

HE COMES UP SMILING

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Title: He Comes Up Smiling

Author: Charles Sherman

Release Date: March 14, 2014 [eBook #45136]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HE COMES UP SMILING

Produced by Al Haines.

HE COMES UP SMILING

By
CHARLES SHERMAN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
ARTHUR WILLIAM BROWN

INDIANAPOLIS
THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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BOOKBINDERS AND PRINTERS
BROOKLYN, N. Y.

HE COMES UP SMILING

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HE COMES UP SMILING

CHAPTER I THE BEAUTY CONTEST

"You have a phiz on yer," said the Watermelon with rare candor, "that would make a mangy pup unhappy."

"I suppose you think yer Venus," sneered James, a remark that he flattered himself was rather "classy."

The Watermelon sighed as one would over the ignorance of a child. "No," said he, "hardly."

"Don't let that bloomin' modesty of yers keep yer from tellin' the truth," adjured James.

The Watermelon waved the possibility aside with airy grace. "With all due

modesty, James," said he, "I can't claim to be a woman."

"Not with that hay on yer mug," agreed Mike, casting a sleepy eye upward from where he lay in lazy content in the long, sweet grasses under the butternut tree.

"When I was a kid, I took a prize in a beauty show," announced James, with pardonable pride.

"Swiped it?" asked the Watermelon.

"Dog show?" inquired Mike drowsily, listening to the pleasing drone of a bee in a near-by clump of daisies.

James sat up and ran his fingers with musing regret through the coarse stubble on cheeks and chin. "I was three, I remember, a cute little cuss. My hair was yellow and ma curled it—you know how—all fuzzy—and I had a little white dress on. It was a county fair. I got the first prize for the best lookin' kid and was mugged for the papers. If I was shaved now and had on some glad rags, I'd be a lady killer, all right, all right."

"Longside of me," said the Watermelon, "you'd look like a blear-eyed son of a toad."

"You! Why, you'd make a balky horse run, you would."

"When me hair's cut, I'm a bloomin' Adonis, not Venus," and the Watermelon drew languidly at an old brown pipe, warm and comfortable in the pleasant shade, where soft breezes wandered fitfully by, laden with the odors of the fields in June.

James was skeptical. "Did y' ever take a prize in a beauty show?" he demanded, still musing upon those bygone honors.

"No," admitted the Watermelon. "My old man was a parson, and parsons' kids never have any chance. Besides, I wouldn't care to. Too much like the finest bull in a county fair, or the best laying hen."

"Huh," sneered James. "My folks was of the bon-ton."

"The bon-tons never broke any records in the beauty line," replied the Watermelon. "And the bon-tonnier they are, the uglier."

"Beauty," said James with charming naiveté, "runs in my family."

"It went so fast in the beginning then, yer family never had a chance to catch up," returned the Watermelon. "We'll have a beauty show, just us two."

Inspired by the thought, he sat up to explain, and Mike opened his eyes long enough to look each over with slow scornful derision and a mocking grunt.

James fondled the short stiff hair on his cheeks and chin and waited for developments.

The Watermelon went on. "We will meet this afternoon, here, see? Shaved and with decent duds on. And Mike can pick the winner."

"Mike! He can't tell a sick cat from a well one."

"That's all right. He knows enough to tell the best lookin' one between you and me. A *blind* mug could do that."

"But—"

"We haven't any one else, you mutt. We can't have too much publicity in this show. I dislike publicity any way, at any time, and especially when I have on clothes, borrowed, as you might say, for the occasion. If the gang was here, we could take a vote, but seein' that they ain't, we got to do with what we got."

"I ain't goin' to get in no trouble wid this here burg," declared Mike. "I want a quiet Sunday, some place where I can throw me feet for a bite of grub and not run no fear of the dog's taking one first. See? Besides, it's a decent, law-abidin' burg, God-fearin' and pious; too small to be made unhappy. You want to take somethin' yer own size."

"Aw, who's goin' to hurt the jerkwater town?" demanded the Watermelon with indignation.

"The cost of livin' is goin' up so these days, it's gettin' hard even to batter a handout," groaned Mike, whose idea of true beauty consisted of a full stomach and a shady place to sleep on a long quiet Sunday afternoon. "I ain't goin' to get every place soured on me. If the public gets any more stingy, I'll have to give up de turf for a livin', that's all. To throw a gag will be harder den hod-carryin'."

"We ain't goin' to hurt the burg none," said James.

He rose languidly and stretched. "You be here this afternoon, Mike, about three, see, or I'll knock yer block off. It's a nice quiet hangout and far enough from the village to be safe. I'm goin' to get a shave and borrow some duds from the bloomin' hostelry up yonder to do honor to de occasion." He knocked the ashes from his pipe and slipped it into his pocket. "If you don't get the clothes and de shave, Watermillion, you'll be counted down and out, see?"

"Sure," agreed the Watermelon.

He lay at length on the ground beneath the butternut tree and James paused a moment to run his eye critically over him, from his lean face with its two-weeks' growth of beard to his ragged clumsy shoes. James smiled grimly and drew himself up to his full height with just pride. He was six feet two in shoes that might as well have been stockings for all they added to his height. His shoulders were broad and muscular, with the gentle play of great muscles in perfect condition. His neck, though short, was well shaped and sinewy, not the short thick neck of a prize-fighter or a bull. His hips were narrow and his limbs long and straight. Beneath his open shirt, one saw his bronze throat and huge chest. A splendid specimen of the genus *homo*, for all the rags and tatters that served as clothes.

The Watermelon was a bit shorter, with narrower shoulders, but long-legged, slim, graceful, and under his satiny skin, his muscles slid and rippled with marvelous symmetry. Where James was strong, slow, heavy, he was quick,

lithe, supple. Dissipation had not left its mark, and the hard life of the "road" had so far merely made him fit, an athlete in perfect condition. His features were clean-cut and symmetrical, with a narrow, humorous, good-natured mouth and eyes soft and gray and gentle, the eyes of a dreamer and an idler.

James looked at the slight graceful youth, sprawled in the shade of the butternut tree, and grinned, doubling his huge arms with slow, luxurious pleasure in the mere physical action and watching the rhythmic rise and fall of the great muscles.

"You might get honorable mention in one of these county fairs for the best yoke of oxen," admitted the Watermelon from where he lay at ease.

"There ain't going to be no show," said Mike firmly. "Not if yer have to swipe the duds. I ain't going—"

James showed that he was a true member of the bon-ton. He waved the other to silence with the airy grace of a master dismissing an impudent servant. "There is goin' to be a contest for the just reward of beauty and yer goin' to be here, Mike, and be the judge or y' will have that red-headed block of yours knocked into kindlin' wood."

Mike was fat and red-headed and dirty. His soul loathed trouble and longed for quiet with the ardor of an elderly spinster. "No, I ain't," said he, in a vain struggle for peace. "I ain't goin' to hang around here until you blokes swipe the rags and come back wid de cops after yer."

"There ain't no cops around this place, you mutt," contradicted the Watermelon with the delicate courtesy of the road.

"There's a sheriff—"

"Sheriffs," interrupted James coldly, "ain't never around until the job's done."

"Sunday," added the Watermelon, from knowledge gained by past experience, "is the best time to swipe anything. No one is lookin' for trouble that day and so they don't find it, see?"

"Sure," agreed James. "Every one's feelin' warm and good and stuffed, and when yer feel good yerself, yer won't believe any one is bad. You know how it is, Mike. When yer feelin' comfortable, yer can't understand why the devil we ain't comfortable."

"Well, why the devil ain't yer?" demanded Mike. "I ain't takin' all the shade er all the earth, am I? Lie down and be quiet. What do yer want a beauty show for?"

"Aw, stow it!" snapped the Watermelon.

"Yes, I'll stow it all right when we're all sent to the jug. I tell yer I ain't fit to work. The last time I got pinched, I pretty near croaked. I wasn't made to work."

"We ain't going to get pinched," said James. "You make more talk over two

suits of clothes—”

”It ain’t the clothes. It’s the damn fool notion of swipin’ ’em and then comin’ right back here, and not makin’ no get-away—”

”This hang-out is more than four miles from the burg, you galoot,” sneered the Watermelon. ”No one would think of coppin’ us here. They’ll go to the next town, or else watch the railroads—”

”But they might—”

”Might what? Might be bloomin’ fools like you.”

”Where are you goin’ to be shaved?”

”In a barber shop,” said James mildly. ”You probably favor a lawn-mower, but personally I prefer a barber.”

”Yes,” wailed Mike, ”go to a barber shop and let every guy in town get his lamps on yer—”

”You’re gettin’ old, Mike, me boy, and losin’ yer nerve,” said James. He stretched and yawned. ”Well, I’m off before church time or the barbers will be closed. Remember, Mike, this afternoon, between four and five.”

He pulled his clothes into place, adjusted his hat at the most becoming angle and started up the narrow woodland path, whistling gaily through his teeth. As he disappeared among the trees, the far-off sound of church bells stole to them on the quiet of the Sabbath morning.

CHAPTER II

A CLOSE SHAVE

The Watermelon climbed the stone wall and paused a moment to view his surroundings. The road wound up the hill from the village nestling at its foot and dipped again out of sight farther on. On all sides were the hills, falling rocky pasture lands, rising to orchards or woods, and now and then a farmhouse. It was summer, glad, mad, riotous summer. The sky was a deep, deep blue, with here and there a drifting, snow-white cloud. The fields were gay with buttercups and daisies, and wild roses nodded shyly at him from the briers along the roadside. In the leafy recesses of the trees, the birds twitted and sang. A little gray squirrel peered at him from the limb close by and then scampered off with a whisk of its bushy tail. A brook laughed and tumbled under a slender bridge across the road.

The Watermelon was a vagabond in every fiber of his long graceful self.

The open places, the sweep of the wind, the call of the birds, the rise and fall of the hills, hiding the fascinating "beyond," found unconscious harmony with his nature. As a captive animal, given a chance for freedom, makes for the nearest timber; as a cat, in a strange neighborhood, makes for the old, familiar attic, so the Watermelon sought the country, the peace and freedom and space where a man can be a man and not a manikin.

He paused a moment now, in perfect contentment with the world and himself, while up the valley, over the hills, through the sun-warmed air, borne on the breath of the new-mown fields came the sound of distant church bells, softly, musically, soothingly. Slipping from the wall, he set out for the village below in the valley, where the road wound steeply down.

The village boasted but one barber shop, a quiet, little, dusty-white, one-room affair, leaning in timid humility against the protecting wall of the only other public building in town, drygoods, grocery and butcher shop in one. The church bells had stopped for some time when the Watermelon turned into the wide empty street, and strolled carelessly up to the faded red, white and blue pole of Wilton's Tonsorial Parlor. In its Sunday calm the whole village seemed deserted. A few of the bolder spirits who had outgrown apron strings and not yet been snared in any one's bonnet strings, had remained away from church and foregathered in the seclusion of the barber shop. The Watermelon regarded them a moment through the window as he felt carelessly in his pockets for the coins that were never there. It was a quiet crowd, well brushed hair, nicely polished boots and freshly shaved faces. They were reading the sporting news of Saturday's papers and ogling any girl, fairly young and not notoriously homely, who chanced to pass. The barber was cleaning up after his last customer and talking apparently as much to himself as to any one. Convinced of what he knew was so, that he had no money, the Watermelon pushed open the door and entered.

"Hello," said he.

"Hello," said the barber.

All the papers were lowered and all conversation stopped as each man turned and scanned the new-comer with an interest the Watermelon modestly felt was caused by some event other than his own entry. He surmised that James had probably been there before him, and the next words of the barber confirmed his surmise.

That dapper little man scanned him coldly, from the rakish tip of his shabby hat to the nondescript covering on his feet which from force of habit he called shoes, and spoke with darkly veiled sarcasm:

"I suppose you are a guest from the hotel up to the lake?"

The Watermelon grinned. He recognized James' favorite role. "No," said he cheerfully, "I'm John D., and me car is waiting without."

"A guest up to the hotel," repeated the barber, upon whom James had evidently made a powerful impression. "Just back from a two weeks' camping and fishing trip—"

"No," said the Watermelon. "I don't like fishing, baiting the hook is such darned hard work."

"Just back," went on the barber, still quoting, his soul yet rankling with the deceit of man. "Look like a tramp, probably—"

"Am one," grinned the Watermelon.

"And you thought you would get a shave as you passed through the village, wouldn't dare let your wife see you—"

"Say," interrupted the Watermelon wearily, "what are you giving us? Did any one bunko you out of a shave with that lingo?"

"Yes," snapped the barber. "About an hour ago a feller blew in here and said all that. He talked well and I shaved him. He said he had sent his camping truck on to the hotel by his team; he had stopped off to get a shave. I shaved him and then he found he hadn't any money in his old clothes—but he would send it right down—oh, yes—the moment he got to the hotel. It ain't come and Harry, there, says there ain't no one up to the hotel like that. Harry's the porter."

"Sure," said Harry importantly. "I passed the feller as I was coming down and there ain't any one like him to the hotel."

The Watermelon laughed heartily. "A hobo, eh? Bunkoed you for fair. You fellers oughtn't to be so dog-goned easy. Get wise, get wise!"

"We are wise now," said the barber ruefully, and added sternly, "If you want a shave, you've got to show your money first."

"Sure, I want a shave," said the Watermelon, and carelessly rattled a few old keys he carried in his pocket. They jingled with the clink of loose coins and were pleasing to the ear if not so much to the touch. "I came here for a shave, but I pay for what I want, see? Say, I'll bet that feller busted your cash register," and he nodded pleasantly toward the new shiny receiver of customs on the shelf near the looking-glass.

The remark brought an agreeable thrill of excited expectation to all save the barber. He shook his head with boundless faith in his new possession. "I bought that just last week and the drummer said it was practically thief proof."

"Do you want to bet?" asked the Watermelon. "All there is in the register, huh? Even money," and he jingled the keys in his pocket.

"Naw," said the barber. "I know he couldn't have robbed it. It's impossible, even if the thing could be robbed, which it can't be. I was right here all the time."

"It's near the lookin'-glass," said the Watermelon. "He went close to the counter to see himself, didn't he?"

The Watermelon knew vanity as James' one weakness and realized with

what pleasure he himself would stand before the mirror and gaze fondly at his own charms, uncontaminated by a shaggy, two-weeks' growth of beard.

"Yes," admitted the barber slowly. "He did look at himself for a long time."

"And some of the time your back was turned," added the Watermelon. "You were probably cleaning up or looking for a whisk."

"Yes," admitted the barber again, still more reluctantly. "But nobody can bust into one of them cash registers, not without a noise that would be heard across the room."

"I'll bet he did," said the Watermelon. "Do you take me?"

"But they can't be busted," reiterated the barber.

"Then why the devil don't you bet?" demanded the Watermelon. "You are bettin' on a sure thing."

"Yes, go on. Don't be scared," encouraged Wilton's gay youth in joyful chorus.

The barber started for his precious register, but the Watermelon reached it first and laid his hand on it.

"Do you take me?" he asked. "You have to say that before you can count the change or the bet's—Say, is that the galoot?" he nodded suddenly toward the window and all turned quickly, instinctively, to look up the village street. The Watermelon hastily thrust a thin comb between the bell and the gong so it would not ring as he gently pressed the twenty-five cent key, registering another quarter, then he joined the others, pushing and struggling to see the man who did not pass, and gazed languidly over their heads.

"There ain't no one there," exclaimed the barber.

"He's passed out of sight," said the Watermelon, making a feeble attempt to see up the street. "He was almost by as I saw him."

"Do you take me?" he asked, as they returned to the counter and the subject of the cash register. His hands were in his pockets and occasionally he jingled the keys.

"Aw, go on," urged Harry, who was a sport. "What are you afraid of?"

"He couldn't have picked it," insisted the barber, whose faith in his register was really sublime.

"Sure he could. They are easy to a guy who knows the ropes," declared the Watermelon. "The drummer was handing you a lot of hot air when he said they can't be picked. You don't want to be so easy."

The slur on his mental capacity was too much for the barber. His vanity rose in defense of his register where his faith had failed. "I have some brains," he snorted. "I know the thing is perfectly safe. Yes, I take you."

He started to open the register, but the Watermelon objected. "Here," he cried, "let Harry do it. I'm not wanting to be bunkoed out of me hard-earned

lucre." And he lovingly rattled the keys in his pockets.

Harry and the others stepped forward.

"How much has been registered?" asked the Watermelon.

Harry drew forth the strip of paper and after a few moments of mental agony, confused by the different results each obtained as all peered eagerly over his shoulder, he finally arrived at the correct answer, three dollars and sixty cents. It was Sunday and shaving day for the male quarter of the population.

"Three, sixty," announced Harry in some trepidation, lest he be flatly and promptly corrected.

The barber reached for the slip and added it on his own account. "Three, sixty," he agreed, and sighed.

"Count the cash," ordered the Watermelon, and Harry counted, slowly, carefully, laboriously, and the rest counted with him, more or less audibly.

When the last coin had been counted, there was a moment of puzzled silence. The Watermelon broke it.

"Three, thirty-five," said he. "What did I tell you?"

"Here," snapped the barber, "let me count it."

He pushed Harry aside and again all counted as the barber passed the coins. Quarters, dimes, nickels and pennies, the last one was lingeringly laid on the pile and the sum was lacking a quarter to make it complete according to the registered slip.

"Three dollars and thirty-five cents," said the Watermelon again, like the voice of doom.

"Well, I vum!" exclaimed Harry.

"How'd he do it?" asked the grocer's son, with an eye out for possibly similar emergencies nearer home.

The Watermelon shrugged. "I don't know," said he. "Can't do it myself, but the fellers in the cities have gotten so they can open 'em the minute the clerk turns his back. They can do it without any noise, too, and so quick you can't catch 'em. I'll be hanged if I know how they do it."

Again the barber counted the change, again he totaled the numbers on the registered slip. They would not agree. That painful lack of a quarter could not be bridged.

"He said it was automatic bookkeeping," moaned the barber, glaring at the slip that would register nothing less than three dollars and sixty cents.

"The bookkeeping's all right," said the Watermelon, "it's the money that ain't."

He gathered up the coins, slowly, lovingly, and the barber turned away from the painful sight.

"Do you want a shave?" he asked crossly.

The Watermelon sank gracefully into the chair. "It's hard luck," said he sympathetically, "but you oughtn't to be so easy. Get wise, get wise."

CHAPTER III

ENTER MR. BATCHELOR

With hair nicely cut, face once more as smooth as a boy's, and three dollars and ten cents in his pocket, the Watermelon gazed fondly at himself in the glass and felt sorry for James. He gently patted his hair, wet, shiny and smelling of bay rum, arranged his hat with great nicety at just the graceful angle he preferred as doing the most justice to his charms, and sallied forth to look for a suit of clothes. He had scanned critically those he had encountered in the barber shop with an eye to future possession, but none of them, at least what he had been able to see of them, the coat having generally been conspicuous by its absence, had pleased him. They had the uncompromising cut of the country and the Watermelon felt that the attractions that gazed back at him from the mirror were worthy of something better. He had a vague fancy for light gray with a pearl-colored waistcoat and purple socks—a suit possessing the gentle folds and undulations of the city, not the scant, though sturdy, outlines of the country. The hotel seemed the best place to look for what he wanted, so he turned in that direction.

The hotel was several miles from the village. Its gables and chimneys could be seen rising in majestic aloofness from the woods on a distant hillside. The Watermelon paused where the road dipped down again into the valley and ran his eye over the intervening landscape. By the road, it would be at least five miles; through the woods, the distance dwindled to about three. The Watermelon took to the woods. They became thicker at every step, the quiet and shade deeper and deeper. A bird's call echoed clear and sweet as though among the pillars of some huge grotto. A brook laughed between its mossy banks, tumbling into foamy little waterfalls over every boulder that got in its path. The Watermelon determined to follow the brook, sure that in the end it would lead him to the hotel. City people had a failing for brooks and no hotel management would miss the chance of having one gurgling by, close at hand. The brook grew wider and wider, and through a break in the trees the Watermelon saw a lake, disappearing in the leafy distance. He heard a splash and saw the shiny white body of a man rise for one joyful moment from the green depths ahead and then dive from sight

with another cool splash.

The Watermelon decided from habit to get a better view of the lonely swimmer before he let his own presence become known. He slipped into the bushes and slowly wriggled his way to the little glade. The lake was bigger than at first appeared. It turned and twisted through the woods and was finally lost from view around a small promontory. The trees grew nearly to the water's edge, a dense protecting wall to one who wished to sport in nature's solitude, garbed in nature's simple clothing. The lake was too far from the hotel to have been annexed as one of the attractions of that hostelry. All this the Watermelon noticed at a glance. He also noticed that the man swimming in the cool brown depths, with long easy strokes, was alone and a stranger. The Watermelon looked for the clothes and found them on a log, practically at his feet.

In everything but color, they fulfilled his dream of what raiment should be like. Instead of the pale gray he rather favored, the suit was brown, a light brown, with a tiny green stripe, barely visible, intertwined with a faint suggestion of red, forming a harmonious whole that was vastly pleasing to the Watermelon's æsthetic senses. In the matter of socks, he realized that the stranger had not taken the best advantage of his opportunity. Instead of being red or green to lend character to the delicate suggestion of those colors found in the suit, they were a soft dun brown. There was a tie of the same shade and a silk negligée shirt of white with pale green stripes. The owner was clearly a young man of rare taste, unhampered by a vexatious limitation of his pocket-book.

He could be seen swimming slowly and luxuriously in the little lake, perfectly contented, unconscious that some one besides the woodpeckers and the squirrels was watching him. The swimmer's strokes had quickened and the Watermelon perceived that he was swimming straight up the lake with the probable intention of rounding the promontory and exploring the farther lake. When he disappeared, the Watermelon quickly, carefully, gathered up the clothes and likewise disappeared.

The swimmer was a big man and the clothes as good a fit as one could look for under the circumstances. They set off the Watermelon's long, lean figure to perfection, and the hat, a soft and expensive panama, lent added distinction. The Watermelon removed the three dollars and ten cents and the keys from his own pockets, and making a bundle of his cast-off dollies, stuffed them out of sight in a hollow log, where later he could return and find them. It was just as well to leave the stranger a practical captive in nature's depths until the beauty show was pulled off. After that event, he would return, and if the stranger was amenable to reason, he could have his good clothes back, but if he acted put out at all, for punishment he would have to accept the Watermelon's glorious attire.

Clean-shaven, well-clothed, there was no longer any need for him to go

to the hotel, unless he wished to dine there. If the devotee of nature, back in the swimming pool, was a stranger in these parts and not a guest at the hotel, the Watermelon felt that he could do this with pleasure and safety. It was after twelve, and his ever-present desire to eat was becoming too pronounced to be comfortable. It would be a fitting climax to a highly delightful morning to have dinner, surrounded by gentle folk again, for the Watermelon came of a gentle family. He had no fear, for some time at least, of the owner of the borrowed clothes making himself unnecessarily conspicuous. But, on the other hand, if he were a guest at the hotel, the clothes would probably be recognized and murder be the simplest solution of their change of owners. Still, reasoned the Watermelon, with a shrewd guess at the truth, if he were a guest, it was hardly likely that he would be swimming alone in the isolated pond, in the bathing suit designed by nature. The clothes hardly indicated a young man of a serious turn of mind, who would seek the wooded solitudes in preference to the vivacious society of his kind to be found in a big hotel.

The wood ended abruptly at a stone wall. There was a road beyond the wall, and beyond the road, another stone wall and more woods. It was a narrow woodland road, a short cut to the hotel. It wound its way out of sight, up a hill, through the pines. It was grass-grown and shady and the trees met overhead. Sweetbrier and wild roses grew along the stone walls, while gay little flowers and delicate ferns ventured out into the road itself, and with every passing breeze nodded merrily from the ruts of last winter's wood hauling. By the side of the road, like a glaring anachronism, a variety theater in Paradise, a vacuum cleaner among the ferns and daisies, stood a huge red touring car with shining brass work and raised top. No one was anywhere in sight and the Watermelon climbed into the tonneau and leaned comfortably back in the roomy depths.

"Home, Henry," said he languidly to an imaginary chauffeur.

A honk, honk behind him answered. He leaned from the car and saw another turn into the road and come toward him. It was a touring car, big and blue. An elderly gentleman, fat, serious, important, was at the wheel. Beside him sat a lady, and a chauffeur languished in the tonneau.

"Hello, Thomas," called the old gentleman with the affability of a performing elephant, addressing the Watermelon by the name of his car, as is the custom of the road.

"Hello, William," answered the Watermelon, wondering why they called him Thomas.

The old gentleman flushed angrily and the lady laughed, a delightful laugh of girlish amusement. The Watermelon smiled.

"We are a Packard," explained the old gentleman stiffly.

"Are you?" said the Watermelon, wholly unimpressed by the information.

"Well, I ain't a Thomas."

"I called you by the name of your car," said the old gentleman. "I surmise that you have not had one long."

"I don't feel as if I owned it now," the Watermelon admitted.

The old gentleman smiled genially. Anything was pardonable but flippancy in response to his own utterances, none of which was ever lacking in weight or importance. The young man, it seemed, was only ignorant.

"Are you in trouble?" he asked with a gleam of anticipated pleasure in his eyes. To tinker with a machine and accomplish nothing but a crying need for an immediate bath was his dearest recreation.

"No," said the Watermelon, thinking of the three, ten, in the pocket of the new clothes and of the lonely swimmer. "I ain't—yet."

The old gentleman was vaguely disappointed. "Can you run your machine?" he asked, hopeful of a reply in the negative.

"No," said the Watermelon.

"Won't go, eh?" The old gentleman turned off the power in his car and stepped forth, agilely, joyfully, prepared to do irreparable damage to the stranger's car. He drew off his gloves and slipped them into his pocket, then for a moment he hesitated.

"Where is your chauffeur?"

"I haven't one," said the Watermelon.

The old gentleman disapproved. "Until you know more about your machine, you should have one," said he oratorically. "I am practically an expert, and yet I always take mine with me."

He waved aside any comment on his own meritorious conduct and foresight and turned to the machine. "There is probably something the matter with the carburetor," said he, and raised the hood.

"Probably," admitted the Watermelon, alighting and peering into the engine beside the old gentleman.

"Father," suggested the lady gently, "maybe you had better let Alphonse—"
Alphonse, sure of the reply, made no move to alight and assist.

The old gentleman, with head nearly out of sight, peering here and there, tapping this and sounding that, replied with evident annoyance. "Certainly not, Henrietta. I am perfectly capable—"

His words trailed off into vague mutterings.

The Watermelon glanced at the lady, girl or woman, he was not sure which. Between thirty and thirty-five, the unconquerable youth of the modern age radiated from every fold of her dainty frock, from the big hat and graceful veil. Her hair was soft and brown and thick, her mouth was rather large, thin-lipped and humorous, and yet pathetic, the mouth of one who laughs through tears, see-

ing the piteous, so closely intermingled with the amusing. Her eyes were brown, clever, with delicate brows and a high smooth forehead. The Watermelon decided that she was not pretty, but distinctly classy. She was watching him with amused approval, oddly mingled with wistfulness, for the Watermelon was young and tall and graceful, good-looking and boyish. His man's mouth and square chin were overtopped by his laughing woman's eyes, soft and gentle and dreaming, a face that fascinated men as well as women. And he was young and she was—thirty-five. He smiled at the friendliness he saw in her eyes and turned to the old gentleman, who was now thoroughly absorbed.

"I need a monkey-wrench," said he. "I thought at first that there was something the matter with the carburetor, but think now that it must be in the crank shaft assembly."

"Oh, yes," agreed the Watermelon vaguely, and got the wrench from the tool-box as directed.

"I—I think that maybe you had better let us tow you to some garage," said the lady timorously, her voice barely audible above the old gentleman's noisy administrations.

"Search me," returned the Watermelon, standing by to lend assistance with every tool from the box in his arms or near by where he could reach it instantly at an imperious command.

"Automobiles," said the lady, "are like the modern schoolmarms, always breaking down."

"Like hoboos," suggested the Watermelon, "always broke."

The old gentleman straightened up. "There is something the matter with the gasolene inlet valve," he announced firmly.

"The whole car must be rotten," surmised the Watermelon, catching the oil-can as it was about to slip from his already over-burdened hands.

"No, no," returned the old gentleman reassuringly, as he buttoned his long linen cluster securely. "The crank shaft seems to be all right, but the—"

He knelt down, still talking, and the Watermelon had a horrible fear for a moment that his would-be benefactor was about to offer up prayers for the safety of the car. He reached out his hand to stay proceedings, when the old gentleman spoke:

"I must get under the car."

"Maybe it's all right," suggested the Watermelon, who did not like the idea of being forced to go after him with the tools.

"Father," the lady's voice was gentle, but firm, and the old gentleman paused. "Let Alphonse go. You know we are to dine with the Bartletts. Alphonse, please find out what the trouble is."

Alphonse alighted promptly. He was a thin, dapper little man with a blasé

superiority that was impressive as betokening a profound knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of motor-cars. He plainly had no faith in the old gentleman's diagnosis. He approached the car and announced the trouble practically at once.

"There is no gasolene."

The old gentleman was not in the least perturbed over his own slight error in judgment. "A frequent, very frequent oversight," said he, rising. "We will tow you to the hotel, my dear sir. You can get the gasolene there."

"Never mind," said the Watermelon. "I can hoof it."

"Hoof it!" The old gentleman was pained and hurt. "Hoof it, when I have my car right here! No, indeed. Alphonse, get the rope."

The Watermelon protested. "Aw, really, you know—"

"Weren't you going to the hotel?"

"I was thinking some of it. But the car—"

"Alphonse, get the rope. It will be a pleasure. We have always got to lend assistance to a broken car. We may be in the same fix ourselves some day."

Alphonse brought the rope and the Watermelon watched them adjust it. When the last knot was tied to the old gentleman's liking, he turned to the Watermelon and presented him with his card. The Watermelon took it and read the name, "Brig.-General Charles Montrose Grossman, U.S.A., Retired." Then, not to be outdone, he reached in the still unexplored pockets of his new clothes with confident ease, and finding a pocket-book drew it forth, opened it on the mere chance that there would be a card within, found one and presented it to the general with lofty unconcern, trusting that the general and the owner of the clothes were not acquainted.

"William Hargrave Batchelor," read the general aloud, while his round fat face beamed with pleasure. "I have heard about you, sir, and am glad to make your acquaintance."

The Watermelon grasped the extended hand and wrung it with fervor. "The pleasure is all mine," said he with airy grace and sublime self-assurance.

"Let me present you to my daughter. Henrietta, this is young Mr. Batchelor of New York. You have read about him, my dear, in the papers. He broke the cotton ring on Wall Street last week. You may remember. Miss Grossman, Mr. Batchelor."

The girl put out her hand and the Watermelon shook it. Her hand was slender and white, soft as velvet and well cared for. The Watermelon's was big and brown and coarse, and entirely neglected as to the nails. Henrietta noticed it with fastidious amusement. William Hargrave Batchelor was not in her estimation, formed from the little she had read about him in the papers, a gentleman. He had started life as a newsboy on the streets of New York, and doubtless had not had his suddenly acquired wealth long enough to be familiar with the small

niceties of life. Besides, he was so young and so good-looking, one could forgive him a great deal more than dirty nails.

"You hardly look as old as I imagined you to be from the papers," declared the general, regarding a bit enviously the youth who had made millions in a few short weeks by a sensational stroke of financial genius.

"I have a young mug," explained the Watermelon modestly.

The general looked a bit startled. Henrietta laughed. She had always wanted to meet a man in the making.

"I hope that if you have no other engagement, you will dine with us," said she.

"Certainly," cried the general. "Have you a previous appointment?"

"With myself," said the Watermelon. "To dine."

"You will dine with us," declared the general, and that settled it. "Get into my car. Alphonse will steer yours."

The Watermelon made one last protest against highway robbery in broad daylight, but the general waved him to silence and the Watermelon decided that if they wished to make off with the stranger's car it was no fault of his. He had done his best to stop it. He climbed into the general's car, the general cranked up and they were off, Alphonse and the Thomas car trailing along behind.

CHAPTER IV AND WHEN I DINE

Henrietta turned sidewise that she might the better converse with her guest.

"I noticed by the papers that you always make it a point to spend Sundays in the country somewhere near New York, so that you can return quickly in your car. I suppose that you really need the rest and quiet for your week's work."

"I never work when I can rest," said the Watermelon truthfully.

"That's right, that's right," agreed the general, torn between a desire to talk to the phenomenal young financier, who in one night had set New York all agog, and to avoid a smash-up with the stone walls on either side of the road. "Men are altogether too eager to make money."

"Yes," said Henrietta. "Everything nowadays is money, money, money." Then remembering who her guest was, she added quickly, "I think it is splendid in your getting away from it all and spending one day a week in the country, close

to nature. They say that stock-brokers are never happy away from the Street.”

”But I am not a stock-broker,” explained the Watermelon, with his candid, boyish smile. ”I’m a lamb.”

Henrietta laughed. ”But not fleeced,” said she gaily.

”Not yet,” admitted the Watermelon, wondering if William Hargrave Batchelor was still enjoying his swim.

”What you want to do, now that you have made your ’pile,” advised the general, as the machine swerved dangerously near a tree, ”is to leave the Street at once. Invest your money in U.S. government bonds and buy a place in the country.”

”You don’t like the country yourself, father, except in the summer,” objected Henrietta.

”That’s all right, my dear, but when a man has three millions invested in government bonds, he does not have to spend all of his life in the country. Your last deal brought you three millions, I believe the papers said?” Never before had the general discussed a friend’s private affairs with such sylvan frankness and interest, with such complete unconsciousness of his own rudeness, but the youth who had risen one night from the obscurity of New York’s multitude to a position of importance in the greatest money market in the world appeared to the general in the light of a public character, and as he would have discussed aviation with the Wright brothers, the North Pole with Peary, so now he discussed money with the Watermelon.

”Three, ten,” chuckled the Watermelon.

”Ah, yes,” sighed the general. Money is power and every man wants power. The general was old, without the time, training or opportunity to make money, while this long-legged youth with the ridiculous woman’s eyes, sat on the back seat and babbled lightly of millions as the general could hardly do of thousands.

”Ah, yes, three millions. Have you ever lived in the country?”

”Oh, off and on,” said the Watermelon.

”I suppose you are fond of it or you wouldn’t come up here every Sunday,” went on the general, missing the wall on the right by a fraction of an inch. ”Do you care for fishing?”

”If the bites ain’t too plentiful.”

Henrietta laughed. ”You can’t do it, Mr. Batchelor,” said she.

”Do what?” asked the Watermelon, leaning forward. The Watermelon never lacked self-assurance under any circumstances, and before a pretty girl it merely grew in adverse ratio to the girl’s years and in direct ratio to her good looks. Henrietta was not pretty, but she had charm and grace and good breeding, and a combination of the three sometimes equals prettiness.

”Make us believe that you are as lazy as you are trying to.”

"If I can't do it, I won't try," laughed the Watermelon. "But you can't do it, either."

"Do what?"

"Make me believe that you are the general's daughter," returned the Watermelon, letting his voice fall, gently and softly. The general was busy at that moment preventing the car from climbing a tree and trying to decide between Maine and Virginia as the best place for the Watermelon to invest in his country estate. Personally, he preferred Maine in summer and Virginia in winter. Was it therefore preferable to roast in summer and be comfortable in winter, or to freeze in winter and enjoy yourself in summer?

"Don't I look like him?" asked Henrietta, wishing that she had not made the conversation quite so personal thus early in their acquaintance.

"You look like him," admitted the Watermelon, "but—"

Henrietta laughed faintly. "You wouldn't take me for his sister, would you?" she questioned, fearing he would say yes. William Hargrave Batchelor had spent his youth peddling papers and blacking boots. A frank disregard for all social graces and hypocrisies was doubtless one of his most pronounced characteristics. The little social amenities would hardly be required in the strenuous existence of newsboy and boot-black.

"For his granddaughter," said the Watermelon.

"Of course," said the general, aloud, "Maine has fine shooting in winter."

"None of Maine for mine," declared the Watermelon conclusively. "Maine is a prohibition state."

The general frowned. "You don't drink, I hope, young man?"

"Drink," said the Watermelon, making Henrietta think unreasonably of a minister, "Drink causes a psychological condition which each man should experience to obtain a clear insight into the normal condition of the mind." He paused impressively and Henrietta felt almost compelled to say "Amen," for what reason she did not know. "But," added the youth in the solemn tones of the benediction, "when I get—lit, I like to do it on whisky and not poison."

The general who had intended a scathing reply, and firm but gentle counsel to lead back to the narrow path this promising young man hovering on the brink of ruin, with all his glorious possibilities, found himself agreeing.

The car had reached the top of the steep hill, and suddenly left the trees, the narrow, woodland road, with the columbine and wild roses nodding at them from the underbrush, and swept out on to a wide, well-kept driveway, with smooth rolling lawns on each side and a majestic white building as a crowning glory on the top of the hill.

Grandview did not belie its name. High on the topmost ridge, it looked over valley and woods and streams, beyond to farther hills, peak after peak, range af-

ter range, fading into a blue shadow against the sky. It was a big, square, garish building, gaunt and unlovely among its lovely surroundings. There were two porches, one up-stairs and one below. They were filled with chairs and gay, brightly fringed hammocks. Behind the hotel was a stable and garage, white and gaunt and square like the main building.

It was the dinner hour and in the country there is never any need to urge one to the table. So, save for a man and a girl, waiting on the steps, there was no one in sight.

"There are the Bartletts now," cried Henrietta, as the train of cars approached the porch. "Poor dears, we have kept them waiting."

"I wonder," said the Watermelon, "why a guy always gets so hungry on Sunday."

"Nothing else to do," suggested Henrietta, "but eat."

The car stopped and she started to alight but the Watermelon was before, offering his hand with a grace bred of absolute unconsciousness of self.

"Alphonse can take your car to the garage and fill it with gasolene," said the general. He always felt that after he had done his best to put a car out of order for good, he practically owned the car and its owner.

"Aw, don't bother," protested the Watermelon.

"Tush, tush, man, it is no bother," and the general turned to the coldly respectful Alphonse.

Henrietta had started toward the steps and the Watermelon turned to follow her, when he saw *her* standing on the top step, looking straight at him across Henrietta's shoulder. His first impulse was to stand and stare, his second, to turn and run back to Mike and James and his old clothes, his third, which he followed blindly, was to stumble forward, hat in hand, not from any respect for woman in the abstract, but just for her, her tiny feet, her small white teeth, her dimple. She would not come up to his shoulder by at least six inches, she was very slender, and in her high-waisted, yellow frock, she seemed a mere wisp of a girl. Her hair and eyes were brown, her cheeks flushed like the petals of an apple blossom. She had a crooked little smile that brought a single dimple in one soft cheek. Her hat was a big, flapping affair, covered with buttercups and daisies.

The Watermelon, gazing at her, forgot everything, Henrietta, dinner, the general. He stared and she stared back. The brown suit with the pale green stripe and the faint suggestion of red, lent an undeniable improvement to the broad shoulders and long limbs of the graceful Watermelon. The admirable shave and hair-cut the village barber had given him in exchange for his own quarter, revealed the square-cut chin and the good-natured, careless mouth of the born ne'er-do-well. Under the brim of the soft expensive panama, were his woman's eyes, now tragic and unhappy, for who was he but a tramp, a frequenter of the

highways and back streets, an associate of James and Mike?

"Billy," said Henrietta, "we have had an adventure and picked up another guest. Miss Bartlett, Mr. Batchelor."

"Were you part of the adventure?" asked Billy, holding out her hand.

"Yes," said the Watermelon, incapable of further speech.

Henrietta presented him to Mr. Bartlett, a stout, red-faced gentleman of middle age. Wealth, success, self-complacency radiated from him like the rays of the sun. He grasped the hard brown hand of the Watermelon and looked the young man up and down, noticing the pin in his tie, the panama and the silk socks without seeming fairly to notice the man.

"William Hargrave Batchelor?" he murmured questioningly.

"The same," answered the general heartily, feeling that he had done something praiseworthy in capturing the young man. He drew off his gloves and beamed at the Watermelon.

"He is a young one to beat us, Bartlett. We ought to be Oslerized."

Bartlett's eyes gleamed and he shook the Watermelon's hand with renewed pleasure. "Youth," said he oratorically, "is hard to beat, General, but we aren't deaduns yet. I have had an occasional try at the Street, myself, Mr. Batchelor. You may have heard of me."

"Oh, yes," said the Watermelon absent-mindedly, thinking of the girl with the single dimple and the turned-up nose.

"Father took me, once," said Billy. "It was terrible. Are you a broker, Mr. Batchelor?"

"Haven't you read yesterday's papers, Billy?" exclaimed Henrietta.

"I never read the papers," admitted Billy, with a charming smile. "Just the front page head-lines, sometimes."

"He was there," laughed the general. "In inch-high print. He broke the cotton ring, my dear." The general's tone was full of reflected glory as the host of the great man.

"Oh," cried Billy, "that's where father lost so much. He told me this morning, just as we left the house—"

Bartlett glanced sharply at the Watermelon and interrupted Billy with a laugh. "You get everything wrong, my dear," said he, tweaking her ear. "I said a good deal of money had been lost—"

"But, papa," protested Billy, "you said—"

"Come to dinner, everybody, please," interrupted Henrietta, in response to an appealing glance from Bartlett. "I am starving whether you others are or not."

"We had better," cried the general jocularly, "or this young man will become a bear instead of a bull." He laid his hand affectionately on the Watermelon's

shoulder and walked down the hall with it resting there.

CHAPTER V

A PLAN AND A TELEGRAM

The big, cool dining-room, with tall palms and plants, snowy tables and gleaming silver, the crowd of well-dressed people, the talk and laughter, and the obsequious, hurrying waiters, was not a new experience to the Watermelon. For one short, painful week, he had essayed to be a waiter and had finally seen the folly of his ways and given it up after he had broken more china than his wages, which were withheld, could cover. His complete indifference as to what people thought of him made him entirely at his ease, while his scattered wits were coming back with a rush and his colossal self-assurance was growing every moment he was in the society of the charming Billy.

"I was a hash-slinger once," said he, gazing at her across the table.

Her small nose wrinkled with pleasure and the single dimple flashed forth and was gone.

"That's right," said the general, who grew more fond of his guest with every passing remark. "Don't be ashamed of the past just because you have money now."

"You blacked boots, too, I believe?" questioned Bartlett, the results of that unfortunate cotton deal he had participated in still rankling. "Quite interesting."

The Watermelon had ears only for Billy. She spoke and it was as if the others had been silent.

"Was it fun?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," drawled the Watermelon sarcastically. "It was fun all right. Everybody wanted to be waited on first and everybody wanted the white meat."

"What did they do when they didn't get waited on?" asked Billy.

"Yelled at me," said the Watermelon, "as if I was their servant. This is a free country and we are all equal. I said that to one old gent once and it raised Cain."

"What'd he say?"

"He said that might be, but we didn't remain equal."

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'I know it and I am sorry for you, sir. Don't blame yourself too much,' I said. 'Was it drink that did it?' When I left they didn't give me any pay."

"Why not?" asked Billy, eagerly amused.

"They said I had broken too many dishes. I said if I had known they were going to keep my pay, I would have broken twice as many."

"Why didn't you do it, then?" asked Billy, whose ideas of vengeance were young and drastic.

"Too much work," explained the Watermelon. "If I wasn't extra strong, I wouldn't have been able to break what I did."

"I presume you return to the city to-night?" questioned Bartlett.

The Watermelon thought of the shivering wretch who was trying to hide his nakedness in the forest depths and shook his head. "I'm leaving about three," said he, putting the parting off as long as possible because of Billy. It hurt him to think of leaving her, even then, charming, dainty Billy.

"Tell me some other things you have done," teased Billy.

"If I sat over that side," said the Watermelon with the boldness of desperation. In two short hours they would part for good, so why not make the most of the short time allowed? "If I sat over that side, I could tell you so much better the sad, sweet story of my life."

"Come on," laughed Billy. And the Watermelon rose, to the amusement of those nearest, went around the table and drew up a chair beside Billy, with the general on the other side of him.

Henrietta made vain attempts to take a hostess' part in the conversation, and both Billy and the Watermelon made equally polite and good-natured endeavors to include her, but when two are young, and one is pretty and the other handsome, a third person assumes the proportions of not a crowd so much as a mob. The general was enjoying himself sufficiently with his dinner. He and Bartlett had gone to the same school and he felt as much right to neglect Bartlett as though he had been a brother. Henrietta turned to Bartlett and they chatted on the trivial affairs of the day, while Henrietta wondered if she did seem so very old to the Watermelon and Bartlett matured a plan that had come to him like an inspiration as he watched the Watermelon's frank admiration for Billy.

In the crash on the Street which had broken the cotton ring and had brought a comparatively young and hitherto unknown man into prominence, Bartlett had lost more than he cared to think about. Though his name had not appeared, he had been heavily involved. The ring had needed but a week, a day, more to bring it to perfection, then in a night, from whence hardly a soul knew, having worked quietly, steadily, persistently, this unforeseen factor had arisen and defeat stared the ring in the face. Another week would bring complete collapse unless this William Hargrave Batchelor could be suppressed. They had tried to see him, but he would not be seen. Clearly he had no price, preferring to fight to a finish, which was an admirable quality in one so young, but hardly to be desired in an

opponent who unfortunately had every chance to win. Voluntarily, he would not leave the fight, but if he could be suppressed? The following Saturday was the crucial time. If he did not return until the day after?

Bartlett had left the city late the previous afternoon to spend Sunday with Billy, away from the heat and worry of the scene of battle, and here was William Hargrave Batchelor, apparently doing the same thing. Clearly it was a dispensation of Providence. There was Billy, and after all William Hargrave Batchelor was young and human. He had probably never known girls like Billy before, or dined with them as equals. He certainly had made no attempt to hide his admiration for this particular one. Bartlett chatted gaily with Henrietta and watched the two opposite, trying to decide if it would be possible to kidnap the young man for a week, take him farther into the country, get him away from Wall Street at any cost. Were Billy's charms equal to the attempt?

William Hargrave Batchelor was said to be a cold, hard-headed youth, who had risen by sheer grit and determination to the place he now held, riding roughshod over his own and every one else's desires and pleasures. A calm, imperturbable young man, with cruel keen eyes, the papers described him. Watching him across the table, Bartlett decided that his square jaw and thin mouth fitted the description fairly well, but that the eyes were a complete contradiction. They were neither keen nor cruel, but soft and mild and sleepy. The whole face was careless, indifferent, and if it were not for the jaw, Bartlett would have hardly believed it possible that Batchelor was sitting opposite him. His own jaw snapped and he swore to himself that he would keep him for a week, either through Billy or otherwise. So strong is the power of suggestion, it did not enter his head to question the youth's identity.

They were rising from the table now. The general, having dined to his satisfaction, was beaming with good humor and stories. Excusing himself a moment, Bartlett hurried to the telegraph station in the office. He hunted for his code, but could not find it and had to write the telegram in English. It would be safe enough. The operator was a raw country youth who wouldn't be able to understand it anyway, and it would go direct to his broker, who would be spending the day at his country place on Long Island.

"Have W.H.B.," wrote Bartlett. "Will take him for a week's tour in the country, with Billy's help. Eat them up."

"Rush it," he ordered sternly, "and bring me the answer. I will wait for it on the porch."

The news soon spread that the stranger dining with the general and his daughter was none other than the suddenly famous young stock broker, whose grim defiance of the Street was told in head-lines in the daily papers, and whose life from the cradle up was thrillingly recounted in the Sunday supplement.

When he had changed his seat at the table, there had been a suppressed titter of amusement for the eccentricities of a great man, and those who made a study of human nature saw plainly an indication of that character which knew what it wanted and would get it and keep it, overriding all obstacles. A man like that, nothing could down.

As they stood on the porch after dinner, waiting for Bartlett to rejoin them, the four were soon surrounded by an ever-growing circle of friends and near friends, and to his pained surprise, the Watermelon was the admired center of the group. All looked on him much as the general did, not so much as a man but as a character out of the Sunday supplement. Bored to exhaustion, he shook hands limply with a score or more whom he did not know and did not want to know.

It was getting late and he would have to return the clothes and become once more merely the Watermelon. He had forgotten the beauty show and had no heart for it now. When he left Billy nothing more counted, nothing mattered. Old clothes or good, hobo or millionaire, without Billy, one was as desirable as the other. He would return the clothes and beat it up the line that evening. James and Mike could go to grass. Meanwhile, instead of getting the most out of the short space of time allotted to him and having Billy alone somewhere, here he was shaking hands with a frowsy bunch of highbrows.

"Mr. Batchelor, would you invest in copper, if you were I?" queried an elderly maiden whose hand he had weakly grasped and but just dropped.

The Watermelon looked around, desperately, miserably. Billy was gazing at him from the edge of the crowd, awe fighting with admiration and amusement on her small face. Henrietta had presented him gaily, to this one and that, and the general, thoroughly in his element, stood by and showed him off as though he were a new horse or the latest model motor-car.

"No," said the Watermelon. "I would not invest in copper."

"Have you any copper?" questioned another with a wink that the great man was caught.

"No," repeated the Watermelon with the animation of a hitching-post. "I have no copper. I have never had any, not even pennies," he added, thinking how fast the time was going and he would become a tramp again, with ragged clothes and empty pockets, while Billy would still be—Billy.

Every one laughed and the general essayed a joke on his own account. "Greenbacks are a better investment," said he, "and you have invested in them pretty well."

"How could you tear yourself away from the Street?" asked one impressionable young thing.

"I don't know," said the Watermelon. "Wall Street is practically my home."

And he gazed languidly over their heads into the trees across the road.

"Oh, Mr. Batchelor, do you think the tariff will affect the cost of living?" inquired another of his new friends. "So many people claim that it will."

Henrietta laughed. "Poor Mr. Batchelor," said she. "You can now realize some of the drawbacks to greatness."

"The tariff," said the Watermelon monotonously, "is all right. Take it from me."

He glanced again at Billy. The clock in the garage struck two and he hesitated no longer. "My car," he muttered vaguely, and made for the steps. He ran down them and started around the hotel toward the stables. As he passed near the place where Billy stood, he looked up straight into her eyes.

"Aren't you coming to see my car—Billy?" he asked, the odd little name below his breath, so that even she did not hear.

"Oh, yes, indeed," said Billy.

He caught her hands and swung her down to the lawn beside him.

At the garage they did not stop. The Watermelon heard the general panting behind in the distance, but he did not pause. Ungratefully he led the way down a narrow path around the stable, into the deep, cool shade of the woods. It was two. He would give himself until the clock struck three, before he slunk away into the unknown again.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE

They found a little mossy knoll beside the brook and Billy made herself comfortable against a tree trunk, while the Watermelon sprawled at her feet.

"Say," said he, "what do those guys take me for? The editor of the 'Answer to correspondents' page?"

"I bet you know as much," said Billy with artless simplicity.

"Sure, I know as much," grinned the Watermelon. "But I'm not paid to tell what I know. It would be starvation rates for mine," he added.

Billy laughed. "Didn't you ever go to school?" she asked.

"Yes, I went to school, when father didn't forget."

"Didn't forget?"

"He had eight kids, you see, and he used to say a man couldn't be respon-

sible for more than six. Two kids, he used to say, were a blessing, four a care, six a burden, and eight an affliction, and no man is responsible for his afflictions.”

”I wish I had some relatives,” said Billy wistfully. ”There are only daddy and I. Don’t you like relatives, some one who belongs to you?”

”Father used to say that relatives were an affliction, and he supposed a man had to have afflictions to make a man of him, but if he had had any influence with Providence, he would have preferred not to be a man.”

”Who was your father?” asked Billy.

”A minister,” answered the Watermelon, clasping his hands behind his head and staring up at the interlaced boughs overhead. ”A country minister. He used to say that there was just one thing in this world more pitiful than a country minister, and that was his wife.”

”Why,” cried Billy, ”the papers said he used to be a policeman.”

”I thought you didn’t read the papers?”

”I don’t, just the Sunday supplements,” said Billy frankly, as one to whom his intellectual development is of minor importance.

The Watermelon wheeled over with a laugh and caught her hand. ”Hang dad!” he exclaimed. ”Where’d you get your name?”

He drew himself up on the log beside her, as near as he dared. He wanted to put his arm around the slim waist, but decided that he had better not.

She jerked her hand away and laughed, her small nose wrinkled, the dimple coming and going. ”Don’t you like it?”

”Sure. It’s classy, all right. But what is the long of it?”

”Wilhelmina. Dad’s is William, just like yours. We’re all Billies.”

”Mine ain’t William,” sneered the Watermelon, edging a bit nearer.

Her eyes opened and she stared in frank surprise. ”But the papers say—”

”The papers lie faster than I can,” said the Watermelon, ”and that’s fairly speedy.” He had only an hour and he did not care what she thought between him and the papers. ”Billy is a darned cute little name, and a cute little girl,” he added.

”I guess you can lie faster than the papers,” said she.

”I can when I want to,” admitted the Watermelon. ”Father used to say that a man that couldn’t lie was a fool and one who wouldn’t, a bigger.”

”I should think if your father was a minister that he wouldn’t lie,” said Billy severely.

”I know. But he used to say he had to in a business way. To tell a man that there was a bigger hell than this earth was a lie on the face of it.”

”Why?”

”Because there couldn’t be, he used to say.”

”Don’t you believe in Heaven?” demanded Billy.

”Sure,” said the Watermelon.

"What do you think it's like?" asked Billy.

"A watermelon patch," said the Watermelon promptly. "Just when all the fruit is ripe. Don't you think so?"

"I think it's an ice-cream counter," said Billy.

"Naw. At an ice-cream counter you would have to have money."

"Not in Heaven, you wouldn't," said Billy. "It would all be free and you could have as much as you wanted."

"Who would wait on you? Any one could pick a watermelon, but everybody can't mix an ice-cream soda."

"The bad people would. That would be hell, you see, always serving it to others and never allowed to taste any."

"That wouldn't work, either," objected the Watermelon. "Because there would be so many more to do the serving than there would be people to serve. No, we are both wrong. Heaven is a grove of trees back of a white garage. There's a fallen log and a couple sitting on it."

"I should think that would be monotonous," said Billy. "Do they talk?"

"Sure, they talk. Heaven ain't a deaf and dumb asylum."

"I should think they would get talked out during eternity."

"Ah," said the Watermelon, leaning a bit nearer, "eternity is but a minute."

"What do they talk about?"

"Heaven."

"Are they angels?"

"One is."

Billy laughed. "Who are you?" she asked, leaning toward him, one hand resting on the log between them, her steady eyes on his face.

The Watermelon again drew forth the card case, extracted a card and presented it to her with a flourish.

Holding it, she shook her head dubiously. "I mean are you a stock-broker? Are you on 'Change? Father has been nearly all his life, and he looks it. His eyes and—everything. Your eyes are different, quite different. I don't mean in color and size, for of course they would be, but in expression."

"How do you know?" asked the Watermelon. "You have only seen their expression when I have been looking at you, and a man doesn't look at a girl as if she were the tape from the ticker."

"I know," acknowledged Billy. "But I have known brokers all my life, and some have been young, and they—they aren't like you. I never sat on a log with one and talked about Heaven."

"Well, you see, I am a minister's son, and I had Heaven with every meal, as it were."

"Maybe that's it," agreed Billy.

A stick snapped behind them as though some one were approaching their retreat with stealthy tread under cover of the friendly bushes.

"Are you afraid of cows?" asked Billy, glancing over her shoulder fearfully.

"Not of female cows," said the Watermelon.

"A broker wouldn't have said that," objected Billy, pursing up her mouth.

"A broker would say, 'No, indeed, Miss Bartlett. Don't be afraid. A cow is really harmless,' and smile as if I were young and half-witted, anyway."

A stick snapped again, nearer, and a woodpecker fled from a group of trees, scolding angrily.

Billy rose nervously. "If that's a male cow—"

"Sit down," ordered the Watermelon. "It's no cow, unfortunately. It's the general."

"Don't you like the general?" asked Billy, sitting down again, but ready to rise quickly, instantly.

"Yes, I like him, but I don't think I would if I were a motor-car."

"I have known him and Henrietta all my life," said Billy. "Henrietta has been like a mother to me," she added, a statement Henrietta would have denied, shortly but firmly. "Really, we ought to go back."

"Politeness is not politeness unless it comes from the heart," said the Watermelon, in the tones that had made Henrietta think of a minister, she knew not why.

"Did your father used to say that?"

"No, he never had any cause to. We never were polite."

Billy glanced around. "I thought I heard some one cough."

"So did I. It can't be the general. He wouldn't cough."

A hollow cough sounded distinctly from the bushes behind and the Watermelon rose to investigate. It was nearly three and at three he would have to go, or the man down yonder in the swimming hole might come after him to reclaim his clothes and motor-car. The Watermelon begrudged every precious moment.

"Wait, and I will see what the mutt wants," said he. "You will wait, won't you?" he pleaded, looking down at her where she sat on the log.

"We really ought to go," said Billy.

"All right, but don't run off until I've—I've cured that cough, will you?"

Billy nodded and the Watermelon strode to the bushes from whence had sounded the harsh, constrained cough. He pushed the branches aside and gazed into the small, pinched face of a thin youth of about eighteen, dressed in the uniform of the hotel.

"Hist," cautioned the boy, before the Watermelon could speak. "I want to tell you something important."

"All right, spit it out and be quick about it," ordered the Watermelon.

If the real William Hargrave Batchelor had managed to get word to the hotel about the impostor, the sooner he knew it the better. The boy had probably come to offer to help him escape in exchange for something, money most likely. Like all tramps, the Watermelon was quick to read faces, and in the crafty young face before him, he saw only the dollar mark.

"It—I don't want no one to hear me," said the boy, with a motion toward the log and Billy's slim young back.

The Watermelon hesitated, but in the shifty eyes he saw fear and deference. If he knew the Watermelon for a tramp, there would be no deference.

"Gwan, spit it out," ordered the Watermelon. "I ain't keen for the pleasure of hearing any of your heart to heart secrets."

"It's very important," said the boy, "and no one must hear."

"I suppose you think every one is busting to hear your words of wisdom," said the Watermelon. "Probably get a dime a word, eh?"

"It's about you," said the boy, harsh with impatience and nervousness. "It's—" He drew a piece of paper from his pocket and held it out. "He gave me that to send."

"Who are you?"

"The telegraph clerk," whispered the boy, with a frightened glance toward Billy on the log.

The Watermelon read the paper and smiled a slow, sweet smile of anticipated pleasure as the full import of Bartlett's telegram became clear. He glanced at Billy and his smile deepened. Then he turned and drew the boy farther away.

"Bartlett sent this, eh?"

"Yes," cried the boy, eager with excitement over the service he was rendering the great man. "And the minute I read it and knew that you were here, I knew you ought to have it."

"Didn't you send it?"

"Yes, I had to. You see he stood right there. But just as soon as he went, I lit out to find you."

"Where is he now?"

"I seen him on the front porch with Miss Grossman. Say, you'll want to be going now, won't you, huh? You ken get to New York to-night if you hurry."

The Watermelon rattled the coins in his pockets and looked down at the thin, crafty face of the youngster. "Kid," said lie, "if you keep on as you've begun, you'll be doing time, sure. You're a thieving little snipe and ought to be the head of a corporation some day, or a United States senator, 'cause you haven't as much honor as a grasshopper, see? I don't know why you shouldn't land in Sing Sing, if you miss the corporation job or the senate."

"Huh," said the boy, reddening with the praise of the great man.

"If you let on that you have shown this to me, you will lose your job here, you know. So, until I can see my friend, J. Pierpont, about that other job for you, you'd better keep your mouth shut. Understand?"

"Sure," cried the boy. "Course I understand."

The Watermelon handed him a quarter. "When I reach New York," said he airily, "I'll send you me check for a thousand."

CHAPTER VII

WATERMELON YIELDS

Eager to accomplish the plan he had suddenly conceived, the Watermelon turned and strolled back to Billy, while the boy gazed after such majesty in awed admiration.

"Who was it?" asked Billy, looking up as the Watermelon approached.

"The telegraph clerk," said the Watermelon calmly. "A telegram—and he brought it to me."

He made no motion to sit down and Billy rose.

"I suppose you have to go back," said she. She had to throw back her head to see into his face, for the top of her beflowered hat only reached to his shoulder.

"No," said the Watermelon, preparing the way for the future. "I could take a few days off, if I wanted to. Come on. I might as well try and save the remains of my car after the general has done his best to ruin it. I heard him go into the garage as we got out of sight. The general is more expensive than a motorcar."

"I like the general," said Billy, as they started slowly back.

"I suppose he has been like a grandfather to you," said the Watermelon, glancing down at the top of the big hat. "Don't you want me for a relative of some kind?"

"You said relatives were afflictions," objected Billy.

"I know; but it is only through our afflictions that we can rise to higher things."

"What higher things?"

"Why, Heaven, as I described it last."

They found the general with Henrietta and Bartlett in the garage. The general was kindly superintending the filling of the absent Batchelor's car with gasolene, Bartlett was expounding the merits of his make of car as superior to any

other make, while Henrietta sat on the step of the general's car and pretended to be listening.

"I took the liberty," apologized the general, as the other two appeared in the doorway, feeling, on the contrary, that he was doing the young man an inestimable favor.

"Go ahead," said the Watermelon.

"Draw the line somewhere," advised Henrietta. "Father is too fond of trying to see what makes the wheels go round to give him *carte blanche* with any car."

"I understand a car thoroughly, Henrietta," said the general. "I have always been fond of mechanics."

"I know it, dear," said Henrietta with contrition. "I have always said that if you hadn't been a general, you would have been a master mechanic."

"Thank God, he's a general," whispered the Watermelon into the small ear of Billy.

"To thoroughly appreciate a car, you should take a trip of a week or two," said Bartlett, not glancing at the Watermelon, apparently talking to the general alone. "There is nothing like it. It has revolutionized travel. Have you ever done it, General, spent a month, a week, at least, in your car, going where you wanted, stopping as long as you wanted and as often?"

Assured that Alphonse was attending to the gasoline, the general withdrew his invaluable supervision and turned to the others.

"We spent a week in the car last summer, and we intended to do it again this year, but have somehow put it off."

"It's perfectly delightful," said Henrietta. "You wonder how you ever tolerated a train."

"It is tramping idealized," declared Bartlett.

"It's dandy," cried Billy. "Daddy, do you remember that time we went from Maine straight down the coast to Maryland?"

The general turned to the Watermelon. "I suppose you have grown tired of it," said he, "A young unmarried man can go when and where he wants."

"Oh, I've been around some," admitted the Watermelon modestly. "But never in a car."

"You should try it, my dear sir," said Bartlett. "Upon my word, you have no idea how fascinating it is."

"I never owned a car."

"You do now," laughed Henrietta. "Now's your chance."

"I've no one to go with," replied the Watermelon innocently, smiling down at Henrietta on the car step and not looking at Bartlett.

Henrietta laughed and threw out one of her delicate, graceful hands with a little gesture that embraced the whole group. "You have all of us, now," said she.

"We have made you one of us."

Bartlett agreed with a chuckle. Things were coming his way with hardly any effort on his part, as they, had had a way of doing until William Hargrave Batchelor had made himself too annoying. He took it as a good sign and smiled cheerfully.

"You can take us all," laughed Billy.

"A week," said Bartlett tentatively, "in the country, away from telegrams and letters and papers, it would do me a vast amount of good. I have been over-working lately." He nodded gravely, in confirmation of his own remark. "I would like to drop everything, now, this minute, crank up the car and start, no matter where, any place, any road. You don't need clothes. The lighter you travel, the better. You can put up anywhere you happen to be for the night, and, if you get lost it does not matter, merely adds to the fun and affords an adventure."

"It sounds alluring," said Henrietta. "Suppose we all go, just as we are!"

"We could," cried Billy. "Why, Dad, we could do it easily. I have that linen dress I wore yesterday, and my brush and comb and things, and you have yours."

"But the general and Henrietta," objected Bartlett. "They only ran up here for the day, my dear. They may not have anything."

"Yes, we have," cried Henrietta, "We planned to stay a week or two and sent a trunk along. We could easily pack a suit-case."

"Oh!" exclaimed Billy. "Do let's do it."

"I noticed a suit-case in your car, Batchelor," Bartlett turned to the Watermelon, genially. "I judge you are planning to take a few days' jaunt somewhere."

"I was thinking of it," acknowledged the Watermelon, with truth, lounging gracefully in the doorway.

Bartlett laughed. "We are crazy, all of us," said he and waved the suggestion aside as a whimsical fancy best forgotten.

"Oh, Daddy, please," teased Billy.

"But, Billy, child, the others don't want to do it, the general or Batchelor."

"I want to," said Henrietta, "and so does the general. Father, wouldn't you like to take a trip in the car somewhere for a week or two?"

The general's attention had wandered back to the car. He turned abstractedly. "Do what, Henrietta?"

"Take a trip in the car for a week or two."

"Yes, we must plan one later, as we did last summer."

"But we mean now, father, start right now."

"Now? Henrietta, you're foolish, my dear."

"No, indeed, father. Why not now? 'Do it now' is your favorite motto, you know."

"It is impossible," and the general, also, dismissed the subject.

Bartlett thrust his hands in his pockets and appeared absorbed in his car. He knew Billy.

"Why impossible?" asked Billy, laying a small hand on the general's arm. "You were going to spend a week here. Why not spend it in your car? You have no engagement, have you?"

"No," said the general, smiling into her pretty face. "But what about clothes?"

"Clothes," laughed Billy, "why, clothes—"

"Be hanged," said the Watermelon.

Bartlett laughed. "Quite so. Wash out on the line, general. Better come."

"Pretend the Indians have risen," said Henrietta, "and you are given an hour to get into marching order."

"Ah, yes," cried the eager Billy, patting the arm she clung to. "You used to do it, General, why, in half an hour, out on the plains."

"What do you know about it, puss?" asked the general.

"Didn't you?" pleaded Billy.

"Yes," said the general, who always gave in to a pretty woman. "I used to. In those days we were always ready for a fight."

"So you will go? I knew you would."

"But Mr. Batchelor may have to return to the city," suggested Henrietta, glancing at the Watermelon.

Bartlett shot a glance at the young man and began to whistle softly through his teeth as he indifferently raised the bonnet of his car and examined the clean, well-ordered machinery within. Would Billy's charms be enough to hold the young man against his better judgment? Could he forget what the next week meant to him, forget the lure of the Street, the rise and fall of stocks, in the light of a woman's eyes, in the sound of a woman's laugh? If Billy could not keep him, what could? He must be kept. A week with him out of the way, the ring could be renewed, strengthened, that which was lost, regained. Bartlett bent low over his car, but he heard Billy, sweetly speaking to the Watermelon.

"You don't have to return to the city, do you? You would much rather go with us, wouldn't you?"

The Watermelon glanced at Bartlett. If he accepted too readily, Bartlett might wonder, yet if he hesitated, if he thought apparently of how important his presence in the city would be in the coming week, even if there were to be a few days of armed neutrality, it might seem even more impossible that he would consent to go.

"Can't you join us, Batchelor?" asked the general. "You've made enough for one while. When you run out of that three million, you can go back. Time enough then."

"Swollen fortunes are a crime nowadays," said Henrietta, smiling her odd, half gay, half tender smile.

"Come ahead, Batchelor," urged Bartlett with friendly good nature, neither too eager, nor too insistent, but his eyes were half shut and the palms of his hands wet as he rubbed them on his handkerchief.

"We will start to-night," said Billy. "It will be beautiful. In the night, driving is perfectly lovely, you know, Mr. Batchelor."

"Better come," advised the general. "We can keep in touch with the telegraph. It's not as if we were going into the wilds of Africa."

"No, indeed," said Bartlett. "I have interests in New York, myself, that I want to keep an eye on."

Billy laid her hand on his arm. "Won't you come?" she teased.

The Watermelon looked down, under the brim of her hat, into the gray-green eyes and smiled.

"Yes," he said simply. "I would like to."

CHAPTER VIII

GRATITUDE IS A FLOWER

James lay in the shade of the butternut tree and smoked gloomily. He was well-shaved and his hair newly cut and carefully brushed, but his clothes were still the rags that had graced his muscular form since the dim, nearly forgotten long ago, when he had stolen them one lucky night from some back yard passed in the course of his travels.

He squinted at the sun through the tree tops and judged it to be about four. The Watermelon had evidently done no better or he would have turned up before. Mike, sprawled in the grass beside him, slept with the stentorian slumber of the corpulent. James kicked him.

"Aw, wake up," he growled. "I want your rare intelligence to unbosom me sorrowful and heavy heart to."

Mike yawned, stretched and sat up, pushing his shapeless hat to the back of his round hot head. He drew his sleeve across his streaming forehead and yawned and stretched again.

"You ought to relax, James," said he, cutting a square from the plug of tobacco that he carried carefully wrapped in a soiled piece of tinfoil. "Youse will

have noivous prostration one of these days with the strenuous life youse leads. The modern hurry and worry is all wrong. Now, take me—”

”No one would take you, not even a kodak,” sneered James, scowling before him moodily.

”The matter with you, James,” said Mike, sticking the tobacco into his mouth with the blade of his knife, ”the matter with you is youse are harboring and cultivating that green-eyed monster called jealousy. Youse are, in short, jealous of me young friend, the Watermillion.”

”Aw, jealous of a kid! Who? Me? Not on your tin-type.”

”You say so, James. We all deny the werminous cancers that gnaw our vitals. But look into your own heart, question yourself—”

”Aw, pound yer ear,” snapped James.

Some one was heard approaching and Mike paused from cleaning the blade of his knife in the ground before him to listen.

”The youth comes,” said he, and rose clumsily to his little fat legs. He stepped aside to see up the path, but James did not move.

”A radiant vision of manly beauty,” announced Mike, one hand on his heart, the other shading his small eyes as though dazzled by a great and brilliant light.

James glanced up sullenly. A youth was coming through the trees, tall and graceful and broad-shouldered. His suit of soft brown, his gently tipped panama, his light shoes and silk socks brought with them a breath of motor-cars and steam yachts, of the smoker in a railway train, with a white-clad, attentive porter, instead of the brake beam underneath and an irate station-master and furious conductor. From the lapel of his coat gleamed a heavy gold chain and in his stylish tie a pin of odd but costly workmanship caught the eye of the enraptured beholder.

Mike laid his hand on his heart again, removed his hat, and standing aside for the youth to pass, bowed low.

”Me lud,” said he in humble salutation.

[image]

”Me lud,” he said in humble salutation

James glanced up from his seat under the butternut tree. He regarded the vision of affluence before him a moment in growing admiration and awe. Then he removed his pipe and spoke.

”You’ll get three years for this,” said he cheerfully, and put his pipe back into his mouth.

"Three nothing," sneered the Watermelon.

"Jealousy," said Mike, putting his hat on the back of his frowsy head. "Jealousy maketh the tongue cruel and the heart bitter. Me," he spread forth his fat dirty hands, "me beauty is such it gives me no concern. I realize youse can not gild the lily."

The Watermelon drew himself up to his full height, threw back his shoulders and fastidiously adjusted his cuffs, with their heavy gold links.

"With every passing moment, more beautiful," murmured Mike.

James snorted.

"Well," asked the Watermelon, "who gets the prize?"

"Me humble faculties," said Mike, with one wary eye on James, "me humble faculties are incapable of rendering true and accurate judgment in the present case where two such rare specimens of manly beauty compete in my honored and deeply grateful presence."

The Watermelon laughed and ran his hand over his smooth chin and hairless cheeks with a gesture of gentle pride. "James said if I could not get a suit, I would be counted down and out. I," and he drew himself up, "I do not have to take advantage of a mere technicality. I scorn to win by default."

"True nobility," said Mike, "is in them words."

"Aw, cut the gas!" growled James. "Where'd you get the blooming outfit?"

"I win, do I?" persisted the Watermelon.

"Mike's the judge," returned James, losing interest in what was too obviously a one-sided contest.

"In this competition, there are three points to decide," declared Mike, not quite sure whom he feared the more, James or the Watermelon. "Beauty of face, beauty of clothes and beauty of soul. The one who gets two points out of the three wins."

The Watermelon nodded, James grunted.

Mike glanced thoughtfully from one to the other and decided that danger lay in either choice. "Neither of you," said he slowly and wisely, "win. For unexcelled art in raiment, me young friend here might be said to be the only competitor. For rare physical beauty and winning charm in looks, unaided by mere externals, me friend and fellow-citizen, James, gets the just reward, and for pure, manly beauty of the soul, truth, which I always follow, compels me to give the prize to me humble self."

"Aw," growled James, "this ain't no show. We will have another."

The Watermelon hitched up his trousers and chose a clean seat on a fallen log. When coat and trousers legs were adjusted so as best to keep their faultless creases, he spoke with the bored accents of the weary scion of great wealth.

"I'm starting for a motor tour with some of me friends," said he.

"I," said Mike, "have always felt for you as for a dear and only son."

"Gwan," said James imperiously. "Where did you get the glad rags?"

The Watermelon told them briefly how from a nameless hobo a few short hours before, he had become a famous young financier, hobnobbing with generals and millionaires. He chuckled as he told it with the half-cynical amusement of the philosopher for the follies of the poor, seething, hurrying, struggling crowd of humanity, too busy in their rush for gold and social position to see their own laughable pitiful shams and affectations. Poverty clears the eyesight as nothing else can, and the Watermelon had been poor so long and was so indifferent to his position that he had lost none of his clearness of vision in the strenuous endeavor of the others, and he saw, unconsciously, but nevertheless keenly, the dead level of human nature, with its artificial hills of gold and social position.

"Me father, I believe, is a policeman," said he. "Me mother a wash-woman. If I had a grandfather, no one knows. I'm fortunate to have a father and no questions asked, yet just because I can write me check, as they think, for a million and have it honored, I'm 'my boy' to the elite of the land, the 'best people.' Gosh, it's enough to make an ass bray."

"It is that," said Mike. "For me, only the intrinsic worth of the soul. Maybe there was a bit of change in the pockets?" he added as an afterthought.

"Yes, there was quite a bit. He's fresh at the game and carries a roll to show off with," returned the Watermelon, pulling a roll of bills from his pocket. Mike edged a bit nearer. "See here, I want you fellers to do something for me."

"For you," said Mike, "I would give me immortal soul."

"I want something more than that, Mike," said the Watermelon.

"Me plug of baccy?" asked Mike with feeling.

The Watermelon shook his head as he slowly pulled a greenback from the bunch he held. "I want you two to go to that lake, get my clothes out of the log and give 'em to the poor devil."

"Don't be a fool," advised James. "He's all right. Nothing will happen to him."

"I know, but I keep thinking of him. He can afford to lose what he is going to lose, but all the same, he's cold and tired."

"Aw, don't go and do that," pleaded Mike. "He'll have youse arrested—"

"I ain't going to be around here; besides, no one would think of looking for me with the swell bunch I'm going with."

"Maybe not," admitted James gravely, "but there's always the danger that some cop will have brains. And he's bound to get away to-night, all right, and have the bulls on you the minute he does. You had better take all the time you can to get away and don't try to shorten it none."

The Watermelon slowly unwound another bill and nodded. "I know, but

I'm sorry for him. A few hours won't make much difference. He hasn't the slightest idea who swiped his clothes. He'll think some tramp did and that the feller is getting out of the country by cross-cuts and as fast as he can. Don't you see? No one will look for me with the general and Bartlett. I'm going to have a week of fun—"

"Maybe," said James gloomily. "Hardly, if you give that bloke his clothes before you need to."

The Watermelon waved the statement aside. "We are going to leave about five," said he. "They are waiting for me, now. It will take you a bit of a walk to find the place. I put the clothes in an empty log near a pile of rocks at the foot of three tall pines, standing together about ten yards from the lake. You can't help but find it. Give him the clothes and this check-book and fountain pen. I can't use them and you two won't get gay with them 'cause Mike's a coward, and James has too much sense."

"You're a damn fool," said James shortly.

"He's all right," argued Mike, meaning the man in the forest shades. "What can hurt him?"

"I know, but he's mighty uncomfortable. Can't sit down, maybe, and there may be flies and mosquitoes—"

"Naw," protested Mike. "He's just comfortable. If it was the style, I would like to have gone naked to-day."

"He'll have the police after youse," warned James, "as soon as he can reach the village."

"Sure he will. Gratitude is a flower," said Mike grandiloquently, "that I have never picked."

"And never will," added James with grim pessimism.

"That's all right," returned the Watermelon. "I ain't gathering any flowers this trip. Here's a ten-spot for each of you, and mind you do what I say."

"For you," said Mike, "I'd give me heart's blood."

"Where do we find this pond?" asked James.

"Come with me and I'll take you to the road that leads by it. You give me time to get to the hotel, though, before you give him his clothes."

"Trust me," said Mike, lovingly concealing the greenback in the dark dirty recesses of his rags.

They parted in the road where the Watermelon had come upon the big red touring car. Mike and James watched him until he disappeared over the top of the hill, then climbed the wall and made their way through the woods to the little mountain lake.

"We won't get the clothes," said James, "until we have had a talk with the guy and tried to get him into a reasonable frame of mind. It's just likely that he

may be somewhat put out.”

There was no one in sight as they made their way cautiously to the edge of the lake. The trees grew nearly down to the narrow, pebbly beach and were reflected in the quiet depths of the water. The little brook, tumbling over its miniature waterfall, with a ripple and splash, was the only sound that broke the all-pervading silence. Nothing stirred in the underbrush, neither man nor beast, and James and Mike were about to slip away as quietly as they came when a stick snapped behind them sharply and Mike wheeled.

A man was peering at them eagerly over the tops of a few bushes. His face was white and his teeth chattering. His arms, dimly discerned through the branches, were wrapped around his shivering form with fervor and he was standing gingerly on first one foot and then the other.

“Hello,” said Mike facetiously. “Going in?” and he nodded casually backward to the lake.

“Been in,” chattered the miserable wretch, trying to control his teeth so that he could say more.

“Oughtn’t to stay in too long,” advised James solicitously. “Your lips look blue.”

“Bad for the heart,” said Mike.

“We ain’t ladies,” added James with delicacy. “You might come out from them bushes.”

“Some—some one stole my—my—my clothes,” stammered the young man, stepping carefully forth. “Been here—here since this—this morning.” He looked sharply at the shabby pair before him, with quick distrust in his bloodshot eyes and added coldly, “Some—some tramp.”

“Did you see him?” asked James.

“No—no—no. But who else could have stolen them?”

“I,” said Mike, drawing himself up to his five feet five and throwing back his pudgy shoulders, “I am a tramp. I trust, sir, you meant no insult to me profession?”

The stranger waved the question aside. “Get me some clothes and I’ll give you some money.”

“What money?” asked James.

“I will send you some. I am rich. My car is in the road. Maybe you saw it. I was coming through the woods to the hotel to get a tow up, for I was out of gasolene, when I saw the lake. It was early and I thought I would take a swim. Maybe you saw my car by the side of the road?”

“I didn’t see no car,” said Mike.

“Did you come by the road?”

“Yes, a narrow wood road.”

"Yes, yes; that's where I left it. The damned thief has probably gone off with my car, too."

"Then he couldn't be a tramp," said James judiciously. "Tramps don't know nothing about motor-cars."

"Maybe he took it up to the hotel," said Mike, cheerfully helpful.

The stranger shook his head. "No, he wouldn't do that. He would get out of the country as fast as he could."

"If there wasn't no gasolene," suggested James tentatively.

"He could easily get some from the hotel. It was early when he stole my clothes." And James realized with relief that the youth before him was, in his own eyes, always right, and advice wholly superfluous.

"I saw a big red car," said Mike, "down the road a bit, over the other side of the village, going south. But maybe your car wasn't red."

"Yes, yes, it was," cried the stranger. "What was the make? Could you tell?"

"A Thomas car—"

"Ah, my car. Get me something to put on and I'll make it worth your while. I'm William Hargrave Batchelor. Maybe you have read about me in yesterday's papers?" And the poor, shivering, naked wretch drew himself up proudly and smiled with much complacency.

"I," said Mike, tapping himself on his breast, "am George V., of England."

"No, no," protested the stranger. "I'm not fooling. Get me, some clothes and come with me to the nearest telegraph office and I'll show you."

"How much," asked Mike, "will you give me?"

"Us," corrected James.

"How much do you want?"

"How much will you give?"

"Ten dollars."

"For a suit of clothes?" Mike's fat red face depicted his horror.

"Twenty," cried the stranger.

"A piece?" asked James.

"A piece," declared the unhappy youth.

"A piece, James," said Mike, turning inquiringly to his companion.

"Make it thirty," said James, "and we may be able to help you."

"All right, thirty a piece. Get me the clothes."

"You might write us each a check," suggested James, and drew forth the pen and check-book.

"For innocence," groaned Mike, "commend me to me loving comrade, James."

The stranger's eyes glittered as he recognized his book and pen. He glanced from one ragged specimen before him to the other, from James' crafty face to

Mike's sly visage, but he said nothing, merely took the pen and book.

"Your names?" he asked, opening the book and resting it against a tree for support.

"Better put 'to bearer,'" said James. "Simplicity is always the best."

The stranger wrote the checks, signed them and turned to the two watching him. "Bring me the suit," he said quietly, "and these are yours."

Mike shuffled off into the trees and James and the stranger waited in silence for his return. He came back presently and threw the suit at the stranger's feet.

"You'll notice," said he, "that this nobby spring suit in our latest style is cheap at the price. Fancy, a thing like that for only sixty dollars!"

"I see," said the stranger.

"Payable in advance," said James.

The stranger handed them each a check and thoughtfully drew on the shabby clothes of the Watermelon. It had not been long since he had worn rags of a necessity, and he hitched them up with the skill bred of familiarity. He thrust the pen and book into a pocket he had first made sure was holeless. Then he turned to the two and his eyes gleamed.

"How much for the car?" he asked.

Mike raised his hands to Heaven. "The car? James, does he think we stole his car?"

"A stock-broker," said James, "would suspect his own mother."

"If you want youse car," said Mike, "go to the hotel."

"Bah," snapped the stranger. "Do you think I was weaned yesterday? Be quick and tell me your price."

"I have no price," said Mike proudly, not sure where the car was.

They started through the woods to the village, the stranger leading and Mike and James following. At the edge of the village, they paused instinctively and without a word.

"Tell me where the car is and who your accomplice is," said the stranger in the short sharp tones of one born to command, "and you two can go free. If you don't tell, I'll do my best to have you arrested and sent up for grand larceny. Understand?"

"Oh, yes," said Mike, "I understand. When I was young I learned English, foolishly, as I haven't used it since."

"We don't know where your damn car is," declared James. "And we didn't steal your blooming outfit. What do you take us for, anyway?"

"Very well, then," snapped the stranger. "I see that you won't tell. Remember, I gave you your chance."

He turned and hurried down the village street. The two watched him as he stopped a pedestrian and apparently asked to be directed to the justice of the

peace, then they slipped away in the woods and quietly, simultaneously, turned north, falling into a gentle lope that took them far with the minimum of effort.

"I hope the kid ain't pinched," said James, after a while.

Mike sighed and shook his head. "Grand larceny," he murmured. "That's gratitude for you."

CHAPTER IX

ON THE ROAD

The general never went anywhere without a well-stocked library, guide-books, instruction books, maps. All were consulted long and often, and with a childlike faith that Henrietta's sarcasm and the sign-posts had not been able to shake.

If the guide-book read, "White rock on left," the general stopped the car if the rock were not immediately seen where it should be according to the book and refused to go farther until it had been discovered. If the rock could not be located, the general ran back a little way or ahead a little way and if the white rock still refused to be seen on the left, the general did not see what right any one had to remove valuable landmarks. Henrietta's tentative endeavor to point out the possibility that the book was mistaken, doubtless unintentionally, but still mistaken, was simply waved aside as one more indication of woman's inferiority to man. If the book said that there was a hill at such and such a place and there was in fact no hill there, the book was still correct. There was something the matter with the landscape.

Bartlett knew of this unfortunate tendency of the general's and resolved to get rid of those books and maps and papers. With every mile indicated and nicely tabulated, every turn and landmark mentioned, it would be almost impossible to get off the beaten route, and they must avoid telegraph stations and post-offices as much as possible. The success of the scheme lay in keeping Batchelor away from all touch and communication with the city. They must, if possible, get lost, and with the multitudinous books and maps they would not be able to. Therefore, they must get rid of the books and maps.

When they had separated to prepare for the trip, Bartlett returned hastily to the garage. No one was in sight except a strange chauffeur lounging in the doorway. Bartlett collected all the literature from the general's car and hastened back to the hotel. Surreptitiously, he entered an empty room near the one as-

signed to him and when he emerged again, his arms were burdenless and he was smiling gently.

They waited for the Watermelon on the porch, intending to have an early supper and start while it was still light. Bartlett greeted the returning youth with relief and lead the way to the dining-room. He mentioned a small village some thirty miles to the north, where they could find accommodations for the night in an old farm-house.

"Friends of mine," said he. "I go there every fall."

The general rose to get his blue book. "We will look it up," said he.

Bartlett stopped him. The town was not in the book. He knew, for he had tried to find it.

"The maps will do," said the general, who liked to locate every town visually on the maps or in the books before he undertook to motor there.

Desperate, Bartlett declared that it was not on the maps. But the general would not be daunted. They could put it on the maps themselves if they knew in which county it was, near what post-office—

"We don't want to locate it," said Bartlett, growing stern and cross of a necessity.

They found the cars waiting at the steps and a small crowd to see them off and wile away the time before supper.

Bartlett said, as he knew the way, he would lead. "We need only two cars. Mr. Batchelor's car can be left until we return."

"Three cars might come in handy," protested the general, who objected to every suggestion not his own, on principle.

"Why?" asked Bartlett coldly.

"Mr. Batchelor might become offended at us and want to ride by himself," suggested Henrietta, laughing.

"Yes," agreed Billy, who, though young and charming, was sometimes lacking in that reserve that should have stamped her father's daughter. "He and dad are fighting each other now on 'Change."

Henrietta flushed, the Watermelon laughed and the general looked pained at the thought of any possible lack of congeniality.

"My dear Billy," said Bartlett, "the third auto would be extremely handy for you and your tongue, at least."

Billy glanced miserably from one to the other. "Why, Daddy, you told me, yesterday—"

"I have told you many things," said Bartlett, "both yesterday and the day before."

He took the general by the arm and gently but firmly thrust him into his car, getting in himself and taking the wheel. The young folk could ride in the

tonneau and Alphonse follow in the general's car with the luggage.

The cars started down the hill in the first sweet flush of evening. Birds were going to bed with noisy upbraids. A few cows at the pasture bars watched them pass with great, stupid, placid eyes, jaws going slowly, rhythmically, as they waited for the milking time. Now they flashed from the shadows of the woods to the open country, pastures and rolling grain fields on each hand. Now they plunged among the trees again with the drowsy twitter of birds and the clear babbling of a brook somewhere off among the ferns and brambles.

The Watermelon leaned back in the deep soft cushions of the big car and smiled a smile of calm and peace and comfort. The car ran smoothly, noiselessly, little breezes laden with the sweetness of the approaching night wandered by, on each side of him was a pretty girl. Tramping idealized! It was living idealized. And that morning, hungry, shabby, unshaved, he had been content to lie in the sweet lush grasses of a chance meadow, under a butternut tree, with the convivial James and the corpulent Mike! He crossed one well-pressed, silken leg over the other and saw by the wayside, lounging in the shadows, waiting for the car to pass, the two, James and Mike—Mike, fat, red-faced, dirty, his frowsy hat pulled aslant over his small, bleary eyes, shoulders humped from long habit in cold weather, toes coming out of his boot ends; James, clean shaven, but otherwise no better dressed, no cleaner, both chewing tobacco with the thoughtful rumination of the cows watching over the pasture bars at the end of the wooded lane.

Over the trees, the sun was dropping from sight. Clearly and sweetly on the quiet air of the eventide, the church bells began to toll from the village below them in the valley.

Billy nudged the Watermelon to call his attention to the two weary figures by the wayside.

"Poor fellows," said Henrietta softly, lest they hear her.

The Watermelon glanced at them in lofty disgust and catching James' eye, his own flickered the fraction of an inch and he raised his hands languidly to adjust the brown silk tie at his throat. When they had passed, he turned and waved a graceful farewell. He explained to Billy as they swept on into the deepening dusk.

"You might as well encourage the poor fellows. They probably want to ride as well as I." And Henrietta fancied that possibly his father had looked thus on a Sunday, in the pulpit of a country church.

"Yes," agreed Billy. "They may be perfectly dandy fellows."

"Assuredly," laughed Henrietta. "The stout one fairly radiated truth and nobility, a manly, upright youth."

"I don't care," declared Billy warmly. "You can't always tell from appearances. You ought to know that, Henrietta. Clothes don't make the man."

"Nor his manners," laughingly retorted Henrietta.

"Sure," said the Watermelon. "Father used to say that manners didn't count any more than the good apples on the top of the box to hide the rotten ones beneath."

"I think your father was a cynic," said Henrietta sharply, into whose ears Billy had been recounting the sayings of the absent divine.

"Yes," admitted the Watermelon, "he was."

"Cynicism is a sign of failure," quoted Henrietta. "Surely your father wasn't a cynic."

"Yes, he was," declared the Watermelon, "and you didn't make that up yourself. You heard some failure say it. Father used to say, and he's right, that if a man reached forty without becoming a cynic, he was a fool and might better never have reached forty. A success can be a cynic, for cynicism is simply a pretty good idea of the meanness of human nature and no unfounded expectation of anything especially decent coming from it, isn't that so? Father used to say that love was divine, hate devilish and meanness just cussed human nature, and a mixture of the three in more or less degree made man."

"Your father was a philosopher," laughed Henrietta. "I would like to have met him."

"I thought the papers said—" began Billy, in her slow, anxious way to get things right.

"Yes, they did," interrupted the Watermelon, "and they were right."

It was quite dark now. Bartlett stopped a moment while Alphonse lit the lamps, and then they went on and on, faster and faster, into the summer night. Once in a while they passed a lighted farm-house and a dog rushed out and barked at them. Twice they whirled through small villages and the villagers, going home from church, paused to watch them pass and be swallowed up in the dark ahead. The air was full of fireflies. A whippoorwill called plaintively from the bushes, and low in the west were flashes of heat lightning, with now and then an ominous rumble of distant thunder. Silence had settled on all, even Billy mused in her corner, half asleep.

The general had been worried for some time. They were apparently getting nowhere. He felt that he should have consulted the blue book. He was about to suggest that they stop and get the book from the rear car, when Bartlett waved toward the dark bulk of a house looming out of the night, some little way ahead.

"That's the place," said he. "We can spend the night there and get one of the best chicken breakfasts I ever ate."

The general looked at the place and rallied his sinking spirits. It appeared dark and he should say it was deserted, but Bartlett doubtless knew what he was talking about. The people probably lived in the kitchen. He was hungry and

tired and the thought of hot sausages, bread and jam and milk and then a soft cool bed was nearly as good as the reality. He turned gaily to the quiet three in the tonneau.

"Wake up and hear the birds sing."

Bartlett glanced back and laughed. "Asleep, eh? We're there," he added, turning the car neatly into the open driveway. "Guess you won't refuse a good supper very strenuously."

The drive was rough and they rolled slowly tip to a great dark house, standing on a slight rise of ground, a typical New England farmhouse, square and gaunt and unadorned, with a small front stoop and a long side porch. From the trees behind the house, came the dismal cry of a hoot owl, as the cars came to a rest, and an answering cry from the grove across the road.

"Ghosts," whispered the general.

"Oh, hush," pleaded Billy. "There is no need of fooling with things like that."

"This house ain't lived in," said the Watermelon, as he slipped from the car to straighten his cramped legs.

"Folks gone to bed," explained Bartlett cheerfully, since he was not the one who had gone to bed. "We will just have to rout them out."

He shut off the power and alighted from the car, pulling off his gloves. Alphonse came up in the other car and peered out at the dark, quiet, lonely house and shook his head with forebodings.

"There isn't any one here," insisted the Watermelon, "asleep or awake."

The general climbed out. "If we had consulted the book—"

"My dear sir," interrupted Bartlett, a bit irritated, "the book could not possibly have told us that the family had moved since last fall when I spent two weeks here, hunting."

"Certainly not," laughed Henrietta, who spent a good part of her life steering with infinite care and constantly growing skill between the Scylla of her father's wrath and the Charybdis of the hurt feelings of those whom the general had offended. "This is simply one of the unforeseen misfortunes of the road."

"Besides," said Bartlett, "we don't know that the Higginses have gone!"

"Don't you see that there aren't any signs of life?" demanded the Watermelon. He had lived by his wits so long that he noticed instinctively the little things which mean so much and are generally overlooked. "If there was any one

here some window would be open on a night like this, wouldn't it?"

CHAPTER X

THE DESERTED HOUSE

"Wonderful, wonderful!" murmured Henrietta in the tones of the famous Watson.

Bartlett looked at the house and nodded gloomily. "I guess you are right. Funny they should have left without writing me about it. I have known them for years."

"I will get the blue book," said the general, with the calm satisfaction of one who at last comes into his own. "We can return to the nearest village—"

"What do we want a blue book to do that for?" sneered Bartlett. "I should think two motor-cars could do it, provided we followed the road."

"Hold on a shake," said the Watermelon. "I will get in a window and open the door."

"We had better not," objected Henrietta, "Wouldn't that be house-breaking?"

The general agreed. "Certainly. It is warm and we can spend the night outside quite comfortably if you do not want to return to the village."

Billy shuddered and glanced appealingly at the Watermelon. A deserted house was bad enough, but outside where the owls called dismally from the woods and where bats flitted by in the dark held possibilities infinitely worse.

"I have known these people longer than I have Billy," said Bartlett. "I used to come here when I was a kid. It will be all right to break in. They are like my own folks."

The Watermelon immediately jumped to the porch, disdaining the few steps, and disappeared behind the vines which covered one end and concealed the window.

Bartlett turned reassuringly to the general. "It will be all right, Charlie. Don't worry about it. Why, I've always called Mrs. Higgins, Aunt Sally."

Visions of hot sausages, bread and milk die hard when one is hungry and the general snorted. "That's all right. I am hungry enough to break into the Bank of England if it resulted in something to eat, but what can we find in an empty house?"

"Ghosts," said Henrietta.

Billy pinched her. "If you think there are ghosts in there, Henrietta, I simply won't go in."

"Certainly there are ghosts," said Henrietta. "There always are in empty houses. Where else do you find them?"

"We will return to the village," declared the general, "and get something to eat. I will get the book—"

"An empty house is better than the countryside," said Bartlett. "And we have plenty to eat in that basket Henrietta put up."

"If there is something to eat—" wavered the general.

A light gleamed a moment through the crack of the door and then the door opened and the Watermelon grinned at them in the light of a small smoky lamp he held.

"Where did you get the lamp?" asked the general as the Watermelon led the way in.

"Found it," said the Watermelon. "The place is furnished. The family is probably only away for a visit." He set the lamp on the table and from long habit wiped his dusty hand on his trouser leg. "I fell over everything in the room before I got next to the fact."

He glanced about with some pride and the others stood in a semicircle and stared around. The room was a typical country kitchen, a huge stove side by side with a large chintz-covered rocking-chair. A dresser for the crockery and a haircloth lounge took up one side. There was a center-table with a red checked cloth, a few chairs and a sewing-machine near the window. On the walls were a number of cheap prints and several huge advertising calendars With gay pictures of young women in large hats and low-cut dresses.

Bartlett glanced around and at every unfamiliar object his heart sank lower and lower and his first sickening suspicion became a painful fact. He had never been in that room before. The Higginases had never lived there. Everything was strange, the furniture, the rugs, the very shape of the room. Where were they? Whose house had they unceremoniously broken into? A clammy chill crept down Bartlett's back and his florid face grew still redder.

None of the others was noticing him. The general was prowling around to see that the enemy could not come upon them unawares. The Watermelon had lifted the basket on to the table and the girls were preparing gaily to set forth the repast, all three rummaging in closets and drawers for plates and knives and forks.

The general returned to the table. "All serene along the Potomac," said he, thrusting his hands into his pockets and peering into the basket with renewed hope. Henrietta smiled gaily. She had pushed aside her auto veil, her cheeks

were flushed with the joy of the adventure and her eyes bright.

"Father," said she, "in all our lives, we have never had an adventure before, because you persist in using those blue books."

The general laughed and helped himself to a sandwich.

Billy opened the dresser and peered gingerly in, her small nose wrinkled for any unforeseen emergency. She had taken off her hat, and her soft yellow hair, bound back by a black velvet snood, escaped around her temples in tiny waves. Her eyes, thought the Watermelon, were brighter than the lamp upon the table and her laughing, kissable mouth redder than the crimson lips of the fair creatures in the gay calendars on the wall. Her hand upon the latch of the door was so near his own, that he was tempted to put his on it, but instead slipped his into his pocket with a delicacy he did not recognize in himself. She was a girl, young and sweet and attractive, and because she was attractive, she had been flung into the maw of the Street, a victim of the age's insane desire for money and more money. Each dainty curl, each flash and disappearance of her single dimple had been reckoned as so much in dollars and cents. So the Watermelon put his hand in his pocket and only watched her with poorly veiled admiration.

"Do you know what I am looking for?" she asked, glancing at him, her eyes full of mischief.

"For the family silver," said the Watermelon. "We might as well take some souvenir of our visit."

"I don't believe the family silver is silver," said she. "I am trying to find a bucket which you can take to the well and fill for tea. It will give you an appetite."

"We will let Alphonse go for the water," said the Watermelon, turning over the articles on the dusty, crowded shelves. "The general sees to the cars. We will give Alphonse a chance to earn his pay."

"You should do something to earn yours," said she.

"What is mine?" he asked, trying to see into her eyes.

"We must find that bucket," said she, gazing innocently upward at the higher shelves. "I love to muss around among other people's things. They are so much more interesting than your own. I wonder why."

"We can't be amused with ourselves and our things," said the Watermelon. "We are too important. Father used to say nothing else was really important but ourselves and what affected us."

Henrietta, fussing with the alcohol lamp at the table, laughed. "Why didn't your father write a book," she asked, "a philosophy? It would have been a deal more interesting than James or Spencer or Decant."

"He used to say that a man who knew life never wrote about it. It would be too painful. It wouldn't sell."

There was a heavy step on the porch and Bartlett turned quickly with sick-

ening fear. It was Alphonse come from putting the cars away in the shed beside the barn. Bartlett wiped his brow and swallowed heavily. This was terrible, this being in another man's house unlawfully. The utterly hopeless inability to explain satisfactorily took all one's nerves away. He glanced at the other four, merrily unconscious of his ghastly discovery, their thoughts filled only with the desire to eat.

"Billy," said he sharply, "what are you doing in that closet? Come away at once."

"I was only trying to find a bucket," stammered Billy.

"Those things don't belong to you. You have no right there." And Bartlett sternly and promptly shut the door.

Billy drew back hurt. "I don't see why it is so wrong to break into a man's pantry," said she, "after you have broken into his house. Besides, Daddy, you have known these people all your life."

"That's the trouble," said Bartlett desperately, with a rush, "I don't know these people. I have never been here before." He glared defiantly at the general, daring him to suggest the blue book.

For a moment no one spoke. Alphonse at the door, hat in hand, the general by the table, another prematurely acquired sandwich in his hand half way to his mouth, Henrietta, busy with the flame of the tiny alcohol lamp, Billy before him, the Watermelon on the edge of the dresser where he had seated himself, all stared in dull surprise. The Watermelon broke the silence.

"Better to break into another man's house than have him break into yours," said he. He glanced at Bartlett with just the flicker of amusement in his mild gray eyes, thinking that Bartlett had got lost already, deliberately, with the intention of spending the greater part of the following day finding themselves, and so successfully passing one day of the seven. Bartlett glanced at the young man and flushed. It seemed to him for one fleeting moment that the youth with the sleepy eyes knew a bit more than Bartlett cared to have him know, cared to have any one know, that he even seemed to suspect him of having got lost on purpose. Then the sleepy eyes turned again to Billy and the older man told himself that he was mistaken. He was growing nervous and reading his own intentions in every one's eyes. He strove to regain the mastery of his nerves by airy indifference.

"A slight mistake," said he.

"Ah, yes," said Henrietta, "as when you go off with another man's umbrella."

She turned down the flame, which threatened a conflagration, and put the cap on, extinguishing the lamp. One did not take tea in another's house when one had entered by mistake and through the window. One merely got out again, quietly and with no unavoidable delay.

The general, with rare nerve, took a bite from the sandwich and laid it on

the table. He drew his handkerchief and wiped his hands. "I will get the blue book," he began busily, his mouth still rather full.

"We don't need the blue book to tell us to get out," said Henrietta, a bit tartly. She looked at the dainty pile of sandwiches, the cold chicken, cakes and olives on the table with the wooden plates and gay paper napkins she had arranged for the coming feast and hesitated. She wished some one was courageous enough to suggest that they eat before they leave.

"Certainly not," said the general. "But if we had consulted them before we left—"

"Sort of in the fashion of an oracle," sneered Henrietta as she began slowly to gather up the napkins and the wooden plates.

"Tell me," said Bartlett calmly, impersonally, not as one desiring an argument, but simply as a humble seeker after knowledge, with no prior views on the subject, "tell me, can you never make a mistake if you have a blue book?"

"No," said Henrietta, "never. With the blue book one could go directly to Heaven. It would be impossible not to."

Billy laughed.

"Billy would laugh at her funeral," said Bartlett coldly.

"We haven't anything to cry about," said the Watermelon, frankly unconcerned. "It's for the man who owns the house to do the crying."

"How did we get here?" demanded the general, as Alphonse went to get the blue book, for the general could no longer be gainsaid in his desire for his book. "Is this where the Higgins' home should be?"

"Why, no, father," said Henrietta, "or it would be here."

"I meant, Henrietta, did we come the right way? If we took every turn and have come far enough and not too far, this should be the Higgins' house."

"It should be," admitted Bartlett. "But it isn't."

Through the open door came the many noises of the summer night, the incessant hum of insects, the plaintive cry of the whippoorwill, the strident chorus of the frogs in the pond back of the bam. A moth, fluttering around the dingy lamp, fell on the table with scorched wings and Billy tenderly pushed it on a plate and carried it to the door.

"Why not eat here?" suggested the Watermelon, unimpressed by the aspect of the affair as it struck the others. "We can hunt for the Higginses afterward. They ought to be around somewhere unless we're helplessly lost."

Henrietta smiled and took out the napkins she had laid back in the basket. "It won't take us long," she agreed. "We don't need to have any tea."

"No," protested Bartlett, glancing at the door and listening for the crunch of wheels on the gravel without, "no, we must leave at once. We aren't lost. The Higginses' is probably the next house."

"Suppose it isn't," said Billy.

"Just so," said the general. "We will return to the village and put up at the hotel. It isn't late."

"It's half-past eleven," said Henrietta, glancing at her watch.

Alphonse returned, blasé, indifferent. "There are no books," said he, devoid of all interest in the affair.

"No books?" cried the general. "Alphonse, what has become of them? Did you take them out of the car before we left?"

"No," said Alphonse, and violent, positive protestations could not have been more convincing.

"But where are they? I left them in the car."

"They probably fell out, father," said Henrietta.

"They have never fallen out before," snorted the general, with base suspicions against Henrietta.

"We can get another to-morrow," said Henrietta. "We will simply return to the hotel in the village for the night." And once more she replaced the napkins in the basket.

"Yes," agreed Bartlett. "There is a good hotel near the railroad tracks."

"Where are the railroad tracks?" asked the general, who had lost all faith in Bartlett's knowledge of the country. "We passed no railroad tracks."

"Just before you come to the village," retorted Bartlett, irritated as a badgered animal. "You have to cross them as you come up the main street."

"We crossed none," said the general, with the indifference of one who realizes that there is no more to hope for. The boat is sinking, let it sink. The last cent gone and the landlord coming for two months' rent. Let him come.

"No," said Billy gently, "we didn't, father."

"Why, we did, we must have," protested Bartlett. "I always come here on the railroad train. They have to flag it, but it stops. Why, I know there are tracks there."

The general did not attempt to argue. "We are lost," said he, and one knew that the unfortunate event was entirely due to the scorn of others for the blue book.

"No," said Henrietta kindly, "there were no tracks. I remember saying to Billy I was glad there was one town not spoiled by the garish contamination of the world. Didn't I, Billy?"

"Yes, she did," admitted Billy, looking pityingly at her father.

"If we didn't pass through Wayne, we are lost and the Higgins' home is probably miles from here and there is no use looking for it," said Bartlett, and smiled—grimly, the general thought; happily, the Watermelon thought. It would be rare luck to be lost thus early.

They were all gathered around the table, except the Watermelon and Alphonse. Alphonse still stood by the door, hat in hand. He was merely a paid hireling. His master's affairs were none of his. The Watermelon still sat on the dresser and swung his feet. The predicament was only one of the many he was more or less always involved in and not worth thinking about. Batchelor and the police did not worry him that night. It was too early.

"Why not eat something before we go?" he said. "We have been here about an hour now, and another hour won't make our crime any the worse."

"Yes," agreed Henrietta promptly, surprised at her own depravity. "Let's," and again she took out the plates and napkins.

"Suppose they come back," softly whispered Billy.

Instinctively they all glanced at the door, and Henrietta paused with her hands on the edge of the basket.

The Watermelon laughed. "You ain't worrying because you broke into another's house," said he. "What's fretting you is that you may be found out."

"It's awful," acknowledged Billy. "I feel funny in my stomach and have creeps up my back."

"So have I," said Henrietta, and nodded grimly.

"Do what you please," said Bartlett. "But don't get caught."

"They won't come," said the Watermelon. "They have been gone for quite a time and aren't coming back."

"Ah, my dear Holmes," said Henrietta, "explain your deductions."

"They've been gone long because there is so much dust on everything and the house smells so close. They won't be back to-night because none of the neighbors have been in to leave anything for them to eat and there aren't any chickens in the chicken-house. Alphonse would have stirred 'em up if they had been there."

"Suppose some one passes and sees the light," suggested the general, tempted to the breaking point by the dainty supper so near at hand and the thought of the terrible apology of a meal they would get at the dilapidated hotel they had passed in the village. And above all things, the general loved his meals.

"We are at the back of the house and it is almost twelve. Every one is in bed and those who aren't are drunk and wouldn't be believed anyway."

"It's five miles to the village," added Bartlett with no apparent relevance.

"Aw, be game," encouraged the Watermelon. "Be sports."

"Just being hungry is enough for me," declared Henrietta, taking the last of

the edibles from the basket.

CHAPTER XI

A NIGHT'S LODGING

The general hesitated. It was not lawful, not right. They had broken into another man's house and should leave at once. But all his life he had lived by rules and regulations, followed life's blue book as persistently and as well as he did the auto blue book. Now he was lost, the blue book was gone and there was an indefinable pleasure in letting go the rules and regulations that had governed him so long. In the warm June night, with the youthful, foolish Billy, and the irresponsible Watermelon, the general's latent criminal tendency came uppermost, that tendency in all of us once in a while to do wrong for the sake of the adventure in it, for the excitement and fascination, rather than for any material gain. In the experience of being in another man's house unknown and uninvited by the owner, of listening for the rattle of a wagon turning in at the gate, for the crunch of a foot on the gravel without, there was an exhilaration he had not known for years. He felt that a bold lawlessness which he had never had and had always felt rather proudly was only kept under by the veneer of civilization, was rising in him and that he was growing young again. He had always believed that if the occasion arose, he could out-Raffle Raffles.

"It will not do any harm," he thought with the remains of his old conscience. "We will go directly after supper."

It was a jovial meal. The conversation waxed merrier and merrier. The general grew younger with every mouthful and Bartlett more and more genial. He forgot that he was kidnapping a famous young financier, and told all his most enjoyable stories with the skill of many repetitions. When they had finished, no one for a while made any motion to clear up the table preparatory to leaving. Billy, with her chin on her hand, thoughtfully gathered up the crumbs still on her plate and transferred them to her mouth. Henrietta leaned back in her chair, her hands clasped behind her head, gazing dreamily at the flickering lamp. Bartlett and the general smoked in contented silence and the Watermelon rolled a cigarette with his long, thin fingers, his old clay pipe discarded with his rags. Alphonse was already asleep. A snore from his corner drew their attention.

The Watermelon licked his cigarette paper and glanced at Billy. "He's got

his nerve," said he, putting the cigarette in his mouth and reaching for a match.

"I don't think that any of us have been lacking in nerve to-night," said the general, with no little pride.

"You're dead game sports," admitted the Watermelon. "Let's stay all night."

"It's morning already," said Henrietta. "We have stayed all night."

"Let's sleep here," said the Watermelon. "We can leave early."

"Er—er—are there any beds?" asked the general.

"Father, father," cried Henrietta, "you are backsliding."

The general protested, immensely flattered.

"Father used to say if you didn't backslide once in a while, goodness wouldn't be goodness but a habit," said the Watermelon.

The general always looked back on that night and the week that followed with wonder, thankfulness and pride. When the Watermelon, waiting for no further consent, picked up the lamp and started to investigate the bedrooms, the general was the first to follow him.

They found two bedrooms on the ground floor, and though the beds only had mattresses and pillows on them, even the Watermelon did not suggest a search for sheets and pillow-cases. The girls took one room, the men the other. Alphonse was aroused enough to be dragged to the haircloth sofa in the kitchen, from which he kept falling during the course of the night with dull thuds that woke no one but himself.

The Watermelon was having the time of his young life. Abstract problems of right and wrong did not trouble him. He took each event as it came and never fretted about it when it was over or worried about the next to come. Last night in the open with the fat Mike and the languid James, all dirty, all tired, all tramps, he had slept as peacefully and had fallen asleep as quickly, as he did that night in a comfortable bed with an austere member of the New York Stock Exchange as bedfellow and a retired general of the United States army on the couch at the foot. The whole adventure was diverting, amusing, nothing more. He took each day as it came and let the morrow take care of itself. Batchelor would probably try to make trouble, but if Bartlett were as successful as he hoped to be, and kept on getting lost, there was little danger from that source. Bartlett, desiring secrecy as much as the Watermelon, had effectually silenced the enterprising reporter at the hotel.

It was early when Bartlett awoke. The birds were singing riotously in the vines over the porch and the sun streamed through the cracks in the shabby window shade. He yawned and stretched, glancing with amusement at the general, still raising melodious sounds of slumber from the couch at the foot of the bed. Then suddenly he became aware that the place at his side was empty, that the Watermelon was gone. He crawled stealthily out of bed and dressed, filled with

misgivings.

Batchelor had consented so readily the day before to come with them that now, when he had had time to think it over, he might have regretted his decision and be already on the way to the railroad, somewhere. His had been the master mind to conceive the check and ruination of the cotton scheme, and surely he would see the folly in what he had done the day before, when lured on by the pretty, bewitching Billy. He would realize now in the clear light of day that he must return to the city or get word to his brokers somehow. He might even then be in a telegraph office, sending a despatch of far-reaching importance.

Bartlett dressed with feverish haste and hurried out to the side porch. The Watermelon was there, sitting in the sun, his feet hanging over the edge of the porch, talking carelessly with the immobile Alphonse. Both were smoking and both had apparently been up for some time. Had Batchelor been to the village and telegraphed already? He would have had time to go and return if he had used one of the cars.

The Watermelon looked up. "Hello," said he.

"Hello," said Bartlett. "Been up long?"

"Not so long," said the Watermelon.

"Are the cars all right?" asked Bartlett.

"I haven't been to see," returned the Watermelon, rolling another cigarette.

Bartlett drew a sigh of relief and started after Alphonse for the shed beside the barn.

The Watermelon had not had time to walk to the village and back, besides telegraphing. Bartlett paused and glanced over his shoulder.

"Aren't you coming?"

"No," said the Watermelon. "I ain't bugs about the gasolene buggies."

Bartlett walked on, shrewdly guessing that the languid youth was waiting for Billy. Her charms, it seemed, had not grown any less effective. He decided that he would not try to get in touch with his broker. He could trust him to take care of the city end of the business if Batchelor were to be eliminated until the following Sunday. Batchelor was an ordinary youth and if Billy's charms were not enough to hold him, finding himself an equal and on friendly footing with people in what his policeman father and washerwoman mother reverently called "society," would probably turn his otherwise level head completely. Bartlett admitted to himself, as he gazed abstractedly at the shining cars, that the young man had not appeared visibly impressed either by himself or the general. But Batchelor was clever and would hide his elation.

The Watermelon's slow drawl at last aroused him.

"Cut it," said the Watermelon. "The cops are coming."

One of New York's leading citizens, bank president and corporation direc-

tor, felt a slow, cold, clammy chill creeping up his spinal column. His first instinctive desire, like that of the small boy caught robbing an apple orchard, was to hide. Last night was one of those unfortunate occurrences it were best to pass over in silence. He turned and glanced at the house. The place looked deserted in the morning sunshine. The blinds were drawn, the doors shut. The general and the girls apparently still slept, and no country variety of New York's "finest" with warrant and shotgun could be seen approaching. Alphonse looked up from the car and gazed a moment at the house with the scornful indifference for the law and its minions of the confirmed joy-rider.

"I do not see any one," said Bartlett with calm dignity.

"They are creeping up on us," said the Watermelon cheerfully. "Trust the rube to do the thing up in style. Three men came along. They stopped down by the gate and talked, pointing up here, then one ran on to the village to get help, I suppose, and the other two are waiting down there."

"I will go and explain that it was a mistake," said Bartlett.

"Now, don't do that," adjured the Watermelon. It was just possible that the police had already picked up his trail and he preferred the chance of escaping in a car to stealing away by himself, through the woods, a tramp again, leaving behind him Billy and a week of fun. "Alphonse can bring up the cars and we can slip away before the reinforcements come. See?"

"I will explain that it was a mistake—"

"Mistakes," said the Watermelon coldly, "aren't on the cards in school and the law. Come up to the house and see the others first, anyway."

"One can afford mistakes as well as any other luxury," said Bartlett. "Money is all the fellows want."

"Let's talk it over first with the others, anyway," urged the Watermelon, feeling that it might be that money was not all they wanted.

They found the general and the girls in the kitchen putting it in order.

"Certainly," said the general with the calmness of one immune from the law. "We will explain."

"What?" asked Henrietta, as she drew shut the basket lid and slipped in the catch.

"Father used to say that if what you've done makes a fight, explanations will only make another," said the Watermelon. While he had the time he realized that he should slip away, but there was a chance that the police, finding their youthful quarry in the society of a general and a reputable and wealthy citizen of New York, could be impressed with the belief that they had made a mistake, and the Watermelon was always ready to take chances. Still, there was no need of running needless risk, and if he could persuade them all to escape with him in the cars, he would do it.

Henrietta nodded. Billy was for an instant flight. "We might as well," she explained lucidly, eying her father questioningly.

"Not at all," said Bartlett. "Money is all they want."

"An explanation," said the general, "will be sufficient. We do not want any tampering with the law." He picked up his hat and started for the door as he would sally forth and demand the surrender of a beaten foe.

"But, father," Henrietta's clear voice made him pause, "what can we explain?" She pushed back her auto veil and gazed from one to the other in gentle deprecation. "How we got in? But they wouldn't want us to explain that. You see, they can surmise that."

The general came back to the table. A little firmness, tempered with a lucid explanation in words of one syllable had always been his method in dealing with the weaker sex. "My dear Henrietta, we can explain why we are here."

"Why are we?" asked Henrietta meekly.

"Why are we?" demanded the general. "Because we took it for the house of a very old and dear friend."

"But as soon as we entered, father, we knew our mistake."

"Henrietta," said the general, "I can not argue with you."

"No, father," agreed Henrietta. "But when we found out our mistake, why didn't we leave?"

"I can not argue with you, Henrietta," repeated the general.

"Money," said Bartlett, "is all they want. They always fine all motorists for breaking speed laws. It becomes a sort of habit with them."

"This ain't breaking the speed laws," warned the Watermelon. "This is house-breaking."

"Sir," demanded the general, "do you accuse me, me, of house-breaking?"

"The whole damn family," said the Watermelon brusksly. He wanted to slip away quietly, whether the men at the gate were waiting for him alone or for all of them, having a tramp's dislike for anything that smacked of a possibility of falling into the hands of the law. "This is some different from speed-breaking," he added gloomily.

"This is preposterous!" cried the general. "That I, I, should be arrested! Why, I refuse to be. No one has a right to arrest me."

"If you break into another person's house, father—" began Henrietta.

"But, Henrietta, I am not a house-breaker. I deny the charge."

"We all are," said Henrietta. "That is all I can see to it."

"Money—" began Bartlett again, the refrain of his life. He felt he could not be arrested and haled before a magistrate, even such an humble one as a country justice of the peace. His whole scheme would be ruined. Batchelor would probably want to return to the city as soon as he could bail himself out, and not

care to have anything more to do with motor trips run on similar lines.

"No," snapped the general, "we will have no graft."

"Graft," sputtered Bartlett. "Who suggested graft? A wise manipulation of the financial end of a difficulty will more often save you than not. There is no graft in paying for a night's lodging."

"Under the present circumstances, paying for a night's lodging is graft," declared the general.

"It's graft, then, or prison," snapped Bartlett.

"Prison," said the general heroically.

"Prison is foolish," said Billy, "when one has a motor-car and can get away."

"Besides," said Bartlett, "graft is not dishonest for the man who gives the bribe."

"It ain't," agreed the Watermelon, "if the man has money enough to give publicly to some college or institution."

Henrietta drew on her gloves. "I think you are all cynics," said she. "Graft is dishonest."

"Why?" asked Bartlett, turning to her. "Why, Henrietta?"

"Because," said Henrietta firmly.

"The only dishonor is playing on another man's weakness, using that for your own ends. If I know a man has a price, am I dishonest to take advantage of the knowledge? No, certainly not. The dishonor is in him who has a price, whose dirty little soul cares so much for money that he lets his manhood go at so much in dollars and cents, like merchandise."

"Ah," cried Henrietta with quick sympathy for the tempted. "Poverty is so terrible and money such a temptation. It doesn't seem to be fighting fair to take advantage of it."

"Father used to say that it would take the constitution of an ostrich, the empty head of a fool and the nerves of a prize-fighter to stand poverty," said the Watermelon, thinking of those days when there were eight children and no money.

"I think," said Billy, as one propounding a wholly original suggestion, "that we should go at once."

"If we have done wrong," said the general, "we should suffer for it. We should not attempt to evade the consequences of our acts."

There was a heavy step on the porch without. The general turned pale, Bartlett reached for his pocket-book and Billy leaned weakly against the knobby end of the haircloth sofa. Only Henrietta and the Watermelon were quite calm,

the latter with the calmness of desperation, the former, of despair.

CHAPTER XII

THE KEY TO THE SITUATION

The Watermelon accepted the inexorable with the tramp's sang-froid; Henrietta with a sweet dignity, though slightly flushed. The door had been shut before the conference began and the person on the porch had not come in sight of the windows. With a slow wink at Henrietta, the Watermelon strode to the door. Instinctively the general started to lay his hand on the young man's arm as he passed, to detain him a moment, but instead picked up his hat from the table and hoped that no one had seen that involuntary little gesture. The Watermelon threw open the door with a bit of a flourish and Alphonse, stolid, unsmiling, entered.

There was an involuntary sigh of relief from all, even the general.

"Well," asked the Watermelon, "what are the sleuths doing?"

"Where are the cars, Alphonse?" asked the general sternly, in the reaction of the suspense of the moment before.

"I left them at the back door," answered Alphonse, as one who understood perfectly the whole aspect of the case and realized that sometimes a quiet exit is more to be desired than great acclaim. "I thought you would not want them seen from the front."

"I have no objection to my car being seen by everybody," returned the general with a wave of his hand, which appeared to include the universe.

The back door was locked and the key gone, and the Watermelon had hurried to the door into the sheds and was struggling with the rusty lock. "This is the way," said he, "through the woodshed. That door's locked and there ain't a key; family probably left that way. I noticed the woodshed route this morning."

"We can shut this door on the side porch and lock it just as we found it," said Henrietta.

She shut the door and Alphonse as quietly turned the key. She lowered the window the Watermelon had opened and, finding that he had broken the lock in doing it, she slipped a dollar from her purse and left it on the ledge. It seemed to Henrietta to leave more, to pay for their night's lodging, would simply be adding insult to injury. One can not take unpardonable liberties with another's

possessions and then pay for it in the gold of the land.

"Come," said she.

The Watermelon had already opened the door and was working on the lock of the one in the woodshed. Henrietta paused in the house door, the basket on her arm, and glanced back at the others. "Come on," said she.

"I will explain," began the general, with a firmness that was fast weakening.

"Father," said Henrietta, "you can not explain. Graft is dishonest. The only thing we can do is to run."

Billy grabbed up her gloves and obeyed with alacrity. Bartlett and the general followed in dignified majesty. Alphonse came last and shut each door as they passed through. With no undue haste, and yet with no loitering to admire a perfect summer morning, they climbed into the cars; Alphonse alone in the general's, the other five in Bartlett's, with Bartlett at the wheel.

"Shall we rush them?" suggested the Watermelon with happy anticipation.

Alphonse, like the voice of reason, calm, unemotional, blasé, spoke: "There is a cow lane back of the barn. It is wide enough for the cars. It leads into the road farther on. I left the bars down."

"You're a man, Alphonse," said the Watermelon.

They glided without further comment through the barnyard into the rocky, tree-shaded cow lane. The general glanced behind. No one was in sight. The lane was narrow and rough, last spring's mud having hardened into humps and ridges from the passing of many feet. The cars ran slowly of a necessity, and while the engines throbbed, the noise was not loud, and the slight hill on which the house stood deadened the sound and concealed the cars from any one in front.

Henrietta leaned toward the Watermelon, who sat on the small seat just in front of her and just behind the general. "On such an occasion as this," she asked, "what did 'father' used to say?"

"Nothing," said the Watermelon. "There were two times when he never said anything, one was when he was asleep and the other was when he was escaping from the police."

"Oh," cried Billy, "he was a minister, why should he have had to escape from the police?"

"He left the ministry," explained the Watermelon.

"What did he say when he left it?" teased Henrietta.

"Good-by," said the Watermelon.

Then the cars turned into the road and two men stepped from the bushes on either side. They were tall, raw-boned country men, in flapping straw hats and blue jeans. Each carried a shotgun in the crook of his arm with a tender pleasure in the feel of it, each chewed a big piece of tobacco and each was apparently more than enjoying the situation. The Watermelon, leaning forward, with wary eyes,

was pleased to see a look of surprise flit across their square-jawed, sun-tanned faces as they saw the second car slowly following the first, and four men instead of one, as the telegram had said "one man in a big red touring car," the make and engine number given.

For a moment the general could think of nothing to say. If he had been permitted to sally forth from the front door, he could have explained clearly, emphatically, with all his old-time belief that being himself no one could possibly doubt him or his good intentions. But now, caught thus, acknowledging his guilt by his surreptitious leave-taking, he did not know what to say, where to begin. Bartlett reached for his pocket-book.

"What's the make of your car?" demanded the taller of the two of Bartlett, laying his hand on the fender.

[image]

"What's the make of your car?"

Surprised, Bartlett told, thankful that he had not been asked for his name.

"Engine number?" demanded the man.

Bartlett gave it.

"License number?"

"Great Scott!" snapped Bartlett. "What do you want next? My age? My number is on the back of my car. I have so many cars I have forgotten it. Go and look, or ask my man. Alphonse, what's the number on the back?"

"97411," droned Alphonse coldly.

"Be both these cars yours?" asked the man, puzzled and a bit disappointed.

"That car," said the general pompously, "is mine. Allow me." He drew his card-case from his pocket, and to the tall man's consternation and Bartlett's horror, presented him with his card. The two withdrew and consulted a moment. Clearly the family party before them was not the young man wanted in Wilton for stealing a motor-car and a suit of clothes, but for all that, what were they doing in an empty house?

"We can arrest 'em and get a fine anyway," said the taller of the two, and the other agreed.

The Watermelon leaned forward with languid interest, his hat on the back of his head. "How d'ye do?" he drawled. "What are you doing with the popguns?"

"Hunting," grinned the spokesman pleasantly.

"Any luck?" asked the Watermelon.

"Bet cher life!" said the man. "Got what we were after."

"Bear?" asked the Watermelon innocently.

"Autos," said the man.

"Sir," began the general. He felt a pressure on his shoulder so firm, that, irritated, he turned to remonstrate with Henrietta. One could not explain the situation with any degree of pride in the first place, still less so, if some one behind were apparently endeavoring to suppress one.

The Watermelon frowned. "We weren't breaking any speed limit, unless the snail is the standard you regulate your speed laws by." The men no longer believed that they had caught the thief, but if they insisted on taking the party before a magistrate, each would have to give his name. With the general present, fictitious names would only be so much waste of breath, and the Watermelon had no desire to give his assumed name to any one in the employ of the law.

"Naw," sneered the man, spitting with gusto. "There're other things to break besides speed laws."

"Yes," agreed the Watermelon, "your empty head."

"Now, don't get sassy," warned the man, growing angry. "I'm an officer of the law and I'm not going to take any of your sass."

"An officer of the law can't arrest a law-abiding citizen," snapped the Watermelon with righteous indignation.

"Law-abiding?" jeered the man.

"What have we done?"

"Try to guess," suggested the man pleasantly and the other laughed.

"I can't guess," said the Watermelon. "Is it for riding through the cow lane? We didn't hurt the lane any. I rode through this same lane last summer and the Browns didn't kick up any row over it. In fact, they were with me, that is, Dick and Lizzie were."

The man stared and the Watermelon frowned coldly.

"Do you know the Browns?" demanded the fellow.

"Not very well," admitted the Watermelon. "I was through here last summer and stopped over night at their place. They were fine people, all right. They told me if I ever came this way again to drop in and I said I would. It was a sort of joke. They gave me a latch-key." He drew a key from his pocket and held it out as proof of his integrity.

"Huh," said the man dully, gazing from the key to the Watermelon.

The second man took it. "Which door does it fit?" he asked.

"The front door," said the Watermelon promptly. "Go try it if you want proof."

"Not so fast," said the second man, who had taken the affair into his own hands. "If you know the Browns, tell me something about them? No, you chuffer feller, hold on, back there. Don't try to slip by, for you can't. You automobilists

think that the Lord created Heaven and earth for your benefit and then rested on the seventh day and has been resting ever since. That's better. Now, then—"turning again to the Watermelon—"how many in the family?"

"How many?" queried the Watermelon. "I don't know. I only saw Ma and Pa and the three kids, Dick and Lizzie and Sarah. Sarah was a young lady about twenty, if I remember rightly; Lizzie was eight and Dick was a bit older, ten or twelve—twelve, I think he said. I remember his birthday came in January, anyway."

"Well, goldarn it," laughed the first man, thoroughly convinced. "Well, say, ain't we the easy marks?"

"Don't blame yourselves," said the Watermelon gently. "Father used to say that anything colossal, even stupidity, was worthy of admiration."

"What did Dick look like?" demanded the second man, loath to give up.

The Watermelon straightened up. "See here, my man," said he sternly, "we are in a hurry. You have detained us long enough. I have told you as much as I am going to about the Browns. It's a year ago this summer that I was there and I haven't been dwelling on their beautiful countenances in rapt and joyful contemplation ever since. I have seen a few people during the interval. Dick was fairly good looking, but Lizzie was the cutest. I took them through the cow lane to show them how they could go for the cows in a motor-car, farming up-to-date, see. Now move aside and let us pass, please."

"No, you don't," returned the man sharply. "Let that chuffer feller in the back car come up to the house with me while I try this key. Tom, you keep the others here, till I come back."

The Watermelon leaned back wearily indifferent and drew out his cigarette papers. Alphonse climbed obediently from the car, with his usual imperturbability. Calmly and willingly he scaled the stone wall and set off across the field with his captor. Tom thoughtfully examined his gun, one eye on the motor-cars.

The general's desire to explain was superseded by a still greater desire to get away. The grim faces of the two men impressed him with the gravity of the event. If they were to escape, now was the time, when the forces of the enemy were divided, but there was his car.

He could not leave that behind and the man in the road was a fairly good reason for him to remain where he was and make no attempt to reach it. Batchelor had put up a clever bluff, but it had been called, and they had to sit there until the return of the other man, when they would be exposed, for of course the key wouldn't fit. That second man was a stubborn brute. The Lord had made mules. He didn't intend men to be.

The general turned irritably and glanced at the Watermelon, lolling gracefully in his seat and humming a ridiculous little song between airy puffs of his

cigarette.

Henrietta repressed a wild wish to scream aloud. Never, never again would she go into another man's house unless expressly asked to do so by the owner. She glanced behind, up the hill, toward the house. Alphonse and his captor had just come into sight again and were returning through the field. Henrietta breathed heavily. This was awful. When the two reached the stone wall, she hoped she would faint. She knew she wouldn't, she never fainted. She turned around that she might not see them. Nothing could be done, apparently, but simply wait for the hand of the law to fall upon them. The Watermelon had made a good guess as to the children, it seemed; why hadn't he been content to let it go at that? Why had he hauled out that useless key? She had ceased to feel, to think. She looked at Billy. Billy was frozen dumb. This was the end. Bartlett glanced at the man in the road and tried to figure his price.

The Watermelon turned carelessly and spoke to Henrietta. "That was a pretty bird up there. Did you see it?"

"Yes," said Henrietta automatically, though she had seen no bird. She heard the two men now right behind the car and she sank back limply. All was over.

"Well?" queried the Watermelon.

"By gum," admitted the man with the key. "It fits."

CHAPTER XIII

ONLY TO BE LOST

Bartlett grinned and removed his hat to wipe his brow. The general strove not to show a guilty surprise, Billy giggled and Henrietta began to live again.

The Watermelon held out his hand. "My key, please. Kindly remove that piece of artillery from the road and we will go on."

The man, covered with perspiration and embarrassment, handed back the key. "When the Browns come back, shall we tell them you called?"

"Certainly," said the general pompously, and in the exuberance of the reaction, he drew a half dollar from his pocket and handed it to the fellow. "Kindly give that to Dick," said he with the benevolence of a grandfather.

Billy waved to the crestfallen two and Henrietta gave them a gracious, forgiving bow.

"Never again," said she, "shall I do wrong. The possibilities of discovery are

too nerve-racking.”

”Father used to say—” began the Watermelon.

”I’ll bet your mother didn’t talk much,” laughed Bartlett.

But the general had passed through an unhappy half hour and had no heart for jesting.

”If you knew the Browns, Mr. Batchelor,” said he, ”it was your duty to have told us so.”

”Yes,” said Henrietta. ”I have aged ten years, and at my time of life that is tragedy.”

”And why,” asked Billy, ”if you had the key, didn’t we go in by the front door last night?”

The Watermelon stared from one accusing face to the other in frank surprise. Even Mike with his fat wits would have grasped the situation. ”I didn’t know them,” he protested. ”When I can go in by a door, I don’t choose the window.”

”But the key,” objected Billy.

”Dick and Lizzie,” added Henrietta.

”Their very ages,” climaxed the general.

”It was only a bluff,” said the Watermelon wearily. ”I remembered their names and ages from books I had seen around the room last night and on the dresser, sort of birthday presents and things, you know. I never saw one of them.”

The general roared and loved the boy. Henrietta leaned forward and patted him on the shoulder. ”Wonderful, wonderful Holmes!” said she.

”Did you take the key on purpose?” asked Billy, all athrill with admiration.

The Watermelon flushed. He had taken the key if by any chance he should ever be in that neighborhood again, and the family away, he could spend the night in a comfortable bed instead of under a hayrick. Besides keys always came in handy. He didn’t look at Billy. Like a sudden flash of lightning on a dark night, he had seen the difference between them, between what he had become and what he had been. But it came and was gone and the old careless indifference rushed back. He laughed and changed his seat to the one between the two girls.

”When I locked the front door, I slipped the key out without thinking, I suppose,” said he. ”Besides, keys are handy. When you are stony broke, you can rattle them and make the other fellow think maybe they’re the mon.”

”Now for breakfast,” cried the general gaily, never long forgetful of his meals.

”Tell me,” begged Henrietta, ”what would father say?”

”Grace,” said the Watermelon.

The general, as he informed Henrietta at the first roadhouse they came to and at which they stopped for breakfast, was full of the old Nick. He felt

that there might be no limit to his daring, he might go as far as to rob an apple orchard and make no attempt to repay the owner, that was, if the apples were ripe. Henrietta's own spirits were rising. One never realized what liberty was until one threw aside conventionality—not honor, but conventionality, the silly, foolish laws of senseless ages. Billy as usual laughed at every remark, while the general, the tramp and the financier grew fairly brilliant beneath the spur of two pretty women's laughing eyes.

The Watermelon, in his silk socks, his soft panama and fine linen, was too much in the habit of taking fate as he found it, without wonder or protest, to marvel now at his change of fortune or to be disturbed or embarrassed at the unexpected society in which he found himself. Between him and Bartlett was only the difference of a few millions, both lived by their wits, and if one preferred to walk while the other rode, it was merely a matter of choice—no sign of inferiority between man and man.

They stopped that evening at a small town in the north of Vermont, as far from a railway and telegraph office as Bartlett could bring them. He had watched Batchelor carefully for signs of restlessness, but the young man appeared entirely absorbed in the present, with no thought for anything but the moment and Billy and Henrietta.

After supper, they loitered a while on the porch. The night was dark and warm. Across the road and over the fields, the frogs in a distant pond were croaking, and the air was thick with fireflies.

"Isn't it dark and still," said Billy, her hands thrust into the pockets of her linen coat, her feet slightly parted, as a boy would stand, her small head thrown back.

The Watermelon watched her covertly from the cigarette he was rolling, the clear oval of her dainty profile, her slender throat and well-shaped head with its coronet of braids.

"Dark as misery," said Henrietta dreamily.

"In the day, one sees a world," quoted Bartlett, standing beside her where she leaned, a slender figure, against the post of the porch. "In the night one sees a universe," and he waved his lighted cigar vaguely toward the myriads of stars above them.

"What good does that do," asked the Watermelon, "seeing a universe? It's miles away and can't help you any."

"Ah, but it's beautiful," cried Henrietta, who had never had much experience with misery. "It teaches one to look up, the night-time does."

The Watermelon lighted his cigarette in the cup of his hands and tossed his match away. "If you are trying to walk in the dark," he objected, "trying to get out of your troubles, say, and not standing still in the same old place, you can't

look up.”

”You have no beauty in your soul,” declared Henrietta. ”I think the idea is beautiful, seeing a universe.”

”When you are down and out, you don’t take any pleasure in looking at a universe,” said the Watermelon. ”A dollar, or even a quarter, will look a darned sight more beautiful.”

”I wouldn’t like to be poor,” said Billy. ”It must be so terrible to have no motor-car, for one thing.”

”It is,” agreed the Watermelon, who would have agreed to anything Billy said. ”It’s simply awful.”

”What did you mind most,” asked Billy, ”when you were a newsboy?”

”Let’s go look at the universe,” suggested the Watermelon hastily. ”We can see it much better down the road a bit.”

Billy consented, and they strolled away in the dark. The general, who thought he was talking politics, was laying down the law to the hotel clerk, and Henrietta and Bartlett were left alone. They lingered a moment on the porch and then quietly disappeared up the road in the opposite direction from that taken by Billy and the Watermelon.

Bartlett’s desire was to reach Maine as soon as possible and get lost over Saturday, but to avoid every city and larger town on the way and to hurry by the smaller places where there might be telegraph or telephone connections.

”Out of touch of the world for a week,” he was fond of repeating, ”no letters, no papers, no worries and no nerves.”

And his desire was the Watermelon’s. The more they avoided towns, the better the youth liked it. Telegraph and telephone stations were zealously shunned. He would have liked to have seen a paper, so as to judge what the police thought in the case of the theft of the wealthy young stock-broker’s car, provided Batchelor had allowed the thing to become public, which he very much doubted, from the little he knew of the man’s character. It was hardly an episode one would care to see in print if one was dignified and self-made. And the Watermelon chuckled.

It took them longer than Bartlett hoped, sticking to narrow, unused country roads, and the next night found them still in Vermont. They spent the night at the village boarding-house, and once again Billy and the Watermelon went down the road a bit to look at the universe, and Henrietta and Bartlett went up the road.

The following day, to Bartlett’s satisfaction, they got lost. It was late in the afternoon when they stopped at Milford, a small town in New Hampshire, and made inquiries about the next town. Was it far and would the accommodations be good? It wasn’t far, the farmer whom they questioned, assured them, only five miles. He directed them how to go and they thanked him and pushed on.

They went on and on and nightfall found them in a lonely bit of wooded road apparently miles from any town or habitation. Bartlett was pleased. They were lost, and by great good luck they might remain lost for a considerable length of time. The general, too, was delighted. They would make a night of it. It was what he had long wanted to do and now they would have to. The lunch basket had been filled earlier in the day at a country store, so there would be enough to eat. The seats of the autos were soft and one could sleep in the cars or on the ground, as one preferred. It was warm and the rugs and shawls would be covering enough.

They ran the cars out of the road to a convenient clearing. Henrietta got out the basket, shawls were spread on the ground in the light of the two cars and they prepared to make the best of things.

"This is like old times," declared the general genially; "a night on the march, far out on the prairies, not a thing in sight, not a sound but a coyote yelping or the cry of a wolf."

"And Indians," said Henrietta, "hiding back of the nearest hillock, creeping up on you unawares."

Billy glanced behind her at the woods and wished they had chosen a more open place to dine.

"Yes," agreed the general cheerfully, "or down in some southern swamp, with the Johnny Rebs stealing through the bushes."

"Oh, please," begged Billy. "What's the use of telling about things creeping up on you?"

And she glanced again at the bit of wood she could see in the light of the lamps. Far in the west the moon was sinking and here and there a star twinkled between the rolling clouds. A thunder-head was now and then revealed distinctly by flashes of distant lightning, and thunder rumbled ominously in the sultry night. A whippoorwill called steadily and once a bat on graceful wing flew by in the eery light.

The general laughed. "That was living in those days, Billy," he said. "A man was a man and not an office automaton, a dimes saving bank."

CHAPTER XIV

BILLY, BILLY EVERYWHERE

Bartlett nodded. He had been watching Henrietta through half-lazy, half-closed lids, leaning against a fallen log. Somehow out there in the coolness and sweetness of the summer night, in the open country, with only the drumming of the insects and the shrill clamor of frogs to break the silence, nothing seemed to matter, to be worth struggling for. He felt that he hardly cared what was happening in his absence, back there in the hot, crowded, dirty city. A few more millions added to the useless many he already owned, what did it matter? What amount could buy the night, the peace and sweetness and content? He glanced at the Watermelon and felt no triumph in the thought that this was Wednesday and so far not a paper had been received, not a letter sent to spoil his plans. He wondered lazily that he had gone to the bother of planning the small, petty intrigue of the small, petty city, like dogs snarling over a worm-eaten bone. How trivial it all was!

"You're right, General," said he, watching the play of Henrietta's thin white hands in the lamp light, as she and Billy arranged the evening meal. "A man's not a man in the city—nothing but a dirty, money-grubbing proposition. Dollars and cents, dollars and cents, the only reason of his being."

"I know," agreed Henrietta, nodding. "I sometimes wonder why it was so arranged—the world, you know. Why couldn't love, courage, honor have been made the medium of exchange, the most vital necessity of life? Every one has to have money, so every one has to struggle for it. Why couldn't things have been started differently?"

"Potatoes, two kisses a peck," suggested the Watermelon.

"Three," said Bartlett, "if the purchaser is young and pretty. A smile would be enough, if she were old and wrinkled and unwed."

"A motor-car would probably necessitate a wedding," said the general.

"No, no, no," protested Henrietta. "How silly! You don't understand me at all."

"I would hate to be a clerk at a bargain sale," said the Watermelon, pilfering a cracker from the box Billy held.

"Yes," agreed Bartlett, "think of the microbes—"

"Microbes?" asked Billy who had not been following the conversation. "Where?"

"In kisses, Billy," said the general. "I should think you would have found it out by this time. Everybody you kiss—"

"I never kiss anybody," protested Billy, blushing delightfully.

"Father used to say—" began the Watermelon.

"Look here," interrupted Bartlett, "that father of yours was a minister, you say. I vow he could know nothing about this subject."

"He married more people than you have," said the Watermelon.

"Yes," said Henrietta kindly, "he must have known all about it. Do tell us what he said."

"He used to say that kissing was just the reverse of poker—"

"Poker," cried Bartlett. "No wonder your father left the ministry."

"It says in the papers that your father was a policeman," declared the general.

"A policeman of souls," said Henrietta softly.

The general waved the sentiment aside as immaterial. "How could he have been a policeman and a minister?"

"I can't say," answered the Watermelon, and turned to help Billy with a sardine can as the best way out of a tight place.

"How is kissing the reverse of poker?" asked Henrietta, always amused by the Reverend Mr. Batchelor's remarks.

"A pair would beat a royal flush," replied the Watermelon.

"Surely," persisted the general, "if your father were a minister—"

The Watermelon looked up from the key of the tin he was laboriously turning and glanced gently at the general, his woman's eyes amused and pitying, the expression they always wore for the general.

"Why, you see that is just what I always fancied. He used to preach and have a church—but if the papers say he was a cop, he probably was."

"It's a wise child that knows his own father," said Henrietta. "Come to supper everybody."

Bartlett spread the filmy paper napkin on his knees and taking the plate Henrietta handed him, balanced it on his lap with great nicety. He was so sure that the Watermelon was William Hargrave Batchelor that it never occurred to him to doubt it. There were the cards, the monogram on the automobile and the general to vouch for it. The papers were a bit wrong.

Supper over, the general conceived the sudden inspiration of tinkering a while with the cars. Alphonse stood by to assist and the others wandered off down the road before turning in for the night.

Billy and the Watermelon soon drifted away by themselves up a tiny cow lane, fragrant with sweetbrier. They wandered up it side by side, like two children, neither saying a thing, content to be together. At the end of the lane, they leaned for a while on the pasture bars. The sultriness of the earlier part of the evening had passed. The thunder was less ominous and only sheet lightning, low on the horizon, was visible. A breeze, cool and sweet, whispered by. The fireflies danced in gay little flashes of light among the shadows.

The two stood side by side, their elbows on the top rail, their hands before them. They said nothing. There was nothing to say, just the night and they two, alone, among the sweetbriers and the fireflies.

Now and then Billy sighed, unconsciously and happily. A great silence had enwrapped Billy for the last two days, a silence in which she was content to dream and in which words seemed superfluous and uncalled for. She wondered that Henrietta could talk so much. What was there to say? Billy had never been in love. She wondered vaguely if the enfolding content, the longing for solitude and her own thoughts were forerunners of approaching death. The good die young, and Billy felt that she was content to go, to drift away into the eternal peace of the after life. She was not of an analytical disposition and she only knew that she was happy, causelessly happy, and did not ask the reason. The Watermelon stood so closely beside her that once when he turned she could smell the tobacco on his breath. She wanted to rub her head on his shoulder like a kitten, and wondered if she were growing weak-minded.

Without warning the bushes at her side parted and a cow with great gentle eyes peered out at them, so near that Billy could feel the breath, warm and sweet, upon her cheek. With a little cry, she shrank close to the Watermelon.

He felt her slender body, soft and yielding, nestling against him, smelt the fragrance of her curly hair, and suddenly a great tide of longing, of passion, of desire welled up in him and choked him. He wanted to crush her to him, to cover eyes and hair with kisses, to hold her so tightly that she would cry for release. All the ungoverned feelings of the past few years surged over him and threatened to carry both for ever out of sight of land and decency. But, blindly, not knowing what he did, he turned from her and picked up a stick to hurl at the cow. She had turned to him in her fear, and with the honor of his clerical father, he controlled himself.

Billy laughed and straightened up, as the cow, grieved and surprised, backed off in the dark. "I'm not afraid of cows, Willie," said she. "Don't you know it? She just came so suddenly I was startled."

"Yes," agreed the Watermelon dully. "So was I. Why did you call me Willie?"

"Short for William, and William is your name, goose. Don't you remember your own name?" crooned Billy, leaning toward him in the dark.

"Yes, surely," said the Watermelon. "But I hate my name. Call me Jerry. That's what the boys call me."

He did not add that his name was Jeroboam Martin. He being the seventh young Martin to arrive, his distracted parents had turned to the Bible for help in names as well as in the more vital necessities.

"Jerry?" laughed Billy questioningly.

"Yes," said Jeroboam gravely, and added abruptly, "Let's go back."

They turned and retraced their steps, Billy all athrill with she knew not what, singing a foolish little song beneath her breath, the Watermelon staring angrily before him, denying hotly to himself what would not be denied, that he

loved Billy. He loved her, not as he had loved other women, not as a careless, lazy tramp, taking what offered, good, bad or worse, with airy indifference, but as the son of his poor virtuous, mother and of his gentle, reverend father would love and cherish the one woman.

But who was he to love like that? The past few years had branded him as a thing apart from Billy. He tried to think it out, but the blood pounded in his temples and he could not think, could only know that he loved her more than he did himself, with a love stronger than the mad passion and longing for her that throbbed in his pulses like leaping fire. The knowledge had come so suddenly, he was so unprepared, that he could not reason it out, could only know that Billy must never dream of such a thing. A companion of Mike and James, who was he to talk of love to Billy? God!

His head moved restlessly as though in pain and his hands, unconsciously jingling the keys in his trousers pockets, clenched tightly. Billy swayed against him in the dark and straightened up with a laugh and a smothered yawn.

"Oh, law," said she, "I'm tired."

"So am I," said the Watermelon moodily. "Tired of living."

"Do you know," said Billy, "I was just thinking that death might not be so awful, just to close your eyes and drift out into space, on and on and on."

"It would be a darned sight better than living," answered the Watermelon. "Hell would be preferable. I beg your pardon."

"Aren't you well?" asked Billy anxiously. "As for me, I never really want to die unless I am feeling perfectly well."

Henrietta and Bartlett strolled up as they approached the cars, where they found the general pacing up and down the road, filled with righteous indignation and anger.

It seemed Alphonse had long ago taken his rug and pillow and retired to the edge of the woods and slumber. Left alone the general had lighted a cigar and was walking slowly back and forth in front of the cars, waiting for the others to return, when a buggy, with two men in it, passed, the horse shying a bit and the general offering his assistance and advice. To his surprise they had not gone by more than three yards, when they stopped, tied the horse and came back on foot.

"First," said the general, as the four gathered around him in the light of the car lamps, "first I thought they were hold-up men. The lamps on my car had gone out and they did not see it, thought that there was only one car, so there would not be many to defend it; besides, I was the only one they had seen, and doubtless they surmised I was alone and they could have held me up easily."

"Father," cried Henrietta, "what did you do?"

"Before I could do anything they asked me the make of my car. I told them. They said it didn't look like a Packard, and I saw that they were looking at Will's

car and hadn't seen mine, back near the wall and with the lights out. I pointed to it and said that was my car. They seemed surprised to see two cars. I told them my name, gave them my card, and told them I was motoring to Maine with a party of friends and asked them what they were going to do about it."

"What did they say?" asked Bartlett, while the Watermelon slowly rolled a cigarette.

"Oh, they apologized," admitted the general. "But what I want to know, and what I don't like at all, is why every one is so curious to know the make of my car, the engine number and the license number. What business is it of theirs?"

The two girls slept in one car, Bartlett and the general in the other. The Watermelon lay on the grass on Billy's side of the car and sought to reason the thing out, to plan what to do. Alone in the dark, he did not sleep, but stared before him, ears attuned to the many sounds of the summer night.

In every whirl of insects' wings, in every whispering breeze that passed, he heard Billy's soft sweet voice. He stared up at the stars and likened them to Billy's eyes, twinkling points of light as far above him as Billy was, for Billy was Billy, and he was a tramp, a hobo—a Weary Willie.

CHAPTER XV

LOVE IN IDLENESS

One not born a vagabond in heart can never understand a vagabond's love for the open places, for absolute freedom, to go where he wants, see what he wants, work when he wants. To a vagabond an office is intolerable, the accumulation of dollars, grinding another man to gain a petty advance for oneself, utterly uninspiring, conventionality, the ceaseless humdrum round of existence as a clerk at ten per, revolting. Following step by step in the well-worn, beaten path, where no man dares step aside lest he be jeered at, where none dares fall, lest he be pushed from the road and another take his place, where all think alike, look alike, act alike, spending one's days in an office, bent over a littered, dusty, shabby desk, one's nights at some cheap play-house, seeking to find an outlet for the battered nerves, for the ceaseless strain of the day by stupefying the senses with some garish parody of life, is not living to a vagabond. He is willing to work if the work is a part of himself, a development of that clamorous ego that must find peace in the open, in the physical side of existence. If he is born rich, he will become a

traveler, a mountain climber, an aviator; if poor, a tramp, and the Watermelon was born poor.

For the last few years his feet had followed his errant will, now here, now there. He was impervious to hardship while he could wander as he wished, indifferent to good clothes when the price was eight hours a day spent in a stuffy office, bent, round-shouldered, hump-backed, over a column of figures. Beneath good clothes or shabby, there was nothing but a human body, all more or less alike. So the Watermelon had gone his careless, contented way, now resting here, now working there, unworried by rent days falling due, by collars fraying around the edges, coats getting shabby and shiny at the seams, and then Billy came along, Billy, young, sweet, conventional, an honored member of convention's band, walking around and around the same well-beaten path, in the same small inclosure. If he had elected to be one of the throng, he would never have met her. Struggling along at ten per, he would have been so far down the line, plodding painfully on, that Billy would never have seen him.

But now he was out and a fence unscalable was between them. If he climbed the fence again, it would do no good. No vagabond can ever fall in line and keep step, and there is not room enough in the inclosure for the man who has dared to climb the fence and drop down the other side.

Bartlett, like Billy, wondered if he were growing simple-minded. A desire to confide in Henrietta, to tell her what he was up to, had come upon him and seemed too strong to be resisted. Last night, up the quiet country road, alone with Henrietta, he had been forced to suppress the desire sternly, and now in the garish light of day it was still upon him. He took a seat beside her on the stone wall where she tried to be comfortable as she fished olives from a nearly empty bottle, the remains of last night's supper.

"I wonder," said he, hovering on the edge of his foolish desire, "if any one can become a man with nothing to regret."

"Certainly not," said Henrietta. "There would always be the years."

"I mean something that he had done himself," explained Bartlett soberly, a sandwich in one hand, a buttered roll in the other.

"Don't tell me your troubles," said Henrietta, thinking miserably of the years it would soon be so hard to deny. "I have enough of my own. Confession may be good for the soul, but it's the death-blow to your reputation."

"Father used to say that if there were public confession instead of private in the Catholic church, there would be no Catholics," said the Watermelon, helping Billy to the last of the sardines.

"Let's have a public confession," cried the artless Billy. "Everybody tell the worst thing that they ever did in their lives."

The Watermelon laughed and leaned toward her, a moth flirting with the

candle flame. "Oh, kid; I'll bet the worst you ever did was to swipe the jam-pot when ma wasn't looking."

"No," said Billy, "I did an awful thing once."

"Let's hear it."

Billy took the olive bottle from Henrietta, speared an olive and passed the bottle on before she spoke. "Will you confess, if I do?" she asked, pausing with the olive half way to her mouth.

"Sure," said the Watermelon. "I robbed an apple orchard once."

"You're fooling," accused Billy. "I'm not. I'm really serious."

"So am I," vowed the Watermelon.

"Billy," said Henrietta, "spare us. I am too young to listen to a tale of depravity."

But the lure of the confessional held Billy and she passed Henrietta's remark without notice. She turned to the Watermelon. "If I tell you the worst thing I ever did, will you tell me the worst you ever did?"

"I haven't done the worst yet," explained the Watermelon.

The general having nearly wrecked the cars and seen the damage repaired by Alphonse, hurried to the four sitting on the stone wall.

"Come on," said he. "It is time we were going. We have no blue book, you know."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Henrietta, "if there were not a rare chance for some one to confess a heinous crime."

She looked at Bartlett as he held out his hand to help her down and her eyes laughed deep into his.

"In self-defense—" he pleaded in a whisper.

It was very early. The freshness of night still clung to fields and wood. The air was full of the clamor of birds and from the valley below came the stentorian crow of a rooster. Little wisps of white clouds drifted by in the deep blue of the sky and a breeze played gently with the girls' long auto veils.

So in the freshness of the early morning they dipped down the hill into the valley, passed farm-houses and corn lands. They stopped about nine at a farm-house and partook of a breakfast of coffee, bacon and eggs. Alphonse filled the cars at a village store and they went on. The glory of the day, the close proximity of Henrietta, who sat beside him, dainty, merry, feminine, the success so far of his plan, which in his saner moments he still cherished, raised Bartlett's spirits higher and higher and they went faster and faster. They swept over the boundary line into Maine with a rush, taking the hills at high speed and skimming into the valleys, now entering a stretch of cool dark wood, now tearing into the sunshine again, past corn-fields, hay-fields, and rocky pastures. Cows whisked their tails at the cars' approach and dashed awkwardly away from the fence rails. Chickens

squawked and tore madly to safety with flapping wings. Farmhouses appeared and disappeared in a cloud of dust. Lakes were seen one moment and gone the next. They swept around a bend in the road and into a man trap, a pile of wood across the road and three farmers waiting grimly with loaded guns.

The Watermelon in the tonneau of the general's car, with Billy, straightened up with a sickening fear of being arrested in her presence. The fun and excitement of the adventure had disappeared. In their stead stalked the grim reality of the fear of exposure, of the surprise, scorn, perhaps anger, maybe pity, he would see in Billy's eyes. When they parted and the Bartletts returned to the city, they would learn how they had been deceived, and Billy would be angry, scornful and a bit amused, for Billy enjoyed a joke even against herself and her ideas of humor were young and of the same style, more or less, as those of the Watermelon. But if he could he would drop out of her sight, first, the good-natured, successful young financier, not slink away, the shiftless, beaten tramp.

The general for a moment considered it merely another means taken by the conspiracy to rob him of his car and contemplated stern defiance of the law's command to stop.

"It's not highway robbery, Charlie," laughed Bartlett. "We've been going a bit fast and have to pay up, that's all."

Haled before the justice of the peace in the village store, Bartlett paid his fine with casual indifference, the general with the haughty disapproval of a judge presiding at the bar of justice, while Henrietta, with gentle condescension, bought some highly-scented soap, "to help them out," she explained, meaning the owners of the store, and the Watermelon, to all outward appearances, frankly bored by the proceedings, presented Billy with a choice assortment of gaily tinted, dusty candy.

They put up for the night at a small town in Maine. It consisted of four or five scattered houses, a school, a store, and a barrel factory. They found rooms in one of the houses and after supper, Henrietta, Bartlett and the general sat on the stoop, while the men smoked and the stars came out one by one, the frogs croaked dismally and the whippoorwills called and called.

The Watermelon asked Billy to take a walk with him and she consented. She must never know, thought the Watermelon, with boyish self-loathing, that he had dared to insult her by thinking of love, but it would not hurt any one but himself to walk with her. There was only a day or two more at the most before they parted, she to go to Newport and Bar Harbor, and he to drift out on the tide again, one with James and Mike.

They walked up the road in the soft beauty of the summer night. Billy was tired and thoughtful, her girlish eyes catching a far off vision of womanhood and what it meant. Unconsciously to both, a man's soul had spoken and her woman's

soul had stirred in answer, stirred, but would it fully waken?

The Watermelon rolled a cigarette and puffed moodily, too busy himself with thoughts to talk, and the Watermelon did not like to think. He was not used to it.

"Darn it," he mused, "what did the Lord give us bodies for to want and want and then add minds to think?"

They came to a New England graveyard, perched on a rise of ground, where the road cut through a hill, a lonely, neglected place, overgrown with weeds and tall rank grasses, the gravestones flat or falling. Hardly aware of what they did, they turned in and picked their way among the sunken graves.

"God's acre," whispered Billy softly, for youth loves sadness, at certain times.

The Watermelon tossed away his cigarette and took off his hat. Somewhere, over there among the Green Mountains, in just such another place, his tired little mother slept. Was her grave sunken, he wondered, her tombstone flat or falling limply sidewise?

The moon was sinking slowly in the west, a silver crescent just above the dark outlines of the woods. The sky was bright with stars, like the kindled hopes of those who have gone. A wind stole softly by, rustling the tall grasses and swaying the tree tops. But there among the graves, it was very dark and still.

Billy sat down on the bank by the driveway, and the Watermelon sat beside her, not too near. There was at least a foot between them.

"We are all alone," said the Watermelon, thinking aloud half of his thoughts. "All alone, but for the dead."

Alone, and the seven seas could not have parted them farther.

"And God," added Billy piously.

"If there is one," admitted the Watermelon.

Billy looked at him quickly, earnestly. "Oh, Jerry, of course there is a God. Don't you know it?"

"No," said the Watermelon. "When a person is happy, they know there is a God; when they are wretched, they say, every one does, 'There is no God.' If there is one, why doesn't He let the miserable wretch realize it instinctively as well as the happy person?"

Billy had never suffered, had never felt the foundations of her world falling around her in ruins, had never cried aloud in anguish, "How long, oh Lord, how long?" She answered from her inexperience, from the faith that had never been tested, "Of course there is a God. Every one knows it, every one prays. Why, if your father was a minister, I should think you would know that there is a God."

"That's the trouble. He was a minister and he lost faith, and when he who should have known, wondered if there was a God, we kids knew there wasn't. I

suppose it's the same if a boy finds that his mother has lost her virtue. He thinks there is none."

Billy placed her hand on the bank between them and leaned toward him on her straightened arm. "Poor old Jerry! But if your mother still believed?"

"A mother always believes in God and her worthless sons. It's a part of being a mother, I suppose."

CHAPTER XVI

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

Billy laughed a low, throaty gurgle, and laid her hand an instant on his sleeve. "Don't you see, she believed in God and she believed in you. You didn't go back on her. Would God?"

The Watermelon did not answer. He was busy with a scene of the long ago. He and the youngest Miss Martin had been engaged in a set-to which hardly savored of brotherly love, and parental authority had separated them and passed judgment.

"Sister should not have struck you," the mother said as she stood him grimly in the corner. "But, Jeroboam, you should not have deceived sister. If you men would only keep faith with your women, this world would be too good to leave, even for Heaven," she had added with her usual tired sigh.

How had he kept faith with Billy? The question stared him in the face and he felt like the child again, standing in the corner, unable to answer. For the sake of an amusing week of her society, he had practically betrayed her father, had branded himself a thief by keeping the clothes, the watch, the money, which he had taken wrongly, for a few hours' fun, but which he had intended to return. In the love he felt for the girl, his long-stifled conscience slowly stirred again.

Billy was talking, crooning her comfort with the maternity latent in all women for the men they love. "Don't you see, Jerry, there is a God? Think of what you did for your mother, think of how proud she was of you when you did so well. By sheer grit you have made yourself what you are. You are tired and blue to-night, poor old boy."

The Watermelon was not listening. He took a roll of bills from his pocket and counted them. Billy watched him in perplexity. Was he worrying over money, she wondered. One hundred and seventy-four dollars left. He had not

had an opportunity to spend more of that roll of bills which he had betrayed a woman and lowered his manhood to steal. He crushed the bills back into his pocket and rose.

"We had better go back," said he shortly. "It's late."

They found Henrietta and Bartlett on the front porch, talking in low voices, oblivious to all else. The general had long since sought the doubtful comfort of the country bed for city boarders.

Billy held out her hand to the Watermelon, a little ceremony she had heretofore neglected, wishing in her tender little heart that she understood his strange mood better and could comfort him.

"Good night," said she gently.

"Good night," said the Watermelon.

Henrietta rose. "I didn't know it was so late. Wait, Billy, I am coming with you. Good night, all."

Bartlett followed the girls, but at the door he stopped and glanced back at the Watermelon, standing on the grass by the steps.

"Better come to bed," said he.

The Watermelon nodded abstractedly and Bartlett went in, leaving him out there alone.

Without thinking of Billy other than as a pretty girl with whom to flirt, moved by the mischief of the moment, he had placed her father financially at the mercy of his enemy. And now to right the wrong to Billy, the only thing he could do would be to tell them who he was, a tramp, masquerading with decent people in his stolen finery. Petty thieving, the sharp tricks of the road, had passed quickly from his conscience, but this was different. A woman had been thrown into the bargain, the woman he loved, and Henrietta and the general trusted him. Bartlett deserved all he got, and Batchelor he dismissed with the comforting conviction that he was doing him a good turn. But Billy, Henrietta and the general! A wry smile twisted the Watermelon's mouth as he thought of the horror on the general's face when he learned that he had spent the week in the company of a nameless hobo. For a while he contemplated hurling away the watch along with the rest of the "hardware" and stealing away in the dark, hitting the trail again and catching up with Mike and James on their annual pilgrimage north. He drew the bills from his pocket and thought of all Bartlett would lose if he crept away without explaining, and Bartlett was Billy's father.

He heard a step on the porch and turned to see Billy hesitating in the doorway. "Jerry," she whispered softly and glanced behind her as though fearful of seeing her father or Henrietta peering at her over the banisters.

He went toward her, the bills still in his hand. "Billy," said he, thrusting the money into his pocket, "what are you doing at this time of night?" And he looked

down at her tenderly in the dark where the hall lamp could not reveal his face.

Billy hesitated. She had seen the bills again and knew that he was worried. To worry over money matters was an unknown experience to Billy. She felt a delicacy in mentioning her errand.

"I—I—I came to see if the moon had set," she faltered.

"It's set," said the Watermelon.

"Well," said Billy, "then I will go back."

"Good night," said the Watermelon.

"Good night," said Billy, and lingered.

Then she laid her hand on his arm and spoke in a rush. "Oh, Jerry, please don't worry. If you want any money, father has heaps. You can have all you want."

The Watermelon drew a bit nearer. "Billy, Billy," said he softly.

"I think it must be terrible to worry about money," Billy hurried on. "It's not worth it."

"I'm not worrying about money, kid," said the Watermelon with a laugh. "I have a bunch. What made you think I was?"

"Twice to-night you've counted your money."

"Esau's bowl of pottage," sneered the Watermelon, turning unconsciously to the old familiarity with the Bible. "Say, Billy, if he found he didn't like his pottage, could he give it back and get his birthright again?"

Billy blushed. She was not sure who Esau was. In a dim way she remembered the name and vaguely associated it with the Bible. "Couldn't he have gotten something else?" she asked judiciously.

"No," said the Watermelon. "He had nothing more to sell."

"What did he sell?"

"His birthright—for a mess of pottage."

"Why'd he do that?"

"He was stony broke, he wanted something to eat, see, and he sold his all for a mess of pottage. Now, if he found he didn't like his pottage, could he have given it back and gotten his birthright again?"

"Yes, indeed," chirped Billy. "I don't see why not. But why didn't he get something better than a mess of pottage?"

"Don't ask me, kid. But, I guess you're right. No one can keep your birthright unless you're willing they should."

"I usually know more about the Bible," stammered Billy, fearful of the impression her ignorance must have made. "I know about Moses and Ruth."

The Watermelon nodded. "You see, I was raised on the Bible," he said kindly.

"Yes," agreed Billy, "and I was raised on Mellen's food."

A step was heard on the floor above and she started hastily. "I guess I had

better be going," she whispered. "Good night, Jerry."

"Good night, Billy."

She slipped away and the Watermelon was again alone.

"She's right. If you don't like your pottage, you can get your birthright back. I can leave a note," he thought and laughed bitterly. "Haven't a thing, name, clothes, honor. Sneak away like a whipped cur. Gosh, I'll be hanged if I can't do something respectable. I will tell them in the morning and they can do and say what they please. If you've sold your birthright to the Old Man, you have to go after it in person to get it back. Why the deuce did I fall in love with Billy? I had fun in the beginning—but now!"

When the Watermelon awoke next morning he lay for a time, stretching and yawning in the comfortable bed and the pea-green silk pajamas he had found in the suit-case in Batchelor's car. He glanced at the general slumbering beside him, his mouth open and his round fat face as pink as the pink cotton pajamas he wore.

"Here's me in silk and him in cotton," thought the Watermelon. "He couldn't tell a lie to save his soul, and I— Stick to your pink cotton, general," he whispered and slipped quietly out of bed. He crossed the room to the bureau where he had left the watch the night before to see the time. The watch was not there and he turned to look in his trousers pockets, thinking he might have left it in them. But his pockets were empty, save for a few old keys, his knife and "the makings." Money, watch, cigarette case, all were gone. He turned to the bureau. Cuff links and stick pin were also gone. Gingerly he felt in the general's pockets. They, too, were empty. He stood a moment in the middle of the room in his pea-green silk pajamas and gently stroked his back hair, then he chuckled softly and glanced at the bed.

The general was awake, looking at him with half-shut, sleepy eyes.

"Robbed, General," said the Watermelon.

"Robbed?" repeated the general, sitting up.

"Everything gone," said the Watermelon, "or I'll eat my hat."

The general rose and they made a systematic search through empty pockets and rifled bureau.

Bartlett came in gloomily. Without a cent among them they could not continue the trip. They would have to make for the nearest telegraph station and wire for help, and Batchelor, his whereabouts known to his brokers, would probably receive an urgent call to return at once.

"Robbed?" asked the general.

"They left me my name," said Bartlett grimly. "Who steals your purse steals trash, I suppose. We have that comfort."

"Not my purse," said the Watermelon. "Mine had money in it."

"My watch," said the general, "was a family heirloom. My great grandfather carried it."

"I wonder if the girls lost anything," said Bartlett.

"We will have to go to the nearest telegraph station and telegraph for money," declared the general.

"I suppose so," growled Bartlett, and trailed from the room to finish dressing.

They found the girls in the dining-room, unaware of what had befallen them. They had slept late and the clock on the mantel registered half-past nine as the three men filed into the room. The general was calm, pompous, austere, but Henrietta had not lived with him for five and thirty years without having acquired the ability to read his every mood.

"Father," she asked, "what's the matter? Have your sins found you out?"

The general waited for the slatternly maid-servant to give them their breakfast and leave the room before he spoke.

"We have been robbed," he said calmly, casually, as one would mention the weather. His tones implied that he was perfectly willing to listen to reason, but that he knew who the thief was and anything stated to the contrary was not reason.

"I spend my whole life, father," said Henrietta, "finding the articles you have been robbed of. Your system is all right. You have a place for everything, but you never remember the place."

The Watermelon pulled out the linings of his empty pockets and held out his wrists that they might see the cuffs tied together by a bit of string.

Henrietta and Billy stared.

"I have never had a thief in my room," cried Billy. "I would like to see how it feels."

"I'm not robbed," said Henrietta, making a hurried examination of the small-sized trunk she carried as a hand-bag.

"It's the stable-boy," said the general. "I noticed him carefully last night. He would not look any one in the face."

"He goes home every night," objected Henrietta. "Mrs. Parker told me so."

"That's no reason he couldn't come back," said the general.

"No," said Henrietta. "But because a boy won't look at you is no reason to say that he is a thief."

"He does look at you, anyway," said Billy innocently. "He looked at me."

"It was clever in him to take our checkbooks," said Bartlett.

"He will forge our names," declared the general. "I made a check out to pay for the board here, signed it, too, I remember, and then I found some cash and thought I would use that and went to bed and forgot to destroy the check. I know

it was the stable-boy for my room has a balcony in front, over the porch, and last night it was so warm I left the door open.”

”Maybe it was,” agreed Henrietta. ”I hate to suspect him, though.”

CHAPTER XVII

ALPHONSE RIDES AWAY

”The stable-boy would have access to the back of the house, too,” said the general, who felt that if he had not become a general and had escaped being a master mechanic, he would have been a famous detective.

”Yes,” agreed the Watermelon. ”But I don’t think it is the boy. I was out until after eleven, and just before I came in I saw him drive up with the girl. They had been out to some dance and he left her and drove on.”

The girl appeared in the doorway wiping a plate, slip-shod and awkward. Henrietta blushed, the general was painfully confused and the other three turned their attention hastily to their food.

”Want anything?” asked the girl.

”No, thank you,” replied Henrietta gently, feeling that in judging the stable-boy she had somehow injured the girl.

The girl lingered a moment, glanced significantly at the clock, and went out.

”Who could it be?” asked Billy, pleasantly excited.

”Why, this is terrible,” said Henrietta. ”If the boy didn’t do it, there is no one else who could have, but the family.”

”It looks that way,” admitted the Watermelon.

”What shall we do?” gasped Billy. ”What shall we pay them with?”

The slatternly girl again appeared in the doorway much to the general’s nervousness.

”Want anything?” she asked, and glanced again at the clock.

”No,” said Henrietta. ”No, thank you.”

”I will speak to Parker,” declared the general as the girl left.

”I wish you didn’t have to,” sighed Henrietta. ”It’s horrid to lose your money, but it must be so much worse to need money so that you would steal it.”

”But that’s the test of honesty,” declared the general. ”To need money and

not steal.”

”I know,” admitted Henrietta, pushing aside her coffee cup. ”I do admire strong people who can resist, but I’m so much sorrier for the weak who can’t. It’s pitiful, that’s what it is.”

”Yes,” cried Billy, as usual carried away by her feelings. ”Let’s not say a thing.”

The door opened for the third time, but instead of the ineffective maid-servant, the farmer’s wife, fat, red-cheeked, good-natured, entered.

She approached the table and smiled jovially from one to the other.

”I hope you liked everything,” she said with a gentle hint in her tones that they had lingered around the breakfast table long enough. ”Have you had plenty, General? Can’t I get you some more coffee, Miss Crossman?”

”No, thank you,” said the general, confused and unhappy.

Mrs. Parker smiled still. ”I am glad you liked everything. Your man should be back soon. He hasn’t had any breakfast yet.”

”Where’d he go?” asked the general, feeling that that was safe enough ground.

”My husband thinks that he went out in one of the automobiles very early, for he found one of them gone.”

”Did your husband see him go?” asked Bartlett.

”Oh, no, but he thinks he must have gone because there is only one automobile—”

”Oh, yes,” said Henrietta, and stared at the others, fearful of reading her own crushing suspicion in their eyes.

Alphonse, the quiet, blasé, peerless Alphonse? Could it be he? That Alphonse had gone for an early morning spin lured by the dew on the clover fields, by the sweet chorus of awakening birds, borne by the unsuppressible desire to see the shy, sweet advent of a new day creeping up the flushed and rosy sky, was wholly out of the question. Alphonse’s soul, in the early morning hours, was filled only with the beauty and glory of bed. The general had always been forced to arouse his serving-man and the process had often been painful, calling for sternness and suppressed wrath on the general’s part. Alphonse a thief was more believable than Alphonse getting out of bed uncalled.

Billy was the first to speak.

”The car,” she whispered.

”Oh, yes,” said the landlady hastily, not quite sure what had happened or was to happen by the expression on the faces before her. ”Oh, yes,” reassuringly, ”he took the car. My husband wasn’t up when he went—”

The general rose, his face red with anger. ”If he has taken my car,” he thundered, ”I shall have him prosecuted whether Henrietta likes it or not.”

"It's an outrage," sympathized Bartlett. "We can telegraph the police."

"Oh," moaned Henrietta, "I did love that car."

The landlady sought to reassure them in a calm, placid manner that savored of a big, gentle-eyed cow. "Why, he has only gone for a ride. He went—"

The general paused in the doorway. "He went last night, madam," said he coldly, and slightly dramatically, for the general never believed in spoiling a good story by a mild delivery. "And he took not only the car, but all our money."

Led by the general and followed by the landlady, they made for the barn. There, in the middle of the floor where last night two cars had stood side by side, a red and a blue, was now only one, a big, blue Packard. A few hens stepped daintily here and there, around and under it, while the cat cleaned her paws contentedly from her seat on the running-board.

The general stopped in the doorway and stared. His car? And such a wave of thanksgiving rushed over him that it was not his car that was missing that he felt he owed Alphonse a debt of gratitude and forgave him immediately.

"My car," said he, and chuckled with relief.

"Where's mine?" demanded Bartlett, growing red and angry.

"Where's Alphonse?" suggested the Watermelon significantly.

Henrietta laughed with positive gratitude to her erstwhile serving-man. "Why," she cried, "he left us ours."

"Alphonse was very fond of me," said the general with some little pride, as he patted his car tenderly.

"Yes," agreed Bartlett, "I can see that. He demonstrated it fully. I am glad he didn't love you or he might have killed Billy and me."

The landlord, followed by the slatternly maid-servant and the shifty-eyed stable-boy, trailed into the barn.

"Man gone off with your car?" asked the landlord. "I locked up last night about twelve. He must have left before then."

"The general's man did," said Bartlett, who felt that the general was in some way to blame.

"He has taken all our money," added Henrietta.

"A thief, eh?" said the landlord.

"Can't we follow the car by the tracks?" asked Henrietta. She went to the door and peered eagerly at the many wheel tracks in the dust of the drive.

The general waved the suggestion scornfully aside. "You can't tell whether the tracks are coming or going," said he.

"All detectives do," said Billy, following Henrietta to the door.

"I'm sorry," whispered the Watermelon in Billy's ear.

Billy laughed. "We have more cars at home," said she. "It doesn't bother me at all. That's the trouble of being rich, you can't be robbed and feel badly about

it.”

”Batchelor, you say that you were up until after eleven,” said the general, feeling that the occasion called for intelligence. ”Did you see Alphonse go out?”

”No,” said the Watermelon.

”The landlord says, however, that he must have gone before twelve,” went on the general. ”Then don’t you see how Alphonse could not have stolen the money? Those thefts were not committed until after twelve.”

”I don’t see how you work that out,” said Henrietta, puzzling over it with knit brows.

”Don’t you see, Henrietta, that if Alphonse stole our money after twelve, he could not have gone out in the car before eleven, so if he went out in the car before twelve, he did not steal the money. He either stole the money or the car.”

”Maybe he didn’t take the money,” said Henrietta, feeling vaguely and disappointedly that she was not a person with detective-like instincts.

”You see,” said the general, ”if Alphonse took the car, he did not take the money; if he took the money, he did not take the car.”

”He certainly did take the money,” snapped the farmer.

”And my car,” added Bartlett angrily.

”He could not have taken both,” declared the general.

”You were robbed last night, weren’t you?” demanded the farmer. ”Well, then?”

”And my car is gone, isn’t it?” demanded Bartlett.

”Yes, yes,” acknowledged the general, feeling that every word he said only made the other two angrier, but still clinging to his deductions as to his life’s principles. ”Yes, of course; but Alphonse could not have done both. He went off with the car before eleven, so he could not have robbed us after twelve—”

”Sir,” interrupted the farmer with a quiet dignity that was impressive, ”do you accuse any of us of stealing?”

”No, no,” protested the general, now hopelessly rattled. ”But if Alphonse stole the money—”

”Alphonse swiped both,” said the Watermelon, and that settled it as far as the general was concerned, for the general had boundless faith in the young man’s deductive abilities. ”I went in about eleven. He took the car out, ran it down the road a bit and then came back and sneaked our things.”

”Certainly,” said Bartlett, who could not help feeling irritated with the general for the fault of his man.

Billy laughed. ”All this bother about nothing,” said she. ”Dad, what’s one car, more or less?”

”A car is a car, Billy,” said Bartlett coldly, refusing to be comforted for the ruin of his plan to keep Batchelor away from the city over Saturday.

"Yes," agreed Henrietta sympathetically, "any one hates to lose a car."

"But when you have seven," objected Billy.

"We haven't got them here, have we?" asked Bartlett.

"No, but we have one, and that's enough for five," declared Billy, finding the usual difficulty in persuading people to count their blessings. "We didn't need two, anyway."

"Yes, we did," said the Watermelon, thinking of the tonneau with only Billy and him, the general in front completely absorbed with the car.

"Why?" asked Billy.

"Why," stammered the Watermelon, who no longer cared to flirt with Billy and who had spoken without thinking, "why, so the general and your father could each run a car," he explained weakly.

"Oh, yes," chirped Billy. "What will they do now?"

The Watermelon turned and glanced out of the wide doors, down the tree-shaded road, and thought pityingly of the unfortunate Alphonse, gone off at the wrong time, with the whole country-side on the watch for a lone youth in a big red touring car. That the car was of a different make from the one they were hunting for would not impress the sheriffs so forcibly as the fact that the youth also carried a time-piece as big as a clock, along with a cigarette case, cuff links and stick pin, all marked plainly and beyond question, with the damning initials, W.H.B.

The Watermelon laughed softly, and glancing at Billy, laughed again. With Bartlett going directly back to the city, he would not have to confess to make things right. He could leave them at the telegraph office and drift away on some pretext or another, leaving Billy gaily, head up, as became a successful financier, not slink away like a whipped dog, with only the scorn and loathing in her eyes to remember, to obliterate all the other memories of that one nearly perfect week.

CHAPTER XVIII

OH, FOR A HORSE

The farmer forgave the general with lofty dignity and turned to Bartlett with suggestions and offers of help. There was a telephone in the village store. They could telephone Boston or Portland, or they could telephone Harrison and Harrison could telegraph the larger cities. With the police notified promptly, Alphonse

would not be able to get far.

Bartlett meditatively chewed a straw and pondered the suggestion, leaning against the nearest stall and frowning thoughtfully at the general's car, while the others stood around him in a semicircle.

They were ten miles from the nearest railroad, and the train service, when they did strike a road, was decidedly poor in that out-of-the-way locality. Still, by good luck, quick work and prompt connections, Batchelor would be able to reach Boston late that afternoon or evening and New York before ten A.M., Saturday morning, and at ten A.M. Saturday the last fight was to be fought, the last stand made. Without their brilliant young leader, the opponents to the cotton ring would be outnumbered and outclassed, hopelessly beaten. Bartlett's fighting blood was up at the thought. Was he to have his week spoiled by the worthless Alphonse's deviltry? Batchelor should not run the slightest chance of reaching Boston that day, if he could help it. Henrietta had a little money in her bag that would tide them over. Better avoid anything to do with telegraph and telephones as long as possible. They could make an attempt to reach Harrison and get lost. But getting lost wasn't as easy as it appeared, when the general was along, thoroughly determined not to get lost. Bartlett's thoughts were broken in on by the Watermelon in a way that caused him quick alarm. The young man had at last awakened to the gravity of the situation, as Bartlett had been expecting him to do ever since the trip began.

"We had better telephone," said the Watermelon, "as Parker says. We can telephone for money and have it sent to Harrison, and we can ride to Harrison and probably get there the same time as the money does and get the train for Boston. It's time we were back in New York, anyway."

The trip was ended and the sooner he left Billy the better. He could give them the slip at Harrison and once more hit the road.

"Telephoning from here won't help matters at all," objected Bartlett, fighting for that opportunity to get lost again, just for one more day—twelve hours would be enough. "We can drive to Harrison and telegraph from there. It is only a ten-mile drive. We can make it in fifteen minutes."

"No joy-riding," warned Henrietta, "when we haven't any money to pay the fines. I don't want to do my time in the workhouse."

"We will do it in twenty minutes, then," laughed Bartlett, who saw another way to create a delay that might be used with advantage. The Parkers scorned to accept the few dollars Henrietta still had in the dark recesses of her bag.

"You can send it to us," said they, and the farmer added, heaping coals of fire on the general's unfortunate head, "We trust you perfectly."

The Watermelon looked sharply at Bartlett and wondered if he were up to any tricks. The Watermelon had only ten more miles of Billy and he didn't want

to shorten the precious time by a confession if there were no need for one.

"Let's hurry," said he. There was no need of prolonging the misery in the thought of the parting.

"Worrying over his affairs," thought Bartlett. "He has come to at last."

The general insisted upon driving, and as it was his car, Bartlett perforce had to be content. He protested, however, that he knew the road thoroughly, and could direct the general with no instructions at all from the farmer, waving them all good-naturedly aside.

They were all quiet as they started down the road. Henrietta was depressed thinking about Alphonse. She had always stood in awe of his superlative virtues, and the fact that he lacked several was a bit of a shock. The general also was grieved. He had trusted Alphonse and Alphonse had failed him. Billy was silent, for she wanted to think, and all her thoughts were of the youth beside her, tall, slim, good-looking, with his merry eyes and devil-may-care indifference.

They could all go to New York together, she planned, and later, when her father and herself went to their summer place on the coast of Maine, they would get him to visit them there in their own home. And in the winter—and Billy's thoughts lost themselves in the hazy rosy glow of the future, with its possibilities and pleasures.

It was after three. The day was intensely warm, even in the shady wooded road on which they found themselves. They had been running through the woods for nearly an hour, and apparently had not reached the end of it. The last abandoned farm-house, gray, weather-beaten, forlorn, had long ago been passed. The birds chattered shrilly in the leafy profusion overhead; somewhere out of sight in the underbrush a brook gurgled refreshingly over its stony bed, and once, far away and very faintly, they heard the wild loon's dismal cry.

The general stopped the car and turned sidewise to face those on the back seat. "We are lost," said he. "Look at the odometer. We have come twenty miles since we left Stoneham and we are no nearer Harrison than when we started."

"Lost again," wailed Henrietta. "How very stupid we are!"

"It's my fault," admitted Bartlett truthfully, but with contrition. "I said to take this turn back there near that barrel factory."

"We can go back," suggested Billy.

"Parker told me last night," said the general gloomily, "that there was no settlement north of here for forty miles. We have probably come north."

"If we have come twenty miles, we can go twenty more without dying," said Bartlett.

"I don't know," laughed Henrietta. "I am famished now."

"So am I," wailed Billy. "Henrietta, haven't we a thing to eat?"

"Not a thing," said Henrietta.

"Hit her up," cried Bartlett jovially. "We will break some more speed laws, by George. I want something to eat."

"We have heard nothing from father," teased Henrietta, her laughing eyes on the Watermelon's face, full of tender amusement. He was so young and looked so serious and almost unhappy that she was unhappy herself.

The Watermelon was unhappy. By this time they should have been in Harrison, with the parting over, and he wanted it over. The thought that they would probably be together a day longer did not please him. The sooner he took to the road again and became a bum and a hobo, the better. Billy did not care for him. He was the only one who would suffer, and every moment he was with her only made the suffering worse. He turned to Henrietta with relief from the thoughts that were insistently bothering him and would not let him alone.

"Father was never in a motor-car," said he. "He used to say that his funeral would be just another irony of fate. The only chance he had to ride, he wouldn't be able to appreciate it."

"I know that it is terrible to be poor," said Henrietta, "but I think people ought to enjoy other things than just those that money can give."

"What things?"

"Why, the woods and fields, a beautiful day—"

"Rent day, probably, and no rent money. Father used to say when you're poor, every day is rent day."

"We're nearing the end of the woods," cried Bartlett. "And I think I see a house."

And then the car stopped.

"Gid ap," chirped Bartlett.

Henrietta leaned forward. The general was hastily trying all the brakes, slipping one lever then the other, fussing here and fussing there, and Henrietta knew the symptoms of approaching trouble.

"Father, is there anything the matter?"

"Oh, no," pleaded Billy. "Not here?"

The Watermelon leaned forward and opened the door. "Every one get out," he ordered. "We can walk to the house. We mustn't monkey with the car unless we want a pile of junk on our hands."

He stepped out and turned to help the girls.

"Not at all," declared the general. "I know all about a car. I can fix it directly." He alighted and started to raise the bonnet. The Watermelon intervened.

"Look in the gasolene tank first," he begged.

The general was already deep in the mechanism, oblivious to all else. "It's the carburetor—"

"Carburetor nothing," pleaded the Watermelon. "It's the gasolene."

"Yes," agreed Henrietta indiscreetly, "maybe it is."

"That won't help us any," snapped the general angrily. "Where can we get more? Much better to have something else wrong—"

"Not for the car," said the Watermelon. "None of us would be able to fix it."

"My dear sir," said the general warmly, "I have owned this car for a year—"

"I know," murmured the Watermelon. "I think it marvelous."

"I am perfectly capable—"

"Will you bet with me," interrupted the Watermelon, "that it's the gasolene? Alphonse may have filled the other car at the expense of this one."

It was the gasolene, or rather the lack of gasolene, that had stopped the car.

"That's where a horse beats a car," lamented Henrietta. "You don't have to keep bothering with their works."

She sat down on the car step and clasped her hands in her lap. "We could spend the night here, but in the morning we wouldn't be any nearer gasolene than we are now."

"I'm not fretting about gasolene," said Bartlett. "I want something to eat. Let's all go to that house—"

"We can't leave the car," objected the general.

"No one could go off with the car," argued Henrietta.

"And we can get them to send a horse," added Bartlett. "I am starving."

"I feel like the car," said Billy. "I have no gasolene."

"I can not leave the car," reiterated the general, and Henrietta realized that that settled it as far as the general was concerned, and that it would take her greatest tact to unsettle it.

"I will go and get a farmer and a horse," said the Watermelon, unexpectedly siding with the general. "We would have to be here anyway, to see that they towed it in right."

"A horse would do," said Billy gravely. "We don't need the farmer."

"I have hopes of Billy sometimes," said Bartlett, regarding his daughter quizzically. "I sometimes even think that she may grasp the difference between sunshine and rain and realize it's best to keep out of the latter."

Billy looked hurt. "Father doesn't like me any more," said she, adding shrewdly, "He thinks I'm getting rather too old for him, anyway."

Bartlett blushed, Henrietta laughed and the general roared.

"You grown-up daughters are so hard to explain," said he. "Not once do you offer to be a sister to us."

"I wouldn't be a sister to father for anything," protested Billy. "He must be fifty, at least."

Bartlett flushed angrily. He dared not glance at Henrietta. "I am forty-five," said he coldly, which was at least two years and a half as near the truth as Billy's

rash statement.

"Yes," sneered Billy. "And I'm only eighteen."

Henrietta changed the subject. When one is eighteen one can announce the fact loudly and cheerfully. When one is thirty-five, one prefers to talk of other things.

"Why not all go for the horse? The car will be all right, father; and I am so hungry," she added pathetically.

CHAPTER XIX

A BROKER PRINCE

"I am going," said Billy with determination.

"We can't leave the general alone," objected Bartlett.

"I don't see how I would be able to help the general any," returned Billy in injured accents.

"I thought you could push him in the car," explained Bartlett with gentle sarcasm.

"You all wait here," said the Watermelon. "I will go and get you something to eat and see about having the car towed, also about rooms for the night."

"Why not all go?" pleaded Henrietta. "Why wait here starving—"

"I can go faster alone," answered the Watermelon.

"Certainly, certainly," seconded the general. "We would have to help you girls over every wooden fence and under every barb wire one we came to. You would probably even then get stuck on one or under the other."

"I never get stuck on anything," contradicted Billy perversely.

Henrietta laughed. "Billy, cheer up. The worst is yet to come."

"That house may be empty," said the Watermelon. "Then we would be all over there and have to come back."

"We've been in empty houses before," said Henrietta crossly.

"But what good would that do, to be over there without food?" asked the Watermelon.

"What good to be here without gasoline?" retorted Henrietta.

"I can not leave the car," reiterated the general.

"Father," exclaimed the exasperated Henrietta, "some night I will find that you have taken the car to bed with you."

"Suppose we leave the car here—" began the general argumentatively.

"We can't," sighed Henrietta. "Such a supposition would be impossible with you the owner of the car."

The Watermelon laughed. "Aw, cut out the conversation," said he. "I will be right back."

"So will I," said Billy.

Now the Watermelon objected. He did not feel equal to a *tête-à-tête* with the adorable Billy, adorable still, though a bit cross.

"Cut out the conversation," mimicked Billy, and scrambled with more speed than grace under the broken bars of the worm-eaten fence.

The Watermelon leaped the fence after her. Henrietta slipped under the fence after the Watermelon. Bartlett hesitated one moment, glanced guiltily at the deserted general and then followed Henrietta.

Billy and the Watermelon were young and light of foot and soon outdistanced the stout Bartlett, who did his gallant best to keep up with the nimble Henrietta, but found that the years of good living told against him.

Henrietta waited politely for him at the stone wall which Billy had just scaled and the Watermelon jumped.

"What are we hurrying for?" asked Bartlett, removing his hat to wipe his heated brow.

"I am sure I don't know," laughed Henrietta. "Monkey see, monkey do, I suppose. That is why there is such a thing as style. No one thinks."

"If we waited here," suggested Bartlett, "our dinner would come to us."

"As the office to the man," agreed Henrietta.

"Precisely."

Henrietta sat down on the wall and Bartlett leaned beside her, gazing over the field to the distant woods. He felt thoroughly comfortable and contented. No matter what happened now, Batchelor could not reach the city by Saturday. The cotton ring was saved.

The scene before them was a typical Maine landscape, rugged, hilly, beautiful, with the long shadows of approaching evening creeping across the fields. From where they rested, the farm seen from the road was hidden from sight. The whole place seemed desolate, primeval, with a beauty and a charm that were all its own.

Henrietta drew a quick sigh of pleasure and fell silent, with dreaming eyes wandering into the mysterious shades of the distant woodland, her hunger for the time forgotten. The place, the time of day, just at eventide, suggested romance, the one man and the one woman, and the world not lost, but just attained. She wished she was Billy, young and foolish and pretty, and that Bartlett was the Watermelon, long-limbed, broad-shouldered, with the glory of youth that sees

only glory down the pathway of the future.

Bartlett broke in upon her reveries. "See that hill?" and he waved toward the slope ahead of them.

Henrietta nodded, still wrapped in her dream. "The hill of life," said she, "with glory at its top."

"A railroad," said Bartlett, prosaically matter-of-fact, "a railroad has been cut through the hill. See, there go the children, suddenly out of sight."

Henrietta came back to earth. "How do you know? Maybe there is just a steep incline the other side and that is why they disappeared so quickly."

"No, there is a cut up there. Don't you notice how abrupt it looks, and there are no trees or bushes. They haven't had time to grow since the cut was made. And those big lumps, see, covered with grass, they are the earth thrown up out of the cut. It's the Grand Trunk. It runs through Maine, you know, into New Hampshire."

Henrietta nodded and frowned. "There is no more romance," and she threw out her hands with a graceful gesture of hopeless disappointment. "It went when the first steam-engine came."

Bartlett looked at her, amused, with a man's tolerance. "What do you want romance for? A railroad pays better."

"Pays, pays, pays," cried Henrietta. "I want something that doesn't pay—that isn't associated with returns. You men have nothing but a bank-book for a heart. It's so lovely here, so quiet. Don't you feel it? With the shadows creeping across the pasture? I was young and beautiful—"

"And a princess."

"No, a goose maid. My hair was brown and thick and hung over each shoulder in two long braids. I was bare-headed, with sleeves rolled to the elbows of my shapely arms—"

"You would have got malaria," said Bartlett. "It's very damp here. I think there must be a pond over there in the woods. You can hear the frogs."

"Oh, yes," agreed Henrietta. "I would have had malaria and rheumatism, but I wouldn't have cared, then—for you see, I had come after the geese, and down here in the tiny glen, with the hush of evening over all, I had met him—"

"Who? Me?"

"My lover," said Henrietta.

"Me," said Bartlett softly, and to Henrietta's surprise he laid his hand gently on hers.

Henrietta blushed and looked away. Her lover, this stout, grim, hard-eyed man of business? She raised her hands to her cheeks and her heart fluttered so she could hardly breathe, while before her startled gaze swam the vision the years had been unconsciously forming. Had romance come to her thus late, in

this guise? Was a middle-aged member of the New York Stock Exchange her prince?

"Henrietta," he asked gently, leaning toward her, "shall I finish the story?"

"Why no," said Henrietta, "there was no finish. It had just begun."

"Just begun," whispered Bartlett, and took her suddenly into his arms.

"Oh, please," begged Henrietta, feeling that modesty called for some re-monstrance.

"Please," he taunted. "When you were the goose girl and I was the prince, you didn't say please."

Henrietta laughed. "And neither did the prince," she dared him.

"No decent lover would," said Bartlett, bending and kissing her full on her whimsical mouth.

After some little time they saw the others reappear over the top of the hill. Henrietta had returned to her seat on the fence and Bartlett was beside her, his arm around her waist, her head on his shoulder with a simplicity truly bucolic. So might the Parkers' shifty-eyed stable-boy be wooing the slatternly maid-servant in some secluded place behind the barn.

Henrietta straightened quickly and blushing crimson after the manner of the maid-servant, raised her hands to her hair so that one side of her coiffure might not appear unnecessarily flattened before the sharp eyes of the youthful Billy.

"Aren't we silly?" said she, glancing at Bartlett with the same expression with which the maid-servant would have glanced at the stable-boy.

"Why silly?" demanded Bartlett. "We love each other, don't we? Why shouldn't I put my arm around you?"

"Oh," said Henrietta, "you should, but—er—er we seem so old for such things."

"Old?" Bartlett laughed. "Love is the oldest thing in the world."

"I know," agreed Henrietta, "but not before people."

"Why not before people? People have become too artificial. They must not love, nor hate, nor have any feelings, apparently, before people. Feelings are interesting and we ought to show them more."

Henrietta laughed. "Oh, you are silly, silly, silly. I never knew a New York broker could be so silly, so mushy."

"There's not a man living whom the right woman can't make mushy. Women never realize how silly men are at bottom, my own. They are frightened by our exteriors, by the ingrain fear of the chattel for her master, born in women since Eve handed the larger share of the apple to Adam."

"I always thought that I would be dignified and sweet—"

"You are, my love."

"No, I am as silly as you. I put my head on your shoulder just as these girls do whom you see in Central Park on Sunday afternoons. I never thought that I would be like that."

"You have never loved before—"

"Indeed, I have. I have loved nearly every one I have ever met. Most all girls do."

"That isn't love. Merely an increased vibration of the muscles of the heart. Love—ah, Henrietta, do I have to tell you what love is?"

"No," whispered Henrietta. "It's just giving."

She paused, gazing before her into the deepening shadows of the evening with misty eyes, for the first time realizing the completeness of life.

She nodded after a moment toward the approaching Billy and the Watermelon. "What's the matter with the children? They look so serious, and yet they must have something to eat, for they are carrying bundles."

"Probably couldn't arrange for a tow for Charlie's car and see where we sit up with it all night and hold its head."

CHAPTER XX

THE SEVEN O'CLOCK EXPRESS

As Bartlett said, the hill was cut through by a railroad. The deep gully brought Billy and the Watermelon to a halt when they had outstripped Bartlett and Henrietta, leaving them behind at the foot of the hill. The sides of the gully were overgrown with grass and tangled briars, but a narrow foot-path led down to the tracks and up the incline on the other side. The Watermelon helped Billy down one side and dragged her up the other.

"I would hate to be a tramp," panted Billy as she reached the other side and paused a moment for breath. "I would get so cross if I were hungry and knew I couldn't get anything to eat for a long time."

The Watermelon flushed hotly, but she was not looking, and when he spoke he spoke carelessly enough. "You would get used to it," said he. "You can get used to anything. Father used to say that the idea of hell for all eternity was an absurdity—you were sure to get used to it and then it wouldn't count any more as a punishment."

"I suppose that's so," agreed Billy. "But how do you know? You weren't

ever a tramp, were you, Jerry?"

"A tramp, kid, is the only man in America to-day, besides the millionaire, who is his own master. Do you know that?"

"I would kind of hate that sort of master," said Billy.

"A tramp never has to worry about rent—"

"I know, but I should think the house might be worth the worry."

The Watermelon changed the subject.

A grim, elderly woman, thin and work-worn before her time, listened to their troubles in the faded, weather-gray farm-house. Her man, she explained, was out in the fields with the horses, but when he returned, she would send him around and he would tow the car in for them. She never took boarders. The house was a sight, but if they didn't mind, she did not and they could have two rooms. She wrapped some bread, fruit and cookies up for them in newspapers, and they started back to wait with the others by the machine until the farmer came.

The still hush of evening was over everything, creeping with the lengthening shadows across the pasture. A flock of turkeys was making noisy preparations for bed in some trees near by. The frogs had begun to croak and once in a while a whippoorwill called from the woods. In an adjoining hay-field, hurrying to get in the last load before dark, the Watermelon saw the farmer. A pair of sorry looking nags drooped drearily, attached to the cart with its high, shaky load of new-mown hay.

"I'm going to speak to him myself," said the Watermelon, stopping. "It will save time. You wait here. I won't be long."

"Give me the food," said Billy. "I will take it to the others. Poor things, they must be starving."

"I won't be long," objected the Watermelon. "You can't carry it alone."

"Indeed, I can," protested Billy.

The Watermelon laughed down at her. "You couldn't get up the other side of the crossing," he teased.

"A girl," said Billy sagely, "is a lot more capable when she is alone than when she is with a man."

She took the ungainly bundle and he watched her hurry away across the fields, slim and graceful, dainty and sweet, while he was—a tramp! His eyes darkened with pain and he threw one hand out after the small figure in a gesture that was full of mingled longing and hopelessness.

"Billy, Billy," he whispered, then turned from the thoughts which were coming thick and fast and started toward the distant field and the farmer.

The farmer listened with blunt stupidity, hot and tired and cross. Yes, he would come for the car as soon as he could, but the hay had to be got in first. It

[image]

"Billy, Billy," he whispered

was late now. That train whistle you could hear was the seven o'clock express. His horses were tired, too, but, of course, if he were paid, why that made a difference. He would be around as soon as he could get his load in. It was the last load, anyway.

The Watermelon turned and far in the distance, echoing and reëchoing through the hills, he heard again the scream of the approaching train.

"Billy win be across the tracks by this time," he thought. "I will have to wait for it to pass. Glad it ain't a freight."

He hurried moodily through the field. His position had become intolerable and yet he could find no chance to get away without revealing his identity, and to do that now would do no good. They could not reach the railroad any sooner than they were trying to. He longed for the morrow that would end it all and yet dreaded the barrenness of the future without Billy.

As he approached the cut, he saw the smoke of the train rising above the bushes, an express, tearing its way through the evening calm like some terrible passion searing the soul. The Watermelon stepped to the edge of the cut and glanced carelessly downward.

There was Billy on the track, struggling to free herself from the rail which held one small foot. Around the bend came the huge engine with its headlight already lit for the wild night run.

The next two minutes were ever after a blank to the Watermelon. He was in the cut, beside the white-faced, struggling girl almost simultaneously with seeing her. As he shot down the bank, he felt for and drew his knife. The engineer had seen them and the engine screamed a warning, while the emergency brakes shrieked as they slipped, grinding on the rails. On his knees, with one slash, the Watermelon cut the lacings which, becoming knotted, had held her prisoner, then with one and the same move, he had regained his feet and forced her flat against the bank, as the train whirled by in a cloud of dust and cinders, brakes grinding, wheels slipping, whistle screaming, a white-faced engineer leaning horrified from the cab window.

Trembling violently, Billy clung sobbing to the Watermelon, her face hidden in his breast. The Watermelon crushed her to him as if he would never let her go, his arms tightening with the agony of remembrance. He was trembling as much as she from the horror of that terrible moment. His head rested on her hair

and he talked, poured out his love in a rush of misery and thankfulness. Words tumbled over themselves and were repeated again and again, in phrases hot from his lips came all his pent-up longing for the girl.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart," he whispered with white lips as Billy still sobbed. "Darling, hush. Dear heart, my love, my Billy."

After a time her sobs stopped and she raised her face. The Watermelon bent his head and they kissed frankly with the simplicity of perfect understanding, perfect love. For a moment they clung together, still, then Billy was the first to rally.

"We've got to go," said she, her hands raised to her tumbled hair as she tried her best to laugh.

The Watermelon caught her hands and forced them down, drinking her in with hungry eyes. Then he bent his head and buried his face for a moment in the backs of her small hands, while something like a sob shook his shoulders.

"Jerry," whispered the girl, a woman now, tender, compassionate, gracious.

The Watermelon dropped her hands and turned abruptly. "I'm a damn fool," he muttered and picked up the bundle, still beside the track.

"Why did you come?" she asked, all solicitude for him. "You might have been killed."

The Watermelon did not answer. He stalked across the track to the other foot-path and Billy perforce had to follow.

Henrietta and Bartlett had not even heard the wild scream of the engine as it shrieked past, and when the Watermelon and Billy joined them, were too preoccupied to notice anything for long in any one else. All four returned to the general, quiet and apparently depressed. The general was depressed himself. He did not see how it would be possible to get gasolene in that neighborhood, and without gasolene they might as well be without a car.

Billy divided the bread and fruit, and without a word, they sat side by side and partook of their humble repast, the two girls, the general, the tramp and the financier. The color returned to Billy's face and in her eyes was a great and shining light every time she looked at the Watermelon, where he sat on the step of the car, bread in one hand, an apple in the other, a part of the paper spread on his knees to serve for napkin.

But he would not look at her. His face was still white and he read the paper before him that he might not think. Billy knew of his love and loved in return, white, pure, decent Billy, and he a filthy piece of flotsam washed for the moment from the slime of the gutter. Slowly, precisely, he reread the article he had just read without having comprehended a word of it.

The parting that evening was slightly prolonged, much to the general's annoyance. He was tired and wanted to go to bed, and why the others should prefer

to linger on the small stoop which served for porch, he could not understand, and what he could not understand always vexed him. Bartlett wanted to take a stroll before turning in, and when the general kindly offered to accompany him, he decided suddenly and rudely, the general thought, that he didn't care to go. Henrietta wanted to sit on the stoop apparently all night. Billy wanted to walk, too. Walking, the general decided, ran in the Bartlett family, but instead of taking a stroll with her father, she hung around the stoop with Henrietta; while the Watermelon did not know what he wanted to do as far as the general could make out. He was quiet, strangely uncommunicative, seemed to be thinking deeply on some important subject. Worried over the past week, thought the general. Irritated and tired, the general could not bother with such nonsense and tramped off to bed.

The Watermelon felt that he could not say good night alone with Billy. He had read the desire in her eyes for a bit of a walk with him and to escape the temptation, he wished them all good night and followed the general up to bed.

All the strength of the man cried constantly for the girl, for her sweetness, her charm, her grace. But he loved with the love that is love, that will give all and ask nothing, a love that is rare and fine and that comes to king and peasant alike, and to no one twice, to some not at all. His week was up. He would slip away that night when they were all asleep. Billy would forget him and he would be better with his old cronies, fat blear-eyed Mike and James of the bon-ton.

Long he lay on his narrow cot and stared at the gray square of the window, while the gentleman he was born fought gallantly with the tramp he had become.

CHAPTER XXI

RICH AND POOR ALIKE

He lay staring at the window while Bartlett's and the general's snores rose and fell, mingling in a steadily growing crescendo of sound. As he stared, he noticed suddenly a faint glow in the east. It was too early for daybreak and the glow was of a different color, brighter, more orange in tint. He watched it a while without comprehending, waiting until it was time for him to steal away from Billy, back to the road again. And as he watched, he was brought to quick consciousness of what it was by a tiny crimson flame which appeared for an instant and was gone.

The Watermelon leaped to the window. The barn, which, fortunately, was

unlike Maine barns, stood some little way from the house instead of being attached to it. With a mighty burst of flames the roof caught from the sides, which had been slowly smoldering. Every moment the flames mounted higher and higher, fanned by a bit of a wind that had arisen when the sun went down. The place was filled with the summer hay, and even as the Watermelon took in the scene, he knew that there was no hope to do more than to save the live stock, if they could do that.

Turning he aroused the general and Bartlett.

"Get up," he whispered, not to disturb the girls, "the barn's on fire."

Bartlett was up and half in his clothes before the general had opened his eyes. The Watermelon had already slipped quietly from the room.

"Fire," cried the general hoarsely, at last awake. He stood a moment in the window, brightly lighted now from the dancing flames in the summer darkness. Then he swore.

"My car!"

"Quick," snapped Bartlett. "The gasolene—"

"There was no gasolene," said the general sadly, as one would talk about a loved and dying friend. He turned mournfully from the window.

The fire had gained too much headway to leave the slightest possibility of saving the barn. The farmer, with the help of the Watermelon, Bartlett and the general, had barely time to lead out the horses and turn the cows into a temporary shelter. When that was done there was nothing more that could be done but to watch the walls crumble and the roof fall in a shower of sparks and a roar of flames, leaping and dancing in a mad riot of destruction. All night the fire burned and all night the four men and the three women turned their efforts to protect the house.

The general, by right and instinct, took command. He formed a bucket brigade, stationing the Watermelon on the roof, at one end of the line, and the girls and the farmer's wife at the well to fill the buckets at the other end of the line. They worked hard and quietly, as people work when face to face with the grim forces of nature. Under the general's able management the few sparks which did threaten were quickly extinguished and save for a slight scorching here and there the house was safe. In the excitement no one but the general thought of the general's car.

The cold, gray streaks of dawn found them worn out, excited and hungry. Unable to console the farmer and his wife, the five drew in a semicircle around the smoldering heap which had been the barn, and forlornly watched the last tiny flames licking around the twisted, blackened ruin that had once been a motor-car.

"Gone," said the general sadly.

And Billy sniffed.

"Better Alphonse had taken it," lamented Henrietta.

"What shall we do now?" asked Bartlett. It was Saturday and Batchelor would not be able to reach New York now no matter what happened. He had won, the ring was safe, but he turned sadly to the general, and laid his hand kindly on his old friend's shoulder. "Hard luck, man," said he. "Hard luck."

"We will have to go home," said Henrietta dully.

"We have no money," replied the general quietly, unmoved by his penniless condition, thinking only of the motor-car that was no more.

"I have a little," said Henrietta. "About six dollars."

"We owe at least all of that here for supper and rooms," said Bartlett.

Henrietta glanced from one to the other, then laughed, a gay little bubble of mirth. They had no money, but what did that matter? What did anything matter when one loved and is loved? She felt guilty because she was not sorrier over the loss of the car, and she patted the general lovingly on the shoulder.

"Cheer up, daddy, we haven't a cent, none of us," she crooned.

"We can telegraph," suggested Billy.

"From where?" asked Bartlett shortly.

"Why, we can drive somewhere where we can," returned Billy desperately, under her father's calm scrutiny of amusement.

"Drive what?" asked Bartlett.

"A horse," said Henrietta mildly.

"What horse?" questioned Bartlett. "There are two. The farmer wants them both to help clear up and to go to a neighbor's for assistance. What shall we drive?"

"Shank's mare," said Henrietta. "At the nearest farm, we can get a team and drive to some town where we can telegraph."

Bartlett and Billy agreed. The general said nothing. There was nothing to say. The dream of his heart, the occupation of his days, was gone. What was there to say?

The Watermelon also was silent. He felt that he could not leave them, now that they were again in trouble. When they reached the town and had telegraphed, he would go—back to the road. He was chewing a straw, hands in his pockets, gazing with the others in dull apathy at the remains of the car, and he raised his head instinctively to read the sky for approaching storms. There would be a moon that night and a good breeze, which would make walking easy.

"Hungry?" asked Billy gaily, smiling at him, her eyes asking what the matter was. Had she done anything to offend him since the evening before when they had climbed the railroad cut together?

"I'm always hungry, Billy," said he and joined the general on the way to the house.

Billy stood a moment, hurt and flushed, then she followed the others in to breakfast.

The farmer's wife had made some hot coffee, strong and black, and fried some bacon, and with thick slices of bread and butter, they all ate ravenously at the bare deal table in the kitchen, with no pretense whatever of tablecloth or napkins. The Watermelon and the farmer's wife stood alone in the kitchen after the others had left and he looked down kindly at her with the camaraderie felt only by one unfortunate in trouble for another in a like place.

"It's damn hard on you," he said.

"And on him," said the woman. "All the hay was just in."

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures—" murmured the Watermelon laconically, instinctively turning to the Bible on every occasion. "Pity you aren't a man. Then you could chuck the whole show and hit the road with me. I'm stony broke, too."

He patted her shoulder gently and tears leaped into the woman's tired eyes. She cried a bit and he soothed her softly as one would soothe a tired child.

"Those others," said she, wiping her eyes on her coarse apron, "they are kind, but they don't understand."

"They mean well," said the Watermelon, "but you have to go through the mill yourself, to *do* well. I know what poverty means. Its ways ain't ways of pleasantness by a dog-gone sight."

"Beggars all, beggars all," cried Henrietta, as they started up the road, in the dewy freshness of early morning.

It was still early and quite cool, with the breeze of the night following them, laden with the depressing odor of charred timbers and burning leather. The road wound around a hill, sloping now and again into the valley and rising again to the heights. The view swept fields and hills and woods, all of the deep green of mid-June, and over all bent the blue sky of a summer day.

The air was like ozone. It was a physical joy simply to walk, to breathe the odor of fields and woods and open places and to let one's eyes dwell on the beauty and the glory of the land.

"I am glad it pleases you, Henrietta," said the general tartly.

Henrietta sobered. "Father, I feel as badly as you do about the car. But I can't go into mourning for it."

"You needed another one anyway," consoled Billy, with the kindly reassurance and hopeless misunderstanding of the rich. "The last model is out now, you know."

"Billy," said Henrietta, "do you think we can buy a car every time the humor

moves us? You don't understand."

"I know," said Billy humbly, crushed under repeated rebuffs from every one. "I am a perfect fool, Henrietta, but I can't help it."

If the general could have forgotten the car for a while, he would have been agreeably pleased and flattered by the Watermelon's sudden apparent infatuation for him. The young man insisted on walking with him, suiting his long, lazy strides to the general's best endeavors. Bartlett, Henrietta and Billy swung along briskly ahead. Henrietta was touched. The boy was trying to show his sympathy, she thought, and liked him more than ever.

It was nearly noon when they came in sight of their destination, a gaunt gray farm-house, perched on the top of the gentle slope overlooking the valley and the winding river to the woods on the hills beyond. They came to the bars of a cow pasture and a narrow cow path leading across the field to the house, a shorter way than by the road.

Henrietta and Billy, seeing no cows in sight, allowed the Watermelon to let down the bars and to pass through. Billy waited inside the fence, standing by the path, among the sweet fern, until all had entered and all but the Watermelon had started up the path for the house.

Quietly she watched the Watermelon as he slowly and reluctantly replaced the bars.

"Jerry," said she, when he had at last finished, "what's the matter?" She had stepped into the path in front of him and he had to stop and face her.

He flushed hotly and would not look at her. "There is nothing the matter," said he. "Why? What makes you think so?"

She drew herself up with pretty dignity. "You need not have told me what you did yesterday in the railroad cut, if it were not so," said she, quite simply.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TRUTH AT LAST

"Billy," began the Watermelon, turning aside with darkening eyes, his flushed face growing slowly white as he realized that the reckoning had come. Billy must know all now, know who her companion of the past week was, know the status of the man who had told her he loved her. Then he turned to her again with all his mad, wild, foolish, hopeless longing in his eyes and voice and held

out his arms.

"Oh, kid, I love you," he whispered, as she went to him, frankly and happily. "I love you so I can't marry you."

"It's old-fashioned to love your wife, I know," chirruped Billy, "but let's be old-fashioned."

"It isn't that, Billy," said the Watermelon slowly. He held her a moment, looking down into her eyes as she looked up at him, her hands on his shoulders, her head back.

"What is it?" she asked, frankly puzzled, but refusing to be dismayed. "You can't afford a wife, you who made three—four—millions this year?"

"Yes," said the Watermelon, grim and quiet, "that's it." He let her go and thrust his hands into his pockets. "I haven't a cent, haven't ever had one. I'm not Batchelor with a few millions. I'm a tramp without a cent, stony broke. That suit-case," kicking Batchelor's suit-case which he had carried with him, "is another's and I'm going to chuck it to-night."

Billy stared, mouth slightly parted, her brows drawn together in wonder, unbelieving. "Not Batchelor?" she stammered. "William Hargrave Batchelor?"

"I am Jeroboam Martin of Nowhere and Everywhere," said the Watermelon bitterly. "That Sunday I met you, I found Batchelor in bathing down in the woods. I swiped his clothes, Billy, for the dinner I could get at the hotel. Then I saw you. I wanted the week with you and I just went on being Batchelor. See?"

"How?" asked Billy through white lips, staring at him from where she stood in the middle of the tiny cow lane, winding away up the hill among the sweet fern and the bracken.

The Watermelon raised his hand to his head and gently brushed his back hair with futile embarrassment. "Why, you know that guy we heard coughing in the bushes? Well, he put me wise to the fact that your father—er—that your father and Batchelor were enemies on the Street and I thought—maybe—er—if—why, your father asked me to go with you on the trip, you know, and I thought—er—that if Batchelor was in the city alone and your father thought he was with him—why, Batchelor could beat him on the Street and not mind the loss of the few things I had to take—er—see, I deceived the gang of you for a week's fun. See what a cheap guy I am, Billy? A bad egg."

"Yes," said Billy. "Father asked you to go. Why did he do that?"

The Watermelon flushed. "Why—er—"

"Father knew you were an enemy. He told me that you, Batchelor, I mean, had made him lose a lot of money last week and would probably make him lose more next week. Maybe father thought as you did, that if you were out of the city—" she knitted her brows and gazed off across the valley. "Father telegraphed just before we went to that place behind the bam, right after dinner. I know, for

I saw him go to the office. Why don't you tell me the truth, Jerry?"

"God, Billy, ain't I giving you the straight goods?"

"Not about father," replied Bartlett's daughter gravely.

"Why—er—he may have telegraphed—"

"Certainly, he did," said Billy. "This whole trip was father's idea." She brushed the subject aside as one to be returned to later. "Tell me, Jerry, isn't your father a minister?"

"Yes, that's straight. He was poor, darned poor. We were all poor. He used to say that a man with more children than brains had no place in the ministry."

"I should think that possibly your father had brains," suggested Billy.

"Yes," admitted the Watermelon. "But they didn't keep pace with the children."

"What happened to you all? Why—er—why couldn't you have worked at something?"

She was gazing at him bewildered, trying to get a grasp on the new state of affairs.

"Aw, we went from bad to worse," muttered the Watermelon sullenly. "Father left the ministry. He used to say that you could appreciate the glory of the Almighty much better in a dollar bill than in the Bible."

"Maybe he had—er—no leanings toward the ministry," murmured Billy, endeavoring to express as politely as possible her growing conviction that the Reverend Mr. Martin was not a godly man.

"Maybe not," agreed the Watermelon. "But when a man's down, every one's down on him. Nothing father did went right. Ma died and the home broke up—I don't know what's become of all the others—working, I suppose, day after day, like slaves in a galley, you know. I tried it, and every night I drank to drown the damnable monotony and stupidity of it all. So, you see what I am, a bum—a tramp."

"And yourself, my love, my Jerry."

Billy held out her hands and he caught them and held them tightly in both his own for a moment, then dropping them, turned away with half a sob.

"Don't, Billy. Don't make it so hard for me, dear. We can't marry. I'm filth and you're sweetness and purity."

"But other men have married. You aren't the only one who isn't clean."

"I know, but I love you. See? When you love a person, you don't make them suffer for it. You can't understand, Billy, for you have never known life. You don't begin to know what it means. I will probably marry a girl from the streets, or one with no brains and no soul. But, you see, I love you."

Billy's eyes blazed. "You will never marry any one else with me alive," said she.

"How could I marry you, dear? I have nothing—absolutely nothing. We couldn't have a home anywhere."

"We can make a home," pleaded Billy. She leaned toward him and laid her hand on his arm, smiling into his moody face with all the charm, the daring, the tenderness of a woman who loves and is fighting for her happiness with every weapon at her command.

"You can't make a home with nothing to make it on," said the Watermelon.

"Ah, but we have something to make it on," cried Billy. "We have you and me."

"But no money."

"Why, Jerry, I have money; hundreds, thousands, dear."

But the Watermelon shook his head. "Money wouldn't be any good when I'm rotten," said he.

"Dear," crooned Billy, and kissed him on the chin, for she could reach no higher.

"Billy," he groaned.

"Tell me you love me, Jerry."

"Tell you I love you? Ah, sweetheart."

"Tell it to me, Jerry."

"Billy, I love you so, that if there is a God, I will thank Him all my life for this week and the thought of you."

"You may not," said Billy, "when we have been married a year."

"We can't marry, dear. Don't you understand? I am a tramp."

"And so am I."

"Your father will kick me out when he knows—"

"It's none of my father's business," said Billy with a saucy tilt of her small chin. "He's marrying whom he pleases and I shall do the same."

"Wait until I speak to him—"

"No," said Billy promptly. "I will speak, Jerry. Promise me that you won't say a thing until we get to the town where we can telegraph. Oh, Jerry, my love, promise me."

"I promise, Billy, kid."

"Promise you won't say a thing until I speak."

"I won't say a thing until I can't help it, but what good will that do?"

"Let's be happy while we can," returned Billy, with a pretty evasion. "We have one more day."

"Oh, Billy," whispered the Watermelon.

Billy turned and led the way up the path to the house while the Watermelon picked up the two suit-cases and followed her.

At the house they found the general with his usual inability to conceal a

thing, explaining that they had no money, but wished to have a two-seated team and a driver to take them to the nearest town.

The farmer did not hail the proposition with unalloyed joy. He looked thoughtfully from one to the other while Bartlett explained earnestly who he was, who the general was, who they all were, in a vain attempt to undo the general's commendable, if mistaken, frankness. Upon promising to let the driver keep his watch as a guaranty of good faith, to be returned when the money they were to telegraph for arrived, Bartlett persuaded the man to give in and go to the barn for the horses.

Billy drew her father aside, while the general, Henrietta and the Watermelon retired discreetly to the well for a drink.

"Father," said Billy, coming directly to the point and evading it with a skill that befitted her father's daughter. "Jerry wants to marry me. Oh, father, I love him so. I love him as much as you do Henrietta."

Bartlett flushed and dismissed Henrietta from the conversation. "My dear Billy, you have only known him a week."

"I know, father," agreed Billy, "but a week is long enough to fall in love in. Truly, it is, father. And we both care so much, so very much."

Bartlett was secretly elated at the idea. He and Batchelor, with their differences reconciled, fighting together, instead of each other, would become rulers of the Street, could attain to any height. Batchelor was young, clever, lovable. There seemed nothing to object to. But he felt that he should. Conventionality, Henrietta, Mrs. Grundy, one or all would clearly see that there was something wrong, would counsel delay, waiting. He had never given a daughter away in marriage and was not sure what to do. He hemmed and hawed and wished that he could consult Henrietta.

"We don't want the others to know," went on Billy guilefully. "Wait until we get to the town before you say anything, won't you, father?"

"But, Billy, a week."

"Now, father," advised Billy, "just forget it. And I will forget about you and Henrietta."

"About me and Henrietta?" snapped Bartlett.

"Yes," said Billy, "and last night on the porch when you thought we had all gone in."

"That will do, Billy. We did nothing at all but say good night. I have no objection to Batchelor as a son-in-law from what I know of him; but only a week—"

"It was only an hour," said Billy. "I loved him that very first day. And please, father, you won't say anything, will you, even to him, about it? Just be nice to him, you know. And then I won't say anything."

"Certainly I won't say a thing if you don't want me to, Billy—but there is nothing whatever that you could say."

"No," said Billy, "only what I heard."

The carriage drove up at that moment, which was well.

CHAPTER XXIII

BACK TO THE ROAD

Bartlett took the telegram the clerk handed him in an elation it was hard to conceal from Batchelor, who leaned against the counter of the store and telegraph office combined, and watched him moodily.

"Realizes that it was a piece of foolishness, his taking that trip," thought Bartlett with the sympathy of the victor for the beaten. "Has probably forgotten Billy for the time. Poor Billy!"

He tore open the telegram quickly and read it eagerly and then slowly and still again more slowly, while his florid face grew first red and then white.

"Come back, for God's sake. B. here all the time. Where have you been?" signed by his broker's name.

After the third reading, Bartlett raised his eyes and glanced dully at the Watermelon, leaning against the counter, among the gay rolls of calico and boxes of rubber overshoes and stockings, watching him with thoughtful wary eyes, and Bartlett wondered if he were going mad.

It was late in the afternoon. The general and the girls, having telegraphed for money, had gone to the hotel to wait for the answers, while Bartlett and the Watermelon had remained in the store, Bartlett eager to receive the answer to the joyful congratulations he had sent his broker on the success of his plan, and the Watermelon because he scorned to run away like a whipped cur, preferring Bartlett to know who he was.

"To ask me for Billy," Bartlett had at first decided, but changed his mind as the youth's gloom became apparently impenetrable.

Bartlett's jaw was set squarely, sternly, his eyes gleamed angrily and a small pulse beat in his cheek. He handed the Watermelon the telegram and watched him as he read it.

"Who are you?" he demanded hoarsely, when the Watermelon had finished reading the message and returned it.

"Jeroboam Martin," said the Watermelon slowly, a grim amusement in his half-shut eyes.

"Jero—what?"

"Jeroboam Martin."

"But Batchelor," stammered Bartlett, confused. The power of suggestion had been so strong that, though he occasionally thought the youth a bit eccentric for a stock-broker, it had never entered his head to question his identity.

"Batchelor is in New York," returned the Watermelon. "I just telegraphed him, C.O.D., where he could find his blooming car. Don't suppose the police had sense enough to look for it at the hotel."

"A low dirty trick," sputtered Bartlett.

The Watermelon agreed. "Typical of the Street," he sneered. "Yah, it fairly reeks with the filth of money, your plan and mine."

"My plan?" Bartlett flushed and looked away. "Stung," said he humbly, and crumpled the telegram in his hand as he gazed moodily through the open door to the village street, impotent to refute the words of the Watermelon.

The Watermelon nodded without any undue elation, in fact, not thinking at all about Bartlett, he was too entirely absorbed in his own troubles.

"I suppose you are his partner—friend?" questioned Bartlett, after a moment's painful readjusting of ideas.

"No, I am a stranger. We met by chance, as you might say. I am a tramp."

"A tramp!" Bartlett's business chagrin vanished before the rush of his paternal alarm and surprise. "But, by heavens, man, I told Billy she could marry you."

The horror in his tones angered the Watermelon. The hot blood leaped into his face and his hands clenched.

"Well, why not?" he demanded. "I am a man if I am a tramp."

"Bah," sneered Bartlett. "A man? A cow, rather, an animal too lazy to work. I suppose you stole your clothes."

Both talked in low voices that the clerk, who only restrained himself from approaching by the exertion of tremendous will power, might not hear them. The Watermelon's face was very white, and he spoke slowly, carefully, as he retold the episode of the swimming-hole and the stolen car, still leaning against the varied assortment of dress goods. "I borrowed these clothes," he concluded, "to keep you away from New York for a week. That object may not sound original to you, and it wasn't. You were the one who suggested it to me through the telegraph clerk last Sunday."

"That boy would take candy from the baby," swore Bartlett gently.

"You were stung, that's all. I love Billy and she loves me. I hate work, but for Billy I will work and am going to work. I love her."

"Does she know you are a tramp?"

[image]

"Does she know you are a tramp?"

"Yes."

"You haven't a cent, I suppose."

"No, but I can earn some."

"How?"

"Working."

"At what?"

"Something."

"What?"

"Anything. Damn it, I ain't incapable of anything but sleep!"

"I've lost thousands through that dirty trick of yours—"

"Yours. You originated it, you know."

Bartlett leaned against the counter beside the Watermelon and glared at the floor. Neither thought to leave the store, and even forgot the clerk, who gazed at them dubiously from a discreet distance and wondered how many more telegrams they wanted.

Bartlett knew Billy. Billy said that she was going to marry this man and so she would marry him—unless something more effective than verbal opposition were used. He had never exerted any authority over Billy and knew that it would be too late to begin now. Billy would only laugh at him. But after all, he was Billy's father, he loved the girl and had some right to object to her marriage with a tramp.

He glanced at the thin clever face beside him and admitted that the man had brains and apparently was not besotted or brutalized, merely indifferent, lazy and wholly unambitious; besides, very young, impatient of restraint and the dull grind of a poor man's life.

"Who are your people?" asked Bartlett to gain time. He must make a plan to separate Billy from this impecunious suitor. Authority was useless. He must use tact, finesse.

"My father was a minister," returned the Watermelon. "Yours was a grocer. Billy told me. Families don't count in America."

Bartlett nodded agreement. "Why did you become a tramp?"

"Through inclination, not the whisky bottle. Not that I am above getting full once in a while, 'cause I ain't. Just, I'm not a drunkard. See? I didn't keep

on losing jobs through drink and finally had to take to the road because I was a bum. I took to tramping because I hate to work. It takes too much of your time. An office is like a prison to me. A man loses his soul when he stays all day bent over a desk. He isn't a man. He's a sort of up-to-date pianola to a desk, that's all. There's a lot of things to think about that you can't in an office. I wanted to think and so I took to tramping. Besides, I don't like work."

"Lazy—"

"Yes," snapped the Watermelon, "but a man. I love your Billy—my Billy, and I can work for her."

Bartlett nodded indifferently, hardly hearing what the other said. He frowned thoughtfully at the floor as he pondered the situation. If he objected to the youth in Billy's presence, she would stand up for him, all her love would be aroused to arms and she would see no wrong in her hero. If the fellow snapped his fingers, she would run away with him. What did Billy, tender, gently-guarded Billy, know of tramps, of the rough, unhappy side of existence? Nothing. But if she caught a glimpse of it with her own eyes, saw this lover of hers in his true light, dirty, drunk, disreputable, the shock would kill her love utterly and Bartlett would not have to use that authority of his which was no authority, which Billy would refuse to obey. She had been free too long for any one to govern her now. The only person who could effectually break the unfortunate tangle was the Watermelon himself. Bartlett glanced at the gloomy face beside him and read it as he had grown used to reading men and events.

The Watermelon was young, hardly older than Billy; he was desperately in love, with a love that was pure and true and generous. He was thinking of Billy and not of himself. His opposition to Bartlett was merely the anger aroused by Bartlett's sneers. He was in reality filled with humility and repentance to a degree that he would do anything to kill the love Billy bore for him, knowing with his man's knowledge that he was not worthy of her, and longing with his youth and love to sacrifice himself for her best good, seeing through young, unhappy eyes, only the past, his own shame and profession. Forgetting the possibilities of the future, he had gone to the extreme of self-loathing. The one thing he saw was his past, that past that was wholly unfit for Billy. It blocked the entire view, crushed him with the weight of inexorable facts. To the young there are but two colors, black and white, and the Watermelon was very young. Bartlett looked at him keenly and decided that his plan would work, that he would not have to take a last desperate and ineffectual stand against Billy.

"See here. In August we are going to our place in Westhaven. It's a small town in this state, up the coast away north of Portland. Come to her there at the end of August, come as you are, a tramp, dirty, shabby, drunk—"

"I don't drink, not as the others do."

"Come drunk. Let her understand what being a tramp means, what your life has been. If she still wants you, I hardly see how I can stop her. That's only fair, for what does she know about you and your life? You know all about her, what she has done and been and is going to do. Leave her now, this evening. Go on being a tramp and then come to her, at the last of August. Come as a tramp, mind. Don't let her think that it is a test she is being put to or she will only laugh at it and us and go on wanting you just the same, scorning to be tested, to think that her love could fail. Give her some other excuse for your going. You must see that it is only fair to the little girl to let her see what she is up against."

"Yes, I see. I tried to tell her," agreed the Watermelon gloomily.

"If she loves you through it all, she can have you, and I suppose I will have to consent. I can afford a penniless son-in-law and I guess an American tramp is preferable to a European noble."

"I won't be penniless," said the Watermelon. "I could work like a nigger for a month and own forty dollars, thirty of which I would owe for board."

"That's just it," declared Bartlett promptly. "You can't support Billy in the way she is used to being supported, can't give her the things that have become necessities to her."

"I can support her in my own way," said the Watermelon, trying to reason down his own benumbing repentance and humiliation as well as to convince Bartlett of that which he himself knew to be all wrong.

"But that isn't Billy's way. You couldn't give her a servant, for instance, and servants to Billy are like chairs to some people, absolutely necessary."

"We love each other," said the Watermelon simply.

"That's all right. But you can't always be sure your love is like elastic and stretchable. Come as a tramp and I will give my consent." Bartlett grew bold, positively convinced that Billy could no longer care when she had once seen the drunken sot, promised as he had grown used to doing on the Street, to do that which he knew he would not have to do. "I will give my consent, if Billy still can care. I know that Billy would be a lot happier with my consent, too, than without it. For, though the modern child has no respect for her parent's authority, she likes to have her wedding peaceful and conventional."

"Can I say good-by to her?"

"Yes, but I trust you not to let her know that she is to be put to a test. If you love her, you can see that I am right."

"Yes," said the Watermelon, "I love her and will not let her know."

He straightened up and pushed his hat farther back, with the slow, inbred languor of the thoroughly lazy man. "I love Billy, and that is why I consent. I tried to make her understand what I am, have been, but I couldn't." He took a handful of beans from a near-by barrel and let them run slowly through his fingers. "I

suppose she will give me the double cross."

"I hope so," answered Bartlett. "I'm not very particular, but a tramp—"

"A gentleman pedestrian," suggested the Watermelon, with a faint flicker of his usual sublime arrogance.

Bartlett laughed and held out his hand. "Well, good-by. I've enjoyed the week immensely, for all this rotten ending. That scurvy trick of yours—"

"Of yours," corrected the Watermelon.

"Yes, yes, I suppose so. I hope that Henrietta won't ever know. Do you think Billy does?"

"Billy isn't as simple as you think," returned the Watermelon.

"What did she say?"

"Father suggested the trip and he telegraphed after dinner, or something like that."

"You didn't tell her it was my plan?" begged Bartlett. "I have to go on living with her."

"No, I didn't tell her, but she's next to the fact."

"I will speak to her," said Bartlett hastily. "I wouldn't like Henrietta to find out about it. Billy has wanted a motor boat for some time. I may give her one."

They walked slowly toward the door and once more shook hands.

"I would gladly have given the thousands I have lost to have you Batchelor boy," said Bartlett gently.

"Aw, thanks," said the Watermelon.

"Tell the others I will be around when I have sent another telegram."

The Watermelon found Billy sitting on the steps of the only hotel in town. It was a big, square, uncompromising affair, blank and unattractive, and Billy, alone on the top step, looked somehow small and forlorn and child-like. The Watermelon sat down beside her.

"Where's Henrietta?" he asked, ignoring her eyes and the question they asked.

"Up-stairs," said Billy, "fixing up." She raised her hands to her own soft hair and bit her lip to get up courage to voice the question her eyes had already asked.

"Where's the general?" asked the Watermelon.

Billy nodded backward. "In the office, trying to convert the landlord. The landlord's a democrat, you know."

"Come and walk down the road with me a bit?" asked the Watermelon. He rose and held out his hand to help her up.

Billy rose with a trembling laugh that failed miserably in its manifest attempt to be brave.

It was late afternoon, sweet and cool as they left the village behind. The deep quiet of the last of the day was over fields and woods and road, the heat and

strenuous business of the morning done. Cows were slowly meandering across the pastures to the familiar bars, empty teams rattled by on the way home, the driver humped contentedly over the reins, thinking of the day's bargains and of the supper waiting for him. The shadows were lengthening, long and graceful across the village green.

Neither Billy nor the Watermelon spoke until they had left the village some little way behind and had come to four cross-roads with the usual small dingy school-house, door locked, dirty windows closed for the summer and shabby, faded blinds drawn.

Billy knew from the Watermelon's face that the interview with her father had been far from satisfactory. She feared that the Watermelon had not "stood up" for himself, that her speaking to her father that morning had not helped matters as she had hoped it would. She tried to think of something to say that would influence the boy, something she could do to show him how she cared, so he would not think of leaving her. The Watermelon was silent, for, now that the hour of parting had come, he did not know what to say, could not bring himself to leave her, gay, foolish, light-hearted Billy.

He, however, was the first to speak. The school-house recalled miserable days of long dull confinement, and he nodded toward it, pausing in the grass by the wayside. "A standing monument," said he, "to buried freedom."

"I never went to school," said Billy. "It must be awful."

"Awful," the Watermelon shrugged. "It's taken ten years from my life. Schools should be abolished."

They sat down on the tiny, weather-stained step, side by side, in the gathering dusk.

"Billy," began the Watermelon earnestly, and then stopped.

Poor little Billy's heart fluttered and she put her hand to her hair in her nervousness. "You know," she said firmly, irrelevantly, "I love you, Jerry."

"I know, dear," replied the Watermelon. "And I love you. No matter where I am, Billy, no matter what happens, you are the best in me and I will keep you best. I'm shiftless, lazy, no 'count, but Billy, kid, I'll always love you."

"And we will get married and live happily ever after," crooned Billy.

"I'm going away to-night, Billy, back to the road."

"Oh, Jerry, please, clear. If father knew how much I care—"

"No, Billy, your father's right. He said to give you time; for me to go away for a while and maybe you would get—over it."

"And if I did," demanded Billy, "if I loved another, wouldn't you be jealous? Wouldn't you kill that other, Jeroboam Martin?" She clenched her small fist and pounded him on the knee to emphasize the passion in her voice.

"If he were a decent chap—" stammered the Watermelon, "it would be better

for you.”

“It’s terrible,” interrupted Billy, “when the girl has to do all the loving.” She pushed the hair out of her hot face and stared angrily before her, across the road.

“You only love me, but I love you. See the difference?” asked the Watermelon. “It’s simply impossible for your love to be as great as mine for that reason. Your father said I could come to you the last of August at Westhaven, and I’m coming, Billy.”

“And then we can marry, did father say that?” asked Billy, turning to him.

“If you care still,” muttered the Watermelon.

“Care,” Billy laughed the contrary to merry scorn. “Care? Why, Jeroboam Martin, when will I not care?”

The Watermelon flushed and rose as the wisest course under the circumstances. “I’m off. Say good-by to the others for me, will you, Billy?”

“You will be my knight,” whispered Billy. “And I will be your lady, and no knight ever went back on his lady, yet, Jeroboam.”

“You’ve got a darned poor knight,” grunted the Watermelon. Suddenly he turned and caught her in his arms, dragging her to him and forcing back her head to see into her eyes. “Billy, Billy,” he cried, “will you be true to me, for ever and for ever, no matter what happens, no matter what I do? Could you, will you love me always?”

“Always, always,” whispered Billy.

“Dirty, drunk?”

“Dirty and drunk and sick and always,” promised Billy. “Only you won’t drink, because I love you.”

“Love never yet stood between a man and the whisky bottle,” sneered the Watermelon. “You don’t know men, kid.”

He let her go and turned away with a shamed laugh. “Good-by, Billy.”

“Good-by, Jerry,” replied Billy, frightened at she knew not what, realizing that there were after all things in men’s lives of which she knew nothing. She walked with him to the fence and watched him swing over it.

“Cross-cuts for me,” he explained, holding out his hand. She placed hers in it and he crushed her small fingers until they hurt, then turning abruptly, left her there among the brambles, watching him across the bars.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE POET OR THE POODLE

The day was unusually hot for late August in Maine. The grass was brown and dry, the leaves hung limply on the trees and the dust in the roads was ankle deep. No breeze came from the sea, while the sails of the pleasure boats drooped in warm dejection. Every one had sought shelter from the sun, and wharfs, streets and houses of the small seaport town appeared deserted.

Bartlett had taken himself off to the dim seclusion of the house, where he lounged with windows opened, blinds drawn and a small table of cooling beverages near at hand. The heat, the drowsy, shrill hum of the crickets and the muffled, monotonous roar of the sea had a soothing influence and Bartlett let his book fall from his hands and slept, stretched at ease in the steamer chair. A door gently opening and softly shutting aroused him. He sat up, yawned and grunted.

"Hello," drawled a voice, slow, indifferent, familiar.

Bartlett recalled a week in June, when, with rare credulity, he had kidnapped a stranger and had discovered that he had been the one in truth to be kidnapped. He turned his head and saw the Watermelon crossing the room. He knew that it was the boy by the size of the shoulders and the grace of the long limbs, but the thin, good-natured face was covered with a month's growth of light hair, the brown suit with the pale green and red stripe was a suit no longer, merely a bundle of rags. The shirt was opened at the throat, without a tie or button, while the panama was shapeless and colorless, but worn with the familiar jaunty ease.

"Ah," said Bartlett. "Jeroboam Martin."

He smiled as one who meets an old and congenial friend, for Jeroboam Martin had shown a fine capability for getting out of a tight place and carrying through a desired project with success and nerve, and Bartlett had grown to like the lad.

"Am I bum enough?" asked the Watermelon, with no answering smile. When one has come to test love, life is too grim for smiles.

"You are fairly dirty and shabby," agreed Bartlett. "You look thin."

"I have had hard luck," said the Watermelon. "How's Billy?"

"Pretty well, thanks."

"Expecting me?" asked the Watermelon, taking off his hat and gently patting his back hair as he had a way of doing.

Bartlett nodded. "Yes, but not exactly as you are."

"It's tough on the little girl," muttered the Watermelon. He sank into a chair and stretched out his long legs with the weather-stained trousers and dirty, broken shoes. "Oh, mama, I'm tired. Been hoofing it since sun-up yesterday with hardly a stop, I wanted to see the kid so."

"Well, go and get drunk," returned Bartlett. "And then you can see her."

The Watermelon frowned. "See here, I don't drink, necessarily. I'm not a

brand to be plucked from the burning, a sheep strayed from the fold. The whisky bottle wasn't my undoing and didn't make me take to the highway. I'm not fallen. I was always down, I guess. I hate work; I hate worry and trouble, slaving like a Swede all day for just enough money to be an everlasting cheap guy. I like leisure and time to develop my own soul." He waved his hand in airy imitation of James.

"That's all right," said Bartlett. "But get drunk. If she can stand you soused, she can stand you sober. She has got to know what she's getting, if she decides to take you after all."

The Watermelon's tired face grew a bit whiter under the tan and beard. He shrugged hopelessly and rose. "All right, if you say so. I hope to hell it will kill her love on the spot and she won't suffer for it afterward. I suppose it will." He started for the door and paused, one hand on the knob. "Shall I have it on you?" he asked with a smile. "I'm broke."

Bartlett tossed him a bill. "Is that enough?"

"Yes," said the Watermelon and slipped it into his pocket.

"Have one with me before you go," said Bartlett, pushing a glass and the bottle across the table.

The Watermelon filled his glass and raised it. "To Billy," said he.

"To Billy's happiness," amended Bartlett.

Maine is a prohibition state, but the Watermelon had been there before and knew just where and how to obtain what he was looking for. With the bottle in his pocket, he sought the beach and made his way up it to some secluded place where he could drink in peace and out of the heat of the sun. A sea-gull flew wheeling gracefully by to the distant cliffs, the waves, long, purring, foam-flecked, ran indolently up the gleaming sands, broke with a gurgling splash of seaweed and tumbled stones and ran back to meet the next one. The ocean stretched limitless before him and behind rose the rocks, hiding him completely from the sight of land. With a grunt of dissatisfaction, he sat down and drew the cork of the whisky bottle.

As the day advanced, the sun crept around the headland until it streamed unchecked upon the Watermelon, sprawled, drunk and warm and dirty in the lee of the rocks. The combined heat of the sun and the poison he had in him, called by courtesy whisky, grew unbearable, and he rose in drunken majesty to find some cooler place. The sun would soon have thrown long shadows on the beach, but the Watermelon could not wait for that. He must get cool at once, and in the waves splashing, gurgling, laughing, breaking at his very feet, he found a suggestion. Where could one get cool if not in the sea itself? A steam yacht far away like a streak of white, was seen creeping slowly landward, but the Watermelon did not trouble about such a thing. He began to undress, solemnly, stubbornly, with the one thought to get cool.

The yacht, *Mary Gloucester*, was a gay little bark, all ivory white and shining brass work. A brightly striped awning covered the deck, there were large, comfortable chairs, with many-colored pillows and ribbons and chintz, and daintily arranged tables to assuage one's thirst and offer cooling bodily comfort on a hot day.

The *Mary Gloucester* was named after a poem of Kipling's, and her owner was explaining this fact, ensconced gracefully, if solidly, in a many-cushioned chair, her feet a bit awkwardly on the rest before her, a fan in one hand and a small, fat, white, woolly dog on her lap, his fore feet on the railing, his mouth open and his tiny red tongue flapping moistly from between his teeth.

"Whom do you love the more," asked Bertie Van Baalen, "Kipling or this angel child?" and Bertie sought to pull one fluffy white ear near his hand. But the little dog snarled angrily and snapped sharply at the hastily withdrawn fingers.

"Ah, the duckems, naughty man shan't tease him," crooned the lady, slapping at Bertie with the fan, while the little dog turned again to the sea.

"Yes, indeed, Mrs. Armitage," said Henry Bliven solemnly. "Tell us truthfully, whom do you love the better, Kipling or the blessed duckems?"

"Do not hesitate or seek to spare either of their feelings," urged Bertie.

Mrs. Armitage laughed, fat, contented, placid. "Oh, you silly boys, comparing a poet and a dog, a blessed little doggie."

"I know it's hard on the dog," agreed Henry, gracefully launching a smoke wreath upward from his fat, red lips, moist like a baby's. "No dog would care to be compared with a thing so far beneath him as a poet, but all the same, are you a sport or an intellect?"

"An intellect?" questioned the lady, wrinkling her brows and gazing puzzled at the youth in the chair beside her.

"Are you, in other words," explained Henry, "of intellectual or sporting tendencies?"

"Think," warned Bertie, "before you answer. Kipling, a great poet, author of sentiments that will stir mankind for all ages, sentiments that will ennoble, strengthen—"

"Do you know," confessed the widow with the gleeful naiveté of a child, "I like Kipling because he's so bad. He says such wicked things." She nodded and glanced audaciously from one youth to the other.

Henry reached wearily for his glass on the table beside him and Bertie Van Baalen sighed heavily. "You women! You make us bad. Don't you know you do? You want us bad, so we are—anything to please you beauteous creatures."

"I don't want you *men* bad, just poets," explained the widow, fanning herself slowly, cheerfully.

Henry waved the digression aside. "Now, tell us frankly, truthfully, black

and blue, cross your heart, do you prefer a small, dyspeptic, overfed, snapping bundle of cotton wool which is, for the sake of euphemism, called a dog, to one of the greatest minds of the day?"

"Yes," said Bertie. "Suppose we sat here now, and you had the blessed angel, mother's pet, and one volume of Kipling complete, the only book of his in the world, and the only one there could ever be, the only book in which we could hand on to our children and our children's children such sublime thoughts, the only book, mind you, and if you had to throw one or the other overboard, a piece of sticking plaster or the greatest poet of modern times, which would it be?"

"If I threw my blessed pet over, would you go after him, Bertie?" demanded the widow, to whose mind a question of grave import had just presented itself. "Henry, would you? You know how I love my dainty little kitty kit, would you save him from cruel death for me? For my sake?"

"No harm," said Henry with feeling, "shall befall the angel child while I live to protect it—her—him."

"For your sake," said Bertie, "I would die."

"Then," said the widow placidly, "I would sacrifice my own for the sake of posterity. For you would rescue him for me and you wouldn't an old book."

"Ah, no," protested Bertie, "that was not our proposition. Neither the book nor the latest thing in worsted—"

There was a splash, a gurgle and a horrified scream from the widow, as with a sudden lurch of the boat, the little dog lost his balance and fell overboard.

"Oh, my precious, my lamb," cried the widow. "Bertie, save him for me."

"Yes, yes," declared Bertie, hanging over the rail and watching the struggling dog in the water below. "Yes, yes, certainly."

"Henry," pleaded the widow. "If you love me—"

"Trust me," said Henry soothingly, hiding a gleam of satisfaction in his mild blue eyes. "I will have the boat stopped."

The widow's daughter and chaperon appeared in the companionway, flushed and sleepy. "Mama, what is the matter?"

"Caroline, my precious lamb," and the widow motioned dramatically seaward. "Henry, you said—"

"I will," said Henry. "I will have the boat stopped."

"I will do that," cried the widow. "You jump overboard and save him."

Caroline yawned and raised her soft white hands to her tumbled hair. "Do save him, Bertie, I'm not equal to the task of comforting mama, just now."

Bertie looked at his immaculate yachting clothes and hesitated.

"Ah, you do not love me," cried the widow. "Oh, my baby, my own."

"I love you so," said Bertie solemnly, "I refuse to leave you in your grief even for a moment."

A long white arm shot over the crest of a tumbled wave and was followed by a man's head and long, thin body. The man swam well and quickly and was making straight for the now swimming dog.

"A rescue, a rescue," cried Henry, and added softly to himself, "Oh, poppy-cock!"

CHAPTER XXV AS HE SAID HE WOULD

The widow leaned far over the side. "Oh," said she, "the man is naked."

"As truth," agreed Bertie. "You might retire, you know."

"I won't look," promised the widow, turning her back and peering over her shoulder. "But is he near my lamb now? Will he, can he save him?"

"Unfortunately, yes, mama," said Caroline.

Bertie and Henry leaned over the rail and watched the rescue, the long, easy strokes of the swimmer and the amusement on his face as a wave carried the struggling dog within reach and he grabbed the little woolly back.

"Saved!" cried Bertie, and turned just in time to grab Mrs. Armitage, who was also turning to see over the rail, by her fat shoulders and whirl her around again. "Safe, dear lady, but look the other way. Our hero is clothed in the seafoam and his own nobility, nothing else."

Henry was already disappearing down the companionway, the yacht was stopping and the crew standing by on the lower deck to lend assistance to rescued and rescuer.

The evening was warm and sultry. What little breeze there had been during the day had gone down with the sun, while the ocean heaved and moaned in long, green swells and ran softly whispering up the beach and splashed against the rocks with hardly a flake of foam. The sun, sinking behind the hills, cast long orange and pink streaks across the waves, and turned the small white clouds overhead a dainty, rosy mass of drifting color.

Bartlett and Billy strolled down the winding street of the little seaside town, out on the pier and stood idly waiting for the evening mailboat to arrive. Henrietta and the general were coming on the evening boat to spend the autumn in a small cottage which the general was pleased to call his "shooting-box." But Bartlett's pleasure at seeing Henrietta once more was mingled with worry and

uneasiness over Billy and the Watermelon. He smoked thoughtfully and watched Billy warily, tenderly. She leaned against a pile and gazed over the vast unrest of the ocean to the distant horizon, with dreaming, unfathomable eyes. Bartlett knew of whom she was thinking, whom waiting for more and more eagerly every day now as August drew to a close and still he did not come. But this evening he had come, he was in the same neighborhood, drunk and probably hungry. When they met, as they must and that shortly, would he make a scene, become loud-mouthed, foul, abusive? It would be hard on Billy, and Bartlett wished vainly that he could spare her. But it was best that she should know, should understand fully and with a sudden quick cut it would be over with, the June madness when one is young and pretty and care-free. Billy would read her folly in the bleared eyes of a shiftless fool. Yet the boy was clever in getting out of a tight place, and Bartlett admired cleverness intensely, not being slow himself when it came to a hard bargain. The boy had gentle blood in his veins, too, more's the pity. It was simply a case of a good family gone to seed. Poor little Billy and her puppy love! A most unfortunate affair, the whole mistaken, unhappy business!

"There comes the *Mary Gloucester*," said Billy, breaking into his thoughts. She nodded toward the yacht, steaming majestically around the headland, pennons gaily waving and the bright awning a splash of color in the afterglow.

"The *Mary Gloucester*," chuckled Bartlett. "That woman hasn't the sense of her ugly little poodle dog."

"I know," said Billy, "that is why I have always been so afraid of her."

"Why afraid of her?"

"For a mother," explained Billy unfortunately, but characteristically saying the wrong thing.

Bartlett flushed. "You just admitted that she was a fool. Do you think I would marry that kind of a woman?"

"Men always do," said Billy. "A fool's bad enough, but a fool and money are simply irresistible."

"You know too much for your age," said Bartlett coldly.

"I don't exactly know it," blundered Billy. "I just see it."

"Billy, have you ever seen me—"

"Yes, father. That night in the pavilion at the Ainsleys'—"

"That will do, Billy."

Billy was hurt. "I don't mean to be nasty, father; but you asked me—"

"There comes the mail boat," interrupted Bartlett firmly.

Billy looked at it and sighed. It was the last of August and Jeroboam Martin had not come. Had he forgotten her in two short months?

Bartlett laid his hand tenderly on her shoulder. "Forget him, girlie. He's not worthy of you."

"He said he would come," whispered Billy.

"If he doesn't, dear, you have me. We have stood together through everything for eighteen years and will stand, still, eh, Billy?"

Billy bent her head and rubbed her cheek against the hand on her shoulder with a half laugh and a half sob.

With the first sight of the smoke on the horizon, heralding the approach of the principal event of the day, the arrival of the evening mail, a crowd had begun to gather, the usual motley crowd of a summer resort on the coast. Townspeople hung indifferently on the outskirts, while the summer visitors, in dainty dresses and baggy trousers, sun-burnt, jovial, indefatigable, pressed to the front. The hum of talk and laughter grew as the crowd grew, good-natured, meaningless chatter. The sight of the *Mary Gloucester*, steaming gracefully into port, was greeted with a gay flutter of handkerchiefs and straw hats, and Billy and Bartlett, standing where the yacht would dock, were soon the center of the laughing, merry crowd, ready and eager to welcome home the stout widow, her unfortunate chaperon and the two "supplements," as a village wag called the fat Henry and the slim Bertie.

As the yacht drew near, the widow's corpulent form was seen by the rail, on one side a tall youth, and on the other, two, side by side and apparently in no very good humor.

"Three, by George," cried Blatts, a prosperous brewer from Milwaukee. "She left here with two and returns with three. Where did she get him, Bartlett?"

But Bartlett did not answer, did not hear. The gang-plank had been lowered and he was watching in numb fascination, the tall youth walking beside the widow, her ridiculous dog in his arms. It was Jeroboam Martin in an immaculate white suit of Bertie's. His hat was off and his hair, after the swim, gleamed soft and yellow. For the sake of the widow upon whose boat he found himself, he had shaved as well as he could with Henry's razor, and while his cheeks were smooth enough, he still wore a small yellow mustache and goatee. Both were brushed until they shone like his hair and they lent a fascinating and distinctly foreign air to his long, thin, clever face. In his arms was the little dog with its enormous bow of sky-blue ribbon.

Bartlett wondered if he were going mad and seeing things that were not so. At two, or thereabouts, he had seen Martin, dirty, shabby, tired, and had given him money on which to get drunk. At seven, a yacht, which had not been in Westhaven for over a week, carefully deposits the youth, clean, fresh, well-dressed at his very side. Was he mad?

Billy, too, had seen, but did not wonder. She knew he was a tramp, for he had said he was, but she never thought of him or pictured him other than well-dressed, well-cared for, gently blasé and a bit languid. She looked at him now

over the heads of the intervening crowd and her heart did not question how he came there, only rushed out to him with the gladness in her eyes, the joyous smile on her parted lips. He had said he would come, and there he was. Further she did not question. Their eyes met over the heads of the people, eager questioning in his, joyful answer in hers.

Hastily he dropped the pup with the sky-blue bow upon the wharf, among the plebeian feet there assembled, and reaching Billy's side through the crowd, grabbed both small hands and stood laughing down at her.

[image]

And stood laughing down at her

"Billy," he whispered, "Oh, you Billy."

There was, there must be some explanation, Bartlett told himself desperately. It could not be that this was not Martin? Bartlett had not slept with the youth for nearly a week without being pretty familiar with the long lank form, the thin, careless face. And it was equally impossible that the forlorn piece of humanity who had stood that afternoon in the drawing-room and inquired for Billy was not Martin. They were one and the same and once more he and Billy had met on equal footing. To ask the boy again to get drunk was an absurdity.

"I suppose I can give him a job where he won't have much more to do than draw his pay," thought Bartlett, hopelessly, dazedly.

The Watermelon dropped Billy's hands and turned to her father in well-bred greeting, but their eyes met and in the Watermelon's was grim defiance. He had seen Billy again and nothing could part them now. All his humility and repentance had gone, and in their place was his old-time arrogance and sublime self-assurance. Fate in the form of a little white dog had brought him and Billy together again, with the Watermelon, still clean, still well-dressed, and to all outward appearances the same as the other gay youths of Billy's acquaintance. With head up, jaw shut, he scorned to lower himself for any one. He would prove himself worthy, not unworthy of Billy. Out of his repentance had grown his manhood. He was no nameless hobo of the great army of the unemployed. He was Jeroboam Martin, son of the late Reverend Mr. Martin, in temporary financial embarrassment that could be soon remedied. He would work for Billy and they would be happy on his wages. He drew himself up and held out his hand. Bartlett could take it or not as he pleased. The Watermelon had sought or desired no man's favor, and Jeroboam Martin would not stoop to do so.

For one second the two stared at each other grimly, square jaws shut, lips

unsmiling, then Bartlett's hand shot forth and he clasped the Watermelon's.

"Ah, Martin," said he, "how are you, boy?"

And still holding him by the hand, he patted the Watermelon on his arm, jovially. After all he liked the boy, and right or wrong, wise or foolish, fate was against any other action, fate in the form of a half-drowned poodle dog.

The Watermelon rested his arm on Bartlett's shoulder with boyish affection. "Say, Bartlett," said he in a low voice, "I got drunk, honest to rights. But it was so blamed hot, I cooled off in the ocean before I knew what I was about and that sobered me up again. Then I saw something fall from the yacht and I thought it was a kid from the noise they were making, not just a pup. I swam out to help and of course they hauled me on board, and now the widow is planning to marry me."

Bartlett roared. "Say, boy, er—er—maybe you need a loan until I can see about that job for you."

Once more their eyes met and this time in complete and tender accord.

"You're all right," whispered the Watermelon, his face softening. "And don't you worry about Billy," he added, "I'll take care of her."

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HE COMES UP SMILING ***

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