

**CIHM
Microfiche
Series
(Monographs)**

**ICMH
Collection de
microfiches
(monographies)**



Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions / Institut canadien de microreproductions historiques

© 1997

Technical and Bibliographic Notes / Notes techniques et bibliographiques

The Institute has attempted to obtain the best original copy available for filming. Features of this copy which may be bibliographically unique, which may alter any of the images in the reproduction, or which may significantly change the usual method of filming are checked below.

- ☒ Coloured covers / Couverture de couleur
- ☐ Covers damaged / Couverture endommagée
- ☐ Covers restored and/or laminated / Couverture restaurée et/ou pelliculée
- ☐ Cover title missing / Le titre de couverture manque
- ☐ Coloured maps / Cartes géographiques en couleur
- ☒ Coloured ink (i.e. other than blue or black) / Encre de couleur (i.e. autre que bleue ou noire)
- ☒ Coloured plates and/or illustrations / Planches et/ou illustrations en couleur
- ☐ Bound with other material / Relié avec d'autres documents
- ☐ Only edition available / Seule édition disponible
- ☐ Tight binding may cause shadows or distortion along interior margin / La reliure serrée peut causer de l'ombre ou de la distorsion le long de la marge intérieure.
- ☐ Blank leaves added during restorations may appear within the text. Whenever possible, these have been omitted from filming / Il se peut que certaines pages blanches ajoutées lors d'une restauration apparaissent dans le texte, mais, lorsque cela était possible, ces pages n'ont pas été filmées.
- ☐ Additional comments / Commentaires supplémentaires:

L'Institut a microfilmé le meilleur exemplaire qu'il lui a été possible de se procurer. Les détails de cet exemplaire qui sont peut-être uniques du point de vue bibliographique, qui peuvent modifier une image reproduite, ou qui peuvent exiger une modification dans la méthode normale de filmage sont indiqués ci-dessous.

- ☐ Coloured pages / Pages de couleur
- ☐ Pages damaged / Pages endommagées
- ☐ Pages restored and/or laminated / Pages restaurées et/ou pelliculées
- ☒ Pages discoloured, stained or foxed / Pages décolorées, tachetées ou piquées
- ☐ Pages detached / Pages détachées
- ☒ Showthrough / Transparence
- ☐ Quality of print varies / Qualité inégale de l'impression
- ☐ Includes supplementary material / Comprend du matériel supplémentaire
- ☒ Pages wholly or partially obscured by errata slips, tissues, etc., have been refilmed to ensure the best possible image / Les pages totalement ou partiellement obscurcies par un feuillet d'errata, une pelure, etc., ont été filmées à nouveau de façon à obtenir la meilleure image possible.
- ☐ Opposing pages with varying colouration or discolourations are filmed twice to ensure the best possible image / Les pages s'opposant ayant des colorations variables ou des décolorations sont filmées deux fois afin d'obtenir la meilleure image possible.

This item is filmed at the reduction ratio checked below /
Ce document est filmé au taux de réduction indiqué ci-dessous.

10x		14x		18x		22x		26x		30x	
	12x		16x		20x		24x		28x		32x

The copy filmed here has been reproduced thanks to the generosity of:

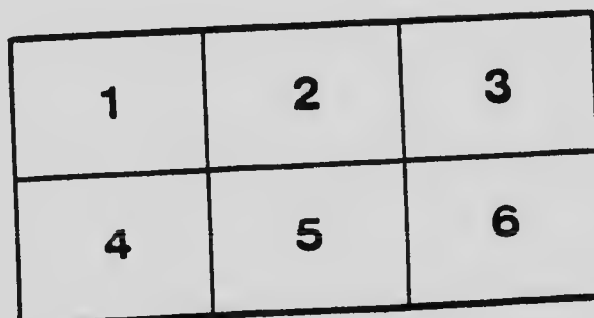
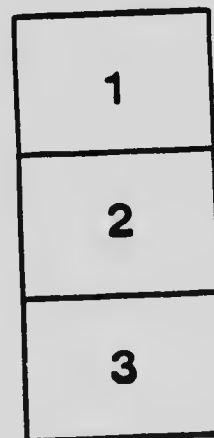
National Library of Canada

The images appearing here are the best quality possible considering the condition and legibility of the original copy and in keeping with the filming contract specifications.

Original copies in printed paper covers are filmed beginning with the front cover and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression, or the back cover when appropriate. All other original copies are filmed beginning on the first page with a printed or illustrated impression, and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression.

The last recorded frame on each microfiche shall contain the symbol \rightarrow (meaning "CONTINUED"), or the symbol ∇ (meaning "END"), whichever applies.

Maps, plates, charts, etc., may be filmed at different reduction ratios. Those too large to be entirely included in one exposure are filmed beginning in the upper left hand corner, left to right and top to bottom, as many frames as required. The following diagrams illustrate the method:



L'exemplaire filmé fut reproduit grâce à la générosité de:

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Les images suivantes ont été reproduites avec le plus grand soin, compte tenu de la condition et de la netteté de l'exemplaire filmé, et en conformité avec les conditions du contrat de filmage.

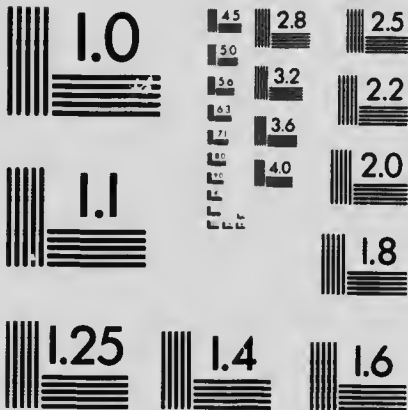
Les exemplaires originaux dont le couvert en papier est imprimé sont filmés en commençant par le premier plat et en terminant soit par la dernière page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration, soit par le second plat, selon le cas. Tous les autres exemplaires originaux sont filmés en commençant par la première page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration et en terminant par la dernière page qui comporte une telle empreinte.

Un des symboles suivants apparaîtra sur la dernière image de chaque microfiche, selon le cas: le symbole \rightarrow signifie "À SUIVRE", le symbole ∇ signifie "FIN".

Les cartes, planches, tableaux, etc., peuvent être filmés à des taux de réduction différents. Lorsque le document est trop grand pour être reproduit en un seul cliché, il est filmé à partir de l'angle supérieur gauche, de gauche à droite, et de haut en bas, en prenant le nombre d'images nécessaire. Les diagrammes suivants illustrent la méthode.

MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



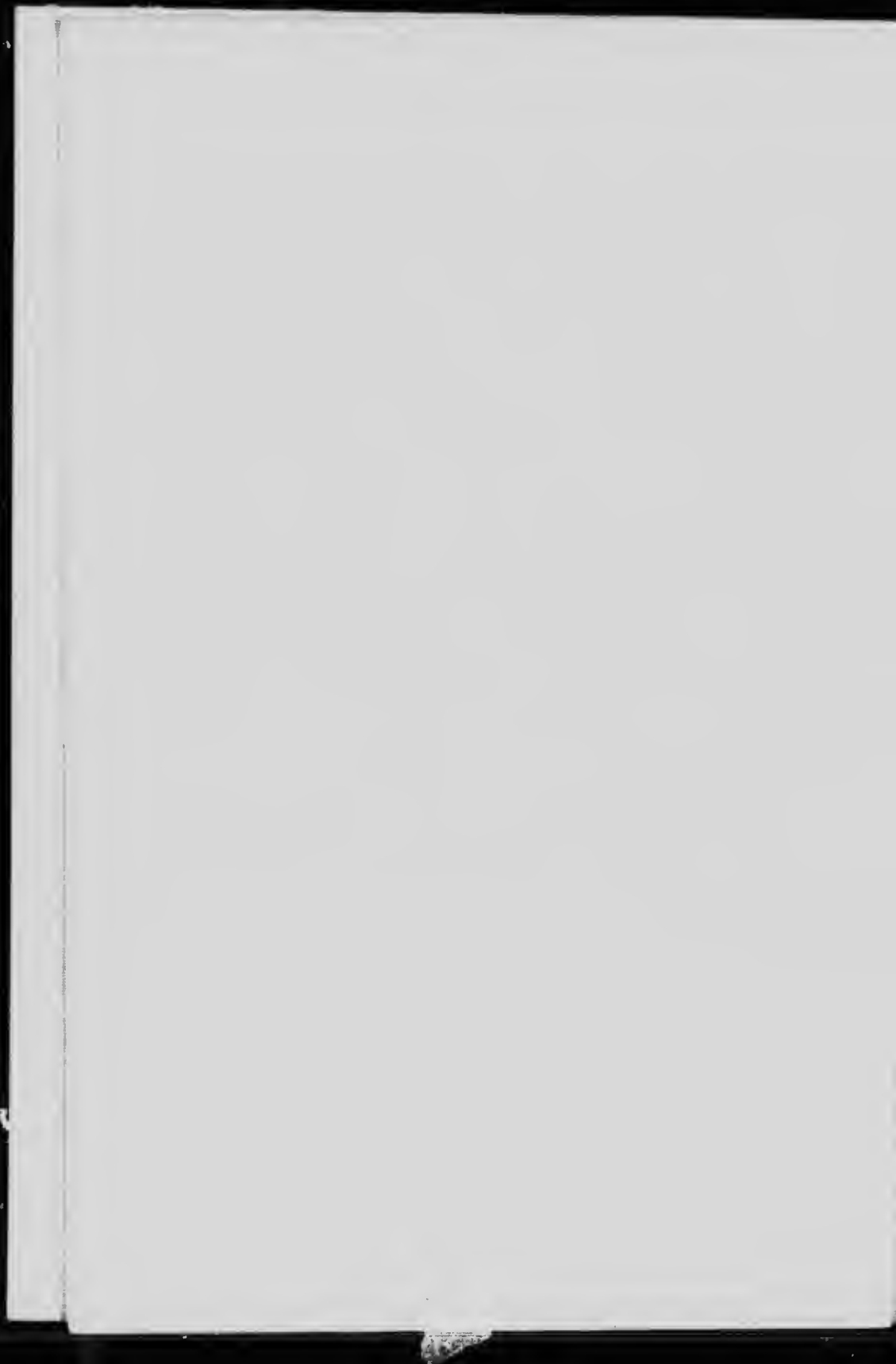
APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

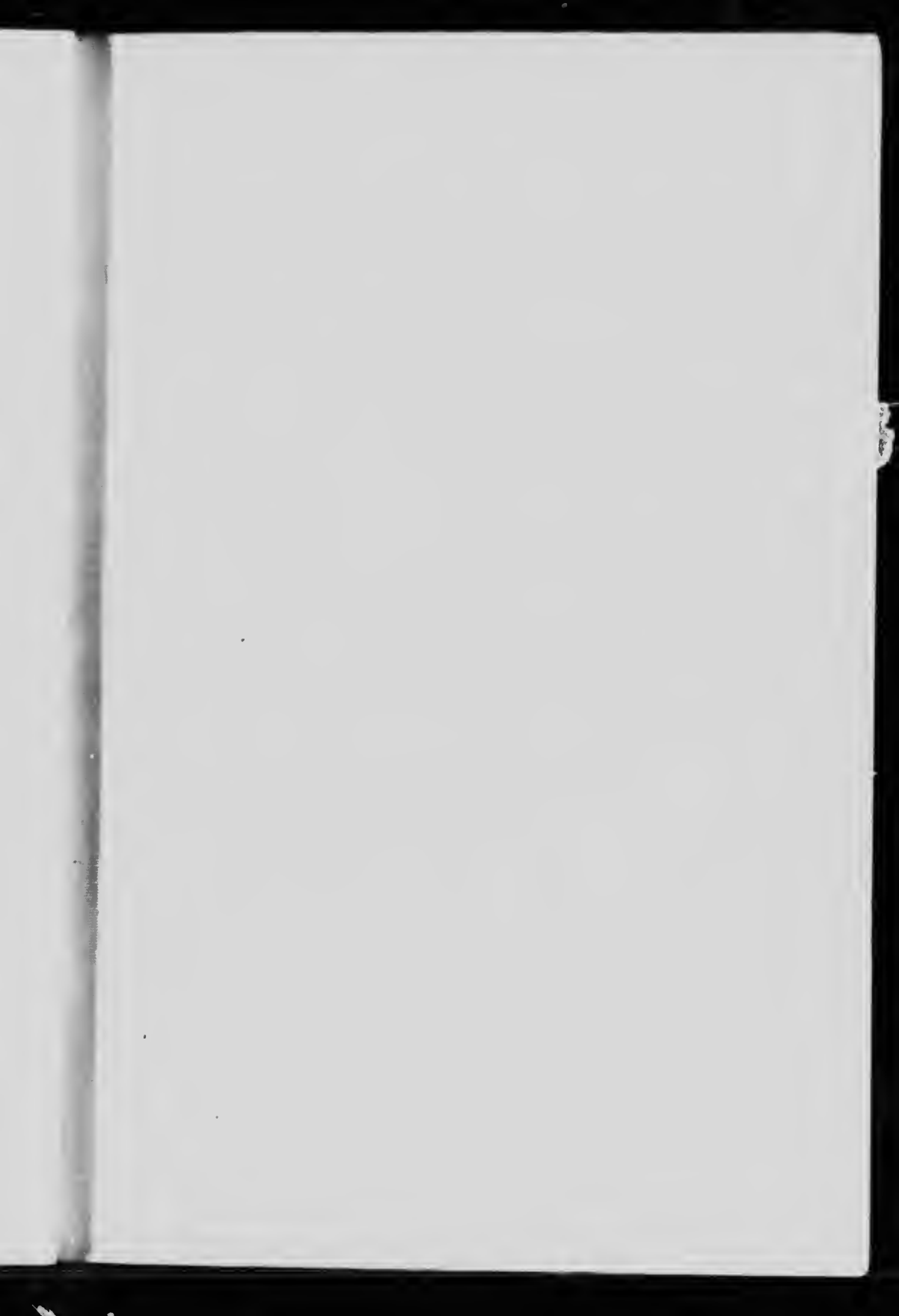


Me G

5201



THE LAST WOMAN





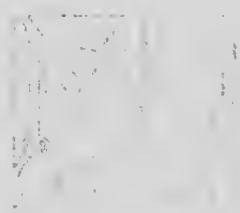
— George Chandler (1891)

THE LAST WOMAN

BY
JOHN L. HICKMAN

IN TWO VOLUMES
VOLUME I

THE FIRST PART OF THE
HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES



EDITED BY
MELVILLE G. ALLEN
NEW YORK

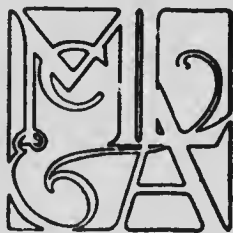


THE LAST WOMAN

BY
ROSS BEECKMAN

AUTHOR OF
PRINCESS ZARA

FRONTISPIECE BY
HOWARD CHANDLER CHRISTY



TORONTO
McLEOD & ALLEN
PUBLISHERS

PS3503

E24

L37

1909

P***

COPYRIGHT, 1909—BY
W. J. WATT & COMPANY

Published August

09601633

THE THEME

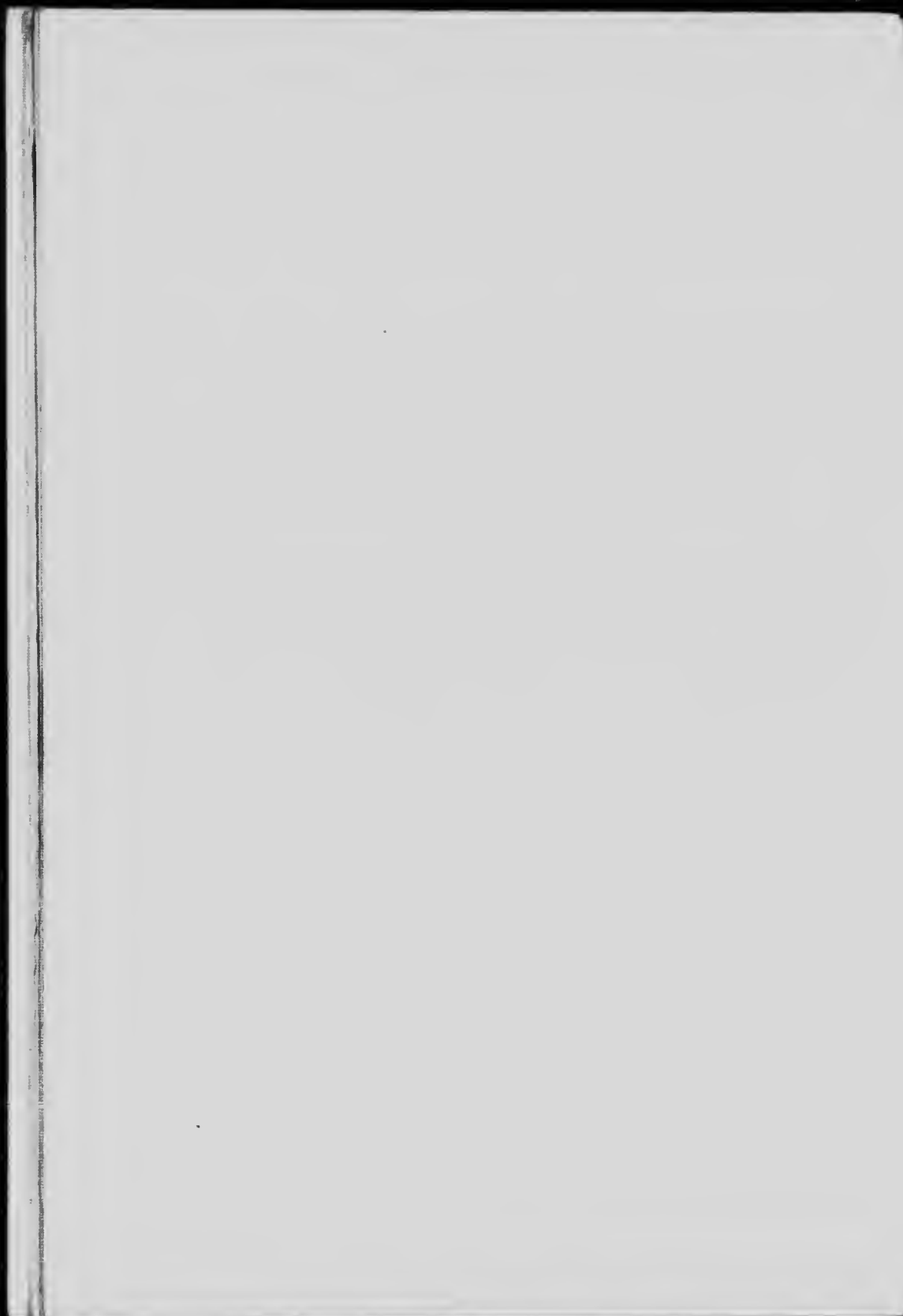
*If I could have my dearest wish fulfilled,
And take my choice of all earth's treasures, too,
And ask of Heaven whatsoe'er I willed—
I'd ask for you.*

*There is more joy to my true, loving heart,
In everything you think, or say, or do,
Than all the joy of Heaven could e'er impart,
Because—it's YOU.*



CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE PRICE	11
II. ONE WOMAN WHO DARED	36
III. A STRANGE BETROTHAL	56
IV. THE BOX AT THE OPERA	79
V. BEATRICE BRUNSWICK'S PLOT	96
VI. A REMARKABLE MEETING	115
VII. THE BITTERNESS OF JEALOUSY	126
VIII. BETWEEN DARKNESS AND DAYLIGHT	142
IX. PATRICIA'S COWBOY LOVER	147
X. MONDAY, THE 13TH	164
XI. MORTON'S ULTIMATUM	176
XII. THE QUARREL	185
XIII. SALLY GARDNER'S PLAN	192
XIV. PATRICIA'S WILD RIDE	201
XV. ALMOST A TRAGEDY	216
XVI. THE AUTOMOBILE WRECK	232
XVII. CROSS PURPOSES AT CEDARCREST	243
XVIII. MYSTERIES BORN IN THE NIGHT	258
XIX. RODERICK DUNCAN SEES LIGHT	272
XX. THE LAST WOMAN	285
XXI. THE REASON WHY	294
XXII. THE MYSTERY	307



THE LAST WOMAN

THE LAST WOMAN

CHAPTER I

THE PRICE

THE old man, grim of visage, hard of feature and keen of eye, was seated at one side of the table that occupied the middle of the floor in his private office. He held the tips of his fingers together, and leaned back in his chair, with an unlighted cigar gripped firmly in his jaws. He seemed perturbed and troubled, if one could get behind that stoical mask which a life in Wall street inevitably produces; but anyone who knew the man and was aware of the great wealth he possessed would never have supposed that any perturbation on the part of Stephen Langdon could arise from financial difficulties. And could his most severe critics have looked in upon the scene, and have seen it as it existed at that moment, they would unhesitatingly have said that the source of his discomfiture, if dis-

THE LAST WOMAN

comfiture there were, was the queenly young woman who stood at the opposite side of the table, facing him.

She was Patricia Langdon, sometimes, though rarely, addressed as Pat by her father; but he alone dared make use of the cognomen, since she invariably frowned upon such familiarities, even from him.

In private, among the women with whom she associated, she was frequently referred to as Juno; and when she was discussed by the gossips at the clubs, as she frequently was (for there are no greater nests of gossip in the world than the men's clubs of New York City), she was always Juno. There was a double and subtle purpose in both cases; one felt it rather a dangerous proceeding to speak criticizingly of Patricia Langdon, lest somehow what was said should get to her ears. She was one who knew how to retaliate, and to do so quickly. She was like a man in that she feared nothing, and hesitated at nothing, so long as she knew it to be right. A precedent had no force with her; if she desired to act, and there was no precedent for what she wished to do, she established one.

All her life, Patricia had been her father's chum; ever since she could remember, they had talked together of stocks and bonds, and puts and calls, and

THE PRICE

opening and closing quotations, and she knew every slang word that is uttered in "the street," that is used on the floor of the stock-exchange, or that appears in the financial columns of the newspapers.

And these two, father and daughter, were as much alike in outward bearing, in demeanor and in appearance, in gesture and in motion, as a man and a woman can be when the man is approaching seventy and the woman is only just past twenty.

These two had been discussing an unprecedented circumstance. The daughter was plainly annoyed, as her glowing cheeks and flashing eyes evidenced. The man, if one could have read his innermost soul, was afraid; for he knew his daughter as no other person did, and he feared that he had gone, or was about to go, a step too far with her.

The room was the typical private office of a present-day financial king, who is banker as well as broker, and who speaks of millions, by fifties and hundreds, as a farmer talks of potatoes by the bushel. It was a large, square room, solidly but not luxuriantly furnished. The oblong table at which Stephen Langdon was seated, and upon which his daughter lightly rested the tips of the fingers of one hand, was one around which directors of various great corporations gathered, almost daily, to be

THE LAST WOMAN

told by "old Steve" what to do. Over in a far corner was a roll-top desk with a swivel chair, at which Langdon usually seated himself when he was attending to his correspondence, or looking over private papers; beside it was a huge safe, and beyond that another, smaller one. Then, there were several easy chairs upholstered in leather, a couch and two other desks. There were three doors: one of these communicated with the main office of Stephen Langdon & Company, Bankers and Brokers; another was a private entrance from the street that ran along the side of the building, which Langdon owned; the third communicated with a smaller room, really the *sanctum sanctorum* of Stephen Langdon, into which it was his habit to take any person with whom he wished to have an absolutely confidential chat.

This room was supposed never to be entered save by himself and those whom he took with him — and by the cleaners who once a week attended to it. These three doors were now closed.

"Old Steve" moved nervously in his chair, shifted his feet uneasily, and rolled the unlighted cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other, biting savagely upon it as he did so.

"Well, Pat," he said, with as much impatience as he ever showed, "have you nothing to say?"

THE PRICE

"There seems to be nothing for me to say, dad," replied his daughter, and the intonation of her voice was different from the one she was accustomed to use in addressing her father, whom she adored. He attributed it, doubtless, to his abbreviation of her name, for he smiled grimly.

"Haven't you heard what I said?" he demanded.

"Certainly."

"Well, then, you know the situation, don't you?"

"I am not quite sure as to that," she replied, meditatively. "You have been somewhat ambiguous, and certainly quite enigmatical in your statement. Am I to gather from what you have told me that you are really facing failure?"

"God knows I have made it plain enough," was the quick response and Langdon pushed his chair away from the table, stretched his legs out straight in front of him, and thrust his hands deep into his trousers-pockets.

"I had not supposed it possible for you to face failure," said Patricia, with her eyes fixed upon her father's mask-like face; "but if it is so, won't you tell me more about it?"

"It all came about through those infernal bonds that I have just described to you. The men who were to go into the deal with me withdrew at the

THE LAST WOMAN

last moment; I have already explained that fully to you, and now, this Saturday afternoon, I find myself in a position such as I have never faced before — where there are demands upon me which I cannot meet; and those demands, Patricia, must be met, somehow, at ten o'clock on Monday morning, or Stephen Langdon must go to the wall."

"It amazes me," she said, speaking more to herself than to him; and she tapped lightly with her gloved fingers upon the table before her. "It amazes me more than I can say. I thought myself closely familiar with all the ins and outs of your business, dad, and I find now that I knew nothing about it at all."

"You have never known very much about it," he replied, with a half-laugh, but with a kindly smile, which changed his iron face wondrously, and which was reflected by a softened expression in his daughter's eyes.

"Is there no one to come to your aid?" she asked him.

"No, Patricia, there is no one to whom I could apply without betraying my condition and situation, and that would be fatal. Such a course would be equivalent to going broke; for when once a man loses his credit, even for an instant, in Wall Street, it is

THE PRICE

lost forever, never to be regained. People will tell you that there are exceptions to this, but I have been fifty years among the bulls and bears, and wolves, too, and I know better. When a man who occupies the position that I have held, and hold now, goes to the wall, it is the end."

During this statement, she had walked to one of the windows and stood silently looking out, for she wished to ask a question which her own intuition had already answered. She knew what the answer would be, but she did not quite know what form it would take. She felt that sort of misgiving which belongs only to women, and she feared that there was something beyond and behind, and perhaps beneath, all this present circumstance, which was being kept from her. For Patricia Langdon did know of one man who would go to her father's assistance, and she could not understand why he had not already applied to that person.

Presently, she returned to the table.

"Patricia," said her father, with some impatience, "I wish to the Lord you'd sit down. You make me nervous keeping on your feet all the while, and with those big eyes of yours fixed on your old dad's face as if they had discovered something new and strange in the lines of it."

THE LAST WOMAN

She paid no heed to this remark — one would have supposed she did not hear it; but she asked:

“Will you tell me why you sent for me? and why you wished to consult with me?”

Again, the cigar was whipped sharply to the opposite corner of the old banker's mouth; and he replied quickly, almost savagely:

“Because I have thought of a way by which you can help me out.”

His daughter caught her breath; it was a little gasp, barely audible; but she uttered only one word in reply. It was:

“How?”

For an instant, the banker hesitated at this abrupt question; then, with a suggestion of doggedness in his manner, he thrust forward his aggressive chin and shut his teeth so tightly together that the cigar, bitten squarely off, dropped unheeded upon the rug where he stood. By way of reply, he spoke a man's name.

“Roderick Duncan,” he said, sharply.

Patricia did not seem to heed the strangeness of her father's reply, nor did she alter the expression of her eyes or features. She seemed to have anticipated what he would say. After a moment, she remarked quietly:

THE PRICE

"I should think it very likely that Roderick would assist you in your extremity. I see no reason why he should not do so. His father was your partner in business. Indeed, I should regard it as his duty to come to your aid, in an extremity like this. But why, if I may venture to ask, was it necessary to consult me in regard to any application you might make to him?"

The old man did not reply; he remained silent, and continued doggedly to stare at his daughter. Presently, she asked him: "Have you already made such a request of Mr. Duncan?"

A smile took the place of the old man's frown; his face softened.

"No; that is to say, not exactly so," he replied.

"You have, perhaps, suggested the idea to him?"

Old Steve shrugged his shoulders, and dropped back into the chair, kicking away the half of the cigar in front of him as he did so.

"Yes," he said, "I have suggested the idea to him, and he met the suggestion more than half way, too. The reply he made to me is what brings your name into the question. If it were not for the fact that I know you to be fond of him, and that you are already half-promised —"

"Is that why you have sent for me?" She inter-

THE LAST WOMAN

rupted him with quiet dignity, although the expression of her eyes was suddenly stormy.

"Yes; it is."

"Would you please be more explicit? I am afraid that I do not clearly understand."

"Well, Pat, to put it in plain words, Roderick's answer implied that he would be only too delighted to advance the sum I require — twenty-million dollars — to his prospective father-in-law!"

Patricia stiffened where she stood. Her eyes fairly blazed with the sparks of anger they emitted. The hand that rested upon the table was clenched tightly, until the glove upon it burst. Otherwise, she showed no emotion.

"So, that is it," she said, presently. "Roderick Duncan has made a bid for me in the open market, has he? I am to be the collateral for a loan which you are to secure from him. Is that the idea? He has made use of your financial predicament to hasten matters with me. I understand — now!"

"Humph! Roderick would be very much astonished if he heard your description of the situation. He thought, and I thought, also —"

"But that is what it amounts to, isn't it?"

"Why, no, child; no, that is not what it amounts to, at all. You ought to know that. Roderick has

THE PRICE

loved you ever since you were boy and girl together, and you were always fond of him. His father and I both believed that some day you would marry. I know that Duncan has asked you time and time again, and I know, too, that you have never refused him. You have just put him off, again and again, that is all. You have played fast and loose with him until he is —”

“Wait, dad. There is one thing that you never knew; or, if you did know it once, you have forgotten what little you knew about it then. I refer to a woman’s heart. You ignored that part of me when you made your bargain. You forgot my pride, too. It is quite true that I have been fond of Roderick Duncan, all my life. It is equally true that he has asked me to be his wife, and that I have seriously considered his proposals. It is even true that I have thought of myself as his wife, that I have tried to believe that I loved him. All that is true, quite true — too true, indeed. But now — How dared you two discuss *me*, in the manner you have?” She blazed forth at her father suddenly, forgetting her studied calm. “Oh, I read you correctly when I first entered this room. I could see, even then, that some plot was afoot. But I never guessed — good heaven! who could have guessed? — that it

THE LAST WOMAN

was anything like this. Do you realize what you have done? Your words, thus far, have only implied it, but I know! Shall I tell you?"

"My dear —!"

"You have found yourself in this financial muddle — if, indeed, it is true that you are in one — and —"

"It is quite true."

"So much the worse for making me the victim of it. You have applied to Roderick Duncan for some of his millions; and you two, together, have discovered in the incident a means of coercing me. Oh, it is plain enough. You are a poor dissembler in a matter of this kind, however excellent you may be in others. I see it all, now, as clearly as if you had expressed it in words. You have asked Roderick, by intimation, if not in actual words, to go to your assistance to the amount of so many millions; and he, the man who professes to love me, whom I have thought I loved — he has, as bluntly, replied — oh, it is too terrible to contemplate! — he has told you that if I will hasten my decision, if I will give my consent at once to the wedding he proposes, he will supply the cash you need. You offer your daughter, as security for the loan; he accepts the collateral! That is the exact situation, isn't it?"

THE PRICE

"I suppose it is about that, although you put it rather brutally," he replied.

"Brutally!" she laughed. "Why, dad, is not that the way to put it? Horses and cattle are bought and sold at auction, knocked down to the highest bidder, or purchased at a private sale. The stocks and bonds and securities in which you deal are handled in precisely the same way. And now, when you are in an extremity, when your back is to the wall, a man whom I had always supposed to be at least a gentleman calmly makes a bid for your daughter, and you, my father, are willing to sell! Is not brutality the fitting word for you both? It seems so to me."

"Look here, Pat —"

"Stop, father; let me finish."

The old man shrugged his shoulders, and the daughter continued:

"It is a habit with people to say, 'If I were in your place I should' do so-and-so. I tell you, had I been in your place when such a suggestion as that one was made I should have struck the man in the face; but you see in me a value which I did not know I possessed. My father, who has been my chum since I was a child, is willing to dispose of his daughter for dollars and cents. And a man whom I have

THE LAST WOMAN

infinitely respected, calmly offers to make the purchase." Patricia clenched her hands and glared stormily at her father. Then, when he made no reply, she turned and walked to the window, staring out of it for a moment, while the old man remained silently in his chair, knowing that it were better for him not to speak, until the first violence of the storm had passed. He knew this daughter of his, or thought he did; but he was presently to discover that he was less wise than he had supposed. After a little, she returned and stood beside him, leaning against the table with her hands behind her, clenching it; but her words came calmly enough, when she spoke.

The old man raised his eyes to hers, as she approached him, and his own widened with amazement when he studied his daughter's face with that quick and penetrating glance which could read so unerringly the operators of Wall street. He could not comprehend precisely what it was that he saw in Patricia's face at this moment — only, he realized it to be the expression of some kind of settled purpose. He had never seen her thus before. Her strangely beautiful eyes had never blazed into his in just this way. He had seen her tempers and had contended against them, more or less, since she was left to his

THE PRICE

sole care, at her birth; but this attitude assumed now was new to him. Stephen Langdon knew, by his knowledge of himself, that Patricia was like him; but here was something new, strange, almost unreal. He wondered at it, shrank from it, not knowing what it was. Settled purpose was all that he was enabled to recognize. But what sort of settled purpose? What was it that his daughter had decided upon?

He was not long in doubt. Her words were sufficiently direct, if the hidden purpose behind their outward meaning was not.

"Father," she said, with distinct calmness, "I will use a phrase that is familiar to you. It seems to fit the occasion. You may tell Roderick Duncan that you will deliver the goods! Tell him to have the twenty millions ready for you to deposit in your bank at ten o'clock Monday morning, and that you will be ready with the collateral he demands."

"But, Patricia, my daughter, you take an unjust view of —"

"Stop, father! He must be told still more: he must be told that the collateral, having certain rights and values of its own, will insist upon a few stated conditions; and when the bargain is concluded, at ten o'clock Monday morning, Mr. Duncan must first have accepted those conditions."

THE LAST WOMAN

She walked around to the other side of the table again and faced her father across it; then she added, slowly and coolly:

"There must be a legal form of document drawn, in this transaction, and it must be signed, sealed and delivered exactly as would be done if the collateral offered, and the thing ultimately to be sold in this instance, were the stocks and bonds in which you usually deal. He must agree, in this document, that on the wedding day the woman he buys must receive an additional sum in her own name, of ten million dollars. One as rich as he is known to be will not object to a pittance like that. You can make your own arrangements with him concerning the loan of the twenty millions to you, the interest it draws, and when the sum will be due; but the consideration paid for me, to me, must be absolute, and in cash, before the marriage ceremony."

She turned quickly and strode to the end of the room. There, she threw open that door which has been described as communicating with the inner sanctum of the banker, and standing at the threshold, she said, in the cold, even tone in which she had pronounced the ultimatum to her father:

"I have surmised that you are in this room, Roderick Duncan. If I am correct, you may come out,

THE PRICE

now, and conclude the terms of your purchase. Do not speak to me here, and now. It would not be wise to do so. You have heard, doubtless, all that has been said in this room."

She turned again, and before Stephen Langdon could intervene, had passed him, going into the main office of the suite, and thence to the street.

Outside the Langdon building was a waiting automobile, which had taken Patricia to the office of her father for that interview, the purport of which she had not then even vaguely guessed. Under the steering-wheel of the waiting car was seated a young man, smoothed-faced, keen of eye, strong-limbed, and muscular in every motion that he made. A pair of expressive hazel eyes that seemed to take in everything at a glance, looked out from his handsome, clean-cut face, the attractiveness of which was augmented rather than marred by the strong, almost square chin, and the firm but perfectly formed lips, just thin enough to show determination of character, yet sufficiently mobile to suggest that the man himself, though young in years, had met with wide experiences. His personality was that of a man prepared to face any emergency or danger that might arise, and to meet it with a smile of entire self-confidence in his ability to overcome it. The rear seats

THE LAST WOMAN

of the waiting car were occupied by two young ladies, friends of Patricia; and the three were laughing and talking together when Stephen Langdon's daughter approached them. She did not wait to be assisted, but sprang lightly into the seat beside the young man who has just been described; and she said rather shortly, for she was still angry:

"Please, take me home, now, Mr. Morton."

He turned to face her, meeting her stormy eyes laughingly; and exclaimed:

"Gee! Miss Langdon, you sure do look as if you'd been having a run-in with the governor. I'd hate mightily to meet up with you, if I were alone and unprotected, and you were as plumb sore at me, as you are now at somebody you have just left inside that building. I sure would. Yes, indeed!"

He chuckled audibly as the car started forward toward Broadway. For a time, he gave his entire attention to the management of the car, purposely ignoring the young woman who was seated beside him, for notwithstanding the fact that he had chaffed her about the anger in her eyes, he was fully aware that she had met with an unpleasant experience of some sort, while he and the others were waiting outside the building.

The hiatus offered sufficient time for Miss Lang-

THE PRICE

don entirely to recover her equanimity, and when at last Richard Morton's glance again sought her, he met the same cold, calm, unflinching gaze from her beautiful eyes that he had discovered there less than two weeks before, and, since, had never been able to forget for a single moment.

"Miss Langdon," he said, with his characteristic smile, "if you had been raised out west, in the country where I come from, you sure would have been bad medicine for anybody who tried your temper a little bit too far."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked him, quickly, but without offense. She was smiling now, and Morton's colloquialisms always interested her.

"Well, I mean a lot — and then some. If you'd been raised with a gun on your hip, and had been born a man instead of a woman, I reckon you'd have been an unsafe proposition to r'il. You certainly did look mad when you came out of that office-building; and the only regret I feel about it, is that I didn't stand within comfortable easy reach of the gazabo that made you feel like that. One of us would — have gone out through the window."

"It was my father," she said, simply, but smilingly.

"Oh! was it? Well, even so, I'm afraid I

THE LAST WOMAN

wouldn't be much of a respecter of persons, if you happened to be on the other side of the scales. I reckon your dad wouldn't look bigger than any other man. Have you forgotten what I said to you the second time I ever saw you?"

"No," she replied, gently, "I haven't forgotten it, and I never will forget it; but I must remind you of your promise to me, at that same meeting."

"Won't you call it off for just five minutes, Miss Langdon?" he asked in a low tone which had begun to vibrate with emotion. "Just call it off for one minute, if you won't let it go for five. It sure is hard to sit here, alongside of you, and not only to keep my hands and eyes away from you, but to keep my tongue cinched with a diamond hitch. I suppose I am hasty, and a mighty sight too previous for your customs here in the East, but I can't see why you won't take up with a chap like me; and, besides —"

"Mr. Morton!" She turned to him unsmilingly, her eyes cold and serious, and she spoke in a tone so low that even the sound of it could not extend to the young ladies who occupied the rear seats in the tonneau. "It is my duty to tell you that I have just become a willing party — a willing party, please understand — to a business transaction, by the terms of which I am now the affianced wife of —"

THE PRICE

Patricia paused abruptly. Morton, still guiding the machine delicately in and out through the traffic of the street, turned a shade paler under his sun-burned skin, and Patricia could see that his hand gripped almost fiercely upon the steering-wheel. She realized that he had understood the important part of what she had said, and she did not complete the unfinished sentence. There was a considerable silence before either of them spoke again, and then Morton asked calmly, but in a voice that was so changed as to be scarcely recognizable:

"Of whom, Patricia?" He made use of her given name unconsciously, and if she noticed the slip, she did not heed it.

"I need not mention the gentleman's name," she told him. "It is unnecessary."

"What do you mean referring to it as a business transaction?" he asked, turning his face toward hers for an instant, and showing an angry glitter in his eyes. "If it is something that was forced upon you —"

"I meant — it doesn't matter what I meant, Mr. Morton."

For just one instant, he flashed his eyes upon her again, and she saw the lines of determination harden upon his face.

THE LAST WOMAN

"It sounded mighty strange to me," he said, quietly, but with studied persistence. "I don't mind confessing that I can't quite savvy its meaning. I didn't know that 'business transaction,' was a stock expression here, in the East, in connection with an engagement party. But I suppose I'm plumb ignorant. I feel so, anyhow."

"You have forgotten one thing, Mr. Morton; you have forgotten that I used the words, 'a willing party.'" She spoke calmly, half-smiling; but he was still insistent.

"Did you mean by their use that I am to understand that the circumstance meets with your entire approval?" he asked, slowly and with distinctness. A heavy frown was gathering on his brows.

"Yes; quite so."

"Do you love the man who is the other party to the — er — business transaction?" This time, he turned his head and looked squarely at her, gazed with his serious hazel eyes, deep into her darker ones — gazed searchingly and longingly.

"You have no right to ask me such a question as that," she told him.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Langdon." He turned his eyes to the front again; "but I think I have a distinct right to do so, and I don't believe it is

THE PRICE

your privilege to deny it. I have loved you from the first moment I saw you. Please, don't interrupt me now, for I must say the few words I have in mind. I'll not look at you. The others won't hear me. By reason of my great love for you, even though there is no response in your heart for me, I certainly have the right to ask that question; and, also, I believe I have the right to demand an answer. If you love that other man, and if you will tell me that you do, I shall have nothing more to say; but if you do not love him, you shall not be his wife so long as I have my two hands and can remember how to hold a gun." It sounded theatrical, but he did not mean it so; and a "gun" and its use, was the strongest form of expression he could think of, at that moment. It had formed the court of last resort throughout his youth in the great West, and just now he felt that the expression fitted the present case admirably. What reply Patricia might have made to this characteristic statement by the young Montana ranchman will never be known, for at that instant they were interrupted by the other passengers of the car, who sought to draw Patricia into conversation with them.

She accepted the interruption gratefully as well as gracefully; it offered an easy escape from a trying

THE LAST WOMAN

situation, and it was not until the car was drawn up in front of the door of her own home and she was about to leave it that she spoke again with Morton, save in a general way. Now, he leaned quickly nearer to her and said, in a tone so low that the others could not hear:

"I shall call upon you to-morrow evening — Sunday — if I may." Then he laughed and, with narrowed eyelids, added: "I'll come to the house whether I may or not. But you will receive me, won't you? Say that you will!" And Patricia nodded brightly, in reply, as she crossed the pavement toward the front steps of her father's princely mansion. At the door, she paused and looked after the car as it rolled up the avenue; and, with a half-smile of troubled perplexity, she murmured:

"I wish, now, that I had not given my word to that 'business transaction.' Richard Morton might have offered a better solution of my problem. Only, it would have been unfair — and cruel; and I have never been either the one, or the other; never, yet!" Then, she passed into the house.

.

Downtown in the private office of Stephen Langdon, Roderick Duncan stepped from the inner sanctum into the presence of the banker just as the latter

THE PRICE

started to his feet after the sudden and unexpected departure of his daughter. For an interval, the young man and the old faced each other in silence, the latter with a cynical and satirical smile on his strong face, the former with an unmistakable frown of anger.

"You're a darned old fool, Langdon!" Duncan exclaimed hotly, after that pause; and he clenched his hands until his knuckles turned white under the strain, half-raising the right one, until it seemed as if he intended to strike a blow with it. But Patricia's father gave no heed to the gesture. Instead, he dropped back upon his chair, and laughed aloud, ere he replied:

"I suspect, my boy, that there is a pair of us."

CHAPTER II

ONE WOMAN WHO DARED

THESE two men, the banker who had weathered so many financial storms of "the street" and had inevitably issued from the wreckage unscathed and buoyant, and the young multi-millionaire who faced him with uplifted hand even after the former returned to his chair, were exact opposites in everything save wealth alone. Roderick Duncan, son and heir of Stephen Langdon's former partner, was the possessor, by inheritance, of one of those colossal fortunes which are expressed in so many figures that the average man ceases to contemplate their meaning. Nevertheless, Duncan had kept himself clean and straight. In person, he was tall, handsome, distinguished in appearance, and genuinely a fine specimen of young American manhood. The older man regarded him with undoubted approval, and affection, too, while Duncan lowered the partly uplifted arm, and permitted the anger to die out of his face slowly. But there remained a decidedly troubled expression in his gray eyes, and

ONE WOMAN WHO DARED

there were two straight lines between his brows — lines of anxiety which would not disappear, wholly. He was plainly perplexed and, also, as plainly frightened by the almost tragic climax that had just occurred.

The elder man, whose face was always a mask save when he was alone with his daughter, or with this young man who now stood before him, had been at first angered by the words and conduct of Patricia. But the exclamation uttered by the young Cræsus impressed him ludicrously, notwithstanding the financial straits he was supposed to be in, and he grinned broadly into the anxious face that glowered upon him. Langdon's heart was not at stake; he had no woman's love to lose, or even to risk losing; and so far as the financial character of his troubles was concerned, he knew that Roderick Duncan would provide the millions he needed, in any case. That fact was not dependant upon any whim of Patricia's. Langdon could afford to laugh, believing that the rupture in the relations of these young people would be healed quickly. The old man did desire that the two should marry; he wished it more than anything else, save possibly the winning of his "street" contests.

It was the younger man who broke the silence.

THE LAST WOMAN

He did it first by striking a match on the sole of his shoe and lighting a cigar; then by crossing to one of the chairs at the oblong table, into which he literally threw himself; and as he did this, he exclaimed, with an expression of petulance that might have belonged to a boy better than to a man:

"Well, you've made a mess of it, haven't you? You have got us both into a very devil of a fix. I ought to have shot you, or myself, before I consented to such a fool plan as that one was. Oh, yes; we're in a fix all right!"

"How so?" asked the old man, rising and selecting a chair at the opposite side of the table, and calmly lighting a fresh cigar, while he swung one leg across the corner of the solid piece of furniture.

"Patricia won't stand for that little scheme of yours, not for a minute; and you know it, Uncle Steve." This was an affectionate term of familiarity which Duncan sometimes used in addressing Patricia's father. "I was afraid of it when you proposed it, but I allowed myself, like an idiot, to be influenced by you. I tell you, Langdon, she won't stand for it; not for a minute. I have made her angry, many times before now, but I have never known her to be quite so contemptuously angered."

"No," said Langdon, and he chuckled audibly.

ONE WOMAN WHO DARED

"I agree with you. I think my little girl is going to make it hot for you before we are through with this deal. In fact, I shouldn't wonder if she made it warm for both of us. She is like her old dad about one thing — she won't be driven."

The younger man said something under his breath which, because it was not audible to his companion, need not be repeated here; but it was probably not an expression that he would have used in polite society. He drummed on the table with his fingertips, and smoked savagely.

"You're mighty cheerful about it, aren't you?" he demanded, with sarcastic emphasis. "What I want to know is, how are we going to fix it up?"

"Fix what up?"

"Why, this business about collateral, and all that rot, with Patricia. How are we going to square ourselves? That's what I'd like to know! Maybe you can see a way out of it, but I'm darned if I can."

The banker took the cigar from his mouth, flicked the ashes into the cuspidor, removed his leg from the table, and replied calmly, with a half-smile:

"It looks to me as if it were all fixed up, now. Patricia has agreed to marry you all right; she told me in plain English that I could deliver the goods."

THE LAST WOMAN

You heard her, didn't you? As far as I can see, she has only raised the ante just a little — a small matter of ten millions, which you won't mind at all. What's the matter with you, anyhow? You get what you wanted — Patricia's consent to an early marriage." The old man grinned maddeningly at his companion.

"Confound you!" shouted Duncan, starting to his feet, and he smashed one hand down upon the top of the table, in the intensity of the resentment he felt at this remark.

"Do you suppose — damn you! — that I want her like that? Can't you see how the whole thing outraged her? She hates me now, with every fibre of her being. She hates me, and you, too, for this day's work!"

Langdon shrugged his shoulders.

"You want her, don't you?" he asked, placidly, as if he were inquiring about a quotation on 'change.

"Of course, I want her. God only knows how greatly I want her."

"Well, you get her, don't you, by this transaction? She'll keep the terms of the agreement. She's enough like me for that. She said I could deliver the goods. She meant it, too. You get her, don't you?"

"Yes — but how?" was the sulky reply. "How

ONE WOMAN WHO DARED

do I get her? What will she do to me. after I do get her? Tell me that, confound you!"

The old man chuckled again. "I am not a mind-reader," he said.

"What will she do to me, Uncle Steve? What did she threaten? What am I to expect from her, now?"

"Oh, I don't know. I confess that I don't. Sometimes, Patricia is a little too much for the old man, Roderick," he added, wistfully. Then, with another change of manner, he exclaimed: "But you get her! And I get the twenty-millions credit. What more can either of us ask? Eh?"

"The twenty millions have nothing to do with it, and you know it. They never did have anything to do with it, and you know that, also. It was only your cursed suggestion, that we should make her promise to marry me the condition of keeping you from failure. You know as well as I do that there is nothing belonging to me which you cannot have at any time, for the asking; and that you do not stand, and have not stood, in any more danger of failure than I do."

"I would have failed if I had not known where to get the credit for the twenty millions," the banker remarked, quietly.

THE LAST WOMAN

"Yes; but — confound it — you did know. You only had to ask me. But instead of doing it in a straight, business-like way, you set that horrible fly to buzzing in my ears, that we could make use of the circumstance to compel Patricia to an immediate consent. And I, like a fool, listened to you. Patricia never meant not to marry me; but now —!"

He strode across the floor, then back again to his chair and flung himself into it. The old man watched him warily, keen-eyed, observant, and with a certain expression of fondness that no one but his daughter and this young man had ever compelled from him. But, presently, he emitted another chuckling laugh; and said:

"That was a sharp stroke of hers to have the ten millions paid over to her. It was worthy of her old dad; eh? She is a bright one, all right. She's a chip off the old block, my boy. I couldn't have done it better, myself."

"Damn you!" Duncan exclaimed, and he sprang to his feet, grasped his hat, and rushed from the office to the street with much more apparent excitement than Patricia herself had shown. He had the feeling that he had allowed himself to be tricked into the commission of an unmanly act, and he was thoroughly ashamed of it.

ONE WOMAN WHO DARED

Stephen Langdon, left alone, chuckled again, although his face quickly fell into that reposeful, mask-like expression which was habitual to it — an expression not to be changed by the loss or gain of millions. He remained for a time quietly in the chair he had been occupying, but soon he rose and crossed to his desk, throwing back the top of it. He pulled a bundle of papers from one of the pigeon-holes and calmly examined certain portions of them. He glanced over three letters left there by his stenographer for him to sign and post. These he signed, and after enclosing them in their respective envelopes, dropped them lightly into a side-pocket of his coat. Then, he pulled toward him the bracket that held the telephone, and placed the receiver against his ear. Having presently secured the desired number, he said:

“ I wish to speak with Mr. Melvin, personally.”

“ Mr. Melvin is not in his office at the present moment,” came the reply over the telephone.

“ Who is it, please? ”

“ This is Stephen Langdon, and I wanted to speak — ”

He was interrupted by the person at the other end of the wire, who uttered an exclamation of surprise, followed by these words:

THE LAST WOMAN

"Why, Mr. Langdon, Mr. Melvin has gone to your house to see you, as we supposed. A telephone call came from your residence, and he departed at once, saying that he would not return to the office to-day."

"The devil he did!" exclaimed the banker, as he hung up the receiver. Then, he leaned back in his chair and smoked hard for a moment, with the nearest approach to a frown that had appeared on his face during all that exciting afternoon; and he did another thing unusual with him: he spoke aloud his thoughts, with no one but himself for listener.

"I'll be blowed if I thought Patricia would go as far as that!" was what he said. "If she hasn't sent for Malcolm Melvin to draw those papers she hinted at, I'm a Dutchman! By Jove, I begin to think that Duncan was right after all, and that he is up against it in this little play we have had this afternoon. But I hadn't an idea that my girl would go quite so far. H'm! It looks as if it is up to me to spoil her interview with Melvin, if I can get there in time.

Five minutes later, he left the banking-house, paused at a letter-box long enough to drop in the correspondence he had signed, and then went swiftly

ONE WOMAN WHO DARED

onward to the subway, by which he was conveyed rapidly to the vicinity of his home. Somewhat later, when he entered the sumptuously appointed library, he discovered precisely what he had expected to find: his lawyer, Malcolm Melvin, and his daughter Patricia were facing each other across the table, the former having before him several sheets of paper, which were already covered with the penciled notes and memoranda he had evidently been engaged in making.

Langdon stopped in the middle of the floor and looked at them. For the first time since the beginning of the interview with his daughter at the office, he realized that she had been in deadly earnest at its close. He understood, suddenly, how deeply her pride had been wounded, and he knew that she was enough like himself to resent it with all the power she could command.

"Since when, Melvin, have you ceased to be my attorney!" he inquired sharply, determined to put an end to the scene, at once.

The elderly lawyer and the young woman had raised their heads from earnest conversation when Stephen Langdon entered the room. The lawyer, with a startled, although amused, expression on his

THE LAST WOMAN

professional face; the daughter with a cold smile and an almost imperceptible nod of her shapely, Junoesque head. But her black eyes snapped with something very nearly approaching defiance, and she replied, before Melvin could do so:

"Do not misunderstand the situation, please," she said, quickly. And her father noticed with deep misgiving that she omitted the customary term of endearment between them. "Mr. Melvin is here at my request, and because he is your attorney. I have been instructing him how to draw the papers that are to accompany the collateral offered for your loan, and the bonus that goes with it; and just how those papers are to be used, in accordance with the discussion between you and me, at the bank, this afternoon. I told you, then, to inform Mr. Duncan that you would meet his requirements. Later, when I realized that he had overheard us —"

"What's the matter with you, Pat?" demanded the father, interrupting her with a touch of anger. "Have you lost your head, entirely?"

"No," she replied, with utter calmness; "I have only lost my Dad. I went down to his office this afternoon to see him, and I left him there. Just now, I have been instructing Mr. Melvin concerning the particulars of the agreement I want drawn and

ONE WOMAN WHO DARED

signed in the transaction that is to take place between you and Roderick Duncan, in which I am, personally, so deeply concerned, in which I am to figure as the collateral security."

The old man stared at his daughter, with an expression that had made many a Wall-street financier turn pale with apprehension. It was a grim visage that she saw then — hard and set, stern and unrelenting, and many a strong man had surrendered to Stephen Langdon, frightened by the aspect of it. Not so this daughter of his. She met his gaze unflinchingly and calmly, without a change in her outward demeanor. After a moment, Langdon turned with a shrug toward the lawyer.

"Melvin," he said, "how many years have you been my attorney?"

"Fourteen, I think, Mr. Langdon," was the smiling reply. One would have thought that the man of law found something highly amusing in this incident.

"About that — yes. Well, do you see that door?" He half-turned and indicated the entrance he had just used. "Melvin, I want you to pick up those papers and tell John, outside, to give you your hat; then I want you to get out of here as quick as God'll let you. If you don't, our relations are sev-

THE LAST WOMAN

ered from this moment. And if you complete the draft of those papers, without my permission, or submit them to any person whatever, without my having seen them first, I will have another attorney to replace you, Monday morning. Go right along now. You needn't answer me. If you don't want my business, all you've got to do is to say so. If you do want it, you'll come mighty near doing what I have told you to do, just now."

The lawyer, quietly, but with dignity, rose from his chair, folded the papers, placed them in an inner pocket of his coat, bowed to Patricia and then to her father, and without a word passed from the room, closing the door quietly behind him; but before he quite accomplished this last act, the clear even tones of the girl called after him:

"I am sure, Mr. Melvin, that we had quite concluded our conference. I will ask you please to draw those papers as I have directed. You may submit copies to Mr. Langdon at the time you bring the originals to me."

He did not answer, for there was no occasion to do so, and a second later Stephen Langdon and his daughter were alone together for the second time that afternoon.

"Now, Patricia," he said, turning toward her,

ONE WOMAN WHO DARED

with his feet wide apart and his hands thrust deep into his trousers-pockets, "what in blazes is this all about?"

His daughter replied coldly and precisely:

"I have merely been dictating to your lawyer the substance of the conditions I wish to have embodied in the papers that are to complete the transaction we have discussed at your office. I selected Mr. Melvin because I knew him to be in your confidence, and I surmised that you would prefer that the condition of affairs under which you are now struggling, which forces you to borrow twenty-million dollars, should not be made known to an outsider."

"Well, I'll tell you that I won't hear of it! It's got to stop right now. I won't have those papers drawn at all. I won't have it. The whole thing is preposterous, and you seem to be determined to make a fool of yourself. I won't have it!"

"But you must have it," she said, quietly.

"Must have it? Patricia, there isn't a man in the city of New York who dares to say that to me."

"Possibly not, sir; but there is a woman in New York who dares to say it to you, and who does say it, here and now. That woman is, unfortunately, your daughter."

"Patricia! Are you crazy?"

THE LAST WOMAN

"No; but I am more hurt and angry, more outraged and incensed, than I believed it possible ever to be. I shall insist upon the drawing of those papers, and the fulfillment of the stipulations I have directed. If you are determined that Mr. Melvin shall not finish what he has begun for me, I shall select another lawyer, and shall have the papers drawn just the same."

"But, my child, it is all foolishness. The papers are not necessary. Roderick will supply what cash I need without anything of that sort, and you know it!"

"Am I to understand, sir, that you have lied to me?"

Langdon dropped upon a chair, breathing an oath which his daughter did not hear, and she continued, without awaiting a reply from him:

"You have taught me, since I was a child, that in a business transaction in the Street, where there is no time for the drawing of papers, a man must live up to his word, absolutely. I took you seriously in what occurred at your office this afternoon. I surmised, when we were near the end of our interview, — nay, I assumed it — that Roderick Duncan was inside the inner office. My surmise proved to be true, and now I have only this to say: We shall

ONE WOMAN WHO DARED

carry out the transaction precisely as it was stipulated between us, and according to the papers I have dictated to Mr. Melvin, or I shall go to another lawyer and have those same papers drawn and offered to you and to Mr. Duncan, for your signatures. He overheard our conversation, and thus became a party to it. I was forced into the situation without my consent, and I shall now insist upon a certain recognition of my rights in the matter. If you choose to deny me those rights, the fact will not deter me from proceeding in my own way — a way which Mr. Melvin, your attorney, thoroughly understands. I have explained it fully to him."

The old man leaned back in his chair, glaring at his daughter, and yet in that burning gaze of his there was undoubted admiration. He liked her pluck, and deep down in his heart he gloried in her ability to maintain the position she had assumed, where she literally held him helpless. For it would never do that she should be permitted to go to another lawyer; such a proceeding would betray to other parties the financial embarrassment into which he had been drawn. The news would get out. There would be a whisper here, a murmur there, and before noon on Monday, all New York would know it. His daughter understood her momentary power

THE LAST WOMAN

over him, and she was determined to make the most of it.

Patricia returned her father's gaze for a moment, then turned negligently away and moved toward the door.

"Wait," he called to her.

"Well?" She stopped, and half-turned.

"Don't you know, girl, that the whole business was tomfoolery?"

"No; and I would not believe you, or Mr. Duncan — now."

"Wait just a minute longer, Patricia; let me explain this thing to you, fully. Let me make you understand just how it came about," her father exclaimed. "It was all a mistake, you know, and I must confess that the mistake was mostly mine. Of course, Roderick was ready to let me have the twenty millions, or fifty if I had asked for them. There was never any doubt about that, and could have been none. He has the money, and there never has been a time, since he inherited it, when I could not use it as if it were my own. You knew that. I have never hesitated to go to him, either. That is why I went to him to-day. Before I had an opportunity to explain the purpose of my call, he asked about

ONE WOMAN WHO DARED

you, and the question suggested to my mind the idea of utilizing the desperate situation I was in to hasten your marriage to him. You know how I have looked forward to that. I have known, or at least I have supposed I knew, for years, that you thought more of him than of anyone else. You are twenty years old now; it is high time that you were married, and it would break my old heart to see you take up with any of those society-beaux who hover around you at every function where you appear. On the other hand, I shall be very glad when you are Roderick Duncan's wife. He is the son of the best friend I ever had, the only man I ever trusted. And he is every bit as good a man as his father was. He is square and on the level. He has wealth, and he doesn't go bumming around town, giving champagne parties, and monkey dinners. He knows how to be a good fellow without making a fool of himself, and that is more than you can say of most young men who have money to burn. You have grown up together, and why in the world you have kept putting him off is more than I can guess. Besides all that, he is easily worth a hundred millions. But this has nothing to do with the present question. I want you to have him, and I want him to have you; and

THE LAST WOMAN

if he didn't have a dollar in the world, I should feel just the same about it. All that happened to-day was at my instigation; not at his. And now, daughter, you must find it in your heart to forgive him — and me."

She listened to him to the end, quietly and outwardly unmoved. When he concluded, she replied in the same even tone she had used ever since her father entered the room:

"I don't know, ma. I don't care to know, any of the particulars regarding how the arrangement came about between you and Mr. Duncan. What I do know is this: the arrangement was made between you, and was agreed upon between you. I was called in, to be consulted, at your private office, with the third interested party concealed like a spy in an inner room. I agreed to the transaction as I understood it. I will carry it out as I agreed to do, while at your office, and in no other way. If Roderick Duncan wishes to make me his wife, he must do it according to the stipulations I have dictated to Mr. Melvin, this afternoon, or he can never do it at all. That, sir, is all I have to say."

She turned and went from the room, closing the door behind her as softly as the lawyer had done.

The old man slipped down more deeply into his

ONE WOMAN WHO DARED

chair, covered his eyes with one hand, and murmured, audibly:

“I have had to live almost seventy years to find out that, after all, I am nothing but an old fool.”

CHAPTER III

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

WHEN dinner was served at seven that Saturday evening, the banker and his daughter faced each other in silence across the table. There was no wife and mother in this money-making's family, for she had passed out of life when Patricia came into the world. This, perhaps, may account for the close intimacy that had always existed in the relations of father and daughter, between whom there had never been any break or shadow, until this particular Saturday afternoon.

"Old Steve," iron-faced, heavy jawed, and steady of eye, wore his Wall-street mask at this particular dinner; and he wore it as grimly as ever he did when encountering a financial storm or a threatened panic. He felt that he had more to conceal, just now, than any financial problem could ever compel him to face. He was no longer "dad." Patricia had practically omitted the use of even the less endearing term of father; but whether intentionally or not, even the

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

shrewd old banker could not determine. For years, he had forgotten that he had a heart, save when he and his daughter were alone together. The money whirlpool of the financial section of the city had made him colder of aspect, harder in nature, and less considerate of the feelings of others. It had never even remotely occurred to him that there could be any rupture between himself and Patricia, or that a yawning gulf, like this one was, could separate them.

But now there was one, and he recognized its breadth and its depth. He knew that he could not cross it to her, and that it would never be bridged, save by Patricia herself. He had offended her beyond forgiveness, almost. He had not entirely realized that Patricia's nature and characteristics were so like his own, save only where they were feminine instead of masculine, that she would now adopt the course he would have pursued under circumstances which might, by a stretch of the imagination, be called parallel.

Patricia's face was almost as mask-like as her father's, save that her great, dark eyes were stormy in their depths, and would have suggested to one who had sailed the Southern seas the brooding and far away approach of a monsoon. Her olive-tinted skin had in it a suggestion of pallor; but only a sugges-

THE LAST WOMAN

tion. When she spoke at all it was to John, the butler who served them; and then it was always in her accustomed low, evenly modulated tone. Not perceptibly different to the butler were her tone and manner, and yet even the servant, wise in his generation, sensed the unsettled condition of things, and moved about like a phantom; perhaps also he was a trifle more assiduous than usual in his efforts at perfect service.

Patricia ate sparingly, but bravely. There was nothing of the shrinking or pouting, or even of the petulant, in her character. Her father ate nothing at all. He dawdled with his soup, turned his fish over and sent it away, and sniffed contemptuously at everything else that was placed before him. He made his dinner of coffee and cognac, and seemed to be greatly interested while he burned the latter over three dominoes of sugar.

When the moment came to leave the table, there had been no word exchanged between them; but then, with an effort, the banker assumed his brightest and most kindly tone; and he asked, cheerily:

"Well, what have you on for to-night, my dear?"

"Nothing at all," she replied, indifferently, as if the question held no interest for her — as, indeed, it did not, for the moment; but she followed him from

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

the dining-room into the library, as was their usual custom whenever they had dined alone. Now, as they entered it, the banker, with an assumption of high spirits he did not feel, remarked:

"If you don't object to a Saturday-night opera, Garden is singing 'Salome' at the Manhattan to-night, and I should like to hear it. Will you go, with your old dad?"

"No, thank you," she replied, indifferently. "I shall remain at home."

She was standing at the table, turning the leaves of a magazine, and her father glanced keenly at her across the intervening space, while he lighted a cigar. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, and a sigh which could not have been seen or heard, and which only he himself knew to have existed, he crossed the floor. As he was passing from the room, he said, as indifferently as she had spoken:

"Then, I suppose, I will have to take it in, alone."

"You might ask Roderick to go with you," she threw at him, as he passed into the hallway; but Langdon pretended not to hear, for he called back at her:

"I'll get Beatrice, I think, and ask her to play daughter for me; eh?"

Patricia made no comment upon this suggestion;

THE LAST WOMAN

but having awaited, where she was, the sound of the closing outer door, she slowly crossed the room.

The drop-light at her favorite chair was adjusted, and she began the reading of a new book which someone had placed on the table beside it. She read on and on, apparently with interest, but really without knowing at all what she did read, until more than an hour had passed; and then a card was brought to her.

She glanced at it, although she believed she knew perfectly well what name it bore, before she did so. Her lips tightened for an instant, and she frowned ever so little. But she said to the footman:

"You may bring Mr. Duncan here, James."

Patricia did not rise from her chair when her caller entered the library. Duncan moved toward her eagerly, but meeting her eyes, which she raised quite calmly to his as he crossed the floor, he paused, and remained at about midway of the distance.

"Good evening, Patricia," he said. "I'm awfully glad to have found you at home. I was afraid you might go out before I could get here."

"I expected you," she told him, without returning his salute. "I have been expecting you for an hour. In fact, I have been waiting for you."

"That is very pleasant news, indeed, Patricia."

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

Duncan was startled by it, however. He had not expected it, and he did not quite like the tone in which Patricia uttered it.

"I am glad you take it so," she returned. "It was not pleasant for me to wait for you, and it is not distinctly agreeable to me to receive you. But I believed that you would think it necessary to call, in order to make some effort at explaining the occurrences of this afternoon. Let me tell you, before you begin, that there exists no necessity for any sort of explanation. My father has fulfilled that duty quite fully, and I listened to him, throughout. He has exonerated you —"

Duncan took a hasty step toward her, but stopped again, even more abruptly than before, repelled by the cold barrier that the expression of her dark eyes built up between them. Whatever it was that he had in mind to say remained unspoken. He turned away and sought a chair opposite her, ten feet away, utterly repelled, for although these two had grown to manhood and womanhood together, she had always had the power to lift a sudden barrier between them. Though he believed he knew every mood and characteristic of this proud young woman, just now, for the first time within his recollection, there was a strangeness about her that he could not

THE LAST WOMAN

fathom. Long habit had made him almost as much at home in this house, as in his own. He had been, ever since he could remember, considered and treated like a member of the family. And so, now, before seating himself, he sought to put himself more at ease by indulging in a liberty which had always been accorded to him. He selected a cigar from Stephen Langdon's box, and lighted it. Then, remembering that conditions were changed, he threw it down with an angry gesture, upon a receptacle for ashes that was on the table. Patricia watched all these proceedings, unmoved.

"Patsy!" he exclaimed, abruptly, making use of an expression of their childhood; and he would have continued with rapid speech, had she not made a quick gesture of aversion that interrupted him. Then, she said, quietly:

"I would prefer, if you don't mind, that you should henceforth use my full name in addressing me."

"Patricia, you have just told me that your father has exonerated me; and if that is so, why do you receive me in just this manner? I need exoneration, all right; and I deserve it, too, for honestly, dear, I never thought of offending you. I thought, until the last moment, that you would take it all as a

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

huge joke. It never occurred to me that you would be so deeply wounded. I should never have agreed to the crazy compact that your father and I made together, if I had realized the seriousness of it."

"No," she replied, quietly. "You should not have agreed to it. It was the mistake of your life, and, perhaps, of mine."

"You know how I love you, dear," he began, half-starting from his chair. But the expression of her eyes, without the slightest motion otherwise, made him pause again, without completing what he had started to say.

"It is best that we should be quite frank with each other," she said, calmly. "That is why I waited so patiently for you, to-night. Please do not interrupt me; let me say what I have in mind to say to you."

"I would like it much better if you would hit me over the head with one of those bronze ornaments, as you would have done ten or twelve years ago; or if you would fly into one of your tempers just as you used to do, Patricia. I would like anything better than this cold calmness. It makes me shudder; it freezes me; it fills me with apprehension. I love you so, dear! and I have loved you all my life. You know it; I don't need to tell you! And if I

THE LAST WOMAN

have made a mistake, surely you can find it in your heart to forgive, because of my great love? No, I will not stop," he ejaculated, when she made a gesture of impatience. "I will finish what I have to say, even braving your anger to do so. I would like to make you angry just now, Patricia. I would delight to see you in one of those tantrums of fury that you used to have when you and I were children together. Do you remember that I bear a scar now, inflicted by a tennis-racket in your hand, when you were ten years old? I think more of that scar than of any other possession I have, for even you cannot take it away from me. I love you with all the manhood there is in me, and I can't remember a time when I did not; and I have thought that I knew, all these years, that you loved me; I believe it now, even though the scorn in your eyes denies it. You may have convinced yourself that you do not, but you are working from a wrong hypothesis. I know why you have put me off, time and again, when I have besought you to name our wedding-day. It has been because you were not quite ready. Isn't that true, dear? You have not denied me because you did not love me; you have put me off only because you were not ready to become a wife. But you have loved me; I am sure of that. You have

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

never said that you would not be my wife; and in fact you have often shown me that some day you would be; you have only declined to say when. I have come to you to-night, Patricia, to tell you that I will wait, on and on, counting only your own pleasure in the matter, until you are willing to appoint the time, if only you will say that you forgive me for the apparently despicable part I have played in the tragedy of this afternoon."

"That is a very pretty speech you have just made. It sounds well, and is quite characteristic," she replied to him, calmly. "I shall be as frank with you in my reply."

"Well?" he said, and waited. Her tone and manner startled him. There was a suggestion of finality in her attitude that was alarming. She continued, speaking almost gently:

"I have believed in your love for me, as sincerely as I have believed in my father's love for me; and I think now that you were more to me than I realized. But, Roderick, have you ever watched a woodman in the forest chopping down a tree? And have you ever seen that tree fall, when its natural prop was stolen away by the sharp edge of the axe? It may have taken that tree a hundred, or a thousand years to grow; but when it crashes down, it is gone

THE LAST WOMAN

forever. A little, puny man has gone into the forest with an axe upon his shoulder, and has ruthlessly attacked one of God's greatest creations, a gorgeously abundant tree. He had no thought of what he was doing, of what he was destroying. His only thought was of a purpose he had in view; and it was somehow necessary to destroy that tree in order to accomplish the purpose. The thing that nature created, which had required years to bring to perfection; the thing that God made beautiful was, in a few minutes, shorn of its splendor by this little, ruthless creature, who went into the forest with the axe on his shoulder. That is what you have done to whatever love I may have felt for you, Roderick Duncan. It lies prostrate now, and it has borne down with it, all the lesser verdure, all the little trees and bushes and vines that grew about it, and has left only a bare spot — and the wounded stump. You were the woodman with the axe."

"My God, Patricia!" he cried out, appalled by the agony of his loss. He understood, suddenly, that this proud young woman would have forgiven downright disloyalty more readily than such hurt to her pride.

She continued as if he had not spoken:

"My father informed me, this afternoon, as you

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

are aware, of certain financial straits in which he has suddenly become involved. I know enough about the methods and habits of 'the street,' to realize how impossible it was for him to betray his condition to certain forces and powers that are exerted there, lest, despite what he could do, he should lose the great influence he now has over all the immense wealth of this country. While he was telling me about his condition, I naturally thought of you; and I wondered why he had not gone to you instantly; or, if you knew of the circumstance, I wondered the more, why you had not as instantly gone to him, and offered the assistance he needed. Then, little by little, the plot which you two had concocted together, was unveiled to me."

"But, Patricia, dear, won't you —?"

"Let me finish, please. I have not quite done so, as yet."

"Well, dear?"

"I have agreed to the terms that were adjusted between you and my father, respecting the loan of a certain sum of money by you to him. Of course, you may repudiate those terms if you please, and it is a matter of indifference to me whether you do so, or not. You may loan the money to my father without accepting me as the collateral for it; that

THE LAST WOMAN

also is a matter of indifference to me. But I wish to tell you, and I wish you thoroughly to understand, that, unless you carry out the terms of this compact precisely as it was agreed upon between you and my father, with the added stipulations which I have requested Mr. Melvin to draw for me, I will never under any circumstances be your wife, or receive you again. That, I think, concludes this interview. I shall be ready Monday morning, at ten o'clock, to fulfill my part of the agreement. You and Stephen Langdon may do as you please. And now, please, bid me good-night — I prefer to be alone."

Duncan started from his chair and took two steps toward her, where he paused. His face was pale, but his finely chiseled features were set in firm lines; and his tall, athletic figure, was drawn to its full height, as he replied, with slow emphasis:

"In that case, Patricia, we shall carry out the compact as agreed upon, and I shall conform to whatever stipulations you have made," he said. "Good-night."

He turned and went swiftly from the room. He seized his coat and hat before James, the footman, could assist him, and he went out at the front door, with more bitterness and more anger in his soul than he remembered ever to have felt before against any

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

man or woman. But just now the bitterness and the anger were directed chiefly against himself.

For a moment, he stood on the bottom step at the entrance to the mansion, undecided as to which way he should go or what he should do. Then, he turned about and again rang the bell at Stephen Langdon's door; and the instant it was opened, he brushed savagely past the astonished James, and made his way to the library, unannounced. He pushed the door ajar noiselessly, without intending to do so, and halted on the threshold, amazed by what he saw there. He had not meant to intrude in that silent fashion upon the privacy and grief of the woman he loved, and as soon as he could master his emotions, he stepped quickly backward into the hall, reclosing the door as softly as he had opened it. Patricia had given way at last. She had thrown herself upon the couch, and with her face buried among the pillows, she was sobbing as if her heart would break. His first impulse, when he discovered her so, was to rush to her side, to take her in his arms, and to tell her over and over again of his love. But he knew instinctively that Patricia would bitterly resent such an effort on his part, that he would again offend her sense of pride if she should know that he had found her in tears.

THE LAST WOMAN

Outside the door, when he had closed it, he hesitated for a time; finally he wrote rapidly on the back of one of his cards, as follows:

“There will be little time on Monday morning to inspect the papers you mentioned. I shall be glad if you will direct Mr. Melvin to submit them to me at my rooms, between five and six o'clock tomorrow afternoon.
R. D.”

He gave this written message to James, instructing him not to deliver it until Miss Langdon summoned him to her, or she should leave the library. Then, he asked the footman:

“Do you happen to know where Mr. Langdon has gone, to-night, James?”

“To the opera, sir,” replied the footman.

“Alone?”

“Quite so, sir, I believe.”

Duncan walked the distance, which was considerable, from the Langdon mansion to the Opera House, where he went directly to Stephen Langdon's box, believing that he would find the banker to be its solitary occupant, and there were reasons why he greatly desired a private conference with Patricia's father. He entered the box without announcement, and came to a sudden pause when he discov-

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

ered that the banker was not alone. Beside him, with her white arm resting upon the rail at the front of the box, was seated a young woman whom Duncan knew well; and she happened to be the one person in New York who came nearest to being on terms of intimacy with Patricia. For Miss Langdon was one who had never permitted herself to be intimate with anybody. Others might be intimate with her, as Beatrice Brunswick had been, but that close and personal relation which so often exists between two young women, and which is so beautiful in its character, was something Patricia Langdon had never permitted herself to know. She was not even aware that this was so. The condition arose from no lack of sympathy for others, and from no want of affection for her friends; it was a characteristic reserve of manner and method, inherited from her father, which had been cultivated by and through her association with him, all her life long.

While Roderick Duncan halted for an instant, to consider whether, or not, he should proceed with his original design, and while he still stood there, holding the curtains apart and appearing much as if he were a stealthy observer of the scene before him, the young woman turned her head and discovered him. She smiled brightly and uttered an exclamation of

THE LAST WOMAN

pleasure as she started to her feet and approached him with out-stretched hand. One could have seen that the pleasure she manifested, was very real. It was at once evident that she liked Duncan.

"How good of you to come, and how fortunate!" she said, when he took her hand and raised it to his lips, just as the banker turned about in his chair, and with a grim smile also made Duncan welcome.

"Hello," he said. "Glad you came! I have been wondering all the evening where you were. Had an idea you would show up somewhere. Sit down and keep still until this act is finished, for I don't want to lose it. After that, we'll chat a little. There are things I wish to discuss with you, Roderick."

Roderick Duncan was in a mood that was strange to him. It affected him to recklessness, though he could not have told why it was so, or in what form of recklessness he might indulge. The discovery he had made when he returned to the library and found Patricia in tears, was still having its effects upon him, for he did not understand the cause for those tears. He knew only that he had made her cry, that her abandonment of grief was due to his acts, and her father's. By a strange paradox, he pitied himself as deeply as he did the woman he loved.

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

He felt that he had been forced into a second false position by so readily accepting the terms Patricia had insisted upon for their betrothal. She had told him plainly that if she ever became his wife at all, the fact could be accomplished only in the manner she dictated; that if he repudiated it, he would not even be received at her home. Impulsively, he had accepted her dictum, and now, at the end of his long and solitary walk to the opera-house, he realized that the change from frying-pan to fire was a simile true as to his present condition. Practically, the end so long sought had been attained. In effect, he and Patricia were betrothed — but such a betrothal! For the moment, he regretted his ready acquiescence to Patricia's terms. He believed that it would be better to lose her entirely than to take her under such conditions.

The meeting with Beatrice Brunswick and her sincere welcome warmed him, and he found a ready sympathy in her eyes and manner for his condition of mind. He wanted company and he wanted sympathy; chiefly, he had wished to discuss the present situation of affairs with old Steve; but now, since his arrival at the box, he decided that it would be a splendid opportunity to talk the matter over with Beatrice Brunswick. She had always shown him

THE LAST WOMAN

great consideration. He had regarded her as Patricia's dearest friend, and had ultimately placed her in that relationship to himself, for she was one of those rare young women whom men class as "good fellows." And Beatrice was as good as she was beautiful. Her merry laugh and quick wit always acted upon Duncan like a tonic. Just now, he was especially glad to find her there, and he showed it.

Beatrice Brunswick was unmistakably red-headed. Referring to her hair in cold-blooded terms, no other hue could have described it. It was like that old-fashioned kind of red copper, after it has been hammered into sheets, in the manner in which it was treated before less arduous methods were invented. It was remarkable hair, too — there was such a wealth of it! It had always impressed Duncan with the idea that each individual hair was in business for itself, refusing utterly to stay where it was put. A young woman's crowning glory, always, this happened to be particularly true in the case of Miss Brunswick, for, although her features and her figure and her graceful motions left nothing to be desired, it was her wonderful hair, emphasized by the saucy poise of her head, that became her crowning glory, indeed. Duncan took a seat near to her, so that she

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

was between him and the banker; and presently Beatrice inclined her head toward him, and whispered:

"What's the matter, Roderick? You look like a banquet of the Skull and Bones, which my brother described to me once, when he was at Yale."

"I'll tell you about it later," was the response; and Duncan shut his jaws, and bent his attention grimly upon the stage.

"Why not now?" She asked.

"There isn't time; and besides —"

"Have you been quarreling with our Juno? Have you two been scrapping?" She whispered, smiling bewitchingly, and bending still nearer to him. Miss Brunswick was sometimes given to the milder uses of slang.

Duncan nodded, without replying in words. He kept his eyes directly toward the stage. But Miss Brunswick was insistent.

"Is Patricia on her high horse to-night?" she asked, with a light laugh.

Duncan replied to her with another nod, and a wry smile.

"She wants to look out about that high horse of hers, Roderick, or sometime it will hit the top rail and give her a fall that she won't get over for a while. What our beautiful Juno needs most is what

THE LAST WOMAN

I used to get oftenest when I was about three years old. Perhaps you can guess what it was; if you can't, I won't tell you."

"I expect you were a regular little devil then, weren't you?" he asked, endeavoring to assume a cheerfulness he was far from experiencing at that moment.

"I expect I was; and the strange part of it is that there are lots and lots of people who insist that I have never got over it. But I can read you like a book. You and Mr. Langdon and Patricia have been having no end of a row. He might just as well have told me that much when he came after me and insisted that I should accompany him to the opera to-night. He said that Patricia wouldn't, and he wanted me to take her place. I wish you would tell me all about it." Then, with a slight toss of her head, Beatrice added: "I suppose Patricia has refused you again?"

"No. She has accepted me, this time," was the blunt reply.

Beatrice stared straight in front of her for a moment, and there was a suggestion of gathering pallor in her face. Then, she drew backward, away from her companion, and her blue eyes widened. If there was a shock to her in the knowledge she had just

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

received, she accepted it with a very clever little laugh which she always had ready at hand.

"So," she said, "that is what makes you so glum, is it? Really, you are a most amazing person. I had supposed that when Patricia accepted you, finally, and set the day —"

"The day hasn't been set. It may be a week, a month, or a year hence, for all I know." This was said harshly, and while Duncan's eyes were fixed steadily upon Mary Garden, on the stage.

"How intensely interesting!" Beatrice exclaimed, under her breath. "I shall insist upon your taking us to supper after the opera, and telling me all about it."

The loud bars of music which announce the finale of an act and the entrance of the chorus precluded the possibility of further conversation just then; and as soon as the curtain was down and the applause had ceased, Stephen Langdon left his chair and reached for his coat and hat. Then, he addressed the two young people who were his companions in the box.

"If you two youngsters care to see this out, I'll leave you here, together," he said. "I have just remembered something I should have attended to, to-night. I must see Melvin, my lawyer. You won't mind, Beatrice, will you, if I leave you in

THE LAST WOMAN

Roderick's care? Possibly, I'll return before the show is out."

Before either of them could answer, Langdon had passed out into the aisle, and hurried away, leaving Duncan and Miss Brunswick alone together in the box. If Roderick Duncan had really desired an opportunity to confide his troubles to Beatrice, it was afforded him then; but now that it was at hand, he felt suddenly uncertain about the wisdom of such a proceeding.

CHAPTER IV

THE BOX AT THE OPERA

DUNCAN stared helplessly at the spot where the curtains had fallen together behind the departing figure of Stephen Langdon; then he turned his eyes toward Beatrice, to discover that she was convulsed with laughter. But whether her demeanor and her quick surrender to expressions of levity had been excited by the departure of the banker, or by Duncan's attitude of dismay, the young man could not have told. He laughed with her, for there was a distinctly ludicrous side to the situation, following, as it did, so closely upon the announcement of his engagement to Patricia.

By mutual consent, they withdrew to the rear of the box, and then Beatrice, with a touch of teasing witchery in her voice and with laughter still in her eyes, asked him:

"Don't you think that this is rather a compromising situation, particularly in view of the fact that you have only just become engaged to Patricia? Really, you know, it is dreadful; isn't it?"

THE LAST WOMAN

"I hadn't thought of that," he replied, quite truthfully. "I was thinking of what Langdon said, when he left us. It recalled something —"

"About leaving us two 'youngsters' alone together?" she asked him, with a pretense of frightened expression in her eyes.

"No, that wasn't the last thing he said."

"What was it? I didn't hear it."

"He said he was going to see Melvin. I suppose you know who Melvin is, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. Mr. Melvin and I are great friends. I think he is about the nicest old gentleman of my acquaintance; don't you? He is what I should call the *arbiter elegantiarum* of the Langdon court, if one could imagine Old Steve as a Cæsar, and Patricia as —" Beatrice paused, and flushed hotly. She had not considered to what length her words were reaching. She had almost cast a reflection upon her friend, which would have been as unkind as it was unmerited. She added, quickly: "But why, if I may ask, did the mention of Mr. Melvin's name interest you?"

Duncan gazed at his companion rather stupidly, for a moment, for his mind had suddenly become intent upon the complications of the day, and he had forgotten for the time being, where he was, and with

THE BOX AT THE OPERA

whom he was talking. But Beatrice's smile and the mockery in her eyes brought him back to the present.

"I remembered that I should have gone, myself, to see Melvin, to-night," he told her, quietly. "It really was quite important. I should have sought him, instead of coming here."

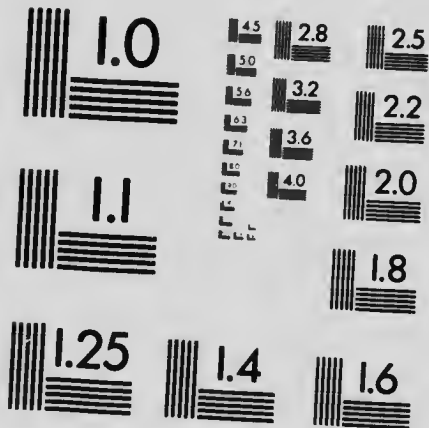
"Indeed?" Beatrice laughed, brightly. "Mr. Melvin seems to be in great demand. Are you and Patricia to follow the French fashion of drawing the marriage-contract? and is Mr. Melvin to act the part of a French notary?" There was a touch of irony in her question, a little shaft of sarcasm that brought a quick flush to Duncan's face. He was reminded instantly of the tentative betrothal with Patricia, and his misgivings concerning it. Beside him was seated the one person who might aid them both; and with sudden resolution, acted upon as quickly as it was formed, he reached out and took one of Miss Brunswick's hands, holding it between both his own.

"Beatrice," he said, with quiet emphasis, "you have always been a good fellow, if ever there was a girl born in the world who was one. I wonder if you could be persuaded to give me the benefit of your advice, and, possibly, your active assistance?"



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

THE LAST WOMAN

She flushed a little under the praise and the intimately personal request that came with it, but he did not notice this as he went on: "I've somehow got things into the biggest kind of a muddle to-day, and I have a notion to tell you all about it; I have the impulse to take you into my confidence and to ask you to help me out. I know you can do it. By Jove, Beatrice, I think you are the only person in the world who can do it! Will you?"

She shrugged her shoulders ever so little, and the flush left her cheeks, rendering them paler than was their wont. It suddenly came home to her that he was asking a favor that might prove extremely difficult to grant.

"I cannot say as to that until I hear what you wish me to do," she replied.

"I want you to help me square myself," he said, quickly.

"To square yourself?" She raised her brows in assumed surprise. "With whom?"

"Why, with Patricia, of course."

"Help you to square yourself with Patricia?" She laughed outright, but without mirth. "I am afraid I don't at all understand you, Roderick. I supposed you had already accomplished that much,

THE BOX AT THE OPERA

for you told me — did you not? — that Patricia has just accepted you? ”

“ Yes, and that’s the devil of it! ” was the unexpected astounding reply. Beatrice moved farther away from him, and took her hand from his grasp, in well-simulated horror of what he had said.

“ Let us, at least, confine ourselves to the usages and language of polite society; ” she said, with mock severity. “ We will leave the devil out of it, if you please. Besides, you amaze me! Patricia has just accepted you, and that is ‘ the devil of it. ’ Really, I can’t guess what you mean by such a paradoxical statement as that.”

“ Forgive me. I am so wrought up that I scarcely know what I am talking about, or what I am doing. As I said before, I have managed to get things into a terrible mess, and I believe that you, Beatrice, are the only person alive who can unravel the tangle for me. Will you help me out? Will you? ”

“ You must tell me what it is, before I commit myself. You are so very aggravating, in words and manner, that I cannot even attempt to understand you.”

For just a few moments, he hesitated. There was

THE LAST WOMAN

within him the feeling that he would outrage Patricia's ideas of the fitness of things, if he should take Beatrice Brunswick into his confidence and relate to her all that had occurred this afternoon and evening. But, on the other hand, he saw in this beautiful girl a personification of the straw at which a drowning man grasps. He knew that she was, personally, closer to Patricia than any other friend had been, and that she understood Patricia better than did anyone else, save Stephen Langdon, perhaps. He knew, also, that he could trust her, and that he could rely, implicitly, upon her loyalty. He knew that she would never betray the secrets he would be obliged to tell concerning Stephen Langdon's affairs. He had tried her often, and he had never found her wanting. Therefore, he felt that the greatest secret of all, concerning the financial extremity in which Stephen Langdon had become involved, would be safe with Beatrice Brunswick. Manlike, he began very stupidly and very strangely.

"By Jove, Beatrice!" he exclaimed. "I wish I might have fallen in love with you, instead of with Patricia! You would never have seen things in the light she does!"

Beatrice's eyes widened and deepened; then, they narrowed so that she almost frowned. She bit her

THE BOX AT THE OPERA

lips with vexation, and for an instant was angry. At last, she laughed. She did not wish him to know how deeply he had wounded her by that careless statement, so she uttered a care-free ripple of laughter.

"I don't quite know whether I should take that as a compliment or not," she replied. "It is more than likely that I would have conducted myself very much worse than Patricia has done in this affair which you have not as yet explained to me. Perhaps, it is a fortunate thing for both of us that you did not fall in love with me, instead of her. I'm sure I don't know what I should have done with you, in such a case. But I will help you if I can; only, understand in the beginning that if you tell me the story at all, you must tell me all of it. I don't want any half-confidences, Roderick."

Duncan did tell her all of it then, leaving nothing to be added, when he had finished; and she listened to the end of his tale in utter silence, with her head half-turned away and her chin supported by the palm of one of her jeweled hands. They did not move to the front of the box again, nor give any heed to the rise of the curtain or to what was taking place on the stage, during the ensuing act. Duncan talked straight on, through it all; and Beatrice listened

THE LAST WOMAN

with close attention. One might have supposed that the music and the singing did not reach the ears of either of them, and one would not have been very wrong in that surmise. The tragic fate of John, the Baptist; the unholy, unnatural passion of a depraved soul for the dead lips of a man who had spurned her while he lived; the exquisite music of Strauss; the superb scenery and stage-setting; the rich and gorgeous costumes — all remained unseen and unheard by these two, one intent upon reëstablishing himself in the esteem of Patricia Langdon, the other disturbed by emotions she could not have named, which she would have declined to recognize, even had they presented themselves frankly to her. She had known, of course, of Duncan's love for her friend, but until this hour there had always existed an unformed, unrecognized doubt in the mind of Beatrice that it would ever be requited.

When he had finished, she was still silent, and for so long a time that at last, with some impatience, he bent nearer to her, and exclaimed:

"Well, Beatrice? What do you think of it all?"

She shuddered a little. There was still another interval before she spoke, and then, with calm directness, she replied:

THE BOX AT THE OPERA

"I think you are both exceedingly brave to be willing to face the situation that exists."

"Eh?" he asked her, not comprehending.

"Why, if you carry out this compact that you have made, if Patricia Langdon becomes your wife according to the terms she has dictated to Melvin — for I can guess, now, what they are — you will both be casting yourselves straight down into hell. I speak metaphorically, of course," she added, with a whimsical smile. "I have been told that there isn't any hell, really. But I mean it, Roderick. If there isn't a hell, you two seem to be bent upon the arrangement of a correct imitation of one."

"How is that?" he demanded, frowning. "I don't know what you mean."

"Our friend has not been named 'Juno' for nothing. She is a strange girl; but I love her, almost as much as you do," Beatrice continued, as if she had not heard his question. "She possesses characteristics, the depth of which I have never been able to sound, and I am her best and closest friend. If you two live up to this agreement, in the spirit in which it was made, and conclude it in the spirit in which she has dictated her conditions to Melvin, I tremble for the consequences that will ensue, for

THE LAST WOMAN

I can almost foresee them. Patricia is not one who forgives easily, and she will resent a hurt to her pride with all the force there is in her."

Beatrice rose to her feet, standing before him, and he, also, stood up, facing her. She reached out both her hands toward him, and he took them; and there were tears in her big blue eyes, when she added, with a depth of feeling that he did not understand:

"Roderick Duncan, it would be better for you, and for Patricia as well, if you never saw each other again. You might far better, and with much greater hope of happiness, cast your future lot with some other woman whom you have never thought of as a wife, than marry Patricia Langdon upon such terms as you have outlined. Have you known her so intimately all your life without understanding her at all? She might have forgiven disloyalty, or unfaithfulness, or at least have condoned such — but an offense against her pride? Never! You would be undergoing much less risk if you should select an utterly unknown woman from one of these boxes, and should take her out of this theatre now, and marry her instead!"

Having delivered this remarkable statement, Beatrice burst into laughter. Duncan, suddenly alive

THE BOX AT THE OPERA

to her beauty and her nearness, deeply impressed by what she had said, and fully alive to the truth of her utterances, retained the grasp he had upon her hands, and drew her toward him, quickly.

"Why not?" he demanded, hotly. "I'll do it if you say the word! But not a strange woman. You, Beatrice — you!! I'll dare you!!! We'll go to the 'Little Church Around the Corner.' I dare you! I dare you, Beatrice! They always have a wedding ceremony on tap, there; if you've got the sand, come on. It offers a solution of everything. Come on, Bee — marry me!"

She raised her eyes to his, and he understood, instantly, how he had wounded her; he saw that her laughter had not been real, and that she was very near to tears. But the fact that she shrank away from his impetuous words and manner, only spurred him on. He caught her hands again.

"Do it, Beatrice," he said rapidly, bending forward with sudden eagerness. "I hate all this mess and muddle of affairs. I hate it! Say yes, Bee."

He stood with his back toward the curtains at the rear of the box; she was facing them. He saw her eyes dilate suddenly, and he had the sensation that she had discovered another person near them,

THE LAST WOMAN

or in the act of entering the box; and then, with more astonishment than he would have believed himself capable of feeling, he realized that Beatrice Brunswick had thrown herself forward and that her white arms were wound clingingly about his neck; at the same time, with evident design, she turned him still more, so that he could not see the curtains which screened the entrance to the box.

The last and final shock of that eventful day, came to him then, for he did turn, in spite of Beatrice's restraining arms — he turned to find that the curtains were drawn apart, and in the opening thus created stood Patricia Langdon. Duncan knew that she had both seen and heard.

He could not have moved, had he attempted to do so, although somewhere deep down inside of him he felt that it was his duty to untwine those clinging arms and somehow to account for the appalling situation. Beyond where Patricia stood, he saw and recognized two other figures that were moving steadily forward toward them, but he had the subconscious assurance in his soul that neither Stephen Langdon nor his lawyer, Melvin, had noticed the scene which Patricia had discovered. He could not guess that it had been the consequence of sudden inspiration on the part of Beatrice, who had thrown

with
him-
trice
her
eck;
rned
ains

ame
ice's
cur-
cre-
that

l to
him
ing
sit-
and
ing
ub-
hen
the
not
den
wn



"She turned him so that he could not see the curtains that screened the entrance to the box."

THE BOX AT THE OPERA

her arms around his neck at the very instant when she had intended to administer a rebuff.

He did not imagine that she had discovered the approach of Patricia before she made this outward demonstration in acceptance of his mad proposal. Duncan felt very guilty indeed, in that trying moment; nevertheless, he was not one to attempt an ignominious escape from a predicament in which he believed himself to be wholly at fault. But Beatrice was not yet through with acting a part. She drew away from Duncan quickly, with an exclamation of mingled disappointment, pleasure and alarm. She cried out the single ejaculation, "Oh!" and dropped backward upon the chair she had recently occupied. But there was a gleam of mischief in her eyes, which belied the confusion otherwise expressed upon her face.

"So sorry to have interrupted you at such a critical moment," said Patricia coolly, at once master of herself and of the situation. "Good-evening, Beatrice. I hope you have enjoyed the opera. I decided to come at the last moment, and met my father at the door of the theatre, as I was entering. He insisted on seeing Mr. Melvin to-night, so we drove to his house together and brought him here. I thought I would enjoy the last act."

THE LAST WOMAN

One might have thought that Roderick Duncan did not exist. Patricia did not so much as glance in his direction, but she moved forward to the front of the box and took her accustomed seat, just as Stephen Langdon and the lawyer, Melvin, entered it.

All this had passed so quickly that the interval it occupied could be reckoned only by seconds. Beatrice Brunswick's face was flushed, and her eyes were alight with mischief, or with something deeper, as she greeted the two gentlemen. Duncan's countenance was like marble; he realized that the mess was bigger now, by far, than it had been before.

Langdon and his lawyer perceived nothing unusual in the attitude of any person in the box; both were preoccupied with the discussion upon which they had just been engaged. Patricia's eyes were already fixed on the stage, and evidently her entire attention was devoted to it. She appeared to have forgotten the propinquity of other persons.

There was a vacant chair beside her which Duncan should have taken, and, doubtless, he would have done so, had not the lawyer stupidly preempted it for his own use. The banker occupied the middle chair, and the consequence was that Duncan was given no choice, but was literally forced into the

THE BOX AT THE OPERA

one next to Beatrice. Not that he would have preferred it otherwise, at the moment. Not he. He was angered by Patricia's conduct toward him; he resented the whole circumstance — and possibly, too, he still felt something of the thrill induced by the clinging arms of Beatrice Brunswick. He stared silently toward the stage, seeing nothing upon it. He was endeavoring to arrange, in some comprehensive form, the combination of circumstances and scenes which it had been his misfortune to encounter, and in part enact, since noon that day. But the more he tried, the more difficult became the task. The whole thing was as exasperating as an attempt to put together, within an allotted time, a puzzle-picture which has been cut into all sorts of sizes and shapes. It was not a panorama of events, as he recounted them in his own mind; it was a kaleidoscope, a jumble of colors and figures, of angles and spaces — or to put it in his own words, it was literally a mess.

He turned toward Beatrice, whose right hand was negligently waving a fan. He reached out and claimed it, and she did not resent the act. He drew it toward him, and she looked up and smiled into his eyes with an expression he did not understand. She made no effort to withdraw her hand, nor any at-

THE LAST WOMAN

tempt to resist his advances. He bent nearer.

"Will you do it?" he asked her, whispering.

"Will you do it, Beatrice?"

She made no reply, and he bent still nearer, seizing her hand in both his own, now.

"Will you do it, dear?" he repeated, a third time. "I'm game, if you are. It is a solution of the whole beastly muddle. Come on. I'll stump you! That is what we used to say, when we were kids. By Jove, girl, you're in as deep as I am, now; and, besides, you gave me your word that you'd help me, didn't you? Turn your eyes toward me. Tell me you'll do it. Say yes. Come on, Bee. I'll dare you. We can slip away from here while their backs are turned. What do you say? Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she replied, without moving or withdrawing her gaze from the stage, and she repeated: "yes, if you wish it." He could not see her face.

"Will you do it now?" Duncan demanded, half-startled by her ready acquiescence.

"Yes."

"Good! I knew you were game!"

He left his chair quickly and secured her wraps and his own coat and hat. Then, he stepped to the

THE BOX AT THE OPERA

opening between the curtains and turned expectantly toward her.

She had not moved; but now, as if she had seen his every act without looking toward him, she turned her head slowly, observing him coolly, and she gave a little nod of comprehension and assent. He returned the nod, touched his fingers to his lips to enjoin silence, and passed outside. In another moment, she had glided softly but swiftly from her seat, and, unnoticed by the other occupants of the box, followed him, dropping the curtains silently after her.

He put her opera-cloak about her shoulders, and swiftly donned his own coat and hat, and so without as much as "by your leave," they left the theatre together and waited in the foyer while the special officer in gray called a taxicab for their use.

Duncan led her across the pavement to the cab, and assisted her inside.

"Do you know where the Church of the Transfiguration is located?" he asked the chauffeur.

"I do, sir," was the reply.

"Drive us there, and be quick about it," said Duncan, and he sprang inside and banged the door shut after him.

CHAPTER V

BEATRICE BRUNSWICK'S PLOT

THE chauffeur to whom the order was given that the taxicab be driven to the Church of the Transfiguration, proved to be an adept and skillful driver; one of those who can exceed the speed limit and then slow down his machine so quickly and quietly at the sight of a blue-coat that he inevitably escapes arrest for his transgression. As a consequence, there was very little time for conversation between these two apparently mad young persons during the journey between the opera-house and the church.

Little as there was, the greater part of it was passed in silence. But when they were quite near to their destination, Beatrice spoke up quickly and rather sharply to her companion.

"Roderick, have you for a moment supposed that I have taken you seriously in this mad proposition you have made to me, to-night?" she demanded. "Surely, you don't think that, do you?"

Duncan stared at her, speechless. Then, with a

BEATRICE BRUNSWICK'S PLOT

vehemence that can better be imagined than described, he exclaimed, half-angrily, half-resentfully:

"Then, in God's name, Beatrice, why are we here? and why should we go to the church at all?"

"Were you serious about it?" she asked.

"I certainly was — and am, now!"

"Foolish boy!" she exclaimed, laughing with nervous apprehension. What more she might have said on this point was interrupted by the skidding of the taxicab as they were whirled around the corner of Twenty-ninth street.

"Why, in heaven's name, are we here, then?" he demanded, just as they were drawn swiftly to the curb, and the cab came to a stop in front of the church.

"You requested my help, did you not?" she replied.

"I certainly did."

The chauffeur, in the meantime, had leaped to the pavement and thrown open the door of the cab.

"You may close the door again, chauffeur, and wait where you are for further orders," Beatrice told him, calmly. And when that was done, she again addressed her companion. "You have called me a 'good fellow' to-night," she said slowly, with

THE LAST WOMAN

quiet distinctness, "and I mean to be one. I have always meant to be one, and to a great extent I think I have succeeded. But I would have to be a much better fellow than I am to go to the extent of marrying a man who does not love me, and who does love another, simply to help him out of a mess in which his own stupidity has involved him. Wouldn't I? Ask yourself the question!"

Duncan shrugged his shoulders and parted his lips to reply, but she went on rapidly:

"That is asking me to go rather farther than I would care to venture, my friend; or you, either, if you should stop to think about it. Your proposition is utterly a selfish one. You must know that. You have thought only of yourself and the mess you are in. You do not consider me at all. You would cheerfully use me as a means of venting your spite — or shall I call it, temper? — against Patricia. For the moment, you are intensely angry at her. Not only that, you feel that you have been out-done, at every point. That she has acted unreasonably, I will not deny. But what a silly thing it would be for you and me to stand together at the altar, and pledge ourselves to each other for life, or until such time as the divorce-courts might intervene, just because of the events of to-day!" She was smiling upon him

BEATRICE BRUNSWICK'S PLOT

now, as if he were, indeed, a foolish boy who needed chiding.

Duncan pulled himself together. For the first time since their exit from the opera-house, and for perhaps the first time since the moment when Patricia discovered him in the private office of her father, he was capable of acting and thinking quite naturally.

"Beatrice," he said, "if the sentiments you have just expressed are the same as those you felt before you left the box at the opera-house, would you mind telling me why in the world you have acted as you have done? Why, in the name of all that's phenomenal and strange, are we here?"

She turned her head away from him, and peered through the glass door at the chauffeur, who was striding slowly up and down the pavement outside, and who had taken the opportunity to indulge himself in a smoke.

"I did it," she said, "because I thought I saw a way to help you and Patricia out of your difficulties. I saw that we could leave the box without her knowledge, and believed that neither she nor her companions would discover our departure for some time afterward. I remembered just then that Patricia had witnessed the tender and somewhat touch-

THE LAST WOMAN

ing scene in the box between you and me. My goodness, Roderick! I hope you didn't think that I meant *that!* It was all done for Patricia's benefit, you goose! Didn't you know that? Did you suppose that I had suddenly fallen head over heels in love with you? You're not very complimentary, are you? Or is it that you were throwing bouquets at yourself?"

"Will you tell me why you did it?" he asked, flushing hotly under the jibe.

"Because I wished Patricia to see it."

"Why?"

"I thought it might bring her to her senses."

"How, Beatrice?"

"Jealousy, you dunce!"

"But why the rest of your superb play-acting?"

"It all works out toward the same end. Don't you suppose that Patricia is in hot water, by this time? When she realized that we had sneaked away, to put it plainly, don't you think she would put two and two together, and make four out of it?"

"It strikes me," he interrupted her, with a light laugh, "that this is a case where two are supposed to make one."

"We won't joke about it, if you please. Still, that isn't a bad idea. But, at all events, I wish Pa-

BEATRICE BRUNSWICK'S PLOT

tricia to believe that we left the opera-house because, for the moment at least, you preferred my society to hers. If we can convince her that we ran away to be married, so much the better!"

"You are deeper than I am, Bee. I confess that you've got me up a tree. I haven't the least idea what you are driving at, but I am quite willing to be taught. What is to be the next play in this little game of yours?"

"You need not be nasty about it, when I'm trying to help you," she retorted.

"What's the next move, Bee? I couldn't induce you to give me another hug, could I? There, now — don't get angry. I liked it, whether you did, or not. You put a lot of ginger into it, too. Oh, yes, I liked it!"

For a moment, it seemed as if she would resent his bantering tone; then she shrugged her shoulders, and smiled.

"I did it to help you — to make Patricia jealous." She laughed lightly, still keeping her face turned away from him. "I saw the curtains part, and recognized Patricia. With the recognition, there came also a revelation as to how I could best help you both. If I had dreamed that you would suppose for a moment I was in earnest, do you think

THE LAST WOMAN

I would have done it? And when I told you that I would come here, to this church, and would marry you like this — good heavens! — did you flatter yourself I meant *that?* ”

“Of course, I did.”

“Are you in earnest, Roderick Duncan? If I thought your selfishness, your egotism, was as great as that, I — I don’t know what I’d do! Have you so little regard for me that you think I would become your wife, in this manner, knowing as I do that you love another — and when that other is my best friend — when I know that Patricia Langdon loves you? For I do know it. Do you — did you think that of me — did you think that of me?” She was a-tremble with indignation, now.

“By Jove, Bee, I acted like a brute, didn’t I? I didn’t consider you; I was selfish enough to think of no one but myself. But, all the same, my girl, I was in dead earnest. If you’ve got the pluck and the spirit to go through with it, now, we’ll see the thing out, side by side, just as we started, and I will make you, perhaps, a better husband than if the circumstances were different. You say that Patricia loves me: I doubt it. I thought so once, but I don’t now. It doesn’t matter, anyhow. I shall ask you again calmly, with all humility and

BEATRICE BRUNSWICK'S PLOT

respect; with all seriousness, too: will you be my wife, and will you marry me, now?"

"I will reply with equal seriousness, Roderick," she retorted, mockingly. "No."

He uttered a sigh, and there was so much satisfied relief in it that she laughed aloud, but without bitterness.

"Then, what shall we do? Sit here in this cab, in front of the Church of the Transfiguration, for the balance of the night? Or shall we go around to Delmonico's and have some supper?" he asked her.

"I think that last suggestion of yours is a very excellent one," she replied, naïvely. "But we will wait yet a few moments before we start. We haven't been at the Church of the Transfiguration quite long enough to have been married, and to have come out of it again."

Duncan stared at her. Then, slowly, a smile lighted up his eyes and relaxed the lines of his face, so that after a moment he chuckled. Presently, he laughed.

"By Jove, Bee, you're a corker!" he said. "You can give me cards and spades, and beat me hands down, when it comes to a matter of finesse. Is it your idea to play out the other part of the game? What will it avail, if we do?"

THE LAST WOMAN

"Never mind that," she replied. "In order to carry out the scheme, and to make it work itself out, as it should, one thing more is necessary. It will be great fun, too — if we don't carry it too far."

"What is that?" he asked her. "What more is necessary?"

"I want you to tell the chauffeur to stop for a moment at the side-entrance to the Hotel Breslin; there I wish you to leave me alone in the cab, while you go inside, and telephone to the opera-house, to have Jack Gardner and his wife meet us as soon as they can, at Delmonico's for supper. You may not have noticed, but they occupied their box, which is directly opposite the Langdon's. One of the ushers will carry the message to him, and Jack will come, if he has no previous engagement."

"But what in the name of — what in the world do you want of Jack Gardner and his wife? what have they to do with it?"

"I want them to take supper with us, that is all; and then I want a few moments' conversation with Jack, while you talk with Sally."

They were driven to the Breslin, and the telephone-message was sent. Duncan waited for a reply, and received one, to the effect that Mr. and

BEATRICE BRUNSWICK'S PLOT

Mrs. Gardner would come at once. And so, not long afterward, the four occupied a conspicuous table of Beatrice's selection, at the famous restaurant.

Recalling the injunction put upon him to occupy himself with Sally Gardner, Duncan began to get a glimmer of understanding regarding the plot that Beatrice had concocted. He, therefore, gave all of his attention to the spirited and charming wife of the young copper-king. Jack Gardner was everybody's friend. He loved a joke better than anyone else in the world, and a practical joke better than any other kind. He was especially fond of Roderick Duncan, and both he and his wife were intimate friends of Beatrice. Duncan noticed, while talking with Sally, that Jack and Beatrice had drawn their chairs more closely together, toward a corner of the table, and were now whispering together with low-toned eagerness. He could hear no word of what Beatrice said, but an occasional exclamation of Gardner's came to him. He saw that Beatrice was talking rapidly, with intense earnestness, and that Gardner seemed to be highly amused, even elated, by what she was saying. Such expressions as, "By Jove, that's the best, ever!" "Sure, I can do it!" and, "You just leave

THE LAST WOMAN

it to me!" came to his ears, from Gardner; and presently the latter excused himself and left the table.

If they had followed him, they would have seen that he went to the telephone, where he called up several numbers before he obtained the person he sought; but he presently returned, apparently in the best of spirits, and with intense satisfaction written upon every line of his smiling features.

As he seated himself at the table, other guests were just assuming places at another one, quite near to them, and he bent forward toward Beatrice, saying in a tone which their companion could not hear:

"I say, Beatrice, it's all working out to the queen's taste! When you get a chance, look over your left shoulder. Gee! but this is funny! All the same, though, I expect I'll get myself into a very devil of a stew. When that reporter discovers that I've given him an out-and-out fake, he'll go gunning for me as sure as you are alive."

"Is he coming here to see you?" she asked him.

"Sure. He will be here in about twenty minutes."

"Now, tell me who it is at the table behind me. I don't care to look around, to discover for myself."

"Why, Old Setve and his Juno; and they've got Malcolm Melvin with them." He leaned back in

BEATRICE BRUNSWICK'S PLOT

his chair, and laughed; then, he emptied the champagne-glass he had been playing with. Presently, he chuckled again.

"Tell you what, Beatrice," he said, in an undertone, "I almost wish that you had taken Duncan at his word, and married him. You should have called that bluff. Sure thing! Think of the millions he's got, and —"

"Hush!"

"Oh, all right. All the same —"

"Hush, I tell you! Don't you see that Sally is trying to talk to you?"

After that, the conversation became general among the four. During it, Jack Gardner sought and found an opportunity to wave a greeting to the late arrivals, whose names he had just mentioned to Beatrice. Duncan, observing him, glanced also in that direction, and, meeting Patricia's eyes fixed directly upon him, flushed hotly as he, also, bowed to her. Then, Sally and Beatrice turned their heads and nodded, as another course of the service was placed upon the table before them.

It was not yet finished when the head-waiter brought a card to Jack Gardner, who instantly left his seat for the second time that evening, and, with a curt, "I'll be back in a moment," departed, with-

THE LAST WOMAN

out further excuse. The person whose card he had received, was awaiting him in one of the reception-rooms; and the two shook hands cordially, for they were old acquaintances and on excellent terms with each other. It was not the first time they had got their heads together concerning matters for publication, although, in this instance, the newspaper man was to be made a wholly innocent party in the affair.

Burke Radnor was a newspaper man of prominence in New York. He was one of the few men of his profession who have succeeded in attaining sufficient distinction to establish themselves independently, and his "stories" were eagerly sought by all of the great dailies.

The two seated themselves in a corner of the room, and talked together earnestly, although in whispers, for a considerable time. It was Gardner who did most of the talking; Radnor only occasionally interjected a questioning remark. When they parted, it was with a hearty hand-clasp, and this remark from Radnor:

"I'll fix it up all right, old man; don't you worry. Nobody shall know that I got the story from you. But it is a jim dandy, and no mistake!"

"Which of the papers will you use it in, do you think?" asked Gardner.

BEATRICE BRUNSWICK'S PLOT

"I am not sure as to that. To the one that will pay the best price for a first-class 'beat,' for that's what it is. Anyhow, that part of it is none of your business. Now that I've got the story, I shall handle it as I think best, and you can bet your sweet life it will be used for all it's worth!"

Gardner returned to the dining-room, with vague misgivings concerning what he had done; his smile was a bit less self-satisfied. Radnor, apparently, left the building. But the shrewd news-gatherer went no farther than the entrance, where he wheeled about and returned; and this time he sent his card to Roderick Duncan. Having "nailed the story," the proper thing now was to obtain an interview with one of the principals concerned in it; with both, if possible.

Duncan received the card, wonderingly. He knew Radnor, and liked him; but he could not imagine what the newspaper man could want with him at that particular time. The truth about it, did not even vaguely occur to him.

Excusing himself, he left the table and presently found Radnor in the same room where the recent interview with Jack Gardner had taken place.

"Hello, Radnor," said Duncan, cordially, extending his hand. "There must be something doing

THE LAST WOMAN

when you call me away from a supper table, at Del's. Make it as brief as possible — won't you? — because I am dining, and —"

"Oh, I won't keep you but a moment, Mr. Duncan," was the quick reply. "I just want to ask you a question or two about the interesting ceremony that took place this evening — that is all."

"Eh? What's that? Ceremony? What the devil are you talking about?"

"Look here, Mr. Duncan, you know perfectly well that I am your friend, and that I'll use you as handsomely as possible in the columns of any paper that gets this story. But I've got the straight tip, and I know what I am talking about. I thought, possibly, you might wish to say a few words in explanation — just to tone the thing down, to give it the mark of authenticity, you know. I thought you'd like to be quoted, and to know, from me, that the story 'll be all right. On the level, now, isn't that better?"

Duncan laughed. He did not in the least understand. He had the idea that Radnor had been drinking.

"Burke," he said; "upon my life, this is the first time I ever saw you when you had taken too much to drink."

BEATRICE BRUNSWICK'S PLOT

"Is that the way you are going to reply to me?" asked Radnor, with all the insistence of a thoroughly trained newspaper man. "You'd best use me right, you know. It's a great 'beat,' and I want all of it. I'd like to talk with the bride, too, if you can fix —"

"But I don't know what the blazes you are talking about, man."

"I am talking about the little ceremony that took place this evening at the Little Church Around the Corner, and was indulged in between you and the former Miss Brunswick; as a sort of *entr' acte* to the opera of Salome," said Radnor, with slow distinctness.

Duncan stiffened where he stood. The smile left his face, and his eyes narrowed, while his clean-cut features seemed to harden in every line of them.

"Radnor," he said with a slow drawl, which to those who knew him best betrayed intense anger, "you will be good enough to explain to me, here and now, in plain English and in as few words as possible, exactly what you mean."

"I mean," was the ready retort, "that you and Miss Beatrice Brunswick were married to-night at the Little Church Around the Corner, between two of the acts of Salome. I mean that I've got the

THE LAST WOMAN

straight tip, and I know it to be true. I wish to quote you, if possible, in what I shall write about it for the morning papers. I'd like to get a statement from the bride, too."

"Are you crazy, Radnor?" asked Duncan, bending forward, his face white and set, and his eyes hard and cold; for Roderick Duncan, with all his apparent quietude, was a man whom it was not safe to try too far.

"No, I'm not crazy. I'm just telling you what's what. I'll get the whole story, and what's more, I'll print it in the morning papers! If you wish to say anything in explanation of the incident, I shall be glad to quote you; but, otherwise, I shall take the liberty of drawing my own inferences, and assuming my own conclusions, from the story I have heard. I tell you, Mr. Duncan, I've got it straight, and I know it to be true."

"It is not true," said Duncan, quietly. "The person who told you such a story as that lied."

Radnor shrugged his shoulders, and laughed, ironically.

"I don't know that I blame you for denying it," he said, "but I happen to know differently. If you choose to deny it, I'll send my card inside to Mrs.

BEATRICE BRUNSWICK'S PLOT

Duncan, and we'll see, then, what we shall see. You can't bluff me, Mr. Duncan. I'm not that sort. If you won't talk, perhaps the former Miss Brunswick, will, and —"

Radnor got no further than that. Duncan's rage, the moment he understood the situation and fully realized the possible consequences of it in the hands of this ubiquitous newspaper man, overcame him, utterly. His right arm shot out with terrific force, his clenched fist caught Radnor squarely on the point of the chin, and the latter was knocked half-senseless to the floor. Waiters, and attendants about the place rushed toward them; but Duncan slowly drew a handkerchief from one of his pockets, and, calmly wiping his hands upon it, said to the manager:

"Kick the dog into the street; that is what he deserves. He probably followed me when I came away from the opera-house, and now he is trying to make capital out of a meaningless incident. Put him out, and don't permit him to pass the door again to-night; otherwise, he will seek to annoy a lady who is here."

Then, he turned calmly about, and, although his features were still pale, reëntered the dining-room as if nothing had happened. Duncan confidently

THE LAST WOMAN

believed that he had correctly estimated the cause of Radnor's quest for news. It never occurred to him that Beatrice Brunswick was herself, through the agency of Jack Gardner, the cause of it.

CHAPTER VI

A REMARKABLE MEETING.

WHEN Jack Gardner returned to the dining-room after his interview with Radnor, he was vaguely troubled, notwithstanding the fact that he was also highly amused. There were elements associated with the thing he had just done that might stir up unpleasant consequences. His inordinate love for a practical joke had led him into it willingly, and he had thought he saw in this affair the best and greatest joke he had ever attempted to perpetrate. But he began to understand that there was a tragic element to it which he could not deny to himself; and, when he was in the act of resuming his chair beside Beatrice, he was more than half-inclined, even then, to rush from the building in the pursuit of Burke Radnor, and to withdraw the whole story that he had given to the newspaper man.

When, a few moments later, Radnor's car was brought to Duncan, the sense of impending disaster was stronger than ever upon Gardner, and he

THE LAST WOMAN

watched the departure of the young millionaire with many misgivings, not one of which he could have defined in words. But he watched the doorway through which Duncan passed, and, during the interval that ensued, he was very palpably disturbed and uneasy. He had recognized the card, although he had been unable to see the name that was engraved upon it. He had not supposed that Radnor would so quickly pursue his investigation of the story, and it had not even remotely occurred to the young copper-king, that the newspaper man would dare to go so far as to seek an immediate interview with Duncan. Even had the man selected Beatrice, it would not have been quite so bad.

Nobody knew Duncan better than did Jack Gardner, and he realized what a strong and stirring effect this fake-story, as made up between himself and Beatrice, might have upon one who was such a stickler for certain forms as he knew Duncan to be. His impulse was to follow his friend from the room, but he resisted it, although he did keep his gaze spasmodically fixed upon the door by which Roderick must reënter the dining-room.

Gardner was the first of the party to discover him, when he did return, and was quick to see that something unusual had happened during the interval out-

A REMARKABLE MEETING

side, which had been all too short to have been fruitful of any other result than violence of some sort. He saw, by the set expression of his friend's face and by the pallor upon it, that something had gone wrong, and he started to his feet and moved rapidly forward, so that he met Duncan half-way between the entrance and the table where Beatrice and Sally Gardner were now left alone together. He grasped his friend by the arm, and drew him aside, saying rapidly, as he did so:

"For God's sake, Dun, what has happened? Tell me quickly."

Roderick Duncan looked down calmly, and without change of expression upon Gardner, for he was considerably taller than his friend; and he said, slowly, in reply:

"Without answering your question, Jack, I wish to ask you one. Was it Burke Radnor whom you were called out to meet, a little while ago, in the reception-room?"

Not thinking of the possible consequences of his response, Gardner admitted, hastily, that it had been Radnor, and Duncan asked another question.

"Did Radnor question you about a marriage-ceremony that is supposed to have taken place between Beatrice Brunswick and myself, to-night?"

THE LAST WOMAN

"Well, you —"

"Answer me yes, or no, Jack, if you please."

"Well, then, he did."

"Have you any idea, Jack, where he obtained the nucleus for such a story?"

Gardner hesitated, and Duncan from his greater height, bent forward quickly, and with a strong grip, seized the young copper-king by the shoulder.

"Jack Gardner," he demanded, "did you, at the instigation of Beatrice, concoct that story? Have I you to thank for it? You need not answer, Jack. I can read the reply in the expression of your face." He withdrew his hand from its detaining grasp upon his friend, and took a half-step backward; then, he added: "Jack, if we were anywhere else than in a public dining-room, I should resent what you have done bitterly — and by actions, not words. As it is, I demand that you instantly seek, and find, Burke Radnor, and retract whatever you have said, or inferred, during your conversation with him. I warn you, Gardner, that if one single line appears in any of the papers to-morrow morning on this subject I'll find a way to resent it, which will make you regret, all your life, your nameless conduct of to-night."

Gardner turned decidedly pale, not because of

A REMARKABLE MEETING

any physical fear he felt of Duncan, but in dread of the possible consequences of what he had permitted himself to do.

"Where is Radnor, now?" he exclaimed, quickly.

"I left him half-conscious, on the floor of the reception-room," replied Duncan, calmly. "I knocked him down."

"Good God!" exclaimed Gardner; and he turned and rushed away with precipitate haste.

Duncan went on toward the table at which Beatrice and Sally were seated, but as he approached it, a desire to hear the sound of Patricia's voice possessed him, and he turned abruptly toward that other table, occupied by Stephen Langdon, with his daughter and the lawyer.

Devoting a careless nod to the two men, Duncan addressed his fiancée, speaking loudly enough so that her companions might hear.

"Patricia," he said, "will you do me a very great favor? It is of vital importance, otherwise I would not ask it."

"Indeed?" she replied, raising her big, dark eyes to his. "Your question and your manner as well imply something that is almost tragic, Roderick. What is it that you wish me to do?"

THE LAST WOMAN

"A very little thing, Patricia. Will you, for a moment, accompany me to the table where Beatrice and Sally Gardner are dining?"

"Why, most certainly," she replied. "You give a very big reason for a very small thing, don't you? Of course, I will go to them." She left her seat instantly, and crossed to the other table; Duncan followed, closely. Patricia accepted the chair that Jack Gardner had occupied, which Duncan drew out for her. Then, he resumed his own. As soon as they were seated, the young millionaire, drawing his chair a bit closer, said, addressing them, generally:

"I have something to say which I wish each of you to hear. To-night, a rumor has been started, somehow, that Miss Brunswick and I were married an hour or so ago, at the Church of the Transfiguration." Patricia gave a slight start, but he continued, unheedingly: "A certain newspaper man, Radnor by name, has already sought to interview me, and he went so far as to insist that he was positive in his assertions as to such a ceremony having taken place. Of course, Beatrice and I both know it to be untrue, and I now make this statement in order to warn you all of what may possibly appear in the morning papers; that is all I have to say on the subject."

Beatrice had flushed hotly at the beginning of

A REMARKABLE MEETING

his statement, and, while he continued, she turned deadly pale. Sally, who it will be remembered had not been taken into the confidence of the intriguers, laughed. Patricia was the only one who appeared to be unmoved by the announcement, but she kept her eyes fixed upon the face of her friend, and she correctly interpreted the changing colors and expressions of Beatrice Brunswick's face.

Whatever might have been the consequences of Duncan's announcement and Miss Brunswick's emotions, her conscious blushes and subsequent pallor, it was interrupted by the sudden and swift return of Gardner, who exclaimed, excitedly:

"Sally, I want you right away; and you, too, Beatrice. It's almost a matter of life and death. Never mind the supper—we can have one some other time. Duncan, you won't mind, will you, if I take them away?" He leaned forward and added, in a whisper: "I am carrying out what you asked me to do, and I need their help." Then, straightening himself, he addressed Patricia: "You will excuse us all, won't you? Come, Sally; for heaven's sake, make haste! There isn't a moment of time to lose."

Sally Gardner had never seen her husband in quite such a state of excitement, but as she was one of

THE LAST WOMAN

the kind that is always ready for anything in the shape of adventure, and scented one here, she lost no time in complying with his request. Beatrice's expression was first of amusement; then, of comprehension. Almost before any of the party fully realized what had happened, Jack Gardner and his companions were gone. Patricia and Roderick Duncan were alone at the table.

She turned her expressive eyes toward him and regarded him closely, but in silence, for a moment. Then, in a low tone, she inquired:

"May I ask if you understand this amazing succession of incidents? To me, it is entirely incomprehensible. If you can explain it, I wish you would do so."

"I am afraid, Patricia, that it cannot be explained—that is, any farther than I've already done so," he replied.

"Who is responsible for this remarkable story you say the newspaper man asked you about?"

Duncan hesitated. Then, he replied:

"When Beatrice and I left the opera-house to-night, we entered a taxicab, and we did drive as far as the iron gateway that admits one to the Church of the Transfiguration. We did not enter; in fact, we did not leave the cab at all. It is possible,

A REMARKABLE MEETING

though hardly probable, that we were followed by some reporter."

"But why did you drive to the Church of the Transfiguration, at all?" she asked him, with a smile upon her face that had something of derision in it, for she plainly saw that Duncan was floundering badly in his effort to explain. When he hesitated for a suitable reply, she continued: "Why, may I ask, did you leave the box at the opera-house, in such a surreptitious manner? It seems to me that the Church of the Transfiguration was an odd destination for you to have selected, when you did leave it, with Beatrice for a companion. Or was there a pre-arrangement between you. Was it her suggestion, or was it yours, Roderick?"

"It was mine," he replied; and he could not help smiling at the recollection of it, even though the present moment was filled with tragic possibilities.

"It seems to amuse you," she told him.

"It does — now."

"Had you, for the moment, forgotten that you were under contract with me, for Monday morning?"

Instead of replying at once, he leaned forward half-across the table toward her, and, fixing his gaze steadily upon her, said, with low earnestness:

THE LAST WOMAN

"Patricia, for God's sake, let us cease all this fencing; let us put an end to this succession of misunderstandings. You know how I love you! You know —"

"I know that this is a very badly chosen time and place for you to make such declarations, or for me to listen to them. Will you come back with me now to the other table, and join Mr. Melvin and my father? People have begun to observe us. If these rumors bear any fruits, such a course seems to me to be the best one to adopt, under the circumstances."

She arose without awaiting his reply, and he followed her.

"Melvin," he said to the lawyer, as soon as he was seated at the other table, "Miss Langdon will agree with me, I think, that it is quite necessary I should accompany you to your home when we leave this place, in order to examine with you certain papers which you have drawn, or are to draw, at her request. Have I your permission, Patricia?" he added.

"I see no objection, if that is what you mean," Patricia replied; "although I think it would be better that we should all drive together to Mr. Melvin's house for the papers —"

A REMARKABLE MEETING

"I have them here, in my pocket," the lawyer interrupted her.

"So much the better, then," Patricia continued, rapidly. "I think the best arrangement, all circumstances considered, would be to go together to my father's house, so that all the interested parties may be present at the interview."

Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, this was agreed upon, and in due time the four were grouped in the library of the Langdon home, where Malcolm Melvin, with the notes he had made that afternoon before him, began in a monotonous voice to read the stipulations of the document upon which Patricia Langdon had decided that she could rely, to supply a soothing balm for her wounded pride. It was a strange gathering to assemble at two o'clock in the morning, but none of them, save possibly the lawyer, seemed cognizant of the curious aspect of the meeting.

CHAPTER VII

THE BITTERNESS OF JEALOUSY

JAMES, the footman, entered the library before Malcolm Melvin had completed the first sentence of the reading of Patricia's stipulations, and deferentially addressed himself to Roderrick Duncan:

"Pardon me, sir," he said, "but there is an urgent demand for you at the telephone — so urgent that I thought it necessary to interrupt you."

"For me? Are you sure?" asked Duncan, in surprise. For, at the moment, he could not imagine who sought him at such an hour, or how his presence at Langdon's house, was known.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Gardner is on the wire."

Duncan started to his feet, and hurried from the room, while Patricia, after a moment's hesitation, arose and followed him, glancing toward the big clock in one corner of the library as she passed it, and observing that it was already Sunday morning.

She waited in the hallway, outside the library door, until Duncan reappeared, after his talk with

THE BITTERNESS OF JEALOUSY

Jack Gardner over the telephone, and she stopped him, by a gesture.

"What is it, Roderick?" she asked. "I think I know what it must be. If it is anything that concerns me, I should like to know about it at once. It is something about the — the rumor of your marriage to Beatrice?"

"It concerns you only indirectly, Patricia," he replied. "I am afraid that I must defer the reading of those stipulations until another time. Gardner is very anxious for me to go to him at once."

"Why?" It was a simple, but a very direct question, which there was no possibility of avoiding.

"Gardner has kidnapped Radnor, and has him now at his own house. Radnor is the newspaper man whom I — who sought to interview me. Beatrice is there, with Sally. You know, they left Delmonico's together. My presence is insisted upon in order properly to clear up this unfortunate business. I really must go, you see. It is necessary for all concerned that this matter go no farther."

He would have said more, but she turned calmly away from him, and spoke to the footman.

"James," she said, "have Philip at the front door with the Packard, as quickly as possible." Then, to Duncan, she added: "I'll go with you; I

THE LAST WOMAN

shall be ready in a moment. You must wait for me, Roderick."

"But, Patricia," exclaimed Duncan, startled and greatly dismayed by her decision, reached so suddenly, "have you thought what time it is?"

"Yes," she responded, moving toward the stairway. "I have just looked at the clock. It is two o'clock, Sunday morning. I understand, also, that the conventions would be shocked, if the conventions understood the situation; but, fortunately, the conventions do not. You and I will drive to Sally Gardner's home together. I shall bring Beatrice back with me when we return. Please, make our apologies to my father and Mr. Melvin. I shall rejoin you in a moment."

There was no help for it, and Duncan waited, for he knew that, even if he should hasten on alone, Patricia would follow in the automobile, as soon as Philip brought it to the door. He sent James into the library with the announcement, and a moment later assisted Patricia into the hastily summoned car. The drive to the home of Jack Gardner was a short one, and was made in utter silence between the two young persons so deeply interested in each other, yet so widely separated by the occurrences of that fateful Saturday afternoon. Duncan

THE BITTERNESS OF JEALOUSY

knew that it was useless to expostulate with Patricia; and she, following her adopted course of outward indifference to everything save her personal interests, preferred to say nothing at all.

When the automobile came to a stop before Gardner's door, Jack himself rushed down the steps; but he paused midway between the bottom one and the curb, when he discovered that Duncan was not alone in the car, and he uttered a low whistle of consternation. He said something under his breath, too, but neither of the occupants of the automobile could hear it; and then, as he stepped forward to assist Patricia to alight, she said to him, in her usual quiet manner:

"Inasmuch as I am an interested party in this affair, Jack, I thought it important that I should accompany Mr. Duncan. I hope you do not regret that I have done so."

"Why — er — certainly not; not at all, Patricia. I don't know but that it is better — your having done so. You see — er — things have somehow got into a most damna — terrific tangle, you know, and I suppose I am partly responsible for it; if not wholly so. I —"

"You need not explain; believe me, Jack," she interrupted him, and passed on toward the steps, as-

THE LAST WOMAN

ending them alone in advance of the two men who had paused for a moment beside the automobile, facing each other. Then, things happened, and they followed one another so swiftly that it is almost impossible to give a comprehensive description of them.

Philip, the chauffeur, sprang out from under the steering-wheel and for some reason unknown to anyone but himself, passed around to the rear of the car. He had permitted the engine to run on, merely throwing out the clutch when he came to a stop. The noise of the machinery interfered with the low-toned conversation that Duncan wished to have with Jack Gardner, and so the two stepped aside, moving a few paces away from the car, and also beyond the steps leading to the entrance of Gardner's home. Patricia passed through the open door, unannounced, for the owner of the house had left it ajar when he ran down the steps to greet Duncan. Miss Langdon had barely disappeared inside the doorway, when the hatless figure of a man sprang through it. He ran down the steps, and jumped into the driver's seat of the Packard car before either Duncan, or Gardner, whose backs were half-turned in that direction, realized what was taking place.

The man was Radnor, of course. He had found an opportunity to escape from his difficulties, and

THE BITTERNESS OF JEALOUSY

had taken advantage of it, without a moment's hesitation. He had argued that there would still be time, before the last edition of the newspapers should go to press, if he could only get to a telephone and succeed in convincing the night editor of the wisdom of holding the forms for this great story. Any newspaper would answer his purpose, for he believed that he could hold back any one of them a few moments, if only he could get to a telephone.

Radnor had not reckoned on the automobile, but he knew how to operate a Packard car as well as did the chauffeur himself, and he had barely reached the seat under the wheel when the big machine shot forward with rapidly increasing speed. He left the chauffeur, and the two young millionaires gaping after it with unmitigated astonishment and chagrin. Duncan and Gardner, both, realized that the newspaper man had escaped them, and each of them understood only too well that at least one of the city newspapers was now likely to print the hateful story of the supposed marriage, beneath glaring and astonishing headlines, the following morning.

Duncan swore, softly and rapidly, but with emphasis; Jack Gardner, broke into uproarious laughter, which he could not possibly repress or control;

THE LAST WOMAN

the chauffeur started up the avenue on a run, in a fruitless chase after the on-rushing car, which even at that moment whirled around the corner toward Madison avenue, and disappeared. Gardner continued to laugh on, until Duncan seized him by the shoulder, and shook him with some violence.

"Shut up your infernal clatter, Jack!" he exclaimed, momentarily forgetful of his anger at his friend. "Help me to think what can be done to head off that crazy fool, will you? It isn't half-past two o'clock, yet, and he will succeed in catching at least one of the newspapers, before it goes to press; God only knows how many others he will connect with, by telephone. What shall we do?"

"I can get out one of my own cars in ten minutes," began Gardner. But his friend interrupted him:

"Come with me," Duncan exclaimed; and, being almost as familiar with the interior of the house as its owner was, he dashed up the steps through the still open doorway, and ran onward up the stairs toward the smoking-room on the second floor, closely followed by Gardner. There he seized upon the telephone, and asked for the *New York Herald*, fortunately knowing the number. While he awaited

THE BITTERNESS OF JEALOUSY

a response to his call he put one hand over the transmitter, and said, rapidly, to his companion :

" Jack, I have just called up the night city editor of the *Herald*. While I am talking with him, I wish you would make use of the telephone-directory, and write down the numbers of the calls for the other leading newspapers in town. This is the only way possible by which we may succeed in getting ahead of Radnor."

Any person who has ever had to do with newspaper life will understand how futile such an attempt as this one would be to interfere with interesting news, during the last moments before going to press. City editors, and especially night city editors, have no time to devote to complaints, unless those complaints possess news-value. Nothing short of dynamite, can "kill" a "good story," once it has gone to the composing-room. Whatever it was that Duncan said to the gentleman in charge of the desk at the *Herald* office, and to the gentlemen in charge of other desks, at other newspaper offices, need not be recorded here. Each of the persons, so addressed, probably listened, with apparent interest, to a small part of his statement, and as inevitably interrupted him by inquiring if it were Mr.

THE LAST WOMAN

Duncan in person who was talking; and, when an affirmative answer was given to this inquiry, Roderick was not long in discovering that he had succeeded only in supplying an additional value to the story, and in giving a personal interview over a telephone-wire. He realized, too late, that instead of interfering with whatever intention Burke Radnor might have had in making the escape, he had materially aided this ubiquitous person in his plans. The mere mention by him to each of the city editors that Radnor was the man of whom he was complaining, gave assurance to those gentlemen that some sort of important news was on the way to them, and therefore Duncan succeeded only in accomplishing what Radnor most desired — that is, in holding back the closing of the forms, as long as possible, for Radnor's story, whatever it might prove to be.

Meanwhile, directly beneath the room where Duncan was so frantically telephoning, a scene of quite a different character was taking place.

When Patricia entered the house, she passed rapidly forward to the spacious library, encountering no one. Entering it, she found Sally Gardner seated upon one of the chairs, convulsed with laughter, while directly before her stood Beatrice, her eyes flashing contemptuous anger and scorn upon the fun-

THE BITTERNESS OF JEALOUSY

loving and now half-hysterical young matron, who seemed to be unduly amused. Neither of them was at the moment, conscious of Patricia's presence. She had approached so quietly and swiftly that her footsteps along the hallway had made no sound.

"You helped Burke Radnor to escape from us, Sally!" Beatrice was exclaiming, angrily. "I haven't a doubt that you put him up to it. I believe you would be delighted to see that hateful story in the newspapers. It was a despicable thing for you to do."

"Oh, Beatrice!" Sally exclaimed, when she could find breath to do so. "It is all so very funny —"

She discovered Patricia's presence, and stopped abruptly; then, she started to her feet, and, passing around the table quickly, greeted Miss Langdon with effusion.

"Why, Patricia!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea that you were here."

Beatrice turned quickly at the mention of Patricia's name, and her anger at Sally Gardner was suddenly turned against Patricia Langdon, with tenfold force and vehemence. It is an axiom that blue-eyed women have more violent tempers than black-eyed ones, once they are thoroughly aroused. Your brunette will flash and sputter, and say hasty things

THE LAST WOMAN

impulsively, or emotionally, but her anger is likely to pass as quickly as it arises, and it is almost sure to leave no lasting sting, behind it. Your fair-haired, fair-skinned, man or woman, when thoroughly aroused, is inclined to be implacable, unrelenting, even cruel.

Beatrice Brunswick's eyes were flashing with passionate fury, and, although she did not realize it, the greater part of her display of temper, was really directed against herself, because deep down in her sub-consciousness she knew that she alone was responsible for the present predicament. But anger is unreasoning, and, when one is angry at oneself, one is only too apt to seek for another person upon whom to visit the consequences. Patricia made her appearance just in time to offer herself as a target for Miss Brunswick's wrath; and Beatrice, totally unmindful of Sally's presence, loosed her tongue, and permitted words to flow, which, had she stopped to think, she never would have uttered.

"It is you! you! Patricia Langdon, who are responsible for this dreadful state of affairs," she cried out, starting forward, and, with one hand resting upon the corner of the library table, bending a little toward the haughty, Junoesque young woman she was addressing. "It is you, who dare to play

THE BITTERNESS OF JEALOUSY

with a man's love as a child would play with a doll, and who think it can be made to conform to the spirit of your unholy pride as readily. It is your fault that I am placed in this dreadful position, so that now, with Sally's connivance, this dreadful tale is likely to appear in every one of the morning papers. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Pat Langdon, for doing what you have done! You ought to get down on your knees to Roderick Duncan, and beg his eternal pardon for the agony you have caused him, since noon of yesterday. I know it all — I know the whole story, from beginning to end! I know what your unreasoning pride and your haughty willfulness, have accomplished: they have driven almost to desperation the man who loves you better than he loves anything else in the world! But you have no heart. The place inside you where it should exist is an empty void. If it were not, you would realize to what dreadful straits you have brought us all, and to what degree of desperation you have driven me, who sought to help you. I tell you, now, to your face, that Roderick Duncan is one man in ten thousand; and that he has loved you for years, as a woman is rarely loved. But you cast his love aside as if it were of no value — as if it were a little thing, to be picked up anywhere, and to

THE LAST WOMAN

be played with, as a child plays with a toy. Possibly it may please you now to hear one thing more; but, whether it does or not, you shall hear it. Roderick was in a desperate mood, to-night, because of your treatment of him, and he did ask me to marry him. So there! He did ask me! And I — I was a fool not to take him at his word. But he doesn't — he didn't — he —" She ceased as abruptly as she had begun the tirade.

Patricia had started backward a little before Beatrice's vehemence, and her eyes had gradually widened and darkened, while she sought and obtained her accustomed control over her own emotions. Now, with a slight shrug of her shoulders and a smile that was maddening to the young woman who faced her, she interrupted:

"You should have accepted Mr. Duncan's proposal," she said, icily, "for, if I read you correctly now, the fulfillment of it would have been most agreeable to you. One might quite readily assume from your conduct and the words you use that you love Roderick Duncan almost as madly as you say he loves me."

"Well?" Beatrice raised her chin, and stood erect and defiant before her former friend. "Well?" she repeated. "And what if I do?"

THE BITTERNESS OF JEALOUSY

Patricia shrugged her shoulders again, and turned slowly away, but as she did so, said slowly and distinctly:

"Possibly, I am mistaken, after all. I had forgotten the attractive qualities of Mr. Duncan's millions." Beatrice gasped; but Patricia added, without perceptible pause: "I should warn you, however, that Mr. Duncan is under a verbal agreement with me! We are to meet and sign a contract, Monday morning. It seems to be my duty to remind you of that much, Miss Brunswick."

Patricia did not wait to see the effect of her words. Outwardly calm, she was a seething furnace of wrath within. She turned away abruptly, and passed through the open doorway into the hall. There, she stopped. She had nearly collided with Duncan and Jack Gardner, who were both standing where they must have heard all that had passed inside the library. Both were plainly confused, for neither had meant to hear, but there had been no way to escape. Patricia understood the situation perfectly, and she kept her self possession, if they did not. For just one instant, so short as to be almost imperceptible, she hesitated, then, addressing Gardner, she said in her most conventional tones:

"Jack, will you take me to my car, please?"

THE LAST WOMAN

"It's gone, Patricia," he replied, relieved by the calmness of her manner. "Radnor took it, you know, when he made his escape. I suppose it is standing in front of some newspaper office, at the present moment, but God only knows which one it is. I'll tell you what I'll do, though: I'll order one of my own cars around. It won't take five minutes, even at this ungodly hour. I always keep one on tap, for emergencies."

"I prefer not to wait," she replied. "It is only a short distance. I shall ask you to walk home with me, if you will."

"Sure!" exclaimed Gardner, glad of any method by which the present predicament might be escaped; and he called aloud to one of the servants to bring him his hat and coat.

Duncan had moved forward quickly, toward Patricia, to offer his services, but had paused with the words he would have said unuttered. He understood that the trying scene through which Patricia had just passed, had embittered her anew against him; and so he stood aside while she went with Gardner from the house to the street. His impulse was to follow, for he, also, wished to escape. Then, he was aware that he still wore his hat. During the excitement, he had not removed it, since en-

THE BITTERNESS OF JEALOUSY

tering the house. He started for the door, but was arrested before he had taken two steps, by Sally Gardner's voice calling to him frantically from the library.

He turned and sprang into the room, to find that Beatrice was lying at full length on the floor, with Sally sobbing and stroking her hands, and calling upon her, in frightened tones, to speak. But Beatrice had only fainted, and, when Duncan knelt down beside her, she opened her blue eyes and looked up at him, trying to smile.

In that instant of pity and remorse, he forgot all else save the stricken Beatrice, and what, in her anger, she had confessed to Patricia. The rapidly succeeding incidents of that day and night had unnerved him, also. He was suddenly convinced of the futility of winning the love and confidence of Patricia, and, with an impulse born, he could not have told when, or how, or why, he bent forward quickly and touched his lips to Beatrice's forehead.

"Is it true, Beatrice? Is it true?" he asked her, in a low tone; and, totally misunderstanding his question, entirely misconstruing its meaning, she replied:

"God help me, yes. God help us all."

Then, she lapsed again into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER VIII

BETWEEN DARKNESS AND DAYLIGHT

SALLY GARDNER had found time during this short scene to recover from her moment of excitement. She had heard, and she thought she understood. Being a many-sided young matron, the best one of all came to the surface now — the one that even her best friends had never supposed her to possess. Underneath her fun-and-laughter-loving nature, Sally was gifted with more than her share of rugged common-sense, inherited, doubtless, from her Montana ancestors.

Even as Duncan bent above Beatrice's unconscious form, and before he spoke to her, Sally had started to her feet and pressed the electric-button in the wall, with the consequence that, at the instant when Beatrice became unconscious the second time, two of the servants entered the room.

"Miss Brunswick has only fainted," she told them, rapidly. "Lift her, and carry her to my room. Tell Pauline to care for her, and that I shall

BETWEEN DARKNESS AND DAYLIGHT

be there, immediately." She stood aside while they carried out her commands; then, she turned upon Duncan.

"You are a great fool, Roderick!" she exclaimed, without stopping to weigh her words. "I thought you had some sense; but it seems that you have none at all. Leave the house at once; and don't you dare to seek Beatrice Brunswick, until you have settled, in one way or another, your affairs with Patricia Langdon. Now, go! Really, I thought I liked you, immensely, but, for the present moment, I am not sure whether I hate you, or despise you! Do go, there's a good fellow; and I'll send you word, in the morning, how Beatrice is."

"Sally, what a little trump you are!" he exclaimed. "I know I'm a fool; I have certainly found it out during the last twelve or fourteen hours. You'll have to help me out of this muddle, somehow; you seem to be the only one in the lot of us who has any sense."

"Then, help yourself out of the house, as quickly as you know how," she retorted; and she ran past him up the stairs, toward the room where she had directed that Beatrice should be taken.

Duncan sighed. He looked around him for his

THE LAST WOMAN

hat, to find that it was still crushed down on the back of his head, and, smiling grimly to himself, he passed out of the house upon the street.

.
Only one of the great dailies of New York City, published that Sunday morning, contained any reference whatever to the supposed incident of the wedding ceremony between Roderick Duncan and Miss Brunswick, at "The Little Church Around the Corner." The editors had been afraid to use Radnor's story, without verification. To them, it had seemed preposterous and unnatural, and especially were they reluctant to print anything concerning it when Radnor was forced to admit to them that Jack Gardner had ultimately denied the truth of the story he had first told.

But there is one paper in the city that is always eager for sensations, and unfortunately it is not very particular concerning the use of them. This paper published a "story," as a newspaper would call it, which was told so ambiguously and with such skill as to preclude any possibility of a libelous action, while the suggestions it contained were so strongly made that the article was entertaining, at least, and it supplied, in many quarters, an opportunity for discussion and gossip. It hinted at scandal in associa-

BETWEEN DARKNESS AND DAYLIGHT

tion with Roderick Duncan and his millions. What more could be desired of it?

The story was merely a relation of the events as we know them, at the outset. It told of the party in the box at the opera-house, of the departure therefrom of Duncan and Miss Brunswick and of their destination when they entered the taxicab; after that, everything contained in the article, was surmise, but it was couched in such terms that many who read it actually believed a marriage ceremony had taken place. During Sunday, Duncan was sought by reporters of various newspapers. He readily admitted them to his presence, but would submit to no interview further than to state that the rumor was absolutely false, was utterly without foundation, and that he would prosecute any newspaper daring to uphold it. Miss Brunswick could not be found by these news-gatherers. Old Steve Langdon laughed when they sought him, and assured them that there was no truth whatever in the rumor. Patricia, naturally regarded as an interested party, declined to be seen.

Radnor himself sought out Jack Gardner, but it is not necessary that we should relate the particulars of that interview. Suffice it to say that no further reference was made to the supposed incident by any newspaper, and that it was quickly for-

THE LAST WOMAN

gotten, save by a very few individuals, who made it a point to remember.

During the day, Duncan sought to communicate with Sallie Gardner over the telephone, but succeeded only in obtaining a statement from one of the footmen, to the effect that Mrs. Gardner presented her compliments to Mr. Duncan, and wished it to be said that she would communicate with him by letter; and that, in the meantime, there existed no cause whatever, for anxiety on his part.

CHAPTER IX

PATRICIA'S COWBOY LOVER

ON Sunday evening Patricia Langdon was alone in the library of her home, occupying her favorite corner beneath the drop-light. For an hour she had tried in vain to interest herself in the reading of the latest novel. Try as she might, she could not center her mind upon the printed words contained in the volume she held, for, inevitably, her thoughts drifted away to the occurrences of the preceding day and evening. No matter how assiduously she endeavored to put those thoughts aside, they insisted upon looming up before her, and at last, with a sigh, she closed her book and laid it aside. The hour was still early, it being barely eight o'clock, when James, the footman, entered the room and announced:

"Miss Houston; Miss Frances Houston."

Patricia had fully intended to instruct the servants that she was not to be at home to anyone, that evening, but, absorbed by other thoughts, she had for-

THE LAST WOMAN

gotten to do so, and now it was too late; so she received the two young ladies who were presently shown into the library. She greeted them in her usual manner, which was neither cordial, nor repellant, but which was entirely characteristic of this rather strange young woman. She understood perfectly well why they had called upon her at this time. They had not missed seeing that article in the one morning paper where it appeared.

"You see, Patricia," exclaimed Miss Houston, whose given name was Agnes, "Frances and I happened to read that remarkable tale that was printed in one of the papers this mornin', about a marriage between Rod Duncan and Beatrice. We thought it so absurd: We couldn't resist the temptation to come over to see you, for a few minutes this very evening, and discuss it; could we, Frances?"

"No, indeed," replied her sister.

"I have not seen any such article," said Patricia; and, indeed, she had not. "But I don't know why either of you should wish to discuss it with me; so, if you don't mind, we'll change the subject before we begin it."

"Why, you see," began Agnes Houston, with some evidence of excitement; but she was fortu-

PATRICIA'S COWBOY LOVER

nately interrupted by the footman, who entered, and announced in his automatic voice:

"Mr. Nesbit Farnham."

The workings of the human mind will forever remain a mystery. Had Nesbit Farnham been announced before the arrival of the two young women, Patricia would undoubtedly have denied herself to him; but, with the announcement of his name, there came to her the sudden recollection of the ultimatum pronounced by Richard Morton the preceding afternoon, when he had brought her home from her father's office in his automobile, the tonneau of which had been occupied by the two young women who were now present with her in the room. Why the announcement of Farnham's name should remind her of Morton's promise to call, this Sunday evening, cannot be said; but it did so, and she nodded to James.

"Hello, Patricia!" Farnham exclaimed, as he entered the room vigorously, for this young society beau and cotillion-leader had long been on terms of intimacy with the Langdon household, and was, in fact, a privileged character throughout his social set. "I am mighty glad that you received me. It's rather an off night, you know, and I wasn't sure,

THE LAST WOMAN

at all that you would do so. Good-evening, Agnes. How are you, Frances? Jolly glad to see you. I say, Patricia, what's all that nonsense I saw in the paper this morning, about Duncan and Beatrice getting married last night? Do you know anything about it?"

"I know nothing whatever about it, Nesbit, save that it is untrue," replied Patricia, calmly. "That much I do know; but I don't care to discuss it."

Farnham flirted his handkerchief from his pocket, and patted it softly against his forehead, smiling gently as he did so. Then, he said:

"To tell you the truth, Patricia, the news was rather a facer, don't you know; for my first impulse was to believe it. Oh, I won't discuss it; you needn't frown like that; but I just want to tell you that I've been looking all over town for Duncan, and I couldn't find him. Then, about an hour ago, I called upon Beatrice, only to be informed that she was not at home, and had not been, ever since yesterday evening. You see, I didn't get out of bed till two this afternoon, and it was four by the time I was dressed and on the street. I didn't take much stock, myself, in the report I read in the paper, until I was told that Beatrice had disappeared. But that got me guessing, and so I came to you, to find

PATRICIA'S COWBOY LOVER

out the truth about it. Please tell me again that it isn't true, and I'll be satisfied."

"It isn't true," replied Patricia, calmly.

James, the footman, made another appearance on the scene at that moment, and proclaimed the arrival of Mr. Richard Morton, who stepped passed him into the library as soon as the announcement was made.

He stopped just inside the threshold, and the chagrin pictured upon his face when he found that Patricia was not alone was so plainly evident, that even Patricia smiled, in recognition of it. Morton was known to Patricia's other callers, having met them frequently since his coming to New York, and, as soon as greetings had been exchanged, they all drifted into a general conversation, which had no point to it whatever, but was, for the most part, the small-talk of such impromptu social gatherings. The subject of the supposed clandestine marriage-ceremony between Duncan and Beatrice was not mentioned again, and fifteen minutes later Miss Houston and her sister arose to take their departure. Farnham, also, got upon his feet, and, stepping lightly and quickly across the room toward Patricia, said to her in a low tone:

"Won't you tell me where I can find Beatrice? I

THE LAST WOMAN

think you can do so, if you will. Please, Patricia. You know why I ask."

"If you should call upon Sally Gardner and ask her that question, I think it would be answered satisfactorily," replied Patricia, smiling at him. "Go and see her, Nesbit, by all means."

A moment later, Miss Langdon found herself alone with Morton, who, true to his promise of the preceding evening, had come to her. She had forgotten him temporarily, but now she was not sorry that he had called. Nevertheless, as she turned toward him, after bidding her friends good-night, Patricia was conscious that the atmosphere had suddenly become surcharged with portentous possibilities. She had recognized in that expression of disappointment, so plainly depicted upon Morton's face when he entered the room, that he had come to her with a self-avowed determination to continue the conversation interrupted by the Houston girls when he was bringing her home, the preceding afternoon. On the instant, she was sorry that she had permitted the others to leave her alone with this man. For some inexplicable reason, she was suddenly afraid of him. She who had never acknowledged fear of any person, who had always met every circumstance calmly as it arose, found herself confronted now by

PATRICIA'S COWBOY LOVER

a condition of affairs that rendered her less self-reliant. Her mind was in a turmoil of a hundred doubts and fears, and there was a vague sense of apprehension upon her, which she could not dismiss, and which she found it difficult to control.

"I told you that I would come, Patricia, and I am here," said Morton, stepping forward quickly, and taking one of her hands, before she could resume her seat. She attempted to withdraw it, but he held it firmly in his own strong clasp; and that expression of unrelenting determination was again in his face and eyes.

"No, Patricia," he said calmly, but in a tone of finality which there was no denying, "I will not release your hand, just yet." He was half-smiling, but wholly insistent and determined. "You see," he went on, "I am taking advantage of your known qualities of courage. I have come to you, determined to say something — something that is very close to me." Patricia's arm relaxed; she permitted her hand to lie limply inside his larger one. Then, she raised her eyes to his, and looked calmly up at him.

As he gazed steadily and keenly into her dark eyes, Morton's face was pale, under the tan of his skin, and he had the look of one who ventures his all upon a single chance. In that moment, Patricia

THE LAST WOMAN

admired him more than she had ever before, and, as he continued to gaze upon her, she permitted her features slowly to relax, and, gradually, a winning smile, which to Richard Morton was overwhelming, was revealed upon her lips and in her eyes.

"You have no right to speak to me like that, Mr. Morton," she said. "Still less have you the right to hold my hand, against my will. The men of my acquaintance, with whom I have associated all my life, would not do as you are doing now; but"—she shrugged her shoulders—"I suppose it is a matter of training."

The words were like a blow, although she smiled while she uttered them. With a sharp exclamation that came very near to being an oath, he threw her hand from him with such force that she was half-turned around where she stood, and he started back two paces away from her, and folded his arms.

"Thank you," said Patricia, still smiling; and she crossed to the chair she had previously occupied.

Morton did not move from the position he had assumed. He stood with folded arms in the middle of the room, staring at her with set face and hard eyes, wondering for the moment why he had been fool enough to go there at all, and trying to read in

PATRICIA'S COWBOY LOVER

her face, what was the charm of her that so fatally attracted him.

"I do a great many things, Miss Langdon, that I have no right to do," he said, after a pause. "That, also, is a matter of training, as you so fittingly adjudged my conduct, just now. But I was trained in the open country, where one can see the sky-line toward any point of the compass; I was trained in the West, where a man is a man, and a woman is a woman, and they are judged only by their conduct toward others, and toward themselves. It is true that I know very little about this Eastern training, to which you have just now called my attention, but from what little I have seen of it, I can't believe that it is wholesome, or good. I was trained to tell the truth, and to insist that the truth be told to me; I find here, in the East, that the truth is the very last thing to be uttered; that it is avoided as long as it possibly can be. In this way, Miss Langdon, our trainings differ. Naturally, then, I am not like the men of your knowledge."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Morton, I didn't mean to give offense by what I said." The girl was more amazed than she cared to show by his vehemence.

THE LAST WOMAN

"The fault is mine," he said to her. "I have no right to expect you to meet me on the plane of my own past life, and with the freedom and candor of the West, any more than you can demand from me, the usages and customs of your social world in New York."

"Won't you sit down?" she asked him. She was beginning to be a bit uneasy, because of Morton's determined attitude, and because she realized that nothing she could say or do would turn him from his set purpose of saying what he had come there to tell her.

"Not yet," he replied. "I can talk much better on my feet. I want you to tell me what you meant by two expressions you used in your speech with me yesterday, after you came from your father's office."

"We will not return to that subject, if you please, Mr. Morton," she replied to him, coldly.

"Pardon me, Patricia, we must return to it — at least, I must. You don't want me to kill anybody, do you?" He smiled grimly as he asked the question, hesitatingly; "you need have no fear on that point, for I probably won't have to."

"Probably won't have to kill anyone?" She raised her eyes to his, but there was no fear in them;

PATRICIA'S COWBOY LOVER

there was only amazement in their depths, astonishment that he should dare to say such a thing to her.

"The qualification of my statement was made because I reserve the right to do what I please, toward anyone who dares to bring pain upon you, Patricia Langdon," he said, incisively; "but I tell you now that I wouldn't trust myself not to kill — again my Western training is uppermost, you see — if I were brought face to face with any man who had dared to bring any sort of an affront upon you. Do you love this man to whom you referred yesterday? Answer me!" The question came out sharply and bluntly. It was totally unexpected, and it affected her with a sort of shock she could not have described.

"You are impertinent," she replied.

"Impertinent, or not, I desire an answer. If you refuse an answer, I shall find other means of ascertaining. Great God, girl, do you suppose that, when my whole life is at stake, I am going to stand on ceremony and surrender to a few petty conventions, just to please an element of false pride that you have built around you, until there is only one way of getting past it? I'm not the sort of man who stands outside, and entreats. My training has taught me to get inside; and, if there isn't a gate,

THE LAST WOMAN

or an opening of any sort, why, then I tear down the barrier, just as I am doing now. Do you love that man?"

"I will not answer the question."

He laughed, shortly.

"From any other woman than you, such an answer as that would be tantamount to an affirmative; but you are a puzzle, Patricia. You are not like anybody else. There is a depth to you that I cannot sound. There is a breadth to you that is like the open country of the Northwest, where one cannot see beyond the sky-line, ever, and where the sky-line remains, always, just so far away."

"I think I'll ask you to excuse me, Mr. Morton," she said, making as if to rise. "This interview is not a pleasant one. You are not kind, or considerate."

He did not move from his position, as he replied, as calmly as she had spoken:

"I shall not go until I have finished. I came here to-night to tell you, again, that I love you. You need not resent the telling of it, for it can in no way offend you, or, at least, it should not. You told me, yesterday, that you had agreed to some sort of business transaction, as you called it, with

PATRICIA'S COWBOY LOVER

some man whom you did not name, by which you are to become his wife. I told you then, and I repeat now, that, if you will but say you love this man, whoever he is, I'll hit the trail for Montana without a moment's delay, and you shall never be annoyed again by my Western training; so, answer me."

"I will not answer you." She looked him steadily in the eyes, and, all unconsciously to herself, she could not avoid giving expression to some small part of the admiration she felt for this daring, intrepid ranchman, who defied her so openly, in the library of her own home.

"Who is the man?" he demanded, sharply.

"Again, I will not answer you."

"I shall find it out, then, and, when I have discovered who he is, I shall go to him. Maybe, he will be able to answer the questions. If he refuses, by God, I'll make him answer!"

She started from her chair, appalled by the implied threat. She did not doubt that he meant every word of it.

"You would not dare do that!" she exclaimed. It was beyond her knowledge that any man should have the courage so far to transgress conventional

THE LAST WOMAN

usages. But he heard the word "dare," and applied to it the only meaning he had ever known it to possess. He laughed outright.

"Not dare?" he exclaimed; and he laughed again. "I would dare anything, and all things, in the mood I am in, just now."

Looking upon him, she believed what he said; and, strange to say, she was more pleased than outraged by his determined demeanor. Nevertheless, she realized that she was face to face with an emergency which must be met promptly and finally, and so she left her chair, and drew herself to her full height, directly in front of him.

"Mr. Morton," she said, slowly, and coldly, "I have had occasion, once before, to refer to your training and to mine. We are as far apart as if we belonged to different races of mankind. If you have really loved me, which I doubt, I am sorry because of it, for I tell you, plainly and truly, that I do not, and cannot, respond to you. I have given my promise to another, and very shortly I shall be married. This sudden passion for me that has come upon you, is an affair of the moment, which you will soon forget when you become convinced that it is impossible of fruition. I am the promised wife of another man, and even your Western training,

PATRICIA'S COWBOY LOVER

which you have chosen sarcastically to refer to since I made my unfortunate remark about it, will tell you that, no matter what rights you believe you possess, you certainly have none whatever to compel me to listen to your declaration of love." Her manner underwent a sudden and marked change, as she continued rapidly, with a suggestion of moisture in her eyes: "Believe me, I am intensely sorry for the necessity of this scene between us. I do not, and I cannot, return the affection you so generously offer me; and, whether I love another, or do not — whether I have ever loved another, or have not — it would be the same, so far as you are concerned. I am not for you, and I can never be for you, no matter what may happen." She took a step nearer to him, and reached out her hand, while she added, with her brightest smile: "But I like you, very much, indeed. I should like to have you for a true, good friend. It would be one of the proud moments of my life, if I could know that I might rely upon you as such, and that you would not again transgress in the way you have done to-night. Will you take my hand and be my friend. Will you try and seek farther for someone who can appreciate the love you have offered to me? I need a friend just now, Richard Morton. Will you be that friend?"

THE LAST WOMAN

For a time, he did not answer her. He stood quite still, staring into her eyes, and through them and seemingly beyond them, while his own face was hard, and set, and paler than she had ever seen it, before. Presently, his lips relaxed their tension; the expression of his eyes softened, and he drew his right hand across his brow.

He took the hand that was extended toward him, and held it between both his own, and, for a full minute after that, he stood before her in silence, while he fought the hardest battle of his life. When he did speak, it was in an easy, careless drawl.

"I reckon you roped and tied me that time, Patricia," he said, smilingly. "You've got your brand on me, all right, but maybe the iron hasn't burnt quite as deep as it does sometimes; and, as you say, possibly there will come a day when we can burn another brand on top of it, so that the first one will never be recognized. Will I be your friend? Indeed, I will, and I'll ask you, if you please, to forgive and forget all my bad manners, and the harsh things I've said."

"It is not necessary to ask me that, Mr. Morton."

"Patricia, if you'll just call me Dick, like all the

PATRICIA'S COWBOY LOVER

boys do, out on the ranch, and if you'll grant me the permission which I have never asked before, of addressing you as I have just now, it will make the whole thing a heap-sight easier. Will you do it?

"I'd much rather call you Dick than anything else," she told him, still permitting him to hold her hand clasped between his own.

He bent forward, nearer to her; and, although she perfectly understood what he intended to do, she did not flinch, or falter.

He touched his lips lightly to her forehead, and then, with a muttered, "God bless you, girl!" he turned quickly, and went out of the room, leaving Patricia Langdon once again alone with her thoughts.

CHAPTER X

MONDAY, THE THIRTEENTH

THE monotonous, but not unpleasing voice of Malcolm Melvin began the reading of the stipulations in the contract to the three persons who were seated before him around the table in the lawyer's private office. The time was Monday morning, shortly after ten o'clock.

"This agreement, hereinafter made, between Roderick Duncan, of the City, County, and State of New York, party of the first part; Stephen Langdon, of the same place, party of the second part; and Patricia Langdon of the same place, party of the third part, as follows: First, the party of the first part —"

"Just wait a moment, Mr. Melvin, if you please," Duncan interrupted him. "If it is all the same to you, and to the other parties concerned in this transaction, I don't care to hear all that dry rot, you have written. If you will be so kind as simply to state in plain English what the stipulations are, it will

MONDAY, THE THIRTEENTH

answer quite as well for the others, and it will suit me a whole lot better."

"It is customary, Mr. Duncan, to listen carefully to a legal document one is about to sign with his name," said the lawyer, with a dry smile.

"I don't care a rap about that, Melvin; and you know I don't. The others know it, too."

"I think," said Patricia, quietly, "that the papers should be read, from beginning to end."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed her father; "and besides, Pat, I haven't time. I ought to be down-town, right now. Let Melvin get over with this foolish nonsense, as quickly as possible; and then, if you and Roderick will only kiss, and make up —"

Patricia interrupted him:

"Very well, Mr. Melvin," she said. "You may state the substance of the agreement."

The lawyer turned toward Duncan. There was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes, although his face remained perfectly calm and expressionless.

"According to these papers as I have drawn them, Mr. Duncan," he said, slowly, "you loan the sum of twenty million dollars to Stephen Langdon, accepting as security therefor, and in lieu of other collateral, the stated promise of Miss Langdon to become your wife. She reserves to herself, the right

THE LAST WOMAN

to name the wedding-day, provided it be within a reasonable time."

"May I ask how Miss Langdon defines the words, a reasonable time?" asked Duncan, speaking as deliberately as the lawyer had done. "As for the loan to Mr. Langdon — he already has that. But, the reasonable time: just what does that expression mean?"

"I suppose, during the season; say, within three, or six, months from date," replied the lawyer.

"That will do very well, thank you. You may now go on." Duncan was determined, that morning, to meet Patricia on her own ground.

"The loan you make to the party of the second part, to Mr. Langdon, is to be repaid to you at his convenience, and with the legal rate of interest, within one year from date. At the church where the wedding ceremony shall take place, and immediately before that event, you are to give to Miss Langdon, a cashier's check for ten-million dollars, which she will endorse and send to the bank, before the ceremony proceeds. It is Miss Langdon's wish to have her maiden name appear as the endorsement on that check. Later, she will have the account transferred from Patricia Langdon to Patricia Duncan. You are —"

MONDAY, THE THIRTEENTH

"Just one moment, again, Mr. Melvin." Duncan reached forward and pulled the papers toward him. "Will you please show me where I am to sign? What remains of the stipulations, I can hear at another time. Unfortunately, at the present moment, I am in haste, and I happen to know that Mr. Langdon is very anxious to get away."

"Is it your habit to sign legal papers without reading them?" demanded Patricia, with just a little touch of resentment in her tone. She had rather prided herself upon the wording of this document, which she had so carefully dictated to Melvin, and it hurt her to think that her stipulations were passed over so easily.

But the lawyer, who saw in the whole circumstance nothing but a huge joke, which would presently come to a pleasant end, had already pointed out to Duncan the places on the three papers where he was to put his signature, and the young man was signing them, rapidly. He did not reply until he had written his name the third time. Then, he left his chair, and with a low and somewhat derisive bow to his affianced wife, said:

"No, Patricia, it is not; but these circumstances are different from those in which one is usually called upon to sign documents. I certainly should

THE LAST WOMAN

have no hesitation in accepting, without reserve, any conditions which you chose to insist upon, so long as those conditions, in the end, made you my wife. You may sign the papers at your leisure; but I shall ask you to excuse me, now." He bowed smilingly to her, shook hands with the lawyer, and called across the table to the banker:

"So long, Uncle Steve; I'll see you later." A moment afterward the door closed behind him.

"The whole thing looks to me like tomfoolery!" ejaculated the banker, as he drew the papers toward him, and signed them rapidly. "Patricia, you are the party of the third part, here, and you can sign them at your leisure. I've got to go, also. Melvin, you can send my copy of the contract direct to me, when it is ready."

"It is your turn now, Miss Langdon," said the lawyer, in his most professional tone, as soon as her father had gone. But, instead of signing, Patricia, for the first time since the beginning of this confused condition of affairs, lost her pride and became the emotional young woman that she really was.

Without a word of warning, she burst into a passion of tears. Throwing her arms upon the table, she buried her face in them, and sobbed on and on, convulsively, vehemently, inconsolably.

MONDAY, THE THIRTEENTH

The lawyer, stirred out of his professional calm by this human side of the cold and haughty young woman, placed one hand tenderly, if somewhat tentatively, upon her shoulder. For a time, he patted her gently, while he waited for her tempest to pass.

"There, there, my dear. Don't let it affect you so," he said. "It is nothing but a storm-cloud, that will quickly pass away. It is just like a thunder-shower, very dark while it lasts, but making all the brighter the sunshine that follows it. I know how you have been tried, and how your pride has been hurt; but, child, there are two kinds of pride in everybody, and it is never quite easy to determine which is which. I strongly suspect, my dear, that you have been actuated by a feeling of false pride, in the position you have taken as to this matter. I won't attempt to advise you, now. Don't sob so, my dear. It will all come out right."

She raised her head from the table, and looked at him, pathetically.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Melvin," she said, slowly, with a catch in her breath as she spoke. "I seem to have done everything wrong, in this matter. I've made everybody unhappy." Again, she buried her face in her arms, and sobbed on, with even more abandon than before.

THE LAST WOMAN

"My child," said the lawyer, "I've lived long enough in the world to discover that it is never wise to permit ourselves to be actuated by false motives. You will discover the truth of that statement, later on; you are only just beginning to realize it, now."

She made no reply to this, but a moment later she started to her feet, and again became the haughty, self-contained, relentless, Juno.

"Give me the pen," she said. "I will sign."

"If you will take my advice," replied the lawyer, without moving, "you will tear up those three documents, or direct me to do so, and leave things as they are."

"No," she replied. "I will sign."

"Very well, Patricia." He pushed the documents toward her, and watched her with a half-smile on his professional face, while she appended her signature to each of them. A moment later, he escorted her from the office, and assisted her into the waiting car. Then, he stood quite still and watched it as it carried her away from the business-section of the city. He shook his head and sighed, as he reëntered the building where his office was located.

"Poor child," he was thinking to himself; "she didn't tee-off well, in the beginning of this game, and she encountered the worst hazard of her life when

MONDAY, THE THIRTEENTH

she came up against her own unyielding pride. Poor child! So beautiful, so good, so tender of heart, she hides every real emotion she possesses behind an impenetrable barrier, barring the expressions of her natural affections with an icy shield which she permits no one to penetrate. For just a moment, she let me see her as she is; I wonder if she has ever permitted others." He got out of the elevator, and walked slowly toward his office-door, pausing midway along the corridor, and still thinking on, in the same fashion. "I must find a way to help her, somehow. Old Malcolm Melvin, whose heart is supposed to be like the parchments he works upon, must make himself the champion of this misguided girl. Ah, well, we shall see what can be done. We shall see; we shall see." He passed inside his office then, and in a moment more had forgotten, in the multitudinous affairs of his professional life, that such a person as Patricia Langdon existed.

.

That Monday, in the evening, at his rooms, Roderick Duncan received two letters. One was delivered by messenger; the other came by post. He recognized the handwriting on the envelope of each, and for a moment hesitated as to which of the

THE LAST WOMAN

two he should read first. One, he knew, was sent by Sally Gardner; the other was from Patricia.

He laid them on the table in front of him, and stood beside it looking down upon the two envelopes with a half-smile upon his face, which was weary and troubled; then, with a broader smile, he took a coin from his pocket and flipped it in the air.

A glance at the coin decided him, and he took up Sally's letter and broke the seal. He read:

"My Dear Roderick:

"I promised you, when you left me Saturday night, to communicate with you at once. Beatrice is quite ill, although you are not to infer from this statement that her indisposition is at all serious. I have merely insisted that she should remain in bed at my house yesterday and to-day.

"On no account should you seek her at present nor should you attempt to communicate with her. I will keep you informed as to her condition because I realize that you will be anxious, inasmuch as you doubtless hold yourself responsible for the present state of affairs. Be satisfied with that, and believe me,

"Loyally your friend,

"SALLY GARDNER.

MONDAY, THE THIRTEENTH

"P. S. Doubtless you will see Jack at the club this evening. Let me advise you not to discuss with him anything that happened Saturday night after his departure with Patricia. I have thought it best to keep that little foolish affair a secret between ourselves.

S. G."

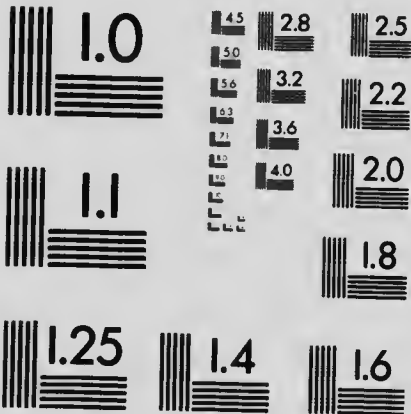
Duncan stood for a considerable time with the letter held before his eyes, while he went over in his mind the chain of incidents that followed upon his meeting with Beatrice Brunswick in the box at the opera-house. Presently, he returned the letter to the envelope, and laid it aside, while he took up the other one, addressed in the handwriting of Patricia.

He read it slowly, with widening eyes; and then he read it again, more slowly, as if he were not certain that he had read it aright before. Finally, with something very nearly approaching an oath, he crushed the short document in his hand, and strode to the window, where he stood for a long time, staring out into the darkness, without moving. His valet entered the room and made some remark about dressing him for the evening, but Duncan sharply ordered the man away, telling him to return in half an hour. Afterward he went back to the table where there was more light, and smoothed out the crumpled



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

THE LAST WOMAN

page of Patricia's letter, so that he could read it a third time.

It was very short and very much to the point; and it had brought with it a greater shock than he could possibly have anticipated. The strange part of it was that he did not comprehend the precise character of that shock. He did not know whether he was pleased, or displeased; whether he was amused, or angry — or only startled. Certainly, he had never thought of expecting such a communication as this from Patricia Langdon. The letter was as follows:

Four, P. M., Monday.

"Dear Roderick:

"According to the document signed jointly by you, my father and myself, and witnessed by Mr. Malcolm Melvin at his office at ten o'clock this morning, I was given the undisputed right to name the day for the ceremony, which is to complete the transaction as agreed upon among us three, but more particularly between you and me. I have thought the matter over calmly and dispassionately, since I parted with you at the lawyer's office, and have decided that, all things considered, it will be best not to defer too long the conditions of that transaction.

MONDAY, THE THIRTEENTH

"I have decided that the ceremony — a quiet one — shall be performed by the Rev. Dr. Moreley, at the Church of the Annunciation, at ten o'clock in the morning, one week from to-day, which will be Monday, the thirteenth.

"If there should be any important reason why you prefer to change this date, you may communicate the same to me at once, and I shall consider it; but if not, I greatly prefer that matters should stand as I have arranged them.

"PATRICIA LANGDON."

CHAPTER XI

MORTON'S ULTIMATUM

ODDLY enough, Roderick Duncan and Richard Morton had never met. Although Morton, during the two weeks of his acquaintance with Patricia Langdon, had been as constantly in her company as it was possible for him to be, there had been no introduction between the two young men. They frequented the same clubs, and Morton had made the acquaintance of many of Duncan's friends; they knew each other by sight, and Duncan had heard, vaguely and without particular interest, that Morton had fallen under the spell of Patricia's stately loveliness. That was a circumstance which had suggested no misgivings whatever to him. He had long been accustomed to such conditions, for it was a rare thing that a man should be presented to Patricia without being at once attracted and charmed by her physical beauty, as well as by her brilliancy of wit.

It was, therefore, with unmasked astonishment that, upon responding to a summons at his door, still

MORTON'S ULTIMATUM

holding Patracia's letter in his hand, he found himself face to face with the young Montana cattle-king.

"Mr. Roderick Duncan, I believe?" said Morton, without advancing to cross the threshold when Duncan threw open the door.

"Yes," he replied. "Won't you come inside, Mr. Morton? I know you very well, by sight and name, and, although it has not been my privilege to meet you socially, you are quite welcome. Come inside, won't you?"

The handsome young ranchman bowed, and passed into the room. He strode across it until he was near one of the windows; then, he turned to face Duncan, who had re-closed the door, and had followed as far as the center-table where he now stood, gazing questioningly at his visitor.

"Won't you be seated, Mr. Morton?" Duncan asked.

"Thank you, no. I intend to remain only a moment, and it is possible that the question I have come to ask you may not be agreeable for you to hear, or to answer. If you will repeat your request after I have asked the question, I shall be glad to comply with it."

"I haven't the least idea what you are talking about, Mr. Morton," said Duncan, smiling, "and

THE LAST WOMAN

I can't conceive how any question you care to put to me would be offensive. However, have it your own way. Will you tell me, now, what that remarkable question is?"

Morton was standing with his feet wide-apart, and with his back to the window. His hands were thrust deep into his trousers-pockets. He looked the athlete in every line of his muscular limbs and body, and the frankness and openness of his expression at once interested Duncan.

"Mr. Duncan," he said, "in the country I come from, we do things differently from the way you do them here. I was born on a ranch in Eastern Montana, and I have lived all my life in a wild country. I began my career as a cow-puncher, when I was sixteen, and not until the last two or three years of my life have I known anything at all of that phase of existence which is expressed by the word 'society.' I indulge in this preamble in order to apologize in advance, for any breaks I may make in that mystical line of talk which you call, 'good form.'"

Duncan nodded his head smilingly, and Morton continued:

"Several years ago, I made my 'pile,' as we express it out there, and since that time it has steadily

MORTON'S ULTIMATUM

increased in size, so that, lately, I have indulged myself in an attempt to 'butt in' upon the people in 'polite society.' The question I have to ask you will amaze and astonish you, but I shall explain it, in detail, if you desire me to do so."

"Very well, Mr. Morton, what is the question?"

"Are you engaged to marry Miss Patricia Langdon?" demanded Morton, abruptly; and there was a tightening of his lips and a slight forward thrust of his aggressive chin.

Duncan received the question calmly. He thought, afterward, that he had almost anticipated it, although he could not have told why he should do so. He permitted nothing of the effect the question had upon him to appear in the expression of his face, or eyes, and he continued to gaze smilingly into the face of the young ranchman, while he replied:

"I see no objection to answering your question, Mr. Morton, although I do not in the least understand your reason for asking it. Miss Langdon and I are engaged to be married, and the wedding-day is already fixed. It is to be next Monday morning, at ten o'clock. I hope, sir, that you are quite satisfied with the reply?"

Morton did not speak for a moment, but he

THE LAST WOMAN

reached out one hand and rested it on the back of a chair, near which he was standing. Duncan, perceiving the gesture, asked again:

"Won't you be seated, Mr. Morton?"

"Thank you, yes."

He dropped his huge body upon the leather-upholstered chair beside him, and crossed one leg over the other, while Duncan retained his attitude beside the table, still with that questioning expression in his eyes.

"I suppose I ought to make some farther explanation," said Morton, presently. He spoke with careful deliberation, choosing his words as he did so and evidently striving hard to maintain complete composure of demeanor under circumstances that rendered the task somewhat difficult.

"I think one is due to me," was the reply.

"Mr. Duncan, when I hit the trail for this room, to have this talk with you, I sure thought that I had mapped out pretty clearly what I had to say to you. I find now that it's some difficult to express myself. If we were seated together in a bunk-house on a ranch in Montana, I could uncinch all that's on my mind, without any trouble. I hope you don't mind my native lingo."

MORTON'S ULTIMATUM

"Not in the least," replied Duncan, still smiling.

"I find it very expressive, and quite to the point."

"Well, it's this way: I arrived in the city about three weeks ago, and one of the first persons I met up with, who interested me was Miss Langdon. There isn't any reason that I know of why I shouldn't admit to you that she interested me more, in about three seconds of time, than anybody else has ever succeeded in doing, during the twenty-eight years I have lived. I was roped, tied, and branded, quicker than it takes me to tell you of it; and the odd part of the whole thing is that I enjoyed the experience, instead of resenting it. I think it was the second time I met up with her when I told her about it, and it is only fair to her, and to you, to admit that I said 'No,' Johnny-on-the-spot. But, somehow, it didn't strike me that it was a final 'no,' or that she had anybody's brand on her; and so I didn't lose the hope that some day I might induce her to accept mine. Last Saturday afternoon, I took her in my car, in company with two other ladies, to her father's office, down-town. She had an interview with her father and somebody else, I suspect, while she was in the office, and whatever that interview was, I am plumb certain that it didn't please her.

THE LAST WOMAN

She come out of the building with her eyes blazing like two live coals, and she was mad enough to shoot, if I am any judge."

He paused, as if expecting some comment from Duncan, but the latter made no remark at all; nor did he change his attitude or the smiling expression of his face. Truth to tell, he was more amused than offended by the other's confidences. Morton continued:

"I had half-promised Miss Langdon that I wouldn't speak to her again of love, but I sure couldn't hold in, that afternoon. I needn't tell you what I said; but the consequence of it was that she told me she had just concluded a business transaction—that was the expression she used—by which she had promised to marry a man whom she would not name. Since that time, I have studied the situation rather deeply, with the result that I came to the conclusion you were the man to whom she referred. That is why I have called upon you this evening, to ask you the question you have just answered."

"Well?" said Duncan. His smile was more constrained, now.

"I'm sure puzzled to know what Miss Langdon means by the 'business transaction' part of it, Mr.

MORTON'S ULTIMATUM

Duncan, and I have come up here, to your own room, to tell you that, if Patricia Langdon loves you —"

"One moment, if you please, Mr. Morton. Don't you think you're going rather too far, now?"

"No sir, I don't."

"Very well, I'll listen to you, to the end."

"If Patricia Langdon loves you, Duncan, I'll hit the trail for Montana and the sky-line this afternoon, and I'll ask you to pardon me for any break I have made here, this evening; but, if she doesn't love you, and if, as I suspect, you are coercing her in this matter —"

Again, Duncan interrupted the ranchman. He did it this time by straightening his tall figure, and raising one hand for silence.

"I think, Mr. Morton," he said, coldly, "that you are presuming rather too far. These are personal matters between Miss Langdon and myself, which I may not discuss with you."

Morton sprang to his feet, and faced Duncan across the table.

"By God! you've got to discuss this with me!" he said; and his jaws snapped together, while he bent forward, glaring into Duncan's eyes. "I've got to know one thing from you, Mr. Roderick Duncan; and I've got just one more thing to say to you!"

THE LAST WOMAN

"Well, what is it?"

The question was cold and very calm. Duncan's temper was rising.

"I'll say it mighty quick and sudden. It is this: If you are forcing Patricia Langdon into this marriage against her will, I'll kill you."

CHAPTER XII

THE QUARREL

DUNCAN'S first impulse, begotten by the sudden anger that blazed within him, was to resent most bitterly the threat thus made against him. But, behind his anger, he was conscious of a certain feeling of respect and admiration for this frank-faced, keen-eyed young Montana ranchman. He saw plainly that Morton was in deadly earnest in what he had said; but he realized, also, that Morton's resentment, as well as the threat he had made, was due, not to any personal feeling harbored against the man he now faced, but was entirely the result of the sense of chivalry which the Western cowboy inevitably feels for every woman. Duncan understood, thoroughly, that Morton's sole desire was to announce himself as prepared to protect, to the last ditch, the young woman with whom he had fallen so desperately in love; and for this Duncan respected and esteemed the man.

In this instance, Duncan was a good reader of character, and, before venturing to reply to the last

THE LAST WOMAN

remark of Morton's, he compelled himself to silence; he tried to put himself in this young man's place, wondering the while if under like circumstances he would have had the courage to do as Morton had done.

"Sit down again, Mr. Morton," he said, presently, waving his hand toward the chair the ranchman had previously occupied.

"No, sir; not until you have answered me."

Duncan smiled, now. He had entirely regained his composure, and was thoroughly master of his own ugly temper, and of the situation, also, as he believed.

"Mr. Morton," he said, "when you entered this room, I did you the honor to listen to your unprecedented statement, without interruption. I now ask you to treat me as fairly as I treated you. Be seated, Mr. Morton, and hear what I have to say."

The ranchman flushed hotly, at once realizing that this young patrician of the East, had, for the moment got the better of him. He resumed his seat upon the chair, and absent-mindedly withdrew from one of his pockets a book of cigarette-papers and a tobacco-pouch.

"Morton," said Duncan, "I am going to speak to you as man to man; just as I think you would like to have me do. I am going to meet you on your

THE QUARREL

own ground, that of perfect frankness; for I do you the honor to believe that you are entirely sincere in your attitude, in your conduct, and in what you have said to me."

"You're sure right about that, Mr. Duncan. Whatever may be said about Dick Morton, there is nobody — at least nobody that's now alive — who has ever cast any doubts upon my sincerity, or my willingness to back up whatever I may have to say."

"You came here out of the West, Morton, and, as you express it, met up with Patricia Langdon. In your impulsive way, you fell deeply in love with her, almost at first sight."

"That's no idle dream."

"You conceived the idea that she wore nobody's brand, which is another expression of your own, which I take to mean that you thought her affections were disengaged."

"That was the way I sized it up, Mr. Duncan."

"Therefore, I will tell you that Patricia and I have been intimate companions, since our earliest childhood. I can't remember when I have not thought her superior to any other woman, and I have always believed, as I now believe, that deep down in her inmost heart she loves me quite as well as I love her. There was an unfortunate circumstance, con-

THE LAST WOMAN

nected with our present engagement, which, unfortunately, I cannot explain to you, since it is another's secret, and not mine. But I shall explain, so far as to say that the circumstance deeply offended her; that when she made the remark to you, in the automobile, which aroused your resentment, she did it in anger; that, far from coercing her in this matter, I have not done so, and have not thought of doing so; and, lastly, I shall tell you, quite frankly, that the engagement between Patricia and myself and the date of the wedding which is to follow are both matters which she has had full power to arrange to her own satisfaction."

Duncan hesitated a moment, and then, as Morton made no response, he suddenly extended Patricia's letter, which he still held in his hand.

"Read that," he said. "I don't know why I show it to you, save that I feel the impulse to do so. It is entirely a confidential communication, and I call upon you to treat it as such. But read the letter from Patricia Langdon, which I have just received, Mr. Morton; it will probably make you wiser on many points that now confound you."

Morton accepted the letter, but the lines of his face were hard and unrelenting; his jaws and lips were shut tightly together; his aggressive chin was

THE QUARREL

thrust forward just a little bit, and his hazel eyes were cold and uncompromising in their expression.

He read the letter through to the end, without a change of expression; then, he read it a second time, and a third. At last, he slowly left his seat, and, stepping forward, placed the document, which he had refolded, upon the table. He reached for his hat, and smoothed it tentatively with the palm of one of his big hands. But all the while he kept his eyes fixed sternly upon the face of the young Cræsus he had gone there to interview.

"Mister Roderick Duncan," he drawled, in a low, even tone, "I don't savvy this business, a little bit. Just for the moment, I don't know what to make of you, or of Miss Langdon, but I am going to work it out to some sort of a conclusion; and, when I have found the answer to the questions that puzzle me now, I'll let you know."

He moved quickly toward the door, but with the lightness of a panther Duncan sprang between it and him.

"One moment, Morton," he said, coldly

"Well, sir?"

"I have been very patient with you, and extremely considerate, I think, of your importunities and your insolence; but you try my patience almost too far.

THE LAST WOMAN

Take my advice, and don't meddle any farther in matters that do not, and cannot, concern you."

For a moment, the two men faced each other in silence, and both were angry. Duncan was not less tall than Morton, but was slighter of build, and very different — with the difference that will never cease to exist between the well-groomed thoroughbred of many experiences and the blooded young colt. Morton's wrath flamed to the surface, and, forgetting for the moment that he was not upon his native heath, that he was not dressed and accoutred as was his habit when riding the range, he reached down for the place where his holster and cartridge-belt would have been located had he been dressed in the cowboy costume of his native Montana.

It was a gesture as natural to the young ranchman as it was to breathe, and he was ashamed of it the instant it was made. He would have apologized had he been given time to do so. Indeed, he did flush hotly, in his confusion. But Duncan, quite naturally, misinterpreted the act. He thought, and with good reason, that Morton was reaching for his gun; the flush of shame on Morton's cheeks served only to strengthen the conviction. And so, with a cat-like swiftness, he took one step forward and seized the

THE QUARREL

wrist of Morton's right arm, twisting it sharply and bending it backward with the same motion, whereby the ranchman was thrown away from him, and was brought up sharply against the table, in the middle of the room.

Duncan was smiling again now; but it was the smile of intense anger, and not pleasant to see. Without waiting for Morton to recover himself, Duncan calmly turned his back upon the ranchman, and threw open the door; then, stepping away from it, he said, with quiet dignity:

"This is your way out, sir."

CHAPTER XIII

SALLY GARDNER'S PLAN

WHAT might have happened between those two fiery natures at that crisis will never be known, because at the moment when Duncan threw the door ajar, and uttered his dismissal, Jack Gardner appeared suddenly upon the scene, having just stepped from the elevator. If he heard that expression of dismissal, he showed no evidence of it, or he did not comprehend its significance; and, if he saw in the attitude of the two men anything out of the ordinary, he gave no sign that he did so. But Jack Gardner, too, was from Montana; and he had learned, long ago, how to conduct himself in emergencies. It was a fortunate interruption, all around. Duncan, although apparently calm, was in a white rage. He would not have hesitated to meet Morton more than half-way, in any manner by which the latter might choose to show his resentment for the twisted arm. As it was, Gardner was the savior of the situation.

"Hello, Duncan! How are you?" he exclaimed,

SALLY GARDNER'S PLAN

in his usual manner. "Why, Dick! I didn't expect to find you here; didn't know that you and Dun were acquainted." He shook hands with both the men, one after the other, in his accustomed hearty and irresistible manner, grinning at them and utterly refusing to see that there was restraint in the manner of either.

"It is my first acquaintance with Mr. Morton," replied Duncan easily, and touched a lighted match to the cigar he had previously taken from his case. He was, outwardly, entirely at ease. "He did me the honor to call upon me, and we have been chatting together for more than half an hour. Will you sit down, Jack? Mr. Morton, be seated again, won't you?"

The ranchman looked upon his late antagonist with utter amazement. It was an exhibition of a kind of self-control that was strange to him. It angered him, too, because of his own inability to assume it. He was suddenly ashamed. Patricia's reference to his "training," recurred to him. He understood, now, exactly what she had meant — it had not been plain to him before. Here before him was "the man of the East," at whom he had so often scoffed, for the word "Tenderfoot" had, until now, been synonymous with contempt. But

THE LAST WOMAN

Morton felt himself to be the tenderfoot, in the present case. He replied, stiffly to the invitation to be seated.

"Thank you," he said. "I find that I am neglecting an engagement." It was the only excuse he could think of.

"Wait just a minute, Dick, and I'll go along with you," said Gardner. "I only stepped in a moment to give Duncan a message from my wife. She says, Roderick, that she would like to have you drop around at the house, for a moment, if you can make it. She is not going out. Now, Dick, if you are ready, I'm with you. So long, Duncan; I'll see you later, at the club."

Just previous to Jack Gardner's interruption of the almost tragic scene at Duncan's rooms, he had been having what he called "a heart-to-heart" talk with his wife, and the message he now delivered to his friend from Sally was, in part, the outcome of that interview.

Sally Gardner had been greatly troubled since the occurrences of Saturday night. Being herself intensely practical, she had sought deeply, through her reasoning powers, to find a means whereby she might be instrumental in helping out of their diffi-

SALLY GARDNER'S PLAN

culties her several friends whom she so dearly loved. She believed that she had succeeded in hitting upon a scheme which would, at least, bring things to a focus. She was sure that, if she could bring all the parties together under one roof, matters would straighten themselves without much outside assistance. Jack and Sally owned a beautiful country place, within easy motoring distance of the city, and the young matron, having decided upon what course she would adopt, had lost no time in summoning her husband to her, taking him into her confidence, and convincing him of the wisdom of her project.

"Jack," she told him, when he was seated opposite her, "I don't suppose you realize into what a terrible mess and muddle you got things last Saturday night, by reason of your fondness for a joke?"

"Oh, confound it, Sally, drop it!" he exclaimed, smiling, but annoyed nevertheless.

"No," she said, "we can't drop it, Jack. You're responsible for the whole affair. I have seen the necessity of finding a way out of it, for all of us — although my heart bleeds for poor Beatrice."

Jack shrugged his shoulders, and lighted a cigar. Then, he thrust his feet far out in front of him, and studied the toes of his tan shoes intently.

THE LAST WOMAN

"What's the matter with Beatrice?" he asked, presently.

"She is in love with Roderick Duncan," replied his wife, with an emphatic nod of her blond head.

"Eh? What's that? In love with Rod? Nonsense!"

"She is, Jack; I know she is."

"Gee, little girl, but it surely is a mix up! What are you going to do about it? Why in blazes didn't she marry him, then, when she had the chance?"

"I've thought of a way Jack, if you will agree to it, and help me out — a way by which things can be smoothed over. Will you help me?"

"Yes, I will. What is it?"

"Could you tear yourself away from the city for two or three days, beginning to-morrow morning?" she asked him.

"I guess so, Sally."

"Are you willing to go out to Cedarcrest for a few days, and entertain a select party, there?"

"Suit me to death, girl. Glad you thought of it. Whom will you ask? And what is the game?"

"I have made out a list," replied Sally, meditatively. "I shall read it off to you, if you will listen."

"Go ahead."

SALLY GARDNER'S PLAN

"It includes Beatrice and Patricia, of course; Dick Morton and —"

"Wait a moment, Sally. I've got a sort of a notion in my head that neither Beatrice nor Patricia, will care to go to Cedarcrest on such an expedition as that, under the present circumstances."

"My dear John"—she sometimes called him John when she was particularly in earnest, and when she attempted to be especially dignified—"you may leave all the details of this arrangement to me. I merely wished your consent to the plan."

"Oh, well, if you can manage it, Sally, you've got my consent, all right. What do you want me to do about it? You didn't have to consult me, you know."

"I want you, first, to listen to the list I have made out, and, after that, to carry out my directions in regard to it."

"Good girl; I can do that, too."

"Patricia and Beatrice, Roderick Duncan and the Houston girls, Richard Morton, Nesbit Farnham; and, to supply the other two men who will be necessary to make up the party, you yourself may make the selection. I only wish them to be the right sort."

"What's the scheme, Sally?"

THE LAST WOMAN

"I want to get these warring elements together, under one roof."

"Whew! You've got more pluck than I thought you had, Sally."

"Listen, Jack: When you go out this evening, find Roderick, and send him here, to me. I have written him not to come here, but that won't make any difference. He'll come if you give him my message. Afterward, you may look up Dick Morton, and the other two men you are to ask, and give them the invitation."

"For when?"

"For to-morrow. Tell them all to be at Cedarcrest before dark, to-morrow. That is all. As I said before, I'll attend to the details."

Jack Gardner left his chair, and, having kissed his wife, was on the point of departure when he paused a moment on the threshold, and, looking back over his shoulder, said, laughingly:

"Sally, I always gave you credit for having more sand than any three ordinary women I've ever known, but, I'll give you my word, I never supposed you had grit enough to undertake any such thing as this one. Talk about me getting things into a mess! Great Scott! if you don't get into one, out at Cedarcrest, with that sort of a mix-up to take care of, I'm

SALLY GARDNER'S PLAN

a sheep-herder. Maybe you haven't got on to the fact, my girl, but, as sure as you're the best little woman in all New York, Dick Morton is so dead stuck on Patricia Langdon that he can't forget it for a minute. If you bring all that bunch together, you'll have Red Duncan and Dick at each other's throat, before you get through with it. And besides —"

Sally sprang to her feet, clapped her hands and laughed, to her husband's utter amazement.

"Splendid!" she exclaimed. "No, I did not know that; but it simplifies matters, wonderfully, Jack."

"Oh, does it?"

"Assuredly."

"Huh! I'm glad you think so. It looks to me as if it were just the other way around. Take my word for it, my girl, there'll be a 'will' in that drive of yours — maybe a tragedy, as well. Duncan is quite capable of committing one, in his present mood; and Dick Morton? — Well, you'll see."

"I'm awfully glad you told me. It's perfectly splendid," said Sally, unmindful of, or indifferent to, the warning. "It's perfectly splendid!"

"Oh, it is, eh? Well, I'm glad you think so. To me, it looks a good deal like a mix-up, Sally.

THE LAST WOMAN

Rod is in love with Patricia; Beatrice is in love with him; Nesbit Farnham is so dead stuck on Beatrice that he doesn't know where he's at, more than half the time; and Patricia — Oh, well, I give it up. I'll do what you told me to, and leave the rest to you;" and Gardner laughed his way through the hall and out upon the street; and he continued chuckling to himself, all the way to his club. But Sally ran after him before he got quite away from her, and called to him from the bottom of the steps.

"One thing more, Jack," she said.

"Well, my dear; what is it?"

"We will take Beatrice with us, in our car, and you may include one of the gentlemen I have given you permission to ask. When you ask Dick Morton, tell him that he is to bring Patricia and the two Houston girls. That's all."

"How about the others, how are they going to get there?"

"The others may walk, for all I care," said Sally, and she returned to the library.

CHAPTER XIV

PATRICIA'S WILD RIDE

IT was a gay party that assembled around the dinner-table at Cedarcrest, shortly after eight o'clock on Tuesday evening, although, had one possessed the ability to analyze deeply, it would have been discovered that the gaiety was somewhat forced. Each person present at the gathering was burdened by the intuitive perception of something ominous in the atmosphere; there was a portentous quality about the environment that had more or less a depressing effect upon Sally Gardner's guests, and each one was conscious of a determined, but silent effort to overcome this feeling, in the belief that he or she was the only one who experienced it.

Two of the expected guests had not arrived. They were Patricia and Richard Morton; but, because no message of any sort had been received from Morton, it was the generally accepted idea, that something had happened on the road to delay his car, and they were expected to arrive at any moment. The serving of the dinner was delayed as long as

THE LAST WOMAN

possible in expectation of their coming, but at last the other guests seated themselves around the table to enjoy the feast so carefully prepared by Jack Gardner's high-salaried chef. Agnes and Frances Houston, who were to have come out in Richard Morton's car with Patricia, arrived on time, accompanied by an uninvited guest, although he was one who was on such terms of intimacy with the Gardners that he had not hesitated to attend this country party, when the idea was suggested to him. It was the lawyer, Melvin; and the suggestion that he should be present, and that he should take out the Houston girls, had, strangely enough, been made by Morton. The young ranchman had gone to the lawyer's office early in the day of that Tuesday, and the conversation he held with Melvin will give a good idea of the drift of his intentions, and of his hitherto latent talents for planning and scheming. And the shrewd old lawyer quite readily fell in with the suggestions that were made to him.

The invitation extended to Morton, the preceding evening, by Jack Gardner, and the directions given him at the time, as to whom he should take with him to the party, had suggested to him a novel plan, which he lost no time in taking measures to carry out. It is true, he was delighted on learning that he

PATRICIA'S WILD RIDE

was expected to take Patricia to Cedarcrest, but he was just as greatly disappointed by the idea that Agnes and Frances Houston were to occupy the tonneau of his car, and therefore he planned to avoid the disturbing element. The presence of the lawyer at the club where Gardner and Morton held their conversation, suggested to the latter what he would do, for he knew of the intimate friendly relations existing between Melvin and the Gardners, and did not doubt that the great legal light would be an acceptable addition to the party which Sally had planned. Had he known all of Sally's reasons for the arrangements she had made, and had he realized exactly why the party had been got up, he might have hesitated to do what he did; possibly, he would have refused to attend at all — but developments will show how he took the information, when at last it was given to him. It must be remembered that Morton knew nothing at all of the real incidents of the preceding Saturday, and was aware only of the fact that something was wrong; that something had occurred to annoy and disturb Patricia Langdon out of her customary self-repose. Nevertheless, Morton was convinced, notwithstanding his interview with her and with Duncan, that she was somehow being forced into a position abhorrent to her. He had promised

THE LAST WOMAN

to be her friend, and Dick Morton knew of only one way to fulfill that promise. Whatever he undertook to do, he did thoroughly, and always his first impulse, whenever one of his friends needed aid of any sort, was to fight for that friend.

His initial occupation that Tuesday morning was to visit the garage where his two automobiles were kept, and the instructions to his chauffeur were given rapidly and to the point. An hour later, when he called upon the lawyer, he said, after greetings had been exchanged:

"Melvin, I don't know whether you are aware of it or not, but Jack Gardner and his wife are having a little impromptu house-party, at their place, Cedarcrest, beginning at dinner time, this evening. I believe it is to continue till the week-end, and of course I know it is impossible for you to leave your business for that length of time; but I —"

"What are you talking about, Morton?" the lawyer interrupted him. "Neither Jack nor Sally have thought to invite me to their gathering."

"Oh, well, that doesn't count, you know — not in this instance. I want you to do me a favor. That's the size of it. The point is this: I was told to take Miss Langdon and the Misses Houston, to Cedarcrest, in my White Steamer. I have just dis-

PATRICIA'S WILD RIDE

covered that the car is temporarily out of commission, and so I am reduced to the necessity of using my roadster. I came down here to ask you to take the Houston girls to Cedarcrest, for me."

The shrewd old lawyer threw back his head, and laughed, heartily.

"You're not very deep, Morton," he said, presently. "I can see through you as plainly as if you were a plate-glass window. You have come here to induce me to relieve you of the necessity of taking Agnes and Frances Houston to Cedarcrest, in order that you may have Patricia Langdon alone with you in your roadster. And I'll wager that your chauffeur is out of commission, too."

"There will be my machinist in the rumble-seat," replied Morton, blushing furiously. "You see, Melvin, I happen to know that you are always an acceptable addition to any party at that house, and — and so —"

The lawyer laughed again, and raised his hand for silence.

"Don't try to explain," he said, still chuckling. "'Least said, soonest mended,' you know. I'll help you out, for I don't think your suggestion is a bad one, at all. You may leave it all to me, without even going so far as to communicate with the two mem-

THE LAST WOMAN

bers of your party whom you wish to rid yourself of. I'll attend to that, by telephoning; and I'll take them to Cedarcrest for dinner, and remain for the night; but I shall have to return early to-morrow morning. When the hour comes for you to start, Morton, you have only to drive around after Miss Langdon." Thus, it happened that, when the party was seated in the splendidly decorated dining-room at Cedarcrest, there were two absentees; as there was, also, one guest who had not been expected, and who, for once in his life, was not entirely welcome at Sally Gardner's country home. For Sally had a wholesome respect for, as well as an intuitive perception of, the old lawyer's shrewdness. Quick to scent a plot of any sort, Mrs. Gardner saw in this incident — the arrival of Melvin with the Houston girls, and the absence of her star guest and escort — certain circumstances that smelled strongly of prearrangement. She remembered what her husband had said to her, the preceding day, when she suggested the party; she recalled Jack's statement to the effect that Morton was in love with Patricia, and, because her acquaintance with the young cattle-king had begun in their childhood in Montana, she realized just what he was capable of doing, if by any chance he

PATRICIA'S WILD RIDE

had been made aware of the circumstances which were the occasion of the gathering at Cedarcrest. Melvin had explained, in as few words as possible, how it happened that he was there; but his explanation only added to the foreboding in Sally Gardner's mind, which grew and grew when daylight faded to twilight, and then to darkness, and still Morton's roadster had not arrived.

Nesbit Farnham was in the seventh heaven of bliss because he was seated at the table beside Beatrice, who bore no outward evidence of having been ill, and who, for the moment at least, was the life of the party; for she compelled herself to a certain gaiety of manner which she did not feel. Duncan had been told, by his host, to bring out the two men who were to complete the party, and he had given little thought to the arrangement made for him until after his arrival at Cedarcrest, when he discovered that the young ranchman and Patricia were alone together, somewhere on the road between the city and their destination. He felt certain misgivings, then, although he could not have defined them; but he recalled the scene that had occurred between himself and Morton, the preceding evening, which had so nearly developed into an open quarrel, and he

THE LAST WOMAN

wondered what the strenuous young ranchman might not attempt to do, in making the most of the opportunity thus afforded him.

Patricia Langdon had received her invitation to Sally's party, and had given her reluctant acceptance, over the telephone, at a late hour the preceding evening. Sally had also told Patricia of the arrangement made for taking her to Cedarcrest. The girl had demurred, at first, and expressed a desire to use her own car; but she had been argued into a final acceptance of Sally's arrangement. It was, therefore, with some amazement that she received Richard Morton, at four o'clock Tuesday afternoon, when he went after her with his roadster, and discovered that they were to ride alone together, to Cedarcrest; for Morton had decided to do without the services of his machinist this afternoon. He was determined to have no third person present, during the thirty miles drive from the city. The lawyer's shrewd guess about the chauffeur being put out of commission had certainly furnished a suggestion for Morton to follow. Patricia hesitated to accompany him, in that manner, but finally consented, though not without reluctance; and so, shortly before five o'clock, they started. They should easily have arrived at Cedarcrest between six and seven.

PATRICIA'S WILD RIDE

We already know that they had not put in their appearance at half-past eight. The reason for this delay, was somewhat startling.

When Patricia was well ensconced in the bucket-seat of the roadster beside Morton, he started the car forward at as rapid a pace as the city ordinance would permit. Both were silent for a considerable time, but, at last, Patricia asked him:

"Will you be good enough to tell me why Mrs. Gardner's arrangement for this afternoon, was not carried out?"

Morton turned his face away from her, in order to conceal the smile of amusement in which he indulged himself, and he replied, with apparent carelessness:

"My big car was out of commission, temporarily. I happened to see Melvin, and he agreed to take Miss Houston and her sister to Cedarcrest, for me."

"Oh, indeed! What has happened to your White Steamer? It was only the other day that you told me how proud you were of it because it never got out of order."

He turned his face toward her and replied slowly and with distinctness:

"I won't lie to you about it, Patricia; that wouldn't be fair. I put the car out of commission, my-

THE LAST WOMAN

self; or, rather, it was done by my order, because I wanted to take this ride alone with you."

"You should have told me that before we started," she said to him.

"Why? Would it have made any difference in your going?"

"Most certainly it would."

"Do you mean that you would have declined to come with me?"

"I do."

"But why?"

"Chiefly, because I do not approve of plots and schemes, in any form. Had you asked me, frankly and openly, to drive to Cedarcrest with you, I should have felt no hesitation in accepting; as it is, you have given offense, Mr. Morton."

"So much so that you won't even call me Dick?" he said, with a light laugh that was more forced than real.

"Yes. You have not proven yourself quite the friend I hoped you would be. Friends don't plot against each other."

"Shall I turn the car about and take you home?" he asked shortly, with tightening lips, angered unreasonably by the attitude she had assumed.

PATRICIA'S WILD RIDE

"No; you may take me to our destination, Cedarcrest."

They drove on in silence for a considerable time after that, and, as soon as they were in the country, on less-frequented roads, Morton increased the speed of his roadster until they were flying along the highway in utter and absolute defiance of the statutes. When they presently arrived at a turn within a few miles of their destination, a turn that would have taken them directly to the house they sought, Morton did not move the steering-wheel of the car, but kept on, straight ahead, and with ever increasing speed.

Patricia knew the road very well indeed; she had been over it many times, and now she called out to her companion:

"You have taken the wrong road. You should have gone around that last turn."

Morton did not reply, or attempt to do so. He seemed not to have heard her.

"Won't you please slow down a little?" she asked, after another moment; and the question came somewhat tremulously, because, strange to say, Patricia was just a little frightened by the circumstance that now confronted her.

Again, Morton made no reply, nor did he comply

LAST WOMAN

with her request, and the car flew on and on, while Patricia tried to collect her thoughts, and to determine what were best for her to do toward restraining this head-strong companion of hers, who now seemed like a runaway colt that has taken the bit in its teeth, and has found the strength to defy opposition.

"Richard Morton!" she exclaimed sharply, touching his arm, tentatively. "Why don't you answer me? What are you trying to do? Where are you taking me?"

For just an instant, he flashed his eyes into hers; then he replied, grimly:

"I am taking you 'or a good ride. We'll steer around to Cedarcrest by another road, presently."

"But I wish to go there at once."

"You can't."

"Do you mean that you refuse to do as I request?"

"Yes," he replied, shortly; and shut his jaws together with a snap like a nut-cracker.

"You dare?"

"I dare anything, Patricia, when I am brought to it. I would like to keep this machine going, at this pace, for hours and days and weeks, with you seated there beside me, and never thinking of a stop until

PATRICIA'S WILD RIDE

I had you out yonder, in the wild country, where I was born and raised."

Again, she reached out and touched him on the arm, for she was more frightened than she would have confessed to herself; but, before she could speak, he called to her in a tone that was almost savage in its intensity:

"Be careful, please. Don't interfere with my steering, or you will ditch us."

"I demand that you bring this car to a stop," she said coldly, controlling herself with an effort. "I insist that you turn it about, and go back. I am amazed at your conduct, Mr. Morton — amazed and hurt. You are offending me more deeply than you realize."

Again, he did not answer her, and Patricia, now thoroughly alarmed, sought vainly for a means of bringing this impetuous and dare-devil young ranchman to his senses. She thought once, as they ascended a short hill, of leaping from the car to the ground, but the speed was too great for her to take such a risk. It even occurred to her to seize the steering-wheel, and to give it a sharp turn, thus wrecking the machine; but she shuddered with terror when she thought of the possibilities of such an act.

Half a mile farther on, Morton turned the car

THE LAST WOMAN

from the main highway they had been following, and drove it at full speed along a narrow road, where the going was somewhat rough, and where both had to give their entire attention to retaining their seats.

"Are you mad?" she cried out to him, at last. She did not remember ever to have been so frightened before. Actual fear was a new sensation with Patricia Langdon.

Still, he did not answer her, and Patricia started to her feet, determined to make the leap to the ground, risking broken limbs, or worse, to escape from this situation, which was becoming more awful with every moment that passed. A sudden terror lest the man beside her had gone mad, seized her. But Morton grasped her with his left hand, and pulled her back into the seat.

"Don't do that!" he ordered her, crisply.

"Then, stop the car," she replied. "Oh, please, do stop the car. You have no idea how you frighten me. It is very dark, here, and this is a terrible road. Please stop, Mr. Morton."

"Call me Dick, and I'll stop."

"Please stop the car — Dick!"

He closed the throttle, and applied the brake. In another moment the speedy roadster slowed down gradually, and came to a stop, just at the edge of a

PATRICIA'S WILD RIDE

wood, where there was no house, or evidence of one, visible in any direction; and, then, Richard Morton and Patricia Langdon stared into each other's eyes through the gathering darkness, the former with set jaws and a defiant smile, and the latter with plainly revealed terror.

CHAPTER XV

ALMOST A TRAGEDY

MORTON'S passion for the beautiful girl beside him had overcome his discretion to such an extent that he was hardly responsible for what he did. The exhilaration of this swift ride through the gathering darkness, the sense of nearness to the woman he believed he loved with every force in him, the certainty that they were alone, and that, for the moment at least, she was his sole possession, stirred up within the young ranchman's mind those elements of barbaric wildness which had grown and thrived to riotousness and recklessness during the life he had lived on the cattle-ranges of Montana, but which had been more or less dormant during his Eastern experiences. He forgot, for the moment, the Sunday-night scene wherein he had promised to be Patricia's friend, and had ceased to be her lover; he remembered only that she was there beside him, with her terror-stricken eyes peering into his beseechingly, and that she looked more beautiful than ever she had before. But, more than all

ALMOST A TRAGEDY

else, the influence she had had over him was absent, and this was so because her haughty defiance and the proud spirit she had hitherto manifested in her attitude were gone. He had never seen her like this before, with the courage taken out of her. It was a new and unknown quality, alluringly feminine, wholly dependent, that possessed her now. She was frightened. And so Morton forgot himself. He permitted the innate wildness of his own nature to rule. He followed an impulse, as wild as it was unkind. He seized her in his arms, and crushed her against him, raining kisses upon her cheeks and brow, and upon even her lips. Patricia strove bravely to fight him off; she struggled mightily to prevent this greatest of all calamities. She cried out to him, beseeching that he release her, but he seemed not to hear, or, if he heard, he paid no heed, and, after a moment more of vain effort, Patricia's figure suddenly relaxed. She realized the utter futility of her effort to hold the man at bay, and she was suddenly inspired to practise a subterfuge upon him. She permitted herself to sink down helplessly, into his confining grasp, and she became, apparently, unconscious.

It was Richard Morton's turn to be frightened, then. On the instant, he realized what he had done.

THE LAST WOMAN

The enormity of the offense he had committed against her rushed upon him like a blow in the face, and he released her, so that she sank back into the confining seat beside him.

"Patricia! Patricia!" he called to her. He seized her hands, and rubbed them; he turned them over and struck the palms of them sharply, for he had somewhere heard that such action would bring a person out of a swoon; but, although he struggled anxiously, doing whatsoever he could to arouse her, and beseeching her in impassioned tones to speak to him, she seemed to remain unconscious, with her head lying back against the seat, her eyes closed, and her face paler than he had ever seen it before.

The car had stopped before the edge of a wood. Just beyond it, there was a bridge over which they must have passed, had they continued on their way. Morton raised his head and looked despairingly about him. He saw the bridge, and experience taught him that there must be a stream of water beneath it. With quick decision, he sprang from the car and ran forward, believing that, if he could return with his cap filled with water, he might restore his companion to consciousness. Then, strange to relate, no sooner had he left the car than Patricia opened her eyes, straightened her figure, and with

ALMOST A TRAGEDY

a quick leap changed her seat to the one beneath the steering-wheel. She accomplished this while Morton was speeding away from her, toward the water.

She saw him arrive at the bridge and disappear down the bank, beneath it; and forthwith, she reversed the gear of the steamer, and opened the throttle. The engine responded instantly, and at the imminent risk of wrecking the car, she backed it, and turned it, reversing and going forward several times, before she quite succeeded in bringing it around, within the narrow space. But, at last, she did succeed, and, just at the moment when the car was headed in the opposite direction, Richard Morton reappeared. He saw, at a glance, what had happened during his short absence. He understood that Patricia had outwitted him, and he ran forward, shouting aloud as he did so.

Patricia caught one glimpse of him over her shoulder, and saw that he carried in his hands the cap he had filled with water to use in restoring her to consciousness — a consciousness she had not for a moment lost, which now was so alive and manifest in effecting her escape.

She paid no heed to his shouts. She opened the throttle wider and wider, and the steam roadster darted away through the darkness, with Patricia

THE LAST WOMAN

Langdon under the wheel, leaving Richard Morton, cap in hand, standing in the middle of the highway, gazing after her, speechless with amazement and more than ever in love with the courageous young woman who could dare, and do, so much.

Patricia Langdon was thoroughly capable of operating any automobile, as was demonstrated by this somewhat startling climax to the unpleasant scene through which she had just passed. Beneath her customary repose of mannner, her outward self-restraint and her dignified if somewhat haughty manner, there was a spirit of wildness, which, for years, had found no expression, till now. But the moment she turned the car about and succeeded in heading it in the opposite direction, the instant she realized that she was mistress of the situation, which, so short a time before, had been replete with unknown terrors, she experienced all that sense of exhilaration which the winner of any battle must feel, when it is brought to a successful issue. She heard herself laugh aloud, defiantly and with a touch of glee, although it did not seem to her as if it were Patricia Langdon who laughed; it was, perhaps, some hitherto undiscoverable spirit of recklessness within her, which called forth that expression of defiant joy, which Richard Morton could not fail to hear.



"She opened the throttle wider and wider and the steam roadster darted away through the darkness."

ALMOST A TRAGEDY

The night was dark, by now, and there were only the stars to light the narrow way along which Patricia was compelled to guide the flying car; but she thought nothing of this, for she could dimly discern the outlines of the roadway before her, and she believed she could follow it to the main highway, without accident. Morton had not lighted his lamps. There had been no opportunity to do so. But the road was an unfrequented one; and Patricia, as she lay away from Morton, through the darkness, thought only of making her escape, not at all of the dangers she might encounter while doing so.

Several times, she caught herself laughing softly at the recollection of how she had triumphed over the daring young ranchman, and at the predicament in which she had left him, standing there near the bridge, in a locality that was entirely unknown to him, from which he must have some difficulty in finding his way to a place where he could secure another conveyance. He might know what it meant to be left horseless on the ranges of the West, but this would be a new and a strange — perhaps a wholesome — experience for him.

Presently, she came to the turn of the road that would bring her upon the main highway; and here she stopped the car, and got down from it, long

THE LAST WOMAN

enough to light the lamps. This done, she went on again, as swiftly as she dared, yet not too rapidly, because now she felt that she was as free as the air singing past her. The highway she traversed was almost as familiar to her as the streets of New York City.

The exhilaration she had experienced when she triumphed over Richard Morton and escaped from him, increased rather than diminished as she sped onward, and when, almost an hour later, she guided the car between the huge gate-posts which admitted it to the grounds of Cedarcrest, and followed the winding driveway toward the entrance to the stone mansion, she was altogether a different Patricia Langdon from the one who had started out, in company with the young Westerner, shortly after five o'clock that afternoon.

She brought the car to a stop under the *porte-cochère*, and announced her arrival by several loud blasts of the automobile-horn; a moment later, the doors were thrown open, and Sally Gardner rushed out to receive her.

"I am afraid I am late, Sally," Patricia called out, in a voice that was wholly unlike her usual calm tones. "Will you call someone to care for the car?" Without waiting for a reply, she sprang

ALMOST A TRAGEDY

from beneath the wheel, and with a light laugh returned the impetuous embrace with which the young matron greeted her.

In some mysterious manner, word had already been passed to the guests that Patricia Langdon had arrived in Richard Morton's car, but alone; and so, by the time Patricia had released herself from Sally's clinging arms, Roderick Duncan, followed by the others of the party, appeared in the open doorway. Duncan came forward swiftly, but his host forestalled him in putting the question he would have asked.

"I say, Patricia!" Jack Gardner called out. "What have you done with Morton? Where is Dick?"

"Really, Jack, I don't know," replied Patricia, standing quite still, with her right arm around Sally's shoulders, and lifting her head like a thoroughbred filly. Mrs. Gardner's left arm still clung around her waist. "Mr. Morton is back there, somewhere, on the road. If he doesn't change his plans, he should arrive here, presently." She laughed, as she replied to the question, perceiving, at the moment, only the humorous side of it. She was still under the influence of that swift ride alone; still delighted by the thought of the predicament in which she had

THE LAST WOMAN

left her escort, because of his outrageous conduct toward her.

"Did you meet with an accident? Has anything happened to Mr. Morton?" inquired Agnes Houston.

Patricia shrugged her shoulders, and, again laughing softly, withdrew from Sally's embrace and began to ascend the steps. One of the Cedarcrest servants appeared at that moment, to take the car around to the garage; and for some reason each member of the party stepped aside, one way or another, so that Miss Langdon was the one who led the way into the house, the others falling in behind her, and following. The circumstance of her arrival in such a manner and the suggestion of mystery conveyed in Patricia's answer to Jack Gardner's question convinced all that something had happened which needed an explanation. Patricia's demeanor was so different from her usual half-haughty bearing, that it was, in a way, a revelation to them all. Each one there had his or her own conception of the occasion, and probably no two opinions were the same; but at least they were all agreed on one point: that there had been a scene somewhere, and that Richard Morton had got the worst of it.

Patricia led the way to the dining-room. Her

ALMOST A TRAGEDY

head was high, her eyes were sparkling. Duncan hastened to her side, but she took no notice of his nearness. As she entered the room, she called out:

"Do order some dinner served to me, Sally. I am as hungry as the proverbial bear. You see, I had anticipated a hearty dinner with you, and the long ride I have had — particularly that part of it which I have taken alone — has whetted my appetite."

Sally nodded toward the butler, and waved him away, knowing that he had overheard Patricia's words, and that she would speedily be served; the others of the party resumed their former seats around the table, and the practical Sally turned and faced Patricia, again, her eyes flashing some of the indignation she felt because of her guest's evident reluctance to explain the strange circumstance of her arrival at Cedarcrest alone.

"Patricia Langdon," she said, "I think you might tell us what has happened. We are all on edge with expectancy. Where is Dick Morton?"

"Oh, he is somewhere back there on the highway, walking toward Cedarcrest, I suppose," replied Patricia smilingly, dropping into a chair beside the table.

THE LAST WOMAN

"Did you start out from New York together?" persisted Sally.

"Oh, yes."

"Won't you please tell us what has happened?"

Patricia's lips parted, while she hesitated for a reply. She had no desire to tell these people of the incidents that had actually occurred. Many another, in her position, would have revealed at once the whole truth, and would have made these others acquainted with the conduct of Richard Morton, during that wild ride she had been forced to take with him through the gathering gloom. But Patricia was not that kind. She was quite conscious of the strangeness of her arrival at Cedarcrest alone, in Morton's car, and of the wrong constructions which might be given to the incident. She knew that every man who was present in the room, would bitterly resent the indignities Morton had put upon her, if she should relate the facts. But she believed that Morton had been sufficiently punished. She even doubted if he would appear there, at all, now; and so, instead of replying to Sally's repeated request, she shrugged her shoulders, and responded:

"I think I'll leave the explanation to Mr. Morton, when he arrives."

Food was placed before her at that moment and

ALMOST A TRAGEDY

she transferred her attention to it; while her friends, perceiving that she was not inclined to take them into her confidence, started other subjects of conversation, although the mind of each one of them was still intent upon what might have happened during Patricia's journey from New York in the company of Richard Morton.

Roderick Duncan had not resumed his seat at the table; he had remained in the background, and had maintained an utter silence. But his thoughts had been busy, indeed. He knew and understood Patricia, better than these others did — with the possible exception of Beatrice, who also was silent. But, now, he passed around the table until he stood behind Patricia's chair. Then, he dropped down upon a vacant one that was beside her, and, resting one elbow on the table, peered inquiringly into the girl's flushed face, more beautiful than ever in her excitement. That strange feeling of exhilaration was still upon her, and there was undoubted triumph and self-satisfaction depicted in her eyes and demeanor.

"What happened, Patricia?" he asked her, in a low tone, which the others could not hear.

"Nothing has happened that need concern you at all," she replied to him, coldly.

"But something must have happened, or you —"

THE LAST WOMAN

"If something did happen," she interrupted him, "rest assured that I shall tell you nothing more about it, at the present time. If Mr. Morton chooses to explain, when he arrives, that is his affair, and not mine. I am here, and I am unharmed. Somewhere, back there on the road my escort is probably walking toward Cedarcrest; or, perhaps, away from it. You will have to be satisfied with that explanation, until he arrives — if he does arrive." She spoke with such finality that Duncan changed the character of his questioning.

"I have not seen you, Patricia, since the receipt of your letter, fixing our wedding-day for next Monday," he persisted. "It now occurs to me that, in the light of the contents of your letter, I have a right to ask you for an explanation of the incidents of to-night."

Patricia turned her eyes for an instant upon him, and then withdrew them, while she said, coldly:

"If you have taken time to read carefully the stipulations in the contract you signed yesterday morning, at Mr. Melvin's office, you will understand why I deny your right to do so."

"Has Morton affronted you in any way?"

"Ask him. I have no doubt that he will answer you."

ALMOST A TRAGEDY

"Patricia, are you going to persist in this attitude toward me, even after we are married?" Duncan inquired, anxiously. But, instead of replying, she raised her head in a listening attitude, and announced to all who were present:

"I hear the horn of an approaching automobile. Perhaps, Mr. Morton has caught a ride."

"Answer me, Patricia," Duncan insisted.

"My conduct will be the answer to your question," she said, with her face averted.

Jack Gardner hurriedly left the room, accompanied by Sally. A moment later, when the automobile horn sounded nearer, Duncan left his place beside Patricia, and followed. Melvin, the lawyer, also went out, and then one by one the others, until Patricia was the only guest who remained at the table. She continued to occupy herself with the food that had been placed before her, while the flush on her cheeks deepened, her eyes shone with added brightness, and she smiled as if she were rather pleased than otherwise by the predicament in which Morton would find himself, when he should be closely questioned by Jack and Sally Gardner and the guests as well, whose curiosity, she knew, would now far exceed their discretion.

It never once occurred to her that Dick Morton,

THE LAST WOMAN

having had time to think over the occurrences of the afternoon and evening, and to realize the enormity of the offense he had committed, would tell the truth about it. Men within her knowledge, who belonged to the society with which she was familiar, would temporize, under such circumstances, would seek, by diplomatic speech to shield the woman in the case from the comment that must follow a revelation, would make use of well-chosen words to escape responsibility for what had occurred; would practise a studied reserve until certain knowledge could be obtained of what the woman might have said, upon her arrival.

The doors had been left open, and Patricia was conscious of loud tones proceeding from the veranda at the front of the house; of masculine voices raised in anger; and then she heard the sound of a blow, followed instantly by a heavy fall. Almost at the same instant, the sharp crack of a pistol smote upon the air, for an instant stiffening her with horror. She started to her feet in terror, her face gone white, her eyes dilated with apprehension. Then, she somehow stumbled to her feet, and stood there, trembling in every nerve, until she could gather strength to run forward.

A horrified and silent group of persons surrounded

ALMOST A TRAGEDY

the principals in the scene that had just occurred, for there had not yet been time for any of them to recover from the paralyzing effect of what had happened.

Richard Morton was on the floor of the veranda where he had raised himself upon one elbow, and he still held in his right hand the small revolver from which the shot that Patricia had overheard, had come. Roderick Duncan was standing a few feet away, and he was holding in his arms the limp form of Beatrice Brunswick, whose head had fallen backward, as if she were unconscious, or dead. Just at the instant when Patricia caught a view of this strange tableau the other spectators threw off the momentary lethargy that had overpowered them, and rushed forward toward the principal actors in the scene that had passed, each shouting a different exclamation, but all alike in their expressions of horror and loathing for the man who was down — Richard Morton.

CHAPTER XVI

THE AUTOMOBILE WRECK

THIRTY minutes after the happening of the incidents just related, a remarkable scene took place in Jack Gardner's smoking-room. There were present only the men of Sally's impromptu week-end party.

If the friends whom Jack Gardner had made since his sojourn in the East could have seen him at that moment, they would not have recognized in the coldly stern, keen-eyed copper magnate, the happy-go-lucky, devil-may-care Jack, of their acquaintance. The almost tragic occurrences of the evening had brought the real Jack Gardner to the surface, and he was for the moment again the dauntless young miner who had fought his way upward to the position he now held, by sheer force of character; for it requires a whole man to lift himself from the pick and shovel, and the drill and fuse, to the millionaire mine-owner and the person of prominence in the world such as he had become. He stood beside the small table at one end

THE AUTOMOBILE WRECK

of the room; Morton occupied the center of it, facing him. Grouped around them, in various attitudes, were the others of that strange gathering. Duncan leaned idly against the mantel, and smoked his cigar with deliberation, although his gray eyes were coldly fierce in their expression, and his half-smile of utter contempt for the man who occupied the center of the scene rendered his face less handsome and attractive than usual. Malcolm Melvin was alert and attentive, from the end of the room opposite Gardner, and the other gentlemen of the party occupied chairs conveniently at hand.

It would be hard to define Richard Morton's attitude from any outward expression he manifested concerning it. He stood with folded arms, tall and straight, facing unflinchingly the accusing eyes of his life-long friend, Jack Gardner. His lips were shut tightly together, and he seemed like one who awaits stoically a verdict that is inevitable.

"Morton," said Gardner, speaking coldly and with studied deliberation, "you have been a life-long friend of mine, and, until to-night, I have looked upon you almost as a brother; but, to-night, by your own confession and by your acts which have followed upon that confession, you have destroyed every atom of the friendship I have felt for you. You

THE LAST WOMAN

have made me wish that I had never known you. You have outraged every sense of propriety, and every feeling of manhood that I thought you possessed. Fortunately for us all, no one is much the worse for your scoundrelism; I can call it by no other word. You have shown yourself to be, at heart, an unspeakable scoundrel, as undeserving of consideration as a coyote of the plains."

Morton's face went white as death at these words, and his eyes blazed with the fury of a wild animal that is being whipped while it is chained down so that it cannot show resentment. He did not speak; he made no effort to interrupt. Gardner continued:

"When Miss Langdon arrived here alone, in your roadster, she gave us no explanation whatever of what had happened, and, while we believed that some unpleasant incident must have occurred, we did not press her for the story of it. Then, you came, and without mincing your words you told the whole brutal truth; and you uttered it with a spirit of brutality and bravado that would be unbelievable under any other circumstances. And when, in your own self-abasement for what you had done, you confessed to the acts of which you were guilty toward Miss Langdon, you received, at Duncan's hands, the blow you so thoroughly merited; I am frank to say

THE AUTOMOBILE WRECK

to you that, if he had held his hand one instant longer, it would have been my fist, instead of his, that floored you. But that is not all. You have been a gun-fighter for so many years, out there in your own wild country, that, before you were fairly down after you received the blow, you must needs pull your artillery, and use it. Do you realize, I wonder, how near to committing a murder you have been, to-night? If Miss Brunswick had not seen your act, if she had not started forward and thrown herself between your weapon and its intended victim, thus frightening you so that you sought at the last instant to withhold your fire, I tremble for what the consequences might have been. As it happened, no one has been harmed. You deflected your aim just in time to avoid a tragedy; but it is not your fault that somebody does not carry a serious wound as the consequence of your brutality. Were it not for Miss Brunswick's act, there would be a dead man at this feast, and you would be his murderer. But even that, horrible as it might have been, is less a crime than the other one you have confessed. You, reared in an atmosphere where all men infinitely respect woman-kind, deliberately outrage every finer feeling of the one woman you have professed to love. That, Richard Morton, is very nearly all that I have to say

THE LAST WOMAN

to you. I have asked these gentlemen to come into the room, and to be present during this scene, in order that we may all bind ourselves to secrecy concerning what has happened to-night. I can assure you that nothing of this affair will leak out to others. I have quite finished now. One of the servants will bring your roadster around to the door. Our acquaintance ends here."

He turned and pressed a button in the wall behind him, and a moment later the door opened; but it was Beatrice Brunswick who stood upon the threshold, and not the servant who had been summoned.

She hesitated an instant, then came forward swiftly, until she stood beside Morton, facing his accusers. With one swift glance, she took in the scene by which she was surrounded, and with a woman's intuition understood it. Turning partly around, she permitted one hand to rest lightly upon Morton's arm, and she said to him, ignoring the others:

"It is really too bad, Mr. Morton. I know that you did not mean it; and I am unharmed. See: the bullet did not touch me at all. It only frightened me. I am sure that you were over-wrought by all that had happened, and I'll forgive you, even if the others do not. I am sure, too, that Patricia will for-

THE AUTOMOBILE WRECK

give you, if you ask her. Come with me; I will take you to her."

She tightened her grasp upon his arm and sought to draw him toward the door, but Jack Gardner interrupted, quickly and sharply.

"Stop Beatrice!" he said. "Mr. Morton is about to take his departure. This is an occasion for men to deal with. Morton cannot see Miss Langdon again unless she seeks him, and that I don't think she will do."

"I'll get her; I'll bring her here!" exclaimed Beatrice, starting toward the door alone, but this time it was Morton's voice that arrested her — the first time he had spoken since he entered the room.

"Please, wait, Miss Brunswick," he said, and the quiet calmness of his tone was a surprise to everyone present. It belied the expression of his eyes and of his set jaws. "I thank you most heartily for what you have said, and for what you would do now. Miss Langdon won't forgive me, nor, indeed, do I think she ought to do so. I have not attempted to make any explanation of my conduct to these gentlemen, but to you I will say this: I realize the enormity of it, thoroughly, and, while I can find no excuse for what I have done, I can offer the one explanation, that I was, for the moment, gone mad —

THE LAST WOMAN

located, we call it, in the West. If Miss Langdon will receive any message from me at all, tell her that I am sorry."

He bowed to her with a dignity that belied his training, and, stepping past her, opened the door, holding it so until she had passed from the room. Then, he turned toward the others.

"I am quite ready to go now," he said. "Gardner, if you will have my car brought around, I shall not trouble you further."

With another slight inclination of his head, he passed out of the room and along the hall to the front door, where he paused at the top of the steps, waiting till his car should be brought to him; and no one attempted to follow, or say another word to him.

Standing alone at the top of the steps, while he waited for the car, Morton was presently conscious of a slight movement near him, and he turned quickly. Patricia Langdon slowly arose from one of the veranda chairs, and approached him. She came quite close to him, and stopped. For a moment, both were silent; he, with hard, unrelenting eyes, which nevertheless expressed the exquisite pain he felt; she, with tear-dimmed vision, in which pity, regret, sympathy and real liking strove for dominant expression.

THE AUTOMOBILE WRECK

"I couldn't let you go, Mr. Morton, without a few more words with you, and I have purposely waited here, because I thought it likely you would come from the house alone."

"Thank you," he replied, not knowing what else to say.

"I am so sorry for it all, Mr. Morton; and I cannot help wondering if I am to blame, in any measure. I wanted you to know that I freely forgive you for whatever offense you have committed against me. I think that is all. Good-night."

She was turning away, but he called to her, with infinite pain in his voice:

"Wait; please, wait," he said. "Give me just another moment, I beseech you."

She turned to face him again.

"I have been a madman to-night, Miss Langdon, and I know it," he told her rapidly. "There is no excuse for the acts I have committed; there can be no palliation for them. I would not have dared to ask for your forgiveness; I can only say that I am sorry. It was not I, but a madman, who for a moment possessed me, who conducted himself so vilely toward you. I shall go back to my ranch again. My only prayer to you is, that you will forget me, utterly."

THE LAST WOMAN

Patricia came a step nearer to him, reaching out her hand, tentatively, and said, in her softest tone, while tears moistened her eyes:

"Good-bye, and God bless you."

But Morton, ignoring her extended hand, cleared the steps of the veranda at one leap, and disappeared in the darkness, toward the garage.

Five minutes later, while Patricia yet remained at the top of the steps where Morton had left her, the steam-roadster that had been so closely related to her experiences of the night rushed past the house and disappeared along the winding roadway toward the Cedarcrest gate. And she remained there, in a listening attitude, as long as she could hear the droning murmur of its mechanism. When that died away in the distance, she sighed, and turned to re-enter the house; but it was only to find that she was no longer alone. Roderick Duncan appeared in the doorway, and came through the entrance, to meet her.

"Was it Morton's car that just went past the door?" he asked her.

"Yes," she replied, shrinking away from him.

"Did you see him, and talk with him, before he went away?" he asked, partly reaching out one hand, but instantly withdrawing it.

THE AUTOMOBILE WRECK

"Yes," she answered again, retreating still farther from him.

"That was like you, Patricia. I am rather sorry for the poor chap, despite what he did to you, tonight. You see, I know what it means, to be so madly in love with you that it is barely possible for one to stand or sit beside you, without crushing you in one's arms. Oh, Patricia, won't you be kind to me? Won't you forgive me, too, as I know, just now, you forgave that poor chap? Surely, my offense was not so great as his."

"It has been infinitely greater," she told him, coldly; and, with head erect, but with averted face, she went past him, through the doorway.

Down the highway, half-way between Cedarcrest and the city, was a place where building operations were in progress; where huge rocks had been blasted out to make room for intended improvements; where derricks and stone-crushers and other machinery were idly waiting the dawn of another day, when the workmen would arrive and resume their several occupations.

Richard Morton, dashing along this highway with ever-increasing speed, utilizing the full power of his racing roadster, remembered that place along the highway. With cold, set face and protruding chin,

THE LAST WOMAN

he set his jaws sharply together, and wondered why his flying car would go no faster. He did not realize that he was covering more than a mile with every minute of time. The pace seemed slow to him, for he had suddenly determined what he would do. He had thought of a plan to expiate his follies of the night.

At last, almost directly beneath an arc-light along the highway, he saw, dimly, the spot where the stone was being quarried, and, as he recognized it, he laughed aloud with a sort of desperate joy, because of the plunge he intended to take. He threw the throttle wide open, and after another moment he saw the derrick loom before him. With careful deliberation, he turned the steering-wheel.

There was a loud crash in the darkness; the roadster leaped into the air like a live thing, and turned over, end for end, twice. Then, it seemed to shoot high into the air, and fell again, in a confused heap of wreckage, among the broken stones of the quarry. Morton was thrown from it, like the projectile from a catapult, and he came down in a crumpled heap, somewhere among that mass of rocks; and after that there was silence.

CHAPTER XVII

CROSS-PURPOSES AT CEDARCREST

AT Cedarcrest, the night was still young. Patricia, and then Morton, had arrived at the country home of the Gardners while the several guests were still at table, and the scenes which followed their coming had passed with such stunning rapidity that every one of the party was more or less affected by them, each one in his or her separate manner. The men of the party were silent and preoccupied. The scene enacted just before the departure of Morton weighed more or less heavily upon them, and while each one felt that the young ranchman had "got what was coming to him," there was not one among them who did not experience a thrill of sympathy for the young fellow, who had been so well liked by the new acquaintances he had made in the East.

The two gentlemen strangers, who had brought Morton to the house in their car, were the first to take their departure, after Morton's dramatic exit, although they remained long enough to imbibe a

THE LAST WOMAN

whisky-and-soda, and to hear what Jack Gardner still had to say. That was not so very much, but, like all he had said that night, it was straight to the point.

"Gentlemen," he said to them, standing with his glass in hand and addressing all, impersonally, "what I have to say now, is said to all, alike. Two of you are strangers to me; the others are more or less intimately my friends. It is my particular wish that we should all bind ourselves to secrecy, concerning what has happened at Cedarcrest, and in this vicinity, to-night. It happens that no real harm has been done; no one has been injured; amends have been made to Miss Langdon, so far as it has been possible to make them, and I am quite sure of her desire never to hear the subject mentioned again."

There was a generally affirmative nodding of heads about him as he spoke, and after an instant, he continued:

"In what has occurred in this room, I have had to assume a triple obligation: that of host, that of self-appointed champion of the young woman who received the affront from another of my guests, and that of a life-long acquaintance with the man whom I was compelled, by circumstances, to expel from

CROSS-PURPOSES AT CEDARCREST

my house. The last was the most difficult of all to fill. There is not one of you who could not readily have assumed two of the responsibilities; the last one I have named has been distinctly unpleasant. I have known and liked Dick Morton, since we were boys. We hail from the same state, and from a locality there where we were near neighbors, during our youth. He is somewhat younger than I — about two years, I think — and, until to-night, I have never known him to be otherwise than a brave and chivalrous fellow, ready to fight at the drop of the hat. We must agree that no matter what his conduct was, prior to the scene in this room, he conducted himself, while here, in a manner that was beyond reproach. He realized the enormity of the outrage he had committed, and he took his medicine, I think, as a fighter should. He is gone now, and I doubt if any of us see him again. That is all, I think, that need be said." It was then that Roderick Duncan silently put aside his glass, and went out of the room, unnoticed by the others. He knew that a general discussion of the incidents of the evening would follow, and he had no wish to take part in it. He anticipated that the two gentlemen who had brought Morton to the house, would be asked to remain, and that he would therefore see

THE LAST WOMAN

them again, later on, and so he took the opportunity that was afforded him to escape unseen and unnoticed.

The whole affair weighed heavily upon him. He realized much better than Patricia did that she alone was to blame for it all; and the fear lest the responsibility of it should come home to her drove him to seek her at once, even before Morton had had time to get beyond the gates of Cedarcrest. Patricia was, of course, unaware of the scene that had taken place at Duncan's rooms just before the informal invitations to Cedarcrest were issued, but Duncan recalled that circumstance now, with a deeper understanding of all that had happened as a sequel to it; and he believed that the time was ripe for a better understanding between himself and Patricia. Therefore, he left the room to seek her.

Outside the door, he came to a pause, in doubt which direction to take. From where he stood, he could see into a part of the dining-room, and instinct told him that it was deserted, save by the butler, who was yet at his post. He approached the music-room, and, screened by a Japanese curtain that hung across the entrance, peered inside. Beatrice and Sally were there, with the other ladies of the party, but Patricia was nowhere to be seen. It occurred to him

CROSS-PURPOSES AT CEDARCREST

that she might have sought solitude in some other part of the great house, and he had turned away, striving to think where he might find her, when the whirr of an automobile engine came to him through an open window from the rear of the building.

He guessed, at once, that it would be Morton's roadster, ready to take him away, and, impelled by a sudden spasm of pity for the man who was now tabooed he hurried toward the front entrance — and fate willed it that he should arrive at the threshold just at the very instant when Patricia took that impulsive step nearer to Morton, reaching her arms out toward him, as she did so, and Duncan plainly heard the words she uttered, "Good bye, Dick; and God bless you." He had heard no word which preceded them; he had seen nothing till that instant; but he did see the tears in Patricia's eyes, and hear the pathos in her voice when she spoke those last words to the man who was supposed to have offended her past forgiveness: and he saw Morton leap into the roadway and start toward the garage to meet his machine.

Duncan waited a moment before he advanced farther, watching Patricia from his sheltered place near the door. Then, he stepped forward to meet the young woman to whom he was betrothed — stepped

THE LAST WOMAN

forward to plead with her once more, and to be rebuffed in the manner we have seen.

When she had left him, he dropped upon one of the veranda chairs, and with his head upon his hand gave himself up to bitter thought — bitter, because of his utter inadequacy to cope with the conditions by which he was surrounded.

Duncan was aroused, presently, by the approach of Beatrice and Sally. They came through the door with their arms encircling each other's waist, and walked forward together until they stood at the edge of the top step, under the *porte cochère*.

"It's a shame," Beatrice was saying, impulsively. "I feel that the whole thing is more or less my fault, Sally, and —" a warning cough from Duncan told them that they were not alone; and also, at that moment, the other guests trooped out upon the broad veranda; all save Patricia, who did not appear.

The two gentlemen who had brought Morton to the house after he was deserted by Patricia on the road, declined to remain, pleading other engagements, and soon their car whirled itself away down the road, and was gone. Nesbit Farnham contrived to secure a *solitude-à-deux* with Beatrice, who, however, turned an indifferent shoulder to his eager words; Agnes and Frances Houston strolled into ob-

CROSS-PURPOSES AT CEDARCREST

curity with the two "extras" who had been asked there to fill out Sally's original plan; Sally disappeared into the house, evidently in search of Patricia; Jack Gardner and the lawyer lighted cigars and betook themselves to an "S" chair at a far corner of the veranda. Duncan remained where he was, alone, screened from view by overhanging vines, as desolate in spirit as any man can be, who is suddenly brought face to face with an unpleasant truth.

Nothing had mattered much, in a comparative sense, until this last scene with Patricia. He had been convinced all along, until now, that Patricia loved him and that her strange conduct during the last upheaval in their relations had been the result of wounded pride, only; it had not even remotely occurred to him that she did not love him. They had been together all their lives; he had never known a time when he did not love her; he believed that there had never been a time, since their childhood, when she did not expect some day to become his wife.

But that short scene he had witnessed on the veranda, when Patricia bade Morton good-bye, had changed all this. He doubted the correctness of his previous convictions. He saw another and an entirely different explanation for Patricia's conduct toward him, for her attitude in the matter of the en-

THE LAST WOMAN

gagement contract which Melvin had been compelled to draw, and which he, himself, had likewise been compelled to sign. He read in that last scene between the ranchman and Patricia a fondness on her part for the young cattle-king which had been forced into the "open" of her own convictions, by the principal episode of the evening. He saw the utter wreck of his own hopes, of his entire scheme of life.

While he sat there in the shadow of the vine, unseen and unseeing, he made still another discovery, a grim one, which brought with it a better realization of Morton's incentives, than anything else could have done. He realized that he hated Morton; hated him wholly and absolutely — hated him suddenly and vehemently. He knew, then, why Morton had attempted to kill him, for, if Morton had made a reappearance at that moment, Roderick Duncan would have taken the initiative, and would have been the one to do the killing.

Yet, he made no move. If you had been watching him from beyond the screen of vines, no indication of what was passing in his thoughts would have been noticeable. The fierce hatred he so suddenly experienced was not made manifest by any act or expression, although it was none the less pronounced, for all that. And, strangely enough, it did not

CROSS-PURPOSES AT CEDARCREST

lead him to any greater consideration of Morton, or of his acts; rather the contrary.

Once, while he was preoccupied in this manner, he was again conscious of the distant whirr of an automobile engine, but he gave it no thought, till afterward. He did notice that Jack Gardner also heard it, and took his cigar from his mouth while he listened to it; but at once resumed his conversation with the lawyer. Soon afterward, Roderick left his chair under the vine, and passed inside the house.

"Hello, Rod," Jack called after him. "I didn't know you were there. Won't you join Melvin and me, in our cozy corner?" to which Duncan called back some casual reply, and passed on.

He had made up his mind that he would seek out Patricia, at once, and tell her of the discovery he had just made; that he had been a fool not to realize before, that Morton was the man of her choice, and that she could have the fellow if she wanted him; that he would not only release her from the tentative engagement, but that he would repudiate the contract entirely, and that, as soon as he could secure his own copy of it from the strong-box where he had put it, he would tear it into ten thousand pieces; that he would have no more of her, on any conditions, and that — oh, well, he thought of many

THE LAST WOMAN

bitter and biting things that he would say to her the moment he should find her — possibly in tears because of Morton's enforced departure from Cedar-crest, or in the act of weeping out the truth on Sally Gardner's shoulder. He thought he understood the situation now, as he had not seen it before.

Duncan searched in the drawing-room, the music-room, the dining-room; he explored the snugery, the library, and even Jack's own particular den; he sought the side piazzas; he went outside among the trees to certain hidden nooks he knew. But Patricia was nowhere to be discovered. Neither had he been able to see Sally anywhere about, and the conviction became stronger upon him that the two were somewhere together, and that Patricia, her pride forgotten, was keeping the young hostess with her while she told of the terrible predicament in which she now found herself to be enmeshed; for it would be a most stupendous predicament for Patricia to face — the realization that she was in love with Morton, in spite of the contract in writing she had forced Roderick Duncan to sign with her.

Returning to the house, he found the butler, and was about to send him in search of his mistress, when he discovered Sally, descending the stairway.

"Where is Patricia?" Each asked the question

CROSS-PURPOSES AT CEDARCREST

simultaneously, so that the words were pronounced exactly together; and yet neither one smiled. Each question was a reply to its mate.

"I have been searching everywhere for her," said Duncan.

"So have I," replied Sally. "Where can she be?"

"I haven't an idea. Isn't she up-stairs?"

"No. Couldn't you find her, outside?"

"No."

"I haven't seen her since — since that dreadful scene on the veranda," said Sally. "Have you seen her, Roderick?"

"Yes."

"When? Where?"

"I saw her taking leave of Morton, when he went away," he replied, with such bitterness that Sally stared at him; but, wisely, she made no comment; nor did she attempt to stay him when he turned abruptly away from her, and walked rapidly toward one of the side entrances. But he stopped and turned, before he left the room.

"Sally," he said, "I am going to ask you to excuse me. I want to get away. I would rather not explain to the others — I would rather not attempt to explain to you. But I want to go. You will

THE LAST WOMAN

excuse me? and if those who remain should happen to miss me, will you make whatever excuse seems necessary?"

"None will be necessary, Roderick. Oh, you men! You make me tired! You do, really! It is inconceivable why you should all fall hopelessly in love with one woman, and utterly ignore the others who are —" She stopped suddenly. She had been on the point of saying too much, and she did not wish to utter words she would be sorry for, afterward. Duncan did not attempt any reply, and was turning away a second time, when she called after him: "If you would only be really sensible, and —"

"And what, Sally?" he asked her, when she again hesitated.

"Nothing."

"But you were about to make a suggestion. What was it?"

"If it was anything at all, it was that you chase yourself out there among the trees, find Beatrice and Nesbit Farnum, and take her away from him," exclaimed this impetuous young woman, who found delight in expressing herself in the slang of the day. Duncan shrugged his shoulders, and uttered the one word:

"Why?"

CROSS-PURPOSES AT CEDARCREST

But Sally did not vouchsafe any reply at all, to the question. She tossed her head, and darted along the wide hall toward a rear door.

Duncan gazed after her for a moment, and then, with another shrug of his shoulders, he passed on out of the house, and made his way swiftly toward the stables and the garage, for he was determined to get out his car and to return to the city, forthwith.

His surprise was great, when, on arriving at the door of the garage, he found that Sally had preceded him, and, as he drew near, she turned a white, scared face toward him, exclaiming:

"Oh, Roderick! What do you think? Patricia has gone."

"Gone!" he echoed. "Gone where? Gone, when? What do you mean, Sally?"

"She has gone. She has taken one of Jack's cars, and gone home."

"Alone?"

"No. She took Patrick with her, to drive the car. They left here half an hour ago, I am told. Why do you suppose she did such a thing, without consulting me, Roderick? Why? Why?"

"Why?" he echoed her question a second time. Then, he laughed, and it was not a pleasant laugh to

THE LAST WOMAN

hear. All the bitterness of those moments under the vine on the veranda was voiced in that laugh. "It isn't a difficult question to answer, Sally. She has followed Morton — that is why;" and, while Mrs. Gardner stared at him, uncomprehendingly, he turned to one of the stablemen who was near, and who had been Sally's informant about the movements of Patricia, and called out:

"Tell my man to fetch my car to me, here. I shall go, at once, Sally." His car was already moving toward him, and, as it stopped and he put one foot upon the step, Sally replied:

"I'll say that you and Patricia went away together. It will sound better."

"Pardon me, Sally, but you will say no such thing — with my permission. Go ahead, Thompson." He sprang into the car, and it sped away with him, leaving Sally staring after him, wide-eyed with the amazement she felt. Already, she realized that her house-party, from which she had expected such wholesome results, had proven disastrous all around. Her husband's prophecy concerning it had been correct. But she did not know, and could not know as yet, just how disastrous it had been, for there had been no prophet to foretell the catastrophe at the stone quarry, toward which Patricia Langdon had

CROSS-PURPOSES AT CEDARCREST

started, half an hour earlier, in one of Jack Gardner's cars, guided by one of Jack's most trusted servants; and, oddly enough, by one who had formerly been in the employ of Stephen Langdon, and who, as a servant, had fallen under the spell of the daughter of the house to such an extent that he had never ceased to quote her as the criterion of all things in the way of excellence to be attained by an employer. And toward this quarry Duncan was now hastening at the full speed of his big Packard-sixty, with the trusted Thompson at the wheel; and toward it, as the chief actor, Richard Morton had started away from Cedarcrest with a broken heart, and with a brain crazed by the calamities that had rushed so swiftly upon him.

CHAPTER XVIII

MYSTERIES BORN IN THE NIGHT

WHEN the car, driven by Thompson, drew near to the derrick which had been to Morton the suggestion of an unholy impulse, he slowed the big Packard and leaned ahead, far over the wheel, for his keen eyes had already discerned something beside the road which had not been there when he had passed earlier in the evening. He stopped the car, and that fact awoke Duncan to a recollection of his surroundings.

"What is it, Thompson?" he asked. "Why have you stopped?"

Thompson was peering anxiously toward the jumbled mass of broken stone ahead of him, and there was an instant of silence before he replied. Then —

"There has been a wreck here, sir," he told his employer.

Instantly, Duncan thought of Patricia. He forgot Morton. He was out of the car even before Thompson could slide from under the steering-wheel,

MYSTERIES BORN IN THE NIGHT

and started ahead at a run, toward the remnants of the wreck which he could now see quite plainly.

The roadster, in making its last leap, had literally climbed the rocky place, and then, turning end for end twice, had finally alighted upon a heap of stone, from which it could be seen from the roadway. It was now a mass of iron, a twisted chaos of castings and machinery, recognizable only as something that had once been an automobile; but the experienced eyes of Thompson, trained to the quick and perfect recognition of all cars that he had ever seen, identified the mass of wreckage as soon as he got near enough to see it clearly. One comprehensive glance sufficed for him. He straightened up after that quick search for identification marks, which was his first instinct, and said, quietly:

"It is Mr. Morton's roadster, sir."

"My God!" cried Duncan, with a catch in his breath. The truth of the matter seemed to rush upon him on the instant, although he afterward refused to recognize it as truth. But, as Thompson made the statement, Duncan saw again the despairing face of Richard Morton which had still had in it a hidden determination to do something that Duncan had not even tried to guess at the time.

THE LAST WOMAN

"Was this what he intended to do?" Duncan asked himself, silently.

"Yes, sir; it is Mr. Morton's roadster," Thompson repeated, with entire conviction. "He must have been hitting up a great gait, when he struck, too. I never saw such a wreck; never, sir. He must be somewhere about, sir."

"True. Look for him, Thompson; look everywhere."

He started forward himself, leaping over the stones, and plunging into every place where the body of a man might have fallen, after being hurled from the wrecked car. They searched distances beyond where it was possible that the body of a man might have been thrown, but they did not find Morton.

"It is possible that he escaped," said Duncan, at last, pausing and wiping perspiration from his brow. He might have alighted on his feet, and —"

"No, sir. Pardon me. It is not possible. No man could go through such a wreck as that one, and in such a place, and escape alive. Besides, sir — look here."

The man struck a match, and held the blaze of it toward a pile of sharp stones. Duncan bent forward, peered at the spot indicated by Thompson, and drew back again with a sharp exclamation of horror.

MYSTERIES BORN IN THE NIGHT

There was blood on the stones; quite a lot of it, partly dried. And near it, half-hidden among the jagged stones, were Morton's watch and fob. The fob was instantly recognizable for it was totally unlike any other that Duncan had ever seen, formed of nuggets in the rough, linked together with steel rings, instead of with gold, or silver. The watch was smashed almost as badly as the automobile. Duncan took it in his hand, held it so for a moment, and at last, with a shudder, dropped it into one of his pockets.

"What does it mean, Thompson? Where is he?" he asked.

"I think it is likely, sir, that someone passed the spot, either at the time of the accident or directly after it happened. Of course, sir, the body would not have been left here under any circumstances."

"The body? You think he must be dead?"

"There can be no doubt of it, sir," said Thompson, with conviction. "Shall we go on, sir? Nothing more can be done here."

They returned to their own car, and the journey toward the city was resumed. Not another word was spoken until they were in the city streets, and then the only direction that Duncan gave his chauffeur was that he be taken directly to his rooms,

THE LAST WOMAN

where, as soon as he entered, he seized upon the telephone. One after another, he called up every hospital in the city, and it was not until he found his search to be entirely unavailing that it occurred to him Morton would have been taken to some place nearer the scene of the accident. Then, he be-thought himself to communicate with police headquarters.

"I will give," he said, "a thousand dollars for positive information about the fate of Richard Morton, provided the same is brought to me before daylight, and that my request be kept a secret. This is not a bribe, but a spur to great effort. You have facilities for making such inquiries. Find Morton for me, before morning, if you can, no matter where he is. Keep it from the newspapers, too. Then, come to me for the check." He explained fully the locality of the accident — and then he waited.

He did not occupy his bed that night, and he could not have explained why he did not do so. He kept telling himself that Richard Morton was nothing whatever to him; that it did not matter what had happened to the fellow; that Morton deserved death for what he had done — and a lot of other things of the same character. But all the while he paced the floor, and waited for information; or, he

MYSTERIES BORN IN THE NIGHT

seated himself in a corner of the room and smoked like a furnace chimney. Just as daylight was breaking, while gazing through his window toward the eastward, he started, and asked himself, guiltily:

"Am I hoping all the time that he is dead? Have I offered that thousand dollars only for assurance of his death?"

Fortunately, he was not compelled to reply to the self-accusing question, for there came a summons at his door, and an officer from headquarters entered to announce that, although diligent search and inquiry had been made in every conceivable quarter, not a word of information regarding Richard Morton could be obtained. Duncan listened in silence to the report, and, when it was finished, said:

"Very well; continue the search. Find the man, or find out what became of him. I will defray all the expenses, and will pay the reward I offered, too. But I must have the information at once, and everything relative to this affair must be kept from the newspapers."

The officer had just gone when a ring at Duncan's telephone took him quickly to it — and the voice of Jack Gardner at the other end of the wire alarmed him unduly, considering that there was no known reason to feel alarm. Gardner, upon being assured

THE LAST WOMAN

that he was talking directly with his friend, said:

"You'll have to pardon me, old chap, for calling you out of bed at this ungodly hour, but I just had to do it."

"You needn't worry, Jack. I haven't been in bed. What's up?" Duncan replied.

"Why; you see there is a mystery developed, just now. If you haven't been in bed, I have. I was called out of it by this confounded telephone — twice. The first call was to tell me that some sort of an accident had happened to Dick Morton. I couldn't gather what it was, and didn't really take much stock in it, so far as that goes. Then, the second call came. I was mad by that time, and didn't have very much to say to the chap at the other end of the wire — til Sally put me up to calling you."

"What was the second call about?" asked Duncan, gritting his teeth and almost fearing to hear what it might have been.

"Why, my Thomas car — the one that took Patricia away, you know — has been found somewhere in the streets of New York, deserted, apparently. I can't understand it. They identified the car by the number, you know. When I told Sally what had been said to me, she immediately had a spasm of

MYSTERIES BORN IN THE NIGHT

fear lest the accident reported to have happened to Morton might have been Patricia, instead. I thought I'd ask you about it; that's all."

"Wait a minute, Jack. Just let me think, a minute; then I'll answer you."

Duncan put the receiver down on the table, and crossed the room. He found it difficult to grasp the situation. Until that moment, it had not occurred to him that Patricia might have been the one to find Morton, or Morton's body, at the scene of the wreck. He had forgotten that she must have passed that way within half an hour from the time of the piling of the steamer upon the mass of sharp stones. Presently, he returned to the telephone, and told his friend all that he knew about the circumstances, and all that he had done since Thompson and he came away from the scene of the wreck.

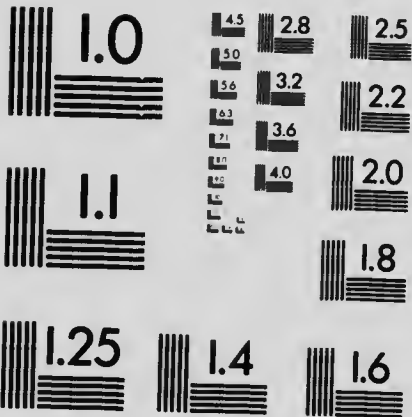
"But I don't see what your Thomas car has got to do with it," he concluded. "Your man Patrick was driving it, wasn't he? I know he was. He used to be with Langdon, you know. He isn't a chauffeur, but he's a lot more competent to be one than half the men who are. I say, Jack, have Sally call up Patricia, right away. You —"

He heard a click over the wire which told him



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

THE LAST WOMAN

that connection was cut off; and after that he paced the floor again, wishing and hoping for the ringing of his telephone-bell.

"We are coming to the city at once," Gardner told him, when at last it did ring, and Duncan had taken down the receiver. "What the devil is the matter with everything, anyhow? You had better hump yourself, Duncan, and get busy. I don't believe that Morton was hurt half so badly as you and Thompson seemed to think. Anyhow, the only way I can see through it all is that Patricia was the one who found him. But, even so —"

"Hold on a minute, Jack. You are getting too swift for me. What did Sally find out when she telephoned to Patricia?"

"Oh! Didn't I tell you that? Patricia hasn't been home, at all. They thought, at Langdon's, that she was here. She certainly hasn't shown up there. And you say that Dick has disappeared, after leaving his gore spread all over the place where his car was smashed. And, then, my car is found somewhere down there, abandoned. I can't make it out, at all. Sally is sure that something dreadful has happened. We're starting now. Sally won't wait another minute. I'll see you as soon as I get into town."

MYSTERIES BORN IN THE NIGHT

He did not delay to say good-bye, but hung up the receiver at his end.

Duncan did not await the arrival of Gardner. He summoned his valet, and gave him strict directions about the reception of any news concerning the mysteries of the night. Then, he hurried to Stephen Langdon's home where he was admitted at once to the old banker's sleeping apartment.

"What in heaven's name is the matter now, Rod?" the financier demanded, testily. "It is bad enough to have you and Patricia at sword's points, but to rout out an old fellow like me from his bed at this hour, is rubbing it in."

"I suppose you haven't heard that Patricia did not come home last night, have you?" Duncan said, by way of reply.

"No, I haven't. I should have been surprised, if I had heard it. She wasn't expected to come home. She went to the Gardners."

"Well, sir, there is a lot that you ought to know, before you step out of this room, to face all sorts of statements and inquiries. That is why I am here. I thought I was the best one to tell you."

"To tell me what?"

"It will be something of a shock, sir. Brace

THE LAST WOMAN

yourself for it. I don't think that a soul in the world except me, guesses at the truth."

"Guesses at what truth? What the devil is the matter with you? What are you trying to tell me? Out with it, whatever it is!"

"Patricia has run away with Richard Morton. He was hurt last night. She was in love with him, and —"

"Stop! Stop where you are, Rod. You're crazy. You're stark, staring, raving crazy! Why, in heaven's name should Patricia want to run away with Morton? It is true that I have always wanted her to marry you, but, if she wanted *him*, she knows mighty well she could have him. I wouldn't put out a finger to stop her from marrying anybody of her choice, so long as the man was morally and mentally fit. Sit down over there; take a drink. You look as if you needed one. Don't utter a word for five minutes, and then begin at the beginning and tell me all about it.

But Duncan would listen to neither request. He began at once and told of the occurrences of the night, from the moment when Patricia had arrived at Cedarcrest alone, till the receipt of the telephonic messages from Gardner; and he concluded by saying:

MYSTERIES BORN IN THE NIGHT

"There is no mystery in the affair, at all, as I regard it. Patricia left the house, at Cedarcrest, half an hour after Morton left it. She found the wrecked car, near the derrick, as Thompson and I found it, later on. But she found Morton, too. Patrick was with her, and Patrick is devoted to Patricia. He wouldn't consider the fact that he is, or was, in Jack's employ, if it came to a question of obedience to her wishes; he would serve her. You see, Patricia found out that she loved Morton, when he got his calling-down; only, I suppose, even then, she wasn't quite sure. But, when the time came for him to go away entirely, she had no more doubts about it! She didn't remain long at Cedarcrest, after that; she followed him. She knew that Patrick was there, and that he would go with her. Well, they found the wreck of Morton's car, along the road; then, they found Morton. Probably, he wasn't much hurt; chaps like him don't mind the loss of a little blood. Patricia and the man helped him into the car. It was just the proper scene, with all the best kind of setting for a mutual confession of their love, and — there you are."

"Go on, Roderick. Finish all you have to say, before I begin. What next?"

"Why — oh, what's the use? There isn't any

THE LAST WOMAN

more to say. Morton probably asked her to go away with him, and she went. That's all. I thought you ought to know it."

"You don't know it yourself, do you?"

"No — not positively, of course."

"You have just guessed it."

"I suppose that's true, too."

"I wonder if your guessing has gone far enough to enlighten me on two important points."

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to know why Morton would want her to run away with him at all, and why she should think of consenting to such a thing, if he did. Patricia isn't one of the run-away kind. I should think you would know that. And they didn't have to run."

"Why, Morton had just been virtually kicked out of Jack Gardner's house. He was —"

"Well? Well? Couldn't Stephen Langdon's daughter kick him into it again? Or into any other house on God's green earth, for that matter, if she tried to do so? Do you suppose he'd have to pay any attention to a little, petty ostracism, on the part of such puppets of society as gathered on it there, if he became the husband of Patricia Langdon? Don't be an ass, Roderick! You are just plain

MYSTERIES BORN IN THE NIGHT

jealous, and I don't know that I blame you — for that."

"I'm not jealous."

"Then, you're a fool, and that's a heap worse."

CHAPTER XIX

RODERICK DUNCAN SEES LIGHT

THE police department of the city of New York did not earn the thousand dollars reward offered by Roderick Duncan. The mystery of the abandoned car, owned by Jack Gardner, was not explained. Patrick O'Toole did not return to his duties at Cedarcrest. The story of the wreck of the White Steamer on the rocks under the derrick remained untold. Patricia Langdon did not reappear among her friends and acquaintances in the city. The mysteries born of that party at Cedarcrest continued unsolved.

Roderick Duncan, having arrived at a conclusion about all those matters which was quite satisfactory to himself, declined to concern himself farther about them; he believed that he perfectly understood the situation, and he let it go at that — although he engaged the services of every clipping-bureau in the city, in an effort to find announcement somewhere of the marriage of Patricia Langdon to Richard Morton. But no such record was discovered, nor

RODERICK DUNCAN SEES LIGHT

was any evidence found that suggested such a possibility. He withdrew very much into himself, shunned his clubs, avoided his friends, and could not himself tell why he did not go away somewhere, to the other side of the world, seeking to forget what he had lost. He went so far in his studied aloofness as to keep entirely away from Stephen Langdon, and was perhaps all the more surprised when, as time elapsed, Patricia's father did not send for him. The utter silence of Stephen Langdon, and his entire inactivity concerning the absence of his daughter convinced Duncan, as it did also Patricia's friends, generally, that he knew perfectly well where she was. It was a logical conclusion, too, for, if Stephen Langdon had not known, it is safe to say that he would have moved heaven and earth to find his daughter.

Jack and Sally Gardner went to Europe and took Beatrice with them. Nesbit Farnham followed them, on the next steamer. The Misses Houston, also, disappeared. The newspapers had contained merely a mention of the wreck, nothing more of consequence. The destruction of the machine was told, and it was hinted that the chauffeur was slightly injured; nothing was said to suggest that Richard Morton had been hurt at all. The police, to whom

THE LAST WOMAN

Duncan had telephoned, made no bones of pooh-poohing the entire matter, and laughing in their sleeves about it. The police had their own ideas about the whole thing — and speedily forgot them all.

Stephen Langdon was strangely grim and silent, those days; he was also unusually dangerous to his rivals in "the street." Every energy that he possessed seemed bent upon ruining somebody, anybody. It did not occur to Duncan that the old man avoided him, because he was guilty of the like avoidance himself; but, had he been less concerned with his own sorrows, and given some thought to Stephen Langdon's, he would have been quick enough to discover that the old financier dodged him, studiously.

There was no gossip about the disappearance of Patricia, because nothing was known about it. She was out of town, as were most of her associates; traveling somewhere, doubtless, or was passing the time among her numerous friends.

The first week after the beginning of the mystery was lived through in a state of unrest by Duncan, and the second and third weeks brought no change to him. With the beginning of the fourth week, he encountered Burke Radnor, and the mere sight of the newspaper man recalled to the young

RODERICK DUNCAN SEES LIGHT

millionaire that bitterly unpleasant episode in which his name and that of Beatrice Brunswick were coupled. Radnor was seated in the lobby of the Hotel Astor, when Duncan entered the place. The man had been drinking just enough to render him a bit boisterous and a trifle loud in his talk and demeanor, when Duncan saw him. He was seated with several other men, and all of them were talking and laughing together at the moment when Duncan passed them on his way to the desk to inquire for a guest whom he desired to see. He took no notice whatever of Radnor, and was passing on, when a remark dropped noisily by the newspaper writer arrested him. It brought him to a halt so suddenly, that he sank at once upon a chair near at hand, and remained there without realizing that he did so, for the sole purpose of hearing what else Radnor might have to say upon this particular subject. He would have passed on, even then, had he not been convinced that Radnor had not seen him, and did not suspect his nearness. As he listened, he gathered that Radnor was boasting of a prospective news story which he had in prospect, and for the publication of which he needed only a few additional facts.

"—elopement in high life, with an automobile wreck, a broken head—a broken heart also, only

THE LAST WOMAN

that was quickly mended — and a bunch of other little details thrown in, you know," was the remark that was overheard by Duncan, as he strolled past the group; was his reason for dropping down upon a convenient chair and remaining there, to listen. "The lady in the case is a swell who is away up in the top rank of the 'two-hundred-and-fifty;' and the man — well, he is up in high C, too, for that matter. One of the newly-rich, you know, lately materialized out of the wild and woolly. Fine stunt, that story; only, I can't seem to nail the few additional facts I need," Radnor continued, while Duncan listened with all his ears. "There are certain elements connected with the story that make it especially attractive to me, for, in addition to getting a clear scoop in the biggest sensation of the year, I can clean up an old grudge of mine, bee-eautiffully. And won't I clean it up, when I get my hooks fairly into it! Well! You can take it from me."

"Oh, go on, Radnor, and tell us about it!" urged one of his companions — another newspaper writer, evidently. "How'd you get next to it in the first place?"

"Oh, that was an accident — a series of accidents, it might be called. I don't mind telling you that part of it, without names. I mentioned a

RODERICK DUNCAN SEES LIGHT

broken head, just now. Well, I had a line on a dandy story that was located out of town, and so I borrowed Tony Brokaw's automobile to go after it, because the story was located some distance off of the main line of travel. I was bowling along quite merrily, all alone in a car that is made to carry seven. It was just in the shank of the evening, and —"

"All this happened out of town, didn't it, Radnor?"

"Yes — a little way out. I came to a place where there had been a wreck, and — well — seated on the ground at the scene of the disaster, was the lady in the case, holding the head of the man in the case, in her lap, and moaning over it to beat the band. Standing beside them, like a big dog on guard, was a 'faithful servant.' It made a picture that couldn't be beaten, for suggestive points, provided the likenesses were made good enough. I took the whole thing in, at a glance, and sized the situation up rather correctly, too. The young woman was rattled clean out of her senses, and kept moaning something about it's being all her fault — I wasn't able to get just the gist of that part of it. She knew me by sight, and remembered my name. I offered my assistance, and then fell to examining

THE LAST WOMAN

the injured man. I discovered that he wasn't dead by a long shot, although he had been hurt quite badly, and he'd bled a lot. But I've been a war correspondent; I know all about first aid to the injured; I have seen wounds of all kinds, and it didn't take me long to estimate 'mister magusalem's' chances at about a thousand to one, for recovery. I made the chauffeur help me, and together we toted the wounded man to my car, and put him in the tonneau. The lady climbed in beside him — and ordered her chauffeur to follow her, and help her with the injured man. All the time, I was keeping up a devil of a thinking, wondering what it was all about. You see, I knew who the man and the woman were, but I couldn't fix the facts of the case sufficiently clear to satisfy me. I knew it would be a dandy sensation for the morning papers, but there was yet plenty of time to get it in, over a wire — besides, I wanted it to go in late, so that other papers than the one I gave it to, couldn't get a line on it. I got into my car — that is, the one I had borrowed, you understand — wondering where I would take the bunch, when another car stopped alongside of us, and a man, also alone, asked what was the matter. I found out that he was a doctor, and got him to take a look at the wounded man. To make

RODERICK DUNCAN SEES LIGHT

a long story short, he dressed the wound then and there, said there wasn't any immediate danger — and a lot more — and went on his way. That decided me. I knew of a place about twenty miles away where I could take them, where the man would have the best of care, and — best of all — where I could fix things up to keep everything quiet till I found out all the facts. You see, I scented the greatest sensational story of my career — and I wasn't far out, either, if ever I get all of it."

"But, great Scott, man, didn't you have it then?"

"You'd have had it, Sommers; but not I. I knew there was more to it. When the doctor pulled his freight out of there, I didn't lose any time in getting a move on me, too. And the girl never asked a question; not one; I had told her that I would take them to a place where the man could get well, and she seemed satisfied. The chauffeur never peeped a word. I let the motor skim along at a good rate, and wasn't long in bringing the bunch to the place I had thought of, which happens to be a small, private sanatorium, which isn't known to be one at all, save by those who patronize it and who want to put their loved ones away for a time, secretly. But the doc who runs it, is a good fellow, a good friend of mine, and when I told him that we

THE LAST WOMAN

didn't want a word said about the affair — and particularly when he discovered who the parties were and that there was a heap of dough in it for him — he fell into my plans without a dissenting vote."

"Say, Radnor, that's a long winded yarn, all right, but it's interesting. I wish, though, that you'd open up with the names."

"Not I, Sommers. I haven't got to the real mystery of the affair — yet."

"You don't say! What is it?"

"Well, when I had fixed things to suit me, and had received the thanks of the lady, when I had also satisfied myself that she was just as anxious for secrecy about the thing as I was, although I couldn't tell exactly why she was so, I hiked it back for town. It was too late, then, to get the other story I had been after, and I had ceased to care much about it, anyhow; and then, when I was ready to leave, out came the chauffeur, and he said, if I didn't mind, he'd ride part of the way back with me. He and the woman had been whispering together, just before that, and I sized it up that she had given him certain instructions to carry out. Anyhow, when we arrived at the scene of the accident, the chauffeur got down, and I came on, to the city, alone. I'm not going to tell you why the chauffeur left me, at

RODERICK DUNCAN SEES LIGHT

the scene of the accident, because that would give you a pointer which I don't wish you to have. He had a certain duty to perform which I did not guess at, just then, but which was all plain to me the next A. M., if anybody should ask you. It amazed me, and it added immensely to the mystery. And now, brace yourself, fellows, for the real mystery — the one I am chasing at the present time."

"We're all ears, Radnor."

"I telephoned to my friend the doc, the next morning. He reported that the man was doing well, and that the lady was hanging over him like a possum over a ripe persimmon. I telephoned again that afternoon, again the next morning, and every day after that, but the doc kept telling me that, although the man was doing well, and the lady was still there with him, I had better not butt in until he tipped me the wink — and I'll give you my word that he managed to keep me on the hooks for ten days before I tumbled."

"Tumbled to what?"

"You shall hear. I got leary about things on the tenth day, for this telephoning was getting monotonous, and borrowed Brokaw's car again, but when I got to the little hidden sanatorium, my birds had flown, and —"

THE LAST WOMAN

"Your birds had flown! What do you mean, Radnor?"

"Just what I say. The man and the woman had gone, and the doc wouldn't tell me when they went away, or anything at all about them. He said he had been well paid for keeping quiet, and I couldn't get any more information out of him than you could dig out of a clam. What is more, that chauffeur hadn't been seen by anybody since I dropped him out of the machine, at the scene of the accident — and that is the story. I don't know whether the doc lied to me, or not. He wouldn't let me go through his place, and, for all I know, the man and the girl were both there when I went back. On the other hand, they might have been gone a week, already. I've been unearthing every clue I could think of, since then, to get trace of them, but you might as well look for saw dust in hades, as for clues about those two — or rather the three of them, for I am satisfied that the chauffeur returned to the sanatorium after he had performed the errand he was sent to do."

"What gets me," said Sommers, "is how people as prominent as you say they were could fade out of sight like that, and leave no trace behind them. I should have thought there would be a hu.

RODERICK DUNCAN SEES LIGHT

and cry after them that would have stirred every newspaper in town."

"Well — all that rather gets me, too. Of course, I could make a big story out of it, as it stands; but that isn't all of the story, and I want it all."

"There is a scandal in the thing, too, Radnor."

"Of course, man! The fellow wasn't so badly hurt but what he must have been around again, by the time I went back to the sanatorium. The girl was certainly in her right senses. She remained there with him, hanging over him and helping to take care of him — and there wasn't a thing said about any marriage ceremony. Oh, it's a big story all right, no matter how it turns out. You see, there are some remarkable circumstances associated with the case. For instance, there are two men in town now, both of whom should be very greatly concerned over the mystery. I have had them both watched, and, while both seem anxious about something, neither one seems to give a hang about affair which I know they would have broken their necks to have prevented. There's a nigger in the fence, somewhere; and those two men avoid each other as if one had the smallpox and the other was down with yellow fever. Whenever I have asked any of the intimate friends about the principals in

THE LAST WOMAN

the case, I have been told enough to inform me that the intimate friends know as little as I do, and don't guess anything about it, at all. Oh, it's a fine mix-up! But just where the trouble is located, I can't make out."

"Put me wise, Radnor, and let me help you. Then, we'll do the story together," said the man called Sommers.

"Not much. It's my story, and I'm going to hang to it. If you can make anything out of what I have told you, you're welcome. You can't! The young woman in the case has got more brains than half the business men, down-town. The man and the woman have both got millions to burn; and there you are. Come on; let's have something. I'm dry as a bone."

The members of Radnor's party marched past Roderick Duncan without seeing him; and he, totally forgetful of the errand that had taken him to the hotel, passed swiftly out of it, hailed a taxi, and gave the address of Malcolm Melvin, the lawyer; and then he was whirled away as swiftly as the driver of the cab dared to take him through the streets of the teeming city.

CHAPTER XX

THE LAST WOMAN

STEPHEN LANGDON was seated at one end of the table, Roderick Duncan was at the opposite one. Melvin, the lawyer, was behind it. Duncan had just related the story he had overheard told by Radnor, and he had brought his recital to a close by making a remarkable statement, which had brought at least one of his hearers to a mental stand-still.

"I am a party to an agreement which was signed, sealed and delivered, in this office, Mr. Langdon," he said. "You are also a party to that document. Your daughter also signed it. By the terms of that document, Patricia Langdon became my promised wife. Under the terms recited in that document, she named a day when we were to be married. That day has come and gone, and I have received no word of any kind from her. I am convinced that you, her father, know where she is, where she can be found, and now I demand of you that information, in order that I may seek her. It is my wish to know

THE LAST WOMAN

from her own lips if she repudiates that contract, or if it is still her intention to live up to it. I have asked you, in Mr. Melvin's presence, twice, to give me the information I wish for. I have asked you once on the ground of our mutual friendship: you declined to answer. I have asked you, the second time, on the ground of love and affection, for you and for your daughter: you have refused. I ask you now on the ground of a commercial transaction, just as Miss Langdon insisted upon viewing it, and with all personal considerations put aside. If you again decline my request, I give you warning that I shall make a call upon you within an hour, for the loan I have advanced. I have that right, under the terms of the agreement, and I shall take advantage of it. That is all I have to say. It is my last word."

Stephen Langdon left his chair. His face was cold, stern, expressionless. It wore the mask which long years in "the street," had given it. He did not look toward Duncan, but turned his face to the lawyer, and said, with cold preciseness:

"Mr. Melvin, you may say for me, to all who may be concerned, that I shall be prepared within an hour to meet all demands that may be made upon me."

THE LAST WOMAN

With a slight inclination of his head, he left the office of the lawyer. He walked as erect as ever; he carried himself no less proudly, although he knew that he was going to his financial ruin unless the unexpected should happen. Twenty millions is a large sum to pay at an hour's notice. It was not a tithe of the fortune which Stephen Langdon was supposed to possess; yet his circumstances at the moment were such that terrible disaster would immediately follow upon the demand for its payment. He knew it; Melvin knew it; Roderick Duncan knew it. But the fighting blood of Roderick Duncan's father was surging in his son's soul, just then; and, in his day, "Old Man Duncan" had been a harder and a more relentless financier than ever his partner, Stephen Langdon, had become.

"You will not insist, will you, Roderick?" the lawyer asked, as soon as they were alone.

"I shall insist," replied Duncan, with decision.

"Even in the event that I might give you the information you seek? Even in that case, will you insist upon forcing your father's lifelong friend to the wall? For that is what it will amount to."

"No. In that case I shall not insist upon calling in the loan. I seek only the information. It doesn't matter where I get it, so long as I do get it,

THE LAST WOMAN

and it proves to be correct. That is all I require."

The lawyer drew a pad of paper toward him and hastily wrote a few lines upon it. Then, tearing off the sheet, he rang a bell and gave the written message into the hand of a clerk.

"Mr. Langdon just left this office," he said. "Overtake him and give him this message. See to it that you do not fail to place it in his hands at once." He waited until the door had closed behind the retreating figure of the clerk; then he turned toward Duncan again.

"Mr. Langdon is only a very little wiser than yourself about what has happened to his daughter, during the last few weeks," he said, with a touch of coldness in his tones. "I am somewhat better informed than either of you, and in order to save my old friend from utter ruin—in order to save his life, for ruin would spell death to him—I shall tell you what you wish to know, even though I have been implored not to do so. Frankly, I believe it better that you should know the truth, only"—he hesitated a moment—"I shall ask you to remember who you are and what you are, and to govern yourself as your father's son should."

"Well, Mr. Melvin?"

THE LAST WOMAN

"Miss Langdon is at Three-Star ranch, in Montana. She has been there —"

"One moment, Melvin!"

"Well?"

"You said, *Miss Langdon*. Do you wish to correct that statement by any change of name? Was it a slip of the tongue, caused by momentary forgetfulness?"

"No."

"'Three-Star' is the name of a brand owned by Richard Morton, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Three-Star ranch is one of his many properties, I believe."

"It is."

"Go on, please."

"I repeat: Miss Langdon is at Three-Star ranch, in Montana. She has been there since a little more than a week after her disappearance. I was the first to be informed of the fact. The information came to me through a letter written by her to me. I have fulfilled the requests made to me in that letter — until now, when I am revealing truths which she wished untold. Through me, her father has settled one million dollars upon her. She now

THE LAST WOMAN

enjoys the income of that amount. That is all."

"The letter! May I see it?"

The lawyer methodically took a red-leather pocket-book from his coat, extracted an envelope therefrom, and passed it across the table to Duncan.

"Dear Mr. Melvin," the young man read, half-aloud, although to himself, "I am at Three-Star ranch, one of the properties of Mr. Richard Morton, in Montana. The full address is inclosed, written upon an additional slip of paper which I trust you will destroy at once; also this letter. I am with Mr. Morton; I am caring for him. More than that, you need not know. I desire you to tell my father that it is my wish to forego any inheritance I might have received from him, but that if he is disposed to make any present settlement upon me, I shall cheerfully receive it. I shall not communicate with him; I do not wish him to communicate with me. I cannot command your silence, or his, concerning me; but I expect it. Unless he should demand of you knowledge of my place of abode, I prefer that you withhold it from him. Concerning others, I implore your entire silence and discretion. I shall communicate with you again only in the event that it should become necessary to do so.
— Patricia Langdon."

THE LAST WOMAN

The letter fluttered from Duncan's hands to the floor. He bent forward and picked it up, his face white and drawn and set and suddenly haggard. He folded the letter carefully, returned it to the envelope, and then, with slow precision, tore it into bits, carried the mass of fragments to the hearth, piled them into a heap and touched a lighted match to it. The lawyer watched the proceeding without emotion, without a change of expression. But he gave a slight nod of satisfaction when it was done.

Duncan did not return to his chair. He stood for a moment before the hearth, with his back turned toward the lawyer; then he wheeled about and came forward three steps, until he could reach his hat which was on the table.

"Thank you, Melvin," he said. "I shall entirely respect your confidence. Good-day."

"Where are you going, Duncan?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought of that — yet."

The lawyer rose from his chair, and rested the tips of his fingers on the table in front of him, bending slightly forward.

"She was a good girl; and you loved her. Don't forget that," he said.

"No; I won't forget it, Melvin."

THE LAST WOMAN

"And — there are others, just as good; don't forget that, either."

"No. There are no others like her. She was the last woman — for me; the last woman; and she is dead."

"The last woman? Nonsense!"

"The last woman, Melvin. You don't understand me."

"No, I do not understand you."

"Good God! Don't you see how it all came about? Don't you know Patricia Langdon?"

"I know that I won't hear a word against her, even now — even from you, Duncan," said the lawyer, with a touch of savagery.

"Don't you understand that, having put her name to a written contract with me, she would not break that contract, or repudiate it? And don't you see that she has intended, all along, to force me into a position where I would be the one to repudiate the terms? You're a poor judge of character, Melvin, if you don't see that. You have never known Patricia Langdon, if you don't understand her, now. And" — he hesitated an instant — "your association with me has taught you mighty little about my character, if you haven't guessed what I will do — now!"

THE LAST WOMAN

"What will you do, Roderick? What do you mean?" asked the lawyer, alarmed by the deep intensity with which Duncan spoke those last words.

"I shall go to Montana. I shall start to-night. I shall find Patricia Langdon. I shall live up to the terms of the contract I made with her, and I shall compel her to do the same. I shall make her my wife. I shall bring her back to New York, to her father, to her home, as Mrs. Roderick Duncan. That is what I shall do. That is what I mean."

"God bless you, boy! But — it can't be done."

"It shall be done."

"But, she will never consent to such an arrangement. She is the last woman in the world to drag your name —"

"The last woman; that is it. She is the last of the Langdon's; she shall be the last of the Duncan's, too. She will keep to the letter of her contract, if I force her to it. I know that. And I will force her to it."

"But the man! What will you do with him?"

Duncan stared a moment. Then, he smiled, as he replied:

"After Patricia Langdon has become Patricia Duncan, I will kill him. Good-day, Melvin."

CHAPTER XXI

THE REASON WHY

RODERICK DUNCAN traveled westward in a special train made up of his own private car, a regular Pullman, and a diner. With his valet for company, Duncan constituted the personnel of the first of these; the second was occupied by the Reverend Doctor Moreley, his wife and two daughters. The reverend gentleman was aware of a part of the purpose of that trip; the members of his family were yet to be told of it. A lavish use of the magician, Money, had prepared everything in advance for Duncan, and he had now only to carry out the arrangements he had made. There was a slight delay in making the start, but after that all things moved as smoothly as possible. Ultimately, the special train was side-tracked at a point that was within a few miles of the house and outbuildings of Three-Star ranch.

The state of Montana held no finer ranch and range, no better or more up-to-date buildings, no better outfit in all respects, than Three-Star. The

THE REASON WHY

house, set well up along the side of a hill, faced toward the south, and commanded a view which had been the pride of its former owners, before Richard Morton bought up all the rangeland in that locality and converted it into one huge estate of his own. A broad veranda extended from end to end, at the front, and from that vantage point miles upon miles of rich pasture could be seen, dotted with grazing thousands of cattle. Trees, set out with a view to the future, by the creators of the ranch, imparted an aspect of homely comfort, of seclusion, peace and contentment to it all.

Just at sundown when Patricia Langdon came through the wide door and stepped out upon the veranda toward the broad flight of steps which led down to the flowered inclosure in front of the house, she stopped suddenly, her right hand flew toward her throat, and her face, flushed and angry until that instant, went as pale as death itself. She gasped and caught her breath, swayed a second where she stood, and then drew herself upright again; and she stood straight and tall and brave, face to face with Roderick Duncan who appeared at the top step at the instant when Patricia advanced toward it.

For a space, neither one uttered a word, or made

THE LAST WOMAN

another gesture, save that, in the first instant, Roderick raised his hat in silent salutation, and now stood with it held in his hand.

Patricia's first act was to cast a half-furtive and wholly apprehensive glance over her shoulder, toward the doorway through which she had just passed. Then, she sprang forward like a young fawn and darted down the steps toward the pathway.

"Come with me," she threw back at him. "There must be an interview, but it cannot be held here. Follow me."

Duncan obeyed her, but without haste; and she led him into a pathway among the trees, soon emerging upon an open space in the center of which a rustic pavilion had been erected. It was overgrown by a riot of climbing vines; an inclosure with windows at every side of it, occupied the center of the space beneath the roof, and inside the inclosure were all the evidences of feminine occupancy. Wicker chairs and chairs of willow, rugs, hassocks, cushions, pillows with embroidered covers, littered the place. One could discern at a glance that it was a place of retreat and rest for a woman of taste. In reality, it was Patricia Langdon's place of refuge — at least, she so regarded it.

THE REASON WHY

She did not speak again until she had mounted the steps which led up to it; nor did the man who followed her. But then, when they were beneath the roof of the pavilion, she turned about and faced him.

"Now," she said, "why are you here? Why have you dared to come to this place, in search of me?" She spoke without emphasis, but the very absence of all emotion gave her words the more weight and power.

Duncan stood tall and straight before her, calmly facing her. If her face showed no emotion, now that she had regained control over herself, neither did his. Before he replied to her question, he took a folded paper from the breast-pocket of his coat, and held it in his hand.

"I have a document here, which bears your signature, and mine," he said, then. "It recites the terms of a certain contract which you have agreed to fulfill. I am here to insist that you carry out the terms of this agreement. It is time now, for action on your part."

Patricia gasped. She took a single step backward, and rested one hand upon the top of a willow arm-chair. Her composure seemed about to forsake her utterly, but by a great effort she controlled her-

THE LAST WOMAN

self, lifting her free hand to her throat as if something were choking her.

"It — is — impossible — now," she muttered, at last; and she swayed where she stood, as if she might fall.

"Be seated, Patricia," he said, using her name for the first time; and, when she had complied, he passed around the chair until he stood behind her. It was a delicate act on his part — a consideration for her feelings which might not have been expected, under all the circumstances. He thought he understood how terrible this interview must be to her, and he did not wish to compel her to face him, while it endured. Patricia shivered when he passed her; otherwise she gave no sign. "It is not impossible," he went on, without perceptible pause. "It has never been impossible; it can never be so. On the contrary, it is imperative; more than ever imperative, now."

She shivered again, and did not reply when he paused. He continued:

"Patricia Langdon, you are not one to refuse the terms of a written contract which you have signed and sealed with a full knowledge of its meaning, particularly when the other party to it insists upon its fulfillment. I am the other party to this contract,

THE REASON WHY

and I do insist upon its complete fulfillment. You are the last woman in the world to —”

“I am the last woman in the world — the very last!” she interrupted him, vehemently, but she did not turn her head toward him. He continued as if he had not heard her:

“— to repudiate the distinct terms of an agreement you have knowingly made.”

“I have already repudiated them.”

“No, you have not. And you shall not.”

“Shall not?”

“No.”

“Do — do you mean that you would force me to a compliance with the conditions of that agreement you hold in your hand?”

“Yes — if such a course is necessary.”

“But you cannot! You cannot!”

“Yes, I can; and I will, Patricia.”

“Don’t speak my name!” she cried out, hotly.

“Don’t utter it again! Don’t you dare to do so! Don’t you dare!”

“Very well.”

“How will you force me? You cannot do it.”

“There is a penalty attached to all legally drawn contracts,” he lied, glibly enough; and, realizing that she was startled by what he had already said, he did

THE LAST WOMAN

not hesitate to add more to it. "I have come here prepared to insist that you fulfill your obligation. You know that I am not one to relent, once I have set my course. There are officers of the law in this county and state, as well as within the county and state where you made the contract." He stopped a moment when she shrank visibly in her chair, for he was about to say a really cruel thing. He would not have said it, had he not deemed it entirely necessary, in order to coerce her to his will; but he went on, relentlessly: "If you make it needful to do so, I shall not hesitate to send officers here, to take you before a court, there to relate why you will not carry out the conditions of your contract."

Duncan expected that Patricia would fly into a rage, at this; he thought she would leap to her feet, confront him, and defy him. He looked for a tirade of rage, of abuse, or of despair; or, failing these, for an outburst of pleading on her part that he would relent.

There was no evidence of any of these emotions. Indeed, for a moment it seemed as if she had not heard him, so still did she sit in her chair, so utterly unmoved did she appear to be by the statement he had made.

If, at that moment he had stepped around in front

THE REASON WHY

of her and looked into her face, he would have been amazed by what he saw. He would have seen great tears welling in her eyes, held in check by her long lashes; he would have seen a near approach to a smile behind those tears, although she was unconscious of that, herself; he would have noticed that she caught her breath again, but not in the same manner, nor from the same cause that had led to the like effort, earlier in their interview. When, at last, she did reply to him, it was in a far-away, uncertain voice, so soft, and so like the Patricia of quiet and sympathetic moods, that Roderick was startled, and he found himself compelled to hold his own spirit in check, lest he should forget the studied deportment he had determined upon for the occasion.

"Why do you insist upon it?" she asked him. He replied, without hesitation — and coldly:

"Because I love you."

"Because . . . you . . . love . . . me," she said, slowly, and so softly that he barely heard the words. They did not form a question; they comprised a statement, like his own.

"Yes," he said.

"But" — she hesitated — "there is another reason."

"Yes. We need not dwell upon that."

THE LAST WOMAN

"Nevertheless, I should like to hear it."

"No."

"You will not tell me what it is?"

"It is not necessary. It is begging the question."

"You wish to give me the protection of your name. I think I understand."

"Have it so, if you wish."

"You wish to make me your wife. I am beginning to comprehend you, Roderick." The name slipped out, unconsciously, on her part, although he was tragically aware of it. "Have you remembered — have you thought of — are you quite aware of what you are doing?"

"Quite. I have remembered everything, thought of all things."

"And your reason for all this is — what? Tell me again, please."

"You make my task harder," he said, coldly. "My reason is that I love you."

Again, Patricia was silent for a time. Then:

"How do you propose to carry out this chivalrous conduct? Who will marry us, if I agree to your absurd proposal?"

"It is not absurd. It is the only logical thing for you to do. Doctor Moreley will marry us. He came with me, in my special train." She caught at

THE REASON WHY

the arms of the chair, and clung to them. "Mrs. Moreley, with Evelyn and Kate, accompany him. It is a short ride to where the cars are sidetracked, waiting. You can ride there in the morning — or go there with me this evening, if you will."

"Do . . . they . . . know —?"

"They know nothing save the one fact that we are to be married, that Doctor Moreley is to perform the ceremony, and that the members of his family are to act as witnesses. Nobody knows anything at all, save that. Nobody ever shall know. Your absence from New York has occasioned no suspicion — save only in the mind of one man, Radnor. The fact of our marriage will be published broadcast at once, and even his suspicions will be stilled."

"And . . . afterward . . . after we are married — what?"

"We will discuss that question after the ceremony."

"No. We will discuss it now. Afterward — what?"

"You will be my wife, then. It is right and proper that you should return to New York, that you should live in my house. I shall take you there, and install you, properly. I shall insist upon that much."

THE LAST WOMAN

There is no way for you to escape the fulfillment of your contract. When you are my wife, you will have entered upon another contract which you will also keep. The contract to honor and obey."

"To love, honor, and obey," she corrected him.

"I shall not insist upon the first of those terms. The second one I shall endeavor to merit. The third one, I shall insist upon. Now, when will you —"

"Wait. You are sure that you do this because you love me?"

"Yes."

"And you are ready to sacrifice your name, your life, to a creature who, according to your view of conditions, should be the very last woman to bear your name — to become your wife? You do this because you love me? It must be a great love, indeed, Rodrick, to compel you to such an act — oh it must have been a very great love, indeed."

"It is a great love; and there will be no sacrifice there will be satisfaction."

She arose from the chair, but stood as she was with her back toward him.

"You have forgotten one thing," she said, gently.

"I have forgotten nothing."

She raised her right arm, and pointed toward the house, through the trees.

THE REASON WHY

"You have forgotten the man, in there," she said, no less gently. It was his turn to shudder, but he repeated with doggedness in his tone:

"I have forgotten nothing."

"You mean to deal with him — afterward?"

"Yes."

"How? If I consent to all that you have asked, will you deal with him — gently?"

"Can you plead for him, even now, when —?"

"Hush! Answer my question, if you please."

"I will deal with him more gently than he deserves. I promise you that."

"I shall be satisfied with that promise." She turned about and faced him, and there was a smile on her lips, now, although Roderick entirely misunderstood the cause of it. He drew backward, farther away from her. But she followed after him, holding out one hand for him to take, and persisting in the effort when he refused to see it. There were tears under her lashes again, but she was smiling through them; and then, while she followed him, and he still sought to avoid her, Patricia lost all control over herself. She half-collapsed, half-threw herself upon the chair again, and buried her face in her hands, sobbing.

"Don't Patricia; please, don't," he said to her,

THE LAST WOMAN

brokenly. "You make it much harder for both of us. This has been a terrible scene for you to pass through, I know, but after a little you will realize its wisdom — and the full justice of the cause I plead."

She controlled herself. She started to her feet.

"Come with me," she cried out to him; and then, before he could stop her, she darted away out of his reach, flew down the steps, and along the pathway toward the house. He followed. There was nothing else for him to do. She waited for him at the top of the steps where he had first seen her; and, when he would have detained her, she eluded him a second time, and fled through the doorway, into the wide hall of the house — of Richard Morton's dwelling place.

"Come," she called after him again; and again he followed.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MYSTERY

THE house was a large one. It covered a great deal of ground although it was only one story high. A wide hall ran through the center of the main building, and there were doors to the right and the left. Through the first doorway to the right, Patricia made her escape; and, through it, Roderick Duncan followed her. But he brought up suddenly, the instant he had crossed the threshold, and stood there, staring. Patricia had passed swiftly ahead of him, and Roderick saw her drop upon her knees beside a couch-bed, whereon a man was lying — and that man was Richard Morton.

Duncan was too greatly amazed for connected thought, but he was conscious of the fact that Morton's eyes sought him over the shoulder of Patricia, who knelt beside the couch. He had never thought that Morton's eyes were quite so expressive. They seemed almost to speak to him, to wonder at his presence there; but, stranger than all else, to express unquestionable pleasure because of his presence. He

THE LAST WOMAN

thought it remarkable that Morton did not move; that the man made no effort to rise, or to speak; that there was neither smile nor frown upon his white, still face. Then, Patricia's voice broke the spell that was upon him. She turned, and beckoned to him.

"Come here, Roderick," she said, softly. "Come and speak to Richard. Tell him that you have come all the way out here, by a special train, to marry me, and that you have brought a minister along with you to perform the ceremony. Come, Roderick, come. He will be made very happy by the news." She turned toward the stricken man, again, and added: "Won't you, Richard?"

Slowly the lids dropped for an instant over those strangely brilliant eyes, and, when they were raised again, the eyes seemed to smile at Roderick; but there was no other emotion visible about the prostrate man.

"I have not told you about him, Roderick," Patricia said, rising to her feet, "but I will do so now, in his presence. He wishes it so; do you not, Richard?"

Again, those eyes closed for an instant, and Roderick understood that the gesture, if gesture it could be called, meant an affirmative.

THE MYSTERY

"Richard wishes you to know all the truth about him," she continued. "I have promised him, many times, that some day I would tell you. He meant to kill himself that night, when he drove his roadster away from Cedarcrest. He guided his car, purposely, into the mass of rocks at the roadside. I found him there. Patrick O'Toole, who is devoted to me, was with me, you know. We saw the wreck, and stopped. Then, we found Richard. Oh, it was awful. I thought he was dead, and I believed that I was his murderer. I still think that I was the unconscious cause of it all, although he will not have it so. I was moaning over him, when Mr. Morton — you remember him? — found us. He took us to a sanatorium that he knew about, where he said there was a good doctor; and so it proved. I forgot all about Jack Gardner's car, but later I sent Patrick back after it."

Morton's eyes began to wink rapidly, and Roderick led Patricia's attention to the fact.

"Yes; I know that I am getting ahead of my story," she said, as if she perfectly understood what the winking meant. "Richard was like a dead man when we arrived at the sanatorium — all save his eyes, and the fact that he breathed. He was completely paralyzed; only his eyes, and the lids over

THE LAST WOMAN

them, retained the power of motion. He was terribly injured. The doctor said he would not die, but that he would never move a muscle of his body again, no matter how long he might live. The power of speech was gone, too. Only his eyes lived; the rest of him — all but his eyes and his great heart — was dead."

Morton's eyes began to wink rapidly, again.

"Yes, I shall tell it all; only, let me do it in my own way," Patricia said to him. "Mr. Radnor told me that he had given fictitious names for both of us to the doctor. At first, I was offended because of it, but later, I was glad. The doctor permitted me to assist in the nursing — I . . . I told him that I was Richard's wife. Mr. Radnor had already given that impression. I did not deny it; I made it more emphatic, in order that I might take the direction of affairs. When Mr. Radnor went away, he said he would return the following day; but I did not want him to do that, and so, when the next day came, I persuaded the doctor to telephone to him that he must not come. Also, when Mr. Radnor took his departure, I sent Patrick with him, to care for Jack's car. I told him to deliver it at the garage, and then to return to me, at the sana-

THE MYSTERY

torium, for further orders. But, when he came back, he told me he had abandoned the car in the streets of New York, knowing that it would be found and claimed, and wishing to avoid the necessity of answering questions. Am I telling the story satisfactorily now, Richard?"

Slowly, the speaking eyes drooped their assent, and she went on:

"At the end of a few days, Richard was much better of his hurts. There was no change in the other condition — the one that still holds him so helpless. I seemed to have a positive genius for understanding him, and he made me know — you see, I kept asking questions till he made the positive or the negative sign. I hit upon that idea because once, Roderick, you made me read 'The Count of Monte Cristo,' and I remembered old Nortier — Well, Richard made me understand several things. One was that he wished to come here, as soon as possible; another was that, most emphatically, he did not wish to have any of the old friends and acquaintances in New York know what had happened to him. Fortunately, he had a large sum of money in his pockets — What are you insisting about now, Richard?" she concluded, with a smile, perceiving that the eyelids

THE LAST WOMAN

of the stricken man were working rapidly. He looked steadily at her, and she shrugged her shoulders.

"Very well," she said, "I understand you. Roderick, he wishes me to tell you that he had the money with him because he intended to run away with me, that evening, and that he came very near to doing so. He wants me to tell you that he was a brute, and everything bad and mean and low and — there! I hope you are satisfied, Richard."

The eyes slowly closed and opened again.

"Richard had a large sum with him. I, also, had a considerable amount with me. I had had some thought of running away from all of you, and had prepared myself for such an emergency. Well, when I knew what Richard wanted, I took command of things. I did not consult him at all, but went directly ahead, in my own way. I always did that, you know, Roderick. I engaged a private car and a special train to bring us here; engaged them in the name of — in the assumed name, you know. One week from the day we entered the sanatorium, we left it again, went aboard the special train, and came here. Patrick came with us. He refused to leave.

"Oh, yes; I am forgetting something. You needn't wink so hard, Richard. I shall tell all of

THE MYSTERY

it. Richard protested with his eyes against my accompanying him. I do believe that he never once stopped blinking them, all the way out here. He would have said horrid things to me, if he could have spoken. I think that I was sometimes really glad he could not do so, fearing what he might have said. But nobody else could understand him; I could, and did. He was utterly helpless, and it was my fault that he was so. Yes, it was, and is, Richard, so stop protesting. I bribed the doctor at the sanatorium, to say nothing at all about us, and above all to keep every bit of information away from Mr. Radnor. Then, we came here.

"At first, it did not occur to me that I should remain, but, when I understood how entirely dependent Richard was upon me, I had to stay. Think of what he had been, Roderick, and of the condition to which I had brought him! It seemed a very little thing for me to do, to stay here and be his wife — Yes, that is what I decided to do; only, he would not let me. Just think of it! I have begged and pleaded with him to marry me, and he has refused."

Again, the eyes began a violent winking, and Patricia, smilingly, said:

"Oh, yes. He wants me to tell you that he has begged and pleaded, just as hard, for me to return

THE LAST WOMAN

to New York, and leave him here, helpless and alone, and that I have been just as contrary about this, as he was about the other. There! Can you imagine our quarreling, Roderick? Well, just before you appeared here, this evening, we had been having a violent quarrel. I was really angry at Richard, when I went out upon the veranda — and met you. He had ordered me out of the house. He had said, as plainly as he could look it, that he didn't want me here; that I was only a trouble to him; that I made him unhappy by remaining; that he would be much better in every way if I were gone. He . . . he made me understand that my . . . my good name was in question; that I would be talked about. I confess that I had never thought of it in that light before. I asked him again to marry me, and let me remain; but he refused. Then, I left him, in a huff, declaring that he couldn't drive me away. And then" — she turned directly toward Roderick this time, and held out both her hands — "I almost ran into your arms, Roderick."

"Do it now, Patricia," he replied, taking her hands, and drawing her closer.

"I can't. You are much too near to me. But —"

She did not finish what she was about to say; and

THE MYSTERY

Roderick held her tightly in his embrace for just one glorious moment, while the eyes of the stricken man glowed upon them with unspeakable joy in their living depths.

Patricia drew slowly and reluctantly away from Roderick's embrace, and once more got upon her knees beside the couch.

"You were right, Richard, after all," she said. "I think it would have killed me if I had found Roderick again, after I was the wife of another. You were right, dear one. You have always been right. But everything is made clear, now. Roderick is here. He loves me. You are pleased that he is here, and that he does love me, and my cup of happiness is filled to the brim. Speak to him, Roderick."

"Dick Morton, I think you are the bravest man I ever knew," said Roderick, stepping forward and permitting his hand to rest for a moment upon Morton's forehead. "I want you to be my friend, as long as you live, and I want Patricia to continue to care for you, just as long as you need her. We will go back East in a day or so, and you shall go with us."

The eyes winked a vehement negative, but Roderick continued:

"Oh, you'll think differently about it, after a bit

THE LAST WOMAN

of thought. In the meantime, how would it suit you to have a wedding, right here, in your room, before your eyes? Eh? He says 'Yes' to that, Patricia."

It was twenty-four hours later. Patricia and Roderrick Duncan had just been united in marriage by the Reverend Dr. Moreley, and had turned about on the platform which projected from the front of the veranda to receive the congratulations of their witnesses, who were made up of the entire outfit of Three-Star ranch. The couch of the invalid was beside them, a cheer was still ringing in the air, when two dust-covered horsemen rode up on the scene.

They came to a sudden halt when it was discovered what they had intruded upon, but Burke Radnor, never at a loss for words, jumped from the saddle and came swiftly forward. The bride saw him, recognized him instantly, and smiled. Then, she beckoned to him.

"Come up here, Mr. Radnor," she called. "You were very good to me when I needed a friend, and I want to thank you for your silence, since then." Radnor flushed. "Please shake hands with my husband, and remember that I want both of you to forget your old differences. There shall be nothing but happiness here, now. And this is our dear friend, Mr. Richard Morton. He cannot shake hands with

THE MYSTERY

you, but he can look his pleasure at greeting you."

"How are you, Radnor?" said Roderick. "I think, we'd better follow Mrs. Duncan's advice, and be friends; eh? I think I know why you came, and now I'll see to it that you have a good story to wire to your paper, to-night. It will beat the one you hoped to get, all hollow. I'll get you to one side and alone, presently, and tell you all about it. Listen to those cowpunchers cheer, will you! But, I'll tell you what, it isn't a patch on the cheer that is in my heart."

"You have won the first woman in the land, Duncan," said Radnor, shaking hands heartily.

"The first woman? No, the last. It takes the last woman to do things, Radnor."

"And the best; eh?"

"Both, old chap."

THE END

