Lynde Francis

The Helpers

Francis Lynde

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Lynde F.

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Содержание

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TO THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE

GUILD COMPASSIONATE,

GREETING:

Forasmuch as it hath seemed good in the eyes of many to write of those things which make for the disheartening of all humankind, these things are written in the hope that the God-gift of loving-kindness, shared alike by saint and sinner, may in some poor measure be given its due.
The Author.

CHAPTER I

The curtain had gone down on the first act of the opera, and Jeffard found his hat and rose to go out. His place was the fourth from the aisle, and after an ineffectual attempt to make a passageway for him without rising, the two young women and the elderly man stood up and folded their opera chairs. Being driven to think pointedly of something else, Jeffard neglected to acknowledge the courtesy; and the two young women balanced the account by discussing him after he had passed out of hearing.

"I think he might at least have said 'Thank you,'" protested the one in the black-plumed picture-hat, preening herself after the manner of ruffled birds and disturbed womankind. "I'm in love with your mountains, and your climate, and your end-of-the-century impetus, but I can't say that I particularly admire Denver manners."

The clear-eyed young woman in the modest toque laughed joyously.

"Go on, Myra dear; don't mind me. It's so refreshing to hear an out-of-church opinion on one's self. I know our manners are perfectly primitive, but what can you expect when every train from the East brings us a new lot of people to civilize? When you are tempted to groan over our shortcomings it'll comfort you wonderfully if you will just stop long enough to remember that a good many of us are the newest of new tenderfoots!"

"Tenderfoots! What an expression!"

"It's good English, though we did use to say 'tenderfeet' before the 'Century Dictionary' set us right. And it calls the turn, as poppa would say."

She of the far-reaching plumes bent her eyebrows in severe deprecation.

"Connie, your slang is simply vicious. Will you be good enough to tell me what 'calls the turn' means?"

"Ask poppa."

Appealed to by the censorious one, the elderly man stopped twiddling the bit of gold quartz on his watch-guard long enough to explain. He did it with a little hesitancy, picking his way among the words as one might handle broken glass, or the edged tools of an unfamiliar trade. He was a plain man, and he stood in considerable awe of the picture-hat and its wearer. When he had finished, the toque made honorable amends.

"I beg your pardon, Myra. Really, I didn't know it had anything to do with gambling. But to go back to our manners: I'll give you the ponies and the phaeton if I don't convince you that the absent-minded gentleman on our left here is the tenderest of tenderfoots – most probably from Philadelphia, too," she added, in mischievous afterthought.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"You think not? Just wait and you'll see. Oh, cousin mine, you've a lot to learn about your kind, yet. If you stay out here six months or a year, you will begin to think your philosophy hasn't been half dreamful enough."

"How absurd you are, Constance. If I didn't know you to be" —

"Wait a minute; let me start you off right: good, and sensible, and modest, and unassuming, and dutiful, and brimful of fads" – she checked the attributes off on her fingers. "You see I have them all by heart."

The little cloud of dust puffing from beneath the drop-curtain began to subside, and the thumping and rumbling on the stage died away what time the musicians were clambering back to their places in the orchestra. Miss Van Vetter swept the aisles and the standing-room with her opera-glass.

"You will not have a chance to prove it, Connie. He isn't coming back."

"Don't you believe it. I am quite sure he is a gentleman who always gets the worth of his money."

"What makes you say that?"

"Oh, I don't know; intuition, I suppose. That's what they call it in a woman, though I think it would be called good judgment in a man."

Taking him at his worst, Miss Elliott's terse characterization of Henry Jeffard was not altogether inaccurate, though, in the present instance, he would not have gone back to the theatre if he had known what else to do with himself. Indeed, he was minded not to go back, but a turn in the open air made him think better of it, and he strolled in as the curtain was rising. Whereupon the elderly man and the two young women had to stand again while he edged past them to his chair.

This time he remembered, and said something about being sorry to trouble them. Miss Elliott's chair was next to his, and she smiled and nodded reassuringly. Jeffard was moody and disheartened, and the nod and the smile went near to the better part of him. He kept his seat during the next intermission, and ventured a civil commonplace about the opera. The young woman replied in kind, and the wheel thus set in motion soon rolled away from the beaten track of trivialities into a path leading straight to the fulfillment of Miss Elliott's promise to her cousin.

"Then you haven't been long in Denver," she hazarded on the strength of a remark which betrayed his unfamiliarity with Colorado.

"Only a few weeks."

"And you like it? Every one does, you know."

Jeffard tried to look decorously acquiescent and made a failure of it.

"I suppose I ought to be polite and say yes; but for once in a way, I'm going to be sincere and say no."

"You surprise me! I thought everybody, and especially new-comers, liked Denver; enthusiastically at first, and rather more than less afterward."

"Perhaps I am the exception," he suggested, willing to concede something. "I fancy it depends very much upon the point of view. To be brutally frank about it, I came here – like some few hundreds of others, I presume – to make my fortune; and I think I would better have stayed at home. I seem to have arrived a decade or two after the fact."

The young woman never swerved from her intention by a hair's-breadth.

"Yes?" she queried. "It's too true that these are not the palmy days of the 'Matchless' and the 'Little Pittsburg,' notwithstanding Creede and Cripple Creek. And yet it would seem that even now our Colorado is a fairer field for ambition and energy than" —

She paused, and Jeffard, with an unanalyzed impression that it was both very singular and very pleasant to be talking thus freely with a self-contained young woman whose serenity was apparently undisturbed by any notions of conventionality, said, "Than a city of the fifth class in New England, let us say. Yes, I concede that, if you include ambition; but when it comes to a plain question of earning a living" —

"Oh, as to that," she rejoined, quite willing to argue with him now that her point was gained, "if it is merely a question of getting enough to eat and drink I suppose that can be answered anywhere. Even the Utes managed to answer it here before the Government began feeding them."

He regarded her curiously, trying to determine her social point of view by the many little outward signs of prosperity which tasteful simplicity, unhampered by a lean purse, may exhibit.

"I wonder if you know anything at all about it," he said, half musingly.

"About getting something to eat?" Her laugh was a ripple of pure joy that had the tonic of the altitudes in it. "I dare say I don't – not in any practical way; though I do go about among our poor people. That is what makes me uncharitable. I can't help knowing why so many people have to go hungry."

Jeffard winced as if the uncharity had a personal application.

"We were speaking of fortunes," he corrected, calmly ignoring the fact that his own remark had brought up the question of the struggle for existence. "I think my own case is a fair example of

what comes of chasing ambitious phantoms. I gave up a modest certainty at home to come here, and" – The musicians were taking their places again, and he stopped abruptly.

"And now?" The words uttered themselves, and she was sorry for them when they were beyond recall.

His gesture was expressive of disgust, but there was no resentment in his reply.

"That was some time ago, as I have intimated; and I am still here and beginning to wish very heartily that I had never come. I presume you can infer the rest."

The leader lifted his baton, and the curtain rose on the third act of the opera. At the same moment the curtain of unacquaintance, drawn aside a hand's-breadth by the young woman's curiosity, fell between these two who knew not so much as each other's names, and who assumed – if either of them thought anything about it – that the wave of chance which had tossed them together would presently sweep them apart again.

After the opera the ebbing tide of humanity did so separate them; but when the man had melted into the crowd in the foyer, the young woman had a curious little thrill of regret; a twinge of remorse born of the recollection that she had made him open the book of his life to a stranger for the satisfying of a mere whim of curiosity.

Miss Van Vetter was ominously silent on the way home, but she made it a point of conscience to go to Constance's room before her cousin had gone to bed.

"Connie Elliott," she began, "you deserve to be shaken! How did you dare to talk with that young man without knowing the first syllable about him?"

Constance sat down on the edge of the bed and laughed till the tears came.

"Oh, Myra dear," she gasped, "it's worth any amount of disgrace to see you ruffle your feathers so beautifully. Don't you see that I talked to him just because I didn't know any of the syllables? And he told me a lot of them."

"I should think he did. I suppose he will call on you next."

Connie the unconventional became Miss Elliott in the smallest appreciable lapse of time. "Indeed, he will not. He knows better than to do that, even if he is a ten – "

But Miss Van Vetter was gone.

CHAPTER II

When Jeffard left the theatre he went to his room; but not directly. He made a detour of a few squares which took him down Sixteenth Street to Larimer, and so on around to his lodging, which was in the neighborhood of the St. James hotel.

After the manner of those whose goings and comings have reached the accusative point, he took the trouble to assure himself that the burning of a cigar in the open air was the excuse for the roundabout walk; but the real reason showed its head for a moment or two when he slackened his pace at one point in the circuit and glanced furtively up at a row of carefully shaded windows in the second story of a building on the opposite side of the street.

The lower part of the building was dark and deserted; but in the alley there was a small hallway screened by a pair of swing doors with glass eyes in them, and at the end of the hallway a carpeted stair leading up to the lighted room above. It was to keep from climbing this stair that Jeffard had gone to the theatre earlier in the evening.

Opposite the alley he stopped and made as if he would cross the street, but the impulse seemed to expend itself in the moment of hesitation, and he went on again, slowly, as one to whom dubiety has lent its leaden-soled shoes. Reaching his room he lighted the gas and dropped into a chair, his hands deep-buried in his pockets, and a look of something like desperation in his eyes.

The suggestive outline of his Western experience sketched between the acts of the opera for the young woman with the reassuring smile was made up of half-truths, as such confidences are wont to be. It was true that he had come to Colorado to seek his fortune, and that thus far the quest had been bootless. But it was also true that he had begun by persuading himself that he must first study his environment; and that the curriculum which he had chosen was comprehensive, exhaustive, and costly enough to speedily absorb the few thousand dollars which were to have been his lure for success.

His walk in life hitherto had been decently irreproachable, hedged in on either hand by such good habits as may be formed by the attrition of a moral community; but since these were more the attributes of time and place than of the man, and were unconsciously left behind in the leave-takings, a species of insanity, known only to those who have habitually worn the harness of self-restraint, had come upon him in the new environment. At first it had been but a vagrant impulse, and as such he had suffered it to put a bandage on the eyes of reason. Later, when he would fain have removed the bandage, he found it tied in a hard knot.

For the hundredth time within a month he was once more tugging at the knot. To give himself the benefit of an object-lesson, he turned his pockets inside out, throwing together a small heap of loose silver and crumpled bank-notes on the table. After which he made a deliberate accounting, smoothing the creases out of the bills, and building an accurate little pillar with the coins. The exact sum ascertained, he sat back and regarded the money reflectively.

"Ninety-five dollars and forty-five cents. That's what there is left out of the nest-egg; and I've been here rather less than four months. At that rate I've averaged, let me see" – he knitted his brows and made an approximate calculation – "say, fifty dollars a day. Consequently, the mill will run out of grist in less than two days, or it would if the law of averages held good – which it doesn't, in this case. Taking the last fortnight as a basis, I'm capitalized for just about one hour longer."

He looked at his watch and got up wearily. "It's Kismet," he mused. "I might as well take my hour now, and be done with it." Whereupon he rolled the money into a compact little bundle, turned off the gas, and felt his way down the dark stair to the street.

At the corner he ran against a stalwart young fellow, gloved and overcoated, and carrying a valise.

"Why, hello, Jeffard, old man," said the traveler heartily, stopping to shake hands. "Doing time on the street at midnight, as usual, aren't you? When do you ever catch up on your sleep?"

Jeffard's laugh was perfunctory. "I don't have much to do but eat and sleep," he replied. "Have you been somewhere?"

"Yes; just got down from the mine – train was late. Same old story with you, I suppose? Haven't found the barrel of money rolling up hill yet?"

Jeffard shook his head.

"Jeff, you're an ass – that's what you are; a humpbacked burro of the Saguache, at that! You come out here in the morning of a bad year with a piece of sheepskin in your grip, and the Lord knows what little pickings of civil engineering in your head, and camp down in Denver expecting your lucky day to come along and slap you in the face. Why don't you come up on the range and take hold with your hands?"

"Perhaps I'll have to before I get through," Jeffard admitted; and then: "Don't abuse me to-night, Bartrow. I've about all I can carry."

The stalwart one put his free arm about his friend and swung him around to the light.

"And that isn't the worst of it," he went on, ignoring Jeffard's protest. "You've been monkeying with the fire and getting your fingers burned; and, as a matter of course, making ducks and drakes of your little stake. Drop it all, Jeffard, and come across to the St. James and smoke a cigar with me."

"I can't to-night, Bartrow. I'm in a blue funk, and I've got to walk it off."

"Blue nothing! You'll walk about two blocks, more or less, and then you'll pull up a chair and proceed to burn your fingers some more. Oh, I know the symptoms like a book."

Jeffard summoned his dignity, and found some few shreds and patches of it left. "Bartrow, there is such a thing as overdrawing one's account with a friend," he returned stiffly. "I don't want to quarrel with you. Good-night."

Three minutes later the goggle-eyed swing doors opened and engulfed him. At the top of the carpeted stair he met a hard-faced man who was doubling a thick sheaf of bank-notes into portable shape. The outgoer nodded, and tapped the roll significantly. "Go in and break 'em," he rasped. "The bank's out o' luck to-night, and it's our rake-off. I win all I can stand."

Jeffard pushed through another swing door and went to the faro-table. Counting his money he dropped the odd change back into his pocket and handed the bills to the banker.

"Ninety-five?" queried the man; and when Jeffard nodded, he pushed the requisite number of blue, red, and white counters across the table. Jeffard arranged them in a symmetrical row in front of him, and began to play with the singleness of purpose which is the characteristic of that particular form of dementia.

It was the old story with the usual variations. He lost, won, and then lost again until he could reckon his counters by units. After which the tide turned once more, and the roar of its flood dinned in his ears like the drumming of a tornado in a forest. His capital grew by leaps and bounds, doubling, trebling, and finally quadrupling the sum he had handed the banker. Then his hands began to shake, and the man on his right paused in his own play long enough to say, "Now's yer time to cash in, pardner. Yer nerve's a-flickerin'."

The prudent advice fell upon deaf ears. Jeffard's soul was Berserk in the fierce battle with chance, and he began placing the counters upon certain of the inlaid cards before him, stopping only when he had staked his last dollar. Five minutes afterward he was standing on the sidewalk again, drawing in deep breaths of the keen morning air, and wondering if it were only the possession of the thing called money that kept one's head from buzzing ordinarily. In the midst of the unspoken query the shuffling figure of a night tramp sidled up to him, and he heard imperfectly the stereotyped appeal.

"Hungry, you say? Perhaps I'll be that, myself, before long. Here you are."

The odd change jingled into the outstretched palm of the vagrant, and for the first time in a fairly industrious life Jeffard knew what it felt like to be quite without money.

"That is, I think I do, but I don't," he mused, walking slowly in the direction of his room. "It isn't breakfast-time yet; and by the same token, it isn't going to be for a good while. I believe I can sleep the clock around, now that I've reached the bottom."

CHAPTER III

When one has sown the wind, and the whirlwind harvest is begun, it is easy to imagine that the first few strokes of the sickle have gathered in all the bitterness there is in the crop. Some such illusory assumption lent itself to Jeffard's mood when he assured himself that he had finally reached the bottom; but the light of a new day, and a habit of early rising which was not to be broken at such short notice, brought a clearer perspective.

In lieu of breakfast he walked up one street and down another, carefully avoiding the vicinity of the St. James for fear Bartrow might offer him hospitality, and dodging the haunts of his few acquaintances in the downtown thoroughfares for the same reason. This drove him to the residence district; and out in Colfax Avenue he met the elderly man whom he had taken to be the father of the young woman with the kindly nod and smile.

Seeing him in daylight, Jeffard recognized a familiar figure of the Mining Exchange and the brokers' offices, and thought it not unlikely that he might presently stumble upon the home of the young woman. He found it a square or two farther out, identifying it by a glimpse of the young woman herself, who was on the veranda, looping up the tendrils of a climbing rose.

At sight of her Jeffard forgot his penalties for the moment, and the early morning sunshine seemed to take on a kindlier glow. She was standing on the arm of a clumsy veranda-chair, trying vainly to reach the higher branches of the rose, and Jeffard remarked that she was small almost to girlishness. But the suggestion of immaturity paused with her stature. The rounded arms discovered by the loose sleeves of her belted house-gown; the firm, full outline of her figure; the crowning glory of red-brown hair with the heart of the sunlight in it; the self-contained poise on the arm of the great chair; these were all womanly, and the glimpse stirred the waters of a neglected pool in Jeffard's past as he went on his aimless way along the avenue.

There was a closely written leaf in the book of memory which he had sought to tear out and destroy; but the sight of the graceful figure poised on the arm of the big chair opened the record at the forbidden page, and the imagined personality of the sweet-faced young woman with the red-brown hair and sympathetic eyes set itself antithetically over against the self-seeking ambition of the girl who had written her own epitaph in the book of his remembrance. He gave place to the sharply defined contrast for a time, indulging it as one who plunges not unwillingly into the past for the sake of escaping the present, and banishing it only when his shortening shadow gave token that the chance of a breakfast invitation was no longer to be apprehended.

But when he turned his face cityward it was with a conscious avoidance of the route which would lead him past the house with a climbing rose on one of its veranda pillars. For what had a man to whom the proletary's highway was already opening up its cheerless vista to do with love, and dalliance, and heaven-suggestive pictures of domestic beatitude?

Once more in Sixteenth Street, the moneyless reality thrust itself upon him with renewed insistence, and he turned a corner abruptly to escape an acquaintance who was crossing the street. The shame of it was too new to strike hands with dissimulation as yet, and companionship was least of all things to be desired. If he could but win back to his room unaccosted and lock himself in until the sharpness of hunger should have exorcised the devil of humiliation, he might hope to be able to face an accusing world with such equanimity as may be born of desperation.

But fate willed otherwise. As he was passing a deep-set doorway giving on the sidewalk, a friendly arm shot out and barred the way. Jeffard looked up with an unspoken malediction on his tongue. It was Bartrow. In his haste to gain his lodging the shamed one had forgotten the proximity of the St. James hotel.

"You're a chump!" declared the broad-shouldered young miner, backing Jeffard against the wall and pinning him fast with one finger. "You're no man's man, and you're not fit to live in a man's town. Why didn't you come around to breakfast this morning, like decent people?"

"I'm not boarding at the St. James now." Jeffard tried to say it naturally, but the evasion was palpable enough.

"What of that? Couldn't you afford to be sociable once in a way?"

Jeffard prevaricated, and since he was but a clumsy liar, contrived to fall into a snare of his own setting.

"I was up too early for you, I guess. When I came by, the clerk told me you weren't down yet."

Bartrow shook his head and appeared to be much moved.

"What an abnormal liar that clerk must be," he commented reflectively. "I asked him five minutes ago if any one had inquired for me, and he said no."

Jeffard hung his head and would have tried to break away; but Bartrow locked arms with him and dragged him whither he would.

"I'll forgive you this time," he went on, laughing at Jeffard's discomfiture. "I suppose you had your reasons for dodging, and while it's ten to one they were no good, that leaves one chance in your favor. Have a smoke?"

Now Jeffard's poverty-pride was fire-new as yet, and though the smell of Bartrow's cigar made him faint with desire, he refused the gift.

"Haven't quit, have you?" Bartrow demanded.

"No – yes; that is, I have for the present. I'm not feeling very well this morning."

"You look it; every inch of it. Let's go around and see what the money people are doing. Maybe that'll chirk you up a bit."

Jeffard yielded, partly because Bartrow's impetus was always of the irresistible sort, and partly because he could think of no plausible objection on the spur of the moment. Bartrow talked cheerily all the way around to the Mining Exchange, telling of his claims and prospects in Chaffee County, and warming to his subject as only a seasoned Coloradoan can when the talk is of "mineral" and mining. Jeffard, being hungry, and sick with a fierce longing for tobacco, said little, and was duly thankful that Bartrow required no more than a word now and then to keep him going. None the less he watched narrowly for a chance to escape, and was visibly depressed when none offered.

In the crowded Exchange the poverty-pride began to lose the fine keenness of its edge. The atmosphere of the room was pungent with cigar smoke, and the tobacco craving rose up in its might and smote down Jeffard's self-respect.

"If you'll excuse me a minute, Dick, I believe I'll go out and get a cigar as a measure of self-defense," he said; and Bartrow supplied his need, as a matter of course. It was a shameful subterfuge, and he loathed himself for having descended to it. Nevertheless, he took the cigar which Bartrow made haste to offer, and lighted it. The first few whiffs made him dizzy, but afterward he was better company for the enthusiast.

While they were talking, the elderly man with the bit of quartz on his watch-chain came in, and Jeffard inquired if Bartrow knew him.

"Know Steve Elliott? I should say I do. Everybody knows him, barring now and then a tenderfoot like yourself. Besides being one of the most lovable old infants on top of earth, he's one of Denver's picturesques. That old man has had more ups and downs than any three men in Colorado; and that's saying a good deal."

"In what way?"

"Oh, every way. He's a Fifty-niner, to begin with; came across the plains in a bull-train to hunt for mineral. He found it – Steve would find it if anybody could – but some sharp rascal euchred him out of it, and he's been finding it and losing it at regular intervals ever since."

Jeffard blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling, and took in the outward presentment of the pioneer in an appraisive eye-sweep. "This is one of the finding intervals, I take it."

"Sure. He's on top just now, – rather more so than usual, I believe, – but the 'pioneer's luck' will catch him again some day, and just as likely as not he'll be hustling around for a grub-stake."

"Man of family?" queried Jeffard.

"Yes, if a daughter's a family. His wife died in one of the lean years a long time ago. But say, Jeffard, you ought to know the daughter. She's as pretty as a peach, and as bright as a new nickel. She's had her share of the ups and downs, and they've made a queer little medley of her. Trap and tandem and a big house on Capitol Hill one month, and as like as not two rooms in a block and a ride in the street-cars the next. That's about the way Connie Elliott's had it all her life, and it's made her as wide awake as a frosty morning, and as good as a Sister of Charity."

"I can believe all that," Jeffard admitted, meaning more than he said.

"Yes, you're safe in believing all the good things you hear about Steve Elliott and his daughter. They're good people. By the way, why can't you come up to the house with me some evening and get acquainted? They've a Philadelphia cousin staying with them now, and you might compare notes on the 'wild and woolly' with her."

Jeffard had a string of excuses ready, ending with, "Besides, there are particular reasons why I don't wish to meet Miss Elliott just now – reasons that I can't explain."

"Reasons be hanged! Just you stand still a minute while I go get the old man and introduce you. You'll like him a whole lot."

Bartrow did his part, but by the time he had pulled Elliott out of the throng in front of the quotation board, Jeffard was two squares away, headed once more for the suburbs. This time he crossed the river and tramped for hours in the Highlands. He told himself he was killing time and keeping out of the way of the luncheon hour; but in reality he was fighting a desperate battle with pride, or self-respect, or whatever it is that makes a man who is not a born vagrant shrink from that species of cannibalism which begins with the eating of one's personal possessions.

It was an unequal fight at best, since hunger was the besieger, but Jeffard made shift to prolong it until the long day of fasting was drawing to its close. He yielded at last, as needs must when famine drives, but the capitulation was upon conditions, and his heart was soft with repentant kneadings. Since one must eat to live, the pride-quenching thing must come to pass; but the doing of it should be the pivot upon which he would turn back to sanity and industrious thrift. The loss of his small patrimony and the hard-earned savings by which it had been fairly doubled was shrewd upon him, but he told himself that the consequences of his folly must be set over against the experience; that he must be content to begin again at the bottom, as his father had before him, thankful for the youth and strength which made such a beginning possible.

From the preliminary survey of penitence to plotting out the map of good intentions is an easy stage, and Jeffard beguiled the long tramp townward by building air-castles spacious and many-storied, with the new resolutions for their foundations. But when the sidewalks of the streets were once more under his feet, the pride-quenching necessity urged itself afresh, plying the lash of shame until he was driven to tramp yet other squares before he could attain to the plunging point.

He was passing the Albany when the climax was reached, and he turned aside to get a light for the carefully economized stump of Bartrow's cigar before setting out to find a pawnshop where his pride might suffer least. At the cigar counter in the rotunda a giant in rough tweeds, with an unshorn beard and the fine bronze of the grazing plains on face and hands, was filling his case with high-priced Cubans from an open box. At sight of Jeffard he dropped the cigar-case and roared out a mighty welcome.

"Well, I'll be – ! Jeffard, my boy, where under the canopy did you drop from? If I haven't had a search-warrant out for you all day, I'm a liar and the truth has shook me. Been to dinner? – but

of course you haven't; or if you have, you are going to eat another with me right now. How've you been? and where in Tophet have you been hiding out?"

Jeffard smiled. "That's the place – in Tophet and elsewhere; but I haven't been out of town since you were here last."

"The devil you haven't! Then what did that muley maverick at the hotel mean when he said you were gone?"

"Gone from the hotel, I guess he meant. I've been 'eating around,' as we used to say back in the Berkshire Hills."

"Have, eh? Well, you're going to 'eat around' with me to-night, savez? I was just going to swear a few lines and go up and eat by myself. Come on; let's get a move. I've got a train-load of steers on the iron, and I'm due to chase 'em at eight-thirty. But before I forget it, here" – the big man found a compact little wad of bank-notes in his vest pocket and thrust it into Jeffard's hand. "I counted that out the next morning and meant to give it back to you, but the thing got away from me slick and clean."

"Give it back to me?" queried Jeffard, with a sudden swelling of the throat that made his voice husky and tremulous, "what is it?"

"Why, it's the hundred I borrowed of you the last time we took in the menagerie together. What's the matter with you? Don't tell me you don't remember it, or I shall go kick myself around the block for an over-honest idiot!"

Jeffard did not remember it; could but dimly recall the circumstances now that he was reminded of them. The lending had been in a moment of supreme excitement in the midst of a feverish attack of the dementia; the loan was in celluloid counters, in fact, and not in legal tender at all. And having been made, it was swiftly lost sight of in the varying fortunes of the sitting. None the less, the return of it at the precise moment when it was most needed drove the thankfulness to his eyes, and the lights of the great rotunda swam in a misty haze when he thought of the humiliating thing from which the small Providence had saved him.

"Pettigrew," he said, when he could trust himself to speak, "you're an honest man, and that's the worst that can be said of you. I had forgotten it long ago. Take me in and fill me up. I've been tramping all day, and it runs in my mind that I've skipped a meal or two."

CHAPTER IV

The dancing party at the Calmaines' was a crush, as Mrs. Calmaine's social enlargements were wont to be. For an hour or more the avenue had been a-rumble with carriages coming and going, and a trickling stream of bidden ones flowed steadily inward under the electric-lighted awning, which extended the welcome of the hospitable house to the very curb.

Thanks to Myra Van Vetter, whose tiring was always of the most leisurely, the Elliotts were fashionably late; and the elderly man, with the hesitant air accentuated by the unwonted dress-coat, had much ado to win through the throng in the drawing-rooms with his charges. His greeting to the hostess was sincere rather than well-turned in its phrasing; but Mrs. Calmaine was sweetly gracious.

"*So* glad to see you, Stephen," she protested; "the old friends can never be spared, you know." She shook hands with unaffected cordiality, and her tactful use of the elderly man's Christian name went far toward effacing the afflictive dress-coat. "Miss Van Vetter, you are quite radiant to-night. You spoil all one's ideals of Quaker demureness."

"Oh, Myra's demure enough, only you have to be her country cousin to find it out," put in Connie maliciously; and when her father and Miss Van Vetter had made room for later comers, she waited for another word with the hostess.

"Just a hint, before I'm submerged," she began, when her opportunity came. "I'm unattached, and particularly good-natured and docile to-night. Make use of me just as you would of Delia or Bessie. You've everybody here, as usual, and if I can help you amuse people" —

"Thank you, Connie, dear; that is very sweet of you. There are people here to-night who seem not to belong to any one. Here comes one of them now."

Constance looked and saw a young man making his way toward them; a soldierly figure, with square shoulders and the easy bearing of one who has lived much in the open; but with a face which was rather thoughtful than strong, though its lines were well masked under a close-trimmed beard and virile mustaches. She recognized her unintroduced acquaintance of the theatre; and a minute or two afterward, when Mrs. Calmaine would have presented the new-comer, Miss Elliott had disappeared.

"Let's sit down here, Teddy; this is as good a place as any. You poor boy! it bores you dreadfully, doesn't it? How trying it must be to be *blasé* at – shall I say twenty? or is it twenty-one?"

The dancing was two hours old, and Connie and the smooth-faced boy who stood for the hopes of the house of Calmaine were sitting out the intermission on a broad step of the main stair.

"Oh, I'm young, but I'll outgrow that," rejoined the youth tolerantly. "All the same, you needn't bully me because you've a month or two the advantage. Shall I go and get you something to eat, or drink?"

"No, thank you, Teddy; I'm neither hungry nor thirsty. But you might give me the recipe for being good-natured when people make game of you."

"Yes; I think I see myself giving you points on that," said the boy, with frank admiration in his eyes. "I'm not running an angel-school just at present."

Connie's blush was reproachful. "You ridiculous boy!" she retorted. "You'll be making love to me next, just the same as if we hadn't known each other all our lives. Do you talk that way to other girls? or are you only practicing on me so that you can?"

Teddy Calmaine shook his head. "There isn't anybody else," he asserted, with mock earnestness. "My celestial acquaintance is too limited. When the goddess goes, there are no half-goddesses to take her place."

Connie sniffed sympathetically, and then laughed at him. "You ought to have seen me yesterday, when poppa brought old Jack Hawley home with him. Poppa and Jack were partners in the 'Vesta,' and Mr. Hawley hadn't seen me since I was in pinafores. He called me 'little girl,' and wanted to know if I went to school, and how I was getting along!"

Young Calmaine made a dumb show of applause. "*O umbræ Pygmæorum!* Why wasn't I there to see! But you mustn't be too hard on old Jack. Half the people here who don't know you think you're an escaped schoolgirl; I've heard 'em. That's why I took pity on you and" —

"Teddy Calmaine, go away and find me somebody to talk to; a grown man, if you please. You make me tired."

The boy got up with a quizzical grin on his smooth face. "I'll do it," he assented affably; "I'm no end good-natured, as you remarked a few minutes ago."

When he was gone Connie forgot him, and fell into a muse, with the sights and sounds of the crush for its motive. From her perch on the stair she could look down on the shifting scene in the wide entrance hall, and through the archway beyond she had a glimpse of the circling figures in the ball-room swaying rhythmically to the music. It was all very delightful and joyous, and she enjoyed it with a zest which was yet undulled by satiety. None the less, the lavishness of it oppressed her, and a vague protest, born of other sights and scenes sharply contrasted but no less familiar to the daughter of Stephen Elliott, began to shape itself in her heart. How much suffering a bare tithe of the wealth blazing here in jewels on fair hands and arms and necks would alleviate. And how many hungry mouths might be filled from the groaning tables in the supper-room.

Miss Elliott came out of her reverie reluctantly at the bidding of her late companion. Teddy Calmaine had obeyed her literally; and when she turned he was presenting the soldierly young man with the pointed beard and curling mustaches.

"Miss Elliott, this is Mr. Jeffard. You said you wanted a" —

"An ice, Teddy," she cut in, with a look which was meant to be obliterative. "But you needn't mind it now. Will you have half a stair-step, Mr. Jeffard?"

She made room for him, but he was mindful of his obligations.

"Not if you will give me this waltz."

She glanced at her card and looked up at him with a smile which was half pleading and half quizzical. "Must I?"

He laughed and sat down beside her. "There is no 'must' about it. I was hoping you would refuse."

"Oh, thank you."

"For your sake rather than my own," he hastened to add. "I am a wretched dancer."

"What a damaging admission!"

"Is it? Do you know, I had hoped you wouldn't take that view of it."

"I don't," she admitted, quite frankly. "We take it seriously, as we do most of our amusements, but it's a relic of barbarism. Once, when I was a very little girl, my father took me to see a Ute scalp-dance, – without the scalps, of course, – and – well, first impressions are apt to be lasting. I never see a ball-room in action without thinking of Fire-in-the-Snow and his capering braves."

Jeffard smiled at the conceit, but he spoke to the truism.

"I hope your first impressions of me won't be lasting," he ventured. "I think I was more than usually churlish last night."

She glanced up quickly. "There should be no 'last night' for us," she averred.

"Forgive me; you are quite right. But no matter what happens there always will be."

Her gaze lost itself among the circling figures beyond the archway, and the truth of the assertion drove itself home with a twinge of something like regret. But when she turned to him again there was unashamed frankness in the clear gray eyes.

"What poor minions the conventions have made us," she said. "Let us be primitive and admit that our acquaintance began last night. Does that help you?"

"It will help me very much, if you will let me try to efface the first impression."

"Does it need effacing?"

"I think it must. I was moody and half desperate."

He stopped, and she knew that he was waiting for some sign of encouragement. She looked away again, meaning not to give it. It is one of the little martyrdoms of sympathetic souls to invite confidences and thereby to suffer vicariously for the misdoings of the erring majority, and her burdens in this wise were many and heavy. Why should she go out of her way to add to them those of this man who ought to be abundantly able to carry his own? Thus the unspoken question, and the answer came close upon the heels of it. But for her own curiosity, – impertinence, she had begun to call it, – the occasion would never have arisen.

"I am listening," she said, giving him his sign.

Being permitted to speak freely, Jeffard found himself suddenly tongue-tied. "I don't know what I ought to say, – if, indeed, I ought to say anything at all," he began. "I think I gave you to understand that the world had been using me rather hardly."

"And if you did?"

A palpitant couple, free of the waltz, came up the stair, and Jeffard rose to make way. When the breathless ones perched themselves on the landing above, he went on, standing on the step below her and leaning against the baluster.

"If I did, it was an implied untruth. It's a trite saying that the world is what we make it, and I am quite sure now that I have been making my part of it since I came to Denver. I'm not going to afflict you with the formula, but I shall feel better for having told you that I have torn it up and thrown it away."

"And you will write out another?"

"Beginning with to-morrow. I leave Denver in the morning."

"You are not going back?" She said it with a little tang of deprecation in the words.

His heart warmed to the small flash of friendly interest, and he smiled and shook his head. "No, that would never do – without the fortune, you know. I'm going to the mountains; with pick and shovel, if need be. I should have started to-night if I hadn't found Mrs. Calmaine's invitation. She has been very good to me in a social way, and I could do no less than come." He said it apologetically, as if the dip into the social pool on the eve of the new setting forth demanded an explanation.

She smiled up at him. "Does it need an apology? Are you sorry you came?"

"Sorry? It's the one wise thing I've done these four months. I shall always be glad – and thankful." It was on his tongue to say more; to dig the pit of confession still deeper, as one who, finding himself at the shrine of compassionate purity, would be assoilzied for all the wrong-doings and follies and stumblings of a misguided past; to say many things for which he had no shadow of warrant, and to which the self-contained young woman on the step before him could make no possible rejoinder; but the upcoming of the man whose name stood next on Connie's card saved him. A moment later he was taking his leave.

"Not going to break away now, are you, Jeffard?" said the fortunate one, helping Connie to rise.

"Yes; I must cut it short. I leave town in the morning. Miss Elliott, will you bid me Godspeed?"

She put her hand in his and said what was meet; and to the man who stood beside her the parting appeared to be neither more nor less than conventionally formal. But when Jeffard was free of the house and swinging along on his way cityward, the spirit of it made itself a name to live; and out of the God-speed and the kindly phrase of leavetaking the new-blown fire of good intention distilled a subtle liqueur of jubilance which sang in his veins like the true wine of rejuvenescence; so nearly may the alchemy of pure womanhood transmute sounding brass, or still baser metal, into the semblance of virgin gold.

So Jeffard went his way reflective, and while he mused the fire burned and he saw himself in his recent stumblings in the valley of dry bones as a thing apart. From the saner point of view it seemed incredible that he could ever have been the thrall of such an ignoble passion as that which had so lately despoiled him and sent him to tramp the streets like a hungry vagrant. As yet the lesson was but a few hours old, but the barrier it had thrown up between the insensate yesterday and the rational

to-day seemed safely impassable. In the strength of reinstated reason, confidence returned; and close upon the heels of confidence, temerity. His reverie had led him past the corner where he should have turned westward, and when he took cognizance of his surroundings he was standing opposite the alley-way of the glass-eyed doors. He glanced at his watch. It was midnight. Twenty-four hours before, almost to the minute, he had been dragged irresistibly across the street and up the carpeted stair to the lair of the dementia-demon.

He looked up at the carefully shaded windows, and a sudden desire to prove himself came upon him. Not once since the first hot flashes of the fever had begun to quicken his pulse, had he been able to go and look on and return scathless. But was he not sane now? and was not the barrier well builded? If it were not – if it stood only upon the lack of opportunity —

He crossed the street and threaded the narrow alley, tramping steadily as one who goes into battle, – a battle which may be postponed, but which may by no means be evaded. The swing doors gave back under his hand, and a minute later he stood beside the table with the inlaid cards in its centre, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, and his breath coming in sharp little gasps.

It was a perilous moment for any son of Adam who has been once bitten by the dog of avarice gone mad. The run of luck was against the bank, and the piles of counters under the hands of the haggard ones girdling the table grew and multiplied with every turn of the cards. Jeffard's lips began to twitch, and the pupils of his eyes narrowed to two scintillant points. Slowly, and by almost imperceptible advances, his right hand crept from its covert, the fingers tightly clenched upon the small roll of bank-notes, – the Providential windfall which must provision any future argosy of endeavor.

The dealer ran the cards with monotonous precision, his hands moving like the pieces of a nicely adjusted mechanism. Jeffard's fingers unclosed and he stood staring down at the money in his palm as if the sight of it fascinated him. Then he turned quickly and tossed it across to the banker. "Reds and whites," he said; and the sound of his own voice jarred upon his nerves like the rasping of files in a saw-pit.

Two hours later, he was again standing on the narrow footway in the alley, with the swing doors winging to rest behind him. Two hours of frenzied excitement in the dubious battle with chance, and the day of penitence and its hopeful promise for the future were as if they had not been. Halfway across the street he turned and flung his clenched fist up at the shaded windows, but his tongue clave to his teeth and the curse turned to a groan with a sob at the end of it. And as he went his way, sodden with weariness, the words of a long-forgotten allegory were ringing knell-like in his ears: —

"When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh in dry places seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty and swept and garnished. Then goeth he and taketh with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first."

CHAPTER V

It was on the day following the dancing party at the Calmaines' that Constance Elliott arrayed herself in a modest street dress, and ran down to the library where Miss Van Vetter was writing letters.

"You'd better change your mind, Myra, and come along with me. It'll do you good to see how the other half lives," she said coaxingly.

Miss Van Vetter calmly finished her sentence before she replied.

"Thank you, Connie; but I believe not. I know it is the proper fad nowadays to go slumming, but I can't do it; it's a matter of principle with me."

Connie's eyebrows arched in mild surprise. "That's a new one," she commented. "I've heard all kinds of excuses, but never that. How do you diagram it?"

"It is simple enough. One sees plenty of misery in the ordinary course of things without making a specialty of looking for it; and when you've done everything that your money and sympathy can do, it is only a single drop in the great ocean of human wretchedness, after all. More than that, you have added to the sum total of the world's suffering by just so much as the miseries of the others hurt you through your compassion."

"Myra, dear, if I didn't know that you are better than your theories, I should try to humble you. What will you do if the evil day ever comes to you?"

"Unload my woes upon some such angelic and charitable sister of mercy as you are, I suppose," rejoined Miss Van Vetter complacently. "But that doesn't make it necessary for me to go about and shed literal tears with those who weep, now. I prefer to do it by proxy." She took a gold piece from her purse and offered it to Constance. "Take this, and make some poor wretch comfortable for ten or fifteen minutes on my account."

Miss Elliott was not yet canonized, and she refused the contribution with an indignant little stamp of her foot. "Myra Van Vetter, you're worse than a heathen! I wouldn't touch your money with the tip of my finger; I'd be afraid it would burn me. I hope you'll learn for yourself some day what the cold shoulder of charity is – there!" And she swept out of the room with as much dignity as five-feet-one-and-a-half may compass upon extraordinary occasions.

Once on the other side of the library door, she laughed softly to herself and was instantly Connie the serene again.

"It does me a whole lot of good to boil over once in a while," she said, going out on the veranda. "Myra serves one beneficent end in the cosmogony in spite of herself: she's a perfect safety-valve for me. Tommie-e-e-e! O Tom! Are you out there?"

A ragged boy, sitting on the curb and shaking dice with a pair of pebbles, sprang up and ran to the gate. When the latch baffled him, as it usually did from the outside, he vaulted the fence and stood before her.

"Prompt as usual, aren't you, Tommie?"

"Ain't got nothin' else to do but to be promp'. Is it a baskit, dis time, 'r wot?"

"It's a basket, and you'll find it in the kitchen."

Five minutes later the dwellers in the avenue might have seen a small procession headed townwards. Its component parts were a dainty little lady, walking very straight with her hands in the pockets of her jacket, and a ragged urchin bent sidewise against the weight of a capacious basket.

The street-car line was convenient, but Constance walked in deference to Tommie's convictions, – he objected to the car on the score of economy. "Wot's the use o' givin' a bloated corp'ration a nickel w'en a feller can mog along on his feets?" he had demanded, one day; and thereafter they walked.

What profits it to set down in measured phrase at what numbers in what streets the basket cover was lifted that afternoon? Doubtless, in that great day when the books shall be opened, it will be

found that a faithful record has been kept, not only of the tumbler of jelly left with bedridden Mother M'Garrihan, the bottle of wine put into the hands of gaunt Tom Devins, who was slowly dying of lead-poisoning, and the more substantial viands spread out before the hungry children in drunken Owen David's shanty, but of all the other deeds of mercy that left a trail of thankful benisons in the wake of the small procession. Be it sufficient to say that the round was a long one, and that Constance spared neither herself nor her father's bank-account where she found misery with uplifted hands.

The basket had grown appreciably lighter, and Tommie's body was once more approaching the perpendicular, when the procession paused before an unswept stairway leading to the second story of a building fronting on one of the lower cross streets. Constance held out her hand for the basket, but the boy put it behind him.

"Wot's the matter with me?" he demanded.

"Nothing at all, Tommie. I only meant to save you a climb. The basket isn't heavy now, you know."

"S'posin' it ain't; ain't I hired to run this end o' the show? You jes' tell me where you want it put, an' that's right where I'm goin' to put it, an' not nowheres else."

She smiled and let him lead the way up the dusty stair. At a certain door near the end of the long upper corridor she signed to him to give her the basket. "Go to the head of the stairs and wait," she whispered. "I may want you."

When he was out of hearing she tapped on the door and went in. It was the interior of all others that made Constance want to cry. There was a sufficiency of garish furniture and tawdry knickknacks scattered about to show that it was not the dwelling-place of the desperately poor; but these were only the accessories to the picture of desolation and utter neglect having for its central figure the woman stretched out upon the bed. She was asleep, and her face was turned toward the light which struggled feebly through the unwashed window. Beauty there had been, and might be again, but not even the flush of health would efface the marks of Margaret Gannon's latest plunge into the chilling depths of human indifference. Connie tiptoed to the bedside and looked, and her heart swelled within her.

It had fallen out in this wise. On the Monday night Mademoiselle Angeline – known to her intimates as Mag Gannon – saw fuzzy little circles expand and contract around the gas-jets in the Bijou Theatre while she was walking through her part in the farce. Tuesday night the fuzzy circles became blurs; and the stage manager swore audibly when she faltered and missed the step in her specialty. On the Wednesday Mademoiselle Angeline disappeared from the Bijou altogether; and for three days she had lain helpless and suffering, seeing no human face until Constance came and ministered to her. And the pity of it was that while the fever wrought its torturous will upon her, delirium would not come to help her to forget that she was forgotten.

Constance had pieced out the pitiful story by fragments while she was dragging the woman back from the brink of the pit; and when all was said, she began to understand that a sick soul demands other remedies than drugs and dainties. Just what they were, or how they were to be applied, was another matter; but Constance grappled with the problem as ardently as if no one had ever before attacked it. In her later visits she always brought the conversation around to Margaret's future; and on the afternoon of the basket-procession, after she had made her patient eat and drink, she essayed once again to enlist the woman's will in her own behalf.

"It's no use of me trying, Miss Constance; I've got to go back when I'm fit. There ain't nothing else for the likes of me to do."

"How can you tell till you try? O Margaret, I wish you would try!"

A smile of hard-earned wisdom flitted across the face of the woman. "You know more than most of 'em," she said, "but you don't know it all. You can't, you see; you're so good the world puts on its gloves before it touches you. But for the likes of me, we get the bare hand, and we're playing in luck if it ain't made into a fist."

"You poor girl! It makes my heart ache to think what you must have gone through before you could learn to say a thing like that. But you must try; I can't let you go back to that awful place after what you've told me about it."

"Supposing I did try; there's only the one thing on earth I know how to do, – that's trim hats. Suppose you run your pretty feet off till you found me a place where I could work right. How long would it be before somebody would go to the missis, or the boss, or whoever it might be, and say, 'See here; you've got one of Pete Grim's Bijou women in there. That won't do.' And the night after, I'd be doing my specialty again, if I was that lucky to get on."

"But you could learn to do housework, or something of that kind, so you could keep out of the way of people who would remember you. You must have had some experience."

The invalid rocked her head on the pillow. "That'd be worse than the other. Somebody'd be dead sure to find out and tell; and then I'd be lucky if I got off without going to jail. And for the experience, – a minute ago you called me a girl, but I know you didn't mean it. How old do you think I am?"

Constance looked at the fever-burned face, and tried to make allowances for the ravages of disease. "I should say twenty-five," she replied, "only you talk as if you might be older."

"I'll be eighteen next June, if I'd happen to live that long," said Margaret; and Constance went home a few minutes later with a new pain in her heart, born of the simple statement.

At the gate she took the empty basket and paid the boy. "That's all for to-day, but I want to give you some more work," she said. "Every morning, and every noon, and every night, until I tell you to stop, I want you to go up to that last place and ask Margaret Gannon if there is anything you can do for her. And if she says yes, you do it; and if it's too big for you to do, you come right up here after me. Will you do all that?"

"Will I? Will a yaller dorg eat his supper w'en he's hungry? You're jes' dead right I'll do it. An' I'll be yere to-morrer afternoon, promp'."

All of which was well enough in its way, but the problem was yet unsolved, and Constance had to draw heavily on her reserves of cheerfulness to be able to make an accordant one of four when Richard Bartrow called that evening after dinner.

CHAPTER VI

During the week following the day of repentance and backsliding, Jeffard's regression down the inclined plane became an accelerated rush. In that interval he parted with his watch and his surveying instruments, and made a beginning on his surplus clothing. It was a measure of the velocity of the descent that the watch, with the transit and level, brought him no more than seven knife-and-fork meals and an occasional luncheon. But the clothing being transmutable in smaller installments, did rather better.

Before the week was out, a bachelor's apartment in a respectable locality became an incongruous superfluity; and having by no means reached the philosophical level in his descent, he hid himself from all comers in a dubious neighborhood below Larimer Street.

The second week brought sharper misery than the first, since it enforced the pitiful shifts of vagrancy before he could acquire the spirit-breaking experience which makes them tolerable. But before many days the poor remnants of pride and self-respect gave up the unequal struggle, leaving him to his own devices; after which he soon learned how to keep an open and unbalanced meal-and-cigar account with his few unmercenary friends.

In a short time, however, the friendly tables began to grow scarce. Bartrow went back to his mine, and with his going the doors of the St. James's dining-room opened no more to the proletary. Then came the return of John Pettigrew, whose hospitality was as boundless as the range whereon his herds grazed, and who claimed kinship with Jeffard because both chanced to be transplanted New Englanders. While Pettigrew stayed in Denver, Jeffard lived on the fat of the land, eating at his friend's table at the Albany, and gambling with the ranchman's money at odd hours of the day and night. But after Pettigrew left there was another lean interval, and Jeffard grew haggard and ran his weight down at the rate of a pound a day.

In the midst of this came a spasm of the reformative sort, born of a passing glimpse of Stephen Elliott's daughter on one of her charitable expeditions. The incident brought him face to face with a fact which had been unconsciously lending desperation to despair. Now that the discovery could be no more than an added twist of the thumbscrew, he began to realize that he had found in the person of the sweet-faced young woman with the far-seeing eyes the Heaven-born alchemist who could, if she so willed, transmute the flinty perverseness of him into plastic wax, shaping it after her own ideals; that it was the unacknowledged beginning of love which had found wings for the short-lived flight of higher hopes and more worthy aspirations. The day of fasting and penitence had set his feet in the way leading to reinstatement in his own good opinion; but the meeting with Constance was answerable for a worthier prompting, – a perfervid determination to fight his way back to better things for righteousness' sake, knowing that no otherwise could he hope to stand with her on the Mount of Benediction.

It was against this anointing of grace that he had sinned; and it was in remorseful memory of it that he brushed his clothes, put on an ill-fitting air of respectability, and tramped the streets in a fruitless search for employment until he was ready to drop from fatigue and hunger. Nothing came of it. The great public, and notably the employing minority of it, is no mean physiognomist; and the gambler carries his hall-mark no less than the profligate or the drunkard.

At the close of one of these days of disheartenment, a day wherein a single cup of coffee had been made to stand sponsor for breakfast, luncheon, and dinner, Jeffard saw a familiar figure standing at the counter in one of the newspaper offices. Knowing his man, Jeffard stopped on the sidewalk and waited. If Lansdale had but the price of a single meal in his pocket, two men would share that meal that night.

There were two entrances to the newspaper office, and Jeffard watched beaglewise lest his chance of breaking his fast should vanish while he tarried. Presently Lansdale came out, and Jeffard fell upon him before he could latch the door.

"Salaam! Jeffard, my son," said the outcomer. "I saw you waiting for me. How goes the world-old struggle for existence?"

"Don't remind me of it, Lansdale; do you happen to have the price of a meal about you?"

Lansdale smiled, and gravely tucking Jeffard's arm under his own, steered diagonally across the street toward the open doors of a café.

"Now that is what our forefathers called Providence, and what we, being so much wiser in our own generation, call luck," he declared. "I had just got a check out of the post-office for a bit of work sent months ago to an editor whose name is unhasting. When you saw me I was closing a negotiation, by the terms of which the cashier of the 'Coloradoan' becomes my banker. Behold, now, the mysteries of – shall we say Providence? At any time within the six months I would have sworn that the opportune moment for the arrival of this bit of money-paper had come; nevertheless Providence, and the slow-geared editor, get it here just in time to save two men from going to bed supperless. Why don't you say something?"

They were at the door of the café, and Jeffard gripped his companion's arm and thrust him in. "Can't you see that I'm too damned hungry to talk?" he demanded savagely; and Lansdale wisely held his peace until the barbarian in his guest had been appeased.

When the soup and fish had disappeared, Jeffard was ashamed of himself, and said as much.

"You mustn't mind what I said," he began, by way of making amends. "I used to think I was a civilized being, but, God help me, Lansdale, I'm not! When I've gone without food for twenty-four hours on end, I'm nothing more or less than a hungry savage."

Lansdale smiled intelligence. "I know the taste of it, and it's bad medicine – for the soul as well as for the body," he rejoined. "There is reason to suspect that Shakespeare never went hungry, else he wouldn't have said, 'Sweet are the uses of adversity.' They're not sweet; they're damnably bitter. A man may come forth of the winepress with bones unbroken and insight sharpened to the puncturing point; but his capacity for evil will be increased in just proportion."

"I don't want to believe that," said Jeffard, whose despair was not yet proof against a good meal in good company.

"You needn't, but it's true. The necessities breed a certain familiarity with evil. Moral metes and bounds have a trick of disappearing in the day of physical dearth. When hunger has driven a man over the ethical boundary a few times, the crossing becomes easy; and when hunger drops the whip, inclination is very likely to take it up."

Jeffard laughed. "'The words of Agur the son of Jakeh,'" he quoted. "I believe you'd moralize if you were going to be hanged, Lansdale."

"Perhaps I should. What possible contingency could offer better opportunities? And am I not going to be hanged – or choked, which amounts to the same thing?"

Jeffard looked up quickly and saw what the myopia of hunger had hitherto obscured: that his companion's smooth-shaven face seemed gaunter than usual, and that his hands were unsteady when he lifted the knife and fork.

"Colorado isn't helping you, then," he said.

"No; but it isn't altogether Colorado's fault. The Boston medicine man said change of climate, plenty of outdoor indolence, nutritious food at stated intervals. I have all any one could ask of the first, and as little of either of the others as may be."

"But you do good work, Lansdale. I've always believed you could make it win, in time. Hasn't the time come yet?"

"No. What I can do easiest would bring bread and meat, if I could sell it; but a literary hack-writer has no business in Colorado – or anywhere else outside of the literary centres. In Boston I

could always find an odd job of reviewing, or space-writing, or something that would serve to keep body and soul together; but here they won't have me even in the newspapers."

"Overcrowded, I suppose, like everything else in this cursed country."

"That's the alleged reason; but the fact is that I'm not a journalist. Your thoroughbred newspaper man has more or less contempt for a fellow who can't or won't write journalese."

They had attained to the dessert, and the waiter was opening a modest bottle of claret for them. Jeffard turned his wineglass down.

"What! Is that the way you flout a man's hospitality?" demanded Lansdale, in mock displeasure.

"No; I don't mean to do that. But I'm drunken with feasting now, and if I put wine into me I shall pawn the coat off my back before midnight for a stake to play with."

Lansdale smiled. "I'll see that you don't have to. Turn up your glass."

But Jeffard was obstinate, and sat munching raisins while Lansdale sipped his wine. When the waiter brought the cigars he came out of his reverie to say, "You want to live, don't you, Lansdale?"

The potential man of letters took time to think about it. "I suppose I do; else I shouldn't be starving to death in Denver," he admitted finally.

"And there is nothing but the lack of a little ready money that keeps you from giving the Boston doctor's prescription a fair trial. If I had the money I believe I'd change places with you; that is, I'd give you the money in exchange for your good chance of being able to shuffle off mortality without the help of extraneous means. I think I've had enough of it."

"Do you? That proves how little a man has learned when he thinks he has arrived. Now pull yourself together, and tell me what you really would do if you became suddenly rich."

"How rich?"

"Oh, make it a comfortable figure; say eight or ten thousand a month for an income."

"I'd do what I said I should, – change places with you; only I suppose that wouldn't be possible. Failing that" – He pondered over it for a moment, balancing his fork on the edge of his plate the while. "A few weeks ago I should have mapped out a future worth talking about. I had a lucid day, in which the things that make for ambition of the better sort had their inning. If you had asked me such a question then, I should doubtless have told you that I should try to realize the ideals of other days; to walk uprightly, and to hold great wealth as it should be held – in trust for the good of one's kind; to win the love of the ideal woman, perhaps; and, having won it, to sit at her feet until I had learned how to be God's almoner."

Lansdale's smile was not wholly cynical. "But now?" he queried.

"But now I know my own limitations. I think I should go back to the old farm in the Berkshire Hills, and try to make it earn me bread and meat."

"But you couldn't spend ten thousand a month on an abandoned farm, though I grant you it would be a pretty expensive luxury. What would you do with the lave of it?"

Jeffard's lips tightened, and his face was not pleasant to look upon. "I'd let it go on accumulating, piling up and up till there was no shadow of possibility that I should ever again come to know what it means to be without money. And even then I should know I could never get enough," he added.

This time Lansdale's smile was of incredulity. "Let me prophesy," he suggested. "When your lucky day overtakes you, you will do none of these things. Jeffard the fool may be heard of wherever the Associated Press has a wire or a correspondent; but Jeffard the miser will never exist outside of your own unbalanced imagination. Let's go out and walk. It's fervidly close in here."

Arm in arm they paced the streets until nearly midnight, talking of things practical and impracticable, and keeping well out of the present in either the past or the future. When Lansdale said good-night, he stuffed a bank-note into Jeffard's pocket.

"It's only a loan," he protested, when Jeffard would have made him take it back. "And there are no conditions. You can go and play with it, if that's what you'd rather do."

The suggestion was unfortunate, though possibly the result would have been the same in any event. Five minutes after parting from Lansdale, Jeffard had taken his place in the silent group around the table in the upper room; and by the time the pile of counters under his hand had increased to double the amount of Lansdale's gift, he was oblivious to everything save the one potent fact – that after so many reverses his luck had turned at last.

Five hundred and odd dollars he had at one time in that eventful sitting, and his neighbor across the corner of the table, a grizzled miner with the jaw of a pugilist and eyes that had a trick of softening like a woman's, had warned him by winks, nods, and sundry kicks under the table to stop. Jeffard scowled his resentment of the interference and played on, losing steadily until his capital had shrunk to fifty dollars. Then the miner rose up in his place, reached across, and gave Jeffard an open-handed buffet that nearly knocked him out of his chair.

"Dad blame you!" he roared; "I'll learn you how to spile my play! Stan' up and fight it out like a man!"

The game stopped at once. The dealer held his hand, and the banker reached for his revolver.

"You two gen'lemen cash in and get out o' here," he commanded. "This is a gen'leman's game, and we don't run no shootin'-gallery – leastwise, not unless *I* have to take a hand in it. Pass in your chips."

They both obeyed; the miner with maledictory reluctance, and Jeffard in a tremulous frenzy of wrath. When they reached the sidewalk, Jeffard flung himself savagely upon his assailant, only to learn that abstinence is a poor trainer, and that he was little better than a lay-figure in the grasp of the square-jawed one with the melting eyes. The big man thrust him into a corner and held him there until he listened to reason.

"You blamed idjit! you hain't got sense enough to go in when it rains! Hold still, 'r I'll bump your head ag'inst the wall! As I was sayin', you don't know enough to pound sand. Every single time I've been in this dive, you've been here, too, a-blowin' yourself like you had a wad as big as a feather bed, and you know danged well you hain't got nothin'. And you wouldn't 'a' kep' a dern cent to-night, if I hadn't thumped you and raised a row. Now you go and hunt you a place to sleep while you've got dust enough to pay for it; and don't you come round here ag'in till you've put a whole grub-stake inside of you. Savez?"

CHAPTER VII

From the beginning of the cannibalistic stage of the journey down the inclined plane, Jeffard had determined that, come what might, he would keep enough of his wardrobe to enable him to present an outward appearance of respectability. With a vague premonition of the not improbable end of the journey he recoiled at the thought of figuring before a coroner's jury as a common vagrant.

This resolution, however, like all others of a prideful nature, went down before the renewed assaults of the allies, hunger and dementia. Whereby it speedily came to pass that he retained only the garments he stood in, and these soon became shabby and wayworn. Since, in his own estimation, if not in that of others, the clothes do make the man to a very considerable extent, Jeffard gradually withdrew from his former lounging-places, confining himself to the less critical region below Larimer Street during the day, and avoiding as much as possible the haunts of his former associates at all hours.

It was for this cause that Bartrow, on his return from Chaffee County, was unable to find Jeffard. Meeting Lansdale when the search had become unhopeful, the large-hearted man of the altitudes lamented his failure after his own peculiar fashion.

"When was it you saw him last?" he inquired of the transplanted Bostonian.

"It was about a week ago. To be exact, it was a week Tuesday. I remember because we dined together that evening."

"Now doesn't that beat the band? Here I've gone and got him a soft snap up on the range – good pay, and little or nothing to do – and he's got to go and drop out like a monte man's little joker. It's enough to make a man swear continuous!"

"I don't think he would have gone with you," Lansdale ventured.

"Wouldn't, eh? If I can find him I'll take him by the neck and make him go; savez? How do you put it up? Runaway? or a pile of bones out on the prairie somewhere?"

"It's hard to say. Jeffard's a queer combination of good and not so good, – like a few others of us, – and just now the negative part is on top. He was pretty low the night we were together, though when we separated I thought he was taking himself a little less seriously."

"Didn't talk about getting the drop on himself, or anything like that?"

"N – no, not in a way to leave the impression that he was in any immediate danger of doing such a thing."

Bartrow chewed the end of his cigar reflectively. "Hasn't taken to quizzing the world through the bottom of a whiskey-glass?"

"No, I should say not. Thus far, I think he has but the one devil."

"And that's the 'tiger,' of course. I knew about that; I've known it all along. The Lord forgive me! I don't know but I was the ring-master in that show. You know we chased around a good deal together, along at the first, and it's as likely as not I showed him a whole lot of things he'd better not have seen."

The half-cynical smile lightened upon Lansdale's grave face. "That is one of my criticisms of Western manners," he commented. "When you get hold of a stranger, you welcome him with open arms – and proceed to regale him with a near-hand view of the back yards and cesspools. And then you swear piteously when he goes back East and tells his friends what an abandoned lot you are."

Bartrow took the thrust good-naturedly, as he did most of his chastenings. "That's right; that's just about what we do. But you've been here long enough now to know that it's meant for hospitality. It's a way we've got into of taking it for granted that people come out here more to see the sights than for any other purpose."

"Oh, it's good of you – I don't deny that; only it's a little rough on the new-comer, sometimes. Take Jeffard's case, for example. He came to Denver with good introductions; I know, for I saw some of them. But a man in a strange city doesn't often go about presenting his social credentials. What he

does is to make a few haphazard acquaintances, and let them set the pace for him. That is what Jeffard did, and I'll venture to say there have been nine evil doors open to him to one good one. You've known him longer than any one else – how many times have you invited him to spend a rational evening with you in the company of respectable people?"

"Good Lord, Lansdale; for Heaven's sake don't begin to open up that lead! We're all miserable sinners, and I'm the medicine-man of the tribe. I never asked the poor devil to go visiting with me but once, and that was after he was down."

"And then he wouldn't go, as a matter of course. But that is neither here nor there. I'll find him for you, if I can, and leave word for you at the St. James."

"You're a brick, Lansdale; that's about what you are. I'll get square with you some day. By the way, can't you come up to Steve Elliott's with me this evening and meet some good people?"

Lansdale laughed outright. "You're a good fellow, Bartrow, but you're no diplomat. When I go a-fishing into your mentality you'll never see the hook. Make my apologies to your friends, and tell them I'm an invalid."

And Bartrow, being densely practical, and so proof against irony of whatsoever calibre, actually did so that evening when he called upon Miss Elliott and her cousin.

"But your friend wasn't promised to us, Mr. Bartrow," objected Miss Van Vetter. "Why should he send excuses?"

"I'm blessed if I know," said honest Dick, looking innocently from one to the other of them. "But that's what he told me to do, and I've done it."

Constance laughed softly. "You're too good for any use, Dick. He was making game of you. Tell us how he came to say it."

Bartrow did that, also; and the two young women laughed in chorus.

"After you've had your fun out of it I wish you'd tell me, so I can laugh too," he said. "I can't see where the joke comes in, myself."

Constance enlightened him. "There isn't any joke – only this: he had just been scolding you about your inhospitality, and then you turn on him and ask him to go calling with you. Of course, he couldn't accept, then; it would have been like inviting himself."

"Well, what of it? I don't see why he shouldn't invite himself, if he felt like it. He's a rattling good fellow." And from thence the talk drifted easily to Jeffard, who was, or who had been, another good fellow.

At the mention of Jeffard's name, Constance borrowed the mask of disinterest, and laid her commands on Bartrow. "Tell us about him," she said.

"There isn't much to tell. He came here from somewhere back East, got into bad company, lost his money, and now he's disappeared."

"How did he lose his money?" Constance would have asked the question, but her cousin forestalled her.

"Gambled it," quoth Bartrow placidly.

Constance looked sorry, and Miss Van Vetter was plainly shocked. "How very dreadful!" said the latter. "Did he lose much?"

"Oh, no; you couldn't call it much – only a few thousands, I believe. But then, you see, it was his stake; it was all he had, and he couldn't afford to give it up. And now he has gone and hid out somewhere just when I have found a place for him. It makes me very weary."

"Can't you find any trace of him?" queried Constance. "That is singular. I should think he would have left his address."

Bartrow grinned. "Well, hardly. Man don't leave his address when he wants to drop out. That's the one thing he's pretty sure to take with him. But we'll run him down yet, if he's on top of earth. Lansdale has seen more of him lately than I have, and he is taking a hand. He and Jeffard used to flock together a good deal when the shoe was on the other foot."

Miss Van Vetter looked mystified; and Bartrow deemed it a matter for self-congratulation that he was able to comprehend the query in her eyes without having it hurled at him in so many words.

"That was while Jeffard had money, and Lansdale was trying to starve himself to death," he explained. "You see, Lansdale is a queer fish in some ways. When he's down he won't let anybody touch him on his money side, so we used to work all kinds of schemes to keep him going. Jeffard would study them up, and I'd help him steer them."

This was practical benevolence, and Connie's interest bestirred itself in its charitable part. "What were some of the schemes?" she asked.

"Oh, there were a lot of them. Lansdale can see farther into a millstone than most people, and we had to invent new ones as we went along. One time, Jeffard bought a common, every-day sort of a pocketbook, and rumpled it up and tramped on it till it looked as if it might have come across the plains in Fifty-nine. Then he put a twenty-dollar bill and some loose silver in it, and dropped it on the sidewalk where I was walking Lansdale up and down for his health. After a while, when he'd actually stumbled over it four or five times, Lansdale saw the wallet and picked it up. Right there the scheme nearly fell down. You see, he was going to make me take charge of it while he advertised it. I got out of it, somehow, but I don't believe he used a nickel of the money for a month."

Connie clapped her hands softly. "That was fine! Tell us some more."

"The next one was better, and it worked like a charm. Lansdale writes things for the papers, only the editors here wouldn't buy any of his work" —

"Why not?" interrupted Miss Van Vetter.

"I don't know; because it was too good, I guess. Anyway, they wouldn't buy it, so Jeffard went to work on that lead. I took him around and introduced him to Kershaw of the 'Coloradoan,' and he made Kershaw take fifty dollars on deposit, and got him to promise to accept some of Lansdale's stories. Kershaw kicked like the deu – like the mischief, and didn't want to do it; but we bullied him, and then I got Lansdale to send him some stuff."

"Mr. Jeffard is an artist in schemes, and I envy him," said Connie. "What happened to that one?"

"Kershaw upset it by not printing the stuff. Of course, Lansdale watched the 'Coloradoan,' and when he found he wasn't in it, he wouldn't send any more. We caught him the next time, though, for something worth while."

"How was that?" It was Miss Van Vetter who asked the question; and Bartrow made a strenuous effort to evade the frontier idiom which stood ready to trip him at every turn when Myra Van Vetter's poiseful gaze rested upon him.

"Why, I happen to have a played-out – er – that is, a sort of no-account mine up in Clear Creek, and I made Lansdale believe I was the resident agent for the property, authorized to get up a descriptive prospectus. He took the job of writing it, and never once tumbled to the racket – that is, he never suspected that we were working him for a – oh, good Lord, why can't I talk plain English! – you know what I mean; he thought it was all straight. Well, he turned in the copy, and we paid him as much as he'd stand; but he has just about worried the life out of me ever since, trying to get to read proof on that prospectus. That one was Jeffard's idea, too, but I made him let me in on the assessment."

Before Miss Van Vetter could inquire what the "assessment" was, Stephen Elliott came in and the talk became general. An hour later, when Bartrow took his leave, Constance went to the door with him.

"Don't you really know where Mr. Jeffard is, Dick?" she asked.

Something in her tone set him upon the right track. "No; do you?"

"I know that he left Denver quite a while ago; about the time you were down last."

"How do you know it?"

"He told me he was going."

"The mischief he did! Where did you get acquainted with him?"

"At Mrs. Calmaine's."

Honest Dick ground his heel into the door-mat and thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his overcoat. What was in his mind came out shorn of euphemism.

"Say, Connie, do you care anything about him?"

"What a question!" she retorted, not pretending to misunderstand its pointing. "I've met him only once – or twice, I should say, though I didn't even know his name the first time."

"What did he tell you? about his going away, I mean."

"He said – but you've no right to ask me, Dick. It wasn't exactly a confidence, but" —

"Yes, I have a right to ask; he was my friend a good while before he was yours. Tell me what he said."

"He gave me to understand that things hadn't been going quite right with him, and he said he was going to the mountains to – to try to make another start."

Bartrow tucked Connie's arm under his own and walked her up and down the long veranda twice before he could bring himself to say the thing that was.

"He didn't go, Connie; he's here now, if he hasn't gone out on the prairie somewhere and taken a pot shot at himself. Lansdale saw him only a week or so ago."

"Oh, Dick!"

"It's tough, isn't it?" He stood on the step and buttoned his coat. "But I'm glad you know him – or at least, know who he is. If you should happen to run across him in any of your charity trips, just set Tommie on him and wire me if you find out where he burrows."

"You said you had found a place for him. Will it keep?"

"I'll try to hold it open for him, and if you wire, I'll come down and tackle him. He's too good a fellow to turn down in his little day of witlessness. Good-night; and good-by – for a week or so. I've got to go back on the morning train."

CHAPTER VIII

Contrary to the doctor's prophecy, Margaret Gannon's progress toward recovery was slow and rather uncertain. Constance professed to be sorry, but in her heart she was thankful, since the hesitant convalescence gave her time to try many expedients pointing toward the moral rehabilitation of her protégée. Ignoring Margaret's bodeful prediction, Constance coursed far and wide, quartering the domestic field diligently; but inasmuch as she was careful in each instance to state the exact truth, each endeavor was but the introduction to another failure.

"Why, Constance Elliott! The idea of your proposing such a thing to me!" said Mrs. Calmaine, upon whose motherly good sense Connie had leaned from childhood. "That is what comes of a girl growing up as you have without a mother to watch over her. Can't you understand how dreadful it is for you to mix up in such things? You can't touch pitch and not be defiled."

Connie was moved, first to tears, and presently to indignation.

"No, I can't understand anything of the kind," she retorted. "It's your privilege not to take Margaret if you don't want her; but it's mine to help her, if I can. And I mean to do it in spite of all the cruel prejudice in the world!"

"You talk like a foolish child, Connie. I can tell you beforehand that you won't succeed in getting the woman into any respectable household in Denver, unless you do it under false pretenses."

"So much the worse for our Christianity, then," Connie asserted stoutly. "If people won't help, they'll have it to answer to One who wasn't afraid to take a much worse woman by the hand. That's all I have to say about it."

Mrs. Calmaine smiled benignantly. She had daughters of her own, and knew how to make allowances for youthful enthusiasm.

"You will get over it, after a while, and then you'll see how foolish it is to try to reform the world single-handed," she rejoined. "You might as well try to move Pike's Peak as to think you can remodel society after your own enthusiastic notions. And when the reflective after-time comes, you'll be glad that society didn't let you make a martyr of yourself at its expense.

"And, Connie, dear; there is another side of the question which you should consider," she continued, going to the door with her visitor. "It's this: since society as a unit insists upon having this particular kind of reformative work turned over to organizations designed for the purpose, there must be a sufficient reason for it. You are not wiser than the aggregated wisdom of the civilized centuries."

Constance went her way, silenced, but by no means convinced; and she added three more failures to her long list before going home to luncheon. In the afternoon, she laid hold of her courage yet once again, and went to her minister, good Dr. Launceston, pastor of St. Cyril's-in-the-Desert. Here, indeed, she found sympathy without stint, but it was hopelessly void of practical suggestion.

"It is certainly most pitiful, Miss Elliott, pitiful to a degree; but I really don't see what is to be done. Had you any plan in view that, ah" —

"It is because all my plans have come to grief that I am here," said Connie.

"Dear, dear! and those cases are so very hard to deal with. Now, if it were a question of money, I dare say we could manage it quite easily."

Constance had some very clear ideas on reformative subjects, and one of them was that it was not less culpable to pauperize than to ignore.

"It isn't that," she made haste to say. "I could get money easily enough, but Margaret wouldn't take it. If she would, I should have small hopes for her."

"No," rejoined the clergyman reflectively; "you are quite right. It is not a problem to be solved by money. The young woman must be given a chance to win her way back to respectability by her own efforts. Do I understand that she is willing to try if the opportunity should present itself?"

"I'm afraid I can't say that she is – not without reservation," Connie admitted. "You see, she knows the cruel side of the world; and she is quite sure that any effort she might make would end in defeat and deeper disgrace."

"A very natural apprehension, and one for which there are only too good grounds," said the clergyman sadly. "We are compassionate and charitable in the aggregate, but as individuals I fear we are very unmerciful. Had you thought of trying to send her to one of our institutional homes in the East? I might possibly be able to make such representations as would" —

Constance shook her head. "Margaret is a Roman Catholic, and I suggested the House of the Good Shepherd in one of our earlier talks. She fought the idea desperately, and I don't know that I blame her. She is just a woman like other women, and I believe she would gladly undertake an honest woman's work in the world; but that isn't saying she'd be willing to become a lay-sister."

"No, I suppose not; I quite agree with you. But what else can you do for her?"

"I don't know, Doctor Launceston, – oh, I don't know! But I'll never give up till I've done something."

In the momentary afflatus of which fine determination Constance went her way again, not wholly comfortless this time, but apparently quite as far from the solution of the problem as when she had latched Mrs. Calmaine's gate behind her.

As for the clergyman, the precious fervor of the young enthusiast left a spark in his heart which burst into flame on the following Sunday morning, when he preached a stirring sermon from the text, "Who is my neighbor?" to the decorous and well-fed congregation of St. Cyril's-in-the-Desert.

Leaving the rectory, Constance postponed the quest for that afternoon and went to pay her daily visit to Margaret. On the way downtown a happy thought came to her, and she welcomed it as an inspiration, setting it to work as soon as she had put the convalescent's room in order.

"You are feeling better to-day, aren't you, Margaret?" she began.

"Yes. I'm thinking I'll be able to go to work again before long; only Pete Grim mightn't have no use for me."

Constance brought the hair-brush, and letting Margaret's luxuriant hair fall in heavy masses over the back of the chair, began another of her ministries of service.

"Do you really want to go back to the Bijou?" she asked, knowing well enough what the answer would be.

"You know you needn't to ask that; it's just Pete Grim's place or something worse. I can't do no different" – she paused and the fingers of her clasped hands worked nervously – "and you can't help it, Miss Constance. I know you've been trying and worrying; but it ain't no use."

Connie did not find words to reply at once, but after a little she said: "Tell me more about your old home, Margaret."

"I've told you all there was to tell, many's the time since you found me with the fever."

"Let me see if I can remember it. You said your father was the village blacksmith, and that you used to sit in the shop and watch the sparks fly from the anvil as he worked. And when his day's work was done, he would take you on his shoulder and carry you home to your mother, who called you her pretty colleen, and loved you because you were the only girl. And then" —

"Oh, *don't*!" There was sharp anguish in the cry, and Margaret covered her eyes with her hands as if to shut out the picture. Constance waited until she thought she had given the seed time to germinate. Then she went on.

"And when you left home they mourned for you, not as one dead, but as one living and still beloved; and as long as they could keep track of you they begged you to come back to them. Margaret, won't you go?"

Margaret shook her head in passionate negation. "I can't —*I can't!* that's the one thing I can't do! Didn't I bring them shame enough and misery enough in the one day? and will I be going back to stir it all up again? having the people say, 'There's Pat Gannon's girl come back; she that went to

the bad and broke her mother's heart.' Indeed, I'll not do that, Miss Constance, though the saints and the holy angels'll tell you I'd do anything else you'd ask."

This was Connie's happy thought; to induce Margaret to go back to her parents. When it proved to be but another rope of sand, she allowed it one sigh and changed front so cheerfully that Margaret never knew the cost of the effort.

"Then we must try something else," she insisted. "I'll never let you go back to the theatre – that's settled. You told me once you could trim hats. Have you ever done any other kind of sewing?"

Margaret knelt before her trunk and threw out an armful of her stage finery. "I made them," she said.

Constance examined the work critically. It was good, and she took courage. "That is our way out of the trouble, Margaret. Why didn't we think of it before? When you are well enough, I'll get you a sewing-machine and find you all the work you can do."

Margaret went to the window and stood there so long that Constance began to tremble lest the battle were going evilward at the last moment. The fear was groundless, as she found out when the girl came back to kneel and cry silently with her face in Connie's lap.

"It isn't so much the love of you," she sobbed; "it's the knowing that somebody cares whether the likes of me goes straight to the devil or not. And never so much as a word about behaving myself, or confessing to the priest, or anything. Miss Constance," – this with uplifted face, grown suddenly beautiful and glorified in the outshining of penitence, – "the devil may fly away with me, – he did that same one day, – but if he does, I'll not live to leave him have the good of it. I promise you that."

"I can trust you," said Constance; and she took her leave presently, wondering how the many-sided world could so unify itself in its merciless condemnation of the Magdalenes.

When she had closed Margaret's door behind her and was halfway to the stair, she heard sounds as of a scuffle coming from a corridor intersecting the main hallway at the landing. Her first impulse was to retreat to Margaret Gannon's room; but when she recognized Tommie's voice uplifted in alternate plea and imprecation, she went forward quickly. At the turn she met a gaunt, unshaven man leading Tommie by the ear, and her indignation slipped the leash without a thought of consequences.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself to abuse a child like that!" she began; and then two things happened: Jeffard released the boy, and Constance recognized in the gaunt figure the wreck of the man whom she had bidden God-speed on the stair at the Calmaine dancing party.

Jeffard flattened himself against the wall, bowed low, and was about to apologize, when Tommie, scenting an accusation, proceeded to vindicate himself by exploding a veritable bomb of consternation between the two.

"I warn't doin' ary single thing, Miss Constance, 'ceptin' jest wot you telled me to do. I caught on to his nibs down on de street an' follered him up yere; an' w'en I was takin' a squint t'rough de keyhole, jest to make sure, he outs an' nabs me."

For one dreadful instant Connie thought she must scream and run away. Then her wits came back, and she saw that deliverance could come only through swift confession.

"Tommie," she said hastily, "run down and wait for me on the sidewalk." And then to Jeffard: "The poor boy wasn't to blame; he was doing just what he had been told to do, and you have a right to ask – to – to know" – She stopped in pitiable embarrassment, and Jeffard flung himself into the breach with chivalric tact.

"Not another word, Miss Elliott, I implore you. It isn't the first time I have been taken for my double, and in broad daylight at that. May I go down and make my peace with the boy?"

Constance was too greatly perturbed not to catch gratefully at the chance to escape, and she made use of it while Jeffard was talking to Tommie at the foot of the stair. Taking Constance's nod and smile in passing as tokens of amity, the urchin allowed himself to be placated; and when Jeffard went back to his room he knew all that Tommie could tell him about Miss Elliott and her deeds of mercy.

That night, before he went out to tramp himself weary, Jeffard did a characteristic thing. He wrapped his last five-dollar note around a bit of plaster dug from the wall, and creeping through the corridor in his stocking feet, tossed the pellet over the transom into Margaret Gannon's room.

CHAPTER IX

At the breakfast-table the next morning, Constance had a shock that set her nerves a-jangle and banished her appetite. The exciting cause was a paragraph in the morning "Coloradoan" which her father had been reading between the fruit and the cereals.

"I wonder if that isn't the fellow Dick was looking for and couldn't find," he queried, passing the paper across the table with his finger on the suggestive paragraph.

It was a custom-hardened account of a commonplace tragedy. A man whose name was given as George Jeffrey had shot himself an hour before midnight on one of the bridges spanning Cherry Creek. Constance read the story of the tragedy with her father's remark in abeyance, and the shock came with the conviction that the self-slain one was Jeffard, whose name might easily become Jeffrey in the hurried notes of a news-gatherer. The meagre particulars tallied accurately with Bartrow's terse account of Jeffard's sociological experiment. The suicide was a late-comer from the farther East; he had spent his money in riotous living; and he had latterly been lost to those who knew him best.

It was characteristic of Stephen Elliott's daughter that she passed the paper back to her father without comment, and that she preserved an outward presentment of cheerfulness during the remainder of the meal. But when she was free she ran up to her room and was seen no more of her father or her cousin until the latter went upstairs an hour later to see if Connie were ready for her morning walk.

"Why, Connie, dear! What is the matter?"

Since her tap at the door went unanswered, Myra had turned the knob and entered. Connie was lying in a dejected little heap on the floor before the fireless grate. She shook her head in dumb protest at her cousin's question; but when Myra knelt beside her it all came out brokenly.

"You didn't see what poppa gave me to read: it was an account of a suicide. Mr. Jeffard has killed himself, and – and, oh, Myra! it's all my fault!"

"Mr. Jeffard? Oh, I remember now, – Mr. Bartrow's friend. But I don't understand; how could it have been your fault?"

"It was, it was! Don't you remember what Dick said? that Mr. Jeffard was in trouble, and that he had a place for him? I saw him yesterday, and I —*I didn't tell him!*"

"But, Connie, dear, how could you? You didn't know him." Getting no more than a smothered sob in reply to this, Myra asked for particulars, and Connie gave them sparingly.

"You say the name was George Jeffrey? Why do you think it was Mr. Jeffard? I can't for the life of me see how you are to blame, in the remotest sense; but if you are, it's foolish to grieve over it until you are quite sure of the identities. Isn't there any way you can find out?"

Connie sat up at that, but she refused to be comforted.

"There is a way, and I'll try it; but it's no use, Myra. I'm just as sure as if I had stood beside him when he did it. And I shall never, *never* forgive myself!"

She got up and bathed her eyes, and when she had made herself ready to go out, she refused Myra's proffer of company.

"No, dear; thank you, but I'd rather go alone," she objected; "I'll share the misery of it with you by and by, perhaps, but I can't just yet."

Her plan for making sure was a simple one. Tommie Reagan had known Jeffard living, and he would know him dead. Putting it in train, she found her small henchman selling papers on his regular beat in front of the Opera House; and inasmuch as he was crying the principal fact of the tragedy, she was spared the necessity of entering into details.

"Tommie, have you – did you go to see the man who killed himself last night?" she questioned.

"Nope; der ain't no morbid cur'osity inside o' me."

"Would you go? – if I asked you to?"

"W'y, cert; I'd take a squint at de old feller wid de hoofs an' horns if it'd do you any good."

"Then I'll tell you why I want you to go. I am afraid it is the man we were going to try to help."

The boy shut one eye and whistled softly. "My gosh! but dat's tough, ain't it now! An' jest w'en I'd got 'quainted with him an' was a-fixin' to give him a lift! Dat's wot I call hard luck!"

Constance felt that the uncertainty was no longer to be borne. "Go quickly, Tommie," she directed; "and hurry back as soon as you can. I'll wait for you in the drug store across the street."

The coroner's office was not far to seek, and the small scout was back in a few minutes.

"Dey wouldn't lemme look," he reported, "but I skinned round to where I could see de top o' his head. It's his nibs, right 'nough."

"Tommie! Are you quite sure?"

"Nope; feller ain't sure o' nothin' in dis world, 'ceptin' death an' de penitenchry," amended Tommie, doing violence to his convictions when he saw that his patron saint was sorely in need of comfort. "Maybe 'tain't him, after all. You jest loaf 'round yere a couple o' shakes while I skip down to his hotel an' see wot I can dig up."

The boy was gone less than a quarter of an hour, but to Constance the minutes marched leaden-footed. When Tommie returned, his face signaled discomfiture.

"I didn't send me card up," he explained, with impish gravity; "I jest went right up to his nibsey's room an' mogged in, a-thinkin' I'd offer him a paper if he happened to be there and kicked. Say, Miss Constance; 'tain't a-goin' ter do no good to cry about it. He ain't there, an' he ain't been there, 'nless he slep' in a chair."

Constance went home with a lump in her throat and her trouble writ large on her face, and Myra needed not to ask the result of the investigation. Miss Van Vetter was not less curious than she should have been, but something in Connie's eyes forestalled inquiry, and Myra held her peace.

Connie wore out the day as best she might, widening the rift of sorrow until it bade fair to become an abyss of remorse. When evening came, and with it a telegram from Bartrow, asking if she had yet learned Jeffard's whereabouts, it was too much, and she shared the misery with her cousin, as she had promised to, making a clean breast of it from the beginning. Something to her surprise, Myra heard her through without a word of condemnation or reproach.

"Now that is something I can understand," said Myra, when the tale was told. "The most of your charity work seems to me to be pitifully commonplace and inconsequent; but here was a mission which asked for all sorts of heroism, for which it promised to pay the highest of all prices, namely, the possibility of saving a man worth the trouble."

Now Connie was well assured that her love for her neighbor was no respecter of persons, and she made answer accordingly.

"I can't agree with you there, Myra. Mr. Jeffard's possible worth had nothing to do with it. I wanted to help him because – well, because it was mean in me to make him talk about himself that night at the opera. And besides, when I met him the next evening at Mrs. Calmaine's, he told me enough to make me quite sure that he needed all the help and encouragement he could get. Of course, he didn't say anything like that, you know; but I knew."

Myra's eyes promised sympathy, and Connie went on.

"Then, when I came upon him yesterday I was angry because he was hurting Tommie. And afterward, when I tried to explain, he made me understand that I mustn't reach down to him; and – and I didn't know any other way to go about it."

"That was a situation in which I should probably have horrified you," said Myra decisively. "I shouldn't have noticed or known anything about him at first, as you did; but in your place yesterday, and with your knowledge of the circumstances, I should have said my say whether he wanted to hear it or not. And I'd have made him listen to reason, too."

"You don't quite understand, Myra. It seemed altogether impossible; though if I had known what was in his mind I should have spoken at any cost."

Twenty times the pendulum of the chalet clock on the wall beat the seconds, and Myra was silent; then she crossed over to Connie's chair and sat upon the arm of it.

"Connie, dear, you're crying again," – this with her arm around her cousin's neck. "Are you quite sure you haven't been telling me half-truths? Wasn't there the least little bit of a feeling warmer than charity in your heart for this poor fellow?"

Constance shook her head, but the denial did not set itself in words. "He was Dick's friend, and that was enough," she replied.

Miss Van Vetter's lips brushed her cousin's cheek, and Constance felt a warm tear plash on her hand. This was quite another Myra from the one she thought she knew, and she said as much.

"We're all puzzles, Connie dear, and the answers to most of us have been lost; but, do you know, I can't help crying a little with you for this poor fellow. Just to think of him lying there with no one within a thousand miles to care the least little bit about it. And if you are right – if it is Mr. Bartrow's friend – it's so much the more pitiful. The world is poorer when such men leave it."

"Why, Myra! What do you know about him?"

"Nothing more than you do – or as much. But surely you haven't forgotten what Mr. Bartrow told us."

"About his helping Mr. Lansdale?"

"Yes."

"No, I hadn't forgotten."

"It was very noble; and so delicately chivalrous. It seems as if one who did such things would surely be helped in his own day of misfortune. But that doesn't often happen, I'm afraid."

"No," Constance assented, with a sigh; and Myra went back to the question of identity.

"I suppose there is no possible chance that Tommie may have been mistaken?"

Constance shook her head. "I think not; he saw that I was troubled about it, and he would have strained a point to comfort me if the facts had given him leave. But I shall be quite sure before I answer Dick's message."

With that thought in mind, and with no hope behind it, Constance waylaid her father in the hall the next morning as he was about to go out.

"Poppa, I want you to do something for me; no, not that" – the elderly man was feeling in his pockets for his check-book – "it is something very different, this time; different and – and rather dreadful. You remember the suicide you read about, yesterday morning?"

"Did I read about one? Oh, yes; the man that shot himself down on the Platte, or was it Cherry Creek? The fellow I thought might be Dick's friend. What about it?"

"It's that. We ought to make sure of it for Dick's sake, you know. Won't you go to the coroner's office and see if it is Mr. Jeffard? It's a horrible thing to ask you to do, but" —

There was grim reminiscence in the old pioneer's smile. "It won't be the first one I've seen that died with his boots on. I'll go and locate your claim for you."

She kissed him good-by, but he came back from the gate to say: "Hold on, here; I don't know your Mr. Jeffard from a side of sole leather. How am I going to identify him?"

"You've seen him once," she explained. "Do you remember the man who sat next to me the night we went to hear 'The Bohemian Girl'?"

"The thirsty one that you and Myra made a bet on? Yes, I recollect him."

"I don't think he was thirsty. Would you know him if you were to see him again?"

"I guess maybe I would; I've seen him half a dozen times since, – met him out here on the sidewalk the next morning. Is that your man?"

"That was Mr. Jeffard," she affirmed, turning away that he might not see the tears that welled up unbidden.

"All right; I'll go and identify him for you."

So he said, and so he meant to do; but it proved to be a rather exciting day at the Mining Exchange, and he forgot the commission until he was about to board a homeward-bound car in the evening. Then he found that he was too late. The body of the suicide had been shipped East in accordance with telegraphic instructions received at noon. When he made his report to Constance, she fell back upon Tommie's assurance, and sent the delayed answer to Bartrow's message, telling him that his friend was dead.

Having sorrowfully recorded all these things in the book of facts accomplished, it was not wonderful that Constance, coming out of Margaret Gannon's room late the following afternoon, should cover her face and cry out in something akin to terror when she cannoned against Jeffard at the turn in the dingy hallway. Neither was it remarkable that her strength should forsake her for the moment; nor that Jeffard, seeing her plight, should forget his degradation and give her timely help by leading her to a seat in the dusty window embrasure. At that the conventionalities, or such shreds of them as might still have bound either of them, parted asunder in the midst, and for the time being they were but a man and a woman, as God had created them.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" were her first words. "I – I thought you were dead!"

"I ought to be," was his comment. "But what made you think that?"

"It was in the newspaper – about the man who shot himself. I was afraid it was you, and when Tommie had been to see we were sure of it."

"In the newspaper?" he queried; and then, with a ghost of a smile which was mirthless: "It was a little previous, but so justifiable that I really ought to take the hint. Can't you tell me more? I'm immensely interested."

She told him everything from the beginning, concluding with a pathetic little appeal for forgiveness if she had done wrong in taking too much for granted.

"You couldn't well do that," he hastened to say. "And you mustn't ask forgiveness for motives which an angel might envy. But it is casting pearls before swine in my case, Miss Elliott. I have sown the wind, deliberately and with malice aforethought, and now I am reaping the whirlwind, and regretting day by day that it doesn't develop sufficient violence to finish that which it has begun."

"Please don't say that," she pleaded. "There are always hands stretched out to help us, if we could but see and lay hold of them. Why won't you let Dick help you when he is so anxious to do it? You will, now that you know about it, won't you?"

"I knew about it before. Lansdale told me, but I made him promise to drop it. It isn't that I wouldn't accept help from Bartrow as willingly as I would from any one in the world; it is simply that I don't care to take the chance of adding ingratitude to my other ill-doings."

"Ingratitude?"

"Yes. The man who allows his friend to help him in any crisis of his own making should at least be able to give bond for his good behavior. I can't do that now. I wouldn't trust myself to go across the street. I know my own potentiality for evil too well."

"But potentiality isn't evil," she protested. "It's only the power to do things, good or bad. And if one have that there is always hope."

"Not for me," he said shortly. "I have sinned against grace."

"Who hasn't?" Constance rejoined. "But grace doesn't die because it's sinned against."

He smiled again at that. "I think my particular allotment of grace is dead beyond the hope of resurrection."

"How can that be?"

He put his back to the window so that he had not to look in her eyes.

"Grace for most men takes the form of an ideal. So long as the condition to be attained is ahead there is hope, but when one has turned his back upon it" —

Indirection fences badly with open-eyed sincerity, and he did not finish. But the door was open now, and Constance meant to do her whole duty.

"I think I understand," she assented; "but I wish you would be quite frank with me. In a way, I am Mr. Bartrow's deputy, and if I have to tell him you refuse to let him help you, I shall have to give him a better reason than you have given me."

"You are inexorable," he said, and there was love in his eyes, despite his efforts reasonward. "I wish I dared tell you the whole miserable truth."

"And why may you not?"

"Because it concerns – a woman."

She shrank back a little at that, and he saw that she had misunderstood. Wherefore he plunged recklessly into the pool of frankness.

"The woman is a good woman," he went on quickly, "and one day not so very long ago I loved her well enough to believe that I could win my way back to decency and uprightness for her sake. It was a mistake. I had fallen lower than I knew, and the devil came in for his own."

Here was something tangible to lay hold of at last, and Connie made instant use of it.

"Does she know?" she asked.

The mirthless smile came and went again. "She thinks she does."

"But you haven't told her all; is that it?"

"I have tried to, but, being a good woman, she can't understand. I think I didn't fully understand, myself; but I do now."

"Is it so far beyond reparation?"

"It is indeed. If the devil's emissary who has brought me to this pass could be exorcised this moment I should never recover the lost ground of self-respect. There is nothing to go back to. If I had not to be despicable from necessity, I should doubtless be so from choice."

"I think you are harder with yourself than you would be with another. Can't you begin to believe in yourself again? *I* believe in you."

"You! – but you don't know what you are saying, Miss Elliott. See!" – his coat was buttoned to the chin, tramp-wise, and he tore it open to show her the rags that underlay it – "do you understand now? I have pawned the shirt off my back – not to satisfy the cravings of hunger, but to feed a baser passion than that of the most avaricious miser that ever lived. Do I make it plain that I am not worthy of your sympathy, or of Richard Bartrow's?"

For once the clear gray eyes were veiled, and her chin quivered a little when she spoke. "You hurt me more than I can tell," she said.

The dull rage of self-abasement in him flamed into passion at the sight of what he had done, but the bitter speech of it tarried at the sound of a heavy step on the stair. Constance rose from her seat in the window embrasure with a nervous thrill of embarrassment, but Jeffard relieved her at once. There was a vacant room on the opposite side of the corridor, and when the intruder appeared at the stair-head, Miss Elliott was alone.

She glanced at the man as he passed, and Jeffard, from his place behind the half-closed door of the vacant room, saw her draw back, and clenched his hands and swore softly, because, forsooth, she had for some fleeting pulse-beat of time to breathe the same air with the intruder. For he knew the man as a purveyor for Peter Grim's house of dishonor; a base thing for which wholesome speech has no name.

What followed was without sequence. Almost at the same instant the footsteps of the man ceased to echo in the empty corridor, there was a cry half angry and half of terror from Margaret Gannon's room, and Miss Elliott disappeared from Jeffard's limited field of vision. In the turning of a leaf Jeffard was at the door of the room in the end of the corridor. What he saw and heard made a man of him for the moment. Margaret Gannon had evidently been surprised at her sewing-machine; the work was still under the needle, and the chair was overturned. Margaret was crouching in the farthest corner of the room, with Miss Elliott standing over her like a small guardian angel at bay.

The nameless one had his back to the door, and Jeffard heard only the conclusion of a jeering insult which included both of the women.

Now Jeffard had fasted for twenty-four hours, and the quick dash to the end of the corridor made him dizzy and faint; but red wrath, so it be fierce enough, is its own elixir. Thinking of nothing but that he should acquit himself as a man before the woman he loved, he flung himself upon the contemner of women with the vigor of a righteous cause singing in his veins like the wine of new life.

The struggle was short and decisive. In his college days Jeffard had been a man of his hands, and the fierce onset proved to be the better half of the battle. Constance caught her breath and cowered in the corner with Margaret when the two men went down together, but she gave a glad little cry when she saw that Jeffard had won the fall; that he had wrenched the drawn pistol from the other's grasp and flung it harmless across the room. Then there was another and a fiercer grapple on the floor, and Jeffard's fist rose and fell like a blacksmith's hammer with the dodging head of his antagonist for its anvil.

The end of it was as abrupt as the beginning. In the midst of another wrestling bout the beaten one freed himself, bounded to his feet, and darted into the corridor with Jeffard at his heels. There was a sharp scurry of racing feet in the hall, a prolonged crash as of a heavy body falling down the stair, and Jeffard was back again, panting with the violence of it, but with eyes alight and an apology on his lips.

Constance ran to meet him and cut the apology short.

"The idea!" she protested; "when it was for Margaret's sake and mine! Are you sure you're not hurt?"

Jeffard's knuckles were cut and bleeding, but he kept that hand behind him.

"It's the other fellow who is hurt, I hope." Then to Margaret: "Do you know him? Are you afraid of him?"

Margaret glanced at Constance and hesitated. "He'll not be troubling me any more, I'm thinking. It's Pete Grim that sent him; and he was at me before I knew."

Jeffard picked up the captured weapon and put it on the sewing-machine.

"Take that to him if he comes again when you are alone. Miss Elliott, please stay here a moment until I can go down and see that the way is clear."

He was gone at the word, but he had barely reached the window with the dusty embrasure when she overtook him. There was a sweet shyness in her manner now, and he trembled as he had not in any stage of the late encounter.

"Mr. Jeffard," she began, "will you forgive me if I say that you have disproved all the hard things you were trying to say of yourself? You'll let me wire Dick, now, won't you?"

He shook his head because he was afraid to trust himself to speak. As between an abject appeal with his hopeless passion for its motive, and a plunge back into the abyss of degradation which would efface the temptation, there was nothing to choose.

"You will at least promise me that you will consider it," she went on. "I can't ask less."

If he did not reply immediately it was because he was trying to fix her image so that he should always be able to think of her just as she stood, with the afternoon sunlight falling upon her face, irradiating it and making a shimmering halo of the red-brown hair and deep wells of the clear gray eyes. A vagrant thought came to him: that it was worth a descent into the nether depths to have such a woman seek him out and plead with him for his soul's sake. He put it aside to deny her entreaty.

"I can't promise even that."

She was silent for a moment, and embarrassment came back and fought for holding-ground when she tried to bring herself to do the thing which compassion suggested. But compassion won; and Jeffard looked on with a half-cynical smile when she took a gold coin from her purse and offered it to him.

"Just for the present," she begged, with a beseeching look which might have melted a worse man.

He took the money, and the smile ended in an unpleasant laugh.

"You think I ought to refuse, and so I ought; as any man would who had a spark of manhood left in him. But that is why I take it; I have been trying to make you understand that I am not worth saving. Do I make it plain to you?"

"You make me very sorry," she quavered; and because her sorrow throttled speech, she turned and left him.

CHAPTER X

After Constance had gone, Jeffard had an exceedingly bad half-hour. For a time he tramped up and down the deserted corridor, calling himself hard names and likening his latest obliquity to whatsoever unpardonable sin has been recorded against the most incorrigible of mankind. Love had its word, also – outraged love, acknowledged only to be openly flouted and spat upon; for one may neither do violence to a worthy passion, nor give rein to an unworthy, without paying for it, blow for blow. What would she think of him? What could she think, save that she had wasted her sympathy on a shameless vagabond who had sought to palm himself off on her and her friends as a gentleman?

The thought of it was stifling. The air of the musty hallway seemed suddenly to grow suffocating, and the muffled drumming of the sewing-machine in Margaret Gannon's room jarred upon him until it drove him forth to wander hot-hearted and desperate in the streets.

Without remembering that he had crossed the viaduct or ascended the hill, he finally found himself wandering in the Highlands. Drifting aimlessly on beyond the fringe of suburban houses, he came to the borders of a shallow pond what time the sun was poising for its plunge behind the upreared mountain background in the west. It was here, when he had flung himself down upon the warm brown earth in utter weariness of soul and body, that his good angel came once more and wrestled with him.

Looking backward he saw that the angle of the inclined plane had grown suddenly precipitous within a fortnight. Since the night of his quarrel with the well-meaning miner, the baize door at the head of the carpeted stair had been closed to him. In consequence he had been driven to the lair of a less carefully groomed but more rapacious wild beast whose keeper offered his patrons a choice between the more serious business of the gaming-tables, and the lighter diversions of a variety theatre. Jeffard had seen the interior of the Bijou on the earliest of his investigative expeditions in Denver, and had gone away sick at heart at the sight of it. Wherefore it was a measure of the depths to which he had descended that he could become an habitue of the place, caring nothing for the misery and depravity which locked arms with all who breathed its tainted atmosphere.

It was at the Bijou that he had lost the better part of the winnings rescued by the miner's bit of charitable by-play; and it was there, also, that he had thrown away the major portion of a second gift from Lansdale. For two nights in succession the lack of money had kept him away.

He took out Connie's offering and stared at it with lack-lustre eyes. With heedful manipulation here was the fuel to feed the fire of his besetting passion for some hours. Having permitted her to give and himself to take it, why should he quibble at the manner of its spending? When he saw that hesitancy implied another attempt to turn back at the eleventh hour, he felt that this was no longer possible. Try as he might, the shame of this last infamous thing would reach out and drag him back into the mire.

The alternative disposed of, the matter simplified itself. He had only to determine whether he should end it all before or after he had flung away this bit of yellow metal. The decision was so nicely balanced that he let it turn upon the flipping of the coin – heads for a sudden plunge into the pond, tails for a final bout with chance and the plunge afterward.

He spun the gold piece, and went down on his hands and knees to read the oracle in the fading light. It was the misshapen eagle that stared back at him from the face of the coin, and he took his reprieve sullenly, calling his evil genius a usurer.

He got upon his feet stiffly and turned his face toward the city. Then it occurred to him that it would be well to make his preparations while he could see. There was a house building on the little knoll above the pond; a brick and the binding-string from a bundle of lath would serve; and when he had secured them he sounded the pond around the edges with a stick. It was too shallow; but from

a plank thrown across to the head of the drainage flume it proved deep enough, and here he left the brick and the bit of tarred twine.

Half an hour later he entered the Bijou. On the threshold he met the proprietor; and when he would have passed with a nod, Grim barred the way.

"Been layin' for you," announced the man of vice, sententiously. "Come into the box-office."

Jeffard obeyed mechanically. He was in the semi-stupor which anticipates the delirium of the gaming fever, and the man's voice sounded afar off. Grim led the way behind the bar to a windowless den furnished with a roll-top desk and two chairs. Closing the door, he waved Jeffard to a seat.

"Been sort o' sizin' you up lately, and I put it up that you're out o' luck. Does that call the turn?"

"I don't know how that concerns you," said Jeffard, with a sudden access of dull resentment.

"No more do I; but that's neither here nor yonder. You're down on your luck, ain't you?"

Jeffard nodded. "Call it that, if you like."

"Thought so. Broke most of the time, I reckon?"

"Yes; most of the time."

"Jes' so. Well, I'm goin' to put you on to a soft snap. I know all about you – who you are, where you come from, and all the rest. You've been playin' to lose right along, and now I'm goin' to give you a tip so you can play to win ever' time. See?"

Jeffard came out of his abstraction sufficiently to wonder what the man was driving at. "Make it short," he rejoined curtly.

Grim leaned back in his pivot-chair, and his hard face wrinkled under an evil smile.

"Don't be in a rush. Game runs all night, and you'll have plenty of time to go and blow in whatever you've got after I get through with you. Or, if you can't wait, go and blow it first, and we'll talk business afterwards."

"No," Jeffard objected sullenly. "If you have anything to say to me, say it now."

"Business before pleasure, eh? All right; here's the lay-out. I'm goin' to stake you with a suit o' good clothes, pay your board at the Albany or the Brown, whichever you like, and give you a roll to flash up that'll make you feel flush ever' time you look at it. Then" —

Jeffard's gesture was of impatience.

"Never mind about the details. What is the price of all this?"

"Mighty nigh nothin' at all. You had plenty o' friends a while back, and you'll have 'em again, as soon as you're flush. And when any of 'em feel like proddin' the tagger, why – you know where he's kep'; that's all."

While one might draw a breath there was murder in Jeffard's heart; in his weakness a rage that was childish in its vehemence took possession of him, and he covered his face with his hands to crush back the hot tears of impotence which sprang up and blinded him. Grim looked on unpityingly, waiting for what he conceived to be the inevitable. When Jeffard struggled to his feet, his face was white and he had to steady himself by the back of the chair.

"I thought I'd got to the bottom when I came here to-night," he began unsteadily, "but you've shown me my mistake. Thank God, I can yet say No to you, low as I am. Let me get out of here."

Knowing the strength of the gambler's chain, as well as the length thereof, Grim held his peace; and Jeffard pushed past the bar-tender and went out through the small door at the end of the bar. On the sidewalk a crowd beset the theatre entrance, and out of the midst of it came two men, striking and clutching at each other as they fought their way into the clear. Within arm's-length of Jeffard they separated. He saw the sheen of the electric light on a weapon, and darted between them in time to spoil the aim of the man who drew first. There was a flash and a report, a rush on the part of the crowd, and Jeffard found himself dodging and doubling swiftly through dark alleys and crooked covered ways, following the lead of the man whose life he had saved. After a time they came out in a silent street where there was light.

"Didn't know me, did you, pardner?" quoth the fugitive, relaxing his grasp on Jeffard's wrist. "Like as not you wouldn't 'a' done it if you had, but that don't saw no wood with me. That greaser had the drop on me, sure's yer born."

Whereupon Jeffard looked again, and recognizing his friendly enemy of the winning night, was glad, inasmuch as he had been able to cancel an obligation. None the less, his reply was ungracious enough.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Well, we're quits now. Good-night."

He turned and walked away, but at the corner the man overtook him. "Not that-a-way," he forbade, pointing up the street. "Somebody in the crowd'll be sure to know you, and you'll walk slap back into trouble after I done drug you out. The p'lice are there by this time, an' they don't care who, so they get a man 'r two to lock up."

Jeffard nodded, and made a circuit of the dangerous locality with his head up and the light of a steadfast purpose in his eyes. Whatever of vacillation there was in him an hour earlier had been thoroughly flailed out in the brief interview with Peter Grim. He knew now what he had to do, and the precise manner of its doing.

Keeping to the quieter streets, he came out in front of the St. James; and dodging the crowded lobby, made his way to the writing-room. Since he dare not go to the clerk for stationery, he was compelled to wait until some one left what he required. The chance befell presently, but when he came to write his note to Constance Elliott the thing was harder to do than he had prefigured it. What he finally wrote, after he had spoiled two of the three sheets of paper left by his predecessor in the chair at the writing-table, was this: —

"After what happened this afternoon, you will not think worse of me if I ask you to let me try to explain what must seem to you too despicable to be remembered. I can't hope to make you understand without being frank, and when, at some future time, you may learn the circumstances under which this is written, I shall hope for forgiveness.

"You may remember that I said I couldn't tell you the truth, because it concerns a woman. When I add that the woman is yourself, you will understand. I love you; I think I have been loving you ever since that evening which you said we were to forget – the evening at the theatre. Strangely enough, my love for you isn't strong in the strength which saves. I went from you that night when you had bidden me God-speed at Mrs. Calmaine's, and within the hour I was once more a penniless vagabond.

"When you were trying to help me this afternoon, I was trying to keep from saying that which I could never have a right to say. You pressed me very hard in your sweet innocence and loving sympathy, – you see, I am quite frank, – and when you finally gave me a chance to make the impossible thing that I longed to say still more impossible, I took it in sheer desperation. Nay, more; I purposed in my heart to so desecrate your gift as to make the thought of my love for you an unhallowed memory.

"That is all, I think, save, when it came to the brink, I found that there was still a deeper depth which was yet unplumbed, and which I trust I shall have the courage to leave unexplored."

When it was finished he wrapped the gold piece in a bit of paper, and, putting it in the envelope with the note, set out to find the house in Colfax Avenue. Having seen it but once, and that in daylight, it was not singular that it eluded him in the night; but it was surely the very irony of chance which led him to slip the envelope under the front door of a house two squares beyond that occupied by the Elliotts, and which kept him from noticing the placard "For Rent" nailed upon the very door under which he thrust his message to Constance.

This single preliminary set in order, he faced once more toward the Highlands, lagging a little from sheer weariness as he went, but finding comfort in the thought that there would be infinite surcease from hunger and exhaustion at the end of this last pilgrimage.

There was time for reflection on the way, and he marvelled that his thoughts dwelt so persistently upon the trivial details of the thing he was about to do. He was a practiced swimmer; would the weight of a single brick be sufficient to overcome the instinct of self-preservation which

might assert itself at the last moment? Probably, since he was weak from fasting, and would be encumbered with his clothing. Then another suggestion came to torment him: If he should tie the brick to his feet, as he had thought to, the water might not be deep enough, after all. Consequently, he must fasten it about his neck. And thereupon he had a fit of creeping horror at the thought of drowning with his face dragged down into the ooze and slime of the bottom.

Oddly enough, when he came to the brink of the pool these things ceased to trouble him; though even there it was impossible to turn the current of thought into a reflective channel. He made the effort for decency's sake. It was not meet that a thinking being should go out of life like the brutes that perish; without a thought for the past with its lacks and havings, or the future with its untried possibilities. But the effort returned to him void, and presently he stumbled upon the reason: the premeditated fact of self-murder shut him off alike from repentance for what had gone before, and from hope in what should come after.

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