

Cobb Irvin Shrewsbury

Ladies and Gentlemen



Irvin Cobb

Ladies and Gentlemen

«Public Domain»

Cobb I.

Ladies and Gentlemen / I. Cobb — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

A Lady and A Gentleman	5
The Order of the Bath	15
Two of Everything	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

Ladies and Gentlemen

A Lady and A Gentleman

There were the hotel lobbies; they roared and spun like whirlpools with the crowds that were in them. But the streets outside were more like mill-races, and the exits from the railroad stations became flumes down which all morning and all afternoon the living torrents unceasingly had poured. Every main crossing was in a twist of opposing currents. Overhead, on cornices and across window-ledge and against house-fronts and on ropes which passed above the roadway from one building to another, hung bunting and flags and streamers, the prevalent colors being red and white; and also many great goggle-eyed and bewhiskered portraits of dead warriors done on sail-cloth in the best styles of two domestic schools – sign-painting and election-bannering. Numbers of brass bands marched to and fro, playing this, that, and the next appropriate air, but when in doubt playing “Dixie”; and the musicians waded knee-deep through an accumulating wreckage of abandoned consonants – softly dropped *g*’s, eliminated *r*’s. In short, the United Confederate Veterans were holding their annual reunion, this being the evening of the opening day.

For absolute proof that this really was a reunion of his kind, there was visible here and there a veteran. His average age was eighty-three years and some odd months. He was feeble or he was halt or sometimes he was purblind. Only very rarely did he carry his years and his frame straight. He was near to being swept away and drowned in a vast and fragrant sea of gracious, chattering femininity. His daughters and his granddaughters and his nieces and his younger sisters and, very rarely, his wife – they collectively were as ten to one against him. They were the sponsors and the maids of honor and the matrons of honor and the chaperons; they represented such-and-such a camp or such-and-such a state, wearing flowing badges to attest their queenly distinctions; wearing, also, white summery gowns, the most of them, with touches of red. But the older women nearly always were in black.

Here and there moved the Amazonian figure of one among them who had decked herself for this great occasion in a gray uniform with bullet buttons of brass in twin rows down the front of the jacket and with a soldier cap on her bobbed hair – nearly always it was bobbed – and gold braid at the seams of her short walking skirt. A crafty stylist even had thought out the added touches of epaulets for her straight shoulders and a pair of black cavalry boots; and she went about much admired by herself and the rest.

You see, it was like this: In the days when there were many of them, the veterans had shared their reunions with their women. Now that they were so few and so weakly, their women would let the veterans share the reunions with them. It was very much like this – a gorgeous social event, the whole South participating; with sentiment for its half-erased background, with the memories of a war that ended nearly sixty years before for its fainting, fading excuse; with the splendid promise of balls and parties and receptions and flirting and love-making and match-making for its assembly call to the campaigning rampaging young of the species.

Only over by the river at the big yellow pine auditorium did the puny veteran element yet hold its own against the dominant attendant tides of the newer generations of its descendants. “General Van Brunk of Texas, honored leader of the Trans-Mississippi Department, will now present the important report of the Committee on History,” the octogenarian commander-in-chief was announcing to those fifteen hundred white heads that nodded before him like so much ripened cotton in the bolls. So General Van Brunk, holding the typewritten fruitage of one year’s hard work in his palsied hands, took the platform and cleared a shrunken throat and began.

But just then the members of the Orphan Brigade of Kentucky – thirty-two of them, no less – marched down the middle aisle with a fife-and-drum corps at their head and a color-bearer bearing a tattered rag on a scarred staff, and everybody rose up shakily to give the Rebel yell, and nobody, not even General Van Brunk, ever heard a word of General Van Brunk's report. It was ordered spread upon the minutes, though, while the commander-in-chief stood up there with his arms outstretched and wept a welcome to the straggly incoming column. He was an Orphan himself.

The proceedings were proceeding according to custom. The orator chosen to deliver the annual oration would have an easy time of it when his hour came next day. "Comrades of my father," he would say and they would applaud for five minutes. He would mention Jackson and they would whoop for seven minutes; mention Lee and that would mean ten minutes of the same. And so on.

At a quarter to ten a certain portly churchman – lately a chaplain with the A.E.F. – who by invitation had come down from Minneapolis to bear an affectionate message to these old men on behalf of the American Legion, wormed his way out of a side door of the auditorium, his job done. Inside his black garments he was perspiring heavily. The air of the packed hall had been steaming hot. He stood for a minute on the sidewalk, grateful for the cooling wind of the May night and trying to decide whether he ought to turn east or west to get back to his hotel. He was a bishop of the Episcopal Church and he had the bishop's look and manner. On his arm he felt a bony clutch, like the clutch of a parrot's foot.

A bent shell of a man was alongside him; it was this shell had fastened its skeleton fingers upon his sleeve. Out of a head that was just a skull with a brown hard skin stretched over it, a pair of filmed eyes looked up into his face, and from behind an ambush of dense white whiskers came a piping voice saying:

"Howdy, son."

The bishop was startled and secretly amused. He was used to being called "Father" – frequently his collar and vest deceived Romanists – but he couldn't remember when anyone had addressed him as "son."

"Good evening, sir," he answered.

"Son," quavered the other – he must be all of ninety, the bishop decided – "say, son, I heared you back thar – part of whut you said. You done fust-rate – yep, fust-rate, fur a Yankee. You air a Yankee, ain't you?"

"Well, I was born in Nebraska, but I live now in Minnesota," said the bishop.

"That so? Well, I'm an Alabama boy!"

All at once the bishop ceased to be amused. As the talon released its fumbling hold on him and the remnant tottered away, the bishop's right arm came up smartly but involuntarily in a military salute.

"He calls himself a boy!" quoth the bishop, addressing no one in particular. "I know now why they fought four years against such odds!"

Suddenly he was prouder than ever of being an American. And he, a stranger to these parts, felt the pathos of it all – the pathos of age and decrepitude, the pathos of the thronging shadows of an heroic Lost Cause, the gallant pathos of these defeated men who even now at their time of life would never admit they had been defeated – these things, thrown out in relief against this screen of blaring brass and pretty young girls and socially ambitious mothers and general hullabaloo.

But this story, such as it is, is not concerned with this particular reunion so much as it is concerned with the reactions to the reunion of one surviving Confederate who attended it. He was not an imported orator nor a thwarted deliverer of historical reports, nor yet the commander of some phantom division whose main camp ground now was a cemetery. He was still what he had been back yonder in '65 – a high private of the rear rank. He was fond of saying so. With him it was one favorite little joke which never staled.

He was a very weary high private as he trudged along. An exceedingly young and sleepy Boy Scout was his guide, striving to keep in stride with him. First the old man would tote his small valise, then the Scout would take it over for a spell.

They had ridden together on a street-car. At a corner which the guide thought must be their corner, they got off. They were entering an outlying part of the city, that much was certain, at least. The last high-dangled example of the art preservative as practiced by local masters of outdoor advertising service – it was labeled with the name of President Jefferson Davis, so it must be a likeness of President Davis – was swinging aloft far behind them. Those thin broken sounds of distant band-music no longer came to their ears. The houses were getting scarcer, getting to be farther apart. They stumbled in the darkness across railroad tracks, thence passed on through a sort of tunnel that was as black inside as a pocket. When they came out from under the culvert they found themselves in a desert so far as stirring life went.

“Shore you’re not lost, sonny?” asked the old man for the second or third time.

“No, suh, I think not.” But the youngster’s tone had lost its earlier manful conviction. “It oughter be right down this way somewhere. I guess we’ll strike it soon.”

So they went ahead. The veteran’s trudge became a shamble. The Scout’s step became a drowsy stagger. That Scout was growing very tired in his legs; they were such short legs. He had been on duty since breakfast time.

It was the high private’s turn to carry the grip. He halted and put it down to ease his cramped hand and to breathe. His companion lurched with a bump against the telephone pole and gave a comatose grunt.

“Look here, little pardner,” said the old man, “you act like to me you’re mighty near played out. Whereabouts do you live?”

“Clean over – over – on the other side of town from here.” The child spoke between jaw-stretching yawns. “That car-line back there goes right past our house though.” His voice was very wistful as he said that.

“Tell you what, then. It’d be wrong to keep you up any longer. But me, I’m one of these here old-time campaigners. You hand me over that piece of paper with the name and the number and all on it, and then you put out for home and get yourself a good night’s rest. By myself I’ll be shore to locate the place we’re hunting for. Anyway, you’ve done enough good deeds for one day.”

That Scout might be sleepy, but sleepy or not he had a bounden service to perform and would have so stated. But the veteran cut short those plucky semiconscious protests of his, and being outargued, the boy surrendered a scrap of cardboard and bade his late charge good-by and good night and set out on his return to civilization.

Under a near-by electric this old-time campaigner adjusted his glasses and studied the scribbled face of the card. Immediately above his head a street-marker showed on the lamp-post where the light would fall on it, and next he looked up and spelled out the lettering there. He merely was reconfirming a fact already confirmed.

“This is certainly the right street,” he said to himself. “But the question is – which-a-way is the right house? The thing for me to do, I reckon, is to roust up somebody and ask – if I can find anybody awake.”

Diagonally opposite, he made out the square bulk of a sizable two-story structure. It must be a dwelling, for it had a bit of lawn in front of it; it must be tenanted because a patchy dullish crescent of illumination made outlines for a transom above the door. Maybe somebody over there might be smart enough to tell him.

He went across, moving very slowly, and toiled up a flight of porch steps. There were only four of the steps; he would have taken his oath there were a full dozen of them. He fumbled at the door-jamb until he found a knocker.

To his knocking the response was immediate. From the inner side there was the scraping sound as of a heavy bolt being withdrawn. Next a lock clicked, and then discreetly, almost cautiously, the door opened a few inches and the face of a negro girl was revealed to him in the dim glow of a heavily hooded light burning behind her in the entry hall. She squinted hard at him.

"Whut you want yere this time o' night, mista?" she demanded. Her manner was not hospitable; it bordered on the suspicious.

"I'm looking for an address," he began.

"Dis can't be it."

"I know that. But I thought maybe somebody here might help direct me." From his growing exhaustion the intruder fairly was panting. "I'm sort of lost."

"Oh, so tha's it? Wait a minute, then." Still holding the door slightly ajar, she called rearward over her shoulder: "Miss Sissie! Oh, Miss Sissie!"

"What is it?" The answer came from back of her.

"They's a ole, kinder feeble-up lookin' w'ite gen'elman out yere w'ich he think he's lost his way."

"Wait, I'll come talk to him."

A middle-aged tall woman, who was dressed, so the stranger decided, as though expecting stylish company, appeared now at the door and above the servant's shoulder eyed him appraisingly. He tried to tell her his mission, but his voice weakened on him and trailed off. He caught at the door-casing; he felt dizzy.

The white woman elbowed the black one aside.

"Come on in," she ordered. "Get out of the way, can't you, Pansy?" She threw this second command at her maid. "Don't you see he's about ready to drop? Pick up his valise. There, that's it, mister. Just put your weight on me."

She half-lifted him across the threshold and eased him down upon a sofa in the hall. The negress closed and barred the door.

"Run make some hot coffee," her employer bade her. "Or maybe you'd rather have a little liquor? I've got plenty of it in the house." She addressed the slumped intruder.

"Nome, I never touch anything strong. But I reckon a cup of coffee would taste good to me – if I'm not putting you out too much? You'll please have to excuse me, ma'am, for breaking in on you this way, but I – " Remembering his manners, he got his hat off in a little flurry of confusion.

"Where were you trying to get to?"

With difficulty he brought his card forth from his pocket and she took it from him and read what was written upon it.

"You're a good long two miles and a half from where you belong," she told him sharply.

"But ain't this Bonaventure Avenue?"

"Yes, North Bonaventure. You came out Lawes Drive, didn't you? – the wide street where the trolley-line is? Well, you should have gone south when you turned off. Instead of that you came north. These people" – she consulted the card again – "Philipson or whatever the name is – are they friends of yours?"

"Well, yes, ma'am, and nome. I've never met them. But they're taking in one old soldier during the reunion, the hotels and the boarding-houses and all being so full up. And a gentleman at Tennessee Headquarters – that's my headquarters, ma'am – he gave me that card and sent me there."

"Send you alone?" Her angular shoulders, bare above a low-cut evening gown, shrugged impatiently.

"Oh, nome, one of these here little Boy Scouts he came with me to show me the way. You see, ma'am, it's rightly my own fault, my not being all settled before dark. But I didn't get in on the steam-cars till about six o'clock this evening and I didn't want to miss the opening session at the big hall. So I went right there, packing my baggage along with me, just as soon as I'd got me a snack of supper,

me not wanting to miss anything, as I was saying to you, ma'am. Then when the speechmaking and all was over, me and this little Boy Scout – he'd stayed right along with me at the hall – we put out to find where I was to stay. But he couldn't hardly drag one foot behind the other. Poor little wore-out fellow, I reckon he'd been running around all day. So a few minutes ago I made him go on home, me figuring I could find the house my own self. And – well, here I am, ma'am, imposing on your kindness and mighty sorry to do it, too."

"Never mind that part of it."

"But just as soon as I can get a dram of hot coffee in me I expect I'll feel stronger and then I'll be shoving along and not bother you any more. I reckon that long train ride and the excitement and everything must 'a' took it out of me, some way. There was a time when it wouldn't have bothered me at all – not a bit. Still, I'll have to confess I'm getting along, ma'am. I'll be eighty-four this coming ninth of August."

"Listen to me: You're not going to stir another inch tonight. You stay right here and tomorrow morning I'll decide myself whether you're fit to go trapesing off across to the other side of town."

"Oh, ma'am, I couldn't do that!"

"Why couldn't you?"

"But, ma'am, are you taking in any visitors during the reunion?"

"I wasn't aiming to." Her voice was grim. "But I'm fixing now to do that very little thing, whether or no."

"But honest, now – I – " He scuffled with his tired feet. "It's mighty good and mighty sweet of you, ma'am, but I'd hate to impose on you like that."

"No imposition. There're five spare bedrooms in this house – and nobody in any of them. And nobody going to be in any of them, either, while you're here – except you. I think you'll be comfortable."

"I know I'd be comfortable but – "

"Then it's all settled. By the way, I don't know your name yet?"

"My name is Braswell – Nathan Braswell, late high private of the rear rank in the Eighteenth Tennessee Infantry. But up at Forks of Hatchie – that's my home town, ma'am, a little town up in West Tennessee – they call me the Reverend Braswell, sometimes."

"Reverend?" Her eyelids narrowed. "Are you a minister?"

"Oh, nome. But sometimes when we're short on a preacher I make out to take the pulpit and read the Scriptures and make a little kind of a talk – not a regular sermon – just a little kind of a religious talk. And I'm purty active in church work generally. So I reckon that's why some people call me the Reverend Braswell. But I never use the entitlement myself – it wouldn't be becoming in a layman."

"I see. You preach but you're not a preacher. I guess you practice what you preach, too. You look like a good man, to me – and a good man can be set down anywhere and not suffer by it; at least that's my opinion. So, Mr. Braswell, right here is where you camp."

"Just as you say, ma'am." His surrender was complete now, his weariness was, too. "Probably you're right – if I tried to go any further tonight it's likely I wouldn't be much good tomorrow and I want to be spry and fresh so I can knock around and see if I can't run across some of my old pardners in the army. But excuse me again – you got my name but you ain't told me yours?"

"Call me Miss Sissie, if you want to. That's what nearly everybody does call me. Or else just plain Sis."

"All right, Miss Sissie, just as you say." He bowed to her with a grave simplicity. "And I'm sure I'm very much beholden to you, ma'am. It ain't every day that an old fellow like me is lucky enough to run into such a lovely nice lady as you."

He drank his coffee, and, being helped to his feet, he went upstairs with some aid from the lovely nice lady and presently was sound asleep in a clean bed in what he regarded as a very fine bedroom indeed. Its grandeur impressed him even through his tiredness.

Coming back down after seeing him properly bestowed, the mistress of the house hailed the colored girl. "Pansy," she said, "this place is out of business until further orders, understand?"

At that, Pansy seemed deeply puzzled. "But, Miss Sissie," she expostulated, "don't you remember 'at a suttin party – you know, Mista J. W. B. – is 'spectin' to be yere most any time wid –"

"Did you hear what I told you?" A quality of metallic harshness in Miss Sissie's voice was emphasized.

"Yessum, but you know yo'se'f how that there party, Mista J. W. B., is. He'll shore be dis'p'inted. He's liable raise Cain. He's –"

"Get him on the telephone; you know his number. Tell him this place is closed for tonight and for every day and every night until further notice from me. And tell the same thing to everybody else who calls up or stops by during the reunion. Get me?" By her tone she menaced the darky.

"Yassum."

"Then turn that hall light out."

For three days Mr. Braswell abode under that roof. Frequently during that time he remarked that he couldn't remember when he'd had a pleasanter stay anywhere. Nor could it be said that Miss Sissie failed in any possible effort to make the visit pleasant for him.

He limped down to breakfast next morning; to limp was the best he could do. His entertainer gave her household staff a double surprise, first by coming down to join him at the meal instead of taking her coffee and rolls in her room and second by appearing not in negligée but in a plain dark house-gown which accentuated rather than softened the square contours of her face and the sharp lines in it. By daylight the two had better opportunity to study each other than the somewhat hurried meeting of the night before had afforded.

She saw in him a gentle tottery relic of a man with a pair of faded unworldly old eyes looking out from a bland, wrinkly, rather empty face. He saw in her a most kindly and considerate hostess. Privately he decided she must have had plenty of sorrow in her time – something or other about her told him that life had bestowed upon her more than her proper share of hard knocks. He figured that living here alone in such a big house – except for the servants she seemed to be quite alone – must be lonesome for her, too.

As they sat down, just the two of them, he said, not apologetically exactly but a bit timidly:

"I hope, ma'am, you don't mind if I say a grace at your table? I always like to invoke the divine blessing before I break bread – seems like to me it makes the victuals taste better. Or maybe" – he hesitated politely – "maybe it's your custom to ask the blessing your own self?"

"You say it, please," she urged him in a curious strained fashion, which, however, he did not notice, and lowered her head. She lifted it once – to shoot a quick venomous glance at Pansy, who stood to serve, and a convulsive giggle which had formed in Pansy's throat died instantly. Then she bowed it again and kept it bowed while he asked God to sanctify this food to their uses and to be merciful to all within those walls and to all His children everywhere. For Jesus' sake, Amen!

She piled his plate abundantly and, for all his bodily infirmity, he showed her a healthy appetite. He talked freely, she encouraging him by proving a good listener. He was a widower with one married daughter. Since his wife's death he had made his home with this daughter. Her husband was a mighty fine man – not religious, but high-principled and doing very well indeed as a banker, considering that Forks of Hatchie was such a small town. He himself had been in the grain and feed business for most of his life but was retired now. He'd never been much of a hand for gadding over the world. Going to reunions once a year was about the extent of his traveling around. In all the time since the United Confederate Veterans had been formed he'd missed but one reunion – that was the spring when his wife died.

"Minty – that's my daughter, ma'am – Minty, she didn't want me to come to this one," he went on. "She was afraid for me to be putting out alone on such a long trip 'way down here; she kept saying, Minty did, she was afraid the excitement might be too much for me at my age. But I says to her, I

says, ‘Minty, child, when my time comes for me to go I don’t ask anything better than that it should be whilst I’m amongst my old comrades, with the sound of one of our old battle songs ringing in my ears!’ I says to her, ‘Shucks, but what’s the use of talking that way! Nothing’s going to happen to me. I can get there and I can get back!’ I says to her. ‘Going to reunion makes me feel young and spry all over again.’ But, ma’am, I’m afraid Minty was right about it, this time anyhow. I actually don’t believe I’m going to be able to get back down-town for today’s doings – not for the morning’s session anyway. I have to own up to you that I feel all kind of let-down and no-account, someway.”

So through the forenoon he sat in an easy chair in an inner sitting-room and Miss Sissie, abandoning whatever else she might have had to do, read to him the accounts of the great event which filled column after column of the morning paper. He dozed off occasionally but she kept on reading, her voice droning across the placid quiet. Following the dinner which came at midday, she prevailed on him to take a real nap, and he stretched out on a sofa under a light coverlid which she tucked about him and slept peacefully until four o’clock. Late in the afternoon a closed car containing a couple – a man and a woman – stopped in the alleyway behind the house and the driver came to the back door, but Miss Sissie went out and gave him a message for his passengers and he returned to his car and drove away. There were no other callers that day.

Mr. Braswell fretted a little after supper over his inability to muster up strength for getting to the auditorium, but somewhat was consoled by her assurances that a good night’s rest should put him in proper trim for marching in the big parade next morning. By nine o’clock he was in bed and Miss Sissie had a silent idle evening at home and seemed not ungrateful for it.

On the second morning the ancient greeted her in what plainly was his official wardrobe for parading. A frayed and threadbare butternut jacket, absurdly short, with a little peaked tail sticking out behind and a line of tarnished brass buttons spaced down its front, hung grotesquely upon his withered framework. Probably it had fitted him once; now it was acres too loose. Pinned to the left breast was a huge badge, evidently home-made, of yellowed white silk, and lengthwise of it in straggled letters worked with faded red floss ran the number and name of his regiment. In his hand he carried a slouch-hat which had been black once but now was a rusty brown, with a scrap of black ostrich-plume fastened to its band by a brass token.

With trembling fingers he proudly caressed the badge.

“My wife made it for me out of a piece of her own wedding-dress nearly thirty years ago,” he explained. “I’ve worn it to every reunion since then. It’s funny how you put me in mind of my wife. Not that you look like her nor talk like her either. She was kind of small and she had a low voice and you’re so much taller and your way of speaking is deeper and carries further than hers did. And of course you can’t be more than half as old as she’d be if she’d lived. Funny, but you do remind me of her, though. Still, I reckon that’s easy to explain. All good women favor each other some way even when they don’t look alike. It’s something inside of them that does it, I judge – goodness and purity and thinking Christian thoughts.”

If she winced at that last his innocent, weakened old eyes missed it. Anyhow the veteran very soon had personal cause for distress. He had to confess that he wasn’t up to marching. Leaving the dining-room, he practically collapsed. He was heart-broken.

“Don’t you worry,” said Miss Sissie, in that masterful way of hers. “Even if you’re not able to turn out with the rest of them you’re going to see the parade. I can’t send you down-town in my own car – it’s – it’s broken down – and I can’t go with you myself – I – I’m going to be busy. But I can send you in a taxicab with a careful man to drive and you can see the parade.”

“That’s mighty sweet of you – but then, I reckon it’s your nature to be sweet and thoughtful for other folks,” he said gratefully. “But, ma’am” – and doubt crept into his voice – “but ain’t all the public hacks likely to be engaged beforehand for today?”

“I happen to know the manager of the leading taxicab company here,” she told him. “He’ll do what I say even if he has to take a rig away from somebody else. I’ll telephone him.”

“But with the streets all crowded the way they’ll be, won’t it be hard to find a place where I can watch the other boys marching by?” In his eagerness he was childish.

“That’ll be arranged, too,” she stated. “As it so happens, I also know the chief of police. I’ll call him up and give him the number of the taxi you’re in and I’ll guarantee one of his policemen will be on the special lookout for you at the far end of the Drive to see to it that you get a good place somewhere along the route.”

“Seems like to me the most important people in this town must respect you mighty highly!” he exclaimed happily. “Well, I guess it’s that same way everywhere – all kinds of people are bound to recognize a real lady when they meet her and look up to her!”

“Oh, yes, there’s one thing more.” She added this as if by an afterthought. “You needn’t tell anybody you meet – any of your old friends or any of the committeemen or anybody – where you’re stopping. You see, I didn’t arrange to take in any visitors for the reunion – there were reasons why I didn’t care to take in anyone – and now that I have you with me I wouldn’t care for anybody connected with the local arrangements to know about it. You understand, don’t you? – they might think I was presuming on their rights.”

“Oh, yes’m, I understand,” he said unsuspectingly. “It’ll just be a little secret between us if that’s the way you’d rather it was. But I couldn’t rightly tell anybody anyhow – seeing that you ain’t ever told me what your last name is. I’d like to know it, too – I aim to write you a letter after I get home.”

“My name is Lamprey,” she said. “Cecelia Lamprey. I don’t hear it very often myself – at least, not spoken out in full. And now I’d better be ringing up those influential friends of mine – you mustn’t be late getting started.”

The same taxicab driver who drove him on this day came again on the third day to take Miss Sissie’s venerable house guest to his train. It would appear that her car still was out of commission.

She did not accompany him to the station. Domestic cares would hold her, she told him. She did not go to the front of the house to see him off, either. Indeed a more observant person than Mr. Braswell might have marveled that so constantly she had secluded herself indoors during his visit; and not only indoors, but behind windows curtained against the bright, warm Southern sunshine. They exchanged their farewells in her living-room.

“I ain’t never going to forget you,” he told her. “If you’d been my own daughter you couldn’t ’a’ treated me any nicer than what you have – and me just an old stove-up spavined country-jake that you never saw before in your life and probably never will see again. You ain’t seen fit, ma’am, to tell me much about yourself – seems like you let me do most of the talking, and that suited me – but old as I am I know a perfect lady when I see one and that’s what you are, ma’am, and what always you must have been and always will be – good-by and God bless you!”

Saying nothing, she bent in the attitude of one accepting a benediction, and a moment later she was following him to the door and watching him as he crept in his labored, faltering gait along the entrance-hall. Under his arm was his luncheon to be eaten on the train; she had with her own hands prepared and boxed it. She waited there on the threshold until the hooded front door clicked behind him.

“Pansy,” she called then toward the back of the house, and now her voice had in it a customary rasping quality which, strangely, had been almost altogether lacking from it these past two or three days. “You, Pansy!”

“Yassum.”

“You might call up that party that we turned down the other night and tell him this place has reopened for business as usual.”

Approximately two weeks later, Mr. Randolph Embury, president of the Forks of Hatchie People’s Bank, wrote as follows to the mayor of that city where the veterans had met:

“Dear Mr. Mayor: You may possibly recall that we met in 1922 while serving as delegates for our respective states at the Inter-Southern Commercial Congress

in Norfolk? I am therefore taking advantage of our slight acquaintance and am trespassing upon your patience to ask a favor which means a great deal to my wife.

“Her aged father, the late Nathan Braswell, attended the recent Confederate Reunion in your city. Almost immediately upon his arrival back at this place he suffered a stroke of paralysis. Within ten days a second stroke resulted fatally to him. The interment took place yesterday, the twenty-ninth inst. His loss in this community is very deeply mourned. He was the last old soldier left here.

“Although rendered completely helpless by the first stroke, he remained almost entirely rational and coherent until the second one occurred. In this stage of his illness he spoke repeatedly of his experiences while at the reunion. He was a guest in the private home of one who must have been a most cultured and charming lady – undoubtedly a lady of position and affluence. By her graciousness and her zealous care of him and her constant ministrations to his comfort she made a deep impression upon him. He was most anxious that she should know of his gratitude, and repeatedly he charged us to write her, telling how much he appreciated the attentions shown him.

“Naturally, during his illness and until after the interment neither my wife nor myself had much time for letter-writing. But this morning Mrs. Embury wrote to this lady, thanking her in her dead father’s name and in ours and telling her that with practically his last conscious breath he spoke affectionately of her and paid tribute to her splendid womanly qualities and even uttered a little prayer for her well-being. He was a very devout man. That letter I enclose with this one, but in an unaddressed envelop. Mrs. Embury, of course, is most anxious that it should reach the intended recipient promptly.

“The reason for not addressing it you will understand when I tell you that my father-in-law could not remember his benefactress’s last name except that it began with an ‘L’ and sounded something like ‘Lampey’ or ‘Lambry.’ He referred to her always as ‘Miss Sissie,’ which I would judge was her familiar name among more intimate friends. He could not remember the name of the street upon which she resided. However, he did describe the residence as being a very large and very handsome one, standing in a somewhat secluded part of the outskirts and not far from where a railroad track and an overhead viaduct were.

“This, then, is the favor I would ask of you: If the lady is as prominently connected as I had reason to believe from Mr. Braswell’s statements, I assume you know her already. If not, I take it that it should not be a very difficult matter to locate one whose character and attainments must have given her a high standing among your good citizens. So I am asking you to see to it that the enclosed letter is put at once into her hands.

“Thanking you in advance for any trouble or inconvenience to which you may be put in carrying out our wishes, I remain,

“Yours most sincerely,

“Randolph Embury.”

And within four days got back the following reply:

“Mayor’s Office, June 2.

“Dear Sir:

“Yours received and contents carefully noted. In reply to same would say that while ready at any time to serve you and your good wife in every way possible, yet

in this case I am put in a delicate attitude and fear you also may be put in one should I undertake to fulfill your desire.

“Undoubtedly the person that your late father-in-law had in mind was one Cecelia Lamprey, better known as ‘Sis.’ But not by the widest stretch of imagination could anyone think of her as a ‘lady.’ She is the proprietress of a most notorious assignation house located on North Bonaventure Avenue, this city, and according to my best information and belief, has always been a woman of loose morals and bad repute. I might add that having been elected on a reform ticket and being committed to the task of ridding our city of evil, I am at present setting on foot an effort to close up her establishment, which has until lately enjoyed secret ‘protection,’ and to drive her from our midst.

“Accordingly, I am constrained to believe that, being probably semi-delirious, the lately deceased, your esteemed father-in-law, must have made a mistake. I assume that he had ‘Sis’ Lamprey’s house pointed out to him and in his ravings got it confused with the domicile where he was housed during his sojourn among us. It is not conceivable to me that a man such as you describe would, while in his sober senses, set foot inside an establishment so readily recognizable at a glance as being absolutely disreputable, let alone remain there for any appreciable period of time. It is equally incredible to think of ‘Sis’ opening her doors to any decent person or for any worthy purpose.

“In view of these facts I am constrained to believe your wife would shrink from any contact or any communication with such an individual. I am therefore taking the liberty of holding her letter on my desk until you and she have had opportunity to consider this embarrassing situation and to decide what you should do. My advice is that you instruct me to return the letter to you at once and consider the incident closed. However, I await your further instruction.

(Signed) “Jason Broderick, Mayor.”

To which the following reply was immediately dispatched by wire:

“Nevertheless, on behalf of my wife and myself, kindly be so good as immediately to deliver the letter in question to the lady in question.”

The Order of the Bath

It seemed like everything that was happening that week happened to the Gridleys. Substantially, these were Mrs. Gridley's own words in speaking of the phenomena.

To begin with, their waitress quit practically without any warning at all. Afflicted by that strange and sudden migratory impulse which at times affects most of the birds and many of the hired help, she walked out between two suns. In the second place, the water famine reached a point where the board of trustees forbade the use of water for all-over bathing purposes or for wetting-down lawns or washing cars or sprinkling streets or spraying flower-beds even; and Mr. Gridley, as one of the trustees, felt it incumbent upon him to set a proper example before the rest of the community by putting his own household upon the strictest of rations, abluently speaking. In the third place, Mr. Jeffreys Boyce-Upchurch, the eminent English novelist, became their guest. And fourthly, although not occurring in this order, the Gridleys took on a butler of the interesting name of Launcelot Ditto.

To a considerable extent, three of these events were interrelated. The drought which had brought on the shortage in the village reservoir was the isolated exception, a manifestation of freaky nature and of absolutely unprecedented weather conditions. But the others were more or less coordinated. If their old waitress had not quit on them the Gridleys would not have been in the market for a new servant to fill the vacancy, and if Mr. Boyce-Upchurch had not been coming to stay with them it was possible she might not have quit at all. There was a suspicion that she was influenced by a private objection to so much company in the heat of the summer, Mrs. Gridley's mother and sister from Baltimore, the latter bringing her little boy with her, having just concluded a two weeks' stay; and if it had not been Mr. Boyce-Upchurch who was coming, but some less important person, the Gridleys would have been content with hiring for the succession one who also was a female and home-grown, or if not exactly home-grown, one belonging to almost any of the commoner Nordic stocks – say Scandinavian or Celtic – whereas it was felt that the advent of a Boyce-Upchurch called for something of an especially rich and fruity imported nature in the line of butlers. At least, such was the language employed by Mrs. Gridley's brother, Mr. Oliver Braid, in describing, this phase of the issue. He – young Mr. Braid – was the only member of the household who declined to take the situation seriously. In this regard he stood quite alone. Mr. Gridley took it seriously, as, to a more or less degree, did the neighbors also. But Mrs. Gridley took it most seriously of all.

Its seriousness began to lay hold upon her in the morning on a Monday, which proverbially is a bothersome day for housewives anyhow, when Miss Rena Belle Titworthy, the recording secretary of the Ingleglade Woman's Club and its only salaried officer, called to break the news to her, it being that in the judgment of a majority of the active workers in the club Mrs. Gridley should have the distinguished pleasure of entertaining Mr. Boyce-Upchurch on the occasion of his impending visit. In a more vulgar circle of life the same thing has been termed passing the buck.

"But," expostulated Mrs. Gridley, "but – of course I feel flattered and I am sure Henry will, too, when he comes home tonight and hears about it – but I'm afraid we couldn't make such a prominent man comfortable. Our house is rather small and all that, and besides there's Olga having packed up and left only last night and all that. Really, don't you think, Miss Rena Belle, that he would prefer to go to the hotel where he could be – you know – quieter and more to himself? Or to Mrs. Wainwright's? She's the president of the club and she's the madam chairman of the executive committee besides, and naturally the pleasure of having Mr. Boyce-Upchurch should go to her. Her house is a mansion, almost, while we –"

Miss Titworthy caught her up right there.

"No," said Miss Titworthy firmly. Miss Titworthy had authority about her and a considerable distinction. She was large and deep-chested and combined in her manner the magisterial and the managerial and, subtly, the maternal. She had all that a motherly woman should have, except children.

And, as just stated, she was large, while on the other hand Mrs. Gridley was slight and, upon the whole, plastic by temperament, not to say bordering on the yielding. And bulk, in such cases, counts.

"Pardon me," said Miss Titworthy still more firmly, "pardon me, my dear, but no. Madam Chairman Wainwright is closing up their place to go to their other place in the Berkshires; you must have known that. Probably you forgot it. And the hotel is quite out of the question. I had a letter only yesterday from Mr. Boyce-Upchurch, written by him personally – it seems he doesn't carry a secretary with him on his tour – saying he preferred stopping at some private home. He mentioned the inconveniences of American hotels and something about their exceedingly high rates. I'm going to keep it as a souvenir. And so, what with Madam Chairman Wainwright closing up and you being the first vice-president – well, there you are, aren't you?" concluded Miss Titworthy with a gesture which was meant to be a death blow to further argument.

"And then the water being shut off – I'm thinking of that, too," said Mrs. Gridley, but in a weakening tone. "Henry had the plumber come and disconnect all three of the bathtubs. He said he wasn't going to put temptation in the way of his own family or himself, either. I know lots of people are doing it on the sly – using a hose, too – but I can't even have a little water in a sprinkling can for my poor withered flowers. Look at them out of that window there – just literally drying up. And we're sending all the wash, even the flat pieces, to the Eagle Laundry. And Henry is going to his club in town for a bath every day, and I'm doing the best I can with the wash-basin and a sponge, and the way Nora – that's my cook's name – and Delia, the waitress – now that Olga has gone, Delia's the only other girl we've got left – the way those two carry on and complain you'd think I was personally responsible for the fact that not a drop of rain has fallen in over two months. And the English being such great hands for their tubs and all, and Mr. Boyce-Upchurch being an Englishman and all, why, I'm honestly afraid, Miss Rena Belle, that he'll be awfully put out.

"I dessay he'll be able to accommodate himself to a condition over which none of us has any control," stated Miss Titworthy. "He'll arrive Wednesday afternoon on the five o'clock boat. He asked that he be met with a car. I dessay you'll be wanting to give a little dinner to him Wednesday evening. I don't know what he'll want to do Thursday morning – be driven around, I imagine. And Thursday afternoon there's the reception at the Woman's Club, and his lecture is that night, and Friday he leaves for Trenton where he has his next date on Saturday. He did write something about preferring to be ridden over to Trenton."

"I could take him over myself," said Mrs. Gridley, her citadel undermined and she rapidly capitulating, "if he doesn't mind going in a two-seated runabout."

"There'll be no trouble about the car," stated Miss Titworthy. "I dessay someone will proffer the use of a touring car."

"Well, that point is settled then," agreed Mrs. Gridley, now entirely committed to the undertaking. "But I must get somebody in and broken in to take Olga's place between now and Wednesday. Really that gives me only today and tomorrow, and help is so hard to get, you've no idea, Miss Titworthy! I suppose I'd better run into town this afternoon and go to the employment agencies. No, I can't, – there's my bridge lesson. And tomorrow is the Fergus' tea. I can't go then, either. I promised Mrs. Fergus I'd pour. I suppose I'll have to get Henry or my brother Oliver to do it. But neither one of them would know how to pick out a girl, provided there's any choice at the agencies to pick from – oh, dear!"

"Had you thought of a butler?" inquired Miss Titworthy.

"A butler?"

"Yes, instead of a maid. You'll pardon the suggestion but I was thinking that Mr. Boyce-Upchurch being a foreigner and accustomed, of course, to butlers, and a butler giving a sort of air – a tone, as it were – to a household, that perhaps – well – "

They had fallen on fertile ground, those seeds. They were sprouting, germinating. Before the massive shoulders of the Ingleglade Woman's Club's efficient recording secretary had vanished down

the bowery and winding reaches of Edgecliff Avenue they were putting forth small green speculative shoots through Mrs. Gridley's mind. Always and ever, from the very first days of her married life, Mrs. Gridley had cherished in the back of her mind a picture of an establishment in which the butler, a figure of dignity and poise and gray striped trousers in the daytime but full-dress by night, would be the chief of staff. As what woman has not? And now for the gratifying of that secret ambition she had an excuse and a reason.

Section Two of this narrative brings us to another conversation. At this stage the narrative seems somehow to fall naturally into sections, but one has a premonition that toward the last it will become a thing of cutbacks and close-ups and iris-ins and fade-outs, like a movie. It brings us to this other conversation, which passed over the telephone between Mrs. Gridley and her brother Mr. Oliver Braid.

"Well, Dumplings," said that gentleman, speaking at noon of Tuesday from his office, "the hellish deed is done!"

"You got one then?" she answered eagerly.

"Got one? Madam, you wrong me and you low-rate him. I got the One and only One – the Original One. The only misleading thing about him is his name. Be prepared for a pleasant shock. It's Launcelot Ditto. I ask you to let that soak into your tissues and be absorbed by the system. Only Ditto means more of the same and if I'm any judge, there aren't any more at home like him and there never will be. But the Launcelot part fits like a union suit.

"Oh, girl, I'm telling you he's got everything, including the adenoids. Not the puny domestic brand of our own faulty and deficient land, mind you, but the large, super-extra-fine export, golden-russet adenoid of that favored island whose boast is that Britons never shall be slaves except to catarrh. And he's as solemn as a Masonic funeral. And he stepped right out of a book by way of the stage. He ought to be serving strawberries and Devonshire cream on the terrace to the curate of St. Ives and the dear old Dowager Duchess of What-you-may-call-'em, while the haw-haw blooms in the hedgerow. He ought to be coming on at the beginning of Act One to answer the telephone and pat the sofa pillows smooth and fold up 'The Pink 'Un,' and sigh deeply because the Young Marster is going to the dogs. He ought to be outlining the plot to a housekeeper in rustling black silk named Meadows."

"Ollie Braid, are you delirious?"

"Not at all. I am dazed, dazzled, blinded, but I am not delirious. I can half shut my eyes and see him in his hours of ease sitting in our buttery perusing that sprightly volume with full-page illustrations entitled 'The Stately Homes of Old England.' Sounds pretty good, eh what? Good – hell! He's perfect. He certainly ought to do a lot for us socially over there in Ingleglade. I can half shut 'em again and see the local peasantry turning a lovely pea-green with envy as he issues forth on the front lawn to set up the archery butts so that we may practice up on our butting. That's another place where the buttery will come in handy."

"He was willing to come out, then?"

"Well, at first he did balk a little on the idea of demeaning himself by accepting a position with the lower or commuting classes. The country, yes; the town, perhaps, but the environs – well, hardly. That was his attitude. But with my lilting love-song I won him, he-siren that I am. I told him Ingleglade was not really suburban but merely outlying, if one gets what one means. That wasn't deception, that was diplomacy. Anyhow, haven't we got some of the outlyingest real-estate dealers in the entire state of New Jersey? Do we not combine all the drawbacks of the city with few or none of the advantages of the country? I often sit and wonder whence comes this magic power of mine for bending strong natures to my will. The crowning stroke was when I told him Boyce-Upchurch was so shortly to honor us. That won him. He admires Boyce-Upchurch tremendously. Not his books – he hasn't read 'em – but it seems he knows Boyce-Upchurch's uncle, who's an archduke or a belted earl or something well up among the face-cards."

"You talk too much, Oliver. You think you're funny and you aren't."

“Oh, but, madam – ”

“Shut up a minute! He has references, of course?”

“Fair lady, sweet dame, I plight you my solemn word that with the references he’s got from noble British families he could be our ambassador to the Court of St. James the day after he took out his naturalization papers. He’s temporarily unattached but that’s because he hasn’t been able to find anybody worthy of him. He’s only taking us on trial. Why hark ye, lass, he used to work for the ‘Un’rable ‘Urrible ‘Ubbs. He’s got the documents to prove it.”

“The what?”

“I’m merely telling you what he said. It didn’t sound like a name to me, either, at first. But now it’s beginning to grow on me; I may make a song out of it.”

“When will he be out?”

“This very night. I’m chaperoning him personally. We are to meet at the ferry, and I’m to wear a primrose in my buttonhole in case he’s forgotten how I look. I’m reading up now on the history of the Norman Conquest. I want to be prepared to meet him on his own ground should he care for conversation.”

“Ollie, you always were an idiot.”

“Dear wench, ’tis a family failing. I have a sister, a flower-like slip of a thing, but, alas, she suffers from pollen in the pod.”

“And what’s more, she’s going to give you a hard slap the first chance.” Over the line her voice took on an uncertain tone. “Of course I know you’re exaggerating frightfully but – ”

“As regards Launcelot, you couldn’t exaggerate. He confounds the powers of description. He baffles the most inventive imagination. He – ”

“Oh, do listen! All at once I’m beginning to worry about Norah. I hadn’t thought of her until right now.”

“What of Norah?”

“Well, from what you say and even making allowances for your romancing, this man must be very English. And Norah’s so – so Irish. Delia is, too, for that matter. But especially Norah.”

“Strange, but I had noticed that myself about our Norah.”

“Notice it? – I should say. She calls the English – what is it she calls them?”

“Black-and-Tans. Also Saxon oppressors. Also a name which is pronounced by hissing first and then gritting the teeth in a bitter manner. I think it’s an old Gaelic word signifying Oliver Cromwell. You may recall having heard that Norah has a brother who had some personal misunderstanding with the authorities in Dublin in the year 1916. He became at that time very seriously antagonized toward them. And it looks to me as though Norah was inclined to take sides in the controversy.”

“Naturally. But she may make trouble. I hadn’t thought of that before. And if he should happen to do anything or say anything to arouse her or if she should take one of her grudges against Mr. Boyce-Upchurch – oh, I’m scared, Oliver!”

“Prithee be blithe and gay. Norah and I understand each other. We have a bond between us or will have one as soon as I tell her privately that I’m contributing to a fund for financing an uprising on the part of those poor down-trodden Hindus. Immediately on my arrival this evening I’ll take Norah apart and – ”

“You’ll do what?”

“Don’t worry. I’m going to put her back together again, so you’d never notice it. But I’ll take her apart and beg her for my sake to remain calm, cool, and collected. You leave Norah to me.”

“I suppose I’ll have to; there’s nothing else to be done. And, Oliver, you may be a born idiot but just the same you’re a dear for going to all this trouble on my account and I do appreciate it. There – I’m throwing you a kiss by wire.”

“Kindly confine yourself to appreciating Launcelot – that, God wot, will be reward enough for me, fond heart. And in case either our butler or our guest, or both of them, should desire to call the

tenants in from the estate, all to stand and join in singing the Royal Anthem, please remember how it goes – God Save the King until Norah’s Brother Can Get at Him!”

Ditto shifted from civilian garb and served dinner that evening. It became a meal that was more than a meal; it became a ceremonial. There was a formalism to it, there was pomp and circumstance. The passing of a dish was invested with a ritualistic essence. Under Ditto’s ministrations so simple a dessert as cold rice pudding took on a new meaning. One wondered what Ditto could have done with a fancy ice. One felt that merely with a loaf of bread and a jug of wine and none of the other ingredients of Old Omar’s recipe for a pleasant evening, he nevertheless could have fabricated the plausible illusion of a banquet of courses. Mrs. Gridley was thrilled to her marrows – possibly a trifle self-conscious but thrilled.

After dinner and a visit to the service wing, Mr. Braid sought out his sister on the veranda where she was doing what most of her sister-villagers of parched Ingleglade were doing at that same hour – wishing for rain.

“Well, Dumplings,” he said, “you may continue to be your own serene self. In me behold a special plenipotentiary doing plenipotenching by the day, week, or job, satisfaction guaranteed or money refunded. I’ve just had a little heart-to-heart chat with Norah and there isn’t a cloud in the sky as large as a man’s hand.”

“I wish there were – this terrible drought!” she said, her thoughts divided between the two concerns uppermost in her mind. “What did you say to her?”

“I approached the subject with my customary tact. With a significant glance toward the visiting nobleman I reminded Norah that blood was thicker than water, to which she piously responded by thanking God for three thousand miles of the water. Still, I think she’s going to keep the peace. For the moment, she’s impressed, or shall I say fascinated. Ditto is high-hatting her something scandalous, and she’s taking it. For all our Norah’s democratic principles she evidently carries in her blood the taint of a lurking admiration for those having an aristocratic bearing, and Ditto is satisfying the treasonable instinct which until now she has had no chance to gratify – at least, not while living with us. As for Delia, that shameless hussy is licking the spoon and begging for more. She’s a traitor to United Ireland and the memory of Daniel O’Connell.

“Mind you, I’m not predicting that the spell will endure. The ancient feud may blaze up. We may yet have a race war in our kitchen. For all you know, you may at this moment be sitting pretty on a seething volcano; but unless something unforeseen occurs I think I may safely promise you peace and harmony, during the great event which is about to ensue in our hitherto simple lives.

“For, as I said just now, Norah is under a thrall – temporary perhaps but a thrall just the same. Well, I confess to being all thrallled-up myself. That certainly was a high-church dinner – that one tonight was. Several times I was almost overcome by a well-nigh irrepressible temptation to get up and ask Ditto to take my place and let me pass a few things to him.”

“I don’t believe there ever has been such a drought,” said Mrs. Gridley.

“Ho, hum, well, I suppose we’ll all get used to this grandeur in time,” said Mr. Braid. “I wonder if he is going to put on the full vestments every night no matter whether we have company or not? I wish on nights when we do have very special company he’d loan me his canonicals and wear mine. I expect he’d regard it as presuming if I asked for the address of his tailor? What do you think, Dumplings?”

“I wish it would rain,” said Mrs. Gridley. “And I hope and pray Norah doesn’t fly off into one of her tantrums. I wonder does Mr. Boyce-Upchurch like Thousand Islands dressing or the Russian better? What were you just saying, Ollie?”

Mr. Braid tapped his skull with his forefinger.

“Ah, the family failing,” he murmured, “that dread curse which afflicts our line! With some of the inmates it day by day grows worse. And there’s nothing to be done – it’s congenital.”

"I expect the best thing to do is just to take a chance on the Russian," said Mrs. Gridley. "If he doesn't like it, why he doesn't like it and I can't help myself, I didn't catch what you said just then, Ollie?"

"Abstraction overcomes the victim; the mind wanders; the reason totters," said Mr. Braid. "By the way, I wonder if Ditto would care to have his room brightened with a group view of the Royal Family – the King in shooting costume, the Queen wearing the sort of hat that the King would probably like to shoot; the lesser members grouped about? You know the kind of thing I mean."

"Would you start off tomorrow night with clams or a melon?" asked Mrs. Gridley.

"Or perhaps he'd prefer an equestrian photograph of the Prince of Wales," said Mr. Braid. "I know where I can pick up one second hand. I'll stop by tomorrow and price it. It's a very unusual pose. Shows the Prince *on* the horse."

"Melon, I guess," said Mrs. Gridley. "Most Englishmen like cantaloups, I hear. They're not so common among them."

"My duty being done I think I shall retire to my chamber to take a slight, not to say sketchy bath in a shaving mug," said Mr. Braid.

"I wish it would rain," said Mrs. Gridley.

Numbers of friendly persons met Mr. Boyce-Upchurch at the boat that Wednesday afternoon. Miss Titworthy inevitably was there and riding herd, so to speak, on a swaying flock of ewes of the Ingleglade Woman's Club. She organized a sort of impromptu welcoming committee at the ferry-house. Mrs. Gridley missed this, though. She had to stay outside with her runabout. Her husband and brother – the latter had escorted Mr. Boyce-Upchurch to One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street from the University Club where he had been a guest of someone since finishing his New England swing the week before – were with the visiting celebrity. They surrendered him over to Miss Titworthy, who made him run the gantlet of the double receiving line and introduced him to all the ladies. Of these a bolder one would seek to detain him a minute while she told him how much she admired his books and which one of them she admired most, but an awed and timider one would merely say she was *so* glad to meet him, having heard of him *so* often. Practically every timider one said this. It was as though she followed a memorized formula. Now and then was a bolder bold one who breasted forward at him and cooed in the manner of a restrained but secretly amorous hen-pigeon.

Mr. Boyce-Upchurch bore up very well under the strain of it all. Indeed, he seemed rather to expect it, having been in this country for several months now and having lectured as far west as Omaha. He plowed along between the greeters, a rather short and compact figure but very dignified, with his monocle beaming ruddy in the rays of the late afternoon sun and with a set smile on his face, and he murmuring the conventional words.

The ceremonial being concluded, the two gentlemen reclaimed him and led him outside, and there he met Mrs. Gridley, who drove him up the Palisades Road, her husband and brother following in a chartered taxi with Mr. Boyce-Upchurch's luggage. There was quite a good deal of luggage, including a strapped steamer-rug and two very bulging, very rugged-looking kit bags and a leather hat-box and a mysterious flat package in paper wrappings which Mr. Braid told Mr. Gridley he was sure must contain a framed steel engraving of the Death of Nelson.

Mr. Braid pattered on:

"For a truly great and towering giant of literature, our friend seems very easy to control in money matters. Docile – that's the word for it, docile. He let me tip the porter at the club for bringing down these two tons of his detachable belongings, and on the way up Madison Avenue he deigned to let me jump out and go in a shop and buy him an extra strap for his blanket roll, and he graciously suffered me to pay for a telegram he sent from the other side, and also for that shoe-shine and those evening papers he got on the boat. Told me he hadn't learned to distinguish our Yankee small change. Always getting the coins mixed up, he said. Maybe he hasn't had any experience."

“Rather brusque in his way of speaking to a fellow,” admitted Mr. Gridley. “You might almost call it short. And rather fussy about getting what he wants, I should say. Still, I suppose he has a great deal on his mind.”

“Launcelot will fairly dote on him,” said Mr. Braid. “Mark my words, Launcelot is going to fall in love with him on the spot.”

Meanwhile, Mrs. Gridley was endeavoring to explain to Mr. Boyce-Upchurch why it was that in a town lying practically on a river so large and so wide as the Hudson there could be a water shortage. He couldn’t appear to grasp it. He declared it to be extraordinary.

This matter of a water shortage apparently lingered in his mind, for half an hour later following tea, as he was on the point of going aloft to his room to dress for dinner he called back to his host from half-way up the stairs:

“I say, Gridley, no water in the taps, your wife tells me. Extraordinary, what? Tell you what: I’ll be needing a rub-down tonight – stuffy climate here and all that. So later on just let one of your people fetch up a portable tub to my room and bring along lots of water, will you? The water needn’t be hot. Like it warm, though. Speak about it, will you, to that slavey of yours.”

Mrs. Gridley gave a quick little wincing gasp and a hunted look about her. But Delia had gone to carry Mr. Boyce-Upchurch’s waistcoat upstairs. The episode of the waistcoat occurred a few minutes before, immediately after the guest had been ushered into the house.

“Frightfully warm,” he remarked on entering the living-room. “Tell me, is America always so frightfully warm in summer?” Then, without waiting for an answer, he said: “Think I must rid myself of the wescut. All over perspiration, you know.” So saying, he took off first his coat and next his waistcoat and hung the waistcoat on a chair and then put the coat back on again. Still, as Mr. Braid remarked in an undertone to nobody in particular, it wasn’t exactly as though Mr. Boyce-Upchurch had stripped to his shirt-sleeves because, so Mr. Braid pointed out to himself, the waistband of the trousers came up so high, especially at the back, and the suspenders – he caught himself here and mentally used the word “braces” instead – the braces were so nice and broad that you didn’t see enough of the shirt really to count.

Dinner was at seven-thirty, with twelve at the table and place cards, and Delia impressed to aid Ditto at serving, and the finest show of flowers that Mrs. Gridley’s dusty and famished garden could yield. She had spent two hours that afternoon picking the least wilted of the blossoms and designing the decorative effects. Little things occurred, one or two of them occurring before the dinner got under way.

Ditto approached the lady of the house. “Madame,” he said throatily, in the style of one who regally bears yet more regal tidings, “madame, Mr. Boyce-Upchurch doesn’t care for cocktails. ‘E would prefer a sherry and bittez.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mrs. Gridley in a small panic of dismay. “Oh, I’m so sorry but I’m afraid there isn’t any sherry.”

“There’s cooking sherry out in the kitchen, sis,” said Mr. Braid, who stood alongside her smiling happily about nothing apparently. “Tackled it myself the other day when I was feeling daredevilish.”

“But the bitters – whatever they are!”

“Give him some of that cooking sherry of yours and he’ll never miss the bitters.”

“Sh-h-h,” she warned, “he might hear you.”

He didn’t, though. At that moment Mr. Boyce-Upchurch was in conversation with Mrs. Thwaites and her husband from two doors away. He was speaking to them of the hors d’œuvres which had just been passed, following the cocktails. The Thwaites were fellow countrymen of his; their accent had betrayed them. Perhaps he felt since they spoke his language that he could be perfectly frank with them. Frankness appeared to be one of his outstanding virtues.

It now developed that the relish attracted him and at the same time repelled. Undeniably, Norah’s fancy ran to the concoction of dishes, notably, appetizers and salads, which one read about in

certain standard women's magazines. Her initial offering this night had novelty about it, with a touch of mystery. Its general aspect suggested that Norah had drowned a number of inoffensive anchovies in thick mayonnaise and then, repenting of the crime, had vainly endeavored to resuscitate her victims with grated cheese.

"Messy-looking, eh?" Mr. Boyce-Upchurch was pointing an accusing finger at the coiled remains on a bit of toast which Mrs. Thwaites had accepted, and he was speaking in a fairly clear voice audible to any who might be near at hand. "Glad I didn't take one. Curious fancy, eh what, having the savory before dinner instead of afterwards – that is, if the ghastly thing is meant to be a savory?"

Major Thwaites mumbled briefly in a military way. It might have been an affirmative mumble or almost any other variety of mumble; you could take your choice. Mrs. Thwaites, biting at her lower lip, went over and peered out of a front window. She had an unusually high color, due perhaps to the heat.

That, substantially, was all that happened in the preliminary stages of the dinner party. There was one more trifling incident which perhaps is worthy to be recorded but this did not occur until the second course was brought on. The second course was terrapin. Mrs. Gridley was a Marylander and she had been at pains to order real diamond-backs from down on the Eastern Shore and personally to make the stew according to an old recipe in her family. Besides, the middle of July was not the regular season for terrapin and it had required some generalship to insure prime specimens, and so naturally Mrs. Gridley was proud when the terrapin came on, with the last of her hoarded and now vanishing store of Madeira accompanying it in tiny glasses.

Mr. Boyce-Upchurch sniffed at the fragrance arising from the dish which had been put before him. He sniffed rather with the air of a reluctant patient going under the ether, and with his spoon he stirred up from the bottom fragments of the rubbery black meat and bits of the queer-shaped little bones and then he inquired what this might be. He emphasized the *'this.'*

"It's terrapin," explained Mrs. Gridley, who had been fluttering through a small pause for him to taste the mixture and give his verdict. "One of the special dishes of my own state."

"And what's terrapin?" he pressed. She told him.

"Oh," he said, "sort of turtle, eh? I shan't touch it. Take it away, please," – this to the reverential Ditto hovering in the immediate background.

From this point on, the talk ceased to be general. In spots, the dinner comparatively was silent, then again in other spots conversation abounded. From his seat near the foot, Mr. Braid kept casting interpolations in the direction of the farther end of the table. Repeatedly his sister squelched him. At least, she tried to do so. He seemed to thrive on polite rebuffs, though. He sat between the Thwaites, and Major Thwaites was almost inarticulate, as was usual with him, and Mrs. Thwaites said very little, which was not quite so usual a thing with her, and Mr. Braid apparently felt that he must sow his ill-timed whimsicalities broad-cast rather than bestow them upon the dead eddy of his immediate neighborhood.

For instance, when Miss Rachel Semmes, who was one of Ingleglade's most literary women, bent forward from her favored position almost directly opposite the guest of honor and said, facing eagerly toward him over the table, "Oh, Mr. Boyce-Upchurch, talk to me of English letters," Mr. Braid broke right in:

"Let's all talk about English letters," he suggested. "My favorite one is 'Z.' Well, I like 'H,' too, fairly well. But to me, after all, 'Z' is the most intriguing. What's your favorite, everybody?"

Here, as later, his attempted levity met deservedly the interposed barrier of Miss Semmes' ignoring shoulders. She twisted in her place, turning her back on him, the more forcibly to administer the reproof and with her eyes agleam behind her glasses and her lips making little attentive sucked-in gasping sounds, she harkened while Mr. Boyce-Upchurch discoursed to her of English letters with frequent references to his own contributions in that great field.

As the traveled observer in his own time may have noted, there is a type of cultured Britisher who regards it as stupid to appear smart in strange company, and yet another type who regards it as smart to appear stupid. Mr. Boyce-Upchurch fell into neither grouping. He spoke with a fluency, with an authoritative definiteness, with a finality, which checked all counter-thoughts at their sources. In his criticisms of this one and that one, he was severe or he was commendatory, as the merits of the individual case required. He did not give opinions so much as he rendered judgments. There was about him a convincing firmness. There was never even a trace, a suggestion of doubt. There were passages delivered with such eloquence that almost it seemed to some present as though Mr. Boyce-Upchurch must be quoting from a familiar manuscript. As, if the truth must be known, he was. Still, had not all of intellectual America as far west as Omaha acclaimed “Masters of the Modern English Novel, with Selected Readings from the Author’s Own Books” as a noteworthy platform achievement?

Thus the evening passed, and the Gridleys’ dinner party. All had adjourned back again to the living-room, where coffee and cigarettes were being handed about, when from without came gusts of a warm swift wind blowing the curtains and bringing a breath of moistness.

“Oh, I believe it’s really fixing to rain,” declared Mrs. Gridley, hopefully, and on this, as if in confirmation, they all heard a grumble of distant summer thunder off to the northwest.

At that, Mrs. Thwaites said she and the Major really must run home – they’d come away leaving all the windows open. So they bade everybody good night – the first ones to go.

Mr. Braid saw them to the door. In fact he saw them as far as the front porch.

“Coming to the lecture tomorrow night, I suppose,” he said. “Rally around a brother Briton, and all that sort of thing?”

“I am not,” said little Mrs. Thwaites, with a curious grim twist in her voice. “I heard it tonight.”

“Perishing blighter!” said the Major; which was quite a long speech for the Major.

“I’m ashamed!” burst out Mrs. Thwaites in a vehement undertone. “Aren’t you ashamed, too, Rolf?”

“Rather!” stated the Major. He grunted briefly but with passion.

“Fault of any non-conformist country,” pleaded young Mr. Braid, finely assuming mortification. “Raw, crude people – that sort of thing. Well-meaning but crude! Appalling ignorance touching on savories. No bitters in the home. No – ”

“Don’t make fun,” said Mrs. Thwaites. “You know I don’t mean that.”

“Surely, surely you are not referring to our notable guest? Oh, Perfidious Albinos!” He registered profound grief.

“I am not.” Her words were like little screws turning. “Why should we be ashamed of him – Rolf and I? He’s not typical – the insufferable bounder! Our writing folk aren’t like that. He may have been well-bred – I doubt it. But now utterly spoiled.”

“Decayed,” amended her husband. “Blighting perisher!” he added, becoming, for him, positively oratorical.

“It’s you Americans I’m ashamed of,” continued this small, outspoken lady. “Do you think we’d let an American, no matter how talented he might be, come over to England to snub us in our own homes and patronize us and preach to us on our shortcomings and make unfair comparisons between his institutions and ours and find fault with our fashion of doing things? We’d jolly well soon put him in his place. But you Americans let him and others like him do it. You bow down and worship before them. You hang on their words. You flock to hear them. You pay them money, lots of it. You stuff them up with food, and they stuff you with insults. This one, now – he’s a sponge. He’s notorious for his sponging.”

“Pardon, please,” interjected Mr. Braid. “There you touch my Yankee pride. Sponging is an aquatic pastime not confined to one hemisphere. You perhaps may claim the present international champion but we have our candidates. Gum we may chew, horn-rimmed cheaters we may wear, but

despite our many racial defects we, too, have our great spongers. Remember that and have a care lest you boast too soon.”

“You won’t let me be serious, you do spoof so,” said Mrs. Thwaites. “Still, I shall say it again, it’s you Americans that I’m ashamed of. But I was proud of you tonight, young man. When you mispronounced the name of Maudlin College by calling it ‘Magdeline,’ the Yankee way, and he corrected you, and when immediately after that when you mentioned Sinjin Ervine as ‘St. John’ Ervine and he corrected you again, I knew you must be setting a trap. I held my breath. And then when you asked him about his travels and what he thought of your scenic wonders and he praised some of them, and you brought in Buffalo and he said he had been there and he recalled his trip to Niagara Falls and you said: ‘Not Niagara Falls, dear fellow — *Niffles!*’ why that was absolutely priceless scoring. Wasn’t it absolutely priceless, Rolf?”

“Rather!” agreed the Major. He seemed to feel that the tribute demanded elaboration, so he thought briefly and then expanded it into “Oh, rather!”

“We do our feeble best,” murmured young Mr. Braid modestly, “and sometimes Heaven rewards us. Heaven was indeed kind tonight... Speaking of heavenly matters – look!”

As though acting on cue the horizon to the west had split asunder, and the red lightning ran down the skies in zig-zag streaks, like cracks in a hot stove, and lusty big drops spattered on the porch roof above them.

“It’s beginning to shower – and thank you once more for ‘Niffles.’” Mrs. Thwaites threw the farewell over her shoulder. “We shall have to run for it, Rolf.”

In the steeple of the First Baptist Church of Ingleglade, two blocks distant, the clock struck eleven times. Except for the kitchen wing the residence of the Gridleys on Edgecliff Avenue was, as to its lower floor, all dark and shuttered. The rain beat down steadily, no longer in scattered drops but in sheets. It was drunk up by the thirsty earth. It made a sticky compound of a precious wagon-load of stable leavings with which Mrs. Gridley, one week before, had mulched her specimen roses in their bed under the living-room windows. It whipped and it drenched a single overlooked garment dangling on the clothes line between the two cherry trees in the back yard. Daylight, to any discriminating eye, would have revealed it as a garment appertaining to the worthy and broad-beamed Norah; would have proven, too, that Norah was not one who held by these flimsy, new-fangled notions of latter-day times in the details of feminine lingerie. For this was an ample garment, stoutly fashioned, generously cut, intimate, bifurcated, white, fit for a Christian woman to wear. It surreptitiously had been laved that morning in the sink and wrung out and hung for drying upon a lately almost disused rope, and then, in the press of culinary duties, forgotten. Now the rain was more or less having its way with it, making its limp ornamentation of ruffles limper still, making the horn buttons upon its strong waistband slippery. So much for the exterior of this peaceful homestead.

Above in the main guest-room, Mr. Boyce-Upchurch fretted as he undressed for bed. He felt a distinct sense of irritation. He had set forth his desires regarding a portable tub and plenty of water to be made ready against his hour of retiring yet, unaccountably, these had not been provided. His skin called for refreshment; it was beastly annoying.

A thought, an inspirational thought, came to him. He crossed to his front window and drew back the twin sashes. The sashes opened quite down to the floor and immediately outside, and from the same level, just as he remembered having noted it following his arrival, the roof of the veranda sloped away with a gentle slant. The light behind him showed its flat tin covering glistening and smooth, with a myriad of soft warm drops splashing and stippling upon it. Beyond was cloaking impenetrable blackness, a deep and Stygian gloom; the most confirmed Styg could have desired none deeper.

So Mr. Boyce-Upchurch walked back and entered the bathroom. There, from a pitcher, he poured the basin full of water and then stripped to what among athletes is known as the buff, meaning by that the pink, and he dipped an embroidered guest towel in the basin and with it sopped himself from head to feet, then dampened a cake of soap and wielded it until his body and his head and his

limbs and members richly had been sudded. This done he recrossed his chamber, pausing only to turn out the lights. He stepped out upon the porch roof, gasping slightly as the downpouring torrent struck him on his bare flesh.

From the head of the stairs Mr. Gridley, in a puzzled way, called down:

“Say, Emaline?”

“In a minute – I’m just making sure everything is locked up down here,” answered Mrs. Gridley in a voice oddly strained.

“Say, do you know what?” Mr. Gridley retreated a few steps downward. “He’s gone and put his shoes outside his door in the hall. What do you suppose the big idea is?”

“Put out to be cleaned,” explained Mr. Braid from the foot of the stairs. “Quaint old custom – William the Conqueror always put his out. But don’t call ’em shoes; that’s one of those crude Americanisms of yours. The proper word is ‘boot.’”

“Well, who in thunder does he expect is going to clean them? – that’s what I want to know!” demanded the pestered Mr. Gridley.

“Perhaps the slavey – ” began Mr. Braid.

“Ollie, for heaven’s sake hush!” snapped Mrs. Gridley. “I warn you my nerves can’t stand much more tonight. They’re still up out in the kitchen – and suppose Delia heard you. It’s a blessing she didn’t hear him this afternoon.”

“I wonder if he thinks I’m going to shine ’em?” inquired Mr. Gridley, his tone plaintive, querulous, protesting. He strengthened himself with a resolution: “Well, I’m not! Here’s one worm that’s beginning to turn.”

“There’s Ditto,” speculated Mrs. Gridley. “I wouldn’t dare suggest such a thing to either of those other two. But maybe possibly Ditto – ”

“Never, except over my dead body,” declared Mr. Braid. “I’d as soon ask His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury to press my pants for me. Fie, for shame, Dumplings!”

“But who – ”

“I, gallant Jack Harkaway the volunteer fireman,” proclaimed Mr. Braid. “I, Michael Strogoff the Courier of the Czar – I’ll shine his doggone shoes – I mean, his doggone boots. I’ll slip up and get ’em now. There’s a brush and some polish out back somewheres. Only, by rights, I should have some of the genuine Day & Martin to do it with. And I ought to whistle through my teeth. In Dickens they always whistled through their teeth, cleaning shoes.”

“Well, for one, I’m going to take a couple of aspirin tablets and go straight to bed,” said Mrs. Gridley. “Thank goodness for one thing, anyway – it’s just coming down in bucketsful outside!”

On the porch top in the darkness, Mr. Boyce-Upchurch gasped anew but happily. The last of the lather coursed in rivulets down his legs; his grateful pores opened widely and he outstretched his arms, the better to let the soothing cloudburst from on high strike upon his expanded chest.

On the sudsy underfooting his bare soles slipped – first one sole began to slip, then the other began to slip. He gasped once more, but with a different inflection. His spread hands grasped frantically and closed on the void. Involuntarily he sat down, painfully and with great violence. He began to slide: he began to slide faster: he kept on sliding. His curved fingers, still clutching, skittered over stark metal surfaces as he picked up speed. He slid thence, offbound and slantwise, toward the edge. He gave one low muffled cry. He slid faster yet. He slid across the spouting gutter, over the verge, on, out, down, into swallowing space.

Out in the service ell the last of the wastage from the Gridleys’ dinner party was being disposed of and the place tidied up against the next gustatory event in this house, which would be breakfast. Along the connecting passage from his butler’s pantry where he racked up tableware, Ditto was speaking rearward to the two occupants of the kitchen. He had been speaking practically without cessation for twenty minutes. With the *h*’s it would have taken longer – probably twenty-two to twenty-four minutes.

He was speaking of the habits, customs, and general excellencies of the British upper classes among whom the greater part of his active life congenially had been spent. He was approaching a specific illustration in support and confirmation of his thesis. He reached it:

“Now, you tyke Mr. Boyce-Upchurch, now. Wot pride of bearin’ ’e’s got! Wot control! Wot a flow of language when the spirit moves ’im! Always the marster of any situation – that’s ’im all oaver. Never losin’ ’is ’ead. Never jostled out of ’is stride. Never lackin’ for a word. Stock of the old bull-dog – that’s wot it is!”

Where he stood, so discouraging, he could not see Norah. Perhaps it was just as well he could not see her. For a spell was lifting from Norah. If there is such a word as ‘unenglamored’ then ‘unenglamored’ is the proper word for describing what Norah rapidly was becoming.

From Delia the tattle-tale, Norah had but just now heard whispered things. She was sitting at ease, resting after an arduous spell of labors, but about her were signs and portents – small repressed signs but withal significant. The lips tightly were compressed; one toe tapped the floor with an ominous little tattoo; through the clenched teeth she made a low steady wasp-like humming noise; in the eyes smoldered and kindled a hostile bale. It was plain that before long Norah would herself be moved to utterance. She did but bide her time.

However, as stated, Ditto could not see. He proceeded to carry on:

“No nonsense abaht ’im, I tell you. Knows wot ’e wants and speaks up and arks for it, stryte out.”

Several of Mrs. Gridley’s specimen rose bushes served somewhat to break the force of Mr. Boyce-Upchurch’s crash, though their intertwining barbed fronds sorely scratched him here and there as he plunged through to earth. He struck broadside in something soft and gelatinous. Dazed and shaken, he somehow got upon his feet and first he disentangled himself from the crushed-down thorny covert and then he felt himself all over to make sure no important bones were broken.

Very naturally, the thought next uppermost with him, springing forward in his mind through a swirl of confused emotions, was to reenter the house and return, without detection, to his room. He darted up the front porch steps and tried the front door. It was barred fast. He tried the windows giving upon the porch; their blinds were drawn, latched from within.

Out again in the storm he half circled the main body of the house, fumbling in the cloaking blackness at yet more snugly fastened windows. An unbelievable, an appalling, an incredible conviction began to fasten its horrid talons upon Mr. Boyce-Upchurch. He could not get in without arousing someone and certainly in this, his present state, he dare not arouse anyone in order to get in. Yet he must get in. Desperation, verging already on despair, mounted in his swirling brain.

Past a jog in the side wall he saw, thirty feet on beyond and patterning through some lattice-work, a foggy shaft of light from a rain-washed window. As cautiously he moved toward it a taut obstacle in the nature of a cord or small hawser rasped him just under the nose and, shrinking back, he was aware of a ghostly white article swinging gently within arm-reach of him. Partly by touch, partly by sight, he made out its texture – woven linen or cotton cloth, limp and clammy with wetness – and he made out its contours; divined likewise its customary purposes. At home a few old-fashioned ladies still were addicts; he recognized the pattern; he had an elderly maiden aunt. In emergency it would provide partial covering – of a sort. Most surely this was an emergency. And yet —

As he hesitated, with tentative fingers still pawing the sopping shape of it, and torn between a great loathing and a great and compelling temptation, the sound of a human voice penetrated the clapboards alongside him and caused him to cower down close.

“Doggone it!”

Mr. Braid, bearing in one hand a brace of varnished boots of Regent Street manufacture, tumbled over a sharp-cornered object in the inky darkness of the cuddy behind the living-room and barked his shins, and his cry was wrung with anguish.

“Doggone it!” he repeated. “Who’s gone and hid the infernal electric light in this infernal Mammoth Cave of a storeroom? And where in thunder is that box of polish and that blacking brush? I’m sure I saw ’em here the other day on one of these dad-blamed shelves. Ouch!”

His exploring arm had brought what from weight and impact might have been an iron crowbar to clatter down upon his shoulders. As a matter of fact, it was the discarded handle of a patent detachable mop.

“Oh, damn!” soliloquized Mr. Braid. “Everything else in the condemned world is here but what I’m after. And I haven’t got any matches and I can’t find the light bulb. Maybe Norah or Delia ’ll know.”

He backed out of the cavernous closet into the hall, heading for the kitchen by way of the intervening pantry.

That vocal threat of peril from within diminished, died out. Mr. Boyce-Upchurch straightened, and in that same instant, piercing the night from a distance but drawing nearer, came to his dripping ears the warning of a real and an acute danger. A dog – a very large and a very fierce dog, to judge by its volume of noise output – was coming toward him from the right and coming very swiftly.

The Thwaites’ police dog, born in Germany but always spoken of by its owners as Belgian, was the self-constituted night guard of all premises in the entire block. To her vigilant senses suspicions of a prowler abroad had floated out of the void. Baying, belling, she was now bounding across lots to investigate.

With a frenzied snatch, Mr. Boyce-Upchurch tore the pendent flapping thing free from its clothes-pin moorings and he thrust his two legs into its two legs and convulsively he clutched its hemmed girth about his middle, and forgetting all else save that a menacing monster was almost upon him breathing its hot panted breaths upon his flinching rear, he flung himself headlong toward that sheltering entryway from whence the blurry radiance poured.

Enlarging upon his subject, Ditto stepped into the kitchen.

“As I was syin’ a bit ago, tyke Mr. Boyce-Upchurch,” he continued. “Look at ’m, I arsk you? Poise, composture, dignity – that’s ’im agyne! It’s qualities like them ’as mykes the English wot they are the ’ole world over. It’s – ”

“Saints defend us!” shrieked Norah, starting up.

In through the back door burst Mr. Boyce-Upchurch, and he slammed it to behind him and backed against it, and for a measurable space stood there speechless, transfixed, as it were, being, in a way of speaking, breeched but otherwise completely uncovered excepting for certain clingy smears of compost – compost is the word we will use, please – upon the face and torso.

Delia’s accompanying scream was just a plain scream but Norah’s further outcry took on the form of articulated words:

“Proud, sez you? Yis, too proud to sup our cocktails but not too proud to be rampagin’ around in the rain turnin’ somersaults in somebody’s cow-yard. Dignified, you sez? Yis, too dignified to ate the vittles I was after fixin’ fur him, but not too dignified to come lapein’ in on two dacint women wearin’ nothin’ only a pair of somebody’s — *Whooroo*, it’s me own best Sunday pair he has on him!”

On the linoleum of the butler’s pantry behind them Mr. Oliver Braid laid him down, holding in either hand a Regent Street boot, and uttered gurgling sounds denoting a beautiful joy.

From the American of July 22d:

Among the passengers sailing today on the *Mulrovia* for Southampton was Mr. Jeffreys Boyce-Upchurch, the well-known English novelist, returning home after suddenly breaking off his lecture tour in this country on account of lameness resulting from a severe fall which he is reported to have had less than a week ago while filling an engagement in New Jersey. Mr. Boyce-Upchurch declined to see the reporters desirous of questioning him regarding the accident. Walking with a

pronounced limp, he went aboard early this morning and remained secluded in his stateroom until sailing-time.

From the Telegram, same date, under Situations Wanted:

BUTLER, English, unimpeachable references, long experience, perfectly qualified, desires employment in cultured household, city preferred. Positively will not accept position where other members of domestic staff are Irish. Address: L. D., General Delivery.

Two of Everything

There was no warning. There rarely is in such cases. To be sure, those gophers acted peculiarly a minute before the tremor started, and that whistling marmot did too. But until he felt the first heave, Chaney attached no significance to the behavior of such as these. He was not concerned with the small mammalia of northern Montana. The fishing was what interested him.

He was disentangling a fly from where, on the back cast, it had woven itself into an involved pattern with the adjacent shrubbery, when he became aware that dozens of the little gray ground-squirrels were popping out of the mouths of their burrows and scooting about in all directions, making sharp chirking noises as they went. Through the day he had seen them by the hundreds and usually they were in motion, but this was the only time he heard an outcry from any of them. A fat one popped up out of the dirt crust almost between his toes and caromed off against an ankle. It appeared to be in an especial haste to get somewhere else.

Just about this time the marmot, a much larger animal, scuttled down the hill, whistling steadily and wrinkling up its back like a caterpillar in a hurry. What happened, of course, was that the earth sent along a preliminary notification to the creatures who delve in the earth and live in the earth, telling them their ancient mother was about to have a very hard chill. This is the way a layman might put it; no doubt a geologist would phrase the explanation differently. But it was a warning, all right enough.

While Chaney still was mildly speculating regarding the reasons for the panic among these ground-dwellers, the solid boulder beneath his feet seemed to lift and stir and the scrub aspens behind him all at once began to bend the wrong way, that is, toward the wind instead of from it. So then he knew it must be a quake. Instinctively he slid off the stone and splashed down on the loose shale in the edge of the creek bed. As he half crouched there, up to his shanks in water and suddenly apprehensive, he felt through his boot soles a progressive rippling movement that grew swift and more violent. It was as though the world were flinching its skin on the haunches of these mountains precisely as a pestered horse does to get rid of a horse-fly.

Evidently this meant to be quite a shock. It was quite a shock. The newspapers were full of it for a week; the scientists were full of it for months after the newspapers eased up. Over in southern California it shuffled the houses of one coast town like a pack of cards and down in the Wyoming Rockies it blocked a gap through which a river ran, so that a valley of ambitious irrigation projects became a lake while the dispossessed residents were getting their families and their cattle out. But when Chaney looked up and saw the face of the cliff above him starting to come loose, he very naturally jumped to the conclusion that the whole thing had been devised for the main purpose of annihilating him; there was going to be a disaster and he was going to be the chief victim.

The mental process of any normal human being would operate thus in a similar abnormal emergency. Lightning strikes near us and in the moment of escape we give thanks for deliverance from a peril launched expressly at us. Heaven sped its direst artillery bolt with intent for our destruction, but we were too smart for it; we dodged. Probably it is mortal vanity that makes us say that to ourselves – and even believe it. We are forever assuming that nature gets up her principal effects either for our benefit or for our undoing.

Anyhow, that was how it was with Chaney. There he squatted with his pleasant sins all heavy upon him, and the front of Scalded Peak was fetching away from its foundation to coast down and totally abolish Chaney. His bodily reflexes synchronized with his mind's. As his brain recorded the thought his legs bent to jump and set him running off to the left along the shore. But before he could take ten long leaps the slide was finished and over with.

It was miraculous – he marveled over that detail later when he was in a frame fit for sorting out emotions – it really was miraculous that the entire contour of one side of the basin could change while a scared man was traveling thirty yards. Yet that was exactly what took place. In so brief a

space of time as this, the façade of the steep, rocky wall had been rent free and shoved off and had descended a thousand feet or so, picking up a million billion bushels of loose stuff on the way, and had stopped and was settling.

In another half-minute the grit clouds were lifting, and Chaney was rising up from where he had flopped over into a tangle of windfall. He was bringing his face slowly out from under the arms which instinctively he had crossed on his head as he stumbled and sprawled and he was wiping his hand across his eyes and taking stock of the accomplished transformation and of his own sensations.

There had been an intolerable numbing, deafening roaring and crashing in his ears, and a great incredible passing before his eyes; he could remember that. There had been a sense that the air about him was filled with sweeping stones as big as court-houses, that tons upon tons of weight were crushing down about him and on him; that something else, which was minute but unutterably dense and thick, was pressing upon him and flattening him to death; that tree tops near at hand overhead were whipping and winnowing in a cyclonic gale that played above all else; and then all definitely he knew for a little while was that his mouth was full of a sour powder and his right cheek was bleeding. Also that the earthquake had passed on to other parts and that the avalanche begotten of it had missed him by a margin of, say, six rods.

He lay almost on the verge of the damage. He turned over, but very cautiously through a foolish momentary fright of jarring to life some poised boulder near by, and sat up in a kind of nest of dead roots and dead boughs and cleared his vision and stared fearsomely to his right. Just over there was a raw gray pyramidal smear, narrow at the top where a new gouge showed in the rim-rock, and broad at the base. It was slick and it was scoured out smoothly up the steep slope, but below, closer to him, the overturned slabs and chunks of stone had a nasty, naked aspect to them, an obscene aspect what with their scraped bare bellies turned uppermost.

In a minute for creation, or put it at fifty years as men measure time, the kindly lichens and mosses would grow out on their gouged shoulders and along their ribs, and the soil and the wood-mold would gather in their seams, and grass would come up between them, and then shrubs and finally evergreens from the crevices; in a few centuries more this scarred place would be of a pattern again with its neighborhood. But now it was artificial looking, like a mine working or the wreckage of a tremendous nitro-glycerine blast.

The stream had turned from steel-blue in its depths and greenish white on the rapids to a roiled muddy gray, but as Chaney rolled his eyes that way it showed signs of clearing. Seemingly there had been only one great splash and wave when the slide came down, and the course of the stream had not materially been changed. Already the dust had gone out of the air; it covered the leaves, though.

He stood up and mastered the trembling in his legs and shrugged the stupefaction out of himself. He was not even bruised. Except for that little scratch on his cheek he had no wound whatsoever. But in certain regards he decidedly was out of luck. His present possessions were reduced to precisely such garments as he stood in and what articles he had in the pockets of those garments, and to one fishing rod which might or might not be smashed.

The guide who had brought him into this country – Hurley was the guide's name – and the camp which he and the guide had made an hour earlier and their two saddle-horses and their one pack-horse and all their joint belongings had vanished with not a single scrap left to show for them. Chaney convinced himself of this tragic fact as soon as he scrambled up on the lowermost breadth of the slide. Presently he balanced himself, so he figured, directly above where the pup-tent had stood and the camp litter had been spread about. He saw then that so far as Hurley and the horses and the dunnage were concerned, this was their tomb for all time.

About four o'clock they had come over the top and on down the steep drop to Cache Creek. They turned the stock loose to graze on the thin pickings among the cottonwoods and willows. He put up the tent and spread the bed-rolls while Hurley was making a fireplace of stones and rustling firewood. He left Hurley at the job of cooking and went a short distance along the creek toward its

inlet in the canyon between the west flank of Scalded Peak and the east flank of Sentinel Peak to pick up some cut-throats for their supper. On the second cast he lashed his leader around a springy twig. He climbed a big rock to undo the snarl – and then this old and heretofore dependable earth began to get up and walk.

And now here it was not five o'clock yet, and he was alone among these mountains, and Hurley's crushed body was where neither digging nor dynamite would bring it forth. By his calculation it was hard to say exactly, with everything altered the way it was; but as nearly as he could guess, he was right above where Hurley ought to be – with at least forty feet of piled-up, wedged-in, twisted-together soil and boulders and tree roots between him and Hurley. Probably the poor kid never knew what hit him. He had been right in the path of the slide and now he was beneath the thickest part of it. He had seemed to be a pretty fair sort too, although as to that Chaney couldn't say positively, having hired the boy only the day before at an independent outfitter's near Polebridge on the North Fork, where he had left his car.

For him, the lone survivor of this quick catastrophe, there was nothing to do except to get out. That part of it didn't worry Chaney much. He was at home in this high country. He had hunted and fished and ranged over a good part of it. With the taller peaks to guide him and the water courses to follow – on this side of the Continental Divide they nearly all ran west or southwest – a man could hold to his compass points even through unfamiliar going.

He would scale the wall of the bowl right away. He didn't want darkness to catch up with him before he was over the top; the place already was beginning to be haunted. Except on the eastern slopes night came late in these altitudes; it would be after nine o'clock before the sunset altogether failed him. He would lie down until morning came, then shove ahead, holding to the trail over which he and Hurley had traveled in until it brought him out on the Flathead plateau. To save time and boot-leather, he might even take a short cut down through the timber to the foot-hills; there were ranches and ranger stations and fire-watchers' lookouts scattered at intervals of every few miles along the river flats.

He might be footsore by the time he struck civilization with word of the killing and certainly he would be pretty hungry, but that was all. He wouldn't get cold when the evening chill came on. He had on a coat and it was a heavy blanket coat, which was lucky, and he had matches, plenty of them. He had loose matches in the breast pocket of his shirt and a waterproof box of matches in the fob pocket of his riding-breeches. He even had two knives; a hunting-knife in a sheath on his belt, a penknife in his pocket.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.