three times too large, etc. Bob, with those reckless eyes, object to a dollar and a half – or a hundred and fifty, for that matter? Not he! If ever there had been a spendthrift! —

"Well, I'll lend a hand to a poor, poverty-stricken wretch," said Miss Gerald, indulgently entering into the humor of the situation.

"What do you mean?" With new misgivings.

"Put them" – indicating the grip and the sticks – "in the trap," she commanded.

Bob did. He couldn't do anything else. And then he assisted her in.

"Thanks for timely help!" he said more blithely, as he saw her slip on her gloves and begin to gather up the reins with those firm capable fingers. "And now – ?" He started as if to go.

"Oh, you can get in, too." Why shouldn't he? There was room for two. She spoke in a matter-of-fact manner.

"I – ?" Bob hesitated. A long, long drive – unbounded opportunity for chats, confidences! – and all at the beginning of his sojourn here? Dad's words – that horrid advice – burned on his brain like fire. He tried to think of some excuse for not getting in. He might say he had to stop at a drug store, or call up a man in New York on business by telephone, or – But no! he couldn't say any of those things. He was denied the blissful privilege of other men.

"Well, why don't you get in?" Miss Gerald spoke more sharply. "Don't you want to?"

The words came like a thunder-clap, though Miss Gwendoline's voice was honey sweet. Bob raised a tragic head. That monster, Truth!

"No," he said.

An instant Miss Gwendoline looked at him, the violet eyes incredulous, amused. Then a slight line appeared on her beautiful forehead and her red lips parted a little as if she were going to say something, but didn't. Instead, they closed tight, the way rosebuds shut when the night is unusually frosty. Her eyes became hard like diamonds.

"How charmingly frank!" she said. Then she drew up the reins and trailed the tip of the whip caressingly along the back of her spirited cob. It sprang forward. "Look out for the sun, Mr. Bennett," she called back as they dashed away. "It's rather hot to-day."

Bob stood and stared after her. What did she mean about the sun? Did she think he had a touch of sunstroke, or brain-fever? It was an inauspicious beginning, indeed. If he had only known what next was coming!

CHAPTER IV – A CHAT ON THE LINKS

At the top of the hill, instead of following the winding road, Bob started leisurely across the rolling green toward the big house whose roof could be discerned in the distance above the trees. The day was charming, but he was distinctly out of tune. There was a frown on his brow. Fate had gone too far. He half-clenched his fists, for he was in a fighting mood and wanted to retaliate – but how? At the edge of some bushes he came upon a lady – no less a personage than the better-half of the commodore, himself.

She was fair, fat and forty, or a little more. She was fooling with a white ball, or rather it was fooling with her, for she didn't seem to like the place where it lay. She surveyed it from this side and then from that. To the casual observer it looked just the same from whichever point you viewed it. Once or twice the lady, evidently no expert, raised her arm and then lowered it. But apparently, at last, she made up her mind. She was just about to hit the little ball, though whether to top or slice it will never be known, when Bob stepped up from behind the bushes.

“Oh, Mr. Bennett!” He had obviously startled her.

“The same,” said Bob gloomily.

“That's too bad of you,” she chided him, stepping back.

“What?”

“Why, I'd just got it all figured out in my mind how to do it.”

“Sorry,” said Bob. “I didn't know you were behind the bushes or I wouldn't have come out on you like that. But maybe you'll do even better than you were going to. Hope so! Go ahead with your drive. Don't mind me.” His tone was depressed, if not sepulchral.

But the lady, being at that sociable age, showed now a perverse disposition not to “go ahead.”

“Just get here?” she asked.

“Yes. Anything doing?”

“Not much. It's been, in fact, rather slow. Mrs. Ralston says so herself. So I am at liberty to make the same remark. Of course we've done the usual things, but somehow there seems to be something lacking,” rattled on the lady. “Maybe we need a few more convivial souls to stir things up. Perhaps we're waiting for some one, real good and lively, to appear upon the scene. Does the description chance to fit you, Mr. Bennett?” Archly.

“I think not,” said gloomy Bob.

“Well, that isn't what Mrs. Ralston says about you, anyway,” observed the commodore's spouse.

“What does she say?”

“‘When Bob Bennett's around, things begin to hum.’ So you see you have a reputation to live up to.”

“I dare say. No doubt I'll live up to it, all right.”

“It's really up to you to stir things up.”

“I've begun.” Ominously.

“Have you? How lovely!”

This didn't require an answer, for it wasn't really a question. A white ball went by them, a very pretty snoop, and pretty soon another lady and a caddy loomed on their range of vision. The lady was thin and spirituelle and she walked by with a stride. You would have said she had taken lessons of a man. She looked neither to the right nor the left. At the moment, she, at any rate, was not sociably inclined. That walk meant business. She wasn't one of those fussy beginners like the lady Bob was talking with.

“Isn't that Mrs. Clarence Van Duzen?” asked Bob.

“Yes. She, too, poor dear, has had to desert hubby. Exactions of business! Clarence simply couldn’t get away. You see he’s director of so many things. And poor, dear old Dan! So busy! Every day at the office! So pressed with business.”

“Quite so,” said Bob absently. “I mean – ” He stopped. He knew Dan wasn’t pressed for business and Bob couldn’t utter even the suspicion of an untruth now. “Didn’t exactly mean that!” he mumbled.

The lady regarded him quickly. His manner was just in the least strange. But in a moment she thought no more about it.

“You didn’t happen to see Dan?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“At his office, I suppose?” Dan had written he hadn’t even had time for his club; that it had been just work – work all the time.

“No.”

“Where, then?”

“At the club and some other places.” Reluctantly.

“Other places?” Lightly. Of course she hadn’t really believed quite all Dan had written about that office confinement. “How dreadfully ambiguous!” With a laugh. “What other places?”

Bob began to get uneasy. “Well, we went to a cabaret or two.” No especial harm about that answer.

“Of course,” said the lady. “Why not?”

Bob felt relieved. He didn’t want to make trouble. He was too miserable himself. He trusted that would end the talk and now regarded the neglected ball suggestively.

“And then you went to still some other places?” went on the lady in that same light, unoffended tone.

“Ye-es,” Bob had to admit.

“One of those roof gardens, perhaps, where they have entertainments?” she suggested brightly.

Bob acknowledged they had gone to a roof garden. And again, and more suggestively, he eyed the little white ball. But Mrs. Dan seemed to have forgotten all about it.

“Roof gardens,” she said. “I adore roof gardens. They *are* such a boon to the people. I told dear Dan to be sure not to miss them. So nice to think of him enjoying himself instead of moping away in a stuffy old office.”

Bob gazed at her suspiciously. But she had such an open face! One of those faces one can’t help trusting. Mrs. Dan was just the homely, plain old-fashioned type. At least, so she seemed. Anyhow, it didn’t much matter so far as Bob was concerned. He had to tell the truth. He hadn’t sought this conversation. It was forced on him. He was only going the “even tenor of his way.” He was, however, rather pleased that Mrs. Dan did seem in some respects different from others of her sex. Bob didn’t, of course, really know much about the sex.

“So you went to the roof garden – just you and Dan,” purred Mrs. Dan.

Bob didn’t answer. He hoped she hadn’t really put that as a question.

“Or *were* you and Dan alone?” She made it a question now.

“No-a.”

“Who else were along?”

“Dickie – ”

“And – ?”

“Clarence.”

She gazed toward Mrs. Clarence, while a shade of anxiety appeared on Bob’s face. In the distance Mrs. Clarence had paused to contemplate the result of an unusually satisfactory display of skill. Mrs. Dan next glanced sidewise at her caddy, but that young man seemed to have relapsed into a condition of innocuous vacancy. He looked capable of falling asleep standing. Certainly he wasn’t trying to overhear.

“Just you four men!” Mrs. Dan resumed her purring. “Or were you all alone? No ladies along?”

While expecting, of course, the negative direct, she was studying Bob and gleaning what she could, surreptitiously, or by inference. He had an eloquent face which might tell her something his lips refused to reveal. His answer almost took her breath away.

“Ye-es.”

He was sorry, but he had to say it. No way out of it! Mrs. Dan’s jaw fell. What she might have said can only be conjectured, for at this moment, luckily for Bob, there came an interruption.

“Tête-à-tête, instead of teeing!” broke in a jocular voice. The speaker wore ecclesiastical garments; his imposing calves were encased in episcopal gaiters. Mrs. Ralston always liked to dignify her house-parties with a religious touch, and this particular bishop was very popular with her. Bob inwardly blessed the good man for his opportune appearance. He was a ponderous wag.

“Forgive interruption,” he went on, just as if Mrs. Dan who was non-amatory had been engaged in a furious flirtation. “I’ll be hurrying on.”

“Do,” said Mrs. Dan, matching his tone, and concealing any inward exasperation that she might have felt.

“It’s I who will be hurrying on,” interposed Bob quickly. “You see, I’m expected to arrive at the house,” he laughed.

“Looked as if you were having an interesting conversation,” persisted the bishop waggishly.

“And so we were,” assented Mrs. Dan. She could have stamped with vexation, but instead, she forced a smile. The dear tiresome bishop had to be borne.

“Confess you find me *de trop*?” he went on, shaking a finger at Bob.

“On the contrary,” said Bob.

“Has to say that,” laughed the good man. He did love to poke fun (or what he conceived “fun”) at “fair, fat and forty.” “I suppose you were positively *dee-lighted* to be interrupted?”

“I was,” returned Bob truthfully.

“Ha! ha!” laughed the bishop.

Bob looked at him. The bishop thought he was joking, just as the hackman had. Of course, no one could say such a thing as that seriously and in the presence of the lady herself. People always didn’t believe truth when they heard it. They thought telling the truth a form of crude humor, and a spark of hope—a very small one – shot through Bob’s brain. Perhaps they would continue to look upon him in the light of a joker. He would be the little joker in the pack of cards and he might yet pull off that “three weeks” without pulling down the house. Only – would Miss Gerald look upon him as a joker? Intuition promptly told him she would not. His thoughts reverted to that last meeting. Think of having told her he didn’t want – His offense grew more awful unto himself every moment. He ceased to remember Mrs. Dan, and saying something, he hardly knew what, Bob walked on.

Miss Gwendoline Gerald was on the big veranda when he reached the house. He would have thanked her humbly and with immense contrition for having transferred his bag and clubs hither, but as he went by, that gracious, stately young lady seemed not to see him. It was as if he had suddenly become invisible. Her face didn’t even change; the proud contour expressed neither contempt nor disdain; the perfectly formed lips didn’t take a more pronounced curve or grow hard.

Bob felt himself shrink. He was like that man in the story book who becomes invisible at times. The fiction man, however, attained this convenient consummation through his own volition. Bob didn’t. She was the magician and he wasn’t even a joker.

He managed to reach the front door without stumbling. A wild desire to attract her attention by asking her if his luggage *had* arrived safely, he dismissed quickly. It wouldn’t do at all. It might imply a fear she had dumped it out, en route. And if she hadn’t, such an inquiry would only emphasize the fact that she had acted as expressman – or woman – and for him!

He would go to his room at once, he told the footman. He didn't mind a few moments' solitude. If so much could happen before his house-party had begun – before he even got into the house – what might he not expect later? In one of the upper halls he encountered the man with the monocle.

“I say!” said this person. “What a jolly coincidence!”

“Think so?” said Bob. He didn't find anything “jolly” about it. On another occasion, he might have noticed that the eye behind the “window-pane” was rather twinkling, but his perceptions were not particularly keen at the present time.

In the room to which he had been assigned, Bob cast off a few garments. Then he stopped with his shirt partly off. He wondered how Miss Gerald would look the next time he saw her? Like a frozen Hebe, perhaps! Bob removed the shirt and cast it viciously somewhere. Then he selected another shirt – the first that came along, for why should he exercise care to select? It matters little what an invisible man wears. *She* wouldn't see the extra stripe or the bigger dot. Stripes couldn't rescue him from insubstantiability. Colors, too, would make no difference. Pea-green, yellow, or lavender – it was all one. Any old shirt would do. And any old tie!

When he had finished dressing, he didn't find any further excuse for remaining in his room. He couldn't consult his desires as to that. He wasn't asked there to be a hermit. He couldn't imitate Timon of Athens, Diogenes or any other of those wise old fellows who did the glorious solitude act. Diogenes told the truth, mostly, but he could live in a tub. He didn't have to participate in house-parties. Whoever invented house-parties, anyhow? They were such uncomfortable “social functions” they must have been invented by the English. Why do people want to get together? Bob could sympathize with Diogenes. Also, he could envy Timon his howling wilderness! But personally he couldn't even be a Robinson Crusoe. Would there were no other company than clawless crabs and a goat and a parrot! He would not be afraid to tell *them* the truth.

He had to go down and he did. Nemesis lurked for him below. Had Bob realized what was going to happen he would have skipped back to his room. But, as it was, he assumed a bold front. He even said to himself, “Cheer up; the worst is yet to come.” It was.

CHAPTER V – TRIVIALITIES

Luncheon came and went, but nothing actually tragic happened at it. Bob didn't make more than a dozen remarks that failed to add to his popularity. He tried to be agreeable, because that was his nature. That "even-tenor-of-his-way" condition made it incumbent on him – yes, made it his sacred duty to be bright and amiable. So it was "Hence, loathed Melancholy!" and a brave endeavor to be as jocund as the poet's lines! Only those little unfortunate moments – airy preludes to larger misfortunes – had to occur, and just when he would flatter himself he was not doing so badly.

For example, when Mrs. Augustus Ossenreich Vanderpool said: "Don't you adore dogs, Mr. Bennett?"

"No. I like them." It became necessary to qualify that. "That is – not the little kind."

The lady stiffened. Her beribboned and perfumed five-thousand-dollar toy-dogs were the idolized darlings of her heart. The children might be relegated to the nursery but the canines had the run of the boudoir. They rode with her when she went out in state while the French *bonne* took the children for an airing. "And why are the 'little kind' excluded from the realm of your approbation?" observed Mrs. Vanderpool coldly.

It was quite a contract to answer that. Bob wanted to be truthful; not to say too much or too little; only just as much as he was in honor bound to say. "I think people make too much fuss over them," he answered at last. That reply seemed quite adequate and he trusted the lady would change the subject. But people had a way of not doing what he wanted them to, lately.

"What do you call 'too much fuss'?" pursued the lady persistently.

Bob explained as best he could. It was rather a thankless task and he floundered a good deal as he went about it. He wasn't going to be a bit more disagreeable than he could help, only he couldn't help being as disagreeable as he had to be. The fact that Miss Gwendoline Gerald's starry eyes were on him with cold curiosity did not improve the lucidity of his explanation. In the midst of it, she to whom he was talking, seemed somehow to detach herself from him, gradually, not pointedly, for he hardly knew just when or how she got away. She seemed just to float off and to attach herself somewhere else – to the bishop or to a certain judge Mrs. Ralston always asked to her house-parties that they might have a judicial as well as an ecclesiastical touch – and Bob's explanation died on the thin air. He let it die. He didn't have to speak truth to vacancy.

Then he tangoed, but not with Miss Gwendoline Gerald. He positively dared not approach that young lady. He didn't tango because he wanted to, but because some one set a big music-box going and he knew he was expected to tango. He did it beautifully and the young lady was charmed. She was a little dark thing, of the clinging variety, and Dickie had gone with her some. Her father owned properties that would go well with Dickie's – there'd been some talk of consolidation, but it had never come off. Papa was inclined to be stand-offish. Then Dickie began to get attentive to the little dark thing, though nothing had yet come of that either. Bob didn't own any properties but the little dark thing didn't mind that. At tangoing, he was a dream. Properties can't tango.

"You do it so well," said the little dark thing breathlessly.

"Do I?" murmured Bob, thinking of a stately young goddess, now tangoing with another fellow.

"Don't you adore it?" went on the little dark thing, nestling as close as was conventional and proper.

"I might," observed Bob. That was almost as bad as the dog question. He trusted the matter would end there.

She giggled happily. "Maybe you disapprove of modern dancing, Mr. Bennett?"

"That depends," said Bob gloomily. He meant it depended upon who was "doing the modern" with the object of your fondest affections. If you yourself were engaged in the arduous pastime with

said object, you would, naturally harbor no particular objections against said modern tendencies, but if you weren't? —

Bob tangoed more swiftly. His thoughts were so bitter he wanted to run away from them. The irony of gliding rhythmically and poetically in seeming joyous abandon of movement when his heart weighed a ton! If that heaviness of heart were communicated to his legs, they would in reality be as heavy as those of a deep-sea diver, weighted down for a ten-fathom plunge.

And in thus trying to run away from his thoughts Bob whirled the little dark thing quite madly. He couldn't dance ungracefully if he tried and the little dark thing had a soul for rhythm. It was as if he were trying to run away with her. He fairly took away her breath. She was a panting little dark thing on his broad breast now, but she didn't ask him to stop. The music-box ceased to be musical and that brought them to a stop. The eyes of the little dark thing – her name was Dolly – sparkled, and she gazed up at Bob with the respect one of her tender and impressionable years has for a masculine whirlwind.

“You quite sweep one off one's feet, Mr. Bennett,” she managed to ejaculate.

At that moment Miss Gwendoline passed, a divine bud glowing on either proud cheek. She caught the remark and looked at the maker of it. She noted the sparkle in the eyes. The little dark thing was a wonder with the men. She seemed to possess the knack – only second to Miss Gwendoline, in that line – of converting them into “trailers.” Miss Gwendoline, though, never tried to attain this result. Men became her trailers without any effort on her part, while the little dark thing had to exert herself, but it was agreeable work. She made Bob a trailer now, temporarily. Miss Gwendoline turned her head slightly, with a gleam of surprise to watch him trail. She had noticed that Bob had danced with irresistible and almost pagan abandon. That argued enjoyment.

The little dark thing would “come in” ultimately for hundreds of belching chimneys and glowing furnaces and noisy factories – quite a snug if cacophonous legacy! – and Miss Gwendoline had only that day heard rumors that Bob's governor had fallen down and hurt himself on the “street.” She, Miss Gwendoline, had not attached much importance to those rumors. People were always having little mishaps in the “street,” and then bobbing up richer than ever.

But now that rumor recurred to her more vividly in the light of Bob's trailing performance and the mad abandon of his tangoing. Of course, all men are gamblers, or fortune-hunters, or something equally reprehensible, at heart! Tendency of a cynical, selfish and money-grabbing age! Miss Gwendoline was no moralist but she had lived in a wise set, where people keep their eyes open and weigh things for just what they are. Naturally a young man whose governor has gone on the rocks (though only temporarily, perhaps), might think that belching chimneys, though somewhat splotchy on the horizon and unpicturesque to the eye, might be acceptable, in a first-aid-to-the-injured sense. But Bob as a plain, ordinary fortune-hunter? – Somehow the role did not fit him.

Besides, a fortune-hunter would not brusquely and unceremoniously have refused *her* invitation to ride in the trap. And at the recollection of that affront, Miss Gwendoline's violet eyes again gleamed, until for sparkles they out-matched those of the little dark thing. However, she held herself too high to be really resentful. It was impossible she should resent anything so incomprehensible, she told herself. That would lend dignity to the offense. Therefore she could only be mildly amused by it. This was, no doubt, a properly lofty attitude, but was it a genuine one? Was she not actually at heart, deeply resentful and dreadfully offended? Pride being one of her marked characteristics, she demanded a great deal and would not accept a little.

The sparkles died from the hard violet eyes. A more tentative expression replaced that other look as her glance now passed meditatively over the dark little thing. The latter had certainly a piquant bizarre attraction. She looked as if she could be very intense, though she was of that clinging-vine variety of young woman. She wore one of those tango gowns which was odd, outre and a bit daring. It went with her personality. At the same time her innocent expression seemed a mute, almost pathetic little appeal to you *not* to think it too daring.

As Miss Gerald studied the young lady, albeit without seeming to do so and holding her own in a sprightly tango kind of talk, another thought flashed into her mind. Bob might be genuinely and sentimentally smitten. Why not? Men frequently fell in love with the little dark thing, and afterward some of them said she had a “good deal of temperament.” Bob might be on a temperament-investigating quest. At any rate, it was all one to Miss Gerald. Life was a comedy. *N'est-ce-pas?* What was it Balzac called it? *La Comedie Humaine*.

Meanwhile, other eyes than Miss Gerald's were bent upon luckless Bob. Mrs. Dan and Mrs. Clarence looked as if they would like to have a word with him. Mrs. Dan even maneuvered in his direction at the conclusion of the dance while Bob watched her with ill-concealed apprehension. He detected, also, an uncanny interest in Mrs. Clarence's eyes as that masterful lady eyed him and Mrs. Dan from a distance. Mrs. Dan almost got him when – the saints be praised! – Mrs. Ralston, herself, tripped blithely up and annexed him. For the moment he was safe, but only for the moment.

A reckless desire to end it all surged through Bob's inmost being. If only his hostess would say something demanding an answer that would incur such disapprobation on her part, he would feel impelled, in the natural order of events, to hasten his departure. Maybe then (and he thrilled at the thought), she might even intimate in her chilliest manner that his *immediate* departure would be the logical sequence of some truthful spasm she, herself, had forced from him? He couldn't talk French to Mrs. Ralston now; he was in honor bound not to. He would have to speak right up in the King's English – or Uncle Sam's American.

Of course, such a consummation – Bob's being practically *forced* to take his departure – was extremely unpleasant and awful to contemplate, yet worse things could happen than that – a whole string of them, one right after another!

However, he had no such luck as to be ordered forthwith off the premises. He didn't offend Mrs. Ralston at all. That lady was very nice to him (or otherwise, from Bob's present view-point) and did most of the talking herself. Perhaps she considered that compliment (?) Bob had bestowed upon her at the Waldorf sufficient to excuse him for a while from further undue efforts at flattery. At any rate, she didn't seem to take it amiss that Bob didn't say a lot more of equally nice things in that Chesterfieldian manner and with such a perfect French accent.

But he “got in bad” that afternoon with divers and sundry other guests of Mrs. Ralston. Mrs. Augustus O. Vanderpool and Miss Gerald weren't the only ones who threw cold glances his way, for the faux pas he made – that he *had* to make – were something dreadful. For example, when some one asked him what he thought of Miss Schermerhorn's voice, he had to say huskily what was in his mind:

“It is rather too strident, isn't it?” No sugar-coating the truth! If he had said anything else he would have been compromising with veracity; he would not have spoken the thought born in his brain at the question. Of course, some one repeated what he said to Miss Schermerhorn, who came from one of the oldest families, was tall and angular, and cherished fond illusions, or delusions, that she was an amateur nightingale. The some one who repeated, had to repeat, because Miss Schermerhorn was her dearest friend and confidante. Then Miss Schermerhorn came right up to Bob and asked him if he had said it and he was obliged to answer that he had. What she said, or thought, need not be repeated. She left poor Bob feeling about as big as a caterpillar.

“How very tactful of Mr. Bennett!” was all Miss Gerald said, when Miss Dolly related to her the little incident.

“That's just what I adore in him!” gushed the temperamental little thing. “He doesn't seem to be afraid of saying anything to anybody. He's so delightfully frank!”

“Frank, certainly!” answered Miss Gerald icily.

“Anyhow, he's a regular tango-king!” murmured Miss Dolly dreamily.

“I'm so glad *you* approve of him, dear!” said Miss Gerald with an enigmatic smile. Perhaps she implied the temperamental little thing found herself in a class, all by herself, in this regard.

The latter flew over to Bob. If he was so “frank” and ingenuous about Miss Schermerhorn, perhaps he would be equally so with other persons. Miss Dolly asked him if he didn’t think the bishop’s sermons “just too dear?” Bob did not. “Why not?” she persisted. Bob had just been reading *The Outside of the Pot*. “Why not?” repeated Miss Dolly.

“Antediluvian!” groaned Bob, then turned a fiery red. The bishop, standing on the other side of the doorway, had overheard. Maybe Miss Dolly had known he stood there for she now giggled and fled. Bob wanted to sink through the floor, but he couldn’t.

“So, sir, you think my sermons antediluvian?” said the bishop, with a twinkle of the eye. *He* never got mad, he was the best old man that way that ever happened.

“Yes, sir,” replied Bob, by rote.

“Thank you,” said the bishop, and rubbed his nose. Then he eyed Bob curiously. “Maybe you’re right,” he said. That made Bob feel awful, but he couldn’t retract. The truth as he saw it! – He felt as if he were chained to the wheel of fate – the truth as he saw it, though the heavens fell!

“Of course, that’s only my poor insignificant opinion,” he murmured miserably.

“Every man’s opinion is entitled to respect,” said the bishop.

“Yes, sir,” replied Bob, more miserably still.

The bishop continued to study him. “You interest me, Mr. Bennett.”

“Do I?” said Bob. “I’m rather interesting to myself just now.”

“You evidently agree with the author of *The Outside of the Pot*?”

“That’s it.” Weakly.

“Well, cheer up,” said the bishop, and walked away.

Later in the day the judge might have been heard to say to the bishop that “that young Bennett cub is a good-for-nothing jackanapes” – from which it might be inferred Bob had somehow managed to rub the judge’s ermine the wrong way.

“Ha! ha!” laughed the bishop. “Did some one ask him what he thought of judges?”

But the judge did not laugh. His frown was awful.

“Or was it about the ‘recall’? Or the relation of judges and corporations?”

The judge looked stern as Jove. “Ass!” he muttered.

“Maybe he’s a progressive,” returned the bishop. “The world seems to be changing. Ought we to change with it, I wonder?”

“I don’t,” snapped the judge. “If the world to-day is producing such fatuous blockheads, give me the world as it was.”

“The trouble is,” said the bishop, again rubbing his nose, “can we get it back? Hasn’t it left us behind and are we ever going to catch up?”

“Fudge!” said the judge. He and the bishop were such old friends, he could take that liberty.

Another of the sterner sex – one of Mrs. Ralston’s guests – looked as if he, too, could have said: “Fudge!” His lips fairly curled when he regarded Bob. He specialized as a vivisectionist, and he was a great authority. Now Bob loved the “under-dog” and was naturally kind and sympathetic. He had been blessed – or cursed – with a very tender heart for such a compact, well-put-up, six foot or so compound of hard-headed masculinity. Miss Dolly – imp of mischief – again rather forced the talk. It must be wonderful to cut things up and juggle with hind legs and kidneys and brains and mix them all up with different animals, until a poor little cat didn’t know if it had a dog’s brain or its own? And was it true that sometimes the dogs me-owed, and when a cat started to purr did it wag its tail instead? This was all right from Miss Dolly, but when the conversation expanded and Bob was appealed to, it was different. “Wouldn’t *you* just love to mix up the different ‘parts’?” asked Miss Dolly, and put a rabbit’s leg on a pussy, just to watch its expression of surprise when it started to run and found itself only able to jump, or half-jump? That got honest Bob – who couldn’t have carved up a poor dumb beast, to save his life – fairly involved, and before he had staggered from that conversational morass,

he had offended Authority about two dozen times. Indeed, Authority openly turned its back on him. Authority found Bob impossible.

These are fair samples of a few of his experiences. And all the while he had an uneasy presentiment that Mrs. Dan and Mrs. Clarence were waiting to get him and have *their* innings. Now, Mrs. Dan would bestow upon him a too sweet smile between games of tennis; then Mrs. Clarence would drift casually in his direction, but something would happen that would prevent a heart-to-heart duologue, and she would as casually drift away again. These hit-and-miss tactics, however, gradually got on Bob's nerves, and in consequence, he who was usually a star and a cracker jack at the game, played abominable tennis that afternoon – thus enhancing his unpopularity with divers partners who simply couldn't understand why he had fallen off so. Indeed, about every one he came in contact with was profoundly dissatisfied or disgusted with Bob. Miss Gerald, who usually played with him, now firmly but unostentatiously, avoided him, and though Bob couldn't blame her, of course, still the fact did not tend to mitigate his melancholy.

How different in the past! – that glorious, never-to-be-forgotten past! Then he had inwardly reveled and rejoiced in her lithe movements – for with all her stateliness and proud carriage, she was like a young panther for grace. Now as luckless Bob played with some one else, a tantalizing college ditty floated through his brain: “I wonder who's kissing her now?”

Of course, no one was. She wasn't that kind. Though some one, some day, would! It was in the natural order of things bound to occur, and Bob, in fancy, saw those disdainful red lips, with some one hovering over, as he swung at a white ball and sent it – well, not where he should have.

“You are playing very badly, partner,” a reproving voice reminded him.

Bob muttered something. Confound that frivolous haunting song! He would dismiss the dire and absurd possibility. Some one else was with her, though, and that was sufficiently poignant. There were several of the fellows tremendously smitten in that quarter. Fine, husky athletic chaps, too! Some of them quite expert at wooing, no doubt, for devotees of house-parties become educated and acquire finesse. They don't have to tell the truth all the time, but on the contrary, are privileged to prevaricate in the most artistic manner. They can gaze into beautiful eyes and swear that they have “never before,” and so on. They can perform prodigies of prevarication and “get away” with them. Bob played now even worse than before.

The sun got low at last, however, and wearily he retired to his room, to change his garments for dinner. Incidentally, he surveyed himself in the mirror with haunting earnestness of gaze. Had he grown perceptibly older? He thought he could detect a few lines of care on his erstwhile unsullied brow, and with a sigh, he turned away to array himself in the customary black – or “glad rags” – which seemed now, however, but the habiliments of woe. Then he descended to receive a new shock; he found out that Mrs. Ralston had assigned Mrs. Dan to him, to take in to dinner. Drearily Bob wondered if it were mere chance that he had drawn Mrs. Dan for a dinner prize, or if Mrs. Dan herself had somehow brought about that, to her, desired consummation. As he gave Mrs. Dan his arm he saw Mrs. Clarence exchange glances with the commodore's good lady. Mrs. Ralston went in with the monocle man.

CHAPTER VI – DINNER

Mrs. Dan dallied with Bob, displaying all the artifices of an old campaigner. Of course, she had no idea how easy it might be for her to learn all she wanted to. She could not know he was like a barrel or puncheon of information and that all she had to do was to pull the plug and let information flow out. She regarded Bob more in the light of a safety vault; the bishop's interruption had put him on his guard and she would have to get through those massive outer-doors of his reserve, before she could force the many smaller doors to various boxes full of startling facts.

It was a fine tableful of people, of which they were a part. Wealth, beauty, brains and brawn were all there. An orchestra played somewhere. Being paid performers you didn't see them and as distance lends enchantment to music, on most occasions, the result was admirable. Delicate orchids everywhere charmed with their hues without exuding that too obtrusive perfume of commoner flowers. Mrs. Ralston was an orchid enthusiast and down on the Amazon she kept an orchid-hunter who, whenever he found a new variety, sent her a cable.

So Mrs. Dan started on orchids with Bob. She hadn't the slightest interest in orchids, but she displayed a simulated interest that sounded almost like real interest. Mrs. Dan hadn't practised on society, or had society practise on her, all these years for nothing. She could get that simulated-interested tone going without any effort. But Bob's attention wandered, and he gazed toward Miss Gerald who occupied a place quite a distance from him.

Mrs. Dan, failing to interest Bob on orchids, now took another tack. She sailed a conversational course on caviar. Men usually like things to eat, and to talk about them, especially such caviar as this. But Bob eyed the almost priceless Malasol as if it were composed of plain, ordinary fish-eggs. He didn't even enthuse when he took a sip of Moselle that matched the Malasol and had more "bouquet" than the flowers. So Mrs. Dan, again altering her conversational course, sailed merrily before the wind amid the breeze of general topics and gay light persiflage. She was at her best now. There wasn't anything she didn't know something about. She talked plays, operas and amusements which gradually led her up to roof gardens. She took her time, though, before laying the bowsprit of her desires straight in the real direction she wished to go. She knew she could proceed cautiously and circumspectly, that there was no need for hurry; the meal would be fairly prolonged. Mrs. Ralston's dinners were elaborate affairs; there might even be a few professional entertainment features between courses.

"And speaking about roof gardens," went on Mrs. Dan, looking any way save at Bob, "I believe you were telling me, only this afternoon, how you and dear Dan were finally driven to them as a last resort. Poor Dan! So glad to hear he could get a breath of fresh air in that stuffy old town! Just hated to think of him confined to some stuffy old office. Men work too hard in our strenuous, bustling country, don't you think so? And then they break down prematurely. I've always told Dan," she rattled on, "to enjoy himself – innocently, of course." She paused to take breath. "Don't you think men work too hard in America, Mr. Bennett?" she repeated.

"Sometimes," said Bob.

She gave him a quick look. Perhaps she was proceeding rather fast, though Bob didn't look on his guard. "As I told you, I adore roof gardens. But you were telling me you men were not alone. What harm!" she gurgled. "Some people," talking fast, "are so prudish. I'm sure we're not put in the world to be that. Don't you agree?"

"Of course," said Bob absently. He didn't like the way that fellow down on the other side of the table was gazing into Miss Gwendoline's eyes. "I beg your pardon. I – I don't think I caught that."

"We were saying there were some wom – ladies with you," said Mrs. Dan quickly. Too quickly! She strove to curb her precipitancy. "You remember? You told me?" Her voice trailed off, as if it were a matter of little interest.

“Did I?” Bob caught himself up with a jerk. He felt now as if he were a big fish being angled for, and gazed at her with sudden apprehension. The lady’s, mien however, was reassuring.

“Of course,” she laughed. “Don’t you remember?”

“I believe I did say something of the kind.” Slowly. He had had to.

“Surely you don’t deny now?” she continued playfully.

“No.” He had not spared himself. He couldn’t spare Dan. The lady’s manner seemed to say: “I don’t care a little bit.” Anyhow, the evening in question had passed innocently, if frivolously, enough. No harm would come to Dan in consequence. And again Bob’s interest floated elsewhere.

He noticed Miss Gwendoline did not seem exactly averse to letting that fellow by her side gaze into her eyes. Confound the fellow! He had one of those open honest faces. A likable chap, too! One of the Olympian-game brand! A weight-putter, or hammer-thrower, or something of the kind. Bob could have heaved considerable of a sledge himself at that moment.

“Of course, boys will be boys,” prattled Mrs. Dan at his side, just in the least stridently. “I suppose you sat down and they just happened along and sat down, too! You couldn’t very well refuse to let them, could you? That wouldn’t have been very polite?” She hardly knew what she was saying herself now. Though a conversational general, on most occasions, her inward emotion was now running apace. It was almost beating her judgment in the race. She tried to pull herself together. “Why, in Paris, doing the sights at the Jardin or the Moulin Rouge, or the Casino de Paris, every one takes it or them – these chance acquaintances – as a matter of course. *Pour passer le temps!* And why not?” With a shrug and in her sprightliest manner. “So the ladies in this instance, as you were saying, came right up, too, and – ?”

She paused. That was crude – clumsy – even though she rattled it off as if without thinking. She was losing all her finesse. But again, to her surprise, the fish took the bait. She did not know Bob’s predicament – that *he* couldn’t finesse.

“Yes, they came up,” said Bob reluctantly, though pleased that Mrs. Dan appeared such a good kind of fellow.

“Show-girls?” asked the lady quickly.

“Well – ah! – two of them were.”

“Two? And what were the others?”

Bob again regarded the lady apprehensively, but her expression was eminently reassuring. It went with the music, the bright flowers and the rest of the gay scene. Mrs. Dan’s smile was one of unadulterated enjoyment; she didn’t seem displeased at all. Must be she wasn’t displeased! Perhaps she was like some of those model French wives who aren’t averse at all to having other ladies attentive to their husbands? Mrs. Dan had lived in Paris and might have acquired with a real accent an accompanying broad-mindedness of character. That might be what made the dear old commodore act so happy most of the time, and so juvenile, too! Mrs. Dan *looked* broad-minded. She had a broad face and her figure was broad – very! At the moment she seemed fairly to radiate broad-mindedness and again Bob felt glad – on the commodore’s account. He had nothing to feel glad about, himself, with that confounded hammer-thrower —

“Who were the others, did you say?” repeated Mrs. Dan, in her most broad-minded tone.

She seemed only talking to make conversation and looked away unconcernedly as she spoke. Lucky for Dan she was broad-minded – that they had once been expatriates together! Even if she hadn’t been, however, Bob would have had to tell the truth.

“Who were the others?” he repeated absently, one eye on Miss Gerald. “Oh, they were ‘ponies.’”

“Ponies,” said the lady giving a slight start and then recovering. “I beg your pardon, but – ah – do you happen to be referring to the horse-show?”

“Not at all,” answered Bob. “The ponies I refer to,” wearily, “are not equine.” These technical explanations were tiresome. At that moment he was more concerned with the hammer-thrower, who had evidently just hurled a witticism at Miss Gerald, for both were laughing. Would that Bob could

have caught the silvery sound of her voice! Would he had been near enough! Across the table, the little dark thing threw him a few consolatory glances. He had almost forgotten about her. Miss Dolly's temperamental eyes seemed to say "Drink to me only with thine eyes," and Bob responded recklessly to the invitation. The little dark thing seemed the only one on earth who was good to him. He drank to her with his eyes – without becoming intoxicated. Then she held a glass to her lips and gazed at him over it. He held one to his and did likewise. He should have become doubly intoxicated, but he didn't. He set down his glass mournfully. Miss Gerald noticed this sentimental little byplay, but what Bob did was, of course, of no moment to her.

"Ponies, Mr. Bennett? And not equine?" Mrs. Dan with difficulty succeeded in again riveting Bob's wandering attention. "Ah, of course!" Her accents rising frivolously. "How stupid of me!" Gaily. "You mean the kind that do the dancing in the musical shows." And Mrs. Dan glanced a little furtively at her right.

But on that side the good bishop was still expounding earnestly to the lady he had brought in. He was not in the least interested in what Mrs. Dan and Bob were saying. He was too much concerned in what he was saying himself. At Bob's left sat the young lady who had been his partner at tennis in the afternoon but she, obviously, took absolutely no interest in Bob now. He had a vague recollection of having been forced to say something in her hearing, earlier in the day, that had sounded almost as bad as his tennis-playing had been. Truth, according to the philosophers, is beautiful. Only it doesn't seem to be! This young lady had turned as much of the back of a bare "cold shoulder" on Bob at the table as she could. In fact, she made it quite clear Mrs. Dan could have the young man entirely to herself. So Mrs. Dan and Bob were really as alone, for confidential conversational purposes, as if they had been secluded in some retired cozy-corner.

"Two show-girls and two ponies!" Mrs. Dan went on blithely. "That made one apiece." With a laugh. "Who got the ponies?"

"Clarence got one."

"And Dan?"

Bob nodded. He had to, it was in the contract. The lady laughed again right gaily.

"Dan always did like the turf," she breathed softly. "So fond of the track, or anything equine."

For the moment Bob became again almost suspicious of her, she was *such* a "good fellow"! And Bob wasn't revengeful; because he had suffered himself he didn't wish the commodore any harm. Of course it would be rather a ghastly joke on the commodore if Mrs. Dan wasn't such a "good fellow" as she seemed. But Bob dismissed that contingency. He was helpless, anyway. He was no more than a chip in a stream. The current of Mrs. Dan's questions carried him along.

"And what did the pony Dan got, look like?"

"I think she had reddish hair."

"How lurid! I suppose you all had a few ponies with the ponies?" Jocularly.

"Yes," said the answering-machine.

"I suppose the ponies had names? They usually do," she rattled on.

"Yes. They had names, of course."

"What was Dan's called?"

The orchestra was playing a little louder now – one of those wild pieces – a rhapsody!

"Don't know her real name."

"Her stage name, then?"

"Not sure of that!" Doubtfully.

"But Dan *must* have called her something?" With a gay little laugh.

"Yes." Bob hesitated. In spite of that funereal feeling, he couldn't suppress a grin. "He called her Gee-gee."

"Gee-gee!" almost shrieked the lady. Then she laughed harder than ever. She was certainly a good actress. At that moment she caught Mrs. Clarence Van Duzen's eye; it was coldly questioning.

“And what did the pony Clarence got, look like?” Mrs. Dan had passed the stage of analyzing or reasoning clearly. She didn’t even ask herself why Bob wasn’t more evasive. She didn’t want to know whether it was that “good-fellow” manner on her part that had really deceived him into unbosoming the truth to her, or whether – well, he had been drinking too much? He held himself soberly enough, it is true, but there are strong men who look sober and can walk a chalk line, when they aren’t sober at all. Bob might belong to that class. She thought she had detected something on his breath when he passed on the links and he might have been “hitting it up” pretty hard since, on the side, with some of the men. In “vino veritas”! But whether “vino,” or denseness on his part, she was sure of the “veritas.” Instinct told her she had heard the truth.

“And Clarence’s pony – did she have red hair, too?” She put the question in a different way, for Bob was hesitating again.

“No.”

“What was its hue?”

“Peroxide, I guess.” Gloomily.

“Is that all you remember?” Mrs. Dan now was plying questions recklessly, regardlessly, as if Bob were on the witness-stand and she were state prosecutor.

“About all. Oh! – her nose turned up and she had a freckle.”

“How interesting!” Mrs. Dan’s laugh was rather forced, and she and Mrs. Clarence again exchanged glances, but Bob didn’t notice. “And what was she called?” Breathing a little hard.

“Gid-up,” said Bob gravely.

“Gid-up’!” Again the lady almost had a paroxysm, but whether or not of mirth, who shall say. “Gee-gee and Gid-up!” Her broad bosom rose and fell.

“Telegram, sir!” At that moment Bob heard another voice at his elbow. Across the table the man with the monocle was gazing at him curiously.

CHAPTER VII – VARYING VICISSITUDES

A footman had brought the message, which Bob now took and opened mechanically. It was from the commodore.

“For heaven’s sake,” it ran, “return at once to New York Will explain.”

Bob eyed it gloomily. The commodore must have been considerably rattled when he had sent that.

“Any answer, sir?” said the footman.

Bob shook his head. What could he answer? He couldn’t run away now; the commodore ought to know that. Of all fool telegrams! —

“A business message, I suppose?” purred the lady at his side. “I trust it is nothing very important, to call you away?”

“No, I shouldn’t call it important,” said Bob. “Quite unnecessary, I should call it.”

He crumpled up the message and thrust it into his pocket. At that moment one of Mrs. Ralston’s paid performers – a high-class monologist – began to earn his fee. He was quite funny and soon had every one laughing. Bob strove to forget his troubles and laugh too. Mrs. Dan couldn’t very well talk to him now, and relieved from that lady’s pertinent prattle, he gradually let that “dull-care grip” slip from his resistless fingers. Welcoming the mocking goddess of the cap and bells, he yielded to the infectious humor and before long forgot the telegram and everything save that crop of near-new stories.

But when the dinner was finally over, he found himself, again wrapped in deep gloom, wandering alone on the broad balcony. He didn’t just know how he came to be out there all alone – whether he drifted away from people or whether they drifted away from him. Anyhow he wasn’t burdened with any one’s company. He entertained a vague recollection that several people had turned their backs on him. So if he was forced to lead a hermit’s life it wasn’t his fault. Probably old Diogenes hadn’t *wanted* to live in that tub; people had made him. They wouldn’t stand him in a house. There wasn’t room for him and any one else in the biggest house ever built. So the only place where truth could find that real, cozy, homey feeling was *alone* in a tub. And things weren’t any better to-day. Nice commentary on our boasted “advanced civilization!”

Bob felt as if he were the most-alone man in the world! Why, he was so lonesome, he wasn’t even acquainted with himself. This was only his “double” walking here. He knew now what that German poet was driving at in those *Der Doppelgänger* verses. His “double” was alone. Where was he? – the real he – the original ego? Hanged if he knew! He looked up at the moon, but it couldn’t tell him. At the same time, in spite of that new impersonal relationship he had established toward himself, he felt he ought to be immensely relieved in one respect. There would be no “cozy-cornering” for him that evening. He had the whole wide world to himself. He could be a wandering Jew as well as a *Doppelgänger*, if he wanted to.

He made out now two shadows, or figures, in the moonlight. Mrs. Dan and Mrs. Clarence were walking and talking together, but somehow he wasn’t at all curious about them. His mental faculties seemed numbed, as if his brain were way off somewhere – between the earth and the moon, perhaps. Then he heard the purring of a car, which seemed way off, too. He saw Mrs. Dan and Mrs. Clarence get into the car and heard Mrs. Dan murmur something about the village and the telegraph office, and the car slid downward. Bob watched its rear light receding this way and that, like a will-o’-the-wisp, or a lonesome firefly, until it disappeared on the winding road. A cool breeze touched him without cooling his brow. Bob threw away a cigar. What’s the use of smoking when you don’t taste the weed?

He wondered what he should do now? Go to bed, or – ? It was too early for bed. He wouldn’t go to bed at that hour, if he kept to that even-tenor-of-his-way condition. He hadn’t violated any condition, so far. Those fellows who had inveigled him into this wild and woolly moving-picture

kind of an impossible freak performance would have to concede that. There could be no ground for complaint that he wasn't living up to the letter and spirit of his agreement, even at the sacrifice of his most sacred feelings. Yes, by yonder gracious lady of the glorious moon! He wondered where *his* gracious lady was now and what she was doing? Of course, the hammer-thrower was with her.

"Are you meditating on your loneliness, Mr. Bennett?" said a well-remembered voice. The tones were even and composed. They were also distantly cold. Bob wheeled. Stars of a starry night! It was she.

She came right up and spoke to him – the pariah – the abhorred of many! His heart gave a thump and he could feel its hammering as his glowing eyes met the beautiful icy ones.

"How did you get rid of him?" he breathed hoarsely.

"Him?" said Miss Gwendoline Gerald, in a tone whose stillness should have warned Bob.

"That sledge-hammer man? That weight-putter? That Olympian village blacksmith, I mean? The fellow with the open honest face?"

"I don't believe I understand," observed the young lady, straight and proud as a wonderful princess in the moonlight. Bob gazed at her in rapture. Talk about the shoulders of that girl who had given him the cold shoulder at the dinner-table! – Miss Gwendoline's shoulders were a thousand times superior; they would cause any sculptor to rave. Their plastic beauty was that of the purest marble in that pure light. And that pure, perfect face, likewise bathed in the celestial flood of light – until now, never had he quite realized what he had lost, in losing her.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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