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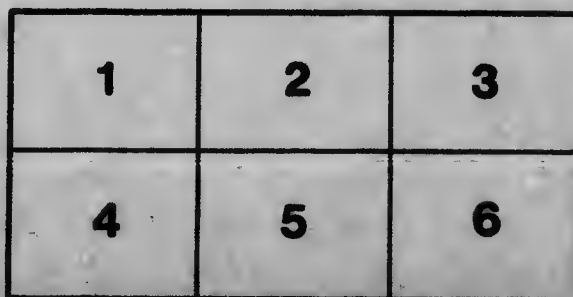
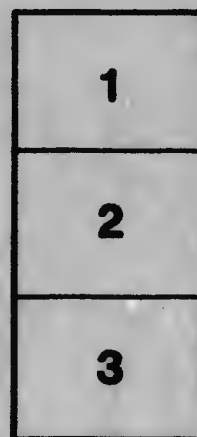
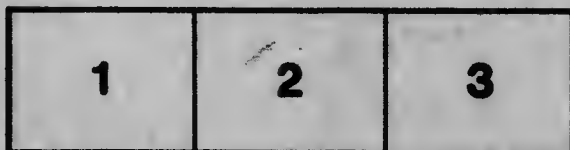
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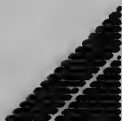
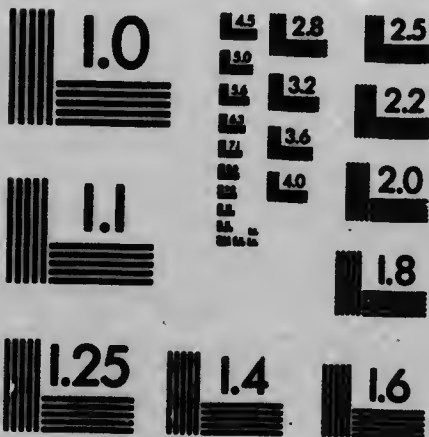
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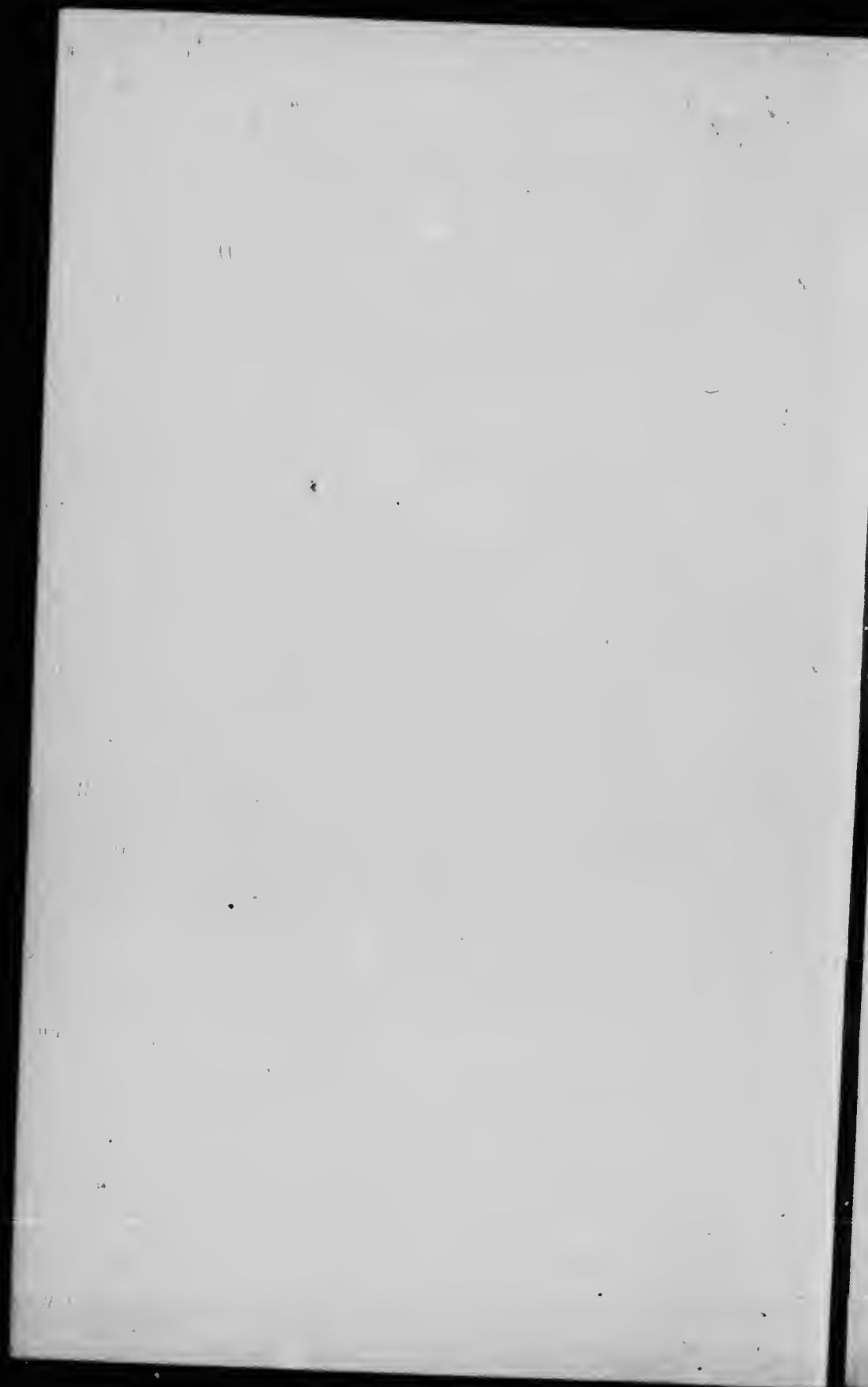
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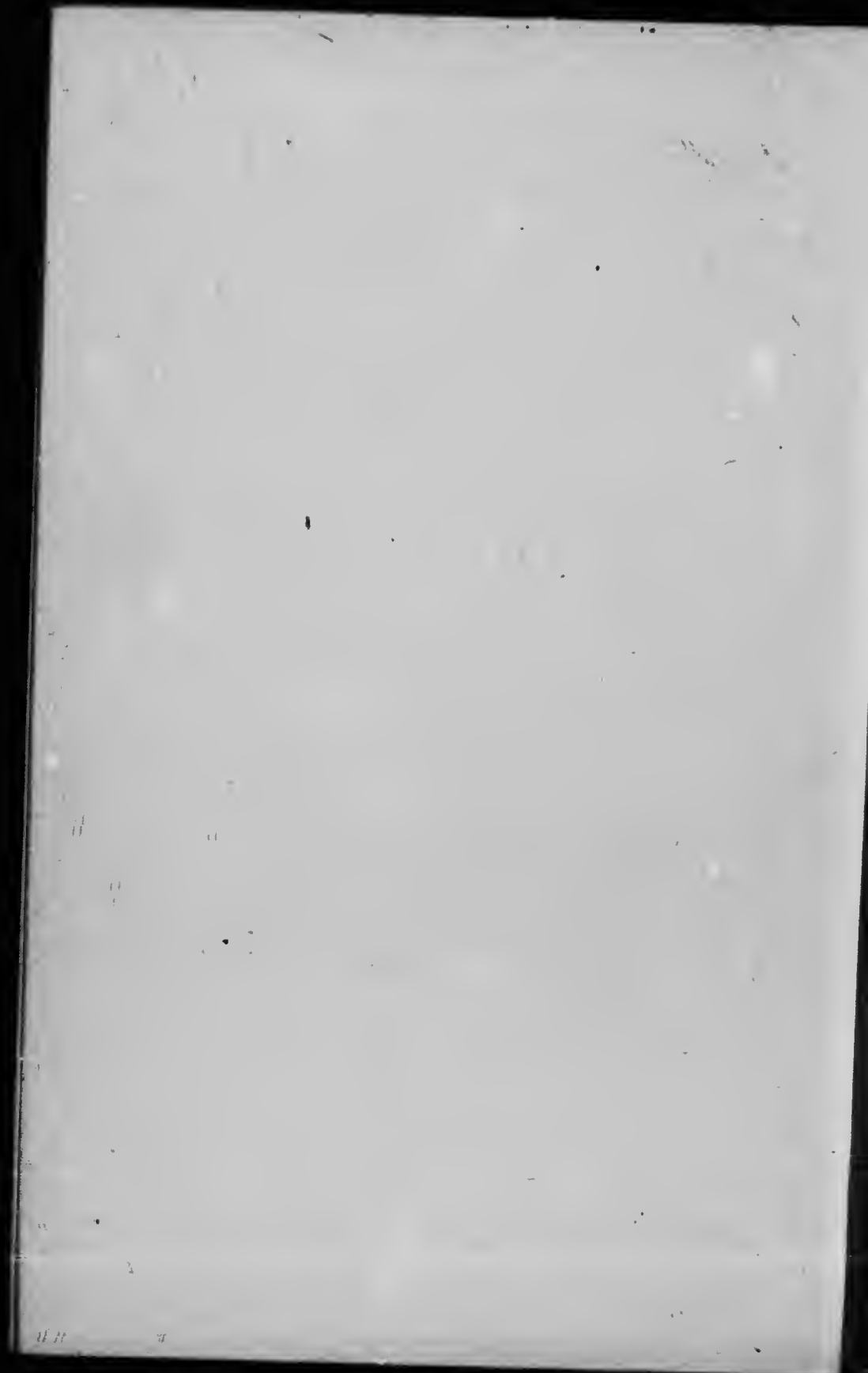
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WALLINGFORD AND BLACKIE DAW

WALLINGFORD AND BLACKIE DAW :

By
GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER

Author of
YOUNG WALLINGFORD, FIVE THOUSAND AN HOUR, THE JINGO
WALLINGFORD IN HIS PRIME, ETC.



TORONTO
MCLEOD & ALLEN, PUBLISHERS

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WALLINGFORD AND BLACKIE DAW

WALLINGFORD AND BLACKIE DAW

CHAPTER I

TIPPING IT OFF

BIG Tim Measen, jaws and all, came out of the ivy-clad Griswald Art Terra-Cotta Studios, with one-half of his mustache neatly curled and the other half chewed to a kinky tassel.

"What's the matter, Tim?" hailed Blackie Daw, who was coming up the flower-bordered path with Wallingford.

"I want to borry a bomb," declared Big Tim, with a vengeful backward glance at the "studios."

"I get you," laughed Blackie. "You've been cut down on the Griswald campaign contribution."

"Cut down!" snorted Big Tim. "Cut out!" and his face grew purple.

"I told you the day of graft and corruption was over in my home suburb," triumphed Blackie. "Jim, this is my friend, Tim Measen, the proprietor of the Tarryville town council. Tim, shake hands with J. Rufus Wallingford, a business associate of mine."

"Glad to meet you," husked Tim, giving Walling-

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ford's hand a crushing grip. "Have you been in business long with Mr. Daw?"

"Don't get me wrong, Tim," hastily corrected Blackie. "Jim isn't a sucker. He's been my regular side-kick for years."

"Oh!" remarked Big Tim, and shook hands again. "I certainly am glad to know you, Mr. Wallingford. I was just going to tip it off to you that you'd better get wise if you was doing business with Blackie," and he laughed uproariously at the possibility of his warning a sucker!

"Tim used to run a squeeze spindle next to my shell game at the county fairs," explained Blackie. "Now he's my political enemy. Wallingford's going to buy a house out here, Tim, to help me elect my reform ticket this fall."

"Stay out of it," warned Tim. "Let me slip you my word that there's nothing in politics any more. Why, I've had this million-dollar Griswald factory valued on the tax list at fifty thousand ever since I've been the politics of Tarryville, and now Harry Griswald won't come across with his regular ten thousand support for the party."

"The reform spirit is growing," exulted Blackie. "The time has come, Tim, when nothing but square methods will be tolerated in public office."

"Go to it!" grinned Big Tim admiringly. "You

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put that con across like a real straight hair, but you're too late by five years. You can't kid anybody with reform splush nowadays. I know, for I've tried it myself."

"But I'm on the level with it," earnestly protested Blackie.

"Go on and deliver your milk," laughed Big Tim. "I'll give it to you for one thing, though. You always was the best spreader on the lot. What are you going to hand the Griswalds?"

"Jim's going to try to buy Harry Griswald's residence property, just between the factory and my house over there."

"He'd better buy it quick, then," snarled Big Tim. "If handsome Harry keeps it, it's going on the tax list at about ten billion dollars instead of thirty thousand," and he started to slouch away, as round-shouldered as a gorilla. "I say," he called, turning. "It's no use your going in now. They were just starting a board of directors' scrap when I got my turn-down—the three Griswald brothers and the two sisters. That's why I wanted a bomb."

"Thanks," chuckled Wallingford. "We'll stay out till they're through, for fear you might find one," and stepping from the path, he walked across the beautifully kept lawn to the hedge beyond which stretched the Harry Griswald estate. It was a hand-

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some big place, running back from the pike to the river, with winding drives, and big trees, and a stately stone house.

"I feel like it's a hop dream when I think of owning a park like that," smiled Wallingford.

"Piker," reproached Blackie.

"I'll put up enough money for it to make a flurry on Wall Street," indignantly repudiated Wallingford; "and I'll let them bite every dollar, to make sure it's good; but I'm suspicious of my luck. From all I hear, this Griswald won't sell. Why doesn't he live in it?"

"His wife got nerves as soon as she married money, and has only strength enough to dress five times a day, and carry twelve trunks to a different health-resort every month in the year," grinned Blackie. "She's a confirmed invalid."

"Then why won't he sell?" puzzled Wallingford.

"Hush! It's the ancestral estate," whispered Blackie. "Harry is the first aristocrat the family ever had, and he broke himself buying an old homestead to make good."

"No heirs?" guessed Wallingford.

"In Tarryville?" scorned Blackie.

"Then he'd sell, with proper pressure," decided Wallingford. "Say, Blackie, if I could buy this property, I'd cut off that whole corner of the river-front with thick shrubbery. I don't like its face."

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"It does look as if it had been disowned by the factory," agreed Blackie as they turned from the despised curve toward the adjoining unattractive private wharf, where great yellow barges unloaded the clay for the Griswald terra-cottas, and carried the finished product away.

Just beyond the Griswald wharf was a dingy little boat-landing, with a narrow alley running back to the pike, and with a ramshackle club-house, before which was clustered an imposing fleet of up-to-the-minute private launches.

"T. B. C.," read Wallingford from the idly hanging pennant. "What's that—Tarryville Boat Club?"

"The same," sighed Blackie shamefacedly. "There's enough money kept in captivity by the owners of those boats to build a navy, but they can't get wharfage enough on this river to dock a peanut-hull."

"There's not much chance to goat in, then," regretted Wallingford.

"Maybe you can win it for us," returned Blackie hopefully. "They tell me they have no accommodations, but Violet Bonnie says it's because she doesn't wear a lorgnette."

Wallingford studied the landscape in profound thought: the residence property, the terra-cotta factory's wharf and the boat-landing; and presently his big round head bobbed with slow determination. "I

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think I'll have to make Harry Griswald part with his old homestead," he decided. "Wanting things too long hurts my liver."

"My own impression is that Harry is a damned fool," rasped a hard voice in the board-room.

Blackie, in the anteroom, grinned with infantile delight. "That's Curtis Griswald," he half-whispered to Wallingford. "He's the oldest brother, and he keeps a bulldog."

"I second the motion," came a languid voice from out the board-room.

"Welles Griswald," explained Blackie. "Youngest brother, and leads an Italian greyhound around on a gilt chain. Say, Jim, if Fannie moves out here will she use a lorgnette?"

"Shut up," growled Wallingford, listening intently.

"I demand to be heard," orated a pompous voice.

"Harry," said Blackie. "Keeps black-and-tans; they bark and run."

"You have your way about being heard," snapped a metallic feminine voice. "We're always hearing you."

"Vivian," checked off Blackie. "She lives with two parrots and an Angora."

"You are always so harsh with Harry," drawled the sweet voice of a lady who one instinctively knew

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must be fat. "He has a perfect right to have a voice in the business, and I, for one, think all his ideas are most clever."

"Grace Griswald, now de Pitzi," added up Blackie. "Keeps a pale-whiskered, imported husband. Say, Jim, could you find room for a kitchen and a chef on a forty-foot launch?"

"You are enthusiastic about Harry's crazy ideas because he is willing to make an ornamental place for your husband in the factory," charged Curtis Griswald.

"He knows he ought to," retorted Grace. "Paul's lifelong study of ceramics should not be wasted."

"It always has been," tittered Welles.

"Again you insult me," piped a small voice which could have belonged to none other than the pale-whiskered husband.

"If you didn't insist on coming here you wouldn't know it," gruffly charged Curtis.

"That's one thing I agree with, anyhow," snapped Vivian, who sounded thin. "No one but a stockholder should be admitted to these meetings."

"That's enough snarling at Paul," protested Grace with a gradually rising voice. "Of course, though, one who has never been able to obtain a husband could scarcely be expected to know the courtesy due to one."

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"If I lowered myself enough to buy one, I would at least have confidence enough in him to put my stock in his name," retorted Vivian.

Brother Curtis pounded energetically with his gavel. "These things are not for business discussion," he remarked. "Since there is nothing more of importance before the board, we may as well adjourn."

There was a chair-pushing sound of Harry Griswald rising violently to his feet.

"We'll not adjourn until I have presented a report on my plans for extension!"

"Move we table the report," offered Welles.

"Second the motion," snapped Vivian.

"You've heard the motion," briskly announced Curtis. "Now, Harry, don't make a silly speech. You and Grace will vote no, Vivian and Welles will vote yes. That leaves the deciding vote of the tie-up to me, and I also vote yes! That settles it! The motion to table your volunteer report is carried, by a poll of three to two."

"I don't see where you get the right to say how I'm going to vote," shrilled Vivian.

"Do you want to change it?" demanded Curtis.

"No!" staccatoed Vivian; "but I do claim the privilege of speaking for myself."

"I should think you'd be tired of it," interpolated Grace.

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"I'm tired of this continuous bickering," announced Vivian. "It is disgraceful that this family can not come together without quarreling. I'm compelled to attend these meetings to protect my interests, but if I could sell my stock at a reasonable figure, I'd never be seen near one of you."

"For how much will you sell your stock?" inquired the pale-whiskered one.

"Don't be a fool," Grace admonished her husband. "You haven't the money to buy it."

"I'll sell for two hundred thousand dollars," offered Vivian.

"Any of us would do that," sneered Welles.

"I'd like to buy it," declared Harry. "With the power to extend the business, I could make it double its value in a year. I'll give you a hundred thousand cash, Vivian, and my note for the balance."

"There'd be something crooked about it," retorted Vivian. "I'd even suspect your cash."

The gavel fell impatiently. "Harry's more than dubious methods are not under discussion, and this meeting is adjourned!" roared the chairman, whereupon an immediate babble arose, with six tireless voices in the contest for supremacy.

"Lovely party," commented Blackie. "Say, Jim, do you suppose they could make a pianola small enough to put on a forty-foot launch?"

Wallingford paid no attention to him, nor was

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he paying any attention to the babble in the board-room. His round pink face had not the trace of a line on it, nor was there a wrinkle in his brow, but he was perfectly oblivious of the fact that Blackie, insistent now to know if a wash-room, dressing-room and kitchen could not be combined on a forty-foot launch, was prodding his elbow. Presently he arose and looked out of the window toward the Griswald wharf.

"Confound it, Jim, I wish you'd listen to me!" insisted Blackie at his elbow again. "Where would you put the cellarette on my launch, or would you have one in each end?"

"Make it a combination knapsack and life-preserver," advised Wallingford, turning to him with a cheerful smile. "I've figured out how to vote for you this fall."

"I knew you'd do it," returned Blackie, in some surprise that Wallingford had spent so much time over the problem. "You said, down at the wharf, that you intended to make Harry Griswald sell you his place."

"I know how, now," chuckled Wallingford. "I'm going to induce that Napoleon of finance to extend the business."

"I think I'd better get a poultice for Harry," thoughtfully proposed Blackie.

"He won't be stung," denied Wallingford.

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Harry Griswald was a man of large ideas; one could tell that from his very walk, which was majestic and a trifle wide and swaying, as befitted a man of some portliness; his brow wore a habitual frown, not at all of displeasure, but of thought; and he greeted Wallingford with the seriousness due to so large a caller, and one supporting so heavy a diamond in his cravat. He might be a buyer of art terra-cotta!

"Any one introduced by my very good neighbor, Mr. Daw, is sure of a hearty welcome to our studios," Mr. Griswald observed, shaking hands most condescendingly, and leading the way into his own private office.

"He'd like to become a neighbor of yours, too," Blackie informed Mr. Griswald. "He wants to buy your residence property."

Mr. Griswald turned most severe. "It is not for sale," he replied. "It is to be entailed."

"I'm sorry," regretted Wallingford. "However, I'm not surprised. I wouldn't sell it. You have a beautiful plant here, Mr. Griswald," and he cast his eye on a magnificent water-color perspective hanging over Griswald's desk, which looked like the bird's-eye view of a world's fair.

"The nucleus of one," admitted Mr. Griswald with modest pride. "It will be a magnificent plant if ever my plans of extension are carried out," and

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he waved his hand gracefully over the water-color, in which the future Griswald galleries squeezed the horizon rudely.

Wallingford nodded his head in emphatic approval. "No business can stand still," he sagely observed. "It must either go forward or backward."

"Precisely what I tell my brothers," declared Griswald, growing choleric as he remembered his wrongs.

"You are a partnership, I believe," prevaricated Wallingford, by way of drawing fire.

"No, a corporation," corrected Griswald. "A million dollars, divided equally among five."

"I see," mused Wallingford. "That is a most unfortunate condition for business progress. The largest enterprises are the result of an aggressive one-man power. I suppose you get along, however, like brothers," and with a glare he dared Blackie to snort.

"Well, yes," admitted Griswald with a wince. "Of course my brother Curtis, being the oldest, assumes a certain amount of authority."

Wallingford cast a savage glance at Blackie. That irresponsible person was grinning shamelessly.

"Authority, to be worth anything, must be absolute," Wallingford declared with the solemn wisdom of a school-teacher. "Of course you know how Peter Wilkinson got his," and he chuckled.

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Mr. Griswald shamefacedly confessed that he did not. In fact, he had never heard of Peter Wilkinson, but naturally he did not confess to that depth of ignorance.

"It's a good laugh," Wallingford informed him, and crossed his legs so comfortably that Mr. Griswald offered him a cigar and gave Blackie a match for his cigarette. Evidently this was a gentleman of wide experience, and one often learned something from these informal chats. "At the start," continued Wallingford, lighting his cigar, "he was a minority stockholder in a business which had stopped growing; but now he owns it all, and is so prosperous that the mint is jealous."

"A minority stockholder?" queried Mr. Griswald, beginning to feel a vague admiration for the Napoleon of finance whose case was so nearly like his own.

"A one-fifth interest was all he owned," insisted Wallingford.

Mr. Griswald reflected that this was an exact parallel to his own case, and became more eagerly attentive.

"He was a strong resourceful man," went on Wallingford.

Mr. Griswald compressed his jaws. He, too, was a strong resourceful man. He wore curly tufts of burnsidés to prove it.

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"He was a man of knowledge, of education and of refinement," stated Wallingford.

Mr. Griswald smoothed his mustache with a hand upon which glowed a daintily set sapphire.

"He was a man of ideas."

Mr. Griswald frowned at the bird's-eye view of the terra-cotta plant that should be built—if he were running the business.

"In fact, he was a commercial genius."

Mr. Griswald strove to look modest. "A commercial genius," he sadly remarked, "usually has unbelievable ignorance and prejudice opposed to him," and he glanced bitterly out at his brother Curtis, who was passing the window.

"Peter Wilkinson made that handicap look like a squeezed soap-bubble," bragged Wallingford with the true pleasure of a creator. "I knew him like a lead dollar. Wilkinson Green Paint Company, you know; you've heard of them; every pair of green shutters in the United States carries a coat of their mixture. That's their specialty. Green shutter-paint. Nothing else."

"By George!" commented Griswald. "I didn't know there was a monopoly of green shutter-paint. How did your friend go about it, with his minority of stock?"

"Well, he was one of these strong, aggressive, never-say-die fighters, to begin with," replied Wall-

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ingford, and Mr. Griswald, squaring his shoulders and his lower lip, looked savagely out toward his brother Curtis's larger and better lighted private office. "Nobody would carry out his ideas, so he got bull-mad, one day, and made up his mind to umpire his own game or go broke. There was one stockholder who would vote with him, and between them they held forty per cent. of the shares. Peter knew where another fifteen per cent. could be bought, so he sold his house and lot, his automobile, his motor-boat and the baby buggy, came into the next stockholders' meeting with a fifty-five per cent. control, tossed out the two men who had pooh-poohed his ideas, and now when he wants to figure out how much he's worth, he sets down a figure nine, and writes ciphers after it until his arm aches!"

Mr. Griswald drew a long, long breath. "Bully!" he declared with much show of vigor. "That was the way to do it!"

"It was a fighter's way," agreed Wallingford warmly. "Think of it! The day he got his Dutch up, he was almost a middle-aged man, but full of fire." Mr. Griswald blinked his eyes and grew deadly stern. "To-day, he is in the prime of life and couldn't even go bankrupt if he invented something or got into a lawsuit. Why, not long ago he bought the immense ancestral estates of Lord Twim-

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bley, and the king was his guest at a recent shooting party!"

The chest of Mr. Griswald expanded. He was one of those who had been within a mile or so of the coronation, and he felt that, somehow, this gave him allegiance to the British crown. "Stunning!" he ejaculated.

Wallingford arose with the apologetic air of one who has already outstayed the limits of a purposeless call, but he paused to admire the pretty perspective over the desk. "That's a magnificent ideal," he politely commented. "Do you figure on achieving it in the near future?"

Mr. Griswald, who was a keen, strong, aggressive, middle-aged man of brilliant ideas and fighting fire, stood up and dwelt heroically on his pet watercolor. "Yes," he suddenly declaimed with vast determination.

"I hope you do," smiled Wallingford, shaking hands with him. "It will beautify Tarryville so much that I am sorry I can not live near enough to watch your studios grow."

"Wait a minute," hesitated Mr. Griswald, and Wallingford allowed him ample time for great thought.

"You spoke, a while ago, of buying my property. How much do you offer?"

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"A hundred thousand dollars," stated Wallingford.

Mr. Griswald inwardly gasped. It almost seemed an omen that Wallingford had named the exact amount he needed to make up enough to buy his sister Vivian's stock; that is, if she had not changed her mind. Moreover, the offer was quite liberal.

"I'll do it!" he enthusiastically decided, banging his fist upon his desk like a hero.

Wallingford whipped out his check-book. "It's a bet," he agreed. "I'll give you a check right now, on a bill of sale, if you like, and we'll put up to our lawyers the job of cheating us the rest of the way."

Mr. Griswald's eyes suddenly contracted. "I'd rather think about it overnight," he responded contemptively, waving the enticing check-book from him.

"If I could only slip you the money, you'd stick," laughed Wallingford, putting away his check-book with regret, nevertheless. "Now, let's have a clear understanding about this. I'm offering you a hundred thousand for Griswald County over there, from the hedge to Blackie Daw's, and from the gasoline pike to the tug-boat speedway."

Again Mr. Griswald silently considered. "For my residence property," he finally corroborated.

As they passed out of the building, Blackie sol-

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emply plucked a geranium from an enormous pot at the side of the door and pinned it on Wallingford's coat. "It's a medal," he explained.

"For what?" grinned Wallingford. "For jolly-ing Brother Harry into selling the family estate, if he can buy Vinegar Vivian's stock to-night?"

"No," corrected Blackie; "for quick digging. Where did you keep all those facts about that paint monopoly? I never heard of it."

"Neither did I, till just as we came in," chuckled Wallingford. "Look there," and he pointed to a workman who was spreading a coat of vivid green paint on the "studio" shutters.

Blackie walked over and looked at the paint-can. "You came close enough for that sucker never to find out the difference, anyhow," he commented. "He'll probably swallow that shutter-paint gag without pinning back its ears."

"What's the matter with the parable?" demanded Wallingford. "I think it was a pippin."

"Nothing much the matter with it," laughed Blackie; "except that you need a lorgnette. You missed the key-board. It isn't the Wilkinson Green Paint Company, but the Williamsburg Cream Paint Company. They grind out twelve cans a day in a leaky old barn just over the bridge; and they manufacture eighty-four shades to order!"

CHAPTER II

THE COME-BACK

WALLINGFORD, happy in the possession of a fair suburban home of many shaded acres, installed his automobile in the garage and littered the place, from pike to river, with several varieties of the five known kinds of building materials: brick, stone, iron, wood and cement. There was a pergola to be built, a spring-house, some bridges, a kiosk and numberless other stamps of his individuality, and accompanied by Blackie, he even went over to see the new president, manager and main-spring of the wholly reorganized Griswald Company about supplanting the hedge, on their mutual property line, with an ancient, ivy-clad stone wall.

"I don't understand what hedge you mean," protested Harry Griswald, looking uncomfortably out the big bow-window that had once shrined Brother Curtis. "There is no hedge on the dividing line between my former residence property and the studio grounds."

"Oh, I see," returned Wallingford carelessly. "The hedge is entirely on your side. In that case

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"I suppose you won't mind my building a wall at the edge of the line."

"I scarcely think you would like a wall so near to the house," advised Griswald, who was so uneasy that Wallingford looked at him sharply.

"Just where is my property line?" he wanted to know, catching the infection of uneasiness.

"I'll show you," offered Griswald with alacrity. "It is marked by corner-stones," and he led the way out to the pike and along the front of Wallingford's new purchase. Half-way he stopped. "This is the limit of my residence property," he stated, removing with his foot the leaves and moss from an X-marked surveyor's stone. "It runs straight back from here, at a right angle to the river."

Wallingford turned in amazement to Blackie. That gentleman was grinning for pure joy.

"Looks like you patted the wrong end of your hornet," he consoled J. Rufus.

"It's hard to believe," protested the veteran "trimmer," and then he demanded of Griswald: "Do you mean to say that this was not a part of your residence property?"

"It was not technically known as such," replied Griswald, recovering his complacency, now that the worst was over.

"Did it never belong to you?"

"Well, yes," admitted Griswald, now curling his

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mustache to conceal a smirk of satisfaction. "In fact, it does yet. You see, this part upon which the house stands was the original residence property, which I purchased from the Sammis estate. The remainder I bought from my brothers, three years ago. We—we still speak of it as a part of the studio grounds."

Blackie snickered outright, and Wallingford gulped audibly.

"Get that poultice," he groaned to Blackie. "But look here, Griswald, I distinctly remember that when I first talked this over with you, I specified that the price I offered was for your entire property; from that hedge to Mr. Daw's and from the pike to the river!"

"And I distinctly remember that I corrected you by saying my residence property," returned Griswald coldly. "You will find the estate you have purchased accurately described in your deed."

Wallingford looked sadly on that beautiful stretch of woodland. There was the spring over which he had intended to build his pretty little stone drinking-house; there ran the tiny brook which he had planned to put to such picturesque use; there was the knoll upon which he had decided to erect his kiosk; and across yonder was to have run his pergola!

"Skinned by an amateur!" he reflected with hu-

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miliation. "Oh, *very* well, Griswald! How much do you want for it?"

"Twenty-five thousand dollars," replied Mr. Griswald happily.

"Fine!" declared Wallingford. "I may as well get it good while I'm at it. I'll meet you at my lawyer's to-morrow morning. I want to see the new deed fixed myself."

"Cheer up, Jim, the worst is always yet to come," advised Blackie hilariously when Griswald had gone. "The bitten worm will turn at last, and the darkest dawn is just before the hour."

"I hope you choke," growled Wallingford savagely. "I don't like to be stung when I'm off duty."

"But see what a good lesson it is to you!" soothed Blackie. "In order to handle a sucker with grace and ease, you ought to know how one feels. How does he?"

"Go on and giggle, you laughing jackass!" snarled Wallingford.

"Do you know that I'm being sheared of a hundred and twenty-five thousand cold iron plunks in order to vote for you?"

"I know it, and I'm proud of it," snickered Blackie. "It's the record price."

Wallingford glared after the retreating form of the gifted amateur. "And to think that peanut-brained four-flusher got it up all in his own head!"

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he exploded with a scorn that was entirely for himself. "I wish Measen had found his bomb!"

"Go to it!" laughed Blackie. "It's a good thing to have a grouch all the way out. You'll have to calm yourself before you can frame up a proper come-back for neighbor Harry, and I think I'll go over to the house and play the saxophone for Violet Bonnie till you are once more willing to be Little Sunshine. Say, Jim, can you think of any way to put a shower-bath on a forty-foot launch?"

Wallingford turned to him kindly but firmly. "When you play your saxophone, won't you please render my favorite airs, very softly, in the far corner of your cellar?" he requested. "I want to stay here, and think."

Half an hour later Blackie, glancing out the window of the Dutch library, saw Wallingford on the river bank, walking frowningly up and down, up and down, up and down.

"I'll give him ten more minutes," he grinningly observed.

"I'll go out and start them making that champagne-cup," sympathetically replied Violet Bonnie. "To tell the truth, though, I expected him in before this. I never knew Jim to take so long to dig up a scheme."

"That's because this one has to be a peach," chuckled Blackie. "Jim's professional pride is hurt."

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"This ain't much like the old fair-ground days when we guzzled our suds straight from the can, ate our scoffin' at a stand-up grease-joint and flopped in the wall of a platform show," observed Big Tim Measen, as Violet Bonnie poured him another sample of the contents of the cellarette in the Dutch library.

"It isn't even like the days when I used to carry Blackie's maybe mining stock as a side line to my Florida swamp-land operations," asserted Chinchilla Williams, who, though fastidiously neat, derived his nickname from his general hairiness. "When we were having our meal-tickets punched at Java Charley's, I never expected to be mayor of Tarryville, nor to see you with a so-help-me house like this."

"It's because I quit phony work," stated Blackie with virtuous pride. "There's no money in a con game. I never would have had a hut of this kind if I hadn't gone into legitimate business graft with Jim Wallingford."

"He seems to be some clever party, all right," agreed Big Tim; "but just the same, you'd still be rolling your own cigarettes, out of chopped alfalfa at five a pack, if you hadn't been lucky enough to catch friend wife here, on her sleep-walking day, and marry her before she woke up," and he lifted his glass gallantly to Violet Bonnie.

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"That's a cautious and stingy statement," echoed Chinchilla Williams. "How an outcast like Blackie ever picked such a peach is a point past me."

"Quit your kidding," chided Violet Bonnie, highly delighted. "A little more of the rye, Mr. Williams?"

"No, I think I'll switch and take a headache, if you have a bottle of hop essence loafing around near the ice some place. Now, Blackie, what can we put over for you?"

"Well, Fringes," explained Blackie, "I'm going to hand you some political dope so good that this ought to be your birthday. On the level, I'd like to hold it over for my reform campaign this fall, but Jim Wallingford can't wait. Don't you think it would be a good play for you to give the masses in Tarryville a public boat-landing?"

"No," replied Chinchilla from force of habit, it being considered the loss of about five points in the game to agree to anything offhand.

"They got one," objected Big Tim; "down at the foot of Ticonderoga Street."

"A fish-market ferry-landing!" scorned Blackie. "What I mean is to get a good place, and doll it all up for red-carpeted skiffs and launches with scalloped awnings."

"It sounds delicate, but where's the rake-off?" objected Tim.

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"Public boat-house and fishing-pier," promptly returned Blackie. "If you had a cute little stretch of river bank, with a Cupid fountain in the center, and a border of geraniums, and eight iron benches, the town council could rent one end for the boat-house, and the other to the Tarryville Boat Club, if they'd build a fishing-pier to shut off the pikers that pay their debts from the spenders that live on their mortgages. The club would put up a pile of verandas that would be a credit to the community."

But Tim looked at him in earnest speculation. "Where do you and Jim Wallingford come in on this?" he naturally wanted to know.

"We'll get to join the boat-club," returned Blackie immediately and with wide-eyed innocence. "Violet Bonnie has a dressmaker that makes a specialty of exclusive yachting outfits."

"And the minute we do horn into that club," supplemented Violet Bonnie with a flush of anger, "I'm going to get me a one-eyed lorgnette made, and hand the marble stare right back at some of these enameled-faced dog-cuddlers out here!"

"Hand 'em a hunk of glassay for my wife," begged Chinchilla Williams. "She was peeved enough before I got to be mayor, but after that, they tossed her the frappéd gaze so hard that every time she came in from her afternoon drive she had chills."

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"I suppose they'll pull the same effect on me when Blackie is mayor," guessed Violet Bonnie philosophically; "but I can dangle some few medals as a freezer myself."

"It's a shriek to me that Blackie's going to lead a reform ticket around by the hand," laughed the mayor.

"He's on the level with it," insisted Violet Bonnie with a trace of indignation. "When Blackie gets through wiping up, politics in this town will be so clean you could eat off it."

"It's been tried, and it doesn't work," declared the mayor with a grin. "However, that's neither here nor there. If Blackie gets too strong in his campaign, I'll have to pull his record on him."

"What difference does that make on a reform ticket?" demanded Blackie.

"They know yours, don't they?" interjected Violet Bonnie.

"Anyhow," went on Blackie, "I think we ought to agree to leave personalities out of the fight, since there's so much to be denied on both sides, and stick to the campaign issues. I'm against graft, bribery and corruption, and that's my platform."

"What's this public-boat-landing scheme?" inquired Big Tim who had been thinking it over very carefully. "Where's the land you want to unload on the town council?"

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"If that's what I was after, I'd come to you, square and honest, and figure how we could split it up," returned Blackie, a trifle hurt. "There's nothing of the kind doing. I wouldn't sell you my land, and Wallingford wouldn't part with any of his."

"Then where do we get it? Show five cards and shake your sleeve."

"You'll have to condemn it," explained Blackie blandly, and blew a thin blue stream of smoke at the bust of Browning; "condemn it and buy it in at its tax valuation."

"I get you now," smiled Big Tim, much relieved. "I didn't know you hated anybody in the burg."

"I don't," grinned Blackie. "This is a mere public-spirited enterprise, as I tell you."

"Tie a bunch of firecrackers to that and start it down an alley," advised Big Tim. "Let's get down to cases. Who's to be stung?"

"Well, there's only one possible location," explained Blackie. "That's the strip of river-front just above the Boat Club landing."

Big Tim and Chinchilla Williams looked at each other speculatively while they figured it out, and then they grinned in unison.

"Why, that's the Griswald wharf!" said the mayor.

"You have the nerve of a taxi-driver," commented

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Big Tim admiringly. "Why, I don't believe we could do that, legally."

"You can do it, though," reproved Blackie; "do it, and make it stick. Can't you?"

"Yes, I guess so," acknowledged the politics of Tarryville; then he chuckled. "Handsome Harry would be so sore he'd holler from the touch of his own clothes."

"He'd probably take a turn at crooked politics this fall, and run us outside the town limits," guessed Mr. Williams. "He's the kind of a Johnny that wears his handkerchief in his cuff, but that doesn't keep him from playing at petit larceny. He got hold of enough stock the other day to toss his two brothers out of the shop and take in his dago brother-in-law, and now he'll keep right on blowing himself up until he touches a pin; but in the meantime he'll make a loud noise in public affairs."

"I'm for him," laughed Blackie. "He stung Wallingford, and that's going some. I never let a good laugh interfere with business, though."

"I should say not," agreed Big Tim. "Why, do you know what that curly-whiskered Lucy had the nerve to tell me yesterday, when I went to see him again about the party contribution? Chinchilla and I need that ten thousand for personal use, and don't you forget it, and I even put it up to Harry in that light. He was crooked enough to tell me that

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the tax values for this year were already fixed, and that I'd be out of the game this fall anyhow! Can you beat it?"

"I knew I had him going!" exulted Blackie. "I've been converting him to the reform government, and he's dead against bribery, graft and corruption. They all are. You're licked now, Tim."

"I wonder if you have a chance," mused Big Tim, whose vision was remarkably clear. "I might be better off if I did let you win, and me step out for about two years. Then I could come back strong."

"I'm for it," announced the mayor. "One reform administration makes it a cinch for the regulars next time."

"Then we'd better clean up all we can," decided Big Tim. "Blackie, what's there in it for us if we put this boat-landing across for you?"

"The applause of the multitude," boasted Blackie. "Every voter in Tarryville, but one, will be for you."

"What's there in it for us?" demanded Big Tim, helping himself to the rye.

"The cutest little political play that was ever put over," insisted Blackie. "Why, Tim, I feel like a sucker for putting you wise to it. It's the only thing I know of that might pound a cork into my campaign against graft, corruption and bribery!"

"What's in it for us?" insisted Big Tim.

"Twenty-five thousand bones," stated Blackie.

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"Say, Tim, how can I arrange sleeping-quarters for four people and a cook and an engineer on a forty-foot launch?"

A month later Harry Griswald, after a series of painful struggles with J. Rufus Wallingford, who had just returned from a business trip, paid that merciless gentleman one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars for the part of the river-front that Wallingford did not want.

"It's an outrage all through!" protested the broken-hearted Griswald as he exchanged his check for a deed. "My business can't exist without that wharf, and you know it, but that doesn't explain all your rapacity. I can understand why you were bound to have one hundred and twenty-five thousand, because that leaves you in possession of my entire personal estate without it having cost you a cent! But I can't understand why you insisted on a fifty-thousand-dollar profit."

"It's easy enough to understand if you will only figure a moment," explained Wallingford pleasantly. "Twenty-five thousand of what you call profit is for improvements," he waved his hand toward the growing pergola, "and the other twenty-five thousand—" here his smile became positively radiant as he waved his hand at the passing Big Tim Measen —"well, that was for expenses!"

CHAPTER III

BLACKIE TAKES CHARGE

THAT," observed Blackie Daw with careful analysis, "was the distinct and unmistakable sound of a wallop."

"It's Jesse James in trouble again," agreed Wallingford with a trace of a frown, as he arose from his comfortable chair in the headquarters of the Tarryville reform party. "That bandit will get the place pinched yet. This is the fourth political fight he's had in the three days since we've hired him, but it's the first one he's pulled off in the office itself."

"Squints is full of the reform spirit," admired Blackie. "I am strong for his sturdy Americanism. Hear that, would you! They've gone to the mat!"

Throwing open the door, they were delighted to discover a highly active bundle of two boys on the floor, a fact that they discovered by counting the legs, in occasional seconds of repose. Presently the bundle came to rest, with one boy sitting on top and breathlessly requesting the other to "holler 'nough!" The victor wore a very much soiled blue

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uniform, highly scuffed and muddied boots and a shock of tousled sandy hair; and except for his brilliantly blue eyes, his countenance was mostly composed of dirt scrambled with orange freckles.

"Why, hello, Toad!" greeted Blackie, extending a friendly hand, while Wallingford, surveying the *mêlée* with chuckling surprise, reached his hand automatically into his pocket. He always had an impulse to give Toad Jessop money.

"I can't let go to shake hands till this kid hollers 'nough," regretted Toad, who was thorough in all his undertakings. "Holler 'nough?"

"No!" aspirated the boy on the floor with a mighty lurch, and the tussle began again.

It became necessary, in the interests of humanity, to "split out" the contestants, for the office boy, who was variously known to Blackie as Jesse James, and Squints, and Legs, and any other name that came handy, had earnestly assured them, on the day of his hiring, that he had never been licked in his life and never intended to be; and they believed him.

"Now, what's it all about?" demanded Wallingford, holding Toad, while Blackie performed a like service for Squints.

"Does that kid belong here?" inquired Squints, feeling of his lip and looking critically at his finger.

"Of course he does," replied Blackie. "He's the adopted son of Mr. Wallingford and myself."

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"Then I resign," promptly decided Squints. "I dare him outside."

Toad made a lunge, but Wallingford had grabbed him in time.

"The resignation is not accepted," declared Wallingford firmly. "Now, Toad, tell us what the rumpus was about."

"Well, I come to the door and said I wanted to see Mr. Wallingford," explained Toad. "He asked me what for. I told him it was none of his business. He told me, 'Get out, you hobo!' Then I pasted him."

"Naturally," agreed Blackie. "I have two tickets for a musical-comedy matinée this afternoon. I think it's the funniest show in town. Would you boys like to go?"

Toad and Squints looked at each other a moment, and then grinned sheepishly.

"I can't leave my job," protested Squints. "There's a kid tryin' to stick a Regular Ticket poster on the door."

"I'll tie my new bulldog to the knob, and he'll be there when we come back," offered Wallingford. "Just now, Jesse James, I think you'd better run down to the corner and get three or four sandwiches and some apples and bananas for Toad. He's hungry."

"I'm starved," Toad replied to this safe guess.

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"All I had for breakfast was some coffee and sinkers and a hamburger steak and some German fried and some bread and butter at a railroad hash-house; and it took my last two bits."

Wallingford looked Toad over critically, from head to foot, and was prepared for the worst as he led the way into the office.

"You've run away from school," he sternly charged, seating Toad in the big swivel chair and making ready to do his duty in the way of stern conversation. "If you had been fired, Major Skillen would have written me to that effect and instructed me to send money for your return ticket."

"Major Skillen ain't there any more," explained Toad, singularly at ease and apparently conscience-free. "The rheumatism got him away last year, and he sold out to Old Polecat."

"Major Poole," severely corrected Wallingford. "I remember now."

"Polecat," firmly insisted Toad. "He was a barber, and he wears smelly stuff all the time. He licks the boys for nothing at all; if you tear your clothes, or break a window, or play hooky, or fight, or anything. He feeds us on nothing but beans, and not enough of *them*. He's cut out baseball, and football, and hockey, and shinny, and marbles, because it spoils our clothes. We got to have our hair cut every Saturday, and be manicured twice a week.

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We got to shine our shoes three times a day, and put on a fresh collar for dinner. Smell me!"

Both Wallingford and Blackie smelled the sleeve he indignantly held up to them. There was no question but that Toad's very clothes were redolent of the unmistakable perfume of a barber shop.

"This," declared Blackie, aghast at the indignity, "is an outrage. I suppose you even have dancing lessons."

"Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday," complained Toad; then his face reddened and tears sprang to his eyes. "Half of us have to play girl!"

Wallingford nearly choked. "Did you play girl?" he asked with a superhuman accomplishment of gravity.

"Once," gulped Toad. "I licked the boy that was dancin' with me, before we got outside. I been in bad ever since."

Wallingford nodded sympathetically. "How did you come to leave so suddenly that you couldn't write for money?" he asked.

"Old Polecat locked me up," stated Toad, immediately straightening up with snapping eyes. "I joined the sixth-grade town football team on Saturdays, and wanted to let my hair grow. I ducked the hair-cutting three weeks, and Old Polecat licked me. I told him I was goana run away from school. He licked me again, and asked me if I was still

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goana run away. I told him yes, and that when I got home I was goana have you go up there and put him out o' business."

"Then he licked you again," grinned Blackie. "Did it hurt?"

"Naw, not much," scorned Toad. "I got a few welts on my legs yet; but I didn't cry."

Wallingford, looking into his eyes, glanced hastily out of the window, from motives of delicacy. "How did you get away?" he inquired.

"Old Polecat threw me in my room, and bumped my head on the wash-stand, and nailed my windows shut; but before he had the door locked, I busted the window with my water-pitcher and jumped out, and hit 'er up through the woods to the railroad, and hid till night, and hopped a fast freight, and come home. Are you goin' back with me?"

Wallingford looked at him in deep perplexity and finally turned to Blackie. "I'll be jiggered if I know what we ought to do," he puzzled.

"Make good!" blurted Blackie, who was fully as indignant as Toad. "It's my opinion that Old Polecat is too good a barber to waste in a military school."

The postman came in with a letter for Wallingford. He opened it and read Major Poole's account of Toad Jessop's crimes.

"We'll go right over to the house and wash up,"

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he announced, passing the letter to Blackie with a gesture of anger. "We'll take the next train, and investigate Major Poole. I think he needs it."

"We'll bring you back his scalp, Toad," promised Blackie, patting his adopted half-son affectionately on the shoulder.

"I'm goin' along," insisted Toad indignantly, "I want to see it done."

Major Poole, sitting in a somber dark office, and in a stiff oak chair, and at a heavy oak desk, all sizes and sizes too big for him, proved to be a skinny little man, with scanty snow-white hair parted in the middle and plastered to his skull, with his snow-white mustache and goatee brilliantined to needle points, and with a carefully cold-creamed professional smile, which weakened when he saw Toad's stern backers.

"Well," said Wallingford, when the formalities of introduction had been disposed of; "now that I have you both together I want to get at the bottom of things; and I may as well tell you, to begin with, that the boy doesn't lie."

"No," granted the major in a squeaky little voice. "Young Jessop is very truthful; I must admit that; but he is not amenable to discipline."

"Not to an overdose of it," agreed Wallingford.

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"I wouldn't want him to be. To my mind, there's too much discipline in your school, anyhow."

"I was a soldier in the Civil War, sir," explained Major Poole proudly, squaring his shoulders; "and I got my practise in discipline in the finest army in the world."

"I've looked you up, and you were a sutler," dryly corrected Wallingford. "You got your practise disciplining mules."

"There's not much difference," defended the major with a laugh.

"Not when you beat them," retorted Blackie, bristling. "I can lick any man who finds it necessary to give frequent lickings to boys. If we had known you had that habit, we would have taken this boy home long ago."

"I think that has been happening," surmised Wallingford. "I notice that you do not seem to have so large an attendance as Major Skillen had when I was here a year ago."

"No," admitted the major sadly. "The business is falling off, and if the city builds its school I'm a goner. I wish I had never got into it."

"You don't belong in it," charged Toad, who had been glaring defiance all this while. "You only took this school so you could lick boys, and a lot of them squealed at home and was took out. Now

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you lick fifty boys as much as you used to a hundred; an' it makes too much for each boy. You're goana be put out of business."

"I wish I could, gentlemen," half groaned the major, appealing to his two older accusers. "My old comrade Skillen seemed to make a living out of this school, but I can't do it. I don't seem to understand boys very well."

"He's a old bachelor," explained Toad vindictively.

"That may be the reason," assented the major wearily. "You probably will not believe that I am not cruel, but the boys keep me continually aggravated with their disorder and untidiness."

"Of course they do," interposed Blackie. "They need dirt. They need to roll around in the grass, and get covered with mud, and tear their clothes on barbed wire. This boy never wore but one suspender up to the time we got him. I don't know just what else we'll do, Major Poole, but I do know that I wouldn't punish Toad by keeping him in this school a minute longer, under your management."

"Toad was quite right," said Wallingford, rising. "You are not fitted to have charge of boys, and we can't leave this one here. What's the matter, Toad?"

"I don't want to go," protested that youngster, visibly distressed. "I like my gang, and the teachers are all right. I don't like to study, but I suppose

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I got to have arithmetic and history and geography when I grow up. I might as well get 'em here as any place, and I got a gang together that can lick twice its weight in town boys."

"I don't see how we can take your gang along," laughed Wallingford.

"Don't do it," urged Toad. "Put Old Polecat out of the business, and let us stay here. I promised the gang that's what you'd do."

Wallingford sat down again. "How much will you take for your school?" he inquired.

"Well, you carry my mortgage, and square off my debts, and give me five thousand dollars, and I'll step right out," offered the major hopefully.

"How much do you owe?" asked Wallingford.

Silently the major produced his books and a bundle of bills. "Here's every cent," he stated.

Wallingford, with a practised eye, ran over the books and the bills, and, satisfied, produced his check-book. "Here's your five thousand," said he. "We'll go right down-town and look after the deed and the mortgage. You will, of course, Major, keep charge of the school until I have found some one else to take your place,"

"Not for me!" jubilated Major Poole, who had already thrown off his military coat and replaced it by a Grand Army serge with brass buttons, which, with a wide-brimmed Grand Army hat, he had taken

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from a cupboard. He now slipped the check into his pocket. "I'll have a new barber shop rented and chairs ordered before night, and in a week I'll be wearing a white coat and saying, 'Next!'"

"Peace be with you," wished Blackie, trying on the trim military cap which he picked up from the desk. "Let him go, Jim. I'll run the school for a few days. Toad—"

Toad, who had been watching him with shining eyes up to this very second, was not there now. He had vanished, and a frantic cheering, which shook the windows in a moment more, told that he had vanished into the dining-hall.

"Didn't you say something about the city being about to build a school?" asked Wallingford in the president's office of the Boomville Bank, where they had gone to arrange about the mortgage.

"Yes, but I don't think you need worry about that," replied Major Poole with a smile. "Do you think so, Jameson?"

Mr. Jameson also smiled, and shook his head. "I scarcely think so," he agreed. "The city's project for building a military school is our local incubus. We're pledged to build one, since General Smithson died three years ago. He left the city a magnificent plot of ground for the purpose, and the city accepted the gift, with all the attached conditions. If the school isn't built on it in twenty-five years the prop-

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erty reverts to the heirs; but the city has many better things it could do with two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars."

"I'm glad to hear that," replied Wallingford; "for I have a school on my hands of which I shall want to dispose, and the city's project might interfere."

"We had hoped that you might remain with us and take charge of the school," suggested Mr. Jameson politely.

"No, thank you," repudiated Wallingford. "I leave educational matters entirely to my friend Mr. Daw, who is now in charge of the school, and he is too busy to serve for other than a purely philanthropic reason. I suppose General Smithson was a very wealthy man," he added, always eager for information about heirs, they being a highly profitable division of humanity.

"Not extremely so, but rather well-to-do," replied the banker. "His two daughters keep their affairs very much to themselves, but I know that they have lost a great deal of money in local investments since the general's death."

"Oh, well, the reversion of the property in twenty-two years will be a handy thing for the third generation," observed Wallingford carelessly.

"I don't think there'll be any third generation," surmised Jameson. "The two Misses Smithson are

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quite elderly. Frankly, as an earnest member of the Boomville Chamber of Commerce, I wish they had their land."

"I see," chuckled Wallingford. "It not being public property until the city makes good, it is not exempt from taxation."

"Not only that," agreed Jameson, "but the tract is so tied up that it's worthless. The B. G. & T. Railroad, which is coming through in the spring, would establish its shops here if it could find a suitable location, and the Smithson Military Academy tract is the only one that would fill the bill."

"Why doesn't the city release its option so the tract can be bought up for the railroad company?" Wallingford inquired.

"It can't let go," Jameson informed him with a worried brow. "The land is available for military academy purposes only, and when it accepted the gift, the city pledged itself to the building of a military school on the grounds. It now has a twenty-five-thousand-dollar fund, which has been tied up and can not be touched for any other purpose."

Wallingford laughed. "You talk as if you needed the money," he taunted.

"We do," acknowledged the banker with a wry smile. "Boomville seems, at last, on the point of deserving its name. We now have two railroads and a third one coming, a traction line and a num-

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ber of factories which cost us money to get here. We want the shops of this new railroad, and then the Chamber of Commerce figures that it can sit still and collect the profits a while."

"It will cost you a lot of money to get the railroad shops," guessed Wallingford, intensely interested.

"Not very much," responded the banker. "We have to give them a right of way through the city, which can be engineered for twenty-five thousand dollars. The railroad company only asks that we find a good location for its shops. I imagine that it would pay as high as a hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the land; but there's no use talking about it. The company won't have any location we've offered it."

"That's why you wish the Smithsonian heirs had their property," summed up Wallingford.

"Beg pardon, gentlemen," urged the fidgety Major Poole; "but I have to go. I'm afraid somebody might grab that vacant store-room I have my eye on. I want to hire a sign-painter to put, 'You're next!' on the windows in big gold letters."

CHAPTER IV

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WALLINGFORD, having been to the recorder's office and the probate court and two or three other county offices, went out to call on the Misses Smithson, and threw those worthy ladies into a state of profound consternation. In the first place, he came out in the Spangle Hotel's dark green limousine, and he bore with him a gigantic bouquet of roses.

"It is presumption, I know, for a stranger to offer you these flowers," said J. Rufus glibly; "but my excuse must be that my father was a warm admirer of General Smithson, and you must consider these roses merely as a tribute to the family of that gallant soldier."

Miss Harriet Smithson bowed graciously. She was a self-possessed spinster, with lines both of care and of gentleness on her waxen-white face, and she wore upon the heavy black silk dress, which was brown at the seams, a soft fichu of yellow old lace, which had been mended, and remended and mended again with infinite labor.

"We can have nothing but gratitude for so pretty a remembrance," she returned, and Wallingford

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wished, quite uncomfortably, somehow, that her voice had not been quite so weak. It seemed to lack food.

Miss Martha Smithson had not yet spoken. She had her own waxen-white face buried in the extravagant mass of pink roses, and when she looked up, a faintly delicate touch of their beautiful color was in her cheeks. She was a trifle younger than Harriet.

"Your father was a soldier, too, I am sure," she remarked, her gaze straying reverently to the big oil painting of firm old General Smithson over the mantelpiece.

Wallingford wished that he could wipe his neck. He had never felt more uncomfortable in his life. Everything in this room, except the ladies, had been old, and massive, and rich when he was a nameless kid, and, somehow, the very furniture, worn as it was, made him ashamed of himself, a feeling he resented.

"Under General Smithson," he promptly lied.

Miss Harriet and Miss Martha hesitated.

"I am sure you will have some tea," offered Miss Martha, after a slight pause and an infinitesimal glance at her sister.

"I scarcely think so," hastily refused Wallingford, with an intuition of the truth about food. "It is so soon after luncheon."

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"Oh, you must have some of our famous tea," urged Miss Harriett, ringing an old-fashioned bell-cord at the side of the portières. "It is supplied to us by an old friend of father's in China, and he sends us so much more than we can use that we are constantly compelled to give it away to our friends."

"We can't help bragging about it," laughed Miss Martha, who had once been extremely pretty, and who was still very nice and restful to look upon. "It is so nearly priceless."

Wallingford felt suddenly angry. Confound it, why couldn't they bring themselves to sell it! That's why their fool friend sent them such an over-supply. And why didn't they sell this big place? An old negro came to the door, his curly hair as white as silver wires, and his long-tailed blue coat hanging about him as loosely as if it had been on a broomstick.

"Some tea, Absalom," ordered Miss Harriet gently; "some tea and—and some cakes."

"Yessum," said old Absalom, looking at her steadily; then he glanced at Wallingford; then he looked back at his mistress. "Yessum," he repeated, and went away.

J. Rufus could feel those cakes choking him in advance; yet he knew that he had to eat them. This proud poverty had to be handled delicately; and he had fat hands!

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"My call is not a purely social one," he stated, "but I intend to enjoy your tea, nevertheless. I came partly on business."

Miss Harriet's lips deadened in a faint bluish pallor. Business could only mean something unexpected to pay.

"Then we might get that over before the tea comes," she observed with a lightness that was the absolute pinnacle of bravery.

"I think that we can," guessed Wallingford pleasantly. "I'd like to get a second option on the land that your father presented to the city."

The bluish tint left Miss Harriet's lips, and Miss Martha, completing a suspended breath that had been cut in half, buried her face in the roses again.

"A second option?" faltered Miss Harriet. "I don't quite understand. That property was set aside for the building of a military academy. It was our father's dearest wish."

"I know," returned Wallingford. "The city, however, may not build this academy, and I want to get from you the privilege of purchasing the land, in the case the city finds a way to relinquish its option."

"Oh, we couldn't sell you any such absurd thing as that," refused Miss Harriet, a certain momentary flicker dying out of her eyes. "We'd be cheating you."

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That idea hit Wallingford in his funny spot, but he could not have laughed, even if he had been alone. "Please don't worry about me," he begged. "I'm turning gray-haired, and I never have been accused of cheating myself."

"Let me understand," puzzled Miss Harriet, looking at Miss Martha for aid in her perplexity. "You want us to say that, if the city does not live up to the conditions of my father's gift and the property reverts to us, we will sell it to you?"

"That's it exactly," agreed Wallingford.

Miss Harriet pursed up her lips. She was a business woman now! "I suppose you would wish us to put that in writing," she cautiously suggested.

"Of course," corroborated Wallingford.

"Then, I should think," went on Miss Harriet triumphantly, "that the price you would pay should be mentioned."

"The price," Wallingford hesitated, changing his mind again, "would be a hundred thousand dollars."

Miss Harriet and Miss Martha looked at each other with gasping astonishment. A hundred thousand dollars!

"Of course," went on Wallingford, "I should pay you for the option itself. For that option I am willing to pay you, cash, immediately, five thousand dollars."

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Miss Harriet swallowed. "Let me understand," she said, becoming again the keen and shrewd business woman. "You mean that you would pay us something in advance for the privilege of having the first opportunity to buy this property, at a hundred thousand dollars, in case the city, before its twenty-two more years are up, does not build its military school?"

Miss Martha gazed at her sister admiringly.

"You have a death grip on the idea," commended Wallingford, sincerely pleased with her clarity.

For a moment there was absolute silence, while the two sisters fought back their swimming senses. The color was high in Miss Martha's transparent cheeks, and her eyes were glistening. She suddenly arose.

"You will pardon me a moment, I am sure," she said with beautiful repression. "It seems to me that Absalom is very long about the tea," and bowing gracefully to Wallingford, she turned her back and hurried from the room. Twice her shoulders started to heave, but she held them firm.

Her sister Harriet gazed after her with much concern. "I do not suppose it would seem rude, since this part of your call is so purely a business matter, if I were to follow my sister and consult with her alone," she suggested.

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"Certainly not," Wallingford smilingly assured her, glad to be rid of them for a moment; for emotional business was uncomfortable.

They came back just ahead of Absalom and the tea, and if their eyes were a trifle suspicious as to color, Wallingford hoped that he betrayed no sign of noticing it.

"We have decided to accept your offer," announced Miss Harriet, with an almost imperceptible touch of Miss Martha's hand as they sat down.

"Very well," returned Wallingford. "Shall we go to your lawyer's or to mine to draw up the agreement?"

"To none of them, if you please," stated Miss Harriet icily. "We had a lawyer, and he lost us a great deal of money; so if you would just as lief draw up a clean and clear agreement that any one can understand, and will be satisfied with having some honest friends of ours witness it, we shall be much better pleased."

"So shall I," chuckled Wallingford, and they led him into the library, where, at a huge and much carved old mahogany secretary, full of odd little compartments and secret drawers, Wallingford drew up an agreement so simple and straightforward that both Miss Harriet and Miss Martha were delighted with it. They signed it immediately and thereupon Wallingford, who was always prepared

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for such emergencies as this, paid them the five thousand dollars in cash, making an energetic bet with himself that they would die of want if they had to wait three days for his check to be put through for collection.

It was a happy party which drank the famous Chinese tea after that important ceremony, and Wallingford, in the big high-ceilinged drawing-room, sat, with the fragile little china platter in one big hand and the fragile little china cup in the other, feeling as much out of place as Toad when he had to play girl; but glad, some way, that he was there, nevertheless. The ladies were particularly animated, and chattered with a gaiety they had not exhibited for years. There was a pretty flush in their cheeks and a sparkle in their eyes. Youth had touched them for a moment again with his magic wand, which makes the blood run fast.

When Wallingford had quite finished with the famous tea, and had eaten every last crumb of his cakes, Miss Harriet, who had been waiting with splendidly concealed impatience, arose and passed the tray for his tea-things.

"It will only take us a moment or two to put on our wraps," she suggested. "We shall go at once with you to the witnesses of whom we spoke, and have our agreement signed, so that you will be protected in case anything happens to us. You have

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made us very rich now, you know, and we are likely to fall victims to mad dissipation."

"We may have a week in the city for the opera, maybe, may we not, Harriet?" ventured Miss Martha hopefully.

"You may have anything you want, I think," promised Wallingford, "for really, I believe that I shall have the pleasure of realizing your father's school for you, and of paying you that hundred thousand dollars besides."

"Our trip to Europe!" gasped Martha. "Paris, and gowns, and the blue ocean! Really, do you believe it can be true, Mr. Wallingford?"

"The most likely thing in the world," he assured them, smiling at her enthusiasm. "By the way, you'll understand that this transaction of ours is absolutely confidential."

"Certainly," hesitated Miss Harriet. "If you wish it, you must have an excellent reason, I know."

He almost blushed. "I have," he replied.

Wallingford, who had quite deliberately kept out of the way until he had a plan of action formed, rolled up to the Skillen Military Academy in the hired limousine, and found the first class in marbles digging holes in the dirt with their knees; two football elevens, grimed from head to foot, taking their initial practise on the campus; a wrestling match in

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progress in the middle of the lawn; a batter for the impromptu senior prep nine driving a ball through a dormitory window, and a board of grievances, Toad Jessop presiding, sitting in grave judgment on an argument between Slimmy Browne and Duckwaddle Morley, as to whose father was the more popular man, Duckwaddle winning, by a bloody nose, just as Wallingford came up.

In the office, Wallingford found Blackie standing gracefully at his desk, surrounded by a group of grinning instructors, and propounding his theory of elementary education.

"In addition," he was announcing, "every boy's hair is his own. On and after this date, beans will be served only twice a week, and sandwiches, pie, doughnuts and apples shall be constantly standing on the sideboard in the main hall, with nobody watching. In case of a fight, the boy who is the most out of breath shall be allowed to explain first. A batting average shall take equal rank with a score in geography. A pupil in arithmetic shall have a proper grade for the answer, no matter how he gets it. I have decided that a certain amount of instruction will not hurt the boys, and it's up to you gentlemen to administer the same with as little pain as possible."

He paused, bowed to J. Rufus and sat down.

"Gentlemen, the first board of education meeting

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is dismissed, with a recommendation that the balance of the time until Saturday night be made a continuous field meet, to make up for lost time. There will be no further classes until Monday."

The instructors, one and all, with the exception of the professor of grammar, who was an enemy to mankind by the very nature of his calling, approved of that suggestion, and being lusty young fellows themselves and working on small salaries, spread out, like a fan, as they left the door, to explain a few football tricks and the finer points of baseball practise.

"Well, Blackie, where are the reporters?" asked Wallingford, energetically pulling off his overcoat, for he had much work to do.

"Locked up in a little room down the hall with a tableful of sandwiches, an empty leather-topped desk and a pair of dice, and they don't know that the time is passing," replied Blackie. "You will find the place by the smoke rolling through the keyhole."

Wallingford looked at his watch. "There is no rush about them, then. This is the quiet hour, when the morning-paper men have plenty of time and the evening papers are off the press, and I can take a little rest. Toad's got us into a desperate gamble, Blackie. I'm in our expenses, and forty-five thousand on this place, and five thousand for an option

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on another piece of land, and I'm not sure that I see daylight yet. All I want is to come out whole."

Toad Jessup came bounding in with a piece of note-paper folded into a triangle, on which was scribbled the name of Principal Daw. "This dropped out of the history class-room just now," he said.

Blackie opened and read the note. "It's all off, Jim," he announced. "You'll have to make up your mind right away what to tell these boys. The losers want out."

"Send them some money," suggested Wallingford. "I have to smoke about an inch more of this cigar and think."

Fifteen minutes later he went back to the door of the history class-room, and knocked, listening interestedly to the educational address within while he waited. The monologue, in the voice of that eminent pedagogue, Horace G. Daw, was as follows:

"Oh, you feeby dice! Huh! Come on, nice little feeby! Huh! A three and a two, now, for your friend Horace! Huh! A three and a two or a four and a one; I'm easy to please! Huh! There she rolls, boys! Get a piece of paper and add 'em up! Fade it, gentlemen! It's all there for the covering, and all velvet! Who takes this six bits that's left over? You're the grand little sport, Fatty, and I hope I break you. All ready now, and watch 'em

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closely. Huh! A natural! The gentlemen who are broke again will kindly edge back from the desk, and let the live members split up this assortment of currency for my sixth consecutive pass."

The door was opened by a youth of the exact shape and dimensions of a bean-pole, who was surmounted by a felt mushroom hat, pale eyes and a brave smile.

"Mr. Wallingford," he guessed. "Step right in, if you have anything."

"The city editor has just called up," observed Wallingford softly, as he stepped inside the smoke-dimmed room.

"What city editor?" demanded six breathlessly interested voices.

"I couldn't catch the name of the paper," chuckled Wallingford, and led them back into the principal's office, where the air was clearer and the light better, and gave them a splendid story. His father, Hiram Wallingford, had been a lifelong friend and admirer of that brave and gallant soldier, the late General Smithson. His father had, just previous to his recent demise, learned of the general's desire to have a military academy named in his honor, and, to carry out the wishes of both brave warriors, Wallingford had now purchased the old Skillen Military Academy, intended to endow it with a twenty-five-thousand-dollar dormitory, rename it the General

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Smithson Memorial Military Academy, and present it to the city of Boomville, as the tribute of one dead soldier to another. This, the dearest wish of his heart, accomplished—

Wallingford pressed a handkerchief to his eyes. The reporters, deterred by professional delicacy, refrained from asking him any more questions about the lately deceased Hiram Wallingford as soon as they were convinced that this big strong man was too much overcome by his intense emotions to answer them. Some of them even withdrew and left him alone with his grief, and awaited outside the door, for fear he should go out the back way. They were still there when, an hour later, Wallingford went out to his limousine, but he choked up again the moment he saw them, and did not unchoke until he was safely on the train and headed for the offices of the B. G. & T. Railroad. He might make a better bargain than he had hoped.

Boomville rang with the philanthropy of J. Rufus Wallingford and his magnificent gift to the city; but the Chamber of Commerce, which also embraced all the Progressive party members of the city council, held a hasty and a worried meeting. The consensus of opinion therein expressed was that J. Rufus Wallingford, undoubtedly generous and emotional as he was in his philanthropy, had

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brought into town with him a huge bundle of festering gall; for he had saddled the city, already groaning with a burden of obligation and taxation by means of one General Smithson Military Academy, with another one, which might turn out a costly institution to keep up.

President Jameson, of the Boomville Bank, allowed them to exhaust their storm of just indignation before he arose to pour oil on the troubled waters. "I am in receipt of a letter from our friend Wallingford, which will explain itself, I think," he observed, holding in his hands the document in question. "The envelope was addressed to me, but the contents was addressed to the Chamber of Commerce and to the City Council of Boomville, and it runs as follows:

"Gentlemen: In urging your acceptance of my gift of the General Smithson Memorial Military Academy to the city of Boomville, I desire to call your attention to the following facts. First, my only desire in carrying out the wishes of my father, Hiram Wallingford, was that your city should have a Smithson Academy at once, and I could not afford to donate the two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars necessary to build and endow such an academy according to the terms and conditions of General Smithson's bequest. However, should the city, at any time, comply with those conditions, and build the new academy on the Gen-

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eral Smithson property, I have no objection to your transferring the name to the new school, and to your selling the old property for any purpose you see fit.

"Secondly, in case the city does not care to build the new academy, it can permit the General Smithson tract to revert immediately to the heirs, and can invest the Smithson Academy fund, which can not be used for other purposes, in the tract of woods now adjoining the old Skillen Academy, thus making that school preserve fully as valuable for the purpose, if not more so, as the Smithson property. How this is possible will be seen by an examination of General Smithson's will, his deed of gift and the pledge of acceptance which the city signed through its mayor and council. These documents in conjunction, by their peculiar wording, only require that the city possess, control and operate an institution to be known as the General Smithson Memorial Military Academy, *and do not stipulate, specifically, that such an academy must be located on the General Smithson ground*; although they do state, specifically, that the city can not utilize the property for any other purpose.'

"Gentlemen, I have looked over the bequest, the deed and the pledge. Mr. Wallingford was shrewder than ourselves."

A thoughtful silence followed the reading of this important communication, and then the pretty light of day began to dawn.

"Why, this man Wallingford is a public bene-

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factor!" stated old Peter Packington, whose specialty was real estate first mortgages. "He has shown us how to let go of the quarter-of-a-million-dollar Smithson Academy load."

"Better than that," supplemented L. G. Wheeler, whose specialty was suburban subdivisions, and who was consequently a factory-boomer. "He has shown us how to let the property revert to the heirs so it will be available for the B. G. & T. shops."

"That is a matter for the city council," immediately urged Samuel Hicks, who made bricks and hoped to sell a few millions of them to the new railroad. "There is a meeting to-night, Cushman."

William Cushman, who was the proprietor of branch grocery stores wherever there were workmen's cottages, nodded his head emphatically.

"We'll put it right through," he promised, and the other members of the city council then present, they representing the majority, cheered him for the statement.

"Move we adjourn!" shouted Peter Packington, suddenly remembering an important engagement.

Peter Packington, who had his automobile right outside the door, was the very first member of the Chamber of Commerce to call on the Misses Smithson.

"I've come to bring you some splendid news," he told the two flushed and happy ladies, who were al-

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ready beginning to pack for Europe and Paris and gowns.

"We're becoming used to such pleasant surprises," returned Miss Harriet, repressing a certain trace of iciness. "We could stand more, I am sure, however."

"I think I can arrange, to-night, to have the property your father left the city revert to you," he beamingly suggested. "In that case, I should like the first opportunity to purchase the tract."

"We have so many friends working to that end, it seems," she replied, wishing that she could be sweeter. "Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Cushman have both telephoned a like message. How much do you offer?"

Mr. Packington considered carefully and immediately raised his bid. "Eighty-five thousand," he offered with a wince. He had figured on obtaining the land for possibly fifty; but, if both Wheeler and Cushman had been after it, an offer of that size would be useless.

"I thank you," said Miss Harriet, rising and smiling sadly at her sister Martha, who had an increasing pink glow in her cheeks.

"Am I to understand that that price is satisfactory?" asked Packington, trying to read Miss Harriet's inscrutable countenance.

"No," replied Miss Harriet, leading the way to

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the door. "We shall make no announcement concerning the property until we know that it is ours."

Mr. Packington cleared his throat. "I might be able to raise that bid a trifle," he suggested hopefully.

"We do not care to discuss it at the present moment," she coolly informed him.

Last of all came Mr. Jameson, of the Boomville Bank; but this was at nine o'clock that night. Both Miss Harriet and Miss Martha were sorry to see him, for, while they had not counted him at any time as their particular friend, their particular friends of the old régime having mostly died or become very poor, they had always looked upon him as trustworthy.

"I've come to bring you some good news," he began, beaming upon them.

Miss Martha had been biting her lips. "How much do you offer us?" she inquired, altogether too sweetly.

"Offer you! Why, great Scott, girls, I wouldn't buy that property from you at any price, because it would be absurd in me to buy it unless I expected to make a profit, and I don't want it from General Smithson's daughters. I came out expressly to warn you not to sell it to any one. The new railroad company will give you at least a hundred and fifty thousand dollars for it."

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Miss Martha was almost cryingly apologetic, but Miss Harriet helped her make him understand that he had started the way all of them had.

"I don't blame you a minute," he said, laughing away Martha's poignant distress. "I am very glad to learn, too, that you did not sell to any of them."

"We could not," Miss Harriet explained. "I believe there's no reason for further secrecy now, is there, Martha?"

"I think not," agreed Martha; "especially with an old friend like Mr. Jameson; besides Mr. Wallingford said that he only asked for discretion until everything was settled."

"Wallingford!" repeated Jameson. "Did you sell to him?"

Their beaming faces told him that they had. "For how much?"

Miss Harriet and Miss Martha looked at each other smilingly.

"For a hundred thousand dollars. We telegraphed him as soon as we heard the news this afternoon, and have had an answer from him. He is coming to-morrow to bring us the money and to get a deed for the property."

"A hundred thousand!" protested Jameson. "Why, he will sell it to the railroad company for half as much again! You should never do business with strangers!"

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That admonition was too much for the gentle Miss Harriet. "I am angry," she said. "All this day, people we have known for years have been trying to buy our property for less than the stranger offered us. Moreover, had it not been for Mr. Wallingford, nothing would have been done about either that property or our father's military academy for twenty-two years to come, by which time both my sister and myself would have been dead, I hope. If Mr. Wallingford, after buying the school property, makes a profit of twenty-five thousand dollars for himself, as I understand from his telegram that he has, both my sister Martha and I, who have discussed the matter thoroughly, only wish that it was more! Besides," and she waved her hand in the general direction of the huge bouquet of pink roses, now widely blown and withering in their third day; "besides, Mr. Wallingford's father was a friend of General Smithson!"

CHAPTER V.

A FESTIVE SCENE

"IS everything all right, sir?" asked the square-faced waiter as he carefully turned the points of the pie away from his two diners, and placed their after-dinner coffee-cups on the wrong sides of them.

J. Rufus Wallingford had endured in the silence of helpless despair until now; but this inquiry was adding insult to injury. "Taking it all in a lump," he observed with forced calmness, "considering it in bulk and in detail, food, price and service, I am compelled to admit that the salt is good. I don't remember ever tasting better salt."

The waiter thoughtfully wiped his thumb. "It's the truth about the salt," he admitted. "Would you like a little more of it, sir?" and he grinned with keen satisfaction. "I'm going right down to the kitchen and tell that dago chef what you said. It's as good as a twenty per cent. tip to me to explain a message like that to a wop."

Wallingford frowned at the waiter's luxuriant presumption, for the dinner had put him in a bad humor. "You have a lot of unfettered conversa-

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tion," he chided. "You should be more careful. My friend here is the famous Vittoreo Matteo. You've probably heard of him. Chef to King Emmanuel of Italy, you know."

The American waiter tried to throw some respect into the glance he cast on the black-haired and black-mustached Blackie Daw, but the attempt was a distinct failure. "I'll rub that in on Umberto," he decided.

"Bring me the check," ordered Wallingford wearily, and as the man strode away he made a wry face into his demi-tasse. "Let's jump this town," he suggested.

Blackie Daw, impelled by the everlasting spirit of perversity, held his cup daintily and sipped at its thick contents as if it were nectar. "Your liver must be awful bad, Jim," he compassionately stated. "Myself, I'm the president of the Boosters' Club for this pleasant little burg. I never saw such a fine collection of factory chimneys; and you know what that means."

"I'll tell you about it," offered Wallingford, still glumly. "It means that this is the original home of the little Willie Weisenheimers. It means that this town is full of earnest hard-working millionaires who drink champagne in their overalls, but whom you couldn't separate from a dollar unless you picked them off it, piece by piece."

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"I hate to encourage you in it, Jim, but what you need is a drink," commiserated Blackie. "Where's that waiter?"

The person in question was just then entertaining a well-fed-looking little man at another table, but presently he came with the check, and let them go.

They had taken dinner rather earlier than the usual hour, and as they walked out through the lobby the parlors began to be filled with the local society leaders, large jelly-like ladies attired in low-necked gowns and plenty of spangles, and accompanied by gentlemen in expansive shirt-fronts and high hats.

"What's the function?" asked Wallingford as he went to the desk for his key.

"Opening night of the grand opera season; three nights and a matinée," explained the clerk; "*Carmen*, *Il Trovatore*, *Faust*, and *Tannhäuser*. I don't think you can get a seat for to-night; it's *Carmen*."

"We can walk over to the Grand Opera House and watch the rich folks go in, anyhow," resignedly decided Blackie. "You have shiny dressers here."

"New York hasn't anything on us," confidently maintained the clerk, who was a native son. "We have the money and the duds, and the good-lookers to wear them. Why, last winter at the opening of the opera season, Billy Dudley, of the *Morning Defender*, counted three hundred and twenty-seven

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dress suits and eleven tuxedos, and eight of the tuxedos were worn by strangers."

"I get it," approved Wallingford. "A pair of white gloves went with every dress suit."

He paused, with Blackie, at the cigar-stand, where the well-fed-looking little man whom they had noticed in the dining-room stepped up to them, and tipping his hat, remarked to Blackie:

"I beg pardon, sir, but I am given to understand that you are a quite distinguished chef."

Wallingford gazed at him in perplexity. He was plump bodied and plump faced, had a sprinkling of iron-gray in his black hair and wore his neat clothing with the ease and grace of a polished man of the world. In his correct and mellow speech there was a slight foreign trace, but no man could have placed his nationality.

Blackie Daw, though with some misgivings as he estimated the stranger, took up the burdensome rôle of Vittoreo Matteo with alacrity. "*Si, signore,*" he answered, with an appealing glance at Wallingford, shrugging his shoulders and turning his palms upward at the height of his neck.

"Nix, Blackie!" suddenly laughed Wallingford. "Tear up your ticket. This is Henri Dufois, late chef of any big hotel which was lucky enough to get him. He speaks Russian and Chinese as well as he does any of the common or high school languages.

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Mr. Dufois, permit me to introduce my friend Mr. Daw."

Mr. Dufois acknowledged the introduction to Blackie with easy courtesy, but kept his eyes turned questioningly on Wallingford. "I can not quite place monsieur, though I remember his face very well," he admitted. "The acquaintance has been professional, perhaps."

Wallingford chuckled, and his big pink face wreathed into lines of jovial reminiscence. "Henri," he solemnly directed, "I want you to put into my turtle-soup some of that eighteen-seventy-six Amontillado, and write my name on the bottle; then—"

"Mr. Wallingford!" interrupted Henri with every indication of delight, and shook the proffered hand of J. Rufus most heartily. "It is a pleasure to meet you after so long a time, and it would be almost as great a pleasure to prepare some of the little delicacies of which you are so keen a judge. Monsieur, your friend, I take it, then, is not a chef?" and he waited a trifle anxiously for the answer, though he turned on Blackie a friendly countenance.

"Not exactly," laughed Blackie. "I have been regarded as a good camp cook, but I have never been applauded for anything more difficult than ham-and or steak and onions."

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"We're just going in for a liqueur to kill the taste of our dinner," offered Wallingford, noting Henri's trace of relief. "Won't you join us?"

"We truly need it," accepted Henri with a wry face. "I have been here two days. If I stay longer I must buy an electric chafing-dish."

"Invite us to your room when you do," urged Wallingford. "What brings you to this dyspepsia factory, anyhow?" And he led the way to the bar-room.

"Business," replied Henri. "I am hunting a location for another good restaurant. I have a Café Henri in each of three excellent cities, but my fourth venture was a failure, and I am naturally cautious."

"This should be a good town," judged Wallingford, noting three silk-hatted men for whom the bartender was nonchalantly pouring champagne highballs. "They seem to have money here, and to be willing to spend it."

"They have no palates," objected Henri sadly. "You'd be doing them a favor to give them a chance at something better," suggested Wallingford.

"At the possible loss of a hundred thousand dollars," retorted Henri with a smile, "I'm afraid of them. I wish I could move one of my places here for a trial."

"That sounds like good business," chuckled Wall-

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ingford. "What you really want is for somebody to invest a hundred thousand in such a place, fit it up and run it according to your ideas and turn it over to you for about eighty thousand, if you like it."

"Well, yes," agreed Henri with a shrewd twinkle.

"Hello, Blackie! How is Violet Bonnie?" inquired a thick man who had been stunted lengthwise.

"Hello, Pop," hailed Blackie. "Violet Bonnie is so healthy she's mislaid her make-up box. Are you running this show?"

"Don't you see my gray hair?" demanded Pop, who could have measured his height with the outstretch of his low-cut white waistcoat, and from whom care had long since fled discouraged. "Coming in?"

"Couldn't get tickets," explained Blackie; "so Jim and I came over to see the procession of dress-suit lollops. Meet my friend Wallingford, Pop. Mr. Hickey, Mr. Wallingford."

"I know Pop," laughed Wallingford, shaking hands with him. "He was one of the loudest knockers when we put on *Lama's Goat*; and it was after he laid down his hammer that I went out and cleaned up a hundred thousand on my belief in the success of the piece."

"I've tumbled," acknowledged Mr. Hickey with

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pride. "So many people won out coppering my bets that now I'm doing it myself. I took out this company just because I knew it would be a frost."

"It looks like an artistic box-office troupe," admired Wallingford, watching the money flow past. "Pretty good company?"

"Medium-weights," replied Hickey indifferently. "I couldn't afford the fat singers, but it isn't the singing that pulls these gooks; it's art. I make spike-tails and open-face bosoms compulsory in the first twelve rows. Say, where do you eat?"

"Star Hotel," confessed Wallingford gloomily.

"I thought so," groaned Hickey. "The last time my business made me halt in this tank town, I found a quiet little German place with sawdust on the floor where a man could buy real food, but there're cobwebs in the windows to-day. Excuse me a minute, and we'll edge in. I got a pair of sure-enough Spanish dancers, and I've split their hot specialty into the second act. It's the best part of the opera."

He waddled hastily into the box-office, and Wallingford and Blackie stood interestedly watching the solemn parade. These people took the duties of wealth quite seriously. The women wore their rich capes and the men their stiff gloves with a brave determination to be at aristocratic ease, no matter how painful. They exchanged gay banter and laughed lightly and moved with careless grace, and

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occasionally apologized for it, and did all the other things which persons of wealth and breeding do.

"It is, indeed, a gay and festive scene," observed Blackie, admiring it, nevertheless. "I will hand them one thing, Jim. They built this theater regardless."

"I never saw a finer one," agreed Wallingford seriously, as his eye roved from the magnificent marble lobby to the glimpses of carmine and gold revealed through the open doors.

Hickey came back to them as the overture began, and led them past the doorkeeper. Blackie, catching the sound of the music, immediately surged into the auditorium, where he found a dark corner and promptly proceeded to forget the world; but Wallingford's commercial mind was caught by the costly foyer, and he hung behind with Hickey to examine it in detail.

"Somebody must have believed in the future of the drama in this town," he commented.

"If they believe in anything here they certainly do back it off the boards," returned Hickey. "Let me show you up-stairs."

He led Wallingford back into the lobby, where, to the right and to the left just outside the entrance to the foyer, wound beautiful marble staircases. He stopped at the box-office a moment and came back with a key.

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"I was so paralyzed when I saw this new shack that I want to see somebody else struck stiff," he remarked as he led the way up-stairs.

He opened an electric switch-box at the head of the stairway and flooded the place with light. Even Wallingford, used as he was to luxurious interiors, was amazed by the richness and beauty of the extravagantly decorated suite of rooms, all of them ablaze from the light of crystal chandeliers, leading up to an immense recital hall in white and gold, the panels between its pilasters embellished with fresco paintings, in soft pastel colors of more than usual breadth and strength.

"For high-brow stuff," explained Hickey with a grin. "They had a few lectures and recitals and readings for the fourteen-story intellects here, but the real brainy people of this town haven't any money, and the other kind would rather sleep at home; so they cut out the classics, and the last thing they held in here was a barn dance. Shame, too, ain't it?"

"If old Cap Churchill could see this, he'd have a freak orchestra in that balcony and a gross of celluloid palms on that waxed floor in twenty-four hours," observed Wallingford thoughtfully.

"Wouldn't it make a swell restaurant!" agreed Hickey enthusiastically. "Right over there is a tiled kitchen, with all the aseptic improvements for

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modern Red-Cross cooking, and a suite of private dining-rooms that might have been designed by David Belasco himself. Let's get out of here. I get cross when anything makes me hungry."

Hickey and Wallingford and Blackie, gathering up Henri Dufois in the lobby of the Star Hotel, strolled back to the dining-room just ahead of the dress-suit brigade, and as soon as the square-faced waiter saw them he made a break for their table.

"Umberto says to leave it to him," he announced.

Blackie smiled and nodded his head energetically, but pointed to his neck, and Wallingford took compassion on him.

"Signore Matteo has a sore throat and can not talk, but he will be happy to have Umberto go as far as he likes."

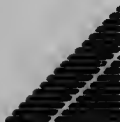
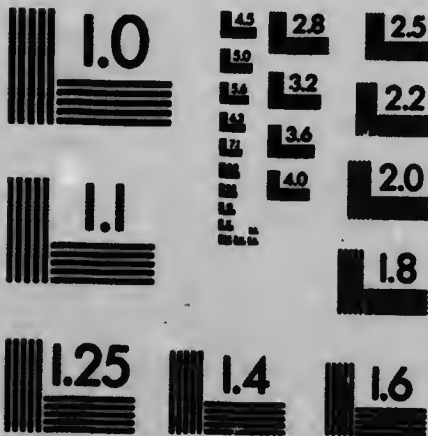
Blackie heaved a sigh of relief when the waiter was gone. "You've run me up against a continuous performance of lightning-change acts, but this one is the rottenest turn of all because it doesn't get us a hand," he complained. "Umberto Primo will cook us raviolas, macaroni and three kinds of spaghetti, and stumble up here to get my fine Italian thanks. If I hadn't been smart enough to invent a sore throat I'd be up against it."

"If it's a new laugh, hand it to me," requested Hickey.



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WALLINGFORD AND BLACKIE DAW

"This is Vittoreo Matteo, the world-famous chef, from the kitchens of King Emmanuel, of Rome," chuckled Wallingford. "How he came to be it was through my hunting some way to send word to the chief poisoner down-stairs how rotten his chefin'g was."

"That explains it, then," laughed Henri. "Your waiter told me about it at dinner."

A swarthy little man with a bristling black beard came toward them, buttoning the vest of his tuxedo, and obedient to a gesture from the square-faced waiter who followed him, went straight to Blackie and held out both hands, which Blackie grasped with equal effusiveness. Good-natured Henri took upon himself the stream of Milanese that poured from Umberto, and the two gabbled energetically for some moments, during which both of them glanced occasionally at the alert and beaming Blackie, Umberto with deep respect and Henri with a sly twinkle. Finally Umberto, bowing profusely, withdrew, and Henri turned to Blackie with a laugh.

"You'll have to keep your sore throat," he declared. "Umberto not only wants to show you some prize cooking, but he invites you to his kitchen."

"Nothing doing," declared Blackie. "He wants to learn some of my secrets."

"I don't doubt it," agreed Henri; "also he wishes

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to talk Italian politics with you. Every man in Italy is a socialist; but there are six different kinds, all enemies."

Two capable-looking men, who would have been better dressed in sack suits, paused at their table to congratulate Hickey.

"It was a highly successful opening," the taller man informed him. "I don't know much about such matters myself, but my wife, who is musical, says that this is the best company that has ever been to Ironburgh."

"It was exquisitely rendered," acclaimed the shorter man, who wore the perpetual frown of one who takes trifles so seriously that there is no room in his life for tragedy. "It is a great relief to find a Carmen who can dance."

"It's what I call a musical treat," corroborated Hickey. "Won't you join us in a cocktail?"

The men eying the experienced-looking group with a certain degree of willingness, Hickey immediately introduced them to J. Rufus Wallingford, promoter and capitalist, to Vittoreo Matteo, the world-famous Italian chef, late from the kitchens of the king at Rome, and to Henri Dufois, secretary and assistant to the great Vittoreo.

"Won't you take supper with us?" begged Wallingford. "Umberto is preparing a special menu in honor of his distinguished fellow professional."

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"We'd be delighted," refused the taller man; "but Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Carter will be along in a few moments. We hurried ahead, while they were removing their wraps, to obtain a table; and I see that Charlie has already turned the chairs at our favorite place."

"We envy you your treat," said Carter, almost pathetically wistful about it. "We have so very little good food in Ironburgh. I wish some of you famous artists would go into business here."

"It is barely possible that Signore Matteo may do so," stated Wallingford with a speculative glance at Blackie. "If he can get the proper backing and can be assured of sufficient exclusive patronage, he could, I think, be induced to locate in your very lively city."

"What does he want?" asked Mr. Thomas, who had a sharp crease in each cheek from jaw-snapping bluntness.

"Mainly, to conduct a café which would be patronized only by the socially elect," replied Wallingford. "Do you suppose that the recital hall in the Grand Opera House could be obtained for such a purpose?"

Both Mr. Thomas and Mr. Carter considered that suggestion in the light of a distinct revelation.

"It would be ideal," commended tall Mr. Thomas, and he looked upon Blackie with increased respect,

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as did, also, Mr. Carter. It was quite evident that Ironburgh reserved all its admiration for thoroughbreds.

"A place conducted on that scale would become the fashionable rendezvous of Ironburgh from the moment it was opened," asserted Mr. Carter.

"You're talking to the right people," stated Hickey. "Mr. Thomas and Mr. Carter were charter members of the Grand Opera House Company, and are on its board of directors."

"Gentlemen, I am pleased to meet you," suddenly interpolated Blackie, awakening to his duties, and he shook hands impulsively with both of them. "I will only consent to manage a café in your very beautiful city if I can have that hall of recital, and if everything shall be, what you call, very swell."

"You don't need to worry about that," Mr. Thomas assured him with a smile. "Ironburgh, in proportion to its population, has a larger contingent of socially inclined wealthy people than any other city in the United States. We have needed just such a café as you desire to operate, and we would support one of exclusiveness and class."

"Without a doubt," corroborated Mr. Carter.

"Everything must be very swell," insisted Blackie, shaking his head. "I should not care to entertain guests, after six o'clock, who were not in evening dress."

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"Certainly not," scorned Mr. Thomas.

"That is exactly what we wish," asserted Mr. Carter, half indignant that any other possibility should be discussed, or even mentioned.

"You spoke about backing," remembered Mr. Thomas, addressing Wallingford. "How much is needed?"

"A hundred thousand dollars," stated Wallingford calmly. "Signore Matteo is not a wealthy man, but he would buy five thousand dollars' worth of the stock, and I would expect five thousand dollars' worth for promotion. Signore Matteo's only condition is that he be given a three-year contract of absolute management, on a reasonable percentage basis."

"True," corroborated Blackie. "If I do only a small business I wish only a small pay; if I do a large business I wish to make a fortune. I shall make a large business."

The cocktails having arrived, and two large ladies, bulging from amid a particularly aggravating riot of spangles, having passed their table with correct smiles, Mr. Thomas and Mr. Carter grasped their glasses and adeptly tossed off their drinks.

"I'm for it," avowed Mr. Thomas as he arose to his full length. "Bring your subscription list to me to-morrow at eleven thirty, and I'll introduce you at luncheon to the balance of your stockholders."

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Monsieur Henri Dufois bent upon Wallingford perplexed and anxious brows. "I do not understand," he puzzled as their guests moved away.

"Neither do I, but it's all right," reassured Blackie.

"You go up to their suite with the boys and you'll get it," laughed Hickey. "I know Blackie of old, and he never even carried a spear in a flivver."

"Cheer up, Henri," chuckled Wallingford. "About the first of next week I'll want you to slip into New York and help me pick out dishes and silverware and such junk for my new Café Haut. Let's see; I'll have them monogrammed C. H."

"C. H.?" repeated Monsieur Dufois. "Why, that is the monogram I use on all the Café Henri supplies. Except that I would not care to have you use the same pattern, which is my own design, I could get them for you very quickly from my own supply-houses."

"Let's talk it over after supper, up-stairs," chuckled Wallingford.

CHAPTER VI

SOME CLASS

THE new Café Haut opened in a conflagration of glory, the occasion being a return engagement, for one night only, of the Hickey Grand Opera Company, and every table having been engaged two weeks beforehand, at a four-quart premium, the stockholders of the latest addition to Ironburgh's social éclat stepped high and beamed and were filled with gay glad repartee. The feminine colors of this particular season running to strong and masterful Richard Strauss effects, into the soft and dignified tinting of Recital Hall was poured a mad riot of purple and red, of green and orange, and of yellow and lavender, the whole sprinkled liberally with evening wraps in frank, brave kimono and Navajo-blanket effects.

On every table there was a ticket with a name, and there were soft-tinted lights, and real flowers, and up in the ornately carved balcony was a sixteen-piece orchestra, led by an acrobatic conductor with no sense of shame. In every direction five-languaged waiters were suavely advising their guests with one breath, and softly cursing buss-boys with the next; and the

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Café Haut, firmly established as the most exclusive and recherché palace of epicurianism east or west of anywhere, was so successfully launched that the directors were half intoxicated with animal spirits before they had touched a drop of alcohol.

It was, indeed, a notable gathering! But who was the most notable person and the most noted in all that hall of glittering light? Who was the most conspicuous, the most sought after, the center of all eyes and the pivot of all thought? Blackie Daw!

Grand, gloomy and peculiar, the pseudo Vittoreo Matteo, in the uncomfortable rôle of a chef too far advanced to cook, infested the floor of the Café Haut in a state of torment, which began in aggravation and ended in downright savagery; and with each man who loftily called him Victor and demanded a service, his hatred of the human race increased.

To add to his discomfiture, Blackie discovered among the diners an unexpected guest. He had just been called to the table of Charlie Secretary, who was living at a five-thousand gait on a three-thousand salary, but had cheerful hopes of making his income catch up to his expenditures.

"Waiter!" had been the sharp call of Charlie, as Blackie, finally convinced that time stretched into eternity, passed his table on the way to change Mrs. Smelting Works' order for the fourth time.

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"Waiter!" repeated Blackie to the nearest foreign servitor.

"No, you," insisted Charlie, not unkindly by any means, but still with a trace of sternness. "Look here, Captain, can't I induce you to hurry up our order a little bit?"

There were three young ladies with Charlie, and one of them, the one with the brightest eyes and the most flawless shoulders and the most perfectly arranged complexion, glanced up at him roguishly. In a soft and mellow voice she issued a few limpid remarks, in musical words, each of which ended with a vowel.

Blackie caught his breath, but stood the shock nobly, beaming upon her with gallant adoration until she had quite finished; then he replied. A shade of distress crossed her face when he began, and it deepened as he continued. When he had finished, she said faintly, "Thank you," and Charlie, glowing with pride over her accomplishment, pulled a five-dollar bill from his waistcoat pocket and handed it nonchalantly over his shoulder to Blackie. There was some class to the girls he could win, and it took a man of class to win a girl of such class!

Blackie, his eyes distended at the sight of that green paper as if some one had offered to pull his nose, was about to make hasty tracks away from

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that table when a hand touched his elbow, and a voice, which he instantly recognized, addressed him as, "Signore Matteo!"

Turning, Blackie beheld, with a sinking heart, the dark visage of Umberto, flawlessly dressed except for his beard, and once more a stream of limpid Italian assailed his ears. Distinctly confused, Blackie pointed hastily to his throat and hurried back into the kitchen for comfort; but Henri, in a white coat and a huge white apron that came up to his neck, was busy among the stew-pans, measuring and weighing with chemical exactness.

"What troubles monsieur?" he asked perfunctorily, though he frowned slightly as he noted the distinguished chef's lassitude.

"Money," replied Blackie disgustedly. "I've been dodging it all night. It seems to injure the sport to have people willing for me to take it away from them."

Henri shook his head in perplexity. "That is an excellent crowd out there," he judged. "It ~~should~~ be worth a hundred dollars to you to-night, ~~it is~~ alone."

"It's a shame to waste it," acknowledged Blackie. "I wish you'd go out and get it, and let me ~~stay~~ here and boil eggs."

"Impossible," returned Henri quickly, brought to

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a realization of how busy he was. "I am, with my own hands, preparing the dinner for Mr. Wallingford and his friends. You should be on the floor."

Blackie's head straightened with a jerk. That last remark of Henri's had been peremptory, and, indeed, for a fleeting second Henri had almost forgotten that he was not talking to a paid under officer of his army. Blackie hastily reviewed his highly miscellaneous lifetime, and could not remember a minute, since his school-days, when anybody but a subway guard had had a right to tell him to step lively. He felt his neck beginning to swell and moved out of the hot kitchen.

The hall of dazzling light was still ablaze with gaiety, and he tried to walk straight through it without a turn of his head to the right or to the left, but, try as he would, he could not escape the now angry face of Umberto, who, as he passed, shook a dark forefinger at him and hissed:

"Royalist!"

That was a slight relief, but, as he passed the length of the dining-room, there was still the table of jovial-faced Jim Wallingford to pass. That unprincipled scoundrel, dining with Hickey and the directors and their wives, now added a probable bitten ear to his list of future casualties, by snapping his fingers sharply as Blackie came abreast. The signal could not be ignored.

"Vittoreo!" called Wallingford, in the tone of

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friendly loftiness he would use to a favorite trusted butler.

Blackie's impulse was to stride straight on, but there sat the pleased directors of the Café Haut watching the well-known and justly famous Vittoreo Matteo, and Blackie never yet had "thrown the game." Wallingford knew that and counted on it, dog-gone him!

"Yes, sir," said Blackie, wheeling, and searching anxiously but hopelessly under the bottom hem of his waistcoat for a pin, he approached and leaned over the back of Wallingford's chair.

"Vittoreo," directed J. Rufus, in the suave tones of a kind master, "I think there is a little too much draft in here from those top windows. I wish you would see to it."

"Yes, sir," strangled Blackie, catching the eye of the fiendishly grinning Hickey at the other end of the table. He felt under the right lapel of his coat. No pin!

"And, Vittoreo."

"Yes, sir."

"I wish you would get me a foot-stool."

"Y-yes, sir." Blackie felt under the other lapel.

"Vittoreo," called Hickey, motioning to him.

Blackie, adding Hickey to his list of future massacres, but determined, now, since he was in it, to bear all and beg for more with a submissive "Yes, sir," hurried over to Hickey.

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"I wish you'd have your drink-mixer put up a bottle of those cocktails for me," he gently requested, and at the same moment Blackie felt something slipped into the hand which hung below the edge of the table.

In the first shock, he thought it was money, and his face reddened, but before he had decided how he could meet this particular atrocity, his sense of touch advised him that Hickey had slipped him a precious pin, and his fingers closed over it.

"Thank you, sir," he said gratefully, and looking up, met the eye of Wallingford, who was chuckling, and whose huge round face was pink with the joy of the occasion.

Blackie returned immediately to his station behind Wallingford's chair, and with his hand resting lightly in the middle of Wallingford's broad back, leaned over obsequiously.

"Is there anything else I can do for monsieur?" he softly inquired.

"No, I think not, Vittoreo," returned J. Rufus grandly, and felt in his waistcoat pocket.

Blackie leaned still lower. "Don't wince, you fat slob!" he hissed in Wallingford's ear. "You feel this pin against your coat? Well, I'm going to jab it in to the hilt and leave it there!"

Wallingford paled and shrank. "Don't," he begged in low agonized tones.

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"If you wince or holler, you're a nigger!" again hissed Blackie, as full of vindictiveness as a coiled rattlesnake. "Now, one, two, three, bing!" and the bony piano-pounding fingers, which could crack hickory-nuts, performed their violent duty well, without the aid of any movement or twitch of his body farther back than the wrist.

Wallingford half lifted himself from his chair, and two big tears dripped from his lower eyelids and splashed down over his cheeks.

"Is there nothing else I can do for monsieur?" asked Blackie anxiously.

Wallingford shook his head and reached back for the pin.

Blackie, his rage only whetted by this taste of revenge, cast a triumphant glance at Hickey and strode out into the anteroom for a whiff of fresh air. There the fates were again kind to him. They sent him Umberto, who, his dark countenance crimsoned with fury, wagged a stubby forefinger under Blackie's nose.

"Royalist!" he hissed. "You know I am a Garibaldian, and you despise me! You say you have a sore throat! Maybe you will talk English, at least, to me, when I tell you that there are five hundred Garibaldians in this town, and no accursed Royalist stays here more than one day! Royalist!" and once more he shook his finger under Blackie's nose.

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The eyes of Blackie glistened with joy. "Um-m-m-berto, you are a gift from heaven," he observed, ineffably soothed. "I have been waiting for you. Come outside with me." And clutching Umberto by the convenient whiskers, he dragged him out into the hall, missed his footing, and they bumped comfortably down the marble steps together.

The great Vittoreo Matteo sat placidly through the called meeting of the Café Haut Company and listened without the quiver of an eyelash to the appalling financial report of the secretary. "In concluding this report," read the palely concerned Mr. Carter, "I beg to call the attention of the board to the remarkable fact that, while the luncheon and afternoon trade is quite up to expectations, the dinner and supper trade has dwindled to next to nothing." The secretary lowered his paper. "Now, I've made some private inquiries about this, and have compared notes with several members of this board, and have discovered a curious thing. Men won't go regularly where they are compelled to wear dress suits, but they will wear dress suits in places where they are not compelled to do so. Men who swear that we have the best food this side of New York put on their dress suits and go to the Star Hotel for dinner, and drop in again after the theater. I have

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asked a lot of them why, and they tell me that this place is too stiff."

President Thomas nodded his head. "Matteo, I guess we'll have to call off the dress-suit rule."

"Call it off?" inquired Blackie, still placid. "You mean to have no more dress suits at dinner?"

"No, I don't mean that," replied Thomas. "I mean that we must lessen the requirements; reduce the necessary fussing up, say, to a clean collar."

"I'm for that!" announced the president of the Bessemer Refinery, who could remember exactly where he got his start, and was proud of it. "I don't see any sense in refusing a twenty-dollar bill because the man who wants to spend it happens to have on a pink necktie with an emerald in it."

Thomas looked at him with a grin. "Why, you're the fussiest dresser in the crowd," he charged. "Seven minutes after six, every evening, finds you cursing your pearl studs."

"What of it?" defended the Bessemer man. "Just because I like to feel clean is no sign I'm a snob!"

A gleam of satisfaction rested upon the face of eleven good men and true. The sentiment was popular.

"The ayes seem to have it, Matteo," laughed Thomas. "The dress-suit rule must go."

"Never," stated Signore Matteo, quite placidly.

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"But, Matteo," Thomas pleaded, "you don't get this. On the opening night of this café we served dinner to two hundred and fifteen dress suits and two hundred and eighty-seven evening gowns, and everybody went home stuttering with happiness and champagne. The next night, which was Saturday, you had a hundred and four diners. The next night twenty-one, and now the average is about seven. People like the place and your food, and they love to pay the price, but they will not be ordered to wear a broad shirt-front. The dress suit must go."

"Never," insisted Vittoreo Matteo, still placidly. "You ask me to run a fine place, with everything very swell. I do so. It is the only kind of a place I will run. If the people do not come—" he shrugged his shoulders and spread his palms.

"Mr. President!" rasped the gentleman who had increased the Malleable Company from a brick stable to a twelve-acre plant. "I propose that we stop this fool discussion. I move that, from and after this date, the dress-suit rule be discontinued, that the newspapers be notified at once of our decision, and that we use our advertising space to state that fact. 'Come as you are,' would be a good slogan."

"Second the motion with much enthusiasm!" interjected the heavy-jowled gentleman who had added twenty-four stacks to the smelting works.

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President Thomas drew a long sad breath, "I regret to be compelled to announce that the motion is out of order," he stated with a sorrowing glance in the direction of Blackie. "Signore Matteo has, in his possession, a contract, signed by the officers of this board, and at the direction of the board, which gives him absolute management of the Café Haut for the next three years."

A silence like a funeral pall descended upon that assemblage of earnest business men.

"Move we adjourn," snapped the Bessemer man.

After the adjournment, the directors flocked around Blackie in their private and individual capacities, begged him, coaxed him and swore at him, but all to no purpose. That obstinate Italian, *pro tem.*, was not to be budged an inch, although they did finally exasperate him to the point of offering to buy their stock. They thought he was foolish, until he named the price he would pay. Thirty-five dollars a share!

Thomas was the first man to recover his breath. "The fundamental principle of my business is to stop a leak," he stated with a sigh.

Two days later, Blackie went to Monsieur Henri Dufois with a large thick bundle of stock certificates.

"Here it is," said he. "One hundred per cent. of the stock of the Café Haut Company. Give me that

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check for seventy thousand and change the sign to the Café Henri."

"I don't think I ought to pay you quite so much," smiled Henri. "Monogrammed china and silverware have not much value."

"I have only an hour and a half to pack and catch my train," laughed Blackie, handing him a fountain pen. "I suppose you'll allow a dress suit in your dining-room once in a while."

"If the wearer can pay cash," assented Henri.

"You were a long time in closing up," grumbled J. Rufus as Blackie stepped off the train in Poplar Center. "I have a lumber game here that has almost gone stale waiting for you to help with the finishing 'touch'."

"Three weeks is short work to close up a thirty-three-thousand-dollar profit," defended Blackie.

"Thirty-three thousand!" repeated Wallingford.

"Why, there was over twenty thousand left in the treasury alone, and you were in sole possession of the company for at least an hour before you sold out to Dufois. Do you mean to tell me that you only took the profit on the manipulation of the stock, and didn't snag out that twenty thousand?"

"Certainly not!" indignantly asserted Blackie.

"Do you suppose I'm a crook?"

CHAPTER VII

PIPING HOT

THE man who hailed J. Rufus Wallingford as an old friend was small and stooped and wizened, but his wrinkle-framed old eyes had a spark in them.

Wallingford shook the proffered hand with a cordiality that was purely habitual, and examined the stranger with cautious perplexity as he sat opposite in one of the leather chairs of the smoking compartment. "You have the advantage of me," he confessed reservedly, wondering whether his enforced traveling companion had known him as a benefactor, or otherwise.

The man laughed; a little crackling laugh which ended in a cough. "I fool all the boys," he boasted. "I'm so ready for the morgue that undertakers follow me home to get my address," and he laughed again, as if that were the best joke in the world. "I'm Dollar Bill."

Wallingford, both shocked and startled, scrutinized him again, incredulously. Why, Dollar Bill, whose specialty had been sawdust money, had been a roly-poly little chap, who should have stayed the

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same age until he failed to hear "ten." "You don't pass with me," puzzled Wallingford. "The Dollar Bill I knew would still be crisp."

The other put his hand on his chest and laughed again. "I make 'em all think I'm a counterfeit," he stated. "Do you remember the night the gook from Carson City passed me this souvenir?" and he exhibited a wrist across which was a ragged seam.

Wallingford looked into the still zestful eyes and shook his head sadly. "It's Dollar Bill all right, I guess," he acknowledged, hurt by the discovery. "What tore you?"

"I was bogus, and the government put a stamp on me," replied the frayed one. "They laid me away for a ten-stretch, Jim, and they took out of me everything I ever had. In place of it they gave me the 'cunny'."

Wallingford, who was physically sensitive to a high degree, hastened to change that unpleasant subject. "Happy news," he commented. "I suppose you've dropped the merry little green-goods game to which you were such an ornament."

"Cold," coughed Dollar Bill. "I've quit graft forever."

"What are you doing?" asked Wallingford sympathetically.

"Manufacturing antique furniture," was the cheerful reply, in which there was a note of pride.

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"I learned my trade in the government's big boarding-house on the island, and if I do say it myself, there isn't a man in the business can bore as fine a set of worm-holes as I can, or break a chair leg so natural. Why, I've even had my own antiques brought to me to be restored."

"No wonder you pin bouquets on Bill," approved J. Rufus. "I suppose there's a good profit in it."

"There would be if I didn't have to go to Texas every winter, to save the piece of a lung I have left. Looks as if I'd be late this season. My best new plant died, confound him; and I had just salted his shack."

"It's a game I'm not hep to," confessed Wallingford. "How do you lay the pipes to sell genuine antiques?"

"Well, I've worked up my own bunk. I watch the papers, and when I see that Mr. Pozollop has picked up a prize Pembroke high-boy in Liberty Center, I hit out for that new Yukon on the first rattler, because I know that the junk bugs will swarm there like mosquitoes around a rain-barrel. I locate a brass-necked old farmer, or a thin-nosed spinster, or even a thousand-year-old nigger mammy living in a shack with all the weatherboards loose, and slip them in a few choice antiques."

"I laugh as follows," observed Wallingford with profound approbation. "I should think these high-

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boy high-brows would have some way to tell the real goods from the phony, though."

"I meet all tests," scorned Dollar Bill. "I know 'em as soon as they do. My best gag, however, is to write, in the bottom of the secret drawer: 'From John to Prudence. With a heart full of love, July 4, 1776.' That always fetches 'em."

"I suppose that the latest storm center of acute antiquarianism is out this way," judged Wallingford.

"Piping hot. I got in ahead of Isaac Abrahams and Maple-Knot and Company, who are my chief competitors in the business. They planted a piecrust table, here and there, and a few Hoppendale dressers; and old Henry Crane screwed antique door-knockers all over Lafayette; but I got old Jonathan Bunker, in near-by Poplarville. His was the only rheumatic mansion in the county, and he was such a grouch that none of the neighbors had been in his house for twenty years; so nobody knew what he had."

"You fitted him up right, then?"

"From cellar to attic," boasted Dollar Bill, glowing with pride. "Every room in his house is filled with priceless antiques, with a secret drawer in everything but the glassware, and not an unbroken piece in the collection. I had the plant all ready for opening to the public, and had suction sweepers

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working, reversed, for a week, to get a good coating of dust, and had turned two dozen spiders loose in each room to put on the finishing touches, when old Jonathan, who went through every battle of the Civil War without a scratch, run a splinter in his thumb and died of lockjaw. Now, every stick of furniture I had is in that house. I haven't a scrap of paper to show for it, and the Oklahoma heir will probably throw me off the place when I put in my bill."

"It's a long way to Texas," commiserated Wallingford. "Why don't you write yourself a note from old Jonathan acknowledging his debt? He'll never dispute it."

"I don't know his handwriting," complained Bill.

"Poplarville!" yelled the brakeman, as the engine whistled for down brakes.

The antique furniture maker arose wearily. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"Lafayette. They tell me it's a live little county seat with plenty of loose money."

"Ten miles farther on," commented the other.

"Any particular business there?"

"No, just prospecting."

"I wish you'd get off and help me collect for my antiques," and the ex-green-goods man eyed wistfully the large proportions and impressive appearance of his old friend Wallingford.

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"I don't mind if I do," observed J. Rufus carelessly, and he went back to his chair for his hand-luggage.

Lafayette Bunker, who was a gaunt and clumsy man of queerly knotted muscles, stood at the gate of the old Bunker farm and acknowledged his identity with gloomy reluctance. "Yes, I'm old Jonathan Bunker's nephew," he stated. "Want to talk about buying the farm?"

"No," denied Dollar Bill, with a hopeless intuition. "I came to see you about some antique furniture."

"I don't want to buy none," immediately repudiated Lafayette. "I declare I don't know where old Jonathan got all the worthless trash the house is cluttered up with. When I was here, five years ago, he had two chairs and a kitchen table and a canvas cot."

"He got it from me," explained the worm-hole expert; "and here's the bill for it. I'm William J. Shuvit."

Lafayette Bunker, who had not yet removed his foot from the lower bar of the gate, eyed the document in question with careless indifference, but did not take it in his hands.

"That ain't no proof that Jonathan owed it to you," he uninterestedly argued. "Course I don't

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say he didn't, but if he did, you'll have to collect it the next time you see him," and he laughed silently, like a man too stingy to share even a joke.

"Very well; I'll have to replevin the furniture," announced Mr. Shuvit, concealing his anger as much as possible.

"You can do whatever you blame please," granted young Mr. Bunker. "The furniture's mine, and I'm goin' to sell it if I can find anybody fool enough to buy it," and he strolled away in the direction of the disintegrating old house, pausing to pull a dead and decayed weed from the side of the walk.

"The worst of it is I don't dare replevin it," confessed Dollar Bill to Wallingford. "The papers would get hold of it, and that would ruin my business. I ought to have made several thousand dollars on this deal, but, in the shape the thing is, I'd have been glad to settle for fifteen hundred, and take the next train for Texas. Why, confound it, Jim, I haven't any furniture left to sell. I used it all in stocking up this place."

"You might buy it in at a very cheap figure," suggested Wallingford. "I say," he called after the retreating heir to the Bunker estate.

Lafayette half turned and bent upon them impatient brows. "Hunh?" he grunted.

"What will you take for that furniture?"

The heir from Oklahoma came back immediately.

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"What'll you give?"

"A hundred dollars."

"Well, this morning I might have sold it to you for that, but I've just seen this man's bill, and it says the furniture's worth fifteen hundred; so that's the price. I ain't lookin' for any profit. I'm just a plain farmer."

"I know; I've bought apples from them," chuckled Wallingford. "Let's see that furniture."

"Come right in," invited Mr. Bunker.

Dollar Bill Shuvit walked reverently into the parlor of the old Bunker homestead, and surveyed his own creations with the worshipful pride of a born genius. "Look at that Scrambleton suite," he glowed. "Did you ever see more beautifully threadbare upholstery? Look at the mended leg on that Stuart table! You can see that the bottom of the leg is newer wood, and was glued on by a dub, say twenty or twenty-five years ago!"

Wallingford looked about him with the appreciation of an artist. The dust of ages lay thickly on everything, and the spiders, undisturbed for years in the dim light of those shuttered rooms, had spun their webs where they would, even across the pendulum of the long-since-stilled grandfather's clock which glared in at them from the hall.

"That's a sure-enough old-timer," observed Wallingford, viewing the last-named article admiringly.

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"Isn't it!" agreed Dollar Bill with enthusiasm, as Mr. Bunker strode back to the kitchen to suppress a boiling teapot. "I buy my works from a maker who can scratch a hundred-year-old repair date better than any other man in the business. There's a secret drawer up in here."

"You're strong for secret drawers," remarked Wallingford, glancing into the library, where stood an exquisitely inlaid mahogany desk that had been painted black, with the paint cleverly worn off on one corner to show the treasure underneath.

"They're the life of the business," corroborated Mr. Shuvit with professional enthusiasm.

He led J. Rufus into the dining-room, and upstairs into the bedrooms, and even into the attic, extolling the virtues of rare high-boys and low-boys and other modern triumphs of antiquity, and since Wallingford was interested, displayed secret drawers and sliding panels and false bottoms and hollow bedposts without number.

"Well, how's the furniture?" asked Mr. Bunker, rejoining them in the front bedroom, where Wallingford himself had begun to covet a heavy old four-poster that bore the marks of two full centuries of dignified wear.

"It's too old-fashioned to be worth much," decried Wallingford. "I might give you the hundred dollars I first offered you for it."

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"It's worth more than that for lumber," insisted Mr. Bunker. "I've heard, too, that old-fashioned furniture sometimes fetches fancy prices."

"When it's in such rotten repair as this!" retorted Wallingford indignantly, pointing to the carefully sagged bed-rail and to the tottering high-boy, one corner of which had been propped up with an artistically scratched and marred and battered walnut jewel box.

"Well, it is kind o' shiftless-looking," admitted Mr. Bunker, scratching his head. "I'm willing to knock two hundred and fifty dollars for repairs off o' what this gentleman says the goods is worth."

"Twelve hundred and fifty dollars," figured Wallingford. "I might buy the farm for that, if you'd throw in the house and furniture."

"Make it five thousand and I'll go you," offered Bunker.

"This isn't oil land," derided Wallingford. "How many acres are there to this place?"

"Twenty."

"And it won't grow mullein stalks!" scorned Wallingford. "Look out of the window at those stone-covered hillsides. Have you the nerve to want two hundred and fifty dollars an acre for this collection of pebbles that has too much earth in it to even make a good gravel-bank?"

"Seventy-five an acre," amended Bunker. "The

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house is worth two thousand and the furniture fifteen hundred. What did you say your name was, mister?"

"J. Rufus Wallingford," answered that gentleman, feeling that he had better play safe on that item.

"I thought I heard this other man call you that," went on Mr. Bunker. "Well, Mr. Wallingford, I'm just a plain farmer, and bein' I'm anxious to get back to my farm with some ready cash, I'm willing to make a leetle sacrifice to you. I'll call the farm fifteen hundred and the house fifteen hundred and the furniture a thousand. That's four thousand dollars; but I want spot cash. There's a barn out there, too, you know."

"I'll think it over, but I know I won't pay you that price," said Wallingford.

"You'd better think quick, for there's other people wants this place," prevaricated Mr. Bunker. "Suppose'n' you just walk out to the barn and back, and give me your answer."

"You'll be perfectly satisfied if you get your fifteen hundred?" inquired Wallingford, out at the barn.

"Satisfied!" echoed Dollar Bill. "I'd be plumb slothful."

"All right; I think I'll give it to you," suddenly decided J. Rufus.

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He went back toward the house, and Mr. Bunker came down the kitchen steps to meet him.

"There's a good grazing meadow down yonder where the spring run goes through," he urged.

"You couldn't graze a sick dog on it. I'll give you three thousand five hundred for the farm and everything in it or on it, if you can assure me of a clear quitclaim deed, and will leave Poplarville to-morrow, and stay away."

"Cash?" demanded Lafayette Bunker with quivering eagerness.

"Money," Wallingford assured him; "plain, simple, United States greenbacks, pronounced genuine at any bank."

"Come right over to Lafayette to the courthouse," invited Mr. Bunker. "We can drive it in an hour and a half in your hired rig out there."

"Sieve" Bascom, so nicknamed because his face was so minutely and so evenly pockmarked, and because he could not hold liquor, plunged his spade slowly into the turf of the old Bunker front yard and paused to rest. An infinitesimal patch of fresh brown earth marked the net result of his last half-hour of labor, but, even so, he glared at it vindictively.

"This country's all for the rich," he growled. "A

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man that's born poor stays poor, an' the only chance that he's got is to slave from morning to night."

Jim-Jams Jones, working with an equally reluctant spade on the opposite side of the path, paused in the very act of lifting a few clods to agree. The tip of Mr. Jones' bulbous nose was an angry copper-red, and there was no sobriety to the windward side of him.

"Sometime they'll be a revolution, an' the down-trod laborin' classes'll git their rights," he thickly prophesied. "For two cents, I'd refuse to drudge another stroke for this here rich Wallingford."

Sieve pried at his spade-handle to loosen the turf. "Trouble is, we need his money, an' there's a law ag'inst takin' it away from him, as we'd ort to do," he opined.

"Didn't even say how much he'd pay," grumbled Jim-Jams, turning his own spadeful. "Supposin' he shouldn't come back!" and he dropped his spade in a sudden panic.

"We'd lay a lien ag'inst the property," pronounced Sieve confidently, turning over another spadeful and proceeding to break it. "This government protects the laborin' man. I reckon—"

The glint of something yellow caught his eye. He stooped over slowly to examine it, then, with an involuntary gasp and a furtive glance at Jim-Jams

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Jones, picked it up and nonchalantly slipped it into his pocket.

"Wha'd you find?" asked Jim-Jams, but without the useless exertion of coming over to see.

"Nail," replied Sieve with studied carelessness. "Say, Jim-Jams, supposin' you go back 'round to the well and draw up that pint of bug-juice we brought along."

Jim-Jams started back along the path with an alacrity that would have been deemed impossible in him by one who had watched him spade. When he returned, Sieve had dug up an area equal to his entire previous work of the morning; and the earth was powdered; also there was a feverish glitter in Sieve's eyes.

"Looky here, Jim-Jams," said Sieve, "this job ain't big enough for two, an' if you don't like to work at it, I don't mind finishin' it myself."

Jim-Jams regarded him darkly, and cast his eye reflectively at his own work. Suddenly he leaned forward, with puzzled brows.

"You spaded up some o' mine," he charged. "Lemme see that nail!"

Sieve reached his hand in his pocket with ready compliance, then drew it out reluctantly. "It ain't there," he said. "I guess I must 'a' dropped it out."

"Lemme see that nail!" demanded Jim-Jams, advancing.

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"It ain't there, I tell you," insisted Sieve, backing away. "It wasn't much of a nail, nohow; all bent an' rusted up."

"Lemme see that nail!" reiterated Jim-Jams, breasting close up to Sieve, with his left forearm close up under that gentleman's chin and his right fist drawn threateningly back for a short-arm jab in the wind.

To his intense surprise, Sieve, who could notoriously be bluffed even by a notorious bluffer, suddenly grappled with him, and they rolled over and over on the weed-tufted gravel walk. They doubled and twisted and writhed, but suddenly the sight of something yellow on the walk, something that had rolled from Sieve's pocket, caused Jim-Jams to let go his hold and pounce. It was Sieve's "nail," and though he pounced also, Jim-Jams got it and arose to his feet, clutching it firmly in his hand. It was a five-dollar gold piece of an old date, tarnished and crusted with earth, but beautiful!

"Turn your pockets inside out!" ordered the outraged and indignant Jim-Jams.

"I ain't got another one, partner," stated Sieve with cheerful alacrity. "I wouldn't fool you. I only intended to surprise you."

"Turn your pockets inside out," ordered Jim-Jams with the cold insistence of an honest man who is dealing with a known thief.

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Sieve did so pleasantly, and proved himself an honest man. "Here's what," he brightly suggested. "You take your side an' me mine, an' see who gets the most."

"Not by a damn sight!" repudiated Mr. J. J. Jones emphatically. "We'll take your side first. You'll spade an' I'll watch."

Mr. Sieve Bascom demurred vigorously to this arrangement, but the inherent force of character of Mr. Jones won the day; and never was there a patch of ground so thoroughly spaded as the forward portion of the right-hand section of the front yard of the old Bunker home. The work, under the active and intelligent supervision of Mr. Jones, was, in fact, so thoroughly done that it was extremely slow. It was almost sub-soil spading, but by night-fall it had yielded thirty-two dollars, a rich pay-streak of old silver coins having been struck just before sunset. Mr. Jones, still fresh and keen upon the scent, was for continuing the work by lantern-light, but Mr. Bascom, whose muscles were throbbing from the unwonted exercise, argued forcefully and successfully that they might overlook something in the dark; so, feeling well paid for their efforts, and united by a strong mutual purpose, they trudged into Poplarville in great friendliness and dropped in to Mike's for a supper appetizer.

They were very lordly as they entered the place,

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where they had so long been furtively meek, and Mr. Jones paid for that drink with a nicely washed gold coin, which Mike scrutinized almost hard enough to make it blush before he tossed it into the drawer and made change. Meanwhile, the two hard-working laboring men chuckled, and gazed at each other with secret understanding as they drank their drinks.

"Let's have some more o' the same," suggested Mr. Jones. "Two more o' that two-for-a-quarter stuff, Mike. It's on Sieve this time."

"I ain't seen the paper yet," observed Mike as he set forth the bottle; "but I suppose I'll hear about the hold-up before the night's over."

Sieve laid a five-dollar gold piece on the bar. "We'll be right here if anybody wants to pinch us," he promised. "Let's have Piggy Moore bring in a steak from next door, Jim-Jams."

"I was thinkin' we'd go down to Reagan's an' have a swell feed," debated Jones; "but I guess we'd be more comfortable here. Tell him a big sirloin an' some German fried, an' some hot coffee an' pie," and with the easy grace of a man of means, he leaned an elbow on the bar and crossed one foot over the other, while he drank his second drink, with his little finger sticking straight out from the glass.

Mike, who had been going out for a little stroll, put on his apron before he counted out the change for the second gold piece.

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Mr. Bascom and Mr. Jones walked over to the little card-table, where, after they had placed their order for the feast, they demanded that liquor be brought to them; good liquor.

Pinky Slump walked in, and Jim-Jams Jones broke the eternal record of Mike's place by inviting him to have a drink, nonchalantly displaying a handful of silver when he paid for it, and Pinky decided to remain. Rhubarb Jennings made his usual appearance for the evening session and joined the pleased committee on irrigation.

At eleven o'clock, Jim-Jams Jones, forgetting that they were not alone, had a sudden remembrance of how Sieve had tried to "do" him.

"Rusty nail, wasn't it!" he charged thickly. "Tried to lie to your old partner, didn't you!"

"Aw, cut it, Jim-Jams!" protested Sieve. "You got yours, an' let's be friends. We got to get more in the mornin'."

"Rusty nail!" scorned Jones, leaning forward and glaring through his reddened eyes. "Tha's what you tried to put me off with. Rusty nail! An' you tried to put me off o' the job, an' let you spade up the whole Bunker front yard yourself. Is that equality and brotherhood?"

Pinky Slump exchanged a startled glance with Mike. Rhubarb Jennings loafed over closer to the table. There were a dozen thirsty regulars at the

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bar, the entire leisure element of the growing little town, and they were all busy drinking, at the expense of the two lucky ones.

"Aw, cut it, Jim-Jams!" pleaded Sieve.

"James!" corrected the other, smacking his fist inaccurately on the edge of the table. "James J. Jones, an' that goes. Rusty nails, eh? Look here, Sieve, this is what I'm goin' to do with you. You're goin' to stay home to-morrow, an' I'm goin' to spade up the rest o' that Bunker front yard myself. Tha's because you tried to do me."

Pinky Slump walked quietly out of the rear door. Rhubarb Jennings regarded his going thoughtfully, and followed. There seemed a strange thrill of intensity in the room. Mike took off his apron and handed it to his bartender.

Fifteen minutes afterward, Sieve Bascom and James J. Jones were left in uninterrupted conversation, with only a nervous bartender to wait on them. The bartender turned them out, sodden in walking sleep, half an hour before closing time, and sallied forth to borrow a spade and a lantern. There was none to be had!

CHAPTER VIII

MONEY MAD

POPLARVILLE suddenly burst from obscurity and elbowed its way into a definite location on the map. J. Rufus Wallingford, waiting for just that transformation, grabbed all the papers from the news-stand and caught the first train, driven by the stern necessity of protecting his property. At the station, he wired Blackie Daw to close up his deal in Ironbough and come on, then he climbed into the train and surrounded himself with entertaining information. A miser story always finds its way to the front page, and the New York correspondent in Poplarville had a gorgeously creative mind, which was attuned to the safe and conservative harmony of only one thousand per cent. exaggeration.

The grounds of the recently defunct Jonathan Bunker had proved to be a veritable gold mine, and the citizens of Poplarville had gone money mad. Fabulous deposits of yellow coin had been unearthed at every spadeful, and untold wealth had suddenly come upon families that had been poor for generations. A thousand dollars had been unearthed from the roots of an old rosebush; another thousand had

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been concealed beneath the flooring of the well platform; a fortune had been discovered in the corner of the long-unused dog-kennel; in the rotted front gate-post had been found the price of a farm, and Wallingford, as he devoured these and smaller glowing details, admired the mental resources of a writer who could turn an exact two hundred dollars' worth of gold and silver coin into such an inexhaustible Golconda. The best was yet to come, however; for, after having detailed these few simple facts, the budding genius, with a loud plunk, fell back on his imagination, and though hemmed in by the absence of display type, narrated, in a free-running, ball-bearing lie, how the worthy citizens had staked out claims in the front yard, the back garden, the stony hillsides and the meadow, and how, this morning, they were feverishly buying and selling shares in these claims on Flagpole Square.

Pausing to give the tension spring on his typewriter another twist, the gleeful gurgling correspondent had manufactured a gaudy life history for the secretive old Jonathan, and incidentally mentioned that the historic old mansion, provided on the spot with a romance of the Revolutionary War, one of the Civil War and with a ghost, was a repository of priceless antique furniture, dating from the landing of Columbus, the whole now being owned by one J. Rufus Wallingford, a world-famous connoisseur

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and antiquarian. On the arrival of Mr. Wallingford wholesale arrests were expected.

Edified, instructed and improved by this intellectual treat, Wallingford stepped from the train at Poplarville and ran straight into an eager young chap with straw-colored hair and gold-rimmed glasses.

"This is Mr. Wallingford, I believe," said the young chap before the porter had set down that eminent connoisseur and antiquarian's grips.

Wallingford clutched him warmly by the hand and viewed him with frank admiration. "You're the young man who writes for the New York papers," he correctly guessed. "What's your name?"

"Paul Pollet."

"That cinches it," chuckled Wallingford. "You're hired."

Paul Pollet had produced a note-book to make a few jottings, but now he slammed it back into his pocket. "Home, hotel or sheriff's?" he briskly inquired, bundling Wallingford into a rickety old cab.

"Sheriff?" repeated Wallingford in perplexity. "Oh, yes. I suppose you have it all planted for me to arrest the town."

A shade of disappointment dawned on the other's face. "I have a posse of twenty deputies sworn in and waiting the word. It would make a great follow story!"

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Wallingford considered carefully a moment. "Drive to the sheriff's," he said.

Paul Pollett's brow cleared instantly. "Will you excuse me a minute?"

"All right," granted Wallingford. "Where are you going?"

"Into the telegraph office to file my description of the wholesale arrests and the rioting which followed. I had planned to have the state militia here by tomorrow," and jerking a bulky manuscript from his pocket, he darted for the depot.

"Wait a minute!" called Wallingford; and then as Paul came back, "Is there anything in your story about the antique furniture?"

"Not a line."

"Get a mention of it in some place where they can't lift it out."

"It's in," promised Paul, and whizzed. He was gone five minutes, and came running back with purple copying ink on his ear, but happy. He immediately bounced into the cab. "Now, Mr. Wallingford, what am I hired for?"

"Secretary and prospectus writer."

"I'll have old Henry stop at the office of the *Evening Reformer*," returned Paul happily. "I have to resign. I suppose there's no use talking salary. You'll pay me more than I'm getting now, and expenses. How soon may I write a prospectus?"

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"Right away," promised Wallingford. "I want a flossy descriptive catalogue of that antique furniture."

For a moment young Mr. Pollet looked blank. "I'm afraid I don't know much about antique furniture," he confessed.

Wallingford turned on him reproachful eyes. "Do you need facts for a good story?" he demanded.

"They only gum it up," announced Paul with conviction. "I thought I ought to get your instructions, though. I'll make you a catalogue that any antiquarian could read to his family. I think I'll run on ahead to the *Reformer* office," and he leaped out of the cab with a friendly word of encouragement to the horse.

He was standing in front of the sheriff's office when old Prince stopped there with a sigh, and he made everything easy for Wallingford.

"Just sit still, but have your fountain pen ready," he suggested. "I'll bring out the warrants for you to sign. It's the custom here. They're all ready. There's fifty-eight of them, so far."

The posse, each man with a glittering tin badge on his breast, marched out in solemn array, while Paul was still in the office, and lined up against the wall, happy in their stern ferocity, and grateful to the stranger who had made it possible for them to arrest their neighbors.

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"This is posse number two," explained Paul as he bustled out with the papers, followed by the sheriff, who was a pursy short man with a protruding mustache and puffy red cheeks. "Posse number one is out guarding your property, and if we can only sneak in the back way, I think we'll see evidence enough to have posse number two arrest posse number one. I have the blank warrants right in my pocket. I think it'll make a great story, don't you?"

Wallingford, his big shoulders heaving so that he could hardly write, paused a moment to enjoy his new secretary. "Blackie Daw is being cheated," he chuckled, and went on with his writing.

The sheriff, who wore the widest brimmed felt hat that could be found, and ostentatiously displayed a huge bulge beneath his coat in each hip pocket, took every warrant as it was signed and examined it with a portentous frown, and when he had twenty, distributed them to the deputies, one to each man, and came back for more. When Henry and old Prince and the antiquarian and his secretary drove away, those deputies were issuing forth in double file, with the globular little sheriff at their head; and there was not another male human being to be seen on the streets of Poplarville.

Half a mile from Jonathan Bunker's former house, Wallingford and young Pollet, after despair-

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ing instructions to old Henry, left the cab and made a détour through the hills. When they came in sight of the house, young Pollet took one look at the industrious panorama, filled with earnest spaders, and whipped out his bundle of blank warrants.

"Just sign these!" he joyfully urged. "I'll send them back by old Henry when he brings up the luggage."

The collectors of antique furniture came and went into rhapsodies over the artistic handiwork of Dollar Bill Shuvit, and read the incomparably erudite catalogue, but they all went away with their hands to their brows, for the price J. Rufus Wallingford had set upon the collection was staggeringly prohibitive, and he would not sell individual pieces. The first two days, of course, brought forth the regular dealers in antique furniture, but these gentlemen did not even inquire the price; they merely inspected the furniture with delighted approval and passed their hands over it lovingly and said "Billy Shuvit" and went away; but the genuine collectors, those who were well up on the literature of antiques, and could tell a Chippendale in the dark, lingered long, and went away broken-hearted, while Paul Pollet went about with a pained puzzled feeling.

On the evening of the fourth day, however, he came to Wallingford with a relieved countenance.

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"There have been two or three people here with enough money to cart away the whole works, but you haven't seemed anxious to sell," he observed, as Wallingford, with his coat off and his sleeves rolled up, prepared to broil a steak over the coals of the kitchen stove.

"No," agreed Wallingford with a speculatively amused glance at young Pollet, who was setting the table for two.

"That means that you haven't found the right kind of a buyer," went on Pollet with relentless logic, propping their two folded cots with a stick of stove-wood so he could move the table away from the wall.

"No," admitted Wallingford, slamming the steak down close to the coals for a sizzling moment and then twirling it swiftly on the other side. "Get your plates out of the oven, Paul," and twirling the steak back to the original side, he reached out with his deft right hand, turned some sizzling German-frying potatoes with a fork, and replaced the tin lid on the skillet.

Young Pollet set the hot plates on the table with a slam, and distributed them. "Gee, what a story!" he exclaimed. "Say, Wallingford, how do you work the rest of it?"

"Open the beer," chuckled Wallingford, watching his steak with painstaking judgment.

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Young Pollet, still laboring with his inexorable logic, took in the beer from the cool window-sill and opened it, as Wallingford slid the deliciously browned steak on to the hot platter, and with the haste of a man stamping out the fuse of the powder-magazine in the third act, returned for the potatoes.

"You could have unloaded, at a fair price, to an honest man this morning, and you let a rich old spinster go yesterday, who was pathetically eager to be stung."

Wallingford seized a carving-knife and laid open some juicy red slices. "Where's the salt?" he demanded.

Paul shoved it from behind the platter of fresh-cut bread, and poured the beer. "I guess if you'd sell to an honest man you'd be in bad," he opined.

Wallingford sat himself down with a sigh of comfort and took up his knife and fork. "You are a young man of remarkable penetration, Paul," he complimented his secretary. "A great many otherwise bright men go to jail for selling their goods to the wrong people. There's a law against that. If you don't eat a steak like this while it's blistering hot it's no good until it's ice cold."

That night, when Wallingford thought he was asleep, Paul raised up on his elbow.

"I'll be jiggered if I see how you work it," he remarked. "This miser stunt has me going. I

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know you planted that money, but I don't see why. Nobody believes there's a cent left in the ground."

"That was advertising," laughed Wallingford, and went to sleep.

In the morning, J. Rufus walked into town for exercise, and when he came back he brought Blackie Daw behind deaf old Henry and dumb old Prince.

Blackie and Paul Pollet accepted an introduction with grave courtesy, and then, after a long hard look at each other, they mutually grinned.

"Welcome to our family," said Blackie cordially.

"Jim has been telling me about the reckless imagination you've brought into the firm, and as soon as Toad Jessop takes your measure, we'll sign them papers. Come on and educate me in antique furniture. I'm to be the sales person."

They went into the dim old rooms, and became better known to each other amid the hoary antiquities deposited there by William J. Shuvit, and by nightfall they were so well acquainted that Paul stopped whatever he was doing every time Blackie started to say anything.

That day had been unproductive, though the place had been overrun with collectors who were willing to bankrupt themselves on a Hoppendale high-boy or a Tingletower table, but staggered faintly away on the ultimatum of all or none.

About nine o'clock the next morning, however,

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Paul hustled back to Wallingford, who was having fun with the preparation of a frog-leg pie, and took down his overcoat.

"If you don't need me, I think I'll run into town to my boarding-house and pack up," he suggested.

"All right," agreed Wallingford, opening the oven door to test the heat. "What's your hurry?"

"Your buyer's here," explained Paul briskly. "Just judging him from the outside, I should say he was worth a few hundred thousand dollars that are hungry for company, and are not particular about their associates."

Washing his hands and slipping on his coat, Wallingford strolled into the front room in a gravely preoccupied fashion, and found there, in furtive inspection of the surroundings, a one-eyed man whose broad mouth and heavily wrinkled cheeks suggested that he would feel more natural with a knife between his teeth.

"I know but very little about such things," Blackie was saying as Wallingford entered, "and, in fact, Mr. Wallingford is equally ignorant of old furniture. He only knows that this is a very valuable collection and bought it on speculation. Mr. Wallingford, this is Mr. Day, who has come to look at the Bunker collection."

"It is a very fine collection," Wallingford gravely assured him. "My business agent will give you

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every opportunity to examine it, and I feel sure that, if you are a judge of such things, you will be ready to talk business when you are through."

"Well, I don't know," speculated Mr. Day, his one keen eye roving to the grandfather's clock and to the what-not and to the ceiling. "I hear that this old Jonathan Bunker was a queer case."

"He was rather an eccentric character, I believe," agreed Wallingford.

"Heard he was a miser," went on Mr. Day, his greedy eye straying in to the heavy black desk and to the bookcase and to the padded chairs.

"I think that report was greatly exaggerated," returned Wallingford with a smile. "The town went crazy over finding a few odd coins scattered about the grounds, and I discovered a few gold pieces in the cellar, but, come to sift it down, I don't believe there was more than three hundred dollars hidden all told. I've made some inquiries, and I can't find where Bunker could have obtained any money to hide."

Mr. Day's anxious eye returned from a roving voyage into the visible portion of the dining-room.

"I suppose not," he acquiesced. "Your man tells me you ain't a regular furniture-dealer."

"Hardly," laughed Wallingford. "This is my first offense. I don't know any more about furniture than a cat does about building a nest in a tree."

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I only bought this place to oblige a friend. Mr. Daw; I'm afraid I shall have to leave Mr. Day entirely in your hands. I have some business in town."

After Wallingford had gone, Blackie also excused himself, on the plea of writing a letter, and begged Mr. Day to conduct his own tour of inspection for a while. He went up-stairs to write his letter, and, instead, looked down into the library through a hole which had been conveniently bored in the elaborate plaster centerpiece of the hanging-lamp.

Mr. Day's first action, on being left alone, was to walk through all the rooms down-stairs, to make sure that they were vacant, then he returned hastily to the library and pulled out the drawers of the old desk, one by one, feeling into the vacant drawer-spaces with his eye upturned in a painfully hopeful squint. At last he gave a grunt of satisfaction as he drew forth a small inner drawer from the base of the desk, behind the longer ones, and Blackie, whose tread was as light as a cat's, arrived in the door of the library just as Mr. Day was about to replace the receptacle.

"What have you found there?" demanded the stern Blackie, advancing swiftly into the room and taking it from him. "A secret drawer, by George!"

"Yes," acknowledged Mr. Day, looking him

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squarely in the eye with his one orb, and betraying no embarrassment whatsoever. "That's the sign of this being a genuine Diskerton desk."

"How interesting," commented Blackie. "Maybe there are some more such things," and he proceeded to haul out the drawers and stack them on the desk.

"It ain't no use," urged Mr. Day hastily, and obviously ill-pleased with the proceeding. "I never heard tell of their putting more than one secret drawer in a piece of furniture."

"They might," insisted Blackie, highly interested, and he kept vigorously at his work, prowling into the interior of the empty desk, and thumping its panels, and investigating it thoroughly. "Why, here's another one, up underneath the top! The regular one slid right under it," and he drew forth a flat narrow drawer, filled with tarnished half-dollars.

He set it on the corner of the desk, and the two men looked thoughtfully at it, and then at each other.

"I reckon Mr. Wallingford would raise his price if he knew this," speculated Mr. Day with a short little laugh.

"Yes, I reckon he would," acknowledged Blackie, echoing the laugh; "if he knew it."

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Mr. Day's available eye gazed on Blackie with kind regard. "I suppose you're kind of attached to your boss," he guessed.

"I'm attached to anybody who hands me money," declared Blackie.

"What he don't know won't hurt him," mused Mr. Day, his now dilated eye rolling greedily in the direction of the bookcase.

Blackie went into the kitchen and returned with a stout flour-bag, into which he dumped the half-dollars. "Let's slam these drawers back and look somewhere else," he suggested. "How much did you get out of that other drawer?"

Mr. Day glared at him a moment and from his pocket produced ten silver dollars and a small handful of pennies. "It ain't much," he declared, omitting to mention the four five-dollar gold pieces which he had slipped into his waistcoat pocket; "but every little bit helps."

They had a mad merry search for secret drawers, and the bag grew steadily heavier. The deposits seemed to be richer, too, as they proceeded, and Mr. Day's greed was whetted to a ravenous point with each successive find.

"Book-learning pays," he triumphed, as they wrenched its long-hidden secret from a chiffonier and rescued some faded greenbacks of an early vintage. "I don't know much about old furniture my-

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self, but once I found fifty dollars in an old bed-post, and I've been reading up on secret drawers ever since. Now, take that bedstead. I'll bet at least one of them posts is hollow, if not all four."

He tried the caps of each one, and the third one unscrewed. He reached his long fingers into the cavity, and at first his upturned eye took on a look of abused disappointment, then it brightened and its lid screwed nearly shut as he drew forth a small glittering object, and held it in the palm of his hand.

"A diamond!" gasped Blackie. "Why, that one's worth eight hundred or a thousand dollars! This rock I'm wearing cost me six hundred."

Mr. Day replaced the cap and screwed it tight. Blackie held out his hand for the diamond. Mr. Day slipped it into his waistcoat pocket and led Blackie immediately away from that bed-post, in which there were nine other diamonds, equally large, and some priceless rubies and sapphires and emeralds.

"We'd oughtn't to put this in the bag," he decided. "It might cut through. Let's see if there's anything in this old secretary."

Blackie watched Mr. Day calmly until he found the cunningly hidden compartment, and then he walked to the window and pulled the crumpled newspaper from its broken pane, as a signal, after which he busied himself with a clumsy old wash-stand in the opposite corner.

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Meanwhile, Mr. Day was excitedly feasting upon an acid-yellowed old parchment, which read as follows:

"To the heir of Zachariah Bunker, who finds this writing. The treasure of the unholy Dalton Band, which I can not with safety put to any present public use, is hid in the place which is told hereinafter. With my dying breath, I charge whoever finds this to exhume that treasure, which consists of some forty pounds, avoirdupois, of melted gold, some fifty pounds, more or less, of melted silver, and many jewels, including above a hundred diamonds, the value of which I am unable to judge, not having any degree of expertness in such matters; but, whatever its value, I charge my descendants to turn this treasure into lawful money and devote it to the chapel and the founding of a fund for the support of such an institution. The treasure is buried as follows: Thirty rods to the southeast of the spring is a black boulder with a rough cross hacked on its side. Measuring from this cross—"

"What did you find?" asked Blackie, suddenly turning.

"Nothing of any consequence," declared Day, attempting to shove the parchment into his pocket, but Blackie was too quick for him, and opened the mouth of the bag peremptorily.

With great reluctance Mr. Day dropped the parchment into the bag, just as a heavy foot resounded in the hall below.

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"I'll hide it in here," whispered Blackie, and hastily stuffing the bag into a closet, he locked the door and slipped the key into his pocket.

"Well, Mr. Day," said Wallingford, entering the room, "how do you like the furniture?"

"It's pretty fair," acknowledged Mr. Day with a fleeting but intense glance at the third bed-post and a speculative one at the fourth. There were two other beds on that floor, and a vast virgin field in the attic. "I've seen better furniture, but this might catch me, if you made the price right. I'd be willing to give you a pretty fair figure for that bed, say."

"I'll not break the collection," declared Wallingford firmly. "I shall have one sale, and be done with it. As a matter of fact, I would rather sell the entire estate just as it stands, and give you the key."

"I'll even dicker with you on that," offered Mr. Day, suppressing his eagerness. "How much do you want for the place?"

"Thirty-five thousand dollars," said Wallingford calmly.

Mr. Day's one eye almost glazed. "I'm talkin' sense," he protested.

"So am I," insisted Wallingford. "There are over forty pieces of furniture here, and some of them are worth over a thousand dollars apiece. Be-

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sides the furniture and the house and the farm, there's the chance that you might find some more money. That's worth something."

"Not much I reckon," scorned Mr. Day. "You said yourself you didn't know where old Jonathan'd get it."

"That's true," admitted Wallingford. "I don't think it's much of an inducement, but the chance is there, just the same. What I'm really charging you for is the antique furniture, which I bought from the heir of old Jonathan Bunker, and I'm told that it's worth the money."

"Let's go out and look at the farm," suggested Mr. Day, and he led the way by a roundabout path to the spring.

There, about thirty rods to the southeast, was a big black boulder, upon the side of which was rudely scratched a cross!

Paul Pollet was waiting on the platform of the station when Wallingford and Blackie and Mr. Day came down to take the train. He sat on an up-ended suit case, with a typewriter on one side of him, a hand-bag on the other, a trunk behind him, and a lunch-basket on his lap, prepared to remain right there until sent for. He grinned cheerfully when the trio approached, and his first question, when Blackie dropped behind while Wallingford and Day went in to buy the tickets, was:

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"How much did you get?"

"The first price," grinned Blackie. "Why?"

"I'm trying to get a line on how much salary to hang you up for," explained Paul. "Have you got your money?"

"Not yet, but soon," replied Blackie. "We're going to the city on this train, and rush to the bank before it closes and get ours, and rush back through here on the return train. Mr. Day, however, will get off at this stop. He wishes to be alone in his new house."

"To hunt the rest of the 'salt'?" laughed Paul.

Blackie looked at him in sorrow. "How foolish," he commented, and Wallingford and the old furniture collector returning just then, Blackie took the latter gentleman to one side. "I'll drop off with you on our way back," he offered, "and help you search the rest of that furniture."

"I don't need any help," refused Mr. Day hastily. "It's my furniture now, you know."

"Yes, but we were to go halvers on what we found," insisted Blackie.

"We only got a little over eight hundred dollars up to the time I bought the place."

"And that diamond," Blackie reminded him. "There were others in there. I remember I heard them clink when you dropped the one you showed me. And then there was that paper. What was in

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it? I'm going back and see. I've a right to know."

"There wasn't anything in it," sturdily maintained Mr. Day, showing the honesty of his soul in his good left eye, which was wide open and fearless and frank, though slightly shifting. "Tell you what I'll do, Mr. Daw. There ain't no use to waste your time by having you stop off there, and make Mr. Wallingford suspicious of you. I'll just buy out your half-interest, counting the cash at eight hundred and the diamond at seven hundred, that makes fifteen; and your half's seven-fifty. I'll give it to you."

"You'll draw enough extra at the bank to slip me fifteen hundred, or I'll get off and look," firmly threatened Blackie.

When they had passed through Marlville on the return trip, Blackie produced fifteen hundred dollars in crisp crackling bills, and passed the bundle to Wallingford.

"That's the prop. cash you used to salt the mine," he stated. "I could have had more of it, but I didn't want a profit. We lose the cost of those three ounces of diamonds and other precious gems. You're an extravagant cuss, Jim, for buying such good ones. Cheaper ones would have done just as well."

"I like things done right," chuckled Wallingford. "They cost us thirty-three dollars, but we can afford to lose it."

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"Extravagance in the small details of running expense has been the ruination of many a good business," chided Blackie sedately.

Little Paul Pollet wiped his glasses reflectively and strove to look as serious as Blackie.

"Only one thing worries me," observed Wallingford presently, with a frown. "That ancient parchment. It's documentary evidence, and it makes me feel like somebody was waiting around the corner with a brick when I leave explosive writing behind me."

Blackie, with an impressive flourish, drew forth the documentary evidence in question, and laid it in Wallingford's hand. "There is them papers," he said with a low choking sob. "The old homestead is saved. My appearance may be against me, because I wear a black mustache and a cigarette, but I am not bad at heart; eh, Polly?"

Little Paul, henceforth Polly and Crackers and such like friendly epithets, leaned back in his seat to rest. "Gosh, what a story!" he ejaculated. "If I could only dig out the details; gosh, what a story!"

CHAPTER IX

DOWN WITH GRAFT

YOU lose your bet, Jim," announced Blackie Daw, looking up from the Tarryville *Banner* and reaching mechanically for his glass of lemonade.

"I have no unsettled bets," protested Wallingford, opening the door of the cellarette between Blackie's red set of Mark Twain and his green set of *The World's History*, to find something with which to temper the plainness of his drink. "Moreover, I don't feel any hunch in my system for a bet."

"You're going to make one right now," insisted Blackie, carefully replacing a life-size picture of Horace G. Daw in the center library window. "You'll bet me that you know what a Sizzlebite is, and I'll win. You may as well pay me."

Wallingford poured a fair-sized portion of amber liquid into his lemonade, and carefully tasted it. "Where did you find Sizzlebite, and how do you spell it, and has it a tail, or do you get it in a bucket?"

"It's a political term," replied Blackie gloomily. "That's why it annoys me to be ignorant."

"Don't worry about it," Wallingford comforted

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him. "In less than two weeks we'll have you elected mayor of Tarryville on the straight reform ticket, without the aid of a scandal, a purchased vote, or a Sizzlebite. Does it seem to be anything like a gerrymander?"

"No; it's a rake-off," explained Blackie, looking at his watch, and buttoning the Prince Albert which he now wore every evening. "It's part of the repaving of the main road which bisects this county from stem to stern, passing through Mount Hopeso, Fevermarsh, Tarryville, Whistlawn and Catty Manor, the expense thereof being borne pro rata by the municipalities above mentioned."

"Bravo!" applauded Wallingford. "Hurrah for Daw and reform! But what about Sizzlebite?"

"It's the code word of the specifications that the county commissioners have just promulgated," went on Blackie, testing his voice two or three times on that last word. "We ought to hear that band by this time. Pro-mulgated; pro-mulgated. There are several other ingredients which look fairly familiar in these specifications, but Sizzlebite is a ringer. There's to be two pounds of it in every square yard, and I thirst for information."

"You'll find the answer ready made," suggested Wallingford. "All you have to do is to call up the county commissioners and find out whose brother-in-law controls the stuff."

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"Graft and corruption!" indignantly declaimed Blackie. "That ought to be a pretty good thing, Jim. There must be twenty miles of that road, and it's an average of thirty feet wide. How many square yards would that be?"

Wallingford, his professional instincts aroused, drew a pad of paper toward himself and figured it up. "Three hundred and fifty-two thousand square yards," he announced with a chuckle. "Why, Blackie, a ten-cent-a-pound profit on Sizzlestuff would amount to over seventy thousand dollars."

"I guess they all have brothers-in-law," surmised Blackie.

"Seventy thousand," mused Wallingford almost hungrily.

"And the people pay," solemnly intoned Blackie. "I suppose the contractors get another rake-off; else, why contract?"

"And the sub-contractors another one, and the village officials another, and the suburban defenders of the public rights, like the Tarryville *Banner*, another," commented Wallingford. "That paving will be contracted for at about a dollar and a half a yard, and its actual cost, outside of the Sizzlegraft, won't be over nineteen cents."

"The business should be systematized," declared Blackie. "There's too many middlemen's profits."

Wallingford was lost in deep thought. He

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smoked one of Blackie's cigarettes and drank some more of Blackie's lemonade, while Blackie carried out to the card-pedestal just inside the front door a pile of neat hand-bills bearing the portrait of Horace G. Daw and the slogan, "Down with Graft!"

"Say, Blackie, you know who the county commissioners are, don't you?" inquired Wallingford when the reform candidate returned.

"As a progressive citizen, alive to the needs and abuses of a growing and prosperous municipality," sonorously began Blackie, with his hand in the bosom of his Prince Albert.

"Who are they?" interrupted Wallingford.

"Tommy Harvester," stated Blackie curtly. "As a patriotic voter, bent on promulgating—"

"You don't say so," broke in Wallingford with a pleased expression. "I didn't know Tommy lived out this way, or I'd have guessed that he was director of the works." He grabbed Blackie's desk telephone with one hand and leafed through the telephone book with the other, while Blackie, standing thin and straight in front of a pier-glass let into the bookshelves opposite the cellarette, made graceful oratorical gestures, and practised on words containing nice round "o" sounds.

"Mount Hopeso eight-o-seven," directed Wallingford, making figures with his disengaged hand while he waited.

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"Hello," presently shouted a voice that sounded like that of a red-faced man with a yellow mustache. "Who is this calling?"

"J. Rufus Wallingford."

"J. Ru— oh, hello, Jim!" greeted Tommy cordially. "Where are you; jail?"

"Blackie Daw's. He's running for mayor of Tarryville," explained Wallingford. "You know Blackie."

"He's a credit to politics. I hope he wins!" responded Tommy warmly. "What can I do for you, Jim?"

"Pass me a little info. Who controls Sizzlebite?"

"Harry Gootch. He's a brother-in-law of Sam Ross."

"County commissioner?"

"Ross is," replied Tommy. "Gootch is just a plain slob. Why do you want to know?"

"I like the name of the stuff," chuckled Wallingford. "Who's to be the head contractor for this new county road?"

"Whoever can buy enough Sizzlebite," returned Tommy promptly. "We're playing no favorites. The county commission can't let any contracts, you know."

"I guessed that from the necessity for Sizzlebite," laughed Wallingford. "Where can I find Mr. Gootch?"

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"Don't fuss with him," advised Tommy. "I can tell you anything you want to know. Sizzlebite's twenty cents a pound, and there's seven hundred thousand pounds of it to be sold."

"Twenty cents a pound!" repeated Wallingford. "What is the stuff?"

"Well, I ain't sure yet of anything but the selling price," hesitated Tommy.

"Slack coal's a good ingredient," suggested Wallingford. "It has a rich solid color. However, that's up to you. Don't do business with anybody till you see me, Tommy."

Violet Bonnie came bounding into the room, with her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling. "The parade's coming!" she announced, and to corroborate that statement the blare of a band broke out somewhere in the foreground.

"Is the American flag hauled up?" inquired Blackie, with the care of a good general.

"It goes up as they turn in at the gate," responded Violet. "I left Fannie watching it."

"Is the barrel of cider on the front porch?"

"I'll bet you," she assured him. "With six dozen new tin cups and a case of stogies. Your picture's in every window, and the toy electric lights around them are all lit up. The moving-picture show's ready to spring at any minute, and Polly Pollet is just fizzing with his lecture."

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"Very well, then; lead me to it," consented Blackie resignedly, assuming his most dignified pose. "I am in the hands of my friends. If my fellow citizens insist on my appearing before them, I shall address them, even though I am taken by surprise. Say, Jim, I want you to count the house out there, and if there's less than two hundred and fifty in that parade, I'll dock Billy Cushman a dollar a head."

Mayor Williams sat in his unpalatial office in the Tarryville city hall, with his knees under his desk and his chair against the wall. Big Tim Measen, with his hair polished smoothly over his knobs, sat across from him with his knees under the same desk and his chair against the opposite partition. Thus working at the responsible business of city government, there was room for but one more person, a limitation which had its advantages, since the business of government is best transacted—and safest—with the fewest possible number in conference.

"Looks like we can count up," suggested Big Tim. "We got ours."

"The new boulevard slips us," reminded Mayor Williams, more popularly known as Chinchilla, because of his untamable beard; "I hate to lose that."

"It's for Blackie," decided Big Tim sadly. "It

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is a snide trick of the county commissioners to show us a nice ripe peach like that just as we get on our train."

"Do we travel, though?" questioned Chinchilla. "Blackie can't make that reform guff stick. We've made his record as an all-round con. man so well known in this town that the life insurance and railroad men out here are jealous of him."

"They think he's on the level with this reform stuff," denied Big Tim. "He could sell phony diamonds to a professional tout. He wins, hands down. Jim Wallingford's speeches, and Paul Pollet's circus newspaper stunts, and that office kid's scraps with our bill-stickers, and Violet Bonnie's house-to-house canvass and Blackie's crazy whoop-'em-up methods have made this sleepy old suburb know it had a campaign for the first time since the Civil War. Men are going to stay in the village to vote who haven't cast a ballot since they were twenty-one. They laugh their heads off every time election is mentioned, and they'll laugh when they go to the polls. Blackie could get elected if he had 'Graft and Corruption' on his banners in place of 'Reform.'"

"Well, we've done the best we could," the mayor consoled himself, glancing at the much-penciled sheet of paper in front of him. "We've contracted all the city improvements for the next ten years,

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and if the cheap-skate contractors don't turn crooked and skin us out of our bit we ought to have a pretty fair income. It's as good as having money out at interest."

"They'll skin us all right," decided Big Tim gloomily; "that is, unless we can get back in the next campaign." He pulled the sheet of paper toward him and inspected the figures with the sedate half-mournful interest of a man who is retiring from business with a comfortable ledger balance that might have been more.

"I'm afraid we've overplayed ourselves," worried the mayor. "The town will never grow fast enough to put in all that sewerage we've contracted."

"That's all right," Big Tim comforted him. "They can put in two lines on some streets. It's been done. We've cleaned up pretty well for a small town."

"I hate to leave Blackie anything, though," fretted the mayor. "He doesn't need it. He's an expert and an inventor. He'll pull off new stunts in graft in the next two years that could be used as a political text-book. Hello, Jim Wallingford. Come in and make yourself comfortable."

"You lollops'll have to move out then," Wallingford laughed, squeezing into a chair at the desk.

"Not for a couple of years," refused Chinchilla, bound not to give up the ship in public.

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"I couldn't get a bet out of you at fifty to one," scorned Wallingford. "I didn't come in to hold a bluffing match with you fellows, though. I didn't even come in as Jim Wallingford. I came as the President of the Sizzlebite Paving Construction Company."

"Have a cigar," offered Big Tim hastily. "Chin-chilla, reach down for that bottle and glass for the gentleman. Mr. Wallingford, have this chair. It's more comfortable."

"You seem to be expecting me," guessed Wallingford with a grin.

"Far from thus," corrected Big Tim. "We didn't expect to be so lucky."

"You seem to recognize that Sizzlebite password," observed Wallingford, lighting his own cigar in preference to the one Big Tim had offered him.

"At a glance," acknowledged the mayor. "We lamped the Sizzlebite plum from afar, but figured that to be laid over for Blackie, if he wins."

"Nothing doing with Blackie," Wallingford advised them. "He's heading the reform ticket."

"Nobody's worrying about Blackie," laughed Big Tim. "He gets his coming and going. How about this Sizzlebite thing? Have we time enough to get in?"

"How soon can you hold a council meeting?" inquired Wallingford.

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"In fifteen minutes," promised the mayor, reaching for his telephone.

"There's no need to pant," objected Wallingford, stopping him. "To-morrow will do. I don't suppose there's much use talking business, except to mention the terms."

"Anything you name will be all right," offered Big Tim. "The boys know this is their last chance."

"Do you intend to build the road yourself?" asked the mayor.

"Me!" chuckled Wallingford. "I never built anything but a plan of action in my life. All I intend to do is to get the contracts, and I just dropped in to see if you fellows are ready."

"Where's your contract?" demanded the mayor, producing his fountain pen.

"I haven't any printed, nor the copy written," smiled Wallingford. "I haven't even settled on the price, but I think it'll be a dollar and a half a square yard. Twenty-five cents of that will go to the officials, I'll take twenty-five myself, and hand the game over to a regular paving contractor at a dollar a yard."

"He can make a swell profit at that price," figured Big Tim.

"About fifteen cents," estimated Wallingford. "He has to pay out forty for Sizzlebite, and split up ten among the suburban newspapers along the route."

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That leaves thirty-five cents to be spent on making the road."

"It can be done," judged Chinchilla. "Although, if the road were to be made according to the specifications published in the *Banner* last night, it would cost a dollar and a half."

"It would if it had to carry forty cents of this county-commissioner graft stuff," corroborated Big Tim. "However, public-work specifications belong in the Sunday supplement."

"They class with poetry," agreed Wallingford, rising. "I'll get a form contract ready to-night, boys, and mail you a copy in a day or so. Lay your pipe-lines right away to have it all signed up."

"It'll come back to you on the next mail," promised Big Tim. "The boys'll be tickled stiff to skin Blackie out of this. Why are you dishing him?"

"Blackie has nothing to do with it," Wallingford assured them. "He's on the reform ticket."

"You're practising your next speech," charged Chinchilla half enviously.

"Maybe," admitted J. Rufus, laughing; "but I speak from the heart." And walking out into the six-foot rotunda, he surprised a thin-legged boy in the very act of pasting an atrocious caricature of Chinchilla Williams on the floor of the city hall.

The boy, affectionately known to Blackie as

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"Legs" and "Jesse James" and any other ignominious name that came handy, returned stealthily when he saw Wallingford. "Was you in the mayor's office?" he wanted to know.

"Right-o, Spider," answered Wallingford, smiling down at him and handing him the customary quarter. "I have just come from an interview with His Honor."

"Go back in and talk loud a minute, won't you?" begged the boy. "I've been tryin' for three days to sneak this poster on his door," and he held up a gorgeously printed cartoon of Horace G. Daw, embellished with the legend, "Vote for Honest Horace!"

"I am sorry to see this tendency in you, Spraddles," gravely reproved Wallingford. "It smacks of underhanded methods. Nevertheless, I shall go back."

He looked over his shoulder as he reentered the office, but the Boy Terror was nowhere to be seen. He was hiding, in an ecstasy of mysteriousness, behind the tall pedestal that supported the thirty-dollar statue—nobody knew why—of Nathan Hale.

"Gentlemen," said Wallingford with solemn pomposity as he reentered the room, "I neglected to explain to you the tremendous advantage of Sizzlebite as an ingredient, in the proportion of two

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pounds to the square yard of boulevard paving, and I have returned to remedy that neglect, so that you may present the advantages of this material at the next meeting of your cautious and conservative council. Sizzlebite, gentlemen," and here, becoming aware of a crackling and rustling and swabbing sound behind him, he raised his voice, "is a rare mineral, mined in the solitudes of the Sudan Desert, which serves to give a proto-plastic homogeneity to roadways intended for the use of that modern vehicle, the pneumatic tired automobile. It is brought to America at vast expense, in specially chartered steamers, and is fused in specially constructed crucibles of solid clay." A mysterious rap on the glass of the door that was hidden by his broad bulk apprised him, with three knocks, a pause, a knock, a pause, and a knock, that the deadly deed was done. "After which interesting process, gentlemen, the dividends are declared."

"Bravo!" laughed Chinchilla Williams. "Blackie Daw, in his palmyest days, never made a better speech to a bunch of ginks in front of a three-shell board."

"Blackie Daw," asserted Wallingford with deep feeling, "is a changed man. He is against graft."

The laughter upon this was long and loud, and Wallingford had a grin on his own face as he once

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more stepped into the rotunda. On the door of the office of Chinchilla Williams were not one but three tightly glued posters extolling the honesty of Horace G. Daw, and decrying the contemptible villainy of wicked Williams.

CHAPTER X

TALKING BUSINESS

THE mayor of Fevermarsh proved to be a yellow-complexioned man with mournful eyes, who received the impressive J. Rufus Wallingford with a cordiality only one degree removed from personal enmity.

"The Sizzlebite Paving Construction Company?" he commented. "I never heard of the concern," and his eye roved with positive hatred over the vast curving area of Wallingford's chest.

"Possibly not," admitted Wallingford suavely, studying his man in perplexity. There were lines in his face, and particularly about his eyes, which made the experienced promoter guess him to be "approachable", and yet, why that distinctly hostile attitude? "The wide use of automobiles has developed many new fields of industry, and has changed many others. Sizzlebite paving has very properly come to be the only recognized road material for automobile highways, and conscientious county commissioners, those who wish to handle the funds of the people with true economy, are insisting on its use everywhere."

"I suppose so," granted Mayor Jaunder, his re-

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sentful eyes resting on Wallingford's big, round, pink face. "They've forced it on Fevermarsh, anyhow, and so, I presume, it is merely a matter of finding where we can make the best terms."

"The best terms you can get will be from the Sizzlebite Paving Construction Company," Wallingford placidly informed him. "We positively control the material, and the price is the same to one and to all."

"I see," admitted the mayor with a dour scowl at Wallingford's plump and bediamonded hand. "You have a monopoly, and we have nothing to say about it. The price is so much, and we pay it. Fortunately, the present town council does not need to burden itself with the opprobrium of having saddled the township with this heavy expense, which, no matter how unjustly, will be charged against this administration."

"We should infinitely prefer to do business with the present council," returned Wallingford hastily, setting the man right in his misapprehension. "The Sizzlebite Company is by no means anxious to take advantage of its apparently superior position, and it is not disposed to be ungenerous; in fact, quite the contrary."

The mayor seemed more interested, although no more friendly. "What is the price of Sizzlebite paving?" he wanted to know.

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"That depends on the amount of cooperation we receive from the authorities in carrying out the specifications," replied Wallingford. "Who is the proper person to see in regard to the necessary business arrangements?"

"The town council," advised the mayor; "although I could carry them your offer."

"I think we're coming at it," decided Wallingford, hitching up his chair and wondering at the sudden flare of dislike that he encountered. It was so positive that he was once more in doubt.

"Then why don't you come to the point?" demanded Mr. Jaunder, producing a little bottle of pills from his waistcoat pocket and taking two of them. "You spoke something about the price depending on what degree of cooperation the authorities gave you in helping you carry out your specifications."

"Well, yes," hesitated Wallingford, deciding that he had made a mistake.

"I suppose that the generosity of which you spoke will be in inverse ratio to the amount of help we give you in seeing that we get what we pay for."

"Well, yes," again admitted Wallingford, feeling decidedly uncomfortable, as he became more and more aware of Mr. Jaunder's intense loathing for him.

"In that case, I may as well tell you that the authorities of this incorporated municipality are far

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too busy with other matters to pay any attention to the work. Now, what's your offer?"

"A dollar and a half a square yard."

"Net?"

"Gross."

"What's the rebate?"

"Twenty-five cents a square yard, which you may turn back into the town treasury or put into any other fund you see fit."

Mr. Jaunder regarded Wallingford's neck with deep malignity for two minutes. "For our entire and complete cooperation in regard to the carrying out of your specifications, you'll have to make the rebate thirty," he declared.

"I don't see where the actual contractor's going to get by with it at that price," worried Wallingford. "There's only thirty-five cents a yard figured now to go into the construction, and at thirty cents I'm afraid some sections of your road wouldn't be over an inch thick."

"It will have the proper amount of Sizzlebite in it, won't it?" demanded the mayor.

"Two pounds to the square yard."

"That's what makes the road right for auto use, isn't it?"

"Well, certainly," granted Wallingford, still worried.

"Then it's up to the county commissioners," de-

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cided Jaunder. "They specified the stuff. By the way, though, if it comes to a show-down, you don't need to take that five cents off the contractor. You can take it off of somebody else; yourself, for instance."

"I'll take it off of you," asserted Wallingford, rising, suddenly out of patience with the man's personal treatment of him. "You get twenty-five cents, and if there's any interference with the contractors, the cost of it will be deducted from your rebate. I don't care whether you get a rebate or not, to tell you the truth. We have the goods on you, and you have to take our stuff. You've treated me as if I were an enemy ever since I came in here, and I came to do you a favor. What's the matter with me?"

"You're so infernal healthy!" complained the man with almost a snarl. "Now, sit down and let's talk business, Mr. Wallingford. I want that extra five cents on the side for myself. I have to get out of this climate."

"Why didn't you say that in the first place?" chuckled Wallingford. "I know where we can get that extra five cents for you. This stretch of the county road is exceptionally difficult, isn't it; hills and swampy land and all that?"

"Not at all," protested the mayor, with the immediate instinct of local patriotism.

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"Yes, it is," insisted Wallingford. "You don't know how difficult it is, from the contractor's standpoint. We'll have to charge a dollar fifty-five for this section."

"Make it a dollar sixty," urged the mayor, his mournful eyes beginning to glisten.

"Anything you like," agreed Wallingford. "I'll send you a blank contract, and you can fill it in to suit yourself, just remembering that the Sizzlebite Paving Construction Company gets a dollar and a quarter net."

"That's better," decided the mayor. "I'll figure around with the boys a little. I think maybe we can dig out a dollar sixty-five, or even more. Fever-marsh is a wealthy community and can afford the best."

Wallingford then hurried away to interview the leading official of Mount Hopeso.

That gentleman, who was deeply interested in a pamphlet on *Reform in Politics*, by Horace G. Daw, was a solemn-faced man of such dignity that his cheeks rounded down below his jaws like the wattles of a turkey, and when he stood up he had great difficulty in keeping himself from falling over backward.

That conversation was a very stern and severe one. Mayor Popple made it immediately apparent

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that there would be no chicanery or buncombe about this matter of the paving.

"First of all, I wish you to understand that I am very much offended that the county commissioners have made it impossible for us to obtain our paving by competitive bids," he announced. "I have already stated my opinion of that matter to Mr. Harvester, in no very uncertain terms, and I think he understands my displeasure."

"Yes, so Tommy told me," admitted Wallingford deferentially. "It is customary, I presume you know, for concerns such as mine to allow a certain percentage—"

"I know what you are going to say, sir, and you need not continue," Mr. Popple sonorously interrupted him. "There will be nothing of that sort in this case."

"So Tommy told me," returned Wallingford, still dryly.

"I am glad that he did," responded the mayor, smoothing back the dry and colorless hair from his forehead. "I am glad that Mr. Harvester knows that much about me. I was elected by the people of Mount Hopeso because they believed in my honor and integrity. I have deserved their confidence, and I expect to be reelected. No taint of questionable methods, nor even any stain of suspicion, has rested

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on my administration. What will be the price of Sizzlebite paving?"

"One dollar and a half a square yard," stated Wallingford calmly but firmly.

"A dollar and a half," mused the mayor. "Now understand me, Mr. Wallingford; your price must be shorn of all rebates, concessions and—I dislike even to use the word—briberies. I want your rock-bottom figure."

"So Tommy told me," agreed Wallingford softly. "The price will be a dollar and a half."

The mayor cleared his throat. "Mr. Harvester informed me that you did not expect to do the actual construction work yourself."

"No," admitted Wallingford, repressing a smile and offering no help.

"You will probably sublet the work."

"Quite likely," assented Wallingford, and waited.

"I understand that you have not yet made arrangements for your sub-contract."

"No."

"I know local conditions very well indeed, and if I can be of any help to you in the matter of selecting a suitable contractor I shall be very happy to render you that courtesy."

"Thank you," accepted Wallingford. "Who are the leading local contractors?"

"Well," hesitated the mayor, "Trimmins and

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Crumb are the leading ones, I believe, but the best results are nearly always obtained by enlisting young blood; at least, such has been my experience. There is a young man here, by the name of Weakson, who might be worth an interview, since he can enlist the support of reliable men. Personally, I should be very earnest about enlisting your cooperation with him, but, owing to my official position alone, I can not permit myself to recommend him too urgently."

"Tommy told me about him," said Wallingford, looking at his watch. "Your sister's son, I believe."

"And a very estimable young man. You will find him, at this hour, in the law office of Grubel and Harker."

"Both members of the town council," added Wallingford, rising. "I shall see Mr. Weakson at once."

"Of course you can do nothing definite," the mayor reminded him. "I think seriously of questioning the authority of the county commissioners to force on us a material of their selection."

With this threat of honest and upright Mayor Popple echoing in his ears, Wallingford sought young Weakson, whom he found to be a goggle-eyed youth with a number thirteen neck, and concluded business with him in something like three minutes, that business consisting in having young

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Weakson prove that he could raise enough money, from his uncle, the mayor, and the members of the town council, to pay for Sizzlebite and Wallingford's twenty-five cents a yard, throughout the entire length of the county road.

This detail being arranged, Wallingford hurried right back over his path to Whistlawn, the mayor of which place was a real estate dealer who dressed up to his black-rimmed spectacles, and wore a brisk air, one glance at which told Wallingford exactly what to expect.

"Now let's get right to it," said Mayor Sterling. "This Sizzlebite proposition is a hold-up, and you and I know it, but whatever theft there is in it stops with you and the county commission. All we want in Whistlawn is a good road. What's it going to cost us?"

"A dollar and a half a square yard," Wallingford quietly informed him.

"Don't let's fool up any time," urged Sterling. "I shouldn't be bothering with this matter, anyhow. Decision in the affair is up to the board of aldermen, but, since they shove all these things on my shoulders, let's get through with it. I've told you there's to be no rake-off, rebate, bonus, or gift to any official in this township, and yet you quote me the same price you've made in the sections where I know they'd steal the strap off a blind man's dog."

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"Certainly," admitted Wallingford. "I know exactly what you want. A good road."

Mayor Sterling was silent for a moment, while he revolved that proposition in his mind. "How do we know we'll get the difference in value?" he demanded.

"Hire a man you can trust to watch the work."

"I guess you're right," decided Mayor Sterling. "How much would it cost to have the road made absolutely according to specifications?"

"You'd better make it a dollar seventy-five," suggested Wallingford; "and I'll fix it up with the subcontractor to see that you get a square deal."

"All right," agreed Mayor Sterling, and closed his desk with a slam. "We'll hire that man anyhow."

In Catty Manor, Wallingford found the town council in session, and received permission to make them an address. He talked for fifteen minutes on the advantages of Sizzlebite, and made it very plain to the assembled lawmakers that the Sizzlebite Paving Construction Company was a concern that held its proud position through merit alone, since it had never given a penny of bonus money to any person in authority. All he asked the city council to do, after making a contract with him, was to appoint a reliable inspector and send the inspector to him; which they did, waiting outside after the meet-

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ing while Wallingford and the inspector had their highly satisfactory chat.

Before he started back home, Wallingford dropped in at the Catty Manor bank and telephoned Tommy Harvester. "It's on," he said with much satisfaction. "I'll bring my check-book over. What time will you be home?"

"Till you get here," announced Tommy decisively. "Have any trouble?"

"Why?" chuckled Wallingford. "By the way, Tommy; what's the color of Sizzlebite?"

"Black, I think," replied Tommy.

With music and lights and literature and oratory, all increasing in a furious crescendo up to the very day of election, Blackie Daw was wafted into the mayoralty of Tarryville on a gale of good-humored popularity seldom equaled and never excelled. On the day after he had taken his seat, amid impressive ceremonies devised by himself, Big Tim and Chinchilla Williams called on him to exhibit a thin youth.

"This is Clarence Weakson, Blackie," introduced Big Tim. "He's the sub-contractor for the Sizzlebite road. You want to treat him right."

"I'll be here to do it," promised Blackie, shaking hands cordially with young Weakson, who limply allowed him to do it. "Either Polly or myself will be on the ground when every load of material is

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dumped. Say, Bandit, jump Polly in here, will you?"

Bandit, in a new suit of dark red plentifully embellished with brass buttons and wearing the grin of a proud victor, was out of the room in one bound and back in another, followed by a compact young man who wore thick eye-glasses and a stiff yellow pompadour.

"Paul Pollet, gentlemen," introduced Blackie. "Big Tim and Chinchilla Williams you know, Crackers, and Mr. Weakson here you will become better acquainted with. He is the Sizzlebite contractor. Watch him."

"We won't have a bit of trouble," returned Mr. Pollet, shaking the limp hand of the lucky sub-contractor.

"Not much danger," laughed Big Tim. "Weakson's well backed and will come right across with the rebate."

"There won't be any rebate," observed Blackie.

"Quit kidding," chided Chinchilla Williams. "You didn't suppose we were going to keep it all ourselves, did you?"

"We knew you'd see the play through just out of friendly feeling," added Big Tim; "but I talked this all over with the boys, and they're willing to have you split in for your bit."

"I don't understand you," asserted Blackie, smil-

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ing cheerfully. "Tarryville has contracted for three miles of road, at a dollar and a half a square yard, to be built under certain specifications, of which Substitute-Mayor Pollet and myself each have a copy. That's all."

Big Tim sat down opposite Blackie in the same chair he had so often occupied during the incumbency of Mayor Williams. "I didn't think you'd do this, Blackie," he protested. "The retiring council did all the work, and you're making a play for all the rake-off."

Blackie turned to Paul Pollet sadly. "I told you we'd never get credit for honest intentions," he regretfully charged. "Show them the cement-tester."

Paul Pollet threw open the door of the adjoining room. "Finest that money could buy," he bragged, displaying the row of odd-looking contrivances ranged along the wall. "I took an engineering course at college, before I went into vaudeville and sold life insurance and traveled with a circus and entered the flowery field of journalism, but testing the crushing strength of cement was my first and only love. I'm teaching Blackie how to obtain high-grade paving materials."

Mr. Weakson blinked and gulped. It began to dawn on even him that contracting was not all profit. "What all's in those specifications?" he demanded of Big Tim.

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"Outside of two pounds of Sizzlebite, how do I know!" Big Tim savagely returned. "Nobody ever pays any attention to specifications anyhow."

"Ask Polly what's in them," suggested Blackie, with a prideful proprietorship in that capable and energetic young man.

"A dollar and a half's worth of good, substantial road-making material," replied Pollet, producing a copy of the specifications from his pocket.

"Good lord!" groaned young Weakson. "Why, Measen, there won't be a cent left for you. I've already paid Mr. Wallingford twenty-five thousand dollars cash, and sixty-three thousand dollars in notes for his contracts, besides tying up all the money in the world for Sizzlebite."

"I know," assented Blackie. "Jim paid me my share. I was the other partner in the Sizzlebite Paving Construction Company; but that's got nothing to do with this deal. We took contracts for a dollar and a half, and sublet them for a dollar and a quarter, and collected the difference."

"You crook!" blazed Measen, shaking his fist.

Blackie was on his feet in an instant. "Get out of my office!" he ordered. "I told you ordinary fakers, first, last and all the time, that I was, and intended to be, strictly on the level. This," and he looked about the little room and its new mottoes with complacency, "this is a reform administration."

CHAPTER XI

TOO GOOD TO KEEP

A GAUNT man with a wayward mustache, a wad of plug in his cheek and an insatiable thirst for miscellaneous information, turned his back to the beautiful ocean and chewed, in perplexity, while he watched a copper-skinned Irishman preparing the soil for a twenty-foot tulip-bed.

"What you diggin'?" he finally called down into the waste of yellow sand.

The earnest digger straightened up and studied the seeker after knowledge. Deciding that the man was entitled to the truth, he gave it to him. "Dirt," he replied, and went right on excavating.

The inquirer spat meditatively, and leaned both arms against the rail. "Smart Aleck," he commented, but entirely without rancor.

A tall thin man, wearing a black mustache, a black Prince Albert, and a shiny black silk hat, came swinging along in company with a short, chunky young man who wore thick glasses.

"Pipe the lollop, Polly," urged the black-mustached one, stopping abruptly as he noted the interested spectator.

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"He's not a lollop, Blackie; he's a gook," protested Paul Pollet.

"Lollop," insisted Blackie. "He makes me homesick. I haven't seen a specimen like that since the old county-fair days, when they used to bet that they knew the location of the little pea better than the artist who put it there."

"Gook," declared Paul firmly. "A lollop begs for his money back, but a gook fights. This gink's a gook."

"Bet you two dollars' worth of salt-water taffy, the loser to pay for it and eat it," offered Blackie.

"You're on," accepted Paul immediately. "How do we decide?"

"Disturb him," explained Blackie, and walking straight up to the citizen from the near-by wilds, he abruptly lifted the stranger's elbow. "You must not lean on this rail," he sternly commanded.

"Why not?" asked the man with the bulging cheek, and Paul felt a faint thrill of hope.

"Because I said so," returned Blackie, and edged forward an inch.

"Oh," remarked the man, blinking, and removed first his other elbow and then his entire person from the forbidden rail.

"You win," granted Paul, eying the stranger indignantly.

That gentleman had stepped away a couple of

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paces, and now stood contemplating Blackie hungrily. "Say, mister," he presently ventured, "what's bein' dug there?"

"That's the entrance to the tunnel," Blackie promptly told him.

"Oh," blinked the stranger. "What tunnel?"

"Just think of that, Polly; he doesn't know," Blackie protested to his companion. "I thought everybody in Atlantic City would know by this morning about the wonderful new sun baths."

"Sun baths?" feebly repeated the traveler. "You said sun baths?"

"Sun baths," reiterated Blackie solemnly. "The largest and most elaborately luxurious in the world," and he leaned his back against the rail, resting comfortably on both elbows.

The man rubbed the bridge of his nose in perplexity. "Excuse me," he hesitated, as he mechanically watched young Pollet lean, with the careless grace of a sawed-off chunky man, along so much of the rail as he could cover without slipping. "If it's a sun bath, what's the use of a tunnel?"

"To get to it," Paul volunteered, catching Blackie's idea with enthusiasm. "The baths are to be out there," and he waved an arm comprehensively in the direction of the wide, wide ocean.

"Oh," commented the stranger, looking out at the billowy waves. "On the water?"

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"Under the water," Blackie corrected him. "A gigantic bath-house, encased in glass, will be built out there beneath the low-tide level, and a tremendous electric plant, to be supplied by a wave motor, will heat the ocean. There will be palm-gardens and fountains and little singing birds beneath the surface of the briny deep, and the rays of the sun, filtered down through the blue waters, will restore to tired and jaded nerves the snap and tune of bounding health. There will be magnificent dining-parlors, where guests in loose robes of ancient Greece—"

"Get off o' that rail!" shouted the laborer in the pit, looking up apprehensively at the sagging support.

"You are quite right, Mike," said Blackie forgivingly. "I fine myself one cigar for disobeying my own orders," and taking a cigar from his pocket, he dropped it over the rail.

The foreman of the works below picked it up and smelled it and stuck it through the band of his cap. "All right, boss," he grinned. "Is this bath-house tunnel to be finished with frescoed cement or tiling?"

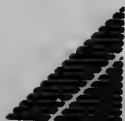
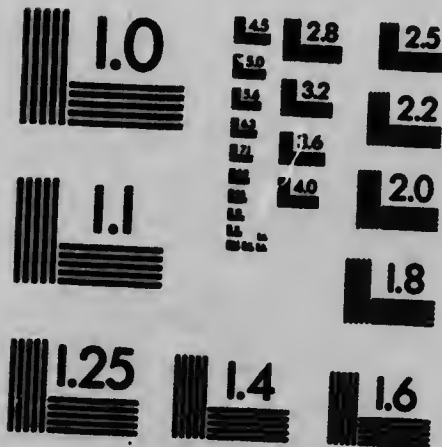
"You may line it with marble, Mike," directed Blackie loftily, and went on describing the magnificent subaqueous bath-house.

J. Rufus Wallingford, with an expression on his



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face of a hungry mastiff watching a goose, stood, in grumpy loneliness, at the bar of the Surf Hotel when Blackie and Paul Pollet, the latter chewing vigorously, came in upon him.

"Where have you expert side-steppers been?" he demanded.

"Kidding around, and listening to the wild waves," replied Blackie cheerily. "We were afraid it might make you nervous if we stuck around while you looked up that missing luggage."

"Oh, you were," retorted Wallingford. "Well, I was so nervous about it that I left it for you to do. What makes Polly bulge so?"

"Salt-water taffy," confessed Paul, trying to be happy about it. "Have some. It's fine," and he placed a little pink box of it on the bar, hospitably removing the lid.

"No, you don't!" interrupted Blackie sternly, capturing the box as Wallingford was about to sample its contents. "You have to curb your unselfish impulses here, Crackers."

"That's right," agreed Paul, taking out a piece of the taffy and replacing the lid, but retaining the box in his hand because he had no place to put it. He was fairly lumpy with similar packages; two in his hip pockets, two in his inner coat pockets, two in the side pockets, and one in the breast pocket of his

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overcoat; eight in all. "I wouldn't be stingy for worlds, Jim, but it's a bet."

"I said a boob was a lollop, and he said the gink was a gook," explained Blackie. "You're a slow host, Jim," and he motioned to the bartender. "How have you been amusing yourself?"

Wallingford's big pink face lost its gloomy expression, and he chuckled. "Restraining myself from joining the party," he confessed, in a confidential tone and with an almost imperceptible jerk of the head toward the padded alcove beyond the end of the bar, where a group of middle-aged men, who looked as if they had earned the right to the mad luxury, were mixing carbonated water with their champagne and trying to drink less than anybody else.

Blackie made a hasty but comprehensive inspection of the quietly animated crowd. "Nothing doing," he softly observed. "This is a pleasure trip in honor of my election as reform mayor of Tarryville, and no one is to talk shop." He gave another glance at the furrow-browed gentlemen.

"Financiers from the wealthy Middle West," mused the chunky ex-reporter. "The home papers are mysterious to-day."

"You're trying to duck that taffy," Blackie reminded him.

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"Excuse me," apologized Paul, and sought out a piece with the teaberry flavor.

Blackie, noting the vast variety of flavors printed on the wrappers of the candy, was about to prepare an elaborate taffy menu for him when his ear caught certain words that acted on him like a magic formula.

"Hundred thousand dollars," were the words he heard, and the man who uttered them, a gray-haired chap with a particularly healthy complexion, never smiled.

The conversation at the bar ceased absolutely. Paul Pollet, having denuded his teaberry taffy of its wrapper, paused with it just at the entrance to his open mouth. Wallingford had been in the act of lifting a drink, but he held it suspended in mid-air.

"Don't figure it that way, Nayler," protested the man with the thin nose and the wrinkled eyes. "There're ten of us here, and I move that we split the half-million equally. Any one of us can arrange for a fifty-thousand-dollar investment."

Blackie stared sadly into the weathered-oak alcove for a moment, then he turned and tiptoed stealthily out of the bar, motioning Polly and Wallingford to follow him.

"I had to leave there or handcuff myself," he admitted. "What do those captains of industry intend to do with their half-million of real money, Jim?"

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"Build an Atlantic City hotel, for social prestige at home," chuckled Wallingford. "Each family plans to reserve an ocean-front suite by the year, and talk about it between trips at the Wildwood Whist Club."

"Half a million, cash," commented Blackie, annoyed with himself for remembering it. "Is there no place where we can have a vacation from boobs?"

"Not in Atlantic City," decided Wallingford with a sigh.

"Stingy!" chided Violet Bonnie, in the elaborate corner parlor of the mayor's extensive suite. "You sit there with enough salt-water taffy to give the stomach-ache to a whole orphan asylum, and you don't offer us a bite. Stingy!"

Amid the admiring grins of Blackie and J. Rufus, Paul Pollet stalked to the telephone. "Heaven knows I don't deserve such," he defended himself. "Nobody in this wide world can understand how glad I would be to offer you some of this taffy; but it was a present from a friend. Far be it from me to pike, however," and with much impressiveness he ordered two twenty-five-cent boxes of taffy, chiefly teaberry. "Now, I may lend each of you ladies a box. Is that right, Mayor?"

"It's strictly within the letter of the bet," admitted Blackie.

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"I don't get this," puzzled Violet Bonnie, as she opened her box of confectionery. "Do you, Fannie?"

"Not quite," laughed Mrs. Wallingford. "I am sure, however, that nothing can be charged against Paul's generous instincts."

"I take it back myself," confessed Violet Bonnie, surrounding herself with cushions and turning out all the lights but the red ones. "I like this hotel, fellows. It's the only one on the circuit where they hand you enough complexion helpers."

"It's an old dump, but it's good," agreed Wallingford. "It's right in the center of the excitement."

"Wait till the new hotel's built," laughed Blackie. "There are to be pink silk sheets in every bedroom."

"Another hotel in Atlantic City!" protested Mrs. Wallingford. "I don't see how they could use any more, unless they were portable ones which could be brought here just for Easter."

"This one is to have a flying start," chuckled Wallingford. "It's to have ten floors, and the bay-window suite on each floor is already engaged by the year."

"That cuts out little Violet," immediately decided the mayor's wife. "If I can't have a bay-window suite I won't come. Who are the members in good standing?"

"Captains of industry from back home," put in

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Paul Pollet, looking speculatively at a cinnamon-flavored taffy cube and returning it, with a sigh, to his pocket. "They're here planning the stockholders' parlors and the yearly tenants' private elevator, and their wives are with them."

"I think that must have been the reviewing committee which inspected us as we walked through to the elevator," guessed Mrs. Wallingford with a smile.

"A solid brigade of lorgnettes," snapped Violet Bonnie, who had an especial aversion for these weapons. "I don't like to be catty, but—"

"Let me do it for you," begged the usually gentle Fannie. "They sniffed at us when we came in because we were too plainly dressed, and they sniffed at us when we went to luncheon because we were too well dressed. I'm going to sniff back at that firing line."

In the uproar that followed this desperate announcement, the telephone bell rang.

"Mr. Twist to see Mr. Daw," announced Paul, covering the transmitter with his hand. "Anything doing?"

"Twist," speculated Blackie, with the anxiety he always felt at the mention of an unfamiliar name. "Who's Twist, Jim?"

"I never remember them by name," stated Wallingford.

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"I'll be right down," advised Blackie.

"No, have him go," suggested Violet Bonnie. "Fannie and I have to dress for dinner, anyhow. We've figured that we only want to stay here two days, but we won't go till our clothes give out; so we won't dare overlook a change. Come on, Fannie."

Mr. Twist proved to be a total stranger, a pasty-complexioned man with shiny lips, and avarice had screwed his eyes nearly shut. He shook hands with Wallingford most effusively when he was ushered into the room, under the impression that J. Rufus was Mr. Daw.

"I came up on a strange errand," he confessed with a dry little chuckle. "I trust you will pardon this liberty, because I have taken a greater one."

"That's a reasonable excuse," agreed Wallingford. "I suppose, in order to square the greater liberty, you'll do something worse."

Mr. Twist laughed as jovially as his evaporated nature would permit. "It isn't so bad as all that," he stated. "It's a very simple matter, after all. My man, who was down digging the tulip-bed, you know, told me that jolly little joke of yours about the tunnel and the under-water sun baths."

Wallingford looked searchingly across at Blackie and Paul Pollet. Those two irresponsible brats were choking with joy.

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"I see," he said. "It was a good joke, wasn't it?"

"Too good to keep!" responded Mr. Twist enthusiastically. "That's why I'm going to ask you to let me give it to the papers and from what my man said of you, Mr. Daw, I'm sure that if anybody came and asked you about it, you'd be quite willing to keep up the joke."

Blackie Daw, watching Wallingford's eyes, suddenly stopped snickering and sat straight up. Paul Pollet, watching Blackie, did likewise.

"I am the grandest little person in the world to keep up a joke," asserted Wallingford. "If you publish this merry little jest in the local papers, and somebody should ask me about it, how do you want me to carry on the laugh?"

"Oh, tell them that you intend to build the sun baths, with glass domes under the water and palm-gardens and fountains and a grill-room and all the other trimmings you invented for that farmer this morning."

"I see. Great joke, isn't it?" commented Wallingford, looking speculatively over at Blackie.

"Well, it's more than a joke," admitted Mr. Twist, judging that Wallingford was not appreciating the comedy as much as he should. "Talk like that is good for the town."

"I believe you," responded Wallingford, study-

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ing him acutely. "I'm very strong for helping a town; but, aside from that, who cashes this joke?"

Mr. Twist became more juicelessly jovial than ever. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good," he confessed. "Without harming you in the least, I might—I say just might, remember—reap a trifling advantage from it."

"I begin to suspect that's why you called," remarked Wallingford, now bending serious attention to the problem. "Come on, Mr. Twist, and tell me all about it. You own that property, don't you?"

"Well, yes."

"You want to sell it."

"You are very shrewd," complimented Mr. Twist.

"I can see a joke so fast I haven't time to laugh at it," declared Wallingford. "You have a possible buyer, and you think that if you get this story printed as an on-the-level proposition, you can not only bring your buyer to a show-down but get a better price."

"That's a good guess," admitted Mr. Twist, his hilarity fast fading as he saw the impressively quiet earnestness of J. Rufus. "There's no harm in that, I hope."

"None at all," granted Wallingford. "Not in the least. Only, I don't see where I come in. Who is dickering with you on this property?"

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Mr. Twist hesitated and rubbed his dry hands over each other meditatively. "You'd scarcely know them, I think. They're some out-of-town people."

"Hotel!" murmured Blackie and Paul Pollet in unison, and Wallingford said it out loud.

"I see no reason for concealing the fact that I have been discussing the property with a hotel syndicate," assented Mr. Twist reluctantly.

"I'll not be a party to it," suddenly decided Wallingford.

"I hope that you will," urged Mr. Twist, beginning to be distressed. "I had no doubt that you would stand by your little joke, since you had carried it so far, and, as a matter of fact, I—I—have already given it to the papers."

Paul Pollet was half-way across the floor when Wallingford stopped him. "What are you going to do, Polly?" he demanded.

"Get a-hold of those reporters!" declared Paul indignantly. "If that gaudy little fake goes in, you don't suppose Blackie and I are going to allow it to be written by possible dubs, do you?"

"What's the difference?" retorted Wallingford. "I shall deny it, anyhow. If that story is printed, I shall state that my engineers report the property to be underlaid with quicksand."

"Great Scott!" wailed Mr. Twist, exuding. "Why, you are fairly malignant about the thing."

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"You have taken an unwarranted liberty," sternly charged Wallingford. "What has been your best offer on that property?"

"Seventy thousand," stated the crestfallen Twist.

"You mean that was *your* best offer," corrected Wallingford. "You'd be tickled to death to sell it for fifty, spot cash."

"No, I wouldn't," denied Mr. Twist, with such instant vigor as to carry conviction. "Here's what I would be willing to do, though. If, by your sticking to this story, I can make the sale at seventy thousand, I wouldn't mind handing you a present of five thousand."

"That is, you'd be willing to split your extra profits," surmised Wallingford. "There's nothing doing, Mr. Twist. I couldn't obtain my consent to help you skin some utter strangers. Can you furnish a clear title to that property?"

"As clean as a snowflake," swore Mr. Twist.

"How's the site, boys?" asked Wallingford of the mischief-makers.

"Swell," they answered in unison.

"Why, Jim," supplemented Blackie, "it's the only available hotel site in the busy section. It's small, but it's right up here in the next block, fronting the very finest part of the Atlantic Ocean. It's really quite the—"

"That'll do," warned Wallingford.

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"I think it's full of crabs, though," hastily corrected Blackie.

Wallingford paid no attention to this radical objection. He was deep in thought. Presently he produced a check-book and a fountain pen, and wrote in the former with the latter. "Here is something very pretty, Mr. Twist," he observed. "I've left a blank space for you to fill in your own initials. It's yours. Keep it."

"Fifty-seven thousand five hundred," read Mr. Twist. "I have not consented to this figure for my property."

"Let's go fix up that deed," suggested Wallingford, rising. "I have figured to the cent just how much you would take to close, and that's it. If you don't want that check, give it back," and he reached out his hand for it.

Mr. Twist hastily drew the check away. "Of course nothing is concluded until I have verified this draft," he cautiously stated. "By the way, it is signed Wallingford in place of Daw."

"We'll do a little telegraphing at the desk as we go out," Wallingford assured him. "Daw is only my nom-de-kid."

Mr. Twist followed him very thoughtfully to the door. "I believe you've outplayed me," he complained. "I declare I believe your bath-house project is bona fide."

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"That check looks like it, doesn't it?" queried Wallingford. "The boys merely indulged in a bit of premature talk."

As they went out the door, chunky little Paul Pollet was leaning against the wall with one elbow, and shouting to the hotel telephone operator, "Say, Bessie, give me the local papers quick, please!"

CHAPTER XII

A STOLEN MARCH

THE fancy writers on the local papers, good as they were, received some new tips from the effervescent Paul Pollet. With the weird imagination of a Poe, the joyous spirit of a Stockton, the poetic instincts of a Stevenson, the lurid facility of a circus poster-writer and the assistance of Blackie Daw, he builded, beneath the bounding billows, a spaciouly splendid world of wonders, a marvelous mansion of languorous luxury, a peerless palace of gorgeous grandeur perspectived with a panoramic pageantry of palms and permeated, in short, with a passionate paroxysm of alluring alliteration.

During one whole night, while Wallingford escorted the ladies back to Tarryville, Paul and Blackie sat snickering and chuckling over this marvel of description, which could have been illustrated only with fireworks; but the astute Wallingford, on his return, added a few lines that were not at all alliterative, but carried a business stinger of some value. He intimated that, since the bath company would use its highly valuable and recently acquired property only for an ornate entrance to the won-

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derful underwater palace, a subsidiary company might possibly be formed to erect a mammoth hotel in connection.

Thomas J. Nayler, heading a committee of three, called on Wallingford within one hour after the publication of that literary masterpiece, and was most cordial. "At first we feared you had stolen a march on us," he confessed; "but, after thoroughly digesting what we could learn of your project, we have come to the conclusion that our interests are identical. Our friendly little syndicate had contemplated building a small but exclusive hotel on that site, and I do not see why we should not plan to do so."

"You'll not find me difficult to talk with," promised Wallingford. "I don't mind confessing that your presence here at this time seems almost providential."

"Naturally," agreed Mr. Nayler, admiring the flawless pinkness of Wallingford's round face. "It saves you the distraction of forming and engineering a hotel company."

"That is, if we can come to satisfactory terms," smiled Wallingford. "How large a company do you propose to form?"

"Half a million dollars, fully paid in," replied Mr. Nayler with quiet and entirely unassumed nonchalance.

Wallingford nodded with equal nonchalance.

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"You may have to increase your capitalization before you are through," he suggested; "but, for that matter, the Neptune Sun Bath Company will probably have to do likewise. It, however, owns its own ground, which is unencumbered, and can offer you a ninety-nine-year lease."

"On what terms?" inquired Mr. Nayler, smiling encouragingly at the thin-nosed man on his left, and at the angular-jawed man on his right.

"I'll give you the same terms I would have proposed to a company of my own raising," returned Wallingford. "First, you will agree to deposit one hundred thousand dollars, in trust, as a guarantee that you will build a hotel on this site to cost not less than two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

Mr. Nayler looked at his two associates dubiously. "What about that, Poynter?" he asked of the thin-nosed man.

"Well," considered Mr. Poynter, his much-wrinkled eyes twinkling, "if nothing else, the provision proves to me that Mr. Wallingford is a good man of business."

"Move we table the provision until we hear the rest of it," recommended the man with the angular jaw.

"Second," went on Wallingford, accepting that thoughtful suggestion without a comment, "we shall require the hotel company to incorporate, in its

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building, a spacious entrance, with cloak-rooms, as an adjunct to the bath company's tunnel; the bath company's construction expense to begin at the front line of the building."

"No argument on that. What's next?" inquired the angular-jawed man, edging his chair forward.

"Next," continued Wallingford; "we would prefer to have the hotel company take up an approximate one-third, or say fifteen hundred shares out of five thousand, of the bath company's stock in exchange for a like valuation of the hotel company's stock."

The gentlemen of the committee looked at one another speculatively.

"Well, Hittam?" queried the chairman.

"We'll take that up later," decided the angular-jawed man.

"That's about all," concluded Wallingford. "These tentative conditions discussed and disposed of, the bath company would offer the hotel company a ninety-nine-year lease, at six per cent. of the present valuation of the unimproved property."

Mr. Hittam hitched his chair straight into the center of the group. "Now we're getting to a tangible basis," he declared with the eager interest of a connoisseur. "That six per cent. sounds harmless, but what is the present valuation of the site?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars," stated Walling-

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ford with calm satisfaction, and glanced over to the corner of the room where a tall thin gentleman and a stubby one with thick spectacles sat in temporary oblivion, the short one eating taffy.

"I thought so," commented Mr. Hittam, glorying so much in his penetration that he almost seemed glad of the price. "I knew that there was a switch-back clause in it somewhere. Yesterday morning that property could have been bought for fifty-five or sixty thousand dollars."

"Quite so," agreed Wallingford. "I paid fifty-seven thousand five hundred for it myself, but, last night, I made a bona-fide sale of it to the Neptune Sun Bath Company at two hundred thousand."

"In stock of the company?" guessed Mr. Hittam, whose own stock was now soaring.

"In stock of the company," repeated Wallingford. "The appreciation in value is only normal and reasonable, in view of the immediate use to which the property is to be turned."

"What's the capitalization of your company?" inquired Mr. Hittam, holding up a cross-examining forefinger.

"The same as yours," returned Wallingford; "half a million—only fifty per cent. paid in, however."

"Fifty per cent.," figured Hittam; "and two hundred thousand of your two hundred and fifty is rep-

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resented by the property. That leaves you only fifty thousand cash."

"It's in the treasury," Wallingford informed him, with a smile. "While the Neptune Sun Bath Company is still waiting for its charter from the state, it is, nevertheless, fully organized and ready for business."

Hittam turned to his fellow committeemen. "A hundred and forty thousand water in a two hundred and fifty thousand paid in valuation."

"By no means," protested Wallingford. "I won't stand for that. The hundred and forty thousand, which you call water, is an actual and normal increase in property worth."

Mr. Hittam arose. "It's a marvelous piece of work," he complimented Wallingford. "From the way you mention the various articles of this proposed agreement, I take it that we have received an ultimatum."

"Practically," Wallingford smilingly assured him. "If I form the hotel company myself, I shall impose exactly those terms. They are not at all unreasonable, if you study them over. The appreciation in property value is real, and would occur under your management as well as mine. The hundred thousand I require you to place in a trust fund is only a proper precaution that delay or failure on your part does not hinder our operations, and it may

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be used in making the final payments on the building. The exchange of stock will be, I think, of vast benefit to both companies, in forming a community of interests."

The chairman of the committee smoothed his snow-white hair and resumed his post of honor. "We shall take up this entire matter in a meeting of the proposed stockholders of the hotel company, and hold a further conference with you," he promised.

Long-nosed Mr. Poynter paused for a word with Wallingford alone. "If I only had a son like you!" he observed with twinkling eyes.

"I'll meet you in the bar by and by," chuckled Wallingford.

Blackie and Paul came out of their trance as the committee left the room.

"I couldn't keep track of that with a score-board, Jim," confessed Blackie, while Paul chewed slowly and painfully on a cylinder of sassafras-flavored taffy; "but I gather this much, and it pains me; you're preparing to engage in an actual construction deal."

"We've no time to monkey," returned Wallingford, looking at his watch. "We have to get busy with an architect."

During the time in which energetic lawyers

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slammed through incorporation papers for the Neptune Sun Bath Company and the Neptune Hotel Company, a huge display-board appeared on the Neptune site, bearing brilliantly colored sketches of the entrance to the baths, the tunnel, the palm-room, the grill-room and the various other glass-domed chambers of that fanciful structure, all tinted with the soft blue light of the sea.

Paul did some conscientious work for the Neptune Hotel Company also; and presently gave entertaining descriptions of the new caravansary to the papers, adding beautifully picturesque drawings of the exterior and interior to the bath company's display. The completely organized companies held their joint meeting and signed their mutual lease, and formed the trust fund, and exchanged specimens of their capital stock.

Then the blow fell. Next morning's papers contained more interesting reading than any which Paul Pollet had previously provided. This time he turned his attention to the social features of the proposed new bath establishment. The baths, primarily, were to be for the relief of the nerve-racked and the fagged and the jaded. The quiet soothing treatment of the blue light rays was to restore tone and health to those who had lived over-well, and the treatment was to consist in absolute freedom. All day long the patients were to spend their time

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in the exhilarating artificial ozone of the underwater palace, were to bask in the filtered sunlight, were to be unhampered of limb, and furnished with light amusements, such as eating and drinking and music and dancing; and it was hinted that, in place of being a bore, the cure was one that would be sought by wealthy luxury-lovers for its gaiety alone. In substantiation of this, it was stated that the steward of the Neptune Sun Bath Company had contracted for the largest, finest and most complete supply of vintage champagne in the world!

"Great Jerusalem!" exploded wedge-jawed Hittam. "How and why did you ever permit such an atrocious story as that to creep into print?"

"Why atrocious?" inquired Wallingford. "It's the sort of a place I propose to run."

"You actually sanctioned it, then?" and Hittam looked to the chairman of his committee for backing.

"It's an outrage!" pronounced Mr. Nayler, his pink face flushing red.

"Certainly, I sanctioned it," Wallingford dispassionately said. "I consider it splendid business publicity. We'll have the live spenders here, from all over the universe, immediately following every spree."

"The Neptune Hotel Company does not want that sort of patronage," Mr. Hittam angrily in-

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sisted. "It wants the respectable moneyed class."

"Respectable people don't spend enough," asserted Wallingford. "These plans, as outlined, are my own, and they're going to stick. I'm not in this business for my health, and any night my patients don't absorb ten cases of champagne I'll complain to the authorities."

The committee adjourned immediately and repaired to the padded alcove of the Surf Hotel bar, where it joined the balance of the hotel company's stockholders, and held a heated indignation meeting.

"We're stung!" declared Hittam. "I understand now why this infernal Wallingford made us put up a hundred-thousand guarantee fund. He wanted to make sure of having a hotel to feed his resort for jaded sports."

"The worst of it is, we hold stock in his company," commented Nayler.

"Not enough," responded Hittam, "or we'd out-vote him and run his bath establishment on a less hilarious basis. It's a good enough scheme."

Mr. Hittam rose sharply from his seat at the inner end of the table. "Pollet!" he called abruptly. "Come over here."

Paul Pollet, taking a gloomy drink by himself and masticating slowly on a piece of peppermint

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taffy, stalked over to the table and viewed the world with disfavor. "Just had my allowance of alcohol, thanks," he reported.

"You don't need anything to fire your imagination," charged Hittam. "Why did you pen that description of the Neptune Sun Bath cure?"

"I ask myself why," returned Paul, sorrowfully wiping his eye-glasses, and weighing, with a sigh, his last box of taffy. "I have been conscience-stricken all morning. I have quarreled with J. Rufus Wallingford, and I wish I was out of the game. I had respectable parents."

"They missed fire in your training," retorted Hittam.

"How is the stock distributed?" inquired the quiet little statistician in the corner.

"You hold fifteen hundred shares, Mr. Wallingford owns fifteen hundred, an office-boy and a butler each hold one share, and Doctor Daw and myself hold nine hundred and ninety-nine each."

"Nine hundred and ninety-nine," figured the little man in the corner. "With our fifteen hundred, we would have within two shares of control. Would you like to sell your stock, Mr. Pollet?"

"I'd just push a wheel-chair from here to Philadelphia and back to find the man with the money," responded Mr. Pollet bitterly.

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"How much do you want for your stock?" asked Hittam.

"Seventy."

"Your indignation does not affect the market value of your investment, I notice," observed the fat member of the party.

"Not so you could notice it," confessed Pollet. "I don't care much for money, but I think I could learn."

"Hold on a minute," counseled the statistician. "Mr. Pollet's shares wouldn't give us control, anyway."

"We might obtain the two odd shares held by the dummy directors," suggested Nayler hopefully.

The nasal laugh of Mr. Poynter discounted that idea. "You'd find a string to those two shares," he avowed.

"Possibly Mr. Daw might be induced to vote with us," again hopefully interjected the optimistic Mr. Nayler.

"No chance," scorned Mr. Pollet disdainfully. "Blackie Daw and Jim Wallingford are firm friends."

"Then I think I'll see Mr. Daw," decided Mr. Poynter, his eyes twinkling. "Where do you suppose I'd find him?"

"Down in the billiard-room, playing Kelly pool for two bits a cue and ten-cent setbacks," advised

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Paul with a grin. "He was three forty ahead of the game when I left him."

Gaunt and thin-nosed Mr. Poynter, looking like a retired preacher who had taken up farming, wandered down into the billiard-room and found Blackie in his shirt-sleeves, with four firm friends whom he had not known at breakfast-time.

"Just at the right minute, Lemuel," hailed Blackie. "Take a stick and trail in."

"Don't care if I do," replied the awkward-looking Poynter, who, with his wide-brimmed hat, looked as much out of place in there as a bathing-suit at a sleighing party.

Blackie inspected the new player as he chalked his cue, and introduced him to the gathering. "Boys, I'm afraid I'll have to apologize for this," he explained. "I never played with Mr. Poynter, but I believe he's a ringer."

"I haven't played for years," stated Poynter, casting his eye speculatively on the edges of the cushions. They seemed a trifle worn.

"Then it's all off," sighed Blackie.

"I don't see what you're kicking about," remonstrated the man with the lumpy biceps, as he prepared to break. "We'd rather give some of our money to a stranger than have you take it all."

The game now being fairly in progress, Poynter leaned against the next table, beside Blackie.

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"Mr. Daw, I'd like to buy about ten shares of your bath company stock," he suggested without wasting any time.

"Couldn't think of it," immediately replied Blackie.

"I hadn't any idea that you would," went on Poynter. "I suppose that you are also voting with Mr. Wallingford on every proposition."

"Certainly," admitted Blackie. "Jim Wallingford is a friend of mine."

"Then I suppose that you approve of his policy, as outlined in this morning's papers?"

"Not for a minute," Blackie assured him. "I think it's rotten."

"Still you would vote with him to sustain that policy?"

"Naturally," replied Blackie, watching the high-ball enthusiast of the party miss his shot by about a foot. "As I said before, Jim Wallingford and I are firm friends," and it being his turn, he stepped forward, pocketed the three and four balls and banked unsuccessfully for the hidden five.

Mr. Poynter walked up to the table and surveyed the layout. He shifted his angle of view, and gave the assortment some interested study. "Gentlemen," he announced, "I don't mind confessing that my ball is the fourteen," and thereupon he proceeded, with great delicacy, to pick off all the intervening balls, from the five up, removed four of them from the

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corner pocket to make room, deposited the fourteen neatly in a vacant net, collected a quarter from each man and returned to Blackie.

"You will, however, sell out your entire holdings?" he guessed.

"At seventy," responded Blackie. "Aren't you going to play any more?"

"No, I think not," decided Poynter with a quiet smile. "I'll buy a drink with my ill-gotten gains, however; then I have to attend a business meeting."

He walked back up into the lobby presently, and found Paul Pollet moodily studying eight pieces of paper-stuck taffy.

"I don't suppose you'd sell ten shares of your bath company stock?" he proposed.

"Oh, no," returned Paul. "If I sell at all, I want to break my entire connection with the company."

"I guessed it," replied Poynter, and went back to the padded alcove, where the indignation was still going around in a highly incandescent circle.

"Well, gentlemen, I have it all figured out what we are to do," he cheerfully stated. "We are to obtain control of the bath company, at a cost of exactly one hundred and thirty-nine thousand eight hundred and sixty dollars, that amount being the combined holdings of Mr. Daw and Mr. Pollet, at seventy dollars a share."

"It would be cheaper to buy out Wallingford," snapped Hittam.

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"You couldn't buy out Wallingford for less than par," calmly announced Poynter. "After all, though, boys, now that we're this far, it isn't so bad as it looks. For less than a hundred and fifty thousand out of our treasury, we gain control of the bath company, which has assets of fifty thousand dollars cash and owns the property."

A speculative silence fell on the impromptu stockholders' meeting.

"Looks like the best thing we could do," judged the man with the mole on his nose; "especially since we're in it this far, and have that hundred-thousand guarantee fund tied up."

"With control of the bath company," mused Mr. Poynter, "I fancy we can find some way to release that guarantee fund."

"Move we go into executive session," offered Hittam.

"Second the motion," said the quiet little statistician in the corner.

J. Rufus Wallingford, who had sat as the manipulator of so many stockholders' and board-of-directors' meetings, found himself in a lonesome minority at the called meeting of the Neptune Sun Bath Company. There was not one friendly face to cheer him; for Blackie Daw and Paul Pollet were not present, and it was inconvenient for his office-

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boy and his butler to attend; so, being positive that a jolt was brewing for him, he relinquished his gavel to Vice-president Nayler, and sat among the common members.

"I hold in my hand an offer from the Neptune Hotel Company for the purchase of the Neptune Sun Bath Company's real estate," said Secretary Poynter through his thin nose, when called upon by the chair for his report. "That company offers us ten thousand for a clear deed and title to the property. The offer is couched in sufficiently legal phraseology and is so clear and definite that I understand it perfectly. As a matter of fact, I wrote it myself. Accompanying this document is a certified check for ten thousand dollars, also quite intelligible. I shall now read the offer," which he proceeded to do with evident relish.

"Move we accept," said the mole-nosed man indifferently.

"Second the motion," snapped Hittam, still at a tungsten glow of indignation.

"Are you ready for the question?" asked the chair, smoothing his silver forelock.

"Question," demanded Wallingford with equal nonchalance, and one-half of the members present stared at him in dawning perplexity, which was increased when, with equal carelessness, he voted aye on the motion, making it unanimous.

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Mr. Hittam, glaring at him ferociously, was immediately upon his feet. "I move that we declare a dividend of sufficient percentage to divide the sixty thousand dollars now in the treasury of this company pro rata among the stockholders."

"Second the motion," remarked the quiet little statistician.

"Are you ready for the question?" yawned the chair.

"Question," observed Wallingford, taking a contemplative puff of his cigar; and moistening down a trifling inequality of the wrapper. He voted aye to this proposition also, making it unanimous.

Once more Mr. Hittam was upon his feet, this time his eye glittering balefully as he launched the final blow at J. Rufus.

"Move we take steps for the immediate dissolution of the Neptune Sun Bath Company!" he half bellowed.

"Second the motion," husked the fat man of the meeting.

"Are we ready for the question?" asked the chair.

"Question," calmly suggested Wallingford, and voted aye, making it unanimous.

So it was that the Neptune Sun Bath Company went out of existence, though the forceful Hittam was somewhat disappointed that it had made no better struggle.

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"I thought you were a fighter," he chided Wallingford, at the close of the meeting.

Long-nosed Poynter laughed. "He's won his fight," he told Hittam. "Mr. Wallingford invested fifty-seven thousand five hundred dollars in property, but we'll call it sixty thousand to cover expenses. He put up fifty thousand additional cash. That makes his total investment a hundred and ten thousand. He receives back the hundred and thirty-nine thousand eight hundred and sixty dollars we paid Mr. Daw and Mr. Pollet for their stock, a dividend of eighteen thousand from the disbanded bath company, which makes him a net profit of forty-seven thousand eight hundred and sixty dollars cash, besides a hundred and five thousand dollars' worth of stock in the Neptune Hotel Company, which is worth par."

Hittam gasped. "I don't understand how it is possible!"

"No one but a genius could," responded Poynter with a chuckle. "Come along, Wallingford, I want to buy you a drink."

CHAPTER XIII

STANDING TREAT

THE fat bicycle-rider stopped near the brow of the hill through sheer lack of momentum, allowed his wheel to drop from under him, and waddled painfully to the roadside, where he sat on a stone and puffed. The thin rider, who was abnormally picturesque in red sweater and hose, blue knickerbockers and cap and tan pumps, went on to the very top of the steep road, dismounted and looked back in disappointment.

"Buck up, Jim," he called. "Aim for the highest."

J. Rufus Wallingford mopped his brow with a dusty handkerchief and glared his scorching anger at Blackie Daw. "When you die and go where you belong," he panted, "I hope you get the hottest kettle of pitch in the whole blazing place!"

"You ungrateful cuss!" reproached Blackie. "Are we taking this trip for my benefit? Am I in danger from fatty degeneration of the works? Am I shaped like an Edam cheese? Is the doctor or my family worried about me?"

"Shut up!" groaned Wallingford. "You cooked

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up this trip so you could kid me, and I'm through. I don't care if I get so fat that I have to travel in sections like a cattle-train. Where's Paul Pollet and that automobile?"

"Sad news, Jim," commiserated Blackie, surveying the landscape from the hilltop. "The tracks of the tires are here, and the smiling village lies below. I behold white houses and red barns; I perceive windmills and haystacks, and orchards and cows—"

"Where's that auto?" demanded J. Rufus, sturdily resisting the panic which threatened him.

"— and horses, and wagons, and chickens, and a babbling brook, but in all the peaceful scenic effect, Jim—"

With a groan, Wallingford rose from his stone and took up the burden of weary life. He did not, however, take up his machine. He left it lie just where it had fallen, and trudged up the hill alone. He took one comprehensive survey of the wintry landscape and swore with earnestness.

"Where's that village?" he demanded.

"Yonder in the middle distance," returned Blackie with a grin, pointing to where their road was intersected by another. At the crossing were a church, a school, a store and a blacksmith shop. This was all, unless a yellow farmhouse, lying slightly nearer, could be considered part of the municipality. "Robins' Corners," explained Blackie

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cheerfully; "so called because a little robin red-breast makes his home in the old church tower."

"No wonder Polly went straight on through," decided Wallingford in deep aggravation. "He's probably still hunting the burg."

Blackie straddled his machine. "You do wrong to desert your steed at this stage of the game," he chided. "It's all down-hill to yonder rural hamlet, and pleasant coasting."

He gave himself a start, and his bicycle gathering momentum, he threw his legs over the handlebar and went sailing down the hill with a howl of joy like a boy just let out from school. Wallingford watched him enviously and looked back with sad speculation at his own wheel. Finally, shaking his head, he left the contraption to its fate and started stolidly after Blackie on foot, through with weight-reducings and bicycle forever.

It was a long, and a slow, and a painful walk, and as the fates would have it, he stumbled on a frozen clod and fell, just in front of the yellow farmhouse, and bruised his knee-cap, and lay there scattering profanity into the surrounding atmosphere until a man, with ear-muffs and a straw hat and gum overshoes on his wrinkled knee-length boots, came clomping out of the yellow house, on the porch of which gathered the mother and the three girls, whose ages could have been told by the

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pounds, so regularly were they graduated in roundness.

"Hurt you, neighbor?" he wanted to know in a voice like a nutmeg-grater.

"No," snapped Wallingford, endeavoring to rise. "I'm just sitting here to enjoy the scenery."

"Folks always does admire the view from here," returned the farmer dryly, and backed up against the fence.

"Is he hurt, paw?" shrilled the oldest and roundest of the quartet.

"Naw, he only cracked a joke," snickered paw.

Blackie came whirling back, and helped Wallingford to his feet, but the big fellow could not stand.

"I knew your infernal bicycle trip would be the death of me," he charged, as he leaned heavily on Blackie.

"Welcher!" retorted Blackie. "If you'd stuck to your bicycle you wouldn't have been hurt. What's the matter?"

"Knee-cap," replied Wallingford, wincing with pain. "I think I've punctured it. It's swelling to beat the band."

"They have a telephone at the store," suggested Blackie. "If you can only get that far, you can rest until we locate the machine, or until it comes back."

"I can't make it," declared Wallingford, testing his foot on the ground and paling from the pain.

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Big drops of perspiration were pouring down his face, and he was quite obviously in agony.

"If the gentleman's through looking at the beauties of nature," observed the farmer, "I might offer to help get him into my house."

"So you might," accepted Blackie with alacrity. "If you'll just grab Mr. Wallingford on his light side over there, I'll struggle along with his heavy side."

Between the two they managed to get the huge Wallingford into the house, while the row of calico-clad women disappeared like a perspective of bowling-pins, the little one first. The pain increasing with every step, the men took Wallingford directly into the front bedroom and put him to bed, and the farmer, seizing the golden opportunity, telephoned to Pinkyville for Old Doc Tutt.

Blackie made an entirely useless examination of his foolish little pocket flask, and urged on by the suffering Wallingford, issued an earnest requisition for some first aid to the sober.

"I got some, but I dassent sell it," returned the farmer. "You can get it down at Sam Bludgeon's Emporium."

Blackie, who was a man of action, started for the door. The farmer followed him out into the crape-paper sitting-room.

"Reckon you might as well register before you

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go," he suggested, producing a thin-ruled blank-book labeled "Compositions."

"Is this a hotel?" inquired Blackie, much pleased.

"Well, sort o' so," replied the proprietor. "I take care of most of the strangers that come this way. They call this the Purty House, because I'm Jeff Purty. I got a big house and a wife and three growed-up girls that ain't doing much, except the milkin' and churnin' and washin' and bakin' and scrubbin' and such chores in the off season this way, and I ain't one to refuse ready cash."

"Such is the custom of our country," agreed Blackie, writing solemnly, at the top of the first blank page in the composition book:

The Travelers.

There came to the splendidly appointed Purty House, on the mild autumn day of November thirtieth, nineteen eleven, two distinguished gentlemen, one fat and ill-favored, and the other slender and handsome; the name of the former being J. Rufus Wallingford, of Tarryville, and of the latter, Horace G. Daw, mayor of the same thriving and exclusive suburb. Parlor A. Dinner. The end.

Jeff Purty looked over the composition, chewing a quill tooth-pick reflectively. "Rates, one dollar a day each," he stated, and closed the book.

Blackie walked into the Emporium, and through

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the whisk-broom department, the dry-goods section, the hardware counter and the grocery aisle, straight around a glass-paneled screen, where he found, behind an abnormally short bar, a red-faced man with a luxuriant yellow mustache, and his hair parted and pasted as if it had been done with a trowel, pouring whisky from a huge demijohn into a string of various labeled bottles.

"When you get to the best grade of rye, pour me out about a pint, will you?" requested Blackie.

The bartender, who was muscled like a derrick, regarded Blackie with a friendly eye. "Any particular brand?" he asked, as he went on pouring.

Blackie smiled appreciatively, as his eye rolled over the line of bottles and discerned every well-known label. "No, I think I'll take mine right out of the jug," he decided.

"You don't look like a guy that would be after the cheap goods," commented the bartender; "but you can never tell," and reaching back, he took a flask from the shelf and filled it with rye from the demijohn, after which he filled up a bottle labeled "Fine Old Kentucky Bourbon."

Blackie took his pint flask and laid down a dollar. The salesman flipped it nonchalantly into a drawer and tossed back a quarter.

"How's the old town?" he asked with perfunctory interest.

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"Meaning Pinkyville or Lafayette Center?" inquired Blackie.

"The little old town between the L and the subway," insisted the other, lowering his big demijohn to the floor as if it had been a thimble full of feathers.

"It's still the best summer and winter resort on earth," claimed Blackie. "How long have you been away from it?"

"Six months since the last visit; but I haven't lived there for years. I left when they tamed the Bowery."

"I get you," replied Blackie, looking at him wonderingly. "You came to Robins' Corners to be near the excitement."

"Get new," admonished the bartender. "I can see you're stuffed up with *The Old Homestead* idea that the country is too moral for a tough man to enjoy, but you never walked into a crossroads saloon on a Saturday night. When Willie Richboy goes on a bender in the city he laps up certain quarts of champagne, takes a swift whiz down the avenue and maybe insults his chauffeur; but when Willie Acres goes on a bender in the country he swallows twelve drinks of liquor made out of raw alcohol and tobacco, takes a knife in one hand and a gun in the other and starts whooping. They'll begin to tie up at the hitching-rails in about half an hour. By night

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there'll be forty or fifty rigs out there, and you can hear the celebration over in Pinkyville. Stick around."

"I'll stick," promised Blackie. "My partner squashed his knee-cap, and I've just put him to bed over at Jeff Purty's."

"Why didn't you say you wanted that liquor for a sick man?" demanded the bartender, promptly opening a bottle with an unbroken seal. "Feed him some of this, and use that fighting whisky for liniment. Dollar, please. If you ain't busy, drop over a little while after supper-time and get stabbed," he invited.

"Thanks," accepted Blackie. "I'll try it and see how I like it," and he hurried back to the Purty House, where he soothed Wallingford with alternate doses from his two bottles.

Old Doc Tutt arrived by the time Wallingford's eyes were beginning to glaze, and put a bandage around the injured knee. He was a hairy-handed old man, with a chest like a barrel and a well-weathered face which was the color of an eggplant, but he was a scientist and a commercial genius as well.

"The charge'll be two dollars," he informed Blackie.

"How long will he be laid up?" inquired the mayor of Tarryville, reaching for his pocketbook.

"I can't tell just yet," returned Old Doc Tutt, with a keen gray eye on Blackie's breast pocket.

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Blackie produced a packet of bills rich enough to cause heart failure, and selected a two-dollar note. "Do the best you can for him," he requested. "If extra trips will do the business, come over two or three times a day."

"If that man puts his foot to the floor inside of two weeks," decided Doc Tutt instantly, "he'll be a cripple for life."

"What's the matter with him?" asked Blackie anxiously.

"We'll have to wait for the inflammation to subside before we can determine," replied the doctor gravely, putting on his spectacles, as he always did to deliver an opinion. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that Mr. Wallingford has sustained a compound fracture of the patella, but he has certainly involved a severe lesion of the cartilaginous tissue," and leaving Blackie to recover from that shock as best he might, Old Doc Tutt strode out to his buckboard.

"Is he bad hurt, Doc?" asked Jeff Purty, much concerned commercially.

"Awful bad," pronounced the doctor with conviction. "I reckon he'll be with us about two weeks."

Jeff Purty scratched his head. "I suppose he's got folks that'll take care of him," he speculated.

"He don't need it," responded Doc Tutt. "Them two's rich."

"Durn it!" ejaculated Jeff Purty.

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Ten minutes later, still regretful, he walked down to Sam Bludgeon's Emporium. A short farmer, with a red shirt and a paper collar and no necktie, stood on the porch.

"Hello, Jeff," he hailed, leering up at the sky from force of habit. "Hear you got some rich New York folks at the house. Doc Tutt just told me."

"Uh-huh," agreed Jeff, visibly worried. "They got scads of money."

"Well, you know what they do to us in the city," suggested the little farmer. "My cousin Eb's son went to New York last summer, and they charged him two dollars a day for his room alone. Not a bite of eating."

"Dog-gone it," confessed Jeff. "I already made 'em a price. Just regular rates; quarter for a bed, and a quarter for each meal."

"There's always some way to get around it," advised the little farmer. "Come in and I'll play you seven-up to see who stands treat."

"I reckon not," replied Jeff. "It's cheaper in the long run by the jug. I just come over to get a peck of beans."

"Of Sam Bludgeon!" protested the little farmer. "Gee, you must be rich."

"It's the poor that gets robbed," replied Jeff, and went in.

An overly plump woman, beautiful with a yellow

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shawl and a red hat with a green feather, shook hands with Jeff and inquired about Mrs. Purty and the girls. "I hear you got some rich New York folks over at your house," she told him. "Millie Parsons just told me. Doc Tutt told her. Millie says the slim one looks like an actor. She seen him at the window as she drove past. I think I'll go over and visit your women folks a spell."

"They'll be glad to see you, soon as they get through primpin' up," returned Jeff.

"Doc Tutt says the strangers is likely to be here a couple of weeks," suggested the woman. "You'd ought to make quite a bit of ready cash."

"Twenty-eight dollars, all told," figured Jeff. "I already made 'em a price; a dollar a day apiece," and the expression of pain on his face deepened.

"Why, jimminy crickets, Jeff!" exclaimed the lady. "That's no price to charge New York folks. My Aunt Matilda Jenkins' second husband took her to New York on their honeymoon, and went to a hotel and asked for the best there was in the house. My heavens, Jeff! That hotel wanted twelve dollars a day, just for the room alone, and it didn't even have a comb and brush in it!"

"Gosh!" commented Jeff. "Well, it's too late. The price is made, and the worst of it is, I'm out of beans. I got to buy some."

"Of Sam Bludgeon!" protested the stout matron.

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"Why, he'll rob you out of all your profits. It's plumb dishonest the prices he charges!"

A stoop-shouldered old farmer, who was practising an occasional hoe-down step, grabbed Jeff as he entered the bar. "Hear you got some New York folks over at your place," he observed. "You ought to stand treat on it."

"I dassent," returned Jeff glumly. "By the time I buy provisions, I'll lose money."

"Dang 'em, gouge 'em," advised the stoop-shouldered one. "That's what they do to us in New York."

"Too late!" groaned Jeff. "I already made 'em a price. Regular rates; dollar a day apiece."

"If I show you how to get around that will you stand treat?" bargained the other, his little red eyes leering up with a shrewd twinkle.

"Well, let's hear it," cautiously held out Jeff.

"Little snake-oil, Sam," jubilated the inventor, and danced his little pigeon-toed hoe-down. "Simple as a, b, c," he went on. "You just tell them folks that the price you made 'em was for the room. Meals extra."

"By jinks, I'll pay for the treat!" declared Jeff recklessly. "That lets me add seventy-five cents a day on each one."

Sam Bludgeon, setting out the snake-oil, suddenly

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chuckled. "Two bits a meal," he scorned. "Here, I'll give you a New York bill of fare. I brought it home from Broadway last trip," and from his safe he produced a gaudily printed souvenir menu of one of the Lobster Square cafés.

Jeff opened that awe-inspiring publication and studied it with gasps. "Great Jehoshaphat!" he exclaimed. "Ham and eggs, eighty cents. How much ham and eggs is that?"

"For one person," explained Sam with quiet pride. "One slice of ham the size and thickness of a theater ticket and two regular eggs. Bread and butter free; but toast and potatoes and jam and griddle cakes all extra, and from two to four bits apiece."

"Gosh a'mighty!" breathed Jeff. "Say, I dassent do it, ask 'em these prices. Besides I ain't got hardly any of the stuff that's on this bill."

"Tell 'em you're out," advised Sam. "That's what they do in New York. Wait; I'll fix you."

Seizing a flower postal-card from his stationery case, he pasted it on the outside of the big folder over the name of the restaurant.

"Now take my rubber stamp outfit and print on there 'Hotel Purty Café'."

The middle-weight Miss Purty, who was now in a pink gingham hobble skirt which allowed her to sag

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wherever she felt like it, presented that astounding menu to Blackie, and simpered while the handsome stranger studied it with gasping incredulity.

"This is an unexpected treat," he assured the ample young lady, looking up at her, and smiling with a friendly wish to share the joke with some one.

Miss Purty shyly averted her bulging blue eyes and giggled.

"I think I'll have some purée St. Germaine, some—"

"Where?" asked the girl, looking hastily over his shoulder.

Courteously Blackie pointed out the item. "Purée St. Germaine, seventy-five cents for two persons or fifty cents for one, if this were a real card, and I may say, lady— By the way, what is your name?"

"Mushewanka," she told him, and put one hand behind her head and giggled.

"Mush—" he gasped, and stopped.

"—ewanka," she finished for him, holding the pose. "It's an Indian name. Maw got it from the picture of a beautiful Indian princess on the label of Swanker's Root and Bark Bitters; but we don't use that medicine any more, since the *Ladies' Constant Adviser* exposed it. It's the prettiest name in the county everybody says."

"It's considerable name," admitted Blackie; "musical, rhythmical and mystical; but what do

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they call you when you're not all dolled up? I know! Don't tell me! I guess it! Mushy!"

She looked at him and giggled. "Well, the boys do call me that," she confessed; then, giggling again, she cast at him a daredevil glance, and putting her hands over her face, ran out of the room, while Blackie looked speculatively at the sleeping Wallingford, debating whether to wake him up or not.

Presently a smaller edition of the bulgingly coy Mushewanka came in, with her one braid of hair ornamented by a huge plaid bow and the four top shoe buttons open, for self-explanatory reasons. "Mush has got the giggles and can't come back," explained the youngest hope of the house of Purty, studying Blackie with so frankly interested directness of gaze that he almost blushed. "What's the rest of your order?"

"Oh, yes, the rest of my order," mused Blackie wonderingly. "First of all, do I get the purée St. Germaine?"

"Sure as shootin'," she contemptuously assured him. "It's only pea-soup. Nasturtium, that's my oldest sister, she looked it up in *Ladies' Constant Adviser Cook Book*. What else?"

"Thus being so," murmured Blackie, consulting the card with fresh hope; "we'll try if we may have a nice, plain, fried spring chicken, country style, with some ordinary French fried potatoes, some stewed

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beans, a little salad of some convenient sort, and a demi-tasse."

"Demi-tasse?" she repeated. "Where?"

"Here," he politely informed her, placing his forefinger on the spot.

"Oh," she observed, and went away blankly.

She came back a few minutes later, still distressed.

"I found out about that demi-tasse," she assured him; "but is this the chicken you meant?" and she pointed to the appalling line, "Milk-fed Spring Chicken, Fried Country Style, \$2.50."

"That's it," he agreed, looking as much puzzled as she did. He saw no French to confuse the intellect.

"Oh," returned the girl. "Well, Mr. Daw, I'll have to tell you something. We ain't got any milk-fed chickens. We're—we're out."

"Tell you the truth, I don't believe there are any in the world," replied Blackie cheerfully; "and, as a matter of fact, I prefer regular chicken, anyhow."

"Oh," commented the girl still more faintly. "Would you rather have spring chicken?"

Blackie began to lose faith. "I have an immoderate fondness for spring chicken," he confessed.

"Well, we got some," she hesitated; "but it's awful late in the fall now, and they're tough. We

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got some that was hatched late in the summer that's just right for fryin'."

"You have my permission to fry the late-summer crop," granted Blackie heartily. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Pete," she told him briskly, and left the room.

CHAPTER XIV

AVOID THE RUSH

WALLINGFORD was lying with his eyes closed when dinner-time came, but when his purée St. Germaine was brought into the room, in a deep yellow bowl with a nick in the rim, he sat straight up. Blackie, taking his dinner at the bedside by special arrangement, sipped of the soup from his own blue bowl, and hitched his chair closer. Mushy did not appear during the meal, which was served with expedition and despatch by Pete, short for Patricia, and when Blackie had eaten his fill of the late-summer chicken, fried country style, he turned upward to that young lady eyes that were almost tearful with happiness.

"It's a lie," he confided to Wallingford, when Pete had departed with the platter of chicken bones and all the other *débris*.

"I know it," agreed Wallingford with an oily sigh. "Nothing like this ever happened in the country. I'm going to find out which one of those girls fried that chicken, and insinuate her name into my will."

"Hush!" admonished Blackie. "There is more to follow."

The more was a decorative low bowl of dried

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grasses in various red and brown colors, which was deposited hastily in the center of the white cloth by the promptly vanishing Pete, whose next appearance was with two platters of salad and two clean forks. The salad was of celery chopped with apples and nuts, covered with cream mayonnaise and garnished with strips of red peppers; and at last Blackie knew the answer.

"*The Ladies' Constant Adviser*," he guessed, tasting the salad with approval.

"Yes, we get everything from that," stated Pete; "fashions and cooking receipts and etiquette and art, but we don't get to practise much. We hobbled our dresses last spring, but now the hobble's gone out, and the *Adviser* hasn't published any article on how to unhobble them. Say! We haven't any demi-tasse cups. Do you care if we fill a regular cup half full?"

"You may do anything you please, and go as far as you like," granted Blackie. "I'm going to subscribe to the *Ladies' Constant Adviser*."

Filled and comforted and soothing himself with a cigarette, Blackie sat watching Wallingford drop into satisfied slumber, when Jeff Purty plodded in and sat on the edge of a chair.

"How's the invalid?" he was kind enough to inquire.

"Stuffed and happy," replied Blackie, lazily offering his host a cigarette.

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Jeff took one and examined it with the same interest he would have bestowed on a curious bug, but he declined to light.

Blackie, his duty of hospitality performed, sank back once more in blissful physical inertia.

Jeff Purty struggled with a weighty problem. "Your dinner up to the mark?" he finally ventured.

"I don't like to talk about it; it's sacrilegious," said Blackie.

Again a painful silence.

"Did you notice the prices?"

"Not particularly; except that they seemed familiar."

"Then it's so, I guess," decided Jeff with a sigh. "Your dinner was five dollars and eighty-five cents."

Blackie considered that with the complacency of a perfectly pacified male animal. "Well, considering the grub, I wouldn't kick at Forty-second Street, and I don't see why I should here," he fairly decided.

Again a silence. Jeff Purty cleared his throat.

"I reckon when you pay this kind of prices you pay as you go," he finally suggested.

"Now I get you," declared Blackie forgivingly. "We have no luggage," and reluctant only because he had to move, he produced a ten-dollar bill.

Jeff Purty took that government certificate with curious hesitation. "By jinks, I try to be an honest man," he finally blurted. "I dassent charge you that

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much. It's a put-up job. Regular meals is twenty-five cents, but this is somethin' special, and all four of the women folks has worked like thrashin' time, so I reckon I'll have to charge you fifty cents apiece."

Blackie straightened up with a renewed interest in life. "Who put up the job?" he demanded.

"Well, Sam Bludgeon give me that menu card. He brung it back from the city his last trip."

"He did us all a favor, but he didn't mean it," stated Blackie, weighing the matter. "He's none too popular here, is he?"

"Popular!" protested Jeff. "Why, by thunder, there'll be fireworks at his funeral."

"Has he any money?"

"He'd ought to have. He gouges everybody in Pinky County, and never spends a cent."

It was Blackie's turn for cogitation. "We'll stick to that menu card, and let the women work their heads off, because they're having the time of their lives," he decided. "Also, we'll pay the printed prices, and before we go, Jim and I will collect the entire amount from Sam Bludgeon."

"Honest to gosh, can you do that?" inquired Jeff eagerly. "If you can I can take this money with a clean conscience, and Lord knows I love it."

"You tell your conscience to sit right up and be suspicious," laughed Blackie. "It won't catch you with the goods. By the way, Landlord, send Pete in

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with the change. I'm going through on the Broadway basis."

Pete entered presently, with the change on a little hand-painted plate, according to the custom gleaned from the fashionable fiction in the *Ladies' Constant Adviser*, but her jaw dropped when Blackie left a dollar on the plate.

"This dollar," he carefully explained, "belongs to mother and Nasturtium and Mushewanka and Pete. It's the start of the unhobbling fund."

"Thanks!" gasped Pete. "Thank you, sir, I mean," and with her pigtail sticking straight out, she blurted out into the kitchen, with the beginning of an absorbing financial calculation that was to last for days.

While they were deep in the pages of the latest issue of the *Ladies' Constant Adviser*, studying its fashion columns with a renewed and hopeful interest, Jeff Purty returned to Blackie.

"Excuse me," he ventured. "I been thinkin'. Of course I know we got to keep mum about this, but, if it's just the same to you, would you mind tellin' me how you reckon you're gonna make Sam Bludgeon pay all your expenses?"

Blackie turned to him with lazy eyes. "You'll have to wait a little," he replied. "I can't tell you till Jim Wallingford wakes up."

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Sam Bludgeon walked out on his porch, when he opened his store doors early on the following Saturday morning, and batted his eyes at the unfamiliar appearance of Jeff Purty's wagon-shed, which opened on the road just a few rods away. Over the wide sliding doors, in the gable where only an old rusty horseshoe had hung, there now stared a brand-new black-and-white sign:

WALLINGFORD AND DAW

Plain and Fancy Everything at wholesale prices plus ten per cent. Ask to see the wholesale bills.

In front of the store stood the big seven-passenger touring car, in which Paul Pollet had been entertaining the Pinky County belles for the last week, and on its broad sides were canvas streamers, painted,

Wallingford and Daw, Robins' Corner,
Fancy Everything.

Sam Bludgeon, with a troubled look on his low brow, swaggered up to the door, with a nod at Paul, and looked in. The counters were rough board benches covered with cambric, and they ran straight down each side of the long wagon-shed. Back of

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each counter were stacked up boxes and bales, lying on their sides with their fronts removed, exposing gingham and calicoes in the bolt, and all other supplies in like wholesale order. There were handkerchiefs, and underwear, and bed-clothing, and stockings, and shirts, and suspenders, and wrappers, and shirt-waists, and gloves, and shoes, and tea and coffee, and spices, and rice, and raisins, and soap, and canned goods, and candy, and tobacco, and muslins, and lamps, and glass, and chinaware, and notions, and perfumes, and rugs, and curtains, and books, and stationery, and toys, and hardware, and more other miscellaneous articles than Sam could quite catalogue in such a hasty view. Behind one counter, just in front of the box of gaudy ribbons, stood the suave and smiling Blackie Daw, and behind the other with the fanciest jabot of the recent shipment at her neck and her face scrubbed till it looked like a highly polished red apple, stood Pete Purty.

"Come right in, Sam," hailed Blackie. "Come early and avoid the rush. Let me show you some of this superior gingham, at seventy cents a bolt."

"So this is your business here," commented Sam. "I've heard wagons and autos come in here the last two nights, and heard you pounding and fussing around in here all week. You wasn't square with me."

"Why not?" demanded Blackie. "Because I

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didn't ask your advice? Let me sell you a bolt of this flannelet. A dollar eighty."

"How much by the yard?" questioned Sam, tempted to inspect the flannelet, which was of a particularly attractive soft-red pattern.

"No goods sold by the yard," replied Blackie loftily. "No packages broken. No piker money taken."

Sam chuckled in relief. "You'll get skinny at this business. That's no way to run a store."

"This isn't a store," scorned Blackie. "This is merely a wholesale distributing depot. It's the latest idea in country merchandising."

"It's a fool scheme," protested Sam. "These farmers won't buy bolts of things."

"They will this time," grinned Blackie. "We only make a specialty of bolt gingham four times a year, but we sure do load up a county every three months. My partner and I own ninety-three of these stores, and we open up a new one every week. Pete, sell Sam a box of soap or a keg of those assorted nails."

"I got my own business to look after," growled Sam, and went out. He stopped a moment at the automobile. "Your bosses are running a monopoly," he charged. "They are enemies to the small retailer."

"Don't you like them very well?" inquired Paul, turning a cold eye on the man he despised because of the quality of liquor he sold.

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"No, I don't," declared Sam, looking darkly in at the door.

Little Paul climbed carefully down from his machine with a wrench in his hand. "Then you take just about two jumps away from here or I'll scramble your egg, you big stiff," he advised, and started to walk straight through the bully of Pinky County.

"Keep away from me," ordered Sam, backing off. "You can't get me to start any fight on Saturday morning."

"You don't have to start it," returned Paul, shaking the wrench at him. "I'm a self-starter."

"Polly!" called a voice from the doorway.

"All right, Patricia," laughed Paul, walking over to her after he had seen the broad back of Sam.

"Cut that," she ordered him. "My name's Pete."

"All right, Pete," he cheerfully agreed, taking her arm. "Come in and give me a dried prune."

He was still nibbling at that delicacy when the first customers of the morning came in—Mr. and Mrs. Mellon, of Ash Grove. Mrs. Mellon carried in her hand a huge wholesale price-list of the Wallingford and Daw Ten Per Cent. Store, the aforesaid hand-bill having been presented to her, two miles out on the north road, by the Storkin boy number six, the number seven, eight and nine Storkin younguns having similar jobs that morning on the east, west and south roads respectively.

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"Let's see that gingham," demanded Mrs. Mellon, with businesslike severity. "I might get fooled on some things, but gingham I could tell if I was dead."

Mrs. Mellon paid no attention to pattern or color in the beginning. She took the first bolt which Blackie handed her, loosened the end, jerked it between her muscular hands till it snapped like a drum, rubbed it vigorously between her knuckles, wet a piece of it, pulled out a thread of the warp and one of the woof, burned half of each and chewed the rest, and announced herself satisfied.

"I'll take two yards," she said.

Blackie smiled on her sweetly but sadly. "I'm sorry that I'm not allowed to cut to a bolt for so good a judge of gingham," he stated, looking her admiringly in the eyes. "I know you'd like the gingham when you got it home, and would tell all your neighbors that they couldn't buy such gingham at Sam Bludgeon's for from twelve to fifteen cents a yard, if at all. Neither would I urge you to take a full bolt unless, after figuring it over, you can see where you could use the ten-yard bolt, at seventy cents."

Mrs. Mellon regarded him with a doubtful eye. "Well, I don't know," she speculated, counting her fingers, with a long and thoughtful pause at each digit. "Where's that wholesale bill?"

"Right on the 'billiton-board' on the center post,"

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said Blackie, leading her to the big framed board, on which were tacked the wholesale bills of every article in the Wallingford and Daw distributing depot No. 93. He even pointed out to her the No. 12,037 gingham, at sixty-two cents the bolt, with six and two-tenth cents added for profit, and the balance of seventy cents figured in for freight and cartage.

Mr. Mellon himself figured out that problem on the edge of the board, with a stump of lead-pencil so short that it cramped his knuckles to hold it, and he announced himself as satisfied also.

"This is what had ort to be done," he told Blackie earnestly. "Even ten per cent. is a mighty high price to charge for keepin' us from buyin' our goods direct from the wholesalers, but it's a step in the right direction; that is, if the gingham's good. Is it, Marthy?"

"It's better'n that shirt you got on," she told him. "You know what we paid for that, two years ago this fall? Ten and a half cents a yard, at Sam Bludgeon's. How much per cent. is that?"

Highly interested, Mr. Mellon went back to the "billiton-board" with his stump of a pencil. "A little over forty per cent., deducting the same amount for freight and cartage," he finally announced.

"Forty per cent!" she hissed. "I'll never darken the door of Sam Bludgeon's again! Young man, I'll

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take a whole bolt of that gingham. What other bargains you got?"

"Some gilt bird-cages," replied Blackie promptly. "We have a shipment of the finest gilt bird-cages ever sold for the money, I think. Each cage an original package, and no packages broken. Allow me to show you one."

"I don't need a bird-cage," she refused, looking about the store.

"But you might," he insisted. "Then you would be sorry, for when these bird-cages are sold we shall consider Pinky County supplied, and shall buy no more."

"But I haven't any bird," she explained.

"You never know when you're going to have a bird," argued Blackie with pained earnestness. "Some dear friend is likely to make you a present of a bird at any moment, and then you might have to drive over to Pinkyville for a bird-cage, or even, if you were in a hurry, send in to Sam Bludgeon's for one; and where could you get a bird-cage like this for eighty cents?"

The triumphant moment having arrived, he switched the glittering object from under the counter and held it temptingly before her eyes.

A family from Leggets Run came in, the oldest girl still reading the wholesale price-list hand-bill, and made a straight line for the flannelet pile; and

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from that moment Pinky County began to congregate, with increasing numbers and enthusiasm, in Jeff Purty's former wagon-shed.

At ten o'clock, Paul Pollet began to pile boxes and barrels out in front at the edge of the road, and on each one he tacked a sign, "Full this morning, emptied by wholesale." By mid-afternoon, Jeff and Mrs. Purty and Mushy had joined the clerical force, and by evening the interior of that store looked as empty as a puppy's milk-plate, while Blackie positively beamed with satisfaction. There wasn't a bird-cage left in the house!

"Now I'm going to have some pink silk pajamas in the order we send in to-night," he declared. "Jim wouldn't let me have them last week, but he didn't even want me to have any bird-cages."

Late that night, Sam Bludgeon, made ferocious by the day's tumble in his fortunes, tried to incite the wilder members of his barroom crowd to go over and clean up the Wallingford and Daw intrusion on his domain, but when he picked himself out from among the broken glassware he decided that even men in their cups are familiar with percentages, and that the principle of personal profit is the very last thing of which they lose consciousness.

Old Doc Tutt pushed Wallingford's shoulders gently but firmly back on to his pillows. "Now, you

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lie still," he ordered in the sternest voice of which professional authority is capable. "Do you want that knee to be crooked for life?"

"Yes!" roared Wallingford, rising to one elbow. "I'd rather live with a crooked knee than die here," and he made a move to swing his injured leg out of bed.

Old Doc Tutt grabbed that leg with the energy of despair and thrust it back under the covers. "Don't you dare!" he warned. "Why, man, the ligaments that hold your patella in place are just now beginning to yield to the granulation which I introduced into the lesions, and if you get out of bed before the cicatrices have properly formed, I shall not answer for the consequences. However, I shall, in my examination to-day—"

"If you touch that knee again, I'll have your heart's blood," offered Wallingford desperately, as the doctor reached for it. "The last time I threatened to get out of bed you broke it open and put some pepper in it. Blackie! Oh, Blackie! Give this big butcher two dollars and tell him to go to and never come back."

In an inadvertent moment Old Doc Tutt turned to locate Blackie, and in that moment a large gentleman, clad in tan silk pajamas with lavender frogs, plumped out of bed, and landed on both feet with a thud. His right foot jerked up. He slammed his

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right foot on the floor. His right knee hurt him like sixty, and once more, this time swearing, he stamped his right foot.

"Hurt, confound you!" he swore at it. "You've kept me in bed two weeks, and now I'm going to hurt you all I darn please," and lifting up his left heel, he kicked himself on the right knee, to Blackie's huge delight and approval.

"Get back in that bed!" yelled Old Doc Tutt, panic-stricken at his impending loss, and he pushed suddenly against Wallingford's shoulders with both hands.

Wallingford, however, had reached the point of deathless defiance. Throwing both arms around the burly body of his tormentor, he made a quick turn, and the two fat men swayed and strained against the edge of the bed, while Blackie Daw shouted glad encouragement impartially to both contenders.

Wallingford, grunting with the exertion, threw all his weight into a final mighty push. Old Doc Tutt felt himself slipping, grabbed wildly and harvested a handful of prisms from the hanging-lamp; then the two of them went back on the bed with a dull splintering thud, followed by the hanging-lamp. Three slats gave way under that mighty impact. The mattress and the feather-tick went through, and there, in that wild tangle of bedding, J. Rufus Wallingford, who had ever counted discretion the better

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part of valor, deliberately punched Old Doc Tutt in the exact center of his appetite.

"Get me out of this!" he bellowed to his pleased audience. "I want that car ready to leave this infernal crossroads to-night."

Twenty minutes later, while Wallingford was dressing with the assistance of Paul, and Old Doc Tutt had driven rapidly off to Pinkyville for the sheriff, Pete Purty rejoined Blackie in the store, where he was at work on a large new sign.

"Aw, Blackie," she protested. "It's all over!"

"Just about ready for the blow-off, Petey," he agreed, cocking his head sidewise to study the effect of a stroke.

"I'm awful sorry," she confessed.

"It has been fun, hasn't it, partner?" he admitted, reaching out to pat her on the plump shoulder, but never moving his eyes from the artistic task.

"I'm going to miss it so much I'll die," the girl acknowledged. "You men have been good company and mighty nice, but I just plumb hate to see this store closed up. I think I was cut out for a business man."

"Don't you worry, kid; I have a little present for you," Blackie encouraged her, putting the final stroke on his sign. "It's all in this soap-box," and walking over to it, he produced a stack of bulky catalogues, illustrated with pictures, plain and colored, of every

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imaginable article of merchandise under the sun. "How do you suppose we were able to start this store in such a hurry?"

"I couldn't guess," she puzzled. "I've been trying to."

"By consulting the advertising pages of the *Ladies' Constant Adviser*," Blackie gleefully informed her, as happy in that fact as she could possibly be. "We found a firm that makes a business of outfitting new country stores. For the last week I've been getting catalogues for you from the same fat advertising columns."

She drew those precious volumes toward her with a motion like a hug. "I'll bet your wife likes you."

"Never say that to a married man," admonished Blackie. "Now, here's what you do, Pete. You don't want to run a ten per cent. wholesale store. You'd lose father's farm, after Pinky County got used to the novelty; but you do want to run a wholesale agency. You can get every farmer's wife to drop in here every Saturday and look at your catalogues, and order what they want. When they want rice, make ten of them subscribe for a barrel. Slap on ten per cent. for handling, and order it. If they want calico, maybe four of them will split a bolt of it. It's a nice business, Pete. Go to it; but keep the idea under your pompadour until we get out of this county."

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With this sage advice, Blackie went out and hung his new sign over the door. It was a large, staring and particularly insolent sign, which read:

Grand Wholesale Liquor Sale
Next Saturday!

"If that don't get Sam Bludgeon's goozle, he hasn't any," decided Blackie with a chuckle, as he stepped back to admire his handiwork.

Ten minutes later Sam Bludgeon came over with his goozle, if there were such a thing, in a high state of palpitation. "What are you trying to do," he demanded; "ruin my business?"

"Build one of our own," returned Blackie calmly, unpacking a crate of jugs with tender care for each handy vessel. "Any fault to find with it?"

"This much," stated Sam. "Two stores can't do business at Robins' Corners. I'm ready either to buy or sell."

"I don't believe we care to do either," suggested Blackie; "but, after all, that isn't up to me. You'll have to see my partner, J. Rufus Wallingford. He drives a better bargain than I do."

"Send up and tell him I'm here, will you?" requested Sam.

"He won't come till he gets ready," replied Blackie, and whistling softly, he began to calculate his shelf space. "Gee, I don't know where I'm

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going to put all these jugs," he observed, as he pushed the empty crate out of the way.

"You haven't more!" protested Sam.

"Five hundred, all told," yawned Blackie.

"They're for the liquor sale."

Sam Bludgeon sat down in the corner on a nail-keg and thought.

Colonel J. Rufus Wallingford came limping down to the store after a while, with his clothing bagging curiously on him, but with a great serenity in his soul; for the world was such a beautiful place.

"Hello, Jim," greeted Blackie. "Welcome to our emporium. Let me show you our new triple-motion egg-beaters," and he gaily thrust one of those cleverly ingenious implements into Wallingford's hand. "You see, you lead it up to the egg from the north-east corner, then you throw out your bait from this edge—"

He paused, transfixed by the stony absorption in Wallingford's face, as J. Rufus examined the utensil. "How much did we pay for these?" he wanted to know.

"Seven forty-five a gross," returned Blackie humbly.

"That is new-store prices or from our own wholesale house?" inquired Wallingford with increasing surliness.

"New-store prices, sir," answered Blackie.

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"I thought so!" flared Wallingford, falling into an immediate fury. "The minute I take sick, the first class in jackassness gets right to work. I thought you could be trusted with at least some of the smaller details of this business, and here I find you going crazy on egg-beaters, which you ought to know as well as you know whisky and rat-traps and cheese."

"I'm sorry, sir," faltered Blackie, without daring to look at the spellbound Pete.

"You're sorry!" sneered Wallingford, working himself into a white frenzy. "Sorry; and billing these egg-beaters into our first store in Pinky County at seven forty-five. Daw, so help me Moses—"

Blackie, apparently frantic with embarrassment, was making violent motions in the direction of Sam Bludgeon. Wallingford, at last seeming to perceive these signals, turned slowly toward the opposition.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Blackie; "this gentleman is the proprietor of the store across the way. He has come to see you on business. Mr. Wallingford, permit me to introduce Mr. Sam Bludgeon."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Bludgeon," said Wallingford, repressing as much as possible his recent just annoyance. "I'm sorry we seem to be encroaching on your territory, Mr. Bludgeon, but this really looked like a splendid opening for one of our ten per cent. stores."

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"It's a pretty rich county," admitted Mr. Bludgeon, who, familiar with Blackie, seemed to stand in distress of Wallingford.

"So I made sure before we came here," declared Wallingford. "You have, I think, Mr. Bludgeon, an assortment of the very worst whisky I ever tasted. Suppose we go over and sample it."

That night, after the most elaborate dinner which the Purty family was capable of cooking, or the *Ladies' Constant Adviser* of suggesting, Blackie turned cheerfully to Wallingford as they sped over the white roads of Pinky County.

"Well, Jim," he announced; "it was a highly successful trip."

"Successful?" queried Wallingford in surprise. "You're plenty modest in your estimate of the value of our time, Blackie. We've been here over two weeks, at fancy expense. You didn't clear anything on the actual store venture. I sold our stock and good will, with a sworn agreement never to open another store in Pinky County, for three thousand dollars; and the stock itself invoices eleven hundred dollars. We're lucky, of course, to have made anything; but you're a piker to call it a successful trip."

"Piker right back," retorted Blackie. "Why, you mercenary lollop, can't you think of anything but money? I call this a successful trip because I promised to reduce your weight; and look at you!"

CHAPTER XV

AGAINST THE RULES

BLACKIE DAW smiled vigorously as the hoarse cries of the "spielers" assailed his ears. "There's no use talking, Jim," he confided to Wallingford, pausing to enjoy the gaudy banners of the Congress of Giants; "I suppose a county fair will seem like home to your Uncle Horace G., until they pick him up by the silver handles."

"Every boob to his taste," dryly commented the large J. Rufus. "I can't remember any stage of my ambition when the Reuben game looked good to me. The city lollop has more coin, he's easier stung and he's a bigger fool about being game."

"You're as fussy as a hen with her first egg," remonstrated Blackie, listening appreciatively to the babel of sounds in the gaudy little canvas-lined "Midway." "I never ask a dollar where it came from. That's insulting a friend."

Out of the moving mass of farmers with ocher-colored cigars, and village sports with twenty-for-a-nickel cigarettes, and women with red shawls and irregular waist-lines, and children with toy balloons,

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there emerged a small, very thin man, with a facial appearance of having been left on a desert to dry out for a few years. His hair was plentifully sprinkled with gray, and a pouchy depression in each cheek indicated that most of his back teeth were gone; but he wore a suit of college-cut clothes with a corset-shaped coat, a straw sailor with a red, green and yellow band, a cravat which used up all the other shades and tints known to nature and art and a big red cravat-pin encircled with stage diamonds.

"Hello, old scout!" he greeted Blackie.

"Well, as I live and breathe," declared Blackie, "it's my old friend, Hoodoo Mann! Shake hands with Jim Wallingford, Mann. Say, old boy, has anybody ever taken the hex off you, or do you still walk around under a Jonah?"

Mr. Mann grinned sadly. "The curse is still on," he confessed.

"This is a living picture of tough luck, Jim," laughed Blackie. "He's afraid to be happy for fear things will be worse. How's the graft, Charley?"

"Rotten, thank you," the unlucky one confessed. "This pumpkin-show is plumb suffocating with easy-money ginks, but I got rheumatism in my thumb."

"That's a horrible epidemic for a three-card worker," condoled Blackie, surveying the stiff and swollen thumb with sympathy. "It should teach you to lead a better life. How are the big noises?"

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To this simple question about the officials, Hoodoo Mann returned a string of solid and soggy expletives to which Blackie listened admiringly.

"Fine!" he applauded. "Old Blister-Mouth Davies, in the very prime of life, couldn't have beaten that cussing. But what's the matter with the head rum-bles?"

"Blast their pea-green hearts and their yellow livers, they've got my fixit money, and they won't cough any of it up," he explained. "They say it's none of their business if I can't work. They've brought the suckers here, and they've got a dozen Johnny-tin-plates on the job, ready to pinch any simp for disorderly conduct if he raises a holler. I'm going to wait until get-away day, and rough the works."

"Crude, undiplomatic and unprofitable," chided Blackie. "Getting a bunch of strong-arm Hicks and shillabers to muss up the lot won't get you anything—not even happiness. What you want, to soothe your soul, is money—eh, Jim?"

Wallingford, deep in the intricacies of a patent auto-plow, needed the question repeated to him before he could answer. "Money is not all," he solemnly advised them. "It's only about ninety-seven per cent. Who wants some?"

"Mann," replied Blackie. "He's put up a wad of kale for the walnut-shell and monte privilege, but he

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can't work, and now the high Mike won't give any of it back."

"Certainly not!" sternly reproved Wallingford. "It's against the rules to give anything up. It's all right to pass money on, but a wise gee never passes any back. He might get into the habit. Why don't Mr. Mann put his understudy on the job?"

"Understudy!" snorted Mann. "Where would I get one. There are mighty few experts in the profession any more, and I don't know of a shell-worker good enough to—" Suddenly he paused, and his eye rested with dawning brightness on Blackie. "Say!" he exclaimed. "Why don't you take a whirl at it? You used to be one of the king pins of the trade."

Blackie smiled reminiscently. "How pleasant it would be to go back to the simple pastimes of my innocent childhood," he musingly observed, smoothing his slender fingers to make sure of their suppleness. "Where's your layout?"

Wallingford, making the lonely rounds of the Higgleburg fair-grounds while Blackie practised deceiving Mr. Mann's eye with the quickness of his hand, paused in front of the tented booth where a large, comfortable-looking man with flowing whiskers everywhere on his countenance but his nose and forehead sat in gloomy charge of "Frazier's Little Wonder Patent Detachable Geared Handle." The same huge muslin sign which gave Wallingford this

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information also told him that the remarkable invention was a long-felt want, that it would revolutionize farm life, and that the patent was for sale!

The extra ingenious uselessness of the detachable geared handle appealed very much to Wallingford's sense of amusement, and he gave the queer contrivance his full mind until the bearded gentleman ventured to disturb him.

"I guess you never saw anything like that!" he confided in a queer falsetto voice, which was starting from amidst that hairy countenance.

"Never," acknowledged Wallingford, quite soberly. "I've been interested in mechanics all my life, but I never ran across anything so novel, so unique, so original as this patent detachable geared handle. It's the limit!"

"The most useful invention of the century," corroborated the whiskered man, waxing enthusiastic. "Look at this. You have the handle on a pump. You unscrew this bolt and slip the handle on your rotary churn. This way. You run your corn-sheller with it, your washing-machine, your feed-chopper, your grindstone, your sausage-stuffer, your cream-separator, your apple-grinder and cider-press—anything, in short, that works with a crank. Three gears, high, low and medium, and easy to carry from place to place. No home should be without one."

"Have all these machines standard axles and ar-

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bors?" inquired Wallingford, looking on the clumsily elaborate contraption with a feeling akin to awe.

"No," admitted the big man, a trifle sadly; "but they'll soon be standardized to accommodate the Frazier universal handle. Until they do, though, I'm working on an adjustable hole."

"Then you are Mr. Frazier!" guessed Wallingford. "It is a pleasure to meet the inventor himself," and he shook hands warmly with the genius.

"That's right; William Harrison Frazier," returned the inventor, much pleased. "Did you say you knew something about machinery?"

"A little," admitted J. Rufus.

Mr. Frazier looked him over keenly. "Maybe you're a manufacturer?" he guessed.

"Not exactly," smiled Wallingford, studying Mr. Frazier with puzzled curiosity. The man did not look like a crank inventor, and his watch-chain must have fifty dollars' worth of coin gold in it, if it was solid, as it looked to be. "A great many manufacturing businesses pass through my hands, however, and stay long enough to yield me a profit. I am a purchasing promoter."

He could see Mr. Frazier mulling that gaudy phrase, "purchasing promoter," over and over in his intellect. "Purchasing promoter," he repeated. "That is, you mean that you buy a business or an

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idea or a patent, and promote a company to manufacture it and sell out?"

"That's it exactly. You are a keen man, Mr. Frazier," stated Wallingford. "That is precisely what I do, presuming that I like the invention."

"Then this article is just what you want," stated Mr. Frazier earnestly. "It's lucky you came here to-day. I'd manufacture it myself, but I'm a cattle-buyer, horse-dealer and pelt- and hide-handler, and I'm busy. I don't know of anything in the world you could promote as easy as this Little Wonder Patent Detachable Geared Handle. Any capitalist that sees this is bound to invest, for there's a fortune in it. It fills a long-felt want."

Wallingford regarded the thing seriously. "You'd ask too much money for your patent," he objected.

A shade of sadness crossed the visible portion of Mr. Frazier's face. "I can't get what it's worth, I reckon," he admitted. "I'd ought to have a hundred thousand dollars, and at first I thought I'd get it; but capitalists don't think an inventor ought to have anything, and I'm willing to take less now."

"I should say you would be," heartily responded Wallingford, and started to walk away.

"Hold on," invited Mr. Frazier. "How much will you give? I got my United States patent papers right here."

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"I might be back," replied Wallingford indifferently, still walking on. "Suppose you spend an hour or so in figuring the least you'll take."

"Wait a minute," pleaded the inventor, but the purchasing promoter turned through an opening between the orange-cider booth and the wheel of fortune and strode away toward the stables.

A spider-legged young man with a blotchy face and a plaid necktie lounged in front of the Little Wonder booth and stopped to inspect that modern triumph. "What's this dooflang?" he asked, keeping his hand-made cigarette in place by the simple expedient of pasting it on his under lip.

"A detachable geared handle," replied Mr. Frazier, resenting the contemptuous tone, but anxious, nevertheless, to change it. "Look at this. You have it on a pump. You unscrew this bolt and slip the handle on your rotary churn. You run your corn-sheller with it, your—"

"I ain't got any corn-sheller," replied the young man thoughtfully, "but Sag Jones has a hundred-to-one skeleton in the third race that hasn't been in the money since Sheepshead Bay was discovered by the Indians. Now if I could borrow one of these handles for her jockey and make a killing— Say; how do you set it on the high gear?"

Mr. Frazier drew the insulted handle toward him

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with red-nosed indignation. "Move away from here, you shrimp," he ordered. "You stop here to have a laugh at my invention, because you haven't any money to invest. I know that, because if you had the price of a clean shirt you'd put one on."

"I'll bet that stung me!" grinned the young man, in nowise abashed. "Why, Lilacs, if I had a million I wouldn't invest the corner of a postage-stamp on a joke like this. All the farmers that pad through here come down to the paddock laughing so hard about this cast-iron dingbat of yours that they don't sober up till they lose two bets. By the way, mister, could you wind a dollar watch with it?"

Seeing certain indications of rude intention on the part of Mr. Frazier, the spider-legged young man moved hastily away, chuckling. The inventor had scarcely regained his peace of mind when two rough-looking fellows in the garb of stablemen came by.

"Well, look who's here!" exclaimed one of them, stopping suddenly as he saw the Little Wonder. "Old Texas Bill Oakley's machinery handle. I thought that was in the discard."

"It ain't the same as Oakley's, quite," commented the other, stopping to examine it without a glance in Frazier's direction. "His had red spokes."

"Green just like this," insisted the first man. "It's been fifteen years, and you've forgot. Don't you re-

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member? He had it on his windmill pump. Tried to make us carry it around and use the fool thing."

"Lemme see," mused the other; "didn't Texas lose a lot of money manufacturing the thing?"

"Lost his ranch. Why, even the people he gave 'em to wouldn't use 'em. They wasn't practical," and the two men moved on without having invited Mr. Frazier into the conversation, either by word or look.

The boss stableman sent everybody he could trust to "kid" Whiskers Frazier, and when they all got through, he went up himself and riddled the marvelous Patent Detachable Geared Handle until it felt ashamed of itself. Just after this shriveling visit, Wallingford called, but the work had been too well done.

"No," declared Frazier, who was hurt and angry to the very tip end of each and every one of his feelings, "I'm a-going to keep her, and manufacture it myself. I'll show these smart Alecks just what kind of a chance they've lost."

"Good idea," declared Wallingford. "If you lose, nobody can blame you or the invention. Maybe I can give you some tips on manufacturing. Let's take a walk and talk it over," and he led Frazier away, determined to put that abused genius in a better humor before he again broached business.

They passed by the platform where thumping

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tom-toms advertised the marvelous performance of Little Egypt, the tent where Zeelah tamed wild boa-constrictors with her keen dark eye, the black-top where men in convict clothes ballyhooed for a moving-picture show, and Wallingford, still hunting diversion, passed back of the dog and monkey circus to where an eager group crowded around a tall black-mustached gentleman who was positively gleeful in his work with three ordinary playing-cards, which he tossed with seeming abandon upon a tiny table with folding legs.

"Walk right in, gentlemen, and test the quickness of your eye," the black-mustached gentleman invited with the trace of a grin at Wallingford. "Anybody may have my money if I can't fool him by a little twist of the wrist. If I can fool you, your eyesight is bad, and you'll find the spectacle-merchant at the third pitch up the alley of joy. Now here they go again, gentlemen and gents. The ace of hearts, the ace of diamonds and the ace of spades. Keep your eye on the little ace of hearts. Now; one, two, three! Ally-cazam, ally-cazook, ally-cazazuz! Bingo! Where, oh, where is the little ace of hearts? Who'll bet me a ten, a twenty, or a hundred that they can locate the little ace of hearts? Which is the little ace of hearts? A ten, a twenty, or a hundred!"

William Harrison Frazier plucked Wallingford

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eagerly by the arm. "It's the middle one," he confided, reaching for his wallet.

Blackie Daw, observing that motion, beamed the barest glint of thanks at Wallingford for bringing him a customer. He had an interested audience, but no suckers. Wallingford grinned at him cheerfully.

"Try the one on the right," he suggested to Frazier, grasping the opportunity to put the man in a good humor.

"No, it's the middle one," insisted Frazier selecting a ten-dollar bill. "It has a bent corner. I noticed it when he held them up. That's the ace of hearts."

He was advancing with his money, but Wallingford put a firmly restraining hand on his sleeve.

"That's a trick," he earnestly warned, still grinning, however, as he met Blackie's perplexed stare. "Do as I tell you. Try the right-end card. I'll pay you back if you lose."

"I don't know," hesitated Frazier doubtfully, but nevertheless he dropped his money on Blackie's ten, and after a moment of wavering turned over the right-end card.

The upward wreathing disturbance of his whiskers was sufficient pay for Wallingford as a shout from the crowd proclaimed the ace of hearts.

"The gentleman wins!" cried Blackie, with a sadly resigned glance at Wallingford. "His eye was quicker than my hand, and now it's a test of endur-

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ance. Once more, friend! Watch 'em closely! Here is the ace of hearts, the ace of diamonds and the black, black ace of spades. Keep your eye on the reddest ace! Now! One, and two—three! Hocus-pocus; mingo bingo; slimmery slam! Now, papa, where's that twenty bones you took home? Come on, pick out the little red ace! Be a sport and break me!"

Never had Blackie Daw thrown the cards so clumsily. A dozen spectators distinctly saw the ace of hearts fall, and half of them were eager to bet real money on their eyesight; but Blackie, with a sigh, waved them away.

"Only papa," he insisted. "He's the gentleman who has my money, and it's his blood I want. Come on, papa, and win enough to have your shrubbery trimmed!"

"It's the middle one," declared Mr. Frazier, slamming down his twenty dollars and turning over the indicated card. It was the ace of hearts, and Mr. Frazier chuckled aloud. "You ain't half as slick as some I've seen," he complimented Blackie, stuffing his original ten dollars into his waistcoat pocket. "I'm going to save my own money, but I'll give you a chance to win yours back. Come on, now, and shoot 'em again."

Blackie, gathering up his cards slowly, looked appealingly at Wallingford, but met only a stony-

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hearted grin in return. "All right, papa," he agreed, accepting his hard fate with such cheerfulness as he might. "Here they are, and there they go. Pick it out."

"The ace of hearts you mean?" cautiously inquired the highly pleased Frazier, poising his hand.

"Name it yourself," offered Blackie.

"Here's your thirty dollars, and here's your ace of hearts! Haw, haw, haw! You're an awful dub. Why, I've always heard that you three-card sharks were the slickest in the business. I'm going to pinch off another ten this time and only bet you fifty."

With murder in his soul, Blackie prepared for another expertly clumsy performance. Wallingford suddenly grabbed a lean wrist, the lean fingers on the lean hand of which had been about to snuggle into the attractive waistcoat pocket where Mr. Frazier had thrust his two ten-dollar bills.

Hoodoo Mann drew the owner of the wrist to one side, over behind the pit of Rosko the Wolf Boy. "Nix, you bonehead!" he disgustedly reproved. "Can't you lamp that the swell guy is framing up a big fall for His Whiskers?"

"I got no rumble," indignantly protested the young man of the lean wrist. "I was hep that it was a plant, but nobody tipped me the office that we was to help string it."

"That's why you don't get up in the business,"

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wearily explained Mr. Mann. "A good dip don't need a wigwag. He pipes in the dark. The swell gun is a pal of Blackie Daw's, and Blackie is throwin' his own play to smooth the frame. Then you try to crab the whole play by crimping a double sawbuck! For a gitney I'd slip cyanide in your scoffin'."

When Mann returned to the agitated little group about Blackie Daw, that distressed artist was folding his table.

"No, papa," he was saying kindly to the flushed and happy Frazier, "I may be a gift, but I'm not an income," and he bent black brows on Wallingford. "Five hundred is a pleasant little noonday amusement for you, so hurry back to your mattress factory and chuckle yourself to death. Move away before I begin to bark. I'm going to have hydrophobia."

A man with a red flannel band around his neck was examining the detachable geared handle when Frazier and Wallingford strolled back to the Little Wonder booth, but he moved away with a conspicuous parting smile of amusement.

"That fellow seems to think the detachable handle is a joke," commented Wallingford, looking after the man severely.

"He's some smart Aleck from the stables," replied Frazier with a returning frown. "He don't know anything about mechanics."

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"Certainly not," heartily agreed Wallingford. "Now I do, and while I know, out of long experience, that the thing can't be sold to the public, I also know that it looks good enough to a manufacturing greenhorn to organize a company with. I'll give you ten thousand dollars for your patent, a thousand cash down, right this minute, and the balance as soon as I can get a check cashed. I can arrange that by to-morrow."

CHAPTER XVI

GET-AWAY DAY

A FLAT-FACED young man with long hair and a soft tie, and dressed like a stage student, paused at the Little Wonder booth and examined the Frazier detachable geared handle with interest and respect. "Looks like a swell graft," he commented. "Works up a speed-limit gait with a peewee muscle, I suppose?"

"Hardly that," returned Mr. Frazier indifferently, for the flat-faced young man did not look like a power in the land. "It allows a small muscle to do heavy work, though. A child can run it."

The monotonously countenanced young man rotated the handle absorbedly, watching the dizzy tumbling of the empty churn. "Blow it from here, I suppose, and hook it up with these other merry-go-rounds?" he suggested, fingering the bolt.

"That's the idea," corroborated Frazier wearily. "You have it on this churn. You unscrew this bolt and slip the handle on your rotary pump. This way. You run your corn-sheller with it, your washing-machine, your feed-chopper, your grindstone, your sausage-stuffer, your cream-separator, your apple-grinder and cider-press—"

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"Ain't I the busy little guy!" admired the student. "I didn't know I had all those day-labor schemes. On the level, though, pal, there ought to be a good sale for this little household article. I know a party in the manufacturing line who'd be pleased into delirium tremens to buy your patent off'n you."

"Too late," reported Frazier with satisfaction. "I've already sold it."

The student loosed an oath of chagrin. "I told Mr. Carson he'd better clinch his hooks into a soft one when he saw it!" he commented. "The time to put down your bet is when the little old hunch jerks your elbow."

"Carson?" questioned Frazier, beginning to be interested. The name seemed familiar.

"That's the guy," returned the student. "He's the main squeeze of the Carson Iron and Steel Corporation, at Carson, up the road, you know. Worth about a million million and gum-shoes around all the time hunting live inventions he can snag off cheap."

"Was he here?" inquired Frazier, beginning to feel breathless. Of course he knew the name of Carson now. Everybody in the state knew of the Carson Iron Works.

"Here now," stated the student. "Little gun, with a brown face. He sent me to feel you out about your patent, and now you've sold it! He'll go batty."

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Three other furtive-eyed persons dropped by, one at a time, and paused to praise the Little Wonder. One of them was broken-hearted because there was no present place to purchase one for his beloved old father back on the farm.

Then came Hoodoo Mann, brisk, crisp, business-like. "You are Mr. Frazier, I believe?" he guessed.

"Yes, sir," admitted that gentleman, studying the other interestedly. He had a brown face.

"I understand that you have sold your patent on this ingenious trick," and he laid his hand with a quick nervous touch on the detachable handle.

"Not over an hour ago," replied Mr. Frazier, not quite so jubilantly as before.

"Just my luck!" complained the snappy business man. "Do you know if the man who bought it from you is still on the grounds?"

"He's stayin' for the races," advised Mr. Frazier.

"He's a big man with a round pink face, and a silk hat, and a big diamond in his gray tie. Name's Wallingford. Looks like he has plenty of money, and I guess he has. He paid me a thousand, spot cash, right out of his pocket, to bind the bargain."

"To bind the bargain!" repeated the brisk one.

"Then the deal isn't completed yet. Much obliged, Mr. Frazier."

"You're welcome," admitted Frazier. "Your name's Carson, ain't it?"

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"How did you know?" returned Hoodoo Mann, apparently displeased.

"Oh, everybody's familiar with your pictures," laughingly evaded Frazier.

After the busy manufacturer had walked away in search of J. Rufus Wallingford, one of the stablemen who had derided the detachable handle in the morning came by and stopped, laughing. "Well, Spinach, how's the fussy handle?" he inquired.

"Sold, you smart Aleck!" snapped Frazier. "Sold for more money than you ever saw."

"Then it worked," chuckled the man. "Wallingford bought it, of course."

"Wallingford?" repeated Frazier, beginning to feel the approach of pain. "Do you know him?"

"Never saw him before to-day," replied the stableman truthfully. "He's a regular fellow though. Gave a bunch of us ten dollars apiece to come up here and knock your handle, so he could buy it for his price. He said it was a great stunt. He was willing to pay a hundred thousand for it. How much did he give you?"

"That's my affair!" snapped Frazier, with a hollow paleness in the pit of his stomach.

He had ample time to suffer before Hoodoo Mann came back again, walking thoughtfully and with knitted brows. He was going on past when the sorrowing and repentant Frazier hailed him.

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"Hello, Mr. Carson," he called. "Did you find Wallingford?"

"Yes, confound him," replied the impersonator of Carson. "The man must have paid you a foolish price for your patent. He knows he has a cinch and won't let go. I offered him fifty thousand, and I'd have made it seventy-five; but he gave me to understand he wouldn't sell at any price."

"Seventy-five thousand!" faintly breathed William Harrison Frazier through his whiskers. Then a desperate hope possessed him. "Would you pay me that?"

The change in the russet-brown face of the brisk manufacturer was remarkable. He was all eagerness now! "Is there a chance you can get it for me?" he demanded.

"I'll get it or I'll have that man Wallingford jailed for false pretenses!" Mr. Frazier violently announced. "I can prove that he paid men to run down my invention so I'd take less money. That's swindling. By jinks, Mr. Carson, leave it to me and I'll get you that patent."

"You haven't assigned it yet?" warned the manufacturer.

"Not me!" scorned Mr. Frazier. "I'm too old a bird for that. I ain't paid in full yet. I only signed a contract to assign the patent on the payment of so much money."

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"Then here's what I'll do," immediately offered the bustling person from Carson. "I'm a prompt-acting man, and I'll give you five thousand cash, right now, advance payment. Give me a receipt for it, as five thousand held in trust until you deliver me that Wallingford contract and the assignment of your patent, upon which I'll pay you the other seventy thousand. Here's your money."

He took from between the buttons of his shirt a flat canvas-covered packet, and counted all its contents but a few lonesome bills. He gazed on the money with a trace of sadness.

"I'll write you the receipt right away," offered Mr. Frazier hastily.

"All right," agreed Hoodoo Mann reluctantly. His eyes brightened as he suddenly made up his mind. "I'm afraid five thousand will leave me a little short of ready money. Suppose we make it four thousand five hundred," and he hurried five hundred back into his pocket. He seemed better pleased with his bargain after that.

William Harrison Frazier found Wallingford in smiling contemplation of Blackie's energetic attempts to get back his five hundred dollars, and never being averse to picking up an honest penny while he could, he edged in and offered to bet ten dollars that he could pick out the ace of hearts.

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Blackie, at the bare sight of him, put up both paws and howled like a hound. "Game's closed," he thereupon announced, and putting away his cards, folded his little table.

"Come on; be a sport," chided Frazier, but Blackie displayed his teeth ferociously, and, laughing, Frazier turned to Wallingford, for whom he was ready, word and deed.

"That deal's off," he blusteringly stated. "I want you to come right over to my booth, give me my contract and take your thousand dollars."

Wallingford took a contemplative puff of his big black cigar and looked Mr. Frazier over coldly. "What's the matter with that money?" he demanded. "I made it myself, and I know it's good."

"You swindled me! You got me to take that money under false pretenses."

Wallingford looked at him in amazement. "That beats my high notch!" he acknowledged. "I've heard of obtaining money that way, but never of paying it out under false pretenses."

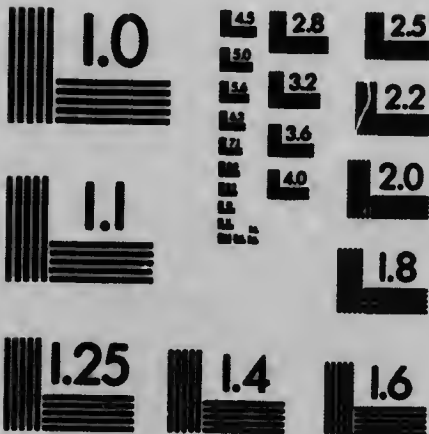
"Well, Wallingford, I've found out how you tricked me, by sending men to scare me about my patent, and now I want my contract back. If we go to law about this, I'll prove swindling on you, and it'll go hard with you. We have laws here, and a farmers' jury is no friend of city sharpers."

"Nor to country ones either," charged Walling-



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ford, suddenly turning stern. "There isn't a man able to serve on a jury whom you haven't cheated in a cattle deal; and you have to go outside the state to trade horses. Besides that," and here Wallingford lowered his voice, "besides that, you have a bay horse which is to run to-morrow, and that horse used to be gray with a black star in her forehead, and three black fetlocks. There's a X-bar-G mark on her left flank, and her name used to be—"

"Hush!" begged Frazier. "How much'll you take to sell me my patent back? Let's talk this over like sensible business men!"

The sensation of get-away day at the Higgle County Fair was the remarkable race made by a bay mare named Little Wonder. She got away last at the barrier, was bumped against the rail by her jockey in the first quarter, took her stride four lengths behind the last of the field and finished, under the whip but riding easy, with nothing in front of her but a few vociferous cheers from William Harrison Frazier.

Immediately after that race, Mr. Frazier slipped the nice little animal out of the grounds for a cooling off, and replaced her by the real Little Wonder, a failure which had never been any nearer the winning horse than the next stall. After that, Mr. Frazier happily and virtuously made a tour of collection,

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in the course of which he annexed most of the loose money in Higgle County. On his way back from this interesting and agreeable occupation, he stopped at Blackie Daw's place of business and watched that abused gentleman preaching bravery of finance to a slender group which had no wealth and no ambition. He was very complacent, was Mr. Frazier, as became a man of ability whose every venture turned to gold, so his contempt for the clumsy Blackie was tempered with smiling.

"I'd bet you a hundred on the ace of hearts, but I have too much money, and besides, I'm in a hurry," he bantered. "Have you seen Mr. Carson about here? Small man with a brown face."

Blackie, with a violent effort, constrained himself to be polite and helpful.

"The manufacturer?" he replied. "Yes, Mr. Frazier, Mr. Carson is up by the agricultural building dickering for a windmill. He wants to blow his money. You're quite welcome, Mr. Frazier. Don't mention it," and as Frazier walked away with a swagger, Blackie, who could not enjoy his return to the scenes of his youth with any pleasure because of this one man, grimly produced a set of dominoes and offered to play anybody for a quarter, to soothe and relieve his mind.

Mr. Carson was just completing his purchase of a windmill, and was arranging for the payment of

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the money, when Frazier found him and drew him to one side.

"Well, I'll have that patent cut loose for you in half an hour," he promised.

"Good!" exclaimed the eminent manufacturer in keen delight. "Well, your money's ready any minute. Do you need any to complete the deal?"

"Not a cent!" exulted Frazier. "I cleaned up the spot-cash money, on to-day's race, to make up enough with what I had. I wanted to see you before I did Wallingford, to make sure there wouldn't be any hitch."

"Give you your check the minute I get the patent," promised the famous manufacturer.

"All right," hastily agreed Mr. Frazier. "You give me the check when I turn over Mr. Wallingford's contract and my patent assignment, Mr. Carson. I know you want the Frazier handle all right. You'll be glad to get it for seventy-five thousand."

"I'll be real pleased," smiled Hoodoo Mann. "We'll finish up the business at your hotel to-night."

"All right," again assented Frazier, and hurried away to give all the money in Higgle County to J. Rufus Wallingford.

Two hours later, in Wallingford's room at the hotel, J. Rufus produced William Harrison Frazier's financial anatomy and held a post-mortem on it.

"Forty thousand bucks," he announced, counting

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it on the bed. "Deducting one thousand I paid Frazier for his patent, and five thousand I gave Mann to pay Frazier, and a thousand I split up with the stable-boys for help and information, that leaves thirty-three thousand to the merry—and out of a jay tank town at that! Ten per cent. makes three thousand three hundred, and not a bad little rake-off for your outfit, Mann, added to whatever you knocked down out of the five thousand I gave you to string our lollop."

Mr. Hoodoo Mann accepted the money soberly, but he did not tuck it into the flat canvas packet inside his shirt. Instead, he folded it up and shoved it into his trousers pocket.

"I only held out five hundred on you, Wallingford," he gloomily stated; "but it didn't do me any good. Some dip got to it, and I think it was one of my own men—the pie-faced gun that tried to glom Frazier's change the time you stopped him. I never seem to have any luck."

"Well, hold out on him," chuckled Wallingford, dividing the remainder of the money into two piles and tossing Blackie his share.

"Wait a minute, Jim; you're shy two hundred and fifty," Blackie objected.

"What for?" puzzled Wallingford.

"Your half of the come-on coin I lost to Frazier at monte."

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"I'm astonished!" chided Wallingford. "How much besides did you lose at the game you thought you could still play? Give me the total, and I'll help you out on the rest of it."

"Wallingford's right, Blackie," agreed Mann with a grin at J. Rufus. "For a boy once supposed to have been the best card-tosser on the circuit, you certainly did put up the rankest job I ever saw, for this Frazier person. Why, you allowed old whiskers to pick 'em as fast as they fell, to pail out on you, and let the velvet ride, and to kid you to your very face. I was so ashamed of you I couldn't stay and watch it any more. On the level, Blackie. Why, if I had a copper so raw in his work—"

"That'll be about all!" announced Blackie majestically. "Mann, where's that outfit?"

"Never mind, Blackie," chuckled Wallingford; "I'll take it all back. Here's your two fifty."

"Keep it!" stormed Blackie. "I want mine from Dog-face Frazier. Has he any money left?"

"About two thousand, I think," laughed Wallingford.

"It's mine," announced Blackie, and he would not be pacified until he hurried back to the fair-grounds with the three-card layout.

Wallingford made a careful study of the town in the meantime, and decided that it was not worth the exercise of his business talents. He returned in time

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for their train and found Blackie and Mann together in deep silence.

"We'll have to hustle," he remonstrated as he jumped into the packing. "Our train leaves at eight, and we don't want to miss it, for Mann would have to see Frazier shortly after that."

Blackie blew a thick ring of cigarette smoke at the ceiling and surveyed his long legs admiringly as they sprawled before him under the legs of the little folding card-table. "Frazier won't bother anybody to-night," he promised. "He's pinched."

"For running in that ringer this afternoon?" inquired Wallingford. "I knew it would get him. Crooked work always does."

"No, for making a holler," replied Blackie deeply content. "I charged him two thousand and eighty dollars and his watch and chain and this diamond ring for bad guesses on the ace of hearts; then he called me a swindler and tried to fight, so I had to collect a souvenir from him and turn him over to a deputy constable for disturbing the peace. Here's the souvenir," and he gleefully exhibited seven long, glossy red whiskers.

Wallingford laughed heartily, but, save for Blackie's superior smile, he laughed alone.

"What's the trouble with you, Mann?" he wanted to know. "Why don't you join the festivities? Or have you heard the joke before?"

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"I got a thirty-third-degree grouch on," confessed Mann. "Say, Wallingford, could you lend me a couple of hundred?"

"Could I what?" demanded Wallingford, looking about him. The little folding table still stood neatly in front of the peacefully smiling Blackie. On the floor lay the ace of spades. On the table, face up, was the ace of diamonds. By its side, with a slightly bent corner was a card, face down. Wallingford picked it up. It was the ace of hearts! "You boob!" he charged Mann.

"I'm hoodooed!" complained that luckless individual.

CHAPTER XVII

UP AGAINST IT

"DON'T stretch!" warned Violet Bonnie Daw, "but when you get a chance, Pinkerton the lone goat two tables behind Fannie."

But Wallingford and Blackie Daw took a careless survey of the variously decorated cannibals who, drifting from Broadway into this gilded palace of gastronomic sin, strove to keep up the gloomy pretense of having a good time. On their ocular excursion, the two men scrutinized the lone goat. He proved to be a pasty-faced man entirely surrounded by an ostentatiously youthful dress suit, and not at all the sort of person one would look at often for the mere pleasure of it.

"You have a rotten disposition, Vi," charged Wallingford. "The minute you see us happy you start something morbid."

"You don't drink enough, friend wife," chided Blackie. "Cheer up and look at the pretty pink lights."

Violet Bonnie powdered her nose in vexation. "I think it identifies me!" she worried. "There's something about its general diagram that seems famil-

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iar, but you never can place them in a glacé front. It might be the ashman."

"It might be one of your former professional friends," suggested Fannie Wallingford charitably.

"Never," scorned Violet Bonnie. "If an actor has a low-down character, he doesn't show it."

"Why worry about it?" counseled Wallingford.

"Take two quick drinks and forget him."

"It isn't human to do that, J. Rufus," objected Violet Bonnie. "When you see anything you'd rather not look at you keep right on looking to see if it's still there; and every time I accidentally glance at this puffy pest it gets ready to wigwag me!"

"If it would help any I might offer you the loan of a perfectly good short-arm jab," suggested her husband politely.

"Not here, anyhow," refused Violet Bonnie. "My professional instincts are against it, unless all these Main Street folks were paying two dollars a ticket. Thank heaven, here comes the boy! Boy, stand right over behind this lady's chair."

The uniformed youngster glanced behind him, out of an appallingly precocious knowledge, to see who was offensive to her, and stepping in range of the lone goat, grinned cheerfully at her.

"Couldn't get another pair of seats at any price," he stated. "I telephoned all the agencies, the inside speculators, went around the corner into the lobby

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myself, and even tried the box-office. Sixty cents telephone."

Wallingford, with a sigh, handed the boy a dollar. "I guess we'll have to put you two girls in at the theater, and Blackie and I will stick around the neighboring pickle-factories until you come out," he proposed.

"All right," agreed Violet Bonnie. "Only don't stay in the brine too long. I knew it! Here comes that unfinished sketch! Look at him! He reminds me of the bottom of an éclair! That's what a stage-door Johnny grows up to be!"

The lone goat arrived, as she had prophesied, and smiling moistly, extended his hand with the easy familiarity of a person who considers that he should be welcome anywhere. "Violet Bonnie!" he exclaimed, with the joy of a lifelong friend. "I'd have known you anywhere."

"The pleasure is all yours," she assured him, wondering why she was so specifically resentful of him.

"Why, you remember me, don't you?" he protested; "Little Billy Brack? We used to be great pals in *The Pink Canary* days, when you were such a hit and I used to know every head waiter on Broadway."

"I don't forget my pals," she amended, studying his pie-crust-like countenance with severe criticism.

"You lose a bet," he laughed with callous assur-

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ance. "Why, of course you remember me, from when you and Muriel Latoska used to have the apartments up on Sixty-fourth Street. Why, I used to be up there to see Muriel all the time."

"Oh, yes," she suddenly remembered; "Bargain Billy. Why, I thought Muriel broke you," and there was a trace of regret in her tone.

"She did, almost," he admitted with an involuntary wince. "I starved her for two seasons, and when she couldn't make good she blamed me. They all handed me that clammy turn-down when I stopped producing. There's no gratitude in the profession."

Violet Bonnie wrinkled the bridge of her nose as she remembered the methods of Bargain Billy. "I never could see why they should be grateful," she dryly commented, and seeing that Mr. Brack was quite bent on taking the rest of her party into his confidence, she weakly gave way to her more spiteful inclinations and introduced him.

He promptly drew up a chair from an adjoining table, and became chummy until it was time for them all to go to the theater. Even then, enjoying himself to the point of gluttony in flabby reminiscence, he stalked with them down to the theater, in the next block, and waited outside while Wallingford and Blackie escorted their respective wives as far as the ticket-chopper.

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Violet Bonnie dragged them into the corner of the lobby. "All right now, begin!" she ordered defiantly.

"Begin what?" asked Wallingford with a grin.

"Kidding me!" she savagely returned. "Begin and get it over with."

"No one shall kid you," promised Blackie soothingly. "It has been done."

"Well, if anybody has anything real cute to say I want them to get rid of it, that's all; because I want to make a sporting proposition. You heard this unripe doughnut drop the information, didn't you, that he had just loosened the last tidbit of papa's once estate?"

Both gentlemen grinned.

"Well, get it!"

Bargain Billy Brack, who still insisted on referring to himself as Little Billy, proved to be a cautious entertainer and absolutely free from the vulgarity of over-lavish hospitality. In fact, he was so careful not to offend in this particular that he allowed Wallingford and Blackie to do all the ordering when they repaired to a near-by café.

"You've been some little time away from Broadway, I gather," suggested Wallingford, in the privacy of a nice little leather-lined nook where the lights and the drinks were mellow.

"A thousand years," replied Mr. Brack. "It's the

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same old game, though, only I see it with different eyes. I used to be a rank sucker!"

"I didn't know it was curable," commented Blackie, inspecting, with technical interest, the flaccid countenance of the gentleman.

"I'm a living testimonial," boasted Bargain Billy. "I was such a sucker that I couldn't do business with a slot-machine without getting stung; and the wise parties, who never get out of bed in time to see the glorious sunset, broke me past any hope from rivets or glue."

"It must have been terrible," commiserated Blackie. "Did you have to work?"

"Worse!" confessed the ex-contributor. "I've had to live on the farm for three years, until the lawyers got through skimming off the cream."

"You're lucky they left you the milk," condoled Blackie. "I suppose it foots up to a southeast corner on Easy Street."

"Hardly," denied Mr. Brack with a sigh of regret. "It's just enough to give a man of energy and ability a decent business start," and he complacently flicked the ashes from the expensive cigar that Wallingford had bought for him.

"Good," approved Blackie; "but don't let the Rialto know you have it, or your name will be on the bulletin-board at the corner of Forty-second Street. They still remember you as a patron of art. Broadway never forgets a live one."

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"I might even go into that game again," responded Bargain Billy; "but it will never be as the sinking fund. I have no more ambitions to back a star. What I'm looking for is a good safe opening, either manufacturing or commercial, that yields a large return on the investment and does not require experience."

"Don't be too hasty about picking it out," Blackie advised him. "You'd be mighty sorry if you went into a business that would only give you a net profit of thirty thousand dollars a year when you could just as easily have picked out one that would net you fifty."

"I've thought of that," returned Brack, with thickly smiling self-approbation. "This is my first actual business venture, and I intend to select it very carefully. Do you know of any really first-class openings?"

"Dozens!" promptly answered Blackie, almost upsetting his glass. "I know more openings than a worm."

"By George, I'm glad I met you!" gratefully announced Bargain Billy. "I'll have to get you to show me around."

"No trouble to exhibit samples," smilingly stated Blackie. "I'm the grandest little shower-around on the island! I'll be glad to chaperon you for Violet Bonnie's sake."

For the first time since they had sat down, Wall-

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ingford, who had been studiously listening and observing, interjected himself into the conversation. "About what size opening could you fill?" he inquired.

"My entire strength is one hundred thousand bucks," stated Mr. Brack, looking modest.

"Well, it's 'worth fussing around with," mused Wallingford.

Violet Bonnie stood in her Dutch library and regarded Wallingford and her husband with scorn. "I can tell you just how it happened," she stated. "Jim Wallingford's head was turned in a lathe, and yours, Blackie, was cast!"

Wallingford and Blackie looked at each other, but neither one offered nor received encouragement. They were hopelessly meek and humble.

"Guilty, as charged," admitted Wallingford. "It's a curious thing, Vi, but I never can think when I'm told to."

"I believe you," she snapped, "and somebody's been telling you all your life! You've been trailing around with this Brack insect for three days now, and you haven't trimmed him yet!"

"I think it's because it's too easy," Blackie moodily ventured to observe, without looking up from the solitaire layout which Violet Bonnie's indictment had robbed of its glamour. "He's such an awful

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saphead that it seems a shame to waste a good live proposition on him."

"Why don't you induce him to draw his cash out of the bank, then come back from some place without him?" she suggested. "I don't like rough work myself, but if you've run clear out of brains you'll have to fall back on your muscles."

"I have scruples against it," objected Wallingford. "Besides, the police department is just as fussy about a boil like Brack as it would be about a missing man. No, Vi, we'll have to stick to proper commercial principles, and earn his money."

"That won't suit me," she insisted. "I want him trimmed, and trimmed good! I don't want a knot left on him!"

"We're willing," implored Wallingford. "We just don't seem to get an idea!"

Violet Bonnie looked at the clock. "You won't find it in this library," she told them. "You've been in here for hours hunting it; you used up a bottle of Scotch and three quarts of seltzer before Paul Pollet went home; the smoke's so thick in here you could slice it, and you've got ashes from the window-sills to that broken-nosed Greek statue over in the corner! I'm going to throw that out! It gets on my nerves!"

"Come on, Jim, let's take a walk," mildly suggested Blackie.

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"You just beat me to it," Violet Bonnie commented, and opened the door for them.

"We're up against it, Jim," grinned Blackie, in the hall. "We have to pauperize this lollop or I'll have to sleep in the garage."

"Mrs. Mayor Horace G. Daw is a kind and gentle woman," stated Wallingford; "otherwise she would have batted us on the bean with the kitchen range before this. Personally, I feel humiliated, Blackie. I feel that we have forgotten the rudiments of commerce, but nothing I see gives me a thought. Coat, hat, cane, hat-rack. I wonder if we couldn't do something with a hat-rack?"

"It's too unhandy, Jim. Paul's plan of about four pounds of sand in a stocking was better."

"I guess so," agreed Wallingford dispiritedly. "I was trying to figure a consolidated hat-rack company, but I can't seem to get the bearings under it. Why don't you think a little, confound you!"

"All right," consented Blackie cheerfully, as he slipped into his overcoat. "It isn't my department, but I'd do anything to oblige a mentally bankrupt friend. Let's see," and he opened the door. "Door-knob. We might invent an electrical door-knob that would stay warm in the winter-time. Front porch. We might interest him in a portable front porch that could be moved around to the shady side. Tree. We might dope out an improved tree

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that would close up like an umbrella. Snow. Don't you think pink snow would have a good market?"

"Shut up!" growled Wallingford.

"Well, you told me to think!" protested Blackie indignantly. "You have me started now, and I don't believe I can stop. Fish-wagon. Don't you suppose this gook could be coaxed to invest in a boneless-fish farm?"

"Violet Bonnie was right," admitted Wallingford. "We neither one of us have brains enough to make change for a nickel. Tree. That doesn't suggest anything to me but the lumber business, and that's too well systematized to touch. Fence. Does a fence suggest anything to you?"

"Paint," replied Blackie. "I have to paint that fence in the spring."

They were walking across Mayor Daw's beautiful grounds, in Tarryville, toward J. Rufus Wallingford's beautiful grounds, and Wallingford was moodily studying every object, animate and inanimate, with the hope that it might suggest to him some plan whereby a hundred thousand dollars, perfectly good and innocent of all harm, could be detached from an unworthy owner, when Violet Bonnie stuck her head out of the library window and yelled:

"Phone!"

Both men came hurrying back.

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"Who is it?" asked Blackie.

"The epidemic," she replied. "I think he misses his food."

"He can miss it, for all of me," decided Blackie. "I've been watching him eat for three days, and I've lost my appetite for everything but drink."

"Lunch will be over when he gets here, if he's coming out," declared Violet Bonnie; "and we're not going to be home for dinner. If I have to look at him very long I'll catch typhoid. You'll entertain him out in the garage, or in the den over in Jim's garage."

"I know Fannie won't have him in the house," chuckled Wallingford.

"She has young Jimmie to think of," agreed Violet Bonnie. "Come on in and be hospitable to him."

"Hello, old pal," the thick voice of Bargain Billy Brack greeted Blackie. "I've just been telling Violet Bonnie I thought I'd drop out and see you this pleasant Sunday afternoon. I suppose you've had your lunch?"

"Oh, yes, we've had lunch," Blackie hastily assured him. "Come right on out and spend the afternoon. What's new?"

"Fellow wants me to invest in an air-ship factory," returned Brack, "but his plans don't sound settled enough for me, though he certainly seems to have a fine idea for an air-ship. What do you think

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of it? I thought I'd come out and talk it over with you. You and Jim seem to be able to point out the fatal defects so quick in all these business schemes that come up to me."

"We've made that our business," Blackie assured him. "We're not going to stand idly by and see you robbed. I suppose you're coming on a train? You'll miss the one-five, but if you hustle you can catch the two-twelve."

He hung up the receiver with a grin.

"I'll have lunch served right away," promised Violet Bonnie. "Jim, go home."

CHAPTER XVIII

THAT'S THE TALK

BLACKIE entertained Bargain Billy in the house just seven minutes by the watch, and then took him out to the garage, where he converted his caller to the merits of a new car, effectually disposed of any leanings Brack might have had toward the air-ship business, and waited for Wallingford. That portly individual came over presently with the lag-gard footsteps of one returning unwillingly to work, and they all three repaired to Wallingford's garage, where there was a cozy little den with a fire-place in it and a well-stocked ice-box.

"Well, how's the investment prospect?" inquired Wallingford, when they had made themselves comfortable.

"Fierce, Jim," declared Brack. "I thought it would be no trouble at all to invest a hundred thousand dollars, but I suppose if it hadn't been for you fellows I'd have been stung a dozen times."

"That's the wastefulness of these amateurs," complained Blackie. "No'ody should be stung but once. That should be enough."

"The bunch that's been after me does seem a

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cheap lot," complained Brack, "and I think there are very few of them on the level."

"Certainly not," agreed Wallingford. "They're a disgrace to every man on Blackwell's Island. They'd make you lose your hundred thousand dollars just so they could get five or ten thousand of it. That Longacre Square crowd is a horrible bunch of pikers."

"They're nothing like when I was young," regretted Brack. "Why, when I first blossomed out on Broadway, I felt bored if anybody tried to skin me out of anything less than my entire roll. I don't believe there are any good sure-thing men left. This generation of them doesn't seem to have any brains."

"You're right!" agreed Wallingford half savagely.

"You wouldn't care for a rubber plantation?" hopefully asked Blackie. "I know a guy who would sell you one for a hundred thousand, and send you away perfectly contented."

"I wouldn't touch a rubber plantation," wisely decided Mr. Brack. "I think they're mostly all fakes."

Wallingford rose abruptly. "Come out and see my new car," he invited disgustedly, and with an equal contempt for Blackie, Brack and himself.

He warmed up somewhat out in the garage, for a man is bound to be enthusiastic over a new auto-

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mobile, in order to vindicate his own doubtful judgment.

"It's a swell battery of machines," agreed Brack, looking about the place for escape from the often renewed and sometimes heated discussion between Blackie and Wallingford over valves, ignition and transmission. "What's that big affair over in the corner? It looks like a delivery-van."

"That's a house-boat on wheels," replied Wallingford.

"It's the ark," added Blackie. "It isn't chummy, though, to hammer that old circus wagon. Jim and I spent many a jolly homesick day and night in her. Let's uncover the whale, Jim, and show it to him."

Like yachtsmen reefing sails, they removed the brown tarpaulin cover from the overgrown limousine that Wallingford had once built for country touring, and though they laughed at its clumsy enormousness, they could not withhold, after all, their tribute of admiration and affection.

"She was a good old hearse," laughed Wallingford, patting the shining black enameled side.

"You fellows may kid it all you want to, but that looks to me like some joy-wagon!" approved Bargain Billy, admiring mightily the low-swung car. "Why, there's double glass windows in the thing!"

"She was built regardless," explained Wallingford; "storm-proof, frost-proof, burglar-proof.

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Look here," and stepping inside he lowered the windows, jerked a lever and ventilated iron shutters slid up, closing the machine like a prison van. "Step inside," he invited, lowering the shutters. "This is some palace. Up in front is an ice-box. This panel flops down, and is an electric stove, with the most compact and comprehensive set of aluminum cooking and eating utensils ever devised. Here is the dining-, card-, and writing-table," and he lifted it from the floor, with a straight motion that turned it upside down on its scissors standard, displaying a green baize top. "Disposing of the dining-room, thus," and he replaced the table, "we proceed to make up the berths. Sleeping accommodations for four, and liquor space for twelve."

Bargain Billy, the joy of his old hectic days returning to him, surveyed the luxurious arrangements with glowing appreciation. "What a bus for a lobster squad!" he admired. "Where did you get this runabout?"

"Invented it, and patented it, and had it made," said Wallingford indifferently. "It set me back a large number of money, but I've had the worth of the money out of it."

"They could be made for less, in quantities," judged Brack. "There would be an awful sale for these among the regular Johnnies—suckers like I used to be, you know."

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"The crop's too small," chuckled Wallingford. "Fiction to the contrary notwithstanding, the number of live spenders who startle Broadway could be reduced to about one in every other so often."

"I don't know," argued Brack. "I was mighty easy picking, and if I was, there were a lot more like me."

A happy thought seized Blackie. "It might be a good business to manufacture this car," he considered. "Jim and I never thought of it."

"We've been too busy with other things," supplemented Wallingford.

"Why don't you take it up?" suggested Blackie. "See, Jim, I'm doing some thinking."

"Nothing doing," laughed Brack. "I've made up my mind firmly to one thing. I won't start a new enterprise. I want a business in full blaze. I want to walk into my place, on the day I take possession, and see the wheels going round and everybody busy."

"How would you like to back a string of ringer foot-races?" suggested Blackie. "There's a lot of money to be picked up by getting a record man a job in a small town factory and running him against the local champion."

"There'd be no novelty in that," objected Brack wearily. "I was double-crossed on that for a roll the size of a liner's funnel before I tumbled."

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"Then you wouldn't care for it," decided Blackie hopelessly, and when they had finally sent Bargain Billy on his way, Blackie stayed with Wallingford as long as possible before he went home to dress for dinner. He dreaded to meet the eye of Violet Bonnie.

"Well, did you get it?" she demanded, as he came into the house.

"Not yet, but we've obtained his confidence," he foolishly stated.

"He shoved that on you," she told him in deep discouragement. "What did you try on him, anyhow?"

"A rubber plantation, and a fake foot-race, and we even tried to get him to manufacture Jim's cottage auto."

For the first time, Violet Bonnie began to soften toward her wedded spouse. "There was a hint of class to that last thought," she commented. "Why couldn't you string him on it?"

"He won't start a new business. He wants to see the wheels going round."

"Then why don't you show him some wheels going round?" she impatiently demanded.

Blackie was struck dumb for a solid minute. "I think I'll slip over and see Jim," he announced.

Either Wallingford or Blackie kept constantly in

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attendance on William Brack, for several solidly aggravating days, to prevent him from being cheated by irresponsible amateurs. Eventually, however, a live promotor "got to" Brack when they were not looking.

This promotor was a chunky young man, with thick eye-glasses and a stiff pompadour, and he gave the name of Paul Pollet. "I understand you have some money to invest in a legitimate manufacturing proposition," began Mr. Pollet, so briskly that he almost seemed surly.

"I don't know how the word got spread so thoroughly," puzzled Mr. Brack, studying Mr. Pollet most critically. "I haven't advertised it."

"You don't need to," Paul confidently assured him. "Money sends out magnetic waves of its own, and the wireless detecting instruments in New York are so sensitive that they quiver at the passing of a canceled postage-stamp. I don't know myself where I heard you had money. I just knew it."

Brack smiled. Paul Pollet, to him, talked like a regular business man; a thoroughly up-to-date party. He was both cynical and shrewd.

"You caught the right message," he admitted. "I have the coin. What's your scheme to take it away from me?"

"Auto manufacturing company," responded Mr. Pollet promptly. "I have a big plant running in full

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blaze right now. I can take you up and show you the wheels whirling any minute; and everybody busy."

"That's the talk," approved Mr. Brack. "You're the first man who has offered to show me anything in action. What kind of an auto are you manufacturing, plain or monogrammed?"

"Extra fussy," Paul advised him with kindling enthusiasm. "It's practically a bungalow on wheels, handsome, expensive and luxurious, with cooking, eating and sleeping accommodations for four."

Mr. Brack rose and took down his hat and coat. "Where's your factory?" he inquired.

The wheels were going round when Mr. Pollet conducted Mr. Brack through the shops of the tearingly busy Autohome Manufacturing Company, and everybody was feverishly doing something. It was a sight good for youthless eyes and jaded nerves, and the clang and the clatter and the hum gave Bargain Billy Brack the first real tingle he had felt in years. In the middle of the shop was the long, gray, freshly painted chassis of a third-handed auto truck, and four muscular workmen were hammering it with loud staccato whangs.

"I'd like to see a finished machine," suggested the prospective investor, looking about him with much interest.

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"You'll have to wait until I sell the treasury stock," replied Mr. Pollet with a smile. "I've got just as far as I can go by myself," and he led the way into the office. "This is a two-hundred-thousand-dollar stock company, of which four dummy directors hold one share each, and I hold a hundred thousand. The balance of the remaining hundred thousand is treasury stock, and it's time for that to be sold."

"I get you," replied Mr. Brack with what was meant to be a shrewd expression of countenance. "You want to sell me this stock, but who gets the money?"

"The Autohome Manufacturing Company," explained Mr. Pollet with convincing emphasis. "Every dollar of it goes to put a punch into the business. Look here, Mr. Brack, if you'll buy up this treasury stock, we'll elect you treasurer, and I'm willing for you to handle every penny of the funds. I guess that proves I'm on the level. Let me show you the drawings for the completed car. It's the sportiest proposition in the auto game!"

He displayed to Mr. Brack's highly interested eyes a beautiful perspective drawing of the completed traveling home, all shiny and black, with glistening high-lights. He produced working drawings, and explained the clever mechanism of the folding-berths and the built-in ice-box and the con-

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cealed kitchennette, and Mr. Brack, who had long since cut his eye-teeth, kept his own shrewd counsel as he recognized devices very familiar, although it seemed to him not so clever as those in the beautiful Wallingford car.

"Have you patents on this?" he sagely inquired.

"Not yet," admitted Mr. Pollet. "I have patents applied for, however, and they're just as good, until I get the actual government papers."

"That is, if you don't strike an infringement suit," commented Brack. "I like your proposition, Mr. Pollet, if you could show me a clean bill of health about your right to do business, but I think I'll just keep my ninety-eight thousand dollars until you get your patents, and can show me that you won't be stopped."

"I thought you had a hundred thousand?" accused Paul with a frown.

"I had, but I've been living since I collected it," and Mr. Brack smiled fishily.

"You're stopping at a mighty expensive hotel," worried Paul.

Mr. Brack reported to Wallingford and Blackie with great pride. "You fellows are educating me," he boasted. "I had my diploma, but you put on the finishing touches. I'm able to protect myself now. This morning I stopped the most plausible little guy

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I've met yet; made him take the count with about six well-planted words."

"I'm glad you're safe to leave alone," responded Wallingford sincerely, "because Blackie and myself are contemplating a little business trip, and we don't like to leave you behind with your money exposed."

"It's safe with Little Billy now!" bragged Brack. "You want to have a little curiosity over this scheme, though. You'll be highly agitated when I tell you about it."

"Go ahead and shock me," invited Wallingford tranquilly.

"It's your big hotel car," replied Brack. "A young fellow by the name of Paul Pollet is preparing to manufacture one nearly like it. Didn't you tell me you had patents on a lot of those features?"

"I bet I did," Wallingford assured him. "I patent everything I think of. It's a cheap amusement, and if you can't sell a patent you can at least make trouble with it. Is this Pullet person just cackling about it, or can he really show an egg?"

"He's manufacturing, and he wanted me to take up his hundred thousand dollars' worth of treasury stock so he can go on with the good work. It's a grand little business, if Pollet had seen it first, but, as it is, I was too smooth for him. I turned him down quick, and switched to you."

"Very noble of you," approved Wallingford.

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"Still, I don't know that I'll do anything. I'll never fuss with the car, and if this is a live young member I think I'll just let him go, unless the time comes when I hate him or he makes too much money."

"If you're going to be that easy about it, it might be a good investment after all," suggested Bargain Billy, and then, at last, he began to think. Wallingford could tell it by the greedy smile of him. "I say, Wallingford, I can probably make a better dicker with him if you will threaten him with trouble."

"How does the financial proposition stand?" inquired Wallingford. "Could you obtain a majority of the stock?"

"Hardly," speculated Brack. "It's a two-hundred-thousand company. There are four dummy directors who own a share each. Pollet owns a hundred thousand dollars' worth, and he wants to sell me the balance for ninety-nine thousand six hundred."

"Don't bite," counseled Wallingford. "I guess you need me around a while, after all. Don't you see that if he could go ahead without any interference from me, he'd outvote you in every stockholders' meeting, and in the end you'd be skinned."

"That's right!" exclaimed Brack, and began to be indignant. "Why, confound that grafter, you ought to put him out of business!"

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"By George, I'll do it," Wallingford generously agreed. "Understand, Brack, I don't advise you to go into this business, because I don't know anything about it, but if it listens good to you, I'll enter suit against this Pullet party—"

"Pollet," corrected Brack.

"—against this Pollet fellow, get out an injunction and scare him to death. Then you offer him a hundred thousand dollars for the whole company, including his stock and the treasury stock, but excepting the four shares by the dummy directors. You'll need them. Then I'll give you control of my patents. You can sell your treasury stock for the funds to conduct the business, and have the whole thing in your own hands."

"Great!" applauded Brack. "That's the kind of a deal I wanted to get into, one that involved a real high-finance operation, with the sucker on the other end of the pole!" and his thick lips moistened with gratification. "But do you suppose I could sell the stock?"

"Anybody can sell stock, that is, any man of a good appearance, and a handy tongue, and a little gray matter in his tank."

"I think I could sell it," decided Brack, considering these requirements thoughtfully. "Wallingford, you're a genius!" he chuckled in pleasant anticipation. "Let's get busy on friend Pollet. I've

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been just dying all my life to toss the harpoon into some one!"

"All right," laughed Wallingford. "Loaf around the gymnasium and get your harpoon arm in good condition. Blackie and I are going away for about a week, but I'll set this suit and injunction on foot to-day and give you that contract on my patents. Don't be hasty, though. You'd better not do anything without consulting us."

"Don't you worry about me!" exulted Bargain Billy. "I understand this game perfectly, now that you've pointed it out to me."

On the day Wallingford and Blackie returned from a pleasantly profitable trip into the interior, Bargain Billy Brack, who had learned from Violet Bonnie the train upon which they would arrive, was waiting at Blackie's house.

"Hello, Pirate," greeted Blackie, bustling into the library, and unlocking the cellarette between the Mark Twain set and the forty-volume Shakespeare. "Have you settled down yet into a regular business man?"

"Well, yes," hesitated Bargain Billy, upon whose doughy brow there were beginning to be lines of actual thought. "You know, I bought out that automobile factory."

"You did!" exclaimed Blackie. "Why, I heard

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Jim Wallingford caution you not to do it until you saw him."

"That's right," admitted Bargain Billy, looking up with a nod as Violet Bonnie came into the room and settled herself in the biggest and most comfortable leather rocker. "However, I took advantage of young Pollet on the day I found him the most scared, and bought him out."

"Well, well," observed Blackie. "I hope you haven't made any mistake. Now, Brack, don't tell me anything about it till I send for Jim. I can see it in your eyes that you want some advice."

"He's on his way over," stated Violet Bonnie calmly, looking out the window. "I told Fannie to bring him across just as soon as he got home. Blackie, why don't you offer your friend a little stimulant?"

"I wasn't sure I needed any," hesitated Bargain Billy, with a half-hearted chuckle. "I'm not sure yet whether I ought to be worried or not."

"Don't tell me a thing," hastily warned Blackie. "I'm not smart like Jim. Will you have water with your rye or seltzer, or will you have whisky for a chaser?"

"I don't care if I do," accepted Brack, and drank reflectively until Mr. and Mrs. Wallingford came in.

"Well, Jim, our fat little ward has done it," announced Blackie, when the callers had arrived and

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had passed the conventional greetings. "Brack tells me that he bought that automobile plant."

"As bad as that?" queried Wallingford, looking grave. "Brack, I told you not to do that until you consulted me. I suppose you got stung?"

"I want you to tell me if I have," confessed Brack. "I thought everything was all right, until I began to try to sell the treasury stock, but it seems to me that they've become awful wise on Broadway since I was a well-known figure there."

"The ones who wanted money always have been wise," chuckled Wallingford. "Needing money is in itself a liberal education. Why won't they buy your treasury stock?"

"They say I haven't got anything except a contract to manufacture under your patents, and that's revocable," complained Brack. "Also, that contract runs out in a year, if I don't continue manufacturing."

"That's all right," Wallingford soothed him. "All you have to do is keep on manufacturing."

"What with!" indignantly protested Brack. "I had to pay this slick Pollet ninety-seven thousand five-hundred dollars! He was even sore because I insisted on keeping out five hundred dollars for personal expenses!"

Blackie looked apologetically at Violet Bonnie. "Have you much of it left?" he inquired.

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"About enough to square my hotel bill. Why, look here, boys, Pollet didn't own that plant!"

"He didn't!" exclaimed Wallingford. "Why, I'd have him pinched."

"Your lawyer says I can't. I bought the good will, fixtures, material, patents applied for, certificates of stock, and machinery owned by the Auto-home Manufacturing Company all right, but the machinery consisted of a new jig-saw and an emery-wheel. The material consisted of a hundred dollars' worth of iron and two hundred dollars' worth of brass; the fixtures of one new desk-light and two dozen twenty-cent letter-files. The patents applied for are only an expense account, and the good will doesn't amount to a cuss!"

Blackie, sitting at the library desk, began to play softly some imaginary piano keys along its edge, and to hum, *New York is a Good Old Town*. Wallingford laid his head back on the cushion of his favorite chair and laughed frankly at the ceiling. Fannie Wallingford smiled amusedly at Violet Bonnie, who was holding one hand on her heaving belt and taking hers out in internal spasms.

"Why, I thought you told me he had a fine big plant there?" protested Wallingford, when he could get his breath.

"It was rented!" exploded Brack.

"He was too smart to tell you it wasn't, I suppose?" ventured Wallingford.

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"Of course he was," agreed Brack. "There's nothing in the papers to show that that was his plant, or that the Autohome Company owned anything in the plant line except just machinery."

"One jig-saw and one emery-wheel," mused Blackie.

"No wonder you couldn't sell stock," commiserated Wallingford. "Everything in the world you got for your ninety-seven thousand five hundred is just the welt where you were stung."

"I wouldn't believe it myself until I saw you," protested Brack. "I'm really soaked then, am I?"

"You're flimflammed to a finish," Wallingford assured him; "and from what you tell me, there's no come-back at Mr. Pollet or anybody. However, I wouldn't worry about it, old man. They were bound to get you, anyhow. Blackie told you that being a sucker was an incurable disease."

"But what am I to do?"

"Go back on the farm!" advised Blackie, turning to him with sudden tenseness.

When Bargain Billy had headed for the farm, which now meant good healthful labor, the party in the library ordered champagne punch to be brewed and planned to have dinner at the Broadway restaurant where they had first encountered that same Bargain Billy.

"I suppose Pollet took care of that check the minute he got it?" inquired Wallingford.

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"I'll bet he did!" promptly responded Violet Bonnie. "Polly is strictly reliable. He had it in cash as soon as the bank could count it, and turned it over to Fannie, who split it with me, and we went down-town together and shopped for some bonds."

"Holy Mike!" exclaimed Blackie. "Isn't that carrying a joke some distance?"

"I like to see you have a good time," encouraged Wallingford, "but I don't want you to laugh yourselves to death! Remember that we have a stiff expense-account on this deal. Five hundred dollars for that Far West incorporation, three hundred for the chassis of that old auto truck, a thousand dollars for labor, four hundred for materials, five hundred for rent, three or four hundred for entertainment, a hundred and fifty for drawings, Polly's fat salary—why, it foots up to between three and four thousand dollars!"

"Well, pikers!" chided Violet Bonnie, "aren't you willing to spend that much to give your wives a treat?"

"Yes," admitted Wallingford, "but we should have something for the use of our talent."

"You didn't use any!" she charged. "You held still, and let Puffy Brack sink the barb into his own gills. He stung himself, and you couldn't help it. You should really be fined. You remember that time

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you smart Alecks stuck me on that strawberry colony deal? Well, now we're even, and I have interest. Those bonds are down in Fannie's and my safety deposit boxes, singing *Home, Sweet Home*."

"Good-by, bonds," grinned Blackie, and wafted them a kiss. "What do we wear to the celebration dinner?"

"Red!" giggled both women.

"We've had the frocks ready for a week," added Violet Bonnie.

"I didn't know it was so important," laughed Wallingford. "Vi, I don't believe I ever did understand why you were so violently sure that this cheese had to get off Broadway?"

Violet Bonnie flushed red and powdered her nose, but she did not answer.

Fannie Wallingford burst out laughing. "It's a secret, but I'll tell you boys," she explained, fighting off Violet Bonnie's restraining hand. "Ten years ago Bargain Billy told her she'd be fat when she got her growth!"

CHAPTER XIX

PLAYING THE GAME

ONION JONES, with his cards folded in the palm of his hand, added all his poker-chips to the interesting collection in the center of the table, thereby meeting the raise of Blackie Daw, and added to them a beautifully folded, purple, engraved document.

"Give me action," he requested. "This assortment of lithographs that I am hiding from all indiscreet onlookers is unique enough to urge me into desperate risks."

"Now I know I have you beat," decided Blackie, bunching his cards and weighting them down with the hotel ash-tray. "What is the fancy stationery?"

"Negotiable securities," proclaimed Onion Jones, so known because of the flawlessly denuded condition of his shining scalp. "That is a certificate for one hundred shares in the Cinder Heap Ocher Metal Prospect, and worth par the moment the first shaft, now being actively dropped, touches bed-rock."

"I pass," indifferently stated J. Rufus Wallingford, tossing his hand into the discard, and picking up the stock-certificate with the amused smile of a

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connoisseur. "Pretty ink is the life of con commerce."

Bawl-'em-out Turner, who, with eight cards, had been able to get nothing better than a pair of deuces, threw away the five pasteboards he still held, and turned on Onion Jones with a snarl. "Aw, play the game!" he surlily protested. "I'm too much loser to take a joke!"

Onion Jones snarled back at him quite promptly. "You wasn't going to meet Blackie's raise!" he growled.

"I might have if you hadn't o' fussed it up!" savagely retorted Turner.

"I'm willing to let him practise," pleasantly announced their host, Doc Otis.

"Next man," called Onion Jones briskly. "It's all between you and me, Blackie. There's my raise."

"Why don't you put in a dollar and a quarter cash?" inquired Blackie. "My hand's too good to speculate with. It's only fit for straight investment."

"You know why I haven't any cash," chided Onion Jones, with only a decently envious glance at the comfortable accumulations of chips in front of Blackie and Wallingford and Doc Otis; "and you won't take my check."

Jim Wallingford chuckled. "We wouldn't want to make you go along to the bank, Bermuda," he declared. "Besides, the price of paper has gone down."

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"Bet your cuff-buttons, Onion, and put away the golden opportunity," suggested Blackie. "You might string some lollop with that."

Onion Jones grew justly indignant. "You're trying to create the impression that your hand is something more than a memorandum," he charged. "I'm offering you negotiable paper. I sold a block of it yesterday for thirty cents a share. Come on and give me a bet."

"All right," agreed the good-natured Blackie. "I needed a purple one, anyhow. I'll take the certificate for a red stack."

A groan from Holler Turner interrupted the proceedings. "Aw, play the game!" he demanded. "I'm too much loser!"

"You borrowed your original set-in from me, and you've made it last for a solid hour of piking," Onion Jones reminded him, though not uncharitably. "I'll take your rank injustice, Blackie; a stack of reds goes."

"Got any more of that currency?" inquired Blackie, preparing to shove forward his chips.

"Plenty of it," asserted Onion, tapping his bulging pocket proudly. "This mine just came home from the printer's."

"Raise you four hundred shares," offered Blackie, shoving him a stack of blues.

"Now we're sporting!" exulted Onion Jones,

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hauling in the hundred-share certificate, and replacing it with one calling for a thousand shares. "Here's five hundred more."

"I'll tilt that one thousand shares," promptly amended Blackie.

"Sporting was right," softly commented Doc Otis, drawing Blackie's hand from beneath the ash-tray, examining it and replacing it with a graven face that Onion Jones studied earnestly.

"Here goes," decided the baldheaded one, grabbing a large bundle of certificates from his inside pocket, and he once more "boosted" the raise.

The certificates were all in the center when Blackie was still offering to continue the diversion.

"All in," confessed the ivory-topped player with a sigh. "The entire Pennsylvania Golconda is mingled with your chips, and I am compelled to restrict you to a mere request to see my four large mines."

"Sorry, Jonesy, old top," chuckled Blackie, spreading out his cards. "A row of pink ones. First one I ever held among friends, and I'm no gentleman to play it. Is there a hole in my mine?"

"Hundred-foot shaft, and well ripened at that," Onion told him, as he regretfully loaned Blackie the wide rubber band, which had not been included in the betting. "On the level, I hate to give up that mine, Blackie. That shaft was dug fifteen years

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ago by coal-prospectors, and since then, it's been the basis of two dozen highly successful companies. I've organized it myself seven times, and sold the stock, and bought it in again after the first assay. I consider it one of the best mines in the East for copper, lead, antimony, bismuth, sulphur, or sapphires. I'll give you my check for a hundred for those certificates. They're still in blank, ready to make out to anybody," and he whipped out his ever-ready check-book.

Blackie eyed it with a grin. "Not meaning to hurt your feelings, Jones, but I'd rather have the mine," he decided. "It can never be so humiliating."

Blackie Daw, indulging in a friendly chat with Doc Otis in the latter's rooms, three days later, was interrupted by a telephone ring, in the midst of a fool eulogy of the saxophone as a means of enlarging the soul.

"Are you here, Blackie?" asked the pleasant Otis, covering the transmitter with his hand.

"I guess so," replied Blackie easily. "I don't know anything they've got on me. Who is the party?"

"Henry Z. Grouge, as near as I can get it from the switchboard girl," smiled Doc.

"Stranger," pronounced Blackie. "He always will be. There's one cinch, though; it isn't a fly-cop. No

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living man would deliberately choose a name like that, even as a disguise."

"What does he look like?" asked Otis.

"I don't dare tell you," giggled the girl.

"If it's as bad as that, send it up. We want to see it," laughed Doc.

In spite of this warning, they were scarcely prepared for the real shock of Henry Z. Grouge. The feature of his countenance that was so unfair a test of politeness was his mouth, the lips of which had been so tightly compressed, during a lifetime of determination to get "the best of it," that they seemed to have been gradually swallowed; nor was he in any way abashed by the splendor of the apartment or by the two splendidly dressed gentlemen who received him. He was only resentful.

"Which one is Mr. Daw?" he inquired, sliding into the nearest chair, and holding to the hat which Otis had tried to take from him.

"This gentleman," stated Otis, indicating Blackie with courtly grace, and thereupon he retired into the adjoining room.

"Is he a partner of yours?" asked Mr. Grouge, following the insulting ease of Doc Otis out of the tops of his spotted eyes.

"No, only a wealthy friend," denied Blackie, somehow wishing for J. Rufus Wallingford.

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"Oh," responded the caller in a most uncomplimentary tone. "I just come from W. O. Jones, Mr. Daw."

"The vindictive cuss," soberly commented Blackie. "I hope there is something I can do for both of you."

"Well, I don't know about Mr. Jones," returned the visitor, with a grin which was worse than the frown of his mouth. "Number one; that's my motto. Mr. Jones told me that you are president and manager of the Cinder Heap Mining Company."

Blackie caught his cue with a promptness of which he intended to brag to Jim Wallingford. "The stockholders have done me that honor," he proudly acquiesced.

"Well, I didn't have anything to say about it, but I suppose I didn't buy my stock in time," grudgingly admitted Mr. Grouge. "I've got a thousand shares, and I didn't know but what, since you hold so much of it, you might want to buy up these," and he produced the familiar purple certificate.

"Ten red stacks or two blues," commented Blackie, with a reminiscent smile. "Friend Jones had on his kidding clothes, I guess. I have more of those negotiable securities than I can bet with."

"It's a fine mine!" urged Mr. Grouge eagerly. "I was down to Heapville looking it over. I just got back last night. They've got a hundred-foot shaft dug."

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"So I'm told," corroborated Blackie. "I understand there has never been a more perfect hole dug than that one."

"Have you been down to Heapville?" queried Mr. Grouge with suppressed anxiety.

"Not yet," answered Blackie. "The mine is, of course, very rich."

"Everybody at Heapville thinks so," instantly stated Mr. Grouge. "They're all excited about it. Now, I have to go out West, and I can't stay around to watch things the way I'd ought to, so if you want to buy my stock I'll sell it to you for a mighty reasonable price. What did you pay for yours?"

Blackie grinned as he thought of his royal flush. "I produced something extremely valuable for it," he informed his fellow stockholder; "a commodity so rare, and in such eager demand, that Mr. Jones relinquished his stock at the mere sight of it."

"I'll take just ordinary cash for mine," immediately suggested Mr. Grouge.

"Sorry I can't spare any cash," said Blackie. "I might play you seven-up for it, but money is different."

"I'll give you a bargain," persisted Mr. Grouge.

"No, I'm a poor man," refused Blackie.

"You don't want to buy it at all?"

"Not under any circumstances."

"All right," reluctantly gave up Mr. Grouge, and

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then he bent a little nearer. "Say, what do you think of this man Jones?"

"Well, I've often wondered," frankly replied Blackie.

"I'll tell you what I think of this man Jones; I think he's a skinner. I got a friend down at Heapville, though, and he'll keep me posted on whatever's done. If there's any shenanigan about this I'll find it out."

When he had gone, Doc Otis returned from the adjoining room in possession of a theory. "That old crab has money," he studiously announced. "Onion is a careless worker. He should have sold Henry Z. the mine."

"I wonder," speculated Blackie.

Heapville, one of those towns that have been deposited throughout this fair land by mere centrifugal force, was thrown into violent agitation by the arrival of a tall, thin, black-mustached, frock-coated gentleman, six chemists and a saxophone. The tall thin gentleman described himself on the freckled register of the Heap House as Horace G. Daw, of Boston, New York and Tarryville, and he immediately inquired (a) where the Cinder Heap Ocher Metal Prospect was located and (b) where a good, safe, well-broken driving mule could be obtained.

Refusing to bend his genius to any other consid-

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eration until this last requirement was satisfied, he spent two days in search of a suitable mule, leaving the six assorted chemists, whom he had got fresh-fledged from a technical school, to infest the Heap House, organize themselves into a glee club and compile a list of the available girls. Naturally these irresponsible young gentlemen were objects of intense curiosity from the instant of their arrival, and Blackie Daw had no sooner left them unprotected than the village pump-works burst into active operation, led by the dapple-faced landlord.

"You fellows going to try to work that busted old Peaseley coal-mine?" he asked of the lanky young chemist with the taffy-colored hair.

"I don't know what we're going to do till Mr. Daw finds his mule," responded the lanky one, whom Blackie kept in a constant state of amused admiration.

"Ain't you got any instructions?" persisted the landlord.

"None except to enjoy ourselves. I understand we're to be busy analyzing."

"Huh!" grunted the landlord, keenly disappointed, and hunted up the little fat chemist.

During the first forenoon of their stay, he managed to interview each one of the boys, individually and severally, but he received no further satisfaction than to learn, from the red-headed one, that Blackie

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had discussed among them the possibility of organizing a saxophone band, to which he looked forward with eager pleasure because he expected to blow bass.

The village caucus discussed this meager information with great vigor all afternoon and finally repaired to the mine itself, which was a hole in the top of a barren hill, backed up by a rough wooden building. The caucus stood around the hole and chewed tobacco until dark, and the next day it assembled for the same useful purpose. It went home to lunch in relays, but at last its patience was rewarded, for, along toward evening, Blackie Daw, heading his procession of chemists, drove over to the mine in a dusty old buckboard drawn by a lop-eared mule with a wicked eye and the name of Percival. In the buckboard were two large boxes. The driver of Percival induced that animal to stop somewhere near the frame building, unlocked the rusty old padlock, threw open the doors and led his band of chemists inside.

"Welcome home!" he said. "You boys pick out your favorite corners, and unpack your materials. To-morrow you may begin analyzing."

The lanky chemist with the taffy-colored hair pre-empted the cleanest-looking spot on the long bench by spreading down a newspaper, on which he sat. "Of course I don't feel justified in exhibiting too

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much curiosity, Mr. Daw," he stated, with the impartial air of a judge; "but I do possess some, and I'd like to know what we're to analyze."

"The mine," replied Blackie promptly. "Say, Riggs, from your voice you ought to play a fine alto."

"I don't know the formula for a single note," confessed Riggs, "but I'm a handy little learner. Say, Mr. Daw," and he looked, with worried speculation at his fellow chemists who were eagerly listening, "do you think you need all six of us?"

"I don't see how I could part with one of you," answered Blackie, considering the matter carefully. "Of course there aren't so many septets written as there are sextets, but I don't expect to play all the time. I expect to lead."

"I can see where you're right," approved the red-headed chemist; "but, at the same time, we want to be fair. We've talked it all over, and we think that one man can do all the work you'll need."

"Oh, hush," ordered Blackie. "You don't know how much analyzing I want done. I never had enough analyzing in my life, and I want you fellows just to get busy and analyze, from nine to twelve and from one to five, every day except Saturday afternoons and Sundays. Hustle those boxes in here while I go out and select some miners."

Beginning vaguely to grasp at the spirit of the

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thing, the still wondering graduates brought in the big boxes, and it was noticeable that, while Riggs was keen to get at his chemical apparatus, the red-headed chemist began frantically tearing at the lid of the box of saxophones. In the meantime Blackie addressed the caucus on the subject of labor.

"I'd like to speak to the walking delegate of the Miners' Union," he requested of the solemnly staring circle.

A pale-whiskered man with pale blue marble eyes bunched his scrap tobacco in one leathery cheek and advanced two paces into the field of importance. "There ain't no regular miners around here," he stated. "Jimmy Jenkins and Pete Doliver and me are about the best diggers in Heapville. We've always done the digging in this hole, for the last fifteen years. There ain't nothin' down there that anybody wants."

"Nobody ever opened this mine with six chemists," Blackie loftily reproved him. "What's your name?"

"Pettus," answered the pale-whiskered one; "Jake Pettus. Me and Jim and Pete has already got our tools ready. We calculated you'd be wantin' us to-day or to-morrow."

"For that, you're foreman of the works," promised Blackie. "The mining operations will begin at the usual hour to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER XX

(PINK AND PROSPEROUS

A LARGE, pink-faced, prosperous-looking gentleman, with a diamond the size of a filbert in his scarf, came to Heapville and gave his name at the Heap House as J. Rufus Wallingford. He did not register because of an injured right hand, which was wrapped up in a silk handkerchief. The landlord, however, was kind enough to register for him, and by request, put two "I's" in the name.

"We ain't got any room with a bath, but the barber-shop across the street has a tub that it rents out for twenty-five cents a bath," he informed Wallingford, surveying with distended eyes the assortment of luggage with which his distinguished-looking visitor was surrounded. "Going away on the two-forty?"

"No, I think I'll make this my headquarters for a while," responded Wallingford. "I may stay several weeks."

"You ain't a drummer, then?" queried the dapple-faced landlord.

"No," denied Wallingford, who seemed singularly reticent and retiring for so jovial-looking a man.

"Thinking of going into business here?"

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"No," replied Wallingford, and clumsily lighting a long, thick, black cigar with the aid of his left hand, he strode over and looked moodily out the window, while the dapple-faced landlord with much awed curiosity, removed his luggage to room twelve.

Wallingford followed him, on the third and last trip, and the frown of discomfort settled on his brow, to remain there permanently during his stay in Heapville. "Haven't you a better room than this?" he protested, as he ruefully inspected the sunken-centered bed and the lumpy pillows, and the delirium tremens wall-paper and the weather-beaten and intoxicated furniture. He walked to the narrow window, the lower left-hand pane of which was mended with a newspaper and some paste, looked out past the blacksmith shop and the Baptist church across the bleak landscape and cursed Blackie Daw and Onion Jones to the farthest and nethermost limits of Hades!

"Well, I could have given you a better room," apologized the landlord, "but they've just opened the mine again, and I got seven new regular boarders stopping here. Mr. Horace G. Daw has the bay-window room. It's about three times as big as this, and has all stuffed furniture, but it's too expensive for most people. Mr. Daw don't care for expenses, though."

"Is he the owner of the mine?" inquired Wallingford.

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"No," responded the landlord, as willing to disseminate information as he was to gather it. "He only owns forty per cent. of the stock, but he's the president and manager. He's the mayor of Tarryville, and is said to be the best saxophone player in the world. He's got a heavy little iron box in his room that's full of medals, for playing the saxophone; but I never saw the medals. The box is locked."

"Is his room near this?" demanded Wallingford, with a keen memory of Blackie's musical activities.

"No, it's way up front, but there's saxophones on each side of you and across the hall. All seven of 'em's got 'em, and they practise every night."

"Isn't there any other hotel in this town?"

"No, there's a place that calls itself a hotel, but you wouldn't want to stop there. There's no bar."

Wallingford groaned internally and took up his burden of duty. "You say there's a mine here?" he inquired. "What sort of a mine?"

"Be-goshed if I know," replied the man of the mottled countenance, scratching his head in acute mental distress. "It started as a coal-mine fifteen years ago, and fly-up-the-creek companies has tried it for everything else since then, including Gophir diamonds. Lord knows what this fellow's after. In my opinion, he's a tolerable sort of a danged fool."

Wallingford almost snickered. "What's the matter with him?" he wanted to know.

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"He don't seem to have nothin' serious on his mind," criticized the landlord, much perturbed by that fact. "Why, he's paying six chemists to do nothing but analyze dirt all day long, and every last one of those chemists says there ain't anything but just dirt in that mine. There is those that says that everybody is lying about it, and it stands to reason that all his parcel of people wouldn't be so happy and cheerful if they was plumb sure they wasn't going to find anything."

Mr. Wallingford grew gravely thoughtful. "There seems something mysterious about that," he admitted, narrowing his eyes. "Do all his chemists seem to like Mr. Daw?"

"They follow him around like kids after candy and they laugh every time he says anything," stated the landlord, beginning to be indignant as he thought over certain matters. "The whole kit and caboodle goes hellin' around town like schoolboys, and last night they played kick-the-picket and prisoner's base till after dark."

Wallingford did not smile. "Then they are not worried about anything," he concluded; "and they are here under heavy expense."

"That's a fact," admitted the landlord, himself growing serious. "I wonder if there ain't something valuable in that mine? I guess I'd better write again to a fellow I promised to keep posted."

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"One of the stockholders?" suggested Wallingford.

"Henry Z. Grouge," replied the landlord. "He's as rich as the mint."

Wallingford was sitting moodily in the office of the Heap House, reading in doleful contempt the jokes in the green-covered almanac, when he heard the sound of approaching vocal music, the burden of which was a bulldog on a bank and a bullfrog in a pool. Just outside the door that tune stopped abruptly, and the vibrant voice of Blackie Daw was heard commanding:

"Now, all together! One! Two! Threé! Ready! Warble!"

The result was immediate and startling, as seven pairs of lusty lungs let forth the Cinder Heap yell:

H'O! H'O!

An-a-lyze a note in G!

Bass!

Frog-bass!

Alto!

Oom-pah Alto!

Tenor!

Sissy-tenor!

Virtuoso!

Oom-pah! Oom-pah! Oom-pah! Bang!

Immediately after this remarkable return from daily toil, the door opened and Blackie Daw burst

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in, wearing a silk hat, a black Prince Albert and a pair of blue overalls. Just behind him was a lanky young man with taffy-colored hair, and he was holding to Blackie's coat-tail. Behind the lanky young man, and clutching that earnest chemist's coat-tail, was a short fat chemist, followed by a spectacled one, a handsome one, a loose-jointed one and a red-headed one! They were all grinning, and their faces were flushed with exercise, singing and pure cussedness. They marched twice around the office. Blackie Daw jumped over a chair. Every chemist following him jumped over that chair. Blackie caught at his overalls, like a skirt, and kicked sideways like a ballet-dancer. The six young chemists did the same thing, in turns, as they passed over the same spot. Blackie bumped his head against the wall, and six thumps followed. Blackie, still circling the room, stopped abruptly in front of J. Rufus Wallingford, and said as follows:

"Hello, stranger, have a drink?"

The six young chemists stopped in front of him successively, and issued the same grinning invitation, in bass, frog-bass, alto, oom-pah alto, tenor and sissy-tenor.

Blackie Daw headed straight for the bar. The big stranger, smiling for the first time since his arrival in Heapville, rose and fell in line behind the red-head.

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As they all congregated at the supper-table, an hour later, the lanky one said to the spectacled one:

"Well, what do you think of the new member of the glee club, except that he can't sing?"

The spectacled one, who had the preternatural and also deceptive solemnity of an owl, considered the problem gravely. "He is a welcome and valuable musician," he emphatically decided. "He is the grandest little left-handed drinker I ever saw!"

That night the landlord discovered that, while the glee club was on its usual round of instruction among the village girls, J. Rufus Wallingford was visiting in the expensive corner room of Horace G. Daw!

On the very day following his arrival, J. Rufus Wallingford, much against his apparent will, was forced to confide a portion of his business to his landlord. "This infernal accident to my hand is most unfortunate," he declared. "Could I get you to write a letter for me?"

"I'll be mighty glad to do it," said the landlord eagerly, and he produced writing-materials instantly. "Who's it to?"

"The Eagle Gold Pen Consolidation," replied Wallingford. "By the way, this is to be a most confidential business letter, and, of course, I expect you not to let anything slip about it."

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"Certainly not," hastily promised the landlord. "I'm not one to pry into folk's affairs, nor to blab."

"I was sure of that," Wallingford smilingly complimented him, after which he dictated: "Gentlemen: I have a small quantity of iridium that I wish to market. Will you kindly quote me the present price on this metal, if commercially pure; payment to be made immediately on receipt, if analysis is satisfactory?"

The landlord paused. "What's iridium?" he asked.

"A very rare and very valuable metal, which is used for making the points of gold pens."

The landlord's 'muddy eyes became reflective. "Where do you get it?" he eagerly wanted to know.

"I would not care to state that, even to the Eagle Gold Pen Consolidation. There is very little of the metal mined in America. Most of it is imported from Russia, where the mines are guarded night and day."

"Huh!" commented the landlord. "Worth its weight in gold, I suppose?"

"Several times that," smiled Wallingford. "Just sign that 'Yours respectfully, J. Rufus Wallingford,' please."

Two days later, the landlord handed Wallingford a letter from the Eagle Gold Pen Consolidation, and was kind enough to offer to open it for him. Wall-

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ingford, however, declined that aid, and retired with the letter to his room.

In about an hour, he returned with a small package that he left at the desk to be expressed to the Eagle Gold Pen Consolidation, and requested the landlord to make out the express blank.

"What value?" asked the landlord. "Fifty dollars, I reckon?"

"No; two thousand," corrected Wallingford nonchalantly, and went back up to his room.

Four days later, another letter came to Wallingford from the gold pen company, and by looking through it to the light the landlord perceived a pink check. The thing was inconveniently folded for inspection, but, by dint of holding the letter against a sunlit window-pane and peering at it until his eyes ached, he made out the perforations to call for two thousand two hundred and thirty-one dollars.

One hour after the receipt of that check, Wallingford, who continued to be a valued member of the glee club, and an accomplished left-handed drinker, and an every-evening companion of Blackie Daw, sent off another small package to the Eagle Gold Pen Consolidation.

"On the second day following that, the noon train brought Henry Z. Grouge!

Henry Z. Grouge had a long, quiet, but sharply

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questioning talk with the landlord, and then he went straight out to the Cinder Heap Mine, where Blackie Daw greeted him coldly.

"I thought you were going West," he observed, taking up a large sheaf of tabulated papers, and tearing them into small bits.

"Changed my mind," said Mr. Grouge. "What are you finding?"

"In this old hole in the ground?" laughed Blackie. "Dirt, that's all."

"What's that you just tore up?"

"Analysis sheets," admitted Blackie, smiling frankly.

"I thought so," stated Mr. Grouge, his spotted eyes almost closing. "I got a right to see them."

"They wouldn't do you any good," responded Blackie briskly, and opening the door of the big cannon-ball stove, he dumped the torn papers into the blaze and slammed the door shut. "They don't show valuable deposits of any sort. They've been accumulating here until they're a nuisance."

Mr. Grouge glared at the cannon-ball stove, and then he looked hungrily at Blackie's desk. "There's shenanigan going on here," he decided. "Otherwise you wouldn't tear up those analysis sheets the minute a stockholder shows up. There's iridium in this mine!"

"There's what!" exclaimed Blackie.

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"Iridium," repeated Mr. Grouge firmly. "It's a rare and valuable metal that's used for pointing gold pens, and it's worth several times its weight in gold."

"What do you think of that, boys?" shouted Blackie. "This is Mr. Grouge, one of our most influential stockholders. He has just brought me the news that we are mining iridium here."

A burst of incredulous laughter followed this announcement.

"Well, I know what I'm talking about!" persisted Mr. Grouge, raising his voice. "You're taking over two thousand dollars' worth of iridium a week out of here!"

Blackie turned to his assembled chemists and raised his hand. "Boys, tell the gentleman your opinion of this despicable slander," he commanded. "Now, all together. One! Two! Three! Ready! Warble!" The Cinder Heap yell answered Mr. Grouge's base accusation.

"Hee-haw!" brayed Percival, outside the door, with all his lungs.

Mr. Grouge glared at the assembled idiots with rage unspeakable. "You're all in cahoots!" he finally snorted, and going outside, he interviewed Jake Pettus, who confirmed the influential stockholder's suspicion of a conspiracy by deriding, with hilarious scorn, the idea that there ever had been or ever would be anything more useful than plain mud or

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gravel brought up from the bowels of the earth at that particular spot.

In the hotel, Grouge sought Wallingford and engaged him in conversation. "I understand you buy and sell iridium," he ventured.

"Who told you so?" inquired Wallingford coldly.

"Don't make any difference where I got my information," responded Mr. Grouge determinedly; "it's correct, all right. Now, what I want to know is where you get that iridium?"

Wallingford rose and gazed down at him, with justly offended dignity. "It's none of your business," he stated, and walked away.

Mr. Grouge caught the next train for the city, and the following evening he returned with a grim-looking, ashen-faced, stoop-shouldered chemist.

Mr. Grouge stuck at the elbow of his chemist like a leech all evening, lest he should be contaminated by the roistering young rowdies who had taken the town by storm; he woke him up early in the morning and breakfasted with him, and he went out to the mine with him.

"This is my own chemist," Mr. Grouge advised Blackie. "He's going to do his analyzing right down in the mine, and if you won't let him I'll get a court order, so you might just as well save time and trouble."

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"Let him go right ahead and analyze," cheerfully acquiesced Blackie. "My boys will give him every facility he wants. Boys, here's a new chemist. Initiate him into the brotherhood and give him a good time while he's here."

The glee club pressed forward with friendly grins, but Mr. Grouge waved them back.

"It ain't going to be necessary," he stated. "My chemist has everything that's needed in this suit case, and he ain't here for any monkey business."

So saying, he went out to the mine, and invited the diggers to come out of the shaft, and had his chemist lowered, and sat grimly at the edge of the hole.

Blackie left him there undisturbed until eleven thirty, then he went out and conversed. He spoke earnestly of the need of money for future development, and of his plan to vote an issue of treasury stock for that purpose.

"If we ever find anything in this hole, we'll have plenty of ground to work on," he confided. "We have several claims here. I suppose you know that I've started to open another shaft?"

"Where?" inquired Mr. Grouge, rising instantly, and looking about him in all directions.

"Just around back of the hill," said Blackie. "Would you like to see it?"

Mr. Grouge, tired and stiff from his long vigil,

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looked down into the hole and up at the sun. "If it ain't too far," he accepted.

"Oh, we'll drive around," promised Blackie easily. "I've made it there and back in fifteen minutes," and he stepped to the side of the wall where his buckboard stood.

He scratched Percival between the eyes as he unhitched that intelligent whim, and Percival winked one ragged ear at him. Just around the hill, Blackie touched Percival with his whip in front of the right flank, and Percival, without stopping to take a breath, ran straight away six miles into the country, with Blackie standing up in the buckboard, sawing at the reins and yelling at the top of his voice!

In the meantime came the lunch-hour and the glee club windlassed the visiting chemist out of the hole, and gave him hot coffee and other refreshments. He was not exactly a sociable party to look at, apparently partaking much of the nature of old Grouge himself, but the boys were healthy, and they had Blackie's instructions to give him a good time; so they attempted to do it. The lanky one tried to talk shop, but awakened no enthusiasm; the fat one tried to interest him in food; the red-headed one tried music; the handsome one tried dogs; the loose-jointed one tried baseball; the spectacled one caught him where he lived. He introduced the topic of chorus girls! At a quarter to four, when the froth-

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ing Grouge and the apologetic Blackie and the placidly contented Percival returned from their little excursion, the spectacled saxophone player was down in the hole with the visiting chemist, helping him analyze and absorbing information from the older man's stock of reminiscences.

The visiting chemist came up out of the hole by special request.

"Well, what have you found?" demanded Grouge, with spotted-eyed distrust.

"Nothing," replied the visiting chemist truthfully.

"There isn't a trace of anything valuable in this mine."

"Then you may as well go back home!" snapped Mr. Grouge.

"All right," agreed the visiting chemist easily. "I think I'll stay over till to-morrow night, however, for the club concert. This is a fine crowd of boys!"

"Your expenses stop from this minute," Mr. Grouge immediately reminded him.

"That's all right," put in the spectacled young man. "He may not look the part, but he's a good sport. We'd like to have him stay over as a guest of the club."

Mr. Grouge regarded his chemist with a darkening brow. "That infernal mule!" he swore. "I knew these fellows would get to you with a bribe if I let you get out of eyesight! There's iridium—"

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He found himself looking at the knuckles of a bony fist, just under his nose. The visiting chemist did not look it, but he was a real sport!

A new actor arrived on the scene, in the person of a chunky young man with a pompadour, who registered as Paul Pollet, and he held a long conversation with Blackie Daw in a corner of the office of the Heap House. When they began that conversation, the landlord went up-stairs and came down with Henry Z. Grouge, who leaned across the desk where he could watch the interview in the corner. At the conclusion of the interview, Paul Pollet passed a small bundle of purple stock-certificates to Mr. Daw, and in return Mr. Daw wrote Mr. Pollet a check. While doing so, Mr. Daw smilingly displayed another check, a pink one, which he immediately returned to his pocket.

Mr. Wallingford came down-stairs, and left another small package to be expressed to the Eagle Gold Pen Consolidation. Mr. Wallingford was introduced to Mr. Pollet by Mr. Daw. Mr. Wallingford and Mr. Daw walked away together.

Mr. Grouge went over and took Mr. Daw's vacated chair. "Fine weather," he suggested.

"Great," agreed Mr. Pollet briskly, and felt in his pocket to see if his check was still safe.

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"You don't happen to be a stockholder in the Cinder Heap Ocher Metal Prospect, do you?" inquired Mr. Grouge.

"No, I'm only a stock-and-bond salesman," returned Mr. Pollet, none too cordially.

"Oh!" responded Mr. Grouge. "You've been selling Mr. Daw some more stock in the mine?" he guessed.

"Yes, I've been hunting it up for him," acknowledged Pollet. "Are you a stockholder?"

"Got a thousand shares."

Mr. Pollet was instantly interested. "How much will you take for it?" he wanted to know.

"What are you offering?"

"Seventy," briskly stated Paul.

Mr. Grouge blinked. At seventy, he could make a profit of four hundred dollars on his block. "I suppose you'd want to sell to Mr. Daw?" he surmised.

"I wouldn't say that," returned Paul. "I have a market for it, however. Will you accept my offer?"

"No, I don't think I will," decided Mr. Grouge, who never in his life had accepted a dollar if there was a possible two dollars in sight.

"Very well," relinquished Paul easily. "I'm not so anxious as I was. It has taken some hard work to accomplish it, but at last I know where all

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of the stock is, and with the price I've offered you, I can easily get enough to give Mr. Daw absolute control of the mine, which is what he wants."

"I knew there was some shenanigan here!" blurted Mr. Grouge excitedly. "This man Daw, and all his chemists, says that there ain't a thing of any value in that mine, and yet he wants control of it!"

"I don't know whether there are valuable deposits in that mine or not," said Pollet. "It's none of my business. I only know that Mr. Daw wants control of it. I know where to get the stock that will give him control, and I have instructions to buy it. With a majority of stock in his pocket, a man can walk into that mine and order every person there off the premises, and run it to suit himself."

Mr. Wallingford returned alone from his walk with Mr. Daw, and left another package at the desk. His hand was well enough now to make out his own receipt. He walked on up-stairs.

The landlord called Mr. Grouge over to him. "He just left some more iridium," he whispered. "The two packages ain't worth a cent less than five thousand dollars!"

"You put those packages back in your safe!" ordered Mr. Grouge. "I'm going to swear out an attachment against them."

"Not by a durn sight!" promptly stated the landlord. "I'm a receiving agent for the express com-

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pany, and I've receipted for these packages, and they're as good as gone! You can't prove where Mr. Wallingford got 'em, anyhow."

"You're receiving stolen goods!" charged Grouge, his fingers clutching.

"Who will you prove it by?" demanded the landlord, putting the packages away.

"I don't know," admitted Grouge.

Mr. Pollet walked over to the desk and asked for his key.

"I reckon I'll sell you my stock," said Mr. Grouge to Pollet.

"All right," accepted Paul promptly, and reached in his pocket. "I haven't my check-book here, but I have the check which Mr. Daw just gave me, for a thousand shares. Perhaps you'll accept that check in payment, and give me a check for the balance?"

"How much is it for?" asked Grouge interestedly unfolding it. "By jinks! It's for eight hundred dollars! Did he pay you eighty for that stock?"

"That's what he did," chuckled Pollet. "I made three hundred dollars on that deal. I bought it in for fifty from a man who didn't know what it was worth."

"Mr. Grouge, with his greedy eyes on the packages that the landlord had put away, slowly pushed back the check. "Who else has got any of this stock?" he wanted to know.

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"That's my secret," declared Paul indignantly. "I know where to find all of it."

"How much does Mr. Daw need to give him control?" inquired Mr. Grouge thoughtfully.

"Not very much," admitted Paul. "A few little blocks like yours would do the trick."

Mr. Grouge, his eyes still on those two packages, spent a moment in deep, deep thought, in which he sucked his lips well back toward his palate. "Looky here," he finally suggested. "If you could buy up a lot of that stock and sell it, you could take a mighty small profit, and still make more than you will by turning over just a few shares to Mr. Daw."

"That's true enough," laughed Paul. "I know one man who has thirty-eight per cent. of the stock. I'm going up to see him to-morrow, and try to get him to sell me part of it."

"I think I'll go with you and see if he won't sell all of it," offered Grouge, with growing eagerness.

"I'll see that man by myself," chuckled Paul.

"All right, all right," agreed Mr. Grouge, clutching him by the arm. "I'll go with you to the city. You go to see your man and I'll wait for you in some saloon. We can catch this next train."

The glee-club chemists were still recovering from the social event of the season, two mornings later, and were dawdling about their monotonous analyses

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with scant enthusiasm, when the door opened and Henry Z. Grouge walked in. His mouth was drawn in until it was knotted, and a triumphant light shone from every freckle in his small eyes.

"Get out, all of you!" he ordered, taking up a commanding position in the middle of the floor. "I'm going to shut down this mine until I have time to call a regular legal stockholders' meeting, and I've got an injunction to do it with."

Blackie Daw advanced upon him majestically. "What is the meaning of this outrage?" he demanded, thrusting his right hand into the bosom of his waistcoat.

"This is what it means," Henry Z. Grouge promptly informed him. "I've bought up a majority of the stock in this mine, at a cost of thirty-five thousand dollars."

Blackie repressed his gleam of satisfaction. Paul Pollet's telegram had not dared to be explicit as to the amount he had managed to wedge out of Grouge. It was fairly satisfactory, since the expenses would not be much over a thousand dollars, and their purchase and sale of iridium had entailed no loss worth mentioning. Such it was to play poker with a lollipop like Onion Jones!

"Good!" declared Blackie. "You will bring new life into the business."

"I should say I will!" agreed Mr. Grouge, all too

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promptly. "It will be absolutely new life, because I'm going to fire every one of you cheaters off the premises, and run it to suit myself! The iridium down there belongs to me! Take your chemists and go!"

The little red-headed chemist had already rolled up his overalls in a neat little bundle, and now he shook it at Mr. Grouge. "We wouldn't work for you, anyhow!" he declared on behalf of the entire glee club. "Blackie, let's tell him what we think of him."

"That's right, Dicky," agreed Blackie. "Now all together! One! Two! Three! Ready! Warble!"

With the leathern lungs of youth the six chemists, and the director of the saxophone band, rolled out the Cinder Heap yell. They listened for an instant.

"Hee-haw!" finished the strident voice of faithful Percival.

CHAPTER XXI

A NOISE LIKE MONEY

"**A**NYTHING else, boss?" asked the boy, as he flopped open the clasps of Wallingford's suit case and struggled with the intricate fastenings of Blackie Daw's oxford.

Wallingford paused in the operation of shaking out his pajamas, took a critical survey of the big double-bedded apartment, inspected the parlor and walked to the door of the bathroom.

"Well, hardly anything, George," he replied. "Just bring us two extra pillows, and some bath-towels, and some coat-hangers, and two fresh bulbs for these burnt-out lights, and some stationery, and six assorted sandwiches, some ice-water, a bottle of Vichy, and two large, strong, double drinks of red liquor."

The "boy," a particularly black-faced and white-toothed one, stopped at his eighth finger and held it while he grinned cheerfully at his two profitable-looking guests. "You'll have to hush right there," he chuckled. "There's a padlock on that red liquor." Wallingford, calculating the drawer-space, turned

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to Blackie, who was examining his saxophone for possible dents. "No wonder we thought the town looked dead," he observed. "It's dry."

"Well, no, boss, it ain't exactly dry," denied the boy, rubbing his broad nose reflectively with his thumb, though still holding his eighth finger; "but it's kind o' petrified. You can drink if you eat. You don't want to stay up late though, 'cause when eleven o'clock goes 'boom' the barroom door goes 'click,' " and he finished with a high falsetto laugh of one syllable.

"I can finish that," decided Blackie Daw. "Tomorrow morning's train goes like this," and he made his saxophone go "toot! toot!"

Only the dignity of his position and the fear of losing his clasp on that eighth finger kept the Alabama boy from rolling on the floor. "That's what they all says," he laughed. "Everybody goes away from this town next mornin'. Some awful nice gentlemen comes to this hotel, but they only says, 'Howdy-do, Jeff, good-by.' "

Blackie studied his jovial countenance reflectively, and slipped a dollar into his hand. "I guess you could get us some Irish tea or something, couldn't you?"

The boy slid the dollar from his palm to the table. "If that there nice, big, iron dollar is jes' for Jeff, you all can say 'Good-by, buck,' to it, but if it's for

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gettin' you-all some corn-juice in a teacup, I'll have to say 'Good-by, buck.'"

"Good-by, buck," grinned Blackie, and waved farewell to the coin.

"Howdy, dollah!" shouted Jeff, and the money disappeared from the table. "Now I'm goana move fast for you gentlemen," and still gripping the number-eight finger he jiggled out of the room.

Blackie drew a particularly dismal strain from his saxophone. Wallingford, thoughtfully arranging his linen in the big chiffonier, turned on him with sudden impatience.

"If you must make a noise, I wish you'd learn to play a phonograph or a Swiss music-box," he objected. "That big calabash of yours always makes me feel guilty."

"That's because you have no soul for divine harmony," calmly explained Blackie, pausing to finger a loose valve. "That beautiful selection was the heavy part of Gounod's *Funeral March*, and I'm playing it in celebration of our prospects in this dead town."

"You're too quick with the sad rites," remonstrated Wallingford, sitting down with a fancy waistcoat on his lap. "This used to be considered a live town, and I know there's money here. I got that on the way up from the depot. The buildings are heavy and substantial. The shop-windows are

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bright and clean. There's a twenty-five-thousand-dollar bronze fountain in the little park out there. This hotel was furnished regardless of expense. The men are plump. They don't smile, but they wear good clothes and heavy watch-fobs. This town isn't dead; it's just sick."

"Maybe a bleeding will do it good, then," hopefully opined Blackie.

"I think it will," judged Wallingford, rising to hang up his waistcoat. "The only thing that troubles me is that I don't see any place to insert a lancet. You couldn't start a quick-action stunt of any kind in a town where all the electric signs are dark at eleven o'clock."

"That's what I said," insisted Blackie. "We'd better look at a time-table."

"I can't leave money," argued J. Rufus.

Jeff came in with two pillows, a pitcher of ice-water, and a box of matches. "I plumb forgot everything but number one and number seven," he cheerfully explained, putting the pillows on the beds, and the ice-water and the matches on the table, so that his fingers were free for counting. "Number nine was the liquor, and my sympathies was aroused so much for number nine that I fussed up the rest of your order. Was these matches number five?"

"Number ten, Jeff," chuckled Wallingford. "I'll write the rest of the order for you."

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"I got a pretty good memory, if I don't get fussed," stated Jeff in his own defense. "Say, boss, there's one of the niggers down-stairs has got a little pet bottle of gin in his pocket. Shall I jes' kind o' pester around till he goes to sleep in his chair?"

"No, thanks," laughed Wallingford. "Jeff, what's the matter with this town?"

"Well, boss," hesitated Jeff, with his thumb against his nose, "the women started votin' jes' last year, and since then the town's done flatted out like a johnny-cake where the batter was too thin. They put crape on the doors of all the saloons, started noon-day prayer-meetings in the place where used to be a mighty prosperous dance-hall and beer-café. Now everybody goes to Chicago to get soused."

"Poor town," commiserated Blackie. "No wonder its pulse is low."

"Where do the best business men go for lunch?" inquired Wallingford of the clerk, who was a grim-lipped young man with his hair parted flat.

The clerk satisfied himself about Wallingford before he answered. "I think they bring it in a pail," he said dryly. "They used to patronize our grill-room, before the bar was a butler's pantry; but if you'd like to see a business man eat, Mr. Sattler lunches down there, in the sunny corner, at twelve thirty."

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"Who's Mr. Sattler?" asked Wallingford with courteous interest.

"He's a regular man, and he walks this hotel," replied the dismal clerk, dipping a pen in the ink-well, from force of habit, and laying it down again. "He used to run it."

"The town doesn't seem very lively," suggested Wallingford. "There's money here, too, isn't there?"

"Plenty; but it has the sleeping sickness," returned the clerk, seemingly relieved to speak his mind. "We used to have traveling men change their routes a hundred miles to Sunday here; but now they tend to business."

"Tough luck," sympathized Wallingford. "You have a good hotel."

"The best in the Middle West," earnestly responded the clerk. "Would you like to buy it?"

"Not till the women are tired of voting," chuckled Wallingford. "Is it for sale?"

"You can buy any business in the town," said the clerk, with a trace of savageness. "This place is on the blink. I wouldn't have it as a Christmas gift. If this town were to be put up at auction—"

"Oh, Al," called a quiet voice, and turning, Wallingford saw in the door of the glass-caged office a well-poised man with a good brow and a square-trimmed brown beard.

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"Pardon me," begged Al, and walked over to the brown-bearded man.

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way," protested the quiet-voiced man in a low tone. "It doesn't help business any. I heard you clear over the partition."

"He hit me too hard, Sattler," protested the depressed clerk. "He asked me where the best business men went for lunch."

Mr. Sattler smiled slightly, and gave Wallingford a critical inspection. He saw before him a huge, pink-faced, stubby-mustached man with jovial eyes, a four-carat diamond in his cravat, and a general appearance of being a ton of money out for an airing.

"The town is rather quiet just now," he advised his guest. "The business men, however, are usually to be found at the Mercantile Club at this hour. I'd be very glad to take you over, if you care to go."

"There's no one in particular I wished to see," responded Wallingford, gaging his man with narrowed eyes, and adjusting his language to his audience. "I've been driving about all morning and now I wish to study your business men in a body, so that I can tell how long to stay."

"That's an interesting reason," returned the hotel proprietor, leaning comfortably against the desk. "I don't know of many businesses that are conducted on that basis."

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"There aren't," admitted Wallingford with a chuckle. "I'm almost alone in my profession. I'm a municipal nerve-specialist."

Money had been spent on the furnishing of the Mercantile Club. In the main dining-room were marble pilasters, and rather well-executed frescoes, and expensive chandeliers; but the tables were cheerlessly vacant, except for a very long one at the end of the room, where a small number of the faithful were gathered in a brave determination to keep up their spirits. To this table, which had still some dozen of covers vacant, Mr. Sattler took his guest.

"Gentlemen, this is Mr. Wallingford, of New York City," introduced Mr. Sattler, as he drew out a chair for J. Rufus, and he named each of the members in turn. Each man rose and bowed gravely, and sat down, and concerted on Wallingford a disconcerting gaze.

"Mr. Wallingford is a municipal nerve-specialist," explained Mr. Sattler.

The man at the head of the table, a bloodless funereal fellow, with hard lines of business care all over his thin and sallow countenance, rose again and bowed profoundly. "He looks the part," he dryly stated, and everybody smiled in friendly fashion.

"That's Henry Diggins, our leading practical joker," remarked Mr. Sattler, *sotto voce*.

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"Welcome to our city," conventionally observed an oily-faced man, who had built a big coal consolidation, and kept it moving.

"Speech!" demanded a long-eared young man with a turned-up nose and a perpetual appearance of enjoying a secret joke on some one.

"Speech," echoed the company.

Wallingford, not at all averse to the opportunity, rose to comply.

"Not yet," Mr. Diggins severely stopped him.

"The rule of the club is no speeches before coffee."

"I think Mr. Sattler introduced you as a municipal nerve-specialist?" remarked the man with the big ears. "In what line, may I ask?"

"In the larger sense," returned Wallingford promptly, his entire course of action having come to a head as he studied these men. "I'll be perfectly frank with you, gentlemen. I came here on business, and I think you need me. Your city requires a social awakening. Your ladies are not elaborately enough gowned for the dry-goods stores to make money, and this means that their opportunities for publicly outdressing one another are insufficient."

Mr. Diggins pounded with his gavel for silence. "All in favor of suspending the coffee rule say 'aye,'" he proposed.

"Aye!" chimed the chorus. Everybody was laughing appreciatively.

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"Mr. Wallingford has the floor," announced the preternaturally grave Mr. Diggins. "As long as he will deliver such superb common sense as that, he may speak between bites, and smoke between courses, and drink between applause. I run a dry-goods store."

"Let me give you the big shock first," went on Wallingford. "I want to organize a million-dollar company for the promotion of extravagance, and I won't put up a cent. On the contrary, I expect one-fourth of the stock for my services in organization and direction."

The oily-faced man looked at him with a certain amount of coldness. "I guess the speech is over," he dryly observed.

"Order," demanded Chairman Diggins. "I'm interested in knowing what we get."

"If I'd tell you the whole scheme right now, you might carry it through yourselves and leave me out," chuckled Wallingford, making a mental memorandum of the oily-faced man and his attitude. "The leading thought of what I have in mind, however, is this: Frivolity encourages extravagance. Frivolity, therefore, is the backbone of commerce. Now, frivolity begins and ends with eating and drinking. You need some elaborate eating- and drinking-places."

"Friend Sattler has a good one, and he's doing

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no business," objected the president of the First National Bank, who was a well-dressed slender man, and looked entirely like a human being.

"Friend Sattler is a follower of a dying sport," smiled Wallingford. "If he had about six live competitors he'd do more business, both local and transient."

Mr. Sattler was so earnest in his reply that he stood up to make it. "That's sadly true," he acknowledged. "I can remember when I used to see the most of you in my dining-room, both before and after the theater, once or twice a week."

"You won't sell us anything to drink, Charley," objected a wavy-haired man, whose glasses could not conceal the twinkle of his eyes.

"Not after eleven," responded Mr. Sattler quietly. "The very ladies who used, with perfect propriety, to enjoy an occasional glass of champagne at my place, were at the head of the movement to suppress joy. Now, I understand, they take you for an occasional week or so of shopping in Chicago—and Chicago sends us no money in return."

"This is a heart-warming occasion," approved the leading dry-goods merchant. "Every time a good customer of mine goes to Chicago, I lose at least five hundred dollars. Sit down, Charley Sattler. Go ahead with your answer, Mr. Wallingford."

"I propose to put a punch into your public life,"

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resumed J. Rufus. "I propose that the million-dollar company I mentioned shall finance a French café, an Italian restaurant, a Japanese tea-house, a Chinese chop-suey place, a roof-garden, a Viennese kitchen, an English grill-room, an American lobster-palace and any other variety of eating-house that may be decorated with pink lights, enlivened with music and made to lure your rapidly aging people from their dismal firesides. We'll make some of them simple and some of them fussy, and you'll see the effect at once. Your ladies will dress better, your taxicabs will go faster and your stagnant financial circulation will take on a new activity. You have the money here; you look healthy; you'd appreciate a good time. I wouldn't open the doors until 11 A. M., and I wouldn't close them until daylight. I'd—"

"Out of order," interrupted Mr. Diggins. "The big dynamo at the electric-light plant stops work at 11 P. M."

"I know," laughed Wallingford. "Black Jeff, at friend Sattler's place, put it even better—'When eleven o'clock goes "boom" the barroom door goes "click." I expect to break up this condition."

He saw no hope in the faces about him. There was almost a groan in response.

"How?" inquired the president of the First National almost eagerly.

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"Make the ladies do it," chuckled Wallingford. "Lead them all up to a dazzling good time on opening night. Let the affair be brilliant, let there be enough wine to exhilarate decorously, let the lights be burning brightly and the hum of happy voices fill the festive hall—then, at eleven o'clock, suddenly stop the music."

Mad enthusiasm greeted that clever plan, and amid the hearty applause, one strong-lunged singer started the club ode.

Wallingford, much worried, at midnight went down to the desk, where he found a spruce-looking night clerk, who, though intended by nature to be of a happy disposition, was as gloomy as the day clerk had been.

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Daw?" inquired J. Rufus.

For a moment a flash appeared in the eyes of the gloomy-looking night clerk, and then he quite carelessly answered, "He was around here earlier in the evening, but I haven't seen him for a couple of hours."

"I was a trifle worried about him," confided Wallingford much relieved. "I haven't laid eyes on him since morning. He's with me in sixty-one and sixty-two, you know."

"Oh, you're his room-mate?" responded the clerk

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with an instant change of manner, and he smiled most cordially. "I can send you right to him. Front!" and he whanged a bell. He leaned over the desk, as a tall, thin, shuffle-jointed negro with a shiny head came over to him. "Show this gentleman down to the cave," he directed in a half whisper. "It's Mr. Wallingford."

"Yassah," returned the boy, grinning broadly. "We all knows Mr. Wallingford and Mr. Daw. Yassah."

He beckoned with a mysterious finger, and led Wallingford down-stairs, past the barber-shop, down another flight of stairs, and through a long dark corridor to a big oak door, behind which, as they approached could be heard a sliding minor chord, in four or five more or less loosely attuned voices. The sound stopped abruptly at the knock on the door, which, a moment later, was opened by no less a person than the proprietor himself.

"Why, hello, Sattler," greeted J. Rufus. "I wondered why you weren't at to-night's organization meeting."

"Come in, Wallingford," invited Mr. Sattler, who was beaming with enjoyment. "I found your friend Daw this evening, and he's the most irresistibly persuasive rowdy in the world. He's made me open the cave, for the first time in a year."

Stepping into the low, heavily beamed oak room,

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Wallingford found Blackie at the head of a long table, surrounded by three athletic-looking young men. A little farther away was a red-whiskered man, whose visible features bore an expression of almost infantile happiness, and with him was a fat man. In front of these gentlemen was an enormous glass pitcher, filled with a golden liquid that was liberally decorated with oranges and cherries and pineapple and cucumber rind and mint. Behind this cheerful group, with not less than twenty white teeth glistening, was Jeff.

"Hee-hyeh!" laughed Jeff in a high falsetto.

"Lock the door, Charley," Blackie ordered the proprietor. "The party is now complete. Jim Wallingford, shake hands with my friend Billy Hassan, the chief of police. He's the one with the whiskers. The fat sport is Bob Tills, the manager of the Grand Opera House. These other scouts are advance members of the United Brotherhood of Crows. Everybody shake."

The young giant with his arm draped loosely around Blackie's neck, rose to his full humorous height to shake hands. "Brother Wallingford," said he in a bass voice so deep that it rattled the loose slivers in the ceiling-beams, "do you harmonize?"

"I'm sorry to say I don't," reluctantly confessed Wallingford.

"Then sit with the audience," directed the tall

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Crow. "Jeff, juggle the gentleman a jorum. Daw, give us the key."

"Ting!" intoned Blackie striking his forefinger on the edge of table, and holding it critically to his ear; then the old oaken bucket began to hang in the well, in all the minor chords known to amateur quartets, the four transported musicians holding their heads closely together, and "harmonizing" with every appearance of solemn ecstasy.

"I'd pay heavy salaries, and give free accommodations, to have a regiment like your friend Daw stay in this town for about a month," declared Mr. Sattler to Wallingford, leaning back in his comfortable armchair, in huge content.

"If there's a live wire in town Blackie finds him," replied Wallingford, eying the leader of the quartet with amused proprietorship. "Where did he pick up his friends?"

"They just naturally found one another," laughed Sattler. "The boys there came to engage quarters for the convention of Crows, which meets here three weeks from Saturday night. Mr. Hassan has promised to go out of the city on that day."

"I've decided to shave off my whiskers and stay," grinned the chief of police. "I've agreed to unlock the city for the occasion, and tie the key to a rabbit."

"It will be some day, and also some night, believe

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me," declared the manager of the Grand Opera House. "The boys picked their date by looking over my list of attractions, and they landed on the one-night stand of the big *Herald Square Girl Show*; sixty of the freshest chorus beauties of New York."

"A two weeks' joy-ride," chuckled Wallingford. "The speculators already have the seats."

"All but the family box," acknowledged Tills. "The papers are even now calling me a robber, but they do that every spring; and I get the money."

When the party had reluctantly broken up, at three o'clock in the morning, Blackie remembered to ask where Wallingford had been all day.

"Working," replied J. Rufus with a trace of reproof in his tone. "We can't both of us spend our time harmonizing."

"That's why I'm so glad to have you along, Jim," responded Blackie cheerfully, humming away at a second-tenor minor of *Old Black Joe*. "I realize that somebody has to work. What have you been doing to earn our living?"

"Scaring up a legitimate game," boasted Wallingford virtuously. "I started a great big scheme to-day that will make us a quarter of a million dollars, and he worth every cent of it to the town."

Blackie stopped the leisurely operation of untying his cravat and turned on Wallingford a face full of concern. "Touch wood," he advised. "Jim, I

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did want to stick around here for the convention of my favorite brotherhood, but I'm willing now to take the morning train."

"Why, what's the matter?" remonstrated Wallingford.

"I'm scared stiff," stated Blackie. "Any time you say you're going into a legitimate game, I look for us to be pinched."

CHAPTER XXII

GETTING IT STRAIGHT

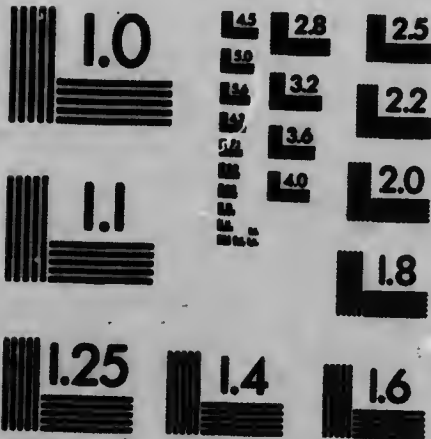
THE City Progress Investment Association, under the energetic influence of J. Rufus Wallingford, subscribed its total stock, and took options on desirable property, and filled the newspapers with columns of live matter, and bought up the effects of three defunct cafés, and obtained a good dramatic stock company and a good musical stock company, and furnished up the old Palace Music Hall for a three-story rathskeller and roof-garden café, and got its charter, and met for a final organization. In the midst of the latter proceedings, the oily-faced man, whose name was Carter Kacker, rose to his feet as placidly as if he were about to ask the time of day, cast a fish-like eye on Wallingford and observed:

"Mr. Chairman, by verbal agreement, we're bound to give Mr. Wallingford the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of stock for which he has subscribed in payment for his services of suggestion, organization and inauguration. I move that this stock be given to Mr. Wallingford, as agreed, but that it be put in escrow until such time as all



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our scheduled enterprises are under way and our stock has paid a dividend."

Wallingford, full of happy content, had been about to light a fat black cigar, but he allowed the match to burn his fingers. This had been a pleasant apartment. It was later to be the tea-room, and some of the wistaria vines were already hung. Every stockholder had been Wallingford's cheerful friend, but the purple-gauze wistaria blossoms suddenly grew gray.

"In escrow!" exclaimed J. Rufus, and sucked his blister.

"Second the motion!" impulsively remarked the large-eared young man who perpetually looked as if he had a secret joke on some one.

"Why, look here!" remonstrated Wallingford, rising heavily to his feet.

"Order," demanded President Diggins, and he put the motion. "Now, Mr. Wallingford."

Mr. Wallingford seized eloquent advantage of that invitation. He protested by the high heavens, and the low heavens and the middle heavens, that they were muzzling the ox which trod the corn; that their town would have stayed in stagnation until the health officers ordered it removed, had he not come along; that the motion was the result of some personal animus, which he could not fathom. He expanded his broad white waistcoat. He pointed with

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pride to his already remarkable achievement. He called on President Diggins to testify that never in the history of his establishment, had that enterprising dry-goods merchant sold so many evening gowns, and fluffy accessories for the same as for the anticipated opening of the Café Palatial. He called on the butcher, the grocer, the shoe-dealer, the tailor and the secretary of the electric light company, to prove that there had been a quickening in every line of commerce, and he demanded of Carter Kacker to know why he had made this offensive and restrictive motion.

"Do you insist on knowing?" inquired Mr. Kacker hotly, jumping to his feet.

"I certainly do!" roared the apprehensive Wallingford, whose moral courage, however, was greater even than his physical cowardice.

"Then I'll tell you," retorted Mr. Kacker. "I've had your record looked up, and you're a crook."

"Order!" rapped President Diggins.

"He doesn't dare deny it," asserted Kacker.

"I'll not permit him to do so on the floor of this meeting," declared the president, pounding the table for emphasis. "I take that ground because I refuse to consider that the assertion has been made, and the secretary is hereby ordered to take no note of it in his minutes. The problem is not pertinent to our purposes. Mr. Wallingford has done here what

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none of us has been able to do for ourselves, and I warn the members that there is to be no more unparliamentary language. An apology from Mr. Kacker will restore us to a decent consideration of things."

Mr. Kacker, who had built up a big business by being able to take back a few things, immediately apologized to the meeting and to Wallingford, and went right on with his argument. "I wish to say, in support of my motion," he urged, "that it is only a reasonable and normal precaution. If the stock is put in escrow, Mr. Wallingford may vote it, and it will be his, except that he can not sell it so long as we have need of his services. I don't propose to have him sell out and leave this city as soon as the prospects look good. It is only," and here he smiled with satirical suavity; "it is only a device to retain, as one of our leading citizens, so valuable an organizer."

The debate waged fast and furious for thirty minutes, but at the end of that time, Wallingford, dripping with perspiration, realized that he had never wasted so much good two-lunged eloquence in his life. Kacker had evidently obtained an effective letter or two, and had quietly shown them about before the meeting; for J. Rufus was the only stockholder who spoke against the motion, and he was the only one who voted against it.

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He went to the hotel with indignation and indignation, and his heated state of mind was in no wise cooled by finding Blackie at work on a most mournful saxophone solo.

"For the love of Mike, can that brass pipe!" he yelled. "You'll drive me to murder with that thing!"

"What's the matter, Jimmy?" inquired Blackie blandly, turning over a page of music, and fingering the top bar experimentally while he talked. "Did you find a plugged nickel in your change?"

"I found a plug in the whole works!" snapped Wallingford. "Blackie, the only way I can get our quarter of a million is to stay in this morgue town about three years; and *work!*"

"Well, it has a perfect climate in pleasant weather," grinned Blackie. "Jimmy, you've hurt my pride in you. How did they hand it to such a cunning little financier?"

"Put our bonus stock in escrow until the whole schedule is on a dividend-paying basis," and Wallingford bit off the end of his cigar so viciously that he pulled the middle out of it.

"In escrow!" repeated Blackie. "Great Scott, that sounds rotten, Jim. What is it?"

With much heat and vigor, Wallingford explained, and when Blackie thoroughly understood it he played a page of the most doleful music ever set to notes.

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"Didn't I tell you?" he finally claimed. "Didn't I tell you there was trouble ahead every time you tried a legitimate stunt? Now you'll hit on some crooked way out of it, and drag me into disgrace! Let me get this straight. Is the money up?"

"There's seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars in the treasury; all regular cash."

"And to get yours you have to make good?"

"That's the only answer."

"Poor Jim!" sympathized Blackie. "Suppose they stopped you from making good, could you hold them to anything?"

"Oh, order a drink," requested Wallingford wearily. "You talk like a bicycle-pump."

He spent the rest of that evening in profound and gloomy cogitation, and at eleven o'clock, Blackie, disgusted with life in general, left him to his heavy thought, and went to bed.

At one, Wallingford, his vexing problem still unsolved, himself retired.

At three, he dreamed he was in a planing-mill, and woke up to find the big end of Blackie's saxophone at his ear, and Blackie, in blue pajamas, bending over him interestedly with his cheeks puffed out.

"Here's your idea, Jim!" exulted Blackie. "Hurry up your opening night of the Palatial about

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a week, and start it on Saturday night when the *Herald Square Girl Show* is here."

Wallingford sat up in bed, and rubbed his eyes.

"What good will that do?" he wanted to know.

"Leave it to your Uncle Horace!" grinned Blackie, and went back to bed.

Even the Women's Civic League gave its cheerful consent to have the eleven-o'clock-closing law shifted to twelve on the night of the opening of the splendid new Café Palatial; yet not even those ladies had imagined that twelve o'clock could come so soon; right in the very beginning of things, as it were. It had been such a thoroughly enjoyable evening, too. The big white-and-gold room had been thronged at dinner, the famous Herald Square organization had given an unusually sparkling performance, and now the cabaret supper-show was just beginning to add its delightful climax to the gayest night in the history of the staid old town. Every table had been engaged days in advance, and every woman, by midnight, was beginning to be friendly with her new gown.

At eleven thirty, the girls of the famous beauty chorus had added their touch of vivacity to the scene. The place had seemed rather empty before, with all those alternate tables vacant, but when this throng

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of gaily chattering, handsomely gowned young women entered, accompanied by particularly live-looking men, who of course were all strangers, the place took on an instantaneous snap. Really, the girls were not vicious-looking at all, and they were quite decorously behaved; even well mannered, which was astonishing. Wasn't it jolly, and a trace deliciously wicked, too, to mingle with these interesting pariahs, and to study them at such close range? Besides, their gowns were so well worth inspection. They were an advance hint of what the home ladies themselves might probably be wearing, in a much modified form, a year later.

Suddenly the music stopped, and every fourth electric bulb went out! A hum of dismay arose! What was the matter! Manager Wallingford, frantically appealed to from a score of tables nearest him, smilingly explained that it was twelve o'clock.

"It's the way of the world," he told the charming Mrs. Seymour Gadson, who was the president of the Women's Civic League. "Sometimes the drinks keep on after the music stops, but the music never keeps on after the drinks stop."

"But we've only just begun our suppers," prettily pouted Mrs. Gadson. "At least we will be served with the refreshments that were ordered before twelve."

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"Not alcoholic refreshments, I am afraid," replied Wallingford with a smile. "I don't want the Women's Civic League to close us up."

"You may rest perfectly secure about that," laughed Mrs. Gadson. "I happen to be the president of the League, and I am willing to wager that every member who is present would sign a petition to have you break the law to-night. Oh! what's that big black crow?"

"That's a grotesque dancing number we'd arranged in honor of the Crows' convention, which opens here to-day," Wallingford explained. "We had prepared several novel cabaret features, but they will be rather flat without music. The café ordinance, you know, forbids music after eleven o'clock, where drinks are sold."

"Oh, that was never intended to apply to a respectable place like this!" worried Mrs. Gadson.

"Why, Mr. Wallingford, the musicians are putting their instruments in their cases! Don't let them!"

"I can't stop them," regretted Wallingford. "The chief of police is entertaining his friends here to-night, and I saw him with his watch in his hand at two minutes to twelve."

"Is Mr. Hassan here?" eagerly asked Mrs. Gadson, half rising. "Why, we elected him! Just have him come over, Mr. Wallingford, and I'll tell him it's all right."

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"I'll see what I can do," promised Wallingford, who had kept himself in reach of the more prominent members of the Women's Civic League expressly for this purpose.

Two minutes later, he led Mr. Hassan to the center of the little dancing space.

"I have taken the police department into custody," Mr. Wallingford explained to the guests of the Café Palatial, and he chuckled as he saw the dismal-looking faces of the Broadway beauties begin to lose their disfiguring gloom.

There was a cheer at the announcement, and a volley of rapid-fire hazing from the men who knew the chief of police. Wallingford had to raise his hand for silence.

"Mr. Hassan does not wish to be cruel, and, in fact, he's not ready to go home himself," Wallingford laughingly went on. "He quite properly declines, however, to bear all the responsibility of lifting the lid, for even this pleasant occasion. He's afraid of the League."

"I'll just put it to a vote," awkwardly announced Mr. Hassan, who was not much of a speech-maker. "If the ladies won't raise any trouble afterward, I won't now. All the ladies of the Women's Civic League who are in favor of forgetting the closing ordinance will please say 'aye,'" and he held to his red whiskers.

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It was astonishing what a vociferous response came to the proposition. Every member of the *Herald Square Company's* chorus voted heartily in the affirmative, and there was even a heavy bass note in the overwhelming majority.

"Contrary 'no,'" requested the grinning chief of police.

Only a joyous laugh greeted that absurd suggestion. The pretty bright lights flashed up, and the smiling musicians took their instruments from their cases, the big human crowd pranced down into the dancing space, and the hum of conversation went up three tones in the musical scale and four in volume!

What a happy, happy time that was! Scores of most estimable ladies and gentlemen wondered how they could have been so long dead, and some of them, quite innocently imbibing more champagne than they were used to drinking, laughed quite naturally.

One clever entertainer after another followed in quick succession. Everywhere were sparkling eyes, smiling lips and very rosy cheeks. Waiters were bustling in every direction, and a popping of corks sounded like a fusillade of firecrackers.

At one thirty, the professional entertainers had begun to pall, and, watching carefully for that moment, Manager Wallingford gave a signal to the

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conductor of the orchestra, and the exhilarating strains of the drinking-song from that night's *Pinky-Punk* burlesque smote upon the air. It was irresistible! Not only the sixty chorus-girls, but everybody who could sing, or thought they could, grasped eagerly at the opportunity, and at the finish the applause lasted for five minutes. They had two encores of that song, between which Wallingford sent over hastily for all the wine in Sattler's cellars.

The equally catchy marching-song followed. Everybody was in the mood now, and about forty of the Crows stood up to sing. From the rear corner of the dining-room appeared a tall slender gentleman with a dark mustache, who had obtained from the property man of the *Herald Square Show* a gaudy dunce-cap, and a Pierrot collar, and a six-foot gold-headed white cane decked with gay ribbons. Just behind him came the giant Crow, the fellow with the subway voice, and he had his hands on Blackie Daw's shoulders. Both gentlemen were singing at the top of their capacity. The giant Crow's shoulders were embellished by two white hands, which belonged to one of the tallest ladies of the chorus. The string was forty persons long before it had proceeded half-way down the center aisle, and the conductor of the orchestra took a firmer grip on his baton, foreseeing that he would be compelled to

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play that marching-song for at least twenty-five minutes.

Around and around the big rathskeller swayed the ever-lengthening serpentine procession of happy singers, while the waiters seized the occasion to clear the tables and open the fresh bottles that had been ordered. As the tail of the procession passed the Gadson table, Mrs. Gadson, who was a live member when she was started, pulled her husband up by the sleeve, and fell in behind him. Mr. Plummit followed suit, but it was his wife's pretty cousin from Chicago who put her hands on his shoulders. Mrs. Plummit, though politely smiling, remained in her seat with her sister Jennie, as did some few of the other ladies of the Women's Civic League. There were not many, however; not nearly enough to cast any cloud upon the merry scene. In fact, most of them only held to their seats through sheer force of will—and through fortunate remembrance!

Exhausted, happy and thirsty, the marchers returned to their seats and grasped clean glasses. The conductor of the orchestra held a pleasant little confab with the musical conductor of the show and gave him the baton. The conductor of the show made a smiling little speech to the smiling players and distributed some music to them.

Oh, everybody was having a good time! The sea

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of faces became more and more rosy, and eyes which had only sparkled, now began to glisten. The laughter, especially that of the ladies of the chorus, became more and more care free. Mrs. Somerland and her husband, who had been sitting at Mr. Sattler's table, up quite near the front of things, went home. It was noticed that Mrs. Somerland's hat was tilting, and her husband held her firmly by the arm. The orchestra began some seductively wild music, which no one remembered from the show. The ladies of the chorus clapped their hands enthusiastically.

"That's you, Gertie!" they cried.

Gertie obliged. She was a slender, beautifully molded slip of a girl with a face like an angel. The giant Crow placed a table for her in the center of the dancing space, and swung her on it. The modest-looking Gertie gave a performance which every one had to admit was highly artistic, though thoroughly Parisian! Mrs. Plummit and her sister Jennie took Mr. Plummit and went home, but Mrs. Plummit's pretty cousin from Chicago remained with the Gadsons.

At four o'clock in the morning, even the most liberal-minded of the local ladies suddenly awoke to a realization of the fact that this was no place for them! They were helped to this conclusion by the startling spectacle of the always conspicuously se-

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date Mrs. Pew, who insisted on singing a solo, and was only removed from the place by coercion. Even Mrs. Gadson, clear-eyed as ever and as clear-headed as her experienced husband, hastily effaced her party from the scene, reminding Mrs. Plummit's pretty cousin to remember that they had left early in the evening.

While the church-bells were ringing on the peaceful Sabbath morning, clusters of *Girl Show* beauties, crowded into taxis and touring cars, were enjoying the fresh air.

"So I move you, gentlemen, that the City Progress Investment Association suspend its operations and surrender its charter," concluded the oily-faced Carter Kacker, after a very sober speech of some length. Mrs. Kacker had been one of those to stay late, and encounter remorse.

"I second the motion," spoke the doleful voice of the large-eared young man, who looked as if he had at last found out whom that long-enjoyed secret joke was on, and was not pleased with the discovery.

The stockholders of the City Progress Investment Association, a particularly sad and unsmiling lot, were about to pass that resolution listlessly and without discussion, when J. Rufus Wallingford arose. He alone, of all that gathering, was able to smile; and he did so.

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"I wish to propose an amendment," he stated. "You will, of course, recognize that this action on your part prevents my fulfilling my contract with you, which I am ready to continue and to which I have been faithful. The money now in our treasury, amounting to about seven hundred thousand dollars, will naturally, and without specific resolution, be divided pro rata among the stockholders." He paused and glanced at Carter Kacker.

That gentleman opened his mouth and half rose, but thought better of it and sat down, still staring blankly at Wallingford.

"As I wish to leave the city at once, I would request the stockholders to pass an amendment that I be given a treasurer's check for the one-fourth of the money now in the treasury, such division being called for by my twenty-five per cent. of the stock in this corporation."

Mr. Carter Kacker jumped to his feet, and swung his arms. "I ask you gentlemen to remember the assertion I once made in this very room!" he shouted, "This man Wallingford is a—"

The gavel of President Diggins beat a loud and violent tattoo on the table. "The gentleman is out of order," he declared. "Is there a second to this amendment?" Then he added somberly, "We may as well pass it."

Wallingford was quietly exhibiting a City Prog-

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ress Investment Association check for one hundred and eighty-seven thousand five hundred dollars to the pleased Blackie Daw, in the anteroom after the meeting, when Carter Kacker came fuming up to him.

"Now, you grafter, I can tell you what I think of you!" he began, his eyes blazing and his fists clenched.

"Wait just a minute," requested Blackie Daw, stepping in between them, and holding up his hand commandingly. "Jim, you've done nearly all the work on this job. May I take it up from here on?"

"What do you want to do?" inquired Wallingford, glancing across Blackie at the impatiently waiting Kacker.

"Paste this big slob," returned Blackie—and he did.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN AMERICAN JOKE

"I GUESS I'm a boob," confessed Violet Bonnie Daw with a sigh. "I think this lavender scream will look well on me just because that plump blonde's so dolly in it."

"You're a simp for not knowing what a peach you are," declared Blackie loyally. "When you put on this crushed eggplant display you'll make Gladys there look like orphan Maggie out in the cold."

"You're the swellest husband I ever had," acknowledged Violet Bonnie, and punched his foot with her parasol, by way of affectionate emphasis. "Just the same, your little gumdrop is hep to herself. She's getting fat. Girlie, bring it here, please."

The plump blond model, whose specialty was fooling fat ladies, swanned across the floor of the pink-and-gray salon to Violet Bonnie's chair with the cold blank expression of a perfect lady. As Monsieur Perigord danced into the room, with his perpetual air of having almost remembered something urgent, Violet Bonnie picked up the hem of the imported creation.

"You didn't borrow this for the French models' ball, did you?" she suggested.

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"No, madame," replied the girl, with one corner of her eye on Monsieur Perigord.

Violet Bonnie noted that glance of apprehension. "Anyhow, this gown has been worn," she declared.

Monsieur Perigord, who was a dark little man with black freckles and a kinky beard, was shocked to the very center of his being. "Impossible, madame!" he cried, both hands aloft. "The house of Mondeaux does not permit it! The costume is new, it is exclusive, it is delicious! With madame's exquisite color the effect is magnificent!"

"My color is a cinch," commented Violet Bonnie; "I can change that any time. But it looks to me as if this gown had paraded an ocean-view piazza or so."

The distress of Monsieur Perigord was painful to observe. "Ah, madame!" he piteously implored, "you do not know the house of Mondeaux! Americans always think first of clever little tricks!"

"That's a knock!" decided Violet Bonnie, turning on him indignant eyes. "Only crooks and lollops get stung in America, and we give medals for that."

Monsieur André Perigord hastened to rectify his mistake. "I am all admiration for Americans!" and he blew into the air a kiss from his five finger-tips. "I adore their clever little tricks! I wish to learn them—all! I, too, would become rich—quick!" He smiled dreamily. "Money—and no questions!"

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Blackie, with a half grin beneath his pointed mustache, was regarding Monsieur Perigord keenly. "You've been reading bad literature," he observed. "There's no money in clever little tricks. Grafting is a sport, not a business."

Perigord smiled wisely. "Four months in New York, and I have four thousand dollars—'on the side'—for André Perigord!" he exulted.

"Somebody'll catch you without your license number," gaged Violet Bonnie shrewdly. "I guess I'm hooked for this lilac splash, Blackie. I like it two hundred and seventy-five dollars' worth."

Violet Bonnie twisted her ankle the day her lavender walking-frock came home, and was kept in the house for five weeks. On her first afternoon out, she made a bee-line for the shopping district and wore her new Mondeaux creation. As she stepped out of her electric, a large lady came up the avenue in a lavender walking-costume which was an exact duplicate of Violet Bonnie's: tan front-and-back panels, black buttons and all!

As she approached the big dry-goods store, she stopped, stunned, in front of the show-window. There, on a lovely wax lady with a bright-toothed smile, was an exquisite lavender walking-suit marked "\$85.00." It had tan front-and-back panels and black buttons! Violet Bonnie looked thoughtfully

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down at her own exclusive importation, and felt her nose beginning to redden. She powdered it savagely, went back to her electric and headed for home.

On upper Seventh Avenue, she saw two plump young women who had expressed their undying friendship for each other by wearing street-dresses exactly alike. They were cheap lavender taffeta with tan panels and black buttons! In a show-window on One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street she saw a lavender dress with tan panels and black buttons! It was made of gingham, and the price was "\$4.98"!

When Violet Bonnnie arrived home she had indigestion, and spent the rest of the afternoon punishing herself with the most severe reduction exercises in her physical-culture book. When Blackie came to dinner, she handed him a pasteboard box!

"If you kid me I'll pour beans in your saxophone!" she warned him. "I was harpooned on that lavender lemon, and I think I'm getting boils!"

Blackie suppressed an explosion with an effort. "Excuse me till I hide my saxophone," he begged. "I take it back!" he hastily added. "That's rotten luck, Vi! How did it happen?"

"The color blinded me," she explained. "However it happened, I want back my two hundred and seventy-five! You take this box down to old Paregoric in the morning and collect!"

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"I'll bring you the money or Perigord's whiskers," promised Blackie confidently.

Monsieur Perigord was most deeply regretful that the beautiful Madame Daw's lavender creation had been so extensively copied. "It is because madame is so striking—so attractive!" he suavely explained. "These clever American manufacturers have their designers everywhere. Regard their little trick! They behold a charming fashionable, like Madame Daw, in a triumph like this exquisite lavender costume. They say: '*Voilà!* We wait no longer! We have found it!' They dash to their workshops. They made a sketch of the design; every button, every thread. Presto! The artistic creation of the house of Mondeaux is in all the shops, on all the streets! It is very sad!"

"So that's the way it's done," mused Blackie. "What do you think of that for pure gall, Jim?"

Jim Wallingford's big shoulders heaved. "It sounds like the explanation for a black eye," he chuckled.

Monsieur Perigord did not quite understand, but he gathered, in some way, that this distressingly big stranger doubted his veracity. "Monsieur does not regard my word!" he complained, quite justly injured.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say he doubts your

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word," gravely disputed Blackie; "he only thinks you lie. Now here's what happened. You rented this dress to these designers. When it was nearly worn out, you raised the price about a hundred bones and sold it to my wife. I'm in a hurry. I'd rather have the cash than the check."

Monsieur Perigord was no longer polite, he was no longer grieved, he was no longer indignant; he was outraged! "I am insulted!" he charged, slapping himself on the breast and stopping to cough. "You insult also the house of Mondeaux! I shall not, however, permit my anger! I shall be kind! I shall explain! Madame Daw has worn the frock five weeks. Do you not see? There has been plenty of time for your clever American manufacturers. Very well!"

Blackie and J. Rufus looked at each other and chuckled.

"Jim, he's a corking good liar," commented Blackie admiringly.

Monsieur Perigord was no longer able to control himself. "It is too much!" he shrieked.

"Oh, hush, Frenchy," advised Blackie kindly. "I've nosed around, and found two firms who get their designs through you; and besides, Mrs. Daw never flashed this dress until yesterday. Give me the money before I get rough."

The change in Monsieur Perigord was slow, but

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it was complete. His rage melted into smiling suavity, in a beautifully graded transition of about one minute. "Monsieur, I shall pay back the money for the frock like an honorable gentleman," he offered.

Wallingford, watching him with heavy-lidded eyes, smiled. "Is this a regular Mondeaux trick?"

"*Mon Dieu*, no!" laughed Perigord. "But the house of Mondeaux is in Paris, and I am here."

"And tossing the bunk both ways," added Blackie; "into your firm and your customers, in one and the same gentle operation."

"One becomes clever in America," boasted Perigord with a self-satisfied smile. "I have learned the little trick to make money. Now I learn the little trick to invest with rapidness. With fifty-four thousand dollars to start—*voilà!*"

"Fifty-four thousand!" responded Blackie in surprise.

Wallingford's head turned suddenly. He took an immediately increased interest in André Perigord. He rose and walked thoughtfully to the window. "Idle capital, at the command of André Perigord!" exulted that student of cleverness.

"Mondeaux bank-balance," chuckled Blackie. "How careless! Well, Perigord, I'm getting thirsty. I don't mind taking a check for that two seventy-

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five, now that I know you have a bank-balance of fifty-four thousand dollars."

Wallingford, at the window, suddenly wheeled and came back looking at his watch. "I'm afraid I can't wait until you settle with Mr. Perigord," he stated.

"What's your hurry, Jim?" protested Blackie. "It won't take long now. When people pass money they part."

"I have to keep my eye on a certain rapid investment," replied Wallingford impressively. "I'll see you to-morrow at the office and settle with you for the next pool. By the way, here's your thousand dollars."

"Oh, give it to a newsboy," laughed Blackie, with a nonchalant wave of the hand.

"I don't care what you do with it," responded Wallingford gravely, producing a big red pocket-book. "My business is to pay you this thousand dollars in return for the hundred and fifty you invested with me yesterday," and into the hands of the astonished Blackie he counted a five-hundred dollar bill and five one-hundreds.

"How much will you invest to-morrow morning?"

At last Blackie got his cue. "The wad," he answered, and started to hand back the money.

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"You know better than that," Wallingford reprovingly reminded him. "A hundred and fifty is the limit in this pool, as I have often told you."

"Can't you let me go in for two hundred?" argued Blackie, suppressing a grin, and getting into the spirit of the unexpected work. "I don't like to play for a piker bet like this."

"Then stay out," retorted Wallingford. "I offered to let you in on a fifty-thousand-dollar pool once, and you failed to meet me at three thirty, so now you take the little pools. Wait a minute," and he consulted a red memorandum-book. "You can only have a hundred to-day."

"All right," agreed Blackie reluctantly. "Here's your hundred," and he handed it over.

"Good day," said Wallingford, taking the money. Monsieur Perigord looked after him in stunned perplexity. "Impossible!" he commented. "He invested a hundred and fifty dollars for you yesterday, and to-day he gives you back a thousand?"

"Yes, confound him," grumbled Blackie. "He's sore at me and won't let me in on his big game."

"Big!" repeated Perigord in astonishment, looking greedily at the money in Blackie's hand. "Do you call this small?"

"It's a tin-horn proposition," scorned Blackie.

"But how does he make it?"

Blackie was afraid to invent the answer to that

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question. "Wallingford won't tell," he half whisperingly confided. "He is one of our most clever Americans. Nobody knows how much money he is worth. Nobody knows how much I am worth."

"And did Mr. Wallingford make you all your money?"

"Every last million dollars," asserted Blackie.

"Ah!" breathed Monsieur Perigord in worship.

"I, also, would become rich—quick! So rich that I also could say of a thousand dollars, 'Give the tin horn to a newsboy.' Monsieur Daw, would you truly give that much money to a newsboy; or was it what you clever Americans call a joke?"

Blackie's eyes widened in astonishment that such a question should be asked. "I'd give it to anybody," he stated, with a flash of inspiration. "Would you like to have it?"

"Nine hundred dollars!" gasped Monsieur Perigord in terror.

"Is it nine hundred? Why, so it is," counted Blackie negligently. "Here, Perigord, take it and buy yourself a dinner," and thrusting the bills into the hands of the dumfounded Perigord, he stalked out of the place.

"I forgot to get my wife's check," explained Blackie the next day, walking into Monsieur Perigord's with a saxophone case in his hand.

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"It is all ready, monsieur," cordially stated the importer, greeting Blackie with the enthusiasm of an old friend. He clasped his hands and bowed profoundly. He delivered the check with a flourish. "It gives me great pleasure to make myself again honorable with Madame Daw."

"She'll appreciate it," grinned Blackie. "Thanks, Perigord. Good day," and he started for the door.

"Pardon, monsieur, one little moment," begged Perigord.

Blackie, expecting that call, turned with slow reluctance. He looked at his watch.

"Your friend, Monsieur Wallingford," insinuated Perigord. "I am consumed with curiosity to know how much he gave you for your hundred dollars of yesterday."

"Oh," returned Blackie with a bored expression. "I don't know yet. As a matter of fact, I hadn't thought of inquiring about it. He probably has only six or eight hundred dollars for me. I'll just let it go."

"Ah, monsieur!" protested Perigord. "Even if it is only a little money like that, to you who are so rich, it should be taken. Perhaps monsieur would like to give it to some friend."

"Very well," agreed Blackie, yawning. "Wallingford's office hours are from three to four. Would you like to go over with me?"

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"I shall be transported!" exclaimed Monsieur Perigord, in a flutter of delight, this being the boon for which he had been eager to ask.

He ran. He brought his silk hat. He brought his gray gloves. He brought his little cane. He brushed his kinky beard. He tripped down the stairs two steps ahead of Blackie Daw. Only when they reached the office did he hang back timidly.

CHAPTER XXIV

CASH, PLEASE

THAT was a brand-new office, in a brand-new skyscraper, and on the door was the legend: "J. Rufus Wallingford. Investments." Monsieur Perigord did not notice that the paint was still fresh, for Wallingford himself had carefully dusted and otherwise aged it. He had spent the morning on the job.

Inside was a small anteroom, in which there sat waiting a totally baldheaded man, and a man with a bushy beard, and a large red-necked man with a mustache, one end of which had been chewed to a tassel. A spider-legged boy, guarding the entrance to the door of the private office, greeted Blackie with a nod, and turned an unfriendly stare on Monsieur Perigord. Beyond the glass partition could be heard the loud and angry voice of that peerless investor, J. Rufus Wallingford!

"No, Mr. Pollet, you can't get on the preferred list," shouted the voice. "You have the gall of a burglar! I let you have a twenty-five-dollar-a-day corner in this little pool practically out of charity. You've made an average of from two to three hun-

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dred dollars a day out of your investment, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," admitted Mr. Pollet. "The lowest you ever made me out of my twenty-five dollars was a hundred. But I want on your larger list. Nearly all your customers are allowed to invest from a hundred to a hundred and fifty dollars a day, and they make from four to six times as much as I do. It isn't fair."

"That settles it!" roared Wallingford, at the limit of his patience. "You get out! Your place on the list is vacant!"

"Please don't say that!" pleaded the frightened Mr. Pollet. "I'm sorry."

"You're too late," sternly returned Wallingford. "Here's your two hundred and seventy-five dollars for to-day."

"Please take my twenty-five dollars," begged Mr. Pollet.

There was the sound of the hasty scraping of a chair. "Your account is closed!" roared Wallingford. "Get out!"

There were other sounds. The door opened suddenly, and out shot a chunky young man who wore thick spectacles. Monsieur Perigord noted that he had money in both hands. He turned in the middle of the anteroom.

"Go on out, you!" ordered the spider-legged boy,

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as J. Rufus Wallingford himself slammed the door of the private office.

Mr. Pollet walked slowly out of the room. The waiting investors looked nervous and apprehensive. A little bell rang sharply. The spider-legged boy darted into Wallingford's room. He bounced out again in a minute.

"W. O. Jones," he announced.

The totally baldheaded man shambled in, casting a jealous look at Monsieur Perigord.

"Hello, Onion Jones," greeted Wallingford suavely. "I have eleven hundred dollars for you. That leaves you a thousand clean profit. Pretty good, eh?"

Perigord's eyes glistened.

"Not the best day we've had, but I'm satisfied," laughed Jones. "I hear you're going to start a new pool, Mr. Wallingford."

"Next week," returned J. Rufus.

"Any chance of my getting a share in it?"

"I think not, Jones," advised Wallingford. "I won't split that pool into shares. I plan to take in just one big investor."

"All right," agreed Jones. "I'm tickled with anything you do. How much can I get in for to-morrow?"

"One hundred," stated Wallingford. "Just give me that hundred-dollar bill."

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"There you are," returned Mr. Jones contentedly.
"Good day, Mr. Wallingford."

The bell rang. The spider-legged boy darted in. Mr. Jones shambled out, with his hand full of money.

André Perigord's breath came quickly.

"W. W. W. Williams," sang the boy.

The full-bearded gentleman went in.

"Good afternoon, Chinchilla," hailed Wallingford cheerily. "You got in for a hundred and fifty, didn't you? Well, here's sixteen hundred and fifty dollars. I'll have to cut you down to a hundred to-day."

"Sorry, sir," said Williams. "By the way, is Pollet dropped from the pool?"

"Yes," snapped Wallingford.

"I'd like to take up his share."

"No," snapped Wallingford.

"Just as you say," hastily responded Chinchilla Williams. "Lord, I don't want you to get sore."

"I guess I am a little grouchy," confessed Wallingford; "but every time I turn around somebody wants to hand me money. I'm tired of it."

"I know," admitted Williams. "You have too much capital now. I guess if you dropped about half of us the rest of us could make more money."

"If I dropped you all, I could make the entire profit for myself," Wallingford reminded him.

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"That's what I'm going to do on this next pool—take just one live partner with a hundred thousand dollars and split the profits."

"I'll dig you up a hundred thousand dollars in a minute," quickly offered Williams.

"Nothing doing, Chinchilla," bluntly refused Wallingford. "I have to have a partner I like. He must be generous, trustful and agreeable, and you won't do. Good day, Williams."

"Good day, sir," returned Williams sadly.

The bell rang as he came out with money in his hands.

"Mr. Measen," announced the spider-legged boy.

The red-necked man with the chewed mustache lumbered in. He spoke a few husky words. Wallingford did not talk at all. Big Tim came out with his hands full of money.

Perigord was dreaming vast dreams.

"Mr. Daw," announced the boy.

The autocratic Mr. Wallingford frowned when he saw the stranger with Blackie Daw, but Monsieur Perigord did not see the frown. His astounded eyes were glued on the novel decorations of Wallingford's desk. These decorations consisted entirely of money; stacks of five-dollar bills, of tens, twenties, fifties, hundreds, five hundreds and thousands! There were packages of money still unopened, and from a projecting drawer peeped more money.

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"Anybody else out there, Jesse James?" yelled Wallingford.

"No, sir," replied the boy.

"Then lock the door," ordered Wallingford. "Mr. Daw, here's your eleven hundred dollars," and he nonchalantly selected the money from the assortment on the desk. "You may get in for a hundred to-morrow."

"All right," assented Blackie carelessly, and held the money loosely in his hand. Passing Wallingford a hundred, he stuffed the rest in his waistcoat pocket with his thumb. "Your to-morrow's pool all made up, Mr. Wallingford?"

"All but a twenty-five dollar share," answered the clever investor. "I was going to let old man Dokes have that, but he didn't show up. You may have it, if you like."

"No, thanks," drawled Blackie. "I don't like odd change. Carry it yourself."

"Me?" laughed Wallingford. "Why should I fuss with a twenty-five-dollar share? Look at what I have left," and with a negligent sweep of his hand, he indicated the litter of money.

Monsieur Perigord had been trying to speak, but he had been too excited. "If it will be any favor to monsieur, I will take it," he offered. "Me; André Perigord."

"I don't like to let strangers in," hesitated Wall-

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ingford with a frown, "but I think I shall let Mr. Perigord in on this pool, Mr. Daw; that is, until it closes next week."

"I am all gratitude!" fervently exclaimed Monsieur Perigord, whipping out his pocketbook and planking down his twenty-five dollars in a hurry, lest Wallingford should change his mind.

"You're on," said Wallingford, tossing the money carelessly on to the desk with the other greenbacks.

Monsieur Perigord smiled and smiled. "How much shall I receive for my twenty-five dollars?" he wanted to know.

"I guarantee nothing," returned Wallingford, casting on him a cold look. "I may not make you over a hundred dollars. I may even lose your money."

Both Blackie and Monsieur Perigord laughed at the absurd supposition.

Again Monsieur Perigord ventured a question. "If I may intrude upon monsieur's courtesy, how does he make such enormous profits?"

"I never tell," declared Wallingford.

"*Voilà!*" accepted Perigord. "Monsieur Wallingford, I thank you. Monsieur Daw, I thank you also. Shall I come over to-morrow to get my money?"

"No, don't bother me. I'll drop in and hand it to you," stated Wallingford carelessly. "Good day, gentlemen."

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They filed out of the office, and Wallingford called Blackie back, and Monsieur Perigord, listening intently, heard Wallingford say:

"Your friend, Perigord, is very agreeable. He is generous. He looks trusting."

André Perigord's heart was glad. What he did not hear Wallingford say was this:

"Double right back, Blackie, and help me take care of this real coin. We'll leave the phony stuff here, but I'm nervous since I had Onion Jones and Chin-chilla Williams and Big Tim Measen in this room."

At last André was a happy man! He was profiting by American cleverness, and he had the most clever man in America as his investing agent. On the first day, Wallingford handed him two hundred dollars for his twenty-five. On that day, also, Perigord sent complimentary gowns to Madame Wallingford and Madame Daw; frocks which no designer had yet seen, but André did not regret the money he lost from their rental. Not he!

On the second day, Wallingford handed him three hundred dollars for his twenty-five. André sent Violet Bonnie Daw and Fannie Wallingford beautiful bouquets.

On the third day, Wallingford handed him two hundred and seventy-five dollars; but on the fourth, three hundred and fifty!

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André Perigord smiled. He was becoming clever. He knew now where Wallingford made these enormous profits; on the bourse; the Stock Exchange! That was where these clever Americans made their quick fortunes! It was the only place! But André Perigord was wise! He said nothing! He held his peace and took the money!

It was a shame that the amount was, after all, so small! It was a tin horn! If he could only invest in the larger business that Wallingford was about to launch, then he might be a millionaire quickly, and go back to Paris, and do nothing, and be a gentleman, and wear a different dress-shirt every evening! He must be more agreeable to Mr. Wallingford; more generous; more trustful. He sent Mrs. Wallingford the finest scarf in his collection.

"Well, André," said Wallingford, on the fifth day; "the little pool is ended. Here is your last rake-off—two hundred and twenty-five dollars."

"But there will be another pool!" protested André. "Can not monsieur make me a place in that, ever so little a place; only twenty-five, or fifty, or a hundred dollars?"

"No," refused Wallingford kindly but firmly. "I've cut out the small shares. I've dropped about half my investors. I've carried lots of them along because they were with me in the start, when I began in a small way. But now they've had enough."

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I don't like to monkey with so many people. The smallest shares in this new pool are two hundred and fifty dollars, and it's filled up."

André cleared his throat. "But there was a larger pool," he suggested. "Just Monsieur Wallingford and one agreeable partner."

"Yes, that's my special pet," agreed Wallingford. "I need a man with a hundred thousand dollars for that."

"Monsieur; look!" begged André. "I have fifty-six thousand two hundred and fifty dollars, upon which I can lay my hands in the clever American fashion. Four thousand is mine, fifty thousand I can borrow for the time being, nine hundred was given me by a friend, and the balance you recognize. I have saved it all, every cent. It is the French way. Now, Monsieur Wallingford, could not this amount be made to do?"

Wallingford frowned. "I like you, but it would not be fair," he objected. "I do all the work and have all the responsibility. If you were to put up less than a hundred thousand dollars, I would be compelled either to take in another small partner or put up some of my own money. No, I must have a hundred thousand."

"Then I am in despair!" worried André. "I can not borrow forty-three thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars, even in the name of Mondeaux."

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"I see," mused Wallingford. "Well, it's too bad, André, because you're a very agreeable gentleman, and exactly the kind of partner I would like to have. However, if you can't raise the money I shall accept some of my other applications."

"One moment," pleaded André. "How much money would this grand pool make me?"

"I don't know," replied Wallingford. "I guarantee nothing. I might make us five million dollars. I might make us a thousand. I might lose the money."

"That is droll," laughed André. "Monsieur Wallingford, I am desperate to become your partner. Look! Could you not yourself loan me the money, and take back the forty-three thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars out of the first day's profits?"

The big pink face of Wallingford brightened immediately, and his broad shoulders heaved. "By George, you're a genius, André!" he chuckled. "That was a happy idea. I'll take your money."

"*Voilà!*" cried André. "The bank will close too soon this afternoon, my friend Wallingford, but to-morrow morning I shall lay the amount in your hands."

"All right," agreed Wallingford. "Bring it over to the office—in cash, please."

One day passed; two passed; three days passed,

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and Wallingford did not bring any millions! He did not, in fact, bring any money! Indeed, he did not come at all!

André Perigord brushed his kinky beard. He put on his silk hat. He donned his gray gloves. He took up his little cane, and he trotted over to the office of J. Rufus Wallingford, Investments!

Some vague cold presentiment possessed him as he entered the anteroom. There were no waiting investors. There was no spider-legged boy. The door of the private office was open, and he entered. There was no money on the desk. It was as bare as varnish could make it. There was no money peeping from the half-open drawer. Monsieur Perigord's heart was sinking fast.

In the big swivel-chair sat J. Rufus Wallingford, with his silk hat on and a huge diamond glowing in his cravat. He was contentedly smoking a big black cigar. Opposite him, with his long legs sprawled under the desk, and his silk hat miraculously poised on the back of his head, sat the grinning Blackie Daw, contentedly puffing a cigarette. They had sat thus every day, from three to four, since André had joined the grand pool. They could afford to loaf. Each one had a new deposit in his bank-book of over twenty-five thousand dollars.

"Ah!" exclaimed André. "You are here, at least. I have not seen you at the Maison Mondeaux!"

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"No use to come, André," explained Wallingford. "You're broke."

André Perigord dropped into a chair. "Broke!" he gasped. "You did not lose the money!"

"You did," advised Wallingford; "every cent. Besides that, you owe me forty-three thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars. I thought I wouldn't bother you for that just now."

"*Mon Dieu!*" groaned André. "Why, monsieur, you have lost me not only all my money, but the money of the house of Mondeaux!"

"Tough," commented Wallingford. "I suppose now you'll have to juggle with your books, and rent the Mondeaux creations to the designers until you can replace their money in the bank. Have a cigar."

André turned to the grinning face of Blackie. "It is a graft!" he suddenly decided, and jumped to his feet. "I go to the police!"

"And have me pinched, and get all our names in the papers, and let the house of Mondeaux find it out," suggested Wallingford. "Whatever happens, André I can see you in the penitentiary, with short hair and no necktie, learning to paste paper soles on water-proof shoes."

"It is true," André admitted, "I am what you call, up against it; but I have learned another American trick. Also, I am still clever, and I shall yet be rich. I shall not go to the penitentiary if they do

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not hear that I have lost so much money. Gentlemen, applaud me. I have already juggled the books. *Voilà!*" and highly pleased with himself, he strode jauntily out.

Blackie and Wallingford looked at each other dumbly. Blackie elevated his hands in the Perigord fashion.

"Voilà!" he said.

