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man," Kent observed, wrathfully. "She was horrid!" Nellie cried, "and the nice who lives with her, and expected to inherit the shawl urged her on, and really was at the bottom of Mrs. Gowen's hatefulness."

"Mother went home just heart-broken; she couldn't pay for the shawl, and she couldn't find it. She hunted the place over and over again until she got sick, and then Father made her stop. Poor soul, she felt so disgraced she wouldn't go any place; not even to church. You know Mother is very proud in her way, and I could see how she resented the humiliation; I won't call it anything else, for as I told her, when I tried to comfort her, nothing could really disgrace her. Oh, Kent, you can't tell any one not to worry when they're just devoured with trouble and anxiety."

"I never heard anything so strange; now they if lived in the city, someone might have slipped in and taken the shawl, but such a quiet place in the country! I can't understand it!" Kent looked puzzled. "Has mother's room an outside door?" he asked with sudden curiosity.

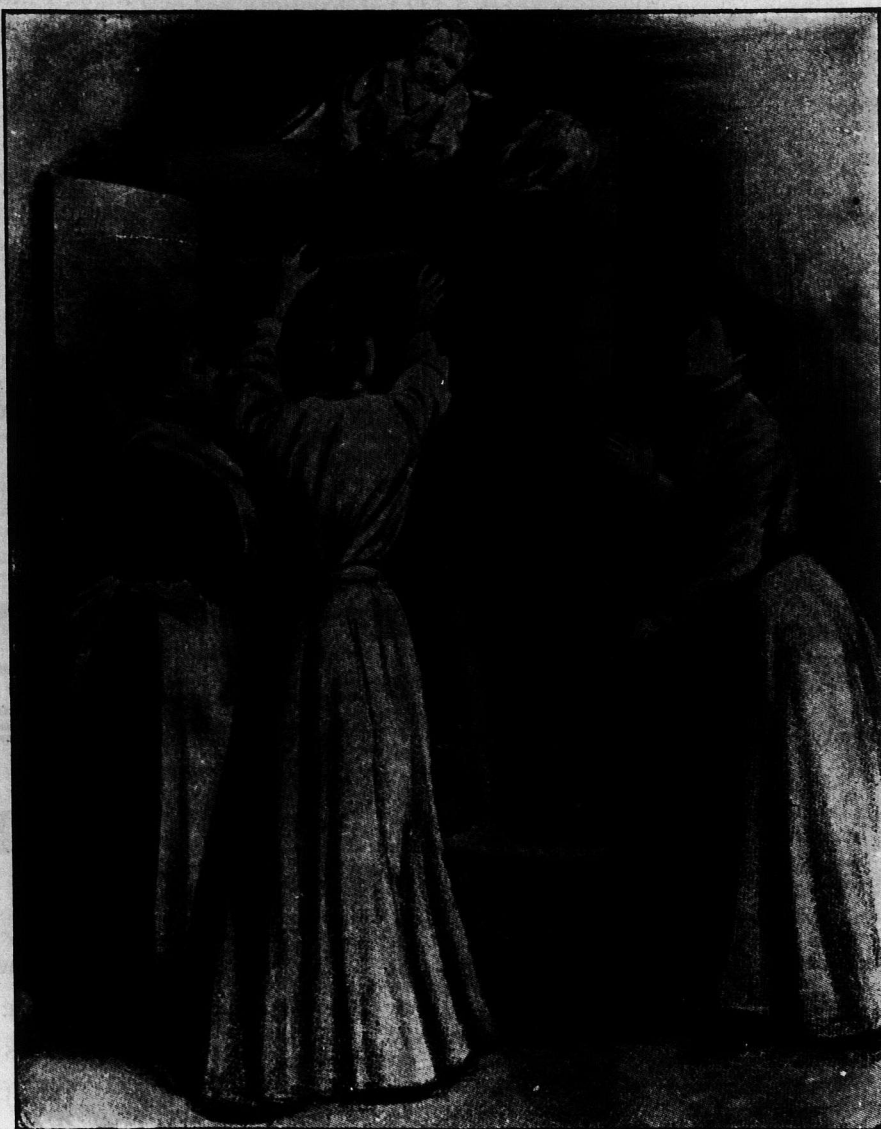
til he got a scare about their being safe, when he brought them home and expected to go over to Laurel and put them in the new bank there.

"He went right to the bed-room when he came into the house. Mother was there and watched him cut the coupons off the bonds. Then she saw him put them into an envelope before she left the room and went to the kitchen."

"Father laid that envelope, with the bonds in it, on the bed and stepped into the dining-room for an instant. Kent, when he went back to the bed-room the bonds were gone! There wasn't a trace of them, or the envelope—both had vanished utterly."

Kent gave a long, shrill whistle. "Great guns!" he exclaimed. "What an awful fix for the old man."

"Oh, Kent, it was awful for them all; it was cruel!" Nellie cried vehemently, her face white with emotion. "They nearly went crazy; they hunted day and night until they were forced to give up all hope of ever finding the bonds. It was an awful blow, and as all of the Wilcox boys are of age this fall, Father knew the



"He's on the old ceiling shelf," Father shouted, as he climbed up by the lower shelves."

Nellie turned impulsively to him. "I thought of that," she cried, "but her room has only two doors; one opening into the dining-room and the other in the old press closet."

"I was thinking of tramps," Kent said slowly. "Go on, Nell, sweetheart."

"When I got Mother quieted a little," she sighed, "I asked her to tell me what was troubling Father, for I don't believe that the loss of a shawl was all; that only meant a woman's fixings to him, and he never could understand their costing much."

"Kent, Mother broke down completely, and at first she didn't want to tell me; said that it was a shame to spoil my visit with their troubles; but at last I got it out of her."

"Trust you for doing that," Kent laughed.

"Oh, Kent, don't laugh, for it really was dreadful." Great tears filled Nellie's bright eyes.

"You know Father is guardian for the Wilcox boys, and ever so much of their money is in government bonds. Father has always kept their bonds in Pow's Bank at Spense, un-

only way he could make up their loss was to sell the old farm. Oh, Kent, when I heard that, I knew what the lines in Father's face meant, or I thought I did until Mother told me that some one had started all sorts of wicked, terrible stories about dear Father."

Kent drew his wife's white face down on his shoulder, with a tender kiss.

"I wish I'd been there," he said grimly, "I'd found more use for a gun than I ever have out here in the West. Poor souls, after standing at the very head of the community all of their lives for uprightness and probity, it makes my blood boil to think anyone could tell such malicious lies about them."

"You can see that it was really impossible to write you all about it," Nellie sobbed, slipping her hand into Kent's.

"If you had, even the ranch couldn't have kept me," Kent hastily asserted; "I'd found a way of reaching you mighty quick."

"That was the comfort I had all of the time," Nellie said tenderly,

"and I begged Mother to let me send for you," but she thought Father would rather wait until he had everything settled. We talked it over, and then I asked Mother if Lottie had anything besides their troubles to worry her. Lottie's as proud as a peacock, and I felt sure she'd never open her heart to me; she knows how good you've always been to me."

Kent's eyes twinkled. "Sure of that, Nell?" he laughingly interrupted.

"I was glad I asked Mother about Lottie; it got her spunk up and did her good," Nellie went on soberly. "Then, as she felt worried about Lottie, she was thankful she could share her anxiety with me."

"Kent, do you remember the Lavells at Laurel? You knew the boys; well, the youngest of them, Bruce, met Lottie at a party and fell deep in love with her. Lottie really is a beautiful girl, and just as sweet as she's pretty, so it wasn't to be wondered at. Mother said Bruce haunted the farm; he was there every day until his uncle died some place here in the West, and he was sent for in a dreadful hurry."

"Why, I tell, that's the boy whose people made such an ado when he went West the first time; they were so sure he'd be scalped. There was even a story about his mother's having some sort of wig made for him to wear and fool the Indians," Kent laughed.

"He didn't wait for a wig this time," Nellie laughed, "for he went in a hurry. Lottie had letters from him at first, and Mother thought there was an understanding between them; then his letters stopped coming, and shortly after that Father saw him in Laurel, and heard that his uncle had left him a fortune. He never came near the farm, and Mother was sure he'd heard and believed the wicked stories people were telling about them."

"I never thought there were scamps among the Lavells," Kent said scornfully.

Nellie's face wore a curious smile. "Kent, I seemed nearer to Mother than I'd ever been; perhaps because I'm a mother, and I could see how she suffered for Lottie, and the more because of Lottie's reticence. Why, that very night, when we were putting Baby to sleep, I just tried my best to get Lottie to tell me about Bruce; but not a bit of it; she turned the subject off with a bitter laugh."

"You can imagine how I felt, Kent," Nellie cried, "and I just was wild to set things straight. In spite of Mother's protests, I got the hunting-craze and went about poking into all sorts of holes and corners. And at last I was so restless I could hardly sit still, and every day, while Baby took his naps, I wandered all over the house, possessed with the idea I might find what they had almost torn the house down searching for."

"You poor child," Kent cried tenderly, "no wonder I worried over your letters."

"I must acknowledge they were very mixed," Nellie laughed queerly; "but, oh, Kent, I couldn't help it; and it got worse every day. One morning we were all busy at something in the kitchen; I'd left Baby sound asleep on Mother's bed, and I knew I could hear him if he cried. After a time I got a little anxious and went to take a peep at him; and, Kent, he was gone!"

"What!" Kent exclaimed in excitement, with an uneasy look toward the cradle.

"He was gone!" Nellie cried tragically, with a wild gesture; "there was no sign of him—for even his blanket had disappeared. Kent—I just went crazy."

Kent drew her nearer to him. "I can't bear to think of it," he groaned.

Nellie shivered. The anguish of the past, like live coals in ashes, revived as she raked it over in the telling. "It was awful," she sobbed; "we tore everything to pieces; we searched and we called; I know I

screamed, 'Kent! if that baby could find her father, and they'd go to the house. Lottie hid her face with a dry sob. 'I'd died if we had. Kent tightened. 'But you did.' 'and as far as I'm pretty lively speaker. 'We got into despair,' Nellie was on the verge white as snow, stop searching. the house like a up on everything the furniture to Lottie had her teeth on her white cloth hunting and something to eat. soul's greatest of her dinner. the dishes, for sense than to let sugar bowl.

"Suddenly we cry. Then and Kent, I stood shivering with joy, face glowing. 'The cries were Mother's room, there Mother's closet!' and we that time Baby roaring state, seemed to come. 'He's on the

Father shouted, the lower shelves had that blessed my arms, and I to see if I had how I yelled! for shawl all gone. 'Great guns! vigorous excitement. 'I threw it at

lie of finding it dropped into a crying at the s all she could do. 'When Father rushed back into out with his en Kent, he really Nellie turned to look of sweet

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