GOOD REFERENCES

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"But, please—*please*, let me explain about the references."

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BY

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CHAPTER I

Mary Decides

There was only one man in the office of the Brain Workers' Exchange and he was an obscurity who "kept" the books in the farthest corner of the room. Girls of various ages and women of all ages crowded him remorselessly out of the picture,

so that when it was possible to obtain even a glimpse of him he served merely as a memorandum of the fact that there are, after all, two sexes. A few of the girls and women sat at desks; they were the working staff of the Exchange. One of them was also the owner and manager.

Outside a railing that divided the room there were a few chairs, very few, because it was not the policy of the Exchange to maintain a waiting-room for clients. It was a quiet and brisk clearing house, not a loitering place nor a shop-window for the display of people who had brains to sell by the week or the month. The clients came and went rather rapidly; they were not encouraged to linger. Sometimes they were sent for, and after those occasions they usually disappeared from the "active-list" and became inconsequential

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incidents in the history of the Exchange. The Exchange had pride in the fact that it made quick turnovers of its stock; nothing remained very long on the shelves. And in times such as these there were no bargain sales in brains.

Mary Wayne paused for a second on the threshold as her eyes swiftly reviewed the details of the picture; then she closed the door gently behind her, conscious of a distinct feeling of encouragement. She had been apprehensive; she had faced an expected sense of humiliation. There had been in her mind an idea that she was about to become one of a clamorous crowd. But things were very much otherwise in the Brain Workers' Exchange—gratefully so.

She walked over to a desk, where a small brass sign said "Registry," sensing that this must be her first port of call. A young woman who sat at the desk glanced up, saw a stranger, reached for a form-card that lay on top of a neatly stacked pile and dipped a pen.

"Name, please," she said.

"Mary Wayne."

"Address?"

The address was given; it was that of a boarding-house in the Eighties, but Mary Wayne hoped that it would not be so identified in the mind of the recording angel, if, indeed, she should prove to be such.

"Married?"

"Oh, no," hastily. It seemed an absurd question, but the answer went down in a place left blank by the printer.

"Age?"

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"Twenty-two."

"Occupation?"

"Stenographer." The answer had a faint note of defiance.

"Expert? We handle only experts, you know."

"Expert," said Mary Wayne.

There were other questions. Had she a knowledge of office management? No. Of bookkeeping? No. Of foreign languages? She knew French; a little Spanish. Did she understand filing systems? She thought so. Education? There had been two years in college; necessity compelled her to give up the remainder.

The woman behind the desk surveyed her from hat to shoes in a rapid, impersonal glance, then wrote something in another blank space. Mary wildly yearned to know what it was, but checked the impulse to lean forward and see.

"Now, your references, please."

"I have no references."

There was a sudden chill in the manner of the recording angel. She pushed the form-card away from her, so that it teetered perilously on the edge of the desk. If it passed the brink there was nothing to save it from the waste-basket below.

"All registrants must furnish references. Perhaps you did not observe the sign on the wall."

Mary had not seen it, but she now looked at it, apologetically.

"I didn't know," she said. "I'm sorry. But I can explain very easily."

"We never deviate from our rule, Miss Wayne. We

have our reputation to sustain. References are absolutely essential."

"But don't you see——"

"It would only waste your time and mine. We recommend no person for employment unless she can furnish at least two references. We even require employers to furnish them, unless they are known to us."

The recording angel was no longer angelic. She was polite, perhaps, yet peremptory. With a little gesture of finality, she tipped the card into the waste-basket. Mary caught her breath, almost desperately. References! Oh, she had heard that word before. A dozen times it had risen to mock her, like a grinning specter.

If asked to spell it, she felt that she would write it thus:

"D-o-o-m."

"But, please—*please*, let me explain about the references."

"Sorry. It would be quite useless."

"I can assure you I'm absolutely—all right," pleaded Mary. "I'm really a good stenographer—an expert. I'm honest, and——"

She paused in the humiliation of having to say things that ought to be obvious to

anybody.

But the woman simply shook her head.

"You must listen; oh, surely you will. I suppose I should have explained in the beginning, but it didn't seem necessary. I didn't understand. This is the first time I was ever in—in—an intelligence office."

The recording angel stiffened in her uncompromising

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desk-chair, and Mary instantly knew she had given unpardonable offense.

"This is *not* an intelligence office, Miss Wayne. An intelligence office is a place for cooks, chambermaids, waitresses, laundresses, chauffeurs, gardeners, and stable-hands. This is an exchange which deals in brains only, plus experience and good character. It is not even an employment agency. Good day, Miss Wayne."

Mary recoiled from the desk, numbed. She had sealed her own fate in two blundering words. She had not meant to say "intelligence office"; it slipped out in an evil moment of inadvertence. It was a forgotten phrase of childhood, come down from the days when her mother employed "help," and now flowing from the tip of her tongue in order to accomplish complete and unmerited disaster.

Dismay and irresolution held her motionless for a moment, outside the inexorable railing that divided the room. It had not yet occurred to her to walk out of the office of the Brain Workers' Exchange; she was thralled in the inertia of an overwhelming despair.

"Good morning, Miss Norcross. Thank you for being prompt."

A woman who sat at another desk was speaking, in crisp, satisfying tones. Mary turned mechanically to observe the person to whom the words were addressed. She saw a girl apparently of her own age crossing the floor with an eager, nervous step; a girl dressed with a certain plain severity that unmistakably helped to give her an air of confidence. Mary was easily as well dressed herself; perhaps more expensively. Yet she

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felt herself suddenly lacking in every essential quality embodied in the person who had been addressed as "Miss Norcross."

"We have an excellent opportunity for you," the woman at the desk was saying. "That is why I sent an urgent message. A lady wishes a competent, well-bred young woman to perform secretarial work. It is of a social character. She will pay a good salary to the right person. We are giving you the first opportunity because of the unusually good references you possess."

There it was again. References! Mary's soul winced.

"The lady, Miss Marshall—here is her address—is known to us by reputation. We have given her an outline of your qualifications. She will wish, of course, to see your references, so take them with you. She expects you to call at three o'clock

this afternoon."

"Oh—thank you!"

There was something so fervent in the words that even Mary, dulled with her own woes, did not fail to observe it. She was conscious of a faint sense of surprise that such a confident and evidently competent person as this Miss Norcross should yield to an ardent protestation of gratitude. She had good references; unusually good ones, the woman said. Why, therefore, be so eagerly thankful?

"It's nothing at all, if you have references," whispered Mary to her inner self, as she walked toward the door. It was a bitter, hopeless whisper.

Once in the outer hall, Mary Wayne paused. She had closed the door behind which crouched that cold-blooded

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monster—the Brain Workers' Exchange. Again she read the neatly lettered sign. What a mockery it was! Brain Workers, indeed! It was merely a meeting-place for the elect, for those who had the mystic password to the inner shrine. And she—she had everything but the mere password.

Abruptly she brushed her hand across her eyes, then began fumbling in a beaded bag.

"I'm going to cry," she said, half aloud. "And I *won't*!"

Yet she would and did, and she certainly was crying when the door of the Brain Workers' Exchange opened again and closed with a joyous click behind the young woman who had the unusually good references.

"Oh—I'm sorry," said the young woman, looking at Mary.

Mary hated herself and loathed the weakness of her tears.

"I saw you inside," continued the person named Norcross. "You've had bad luck, of course."

It was not a question, but an assertion. Mary fought against a sob.

"N-no luck," she managed.

"Never mind. You'll have better luck very soon."

"I—I'll never have any luck. I'm doomed. I—oh, it's so silly of me—but I haven't any references."

A hand was slipped within Mary's arm; she felt a gentle pressure of reassurance.

"Don't let luck down you," said the lucky one. "It always changes. Mine did; so will yours. I've just had a wonderful piece of luck and it doesn't seem right that somebody else should be unhappy."

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"But you had ref—ref—references. I heard."

"Yes, my dear; I had references. They're good things to have. Come—cheer up.

I've simply got to celebrate. Please come and have lunch with me. Honestly, I insist."

Mary looked wonderingly at the girl with the magic key. She wiped her eyes bravely, then shook her head.

"I'll—I'll be all right. Thank you."

"You'll be better for lunch; so will I. Please come. I want somebody to talk to. My name is Norcross—Nell Norcross."

She was still gripping Mary's arm, with an insistence that surprised the tearful one, for Miss Norcross did not appear like a resolute and robust person, but rather one who was somewhat frail and worried, despite all her jaunty assurance of manner.

"I'm Mary Wayne—but—oh, what's the use? Thank you, just the same."

"Come along," said Miss Norcross. "I know a dandy little place. It's cheap, too. You see, I'm not very strong financially, even if I am getting a job."

She walked Mary to the elevator and down to the street level they went. Mary felt very weak of will, yet somehow comforted, as she suffered herself to be marched for several blocks to an obscure little restaurant in a basement. The strange young woman chattered all the way, but Mary had no very clear notion of what she talked about. It was not until they were seated on opposite sides of a table that she began to pay close attention.

"You must always have references," Miss Norcross was saying with an energy that was strangely in contrast

with the pale, drawn cheeks and very bright eyes. "You must find a way to get some. People are so silly about them; they think more of references than of what you can really do."

"But how can I ever get them?" asked Mary. "You see, I've never worked; that is, I never worked for anybody except father. And he is dead. I'm really a very good stenographer; I can do over one hundred and twenty-five words a minute. But there isn't anybody who knows I can. And there isn't a business place that will give me a chance to prove it. I've tried; and every time they ask for references."

"My dear, if you can do one hundred and twenty-five you're a better stenographer than I am; lots better. In your case it's only a question of getting started. After that, you'll go like wildfire."

"But it's the references," sighed Mary. "You've got them, you see."

"Simply because I've worked before; that's all." Miss Norcross sipped hastily from a glass of water and shook her head with a little frown of annoyance. "I'm just a bit dizzy; it's my eyes, I think—or perhaps the good luck. The thing for you to do is to get some references; surely there must be somebody who can help you out. Now, when I started——" She shook her head again. "When I started——" Another

drink of water. "It's quite easy if—my dear, I'm afraid I'm going to be ill."

She announced the fact with a gasping sigh of resignation. Mary arose from her chair, startled, and walked around the table.

"I've—I've been afraid of it," said the lucky one of

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the references. "I haven't been very strong. Worrying, I suppose. I worried about a job. It's my head; it aches in such a funny way. Just my luck, I suppose. I—I—oh, please don't leave me!"

"I shouldn't dream of leaving you," said Mary, stoutly. "Let me take you home. Where do you live?"

"It's——" Miss Norcross whispered an address; Mary observed with conscious surprise that it was on the lower East Side. "It's written on a piece of paper—in my bag—in case you forget it—or I faint. You'll find money there—for the check. I'm sorry. I——"

The sick girl leaned forward and rested her head on her folded arms.

"Just get me home," she muttered. "After that——"

Mary took command. She paid the check out of her own purse and sent the waiter out into the street to hunt for a taxi. With responsibility so suddenly thrust upon her there was no opportunity to brood upon her own troubles or the meager state of her finances. This girl had been kindly; she could do no less than be a Samaritan herself.

The ride in the taxi was swift and, for the most part, through streets whose pavements had deteriorated in keeping with the neighborhood itself. Mary sat rigid, her feet braced in front of her, with her arm tightly clasped around the girl of the references, who sagged heavily against her, her eyes closed, her forehead and cheeks cold and damp. The cab stopped at what was evidently a boarding-house; Mary could tell a boarding-house through some queer sixth sense, developed

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out of cheerless experience. It was an acquired faculty in which she took no joy or pride.

A nervous and wholly pessimistic landlady assisted in the task of conveying Miss Norcross to her room, which was up three flights.

"I been expectin' it," observed the landlady. "It's been comin'. She ain't been feedin' herself right. I ain't complainin', y' understand; she's paid her bills—so far, anyhow. I hope to goodness it ain't contagious. I got my house to think about. If it's contagious——"

"Go down and telephone for a doctor," said Mary shortly.

"It's a good thing she's got a friend. If she has to go to a hospital——"

"Where is the telephone?"

"Oh, I'll go. I'll send for my own doctor, too. There isn't anybody better. I'll ask him if it's contagious and——"

Mary pushed her out of the room and turned to the patient, who was lying on the bed.

"Don't be a bit frightened," said Mary. "I don't believe you're very sick. Keep still and I'll undress you."

She felt quite composed and wholly in command of herself; it was as if she were doing something entirely commonplace and all planned in advance.

"It—it isn't just being sick," said Miss Norcross weakly. "I'm not afraid of that. It's the job—the money. I need it so. Oh, please—don't bother. I can take off my own shoes."

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"Keep still," ordered Mary. "We'll have the doctor very soon."

"Doctor!" moaned the patient. "That's more money."

"Stop talking about money. Be quiet. Would you like a drink of water?"

When Mary returned with a glass she found her patient sitting up, staring at her with frightened eyes that were luminous with fever.

"I've got to talk about money!" she exclaimed. "Why, I haven't even five dollars to my name."

"There, there, my dear," said Mary. "Don't let it worry you. Neither have I."

It had cost her nearly three dollars to pay the restaurant check and the taxi-driver, but that pang had passed. She was amazed at her own indifference.

"But, don't you understand? I'm going to be sick—sick! And who's going to pay for it all? I *won't* be a charity patient; I *won't* go to a hospital. And my job! I've been trying so long and—and just when I get one—such a wonderful chance—I—oh, it's going to drive me mad, I tell you."

"Never mind; there'll be other chances. Perhaps the lady will wait. Drink your water."

But Miss Norcross pushed the glass aside.

"Jobs never wait," she moaned. "People always have to wait for jobs. That's what I've been doing, and now—now—oh, isn't it simply fiendish? And my head aches so!"

"Of course, dear. But never mind. I'll see you through. Perhaps I'll get a job myself, and——"

The sick girl gripped Mary's arm tensely.

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"My job!" she whispered. "You'll take mine!"

Mary smiled rather wanly.

"I couldn't do that, of course," she said. "I haven't references—and they're expecting you. But I'll find something else; I'm sure of it."

She was anything but sure of it; she was quite certain it would be otherwise. But it was her duty, she felt, to make a brave front.

"No, no, no! You *must* take mine. Oh, can't you see——"

There was a knock, followed by a doctor. He seemed to be in a hurry, yet for all that he was quite positive about things. No, it wasn't contagious. The landlady vanished from the threshold to spread the joyous news down-stairs. But she was a sick girl, none the less. There would be ten days in bed, at the very least. She needed medicine, of course he would leave prescriptions. And there must be a special diet. There really ought to be a nurse. And—well, he would look in again that evening; he would decide about the nurse then.

Miss Norcross was sitting up again as the door closed behind him.

"See!" she cried. "You've just got to do it! What's going to become of *me*—and of you? It's for three o'clock. Oh, please go! Take my references. Take——"

She fell back on the pillow in a seizure of weakness.

Mary Wayne walked to the window and looked down into the drab street. Would she do it? Dared she? Had she any right? And if she did—— The sick girl was whispering for water. Mary carried it

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to her, raised her head and steadied the glass at her lips.

"Oh, please! I'm frightened and worried—and——"

Mary made a decision.

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CHAPTER II

Aunt Caroline

Bill Marshall was home from college. He had fought his education to a finish, after a bitter battle that was filled with grueling rounds of uncertainty, and now he returned in triumph to show his prize to Aunt Caroline; not that he valued the prize itself, for it was merely a diploma, but because it represented the end of the business of learning things. He was free now; he could turn his mind and his talents to life itself. Work! Oh, not necessarily. He had not thought about work.

Bill—he was infinitely too large to be called Billy or Willie—had great respect for

Aunt Caroline. He wanted her to think well of him. Her home was his. There was excellent reason for the expectation that some day her fortune would be his. There was nobody except Bill to whom it was likely to be given, except for those modest remembrances that go to the old servants who survive mistress and master. Yet Bill was neither mercenary nor covetous; he simply accepted conditions and prospects as they stood, taking it for granted that life was going to be good to him and that there was no need for anxious glances into the future. If Fate chose to make him a sole heir, why struggle against it?

"Why go to the mat with Destiny?" was the sum of

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Bill's philosophy. "Why go out of your class and get trimmed?"

Aunt Caroline Marshall lived in a once fashionable brownstone cave on lower Fifth Avenue. Her blood was of the bluest, which made her a conservative. She never "took part" in things. When Bill was in college there was nobody in the house except herself and the servants. She used a carriage and team, never an automobile, although she permitted Bill to have his own car as a reluctant concession to the times.

She was proud of her ancestral tree, wore lace caps and went to church every Sunday. She believed that there were still ladies and gentlemen in the world, as well as lower classes. She made preserves and put up her own mince-meat. But for all that there was no severity about Aunt Caroline. She was rather fat and comfortable and tolerant. She liked young people and somehow she had acquired a notion that Bill had a future.

"William," said Aunt Caroline, as she examined the diploma through her gold-rimmed spectacles, "I think you have done very well. If your father were alive I am sure he would say the same thing. I am going to give you a check."

"Oh, don't bother, Aunt Caroline," said Bill grandly. But he knew she would.

"It is so comforting to know that you stood at the head of your class, William."

She alone used "William."

"Why—what?"

"That out of two hundred you were the very first," remarked Aunt Caroline, smoothing her black silk.

Bill was blinking. Was he being joshed by his maiden aunt?

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"Why, Aunt Caroline, who——"

"Oh, the young man you brought home told me," and she beamed benevolently. "But the Marshalls always have been a modest family. We let our acts speak for themselves. I suppose I should never have found it out if your valet had not told me. His name is Peter, isn't it?"

So Pete had told her that!

"He appears to be a rather nice young man," added Aunt Caroline. "I am glad you brought him."

Bill was thinking of things to say to Pete.

"While he is, of course, your valet, William, I think we can afford to be rather considerate toward him. It seems so rare nowadays to find a young man with such high aims."

"So?" remarked Bill. This was bewildering. "Just—er—what did he say about his aims, Aunt Caroline?"

"He explained about his theological studies and how he has been earning his way through college, doing work as a valet. It was kind of you, William, to give him employment."

Bill was making the motions of swallowing. Theological studies! Why——

"He takes such a deep interest in the heathen peoples," Aunt Caroline was saying. "While I hate to see a young man bury himself away from civilization, it shows very high Christian principles. There have to be missionaries in the world, of course. He speaks so hopefully about his future life."

"Why—er—oh, yes; he's an optimist, all right, Aunt Caroline."

Bill's large bulk showed signs of considerable agitation, but his aunt did not observe them.

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"I gather from what he said, William, that he is something more than just a valet to you. He told me about your talks together on theology. I feel sure that he is going to be a very good influence. He told me about how hard you worked in your classes, and the honors you won, and all the temptations you resisted. He did not say that he helped you to resist them, but he did not need to. I could understand."

Aunt Caroline nodded in confirmation of her own statement.

"I hope he is orthodox," she added. "I shall ask him about that some time."

There was a dull-red in Bill's cheeks. Suddenly he excused himself and bolted. Aunt Caroline reached for the very conservative magazine she affected.

Up-stairs in Bill's room a young man was sprawled on a couch. He was smoking a pipe and staring up at the ceiling as Bill thundered in and slammed the door behind him.

"Pete, what in blazes have you been saying to my aunt?"

The valet grinned, yawned and stretched. Bill jerked a pillow from under his head, gripped him mercilessly by one shoulder and spun him into a sitting posture.

"Ouch! Leggo, you mastodon."

"What have you been saying?" repeated Bill savagely.

"Oh, whatever she told you, I suppose. Two to one I made it stick, anyhow."

Mr. Peter Stearns, who had accompanied Bill home from college, smiled benignly. He was a frail-looking young man, utterly unlike Bill, whose mold was heroic. He was also mild-looking; there was a baffling depth

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of innocence in his eyes, a placid expression of peace on his lean features. There was even a hint of piety that might pass current among the unwary.

"You filled her up with a lot of bull about me being first in the class and you having religion—you!"

"Didn't she like it?" asked Pete mildly.

"Of course she did, you fool idiot!"

"Then why the roar?"

"Because it's going to make a devil of a mess; that's why. Now we've got to live up to things."

Pete whistled a careless note and shrugged.

"That might be a good stunt, too, Bill."

Bill wheeled away in disgust, then charged back.

"You know as well as I do that we *can't* live up to it—neither of us. You've filled her bean with a lot of fool notions. Oh, Lord, Pete! I had no business to bring you."

"Bill, answer me this: am I making things more exciting?"

"Exciting! You're making them batty."

"Did I ever fail you?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Did I ever hesitate to give the best that was in me, Bill?"

"Cut out the bunk; you can't pull it on me. Didn't I have enough trouble getting through college at all? Didn't I just miss getting the razz from the faculty? Didn't they let me through for fear if they didn't I'd come back? And now you butt in and make me the president of the class and one of those magna cum laudæ guys. Why, you'll have my Aunt Caroline writing to the college to tell 'em how happy she is and how much money she's going to leave 'em!"

Pete made a reassuring gesture.

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"No, she won't, Bill. I'll fix that the next time I talk to her. I'll tell her——"

"You won't tell her one damn thing. You've said plenty now. You lay off, do you hear? You—you—divinity student!"

Pete smiled brightly.

"Do you know, Bill, when I did that I honestly believe I pulled off a new stunt. I doubt if it's been done before. Don't sneer, Bill, I mean it. And don't you worry about my getting away with it. I'll swing the job; you watch."

"But why in blazes did you have to start in telling lies?"

"Why, I was only making things softer for you, old man. We'll assume your aunt has always been fond of you, although God knows why. Anyhow, we'll assume it. But she's more than fond of you now, Bill. She thinks you're not only a lovable man mountain, but she also thinks you're the world's leading intellect. Why? Simply because I told an innocent fib that has harmed nobody."

Bill grunted savagely.

"As for the rest of it," remarked Pete, "each of us must carve his own destiny. I carved mine according to such lights as I had at the moment. Your aunt is pleased with me; most ladies are. Tut, Bill; I speak but the simple truth. What there is about me I don't know. Something too subtle for analysis, I fancy. But, anyhow, you old rip, she likes me. In giving myself an excellent character I also aid you, which was something I had particularly in mind. I am always your little helper, Bill; always and forever. Your aunt feels that it confers honor upon you to consort with a young man of religious tendencies. You have risen

a hundred per cent, not only as an intellectual, but as a moralist. Why, it's almost like having religion yourself, Bill."

Bill Marshall shook a stern finger of warning.

"You've got to stop it, Pete. I won't stand for it. You'll ruin us."

"Oh, I'll get by," said Pete, comfortably.

"Will you? I think you are riding for a fall. How far will you get if she ever finds out you come from the Stearns family?"

Pete became thoughtful.

"She doesn't like us, does she?"

"She thinks your whole outfit is poison. Understand, Pete; I'm only saying what *she* thinks. I haven't any of the family prejudice myself."

"That's nice."

"As a matter of fact, I don't know what the trouble is all about, anyhow. It goes away back. It's a sort of an old family feud; I never bothered with it. It's nothing in my life—but it is in Aunt Caroline's. All you've got to do is to mention the name to her and she broadsides. Why, if she knew that I had anything to do with a Stearns I wouldn't last five minutes under this roof."

"I won't tell her, Bill," said Pete, soothingly.

Aunt Caroline's heir presumptive packed a pipe and lighted it. For several

minutes he smoked ferociously.

"I'm afraid I've made a mistake in bringing you here at all," he said. "It's bad enough to have you a Stearns, but if she knew you had been expelled from college—well, it can't be expressed. Why did you have to insist on being my valet, anyhow? If you'd just come along as a friend, under any old name, it would have been a lot better."

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"No, Bill; I figured that all out. Your Aunt Caroline was suspicious of all college friends; you told me so yourself. She worried about bad company and all that sort of thing. But she won't worry about a poor young man who is working his way in the world and getting ready to reform the heathen. No; I'm better as a valet. Besides, I don't have to give any name except Peter, which is my own. That keeps you from making breaks and saves me from telling a lie."

Bill shook his head gloomily.

"We're off to a bad start," he grumbled. "I don't like it."

"Well, let's be gay and bold about it, anyhow," said Pete. "To become practical, Bill, what sort of accommodations do I draw here? Do I room with you?"

"In your capacity as my valet I imagine you'll get a room in the servants' quarters. Aunt Caroline may put you out in the stable."

"That's a pleasant way to treat a pal," observed Pete.

"Take my tip and get that pal stuff out of your head. You'll forget yourself in front of my aunt some day."

There was a knock at the door and Bill found one of the maids standing in the hall.

"Your aunt would like to see you in the library, Mr. William, if it's convenient," she said.

"I'll be right down."

He turned and glared at Pete.

"I've got a hunch that she's tumbled to you already," he said. "If she has, you'd better go out by that window; it's only a twenty-foot jump."

Pete smiled easily.

"Bet you three to one she hasn't tumbled. Now you trot along, Bill, and cheer up."

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Bill could not shake off his premonition of trouble as he walked slowly down-stairs. With disquieting clearness he sensed that all was not right with his world. Nor did this feeling leave him even when Aunt Caroline removed her spectacles and looked up, smiling.

"It's something I just remembered, William. I wanted to speak to you about your secretary."

"Secretary, Aunt Caroline? He's my valet."

"Oh, no; I don't mean Peter. I mean your secretary."

Bill shook his head to signify he did not understand.

"The secretary I am going to engage for you, William."

"What secretary? What would I do with a secretary, Aunt Caroline?"

"Your social secretary," said Aunt Caroline.

"My social—I'm afraid I don't get you, aunty."

"It is very easily explained, William. All persons who lead an active life in society require a secretary."

Bill stared at his benevolent aunt.

"Holy smoke, Aunt Caroline! I'm not in society."

"But you will be, my dear nephew."

"Never!"

"Oh, yes, William—soon."

"But—Aunt Caroline—I don't want to go into society. I haven't any use for it. I'm not built——"

"There, now, William. We must always put our duty before our mere inclinations. It is your duty to enter society."

Bill almost trembled. This was worse than anything his imagination had conjured. He felt deeply dismayed and, at the same time, excessively foolish.

"Duty?" he echoed. "Duty? Why, how in—how

can it be a duty, Aunt Caroline? You've got me knocked cold."

She smiled gently and patiently.

"It is your duty to the family, William. It is something your father would wish. He had a distinguished position in society. Your grandfather's position was even more distinguished. Because of the fact that I am a spinster it has not been possible for me to maintain the family tradition. But for you, William—why, the whole world of society is open to you. It is waiting for you."

Aunt Caroline clasped her hands in a spell of ecstasy.

"But, my dear aunt, I don't know anybody in society," groaned Bill.

"A Marshall can go anywhere," she answered proudly.

"But I don't *want* to. I'm not fit for it. I'd feel like a jay. I can't dance, Aunt Caroline, I can't talk, I can't doll up—hang it! Look at the size of me. I tell you I'm too big for society. I'd step on it; I'd smother it. I'd break it all into pieces."

"William, nonsense!"

"It is not nonsense; it's the goods, Aunt Caroline. Why, I couldn't even sneak in the back way."

"No Marshall ever sneaks in anywhere," said Aunt Caroline, with a trace of sternness that Bill did not miss. When his aunt was stern, which was rare, it was an omen. "The family pride and the family honor are now in your hands, William, and if you are a Marshall you will be true to them."

"But—oh, I want to do something serious," pleaded Bill.

"What, for instance?"

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Bill was stalled. He did not know what. It was merely the clutch of a drowning man at a straw.

"You will find that society is serious, very serious," observed Aunt Caroline. "There may be some who think it is frivolous; but not the society in which the Marshalls are known. None of us can escape the heritage of our blood, William; none of us should try. If the world of fashion calls you as a leader, it is simply your destiny calling."

Bill regarded his aunt with horror-stricken eyes. He had never thought of a Destiny garbed in the grotesque. For one awful instant he saw himself the perfect gentleman, moving in a wholly polite and always correct little world, smiling, smirking, carrying ices, going to operas, wearing cutaways and canes, drinking tea, talking smartly, petting lap-dogs, handing damosels into limousines, bowing, dancing, holding the mirror to propriety—he—Bill Marshall—old Walloping Bill. His knees shook. Then he brushed the fearsome picture from his mind.

"Aunt Caroline, it's utterly impossible!"

"William, I have decided."

For a few seconds he faced her, matching her glance. He was red with belligerence; Aunt Caroline had the composure of placid adamant. He knew that look. Again the dread picture began to fashion itself; there was weakness in his soul.

"But listen, Aunt Caroline; I'm such a roughneck——"

"William!"

He made a ponderous gesture of despair and walked out of the library.

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CHAPTER III

Engaged

Out of the library and through the parlor—there was a parlor in the Marshall home—strode Bill, with each step gathering speed and assuming the momentum of an avalanche. Things that were in his way suffered consequences. Not that Bill was clumsy at all, although he thought he was, as most men do who belong in the oversize class. He was simply for the moment disregardful of property. Sometimes he believed in the innate perversity of inanimate matter and comported himself accordingly. He was in a hopeless anguish of mind. Oh, that Aunt Caroline should have pressed this cup to his lips.

Through the parlor and into the reception-room. A high-backed chair lay in his path. He placed a foot against it and shot it across the floor, the chair moving on its casters as smoothly as a roller coaster. It hit the wall, spun around and a young woman fell out of it.

Bill halted to stare.

"Holy smoke!"

Then he was across the room, picking her up.

"Oh, I beg a million pardons!"

By this time she was on her feet, very pink in the cheeks and with eyes all amaze. Bill was steadying her with a reassuring hand, but she drew away quickly. It was quite plain that as soon as her surprise passed she would become angry. Bill sensed this in a swift glance.

"Two million!" he said hastily.

She regarded him uncertainly. Gray eyes, straight nose, pleasant mouth, but rather large, fluffy sort of hair that might be reddish in a strong light—all these things Bill was observing. And then—yes, she had freckles; not aggressive, spacious freckles, but small, timid, delicately tinted freckles—the kind of freckles that are valuable to the right sort of girl. Bill liked freckles.

"Three million," he said, and grinned.

"I'll take you at the last figure," she answered.

"Good. I'm awfully obliged. I suppose there's no use asking if I startled you?"

"Quite useless. You did."

"It was very childish of me," said Bill, more humbly. "You see, the chair was in my way."

"And you refused to be thwarted," she nodded gravely.

"I certainly did. I was angry about something and—say are you kidding me?"

This time she smiled and Bill grinned again, sheepishly.

"Anyhow, the chair wasn't where it belonged," he said. "And when you sit in it your head doesn't even stick over the top. I had no idea there was anybody in it, of course."

"Of course," she assented. There was a funny little wrinkle at the corner of her mouth.

"See here," said Bill sharply. "You *are* kidding me, and—well, I'm glad I kicked the chair."

"But really, I don't think either of us was to blame," said the young woman. "I knew the chair wasn't in its regular place. It was moved over here for me."

"What for?"

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"So I could look at the ancestors."

Bill glanced at the wall, where Grandfather and Grandmother Marshall hung in their golden frames.

"Now, who in blazes did that?" he demanded.

"I don't know. Some young man." She spoke as if young men were articles. "I called to see Miss Marshall and a maid left me here for a few minutes. And then this young man came into the room. He asked me if I was interested in ancestors; that was the very first thing he said. And I said I was!"

"Are you?"

"Certainly. So he moved the chair to the center of the room and made me sit in it. He wanted me to be where I could get a proper light on the ancestors, he said. And then he explained them to me. He was very interesting."

"He is interesting," admitted Bill. "But he is an awful liar!"

"Isn't that too bad!"

"Oh, not necessarily. It's really not very important whether he tells the truth or tells lies. You see, he's only a servant."

"Oh."

"My valet."

"I see," she said slowly.

"It was very impertinent of him," said Bill. "He is an exceptionally good servant, but he is rather erratic at times. I shall speak to him about it."

"Oh, please don't. He really didn't offend me."

"Doesn't make any difference," declared Bill, sternly. "I won't have him forgetting his place. Won't you sit down again? I won't bother you to look at the ancestors."

But scarcely had she seated herself than they were

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interrupted. A maid came in to say that Miss Marshall would see her. To Bill it seemed that the stranger became suddenly preoccupied. She was chewing her lip as she walked out of the room and did not even nod to him.

"More of her later from Aunt Caroline," muttered Bill. "And now for a brief word with Pete Stearns."

When Mary Wayne stood in the presence of Aunt Caroline she wondered if she looked as guilty as she felt; it seemed as if "Fraud" must be blazoned in black letters across her forehead. But Aunt Caroline did not appear to discern anything suspicious. She smiled cordially and even extended a hand.

"Please sit down," she said.

Mary sat down. She knew that a social secretary ought to be at ease anywhere, and she was trying hard. Back in the reception-room, where she had encountered two odd young men, she had been surprised at her own poise; for a brief interval all thought of her deception had been driven from her mind. But now, sitting face to face with a kindly old lady who accepted her at face value, Mary was suffering from conscience. She found herself gripping the arm of her chair tensely, girding up her nerves to meet some sudden accusation.

"Miss Norcross, I believe," said Aunt Caroline.

"Ah—yes."

There! The thing was done. She had not done it very confidently, but the lie evidently passed current. When it became apparent that Aunt Caroline had no thought of thrusting a stern finger under her nose, Mary breathed again.

"The people who sent you speak very highly of you,"

remarked Aunt Caroline. "Did they explain to you the nature of the work that would be required?"

"You wished a secretary, I understood."

"A social secretary."

"Yes; they told me that."

"Would you mind giving me some idea of your experience?"

Mary hesitated. She had not prepared herself for this; she was neither forehanded nor wise in the ways of fraud.

"Perhaps," she managed to say. "You would like to see some references."

She tried to placate her conscience in that speech; it seemed a smaller lie than saying "my" references.

"If you please," and Aunt Caroline adjusted her spectacles.

The references came out of Mary's bag. As the mistress of the Marshall mansion took them Mary was thinking:

"Now I am a forger as well as a liar."

Aunt Caroline read the first slowly and aloud, and looked up to find her caller blushing.

"Oh, I am sure it must be honest praise, my dear. Do I confuse you by reading aloud?"

She passed to the next, glancing first at the signature.

"Why," exclaimed Aunt Caroline, "it's from Mrs. Rokeby-Jones. Is it *the* Mrs. Rokeby-Jones?"

Now, Mary had never heard of the lady. She did not know whether she was "the," or merely "a," and to cover the point without committing herself to the unknown she nodded. Aunt Caroline nodded in return and read the reference.

"I am very pleasantly surprised, Miss Norcross,"

she said. "This is what I should call a very distinguished reference. Of course, we all know Mrs. Rokeby-Jones; that is, I mean, by reputation. Personally, I have never had the pleasure of meeting her. You see, my dear, I am rather old-fashioned and do not go out very much. Mrs. Rokeby-Jones. Dear me, why everybody knows her."

Mary almost said "Do they?" The name of Rokeby-Jones meant nothing to her.

"She speaks remarkably well of you," observed Aunt Caroline, again glancing at the reference.

Mary had not even read it. She was too much of a novice for that, and there had been too many things to distract her.

"Quite a cultured lady, I am told, Miss Norcross."

"Yes—quite."

Aunt Caroline was about to pass to the next reference, hesitated and glanced up.

"You know, we women are curious, my dear. I should like to ask you something."

Mary was gripping the chair again. What now?

Aunt Caroline leaned forward and lowered her voice.

"Is it really true—what they say about her daughter?"

The candidate for social secretary somehow felt that the bottom was dropping out of things. What ought she to say? What could she say? And what was it that anybody said about Mrs. Rokeby-Jones's daughter?

"I mean the older daughter," added Aunt Caroline.

So there were two. Mary was staring down at her lap, frowning in bewilderment. How would she find Mrs. Rokeby-Jones's elder daughter—guilty or not

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guilty? If she only knew what people said about her. Probably it had been in the newspapers. Oh, why hadn't she seen it?

"I admit I merely ask from curiosity," said Aunt Caroline, yet hopefully.

Mary looked up and made her decision. Even the meanest prisoner at the bar was entitled to the benefit of a doubt. Why not Mrs. Rokeby-Jones's daughter?

"Personally, I have never believed it," said Mary.

Aunt Caroline sighed happily.

"I am so glad," she said. "That means it isn't true, because you would know. It always seemed to me it was such a strange and cruel thing to say. Of course, I understand, that there are certain family traits on the Rokeby-Jones side. But it doesn't follow, even then. Just how did the story ever come to get about, my dear?"

"I—really, I—— Would you mind if I didn't discuss it, Miss Marshall?"

Aunt Caroline hastily put away the reference and passed to the next.

"You are perfectly right, my dear," she said. "I ought not to have asked you. I think you show a very fine sense of honor in not wanting to talk about it. I'm quite ashamed of myself. Still, I'm very glad to know it isn't true."

She examined the remaining references, obtaining fresh satisfaction from the discovery that the famous Mrs. Hamilton was fully as ardent in her encomiums as Mrs. Rokeby-Jones.

"I must say that your references please me extremely," said Aunt Caroline, as she finished reading the last one. "Your trip abroad with Mrs. Hamilton must have been a charming experience. I shall ask you

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to tell me about it some time. When will you be able to come?"

And thus Mary knew that she was engaged.

"I can start any time," she said.

"To-morrow?"

"Yes, Miss Marshall.

"That will do excellently. You will send your trunk here, of course. I should prefer to have you live with us."

This was something Mary had given no thought, but it sounded wonderful. No more boarding-house. And it would save money, too; there was no telling how much would be needed for the sick girl on the East Side.

Aunt Caroline rang a bell and asked the maid to serve tea.

"We'll have a little chat about terms and other things," she said comfortably.

The little chat lasted the better part of an hour, but it passed without embarrassments. The terms were beyond Mary's hopes. As for Aunt Caroline, she was quaint and captivating. Strange to say, she did not ask many more questions. For the most part, she talked about herself; occasionally she reverted to Mary's references which, it was obvious, had made an indelible impression. Mary discovered a prompt liking for the old lady, and the more she liked her the more shame she had in the masquerade she was playing. Only the desperate plight of a sick girl kept her nerved to the ordeal.

She was taking her leave when Aunt Caroline remarked casually:

"I feel sure that you will not find my nephew unduly exacting in the work he expects of you."

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"Nephew?" asked Mary.

"How odd, my dear. I didn't tell you, did I? I'm afraid I forget things sometimes. You see, you are not my secretary at all. You are to be secretary to my nephew."

Mary stared.

"Why—I——"

"Oh, Miss Norcross! You mustn't say you can't. You will find him most considerate. He is really a brilliant fellow. He stood first in his class at college, and he is even interested in religious matters. He has a very promising social career ahead of him."

Something was whirling in Mary's brain. She felt as though she were shooting through space, and then bringing up against a wall at the farther end of it, where a large and grinning person stood offering apologies by the million. She was going to be secretary to *him*—she knew it.

"Say that you will try it, anyhow," pleaded Aunt Caroline. "I insist."

Too late for retreat, thought Mary. Besides, what difference did it make, after all? The money had to be earned. And she felt quite sure that he would not dream of asking her about Mrs. Rokeby-Jones's daughter.

"I shall report in the morning," she said.

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CHAPTER IV

"The Web We Weave"

It was an excellent morning for a grouch, there being a drizzle outside, and Bill Marshall's grouch was carefully nursed by the owner. He had breakfasted alone, Aunt Caroline rarely taking that meal down-stairs. It would have been a comfort to have had Pete at breakfast, for Pete was entitled to the full benefit of the grouch; but a man cannot eat with his valet and preserve caste with the remaining servants in the house. Up-stairs again in his own rooms, Bill was railing at life, which now stretched before him as cheerless as a black void.

"Society! I'm ruined if it ever gets back to the gang."

"You'll get to like it," Pete assured him. "They all do."

"Oh, stop lying. Do I look like a Rollo?"

"But you'll change, Bill. You won't keep on being uncouth. Influence of environment, you know."

"Cut out the rot, Pete. Can't you take this thing seriously? I tell you, it's going to ruin me."

"And you so young," commented Pete. "Bill, I'll admit it looks tough just now. But what the deuce can you do about it? There's Aunt Caroline, you know."

A rumbling growl from Bill.

"She cuts quite a figure in your scheme of existence, Bill. You've got to play along with her, up to a certain

point—or go to work. And what would you work at? They wouldn't start off by making you president of anything. I know that much about business myself."

"I'm not afraid to take a chance at work."

"Not you. But how about the fellow that gives out the jobs? And, besides, Aunt Caroline hasn't said anything about your going to work, as I understand it. She's got higher ideals right now."

"Pete, I tell you I'm not going to stand for this without a fight. I haven't promised anything yet."

Pete grinned.

"Maybe you didn't promise, but you marched off the field, and Aunt Caroline didn't. You went through all the motions of taking a beating. Bill, she hung the Indian sign on you right then. They never come back after the champ puts 'em away. I'll string a little bet on Aunt Caroline."

Bill growled again, seized the morning paper, essayed to read it, then flung it across the room.

"Never on the front page, Bill," said Pete. "They always print it opposite the editorial page."

"What?"

"The society news."

"Oh, go to blazes!" Bill's grouch was as virile as himself. "And see here, Pete. I'll beat this game yet. They can't put me into society without a secretary, can they? Well, you stand by and see how long any Willy-boy secretary holds a job with me. You keep time on it. The main part of his job will be his exit. And, believe me, he'll *want* to go."

Bill towered importantly in the center of the room.

"If he's my secretary he takes orders from me, doesn't he? And I have to have my daily exercise,

don't I? Well, his first job every day is to put on the gloves for half an hour. After that he can open the mail, if he's able."

Pete smiled a tribute of admiration.

"It's good as far as it goes, Bill. Yes, you can lick a secretary. There isn't any doubt he'll take the air as soon as he comes to. But then you've got nothing between you and the old champ. And, as I said before, I'm stringing with Aunt Caroline."

Pete strolled to the window and observed the drizzling morning. Also, he observed something else—something that caused him to turn about with a show of genuine enthusiasm.

"Bill," he whispered loudly, "she's in again."

"Who?"

"Little Gray Eyes."

"*Who?*"

"Man dear, the girl. The mysterious lady. The one that took a liking to me. The one——"

Bill strode to the window.

"Oh, she's inside now," said Pete. "I heard the door closing. Bill, I must have made a hit."

He went over to the dresser, picked up Bill's brushes and began work on his hair.

"Pete, you can cut that out right now. You don't leave this room. Understand?"

"But maybe she's back to look at the ancestors again. She liked the way I talked about 'em, and——"

Bill pushed his valet violently into a chair.

"Pete, you've got to behave. I had trouble enough explaining about you yesterday. My Aunt Caroline's friends don't call here to see the servants—and you're a servant. Get me?"

"Don't be a snob, Bill."

"I'm not. But I'm your boss; that is, while you're in this house. If you don't like it, blame yourself. You invented this valet stuff. Now live up to it. Keep your own place or you'll have everything coming down in a grand smash."

Pete looked up at him sourly.

"Bill, you act jealous."

"Who? Me? Bull!"

"Bill, you *are* jealous."

"Don't be an ass. I don't even know the lady. She's nothing to me. But I intend to protect Aunt Caroline's guests——"

Bill was cut short by a knock and a message from a maid. Following its receipt, he walked over to the dresser and examined his scarf.

"Brush me off," he commanded.

"Go to the devil," remarked his valet. "And look here, Bill; play this square. Don't you go taking advantage of my position. Be a sport now. And if Gray Eyes——"

Bill was out of the room.

Down in the library he found Aunt Caroline—and the young woman with the gray eyes. The freckles were there, too; he saw them in a better light now and decided they were just the right shade of unobtrusiveness.

"William," said Aunt Caroline, "this is Miss Norcross."

Mary Wayne had arisen from her chair. It seemed to Bill that she lacked something of the poise that he had remarked on the afternoon before. There was uncertainty in her glance; an air of hesitation rather than of confidence was asserting itself. When he upset her chair in the reception-room she had rallied

with discomforting assurance; now she betrayed timidity.

"Mighty glad to meet you," said Bill, with a large, amiable smile.

He found it necessary to reach for her hand, and when he had possessed himself of it he discovered that it was trembling.

She murmured something that he did not catch; evidently it was a mere formality. Bill regarded her with faint perplexity; she was behaving quite differently this morning. He wondered if it would be a good idea to say something about yesterday. Had she told Aunt Caroline? No; probably not. If she had, Aunt Caroline would certainly have chided him for working himself into a childish fury. Perhaps it would be embarrassing to mention the matter. He decided to let "Miss Norcross" take the initiative.

"Miss Norcross is ready to start this morning," explained Aunt Caroline.

Was she? thought Bill. Start what, or where?

"Too bad it should be raining," he observed. Then he could have chastised himself; it was such a futile commonplace. Pete would never have said anything so stupid.

"I think it will be more convenient for both of you to use the sun-parlor room on the second floor," said Aunt Caroline. "Here in the library there are so many interruptions."

"Er—yes; interruptions," said Bill.

Well, what interruptions? What was all this about, anyhow? From Aunt Caroline he turned to the girl. Evidently she did not think it was for her to explain; she avoided his glance.

"Oh, perhaps I forgot to explain, William." Aunt

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Caroline smiled at her own omission. "Miss Norcross is your secretary."

Bill started to whistle, but it died on his lips. Truth, out in the light at last, was overwhelming him. He looked again at his secretary; this time she did not avoid his eyes, but her expression puzzled him. As nearly as he could read it, there was a pleading there. As for Bill himself, he knew that his face was growing red. This girl—his secretary! All his hastily conceived plans were crashing. Aunt Caroline had spiked a gun.

"Miss Norcross has some remarkably fine references, William, and I see no reason why you should not get along very well," added Aunt Caroline.

"Ah—none whatever," he said clumsily.

"I think now you might show her the way up-stairs, William."

Without a word, Bill turned and led the way. He wondered if his ears were red, too, and if she could notice them from the back. He had a mad desire to run. He actually did start taking the stairs two at a time, then remembered and fell into a dignified pace.

A girl secretary! Oh, Aunt Caroline!

"How'll I get rid of her?" thought Bill. "I can't beat her up. I can't swear at her. And why does she have to be a secretary, anyhow? It isn't a square deal. If this ever gets out—oh, boy!"

Mary Wayne followed primly, although she was in a tumultuous state of mind. Of course she had had a night to dwell upon it, but now that she was really entering upon the adventure it seemed more formidable than ever. What an amazingly large person he was; it seemed contradictory, somehow, that a brilliant society man, such as described by Aunt Caroline, should

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run so aggressively to bulk. And he seemed embarrassed; he was not at all like the man who kicked her chair across the room.

Bill, with the air of a man about to face a firing squad, moved grimly along the upper hall in the direction of the sun-parlor room. There was nothing heroic in his bearing; rather, there was the resignation of despair. And then something happened to awaken him.

Pete Stearns, coming down from the third floor, spotted him.

"Say, listen——"

Then Pete spotted the girl and the sentence froze. He stood with his mouth agape, staring at the procession.

Bill jerked his head higher and set his shoulders. Pete Stearns wouldn't get any satisfaction out of this, if he knew it. He eyed his valet coldly.

"Don't forget to sponge and press those suits, and hurry up about it," he ordered roughly. "When you've done that I may have some errands for you. Look sharp."

He strode past Pete, and Mary Wayne followed. She did not even glance at the amazed valet. Pausing at a door, Bill opened it and held it wide.

"This way, if you please, Miss Norcross," he said, with a bow whose courtliness astonished himself.

She entered the sun-parlor room. Bill followed—and closed the door.

Out in the hall Pete Stearns was leaning against the wall.

"I'll be damned!" he whispered. "The lucky stiff."

Beyond the door Bill was facing Nemesis. She

looked neither perilous nor forbidding; she was just a girl with a lot of nice points, so far as he could see. The encounter with Pete had braced him; perhaps it had even elevated him somewhat in her eyes. He felt the need of elevation; Aunt Caroline had managed to give him a sense of pampered unmanliness. Evidently the girl was waiting for him to begin.

"I guess you didn't tell Aunt Caroline how I booted you across the room last night," said Bill.

"No," she answered.

"That's good."

And he felt that it was good. This mutual reticence, so far as Aunt Caroline was concerned, tentatively served as a bond. He waved her gallantly to a chair, and she sat first on the edge of it; then, remembering that a social secretary should be a person of ease, she settled back.

"What has my aunt been telling you about me?" he demanded suddenly.

"Why—er—nothing. That is, she told me you wanted a social secretary."

"She did, eh? She said I *wanted* one?"

Mary hesitated for a second.

"Perhaps she did not put it exactly that way—Mr. Marshall. But of course I understand that you wanted one. I was engaged for that purpose."

"Did she tell you I was in society?"

"I don't remember that she did. But I took that for granted."

"Do I look as if I was in society?"

"I—I can't say." She found the young man somewhat disconcerting. "Aren't you?"

"No!" Bill thundered it.

"Oh!"

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"I'm not in society, and I'm not going in. I wouldn't go into society if they closed up everything else."

Mary experienced a pang of dismay.

"Then I'm afraid there's some mistake," she faltered. "I'm sorry."

"Wait a minute," said Bill, drawing up a chair for himself and facing her. "Don't worry, now. Let's get this straightened out. I'll explain. My aunt wants me to go into society. I want to stay out. She's got a lot of ideas about keeping up the family reputation. I'd sooner go get a new one. So she hires a social secretary for me—and take it from me, Miss Norcross, I don't need a social secretary any more than I need crutches. I don't need any kind of a secretary."

Mary's heart was sinking. This was the end of her job; it had all been too good to be true. He must have read this thought in her eyes, for he continued hastily:

"Now, don't get scared. I'm trying to figure this thing out so it'll suit all hands. You see, this has sort of taken me by surprise. I wasn't expecting you as a secretary; I was expecting a man."

"Oh," said Mary faintly.

"And I was going to get rid of him—pronto. I had it all doped out. But——" Bill grinned—"I can't get rid of you that way."

Mary suddenly stiffened. She was not accustomed to having men get rid of her; she would get rid of herself. She arose from her chair.

Bill reached forth a long arm and calmly pushed her back into it. She flushed angrily. No matter how badly she needed work she did not intend to be treated as a child. But again he was employing that disarming grin.

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"Easy now—please. I guess I'm rough, but I don't mean it that way. I suppose you need a job, don't you?"

Mary considered for an instant.

"Of course," she said, with a touch of dignity, "I should not have applied for a

place I did not need."

"Sure; I get you. Listen, now: You can hold this job as long as you like; you can be social secretary or any other kind—only I'm not going into society."

"Will you please explain that?"

"It's easy. So long as my aunt thinks I'm going into society—fine. So long as I stay out of it—fine. I haven't any objections to having a secretary, on that basis."

Mary shook her head.

"That would be practicing a deception on your aunt," she said.

Oh, Mary!

But what Mary had in her mind was not the drawing of a fine distinction between one deception and another. She had not forgotten that already she was a deceiver. What troubled her was this: She liked Aunt Caroline. Thus far she had done that nice old lady no harm, even though she posed as Nell Norcross. But to take Aunt Caroline's money and give nothing in return was very different. That would be stealing. And, besides, she felt that the acceptance of Bill's idea would put her in an equivocal position toward him.

"But Aunt Caroline will never know," said Bill, who had no scruples on this point. "And you will be able to keep right on in your job."

Again Mary shook her head. She would have risen but for the fear that he would push her back into the chair a second time.

"I would be accepting charity," she declared firmly. "I do not need to do that."

Even her thought of the sick girl in the boarding-house did not prevent her from making this renunciation. Not even to supply Nell Norcross with a doctor, a nurse and medicine would she accept charity.

"I had better go down and explain the situation to Miss Marshall and then go," she added.

When she said that she did not realize how vulnerable was the spot in which she attacked him. Bill sensed the blow instantly.

"No, no!" he almost shouted. "You can't do that. You couldn't explain it to her in a million years."

Bill was worried. He did not know that young women were so difficult to please. He was worried about what Aunt Caroline would say. He knew that she was not only determined he should have a social secretary, but he divined that she wished him to have this particular secretary. More than that, on his own account, he was not yet ready to see the last of this young person. Still further, there was the desirable project of humiliating Pete Stearns in even greater degree.

"Then you may explain it to her," suggested Mary, clinging desperately to her remnant of conscience.

"I can't explain it any better than you can," groaned Bill. "I tried to, yesterday, and flivvered."

There was half a minute of silence, conversation having ended in a *cul de sac*. Both turned toward the door with a breath of relief when it opened softly, after a premonitory knock. Pete Stearns stood on the threshold.

He glanced not at all at Bill; his eyes were for Mary alone.

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"Well?" demanded Bill.

"I thought, sir," said Pete, still watching Mary, "that unless you were in a hurry about your clothes——"

Bill cut him short with a gesture.

"I am in a hurry," he snapped, glaring at his valet. "What's more, I do not wish to be interrupted when I am busy with my secretary."

Pete's eyebrows went up nearly an inch. The news was staggering—but it solved a mystery. Unmistakable hints of a smile lurked on his lips. Then he bowed deeply —at Mary.

"Very good, sir," he said, and closed the door.

Bill turned again toward his secretary.

"Ultimately, I'm going to assassinate that valet," he said. "I'm only waiting in order to get my alibi perfected."

Mary found herself smiling.

"Now," said Bill, "let's talk business again. I think I know a way to straighten this out."

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CHAPTER V

Social Secretarying

When half an hour had passed Bill was still talking, and Mary had confirmed certain tentative impressions concerning his respect for the opinions of Aunt Caroline; or, rather, not so much for her opinions as for her authority. She saw that Bill had substantial reasons for at least an outward semblance of acquiescence in his aunt's plans.

Bill found that it was quite easy to talk to his secretary. She was an attentive, accurate listener; she seldom interrupted him with questions. She simply sat and absorbed things, with her hands folded in her lap and her whole posture that of

trained concentration. Out of her gray eyes she would watch him steadily, but not in a disconcerting way. There was nothing in her eyes that should not have been there, not even one of those quizzical flashes that had temporarily unsettled him the afternoon before. To say that she was demure might, perhaps, suggest the artificiality of a pose; therefore, she was not demure. She was simply decorous, in a perfectly natural way.

"So, then," Bill was saying, "my idea is this: Not being in society, and never having been there, naturally I can't take a running jump into the middle of it. An outsider has to be eased in, I don't care who his family is, unless he's a foreigner. In my case it ought to take some time to fight my way through the preliminaries.

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Now, I'm not saying yet that I'll go in, mind you. But I'm willing to see the thing started. I don't want you to get the idea that I'm pigheaded. I might change my mind."

He knew that he wouldn't, but Mary nodded.

"So, why not go ahead with the job and see what comes of it? That's playing square with Aunt Caroline, I'm sure. Later on, if the time comes when it's all off, we'll go and tell her so and ask for a new deal. How about it? Fair enough?"

"Yes," said Mary, slowly, "that seems to be fair—provided you're sincere."

"Miss Norcross, I'm the soul of sincerity."

For that protestation she suspected him, yet she did not feel justified in pressing scruples too far. She was not a hypocrite.

"If you are really going to try it, then, I suppose you will have need of a secretary."

"My idea exactly," said Bill heartily. "Shake."

She shook.

"I'm glad that's settled," he declared, with a comfortable stretch. "Now we can talk about something else."

Mary's eyebrows went up almost imperceptibly.

"Seen the 'Follies' yet?" asked Bill. "No? Say don't miss it. I've been twice. Think I'll go again, too. Lot of good shows in town, but I'm 'way behind on them."

He was regarding her with such a speculative eye that Mary felt the need of a change of subject. She arose and began removing her hat.

"I think I had better go to work," she said.

"Work? Oh, sure; I forgot. Certainly. Er—what at?"

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"We might start on your correspondence," she suggested.

"I'm game. Who'll we write to?"

"Why—how should I know, Mr. Marshall? That's for you to say."

Bill rubbed his ear.

"Hanged if I know who to write to," he mused. "I never had the habit. I suppose it's done regularly—in society."

"It is considered quite important to attend promptly to all correspondence," said Mary. That was a safe generalization, she thought, applicable to society as well as business.

Bill began fumbling in a coat-pocket and eventually drew forth some papers.

"I haven't had a letter in a week," he said. "You see, what I get mostly is bills. Aunt Caroline attends to those. But here's a letter I got last week; we could begin on that, I suppose."

He drew it out of the envelope and then shook his head.

"Too late, I'm afraid. The party was last night. I had another date and didn't go."

"But you sent them word, of course."

"No, indeed; never bothered about it."

Mary looked disturbed; her sense of order was really offended.

"I think that was very wrong," she observed.

"Oh, they'll get over it," said Bill easily. "It was only a poker outfit, anyhow."

"Oh."

Bill finished examining his papers and tossed them into the fireplace.

"Not a thing in the world that needs an answer,"

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he sighed contentedly. "Ever occur to you, Miss Norcross, that there's a lot of paper wasted? If people would only put letters in their pockets and carry them for a couple of weeks, nine-tenths of them wouldn't need to be answered."

Mary was frowning.

"After this I hope you'll let me take charge of your mail," she said.

"It's all yours," said Bill generously. "I never get anything interesting, anyhow. Now, what'll we do?"

The situation was perplexing to her. She could not sit all morning simply talking to him; that might be social but not secretarial. There was a business relation to be preserved.

"You might plan out things," she suggested. "Give me your ideas about your—your ——"

"Career?" he asked, with elaborate irony, and she nodded.

"Not for anything," said Bill. "I haven't any ideas. That's your part of it. I'm going

to let you handle the planning along with the correspondence. You've got more dope on it than I have. You're the manager, or maybe the chaperon. I'm only the débutante."

As Mary regarded this large and impossible débutante the mere suggestion of chaperoning him appalled her.

"But surely you've got some suggestions," she said.

"Not a solitary one. Where would I get any? I've been on the outside all my life, not even looking in. Is it all right for me to smoke? Thanks. No; it's up to you. But remember—there's no rush. Don't get the idea I'm driving you. Why, you can take all

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the time in the world. Take six months; take a year. Think it over."

"A year!" echoed Mary. "But you ought to start right away."

"Why?"

"Why—so you can enjoy the—er—advantages of society."

"Well, Mr. Bones—I mean Miss Norcross, of course—what are the advantages of society?"

He stood against the mantel, his feet spread wide, his hands deep in his pockets, staring down at her with a challenging grin.

Mary became confused. Her soul was crying out in protest at the unfairness of it. What did she know about the advantages of society? And yet she must know. Was it possible he suspected her? Any social secretary ought to have the advantages of society at the tip of her tongue.

"It seems to me they're obvious," she said, with desperate carelessness. "I shouldn't think it would be necessary to make a list of them."

"It is with me," said Bill mercilessly. "I've got to be shown. Come on, now; you're an expert. We'll take them one at a time. What's the first?"

"—I wouldn't know which to put first."

"Take 'em in any order you like, then. Name the first you happen to think of."

Mary was growing pink under the freckles. Never in her life had she felt so helpless or so absurd. It was deliberate teasing, she knew; but she must not permit herself to be teased. She must have poise and self-possession; literally, she must know everything he asked, or at any rate have an answer.

"Shoot," said Bill cheerfully. "I'm all attention."

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That was just the trouble, thought Mary. She was fearing now that she would fly into a temper, which would ruin everything.

"Well," she said slowly. "I would say that one of the advantages is in meeting

people who are trained to be considerate of your feelings."

Nor was she ready to bite off her tongue after she said it. He had no right to treat her that way. She hoped he would understand.

And Bill did. His eyes widened for an instant and his cheeks reddened. Then he laughed.

"That one landed good and plenty," he said admiringly. "I like the way you snap your punches. Next time I'll know when it's coming. A second ago I wasn't sure whether you were going to continue the footwork or step in and hang one on me."

"What in the world——" Mary faltered in her bewilderment.

"It's just a way of apologizing," he explained. "It's what you might call an allegorical apology. I don't know just how they would say it in society, but whatever they say goes. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings by teasing you."

"Oh, it's all right," said Mary hastily, although she noted that he was sorry for hurting her feelings, not because he had been teasing.

"I'll try to remember after this," continued Bill. "Of course, you really stirred things up yourself by saying I ought to start right away. You don't seem to realize what a job it's going to be. I can't help you any. When I think of the amount of creative work that's falling on your shoulders I stagger in sympathy, Miss Norcross. Honestly I do. No; I'm not joshing you again. I'm serious. Where do you begin to get a guy

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like me into society? How do I pry in? What have I got to do to be saved?"

Mary smiled in spite of a determination to maintain a dignified view-point.

"It will not be so difficult as you think. I'm quite sure of that, Mr. Marshall. If I may suggest——"

As she stopped she was looking in the direction of the door. Bill turned and beheld his valet, standing well inside the threshold. Pete was meek and smug, his hands clasped in front of him, as he fetched an obsequious bow.

"Knock before you enter a room," said Bill sharply.

"I did, sir."

Bill knew that he lied, but the point was not worth arguing.

"I have finished with your clothes, sir."

"Well, why disturb me about it."

"You said you were in a hurry, sir."

Pete gave the "sir" an annoying twist. Also, he had a way of fixing his gaze upon Mary, not boldly or offensively, but with a sort of mild persistence that had an even more irritating effect upon Bill Marshall.

"You said something about errands, sir, after I finished with your clothes," Pete reminded him.

"I'll talk to you about that later. You needn't wait."

But Pete lingered. The social secretary turned away and began examining a book that lay on a table. As she did so, Bill made a violent gesture to his valet. It was intended to convey a demand for instant exit, also a threat of events to come if it was not obeyed. Pete favored him with a wide smile and a wink. Mary moved across the room to examine a picture, bringing the valet again within her range of vision. The smile vanished instantly.

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"May I make a suggestion, sir?"

"Well?" Bill demanded.

"I could not help but overhear a part of the conversation, sir," said Pete. "It was about the difficulties of getting a social introduction."

Both Bill and Mary were regarding him speculatively, and each was wondering how long he had been listening. But the valet remained unabashed.

"Well?" repeated Bill ominously.

"I might say, sir, that I agree with the young lady—that it will not be so difficult as you think. If I may make bold, sir——"

Bill halted him with a sternly raised hand. He would have preferred to choke him, but valets were not commonly choked in the presence of young ladies. He could do it much better later.

"That will be all from you," barked Bill. "I do not wish any advice from the servants. Leave the room."

But Pete lingered. He even sent an appealing look in the direction of Mary, who showed obvious signs of puzzled interest in the encounter.

"Leave the room!"

Bill followed the remark with a stride. He felt both angry and ridiculous. But Pete was holding his ground with an air of sleek and pious fortitude.

"Your aunt, sir, thought there was much promise in the idea," he said.

Bill halted.

"What idea?"

"A suggestion that I made about you, sir."

Bill groaned in the depths of his soul. Now what had happened? What new devilment had been set afoot by Pete Stearns? Well, he would soon find

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out, but not here—not in the presence of his social secretary. He must brazen it out for the moment:

"You mean to tell me you have dared discuss my affairs with my aunt?"

"At her request, sir," answered Pete, lifting a deprecating hand. "I should not have dreamed of volunteering, sir."

Bill was almost ready to believe him; yes, in all probability it was a horrible truth. Doubtless Aunt Caroline had actually asked for his advice. She was capable of that folly since she had acquired the notion that Pete Stearns was an uplifting influence.

"Well, you won't discuss them with me," roared Bill. "Get out!"

The valet shrugged and looked sorrowful.

"Perhaps if I talked the matter over with the young lady, sir——"

Bill made a rush, but his valet was several jumps in the lead as he sped out into the hall. The pursuer stopped at the threshold and turned back into the room.

"Oh, damnation!" he cried. "Oh, why in—— Say, wait a minute! Please, Miss Norcross. Awfully sorry; forgot you were here. I apologize. I didn't mean——"

But she, too, was gone. Not for the reason that Bill feared, however. She was hurrying to see Aunt Caroline. She wanted an idea.

She never needed an idea so badly in her life.

CHAPTER VI

In Search of an Idea

Bill hunted for his valet with commendable industry. He searched his own rooms, the servants' quarters and every part of the house where Pete by any possibility might be concealed. He went out to the stable and garage. He made inquiries among the maids. But he did not find Pete, which was an excellent turn of fortune for that young man. Bill was more than angry; he was primed for conflict.

"I'll stand anything within reason," he told himself, "but if Pete Stearns thinks he can ruin me offhand he's got to lick me first."

He gloomed around in his room until it was time for luncheon, and went downstairs to find Aunt Caroline and Mary already at the table. Bill held them both under suspicion as he took his seat. He glanced from one to the other, searching for some sign that would betray a conspiracy. But Aunt Caroline appeared to be her usual placid self, while Mary Wayne neither avoided his glance nor sought to meet it, nor did she in any wise behave as might a young woman who had guilt on her soul.

Bill ate stoically. Curiosity was burning within him; he wanted to know what Pete Stearns had been saying to Aunt Caroline. But he feared to ask; somewhere there was a flaw in his moral courage whenever he was in the presence of his aunt.

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He really had a morbid desire to know the worst, but lacked the hardihood to seek the knowledge boldly. So for a while there was nothing but perfunctory conversation between Aunt Caroline and the social secretary, with Bill affecting preoccupation but listening to every word.

"Miss Norcross tells me you have been discussing plans, William," said his aunt, suddenly turning the talk.

"Huh? Oh, yes; certainly."

He directed a sharp glance at Mary, but it did not reveal to him anything that suggested an uneasy conscience.

"I am glad that you are losing no time," continued Aunt Caroline. "Have you decided on anything definite?"

"Why—nothing's positively settled, Aunt Caroline. Takes time to get started, you know. It's a sort of closed season in society, anyhow. Isn't that so, Miss Norcross?"

"It is not as active as it might be—in town," said Mary diplomatically.

"I suppose it is true," observed Aunt Caroline. "Yet, of course, opportunities can be found. I had what seemed a really excellent suggestion this morning."

Bill laid his fork on his plate and waited grimly.

"It came from that nice young man of yours, Peter."

The social secretary was diligently buttering a piece of toast; she did not appear to be interested. Bill knew what that meant—Aunt Caroline had already told her. Everybody was taking a hand in planning his career except himself. It was enough to make a red-blooded American explode.

"Well, I'll bite, Aunt Caroline. What did he say?"

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"William, please avoid slang. Why, he spoke about the social possibilities that lie in charitable and religious work."

Bill gripped the edge of the table and held on. He felt certain that his brain had flopped clear over and was now wrong side up.

"What he had in mind," continued Aunt Caroline, "was killing two birds with one stone. It would give you an opportunity to combine society with other worthy enterprises. As I myself know, there are many people of very fine standing who are interested in the various religious and charitable organizations, while the extent of Peter's knowledge of the matter really surprised me. Through the medium of such organizations he assured me that it would be possible for you to meet some of the most socially desirable families. Of course, you would also meet other persons whom it is not so important for you to know, but that is a detail

which would regulate itself. At the same time, you would have an opportunity to do some morally uplifting work."

Bill moistened his lips and stole a horrified glance at Mary Wayne. This time she was stirring her tea.

"Well, William, what do you think of the idea?"

"Preposterous!"

Aunt Caroline was frankly surprised.

"Absolute nonsense! Drivel!"

"William!"

"Well, it is. It's nothing but sanctimonious bunk."

"Now, William, control yourself. Consider for a moment——"

"Aunt Caroline, I can't consider it. Gee whiz, if I've got to go into society I'm not going to use the family entrance. I'm going in through the swinging

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doors or I don't go in at all. And I'd like to know what business my valet has butting into my affairs."

Aunt Caroline displayed a mild frown of disapproval.

"You must remember, William, that he is something more than a valet. He has been a companion in college and is a young man of very high ideals."

"I don't care what his ideals are—high up or low down. Let him mind his own business."

"But William, he has your very best interests at heart," persisted Aunt Caroline. "I consider him a very fine influence."

"Well, he can't meddle with me."

"Nobody is meddling, William. We are all trying to help you—Miss Norcross, Peter, myself—everybody."

"Say, who's trying to run me, anyhow? What is this—a League of Nations, or what?"

"William!"

But Bill was becoming reckless. The more he heard of this diabolical plot the more he was determined to wipe Pete Stearns summarily out of his life. How many were there in this scheme? He glared accusingly at his secretary.

This time she met his glance steadily. There was something so purposeful in her gaze that it held his attention. Her gray eyes seemed to be telegraphing, but he could not read the message. She flashed a side glance toward Aunt Caroline. With no apparent purpose she lifted her napkin, but instead of putting it to her lips she laid her finger across them.

Bill raged. So they had dragged her into the plot, too. Her part, it seemed, was to put a soft pedal on protests.

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"I'm not going to be charitable and I'm not going to be religious," said Bill, defiantly. "And if you don't lay off me I'm not going into society, either. I'd sooner go to the devil; all by myself, if I have to."

"William Marshall!"

Bill was not looking to see how much Aunt Caroline was shocked; he was again looking at his secretary. Her finger went to her lips once more, and this time she also shook her head. She was slightly frowning, too. Well, what was the idea? What difference did it make to her whether he spoke his mind or kept a craven silence? Probably she was afraid of losing her job.

"Society!" jeered Bill. "Personally conducted by my valet! Me—hopping around in a pair of patent-leather pumps, lugging lemonade for a lot of giggling boneheads and saying 'Ain't it great!'"

Aunt Caroline was passing the point where her sensibilities were merely outraged; she was growing angry. Her fingers were drumming nervously on the cloth and in her eyes was an expression that Bill had seen there before. But this time he seemed to miss it. Mary Wayne did not miss it, however. She sent him a frown of warning. And then she spoke.

"Miss Marshall, wouldn't it be a good idea if your nephew and I discussed this matter up-stairs?"

Aunt Caroline sternly regarded Bill and hesitated. Bill began bracing himself for combat.

"I think perhaps he doesn't fully understand the idea," continued Mary, hastily. "Perhaps there are some features of it that can be—modified. I'd like to have a chance to explain it to him more fully."

Aunt Caroline arose from the table.

"Very well," she said. "But you needn't go up-stairs

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to discuss it, my dear. You can discuss it right here; that is, if you are able to talk to him at all, which I am not."

She walked stiffly out of the dining-room, leaving Mary and Bill facing each other from opposite sides of the table.

"Well?" demanded Bill.

She leaned forward and regarded him with complete disapproval.

"You nearly spoiled everything," she said. "Oh, please—please can't you be more reasonable, Mr. Marshall?"

"Reasonable! Do you call that stuff reason?"

"I haven't called it anything. But don't you see that it only makes these things worse to quarrel about them?"

"You don't even want to give me a chance to defend myself," accused Bill. "You tried to shut me up."

"I was trying to warn you to be more diplomatic."

"What's the sense of being diplomatic when somebody sticks you up with a gun? That's what it was; it was a stick-up."

Mary made a patient gesture of dissent.

"I don't think you handled it in the right way at all," she said, firmly. "You didn't accomplish anything, except to offend your aunt."

"Well, I'm not going to stand for it, anyhow. So what was the use of pussy footing? You're all against me—the whole three of you."

Mary studied him for several seconds.

"Whose secretary am I?" she demanded.

"Why—mine. That is, you're supposed to be."

"Well, am I or am I not?"

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"Of, if it comes to that, you are." He said it reluctantly and suspiciously.

"Very well. Then whose interests do I look after?"

Bill hesitated. He was by no means certain on that point.

"You're supposed to look after mine, I should say."

"I'm not only supposed to, but I do," declared Mary. "And I don't think that thus far you have any good reason to doubt it. I don't think it's fair for you to doubt it."

Bill was beginning to feel uneasy. It would be very embarrassing if she started to scold him.

"I'm not doubting it," he said, but none too graciously.

"All right, then," said Mary. "As your secretary I am looking after your interests first of all in this matter."

"But you've got a wrong idea of my interests, Miss Norcross. They've got you in on this scheme and——"

"Who said I was in on it?" she interrupted.

"But aren't you?"

"I am not."

Bill stared incredulously.

"But you're in favor of it, anyhow."

"I am not."

He spent a few seconds trying to grasp that.

"You're against it? On the level?" he gasped.

"On the level," she said calmly.

"Then why in blazes didn't you say so?" he cried.

"Because it wasn't the time or the place to say so, Mr. Marshall."

He was rubbing his ear in a puzzled way.

"Does my Aunt Caroline know you're against it?"

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"I think not. We merely discussed it. I didn't express any opinion."

Bill rose and took a turn about the room. He stretched comfortably. He was breathing normally again.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "I'm glad they haven't got you hooked up on it. But you certainly had me guessing for a while."

Mary was smiling faintly as she watched him.

"You stick by me and I'll stick by you," he said, walking back to the table. "We'll put rollers under Aunt Caroline yet."

"Oh, no, Mr. Marshall. Remember, you promised to make a beginning."

"Well, we'll put that valet on skids, anyhow."

Mary pursed her lips and considered.

"He has a certain ingenuity," she remarked judicially.

"What?"

"I think so. And when you come to think of it, there are really possibilities in his idea."

"Oh, glory! And you just told me you were against it."

"I am—in your case," said Mary. "But that doesn't condemn the idea. It simply means it might not work in a particular instance."

"I take it you couldn't quite see me breaking in from the religious angle."

"Not quite," she answered, and Bill thought her emphasis was unnecessary. But he did not dwell upon the matter of emphasis, because he was still overwhelmed with gratitude at the discovery that she did not belong to the cabal that had been organized against him.

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"You see," explained Mary, "I did not take any side in the matter because I felt it was necessary first to find out what you thought about it. But you ought not to have been so emphatic. I haven't been here very long, of course, but I have

already learned that that is not the best way to deal with your aunt, Mr. Marshall."

Bill was studying his secretary with new respect. He knew that she spoke the truth about Aunt Caroline, but he had never been able to put into practice the best method of dealing with her.

"I think we can let the matter rest for a while," she added. "Although, of course, it depends a good deal on whether we can make progress in some other direction. It's imperative to make a start."

"Keep me out of the charitable and religious game and I'll leave it all to you," said Bill, fervently. "But listen: don't start in with the idea that that valet is any friend of mine. He's dangerous."

"Then why do you keep him, Mr. Marshall?"

"Why? Oh, I'm—well, I'm sorry for him, you know. And I knew him in college, which makes it hard to turn him down. He sticks around in spite of me."

To Mary Wayne this explanation did not cover the situation. Peter the valet impressed her as a somewhat mysterious retainer in the Marshall household. But she did not press her inquiry. Instead, she asked Bill if it would be convenient for her to leave the house for a couple of hours that afternoon, as she had an errand to perform. Bill assured her that it would; he volunteered to drive her wherever she wanted to go, an offer that Mary declined with prim and hasty thanks.

Not long after that she was sitting at the bedside of Nell Norcross. The sick girl regarded her with feverishly bright eyes.

"I mustn't disturb you, of course," said Mary, "but the doctor says it is all right for you to talk a little. I need some advice."

"About what?" asked Nell.

"About how to get a young man into society when he doesn't want to get there. A rather violent young man, I'm afraid."

"A man!"

"I didn't explain to you last night, did I? You were too sick. Well, I'll tell you what has happened."

Mary sketched the affair as briefly as she could. Nell Norcross, rightful owner of the magnificent references, showed flashes of interest, but for the most part she lapsed into listlessness. Her head still ached and the medicine that she took every two hours tasted frightfully.

"Now, what would you do with a young man like that?" asked Mary.

"I—I don't know. I'll have to think." Nell turned wearily on the pillow and closed her eyes. "I—I'm afraid I can't think now."

"Any suggestion might help," said Mary, encouragingly.

Nell groaned and asked for a drink of water. Mary fetched it and again sat by the bedside.

"Just a single idea as a starter," she urged.

"Oh, give a party," answered Nell, irritably. "They all do that."

"What kind of a party?"

"Oh, any kind. I—oh, I'm so tired."

"Never mind," said Mary, soothingly. "I'm sorry,

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my dear. I won't bother you now. Perhaps I can think——" She paused as an inspiration came to her. "I know what I'll do. I'll call up one of your references on the telephone and explain that I need a little advice."

Nell turned quickly and stared at her.

"Oh, no," she muttered. "You shouldn't do that."

"But, don't you see——"

Nell was shaking her head, then groaning with the pain it caused her.

"Very bad form," she managed to say. "It's never done."

Mary subsided into a perplexed silence. If it was bad form of course she would not do it. She must be scrupulous about matters of form. More than ever she felt herself a neophyte in the social universe; she knew neither its creed nor its ritual.

"All right; I won't do it, my dear. There now, don't worry. The doctor says you're going to come out all right, but it will take a little time."

"You've—you've got to hold the job," whispered Nell.

"Of course; I'll hold it. I'll manage to get along. They're paying me very liberally and it's all yours, every cent. You see, living there I can get along quite a while without any money of my own. I don't even need to buy any clothes just yet. We can afford a nurse for you, I think."

But Nell shook her head stubbornly; she did not want a nurse. All she wanted was to be left alone.

Mary was saying good-by when something else occurred to her.

"It's just one question," she explained. "In case I should be asked about it again I ought to know. And

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I'm really curious on my own account, although it isn't any of my business. What is it that they say about Mrs. Rokeby-Jones's daughter?"

Nell stared at her dully.

"The elder daughter," added Mary.

Nell was shaking her head again and reaching for the glass of water.

"Is it really something—awful?"

"Yes—awful," faltered Nell. "I—oh, please——"

"I won't say another word," declared Mary, hastily, but there was a note of disappointment in her voice. "If I should be asked again I'll give the same answer I did before."

"What was that?" mumbled the voice from the bed.

"I said I didn't care to discuss it."

"That's—best. I never did, either."

"And I said that personally I never believed it."

Nell answered with a gesture of dismissal and Mary left her. As she descended the dark staircase of the boarding house she shook her head as if dissatisfied about something.

"I'm just as curious as Aunt Caroline," she thought. "I ought to be ashamed of myself. But just the same I'd like to know what it is that they say—and some day I'm going to find out."

CHAPTER VII

Via the Night Court

Matters were not going ahead to suit the liking of Mary. Aunt Caroline was displaying mild symptoms of impatience because the ship that represented Bill's society career still hung on the launching ways. Bill himself would pay no attention to the business of getting it off. He was never at home at night and it seemed to Mary that he slept very late in the mornings. Pete Stearns was also missing from the household nearly every time that Bill disappeared. He was probably taking covert advantage of his employer's absences, Mary thought.

Thus she was left very much to her own devices, save for occasions when she found it advisable to consult Aunt Caroline. In the case of the latter, Mary observed a threatening tendency to revert to the launching plans that had been conceived by Pete. Whenever she found opportunity she tried to impress upon Bill the fact that unless he helped to devise something else he would find himself forced to follow the charitable and religious route into society. But he waved all that aside in the most optimistic fashion.

"You take care of it," he said. "You're against it yourself; I'm counting on you."

The valet still puzzled Mary. He had an annoying way of appearing when Bill was not around, always ostensibly looking for Bill and always lingering when he did not find him. She could not deny that he interested

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her; he possessed an element of the mysterious, whereas Bill was as transparent as air. It was not easy to establish the precise status of Pete; Aunt Caroline contributed to that difficulty by lending him a willing ear on any subject to which he chose to devote his fluent tongue. His rank was that of a domestic servant; he even ate with the servants, which was something of which he bitterly complained to Mary. She could not help feeling that there was some merit in the complaint.

Yet she could not and would not accept him on a plane of social equality, although she did not wish to appear snobbish. The relative values of their positions in the household must be preserved, if only for the sake of discipline. She would not have minded an occasional chat with her employer's valet if he did not constantly convey the idea that he was about to step out of his character. He never actually presumed upon her friendliness, but he always made her feel that he was about to presume.

She had a sense of something like espionage whenever Pete was about, coupled with an idea that he viewed her work with suspicion and even derision. Certainly the impression that he made upon Mary was quite different from that upon Aunt Caroline. He never talked theology to Mary, although to Aunt Caroline he would discourse upon it until the dear old lady actually became sleepy.

As for affairs between Bill and Pete, there had been a truce ever since the former threatened to throw his valet out of the house by way of the skylight if he dared to discuss any more social projects with Aunt Caroline. They did very well together so long as it was not necessary for them to play the parts of master

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and man for the benefit of the household; it was on those occasions that the ever-lurking devil within Pete Stearns took charge of his actions and speech. Outside of the house, of course, all barriers between them were down—and they were outside a great deal.

It was late in the evening of a difficult and dissatisfying day that Mary sat alone in the library, quite vainly trying to scheme something practical for the social launching of Bill. The only thing that cheered her was a faint hope that he would bring home an idea of his own, for he had told her that he was to spend the evening at a private and very exclusive affair. Aunt Caroline had gone to bed early, as usual, and even the valet had disappeared.

"I do hope I'll be able to do something very soon," mused Mary, frowning at a book she had been trying to read. "Poor Nell! She's too sick to help, and even in her bright moments she doesn't seem to want to talk about it. I never dreamed it could be so difficult. It's not fair, either. I came here to be a secretary and they're trying to make me a manager. And he simply won't be managed and—and I don't know how to manage him, even if he would."

"Ps-s-s-st!"

Mary jumped half out of her chair as she looked up and saw the valet standing in the doorway.

"Please make a noise when you walk, or knock, or do something," she said, sharply. "You startled me."

Pete made a gesture for silence, stepped into the room and swiftly surveyed it.

"Where is Aunt—where is Miss Marshall?" he whispered.

"She went to bed long ago."

"Good! Come on, then; we need help."

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"Who needs help?" demanded Mary, impressed more by the mystery of his manner than by his words. "What's the matter?"

"The boss is in the hoosegow," answered Pete, his voice tragic.

"What!"

"Mr. Marshall—he's in jail."

Mary leaped to her feet and stared with incredulity.

"In jail! What for? How?"

"Caught in a raid. Come on; we've got to hurry."

"How horrible!" exclaimed Mary. "Is he hurt?"

"Only in his feelings," said the valet. "Get your hat; you're needed."

"But—where do you want me to go? What can I do?"

"Bail him out; get him home. We can't let his aunt know about it, can we? We've got to produce him at breakfast, haven't we?"

Mary felt appalled and helpless.

"But how can I bail him?" she asked. "I haven't any property, or any money, or ——"

"I'll put you wise to the ropes," said the theological valet in a hurried voice. "Come on. Aren't you willing to help?"

"Of course I am," said Mary, indignantly. "I'll be ready in a jiffy."

When she came down-stairs again Pete was waiting at the front door, which he closed gently behind them. In front of the house stood a taxi, into which he thrust her with much haste, following himself, after he spoke an order to the driver.

"Where are we going?" asked Mary, as the taxi gathered speed.

"Jefferson Market—it's a police court."

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She could not repress a shiver.

"You said a raid? What—what kind?"

"Listen," said Pete. "Now this is what happened: the boss went to a scrap—a prize-fight."

Mary, sitting in the darkness of the taxi, compressed her lips. He had made her believe that he was going into society!

"Fights are against the law in this State," continued the valet. "While it was going on somebody told the police. And the police came and, among others, they got the boss. He got stuck in the window that was too small for him."

"Oh!" gasped Mary.

"They'll be taking him to the night court by the time we get there. And we've got to bail him out."

"How?"

"We get a bondsman. There'll be one of 'em there; I've got it arranged. He's in the business; professional bondsman, you know. Only he won't put up a bond on my say-so. I'm only the valet, you understand; it takes somebody higher up, like a secretary. We'll get it across all right, if you put up a good front. Got any money with you?"

"A little," said Mary. "About twenty dollars, I think."

"That'll help with what I've got. We've got to give this bird some cash down."

Mary was bracing herself as rigidly as she could in a corner of the seat. It was difficult to prevent a rising tide of indignation from overwhelming her, although she realized it was a time to keep her head. Of course, there was but one thing to do—get Bill Marshall out of jail. But after that she felt that she would be entitled to a reckoning. How awful it was!

Her employer—her social climber—her débutante—in jail after a raid on a prize-fight!

At Jefferson Market she was hustled out of the taxi, across the sidewalk and up some steps that led to a badly-lighted corridor.

"Wait here; I'll get him," whispered Pete.

Mary shrank herself as small as possible against a wall and waited. The valet was not long in returning. With him was a middle-aged, stout, red-faced person who swiftly inspected Mary with a piercing pair of eyes.

"This the dame?" he asked, in a casual tone.

Mary stiffened at the question.

"This is the lady I told you about," said Pete. Then addressing Mary: "This is the gentleman who is going to bail Mr. Marshall."

"Don't travel too fast," said the bondsman. "Maybe I am and maybe I'm not. Who are you, anyhow?"

He was looking at Mary with another critical glance. Her cheeks had become red by this time; to Pete she seemed to be growing taller.

"I am secretary to Mr. William Marshall," she said. "My name is Miss Norcross. And I do not wish to be addressed in the manner that you now assume."

There was a flash of dismay in Pete's eyes, to be succeeded by one of admiration. As for the bondsman, he stared for several seconds in a sort of dull surprise.

"Oh, no offense," he said. "Got anything to identify you?"

Mary opened her bag and drew forth some letters, which she handed to Pete. She would not permit this creature to receive them from her own hand. He seemed to sense the import of this employment of an

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intermediary, for he surveyed her once more, this time with what was obviously a more respectful curiosity. Then he began reading the letters.

Even a professional bondsman is permitted to have knowledge of the upper world, and this one was not wholly ignorant of names in the social register. His eyebrows went up as he read, and Mary was once more made aware of the potent magic of references. She continued to grow taller. When he made a move to return the letters she indicated that he was to hand them to the valet, which he did.

"I guess it'll be all right," he said. "The bond'll be for a thousand. The prisoner himself is good for it, but I got to have additional security. I'll want to see the prisoner when he's arranged, and if he ain't the right one, tip me off. And I'll take fifty bucks now."

Mary brought forth what she had and handed it to Pete. He played up to the situation by palming his own resources as he received Mary's contribution, and then began counting off bills that were apparently all supplied by her. The bondsman pocketed the money.

"Sign here," he said, producing a paper from his pocket.

Mary received the paper from Pete and examined it. For all she understood of its contents it might have been printed in Chinese. But nowhere did it mention Bill Marshall. It dealt with a defendant named "Henry Smith." She was being swindled!

"Give me a proper paper," she said, sharply. "This has nothing to do with Mr. Marshall."

The bondsman grinned and Pete made the explanation.

"That's the name he gave on the police blotter. It's all right, ma'am."

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So Mary produced a fountain pen and signed, dimly aware that she was probably committing one of the varied degrees of forgery. When she had finished, it appeared nowhere that Mary Wayne was going to the rescue of one William

Marshall, but rather that Nell Norcross had undertaken to guarantee a bond that would open the jail doors for Henry Smith.

"Now we'll go up to court," said the bondsman, and he led the way.

Mary had never been in a court before, much less a night court, which is peculiar to itself in atmosphere and characters. She slipped into a place on a rear bench, anxious now to lose something of that stature she had attained during her interview in the corridor. The bondsman and Pete went forward and stepped inside a railing.

Mary waited and watched. The judge who sat behind a high desk was yawning. Two persons whom she took to be clerks were fumbling over papers. There were several policemen in uniform. On the benches about her were numerous and, for the most part, unpleasant persons.

Two women were led through a side door, evidently to be "arranged," as the bondsman said. They seemed at ease. A policeman said something, the judge said something, the clerks did something, and they passed on, still in custody. Then came a man, who followed the same routine; then another woman.

And then out of the side door, which was constantly guarded by a policeman, came several men—and among them Bill Marshall, towering almost proudly, it seemed to Mary. She listened breathlessly, but could not hear a word; everybody was talking in low tones. All she knew was that Bill was standing in front of

the judge, and evidently unashamed. Pete and the bondsman were there, too, and presently the group moved over to the clerk's desk.

This, it seemed to Mary, was a critical instant. She knew that they must be examining the bond; she felt as though she, too, ought to be standing there with Bill Marshall, a defendant at the bar. A sense of guilt was overwhelming her; if anybody had touched her on the shoulder she would have screamed. And then it was over, in a most perfunctory and undramatic manner. "Henry Smith" was not returning to the place beyond the side door, but was passing through the swinging gate that led to the space reserved for benches. His valet was at his heels. The bondsman showed no further interest in them. He stayed inside the rail, where he chatted with a policeman.

Up the center aisle came Bill, swinging along jauntily. As he neared the bench on which she sat, Mary became aware that a young man who had been occupying a place beside her was as much interested in Bill as herself. This person suddenly sprang into the aisle, gripped Bill's hand and then linked arms with him. Together they passed out of the court-room.

Mary, too, had risen, and now the valet was beckoning to her. She followed him out beyond the swinging doors. There in the corridor she observed Bill Marshall in one of his intimate and happy moments. He was laughing with a wholesome lack of restraint and was slapping on the shoulder one of the most ill-favored

persons that Mary had ever seen. This was the young man who had joined Bill in the moment of his triumphal exit.

He was not over five feet six, but he was somewhat broader in the shoulders than most youths of that stature.

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His clothes seemed too tight for him, although they were not a misfit, but rather, the product of a tailor who must have received his inspiration from a brass band. His skin was swarthy; his dark eyes small and bright. His nose appeared to have undergone a flattening process, in addition to which, it displayed a marked tendency to point to the left. One of his ears Mary observed with particular attention; it had been twisted into a knotty lump and stood out from his head in an aggressive effort at self-advertisement. It was not within Mary's province to know that this was a singularly perfect specimen of cauliflower, or "tin," ear.

"Oh, it's all right now, Bill," the young man was saying, "only if you'd 'a' took my tip an' follored me you wouldn't 'a' been pinched at all. Gee! I had an easy getaway."

"You always did have speed, Kid," remarked Bill. "Oh, well, it's nothing in our young lives. Where do we go from here? Where's Pete?"

He glanced around and beheld not only Pete, but Mary Wayne.

Bill slowly flushed a fiery red and his eyes widened to almost twice their size. He faltered for an instant, then rushed forward.

"Miss Norcross! Why, what in thunder——"

"I had to bring her, sir," said Pete, hastily dropping into character. "They wouldn't accept me as additional security, sir."

Bill hesitated. The cool gaze of his secretary upset him far more than if she had flung scorn in her glance.

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry," he began. "I wouldn't have had you come here for all the world. It isn't right. It's a shame! Why—— Peter, how dared

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you bring Miss Norcross to this place? No; don't try to make any excuses. You ought to be thrashed for it."

"Your valet was not to blame in the least degree," said Mary, in a frosty tone. "It appears that it was necessary for me to come."

"Yes, sir," echoed Pete.

"I don't care," stormed Bill. "It's no place for her. I won't have it. I'd sooner lose a leg than have Miss Norcross come here."

But in his soul he was really not so much disturbed over the fact that she visited a police court as he was over her discovery of Bill Marshall as a prisoner at the bar, although he was not at the time capable of analyzing his emotions very

accurately. He was ashamed, confused, angry at the presence of Mary Wayne, whereas but a moment before he was enjoying the relish of an adventure and a joke.

"Shall I get a taxi, sir?" inquired Pete.

"I'll get it myself. Wait here, Miss Norcross."

Anything to escape even for a moment from the level gaze of those accusing eyes. He dashed down a staircase, followed by Pete, who had a word he wished to say in private.

Mary now observed that the young man with the tin ear whom she had heard addressed as "Kid" was watching her attentively. As her look settled upon him he stepped forward, swiftly tipped a derby, swiftly replaced it on his head and favored her with a confident and confidential smile.

"Friend of Bill's, it seems," he observed. "Well, we had a nice evenin' for it."

"I do not seem to know you," said Mary.

He stared in honest astonishment.

"Y' don't know me?" he echoed.

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"I do not."

"Y' mean to say Bill never told y' about me?"

"He never did—and I do not think I am interested."

His small, black eyes blinked at the astounding news.

"Why, I'm Kid Whaley. Everybody knows me. Bill's my best friend. Wot? Y' never heard of Kid Whaley? Say, are y' kiddin' me? Why, it's only last week I put away Battlin' Schwartz. Knocked 'im dead in five rounds, over in Trenton. Say, don't y' read the papers? Aw, y' must've heard of me. Sure y' have. Why, I'm gonna be the next champ. Ev'ry-body knows that. An' take it from me, th' champ knows it, too. You ask Bill; he'll tell y' right."

During this outburst of sincere protestation Mary stood stiffly where Bill had left her. She would have preferred to walk away, but for the fear that this voluble young man would follow her.

"Aw, g'wan," he added, as he playfully poked a finger into her arm. "You're givin' me a josh. Any friend o' Bill's knows me. Why, he's crazy about me. I ain't been inside th' ropes once in a whole year that Bill didn't have a roll bet on me. Why, him an' me——"

He paused for an instant as he sighted the returning Bill, only to break forth:

"Hey, Bill; get this. Here's a dame never heard o' Kid Whaley. Whadda y' know about that? An' she's a friend o' yours."

"Shut up!" snarled Bill savagely.

Kid Whaley stared in bewilderment.

"Come, Miss Norcross; there's a taxi waiting."

He seized her by the arm and urged her rapidly toward the staircase. Mary went willingly; escape from the Kid was the immediate necessity.

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"Hey, Bill; y' comin' back? Hey, Bill——"

They lost the remainder of the Kid's plea as they hurried toward the street.

Pete Stearns was standing guard over a taxi as they emerged from Jefferson Market and, as he sighted them, he flung the door open. Mary permitted herself to be propelled into the vehicle with more force than grace, and Bill followed. Pete was about to make a third member of the party when his benefactor placed a determined hand against his breast and pushed him half-way across the sidewalk. Then Bill leaned out, shouted a direction at the driver, slammed the door and settled back with a sigh, prepared to receive whatever his social secretary might decide was coming to him.

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CHAPTER VIII

"Miss Norcross Gets the Goods"

As minutes passed the silence became more than he could endure. Why didn't she say something? Why didn't she flay him alive and be done with it? He could stand that; it would not be pleasant, of course, yet it could be borne. But no; she sat staring straight in front of her, wordless, even oblivious.

"Oh, say—go to it!" he blurted.

"I beg your pardon."

"Have it out; hand it to me—mop me up."

She turned to look at him briefly as they passed a brightly lighted corner, then resumed her former pose.

"Well, aren't you going to?" he pleaded.

"I don't know that there is anything for me to say," she answered.

"Yes, there is; you're full of it," insisted Bill. "I can tell by the way you're acting. I'll stand for it. Go on."

"I'm not sure that I care to, Mr. Marshall."

Her voice was not frigid; rather, it merely conveyed an idea of remoteness. It was

as if she were at the other end of a thousand miles of wire.

"Anyhow, I'm sorry," he said.

To Mary that seemed to require no answer.

"Mighty sorry, Miss Norcross. I wouldn't have put you in that position for anything. I—I apologize."

But it appeared that she had again retired into the silences.

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"Oh, be reasonable about it," he said in a begging tone. "Bawl me out and let's have it over with. That's the way Aunt Caroline and I do it."

"I am not your Aunt Caroline, Mr. Marshall."

"I know. But you're thinking just what she would think, so it amounts to the same thing. Please bawl me out."

"I don't know that it is one of my duties to do so," observed Mary. "I think perhaps we had better not discuss it at all."

Bill squirmed for the twentieth time. The air within the taxi was oppressive; he opened the window on his side with violent hands.

"Well, I apologized," he reminded her. "You might at least say whether you accept it or reject it or what."

"Why, I accept it," she said. "What else is there to do?"

"You might have left off the last part," he grumbled. "You don't have to accept it unless you want to. I'd sooner you didn't."

"But I already have."

"Well, you needn't."

"It's done, if you please."

Bill felt peevish. This was not a fair way of punishing him.

"If you're going to act that way I'll withdraw the apology," he declared.

"It is already accepted, so it is too late to withdraw anything, Mr. Marshall."

He was uncertain as to the soundness of this position, but it baffled him, nevertheless.

"Oh, all right," he agreed lamely. "Have it any way you like. I—I suppose Aunt Caroline will raise the devil, so I'll get it good from somebody, anyhow."

"You will tell her about it, then?" she asked.

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"Who? Me? Do I act crazy?"

"Then you will leave it to your valet, perhaps," suggested Mary.

Bill involuntarily tensed his shoulder muscles.

"Pete? He doesn't dare. I'd slaughter him."

"Then how is your aunt going to know, Mr. Marshall?"

Bill turned and stared down at her.

"Why—why, you'll tell her!" he exclaimed.

It was Mary's turn to look upward at Bill, which she did steadily for several seconds.

"Once again, Mr. Marshall, I ask you, whose secretary am I?"

"Miss Norcross! You mean——"

"I mean that I do not peddle gossip," she said sharply.

Bill had seized her hand and was crushing it; when she managed to withdraw it her fingers were aching.

"You're an ace," he said joyously. "I thought, of course——"

"I do not think you had any business to believe I would tell," said Mary. "If I have given you any cause to think so I'm not aware of it."

"You're a whole fist full of aces!" he declared fervently.

But Mary had no intention of relinquishing any advantage that she held.

"I think I have been quite frank with you, Mr. Marshall, ever since I entered your employ. And that is more than you have been with me."

"Huh? How's that?"

"Have you forgotten what you told me this afternoon? You—you said you were going to a very private affair—very exclusive, you said."

Bill managed to twist a smile.

"So it was, until the police butted in."

"I assumed, of course, it was social," said Mary coldly.

"But I didn't say it was. Now, did I?"

"You allowed me to infer it. And that is the worst way of deceiving people."

"Oh, well, I'll make an apology on that, too. But if I'd told you the truth you'd have tried to stop me. You'd have roasted me, anyhow."

"I should have tried to persuade you not to go," she conceded.

"Sure. I knew it." And Bill grinned.

The taxi stopped in front of the Marshall home. He helped her out, paid the driver and followed her up the steps. His night-key effected a noiseless entrance. Once inside, Bill beckoned her to the library.

"I want to thank you for doing all you did," he said humbly. "I feel awfully mean

about it."

"About getting arrested?"

"No. That's nothing. About dragging you to court. It was a mighty square thing for you to do. I'm grateful—honestly."

"I simply did it for business reasons, Mr. Marshall."

"Business?" he repeated, with a frown of disappointment.

"Of course. Don't you see the point?"

He shook his head.

"It's quite plain," she said. "My business is to see that you enter society. That is the reason for my employment. Anything that would interfere with that is naturally also my concern. If you participate in a brutal prize-fight——"

"Oh, wait. I wasn't in the ring, Miss Norcross. I was only looking on."

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"If you attend a brutal prize-fight," she corrected, "and are arrested, and the papers are full of it, and your aunt learns of it, what becomes of your chances to enter society?"

"I see what you're driving at," he said slowly.

"Your chances would be nothing, of course. And with your chances gone you would have no need for a social secretary. Therefore, I would lose my position. So you will understand that I had a purely business interest in the matter, Mr. Marshall."

Confound her! She did not need to be so emphatic about putting it on that basis, thought Bill. He was trying to make her see that she had done something generous and fine, but she stubbornly insisted on having it otherwise.

"Well, anyhow, I'm much obliged," he repeated. "Next time I won't bother to send for bail."

"*Next* time?"

"Certainly. I'll just stay in the lockup, let the newspapers fill up on it and then I won't be able to get into society if I try. That's not a bad idea, come to think of it. Much obliged."

If she insisted on being unpleasant about this, he would show her. For the moment, Bill was very much of a spoiled child.

"Well," retorted Mary, "there isn't much danger of your ruining your social career so long as you follow your—other—career under a false name."

Bill glared. "Oh, I guess you'd do the same thing if you got in a tight place."

Mary began to turn pale under the freckles. Bill had startled her without himself being aware of it. He didn't know; he didn't suspect; it was nothing but an offhand and ill-tempered retort. But it awakened in Mary something she had been

studiously endeavoring

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to forget; it had been flung so suddenly at her that it sounded like an accusation.

"Take it from me," he added, "there's many a sanctimonious high-brow in this burg who sports an alias on the side. I've got plenty of company."

Mary was seized with a fit of choking that compelled her to turn her head. She was rapidly becoming confused; she did not dare trust herself to speech. Why, she might even forget her wrong name!

Bill watched her for a moment, then shrugged and yawned.

"Well, I guess I'll call it a day, Miss Norcross. You can give any reason you like for what you did, but I'm going to keep on being much obliged." His voice had taken a more generous tone. "You're all right. Good night."

Mary watched his exit from the library, a curious expression in her eyes. Then suddenly she sat down and began to laugh, very quietly, yet rocking back and forth with the intensity of the attack.

"Oh, what a job I've got!" was the burden of Mary's thought.

She was in no hurry to go up-stairs to her room and the reason for this was evident when she caught the faint sound of the latchkey turning in the front door, which brought her to her feet and sent her running softly into the hall. She intercepted the valet as he was about to make a stealthy ascent of the staircase and motioned him into the library.

"Where's the boss?" whispered Pete.

"He has gone up-stairs. I want to talk to you a moment."

"Yes, miss."

Mary looked at him sharply; whenever he addressed

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her in that manner she was filled with a sensation of being mocked.

"Does Mr. Marshall attend many prize-fights?" she inquired.

Pete clasped his hands and pursed his lips.

"Well, between you and me, miss," he said, after an instant of deliberation, "I'm afraid he attends about all there are."

"Has he ever been arrested before?"

"Not that I can recall, miss. I'm quite sure this is the first time since I have been in his employ."

"Is he in the habit of associating with pugilists?"

Pete sighed and hesitated.

"If it's just between us, miss, why I'll say that he has his friends among such people. It's a very shocking thing; I've done my best to keep it away from his aunt. So far I think I've succeeded. I've tried very hard to persuade him to change his ways. I've labored with him; I've tried to get his mind turned to different things."

"Theology?" suggested Mary.

"Exactly," answered the valet. "But it's not an easy matter, miss. Mr. William is very set in his ways."

"But I thought you had told his aunt that he was interested in higher things."

"To encourage her," said Pete, glibly. "It was not what you'd call a falsehood. There had been times when he seemed interested, but never for very long. Still, I've always had hopes. His aunt is good enough to believe that I have a desirable influence over him. I hope it's true; I hope so."

It always puzzled Mary when the valet pursued this strain, and it puzzled her now. Ninety-nine out of a hundred men who talked thus she would have classed

as hypocrites, but Pete did not seem to her to be exactly that. She viewed all his excellent protestations askance, yet she was not satisfied that hypocrisy was the true explanation.

"It seems a shame," he continued, "that it was necessary to bring you into touch with such an affair as to-night's. I wouldn't have thought of it if there had been any other way. I knew that you would be very much shocked, miss; very much surprised, too."

He watched her so closely that Mary wondered if he really suspected the truth—that she was neither quite so much shocked nor surprised as both he and Bill seemed to believe. That was her own secret and she intended to guard it at all costs.

"This affair of to-night," she observed, "was it particularly brutal?"

"No; I wouldn't say that," replied Pete, reflectively.

"Had it been going on very long?"

"Not very long, miss."

Mary thought for a moment before she framed the next question.

"Just an ordinary vulgar brawl between two ruffians, I take it?"

Pete unclasped his hands and made a quick gesture of dissent.

"Not at all; not at all. Why, it was a pip——"

He pulled himself up short and coughed. There was a gleam in Mary's gray eyes.

"Fortunately, it had not progressed far enough to become actually brutal," said Pete, and he showed for the first time since she had known him a trace of

confusion.

"What were you doing there?" she demanded.

Pete soothed out a wrinkle in the rug with the toe of his shoe before he decided to meet her glance.

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"It happened this way: I knew where he was going and I was trying to persuade him to stay away. You see, his aunt expects a great deal of me, miss, and I didn't want to do anything less than my duty. I followed him; I argued with him. In fact, we argued all the way to the place where it was being held."

And Pete was telling the literal truth. He and Bill had argued, heatedly. Bill had stubbornly asserted that the Harlem Holocaust would not last four rounds with Jimmy Jenkins, the Tennessee Wildcat, while it had been the contention of Pete that in less time than that the Wildcat would be converted into a human mop for the purpose of removing the resin from the floor of the ring.

"Failing to convert him, I take it that you went inside with him," remarked Mary.

"Exactly. As a matter of loyalty, of course. So long as there seemed to be any chance I would not desert. I am not the kind, miss, who believes in faith without works."

Which was again true, for Pete had translated his faith in the Harlem Holocaust into a wager that would have left him flat had the contentions of Bill reached a confirmation. Unfortunately, the police had canceled the bet.

"And how is it that you were not arrested, as well as Mr. Marshall?"

"There was much confusion. We became separated. I found myself running; I was carried along in the rush of the crowd. Before I knew it I was in the street again. And besides"—Pete made a gesture of appeal "it was necessary for somebody to see about obtaining bail, Miss Norcross."

"I'm sure it was very fortunate you were there,"

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said Mary. "You seemed to understand exactly what to do."

But Pete declined to be further disconcerted. He was able to look at her without flinching this time.

"Just one more question," added Mary. "Is this Mr. Whaley whom I saw at court a particularly close friend of Mr. Marshall's?"

Pete drew a deep breath and launched upon another speech.

"It seems, miss, as nearly as I can learn, that for quite a long time the Whaley person has been known to Mr. William. I frequently took occasion——"

Mary interrupted him with a gesture.

"Never mind," she said. "I understand. You labored with him on that matter, also.

I have no doubt that you prayed with him and preached at him. I am sure you did everything in your power. I won't embarrass you by asking for the details. Some day I feel certain your efforts to exert a good influence over Mr. Marshall will have better success."

"Thank you, miss," and Pete bowed.

"But meantime——" And as Mary leaned forward her knuckles were tapping firmly on the arm of the chair. "Meantime, if I may make a suggestion, it would be an excellent plan for you to remain away from prize-fights."

"Yes, miss."

"And it would be a very good thing for Mr. Marshall to do likewise—very good."

Pete bowed again and made a note of the fact that she had a significant way of tightly closing her lips.

"You're quite sure you understand?"

"Oh, quite—quite."

"Good night," said Mary.

Dismissal was so abrupt that there was nothing to

do but accept it. And Pete was not in the least sorry to terminate the interview. In spots he had enjoyed it, but the spots had been infrequent. He was dissatisfied because he had never for an instant been master of it. Talking to Aunt Caroline was easier than talking to Bill's secretary, who did not seem to place a proper value on theology. Hang the business of being a valet, anyhow! Such were the reflections that crowded into his agile mind as he bowed himself out.

He paused on the staircase to consider the matter further. The more he thought about this interview with the social secretary the more it disturbed him. It had not been a matter of mere suggestions on her part; it was very like orders. He recognized a threat when he heard one, even though the threat might be veiled with ironical advice.

"Confound her!" muttered Pete. "That little bird is wise—too wise. I wouldn't object to her simply getting the deadwood on us, if she seemed willing to let it go at that. But she served notice on me that she might make use of it. And I believe she'd do it, if she once took it into her head. What Samson did to the pillars of the temple isn't a marker to the house-wrecking job she can do, once she decides to get busy at it."

Up-stairs, he opened the door to Bill's apartments and thrust his head inside.

"Bill!" he said, softly. "She's got the Indian sign on us."

"Come in and shut the door," growled a voice. "What did she say to you?"

Pete summarized the conversation that had taken place in the library.

"She's swinging a big stick," he said, in conclusion. "The worst of it is, she's got the goods. It isn't me

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alone who is supposed to stay away from prize fights. It's you."

"She can't dictate to me," declared Bill, sourly.

"Don't be too certain. She can always carry it up to the supreme court."

"Who? Aunt Caroline?" Bill considered the suggestion. "No; I don't believe it. I don't think she's mean, whatever else she may be. In fact, she told me——" He paused. It did not seem necessary to take Pete entirely into his confidence concerning conversations with his secretary. "No, Pete; I don't believe she'll say anything. That is—not this time."

"Maybe," assented Pete, pessimistically. "I don't expect she will, either. But how about the next time? Are you figuring to reform?"

Bill made a scornful gesture of denial.

"But she expects us to reform, Bill. That's where the danger comes in. And she'll be keeping her eye on us."

"Well, I guess we're as clever as she is, if it comes to that."

"That so?" remarked Pete. "Well, I'm not so sure. If you think it's going to be easy to pull wool over the eyes of this secretarial lady I want to go on record with a dissenting opinion. I'd just about as soon try to slip a fake passport over on St. Peter."

"Well, I'm not going to be threatened," declared Bill.

"Brave words, lord and master. Only it happens you *are* threatened."

Mary sat for some time in the library, isolated with her thoughts. Occasionally she smiled. At other times she frowned. There were also brief periods when perplexity showed in her eyes. But at the last, as she went up-stairs to her room, she was smiling again.

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CHAPTER IX

"Miss Norcross" Wields a Club

Nell Norcross—the real one—was sitting up in bed, unmistakably convalescent.

She had been listening to the adventures of Mary Wayne; not all of the adventures, for Mary did not believe it was wise to subject a patient to too much excitement, yet enough to convey the idea that the introduction of Bill Marshall into society was not an affair of mere toast and tea.

"I feel," said Mary, "that at last I'm in a position to accomplish something. I feel more established than I did at the beginning."

"More influential," suggested Nell.

"Exactly. You see, I have such strong moral support from Miss Marshall."

"And from this valet you speak about," Nell reminded her.

"I'm not so sure about him. He puzzles me." There was a calculating look in Mary's eyes. "He keeps telling me that he wants to help, but I'm always doubtful as to just what he is really driving at. But he won't block me, at any rate; I'm able to take care of that."

"Then everything looks quite simple, doesn't it?"

"No, Nell; everything doesn't. That's the trouble. I'm in a strategic position, if that's what you'd call it, but I don't know how to take advantage of it."

"Then wait for an opening," advised Nell. "One is bound to come."

Mary shook her head.

"I can't afford to wait," she said. "I could wait forever, as far as Mr. Marshall is concerned, but I can see that his aunt is becoming impatient. She thinks it is time that something really began."

"What does she suggest, my dear?"

"Nothing. That's the worst of it. She leaves it all to me. She is so confident that I know everything there is to know about such matters. She wants me to go right ahead with anything I decide upon. And if I ever express any doubt about what to do first, she begins talking about those wonderful references of mine—yours—and says that any young woman with such an experience is competent to take full charge without suggestions from anybody. And I don't know how to start, Nell, or what to do."

"She is really impressed by the references, is she?" mused Nell.

"Tremendously."

"Then it's certain you've got to make good."

"Oh, absolutely. So that's why I've come to bother you."

Nell was thoughtfully regarding a plate of white grapes that lay on her lap.

"So tell me how to start him off," said Mary.

"H-m; let's see now. I never launched a man in society," said Nell, wrinkling her nose. "I never was secretary to a man, you know. I imagine they may be more

difficult than girls."

"This one is," affirmed Mary, with an emphatic nod. "He's so—so big, for one thing."

"Men are awfully awkward to handle," philosophized Nell.

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"I didn't say he was awkward; you misunderstood me. I merely said he was big; he thinks he's too big for society. Of course, he isn't at all. He handles himself very well."

"Can he dance?"

"He says not. But I'm not sure."

"Why don't you try him out?"

"I'd rather not," said Mary hastily. "I don't think that's one of my duties."

"Anything is your duty that will get him into society, my dear."

"We-e-ell, possibly. But we're getting off the track, Nell. What am I to do with him?"

"Now, if he were a girl débutante, just being introduced, why—— There! It's the very thing for him! Give him a coming-out party."

"I'm afraid he wouldn't endure it," said Mary. "He's terribly afraid of being mistaken for what he calls Rollo boys. If I planned a coming out party he'd probably disappear for a month. The very name would make him explode."

"Don't call it by that name," said Nell. "Don't call it any name particularly. Just have a party; at the house, of course. Invite all the nice people you can get hold of. Let's see; there ought to be some particular reason for the party. I've got it! He's about to make a tour of the world, having finished his studies at college. This gives him an opportunity to meet and entertain his friends before he starts, and also furnishes something for everybody to talk about."

Mary nodded as she listened. The idea sounded promising. But——

"Who will we invite, Nell?"

"His friends, of course."

"I'm afraid his friends are not in society," sighed

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Mary, as the vision of a tin ear flashed into her mind.

"Then his aunt's friends. She must know a lot of society people."

"I don't think she has kept up her acquaintances."

"That won't make a particle of difference, my dear. Miss Caroline Marshall bears a name that will get her anywhere she wants to go. And it will do as much for her nephew, too. It's a key that will open any society lock; don't worry about that.

Why, you could invite people that Miss Marshall never met, and nine out of ten of them would jump at the chance. Give him a party and it can't fail."

"I really believe it can be done," said Mary thoughtfully.

"Easiest thing in the world."

"It will be a party, then. And now tell me all about the details."

But when it came to details, Nell was less satisfying. She pleaded that she was sleepy; the doctor had told her she must not talk too long. Besides, anybody could work out the details.

"The main thing is the idea," she said with a careless gesture. "I've given you that. All you have to do is to develop it. Make him help you; he'll probably have a lot of suggestions of his own."

"You haven't met him," declared Mary.

"I'd like to. He must be an extraordinary character."

"I never said so, did I?"

"No. But judging by the way you're all fussed up over this thing——"

"Bosh!" said Mary, rising. "I'm not a bit fussed. It's as easy as anything."

But all the way back to the Marshall home Mary

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was reflecting upon the difficulties, rather than the ease of the problem. The first thing to do was to obtain the consent of Bill Marshall. It would be no use to consult Aunt Caroline; that good lady would simply tell her to go right ahead and do exactly as she pleased. She might, of course, call upon Aunt Caroline to give Bill his orders in case he balked; but that would be a confession of her own weakness.

"I've got to persuade him myself," she decided, "even if it comes to being ruthless."

Just as she had foreseen, Bill objected strenuously and at once. He did not want a party; he was not going around the world. But if she insisted on having a lot of silly people at the house, he would start around the world before they arrived, and he would never come back. Mary argued with much patience. She even pointed out the danger that his aunt might be driven back upon the plan suggested by his valet, Peter. But Bill was in a particularly obdurate mood. Faced at last with a definite project, he quailed.

"We'll just let things drift a while," he told her.

"No," said Mary.

Bill grinned at her in an amiable way and said he thought he would go out for a ride.

"We're going to settle it," she declared. "You promised you'd let me start."

"But I never said when."

"Well, this is the time, Mr. Marshall. We'll start now."

Bill shook his head. Mary, who faced him across the table in the sun parlor, tapped a forefinger on the writing-pad and looked him in the eye.

"Mr. Marshall," she said, "if you do not consent I shall be compelled to go to your bondsman, withdraw

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from your bond and advise him to surrender you to the court."

Bill gasped. He swallowed. He stared.

"And I shall do it this very afternoon," said Mary.

"It isn't fair," he cried. "Why, you agreed——"

"I simply agreed not to say anything to your aunt," she reminded him, coldly. "And I shall not, of course. But I am entirely at liberty to go to your bondsman. If your aunt should happen to hear about it when they come to arrest you again, why that would be unfortunate. But it would be something that could not be helped."

Bill rose from his chair and leaned heavily on the table. He was red in the face and glaring, but his secretary did not even wince.

"You're threatening me!" he almost shouted.

Mary shrugged.

"It's blackmail, I tell you!"

"On the contrary, it will all be strictly according to law," said Mary with appalling calmness.

"Pete put you up to this!"

"I am not in the habit of discussing social affairs with your valet."

"Then it's Aunt Caroline."

"No. Your aunt left everything to me."

Bill began shaking a formidable finger, but the table was between them and Mary felt no immediate cause for apprehension.

"I'll never stand for it. I won't have a party. I won't be here when it happens. You're swinging a club on me. And last night I thought you were a good sport!"

"I merely intend to earn my salary," said Mary. "I make no pretensions to being a sport. I could never

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hope to equal—— Well, we won't go into the sporting phase of it, if you please."

Bill was momentarily brought to halt. Then came another inspiration.

"Call this off and I'll double your salary," he announced.

Mary shook her head.

"That's offering me a bribe," she said. "Besides, I believe your aunt pays my salary."

"I'll make up the difference out of my allowance."

"No, thank you."

Bill had never learned the science of dealing with women. There are about 350,000,000 grown men in the world, all exactly like Bill. So, while he felt that he had been singled out as the sole victim of a Machiavellian female, in reality he had all mankind for a companion. The sheer hopelessness of his plight made him calm again.

"You admit that you're my secretary, don't you?" he asked.

Mary nodded.

"Then I'm entitled to your advice. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," answered Mary, cautiously. "I wouldn't volunteer advice, but if you ask it, that's different."

"All right; I ask it. Advise me how I can duck this party."

Mary laughed outright.

"I couldn't possibly. I can only advise you that there isn't any way in the world to duck it. And that's honest advice, Mr. Marshall."

He resumed his chair and began drawing diagrams on a sheet of paper. This occupation absorbed all his attention for several minutes. When he glanced up he was grinning helplessly.

"Some day I'll get even for this," he said, "but right

now I'll admit you've got me. Go ahead, but don't rub it into me any more than you have to."

"Why, of course I won't," declared Mary heartily. "All along I've been trying to save you from getting into society another way."

Bill nodded an acknowledgment of the fact.

"What date shall it be?" she asked.

"The quicker the better. I never got warmed up standing on the edge of a swimming tank, wondering how cold the water was."

"We'll make it as early as possible, then. Do you think it ought to be a large party?"

"No!"

"Neither do I," agreed Mary. "But it ought to be exclusive—very exclusive."

"Are you reminding me of something?"

"No," laughed Mary. "I wasn't thinking of that. Now, about the invitations: do you think they should be engraved, or would it be a little better to write personal notes to everybody?"

"That's your end of the job. How do I know?"

"I think perhaps I'd better consult one or two of the fashionable stationers," said Mary. "I want to find out just what they're doing this season."

Bill looked at his watch.

"All right; let's go and see the stationers now."

"It's almost lunch-time, isn't it?"

"Almost. That's why I want to go and see the stationers."

"Oh," said Mary.

"Come along. You owe me something after what you've done."

She smiled at that, although she was not quite certain whether she ought to go. Still, he had really surrendered, and she felt rather grateful to him.

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"All right; I'll get my hat," she said.

Five minutes later they were moving up Fifth Avenue in Bill's car.

"Would you honestly have turned me over to the bondsman?" he asked suddenly.

"Let's talk about stationery," she reminded him. "I suppose for a man it ought to be plain white."

Bill turned to study her and bumped fenders with a taxicab.

"Pink," he declared.

"Pink! For a man?"

"Pink, with little freckles on it," he said, taking another look.

Mary lifted her chin and watched the traffic. Presently he turned into a side street and ran on for half a block.

"Anyhow, here's where we take lunch," he announced.

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CHAPTER X

The Leopard's Spots

Pete hitched the largest chair forward, lifted a foot to the top of Bill's writing-table, crossed the other upon it and glared sourly at the wall in front of him.

"You'll get to like it yet," he predicted.

"Bull!" observed Bill. "I'm a leopard. I can't change 'em."

"You can have 'em changed for you all right. Many a good leopard has been skinned, Bill."

"What are you beefing about? You're responsible for getting me in on this more than anybody else."

"Oh, go ahead; lay off on me. It's a grand joke because you see I'm down. Where do I come in?"

"Where does anybody's valet come in?" countered Bill, as he stropped a razor.

"You said it. That's just the point. You're copping all the cream. I'm a servant, that's all. It isn't neighborly, Bill. Gosh hang it, it isn't democracy! Do you call it a square deal, sneaking her off to a lunch?"

"That was business, Pete. We had to look at stationery. Beside, don't I give you my evenings?"

"Is it right that I eat in the servants' dining-room? Is it right that I sleep in the servants' quarters? Me—your guest! Is that a way to treat a guy who passed your college exams for you? And *she* thinks I'm a servant, too. I'll leave it to you if it's right."

"But Aunt Caroline puts you in a class by yourself,"

observed Bill. "Aunt Caroline doesn't misjudge you, Pete, even if you do claim to be a valet."

Pete allocated Aunt Caroline according to his idea of where she would do the most good.

"But *she* treats me as if I was somebody to take orders from her," he grumbled on. "She's losing her respect for me."

"Oh, forget Miss Norcross."

"What? Forget Gray Eyes? Forget little Nell? Why don't you try it yourself, Bill?"

"I don't have to. She's my secretary," said Bill maliciously.

"She's your dancing-teacher, you mean. I've seen you at it; the two of you. Getting ready for the party! Bill Marshall, you're losing your character and your self-respect."

Bill grinned complacently.

"It isn't as if you needed to learn to dance," added Pete, as he kicked a book off the table. "You can dance rings around her, if you want to. But you're deceitful,

Bill. She's got you one-twoing and three-fouring all over the library, and you making believe it's all new stuff. It's a gol darned shame, and I'm going to tell her so."

"You're going to mind your own business or get busted," predicted Bill. "It doesn't make any difference what I used to know about dancing; I need practice. Besides, you can always go and talk theology to Aunt Caroline. She's never busy."

Pete groaned.

"I'm laying off it—when she'll let me," he said miserably. "She's getting interested in it, Bill. Yesterday I had to go and bone up some more in the encyclopedia; I was all run out of stuff."

"All right, son; only don't accuse me."

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Pete subsided into silence and Bill shaved. The young man who would be a valet was not enjoying a happy morning. Part of it was because of the night before, but some of the unhappiness lay rooted in the fact that Bill's secretary persisted in taking him at face value. At the same time Pete was convinced that she knew better; that there was a mocking deliberation in the way that she held him to his bargain.

"Confound it, Bill! That girl's no fool."

"I said it first," Bill reminded him. "I said it days ago."

"She knows darn well I'm something more than a valet."

"She never said it to me, Pete; never even hinted at it. I don't believe she even suspects."

"Bill, that's an insult. If you say she doesn't even suspect, I'll poison you. Why, any girl with good sense would suspect. Do I look like a valet?"

"Sure."

Bill had finished shaving, so it was easy enough to dodge the book.

There had been a good deal of talk like that ever since the party became a fixed project. Pete Stearns was discovering that the business of flinging gibes had become less profitable; either Bill's hide was getting thicker or his perceptions were becoming dulled. It was no longer possible always to get a rise; sometimes it shocked him to find that he was rising himself. And then there was that secretary; she had annoying moments of superiority. She was in a fair way to become a snob, thought Pete, and just because she could not recognize the difference between a real social gulf and one that was self-imposed. Some day he was going to cross that gulf in a wild leap and make her feel silly.

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"Where you going now?" he demanded, as Bill made for the door.

"Business, old dear. Cheer up."

Bill's business was in the office on the second floor. It, or she—or both—had been making a good many demands on his time. He bore them with a fortitude that made him proud of himself.

"Good morning," said Mary, looking up. "Any more names to suggest?"

"Haven't we dug up enough?"

"We should have a margin to allow for declinations. There are bound to be a few, you know. Even some of the people who accept don't come."

"I don't think of anybody else," said Bill. "You've got a whole lot of people now that I never saw or heard of."

"I'm quite proud of the list," she said. "Some of it is really distinguished. And——

Oh, by the way, Mr. Marshall. Your aunt gave me another name; you must know him, of course. Bishop Wrangell."

"What! That old dodo?"

"He's a bishop; a very old friend of your aunt's. And bishops are very exclusive. I think it's fine to have a bishop."

"He's a dodo," reaffirmed Bill. "He'll crab it all. Cut him off."

"But I've already invited him," said Mary. "It's in the mail."

"He'll talk everybody to death," groaned Bill. "I know him; he's been here to dinner. It's a curse to have a party, but bishops are damnation."

"You surprise me," observed Mary. (He did not.)

"But you don't know this bird and I do. He's so dry that the dust flies out of him when he talks."

"Well, I'm sorry, but it's done. I couldn't very well refuse your aunt."

"Oh, I suppose not. Just because he's a bishop Aunt Caroline thinks he's going to put her on the free-list when she hits heaven. A bishop! What are we going to have at this party? Prayers?"

Mary bent over her work until she was sure that she had command of herself.

"Say!" exclaimed Bill. "I know a stunt. Would it be all right to invite my valet?"

"No; I should think not," answered Mary. "You mean as a guest? Why in the world do you want him?"

"He could entertain the bishop. We could make that his special job. Come on; let's do it."

Mary smiled, but shook her head decisively.

"Your guests would never forgive you if they discovered that you had invited your valet. You see, such things are not done."

She had slipped into the employment of that little phrase until it came to her lips as a reason for almost any prohibition that dealt with the social code.

"But I want to do it as a special favor to Pete," urged Bill.

"Or as a special penance, perhaps," said Mary, with a wise look. "No; and besides, your valet will doubtless have his duties that evening. He'll be needed in the gentlemen's dressing-room."

Bill picked up a morning paper and turned to the sporting page. Suddenly he looked up.

"Say, if you can squeeze a bishop in at this stage of the game I ought to be entitled to invite somebody else, hadn't I?"

"Of course. I asked for suggestions."

"Well, I want to invite a very, very good friend of mine."

"Who?" asked Mary cautiously.

"He's an Italian."

She raised her eyebrows and wrinkled her forehead into an inquiry.

"An artist," added Bill.

"Oh! Now that sounds promising."

"A wop artist. His name is Valentino."

"Why, of course we've got room for him," she said. "I think it's a splendid idea, Mr. Marshall. I hadn't any notion that you had friends in the art world. I'm very much interested in art myself. What does he paint?"

"He's a sculptor," said Bill.

"Better yet. That's even more distinguished. He must have the true temperament."

"Oh, barrels of it."

"An impressionist or a realist."

Bill considered.

"I'd say he was a little of both. He's very strong on impressions, but he produces them in a realistic way, if you can get what I mean."

"His work has strength," commented Mary, with a nod of understanding.

"You've got it. That's exactly it, Miss Norcross. He's young, but he's already made a name for himself. He makes a specialty of working on heads and busts."

"His full name?" inquired Mary.

"Antonio Valentino."

"Oh, I like it," she exclaimed. "He's the only artist we'll have. Perhaps another time we can get him to bring his friends. What is the address, please?"

"He has a studio over on the East Side. Wait a second."

Bill searched a pocket and discovered a memorandum of the address.

"And when you write," he advised, "don't address it to 'Mister,' Make it 'Signor.' He's accustomed to that and it'll please him."

"Signor Antonio Valentino," said Mary, reading from her list. "Quite the most distinguished name at the party, Mr. Marshall. That's the best suggestion you've made yet."

Bill smiled as though he had done a full morning's work.

"And now, if you've nothing more for the present, I have errands to do," she

announced. "Will you excuse me?"

"Don't I get another dancing lesson? I thought you said——"

Mary shook her head as she gathered up some papers.

"I've been thinking about your dancing," she said. "And I've come to the conclusion, Mr. Marshall, that there isn't anything more I can teach you. You've done so well that sometimes I suspect——"

That seemed a good place to end the sentence and she walked out of the room, leaving Bill to wonder whether Pete had not already played him false.

On her way out Mary remembered that she wanted to speak to Aunt Caroline about the florist, but at the threshold of the library she paused. Aunt Caroline was engaged.

"I wish you'd continue where you left off yesterday," she was saying.

"About what, madam?" It was the voice of the valet.

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"Why, it was about theology."

"Ah, yes. But you see there are so many kinds. Do you remember just which we were discussing? Speculative, philosophical, practical or dogmatic?"

"Mercy, Peter; how should I know? But it was interesting, so please go on."

"Very good, madam. I think we might go into the catechetical school for a bit, and that will lead us up to the doctrine of penal substitution."

"Splendid!" said Aunt Caroline.

Mary tiptoed down the hall, holding a gloved hand tightly over her lips. When she reached the street she let the laugh have its way.

"Now what do you know about that?" she murmured. And Mary was not an adept in the use of slang.

Some hours later she was discussing final preparations with Nell Norcross, who had convalesced to the point where she was sitting up in a chair and taking a vivid interest in everything that concerned the social fortunes of Bill Marshall, débutant.

"And now I have a surprise for you," said Mary. "You're coming to the party yourself!"

"I?" exclaimed Nell.

"You're quite well enough, and I'll need your help, my dear. I'm counting on you."

"But, Mary—oh, I can't."

"Nonsense. I've spoken to Miss Marshall about it. I explained I had a friend who had also done secretarial work and who really knew a great deal more about it than I do, and she said by all means to bring you. There won't really be anything

for you to do, but you'll just be there in case we need some expert advice."

"I don't believe I'm strong enough," demurred Nell.

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"Yes, you are. I asked the doctor. He said it would do you good."

"But I haven't a dress, Mary."

"Yes, you have. I've ordered one—one for you and one for me. They're with the compliments of Miss Marshall, they're perfect dreams and we're the luckiest people alive."

"You're a conspirator," complained Nell. "Honestly, Mary, I don't think I ought to go. I'm sure I shouldn't."

One of those determined looks flashed into Mary's face.

"Nell Norcross, you've got to go. I won't let you stay away. It's time you did something. Here I've been skating along on thin ice, bluffing and pretending and telling fibs until I hardly know which is my real name—yours or mine. Now I've reached the very climax and you've got to see me through. I'm going to be adamant."

Nell sighed.

"You're a whole lot bossier than you were the day I met you in the Brain Workers' Exchange," she said petulantly.

"Don't ever mention that place," and Mary made a grimace. "It gives me crawly little chills."

"Will I have to bring any more references?"

"No, you silly thing. References, indeed! Why, Nell, you won't go to this party on references. You'll go on my reputation!"

"Mary Wayne, I'm in awe of you."

Mary laughed.

"You wouldn't be if you knew how much I feel like a charlatan. It's all on the outside, Nell. I am just hollow emptiness; the shell is the only thing that holds me together."

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Nell made a gesture of reluctant assent.

"I'll go if you'll let me meet the Italian sculptor," she said. "I adore sculptors."

"You can meet the sculptor and the bishop both," promised Mary. "And if you're very good I'll let you meet the valet."

"But not, of course, Mr. Marshall."

"Pooh! That's nothing exciting. Anybody can meet him, my dear."

"Mary," said Nell, "inside of the Marshall house you may be a marvelous liar, but

outside of it your work is really very poor."

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CHAPTER XI

The Valet in the House

A small, thin girl with large, vivid eyes, a blue dress and collar-bones, who was zooming up-stairs two steps at a time, ran head on into Bill, who was coming slowly down. Her head struck him at the waist line and Bill sat down on a step. She immediately sat beside him.

"Isn't this the funniest party!" she exclaimed. "Did I hurt you?"

"It is, and you didn't," answered Bill.

He had never seen her before.

"I haven't seen a soul I know, except mother, who brought me here."

"Neither have I," said Bill, glancing down-stairs at the crush.

"Heaven knows why they invited us. Mother says that father used to know somebody in the family years and years ago. She says they're really all right, too. We just came because things have been so terribly dull in town that we've been sitting home screaming. Do you ever feel like screaming?"

"Right now."

"Go ahead," she advised. "I'm sure it will be all right. Anyhow, we came. They have perfectly lovely things to eat. And the house is so beautiful. But it's funny, just the same. Did you know there was a bishop here?"

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"I heard so."

"There is; he shook hands with me. He was so solemn; it seemed like shaking hands with God. And there are piles of middle-aged people here, aren't there? I don't mean there aren't any young ones, for of course there are—just millions. But there are more middle-aged ones. Still, the music is just wonderful. Who is the queer old lady who wears the little cap?"

"I believe she lives here," said Bill.

"Well, she's perfectly dear. She patted me on the head and asked me if I was Henry Kingsley's little girl. I told her I was; I didn't want to disappoint her. But I'm not; I'm Arnold Gibbs's little girl. And—somebody's else's."

She chirped her way through the conversation like a voluble bird.

"Engaged," she added, holding up a finger. "But he's not here, so it's all right for me to sit on the stairs with you. Here's something else that's funny: I haven't met the man they're giving the party for. Isn't that a scream? Somehow, we got in late, or something or other. He's awfully high-brow; oh, yes, I heard that the first thing. You're not high-brow, are you?"

Bill shook his head.

"It's comfortable to know you're not," she said. "Whenever I meet an intellect I make a holy show of myself. Did you know that he's sailing for Australia to-morrow? Uhuh! He's going there to study something or other. They told me that down-stairs, too. Let's see; what is it he's going to study? Crustaceans! That's it. What are they? Negroes?"

"I'm not up on them," said Bill. "Maybe."

"Anyhow, he's going to study them. And then he's going to write volumes and volumes about them. He's a scientist. Isn't it funny to be at a scientific

party? And—oh, yes; it seems there's been an affair in his life. He's going away to bury his heart while he's studying the thingamajigs. Did you ever hear of anything so romantic?"

Bill turned his head for a better survey of the young person with the astonishing information.

"Where did you pick up all the info?" he inquired, as carelessly as he could.

"From a young man who knows all about him," answered Arnold Gibbs's little girl.

"What sort of a young man?"

"Oh, a nice one. He's kind of thin and pale and he has baby-stare eyes."

"Does he have funny wrinkles at the corners of them when he laughs?" asked Bill.

"That's exactly what he has!" she exclaimed. "How beautifully you describe. Are you a detective? They have them at parties, you know."

"No, I'm not a detective. I—er—just happen to know him, I think."

Bill wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and stared straight ahead.

"Where did you meet him?" he asked, after a pause.

"Oh, down-stairs. You can meet anybody at a party, you know. It's perfectly all right. If people weren't perfectly all right they wouldn't be invited. He dances beautifully."

"You mean to say——"

"Twice. We danced out in the conservatory. It seems he's bashful; he wouldn't go into the big room for fear he'd bump me into people or step on their feet. He isn't sure of himself. But I don't see why, because he dances excruciatingly well. But he wouldn't believe I was engaged, so I had to run away from him."

"I don't quite get that."

"Kissed me," she sighed. "Oh, well, a party's a party. But I wouldn't let him do it again."

"Would you like to have me lick him?" asked Bill, his voice slightly trembling.

"Lick him? What in the world for? Because he didn't know? Why, what a queer person you are!"

Bill felt that he was, indeed, a very queer person. He was the owner of a party at which his valet had danced twice with one of his guests and kissed her as an additional token of democracy! He did not know whether to rage or laugh. But—oh, if Aunt Caroline ever heard of it! Or his secretary!

"Perhaps you'd like to dance with me," she added.

Bill was startled. But he mumbled an affirmative.

"Let's go, then," and she trotted down-stairs ahead of him, as eager as a kitten chasing a paper ball.

In the lower hall Bill felt a touch on his arm and turned to face Mary Wayne.

"May I interrupt just a moment?" she asked. Then to the girl: "I know you'll excuse me. I won't keep Mr. Marshall a minute."

The small one in the blue dress gave a frightened stare at Bill, shrieked and fled into the crowd.

"Have I offended her?" asked Mary, anxiously. "I'm sorry. I don't seem to place her, although I've been trying to remember all the guests."

"That's Arnold Gibbs's little girl," explained Bill. "She's been telling me things about my party and now she's just discovered who I am."

"Oh! And you let the poor child go on and on, of course. How awfully mean of you. Will you never learn?" Mary frowned at him with all the severity of a sister. "But that's not what I wanted to speak to you about. You've been hiding—and you mustn't!

People are asking where you are. Please—please don't spoil things. It's your party and you've just got to be present at it."

Bill made a face.

"I'm tired of being exhibited," he growled. "I'm tired of meeting people who say: 'So this is little Willie Marshall. Mercy, how you've grown! I haven't seen you since you wore knickerbockers. But you're a Marshall, sure enough; you're the image of your father.' I tell you, I'm sick of it!"

"But it's only for once," pleaded Mary. "Now they've met you they won't do it again. But what I want you to do now is to go in and dance with some of the

young people. There are some lovely girls in there, and they're just sitting around. Come; I'll introduce you, if you haven't already met them."

But Bill hung back. He did not want to dance at all; he was grateful because his secretary had inadvertently saved him from Arnold Gibbs's little girl. There was woe in his eyes as he looked at Mary. There was every sound reason why his expression should have been different, for Mary, in her party gown from Aunt Caroline, inspired anything but woe. Even she herself was conscious of the fact that she looked nice. Bill was becoming slowly conscious of it himself, although he could not drive the gloom out of his soul.

"Come," she said, peremptorily, hooking her arm in his.

"I'll dance with you," he offered.

"That won't do at all. I'm not a guest."

"If I can't dance with you I won't dance with anybody."

She shook her head impatiently.

"Please be sensible, Mr. Marshall."

"You first," declared Bill stubbornly.

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"No! It's not the thing for you to do at all. Perhaps later; but——"

"We'll go out in the conservatory and dance."

"But nobody is dancing out there."

"Come on, then."

Bill started, with her arm prisoned in a grip that forbid escape.

"Well, if I dance with you," said Mary, as she was dragged along, "then afterward you must promise to——"

"Maybe."

They stood at the entrance to the conservatory, Mary still scolding in an undertone. Suddenly she pinched his arm violently and pointed. An animated couple were swinging into view from behind a patch of palms. His valet—and Arnold Gibbs's little girl!

"Oh, Heavens!" said Mary.

She fled, with Bill trailing in her wake.

Even at that, it was not a bad party. It was somewhat overwhelmed with descendants, it is true; descendants of relatives and of old friends and of persons who were intimates of Bill Marshall's grandfather. But some of the descendants were young and were managing to have a good time. Aunt Caroline had her own circle, a sort of little backwater, into which descendants eddied and tarried a bit, and from which they eddied out again. In fact, Aunt Caroline had a party within a party. Her permanent guest seemed to be the bishop; once caught in the

backwater he never escaped into the stream. He stayed there with Aunt Caroline, while the descendants whirled gently around them. But the bishop was amiable in his dusty way, while his dignity was unimpeachable. He had made an impression on Arnold Gibbs's little girl, and what more could any bishop do?

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Nell Norcross, known to the household and its guests as "Miss Wayne," did not prove to be such a reliance as Mary hoped. Perhaps it was because she was a convalescent and did not feel equal to the ordeal of plunging boldly into affairs; perhaps it was due to a natural diffidence among strangers. But whatever it was, Mary discovered that she was almost wholly upon her own resources; that Nell was not rising capably to the emergency; that she edged off into the middle distance or the background with irritating persistence; that, in short, Nell, with all her wealth of experience and all her highly attested worth as an expert, was unable to adapt herself to the situation so well as the amateur secretary. Nell even admitted this shortcoming to Mary.

"I feel strange because I'm being called by your name," she offered as an explanation.

"Mercy," said Mary. "How about me?"

"But you've become accustomed to it, my dear. Never mind; I'm sure I'll brighten up as soon as the sculptor comes."

"There! I'd forgotten him. Oh, I hope he doesn't fail. I must find Mr. Marshall and ask him if he's heard anything. Have you seen him? I'll hunt around for him. I suppose he's trying to hibernate again."

And once more Mary started on the trail of Bill Marshall, for the double purpose of dragging him back into society and inquiring as to the whereabouts of the *signor* from Italy.

Pete Stearns was in purgatory. He had been sent for by Aunt Caroline, discovered by a servant and haled to the backwater, into which he was irresistibly sucked.

"Bishop," said Aunt Caroline, "this is the young man of whom I spoke."

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The bishop took Pete's hand, pressed it gently and retained it.

"My young friend," he said, "you are on the threshold of a career that offers you priceless opportunities. Have you looked well into your heart? Do you find yourself ready to dedicate your whole life to the work?"

"Sir," replied Pete, with a shake in his voice, "it is my ambition to become nothing less than a bishop."

"There! I told you so," said Aunt Caroline.

"Have you a sound theological foundation?" asked the bishop, still holding Pete's hand.

"I should say he had!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline. "What was it you were telling me

about yesterday, Peter? The cat—cat——"

"The catechetical lectures of Cyril of Jerusalem," said Pete smoothly. "From that we go on to the doctrines of Arius of Antioch."

"That would be going backward," commented the bishop.

"Huh! Oh, certainly, sir, strictly speaking. But we have been skipping around a bit, if I may say it, sir. Hitting the high—that is, sir, taking up such matters as interest us. Theistic philosophy, ethical rationalism, Harnack's conception of monophysticism, Gregory of Nyssa, Anselm of Canterbury——"

"Who wrote the 'Canterbury Tales,'" interrupted Aunt Caroline. "Wasn't that what you told me, Peter?"

But Peter was hurrying on.

"Miss Marshall has been good enough, sir, to show some small interest in my work; it has been a great encouragement to me. I may say that in the field of philosophical and speculative theology——"

"Stick to the dogmatic, my friend," advised the

bishop—"the dogmatic and the special dogmatic. Be sound, whatever you are. Now, here is a test I apply to every young man; it shows the trend of his thought, it tells me whether he has embarked upon the proper course; give me, my young friend, an outline of your views on diophysite orthodoxy."

Pete coughed and lifted his glance to the ceiling.

"Confound the old coot!" he was telling himself. "He has me out on a limb. What will I do? How in——"

And then—rescue! A small person in a blue dress floated into the backwater.

"Oh, here's my nice man," she said, as she possessed herself of Pete's arm. "Bishop, let go of his hand. He's going to teach me that new vamp thing. Hurry, teacher; the music started ages ago."

And as Pete was towed out of the backwater by Arnold Gibbs's little girl the bishop and Aunt Caroline stared after him.

"I greatly fear," observed the bishop, "that our young friend is somewhat in the grip of predestinarianism."

"Bishop, you frighten me," said Aunt Caroline. "But I'll take it up with him in the morning."

When another partner had invaded the conservatory and claimed the little girl in the blue dress, Pete Stearns sighed.

"There goes the only one who doesn't suspect me," he said. "The only real little democrat in the place. Although it's only ignorance in her case, of course. Oh, well, it's not so bad; I'm doing better than Bill at that."

Somebody tapped him on the arm.

"I've been waiting for an opportunity," said Nell Norcross. "I do not wish to make a scene. But I

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understand that you are Mr. Marshall's valet. Is that correct?"

Pete looked her in the eye and speculated.

"I think I am not mistaken," said Nell, after she had waited sufficiently for an answer. "May I ask, then, if it is customary for valets to dance with the guests of their employers?"

"Madam," said Pete, "may I in turn ask by what authority you question me?"

"There is nothing mysterious about my position in this house," replied Nell. "I am here as an assistant to Miss—Norcross." It was annoying to stumble over the name. "Miss Marshall understands perfectly; I am here at her request. I think you will do a very wise thing if you retire to the gentlemen's dressing-room and remain there. Am I clear?"

It was Pete's first glimpse at close hand of the social secretary's aide. It did not bore him in the least. He might have described her pallor as "interesting," had he been prone to commonplaces. Her eyes, he thought, were even better than those of Arnold Gibbs's little girl; they were not so vivid, perhaps, yet more deeply luminous.

"Let us debate this matter," he said. "Will you sit down?"

"Certainly not!"

"Aw, let's."

He spoke with a disarming persuasion, but Nell refused to be seated.

"Will you go up-stairs at once?" she demanded.

Pete placed a finger against his lips and glanced from side to side. "Suppose," he said, "I were to tell you a great secret?"

"Go at once!"

"Suppose we exchange secrets?" he whispered.

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That startled her. What did he mean? Did he know anything—or suspect?

"Suppose——" He stopped, turned his head slightly and listened. "Something is happening," he said. "Let's run."

And before Nell Norcross knew it she was running, her hand in his, for all the world like *Alice* in the Looking Glass Country dashing breathlessly along, with the *Red Queen* shouting: "Faster! Faster!"

CHAPTER XII

Signor Antonio Valentino

As they reached the front of the house they heard the voice of the announcer:

"Signor Antonio Valentino."

They saw Mary Wayne dexterously crowding her way forward; they saw her look, gasp, utter a faint cry and freeze into an attitude of horror.

And then they saw Bill Marshall, wearing a whole-hearted grin of delight, rush forward to greet his friend, the eminent artist from Italy.

Signor Valentino was short and dark. He had a flattened nose that drifted toward the left side of his face. He had a left ear that was of a conformation strange to the world of exclusive social caste, an ear that—well, to be frank, it was a tin ear. He had large, red hands that were fitted with oversize knuckles. His shoulders rocked stiffly when he walked. His eyes were glittering specks.

"H'lo, Bill, yo' old bum," said the signor.

"Kid, I'm glad to see you. You look like a million dollars."

And Bill seized Kid Whaley's hand, pumped his arm furiously and fetched him a mighty wallop on the shoulder.

The signor did, indeed, look like a million dollars. He wore the finest Tuxedo coat that could be hired on the East Side. His hair was greased and smoothed until it adhered to his bullet head like the scalp thereof.

There was a gold-tipped cigarette between his lips. The bow tie that girded his collar had a daring pattern of red. In a shirt front that shone like a summer sea was imbedded a jewel whose candle-power was beyond estimate, so disconcerting was it to the unshielded eye. A matchless brilliant of like size illuminated a twisted finger. His waistcoat was jauntily but somewhat sketchily figured in dark green, on a background of black.

"I got everythin' but th' shoes, Bill," confided the signor in a public whisper. "They gimme a pair that was too small an' I chucked 'em."

Thus it was that the signor wore his own shoes, which were yellow, and knobby at the toes and had an air of sturdiness.

"You're great," said Bill, as he pounded him again on the shoulder. "What made you so late?"

But the signor did not seem to hear. His glance was roving, flashing here and there with a shiftiness and speed that bewildered.

"Some dump and some mob," was his ungrudging tribute. "What's th' price of a layout like this, Bill? I'm gonna get me one when I lick the champ."

The rigid pose of Mary Wayne suddenly relaxed. She appeared to deflate. Her muscles flexed; her knees sagged. She backed weakly out of the crowd and found support against the wall.

As for Pete Stearns, there was a rapt stare of amazed admiration on his face. He turned and whispered to Nell, whose hand he still gripped:

"The son of a gun! He held out on me. He never tipped me a word. But, oh, boy, won't he get his for this!"

As for Bill Marshall, he was presenting Signor Antonio Valentino to his guests. Some of the bolder

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even shook hands, but the uncertain ones bowed, while those of unconcealed timidity or ingrained conservatism contented themselves with glances which might have been either acknowledgments or a complete withdrawal of recognition.

The signor was unabashed. The days of his stage fright were long past; to him a crowd was an old acquaintance. He turned to Bill with a bland grin.

"Gee, Bill, ain't it funny how I'm a riot anywhere I go? Y' don't even have to tell 'em I'm Kid Whaley."

Bill tucked the signor's arm under his and was leading him through the reception-room. In his own mind there was a faint twinge of misgiving. It was a great adventure, yes; it represented his defiance of Aunt Caroline, of the social secretary, of the career that they were carving for him. It was not open defiance, of course; Bill had intended that it should be subtle. He was undermining the foundations, while at the same time appearing to labor on the superstructure. Presently the whole false edifice would crash and there would be no suspicion that he was the author of disaster. That was the reasoning part of his plotting. The remainder—perhaps the greater part—was sheer impulse. He was cooperating with the devil that lurked within him.

Now the real test was coming. He summoned his moral reserves as he leaned over and whispered:

"Kid, you're going to meet my aunt. Watch your step. Spread yourself, but be careful. Do you remember what I told you?"

"Sure," said the Kid, easily. "I'll put it over. Watch me."

"If you fall down I'm gone."

"I ain't ever fell down yet. Ring the gong."

Aunt Caroline and the bishop were still in the backwater

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as Bill arrived with the new bit of flotsam. The amiable old chatelaine glanced up.

"Mercy!" she murmured.

"Signor Antonio Valentino," said Bill, with a bow.

Instantly Aunt Carolina smiled and extended her hand.

"Oh! Why, we had almost given you up. I'm so glad you did not fail us. William has told me——"

"Wotever Bill says is right," interrupted the signor. "He's a white guy. Pleased t' meetcha."

Aunt Caroline's hand crumpled under the attack, but she suffered without wincing and turned to the bishop.

"Bishop, this is the sculptor of whom I spoke."

The bishop was staring. His eyebrows were rising. For an instant only he was studying Bill Marshall.

"Pleased t' meetcha, bish."

It was a greeting not according to diocesan precedents, nor was the shaking of hands that followed it, yet the bishop survived. "It is very interesting to know you, sir," he murmured, non-committally.

Aunt Caroline was devoting her moment of respite to a study of Signor Valentino. She knew, of course, that it was not polite to stare at a man's ear, or at his nose, but these objects held her in a sort of wondering fascination. In advance she had formed no clear picture of what a sculptor should be; he was the first she had met. Yet, despite her inexperience and lack of imagination, she was conscious that this sculptor did not match very closely even the hazy ideal that was in her mind.

Bill nudged the signor, and the signor suddenly remembered. He was expected to explain, which he could do readily. It was merely a matter of feinting for an opening. Ah—he had it.

"It's cert'nly a grand little thing t' break trainin', lady. This here sculptor game is a hard life. Y' been pipin' me ear, ain't y'?"

Aunt Caroline lifted a hand in embarrassed protest and tried to murmur a disclaimer.

"W'y, it's all right, lady," said the signor, with generous reassurance. "It's one o' me trade-marks. Say, y'd never guess how I got it. Listen: I landed on it when I did a Brodie off a scaffold in th' sixteenth chapel. Uhuh; down in Rome."

"Sistine!" It was a violent whisper from Bill.

"Sistine," repeated the signor. "That's wot hung it on me, lady. I was up there a coupla hundred feet—easy that—copyin' off one o' them statues of Mike th'

Angelus. You know th' guy; one o' th' old champs. All of a sudden, off I goes an' down on me ear. Gee, lady, it had me down f'r nine all right; but I wasn't out. Ain't never been out yet. So I goes up again an' finishes th' job in th' next round. That's th' kind of a bird I am, lady."

Aunt Caroline nodded dumbly. So did the bishop.

"I got th' twisted beezer in th' same mixup," added the signor, as he scratched his nose reflectively. "First I lit on me ear an' then I rolled over on me nose. But, gee; that's nothin'. Guys in my game gotta have noive."

"It would appear to require much courage," ventured the bishop.

"You said it," advised the signor. "But y' gotta have noive in any game, bish. Yes, ma'am; y' gotta have guts."

Aunt Caroline steadied herself against the bishop's arm.

"The signor," explained Bill, "unconsciously slips into the vernacular."

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"Slippin' it in on th' vernacular is one o' me best tricks," assented the signor. "Lady, I remember once I caught a guy on th' vernacular——"

Bill was pinching him. The signor remembered and shifted his attack.

"See them mitts?" he asked, as he held forth a pair of knotted hands. "All in the same game, lady. Y' see, I got a studio in Naples, just like th' one I got over on th' East Side. This is th' way I get from handlin' them big hunks of Carranza marble."

Again Bill pinched the sculptor, who inclined his tin ear for counsel.

"Cheese it, Kid; you're in Mexico. Get it right—Carrara."

"Sure," observed the signor, undisturbed. "This here Carrara marble, lady, is all heavyweight stuff. It's like goin' outa y'r class t' handle it. I don't take it on regular."

"I—I've heard so much of the Carrara marble," said Aunt Caroline.

"There ain't nothin' better f'r hitchin' blocks, pavin' stones an' tombstones," declared the signor. Then, with an inspiration: "An' holy-stones, too. Get that, bish? Holy-stones. Ain't that a hot one? Hey, Bill, did you get it? I'm tellin' the bish they take this here Carranza marble——"

Bill interrupted firmly.

"I doubt if the bishop would be interested in the details, signor," he said. "Your work speaks for itself. You see"—to the bishop—"while the signor fully understands all the purposes for which Carrara marble may be used, he is really a specialist on heads and busts."

"Portrait work," suggested the bishop, still a trifle dazed.

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"Exactly. The expression that he can put into a face is often marvelous."

"Do you think," inquired Aunt Caroline, hesitating as though she were asking the impossible, "that he would consent to show some of his work here?"

"Any time, lady; any time," said the signor heartily. "Only I ain't brung me workin' clothes an'——"

He broke off as his glance enveloped a figure standing in a doorway that led to the hall.

"My Gawd! It's Pete!"

And Signor Valentino was gone in a rush of enthusiastic greeting.

"Why, he knows your valet, William," said Aunt Caroline.

"I have had Peter over at his studio; he's interested in ecclesiastical art, you know."

"Of course; I might have known." Aunt Caroline hesitated for an instant, then: "William, does he always talk in that curious manner?"

Bill nodded and sighed.

"It's due to his spirit of democracy," he explained. "He chooses to live among the lowly. He loves the people. He falls into their way of speech. I'll admit that it may sound strange, Aunt Caroline——"

"Oh, I wasn't objecting," she said, hastily. "I know so little about the foreign artists that I am ignorant; that's all."

"Some time, Aunt Caroline, I should like to have the signor bring some of his fellow-artists here. At a small affair, I mean."

"And you certainly shall, William. By all means."

Now, Bill was not wholly satisfied with this. He had been relying upon the Kid to do him a certain service. He was using him in the hope of destroying Aunt Caroline's illusions concerning art, society and

other higher things. He had no idea that the Kid would score anything that resembled a triumph. But now it was evident to him that in certain phases of life he had never sufficiently plumbed the innocence of his maiden aunt.

"He seems to interest you," he ventured, with a view to exploration.

"Strength and endurance are qualities always to be admired in a man," said Aunt Caroline, as glibly as if it came out of a book. "I had never dreamed that art developed them. Bishop, were you aware of it?"

The bishop was staring pointedly at Bill.

"I—er—no. That is—well, it is probable that I have never given sufficient attention to certain of the arts."

He continued to stare at Bill, until that gentleman began to feel that the bishop

was not so unsophisticated as he seemed.

"If you'll excuse me, Aunt Caroline, I'll hunt up the signor. I wouldn't have him feel that I am neglecting him."

But the signor was no longer standing in the doorway, talking to Pete Stearns. Nor was he out in the hall, where Bill immediately searched. A hasty exploration of the dining-room did not discover him.

"Now, where in blazes did he go?" muttered Bill, in an anxious tone.

He started on a run toward the front of the house and barely managed to avert a collision with his social secretary.

"Say, have you seen——"

She checked him with a stabbing glance.

"Do you know what you've done?" she demanded.

"Why, I——"

"Are you sane enough to realize?"

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Bill had never seen quite such an expression in her eyes. They fascinated him; almost they inspired him with awe. He even forgot the freckles.

"But I'm looking for the signor."

"Signor!" she echoed. "Well, never mind him. He's gone. Just for the moment, there's something else——"

"Gone? But he just came!"

Mary's jaw had developed an angle of grimness.

"I had him put out of the house," she said. "Yes, and I helped! I had him thrown out by servants. Do you know what he did?"

Bill experienced a sudden shrinking of the skin at his throat and down the sides of his neck.

"He met my friend—Miss Wayne—and——" Mary beat a clenched fist into her palm. "Because she spoke pleasantly to him he—he seized her! And he kissed her! And—now do you see what you've done?"

"I'm sorry," said Bill, in a stumbling whisper.

"Sorry!" Mary's face was aflame. "Sorry! But never mind that now. She has fainted. She was just recovering from an illness. It will probably kill her. Do you understand? I'll have to send for an ambulance. I'll——"

Bill led the way at a run and reached the second floor.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"You mean the sick lady?" asked the up-stairs maid. "Peter has taken her home, sir. He asked me to tell you that he would use your car."

"Better, was she?"

"A little hysterical, sir; but she could walk."

Bill breathed more comfortably. He turned to Mary Wayne.

"Everything's all right, I guess," he said.

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"You think so?" she inquired icily. "You are easily reassured, Mr. Marshall."

Bill shrugged.

"Oh, well; I'm sorry it happened, of course. I guess I'd better go back to the party, perhaps."

Not that he wanted to go back to the party; he simply wanted to get away from those awful eyes of Mary Wayne.

"There will be no need for you to do that," she said. "Everybody is going. Everything is ruined! Everything—oh, how could you?"

"I'll take a look around, anyhow," he said.

She reached forth a hand and seized him by the sleeve.

"You will not!" she said, hotly. "You won't look around anywhere. You'll come straight into the office and talk to me!"

"But——"

"At once!"

So he followed her.

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CHAPTER XIII

Mary Resigns

When the car reached a clear block, Pete turned his head for a hurried glimpse at the partly-huddled figure at his right.

"Air doing you any good?" he asked.

"I—I think so."

Miss Norcross spoke uncertainly. She was not quite clear concerning even such a matter as air.

Pete skillfully lighted a cigarette without checking the car's pace. He smoked in silence for several blocks.

"How did you like our little party?" he inquired.

No answer.

"He didn't mean any harm; that was only his way of being democratic."

There was no comment from Miss Norcross.

"Of course," mused Pete, "when you take the warm and impulsive Neapolitan nature and stack it up against the New England conscience you produce a contact of opposites. Looking at the matter impartially——"

"Please stop talking to me."

"Why?"

"For excellent reasons."

"Because I am a valet?"

"Because you choose to forget your position," said Nell, sharply.

Pete sighed mournfully.

"Everywhere it's the same," he said. "They all draw

the line. It'll haunt me even when I'm a bishop. Did you know I was going to be a bishop? I am. But, of course, being once a valet will have its advantages as well as its drawbacks. I'll be able to clean and press my own robes. I'll be a neat bishop if I'm nothing else. If there's one thing I dislike it's a dowdy bishop. You just run over all your bishop friends and you'll appreciate what I mean."

"Stop talking!"

"I don't believe you mean that, Miss Wayne. I believe that you have a secret liking for my conversation. Most people have. You see, it's like this: when I was a young boy——"

Nell sat up abruptly and looked about her.

"Where are you taking me to?" she demanded.

"I thought I'd drop you at the Ritz. That's where you live, isn't it? You have the Ritz manner."

"We've got to go back," she said furiously. "I don't live up this way at all. I live down-town."

"Well, you didn't tell me," said Pete, mildly. "You just let me go right on driving. I never dreamed of taking you anywhere except to the Ritz."

She told him the address and huddled back into her seat. Pete merely elevated an eyebrow as he turned the car.

"To return to our discussion of the party," he said, "it is unfortunate that you fainted before Signor Valentino took his departure. There were features connected with his exit that were unique. But I am greatly afraid that my master, Mr. Marshall, will have difficulty in making explanations. To bring your dearest

friend to your house and then——"

"If you don't stop talking I'll shriek."

"We shall see. To make it interesting, I'll bet you five dollars that you don't."

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And he continued to talk, smoothly, placidly and without cessation. She did not shriek. She did not even whimper. She sat in outraged silence, her hands clenched, her brain swimming with the futility of trying to puzzle out this mystery of Bill Marshall's valet.

"And so we arrive," said Pete, as he stopped the car in front of the boarding house and glanced up at its gloomy front. "No shrieking, no police whistles, no general alarm. Allow me."

He assisted her from the car and escorted her across the sidewalk. "You need not come up the steps," she said.

But already he was urging her up the steps, with a firm yet considerate grip on her arm. Also, he rang the bell.

"Thank you," said Nell, hurriedly. "That will be all, if you please."

"Suppose they should not hear your ring? Suppose you had to sit on the top step all night? No; I should never forgive myself. It is my duty to remain until—— Ah! The concierge."

The door opened and the landlady peered out into the vestibule.

"Madam," said Pete, removing his hat, "I have the honor to leave in your charge Miss Wayne. May I ask that you show her every consideration, inasmuch as she is somewhat indisposed?"

"Miss Wayne?" echoed the landlady. "There's nobody here——"

And then, in a flicker of light that came from the hallway, she established an identification. At the same instant Nell pushed weakly past her and stumbled into the house.

"There! I told her she wasn't fit to go out," declared the landlady. "I warned her. I knew she'd pay

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for it. But you can't drill sense into some people; not a particle."

She seemed to be soliloquizing, rather than addressing the stranger on her doorstep. But Pete was not interested in the soliloquy. There was a matter that mystified him. He interrupted.

"When I presented Miss Wayne did I understand you to say——"

She suddenly remembered that he was there.

"None of your business, young man. And don't stand around on my front stoop."

Then she was gone, with a slamming of the door that echoed through the lonely

block. Pete decided that her advice was sound; there was nothing to be achieved by standing there. He walked down the steps, climbed into the car and drove slowly off.

"Something is peculiar," he observed, half aloud. "Let us examine the facts."

All the way back to the Marshall house he examined the facts, but when he backed the car into the garage he had reached no conclusion.

Another conversation had been in progress during the time that Pete Stearns was playing rescuer to a stricken lady. It took place in the "office," a term that Mary Wayne had fallen into the habit of applying to the sun parlor where she transacted the affairs of Bill Marshall. For a considerable time all of the conversation flowed from one pair of lips. To say that it flowed is really too weak a characterization; it had the fearsome speed and volume of an engulfing torrent.

Bill walked during most of it. He could not manage to stay in one place; the torrent literally buffeted him about the room. He felt as helpless as a swimmer in the Niagara rapids. Never before had he realized

the conversational possibilities of a social secretary. He was particularly disquieted because she did not rant. She did not key her voice high; she did not gesture; she did not move from her chair. She simply sat there, pouring scorn upon him in appallingly swift and even tones. She drenched him with it; she seemed in a fair way to drown him.

At last, inevitably, there came a pause. There was awe as well as surprise in the gaze with which Bill contemplated her. She sat stiffly on the edge of her chair, pinker in the cheeks than he had ever seen her before, with her lips tightly set and her eyes glowing.

"That's more than I ever stood from anybody," he said slowly.

"Then you have been neglected in the past," was the comment she shot back.

"My aunt never went as far as you have."

"She would if she appreciated what you have done. When I think of the way you have deceived that dear old woman it makes me want to be an anarchist. Even now she doesn't understand what you've done. She doesn't know that you deliberately ruined everything; she's too innocent to suspect. All your guests know; all the servants know—everybody knows except your poor aunt. But you've imposed on her, you have deceived her, you have lied to her——"

"Oh, hold on there, please."

"Well, you have!" cried Mary. "And you've lied to me."

"How?" he demanded.

"You ask me that! Do I need to remind you? You said you were bringing a friend, an artist. You even lied about his name. And then you had the effrontery to bring

into this house a disreputable bruiser——"

"Now, wait a minute," commanded Bill. "I didn't

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lie about his name. I told you the truth. His name is exactly as I gave it—Antonio Valentino."

"I don't believe a word of it."

"Simply because you're ignorant about a lot of things. Probably you don't know that nearly every wop fighter in New York City goes into the ring under an Irish name. It's done for business reasons mostly. This man's name is Valentino; he was born in Italy. But when he fights it's Kid Whaley. And if you don't choose to believe me, write to any sporting editor and he'll tell you."

But Mary was not to be thrust aside.

"It makes no difference what his real name is, you concealed his identity. You deliberately deceived me. Not that *I* care," she added bitterly. "I'm thinking of your aunt and the reputation of her home."

"How could I help it if you misunderstood me?" demanded Bill. "I said he was an artist, didn't I? Well, he is. He's next to the top in his line, and it won't be long before he takes first place. If you ever saw him fight you'd understand what art is."

"You said he was a sculptor."

"Well, he is, too, in a way. That may be a bit of artistic license, but he's a sculptor. I've seen him take a man, go to work on him, carve him up and change him so that you couldn't identify him with anything short of finger prints. He's a sculptor of human beings. He works on heads and busts; I said he did, didn't I? And I said he was an impressionist and a realist rolled into one. And he is. A man can do impressionistic work with a pair of six-ounce gloves just as well as he can with a paint brush or a chisel. And you yourself suggested that his work must have strength, and I agreed with you."

Bill rather hoped that this would settle it; not that

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he banked heavily on the soundness of his defense, but rather because he felt that it was technically adroit. Mary simply curled a lip and regarded him with fresh scorn.

"That's what I call a very cowardly explanation," she said. "You know as well as I do that it's worthless. It doesn't explain the fact that you let me deceive myself and made me the instrument for deceiving your aunt. I'd have more respect for you if you came out boldly and admitted what you've done."

Bill was beginning to glare.

"If you think I'm going to throw down my friends in order to get into society, then

I'll stay out."

"You'd better change your friends," she advised. "So long as you have friends who are an offense to decent people——"

"Stop right there!" warned Bill. "I pick my own friends and I stick by 'em. The Kid has been a good friend of mine and I've tried to be a good friend of his. He's helped me out of more than one hole. And I've helped him. I backed him in his first big fight and got him started on the uproad. I've backed him more than once and I'll back him again, if he asks me to. Why can't you be reasonable about this? Suppose he is a fighter. He's a friend of mine, just the same. And what's a little scrap now and then between friends?"

Mary stared at him in cold silence. He mistook it for wavering. He felt that it was time to fling back the tide.

"I didn't choose to go into society, did I? I was dragged into it—and you were hired to drag me. Now you take the job of trying to come between me and my friends. You try to make a Rollo out of me. Would any self-respecting man stand for that?"

Bill was working up to it as he went along.

"I think you'd better remember your position and mine. If I were you, I'd bear in mind that you're my secretary—not my boss. If I were you——"

Mary sprang to her feet. "I'm *not* your secretary!" she cried, in a trembling voice.

"Oh, but I think you've already admitted that," he said, with an angry laugh.

"Well, I'm not now! I was, but not any more. I resign! Do you hear? *I resign!*"

Saying which, she sat down again and burst into tears.

The wrath in Bill's eyes faded slowly. In its place came a look of dismay, of astonishment, of clumsy embarrassment. He began shifting his feet. He took his hands out of his pockets and put them back again. He chewed his lip.

"Aw, hell!" he muttered under his breath.

Mary did not hear him. She was too much preoccupied with her sobs. She began searching blindly for a handkerchief, and was not aware of what she did when she accepted Bill's, which he hastily offered.

"Don't cry," he advised.

He might as well have advised the sky not to rain.

"Oh, come, Miss Norcross; please don't cry."

"I—I *will* cry!"

"Well, then, don't resign," he said.

"I *will* resign!"

"Let's be reasonable. Don't let's lose our tempers."

Mary swallowed a sob and shouted into the handkerchief:

"I resign! *I resign!* I resign!"

Bill gritted his teeth and planted himself threateningly in front of her.

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"I won't have it! Understand me? I won't let you resign. I refuse to accept your resignation."

"You c-can't."

"Well, I do."

"I—I w-won't endure it! I've already resigned. I'm through. I'm——"

Right there she had a fresh paroxysm. Bill knew that he must be firm, at all costs. If only on account of Aunt Caroline she couldn't be allowed to resign. And then there was his own account to be considered. Any girl with such nice freckles—— He was in a state of inward panic.

"See here; I'll try to do better," he promised. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"It's too—too l-late now," sobbed Mary.

"No, it isn't. We'll start all over again. Come, now."

She shook her head miserably.

"Pup-pup-please!" she wailed. "I—I want to resign."

Bill watched her as she curled up in the chair, tucked her feet under her party dress and hunted for a dry spot on the handkerchief.

"I wonder if it would be all right for me to cuddle her," he mused. "The poor kid needs it; maybe she expects it. Well, such being the case——"

A knock, a door opening, and Pete Stearns. He sensed the situation at a glance and winked at Bill.

"I just wished to report, sir, that I escorted Miss Wayne to her home and left her feeling somewhat better."

Mary hastily dabbed her eyes and looked up.

"She's all right? You're sure?"

"Miss Wayne is quite all right, ma'am." He accented the name, watching Mary as he spoke.

"Thank you very much, Peter," she said.

"Once she got out into the air, ma'am——"

Bill interrupted him with a peremptory gesture. Pete winked again and backed out.

Ten minutes later Mary Wayne was more concerned about the probability that her nose was red than she was about her status as Bill Marshall's secretary. Bill was smoking a cigarette and looking thoughtful. He did not know whether it would have been all right to cuddle her or not. The inopportuneness of Pete Stearns had left the question open.

"I think I'll go to bed," said Mary.

Bill went to the door and paused with his hand on the knob.

"That resignation doesn't go, you know," he said.

"Good night," answered Mary.

"Do you withdraw it?"

"I—I'll think about it. Will you open the door, please?"

He opened it a little way.

"I've got to know definitely," he said, with great firmness.

"Well, perhaps—if you really want——"

"Atta boy," said Bill, with a genial patting of her shoulder. "I mean, atta girl. But listen: if you ever pull a resignation on me again I'll——"

Mary looked up, a question in her eyes. Would he really accept it—really?

"Why, I'll spank you—you freckle-faced little devil."

Mary yanked the door full wide and ran down the hall. Bill watched hopefully, but she never looked back.

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CHAPTER XIV

References

To the horror of Bill Marshall, the undisguised wonder of Pete Stearns and unexpected joy of Mary Wayne, Aunt Caroline announced herself as much pleased with the party. There were a few things she did not understand, others that she did not know—such as the manner of Signor Valentino's leave-taking—and, therefore, between unsophistication and ignorance, she thoroughly enjoyed matters in retrospect.

Upon Mary she heaped praise, upon Bill gratitude, while to Peter she confided the impression that the bishop was well disposed toward him and would doubtless supply him with any theological hints that he might find necessary in the pursuit of his life-work.

As for Bill and Mary, they were on terms again. Mary had not forgotten what he called her as she fled to her room; it was the second time he had alluded to her freckles, which hitherto she had been wont to regard as a liability. Nor had she forgotten the storm and the tears. It was all very unsecretarial, she realized, and it might easily have been embarrassing if Bill had not displayed a tact and delicacy that she never expected of him. He made neither hint nor allusion to the matter; he behaved as if he had forgotten it. He had not, of course, and Mary knew he had not; and Bill himself knew that it was still vivid in Mary's mind. It was a shunned topic, and underneath

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this tacit ladies' and gentlemen's agreement to shun it, it survived as an invisible bond.

In fact, a sort of three-cornered alliance had grown out of Bill's party, so that Pete

came to be included in the triangle. This was also tacit as between Pete and Mary, although it was directly responsible for certain covert inquiries that Pete made from time to time concerning "Miss Wayne." His anxiety as to her health appeared to do great credit to his goodness of heart. Between Bill and Pete there was always frank discussion, in private, although on the subject of the social secretary it flowed with perhaps a trifle less freedom.

So greatly had the party furthered the innocent dreams of Aunt Caroline that she lost no time in urging further assaults and triumphs in the new world that had been opened to her nephew.

"My dear," she said to Mary, "I think it would be well to give a small dinner—very soon."

Mary agreed that it would be very well, indeed.

"I confess that I have certain ambitions," said Aunt Caroline. "I would like to have William extend his circle somewhat, and among people whom it would be a very fine thing for him to know."

Mary carelessly approved that, too.

"It would be wonderful, my dear, if we could have Mrs. Rokeby-Jones as a guest."

Mary glanced sharply at Aunt Caroline. She was suddenly trembling with a premonition.

"But do we know Mrs. Rokeby-Jones?" she asked.

Aunt Caroline smiled confidently.

"You do, my dear."

To which, of course, Mary was forced to nod an assent.

"I believe it would be all right for you to speak to

her about it," added Aunt Caroline. "She thinks so highly of you that I am sure she would not consider it strange in the least. And besides, there is always the Marshall name."

The Marshall name was Aunt Caroline's shield and buckler at all times, and since Bill's party she had come to regard it as a password of potent magic.

Mary felt suddenly weak, but she fought to avoid disclosure of the fact. Mrs. Rokeby-Jones! What could she say? Already, in the case of Bill's party, threads of acquaintanceship that were so tenuous as scarcely to be threads at all had been called upon to bear the strain of invitations, and, much to her astonishment, they had borne the strain. Thereby emboldened, Aunt Caroline was now seeking to bridge new gulfs. But why did she have to pick Mrs. Rokeby-Jones? Was it because—— Mary tried to put from her mind the unworthy suspicion that Aunt Caroline was still delving as to the facts concerning what they said about the elder daughter. But whatever the motive, whether it be hidden or wholly on the

surface, booted little to Mary. It was an impossible proposal.

"She will recall you, of course," Aunt Caroline was saying. "And I am sure that she knows the Marshalls. In fact, I have an impression that at one time William's mother——"

"But are you sure she hasn't gone to Newport?" asked Mary, desperately.

"I saw her name in the paper only this morning, my dear. She was entertaining last night at the theater."

Mary began wadding a handkerchief.

"And perhaps she could suggest somebody else," added Aunt Caroline. "At any rate, suppose you get in touch with her and let me know what she says."

Mary went up-stairs to nurse her misery. It was out

of the question to refuse, yet she dreaded to obey. She could not call upon Mrs. Rokeby-Jones; even a blind person could tell the difference between Nell Norcross and Mary Wayne. She could not get Nell to go, for Nell was still overcome by her adventures at the party. She could not send a letter, because the writing would betray her. She could telephone, perhaps; but would Mrs. Rokeby-Jones detect a strange voice? And even if she succeeded in imposture over the wire, how was she to approach the matter of an invitation to the home of a stranger?

After much anguished thought, she decided upon the telephone.

"But even if she consents," murmured Mary, "I'll never dare meet her face to face."

A connection was made in disconcertingly short time and Mary, after talking with a person who was evidently the butler, held the wire, the receiver trembling in her fingers. And then a clear, cool voice——

"Well? Who is it?"

"This—this is Miss Norcross talking," and then Mary held her breath.

"Miss who?"

"Norcross. Miss Norcross."

"Do I know you? Have I met you?" said the voice on the wire.

"This is Nell Norcross." Mary was raising her voice.

"Yes; I hear the name. But I don't place you."

"Miss Norcross—formerly your secretary."

There was an instant's pause. Then the cool voice again:

"Perhaps you have the wrong number. This is Mrs. Rokeby-Jones talking."

"Then I have the right number," said Mary,

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wrinkling her forehead in perplexity. "I used to be your secretary—Miss Norcross."

"But I have never had a secretary by that name," said Mrs. Rokeby-Jones.

Mary gasped.

"But the reference you gave me! Don't you remember?"

"I have an excellent memory," the voice said. "I have never employed any person named Miss Norcross, I never knew anybody by that name and I certainly never supplied a reference to any such person. You are laboring under some mistake."

"But—but——"

"Good-by."

And Mrs. Rokeby-Jones hung up.

Mary slowly replaced the receiver and sat staring at the telephone. A blow between the eyes could not have stunned her more effectually. Mrs. Rokeby-Jones had repudiated her reference!

Presently she rallied. She ran to her own room and began dressing for the street. She felt that she must escape from the house in order to think. At all costs she must avoid Aunt Caroline until she had been able to untangle this dismaying snarl. A few minutes later she made certain of that by slipping down the rear staircase and leaving the house by a side entrance.

Fifteen minutes later she was at Nell's boarding-house, impatiently ringing the bell.

Nell was propped up in a rocker, looking very wan as Mary entered, but brightening as she recognized her visitor. Mary drew a chair and sat opposite.

"A most embarrassing thing has happened," she said. "I have just had Mrs. Rokeby-Jones on the telephone."

Nell stifled an exclamation.

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"And she doesn't remember me—or you, rather—or anybody named Norcross!"

"Oh, my dear!"

"It's the truth, Nell. Oh, I never felt so queer in my life."

Nell moistened her lips and stared with incredulous eyes.

"What—what made you call her up?" she faltered.

"Because I couldn't help it. I was forced to."

And Mary explained the further ambitions of Aunt Caroline and what they had led to.

"Oh, it was shocking, Nell! What did she mean? How dared she do it?"

"I—I—— Oh, Mary!"

"But how could she?" persisted Mary. "That's what I don't understand. Even if my voice sounded strange I don't see how she could. Why did she deny that she ever wrote a reference?"

Nell Norcross pressed a hand to her lips to keep them from quivering. In her eyes there was something that suggested she had seen a ghost. Slowly she began to rock to and fro in her chair, making a gurgling in her throat. Then she whimpered.

"B-because she never wrote it!" she moaned.

"Why—Nell. Oh, Heavens!"

Mary suddenly seemed to have become as frightened as Nell. She glanced quickly over her shoulder, as though expecting to face an eavesdropper. Then she sprang up, went to the door and locked it.

"Nell Norcross, tell me what you mean!"

"She—she didn't write it. Oh, Mary! Oh—please!"

For Mary had taken her by the shoulders and was pushing her rigidly against the back of the chair.

"Who wrote it?" demanded Mary.

"I did."

It required several seconds for Mary to absorb this astounding confession. Then:

"You forged it?"

"I—I wrote it. It isn't forgery, is it? I won't go to jail, will I? Oh, Mary, don't let them——"

Mary shook her somewhat roughly.

"Tell me more about it," she commanded. "Did you lose the reference she gave you? Or did she refuse to give you one?"

Nell shook her head miserably.

"It's worse than that," she sobbed. "I—I never set eyes on the woman in my life."

Mary collapsed into her own chair. She seemed to hear the cool, clear voice of Mrs. Rokeby-Jones calmly denying. Now it was taking an accusative tone. She flushed to a deep red. The memory of that telephone conversation appalled her.

"But the other references?" she managed to whisper.

"All the same."

"All! You wrote them yourself?"

Nell answered with a feeble nod.

"Every one of them?"

"Every one."

"And do you know any of the women who—whose names are signed?"

"Two—one of them by sight."

"Nell Norcross!"

But Nell had reached a fine stage of tears and there was nothing to be had out of her for several minutes. Then Mary managed to calm her.

"Now, tell me about it," she said. "And stop crying, because it won't do a bit of good."

Nell swallowed a sob and mopped at her eyes.

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"I—I was in the same fix that you were," she said shakily. "Only I guess I was that way longer. I didn't have any job, and I couldn't get one—without references. You understand?"

Mary nodded. Indeed she did understand.

"I worked in a furrier's; one of the Fifth Avenue places. Stenographer, and I helped on the books, too. And then—well, I had to leave. It wasn't my fault; honestly, Mary. I couldn't stay there because of the way he acted. And of course I wouldn't—I couldn't—ask him for references."

Nell was quieting down, and Mary nodded again, to encourage her.

"Well you know how it is trying to get a job without any references. No decent place will take you. I kept it up for weeks. Why, I couldn't even get a trial. When I couldn't get references, or even refer them to the last place, they'd look at me as if I were trying to steal a job."

"I know," murmured Mary. "They'd look at me, too."

"So I got desperate. You know what that is, too. I had to have a job or starve. And I had to have references—so I wrote them!"

"Oh, Nell!"

Nell looked up defiantly.

"Well, what else could I do? And I didn't harm anybody, did I? I didn't say anything about myself that wasn't true. All I did was to use some good names. And not one of them would ever have known if you hadn't called that woman up on the telephone. They were all customers of the place where I worked. I knew their names and addresses. I couldn't go and ask them to give me references, could I? I couldn't even do that with the one I'd spoken to. So I got

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some stationery and wrote myself references—that's all."

Mary pondered the confession.

"If it had only been one reference," she began, "but you had five or six."

"I only intended to write one," declared Nell. "But what was the use of being a piker, I thought. So—well I plunged."

"Yes; you plunged," agreed Mary. "And now look at the fix I'm in."

"But you've got a wonderful place!"

Mary smiled bitterly.

"Oh, yes; it's wonderful enough. I'm not only holding it under a false name, but now it turns out that even the references were false. And"—she looked sharply at Nell as something else occurred to her—"perhaps it doesn't end even there. Tell me—is your name really Nell Norcross?"

"Why, Mary Wayne! Of course it is!"

"Well, how could I be sure. I'm false; the references are false. Why couldn't your name be false, too? That would be the finishing touch; that would leave me—nowhere. And I'm just about there, as it is."

"But I *am* Nell Norcross, I tell you. I can prove that."

"Oh, I suppose so," said Mary, wearily. "So am I Nell Norcross, according to the references. If you've committed a crime, I suppose I have, too. They call it compounding it, don't they? Oh, we're both in; I dare say I'm in deeper than you, because I've been taking money for it."

"You haven't cheated them, have you? You've worked for it."

"Yes, I've worked. But—why, in Heaven's

name, Nell, didn't you tell me all this before I started?"

"I was too sick."

"You weren't too sick to give me the references and send me off to take the job."

"But I was too sick not to have you take it," said Nell. "One of us had to go to work. And if I'd told you, you wouldn't have done it."

"That's true enough," assented Mary. "I wouldn't have dared. It took all the nerve I had, as it was. But now what am I going to do?"

"Why, you'll go right on sticking to your job, of course."

"And keep on being a liar, and a hypocrite, and a falsifier, and maybe some kind of a forger—— Why, I believe I am a forger! I signed your name to some kind of a bail bond!"

"Oh, well; you told me the case was settled, Mary. So you don't have to worry about that."

"I can worry about my conscience if I like," declared Mary, resentfully.

"Yes; but you can't eat your conscience, or buy clothes with it, or hire a room—or

anything."

Mary stared down at the floor for a while.

"I suppose I've got to keep on taking care of you until you're well," she remarked.

Nell winced.

"I—I hate to be a charity patient," she faltered. "I'll make it all up to you some time. But if you'll only keep on for the present——"

Mary reached forward impulsively and took her hands.

"I don't mean to suggest that," she said. "You're not a charity patient; you got my job for me. Of course I'll look out for you, Nell. I'll see it through

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somehow, as long as it's necessary. There; don't worry, dear. I'm not angry. I'm just staggered."

Nell leaned forward and kissed her.

"You're a darling!" she said. "And just as soon as I'm strong I'll get a job for myself."

Mary looked at her thoughtfully.

"Yes," she said slowly, "I suppose you might write yourself some more references."

"Mary Wayne!"

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CHAPTER XV

To Sail the Ocean Blue

Mary Wayne was in weak, human fear. The confession of Nell Norcross had not merely served to revive half-forgotten apprehensions, but had overwhelmed her with new ones. She wanted to quit. She did not dare. For where could she get another place, and who would take care of Nell? Circumstances were driving her toward a life of perpetual charlatanism, it seemed, but for the present she could not even struggle against them.

Mary was neither a prude nor a Puritan, so it may as well be said that what troubled her most was not the practice of deception. It was the fear of discovery. She now lived with an explosive mine under her feet. At any instant Aunt Caroline, for all her innocence and abiding faith, might inadvertently make the contact. Then—catastrophe! Even that queer valet might make a discovery; she

was by no means certain that he was without suspicion. Bill Marshall himself might blunder into a revelation; but Mary feared him least of all. She did not regard him as too dull to make a discovery, but she had a feeling that if he made it he would in some manner safely remove her from the arena of disturbance before the explosion occurred.

All the way back to the Marshall house she was seized with fits of trembling. The trembling angered her, but she was unable to control it. Suppose Aunt Caroline had taken it into her head to seek a personal

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talk with Mrs. Rokeby-Jones! Or, even if matters had not gone that far, what would she say when Aunt Caroline asked for the result of Mary's interview?

"The city of New York is not large enough for Mrs. Rokeby-Jones and me," declared Mary. "I feel it in my bones. One of us must go. Which?"

She had reached a decision when the butler opened the front door and informed her that Mr. William would like to see her. He was the very person that Mary wanted to see. She found him in the office.

"Say, what's this I hear about a dinner?" demanded Bill.

"Has your aunt been speaking to you?"

"Uh, huh! I don't want any dinner. Good Lord, they'll ask me to make a speech!"

Mary smiled for the first time in hours.

"Of course," said Bill, uncomfortably, "I promised to do better and all that sort of thing, and I don't want to break my word. But a dinner—oh, gee!"

"I don't favor the dinner idea myself," said Mary.

"But it looks like Aunt Caroline was all set for it. What's the answer?"

Mary laid her gloves on the desk and removed her hat.

"It seems to me," she said, "that the thing to do is to go out of town for a while."

Bill looked at her with a hopeful expression.

"You see, Mr. Marshall, the town season is really over. Most of the worth-while people have left the city. It's summer. There will be nothing of importance in society before the fall; nothing that would interest you, at any rate. So I would advise doing exactly what the other people are doing."

Bill rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Trouble is, we haven't got a country house," he

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said. "We don't own a villa, or a camp or any of that fashionable stuff."

"I understand," said Mary. "But how about a yacht?"

"Don't even own a skiff."

"But we could hire one, couldn't we?"

Mary had unconsciously adopted the "we."

Bill regarded her with sudden interest. He stopped rubbing his nose, which was always one of his signs of indecision.

"Say, where did you get that idea?" he demanded.

"Why, it's a perfectly obvious one to arrive at, considering the season of the year."

"Have you spoken to my aunt about it?"

"Not yet. I wanted to consult you first, of course."

Bill liked that. It was another way of saying that she was still *his* secretary.

"You've got a whole beanful of ideas, haven't you?" he exclaimed, in admiration. "Well, I'm for this one, strong!"

Mary breathed a little more deeply. It seemed as if she had already removed herself a step further from Mrs. Rokeby-Jones and other perils of the city.

"I'm glad you like it," she said.

"Like it! Why, man alive—I mean little girl—well, anyhow, it's just the stunt we're going to pull off."

"It's not really a stunt," Mary reminded him. "It's not original at all. We do it simply because it is the right thing to do. Everybody of any account has a yacht, and now is the time for yachting."

"Now, don't you go crabbing your own stuff," said Bill. "This thing is a great invention, Secretary Norcross, and you get all the credit. I wouldn't have thought of it in a billion years. Now, what's your

idea about this yacht? Do we want a little one or a whale? Where do we go? When? And who's going along?"

"Well, I don't know much about yachts," confessed Mary. "But it seems to me that a medium-sized one would do. We're not going across the ocean, you know."

"We might," declared Bill, hopefully—"we might start that trip around the world. I'm supposed to be on my way to Australia, you know, studying crustaceans."

Mary laughed.

"Do we cart a gang along?"

Mary had a vision of a tin ear. She shook her head.

"I see no occasion for a large party, Mr. Marshall. We might ask one or two besides the family; the bishop, for instance."

"Now you're joshing me. Into what part of the world do we sail this yacht, if you don't happen to be under sealed orders."

He was traveling somewhat rapidly, Mary thought; and she was right. Bill was already cleaving the high seas, perched on his own quarter-deck and inhaling stupendous quantities of salty air.

"I think we'd better obtain your aunt's approval before we plot out a cruise," she advised. "Also, there's the problem of getting a yacht."

"We'll get one if we steal it," Bill assured her. "I'll talk to Pete about it. He's amphibious. He's a sort of nautical valet. He knows all about yachts."

"I dare say. He seems to have a wide range of information. Suppose you consult him, while I speak to your aunt."

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A frown clouded Bill's face.

"Do you suppose Aunt Caroline will want to go?" he asked.

"Want to? Why, she must."

"I don't see why. I don't believe she'd enjoy it a bit. We can have a barrel of fun if Aunt Caroline doesn't go. Let's leave her home."

Mary shook her head decisively.

"That's out of the question. Of course she'll go.

"But, listen; I don't need any chaperon."

"Well, perhaps I do," said Mary.

"Oh!" Bill was still scowling. "Why couldn't we let Pete be the chaperon?"

Mary squashed that suggestion with a glance.

"Then don't blame me if she turns out to be a bum sailor," he warned.

"I think I'll speak to her now," said Mary.

Aunt Caroline was frankly surprised. It had never occurred to her that there were times when society went to sea. Yet, to Mary's great relief, she did not prove to be an antagonist. She merely wanted to be shown that this cruise would actually be in furtherance of Bill's career.

"Of course it will," urged Mary. "It's the very thing. We'll take the regular summer society cruise."

"And what is that, my dear?"

Mary bit her lip. She did not have the least idea.

"Oh, I suppose we'll stop at Newport, Narragansett, Bar Harbor, and such places," she said, dismissing the details with a wave of her hand. "We'll make all the regular society ports—that is, of course, if you approve the idea, Miss Marshall."

Aunt Caroline smiled.

"Certainly I approve it, my dear. Although I admit

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it perplexes me. What sort of yachting flannels does an old lady wear?"

"Oh, they dress exactly like the young ones," said Mary, hastily.

"Which reminds me that we'll both need gowns. So, please order whatever you want."

"You're awfully generous with me," and Mary laid an impulsive hand on Aunt Caroline's. She felt very small and mean and unworthy.

"I want you to be a credit to the family, my dear. So far, you're doing beautifully! Have you spoken to William about buying the yacht?"

"Oh, we don't have to buy one! We just hire one—charter it, I think they say."

"It sounds like hiring clothes," said Aunt Caroline. "Still, I leave it all to you and William. But if it's necessary, buy one. And please get it as large as possible. We wouldn't want to be seasick, you know."

"We'll only sail where it's nice and calm," Mary assured her.

"And where there are the proper sort of people. Very well, my dear. And, oh, I've just remembered: have you done anything yet about Mrs. Rokeby-Jones?"

That lady had passed completely out of Mary's head.

"Why—er—you see, this other matter came up, Miss Marshall, so I haven't done anything about her as yet."

"Never mind the dinner, then," said Aunt Caroline.

"I'm afraid we wouldn't have time for it," agreed Mary.

"Probably not, my dear. We'll do better. We'll invite her to sail with us on our yacht."

Mary groped her way out of the room.

The business of fleeing the city went surprisingly well, notwithstanding Aunt Caroline's obsession on the

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subject of Mrs. Rokeby-Jones. Bill consulted Pete Stearns, who numbered among his friends a marine architect. The marine architect believed that he knew the very boat they needed. She was not a steam-yacht; most of the steam-yachts, he pointed out, were too large for a small party and a lot of them were obsolete. What they wanted was a big cruiser with Diesel engines, that ran smoothly, noiselessly and never smokily.

So through the offices of the marine architect, who made a nice commission, of which he said nothing at all, Bill Marshall became charterer of the yacht *Sunshine*, an able yet luxurious craft, measuring some one hundred and twenty feet on the water-line, capable of all the speed that was required in the seven seas of society and sufficiently commodious in saloon and stateroom

accommodations.

Mary Wayne was delighted. Any craft that would sail her away from New York City would have been a marine palace, in her eyes. She would have embarked on a railroad car-float, if necessary. There was a vast amount of shopping to be done, which also pleased Mary. Aunt Caroline insisted upon being absurdly liberal; she was in constant apprehension that the ladies of the party would not be properly arrayed for a nautical campaign. So Mary presently found herself the possessor of more summer gowns than she had ever dreamed of.

Even when it came to the business of seeing that Bill Marshall was adequately tailored for the sea Aunt Caroline proved prolific in ideas. Somehow, she acquired the notion that Bill would need a uniform; she pictured him standing on the bridge, with a spy-glass under his arm, or perhaps half-way up the shrouds,

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gazing out upon the far horizon; although there were no shrouds on the *Sunshine*, inasmuch as there were no masts. But Aunt Caroline did not know that. To her, Bill would not merely be the proprietor and chief passenger of this argosy, but the captain, as well.

Mary saved Bill from the uniform. She did it tactfully but firmly, after explaining to Aunt Caroline that only the hired persons on board would wear uniforms. Nevertheless, Aunt Caroline insisted on such a plethoric wardrobe for her nephew that for a time she even considered the advisability of an assistant valet. Pete fell in with that idea instantly, but again there was a veto from Mary. One valet was trouble enough, as she well knew.

When it came to the matter of Mrs. Rokeby-Jones, however, Mary was hard put for a suitable defense. Aunt Caroline mentioned the lady several times; she hoped that the negotiations were progressing favorably; in fact, she at last reached the point where she decided upon two additional evening gowns for herself, because she was certain that Mrs. Rokeby-Jones would come arrayed like the Queen of Sheba. Poor Aunt Caroline did not know that the Queen of Sheba, in these times, would look like a shoddy piker beside even the humblest manicure in New York.

Mary had consulted Bill about Mrs. Rokeby-Jones. She could not explain as fully as she would have liked just why it was impossible for her to transmit Aunt Caroline's invitation; but she did not need to. Bill was flatly against his aunt's scheme. He declared that he would back Mary to the uttermost limit of opposition.

"But opposition is exactly what we must avoid," said Mary. "We mustn't antagonize—and yet we

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must stop it. Oh, dear! It seems a shame for me to be plotting this way against your aunt; she's been so wonderful to me. But there's no way to make her see that a perfect stranger is hardly likely to accept an invitation to a yachting party.

Of course, your aunt is relying on the Marshall name." Bill nodded.

"And names don't get you anywhere; except, perhaps, in society. I knew a youngster who called himself Young John L. He kept at it for quite a while, but the only thing he was ever any good at was lying on his back in the middle of the ring and listening to a man count ten. That's all his name ever got him."

"But to get back to Mrs. Rokeby-Jones," said Mary, with a slight frown. "We've got to appear to want her, but we mustn't have her."

"We won't; don't you worry. We'll count her out or claim a foul. We'll leave her on the string-piece, if it comes to the worst."

"It isn't quite so simple as that, Mr. Marshall. Do you know what your aunt did to-day? She wrote her a note—personally."

"I know it," said Bill.

"She told you?"

"No; but here's the note."

He delved into a pocket and produced an envelope. Mary's eyes became round.

"Why, how in the world——"

"You see, the letters were given to Pete, to put stamps on and mail. And—well, he thought I might be interested in this one."

"But—that's a crime, isn't it?"

"Why do you have such unpleasant thoughts, Secretary Norcross? Pete says it's no crime at all; not

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unless it's been dropped in a letter-box. But if you feel finicky about it, why here's the letter. Mail it."

Mary shook her head.

"I'd be afraid to touch it."

"Thought so," said Bill, as he returned the letter to his pocket. "I'll hold it for a while."

"If the boat was only sailing now!" exclaimed Mary.

"That's a good suggestion. I'll hold it till we sail."

"Why, I never suggested anything of the kind, Mr. Marshall."

She made a very fair show of indignation, but Bill simply winked at her. Mary turned away for fear of betraying herself. Nevertheless, she knew that it was all very discreditable and she was not in the least proud of herself. It was a comfort, though, to have somebody else sharing the guilt.

The day came for the sailing of Aunt Caroline's armada. The *Sunshine* lay at anchor in the Hudson. From early morning a launch had been making steady trips

from wharf to yacht, carrying trunks, boxes, grips, hampers, and packages. A superficial observer would have been justified in assuming that the *Sunshine* was documented for the Philippines, or some equally distant haven. All of Aunt Caroline's new gowns, all of Mary's, all of Bill's wardrobe, all of Pete's, and many other things that might prove of service in an emergency went aboard the *Sunshine*.

At the last moment there was great difficulty in persuading Aunt Caroline to leave the house. There had been no word from Mrs. Rokeby-Jones, and the good lady who was determined to be her hostess insisted that she would not depart without her. Bill fumed; Mary twisted her handkerchief. Aunt Caroline was displaying stubborn symptoms.

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"Madam, I telephoned myself, only half an hour ago," said Pete. "She was not at home."

"She's probably on her way to the yacht," said Bill, with a glance at Mary.

"We'll wait a while and telephone again," announced Aunt Caroline.

"But if she's on her way," said Mary, "wouldn't it be better for you to be there to receive her?"

Aunt Caroline hesitated. It was Pete who saved the day.

"If I may make bold to suggest, Miss Marshall, you could go to the yacht at once. If Mrs. Rokeby-Jones has not arrived you could then telephone from the boat."

Mary turned away and stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth. Bill went out into the hall to see if the taxis had arrived.

"Peter," said Aunt Caroline, "that's a most sensible suggestion. I never thought of the telephone on board."

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CHAPTER XVI

Three Errands Ashore

If Aunt Caroline had been bred to the sea, and familiar with its customs that have practically crystallized into an unwritten law, she would have written in her log:

Aboard the yacht *Sunshine*—Latitude, 40° 43' North; Longitude, 74° 0' West. Weather, clear; wind, SSW., moderate; sea, smooth. Barometer, 29.6.

But not being a seafaring lady, she phrased it in this way in the course of a remark to her nephew:

"William, isn't it lovely to be sitting here aboard our own yacht in the Hudson, and isn't the weather superb?"

The *Sunshine* still lay at her anchorage, with every prospect auspicious, except for the fact that nothing had been heard from Mrs. Rokeby-Jones. The sun had set somewhere in New Jersey and the lights of New York were shining in its stead. There was a soft coolness in the air, so that Aunt Caroline found comfort in a light wrap.

Bill had decided that they would not sail until later in the evening. This was not because of Aunt Caroline's anxiety concerning the missing guest, but for the reason that he had an errand ashore which he had been unable to discharge during the busy hours of the day. It was an errand he could trust to nobody, not even to Pete Stearns. In fact, he did not consider it wisdom to take Pete into his confidence.

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Aunt Caroline had, indeed, discovered a telephone aboard the *Sunshine*. It was in the owner's stateroom, which had been set apart for her because it was the most commodious of all the sleeping apartments. Three times she had talked into this telephone, on each occasion giving the correct number of the Rokeby-Jones house, of which she had made a memorandum before leaving shore. But each time she was answered by the voice of a man, always the same voice. The second time he laughed and the third time he hung up with a bang! So Aunt Caroline, after vainly trying to lodge a complaint with "Information," made a personal investigation and discovered that the other end of the telephone system was in the cabin of the sailing-master.

She made an instant complaint to Bill, and Bill referred her to Pete. The latter explained it very easily.

"You see, madam, through a mistake the telephone company was notified that we were sailing several hours ago, so they sent a man out in a boat to disconnect the shore wire. I'm very sorry, madam."

Aunt Caroline accepted the explanation, as she had come to accept anything from Pete Stearns, although it did nothing to allay her anxiety as to Mrs. Rokeby-Jones.

Dinner had been over for more than an hour and darkness had settled upon the river when Bill Marshall announced that he was going ashore. He said that it was expressly for the purpose of pursuing Aunt Caroline's thwarted telephone inquiry and that he would not come back until he had definite news. His aunt thanked him for his thoughtfulness, settled herself for a nap in a deck-chair and Bill ordered the launch.

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He was about to embark upon his errand when it occurred to him that perhaps his secretary would also like to go ashore. Bill had it in the back of his head that there might be time to pay a short visit to a roof-garden or seek some sequestered place for a chat. He had been trying for some time to have a

confidential chat with Mary Wayne, but she had an annoying way of discovering other and prior engagements.

"You mean the young lady, sir?" said the second officer. "She went ashore an hour ago, sir. I sent her across in the launch."

Bill became thoughtful. Why hadn't she mentioned the matter to him? And who was the boss of this yacht, anyhow? Could people order up the launch just as if they owned it?

He made a search for Pete Stearns and could not find him. Again he spoke to the second officer.

"Oh, the young man, sir? Why, he went ashore at the same time. I believe I heard him say that he had a few purchases to make."

Bill gritted his teeth. Here was a piece of presumption that no owner could tolerate. They had gone away together, of course; they had been very careful not to say a word to him. What for? What sort of an affair was in progress between his valet and his secretary? The more he thought about it the higher rose his temper.

"I'm going ashore myself," he said shortly. "Please hurry the launch."

Ten minutes later he was hunting for a taxi along the Manhattan waterfront, deeply disturbed in mind and with a fixed resolution to demand explanations.

But the suspicions of Bill Marshall did injustice at least to one of the missing persons. Mary Wayne

had gone ashore on a purely private mission, and she was not only surprised, but annoyed when her employer's valet also stepped into the launch.

"If you don't mind, miss," said Pete, apologetically, as the launch was headed for the wharf, "I have some purchases to make for Mr. William."

Mary answered, of course, that she did not mind, and after that she kept her thoughts to herself. Where the wharf entrance opened on Twelfth Avenue, Pete lifted his hat respectfully, bid her good evening, and went off in an opposite direction.

But he did not go far; merely far enough to conceal himself in a shadow from which he could watch without fear of discovery. Mary was without suspicion; she walked briskly eastward, glad to be so easily rid of her fellow passenger. When he had permitted her to assume a safe lead, Pete stepped out of his shadow and followed.

It was fortunate that there were two taxis at the stand which Mary discovered after a journey of several blocks through lonely streets; that is, Pete considered it was fortunate. He took the second one, giving the driver the order and promise of reward that are usual in such affairs. This nocturnal excursion on the part of Mary Wayne had piqued his curiosity. He knew that she had not spoken to Bill

Marshall about it; he doubted if she had said anything to Aunt Caroline. The clandestine character of Mary's shore visit impressed him as warranting complete investigation.

The two taxis had not been in motion for many minutes when Pete became convinced that he could name Mary's destination almost beyond a question. They were headed down-town, with occasional jogs

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toward the East Side. So certain was Pete of his conclusion and so anxious was he, purely for reasons of self-gratification, to prove the accuracy of his powers of deduction, that he halted his taxi, paid off the driver and set off at a leisurely walk, quite content in mind as he watched the vehicle that contained Mary Wayne disappear from view.

Twenty minutes later Pete found himself vindicated. In front of the boarding-house where Nell Norcross roomed stood a taxi. Sitting on the top step of the porch were two figures. As he strolled slowly by on the opposite side of the street he had no difficulty in recognizing Mary Wayne's smart little yachting suit of white linen. Of course, there was no doubt as to the identity of the second person, even though the street lights were dim and there was no lamp-post within a hundred feet of the boarding-house. Pete walked as far as the corner and posted himself.

The conversation between Mary and Nell proceeded in low tones.

"We shall be in Larchmont to-morrow," Mary was saying. "I'll try to send you a note from there. After that I'll keep you informed as well as I can concerning the rest of the trip, so you can reach me, if it's necessary. We are not traveling on any fixed time-table."

"I'll feel dreadfully lonely, Mary."

"I'd have brought you if I could, Nell; but there wasn't any legitimate excuse. And besides, I don't think you're strong enough to attempt it."

"If there was only somebody staying behind that I knew," Nell sighed. "I'll be so helpless."

"Nonsense. Besides, who would stay behind?"

Nell did not answer, but if Pete Stearns could have read a fleeting thought from his point of observation

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on the street corner his waistcoat buttons would doubtless have gone flying. Mary Wayne, however, read the thought.

"You don't mean that valet who brought you home from the party?" she demanded suddenly.

"Oh, I didn't mean anybody particularly," answered Nell, guiltily. "But of course even he would be better than nobody."

"Nell Norcross, don't let that young man get into your head. There's something mysterious about him. He may be only a valet, but I'm not certain. I'm suspicious of him. He has a habit of forgetting himself."

"I know," assented Nell, nodding.

"Oh, you do, do you? I might have guessed it. Take my advice and give him a wide berth."

Nell regarded her friend with a look of speculative anxiety.

"Of course, Mary, I don't want to interfere with you in any way. But——"

"Interfere with me?" exclaimed Mary sharply. "Do you think I am interested in valets?"

"But you thought he might be something else. At least, you hinted it. He's a divinity student, isn't he?"

"Divinity!" Mary summoned all her scorn in that word. "Oh, very likely. But what sort of a divinity is he studying? Perhaps you're a candidate for the place."

"Mary Wayne, you're mean! I think that's a nasty remark."

"Oh, well; I didn't mean it. But you'd better take my advice, just the same. I've seen much more of him than you have."

Nell sighed again.

"Now, my dear, I must be going back. They'll be

sending out a general alarm for me, I suppose. I didn't ask anybody's permission to come, you see."

"There isn't much doubt Mr. Marshall will be alarmed," remarked Nell, who was not above seeking a legitimate revenge.

"You're in a rather silly mood this evening," said Mary. "Well, good-by. I'll send you some more money as soon as I'm paid again."

Nell looked gratefully at a small roll of bills that lay in her hand.

"You're awfully good to me," she murmured. "Good-by. And if you see——"

But Mary ran down the steps, popped into the taxi and was driven off.

Pete Stearns aroused himself, crossed the street, and walked briskly in the direction of the boarding-house. He arrived in time to intercept Nell, who had risen to go in. She sat down again in sheer surprise, and Pete seated himself without invitation on the step below.

"It's a fine night, isn't it?" he said. "Now what's your real name?"

Nell gasped and could only stare.

"Is it Wayne?" he demanded.

"Of—of course, it is!"

"I just wanted to see if I'd forgotten. Sometimes my memory walks out on me. Amnesia, you know. It's lucky I never suffered from aphasia. A bishop with aphasia wouldn't be able to hold his job. Let's talk about the bishops."

And he did, for ten solid minutes, until Nell began seriously to wonder if he was in his right mind. Suddenly he dropped the subject.

"You said your name was Wayne, didn't you?"

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"Why in the world do you keep asking that?" she parried.

"It's the amnesia. Excuse it, please. Now let's talk about ourselves."

Eventually he said good night; he would be delaying the yacht, he explained. But he promised to write, which was something that had not even been hinted at during the conversation. He also shook hands with her, begged her to have faith in him, urged her to believe nothing she might hear, reaffirmed his purpose to become a bishop and perhaps even an archbishop, told her that she inspired him to great things, as witness—a kiss that landed on the end of her nose. Then he ran.

Nell Norcross was still sitting on the top step half an hour later, trying to muster sufficient confidence for the climb up-stairs.

At about the same time Bill Marshall was taking leave of a friend in the back room of a hostelry that had descended to the evil fortunes of selling near-beer.

"I'm sorry I won't be able to be there, Kid," he said, "but go to it and don't worry about any cops butting in to bust up the game."

"I'll run it strictly Q. T., Bill. Doncha worry about nothin'."

"I won't. But I owe you that much for the way they chucked you out of the house the other night."

"'Sall right, 'sall right," said Kid Whaley with a generous wave of his hand. "They didn't hurt me none."

Bill handed him something, and the Kid pocketed it with a wink.

"I'd like to take you with me, Kid; but you understand."

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"Aw, sure. Sure—I'm wise. I ain't strong for yachtin', anyhow. That's why I blew me roll in a buzz-wagon. Well, s'long, Bill. This here little scrap's goin' t' be a bird. I'll tell y' all about it."

When Mary Wayne arrived at the wharf there was no sign of the launch. She remembered that she had said nothing about the time of her return. Out in the river she could see the riding lights of the *Sunshine* and the glow from the saloon windows. But she had not the least idea of how to make a signal, nor any notion that they would understand a signal. The wharf was lonely. It seemed to her, as

she seated herself on the string-piece, that she was as remote from civilization as though she were sitting at the north pole, although she knew there were seven or eight million people within a radius of a few miles. There was nothing to do but wait, even if it was a creepy place for waiting.

She had been sitting there for what seemed like half the night when a sound of footsteps startled her. Out of the murk a figure was approaching. An instant later, to her relief, she perceived it to be the valet.

He bowed in his mock deferential way and seated himself beside her.

"No launch?" he inquired.

"I forgot to speak to them."

"So did I. Well, the yacht's there, anyhow, miss. They won't leave without us. Is Miss Wayne better?"

Mary experienced a shock. She leaned closer toward him and stared through the gloom.

"You followed me!" she exclaimed.

"I'd hardly say that, miss. You see, I was quite certain where you were going."

She had an impulse to sweep him off into the water.

"I shall speak to Mr. Marshall about this," she said

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hotly. "I do not propose to be spied upon by a servant."

Pete made a gesture of deprecation.

"Why be nasty, miss? Let's talk about something pleasanter. You know, if we both started telling all we knew there might be a great deal of embarrassment."

"Just what do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"I leave it to your imagination," he said cryptically.

"I can tell things myself," she said savagely.

"Exactly, miss. So why shouldn't we be friends? Why can't we establish a real democracy? I won't always be a valet; some day I'll be a bishop."

"I believe you're nothing but a fraud!"

"Well, now," observed Pete in a mild tone, "I might remark, on the other hand—but I think the master is coming."

Mary jumped to her feet with a sense of confusion. There was no doubt that the large figure emerging out of the darkness was that of Bill Marshall. How was she to explain the valet?

"Oh, hello!" said Bill as he identified her. "Waiting here all alone, eh? Well, that's a darn shame. Hasn't the launch—oh!" He discovered the presence of Pete Stearns. "Didn't know you had company," he added, his tone altering. "Beg your

pardon."

"I—I haven't," said Mary, defiantly.

"I'll see if there's any sign of the launch." Bill walked to the end of the wharf, where he stood staring at the river, raging with and almost bursting with questions that he scorned to ask.

"Why didn't you explain to him?" snapped Mary, whirling upon Pete.

"I pass the question back to you, miss." And Pete

lighted a cigarette, the glow of the match illuminating for an instant a pair of eyes that were regarding her with unveiled amusement.

When the launch came, after an uncomfortably long interval, Bill helped her into it, with cold courtesy. The valet scrambled aboard and took himself off to the bow. All the way to the *Sunshine* the three sat in silence—Bill smoldering with anger and curiosity, Mary humiliated and resentful, Pete content because they were as they were.

The social secretary hastened to her stateroom as soon as she stepped aboard; she did not pause to speak to Aunt Caroline, who was dozing in her chair. Pete disappeared with like alacrity. It remained for Bill to arouse his aunt and suggest that it was time for her to retire.

"But Mrs. Rokeby-Jones?" asked Aunt Caroline.

"Had her on the wire; she can't come," said Bill. "Says she wrote a note, but it must have gone astray. Very sorry and all that sort of thing."

Aunt Caroline sighed.

"At any rate, I have done my duty, William. When do we sail?"

"Soon."

Bill went forward to give an order to the sailing-master.

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CHAPTER XVII

The Way of a Maid

Larchmont Harbor!

It was fair even to the eyes of Bill Marshall, as he stood under the after awning of the *Sunshine*, staring out over the shining water, as yet untouched by so much as a breath of breeze. He was in no pleasant mood this morning, but he could not deny the serene, luxurious charm of the harbor. At another time it might have awakened the spirit of the muse within him; Pete always insisted that far under the surface Bill was a poet. But now its influence was not quite so potent as that; it merely laid a restraining spell upon him, soothing him, mollifying him, yet not lifting him to the heights.

There were many yachts at anchor, with club ensigns and owners' flags drooping limp in the sluggish air. Bill watched them for signs of life, but it was still an early hour for Larchmont. Occasionally he saw a hand scrubbing a deck or polishing a brass, but he discovered no person who resembled an owner or a guest. A warm mist had thinned sufficiently to show the rocky shore, and beyond it, partly sequestered among the trees, the summer homes and cottages of persons who still slept in innocence of the designs of Aunt Caroline. The harbor was not even half awake; it was yet heavy with the unspent drowsiness of a summer night.

Bill was on deck early because he had slept badly.

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The affair of Mary Wayne and Pete Stearns, as he interpreted it, rankled. The yacht had been clear of Hell Gate before he went to his stateroom, and even then it was a long time before he closed his eyes. The fact that Bill was jealous he did not himself attempt to blink; he admitted it.

"He's not a valet, of course," Bill was muttering, as he continued to watch the harbor. "But she doesn't know that. Why does she have to pick a valet? And if she wanted to go ashore with him, why didn't she say so, instead of sneaking off? I wish I'd stayed home. Damned if I'll go into society, either by way of the steamboat route or any other way."

A steward brought breakfast and served it under the awning. Bill greeted it with his usual sound appetite; nothing ever seriously interfered with his breakfast.

"Good morning!"

He looked up from the omelette at Mary Wayne, who stood there all in white, fresh, clear-eyed, a part of the morning itself.

Bill arose and drew another chair to the table; he could do no less.

"Good morning," he said.

"Doesn't it make you just want to shout?" she exclaimed. "I was watching it from my stateroom window while I dressed. It's Larchmont, isn't it? I love it already."

Bill pushed the coffee pot toward her and rang for the steward.

"Yes; it's Larchmont," he said.

"Aren't you just glad all over that we came?"

"Not particularly."

Mary studied him more carefully.

"Oh," she said.

Bill continued to eat in silence. The steward brought another omelette and she helped herself sparingly.

"How long shall we stay here, do you think?" she ventured.

"What have I got to say about it?"

"I should think you'd have quite a lot to say. I would if I was in command of a yacht."

"Suppose you weren't sure who was in command?"

"I'd make sure," she answered promptly.

Bill glowered sullenly. The spell of the morning was loosening its grip.

"Well, aboard this yacht it appears that everybody does as he pleases," said Bill, helping himself to more coffee and ignoring her proffered assistance.

His mood pleased her. She would not, of course, show him that it did; but her innermost self accepted it as a tribute, no matter how ungraciously the tribute might be disguised.

"That's something new, isn't it?" she inquired. "At sea I always thought the captain was a czar. Have we a soviet, or something like that?"

"I'm not sure we have even that much. More coffee?"

"No, thank you."

He appeared determined to relapse into a silence, but Mary would not have it so. She had not been wholly tranquil when she came on deck; she was somewhat uncertain about the night before. But now everything suited her very well.

"Do you go ashore here?" she asked.

"Don't know."

"Will any of us be permitted to go ashore?"

"Why ask me?"

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"Because you don't seem to want us to use the launch."

Bill gave her a measuring glance.

"Did I say so?"

"Not exactly; that is, not in so many words. But last night——"

"We won't talk about last night, if you don't mind."

She was becoming better pleased every minute. When she had retired the night before she made up her mind that it would be necessary to make a clear explanation concerning Peter, the valet. Now she knew that she would never explain.

"Well, if we're not permitted to go ashore here, do you think we can get permission at Newport?" she asked.

"Confound it! I didn't say you couldn't go ashore. You can go ashore any time you want. You can——"

Bill excused himself abruptly and walked forward. Mary beamed at his retreating back and poured another cup of coffee.

"He was going to say I could go to hell," she murmured. "Oh, lovely!"

Aunt Caroline had breakfast served in her stateroom and then sent for Mary. After a satisfactory conference, she dismissed Mary and sent for Bill.

"How soon are you going ashore, William?" she asked.

"I didn't know I was going."

"Why, of course. You have friends here. You can't leave Larchmont without calling. That's what we came for."

"Who are the friends, I'd like to know."

"Well, in the first place, I believe Bishop Wrangell is staying here—with the Williamsons. It will give

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you an opportunity to meet them; they're very desirable. And then the Kingsleys have a cottage here, or did, at any rate. You remember the little Kingsley girl at the party—the one in blue?"

Bill remembered. Only she was not the Kingsley girl; she was Arnold Gibbs's little girl.

"You must look them up, too. They'll probably have some people visiting them, too; the Kingsleys always did entertain, and they have a very good position. And Miss Norcross thinks it just possible that the Humes have opened their house.

You've never met Mrs. Hume, but if you just mentioned that you're a Marshall, she'll be delighted to see you. She knew your mother."

Bill groaned.

"Talk to Miss Norcross about it," added Aunt Caroline. "She'll know exactly what you should do."

"Good Lord, Aunt Caroline! Don't you think I know how to behave without getting tips from Miss Norcross? You'll be wanting me to consult Peter next."

"And a very good idea it would be, William. I suggest it. And now see if you can find last night's *Evening Post*; I haven't seen it yet. After that I think you'd better start."

Bill walked out like a surly child. He could not find the *Evening Post*, but he picked up a copy of *Devilish Stories*, gave it to a maid and told her Aunt Caroline wanted it. Then he went on deck and ordered the launch.

He had no intention of calling on anybody. He might ring up Kid Whaley on the 'phone and see if everything was all set for that little affair. But what he wanted principally was a change of environment.

Mary saw him sulking at the rail as he waited for the launch to be brought around to the gangway. She smiled, bit her lip and approached.

"You're going ashore?"

"Uhuh."

"You have cards with you, I suppose? Your aunt's also?"

Bill faced her savagely.

"Stacks of cards," he barked. "Mine and my aunt's and my valet's and my secretary's and the steward's and everybody else's. And my shoes are clean and I've washed behind my ears and brushed my hair in the back. Anything else?"

"I don't think of a thing, unless you've forgotten a handkerchief," she said, sweetly.

The launch arrived and Bill boarded it. At the final moment it occurred to him that he had, perhaps, been ungracious.

"Want to come along?" he asked, looking up at the rail where Mary stood. He really hoped she would say yes.

Mary shook her head and smiled like the morning.

"I'm afraid I've too many things to do," she answered. "But thank you, just the same. You won't forget to call on Mrs. Hume, if she's here."

"I won't forget to take you by the neck and pitch you overboard," was what Bill had in his mind, but he did not give utterance to it. He merely scowled and turned his back.

Mary watched the launch as it headed for the yacht club landing and, when it had moved beyond any possibility of hearing, laughed outright.

"The poor man!" she said. "I'd better watch myself. Back in New York I felt as if I were living in

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a reign of hidden terror. Now the pendulum is at the other extreme and I feel as if I could do anything that pleased me. It's a time for caution, probably. But he is so funny!"

Bill was gone for several hours. He was late for lunch when the launch drew alongside the *Sunshine*; in fact, everybody else had had lunch long ago. His visit ashore had not been satisfactory and was only prolonged because he felt that the shore, however strange and lonesome, was more congenial than the deck of his yacht.

He spied Aunt Caroline in an easy chair.

"Nobody home, Aunt Caroline!" he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, William. Well, there's no hurry, of course; we can stay over indefinitely. Probably you'd better go back this afternoon."

Bill had no intention of going back. He had not visited a single house; he had done nothing beyond making several futile attempts to get a telephone connection with Kid Whaley.

He glanced about the deck and saw nobody but a couple of hands.

"Where's Miss Norcross?" he asked.

"She went swimming," said Aunt Caroline.

"Swimming!"

"Right off the yacht, William. Do you know that she's a very remarkable swimmer. I was completely astonished."

William went to the rail and surveyed the harbor. He saw no sign of a swimmer.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"Oh, somewhere out there," said Aunt Caroline, with an easy gesture. "She's perfectly safe. Peter is with her."

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"What!"

"They went swimming together. I wish you could have seen them, William. They were just like two children. They've been swimming all around among the yachts. Where they are now I haven't the least idea; but they'll be back."

Bill struck the rail savagely and once again glared out at the harbor. So this was the reason his secretary did not want to go ashore; she had an engagement to go swimming with his valet. But if Bill was disturbed, not so Aunt Caroline; she was

once more absorbed in her magazine.

The boss of the yacht *Sunshine* walked forward, where he found the second officer superintending the cleaning of brasswork.

"Where's that swimming party of ours?" asked Bill, carelessly.

"Now, there's a question you might well ask, sir," said the second officer. "Where aren't they? Seems to me they've been all over the harbor, sir, as far as I can make out. Never saw anything like it."

"Is there any boat following them?"

"Boat, sir?" The second officer laughed. "I don't know what they'd be doing with a boat. The last time I saw them they looked as if they were fit to swim to Europe. And the young lady, sir!"

He made what was intended to be an eloquent gesture.

"What about the young lady?"

"A fish, sir; a fish, if ever one lived. First off they did a lot of playing around the yacht, sir. Climbing aboard and diving off again. I give you my word, sir, the whole crew was on deck watching. The young lady—well, she's a little thing, but she's nicely set up,

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sir. She'd think nothing of making a back dive off the end of the bridge. And the young gentleman was no ways behind her, sir. You'd think there was a couple of porpoises in the harbor."

Bill's soul was growing blacker and blacker.

"I've seen swimmers in my time, but never the beat of that pair, unless it was professionals," added the second officer, in a musing tone.

He glanced out at the water, then gestured quickly.

"Look, now! There they go."

Bill looked. There was a commotion in the water a hundred yards distant. Two heads were moving rapidly in parallel courses; one was conspicuous in a scarlet bathing cap. He could see a flashing of wet arms; the sound of a familiar laugh came to him. A race seemed to be in progress.

He ran up on the bridge for a better view and evidently the red cap sighted him, for there was an instant of slackened pace and the joyous wave of a white arm. And then she was again leaving a wake behind her as she sped in pursuit of the second swimmer. Bill gritted his teeth and watched. They were not returning to the yacht; rather, they were increasing their distance from it with every stroke. He stared until they passed from sight behind a big sloop that lay at anchor, and then the harbor seemed to swallow them. Evidently they were again exploring the yacht anchorage, which was crowded with craft.

Bill slowly returned to the deck.

"They've been at it over an hour," volunteered the second officer. "Get the lady to dive for you when they come back, sir. She'll surprise you, if I don't mistake."

Bill made no answer, but walked aft, where he

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plunged himself heavily into a wicker chair. Aunt Caroline had retired to her stateroom for a nap and he had the deck to himself.

"I'll not stand for it!" he muttered fiercely. "Last night they were sneaking off to town together and now they're making a holy show of themselves here. What does she think she can put over on me, anyhow? As for Pete Stearns, I'll drown him."

In fact, Bill for a time had been minded to get into his own bathing suit and pursue them, but his dignity intervened. No; if his secretary chose to run away with his valet, let her do so. What made it worse, she knew he was aboard; she had seen him; she had waved her arm at him. And then, deliberately, she had turned her back upon him.

After half an hour of glooming he went to the rail again and once more searched the harbor with his glance. He saw no flashing arms; no red cap.

"I won't stand much more of this," he said, grimly. "I'll show them where they get off."

He went to his stateroom and mixed a drink, and after that he mixed another. Presently he returned to the deck, this time with a pair of binoculars. The glasses showed him no more than he had been able to see without them. He fell to pacing, his hands clasped behind him, his glance directed at the canvas-covered deck beneath his feet. Napoleon could have done it no better; Lord Nelson would have been hard put to outdo him.

The afternoon was as fair as the morning, but Bill took no account of its glory. He was wholly absorbed in plumbing the gloomy depths of his mind.

"They think they're putting it over on me," he sneered. "All right. Let 'em see what happens."

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Once again he swept the glasses in a circle of the harbor. No scarlet cap. He glanced at his watch.

"Well, I'm through. Time's up."

Slipping the glasses into their case, he strode forward and banged on the door of the sailing master's cabin. A sleepy-eyed officer answered the summons.

"We're going to pull out of here at once," said Bill.

"Everybody aboard, sir?"

"Everybody that's going."

"Very good, sir. Which way are we heading?"

"I'll tell you when we get outside the harbor. I'm in a hurry."

The sailing master ducked back into his cabin, shouted an order through a speaking tube that communicated with the engine-room and then ran forward along the deck. A minute later the winch was wheezing and the yacht *Sunshine* was bringing her mud-hook aboard.

Bill retired to his stateroom and poured another drink.

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CHAPTER XVIII

Castaways

Two swimmers rested for breath at an anchorage buoy and smiled at each other.

"Where did you learn to swim, anyhow?" demanded Pete Stearns. "You never said a word about it until this afternoon."

"I don't tell all I know," said Mary, tucking a wet lock under the scarlet cap.

"I believe you. But there's only one thing I'd criticise; you'd get more out of that trudgeon of yours if you watched your breathing."

"I know it," she answered, with a nod. "But I don't take it so seriously as all that. I've always managed to get along, anyhow."

Pete blinked the salt water out of his eyes and studied the social secretary with new respect.

"You haven't ever been a diving beauty or a movie bathing girl or anything like that, have you?"

Mary laughed. "Not yet, thank you. I never made any money out of swimming."

"Oh, they don't swim," said Pete. "They just dress for it."

"Well, I never did that, either."

"But you could if you wanted to."

"That will do," said Mary.

Even in the democratic embrace of Larchmont Harbor she did not think it advisable for her employer's

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valet to venture into the realm of personal compliment. Besides, she was not wholly convinced of the validity of his status as a valet. For one thing, she had

never heard of a valet who could swim, and by swimming she meant more than the ordinary paddling about of the average human. For Mary could swim herself and she had discovered that Pete was something more than her equal.

"Well, anyhow," he said, "you're a first-class seagoing secretary. Did you notice Mr. Marshall standing on the bridge? I think he saw us."

"I'm quite sure he did. And I believe we'd better be starting back."

"Is it a race?"

"You never can tell," said Mary, as she slid off the buoy like a seal and shot along under the surface for a dozen feet.

Pete fell in beside her and let her set the pace. It was a smart one and he did not try to take the lead; he was saving himself for the sprint. For several minutes Mary attended strictly to her work. They were reaching mid-harbor when she eased up and raised her head to take a bearing for the *Sunshine*. Then she ceased swimming altogether and began to tread.

"Why, where's the yacht?" she said.

Pete also paused for a survey.

"They've moved it, haven't they? Well, I'll——"

He made a slow and deliberate inspection of the horizon.

"Is that it?" and Mary pointed.

Pete studied a stern view of a somewhat distant craft, shading his eyes from the sun.

"That's it," he announced. "And it's still moving."

"They must be going to anchor in another place. I

think they might have waited until we reached them. Shall we follow?"

She did not wait for an answer, but fell once more into a steady trudgeon stroke that served her extremely well. Then she paused for another reconnaissance.

"The darn thing is still moving," declared Pete. "It's further off than when we first saw it. Now, what do you make out of that?"

Mary wrinkled her forehead into a moist frown as the water dripped from the tip of her nose.

"It's perfectly silly to try to catch it by swimming," she said. "They must have forgotten all about us. Why didn't they blow a whistle, or something?"

There was no question that the silhouette of the *Sunshine* had receded since their first observation. Pete tried to judge the distance; it was more than half a mile, he was certain.

"Well, what'll we do? Paddle around here and wait for it to come back?"

"I don't mind admitting that I'm a little bit tired," said Mary. "I'm not going to wait out here in the middle of the bay for Mr. Marshall to turn his yacht around. How far is it over to that shore?"

"It's only a few hundred yards. Shall we go?"

"We'll go there and wait until we see what they're going to do."

Several minutes afterward Pete stood waist deep on a sandy bottom. There was a tiny beach in front of them, where a cove nestled between two rocky horns. He gazed out into the harbor.

"It's still going—the other way," he reported.

Mary was also standing and staring. The *Sunshine* looked discouragingly small.

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"Oh, well, we'll sit on the beach and get some sun. If Bill—if Mr. Marshall thinks he's having fun with us he's greatly mistaken. I'm having the time of my ecclesiastical life."

He waded ashore and sat down on the sand. But Mary did not follow. She stood immersed to her waist, biting her lip. There was a look of annoyance and a hint of confusion in her eyes.

"You'd better come ashore and rest," called Pete. "You'll get chilled standing half in and half out of the water."

"I—I can't come ashore very well," said Mary.

"What's the matter?"

She was flushing under her freckles.

"When we decided to swim around the harbor," she said, slowly, "I—er—slipped off the skirt of my bathing suit and tossed it up to one of the deck-hands to keep for me until I got back. And it's aboard the yacht now."

Pete stifled a grin.

"It—it wasn't a very big skirt," she added. "But it was a skirt."

"Oh, forget it," he advised. "Don't mind me. Come on out of the water."

But Mary was again studying the retreating yacht. At that instant she would have liked to have laid hands on Bill Marshall. Not only the skirt of her bathing suit, but every stitch she owned was aboard that yacht.

"I'm only a valet," Pete reminded her.

Mary was not at all certain about that, but she decided not to be foolish any longer. She waded ashore. There was something boyish about her as she emerged full length into the picture, yet not too boyish. Not only was she lacking a skirt, but also stockings,

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for when Mary went swimming she put aside frills. The scarlet bathing cap gave

her a charming jauntiness; although she was anything but jaunty in mood.

"My, but the sun is comfortable," she said, as she sat down and dug her toes into the sand.

"It'll warm you up," said Pete, affecting to take no notice of her costume. "Say, what do you make out of that yacht, anyhow?"

"It seems to be still going. It looks awfully small to me."

They watched it for another minute.

"There's another landing down that way, where they're headed," said Pete. "Maybe they want to send somebody up to town for something."

"You've been here before, haven't you?"

"Oh, I've valeted 'round a bit in the summers, miss."

She gave him a swift, sidelong glance. Out in the harbor he had dropped the "miss"; the water seemed to have washed away his surface servility. Now he was falling back into the manner of his calling.

"They can't go much farther in that direction," he added. "They've either got to anchor, turn around or stand out for the mouth of the harbor. We'll know in a minute or two, miss."

"Please stop calling me 'miss,'" she said, sharply.

"Why?" He turned innocent eyes toward her.

"It annoys me."

"Oh, very well. But I didn't want you to feel that I was forgetting my place. Once you reminded me——"

"Never mind, if you please. I think one of your troubles is that you are too conscious of your 'place,' as you call it. You make other people conscious of it."

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"I'm unconscious from now on, Miss Way—Miss Norcross."

She whirled around upon him in fair earnest.

"Excuse me," said Pete. "I get the names mixed. I'm apt to do the same thing when I'm with your friend Miss Wayne."

She studied him with uneasy eyes. How much did he know? Or was he just blundering clumsily around on the brink of a discovery? Last night he had flung a pointed hint at her; it came to her mind now. Well, if there was to be a battle, Mary felt that she was not without her weapons. She knew of a divinity student who followed the prize ring and who kissed the house guests of the master to whom he played valet.

"She's swinging around," said Pete, abruptly, pointing out into the harbor.

The *Sunshine* was turning to port and now showed her profile. But she was not

turning far enough to cruise back in her own wake. Her new course was almost at a right angle to that she had been following, and she seemed bent upon pursuing it briskly.

Pete gasped and leaped to his feet.

"Come on!" he cried.

The rocky promontory that sheltered one end of their little beach was cutting off a view of the yacht. He raced along the strip of sand, with Mary at his heels, quite unconscious of her missing skirt and certainly a gainer in freedom of movement through the lack of it.

Pete climbed the rocks at reckless speed and she followed him, heedless of the rough places. He was poised rigidly on an eminence as she scrambled up beside him.

"Damnation!"

He said it so fervently that it seemed to Mary the most sincere word he had ever spoken.

"Do you see what they're doing?" he cried, seizing her arm. "Look! They're heading out of the harbor!"

"You mean they're leaving us?"

He shook her arm almost savagely.

"Can't you see? There they go. They're headed out, I tell you. They're going out into the Sound!"

The yacht seemed to be gaining in speed.

"But I just can't believe it," she said, in a stifled voice.

"You'd better, then. Look!"

"But I'm sure that Mr. Marshall wouldn't——"

"Oh, you are, are you? Well, I'll prove to you in about one holy minute that he'll do whatever comes into his crazy head. Take your last look. They're on their way."

Nor had they long to wait in order to be convinced beyond argument. Even at the distance that separated them from the *Sunshine* they could see the white bone in her teeth as she continued to pick up speed. And then she was gone, beyond a jutting point that barred their vision.

Pete looked at Mary. Mary looked at Pete. Both looked again toward the spot where they caught their last glimpse of the Sunshine. Then, with one accord and without speech, they slowly descended to the beach and sat in the sand. A thin, blue cloud of rage seemed to have descended upon them.

Minutes afterward she flung a handful of sand at an innocent darning needle that was treading air directly in front of her.

"Oh, say something!" she cried.

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"You'd censor it, Mlle. Secretary."

"I wouldn't!"

Pete lifted his eyes to the heavens and swore horribly.

"That's better," she said. "But you needn't do it any more. Now what are we going to do?"

"Wait for the commander-in-chief to get over his practical joke, I suppose."

"Then, this is your idea of a joke, is it?"

"Not mine; his," said Pete. "And it's not so bad, at that."

Mary tried to wither him with a look.

"I believe you don't care," she said, stormily.

"Oh, yes, I do. But I'm all over the rage part of it. What's the use?"

"Well, think of something, then."

"I don't think it even requires thinking. What is there to do but sit here and wait?"

Mary gritted her teeth.

"That may be all right for you," she said, coldly. "But it seems absolutely futile to me. We don't know whether they'll ever come back."

"Oh, they're bound to."

"They're not, anything of the kind! He's done it deliberately; I'm sure of it. I wish I had him here for about two minutes."

"I wish you had," said Pete, earnestly. "I'd pay for a grand stand seat."

"I'd tell him what I think of him."

"You sure would."

"I never felt so helpless in my life. All I'm doing is getting sunburned. I'll be a fright."

"If it's freckles you're worrying about, he likes 'em."

"Oh, don't talk about them." She had a sudden

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craving for a mirror. But beyond that boyish bathing suit and the scarlet rubber cap, Mary did not even possess so much as a hairpin. She would have given a million dollars for a kimono and a vanity bag.

"At a rough guess," mused Pete, "I'd say we're the first persons who were ever shipwrecked on a society coast. Didn't you ever feel a yearning to be marooned?"

"Never—and I never will, after this."

"Well, we're better off than a lot of castaways. We're not on an island. We can walk home, if it comes to that."

"Walk! Dressed like this?"

"Swim, then."

Mary relapsed into a fit of exasperated silence. If Pete's rage had cooled, her own was still at cherry heat. She felt ready to take the whole world by the throat and shake revenge out of it, particularly out of Bill Marshall. But she was helpless even to start upon the warpath. A girl in a bathing suit, the skirt of which had been carried to sea by a ruthless yacht, is not panoplied for a campaign. She felt shamed, outraged, desperate to the point of violence—and futile. It seemed quite possible, as she viewed it then, that she might be compelled to sit on that beach for the remainder of her life. Certainly she did not intend to walk around Larchmont in a costume designed only for the Australian crawl.

Pete was devoting time to a survey of their immediate environment. The beach was not more than ten yards in breadth; it was bounded on either side by the little capes of rock, and behind them by a low stone wall. A well-rolled and clipped lawn came down to the edge of the wall; it was studded with trees and

shrubs. The gable of a dwelling was visible through an opening. As Pete studied the landscape a figure appeared from among the trees.

It was that of a young man in white flannels. He approached to the top of the stone wall and observed them carefully.

"This is a private beach," said the young man, speaking in a peculiar drawl that Pete immediately identified with the world of exclusive society.

Mary, until then unaware of the presence of a third person, turned quickly, observed the speaker and huddled her knees under her chin.

"Well, we're private citizens," said Pete.

"We do not permit trespassing," said the young man.

"Do you by any chance permit Divine Providence to deposit a pair of shipwrecked castaways on your seacoast?" inquired the valet.

The young man in flannels appeared to be puzzled. He was now studying Mary with particular attention. Then he glanced quickly from side to side, as though searching for something else.

"We never permit motion pictures to be taken here," he said. "Oblige me by going away."

"My dear sir," said Pete, who had risen to his feet, "we are not in the movies. We are not here for fame or for profit. We do not occupy your beach either in the interests of art or health. We are merely here as the result of a contingency, a hazard of fortune, a mischance of fate."

"Well, go away."

The young man stepped down on the beach and approached for a closer view.

Pete turned and whispered to Mary:

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"Shall we steal his beautiful clothes and divide 'em up?"

"Hush!" she said.

The owner of the white flannels, which Pete was coveting with envious eyes, studied Mary until she began to blush.

"We do not wish to have this kind of a display on our private waterfront," he remarked. "You must leave at once."

Mary sprang up, her gray eyes dangerous.

"Can't you see that we're in distress?" she cried, hotly.

He surveyed her deliberately—her legs, bare from the knees down, her skirtless trunks, her white, rounded arms.

"I can see very little of anything," was his comment.

"Why, you——"

But even though she choked on her words, there was no need for her to finish them. Pete stepped to within a yard of the stranger.

"I don't like the color of your hair," he said, "and that, of course, leaves me no alternative."

So he tapped the young man on the nose, so unexpectedly and with such speed and virility that the owner of the nose lost his balance and sat in the sand.

Pete turned and seized Mary by the hand.

"Run like hell," he counseled.

"But where?"

"Overboard."

He dragged her across the sand and out into the water. Waist deep they paused and looked back.

The young man in flannels had followed to the edge

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of the water, where he stood holding a handkerchief to his nose and shaking a fist.

"You come ashore!" he yelled.

"We can't, sir. It's private," said Pete, with a bland grin.

"Come back here. I'm going to thrash you!"

"We can't come back," said Pete, "but we invite you to join us, dear old thing."

The young man stood irresolute, glaring at them. Then he looked down at his flannels and edged backward a step from the water.

"I'm going to have you arrested!" he cried, as he turned and ran in the direction of the house.

Pete waved him a gay salute.

"Well, come on," he said to Mary.

"Where?"

"To a more friendly coast. We can't use this one any more."

He struck out into the harbor and Mary followed.

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CHAPTER XIX

The Spoilers

They followed the shore for a while and presently a bend in its contour hid their view of the unfriendly harbor. It was an aimless journey. They were safe from the revenge of the young man in white flannels, but they were as far as ever from any project of rescue. Mary swam in a listless, automatic fashion; there was no longer any zest of sport. She was not tired, but her enthusiasm had oozed away. As for Pete, he also felt that there had been enough swimming for a day.

"Shall we try that place in there?" she asked, lifting her arm above the water and pointing.

"I'm for it," he answered, with a nod. "I'm not going to be a poor fish any longer. I don't care if they meet us with a shotgun committee."

Their second landing place was devoid of a beach, but it had shelving, sunwarmed rocks, upon which they climbed out and sat down.

"I never suspected you were a fighter," observed Mary, the recent picture still fresh in memory.

"I'm not. I'm a baseball player, by rights. That was what they call the hit-and-run play."

"Well, I think you did excellently, Peter. I was just getting ready to do something like that myself. Was his nose bleeding?"

"Here's hoping. While I don't claim to be within

a mile of Signor Antonio Valentino's class, I have a fixed impression that by this time the young gentleman has a beak like a pelican."

Mary glanced appreciatively at her knight. "I'm glad Mr. Marshall wasn't there," she said.

"Why?"

"If he had hit him the young man would probably be dead, and then we'd have lots of trouble."

"Now, that," said Pete, in an aggrieved tone, "is what I call ungrateful. I hit the bird as hard as I could, didn't I? I don't see any need of dragging the boss into this, by way of comparison. Of course, if you can't get him out of your head——"

"Nonsense! He's not in my head. I said I was glad he wasn't there, didn't I? And I explained why. I didn't mean to take any credit away from you at all. Don't be so sensitive. Are you hungry?"

Pete groaned.

"There! Now you've done it. I've been busy trying to forget it and you've deliberately made me remember it. Of course I'm hungry. If I don't eat I'm going to die."

"So am I."

Pete stood up and looked about him.

"I don't see any cocoanut palms or breadfruit trees," he said. "That's what we're supposed to live on, isn't it? I don't even see a drink of water. It's an awful come-down for a pair of Robinson Crusoes, but it looks as if I'd have to go to somebody's kitchen door and ask for a handout."

"Never," said Mary. "I'll starve first."

"I don't think that's a very clever revenge. I'm still pusillanimous enough to eat. I'll scout around."

"No!"

"But why not?"

"Because I feel ridiculous enough as it is," she declared, frowning at her costume.

"But I might be able to locate some of our society friends. We're supposed to have friends here, aren't we?"

"I wouldn't dream of appealing to them."

Pete shook his head helplessly.

"Do you expect to sit here for the rest of your life?"

"I don't care. I'm not going to humiliate myself any further. We might meet another man and——"

"But I'll soak him for you. Honest."

"We might meet several."

"It doesn't take you long to collect a crowd, does it?" he said. "You can invent whole armies right out of your head. Be cheerful and take it the other way around; we may not meet anybody at all."

But Mary wiggled her toes in the sun and shook her head.

"You stay here, then, and I'll reconnoiter."

"No! I don't intend to be left alone."

"Let's hoist a signal of distress, then. That's always been done and it's considered perfectly good form."

"No."

"All right. Starve!" Pete made no effort to hide exasperation.

"I don't believe you'd care if I did."

His only answer to that was a gesture of despair. Who was it who claimed to understand woman? Pete would have been glad to submit this one for analysis and report.

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He sat with his knees drawn up under his chin, staring out at the harbor. He was hungry. He was thirsty. He wanted a cigarette. He wanted to stretch his legs. He wanted to do anything except remain glued to a rock, like a shellfish. Why did she have to be so fussy on the subject of conventions? He knew that many a martyr had died cheerfully for a cause. But did ever one die for a cause like this?

After half an hour of silence he was about to renew the argument when he discovered that she was asleep. She had curled herself up in a sunny hollow of the rocks, made a pillow out of an arm and become quite oblivious to Larchmont Harbor and all the world beyond and around it.

Pete arose cautiously. He climbed further up on the rocks, then paused to look back. She had not moved. He went still farther inshore, moving noiselessly on all fours, then straightened up and walked as briskly as a man may who is not innured to going barefoot in the rough places.

"If she wakes up, let her holler," he muttered. "I'm going to take a look around."

Half an hour later he was back again, munching an apple. He had several more that he placed on the rock beside Mary, who still slept as dreamlessly as a baby and who had not stirred during his absence. Pete regarded her with severe eyes.

"Shall I wake her? No. Let her sleep the sleep of starvation within arm's reach of food. Never was there any justice more poetic. If she wants to be stubborn let her find out what it is costing her. Perhaps I'd better eat all the apples. No; I won't do that. Then she'd never know what she missed. I might leave a little row of cores for her to look at. That's a good

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idea, but—oh, she'd murder me. I think she could be dangerous if she tried."

Mary did not look dangerous. She seemed more like a tired little child. Once she stirred, but did not awaken, although she smiled faintly.

"Dreaming of Bill," was Pete's comment. "Which reminds me: wonder where Bill is?"

Several yachts had entered the harbor; others had left. But although he made systematic survey of the entire anchorage there was no trace of the *Sunshine*. The sun disappeared, and there followed a perceptible cooling of the air. Pete reached mechanically for his watch, then remembered and laughed. The laugh awoke Mary.

She sat up in a daze, staring at him.

"We're in Larchmont, sitting on a rock and trying to be dignified in the midst of preposterous adversity," he reminded her. "Have an apple?"

She seized one and bit into it, then eyed him accusingly.

"You did go away, didn't you?"

"Oh, hear the woman! Certainly I did. I sneaked off as soon as you hit the hay. I'm not cut out for a martyr. But I notice you're not above accepting the fruits of my enterprise. Now, are you ready to be reasonable?"

"I'm always reasonable," she mumbled through a large mouthful.

"So? Well, listen, then: I have made discoveries."

Mary stopped chewing and stared expectantly.

"Those apples come from a toy orchard. The orchard is part of the backyard of a house. This place where we are sitting is part of the waterfront adjoining

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that house. So much I have learned by being cautious as well as intrepid. Do I bore you?"

"Hurry!" she commanded.

"In the other part of that backyard, nearest to the house, is something even more important than food. Can you guess?"

"Clothes?"

"Not exactly the word," said Pete. "It is better to say the week's wash. My dear seagoing secretary, there is wash enough in that backyard not only for you and me, but for the whole crew of the *Sunshine*, if they had happened to be cast away with us."

"Well, if there are clothes there, for Heaven's sake, why didn't you bring some? I'm getting chilly."

"Wash, I said; not clothes. You'll understand when you see. The reason I didn't bring any is simple: it was still broad daylight. Back in the orchard I had partial concealment among the trees, but I took chances, even there. To have invaded the raiment department would have been foolhardiness, for which I have never been celebrated. So I merely located the outfit and provided myself with food."

He glanced out at the harbor.

"In a very short time it will be twilight, and when twilight comes we will see what can be done to remove a rival from the path of Annette Kellerman."

Mary was too deeply interested in these disclosures to pay any attention to this reference to her present costume. He had brought a new hope into her life. Clothes at last! After that—well, clothes came first. Except, of course, the apples. She began to eat another.

Never had a twilight gathered so slowly. Just as she had been immovable before, now it was difficult

to restrain her impatience. She was for starting at once.

"I'm getting chillier all the time," she complained.

"Patience," he counseled. "Give us fifteen minutes more. If you're cold you might spend the time doing setting-up exercises."

He took his own advice and began a series of exercises that were highly recommended to the pupils of Kid Whaley's gymnasium. Mary watched for awhile and then emulated him, so that two figures were presently engaged in an occupation that suggested nothing so much as a pair of railroad semaphores gone mad. Eventually they paused breathless.

"I think we'd better go," said Pete. "A man on that nearest yacht seems to be trying to answer us with a pair of wigwag flags. You didn't happen to be telegraphing him anything, did you?"

Mary squealed and began scrambling up the rocks.

"You'd better let me take the lead," he said. "I know the way. Follow close behind me and do whatever I do. If I flop down on my stomach, you flop. If I duck behind a tree, you duck. If I run, run."

"And if we get caught?" she asked.

"That's one thing we won't permit. Don't suggest it. Take to the water again, if it comes to that."

The ledge of rock along which they picked their way ended at a grassy bluff, where there was a grove of small evergreens. In among the trees Pete paused to look and listen. Then he beckoned her to follow. Dusk was thicker in the grove, and Mary felt more comfortable in its added security, although she hoped it would not be long before they came to the land of

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promised raiment. Pete moved stealthily and she imitated his caution.

They skirted along close to the edge of the bluff, keeping within the shelter of the evergreens. Through a vista she glimpsed a house, and pointed, but Pete shook his head. Evidently it was not the right one. Presently they arrived at a tall, thickly grown hedge.

He got down on all fours in front of it, thrust his head into an opening and, with a series of cautious wriggles, began to disappear from her sight. When he had completely vanished, Mary undertook to follow him. The hedge was rough and stiff, and the aperture through which he had passed was uncomfortably small. With head and shoulders through, she looked up and found him beckoning.

"It scratches awfully," she whispered.

"S-sh! Never mind the scratches."

She wriggled a few inches farther.

"Ouch! I'm afraid I'll tear——"

"Let it tear."

He seized her hand and dragged her completely through, mindless of her protest that she was being flayed.

"Don't talk so loudly," he warned. "You're in the orchard now. It's only a little way to the raiment. Remember: this is no deserted house. The folks are home. I'm banking on the fact that they're at dinner, and that the servants are busy. Come on."

He now began to advance by a series of short rushes, each rush taking him from the shelter of one tree to the next. Mary followed, establishing herself behind a tree as soon as he had vacated it. It seemed to her that the trees were intolerably meager in girth;

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she felt as if she were trying to hide behind a series of widely placed lead pencils. But the dusk was continuing to thicken, which was welcome consolation.

They were within easy view of the house now. It was something more than a house; it was a mansion, filled with innumerable windows, it seemed to Mary, and out of each window a pair of accusing eyes probably staring. Where the orchard left off there was an open space, and beyond that a yard full of fluttering garments, suspended from a clothes line. Between the yard and the house was another hedge, and Pete was counting upon that hedge as a screen.

They paused at the edge of the orchard.

"For the next few minutes we are in the hands of Providence," he whispered. "Want to come with me, or will you trust me to pick out a costume?"

"I—I'll trust you," said Mary.

"Stay right here, then. Here goes."

Out into the open, where there was still an ominous amount of daylight, dashed Bill Marshall's valet, bent as low as he could manage without sacrificing speed. Mary held her breath and watched. A few seconds and he vanished behind a white curtain that represented a part of the family wash.

To Mary it seemed that there was an interminable interval. Then, with a spooky flutter, the white curtain that hid him seemed to sink into the ground. Another instant and the flying figure of Pete Stearns was approaching. He seemed to be pursued by a long, white snake, writhing close at his heels. And then he was back in the shelter of the trees.

"Help pull on this!" he panted.

And Mary identified the white snake as a clothes line to which was attached garment after garment of

ghostly hue. She seized the line and together they raced back toward the rear of the orchard, the snake following.

"Found a sickle and cut the whole line!" he explained. "Quickest way. Help yourself. I'll begin at the other end."

Mary was pulling clothes-pins as rapidly as she could make her fingers fly.

"Don't stop to choose anything here," he warned. "Take everything. We've got to beat it."

So they took everything. Pete made two hasty bundles, thrust one into her arms, picked up the other and started at a lope through the orchard, in a direction opposite to that from which they had come. They came to another hedge that was as forbidding as the one through which they had passed.

He dropped his bundle, dove half-way through the hedge, made a swift inspection of what lay beyond, and then hauled himself back again.

"It's all right," he said.

Picking up his bundle, he tossed it over the hedge. He seized Mary's and repeated.

"Now for you!"

Before she could protest, even had she been so minded, Pete was wedging her into a dense, prickly obstruction and ordering her to scramble with all her might. She landed head down on the other side of the hedge, and was picking herself up when he joined her.

He seized both bundles and started running again.

They were still among evergreens, but the property was evidently that of a neighbor. Pete had made an observation of it on his previous journey. He knew

exactly where he was going. Right on the edge of the

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bluff, which still followed the line of the shore, stood a summer pavilion. Into its shadowy shelter he dashed, with Mary Wayne close behind.

"There!" he gasped, tossing the bundles to the floor. "Now doll yourself up."

Five minutes later she looked at him in dismay.

"Why, it's nothing but lingerie!" she exclaimed.

Pete was holding out a pair of silk pajamas at arm's length, for better inspection.

"What did you expect? A tailor-made suit?" he demanded. "I'm going to be satisfied with these."

"But lingerie! And it's——"

"Put on plenty of it and it'll keep you warm."

"You don't understand," she said. "Oh, we've done an awful thing!"

She spread out a long, lacy garment and viewed it with awe in her eyes.

"Do you know lingerie when you see it?" she demanded. "Why, this is so beautiful that I'm afraid of it. I never dared buy anything like this for myself."

"Is that's what worrying you?"

"But it's perishable—fragile! And I'm afraid I've torn some of it already. You're not a woman and you can't understand—but what I'm doing is almost a sacrilege. I feel like a vandal."

"Here's some more," said Pete, tossing additional articles out of his pile. "What do you care? Pile it on."

He discovered a second suit of pajamas as he rummaged further, and added them to his collection.

"Give you five minutes to dress," he said, as he stepped outside the summer-house, the pajamas tucked under his arm.

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Pete dressed on the edge of the bluff, putting on one suit of pajamas over another, and keeping a wary eye for possible intruders. So concerned was he lest they be discovered that he was unaware, until he had finished dressing, that his outer covering consisted of the coat of one suit and the trousers of another. The coat was striped in purple and green, the trousers in a delicate shade of salmon pink. But the effect did not dismay him; rather, it appealed to his sense of color.

As he approached the summer-house he saw an apparition in the doorway. Mary Wayne had taken his advice; she had piled it on.

"Jehosaphat!" he exclaimed in a low voice. "You look like something out of Rider Haggard, or grand opera, or—— Why, you're barbaric!"

"Isn't it awful!" she whispered.

"Awful? Why, it's magnificent! You're not dressed—you're arrayed! You're a poem, a ballad—a romance! You're a queen of Egypt; you're something from the next world! You're—oh, baby!"

He spread his hands and salaamed.

"Hush, for Heaven's sake! I just can't wear this. It's impossible!"

"You're a hasheesh dream," he murmured.

Mary shook her head angrily.

"I've no shoes," she said. "And the stockings are not mates."

"You're a vision from heaven," said Pete.

"Shut up! Don't you see I'm no better off than I was before? Neither are you."

"We're warmer, anyhow."

"Oh, be sensible."

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"And we're more beautiful," he added, stroking his silken coat.

"But we can't go anywhere in these things!" she cried. "We'll be arrested. We haven't any money. We'll be taken for lunatics. And then they'll find out we're thieves. And then—— Oh, I wish I'd never come on this awful trip!"

Pete shook off the spell of his gorgeous imagination.

"You're a hard lady to please," he said. "But I'll see what I can do. Go back in the summer-house and wait for me. If anybody bothers you, jump at them and do some kind of an incantation. They'll leave you alone, fast enough."

"Where are you going now?" she demanded.

"Well, having stolen a classy outfit of society lingerie for you, I'm now going to see if I can steal you a limousine."

"Peter! Don't you leave me here. Come back! I——"

But he was gone.

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CHAPTER XX

The High Cost of Jealousy

Bill Marshall, leaning on the after rail of his yacht and watching the churning, white wake of her twin screws, was not sure but the best way to mend things was to jump overboard and forget how to swim. Jealousy and rage were no longer his

chief troubles. Remorse had perched itself on his already burdened shoulders. And then came shame, piling itself on top of remorse. And soon afterward fear, to sit on the shoulders of shame. Truly, his load was great.

To steam his way out of Larchmont Harbor had been a magnificent revenge. But with Bill, vengeance was never a protracted emotion; when its thrill began to fade it left him chilled. Even jealousy did not suffice to warm him. And then came crowding all the other emotions, to thrust him down into a bottomless mire of despondency and irresolution.

The sailing master of the *Sunshine* had reached the opinion that his owner, in which relation, as charterer, Bill stood for the time being, was either extremely absent-minded or slightly mad. When the yacht cleared the harbor he asked for further orders. Bill told him to stand across the Sound for awhile. When it was no longer possible to hold that course, because of the presence of Long Island, he again asked for a course. Bill advised him to sail east awhile, then

west awhile, but on no account to bother him about the matter any further. So this was done, while the sailing master and his two officers held whispered consultations on the subject of their owner.

While these somewhat peculiar maneuvers were being carried into execution, Bill endeavored to reach a decision. Should he go back to Larchmont and hunt for the missing ones? No; their punishment was not yet great enough. Even if he went back, was there any chance of finding them? Had they gone ashore? Had they been picked up by a craft? Had—he shivered—anything worse happened to them? Of course nothing had happened to them; of course. He assured himself of that over and over again. And yet—well, things did happen, even to the best of swimmers. And if anything had happened, what could he do now? Would he be responsible? Would he be a murderer? Nonsense; certainly not. Yet he would feel himself a murderer, even if the law demanded nothing of him. Why, if anything happened to that little girl—— He gripped the rail and tried to pull himself together.

Well, even if the worst happened, it would put an end to his society career. There might be consolation in that, he thought; but much as he sought to draw upon this source of comfort, it yielded little.

"Any further orders, sir?" asked the sailing master.

"Not yet; keep on sailing."

"But which way, sir?"

Bill glared.

"Forward, backward, sidewise—suit yourself."

The sailing master went away with deep wrinkles in his forehead and, for a change, the *Sunshine* began to describe wide circles. She was still circling, like a

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destroyer waiting to pounce upon a submarine, when Aunt Caroline, fresh from her nap, came on deck. She found Bill still standing at the stern.

"Have you seen Miss Norcross, William?"

"Not for some time."

"I've been looking for her. I can't imagine where she is."

"Neither can I."

Aunt Caroline looked at him inquiringly.

"You haven't quarreled with her about anything, have you, William?"

"Quarreled? No, indeed; there's been no quarrel."

"I'm glad of that," said Aunt Caroline. "She's too nice a girl to quarrel with."

Now, for the first time since her arrival on deck, she took note of the fact that the *Sunshine* was moving; also, that their environment had completely changed.

"Why, we're sailing again, William!"

"We're just out in the Sound a ways; I got tired of staying in one place."

The answer seemed to satisfy her immediate curiosity. Bill wished that she would go away, so that he might drown himself in peace, but Aunt Caroline appeared to be taking an interest in things.

"I don't think they keep the yacht quite as tidy as they might," she remarked. "There's a chair lying on its back. The magazines are blowing all over the deck, too. There ought to be paper-weights. Dear me, William; they need a housekeeper."

Suddenly she walked across the deck and bent over to study a dark object that lay near the opposite rail.

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"More untidiness," said Aunt Caroline resentfully. "One of the sailors has left a wash-rag here."

She stooped and picked the thing up between thumb and forefinger. As she shook it out drops of water flew from it. Aunt Caroline's eyes became round with amazement.

"Why, William! It's the skirt of her bathing-suit!"

Bill stared at the thing, fascinated.

"How on earth did it ever come to be lying here on the deck?" exclaimed Aunt Caroline.

"She must have taken it off," he mumbled.

"And came on board without it? William, she is not that kind of a girl."

What was the use of hiding things any longer? Bill looked Aunt Caroline in the eye.

"She didn't come on board," he said.

It required several seconds for that to sink in.

"Not on board?" she repeated. "Why, what do you mean? Where is she?"

He waved his hand in the direction of Larchmont Harbor.

"Having a swim, I guess," he said, with an effort at nonchalance.

"William Marshall! You mean to say she didn't come back to the yacht?"

"She hadn't at the time we left."

"Or Peter?"

"Nope. Peter didn't come back, either."

"Then what in the world is this boat doing out here?" demanded Aunt Caroline.

"It got tired of waiting."

"You don't mean to tell me that you left them back there in the water?"

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"That's about it."

Aunt Caroline was puffing out.

"Why, William! Are you insane? To leave that girl back there with nothing——" She looked down at the little wet skirt and shuddered. "Oh, I can't believe it!"

"Well, it's true, all right," said Bill sullenly. "They didn't seem in any hurry to come back, and I didn't think it was up to me to wait all day."

"It's unheard of. It's shocking! Why, she isn't dressed to go anywhere. She isn't even properly dressed for—for bathing." Aunt Caroline for an instant was trying to put herself in the place of any fish who might chance to swim in the vicinity of Mary Wayne. "William Marshall, there ought to be some terrible way to punish you!"

Bill thought a way had been discovered; he had been punishing himself for the last two hours.

"You turn this yacht right around and go back to Larchmont and find them," she commanded.

In one respect, Bill found a slight measure of relief in his aunt's view of the situation. Evidently it did not occur to her that Mary and Pete might be drowned, and if such a possibility had not occurred to her very likely it was extremely remote.

"What's the sense of going back now?" he asked. "It'll be dark in half an hour."

"Nevertheless, you turn this boat around."

"Oh, they're all right by this time," he said carelessly.

"Well, if they are, it's not because of anything you've done, William Marshall." Aunt Caroline's eyes were beginning to blaze. "You've done your best to disgrace the girl. Oh, that poor child! I don't approve

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of her taking off her skirt, understand me; I never could bring myself to that. I never did it myself, when I was a young woman, and I wouldn't do it now. But that doesn't excuse you. It simply makes it worse that you should have gone away and left her. You did quarrel with her, of course; I can understand, now. You let that childish temper of yours govern you. Oh, that I should ever have had such a nephew. I'm ashamed of you!"

Bill felt that he was on the verge of disinheritance, but Aunt Caroline abruptly changed her line of thought.

"Thank goodness she's in charge of a responsible person!" she exclaimed.

"Who? My valet?"

"Certainly. If it were not for that I should be dreadfully frightened. But he'll take care of her, of course. He's just the kind of young man she ought to be with in such an awful predicament. If she were my own daughter I wouldn't ask anything better, under the circumstances."

Bill sneered elaborately.

"He's so absolutely safe," declared Aunt Caroline. "He has such fine, high principles."

"Oh, bunk, Aunt Caroline."

"William, don't you try to disparage that young man. I only wish you had his pure ideals. That's what makes me feel safe about Miss Norcross. He's so sound, and religious, and upright. Why, his very character is sufficient to save the girl's reputation."

Bill was growing restive under the panegyric.

"Her reputation doesn't need any saving," he declared.

"Not with you or me; no. That's perfectly understood.

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But with the world—that is different. The world will never understand. That is, it would not understand if her companion were anybody but Peter. But when it is known that it was he who guarded her and watched over her——"

"Aunt Caroline, lay off."

She stopped in sheer amazement and stared at her nephew. Bill was in a mood to throw caution to the winds.

"I'll agree with you she's safe enough," he said, "but for the love of Mike cut out

that bull about Pete. He hasn't got any more principles than I have. I'm sick and tired of hearing you singing psalms about him."

Aunt Caroline gasped.

"Why, confound him, he hasn't any more religion than a fish. He never studied theology in his life."

"William, I don't believe a word you say."

"You might as well," said Bill scornfully. "Why, Aunt Caroline, he doesn't know any more about theology than you do about dancing the shimmy."

"But he talked to Bishop Wrangell——"

"Oh, he talked, all right. He's a bird at that. But it was just words, I tell you, words. He got it all out of the encyclopedia home. He's been stringing you—you and the bishop. That's just where he lives—stringing people."

"I—don't—believe—it!" But there was a trace of alarm in Aunt Caroline's voice, despite her brave insistence.

"Oh, all right; don't. But if you'd ever known that wild aborigine in college you wouldn't swallow that theology stuff, hook, line and sinker."

"It simply cannot be true, William Marshall."

Bill laughed recklessly.

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"Why, if you'd ever seen Pete Stearns——"

"Peter who?"

"Stearns."

Aunt Caroline was sniffing, as though she scented danger.

"What Stearns?" she demanded.

"Oh, you know 'em, all right, Aunt Caroline."

She seized Bill by the arm and backed him against the rail.

"Of the Eliphalet Stearns family?" she demanded.

"That's the bunch," affirmed Bill, wickedly.

She put her hand to her throat and retreated a pace, staring at Bill through horrified eyes.

"You stand there and tell me he is a Stearns?" she whispered. "And you say it without shame, William Marshall? You have brought a Stearns to my house, when you knew—— Oh, William!"

"As a matter of fact," said Bill with sudden generosity, "Pete's all right in his own way, but he's no divinity student. As for his being a Stearns——"

Aunt Caroline stopped him with a gesture.

"Answer my question," she said sharply. "Is he a grandson of Eliphalet Stearns?"

"Uh huh."

"A son of Grosvenor Stearns?"

"That's Pete."

She seemed to grow suddenly in stature.

"Then," she said, "you have disgraced the house of Marshall. You have brought under my roof, in disguise, the son of an enemy. A Stearns! You have done this thing with the deliberate purpose of deceiving me. Had I known, had I even suspected, that you had ever associated with such a person, I should have disowned you, William Marshall."

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"But his name is Pete, all right, Aunt Caroline. And you never asked me for his last name."

"You would have lied if I had," she said, in a voice that trembled despite its sternness. "You did all this knowing full well my opinion of the Stearns family. Eliphalet Stearns! He was your grandfather's worst enemy. Grosvenor Stearns! Your father and Grosvenor Stearns never spoke to each other from the days when they were boys. And now—now it remains for you to bring into my house another generation of a people who are beneath the notice or the contempt of a true Marshall. It is unspeakable!"

And yet she found herself able to speak with much freedom on the matter.

"Oh, what's the use of all this medieval history?" demanded Bill. "Just because my grandfather and old man Stearns had a blow-up, I don't see why I've got to go on hating the family for the rest of my days. That old row isn't any of my funeral, Aunt Caroline."

"Have you no regard for your family honor and pride, William Marshall? Have you no loyalty to the memory of your ancestors? Have you no thought of me? Must you insult the living as well as the dead?"

"I should think," grumbled Bill, "that if you believed in theology you'd go in for that business of forgiving your enemies."

"But not a Stearns," she said vehemently. "And as for believing in theology—oh, how can I believe in anything after this?"

"Well, if you hadn't gone so daffy over him I wouldn't have said anything about it."

"Daffy?" echoed Aunt Caroline. "Are you insinuating——"

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"You've been throwing him up to me as a model of holy innocence ever since he came into the house," said Bill angrily. "Just now you've been preaching about how safe she was with Pete, and all that sort of poppycock. I tell you, I'm sick of it, Aunt Caroline."

Aunt Caroline suddenly remembered. She groaned.

"Oh, that poor girl! Heaven knows what will become of her now. Out there——" She gestured wildly. "With a Stearns!"

"Oh, he'll do as well by her as any sanctimonious guy."

"The child's reputation is gone! Gone!"

"That's nonsense," said Bill sharply. "If it comes to that, she can take care of herself."

"No girl can take care of herself, William Marshall. No proper girl would think of attempting it." Aunt Caroline bridled afresh at the very suggestion of feminine independence. "This is the end of the poor child. And you are responsible."

"Oh, piffle."

"A Stearns!" murmured Aunt Caroline.

"Bunk!"

"A *Stearns*!"

"But suppose he was really trying to live down the family name and lead a better life?" suggested Bill.

"Not a Stearns, William Marshall. There are some things in this world that cannot be done. Oh, that unfortunate girl!"

Bill sighed irritably.

"All right; we'll go back and hunt her up," he said. He was, in fact, rather pleased to have an excuse.

"And see to it that she is properly married to him," added Aunt Caroline.

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Bill looked like a man about to choke.

"What!" he shouted.

"Certainly," said his aunt. "He's a Stearns, I know; but what else is there to do? Even a bad name is better than none."

"Aunt Caroline, you're crazy!"

"I was never more sane in my life. William. The poor child *must* marry him. I'm sorry, of course; but it is better than not marrying him at all."

"Marry Pete Stearns?" Bill resembled a large and ferocious animal, perhaps a lion. "*Marry* him? Not in a million years will she marry him!"

Aunt Caroline studied her nephew in astonishment.

"Would you deny her the poor consolation of a name?" she demanded. "Of course she will marry him. I shall personally attend to it."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Bill savagely. "You'll keep out of it."

"Order the boat back to Larchmont at once," was Aunt Caroline's answer.

"Not for that purpose."

"To Larchmont!"

Had she been taller, Aunt Caroline at that moment would have been imperious. She gestured with a sweep of the arm worthy of a queen. The gesture, it happened, was not in the direction of Larchmont at all, but she did not know that.

Bill shook his head grimly.

"William Marshall, I propose to be obeyed."

Ordinarily, when Aunt Caroline reached that point, Bill yielded the field to her. But this was no ordinary occasion. She proposed to marry her social secretary to Pete Stearns—*his* secretary! Where was ever such an outrageous idea conceived? Again he shook his

head. He could find no words to voice his scornful defiance.

Suddenly Aunt Caroline wilted into a deck chair.

"I wish to go to my stateroom," she said, in a weak voice. "I feel faint. Send for my maid."

Bill departed on a run. The maid brought smelling salts, and after a minute of sniffing Aunt Caroline arose and walked slowly toward the saloon entrance, through which she disappeared. She ignored Bill's offer of an arm.

The boss of the yacht *Sunshine*, having satisfied his lust for defiance, ran forward and mounted the bridge two steps at a time.

"Back to Larchmont!" he commanded.

He was still standing on the bridge as they entered the harbor. By the time they were well inside, darkness had fallen.

"Are we to anchor, sir?" inquired the sailing master.

"I don't know," said Bill shortly. "Take a turn up where we were moored a while ago."

But before they had proceeded very far up the harbor he realized the futility of it. No sane persons would be swimming about after dark looking for a yacht whose return was purely conjectural.

"Head her outside again," ordered Bill.

The sailing master shrugged, gave a command, and the *Sunshine* began swinging in a circle.

"After we get outside, sir, which way?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided. I'll tell you later. Damn it, don't ask so many questions."

CHAPTER XXI

The Last Bottle in Larchmont

When Pete Stearns went in quest of a limousine he had, of course, merely employed a figure of speech that seemed to befit the raiment of his fair charge. In his practical mind he knew that it did not matter whether it was a limousine or a lizzie, so long as it was capable of locomotion and was not locked. The grounds through which he now walked were less familiar to him than those which contained the orchard on the other side of the hedge, yet he sensed the general direction of the house that he knew they must contain.

Through the darkening shadows he wended his way confidently; he felt sure that if there was danger ahead he would detect it before falling a victim. At last he emerged from the grove and stepped upon a lawn, where he paused for reconnaissance. Fifty yards from him stood a house. It was large and dark and quiet. For two or three minutes he observed it carefully, but detected no sign of life. There was no other building to be seen; if there was a garage it was probably on the farther side of the house. He was more interested in discovering a garage than anything else.

He walked rapidly across the lawn, intending to pass in what seemed to be the rear of the dwelling. The path he chose carried him near to the end of a broad porch, from which half a dozen steps descended to the

lawn. Close to the edge of the top step his watchful eyes observed an object that caused him to slacken pace, then stop. It was a hat.

"I need a hat," thought Pete.

His bare feet were soundless on the steps as he ascended lightly and captured the object of his desire. It was a straw hat with a striped ribbon and by good chance it was an excellent fit.

"I ought to get her a hat," he murmured. "She'll expect it."

It seemed quite safe to explore the porch a bit further, so he moved softly along, avoiding a hammock, a table and several chairs. He was midway the length of the house when he became aware that there was a light within. Its mellow glow reached him through a curtained window. Pete held his breath as he came to a halt, and decided that his next move would be a retreat.

And then he found himself bathed in a flood of illumination that came from directly overhead. Some one within the house had switched on the porch-light!

"Run!" he whispered to himself.

Too late! In front of him a French window was slowly opening. Pete stared at it hypnotically. Wider and wider it swung as he stood there inert, as incapable of flight as though his bare feet were nailed to the porch floor.

And then from out the window stepped a stout gentleman of middle age whose face wore an innocuous and cordial smile. He did not seem to be smiling at anything in particular, but rather at the whole world. Evidently it had been warm in the house, for he was coatless and collarless and his shirt was unbuttoned

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at the throat. Hugged against his bosom with one hand was a bottle in which there was no cork. Swinging loosely in the other hand was a carbonated water siphon.

The stout gentleman's glance rested upon Pete with the utmost friendliness. His smile ceased to be a generalization and became a greeting. He bowed. He winked slowly and ponderously. The winking achievement pleased him so well that he repeated it, and afterward tried it with the other eye, where he again succeeded to his still greater satisfaction.

"Prince," said the stout gentleman, "have a drink."

Pete indulged in a deep sigh of relief.

"Sir," he said, returning the bow, "your hospitality charms me. I don't mind if I do."

"Hold 'em," said the gentleman, proffering the bottle and the siphon. "Have a chair, prince. Back in a minute."

He turned and disappeared through the French window. There was a barely perceptible unsteadiness in his gait, but it did not interfere with his efficiency, for he returned within a few seconds, bearing two glasses. Pete and the gentleman drank to each other punctiliously, the latter waving his glass with a grandiose flourish before he put it to his lips.

"Lil private stock, prince," and the gentleman winked again, this time with the original eye.

"Nectar, sir, if you will permit me to say so," affirmed Pete, with another bow. "But I regret to say that you have made a slight mistake. I am not a prince."

The gentleman smiled knowingly and made a gesture of deprecation.

"'Sall right, old man. My mistake. Liable to run

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into princes any time round here. Had prince callin' on my daughter 'safternoon. Just as soon have prince round as anybody. I'm liberal. Have li'l drink?"

Pete declined regretfully. His host placed bottle and siphon on a table with meticulous care.

"Listen, prince."

Pete checked him with an upraised hand.

"Merely a viscount, sir."

"Listen, viscount. Play a li'l cowboy pool?"

Pete considered. Clearly it would be inconsiderate to treat so benevolent a host in a churlish manner; yet there was a lady all in lace, sitting in a gloomy summer-house among the trees, who doubtless awaited his return with impatience and perhaps alarm.

"I fear, sir," he said, "it would be an intrusion upon your family."

The stout gentleman shook his head earnestly.

"Nobody home, viscount. No family; no servants. Everybody gone away somewhere. Everybody on a party. I'm on party; you're on party. You and me play li'l cowboy pool."

So saying, he linked his arm affectionately into one of Pete's and led him firmly into the house. He led him through several rooms, pausing in each to press buttons, so that the apartments through which they strolled became ablaze with lights. No ordinary summer cottage was this, Pete learned, as his eyes appraised each successive revelation; it was a mansion.

"Family all in society, viscount," confided the stout gentleman, as he clung to Pete's arm. "All hittin' high spots. Wife, society; daughter, society; son, society. Old man, cowboy pool. C'mon."

While Pete Stearns was conscious of his own informalities of costume, it seemed that his host had not given the matter a thought. The purple and green coat of silk did not appear to have attracted his attention, nor the other garment, that was striped in salmon pink. If the stout gentleman owned the straw hat that Pete had discovered on the porch, he displayed no sign of recognition. He was, in fact, surprised at nothing whatever.

In the billiard room the shaded lights that were suspended over the table did not satisfy him, for he made a complete circuit of the apartment, turning on all the lights in the wall sockets.

"'Smore cheerful," he explained. "Find a cue, prince."

"Viscount, sir."

"My mistake, viscount. Find a cue."

Pete found a cue that suited as to weight. His host bowed until he rocked on his heels and assigned him the honor of opening the game.

For some fifteen minutes they played in silence, the stout gentleman revealing a measure of skill and technique that quite astonished his antagonist. His difficulties seemed to be wholly in measuring angles with the eye; otherwise his

game was well nigh faultless and his control of the cue masterly. It was the eye difficulty that eventually compassed his defeat, although Pete was hard put, even with the employment of all his own skill, to nose out a winner.

With the shot that settled the game the stout gentleman flung his cue on the table and embraced his conqueror.

"Viscount," he said, "you're a prince. Firs' man beat me cowboy pool all summer."

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"It was but an accident, sir," said Pete modestly.

"Nope. No accident. Strictly on merits. 'Sall right; pleasure all mine. Firs' time ever stacked up against gentleman from Arabian Nights."

From which remark Pete perceived that his host had not been wholly insensible of his costume, although it was evident that he was in no whit surprised by it, nor did he regard it as in any way incongruous.

"I think, sir, if you will pardon me, that I should be taking my leave," observed Pete, as his eye chanced upon a tall clock that stood in a corner.

"What's hurry, prince? Have li'l drink."

But Pete, even under the warm pressure of hospitality, had not forgotten the lady in the summer-house. He felt certain that she was becoming alarmed; he feared that she might even attempt an exploration on her own account.

"Viscount," observed the lord of the manor, once more linking arms, "you're greates' cowboy pool player in world. Extraord'nary! I'm next greates'. Any gentleman beats me welcome anything I got."

They had progressed as far as the library, where his host halted.

"Anything I got," he repeated, with a wave of his arm. "'Sall yours. Anything you see—'s yours. What'll it be?"

It occurred to Pete that so generous an invitation to trespass further upon hospitality should not be ignored.

"If you could loan me a pair of shoes," he suggested, "I would be greatly indebted to you."

"Dozen pair shoes!" said the stout gentleman earnestly.

"And a hat—a lady's hat."

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"Lady's hat? Lady's——"

His host looked him in the eye, placed a finger alongside his nose and winked roguishly.

"Lady's hat—for princess?"

"For the viscountess, sir."

"Dozen hats!" exclaimed his host warmly. "Dozen hats for viscountess. Back in a

minute."

He rushed up-stairs at an alarming speed and Pete heard him charging around on the floor above. The gentleman had an unaccountable way of keeping his word almost to the letter. It was little more than a minute before he was back again, his arms full of hats and shoes. He dumped them all on the floor and bowed.

"All yours, prince."

Pete was not long in finding a pair of shoes that would stay on his feet, but the selection of a hat from among the fragile heap was a task that perplexed him. His difficulty was not ignored by his host, for the stout gentleman suddenly reached into the pile, yanked forth something that was broad brimmed and lacy and thrust it into his hands.

"There's hat for princess!" he exclaimed. "My compliments. Have a li'l drink?"

He hugged Pete's arm delightedly as he led the way back to the porch. The bottle and the siphon inspired him to confidences.

"Viscount, observe bottle, please. Listen. Last bottle Scotch in Larchmont."

He lifted the bottle and stroked it gently.

"Last bottle anything in Larchmont," he added.

Pete viewed the bottle with a new and reverent light in his eyes.

"Sir," he said, "knowledge of that fact overwhelms me with the true measure of your hospitality."

"'Sall right, prince, old man. 'Sall yours. Take bottle."

But there were some things that even Pete Stearns could not bring himself to do. He sighed and shook his head. To what unknown heights of generosity might this genial gentleman arise—this gentleman who would even renounce the last bottle in Larchmont?

"Have li'l drink, anyhow."

And it was a very small drink that Pete poured for himself, for he had discovered that within him lay a conscience.

"Where's princess?" demanded his host abruptly.

Pete answered with an indefinite wave of the hand.

"She awaits me," he said.

The stout gentleman winked again, knowingly, and thrust an elbow into the ribs of his guest. He was clinging to Pete's arm. Pete hesitated. He wanted something more; in fact, he had not yet obtained that for which he had gone in search. Yet why hesitate? Surely a gentleman who offered his last bottle would not quibble over an automobile.

"Do you happen, sir, to have a car that I could borrow for a short time?"

"Car? Le's see." His host thought for several seconds. "Nope, all cars out with family. All cars out in society. All cars——"

He paused, then smiled broadly yet mysteriously.

"Sh! This way, prince."

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Although there was nobody in the house, the owner thereof tiptoed his way carefully along the porch toward the rear, with a constant beckoning and a warning for caution. He created in Pete the impression that they were now upon an errand of distinctly clandestine character and must manage the affair accordingly.

Down the steps to the lawn and around the corner of the house they went, in single file. The stout gentleman paused near a small porch that evidently constituted an entrance to the kitchen. He looked around cautiously in the semidarkness. Bidding Pete to remain exactly where he stood, he stole across to the side of the porch with catlike steps, fumbled there for a moment, and returned, trundling a vehicle.

It was a motor-cycle, and attached to it was one of those peregrinating bath-tubs known as a side car.

"Sh! Last car in Larchmont, viscount. Belongs to gardener. 'Sall yours."

In the dim light Pete examined it hastily. He mounted the saddle and threw the switch. He pumped the starting pedal. At the third thrust there was a sharp explosion, and then a rapid fire that cut the night. He let the engine race for half a minute, then throttled down and leaned over toward his benefactor.

"Sir," he said, "you are the noblest of men. You do not know just what you have done, but it is a service far beyond price."

"Viscount," answered his host, with a deep bow, "pleasure's all mine. Any gentleman beats me cowboy pool—any gentleman honors me cowboy pool—any gentleman from Arabian Nights——" A thought occurred to him. "Want you to meet family.

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Stay and meet family. Stay and meet society. Stay——"

Pete interrupted him hastily.

"At any other time, sir, I should be charmed. But, as I told you, there is a lady awaiting me."

"Forgot lady. My apologies. Forgot all about lady. My apologies to lady."

"And so I bid you good night, sir. And may Heaven reward you," said Pete fervently.

The stout gentleman clung to his hand.

"Want to see princess," he observed. "Want to salute princess. Want to extend

hospitality——"

"If you will go up on your porch," said Pete, "I will drive the princess by. She will be charmed to see you, sir, and in her behalf I now thank you for all your goodness."

He threw in the clutch and the motor-cycle started forward with a leap. Straight across the lawn Pete headed it, bringing it to a halt at the edge of the grove. Leaving the engine running, he leaped from the saddle and ran in among the trees, in the direction of the summer-house.

Mary Wayne was standing in the doorway as he approached.

"Where—where have you been?" she demanded.

"I'll explain later," he answered briefly. "Hurry. I've got a car."

"You stole——"

"It was presented to me. Come on."

He seized her hand and urged her forward at a run.

As they reached the panting machine, Mary uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"That thing!"

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"What do you want for nothing. Get in. It's all right."

"But it's so conspic——"

He lifted her and dumped her into the bathtub.

"That thing down at your feet is a hat," he said. "Put it on. Now, there's a gentleman waiting to wave good-by at us. He's the most important man in the world. He thinks you're a princess. As we go past, I want you to kiss your hand to him. It's highly necessary. He expects it."

The motor-cycle was under way again. Pete guided it in a wide curve until he was headed toward the house. Then he dashed with full speed, straight for the illuminated veranda.

Standing at the edge of the porch was the stout gentleman, his body gently swaying. His arms seemed to be engaged in an incantation, for they waved rhythmically. In one hand was the bottle.

Pete swerved the machine within a few feet of the porch and waved elaborately. The gentleman was saying something, but they could not hear him. Mary waved her hand as they swept by.

"Throw him a kiss!" ordered Pete sharply. "Confound it, you're a princess! Wait, now; I'll make a circle and go by again."

The machine curved out across the lawn and Pete laid a course that would once more enable them to pass in review. The gentleman on the porch continued his incantation. He was chanting, too.

As they slowed down opposite him, Mary half rose from her seat and threw him a kiss. The waving arms halted abruptly. The stout gentleman's eyes became round with pleasure. He gripped the rail and leaned forward.

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"Princess——"

He made a courtly gesture and a treasured object flew from the gesturing hand. There was a crash of glass on the gravel walk below. The gentleman blinked, lurched forward, swung back and sat heavily on the floor of the porch. He leaned his forehead against the rail and burst into manly tears.

Pete gave his chariot a full charge of gas.

"The last bottle in Larchmont!" he gasped chokingly.

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CHAPTER XXII

The Road to Home

The motor-cycle was behaving excellently. As Pete began to get the feel of his steed he experimented a bit with the throttle, twisting the hand grip that controlled it farther and farther, until the machine responded with a burst of speed that alarmed the lady in the bathtub. She clung to the edges of the car and shut her eyes against the wind, bracing her feet with the instinctive effort of trying to apply brakes.

Pete knew only in a general way the direction of the main road, which he was seeking. When they emerged from the private grounds of the gentleman who owned the last bottle, he turned the car in what seemed to be the proper course and raced along a road that was bordered with villas. It ended at a cross-road, where he was forced to make a change of direction. Then, for the next five minutes, he was alternately covering short stretches of straightaway and turning corners. The residential section devoted to summer dwellers seemed to Pete to have been provided with streets that were designed on the plan of a labyrinth. It baffled escape.

They passed people on walks and cars in the roadways, passed them at a nervous speed. Mary Wayne was huddled as low in the bathtub as she could squeeze herself, but Pete was astride a saddle in the open, and

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he had an annoying sense of conspicuity. He doubted if the ordinary citizen of Larchmont would accept his pink-striped pajamas with the complete equanimity that had characterized his late host. The silk garments wrapped themselves

tightly around his shins, but streamed out in the rear like pennants in a gale. The rush of air sculptured his high-priced haberdashery until he resembled the Winged Victory of Samothrace.

Mary reached both hands to her head with a little cry, but too late. The picture hat had been snatched by a gust and went sailing into a hedge.

"Can't stop!" he yelled. "Mine went long ago."

She shook her head to signify that she did not want him to stop.

Still the labyrinth held them. One of its trick passages brought them into a cul de sac, where he was forced to slow down and turn in his tracks. A man on the sidewalk shouted at him, but Pete did not answer. Mary huddled closer in her refuge.

They turned another corner and came to a dead stop, with a screeching of brakes, in order to avoid collision with a touring-car approaching in the opposite direction. The touring-car also stopped. Its driver uttered an exclamation, and an instant afterward switched on a spotlight. Mary shrieked as the merciless beam fell upon her. Somebody in the car tittered.

"When did they turn the club dance into a masquerade?" asked a voice.

"Ages ago," answered Pete promptly. "Swing your car; you're on the wrong side of the road."

There was more laughter; the spotlight still held its victims.

"He looks like the Sultan of Sulu," commented the voice behind the spotlight.

"Running away with Marie Antoinette," said a second voice.

And then, in a sharp, feminine treble:

"Jack, look at that thing on her shoulders! Why, it's just exactly like my——"

Mary hid her face and shuddered. Pete slipped in the clutch and made a reckless detour that came within an ace of landing the side-car in a ditch. They shot away again with an echo of excited voices in their ears.

"We've got to get out of here quick!" shouted Pete. "I think they've got our number."

Mary knew it to a certainty. No woman who owned the piece of lingerie that graced her shoulders would ever fail to recognize it.

"Try the road to the left," she urged, as she looked back. "I think they're turning the car around."

He acted on the suggestion, for want of anything better, and shot into a new road that possessed the grateful advantage of poorer illumination. Fear of pursuit caused him to forsake it after a few hundred yards, and after that he spent several minutes dodging into one street after another, until he felt that the

touring car must have abandoned pursuit. Every time they passed a street light he accelerated speed, regardless of all considerations save a resolve not to linger in the illuminated places.

Mary was grim. She had abandoned hope of ever escaping from the hated town; she felt that she was the helpless prisoner of a nightmare, unable to loose the invisible shackles. They would either be dashed to pieces or fall afoul of the law, and between these alternatives she attempted to make no choice; one was as

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unhappy as the other. Yet during all this maddening and futile whirl she found a corner of her mind sufficiently detached from imminent perils to give its entire attention to the hating of Bill Marshall. He, and he alone, had done this thing, she told herself over and over again. Oh, how she hated him!

And then came sudden liberation from the labyrinth. They shot out of a narrow lane upon what was unmistakably the main road, missed a juggernaut limousine by inches, careened sickeningly as their machine straightened out in the direction of the city, and then gathered speed to put behind them forever the place of their undoing.

"We're all clear, now," he called, bending his head toward her. "Making out all right?"

"Go on," was her only answer.

There was but one goal in the mind of Pete Stearns—the Marshall mansion in lower Fifth Avenue. It was of no avail to stop short of that; they had no money, no friends, no spare wardrobe elsewhere. A return to Larchmont was not for an instant to be considered. Probably the *Sunshine* was back in the harbor, looking for them. Well, let Bill Marshall look—and then worry when he did not find them. The same thought was in the mind of Mary Wayne; she prayed that Bill might now be in a frenzy of fright and anxiety.

In a general way, Pete knew the main road; if he had not, the volume of traffic easily served as a guide. They passed anywhere from a dozen to twenty cars every mile, and inasmuch as speed was their one available refuge from curious eyes, Pete employed it. It would have been better for peace of mind to make their way to the city by sequestered roads, but he did not

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know all the byways and turnings of the Westchester highway system, and there was the risk of getting lost in unfamiliar paths. The labyrinth of Larchmont had been a sufficient lesson in that.

The evening was warm, yet Pete found that two sets of silken pajamas were none too much for comfort, for the motor-cycle created its own little gale. Mary sat crouched in her lingerie, trying desperately to keep everything in place, yet discovering every little while that a homeward-bound pennant of filmy stuff was whipping the air half a dozen feet behind her.

New Rochelle flew past them in a blur of light. Pelham Manor came and went in a flash. Mount Vernon was little more than a brief burst of illumination.

"Safety first," whispered Pete to himself. "That means speed."

They were crossing the Harlem, still at a pace that was barred by all law save the primitive one to which alone they held allegiance—self-preservation. Riverside Drive! Should they risk it or seek less traveled paths?

"Stick to the Drive," urged the guiding spirit.

Pete stuck to it. Better to come to grief boldly on the highway of pleasure and fashion than to meet disaster ignominiously along some furtive route. But even the desperate urge of speed could not be completely satisfied now. There was the summer evening's traffic to be considered, and often it slowed them to a maddeningly moderate pace.

Mary was aware of the fact that they were not without observers. With another driver she felt that her own costume would have escaped notice; she was making herself as small as possible, wrapped tightly in

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her raiment. But Pete Stearns, astride the saddle, flaunted himself. He could not help it. The coat of purple and green shone in the city's glare like the plumage of a peacock. As for the trousers striped in salmon pink, they shrieked like a siren.

People in cars stared and turned to stare again. People atop the buses gesticulated and waved. People on the sidewalks halted in their tracks and blinked. A million eyes, it seemed to Mary, were boring into her from all sides. Oh, wait till she laid hands on Bill Marshall!

Fifth Avenue! The traffic increased; the pace slackened perforce. Mary gripped the edges of the car and closed her eyes. Why had they risked it? Why hadn't she urged him to seek a hiding place until long past midnight? Too late now. The machine came to a stop. She opened her eyes long enough to photograph the awful picture on her mind.

Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street—with the east and west traffic holding the right of way! A bus towered above them on the curb side. A millionaire touring-car flanked them on the left. Ahead were most of the automobiles in the world; of that she was certain. She did not dare to look behind. Her eyes were shut again, but her ears were open. She could hear voices, laughter, a screeching of horns. Somebody flung a question; a dozen followed. And Pete Stearns was flinging answers! Oh, why didn't he keep still?

The traffic moved again, and with it the little chariot that had become their ark of preservation. Mary felt it bumping across the tracks on Forty-Second Street. Somebody shouted; she knew without looking that it

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was a policeman. There was a shrill whistle. The motor-cycle plunged forward.

"Hold fast!" yelled Pete, bending over. "That guy wants us, but he'll have to step some. No more traffic stops for mine!"

Just what they did after that Mary never knew. Nor was Pete himself particularly clear. They lurched, swayed, dodged; they scraped mudguards right and left; they shot behind, in front of, and around automobiles that were stupidly content to keep within the law; they scattered pedestrians; they ran past traffic semaphores that were set against them; they mocked cross-town trolleys by dashing across their paths; and all this to a constant din of shouting people and piercing police whistles.

The home of Miss Caroline Marshall stood on a corner, and the entrance to the garden and stable yard in the rear was on the side street. As Pete swerved from the avenue, Mary opened her eyes again and gasped incredulously. They were home!

He had leaped from the saddle, crossed the sidewalk, tried the tall, iron gate that barred the driveway and was back again before she could move her cramped body from the position into which she had twisted it.

"Gate's locked!" he cried. "We haven't any keys. Got to climb the wall. Hurry!"

Saying which, he seized her by an arm and dragged her out of the little bathtub. The brick wall that flanked the Marshall garden on the street side stood about seven feet in height. Pete reached for the top, chinned himself, and squirmed astride it.

"Gimme your hands!"

Mary lifted them, felt them seized, and found herself

slowly rising from the sidewalk. For Bill Marshall she would have been a feather; for Pete Stearns she was a burden. He gritted his teeth and lifted until his muscles cracked. Inch by inch he raised her. Mary tried to dig her toes into the bricks, but they offered no foothold; all she accomplished was to tangle her feet in the lingerie. Two people across the street stopped to stare. Pete sighted them and gave another grim hoist.

Then victory. She was sitting on top of the wall, swinging her feet on the garden side, as he leaped down into a flower-bed and reached for her.

"Oh! The rose-bushes!" she cried, as he caught her and deposited her in the flower-bed.

"Damn the roses!"

"But it's me! The thorns!"

"Forget it."

Some of her raiment was clinging to Aunt Caroline's treasured plants as she stepped painfully out on the grass.

"Now to get into the house," he said briskly. "We'll have to break in. There isn't a soul home."

"Thank goodness," murmured Mary.

The house was dark, but never had Mary seen it when it looked so friendly and sheltering. The nightmare was over. They were really home!

Pete ran to the kitchen entrance. Locked, and undoubtedly the stout bar on the inside was also in place. It was not worth while to try the window-catches, for even if he were able to raise a sash there were stout steel bars through which they could not pass. He went to the cellar entrance, turned the knob in the door, and threw his weight against it. Nothing budged.

He stepped back on the lawn and made a survey

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of the rear elevation of the house. All of the windows that lacked bars were beyond his reach or that of any ordinary climber. If he could find a ladder—— He ran back to the stable, but discovered it to be as stoutly resistant to intrusion as the house itself.

Mary beckoned to him.

"I should think you could climb up on the wall," she said, pointing, "right where it joins the house, and then make a jump for that nearest window."

Pete looked at her severely.

"Do you think I'm a trapeze performer? Do you want me to break a leg?"

Mary measured the jump with her eye.

"Mr. Marshall could do it," she said.

"Rot!"

"But he could. And he'd be willing to try, too."

Pete's glance had turned into a glare.

"There's gratitude for you! That's a fine thing to throw up in my face. Just because I'm not an overgrown brute you think it's a lot of fun to stand there making dares."

"If you think I'm having any fun," she said sharply, "you're tremendously wrong. I'm all stiff and scratched up from those rose-thorns—and I'm hungry. And thirsty! And Mr. Marshall may be large—but he is not an overgrown brute."

"Oh, that's it, is it? You're singing another tune. The last time you mentioned him it was in connection with murder, I think."

"Never mind. He could get in that window, just the same."

Pete eyed her for an instant, then walked toward the garden wall.

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"Wait till I'm lying crushed at your feet," he said bitterly. "You're driving me to suicide."

"Pooh!" said Mary.

He climbed the wall and tested his reach in the direction of the window. The sill was at least a foot beyond the tips of his fingers.

"Jump for it," she said from below. "It looks easy."

"Does it?" he said scornfully. "You ought to see it from here."

"I can see it perfectly well. I could do it myself."

Pete Stearns marveled. Why had she turned on him thus? Had he not been playing the hero since mid-afternoon? Had he not brought her out of the jaws of Larchmont and into the sanctuary of Aunt Caroline's back yard? And now she taunted him, mocked him, dared him to take a senseless hazard.

"Are you going to stand on that wall all night?" she demanded. "Everybody in the street can see you."

He turned and faced the window desperately. He stepped back a pace and viewed it again. He considered the relative advantages of a standing or a running jump and decided upon the former. He crouched. He straightened and again measured the distance with his eye.

"Well?" asked the pitiless voice from below.

"Oh, give me a chance to figure it out," he retorted. "Stop staring at me. You make me nervous."

So Mary looked away. She even walked away. Her steps carried her to an asphalt driveway, where she paused, staring down at a metal disk that lay directly in front of her. It was about two feet in diameter, and fitted closely into an iron rim that was embedded in the pavement. She recognized the thing instantly.

It was the cover of the coal hole. Aunt Caroline had objected to coal wagons unloading at her curb; and being the possessor of a back yard, into which wagons could be driven, she had built a chute from that point directly into the bins. Mary remembered that she had seen ton after ton of coal poured down that very hole.

She turned and glanced toward the adventurer on the wall. He was still staring up at the window, now crouching, now standing erect, now advancing, now retreating, but never leaping. With an exclamation of disdain, she stooped and laid hold of the cover of the coal chute.

As she tugged at the handle it moved. She applied both hands to the task. The disk came out of its rim and she dragged it clear of the aperture. She glanced downward into the depths. She might as well have closed her eyes, for the darkness within that coal chute was total. It was spooky. Yet her common sense told her that there was nothing spooky about it; it was merely a coal chute that

sloped at an easy angle into a cellar bin.

She looked again to see what progress Pete had made; she could not observe that he had made any. He was still standing on top of the wall, making calculations and having visions of a little white cot in an emergency ward.

"He's afraid," she said. "I'm not!"

But she was, despite the brave boast—she was dreadfully afraid. Yet fear did not prevent her from sitting down and letting her feet dangle into the hole. Of course, she could summon Pete Stearns and bid him plunge into the Stygian shaft. But she scorned that; she was minded to show him what a little woman could do.

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He was still fiddling on top of the wall when she glanced up.

"Oh, don't bother," she called. "If you're so afraid——"

"I'm not. I'm just taking precautions. If you'll leave me alone a minute——"

"I'm tired of waiting. You don't seem to be able to make up what you call your mind."

"If you'd stop talking to me——"

He turned to glare down at her.

Zip!

She was gone. He blinked rapidly and stared again. What—— How—— He rubbed his eyes. Only an instant before she was there; she was sitting in the middle of the driveway. Her white figure had been perfectly distinct; there could not be a possible doubt about it. And then the earth swallowed her!

Hastily he scrambled down from the top of the wall and ran across the yard. The open coal chute yawned at his feet. He stooped and listened. There was no sound. He called into the depths. There was no answer.

"The son of a gun!" he muttered in an awed whisper.

He was still standing there, dully contemplating the hole in the earth, when a flicker of light caused him to lift his head. She was in the kitchen. He heard the lifting of the bar and the turning of the key in the lock, followed by a rattle of bolts. As he approached the door it opened.

Mary Wayne looked as weird as the witch of Endor. Her white robes were streaked with black. Her face was smeared with coal dust; her hands, her hair. Out

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of a sooty countenance gleamed two dangerous gray eyes.

"You coward!" she said. "See what you've done!"

"But if you'd waited——"

"You've just made me ruin the loveliest things I ever wore in all my life. Look at

this peignoir. It's ripped, it's torn, it's—— Oh, don't stand there! I'll slam the door in a second, and then you can stay out or else come in by way of the coal bin."

Pete entered meekly and closed the door behind him. Single file they mounted the back stairs that led to the servants' quarters.

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CHAPTER XXIII

Home

Pete Stearns, dressed once more like a citizen of the United States, descended again to the lower floor by the back stairs and began a search of the pantry. He foraged some crackers, a jar of cheese, and some potted tongue, and with these he returned to the second floor, where he found the social secretary awaiting him in the sun parlor. Mary Wayne was a normal person again. The soot of the coal chute had disappeared, as well as the fragile vestments; she had not taken her entire wardrobe aboard the yacht.

Pete was still grumbling over her treatment of him. It was ungenerous, unfair, he contended; she was coldly ignoring all his prowess of the afternoon and evening and dwelling only upon a single incident in which he felt entirely justified in exercising reasonable precaution.

"I'd have gone down the coal chute myself if you'd only waited a minute," he said. "You didn't give me a fair chance."

"I notice you didn't follow me," she answered contemptuously. "You waited for me to find my way out of the cellar and open the kitchen door."

"Well, what was the use——"

"Please open that can of tongue. Do you want me to die of hunger?"

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He shrugged gloomily and attacked the can. Mary picked up the telephone instrument and called for a number. Presently she was talking.

"Send Miss Norcross to the telephone."

Pete repressed a start and worked steadily with the can-opener. But his ears were alert. As for Mary, she appeared to have forgotten his presence.

"Oh, Nell; is that you? This is Mary talking. No; I'm not in Larchmont. I'm *home*. Oh, yes; we were there. But something awful happened. I want you to come around here right away. I've just got to talk to you; I need your advice. What? No; I can't tell you about it over the 'phone; it would take too long. Please hurry; it's important. I—I want your moral support. I'm afraid the beginning of the end is here, and you just can't desert me now. You've *got* to come. All right. Take a taxi, if you can find one. But hurry, anyhow."

As she replaced the receiver Pete Stearns was facing her. And then she remembered. A slow flush came into her cheeks.

"I've been guessing for a long time that there was something queer about you," he observed, with a cynical smile. "So it's 'Miss Norcross' at the other end of the wire, is it? And who are you?"

"You had no business to listen to a conversation," she said angrily.

"Strikes me it was stupid of you to forget I was here, Miss Norcross—Wayne—or whoever you are."

He eyed her maliciously.

"So it's the beginning of the end, is it? Well, let me in on it."

Mary returned her glance defiantly.

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"I have nothing to say to *you*," she said. "It isn't any of your business."

"But, of course, you don't deny you're an impostor?"

"Well, if it comes to being an impostor, Mr. Valet, I don't believe you'll stand very much investigating."

Pete regarded her calmly.

"Let's form an alliance," he suggested.

"An alliance of what? Fraud?"

"Something like that. I see you confess it."

"I confess nothing," she retorted hotly. "And I don't care for an alliance."

"It might pay," he said, thoughtfully. "If we keep up the teamwork I believe we can get by yet. Between my ingenuity and your references——"

"Stop!"

Mary was shuddering at the allusion to references. Not only the thing itself, but the very word, had become hateful.

"Don't talk to me," she ordered. "I won't discuss anything with you."

Pete shrugged and pushed a plate of crackers and cheese toward her.

"Let's talk about your friend, anyhow," he suggested.

Mary rose to her feet abruptly and ran toward the door that opened into the hall.

She opened it half-way and stood there, listening. Then she turned and beckoned mysteriously. When he had joined her she whispered:

"I thought I heard something—down-stairs. Listen."

For half a minute neither spoke.

"Sounds like somebody talking," he said, in a low

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voice. "But it seems far away. Maybe it's out in the street."

She shook her head.

"I'm positive it's in this house. It's down-stairs. There! Hear it?"

He nodded.

"Maybe Aunt Caroline and the rest of 'em have come home again," he suggested.

"No; it's a man's voice, but it's a strange one. It's—burglars!"

"It might be, of course," he assented.

"Let's telephone for the police. Hurry!"

"No. Let's investigate first. We can telephone afterward."

He stepped softly out into the hall and started toward the front of the house. Mary seized his arm.

"Isn't there a pistol—or something—that we could take?" she whispered, nervously.

"Don't believe there's a gun in the house. Bill doesn't own one—except a shotgun."

"Get it."

He tiptoed toward Bill's room and reappeared with a double-barreled weapon, the mere sight of which gave Mary a thrill of reassurance. It was unloaded, but Pete did not disclose that fact.

In single file, with Pete leading, they moved cautiously along the hall in the direction of the main staircase. At the top of the flight they paused. There was a light burning in the lower hall. Mary pinched him and pointed at it.

"I'm going back to telephone the police," she said.

"Not yet. Wait!"

He started gingerly down the staircase, the shotgun thrust boldly forward in order not to betray its utter

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unpreparedness. Mary hesitated, but when he had descended half a dozen steps she followed, curiosity overwhelming her.

They heard the voice again, more clearly now:

"Understand, now; no noise. If we make a racket we'll have the bulls here. The first man makes a noise gets what's comin' to him."

Pete and the girl exchanged glances.

"A whole gang of them!" she said, in a frightened whisper.

Pete placed his finger against his lips and descended half a dozen steps more. She crept along behind him, clinging to the banisters.

The Marshall mansion was of old-fashioned construction. Over many of the doors there were transoms. This was true of the door that separated the library from the lower hall. As the pair of adventurers halted again and leaned stealthily over the railing they could see that there was a light in the library. The door was closed, but the transom stood open nearly to its full width.

Through the transom they could view a rectangular section of the library floor. Ordinarily, from where they stood, a table would have been visible, a chair or two, and a rug. But now table, chairs and rug had vanished and there was nothing but smooth parquetry.

"They're packing up the things!" gasped Mary.

Pete answered with a gesture imposing caution.

As they watched the open space in the library a man stepped into view. He came to a halt and, from where he stood, was visible to them from the waist up. He did not look exactly like a burglar; he was too well dressed to fit Mary's notion of the fraternity.

He was too stout, also, for Mary's idea of a burglar called for a lean and hungry Cassius. As he paused in the center of the library, he made a commanding motion with his arms. It was a sign for silence on the part of persons who were invisible to the watchers on the staircase.

Then he began to speak again.

"Now, what I said about keepin' your lips buttoned goes. Get me? I'm runnin' this and I don't want to have any trouble. There ain't goin' to be any yellin' or stampin' or any other kind of noise, except what can't be helped. Everybody understand that, now?"

There was a murmur from an unseen throng, and evidently an assent, for the speaker nodded.

"And I want everybody to be careful not to break nothin'," he continued. "You don't want to break no chairs or tables or nothin' like that. And be careful of them pictures on the walls."

"Why, they're going to take every single thing!" murmured Mary, in a shocked voice.

"S-sh. Wait!" answered Pete, staring wide-eyed at the man whose body was

framed in the transom.

"All right, then," the man was saying. "Only don't forget. The gentleman who give us the use of this house is a friend of ours and we don't want to get him into no trouble."

"Aw, we're wise; we're wise," remarked a voice whose owner they could not see. "Start somethin'."

Mary was clutching Pete's arm and staring at him with widely questioning eyes. The gentleman who gave the use of the house! Why——

"Now, the winner of this bout, gents——" The beefy man was talking again. "The winner of this

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bout is goin' to be matched against the champion. Everything here is strictly on its merits. The men will wear six-ounce gloves, accordin' to regulations. Both of 'em was weighed in this afternoon at three o'clock, with the scale set at one hundred and thirty-five, and neither of 'em tipped the beam. And the bout goes to a finish."

There was a rumbling chorus of satisfaction from the invisible audience, and the speaker checked it sharply.

"Lay off the noise, now. That's just what we ain't goin' to have. You guys paid your good money to get in here and I guess you don't want trouble any more'n I do. Now, in this corner is Charley Collins, the Trenton Bearcat, lightweight champion of New Jersey."

As he spoke another person stepped into the field of vision. It was unquestionably the Bearcat. He was a blond-haired youth of sturdy proportions, clad in a breech clout, a pair of shoes and two six-ounce gloves. He nodded carelessly in response to the introduction and began testing the floor with his feet.

"In this corner," continued the stout man, "is Kid Whaley, pride of the East Side."

Whereat came briskly into view Signor Antonio Valentino. He was grinning cheerfully and bowing right and left. There was a suppressed murmur of admiration. Whatever his omissions as a sculptor of Carrara marble, the Kid had neglected nothing that would make his own body a living statue of grace and brawn. Save for the twisted nose and the tin ear, he was an undeniably fine specimen. His attire matched that of the Bearcat.

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"Now, when I say 'Break,'" remarked the master of ceremonies, addressing himself to the Kid and the Bearcat, "I want you to break. Understand! Hittin' with one arm free goes, but no rough stuff in the clinches. And when you break, break clean and step back. No hittin' in the breakaways. All set?"

The two young gentlemen in breech clouts nodded nonchalantly.

"Go to your corners."

The Kid and the Bearcat stepped out of sight, and likewise the beefy man.

"It's—it's awful!" stammered Mary Wayne to her companion on the staircase. "Make them stop it!"

Pete viewed her with a look of amazement.

"Stop it?" he echoed, incredulously. "What for? Why, this is a bout they've been trying to pull off for the last two months. Stop it? Why, we're lucky to be in on it!"

There was nothing but horror in Mary's eyes.

"Then I'll get the police to stop it!" she hissed. "I'm going to telephone now."

"And get Bill Marshall into all kinds of trouble?"

She hesitated. Doubtless it would make a great deal of trouble for Bill Marshall, not only with the authorities of the law, but with Aunt Caroline. He deserved the worst, of course, and yet—— Ever since the middle of that afternoon she had felt that the administering of justice to Bill was something that lay properly in her own hands. If she had cared to analyze the matter closely she would have found that it was not justice she sought so much as vengeance.

And while she still hesitated at Pete's reminder, a bell sounded in the library.

She looked again toward the open transom. The

Kid and the Bearcat were in view again, no longer nonchalantly inert, but in animated action. Their bodies were tense and swaying, their arms moving in a bewildering series of feints, their feet weaving in and out in a strange series of steps that seemed to have an important relation to their task. The Bearcat was grim, the Kid smiling contentedly.

Suddenly the blond one shot an arm forward and behind it lunged his body. Mary clutched the banister. But Signor Antonio Valentino, still smiling, merely flirted his head a few inches and the gloved fist went into space across his shoulder. At the same time, he seemed to be doing something himself. Mary could not, with all her inexperience, discern exactly what it was, but she saw the Bearcat's head snap backward and she heard him grunt audibly as he clinched.

"The Kid'll eat him," whispered Pete. "Gee, I wish I had a bet down!"

Mary shuddered. She decided to go up-stairs, but somehow she could not release her grip on the banisters. She felt that she ought to go away and hide from this horror in Aunt Caroline's library. Even if she could not move, at least, she thought, she could close her eyes. But when she tried to close them, somehow they persisted in staying open.

The two young sculptors on the other side of the transom were now entering upon their artistic task with amazing speed and zest. Sometimes it took them entirely beyond the vision of the watchers on the staircase. Then they would come zigzagging back into view again; first their legs, then their bodies, then

their flying arms and low-bent heads. There was a constant smacking and thudding of gloves, a heavy padding of feet on the parquet floor. Now and then Mary

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heard the sharp voice of the beefy man: "Break! Break clean!" Once she saw him stride roughly between the panting pair reckless of his own safety, fling them apart with a sweep of his arms and say something in a savage tone to the Bearcat. But no sooner had he passed between them than they met again behind his back; the Bearcat swinging a glove that landed flush on the celebrated tin ear.

The bell rang again. Kid Whaley stopped an arm that was moving in mid air, dropped it to his side and walked quickly away. The Bearcat also walked out of sight.

Mary felt as if she could breathe again.

"Thank Heaven, it's over!" she said.

Pete looked at her pityingly.

"It's just begun," he explained patiently. "That was only the first round. There may be a dozen or fifteen, or twenty, or Lord knows how many yet before they finish it. It won't end till one of 'em goes to sleep."

"To sleep? How can any man fall asleep when somebody is pounding him all over the head and body?"

"Wait and see," answered Pete with a grin.

But Mary was not minded to wait and see. All that filled her mind was resentment and horror that Aunt Caroline's library should have been loaned by her unredeemed nephew for such an awful purpose. She had a new account to square with William Marshall. She did not intend to tell Aunt Caroline; she would spare that shock to her benefactress. She phrased a little silent prayer of thanks because Aunt Caroline was safely removed from the scene of blood

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and violence. But there would be no softening of the blow when she came to deal with Bill.

"I'm going down to stop it," she said suddenly.

Pete seized her arm and held it.

"You can't think of it!" he said, in a shocked whisper. "You'd only be insulted and laughed at. And besides——"

He was about to remark that it was too excellent to stop when the bell rang for the second round.

To Mary it seemed no different from the first round. The two young men in breech clouts alternately flailed and hugged each other, the referee constantly danced between them crying, "Break!" and the stamping of swiftly shifting feet echoed

again through the darkened recesses of the big house. Then another bell and another period of waiting.

"This Bearcat is good," explained Pete, carefully. "He's better than I figured him. The Kid'll get him, but it may take him some time. Do you notice the way the Kid handles that left? Isn't it beautiful?"

"It's—it's horrible."

"Oh, not at all; it's clever. This other boy has a pretty neat left himself. But it's his right that the Kid's watching, and he'd better, for it's wicked. Only trouble with the Bearcat is he telegraphs every punch. Now, when they come up again I want you to notice—— S-sh! There's the bell."

Mary, still gripping the banister, gazed with horrid fascination at the further desecration of Aunt Caroline's black walnut library. And yet, while the spectacle outraged her eyes and violated all the standards by which she measured domestic life in the American home, a subconscious partisanship was breeding within her. She hated this Whaley, almost as much as she

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hated Bill Marshall. Why didn't the blond bruiser annihilate him forthwith? Why didn't he make an end of the thing at once? Why wasn't Kid Whaley beaten ruthlessly to the floor and stamped under foot, as became his deserts?

She lifted her hand from the banister and clenched her fists. She was not aware that the cave woman was awakening within her, but it was. She thought she was still horrified; and so she was—in the civilized part of her. But Mary Wayne did not possess a hundred per cent of civilization, nor do any of her sisters, although she and they may be ignorant of the lesser fraction of savagery that hides within.

The third round was followed by a fourth, a fifth and a sixth, and still she stood on the stairway, with a conscience that cried aloud in behalf of Aunt Caroline and a surge of primitive rage that demanded victory for the Trenton Bearcat. Pete Stearns was wholly given over to the spell of the battle.

Came the seventh round, more furious than any that went before. The invisible crowd in the library was becoming vocal. Throaty voices were demanding blood. And blood there was, for the Bearcat's crimson nose paid tribute to the efficiency of the Kid, while over one of the Kid's eyes was a cut that witnessed the counter prowess of the Bearcat. Some of the blood was dripping on Aunt Caroline's parquet floor, but not enough for the crowd.

Round eight. The Kid sent two lefts to the face without return. They clinched. The Kid uppercut to the jaw in the breakaway. The Bearcat swung right and left to the head. The Kid landed a right to the body, and followed it with a hook to the jaw. The Bearcat came back with a volley of short-arm jabs,

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rocking the Kid's head. The Kid rushed, sending right and left to the face. They clinched. The Kid swung a left to the jaw. It shook the Bearcat. The Kid——

Mary Wayne, following all this with blazing eyes and panting bosom, wholly free to sense the combat in its larger aspects because she knew nothing of its superb technique, was leaning half-way across the banisters, a battle-cry hovering on her lips, when her quick ear caught the sound of a key turning in a lock. It had the effect of a cold shock. She was the civilized woman again.

Fear and apprehension turned her eyes in the direction of the front door. Yes, it was opening. Police? *No!*

Aunt Caroline Marshall, Bill Marshall, the butler, and a file of the Marshall servants!

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CHAPTER XXIV

Aunt Caroline—Referee

As Bill stepped into the hall he glanced in dull surprise at the single light that was burning there. And soon he became aware of a din in the library. For an instant his bewilderment increased. Then came sickening comprehension. The Kid was pulling it off to-night. He had changed the date. Why? And why, again, had fate summoned Aunt Caroline to the feast? Bill put a hand against the wall to steady himself. He turned fearful eyes toward his aunt.

She was already in action. On occasion she was a brisk lady, despite her years; she was not timorous. Something she did not understand was taking place in her house. She proposed to look into the matter herself. Before Bill could clutch her arm she darted along the hall and flung open the door of the library.

She never really appreciated the beauty of what she saw. Like Mary Wayne, she was untutored in its scientific nicety and its poetic movement. She merely sensed that it was red carnage, titanic, horrific. Just what happened is most easily described by referring to the official version of the eighth round, which was uncompleted in the last chapter.

The Kid rushed again, landing left and right to the head. The Bearcat wobbled. The Kid stepped back, measured his man, and sent a right to the body. The

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Bearcat's hands dropped to his side. The Kid drove a terrific blow to the jaw, and the Bearcat crashed over on his back, completely out.

The official version does not say that when the Bearcat prostrated himself in dreamless slumber he did so with his head lying at the feet of Aunt Caroline, who drew aside her skirts with housewifely instinct and stared down at his battered, yet peaceful countenance. The Bearcat never slept more soundly in his life; so

profound was his oblivion that Aunt Caroline, in her inexperience, thought he was dead.

She looked up and saw a stout man waving an arm up and down and counting. She saw Signor Antonio Valentino, poised and panting, waiting in vain for the Bearcat to rise again. Beyond she saw, through a haze of smoke, the faces of strange men. None of these persons whom she saw as yet appeared to be aware of her own presence, or that of Bill Marshall, who was now staring over her shoulder. They were all too utterly absorbed in the slumberous bliss of this young man from Trenton.

"Ten!" said the stout man triumphantly, as though it were an achievement to count as high as ten.

Then he seized Kid Whaley's right arm and held it high in air. There was a hoarse roar of joy from the crowd. Two young men whose bodies from the waist up were clad in sleeveless jerseys rushed forward and hugged the Kid deliriously. They upset a bucket of water in their agitation, and it flowed across the parquetry, to mingle with the powdered rosin. Two other young men, similarly attired, sprang into the picture, seized the Trenton Bearcat by the heels and dragged him into an open space, where they could more readily lay hands upon him.

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And then everybody at once—except, of course, the Bearcat—seemed to observe Aunt Caroline Marshall, standing in the doorway. They froze and watched. Slowly she raised a finger until it pointed at the breast of the Kid.

"Murderer!" she cried.

The Kid blinked in amazement.

"Murderer!"

The stout man who had counted so excellently shook himself and spoke.

"There ain't nobody been murdered, ma'am. Everythin's all right. He won't be asleep more'n a coupla minutes."

Aunt Caroline turned upon him in a blaze.

"Who are you? Who are all these men? What have you been doing? How do you come to be in my house?"

She surveyed her library—the wet and rosined floor, the rugs heaped in a corner, the chairs piled against the wall, the tables with men standing on their polished tops. Was it really her house? Yes; it must be. There was no mistaking that portrait of her grandfather, still looking down from its accustomed place on the wall.

She centered her gaze once more upon Signor Valentino, advancing as she did so. The signor backed away, plainly nervous.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded. "How dare you break into my house?"

The Bearcat had been propped up in a chair, and his seconds were squirting water over him, employing a large sponge for the purpose. He had not yet responded to the reveille. There was an uneasy stir

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among the crowd. The men were trying to unfasten a window.

Aunt Caroline was still advancing when Mary Wayne pushed Bill Marshall aside and darted into the room.

"Come away! Please!" she cried, seizing Aunt Caroline's arm.

The mistress of the Marshall mansion turned a dazed glance upon the social secretary, uttered a little shriek of recognition and embraced her.

"Oh, my dear child! You're safe!"

"Of course. Please come up-stairs."

Suddenly Aunt Caroline stiffened and thrust her away.

"What do *you* know about this?" she demanded.

"Nothing—absolutely nothing. Oh, *please* come away. You mustn't stay here."

"I am entitled to remain in my own library," said Aunt Caroline, in stern tones. "And I propose to stay here until I discover exactly what this means."

And as she stood in the middle of the cleared space, she looked far more like a conqueror than Kid Whaley.

Bill Marshall, who had been standing in an awed trance at the doorway, abruptly came to life. He leaped forward with a yell. Aunt Caroline, the Kid, the Bearcat, the seconds, the crowd—all had vanished from his vision. He saw nobody but the social secretary. Her he gathered into his arms, lifted clear of the floor and hugged violently to his breast.

"Oh, girl," he muttered. "Oh, girl, but I'm glad to see you."

Mary gasped. She struggled. She tried to push

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herself free. But Bill was oblivious to all but his honest joy.

"Oh, girl!" he murmured, over and over again.

The crowd, which had been moving restlessly, became immobile again. It forgot even Aunt Caroline.

Mary Wayne writhed frantically in the grip that held her. Her feet, inches clear of the floor, beat the air impotently. She worked an arm free and tried to strike, inspired, perhaps, by a memory of the battle; but a series of futile slaps was all that resulted. She stormed at him; she tried to slay him with her eyes. But Bill Marshall only smiled happily, bent his head and kissed her on the freckles.

"Oh, girl!"

At last he set her free, placing her gently on her feet and gazing at her with an intensity of admiration that ought to have made any woman proud. But Mary was in a cyclonic state of rage and consternation. She swung an open hand against his ear with a crack that resembled a pistol-shot, and fled ignominiously from the room. Bill looked after her, nodding his head proudly and grinning wide.

"Oh, girl!" he whispered.

Aunt Caroline tapped him sharply on the arm.

"William, do *you* know what this means?"

Bill rallied from his ecstasy and began to scratch his chin. He neither knew how to approach nor to evade explanation. Kid Whaley went generously to the rescue. He had draped a bath-robe over his shoulders, and now accosted Aunt Caroline with the assurance of a gentleman who regards himself fittingly garbed for an occasion.

"It's like this," said the Kid. "We got t' have a place t' pull off this mill, see? So Bill says th' fam'ly's

goin' off yachtin', an' we c'n come over here, where it's all quiet an' no bulls t' horn in, an' go as far as we like. He gives me th' keys an'——"

Aunt Caroline halted him with a peremptory hand, and turned to Bill.

"William Marshall, is this true?"

Bill drew a deep breath and managed to look her in the eye.

"Yes, Aunt Caroline."

"You gave this creature permission to conduct a prize-fight in *my* house?"

"I'm afraid I did."

"And then you brought me home to be a witness——"

Kid Whaley interrupted her.

"Nothin' like that," he said. "Bill didn't know we was pullin' it off t'-night. It wasn't comin' till next week. Only I got trained down kinda fine, see? I was li'ble to go stale. So th' Bearcat, he don't mind, an' we touches it off t'-night. Y' wouldn't expect a guy t' wait till he gets stale, would y'? I ain't makin' myself a set-up f'r nobody."

Aunt Caroline eyed Kid Whaley from head to foot.

"You have never been a sculptor, of course," she said in a bitter tone. "I might have known better. Of course, I placed confidence in my nephew. I shall take care never to do so again. You are nothing but a low prize-fighter, it appears."

The Kid was beginning to glower. There is a dignity that attaches to every profession, and those who rise high should always endeavor to maintain it.

"I'm a pr'fessional athalete," said the Kid, wrapping

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his robe about him. "There ain't nothin' low about me. I'm goin' t' fight th' champeen."

Aunt Caroline studied him with narrowing eyes.

"Bill, y' oughta been here," continued the Kid, turning to his patron. "Y' oughta seen th' mill. Take it from me, this Bearcat is good. He gimme a run. I got nothin' against him f'r it. Knocked him stiff in eight rounds, Bill. Say, if I'd had th' champ in here t'-night I'd 'a' done th' same thing. Bill, I'm gettin' better every time I put on th' gloves. Six months from now I'm gonna be champeen, Bill. Get me! *Champeen!*"

The Kid expanded his chest under his frowsy toga and glanced condescendingly at Aunt Caroline. It was time she acquired a proper perspective concerning his exact status, he thought.

"Out of my house!" she said sharply. "Out of my house—everybody!"

There was a sudden movement of the crowd, a slacking of tension. Men started crowding through the door into the hall. The Trenton Bearcat, groggy as to head and legs, went with them, supported on either side by his seconds. The stout man who had been general manager, announcer and referee, seized his coat and elbowed his way toward freedom as though seized with panic. A window had been opened and part of the crowd began flowing out through that.

Kid Whaley turned nonchalantly, sought a chair and began unlacing his fighting-shoes.

"Leave my house—at once!" commanded Aunt Caroline.

He glanced up with a confident grin.

"Y' don't think I'm goin' out th' way I am?" he

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inquired. "I got chucked outa this house once; I'm goin' when I get ready now."

Aunt Caroline turned to her nephew.

"William, I want this person out of the house—immediately."

"Beat it, Kid," said Bill tersely.

Kid Whaley regarded his patron with faint surprise.

"What's th' idea?" he asked. "Y' gimme th' run o' th' place. Y' gimme th' keys. Now y' want t' gimme th' bum's rush."

Bill Marshall was suddenly sick of the whole affair. He had no pride in his exploit. He was even acquiring a dislike for Antonio Valentino. And all this revulsion was quite apart from his fear of consequences at the hands of Aunt Caroline. He wanted to be rid of the whole business; he wanted a chance to go up-stairs and

explain things to Mary Wayne.

"Beat it—the way you are," he ordered. "Go on, Kid."

Kid Whaley twisted his lip into a sneer.

"Gettin' cold feet, eh? That's th' way with all you rich guys. Puttin' on th' heavy stuff. Oh, well; I guess I got nothin' t' worry about. I'll be champeen in six months."

"Move quick!" said Bill sharply.

"What f'r? Just because th' old dame——"

Bill reached forth, seized the Kid by an arm and brought him to his feet with a single heave. He was beginning to get angry.

"Get out of this house," he said, shaking him. "Do you understand me?"

The Kid wrenched himself free and swung an upward blow that landed on Bill's ear.

"William!" cried Aunt Caroline.

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"Don't worry about me, Aunt Caroline," said Bill grimly. "Just leave the room, please."

"I shall not leave the room. I want you to——"

"I'm going to."

And he made a rush for Kid Whaley.

Bill Marshall was a large young man. So far as the Kid was concerned, he had every advantage that goes with weight. He was also something better than a mere novice in the use of his hands. But he did not have the skill of Antonio Valentino, nothing like it; nor his experience, nor his generalship. He simply had a vast amount of determination, and he was angry.

He missed a good many blows, whereas the Kid seldom missed. But the more often Bill missed the more resolved was he that Kid Whaley should leave the house a chastened artist. One thing that encouraged him was the fact that the Kid was not really hurting him. For several minutes they utilized all the available floor space.

Aunt Caroline had retreated to a corner, where she was standing on a chair, her skirts gathered about her. Frightened? No. She was giving Bill Marshall plenty of room. There was a battle-light in her eyes. And Bill, busy as he was, began to hear her voice, coming to him as though in a strange dream:

"Will Marshall, don't you let that creature beat you! Do you hear that? William! Look out! Don't you way. I expect you to thrash him, William Marshall. I want him thrown out of this house. *Thrown* out! Do you hear that? William! Look out! Don't you see what he's trying to do? There! Strike him again, William. Harder! Again,

William; again!"

Aunt Caroline was stepping around on the chair-seat

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in her agitation. Her fists were clenched; her eyes blazing; her nostrils dilated. The butler and the servants and Pete Stearns, who had crowded to the doorway, looked at her in amazement.

"Keep on, William; keep on! I want him punished. Do you understand? I want him beaten! Harder, William! There! Like that—and that! Oh, dear; I can't think——Oh, what is it I want to say?"

What dear old Aunt Caroline wanted to say was "Atta boy!" but she had never learned how. She wanted to say it because matters were suddenly going well with Bill.

Kid Whaley, shifty as he was, had been unable to stem the tide of Bill's rushing assault. A right caught him on the tin ear, and he went down. He was on his feet in a flash. Another right caught him, and he went down again. This time he lingered for a second or two. When he got up Bill managed to land a left on the jaw. Down went the Kid. But he was game. Once more he got to his feet.

There was a shrill call from Aunt Caroline, who was now dancing on the chair.

"William, remember that you are a Marshall!"

Bill remembered.

The Kid went down. He got up. He went down. He got up. He went down—and stayed.

Bill Marshall stepped back and surveyed his work grimly. Two young men in jerseys came slinking forth from a corner and moved toward the prostrate warrior. Bill greeted the nearest with a critical inspection.

"Are you one of his seconds?" he asked.

"Uhuh."

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Bill calmly let fly a punch that knocked him over two chairs.

He turned to the other youth.

"Are you a second, too?"

"No, sir," said the youth, hastily.

"You're a liar," said Bill, and knocked him over three chairs.

He stooped, lifted the quiet form of the Kid and tucked it under his arm. As he made for the door the servants gave way to him. Through the hall he marched solemnly, bearing the burden of his own making as though it were merely a feather pillow. Through the front door, down the stone steps and across the sidewalk he carried it. Pausing at the curb, he dropped Signor Antonio Valentino

into the gutter.

As he reentered the house, his mood gravely thoughtful, two young men who had waved towels for the conqueror of the Trenton Bearcat slid out a side window and hurried around the corner to see what had become of their hero.

Bill encountered his aunt in the front hall. He regarded her doubtfully.

"I am very sorry, Aunt Caroline," he said quietly, "that you had to see this thing. I asked you to leave the library, if you remember."

Aunt Caroline clasped her hands and looked up at him.

"Why, William Marshall! It was perfectly splendid!"

Bill scratched his ear and shook his head helplessly.

"I give it up," he said.

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CHAPTER XXV

William Develops a Will

Then he remembered something that had been on his mind all afternoon and evening. He wanted to see Pete Stearns. Although he had not encountered him, he took it for granted that Pete must be in the house, inasmuch as his secretary was there.

"Where's Pete Stearns?" he demanded of the butler.

"You mean your valet, sir?"

"Yes."

"He was here a moment ago, sir. Shall I look for him?"

"Tell him I'm going to lick him. No; wait. I'll look for him myself."

With stern deliberation Bill made a search of the first floor, then went up-stairs and began on the second. In his rooms he discovered the man he wanted.

"Put up your hands," said Bill quietly. "I'm going to lick you."

"Why, Bill!"

Pete was never more profoundly astonished.

"Hurry up," said Bill.

"Haven't you licked three men already? What in blazes do you want to lick me for?" demanded Pete.

"For running away with my girl."

"But I didn't do anything of the kind. Instead of

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running away with her I brought her home, Bill. You don't understand."

"You bet I don't. Ready?"

"No, I'm not ready." And Pete sat on the couch, crossed his legs and clasped his hands around one knee. He knew that Bill Marshall would not open hostilities against a defenseless opponent. But he knew also that in order to avert ultimate castigation he must make an excellent explanation. He decided to tell the exact truth.

"Stand up and be a man," ordered Bill. "We're going to settle things right now."

Pete shook his head firmly.

"Not on your life, Bill. I'm going to tell you a story first. After that——" He shrugged. "Well, after that, if you decide to lick me, you can do it. But if you ever do lick me, Bill Marshall, remember this: I'll poison your coffee some day, if it takes me the rest of my natural life. I'm not going to be a worm. Now, listen."

While Pete was making his explanations up-stairs, Mary Wayne and Aunt Caroline were below, viewing the wreck of the library.

"Part of it was done by my nephew," remarked Aunt Caroline, as she pointed toward several overturned chairs.

Mary blushed at the mention of Aunt Caroline's nephew. Her humiliation in the presence of a crowd of strange men still rankled deep.

"It was awful of him," she said indignantly.

"Not at all," said Aunt Caroline. "Not at all, my dear. But you were not here when it happened, so you cannot be expected to understand. Do you see those chairs? My nephew knocked two men clear

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across them." She viewed the wreckage almost affectionately. "And before he did that he thrashed a prize-fighter. Yes, my dear; thrashed him and carried him out of the house. Right in my presence he thrashed three men."

Mary Wayne opened her eyes wide. Was it possible she had never discovered the real Aunt Caroline before?

"He thrashed them completely," added Aunt Caroline, with a slight lift of her head. "It was most thoroughly done. I do not believe anybody in the world could have done it better than my nephew. He is very like his father."

Mary gasped.

"My nephew is a true Marshall. I am very much pleased."

"I—I'm so glad to hear it," said Mary faintly.

"Yes, indeed, my dear. Why, do you know——" Aunt Caroline paused to indicate the spot on the floor. "Right where you see me pointing he struck this vulgar prize-fighter senseless. Oh, it is absolutely true. I saw it all. I was standing on that chair over there. My nephew was here." She indicated. "The other man was standing here. It happened exactly as I am going to show you."

And Aunt Caroline proceeded to enact in pantomime the events that led to the downfall of Kid Whaley, reproducing as nearly as she could the exact methods employed by her conquering nephew. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright when she had finished. Mary Wayne was overcome with astonishment.

"But—but the prize-fight that took place before?" faltered Mary.

"That is another matter," said Aunt Caroline, with

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a wave of her hand. "A minor matter, I think. Now, are you sure you understand exactly what my nephew William did?"

She was preparing to reenact the scene, when they were interrupted by a ringing of the door-bell and a few seconds later by the arrival of Nell Norcross in the library. Nell viewed the wreckage in one swift glance and ran forward with a cry.

"Mary Wayne, whatever in the world has happened?"

Aunt Caroline glanced quickly from one girl to the other, then smiled.

"You two young people are so excited over this thing that you are getting your names mixed," she said.

Nell clapped a hand to her mouth, consternation in her eyes. Mary sighed, looked at Aunt Caroline and shook her head.

"No; we haven't mixed our names," she said. "You may as well understand all about it now, Miss Marshall. I'm—I'm an awful impostor."

Aunt Caroline showed more evidence of perplexity than alarm.

"This is Nell Norcross," said Mary, in a miserable voice. "I am Mary Wayne."

"Dear me!" said Aunt Caroline. "More things to be explained. Well, come back into the sitting-room, both of you. I suppose somebody has been making a fool of me again. But whoever you are, my dear, don't let me forget to tell your friend about my nephew William."

She led the way to the sitting-room. Mary and Nell exchanged glances as they followed. Aunt Caroline was bewildering.

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When they returned to the library half an hour later Bill and Pete Stearns were standing there, the latter rendering a vivid narrative of the great battle between Kid Whaley and the Trenton Bearcat. Aunt Caroline walked directly over to the valet.

"I understand you are a Stearns," she said.

Pete made an acknowledgment.

"A grandson of Eliphalet Stearns?"

"Yes, madam."

"Don't 'madam' me. You have done quite enough of that. A son of Grosvenor Stearns?"

"Yes, Aunt Caroline."

She glowered at him for an instant, then her lips began to twitch. But she rallied herself.

"Your grandfather and your father were enemies of my house," she said. "They were both very bad men. I still think so."

Pete wore a pained look, but made no answer.

"But I believe there is some hope for you. Not, however, in the field of theology. In that connection, I will say that I expect you to make a personal explanation to the bishop. I never can. My nephew's secretary has been telling me something of what happened at Larchmont and also on the way home from Larchmont. For a Stearns, I think you have done fairly well."

"Thank you—Aunt Caroline."

Miss Marshall bit her lip.

"I think you may omit that," she said, but not with the severity that she intended to convey. "As I said, you did fully as well as could be expected of a Stearns. For your deception of me I shall never forgive you. That is understood. But I shall not let that stand in the way of safeguarding the reputation of my nephew's

secretary. It will be necessary, of course, for you to marry her."

Aunt Caroline was serious again. She meant what she said. She had certain rooted ideas concerning proprieties and they had not been dislodged by the events of a day given over to the shattering of ideals.

Bill Marshall choked. Pete gaped. Nell Norcross went white at the lips and turned away.

"But," began Pete, "it seems to me——"

Aunt Caroline raised her hand.

"It is unfortunate, of course, that she must marry a Stearns. It is not what I would have chosen for the girl. But there shall be no such thing as gossip connected with any person in my household; I will not endure it. You owe her the name of Stearns, poor as it is. I have not discussed the matter with her, but I feel that she will see it as I do."

Bill was watching Mary Wayne with horrified eyes. His knees grew suddenly weak when he saw her nod.

"I have no doubt it is the best thing to do," said Mary.

As she said that she cast a swift glance at Bill Marshall, then bent her head. Nell had crossed the room and was staring out of a window. She was holding a handkerchief to her lips. Pete Stearns was plainly frightened. He looked in the direction of Nell, then at Mary, then at Aunt Caroline, and last of all at Bill.

"There need be no immediate hurry about the wedding," observed Aunt Caroline, "so long as the engagement is announced. I have no doubt the bishop will be glad to perform the ceremony." Turning to Mary: "You can attend to the announcement yourself, my dear."

Mary slowly raised her eyes. Her glance met that of

Pete Stearns. It wandered to the figure of Nell, then back to Pete. And then—could he be mistaken?—one of Mary's eyes slowly closed itself and opened again.

"I'll make the announcement whenever you wish, Miss Marshall," said Mary.

"To-morrow," said Aunt Caroline.

Bill Marshall emerged from his coma.

"Not in a million years," he cried.

Aunt Caroline lifted her eyebrows.

"Not while I'm on earth."

Nell Norcross, still standing by the window, half turned and glanced toward the group. She was very pale. Pete Stearns was trying to catch her eye, but she was looking only at Mary.

"Why, William!" said Aunt Caroline. "I do not see how the matter concerns you at all."

"Nor I," said Bill's secretary, throwing him a defiant glance.

"Well *I* know how it concerns me," shouted Bill. "Before she marries Pete Stearns there's going to be red, red murder! Understand?"

"But, William, she has already said she is willing," said Aunt Caroline.

"I don't care what she says. She doesn't know what she is talking about. She's crazy. There isn't a chance in the world of her marrying Pete Stearns. I'll not stand for it."

Pete again intercepted Mary's glance.

"If she is willing to marry me," remarked Pete, "I don't see where you have any ground for objection."

Bill swept him aside with an arm-thrust that sent him a dozen feet across the room.

"From now on I'm going to manage my own

affairs," he announced grimly, "and this is one of them. I'm tired of taking doses that somebody else prescribes for me. I'm through running for society on the opposition ticket. I'm going to do as I please."

"William!"

He glanced at Aunt Caroline, then shook a finger directly under her nose.

"See here, Aunt Caroline—I'm not going to let you marry her off to Pete Stearns, and that settles it. There isn't going to be any argument about it. She's going to marry *me*!"

"Mercy!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline. "Why, my dear, is this true?"

She turned to Mary Wayne, who met her with innocent eyes.

"Of course it is not true," answered Mary. "I never thought of such a thing."

"Then you'd better begin thinking of it," warned Bill, "because that's exactly what's going to happen. This is my affair and I'm managing it."

Mary did not deem that it was a politic time to discuss compromises. She had too long a score against Bill Marshall. Inwardly, she was having a glorious time, but it would never do to let Bill know it.

"Do you think that marrying me is *entirely* your affair?" she demanded.

"Absolutely."

"That I have nothing to say about it?"

"Nothing whatever," said Bill sternly. "Not a word."

"Why, you——"

For an instant Mary feared that she was really going to be angry. This was more than she expected, even from Bill Marshall.

"I won't be talked to in that manner!" she exclaimed, stamping a foot "I—I'll marry Mr. Stearns."

Bill sent a dangerous look in the direction of his valet.

"If you want to see him killed, just you try it," he said. "We've had enough nonsense about this thing. There's going to be no more argument."

Even Mary could not but marvel at the change in Bill Marshall. He seemed suddenly to have grown up. He was not talking with the braggadocio of boyhood. Rather, he had become a man who was desperately resolved to have his own way and would not scruple to get it. But her time had not come yet.

"I'll marry Mr. Stearns," she repeated perversely.

"Aunt Caroline," said Bill quietly, "it's all settled. Miss Norcross and I are to be married."

There was an exchange of glances between Pete, Mary, Nell, and Aunt Caroline. The latter smiled at her nephew.

"Of course," she said, "if Miss *Norcross* wishes to marry you, William, that's different entirely. But this isn't Miss Norcross, you know; this is Miss Wayne."

And she laid a hand on Mary's arm.

Bill devoted seconds to an effort at comprehension, but without avail. He found four persons smiling at him. It was disconcerting.

"Your name is not Norcross?" he demanded.

Mary shook her head.

"It's Wayne?" he faltered.

"Mary Wayne."

"But, how the——"

He paused again to consider the astounding news. Somebody had been playing tricks on him. They were

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laughing even now. Suddenly his jaw set again. He transfixed Mary with steady eyes.

"Well, leaving the name part of it aside for a minute, let me ask you this: whose secretary are you?"

"Yours," answered Mary.

"No argument about that, is there?"

"None at all. I always made it perfectly clear that I was your secretary."

"Good," said Bill. "I have a matter of business to be attended to in the office. Come along, Miss Secretary."

He picked her up, tucked her under one arm and walked out of the library. Mary was too amazed even to struggle.

Aunt Caroline stared after them and shook her head.

"Do you know," she said, turning to Pete, "I have a notion that William will have his way about this matter."

"You're damned right he will, Aunt Caroline," said the theological student.

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CHAPTER XXVI

Without References

The transaction of Bill Marshall's business required upward of half an hour. When it came to driving a bargain, Mary Wayne admitted that he was ruthless and inexorable. He rode rough-shod over opposition; he crushed it.

"You're worse than a trust," she said, wrinkling her nose at him.

"I'm a monopoly," he admitted. "I've got the whole world."

Mary sighed and began straightening his tie.

"But you treated me so badly," she complained.

"Because I loved you," he said, kissing her some more. "Do I have to explain that all over again?"

"Oh, well, Bill Marshall; if you object to explaining——"

"Confound it! Did I say I objected? I *don't* object."

"Then let me see if you can explain it twice in the same way."

So Bill explained all over again. The explanation may not have been in identical words, but it amounted to the same thing. It rumpled Mary's hair all over again and left her freckles swimming in a sea of pink.

"Oh, Bill!" she whispered, hiding her face.

When they came down from the skies and recognized

the familiar details of the office, Mary asked a question.

"Bill, do you think Peter is really serious about Nell?"

"Why?"

"Because she is—terribly."

"Well, then, if he isn't I'll break his neck."

"That's dear of you, Bill; I want her to be happy."

A moment afterward:

"Bill?"

"Yes?"

"What do you think your aunt will say about—us?"

"Let's find out."

They discovered Aunt Caroline in her sitting-room. She glanced over the top of her gold rims and marked her book with her finger.

"Well, what now?" she demanded, but her tone was patient. "Have you attended to your business affairs?"

"Yes, Aunt Caroline," assented Bill. "I've decided to give up society."

"William, I think possibly society has given up you. But I have no complaint to make. I have been thinking it over, and it seems to me that if you care to go into business——"

Bill interrupted her.

"Aunt Caroline, you're stealing our stuff. We've already decided that. I am going into business. I don't know just what—but I'm going."

"That can be decided later," said his aunt. "I'm very glad, William. I think perhaps I made a mistake in attempting—— But we won't discuss that any more."

Mary Wayne was fidgeting.

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"I have also decided to abandon my interest in art," observed Bill.

Aunt Caroline regarded him suspiciously.

"William, be careful. Are you sure you are quite well?"

Bill laughed.

"Never better. Now, as to Pete Stearns——"

Mary, who had been growing more and more restless, placed a hand over his lips. Then she ran forward, dropped to her knees and buried her head in Aunt Caroline's lap.

"He's teasing us—both of us," she said in a muffled voice. "That isn't what we came to say at all."

Aunt Caroline stroked the small head.

"And what is it you want to say?" she inquired.

Mary looked up suddenly.

"Will—will you let me marry Bill Marshall—Aunt Caroline?"

The eyes behind the spectacles were smiling.

"Just for calling me 'Aunt Caroline,'" she said, "I believe I will, my dear."

Mary hugged her.

Presently she and Bill went to hunt for Pete Stearns and Nell, who were reported to be in the conservatory. As they departed, Aunt Caroline called:

"If William requires you to give references, my dear, just come to me."

Mary uttered a small shriek.

"References! Oh, please! If anybody ever says 'references' to me again I'll just die. Bill, you'll have to take me without any at all."

Bill took her.

Aunt Caroline readjusted her spectacles and opened her book.

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"There is only one thing that really upsets me," she said, half aloud. "I shall never find out what they say about Mrs. Rokeby-Jones's elder daughter."

THE END