

all of this whirl. But it is only natural, and you'll get over it. You enjoy this sort of a life, and so do I. Why can't you wait and get love and riches from the same hand? I have brains, horse-sense, and business instincts, and out in Colorado the earth fairly throws the gold into our pockets. In a year or so—

"Well, and how much do you offer for me?" Margery's question came so icily that Tom was momentarily dazed.

"Everything I have," he answered quickly. "No, that is too much. Half of all I have."

This flippant reply again brought tears to Margery. "I am not for sale," she said with a choke. "Please go away, and don't come back. You need not wait out the week."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry," Tom replied. "Dad has an old friend here that he wishes me to meet and I want to see a little of the town. There is Coney Island and the Statue of Liberty. We don't have such things in Colorado, you know."

Mrs. Van Tromp entered quickly, and Tom saw by the amused twinkle in her eyes that she had overheard his last words; but when she saw Margery's tear-stained cheeks, her look changed to one of sharp interrogation.

"Bad news, Margery?" she asked.

"Auntie, this is a dear friend of my father, Mr. Meredith, of Colorado Springs."

Mrs. Van Tromp offered Tom her finger tips. "I fancy that I have heard Margery speak of you," she said coldly.

"It is quite possible," Tom answered, "since before Saturday I expect to announce our engagement to her parents."

Mrs. Van Tromp openly gasped at this abrupt declaration, but before she could reply luncheon was announced.

"May we have the pleasure?" Having regained her self-possession, Mrs. Van Tromp smiled courteously.

"I thank you," Tom replied, "but I shall be engaged until this evening."

"Well, my dear?" Mrs. Van Tromp appealed to Margery.

"I shall be pleased to see Mr. Meredith," she answered. "No doubt it will be for the last time, and—"

"Not necessarily," Tom answered. "I remain in the city until Saturday."

Giving no time for a reply, he at once made his adieu.

While Tom was dressing for dinner he began to wonder what sort of a fellow he had for a rival. Of one thing, he was certain, the man had both wealth and position.

"Hang it all," he growled; "it's these ambitious matrons that ruin the girls with their ideas of marriage. I'm practical; I wouldn't ask any woman to share poverty with me; but I don't come to Margery with only a heart to offer. I give my love, and something in the way of dollars and cents."

This line of reasoning did not give great comfort, for he turned away from the mirror with an explosive: "Dash it all, the other fellow can say the same thing!"

Irreproachably clad, Tom presented himself at the house where he had met with such a keen disappointment in the morning. Mrs. Van Tromp smiled and held out her hand in friendly greeting.

The gracious smile meant war, of this Tom was certain, and he held her hand firmly in his own until he fired his first shot. "I hope you will forgive me for robbing you of your niece."

Before Mrs. Van Tromp could reply, Margery, preceded by two ladies, entered the room. As Mrs. Van Tromp murmured Tom's name to her guests "Miss Troutman and Miss Elizabeth Troutman," both gave a start of surprise and their pale faces flushed to pink. Miss Troutman, after a wise nod to her sister, offered Tom her hand.

"Why, you are the young man we saw this morning in the square," she cried.

"Margery told us that we were to meet an old friend of hers, and to think that it should be you. Truth is certainly stranger than fiction."

"That is one of Miss Troutman's favorite maxims," Margery explained to Tom.

"Yes, and the unexpected always happens," Miss Elizabeth continued.

"I am rather inclined to accept the latter," Mrs. Van Tromp said with a meaning smile. "What is your opinion, Mr. Meredith?"

"I quite agree with you," he answered, glancing at Margery, who blushed and lowered her eyes.

Other guests now began to arrive, for Mrs. Van Tromp kept to the custom of an informal evening for old friends. Tom was taken in charge by Miss Troutman, and tried to listen patiently to the proofs of her theories, awaiting with subdued eagerness the arrival of one man. He was certain that Margery's confusion and her aunt's smile would at once tell him when his rival entered the room.

As soon as Miss Troutman joined the little group of courtiers about a Russian

countess, who came in upon the arm of a tall, elderly man of decided military bearing, Miss Elizabeth took her sister's place at Tom's side. Tom noticed that the escort of the countess went at once to Margery, and that a flush rose to her cheek when she looked up and saw who stood before her. But the possibility of a rival so many years his senior did not disturb him, and he listened with interest to what Miss Elizabeth was saying.

"I am so glad to talk with one who knows Margery's mother," she began, "for Mrs. Kessler was my dearest friend when we were girls. You know that when Margery's mother and father were married, it was considered a dreadful mesalliance; for he was then only a poor, private teacher, just out of college, and with no prospects. But it was a real love match, and it makes me happy that it has turned out so well. And please do not think me meddlesome, when I tell you that Margery has hinted to me the object of your journey. I am sure that she cares for you."

Tom could have hugged the frail little woman. "Did she tell you so?" he asked.

"No; Margery is not quite certain of

For an instant Tom felt as if the room whirled about him; then he gritted his teeth and threw back his shoulders. "I congratulate you," he said hoarsely; "with you the expected has happened."

"You are wrong," she answered lightly. "I confess that I looked for a different conclusion. Do you return to Colorado to-morrow?"

"Not until Saturday, as I had planned."

Mrs. Van Tromp was touched. "Believe me," she said, "I have done nothing to influence Margery's hasty decision."

While Tom was waiting for an opportunity to speak to Margery alone, Miss Elizabeth came to him. "Don't be unjust," she pleaded; "few girls would refuse General Thornton."

"General Thornton?" Tom repeated. "Not General Bob Thornton?" Why, he's an old chum of my dad's. He's been a sort of a mythical hero for me to worship ever since I wore kilts. And now Margery has—

He broke off abruptly as the full understanding of the situation came to him.

The day Tom started for New York, his father had given him a letter of in-

became even more animated than at the sight of his betrothed.

"Not old John Meredith's boy?" he asked.

"The same," Tom answered. Then, as if to get the matter settled as quickly as possible, he offered his congratulations. The men clasped hands and turned to look for Margery, but she had quietly slipped from the room.

"You must call upon me," General Thornton insisted as Tom turned to go. "Your father married my first love and turned me over to the Indians. But we didn't row about it; we were only made closer friends by your mother, who was an angel. Come to my quarters to-morrow. Mrs. Van Tromp and Margery will drop in for a cup of tea. You will meet Miss Daisy, my niece, and perhaps others."

Tom thanked him and went to Mrs. Van Tromp. "Good night," he said. "I shan't say good-by until Saturday."

"You still hope?" Mrs. Van Tromp's smile was incredulous.

"No," Tom answered; "I'm too modest; my training is against me. Life-long I've been told that General Thornton is the best man on earth, and—he smiled wearily—"I reckon that the best man will always win."

The following morning Miss Elizabeth was surprised at receiving a visit from Tom. The Misses Troutman lived in a very quiet hotel, the haven of several old-fashioned persons like themselves, who kept up a faded gentility on small incomes, and lived mainly in the past—the good old days before great wealth formed aristocracy, and when the social center of New York was far downtown.

Tom came at once to his errand and released Miss Elizabeth from her promise to tell Margery of her own unhappy love episode. "I shall do nothing more," he concluded, with a show of light-heartedness which did not for an instant deceive her. "I am not trying to play the unhappy hero, understand, but somehow, I can't back against a man who has always been held up to me as a model. If I were only certain that Margery cares for him,—I mean as a woman should care,—not simply respect, nor admiration for a past, but with an affection that will sacrifice as well as enjoy."

"I believe that your love is of this ideal kind," Miss Elizabeth said, sentimentally.

"No, it isn't," Tom admitted; "for if I were to do as I choose, I'd pick Margery up in my arms and run away with her. I'm afraid that Mrs. Van Tromp is right, and that I'm only half-civilized after all. But I'm man enough, I hope, to give General Thornton all credit, and if I went to Margery with a plea, or sent you, I'd feel as though I'd made an attempt at theft. I'm awfully obliged that you listen so patiently. It does a fellow good to tell his troubles once in a while,—sort of acts like a safety-valve. And I'm sorry that I must say good-by. I start for Colorado to-morrow."

"But without bitterness towards Margery,—or—other women?" Miss Elizabeth asked gently.

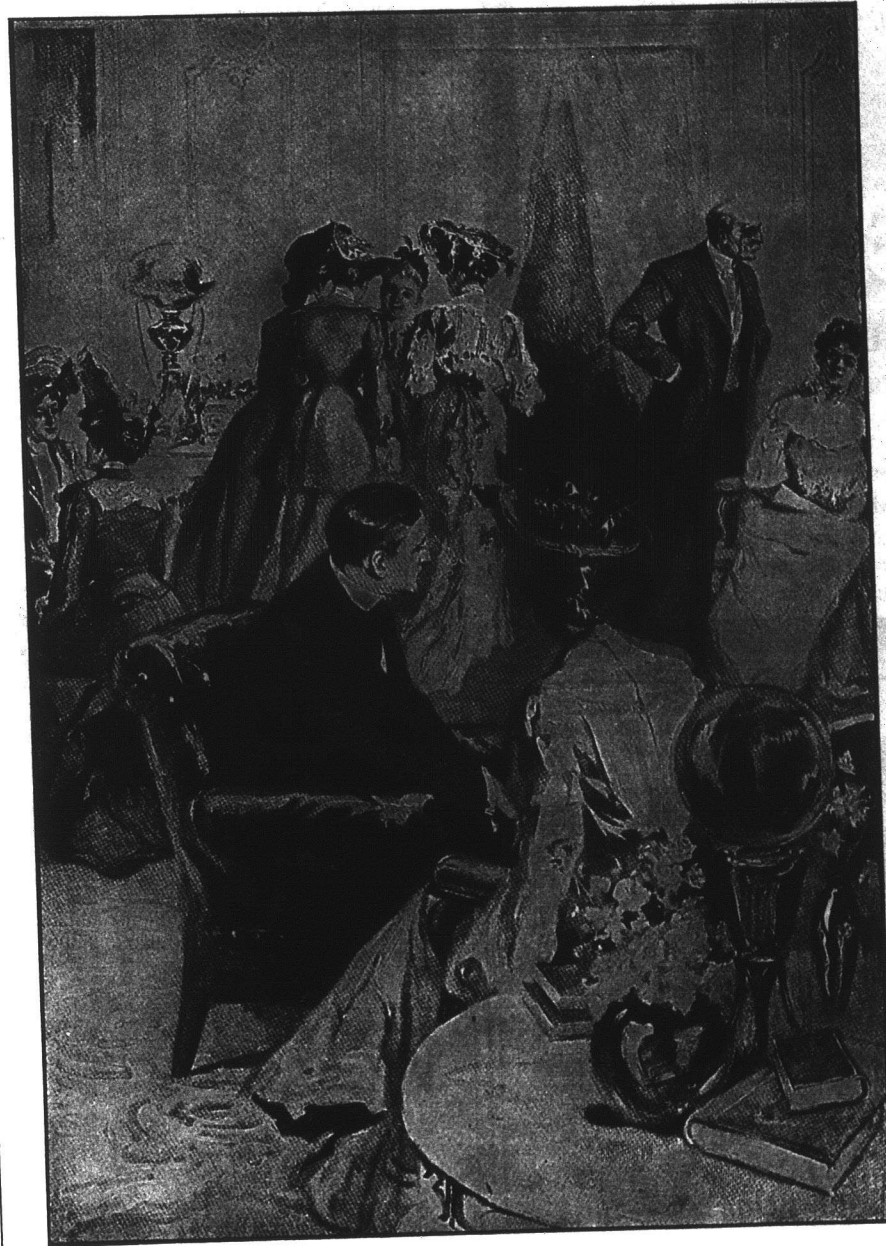
"Oh, I'm not the sort of a fellow that drops at the first knock. I'm not sick of life; a fellow can stand an awful lot before he loses his grip. Perhaps in ten years, when I've a wife and children, I'll look back to this day and wonder why I was off my feed, and the best tobacco tasted like tarred rope to my tongue."

With a short laugh, decidedly forced and unnatural, he left Miss Elizabeth to repeat his conversation to her sister.

In the afternoon, when Tom met Margery at General Thornton's apartments, he greeted her with the most commonplace cordiality. Careful not to overact, and with no purpose save to show her that disappointment had not made too great a breach in his life, his well-meant artifice caused her more annoyance than satisfaction. For Margery had prepared herself to be very kind to him; to hold a last confidential chat, and to show so thoroughly how practical were her reasons for accepting General Thornton, that his regard for her would only increase.

Tom gave no opportunity for the quiet confidences. He talked with Miss Daisy, the General's niece, about greyhound coursing, golf, and social life in the West. Margery, who sat near enough to overhear, was vexed with him for his good-natured raillery of Colorado. "Yes, we live in the most primitive fashion," she heard him say. "We dine at noon, begin our dance in the Town Hall at eight, and instead of the theatre, depend upon the native talent of our literary club, which meets with song and debate every Friday evening."

Forgetting that only yesterday she had looked upon the years before she came to her aunt as dull and provincial, Margery could not keep silent. "Our way of living in Colorado is quite as charming as yours here," she declared



"THE ESCORT OF THE COUNTESS WENT AT ONCE TO MARGERY"

herself, and you must be patient. Her aunt wishes her to accept an offer which is most advantageous. But I hope that Margery will not be misled by a mistaken idea of duty. Long ago," here Miss Elizabeth sighed, "I did not have the courage to follow where my heart would have led me. I have always regretted it, and wished that I had chosen boldly."

"Will you promise me something?" Tom begged. "Will you tell Margery what you have just told me? Tell her what you lost by not obeying your heart?"

"I will tell her to-morrow," Miss Elizabeth answered impulsively, looking across the room toward Margery. Just at this moment the man beside her bowed and went quickly to Mrs. Van Tromp. Margery sat with her hands clasped in her lap, her face pale and set.

Tom hastily crossed over to her. "What is the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing, nothing at all," Margery answered with an hysterical laugh. "Will you send Miss Elizabeth to me?"

But before Tom could go back to Miss Elizabeth, Mrs. Van Tromp beckoned to him. "Have you been wishing the joy to Margery?" she whispered. "The General has just told me of his happiness."

production to his old friend. "And now, my boy," he said at parting, "mind that you spare the time from sweethearting to call on old Bob. I want you for once to meet a whole man, and, well, I want my friend to know what a fine son I have." Then Meredith senior had given Tom a rousing slap upon the back, told him to go to the devil, and while in New York to look out that he did not buy a gold brick or green goods.

Margery was now alone and Tom went to her. "Your aunt has told me, he said, forcing his voice to come without a tremor, and I wish you joy."

Margery did not trust herself to words, but silently pressed Tom's hand. "Won't you make us acquainted?" he asked. "I wish to congratulate him."

"For taking me away from you?" Margery's surprise gave her speech.

"Why not?" Tom answered stoutly. "He's a better man than I, or you would not have chosen him. I wish that you could hear my dad go on about Bob Thornton. There's nobody in the world to whom I could give you with so little of a struggle. He's an old Indian fighter. I'd rather have my tongue cut out than make a howl before him."

Margery led the way to General Thornton, who at the name of Meredith