

"Yes," he finally admitted, with a solemn movement of the head. "Yes, I know."

"You don't know. She's got you buffaloed. I tell you right now, Prentiss, that woman's got to be put right, or she'll break us, all of us. She can do her high and mighty in an up-state summer stock, but she can't do it on Broadway, not in my houses."

The Governor knew he was carrying his audience of one. He could see it by the melancholy hesitancy in the younger man's eyes, and he swept up his climatic movement while the moment was ripe.

"It may hurt you a little, and it may hurt her. But it's the only way. I've got to face it, the same as you've got to. I've got to break that woman the same as you'd break a range colt!"

Prentiss resented the man's language even while he was unable to resent the statement. But he would never have been the dramatist he was without some inherent love of power simply as power. They were now down to finalities. He knew the careers the Governor had shaped. He knew the stars he had made. Yet he was not altogether ignorant of how they had been fashioned, of how those long-adulated and arbitrary and emotional women had been taken in hand, and how, like snow, they could be shaped only after they were in a melting condition.

The proof of the pudding was in the eating. Prentiss admitted, as he sat wrapped in thought. The painful reality of just how much his play meant, of how much its success meant, was coming home to him.

"Well, if you insist on my going away, I'll go," he finally said, as he stood up. "But it'll only be on one condition."

"I don't want conditions," retorted the autocrat of destinies.

"Well, then, one decency," revised the other.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'll go only when I'm assured you'll be gentle with her, as gentle with her as possible."

"What do you think I am?" broke out the white-mopped manager. "What do I gain by being the other thing?"

Prentiss took up his hat. Then he sighed.

"I suppose we've got to face it," he said, as Borowsky snapped out the electric and followed him to the door.

PRENTISS always remembered that week in Atlantic City as the most miserable one of his life. The sheer stagnating idleness into which it plunged him ate like acid on his tired nerves. He no longer felt like a mere desert-er; he was slowly possessed of the impression that he had basely betrayed the one person it was his duty to protect.

Yet whatever his wife might be undergoing in New York, he assured himself, she had at least been coerced into no such souring and corroding passivity as his own. He felt, as the week dragged on, that his very soul had been strapped up in some narrow and stifling straight-jacket. A dozen times a day he regretted his promise not to write or telegraph. A dozen times a day, as he caught up the belated New York papers and hungrily read the different and all too meagre "advance" paragraphs as to the new Borowsky production, he would feel the same smouldering resentment against the compact which forbade him to ring up on the "long distance" and the same old tug to throw up everything and return. It began to seem like a sort of catalepsy to him. He felt that great movements were under way, movements in which all his destiny was involved, and yet he was being denied a part in them.

But he paced the board walk and fought it out to the end. Then he packed his bag and took a train to New York, like a man coming back from the dead. He could scarcely decide, as he stepped down into the fetid warmth of the Subway, whether he should go home to his wife or first go and find Borowsky. He began to realise how hard the whole thing would be to make clear. He also realised how contrary to his expectations it had all turned out. He had once dreamed that this play was going to bring him and his wife more intimately, more indissolubly together, almost as a child itself might have done. But in that he had been mistaken.

He awoke to the extent of that mistake when he found himself unconsciously directing his steps

towards his club. He would only be in the way now, an outsider, an intruder, until the coming three-hour ordeal was over. So he buried himself behind his paper in the reading room, scanning without any ponderable reaction the theatrical page news that Ivan Cartright had been supplanted by Gordon Shane as the father in the new Borowsky production. The part had never been more than a "feeder," and Prentiss had never been much impressed by the bibulous Cartright. And nothing, by this time, made much difference.

As the dinner hour drew on Prentiss found the club unendurable. So he wandered out to the square, and then went slowly and aimlessly up Broadway, looking for the Borowsky "three sheets"



"The curtain continued to go up and down like a great maw—"

on the billboards and watching the electric signs as they blossomed like tulip beds along the crowded valley side of stone and steel. He found something companionable and home-like in the hurrying crowds, in the dodging taxi-cabs, in the homing motor cars that hummed out through the streets like a bee swarm scattering from its hives through an open orchard.

He wandered on until he was hungry and a familiar chop-house sign turned his thoughts agreeably to musty ale and a mutton chop. So he entered the restaurant, found a table, and proceeded diffidently and deliberately to eat his dinner.

He was half way through his bulky English mutton chop when he became conscious of an even bulkier presence close behind him. It was that of Cartright, the bibulous old "heavy," gazing down at him with pensive and bleakly-reproving eyes. The newcomer, with that pompousness which even alcohol could not submerge, sadly and calmly sat down in the chair directly across the table from Prentiss.

"Well, what's happened since I left you?" enquired the playwright, forcing a note of facetiousness which was far from his actual temper.

"You should never have left, sir!" was the deeply-intoned and melancholy response.

"Anything wrong?" demanded Prentiss, now actually and actively alarmed. The old actor leaned slowly back in his chair and bellowed his lungs. It was a slow and dramatic inhalation of righteous indignation.

"I'm out!" was the deliberate and guttural and altogether conclusive answer. Cartright's slow and heavy sigh, however, obviously implied that even

greater misfortunes, if possible, had befallen the production.

"Why are you out?"

"Yes, why?" intoned the slow-speaking bulk of indignation. "Why, indeed? Ha, they will tell you it was this, and they will tell you it was that. But now, sir, I'll tell you why, man to man!"

"Been drinking?" asked Prentiss, resenting the hortatory diaphoresis which was so prolonging his suspense.

"I had not been drinking, sir. But I had been beholding what no gentleman of the old school!"—he rolled the phrase like a sugar plum under his swollen tongue—"what no gentleman of the old school can behold without resentment!"

"What are you talking about?" Prentiss snapped out.

"I'm talking about the way that man has been using your wife, sir!" he spluttered in his alcoholic indignation. "About the way he villified and degraded and abused that little woman. I'm a gentleman; and I'm not going to stand by, sir, and hear a woman defiled, defamed, cursed at like a runnion!"

"Oh, come now," began Prentiss, though he pushed his chop away with all his taste for eating gone.

"I couldn't do it," declaimed the man of the stage. "And I tell you, Mister Prentiss, you don't gain anything by hounding a woman like that into hysterics every day! You know her; and I know her. And we both know Borowsky. She should have been protected. She should have been watched over!"

He saw by the pallor that crept into Prentiss' face that his work was good, and went on with it.

"A play's a play," he largely conceded. "And a part's a part. You have to make your people work. You've got to make them take their hurdles, no matter how it hurts! But when a man hauls a woman half-way across a stage by the hair, Borowsky or no Borowsky, Ivan Cartright hands in his part and walks out!"

"That's a lie!" cried Prentiss, projecting his white face forward across the table. The movement was like that of a fighting game cock.

"That's the truth!" intoned back the old actor, bringing his hand down on the table like a joiner giving a nail head its last hammer blow.

PRENTISS was glad of the open air; he was glad of the chance to give belated direction to his movements; he was glad to have something on which to focus ten days of hot and smouldering resentment. There was going to be some good plain talk, and he was glad of it. And he hoped it would lead to something else, promptly and uncompromisingly, and in his imaginative young mind he could already feel the thud of the clenched fist against the padded white flesh.

Yet Borowsky, he found, was not at his apartment hotel. A calmly and disconcertingly courteous servant informed Prentiss that the manager had not dined home; nor had he even lunched home. He had, in fact, been busy at the theatre since nine in the morning. And would there be any message?

Prentiss slightly weak and shaken and wholly miserable, said there would be no message. He made his way to the street again, looking irresolutely about at the flood tide of traffic that surged down through upper Broadway to the theatre district. He let that current catch him up and carry him along. He let it eddy him aimlessly about the western sweep of the Circle and across Eighth Avenue into Broadway again. He let it carry him on into Times Square. Then he looked up at a street clock and saw that it was already eight.

He pulled his hat down over his eyes as he drew nearer Borowsky's theatre with the great rose-tinted sign of stippled electric lights announcing the new star's name. He pushed through the crowd, as cautious as a pickpocket, and for the price of an orchestra chair bought a top gallery seat from a speculator with a row of greenbacks folded fan-like between his fingers. Then he climbed the stairs, made his way to his seat, and sat down and waited. He could feel the beat of his own pulse, quick and short and hard. Out of his blood, for some reason,

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