

Danforth's Dilemma

Written Specially for The Western Home Monthly.



MR. HOWARD DANFORTH, alias John Detch, alias Mortimer Ritter, alias H. L. Davis—by which last he was just now registered in the office below—this gentleman of many appellations sat in his room on the third floor back, before a coal fire, toasting his shins and cogitating on his fortunes.

Looked at in one light, these were at the very ebb. If payment had been demanded he could not have put up the money for the fire before which he was comforting himself, much less for the delectable dinner he had eaten some hours before. But payment was not demanded. Being a specious gentleman of good address, with a fine, open countenance and a large and stylish portmanteau, he was welcomed to the privileges of the accommodating hostelry without question.

Besides this outward show, which was always a large part of his stock in trade, his entire capital consisted of two twenty-five cent pieces, a Columbian half dollar, and an unlimited amount of "nerve." Upon this latter Mr. Danforth relied, both to take him through certain tight places, and to replenish his funds when that became absolutely necessary. It had become necessary now, and he was only waiting until the proper time to take prompt and effective action.

The goddess Fortune, his only acknowledged mistress, had placed in his hands the opportunity for the replenishment of his purse. That opportunity took the shape of a bridal couple, who had arrived that morning with an atmosphere of love and three trunks. The groom was a slight, pale young fellow with a downy moustache; the bride, a willowy girl, so enveloped in furs that one could not see her face, but with a deliciously small ankle and a charming turn of the wrist when holding up her skirts. These things Mr. Danforth admired, as became a man of taste; but most of all was his attention attracted by the sparkling ear drops that twinkled from under her veil. He was an amateur in diamonds, and knew a good thing, when he saw it, as well as Grubb, the pawnbroker—who, by the way, could be counted on to discount those same diamonds if luck turned that way. An examination of the register, and a little casual conversation with the clerk, showed these young people to be Francis Drummond and wife, and that they were established in a suite of rooms on the third floor front.

And so Mr. Danforth sat and meditated on these things, and waited for the clock in the church tower around the corner to strike three, which was his hour for business. This rule of action was based on a great deal of practical investigation as to the precise time when people sleep soundest. As every keen observer knows, two o'clock in the morning is the hour when the world turns over in bed, yawns, and goes to sleep again; and, for good reasons, three o'clock is the time when it is again sleeping soundly.

By way of preparation, Mr. Danforth carefully removed his pointed patent leather shoes. Then he opened his bag and extracted therefrom a pair of heavy felt slippers, which fastened about the ankle with an elastic. He also took out a silver mounted revolver. It was not loaded, and was only intended to display to persons who happened to be wakeful, and who were disposed to express surprise at the presence of an unknown and unbidden visitor. In all his experience, which extended over some five years of fortune hunting in two hemispheres, he had met but one man who cared to look into the muzzle of the revolver and at the same time make a disturbance. This man had compelled Mr. Danforth to hit him between the

eyes with his left and "upper cut" him with his right, before the intruder's exit was undisputed. He now adjusted the slippers, placed the ornamental firearm in his right hand coat pocket, and resumed his attitude of shin toasting.

Half an hour later, when the clock struck three, he was at the door of the suite on the third floor front. How he got through the door it is not necessary to state, but to a man of his experience a lock or a bolt was as little binding as a spider's thread, and to give away the secret of unbolting a door from the outside would be a poor bit of policy. He found himself in a dressing room. With a match that had neither the crackle of the "parlor," nor the odor of the "sulphur," he lighted the gas. In the bed room beyond a tiny night lamp was burning, and he paused for an instant at the door to make sure of the regular breathing of the sleepers. Then he turned to the toilet table, which stood between the windows. It was overspread with a most elaborate and tempting display. There were silver backed brushes of all sizes and kinds, hand mirrors and tiny teeth mirrors, cut glass perfume bottles, knives and scissors, and dainty powder boxes.

Mr. Danforth looked at all these with a loving eye; he could appreciate fine things, even though they belonged to another. He even touched his cheek with perfume, and smoothed his hair a little, as he looked into the mirror. He was really a very good looking fellow.

But other matters pressed. Opening the top drawer he fumbled through it. There was a profusion of neck wear, collars and cuffs, underclothing and fine linen. There were also buttons for the cuffs, studs of fine gold, and pins of precious stones, but Mr. Danforth put them aside. He opened the next drawer. The linen was finer. It was fluffed and ribboned. There was a suspiciously large pile of handkerchiefs in one corner. He lifted them and disclosed a jewel box of soft leather. His eyes sparkled, and he snapped up the lid. The diamonds within sparkled back at him—two as prettily set stones as he had ever seen, in ear drops; a brooch of diamonds and rubies; a splendid tortoiseshell comb topped with rare diamonds. Then there were some rings of various sorts, a pretty little pearl necklace, and a bracelet.

He selected a large silk handkerchief and wrapped the jewels in it carefully, making a neat bundle, which he put into his left hand coat pocket. He closed the box and replaced it. He even laid back the linen and smoothed it into place, for he liked order. Then, having put things as he found them, something possessed him to go into the further room, where the sleepers were.

He walked quickly on flat foot to

the door, and after listening a minute, entered. The night lamp cast a dull glow over the objects in the room. The light fell on the face of the sleeping woman, and warmed into a pleasing color the hair that lay on the pillow. She was lying on her side, with her arm thrown out, and her lips just parted in the effort of respiration. Mr. Danforth went a step nearer. She turned a little, and the yellow ruffle of her gown fell away from her throat. He could see her face clearly. He stopped, grasped nervously at the footboard, and put his hand to his eyes; then it went involuntarily to his left pocket. He leaned farther over and peered hard into the girl's face. His lips smiled, but there was no smile in his eyes. "Louise!" he muttered, and the room with the little dot of light faded away. In its place he saw a long stretch of white beach with the waves coming in, lap, lap. The sandpipers "teetered" along the shore, and the gulls screamed in the sky. He saw a big white umbrella, and under it a girl sketching, while at her feet lay a man reading aloud from a magazine. Once he caught up her hand and kissed it. The face of the girl was the same that lay on the pillow, and the man was Howard Danforth.

He thought of a good many things that had happened that summer, and he thought of them a little sadly. Things turned out queerly, very queerly; if it had not been for—but he smiled grimly, and put that behind him.

The room seemed to be getting very

she asked despairingly, as they ran into the hall.

"Nothing," he answered, ignoring the first question. He recalled afterwards how beautiful she looked in her loose white wrapper, with her hair fluffed about, and fright in her eyes. They went to the staircase. A battalion of black smoke and red flame charged up at them.

"There's a stairway at the other end of the hall," said Drummond; "perhaps we could go by that."

"No use," panted Danforth, and he pointed to the flame that was already licking around the corner at the far end of the hall. "We'll have to go by the window of your room."

They got into the room and shut the door. Danforth began to uncoil the big rope. "It's not very dangerous if the fire doesn't get here before we get away. You must go first, Mrs. Drummond. Better put something under your arms so that the rope won't cut you. So—" and he slipped the loop over her shoulders and drew it tight. "Now, if you are ready, get out on the sill and let yourself over. We'll hold you perfectly secure, and it won't take a minute."

She hesitated for the shadow of a second. Her face grew white. Then she turned and kissed her husband, and stepped quickly upon the window sill. She swung off, bumped against the wall, and cried out. The men lowered her rapidly, but for all that it seemed as if she would never reach the ground. It was getting hotter, and the little waves of smoke were oozing in by the door.



FARM HOME OF JAMES J. JAMIESON, NEAR GLADSTONE, MAN.

hot. Perhaps he was nervous; yet there were few things, no matter how startling, that could upset his coolness. But what was all that rumble from the street below, and what—? He raised his head and sniffed the air. Just then a cry floated up to him from below, a boy's shrill voice, and it said, "Fire!"

Simultaneously, he heard the clang of a patrol bell. He went into the outer room. It was hotter than the other, and his nostrils smarted. He jerked open the door and went into the hall. The smoke rolled heavily along it. What was to be done must be done quickly. Catching up a white wrapper of flannel from a chair, he bounded back into the sleeping room. He laid his hot hand on the forehead of the man. The jar wakened him, and he sat up wonderingly.

"Get up," said Danforth. "The place is on fire! Don't stop to dress, but tell your wife to throw on this wrapper. Hurry!"

"What is it?" said the girl, startled suddenly into consciousness. "What is it, Frank? Who was that?"

But Mr. Danforth was already in the outer room. He stepped to the window and looked down. The street was full of men. He felt of the rope that hung coiled on a hook by the window.

"We will try the stairway first," he said, as the Drummonds joined him. The husband had hurriedly donned his trousers, and was struggling with his coat.

"Howard, is it you?" exclaimed Mrs. Drummond. "How did you come to be here? And can I take nothing?"

At last the rope slackened. They could see her lifted in the arms of men, a white dot in the blackness. The rope swung free, and Danforth pulled it back with great jerks.

"No! No!" interposed Drummond. "I can slide down it. It will take too long to lower me, and you mustn't take any risks. Wait till I get my wife's jewels; I can save them." He made a dive for the drawer, and took out the jewel case, which he slipped into his pocket. The glass in the transom crackled, and the flames peered in and lit up the room.

"Did you ever swarm down a rope?" asked Danforth, as he looked at the young man's hands.

"No, but I can try. If I fall—" But the other cut him short, and flung the noose over his head, almost roughly.

"Now you're off," he urged, and the young fellow went over the sill. He was not heavy, but Danforth was out of training. His muscles strained and his joints cracked, as the rope paid out slowly. His eyes smarted, and once he had to take a hitch around the hook, and lean out for breath. Then he shut his eyes and lowered away, but his breath came fast and his head was dizzy.

Again the rope slackened. With a gasp Danforth sprang upon the sill and let himself over. He twisted his leg into the rope and swung off. He breathed more freely after he got away from the window, but the hemp grew hot under his hands, and he thought he must let go. But again his mind helped his muscles, and he still went down; down, past the second story