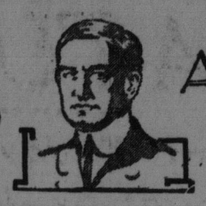
CRAVATH WINS



A SERIES OF TEN STORIES BY JOHN T McINTYRE

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING STORIES

CRAVATH is an athletic young fellow in search of $1000. His quest for the coin leads him to a gilded cafe, where he can most readily get rid of his sole remaining cash. Luck favors, however, and he meets his Boswell, the narrator of his subsequent adventures, in the person of a good-natured promoter of athletic sports named Scanlon. It so happens that the latter is in the dumps. His "white hope," a mammoth specimen of stonemason that he had matched to fight the "Gravedigger" at the Pelican Athletic Club, has decided not to risk having his beauty spoiled in the ring. The purse is $1000, and as that is just the amount Cravath needs, he agrees to be a "ringer." It seems that the thousand is the price of a certain dueling pistol belonging to a Miss Betterton, then in Europe, with whom Cravath is in love. When he recovers it, he gets the girl. She wants the pistol because it is her sole and only claim to aristocratic lineage. One of her ancestors used it when he seconded a gentleman in a duel, so it is proof positive that the ancestor was a gentleman.

When Cravath enters the ring, he goes after the thousand as rapidly as possible—in the first place, because he needs the money, and in the second, because he is not in trim to stand a long fight. The "Gravedigger" goes down, and the "white hope's" substitute walks away with the coin.

Next day the papers are full of the sensation—an aristocratic amateur has entered the professional ranks and pounded the other fellow for what there is in it. Most scandalized of all are "Old Blaylow" and his son, who are intent upon taking Miss Betterton and her money into their family. Blaylow calls upon Cravath at his suburban home, to induce him to give up his claims to the young woman, but without avail. In the afternoon, however, Cravath is obliged to call up Scanlon and impart the information that the thousand has been stolen. Suspicion, of course, attaches to Blaylow. In the night the two repair to Blaylow's house, where the money is supposed to be hidden in a Flemish cabinet. Unfortunately, another has taken up the quest before them, and he gets away with the money. Not to be outdone, they pursue the thief and rob him, regaining the missing money.

Still determined, "Old Blaylow" induces a racing man, who is the worse for wear, to borrow Cravath's thousand to bet on one of his superannuated thoroughbreds. But Scanlon gets on to the game in time, and substitutes a live horse, so that the money is not lost.

Next the two buy the pistol. But Cravath is visited at his home by a beautiful woman, a sister of young Blaylow, who palms a bogus weapon off on him. The men suspect, however, that the dealer has "done" both parties, so they visit him and bluff him into disgorging the genuine firearm.

Taking another tack, the Blaylows endeavor to have the real pistol stolen by a Swedish butler, whom they "plant" in Cravath's home, but the plot is discovered, barely in time.

A cleverer plot is next hatched. Cravath is requested to show the curious old pistol to an antiquarian friend who has been hurt in an automobile accident and cannot leave his house. When Cravath lays it on a table, there is a mysterious upset, the antiquarian is bowled over and the pistol is gone. Again Cravath and Scanlon suspect that a butler has been subsidized. They force him to admit it, and get the pistol from young Blaylow, who has taken it and hidden in a recess behind a Venetian panel.

Hard luck next besets the friends. Cravath's mother goes on a visit to a country estate, and they start to call on her, taking the pistol with them. They get into an empty house, are taken for burglars, lose the pistol, and are only released when Cravath's mother comes along in an automobile. The pistol is then restored to them.

Hearing that Miss Betterton is about to arrive from Europe, Cravath and Scanlon hire a launch called the Stork's Chicken, to go down the bay to meet the steamer on which she is a passenger. Cravath tells Scanlon that he has the pistol with him, and Blaylow's spies are of the same belief. So the Blaylows hire a tug, which sinks the launch. When the excitement is over, Cravath tells them the pistol is reposing in a safety deposit vault.

Determined to the last, the Blaylows organize a plot by which one of their employes is enabled to steal the pistol as Cravath is taking it out of the trust vault to give it to Miss Betterton. By an error, however, one of their men reveals the theft, and the pistol is restored.

(CONCLUDED)

X—The Last Adventure

OF COURSE I was not to win a lady fair. Nevertheless, I felt particularly good on that last night. Than Cravath I had never met a better fellow—ready, courageous, simple—and his good fortune affected me, perhaps, more strongly than any of my own would have done.

"A game boy," I told myself, as I sat in my room at the hotel; "a game boy with the makings. He'll get on."

To be sure, I could have done so; indeed, there was every excuse for it, but the fact remains that I did not let my thoughts go back to what I was at his age. In my case the fight had been, and was to be, infinitely harder, and the reward infinitely less. No, I didn't allow my mind to rake up the embers of old, burned-out struggles. There was no good feeling there, and I wanted particularly to go on feeling good that night.

"It's a triumph for the boy," I said; "a real triumph. He has conquered his enemies. He has won his bride much as the knights of old won theirs. Tonight is the night upon which he comes to his own, and I don't want to go harking back to any old things which are stark and cold. Life and light and love for tonight, and, maybe, tomorrow night I'll give a few moments to my own private despairs."

However, I had no large confidence in my strength, and of that, I think, was born the resolve to go to Allen's.

"At Allen's," said I, "there are lights; there is food and drink; there are women and men. I will go to Allen's, forget the past and remember the present only."

Then I rose up and attired myself in my dress clothes. With my hair brushed and my face closely shaven, I fancied that the contrast of black and white became me well.

"Smooth old wine and smooth old music are what are needed in my case," I said, finishing my examination; "and if only there was a friendly soul to confide in between the glasses, it would be all the better."

Allen's was much different from the place in which I had met Cravath first. The "hip-hip-hurrah" element were kept away by the simple process of lifting the ante beyond their reach, and it was particularly not the place which a disappointed man would select while he matched his capacity against the establishment's stock. But it had "class," and class was what I was in search of. For this was the sort of celebration that must be carried through with care.

"Of course," I thought, as a respectful Celt slipped a chair under me at a secluded table, "it has nothing to do with Blaylow fails naturally into one shape—the Betterton pistol. Let me but hear his name, and I grow suspicious; let me but hear of things in which he is concerned, and my eyes begin to narrow, searching for a plot. This girl expects to meet Blaylow, the contents of her handbag—grotesquely shaped contents, if I'm not deceived by the bag—causes her some anxiety, and my state of mind immediately suggests the Betterton flintlock.

"Oh, yes, I know." I would more than likely have proceeded, "the pistol is at this moment in the hands of Miss Betterton herself, or, perhaps, it is lying beside the table, where both she and Cravath can see it, and he is telling of his adventures, of the mishaps he has met with since he recrossed the ocean to get possession of it. That the pistol should be in the bag there upon the chair is absurd."

Nevertheless, I allowed my soup to grow cold while studying the bag. Once, as I lifted my eyes from it, I found the lustrous ones of its owner fixed upon me. And the expression of the eyes was unquestionably suspicious.

Before this incident she had paid, as far as I could see, not the slightest attention to me. From that on, however, she manifested a quick interest in every move I made.

"The thought that Blaylow will not come," I thought, "resulted in a vague fear of the bag's contents. And now that lateral fear has crystallized upon me. That I may have designs upon it, plainly gives her concern."

The bit of fish placed before me was delicious, and I tried to enjoy it. But interest in other things makes even the most delicate cookery tasteless.

"Here is a dainty young lady in a fashionable restaurant," I told myself; "everything about her speaks of taste, training and wealth. Yet she carries a bag that sounds like a plumber's kit. Handbags of such delicate texture were never meant for more weighty service than the small requirements of a female temporarily away from home. Of course there may be times when a sterner call may be made upon them; but I cannot reconcile the portage of so much hardware with the true customs of life. This thing is unusual and queer, and I'd like to go deeper into it."

More than ever the shape within the bag became grotesque in my eyes. It could not be any small article of female necessity; curling irons would not be so heavy, a powder puff not so long; a hand mirror would have another shape.

"But a flintlock dueling pistol," said I, "would be just about so when enveloped in a bag like that."

Now, the thought dawned strongly upon me that I must see this thing which so excited both my suspicions and my imagination; but how was I to do so? This was being turned over carefully in my mind, when a turn of fortune favored me. My ill-concealed interest in the bag, and, possibly, my very proximity, lifted the tide of conjecture to such a height in the young lady's mind that she suddenly became uncertain as to whether or not the calamity which she feared had not already befallen. I could see this idea shape itself. The sudden fear in her eyes, the tightening lines about her mouth, her startled grasping for the bag were all as plain as spoken words could have been. The feel of the thing must have told her that all was as it should be; but she had evidently got beyond the point where the evidence of anything but her eyes would serve. Opening the bag, she glanced within. One glance was enough; she knew that all was well. And one glance—a brief one, and from an awkward angle—was also enough for me. Within the bag was the Betterton flintlock.

"I allowed my soup to grow cold while studying the bag"

"With a quick snatch, I had the bag; and found myself gazing into the smiling face of Cravath"

With renewed confidence, the young lady closed the bag and sat back in her chair. I, too, sat back, but with every grain of confidence scattered to the winds. Gone was everything that I had counted upon; gone was the picture of the happy Cravath, and at the pretty dinner table, lighted by candles under rose-colored shades. Instead of being at his journey's end, he was still out upon the dark road, his troubles, like snowflakes, thick upon him. There was no more visioning of a happy girl, delighted at the address and readiness of her lover; there was no more sentimental loneliness upon my part, and there was no need of further celebration.

"There is nothing to celebrate," I said to myself, "unless it be Cravath's defeat. And to that I refuse to drink."

I poured out a glass of purple wine, which I drank. There followed another and still another in rapid succession. Then, considering myself fit to take up the outlines of any mental performance, I filled the glass once more and placed it before me much as an ancient priest of the boose god might have done.

"Now," said I, "let me think of a piece of clever devilitry, for here before me is still another beautiful bunko artist. Who knows, indeed, but that it is a second sister of Blaylow's? And if she is as deft of hand and quick of mind as the first, she's some chicken."

And, as far as I could see, she lacked nothing of the other's skill. For the fact that she had outwitted Cravath—and to know that she had outwitted him one had only to look at the bag upon the chair—was proof of it. And it was more than proof, for the Cravath of these last few days was a far more wily Cravath than he of those before. He was more careful, more crafty, his eyes were quicker to pierce intentions and cut through the rind of guile. He knew more of the under side of humanity. And he believed less.

"She's clever," I said to myself, my eyes upon the purple mysteries in the glass before me. "Oh, yes, she must be clever. But is she going to turn out clever enough to get that weapon into the hands of Blaylow, when fortune has hailed me in such timely style? Is she going to get by with this effort, when here I sit, blocking the way? Well, I think not."

Plans crowded upon me—plans full of swift action and quaint surprise—gorgeous plans, rich in intricate steps and tremendous in their climaxes. The purple wine was an undoubted success; it inspired me; my thoughts raced along at top speed. I emptied the glass, refilled and emptied again. And as I set it down, the purple stains heavy upon its rim, I sighed gently that my lot had not been cast two flights higher. It should be a nation, and not an obsolete firearm, that I was called upon to save.

Her maiden alarm dispelled, and convinced that she had not lost her prize, the suspicions of my fair neighbor did not diminish. On the contrary, they seemed to increase. Furtively, she watched my performance with the bottle and glass. Once I felt sure that she was going to change her table. Indeed, she had already arisen, but she sat down again, with the manner of one who would rather chance those things which she had some knowledge of. Apparently, she did not care to venture into a part of the restaurant where she'd be readily seen.

"Very beautiful," I thought, studying her at my case, "very beautiful and of exquisite taste. However, she has not the steadiness of a heroine or of a female crook of the experienced sort. She lacks the poise of manner necessary to those who do or get things. But," after a moment, "she fooled Cravath, so she must have a punch which she doesn't keep on display. Yes, yes, she's clever enough for that. She's got the best of him somehow, and all this pretty timidity might be paraded for its effect upon me."

I laughed at this. It seemed the very pinnacle of humor; never had there been a situation in the world's comedy more deliciously preposterous. I meant the laugh to be one of a private nature, but in issuing it, it got the better of me, and probably roared some. I know that a few of the guests and all of the waiters looked in my direction. My neighbor was visibly agitated.

"How," I wondered, "did she slip it across on Cravath? I'll bet when I hear it I'll laugh my head off. I can see him now, with a long face and a devil-take-me air, and when I hand him the pistol he'll begin to shine and smile like all possessed. Maybe he'll try and hide the facts from me; maybe he'll be backward in explaining just how she got around him." I was hugely amused at this idea; indeed, I was about to break into another laugh, but recalling the looks of guests and waiters, I held it safe. "It will be funny to watch him if he gets off the story," I chuckled; "it'll be awfully funny. And then, when I hand him the pistol—"

At this point I stopped laughing and sat up straight. In order to hand him the pistol I must first get it. There it was in the bag, almost within reach; but how should I gain possession of it?

The bottle stood with a light at its back and a small, sparkling quiver ran through its purple soul. I smiled at this in remembrance.

"Oh, yes," I said, "there is the plan, still imprisoned in the bottle. Well, here's luck. Let us hope I run it out in this drink."

I drank the wine, touched my lips with the napkin, and waited for the stirring of the thought. And as I waited I watched the girl.

"There are some measures," I reflected, "that would be gross enough to pull this entire fabric of delight into a commonplace police court case. If I were one of those, I would grab the bag, call the waiters and accuse yonder off-colored angel of robbery. There would be a scene; she would scream, the guests would be scandalized, I would be looked at askance, the proprietor would be in despair."

I abhorred the whole idea; to a man who had consumed a bottle of a beautiful drink the thing was clumsy and raw.

"Tact and aplomb should be called into play," I agreed. "Some skill has been required in days past in dealing with delicate matters; the old diplomats were charmingly cautious in even their most deadly moments; the iron hand was ever hidden by the velvet glove. I think," thickening my brows, "some such methods are necessary here."

I brushed some stray crumbs from my coat, smoothed my hair and sat very erect. I cannot figure just what my expression was; what I tried for, however, was one of careless ease, the contented look of a man well fed and at peace with his fellows. And while assuming this pose I narrowly watched for an opportunity.

This same narrow look was what did the business. It was evidently so extremely narrow that it frightened the suspicious beauty over the last line of self-control. About to get up, she overturned a glass of water. And so, napkin in hand, I moved to the rescue, righted the glass, said a number of disconnectedly polite things, moved her chair so that she might avoid the flood, and called her waiter.

The first shock over, she grew remarkably calm. I had encountered that sort of thing before. Once or twice I caught a flash of what might have been a smile, and was therefore in a mood of much self-approval.

"To move gently upon the enemy is the proper scientific method," I thought. "The other way gets you nothing."

After the excitement died and the waiter had departed, she said;

"Thank you."

Ordinarily, that would have been my cue to go back to my own preserves, but just then I ignored the suggestion. This was the place where the diplomacy began; there might never come another such opportunity.

So I bowed politely.

"Only too glad to have been of service," said I. Then I called up a smile. "As Mr. Blaylow is not here, you see, I will, to some extent, take his place."

I saw her eyes widen, but, however, there was no trace of the former agitation. She seemed to have put that aside for good.

"Mr. Blaylow?" she said, inquiringly.

"I heard you speak of him when you came in," I explained.

"Oh, yes." She looked at me quietly. "So you know him?"

"Very well."

There was a pause, during which I sat down. She did not resent this; indeed, I am not at all sure that she noticed it.

"It is a privilege to know so capable a gentleman as Mr. Blaylow," she said after a time.

"Why, I don't know but what it is," I answered. "His show of nerve is very consistent. However, his speed is nothing to brag of, and he has pulled up lame more than once. When you look at his record from one particular angle you see no victories marked up to his credit."

"From one particular angle," she said, in a musing sort of way. "I think I understand."

I smiled knowingly, but did not reply.

"Is it, do you think," she asked, "because he lacks interest in the matter in which he has failed?"

"Believe me," I assured her, "his interest there is very close to his heart. As far as I know, he would much prefer to succeed in this and place his losses elsewhere."

She nodded gravely and tapped the table with the edge of her fingers. In a moment she looked up with a smile.

"It was not always Mr. Blaylow himself who failed," she said. "Sometimes he had assistants. And they, it seems, did no better than he."

"In a number of cases," I answered, "he did employ others, and as you say, the result was failure."

"All this," she said, "seems to indicate an opposing strength of no small consequence. Failure after failure must mean that the force at hand, and the intellect as well, was of a lower order than that of the persons attacked."

I shook my head.

"As to that," said I, "I have not been able to make up my mind. Chance sometimes operates tenaciously in favor of a given person."

The smile she now gave me was something of an enigma.

"Suppose," she suggested, "that the things were to do over again—suppose that tonight there was to be another attempt—" She paused there; but the purple wine had fortified me against a like caution, and I said, humorously:

"Another attempt upon the Betterton pistol?"

And now her smile became a laugh.

"Why, yes," she said, "seeing that you are so candid about it, let us suppose that another such attempt were to be made tonight. And suppose it were to be made, I recall that she looked me squarely in the eye as she said this, "by still another employe of Mr. Blaylow's. What chance would there be of success?"

I leaned my head upon my hands as though to get a better view of this problem. But really it was to hide a laugh. Little wretch, she was mocking me! With all the assurance in the world, she inquired as to the possibility of a thing she had already accomplished. Splendid girl! I lifted my head and looked longingly toward my own table, where there was still some remaining inspiration. I longed to drink just one long glass to her ability, but falling that, I said:

"Why, as to the chances tonight for success in such a thing, I would mark them as being good."

"Ah!" she said; and I noted that she looked down at the bag beside her. "And why better tonight than previously?"

"When a man fails repeatedly," said I, "it must tell him, if he be a man of brains and experience, that he should increase his efforts; he should add to the strength of his aggression. Mr. Blaylow I know to be such a man. I am quite confident," and I waved a hand with subtle significance, "that if he made another try tonight, he would select an aid of surpassing cleverness."

She laughed once more. Previously her laughs were subdued, even if quite frank; now, however, there was a free ring to it, that showed great calisation.

"She is flattered," said I to myself; "she is flattered as well as amused."

She put her handkerchief to her eyes and then looked at me joyfully.

"Please forgive me," she said; "I did not mean to be rude; indeed, I am very glad to have met you. In fact, I wouldn't have missed the opportunity for anything. And so you think," the corners of her mouth curling deliciously upward, "a last attempt would necessitate the employment of some one of surpassing cleverness."

I nodded emphatically.

"And not only that," I told her. "This eleventh-hour person would need to be possessed of superb confidence, of iron self-command; and covering it all there would be an air of appearing to be something which she was not."

A cloud passed over her face; it were as though this picture did not please her. However, she said, banteringly:

"She?"

"Or he, as the case may be," I hastened to add.

"And do you think there would be no chance of failure for this operator?" She was smiling again.

"The chances would be in favor of failure," I corrected her. "They would be greatly in its favor, in fact. But skill does much. The operator, if such a thing is attempted, will gain possession of the pistol."

She looked at the bag; and then affecting to set something wrong with the arrangement of the strings, she took it up and began trifling with them.

"You feel sure of this?" she asked.

"I am confident of it."

Again the shadow which I had noticed before passed over her face. But at almost the same moment there came a step behind me; glancing up, the cloud vanished, she was radiant as the sun.

"Blaylow!" I told myself. "I've dallied too long with the velvet glove idea; now I'll have to take up the scorned police court way out, after all."

"There is such a thing as excess of confidence," she told me.

"The pistol," said I, steadily, "will pass into the hands of the operator. But," and I arose, "it will not remain there."

She smiled sweetly; then she laid the bag upon the table and lifted her hands to do something with her hat.

"Oh," she said, "you think that, do you?"

With a quick snatch I had the bag, and then I whirled, a hand uplifted to strike, and found myself gazing into the smiling face of Cravath.

"Well," said he, "what's all this?"

"Oh!" said I. Then: "It's you, is it?"

He looked at the girl.

"I'm delighted," he said. "But how in the world you came to know Scanlon, I don't understand."

At this, her amazement equaled my own.

"Jimmy," she protested, "this is not Mr. Scanlon?"

"Well, it was when I saw him this afternoon at the Merchants' Trust," answered he.

She gazed at me for a moment in wonder; then she began to laugh. And seeing my helpless look, Cravath understood that something was wrong. He said to me:

"Is it possible that you do not know that this is Miss Betterton?"

I sat down helplessly.

"I came here to celebrate your victory," said I, bewilderedly. "I saw her with this," holding out the open bag, "and felt sure that it had been stolen from you once more."

Cravath also sat down. He and Miss Betterton were all but helpless.

"I saw," he managed to say after a few moments, "that the longer I kept the pistol the longer the suspense would be. So, instead of waiting until tonight, I took it to Miss Betterton this afternoon and told her the whole story."

Miss Betterton held out her hand.

"The whole story means the part that you played, too." Her smile was charming, but in a moment she was laughing again. "And all the time tonight you took me for a thief; it was me you meant when you outlined the skill and address of the 'operator.'"

"Why, of course," I said. "Whom did you think I meant?"

"Yourself!" she answered. "Upon seeing you watching me, and noticing your glances at the bag, I felt that I was about to meet with one of those adventures that Jimmy has been telling me of. And when you mentioned the name of Blaylow, and finally the pistol, I was sure of it."

I mentally plodded through the scene; as she talked with Cravath my eyes were fixed upon her. I had taken her for a crook; but how I ever came to do it I couldn's imagine.

"The house had been closed so long that I was afraid it would be dreadfully stuffy," she was saying as I came out of my dream of what had taken place, "and along with that, I would have had to ask Mrs. Fulton or Aunt Katherine. So at the last moment I made up my mind to come here, and telephoned you, too. And I brought Great-grandfather Betterton's pistol, so that I might have it near me while you told me all your experiences with it over again."

"It might be," I suggested to her, "that I would never have gone off upon that whirl of suspicion if I had not heard you speak of Blaylow."

"Anna told Mr. Blaylow that I was dining here tonight," she said to Cravath. "I was afraid he'd have the effrontery to follow me, as I'd refused to receive him." Then to me she said, with a pleased little laugh: "But I wouldn't have had it happen any other way for the world. For I'd have listened very often to you two men talking of all these delightful things, and I would have felt that I had played but a colorless little role in them, indeed. But, now," radiantly, "it is different. I have had a speaking part. It was given me at the last moment, to be sure, but I have had it, and that is the important thing."

Then, looking over our heads, she folded her hands upon the cloth before her.

"The waiter is hovering about in great anxiety, Jimmy," she said, persuasively. "I'm sure he expects an order." And while Cravath was giving it she leaned confidentially toward me. "Did I play my part well?" she asked.

"You heard what I said about the talents required by the person who would play Blaylow's last hand," said I. "Well, when I mistook you for that person, I think it shows that you were going ahead pretty well."

And at that she laughed, and laughed, and laughed, until, at length, I didn't care whether I got any dinner or not.

(THE END)