

in Santa Dominica. He was a short, thick-set chap, with vigorous tawny hair and an energy that the climate had been unable to quell; he was as disturbing to our aristocratic calm as a bumblebee in a mosquito net. The dream of his life was to make us a second Los Angeles, while it was the dream of ours to stay just as we were, and preserve the drowsy charm of our old Mexican city. He was in the real estate business, and would have been in oil, too, had we allowed him to disfigure the beach with derricks, which we wouldn't.

WELL, there he was, in a highly wrought-up condition, demanding sympathy and assistance. What was he to do? Great Heaven, what was he to do? He had come straight to me as the one person, et cetera—here was Elinor's letter dismissing him. A letter—! And that with a house bought and furnished, and the date set for the wedding! Cruel? Why, it was incredible! They had spirited her away; she had been forced to write it under compulsion; the old lady had never thought him good enough for Elinor, and was now in cahoots with that black scoundrel to break it off. What about breaking him? Taking him by the scuff of the neck, and—

I smoothed Fred down, gave him a cigar, and told him genially that he was a darned fool. To tar and feather the Prophet, or make a martyr of him in some other ignominious fashion, struck me as most unwise. Indirectly it would be an insult to Elinor and her mother, and the worse he lambasted the Hindoo the angrier and more resentful they would feel. After all, what was wanted was not revenge, but to win the girl back. Impugning the old lady's sanity or instituting habeas corpus proceedings were the suggestions of a lunatic. I told Fred that the right way to deal with a prophet was to give him rope, lots of rope—miles.

"There'll be a row in that upper plane before long," I announced. "Prophets don't last, at least modern ones don't, and sooner or later there will be a lady-complication, or a missing diamond stud, or something wrong with the cash box—and then down they'll all come like people in a busted airship."

"But what am I to do in the meantime?" groaned Fred.

"Forget it," I replied, in the vernacular. "That's the basis of all philosophy, ancient, modern, and to come—forget it. Hustle on your own low-down plane; exert your exuberant talents in getting folks to buy lots; take it from me that it will all come right."

"You seem mighty sure about it," said Fred, dubiously. "Anybody can see that you aren't engaged to a New Religionist." He lapsed into gloom, and then asked, somewhat at random, whether I thought feathers would stick to crude petroleum. "It's so easy to get crude petroleum," he said.

"EASIER than driving any sense into your silly head," I exclaimed, out of all patience. "Here is a situation of great delicacy and complexity, a situation screaming for tact, and you propose to resolve it like a wounded bull. When you are snorting around the arena, stuck all over with little red flags, with Mr. Matador Ram, B.A., uttering shouts of triumph and a delighted audience whooping, then perhaps you'll wish you had listened to muh!"

"I don't like your slangy way of putting things," said Fred. "I am bad enough cut up already without being made a joke of. If you can't help a fellow, just say so, and let it go at that."

"It's you who won't be helped!" I cried. "Now listen: women are always dazzled by renunciation; it appeals to something in them that we don't have; there's a nun-streak in all of them, an innate love of hair shirts and bare boards and half a slice of bread for breakfast, if only you can persuade them it's for their spiritual welfare. You never hear a prophet advocating a full dinner pail or pate de foie gras

and champagne. He lifts his emaciated hand, and says, 'My daughter, you must sacrifice everything!' If he didn't, he'd never get the women! Elinor at first will be very happy up there; the pathos of eternal separation from you will make her deliciously wretched; then she'll begin to get bored and mopy and cross and snappish, and they'll find her peeping over the edge, and wondering what you are doing."

Fred sighed heavily. I really felt very sorry for Fred. It was such a commonplace little romance, his and Elinor's. Rising young real estate man, fluffy blonde of twenty, general conspiracy to throw them together, dinners and dances to help it along, proposal on moonlight picnic with everyone in the secret, modest house with garage on De La Guerra Street, bell of roses and Episcopalian clergyman, honeymoon at Del Monte, steady advance in acre property and resultant prosperity, two tots and a Japanese curse—it all seemed as inevitable as death or taxes. And



"Fred's face was beaming from ear to ear; he hugged me like a bear."

now it was all knocked higher than a kite. I guess poor Fred was entitled to sigh.

"It's been a wonderful comfort to talk to you about it," he said. "Yes, a wonderful comfort. A fellow can't travel far without hope, and I was about all out of mine till you gingered me up. My only idea was to lick the stuffing out of the Hindoo, but you have decided me to leave him alone and wait. Though I hardly know how I am going to do it; waiting is the worst thing I do; it's awful just sitting around and waiting."

"You needn't stop work," I observed. "Of course, you must work. Work is the universal panacea. If it wasn't for work the gutters would be running with blood, and the majority of the human family would be in jail. No, you go out and boom for all you're worth; sing your glad song of climate and opportunity; talk of the profitable orange and the generous beet, and of agricultural gold mines awaiting the tickle of the hoe. Take the enchanted Easterner by the ear, and hold him tight till you've got his wad. Work, my boy, work—and leave the rest to Time."

Fred brightened visibly at the idea. While his fiancée had fallen under the spell of one prophet, here was he surrendering to another! His faith, his acquiescence were immensely flattering. It put me into quite a glow about him—good old Fred. He asked me, with a naive new belief in my omnipotence, for the probable date of Elinor's disillusionment. I answered two months, not caring to shake my position by any appearance of haziness. Well, why not?

A raft of things could happen in two months, and he wouldn't be likely to blame me if the young lady climbed down a little before schedule. But what if it were the other way around? Well, life is all risk, especially for prophets.

LATER on I wished I had kept my good advice for myself, instead of getting excited and wasting it on Fred. Fred ought to have been a curbstone Socialist, he had such a talent for invective. When the two months had expired and there was still no Elinor, he boomeranged back to me with blood in his eye. If I had been a wicked railroad, side-tracking a shipment of fresh apricots in Death Valley, he couldn't have gone for me any worse.

Busybody and meddler were the mildest of his expressions. Hadn't I spoiled everything by my damned officiousness? Wasn't Ram now so securely intrenched, bodyguarded, live-wired and burglar-

belled that personal violence was almost out of the question? And how else was the rascally charlatan to be got rid of? Say, was I prepared to join a small desperate party with masks and blackjacks? What, certainly I wasn't? Then I was not only a double-dyed jackass, but a coward, too!

The new religion was belying all anticipations, and putting other wiseacres than myself to shame. Its adherents had doubled, and it seemed to be meeting a long-felt want. From what one heard it seemed just the thing for dyspeptic people, with large fixed incomes, who were tired of idleness and bridge.

In a most interesting talk I had with Miss Gibbs, the sprightliest of old maids, and an ex-convert, who had broken away to have an ulcerated tooth seen to (not being satisfied with the new religion's treatment)—in that delightful talk with Miss Gibbs I was struck by her unshaken belief in the Prophet's sincerity.

"He's a dear, good man," she said, "and oh, so kind and gentle and saintly that it ought to be true, even if it isn't. He says he is perfect, and really, do you know, he is. No, I haven't a word to say against the Purple Brother, as we call him. It was that horrible getting up at dawn, and the monotony of the diet, and having nothing to read, nor any gossip or news, that brought me back. I wasn't good enough, too earthy, you know. I missed

my home comforts and the Country Club and my breakfast on a tray, and when it came to needing a dentist and being oomed over instead, I just quit. Secrets? Oh, they're safe enough in my keeping! I'm not a renegade, only a backslider."

"And Elinor?" I inquired. "Tell me about Elinor Wentworth."

Miss Gibbs' faded eyes flashed.

"That's where I fell out with the whole crowd," she exclaimed. "It was a shame to make her break it off with Fred McCall, and spoil her life. She's simply pining away, poor baby, and moons about like a ghost. But what can one do? The old lady is such a domineering old thing that Elinor has about as much chance as a kitten tied up in a gunny sack."

"Too bad, too bad!" I observed.

"JUST rotten," replied Miss Gibbs, with spirit. "There ought to be an age-limit for New Religionists, the same as there is for minors in saoons, nobody allowed under twenty-five, you know, and arrested if they are found on the premises."

"It's a pretty black look-out for Fred, isn't it?" I said.

"What a man's way of looking at it," she returned, indignantly. "Fred will still be Fred when Elinor is lying in her poor little grave; just as boomy and hustling and get-there, when she'll be a patch of daisies. It's Elinor's side of it that's the tragedy."

I accepted the report with humility; one has to admit the pre-eminence of women in sentiment; in