

The Honorable Senator Sage-Brush eBook

The Honorable Senator Sage-Brush by Francis Lynde Stetson

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Page 1

I

Because Patricia said "No"

Some one was giving a dinner dance at the country club, and Blount, who was a week-end guest of the Beverleys, was ill-natured enough to be resentful. What right had a gay and frivolous world to come and thrust its light-hearted happiness upon him when Patricia had said "No"? It was like bullying a cripple, he told himself morosely, and when he had read the single telegram which had come while he was at dinner he begged Mrs. Beverley's indulgence and went out to find a chair in a corner of the veranda where the frivolities had not as yet intruded.

It was a North Shore night like that in which Shakespeare has mingled moon-shadows with the gossamer fantasies of the immortal "Dream." Though the dance was in-doors, the trees on the lawn and the road-fronting verandas of the club-house were hung with festoons of Chinese lanterns. At the carriage-entrance smart automobiles were coming and going, and one of them, with the dust of the Boston parkways on its running-gear, brought the guests of honor—three daughters of a Western senator lately home from their summer abroad.

Blount knew neither the honorers nor the honored ones, and had resolutely refused the chance offered him by Mrs. Beverley to amend his ignorance. For Patricia's "No" was not yet twenty-four hours old, and since it had changed the stars in their courses for Patricia's lover, the cataclysm was much too recent to postulate anything like a return of the heavenly bodies to their normal orbits.

Not that Blount put it that way, either to Mrs. Beverley or to himself. He was a level-eyed, square-shouldered young man of an up-to-date world, and the stock from which he sprang was prosaic and practical rather than poetic or sentimental. But the fact remained, and when he sat back in his corner absently folding the lately received telegram into a narrow spill and scowling moodily down upon the coming and going procession of motor-cars he was unconsciously giving a very life-like imitation of the disappointed lover the world over.

It was thus, and apparently by the merest chance, that Gantry found him; a chance because the Winnebasset club-house is spacious and the dinner dance minimized the hazards of a meeting between two unattached men who were merely transient guests. But the railroad man at least was unfeignedly glad.

"Doesn't it beat the dickens what a little world this is?" he exclaimed, with a true bromidian disregard for the outworn and the axiomatic. "Of course, I knew you were in or around Boston somewhere, but to run slap up against you here, when there seemed to be nothing in it for me but to be bored stiff—" He stopped short, finding it difficult to be

shiftily insincere with as old a friend as Evan Blount. But in the nature of things it was baldly impossible to tell Blount that the meeting was not accidental.

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"Pull up a chair and sit down," said Blount, not too ungraciously, considering his just cause to be more ungracious. "I was thinking of you a little while ago, Dick. I saw your name in the list of Transcontinental representatives to the traffic meeting in Boston, and—well, at the present moment I'm not sure but you are the one man in the world I wanted most to meet."

"Say! that sounds pretty good to me," laughed Gantry, settling himself comfortably in a lazy-chair and feeling in his pockets for a cigar. "I've been in Boston the full week, skating around over the chilly crust of things and never able to get so much as one tenuous little social claw-hold. Say, Evan, how many ice-plants does that impenetrable old town keep going ever count 'em?"

"Boston is all right when you know it—or, rather, when it comes to know you," returned Blount, remembering that Boston or Cambridge—which is Boston in the process of elucidation—was the birth and dwelling place of Patricia.

Gantry grinned broadly and lighted his cigar.

"The 'effete East' has psychically and psychologically corralled you, hasn't it, Evan?—to put it in choice Bostonese. I thought maybe it would when I heard you were taking the post-graduate frills in the Harvard Law School. By the way, how much longer are you in for?"

"I am out of the Law School, if that is what you mean—out and admitted to the bar," said Blount. "If you get into trouble with the Boston police let me know, and I'll ask for a change of venue to the greasewood hills and Judge Lynch's court."

"The good old greasewood hills!" chanted Gantry, who was of those who curse their homeland to its face and praise it consistently and pugnaciously elsewhere. "Are you ever coming back to them, Blount? I believe you told me once, in the old college days, that you were Western-born."

"I told you the truth; and until to-night I have never thought much about going back," was Blount's rather enigmatic reply.

"But now you are thinking of it?" inquired the railroad man, waking up. "That's good; the old Sage-brush State is needing a few bright young lawyers mighty bad. Is that why I'm the particular fellow you wanted to meet?"

Blount passed the telegram which had come while he was at dinner across the interval between the two chairs. "Read that," he said.

Gantry smoothed the square of yellow paper carefully and held it up to the softened glow of the electric ceiling-globe. Its date-line carried the name of his own city in the

“greasewood country”—the capital of the State—and the time-markings sufficiently indicated its recent arrival. Below the date-line he read:

To Evan Shelby Blount,
Standish Apartments, Boston.

You have had everything that money could buy, and you owe me nothing but an occasional sight of your face. If you are not tied to some woman’s apron-string, why can’t you come West and grow up with your native State?

David Blount.

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It was characteristic of Richard Gantry, light-handed juggler of friendly phrases, but none the less a careful and methodical official of a great railway company, that he folded the telegram in the original creases before he passed it back.

"Well?" said Blount, when the pause had grown over-abundantly long.

"I was just thinking," was the reflective rejoinder. "We used to be fairly chummy in the old Ann Arbor days, Evan, and yet I never, until a few days ago, knew or guessed that Senator Blount was your father."

"He was and is," was the quiet reply. "I supposed everybody knew it."

"I didn't," Gantry denied, adding: "You may not realize it, but what you don't tell people about yourself would make a pretty big book if it were printed."

Blount's smile was altogether friendly.

"What's the use, Richard?" he asked. "The world has plenty of banalities and commonplaces without the adding of any man's personal contribution. Why should I bore you or anybody?"

"Oh, of course, if you put it on that ground," said the railroad traffic manager. "Just the same, there's another side to it. In an unguarded moment, back in the college days, as I have said, you admitted to me that you were Western-born. I always supposed afterward that you regretted either the fact or the mention of it, since you never told me any more."

"Perhaps I didn't tell more because there was so little to tell. I had a boyhood like other boys—or, no, possibly it wasn't quite the usual. I was born on the 'Circle-Bar,' when the ranch was—as it still is, I believe—a hard day's drive for a bunch of prime steers distant from the nearest shipping-corral on the railroad. At twelve I could 'ride line,' 'cut out,' and 'rope down' like any other healthy ranch-bred youngster, and since the capital was at that time only in process of getting itself surveyed and boomed into existence I had never seen a town bigger than Painted Hat."

"And what happened when you were twelve?" queried Gantry. He was not abnormally curious, but Blount's communicative mood was unusual enough to warrant a quickening of interest.

"The greatest possible misfortune that can ever come to a half-grown boy, Dick—my mother died."

Gantry's own boyhood was not so deeply buried in the past as to make him forgetful of its joys and sorrows. "That was hard—mighty hard," he assented. Then: "And pretty soon your father married again?"

“Not for some years,” Blount qualified. “But for me the heavens were fallen. I was sent away to school, to college, to Europe; then I came here to the Law School. In all that time I’ve never seen the ‘Circle-Bar’ or my native State—in fact, I have never been west of Chicago.”

Gantry was astonished and he admitted it in exclamatory phrase. As a railroad man, continent-crossing travel was to him the merest matter of course. Though he might Sunday-over at the Winnebasset Country Club on the North Shore, it was well within the possibilities that the following week-end might find him sweltering in New Orleans or buttoning his overcoat against the raw evening fogs of San Francisco.

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"Never been west of Chicago?" he echoed. "Never been—" He stopped short, beginning to realize vaguely that there must be strong reasons; reasons which might lie beyond the pale of a college friendship, and the confidences begotten thereby, in the rendering of them.

"No," said Blount.

"Then the senator's—that is—er—your father's political life has never touched you."

The friendly smile rippled again at the corners of Blount's steady gray eyes, but this time it was shot through with a faint suggestion of the Blount grimness.

"It has touched me on the sympathetic side, Dick. I saw a large-hearted, open-handed old cattle-king wading good-naturedly into the muddy stream of politics to gratify an ambition that wasn't at all his own—a woman's ambition. In order that the woman might mix and mingle in Washington society for a brief minute or two, he got himself elected to fill out an unexpired term of two months in the United States Senate—bought the election, some said. That was three years ago, wasn't it?—a long time, as political incidents or accidents go. But Washington hasn't forgotten. When I was down there last winter the five-o'clock-tea people were still recalling Mrs. Blount's gowns and the wild-Western naivete of 'The Honorable Senator Sage-Brush.'"

Gantry was chuckling softly when the half-bitter admission had got itself fully made.

"Land of love, Evan!" he said, "you may be an educated post-graduate all right, with the proper Boston degree of culture laid on and rubbed down to a hard-glaze finish, but you've got a lot to learn yet—about the senator and his politics, I mean. Why, Great Snipes, man! he isn't in it a little bit for the social frills and furbelows; he never was. Let me intimate a few things: Politically speaking, David Blount is by long odds the biggest man in his State to-day. He can have anything he wants, from the head of the ticket down. You spoke rather contemptuously just now of his two months in the Senate; you probably didn't know that he might have gone back if he had wanted to; that he actually did a much more difficult thing—named his successor."

David Blount's son stood up and put his shoulders against one of the veranda pillars. From the new view-point he could look through the reading-room windows and on into the assembly-room where the dancers were keeping time to the measures of a two-step. But he was not thinking of the dancers when he said:

"It's a sheer miracle, Dick, your dropping down here to-night like the *deus ex machina* of the old Greek plays. You've read this telegram"—holding up the folded message—"it is just possible that you can tell me what lies behind it. Why has my father sent it at this particular time and in those words? He knows perfectly well that my plans for settling here in Boston were definitely made more than a year ago."

“I can tell you the situation out in the greasewood country, if that’s what you want to know,” said Gantry after a thoughtful pause.

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“Make it simple,” was Blount’s condition, adding: “What I don’t know about the business or the political situation in the West would fill a much larger book than the one you were speaking of a few minutes ago.”

“‘Business or political,’ you say; they are Siamese twins nowadays,” returned the railroad man, with a short laugh. Then: “The outlook for us out yonder in the greasewood hills is precisely what it is in a dozen other States this year—east, west, north and south—everything promising a renewal of the unreasoning, bull-headed legislative fight against the railroads. I suppose our own case is typical. As everybody knows, the Transcontinental Railway has practically created two-thirds of the States through which it passes—made them out of whole cloth. Where you left sage-brush and bare hills and unfenced cattle ranges a dozen years ago you will now find irrigation, tilled farms, orchards, rich mines—development everywhere, with a rapidly growing population to help it along. To make all this possible, the railroad took a chance; it was a mighty long chance, and somebody has to pay the bills.”

“I know,” smiled Blount; “the bill-paying is summed up in some railroad man’s clever phrase, ‘all the tariff the traffic will stand.’ I can remember one year when my father rose up in his wrath and drove his beef cattle one hundred and fifty miles across the Transcontinental tracks to the Overland Central.”

“That was in the old days,” protested Gantry, who was loyal to his salt. “As the State has filled up, we’ve tried to meet the situation half-way, as a straight business proposition. Fares and tariffs have been lowered from time to time, and—”

“You are not making it simple enough by half,” warned Blount quizzically. “You are getting further away from my telegram every minute.”

Gantry paused to relight his cigar.

“I don’t know how your telegram figures in it specially, but I do know this: the legislature to be elected this fall in our State will be chosen entirely without regard to the old party lines. There is only one issue before the people and that is the Transcontinental Railway. The ‘Paramounters,’ as they call themselves, taking the name from the assumption that it is the paramount duty of the voter to pinch any business interest bigger than his own, would like to legislate us out of existence; as against that we shall beat the tomtom and do our level best to stay on top of earth.”

“Naturally,” Blount agreed, then half-absently, and with his eyes still resting upon the merry-makers twirling like paired automatons in the distant assembly-room: “And my father—how does he stand?”

“The idea of your having to ask me how the senator stands in his own State!” exclaimed Gantry. “But really, Evan, I’d give a good bit of hard cash to be able to tell you in so

many words just where he does stand. There are a good many people in our neck of woods who would like mighty well to know. It will make all the difference in the world when it comes to a show-down."

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"Why will it?"

"Because, apart from the railroad and the anti-railroad factions, there is a very complete and smoothly running machine organization."

"And my father is identified with the machine?"

Again Gantry choked over the singular lack of information discovering itself in Blount's question.

"Land of glory!" he ejaculated. "Where have you been burying yourself, Evan? Didn't I just tell you that he is the biggest man in the State? Oh, no"—with heavy irony—"he isn't identified with the machine—not at all; he merely owns it and runs it. We may think we can swing a safe majority in the legislature, and the 'antis' may be just as firmly convinced that they can. But before either side can turn a wheel it will have to walk up to the captain's office and get its orders."

"Ah," said Blount, and a little later: "Thank you, Dick, I am pretty badly out of touch with the Western political situation, as you've discovered." Then he changed the subject abruptly. "How long will your traffic meeting last?"

"We practically finished to-day. An hour or two on Monday will wind it up."

"After which you'll go West?"

"After which I shall go West by the Monday noon train if I can make it. You couldn't hire me to stay in Boston an hour longer than I have to."

Silence for a time until Blount broke in upon Gantry's tapping of the dance-music rhythm with: "If I can close up a few unfinished business matters and get ready I may go with you, Dick. Would you mind?"

"Yes; I should mind so much that I'd willingly miss a train or so and worry out a few more of the chilly Boston hours rather than lose the chance of having you along."

"That is good of you, I'm sure. I should bore myself to death if I had to travel alone."

Blount's rejoinder might have passed for a mere friendly commonplace if it had not been for the rather curiously worded telegram. But it was a goodly portion of Gantry's business in life to put two and two together, and that phrase in the senator's message about a woman's apron-string interested him. Moreover, it was subtly suggestive.

"Ever meet your father's—er—the present Mrs. Blount, Evan?" he asked.

“No.” Blount may have been Western-born, but the chilling discouragement he could crowd into the two-letter negation spoke eloquently of his Eastern training.

Gantry was rebuffed but not disheartened.

“She is a mighty fine woman,” he ventured.

“So I have been given to understand.” This time Blount’s reply was icy. But now Gantry’s eyes were twinkling and he pressed his advantage.

“You’ll have to reckon pretty definitely with her if you go out to the greasewood country, Evan. Next to your father, she is the court of last resort; indeed, there are a good many people who insist that she *is* the court—the power behind the throne, you know.”

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There is one ditch out of which the most persistent and gladsome mocker may not drive his victim, and that is the ditch of silence. Blount said nothing. Nevertheless, Gantry tried once more.

"Not interested, Evan?"

Blount turned and looked his companion coldly in the eyes.

"Not in the slightest degree, Dick. Will you take that for your answer now, and remember it hereafter?"

"Sure," laughed the railroad man. And then, to round out the forbidden topic by adding worse to bad: "I didn't know it was a sore spot with you. How should I know? But, as I say, you'll have to reckon with her sooner or later, and—"

"Let's talk of something else," snapped Blount.

Gantry found a match and relighted his cigar. When he began again he was still thinking of the "apron-string" clause in the senator's telegram.

"I can't understand how any man with Western blood in his veins could ever be content to marry and settle down in this over-civilized neck of woods," he remarked, looking down upon the parked automobiles and around at the country-club evidences of the civilization.

"Can't you?" smiled Blount, with large lenience. One of the things the civilization had done for him was to make him good-naturedly tolerant of the crudeness of the outlander.

"No, I can't," asserted the Westerner. Then he added: "Of course, I don't know the Eastern young woman even by sight. She may be all that is lovely, desirable, and enticing—if a man could hope to live long enough to get really well acquainted with her."

"She is," declared Blount, with the air of one who had lived quite long enough to know.

Once more Gantry was putting two and two together. Blount's determination to go West and grow up with the country—his father's country—was apparently a very sudden one. Had the decision turned entirely upon the senator's telegram? Gantry, wise in his generation, thought not.

"You say that as if you'd been taking a few lessons," he laughed. Then, with the friendly impudence which only a college comradeship could excuse: "Is she here to-night?"

"No," said Blount, unguardedly making the response which admitted so much more than it said.

"Tell me about her," Gantry begged. "I don't often read a love story, but I like to hear 'em."

If it had been any one but Gantry, Blount would probably have had a sharp attack of reticence, with outward symptoms unmistakable to the dullest. But the time, the surroundings, and the exceeding newness of Patricia's "No" combined to break down the barriers of reserve.

"There isn't much to tell, Dick," he began half humorously, half in ill-concealed self-pity. "I've known her for a year, and I've loved her from the first day. That is Chapter One; and Chapter Two ends the story with one small word. She says 'No.'"

"The dickens she does!" said Gantry, in hearty sympathy. Then: "But that's a good sign, isn't it? Haven't I heard somewhere that they always say 'No' at first?"

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Blount laughed in spite of himself. Gantry, the Dick Gantry of the college period, had always been a man's man, gay, light-hearted, and care-free to the outward eye, but in reality one who was carrying burdens of poverty and distress which might well have crushed an older and a stronger man. There had been no time for sentiment then, and Blount wondered if there had been in any later period.

"I am afraid I can't get any comfort out of that suggestion," he returned. "When Miss Patricia Anners says 'No,' I am quite sure she means it."

"Think so?" said Gantry, still sympathetic. "Well, I suppose you are the best judge. Tough, isn't it, old man? What's the obstacle?—if you can tell it without tearing the bandages off and saying 'Ouch!'"

"It is Miss Anners's career."

"H'm," was the doubtful comment; "I'm afraid you'll have to elaborate that a little for me. I'm not up in the 'career' classification."

"She has been studying at home and abroad in preparation for social-settlement work in the large cities. Of course, I knew about it; but I thought—I hoped—"

"You hoped it was only a young woman's fad—which it probably is," Gantry cut in.

"Y-yes; I'm afraid that was just what I did hope, Dick. But I couldn't talk against it. Confound it all, you can't go about smashing ideals for the people you love best!"

"Rich?" queried Gantry.

"Oh, no. Her father has the chair of paleontology, and never gets within speaking distance of the present century. The mother has been dead many years."

"And you say the girl has the Hull House ambition?"

"The social-betterment ambition. It's an ideal, and I can't smash it. You wouldn't smash it, either, Dick."

"No; I guess that's so. If I were in your fix I should probably do what you are doing—say 'Good-by, fond heart,' and hie me away to the forgetful edge of things. And it's simply astonishing how quickly the good old sage-brush hills will help a man to forget everything that ever happened to him before he ducked."

Blount winced a little at that. It was no part of his programme to forget Patricia. Indeed, for twenty-four hours, or the waking moiety of that period, he had been assuring himself of the utter impossibility of anything remotely approaching forgetfulness. This thought made him instantly self-reproachful; regretful for having shown a sort of disloyalty by

opening the door of the precious and sacred things, even to so good a friend as Dick Gantry; and from regretting to amending was never more than a step for Evan Blount. There were plenty of reminiscences to be threshed over, and Blount brought them forward so tactfully that Gantry hardly knew it when he was shouldered away from the open door of the acuter personalities.

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It was quite late, and the talk had again drifted around to a one-sided discussion of practical politics in the Western definition of the term, when Gantry, pleading weariness on the score of his hard week's work at the railroad meeting, went to bed. The summer night was at its perfect best, and Blount was still wakeful enough to refill his pipe and well-balanced enough to be thankful for a little solitude in which to set in order his plans for the newly struck-out future. In the later talk with Gantry he had learned many things about the political situation in his native State, things which were enlightening if not particularly encouraging. Trained in the ethics of a theoretical school, he knew only enough about practical politics to be very certain in his own mind that they were all wrong. And if Gantry's account could be trusted, there were none but practical politics in the State where his father was reputed to be the dictator.

Hitherto his ambition had been to build up a modest business practice in some Eastern city, and, like other aspiring young lawyers, he had been filling out the perspective of the picture with the look ahead to a possible time when some great corporation should need his services in permanence. He was of the new generation, and he knew that the lawyer of the courts was slowly but surely giving place to the lawyer of business. Without attempting to carry the modern business situation bodily over into the domain of pure ethics, he was still young enough and enthusiastic enough to lay down the general principle that a great corporation, being itself a creation of the law, must necessarily be law-abiding, and, if not entirely ethical in its dealings with the public, at least equitably just. Therefore his ideal in his own profession was the man who could successfully safeguard large interests, promote the beneficent outreachings of corporate capital, and be the adviser of the man or men to whom the greater America owes its place at the head of the civilized nations.

Oddly enough, though Gantry's attitude had been uncompromisingly partisan, Blount had failed to recognize in the railroad official a skilful pleader for the special interests—the interests of the few against those of the many. Hence he was preparing to go to the new field with a rather strong prepossession in favor of the defendant corporation. In their later conversation Gantry had intimated pretty broadly that there was room for an assistant corporation counsel for the railroad, with headquarters in the capital of the Sage-brush State. Blount assumed that the requirements, in the present crisis at least, would be political rather than legal, and in his mind's eye he saw himself in the prefigured perspective, standing firmly as the defender of legitimate business rights in a region where popular prejudice was capable of rising to anarchistic heights of denunciation and attack.

The picture pleased him; he would scarcely have been a true descendant of the fighting Blounts of Tennessee if the prospect of a conflict had been other than inspiring. If there were to be no Patricia in his future, ambition must be made to fill all the horizons; and since work is the best surcease for any sorrow, he found himself already looking forward in eager anticipation to the moment when he could begin the grapple, man-wise and vigorously, in the new environment.

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It was after the ashes had been knocked from the bedtime pipe that Blount left his chair and the secluded corner of the veranda to go down among the parked automobiles on the lawn. His one recreation—and it was the only one in which he found the precious fillip of enthusiasm—was motoring. There was a choice collection of fine cars in the grouping on the lawn, and Blount had just awakened a sleepy chauffeur to ask him to uncover and exhibit the engine of a freshly imported Italian machine, when a stir at the veranda entrance told him that at least a few of the dancing guests were leaving early.

Being more curious at the moment about the mechanism of the Italian motor than he was about people, he did not realize that he was an intruder until the chauffeur hastily replaced the engine bonnet and began to get his car ready for the road. Blount stepped back when the little group on the veranda came down the steps preceded by a club footman who was calling the number of the car. And it was not until he was turning away that he found himself face to face with a very beautiful and very clear-eyed young woman who was buttoning an automobile dust-coat up under her chin.

“Patricia!” he burst out. And then: “For Heaven’s sake! you don’t mean to tell me that you have been here all evening?”

Her slow smile gave the impression, not quite of frigidity perhaps, but of that quality of serene self-possession which strangers sometimes mistook for coldness.

“Why shouldn’t I be here?” she asked. “Didn’t you know that the Cranfords—the people who are entertaining—are old friends of ours?”

Blount shook his head. “No, I didn’t know it; and because I didn’t, I have lost an entire evening.”

“Oh, no; you shouldn’t say that,” she protested. “The evening was yours to use as you chose. Mrs. Beverley told me you were here, and she added that you had particularly requested not to be introduced to the Cranfords or their guests. Besides, you know you don’t care anything about dancing.”

The chauffeur had placed his other passengers in the tonneau, and was trying to crank the motor. Blount was thankful that the new Italian engine was refusing to take the spark. The delay was giving him an added moment or two.

“No, I don’t care much for dancing; and you know very well why I couldn’t, or wouldn’t, be anybody’s good company to-night,” he said. Then: “It was cruel of you to deny me this last evening by not letting me know that you were here.”

“This last evening’?” she echoed. “Why ‘last’?”

“Because I am leaving Boston and New England to-morrow—or rather, Monday. It is the only thing to do.”

"I am sorry you are taking it this way, Evan," she deprecated, in the sisterly tone that always made him hotly resentful. "It hurts my sense of proportion."

"Sometimes I think you haven't any sense of proportion, Patricia," he retorted half-morosely. "If you have, I am sure it is frightfully distorted."

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The recalcitrant motor had given a few preliminary explosions, and a white-haired old gentleman in the tonneau was calling impatiently to Patricia to come and take her place so that he might close the door.

"It is you who have the distorted perspective, Evan," she countered. "But I refused to quarrel with you last night, and I am refusing to quarrel with you now. It pleases you to believe that a woman's place in this twentieth-century world is inevitably at the fireside—her own fireside. I don't agree with you; I am afraid I shall never agree with you. Where are you going?"

"I am going West, Monday."

"How odd!" she commented. "We are going West, too—father and I—though not quite so soon as Monday."

"You are?" he queried. "Whereabout in the West?"

She did not tell him where. The car motor was whirring smoothly now, the chauffeur was sliding into his seat behind the pilot-wheel, and the old gentleman in the tonneau was growing quite violently impatient.

"If we are both going in the same direction we needn't say good-by," she said hastily, giving him her hand at parting. "Let it be *auf wiedersehen*." Then the clang of the closing tonneau door and the outgoing rush of the big car coincided so accurately that Blount had to spring nimbly aside to save himself from being run down.

II

THE BOSS

It is a far cry from Boston to the land of broken mountain ranges, lone buttes, and irrigated mesas, and a still farther one from the veranda of an exclusive North Shore club to a private dining-room in the Inter-Mountain Hotel, whose entrance portico faces the Capitol grounds in the chief city of the Sage-brush State, whose eastern windows command a magnificent view of the Lost River Range, and from whose roof, on a clear day, one may see the snowy peaks of the Sierras notching the distant western horizon.

Allowing for the difference between Eastern and Mountain time, the dinner for two in the private dining-room of the Inter-Mountain synchronized very fairly with the threshing out of college reminiscences by the two young men whose apparently fortuitous meeting on the veranda of the far-away North Shore club-house one of them, at least, was ascribing to the good offices of the god of chance.



On the guest-book of the Inter-Mountain one of the men at the table in the private dining-room had registered from Chicago. The name was illegible to the cursory eye, but since it was the signature of a notable empire-builder, it was sufficiently well known in all the vast region served by the Transcontinental Railway System. The owner of the name had finished his ice, and was sitting back to clip the end from a very long and very black cigar. He was a man past middle-age, large-framed and heavy, with the square, resolute face of a born master of circumstances. Like the younger

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generation, he was clean shaven; hence there was no mask for the deeply graven lines of determination about the mouth and along the angle of the strong, leonine jaw. In the region traversed by the great railway system the virile face with the massive jaw was as familiar as the illegible signature on the Inter-Mountain's guest-book. Though he figured only as the first vice-president of the Transcontinental Company, Hardwick McVickar was really the active head of its affairs and the dictator of its policies.

Across the small round table sat the railway magnate's dinner-guest, a man who was more than McVickar's match in big-boned, square-shouldered physique, and whose half-century was written only in the thick, grizzled hair and heavy, graying mustaches. Like McVickar, he had the lion-like face of mastership, but the fine wrinkles at the corners of the wide-set eyes postulated a sense of humor which was lacking in his table companion. His mouth, half hidden by the drooping mustaches, needed the relieving wrinkles at the corners of the eyes; it was a grim, straight-lined inheritance from his pioneer ancestors—the mouth of a man who may yield to persuasion but not easily to opposition.

"I wish I could convince you that it isn't worth while to hold me at arm's-length, Senator," McVickar was saying, as he clipped the end from his cigar. "You know as well as I do that under the present law in this State we are practically bankrupt. We are not making enough to pay the fixed charges. We do a losing business from the moment we cross your State line."

"Yes; it seems to me I have heard something that sounded a good deal like that before," was the noncommittal rejoinder.

"You have heard the simple truth, then. And it is a bald injustice, not only to the railroad company, but to the people it serves. We can't give adequate service when the cost exceeds the earnings. That is the simplest possible proposition in any business undertaking."

"And you can't make out to convince the members of the State Railroad Commission of the simpleness?" asked the man whom the vice-president addressed as "Senator."

"You know well enough that we can't hope to convince a rabidly anti-railroad commission," was the half-angry retort.

"Yet you are still running your railroad," suggested the other. "We don't hear anything about your shutting down and tearing up the track."

“No; luckily, the Transcontinental System does not lie wholly within your State boundaries. If it did, we might as well surrender our charter and go out of business—shut down and tear up the track, as you put it.”

“All of which has come to be a pretty old and well-worn story with us, McVickar,” said the listener quietly. “I’m sure you didn’t make me motor thirty miles to hear you tell it all over again. What do you want?”

“We want a square deal,” was the curt reply.

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"So do the people of this State," asserted the man across the table. "You bled us, Hardwick—bled us to the queen's taste—while you had the chance; and the chance lasted a blamed long time. You are equitably, if not legally, in debt to every man in this State who had ever shipped a car-load of freight or paid a passenger fare over your line before the present rate law went into effect. You can shuffle and side-step all you want to, but that is the plain fact of the matter."

The vice-president sat up and braced his arms on the edge of the table.

"You are too much for me, Blount—you hold out too many cards; and I'm no apprentice at the game, either. In all these years we've been dickering together you've always been a hard-bitted and consistent fighter for your own hand. What's happened to you lately? Have you acquired a new set of convictions? Or have you been figuring out a different way of whipping the devil around the stump?"

"Oh, I don't know," returned the guest, with large good-nature. "We are all growing older—and wiser, perhaps. You don't deny the debt you owe us, do you?"

"Do we owe you anything, Blount?" asked the magnate pointedly, and with a definite emphasis upon the personal pronoun. "If we do, we are willing to pay it in spot cash, on demand."

The big man on the other side of the table was leaning back in his chair with his hands in his pockets, and the smile wrinkling at the corners of his eyes was half-genial, half-satirical.

"It's lucky we're alone, McVickar," he remarked. "A third fellow standing around and hearing you talk might imagine that you are trying to bribe me."

"That's all right, Blount; this is between us two, and we understand each other. Nothing for nothing is the accepted rule the world over, and we both recognize it. You are figuring on something; I know you are. Name it. If it is anything less than a mortgage on the earth and one or two of the planets I'll get it for you."

"I'm afraid we are a good deal more than a mile or two apart yet, McVickar," said the man who was not smoking, after a long minute. "Let's ride back to the beginning and get us a fresh start. I said that Gordon is going to be the next governor of the State."

"I know you did; and I said—and I say it again—he isn't going to be—not if we can help it," declared the railway magnate, with emphatic determination.

"The methods you will take to defeat him will insure his election, McVickar. You fellows are mighty slow to learn your lesson; mighty slow and obstinate, Hardwick. You don't know anything but wire-pulling and crookedness and bribery. The times have changed,

and you haven't had the common-sense or the courage or the business shrewdness to change with them. I say Gordon will be the next governor."

Again there was a strained silence like that which follows the hand-shake in the prize-ring when the two antagonists have drawn apart and are warily watching each for his opening. After the pause the vice-president said:

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"If we had the safest kind of a majority in both houses of the legislature, we couldn't be sure of accomplishing anything worth while with Gordon in the governor's office; you know that, Blount. If Gordon runs and is elected, his platform will be flatly anti-railroad."

"Oh, I don't know," was the calm rejoinder. "Gordon is a mighty square fellow; an honest man and a fair one. If you could stay out of the fight and go to him with clean hands—but you couldn't do that, McVickar; you're too badly out of practice."

"We needn't go into that phase of it. We are so savagely handicapped in this State that we can't afford to take a divided chance; can't afford to pass our case up to a man who has been elected by an unfriendly opposition. If we should wash our hands of the fight, as you suggest, we might just as well throw up our franchises and quit, so far as any prospect of earning a reasonable return upon our investment here is concerned."

"I know; that is what you always say, and you have said it so often—you and your fellow railroad string-pullers—that you have lost the straightforward combination completely. If you ever knew how to make a clean fight you've forgotten the moves, and it's your own fault."

Once more the man with the fierce eyes and the dominating jaw took time to consider. Like others of his class, he was partisan only in the sense of one fighting hardily for the side upon which he had happened to be drawn in the great world battle. If he had not long ago parted with his convictions, the heat and smoke of the battle had obscured them, and he chose his weapons now with little regard for anything beyond their possible efficacy.

"You are sparring with me, Blount," he said finally. "You are talking to me as you might talk to a committee of the Good Government League—and possibly for the same reason. Let's get together. You control the political situation in your State, and we frankly recognize that fact. It's a matter of business, and we can settle it on a business basis. I have been outspoken and above-board with you and have told you what we want. Meet me halfway and tell me what you want."

"I want a square deal all around, Hardwick; that's all. You've got to take the same ground and make a clean fight if you want me with you. I can't make it any plainer than that, can I?"

"I don't know yet what you are driving at," frowned the vice-president, "nor just why you have taken this particular occasion to read me a kindergarten lecture on political methods. In times past I suppose we have both done some things that we would like to have decently buried and forgotten, but—"

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"But right there we break apart, McVickar," cut in the other, setting his jaw with a peculiar hardening of the facial muscles that gave him the appearance of a fierce old viking attacking at the head of his squadrons. "I'm telling you over again that a new day has dawned in American politics; I and my kind recognize it, and you and your kind don't seem to be big enough to recognize it. That is the difference between us. In the present instance it comes down to this: you are going to fight for a railroad majority in the legislature, and you want Reynolds for the head of the ticket because you know that you can depend upon his veto if you don't get your majority in the House and Senate. You are not going to get Reynolds, or the majority either, without the help of the party organization."

"We can put it much more elementally than that," supplemented the railroad man. "We get nothing without your say-so as the head of the party organization. That is precisely why I have come a couple of thousand miles to ask you to eat dinner with me here to-night."

"I reckon I ought to feel right much set up and biggitty over that, Hardwick," smiled the veteran spoilsman, relapsing, as he did now and then, into the speech of his Southern boyhood. And then half-quizzically: "Are you tolerably well satisfied that you've got around to the place where you are willing to tote fair with me? You recollect, I gave you a straight pointer two years ago; you wouldn't take it, and we did you up. Are you right certain you are ready now to holler 'enough'?"

Once again the vice-president refused to be hurried into making a capitulative admission. When he spoke, the militant second thought of the fighting corporation commander chose the words.

"There is a limit to all things, Senator, and you are pushing us pretty well up to it. I suppose you can crack the whip and swing the vote on the legislature, and you can take it and be damned. But, by God, we'll have our governor and our attorney-general!"

"You are betting confidently on that, are you?" said the veteran mildly. "Is that your declaration of war?"

"Call it anything you like. We are not going to be legislated off the map if we can help it. Strong as your machine is, you can't swing Gordon in against Reynolds if we concede your bare majority in the legislature and put up the right kind of a fight. And when it comes to Rankin, our candidate for attorney-general, you simply haven't another man in the party to put up against him. You'd have to run in a dummy, and even you are not big enough to do that, Blount, and put it over."

"You've settled this definitely in your own mind, have you, Hardwick?" was the placable rejoinder. "I'm sorry—right sorry. I've been hoping that you had learned your lesson—you and your tribe. I came to town this evening prepared to show you a decent way out

of your troubles, so far as this State is concerned; but since you have posted your 'de-fi,' as we cow-punchers say, I reckon it isn't worth while to wade any deeper into the creek."

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Again the railroad magnate rested his arms on the table-edge. "What was your 'decent way,' Senator?" he asked, fixing his gaze upon the shrewd old eyes of the other, which, for the first time in the conference, seemed to be losing a little of their grimly good-natured aggressiveness.

"I don't mind telling you, though you will likely call it an old man's foolishness. I have a grown son, McVickar. Did you know that?"

The vice-president nodded, and the big man opposite went on half-reminiscently:

"He is a lawyer, and a mighty bright one, so they tell me. As I happen to know, he is pretty well up on the corporation side of the argument, and the one thing I've been afraid of is that he would marry and settle down somewhere in the East, where the big corporations have their home ranches. I'm getting old, Hardwick, and I'd like mighty well to have the boy with me. Out of that notion grew another. I said to myself this: Now, here's McVickar; if he could have a good, clean-cut young man in this State representing his railroad—a man who not only knew his way around in a court-room, but who might also know how to plead his client's case before the public—if McVickar could have such a young fellow as that for his corporation counsel, and would agree to make his railroad company live somewhere within shouting distance of such a young fellow's ideals, we might all be persuaded to bury the hatchet and live together in peace and amity."

A slow smile was spreading itself over the strong face of the railway magnate as he listened.

"Say, David," he retorted mildly, "it isn't much like you to go forty miles around when there is a short way across. Why didn't you tell me plainly in the beginning that you wanted a place for your boy?"

"Hold on; don't let's get too far along before we get started; I'm not saying it now," was the sober protest. "You forget that you've just been telling me that you don't intend to comply with the one hard-and-fast condition to such an arrangement as the one I've been pipe-dreaming about."

"What condition?"

"That you turn over a brand-new leaf and meet the people of this State half-way on a proposition of fair play for everybody."

"There isn't any half-way point in a fight for life, David. You know that as well, or better, than I do. But let that go. We'll give your son the place you want him to have, and do it gladly."

The man who had once been his own foreman of round-ups straightened himself in his chair and smote the table with his fist.

“No, by God, you won’t—not in a thousand years, McVickar! Maybe you could buy me—maybe you *have* bought me in times past—but you can’t buy that boy! Listen, and I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I telegraphed the boy this afternoon, telling him to throw up his job in Boston and come out here. If he comes within a reasonable time he will be legally a citizen of the State before election. You said we didn’t have anybody but Rankin to run for attorney-general. By Heavens, Hardwick, I’ll show you if we haven’t!”

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Mr. Hardwick McVickar was not of those who fight as one beating the air. While the deft waiter was clearing the table and serving the small coffees he kept silence. But when the time was fully ripe he said what there was to be said.

"You've got us by the nape of the neck, as usual, Blount. Name your terms."

"I have named them. Get in line with the new public opinion and we'll do what we can for you."

During the long pause following this curt ultimatum the masterful dictator of railroad policies deliberated thoughtfully upon many things. With the ex-senator as the all-powerful head of the machine in this State of many costly battle-fields, it would have been a weakness inexcusable on the part of so astute a commander as McVickar if David Blount's history, political and personal, had not been known to him in all its details. As a contingency to be met sooner or later, the vice-president had anticipated the thing which had now come to pass. That Blount should wish to push the fortunes of his son was perfectly natural; and it was no less natural that he should push them by making the railroad company's pay-roll furnish the motive-power. The magnate smiled inwardly when he remembered that he had given Gantry, the division traffic manager of the Transcontinental, a quiet hint to look up one Evan Blount, a young lawyer, on his next visit to Boston. By all odds it would be better to wait for Gantry's report before taking any irrevocable steps in the bargaining with Evan Blount's father; but unhappily the crisis had arrived, and in all probability it could not be postponed. None the less, the vice-president tried craftily for the postponement.

"You're asking a good deal, Blount, and you don't seem to realize it. You are practically demanding that we lay down our arms and put a possible enemy in the saddle on the eve of a battle. If we should agree to meet the people of this State half-way, as you suggest, what guarantee have we that we won't be compelled to go all the way?"

The fine-lined wrinkles were appearing again at the corners of the hereditary Blount eyes.

"You can't quite rise to the occasion, can you, Hardwick?" smiled the boss. "You'd like to behave yourself and be good, of course; but you want to be cocksure beforehand that it isn't going to cost too much."

"Well, anyway, I'm going to ask for a little time in which to consider it," was the vice-president's final word.

"Sure! You have all the time there is between now and the election. Go on and do your considering. I've told you what I'm going to do."

“You know very well that we can’t allow you to do what you propose. With an unfriendly attorney-general we might as well throw up our hands first as last.”

“All right; it’s right pointedly up to you,” was the calm reply.

The vice-president rose and dusted the cigar-ash from his coat-sleeve with the table-napkin. When he looked up, the heavy frown was again furrowing itself between his eyes.

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"Let me know when your son is coming and I'll try to make it possible to meet him here," he said rather gratingly.

And thus, at the precise moment when Richard Gantry, some three thousand miles away to the eastward, was declaring his weariness and his intention of going to bed, the two-man conference in the Inter-Mountain private dining-room was closed.

III

A FALSE GALLOP OF MEMORIES

As a churlish fate decreed, it turned out that Evan Blount was not to have Gantry for a travelling companion beyond Chicago. On the second day of westward faring the railroad traffic manager, whose business followed him like an implacable Nemesis wherever he went, had wire instructions to stop and confer with his vice-president in the Illinois metropolis. Hence, on the morning of the following day, Blount continued his journey alone.

Twenty-odd hours later the returning expatriate had crossed his Rubicon; in other words, his train had rolled through the majestic steel bridge spanning the clay-colored flood of the Missouri River at Omaha, and he was entering upon scenes which ought to have been familiar—which should have been and were not, so many and striking were the changes which had been wrought during his fourteen years of absence.

Though he was far enough from realizing it, his education and the Eastern environment had given him a touch of Old-World insularity. The through sleeper in which he had his allotment of space was well filled, and there were the usual opportunities for the making of passing acquaintanceships in the smoking-compartment. But it was not until the second day, after the dining-car luncheon and its aftermath of a well-chosen cigar had broken down some of the barriers of the acquired reserve, that he fell into talk with the prosperous-looking gentleman who had seized upon the only chair in the smoking-compartment—a man whose thin, hawk-like face, narrowly set eyes, and uneasy manner were singularly out of keeping with the fashionable cut of his clothes, with his liberal tips, and with the display of jewelry on his watch-fob.

At first the conversation was baldly desultory, as it was bound to be, with an escaped lover, whose disappointment was still rasping him like a newly devised Nessus shirt, to sustain an undivided half of it. The hawk-faced one, who had boarded the train at Omaha and whose section was directly opposite Blount's, defined himself as a mine-owner whose property, vaguely located as somewhere "in the mountains," was involved in litigation.

It was the reference to the litigation which first drew Blount beyond the boundaries of the commonplaces. Oddly enough, considering the fact that his planned-for Eastern career would have given him little occasion to dip into the mining codes, he had specialized somewhat in mining law. Hence, when the hawk-faced man had told his story, Blount found himself thawing out sufficiently to be suggestively helpful to the man who had apparently purchased more trouble than profits in his mining ventures.

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Into the cleft thus opened by the axe of human sympathy the man in the wicker chair presently inserted a wedge of cautious inquiry touching another matter. In addition to his mining ventures he had been making investments in timber-lands, or, rather, in certain lumber companies operating “in the mountains”—bad investments, he feared, since the Government had lately taken such a decided stand against the cutting of timber in the mountain-land reserves and water-sheds. Was it likely, he asked, that the talk would materialize in restraining action? If so, he was in the hole again—worse off than he should be if his mining lawsuits should go against him.

Again Blount, good-naturedly charitable and not a little amused by the nervous anxiety of the gentleman of many troubles, gave an opinion.

“Conservation, in timber as well as in other remaining resources of the country, has come to be a word which is in everybody’s mouth,” was the form the opinion took. “The plain citizen who isn’t familiar with the methods of the timber sharks would do well to keep his money out of their hands if he doesn’t wish to be held as *particeps criminis* with them in the day of reckoning.”

“Say!” ejaculated the thin man, wriggling nervously in his chair. “If you were a Government agent yourself you could hardly put the case stronger for the conservation crowd!”

Now, in ordinary circumstances, nothing was ever farther from Blount’s normal attitude toward his fellow-men than a disposition to yield to the sudden joking impulse. But the hawk-faced man’s perturbation was so real, or so faultlessly simulated, that he could not resist the temptation.

“How do you know that I am not a Government agent?” he demanded, with a decent show of gravity.

“Because you are not travelling on Government transportation,” was the shrewd retort.

At another time Blount might have wondered why a casual fellow-traveller should have taken the trouble to make the discovery. But at the moment he was intent only upon keeping the small misunderstanding alive.

“I suppose you have seen my ticket, but you can’t tell anything by that,” he countered, laughing. “A good many civilian employees of the Government travel nowadays on regular tickets, like other people.”

“I know damned well they do,” admitted the anxious one; and then, with a swift eye-shot which Blount missed: “Especially if they happen to be travelling on the quiet to catch some poor devil napping on the job.”

“You needn’t be alarmed; you haven’t told me anything that the department could make use of,” returned Blount, carrying the jest the one necessary move farther along.

It was precisely at this point, as Blount remembered afterward, that the timber-thieving subject was dropped. Later on, after the talk had drifted back to mining, and from mining to politics, the nervous gentleman pleaded weariness and declared his intention of going to his section to take a nap, and presently disappeared to carry it out.

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Blount was not sorry to be left alone. In response to a vague stirring of something within him—a thing which might have been the primitive underman yawning and stretching to its awakening—he had been trying in the window-facing intervals to reconstruct the passing panorama of mountain and plain upon the recollections of his boyhood. As yet there was little familiarity save in the broader outlines. Where he remembered only the fallow-dun prairie, dotted with dog-mounds, there were now vast ranches planted to sod corn; and upon the hills the cattle ranges were no longer open. The towns, too, at which the train made its momentary stops, were changed. The straggling shack hamlets of the cattle-shipping period, with the shed-roofed railroad station, the whitewashed loading-corral, and the towering water-tank—all backgrounded by a thin line of saloons and dance-halls—had disappeared completely, and the window-watcher found himself looking in vain for the flap-hatted, cigarette-smoking horsemen with which the West of his boyhood had been chiefly peopled.

Farther along toward evening the great range, which had been visible for hours in the westward vista, began to define itself in peaks and high, bald shoulderings of wind-swept mesas. Here was something definite and tangible for the stirring underman to lay hold upon. Blount, the sober-minded, the self-contained, found a curious transformation working itself out in quickened pulses and exhilarating nerve-tinglings. Boston, the Law School, the East of the narrow walk-ways and the still narrower rut of custom and convention, were fading into a past which already seemed age-old and half forgotten. He threw open the window at his elbow and drank in deep inspirations of the hill-sweeping blast. It was sweet in his nostrils, and the keen crispness of it was as fine wine in his blood. After all, he had been but a sojourner in the other world, and this was his homeland.

At the dining-car dinner, which was served while the higher peaks of the main range were as vast islands floating in a sea of crimson and gold, Blount missed the man of many troubles. The dining-car was well filled, and, though the faces of the diners were all unfamiliar, the hum of talk, the hurrying of the waiters, and the subdued clamor drowning itself in the under-drone of the drumming wheels answered well enough for companionship. There are times when even the voice of a friend is an intrusion, and the returning exile had happened upon one of them. Largeness, the inspiring breadth of the immensities, was what he craved most; and when he had cut the many-coursed dinner short, he hurried back to his Pullman window, hoping that he might have the smoking-compartment to himself again.

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The unspoken wish was granted. When he entered the smoking-room he found it empty; and, filling his cutty pipe, he drew the cushioned wicker chair out to face the open window. Fresh glimpses of the northward landscape shortly brought a renewal of the heart-stirrings; and when he finally had the longed-for sight of a bunch of grazing cattle, with the solitary night-herd hanging by one leg in the saddle to watch the passing of the train, the call of the homeland was trumpeting in his ears, and he would have given anything in reason to be able to change places, temporarily at least, with the care-free horseman whose wiry, muscular figure was struck out so artistically against the dun-colored hillside.

"Would I really do such a thing as that?" he asked himself half incredulously, when the night-herd and his grazing drove had become only a picturesque memory; and out of the heart-stirrings and pulse-quickenings came the answer: "I more than half believe that I would—that I'd jump at the chance." Then he added regretfully: "But there isn't going to be any chance."

"Any chance to do what?" rumbled a mellow voice at his elbow, and Blount turned quickly to find that a big, bearded man, smoking an abnormally corpulent cigar, had come in to take his seat on the divan.

At another time Blount, the conventional Blount, would have been self-conscious and embarrassed, as any human being is when he is caught talking to himself. But with the transformation had come a battering down of doors in the house of the broader fellowship, and he laughed good-naturedly.

"You caught me fairly," he acknowledged. "I thought I still had the place to myself."

"But the chance?" persisted the big man, looking him over appraisively. "You don't look like a man who has had to hang round on the aidges hankerin' after things he couldn't get."

"I guess I haven't had to do that very often," was the reflective rejoinder. "But a mile or so back we passed a bunch of cattle, with the night man riding watch; I was just saying to myself that I'd like to change places with that night-herd—only there wasn't going to be any chance."

The bearded man's laugh was a deep-chested rumbling suggestive of rocks rolling down a declivity.

"Lordy gracious!" he chuckled. "If you was to get a leg over a bronc', and the bronc' should find it out—Say, I've got a li'l' blue horse out on my place in the Antelopes that'd plumb give his ears to have you try it; he shore would. You take my advice, and don't you go huntin' a job night-ridin' in the greasewood hills. Don't you do it!"

"I assure you I hadn't thought of doing it for a permanency. But just for a bit of adventure, if the chance should offer while I'm in the notion. I believe I'd take it. I haven't ridden a cow-pony for fourteen years, but I don't believe I've lost the knack of it."

"Ho!" said the big man. "Then you ain't as much of a tenderfoot as you look to be. Shake!" and he held out a hand as huge as a bear's paw. Following the hand-grip he grew confidential. "Long in the afternoon I stuck my head in at the door and saw you chewin' the rag with a thin-faced old nester that couldn't set still in his chair while he talked. Know him?"

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“Not at all,” said Blount promptly. “He has the section opposite mine, and he got on at Omaha.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to know him if I was you,” was the bearded man’s comment. Then: “Tryin’ to get you to invest in some o’ his properties?”

“Oh, no.”

“Well, he will, if he gets a chance. He’d go furdur’n that; he’d nail you up to the cross and skin you alive if there was any money in it for him. His name’s Simon Peter, and it ort to be Judas. I know him down to the ground!”

“Simon Peter?” said Blount inquiringly.

“Ya-as; Simon Peter Hathaway. And my name’s Griggs; Griggs, of the Antelopes, back o’ Carnadine—if anybody should ask you who give you your pointer on Simon Peter Judas. I don’t blacklist no man in the dark, and I’ve said a heap more to that old ratter’s face than I’ve ever said behind his back. Ump! him a-wrigglin’ in that chair you’re settin’ in and tryin’ to fix up some way to skin you! Don’t tell me! I know blame’ well what he was tryin’ to do.”

Blount listened and was interested, not so much in the bit of gossip as in the big, red-faced ranchman, who so evidently had a grudge to pay off.

“I am not likely to have any dealings with Mr. Hathaway,” he rejoined. “And I must do him the bare justice of saying that he wasn’t trying to sell me anything. The shoe was on the other foot. He seemed to be afraid he was in danger of losing out, and he was asking my advice.”

“S.P. Hathaway lose out? Not on your life, my young friend! You say he was askin’ for advice? You’ve done stirred up my curiosity a whole heap, and I reckon you’ll have to tell me who you are before it’ll ca’m down again.”

Blount laughed. “Mr. Hathaway thinks I am a special agent for the Government, travelling on business for the Forest Service.”

“The hell he does!” exploded the big man. Then he reached over and laid a swollen finger on Blount’s knee. “Say, boy, before you or him ever gets off this train—Sufferin’ Moses! what was that?”

The break came upon a thunderous crash transmitting itself from car to car, and the long, heavy train came to a juggling stop. The ranchman sprang to his feet with an alacrity surprising in so huge a body and ducked to look out of the open window.

“Twin Buttes!” he gurgled. “And, say, it’s a wreck! We’ve hit something right slap in the middle of the yard! Let’s make a break for the scene of the conflagration till we see who’s killed!”

Blount followed the ranchman’s lead, but shortly lost sight of the burly figure in the crowd of curious passengers pouring from the hastily opened vestibules. Seen at closer range, the accident appeared to be disastrous only in a material sense. The heavy “Pacific-type” locomotive had stumbled over the tongue of a split switch, leaving the rails and making a blockading barrier of itself across the tracks. Nobody was hurt; but there would be a delay of some hours before the track could be cleared.

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Finding little to hold him in the spectacle of the derailed locomotive, Blount strolled on through the railroad yard to the station and the town. He remembered the place chiefly by its name. In his boyhood it had been the nearest railroad forwarding-point for the mines at Lewiston, thirty miles beyond the Lost Hills. Now, as it appeared, it had become a lumber-shipping station. To the left of the railroad there were numerous sawmills, each with its mountain of waste dominated by a black chimney, screen-capped. For the supply of logs an enormous flume led down from the slopes of the forested range on the south, a trough-like water-chute out of which, though the working-day was ended, the great logs were still tumbling in an intermittent stream.

North of the town the valley broke away into a region of bare mesas dotted with rounded, butte-like hills, with the buttressing ranges on either side to lift the eastern and western horizons. The northern prospect enabled Blount to place himself accurately, and the tide of remembrance swept strongly in upon him. Some forty-odd miles away to the northeast, just beyond the horizon-lifting lesser range, lay the "short-grass" region in which he had spent the happy boyhood. An hour's gallop through the hills to the westward the level rays of the setting sun would be playing upon the little station of Painted Hat, the one-time shipping-point for the home ranch. And half-way between Painted Hat and the "Circle-Bar," nestling in the hollowed hands of the mountains, were the horse-corral of one Debbleby, a true hermit of the hills, and the boy Evan's earliest school-master in the great book of Nature.

Blount's one meliorating softness during the years of exile had manifested itself in an effort to keep track of Debbleby. He knew that the old horse-breeder was still alive, and that he was still herding his brood mares at the ranch on the Pigskin. The young man, fresh from the well-calculated East, threw up his head and sniffed the keen, cool breeze sweeping down from the northern hills. He was not given to impulsive plan-changing. On the contrary, he was slow to resolve and proportionately tenacious of the determination once made. But the stirring of boyish memories accounted for something; and in the sanest brain there are sleeping cells of irresponsibility ready to spring alive at the touch of suggestion. What if he should—

He sat down upon the edge of the station platform and thought it out deliberately. Since it would be hours before the tracks could be cleared and the rail journey resumed, what was to prevent him from taking an immediate and delightful plunge into the region of the heart-stirring recollections? Doubtless old Jason Debbleby was at this moment sitting on the door-step of his lonely ranch-house in the Pigskin foot-hills, smoking his corn-cob pipe and, quite possibly, wondering what had become of the boy whom he had taught to "rope down" and saddle and ride. Blount estimated the distance as he remembered it. With a hired horse he might reach Debbleby's by late bedtime; and after a night spent with the old ranchman he could ride on across the big mesa to the capital.

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Another ineffectual attempt to find out how soon the relief train from the capital might be expected decided Blount. Arranging with the Pullman conductor to have his hand-luggage left in Gantry's office at the capital, the man in search of his boyhood crossed quickly to a livery-stable opposite the station, bargained for a saddle-horse, borrowed a poncho and a pair of leggings, and prepared to break violently, for the moment at least, with all the civilized traditions. He would go and see Debbleby—drop in upon the old horse-breeder without warning, and thus get his first revived impression of the homeland unmixed with any of the disappointing changes which were doubtless awaiting him at the real journey's end.

Now it chanced that the livery-stable was an adjunct to the single hotel in the small sawmill town, and as Blount was mounting to ride he saw the thin-faced man, whom the ranchman, Griggs, had named for him, standing on the porch of the hotel in earnest talk with three others who, from their appearance, might have figured either as "timber jacks" or cowboys. Blount was on the point of recognizing his companion of the Pullman smoking-compartment as he rode past the hotel to take the trail to the northward, but a curious conviction that the gentleman with the bird-of-prey eyes was making him the subject of the earnest talk with the three men of doubtful occupation restrained him. A moment later, when he looked back from the crossing of the railroad track, he saw that all four of the men on the porch were watching him. This he saw; and if the backward glance had been prolonged for a single instant he might also have seen a big, barrel-bodied man with a red face stumbling out of the side door of the shack hotel to make vigorous and commanding signals to stop him. But this he missed.

There was an excuse for the oversight as well as for the speedy blotting out of the picture of the four men watching him from the porch of the hotel. With a fairly good horse under him, with the squeak of the saddle-leather in his ears and the smell of it in his nostrils, and with the wide world of the immensities into which to ride unhampered and free, the lost boyhood was found. Not for the most soul-satisfying professional triumph the fettered East could offer him would he have curtailed the free-reined flight into the silent wilderness by a single mile.

For the first half-hour of the invigorating gallop the fugitive from civilization had the sunset glow to help him find the trail. After that the moon rose, and the landmarks, which had seemed more or less familiar in daylight, lost their remembered featurings. During the first few miles the trail had led broadly across the table-land, with the eastern mountains withdrawing and the Lost River Range looming larger as its lofty sky-line was struck out sharply against the sunset horizon. Farther on, in the transition darkness between sunset and moon-rise, the trail disappeared

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entirely; but so long as he was sure of the general direction, Blount held on and gave the tireless little bronco a loose rein. The Debbleby ranch lay among the farther foothills of the western range, with the broad gulch of the Pigskin cutting a plain highway through the mountains. If he could find one of the head-water streams of the Pigskin, all of which took their rise in the gulches of the mesa, there could be no danger of losing the way.

It was some little time after he had left the shoulderings of the eastern range behind that a singular thing happened. Far away on his right he heard the sound of galloping hoofs. Though the moon was nearly full and the treeless landscape was bare of any kind of cover, he could not make out the horseman who was evidently passing him and going in the same direction. At first he thought it was some one who was making a *detour* to avoid him. Then he smiled at the absurdity of the guess and concluded that he himself was off the trail. This conclusion was confirmed a little later when two other travellers, announcing themselves to the ear as the first one had, and also, like the first, invisible to the sharpest eye-sweep of the moonlit plain, passed him at speed.

After that Blount had the solitudes and vastnesses to himself, and it was not until after the mesa-land had been crossed without a sign of a water-leading gulch to guide him to the Pigskin, and the bronco was patiently picking its way through the hogback of the western range, that the boyish thing he had been led to do took shape as an adventure which might have discomforting consequences.

For, after the hired bronco had wandered aimlessly through many gulches and had climbed a good half-score of the hogback hills, the young man from the East admitted that the boyhood memories were hopelessly and altogether at fault in the deceptive moonlight. Blount gave the horse a breathing halt on one of the hogbacks and tried to reconstruct the puzzling hills into some featuring that he could remember. The effort was fruitless. He was very thoroughly and painstakingly lost.

IV

THE HIGHBINDERS

When the three men who had pulled him from his horse and tied him hand and foot had withdrawn to the farther side of the tiny camp-fire to wrangle morosely over what should be done with him, Evan Blount found it simply impossible to realize that they were actually discussing, as one of the expedients, the propriety of knocking him on the head and flinging his body into the near-by canyon.



The difficulty of comprehension lay in the crude grotesqueness of the thing that had happened. Five minutes earlier he had been riding peacefully up the trail in the moonlight, wondering how thoroughly he was lost and how much farther it was to Debbleby's. Then, at a sudden sharp turn in the canyon bridle-path, he had stumbled upon the camp-fire, had heard an explosive "Hands up!" and had found himself confronted by three men, with one of the three covering him with a sawed-off Winchester. From that to the unhorsing and the binding had been merely a rough-and-tumble half-minute, inasmuch as he was unarmed and the surprise had been complete; but the grotesquery remained.

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Since his captors had as yet made no attempt to rob him, he could only surmise that some incredibly foolish mistake had been made. But when he remembered the three invisible horsemen who had passed him on the broad mesa he was not so certain about the mistake. Most naturally, his thoughts went back to the little episode on the hotel porch. The passing glance he had given to the three men with whom the fourth man, Hathaway, had been talking did not enable him to identify them with the three who were sourly discussing his fate at the near-by fire; none the less, the conclusion was fairly obvious. Thus far he had been either too busy or too bewildered to break in; but when the more murderous of the expedients was apparently about to be adopted, he decided that it was high time to try to find out why he was to be effaced. Whereupon he called across to the group at the fire.

"Without wishing to interfere with any arrangements you gentlemen are making, I shall be obliged if you will tell me why you think you have found it necessary to murder me."

"You know mighty good and well why there's one too many of you on Lost River, jest at this stage o' the game," growled the hard-faced spokesman who had held the Winchester while his two accomplices were doing the unhorsing and the binding.

"But I don't," insisted Blount good-naturedly. "So far as I know, there is only one of me—on Lost River or anywhere else."

"That'll do for you; it ain't your put-in, nohow," was the gruff decision of the court; but Blount was too good a lawyer to be silenced thus easily.

"Perhaps you might not especially regret killing the wrong man, but in the present case I am very sure I should," he went on. And then: "Are you quite sure you've got the right man?"

"The boss knows who you are—that's enough for us."

"The boss?" questioned Blount.

"Yas, I said the boss; now hold your jaw!"

Blount caught at the word. In a flash the talk with Gantry on the veranda of the Winnebasset Club flicked into his mind.

"There is only one boss in this State," he countered coolly. "And I am very sure he hasn't given you orders to kill me."

"What's that?" demanded the spokesman.

Blount repeated his assertion, adding jocularly: "Perhaps you'd better call up headquarters and ask your boss if he wants you to kill the son of his boss."

At this the gun-holder came around the fire to stand before his prisoner.

“Say, pal—this ain’t my night for kiddin’, and it hadn’t ort to be your’n,” he remarked grimly. “The boss didn’t say you was to be rubbed out—they never do. But I reckon it would save a heap o’ trouble if you was rubbed out.”

“On the contrary, I’m inclined to think it would make a heap of trouble—for you and your friends, and quite probably for the man or men who sent you to waylay me. But, apart from all that, you’ve got hold of the wrong man, as I told you a moment ago.”

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"No, by grapples! I hain't. I saw you in daylight. If there's been any fumblin' done, I hain't done it. So you see it ain't any o' my funeral."

"Think not?" said Blount.

"I know it ain't. Orders is orders, and you don't git over into them woods on Upper Lost Creek with no papers to serve on nobody: see?"

It was just here that the light of complete understanding dawned upon Blount; and with it came the disconcerting chill of a conviction overthrown. As a theorist he had always scoffed at the idea that a corporation, which is a creature of the law, could afford to be an open law-breaker. But here was a very striking refutation of the charitable assumption. His smoking-room companion of the Pullman car was doubtless one of the timber-pillagers who had been cutting on the public domain. To such a man an agent of the National Forest Service was an enemy to be hoodwinked, if possible, or, in the last resort, to be disposed of as expeditiously as might be, and Blount saw that he had only himself to blame for his present predicament, since he had allowed the man to believe that he was a Government emissary. Having this clew to the mystery, his course was a little easier to steer.

"I have no papers of the kind you think I have, as you can readily determine by searching me," he said. "My name is Blount, and I am the son of ex-Senator David Blount, of this State. Now what are you going to do with me?"

"What's that you say?" grated the outlaw.

"You heard what I said. Go ahead and heave me into the canyon if you are willing to stand for it afterward."

The hard-faced man turned without replying and went back to the other two at the fire. Blount caught only a word now and again of the low-toned, wrangling argument that followed. But from the overheard word or two he gathered that there were still some leanings toward the sound old maxim which declares that "dead men tell no tales." When the decision was finally reached, he was left to guess its purport. Without any explanation the thongs were taken from his wrists and ankles, and he was helped upon his horse. After his captors were mounted, the new status was defined by the spokesman in curt phrase.

"You go along quiet with us, and you don't make no bad breaks, see? I more'n half believe you been lyin' to me, but I'm goin' to give you a chance to prove up. If you don't prove up, you pass out—that's all. Now git in line and hike out; and if you're countin' on makin' a break, jest ricollect that a chunk o' lead out of a Winchester kin travel a heap faster thern your cayuse."

If Blount had not already lost all sense of familiarity with his surroundings, the devious mountain trail taken by his captors would soon have convinced him that the boyhood memories were no longer to be trusted. Up and down, the trail zigzagged and climbed, always penetrating deeper and deeper into the heart of the mountains. At times Blount lost even the sense of direction; lost it so completely that the high-riding moon seemed to be in the wrong quarter of the heavens.

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For the first few miles the trail was so difficult that speed was out of the question; but later, in crossing a high-lying valley, the horses were pushed. Beyond the valley there were more mountains, and half-way through this second range the trail plunged into a deep, cleft-like canyon with a brawling torrent for its pathfinder. Once more Blount lost the sense of direction, and when the canyon trail came out upon broad uplands and became a country road with bordering ranches watered by irrigation canals, into which the mountain torrent was diverted, there were no recognizable landmarks to tell him whither his captors were leading him.

As he was able to determine by holding his watch, face up, to the moonlight, it was nearly midnight when the silent cavalcade of four turned aside from the main road into an avenue of spreading cottonwood trees. At its head the avenue became a circular driveway; and fronting the driveway a stately house, with a massive Georgian facade and colonnaded portico, flung its shadow across the white gravel of the carriage approach.

There were lights in one wing of the house, and another appeared behind the fan-light in the entrance-hall when the leader of the three highbinders had tramped up the steps and touched the bell-push. Blount had a fleeting glimpse of a black head with a fringe of snowy wool when the door was opened, but he did not hear what was said. After the negro serving-man disappeared there was a little wait. At the end of the interval the door was opened wide, and Blount had a gruff order to dismount.

What he saw when he stood on the door-mat beside his captor merely added mystery to mystery. Just within the luxuriously furnished hall, where the light of the softly shaded hall lantern served to heighten the artistic effect of her red house-gown, stood a woman—a lady, and evidently the mistress of the Georgian mansion. She was small and dark, with brown eyes that were almost childlike in their winsomeness; a woman who might be twenty, or thirty, or any age between. Beautiful she was not, Blount decided, comparing her instantly, as he did all women, with Patricia Anners; but—He was not given time to add the qualifying phrase or to prepare himself for what was coming.

“What is it, Barto?” the little lady asked, turning to the man with the gun.

The reply was direct and straight to the purpose.

“Excuse *me*; but I jest wanted to ask if you know this here young feller. He’s been allowin’ to me th’t he is—”

“Of course,” she said quickly, and stepping forward she gave her hand and a welcome to the dazed one. “Please come in; we have been expecting you.” Then again to the man with the Winchester: “Thank you so much, Barto, for showing the gentleman the way to Wartrace Hall.”

It was all done so quietly that Blount was still unconsciously holding the hand of welcoming while his late captors were riding away down the cottonwood-shaded avenue. When he realized what he was doing he was as nearly embarrassed as a self-contained young lawyer could well be. But his impromptu hostess quickly set him at ease.

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"You needn't make any explanations," she hastened to say, smiling up at him and gently disengaging the hand which he was only now remembering that he had forgotten to relinquish. "Naturally, I inferred that you were in trouble, and that your safety depended in some sense upon my answer. Were you in trouble?"

Blount perceived immediately how utterly impossible it would be to make her, or any one else, understand the boyish impulse which had prompted him to leave his train, or the curious difficulty into which the impulse had precipitated him. So his explanation scarcely explained.

"I was on my way to a ranch—that is, to the capital—when these men held me up," he stammered. "They—they mistook me for some one else, I think, and for reasons best known to themselves they brought me here. If you could direct me to some place where I can get a night's lodging—"

"There is nothing like a tavern within twenty miles of here," she broke in; "nor is there any house within that radius which would refuse you a night's shelter, Mr.—"

Blount made a quick dive for his card-case, found it, and hastened to introduce himself by name. She took the bit of pasteboard, and, since she scarcely glanced at the engraved line on it, he found himself wholly unable to interpret her smile.

"The card is hardly necessary," she said; and then, to his complete bewilderment: "You are very much like your father, Mr. Blount."

"You know my father?" he exclaimed.

She laughed softly. "Every one knows the senator," she returned, "and I can assure you that his son is heartily welcome under this roof. Uncle Barnabas"—to the ancient serving-man who was still hovering in the background—"have Mr. Blount's horse put up and the blue room made ready."

Blount followed his still unnamed hostess obediently when she led the way to the lighted library in the wing of the great house.

"Uncle Barnabas will come for you in a little while," she told him, playing the part of the gracious lady to the line and letter. "In the meantime you must let me make you a cup of tea. I am sure you must be needing it after having ridden so far. Take the easy-chair, and we can talk comfortably while the kettle is boiling. Are you new to the West, Mr. Blount, or is this only a return to your own? The senator is always talking about you, you know; but he is so inordinately proud of you that he forgets to tell us all the really interesting things that we want to know."

The serving-man took his own time about coming back; so long a time that Blount forgot that it was past midnight, that he was a guest in a strange house, and that he still had

not learned the name of his entertainer. For all this forgetfulness the little lady with the dark-brown eyes was directly responsible. Almost before he realized it, Blount found himself chatting with her as if he had always known her, making rapid strides on the way to confidence and finding

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her alertly responsive in whatever field the talk happened to fall. Apparently she knew the world—his world—better than he knew it himself: she had summered on the North Shore and wintered in Washington. She knew Paris, and when the conversation touched upon the Italian art-galleries he was led to wonder if he had gone through Italy with his eyes shut. At the next turn of the talk he was forced to admit that not even Patricia herself could speak more intelligently of the English social problem; and when it came to the vital questions of the American moment he gasped again and wondered if he were awake—if it could be possible that this out-of-place Georgian mansion and its charming mistress could be part and parcel of the West which had so far outgrown the boyhood memories.

Since all things mundane must have an end, the old butler with the white-fringed head came at last to show him the way to his luxurious lodgings on the second floor of the mansion. With a touch of hospitality which carried Blount back to his one winter in the South, the hostess went with him as far as the stair-foot, and her “Good-night” was still ringing musically in his ears when the old negro lighted the candles in the guest-room, put another stick of wood on the small fire that was crackling and snapping cheerfully on the hearth, and bobbed and bowed his way to the door. Blount saw his last chance for better information vanishing for the night, and once more broke with the traditions.

“Uncle Barnabas, before you go, suppose you tell me where I am,” he suggested.
“Whose house is this?”

The old man stopped on the threshold, chuckling gleefully. “A-ain’t you know dat, sah? —a-ain’t de mistis done tell you dat? You’s at Wa’trece Hall—Mahsteh Majah’s new country-house; yes, sah; dat’s whah you is—kee-hee!”

“And who is ‘Master Major’?” pressed Blount, whose bewilderment grew with every fresh attempt to dispel it.

“A-ain’t she tell you dat?—kee-hee! Ev’body knows Mahsteh Majah; yes, sah. If de mistis ain’t tell you, ol’ Barnabas ain’t gwine to—no, sah. Ah’ll bring yo’-all’s coffee in de mawnin’; yes, sah—good-night, sah—kee-hee!” And the door closed silently upon the wrinkled old face and the bobbing head.

Having nothing else to do, Blount went to bed, but sleep came reluctantly. Life is said to be full of paper walls thinly dividing the commonplace from the amazing; and he decided that he had surely burst through one of them when he had given place to the vagrant impulse prompting him to go horseback-riding when he should have gone comfortably to bed in his sleeper to wait for the track-clearing.

Whither had a curiously bizarre fate led him? Where was “Wartrace Hall,” and who was “Mahsteh Majah”? Who was the winsome little lady who looked as if she might be twenty, and had all the wit and wisdom of the ages at her tongue’s end—who had held him so nearly spellbound over the teacups that he had entirely lost sight of everything but his hospitable welcome?

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These and kindred speculations kept him awake for a long time after the door had closed behind the ancient negro; and he was just dropping off into his first loss of consciousness when the familiar purring of a motor-car aroused him. There was a window at his bed's head, and he reached over and drew the curtain. The view gave upon the avenue of cottonwoods and the circular carriage approach. A touring-car, with its powerful head-lights paling the white radiance of the moon, was drawn up at the steps, and he had a glimpse of a big man, swathed from head to heel in a dust-coat, descending from the tonneau.

"I suppose that will be 'Mahsteh Majah,'" he mused sleepily. "That's why the little lady was sitting up so late—she was waiting for him." Then to the thronging queries threatening to return and keep him awake: "Scat!—go away! call it a pipe-dream and let me go to sleep!"

V

AT WARTRACE HALL

In his most imaginative moments, Evan Blount had never prefigured a home-coming to coincide in any detail of it with the reality.

When he opened his eyes on the morning following the night of singular adventures, the sun was shining brightly in at the bed's-head window, a cheerful fire was blazing on the hearth, and his father, a little heavier, a little grayer, but with the same ruggedly strong face and kindly eyes, was standing at his bedside.

"Father!"—and "Evan, boy!" were the simple words of greeting; but the mighty hand-grip which went with them was for the younger man a confirmation of the filial hope and a heart-warming promise for the future. Following instantly, there came a rush of mingled emotions: of astoundment that he had recognized no familiar landmark in the midnight faring through the hills or on the approach to the home of his childhood; of something akin to keen regret that the old had given place so thoroughly and completely to the new; of a feeling bordering on chagrin that he had been surprised into accepting the hospitable advances of a woman whom he had been intending to avoid, and for whom he had hitherto cherished—and meant to cherish—a settled aversion.

But at the hand-gripping moment there was no time for a nice weighing of emotions. He was in his father's house; the home-coming, some phases of which he had vaguely dreaded, was a fact accomplished, and the new life—the life which must be lived without Patricia—was fairly begun. Also, there were many arrears to be brought up.

"Intuition, on the manward side of it at least, doesn't go," he was saying with half-boyish candor. "I was awake last night when you drove home in the motor, and I looked out of

the window and saw you as you came up the steps. According to the psychics, there ought to have been some inward stirrings of recognition, but there weren't—not a single thrill. Did the little—er—did Mrs. Blount tell you that I was here?"

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"She did so; but she couldn't tell me much more. Say, son, how on top of earth did you happen to blow in at midnight, with Jack Barto for your herd leader?"

"It's a fairy tale, and you won't believe it—of a Blount," was the laughing reply. "I left Boston Monday, and should have reached the capital last night. But my train was laid out by a yard wreck at Twin Buttes just before dark, and I left it and took to the hills—horseback. Don't ask me why I did such a thing as that; I can only say that the smell of the sage-brush got into my blood and I simply had to do it."

The old cattle-king was standing with his feet planted wide apart and his hands deep in his pockets. "You hired a horse!" he chuckled, with the humorous wrinkles coming and going at the corners of the kindly eyes. "Did you have the nerve to think you were going to climb down from a three-legged stool in a Boston law office one day and ride the fifty miles from Twin Buttes to the capital the next?"

"Oh, no; I wasn't altogether daft. But knowing where I was, I did think I could ride out to Debbleby's. So I hired the bronco and set out—and that reminds me: the horse will have to be sent back to the liveryman in Twin Buttes, some way."

"Never mind the cayuse. Shackford would have made you a present of it outright if you had told him who you were. Go on with your story. It listens like a novel."

"I took the general direction all right on leaving Twin Buttes, and kept it until I got among the Lost River hogbacks. But after that I was pretty successfully lost. I'm ashamed to tell it, but about half of the time the moon didn't seem to be in the right place."

"Lost, were you? And Jack Barto found you?" queried the father.

"Barto hadn't lost me to any appreciable extent," was the half-humorous emendation. And then: "Who is this ubiquitous Barto who goes around playing the hold-up one minute and the good angel the next?"

"He is a sort of general utility man for Hathaway, the head pusher of the Twin Buttes Lumber Company. He is supposed to be a timber-cruiser and log-sealer, but I reckon he doesn't work very hard at his trade. Down in the lower wards of New York they'd call him a boss heeler, maybe. But you say 'hold-up'; you don't mean to tell me that Jack Barto robbed you, son!"

"Oh, no; he held me up with a gun while his helpers pulled me off the bronco and hog-tied me, and then fell to discussing with the other two the advisability of knocking me on the head and dropping me into Lost River Canyon—that's all. Of course, I knew they had stumbled upon the wrong man; and after a while I succeeded in making Barto accept that hypothesis; at least, he accepted it sufficiently to bring me here for identification. Since he wouldn't talk, and I didn't recognize the trail or the place, I

hadn't the slightest notion of my whereabouts—not the least in the world; didn't know where he was taking me or where I had landed when we stopped here.”

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The big man was leaning against the foot-rail of the bed and frowning thoughtfully. "Talked about dropping you into Lost River, did they? H'm. I reckon we'll have to look into that a little. Who set them on, son? Got any idea of that?"

"I have a very clear idea: it was this man Hathaway you speak of—a big ranchman named Griggs told me his name. He came across in the Pullman with me from Omaha; middle-aged, tall, and slim, with a hatchet face and owlish eyes. Before I learned his name we had talked a bit—killing time in the smoking-room. He said he was interested in mines and timber. Along toward the last he got the notion into his head that I was a special agent of some kind, on a mission for the Bureau of Forestry, and I was foolish enough to let him escape with the impression uncorrected."

"That was Pete Hathaway, all right," was the senator's comment. "His company has been cutting timber in the Lost River watershed reserves, and he probably thought you were aiming to get him. You say he sent Barto after you?"

"I'm only guessing at that part of it. When I rode away from Twin Buttes he was standing on the porch of the tavern, talking to Barto and two others; and I'm pretty sure he pointed me out to them. An hour or so later, three horsemen passed me on the mesa, one after another. I couldn't see them, but I heard them. It might have been another hour or more past that when they potted me."

"You gave them your name?"

"Yes; and that seemed to tangle them a little. Barto said he believed I was lying, but, anyway, he'd give me a chance to 'prove up.' Then they brought me here, and your—er—Mrs. Blount kindly stepped into the breach for me."

"You didn't know Honoria when you saw her?" queried the father.

"No; I wasn't in the least expecting—that is, I—you may remember that I had never met her," stammered the young man, who had risen on his elbow among the pillows.

The older man walked to the window and stood looking out upon the distant mountains for a full minute before he faced about to say: "We might as well run the boundary lines on this thing one time as another, son. You don't like Honoria; you've made up your mind you're not going to let yourself like her. I don't mean to make it hard for either of you if I can dodge it. This is her home; but it is also yours, my boy. Do you reckon you could—"

Evan Blount made affectionate haste to stop the half-pathetic appeal.

"Don't let that trouble you for a minute," he interposed. "I—Mrs. Blount is a very different person from the woman I have been picturing her to be; and if she were not, I

should still try to believe that we are both sufficiently civilized not to quarrel.” Then:
“Have you breakfasted yet—you and Mrs. Blount? But of course you have, long ago.”

“Breakfasted?—without you? Not much, son! And that reminds me: I was to come up here and see if you were awake, and if you were, I was to send Barnabas up with your coffee.”

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"You may tell Uncle Barnabas that I haven't acquired the coffee-in-bed habit yet," laughed the lazy one, sitting up. "Also, you may make my apologies to Mrs. Blount and tell her I'll be down *pronto*. There; doesn't that sound as if I were getting back to the good old sage-brush idiom? Great land! I haven't heard anybody say *pronto* since I was knee-high to a hop-toad!"

Farther on, when he was no longer in the first lilting flush of the new impressions, Evan Blount was able to look back upon that first day at Wartrace Hall with keen regret; the regret that, in the nature of things, it could never be lived over again. In all his forecastings he had never pictured a homecoming remotely resembling the fact. In each succeeding hour of the long summer day the edges of the chasm of the years drew closer together; and when, in the afternoon, his father put him on a horse and rode with him to a corner of the vast home domain, a corner fenced off by sentinel cottonwoods and watered by the single small irrigation ditch of his childish recollections; rode with him through the screening cottonwoods and showed him, lying beyond them, the old ranch buildings of the "Circle-Bar," untouched and undisturbed; his heart was full and a sudden mist came before his eyes to dim the picture.

"I've kept it all just as it used to be, Evan," the father said gently. "I thought maybe you'd come back some day and be sure-enough disappointed if it were gone."

The younger man slipped from his saddle and went to look in at the open door of the old ranch-house. Everything was precisely as he remembered it: the simple, old-fashioned furniture, the crossed quilts over the high wooden mantel, his mother's rocking-chair ... that was the final touch; he sat down on the worn door-log and put his face in his hands. For now the gaping chasm of the years was quite closed and he was a boy again.

Still later in this same first day there were ambling gallops along the country roads, and the father explained how the transformation from cattle-raising to agriculture and fruit-growing had come about; how the great irrigation project in Quaretaro Canyon had put a thousand square miles of the fertile mesa under cultivation; how with the inpouring of the new population had come new blood, new methods, good roads, the telephone, the rural mail route, and other civilizing agencies.

The young man groaned. "I know," he mourned. "I've lost my birth-land; it's as extinct as the prehistoric lizards whose bones we used to find sticking in the old gully banks on Table Mesa. By the way, that reminds me: are there any of those giant fossils left? I was telling Professor Annors about them the other day, and he was immensely interested."

"We're all fossils—we older folks of the cattle-raising times," laughed the man whom Richard Gantry had called the "biggest man in the State." "But there are some of the

petrified bones left, too, I reckon. If the professor is a friend of yours, we'll get him a State permit to dig all he wants to."

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"Yes; Professor Annors is a friend of mine," was the younger Blount's half-absent rejoinder. But after the admission was made he qualified it. "Perhaps I ought to say that he is as much a friend as his daughter will permit him to be."

The qualifying clause was not thrown away upon the senator.

"What-all has the daughter got against you, son?" he asked mildly.

"Nothing very serious," said Patricia's lover, with a laugh which was little better than a grimace. "It's merely that she is jealous of any one who tries to share her father with her. Next to her career—"

"That's Boston, isn't it?" interrupted the ex-king of the cattle ranges. Then he added: "I'm right glad it hasn't come in your way to tie yourself up to one of those 'careers,' Evan, boy."

Now all the influences of this red-letter day had been humanizing, and when Evan Blount remembered the preservation of the old "Circle-Bar" ranch-house, and the motive which had prompted it, he told his brief love-tale, hiding nothing—not even the hope that in the years to come Patricia might possibly find her career sufficiently unsatisfying to admit the thin edge of some wedge of reconsideration. He felt better after he had told his father. It was highly necessary that he should tell some one; and who better?

David Blount listened with the far-away look in his eyes which the son had more than once marked as the greatest of the changes chargeable to the aging years.

"Think a heap of her, do you, son?" he said, when the ambling saddle-animals had covered another half-mile of the homeward journey.

"So much that it went near to spoiling me when she finally made me realize that I couldn't hold my own against the 'career,'" was the young man's answer. Then he added: "I want work, father—that is what I am out here for; the hardest kind of work, and plenty of it; something that I can put my heart into. Can you find it for me?"

There was the wisdom of the centuries in the gentle smile provoked by this unashamed disappointed lover's appeal.

"I wouldn't take it too hard—the career business—if I were you, son," said the wise man. "And as for the work, I reckon we can satisfy you, if your appetite isn't too whaling big. How would a State office of some kind suit you?"

"Politics?" queried Blount, bringing his horse down to the walk for which his father had set the example. "I've thought a good bit about that, though I haven't had any special training that way. The schools of to-day are turning out business lawyers—men who know the commercial and industrial codes and are trained particularly in their

application to the great business undertakings. That has been my ambition: to be a business adviser, and, perhaps, after a while to climb to the top of the ladder and be somebody's corporation counsel."

"But now you have changed your notion?"

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"I don't know; sometimes I wonder if I haven't. There is another field that is exceedingly attractive to me, and you have just named it. No man can study the politics of America to-day without seeing the crying need for good men: men who will not let the big income they could command in private undertakings weigh against pure patriotism and a plain duty to their country and their fellow-men; strong men who would administer the affairs of the State or the nation absolutely without fear or favor; men who will hew to the line under any and all conditions. There's an awful dearth of that kind of material in our Government."

A quaint smile was playing under the drooping mustaches of that veteran politician the Honorable Senator Sage-Brush.

"I reckon we do need a few men like that, Evan; need 'em mighty bad. Think you could fill the bill as one of them if you had a right good chance?"

The potential hewer of political chips which should lie as they might fall smiled at what seemed to be merely an expression of parental favoritism.

"I'm not likely to get the chance very soon," he returned. "Just at present, you know, I am still a legal resident of the good old Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and a member of its bar—eligible to office there, and nowhere else."

"You'd be a citizen of this State by the time you could get elected to an office in it," suggested the senator gravely.

"I know; the required term of residence here is ridiculously short. But you are forgetting that I am as completely unknown in the sage-brush hills as you are well known. I couldn't get a nomination for the office of pound-keeper."

David Blount was chuckling softly as he threw up the brim of the big sombrero he was wearing.

"Sounds right funny to hear you talking that way, son," he commented. "Mighty near everybody this side of the Bad Lands will tell you that the slate hangs up behind the door at Wartrace Hall; and I don't know but what some people would say that old Sage-Brush Dave himself does most of the writing on it. Anyhow, there is one place on it that is still needing a name, and I reckon your name would fit it as well as anybody's."

The young man who was so lately out of the well-balanced East was astounded.

"Heavens!" he ejaculated. "You're not considering me as a possibility on the State ticket before I've been twenty-four hours inside of the State lines, are you?"

"No; not exactly as a possibility, son; that isn't quite the word. We'll call it a sure thing, if you want it. It's this way: we're needing a sort of political house-cleaning right bad this

year. We have good enough laws, but they're winked at any day in the week when somebody comes along with a fistful of yellow-backs. The fight is on between the people of this State and the corporations; it was begun two years ago, and the people got the laws all right, but they forgot to elect men who would carry them out. This time it looks as if the voters had got their knives sharpened. We've been a little slow catching step maybe, but the marching orders have gone out. We're aiming to clean house, and do it right, this fall."

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"Not if the slate hangs behind your door—or any man's, father," was the theorist's sober reminder. "Reform doesn't come in by that road."

"Hold on, boy; steady-go-easy's the word. Reform comes in by any old trail it can find, mostly, and thanks its lucky stars if it doesn't run up against any bridges washed out or any mud-holes too deep to ford. We've got a good man for governor right now; not any too broad maybe, but good—church good. Nobody has ever said he'd take a bribe; but he isn't heavy enough to sit on the lid and hold it down. Alec Gordon, the man who is going to succeed him next fall, is all the different kinds of things that the present governor isn't, so that is fixed."

"How 'fixed'?" queried the younger man, who, though he was not from Missouri, was beginning to fear that he would constantly have to be shown.

"In the same way that everything has to be fixed if we are going to get results," was the calm reply. "After the governor, the man upon whom the most depends is the attorney-general. The fellow who is in now, Dortscher, is one of the candidates, but we've crossed his name off. The next man we considered was Jim Rankin. In some ways he's fit; he's a hard fighter, and the man doesn't live who can bluff him. But Jim's poor, and he wants mighty bad to be rich, so I reckon that lets him out."

All of this was directly subversive of Evan Blount's ideas touching the manner in which the political affairs of a free country should be conducted, but he was willing to hear more.

"Well?" he said.

"What we want this time is one of your hew-to-the-line fellows, son. Reckon you'd like to try it?"

The young man who was less than a week away from the atmosphere of the idealistic school and its theories was frankly aghast. That his father should be coolly proposing him for a high office in the State in which, notwithstanding the birthright, he was as new as the newest immigrant, seemed blankly incredible. But when the incredibility began to subside, the despotism of the machine methods which could propose and carry out such unheard-of things loomed maleficent.

"I'm afraid we are a good many miles apart in this matter of politics," he said, when the proposal had been given time to sink in. "America is supposed to be a free country, with a representative government elected by the suffrages of the people; do you mean to say that you and a few of your friends ignore the basic principles of democracy to such an extent that you nominate and elect anybody you please to any office in the State?"

The far-seeing eyes of the veteran were twinkling again.

“Oh, I don’t know about our being so far apart,” was the deprecatory protest. “You’re just a little bit long on theory, that’s all, son. When it comes down to the real thing—practical politics, as some folks call it—somebody has to head the stampede and turn it. And if we don’t do it this coming fall, the other bunch will.”

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"What other bunch?"

"In this case it's the corporations: the timber people, the irrigation companies, and, most of all, the railroad."

"Gantry seems to think that the railroads—or his railroad, at least—are persecuted."

The senator pulled his horse down to a still slower walk. "Where did you see Dick Gantry?" he demanded.

Evan told of the meeting on the veranda of the Winnebasset Club, adding the further fact of the college friendship.

"Just happened so, did it?" queried the older man, "that getting together last Saturday night?"

"Why—yes, I suppose so. Dick knew I was in Boston, and he said he had meant to look me up."

"I reckon he did," was the quiet comment; "yes, I reckon he did. And he filled you up plumb full of Hardwick McVickar's notions, of course. I reckon that's about what he was told to do. But we won't fall apart on that, son. To-morrow we'll run down to the city, and you can look the ground over for yourself. I want you to draw your own conclusions, and then come and tell me what you'd like to do. Shall we leave it that way?"

Evan Blount acquiesced, quite without prejudice, to a firm conviction that his opinion, when formed, was going to be based on the larger merits of the case, upon a fair and judicial summing-up of the pros and cons—all of them. He felt that it would be a blow struck at the very root of the tree of good government if he should consent to be the candidate of the machine. But, on the other hand, he saw instantly what a power a fearless public prosecutor could be in a misguided commonwealth where the lack was not of good laws, but of men strong enough and courageous enough to administer them. He would see: if the good to be accomplished were great enough to over-balance the evil ... it was a temptation to compromise—a sharp temptation; and he found himself longing for Patricia, for her clear-sighted comment which, he felt sure, would go straight to the heart of the tangle.

It was that thought of Patricia, and his need for her, that made him absent-minded at the Wartrace Hall dinner-table that evening; and the father, looking on, suspected that Evan's taciturnity was an expression of his prejudice against the woman who had taken his mother's place. After dinner, when the son, pleading weariness, retreated early to his room, the senator's suspicion became a belief.

“You’ll have to be right patient with the boy, little woman,” he said to the small person whom Gantry had described as the court of last resort; this when Evan had disappeared and the long-stemmed pipe was alight. “I shouldn’t wonder if Boston had put some mighty queer notions into his head.”

The little lady looked up from her embroidery frame and a quaint smile was twitching at the corners of the pretty mouth. “He is a dear boy, and he is trying awfully hard to hate me,” she said. “But I sha’n’t let him, David.”

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VI

ON THE WING OF OCCASIONS

From the time when it was heralded in the mammoth New Year's edition of *The Plainsman* as "the newest, the finest, and the most luxurious hostelry west of the Missouri River," the Inter-Mountain Hotel, in the Sage-brush capital, had been the acceptable gathering-place of the clans, industrial, promoting, or political.

Anticipating this patronage, Clarkson, its bonanza-king builder and owner, had amended the architect's plans to make them include a convention-hall, committee-rooms, and a complete floor of suites with private dining-rooms. Past this, the amended plans doubled the floor space of the lobby—debating-ground dear to the heart of the country delegate—and particular pains had been taken to make this semi-public forum, where the burning question of the moment could be caucussed and the shaky partisan resworn to fealty, attractive and home-like; the plainly tiled floor, leather-covered lounging-chairs, and numerous and convenient cuspidors lending an air of democratic comfort which was somehow missing in the resplendent, bemirrored, onyx-plated bar, blazing with its cut glass and polished mahogany.

After the solid costliness of Wartrace Hall and the thirty-mile spin in a high-powered gentleman's roadster, which was only one of the three high-priced motor-carriages in the Wartrace garage, Evan Blount was not surprised to learn that his father was registered in permanence for one of the private dining-room suites at the Inter-Mountain. It was amply evident that the simple life which had been the rule of the "Circle-Bar" ranch household had become a thing of the past; and though he charged the new order of things to the ambition of his father's wife, he could hardly cavil at it, since he was himself a sharer in the comforts and luxuries.

For the first few days after the father and son had gone into bachelor quarters at the Inter-Mountain, the returned exile was left almost wholly to his own devices. Beyond giving him a good many introductions, as the opportunities for them offered in the stirring life of the hotel, his father made few demands upon him, and they were together only at luncheon and dinner, the midday meal being usually served in their suite, while for the dinner they met by appointment in the hotel *cafe*.

Notwithstanding this hospitable neglect on the part of his father, Evan Blount suffered no lack of the social opportunities. Gantry was back, and, in addition to a most ready availability as a social sponsor, the traffic manager was both able and willing. Almost before he had time to realize it, Blount had been put in touch with the busy, breezy life of the Western city, was exchanging nods or hand-shakings with more people than he had ever known in Cambridge or Boston, and was receiving more invitations than he could possibly accept.

“Pretty good old town, isn’t it?” laughed Gantry one day, when he had tolled Blount away from the Inter-Mountain luncheon to share a table with him in the Railway Club. “Getting so you feel a little more at home with us?”

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"If I'm not, it isn't your fault, Dick, or the fault of your friends. Naturally, I expected some sort of a welcome as ex-Senator David Blount's son; but that doesn't seem to cut any figure at all."

Gantry's smile was inscrutable.

"The people with whom it cuts the largest figure will never let you know anything about it. Just the same, your sonship is cutting a good bit of ice, if you care to know it. I've met a number of men in the past few days who have discovered that you are just about the brainiest thing that ever escaped from the effete East and the law schools."

"Tommy-rot!" derided the brainy one.

"It's a fact. And they are prophesying all sorts of a roseate and iridescent future for you. One might almost imagine that the prophets are inspired by that kind of gratitude which is a lively sense of favors to come."

"Oh, piffle! You know that is all nonsense!"

"Is it?" queried the railroad man, stressing the first word meaningly. Then, shifting the point of attack: "You're mighty innocent, aren't you, old man? But I think you might have told me. Goodness knows, I'm as safe as a brick wall."

"Might have told you what?"

"That you are going to run for attorney-general against Dortscher."

"I couldn't very well tell you what I didn't know myself, Dick," was the sober reply. "Who has been romancing to you?"

"It's all over town. Everybody's talking about it—talking a lot and guessing a good deal more. You've got 'em running around in circles and uttering loud and plaintive cries, especially Jim Rankin, who had—or thought he had—a lead-pipe cinch on the job. Dortscher is tickled half to death. He knew he wasn't going to be allowed to succeed himself, and he hates Rankin worse than poison."

Blount was balancing the spoon on the edge of his coffee-cup and scowling abstractedly. It was the first little discord in the filial harmony—this evidence that the powers were at work; almost a breach of confidence. There was no avoiding the distasteful conclusion. Without consulting his wishes, without waiting for his decision, his father had publicly committed him—taken "snap judgment" upon him was the way he phrased it.

"Dick, will you believe me if I say that I haven't authorized any such talk as this you've been hearing?" he asked, looking up quickly.

This time Gantry's smile was a grin of complete intelligence.

"Oh, that's the way of it, eh? The Honorable Senator took it out of your hands, did he? You'll understand that I'm not casting any aspersions when I say that it's exactly like him. If he has slated you, you are booked to run; and if he runs you, you'll be elected. Those are two of the things that practically speak right out and say themselves here in the old Sage-brush State."

Blount was indignant—justly indignant, he persuaded himself.

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"If that is the case, Gantry, it is high time that some one should have nerve enough to break the charm. I haven't said that I would accept the nomination if it were tendered me, and I am not at all sure that I am going to say it. And if I don't say it, by all that's good and great, that settles it!"

Gantry was plainly shocked. "You're not trying to make me believe that you've got nerve enough to buck the old m—your father, I mean? Why, great cats, Evan! you don't know what that stands for in the greasewood hills!"

"And I don't care, Dick. Up to this present moment I am a free moral agent; I haven't surrendered any right of decision to my father, or to any one else, so far as I am aware."

Gantry's eyes dropped to his plate, and his rejoinder was not wholly free from guile.

"Will you authorize me to contradict the talk as I can?" he asked, without looking up.

Blount was still warm enough to be peremptory.

"Yes, you may contradict it. You may say that it is entirely unauthorized—that I have told you so myself." Then he remembered the claims of friendship. "I'll be frank with you, Dick; this thing has been mentioned to me once, but nothing was decided—absolutely nothing. I didn't even promise to take it under advisement."

Among those who knew him only externally, Mr. Richard Gantry had the reputation of owning a loose tongue. But none recognized more justly than the real Richard Gantry the precise instant at which to bridle the loose tongue or when to make it wag away from the subject which has reached its nicely calculated climax. While the flush of irritation was still making him ashamed that he had shown so much warmth, Blount found himself gossiping with his table companion over a social function two days old; and subsequently, when the waiter brought the cigars, Gantry was congratulating himself that the danger-point, if any there were, was safely past.

It was after the club luncheon, and while the two young men were on their way to the smoking-room, that some one on business bent stopped Gantry in the corridor. Blount strolled on by himself, and, finding the smoking-room unoccupied, went to lounge in a lazy-chair standing in a little alcove lined with bookcases and half screened by the racks of the newspaper files. Notwithstanding the successful topic changing at table, he was still brooding over the false position in which his father's plans had placed him; wherefore he craved solitude and a chance to think things over fairly and without heat.

Shortly afterward Gantry looked in, and, apparently missing the half-concealed easy-chair and its occupant in the bookcase alcove, went his way. He had scarcely had time to get out of the building, one would say, before two men entered the smoking-room, coming down the corridor from the grill. Blount saw them, and he made sure that they

saw him. But when they had taken chairs on the other side of the sheltering newspaper files he was suddenly assured that they had not seen him. They were talking quite freely of him and of his father.

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"Well, the Honorable Dave has got McVickar dead to rights this time," remarked the older of the two, a hard-featured, round-bodied real-estate promoter to whom Blount had been introduced on his first day in the capital, but whose name he could not now recall. "This scheme of the senator's for shoving his son into the race for the attorney-generalship is just about the foxiest thing he has ever put across. You can bet the air was blue in the Transcontinental Chicago offices when the news got there."

"What do you suppose McVickar will do?" asked the other.

"He will do anything the senator wants him to—he's got to. Blount is land hungry, and I guess he'll take a few more sections of the railroad mesa-land under the Clearwater ditch. That was what he did two years ago when McVickar wanted the right of way for the branch through Carnadine County."

"Don't you believe he's going to take any little Christmas gift this time!" was the rasping reply. "He'll sell the railroad something, and take good hard money for it. It's a cinch. The railroad can't afford to have the courts against it, and McVickar will be made to sweat blood this heat. You watch the wheels go round when McVickar comes out here."

Evan Blount found himself growing strangely sick and faint. Could it be his father whom they were thus calmly accusing of graft and trickery and blackmailing methods too despicable to be imagined? His first impulse was to confront the two; to demand proofs; to do and say what a loyal son should. But the crushing conviction that they were discussing only well-known and well-assured facts unnerved him; and after that he was anxious for only one thing—that they might finish their cigars and go away without discovering him.

Fate was kind to him thus far. After a little further talk, in which the accepted point of view of the on looker at the great game was made still more painfully evident for the unwilling listener, the men went away. For a long time after they had gone, Blount sat crumpled in the depths of the big chair, chewing his extinct cigar and staring absently at the row of books on a level with his eyes in the opposite case.

One clear thought, and one only, came out of the sorrowful confusion: not for any inducement that could now be offered would he lend himself to the furtherance of his father's plans. Beyond this he did not reason in the miserable hour wrought out in the quiet of the club smoking-room. But when he got up to go, another prompting was forcing its way to the surface—a prompting to throw himself boldly into the scale against graft and chicanery; to redeem at any cost, and by whatsoever means might offer, the good old name which had been so shamefully dragged in the mire.

He did not know just how it was to be done, but he told himself that he would find a way. That the path would be full of thorns he could not doubt, since every step in it would widen the breach which must be opened between his father and himself.

Possibly it might lead him to the bar of justice as that father's accuser, but even in that hard case he must not falter. He said to himself, in a fresh access of passionate determination, that though he might have to blush for his father, Patricia should not be made ashamed for her lover.

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Upon leaving the club, he paused long enough to remember that he was in no fit frame of mind to risk an immediate meeting with his father. To make even a chance meeting impossible, he crossed the street, and, passing through the Capitol grounds, strolled aimlessly out one of the residence avenues until he came to the open country beyond the suburbs.

It was quite late in the afternoon when he re-entered the city by another street and boarded a trolley car for the down-town centre. The long afternoon tramp, and the conclusions it had bred, made it imperative for him to see Gantry before the traffic manager should leave his office for the day. His business with the railroad man was purely personal. He meant to ask Gantry a few pointed questions requiring such answers as friendship may demand. If Gantry's replies were such as he feared they would be, he would seek his father and come at once to a plain understanding with him.

The trolley car dropped him within a square of the railway station, on the second floor of which Gantry had his business office. The shortest way to the Sierra Avenue end of the station building was through the great train-shed. Half-way up the platform Blount met the west-bound Overland steaming in from the eastern yards. At the Sierra Avenue crossing the yard crew was cutting off a private car. Blount saw the number on the medallion, "008," and noted half absently the rich window-hangings and the polished brass platform railings. A car inspector in greasy overalls and jumper was tapping the wheels with his long-handled hammer.

"Whose car is this?" asked Blount.

"'Tis Misther McVickar's, sorr—the vice-prisidint av the coompany," said the man.

Blount turned away, saying something which the hammer-man mistook for a word of thanks. So the vice-president had come, hastening upon the wing of occasions, it seemed. And in the light of the overheard conversation in the club smoking-room, it was only too easy to guess his errand in the Sage-brush capital. He had come to make such terms as he could with the man who was going to hold him up.

VII

A BATTLE ROYAL

Having already convinced himself that the time was ripe for a straightforward declaration of principles, Evan Blount saw in the arrival of the Overland, with the vice-president's private car attached, only an added argument for haste.

During the better part of the long tramp in the outskirts of the city he had been halting between two opinions. The fighting blood of the Tennessee pioneer strain had clamored for its hearing, prompting him to enter the lists, to set up the standard of honesty and

fair-dealing in the Blount name, to plunge into the approaching political campaign with a single purpose—the purpose of overthrowing the power of the machine in his native State. On the other hand, filial affection

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had pleaded eloquently. The battle for political honesty would inevitably involve his father; would, if successful, defeat and disgrace him. As often as he thought he had closed decisively with the idealistic determination, the other side of the argument sprang up again, keen-edged and biting. Up to the present moment he had owed his father everything—was still owing him day by day. Would it not be the part of a son to drop out quietly, leaving the political house-cleaning for some one who would not be obliged to pay such a costly price?

It was the idealistic decision which had been in the saddle when he dropped from the trolley car at the western portal of the railway station, and which was sending him to seek the scale-turning interview with Gantry. But, after all, it was chance and the swift current of events which seized upon him and swept him along, smashing all the arguments and fine-spun theories. Before he had gone ten steps in the direction of Gantry's office, some one in the throng of debarking Overland travellers called his name. Turning quickly, he found himself face to face with a white-haired little gentleman who had plucked impatiently at his sleeve.

"Why, bless my soul! Of all the lucky miracles!" gasped the young man who, but an instant earlier, had been deaf and blind to all external things. And then: "Where is Patricia?"

"She's here, somewhere," snapped the little gentleman irascibly. "I've lost her in this confounded mob. Find her for me. I've got my reading-glasses on, and I can't see anything. Why don't they have this barn of a place lighted up?"

"Stand still right where you are," Blount directed, and a moment later he had found Patricia guarding a pair of suit-cases which were too heavy for her to carry.

"You poor lost child!" was his burbled greeting.

"You don't mean to tell me that *this* is the West to which you said you were coming?"

"I'm not lost; I'm here. It's father who is lost," she laughed. Then she answered his question; "Yes, this is the West I meant, and if you haven't been telling the truth about it —"

Blount had snatched up the two hand-bags and had effected a reunion of the scattered pair. The little gentleman, standing immovable, as he had been told to do, was blinking impatiently through his reading-glasses at the surging throng. When Blount came up, the professor stabbed him with a sharp forefinger.

"Well, we're here, young man," he barked. "If you've been telling me fibs about those Megalosauridae which you said could be dug out of your sage-brush hills, you'll pay our

fare back home again—just make up your mind to that. Now show us the best hotel in this mushroom city of yours, and do it quickly.”

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Having a hospitable thing to do, Blount shoved his problem into a still more remote background and bestirred himself generously. Though the Inter-Mountain was only three squares distant, he chartered the best-looking auto he could find in the rank of waiting vehicles, put his charges into it, and went with them to do the honors at the hotel. By this postponement of the visit to Gantry he missed a meeting which would have done something toward solving a part of his problem. But for the hospitable turning aside he might have reached the railroad office in time to see a round-bodied man halting at the open door of Gantry's private room for a parting word with the traffic manager.

"Oh, yes; he fell for it, all right," was the form the parting word took. "If you had seen his face when Lackner and I came away, you'd have said there was battle, murder, and sudden death in it for somebody."

"But, see here, Bradbury," Gantry held his visitor to say, "it wasn't in the game that you were to fill him up with a lot of lies. I won't stand for that, you know. He is too good a fellow, and too good a friend of mine."

It was at this juncture that Blount, if he had been present and invisible, would have seen a sour smile wrinkling upon the face of the club gossip.

"I owe the senator one or two on my own account, Gantry. But it wasn't necessary to go out of the beaten path. If young Blount or his daddy would like to sue us for libel, we could prove every word that was said—or prove that it was common report; too common to be doubted. And it got the young fellow; got him right in the solar plexus. If you don't see some fireworks within the next few days, I miss my guess and lose my ante."

This is what Evan Blount, carrying out his intention of going to Gantry, might have seen and heard. On the other hand, if he had lingered a few minutes longer on the station platform he could scarcely have failed to mark the side-tracking of private car "008," and he might have seen the herculean figure of the vice-president crossing to the carriage-stand to climb heavily into a waiting automobile.

Mr. McVickar's order to the chauffeur was curtly brief, and a little later the vice-president entered the lobby of the Inter-Mountain and shot a brisk question at the room-clerk.

"Is Senator Blount in his rooms?"

"I think not. He was here a few minutes ago. I'll send a boy to hunt him up for you. You want your usual suite, I suppose, Mr. McVickar?"

"No; I'm not stopping overnight. Is young Blount here in the hotel?"

"He has just gone up to the fifth floor with some friends of his—Mr. Annors and his daughter, from Boston. Shall I hold him for you when he comes down?"

“No; I want to see the senator. Hustle out another boy or two. I can’t wait all night.”

It was at this moment that Evan Blount, bearing luggage-checks and going in search of the house baggageman, missed another incident which might have drawn him back suddenly to his problem and its unsettled condition. The incident was the meeting between his father and the railroad vice-president at the room-clerk’s counter. It was neither hostile nor friendly; on McVickar’s part it was gruffly business-like.

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"Well, Senator, I'm here," was the follow-up of the perfunctory hand-shake. "Let's find a place where we can flail it out," and together the two entered an elevator.

Reaching the floor of the private dining-room suites, the ex-cattle-king led the way in silence to his own apartments; rather let us say he pointed the way, since in the march down the long corridor the two field commanders tramped evenly abreast as if neither would give the other the advantage of an inch of precedence. In the sitting-room of the private suite the senator snapped the latch on the door, and pressed the wall-button for the electric lights. McVickar dragged a chair over to one of the windows commanding a view of the busy street, and dropping solidly into it, like a man bracing himself for a fight, began abruptly:

"I suppose we may as well cut out the preliminaries and come to the point at once, Blount. Ackerton wired me that you had definitely announced your son as a candidate for the attorney-generalship. Have you?"

The senator had found an unopened box of cigars in a cabinet and he was inserting the blade of his pocket-knife under the lid when he said, with good-natured irony: "The primaries do the nominating in this State, Hardwick. Didn't you know that?"

"See here, Blount; I've come half-way across the continent to thresh this thing out with you, face to face, and I'm not in the humor to spar for an opening. Do you mean to run your son or not? That is a plain question, and I'd like to have an equally plain answer."

"I told you two weeks ago what you might expect if you insisted on sticking your crow-bar in among the wheels this fall, McVickar, but you wouldn't believe me. I'll say it again if you want to hear it."

"And I told you two weeks ago that we couldn't stand for any such programme as the one you had mapped out. And I added that you might name your own price for an alternative which wouldn't confiscate us and drive us off the face of the earth."

"Yes; and I named the price, if you happen to remember."

"I know; you said you wanted us to turn everything over to the Paramounters and take our chances on a clean administration. Naturally, we're not going to do any such Utopian thing as that. What I want to know now is what it is going to cost us to do the practical and possible thing."

"Want to buy me outright this time, do you, Hardwick?" said the boss, still smiling.

"We"—McVickar was going to say—"We have bought you before," but he changed the retort to a less offensive phrasing—"We have had no difficulty heretofore in arriving at some practical and sensible *modus vivendi*, and we shouldn't have now. But as a condition binding upon any sort of an arrangement, I am here to say that we can't let

you nominate and elect your son as attorney-general; that's out of the question. If it's going to prove a personal disappointment to you, we'll be reasonable and try to make it up to you in some other way."

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Again the grimly humorous smile was twinkling in the gray eyes of the old cattleman. "What is the market quotation on disappointments, right now, Hardwick?" he inquired.

With another man McVickar might have been too diplomatic to show signs of a shortening temper. But David Blount was an open-eyed enemy of long standing.

"I don't know anybody west of the Missouri River who has a better idea of market values than you have," the vice-president countered smartly. Then, dropping a heavy hand upon the arm of his chair: "This thing has got to be settled here and now, Blount. If you put your son in as public prosecutor, you can have but one object in view—you mean to squeeze us till the blood runs. We are willing to discount that object before the fact!"

"So you have said before, a number of times and in a whole heap of different ways. It's getting sort of monotonous, don't you think?"

"I sha'n't say it many more times, David; you are pushing me too far and too hard."

"All right; what will you say, then?"

"Just this: if you won't meet me half-way—if you insist upon a fight—I'll fight you with any weapons I can get hold of!"

Once more the quiet smile played about the outer angles of the hereditary Blount eyes.

"You've said that in other campaigns, Hardwick; in the end you've always been like the 'possum that offered to come down out of the tree if the man wouldn't shoot."

"I'll hand you another proverb to go with that one," snapped the man in the arm-chair: "The pitcher that goes once too often to the well is sure to be broken. You've got a joint in your armor now, Blount. You've always been able to snap your fingers at public opinion before this; can you afford to do it now?"

"Oh, I don't know; I reckon I'll have to grin and bear it if you want to buy up a few newspapers and set them to blacklisting me, as you usually do," was the half-quizzical reply. Then: "I'm pretty well used to it by this time. You and your folks can't paint me much blacker than you have always painted me, Hardwick."

"Maybe not. But this time we're going to give you a chance to start a few libel suits—if you think you can afford to appear in the courts. We've got plenty of evidence, and by heavens we'll produce it! You put your son in as public prosecutor and we might be tempted to make your own State too hot to hold you. Had you thought of that?"

"Go ahead and try it," was the laconic response.

“But that isn’t all,” the railroad dictator went on remorselessly. “Your fellow citizens here know you for exactly what you are, Blount. You rule them with a rod of iron, but that rule can be broken. When it is broken, you’ll be hounded as a criminal. In our last talk together you had something to say to me about our not keeping up with the change in public sentiment; public sentiment *has* changed; changed so far that it is coming to demand the punishment of the great offenders as well as the jailing of the little ones. If we want to push this fight hard enough, it is not impossible that you might find yourself in a hard row of stumps at the end of it, David.”

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"I'm taking all those chances," was the even-toned rejoinder of the man who was to be shown up.

"But there is one chance I'm sure you haven't considered," McVickar went on aggressively. "This son of yours; I know as much about him as you do—more, perhaps, for I have taken more pains to keep tab on him for the past few years than you have. He is clean and straight, Blount; a son for any father to be proud of. If that is the real reason why we don't want to have him instructing the grand juries of this State, it is also your best reason for wanting to keep the past decently under cover. What will you say to him when the newspapers open up on you? And what will he say to you? And suppose you get him in, and we should show you up so that you'd be dragged into court with your own son for the prosecutor? How does that strike you?"

For the first time since the opening of the one-sided conference the senator laid his cigar aside and sat thoughtfully tugging at the drooping mustaches.

"You'd set the house afire over my head, would you, Hardwick?" he queried, with the gray eyes lighting up as with a glow of smouldering embers. "The last time we talked you'll remember that you posted your 'de-fi'; now I'll post mine. You go ahead and do your damndest! The boy and I will try to see to it that you don't have all the fun. I won't say that you mightn't turn him if you went at it right; but you won't go at it right, and as matters stand now—well, blood is thicker than water, Hardwick, and if you hit me you hit him. I reckon, between us, we'll make out to give you as good as you send. That's all"—he rose to lean heavily upon the table—"all but one thing: you fight fair, Hardwick; say anything you like about me and I'll stand for it; but if that boy has anything in his past that I don't know about—any little fool trick that he wouldn't want to see published—you let it alone and keep your damned newspaper hounds off of it!"

The vice-president, being of those who regain equanimity in exact proportion as an opponent loses it, chuckled grimly; was still chuckling when an interrupting tap came at the locked door. Blount got up and turned the latch to admit an office-boy wearing the uniform of the railroad headquarters. "Note for Mr. McVickar," said the messenger; and at a gesture from the senator he crossed the room to deliver it.

For a full half-minute after the boy had gone, the vice-president sat poring over the pencilled scrawl, which was all that the sealed envelope yielded. The note was lacking both date-line and signature, though the clerks in Richard Gantry's office were familiar enough with the hieroglyph that appeared at the bottom of the sheet. In his own good time the vice-president folded the bit of paper and thrust it into his pocket. Then he resumed the talk at the precise point at which it had been broken off.

"You needn't let the boy's record trouble you," he averred. "As I said a few minutes ago, it's as clean as a hound's tooth. That is one of the things I'm banking on, David. If you

don't look out, I'm going to have that young fellow fighting on our side before we're through."

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At this the light in the gray eyes flamed fiercely, and the ex-cattle-king took the two strides needful to place him before McVickar.

“Don’t you try that, McVickar; I give you fair warning!” he grated, his deep-toned voice rumbling like the burr of grinding wheels. “There’s only one way you could do it, and—”

The vice-president stood up and reached for his hat.

“And you’ll take precious good care that I don’t get a chance to try that way, you were going to say. All right, David; you tell me to do my damndest, and I’ll hand *that* back to you, too. You do the same, and we’ll see who comes out ahead.”

The vice-president caught an elevator at the end of his leisurely progress down the corridor, and had himself lowered to the lobby. The electric lights were glowing, and the great gathering-place was beginning to take on its evening stir. Mr. Hardwick McVickar pushed his way to the desk, and a row of lately arrived guests waited while he asked his question.

“Where shall I be most likely to find Mr. Evan Blount at this time of day?” he demanded; and the obliging clerk made the guest-line wait still longer while he summoned a bell-boy and sent him scurrying over to one of the writing-tables.

“This is Mr. Evan Blount,” said the clerk, indicating the young man who came up with the returning bell-boy. “Mr. Blount, this is Mr. Hardwick McVickar, first vice-president of the Transcontinental Railway Company.”

There was no trace of the recent battle in Mr. McVickar’s voice or manner when he shook hands cordially with the son of the man who had so lately defied him.

“Your father and I were just now holding a little conference over your future prospects, Mr. Blount,” he said, going straight to his point. “Suppose you come down to the car with me for a private talk on legal matters. I’m inclined to think that we shall wish to retain you in a cause which is coming up in September. Gantry tells me that you are pretty well up in corporation law. Can you spare me a half-hour or so?”

Evan Blount glanced at the big clock over the clerk’s head. Patricia had told him that she and her father would dine in the *café* at seven, and that there would be a place at their table for him—and another for his father, if the ex-senator would so far honor a poor college professor. There was an hour to spare; and if the vice-president of the Transcontinental was not the king, he was at least a great man, and one whose invitation was in some sense a royal command.

“Certainly, I’ll be glad to go with you,” was Blount’s acquiescent rejoinder. So much the registry-clerk heard; and he saw, between jabs with his pen, the straight path to the revolving doors of the portal ploughed by the big man with young Blount at his elbow.



One minute after the spinning doors had engulfed the pair the registry-clerk was called on the house telephone. A sad-faced tourist who was waiting patiently for his room assignment heard only the answer to the question which came over the wire from one of the upper floors: "No, Senator, Mr. Evan is not here; he has just this moment gone out—with Mr. McVickar. Could I overtake him? I'll try; but I don't know where they were going. Yes; all right. I'll send a boy right away."

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VIII

THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT

When the news went forth to the dwellers in the sage-brush hills that Boss David's son had been appointed to fill an important office as a member of the railroad company's legal staff, the first wave of astoundment was swiftly followed by many speculations as to what young Blount's *debut* as a railroad placeman really meant.

The Plainsman, the capital city's principal daily, and the outspoken organ of the people's party, was quick to discover an ulterior motive in Evan Blount's appointment and its acceptance. Blenkinsop, the leader-writer on *The Plainsman*, took a half-column in which to point out in emphatic and vigorous Western phrase the dangers that threatened the commonwealth in this very evident coalition of the railroad octopus and the machine.

The *Lost River Miner*, on the contrary, was unwilling to believe that the younger Blount was acting in the interest of machine politics in taking an employee's place on the railroad pay-roll. In this editor's comment there were veiled hints of a disagreement between father and son; of differences of opinion which might, later on, lead to a pitched battle. The *Capital Daily*, however—the stock in which was said to be owned or controlled by local railroad officials—took a different ground, covertly insinuating that nothing for nothing was the accepted rule in politics; that if the railroad company had made a place for the son, it was only a justifiable deduction that the father was not as fiercely inimical to the railroad interests as the opposition press was willing to have a too credulous public believe.

Elsewhere in the State press comment was divided, as the moulders of public opinion happened to read party loss or gain in the appointment of the new legal department head. Some were fair enough to say that young Blount had merely shown good sense in taking the first job that was offered him, following the commendation with the very obvious conclusion that the railroad company's pay check would buy just as much bread in the open market as anybody's else. On the whole, the senator's son was given the benefit of the doubt and a chance to prove up.

Of the interview between the father and the son, in which Evan announced his intention of accepting a place under McVickar, nothing was said in the newspapers, for the very good reason that no reporter was present. If the young man who had so summarily taken his future into his own hands was anticipating a storm of disapproval and opposition, he was disappointed. He had seen Mr. McVickar's private car coupled to the east-bound Fast Mail, and had dined with Patricia and her father, the fourth seat at the table of reunion being vacant because the senator was dining elsewhere. Later in

the evening he faced the music in the sitting-room of the private suite, waylaying his father on the Honorable David's return to the hotel.

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Planning it out beforehand, Blount had meant to give the ethical reasons which had constrained him to put a conclusive end to the attorney-generalship scheme. But when the crux came, the carefully planned argument side-stepped and he was reduced to the necessity of declaring his purpose baldly. The railroad people had offered him a place, and he had accepted it.

“So McVickar talked you over to his side, did he?” was the boss’s gentle comment. “It’s all right, son; you’re a man grown, and I reckon you know best what you want to do. If it puts us on opposite sides of the political creek, we won’t let that roil the water any more than it has to, will we?”

To such a mild-mannered surrender, or apparent surrender, the stirring filial emotions could do no less than to respond heartily.

“We mustn’t let it,” was the quick reply; but after this the younger man added: “I feel that I ought to make some explanations—they’re due to you. I’ve been knocking about here in the city with my eyes and ears open, and I must confess that the political field has been made to appear decidedly unattractive to me. From all I can learn, the political situation in the State is handled as a purely business proposition; it is a matter of bargain and sale. I couldn’t go into anything like that and keep my self-respect.”

“No, of course you couldn’t, son. So you just took a job where you could earn good, clean money in your profession. I don’t blame you a particle.”

Blount was vaguely perturbed, and he showed it by absently laying aside the cigar which he had lately lighted and taking a fresh one from the open box on the table. He could not help the feeling that he ought to be reading between the lines in the paternal surrender.

“You think there will be more or less political work in my job with the railroad?” he suggested, determined to get at the submerged facts, if there were any.

“Oh, I don’t know; you say McVickar has hired you to do a lawyer’s work, and I reckon that is what he will expect you to do, isn’t it?”

Blount laid the second cigar aside and crossed the room to readjust a half-opened ventilating transom. Mr. McVickar had not defined the duties of the new counselship very clearly, but there had been a strong inference running through the private-car conference to the effect that the headship of the local legal department would carry with it some political responsibilities. At the moment the newly appointed placeman had been rather glad that such was the case. The vice-president had convinced him of the justice of the railroad company’s contention—namely, that the present laws of the State, if rigidly administered, amounted to a practical confiscation of the company’s property. While Mr. McVickar was talking, Blount had hoped that the new office which the vice-

president was apparently creating for him would give him a free hand to place the company's point of view fairly before the people of the State, and to do this he knew he would have to enter the campaign in some sort as a political worker. Surely, his father must know this; and he went boldly upon the assumption that his father did know it.

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"As I have said, I am to be chief of the legal department on this division, and as such it will be necessary for me to defend my client both in court and out of court," he said finally. "Since I am fairly committed, I shall try to stay on the job."

"Of course you will. You've got to be honest with yourself—and with McVickar. I don't mind telling you, son, that I'm flat-footed on the other side this time, and I had hoped you were going to be. But if you're not, why, that's the end of it. We won't quarrel about it."

Now this was not at all the paternal attitude as the young man had been prefiguring it. He had looked for opposition; finding it, he would have found it possible to say some of the things which were crying to be said and which still remained unsaid. But there was absolutely no loophole through which he could force the attack. If his late decision had been of no more importance than the breaking of a dinner engagement, his father could scarcely have dismissed it with less apparent concern. Balked and practically talked to a standstill in the business matter, Blount switched to other things.

"I missed you to-night at dinner," he said, beginning on the new tack. "Two of my Cambridge friends are here, and I wanted you to meet them."

The Honorable David looked up quickly.

"The fossil-digging professor and his daughter?" he queried shrewdly.

"Yes; how did you know? They came in on the Overland, and I find that the professor has made the long journey on the strength of what I once told him about the megatheriums and things. I guess it's up to me to make good in some way."

"Don't you worry a minute about that, Evan, boy," was the instant rejoinder. "Honorias coming in from Wartrace to-morrow, and if you'll put us next, we'll take care of your friends—mighty good care of 'em." Then, almost wistfully Blount thought: "You won't mind letting Honorias do that much for you, will you, son?"

"I'd be a cad if I did. And you've taken a load off of my shoulders, I can assure you. If you can persuade Mrs. Blount into it, I'll arrange for a little dinner of five to-morrow evening in the *cafe* where we can all get together. You'll like the professor, I know; and I hope you're going to like Patricia. She's New England, and at first you may think she's a bit chilly. But really she isn't anything of the kind."

The Honorable Senator got up and strolled to the window.

"You'd better go to bed, son," he advised. "It's getting to be mighty late, and you'll want to be surging around some with these friends of yours to-morrow. And, before I forget it, the big car is in Heffelfinger's garage. Order it out after breakfast and show the Cambridge folks a good time."

It was late the following evening, several hours after the informal little dinner for five in the Inter-Mountain *café*, when the senator had himself lifted from the lobby to the private-suite floor and made his way to the door of his own apartments. As was her custom when they were together, his wife was waiting up for him.

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"Did you find out anything more?" she asked, without looking up from the tiny embroidery frame which was her leisure-filling companion at home or elsewhere.

"Not enough to hurt anything. McVickar has fixed things to suit himself. The boy's law-office job is to be pretty largely nominal; a sort of go-as-you-please and do-as-you-like proposition on the side, with Ackerton to do all the sure-enough court work and legal drudgery. Since Ackerton is a pretty clean fellow, and Evan stands up so straight that he leans over backward, this lay-out means that the bribing isn't going to be done by the legal department in the coming campaign."

"Is that all?"

"All but one little thing. Evan's job is to be more or less associated with the traffic department, and the word has been passed to Gantry and his crowd to see to it that the boy doesn't get to know too much."

"But they can't keep him from finding out about the underground work!" protested the small one.

"If it's an order from headquarters, they're going to try mighty hard. Evan wants to believe that everything is on the high moral plane, and when a man wants to believe a thing it isn't so awfully hard to fool him. It'll be a winning card for them if they can send the boy out to talk convincingly about the cleanness of the company's campaign. That sort of talk, handed out as Evan can hand it, if he is convinced of the truth of what he is saying, will capture the honest voter every time. I tell you, little woman, there's a thing we politicians are constantly losing sight of: that down at the bedrock bottom the American voter—the man in the street, as the newspapers call him—is a fair man and an honest man. Speaking broadly, you couldn't buy him with a clear title to a quarter-section in Paradise."

This little eulogy upon the American voter appeared to be wasted upon the small person in the wicker rocking-chair. "We must get him back," she remarked, referring, not to the American voter, but to the senator's son. "Have you thought of any plan?"

"No."

She smiled up at him sweetly. "You are like the good doctor who cannot prescribe for the members of his own family. If he were anybody else's son, you would know exactly what to do."

"Perhaps I should."

"I have a plan," she went on quietly, bending again over her embroidery. "He may have to take a regular course of treatment, and it may make him very ill; would you mind that?"

David Blount leaned back in his chair and regarded her through half-closed eyelids. “You’re a wonder, little woman,” he said; and then: “I don’t want to see the boy suffer any more than he has to.”

“Neither do I,” was the swift agreement. Then, with no apparent relevance: “What do you think of Miss Anners?”

The senator sat up at the question, with the slow smile wrinkling humorously at the corners of his eyes.

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"I haven't thought much about her yet. She's the kind that won't let you get near enough in a single sitting to think much about her, isn't she?"

"She is a young woman with an exceedingly bright mind and a very high purpose," was the little lady's summing-up of Patricia. "But she isn't altogether a Boston iceberg. She thinks she is irrevocably in love with her chosen career; but, really, I believe she is very much in love with Evan. If we could manage to win her over to our side as an active ally —"

This time the senator's smile broadened into a laugh.

"You are away yonder out of my depth now," he chuckled. "Does your course of treatment for the boy include large doses of the young woman, administered frequently?"

"Oh, no," was the instant reply. "I was only wondering if it wouldn't be well to enroll her —enlist her sympathies, you know."

"Why not?—if you think best? You're the fine-haired little wire-puller, and it's all in your hands."

"Will you give me *carte-blanche* to do as I please?" asked the small plotter.

"Sure!" said the Honorable David heartily, adding: "You can always outfigure me, two to one, when it comes to the real thing. You've made a fine art of it, Honoria, and I'll turn the steering-wheel over to you any day in the week."

When she looked up she was smiling in the way which had made Evan Blount wonder, in that midnight meeting at Wartrace Hall, how she could look so young and yet be so wise.

"You deal with people in the mass, David, and no one living can do it better. I am like most women, I think: I deal with the individual. That is all the difference. When do the Annenses go out to the fossil-beds?"

"I don't know; any time when you will invite them to make Wartrace their headquarters, I reckon."

"Then I think it will be to-morrow," decided the confident mistress of policies. "It won't do to let Evan see too much of Patricia until after his course of treatment is well under way. Shall we make it to-morrow? And will you telephone Dawkins to bring down the biggest car? I have a notion wandering around in my head somewhere that Miss Patricia Annens will stand a little judicious impressing. She is exceedingly democratic, you know—in theory."

IX

THE RANK AND FILE

Considerably to his surprise, and no less to his satisfaction, the newly appointed “division counsel,” as his title ran, was not required to take over the old legal department offices in the second story of the station building, where all the other offices of the company were located. Instead, he was directed to fit up a suite of rooms in Temple Court, the capital’s most pretentious up-town sky-scraper, and there was something more than a hint that the item of first cost would not be too closely scrutinized.

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It was the vice-president himself, writing from Chicago, who authorized the new departure and loosened the purse strings. "Don't be afraid of spending a little money," wrote the great man. "Make your up-town headquarters as attractive as may be, and arrange matters with Ackerton so that your office will not be burdened with too much of the routine legal work. A successful legal representative will be a good mixer—as I am sure you are—and will extend the circle of his acquaintance as rapidly and as far as possible. Your appointment will be fully justified when you have made your up-town office a place where the good citizens of the capital and the State can drop in for a cordial word with the company's spokesman."

Acting upon this suggestion, Blount opened the Temple Court headquarters at once and threw himself energetically into the indicated field. Ackerton, a technical expert with a needle-like mind and the State code at his fingers'-ends, was left in charge of the working offices in the railroad building, with instructions to apply to his chief only when he needed specific advice.

At the up-town headquarters, Blount gave himself wholly to the pleasant task of making friends. With a good store of introductions upon which to make a beginning, and with the open-handed, whole-souled *camaraderie* of the West to help, the list of acquaintances grew with amazing rapidity. For the three or four weeks after Mrs. Blount had whisked the Annorses away to Wartrace Hall and the habitat of the Megalosauridae, the newly appointed "social secretary" for the railroad, as Honoria had dubbed him, met all comers joyously and accepted all invitations, never inquiring whether they were extended to his father's son, to the railroad company's legal chief, or to Evan Blount in his proper person.

During this social interval he saw little of his father, though he was still occupying his share of the private dining-room suite at the Inter-Mountain. Part of the time, as he knew, the Honorable Senator was at Wartrace Hall, looking after his mammoth ranch, and helping to entertain the visitors from Massachusetts. But now and again the father came and went; and occasionally there was a dinner *a deux* in the hotel *cafe*, with a little good-natured raillery from the senator's side of the table.

"Got you chasing your feet right lively in the social merry-go-round these days, haven't they, son? Like it, as far as you've gone?" said the ex-cattle-king one evening when Evan had come down in evening clothes, ready to go to madam the governor's wife's strictly formal "informal" a little later on.

"It's all in the day's work," laughed the younger man. "I shall need all the 'pull' I can get a little later on, sha'n't I?"

"I shouldn't wonder if you did, son; I shouldn't wonder if you did. And I reckon you're doing pretty good work, too, mixing and mingling the way you do. Was it McVickar's idea, or your own—this sudden splash into the social water-hole?"

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"I don't mind telling you that it is a part of the new policy," returned the social splasher, still smiling. "We are out to make friends this time; good, solid, open-eyed friends who will know just what we are doing and why we are doing it."

"H'm," mused the senator, "so publicity's the new word, is it?"

"Yes; publicity is the word. The Gordon people say they are going to show us up; there won't be anything to show up when the time comes. We are going to beat them to the billboards."

The grizzled veteran of a goodly number of political battles put down his coffee-cup; he was still old-fashioned enough to drink his coffee in generous measure with the meat courses.

"You can't do the circus act—ride two horses at once and do the same stunt on both, son," he remarked gravely. "If you're really going to put the saddle and bridle on the publicity nag, you've got to turn the other one out of the corral and let it go back to the short-grass."

"It is already turned out," asserted the young man, not affecting to misunderstand. "We neither buy votes nor spend illegitimate money in this campaign."

The stout assertion was good as far as it went; the new division counsel made it and believed it. But on his way to the governor's mansion, a little later, he could not help wondering if he had been altogether candid in making it. The offices in the up-town skyscraper were not exclusively a railroad social centre where the disinterested voter could come and have the facts ladled out to him without fear or favor on the part of the ladler. They had come to be also a rallying-point for a heterogeneous crowd of ward-workers, wire-pullers, and small politicians, most of whom were anxious to be employed or retained as henchmen. Some of these "stretcher men," as Blount contemptuously called them, had been employed in past campaigns; others were still the beneficiaries of the railroad, holding pay-roll places which Blount acutely suspected were chiefly sinecures.

Latterly, this contingent of strikers and heelers had been greatly augmented, and it was beginning to make its demands more emphatic. A dozen times a day Blount had the worn phrase, "nothing for nothing," dinned into his ears, and he was beginning to harbor a suspicion that his office had been made a dumping-ground for all the other departments.

Seeing Gantry at madam the governor's lady's reception, Blount took an early opportunity of cornering the traffic manager in one of the otherwise deserted smoking-dens, and when he had made sure there were no eavesdroppers plunged at once into the middle of things.

“See here, Dick,” he began, “you fellows downtown are making my office a cesspool, and I won’t stand for it. Garrigan, that saloon-keeper in the second ward, came up to-day to ask for a free ticket to Worthington and return; and when I pinned him down he admitted that you’d sent him to me.”

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"I did," said Gantry, grinning. "Why otherwise have we got a post-graduate, double-certificated political manager, I'd like to know?"

Blount dropped into a chair and felt in his pockets for his cigar-case.

"I guess we may as well fight this thing to a finish right here and now, Dick," he said coolly. "I'm not chief vote buyer for the Transcontinental Company—I'm not any kind of a vote buyer."

"Who said you were?" retorted the traffic manager.

"It says itself, if I am supposed to cut the pie and hand out pieces of it to these grub-stakers that you and Carson and Bentley and Kittredge are continually sending to me."

This time Gantry's grin was playful, but behind it there was a shrewd flash of the Irish-blue eyes that Blount did not see.

"I guess the company would be plenty willing to furnish a few small pies for really hungry people, if you think you need them to go along with your Temple Court office fittings," he returned.

"Ah?" said Blount calmly, giving the exclamation the true Boston inflection. "You are either too shrewd or not quite shrewd enough, Dick. You covered that up with a laugh, so that I might take it as a joke if I happened to be too thin-skinned to take it in disreputable earnest. Let us understand each other; we are fighting squarely in the open in this campaign; publicity is the word—I have Mr. McVickar for my authority. Anybody who wants to know anything about the railroad company's business in this State can learn it for the asking, and at first-hand. Secrecy and all the various brands of political claptrap that have been admitted in the past are to be shown the door. This is the intimation that was made to me: wasn't it made to you?"

Gantry did not reply directly to the direct demand. On the other hand, he very carefully refrained from answering it in any degree whatsoever.

"You have your job to hold down and I have mine," he rejoined. "What you say goes as it lies, of course; but just the same, I shouldn't be too righteously hard on the little brothers, if I were you."

"If by the 'little brothers' you mean the pie-eaters, I'm going to fire them out, neck and crop, Richard. They make me excessively weary."

Gantry's playful mood fell away from him like a cast-off garment.

“I don’t quite believe I’d do that, if I were you, Evan. There are pie-eaters on both sides in every political contest, and while they can’t do any cause any great amount of good, they can often do a good bit of harm. I wouldn’t be too hard on them, if I were you.”

“What would you do?—or, rather, what did you do when you were managing the State campaign two years ago?” inquired Blount pointedly.

“I cut the pie,” said the traffic manager simply.

“In other words, you let this riffraff blackmail you and, incidentally, put a big black mark against the company’s good name.”

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"Oh, no; I wouldn't put it quite that strong. Not many of these little fellows ask for money, or expect it. A free ride now and then in the varnished cars is about all they look for."

"But you can't give them passes under the interstate law," protested the purist.

"Not outside of the State, of course. But inside of the State boundaries it's our own business."

"You mean it was our own business, previous to the passage of the State rate law two years ago," corrected Blount.

"It is our own business to this good day—in effect. That part of the law has been a complete dead-letter from the day the governor signed it. Why, bless your innocent heart, Evan, the very men who argued the loudest and voted the most spitefully for it came to me for their return tickets home at the end of the session. Of course, we kept the letter of the law. It says that no 'free passes' shall be given. We didn't issue passes; we merely gave them tickets out of the case and charged them up to 'expense.'"

"Faugh!" said Blount, "you make me sick! Gantry, it's that same childish whipping of the devil around the stump by the corporations—an expedient that wouldn't deceive the most ignorant voter that ever cast a ballot—it's that very thing that has stirred the whole nation up to this unreasonable fight against corporate capital. Don't you see it?"

Gantry shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess I take the line of the least resistance—like the majority of them," was the colorless reply. "When it comes down to practical politics—"

"Don't say 'practical politics' to me, Dick!" rasped the reformer. "We've got the strongest argument in the world in the fact that the present law is an unfair one, needing modification or repeal. We mustn't spoil that argument by becoming law-breakers ourselves and descending to the methods of the grafters and the machine politicians the country over. If you have been sending these pie-eaters to me, stop it—don't do it any more. I have no earthly use for them; and they won't have any use for me after I open up on them and tell them a few things they don't seem to know, or to care to know."

"I don't believe I'd do anything brash," Gantry suggested mildly, and he was still saying the same thing in diversified forms when Blount led the way back to the crowded drawing-rooms.

Dating from this little heart-to-heart talk with the traffic manager, Blount began to carry out the new policy—the starvation policy, as it soon came to be known among the would-be henchmen. The result was not altogether reassuring. The first few rebuffs he

administered left him with the feeling that he was winning Pyrrhic victories; it was as if he were trying to handle a complicated mechanism with the working details of which he was only theoretically familiar. There were wheels within wheels, and the application of the brakes to the smallest of them led to discordant janglings throughout the whole.

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Many of the small grafters were on the pay-rolls of the railroad company, and Blount was soon definitely assured of what he had before only suspected—that they were merely nominal employees given a pay-roll standing so that there might be an excuse for giving them free transportation, and a retainer in the form of wages, if needful.

In many cases the ramifications of the petty graft were exasperatingly intricate. For example: one Thomas Gryson, who was on the pay-rolls as a machinist's helper in the repair shops, demanded free transportation across the State for eight members of his "family." Questioned closely, he admitted that the "family" was his only by a figure of speech; that the relationship was entirely political. Blount promptly refused to recommend the issuing of employees' passes for the eight, and the result was an immediate call from Bentley, the division master mechanic.

"About that fellow Gryson," Bentley began; "can't you manage some way to get him transportation for his Jonesboro crowd? He is going to make trouble for us if you don't."

Blount was justly indignant. "Gryson is on your pay-roll," he retorted. "Why don't you recommend the passes yourself, on account of the motive-power department, if he is entitled to them?"

"I can't," admitted the master mechanic. "I am held down to the issuing of passes to employees travelling on company business only. We can stretch it a little sometimes, of course, but we can't make it cover the whole earth."

"Neither can I!" Blount exploded. "Let it be understood, once for all, Mr. Bentley, that I am not the scape-goat for all the other departments! I have cut it off short; I am not recommending passes for anybody."

"But, suffering Scott, Mr. Blount, we've simply *got* to take care of Tom Gryson! He's the boss of his ward, and he has influence enough to turn even our own employees against us!"

"Influence?" scoffed the young man from the East. "How does he acquire his influence? It is merely another illustration of the vicious circle; you put into his hands the club with which he proceeds to knock you down. Let me tell you what I'm telling everybody; if we want a square deal, we've got to set the example by being square. And, by Heavens, Mr. Bentley, we're going to set the example!"

The master mechanic went away silenced, but by no means convinced; and a week later Gryson, who in appearance was a typical tough, and who in reality was a post-graduate of the hard school of violence and ruffianage obtaining in the lawless mining-camps of the Carnadine Hills, sauntered into Blount's office with his cigar at the belligerent angle and an insolent taunt in his mouth.

“Well, pardner, we got them dickie-birds o’ mine over to Jonesboro, after so long a time, and no thanks to you, neither. I just blew in to tell you that I’m goin’ to hit you ag’in about day after to-morrow, and if you don’t come across there’s goin’ to be somethin’ doin’; see?”

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Blount sprang from his chair and forgot to be politic.

"You needn't come to me the day after to-morrow, or any other time," he raged. "I'm through with you and your tribe. Get out!"

After Gryson, muttering threats, had gone, the young campaign manager had an attack of moral nausea. It seemed such a prodigious waste of time and energy to traffic and chaffer with these petty scoundrels. Thus far, every phase of the actual political problem seemed to be meanly degrading, and he was beginning to long keenly for an opportunity to do some really worthy thing.

Notwithstanding, his ideals were still unshaken. He still clung to the belief that the corporation, which was created by the law and could exist only under the protection of the law, must, of necessity, be a law-abiding entity. It was manifestly unfair to hold it responsible for the disreputable political methods of those whom it could never completely control—methods, too, which had been forced upon it by the necessity, or the fancied necessity, of meeting conditions as they were found.

As if in answer to the wish that he might find the worthier task, it was on this day of Gryson's visit that Blount was given his first opportunity of entering the wider field. A letter from a local party chairman in a distant mining town brought an invitation of the kind for which he had been waiting and hoping. He was asked to participate in a joint debate at the campaign opening in the town in question, and he was so glad of the chance that he instantly wired his acceptance.

That evening, at the Inter-Mountain *café* dinner hour, he found his father dining alone and joined him. In a burst of confidence he told of the invitation.

"That's good; that's the real thing this time, isn't it?" was the senator's even-toned comment. "Gives you a right nice little chance to shine the way you can shine best." Then: "That was one of the things McVickar wanted you for, wasn't it?—speech-making and the like?"

"Why, yes; he intimated that there might be some public speaking," admitted the younger man.

"Well, what-all are you going to tell these Ophir fellows when you get over there, son?" asked the veteran quizzically. "Going to offer 'em all free passes anywhere they want to go if they'll promise to vote for the railroad candidates?"

"Not this year," was the laughing reply. "As I told you a while back, we've stopped all that."

“You have, eh? I reckon that will be mighty sorry news for a good many people in the old Sage-brush State—mighty sorry news. You really reckon you *have* stopped it, do you, son?”

“I not only believe it; I am in a position to assert it definitely.”

“McVickar has told you it was stopped?”

The newly fledged political manager tried to be strictly truthful.

“I have had but the one interview with Mr. McVickar, but in that talk he gave me to understand that my recommendations would be given due consideration. And I have said my say pretty emphatically.”

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The senator's smile was not derisive; it was merely lenient.

"Sat on 'em good and hard, did you? That's right, son; don't you ever be afraid to say what you mean, and to say it straight from the shoulder. That's the Blount way, and I reckon we've got to keep the family ball rolling—you and I. Don't forget that, when you're making your appeal to those horny-handed sons of toil over yonder at Ophir. Give 'em straight facts, and back up the facts with figures—if you happen to have the figures. When do you pull out for the mining-camp?"

"To-night, at nine-thirty. I can't get there in time if I wait for the morning train." Then, dismissing the political topic abruptly: "What do you hear from Professor Anners?"

"Oh, he's having the time of his life. I got him a State permit, and scraped him up a bunch of pick-and-shovel men, and he is digging out those fossil skeletons by the wagon-load."

"And Miss Anners?" pursued Patricia's lover.

"I shouldn't wonder if she was having the time of her life, too. I've given her the little four-seated car to call her own while she is out here, and she and Honoria go careering around the country—breaking the speed limit every minute in the day, I reckon."

"I'm glad you are giving her a good time," said Evan, and he looked glad. Then he added regretfully: "I wish I could get a chance to chase around a little with them. I have seen almost nothing of them since they came West. I should think Mrs. Blount might bring Patricia down to the city once in a while."

"Well, now! perhaps the young woman doesn't want to come," laughed the senator. "You told me you hadn't got her tag, son, and I'm beginning to believe it's the sure-enough truth. What has she got against you, anyway?"

"Nothing; nothing in the wide world, save that I don't fit into her scheme for her life-work."

The senator was eating calmly through his dessert. "If you hadn't made up your mind so pointedly to dislike Honoria, you might be getting a few tips on that 'career' business along about now, son," he remarked, and Evan was silent—had to be silent. For, you see, he had been charging Patricia's continued absence from the capital to nothing less than spiteful design on the part of his father's wife.

It was at the cigar smoking in the lobby, after the young man had made his preparations for the journey and was waiting for the train-caller's announcement, that the senator said quite casually: "It's too bad you're going out of town to-night, son. Honoria 'phoned me a little spell ago that she and Patricia would be driving down after their dinner to take in the Weatherford reception. You'll have to miss 'em, won't you?"

The announcer was chanting the call for the night train west, and the joint-debater got up and thrust his hand-bag savagely into the hand of the nearest porter.

“Isn’t that just my infernal luck!” he lamented. Then: “Give them my love, and tell them I hope they will stay until I get back.”

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The senator rose and shook hands with the departing debater. "Shall I say that to both of 'em?" he asked, with the quizzical smile which Evan was learning to expect.

"Yes; to both of them, if you like—only I suppose Mrs. Blount will hold it against me. Good-night and good-by. I'll be back day after to-morrow, if the Ophir miners don't mob me."

It was only a few minutes after Evan Blount's train had steamed Ophir-ward out of the Sierra Avenue station that a dust-covered touring-car drew up at the curb in front of the Inter-Mountain, and the same porter who had put Blount's hand-bag into the taxicab opened the tonneau door for two ladies in muffling motor-coats and heavy veils.

The senator met the two late travellers in the vestibule, and while the three were waiting for an elevator a rapid fire of low-toned question and answer passed between husband and wife.

"You got Evan out of the way?" whispered the wife.

The husband nodded. "That was easy. I passed the word to Steuchfield, and he helped out on that—invited Evan to come to Ophir to speak in a joint debate. He left on the night train."

"And Hathaway? Will he be here?"

"He is here. Gantry has turned him down, according to instructions, and he is clawing about in the air, trying to get a fresh hold. I bluffed him; told him he'd have to make his peace with you for something, I didn't know what, before I could talk to him."

Miss Anners was watching the elevator signal glow as the car descended, and the wife's voice sank to a still lower whisper.

"He will be at the Weatherfords'?" she inquired eagerly.

"He is right sure to be; I told him you would be there."

The small plotter nodded approval.

"Give us half an hour to dress, and have the car ready," she directed; and then the senator put the two into the elevator and turned away to finish his cigar.

X

IN THE HERBARIUM

The Weatherfords, multimillionaire mine-people, and so newly rich that the crisp bank-notes fairly crackled when Mrs. Weatherford spent them, kept their lackeyed and liveried state in a castle-like mansion in Mesa Circle, the most expensive, if not the most aristocratic, no-thoroughfare of the capital city. Weatherford, the father, egged on by Mrs. Weatherford, had political aspirations pointing toward a United States senatorship, the election to which would fall within the province of the next legislature. The mine-owner himself, a pudgy little man with a bald spot on top of his head and a corner-grocery point of view carefully tucked away inside of it—an outlook upon life which was a survival from his hard-working past—would willingly have dodged, but Mrs. Weatherford was inexorable. There were two grown daughters and a growing son, and it was for these that she was socially ambitious.

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The reception for which the senator's wife and her guest had driven thirty miles through the dust of the sage-brush hills was one of the many moves in Mrs. Weatherford's private campaign. For the opening-gun occasion the great house in Mesa Circle was lighted from basement to turret—to all of the numerous turrets; an awning fringed with electric bulbs sheltered the carpeted walk from the street to the grand entrance, an army of lackeys paraded in the vestibule, and the wives and daughters of the bravest and best in the capital city's political contingent stood with Mrs. Weatherford in the long receiving-line.

From room to room in the vast house a curiously assorted throng of the bidden ones worked its way as the jam and crush permitted. A firm believer in the maxim that in numbers there is strength, the hostess had made her invitation-list long and catholic. For the gossips there were the crowded drawing-rooms, for the hungry there were Lucullian tables, and for the sentimentalists there was the conservatory.

It was a mark of the unashamed newness of the Weatherford riches that the conservatory, a glass-and-iron greenhouse, built out as an extension of one of the drawing-rooms, was called "the herbarium." It was a reproduction, on a generous scale, of a tropical garden. Half-grown palms and banana-trees made a well-ordered jungle of the softly lighted interior; and if, in the gathering of her floral treasures, Mrs. Weatherford had omitted any precious bit of greenery whose cost would have shed additional lustre upon the Weatherford resources, it was because no one had remembered to mention the name of it to her.

Ex-Senator Blount's party of three was fashionably late at the function in Mesa Circle, but in the crush filling the spacious drawing-rooms the hostess and her long line of receiving assistants were still on duty. Having successfully passed the line with her husband and Patricia, little Mrs. Blount looked about her, saw Mr. Richard Gantry, signalled to him with her eyes, and, with the traffic manager for her centre-rush to wedge a way through the crowded rooms, was presently lost to sight—at least from Miss Anners's point of view.

Whether she knew it or not, from the moment of her appearance at the hostess's end of the long receiving-line, the senator's wife had been marked and followed in her slow progress through the rooms by a thin-faced man who seemed to be nervously trying to hunch himself into better relations with his ill-fitting dress-coat, an eager gentleman whose hawk-like eyes never lost sight of the little lady with her hand on Gantry's arm. Only the senator saw and remarked this bit of by-play, and he looked as if he were enjoying it, the shrewd gray eyes lighting humorously as he bent to hear what Patricia was saying.

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When his quarry stopped, as she did frequently to chat with one or another of the guests, the man with the hawk-like profile and the nervous hunch circled warily, and once or twice seemed about to make the opportunity which was so slow in making itself. But it was not until the little lady in the claret-colored party-gown had drifted, still with a hand on Gantry's arm, in among the palm and banana trees of the herbarium that the bird-of-prey person made his swoop. A moment later Gantry, taking a low-toned command from his companion, was disappearing in the direction of the refreshment-tables, and the lady looked up to say: "Dear me, Mr. Hathaway, you almost startled me!"

"Did I?" said the lumber-king, rather grimly, if he meant the query to be apologetic. "I am sorry. I didn't mean to; but Mrs. Gordon said I would find you here, and so I took the liberty of following you. I'm needing a little straightening out, you know, and—ah—would you mind letting me talk business with you for a minute or two, Mrs. Blount?"

She drew her gown aside, and made room for him on the carved rustic settee, which was exceedingly uncomfortable to sit in, but which was in perfect harmony with the background of gigantic palmettos. He nodded gratefully and took the place, and the manner of his sitting down was that of a man who wears evening-clothes only under compulsion.

"Business?" she was saying. "Certainly not; if you can talk business in such a place as this"—giving him the coveted permission.

"Perhaps it ain't what you'd call business—maybe it's only politics," he resumed; then, with the abruptness of one whose dealings have been with men oftener than with women: "In the first place, I wish you'd tell me what I've been doing to get myself into your bad books."

She laughed easily. "Who said you had been doing anything, Mr. Hathaway?" she asked.

"The senator," he answered shortly, adding: "He told me I'd have to make my peace with you."

She had developed a sudden interest in the quaint Japanese figures on the ivory sticks of her fan. "You want something, Mr. Hathaway; what is it?" she inquired.

"I want to be put next in this pigs-in-clover railroad puzzle," was the blunt statement of the need. "Our freight contract with the Transcontinental is about to expire, and I'd like to get it renewed on the same terms as before."

"Well," she said ingenuously, "why don't you do it?"

"I can't," he blustered. "Everybody has suddenly grown mysterious or gone crazy—I don't know which. Kittredge, the general superintendent, don't seem to remember that we ever had any contract, and Gantry is just as bad. And when I go to the senator he tells me I must make my peace with you. I'm left out in the cold; I can't begin to *sabe* what the senator and these railroad brass-collar men are driving at. I've got something to sell; something that the railroad company needs. Where the d—— I mean, where's the hitch?"

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The small person in the fetching party-gown reached up and pinched a leaf from a fragrant shrub fronting the settee.

"Mr. Gantry has gone to fetch me an ice, and he will be back in a very few minutes," she suggested mildly. "Consider your peace made, Mr. Hathaway, and tell me what I can do for you."

"You can put me next," said the lumber lord, going back to the only phrase that seemed to fit the exigencies of the case. "Why the—why can't we get our contract renewed?"

The little lady was opening and shutting her fan slowly. "What was your contract?" she inquired innocently.

"If I thought you didn't know, I'd go a long time without telling you," he said bluntly. "But you do know. It's the rebate lumber rate from our mills at Twin Buttes and elsewhere, and it was given us two years ago, a few days before election."

"And the consideration?" she asked, looking up quickly.

"You know that, too, Mrs. Blount. It was the swinging of the solid employees' vote of the Twin Buttes Lumber Company over to the railroad ticket."

"And you wish to make the same arrangement again?"

"Exactly. We've got to have that preferential rate or go out of business."

"With whom did you make the contract two years ago?"

"With Mr. McVickar, verbally. Of course, there wasn't anything put down in black and white, but the railroad folks did their part and we did ours."

"I see—a gentleman's agreement," she murmured; and then: "You have tried Mr. McVickar again?"

"Yes, and he referred me to Gantry."

"And what did Mr. Gantry say?"

"I couldn't get him to say anything with any sense in it," said the lumber magnate grittingly. "The most I could get out of him was that I would have to see the boss."

"And instead of doing that you went to see the senator?" she asked.

"Of course I did. Who else would Gantry mean by 'the boss'?" demanded the befogged one.

“Possibly he meant the senator’s son,” she ventured, tapping a pretty cheek with the folded fan. “Have you been leaving Evan Blount out in all of this?”

“I didn’t know where to put him in. That’s what brings me here to-night. The senator, or McVickar, or both of them together, have set the whole State to running around in circles with this appointment of young Blount. Some say it’s a deal between the senator and McVickar, and some say it’s a fight. Half of the professional spellbinders are walking in their sleep over it right now. I thought maybe you could tell me, Mrs. Blount.”

“I can’t tell you anything that would help the people who are walking in their sleep,” she returned, “but I might offer a suggestion in your personal affair. Mr. Evan Blount is your man.”

Hathaway pursed his thin lips and frowned. “I’m in bad there—right at the jump,” he objected.

“I know,” she shot back quickly. “For some reason best known to yourself, you saw fit to have Mr. Evan waylaid and man-handled on the first night of his return to his native State. But you needn’t worry about that. He won’t hold it against you. I’m sure you’ll find him entirely amenable to reason.”

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The tyrant of “timber-jacks” frowned again. “H’m—reason, eh? How big a block of Twin Buttes stock shall I offer him?”

Her laugh was a silvery peal of derision.

“You always figure in dollars and cents, don’t you, Mr. Simon Peter Hathaway?” she mocked.

“I have always found it the cheapest in the end.”

“Listen,” she said, with the folded fan held up like a monitory finger. “Mr. Gantry may be back any minute, and I can give you only the tiniest hint. You must go to Mr. Evan Blount and appeal to him frankly, as one business man to another.”

“But I have heard—they say he’s all kinds of a crank.”

“Never mind what you have heard. Tell him all the facts and ask him to help you, and for mercy’s sake don’t offer him a block of your stock. Put it where it will do the most good. Put it in the name of Professor William J. Anners, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and show Mr. Blount how dreadfully disastrous the loss of the preferential freight rate would be to all the poor people in your list of stock-holders—including Professor Anners.”

Hathaway drew down his cuff and made a pencil memorandum of the name and address of the new beneficiary.

“You’ll notice that I’m not asking any foolish questions about who this Professor Anners is, or why I should be making him a present of a block of stock. If I don’t, it’s because what you say goes as it lies. Anything else?”

“Yes; don’t fail to be perfectly frank with Mr. Blount, and don’t let him put you off. He may pretend to be very angry at first, but you won’t mind that.”

“I won’t mind anything if I can bring this business down to the every-day commonplace earth once more. You and the senator and Gantry and McVickar are playing some sort of a game, and you ain’t showing me anything more than the back of the cards. That’s all right. I guess I’m fly enough to play my hand blindfolded, if I’ve got to. I don’t care, just so I win the odd trick.”

Gantry was coming down the avenue of banana-trees with the ice he had taken so much time to procure, and the lumber magnate rose reluctantly. There was time for only one more question, and he put it hastily.

“When and where can I find Evan Blount?” he asked.

“The day after to-morrow, at his office in Temple Court. He is out of the city now, but—” Here Gantry’s coming put an end to the private conference, and the president of the Twin Buttes company went his way.

Not until they had served out their full sentence at Mrs. Weatherford’s crush, and were back in the private dining-room suite at the Inter-Mountain, with Miss Annors safely behind the closed door of her own apartment, did the small conspirator pass the word of good hope on to her husband.

“It is working beautifully,” she exulted. “He will go to see Evan day after to-morrow—and after that, the deluge.”

XI

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THE GREAT GAME

If Evan Blount, as the representative of the unpopular railroad, had been anticipating an unfriendly reception at the great gold-camp in the Carnadine Hills, he was agreeably disappointed. A committee of citizens, headed by Jasper Steuchfield, the "Paramounter" chairman for Carnadine County, met him at the train, escorted him to the hotel, and, during the afternoon which was at his disposal, gave him joyously and hilariously the freedom of the camp.

The political meeting, called for an early hour in the evening, was held in the Carnadine Mining Company's ore-shed, electric-lighted for the occasion. When the hour came the big shed was packed with an enthusiastic audience, and there were prolonged cheers and hand-clappings when the railroad advocate took his seat on the improvised platform as the guest of the local committee.

Later, when Judge Crowley, candidate prospective on the popular ticket for the State Senate, opened the joint debate with a shrewd arraignment of the methods of the railroad company, not only in its dealings with the public as a common carrier, but also in the pertinacity with which it invaded the political field, there was tumultuous applause; but it was no heartier than that which greeted Blount when he rose to present the railroad side of the argument.

During the journey from the capital, which had consumed the night and the greater portion of the forenoon, he had prepared his speech. His argument—the one unanswerable argument, as it appeared to him—was the absurdity and injustice of a law which presumed to limit the earning power of a corporation by fixing the maximum rates it might charge, without at the same time making a corresponding regulation fixing the price which the company should pay for its labor and material.

Upon this foundation he was able to build a fair structure of oratory. The judge, his opponent, was a rather turgid man whose speech had abounded in flights of denunciation and whose appeal had been made frankly to prejudice and party rancor. Blount took his cue shrewdly. Touching lightly upon the public grievances, some of which he characterized as just and entirely defensible, he rang the changes calmly and logically upon the square deal, no less for the corporations than for the individual. "Take it to yourselves, you merchants," he urged. "Imagine a law on the statute-books fixing the prices at which you shall sell your goods, and that same law leaving you at the mercy of those from whom you must buy! Take it to yourselves, you miners. Suppose the legislature had enacted a law fixing the maximum price at which you shall sell your skill and your labor, and at the same time leaving it optional with every man from whom you buy, the butcher, the baker, the grocer, to charge you what he pleases or what he can get! That, my good friends, is the situation of the railroad company in this State to-day"—and he went on to analyze the hard situation, filling his hour very creditably and, if the frequent bursts of applause could be taken to mean anything, to the complete

satisfaction of his hearers. Indeed, at the end of his argument he was given what the local paper of the following day was pleased to call “a spontaneous and pandemonious ovation.”

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After the cheering and hand-shaking, Steuchfield and his fellow-committeemen went to the train with the visiting speaker, and no one in the throng of congratulators was more enthusiastic than the opposition chairman.

"That was a cracking good speech—a great speech, Mr. Blount!" he said, as the branch train rattled in from the north. "If you can go all over the State making as good talks as the one we've just heard, you'll tie the whole shooting-match up in a hard knot for us fellows. But McVickar won't let you do it—not by a long shot!"

The potential tier of hard knots laughed genially. "I don't blame you for wanting to be shown, Mr. Steuchfield. But I can assure you that the new policy has come to stay. I have the management behind me in this thing, and any day you'll come down to the capital I'll put my time against yours and try to show you that we are out for open publicity and a square deal for every man—including the railroad man."

"All right," was the cordial reply. "I'll be down along some of these days, and if you can convince me that McVickar isn't going into politics any further than you've gone here to-night, I'll promise you to come back to Carnadine and tell the boys the jig's up."

A few minutes later the branch train pulled out, and the chairman and his fellow-committeemen gave the departing joint-debater three cheers and another. After the red tail-lights of the train had disappeared around the first curve, Steuchfield turned to the others with a broad grin.

"Well, boys," he said, "there goes a mighty nice young fellow, and I guess we did it up all right for him and accordin' to orders. I don't know any more'n a sheep what sort of a game Dave Sage-brush is playin' this time, but whatever he says goes as she lays, and I figure it that we gave the young chip o' the old block a right jubilant little whirl. Anyhow, he seemed to think so."

Blount did not reach his office in the capital until the afternoon of the next day. There was an appalling accumulation of letters and telegrams waiting to be worked over, but he let the desk litter go untouched and called up the hotel, only to have a small disappointment sent in over the wire. His father, Mrs. Blount, and their guest had left for Wartrace Hall some time during the forenoon, and there had been nothing said in the clerk's hearing about their return to the city. Blount hung up the receiver, called it one more opportunity missed, and sat down to attack the desk litter.

Almost the first thing his eye lighted upon was a stenographer's note stating that Mr. Hathaway, president of the Twin Buttes Lumber Company, had been in several times, and was very anxious to obtain an interview. Blount pressed the desk button, and the stenographer came in promptly.

"This man Hathaway; what did he want?" was the brusque question shot at the clerk.

"I don't know. He said he was stopping at the Inter-Mountain, and he asked me to let him know when you got back."

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"Phone him and tell him I'm here," said Blount; and in due time the lumber magnate made his appearance.

It was not at all in keeping with Mr. Simon Peter Hathaway's gifts and adroitness that he should begin by attempting a clumsy bit of acting.

"Well, I'll be shot!" he exclaimed. "So you're the senator's son, are you? If I'd known that, that day on the train when you were trying to make me believe you were one of Uncle Sam's men—"

Blount's smile was neither forgiving nor hostile.

"In a way, I had earned what was handed out to me afterward, Mr. Hathaway, and I'm not bearing malice," he said briefly. "I had no business to let you get away with the wrong impression, but you were so exceedingly anxious to identify me with the Forest Service that it seemed a pity to disappoint you. Since your scoundrels didn't kill me, we'll set one incident against the other and forget both. What can I do for you to-day?"

By this time the lumber lord was apparently recovering his breath and some measure of composure, though he had lost neither.

"Great Jehu!" he lamented. "If you had given me half a hint that you were Dave Blount's son—but you didn't, you know, and now I'm handicapped just when I oughtn't to be. I've come to talk business with you to-day, Mr. Blount, and here you've got me on the run the first crack out of the box!"

This time Blount's smile was entirely conciliatory.

"Don't let that little misfire in the Lost Mountain foot-hills embarrass you, Mr. Hathaway. I assure you I'm not at all vindictive."

"All right," said the visitor, only too willing to dismiss the Jack Barto incident and the forced awkwardness of the pretended surprise. "That being the case, I'll jump in on the other matter. But first I'd like to ask a sort of personal question: I've been given to understand that you are handling the political business for the railroad company in this campaign. Is that right?"

"It is and it isn't," was the prompt reply. "The railroad company isn't in politics in this campaign—as a political factor, I mean. What we are trying to do—and all we are trying to do—is to lay the entire matter plainly and fairly before the people of this State, with a frank appeal for the relief to which we are entitled."

"Ha—h'm—I guess I get you, Mr. Blount. That's the way to talk it; in public, anyway. But, just between us two—I guess we needn't beat the bushes in a little personal talk

like this—we both know there are certain things that have to be done in every campaign; things you wouldn't want to publish in the newspapers.”

Blount sat back in his chair and the conciliatory smile disappeared.

“What kind of things?” he asked abruptly.

“Oh, of course, I don't know all of 'em. But there was one little arrangement that was made two years ago with us, and it helped out both ways. I thought I'd come around and see if it couldn't be worked again.”

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"State the facts," said Blount shortly.

"It was like this. As you know, we've got a number of plants scattered around at different places in the State, and, one way and another, we employ a good many men. These men are residents of the State, but you couldn't call 'em citizens in the sense that they take any active interest in what's going on. They're here this year, and they may be up among the Oregon redwoods next year, and somewhere else the year after. When they vote at all they naturally ask us how we'd like to have 'em vote; and that's the way it was two years ago at election time."

"I see. But how does this concern the railroad company?"

"I'm coming to that, right now. Two years ago we found that our employees' vote was big enough to turn the scale in four of the legislative districts and to cut a pretty good-sized figure in a fifth. This vote was worth something to your people, and the fact was properly recognized. I don't know but what I'm telling you a lot of stale news, but—"

"Go on, Mr. Hathaway; if I wasn't greatly interested in the beginning, I am now. How was the fact recognized by the Transcontinental Railway Company?"

"It was just as easy as twice two. The Twin Buttes Lumber Company is practically the only heavy lumber-shipper in this inter-mountain territory, and it was given a preferential rate on its products; you might say that the amount of business we do entitles us to some special consideration, anyway. There wasn't any bargain and sale about it, you understand. It was just a sort of friendly recognition of our help in the election."

"This rate is lower than the rate made to other lumber-shippers?"

"Well, yes; but, after all, it isn't any big thing. If you were up on lumber rates, Mr. Blount—as I don't suppose you are—you'd know that the special tariff we get is all that enables us to live and do business."

Blount had opened his penknife and was absently sharpening a pencil.

"This special rate you refer to, Mr. Hathaway," he said, speaking slowly and quite distinctly—"am I right in inferring that it is not confined strictly to points within the State boundaries?"

At this the lumberman repeated a phrase which he had used in the anxious conference in the Weatherford herbarium.

"If I thought you didn't know, I'd go a long time without telling you, Mr. Blount. But of course you do know. If you wasn't on the inside of all the insides you wouldn't be sitting here pulling the strings for McVickar. The rate is a blanket; it covers all shipments."

Blount nodded and his apparent coolness was no just measure of the inward fires the crooked lumber-king was kindling.

“You interest me greatly, Mr. Hathaway. I am a little new to these things—as you intimated a few moments ago. How is this matter handled—by rebates, I suppose?”

“N-not exactly,” was the hesitating denial. “That would be too risky for both of us. But the Transcontinental Company is a heavy buyer—lumber and cross-ties and bridge timber, you know—and the biggest part of the difference between our special and the regular rate is taken up in our bills for material furnished to the railroad.”

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“Let me be quite clear upon that point,” said Blount; and if Hathaway had had eyes to see, he would have observed that the young lawyer’s attitude was becoming more judicial with every fresh questioning. “Let me be quite sure that I understand. You mean that you are allowed to charge the railroad company more than the market price on the material it buys?”

Hathaway nodded. “Yes, that’s the way of it.”

“And this preferential rate is still in force?”

“It is.”

“You’re sure you have had no notice of its withdrawal—say within the past few weeks?”

It was at this point that the lumber lord began to fear that some one had slipped a cog in sending him to first one and then another, and finally to young Blount.

“Of course, it hasn’t been withdrawn!” he retorted. And then: “You seem to think there is something off color in the deal, Mr. Blount, and I don’t know whether you’re stringing me or whether you’re too new in the railroad game to have the dope. If you’re going into this political knock-down-and-drag-out, you ought to have the dope. There isn’t a big interest in this State—ore-shippers, power people, irrigation companies, or any of ’em—that ain’t getting a rake-off. I guess you *are* stringing me; I guess you know all this a good deal better than I do. If you don’t, I can tell you that it’s a fact; not a ‘has-been’, but an ‘is’! Ask Gantry; he’ll tell you, if he tells the truth. We ain’t asking or getting anything that other people ain’t getting!”

“I see,” said Blount soberly. “What do you expect me to do, Mr. Hathaway?”

“I want you to set the wheels in motion so that we can have our rate made good for another two years—on the same terms as before. You’re going to need every vote you can get this year, and you can’t afford to turn us down.” Then the lumber-king shifted again to his own necessities. “It’s the only way we can live and do business nowadays. Like every other large corporation, we’ve got an army of little investors to look out for: widows, orphans, charitable institutions, and trustees’ accounts. I’ve got a list of our stockholders right here, and I’d like to have you look it over.”

Blount took the paper mechanically, and quite as mechanically ran his eye down the list of names. At the bottom of it, written in with a pen, was the name of Patricia’s father, with his residence and occupation. While he was staring at the pen-written name, Hathaway went on, eloquently emphasizing the disastrous results which would fall upon the people for whom he was, in the larger sense, a guardian and a trustee—the disaster hinging upon the withdrawal of the preferential rate.

Blount broke him abruptly in the midst of the special plea. "I see you have recently added one new name to this list: the name of Professor Annors. How—"

"Yes," interrupted the Twin Buttes diplomatist hastily, fearing that this legal-minded young man would presently be asking questions too hard to be answered; "now there's a case in point: Mr. Annors is a good example of our smaller stockholders. Men like Annors, college professors, preachers, and so on, buy stocks, when they buy 'em at all, for an investment—for the income—and they pay for 'em out of their hard-earned savings."

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"I know," said Blount, and, since he was the last man in the world to be diverted from his purpose by any conversational dust-throwing, he pressed the question cut off by the hasty interruption. "What I was going to ask was how you happen to have added Professor Annners's name to your list—recently, it seems?"

The lumberman was reduced to the necessity of inventing a ready lie. He had obeyed his instructions blindly, on the supposition that young Blount would know and understand.

"Annners? Oh, he knows a good thing when he sees it; and I guess maybe your father put him on. He's a friend of the family, ain't he? Maybe the senator found a little chunk of 'Twin Buttes' that he didn't want himself, and passed it along."

Blount's blood ran cold at the sight of the cracking walls and crumbling foundations on every hand. The proof that the railroad company's lawless attitude was still unchanged was too strong to be doubted; and now there was an added blow from the hand of his father. He wheeled short upon the lumber-king.

"Who sent you to me, Mr. Hathaway?" he demanded.

The hawk-faced man laughed. "I guess you know just as well or better than I do. But just to show you that I can keep my mouth shut, I ain't going to tell you. It's all right and straight—and you might say it's all in the family, counting the professor in on the side, as it were."

"I see," Blount said, and this time he was only too sure that he did see. Then: "What is it you want me to do for you, Mr. Hathaway? You have told me once, but I'm afraid I didn't grasp it fully."

"Fix it with Gantry, or somebody, so that we can put the company vote where it's most needed and get our rate continued. It's simple enough."

"The simplicity is beyond question." Blount returned the list of stockholders and fell back upon the pencil-sharpening. "It is quite elementary, as you say; but there is another phase of the transaction which seems to have escaped you. Are you aware that the present arrangement which you have so accurately described, and the continuance of it which you are proposing, are crimes for which both parties involved may be called into court and punished?"

Hathaway started as if the comfortable chair in which he was lounging had been suddenly electrified.

"Say, Blount, are you working for the railroad, or not?" he demanded. "If you are, what in the name of Heaven are you driving at? I know the line of talk you've been handing out since McVickar gave you your job and set you up in business here, but that's for the

dear public. You don't have to wear your halo when a man comes in to talk hard facts from the inside. It comes to just this: you do something for me, and I do something for you. You make it possible for us to live and sell lumber, and we do what we can to make it easy for your railroad to get its 'square deal' from a pie-cutting legislature. That's the whole thing in a nutshell."

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"One more question," snapped Blount, striving to fix the roving gaze of the hawk-like eyes. "With whom did you make this arrangement two years ago?"

"With your boss, if you want to know; with Mr. McVickar himself!"

"And you think you can do it again?"

"I know damned well I can; only I don't care to go over your head unless I have to. They tell me you're handling this end of it for the railroad company, and I'm not going around hunting a chance to make enemies. That's all I've got to say"—and he rose to go—"all but this: you've got a lot to learn about this something-for-something business, and the quicker you get at it, Mr. Blount, the sooner you'll arrive somewhere. About this little matter of ours, there's no special hurry. Take your own time to think it over; take it up with McVickar, if you want to. Then, when you get things fixed, wire me one word to Twin Buttes. Just say 'Yes,' and sign your name to it. That'll be enough."

For a long half-hour after the president of the Twin Buttes Lumber Company and its allied corporations had closed the door of the private office behind him, Blount sat rocking gently in his pivot-chair. In the fulness of time the bitter thoughts wrought their way into words.

"So this is what I was hired for!" he mused, "a fence; a wretched mask put up to hide the trickery and chicanery and criminality—the crookedness which has never been put aside; which nobody ever meant to put aside! My God! they've let me stultify myself in a thousand ways; let me sit here day after day with a lie in my mouth, saying things that nobody in this God-forsaken homeland of mine has believed for a single minute! After it's all over, every man who has listened to me will say that I *knew*—that all this talk about openness and fair dealing was simply that much dust-throwing to hide the workings of a corrupt and criminal machine grinding away in the background!"

He turned to his desk and sat with his head propped in his hands, staring at the little photograph of Wartrace Hall which he had had mounted in a plate-glass paper-weight. The sight gave an added twist to the torture screw and he broke out again.

"I've been nothing more than a bit of potter's clay, and the master potter—God help me! —is my own father! It's all plain enough now. He saw that I wasn't going to fall in with the attorney-general scheme; or perhaps he saw that I might be a stumbling-block if I should; so he planned this thing with McVickar—planned it deliberately! There is no fight, after all; it's merely one of the moves in the game that the 'boss' and the railroad should seem to be fighting each other. Good God! I can't believe it, and yet I've got to believe it. That man Hathaway is a self-confessed criminal, but he was telling the truth about the law-breaking trickery that is going on; he wouldn't be idiotic enough to lie and then give me a chance to prove the lie. And he didn't come to me of his own volition; he was sent—sent to break me down, and sent by.... Oh, dad, dad! how could you do it!"

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With his face hidden in the crook of his arm, he was groping in vain outreachings for something to lay hold of, for some clear-minded, clean-hearted adviser who could tell him what to do; how he should clamber out of this pit of humiliation into which nothing more culpable than an honest zeal for civic righteousness had precipitated him. In his despair he told himself that there was no one, and then suddenly he remembered—Patricia would know, and she would understand better than any one else in a populous world how to point the way out of the labyrinth. He must go to her and tell her. In the meantime....

He got up and shut his desk with a slam. In the meantime there should be no more lies told—no more turns taken in the crooked path. Collins, the stenographer, heard the noise of the desk closing and came to the door of the private room, note-book and pencil in hand. “Anything to give me before you go out?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Blount almost savagely. “Take a message to Mr. McVickar. Are you ready?”

The stenographer nodded.

Blount dictated curtly: “‘Pending another interview with you in person, I shall close my offices in Temple Court and confine myself strictly to the routine legal business of the company. Meanwhile, my resignation is in your hands if you wish to appoint a new division counsel.’ Have you got that, Collins? Very well; write it out and send it at once. I shall be at the Inter-Mountain for a little while, if you want to reach me between now and closing time.”

XII

A WELL-SPRING IN THE DESERT

Going to the hotel, Blount shut himself into a telephone booth and tried, ineffectually, to get a long-distance connection with Wartrace Hall. When he finally grew exasperated at the central operator’s oft-repeated “line’s busy,” he called up Gantry to ask if the traffic manager knew anything about the purposes and movements of his father. Gantry did not know, but he knew something else—a thing which proved the leakiness of the railroad telegraph department.

“Come down here and tell me what you mean by sending incendiary telegrams to the vice-president,” he commanded, with jesting severity. And with a hard word for the department which had gossiped, Blount went down to the general offices in the station building.

Gantry was busy with the stenographer, but the business was immediately postponed and the clerk dismissed when Blount entered.

“Tell it out among the heathen,” the traffic manager quoted jocosely, when the door closed behind the shorthand man.

“There is nothing to tell—more than you seem to know already,” snapped Blount morosely. “I have wired my resignation, that’s all.”

“But why?” persisted Gantry.

“Because I’m not going to be an accessory, either before or after the fact—not if I know it,” was the curt rejoinder.

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"An accessory to what?"

"To the criminal disregard for the laws of this State and the nation which seems to be the underlying motive actuating every move in this corrupt game of politics. Gantry, if you and some others had your just deserts, you would be breaking stone in the penitentiary this blessed minute!"

"Suffering Moses!" gasped the traffic manager. "Somebody must have been hitting you pretty hard. Who was it; some more of the 'little brothers'?"

At another time Blount might have been less angry, and, by consequence, more discreet.

"No, it wasn't any of the 'little brothers'; it was Mr. Simon P. Hathaway, president of the Twin Buttes Lumber Company."

Gantry drew a long breath which ended in a low whistle.

"So that's what you were let in for, was it?" he exclaimed, and then he checked himself abruptly and went back to the original contention. "But you're not going to throw down your tools and walk out, Evan. You can't afford to do that."

"Why can't I?"

"Because you have committed yourself right and left. No man can afford to drop out of the ranks on the eve of a battle. You are not stopping to consider the construction which will be put upon any such hasty action on your part."

"I am not stopping to consider anything, Dick, save the fact that I was evidently expected to connive at a cynical and criminal disregard for the law of the land, the law which, as a member of the bar, I have sworn to uphold and defend. That is enough for me. I don't have to be knocked down and run over before I can realize that it's time to get out of the way."

"You say it's enough for you; it won't be enough for Mr. McVickar," Gantry interposed. "If you could afford to drop out—and I'm not admitting that you can—he couldn't afford to let you." Then, with sudden gravity: "Hadn't you better let me hold up that telegram of yours for a few hours, Evan, until you've had time to cool down and think it over?"

Blount sprang from his chair in a white heat.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are already holding it up?" he demanded.

"I took the liberty of holding it up—temporarily," confessed the traffic man coolly. "There is no harm done. Mr. McVickar is on his way West now, and he will be here in a day or two. Why not kill the message and have it out with him in person when he comes?"

Blount was not to be so easily appeased.

"I won't have my communications tampered with!" he exploded. "If you have given an order to have that telegram held out, you can give another to have it sent immediately!"

"All right," said Gantry; "just as you say." And he made no effort to detain the enraged one who was turning his back and striding away. But after the self-discharged political manager was gone, the traffic man chuckled quietly and turned up a square of paper which had been lying on his desk during the short and belligerent interview.

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"It's a nice lay-out," he mused, reading the type-written lines over again, "but the little lady was too fly for you this time, Evan, my boy. She was just prophetess enough to guess where and how you would go off the handle, clever enough to pass me the word to watch the wires after a certain train should get in from Ophir to-day. Great little woman, that. I believe she figures out more than half of the fine moves in the Honorable Senator's game, though this particularly fine move of sending Hathaway to touch a match to Evan's little powder-keg is one that I don't begin to understand." And he folded the telegram and carefully put it away in his pocket-book.

Evan Blount walked three squares beyond the Inter-Mountain Hotel before he had cooled down sufficiently to determine what to do next. As it chanced, the cooling-down process had led him to the door of the public garage patronized by his father. That thought of flying to Patricia for counsel and comfort was still with him, but it was overshadowed by a more militant desire to fight somebody; to go to his father and tell him how completely and successfully he had plotted with the vice-president to humiliate a son whose only offence was a decent regard for honor and uprightness.

Acting upon the impulse of the moment, he went in and asked if any of Senator Blount's cars were in the city. There was one—the big roadster; and Blount's decision was taken instantly. On that first day at Wartrace Hall his father had tried to give him one of the three motor-cars outright, and when he had refused to take it as a gift, a compromise had been made by which he was under promise to use any one of the machines he could get hold of when the need arose. Accordingly, a few minutes later he was behind the steering-wheel of the fast roadster, picking his way through the traffic-burdened city streets and pointing straight for the country road leading north to the sage-brush hills.

Now, among its many attractions, motoring numbers—from the driver's point of view—this: that it effectually sweeps the brain of all other cares and distractions, sundry and several, since one may not drive a high-powered car at speed and successfully think of anything but the driving. Blount reached the entrance to the cottonwood-shaded avenue at Wartrace Hall just before the dinner hour; and he was so far recovered from the attack of righteous indignation that he was able to meet his father and the others with a fair degree of equanimity. In the back part of his mind, however, he held the fighting ultimatum in suspense. In the course of the evening he would make his opportunity and have it out, once for all, with the master plotter. So much he determined while he was dressing for dinner. But the course of events is sometimes a most unmalleable thing, as he was presently to learn.

At the dinner-table it was the professor who monopolized the conversation, holding forth learnedly and dictatorially upon matters pertaining solely to the Pliocene age, and never once suffering the talk to approach nearer than several million years to the twentieth century. And at the dispersal—only there was no dispersal—the senator took his turn, leading the way to the great wainscoted living-room and persuading Patricia to go to the piano.

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The young man with the fighting determination in the back part of his brain bided his time. He was willing enough to listen to Grieg and Brahms as they were interpreted by Patricia, but the greater matter was still outweighing the lesser. Further along, when Miss Annors had played herself out, Blount tried to break the obstructing combination. But, in spite of his efforts, the talk drifted back to the dinosaurs and the pterodactyls, and when he finally went away to smoke, he did it alone.

The Wartrace Hall den was an annex to the living-room, and through the bamboo *portieres* he could hear the animated hum of the prehistoric discussion, in which Patricia had now joined as a loyal daughter should. Hoping against hope that the professor would some time go to bed, and that his father would come to the den for his bedtime whiff at the long-stemmed pipe, Blount smoked and waited. But when his patience was finally rewarded, it was not the Honorable Senator who drew the bamboo *portieres* aside and entered the cosy smoking-room. It was Patricia, and she was alone.

"I thought perhaps I should find you here," she said, taking the easy chair at the opposite corner of the fireplace where a tiny wood fire was blazing in deference to the chill of the approaching autumn. "Did we bore you to death with the Pliocenes?"

"Not quite," he admitted grudgingly. "But since I hadn't remembered to have myself born six or seven million years ago, I can't somehow seem to galvanize a very active interest in the dead-and-gone periods."

"Nor I," she confessed frankly, "though for daddy's sake I do try to. But for us who are living to-day there are so many problems of critically vital importance—problems that the pterodactyls never knew anything about."

"I know," returned the young man, half-absently. "I am up against one of them, right now, and I don't know how to solve it."

"Will it bear telling?" she asked, and he hoped that the sympathy in her tone was personal rather than conventional.

"It will not only bear telling; it demands to be told to some one whose sense of right and wrong has not been drawn and quartered and flayed alive until it has no longer life or breath left with which to protest," and thereupon he told her circumstantially all that had befallen him since the eventful evening on which he had forsaken the wrecked train at Twin Buttes, concluding with the story of the lumber magnate's attempt at corruption, of which he suppressed nothing but the fact that her father's name appeared in Mr. Hathaway's list of share-holders. When he had made an end, her eyes were shining, though whether with quickened sympathy or indignation he could not determine.

"What did you do?" she asked, referring to the incident of the afternoon.

“I didn’t do half enough!” he fumed. “I’m afraid I let Hathaway escape without being told plainly enough what a hopelessly irreclaimable scoundrel he is. When he edged out of the door, he was still telling me to take my time to think it over, and was indicating the way in which I might communicate my consent without committing anybody. I made a mistake in not firing him bodily!”

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Miss Anners was tapping one daintily shod foot on the tiled hearth.

"You made your greatest mistake in the very beginning, Evan," she said decisively. "You should have made a confidant of your father."

"I did try to," he protested. "Everything was all right until this political business came up between us. But that opened the rift. I couldn't do as he wanted me to, and my sympathies were with the corporations which I thought he was fighting unjustly. So when Mr. McVickar made me an offer, I accepted in good faith, believing that I could really do something toward bringing about a better understanding."

"And now you believe you can't?—that it is impossible?"

"Not wholly impossible, I suppose. But the 'great game' seems to be everything in this benighted commonwealth, and everybody plays it—my father, his wife, the railroad officials, and the politicians. Surely you wouldn't say that I should have let father put me on the State ticket as a candidate, knowing—as I could not help knowing—that I would be expected to carry out the designs of the machine regardless of right and wrong?"

"Certainly not," was the quick reply, "not if you were convinced that the motive—your father's motive—was unworthy. But if you have been telling me the truth, and all the truth, I should say that you didn't stop to inquire what his motive was."

"What was the use of inquiring?" he demanded moodily. "He is the boss, and he would have used the machine to put me into office as attorney-general. In other words, I should have owed my election, not to the will and selection of the people, but to the will of one man, and that man my nearest kinsman; a man who is, beyond all question of doubt, working hand in glove with all the trickery and double-dealing practised by the corporations. Under such conditions, would it have been possible for me to accept and to administer the office without fear or favor?"

"I don't know why not," she returned. "Notwithstanding your charge—which merely shows how angry you are—your 'nearest kinsman,' as you call him, would have been the last man in the world to interfere. Wasn't that the very reason he gave you for wanting to put you on the ticket?"

"I know," said Blount, whose mind was beginning to cloud again. "But there are so many other mysteries. We'll say that my father honestly wanted me to stand for the candidacy. But right in the midst of things he conspires with Mr. McVickar to put me into my present unspeakable dilemma."

Her smile was gently reproachful.

"It is my poor opinion, Evan, that you don't half appreciate your father. Worse than that, you don't know him. But that is beside the present mark. What are you going to do?"

"I have already done it. I have wired my resignation to Mr. McVickar, and he will doubtless accept it."

She was looking him fairly in the eyes. "That is the second unwise thing you have done," she remarked. And then: "Evan, there are times when you are sadly in need of a balance-wheel. Don't you know that?"

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"I knew it a good while ago. I applied for one once, and it was refused when you said 'No'."

For one who was supposed to be far above and beyond such emotional signalings, she blushed very prettily. Which merely proves that one may be a diplomaed sociologist with a burning zeal for alleviating the miseries of a sodden world, without having parted with the primitive sex impulse.

"I am willing to try to help you now," she said, half hesitating; "if only you won't try to drag me over into the field of sentiment. It was just a bit of boyish rage—fine enough in its way, but foolish—your sending that telegram to Mr. McVickar. Can't you recall it?"

"No; not now."

"Then you must do the next best thing: tell him you have reconsidered."

"But I haven't reconsidered; I can't and won't stand in with the corruption and bribery that is going on all around me!" he objected indignantly.

"Of course you can't; and you mustn't. But the true reformer doesn't drop things and run away. You must stay in and fight—fight harder than you ever have before, Evan. If you can't do it for the sake of the larger right, then you must do it for your own sake. Can't you see the open door before you?"

"I can see and hear and feel when the door is slammed in my face," was the qualifying rejoinder. "How can I go on preaching the gospel of cleanness and fair dealing, when I know that all this crooked work is going on behind my back? What will the people of this State say to me and about me when the crookedness comes to light?"

"Ah!" she said; "that is just where you begin to grow one-sided. You must go on preaching the gospel, but that is only half of the battle. The other half is to be big enough and strong enough and insistent enough to make the thing itself agree with the gospel. I fully believe you lost your best helper when you refused to join hands with your father. You don't believe that, so we'll let it go. You have gone your own way, choosing what seemed to you to be the better opportunity. Evan, you can't turn back; you've simply *got* to go on and wring success out of apparent failure!"

Blount drew a deep breath and sat up in his chair. There was no mistaking the light in Patricia's eyes now; the pure flame of which it was the visible radiance is the torch which has kindled the beacon fires on all the heights since the world began.

"If I had only my own people—the railroad people—to knock down and drag out," he was beginning, but she broke in warmly:



“You think you have your father against you, too; I don’t believe it, but you do. Very well; then you must compel him, as well as the others. Be a big man, Evan; be the biggest man in the State until you have proved that one man with a righteous cause is better than ten thousand without it.”

Blount got up and stood with his back to the dying embers of the tiny fire, and if he put his hands behind him it was because the passionate impulse to break down all the barriers was twitching in every fibre of him.

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"Patricia, girl, I wonder if you know what you have done to me? I drove out here this evening utterly discouraged and disheartened; bitter and angry, and ready to throw the whole thing up and go away. You've changed all that—you, you know; just you. Oh, girl, girl! if I could only have you beside me to give me my battle-word!"

She had her slender fingers locked over one knee and her eyes were downcast.

"Now you are tempting me," she said slowly; "and—and it isn't fair. You know my weakness and passion to help. You *mustn't* tempt me, Evan."

What he would have said, with what eager pleadings he would have pressed the advantage gained by his appeal for the larger help, is not to be here set down. For at that moment the bamboo door curtains parted to admit the small house-mistress.

"You two!" she scolded with light-hearted austerity. And then to Evan: "Don't you know that we are keeping country hours here at Wartrace now? The professor will be up and calling for the car at six o'clock, and it's past midnight. Shame on you! Run away and get your beauty sleep—both of you!"

XIII

THE LIEGEMAN

Evan Blount drove himself back to the capital in the swift roadster the following morning, and there was no opportunity for further confidential speech with Patricia before he left. But with the new day had arisen, full-grown, the determination born in the moment of midnight heart-warming and inspiration. To the best of his ability he would live up to the high standard set for him by the woman he loved, not only preaching the gospel of fair dealing, but doing his utmost to make it effective.

With this high purpose singing its song of exaltation in his veins, he drove on past the garage and made an early call at the office of the traffic manager. Gantry was in the midst of his morning mail-opening, but he pushed the desk-load of papers aside when the door swung inward to admit the early visitor.

"Hello, old man! Come back to jar me some more about that telegram?" was his greeting.

Blount shook his head. "No; if you've sent it, well and good. If you haven't, you may pitch it into the waste-basket. I came to talk about something else."

"Good, sound, sensible second thought!" Gantry commented, laughing. Then he took out his pocket-book and passed the suppressed telegram across to Blount. "Here it is; you can do the waste-basket act yourself. I couldn't let you commit *hara-kiri* without at

least trying to get the cutting tool out of your hands. What is the other thing you've got on your mind this early in the morning? It must be a nightmare of some sort, by the look in your eyes."

"It may figure as a nightmare to you, Dick, before we're through with it. I'll make it short. You know what I have been doing—what I supposed I was hired to do—assuring everybody right and left that we were going into this campaign with clean hands?"

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"I know," admitted the traffic manager, developing a sudden interest in the figures of the rug at his feet.

"I have been doing this in a business way at my office up-town, in season and out of season, and night before last, at Ophir, I did it publicly. As the campaign progresses, I shall doubtless put myself on record many times to the same effect."

"Good man!" applauded Gantry, striving to drag the talk down to some less portentous altitude. "I'm sure we need all the whitewashing anybody can give us."

"That is just the point I have come to make," Blount went on gravely. "It mustn't be merely a coat of whitewash, Dick; it has got to be the real thing, this time. I began by firing the 'little brothers,' as you called them, but I sha'n't stop at that; I mean to go higher up if I am compelled to. I am here this morning to ask you to give me your word as a gentleman and my friend that you will not, directly or indirectly, do or cause to be done anything that will make me stand forth as a self-convicted liar before the people of this State. I want you to promise me that you will cut out all the deals, all the briberies, all the bargainings, all the—"

"Oh, say; see here!" protested the man under fire; "you've got the wrong pig by the ear, Evan. I'm not the Transcontinental Railway Company!"

"I know you are not. But, to a greater degree than any other official in the local management, you have Mr. McVickar's confidence. If you don't feel competent to handle the thing on your own responsibility, of course it's your privilege to pass it up to those who have the authority. In that case, I wish to make one point clear: you're the man I'm going to hold up to the rack. I can't afford to spread myself over the entire management, and I don't mean to try. I'm going to look to you, Dick, for the backing of the clean sheet, and I warn you in all soberness that there must be no blots on it; no compromises; no whipping of the devil around the stump."

"Great Scott!" murmured Gantry. "And you're on the pay-rolls, the same as the rest of us! But candidly, as man to man, Evan, the thing can't be done, you know. We've got to play the game; they'll eat us alive if we don't. You needn't figure in it at all; it was a mistake letting Sim Hathaway get to you, and I said so at the time. But your—er—the powers that be said it had to be that way, and I had to let him go and ball you all up. It sha'n't happen again; I can promise you that much, anyway."

Blount caught quickly at the hesitant pause.

"Who were 'the powers that be' in Hathaway's case, Dick?" he inquired.

"I can't tell you that; honestly, I can't, Evan," was the anxious refusal. "Don't ask me."

“All right; then I shall assume that Mr. McVickar was responsible,” said Blount calmly, thus proving that he had not taken his degree in the law school for nothing.

“Oh, hold on! You mustn’t do that, either!” protested the man who was figuring most unwillingly as the occupant of the witness stand.

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"Thank you," returned the postgraduate, with the true Blount smile. "Now I know that it was my father. No; you needn't deny it; I suppose it was for some good reason that this man was sent to teach me how to play the game—as reasons go in practical politics. But we are side-stepping the real issue. I've asked you for a promise: will you give it?"

"I—I can't give it, Evan, and hold my job; that's God's own truth!"

"No; it isn't God's truth—it's the other kind. But that was about what I expected you to say. Now hear my side of it: if you don't clean house—you and the other officials of the company—I shall not only resign; I shall take the field on the other side and tell what I know and why I've thrown up my job. I've been telling everybody that this is to be a campaign of publicity, and by all that is good and great, I shall keep my word, Dick!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, you wouldn't do that!" ejaculated the traffic man, now thoroughly alarmed. "Land of glory, Evan! you know too much—a great deal too much!"

The young man who knew too much got up and relighted his cigar with a match taken from Gantry's desk box.

"It's up to you," he said, with his hand on the door-knob. "Get into communication with whatever 'powers that be' there are that can give the necessary orders; see to it that the orders are given, and that they are put in the way of being carried out. As God hears me, Dick, I mean what I say: it's a clean sheet, or an exposure that will make a lot of you wish you had never been born. If I have to put the screws on—as I hope and pray I sha'n't—you can bet they'll be put on lawyer-fashion; with evidence that will send a bunch of you to the penitentiary."

"Hold on—one question before you go, Evan!" pleaded Gantry. "I haven't known half the time where I'm at in this latest muddle. Is this another little blind lead of the Honorable Sen—of your father's?"

Blount's smile was as grim as any that Gantry had ever seen on the face of the Honorable David.

"It's against nature for you to play the game straight, isn't it, Dick?" he said in mild reproach. "If you don't know that my father is still the head of the machine, and that the machine has always been for you in the past, I imagine you're the only man in the Sage-Brush State who needs enlightening. No, Gantry; you've got only one man to fight; but you mustn't forget that his name, also, is Blount. Go to it and send me word, and let the first word be that you have scotched the head of this lumber-company snake. That's all for to-day. Good-by."

Notwithstanding the fact that his day's work was still ahead of him, the traffic manager did not attack it when he was left alone. An able man in his calling, and one who had



fought his way rapidly by sheer merit and hard work from a clerkship to an official desk, Richard Gantry was still lacking, in a character admirable and most lovable in many ways, the iron that refuses to bend, and—though perhaps in lesser measure—the courage of his ultimate convictions. In addition to these basic weaknesses he owned another—the weakness of the cog which is constrained to turn with the great wheel of which it is a part.

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In his heart of hearts Richard Gantry knew that Blount was right; knew that the forlorn-hope fight into which his friend and college classmate had plunged was a struggle to call out all that was best and finest in friendly loyalty. But when he sprang from his chair and began to walk the floor of his private office with his head down and his hands deeply buried in his pockets, he was once more the true corporation liegeman, loyal to his salt, and anxious only to contrive means to an end.

"Confound his picture!" he muttered, "why the devil can't he see that he's got everything to lose and nothing to gain? It's a thousand pities that such a royal good fellow has to turn himself into a wild-eyed, impossible crank! The Lord knows, I'd do anything in reason for him; but I can't let him turn anarchist and blow us all to kingdom come. He's got to be muzzled in some way, and I'll be hanged if I know how it's going to be done."

The pacing monologue paused when the traffic manager stopped at the window and stood looking with unseeing eyes upon the morning bustle of Sierra Avenue. Then he broke out again.

"It's a beautiful tangle—damn' beautiful! Evan says I know that we've got the machine with us; I wish to heaven I did know it, and could be sure of it. That would simplify matters a whole lot. But the vice-president won't say, and he's the one who has been doing all the dickering with the Honorable David. They quarrelled at first; I'd bet every dollar I've got on that. But I more than half-believe they've patched it up now, and I believe it was Mr. McVickar's quick swiping of Evan—jerking him out from under his father's thumb the way he did—that brought on the peace negotiations."

He turned away from the window and resumed the floor-pacing, still wrestling with the deductions.

"By George! I believe I've got hold of the end of the thread at last! The senator *is* with us, working in the dark, as he always does. And that Hathaway business: that was one of his smooth little side-moves—his or Mrs. Honoria's. He didn't want Evan to get in too deep in the righteousness puddle, and he took that way of letting him get a peek at the real thing. It was overdone, though; horribly overdone. Confound it all! I wish Mr. McVickar would loosen up a little more with me! If he'd tell me a few of the things I ought to know—"

The interruption was the entrance of the boy from the train-despatcher's office with a verbal message. The vice-president, moving westward, had changed his plans and cut out some of his stop-overs. Car "008" would be in on the noon train and would proceed westward, running special, at one o'clock. The despatcher had thought that Mr. Gantry might want to know.

The traffic manager did want to know, and when the boy had ducked out, the knowledge was promptly utilized. A touch of a desk-button brought the stenographer, and Gantry

dictated a message. "Important that I should have conference with you on arrival. Will meet you at train at twelve-three.' Send that to Mr. McVickar over the despatcher's wire, and ask Gilkey to rush it," he directed, and the shorthand man went to do it.

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"Now, Mr. Evan Anarchist Blount!" said Gantry, apostrophizing the late disturber of his peace, "now we'll find out just where we're at and how big a rope it's going to take to snub you down," and thereupon the desk buzzer rattled again, and Mr. Richard Gantry squared himself for his forenoon's work.

At the moment of his apostrophizing Blount was opening his mail in the Temple Court office, and lamenting, as a loyal friend might, the necessity for the recent clubbing into line of so fine a fellow as Dick Gantry. But the mail-opening plunged him once more into the political actualities. There were letters from all over the State, and among them three invitations from widely separated cities, all based upon the newspaper reports of his Ophir speech. It seemed to be plainly evident that the "campaign-of-education" idea was striking a popular chord, and the proponent of the idea saw what a miraculous opportunity was offering for the railroad if only the "powers" that Gantry had refused to name were broad enough and high-minded enough to seize it.

After a day and an evening well filled with detail, Blount went to the station to take the nine-thirty west-bound, since the first of the three speaking engagements—all of which had been promptly accepted by wire—lay in that direction. On the platform, whither he went to consult the bulletin-board, he found Gantry.

"Your train is half an hour late," said the traffic man, with a glance for the travelling-bag in Blount's hand. "Didn't they know enough at the hotel to tell you about it?"

"They told me it was on time," said the putative traveller, and he was far enough from suspecting that Gantry himself had arranged to have the inaccurate information given across the counter at the Inter-Mountain, so that he might be sure of an uninterrupted half-hour with Blount before he should leave the city.

"Ump!" said the traffic manager, "I've got to wait for it, too. One of my men is coming in on it. Let's go up to the office. It's pleasanter there."

Together they climbed the stair to the second floor of the station building, and Gantry unlocked the door of his private room and turned on the lights.

"Feeling any more humane than you did this morning?" he inquired genially, after he had opened his desk and found a box of cigars.

"I haven't been feeling otherwise since—well, let's say since midnight last night," countered Blount laughing.

"Why midnight?"

"That was about the time when I made up my mind definitely to stay in the fight."

"Then you are still meaning to go ahead on the lines you laid down this morning?"

“If I wasn’t, I shouldn’t be here to take the train for the rally at Angora to-morrow night.”

Gantry smoked in silence for a little time. Then he said: “You can’t do it, Evan. It’s fine and glorious and heart-breaking, and all that; but you can’t do it.”

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"I can, and I will!"

"I say you can't. I know a good bit more now than I knew this morning!"

"Catalogue it," said Blount tersely.

"Mr. McVickar came in on the noon train to-day, and I had an interview with him."

"That doesn't tell me anything."

Again the traffic manager took time to smoke and to reflect.

"You made some pretty savage threats this morning, Evan; about shoving this thing to the point where the grand juries, Federal and State, could take hold of it. As a lawyer, you know even better than I do what that would mean."

"I told you what it would mean. In the present state of public sentiment it would mean prison sentences for every man of you caught with the goods."

"Yes, for every man of us," said Gantry slowly; "for the railroad man who has given, and for the other man who has taken. Evan, the jails of this State wouldn't be big enough to hold us all."

"I can readily believe you. That is the full weight of the stick with which I am going to club you fellows into decency."

"And you'll let the club fall wherever it may?"

"I've got to do that, Dick; I can't do any less."

For the third time Gantry paused. The train-waiting interval was half gone, and he had been feeling purposefully for the climaxing moment without finding it. But now he decided that it had come.

"In the talk this morning there was some reference made to your father and his attitude in this fight, Evan. Do you remember what was said?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, suppose I should tell you that I know now—what I didn't know certainly then—that when you hit out at us you hit him?"

"You mean that he is with you in this scheme to hoodwink the people?"

"Ask yourself," was the low-toned reply.

"I have asked myself a hundred times, Dick; I've been hoping against hope. I'll be utterly frank with you, as man to man. We've kept pretty obstinately out of the political field, both of us, father and I, since the first day when I told him my views on machine-made government. But from a few little things he has said, I've gathered that he isn't with you; that there has been a quarrel of some kind between him and Mr. McVickar—"

"There was a set-to—a battle royal," Gantry put in. "The last act of it was played to a finish that evening when Mr. McVickar took you down to his car and hired you. But there has been a meeting since. Ask yourself again, Evan. Haven't you had good and sufficient reasons for believing that you are bucking, not only the railroad company, but your own flesh and blood?"

This time it was Blount who took time for reflection. The shot had gone home. He told himself that there were only too many reasons for believing that Gantry was stating the simple fact. None the less, he made a final effort to break down the conclusion that Gantry was relentlessly thrusting upon him.

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"In all our talks, Dick—there haven't been very many of them—my father has taken, or seemed to take, a different line. I don't recall anything specific just now, but he has given me the impression that he hasn't much in common with Mr. McVickar and his methods. To hear him talk—"

Gantry smiled. "You know your father very superficially, Evan, if you'll permit me to say so. What the Honorable David Blount says in talk with you or me or anybody outside of the inner circle is a mighty poor foundation upon which to build any idea of what's going on in the back of his head. No—hold on; don't get mad. What I'm trying to tell you is what everybody in the sage-brush hills—save and excepting yourself—knows like a book, and that is that the big boss's moves are all made strictly in the dark. He doesn't let his own right hand know what the left is doing. That's the secret of his absolutely Czarish power, I think."

The shriek of a distant locomotive whistle floated in through the open window at Blount's back and he got up stiffly.

"That's my train coming," he said. And then: "Tell me plainly, Dick: you brought me up here to throw a final brick—a bigger one than you have yet thrown—and I know it. What did Mr. McVickar tell you to-day that will make my job harder than I am already finding it?"

Gantry turned his head, refusing to meet the straightforward gaze of the questioner.

"You intimated this morning that you would go at it lawyer-fashion, Evan," he said; "which means, I suppose, that you would get the evidence on us. You can do it; the Lord knows, there's plenty of it to be had. But when you pull out one set of props the whole thing will come down. We haven't any of us been careful enough about what we put in writing—*not even your father.*"

Blount staggered as if the words had been a blow.

"You're trying to tell me that my father would be involved in the disclosures you fellows might drive me to make?" he demanded, and his voice was husky.

Gantry was still looking away. "There always has to be an intermediary—you know that. We can't do business direct with these—with the people who have something to sell. You can draw your own inferences, Evan. I didn't send Hathaway to you; I sent him to your father."

The train was thundering into the station and Blount picked up his hand-bag and went out, stumbling blindly in the unlighted passage at the stair-head. And in the private office behind him the traffic manager was crushing his dead cigar in his clenched hand and staring fixedly at the square of darkness framed by the open window.

XIV

BARRIERS INVISIBLE

During the three weeks following the night journey to Angora, a journey on which he once more fought the hard battle to a still sharper conclusion, Evan Blount scarcely saw his office in Temple Court for more than a brief hour or two at a time. One speaking appointment followed another in such rapid succession that he was constantly going or returning; and since there was everywhere a repetition of the welcome accorded him by the miners of the Carnadine district, there was no reason save physical weariness to make him wish to limit his opportunity.

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It was not until he was deep into the fourth week of the hurryings to and fro that he began to admit a suspicion which grew like a juggler's rose once he had given it place. Could it be possible that these numerous invitations, coming now from all parts of the State, were purely spontaneous? If not, if they were so many subtle moves in the great game, he could see no possible end to be subserved by them save one: they were effectually keeping him away from the capital, which was naturally the nucleus and centre of the campaign activities. Was there something going on at headquarters that "the powers" did not wish him to find out? Of one thing he was well assured. Gantry was dodging him, was apparently keeping an accurate record of his movements; for whenever the hurryings permitted a flying return to the capital the traffic manager was always out of town.

These were small matters, but vital in their way. Failing to keep in touch with Gantry, Blount could never be sure that the policy of the railroad company had been reformed or changed in any respect. Moreover, his journeyings, which brought him in direct contact with the voters themselves, seemed to have the effect of isolating him curiously in the actual battle-field. That a hot political campaign was raging throughout the length and breadth of the State was not to be doubted; the newspapers were full of it, and in many districts the fight had become acrimonious and bitter. But although he was supposed to be in the thick of the fight, he knew that he was not; that some mysterious influence was shutting him out and holding him at arm's length.

Everywhere he went the cordial reception, the attentive and hospitable committeemen, the packed house, and the generous applause were always awaiting him. It was as if his progress had been carefully prearranged, like a sort of triumphal procession. None the less, the invisible barrier—the barrier which was excluding him from a hand-to-hand grapple with the inner workings of the campaign—was always there, and he could neither surmount it nor push it aside.

Notwithstanding the hard work and hard travelling, he did not allow the missionary effort and its curious isolation to obscure in any sense the sturdier purpose. By every means he could devise he was holding his principals up to the mirror of a vigilant watchfulness. Arguing that the opposition newspapers would be quick to seize upon any charge of corruption involving the railroad company, he read them faithfully. As yet there had been only innuendoes and a raking over of past misdeeds, though by this time many of the editors were openly claiming that the old alliance between the railroad and the machine had never been broken, and warning their readers accordingly.

Blount winced when he read such editorials as these. Though he was going about, striving to do his part manfully, and even with enthusiasm, the burden of the cruel responsibility he had voluntarily shouldered was never less than crushing. His only hope lay in success. If he could make Gantry and his superiors come clean-handed to the election, there need be no exposure, no cataclysm involving both the railroad officials and his father.

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So ran the saving hope; and not content with mere watchfulness, Blount tried to get his finger upon the pulse of occasions whenever he could. On his brief stop-overs in the capital he kept his eyes and ears open for the earliest hint of any charge of chicanery, and though he was unable to get hold of Gantry personally, he kept up a steady fire of letters and telegrams, all pointing to the same end—absolute and utter good faith, and the upholding of his hands in the public plea for a square deal. To these the traffic manager always replied guardedly and optimistically. Everybody was delighted with the good work done, and doing, by the railroad company's field manager; public opinion was slowly but surely changing; let the good work go on—and much more to the same effect.

Blount did let the good work go on; but as the critical pre-election weeks approached, he began to arm himself, reluctantly but resolutely. A little quiet investigation, which was made to dovetail cleverly with his speech-making journeys, revealed—as Gantry had confessed it would—convincing evidence of past corruption and present law-breaking. Hathaway had told the truth when he had asserted that his own involvement was only one of many similar bargains. Blount called upon the president of the Irrigation Alliance at Romero, in the heart of the agricultural district, upon the managers of several of the electric-power companies, and upon a number of influential mining men—all shippers, and all large employers of labor. It was the same story everywhere. Preferential freight rates had been given in return for votes controlled, and the rates were still in effect.

The investigator turned sick at heart when these men talked quite freely to him, thus showing conclusively that they were cynically discounting his public utterances. McDarragh, owner and manager of the "Wire-Gold" properties in the Moscow district, winked slyly when Blount cautiously inserted the probe.

"You're on, Mr. Blount. I sat up there in the Op'ry-house last night listening to your game, and says I to myself, 'Thim railroad shift-bosses know their trade.' 'Twas a gr-reat talk you gave us, and it'll make the swinging of the har-rd-rock vote as easy as twice two. Of course, we have a thin paring on the ore rate; you'll be knowing that as well as annybody in the game, I'm thinking. 'Tis well that we fellows at the top know how to make one hand wash the other. Come again, Mr. Blount, and give my regards to the sinator when ye see him. And ye might whisper in his ear that it's a waste of good wor-rk for him to be sinding his gum-shoe wire-pullers to be laboring with our min. We're safe as the clock up here in the Moscow."

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This was not the first hint that Blount had been given pointing to the underground work of the machine. That this work was being directed toward the subversion of the popular will, he made no doubt; and there were times when he was strongly tempted to carry the war boldly into the wider field of graft and bossism. That he postponed the bigger battle was due quite as much to the singleness of purpose which was his best gift as to the desire to spare his father. Telling himself resolutely that the reformation of the railroad company's political methods was his chief object, and the only one which warranted him in retaining his place on the Company's payrolls, he held aloof when his father's name was mentioned and bent himself to the task of providing the means for the subjugation of Gantry—and of Gantry's and his own superiors, if need be.

The securing of evidence of the kind which would really give him the whip-hand promised to be a delicate undertaking. Men like McDarragh talked openly enough about the illegal special freight rates, but talk was not evidence. Curiously enough, while he was trying to devise some way of obtaining the tangible proof without using his semiofficial position in the company's service as a lever, the thing itself was thrown at him. From some mysterious source a rumor went out that the special rates were in jeopardy; and the very men with whom he had talked began to write him importunate letters begging him to deny the rumor. With a sheaf of these letters in his pocket, each one inculcating both parties to the illegal "deals," Blount grew gayly exultant. The natural inference was that Gantry and "the powers" had been finally forced to yield—that he had won his victory. But if he had not yet won it, chance, or something better, had placed in his hands the weapon with which he could compel a return to fair dealing and honesty.

It was on a second speech-making visit to Ophir that Blount had his first face-to-face chance at Gantry. A meeting of the Mine-Owners' Association, moving for a readjustment of the classification on copper matte and bullion at a time when the railroad company might be supposed to be on the giving hand, brought Gantry to the gold camp in the Carnadine Hills, and the first man he met at the hotel was the stubborn dictator of new policies for the Transcontinental Company.

"Hello, Dick! made a mistake, didn't you—coming while I was here?" said the reformer, with a very lifelike replica of his father's grim smile. "I suppose you have an immediate engagement to go somewhere else, or to do something that will give you a chance to dodge?"

"No; I wish to the Lord I had!" was the hearty admission. "You're a fright, Evan; you are getting to be a perfect nightmare, with your letters and telegrams. You've got me so I'm afraid to open my desk."

Blount nodded gravely. "I'm glad the letters and telegrams have had their effect at last," he rejoined.

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"Had their effect? Yes, they've had the effect of turning my hair gray, if that's what you mean."

"I think you know what I mean, Dick."

"I'll be hanged if I do. What are you driving at?"

"At the fact that you have finally concluded to cancel the crooked deals with—wait, and I'll give you the names of the co-respondents"—and he drew a packet of neatly docketed letters from his pocket.

"Hold on a minute," protested the traffic manager; "you're getting in rather too deep for me. Will you let me see those letters?"

Blount put the letters back into his pocket and mechanically buttoned his light top-coat over them for additional safety.

"Do you mean to say that you haven't passed the word to Hathaway and McDarragh and a dozen others I could name?" he asked.

"Of course I haven't. You call yourself a lawyer, and yet you ask us to set aside promises that are, or ought to be, as binding as so many written contracts with penalties attached. You're crazy, Evan; it can't be done, and that's all there is to it."

Blount was frowning thoughtfully. "'Can't' goes out of the window when 'must' comes in at the door, Dick. You remember what I told you—that I'd get evidence, lawyer-fashion. I've got it; evidence of the sort that would turn the people of this State into a howling mob to tear up your tracks if I should publish it."

"But I tell you we *can't* withdraw the specials, you wild-eyed fanatic!"

"All right; then level down the public's rates to fit them. And do it quickly, old man. The time is growing fearfully short, and my patience isn't what it used to be."

"My Lord! anybody would think you owned the Transcontinental Company, lock, stock, and barrel! Where under heaven did you get your nerve, Evan? Blest if I don't believe you could out-bluff the old—er—your father, himself, if you once got the fool notion into your head that it was your duty to try!"

"You are side-stepping again, Dick, and that won't go any longer. You've got to fish or cut bait, and do one or the other pretty soon."

"I'd cut the bait all right, if I were Mr. McVickar, Evan. I'd fire you so blamed far that you wouldn't be able to find your way back in a month of Sundays."

Blount tapped his pocket. “As long as I have these documents, Mr. McVickar doesn’t dare to fire me. And if you and he don’t come down within the next few days—yes, it’s a matter of days, now—I’ll fire myself and go over every foot of the ground again, telling what I know.”

Gantry’s eyes darkened. He had graduated with honors from the particular department in railroading in which patience is more than a virtue. Yet there are limits.

“You seem to have entirely forgotten that little talk we had in my office the night you were going to Angora,” he said.

“No; I haven’t forgotten it—not for a single waking minute.”

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"What I said to you then goes as it lies," was the threatening reminder. "If you pull the props out, there'll be more than one death in the family."

"You mean that you, or Mr. McVickar, will make it a point to include my father; I've wrestled that out, too, Dick. I'm going to try to pull him out of it, but whether I succeed or fail, the consequences will be the same for you fellows. Come and hear me speak to-night, Dick—if you're stopping over that long. Then you'll know how much in earnest—how deadly in earnest—I am. You spoke of my father just now; I want to remind you again that I, too, bear the Blount name—a name that I have heard bandied about as a synonym for all that is worst in our political life. Don't you see that I've got to make good?"

"Oh, great cats!—you and your high-strung notions of what you've got to do!" snorted the traffic manager, and he went away to his classification meeting.

XV

WORD-PLAY

It was during this hard-travelling period that Blount saw, with keen regret, the gradual widening of the breach between his father and himself. In their infrequent meetings there was never anything remotely approaching an open rupture; but in a thousand ways the younger man fancied he could see and feel the steady growth of the rift.

That the long arm of the machine of which his father was the acknowledged head was reaching out into all corners of the State, was a fact no longer to be doubted, and that the influences thus set in motion were sinister, he took for granted. Therefore, when it came in his way, he scored the machine frankly, charging it with much of the mischief which had been wrought in the way of arousing public sentiment against the corporations. "The worst in politics joined with the worst elements in capitalized industry," was his platform characterization of the alliances of the past, and he usually added that he was fighting it as every honest man was in duty bound to fight it. But it is hard to fight in the dark. After all was said, he could not help admiring the subtlety of the master brain which was able to control and direct such a complicated piece of human mechanism; direct it so skilfully and cleverly that, though the name of the thing was in everybody's mouth, its workings were so carefully concealed that it was only by the merest chance that he stumbled upon them now and then.

In more than one of the short stop-overs in the capital he had found his father still occupying the private suite at the Inter-Mountain, and now and again there was a meal shared in the more or less crowded *café*. On such occasions the son leaned heavily upon the public character of the place and carefully steered the table-talk—or thought he did—into innocuous channels. But on a day shortly after the meeting with Gantry in

Ophir this desultory programme was broken. Reaching the hotel in the evening after an all-day train journey from Lewiston, Blount found his father waiting for him in the lobby, and when he proposed a *café* dinner the senator shook his head.

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"No, son; not this evening," he said. "I've been feeling sort of set up and aristocratic to-day, and I've just ordered a dinner sent upstairs. I reckon you'll join me?"

The young man was willing enough; more than willing, since he was now ready to say a thing which must be said before he could be prepared to set a time limit upon Gantry—a limit beyond which lay the firing of the fuse and the blowing up of all things mundane.

"Certainly," he agreed. "Give me a few minutes to change my clothes—"

"You look good enough to me just as you are, boy," said the dinner-giver, and he took his son by the arm and walked him to the elevator.

In the private dining-room Blount found the table laid for two, much as if his coming had been pre-figured. He let that go, and for the time the talk was of the doings at Wartrace Hall: of the professor's enthusiastic digging for fossils, of Patricia's keen enjoyment of the life in the open, and—this put with gentle hesitation on the part of the news-bringer—of Mrs. Honoria's growing affection for the young woman whose ambitions reached out toward a sociological career.

"You say Patricia is learning to drive a car?" queried Patricia's lover.

"Best woman driver I ever saw," was the senator's praiseful rejoinder. "Nothing feazes that little girl, and I'm telling you that she can turn the wheels just about as fast as you want to ride."

This was a new aspect of Miss Anners, even to one who knew her as well as Blount thought he knew her, and, lover-like, he found a grain of encouragement in it. Patricia had never cared for the out-of-door things save as they bore upon the hygienic condition of the poor in the great cities. If she had changed in one respect, she might change in another.

"I'm glad to know that," he commented. "She was needing an outlet on that side. There is a good bit of the Puritan in her—all work and no play, you know."

The senator looked out from beneath his shaggy eyebrows. "Speaking of work; they're working you pretty hard these days, aren't they, son? If you belonged to my generation instead of your own, you wouldn't be cold-shouldering that young woman out yonder at Wartrace the way you do; not for all the politics that were ever hatched."

"I have my work to do, and Patricia Anners would be the last person in the world to put obstacles in the way of it," returned the son gravely. Then he added: "I wish I could say as much for other people."

The boss shot another keen glance across the table. "Somebody been trying to block you, Evan, boy?" he asked.

Blount met the gaze of the shrewd gray eyes without flinching.

“I don’t know of any good reason why we shouldn’t be entirely frank with each other, dad,” he said, using for the first time since his return to the homeland the old boyhood father-name. “You know, better than any one else, I think, what the stumbling-blocks are, and who is putting them in my way.”

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"Maybe so; maybe I do," was the even-toned answer. "It happens so, once in a while, that I know a heap of things I can't tell, son." Then: "Has McVickar been calling you down?"

"No one has called me down. But some one, or something, is keeping me out of the real fight. I don't mean that I'm not doing what I set out to do: I've got my own particular abomination by the neck, and I'm about to choke the life out of it. But that is, as you might say, a side issue. The real struggle is going on all around me, but I'm not in it or of it. Everywhere I go there is the same cut-and-dried welcome, the same predetermined enthusiasm. Sometimes it seems as if all the people I meet have been instructed to make things pleasant and easy for me."

The senator's chuckle was barely audible.

"Seems as if I wouldn't find fault with that, if I were you, son," he suggested. "You are like the boy who has found a good piece of skating over a sheet of fine, smooth ice, and takes to complaining because it won't break and let him down into the cold water. You'll get enough of the real thing by and by."

Evan Blount felt his anger rising. He was in precisely the right mood to construe the gentle jest into an admission that his father, failing to make him a cog in one of the wheels of the machine, had gone about in some mysterious way to insulate him—to make it impossible for him to get into the real tide of affairs. But he kept his temper, in a measure, at least.

"I guess it's no use for us to try to get together," he said with a tang of abruptness in his tone. "We are diametrically opposed to each other at every point, you and I, dad. I stand for democracy, the will of the people and its fullest and freest expression. You stand for—"

"Well, son, what do I stand for?" queried the father, and the question was put with a quizzical smile that brought the hot blood boyishly to Blount's cheeks.

"If I should say what all men say—what some of them are frank enough to say even to me—" he stopped short, and then went on with better self-control: "Let's keep the peace if we can, dad."

"Oh, I reckon we can do that," was the good-natured rejoinder. "Being on the railroad side, yourself, you can't help feeling sort of hostile at the rest of us, I reckon."

Blount put his knife and fork down and straightened himself in his chair.

"There it is again, you see. We can't get together even on a question of admitted fact! Do you suppose for a single minute, dad, that I've been going up and down, and around

and about, all these weeks without finding out that the old alliance of the machine with the very element in the railroad policy that I am fighting is still in existence?"

The senator was nodding soberly. "So you've found that out, too, have you?" he commented.

"I have, and I wish that were the worst of it, but it isn't, dad. There's a thing behind the alliance that cuts deeper than anything else I've had to face."

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Once more the deep-set eyes looked out from their bushy penthouses. "Reckon you could give it a name, son?"

"Yes; when you found that I wasn't going to let you run me for the attorney-generalship, you arranged with Mr. McVickar to have me put on the railroad pay-roll. Isn't that the fact?"

"Not exactly," said the senator, and a grim smile went with the qualified denial. "It was sort of the other way round. I reckon McVickar thought he was putting one across on me when he offered you the railroad job and got you to take it."

"I know; that was at first. You and he couldn't come to terms because you—because the machine wanted more than he was willing to give. But afterward there was another meeting and you got together. That part of it was all right, if you see it that way. What broke my heart was the fact that you and he agreed to put me up as a fence behind which all the crookedness and rascality of a corrupt campaign could be screened."

In the pause which followed, a deft waiter slipped in to change the courses. When the man was gone, Blount went on.

"It came mighty near smashing me when I found it out, dad. It wasn't so much the thing itself as it was the thought that you'd do it—the thought that you had forgotten that I was a Blount, and your son."

Again the older man nodded gravely. "How come you to find out, Evan, boy?" he asked.

"It was when Hathaway had been given his chance at me. He opened the cesspool for me, as you meant he should when you sent him to me. From your point of view, I suppose it was necessary that I should be shown. You knew what I was saying and doing; how I was taking it for granted that the railroad was going in clean-handed, and the one ray of comfort in the whole miserable business is the fact that you cared enough to want to give me a glimpse of the real thing that was hiding behind all my brave talk. But I don't think you counted fully upon the effect it would have upon me."

"What was the effect, son?"

"At first, it made me want to throw up the fight and run away to the ends of the earth. It seemed as if I didn't have anybody to turn to. You were in it, and Gantry was in it—and Gantry's superiors and mine. That evening I borrowed one of your cars and drove out to Wartrace. I meant to have it out with you, and then to throw up my hands and quit."

"But you didn't do either one," said the father tentatively.

“No. Nothing went right that day, until just at the last. When I was about to give up and go to bed, Patricia came into the smoking-room. I had to talk to somebody, so I talked to her; told her where I had landed.”

“And she advised you to throw up your hands?”

“You don’t know Patricia. She put a heart into my body and blood into my veins. What she said to me that night is what has kept me going, dad—what has made me drive this fight for a clean election on the part of the railroad company home to the hilt. I have driven it home. There will be no crooked deals on the part of the railroad company this time.”

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The senator looked up quickly. "That's a mighty good stout thing to say," he remarked, adding: "I reckon you're not saying it without having the right and proper club hid out somewhere where you can lay hands on it?"

Blount tapped his coat-pocket. "I have the club right here—documentary evidence that will rip this State wide open and send a lot of people to the penitentiary. I've told Gantry to pass the word: a clean sheet, or I go over to the other side and tell what I know. And that brings me to the thing that I've got to say to you, dad—the thing that made me hope I'd find you here to-night. After I'd got my battle-word from Patricia, I had a jolt that was worse than the other. When I pulled the gun on Gantry, he told me that I couldn't shoot without killing you; that you were just as deeply involved as any one of the railroad officials. Is that the truth?"

The senator had pushed his chair back and was burying his hands in his pockets.

"You've come to try to haul me out of the fire?" he inquired, ignoring the direct question.

"I've come to ask you, first, if it is possible for you to stand from under. Can you?"

"Oh, yes; I reckon I could dodge, if I had to."

"Then do it, and do it quickly, dad! As there is a God above us, I'm going to push this thing through to the bitter end. To-morrow morning I shall give Gantry his time limit. If the time goes by, leaving the house-cleaning still undone, I shall keep my promise to the letter. You know, and I know, what will happen after that."

"Yes; I reckon I know," was the half-absent reply.

Blount threw his napkin aside and glanced at his watch.

"I've got to go back to the office and work a while," he said. And then: "I feel better for having had this talk with you, dad. I'm sorry you are finding it necessary to fight me, and a thousand times sorrier that I've got to fight you. But I can't give ground now, and still be a man and your son. Think it over and dodge. It'll break my heart a second time if I have to pull the other fellow's house down and bury you in the wreck."

For some little time after his son had left the table and the private dining-room, the Honorable Senator Sage-Brush sat absently toying with his dessert-spoon. When he rose to go out, the battle light in the gray eyes was the signal which not even his most faithful henchmen could always interpret; but it was a signal which all of them knew by sight, and one which many of them feared.

XVI

THE SAFE-BLOWER

About the time that Evan Blount was finishing the fourth week of the campaign of education, the senator's wife began to detect signs of country weariness in the eyes of Miss Patricia Anners.

"When you are tired of the out-door bignesses, you have only to say the word," she told the professor's daughter one morning after they had driven to Lost River Canyon and back in the small car. "As you have doubtless discovered, the senator and I live either here or at the capital indifferently during the season, and we shall be only too glad to entertain you in town whenever you feel like going."

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To similar proposals made earlier Miss Anners had always returned prompt refusals. But for a week or more some impulse which she had not taken the trouble to analyze seemed to be drawing her toward the city. The mesa roads were just as inviting, and the free pleasures of motoring, in a country where speed restrictions were conspicuous only by their absence, were just as keen. But now Patricia confessed to a restless longing for the sight of city streets and the brabble of city noises.

"Only you mustn't consider us, or me, so much as you do, Mrs. Blount," she protested. "I have a dreadful suspicion that we have already interfered shamefully with your autumn plans. You are simply too kind and too hospitable to admit it."

"You have interfered with nothing," was the ready assurance. "We were not going anywhere, or thinking of going anywhere. No inducement that was ever invented would take the senator away from his own State in a political year, and your coming has been a blessing. But for the good excuse to bring your father out here to the fossil-beds, we should have been mewed up in the Inter-Mountain Hotel from the firing of the opening gun to the day after election. But that isn't what I meant to say. You are tired of so much country; I can read the call of the city in your eyes—and they are very pretty eyes, my dear. Shall I telephone the senator that we are coming in this afternoon to stay a while?"

"I shall be delighted," said Patricia, and the eyes, which were not only pretty but exceedingly apt to tell tales, confirmed the eager assent. Then she added: "Now that daddy has his box of books from the university library, I doubt if he will know that we are gone."

On their first day in the capital Evan was away, but he returned the following morning and Mrs. Blount promptly captured him for a theatre box-party which she was inviting for the same evening. In Mrs. Honoria's orderly scheme Blount was predestined to go, though he was allowed to believe that his acceptance was of free will. Notwithstanding the lapse of time and Mrs. Honoria's uniform kindness, he was still unreasonably prejudiced, and with the prejudice he was now admitting a feeling akin to jealousy. It was evident that Patricia's admiration for his father extended over to his father's wife; and meaning consistently to dislike Mrs. Honoria, he was irrational enough to want Patricia to dislike her, too.

The box-party proved to be a more formal affair than he had anticipated, since it was large enough to fill two of the open dress-circle boxes. Gantry was included, and so were the Weatherfords—father, mother, daughters, and son. These, with the Gordons and a Denver man whose name of Critchett Blount was not quite sure that he caught in the introduction, filled Mrs. Honoria's list. In the seating Blount meant to make sure of having a measurably undisturbed evening with Patricia. But fate, or a designing hostess, intervened, and he found himself cornered between Mrs. Weatherford and her

younger daughter, with the square-shouldered “Paramounter” candidate for governor strengthening the barrier which separated him from Miss Anners.

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Blount had met Gordon socially a number of times, and in the intervals allowed him by Mrs. Weatherford he was silently studying the face of the big man who, singularly enough, as the student thought, was thus identifying himself publicly as a friend of the boss. True, Blount did not forget his father's warm commendation of Gordon in that earliest political talk on the Quaretaro Canyon road, but that was before the lines had been drawn and the gage of battle thrown down by the allied forces of the machine and the railroad. Now, with the battle drawing to its close, Blount thought that nothing could be more certain than the fact that his father and his father's organization were joining hands with the railroad oligarchy to slaughter Gordon at the polls.

Putting aside the wonder that Gordon should be accepting Mrs. Honoria's hospitality, Blount fell to contrasting the strong, large-featured face of the Mission Hills ranchman with that of Reynolds, the opposition candidate. Though he was himself on the corporation campaigning staff, Blount could not help admitting that the comparison was not favorable to Reynolds. His first impression of the round-faced, portly gentleman who was standing firmly upon what he was pleased to call a platform of law and order—a man who was Gordon's opposite in every feature and characteristic—had been unfavorable. He had been saying to himself, since, that Reynolds's face, in spite of its heavy jaw and prominent eyes, was the face of a time-server.

Another point of difference between the two men counted for much. Reynolds wanted the office, and was spending money liberally to get it, while Gordon had accepted the nomination reluctantly. Throughout the hot campaign he had refused to stump the State for himself or his party, and was said to be holding steadfastly aloof in the bargaining and dickering. Weighing the two men one against the other—Reynolds was sitting in an adjacent box with Kittredge and Bentley and two other railroad officials—Blount admitted a twinge of regret that chance, or his convictions, had made him a partisan of the weaker.

Having been lost in the shuffle, as he expressed it, Blount made the most of these reflective excursions during the period of the box-party captivity. From the rising of the curtain to the going down thereof the Weatherfords, mother and daughter, kept him from exchanging so much as a word with Patricia, whom Gantry was shamelessly monopolizing. But on the short return walk to the hotel, Blount asserted his rights and gave Patricia his arm.

"I think you owe me an abject apology," was the way she began on him, when they had gained such privacy as the crowded sidewalk conferred.

"Consider it made, and then tell me what for," he rejoined, striving, man-fashion, to catch step with her mood.

"For making us leave that dear, delightful, out-of-date, and out-of-place Georgian mansion in the hills and come to town when we want to get a sight of your face."

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"If anybody else should say a thing like that, I'd blush and call it a compliment," he retorted. Her near presence seemed to lift the burden he was carrying, and it was good to be light-hearted again, if only for the passing moment.

"It wasn't meant for a compliment," she returned, with the straightforward sincerity which Blount had always been fond of likening to a cup of cold water on a thirsty day.

"Consider a moment. You come to me with a really harrowing story of your new experiences, and just as I am beginning to get interested we are interrupted. In the morning, at some perfectly impossible hour, off you go, and we hear no more of you for weeks and weeks. What have you been doing?"

"I have been doing precisely what you told me to do; preaching the gospel of honesty and fair dealing, and trying my level best to make other people practise it."

"You have been successful?" she asked quickly.

"Reasonably so in the preaching, since that depended solely upon me. As to the other, I don't know. Sometimes I'm credulous enough to believe that the house-cleaners are honestly at work, as they say they are, and at other times I'm afraid they are only putting up a bluff to mislead me. Some day, perhaps, I may tell you how far I have had to go into the 'practical-politics' armory to get my weapons."

There was still a half-square of the sidewalk privacy available, and she made what seemed to be the most necessary use of it.

"And your father, Evan; are you coming to understand him any better?"

He shook his head despondently. "No; or rather yes. I might say that I am coming to understand him—or his methods—only too well. The only way we can keep from quarrelling now is to banish politics when we are together."

"I am sorry," she said, and the sorrow was emphatic in her tone. "As I have said before, you don't understand him. You are judging him by standards which, however just and true they may be, are peculiarly your own standards. I know you can be broad for others when you try. Can't you be broad for him?"

It was good to hear her defend his father. It was what he would have wished his wife to do. Suddenly there arose within him a huge reluctance to lessen or to weaken in any way her trust in David Blount.

"Let us say that the fault is mine," he interposed hastily. "God forbid that I should be the means of making you think less of him in any respect."

"You couldn't do that, Evan. He is simply a grand old man—the first I have ever known for whom the hackneyed phrase seemed to have been made," she asserted warmly. "If

he has faults, I am sure they are nothing more than gigantic virtues—the faults of a man who is too strong and too magnanimous to be little in any respect.”

The final half-square lay behind them, and Mrs. Honoria and the senator, Gantry, Gordon and his wife, and the two Weatherfords, with one of the marriageable daughters, were at the *cafe* door waiting for the laggards. Being in no proper frame of mind to enjoy a theatre supper with another Weatherford attack as the possible penalty, Blount reluctantly surrendered Patricia to Gantry, made his excuses, and went to smoke a bedtime pipe in the homelike and democratic lobby.

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With Patricia in town the “silver-tongued spellbinder of Quaretero Mesa,” as *The Daily Capital* called the railroad company’s campaign field-officer, would have been glad to evade some of the speaking appointments; but since his engagements had been made some days in advance, he was obliged to go.

On his return to the capital he was delighted to find the party of three still occupying the private dining-room suite at the Inter-Mountain. Arriving on a morning train, he was permitted to make the party of three a party of four at the breakfast-table; and with Patricia sitting opposite he was able to forget the strenuosities for a restful half-hour.

Later, when he went to his offices in the Temple Court Building, the strenuosities reasserted themselves with emphasis. Though he found his desk closed, and was reasonably certain that he had in his pocket the only key that would unlock it, he found his papers scattered in confusion under the roll-top. A touch upon the electric button brought the stenographer from the anteroom.

“Who’s been into my desk, Collins?” he demanded, pointing to the confusion and scrutinizing the face of the young man sharply for signs of guilt.

“Goodness gracious! How could anybody get into it when you’ve got the only key, Mr. Blount?” stammered the clerk. Then he went on, parrot-like: “I’ve been putting the letters and telegrams through the letter-slit, as you told me to, and I’ve kept the private office locked.”

“Nevertheless it is very evident that somebody has been here,” said Blount. Then he had a sudden shock and wheeled shortly upon the stenographer. “Collins, what did you do with that packet of papers I gave you last Monday—the one I told you to put away in the safe?”

“I did just what you told me to; put it in the inner cash-box, and put the key of the cash-box on your desk. Didn’t you get it?”

Blount felt in his pockets and found the key, which he handed to Collins. “Go and get that packet and bring it to me,” he directed. The shock was beginning to subside a little by now, and he sat down to bring something like order out of the confusion on the desk. At first, he had thought that the sheaf of evidence letters which gave him the stranglehold upon Gantry and the lawbreakers had been left in a pigeonhole of the desk. Then he remembered having given it to Collins to put away.

A minute or two later it occurred to him that the stenographer was taking a long time for a short errand. Rising silently, he crossed the room and reached for the knob of the door of communication. In the act he saw that the door was ajar, and through the crack he saw Collins standing before the opened safe. The clerk was running his tongue along the flap of a large envelope, preparatory to sealing it. Blount’s first impulse was to

break in with a sharp command. Then he reconsidered and went back to his desk; was still busy at it when Collins came in and laid the freshly sealed envelope before him.

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"That isn't the packet I gave you," said Blount curtly.

The clerk looked away. "You meant those letters, didn't you?" he queried. "The rubber band broke and I put them in an envelope."

"When?" snapped Blount.

The young man faced around again and the innocence in his look disarmed the questioner.

"When? Just now. That's what made me so long—I couldn't find an envelope big enough."

Blount took up the letter opener and slipped the blade under the flap of the envelope. If he had looked up at the stenographer then he would have seen the mask of innocence slip aside to discover a face ashen with terror. But whatever the shorthand man had to fear from the opening of the lately sealed envelope was postponed by the incoming of Ackerton, the working head of the legal department, with a damage suit to discuss with his chief. Blount thrust the big envelope into his pocket unopened, and later in the day, when he went around to his bank to put the evidence letters into his safe-deposit box, the incident of the morning had lost its significance so completely, or had been so deeply buried under other and more important matters, that he deposited the packet without examining it.

The evening of this same day there was a dance given by the Gordons in the ranchman candidate's big house opposite the Weatherfords' in Mesa Circle, and Blount went, hoping that Patricia would be there. She was there; and in the heart of the evening, when Blount had persuaded her to sit out a dance with him in a corner of the homelike reception-hall, he began to pry at a little stone of stumbling which was threatening to grow too large to be easily rolled aside.

"I'm hunting a conscience to-night," he said, without preface. "Have you got one that you could lend me?"

She laughed lightly.

"You told me once that I had the New England conscience—which was the same as saying that I had enough for my own needs and a surplus to pass around among my friends. What bad thing have you been doing now?"

He made a wry face. "It's the 'practical politics' again. Suppose I say that I have obtained positive evidence of a crime against the laws of the State and the nation. How far am I justified in suppressing, for a perfectly right and proper end, this evidence which would send a lot of people to jail?"

“Mercy!” she exclaimed; “how you can bring a thunderbolt crashing down out of a perfectly clear sky! Is it ever justifiable to shield criminals and criminality?”

“That is just what I’m trying to find out,” he persisted. “At the present moment I am shielding a good handful of open lawbreakers. Some of them know what I’m doing, and some of them don’t. Those who know have been told that they must be good or I’ll publish the evidence, and they’ve promised to be good if I won’t publish it. At the time I didn’t question my right to make such a bargain, but—”

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"But now you are questioning it? What would happen if you should tell what you know?"

"Chaos," he replied briefly.

"May I ask who is implicated?"

"A good half of the corporation officials in the State, and some few outside of it."

"Mercy!" she said again. And then: "It's too big for me, Evan. I can only go back to first principles and ask if it is ever justifiable to do evil that good may come."

"If you put it that way, I've made myself *particeps criminis*," he said gravely. "I have given my word to keep still if the lawbreaking deals are broken off at once and in good faith. Beyond that, I can't help knowing that the exposure which I have threatened to make, and could make, would practically turn the people of this State into a mob."

She was shaking her head determinedly. "I can't help you this time, Evan; truly I can't." Then, in sudden appeal: "Why won't you go to your father? He could tell you what to do and how to do it, and his judgment would be too big and just to stumble over the tangling little moralities."

Blount smiled.

"What if I should tell you that my father is more or less involved, Patricia? I don't know precisely how much or how little, but I am assured, by those who claim to know, that he, too, would go down in the general wreck."

"I can't believe it!" she protested, in generous loyalty. "These people, whoever they are, are deceiving you to shelter themselves. Have you ever spoken to your father about this?"

"Yes, once; one evening when we were dining together I told him what I had, and what use I should make of it if all other means should fail. Also, I advised him to dodge."

"What did he say?"

"That is the discouraging part of it. I was hoping against hope that he would tell me to go ahead; that he would say that he wasn't involved. But, as a matter of fact, he didn't say much of anything. I'm horribly afraid that his silence meant all that I've been trying to believe it didn't mean."

She was slowly opening and closing her fan, as if she were trying to gain time.

"I can only tell you again what I told you at first," she said at length. "You must be bigger than all these hampering circumstances; bigger than the little moralities, if need be. You

can be, Evan; you've given splendid proof of it thus far, and I'm proud—just as proud as I can be—”

Blount felt as if he could, joyously and entirely without scruple, have brained young Gordon, to whom the next dance belonged, and who came just at this climaxing moment to claim Patricia. But there was no help for it, short of a cold-blooded and rather embarrassing deed of violence, and the hard-won confidence ended pretty much where it had begun.

When he left the Gordon house, which was far out in the northeastern residence suburb, Blount meant to go directly to the hotel and to bed. He had been losing much sleep in the activities of the campaign, and the loss was beginning to tell upon him. But as the trolley-car was passing the Temple Court Building he made sure that he saw a dim light illuminating the windows of his upper-floor office. With all his suspicions of the morning reawakened, he dropped from the car, dashed into the building, and took the all-night elevator for his office floor.

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The sleepy elevator-man had to be shaken awake, and when he had set the car in motion he let it run past the designated floor. Blount swore impatiently, and instead of waiting to be carried back, darted out and ran to the stairway. When he reached the lower corridor and was hurrying toward his suite in the corner of the building, there was a dull crash, as of a muffled explosion, and two or three of the glass doors in the street-fronting suite were shattered. Blount quickened his pace to a run, let himself in by means of his latch-key, and, cautiously opening his desk, groped in an inner drawer for the revolver which Gantry had persuaded him to buy as a part of the office furnishings.

With the weapon in hand, he pushed through the unlatched door into Collins's room. There was an acrid odor of dynamite fumes in the air, and when he pressed on to the third room of the suite the gases were stifling. His first act was to feel for the switch and cut in the electric lights. The third room, which had doors of communication with his own office and Collins's, was a wreck. Desks were broken open, and the safe-door had been blown from its hinges.

Blount saw the figure of a small man with his cap pulled down over his ears bending over the wrecked cash-box. At the upblazing of the ceiling lights, the man sprang to his feet and fled, going out through the door by which Blount had just entered, and snapping the light-switch as he passed to leave the rooms in darkness.

Blount was cursing his own lack of presence of mind when he turned to follow the escaping burglar. In the darkness he fell over a chair, and by the time he had disentangled himself and had reached the corridor the safe-blower was gone. Racing to the elevator, Blount rang the bell until the sleepy car-tender set the machinery in motion and lifted himself to the floor of happenings. Here the incident ended abruptly, so far as any helpful discoveries were concerned. The elevator-man had carried no one down, and he confessed shamefacedly that he had again been asleep, and could not say whether or not anybody had descended the stair which circled the elevator-shaft.

Blount went back to his office, turned in a police alarm, and waited until a policeman came from the nearest station. Then he went to report the safe-blowing in person to the night captain on duty in the basement of the City Hall. A drowsy clerk took notes of the story, and the night captain contented himself with asking a single question.

"Do you know how much you lost, Mr. Blount?"

"Nothing of any great consequence, I imagine," said Blount, remembering, with an inward thrill of thankfulness, the morning impulse which had prompted him to transfer the one thing of inestimable consequence to the security of the bank safe-deposit box. Then he added: "There was a little money in the box, and some papers of no especial value to anybody. Just the same, captain, I want that man caught."

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"We'll catch him, come morning," was the assurance, and then Blount went away and carried out his original intention of going to the Inter-Mountain and to bed.

To bed; but, for a long hour after the post-midnight quiet had settled down upon the great hostelry, not to sleep. If he had asked himself why he could not close his eyes and take the needed rest, the exciting incident in which he had lately been an actor would have offered a sufficient answer. But in reality the sharpened spur of wakefulness penetrated much more deeply. Beyond all doubt or shadow of doubt, it was the sinister, many-armed machine which had reached out to seize and destroy the evidence against its allies and fellow conspirators, the lawbreaking railroad company and the vote-selling corporations.

And, again beyond doubt, he made sure, it was his own boast made to his father which had been passed on to tell the sham burglar where to look and what to look for.

XVII

ON THE KNEES OF THE HIGH GODS

In the evening of the day following the safe-blowing in Blount's office, a one-car train, running as second section of the Overland, slipped unostentatiously into the capital railroad yard. With as little stir as it had made in its arrival, the single-car train took a siding below the freight station, where it would be concealed from the prying eyes of any chance prowler from the newspaper offices.

Coincident with the side-tracking O'Brien, the vice-president's stenographer, dropped from the step of the car and went in search of a telephone. When O'Brien was safely out of the way, a small man, clean-shaven and alert in his movements, whipped out of the shadows of the nearest string of box-cars, pushed brusquely past the guarding porter, and presented himself at the desk in the roomy office compartment of the private car.

The vice-president looked up and nodded. "How are you, Gibbert?" he said, and then: "You may condense your report. I have seen the newspapers. In passing I may say that it isn't much to your credit that you had to fall back upon the methods of the yeggmen."

"There wasn't any other way," protested the small man. "The papers were locked up in the cash-box of the safe, and young Blount carried the only key."

"It was crude; not at all worthy of a man of your ability, Gibbert. And if the newspapers tell it straight, you came near being caught. How did that happen?"

“Blount went to a ball, and I shadowed him. His girl was there, and it looked like a safe bet that he’d stay to see the lights put out. But he didn’t.”

“Well, never mind; you got the papers, I suppose?”

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The company detective drew a thick envelope from his pocket and laid it upon the desk. The vice-president tore it open and read rapidly through the file of letters it had enclosed, tearing them one by one from the hold of the brass fastener at the upper left-hand corner as he glanced them over. "The chuckle-headed fools!" he gritted, apostrophizing the writers of the letters. And then: "Gibbert, I'd like to go into this a little deeper, if we had time; I'd like to know why in hell every man in this State with whom we've had a private business arrangement found it necessary to spread the details out on paper and send them to young Blount! Here; burn these things as I hand them to you."

The small man struck a match and, using the wide-mouthed metal cuspidor for an ash-pan, lighted the letters one at a time as they were given to him. When the cinder skeleton of the final sheet had been crushed into ashes, he rose from his knees and reached for his hat.

"Any other orders?" he asked.

"No; nothing more. You are reasonably sure that you haven't been recognized here by any of our local people?"

"I've kept the 'make-up' on most of the time. I've been in Mr. Gantry's office a couple of times, and in Mr. Kittredge's once, and neither of them caught on to me."

"That's good. You'd better go now. O'Brien has gone after Gantry and Kittredge, and I don't care to have them find you here. Better take the first train back to Chicago. These mutton-headed police here might possibly get on your track, and we don't want to have to explain anything to them."

Five minutes after the small man had dropped from the step of the "008," to disappear in the box-car shadows, Gantry and Kittredge came down the yard and entered the private car. Again the vice-president said, "How are you?" and nodded toward the nearest chairs. "Sit down; I'll be through in a minute," and he went on reading the file of papers taken up at the departure of the detective. At the end of the minute he shot a question at the two who were waiting.

"You got my message?"

Gantry answered for himself and the superintendent. "Yes. Your orders have been carried out. The yards are posted, and nobody, outside of a few of our own men, knows that your car is here."

The vice-president took one of the long black cigars from the open box on the flat-topped desk, and passed the box to his two lieutenants.

“Light up,” he said tersely. “I’m due in Twin Canyons City to-morrow morning, and we’ve got to thresh this thing out in a hurry. Any change in the situation since your last report?”

Gantry shook his head. “Nothing very important. Blount’s up-town office was broken into last night and his safe ripped open with dynamite, as I suppose you have read in the papers. Who did it, or why it was done, nobody seems to know.”

“Well, what came of it?”

“Nothing, so far as I can find out,” returned the traffic manager. “Blount had been to the Gordon dance, and he saw the light in his office as he was coming down-town. When he went up to find out what was going on, he caught the safe-blower fairly in the act, but the fellow got away.”

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"Did Blount lose anything?"

"That's the queer part of it. Blount won't say much about it; and this morning he went around to police headquarters and told the chief to drop the matter, giving as his reason that he was too busy to prosecute the fellow even if he was caught."

To a disinterested observer it might have seemed a little singular that the vice-president made no further comment upon the burglary. As a matter of fact, his next question completely ignored it.

"What has Blount been doing this week?" he asked.

"He has spoken twice; once at Arequipa and once at Hellersville. I understand he has engagements enough to keep him out of town right up to election day."

"That is good," was the nodded approval. "He would only be in the way here at the capital." And then pointedly to Gantry: "Any more of that nonsense about putting a barrel of powder under us and blowing us all up if we don't build the freight tariffs over to suit his notion?"

"A good bit more of it," Gantry admitted reluctantly. "The other day he went so far as to set a time limit; gave me three days of grace in which to file the public notice of the change in rates."

"What did you do?"

"I filed the notice—taking care that the only copy should be the one I sent to Blount's office."

The vice-president looked coldly at his division traffic manager.

"There are times, Gantry, when you seem to be losing your grip. Dave Blount's son isn't a school-boy, to be fooled by such a transparent trick as that! Don't you suppose he knows, as well as you do, that the public notice has to be filed in every station on the road?"

"I had to take a chance—I've had to take a good many chances," protested the traffic manager in his own defence; and Kittredge, a bearded giant who was fully the vice-president's match in heroic physique, removed his cigar to say: "That young fellow has been a frost. If he isn't a wild-eyed fanatic, as Gantry insists he is, he is deeper than the deep blue sea! I'd just about as soon have a box of dynamite kicking around underfoot as to have him messing in this campaign fight. I've been keeping cases on him, as you ordered, and he has worn out three of my best office men on the job."

“You are prejudiced, Kittredge,” was the vice-president’s comment. “It was the best move in the entire campaign—putting him in the field. Apart from the public sentiment he has been turning our way, we mustn’t lose sight of the fact that we got hold of him at a time when the Honorable Senator was getting ready to turn us down.”

“Speaking of the sentiment,” Gantry put in, “I don’t know whether it’s all sentiment or not. There’s a sort of mystery mixed up in this speech-making business of Blount’s. At first I thought maybe his sudden popularity was due to some word sent out from your Chicago office; but when you told me it wasn’t, I began to do a little speculating on my own account. I can’t make up my mind yet whether it is pure popularity, or whether it’s the assisted kind.”

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"Assisted?" said the vice-president, with a lifting of the heavy eyebrows.

"Yes. It has been too unanimous. I have a trustworthy man in Blount's up-town office, and he says the invitations have fluttered in like autumn leaves; more than Blount could accept if he travelled continuously. Kittredge's men report that the speech-making has been a triumphant progress all over the State; bands, receptions, committees, and banquets wherever Blount goes."

Mr. McVickar grunted. "The speeches have been all that anybody could ask. I've been reading them."

Kittredge shook his head.

"Gantry says they are, but I say no," he contended. "There is such a thing as putting too much sugar in the coffee. Blount's overdoing it; he's putting the whitewash on so thick that any little handful of mud that happens to be thrown will stick and look bad."

"Of course, we have to take chances on that," was the vice-president's qualifying clause. "Nevertheless, young Blount's talk has undoubtedly had its effect upon public sentiment. We must be careful not to let the opposition newspapers get hold of anything that would tend to nullify it."

"They are moving heaven and earth to do it," said the superintendent. "The Honorable David is lying low, as he usually does, but I more than half believe he's getting ready to give us the double-cross. That is the explanation of this safe-blowing scrape, as I put it up."

Again the vice-president failed to comment further on the burglary. "What I am most afraid of, now, is that our young man may be, as you say, Kittredge, a trifle over-zealous," he said musingly. "We have discovered that he is something of a fanatic."

"He's more than that," Kittredge cut in quickly. "One of the men I've had following him—Farnsworth—is as good as any Pinkerton that ever walked. He says Blount isn't half so innocent as he looks and acts. The speech-making has taken him into every corner of the State, and Farnsworth says he has been doing a lot of quiet prying around and investigating on the side."

"I've been thinking," Gantry added, "what a beautiful mix-up we should have if the senator and his son should both conclude to pull out and get together at the last moment."

The master plotter shook his head. "You have no sense of perspective, Gantry. Young Blount is with us solely because he is too straightforward to countenance his father's political methods. On the other hand, if the Honorable Dave should turn upon us now, he would be obliged to do it at the expense of his son's reputation. Anything he could

say against us would simply have the effect of holding his son up to public exprobration as a common campaign liar. I know David Blount pretty well; he won't do anything like that."

Gantry bit his lip and a slow smile of respectful admiration crept up to the Irish eyes.

"When it comes to the real fine-haired work, you have us all feeling for hand-holds, Mr. McVickar," he said. "Now I know why you made a place for Evan Blount, and why you have been giving him a free hand on the whitewashing. It's the biggest thing that has ever been pulled off in Western politics!"

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"It hasn't been pulled off yet," was the quick reply. "We are holding old David in a noose that may turn into a rope of sand at any minute; don't forget that. During the few days intervening before the election we must preserve the present status at any cost. Young Blount is the only man who may possibly disturb it. Keep him out of the way. If he doesn't have speaking invitations enough to busy him, see to it that he gets them. As long as you can keep him talking he won't have any time for side issues. Now about this Gryson business: you want to handle that yourselves, and I don't want any more telegrams like the one you sent me last night, Gantry. What's the condition?"

Gantry outlined the Gryson "condition" briefly. The man Gryson, who had developed into a heeler of sorts, had been growing restive, wanting more money.

"What can he swing?" was the curt question.

"Six out of seven pretty close counties. I don't pretend to know how he has done it, but he has got the goods; I've taken the trouble to check up on him. With his pull, we can swing the vote of the capital itself."

The vice-president frowned thoughtfully. "The old game of stuffing the registration lists, I suppose," he said. And then: "Young Blount hasn't got wind of this, has he?"

Gantry laughed. "You may be sure he hasn't. He has it in for Gryson on general principles—made us take him off the shop pay-rolls. If he thought we were dickering with him now, he'd be down on us like a thousand of brick."

"Well, why don't you fix Gryson, once for all, and have it over with? You oughtn't to expect me to come here and tell you what to do!"

It was at this point that Kittredge broke in.

"Gryson isn't safe. I have it straight that he is getting ready to sell us out. That's why he wants his pay in advance."

The vice-president's heavy brows met in a frown, and the muscles of his square jaw hardened.

"Put Gryson on the rack and show him what you've got on him in that Montana bank robbery. That will bring him to book. It will be time enough to talk about terms when he delivers the goods. Now another thing—that Shonoho Inn matter that I wired about—what has been done?"

"It is all arranged," said the big superintendent. "The house was closed for the season last month, and we have taken a short lease. One of our dining-car managers will take charge of the service."

“And the wires?”

“We have made a cut-in from the old Shoshone Mine wire, which wasn’t taken down when the mine was abandoned. That let us out very neatly, and no one outside of our own line-men know anything about the job. We have four instruments in the hotel writing-room; two on the commercial and two on the railroad wires. Will that be enough?”

Mr. McVickar nodded and reached over to press the bell-push which signalled to his train conductor.

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"That is about all I have to say," he said, in dismissal of the two local officials. "Just nail Gryson up to the cross, where he belongs, and keep young Blount busy and out of town; I leave the details to you. Get orders for me as you go up to your office, Kittredge, and have the despatcher let me out as soon as possible. I ought to be half-way to Alkali by this time."

XVIII

THE CHASM

It was young Ranlett, a reporter for *The Plainsman*, who told Evan Blount of the arrival of the vice-president's car, running as second section of the Overland, and the scene of the telling was the lobby of the Inter-Mountain Hotel, where Blount was smoking a pipe of disappointment filled and lighted upon hearing that his father, Mrs. Honoria, and Patricia had gone out to dinner somewhere—place unknown to the obliging room clerk.

Ranlett had tried ineffectually to get to the private car, having for his object the interviewing of the vice-president, but there had been curious obstructions. The lower yard was apparently carefully guarded, since the reporter had been turned back at three or four different points when he had attempted to cross the tracks. Blount thought it a little singular that the vice-president should come to the capital secretly, but he did not stop to speculate upon this.

Having something more than a suspicion that Gantry had not properly passed the threat of exposure up to McVickar, he determined at once to seek an interview with the vice-president. Walking rapidly down to the Sierra Avenue station, he saw a light in Gantry's office, and meaning to be fair first and severe afterward, if needful, he ran up the stair and tried the door of the traffic manager's office. It opened under his hand, and he found Gantry sitting at his desk.

"Ranlett tells me that Mr. McVickar is in town," he began abruptly. "Where is he?"

"Ranlett is mistaken—about twenty minutes mistaken," was Gantry's reply. "Mr. McVickar passed through here a few minutes ago on his way to Twin Canyons City. His special has been gone some little time."

"When is he coming back?"

"I don't know."

"Did you see him?"

"I did."

“Did you take up with him the matter of issuing new tariffs to do away with the preferentials, or to level the public rates down to them?”

Gantry shifted uneasily in his chair, and tried to evade. “There was very little time,” he said. “Mr. McVickar was in a great hurry, and his special was held only a few minutes.”

Blount crossed the room and sat down.

“Dick, we’ve come to the last round-up,” he said gravely. “In the nature of things, I can’t give you any more time. You’ve been playing with me all along, and your last move in the game was a very childish one—sending me what purported to be a copy of a new freight tariff notice to the public. Did you suppose for a moment that I wouldn’t have sense enough to see that the thing wasn’t official, that it had no signatures and lacked even the name of the railroad company? I’m here now to tell you that you’ve got to do some real thing, and do it quickly. Let’s go up and see the editor of *The Capital*.”

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"What for?" demanded Gantry.

"It is the railroad paper, and I want you to give Brinkley, the editor, an interview to the effect that a revision of the freight rates is in process, and that shippers having grievances should present them at once. That will at least start the ball to rolling in the right direction."

"I should think it would!" scoffed the traffic manager. "What you don't know about the making of freight tariffs would sink a ship, Evan. These things can't be done while you wait!"

"But they must be, in this instance," Blount insisted. "If you won't withdraw the preferentials given to the corporations, you must do the other thing. Post your legal notice of a reduction of the rates on the commodities upon which you are now allowing rebates, and I'll fight straight through on the line I've been taking all along."

"And if we don't?" queried Gantry.

"What is the use of making me say it for the hundredth time, Dick? If you don't do one or the other, there will be an explosion, just as I've told you. Of course, you know that my safe was broken open last night—wrecked with dynamite?"

"Yes."

"Well, unluckily for you, the packet of papers which might otherwise have been taken or destroyed, didn't happen to be in the safe. The documents are still where they can be used at an hour's notice. And, by heaven, Dick, I'll use them if you don't play fair!"

Gantry, long-suffering and patient to a fault in a business affair, was not altogether superhuman.

"Evan, you are a frost—a black frost! You harp on one string until you wear it to frazzles! Don't you know that the Transcontinental is big enough and strong enough to chivvy you from one end of this country to the other, if you turn traitor? I love a fighting man, but by God, I haven't any use for a fool!"

Blount laughed.

"If I have succeeded in making you angry, perhaps there is a chance that you will do something. You may curse me out all you want to, but the fact remains. I'm going to explode the bomb, and it will be touched off long enough before election to do the work, if you keep on refusing to make my word good to the people. That is all—*all* the all. Now, will you go up to *The Capital* office with me, and dictate that bit of information that I mentioned?"

“Not in a thousand years!” raged Gantry. “Not in ten thousand years!” Nevertheless he rose, closed his desk, and prepared to accompany the importunate political manager. Half-way up the first square he said: “There is no use in our going to *The Capital* office at this time of night. Brinkley doesn’t get around to his desk much before eleven. Let’s go up to the club.”

At the Railway Club the traffic manager developed a keen desire to kill the intervening time in a game of billiards. Blount indulged him, beat him three games in succession, and consistently refused to drink with him. At the end of the third game, Gantry gave a terse definition, abusively worded, of a man who would force his friend to go and drink alone, and went to the buffet. Ten minutes later, when Blount went after him, he had disappeared, and the visit to the newspaper office was postponed, perforce.

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On the following morning, Blount found a telegram on his desk. It bore the vice-president's name, and the date-line was Twin Canyons City. It directed him to go to a remote portion of the State beyond the Lost River Mountains to examine the papers in a right-of-way case which was coming up for trial at the next term of court. This was in Kittredge's department, and Blount called the superintendent on the phone. Kittredge was in his office, and he evidently knew about the vice-president's telegram. Also, he seemed anxious to have the division counsel go to Lewiston at once; so anxious that he offered his own service-car to be run as a special train.

Blount saw no way to evade a positive order from the vice-president, but he was more than suspicious that Gantry or Kittredge, or possibly both of them, had misrepresented the right-of-way case to Mr. McVickar, in an attempt to get him away from the city and so to postpone a reiteration of the demand for a new freight tariff. What he did not suspect was that Mr. McVickar's telegram might possibly have originated in Kittredge's office.

Asking the superintendent to have the service-car made ready immediately, he packed his handbag, left a note for Patricia, who was not yet visible, and another for Gantry, who was not in his office, and began the roundabout journey.

In all his travelling up and down the State he had never found anything to equal the slowness of the special train. The noon meal, served by Kittredge's cook in the open compartment, found the special less than fifty miles on its way, and comfortably waiting at that hour on a side-track among the sage-brush hills for the coming of a delayed train in the opposite direction. Four mortal hours were lost on the lonely siding. There was no station, and Blount could not telegraph. So far as he knew, the service-car might stay there for a day or a week. It was all to no purpose that he quarrelled with his conductor. The train crew had orders to wait for the west-bound time freight, and there was nothing to do but to keep on waiting.

Late in the afternoon the time freight, or some other train, came along, and the special was once more set in motion eastward, but at dinner-time it was again side-tracked, eighty-odd miles from its destination, and once more at a desert siding where there was no telegraph office. The car was still standing on the siding when Blount went to bed. But in the morning it was in motion again, jogging now on its leisurely way up the branch line.

At Lewiston, the town at the end of the branch where the right-of-way trouble had originated, Blount found more delay, carefully planned for, as he had now come firmly to believe. The plaintiffs in the right-of-way case were out of town, and their lawyers had gone to the capital. Blount saw that he might wait a week without accomplishing anything, hence he immediately instructed his conductor to get orders for the return.

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After having been gone a half-hour or more, the conductor came back to the service-car to say that the single telegraph-wire connecting Lewiston with the outer world was down, and that the orders for the return journey could not be obtained until the telegraph connection was restored. At that point Blount took matters into his own hands.

There was a mining company having its headquarters in the isolated town, and Blount had met the manager once in the capital—met him in a social way, and had been able to show him some little attention. Hiring a buckboard at the one livery stable in the place, he drove out to the “Little Mary,” and found Blatchford, the friendly manager, smoking a black clay cutty pipe in his shack office. It did not take Blount over a minute to renew the pleasant acquaintance, and to state his dilemma.

“I’m hung up here with my special train, the wires are down and I can’t get out,” was his statement of the crude fact. “Didn’t you tell me that you owned a motor-car?”

“I did,” was the prompt reply. “Want to borrow it?”

“You beat me to it,” said Blount, laughing. “That was precisely what I was going to beg for—the loan of your car. I believe you told me that you had driven it from here to the capital.”

“Oh, yes; several times, and the road is fairly good by way of Arequipa and Lost River Canyon. It’s only about half as far across country as it is around by the railroad. You ought to make it in six hours and a half, or seven at the longest. Drive me down to the burg, and I’ll put you in possession.”

Blount began to be audibly thankful, but the mine manager good-naturedly cut him short.

“It’s all in the day’s work, Mr. Blount, and I’m glad to be of service—not because you are the Transcontinental’s lawyer, nor altogether because you are the Honorable David’s son. I haven’t forgotten your kindness to me when I was in town three weeks ago. Let’s go and get out the chug-wagon.”

A little later Blount found himself handling the wheel of a very serviceable knockabout car equipped for hard work on country roads. When he was ready to go, he drove down to the railroad yard and hunted up his conductor.

“After you have had your vacation, you may get orders from Mr. Kittredge and take his car back to the capital,” he told the man. “When you do, you may give him my compliments, and tell him I preferred to run my own special train.”

The conductor grinned and made no reply, and he was still grinning when he sauntered into the railroad telegraph office and spoke to the operator.

“I dunno what’s up,” he said, “but whatever it was, the string’s broke. Old Dave Sage-Brush’s son has borrowed him an automobile, and gone back to town on his own hook. Guess you’d better call up the division despatcher and tell him the broken-wire gag didn’t work. Get a move on. We hain’t got nothin’ to stay here for now.”

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Blount had a very pleasant drive across country, with no mishap worse than a blown-out tire and a little carburetor trouble. Being a motorist of parts, neither the accident nor the needed readjustment detained him very long, and by the middle of the afternoon he was racing down the smooth northern road, with the spires and tall buildings of the capital fairly in sight.

Not to let gratitude lag too far behind the service rendered, he drove Blatchford's car to the garage nearest the freight station, left instructions to have it shipped back to Lewiston by the first train, and promptly went in search of Gantry. The traffic manager was not in his office, but Blount found him at the Railway Club.

"Just a word, Dick," he began, when he had overtaken his man pointing for the buffet. "Kittredge put up a job on me, and I think you helped him. I had to borrow an automobile to come back in from Lewiston. It's down at the Central Garage, and I have given Bankston, the garage man, orders to ship it back to Mr. Blatchford, of the 'Little Mary.' I wish you'd phone your freight agent to see that it is properly taken care of, and that the freight bill is sent to me."

Gantry made no reply, but he went obediently to the house telephone and gave the necessary instructions. The thing done, he turned shortly upon Blount, scowling morosely.

"Come on in and let's have a drink," he said.

Blount marked the brittleness of tone and the half-quarrelsome light in the eyes which were a little bloodshot.

"No, Dick; you've had one too many already," he objected firmly.

Gantry put his back against the wall of the corridor.

"No," he rasped; "I'm not drunk, but I'm ready to fight you to a finish, and for once in a way I'm going to get in the first lick. You've been bluffing me from the start, and you're going to try it again. It won't go this time; you've got to show me!"

If Blount hesitated it was only because he was trying to determine whether or not the traffic manager was business-fit. Gantry comprehended perfectly, and his laugh was derisive and a trifle bitter.

"You're sizing me up and asking yourself if I'm too far gone to be worth while," he jeered. "If I couldn't stand any more liquid grief than you can, I would have been down and out years ago. Show your hand, Evan—if you have any to show."

Blount hesitated no longer. Taking Gantry's arm, he led him out of the club and around the block to the Sierra National Bank. It was after banking hours, but the side door

giving access to the safe-deposit department was still open. With the traffic manager at his elbow, Blount asked the custodian for his private box, got it, and led the way to one of the cell-like retiring rooms. Gantry proved his capacity for transacting business by turning on the lights, locking the door, and squaring himself in a chair at one side of the tiny writing-table.

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Blount opened the japanned safety box, took out a bulky envelope and tossed it across to the traffic manager.

"You can see for yourself whether I've been bluffing or not," he said quietly; and then he turned his back and interested himself in the lithograph of the latest Atlantic liner framed and hanging upon the mahogany end wall of the small room.

For a little time there was a dead silence, broken only by the faint rustling of the papers as Gantry withdrew and unfolded them. When he had glanced at the last folded letter sheet, he snapped the rubber band upon the sheaf and sat back in his chair. Blount turned at the snap and found the traffic manager smiling curiously up at him.

"Sit down, Evan," was the friendly invitation. And when Blount had dropped into the opposite chair: "We used to be pretty good friends in the old days, Ebee," Gantry went on, falling easily into the use of the college nickname. "I haven't forgotten the time when I would have had to break and go home if you hadn't stood by me like a brother and lent me money. For that reason, and for some others, I hate to see you bucking a dead wall out here in the greasewood hills."

"It is you and your kind who are bucking the dead wall, Dick."

"No, listen; I'm giving it to you straight, now. A few minutes ago you thought I was drunk—possibly too far gone to serve your purpose. I wasn't; I was merely sick and disgusted at the spectacle afforded by a crafty, crooked, double-dealing old world—the world we're living in. Once in a blue moon an honest man turns up, and when that happens he's got to be broken on the wheel—as you're going to be broken. Oh, yes; I came out with ideals, too, but they've been knocked out of me. We all have to keep the lock-step in business, and business is hell, Evan. I'm honest to my salt—which is to say that as yet I'm not using my job to line my own pockets, but that's the one decent thing that can be said of me. Don't let me bore you."

"Go on," said Blount soberly. "I don't see the pointing of it yet, but—"

"You will when I tell you that I've been lying to you; faking first one thing and then another. Do you get that?"

"I hear you say it; yes."

"It's so. I faked that story about your father's having made an underground deal with us. It was a lie out of whole cloth, because I didn't believe at that time that he had. There had been a falling out between him and Mr. McVickar; that was common talk on the division. But until yesterday I didn't know for certain that the trouble had been patched up; in fact, I had my own reasons for believing that it hadn't been patched up."

“And you told me there was an alliance in order that I might believe that my father would be involved in an exposure of the railroad’s double-dealing with the public?”

“Just that. Self-preservation is the primal law—after you’ve dropped the ideals—and I thought I had invented a way to hold you down. I might have saved myself the trouble—and the lie. It comes down to this, Evan: you are one man against a crooked world, and you haven’t had a ghost of a show from the first minute.”

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"You'll have to make it plainer," was the even-toned rejoinder. "As matters stand now, I am pretty well assured that I can do what I set out to do. I'm going to be able to make my own employers come through with clean hands."

Gantry was shaking his head slowly, and again the curious smile flitted across his keen, fine-featured face, lingering for an instant at the corners of the eyes.

"You say I'll have to make it plainer, and I will. A little while ago you intimated that Kittredge and I were responsible for the telegram which sent you to Lewiston yesterday. It was a fake, but it didn't originate with Kittredge or with me."

"With whom, then?"

"I hate to tell you, Evan—it'll hit you hard. The frame-up was your father's. He got hold of Kittredge the night before, some time after we had left my office together to go up-town. He told Kittredge it was for the good of 'the cause,' and suggested that a wire purporting to come from Mr. McVickar would probably turn the trick. He didn't give his reason for wanting to get you out of the way at this time, and Kittredge didn't ask it."

Blount was pinning the traffic manager down with an eyehold which was like a gripping hand, and the close air of the little mahogany bank cell became suddenly charged with the subtle effluence of antagonism. Blount was the first to break the painful silence.

"You have told me nothing new, Dick, or at least nothing that I have not been taking for granted almost from the beginning. But let it be understood between us, once for all, that I discuss my father, his motives, or his acts, with no man living. We'll drop that phase of it; it's a side issue, and has no bearing upon the business that brought us here. You asked for the proof of my ability to compel your employers and mine to turn over the clean leaf. You have it there under your hand."

For answer, Gantry pushed the rubber-banded file across the table to his companion. "Take another look, Evan, and see how helpless you are in the grip of a crooked world," he said, very gently.

Blount caught up the file and ran it through. It was made up wholly of pieces of blank paper, cut to letter-size, and clipped at the corner with a brass fastener, as the originals had been.

XIX

A COG IN THE WHEEL

While Blount was staring abstractedly at the file of blank sheets which had been substituted for the incriminating letters of the vote-selling corporation managers, with

Gantry sitting back, alert and watchful, to mark the first signs of the coming storm, there came a tap on the locked door of the little room, and a deprecatory voice said: "It's our closing time, gentlemen: if you are about through—"

"In a minute," returned Gantry quickly, and then he took the blank dummy out of Blount's hands, pocketed it, shut the japanned safety box, and touched his companion's shoulder.

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"Let's get out of this, Evan," he said, still speaking as one speaks to a hurt child.
"Conroy wants to close up."

Blount suffered himself to be led away, and in the vault room he went mechanically through the motions of locking up the empty box. In the street Gantry once more took the lead, walking his silent charge around the block and into the Temple Court elevator. A little later, when the door of the private room in the up-town legal office had opened to admit them, and Blount had dropped heavily into his own desk chair, Gantry plunged promptly into the breach.

"We've been friendly enemies in this thing right from the start, Evan," he began, "and that's as it had to be. But blood—even the blood of a college brotherhood—is thicker than water. I know now what you're in for, and I'm going to stand by you, if it costs me my job. First, let's clear the way a bit. If I say that I haven't had anything to do, even by implication, with this jolt you've just been given, will you believe me?"

Blount lifted a pair of heavy-lidded eyes and let them rest for an instant upon the face of the traffic manager. "If you say so, Dick, I'll believe it," he returned.

"Good. Now we can dive into the thick of it. I won't insult you by doubting the premising fact. You had the evidence once?"

"I did—enough of it to keep a grand jury busy for a month. It came to me in the shape of unsolicited letters from the men who are benefiting by the railroad company's evasion of the law, and who are, of course, equally criminal with the railroad officials. Why these letters were written to me I don't know, Gantry. I merely know that they were wholly unsolicited."

"They were written to you because you are supposed to be the doctor in the present crisis."

"But good God, Dick! Haven't I been shouting from every platform in the State that we were out for a clean campaign?"

Gantry shook his head and his smile was commiserative. "I know; and every man who has had his fingers in the pitch-barrel has chuckled to himself, and when two of them would get together they'd pound each other on the back and swear that you were the smoothest spellbinder that Mr. McVickar has ever turned loose on this side of the big mountains. It grinds, Evan, but it's the fact. Not one of the men you are after has ever taken your speeches seriously."

Blount's head sank lower.

"I'm smashed, Dick!" he groaned; "utterly and irretrievably disgraced and discredited in my native State! There isn't a man in the sage-brush hills who would believe me under oath, after this."

"It's hard, Evan—damned hard!" said the traffic manager, driven to repetition. "But grilling over it doesn't get us anywhere. What are you going to do"?

"With the election only five days away, there is nothing that can be done. I had you down, Dick; I could have forced my point with the weapon I had. Isn't that so?"

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Gantry wagged his head dubiously. "I'm not the big boss, but I can tell you right now that, if you could have shown me what I was fully expecting to see, the wires between here and wherever Mr. McVickar's private car happens to be would have been kept pretty hot for a while." Then, upon second thought: "Yes; I guess you could have pulled it off. We couldn't stand for any such bill-boarding as you were threatening to give us."

Blount turned to his desk, opened it, and began to arrange his papers.

"You've been a good friend, after all, Dick," he said, talking as he worked. "I'm going to ask you to go one step farther and take charge of the funeral, if you will. Find Mr. McVickar and wire him that I've dropped out. I'll write him a resignation from somewhere, when I have time."

Gantry left his chair and came to stand beside the quitter.

"Honestly, Evan," he said slowly, "I thought you were a grown man. You'll forgive the mistake, won't you?"

Blount turned upon his tormentor and swore pathetically. "What's the use—what in the devil is the use?" he rasped, when the outburst began to grow measurably articulate. "You know as well as I do what's been done to me, and who has done it. Can I lift my hand to strike back, even if I had a weapon to strike with?"

"Perhaps you can't. But you owe it to yourself, and to a certain bright-minded young woman that I know of, not to fly off the handle without at least trying to see if you can't stay on. Wait a minute." The railroad man took a turn up and down the floor, head down and hands behind him. When he came back to the desk end he began again. "Evan, who's got those original papers?"

"The man who blew up my safe, of course. You've said you didn't hire him, and that leaves only one alternative."

Gantry took the dummy packet from his pocket and held one of the blank sheets up to the light of the window. It was growing dusk, and when he failed to discern what he was looking for, he turned on the electric lights and tried again. At this the script "T-C" watermark was plainly visible, and he showed it to Blount.

"That proves conclusively that the substitution was made here in your own office. Whom do you suspect?"

In a flash Blount remembered: how he had sent Collins to get the packet out of the safe, the stenographer's delay, the hasty sealing of the envelope, and the suspicion which had been cut short by the incoming of Ackerton.

"I know now who did it, and when it was done," he said. "The day before the office was broken into I told Collins to bring me the papers from the safe. What he brought me was that dummy—in a freshly sealed envelope. I was going to open the envelope, but just then Ackerton came in."

"All clear so far," said Gantry; and then: "Where is Collins now?"

"I don't know; he comes and goes pretty much as he pleases when I'm not in town."

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"Do you know anything about him personally?"

"No."

"I do. His father was a bank cashier, and he became a defaulter—of the easy-mark kind; the kind that is too good-natured to look too curiously at a friend's collateral. He would have gone over the road if your father hadn't pulled him out by main strength."

"I see," said Blount cynically. "And the son has paid his father's debt to my father. But why the safe-blowing?"

"Collins's face had to be saved in some way. He couldn't know that you meant to lock the dummy up in the safety vault," returned Gantry, and then, after a pause: "That's our one little ray of hope, Evan."

"I don't see it."

"Don't you? Then I'll make it a bit plainer. If some railroad burglar had cracked your safe, you could confidently assume that the original letters have been carefully cremated by this time, couldn't you?"

"I suppose so."

"But if your father has them ... Evan, I don't know any more than the man in the moon what he wants them for, but the man in the street would grin and tell you that your father was merely getting ready to hold the railroad company up for something it didn't want to part with."

"I'm letting you say it of my own flesh and blood, Dick; and it shows you how badly broken I am. After all, it doesn't lead anywhere."

"Yes, it does. Let us suppose, just for the sake of argument, that your father doesn't know how much those letters mean to you—I know it's a pretty hard thing to imagine, but we'll do it by main strength and awkwardness. Let us suppose again, that being the case, that you go to him frankly and show him in a few well-chosen words just where he has landed you; tell him you've got to have those letters—simply *got* to have them—to save your face. I know your father, Evan, a good bit better than you do; he'd give you the earth with a fence around it if you should ask him for it."

Evan Blount got slowly out of his chair, stood up, and put his hands upon the smaller man's shoulders.

"Dick, do you realize what you are doing for yourself when you show me a possible way of getting my weapon back?" he demanded.

Gantry's lips became a fine straight line and he nodded.

"That's what made me walk the floor a few minutes ago; I was trying to find out if I were big enough. It's all right, Ebee; you go to it, and I'll throw up my job and run a foot-race with the sheriff, if I have to. Damn the job, anyway!" he finished petulantly. "I'm tired of being a robber for somebody else's pocket all the time!"

Blount sat down again and put his face in his hands. After a time he looked up to say: "I can't let you outbid me in the open market, Dick. You can't set the friendship peg any higher than I can."

Gantry crossed the room and recovered his top-coat and hat from the chair where he had thrown them.

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"Don't you be a fool," he advised curtly. "There's a railroad down in Peru that is going bankrupt for the lack of a wide-awake, up-to-date traffic man. I've had the offer on my desk for a month, and I'm going to cable to-night. That lets you out, whether you do or don't. But if you've got the sense of a wooden Indian, you'll do as I've said—and do it *pronto*. Your time's mighty short, anyway. So long."

And before Blount could stop him he was gone.

XX

A STONE FOR BREAD

Though he had eaten nothing since the early breakfast in the service-car on the way to Lewiston, Evan Blount let the dinner hour go by unnoted. For a long time after Gantry had left him he sat motionless, a prey to thoughts too bitter to find expression in words; the dismaying thoughts of the hard-pressed champion who has discovered that his foes are of his own household.

Apart from the one great boyhood sorrow, a sorrow which had been allowed unduly to magnify itself with the passing years, he had never been brought face to face with any of the hardnesses which alone can make the soldier of life entirely intrepid in the shock of battle. In the backward glance he saw that his homeless youth had been, none the less, a sheltered youth; that his father's love and care had built and maintained invisible ramparts which had hitherto shielded him. It was most humiliating to find that the crumbling of the ramparts was leaving him naked and shivering; to find that he was so far out of touch with his pioneer lineage as to be unable to stand alone.

But there are better things in the blood of the pioneers than a latter-day descendant of the continent-conquering fathers may be able to discern in the moment of defeat and disaster. Slowly, so slowly that he did not recognize the precise moment at which the tide of depression and wretchedness reached its lowest ebb and turned to sweep him back to a firmer footing, Blount found himself emerging from the bitter waters. Gantry, the Gantry whom he had been calling hard names, setting him down as at best a lovable but wholly unprincipled time-server, had pointed a possible way to retrieval, heroically effacing himself that the way might be unobstructed. With the warm blood leaping again, Blount straightened himself in his chair. He would go to his father, not as a son begging a boon, but as a man demanding his rights. The machine had seen fit to throw down the challenge by burglarizing his office and robbing him. Very good; there were five days remaining in which to strike back. He would lift the challenge, and if his reasonable demand should be refused, he would drop the railroad crusade and break into the wider field of bossism and machine-made majorities, ploughing and turning it up to the light as he could.

The fiery resolution had scarcely been taken when he heard the door of Collins's outer room open and close, and a moment later the good-looking young stenographer came in, bringing a breath of the crisp autumn evening with him.

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"I didn't know you were back, Mr. Blount!" he exclaimed. "I saw the office lights from the street, and thought somebody had left them turned on. Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes; sit down," said Blount crisply, and then: "Collins, what do you do with yourself when I am out of town?"

"I stay here most of the time. I went out early this afternoon, but I don't often do it."

"Were you here all day yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Was there anything unusual going on?"

The young man looked away as if he expected to find his answer in the farther corner of the room.

"I don't know as you'd call it unusual," he replied half-hesitantly. "There were a good many callers. Shall I bring you the list?"

"Yes."

The stenographer went out to his desk and brought back a slip of paper with the names.

"This man Gryson," said Blount, running his eye over the memorandum, "I see you've got him down four or five times. What did he want?"

"He wouldn't tell me. But he was all kinds of anxious to see you. That was why I telegraphed you; I couldn't get rid of him any other way."

"Let me see the copy of the message."

Again Collins made a journey to his desk, returning with the telegraph-impression book open at the proper page. Blount glanced at the copy of the brief message: "Thomas Gryson wants to know when he can be sure of finding you here," and handed the book back.

"How did you send that?" he asked.

"I sent it down to the despatcher's office by Barney."

Blount nodded. The message had not reached him; and its suppression was doubtless another move in the subtle game.

"You say you couldn't find out what Gryson wanted?" he pressed.

"He—he seemed to be all torn up about something; couldn't say three words without putting a cuss word in with them. The most I could get out of him was that somebody was trying to double-cross him."

Blount took a cigar from his pocket and lighted it. He was faint for lack of food, but he absently mistook the hunger for the tobacco craving.

"Collins," he said evenly, "you appear to forget at times that you are working for a man who has had some little experience with unwilling witnesses in the courts. You are not telling me the truth; or, at least, you're not telling me all of it. Let's have the part that you are keeping back."

"The—the last time he was in, he—he did talk a little," faltered the young man. "He's got something to sell, and he's f-fighting mad at Mr. Kittredge. He said he was going to throw the gaff into somebody damn' quick if Mr. Kittredge didn't wipe off the slate and come across with the price."

"That is better," was the brief comment. "Now, then, why did you lie to me in the first place?"

The stenographer shut his eyes and shrunk lower in his chair, but he made no reply.

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"I'll tell you why you lied," Blount went on, less harshly. "It was because you were told to. Isn't that so?"

Collins nodded.

Reaching out quickly, Blount laid a hand on the young man's knee. "Fred, what do you think of a soldier who takes his pay from one side and fights on the other? That is what you've been doing, you know; it is what you did when you put a dozen sheets of blank paper into an envelope the other day—the day I sent you to get a file of letters marked 'private' from the safe."

The culprit drew away from the touch of the hand on his knee, and there was fear, and behind the fear the courage of desperation, in his eyes when he lifted them.

"You can give me the third degree if you want to, Mr. Blount, but as long as I've got the breath to say no, I'll never tell you the next thing you're going to ask me!"

Blount sprang up and went to stand at the window. There was a street arc-lamp swinging in its high sling some distance below the window level, its scintillant spark changing weirdly to blue and green and back to blinding orange, and he stared so steadily at it that his eyes were full of tears when he turned to look down upon the waiting culprit.

"No, Collins; I'm not going to ask you the name of the other master for whom you have thrown me down," he said gravely; and then: "That's all—you may go now."

The young man got up and groped for the hat which had fallen from his hands to the floor and rolled away out of reach.

"You mean that I'm to get my time-check?" he asked.

"No," he grated—the harshness returning suddenly. "You are disloyal, and I know it; your successor would probably be the same, and I shouldn't know it."

Nerved to the strident pitch now by the new resolution, Blount hurriedly set his desk in order, slammed it shut, and followed the stenographer to the street level. In the avenue he hesitated for a moment, the thoughts shuttling swiftly. In a flash the inferences fell into place. Gantry had said that his father was responsible for the time-killing journey to Lewiston. Why had it been necessary? Was it to keep him out of Gryson's way? What did the ward-organizer have to communicate that made him so anxious to secure an interview? Was that anxiety the breach through which the wider field of corruption might be reached?

Again swift decision came to its own and Blount faced to the right, walking rapidly until he turned in at the foot of the worn double flight of stairs leading to the editorial rooms of

The Plainsman. Blenkinsop, the editor, a lean, haggard man with a sallow face, coarse black hair worn always a little longer than the prevailing cut, and deep-set, gloomy eyes, was at his desk.

“Can you give me a few minutes of your time, Blenkinsop?” the caller asked shortly.

“I can sell ’em to you, maybe,” said the editor, and the lift of the gloomy eyes merely served to turn the jest into a bit of morbid sarcasm. Then he gave the sarcasm a half-bitter twist: “You railroad gentlemen are always willing to buy what you can’t reach out and take.”

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"I know that is what you believe," said Blount, drawing up a broken chair and planting himself carefully in it; "we are on opposite sides of the fence in this fight, if you are fighting the railroad merely because it is a railroad; otherwise, perhaps, we are not so far apart as we might be. I don't know whether or not you have listened to any of my speeches, but you've printed a good many of them."

The editor nodded. "I've read 'em, and I'm willing to be the hundredth man and say that I believe you are individually honest. I hope you're not going to ask me to go any further than that."

"I'm not; I came for quite another purpose. First, let me ask a frank question: Is *The Plainsman* out for a square deal all around, regardless of who may be hit?"

Blenkinsop took time to consider the question and his answer, chewing thoughtfully upon his extinct cigar while he reflected.

"This is straight goods?" he asked finally. "You're not trying to pull me into an admission that can be used against us a little later on?"

"At the present moment you are talking to Evan Blount, the man, and not to the Transcontinental company's lawyer, Blenkinsop."

"All right; then I'll tell you flat that we are out for blood. We hold no brief for any living man. There are no strings tied to us, and we wear nobody's brass collar."

"Then you are fighting the machine as well as the railroad?" Blount put in quickly.

The editor sat back in his chair, and the two furrows which deepened upon either side of his hard-bitted mouth answered for a smile.

"When you find a machine that hasn't got 'T-C.R.' lettered on it somewhere, you let us know about it," was his rather cryptic reply.

"That is not the point," said Blount dryly. "Here is the question I wanted to ask: There are only five days intervening before the election. How wide a swath could you cut if the evidence of wholesale corruption could be placed in your hands within twenty-four hours?"

Again the editor took time to consider. When he spoke it was to say: "I can't quite believe that you are going to be disloyal to your salt at this late stage of the game, Blount. Do you mean that you are going to show your own company up for what it really is?"

"Never mind about that. I asked a question, and you haven't answered it."



"It was a question of time, wasn't it? There's time enough to tip the skillet over and spill all the grease into the fire, if that's what you mean; always time enough, up to the last issue before the polls open."

"And you'd do it—no matter who might happen to get in the way of the burning grease?"

"We print the news, and we try to get all the news there is. But it would have to be straight goods, Blount; no 'ifs' and 'ands' about it. I'm not saying that you couldn't produce the goods, you know. If you could break into Gantry's and Kittredge's private files, the trick would be turned. But I know well enough you're not going to do that."

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Blount got up out of the broken chair and buttoned his coat.

"I needn't take any more of your time just now," he said. "I merely wanted to know how far you'd go if somebody should happen along at the last moment and give you a plain map of the road."

"We'll go as far, and drive as hard, as any newspaper this side of the Missouri River. But we've got to have the facts—don't forget that."

Blount was turning to go, but he faced around again sharply.

"Do you mean to tell me, Blenkinsop, that you don't know, as well as you know you're alive, that this campaign is honeycombed with deals and trades and dishonesty and trickery in every legislative district?" he demanded.

Again the ghastly smile which was only a deepening of the natural furrows flitted across the editor's face.

"Of course, I know it," he returned. "But you'll excuse me if I say that I scarcely expected to have the railroad company's field-manager come and tell me about it."

Blount's grim smile was a match for the editorial face-wrinkling. "You are like a good many others, Blenkinsop; you see red when you hear the noise of a railroad train. Perhaps, a little later, I may be able to persuade you to see another color—yellow, for example. Let it go at that. Good-night."

Once more in the avenue, Blount turned his steps toward the Inter-Mountain. Since the campaign was now in its final week, the clans were gathering in the capital, and the lobby of the great hotel was filled with groups of caucussing politicians. Blount was halted half a dozen times before he could make his way to the room-clerk's desk, and the pumping process to which he was subjected at each fresh stoppage would have amused him if the fiery resolution which was driving him on had not temporarily killed his sense of humor. It was evident that, in spite of all he had been saying and doing, a considerable majority of the caucussers were still regarding him as his father's lieutenant. He did not try very hard to remove the impression. It mattered little, in the present crisis, what the various party henchmen thought or believed.

It was a sharp disappointment when the room-clerk told him that his father and Mrs. Honoria and their guest had gone to the theatre. He was keyed to the fighting-pitch, and he wanted to have the deciding word spoken while his blood was up and there was still time to act. A glance at the clock showed him that he had a full half-hour to wait; and, as much to escape the buzzing lobbyists as to satisfy his hunger, he went to the *cafe* and ordered a belated dinner, choosing a table from which he could look out

through the open doors and command the main entrance through which the theatre-goers would return.

He was through with the dinner, and was slowly sipping his black coffee, when he saw them come in. Since it was no part of his plan to dull the edge of opportunity by holding it first upon the social grindstone, he let the party of three go on to the elevators, and a little later sent a card up-stairs asking his father to meet him in the lounge on the mezzanine floor.

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Having the advantage of time, he was first at the appointed meeting-place. He had drawn a chair to the balustrade, and was glooming thoughtfully down at the lobby gathering, upon which even the lateness of the hour appeared to have no dispersing effect, when a mellow voice behind him said: "Well, son, taking a quiet little squint at the menagerie?"

Blount got up and gave the speaker his chair, dragging up another for himself. The senator sat down and stretched his great frame like a man wearied. "Ah, Lord!" he said. "The old man isn't as young as he used to be, Evan, boy. There was a time once when eleven o'clock didn't seem any later to me than it does now to you; but it's gone by, son, and I don't reckon it'll ever come back again."

Blount drew his chair nearer. "I have a hard thing to say to you to-night, dad," he began, "and you mustn't make it harder by speaking of your—of the things that get near to me. I am a man grown, and a Blount, like yourself; I want you to give me back those papers which your dynamiter or somebody else in your pay took from my office safe three nights ago."

The senator's eyes lighted with the gentle smile, and the tips of the great mustaches twitched slightly.

"So McVickar's been telling tales out of school, has he?" he inquired half-jocularly.

"I have had no communication with Mr. McVickar. It wasn't necessary, nor is it needful for us to go aside out of the straight road. I want those papers. They are mine, and they were stolen."

The elder man smiled again. "What if I should say that I haven't got 'em, son—what then?" he asked mildly.

"I don't want you to say that. I want to believe that, however bitter this fight may grow, we shall still speak the truth to each other."

There was silence for a little time, and then the father broke it to say: "Reckon I could ask you what papers you mean, without roiling the water any more than it's already been roiled, son?"

"You may ask and I'll answer, if you'll let me say that it is hardly worth while for you to spar with me to gain time. I had certain documents—letters—which would have enabled me to come through clean with my own people—with the railroad management. You knew I had them; I was imprudent enough to boast of it one evening when we were dining together in your rooms. I know what I'm talking about, dad, when I make this demand of you. One of my clerks has been tampered with. Three days ago, when I asked him to bring me the letters from the safe, he brought me, instead, a

packet of blank paper which he allowed me to go and lock up in my safety-box in the Sierra National. I don't know why you had the safe blown up, unless it was to save Collins's face."

Again a silence intervened, and in the midst of it the senator sat up and began to feel half-absently in his pockets for a cigar. Blount offered his own pocket-case, following it with the tender of a lighted match. With the cigar going, the Honorable David settled back in the deep chair, chuckling thoughtfully.

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"They wrote me from back yonder on the Eastern edge of things that you had the makings of a mighty fine lawyer in you, boy, and I'll be switched if I don't believe they had it about right. The way you've trailed this thing out doesn't leave the old man a hole as big as a dog-burrow to crawl out of, does it, now? Reckon you've sure-enough got to have those papers back before you can go on, do you?"

"You know I must. You know what I've been preaching and talking: I have meant every word of it in good faith, and when I began to doubt the good faith of those behind me, I was forced to cast about for a weapon. It was handed to me almost miraculously, and as long as I held it my good name before the people of the State was safe. As the matter stands now, I'm a broken man, dad. After the election I shall be billeted from one end of the State to the other as the most shameless liar that ever breathed!"

The senator was rocking his great head slowly upon the chair-pillow. "That's bad; that's mighty bad, son. I reckon we'll have to fix some way to trail you out of that bog-hole, sure enough!"

"I'm not asking for help; I'm asking for bare justice. Give me those papers and I'll fight myself clear."

"And if I say I can't give 'em to you, Evan, boy, what then?"

"Then, hard and unfilial as it may seem to you, I shall fight you and your machine to a finish. You think I can't do it? I'll show you. I've got five days, and they are all my own. This campaign has been rotten to the core from the very beginning. You have tried to keep me from finding it out, and you have partly succeeded. But I know a little, and inside of the next twenty-four hours I shall know more. That's my last word, dad, and it breaks my heart to have to say it. But, by the God who made us both, if you drive me to it, I shall stir up such a revolution in this State that the people will forget to curse me for the lies I have been allowed to tell them!"

Blount was upon his feet when he finished, and the senator was rising stiffly from the depths of the big chair.

"That's good, man-sized talk, son," he commented gently, "and I reckon I haven't a word to say against it. All I'm going to beg for is this: we're kin, boy—mighty close kin. Belt away as hard as you like in the big scrap; it does me good to see that all these little Eastern frills haven't made you any less a two-fisted, hard-hitting Blount; but don't let it make you turn your back when your old daddy comes into the room. That's all I ask. Now you'd better go to bed and sleep up some. There's another day coming, and if there isn't, none of these little things we've been haggling over is going to count for much to any of us."

Three minutes later the Honorable Senator Sage-Brush was letting himself into the sitting-room of his suite on the private dining-room floor by means of his night-key. The small person whom Gantry and a few others were still calling the court of last resort was sitting up, and the tiny embroidery-frame on the table had evidently just been laid aside.

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"Well?" she said inquiringly.

The senator shook his head in patient tolerance.

"Whatever you've been doing, it's knocked the bottom clean out for the boy, Honoria. For a little spell he had me going, and I thought I'd just naturally have to turn loose and spill all the fat into the fire."

"You mustn't do that," she returned quickly. "There are five days yet, and I need at least three of them. He was very angry?"

"Fighting mad."

"Of course," said the small one thoughtfully. "But we can't allow that to get in the way of the bigger things. It won't make any family break, will it? For Patricia's sake I shall be sorry if he is desperate enough to make the quarrel a personal one."

"I did the best I could on that, little woman, and I reckon he's big enough to keep on telling us 'Howdy.' What comes next on the programme?"

"To-morrow I'm going to try to get him to take Patricia driving. Beyond that I haven't planned, and anyway it doesn't matter, now that you have Gryson out of the way." Then she offered a bit of news. "Richard Gantry telephoned me a few minutes ago. He has sent in his resignation, and is going to Peru."

The senator was opening the door to the adjoining bedroom and turning on the lights.

"Oh, no, I reckon not," he rejoined, with a mellow laugh rumbling deep in his great body. "Dick only thinks he is going to Peru. We all think such things now and then."

XXI

THE UNDER-DOG

Blount's first move on the morning following the militant interview with his father was telegraphic; he wired the campaign chairmen in the three towns remaining on his list, cancelling his speaking-engagements. Beyond that he went forth to institute a painstaking search in the purlieus of the city, a quest having for its object the unearthing of the man Thomas Gryson. More and more he was coming to believe that this man was the key to a larger situation in the field of political corruption than any which had as yet developed. Wherefore he made the search thorough.

Oddly enough, considering the man and his habits, the quest proved fruitless. Blount was too clean a man to be on familiar terms with the saloon men and dive-keepers of



the capital-city underworld, or with the crooks and turnings of the underworld itself; but he found his way around easily enough in daylight, and had his labor for his pains. For when he went back to the hotel at the luncheon-hour he brought little with him save a stench in his nostrils and a slightly increased fund of mystification. Gryson had disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him. And Blount knew the disappearance was real, because the ward-heeler's own henchmen were searching for him.

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Daunted but not beaten, Blount meant to continue the quest in the afternoon. But man proposes, and a small *dea ex machina* may dispose. At the *cafe* family luncheon, at which Blount was careful to make his appearance, not only because Patricia was there, but also for the sake of keeping the kinsman peace his father had begged for, it transpired that Patricia had been promised an auto drive to Fort Parker, the military reservation sixteen miles to the westward, and that there were difficulties. The senator's wife took his arm and explained her dilemma at the table dispersal.

"It is parade day at the Fort, you know, and Patricia has set her heart on going. I don't know how I came to be so absurdly thoughtless, but I promised her before I remembered that this is the Kismet Club election afternoon, and if I don't go, they'll make me president again in spite of everything," she said in low tones as they were leaving the *cafe*. "I simply *can't* serve another year; and at the same time, I do so dislike to disappoint Patricia. She is such a dear girl!" Mrs. Honoria was strictly within the bounds of truth in claiming to have forgotten the date of the Kismet election of officers; but it was equally true that the club would re-elect her, present or absent, since she was its founder and chief patroness.

Blount saw the pointing of all this with perfect clarity, and he had no need to assure himself that it had every ear-mark of another expedient to get him out of the way. But while he was with Mrs. Honoria and listening to her persuasive little appeals it was much harder to maintain the antagonistic attitude than it was when she figured—at a distance—merely as his father's second wife and his mother's supplanter. Foolish? Oh, yes; but at times when the star of impulse is in the ascendant every man hath a fool in his sleeve.

"It *is* too bad to disappoint her," he found himself saying, matching the little lady's low tone. "If I wasn't so terribly busy—"

"I know; and just now, with the election so near, you must be busier than ever. I suppose I shall have to explain to Patricia, and it hurts me, when she is going home so soon."

"Going home?" echoed the victim.

"Yes; in a few days now. The professor has already overstayed his leave of absence, so he says."

Blount clenched a figurative fist and shook it savagely at an unkind fate. Nevertheless, he fell.

"If you can shift your responsibility to my shoulders, Mrs. Blount—" he began, but she would not let him finish.

“Oh! that is so good of you, Evan. Take the little car, and be sure to ask the garage man to put in new batteries. The magneto isn’t working very well. And be here by half past one if you can. The parade is at half past two, you know.”

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Under other conditions the railroad company's "social secretary," as the society editors of the capital were still calling him, might have had a joyous half-holiday. The autumn afternoon was picture-fine, the little car ran well, and Patricia's mood was tempered with the gayety which strives to extract the final thrill of enjoyment out of the closing days of a delightful vacation. Blount was grateful for the light-hearted mood. He felt that it would be next to impossible to tell Patricia how wretchedly he had failed in the single-handed crusade, and, as to the desperate alternative, there could be no confidences with one whose every reference to his father was shot through with loving and loyal admiration.

At the military reservation there were fewer opportunities for the confidences, or rather fewer temptations to indulge in them. It was a gala day at the post, and there were a number of auto parties out from the city. Blount knew most of the officers and their wives, and Patricia was welcomed not less for her own sake than for the reason that she had figured in former visits as the *protegee* of an ex-senator's wife. After the parade there was an impromptu game of baseball, with the broad verandas of the officers' quarters serving for the grandstand. Beyond the game there was tea, and the sunset gun had been fired before the young lieutenant, who had attached himself to Miss Anners at the earliest possible moment in the afternoon, reluctantly surrendered his prize and handed Patricia into the waiting runabout for the return to the capital.

"We shall be late for dinner, if we don't hurry," was the young woman's comment when Blount steered the little car clear of the post settlement and took the road well in the wake of the Weatherford touring machine. Then she added: "We mustn't be; we are dining out this evening—at the Gordons."

Blount was entirely willing to hurry. Half of one of the precious days of challenge had been wasted in the futile search for Gryson, and here was the other half worse than wasted, since the handsome young lieutenant had so brazenly monopolized Patricia.

"I'll get you home in time for dinner, never fear," he returned, but apparently the little car was no party to the promise. A short mile from the reservation the motor began to miss, and a few minutes farther along it stopped altogether. Blount got out and began to investigate. There was plenty of gasolene, but the spark appeared to be dead.

"I ought to have a leather medal!" he confided to Patricia, in great disgust. "Mrs. Blount told me that the batteries needed to be changed, and I had them changed, but neglected to have them tested. Sit still and let me spin it on the magneto a while."

She let him do it until the perspiration was standing in fine little beads on his forehead and he was hot and desperate. Then she said sweetly: "I don't believe I'd wear myself out that way, if I were you, Evan. Something happened to the magneto two or three weeks ago, and it has never been fixed."

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Blount pushed his driving-cap back, mopped his face, and came around to dive once more into the wiring in the battery box. Dusk was coming on, and he had to light one of the side-lamps to serve as a lantern. By changing the wiring he was finally able to evoke a desultory response from the spark-coil, and a little later to start the motor after some limping fashion.

"Oh, my poor dinner!" said Miss Anners, who was still in the light-hearted mood; this after Blount's careful nursing had resulted in a creeping resumption of the cityward progress. And then: "I hope you didn't have any engagement for this evening?"

"I have but one ambition in life," he rejoined grimly, "and that is to get you back to the hotel in time for your engagement. Surely Mrs. Blount will wait for you."

At the rate they were going the waiting promised to be long. But after another half-hour had been killed, the headlights of a westward-driven car appeared in the road ahead. Blount pulled quickly into the ditch and jumped out to flag the oncoming machine; did flag it, and was able to borrow a set of batteries. With the new equipment the remainder of the drive was accomplished swiftly, but not swiftly enough. At the Inter-Mountain they found that the senator and Mrs. Honoria had gone to keep their dinner engagement, and a note in the little lady's copperplate handwriting informed Blount that the invitation had been made to include him, and that he was to hurry and bring Patricia.

Fully alive now to the time-killing purpose of the clever little machinator in arranging to have spent batteries given him, Blount, nevertheless, did his duty like a man, and the pair made a late descent upon the Gordon dinner-table. Though the dinner was informal, there were other guests besides the senator's party, and among them the traffic manager. Blount, sitting next to Patricia, made their tardiness an excuse and devoted himself to her, thus escaping the toils of the general table-talk, which was frankly political. But at the adjournment to the drawing-room he cornered Gantry.

"I meant to hunt you up this afternoon," he began, "but I was otherwise spoken for. What have you done?"

"I've cabled a conditional acceptance of the offer I was telling you about."

"But you haven't resigned?"

"No. Mr. McVickar will probably be here within a day or two, and I'll make it verbal."

Yielding to the urgings of the younger Gordon, Patricia was going to the piano, and Blount snatched at his opportunity.

"Give me a few minutes in the smoking-room," he said to the traffic manager, and when the privacy was secured: "You needn't resign, Dick. There isn't going to be any earthquake—of the kind you were fearing."

“You don’t mean that the Honorable Senator has turned you down, Evan?”

“Just that.”

“I’m sorry,” said the friend in need, feeling his way cautiously. Then he added: “You needn’t tell me anything more than you want to, you know.”

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"There isn't much to tell. I asked for bare justice, and it was refused."

"Your father has the papers?"

"He neither admitted nor denied."

"But you didn't quarrel?"

Blount's smile was mirthless. "We are here together, as you see. After all is said, we are still father and son."

"Of course; that's as it should be, Evan. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know: go on fighting until I'm wiped out, I suppose. And that reminds me: have you seen that fellow Gryson within the last day or two?"

Gantry dropped into the depths of a lounging-chair and lighted a cigarette. "So you're after Thomas Matthew, too, are you? Kittredge has been ransacking the town for him all day, and up to a couple of hours ago he hadn't found him. What's in the wind?"

"I don't know, but I mean to find out. What can you tell me about Gryson—more than you have already told me?"

"Not very much, I guess. He's a scalawag, of course, but unhappily for all of us he is a scalawag with a pull. Kittredge has been dicking with him—I don't mind telling you that now."

"What is the nature of the pull?"

"Votes," said Gantry succinctly.

"Straight or crooked?"

"You may search me. But knowing Tom Gryson a little, I should put my money on the marked card."

"Naturally," said Blount dryly. "Still, I am needing to be shown. I've had two or three chances to size Gryson up, and he didn't impress me as a man with any ability beyond the requirements of a bully and the lowest type of a political heeler."

"Tom is bigger than that; I don't know how much bigger, but some. He has votes to sell, and Kittredge, at least, seems to believe that he can deliver the goods. I don't know the inside of the deal. I'll tell you frankly that I tried to shove it over to you, neck and heels, at first. When that little notion failed, I pushed it along to Kittredge."

Blount's eyebrows, which promised in time to be as portentous as the Honorable Senator's, met in a frown. "I'm going to find Gryson, dead or alive," he said.

Gantry looked up quickly.

"Which means that you know what has become of him?"

"He has been put out of the way for a purpose, and the purpose is to keep me from finding out something that Gryson wants to tell me. That was the animus of the scheme to send me on a fool's errand to Lewiston. After you left me last night I found out that Gryson had been worrying Collins the day before; had been in the office a number of times and was sweatingly anxious about something."

Gantry flung his cigarette away and lighted another. After a deep inhalation or two he said: "Let it alone, Evan. I have a hunch that you'll be happier if you don't try to drag the cover off of that particular cesspool."

"Listen," said Blount shortly. "When my father turned me down last night I told him that I still had five days in which to—"

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"I know," Gantry nodded. "Just the same, you're not going to do it."

"If I don't, it will be because I can't; because the time is too short." Then, with a sudden and impulsive gesture of appeal: "Dick, for Heaven's sake help me to find that man Gryson, if you know where he is! I shall blow up if I can't do something!"

Gantry rose and tossed the second cigarette among the coals in the grate.

"I've been afraid all along that they'd corner you and beat you to death with feather-dusters," he lamented. "And the only thing I can say will make matters worse instead of better. I have it pretty straight that Gryson has been fired—shooed out of town, and probably out of the State."

"Who did it, Gantry?"

"There is only one man in this bailiwick who can take the whip to a fellow like Tom Gryson. I guess I don't need to name him for you, Evan."

Blount got out of his chair and stood with his back to the fire, and his face was white.

"Good God! the rottenness of it, Dick!" he groaned. And then: "I've got to get out of this and begin all over again in some corner of the world where at least one man in ten hasn't forgotten the meaning of common honesty and decency and fair dealing. Heaven knows I'm no saint, but if I stay here this cursed crookedness will get into my blood and I'll be just as degraded as the worst of them. No, I'm not raving; there have been times when I've felt myself slipping—times when I've been tempted to get down and fight with the weapons that everybody fights with in this God-forsaken, law-breaking, graft-ridden commonwealth!"

Gantry had risen and he was slowly shaking his head.

"You're hot now—and with good enough cause, I guess. But that sort of a temperature makes a man near-sighted and color-blind. Human nature is pretty much the same the world over, Evan, and if you could see beyond the crookedness you'd find a lot of good people out here, averaging about the same as the decent majority anywhere. It's an inarticulate majority generally; it doesn't stand up on its hind legs and rear around and call attention to itself—couldn't if it should try. But it's here and there and everywhere in America, just the same. A railroad car with one drunken fool in it gives you the idea. You focus on him and say, 'What a beastly shame!' and you entirely overlook the other fifty-odd people in the car who are quietly minding their own business."

Blount's smile was for the man rather than for the theory.

"You are an implacable optimist, Dick, and you always have been," he returned. "Your theory is good humanitarianism, and I wish I could accept it as applying to this

abandoned community out here in my native hills; but I can't. Let's go back to the others. We've established a sort of family *modus vivendi*, my father and I, and I don't want him to think that I'm breaking it by plotting with you."

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It was while the evening was still measurably young that Blount made his excuses to his hostess and got away, fondly believing that he was escaping without attracting the attention of the small lady who was deep in a political discussion with candidate Gordon at the critical moment. He was mistaken, but the escape was not interrupted. At the curb the Blount touring-car was waiting, with two others, and for an instant Blount hesitated, half inclined to ask his father's chauffeur, to drive him down-town. On such inconsequent pivots fate, or accident, twirls the most momentous affairs of life. If Blount had taken the car he would have been driven directly to the hotel. As it was, he walked, and in passing the Temple Court Building he remembered that he had not seen his mail since early morning.

Rousing the sleepy boy in charge of the all-night elevator, he had himself lifted to his office floor. The upper corridor was dimly lighted, and on leaving the car he went directly to the door of his private room, walking swiftly and neither seeing nor hearing a man who, materializing mysteriously out of the corridor shadows, followed him step by step.

In the office Blount snapped the lights on and turned to unlock his desk. As the key clicked in the lock the sixth sense, which is perhaps only a mingling of the subtler essences of the other five, warned him sharply, and he wheeled to face the door which had been left on the latch. As he looked, the door opened silently and the materializing shadow, haggard of face and with bloodshot eyes mirroring blind rage and the terror of a cornered rat, slipped into the room and stood warily aside out of the direct light from the electric chandelier. Blount looked again and swore softly. The dodging intruder was the man Thomas Gryson.

XXII

THE ICONOCLAST

It is a threadbare saying that the environment moulds the man. Yet, much more than the philosophers have contended, there are chameleon tendencies in the strongest character, and one finely determining to coerce his surroundings is quite likely to end by realizing that the surroundings have appealed to unsuspected color-changings in himself. Thus it may chance that the fairest fighter, finding himself sufficiently kicked and cuffed in the rough-and-tumble, will discover how facilely easy it is to descend to the level of his antagonists, and from this discovery to the awakening of the remorseless passion for success at any price is but a step, long or short according to the exigencies of the struggle.

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Checked in his luggage, if not precisely pinned openly upon his sleeve, Blount had brought with him from the scholastic banks of the Charles a choice assortment of ideals, which are things precious only as they can be preserved inviolate. But for weeks, endless weeks as they seemed to him in the retrospect, he had been rubbing shoulders with a crude world which appeared to care little for ideals and less for the man who upheld them. Inevitably, as he had admitted to Gantry, the change was wrought, or working; the exclamation springing to his lips when he recognized Gryson evinced it, and when he beckoned the shifty intruder to the chair at the desk end the ruthless *zeitgeist* had taken full possession of him, and the thought uppermost had grown suddenly indifferent to the means if by their employment the end might be gained.

"Come over here and sit down," he commanded; then, seeing that Gryson hesitated and flung a glance over his shoulder at the door: "What are you afraid of?"

"They've got my number," said the ward-heeler, in a convict whisper which was little more than a facial contortion. "There's a couple o' bulls waitin' f'r me down on the sidewalk."

Blount crossed the room, shut the door and locked it. Then he went back to the self-confessed fugitive.

"You're safe for the time being," he told the man. "Now talk fast and talk straight. What do you want this time?"

Gryson hammered the arm of his chair with his fist and babbled profanity. When he became coherent he told his story, or rather Blount got it out of him piecemeal, of how he had been employed by the "organization" to falsify the registration lists in certain districts; of how, when the work was done, he had been denied the price and driven out with cursings. In the accusation, which was shot through with tremulous imprecations, the "organization" and the railroad company were implicated as if they were one. In one breath the fugitive charged the "double-crossing" to Kittredge, and in the next he accused the "big boss" himself, of having passed the sentence of deportation.

"You say you were driven out? How could they drive you if you didn't want to go?" queried the cross-examiner.

"That's on me: it was a job I pulled off two years ago in another place—up north of this—and the night-watchman got in the way when I was leavin'. They jerked that on me and showed me th' rope. They had me by th' neck, with th' word passed to Chief Robertson. I'm back here now wit' my life in my hand, but I'd chance it twice over to get square wit' them welshers that have bawled me out!"

"Why have you come to me?" asked Blount briefly.

“Gawd knows; I took a chance again. I’ve heard your speeches, and says I, ‘There’s your wan chance, cully,’ and I’m here to grab f’r it. If you’ve been meanin’ the half of what you’ve been sayin’, Mr. Blount—” There was more of it, half pleadings and half mere rageful babblings of a vengeful soul hampered by the tongue of inadequacy.

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Blount left his chair and began to pace the floor, with Gryson watching him furtively. At any time earlier in the struggle the thought of using this wretched time-server as a means to any end, however desirable and just, would have been nauseating. True, if there could be any such thing as honor among thieves, the man had earned the price of his crooked work among the registration clerks; but for another man to profit by the broken bargain, and by the confessed criminal's rage and lust for vengeance, was a thing to make even a hard-pressed loser in an unequal battle hesitate.

The hesitation was only momentary. With a gesture which was more expressive than many words, Blount turned short upon the furtive watcher in the chair at the desk end.

"What do you want me to do?" he demanded.

"You're on before I could stall it f'r you. You've been swearin' you'd back th' square deal to th' limit; it ain't square; it's crooked as hell. Grab f'r this knife I'm handin' you and cut the heart out o' these welshin' bosses that are givin' you th' double-cross the same as they're givin' it to me. You're the on'y man that can do it; the on'y man on Gawd's green earth they're afraid of. I know it damn' well. That's why they handed my number to th' chief and passed th' word to have me pinched. They was afraid I'd come here and squeal to you!"

Blount stopped him with an impatient gesture. "Let that part of it rest and get down to business. What you have been telling me may be true, but I can't do anything on your bare word—the word of a man who is dodging the police. You've got to bring me proofs in black and white; lists of the faked names, and a straight-out give-away of how they are to be used; names and dates, and a written story of your bargainings with the men higher up. This is Thursday; to be of any use, these documents would have to be in my hands by Saturday noon, at the latest. You know best whether the thing can be done in time—or done at all. What do you say?"

For a little time Gryson said nothing. When he spoke it was evident that the lust for vengeance and a guilty conscience were fighting an even-handed battle.

"I could get the affidavits—maybe," he said. "There's a dozen 'r more of the cullies down-along got their notice to fade away when I got mine, and they'd jump at th' chance to get back at the bosses. But f'r Gawd's sake, look at what it means to me! Anny minute I'm on the job I'd be lookin' to see some bull with a star on 'im holdin' a gun on me; and after that, it's this f'r mine"—with a jerk of the head and a pantomimic gesture simulating the hangman's knot under his ear.

"That is your risk," said Blount coldly, making this small concession to the expiring sense of uprightness. "You know how badly you want to 'get square,' as you put it, and I am interested only in the results. If you get caught, I sha'n't turn my hand over to help you—you can take that straight. But if you show up here with the proofs, proofs that I

can use, any time before Saturday night, I'll undertake to see that you get safely out of the State."

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It was in the little pause which followed that some one in the corridor rapped smartly on the locked door. At the sound, Gryson collapsed and his face became an ashen mask of fear. Blount, the law-abiding, might have hesitated, but this newer Blount had slain his scruples. Snatching Gryson out of his chair, he thrust him silently through the half-open door of the work-room, and a moment later he was answering the rap at the corridor entrance, opening the door and calmly facing the two policemen on the threshold.

"Well?" he said brusquely.

One of the men touched his helmet.

"We're looking for a felly that ducked in below a couple of hours ago, Mr. Blount. He's in the building, somewheres, and your office being lighted, we thought maybe you'd—"

Blount threw the door wide.

"You can see for yourselves," he said. "Would you like to come in and look around?"

"Sure not; your word's as good as the search, Mr. Blount. 'Twas only on the chance that he might have faked an excuse and ducked in on you to be out of reach."

Blount left the door open and went to get his coat and hat.

"Who is the man?" he asked, while the officers lingered.

"A felly named Gryson. He's been working in the railroad shops what times he wasn't pullin' off something crooked in the p'litical line."

"What is he wanted for?" Blount was closing his desk and preparing to leave the office.

"Croaking a bank watchman up in Montana afther he'd souped the vault door for a kick-shot."

"In that case, perhaps I'm lucky that he didn't drop in and croak me," laughed Blount, turning off the lights and joining the two men in the corridor. And then: "There is a back stair to the engine-room in the basement in the other wing of the building: have you been watching that?"

The bigger of the two policemen prodded the other in the ribs with his night-stick. "That's on us, Jakey. He'll have been gone hours ago. Let's be drilling. 'Tis a fine mind ye have, Mr. Blount, to be thinking of thim back stairs right off the bat." And the pair went down in the elevator with Blount, chuckling to themselves at their own discomfiture.

Having set his hand to the plough, Blount did nothing carelessly. Sauntering slowly, and even pausing to light a cigar, he trailed the two policemen until they were safely in another street. Then he turned back to the great office building and once more had himself lifted to the upper floor. In the office corridor he waited until the car had dropped out of sight; waited still longer to give the drowsy night-boy time to settle himself on his stool and go to sleep. Then he went swiftly to the door of the private room and unlocked it.

Gryson was ready, and even in the dim light of the corridor Blount could see that he was white-faced and trembling. In the silent faring to the stair which wound down in a spiral around the freight elevator Blount gripped the arm of trembling.

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"You've got to get your nerve," he gritted savagely, "or you'll be nipped before you've gone a block!" And then: "Here's the stair: follow it down until you get to the basement. There's a coal entrance from the alley, and the engineer will be with his boilers in the other wing—and probably asleep. You've got it straight, have you? You're to bring the papers to my office on or before Saturday night. I'll be looking out for you, and if you bring me the evidence, you'll be taken care of. That's all. Down with you, now, and go quietly. If you're caught, I drop you like a hot nail; remember that."

Still puffing at the cigar which glowed redly in the darkness of the wing corridor, Blount waited until his man had been given time to reach the basement. Then he walked slowly back to the main corridor and descended by the public stair without awakening the elevator boy, who was sleeping soundly in his car on the ground level.

On the short walk to the hotel the full significance of the thing he had done had its innings. Cynical criticism to the contrary notwithstanding, there is now and then an honest lawyer who regards his oath of admission to the bar—the oath which binds him to uphold the cause of justice and fair dealing—as something more than a mere form of words. Beyond all question, an honest man who has sworn to uphold the law may neither connive at crime nor shield a criminal. Blount tried the shift of every man who has ever stepped aside out of the plain path of rectitude; he told himself morosely that he had nothing to do with Gryson's past; that he had taken no retainer from the Montana authorities; that the criminal was merely a cog in a wheel which was grinding toward a righteous end, and as such should be permitted to serve his turn.

The well-worn argument is always specious to the beginner, and Blount thought he had sufficiently justified himself by the time he was pushing through the revolving doors into the Inter-Mountain lobby. But when he saw his father quietly smoking his bed-time cigar in one of the big leather-covered lounging-chairs, he realized that the first step had been taken in an exceedingly thorny path; that whatever else might be the outcome of the bargain with Thomas Gryson, a son was coldly plotting to bring disgrace and humiliation upon a father.

For this reason, and because, when all is said, blood is much thicker than water, Blount made as if he did not see the beckoning hand-wave from the depths of the big chair in the smokers' alcove; ignored it, and with set lips and burning eyes made for the nearest elevator to take refuge in his room.

XXIII

A CRY IN THE NIGHT.

With the critical election, a struggle which was to decide for another two-year period whether or not the people of the Sage-Brush State were to be the masters or the

servants of chartered monopoly, only four days distant, the capital city took on the aspect of a stirring camp—two rival camps, in fact, since the State headquarters of the two chief parties were in the Inter-Mountain Hotel—and each incoming train brought fresh relays of henchmen and district spellbinders to swell the sidewalk throngs and to crowd the lobbies.

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On the Friday morning Blount awoke with the feeling that he had definitely cut himself off from all the commonplace activities of the campaign. There were two days of suspense to be outworn, and if he could have compassed it he would have been glad to efface himself completely. Since that was impossible, and since it seemed equally impossible that he should go on keeping up the farce of the *modus vivendi* after he had taken the step which would presently blazon his name to the world as that of his father's accuser, he bought the morning papers hurriedly at the hotel news-stand and went down the avenue to get his breakfast at the railroad restaurant, where he would be measurably sure of isolation.

After giving his order he ran hastily through the local news in the papers. There was no mention of the arrest of one Thomas Gryson in any of the police notes, and he breathed freer. But in *The Plainsman* there was an editorial which was vaguely disturbing. Blenkinsop, who wrote his own leaders, hinted pointedly at coming disclosures which would change the political map of the State for all time. Blount, trying to determine how much or how little the editorial was based upon his talk with the editor on the Wednesday night, found his omelet tasteless. Ready enough, as he was persuaded, to fire the disrupting mine with his own hand, he was not ready to surrender the match to any one else. Manifestly he must see Blenkinsop and caution him.

Breakfast over, he walked, by the longest way around, to his office in the Temple Court, hoping to find work which would help him through the forenoon. It was an idle hope. From a State-wide shower of political correspondence the daily mail had dropped suddenly to an inconsequential drizzle, and there were no callers. Here, again, he saw, or thought he saw, the all-powerful hand of the machine. He had been used for a purpose, the purpose of hoodwinking and deceiving the voters. That purpose having been served, he was to be dropped—was already dropped, as it seemed. By noon the sheer time-killing effort became blankly unbearable, and in desperation he broke with another of the ideals—the one labelled sincerity—and going boldly to the Inter-Mountain he waited in the lobby for the family party of three to come down to the one-o'clock luncheon in the public *café*.

Joining the party when it came down, he found it difficult only in the inner sanctuaries to maintain the *status quo ante* Gryson. There was no shadow of suspicion or coolness in his father's kindly smile and genial greeting, and Mrs. Honoria rallied him playfully upon the narrow margin by which he had held his own and Patricia's places at the Gordon dinner-table the night before. Only in Patricia's eyes he read a curious questioning, a hint that they were finding something in his eyes which was new and not wholly understandable. He knew well enough what it was that she saw; and though she was sitting opposite him at the table for four, he looked at her as seldom as possible, devoting himself, for once in a way, resolutely to his father's wife.

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After luncheon he again fell back upon the dogged boldness. Unable to contemplate a second plunge into the solitude of the Temple Court offices, he asked and was accorded permission to take Patricia for a country drive in the little car. When the city was left behind, and the small machine was purring steadily northwestward over a road which led to nowhere in particular, Blount put his finger accurately upon the thing which had been building little barriers of silence between them all the way out from town.

"You knew me well enough yesterday to be reasonably certain of what I would do in given circumstances, didn't you, Patricia?" he began abruptly. "To-day you are not so sure about it. Why?"

She laughed lightly, but there was a serious undertone in her voice when she said: "There are moments when you make me wonder if you haven't been dabbling in necromancy, Evan. I was at that very instant telling myself that it wasn't so."

"But you know it is so," he persisted. "Why am I different?"

"I don't know."

"Yet you recognize the fact?"

"Is it a fact?" she queried.

"Yes."

"In what way are you different?"

"I am not altogether certain that I know, myself. But I do know this: between yesterday and to-day there is a gulf so wide that it seems measureless. The scientists claim there are no cataclysms; no sudden and sweeping changes taking place either in the physical or the metaphysical field. If that be true, the changes must go on subconsciously for a long time before they are recognized. There is no other way of accounting for the gulfs."

"You are talking miles over my head," she protested; and, though the assertion was not strictly true, it served its purpose.

"I can make it a little plainer," he went on, slowing the motor until the small car was merely ambling. "You remember that night at Wartrace Hall, and what you told me? I went out from that talk resolved to do what you had shown me I ought to do, stubbornly refusing to consider the possibility of failure. None the less, I have failed."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed; "not that!"

“Yes, just that. But the failure is not the worst thing that has befallen me. I have lost or gained something that pushes the yesterdays into a past which can never be recovered. Let me tell you, girl: I have been fighting in the open, against treachery and deceit fighting always under cover. I have been fighting bare-handed where others were armed. Day by day I have been finding out the baseness and the trickery; how my own side has used me as a screen behind which the old dishonorable expedients could be safely planned and carried out. I never knew until within the past two days what all this chicanery and double-dealing might be doing to me, but now I do know.”

“Will it bear telling?” she asked quietly.

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"I think not—to you," he returned, matching her low tone. "Let it be enough to say that I am no longer the man I was when I came out here. Patricia, I'm not fighting bare-handed any more; I'm smashing in with any weapon I can get hold of. There will be no such reform as the one you urged me to champion—as the era of fair-dealing and sincerity which I have been trying honestly and earnestly to inaugurate. Nevertheless, if my hand doesn't tremble too much at the critical moment, there will be, on the morning of next Tuesday, such a revolution as this commonwealth has never seen. Though they have robbed me and made a puppet of me, I can still bring it about."

He had gone farther than he meant to, and he thought she would protest. He knew that her convictions of what should be and what should not be were clear-cut and definite. But a man, even though he be a lover, may know a woman's mind without knowing very much about the woman herself. There was no protest forthcoming. Quite the contrary, she answered him with a little shudder that was almost a caress, saying: "I think you have grown—bigger and stronger than I ever thought you could grow, Evan; and I'm sure your hand won't tremble. Is that what you want me to say?"

Since there is no more contradictory being in a sentient world than a man in love, Blount was not quite sure that it was what he wanted her to say. By times, to any lover worthy of the name, the chosen woman figures as a goddess, a tutelary divinity postulating for a mere earthly man all that is high and holy and inerrant; an impeccable standard by which he can measure his own baser desires and ambitions and be shrived of them. At other times the straitly human has its innings, and the longing is for a comrade, a companion, a second self buried, lost, submerged in the loyalty which never questions. Having come slowly to maturity as a lover, Blount had been leaning toward the divinity definition of Patricia Anners. But now the iconoclastic change was breaking many images.

"You are willing to believe that I haven't gone altogether backward?" he queried, after the little car had measured an additional stretch of the mesa road.

"You are bigger and stronger," she repeated.

"How do you know I am?"

"I can tell; any woman could tell."

"Is the acquirement of size and strength so great a thing that—"

"I think it is—in a woman's eyes," she admitted fearlessly. "We are all more or less primitive and—and, well, 'Stone-Agey,' let us say, in the last analysis; at least, women are." And then: "You don't know women very well, Evan."

"Don't I?"



"No, you don't. You judge us by standards which have no existence outside of your own purely masculine deductions. For example: I suppose you wouldn't admit for a moment that a good woman might properly do things which would be entirely discreditable in a man?"

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He shook his head slowly and said: "Yesterday, or the day before, I might have said 'no,' with all the cocksureness of a boy of twenty. To-day I can only say: 'Who am I, that I should judge any man—or any woman?'" Then suddenly: "You are making excuses for my father's wife. You needn't, you know. She has fought me from the beginning, and I know it. Sometimes I think that she is solely responsible for my failure to accomplish the thing I had set my heart upon. Let it go; I don't bear malice. Just now I'm more interested in what you were saying about the sex differences and the woman's point of view. Have you been calling me a weak man, Patricia?"

"No; only—a little—conventional," she returned half reluctantly.

"But you are the quintessence of conventionality yourself!" he burst out.

"Am I? Perhaps that was a passing phase, too. Quite probably the little things will remain—the dressing for dinner and the paying of party calls and all that. But one really big man has made many things seem petty and trifling—things that I used to think were of the greatest possible importance."

"My father, you mean?"

"Yes. If I should ever marry, Evan, I should be deliriously happy if I could find a man who promised to grow to the stature of your father."

There was manifestly no rejoinder to be made to this by David Blount's son, though it pointed to another and still more painful involvement. What would Patricia say when the *debacle* came? Would she lose faith in his father, and in all masculinity, in the crash? Or would she borrow yet again from the primitive woman she had been half-acknowledging and still be loyal? In either case Blount saw his own finish, and he was rather relieved when she left the sex argument indeterminate and began to talk of other things: of her father's decision to go home at the end of the following week, of the good times she had been having, and of the regret with which she would turn her back upon the wide horizons and the freedom of it all.

"I brought my shell with me when I came," she confessed, laughing, "but I think it is broken into little pieces by now. You will know how small the pieces are when I tell you that 'Tennessee Jim,' your father's horse wrangler, calls me 'Miz' Pat,' and it always makes me want to shake hands with him."

Blount made the afternoon last as he could, sending the little car over many miles of the mesa roads and encouraging the small confidences which were enabling him to postpone his own evil hour. When the sun was dipping toward the Carnadine Hills they returned over a trail which came into the main Quaretaro road at a point where the northern highway begins its descent to the lower mesa level. Half-way down the descending gulch they came to the mouth of a small lateral canyon breaking into the

larger gorge from the eastward; a canyon dry for the greater part of the year, but in the rainy season affording an outlet for the flood-waters of the Little Shonoho.

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"That is a road I have always wanted to explore," said Patricia, pointing to the fine driveway leading up the small canyon. "That is one of my weaknesses when I am driving; I am never able to pass a branch road without wanting to turn aside and explore it."

"Then we'll explore this one, right now," said Blount, cutting the car to the left. He was more than willing to delay, even by littles, the moment when he should be obliged to resume the sorry business of waiting and dissembling.

Miss Annors glanced at the tiny watch pinned upon her shoulder.

"Shall we have time? It's getting late."

"Plenty of time for all we shall be able to do or see up here," Blount returned. "The road ends at the canyon head, a mile above. There is a very small and very exclusive summer-resort hotel, called the Shonoho Inn, on the upper level. It has a six-weeks' season—like the Florida resorts—they tell me, and it is closed now."

It was within the next five hundred yards that the prediction that there would be nothing to see anticipated its fulfilment. At a sudden turn in the narrow defile they came to a brush-built barricade posted with a sign:

ROAD WASHED OUT ABOVE
NO PASSING FOR VEHICLES!

"That settles it," said Blount shortly, and he turned the car and let it roll back down the grade to the main gulch.

When they were once more speeding toward town Blount stole a glance at his companion, wondering if it were the small disappointment which made her silent.

"Are you tired?" he asked quickly.

"Oh, no," she rejoined, brightening again. "I have enjoyed every minute of it. I was just thinking of what I said a little while ago; of how it is going to break my heart to leave it all."

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that she needn't leave it. But he remembered and caught himself sharply. When the dreadful Tuesday should have come and gone, she might be only too willing to go away; and, in any event, he would have to go. There would be no place in his own and his father's State for him after Gryson returned, and the match had been touched to the hidden mine of high explosives. This was what was in his mind when he said rather tamely: "I suppose you will have to go. There isn't any chance for social-settlement work out here yet."

“No,” she responded half-absently; and thereupon he gave the little car still more spark and throttle and sent it flying over the final stretch of the fine road to the city.

The electric lights were showing like faint yellow stars against the sunset sky when Blount skilfully placed the small car at the Inter-Mountain curb and lifted his companion to the sidewalk.

“Are you going anywhere to-night?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” was the reply. “There is a ‘crush’ on at the Weatherfords’, but I don’t know whether Mrs. Blount has accepted for us or not.”

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"Don't go," he pleaded quickly. "Back out of it some way, and give me just this one evening to myself. Won't you do that, Patricia?"

"I'll try," she agreed. "But if Mrs. Blount has accepted—"

"Confound Mrs. Blount!" he growled. And then the newly aroused underman in him added: "You tell her that I want you to give me the evening, and let that settle it."

As it turned out a little later, Miss Anners found it unnecessary to be rude to her hostess. For some reason best known to herself, Mrs. Honoria had declined the invitation—engraved in the correctest shaded Old English and made to include the senator and Miss Anners—and was planning a free evening for herself and her guest.

After the *cafe* dinner—a dinner at which Evan Blount, once more calling himself all the hard names in the hypocrite's vocabulary, made the fourth—Mrs. Honoria proposed an adjournment to the hotel parlors, which were in the mezzanine lounge. Later, she found herself alone on the divan which had been drawn up to command a view of the spirited scene in the lobby below. The senator had gone down to mingle with the politicians, and she could see him—big, masterful, and smiling—moving about from group to group. On the opposite side of the mezzanine gallery, Evan and Patricia were "doing time," as the little lady musingly phrased it: walking up and down and talking quietly; a handsome couple, as the approving glances of more than one passing guest testified.

To Mrs. Honoria, thus isolated, came at the appointed time the sober-eyed young traffic manager for the railroad company. Gantry had been under orders from the little lady for the better part of the afternoon, but the business of the day had given him no chance to report earlier.

"You got my note?" he asked, taking the place she made for him on the *tete-a-tete* divan.

"Yes; a little while before dinner. It came just in time to let me send frightfully late 'regrets' to Mrs. Weatherford."

"I couldn't come sooner. I've had the Hathaway crowd on my hands all afternoon. There is something in the wind, and those fellows are scared stiff. They say that Evan's speech-making has stirred up the working men and the rank and file like a declaration of war with Mexico, and nobody can tell what is going to happen next Tuesday."

"Is that all?"

"No, not quite all. There is a mild panic on in at least three of the city wards over the disappearance of a fellow named Gryson, a sort of—er—wire-puller and all-around general-utility man. Some say he has been doing crooked work and had to disappear;

others say that he has taken his pay for whatever job he was doing and has skipped out, leaving his journeymen strikers to hold the bag.”

“Gryson,” said the little lady, her eyes narrowing; “Gryson—the name is curiously familiar. He is what you call a ward-worker, isn’t he?”

Gantry nodded. “Something of the sort, yes. Evan calls him one of the ‘pie-eaters,’ and away along early in the game they had a set-to in Evan’s office and Evan fired him; told him if he ever came back he’d throw him out.”

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Again Mrs. Honoria's fine eyes became reflective.

"Richard," she said softly, "I'd give anything in the world if I could know that Evan still feels that way about Thomas Gryson."

"Then you know the plug-ugly, do you?" said Gantry.

"I know of him. He is a criminal and a dangerous man."

"Well, he is out of it, I guess; he must be, if his own running-mates can't find him."

"Isn't Mr. Kittredge trying to find him, too?"

"Yes. And I think Kittredge played it rather low down on the poor beggar. They had a deal of some sort, and when Gryson put his price on the job—"

"I know," she interrupted. "Mr. Kittredge ought to have paid him and let him go."

Gantry's smile was a tribute to superior genius.

"You've got me going," he said; "you always have me going. With the election only three days off, I can't tell yet what you and the senator are trying to do."

"The senator, at least, has never made any secret of his object," she smiled back at him. "He has told everybody that he is out for a clean sweep."

"Exactly," said Gantry; "but no man living knows what he means by a 'clean sweep.' I'll bet there are a hundred men down there in the lobby right now who would give the best year out of their lives to know. And they can't guess—they can't begin to guess!"

"Let us leave them to their guesses, while we go back to the certainties," she suggested. "Did you find out what I asked you to?"

"Yes; and I don't know whether I ought to tell you or not. I'm still drawing my salary from the railroad, you know."

"And you are not sure that I am drawing mine?" she laughed. "Don't you remember when Mr. McVickar gave me this?" touching the little jewel-incrusted watch on her shoulder.

"Yes, I remember; also I remember that this is the first time I have ever seen you wearing it." And then: "I'd never try to bribe you in the wide, wide world, Mrs. Blount."

"Why not?"



"For two reasons: you are too much in love with your husband; and, if you took a notion to fly the track, a king's ransom wouldn't be big enough to make you stay bribed."

"I am flattered, I'm sure; but I'm still in the dark about the thing you have come here to tell me," she reminded him.

"I presume you may as well know it, though I can tell you that it has been kept the darkest kind of a secret. Mr. McVickar came west to-day from Bald Butte in a new gasoline unit-car which is supposed to be making a trial trip over the road. The car is supposed to have a bunch of the Chicago officials on board, though not half a dozen men on this division know that the vice-president is the only official, and that the others are clerks and telegraphers."

"Go on," said the small person quickly.

"That gasoline special is lost. No station west of Bald Butte has yet reported it. Strictly between us two, it left the main line at the old disused track leading out to the abandoned Shoshone mine workings. There were autos to meet it at the mine, and by this time Mr. McVickar is probably toasting his feet before an open wood-fire in the Shonoho Inn."

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Mrs. Honoria leaned her two round arms on the mezzanine rail, and looked long and earnestly down upon the caucussing lobby throng. When she looked up it was to say: "There are wires?"

"A full set of cut-ins. You can trust the big boss for that. He is in touch with every corner of the State, just the same as he would be if he were here in his usual election headquarters in the hotel."

The small plotter became silent again, and when she spoke she was smiling brightly.

"You are a good boy, Richard, and you shall have your reward. And it is going to be something that will make you happy, this time. Run away, now, and let me have a little solitude. I want to think."

It was a full hour after Gantry's disappearance that the senator came up-stairs, and Mrs. Honoria beckoned to the pair on the opposite side of the gallery.

"It's bedtime," she said, when they came around to her divan. And then, with a malicious little grimace for Evan: "I've been counting, and I've seen Patricia stifle three distinct and separate yawns in the last five minutes. She has been up every night since we came to town, and—"

Left to himself, Blount sat watching the crowd for a time, and then went to his room to read himself to sleep. One of the two crucial days of suspense was outworn, but there was another coming; and after he had read for an hour he went to bed, resolutely determined to get the rest necessary to carry him through the dreaded Saturday. Sleep came quickly when he had turned off the lights, but it was merely a transition to a troubled dreamland in which Patricia, Mrs. Honoria, Gryson, and Gantry were weirdly confused. In the thick of it he seemed to see the ward-heeler standing at his bedside and beating furiously upon a huge Chinese gong. When he sprang up and began to rub his eyes, the room was lighted by a red glare, and the dream-noise was translated into the rattling of wheels and the clanging of alarm-gongs and cries of "Fire!" in the avenue below.

As a city dweller, Blount should have felt the wall of the room, and, finding it still cool, should have turned over and gone to sleep again. Instead, he slipped out of bed and went to the window. One glance showed him that the fire was in the business district, either in or near the Temple Court Building. That was enough to make him dress hurriedly and hasten to the street, where he found a handful of policemen trying ineffectually to keep a clear pavement for the racing fire-trucks. Watching his chance, Blount darted out to make the crossing. He was half-way to the opposite curb when an unwieldy hook-and-ladder truck, drawn by a pair of magnificent grays, came lurching and plunging down the side street upon which the hotel cornered.

In front of the horses, and leaping and barking at their heads in a frenzy of excitement, was a spotted coach-dog—the truck squad's mascot. Blount was within a few feet of the farther sidewalk, and was well out of danger when the long truck slewed into the avenue. But at the passing instant the mascot dog, leaping and whirling like a four-footed dervish, sprang backward. Blount felt the catapulting shock of a yielding body between his shoulders, heard a yell from the truck-driver on his high seat, and went plunging headlong to the curb. After which he felt and heard no more.

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XXIV

FIELD HEADQUARTERS

In the great world-battles of yesterday, or the day before, the commanding general rode, with a few chosen officers of his staff, to some near-by hill-top, shell-swept and perilous, and with the help of a pair of field-glasses and a corps of hard-riding aides kept in touch as he could with the shifting fortunes of his divisions and brigades. It would be small credit to an up-to-date day of progress and invention if this were not all changed. The present-moment commander-in-chief—warring, industrial, or political—may sit, thanks to the Morses and the Edisons, comfortably in office-coat and slippers, far removed from the battle turmoil, directing his forces with the pressure of a finger upon the appropriate electric button, or in a few words dictated to the human ear of a clicking telegraph-instrument.

By all these adventitious aids Vice-President McVickar was profiting on the Saturday morning following the mysterious disappearance on the Friday of the gasolene unit-car somewhere between Bald Butte and the capital. The small resort hotel at the head of Shonoho Canyon had been transformed into a field headquarters. The hotel manager's desk, wheeled out in front of a crackling wood-fire in the ornate little lobby, was studded with its row of electric call-buttons; a railroad dining-car crew had taken possession of the kitchen; and the spacious writing-and lounging-room, sacred, in the season, to the guests of the exclusive hotel, housed a ranking of glass-topped telegraph-tables and impromptu desks—a work-room manned by a dozen picked young men, with O'Brien, the vice-president's private secretary, acting as the chief.

Though the momentous Tuesday was still three days in the future, Mr. McVickar was actively at work on the Saturday morning, gathering in the loose ends and strengthening the railroad company's defences. With his arm-chair drawn up to the borrowed desk he was running rapidly through the telegrams filtering in a steady shower from the crackling sounders in the writing-room. When the situation had begun to outline itself with something like coherence, he pressed a call-button for O'Brien.

"How about that wire to Detwiler at Ophir—any reply yet?" was the rasping demand shot at the secretary.

"Nothing yet; no, sir."

"Go after him again! There's a screw loose among those miners! How about Hathaway? Did you phone Twin Buttes?"

"Yes; and Grogan, the mill time-keeper, answered. He says Mr. Hathaway is in the capital and something has gone wrong—he doesn't know what."

“Keep the wires hot until you can get hold of Hathaway himself, and when you nail him, switch him over to my phone. Any word from the irrigation people at Natcho?”

“Yes. They say that the farmers under the High Line have been getting restive and forming associations. Daniels was the man who talked to me, and he says it’s a Gordon movement, though the ranchmen are trying to keep it quiet.”

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"Take a message to Daniels!" snapped the vice-president; and then, dictating: "'How would it do to let it be known quietly that Gordon's election means raise in price of water to High Line users?' Send that, and sign it 'Committee of Safety.' Now how about Kittredge? Did you get him?"

"I did; he's driving out in his car, and he ought to be here in a few minutes."

As if to make O'Brien's word good, the roar of an automobile came from the driveway, dominating for the moment the chattering of the telegraph-instruments, and a little later Kittredge came in, lifting his goggles and wiping the road dust from his closely clipped black beard.

"That car of yours isn't what it might be, Kittredge," was the vice-president's crusty greeting. "You'd better get a faster one. Sit down, and let's have it. How are things shaping up in the city?"

The big superintendent sat down and found a cigar in an inner pocket of his driving-coat.

"We are holding our own, as far as anybody can see," he returned.

"That 'as far as anybody can see' is just your weakness, Kittredge," said the chief testily. "What we want—what we've got to have first, last, and all the time—is the *fact*. Now see if you can answer a few straight questions. What is the senator doing?"

"His wife has a young girl visiting her, and if the Honorable Dave is doing anything more than to show the two women a good time, I can't find it out."

"There you go again! You say 'if.' It's your business to know."

Kittredge held his peace. Being designed by nature for a heavy-weight ring-fighter, there were times when he felt like taking off his coat to the vice-president.

"Well?" prompted McVickar, when Kittredge remained obstinately silent.

"If I knew what sort of a deal you have made with the senator—"

"That cuts no figure. But let it go. What's young Blount doing?"

"He's out of it, good and plenty. He started to go to the Sampson Block fire last night and was knocked down by a hook-and-ladder truck. It's a cracked skull, and Doc Dillon says he's safe to stay in bed for a week or so."

"H'm," said the chief reflectively. "That is almost what you might call opportune, Kittredge. The young fellow has done his work well, but there was always the danger

that he might overdo it. In fact, there was a time, a week or two ago, when I thought he would have to be called down and given a lesson. Now then, how about that Gryson business?”

“It was just as you said: I had to take Tom by the neck and get rid of him.”

“He did his work all right?”

“Yes, and came swaggering around for his pay. I sized it up one side and down the other. He had a pretty bad case of swelled head and tried to hold me up for a bonus, hinting around about what he could do if he wanted to throw the gaff into us. As I say, I sized it up, and took snap judgment on him—pulled the Montana racket and gave him twenty-four hours’ start of the police.”

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The vice-president frowned and shook his head. "You took a chance—a long chance, Kittredge! Twenty-four hours gave him all the time he needed to fall afoul of young Blount."

The big superintendent grinned amiably.

"The senator helped out on that," he explained.

"The senator? How was that?"

"It's the first time he has shown any part of his hand to me in the entire campaign. About an hour after I had shot Tom Gryson to pieces a note came down from the Inter-Mountain, asking me to come up. I didn't get to see the senator himself, but Mrs. Blount gave me the dope. As a result, young Blount got a hurry telegram from you, directing him to go to Lewiston at once in that right-of-way matter of Brodhead's. I gave him my car, and the trip cost him the better part of two whole days."

Again the vice-president shook his head.

"Your methods are always pretty crude, Kittredge," he commented. "You took another long chance when you forged my name to a telegram for as shrewd a young lawyer as Evan Blount. But go on. You got Blount out of the way—then what?"

"Then I went after Gryson again. The little woman's hint hit the bull's-eye as true as a rifle bullet. Tom meant to give us away to Blount. He haunted Blount's up-town office the better part of the day; and finally, in sheer self-defence, I had to tip him off to the police, as I had threatened to. Another little mystery bobbed up there. Chief Robertson winked one eye at me and said: 'You're too late, Mr. Kittredge; your man has already been piped off and he's gone.'"

"Who did it?" snapped McVickar.

"I don't know, and Robertson wouldn't tell me. But I got him to promise to put out the reward quietly. If Gryson comes back he'll be nipped before he can talk."

"With young Blount laid up, it won't make much difference," was the summing-up rejoinder. And then: "I think that is all—for this morning. Go around to the telephone-exchange when you get back to town and tell the manager that I want a special operator—a man, if he's got one—put on this long-distance wire. Have you sent your linemen out to guard the wires on the Shoshone mine track?"

"Yes; all the way from the switch to the hills."

"All right; that's all. Keep your finger on the pulse of things in town to-day, and arrange with your despatcher to give my operators here a clear wire in any direction whenever

it's called for. Above all, keep me posted, Kittredge; don't let anything get by you, no matter how trivial it may seem."

As the superintendent was climbing into his car, the railroad electrician who was in charge of the men guarding the telegraph-wires came up.

"One minute, Mr. Kittredge. I've put the box in, according to orders—"

"What box, and whose orders?"

"The recording microphone in Mr. McVickar's office, in there; and by his orders, I guess—at least they came from one of his men. We're needing a couple more batteries, and I was just wondering if it'd be all right to take 'em from that gasoline unit-car. We could put 'em back afterwards."

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"Yes; take 'em wherever you can find 'em," said the superintendent, who was thinking pointedly of other things just then; and the permission given, he started his motor and drove away.

XXV

BLOOD AND IRON

Ten o'clock in the Saturday forenoon marked the time of Superintendent Kittredge's flying visit to his chief's headquarters-on-the-field at the head of Shonoho Canyon; and at that hour Evan Blount, blinking dizzily, and with his head bandaged and throbbing as if the premier company of all the African tom-tom symphonists were making free with it, was letting Mrs. Honoria beat up his pillows and prop him with them, so that the drum-beating clamor might be minimized to some bearable degree.

"You are feeling better now?" suggested the volunteer nurse, going to adjust the window-curtains for the better comfort of the blinking and aching eyes.

The victim of the hook-and-ladder squad's mascot answered qualitatively.

"I feel as if I had been having an argument with a battering-ram and had come off second-best. I've been out of my head, haven't I?"

"A little, yes; but that was to be expected. You were pretty badly hurt."

"Have I been talking?"

"Not very much—nothing intelligible." The little lady had drawn her chair to the window and was busying herself with the never-finished embroidery.

"What hit me—was it the truck?"

"No; some of the people in the street said it was a dog; a coach-dog running and jumping at the heads of the fire-horses. In falling you struck your head against the iron grating of a sewer inlet."

"Umph!" said Blount, and the face-wrinkling which was meant to be a sardonic smile turned itself into a painful grin. "Shot to death by a dog! Blenkinsop or some of the others ought to have run that for a head-line." Then, with a twist of the hot eyeballs: "This isn't my room. Where am I?"

"You are in the spare room of our suite. Your father had you brought here so that we could take care of you properly. But you mustn't talk too much; it's the doctor's orders."

Blount lay for a long time watching her as she passed the needle in and out through the bit of snowy linen stretched upon the tiny embroidery-ring. She had fine eyes, he admitted; eyes with the little downward curve in brow and lid at the outer corners—the curve of allurements, he had heard it called. Also, her hands were shapely and pretty. He recalled the saying that a woman may keep her age out of her face, but her hands will betray her. Mrs. Honoria's hands were still young; they looked almost as young as Patricia's, he decided. At the comparison he broke over the rule of silence.

"Does Patricia know?" he asked.

"Certainly. She has been here nearly all morning. She wouldn't let anybody else hold your head while the doctor was sewing it up."

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"I know," he returned; "that is a part of her—of her special training: first aid to the injured, and all that. They teach it in the German sociological schools she attended last year."

"Oh, yes; I see"—with a malicious little smile to accentuate the curving downdroop of the pretty eyelids. "You mean that she was just getting a bit of practice. I wondered why she was so willing; most young women are so silly about the sight of a little blood. Don't you think you'd better try to sleep for a while? Doctor Dillon said it would be good for you if you could."

"Heavens and earth!" he chanted impatiently; "I'm not sick!" And then, with a sharp fear stabbing him: "What day is this, please?"

She looked up with a smile. "Are you wondering if you have lost a day? You haven't. The fire was at three o'clock this morning, and this is Saturday."

As if the naming of the day had been a spell to strike him dumb, Blount shut his eyes and groped helplessly for some hand-hold upon the suddenly rehabilitated responsibilities. Saturday—the day when Gryson would return with the proofs which, if they were to serve any good end, must be given the widest possible publicity in the two days remaining before the election. Blount recalled his carefully laid plans: he had intended giving Collins and the two record clerks a half-holiday, so that Gryson might come and go unnoticed. Also, he had meant to make a definite appointment with Blenkinsop and the representative of the United Press, to the end that there might be no delay in the firing of the mine. Lastly, Gryson must be shielded and gotten out of the city in safety; so much the traitor had a right to demand if he should risk his liberty and his life by returning with the evidence.

It was a hideous tangle to owe itself to the joyous gambollings of the firemen's mascot dog. And there was more to it than the hopeless smashing of the Saturday's plans. Into the midst of the mordant reflections, and adding a sting which was all its own, came the thought of this newest obligation laid upon him by his father and his father's wife. They had taken him in and were loading him down with kinsman gifts of care and loving-kindness, while his purpose had been—must still be—to strike back like a merciless enemy. He remembered the old fable of the adder warmed to life in a man's bosom, and it left him sick and nerveless.

None the less, the obsession of the indomitable purpose persisted, gripping him like the compelling hand of a giant in whose grasp he was powerless. For a time he sought to escape, not realizing that the obsession was the call of the blood passed on from the men of his race who, with axe and rifle, had hewn and fought their way in the primeval wilderness, and would not be denied. Neither did he suspect that the dominating passion driving him on was his best gift from the man against whom he was pitting his strength. What he did presently realize was that the giant grip of purpose was not to be

broken; and thereupon a vast cunning came to possess him. He must have time and a chance to plan again: if he should feign sleep, perhaps the woman whose presence and personality were shackling the inventive thought would go away and leave him free to think.

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She did go after a while, though so noiselessly that when he opened his eyes it was with the fear that he should see her still bending over the little embroidery frame at the window. Finding himself alone, he sat up in bed and gave the broken head an opportunity to blot him out if it could. For a little space the walls of the room became as the interior of a hollow peg-top, spinning furiously with a noise like the rushing of many waters. After the surroundings had resumed their normal figurings he rose to his knees. There was another grapple with the whirling peg-top, and again he mastered the dizzying confusion. Made bold by success, he got his feet on the floor and stood up, clinging to the brass foot-rail of the bed until the unstable encompassments had once more come to rest.

By this time he was able to conquer all save the throbbing headache. Shuffling first to one door and then to the other, he shot the bolts against intrusion. Then he staggered across to the dressing-case and took a look at himself in the glass. The bandaged head, with its haggard, pain-distorted face grimacing back at him, extorted a grunt of sardonic disapproval, but the mirror answered the query which had sent him stumbling across to it. The bandage was comparatively small and tightly drawn; a soft hat could be worn over it—the hat would cover and decently hide it.

Next he found his clothes, those he had been wearing at the time of the accident. Somebody had been thoughtful enough to have them cleaned and pressed; from which he argued that the plunging fall on the wet asphalt had been demoralizing in more ways than one. Continuing the experimental venture, he walked back and forth and up and down until he could do it without clutching at the bed-rails to save himself from falling. Then he reshot the door-bolts and went back to bed to await developments.

The first of these came when Patricia brought his luncheon. He had been wondering if she would be the one to come; wondering and hoping. With the unfilial purpose driving him on, there were added twinges at the thought of his father's wife going on piling the mountain of obligation higher and still higher by waiting upon him, and thus reminding him at every turn of the adder fable. With Patricia it was different.

"Good morning," he grimaced, when Patricia came in with the daintily appointed server. "Getting a bit more of the first-aid practice, are you?"

"I am obeying orders," she flashed back, when she had shaken up the pillows and placed the appetizing meal within his reach. "Mrs. Blount said I'd probably have a less disturbing influence upon you than she would. Shall I feed you?"

"Good heavens, no! I'm not that near dead, I hope! If you don't believe it, you may sit down and watch me eat—if you're not missing your own luncheon."

"Nurses have no regular meal-times," she retorted. And then: "You are feeling a great deal better, aren't you?"

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"Much better—since you came. Did they tell you it was a dog?"

She nodded, and he went on.

"It was my unlucky night, I guess. Did the fire burn up my office? I forgot to ask Mrs. Blount about that."

"No; it was a building across the street from the Temple Court."

"Small favors thankfully received," he quoted, resolutely pushing a fresh recurrence of the tomtom beatings into the background; "small favors and larger ones in proportion—this broth, for example. It's simply delicious. I hadn't realized how hungry I was."

"The broth ought to be good; I made it myself, you know."

"You did? Where, for pity's sake?"

"In the hotel kitchen. The *chef* was furious at first. He twirled his Napoleon-III mustaches and sputtered and swelled up like an angry old turkey. But when I talked nice to him in his own beloved Bordelaise he let me do anything I pleased."

Blount looked up quickly, and the movement brought the head-throbbings back with disconcerting celerity.

"You are cruelly kind to me, Patricia; everybody is kind to me. And I'm not needing kindness just now," he ended.

"Aren't you? I don't agree with you, and I'm sure your father and Mrs. Blount wouldn't." Then she went on to tell him how they had all been up, watching the progress of the fire from their windows, when the word came that he had been hurt in the street. Also, she told how his father had impatiently smashed the telephone because, the wires having been cut and tangled in the fire, he could get no response, and how, thereupon, he had turned the entire night force of the hotel out to go in search of a doctor. "But with all that, he couldn't stand it to look on while the doctor was taking the stitches," she added. "He turned his back and tramped over here to the window; and I could hear him gritting his teeth and—and swearing."

If Evan Blount ate faster than a sick man should, it was because there are limits to the finest fortitude. Patricia ran on cheerfully, minimizing her own part in the first-aid incidents, and magnifying the anxious and affectionate concern of the senator and his wife. He listened because he could not help it; but when he had finished, and she was inquiring if there was anything else she could do for him, he dissembled, saying that he would try to sleep, and asking her to shut out more of the daylight and to deny him to everybody until evening.



She promised; but naturally enough, with the dreadful responsibility drawing nearer with every hour-striking of the tiny leather-cased travelling-clock on the dresser, sleep was out of the question for him. Hot-eyed and restless, he wore out the long afternoon in feverish impatience, slipping now and then into the shadow land of delirium when the pain was severest, but clinging always to the obsessing idea. At whatever cost, the crisis must find him resolute to do his part. Gryson must be met, the evidence of fraud must be secured, and the fraud itself must be defeated.

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The bright autumn day was fading to its twilight, and the shadows were gathering around his bed, when Patricia tiptoed in to ask, first, if he were awake, and, next, what he would like to have for his supper. Exhausted by the waiting battle, he answered briefly: he was not hungry; if he could be left alone again, with the assurance that no one would come to disturb him, it was all he would ask. He tried to say it crustily, with the irritable impatience of the convalescent—dissembling again. But the young woman with a self-sacrificial career in view had lost none of her womanly gift of sympathetic intuition.

"You are not so well this evening," she said softly, laying a cool palm on his forehead. "I think I'd better telephone Doctor Dillon."

Now the thing for Patricia's lover to do was obvious. With pity thus trembling on the very crumbling brink of love, the opportunity which months of patient wooing had not evoked lay ready to his hand. It was a fair measure of the mastery an obsession may obtain—the lover's ability to thrust the gentler emotion into the background, to feign restless irritation under the passion-stirring touch, and to say: "No; I don't want Dillon or anybody; I want to be left alone. Please latch the door when you go out, and tell father and his—and Mrs. Blount that I don't want to be disturbed."

She took the curt dismissal in silence, and after she was gone Blount sat up in bed and cursed himself fervently and painstakingly for the little brutality. But the remorseful cursings took nothing from the grim determination which had prompted the brutality. The dusk was thickening, and the street electrics were turning the avenue into a broad highway of radiance. Blount got up, and with a disheartening renewal of the splitting headache, began to dress, but there were many pauses in which he had to sit on the edge of the bed to wait for the throbbing pain to subside.

The next step was to reach his own room, two floors above, and he let himself cautiously into the corridor and locked the door from the outside. Making a long round to avoid the elevators, he dragged himself up two flights of stairs and so came to his goal.

Enveloped in a rain-coat, and with a soft hat drawn well over his eyes, he compassed the escape from the upper floor by means of the remote stair he had used in ascending, and so reached the ground-floor. Fortunately, the lobby was crowded; and turning up the collar of the rain-coat to hide the bandage, Blount worked his way toward the revolving doors. More than once in the dodging progress he rubbed shoulders with men whom he knew, and who knew him; but the shielding hat-brim and the muffling rain-coat saved him.

Reaching the street, he did not attempt to walk to the Temple Court. Instead, he crept around to a garage near the hotel and hired a two-seated road-car. Quite naturally, the garage-keeper wanted to send his own driver, and Blount counted it as an unavoidable



misfortune that he was obliged to give his name, and to hear the motor-liveryman say: "Oh, sure! I didn't recognize you, Mr. Blount. I reckon Senator Dave's son can have anything o' mine that he wants."

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Blount drove the road-car all the way around the Capitol grounds to come into his office street inconspicuously. Across from the Temple Court the fire ruins were still smouldering, and there was an acrid odor of stale smoke in the air. For a full third of the block the street was littered with debris. Blount stopped his machine at the nearest corner and got out to reconnoitre the office-building entrance. In the vestibule he glanced up at the face of the illuminated wall-clock, making a hasty calculation based upon the leaving time of the east-bound Overland. There were fifty minutes to spare, and when he reached his office, and had turned on the desk-light and dropped heavily into his chair, he called up the railroad station to inquire about the train. The Overland was reported ten minutes late. If Gryson should show up in time, this earliest outgoing train must be made to serve as the means for his flight.

Blount had scarcely formulated the condition when the office-door winged noiselessly, and the man himself, hollow-eyed and haggard, stumbled in. As once before, Blount got up and went to shut the door and lock it. When he came back, Gryson had taken his seat in a chair at the desk-end, where the light from the shaded working-lamp fell upon his sinister face.

"Well, I've been all th' way t' hell and back ag'in," he announced in a grating whisper. "They've put th' reward out, and three times since last night some of me own pals 've tried to snitch on me." Then he drew a carefully wrapped package from its hiding-place under his coat and laid it on the desk. "It's all there," he went on in the same rasping undertone. "Some of 'em give up to get square wit' th' bosses, and some of 'em had to have a gun shoved in their faces. No matter; they've come across—the last damn' wan of 'em; and th' affidavits are there, too—when I c'd get next to a dub of a not'ry that'd make 'em."

Blount did not untie the package, nor did he cross-examine the traitor. His head was throbbing again almost unbearably, and he was beginning to fear that he might not last to carry out the plan of safe-conduct for the informer. Slipping the precious package into an inner pocket of the enveloping coat, he took a compact roll of bank-bills from a drawer in the desk and gave it to Gryson, saying tersely: "That isn't a bribe, you understand; it's merely to help you make your getaway. Can you manage to ride on Transcontinental trains without being recognized offhand?"

Gryson pulled a false beard from his pocket and showed it. "Wit' that, and me old hat, I've been keepin' most o' th' boys from tippin' me off," he said.

"All right; here's the lay-out. You have earned immunity, so far as this latest raid on you is concerned, by turning State's evidence. But you've got to move on, and keep moving. Do you get that?"

The fugitive nodded, and Blount got up to stagger across to the office wardrobe, from which he took the extra rain-coat kept there for emergencies.

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"Here, get into this and go down-stairs. At the corner above, you'll find a two-seated motor-car backed against the curb. Do you know enough about machinery to start an auto-engine?"

Gryson nodded again. "I'd ought to, seein' that I've been a gang boss in a shop that made 'em."

"Good enough; crank the motor, climb in, and wait. I'll do the rest."

Five minutes later, Blount had stumbled out of the elevator at the ground-floor and was groping his way along the sidewalk toward the corner—groping because the pain had become blinding again and the street-lights were taking on many-colored and fantastic brilliancies.

When he finally found the car, it was mainly by the sense of hearing; the motor was drumming softly under the hood, and there was a blur in the mechanician's seat which answered for the crouching figure of the ward-worker. By a supreme effort of will Blount swung himself up behind the steering-wheel and let the clutch in. Luckily, the street was clear of vehicles and he made the turn in safety; but fully realizing his handicap, he steered straight away from the business district, and making a wide circuit through the residence quarter, brought the car out in the eastern suburb at the beginning of a road paralleling the Transcontinental tracks.

With the lights of the city dropping away to the rear, and the drumming motor quickened to racing speed, he told the fugitive from justice what was to be done and the manner of its doing. Twenty-two miles out they would reach the coal-mine station of Wardlaw, a few minutes ahead of the Overland. Since all east-bound trains stopped at the coal-mines to coal the engines, the way of escape would be open.

Something more than a wordless, space-devouring half-hour beyond this, Blount applied the brakes and dropped his passenger at the rear of the small iron-roofed building which served as the railroad station for the coal-mines. Far to the rear on the twenty-two-mile tangent the headlight of the coming train showed like a blazing star low on the western horizon.

"Go and blacken your face and hands at one of the slack dumps and pass yourself for a miner quitting his job," was Blount's parting suggestion; but the hollow-eyed fugitive had a last word to say, too, and he said it.

"I've been t' hell and back, as I told you, and 'twas f'r on'y th' wan thing: give me your word, Evan Blount, that you'll chop th' damn' tree down and let it lie where it falls! That's all I'm askin', this trip."

“You needn’t lose any sleep worrying about that,” was the curt reply; and without waiting for the train arrival, Blount turned the car and sent it racing on the way back to the city.

By all the tests he knew how to apply, he was little better than a dead man when he returned the hired auto to the side-street garage and made his halting way around to the hotel. He had long since given up the idea of trying to see Blenkinsop. He knew that the editor would not be in his office much before ten o’clock, and the two-hour wait was not to be endured.

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Clinging desperately to the single purpose of getting back to the deserted room before his absence should be discovered, and weighed down by a crushing sense of the immorality of the step he had just taken in bargaining with a hunted criminal and in conniving at his escape, he pressed on, pushing through the revolving doors and slipping once more into the Saturday evening lobby throng. Edging around to the stair, he took all the cautious steps in reverse; ascending first to his own room to leave the rain-coat and the hat, and afterward feeling his way down the servants' stair and through the lower corridor to the locked door in his father's private suite.

Past this he had a hazy notion that part of him—the observing part—stood aside and looked on while the other part slowly and painfully struggled out of its clothes and into its pajamas. Also he saw the other part, after it had carefully secreted the wrapped package of papers under the mattress, beat the pillows feebly and bury its head in them. After that there was a great blank.

XXVI

APPLES OF GOLD

Notwithstanding the pillow-muffled plunge which was almost a lapse into the coma of utter exhaustion, Evan Blount awoke early on the Sunday morning, refreshed and measurably free from pain. Since the sun was just beginning to gild the lofty finial on the dome of the Capitol opposite, there was no one stirring as yet in the adjoining rooms of the suite, and the streets were silent save for the chanting cries of the newsboys.

Slipping out of bed, Blount crossed to the window and threw it open. It was good to be able to stand and walk without wincing; and a breath of the sunrise breeze sweeping down from the eastern hills was like a draught of invigorating wine. As he leaned out for an instant to make sure that not even the height would bring a return of the vertigo, the wail of the nearest newsboy became shrilly articulate: "*Here's yer Morning Plainsman! All erbout the great election frauds!*"

Hardly crediting his ears, Blount listened again, and when the cry was repeated he closed the window softly and sat down to grapple with this newest development of his problem. Did the newsboy's selling-cry mean that Blenkinsop had found out for himself, and independently, about the falsified registration lists? If so, there would be no public vindication for one Evan Blount; but also—thank God!—no need for a son to blazon himself to the world as his father's accuser. A great wave of thankfulness rolled over Blount's head, submerging him and turning the exclamation which sprang to his lips into a paean of rejoicing. Instantly he saw himself throwing up his railroad connection and taking his rightful place as his father's counsel and defender. Here, at last, was a cause into which he could fling himself body and soul. True, people would say that he had

been in league with the corporations, the boss, and the machine, from the first, but what did that matter?

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But would his father need a defender? No shadow of doubt as to this was admissible in the face of the accumulating evidence, he told himself. From the opening day of the campaign the machine and the corporations had been working hand in hand; Gryson and his fellow-crooks were the sufficient proof; and besides.... Blount reached under the mattress and drew out the wrapped package, untying the string with fingers that trembled. A cursory examination of the affidavits sufficed. In Gryson's sworn statement, and in two others, the "Big Boss" was inculpated definitely and by name.

Blount glanced at the little clock on the dressing-case. The early Sunday morning silence still prevailed in the great hotel, and his resolve was quickly taken. Dressing hurriedly, he went up to his own room, and after a shave, a bath, and a freshening change which included the removal of the disfiguring bandage, he put on a close-fitting silk travelling-cap under the soft hat and went down to the lobby.

There were but few guests stirring at that hour, and Blount had the writing-room to himself when he bought a copy of *The Plainsman* and turned anxiously to the editorial page. After the first thrilling of relief born of the newsboy's cry, an unnerving fear had crept in to whisper that possibly the facts might not bear out the thankful assumption. A rapid reading of Blenkinsop's editorial confirmed the fear, and the reader's lips grew dry and his breath came quickly when he realized that the submerging wave of thankfulness had risen only to be driven back. Blenkinsop had no facts, no evidence; he was merely hitting out blindly with a general accusation of fraud which he made no effort to substantiate or prove!

Evan Blount saw the thorny path stretching away before him again, and he rose up to walk in it like a man. As once before, he went down to the railroad restaurant for his breakfast, seeking solitude, and the meal had been half-absently eaten before he had readjusted himself, sorrowfully but firmly, to the unchanged situation. His duty was as clearly defined now as it had been the day previous, or at any time in the past. There was nothing changed, nothing different, save that a new complication had arisen in the crucial shortness of the interval for action. Knowing human nature a little, he knew how difficult it is to arouse an effective public sentiment on the eve of an election, no matter how important the issues involved. In a hard school of experience the voter has learned to discount the final-moment cry of fraud. Would an exposure, however convincing, appearing only in the Monday and Tuesday morning newspapers have the desired effect?

Blount walked by devious ways from the railroad station to the Temple Court, and secluded himself behind the locked door of his office to have a chance to think the problem out to some effective conclusion. What should he do? Should he find Blenkinsop and get him and the United Press representative together at once, laying before them the damning evidence and telling them to use it as they could? Or was there some surer way of firing the mine of protest and exposure?

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There was one other way, at least, but the mere thought of it made him sick and shaken. As an upright citizen and a member of the bar, was it not his duty to lay the evidence, not before the public in the newspapers, but before a competent court of justice? And in that event, was there in this land of graft and corruption a judge sufficiently fearless and incorruptible to act with the needful vigor and promptness?

When Blount asked himself this question, the answer came quickly. Though it was the common accusation, well or ill founded, that the lower courts of the State were the creatures of the corporations, the judges on the supreme bench still commanded the respect of the people. Hemingway, the chief justice, was peculiarly a man for a crisis; strong, honest, and entirely fearless; a man who would not stop to haggle over nice questions of precedent and jurisdiction where the public welfare demanded prompt and effective action.

For a long half-hour Blount sat staring absently at the desk litter, trying to decide between the two courses open to him. He knew that his father and Judge Hemingway had been lifelong friends, and this added another drop of bitterness to a cup which was already overflowing. None the less, he was confident that the judge would do his duty as he saw it. It was a merciless thing to do—to make this just judge the slayer of the friend of his youth; but at the end Blount reached for the telephone-book and began to search for the chief justice's residence number. Before he could find it the phone bell rang.

"Well?" he answered shortly, putting the receiver to his ear.

It was Miss Annors who was at the other end of the wire, and he was instantly aware of the note of anxiety in her voice.

"*Evan!*" she exclaimed; "you don't know what a fright you have given us! What are you doing at your office when you ought to be here and in bed?"

Blount drew the desk instrument closer and tried to put her off lightly.

"I'm all right again. I turned out early this morning to make up for lost time. You wouldn't expect me to stay in bed for more than a day to oblige a common, ordinary coach-dog, would you?"

"Yes, but see here—listen: Doctor Dillon has been here, and he is perfectly shocked. He says there may be complications, and the very least you can do is to be careful. Your father has had the hotel boys looking everywhere for you. When are you coming back?"

Here was the direct question which Blount had been dreading. Now, if never before, the wretched involvement had reached a point beyond which it was impossible to follow his father's plea for a continuance of the kinsman amenities.

"I think you had better leave me out of any plans you are making for the day," he answered evasively. "I shall be pretty busy."

"No—listen," she insisted. "It's wrong to work on Sunday, but if you will be obstinate, you must stop at luncheon-time. We are going to drive out to Wartrace Hall this afternoon; Doctor Dillon says we positively *must* take you away from town and keep you quiet for a few days."

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"I can't go with you," he answered brusquely, adding: "And I'm not sure that I can join you at luncheon. There is so much to be done that I shall probably drop around to the club for a bite at one o'clock. Don't wait for me, and don't worry. Above all, please don't tell anybody where I am—not even Dick Gantry."

He was considerably relieved when she said "Good-by" rather abruptly, and rang off. None the less, he thought it a little strange that his father should be planning to leave the capital on the very eve of the great struggle. Was he so sure that nothing could happen within the next twenty-four hours? Leaving the query answerless, he returned to the interrupted duty. Deliberately, with the open telephone-book before him, he sought and found Judge Hemingway's number; and a few seconds later he had the judge's house in Mesa Circle, with the judge himself answering his call. The wire conversation was brief and to the point. Cautiously, and in well-guarded phrase, Blount stated his case. By a series of correlated incidents which could be explained later, documentary evidence of a great conspiracy had fallen into his hands; would the judge step aside so far as to accord him a Sunday interview, taking his word for it that the emergency was most urgent, and that the time was too short to admit of the ordinary methods of procedure?

The judge's answer was satisfactory, though Blount fancied it was rather reluctantly given. A family engagement—an accepted luncheon invitation—would intervene; but between four and five o'clock in the afternoon the chief justice would be in his chambers in the Capitol building, and would be glad to have the son of his old friend the senator come at that hour.

With time on his hands, Blount squared himself at his desk and began to set his railroad house in order. Now that the dreadful step was practically taken, he was free to wind up the business of his office, leaving things in order for his successor. Once he had thought that he could not stay in the capital or in the West after the cataclysm. But now the manlier thought prevailed. A hard fate was making him his father's betrayer; but beyond the betrayal, with the bare duty done, he would take his place as his father's son, proving his love and loyalty by going down with him to any depth of infamy into which the cataclysm might drag him.

Since there was much to be done in the winding-up task, the forenoon fled quickly, and the hands of the small paper-weight clock on the desk were pointing to a quarter of two when Blount snapped the rubber band upon the final file of referred papers. There were other odds and ends to be set in order, but he determined to let them wait until he had eaten. A scant half-hour in the club grill-room was all he allowed himself, and at a quarter past two he was back at his desk, preparing to make the cleaning-up task complete. Between four and five, Judge Hemingway had said; and Blount began on one of the odds and ends, which was the writing of his letter of resignation from the railroad service.

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He was enclosing the letter when there came a light tap at the office-door, and then the door itself opened to admit Patricia—a Patricia bright-eyed and determined, alluringly charming in her tightly veiled driving-hat, muffling motor-coat, and dainty gauntlets.

“You?” said Blount not too hospitably. “I thought you said something about going to Wartrace?”

“So I did, and so I am,” she asserted, coming to sit in the chair last occupied by one Thomas Gryson.

“And the others?” he queried.

“They have just left; gone on ahead in the touring-car. I was deputed to bring you.”

“But I told you this morning that I couldn’t go, and I can’t!” he protested.

She looked him squarely in the eye. “Evan, you don’t dare tell me why you can’t!”

“Business,” he pleaded.

“That may be half of the truth, but it isn’t any more than half.” Then she made the direct appeal: “I wish you’d tell me, Evan. I know a little—just the little that Mrs. Blount has seen fit to tell me—and no more. There is trouble threatening; some dreadful trouble. I saw it yesterday when you were so miserable; I can see it in your eyes this minute.”

Blount got up and began to pace the floor so that she might not see his eyes. He was no more proof against such an appeal than any lover gladly ready to bare his soul to the woman chosen out of a world of women for his confidant and second self would be.

“I want to tell you,” he affirmed, wheeling abruptly to face her; “I wanted to tell you yesterday, only it was too horrible. You will know it all when I say that by this time tomorrow the whole State will be ringing with the story of David Blount’s degradation and ruin; and I—his only son, Patricia—I shall be the one who will have betrayed him and brought it to pass!”

She blanched a little at that, and there was a great horror in her eyes. But he noted at the moment, and remembered it afterward, that she did not push him into the harrowing details, as another woman might have done.

“You are very sure, I suppose?” she said gently.

He drew the packet of affidavits from his pocket.

“This is the evidence: sworn statements incriminating my father and many others.”

“You had those papers yesterday?”

“No. I got up last night to keep my appointment with the man who brought them. But you see now why I can’t go to Wartrace with you.”

“I see that you are going to do something for which you will never, never be able to forgive yourself,” she said gravely. “You are going to make use of those papers?”

He sat down and stared gloomily at her. “Patricia, I have taken a solemn oath. The law which I have sworn to uphold is greater than—” He was going to say, “greater than any man’s claim for immunity,” but she finished the sentence otherwise for him.

“Is greater than your love for your father. I suppose I ought to be able to understand that, but I am not. Evan, you can’t do it—you mustn’t do it; every drop of that father’s blood in your veins ought to cry out against it.”

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"Ah!" he exclaimed with a sudden indrawing of his breath. "You don't know what it is costing me!"

"Truly, I don't," she asserted calmly. "Your father is a great and good man. If he had a daughter instead of a son, she would know and understand." Then, in a quick and generous upflash of feeling: "I wish he had a daughter—I wish I were she! I should try to show him that blood is thicker than water!"

"You wish—you were—his daughter? Do you realize what you are saying?" Then he went on brokenly: "*Don't*, Patricia, girl—for God's sake don't tempt me to do evil that good may come! Can't you understand how I am driven to do this thing—how every fibre of me is rebelling against the savage necessity? God knows, I'd give anything I am or hope to be if the necessity could be wiped out!"

Instantly she changed her attack.

"But I say you can not do it. You are a brave man, Evan; I know, because I have seen you tried. You mustn't turn cowardly now."

"Nor shall I!" he countered quickly. "But I don't understand."

"Don't you? Isn't it cowardly to strike this cruel blow in the dark? You *can't* do this thing without giving your father the warning that you would give your bitterest enemy—you simply can't, and still be the man I have known and I—liked for two whole years!"

"Father's going to Wartrace this afternoon is merely an added twist of the thumb-screws," he protested in fresh wretchedness. "I should have gone to him first—I meant to go to him first. From what you said over the telephone this morning I gathered that the Wartrace trip was to be made on my account, and I hoped, I believed, it would be given up when I refused to go. Now I can not see him first; the time is too short. That which is to be done must be done to-day—this afternoon; otherwise it will be too late. Don't make it any harder for me, Patricia. Surely you can see how hard it is, in any case!"

"As I said a moment ago, I can see that you are about to do something for which, in all the years to come, you will never be able to get your own forgiveness. Oh, I know," she went on bitterly. "You will tell me that I am a woman, with only a woman's standards, which are valueless when they get mixed up with the emotions. But I can tell you that I know your father better than you do—much better. And I believe in him, utterly, absolutely. Won't you give him a chance, Evan? Won't you show him those dreadful papers and ask him what he will do when you have betrayed him?"

Blount winced painfully at the hard word, and then he remembered that he had been the first to apply it. But he answered her in the only way that seemed possible:

“The time: I have promised to meet Chief Justice Hemingway at his chambers between four and five this afternoon.”

“Chief Justice Hemingway?” she queried. “Why, he—” she broke off suddenly and sprang from her chair. “I have the little car here in the street. It was Mrs. Blount’s proposal; she said you would change your mind if I came after you and offered to drive you. Come! I’ll promise to bring you back before five o’clock. I know the time is awfully short, but I can do it!”



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If Blount hesitated it was only because her beauty and her eagerness thrilled him until, for the moment, he could think of nothing else. Then he closed his desk quickly and struggled into his overcoat, saying: "It shall be as you wish. Let's go."

XXVII

IN WHICH PATRICIA DRIVES

For fifteen miles north of the capital the Quaretaro road is a well-kept, level speedway, and Miss Anners amply proved the worth of her summer's training by showing herself a fearless driver. Half an hour after the small roadster had left the curb in front of the Temple Court Building it was among the hills and climbing to the upper mesa level.

Nearing the mouth of Shonoho Canyon, they overtook and passed a horseman turning into the canyon road. The man's horse shied and threatened to bolt at sight of the storming car, but Patricia was looking straight ahead, and she made no movement to slacken speed. At the passing glimpse, Blount's mind went shuttling backward to the homecoming night in the Lost Hills, and he made sure he recognized the rider as Hathaway's morose henchman, the man Barto.

He wondered vaguely what Barto could be doing at the turn in the obstructed side-canyon road, and the wonder went with him while the little car was covering the remaining distance and flying up the cottonwood-shaded avenue at Wartrace Hall. But a glance at his watch made him forget the Barto incident in a heart-warming thrill of admiration—the joy of a skilled motorist recognizing kindred skill in another. The thirty miles from the city had been made in something under fifty minutes.

When she brought the roadster to a stand at the carriage entrance, Patricia spoke for the first time since she had taken the wheel for the record-breaking drive.

"Find your father quickly and say to him what you have come to say. When you are ready to go back, I'll keep my promise and drive you."

"That won't be at all necessary," he protested, getting out to stand with his hand on the dash. "I am perfectly well able to drive myself; and, besides, it would leave you at the wrong end of the road, and alone."

"Don't stand there talking about it," she commanded. "Go and do what you have to do. I'll wait here."

Blount turned away and found old Barnabas holding the door open for him. A word passed, and the old negro bobbed his head. "Yas, sah; Marsteh David's in de libra'y," was the answer to Blount's query, and, throwing his overcoat and soft hat aside, the

bearer of burdens not his own walked quickly through the hall and let himself into the room of trial.

The bright autumn day was cool—cool enough to warrant the crackling wood-fire on the library hearth. With his easy chair planted at the cosy corner of the fire and an open book on the table at his elbow, the senator sat smoking his long-stemmed pipe in the Sunday afternoon quiet. Mingled with the fire-snapping there were faint tappings, as if one of the cottonwoods, growing too near the house, were sending twig signals to the inmates.

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The senator moved the open book a little farther aside when his son made an abrupt entrance into the cheerful room.

"Well, son, you made out to get here after so long a time, didn't you?" he said gently. And then: "How's the broken head to-day?"

"Better," answered the son shortly, adding: "It's the least of my troubles just now."

"That's good," was the hearty comment. Then, with the long stem of the pipe pointing to a Morris-chair: "Draw up and sit down. I reckon the drive has tired you some, even if you won't admit it. Where's the little girl?"

Evan Blount saw instantly that he must be brief and pitiless.

"Patricia is waiting in the car to drive me back to town," he explained, forcing himself to speak calmly. "I have an appointment with Chief Justice Hemingway which must be kept, and he will wait in his chambers in the Capitol only until five o'clock. Father, do you know why I have made that appointment?"

The senator wagged his great head in a way which might mean anything or nothing, and said: "How should I know, son?"

"I hoped you would know. It's not a very pleasant task for me to tell you," the younger man went on, ignoring the chair to which the long-stemmed pipe was still pointing. "A short time ago—yesterday, to be exact—evidence, legal evidence, of corruption and false registration in four of the city wards, and in a number of outlying districts in the State, was put into my hands. This evidence incriminates a group of ringleaders and a still larger number of election officers. You know what I've got to do with it."

The older man nodded slowly.

"Yes, I reckon I know, son; and I'm not saying a word. If you weren't a Blount, I might ask if you haven't learned that one of the first rules in the book of politics is the one that says we mustn't hang the dirty clothes out where everybody can see 'em, but I know better than to say anything like that to you."

The young man's heart sank within him. It seemed evident that his father was still unsuspecting, still unconscious of the dreadful consequences to himself. Only utter frankness could avail now.

"I can't discuss the question of expediency with you," he said hastily, "any further than to say that I'd cheerfully give ten years of my life to be able to consider it. Let me be perfectly plain: This evidence I am speaking of involves you personally. If the papers are put into Judge Hemingway's hands there will be a searching investigation, prompt

indictments, criminal proceedings, and all the disgrace that the widest publicity can bring upon the men who are responsible for the present desperate state of affairs.”

The senator had laid his pipe aside and was staring soberly into the fire. “Go on, son,” he said quietly; “let’s have the rest of it.”

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"You know what has led up to the present wretched involvement—my involvement," Blount went on. "When I took the railroad job, I did it in good faith and went about preaching the gospel of the square deal for everybody, including the corporations. But in a very short time I discovered that my own people were not keeping faith with me; had no intention of keeping it. Later on, a number of corporation officials and managers, men who had formerly made corrupt deals with the railroad company, and are to this day profiting by them, became frightened. Assuming that I was the chief broker for the railroad company in the present campaign, these men wrote me letters which were in the highest degree incriminating."

The big man who was staring into the heart of the fire nodded thoughtfully.

"I remember; you told me something about that before, didn't you?"

"Yes, and we needn't go into the details again. I meant to use those letters as a club to hammer a little honesty into my own employers. Up to that time I had been trying to believe that the machine—your machine—and the railroad lawbreakers were not one and the same thing."

"But you changed your mind about that?"

"I had to, after I found out that you had corrupted one of my clerks and had sent one of your thugs to dynamite my safe. That is past and gone; but you can see where it left me. As you and everybody in the State know, I had been committing myself publicly everywhere, doing it with the assurance that when it came to the pinch I could bring Gantry and Kittredge and even Mr. McVickar himself to terms—the terms of honesty and fair dealing. With my weapon stolen, I was left helpless, facing the certainty that on the day after the election I should be pilloried in every hole and corner of my native State as the most shameless liar that ever breathed. Do you wonder that I was desperate?"

"No, son; I reckon you wouldn't have been much of a Blount if you hadn't been."

"I was desperate. I said to myself that I would find another weapon, even if I should have to take a leaf out of your own book, dad, to do it. I took the leaf, and I have the weapon. You drove Gryson away, but you made one small miscalculation. You didn't believe that his desire for revenge would be stronger than his fear of the gallows."

Again the older man nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, son; I know. He came back twice: once when he found you in your office last Wednesday night; and again yesterday, or rather last evening, when you got out of your bed and went to help him make his getaway on the east-bound Overland."

Evan Blount started back, and his exclamation was of pure astoundment.

“You knew all this?” he gasped.

“Oh, yes; I reckon there isn’t much happening that such a double-dyed old villain as I am doesn’t find out, Evan,” was the sober rejoinder.

“But, good heavens! if you know so much, you must know what Gryson came back for, and what he gave me!”

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"Yes; I know that, too. I reckon I might as well make a clean breast of it while I'm at it."

"You knew it last night, and yet you didn't send somebody to hold me up and take the papers away from me?"

The senator's chuckle rumbled deep in his mighty chest.

"Maybe I was counting a little on the kinship, Evan, boy. Maybe I was saying to myself: 'No, I reckon the boy won't do it, after all—not when he reads what's set down in the papers; he just naturally couldn't do it.'"

"Oh, my Lord, dad!" was the choking response. "Can't you see that you are killing me by inches? Can't you see that I've got to choose between being a man clear through, or a scoundrel as weak and shifty as any of those I have been denouncing? My God, it's terrible!"

"I reckon you're going to choose straight," said the older man, still with eyes averted.

"I have chosen," said the son brokenly; "or perhaps it would be truer to say that there never has been any choice since the moment when I set my foot in the path which has led me thus far on the way to hell. I can despise myself utterly for the means I took to secure the evidence, but that very lapse makes it all the more needful that I should atone as I can."

David Blount rose and put his back to the fire.

"Son, you are a man among a thousand—among ten thousand," he said quietly. "When it comes to a pure question of good, old-fashioned right and wrong, you can buck up just like your old great-gran'paw, the judge, did when he had to sentence one of his own sons for killing an Indian. You haven't said it in so many words, so I'll say it for you: you've got me, and maybe some others, right where you can shove us into the penitentiary. That's about what you're trying to tell me, isn't it?"

"For God's sake, don't put it that way!" Blount protested. "I gave you fair warning almost at the first. I've got to fight for the right as I see it. If I don't, I shall be less than a man—less than your son. Can't you see that it is breaking my heart?"

A silence electrically surcharged with possibilities settled down upon the isolated room, with the stillness broken only by the crackling of the fire and that other distant tapping as of tree-twigs on the roof. At the end of the pause the senator took a forward step and put a hand on his son's shoulder.

"I haven't one word to say, Evan, boy," he began slowly. "As you told me that first day out here, son, it's your job to hew to the line and let the chips fall where they may. You

go ahead and do just what seems right and law-abiding to you. I'd rather go to jail twice over than have you do any different. Is that what you're wanting me to say?"

Blount dropped into a chair, as if the touch on his shoulder had crushed him, and covered his face with his hands. It was hard—harder than even his own prefigurings had forecast it. Fighting against the patent facts, he had been cherishing a lingering hope that his father might be able to brush away the cruel necessity at the last moment. But now the hope was dead.

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It was a long minute before he staggered to his feet and groped his way to the door, leaving his father standing before the fire and once more puffing absently at the long-stemmed pipe. When old Barnabas had helped him into his coat and had given him his hat, he found Patricia still sitting in the car, with the motor purring softly under the hood.

"Must you go back?" she queried, when he had descended the steps to climb stiffly into the seat beside her.

He nodded.

"Your duty is clear?"

"Perfectly clear—now."

"And the consequences?" she asked.

"I can only guess," he muttered. "Ruin and disgrace for all of us, I suppose. Of course, you understand that I have resigned from the railroad service and shall stand with my father when—when the thing is done."

She was backing the little roadster into the circling driveway to turn for the start. At the reversing moment she made her final plea.

"Don't do it, Evan—*don't do it!* I have no more than a woman's reason to offer, but I am sure you are opening the door to a lifelong sorrow for yourself and—and—for me!"

It was the last two words that steeled him suddenly. Not even at her beseeching would he turn aside from the plain path of the oath-bound obligation. It struck him like a blow that the turning aside would make him forever unworthy of her.

"Take me back to the city as quickly as you can!" he said. "Or, better still, stay here and let me have the car. That is my last word."

"You're not fit to drive a car!" she snapped; and for further answer she threw the speed lever into the intermediate gear and released the clutch. Like a projectile hurled from a catapult, the swift little roadster shot away down the cottonwood avenue, and with a jerk of the lever into the "high" the second race against time was begun.

For the first few miles Patricia's passenger had all he could do to keep his seat. On its upper mesa windings the Quaretaro road follows the course of the stream which has been robbed of its waters for the cultivated lands, and though the roadway was good the hazards were plentiful when taken at speed. More than once Blount caught himself in the act of reaching for the steering-wheel, but as often he desisted. As on the outward race, Patricia was staring straight ahead, and giving the little car every throb of

speed there was in its machinery. None the less, he could see that she had it under perfect control.

What finally happened came with the suddenness of the thunder-clap following a bolt which strikes near at hand. They were on the down-grade approach to the mouth of Shonoho Canyon, and they could not see beyond the gentle curve to the left, where the smaller gulch found its intersection with the main ravine. When they were within a hundred yards of the curve the stretch below came into view. Blount had a momentary glimpse of some barrier—a pine-tree, as it proved to be—lying across the main road. Seeing it, he realized at the same instant that Patricia was neither throttling the motor nor applying the brakes. After that he had barely time to snap the switch and to throw the heavy wind-shield down before the devastating crash came.

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XXVIII

THE GOSSIPING WIRES

After his son had left him, the Honorable Senator Sage-Brush remained standing before the library fire until he heard the machine-gun exhausts of the small roadster distance-diminishing down the driveway avenue. Then he stepped aside and pressed the bell-push ordinarily used to summon the old negro footman.

In answer to the call a door opened beyond the chimney-jamb, and immediately the gentle twig-tapping sounds resolved themselves into the clickings of a pair of telegraph relays and the chatter of a typewriter. A good-looking young fellow, with his coat off, entered the library, carefully closing the door behind him.

"Want to send something, senator?" he asked, whipping a note-book from his hip-pocket.

"No, not just this minute. Anything new coming over the wires?"

"Nothing startling. Steuchfield reports from Ophir that we swing the miners' vote almost to a man unless something unforeseen breaks loose. Hetchy gives us a good word from Twin Buttes; and Griggs, up in the Carnadines, wires from Alkire that he has just completed an auto canvass of the High Line district. The ranchmen up that way have had a pretty bad scare. There was a threat made that the price of water was going to be raised. But they're all right now."

The boss nodded approvingly. Then: "How about those microphone notes?"

"Crowell is writing them off," was the reply. "He'll have them in half an hour or so."

The senator drew out his watch, a huge thick-crystalled time-piece dating back to the range-riding period.

"As matters have turned out, I shall be going to the city before long," he said. "If the notes are not ready before I leave, you can order out the speed-car and send them in by Gallagher any time before six o'clock. Don't slip up on that, Fred; tell Gallagher to deliver the notes to me, in person, at the Inter-Mountain. What's become of Professor Anners?"

"He's staying over at Haworth's ranch, just to be near the fossil bone-field. They've made another plesio-something find, and Haworth telephones that the professor couldn't be dragged away with a derrick until those bones are safely out of the ground and boxed for shipment."

The professor's host smiled indulgently, saying: "It's just as well, I reckon. The professor's about as blind as a bat when it comes to seeing anything this side of a million years ago, but if he were here he might wonder why we've set up a telegraph-office—wonder, and talk about it."

The young man in his shirt-sleeves was turning to go. "I'll hustle Crowell on those notes," he promised: but as he was reaching for the door-knob the senator stopped him.

"Hold on a minute, Fred; how is that contrivance of ours at the mouth of Shonoho working?"

"It's working all right. Canby is on watch there now, and he says he can see everything that passes on both roads."

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"That's good. These little precautions are mighty necessary in a close fight. Those folks over at Shonoho Inn ought to have thought of this outer-guard business for themselves, but it seems they didn't. They'd be right awkwardly embarrassed if some fellow they don't want to see should slip in on 'em without notice. While I think of it, don't fail to keep me posted on what Canby sees after I go back to town. He thinks he's safe, does he?"

"Perfectly. Nobody can see his dugout from the road, and his oil-heater doesn't make any smoke. That scheme of laying insulated wires on the ground works like a charm. You could walk all over them without noticing them." The young man was opening the door as he spoke, and he broke off suddenly to say: "That's his call ringing now. Would you like to come and talk to him?"

"No; you can tell me what he says, if it's worth telling."

The clerk disappeared into the room of the tapping noises, but he was back again almost immediately.

"It was Canby," he said hurriedly. "He says two men on horseback have just dragged a good-sized pine-tree down the Shonoho road and are placing it across the county road. He can't see the men's faces very well, but he thinks the bigger of the two is Jack Barto."

It was the senator's boast that he had never lost a tooth or had one filled, and his smile showed the double row, strong and evenly matched, under the drooping grayish mustaches.

"That boy Canby is a mighty good guesser, Fred. I shouldn't be surprised if the fellow he has spotted *is* Jack Barto, sure enough. If you didn't know beforehand what a good-natured, meechin' sort of rooster Jack is, you might think he was fixing to play some kind of a hold-up game on somebody."

"That's what Canby thinks, and he asked me to hold the wire open."

The big boss smiled again. "Then don't you reckon you'd better go and hold it?" he suggested mildly; and the young man in his shirt-sleeves vanished to do it.

When he was left alone, the senator went to the house phone connecting the library with the remoter suites. A touch of the button brought an answering word, and he spoke softly into the transmitter.

"The time is getting right ripe, and I thought you might want a minute or so to put on your things," he said, in answer to the low-toned "Well?" that came over the house wire. Then he added: "I don't know but what we may have to make a little bluff at somebody on the way in. When you order the car around, suppose you tell Rickert to put

'Tennessee' and Billy Shack in the tonneau, with a couple of shot-guns. We can drop 'em if they look too warlike and conspicuous."

He was hanging the ear-piece on its hook when the shirt-sleeved young man burst in again excitedly.

"It *is* a hold-up!" he declared breathlessly. "Miss Anners and Mr. Evan have slammed their car into the tree, and Canby says the two horseback men are watching them from the dry gulch just below him!"

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"All right," was the even-toned reply. "You go and tell Canby to keep his shirt on, Fred; and don't forget to send those papers in by Gallagher."

While the senator was speaking, the door opened and the old negro came hobbling in with a driving-coat and the broad-brimmed planter's hat which made the Honorable David a marked man throughout the length and breadth of the Sage-Brush State.

"De cyar's at de do', Marsteh David, and Mistis say she plumb ready when you is, yes-sah," stammered the serving-man, holding the coat for his master; and a moment later the senator was climbing to his place behind the big wheel of the touring-car, with Mrs. Honoria for his seat-mate on the mechanician's side, and the chauffeur, the horse wrangler, and Billy Shack comfortably filling the tonneau.

While the touring-car, with its curiously assorted complement of passengers, was leaving Wartrace Hall, Evan Blount, having assured himself that Patricia was not hurt, was trying to estimate the extent of the damage done to the little red roadster by the collision with the tree. The inspection was brief. With the front axle bent and the radiator crushed, the car was safely out of commission.

"We're definitely out of the fight," he reported shortly, helping his companion down from the driving-seat.

Patricia was still trembling and pale.

"You mean that we can't go on to the city?" she quavered.

"Not unless we walk; and of course that is out of the question."

"Then you—you can't keep your appointment with Judge Hemingway."

Blount's smile was scornful. "I imagine it was no part of my father's plans that I should keep my appointment," he commented bitterly. "He took it for granted that I would drive out to Wartrace with you, and made his preparations accordingly. This tree wasn't here half an hour ago, and it is here now."

"I can't believe it of him," she denied, and her lip quivered. And then she added: "Just think, Evan; we might have been killed—both of us!"

Blount's teeth came together with a little clicking noise. "Politics, or what passes for politics in this God-forsaken region, seems to make no account of such a small thing as a human life or two," he said. And then: "I suppose we are due to wait until somebody comes along to pick us up. It's four miles or more back to the nearest ranch on the mesa."

"It is all my fault!" lamented the young woman. "I—I might have stopped the car, don't you think?"

"I wondered a little that you didn't at least try to stop it," he permitted himself to say; and at this she forgot the traditions, sociological or other, reverting to the type of the eternal feminine.

"Say it all," she flashed out. "You are beginning to wonder if I didn't do it purposely. I *did* do it purposely. All the way along I had been trying to muster up courage enough to smash the car in the ditch, and if I hadn't been such a coward I would have done it. Now hate me, if you want to!"

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Blount would have been less the lover than he was if he had not been moved to something much warmer than hatred.

"Let us say that you are doing your level best to save my faith in human nature, Patricia, girl," he said soberly. "Do you know what you are? You are the one loyal person in a tricky world. I am still fair enough to say that it was fine—splendid! And I only wish my father were worthier of such superb loyalty and affection."

She looked at him curiously for a moment. Then her mood changed in the twinkling of an eye, and she laughed and said: "Yes, I think women are more loyal than men; and I am sure they are vastly more discerning at times. Don't you think—"

The interruption was the appearance of two horsemen pushing their animals out of a small gorge on the right. When they had gained the main road they came up, ambling easily, and Blount instantly recognized the leader of the pair. It was Barto again.

"Howdy?" said the timber-looker, riding up to hang with one knee over the saddle while he grinned genially at the two castaways. "Lost out ag'in, ain't ye, Mr. Blount? Couldn't make out, nohow, to run yer chug-wagon over that there pine-tree, could ye?"

"Did you put the tree in the road?" snapped Blount, his anger rising promptly, now that there was a man to quarrel with.

"I reckon we did; and it was one Hades of a job, too," was the cool reply. "Had to drag the dern thing f'r more'n half a mile down the gulch with the hawss-ropes."

Here was plenty of material for a wrathful explosion, but Blount controlled himself.

"By whose orders did you do it?" he demanded.

"Th' boss's."

"Mr. Hathaway?"

"Not on yer life; it was the big boss this time."

Blount's quick glance aside at his companion was a wordless "I told you so!" and then to Barto: "Well, now that you have stopped us, what's next?"

The outlaw grinned again and kicked his horse a little nearer.

"I'm a-holdin' you up sure enough this time, Mr. Blount—jest like another little Billy th' Kid," he confided. "You're goin' to gimme them papers you've got in your pocket, and then me an' Kinky we rides away all peaceful and leaves you and the lady to set down quiet till somebuddy comes along to pick you up."

Blount put his hand to his head. His wound was throbbing painfully again, and the pain may have been partly responsible for his answer.

“When you get those papers you’ll take them from a dead man, Barto. Do your instructions go that far?”

The man of many trades swung straight in his saddle and fell into the attitude of one listening. Then the good-natured grin became a menacing scowl.

“Shuck them papers out, and do it sudden!” he commanded.

“No,” said Blount crisply.

Instantly the timber-looker’s pistol was out.

“Give ’em up!” he shouted; “shell ’em out, quick, ’r by the holy—”

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The interposition broke in stormily. Down the grade from the upper mesa level came a touring-car, with a big man at the wheel, a veiled woman beside him, and three men in the tonneau. "Holy smoke!" said the outlaw, and with his riding mate was slipping away up the Shonoho road when the touring-car, with brakes protesting, came to a stand at the tree barrier. Like a flash, two of the three men in the tonneau leaped out, and a charge of buckshot whistling over the heads of the two obstructionists halted them. Thereupon the Honorable David gave his orders tersely.

"Tennessee, you go up yonder and argue with Jack Barto a spell," he directed. "Tell him and his partner that the Wartrace smoke-house is the safest place in Quaretaro County for a couple of club-witted bunglers like they are, and then you see to it that they get there. You, Billy, help Rickert get a tow-rope hitch on that road-car, and we'll see if we can't jerk it out of the way." After which he turned to his son as casually as if only the preconceived and preconcerted had come to pass: "Tried to wreck you, did they? Mighty near made a job of it, too, from the looks of Miss Patty's little car. Not hurt, are you? That's good. Climb in here, both of you, and when we get this windfall out of the road we'll go on to town."

Blount put Patricia into the empty tonneau while Shack and the chauffeur were making the tow-rope hitch, but he was still angry enough to hesitate when it came his turn. A glance at his watch decided him. It was still only half past four. Had his father repented so far as to override the obstacle which he himself had interposed? Patricia was holding the tonneau-door open, and Blount got in and took his seat beside her.

A small engineering feat, made possible by the power plant of the big car and the tow-rope, soon cleared the way of the wrecked roadster and the tree. Then the senator gave another order.

"You and Billy stay here and see if you can't get that roadster so you can run it to town on its own power," he said to the chauffeur; and over his shoulder to the pair behind him: "If you'll change partners back there, and let Honoria ride on the cushions—"

Though he could not remotely apprehend his father's reason for the rearrangement, Blount got out, helped Mrs. Honoria down and up again, and then climbed into the seat she had just vacated. At the click of the tonneau door-latch the big car rolled on down the grade, and for a good half of the straightaway fifteen miles to the city the younger man held his peace grimly. Finally he turned to his father and said:

"I'm blaming you for the tree, and for Barto's attempt to get those papers away from me. Am I wrong?"

The Honorable David shook his head.

“This close to an election you’re mighty near safe in blaming anybody and everybody in sight, son,” he returned gravely; and apart from this small break in the monotony, the second half of the fifteen miles went speechless.

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The clock in the Temple Court tower was pointing to five minutes of five when the senator, instead of taking the direct street to the Inter-Mountain, as his son expected him to, turned the car aside into the Capitol grounds and brought it to rest before the side entrance which led to the chambers of the Supreme Court justices.

"You're still in time, Evan, boy," he intimated gently; "and I'm only going to ask one thing of you. When you get through with Hemingway, come around to the hotel and show your grit by taking dinner with the rest of us. Are you man enough to do that?"

If the son hesitated, it was only for a fraction of a second. When he answered, it was to say: "If I were going up-stairs to put a noose around my own neck, it would be simpler and easier than the thing I've got to do. As to your one condition—dad, I'll be with you at dinner, and at all other times, after this thing is done. I've quit the railroad, and I did it so that I might be free to be your son and your lawyer when the smash comes. Can I say more?"

"You don't need to say another blessed word, son," was the sober rejoinder; and when Evan Blount got out, the Honorable David drove away without a backward glance for the young man who was dragging himself up the granite steps of the Capitol entrance like a condemned criminal going to execution.

XXIX

AT SHONOHO INN

Evan Blount's interview with the venerable chief justice was not at all what he had imagined it would be. To begin with, he found it blankly impossible to take the attitude he had meant to take—namely, that of a conscientious member of the bar, rigorously ignoring all the little cross-currents of human sympathy and the affections.

Almost at once he found himself telling his story incident by incident to the kindly old man who was figuring rather as a father confessor than as a judge and a legal superior. When it was done, and the chief justice had gone thoughtfully over the mass of evidence, Blount saw no thunder-cloud of righteous indignation gathering upon the judicial brow. Nor was Judge Hemingway's comment in the least what he had expected it would be.

"I can not commend too highly your prudence and good judgment in bringing these papers to me, Mr. Blount," was the form the comment took. "Your position was a difficult one, and not one young man in a hundred would have been judicious enough to choose the conservative middle path you have chosen. The fanatic would have rushed into print, and the vast majority would have weakly compromised with conscience. It is a

source of the deepest satisfaction to me, as your father's friend, to find that you have done neither."

"As my father's friend?" echoed Blount.

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“Yes, just that, Mr. Blount. There is an appreciation which transcends the commonplace things of life, and I don’t know which is worthier of the greater admiration, your courage in coming to me, or your father’s single-heartedness in urging you to do it after he had learned the purport of these papers. Yet this is what I should have expected of David Blount as I know him. Men say of him that he has sometimes wielded his tremendous political power regardless of the law and of other men’s rights. But in the field of pure ethics, in the exercise of the high and holy duty which is laid upon the man who has become a father, I should look to find your father doing precisely what he has done. I assure you that it is not without reason that many of his fellow citizens call him most affectionately the ‘Honorable Senator Sage-Brush.’”

“But the consequences!” gasped the unwilling informer. “His name in those affidavits!”

The chief justice was nodding slowly.

“Without doubt a great crime has been committed, and a still greater one is contemplated. We shall take prompt action to defeat the contemplated crime at the polls next Tuesday, rest assured of that. But at the same time, let me say a word for your comfort: these papers came to you from the hands of a criminal, and that particular criminal had—as I am well informed—every reason to be vindictively enraged against your father. I am sure you are too good a lawyer to fail to see the point. If this man Gryson, in ‘getting even,’ as he expressed it to you, has added perjury to his other crimes—But we need not follow the suggestion any further at this time. Be hopeful, Mr. Blount, as I am. Leave these matters with me, and go and be as good a son as he deserves to my old friend David.”

Evan Blount left the venerable presence in the judges’ chambers of the Capitol with a heart strangely mellowed, and with a feeling of relief too great to be measured. At last, without compromise, and equally without the slightest concession to the natural human passion for vindication, the momentous step had been taken. Whatever might come of it, there would be no daggerings from an outraged conscience, no remorse for an unworthy passion impulsively yielded to. Also, with the rolling of the terrible burden to other and entirely competent shoulders there came a sense of freedom that was almost jubilant; and under the promptings of this new light-heartedness he was able to make a reasonably cheerful fourth at the *café* dinner-table a little later.

Oddly enough, as he thought, Patricia was also cheerful, though she vanished with Mrs. Honoria to the private suite shortly after the adjournment to the mezzanine lounge. Past this, after the father and son had smoked their cigars in man-like silence for a time, Mrs. Honoria, coated and hatted as if to go out, came back to sit near the balustrade, looking down upon the kindling lobby activities. Shortly after her coming the senator rose to go. Instantly his wife sprang up to walk with him to the head of the great stair.

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"The time has come?" she asked quickly.

"I reckon it has, little woman."

"I wish I might be there to see," she said softly. And then, whipping a packet of papers from under her street-coat: "Take these. When you see what they are, you'll know why I haven't given them to you before this. As long as you didn't know anything about it, you could tell Evan the simple truth—that you didn't have them."

The Honorable David pocketed the papers without looking at them.

"I suspected you—or, rather, young Collins—quite a little spell ago," he said with imperturbable good nature. "I couldn't have done it myself; I reckon no right-minded man could have done it, but—"

"—But women have no conscience," she finished for him. "I hadn't in this instance. There was too much at stake with a firebrand like Evan to deal with. Don't be too good-natured, David—to-night, I mean. You know that is your failing when you have a man down. But to-night you must make the man pay the price. That's all, I think. I'm going back to Evan now to see if I can't make him talk to me. That is the one thing I have seldom been able to do thus far."

If Blount was a little surprised when the small plotter came back to take the chair recently vacated by his father, he was generous enough not to show it. The huge sense of relief was still with him, and its mellowing influence made him smile leniently when she said: "I want to be reasoned with, Evan. I have just let your father persuade me that a certain thing he is about to do is perfectly safe, when I am afraid it isn't."

"Since he is undertaking to do it, it's safe enough, you may be sure," he replied at random.

"Then you know what it is?"

"Oh, no; he didn't tell me where he was going. But on general principles, you know, I think he can be trusted to take care of himself. He is a many-sided man, Mrs. Blount. You are his wife, but I have sometimes found myself wondering if, after all, you know him as he really is."

"Perhaps I don't," she agreed readily enough. "But I do know his absolute fearlessness, at least. That's why I'm a little nervous just now."

Blount took the alarm at once, as she hoped he would.

"You mean that he is really going into danger of some sort?" he demanded.

She nodded. "He is going to meet a man who is—well, he is a big man with many of the same qualities that your father has. But down at the very bottom of him there is a quality that even your father doesn't suspect. Have you ever seen a cornered rat, Evan?"

Blount had got upon his feet and was buttoning his coat.

"I don't know how much or how little you know about what has taken place this afternoon, Mrs. Blount," he broke out hastily, "but I can tell you this much: I am my father's son now, whatever I have been in the past, and if he is in danger, my place is with him. Tell me where he has gone."

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The little lady's eyes were demurely downcast. "I shouldn't dare tell you that, but—but perhaps I might show you. I didn't promise not to—not to follow him," she returned with exactly the proper shade of half-frightened reluctance.

"Is it far?" he asked.

"Y-yes; we should have to drive."

"Excuse me for a minute or two," he said abruptly, and, making a bolt for the elevator, he was back almost within the limit named with a top-coat for himself and a driving-wrap for his companion. "I broke into your suite and made Patricia give me the wrap," he explained. "If it isn't what you want, I'll try again."

"It will do nicely," she told him; and together they went down the broad marble stair to the ground-floor.

"Do we take a cab?" he asked, when they reached the sidewalk.

"No; it's only a short walk to the garage, and we can take the touring-car."

"I'm entirely in your hands," he rejoined; and then: "Perhaps you'd better take my arm. We can make quicker time that way."

The small plotter's eyes were dancing when she slipped her hand under his arm. In a career which had not been entirely devoid of excitement, Mrs. Honoria had rarely found men difficult. But this particular young man was proving himself to be the easiest among many.

At the garage Blount asked for the family touring-car, more than half-expecting to be told that his father had taken it. The garage man nodded and laughed. "You can have it, but you came within an ace of losing out," he said. "The senator was just here, and he was going to take it, but he changed his mind when I told him the big roadster was in."

Blount made no comment, and when the car was ready he asked his companion where she would ride.

"In front, with you," was the quick reply; and when they were placed she gave him his running orders. "Slip out of the city by the quietest streets you can find and take the Quaretero road," she directed, and he obeyed in silence, holding the speed down until they had left the capital behind them and were bowling along under the stars on the fine boulevarded county road.

"Do we take it easy or the other way?" he asked, speaking for the first time since they had left the town garage.

"You may drive as fast as you like until we come to the hills," he was told; and with this permission Blount let the motor out and speedily put the fifteen miles of the straightaway road to the rear.

"Is it Wartrace?" he inquired, when the touring-car was breasting the first of the grades in the gulch-threading climb to the second mesa level.

"No. When you come to the pine-tree, turn to the right up Shonoho Canyon."

"We can't get anywhere on that road," he objected. "It's washed out and posted. I tried to go up there the other day when I had Patricia out in the little car."

"I think you will find it quite passable to-night," was all the answer he got; and a little later, when they had turned out of the main road and were ascending the small canyon, the prophecy came true. The brush barricade had been thrown aside, and there were fresh wheel tracks in the sand.

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At sight of the wheel marks the senator's wife spoke again.

"You have been up here before?"

"Yes, once; in the middle of the summer."

"There is a small hotel at the head of the road."

"I know; but it is closed."

"It has been reopened—please throttle the motor so it won't make so much noise—the hotel is occupied now, as I say, and that is where we shall find your father. Are you still willing to do as I tell you to?"

"In all things reasonable."

"As if I'd ask you to do anything unreasonable!" she broke out half-petulantly. "Listen; there is a lawn with a circular driveway in front of the hotel. Drive to the outer edge, near the cliff, and stop the car."

Five minutes later he had obeyed his instructions literally. Through the groving of trees on the lawn he could see the lights in the lower story of the inn. At the flicking of the motor-switch a man with a pair of lineman's climbing spurs at his belt rose up out of the shadows and touched his cap to the lady, saying: "The boss is here; he has just gone in."

"I know," was the low-toned response. And then to Evan: "Help me out, please."

When they stood together beside the car she spoke again to the lineman.

"Is it all right, Jackson? Can you do what I asked you to?"

"We can try it a whirl," said the man; and thereupon he led the way across the lawn, around to the darkened end of the bungalow-built resort house, and through a sheltering pergola to a side door. "I got hold of the key, and it's open," he signified, meaning the door. "Can you find your way in the dark on the inside?"

"Perfectly," was the whispered reply; and then the lineman guide got his further orders: "Go back to the car and see that nobody interferes with it, Jackson." Then, when the man had disappeared in the tree shadows, the little lady turned short upon Blount. "I am going to take you where you can see and hear, but you must promise me not to interfere unless it becomes perfectly plain that your father needs you. Is it a bargain?"

"It is—if you'll allow me to be the judge of the need."

She laughed softly. "You are simply incorrigible, and I should think there would be times when Patricia would be tempted to stick pins into you," she mocked. Then: "Come on; we are wasting time," and, entering the house, she took his hand and led him through a dark passage, up a stair, through another passage into a long, low-pitched room, bare and empty save for a great pyramid of dining-tables and chairs piled in the middle of it, and lastly through a cautiously opened door which admitted a flood of yellow lamp-light from below.

"The musicians' gallery," she whispered. "Go to the screen and look down, but for Heaven's sake, don't make any noise!"

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Blount obeyed mechanically. The orchestra gallery, screened on three sides by an open fretwork of Moorish design, was built out from the wall of the dining-room, and through the latticings of the fretwork he could look down upon the oblong lobby of the resort hotel. There was a table-desk with lamps on it drawn out in front of a cheerful wood-fire burning in a great stone fireplace, and in front of the fire, standing with his back to the blaze, Blount saw his father. From a lighted room at the opposite end of the lobby space came a confused clattering of telegraph instruments. Blount caught a glimpse of shirt-sleeved clerks moving about in the room beyond, and then a door opened beneath him and the vice-president of the Transcontinental Company strode out into the firelight to shake hands with his visitor and to say: "I've been looking for you; I thought you'd come in out of the wet before it was too late, David. Sit down and tell me how much you're going to bleed us for, and I'll make out the check."

With a cold hand gripping at his heart, Blount turned away, sick and revolted, and there was a curse on his lips for the cruelty of the woman who had brought him to be a witness to his father's shame. But when he groped for the door of egress and found it, the knob refused to turn. The door was locked and he could not retreat.

XXX

THE RECKONING

Evan Blount's first impulse when he found his retreat cut off by the locked door of the musicians' gallery was to make his presence known instantly to the two men standing before the fire in the lobby below. Shame, vicarious shame for the father who would thus find himself unmasked before his son, was all that made him hesitate; and in the pausing moment he heard his father's reply to the vice-president's challenging greeting.

"The same old song; always the same old song with you, isn't it, Hardwick?" the senator was saying in jocular deprecation. "What money can't buy, isn't worth having; that's about the way you fellows always stack it up." Then, with sudden grimness: "Sit down, Hardwick. I've come to say a few things to you that won't listen very good, but you've got to take your medicine this time."

"What's that?" demanded the vice-president, dropping mechanically into his desk-chair. And then: "It's no use, David. We've beat you at your own game. We're going to roll up a majority next Tuesday that will wipe you and your broken-down machine out of existence. Don't you believe it?"

"Not yet—not quite yet" was the mild rejoinder.

"Well, you'd better believe it, because it's the truth. You are down and out. I had you beat, David, that night last summer when you gave me your 'de-fi' and I came back by



taking your son away from you. The young gentleman you were going to spring on us for your next attorney-general has done more than any other one man in the campaign to help our lame dog over the stile."

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"Yes," said the big man, sunning his back at the fire, "that is one of the things we're going to flail out right here and now, Hardwick; about the boy and what he's been doing. You told him to go out and preach the good, clean gospel of the square deal, didn't you?"

It was at this point that the listener in the musicians' gallery, a prey to tumultuous emotions which were making the freshly healing wound in his head throb like a trip-hammer, lost all of his compunctions and drew closer to the fretwork screen.

"He didn't need any special instructions," was the vice-president's rejoinder, and his tone chimed in with the hard-bitted smile. "Now that it is all over, I don't mind telling you that he mapped the thing out for himself, and all we had to do was to sit tight and give him plenty of rope. Candidly, David, I don't believe I'm hardened enough to play the game as it ought to be played out here in the sage-brush hills. The young fellow's sincerity came pretty near getting away with me when I saw how ridiculously in earnest he was."

"Yet you let him go on, putting himself deeper and deeper in the hole every time he stood up before an audience, and you never said a word—never gave him a hint that you were not going to back him up in everything he was saying?"

This time the hard-bitted smile broke into a laugh.

"Let's get down to business, David. You wouldn't expect us to throw the game away when somebody was trying his best to put the winning card into our hands. We needn't dig back into the campaign for something to jangle over, you and I. We can come right down to the present moment. You're cornered, but I don't deny that you've still got a few votes to dispose of. How much do you want for them?"

Blount saw his father take a step forward, and for a flitting instant he thought there would be violence. But apparently nothing was farther from the senator's intention.

"I'm not selling to-night, Hardwick; I'm buying," he said, with the good-natured smile wrinkling at the corners of his eyes. "I want to know how much you'll take to clean up right where you are and make my boy's word good to the people of this State."

Mr. McVickar turned to his table-desk and took up a sheaf of telegrams.

"I'm a pretty busy man this evening, David; and if you haven't anything better than that to offer—"

"You've got a lot of crooked deals out—special rates and rebates and such things; the boy believed you were going to call them all off and be good, Hardwick."

The vice-president laid the telegrams aside and turned back again with the air of a man determined to sweep away all the obstructions at one shrewd push.

“You’re wasting your time and mine; let’s get down to business,” he snapped. “Some little time ago your son began to urge this same ‘reform measure,’ as he termed it. I believe he even went so far as to threaten Gantry and Kittredge with the publication of certain private letters from our patrons, letters written to him in his capacity of field campaigner for our company. I don’t suppose he really meant to do any such disloyal thing as that, but—”

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"But to make sure he wouldn't, you had one of your hired shadow-men blow up his safe and steal the letters," put in the senator mildly. "That was prudent, Hardwick. I was a little scared up myself for fear Evan might get real good and mad, and let the cat out of the bag; I was, for a fact."

"Without admitting the safe-blowing, I may say that the letters were destroyed, and our friends were advised to be a little more conservative in their correspondence. That settles the 'reform measure' incident and brings us down to the present argument. If you are not here to get in line with us, what did you come for?"

"I came to give you one more chance to be decent, Hardwick; just—one—more—last—chance."

"David, there are times when you make me tired, and this is one of them. For years you've held us up and dictated to us; but this time we've got you by the neck. Did you ever happen to hear of a fellow named Thomas Gryson?"

"Oh, yes; I've heard of him. I believe he has been on your pay-rolls for a while— notwithstanding the fact that he is an escaped criminal," was the shrewd counter-thrust.

"He's a scoundrel; we'll admit that. Just the same, your son hired him to go out and get evidence in a certain matter of alleged crookedness in the registration lists. He got it, and delivered the papers to your son last night. Some of those affidavits incriminate you, David. If we wanted to use them, we could send you to the penitentiary, right here in your own State."

The senator drew up a mock-Sheraton arm-chair and lowered his huge frame gently into it.

"In order to use those papers against me you'd first have to get hold of them, wouldn't you, Hardwick?" he asked.

"We have them," was the terse assertion.

The Honorable David's chuckle rumbled deep in his capacious chest.

"Barto phoned you an hour or so ago that he had 'em, but, owing to circumstances over which he had no control, he couldn't deliver 'em to you until to-morrow morning. Isn't that about the way it shapes up?"

The vice-president's frown marked an added degree of irritation. "So you have a cut-in on my telephone wire, have you?" he rasped.

The senator leaned forward and laid a forefinger on the vice-presidential knee.

“Listen, Hardwick,” he said. “I dictated that phone message to you, and Barto repeated it word for word because he had to—I reckon maybe it was because one of my men was holding a gun to his other ear while he talked to you. The little hold-up that you planned this afternoon didn’t come off. Barto lost out bad, and when we get around to giving him the third degree, I shouldn’t wonder if he’d tell a whole lot of things that you wouldn’t want to see printed in the newspapers.”

Mr. McVickar sprang out of his chair with an agility surprising in so heavy a man, crossed to the open door of the room where his clerical force was at work, and slammed it shut. When he returned, he was no longer the confident tyrant of foregone conclusions.

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"Where are those papers now, Blount?" he inquired.

"They are in the hands of Chief Justice Hemingway, for investigation and such action as he and his colleagues on the Supreme Court bench see fit to take."

"Good God! Your son did that, knowing that you are as deep in the mud as we are in the mire?"

"I reckon he did, so. That boy is all wool and a yard wide. He thought he was putting me in the hole, too, along with Kittredge and your railroad crooks, and it came mighty near tearing him in two. But he did it. You haven't been more than half-appreciating that boy, Hardwick."

"He thought, 'you say; isn't it the fact that you are in the hole, David?"

The senator reached over, took one of the gigantic McVickar cigars from the open box on the desk, and calmly lighted it.

"You're a pretty hard man to convince, Hardwick," he said slowly, when the big cigar was filling the air of the lobby with its fragrance. "Away along back at the beginning of this fight I told you what I was aiming to do, and why. You wouldn't believe it then, and you don't want to believe it now; but that's because you don't happen to have a son of your own. When that boy of mine wired me that he was coming out here to get into the harness, I began to turn over the leaves of the record and look back a little. It was a mighty dirty record, McVickar. I don't know that I'm any better man now than I was in the days when we made that record—you and I—but when I looked it over, it struck me all in a heap that I'd have to get out the bucket and scrubbing-brush if I didn't want to make a clean-hearted, clean-minded boy plumb ashamed of his old daddy."

"But, say—you haven't quit your scheming for a single minute, Blount!" retorted the railroad tyrant. "You are just as much the boss of the machine to-day as you've ever been!"

"I reckon, that's so, too," was the measured reply. "But there's just this one little difference, Hardwick: a machine, in a factory or in politics, is a mighty necessary thing, and we wouldn't get very far nowadays without it. Here in America we're just coming to learn that machine politics—which is sometimes only another name for intelligent organization—needn't be bad politics unless we make 'em bad. To put it another way, the machine will grind corn or clean up the streets and alleys just as easily as it will grind up men and principles."

The vice-president made a gesture of impatience.

"Come to the point," he urged. "Do you mean to tell me that you can face an investigation by the Supreme Court?"

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"For this one time, Hardwick, I can. For this one time in the history of the Sage-Brush State, the slate—the machine slate—is as clean as the back of your hand. When the court comes to investigate, it will find that every crooked deal in this campaign has had a railroad man or a corporation man at the back of it. Let me tell you what's due to happen. Chief Justice Hemingway had luncheon with me to-day, and he came early enough to give me a quiet hour before we went to table with the ladies. There is going to be an investigation, and some sharp, shrewd young lawyer is going to be appointed by the court to take evidence. When this young man gets to work, every wheel in the machine is going to roll his way. Every bribe you've offered and paid, every false name you've put on the registration lists, every deal you've made with men like Pete Hathaway and McDarragh, has had its witnesses, and by the gods, Hardwick, they'll testify—every man of them!"

Again the vice-president sprang from his chair, but this time it was to walk the floor with his head bowed and his hands in his pockets. The listener in the musicians' gallery found a seat and sat down to let the intoxicating, overwhelming joy of it all have its will of him. In the fulness of time the tramping magnate who had been so crushingly out-generalled in his own chosen field came to stand before the big man, who was still quietly smoking in the sham-Sheraton arm-chair.

"You spoke of the appointment of a special prosecuting attorney, David," he said in a harsh monotone. "Who will it be?"

"You've guessed it already, I reckon. It'll be the boy, Hardwick. Hemingway will appoint him if he is willing to serve."

"He's taken our retainer!" snapped the vice-president.

"Not much, he hasn't! you hired him for wages, and if he wants to resign—he has resigned, by the way—and take another job, I reckon he can do it without breaking any of the Ten Commandments."

"We can't stand for that—you know we can't."

"No; I don't think you can—not as a corporation. Besides the flock of witnesses that we can drum up, he'll have those letters that we were talking about a while back. You missed fire on that, too, Hardwick. What your man dynamited out of Evan's office safe, and what you destroyed, were only clever copies. The real letters were stolen by the boy's friends, and little as you may believe it, the object of that theft was to give you this last chance. The boy was mighty hot under the collar, and we couldn't be sure that he wouldn't start the fireworks before the band was ready to play. He would have started them, too, if his match hadn't been taken away from him."

Mr. McVickar walked around the other end of the table-desk and sat down heavily.

“You’ve spoken twice of a ‘last chance’ David,” he said grittingly. “What is it?”

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"It's the chance I gave you in the beginning. First, let me tell you what I reckon you're already admitting. You're whipped, Hardwick; your slate's broken, and your man Reynolds hasn't a ghost of a show—he nor any of the others on your string. You haven't made a move that we haven't caught onto just about as soon as you put your fingers on the piece you meant to move. For instance, that little box up there in the beaming just over your head—the one that looks as if it were a part of the house electric installation—is a microphone, and one of your own men helped to put it up. We've got copies of every letter and telegram you've dictated since you had this desk dragged out here a week ago Saturday."

"I'm taking all that for granted," was the curt admission.

"Then we'll come down to the nib of the thing and put you out of your misery. You've got two things to do—just two, Hardwick. One of 'em is to clean house and make a good job of it, just like you let Evan believe you were going to do when you sent him out to tell the people of this State a lot of things that you didn't mean to have come true; cut out all the deals, all the private tariffs, all the little preferentials and palm-warmings. When you've done that, you'll find that the other thing will mighty nearly do itself."

"Name it," rasped the magnate.

"It's just merely to take your railroad out of politics in this State, and keep it out. We've had enough of you, McVickar, and more than enough. Is it a bargain?"

"It's a damned one-sided bargain thus far, Blount. What do we get for all this?"

Again the senator chuckled genially. "You may not believe it, but we're going to let you down easy. You do these two things that I've mentioned, and get rid of Kittredge and a few others that have been caught red-handed, and the Supreme Court investigation won't touch your railroad as a corporation—in other words, it'll go after individuals. But you've got to play fair, you know—and bring forth fruits meet for repentance, before the fact. How does that strike you?"

Again the vice-president got up to walk the floor, but this time the deliberative interval was shorter.

"What is the political programme, as you have it figured out, David?" he asked presently.

"It'll be a landslide for us, as I have told you. Gordon will go in by the biggest majority that has ever been rolled up in this State. Dortscher will succeed himself as attorney-general; and by and by, after things have quieted down, he will resign. That will give Gordon the appointment of his successor, and I'm thinking it might be a pretty good thing for you, as well as for the people of the State, if Alec should happen to pick out a bright young fellow who knows your side of the question as well as the people's, and

who is square enough to give you a fair show when it comes to framing up any new railroad legislation.”

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"That will be your son, I suppose?"

"If he'll take it," was the imperturbable rejoinder.

For the third time the vice-president, dying hard, as befitted him, deliberated thoughtfully. At the end of the thoughtful interval he took a cigar from the open box and clamped it between his teeth.

"We trade," he said shortly. And then: "How will you take it—in stock or bonds?"

The Honorable David rose slowly and snapped the cigar ash into the fire.

"I'm right sorry, Hardwick, but this is one time when I reckon we'll have to have what you might call the spot cash. Promises don't go. You're too good a fighter to be allowed to get up merely because you've hollered 'enough.' Come on into your telegraph-shop and let me hear you dictate that string of 'come-off' orders. Then we'll drive to town in my road-car, and you can tip off Kittredge and a few of the other prominent victims by word of mouth, as you'll most likely want to."

For a full minute after the two had left the lobby together Evan Blount sat motionless in the screened orchestra gallery. Then he got up and groped once more for the door-knob. It yielded at his touch, and in the semi-darkness beyond the opening he saw his father's wife with her arms upstretched to him.

"Oh, Evan, dear—am I forgiven?" she asked softly.

"Little mother!" he said, and then he took her face between his hands and kissed her.

* * * * *

When the Honorable David Blount reached the city an hour or more later, and had dropped his passenger at the Railway Club, he found his son waiting for him in the otherwise deserted sitting-room of the Inter-Mountain private suite.

"I couldn't sleep without telling you first, dad," the waiting one broke out. "I've been eavesdropping; I was a listener, unwilling at first, but not afterward, to everything that was said an hour or so ago in the lobby of the little hotel at the head of Shonoho. Do I need to tell you in so many words how deep the plough has gone?"

"I reckon not," was the gentle reply. "Neither do you need to tell me how you came to be out at Shonoho when I thought I'd left you tied hand and foot right here in the hotel." Then, with the quizzical smile wrinkling at the corners of the grave eyes: "How does the political wrestle strike you by this time, son?"

“It strikes me that I haven’t been in it; not even in the outer edges of it. Isn’t that about the size of it?”

“Oh, no; you’ve been doing good work, mighty good work. You’ve helped out in the only way that help could come in this campaign; you’ve stirred up a good, healthy public sentiment in favor of a square deal for everybody. McVickar was fixing to tangle it all up—get the people down on him until they’d simply legislate the life out of his railroad. But he couldn’t see that.”

“He sees it now—the ‘machine’ has made him see it.”

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"Yes. You didn't know that a machine could be put to any really righteous use, did you, boy? But in this campaign it has gone in to knock out the crookedness, big *and* little. Listen, son; you heard what I told McVickar. After you'd sent me that wire from Boston last summer, saying you'd come, I lay awake nights projecting how I'd put you in training for a spell, and then help you into the saddle and make you the boss of the round-up, the same as I'd been. Then it came over me, all of a sudden, that I'd been as crooked as a dog's hind leg—that we'd all been crooked. Not that I've ever taken a dollar for my personal pocket, for I haven't; but I've bought and sold and dickered and schemed with the best of 'em, and the worst of 'em. On top of that, I began to ask myself how I'd like it to see you wallowing in the same old mud-hole, and—well, Evan, boy, you may have a son of your own some day, and then you'll know. I let things rock along until you came; until that first day at Wartrace when you ripped out at me about hewing to the line. Right then and there I made up my mind that I'd put the whole power of the 'machine,' as you call it, into one campaign for a clean election and a square deal."

"Oh, good Lord!" ejaculated the son, "and I've been fighting you and your organization at every turn!"

"Oh, no, you haven't," was the quick rejoinder.

"You've been fighting graft and crookedness, and that's what you thought you were hired to do. As you know now, McVickar wasn't playing quite fair with you. Just the same, you've been in the hands of your friends, right from the start. It's the organization that's been giving you all these chances to preach the gospel of the square deal; it was a shrewd little captain-general of the organization who pushed Hathaway up against you to let you know that the railroad people were running around in the same old circles—hollering for justice, and doing everything under the sun to defeat the ends of justice—muddying the spring because, they say, they don't know what else to do. And, by the way, it was that same little captain-general who put you up against the real thing to-night, without telling me or anybody else what she was going to do."

The younger man left his chair to go to one of the windows where he stood for a moment or two looking down upon the street-lights. When he turned, it was to say: "I'm with you, dad, heart and soul. But you won't mind my saying that I'm still a little bit afraid that you and your kind are a menace to civilization and a free government. You'll let me hang on to that much of my prejudice, won't you?"

"Sure! Hang on to anything you like, son, and say anything you like. Or, rather, let me say something first. How about this 'career' business of Patricia's? Have you fixed that up yet?"

Blount shook his head. "She's going home with her father next week," he said. And then: "Do you know what she did to-day, dad? She ran the little red car into that pine-

tree intentionally—so I couldn't get back here in time to give Judge Hemingway those affidavits, which we both supposed would incriminate you.”

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"Well, God bless her loyal little soul!" exclaimed the Honorable David, and the grave eyes were suspiciously bright. "I hadn't told her a word of what I was trying to do; but, Lord love you, Evan, she knew: you trust a good woman for knowing, every time, son. And now one more thing: Have you come to know Honoria any better in these last few days?"

"Yes; much better, within the last few hours, dad."

"That's good; that does my old heart a heap of good, son! Now then, you go straight off to bed and sleep up some. You've had a mighty hard day for a sick man. To-morrow morning we'll drive out to Wartrace and get ready to touch off the fireworks when the returns trickle in on Tuesday. I tell you, boy, Tuesday's election is going to be a regular old-fashioned, heave-'em-up and keep-'em-a-going land-slide! Good-night, and good dreams—if that cracked head doesn't go and roil 'em all up for you."

XXXI

A LA BONNE HEURE

By some law of contraries, whose workings not even the politically profound can fathom, the election proved the truth of the adage that all signs fail in a dry time by recording itself as one of the quietest and most orderly ever known in the Sage-Brush State. A few editors there were, like Blenkinsop, of *The Plainsman*, who maintained stoutly that it sounded the death-knell of the machine, but there was no gainsaying the result. The "Paramounters" ticket, with or without the help of the machine, was elected by sweeping majorities everywhere; and Gantry, roaming the corridors and lounging-rooms of the Railway Club and reading the bulletins as they were posted, shook his head despairingly over each fresh announcement.

Late in the evening, finding that the senator's party had left the Inter-Mountain the day before to drive to Wartrace, the traffic manager called up the Quaretaro Mesa country-house and poured the news of the *debacle* into Evan Blount's ear.

"We've gone to the everlasting bow-wows, and Mr. McVickar has disappeared, and the end of the world has come," was the way he phrased it for the listening ear; but the word which came back must have been peculiarly heartening, since from that time on to an hour well past midnight Gantry figured hilariously as the self-constituted host of any and all who would be entertained.

At Wartrace Hall there was also rejoicing, albeit of a quieter sort. Five people sat around the cheerful blaze in the library, and when Crowell, whose telegraph instrument was in the adjoining den, had brought the final report from the outlying wards of the capital, he was told to close his key and go to bed.

After the young man had withdrawn, the Honorable David rose to stand with his back to the fire.

“Well, Evan, boy, are all the tangles straightened out for you for keeps, now?” he asked jovially.

“Just about all of them, dad,” laughed the younger man. He had been spending a very happy evening, due less to the triumphant story which had been pouring in over the wires than to the fact that Patricia had been occupying the other half of the small sofa which he had dragged out to face the fire.

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"Don't feel sore because you didn't get the governor you thought you were going to get when you went around preaching the gospel?" said the father, still chuckling.

"We've got a better man and a bigger one, I'm sure," was the quick reply. Then he added: "But I think I am still doubtful about the advisability of injecting the machine principle into politics."

The senator laughed silently.

"Call it 'the organization' instead of 'the machine,' son, and you've named the power that moves the civilized world to-day. Man, the individual, is just about as helpless as a new-born baby. If you want to reform anything, from an unjust poor-law to the tariff, your first move is to rustle up a following; after that, you've got to solidify your bunch of sympathizers into a working organization—in other words, into a machine. Isn't that so, Professor Anners?"

The white-haired professor of palaeontology nodded sleepily. He had been dreaming of the Megalosauridae, and had not heard the question.

"You've heard me called 'the boss' from the time Dick Gantry had his first talk with you back yonder in Massachusetts," the senator went on, turning again to his son. "Call me a man with friends enough to make me a sort of foreman of round-ups in the old home State, and you've got it about right. I don't say that I've always used the power as it ought to be used; the good Lord knows, I'm no more infallible than other folks. You've gone through a heap of trouble and worry because you thought, when you got ready to knock the wedge out of the log, my fingers were going to get caught in the split, along with a lot of others. That would have been true enough any other year but this, I reckon, so you didn't have your fight and your worry for nothing. I've bought and trafficked and bargained and compromised—I don't deny that—but only when it seemed as though the end justified the means. Maybe the end never does justify the means—I'm open to conviction on that. But sometimes it's mighty easy to persuade yourself that it does."

It was just here that the professor awoke with a start and a snort, excused himself abruptly, and stumped off to bed. Mrs. Honoria, sitting under the drop-light and stitching patiently at her bit of stretched linen, laid the tiny embroidery-hoop aside, signalled to her husband, and vanished in her turn. A few minutes after she had gone, the senator crossed from his corner of the fireplace to stand before the two sitting on the little sofa.

"Son," he said gravely, "you've got your work cut out for you from this on, and it's a good-sized job. You're going to have a string of hard fights, one after the other, and there'll be times when you'll long with all your soul for some good, clean-hearted, bright-minded little girl to go to for comfort and counsel. Of course, I know that Patricia, here, has another job, but—"



The Honorable Senator Sage-Brush had been out of sight and hearing for five full minutes when Evan Blount reached over and possessed himself of the hand that was shading a pair of deep-welled eyes from the firelight.

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"Last Sunday afternoon, Patricia, when I had right and reason and logic on my side, your woman's intuition found the truer path," he said, in sober humility. "I know I am only one, and your poor people to whom you have been planning to give yourself are many; still, I am selfish enough to—"

She looked up quickly and the deep-welled eyes were shining.

"We can't learn everything all at once, Evan, dear," she interrupted, breaking in upon his pleading. "There was one moment in that Sunday afternoon when I learned the greatest thing of all; it was the moment when I saw the pine-tree lying across the road and knew what I should do, and for whom I should do it."

"I know," he returned gently. "You learned that love is stronger than death or the fear of death; and that loyalty is greater than many ideals. You heard what my father said just now, and it is true—only he didn't put it half vitally enough; I can't walk in the way he has marked out for me without you, Patricia."

With a swift little love impulse she lifted his hand and pressed it to her cheek.

"You needn't, Evan, dear," she said simply.

THE END

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[Transcribers Note: This section was originally at the beginning of the text.]

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