THE RIDDLE AND THE RING

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Title: The Riddle and the Ring
or, Won by Nerve

Author: Gordon MacLaren

Release Date: July 24, 2013 [eBook #43298]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RIDDLE AND THE RING ***

Produced by Al Haines.

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Cover

The Riddle and the Ring;

OR,

WON BY NERVE

BY

GORDON MACLAREN

[From *TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE*]

STREET & SMITH, PUBLISHERS
79-89 SEVENTH AVE., NEW YORK CITY

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The Riddle and the Ring

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THE RIDDLE AND THE RING.

CHAPTER I.

THE LITTLE MAN IN BLACK.

It was the second time the man had passed the bench, and, as their eyes met for an instant before the stranger swiftly averted his head and walked on, Barry Lawrence frowned with quick suspicion. Was it possible that the intolerable persecution had begun again? For more than three weeks he had been left in peace, and it seemed the irony of fate that now, at a moment when he was tasting the bitter dregs of life, the harassing should begin again.

The next moment he shrugged his shoulders resignedly. After all, what did it matter? They could get nothing from him now—he had nothing to give. If they had indeed returned, they must soon discover that.

The massive façade of the Pennsylvania Station had caught his eye, and brought new hope to his numbed brain. Here at least would be comparative warmth, and they could not very well turn him out. He could pretend that he was waiting for a train, and might sit for hours in the waiting room. After that—— Well, he did not wish to think of afterward.

He was only just beginning to recover from the stupefying cold which had numbed and chilled him to the marrow, and driven him into the great station to keep from dropping in the icy, wind-swept street.

He fancied that the passing porters looked at him curiously. When the announcer strolled near him, he felt impelled to turn toward the news stand in the corner. At least he could afford a paper. It was about the only thing he could buy now, and with it he could retire to the waiting room with some semblance of naturalness.

It was as he turned away from the stand that his eyes met, for the first time, those of the little man in black. Lawrence did not notice his appearance particularly then, but averted his eyes, and strode toward the men's waiting room. Here it was much warmer. The benches were well filled, but he found a seat facing the door, spread out his paper, and began to read.

Perhaps five minutes later he happened to glance up in time to see that same short, slim, precise figure pass the bench on which he sat. Of course, there might have been nothing more than a coincidence in it—people are constantly walking about a station while waiting for a train, and one frequently notices the same face half a dozen times in the space of a few minutes.

Still, Lawrence felt annoyed. His recent experience of having been followed and spied upon had so worn on his nerves that he constantly found himself suspicious of even the most casual glance. A frown furrowed his wide forehead, and, though his eyes dropped again to the printed sheet before him, he could not seem to dismiss the commonplace stranger from his mind.

Thus it happened that, when the man passed the bench again, Lawrence threw back his head swiftly, and caught the pale, grayish eyes fixed on his face with a stealthy, but unmistakably intent, scrutiny. The lids drooped instantly,

and the stranger continued his pacing without a pause, Barry's glance followed him suspiciously.

This man did not look at all like the others who had made his life miserable for months. He seemed so insignificant, with his slight, spare form, his pale eyes, and rather weak face. He looked more like a bookkeeper or clerk, grown old and sedate in the service of some long-established banking house, than anything Lawrence could think of; though that did not seem to fit him exactly.

Now the man had turned and was coming back, and Barry, noticing his face intently, found himself wondering whether he was really old or not. After all, he might easily have been thirty-five or so; it was his iron-gray hair and curiously set expression which made him seem older.

The young fellow's eyes dropped to the paper, and he waited for the stranger to pass on. The latter did not pass, however. Instead, he approached the bench, and quietly took the seat on Barry's left. There was a momentary pause, during which Lawrence wondered what under the sun was coming next. Then the unknown cleared his throat, shot a quick glance at the stout man dozing at the end of the bench, and spoke.

"I beg pardon," he said sedately, "but would you have any objection to earning a thousand dollars?"

CHAPTER II.

AN AMAZING OFFER.

Lawrence dropped his paper, and flashed a startled, bewildered glance at the man beside him. For a moment he was silent, unable to credit his senses.

"What did you say?" he gasped at length.

"I asked if you would care to earn a thousand dollars," the stranger repeated, in a quiet, precise voice.

Lawrence stared for a second longer, and then suddenly burst into a harsh, mirthless laugh. For an instant he had been thrilled to the very core. A thousand dollars! Good Lord!

In that fleeting space there flashed through his brain a dozen pictures—clear, vivid, and distinct. He saw restaurants such as he used to patronize, with food—real food, and not the gross, coarse stuff one ate simply to fill that gnawing, aching void. He saw theaters, with their glittering lights and stirring music. He

saw his old rooms, cheery and homelike in the lamplight and the red glow of the grate fire. He saw an overcoat, well cut, and lined with thick, warm fur, into which he might snuggle and defy the bitter blasts which had sapped his vitality and tortured him almost beyond endurance. He saw everything that a thousand dollars would bring to him.

And then he came to earth with a thud. Of course, the man was mad!

"I can understand that this may seem a little odd to you," the stranger went on, in that same dry, unemotional tone, "but the circumstances themselves are somewhat out of the ordinary. I had hoped that you might consider the matter favorably."

Something in the other's calm, sedate, business-like manner made Lawrence eye him again keenly. There was nothing in the least savoring of insanity about the stranger. His whole personality fairly exuded respectability. His pale eyes were quiet and steady—the eyes of a man who might be utterly unemotional and lacking imagination, but scarcely the eyes of a maniac.

Somehow the glance steadied Barry, and brought him new hope. After all, it would do no harm to inquire further into this extraordinary matter. He could scarcely be worse off than he was now.

"You can hardly blame me for being surprised," he said, with a faint, whimsical smile. "I beg your pardon for laughing, but I couldn't help it. If you will be a little more definite, and explain what I shall have to do to earn this money, I'll be very glad to consider it."

The stranger did not smile in answer. He simply nodded in a manner betokening his satisfaction, and turned more directly toward Lawrence.

"Good!" he said briefly, in that same low tone, which made it impossible for any passer-by to hear him. "The matter is very simple. It will take exactly one week of your time, at the end of which the thousand dollars I shall hand you now will be yours, without further obligation on your part."

"You mean to pay me in advance?" Lawrence exclaimed incredulously.

"I am obliged to. I think, however, that I may safely leave it to your honor to fulfill the conditions I impose."

Barry frowned. The situation was growing more and more puzzling, and verging on the absurd.

"And those conditions are?" he questioned.

"Simply this," the unknown explained: "If you accept my proposition, you will at once provide yourself with an ample wardrobe, including proper evening clothes—provided, of course, that you are not already so equipped."

Barry's lips twitched as he remembered that empty hall bedroom over near Tenth Avenue, but he made no comment save an understanding nod.

"There are shops where a man of taste can obtain these things ready-made,"

the stranger continued quietly. ”I should prefer to have them cut by a good tailor, but there is no time. Having secured the wardrobe—you understand that there must be no stinting in either quality or quantity—I will give you an additional sum for expenses. You will go to the St. Albans Hotel, and engage a suite of rooms. You know the house?”

Lawrence shook his head. It seemed that he could not speak. His brain was whirling, and he was beginning to wonder whether it might not be he himself who had taken leave of his senses. One or the other of them must be mad; there could be no doubt of that.

”It is on Forty-fifth Street, just west of the avenue.” The precise, matter-of-fact tone of his companion’s voice penetrated to Barry’s disordered brain, and again he felt that odd, reassuring sense he had noticed before. ”A quiet, high-class house. You will remain there for just one week, beginning to-day. During that week you will dine every night at the Waldorf; lunch each day at the Plaza, the Knickerbocker, Shanley’s, or restaurants of equal standing, and next Tuesday afternoon, at three o’clock, the thousand dollars will be earned.”

Lawrence sat staring at him, open-mouthed, waiting for him to continue. When it became evident that the little man had nothing more to say, Barry’s eyes threatened to pop out of his head.

”Is that all?” he managed to stammer.

”Yes.”

”You don’t want me to do anything but that?”

”No.”

”He is daffy!” Lawrence said to himself decidedly. ”There can’t be a doubt of it. He’s probably given his keeper the slip, and is having the time of his life with me.”

For an instant his heart sank, for, in spite of everything, he had been thrilled by the prospect opened up by the stranger’s words. Then he shrugged his shoulders. After all, it would be rather diverting to see how the fellow would get out of the affair, and Barry was sadly in need of something to take his mind from his own difficulties.

”My time, then, except for lunching and dining and sleeping, will be my own?” he inquired seriously.

”Exactly.”

”You wish me to register at the St. Albans under my own name?”

”That’s a matter for you to decide. It’s quite immaterial to me.”

”I suppose it would be a waste of time to inquire why you are willing to pay such a sum for anything so very simple,” Lawrence remarked tentatively.

”Quite so!” the stranger returned emphatically. ”That is altogether my affair. Well, what do you say?”

Barry kept his face serious with difficulty. ”Say?” he repeated. ”Why, I accept, of course. I’d be a fool not to.”

The unknown arose briskly.

”Good!” he said. ”Suppose we take a stroll outside. This place is getting close.”

Without question, Lawrence followed him out into the great vaulted space. What was the fellow going to do? How was he going to escape carrying out his side of the bargain with any plausibility or grace? Of course, he would get out of it somehow, for he was mad—mad as a March hare.

But, in spite of this conviction, Barry felt the blood tingling in his finger tips as they walked past the news stand, past the ticket offices, and on to the deserted extremity of the enormous marble hall.

CHAPTER III.

PANIC.

Clear of the last passer-by, the little man paused, and thrust one hand into the pocket of his inner coat. ”There is one other condition,” he said, drawing out a thick leather wallet. ”Under no circumstances must you explain to any one where you obtained this money. You must be silent regarding every particular of our meeting here, and the terms of our bargain. I have your promise?”

Lawrence, his eyes fixed incredulously on the bulging wallet, felt something grip his throat. It could not be true—it simply could not! And yet——

”I promise,” he said, in a queer, hoarse voice.

The stranger opened the leather flap, and showed the wallet crammed with crisp bank notes.

”I have your word to carry out faithfully every condition I have mentioned?” he questioned briskly, fixing Barry with a keen glance.

The latter tore his eyes from the bills, and returned the look.

”I give you—my word—of honor,” he stammered.

His brain was whirling. He could not believe his senses. It was all a mad illusion—a dream from which he must soon awake. His heart, thudding loudly and unevenly, drove the blood into his face, a crimson flood. He was trembling, but not with cold. The stranger’s voice seemed to come from far, far away; it had fallen to a mere whisper, which Lawrence could barely catch.

”There is a matter of another thousand dollars here for expenses,” he was saying. He held out the wallet, and Barry’s fingers closed around it instinctively. ”That is all, I think. You know what you are to do, and I can trust to your word of honor.”

Without another word, he turned and walked away.

Lawrence sprang after him. ”I haven’t thanked you!” he exclaimed incoherently. ”You don’t know—what you have done for me. I—I——”

”I want no thanks,” the stranger returned impatiently, his eyes fixed on the great clock. ”You can best show your gratitude by carrying out my conditions to the letter. I am pressed for time. I can wait no longer. Good-by!”

As he hurried away, Lawrence stood staring after him, as if in a dream. He saw the slim, somberly clad figure bustle past the waiting rooms and through the doors into the train shed. A moment later the announcer bellowed out the last call for a certain train, and his raucous voice aroused Barry from the trance.

He had thrust the wallet into his pocket, but now he took it out, and opened it with trembling fingers. The bills were still there—new, crisp, and yellow. His fingers touched them, and they did not crumble into dust, as he almost expected them to do. Scraps of long-forgotten fairy stories, read as a child, danced through his dazed brain, in which benefactors in strange guises gave unexpected largess to starving, freezing people. Nothing could be stranger than the appearance of the little man in black.

He laughed aloud. Then a thought came to him which swept the smile from his lips and the color from his cheeks in the twinkling of an eye: The bills were counterfeit!

With blanched face and trembling fingers, he thrust the wallet back into his pocket like a flash. What a fool he had been—what a bonehead! The bills were counterfeit, and the stranger, followed closely, no doubt, by detectives, had taken this way of getting them off his person. This accounted for the stealth, the secrecy, of the transaction. This explained everything which had been inexplicable.

With a swift-drawn breath, Lawrence looked nervously around, to meet the glance of a thin, wiry man standing in the center of the rotunda. Cold chills began to course up and down Barry’s spine. What should he do if he were caught with the stuff in his pocket? If he could only escape from the station there might be a chance of throwing it away unobserved. If only he had not dropped his paper, he might, even here, tuck the incriminating wallet in its folds, and fling both carelessly into the rubbish can. What a fool he had been!

Presently the man who had been watching him turned slowly away, and walked toward one of the ticket windows. That was only a pretense, of course. Lawrence realized that perfectly, and yet, relieved of the stranger’s scrutiny, he

ventured to move toward the broad flight of steps leading up to that long corridor, and thence to the street.

The man did not turn, and Barry's speed increased. If he could only get out of the station it would be all right. As his foot struck the bottom step, his eyes, glancing backward, told him that the man was buying a ticket. He could scarcely see through the back of his head. Perhaps there was a slim chance, after all.

Less than a minute later he flung himself out into the icy street, with a gasp of thanksgiving. Hurrying past the long front of the building, it seemed to him that every one must be staring after him. Through his thin coat the wallet bulged horribly. How could any one fail to guess what was in it?

Under normal conditions he was not a fellow to act in this fashion, but conditions were far from normal. He was half starved, and half frozen. He had lost his job four months before, under circumstances which made it almost impossible to get another, and he was desperate. On top of this, the extraordinary situation in which he found himself was enough to make any man lose his head.

But Lawrence did not quite do that.

He was flustered, nervous, almost terrified; but through it all he clung to one idea—to get back to his miserable room he had thought never to see again. There, at least, he would have security for the moment, and a chance to pull himself together.

So he sped on, dodging through cross streets and down wide avenues, the wind whistling in his ears unheeded, the cold penetrating anew his flimsy garments. As block after block was set behind him without the expected happening, a shaky sort of confidence began to take possession of him. And when at last he ran up the steps of the dilapidated rooming house on Twenty-fourth Street, he gave a long sigh of relief.

"I'm glad I didn't throw it away, after all," he muttered, feeling for his key with fingers blue with cold. "There's just a chance it may be good."

But in his heart he felt that the chance was slim indeed.

CHAPTER IV.

THE EMERALD RING.

In the absorption of the greater trouble, Lawrence had quite forgotten one of his lesser worries—his landlady. That argus-eyed female was on the watch, however,

and darted up from the basement just in time to catch him in the hall.

"I s'pose you're comin' to pay me the three weeks' rent you're owin'?" she said, with sarcasm.

Lawrence winced at her tone. He was not yet hardened to that sort of a thing.

"I hope to have it for you this afternoon, Mrs. Kerr," he returned quietly.

"You hope, do you?" shrilled the woman caustically. "Well, let me tell you right here, I ain't livin' on hopes. If that money ain't paid down by three o'clock, out you go. I don't care if it is below zero. I've stood your triflin' long enough, an' if you can't pay you can beat it an' find another lodging place. I hear they're letting loafers sleep in the churches these nights. That might suit you, bein' it's free."

Barry's face flushed, and his hand strayed toward the wallet in his pocket. For a second he was sorely tempted to hand her one of those crisp twenties, and tell her to keep the change. She would never find out its worthlessness until he was safe away. He stifled the impulse, however, and, repeating briefly that she should have her money that afternoon, passed on up the stairs.

The instant his door was shut and the key turned, he jerked the wallet out and opened it with trembling fingers. As he shook out the mass of yellowbacks on the bed, the sight of them was like a stab of a knife. They looked so real it seemed impossible that they could be counterfeit.

He took up a fifty, and, carrying it to the light, examined it closely, feeling the texture and scrutinizing every little detail with care. He could see nothing wrong about it. Four months before, had such a bill been offered him at the bank, he would have accepted it without hesitation.

He took up another, which seemed equally good. He examined half a dozen without finding a single flaw, and then decided that the trouble was in himself. His judgment was no longer what it had been, and he dared not trust it.

"They look good, but they can't be," he muttered, frowning down at the beautiful bits of yellow paper strewn so carelessly over the bed. "What the mischief can I do?"

For fully ten minutes he stood there, his eyes thoughtful and his forehead wrinkled. Then, gathering the bills up, he put them all back in the wallet save one, a ten; after which he lifted the mattress, and shoved the wallet well underneath it.

"There!" he said, straightening up; "now, if I'm pinched, they won't find but one on me. I hate to take this over to the bank, but that's the only way I can be sure."

Ten minutes later he entered the big Twenty-third Street National Bank, and walked directly to one of the tellers.

”Will you kindly tell me if this is all right?” he said quietly, thrusting the ten-dollar bill through the window.

The teller picked it up, and examined it intently. Then he glanced keenly and with some suspicion at Lawrence.

The latter bore the scrutiny well, however, and the official looked the bill over carefully again, drew it through his fingers, and finally tossed it back.

”Certainly it’s good,” he said, rather brusquely. ”What made you think it wasn’t?”

For a second Barry was silent. He could not have spoken to save his life. Then he stammered something about ”just wanting to make sure,” and turned away, quite heedless of the impatient exclamation of the teller at having his time wasted in that manner.

Lawrence had no distinct recollection of how he got back to his room. His brain was in a whirl, and the only thing which stood out vivid and clean-cut was the realization that the money was real.

Real! Ye gods! The thought intoxicated him like champagne. He forgot the cold and wind, his thin clothes, his ravenous hunger. He gave no thought to who the donor might be, or how he had acquired those crisp yellow bills. They were his, every one of them. All he had to do was to buy clothes, to take an apartment at the St. Albans, to dine for a week at the Waldorf! He laughed aloud, and a shivering, frosty-nosed citizen turned and stared after him suspiciously as he hurried down the street.

Lawrence did not see this; nor, seeing, would he have cared. He flew through the snowy streets, and on the doorstep of his lodging house was smitten with a sudden fear for the safety of his treasure. Racing up the two flights of stairs, he darted into his room and tore up the mattress.

The wallet was safe, but what might have been made him tingle all over with a sickening sensation, for he had gone out without even locking his door.

Having turned the key, he sat down on the bed, and opened the wallet. Slowly, deliberately, and with a delicious thrill, he counted the bills. There were fifteen one hundreds, eight fifties, and an odd hundred dollars in twenties and tens.

Evidently the little man in black had been prepared for his acceptance of the extraordinary offer, and the realization brought into Lawrence’s mind a swift wonder as to what it could all be about. What reason—what possible reason—could the stranger have for making those astonishing, seemingly absurd, conditions? What purpose would be accomplished by Barry’s appearing at the places mentioned for the short space of a week?

Urged on by a fresh curiosity, Lawrence took up the wallet again, to examine it for some mark of identification.

It was of heavy pigskin, finely made, and bearing the stamp of a well-known English firm. That much told nothing; but, in turning it over, Barry noticed something which had escaped his attention before. One corner was bulkier than the rest. His inquiring fingers told him that there was undoubtedly a hard object in one of the numerous compartments of the case.

Eagerly he searched, and at last, slipping his fingers into a slit in the back of the wallet, drew forth a ring.

For a moment he sat staring at it in wonder and admiration, for it was one of the strangest jewels he had ever seen.

A great, square-cut emerald was in the center, and twined about it were two serpents in dull, exquisitely chiseled gold, with tiny flecks of emerald for their eyes. Their heads were slightly raised, and the unknown craftsman had wrought them in amazing similitude to life. With patient cunning he had carved each tiny line of flat, broad head and sinuous, undulating body, until it seemed to Barry as if the things must actually wriggle presently, and dart out forked tongues.

"By Jove!" Lawrence exclaimed aloud. "I never saw anything like it in all my life. That emerald's a perfect whopper, and must be worth a fortune. He forgot to take it out, of course; and, hang it all, I don't see how the mischief I can get it back to him. I don't even know his name."

He slipped it on his finger, and found that it fitted well. Then, as he sat admiring its perfect, almost uncanny, beauty, the thought flashed into his mind that, by its means, he might solve the mystery of the man in black.

"Of course he'll come for it," he thought. "I have only to keep it, and he'll show up before long to claim it. Then perhaps I'll find out something."

He began to gather up the bills and stow them carefully away, his fingers trembling with excitement. There was much to be done if he were to carry out the stranger's conditions.

CHAPTER V.

THE POWER OF AVARICE.

In the hall of the lodging house, Lawrence stood by the door, holding a crisp yellowback in his hand. Mrs. Kerr was panting up the basement stairs, from which came the odor of cooking cabbage to join the ghosts of a thousand boiled dinners that lingered in the stuffy, airless place.

Barry was not yet used to it. He felt stifled, breathless, almost nauseated, and he longed to get away. He did not look at the ferretlike face of the slovenly woman as he handed her the bill. There was something about her he could not abide.

"Here's your money," he said brusquely. "I am leaving at once."

She grasped the bill, and examined it closely. Then she flashed a swift, sidelong glance at Lawrence. There was something about his face and bearing which she had never seen before, and it aroused her curiosity.

"I ain't got a bit of change in the house," she said, in a very different tone from the one she had used an hour before. "Mebbe you want it to count on this week."

Barry's fingers had closed around the knob.

"You can keep the change," he returned shortly. "I said I was leaving at once. I am not coming back."

"Lord save us!" she gasped. "Don't say that, Mr. Lawrence. Don't say as you're leavin' on account of them hasty words I spoke this mornin'. Fergit it. I'm a lonely widder woman as has to work my fingers to the bone to make both ends meet." Her voice took on a whining tone. "I has to count every penny, an' sometimes I'm most distracted, an' says what I don't mean. You——"

She broke off abruptly as the door slammed, and instantly a venomous expression leaped into her face. Like a flash, she had yanked the door open, and run out on the little stoop, to peer around the corner.

For a moment or two she stood shivering in the cold, her small, close-set eyes fixed intently on the back of the man hurrying toward Ninth Avenue. When he had disappeared she came back into the hall, her face thoughtful.

"Now, what's come to him, I wonder," she muttered, making her way slowly back to the basement stairs. "It's somethin', I'll be bound. I never seen him look that way before. He was excited, too, when he come in before. If I'd had any sense I'd 'a' looked around his room whilst he was out."

An instant later she was pounding up the stairs to the top floor. The door of the hall bedroom was ajar, and, pushing it open, she walked in. For a moment she stood there, her sharp eyes taking in every detail of the miserable place. The scantily covered bed showed signs of having been sat upon, but that was nothing unusual. Most of Mrs. Kerr's lodgers found the bed more comfortable than the straight, hard chair she supplied. The woman noticed something else, however, which brought a swift frown to her face, and made her step quickly forward, and jerk up the cornhusk mattress.

"He's been hiding something away here," she snapped aloud, peering closely at the rusty springs. "I knowed it! What a fool I was not to look before! but who'd 'a' thought it, after the times I've went through his——"

She broke off with a queer, choking sound, and in a second every trace of color had left her face. For a moment she stood as if turned to stone, staring at the floor with a look of utter incredulity in her narrowed eyes. Then, with a guttural sound, half groan, half exclamation of joy, she dropped on her knees and snatched up a crisp twenty-dollar bill that lay under the bed.

"Good Lord!" she gasped.

Stumbling to her feet, she held it out, devouring it with her eyes. Then, fumbling in her dress, she drew forth the money Lawrence had just given her, and compared the two. Both were crisp and new and yellow; both were uncreased, as if they had lain together in the same long wallet or package. And Mrs. Kerr's eyes lit up with a horrible sort of cupidity.

"An' I let him go!" she muttered, through clenched teeth. "I let him step out of the house with his pockets full of dough, leaving a twenty behind he never knowed he'd lost! I'm a dope! But mebbe it ain't too late. Mebbe—— Jim! Jim!"

Her face flushed and mottled, her hands trembling, she flung herself into the hall and down the stairs, calling the name at intervals.

She had reached the second floor, and was panting toward a door in the rear, when it was jerked open, and a man appeared on the threshold.

"Shut your face, you fool!" he snarled. "What're you yowling round like that for? You'll bust yer pipes!"

She caught her breath with a queer gurgle, and, putting out both hands, pushed him back into the room.

"Wait till you see what I found," she gasped. "Wait till you hear——"

Then the door slammed shut, and the sound of her voice ceased abruptly, leaving the hall dark and silent, save only for the rapid, indistinct murmur rising and falling in the room beyond.

CHAPTER VI.

AS IN A DREAM.

It was not until he had reached Broadway that Lawrence remembered his failure to turn over the latchkey before leaving the miserable lodgings for good. For a moment he hesitated, wondering whether he ought to go back. Then he remembered the extra money he had given the woman, and the small cost of a new key.

”She can get another for a quarter,” he murmured. ”Besides, I simply couldn’t go back there now. I wonder I was able to stand the old harridan as long as I did.”

Dismissing the matter from his mind, he turned down Broadway, and a few minutes later entered the big clothing store of Butler & Bloss.

”I wish to look at some fur-lined coats,” he said quietly to the gray-haired man who stepped up to him.

Whatever surprise the latter may have felt at this request from a man wearing no overcoat at all, and a thinnish suit, at that, none showed in his face. Besides looking the gentleman, Barry had an undeniable air about him which commanded respect. No doubt he might have stepped in from some near-by building without stopping to put on his overcoat. At any rate, the customer had the appearance of one used to instant consideration, so a salesman was summoned without delay, and Barry was committed to his care.

Lawrence had decided that about five hundred dollars of the expense sum should be reserved for hotel, restaurants, and incidentals. The remainder, therefore, was left to be spent on his wardrobe, for he had determined to carry out the conditions of the strange bargain to the very letter.

For a full hour he was busy in the various departments of Butler & Bloss, and though in that time he ran up a bill of close on to four hundred dollars, the fur-lined coat was his only extravagance. Even that was not expensive, as such things go, but he had been so cold for so many days that he could not resist the handsome garment, with its luxurious lining and wide collar of unplucked otter.

In addition to this, he bought another, lighter overcoat, of soft dark cheviot, two sack suits, and a Tuxedo. There were also, of course, several pairs of shoes necessary, shirts of various sorts, collars, neckties, underwear, gloves, and a quantity of various odds and ends, which added materially to the total of the bill. When he had paid it, and ordered the things delivered at the St. Albans before six o’clock, he slipped into the fur coat, drew on a new pair of gloves, and went out into the street.

There he did not hesitate an instant, but made a bee line for the nearest Broadway restaurant. The interest and excitement of spending money after such a long deprivation had kept him from realizing how ravenously hungry he was, but at the first lull the fact smote him with renewed force.

The glamour of that first real meal in weeks will linger long in the memory of Barry Lawrence. He ordered lavishly, luxuriously, and yet with the instinctive good taste which had characterized him in the days when that sort of thing was a part of his regular life. And, as the courses followed one another, he ate slowly, enjoying every mouthful, reveling in the hum and buzz of conversation, the animated faces of the people about him, and the plaintive murmur of violins

playing the latest popular airs.

It was during the progress of the meal that he suddenly solved the problem of the evening clothes which had been troubling him. A dress suit had always seemed to him the one thing it was impossible to get ready-made, and for that reason he had refrained from looking at them in the shop. A sudden remembrance came to him, of the suit which Tyson, his tailor, up on Thirty-eighth Street, had been making for him when the crash came. He had never shown up for the final fitting, and it was just possible that the man had held the garments, awaiting some word from him.

Having paid his bill and left the restaurant, Barry walked through to Fifth Avenue and turned up that thoroughfare toward the tailor's rooms. One might have supposed he would have taken a stage or taxi, but no such thought entered his head. Walking, when one is well fed and well clothed, is a very different thing from the exhausting struggle of that morning, when the cold seemed to freeze his very marrow.

He reveled in the warm comfort of his fur-lined coat and heavy deerskin gloves. The passing crowd pleased him, and the very contents of the shop windows interested him as they had never done when he had been penniless. There were few things among the myriads displayed in such tempting array which he could not step in and buy if he chose. The fact that he did not choose made no difference whatever.

Past the brick façade of the Waldorf he walked briskly, glancing in at the dining-room windows with a smile. He would dine there later. It was a pleasant thought.

The tailor welcomed him heartily, gave the suit of evening clothes a final fitting, and promised to have it completed and delivered at the St. Albans by evening.

Presently Lawrence crossed the avenue, and purchased a handsome stick. A little farther on he remembered the need of cuff links and studs. A firm of famed goldsmiths was near at hand, and without hesitation Barry entered.

As the tray of cuff links was lifted out and set on the glass case, Lawrence naturally stripped off his gloves to examine the articles more closely. He gave no thought to the fact that the serpent ring was still on his finger, where he had placed it for safe-keeping, but he was speedily reminded of its presence there by the behavior of the salesman.

The man could scarcely keep his eyes off it. He stared and stared, fidgeted about, and stared again. Finally, unable to contain himself longer, he spoke.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, in a quick, nervous manner, "but you have a wonderful ring there."

Lawrence did not lift his eyes from the tray.

”I think it rather good myself,” he admitted.

His tone was intended to quell this unwelcome display of interest, but it quite failed of its effect.

”I have never seen anything like it before,” the salesman went on rapidly. ”Would you mind if I—looked at it more closely?”

Barry glanced up with a faint frown, alert for the hidden meaning in the man’s words. What he saw reassured him. The wide brow, the vibrant, tapering fingers—above all, the soft brown eyes, shining with enthusiastic interest—all pointed toward an expert in his line, to whom a thing of beauty was a source of joy, no matter where he found it.

Without a word, Lawrence extended his hand, and the salesman bent over it, his eyes devouring the ring.

”Extraordinary!” he murmured, half to himself. ”The stone is perfect, and worth a small fortune, but the workmanship is even more unusual.” He sighed a little, and went on in a rapt tone: ”Eastern, of course. Probably Indian, but not the stuff they make there now. I should place it in the reign of Shah Jahan, the golden age of Delhi—over three hundred years ago. But of course you know all this. I must beg your pardon for letting my interest get the better of me.”

”You needn’t,” Barry returned. ”I am very glad to know what you have told me. The former owner of the ring gave me little or no information of its history.”

Having, concluded his purchases, to which he added a silver cigarette case, he continued his walk up the avenue in a rather thoughtful mood.

So the ring had come from India! Still, that proved nothing. He could not picture the little man in black having anything to do with that country, and it did not really follow that he had. No doubt the emerald had passed through numberless hands since leaving the loving fingers of its creator.

It was foolish to waste time puzzling over a problem the solution of which was beyond his reach. Besides, Lawrence had a curious feeling of irresponsibility, a conviction that he was in the hands of fate. What was to be, would be. There was nothing left for him to do but float with the current. Since that current promised at the moment to take him into pleasant places, he made no effort to struggle out of it, or swim away.

CHAPTER VII.

NEW GRACE AND DIGNITY.

It was half past six, and Lawrence stood in the bedroom of his attractive suite, taking a last critical look at his reflection in the long mirror.

Mrs. Kerr would scarcely have recognized in that tall, distinguished figure in evening dress her former lodger. Somehow, it was not the clothes alone which made the difference, though they had, of course, much to do with it. Few men there are who do not feel the influence of well-cut, perfectly fitting evening clothes.

With Barry, however, the transformation was something deeper and far more encompassing. His face seemed actually fuller, and it glowed with color. His eyes sparkled with excitement. He carried himself with a new grace and dignity. His whole expression was that of a man in love with life, and determined to extract from it the last drop of enjoyment.

Naturally he was quite unconscious of all this as he stared into the glass. He was occupied in noting the fit of the coat about his broad shoulders, and the effect of the barber's shears upon his wavy blond crop. Both seemed satisfactory.

"Tyson never did a better piece of work in his life," he said aloud, with satisfaction.

Turning from the glass, he reached for his fur-lined coat, and slipped it on. The room was cluttered with parcels and boxes, opened and unopened. Clothes were strewn over bed and chairs. It was too late now to put them away. He could do that later.

Taking up the pigskin wallet from the dressing table, he extracted a hundred dollars, and slipped the bills into an inner pocket. Downstairs he handed the wallet to the clerk, asking him to put it into the safe, and sallied forth to where a taxi waited by the curb.

The corridors of the Waldorf were agleam with lights, and resounded with a buzz of talk, the swish of skirts and gay laughter of pretty women, not a few of whom turned for a second glance at Lawrence as he made his way slowly to the dining room.

Here the head waiter met him, and ushered him deferentially to the table which had been reserved by telephone. Another man, deft and silent-footed, took his order.

Barry leaned back with a barely perceptible sigh of pleasure. It was good to be back in his own world again; good to watch the many faces, with their swiftly varying expressions, to hear the chance remarks that filtered to his ears through the soft music from the orchestra.

Resolutely he thrust all thought of the future from his mind. There were to be six more nights like this, and when the last one had passed it would be quite time to turn to serious things.

The oysters had passed, and the soup. Barry was just finishing his entrée

when, happening to glance around at a table standing somewhat back of him and on his right, he experienced a shock.

Two men were dining there alone. The one who faced him, and whose expression was almost ludicrous in its mixture of startled surprise and outraged anger, was short and stout and rather pompous. He was Robert Tappin, president of the Beekman Trust Company. His companion, black-haired and ruddy-cheeked, with full lips, and the blue tinge of a heavy beard showing on his clean-shaven face, was Julian Farr, the cashier.

Lawrence disliked them both with the intensity which only a man can feel for those who have wronged him deeply. A little over four months before he had been one of the tellers in that institution. A defalcation was discovered. Several thousand dollars was missing from the cash, and Barry was accused of theft. There was no real proof against him, but the money had been in his charge; and, though Lawrence vehemently protested his innocence, he was summarily discharged.

Not only that, but for weeks he had been followed by detectives set on by Tappin for the purpose apparently of finding out what he had done with the loot. Day and night they dogged his footsteps. Half a dozen times Barry had landed a position, only to lose it the next day, certain that these men had gone to his new employers with their lying tale.

Now these two who had nearly wrecked his life must turn up here to spoil his new-found pleasure. With sudden fierce determination, Lawrence resolved that they should not. Pulling himself together, he met Tappin's amazed look with a cool stare of utter blankness which staggered the man. Then he turned back and went on composedly with his dinner.

It was impossible to forget them, however. Though he did not turn again, he felt that their eyes were fixed upon him, and he knew as surely as if he had heard the whispered words that they were talking about him.

Nevertheless, he finished his meal leisurely. When the check had been paid, he arose and made his way slowly toward the door, without a backward glance.

His preoccupation prevented his noticing a rather odd incident which happened on his way out. Near the door, sitting alone at a small table, was a short, thickset man of forty odd, with a rather full, round face, helped out to some degree by a pointed Vandyke beard, tinged with gray.

During the progress of the meal he had been not a little interested in Lawrence, if one could judge by the frequent keen glances he shot across the room. But now, as Barry came toward him, he swiftly dropped his head, seemingly absorbed in the menu which lay before him. Not until the younger man had disappeared did he raise his eyes, and then a close observer might have noticed in them a curious, enigmatic expression.

Within three minutes the table by the door was empty.

CHAPTER VIII.
THE GATES OF CHANCE.

At the Fifth Avenue corner Lawrence paused, leaning on his stick, and glancing up and down the brilliant thoroughfare. Though it was too late for the theater, the night was still young, and he was wondering just how he would put in the hours before bedtime.

In the old days, before his disgrace, he would have headed straight for the Harvard Club, on Forty-fourth Street, and been sure of a pleasant, lazy evening; but now the thought did not appeal to him. In some ways Barry was unusually sensitive, and it had happened that the few acquaintances he encountered shortly after leaving the bank seemed cool and offish in their manner.

Whether that was really so, and chance had thrown the caddishly inclined in his way, or whether he had simply imagined it all, did not matter now. The result had been to embitter the young man, and make him determined to take no further chances of snubbing from those he had supposed his friends.

The club was, therefore, impossible. It was equally out of the question to look up any one else he had known in his prosperous days. As for relatives—well, Barry was singularly deficient in that respect. Save some cousins in Boston, and an aunt living in Providence, he was quite alone in the world.

In spite of this, the pause at the corner was not a long one. Lawrence wanted to walk. The fascination of the great city still held him in a vise. The novelty of seeing it in this wonderful new light had not even begun to wear off. He wanted to watch the people, look into the shop windows, smoke his cigar, secure in the knowledge that he was safe against cold and hunger and distress.

Wondering which way to turn, Barry's eyes fell upon an approaching Thirty-fourth Street car, and whimsically he determined to take the opposite direction to that of the first alighting passenger. With a faint smile curving his sensitive mouth, and lurking in the pleasant gray eyes, he saw a man bustle off the front platform, dart across the tracks, and hurry on up the avenue. Then, without hesitation, Lawrence wheeled about, and walked briskly downtown.

There was a certain fascination in walking thus at random, having no fixed plan, no definite destination. He had done exactly the same thing in the weary

weeks which now seemed so dim and nebulous and far away; but this was quite different. He was well fed and immaculately garbed. There was money in his pockets, and a fine cigar between his teeth. When he tired of rambling he had simply to hail a taxi or step on a car and be whirled back to the luxurious apartment which belonged to him—for a week, at least.

And so it pleased him to feel again that he was in the hands of fate; that the gates of chance had opened to his touch, admitting him to a strange, fantastic city where anything might happen, and nothing was beyond the bounds of probability.

As he walked briskly southward, he amused himself for a time by watching the passers-by, and inventing stories to fit their appearance. But this soon palled. They were all so bundled up, and hurried past so swiftly through the bitter air, that all Barry could think of was how cold they were and how anxious to get home.

Then he took to regulating his course by means of odd devices. If a certain man crossed the avenue at Twenty-eighth Street, he would follow the example. If the next kept on downtown, Lawrence would turn eastward on Twenty-seventh Street, and the like.

It happened that the man turned into the side street, and Barry continued straight ahead until, high above the icy branches of the naked trees, the glittering Metropolitan Tower, ethereal and fairylike, in spite of its colossal bulk, loomed before his eyes.

He paused an instant, while the silvery chimes rang out the hour of nine. There were many directions in which he might turn his steps, but at the moment the square seemed singularly deserted. At length his glance shifted to the bright, open space beyond him, where three streets joined, and he smiled.

"If that Broadway car is a Lexington," he murmured, "I'll cut across the square."

The car approached, swerved off, and turned east on Twenty-third Street; and Lawrence promptly wheeled into the winding walk, and briskly followed the diagonal course.

The benches, usually so full of loungers, were deserted now. The fountain in the center was filled with dingy snow, while ice glittered on the iron railing about it. The wind, whistling across the open space, penetrated even the thick fur of Barry's coat a little, and made him half wish that guiding street car had not led him thither. He did not turn back, however; he was too much interested in this game of chance to give it up just because it had so far failed to bring him anything out of the ordinary.

Rounding the desolate fountain, he slipped on a treacherous bit of ice. When he recovered his equilibrium, he saw that a woman was coming toward

him along the cement path. She walked hurriedly, yet there was an odd touch of indecision in her movements which puzzled Barry.

As they approached each other, she passed under the glare of an electric light, and Lawrence noticed for the first time how slim and girlish she was. She seemed little more than a child. Certainly she ought not to be on the streets at that hour and in such bitter weather.

As she came nearer he saw that she had no muff or neck-piece, and that her little suit seemed woefully inadequate. Her face was invisible under the wide brim of the black hat, but she did not pause or falter or even glance up at him.

Then came a sound which turned Barry's sigh into a quick gasp of pain, and made him whirl around to stare after the slight, retreating figure. It was a stifled sob, carried to his ears by the vagrant wind, until it seemed as clear and pitiful as if she had stood close beside him. Another followed, and another still. The girl was crying as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER IX.

A WOMAN IN DISTRESS.

For a second Lawrence stood rooted to the pavement. His first impulse was to follow her. She was in trouble, and perhaps he could help her. He took a few quick steps back toward the fountain, and stopped still. How could he speak to her? How could he offer to do her a service? She would misconstrue his motives, and be terrified. She would——

A faint cry, which was little more than a startled exclamation of terror, cut short Barry's mental reasonings, and in a second he was running forward with long, lithe strides. As he approached the fountain he saw another figure scurrying away across the snow toward Madison Avenue. The girl was crouching against the ice-covered railing, steadying herself with one small, gloved hand, and, as Lawrence came straight toward her, he saw that she was trembling violently.

"You called me," he said quietly.

For a second she made no response. Her fingers still clutched the iron railing; her whole attitude was that of one driven into a corner and standing at bay. From under the shadowy hat brim Barry could see that her lips were pressed tightly together. Her eyes, wide with a desperate sort of fear, were fixed upon his

face.

”I heard you call out,” Barry said gently. ”I thought you were frightened at something.”

Something in his voice, or perhaps his face—the light was very bright around the snowy fountain—reassured her. Her eyes lost a little of that look of terror, and her fingers relaxed their grip on the iron railing.

”I was,” she answered, in a low, uneven, and charming voice, ”terribly frightened. That—man——”

Suddenly she put up both hands to her face, and swiftly turned from him. Scarcely a sound came from her, but the sight of that bowed head and the convulsively heaving shoulders, showing but too plainly through the thin cloth of her short coat, hurt Lawrence desperately, and brought a lump into his throat. She seemed so young and frail and girlish, so utterly unfitted to cope with the world, that a quick impulse came to the man to take her in his arms and comfort her exactly as one does a child. He realized instantly, of course, that such a thing would be impossible.

”Please don’t,” he said softly, after a moment’s silence. ”It’s all right now.” He watched her trembling hands searching for a handkerchief, and then he went on, with deliberately forced cheerfulness: ”I tell you what we’ll do. If you’ll let me, I’ll walk along with you, so there won’t be a chance of anything like this happening again.”

She ceased dabbing her eyes, and, turning slowly, looked long and searchingly into his face. ”You are very kind,” she said at length, and Barry caught again that faint, Southern intonation which he had not been quite sure of before; ”but it is a long distance, and I think I can manage by myself. I—am used to going about alone.”

”But you really wouldn’t be taking me out of my way—if that’s what you were thinking,” Lawrence expostulated. ”I haven’t a thing to do. I’m out for a walk, and one direction is just as good as another for me. I hate to think of your taking any more chances.”

For a second the girl hesitated. Then her lids drooped a little, and she swayed the least bit, putting out one hand blindly to steady herself against the railing.

Barry stepped swiftly forward, and took her arm.

”Come!” he said, with a whimsical sort of positiveness. ”You really must! I know it’s unconventional, and all that, but we’ll probably never see each other after to-night. I’ll leave you wherever you wish, and say good night. You were heading toward Broadway, weren’t you? Well, we’ll go together.”

The girl made no protest. Perhaps it was because she had come to the end of her rope, and had no strength left. Perhaps she sensed intuitively the motives

which governed this frank, straightforward stranger who had come to her aid so opportunely. At all events, she let her hand rest upon his arm, and walked with him back through the square, across Twenty-fifth Street, into the dazzling stretch of Broadway.

The touch of her hand brought again to Barry that odd desire to protect and comfort her. By this time he knew that she was almost perishing with cold. In spite of her effort to control herself, he felt she was shaking violently, and every now and then the unconscious weight of her hand on his arm made him wonder whether some other thing than cold had not contributed to her weakness.

He wanted desperately to do something, yet somehow he could not think of any way. He had not asked her where she wished to go, and the girl herself volunteered nothing.

And so they walked on up New York's great artery, he talking carelessly, lightly, and frequently at random as his brain worked in another totally different direction, she answering him briefly now and then in her soft, tired voice, but more often silent—out of sheer weariness, he guessed.

Suddenly the electric sign of a well-known restaurant blazing before his eyes gave Lawrence the clew he had been seeking, and he stopped abruptly.

"Are you in very much of a hurry?" he asked.

She glanced up at him swiftly, and he was struck anew by the charm of her-wonderful eyes, the delicate beauty of her mouth and chin.

"Not very," she said, in an odd, restrained tone. "Why?"

"I was wondering whether you'd do me a favor," Barry returned glibly. "I meant to get a bite of supper here, and I hate to eat alone. If you'd only take pity on me, and keep me company, I'd be everlastingly obliged. After that we can take a car to where you're going, so's to make up time."

Again she sent a long, searching glance into his candid, level gray eyes. Then suddenly she laughed, a curious laugh, which had no mirth in it, but rather held an undercurrent of intense pathos.

"Very well," she said quietly, with an odd gesture of her hands.

Her manner brought the color into Barry's cheeks, and made him wonder whether she saw through his clumsy subterfuge. He did not hesitate, however, but stood aside for her to enter the turnstile door, following close behind.

The dining room was almost empty, for it was the quiet interval which comes between dinner and the after-theater supper crowd. They were ushered at once to a table against the wall.

While Barry was slipping out of his coat he noticed the girl glancing into a mirror beside her, touching her hair here and there, and giving the frilly lace thing at her neck an unconscious pat. She was still shaking a little, and when she drew off her gloves he saw that she was gently chafing her hands together

beneath the shelter of the white cloth.

Her hair was brown, thick, and dark, with glints of copper in it, and waved attractively above her brow. Her eyes were almost of the same shade, with long, curling lashes, which made them seem almost too large for the delicate, oval face. Her mouth was sensitive, and infinitely appealing with its pathetic downward droop at the corners. There was an unmistakable refinement in everything about her; and, in spite of the fact that she was very tiny, she held herself with an air which made Barry quite forget her forlorn condition.

"How the mischief could I have ever taken her for a child?" he thought, with a faint flush of embarrassment, as he reached for the card. "I suppose it was because she seemed so little and helpless."

CHAPTER X.

SHIRLEY RIVES.

Having ordered two portions of a nourishing bouillon to be served at once, Lawrence picked out several dishes, then leaned back in his chair.

"I quite forgot to introduce myself," he said, with quick, boyish impulsiveness. "My name is Lawrence—Barry Lawrence."

A faint, shadowy smile curved the girl's lips. The warmth of the room was beginning to touch her cheeks with color, and make her even more lovely than before.

"It will be easier," she conceded gravely. "I am Shirley Rives."

"From Virginia?" Barry inquired quickly, then bit his lips. "I beg your pardon," he added contritely. "I forgot for a second that I meant to ask no questions."

"That one doesn't matter," she said quietly. "I am from Virginia. Since you've asked it, though, I'll venture one myself: Do you happen, by any chance, to be a Harvard man?"

Barry stared. "Why, yes!" he exclaimed. "How in the world did you guess?"

"You seem rather like other Cambridge men I've known," she answered slowly. "I had a cousin there, and his friends used to visit——"

She broke off abruptly, as if regretting that she had been so frank, and for a moment there was silence as she touched one of the forks nervously.

"I don't know that it makes much difference," she went on at length. "His name is Philip Calvert. Perhaps you knew him."

Barry laughed boyishly, and then bent forward with sparkling eyes. ”Of course I did!” he exclaimed. ”He was a junior the year I was graduated. To think of my meeting Phil Calvert’s cousin in New York! I knew chance was going to bring me something pleasant when I started out this evening.”

There was a moment’s pause while the waiter placed the soup before them. Somehow, Barry had a feeling that the girl was more than hungry, and, though he did not see how he could take a mouthful after his luxurious dinner at the Waldorf, he did his best to seem ravenous himself, talking all the while, so that she might not see how little he was really eating.

The girl sipped the bouillon slowly and leisurely, listening to her companion’s whimsical account of his progress down Fifth Avenue that night, and occasionally making a light comment of her own. One would never have guessed, to watch her, that she could have drained the cup at a single swallow.

Lawrence’s surmise as to her desperate condition was more the result of intuition, helped on a little by details he observed from time to time, rather than anything he saw in her manner.

Little by little it was borne upon his consciousness that the extraordinary trimness which had puzzled him at first was nothing more than the painful neatness of extreme poverty, combined with innate good taste. The wide black hat was simply trimmed, and showed signs of wear. The perfectly fitting suit was of good material, but had been brushed and sponged until it was almost threadbare. The shirt waist of fine cambric looked as if it had been washed time and again with jealous care by the girl’s own hands. On one sleeve a tear had been repaired with painful neatness.

All this Barry noticed as he talked on, wondering to himself how under the sun a cousin of his fastidious, seemingly wealthy, college mate could possibly have been reduced to such straits. But he asked no questions, nor did he in his manner betray the slightest touch of curiosity. He was only too thankful to see, under the influence of warmth and comfort and nourishing food, the color coming back into the girl’s face, the sparkle to her eyes, and that tired droop of her mouth growing less and less noticeable.

As the meal progressed, however, his curiosity was gratified. It was inevitable that the discovery of a mutual friend should make some difference in the girl’s attitude toward Lawrence. From discussing Calvert—who, it appeared, had been in Manila for over a year—the girl’s story came out bit by bit.

More than likely Shirley Rives would never have thought of starting out to tell it to any one from beginning to end. But, while he did not express it by a single word, she seemed to feel Barry’s sympathy, and be comforted by it. She had been bearing her troubles alone for so long that the temptation to talk a little about them to some one else was irresistible. And, last of all, she, too, seemed

to feel that night something of Barry's attitude toward fate. She had come to the end of her rope, and was desperate. When one is in that pass conventions seem very petty, and life is stripped to the bones.

The story Lawrence gathered from a chance word here, a sentence there, was very old and hackneyed. It was really threadbare, yet the personality of the girl across the table lent it a vivid, enthralling interest.

Orphaned a year before, and left in straitened circumstances, Shirley Rives had taken the few hundred dollars remaining after the settlement of the encumbered estate, and come to New York to earn her living. Having no particular talent, and no influence, stenography seemed the only thing left her. She took a course in a correspondence school, and then obtained a position. Three months later the firm changed its organization, and she was cast adrift. She got another place, after eating into her diminishing capital, but the wholesale company was presently absorbed by a trust. Another period of enforced idleness ensued before she was taken on in a broker's office, only to be forced to leave by the unwelcome attentions of a junior partner.

That was three weeks ago. Since then she had failed to find anything. Her money became exhausted, and the board bill remained unpaid. The landlady gave her notice to pay or leave. The room had been rented late in the afternoon to another woman. Since then she had walked the streets, dazed, bewildered, not knowing what to do or where to go.

It was all told in snatches, but the thought of this girl, delicate and refined and well-bred, thrust out into the streets at such a time, without a penny, and with no place to go, made Barry's blood boil. Again came that intense desire to do something for her, accompanied by that same maddening sense of helplessness he had felt before.

"You were hurrying when I saw you first," he said at length.

She moved her shoulders a little. "It was partly to keep warm," she explained quietly, "and partly because I had just thought of a sort of forlorn hope."

"And that was——"

"A girl who used to work with me in the wholesale house; she was very nice, and we got to be good friends. She used to live on Forty-eighth Street, and I thought she would take me in to-night."

"How long is it since you've seen her?" Barry asked.

"Some months. I was tired, and it's a long way to Forty-eighth Street."

She tried to speak lightly, but Lawrence could see that old look of desperation, banished for a time, again lurking in her eyes.

"But what if she's moved?" he asked. "What if you shouldn't find her at the old address?"

She tried to smile, but her lips only quivered. And though she held her

head high, like the thoroughbred she was, the expression in her eyes cut Barry to the quick.

"I—hadn't thought," she answered, in a low tone.

CHAPTER XI.
HIDE AND SEEK.

For a second Lawrence was silent, as a thought flashed through his brain as to the pathetic plight of the girl. The next instant he bent forward across the table, his clear gray eyes fixed upon hers, and holding her wavering gaze.

"I want to tell you a little story, Miss Rives," he said, in a hurried, almost jerky, tone, "and then I want you to do me a favor. Wait, please! Don't say you won't until you've heard me. This morning I left a miserable hall bedroom over on the West Side to walk the streets, because I could not face the woman I owed three weeks' rent."

She caught her breath quickly, and, as her eyes flashed to the wonderful emerald ring on his finger and back again to the pearls gleaming in his immaculate shirt, an expression of bewildered incredulity came into her face.

"I know," Barry went on hastily; "it seems impossible, but it's true. I'd had little to eat for days. My last nickel went for a cup of coffee. I had only a single penny left. I was cold and hungry and desperate. I had been out of a job for months, and there wasn't the slightest prospect of getting one. You see, there's scarcely a person in New York who could understand as I do what you have been through—and what may be before you now."

He paused an instant, but she made no comment. Her eyes were fixed intently on him as if his story held her entranced.

"For hours I walked the streets, then took refuge in a railway station to keep from freezing," Lawrence continued presently. "And there, when everything was blackest, when it seemed as if not a single hope remained, the wheel of fortune turned. From the lowest depths I was hoisted in a moment to a height I had come to believe impossible."

A faint, puzzled line had come into her low forehead. For a moment she waited, expecting him to continue. When he did not, she raised her eyebrows a trifle.

"But how——" she began.

”I can’t tell you,” he put in swiftly. ”I’ve promised to keep silent. I can only say that I was given a very large sum of money to carry out certain conditions, and that those conditions carry with them no loss of self-respect. What I want you to do is to take a little—just a little—of this money to tide you over this period of hard luck.”

A sudden color flamed into her face, and her lips parted. Before she could utter a word Barry went on pleadingly:

”Please don’t say no, Miss Rives. The situation is desperate. If this girl friend of yours has moved, what will you do? Even if she is still there, I don’t suppose you would keep on accepting hospitality from one who probably couldn’t afford it. I can, you see, and if you’ll only look upon me as Phil’s friend, acting in his place, I’m sure you won’t refuse.”

For a long minute the girl sat staring into his frank, kindly face with eyes which seemed to plumb his very soul. Perhaps it was what she saw there that made her give in; perhaps it was the thoughts which flashed through her mind of the awful streets, wind-swept and dark and bitter cold, with even more poignant terrors lurking in the shadows. At all events, she sighed faintly, and reached for her gloves.

”Very well, Mr. Lawrence,” she said quietly. ”You may lend me—ten dollars.”

”But that isn’t——”

”It is quite enough,” she put in decidedly, ”to make me grateful to you as long as I live. Would you mind—if we go now? It’s getting late.”

Without further protest, Barry paid the bill at once, and helped her on with her coat. As they reached the street he handed her a ten-dollar bill, which she slipped into her worn glove with another brief word of thanks.

The ride uptown was a rather silent one. Barry did most of the talking, for he felt that the girl would rather say little.

At Forty-eighth Street they got out, and, turning westward, walked briskly through the chilly street. As they approached a certain shabby-looking house midway in a block, Miss Rives, glancing upward, gave an exclamation of satisfaction at the sight of a light in the front room on the top floor.

”I’m sure Sally’s still there,” she said, turning to Lawrence. ”She used to sit up reading till all hours.” She hesitated an instant, and then went on more slowly: ”I think I’d better go to the door alone. The woman who keeps the house is very kind, and, even if Sally’s gone, she’ll take me in. Good-by, Mr. Lawrence, and—thank you—a thousand times, for what you have done. Will you—give me your address so that I can send back the money—when I have it?”

Barry’s fingers closed firmly over the hand she held out.

”I’m at the St. Albans just now,” he returned. ”But I probably won’t stay there long. Wouldn’t it be better if I looked you up to see how you’re getting

on?"

For a bare second Shirley Rives hesitated. Then she turned away, and began mounting the steps.

"I should be very glad to see you again, Mr. Lawrence," she answered. "Good night!"

From a little distance Barry watched her ring the bell, saw the door open with almost no delay at all, and heard a brief murmur of conversation. When the girl finally stepped into the house and the door closed, he turned away with a sigh of satisfaction, and started back toward Broadway.

He had not gone more than a few steps when he saw approaching the lights of a rapidly moving carriage, and a moment later a well-appointed private brougham passed him, the iron-shod hoofs of the spirited horses striking sparks from the icy street. A vague, languid curiosity stirred him as to what a conveyance of that sort was doing there at that hour, but it swiftly vanished in the interest of another discovery.

Reaching the corner of Eighth Avenue, he happened to glance swiftly to his right, and noticed a man standing silently in the corner of a darkened doorway. There was nothing very extraordinary in this, save for the fact that it was a night which offered no temptations for loitering in the street; but there was something about the powerful, square-shouldered figure, accentuated by the heavy ulster which enveloped it, that struck Lawrence as oddly familiar. The coat collar was turned up and buttoned close; the brim of the soft felt hat was pulled well down, so as to conceal the face, but in spite of that a bit of grizzled beard was visible, which stimulated Barry's memory.

In that momentary hesitation on the curb he remembered that just such a man had been standing in another doorway near the restaurant as they left it less than an hour before, and he wondered at the curious coincidence which should bring about this second meeting.

Before he reached Broadway Lawrence began to have doubts as to whether it really was a coincidence or not. Another man would have thought nothing of the matter; but Barry had lately been through an experience of shadowing which taught him many things about the methods of private detectives and others of their ilk, which had produced in him a habit of being constantly on guard.

At least it would do no harm to be sure, he thought, and, rounding the corner of Broadway, he hastened forward a few steps to the entrance of a moving-picture theater. Once within its shelter, he swiftly found a spot where the plate-glass windows of the ticket booth acted as an admirable reflector. Then, back squarely to the street, and eyes riveted on the improvised mirror, he leisurely undid his fur coat, as leisurely produced a cigarette from his case, and hunted for his match box.

It was just as he struck a light that his patience was rewarded. In the glass he saw the stranger steal silently into view around the corner, hesitate for the fraction of a second, then, catching sight of Barry's back, as softly withdrew out of sight.

"So that's your little game, is it?" Lawrence reflected, with a grim smile, as he lighted the cigarette with care, and flicked the match into the street. "Looks as if there might be a bit of fun in this."

Buttoning his coat, he started briskly down Longacre Square, swinging his stick with the air of a man who was just beginning a constitutional. In front of the Astor he paused a second, as if half minded to enter the brilliant hostelry. Then, without warning, he turned abruptly, stepped into the street, and headed for the Times Building. As he did so he caught a glimpse, out of the corner of his eye, of his pursuer, half a block in the rear.

With a chuckle of amusement, Barry passed the outdoor subway entrance, and walked swiftly into the lower floor of the building. The instant he was inside, he hastened his steps, hurried past the stairs leading down into the underground road, pushed his way through the throng which crowded the big drug store that occupied the ground floor, and emerged on Forty-second Street.

A crosstown car was just getting up speed as he dashed across the street; and with some difficulty he raced forward and swung himself aboard. A backward glance showed that his bearded friend was nowhere in sight, and Lawrence smiled again.

Nevertheless, he did not relax his vigilance. Making his way through to the front of the car, he sat down on one of the little seats just behind the motorman, and made no attempt to alight until Madison Avenue had been reached. Here he slipped off, dodged around the front of the car, slid across the slippery pavement, and was engulfed in the comparative shadow of the Manhattan in an instant.

The three blocks to Forty-fifth were passed in as many minutes. Around the corner of the cross street, however, he sought a secluded doorway, and waited patiently for as much as five minutes, with the pleasant, ever-growing conviction that his man had been eluded.

"Not quite clever enough, my friend," he murmured, as he crossed the dark and rather silent street, heading for the bright entrance of the St. Albans near Fifth Avenue.

Part way down the block stood a pair of old-fashioned brownstone houses, and, as he passed the shadowy bulk of the first high stoop, Barry chuckled again.

"Not quite clever enough," he repeated amusedly. "You'll have to get up a trifle early to——"

Crash! From behind, something struck his head with a crushing force that sent him to his knees, stick flying one way, top hat the other.

With a hoarse cry of anger, he strove dazedly to turn and grapple with the unknown assailant. Before he could do so the heavy weapon descended for the second time. There was a shower of stars, a sickening sense of faintness, and, with a groan, Lawrence toppled forward on his face, to lie still and silent on the icy pavement.

CHAPTER XII.
PUZZLED.

How long Barry Lawrence lay there unconscious he did not know. Afterward he realized that it could have been no more than a minute or two, but at the moment he was too occupied with what was occurring near him to waste time on that score.

Even before he opened his eyes he was vaguely aware that a struggle was going on close at hand. The thud of feet, the heavy breathing, mingled with occasional oaths, subdued, but fervent, told him that, and acted as a spur on his dazed senses.

A moment later, as he pulled himself to a crouching position on the pavement, he discerned through the darkness two figures swaying in close embrace a dozen feet away.

What did it mean? Who were they? He could not understand why they were fighting there, instead of carrying out the object of their attack on him. Then, as his sight cleared, he suddenly discovered that one of them was the bulky man in the soft hat whom he had lately been pluming himself on having given the slip so completely. The other was taller and wore no overcoat; beyond that Lawrence could make out no distinguishing features.

Suddenly, out of the bewildering chaos of Barry's mind, came the swift realization that one of these men was apparently on his side. There could be no question that one was fighting in his behalf to prevent the other from carrying out the object of the cowardly attack, whatever that might be.

Of reason or motive for that attack, Barry knew none, but he was strongly moved for a moment to join in the mix-up, and get in a blow or two he was aching to deliver. He even secured his hat and stick, and was on the point of struggling to his feet, when he remembered that he had no idea which was the friend and which the enemy. He was not even sure that either of them was a friend.

What could he do?

The answer came on the very heels of the unspoken question. The gate in the low, old-fashioned iron fence close beside him was partly open. Beyond loomed the friendly shadow of the high stoop.

Instinctively, with his brain still a little muddled from the blow he had received, Barry crept silently through the gate, casting a swift, sidelong glance at the struggling pair. He saw that the taller man was evidently getting the worst of if, and apparently trying his best to break away. In another moment the fellow with the beard would be free—free to return and complete his work; for by this time Lawrence had come to the conclusion that he was the one responsible for the assault.

Without a second's delay the Harvard man slipped through the gate and closed it softly behind him. Rising to his feet, but stooping low, he felt his way forward, went down a couple of steps, and pushed against the iron grille which gave access to a space under the stoop, and thence to the basement door.

To his surprise it yielded to his touch, and a moment later he was ensconced in the little square, dark space, the grille closed and latched, peering through the openings in the ornate wrought ironwork.

He was no more than safe before he heard the beat of running feet on the pavement, and saw a tall, thin figure dart past his hiding place, and disappear toward Madison Avenue. An instant later another, bulkier shadow appeared more slowly, and paused by the low fence.

It was the mysterious person with the beard, and Barry shrank swiftly back, wondering what he meant to do.

There was a moment's pause; then the low gate was pushed open, and the stranger stepped toward the grille. Reaching it, he shook it briskly, but the latch held. From where he had retreated in the shadow, with one arm thrown up to prevent his face from being seen, Barry heard the unknown give a guttural growl of mingled surprise and impatience. A brief pause followed, during which his irregular breathing sounded clear and distinct. Then he turned and walked back to the sidewalk, the gate clicking behind him.

For a minute or two Barry did not move, but at length, unable to restrain his curiosity, he stole to the grille and peered through. The stranger was still standing near the fence, gazing intently up and down the street. Presently he disappeared toward Madison Avenue, and Barry, after waiting a few moments, undid the grille and stole out.

Peering over the fence, the Harvard man watched the mysterious stranger move slowly down the street, staring keenly into every doorway as he passed it. Finally, at the corner, he paused, glanced swiftly back, stood for some time undecided, then vanished from sight.

The instant the man was gone, Barry emerged, and made his way straight back to the hotel. He managed to brush his top hat into some semblance of decency, and rid his coat of the bits of ice and snow which clung to it. Happily the elevator boy was half asleep, and did not notice anything unusual in his appearance, so that Lawrence reached his rooms without attracting undue comment.

His first move was to examine the lump on his head, which felt about the size of a billiard ball. He had a feeling that his hair must be smeared and clotted with blood, and was agreeably surprised to find that the skin had scarcely been broken. The weapon, whatever it was, had evidently struck just the right spot to produce momentary unconsciousness, without doing any very permanent damage.

Stripping off his clothes, and getting into pajamas and a loose dressing gown, Barry bathed the bump carefully with warm water, then with cold, placed a wet towel against it, and sat down to think over the night's experiences.

They had certainly not lacked interest and excitement. When he started out in that whimsical manner from the Waldorf he had expected nothing quite like this.

The last adventure naturally received his attention first. Who was the bearded man, and why had he such an interest in Lawrence? Remembering the distasteful encounter with Tappin at the Waldorf, Barry wondered whether it were possible that the bank president had set his detectives again on the trail.

Swiftly he thrust the idea aside. Though he realized that the sudden display of affluence on the part of one who had so short a time ago been in abject poverty was sufficient reason for Tappin to make another effort to find out what had become of the missing funds, Lawrence did not see how there could possibly have been time to get into communication with the agency, and summon a detective to the hotel.

"I left them at table," he murmured aloud, his forehead wrinkled in a puzzled manner. "No one could know where I was going—I didn't even know myself; yet that fellow was waiting outside the Broadway restaurant."

With Tappin eliminated, what motive remained? Was the bearded man a common thief who had marked him down as a profitable undertaking? Had he by any chance caught a glimpse of the serpent ring? Barry had not been oblivious to the fact that the unique jewel had attracted attention in many quarters that evening; and now, as he lifted his hand, and surveyed the great, square, dully gleaming stone, with its strange setting, he wondered suddenly whether there was anything uncanny about the thing. He had read before of jewels like this coming out of the mysterious East, and leaving a trail of violence in their wake. Perhaps there was something about it——

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed aloud, springing to his feet. "I'm getting dippy! This

is New York City, and the twentieth century. Such things can't happen here. I'm going to bed."

But after the lights were out, and he had stretched himself luxuriously between the fine sheets, the puzzle returned to torment him. How long it might have kept him restlessly awake he did not know. Fortunately his mind suddenly jumped to the more restful and infinitely more attractive subject of Shirley Rives.

She affected him in a way no girl had ever done before. There was an impalpable charm about her which he could not define, but which was very powerful; a curve to her lips that fascinated him even to think of now.

If he only had a little influence in the proper quarters it might be possible to find her a position. But, no! That wouldn't do at all. He realized suddenly that hateful gossip and slander had started from slighter beginnings than that.

Still, something must be done. It was intolerable to think of her being placed again in the horrible position from which he had rescued her that evening. Something should be done. He must think up a scheme. Probably one would come to him in the morning, when he was fresh, and not so utterly fagged out as he was this minute.

So he dropped asleep, the last thing before his eyes a vivid mental picture of the girl's face as he had last seen it, turned back to glance at him over her shoulder; the last thought in his mind a little pæan of thanksgiving to the god of chance who had directed his footsteps that evening to such wonderful and wholly unexpected purpose.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE.

Barry slept late, and, having brought some order out of the chaos in his rooms, descended to breakfast with luxurious ease in the St. Albans restaurant. The subdued lights, the gleam of silver and glass and delicate white napery, the silent, swift-footed attention of his waiter, were all very pleasing to Lawrence, and combined to make last night's adventure seem more remote than ever, more the sort of accident which might happen to any one rather than a plot directed especially toward himself.

He spent little time considering it, for his mind was almost entirely taken up with thoughts of Miss Rives, and how it would be possible for him to serve

her.

It would not be an easy matter; he realized that. The charming Southern girl was not the sort to accept favors from any one and every one. The utmost tact would have to be exercised in hitting upon just the right kind of thing, and Barry finished his leisurely breakfast without the shadow of an idea striking him. His only consolation was that the ten dollars he had given her would keep poverty at bay for two or three days at least.

"And before the end of that time I'll surely devise a way," he reflected, as he strolled out into the hotel lobby.

"A letter for you, Mr. Lawrence," the clerk said deferentially, as he passed the desk.

Barry took the missive with outward indifference, but with not a little inward curiosity. He stared at the unfamiliar hand, then tore open the flap hastily. The contents were brief, merely two lines of undistinguished writing without superscription or signature:

For the week agreed upon, you will be good enough to lunch and dine entirely alone.

Barry frowned. Somehow, the communication brought bitterly to his mind a recollection of his self-imposed isolation. He was not likely to have company at luncheon or dinner. For months he had gone his way alone, shunning his old friends, avoiding their usual haunts, and crossing the street on the rare occasions in which he saw them approaching. After all this trouble to avoid cold snubs or equally abhorrent pity, he could not imagine himself inviting them now. The request was rather unnecessary.

As he strolled toward the door he looked the note over curiously. The writing was irregular, almost to precision, and yet it had a certain pleasing individuality about it. The envelope was postmarked "Madison Square, 6 a.m." Evidently it had been taken up in the first collection. The little man in black was apparently still in town.

Reaching the street, Lawrence thrust the communication into his pocket, and turned toward the avenue. Beyond the purchase of a few small things he had forgotten the day before, he had nothing whatever to do before luncheon, and, strangely enough, the fact was not an unadulterated pleasure. Time was—and not so very long ago—when he would have looked upon this condition with unfeigned envy. To be well dressed and well fed, with money in his pockets and unlimited leisure at his command, had seemed a state beyond which there was little to desire. He knew now how wrong he had been, and the unsigned note had driven home that knowledge. What good were his money and his leisure if there were no one to enjoy them with him?

"Of course, I'm not prohibited from seeing my friends outside of working

hours," he muttered, with a whimsical sort of sadness. "But the trouble is I haven't any friends left to see."

From force of habit, he glanced up Forty-fourth Street toward the club as he passed; but he made no attempt to cross the avenue, and continued on his way downtown. The day was cloudless, and, though it was still bitter cold, the wind had died down to some degree, and made walking possible.

At Forty-second, Lawrence paused a moment or two, waiting for the stream of crosstown traffic to pass. He had just stepped from the curb when a hail from behind made his heart jump, and brought him to a standstill in the middle of the car track.

"Barry!" came in a familiar voice, raised in protest. "Oh, you Barry! Hold up!"

He turned swiftly, and the blood flamed into his face as he saw hurrying after him the great, almost hulking figure of Jock Hamersley, the famous Yale full back of two seasons ago.

The two fellows had chummed it at Groton. They had kept up their friendship to a certain degree ever since, in spite of the fact that they had different Alma Maters, and had more than once fought fiercely against each other on the gridiron. There was no one, perhaps, whom Lawrence would rather have seen just at this moment than big, lumbering, good-natured, soft-hearted Jock; yet his face flushed and grew tense, and his eyes held a touch of nervous fear as he waited for the other's first words.

Hamersley, his big mouth stretched in a wide grin, fairly flung himself at Barry, and gripped his hands with a force which made the bones crack.

"You blamed old quitter!" he roared. "Where have you been keeping yourself? Haven't got my lamps on you in months—nobody has! What do you mean by dropping all your friends as you have?"

The blood began to tingle in Barry's finger tips, and his eyes sparkled. The sound of that booming voice was sweeter in his ears than the most ravishing music. The sight of that great, muscular figure, clad in a loose, woolly coat of English frieze, was a pleasure greater than the most world-famous masterpiece of painting had ever produced. Of a sudden he was smitten with a doubt as to whether his course had been right or not. He stammered something vague about the trouble at the bank, but Hamersley promptly cut him short.

"Rot!" he bellowed. "Bosh! I'd punch your head, only I'm afraid of the concussion all that gas would make rushing out. What have you done with the sense the Lord gave you when you think the boys paid any attention to that stuff? You're more a fool than I thought you, and that's saying a lot."

He had linked his arm through Barry's, and the two proceeded briskly down the avenue together.

Within three minutes Lawrence had a feeling that nothing had ever happened. After that first outburst, Jock slipped back into his old manner, quite as if they had parted only the night before. He asked no questions, even by inference, seeming content with what his companion volunteered; and by the time they paused before the building where the Yale man had offices, Lawrence felt as if he had come into his own again.

"You'll lunch with me, of course," the big fellow said.

Barry's face fell. "I'm beastly sorry, Jock," he returned slowly, "but I've an engagement. I'm booked for luncheon and dinner both."

"Humph! Well, drop in at the yacht club around five, and we'll have a good talk. Yes? Right! Don't forget, now."

He started into the building, but was back in an instant.

"Say," he exclaimed. "There's a dance at Sherry's to-night, and I've got an extra card. Don't start till eleven or so. How about it?"

Barry's mind was made up in a flash. That would give him time for dinner and a call on Miss Rives. His meeting with Hamersley had set stirring within him an intense desire to mingle with his kind, to be one of the passing show, instead of a mere onlooker, no matter how spectacular a part the latter was. He wanted to go to that dance. He would go.

"That hits me all right," he said; "nothing I'd like better."

As he walked on down the street the smile still lingered on his lips. He was thinking of what he had been twenty-four hours before. Already the pain and suffering and sordidness of that phase of his life seemed nebulous and unreal. At times he caught himself wondering if it had not been an amazingly vivid and horrible nightmare.

The wheel of fortune was whirling him higher with every passing moment.

CHAPTER XIV.

FOLLOWED.

Having completed his purchases at several shops along the avenue, Lawrence finally emerged from the last one near Thirty-first Street, and paused on the sidewalk to consider how he should put in the time before lunch. It was not long after twelve, and he did not feel as if he could possibly lunch before half past one or two o'clock.

He glanced back at the dull-red façade of the Waldorf. He might go back there and take his place among the loungers in one of the corridors or smoking rooms, but he had an instinctive dislike for that sort of thing.

His eyes, ranging swiftly in the other direction, suddenly encountered the shifting glance of a man who stood looking into a window of the shop Barry had just come from; and at once Lawrence's mind, for some reason or another, reverted to the mysterious fellow with the beard.

There was no resemblance between the two. This one was young and tall, smooth-shaven, and very blond. His clothes, while inconspicuous, bore a certain foreign touch which Barry had learned to recognize in that year he had spent abroad, directly after leaving college, as secretary to Doctor Grenfell, wealthy scientist and Harvard lecturer.

Nevertheless, there was something in that hastily averted glance he had surprised which made Lawrence wonder whether the unknown stranger was anything more than an ordinary lounger, and decided him to put into operation a little test he had found extremely effective during his late unpleasant experience with Tappin's detectives.

Still swinging his stick gently back and forth and humming a tune under his breath, he turned and began to survey the man critically. Slowly his gaze wandered from the narrow-brimmed, precisely dented felt hat, down the length of belted overcoat to the narrow, flat, rather clumsily shaped shoes. Then he reversed the process. And when his eyes came to rest upon the strong, rather rough-hewn profile presented to him, Barry was interested to observe that the stranger was fidgeting nervously, and that a dull red was slowly stealing upward from the high, close-fitting collar.

All this proved nothing, for any man was likely to be embarrassed by being stared at in such a pointed way. But when, as the scrutiny continued, the fellow finally turned from the window, and walked slowly on down the avenue, without so much as a glance at Barry, the latter felt that his suspicions were more than justified. An ordinary individual would have glared at him, or shown other signs of ill temper.

The affair was only beginning, however, and, as Lawrence moved leisurely toward Thirty-first Street, he decided that he would have no difficulty in being entertained until luncheon time.

Rounding the corner, he hurried toward Broadway for a hundred feet or so, then stopped abruptly to look into a shop window.

As he expected, the blond individual appeared almost instantly, crossed the street, and came briskly along on the opposite side.

From that moment the game progressed merrily for nearly an hour. Barry did not exert himself at first. He wanted to test the stranger's cleverness, so he

confined himself to entering one door of a department store or hotel, and hastily departing by another; leaping on a surface car just as it was starting, only to alight as swiftly a few blocks farther on, and take one going in the opposite direction.

These, and half a dozen other tricks of a like nature, he tried, only to end up at Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue with the blond fellow sticking to him like a leech.

"He's no slouch," Barry reflected, as he turned slowly eastward. "I reckon I'll have to be a little spryer."

Turning uptown at Fifth Avenue, he kept a sharp lookout for a solitary taxi. When one finally came along behind him, he hailed it swiftly, ran out into the street, and leaped in almost before the car had come to a stop.

"Metropolitan Building—Madison Avenue entrance," he said quickly. "Hustle!"

The chauffeur did hustle, and Lawrence, glancing back through the little window, was pleased to see his pursuer swiftly lost in the crowd of noon-day pedestrians.

There was a short delay at the Flatiron Building, then the car sped up the west side of the square, on account of traffic regulations, east along Twenty-sixth, and thence into Madison. It was just as they rounded the last corner that Lawrence spied another flying taxi which seemed to be following them.

He had a bill ready, however, and, as the car slowed down, he leaped out, thrust it into the chauffeur's hand, and darted into the building.

The arcade was full of people moving in both directions, and Barry, hurrying through them, slipped suddenly into a little cigar store midway to Fourth Avenue, which had another entrance on Twenty-third Street. Less than a minute later he was diving into the subway entrance.

Fortunately a local was just drawing into the station, and, as he took his seat, he chuckled a little to himself.

"You'll have some trouble in following that trail, my friend," he murmured.

He got out at Fourteenth Street, and took an uptown train, but long before reaching Fifty-ninth Street the smile had vanished, and a puzzled frown furrowed his forehead.

There seemed no doubt now that his encounter with the bearded man last night had not been the result of chance. He was being followed deliberately, and there were at least two men who seemed tremendously interested in every move he made. What was their object? What motive governed this inexplicable pursuit?

Try as he would, Barry could find no answer to the questions. If they had been attracted by the emerald ring, and were following him for the purpose of robbery—and last night's experience certainly pointed strongly toward

that solution—what earthly sense was there in the actions of the blond stranger? Did he expect to sandbag and rob a victim in broad daylight, amid the crowds which swarmed the city streets? It was absurd, Barry told himself, yet what else was there to think?

The problem occupied him on his way over to the Plaza, and made him somewhat absent during the progress of the simple luncheon he ordered. He did not, in fact, really pay much attention to his surroundings until an odd event effectually brought him to himself.

He had arisen from his table, and was making his way slowly to the door, his progress somewhat impeded by the simultaneous departure of a large luncheon party. As he trailed along behind the laughing crowd of girls, he happened to glance casually to the left, and encountered the gaze of a woman sitting at a table near the wall.

She was not young, but there was a stately distinction in her looks and manner which impressed Lawrence. Her face was a perfect oval, showing remnants of great beauty, and Barry had a vague impression that he had seen her before. She was perfectly gowned, and wore no jewels, save a single strand of wonderful pearls. Her companions were much younger, and wholly charming. The head waiter hovered obsequiously about the table.

As their eyes met, Barry saw her start slightly and stare for a second, a look of puzzled astonishment on her face. The next instant she smiled and bowed in a manner which was even more than cordial.

Automatically Lawrence returned the bow with what grace he could assume, and passed on. At the door he turned for a backward glance. and was surprised to see that the lady had moved a little in her chair, and was following him with her eyes.

"I suppose I've met her somewhere," he thought, pausing in the doorway. "I wish I could remember her name. She's certainly somebody."

An instant later he caught the eye of the head waiter, and summoned him with a slight gesture.

"Who is the lady at the fourth table from the door?" he asked briefly. "I seem to have forgotten her name."

The haughty functionary followed the direction of Barry's glance, and then turned back, an odd expression in his eyes.

"That is Mrs. Winslow Courtney, sir," he answered stiffly.

For a second Lawrence was almost feezed. Then, with a short nod, he passed on into the corridor.

Mrs. Winslow Courtney! No wonder he could not recall meeting her before. He doubted whether he had ever even seen her, save, perhaps, in her box at the opera; for it was she, more than any other woman, who ruled New York

society. With family, vast wealth, and a charming personality, she had taken her place in that innermost circle around which the social life of the entire country revolved. One of her daughters was the wife of Prince von Lauenberg, the wealthiest nobleman in Prussia; another was the Duchess of Wilton.

Decidedly Barry had no right to that charming smile from Mrs. Winslow Courtney.

"I suppose she took me for some one else," he murmured, as he left the Plaza. "I wouldn't mind knowing her, though. Her friends, her acquaintances, have to be somebody."

CHAPTER XV.
THE GIRL WHO VANISHED.

Having grown a little weary of dodging people, Lawrence decided not to give those who seemed so interested in his movements a chance to pick up his trail again that afternoon. He was fond of motoring, so he proceeded at once to hire a good car, and, with only a chauffeur for company, went spinning out over the snowy, level roads of Westchester County.

In spite of the cold, he enjoyed it so much that it was nearly a quarter past five before he entered the yacht club, and sent up his name to Hamersley.

The latter descended at once, and, when he had finished upbraiding Barry, they went up to the famous model room, and, settling down in a corner with cigars, chatted, and joked each other for over an hour.

Two or three times Lawrence was on the point of asking his friend whether he had an opening for a good stenographer in his office, but each time he could not seem to bring himself to make the inquiry. And so they parted without Miss Rives and her very pressing necessities being mentioned.

"I'll talk it over with her to-night, and ask her if she won't let me find her a position," Barry decided, as he walked around to the hotel.

Having dressed with unusual care, he took a taxi to the Waldorf and dined there again in solitary state.

Though he kept his eyes open throughout the meal, he saw nothing of the blond fellow he had outwitted that morning, or of the bearded man. There was apparently no one in the dining room or about the hotel corridors who paid any more attention to him than would be accorded to any handsome, well-dressed,

prosperous-looking chap. Instead of being relieved at this, Barry was affected in quite the opposite manner. The sudden cessation of interest struck him as being decidedly unnatural, and made him wonder whether it was not a bluff to hide the real intentions of the unknown spies.

After he had dined, he had a taxi summoned, and not until it was at the door did he leave the lighted corridor for the street.

Giving the Forty-eighth Street address, he stepped in and took up a position that would enable him easily to glance through the back window every now and then, and see whether he was being followed.

Until they turned out of Longacre Square it was impossible to tell this with any certainty. The streets were full of taxis and motor cars, carrying people to theaters or the opera or coming away empty. But, having turned into the comparatively deserted cross street, Barry kept an extra sharp lookout. Before the taxi reached Eighth Avenue he was rewarded by seeing another car skid around from Broadway in their wake.

With a slight frown of annoyance, he wondered how they had managed it. It is always more or less trying to miss a trick of any sort, and Lawrence rather prided himself on his keenness of observation.

The slowing down of his car as they approached the house made him thrust the matter from his mind in favor of more agreeable things. After all, his pursuer could accomplish nothing here.

Stepping out on the sidewalk, Barry told the chauffeur to wait, and ran up the steps. After a prolonged wait, a rather untidy-looking maid answered his ring, holding the door only partially open, and peering doubtfully through the crack.

"Is Miss Rives at home?" Lawrence inquired.

The girl stared. "Miss—who did you say?"

"Miss Rives—Miss Shirley Rives!" Barry's tone was slightly impatient. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the second taxi had crawled past, and come to a stop a few doors beyond. "She arrived last night, I believe."

The maid sniffed. "It's news to me," she remarked pertly. "Mebbe you've got the wrong house. There ain't no Miss Rives, nor anybody like it, stopping here just now."

Lawrence's eyes flashed, but he restrained his anger with an effort. He had never seen quite such a stupid creature in his life.

"I have made no mistake in the house," he retorted abruptly. "Kindly ask your mistress to see me for a moment."

"She ain't in." The girl's tone was plainly triumphant. Evidently she sensed the irritation in Barry's voice, and was glad of a chance to retaliate.

For an instant Lawrence was stumped. It was intolerable that he should be

cheated out of something he had been looking forward to all day by the stupidity of a saucy maid. Whether it was anything more than stupidity he did not know, but he was determined not to give in yet.

"Then take my card to Miss Sally, the young lady who has your top floor front," he said tersely, slipping one hand into his pocket, and drawing forth a cardcase.

The maid hesitated, frowning. For an instant it seemed as if she meant to close the door in his face, and Barry was all ready to thrust a foot into the crack. Then something in his determined expression must have decided her, for she grudgingly stood aside for him to enter.

Taking out a gold pencil, Lawrence hastily scrawled a few words on his card, and handed it to her in silence.

The girl took it and glanced insolently at the hatrack. Finding that there was nothing there or anywhere else in the hall of an easily portable nature, she tossed her head and flounced to the stairs.

It seemed an eternity to the impatient Lawrence before a door closed hastily above, and he heard the sound of light footsteps hurrying down from the top floor. Presently a girl came in sight on the stairs, a rather nice-looking girl, with trim black hair and fresh coloring. As she saw Barry, she slackened her pace, and made the last few steps very slowly, indeed, pausing at the foot with one hand still resting on the balustrade.

"I'm very sorry, indeed, to have troubled you," Lawrence said, with a pleasant smile, "but I came to see Miss Rives, and the girl insists she isn't here."

The blank stare of amazement she gave him struck Barry with a chill sense of foreboding.

"Miss Rives!" the girl repeated slowly. "You can't be talking about Shirley Rives?"

"That's just who I mean. She came here last night. She had—er—left her boarding place rather suddenly, and when I—met her downtown she was on her way to see you."

For a second the girl looked keenly into his eyes, without speaking. Then she gave her head an odd shake.

"You don't look like a person who is joking," she said quietly, "so I s'pose you've made a mistake some way. I haven't seen Shirley Rives in two months, and more."

Barry's jaw dropped, and some of the ruddy glow left his cheeks. The thing was impossible. He had left Shirley on this very doorstep not twenty-four hours before—had even seen her enter the house on her way to this friend's room. And now they had the audacity to tell him that she had never been here. There was something queer about the whole matter, and he meant to find out what it was

before he left the place.

”I haven’t made a mistake,” he said sternly. ”I brought Miss Rives to this door myself a little before eleven last night. She looked up at your window, and when she saw it lighted she said it was all right; that Sally must still be here, because she used to read till all hours. She rang the bell, and I waited till the door opened and she went inside. And now you want me to believe that you never——”

He broke off abruptly, startled at the look on the girl’s face. She had grown pale, and her eyes were dilated until they looked like holes burned in a white sheet. Her hands—slender, well-kept hands they were—were clenched tightly, and as Barry stopped she flung them up with an odd, eloquent gesture.

”It’s the truth!” she gasped, in a frightened voice. ”I haven’t seen her—I swear it!” Her lips were trembling, and she caught them swiftly between her teeth. ”Something’s happened to her—it must have! Was she down in her luck? Had she lost her job?”

Barry nodded miserably. He was dazed—bewildered. But overtopping every other sensation was cold, deadly fear; fear for another one cares for, which is infinitely more gripping and powerful than an emotion involving self alone.

”Yes,” he stammered. ”She’d lost her job. She’d been turned out of her room—turned into the street last night. Do you know what that might have meant if I hadn’t found her?”

The swift, horrified intake of her breath told him that she knew only too well. For a second she stood absolutely still, her mouth working. Then suddenly she put up both hands swiftly to her face, and began to sob. Almost as swiftly, she snatched them away again, and stared at him out of eyes filled with tears.

”What’s come to her?” she demanded fiercely. ”Why’d she leave this house without seeing me? What made her go, and where’s she gone? Tell me that! She didn’t vanish into air, did she? Where’s she gone, and—where—is she—now?”

Lawrence did not answer her. For some seconds that same question had been pounding through his brain with the dull, rhythmical iteration of a hammer on an anvil.

Where was she now?

CHAPTER XVI.

ANOTHER WOMAN.

As Barry departed a little later he was conscious of a maddening sensation of helplessness. There seemed no question in his mind that Shirley Rives had left the house of her own accord. The fact that she had made not the slightest attempt to see her friend, Sally Barton, proved that conclusively. It was possible, of course, that the head of the establishment, a Mrs. Weston, could throw some light upon the mystery; but she had gone over to Long Island, and was not expected back until the following morning.

Barry's first impulse had been to go at once to the station house, make inquiries there, and possibly send out a general alarm; but he realized almost at once that such a step would be unwise. Miss Rives had given him no right to interfere in her affairs. She was a perfectly free agent to come and go as she liked, and where she chose; but the fact that she had disappeared in this utterly inexplicable manner drove Lawrence distracted.

Wild thoughts of suicide, under the burden of her troubles, flashed through his mind. Girls, even of her high mental caliber, had been driven to such desperate acts. Mrs. Weston's reception of her might have been the last straw to an already staggering load, and driven her impulsively forth into the street again. Worse yet, it might not have been Mrs. Weston at all who opened the door. There was quite as good a chance of its being some lodger on his way out. And Sally Barton's estimate of some of the lodgers was far from reassuring.

The maid had been summoned again, and interrogated sharply by the girl, but to no purpose. She had gone to bed about half past nine, leaving her mistress making up accounts in the back room. She knew nothing further, had heard nothing out of the way; and in the morning there had not been the slightest sign of any stranger having been in the house.

And there Lawrence was obliged to leave the matter. Think as he would, he could hit upon nothing else he might do. The stenographer promised to telephone him the instant she learned anything from Mrs. Weston; but Barry had already determined to call at the house directly after breakfast next morning. How he was going to remain in suspense for even that length of time he did not understand.

It was barely nine as he left the house, and for a moment or two he hesitated on the curb, wondering where he should go. Then a whimsical, absurd notion came to him, and, having ordered the chauffeur to drive to the northwest corner of Madison Square, he stepped into the taxi.

There was not the slightest hope in his mind of thus finding any clew. The vagaries of chance were strange and improbable enough, to be sure, but they could scarcely be expected to bring about such an utterly wild coincidence as that. He simply had a feeling that he wanted to return to that spot where he had first met her, and anything in the way of action was better than moping alone in

his rooms.

As the car jerked forward and sped across town, Barry paid little attention to the second taxi, except to notice that it was following about half a block behind. At the corner of the square he got out, told the chauffeur to wait, and walked slowly down the winding walk.

As before, the place was deserted. The great, glittering tower still loomed high above the branches of the gaunt trees. The fountain had that same look of dreariness and desolation. The cold was as bitter; but the wind had died away, and everything was still.

As he rounded the ice-rimmed basin, Barry's heart leaped into his throat. Entering the square, just as she had entered it last night, was a slight, slim figure, who came toward him hurriedly, yet with that same odd sense of hesitation in her movements. As they approached each other, Lawrence's heart was thudding so loudly that he fancied he could hear the beats. It was impossible—utterly impossible; and yet he hoped.

She came on hurriedly, and his pace slackened the barest trifle as he tried to penetrate the shadow beneath the black hat brim. Then he saw that it was not Shirley Rives. It was a girl, pinched and worn with fatigue and hunger.

Half a dozen steps he took blindly, fairly sick with disappointment, before he stopped abruptly and turned around. The girl was hurrying on; she had almost reached the fountain.

"Stop!" Barry cried impulsively. "Wait a minute."

Instinctively she obeyed, twisting her head backward to watch his coming; and the thin, white wedge of face, ghastly in the pitiless electric light streaming down upon it, smote Lawrence with a new pang. By the time he reached her he held a thin leather case with gold corners in his hand.

"Here!" he said harshly, yet with a certain throbbing undercurrent of pity in his voice. "Take this and get something to eat. Do you understand?"

She stared at the bill he held out, then her fingers closed over it convulsively.

"Thanks," she said hoarsely. She stood for a second or two, gazing into his face. Then she shivered. "Thanks," she repeated, and this time it seemed as if a whole world of despair and misery was in that little word.

Barry made no answer. There was nothing more to say, and he knew it. Still he lingered for a second before he uttered a brief good night, and turned toward his waiting taxi.

It was the old, old tragedy, but somehow the strange coincidence of time and place filled Lawrence with an awful, unreasoning dread, and made his ride

back to the hotel a torture.

CHAPTER XVII.
BEYOND BELIEF.

At first Barry was tempted to phone Hamersley, and tell him he could not come to the dance. He had never felt less like such a thing in his life, but, as he slowly approached the instrument, trying to think up a plausible excuse, he realized that anything would be better in his present state of mind than sitting alone in his room.

So he ordered a taxi to be ready for him at ten. When that time came he descended, and was driven to the Hamersley house, just off upper Fifth Avenue. He saw that the other car was still trailing him persistently, but somehow he did not care. That seemed no longer a very important matter.

There was a considerable delay in getting started, for Jock's mother and sister were going along, and, as the big chap expressed it: "To be ready in time for a dance, a woman ought to start dressing when she gets up in the morning."

They came down at length, however, and, after a little conversation, all four got into the limousine, which had been waiting nearly an hour, and were soon bowling down Fifth Avenue.

It was after eleven when they entered the great ballroom at Sherry's, and the dance was apparently in full swing. The glittering lights, the flowers, the wonderful, intoxicating music, the gleam of jewels and bright eyes, could not but arouse Barry from his abstraction and make him glad that he had come.

Large as the room was, it seemed crowded with dancers, while about the walls and in the anterooms sat patronesses, chaperons, and other non-participants, watching the brilliant scene, chatting among themselves, or here and there indulging in a rubber of the inevitable bridge.

"It's very mixed, of course," Miss Hamersley was saying, as they glided over the perfect floor. "That's always the way with a big affair like this. If there's any one you want to meet just make Jock introduce you. He knows everybody. Yes, surely, Peter. Thanks, very much, Mr. Lawrence."

Before the latter could collect his wits, she was whirled away on the arm of the young fellow who had cut in; and Barry backed up against the wall, diverted by the kaleidoscopic scene, his eyes roving about the room in search of possible

acquaintances.

For a time he saw no one he knew. There were plenty of charming faces, beauties of every type, and not a few of whom glanced curiously in his direction. There were many girls whom he would have liked immensely to meet twenty-four hours before; but, somehow, now that he had seen Shirley Rives, he ceased to be enthusiastic over others.

The thought of her, leaping back into his mind after a brief distraction, brought a faint pucker into Barry's forehead. Presently, still thoughtful, he moved slowly from his place, drifting toward the end of the room where the line of ladies stood to receive the belated guests who still dribbled in at intervals.

Presently his eyes fell upon a group at some distance from him, and he gave a great start. The group consisted of a girl surrounded by five or six men. Her back was squarely toward Lawrence, but there was something about her slim, graceful figure, tiny but exquisitely proportioned, and the tilt of her head, with its wonderful crown of coppery hair, which was so like Shirley Rives that it almost hurt.

She wore a close-fitting gown of shimmering golden tissue, in which sequins gleamed and winked with every movement. A gorgeous string of pearls was wound twice about her neck. On her arms were several costly bracelets.

Apparently she had only just arrived. It would seem, also, that she was having some difficulty in choosing a partner from the number of men hovering about her. Barry, watching her with unconscious curiosity, could see her laugh and shake her head several times. Once, when a youth stepped forward with lifted arms, as if the matter were settled, she slipped away from him, holding up the big spray of orchids she carried with a gesture of admonition.

At length, with a sudden display of dignity, she lifted her head, and nodded to a tall, handsome fellow who stood, apparently unmoved, on the outer edge of the circle.

As he came swiftly forward, the others fell back with shrugs and disappointed looks. The girl caught up her skirts, and placed one tiny hand upon her partner's shoulder; and Lawrence, who had been watching the little comedy with more interest than he realized, decided that in a moment she would turn, and he would see her face.

An instant later she did turn—full upon him; and Barry's heart almost ceased to beat. In that brief second, before she was whirled away into the crowd, he saw the wonderful brown eyes, the tender, shapely mouth, the graceful curve of cheek and chin which had so fascinated him the night before, and which had scarcely left his mind for a moment since.

The girl was Shirley Rives!

CHAPTER XVIII.
CHAOS.

Never in all his life had Barry Lawrence been so staggered. For a moment or two he refused to believe the evidence of his senses. The age of miracles was passed, and it was nothing less than a miracle to see this girl, who had been penniless, friendless, desperate the night before, now clad in silks, glittering with jewels, and apparently absolutely at home amid these luxurious surroundings.

It was more than absurd; it was utterly impossible. He had been deceived by some chance resemblance, coupled with the fact that her face remained so vividly and constantly in his mind, into fancying for a second that this stranger was Shirley Rives.

Recovering his composure with an effort, Barry moved swiftly along the wall until he reached a nook banked with palms and ferns. Slipping through them, he let the trailing green curtain fall into place behind him. Then he waited, his eyes, fixed upon the gliding throng, for the girl to reappear. He meant to satisfy himself that he had made no mistake.

Subtle, seductive, almost intoxicating in its rhythmic sweetness, the wonderful waltz music, while it fell upon unheeding ears, seemed, nevertheless, to stir his being with vague unrest. Couples flashed swiftly by his corner or glided past more slowly. Some were the epitome of graceful motion; others romped about the hall in modifications of the uncouth turkey trot and other dances of the same sort which had, of late, been attracting so much unfavorable comment. There were tall girls and short, beautiful and plain; but Barry's eyes passed over their faces with the utmost indifference. Not one of them was the girl he sought.

Suddenly his heart began to thud, and his figure stiffened as he bent forward and parted the leaves a little more. She was coming toward him down the polished floor, moving with that inimitable grace which seems born in most Southern girls.

There was a gleam of jewels on her corsage and in her hair. The diamond buckles on her absurdly tiny satin slippers winked and sparkled as her feet kept perfect time with the music. The swish of her gown sounded clearly to the strained senses of the man behind the palms.

Just as the couple glided so close that he could almost have touched them, the girl looked up into her partner's face, and laughed, a low, soft, bewitching laugh, which sent the blood boiling into Barry's face, and brought his teeth together on his under lip.

He had not made any mistake. She was Shirley Rives beyond any question or doubt. She was the girl whom he had found half frozen, perishing from cold and hunger, without a roof to cover her—without a single friend, apparently, in that whole vast city, save a stenographer in a cheap West Side lodging house.

The look in her eyes, the curve of her half-smiling lips as she glanced up into the face of her tall partner, the very sound of her laugh, drove Lawrence almost mad. He hated the fellow with every atom of hatred in his being; hated his graceful dancing, his polished manner, his air of proprietorship; detested, above all, his dark, handsome face with its expression of captivating melancholy. It was only a pose, he told himself bitterly, to gain attention and sympathy.

But swiftly that feeling was displaced in the realization that his idol had been shattered. The girl had deliberately deceived him from the very first. She had never been friendless and homeless and desperate at all. As to what reason she could have had for playing with him as she did he had not the remotest conception, but the bitter, intolerable, fact remained that she had made a fool of him.

How she must have laughed to herself when he fell into the trap, like a great booby! How entertained she must have been in the restaurant, and later, when he practically forced the money upon her. No doubt it had been a merry play to her, over which she would probably laugh herself weary whenever it came back into her mind. Very likely she had already amused her friends by telling them of her little adventure, and what an easy mark she had found.

Barry shivered at the thought. Then he laughed mirthlessly. The trouble with him was that he had taken the jest with deadly seriousness. It was up to him to think of some way to play up to her. She must never know how much the thing had hurt him. He must make her think that he, too, had been playing a part all the time, instead of being the goat.

Unfortunately such a thing was much more easily thought of than put into execution. Barry was sore and hurt beyond measure, and not at all in condition for playing a game of that sort. The lights and music, the laughter and gayety, suddenly palled. He felt as if he wanted to get away from it all, yet he did not want to go as long as she was here.

The result was that he kept his place behind the palms for fifteen or twenty minutes, during which Miss Rives circled past him time after time. The handsome, melancholy youth had disappeared, and given place to a tawny-haired giant with a strong, pleasant face and infectious laugh which Lawrence disliked

unreasoningly. Then followed a slim, graceful chap with a delicately penciled mustache, who showed an inclination for the most sensational dances, and was evidently restrained only by his partner's preference for the more sedate Boston.

To one and all of them Shirley Rives seemed equally pleasant and equally fascinating. Instead of relieving Lawrence, as this should have done, it simply aggravated him the more; and presently, unable longer to contain himself, he left his corner, and made his way straight to the retirement of the smoking room.

He had scarcely entered it, and was taking out his cigarette case, when a tall, smooth-shaven fellow, very ruddy and very blond, sprang from a chair in which he had been lounging, and, rushing forward, gripped Barry's hand.

"By Jove, Oscar, old chap!" he exclaimed heartily. "Why, this is ripping, don't you know! To think of seeing you in this bally place!"

Lawrence frowned, and withdrew his hand as soon as the other's fingers relaxed their pressure. He was in no mood for talking to strangers, even if they did labor under an innocent case of mistaken identity.

"I think you must have made a mistake," he returned coldly. "I don't remember ever having seen you before."

The Englishman's face took on an expression of incredulous astonishment, and he fumbled for the monocle depending from his neck by a broad black ribbon.

"But, I say!" he objected, in a plaintive tone. He had screwed the glass into his left eye, and was regarding Barry inquiringly. "You don't mean you've really forgotten the ripping times we had at Cambridge? You're just chaffing, old chap! You couldn't forget the bloomin' rackets we used to pull off in your rooms—eh, what?"

"I really have," Barry retorted shortly. "You are evidently taking me for some one else."

The other's jaw dropped, but the monocle remained firmly in its place.

"Fancy, now!" he gasped helplessly. "Extraordinary lapse of memory!" He shrugged his shoulders, and went on, with heavy sarcasm: "I dare say, then, you don't even remember Cambridge?"

"I remember Cambridge perfectly," Lawrence retorted sharply, goaded beyond endurance; "but I have no recollection of you whatever."

Turning on his heel, he flung away his unlighted cigarette, and left the room without giving the other a chance to speak.

CHAPTER XIX.

PROTECTIVE MEASURES.

"Fool!" muttered Lawrence, as he passed down the corridor toward the ballroom. "If that was meant as a joke, it was a poor one."

Reaching one of the entrances to the ballroom, he hesitated. He had not the faintest desire to return and take part in that scene of festivity. He was tired of being pestered and having to talk and make himself agreeable. He wanted to get away and be let alone, so very swiftly he resolved to hunt up Mrs. Hamersley, and take his leave as gracefully as he could.

He found the lady after some trouble, told her that he was not feeling very fit—which was quite true—and said good night. Securing his things in the coat room, he made haste to take the elevator downstairs.

But, once on the steps of the building, with the cold wind blowing against his heated face, he paused, irresolute.

Where should he go? What could he find to take his mind from the disappointment he seemed unable to shake off? It was scarcely half past twelve, and he had never felt less sleepy. The idea of going back to his rooms and tossing restlessly about for hours, with only his thoughts to keep him company, was intolerable.

As he waited, undecided, the doors behind him were thrust suddenly open, and two young fellows issued forth precipitately. One of them was singing a popular song, to which the other beat time on the marble pavement with his stick, laughing boisterously at frequent intervals.

As Lawrence drew aside to let them pass, the song ceased instantly, and a pair of arms were flung about his neck with an unexpectedness and force which made him stagger back a pace or two.

"Li'l' Barry!" exclaimed the youth, with maudlin joyousness. "M' long-los' college chum! Lemme give you good hug!"

The flash of annoyance which Lawrence had felt at first gave place instantly to a thrill of pleasure as he recognized Reggie Minturn, one of his classmates, whom he had not seen in months.

"Hel-lo, Reg!" he cried, removing the arms gently, but firmly, from his shoulders, and shaking the chap's hand heartily. "What in the world are you up to, leaving the dance so early?"

Minturn, still gripping his hand, teetered gently back and forth on his heels, regarding Lawrence with a wide stare of preternatural gravity.

"Child's play," he presently announced solemnly. "Jack 'n' I want some 'citement. You know Jack? No, course not. Jack, this's my frien'—very dear frien'. Wantche know—Mister—er—Barry. Shake han's."

The other individual, still chuckling inanely, took Barry's hand, and shook it until Minturn forcibly intervened.

"That's 'nough," he said, linking his arm with Lawrence's. "You're comin' with us, Barry. We goin' to have some 'citement. Dean's, you know."

Barry started slightly, and a faint frown furrowed his forehead. Dean's was one of the most select and high-class gambling houses in the city, and he pictured to himself the alacrity with which these two helpless chaps would be stripped of their last cent.

"What do you want to go there for?" he asked quietly. "Why don't you come around to my place and have a game of poker? It's much nearer."

Minturn shook his head stubbornly. "Do' want poker," he announced. "Wan' roulette. Come on!"

For a second Lawrence hesitated. Then, realizing his helplessness, he gave a resigned shrug, and allowed himself to be dragged out to where a taxi waited at the curb. If he could not keep the two away from the gambling joint, at least he might prevent their losing very much.

They piled into the car, with much laughter, and, when Minturn had given a certain address to the chauffeur, and settled down for a second, Barry proceeded to put his plan into operation.

"Look here, Reggie," he said suddenly, "I can't go into Dean's without any money."

"No money!" exclaimed the inebriated one jocosely. "Ha, ha! Tha'sh easy. We'll lend you some—eh, Jack? Show your roll."

Still chuckling, he reached his pocket with some difficulty, and produced a crumpled handful of yellowbacks which he thrust at Barry.

"Take all you want, ol' man," he announced. "Lot's more where that came from, eh, Jack?"

That Barry could readily believe. The elder Minturn was almost sinfully wealthy, and his only son had hitherto led an existence as carefree and lacking in responsibility as the proverbial lily of the field. A swift glance told Barry that there was close to seven hundred dollars in the roll, mostly in fifties and twenties, with the single exception of one five-hundred-dollar bill. Without hesitation Lawrence took the latter, and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket.

"This'll do for me," he said carelessly, handing the remainder back.

From the other youth's generously extended bill case he extracted two one-hundred-dollar yellowbacks, leaving less than half that amount. After that he settled back, much more relieved. Of course, it was really none of his business, but he hated to see them simply throwing all that money away, even if they could afford it.

On a cross street, not far from Park Avenue, the chauffeur drew up before

an unpretentious-looking brownstone front, and the party rolled out of the taxi. While his two companions were fumbling in their pockets, Lawrence paid the man, who drove off at once.

There was an instant expostulation, which Barry silenced, good-naturedly, following with a last attempt to dissuade the other two from their purpose. As he expected, it was quite useless. Both were fixed in their resolve to have some excitement, and Minturn led the way up the steps with firm, but somewhat swaying, gravity.

After a considerable delay, and a very careful inspection of them by an attendant, they were admitted to the lower hallway, which differed not a whit from the hall of any ordinary private house. Here Minturn and his companion were recognized, and, both vouching for Lawrence, they were allowed to proceed upstairs.

The second floor consisted of two large rooms furnished with great taste and luxury, and provided with all sorts of gambling paraphernalia. They were both fairly well filled with men, mostly in evening clothes; and, as he followed his companions into the one containing the roulette wheels, Barry smiled a little at the realization of how completely his mind was being distracted.

In spite of Minturn's insistence that he chance his money with them, Lawrence managed to put it off by saying that he preferred *rouge et noir*. He waited until they were well started at the wheel, and quite oblivious to everything save the excitement of betting, then he strolled off into the other room.

Here quite a crowd was gathered about the board. Evidently the playing was of a sort to attract unusual attention, and Barry made his way forward to a place from which he had a fair view of the table.

Half a dozen men were sitting there, betting at irregular intervals, but the attention of the onlookers seemed given entirely to one individual, whom Lawrence could not quite see from where he stood. A bit of smooth black hair, a portion of a low forehead, and now and again a hand stretching out to place his bets, was all that came within the Harvard fellow's vision.

It was enough, however, to show him very swiftly that the man, whoever he was, was plunging heavily. He was also having a spell of the most persistent ill luck, for in the few minutes that Barry stood there he saw something like six hundred dollars swept in by the expressionless dealer.

"Wonder who he is?" Lawrence thought. "Some millionaire, I suppose, throwing away his car fare."

Then, more because he had nothing else to do than from any real curiosity on the subject, he strolled around to the other side of the table, and glanced over another man's shoulder.

In a second he had stiffened slightly, and his features seemed suddenly

to become tense and alert and eager. The individual who was betting as if a hundred-dollar bill was so much trash to be thrown away without a qualm, was no millionaire, or anything like it.

He was the man who, more than any other, had been active in bringing disgrace upon Barry Lawrence—Julian Farr, the cashier of the Beekman Trust Company.

CHAPTER XX.
THE MAN WHO LOST.

For a second Barry stood with eyes riveted on the florid face, with its blue-black shadow of heavy beard darkening the clean-shaven cheeks and chin. Then he stepped swiftly back out of sight, and, turning, pretended to examine a painting hanging on the wall near by.

He scarcely saw the wonderful Corot landscape, however, for his brain was fairly seething with the discovery he had just made, the significance of which he realized in a flash.

Julian Farr received, to his positive knowledge, a salary of ten thousand dollars a year, and the manner in which he lived must use up every penny of it. Yet here he was gambling recklessly in a place like Dean's.

In an instant Lawrence knew where those missing funds had gone as surely as if the proof in every smallest detail lay before him.

Farr had stolen them! He was the thief who had so cleverly foisted the blame upon an innocent man's shoulders.

For a moment Barry was furiously angry. He wanted to catch the fellow by the scruff of his neck and thrash him within an inch of his miserable life. It was impossible, of course, and Barry knew it; but he wanted terribly to do it, just the same.

A passing wonder came into his mind as to how Farr could have had the nerve to show himself in such a place. Of course, Dean's was patronized mostly by the very wealthy members of the younger sporting set, and the Beekman Trust Company had a clientele made up almost altogether of shopkeepers, proprietors of lofts and the like, on the lower East Side. Two such extremes were scarcely ever likely to come together, but there was always a chance of discovery, as had been proved in this very instance.

But Barry did not waste much thought on how his enemy happened to be here. His presence in the rouge et noir game was the important thing, and Lawrence instantly began to cudgel his brains as to how he might take advantage of this discovery.

His own unsupported word as to Farr's doings would not be enough to convince Tappin or any of the directors. He must have a witness wholly above the charge of bias.

Barry glanced swiftly around at the men near the table, and his heart sank. He did not know a single one of them, and without a previous acquaintance it would be time wasted to ask any of them to do such a favor.

His eyes ranged over the faces for the second time, and stopped at a tall, lean, slightly dissipated-looking chap who sat opposite Farr, watching him with a languid interest, between whiles placing a bet himself of no small amount.

"By Jove!" Lawrence said to himself. "I'll be hanged if that isn't Charlie Biddle. It is!" he went on positively, after a careful scrutiny. "I wonder if he wouldn't help me out?"

Biddle was a man of means, with extremely rapid tendencies, and a type of mind which caused his photograph to blaze forth frequently in the metropolitan papers, while columns were devoted to his divertingly eccentric escapades. He was a thoroughgoing, out-and-out sport, however, and it struck Barry that he might possibly consent to become the very desirable witness in the present case. At all events, he was the young man's only hope.

Having reached this conclusion, Lawrence went back to the other room, eager to get away. He did not wish to have Farr see him.

The matter proved easier than he expected. Minturn greeted him with a pathetic wail that he was busted, and so was Jack, and begged for a loan. Barry managed to put him off by intimating that he also had been cleaned out, and, after a somewhat prolonged argument, succeeded in persuading the two fellows to depart with him.

Suppressing their tendencies to play tricks with the officer on the corner, Lawrence managed at length to find a taxi, into which they piled, and started for the Minturn mansion. His companions pleaded for a "joy ride" through Central Park, and were moved to tears when he said it was too cold for an early-morning plunge in the reservoir. There was almost a fight at the Minturn house, but, with the unexpected and welcome assistance of a footman who had been waiting up, Barry managed to get them both inside, having first slipped the borrowed money into their waistcoat pockets.

It was just four o'clock when Barry reached the St. Albans, and he was feeling tired and sleepy. Reaching his rooms, he lost no time in flinging off his clothes and diving into bed.

In the interest and excitement of the past few days he had almost forgotten that in less than a week he would be free to live his own life as he chose. He had been going about in a sort of dream, but the sight of Julian Farr's face that night, bent over the gaming table, and the realization of everything it might mean to him, had awakened him effectually. To-morrow he would seek out Charlie Biddle, and enlist his coöperation.

After that—well, he had an idea that things would be doing.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE NEXT COMPARTMENT.

Lawrence intended to be up early, but it was late in the morning before he was awakened with a start by the tinkle of the room telephone. Leaping out of bed, he hastened into the sitting room, and, unhooking the receiver, recognized Jock Hamersley's booming voice at the other end of the wire.

"You're a deuce of a fellow, you are! What in thunder did you go and quit last night for?"

"I wasn't feeling a bit fit, Jock," Barry explained, "so I lit out before supper. I'll bet you didn't notice I was gone till it came time to go home. Say, can't you meet me in the Belmont café about five this afternoon? I want to talk to you about something."

"I'm going to be mighty busy. Why not lunch together?"

"Can't. I've got a date for luncheon."

Hamersley's snort made the wires buzz. "Hang you and your dates!" he exploded. "That's what you said yesterday. You're such a popular guy I s'pose you've got every lunch and dinner taken for a week ahead."

Lawrence's lips twitched at the unconscious closeness with which his friend came to the truth, but he only laughed.

"Sure, I have!" he returned lightly.

"Well," retorted Hamersley sarcastically, "seeing you're such an unaccommodating grouch, I'll meet you at the Belmont, only just blame yourself if you cool your heels for half an hour."

Barry hung up the receiver, chuckling. Then his face grew suddenly serious, and he reached for the telephone directory. Having found the number of Biddle's apartment, he called it without delay, and a man's voice answered.

”No, sir, this is not Mr. Biddle,” came in response to Barry’s swift question. ”Mr. Biddle has gone to Baltimore, and will not be back till Sunday afternoon. Do you wish to leave any message, sir?”

”No; I’ll call again.”

Barry clicked the receiver into place with an impatient movement, and sat frowning for a moment on the arm of his chair. Presently his face relaxed. Sunday afternoon was not so very far away, and nothing changed the fact that he had Julian Farr in an exceedingly awkward position.

He dressed leisurely, and it was after twelve when he left his room. Breakfast and luncheon were combined that day in one, and he took the meal at the Ritz-Carlton, enjoying the music, entertained by the crowd, and altogether in a more peaceful mood than he had been for some time.

Now and again the thought of Shirley Rives—if that were really her name—returned to torment him and make him unhappy, but he did his best to thrust the recollection from his mind, and fancied he had succeeded. He could not help pondering, however, on the one apparently inexplicable feature of the affair. If she were not in the desperate straits she had pretended to be, how was it that she had known anything of Sally Barton?

It was possible, of course, that she had taken the name of another person with whom the black-haired stenographer had once been on friendly terms; but still the matter puzzled Barry until he finally gave up thinking of it, and turned his attention to the question of whether or not it would be wise to confide his affairs to Jock Hamersley.

He had reached a point where he longed desperately to talk things over with some one, and Jock had seemed, that morning, the only person available. But now, in the light of second thoughts, he began to have grave doubts as to the wisdom of such a step.

The Yale man was good nature personified, and had a heart as large as his big body. He had also a total absence of tact in his make-up, and the more Lawrence considered the matter, the more he became certain that he had better keep the nature of Julian Farr’s behavior to himself.

This made it necessary, of course, to hit upon something else to take its place, but that was not difficult. After his friend’s kindness of the night before, Barry felt that it was decidedly up to him to do something in return; and, with dinner out of the question, a theater party, with supper afterward, seemed the only alternative.

Having come to this decision, Lawrence finished his luncheon slowly, and left the restaurant. He had been too occupied the night before to notice whether the mysterious men had continued to trail him after he left Sherry’s, but they were certainly on the job to-day, and the fact began presently to wear a little

on his nerves. A person may be ever so innocent, and still become exasperated when a persistent taxi or an equally persistent man dogs his every movement.

Having nothing special to do between two and five, Barry decided to pit his wits against those of the two pursuers. The little game was interesting, not to say exciting, and consumed considerable time, the maneuvers taking Lawrence from the Battery to Fifty-ninth Street. It ended, however, with comparative satisfaction, and a few minutes before five Barry entered the Belmont on Forty-second Street with the pleasant conviction that he was unobserved for the first time in over twenty-four hours.

The café was rather full as he entered it, but one or two of the cushioned wall seats were empty, and Lawrence promptly settled down comfortably, and proceeded to take things easily until his friend's arrival.

Instinctively he noticed that on his left was a party of three men, talking over the cloak-and-suit industry with an interest which left no room for any other thought in their minds. The compartment on the other side was occupied by a typical broker, absorbed in the financial page of an evening paper.

Jock arrived about ten minutes late, and thumped down beside Lawrence with a force which shook the seat, and made the broker start nervously.

"Hope you've got something to talk about that'll pay for the way I tore over here," he grunted. "Never worked so hard in my life as I did this afternoon."

"You don't know what work is, you old bluffer," Barry laughed, as he tapped the bell. "What'll you take?"

Hamersley gave his order, and by the time it arrived Lawrence had broached the subject of the theater party.

"Suits me fine," the big chap returned. "Better get seats for 'The Blue Moon,' if you can. First night, you know, and that's always more fun."

"I'll phone for seats as soon as I get back to the hotel," Barry agreed. "Suppose I ask Reggie Minturn and that chap he had with him? That makes a good number."

"Good!", chuckled Hamersley. "Reckon Reg has sobered up by now. He was pie-eyed last night, though. See him?"

Barry nodded with twinkling eyes. He was wondering what Reggie's thoughts had been on discovering the five-hundred-dollar bill in his waistcoat pocket.

"Yes, I ran across them," he returned. "They'd had about all they could hold, sure enough. Well, I'll try and rope them in. I'll have a car meet me at the Waldorf at a quarter to eight. That'll give me time to pick you fellows up. Show doesn't begin till eight-fifteen, I suppose?"

"Nearer eight-thirty," Jock corrected, setting down his empty glass, and tapping the bell.

Lawrence declined further refreshment, however, and they presently arose and made for the door.

It would have been rather interesting for Barry to observe the behavior of the nervous broker after their departure. Their backs were no sooner turned than the financial page seemed to lose all interest for him. He leaned forward a bit, and peered after their retreating figures. Then, as they passed through the turnstile door, he sprang to his feet and hastened after them into the street.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TOUCH Of COLD STEEL.

The two friends made their way briskly up Madison Avenue to Forty-fifth Street, and thence turned to the left toward Fifth Avenue. At the entrance to the St. Albans they paused a minute, while Jock finished the diverting story he had commenced.

"Good, ain't it?" he chuckled. "Jimmie Toler has the greatest raft of 'em you ever heard. Well, see you around eight or after, I s'pose. S'long." He took a few long strides, and then wheeled around. "Say, you missed the time of your life cutting away early last night, Barry," he called back. "Greatest little queen you ever saw. Miss Rives was her name—Shirley Rives, from Virginia."

Lawrence caught his breath swiftly, and took a single, impulsive step toward his friend. But Hamersley had already resumed his chuckling way, and, with a sigh, Barry went into the hotel and up to his rooms.

"So that was really her name," he murmured, in a puzzled way, as he was dressing a little later. "I'll be hanged if I can understand it. The whole business is one too many for me."

The problem occupied his mind throughout his entire toilet; and afterward, as he bowled down to the Waldorf, he quite forgot to keep his eyes open for the persistent followers. So he failed to notice that the trailing taxi was conspicuous by its absence.

As he ate his oysters, the wonderful, deep eyes of the Southern girl looked at him in spirit from across the table. It seemed impossible that such eyes could be false, yet what else was there for him to believe? Again he saw, as clearly as if he had been gazing on it in the flesh, that bewitching mouth, with the tragic, little droop at the corners of the sensitive lips. How could such lips have voiced

the things they had to him, if each word they uttered was a lie?

He could not believe it. Suddenly there came to him a conviction that he had been a fool to act as he had last night. There must be something about it all which he could not understand; some mystery which could be explained in a simple, logical way, if only he had the key. And, as he remembered the things he had thought of her, he became ashamed. A flood of crimson surged into his pleasant face at the realization of what a cad he had been. No one had known, to be sure. Happily he had voiced his feelings to no single soul, but he was a cad, nevertheless, unworthy of her friendship. From this moment things would be very different. He would have faith in her, no matter what happened, or how much appearances were against her. When he saw her again——

His heart suddenly sank within him. That was the question. Was he ever going to see her again? Would he ever be given a chance to show what he felt for her? Perhaps his new-found faith had come too late.

In this unenviable state of mind he finished his dinner, and left the table.

It was barely half past seven when he reached the corridor, and he realized, with some slight impatience that he had a wait of nearly fifteen minutes before the limousine he had ordered from the garage would put in an appearance.

Taking out his case, he extracted a thick Egyptian cigarette, and lighted it. As he tossed the match aside, and took a first deep whiff of smoke, he had the curious, instinctive feeling that some one was looking at him.

Slowly, leisurely, without any appearance of premeditation, he turned, as if to stroll down the corridor, and found that his intuition had not been at fault.

Standing perhaps twenty feet away, in an attitude which indicated he had been merely passing toward the elevator when something arrested his attention, was a tall, rather elderly man in faultless evening dress. He wore a top hat, and carried a heavy, fur-lined coat over one arm.

But Barry barely noticed those details. He was occupied with the handsome, distinguished face, smooth shaven, and with a subtle touch of intellectual power in the brilliant dark eyes. Those eyes were fixed upon the Harvard man with an expression at once so surprised and puzzled that, in a flash, Lawrence was reminded of the look on Mrs. Winslow Courtney's high-bred face the day before.

And then—the parallel was amazingly like—a quick, genial smile flashed into the stranger's face; he bowed pleasantly, hesitated a second, as if tempted to cross the intervening space to Barry's side, then resumed his progress across the corridor and disappeared.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Lawrence muttered, in a tone of whimsical annoyance. Though taken by surprise, he had returned the older man's salutation promptly. "Reckon I must have a double floating around town, or else people

like my looks a lot more than they used to."

After a moment's hesitation, he crossed to the desk, and, giving a brief description of the elderly gentleman, asked one of the clerks who he was.

"I think you must mean Mr. Grafton Fahnstock," the latter returned promptly. "He passed through the lobby a moment ago."

Barry thanked him, and walked away, puffing meditatively on his cigarette. Presently he smiled, and shrugged his shoulders. Grafton Fahnstock was the famous cabinet minister, who had just returned from a diplomatic conference at the Hague.

"Coming up in the world, my boy," he chuckled, as he strolled toward the door. "First Mrs. Winslow Courtney, now Fahnstock. Next thing you know you'll be chumming with his excellency at Wash——"

"Your car is here, Mr. Lawrence."

It was the carriage man who spoke, and with a start Barry realized that he must have spent more time than he supposed dawdling about the lobby.

Hurriedly slipping into his coat, which he had been carrying on his arm, he walked rapidly out across the sidewalk to where a handsome limousine stood by the curb.

"Mr. Jacob Hamersley's house on Fifth Avenue," he told the chauffeur.

"Yes, sir." The man saluted, without turning his head.

Lawrence leaped in, the porter slammed the door, and the car started off with a jerk.

The next instant Barry realized that he was not alone. A shadow in the farther corner of the wide seat had suddenly come to life.

But before the surprised Harvard man could so much as lift a finger, the cold barrel of an automatic revolver was pressed firmly against his temple, and a cool, steely voice said in his ear:

"Just sit tight, and don't let a yip out of you, my friend, if you want to keep your brains where they belong!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

BY FORCE OF ARMS.

For a moment Lawrence sat rigid, stunned with surprise at the unexpected audacity of the thing. Then, as the car swung around the corner of Fifth Avenue,

a bright glare of light streamed in through the front window, full upon the face of the individual beside him. To Barry's intense astonishment, and not a little to his chagrin, he recognized the supposed broker who had occupied the next compartment that afternoon in the Belmont café.

"So it's you!" he exclaimed aloud.

The man reached forward with his left hand, and jerked down the front curtain, plunging the interior of the limousine into almost utter darkness.

"It sure is," he returned coolly, but with an undercurrent of satisfaction in his voice.

The hand which held the automatic against Barry's head did not relax. Lawrence had an odd impression that, even through the length of immovable steel, he could feel the fellow's muscles tensed, and his whole being alert for the slightest stirring on the part of his prisoner. He did not really believe that the man would actually pull the trigger, no matter what happened, but under such circumstances one does not feel anxious to put beliefs like that to a test.

As the car whirled southward without a single pause or even slowing down—at that hour traffic regulations were very much relaxed—Lawrence strove desperately to bring some order to the chaos of his mind.

Who was the audacious unknown, and what could possibly be his purpose in acting in this high-handed manner? He recalled vividly the strange attack which had been made on him several nights before. Was this a natural sequence of that assault, and of the persistent shadowing which had been going on ever since? Was this fellow hand in glove with the bearded man and his gawky, foreign-looking confederate? Or was he acting in behalf of Tappin and the bank officials? Where was he himself being taken, and for what object?

The car jolted over cross tracks twice, with a very brief interval between, and Barry knew it was the Twenty-ninth and Twenty-eighth Street surface lines. In a few seconds they would reach Twenty-third, where a slowing down at least would be imperative. There were always policemen about that corner. Should he plunge forward at the right moment, smash the glass of the door near him, and risk a shot from the revolver, or should he quietly let things take their course, in the hope of finding out something which would help to clear the mystery?

He finally decided on the latter course, at least until he could have time to sound his captor, and, relaxing in his corner, he promptly proceeded to that end.

"I suppose you know what you're doing?" he remarked suddenly.

"I generally do," the unknown drawled.

"Really?" murmured Lawrence. "Then you must realize that you're running a considerable risk, taking the law into your own hands this way."

The other chuckled. "Law!" he exclaimed. "You're a great one to talk about the law, when you're——"

He broke off abruptly, much to Barry's disappointment, and the latter retorted swiftly:

"Nabbed, am I? Will you be good enough to tell me what crime I am charged with?"

"Ha! ha! That's good. As if you didn't know without any telling! You'll find out soon enough, my friend."

"You think so?" Barry retorted sharply. "I hope you're taking me to a station house or before a magistrate, where this matter can be straightened out at once."

"You want——" the man began incredulously, then paused.

"Of course that's what I want," Lawrence put in swiftly. "What's more, I demand it. I've done nothing to be ashamed of—nothing I'm afraid of having the whole world know. Just take me before a magistrate, and see how long your flimsy charges, whatever they may be, will hold me."

There was an instant's pause, then the man laughed. "Ha! ha! Sounds good, but you can't fool me that way. I've heard that line of talk before, many a time."

Superficially his tone was confidence itself, but Barry's alert senses caught a faint note of hesitancy in his voice which was at once puzzling and encouraging.

"Very likely," the Harvard chap retorted. "Perhaps you've also observed the consequences of holding up an innocent man at the point of a gun, and carrying him off against his will. I recall one instance where the judge was hard-hearted enough to define it as kidnaping. The perpetrator was sent up for six years, as I remember."

This time the stranger's laugh was decidedly forced.

"You're wasting your breath," he said, with some curtness. "You may be slick enough to put it over that foreign bunch across the pond, but, we ain't so easy over here."

Lawrence started ever so slightly, and drew a quick, noiseless breath. He had not the most remote idea what the man was talking about, but the fact was instantly apparent that it had nothing whatever to do with Tappin and the Beekman Trust Company.

In spite of his bewilderment at this discovery, Barry was decidedly relieved. He was not at all anxious for a revival of the old affair before he had taken the steps he planned in regard to Julian Farr's exposure. He was absolutely innocent, of course, and felt that it would be impossible for them to prove anything against him. Still, the bank people might make things annoying, and perhaps ruin the plans he had made about the cashier.

The car bumped over the Twenty-third Street tracks, and went speeding on down Fifth Avenue. After a time another slight jolt told Lawrence that Fourteenth Street had been reached and put behind, but still the course was held straight

southward.

Barry tried to sound his captor a little more, but the latter had grown taciturn, and shut him up without revealing another scrap of information.

Eighth Street was crossed, and, a moment or two later, the car swerved sharply to the right.

"Washington Square," Barry thought, with every sense alert. "Now, where the mischief are they taking me?"

The twists and turns which followed were so bewildering that Barry soon ceased trying to keep track of his whereabouts. The car sped on, whirling around corners, taking long, straight stretches with a rush, and darting back and forth, up and down, in such a manner that Lawrence finally lost even his sense of direction.

Evidently the detective—Barry was sure by this time of his captor's occupation—was headed for some rendezvous where possibly he would meet the persons who had employed him in this lawless undertaking. Between leaving the car and entering the building, wherever that might be, there would surely be some slight chance of breaking away, and Lawrence determined to be ready to take advantage of it the instant the car stopped.

Thus it was that, when the automobile began to slow down and swerve in toward the curb, Barry held himself tense, with feet braced in such a manner that he was ready to launch himself straight at his companion in the twinkling of an eye, snatch the automatic, and fling himself from the car to freedom.

"No monkeyshines, now!" admonished the unknown suddenly, as if reading Lawrence's very thoughts. "You try to make a get-away, and you'll wish you hadn't."

"Why should I?" Barry returned, with light indifference. "I'm too anxious to see you get yours, to leave just now."

The only answer was an inarticulate grunt. The car skidded a little, then stopped with a jerk. Lawrence was waiting breathlessly for the pressure of the revolver to be removed, when suddenly his heart sank into his boots.

From the sidewalk came the low murmur of voices, followed almost instantly by the jerking open of the door. In a single swift glance he took in the shadowy forms of three men grouped around the car—four, if he counted the chauffeur, who was slipping out of his seat to join them.

It would be folly to try to break away against such odds as this. He would

do better to submit without resistance and bide his time.

CHAPTER XXIV.
THE EMPTY HOUSE.

The instant Lawrence stepped out of the car he was surrounded by the four men, and hurried across the icy sidewalk. There was a brief glimpse of a row of squalid-looking buildings, unfamiliar in their monotonous regularity, then he was pushed into the shadowy doorway, through the door, which yielded to a touch, and thence to the pitchy blackness of a hall where the echo of their footsteps sounded hollow and ringing, as in an empty house.

A brief pause followed, broken only by low whispering. Then the door closed, and, as the purring of the motor car died away in the distance, a round, brilliant spot of light suddenly flashed out of the darkness, showing Barry the uncarpeted stairs near which he stood, the dingy railing, and, more dimly, the figures of the men grouped about him.

"Ed, you and Jim stay down here," the detective ordered tersely. "Beat it upstairs, Billy, and light the lamp. Now, Mr. Lawrence," he went on, with a sort of mocking politeness, after his man had disappeared into the darkness above, "I'll have to ask you to follow. Your room is all ready for you."

With a slight shrug of indifference, Barry obeyed. From his manner one would have supposed him quite resigned to the unpleasantness of the situation. He seemed to look neither to the right nor left, but, as he reached the second floor, with the detective close behind, he shot a swift, comprehensive glance around, without turning his head.

In that brief instant, aided by the feeble yellow light streaming out of the back room, he saw that there were but three doors opening on the narrow hall. One led into the lighted room; another, close beside it, and also standing partly open, seemed to give access to a small back bedroom or bathroom, while the third was at the other end of the hall, close to the shadowy outlines of the stairs leading up to the third floor.

Having taken in this, much without apparently noticing anything, Lawrence walked directly into the lighted room, and stood in the middle of it, staring around with a disgusted expression.

The place was absolutely bare, and filthy to a degree. Opposite the door

was a rough wooden mantel above a boarded-up fireplace, on which stood a common glass lamp. Not another stick of furniture was visible. The paper hung in strips from the dingy walls, and the floor seemed covered with the dust of ages. There was a door which led apparently into the front room, and a single, uncurtained window, the panes of which were so incrusted with dirt as to make a shade unnecessary.

Barry's lips curled scornfully as he met the keen, dark eyes of the detective.

"A nice hole!" he commented disgustedly. "And how long do you propose keeping me here?"

The man whom he addressed shrugged his shoulders slightly, and glanced at his subordinate.

"That'll do, Billy," he said. "Just wait in the hall outside."

When the fellow had departed, he closed the door, and turned again to the Harvard man. He still held the automatic in his hand, but Barry observed that it was no longer covering him.

"Now, don't get in a stew," the detective said. "An hour or so of this ain't going to hurt you any."

"It's outrageous!" Lawrence exclaimed angrily. "Here I'm giving a theater party to-night, and have the tickets in my pocket. What do you suppose my friends will think when I don't show up? If you don't smart for this, it won't be my fault, I can tell you!"

"Keep your shirt on," drawled the detective. "Losing your temper won't help you."

He strolled over to the wooden mantelshelf, and leaned one elbow negligently on it, idly snapping the switch of the pocket flash light on and off.

"So you really don't know what you're wanted for?" he went on, in a semi-jocose tone.

"I haven't the faintest idea," Barry answered.

"That's rich," chuckled the other, laying the pocket battery on the mantel. "Not a thing lying heavy on your conscience, I s'pose?"

"There is not!" Lawrence retorted sharply. "And I'll tell you this: You've made one big mistake, and I should hate awfully to be in your shoes when I tell my story in a station house or courtroom. If you're on the regular force—which I doubt very much—you'll be broken into little bits. If you're just a private citizen from one of these bureaus, you'd better make plans for skipping the country, for I give you my word I mean to push this to the limit."

The flash of worried doubt which swept across the detective's face, and was gone in an instant, was all Barry needed to confirm the suspicion which had been growing in his mind for the past few minutes. The fellow did not know what his prisoner was wanted for. That was one of the reasons why he had remained in

the room. What was the motive of these apparently casual hints and questions. He did not know, and he was beginning to be very anxious to find out.

Probably he had been hired to kidnap Lawrence, and bring him to this house without being told anything definite as to Barry's supposed misdoings, beyond a vague tale of some lawlessness said to have been committed abroad.

It would be simply a waste of valuable time to linger longer here trying to learn the impossible, and Lawrence had no wish to stay until the arrival of his real enemies. He was intensely curious to meet them face to face, and find out something of the cause of the extraordinary persecution, but he much preferred choosing his own time and place.

"I think before this time to-morrow," Barry went on swiftly, "that you'll be mighty sorry you ever undertook the case."

The detective shrugged his shoulders in an affectation of bravado, which did not deceive the captive for a second. The latter had not stirred from the middle of the room, but now his muscles were tense and ready for action, and every nerve quivered as he awaited the slightest opening.

"I ain't worrying a whole lot," the dark-haired man returned. "I reckon you're the one who'll be sorry you ever bumped up against me. There ain't a doubt in——"

In his attempt to show how little he was disturbed by his prisoner's threats, he had been swinging the automatic negligently back and forth on one crooked finger. Either his suppressed nervousness got the better of him, or his mind was so busy with other things that he did not realize how careless he had become. At all events, the weapon slipped off his finger and struck the floor with a thud.

Like a flash he stooped to snatch it up. But Barry was even quicker. With a single lithe spring he had leaped across the intervening space. One hand, the muscular fingers tightly clenched, caught the detective on the chin, and sent him backward with a crash which made the floor shake. The other arm, outstretched, swept the glass lamp from the mantel, and caught up the pocket flash light in one and the same motion.

There was a yell of fury from the man on the floor, a splintering of glass, then darkness—inky, pitchy, smothering darkness—dropped like a heavy pall over the room, and blotted everything.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FACE IN THE CANDLELIGHT.

A second later the hall door was burst open, and a voice sounded from the opening: ”What’s up, Joyce? Has he got away?”

A flood of imprecations answered him as the detective scrambled painfully from his feet.

”You fool!” he roared. ”Strike a light, quick! Don’t stand there like a dummy. Strike a light! He’s in this room—he can’t get away! Where in blazes is that gun of mine? A-h!”

The tiny, wavering flame from a match clove the inky blackness, and showed Joyce crouching near the mantel, the recovered automatic ready in one hand, and his keen, dark eyes roving swiftly about the barren place.

For a moment he did not move a muscle; then, with an oath, he sprang to his feet. The flickering flame made odd, grotesquely dancing shadows in the corners of the room, but aside from the detective and his assistant by the door, there was no one else there. Lawrence had disappeared.

”He’s slipped into the front room!” snapped Joyce. ”He can’t get out of the house—that’s impossible! Where’s my flash light? Yell down to the boys to be on the lookout. They mustn’t stir from the foot of the stairs. You go down and get that lantern out of the kitchen. We’ve got to have light, and my blooming battery’s gone.”

He had scarcely spoken when the match burned out, and darkness infolded them again.

It was during this second period of eclipse that Barry softly pushed open the door of the front room, and emerged into the hall. He heard the detective’s angry voice roaring out orders from the back room, and was conscious, also, of excited talking in the hall below. Escape that way was quite impossible, and, since there was no time to hunt up a convenient fire escape, the only thing left was the roof.

With nerves tingling, and a certain exhilaration possessing him at the thought of outwitting this fellow who had been so annoying, Barry slid over to the stairs, and began to feel his way up them with extreme caution. He was not more than halfway up before the fellow clattering down for the lantern gave him a chance to take the remainder of the flight in two jumps without risk of being overheard. The next instant, however, he was halted in his tracks by the appearance of Joyce at the foot of the stairs.

As long as the fellow stood there it was impossible to move without being discovered, so Barry possessed his soul with patience, trusting that, when the light arrived, they would enter the front room first, and give him a chance to find a way to the roof.

Meanwhile, he stretched out one hand, and began to explore with his fingers everything within reach. The stairs curved sharply about three steps from

the top, and just around the corner Lawrence touched the handle of a door. From its position he knew that it could lead into nothing more than a shallow closet. On the other side of the narrow hall was nothing but smooth wall, with here and there a sagging strip of moldy paper. Underfoot the floor was as bare, carpetless as the rest of the house.

Presently the sound of thudding footsteps came to Barry's ears again, and a moment later the fitful, dancing gleams of light below told him that the man was hurrying back with the lantern.

"Hustle up, Billy!" Joyce cried impatiently. "You come along, too, Jim. Don't need more than one to stay by the door. He can't get past us."

Under cover of the noise below, Lawrence gripped the knob of the closet door, and wrenched it open. It came with a reluctant screech of rusty hinges which sent his heart into his throat, but apparently the sound passed unnoticed. Joyce was giving rapid directions to his men, and, when one of them finally had been stationed at the door of the back room, the other two advanced to the front of the lower hall.

"Better come out peaceable, Lawrence," Barry heard him say. "You're cornered, and can't possibly get away."

There was no answer, of course. With a muttered exclamation, the detective thrust open the lower door, calling to his men to look sharp, and leaped into the room, followed closely by his companion with the light.

Instantly Barry pressed the switch of the pocket light, and flashed it swiftly around the hall. There was no sign of any ladder, or even a skylight. Was it possible there was no way to the roof? Desperate, he whirled around, and turned the shaft of light into the closet. His eyes fell on the lower rungs of a ladder, and he gave a sigh of relief.

There was not an instant to lose, for they would soon find that he had left the second floor. He meant to be more cautious than ever, but, supposing the closet to be as empty as the rest of the house, he gave no thought to the possible presence of obstacles. The result was that he struck an unseen shelf with his head and shoulders, and the next moment an empty can of some sort clattered down, and rolled out into the hall with noise enough to wake the dead.

There was a shout of surprise and triumph from below, followed by the sound of running feet, but Barry waited to hear no more. Slamming the door behind him, he darted up the ladder, one hand outstretched before him. When the fingers encountered a rusty bolt, he struck it out of the socket with one blow of his clenched fist. Then, with lowered head, he brought his powerful shoulders against the skylight with all the force of his trained muscles.

Bang! bang! bang! Three times he flung himself against something as immovable as rock. Bang! bang! The wooden covering creaked ominously, but

scarcely gave at all, and Barry groaned inwardly at the sudden recollection of the ice and snow which must be spread over it, sealing it most effectually.

Scrambling up another step, he placed his shoulders against the boards and heaved strenuously. As he struggled in desperation he heard his pursuers reach the hall below, and a hand rattled the knob of the closet door.

"He's in here, fellows," came in a muffled voice, then, just as the door was jerked open, admitting a stream of light to the dark hole, Lawrence gave a final heave, and tumbled his way out on the flat, snowy roof, white and gleaming in the brilliant starlight of the cloudless night.

Like a flash he had whirled around and slammed the cover back on the skylight. In another second he was running with long, lithe, silent strides across the roof.

Recklessly he leaped a low parapet to the next roof, raced across its narrow, white expanse, cleared the second parapet, and had almost reached the third when the lifting of the skylight behind him made him stop like a flash and huddle down behind a chimney.

For a second he crouched there, breathing hard. Barely six feet beyond was an abrupt descent to a lower roof. Just how much of a drop it was he could not tell, but it could scarcely be too great for him to make it. The houses all seemed much the same general height.

He wished that he had kept on to the parapet, and risked their seeing him. It would be much harder to do it now unobserved, yet he could not stay where he was. The minute they found his footprints in the snow they had only to follow the trail, and nab him by the chimney. What a fool he was not to have thought of that before!

A stealthy glance around the brick chimney showed him that two of the pursuers had emerged onto the roof, but were apparently waiting for the others. He had a moment more of grace, and instantly he began to back noiselessly toward the dividing wall.

He reached it safely; then, just as he was lowering himself over, some one sighted him, and sounded the alarm.

Barry dropped like a flash, and, landing, somewhat shaken, up, about six feet below, spun around, and started across the roof. Even in his haste he noticed that the snow here had been cleared away in a square space, about which were hung lines for drying clothes. There was no ice on the scuttle, either, and without a moment's hesitation he dropped on his knees and pulled hard at the wooden frame.

It was unlatched, and, with a gasp of joy, Lawrence jerked it up, and slid into the opening. In his haste his foot missed the ladder, and the scuttle, descending with cruel force on his fingers, very nearly sent him tumbling into the hall below.

He managed to keep his grip, however, till his feet were planted on the ladder. Then, with a grunt of pain, he released his hands, and fairly flung himself down the remaining rungs.

At the bottom he paused a second, fumbling for the flash light. He realized that he was not much better off than he had been on the roof. Joyce and his gang would certainly suspect where he had gone, and, ten to one, would follow. He could not linger, therefore, and the instant he found the location of the stairs he hurried down them, praying inwardly that he might meet no one before he reached the door.

The thought had scarcely passed through his mind before he realized that some one was coming up from the hall below. He stopped and listened. It was a slow, heavy tread, but the sound of skirts brushing against the wall told him that it was a woman. She held a candle in her hand, and the wavering light, flickering against the wall, kept pace with her slow ascent.

Would she stop at the second floor, or come on to where he stood in a curve of the next flight of stairs? That was the question which pounded monotonously through Barry's brain as he watched that spot of light creep higher and higher. If she did not have to pass him, there was a good chance of his escaping after she had gone into her room. If not—

As she climbed the last step and stood there, panting heavily, Lawrence scarcely dared take a breath. Then, with infinite thankfulness, he saw her step forward, and turn the knob of one of the doors opening off the passage. The latch clicked, and in a moment more she would have been out of the way, had not there come to her ears the unmistakable sound of the scuttle being raised.

With a sharp ejaculation of surprise and fear, she turned about, and took a quick step straight toward where Lawrence was crouching. For a second the latter stood as one paralyzed, staring at the face now plainly visible in the light of the candle.

It was the coarse, evil face of Mrs. Kerr, his old landlady. He had stumbled into that very house on Twenty-fourth Street which had been the scene of so much despair and misery, and which he had never expected to see again.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE HAND OF FATE.

The woman did not come forward immediately, but stood staring upward, in the attitude of one listening. It was a very brief space of time, to be sure, but it gave Barry a chance to pull himself together and recover from the petrifying amazement that had stricken him at the discovery that he was actually in his old lodging house.

When at length another sound from above started her toward him again, Lawrence had recovered his wits, and seized upon the only possible chance which was left him.

"Good evening, Mrs. Kerr," he said blandly, leisurely descending the remaining few steps. "I left a few small personal belongings in my room, and——"

The expression on the woman's face as she staggered back against the railing was so extraordinary that it fairly took Barry's breath away. There was amazement, of course, and a quick gasp of fear escaped her lips, but in a second every other emotion was swallowed up in a kind of triumphant gloating which was horrible to see.

"So you're back," she said, in an odd, suppressed voice. "I begun to think I wasn't never goin' to see you, an' here you are of your own free will Luck, I calls it—nothin' but luck."

Lawrence's first thought was that she had been drinking, and a moment later he saw that she was creeping closer to him, with a crablike motion, at the same time maneuvering so as to block the narrow passage.

What her idea was he could not conceive, but he had no desire to be detained a second longer, especially as the sounds from above told him that Joyce and his men were already descending the ladder from the roof.

"Isn't it luck?" he agreed, smiling genially. "Of course, I never thought I'd find you up at this hour, but, since I have, I may as well give you what you want right now."

He thrust one hand into an inner pocket, as if to produce something, and the next instant had leaped forward, snatching the candle from her as he did so. As he darted past her in the darkness, he felt a futile clutch of hands on his coat, and then her voice was raised in a series of piercing shrieks: "Help! Murder! Jim! Jim!"

Taking the stairs in great leaps, Lawrence thought he had never heard such bedlam in his life. The woman continued to scream at the top of her voice. Somewhere a door was jerked open, and a man's harsh voice, adding to the tumult, accelerated Barry's flight.

He flung himself at the door, one hand instinctively touched the spring lock, while the other yanked it open. He had the wit to remember a second antiquated catch, seldom used, and ponderous to undo, and promptly snapped it down before slamming the door behind him.

Without an instant's hesitation, he ran straight toward Tenth Avenue. Fortunately the street was dark and deserted, and he reached the corner without encountering any one.

As he whirled around into the avenue, he looked swiftly backward, and saw the door of Mrs. Kerr's house burst open, throwing a shaft of light out across the icy sidewalk. Into that path of light two figures hurried—one tall, thin, and wearing a slouch hat; the other chunky and shapeless.

"My dear landlady and Jim, whoever he may be," Lawrence murmured, as he started briskly south on the avenue. "I wish 'em the joy of their hunt for me. What an old harridan that woman is! She positively made my flesh creep when she was coming at me in the hall. Wonder what she was after?"

He did not waste much thought on the matter, however. Very likely the woman was drunk, and it was rather startling for her to encounter a man who did not belong in the house. At all events, it was immaterial. He had managed to get out of the scrape successfully, so he devoted himself to brushing off his coat and hat, and putting on his gloves, while hastening toward the car line on Twenty-third Street.

He was more than thankful for the whim which had caused him to wear a soft hat of black velour. It had stayed with him through all the excitement of the evening, and now needed only a deft touch or two to make it quite presentable.

As the car bowled eastward at a good clip, Barry chuckled one or twice at the thought of Joyce's discomfiture when driven back to the roof by those piercing shrieks from Mrs. Kerr.

"He'll be mad as a wet hen," he thought amusedly. "Serves him right, though, for trying such a game."

Altogether, Barry was very much pleased with the way things had turned out. While he had come no nearer to solving the mystery which seemed to surround him, he had at least learned the lesson of caution, and it would be an extremely difficult matter to catch him unawares as he had been caught to-night.

He was very much annoyed, of course, at having been forced to break his engagement with Jock and the others, but that had not been his fault, and his explanation must appease them. It was only half past ten now, and perhaps he could get hold of the Yale man that night. Hamersley would certainly be entertained by a recital of the evening's experiences.

Entering the lobby of the St. Albans a little later, he was hurrying toward the telephones with that idea in mind, when one of the clerks stopped him.

"Just a moment, Mr. Lawrence," he called. "Here's a letter for you, which should have been delivered yesterday. It was sent to the St. Athol by mistake, and reached us after you went out this evening."

Barry took the letter, and stared at the unfamiliar writing in a puzzled way.

Then he tore open the envelope, and hastily took out the several sheets of closely written note paper it contained. The next instant, as he caught sight of the inclosure, his heart began to beat loudly and irregularly, flooding his face with flaming crimson.

It was a crisp, new ten-dollar bill, and, though he turned the pages with slightly trembling fingers to find the signature, it really was not necessary. Deep down in his heart he knew that it was from Shirley Rives.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LETTER.

For a moment or two Lawrence stood there staring at the name. Then, pulling himself together, he turned on his heel, and made for the elevator. Whatever the letter contained, it was impossible to read it down there.

Once in his sitting room, he switched on the lights, and, flinging himself into a chair without even taking time to remove his coat, plunged into a perusal of the letter:

MY DEAR MR. LAWRENCE: As I sit here in a perfectly charming boudoir, done in blue, with lovely old mahogany furniture, the things you said last night about the strangeness of chance come irresistibly back to me. I could not help but feel then that fate or destiny, or what you will, must have had something to do with bringing us together, and perhaps that was why I let myself drift with the current in a manner which was, to say the least, decidedly unconventional. Really, you know, I'm not in the habit of taking supper and favors from men I've never seen before!

The story you told of what had happened to you was unreal enough in all conscience, but never for an instant did I imagine when I left you that something infinitely more extraordinary, something a thousand times more impossible, was coming to me.

Lawrence started and frowned with perplexity; but he reflected that scarcely anything could be unbelievable after what had already transpired. He went on reading eagerly:

It is much too long to put into writing. Besides, I have a notion that I'd like to tell it to you, so I'll only give you enough to whet your appetite and stir your curiosity.

I went into that house on Forty-eighth Street despairing, hopeless—perhaps not quite so hopeless as I had been two hours before; but, still, I had little enough to hope for. I tried my best to keep you from seeing how utterly miserable I was and how completely at my wits' end, but I think you guessed something of it in spite of my efforts.

I was there for less than ten minutes, then I came away in a private brougham with a woman I had never seen before. There were two men on the box. Inside there were furs—soft, luxurious furs—into which one could snuggle down and be warm at last. There was some sort of electric heating apparatus, and I could smell the perfume of roses clustered in a hanging vase. Do you wonder that I thought of Cinderella and the pumpkin coach, and was afraid it would all vanish into nothing?

We drove to a splendid house on the avenue, and there I was made to go to bed at once in a wonderful, carved, four-poster, with silk hangings. This morning it was still there; it had not vanished in the night. I had not dreamed it, or, if I had, I am dreaming still.

Lawrence laughed aloud; but he wondered if he himself were not dreaming. But he finished the letter with no lessening of interest:

At first I went about in a sort of daze, but, little by little, I'm becoming convinced that it is real. We have been shopping all morning, and somehow the quantities of lovely clothes which are constantly arriving are not like dream clothes. There is a dance, to-night, too. Fancy going to a dance again! That's almost the most impossible thing of all. It isn't really so long since the last one, but I feel as if I had lived a thousand years since then.

Isn't it stranger than any fairy tale? Do you wonder that I feel as if this wasn't Shirley Rives at all, but some one else? And, stranger than anything else is the fact that I owe it all to you and your helping me through the "Gates of Chance" last night. If I had come straight to Sally's, as I meant to, nothing would have happened. If we had not met in the square, if we had not lingered at the restaurant, even, nothing would have happened. If one single thing had occurred to vary the time of my reaching the house by five short minutes, there would be nothing to tell you now.

I know I'm perfectly hateful not to give away the secret—you see, I'm taking it for granted that you are a little curious about it—but I have a selfish desire to tell it to you; to try and show you something of how strange and wonderful and utterly staggering it has all been to me. I'm sure you'll let me, won't you—soon? Sincerely yours, SHIRLEY RIVES.

Below the girl's signature was written the address of a house in the most exclusive section of Fifth Avenue, a section where dwelt only people of great wealth, and usually of equally great social position.

Lawrence stared at it, his face dazed and bewildered. Then he turned back to the first sheet, and read the letter slowly through to the very end again. It was utterly baffling and incomprehensible, yet through it all there ran a strain of perfect truth and high-minded sweetness which was unmistakable. The realization of this, coupled with a remembrance of what he had once tried to make himself believe about Shirley Rives, brought a rush of color to his cheeks, and an expression of shame into his pleasant face.

"She's true-blue to the very core," he murmured at length. "I can't imagine what sort of luck it is that's come to her; the whole business sounds like a tale from the 'Arabian Nights.' But I know one thing—I was the biggest fool in all creation ever to have doubted her for a second."

He glanced again at the end of the letter, and a swift smile curved his sensitive lips.

"Will I come and let her tell me all about it?" he said aloud. "Will I? And soon? Well, I guess yes!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HOUSE ON THE AVENUE.

Though he tried his house and one or two other places where Jock Hamersley was likely to be at this hour, Lawrence was unable to get his friend on the phone. Somehow, he was not altogether sorry. He certainly owed an apology and some sort of reparation to the men he had been forced to leave in the lurch in this abrupt, seemingly ill-mannered fashion, but he was just as well pleased to have it all put off until to-morrow. With a mind full of Shirley Rives and her extraordinary letter, he did not particularly fancy the idea of doing anything but just sit there in his room and think it all over.

Having taken off his things, and made himself comfortable, he read her letter over for the third time, gaining nothing from this perusal save an intense desire to see the girl as soon as he could, and hear from her own lips the details of the amazing good fortune which had come so opportunely.

Of course, it could not be stranger than his own experiences during the past three days; but the manner in which it had followed so close upon the heels of that, brought again to Barry that odd feeling of being in the grip of circumstance, the conviction that fate was molding her life as well as his, without consulting

either of them even in the smallest detail.

"I suppose it wouldn't be at all the thing to call there in the morning," he thought impatiently, as he was getting into bed, long after midnight. "Hang it all! I don't see how I'm going to restrain myself until the conventional hour."

While he was breakfasting the next morning, however, he resolved to set convention at defiance for this once, at least. Almost as fervent as his desire to hear Miss Rives' story was his eagerness to set himself right with her. He did not wish her to labor an hour longer than was absolutely necessary under the impression that his failure to call in answer to her letter was due to any possible lack of interest on his part. He must see her this morning, and so he determined to send up some flowers with his card, and the intimation that he would follow himself in an hour or so.

On his way out he stopped at the desk to obtain some more money from the wallet he had left in the safe. He had done this every morning, but now, as he opened it, the realization came to him for the first time that his supply was growing low. The thousand dollars had been placed in one compartment, leaving his expense money in another, and, as he took out about a hundred dollars, he was astonished to find how comparatively little was left. He was not conscious of having been especially extravagant, but he had obeyed the unknown donor's injunctions to the letter, and had not spared expense.

"By Jove!" he muttered, as he left the hotel and walked toward Fifth Avenue. "I'll have to go slow, or I'll be dipping into my capital. It's astonishing how money melts away on comparatively little things. I must begin to economize."

Evidently he did not mean to begin quite at once, however. He made his way directly to an expensive flower shop on the avenue, where he selected a huge box of very costly roses, wrote a line on his card, and ordered them sent at once to Miss Rives. As he left the shop he consoled himself for the flatness of his bill case by the reflection that this was a private matter, which could be paid out of his own money.

The hour and a half which followed seemed to pass on leaden wings. Barry had never known a period of time to drag so boringly. He could not enjoy his morning walk, and, though he had several errands to do, which ordinarily would have consumed the better part of an hour, it seemed as if the salesmen were conspiring to attend to his wants with positively supernatural briskness.

"If I were in a hurry," he thought crossly, "I'd cool my heels in each store for fifteen or twenty minutes. That's always the way when you want to kill time."

At length, when the hands of his watch had crept around to eleven, Barry squared his shoulders with a determined gesture, and, making his way swiftly through from Broadway to the Waldorf cab stand, procured a taxi which deposited him less than ten minutes later before a very imposing residence up in

the seventies, facing the park.

And, now that he was actually here, and the taxi dismissed, a sudden, curious timidity began to besiege Lawrence. The marble front, with its heavy, ornamental carvings, was almost oppressive in its atmosphere of wealth and exclusiveness. The wonderfully wrought bronze grille which guarded the imposing approach, even though one of the doors was flung back, revealing the elaborate mosaic of the square entrance, seemed fashioned for the sole purpose of excluding the presumptuous stranger who sought admission.

The amazing contrast between this palatial residence and the desperate, homeless girl he had encountered in Madison Square little more than forty-eight hours before, struck Barry anew with startling force, and made him hesitate at the foot of the broad, shallow sweep of marble steps.

A dozen doubts and questions flashed through his mind in that brief pause. Then, with a swift, characteristic flinging back of his head, he thrust them from him in a flash.

"What a fool I am!" he muttered angrily. "I swore I'd never doubt her again, and I won't."

A second later he reached the entrance, and firmly pressed the electric button.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LAWRENCE PLEADS.

Almost on the instant of Lawrence's ringing the bell, the door was swung open by a footman in rich, quiet livery, who stood aside while Barry entered, and, having closed the door, led the way down the paneled hall.

"Is Miss Rives at home?" Lawrence asked briefly.

"This way, if you please," said the footman noncommittally, indicating a tiny elevator hidden behind hangings of rich damask.

The car ascended noiselessly, and Lawrence stepped out into a wide hall, the walls of which were lined with tapestries, while underfoot were heavy Persian rugs, laid upon some sort of matting which made them thick and soft as velvet. The footman took Barry's card, and, crossing noiselessly to a doorway, drew aside the hangings.

"Will you wait in the drawing-room, sir?" he murmured.

The room which Barry entered was long and lofty, and almost oppressive in its wealth of furnishings. The richly carved mantel of mellow Caen marble looked as if it might have been transported entire from some French chateau. The walls were hung with tapestries, while here and there a wonderful painting gave relief with its gorgeous coloring and the richness of its carved frame. The chairs, tables, cabinets, and other pieces of furniture which filled the great room were antiques of rare beauty and value; while scattered everywhere were carved ivories, miniatures, exquisite old silver, and wonderful porcelain in such bewildering array that Barry decided it would take weeks properly to examine and appreciate each separate piece.

The room was filled with flowers in great bowls and vases, and the air was heavy with their fragrance. Lawrence was wondering whether his roses were among the masses of lilies and violets, when the soft swish of trailing garments brought him hurriedly to his feet just as the velvet hangings were parted and Shirley Rives stood on the threshold.

"It was very nice of you to come, Mr. Lawrence," she said as he sprang forward to greet her; "and your roses are charming."

"It's you who are nice to receive me at such an hour," Barry returned quickly. "I know I should have restrained my impatience until this afternoon, but your letter only came last night—it was sent first to the St. Athol—and I simply couldn't wait." He hesitated, looking down into her eyes, and a slow flush crept into his face. "You see," he went on bravely, "I was at Sherry's myself on Tuesday night."

For a second she stared at him in astonishment. "At the dance?" she exclaimed. "Why, I never——"

"Of course you didn't," Lawrence returned swiftly. "I came away very soon."

"But you saw me?"

Her tone was perplexed, and a tiny, puzzled wrinkle had leaped into her smooth, low forehead. Then, as Barry nodded, a sudden gleam of comprehension flashed into her dark eyes.

"You saw me!" she exclaimed, in an odd voice. "And my letter never reached you until last night! What must you have thought? But come; let's sit down and talk comfortably."

She moved gracefully across the room to a great carved chair near one of the windows. Lawrence drew up another chair and sat down. For a second or two neither of them spoke; then the girl bent forward a little, her chin resting on one hand.

"Well," she questioned, "tell me what you thought?"

The flush had deepened in his face, and his muscular, well-shaped fingers were lacing and interlacing, an unconscious key to the perturbation of his mind.

Now that he had seen her again, his folly at having doubted her seemed more utterly absurd and idiotic than ever. He hated desperately to tell her the truth, yet he knew he must. The sooner it was over the better.

"I was a fool!" he said brusquely. "I thought you had been making sport of me. I thought you had made up that whole story for a lark. I realized long before your letter came that such a thing was impossible; but at the dance I was simply stunned. I had just come from the house on Forty-eighth Street, where they told me you had never been there. Your friend, Miss Barton, said she had not seen you in months, and, after what you——"

The girl started slightly. "Of course!" she murmured. "I forgot all about Sally. But surely Mrs. Weston must have——"

"She was away. I didn't see her. The maid said you weren't there, and certainly hadn't been there overnight. Miss Barton knew nothing whatever about you. It looked as if the earth had opened and swallowed you up, so you can imagine my feelings when I caught sight of you at the dance. When I left you the night before, you hadn't a friend in the city but this stenographer, or a cent——"

"You forget the ten dollars," she murmured demurely, her long lashes sweeping her cheeks as she played with a jeweled chain hanging from her neck.

"That didn't count," he retorted.

"Not in the way you mean, perhaps," she supplemented. "And so you went from Mrs. Weston's to the dance, and saw me there?"

"N-not directly. It was too early, and I was troubled and worried to know what had become of you. I drove around a little, and walked through the square——"

Her lids suddenly lifted, and she looked oddly at him.

"Madison Square?" she questioned swiftly.

He nodded. "Yes. I—er—just wanted to walk a little where it was quiet and I could think. Then I joined my friends, and drove with them to Sherry's. I hadn't been there half an hour before I saw you."

"I suppose it did seem a trifle odd," she remarked, glancing out of the window.

"Odd doesn't quite express it. There you were in a wonderful gown with pearls and things, and talking to three or four men at once as if you'd known them all your life. Of course, I couldn't believe my senses at first; and when at last I was sure, I—well, it was all so bewildering and impossible that I couldn't seem to stay there."

"You mean you couldn't stay because you thought I'd been deceiving you?" she said quietly.

"There didn't seem to be any other explanation," he pleaded. "Next day I came to my senses, and knew that there must be some other reason. Of what it

could be I hadn't the most remote conception; but I knew that you weren't the sort to make believe to that extent; and it was a big relief, I can tell you."

He hesitated a second, and bent forward slightly, his forehead wrinkled and his eyes fixed intently on her lovely face.

"Please forgive me," he begged, "and admit that there were extenuating circumstances."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE TANGLED WEB.

The girl's lids had drooped again, hiding the expression in her eyes, while the rest of her face told Barry nothing. He was just beginning to wonder whether she was very angry, when suddenly she threw back her head, and her lips parted in a peal of low laughter.

"Of course there were!" she exclaimed. "How absurd you are to take it so seriously, Mr. Lawrence! If I'd been in your place, I should have hated a girl I thought had played me such a trick. I think you're very nice, indeed, not to have thought worse things about me than you did, and I really haven't anything to forgive."

"You're sure of that?" he asked eagerly, his face glowing.

"Perfectly! And now that's over," she went on briskly, "don't you want to hear my fairy tale?"

"You bet I do!" he asserted, with more force than elegance. "I've been eaten up with curiosity ever since your letter came. It sounded as wildly impossible as an Arabian Night."

She laughed. "It was—it is yet. I'm really not quite certain that it isn't all a wonderfully vivid dream; though, as I wrote you, the clothes do seem awfully convincing. You know, a person never by any chance dreams the sort of dresses one would like to have. They're always utterly impossible."

She clasped one knee with both hands in a boyish way, and fixed her dancing eyes upon his face.

"I was a little frightened when I said good-by that night," she began. "So many horrid things had happened that I wasn't even sure of Mrs. Weston, or Sally, or anything. I rang the bell, and the door was opened so suddenly that I jumped."

”I wondered at the time how any one could get up from the basement so quickly,” Lawrence commented interestedly.

”You waited?” she questioned. ”That was good of you. Well, Mrs. Weston was already in the hall with a lady who seemed on the point of going out. I didn’t pay much attention to her except to notice that she was beautifully gowned and had quantities of wonderful jewels. You see, I wanted to find out whether Sally was still in the house, so I turned directly to Mrs. Weston, and started to ask her. I’d spoken scarcely half a dozen words before the other woman caught me by the arm and drew me over to the light. If she hadn’t stared at me so strangely, I suppose I’d have wondered what in the world she was doing in such a place; for her pearls were really extraordinary, and the house—well, you know there was nothing especially high class about it. But she just stared and stared in the oddest way imaginable; then suddenly she cried out: ’Who are you, child?’

”The queer way she snapped out the words—it reminded me of bullets shot out of a gun—almost took my breath away; but I managed to tell her my name. It was fortunate she still held my arm; otherwise I’m sure I should have collapsed in sheer astonishment.

”’I knew it!’ she exclaimed, in that extraordinary choppy manner. ’I knew it the minute I set eyes on you. I’m your aunt.’”

”Your aunt!” gasped Barry.

”Yes, my aunt. Fancy! Whenever I think of it now I laugh. It was really screamingly funny, you know, to be told by a perfect stranger, who looks rather like a drum major, that she’s an aunt you have never heard of. I didn’t laugh then, though. I thought she was crazy, and was wondering how in the world I should get away from her, when all at once I remembered that mother did have a sister very much older than herself who had lived abroad almost all her life. She was eccentric to begin with, and married unhappily; and finally, when mother was engaged, she was terribly opposed to it; and the result was a quarrel which kept them apart all the rest of their lives. All this went through my mind like a flash; and I was so taken back that I could only stammer: ’You’re—not—Aunt Beverly?’

”’Of course I am!’ she snapped back. ’What other aunts have you got, I’d like to know?’

”And then she began to ask me questions as fast as she could talk. She wanted to know what I was doing in New York, why I was wearing such dreadful clothes, how I dared be out on the streets alone at such an hour, and a dozen other things. I suppose you’ll think I’m hateful, Mr. Lawrence, but all at once I felt perfectly furious that she should have all those wonderful diamonds and pearls and lovely clothes, and probably quantities of money, while I hadn’t even a coat to wear. And so I told her everything she wanted to know, without mincing matters in the least; and for once she had nothing to say.

”She dropped the gold bag she was carrying; and, though she was quick enough in bending over for it, she was a long time straightening up again; and, when at last she did speak, there was something in her voice which hadn’t been there before.

”’Come, my dear,’ she said quietly. ’It’s time we were starting home.’

”The things which happened after that were much more like a dream than any real dream I ever had. She called Mrs. Weston Janet when she said good night; and, when we went out, there was a private brougham waiting in the street, exactly as if it had been conjured up by a magic wand. There was no carriage in sight when we came through the street, was there?”

Barry shook his head. ”No, but one passed me near Eighth Avenue,” he answered, struck by a sudden recollection.

”Really? That must have been it, then. Well, we came here, and I’ve been in this miraculous walking dream ever since. At breakfast next morning, Aunt Beverly announced, in that gruff way of hers, that she intended to adopt me. She said she was a sour old woman who for years had tried to be happy by spending her money on herself alone. She hadn’t been happy, so now she was going to see if making other people happy would be any different. It seems that Mrs. Weston was an old friend whose husband died leaving her nothing but debts; and Aunt Beverly’s visit there last night was to do something for her. That’s all, I think. Of course, there are surprises every minute, for Aunt Beverly is incredibly wealthy, and seems to delight in making my eyes pop out. There doesn’t seem to be anything one can wish for that she doesn’t conjure up in a minute or two.”

She paused, her deep, wonderful eyes fixed intently on Barry’s face.

”Isn’t it amazing?” she queried. ”Have you ever known anything quite so strange in all your life?”

”Never!” agreed Lawrence. ”It’s simply corking! And I can’t tell you, Miss Rives, how glad I am. Beside your experiences, my little strike of luck shrinks into nothingness.”

”But yours was the first,” the girl replied, with an odd earnestness. ”Yours was the turn of destiny’s wheel which started all the other mechanism into motion. But for you, I should be—well, I don’t know where.” She made an expressive gesture with her hands. ”I shudder whenever I think of it.”

”You mustn’t think of it, then,” said Barry. ”The future holds too many pleasant things for you to waste time upon the past.”

”Controlling one’s thoughts is not so easy as you seem to imagine,” Shirley retorted, glancing out of the window toward the snowy stretch of park across the avenue. ”Besides, I am not at all sure that I wish to forget the past—at least, all of it.”

Barry felt the blood rising into his face. What did she mean by that, or did

she mean anything? His hands closed tightly over the arms of the carved chair, and, by a great effort, he restrained the impulse to speak.

"Aunt Beverly is really splendid, and I'm becoming fonder of her every day," the girl went on, turning back. "At first I was a little afraid of her, until I found out that her brusque, snappy manner was only an affectation to hide what she really thinks and feels. I want you to know her, for I'm sure you'll like each other. You'll stay to luncheon, won't you?"

"I should be delighted," Barry returned impulsively, then bit his lips as he remembered. "But, unfortunately, I've an engagement," he went on after that momentary pause. "I hope you'll let me call soon again, though, when she is at home. I haven't heard what the rest of her name is yet."

"How stupid of me! She's Mrs. Ogden Wilmerding. Her husband has been dead about ten years, I believe, and this house and——"

But Lawrence heard no more. At the mention of that name, the smile seemed to freeze upon his lips, and something like a red-hot iron seared through his brain.

Mrs. Ogden Wilmerding! The eccentric widow of the traction magnate, who was said to be one of the five wealthiest women in New York! This accounted for the imposing house crammed with priceless works of art. This accounted for that sudden taking home of her niece and loading the girl with costly clothes and more costly jewels. It was more than likely that she would carry out her plan of adopting Shirley; it was just the sort of thing she would delight in doing. But stranger than anything else was the incredible fact that the girl should be ignorant of a name which was famous in New York.

With a tremendous effort Lawrence managed to pull himself together and nod understandingly as Miss Rives finished.

"That's very interesting," he said inanely. "But—er—had you never heard anything about this aunt before you saw her?"

"Almost nothing," she confessed. "She quarreled with father, you know, and he wouldn't allow her name to be mentioned in his presence. I suppose it got to be a sort of habit about the place; and, by the time I was old enough to take notice, the others had stopped talking about her, even when they were alone."

With a brain which seemed heavy and dead, Barry tried to carry on his part of the conversation naturally and lightly; but presently the effort became more than flesh and blood could stand, and he rose to take his leave.

"You'll come soon when Aunt Beverly is here?" Shirley questioned as she held out her hand. "I want very much to have you meet her."

Barry's fingers closed around hers, and he smiled naturally, heroically.

"Of course," he returned quickly. "I should be delighted to come any time you want me. You can call me at the St. Albans, and, if I'm not there, leave your

number with the clerk, and I'll get your message when I come in."

"That's splendid," she said. "I'll call very soon. Good-by, and thank you for the flowers."

With head high, Lawrence stepped through the doorway and let the velvet hangings fall into place behind him. But in the tapestry-lined hall he stumbled blindly, then, spurred by the presence of the footman, pulled himself together, and entered the elevator.

When at last he had donned his things and issued forth into the street, he turned instinctively southward without the slightest idea where he was going, and without a single backward glance at the upper window where a graceful, girlish form stood half revealed against a background of old rose damask.

His face was set and rather pale; his gray eyes showed dumbly a little of the despair which filled his soul at the presence of this tremendous, insurmountable barrier which had suddenly reared itself between him and the girl—he loved.

CHAPTER XXXI.

DESPAIR.

As Barry walked down the avenue, aimless and unseeing, he thought of many things; but the one which loomed up biggest was the colossal fortune controlled by Mrs. Ogden Wilmerding. It seemed to hang over him like some awful monster, hovering in the air ready to fall and crush him. It filled Lawrence with despair. He disliked the woman he had never seen because of her money, because she was Shirley's aunt, and, lastly and most intensely, because she had taken it upon herself to cast the mantle of her wealth and position around the girl she had neglected and ignored for so many years.

Barry realized perfectly the selfishness of this point of view; but he could not help it. If only Mrs. Wilmerding had kept out of it things would have come right somehow. At least, there would have been left him the feeling that he and Shirley Rives were on equal terms. He would still have had the delight of knowing that there were many things he could do to help the girl, instead of having her transported to a plane so infinitely above him, and so inaccessible.

Bitterly he contrasted the untold millions belonging to this new-found relative of hers with his own miserable pittance. His very name was tarnished, though through no fault of his; and it would be utterly impossible for him ever to

harbor again the thoughts and hopes which had possessed him during the early part of his call.

Barry's abstraction was so great that he quite failed to notice the taxi which moved slowly out of a side street and trailed along the avenue about half a block behind. He walked straight on until, at length, happening to glance up, the looming front of the St. Regis reminded him of the terms of his bargain; and he promptly entered, though he did not feel at all like eating.

He had scarcely disappeared before the taxi drew up beside the curb, and a slim, dark fellow, immaculately dressed, stepped out. He paused by the open door, talking in an undertone with a man who remained inside; a man with broad, thick shoulders, a round, full face, and a Vandyke beard slightly tinged with gray.

For perhaps a minute they conversed in low tones. Then the door was slammed, and the taxi whirled on down the avenue, while the slim, dapper individual made his way promptly into the St. Regis, languidly surveyed the dining room from the doorway, and presently took his seat at a table just back of Lawrence.

The latter finished a very simple luncheon without so much as turning round, then made his way to the telephone operator. There was some delay in getting Hamersley's office; but, when the connection was made at last, he stepped into the booth, quite oblivious to the fact that the tall, dark fellow occupied the next one.

As Barry had half expected, Jock was out, so he left word for the Yale man to meet him at the Knickerbocker at five if he possibly could, and sauntered out of the hotel.

Listlessly he turned downtown, wondering what under the sun men of leisure did with their time. Somehow, the glamour which had enveloped him for the past few days was beginning to wear away. Once more he was desperately tired of doing nothing but lunch and dine and evade detectives. He wondered pettishly whether the man in black had been captured yet and taken back to his asylum, for it seemed impossible that any sane person could have acted in such an extraordinary manner. There were the detectives, to be sure; but perhaps they were all of a piece with the rest of the bewildering jumble. There seemed to be no reason or sense to what anybody did. They were probably all mad.

Lawrence was, in short, at odds with himself and the world. He would have given a lot to come face to face with some one he could sail into and pummel with all his might. It would be such a relief now to run into that smart Alec who had decoyed him to the house on Twenty-fourth Street last night.

Happily the mood did not long continue. An hour's brisk, almost feverish, walking brought with it a more sane outlook on life. When Barry strayed into a café on Times Square about half past three, more for lack of any other method of

passing the time than from any real desire for refreshment, he had quite recovered his poise.

He was making for a little table in the corner, when suddenly a hand clutched his coat and a vaguely familiar voice sounded in his ear.

"I say, Oscar, sit down here, unless you're too bally proud to be seen with me."

It was the Englishman who had puzzled him so at the dance at Sherry's, and for an instant Barry frowned. Then, struck by a sudden impulse, he smiled and dropped down in a chair opposite the other. The fellow didn't look like a bad sort, and he was sorely enough in need of diversion.

"Why should I be ashamed to be seen with you?" he asked lightly. "Where did you ever get that idea?"

The tall man's blue eyes widened. "Where'd I get it?" he echoed, in surprise. "Why, at that blooming dance, to be sure. You wouldn't speak to me then, old chap."

Lawrence tapped the bell.

"I beg your pardon, then," he said. "I was worried, and not really myself. What'll you have?"

When the waiter had taken their orders and departed, the Englishman screwed his monocle into his eye and sat regarding his companion for a minute in silence.

"Jolly glad of that," he said solemnly, at length. "Didn't seem like you to throw an old friend down. I couldn't understand it. Sure you weren't thinking of the bally rotten way I was forced to leave Cambridge, old chap?"

"Positive," Lawrence returned promptly. "I'd forgotten all about it." He hesitated an instant, and then went on at random: "Of course, that wasn't your fault, you know."

"Should say not!" The Englishman's tone was indignant; and Barry suddenly had a suspicion that, if the fellow had not taken too much already, the limit was not far off. While his enunciation was perfect, there was an expression about his eyes which was unmistakable.

"Should say not!" the other repeated. "You know jolly well John Brandon would never disgrace the old name. A plot against me—a beastly plot; that's what it was!"

He took a long drink, and sat staring oddly at Lawrence.

"Say, Oscar," he burst out abruptly, "you must have been in the States a bally while, by Jove!"

"I have," Barry smiled. "How did you guess it?"

"You talk just like these blooming Yankees; 'pon my soul, you do! I've been listening for that bit of an accent you used to have, old chap; and I give you my

word, it's gone—you've lost it. Funny thing; eh, what?"

For a second Barry sat silent, his interest thoroughly aroused. Was it possible that he was on the point of finding the key to the enigma which had so puzzled him.

"Accent!" he repeated the next moment. "Did my accent used to be so bad?"

Brandon laughed.

"Not bad," he chuckled. "Just enough to notice now and then. By Jove! Have you forgotten how we always said you'd be taken for a foreigner sooner or later? You wouldn't now, old chap. Give you my word, I'd think you were a blooming Yankee if I didn't know you so well."

CHAPTER XXXII.

AN EXTRAORDINARY INTERVIEW.

It was at least three-quarters of an hour later when Lawrence left the hotel and walked slowly toward Forty-second Street. He was puzzled, perplexed, and rather piqued; for, in spite of all his efforts, he had been unable to extract from the Englishman a single additional fact which would help him solve the problem which vexed him.

Brandon evidently took him for some one else, and the resemblance must have been astonishingly great; for it was evident that the Briton had spent a year, if not more, with Barry's double at Cambridge.

It was the famous English university, of course, and not the equally well-known Massachusetts college. Lawrence had realized that very early in the talk; but, in spite of his repeated efforts, he had been unable to elicit a single additional particular concerning his double, save the fact that Oscar Nordstrom had evidently spent some years as a student in England. While Brandon had plainly been on the most friendly terms with Nordstrom, he seemed curiously ignorant regarding the man's antecedents.

"It's a queer thing from beginning to end," he murmured as he pushed through the whirling doors of the Knickerbocker. "I wish I could find out who I'm supposed to be. I'll wager anything that this would solve the whole mystery."

For a moment he stood in the lobby glancing mechanically around. It was much too early to expect Jock, and he had just made up his mind to pass the time comfortably in the smoking room, when suddenly his eyes strayed to the face of a

woman moving slowly and gracefully toward him from the elevator. She was tall and slim and very blond; and there was something about her attractive face which touched a chord in Barry's memory. Somehow the sight of her seemed to bring with it visions of a smooth, sandy beach, with the ocean stretching out beyond it, of merry sailing parties and clambakes, of drives and automobile excursions, and a host of other summer pleasures.

"Southampton, of course," he muttered. "But what the mischief is her name?"

The next instant their eyes met, and he saw that the recognition was mutual. She gave a sudden start, and stood for a second staring incredulously at him, a wave of color flaming into her face. Then, as he moved forward, she seemed to recover herself, and came slowly to meet him.

"How do you do?" she said, in a low, soft voice, which had in it an odd note which Barry could not quite fathom. "This is a very, very great surprise."

Hat in hand, Lawrence clasped the slender fingers she extended to him, and smiled. She was even more beautiful than he had remembered her.

"Isn't it?" he agreed pleasantly. "But here in New York one is constantly having surprises like this."

She raised her eyebrows a trifle. "Surely not quite—like this," she murmured.

He laughed, racking his brain desperately for the forgotten name. "No, of course I didn't mean just that," he returned. "This is an exception."

He hesitated a second, wondering if she would help him out; but she made no effort to speak. Leaning against the back of one of the crimson velvet chairs, she seemed content simply to look at him.

"Do you know," Lawrence exclaimed, forced to say something, "that when I saw you, my mind went back instantly to that wonderful, smooth beach, with the cloudless blue sky above and the waves dashing up almost to where we sat on the sand."

She smiled faintly. "I thought of that, too," she murmured; "but I saw it all in the moonlight. With that flood of silver dancing on the water, making everything almost as bright as day, except where the shadows of the trees behind were denser than ever."

Lawrence did not remember any trees near the Southampton beach; but, supposing this to be a sort of poetic license, he nodded agreement.

"It was a wonderful summer," he added. "Somehow it doesn't seem possible that three years have passed since then."

A low, silvery laugh issued from her lips, and she tapped him lightly on the arm.

"Always the same flatterer," she said softly. Suddenly her face grew pen-

sive. ”Does it really seem that long to you? I’ve often wondered. Men have so many things to occupy them—especially such men as you. A woman has only her remembrances to treasure zealously, and bring out now and then to gloat over. And memories are rather barren things sometimes.”

For an instant Lawrence stood aghast. What did she mean? Certainly he could recall nothing of a tender nature having passed between them, and her words were decidedly significant. He pulled himself together with an effort; but, before he could speak, she broke the silence.

”Your voice puzzles me,” she said abruptly. ”It doesn’t seem possible that you can have been long enough in America to have lost every trace of accent. Of course, it was never very noticeable; but one who knew you well could always tell.”

Barry’s jaw dropped, and his face took on an expression of utter astonishment. His accent—again! What in the world did it mean? Was it possible that she was taking him for——

”You were talking about that summer at Southampton, of course?” he managed to ask in an odd voice.

”Southampton?” she exclaimed, her eyes fixed intently on his face. ”I don’t understand. You don’t mean that you’ve forgotten—Cannes?”

Lawrence stood as one in a trance. ”Cannes!” he muttered hoarsely, wondering whether his brain was giving way. ”I have never been in Cannes in all my life.” Then, as the belated memory came to him at last, he gasped out: ”Aren’t you Miss Vera Pell?”

The woman’s face turned white, and one slim, gloved hand stole upward to her lips. Her eyes, wide, almost black with the emotion which was rending her, were fixed on his face with a look of absolute bewilderment.

”Are you jesting?” she managed to gasp at last. ”You know that I am Mrs. Walbridge Gordon. You could never forget—it is impossible.”

As Barry did not answer, a look of utter horror flashed into her face. She swayed a little, and put out one hand to steady herself.

”Who—are—you?” she asked, in a low, trembling voice. Then swiftly she laughed an uneven, hysterical sort of laugh. ”You are jesting with me. It is impossible that there should be two men so absolutely alike on earth. You must be——”

She broke off abruptly, and her eyes flashed past Barry’s shoulder to the door. The next instant a spasm of fear ripped swiftly across her face, and her white teeth came together over her lips with a cruel force which brought forth a tiny fleck of blood to glisten there.

”Go!” she whispered in a harsh voice. ”My husband is coming. He must not see you here.”

”But—who?” Lawrence managed to mutter.

”Go, I tell you—quickly!” she repeated. She was trembling violently; and that look of fear had come back into her face to stay. ”You must—for my sake.”

Without a moment’s hesitation Barry obeyed, slipping around a big pillar. With his back squarely toward the entrance, he passed quietly and easily through the crowd toward the telephones in the narrow passage behind the desk.

His brain was in a seething turmoil; but overtopping every other emotion was anger at the man who had arrived so inopportunely. If he could only have delayed a single, brief minute longer, the name trembling on the woman’s lips would have been uttered, and Lawrence would have possessed at last the key to the mystery which was driving him almost frantic.

Who was he supposed to be? Who was the man he so resembled? Why had he been given a thousand dollars to pass himself off for this unknown for a single week?

These and a dozen other questions passed swiftly through Barry’s brain as he perfunctorily fumbled the leaves of the telephone book to give some excuse for lingering there.

What did it all mean? Was he ever to know?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GONE!

Lawrence presently closed the book and ventured back into the lobby. A swift survey of the place told him that Mrs. Walbridge Gordon was no longer there; so he made his way to the café and settled down in one corner to wait for Hamersley.

He rather wished he did not have to talk to Jock just then. It would be a difficult matter at any time to explain what had happened to him the night before without breaking the pledge of secrecy he had made to the little man in black. Besides, at the present moment his mind was so full of the extraordinary experience he had just been through, and its probable relation to the mystery which surrounded him, that there was little room for anything else.

Nevertheless, when the big bulk of the Yale man loomed up before him, and that booming voice resounded in his ears, Barry was glad, after all, that he had come. When one is perplexed and muddled and utterly at sea, there is nothing like a good friend whose discretion can be trusted and whose interest and

sympathy is assured, even if he lacks the cleverness to suggest a solution of the difficulty.

The result was that Lawrence hailed Hamersley with pleasure, silenced the upbraiding tirade Jock started, and began to pour into his ears an account of the extraordinary things which had been happening for the past few days. He made no mention of Shirley Rives, and he refrained from saying anything about the man in black, the conditions the latter had imposed, or the money which had changed hands. He simply told his friend that he had undertaken certain trivial matters concerning which he was sworn to secrecy. What had occurred after that strange interview in the Pennsylvania Station, including mention of the Englishman and an account of his interview with Mrs. Walbridge Gordon, he had no hesitation in narrating; and, when the story was finished, the big fellow's eyes were starting out of his head.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, leaning back in his chair and staring at Lawrence. "If I didn't know you better, old boy, I'd say you'd been hitting the pipe. Shadowed, kidnaped, mistaken for another man, and—— Say! Did you find out what that woman's name was?"

"I did; but it wouldn't be quite right to mention it, would it? I only brought her in because it bore on the case."

"Hum! I suppose you're right. Awkward fix for a woman to be in, ain't it? I reckon she and this double of yours must have known each other pretty well."

"I judged so," Barry returned grimly. "Do you know, Jock, I made the mistake of my life in giving that detective the slip. If I'd only stayed quietly there in that empty house until his employers showed up, there isn't a doubt in my mind that by this time I'd be wise to the whole shooting match."

Hamersley nodded. "No doubt," he agreed. "Still, a fellow can't always plan so far ahead. When a thug holds you up with a gun and carries you off that way, the natural thing is to go him one better, and make a sneak. Jove! I wish I'd been along. That chase over the roofs must have been some time, all right."

"It wasn't quite so entertaining while it was happening," Barry said. "You could have taken my place, and welcome, if you'd been around."

"Why don't you turn the tables on this gang of snoopers?" inquired Hamersley suddenly.

Barry started slightly. "You mean that——"

"Turn around and follow them. Get after that duck with the beard. Strikes me he's the head one of the push. Get him in a corner and make him come over with the information. Two can play at the game, can't they?"

"By Jove!" Lawrence exclaimed jubilantly. "I believe you're right, Jock. That's a whopping good idea of yours, old fellow!"

"Didn't expect anything but good ones from me, I hope?" Hamersley re-

turned. ”That’s my specialty, you know.”

Filled with enthusiasm over the notion, they made haste to leave the hotel. There seemed no time like the present for starting in, so they leisurely paused on the sidewalk to give any spies who were about ample opportunity to get on the job; then, turning eastward, sauntered along the south side of Forty-second Street.

Unfortunately, the scheme did not seem to pan out as they expected. Though they kept the sharpest sort of a lookout around them, suddenly turning to glance into shop windows, whirling about as if to retrace their steps, and taking the most roundabout route possible to the Yale Club, not a suspicious pedestrian or taxi did they see.

”Too big a crowd, I reckon,” Hamersley sighed as they paused before the building on Forty-fourth Street. ”We’d better take dinner here and start out afterward when the streets aren’t so full.”

”I can’t dine with you, Jock,” Barry said regretfully. ”I’ve got a date.”

”Part of the game you couldn’t tell me about, I’ll bet,” the Yale man returned shrewdly. ”Well, meet me here at eight, then.”

Having left his friend, Lawrence returned at once to the St. Albans. As he took his key, the clerk handed him a letter, the precise, old-fashioned handwriting of which he recognized with a quick thrill.

”Wonder what the old geezer has to say now,” he said to himself as he sailed up in the elevator. ”If he’s thought up any more conditions, I’ll balk, hanged if I won’t.”

There were none, however. The letter contained five one-hundred-dollar bills and a few lines of symmetrical writing on a single sheet of note paper:

You are doing admirably. Keep on as you have begun, and use the inclosed in case your expense money does not hold out.

Barry scratched his head, and sat staring at the note.

”Well, I’ll be hanged!” he exclaimed. ”Don’t want me to do anything but spend money. It’s the weirdest thing I ever ran across, sure. What in creation does it mean? What does he get out of it? If I only——”

The room telephone tinkled imperatively; and, cramming money and letter into his pocket, Lawrence sprang up and took down the receiver.

”Hello!” came in a woman’s voice. ”Is this Mr. Lawrence—Mr. Barry Lawrence?”

”Yes, what is it?”

”Hold the wire, please. Mrs. Ogden Wilmerding wishes to speak to you.”

In the brief pause which followed, Barry stood there the picture of amazement. What in the world could Mrs. Wilmerding want with him? He did not know her—had never seen her. She was not the sort of woman to give her personal attention to such trivial matters as an invitation to call or to take dinner, anyway. Was it possible that anything had happened to——

”Mr. Lawrence!”

The name came snapping over the wires with the force of a pistol shot, and made Barry jump.

”Yes!” he gasped. ”This is Mr. Lawrence.”

”Get a taxi and come to my house at once. Do you understand?”

Barry flushed a little at the peremptory tone, coming as it did from a woman he fancied he disliked so greatly.

”But I am just dressing for dinner,” he expostulated, trying with not much success to make his tone cool and dignified.

”Dinner!” snapped the voice. ”What’s that to me? Go without your dinner, as I shall. My niece is gone!”

Lawrence felt an odd pounding in his head which made him certain that he could not have caught her meaning.

”Gone?” he repeated dazedly. ”Where?”

”Don’t be a fool! Should I be doing this if I knew? She went out after lunch and hasn’t returned. A letter was just delivered which—— But we’re wasting time. Are you coming?”

”Yes. At once. I’ll be there in five minutes.”

There was no response save a sharp click, and Barry turned from the instrument, his face ghastly. Shirley gone—disappeared! For a second he stood there, his lips moving. Then, with an exclamation of fury, he snatched hat and coat, tore open the door, and ran down the hall toward the elevator.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE PUZZLE GROWS.

It seemed an eternity to Barry Lawrence before the taxi finally swerved in toward the curb and stopped with a grinding jar before the marble-fronted house facing the park. He was on the sidewalk in an instant, and, telling the man to wait, ran

up the curving steps to the ornate doorway.

Evidently the footman was on the watch, for the door swung open before Barry had even time to press the bell, and, without a word, the servant took the visitor's coat and hat and led the way at once toward the elevator.

The long drawing-room was filled with a soft radiance from shaded lamps and ornate electric globes cunningly hidden in the heavy, carved cornice; and the amazing richness of its furnishing showed now to even better advantage than it had that morning.

But Lawrence was not thinking of furnishings. As he stepped through the wide doorway his eyes sought at once the single figure the great room contained—the figure of a woman of middle age, richly dressed and wearing many jewels, who had been pacing back and forth the length of the apartment, but who stopped abruptly as the man entered, and turned swiftly toward him. She was tall, a bit angular, sharp in her movements, and the wildest stretching of the imagination could not have conceived her handsome. But there was something about the way she carried her head, and an expression in the rather rugged face, which gave one an impression of bigness, mental and moral. Such a woman might be brusque and sharp and domineering; she could never be unjust or petty.

Barry took a few quick steps forward, and paused, a little embarrassed by the way those keen, dark eyes were fixed upon his face, as if searching the very depths of his soul. A faint touch of color came into his cheeks; but his eyes never wavered, and he held his head high. Presently, as the odd silence began to seem intolerable, his lips parted, as if he meant to speak, only to close again without a sound issuing. When at last the silence was broken, it was the woman who spoke.

"So you are Barry Lawrence," she said abruptly, with an oddly puzzled undercurrent in her voice.

He bowed.

"Humph!" she commented. "Read that!"

As she thrust her hand toward him, Barry saw that a letter was crumpled between her fingers. Without a word, he took it eagerly and twitched it open. It was written in a simple, running hand without any special characteristics, and was unsigned:

DEAR MADAM: This is to let you know that your niece is all right as long as you keep quiet and don't interfere. Very likely you think that money and position can do everything, but in this case you're wrong.

Nothing is going to happen to the girl unless you go running to the police; but if you do, you won't be a bit better off, and there'll only be a big scandal raised which will do irreparable harm to

her and her husband.

This is just a tip to keep quiet and let things run their natural course unless you want to do a lot of harm to all concerned.

Lawrence scarcely took in the meaning of the second paragraph. His brain was reeling. Her husband! He could not believe that he had read aright, and dazedly his eyes sought the paragraph and tried to focus themselves upon the amazing, impossible, dastardly words.

Before he could do so, however, an impatient movement came from the woman beside him, and her voice broke the stillness.

"Well?" she snapped. "Are you her husband?"

Barry flung back his head and stared at her with blazing eyes.

"No!" he replied sharply. "No, I'm not! I'd give anything under heaven if there could ever be a chance for me to be."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before he realized, with a pang of dismay, that he had been stung into saying something he never meant to say. All day he had been telling himself over and over again that no word concerning his feelings for Shirley Rives should ever pass his lips, yet now he had blurted it out like a blundering fool. The color flamed into his face, and his lids drooped before the curious expression in Mrs. Wilmerding's eyes.

"Indeed!" she said tersely. "And may I ask why you think there isn't?"

Lawrence stared at her in astonishment. Then he pulled himself together and glanced again at the crumpled letter.

"If this is true——" he began.

But Mrs. Wilmerding cut him short with a most emphatic snort.

"Fiddlesticks!" she snapped. "You don't believe that, I hope? Haven't you any faith at all in Shirley? It's all a lie from beginning to end."

"But what——"

"I don't know," she broke in, frowning. "I don't understand it yet, but I know it's a lie."

Barry's spirits began to rise. There was something about her tone of positiveness which heartened him instinctively. He had not really doubted Shirley; but the statement of the unknown writer was so nonchalant and matter-of-fact that it bewildered him.

"Still," he remarked more calmly, "you asked me——"

"I had my reasons; but it wasn't because I thought it true." She stood leaning against the side of a heavy, carved table, both hands resting lightly on the dull, waxed surface, her shrewd, bright eyes holding his in thrall. "What stands between you and Shirley?" she questioned quietly.

Lawrence threw out his hands in an impatient gesture. ”Everything!” he exclaimed. ”Her money and my lack of it are enough, without wasting time to go into any others.”

”Her money!” Mrs. Wilmerding repeated. Then, with a sudden frown, she went on swiftly: ”You’re right. We are wasting time. Let us get down to business at once. Shirley must be found to-night, and yet I don’t feel like putting the matter into the hands of the police.”

”You don’t believe there can be a particle of truth in this letter?” Barry questioned.

”Of course not. I told you it was a lie. At the same time, you must see that if the matter became public it might do my niece an irreparable amount of harm. No. We must work it out ourselves. To be strictly accurate, you must find her. Being a woman, I can’t very well traipse around town without causing all sorts of talk. You won’t fail me, I know.”

”Fail you!” Lawrence cried. ”I should say not! I won’t rest or sleep until Miss Rives is found. I’ll rake the city with a fine-tooth comb, and if any harm has come to her——”

He broke off abruptly, his face hard, almost cruel, his eyes narrowed. The momentary silence which followed was more expressive than many words.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE ASTONISHING MRS. WILMERDING.

Mrs. Wilmerding looked at him with an odd touch of wistfulness in her gaze. Then she sighed a little. ”Youth is a very wonderful thing,” she murmured. ”I shouldn’t make such a vow as that, though. You might have to break it. Have you thought of any plan?”

”Not yet. I only know I’ll find her in some way. You must tell me everything you know quickly. We haven’t any time to lose. When did she go out?”

”A little after three. She said she was going to call on a girl friend she met at the dance—a Miss Jennings.”

”And did she?”

”Yes. When I reached home, about half past five, and did not find her here, my secretary called up the Jennings house on Fifty-seventh Street, and found that Shirley had left there an hour before. Even then there was nothing to worry

about. She might easily have gone shopping. But when another hour had passed I began to be troubled. At twenty minutes to seven this letter was delivered at the door."

"Delivered!" Barry exclaimed. "Did the man notice by whom?"

"An ordinary messenger boy in uniform."

Barry's eyes sparkled. "By Jove!" he burst out. "You're sure there isn't any mistake about that?"

"Perfectly. Naturally, I asked Pagdon about it instantly. Unfortunately, he did not notice the boy's number; but there was no mistaking the uniform."

"May I have a telephone book?" Lawrence asked abruptly. "It may take a little time, but there won't be any real difficulty in running the boy down."

Mrs. Wilmerding stepped over to the fireplace and pressed a button concealed in the carving. Almost instantly the velvet hangings were parted, and the footman stood in the doorway.

"Bring a New York telephone directory, Pagdon," Mrs. Wilmerding directed tersely; "and then tell Miss Winters I wish to see her at once. My secretary can do the telephoning as well as you," she went on, turning to Lawrence. "It will give you time for a bite of dinner, which you might not otherwise have."

Barry protested that he wanted nothing to eat; but his hostess insisted, and, to avoid actual rudeness, he was finally obliged to give in. The instant the directory was brought, he turned hastily to the list of American District Telegraph offices, and discovered that there were almost fifty in Manhattan and the Bronx alone. A number of them could be eliminated, however, and that he proceeded to do, jotting down the phone numbers of the most likely ones on a sheet of note paper. He had just finished the list, when the secretary, a trim, capable-looking girl of twenty-six or so, entered the room.

Having acknowledged the introduction, Lawrence explained what he wanted.

"We must find out which of these offices handled the letter that was delivered to Mrs. Wilmerding about half past six," he said hurriedly. "Will you please call them up, Miss Winters, beginning with the numbers I've jotted down here? If you fail to locate the right one, take the rest of the numbers from the book. The instant you succeed, tell the manager to hold the boy until I can get down, and kindly let me know at once."

The secretary nodded, and, gathering up list and book, was leaving the room when Barry had a sudden idea.

"Before you do anything else," he said quickly, "will you please call the Yale Club and get Mr. Jacob Hamersley, junior? Tell him that I'm delayed, but that it's most important he should wait at the club until I can get down there."

The girl nodded understandingly, and disappeared into the hall; while

Lawrence followed his hostess through some wide doors at the farther end of the drawing-room into a library lined with books and as bewilderingly rich in its furnishings as the rest of the house.

At one end was a fireplace with a carved oak mantel and paneling black with age, which looked as if it had been transported from some old English country house—as it probably had. A fire of logs blazed and twinkled there; and drawn up before it was a small round table, set for two. Evidently Mrs. Wilmerding had not been idle while Barry was busy with the telephone book.

"I had it brought here because it is nearer the telephone," she explained as Lawrence drew out her chair. "It is only the simplest sort of a supper."

It proved to be extremely satisfactory, for all that. The butler and a footman who served the dishes seemed to realize the necessity for haste, and there was not a second's delay. Consequently, in an incredibly short space of time the meal was over, and they returned to the drawing-room a moment or two before Miss Winters reappeared.

"The office is on Broadway, between Thirteenth and Fourteenth," she said quietly. "The boy had not been sent out again, and the manager will hold him there until you get down."

Lawrence sprang to his feet. "Good!" he exclaimed. "And Hamersley?"

"He had left the club a moment or two before I called. He left word, however, that he would be back within half an hour."

Barry turned to Mrs. Wilmerding. "It doesn't matter," he said. "I thought my friend might help, but I can pick him up afterward if it's necessary."

"You might call the club again, Miss Winters," the older woman suggested, "and have them request Mr. Hamersley not to leave until he hears from Mr. Lawrence."

When the secretary had departed, she glanced swiftly back to Barry.

"You have enough money?" she asked.

"Plenty."

"Then hurry. Be sure and keep me informed of what you are doing when it's possible. I trust you to find her to-night."

She held out her hand, and Lawrence took it quickly. For an instant they stood looking into one another's eyes; then the woman threw back her head.

"You love my niece," she said rapidly. "You think there are insurmountable barriers between you. I tell you this, Barry Lawrence: The moment you bring Shirley back to me those barriers shall cease to exist. You understand? It shall be as if they had never been."

A flood of bright crimson leaped into Barry's face, and he stared at her, unable to credit his senses.

"But that will be—impossible!" he gasped. "I'm almost a—pauper! I have

no position; my very name is—tarnished."

"Humph!" she exclaimed incredulously. "Tarnished through some fault of yours?"

"N-o; but everybody thinks——"

Her teeth came together with a click; her eyes were flashing. "Bah!" she retorted impatiently. "Do you suppose for a minute that I care what everybody thinks? I trust my own judgment, and it has never failed. If a man is clean and straight and decent, money isn't worth that!" She snapped her fingers. "I have more of it than I know what to do with. You understand? Well, go, then—and remember what I've said."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TAKING UP THE TRAIL.

Dazed, bewildered, his mind in a turmoil of mingled joy and acute anxiety, Lawrence hastened down the steps of Mrs. Wilmerding's house and across the sidewalk to the waiting taxi.

"No. 854 Broadway, and go like the deuce!" he cried out as he leaped inside.

The door slammed behind him and the machine leaped forward like a thing alive. Straight down the wide avenue it flew, past marble palaces gleaming with lights, past the park entrance with its guarding statue of golden bronze, past great hotels whose tiers of twinkling windows seemed almost to touch the stars, past shadowy churches, glittering shop windows, and looming skyscrapers stealing slowly northward in that inexorable march of progress.

Sitting stiffly upright on the seat within, Lawrence saw nothing save those twin lines of opalescent globes which seemed to converge with such intolerable slowness until at last they came together miles and miles beyond. He knew that they would have to go almost to that point before nearing their destination, and he chafed impatiently at the slightest delay made necessary by traffic regulations.

Now that he had commenced the quest, he seemed to feel, even more strongly than before, the necessity for haste. While he was searching blindly for a clew, Shirley might be suffering all sorts of annoyances, humiliations, and fears. He ground his teeth and swore softly under his breath at the thought of his helplessness. He had started out with the quixotic belief that earnest effort, coupled with money, could accomplish anything; but slowly, as the car flew southward,

a doubt began to creep into his mind.

What was he going to do if the messenger boy could tell him nothing? He had talked bravely enough about raking the city with a fine-tooth comb, but he knew that was an impossibility. The vastness of New York defied him, and made him feel suddenly as small and insignificant as a tiny insect. Without a clew, what possible chance had he to find a trace of the girl, whose captors would naturally be doing their best to baffle pursuit?

By the time the taxi had whirled through Thirteenth Street, and halfway up the block, Barry was well-nigh despairing. He pulled himself together with an effort, however, and hurried into the telegraph office.

There were telephone booths in the front, but he passed them with unseeing eyes and made straight for the desk beyond a railing, above which was painted, on a tin sign, the word, "Manager." A young fellow of about his own age occupied the revolving chair, and glanced up inquiringly as Barry stopped in front of him.

"My name is Lawrence," the latter explained swiftly. "I phoned down some twenty minutes ago asking you to hold the boy who delivered a letter to Mrs. Ogden Wilmerding about half past six this evening. He hasn't been sent out, I hope."

"Nope! I only came on ten minutes ago, but the boss told me to keep Jimmy till you showed up. He's over there."

Lawrence followed the direction of his thumb, and saw a very diminutive youngster, with a pert, freckled face and fiery red hair, sitting nonchalantly on the end of the bench and eying the newcomer with undisguised curiosity.

"Want me to call him over?" continued the temporary manager. "Maybe I can help you get what you want out of him."

Barry shook his head. "If you don't mind, I'll just talk to him over there." He hesitated an instant and then went on, in an attempt to assuage the other's very evident curiosity: "The letter was unsigned, and Mrs. Wilmerding is very anxious to have a description of the person who sent it."

"Well, go ahead and see what you can do," replied the man at the desk. "Jimmy's a sharp little cuss, though, and if he's been paid to hold his tongue, you'll have a job getting anything out of him."

"I can try, anyhow," smiled Lawrence. "By the way, you have a record of where the call came from, I suppose?"

"Sure!" The young man reached across the littered desk and drew a slip of paper toward him. "I thought you might want to know, so I looked it up when I first came in. It was phoned in from the Merton House at six-five. Party by the name of Brown."

"Much obliged," Barry remarked thoughtfully. "I'll see what I can get out

of the boy."

As he turned toward the youngster, he saw the latter's eyes drop and his heels begin to kick automatically against the rungs of the wooden bench.

"Just a little too careless to be natural," Barry reflected. "Looks to me as if you'd been well coached, my son."

The boy did not look at him squarely as Lawrence took his seat on the bench beside him; but the man caught a flashing glint from the blue eyes which told him that his young neighbor was on the alert.

For a second Barry sat silent. Then, turning suddenly toward the youngster, he said quietly:

"I'm in trouble, Jimmy, and I want you to help me."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TWO SHEETS OF PAPER.

There was no reply in words, but the boy moved uneasily and twisted one foot around the bench leg.

"You went to the Merton House a little after six to-night," Lawrence went on, in the same low, even voice, "and got a letter there, which you took to Mrs. Ogden Wilmerding on Fifth Avenue. Do you remember anything about the man who gave it to you?"

The boy squirmed a little, and seemed intent on poking a minute pebble into a crack in the floor.

"Nothin' special," he mumbled at last.

Barry laughed. "Oh, come now!" he returned. "You must remember what he looked like."

The youngster thrust both chapped and freckled hands deep into the pockets of his trousers, and scowled.

"Well," he muttered slowly, his eyes still on the floor, "he was sort o' short, an' fat, an'—an' had a—a squint in one eye. His hair was—light. That's all I know about him."

For a moment Barry sat regarding the small face screwed up into a fearsome scowl, noted the twitching eyebrows, and the clenched fists visible through the cloth of the blue trousers. Then he shook his head.

"I'm afraid, Jimmy," he murmured, "that your bump of observation isn't

very well developed. Are you sure the man wasn't tall and slim and dark, and rather good looking?"

The red-headed youngster gasped, and, flinging back his head, met Lawrence's eyes squarely for the first time.

"How in blazes did you——" he stammered; and then broke off abruptly, a vivid flush staining his freckled face.

"I guessed," Barry returned quietly. "Look here, Jimmy," he went on, in a low, vibrant tone. "I'm going to tell you something which I haven't spoken of to a soul to-night. I'm doing this because I need your help—badly. A young girl is in trouble. She's been carried off by some men whom she's never harmed in any way, and I've got to get her back—I've simply got to! That fellow who gave you the letter at the Merton House is one of the gang. That's why I want to know what he looks like. That's why I'm sure you're going to tell me everything you can, for he's a scoundrel, Jimmy, nothing less; and no decent man would try to shield him once he knew how bad he was."

For the second time the boy looked straight into Barry's eyes. His face was still flushed, but there was upon it an expression of intense, overpowering interest.

"Is that straight, mister?" he demanded excitedly. Jimmy had always pined to be mixed up in some really big crime, but this was the nearest he had come to realizing his dream. "You ain't stringin' me?"

"I'm telling you the solemn truth," Lawrence returned seriously. "If the reporters got on to it, there'd be the biggest kind of excitement in the newspapers. She's the niece of Mrs. Wilmerding; one of the richest women in New York, you know."

The youngster's eyes were popping out by this time, but he still seemed to hesitate.

"He gimme a dollar," he explained doubtfully, "an' I promised——"

"I wouldn't worry about that," Lawrence interposed. "He had no right to make you promise to keep still about a crime."

"Then I'll tell you," the boy burst out impulsively; and, with a long breath, he plunged into a recital which Barry had no doubt was the truth this time.

He had been called to the desk at six-five, and told to report to Mr. George Brown in the lobby of the Merton House. On arriving, he had not even had to inquire at the desk for that person. A man had hurried up to him as he entered the door, and, drawing him to one side, handed him a sealed letter addressed to Mrs. Ogden Wilmerding on Fifth Avenue. It must be delivered at once, the stranger said; then, when he had paid the boy and Jimmy was turning to leave, he produced a dollar bill, and told the messenger that, if any inquiries were made, he was not to tell anything. The man was tall and slim, with dark hair and eyes,

and wore a silk hat. Jimmy pronounced him altogether a decided swell.

"He told me it was a joke, an' he didn't want the parties to get wise to him," the boy concluded; "but I kinda thought it was something different from that."

"It was—very different," Barry said thoughtfully. He was searching his memory for any possible recollection of such an individual, but in vain. "You're all to the good, Jimmy, and I can't tell you how much obliged I am. I'd like to give you——"

"I don't want nothin'," the youngster broke in decidedly. "You jest give my name right to the reporters, that's all."

"I will," Lawrence returned seriously, "if they get on to the case. What is it?"

"Donovan—James F. Donovan."

Barry noted it on a bit of paper with the inward determination to reward the boy in some way; then, after another word of thanks and a quick handshake, he sprang to his feet and made his way hastily to the door.

Three minutes later he was interviewing the telephone girl at the Merton House concerning the tall, slim man with the top hat who had called a certain number earlier in the evening.

The young woman remembered the incident perfectly, and was able to add one or two particulars which had escaped the messenger boy, but which only made certain Barry's impression that he had never set eyes on the unknown.

On his way out he scrutinized the hotel stationery, but without any real hope that it would prove identical with that on which the letter, was written.

In the doorway he paused undecided. The fact that the man had sent his message from the Merton House showed absolutely nothing. He might have come from a totally different part of town in order to divert suspicion and throw possible pursuers off the track. That would be a natural move, anyway, and Lawrence hesitated a long time before an idea came to him.

Then suddenly his eyes brightened and he glanced swiftly up Fourth Avenue. He knew the neighborhood very well, and could recall no stationery shop near it. Nevertheless, he told the chauffeur to drive slowly around the square, and to stop if he rapped on the glass.

The circuit was of no avail. The taxi reached the southwest corner without the signal having been made, and Barry told the man to proceed on down University Place at the same slow speed. A block passed, then another; but before the third corner had been reached Lawrence struck the glass with such force as nearly to shatter it, and, leaping out of the still-moving machine, darted into a narrow little shop bearing a sign above the door to the effect that stationery and cigars could be had within.

As the girl came forward, he fumbled in his pocket and produced the letter.

”Have you any writing paper like this?” he asked, extending it to her, but still retaining a hold upon one corner.

She bent forward to glance at the texture, and at that instant Barry realized with a start that he had handed her the letter which had come from the little man in black, inclosing the five one-hundred-dollar bills.

”I beg pardon,” he said hastily. ”I’ve made a mistake. This is the kind I want.”

He drew forth the other letter; then, with a swift catching of the breath, stood staring stupidly from one to the other. For a second he did not move. He could not believe this odd coincidence. He held the two sheets to the light. The watermarks were identical. He lowered the sheets and examined them intently. In size, color, texture, quality they could not have been more alike had they come from the same box.

What did it mean?

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN CAPITALS OF RED.

In a moment Barry had recovered himself. After all, the sheets being identical did not prove that they had come from the same shop. No doubt there were hundreds of stores in New York which kept that kind of paper in stock. It was an odd coincidence, that was all.

”This is the sort I want,” he said quietly, meeting the girl’s curious glance with indifference. ”About two quires will be enough—with one package of envelopes.”

His perfect ease of manner seemed to reassure her, and she glanced at the paper he held out, then shrugged her shoulders.

”I’m afraid I can’t give you even a quire,” she said, reaching up to a shelf behind her and taking down a box. ”I noticed when I sold a sheet and envelope this afternoon that there were only a few left.”

”This afternoon!” Lawrence exclaimed, with well-simulated surprise. ”I wonder if it could have been my friend Davis, who wrote this letter? Was he tall and slim and dark?”

”That’s him,” the girl answered. ”He was dressed swell, too, and wore a high hat.”

"Funny, isn't it?" Barry commented. "Well, give me what you have. I suppose you'll be getting in some more of the same kind soon."

"I'm afraid not," she returned, wrapping the few sheets with accustomed deftness. "The firm that supplied us with this has gone out of business. This box is three or four years old. It got lost in the stock, and I only ran across it about a week ago, and put it on sale. You'd have a hard job locating a bit of it anywhere in town. We've got some which is just as good, though."

It was with difficulty that Lawrence made an easy, casual answer, paid for the paper, and left the shop. The girl's explanation had left no doubt in his mind that the thing which had seemed so impossible was true. The man in black and the agent of those who had kidnaped Shirley Rives had both come to this obscure little shop to purchase writing paper.

It was incredible that there could be any connection between the two, yet Barry had seen so many apparently impossible things transpire within the past week that he began to doubt everything.

Out of the whole intricate medley of events, however, one fact stood clear and distinct: The men who had sent both letters must be living somewhere within a comparatively short distance of the little shop. University Place is not a main artery, like Broadway or Sixth Avenue; people do not pass through it, as a rule, unless they have business there or live in the neighborhood. There are no car lines on it—it is a sort of back eddy, away from the rush and turmoil and passing of great throngs.

But, now that he was sure Shirley's place of captivity was not so very far away, Barry could not make up his mind what to do. He could traverse the streets one by one, to be sure, but what would that accomplish? It was scarcely likely that chance would again direct his footsteps as it had done in sending him here from Union Square.

Puzzled and undecided, he told the chauffeur to follow him, then set out slowly toward Fourteenth Street. If he only had some one with whom to talk things over it would be much easier. Two heads are always better than one; and even Jock Hamersley might be able to suggest some feasible plan.

"I suppose there's nothing to prevent my hustling up and getting the old chap," he murmured as he reached the corner of the busy cross street. "It'll only take a few minutes. Hang it all! I believe I'll do it."

He turned toward the taxi, which had come to a stop beside the curb, and had almost reached the door when a newsboy darted toward him, waving a sheet with gaudy scareheads.

"Wuxtry!" he shrilled, thrusting the paper under Barry's nose. "All about banker's suicide! All about turrible shootin'! Wuxtry! Paper, mister?"

Lawrence shook his head impatiently, and was about to step into the taxi

when his eyes fell upon the flaming headlines of the paper, and for a second his heart almost ceased to beat:

Trust Company Official Shoots Himself! Julian Farr, of the Beekman Trust, Blows His Brains Out. Defaulter in Many Thousands, He Leaves Behind a Confession Exonerating Former Employee.

Without a word, Barry snatched the sheet and thrust a coin into the boy's hand.

"Never mind the change," he said hoarsely.

Eagerly, feverishly, his eyes raced over the lines of large print. It was the old, old story, sordid in detail, inevitable as to conclusion. Julian Farr, cashier of the Beekman Trust, had started in by living beyond his means, and, getting in a hole, used the funds of the bank to speculate with. Once, when exposure threatened, he had saved himself by the despicable device of throwing the blame upon another man. The second time such a thing was impossible, and so, penniless, desperate, with a bank examiner due the following day, he had solved the whole problem, after the fashion of many cowards, with a little piece of lead.

The one graceful, decent action, which stood out in vivid contrast to all the rest, was the full and complete confession he had left behind, taking the responsibility of that first defalcation and explaining in detail how entirely blameless Barry Lawrence was. And, as the latter read the last word of this printed document, his eyes sparkled and a great joy surged through him.

He was free again—free from the shackles of suspicion and accusation which had been fastened upon him so unjustly! His name was no longer tarnished. It had been cleared in a manner which could leave no doubt in the mind of a single soul concerning his absolute honesty.

Then, like a flash, he came back to the present. What did this matter—what did anything matter when Shirley Rives was still in the hands of this unknown gang? He was wasting precious time, and, thrusting the paper into his overcoat pocket, he jerked open the door of the taxi.

"The Yale Club—and hustle!" he said tersely as he stepped hastily into the car.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HAMERSLEY TAKES A HAND.

Jock Hamersley, after leaving his friend, entered the club briskly, and, having freshened up a little, took the elevator to the dining room. It was early, but his appetite had been making itself felt for some time, so he did not wait for a congenial companion to sit at his table.

The result was that he finished the meal and descended again to the lower floor before seven. Here he strolled about a little, chatting briefly with one or two friends, but with his mind altogether on the problem which faced Barry Lawrence.

When Jock once got something well fixed in his mind it was extremely difficult to find room for anything else. The more he considered the scheme of tripping up the mysterious persons who had been following Lawrence, the more he liked it, and the more anxious he was to put it into operation. He knew that Barry would not be likely to show up much before eight, and consequently, after fretting and fuming impatiently for some ten or fifteen minutes, he decided to take a stroll to use up the intervening time, with the added hope that something more might occur to him.

Leaving word with the hall man that he would be back shortly, he slipped into his coat and sallied forth into the street. For a moment he hesitated; then, turning to the right, he walked briskly toward Fifth Avenue.

He had scarcely reached the corner, and had not even decided which way to turn, when suddenly a man, coming up behind, touched him lightly on the arm.

"Beg pardon, sir," said a voice in his ear, "but have you any idea where I can find Mr. Barry Lawrence?"

Whirling about in surprise, Hamersley saw, standing beside him, a slim, slight individual of medium height, smooth-shaven and dressed in an inconspicuous manner. He was holding an envelope in one hand; and Jock first sized him up as a clerk from some banking or brokerage house. He was about to answer freely, when he suddenly recalled the varied assortment of men who had been trailing Barry of late, and paused.

"What do you want him for?" he asked abruptly, at length.

"The chief wanted me to give him this," the stranger explained promptly, holding up the letter. "Said it was most important he should have it at once. He isn't at his hotel, and they don't know where he's gone."

"Humph!" grunted the big chap. "Who's your chief?"

"Mr. Marvin, of Kane & Marvin," was the swift response.

Hamersley knew the Wall Street firm very well, and, having no notion of Barry's affairs, it seemed quite possible that the latter might be doing business in that quarter. Nevertheless, a vague, intangible suspicion made him hesitate, and in that fortunate pause a conviction suddenly flashed into his mind which almost

took his breath away.

The fellow beside him was none other than the detective who had inveigled Lawrence into the empty house on Twenty-fourth Street the very night before.

Jock remembered his friend's description perfectly, and, moreover, recalled Barry's having said that he was the identical man who had sat next to them at the Belmont café. There could be no mistake. This was, indeed, the man, and Hamersley's first feeling was one of infinite regret that the chance they had been seeking should come when Lawrence was not on hand to take advantage of it.

On the heels of that, however, came a swift determination to work the trick alone. He could do it if only he kept his head and handled the situation cleverly. He would do it, and give Barry the surprise of his life. With a tremendous effort to keep his voice casual and careless, he plunged into the game.

"I see," he said. "But what gave you the idea that I could tell you anything about him?"

"Mr. Marvin said he belonged to a college club on Forty-fourth Street," the unknown returned glibly. "When I asked for him back there, they said he wasn't a member, but that he sometimes came in with you. That's what made me hustle out after you. I want to get rid of the thing and beat it home to supper."

His easy tone was most convincing, and, had he not been perfectly sure of his identification, Jock would never have dreamed that anything was out of the way. For a second he hesitated, digging into his brain for some plausible means of finding out more. Unfortunately Jock's brain was of the slow-moving variety which so often accompanies big, brawny bodies, and nothing occurred to him.

"Sorry I can't help you," he said at last; "but I haven't an idea where he is now. He's going to meet me at the Yale Club at half past eight or so. Why don't you come around then and see him?"

"Half past eight! I can't hang around till then. Still, I suppose I'll have time to get supper and come down afterward, won't I?"

"I should think so," Hamersley returned, with an affectation of indifference he was far from feeling.

"I'll do it," the stranger said decidedly, thrusting the letter into his pocket. "Half past eight, you say? Much obliged for the information."

With a quick nod, which Jock returned, he started briskly up the avenue, leaving the Yale man staring, helplessly after him in a perfect agony of indecision. He wanted to follow the fellow, and yet he realized how utterly futile such a thing would be. The man would be wise to the game before he had gone a block, and that would probably spoil everything.

What should he do? What could he do? The man was rapidly getting away from him, and Hamersley fairly danced on the pavement as he tried frantically to think.

It was at this moment that he caught sight of ”Shrimp” Bradley briskly crossing the avenue.

CHAPTER XL.
THE OPEN DOOR.

As his cognomen indicated, Bradley was short and slim and boyish-looking. He had fresh, rosy cheeks and innocent, bland blue eyes, which reminded one vaguely of cherubs and better worlds than this. In reality he was as sophisticated a little chap as had ever made the lives of New Haven professors miserable; and he had a command of language which, during his two years of ”coxing” on the varsity shell, had caused the hair of even those hardened athletes to stand on end. To the harassed Hamersley his appearance at that particular moment seemed like a direct dispensation of Providence.

”Shrimp!” he spluttered, clutching the diminutive chap by the shoulders, ”there’s a fellow going up the avenue there—short, slim, dark clothes and brown felt hat. He’s a detective, after Barry Lawrence. I’ve got to know where he goes. For the love of Mike, follow him and tell me where he lands! I’ll be at the club. Be quick, now, or you’ll miss him!”

The single, searching glance Bradley cast at his friend’s face convinced him that this was no joke, and without a question he snapped back: ”Right. I’m on.” And he hustled off up the street.

Jock watched him anxiously as he scurried away, and presently, when pursuer and pursued were lost to sight, the big chap sighed and turned back in the direction from which he had come.

”He’ll catch the dope if it’s a possible thing,” he muttered. ”Hang it all! I wish Barry were here.”

He was puzzled to learn, on reaching the club, that Lawrence had phoned during his absence and left an urgent message that he was not to leave the building until he heard again from the Harvard man. Of what it could mean Hamersley had no idea, unless Barry had become wise to the situation in some way and was also following up a clew.

At all events, there seemed nothing else for him to do but wait; and for nearly an hour he performed that difficult and trying duty in a manner which nearly drove the other club members to murder.

Apparently unable to keep still, he tramped back and forth through the rooms on the lower floor with a frowning countenance. He was deaf to the gibes and jokes hurled after him, oblivious to remarks and questions from his friends, heedless to everything save the matter which filled his mind so exclusively. Had he not been so universally known and liked by almost all the members, there is no telling what might have happened. As it was, when Shrimp Bradley appeared about a quarter past eight, and Jock made a rush for him which compared favorably with some of his best efforts on the gridiron, there was a general sigh of thankfulness that something had at length arisen to break the spell.

"Let me get my breath!" panted Shrimp. "I never hustled so before. Yes, I got him! Did you take me for a piker? Sure, I want a drink. I've got a thirst a mile long. I want something to eat, too, and tell him to hustle. You and I have got our night's work cut out for us, old socks!"

While he was talking Jock had pushed him into the small room to the left of the door, which happened at the moment to be unoccupied. Placing one big thumb against the bell, he kept it there until the attendant appeared on the run and took their order.

"Now," exclaimed Hamersley, sinking into a chair, "where'd he go? Harlem?"

"Harlem? No. He went up three blocks and then hopped onto a stage going downtown. Luckily I was just about a block behind, so I sprinted and grabbed it. We rode down to Fourteenth, and then he got off. I stayed on half a block longer, then beat it. I was hustling back, keeping well in near the buildings, when I saw him coming down with another guy, and I slipped into a doorway. As luck would have it, they stopped a couple of feet past me for the stranger to light a cigarette, and I heard about all they said. They talked in riddles, of course, but I made out pretty clearly that they've got a girl locked up somewhere, and that they caught her by telling her some fellow was in trouble. I made out, too, that the girl put up something of a fight, but they told her if she didn't keep quiet 'twould be worse for the fellow, and she behaved after that. They said they'd have him by nine o'clock. Do you suppose they meant Barry Lawrence?"

"Sure!" said Hamersley hoarsely. "But how did you make out all of that, Shrimp? They must have been boobs to talk so much in the open street."

"Oh, they weren't so slow," protested Bradley; "but neither am I, Jock. I kept my ears open and read between the lines. What they said couldn't have meant much of anything else."

"Well, go on!" cried Jock impatiently.

"That's all I heard," said Bradley. "They were moving off by that time and the wind was blowing the other way. I let 'em get 'most to the next corner before I slipped out after them. They went down the avenue as far as Eleventh, and

then turned west, with me following as close as I dared. I reckon they weren't thinking about any one being after 'em, though, because they never once looked back. They went down the street almost to the next corner, then walked up the steps of a brownstone front, opened the door with a latchkey, and stepped in. In a couple of minutes I pranced past to get the number, noticed the sign, 'Rooms to Let,' boarded a Sixth Avenue car, grabbed a taxi at Twenty-third Street, and hustled back."

Hamersley nodded, but remained silent.

"What's biting you, Jock?" inquired Bradley sharply. "Aren't you wise to what I'm telling you? Don't you catch on that there's a girl in trouble?"

"Sure!" gasped Hamersley. "But what girl?"

"What girl!" snapped Shrimp. "How do I know, when you didn't tell me anything? Don't you know?"

Jock shook his head dazedly. "First I've heard of any girl," he returned weakly. "I thought it was——"

"What girl are you talking about?" demanded a voice from the doorway, in a tone which made both men jump.

"Barry!" roared Hamersley, leaping at him. "For Pete's sake, come and put us wise! I put Shrimp on the trail of a man who was asking me all about you, and he comes back with a weird tale of a girl kidnaped by a bunch and kept a prisoner in a boarding house down on West Eleventh Street, near Sixth——"

"West Eleventh!" exclaimed Lawrence triumphantly. "By Jove! You've hit it right. Come on—both of you. There isn't a minute to lose. I'll tell you the rest in the taxi."

He turned and hurried out of the room, followed by Hamersley, and, more slowly, by Shrimp Bradley, who had paused to secure the remaining sandwiches. Issuing hastily from the club, Barry told the driver to take them to the corner of Sixth Avenue and Eleventh Street, and they all piled in and slammed the door behind them.

During the hurried ride downtown they exchanged stories briefly, so that when they reached their destination they were ready to act. In half a minute Bradley had led the way to the house, and Lawrence swiftly took in its salient features. It was an ordinary-looking, four-storied brownstone dwelling, a little gone to seed, perhaps, which accounted for the sign displayed in a lower window. The room on the second floor front was brightly lighted, but the shades were pulled down. All the other windows were dark. In that instant Barry had made up his mind.

"I'm going in if I can get in, fellows," he said abruptly.

"Hadn't you better wait——" began Bradley.

But Lawrence cut him short. "Not if I know it!" he exclaimed. "I've waited

too long already. I'm going in! See if you can find a cop, Shrimp. Jock, will you watch the house?"

Before the others could realize what was happening, he had raced up the steps and grasped the doorknob firmly. To the intense surprise of his two companions, the door yielded to his touch, and a second later he had disappeared, leaving them staring dazedly at each other.

"There's something queer about this!" Hamersley burst out the next instant. "I don't like the looks of it a little bit."

Bounding up the steps, he seized the knob and twisted it, flinging his whole weight against the door. It held fast. He tried again with the same result, then turned a serious face toward Bradley.

"Beat it, Shrimp!" he said hurriedly. "Get a cop, quick! It's a trap, that's what it is!"

CHAPTER XLI.

AT CROSS-PURPOSES.

As the door swung into place behind him, with the unmistakable click of a spring lock, Lawrence stood there, every nerve tense, glancing swiftly around into the shadows, half expecting an attack of some sort.

The hall was lighted by a single gas jet turned down to the tiniest spark, and for a moment he thought himself alone. Then, with a suppressed start, he realized that a tall, slim, smooth-shaven man stood silently by the portières of a double door, watching him with cool, level, dark eyes.

"Well?" snapped Barry, recovering his composure. "Where is she? Quick! What have you done with her?"

The stranger smiled. "One flight up, on your right," he drawled nonchalantly. "You can't miss it. The door's unlocked."

For a second Lawrence stared at him dazedly. With every nerve keyed to its highest tension, expecting, and ready to use force, and with visions of having to break down doors and overcome all sorts of obstacles to reach the girl he was seeking, the utter indifference and casual politeness were staggering. He scowled fiercely at the urbane stranger for an instant, the color rising to his face; then, whirling about, raced up the stairs without a word.

The upper hall was almost pitch dark, but he thrust out both hands and felt

the panels of a door on his right. A second later his fingers closed over a knob, he pushed forward, then stopped still on the threshold, blinking in the bright light, with the echoes of a faint, suppressed cry of a woman ringing in his ears.

The room was long and spacious, that effect being heightened by several full-length mirrors, with massive, old-fashioned frames of black walnut, set into the walls at different points. The furniture was mostly of that same mid-Victorian period, ponderous, ugly, and uncomfortable, with a good deal of fringe and furbelows and gimcrack ornament. It was only in contrast to the hall that the place seemed brightly lighted. In reality, the only source of illumination was a nickel lamp with a dark-green china shade, which stood on a marble table at the farther end.

Most of this Barry perceived in that curious, instinctive, intuitive manner with which one observes a thing without really looking at it. His whole mind was taken up with the girl who had started from her chair and was staring at him, a half-frightened, half-puzzled, wholly incomprehensible expression on her lovely face.

"Shirley!" he cried, springing forward impulsively. "You're all right? They haven't—hurt you in any way?"

To his amazement, she did not show the slightest sign of being glad to see him. On the contrary, she seemed almost frightened; and the quick backward step she took to place the table between them, no less than the look in her dark eyes, halted Lawrence in his tracks as effectually as a bullet might have done.

For a second he stood there staring at her, the color swiftly ebbing from his face.

"I don't—understand," he said at length, in a low, bewildered tone. "What is the matter? It isn't possible that you're—afraid of me?"

She moistened her lips and, putting out one hand, let the tips of her gloved fingers rest lightly on the table top. From the moment of his entrance her eyes had never left Barry's face, and now, as he saw them clearly in the lamplight, the look there was like the stab of a knife.

"I don't know," she said quietly; and Lawrence saw that it was the calmness of deliberate effort. "I don't think it's quite—that."

"But what is the matter? What has happened?" He flung out both hands in an eloquent gesture. "Why are you acting so strangely?" After all he had been through, after the strain and stress and mental suffering he had been laboring under, this frigid reception, so different from the one he had imagined when he dared to picture their meeting at all, was almost unnerving. "You must tell me what it means!" he cried.

Her lips quivered, but she caught them between her teeth and tilted her chin a little more. She still wore her hat—a wide one of black velvet, with curving brim

and soft black plumes. Her sable coat was flung over the back of a nearby chair; and as she faced him—slim, erect, palpitating with life and charm and fascination, Lawrence realized that she had never seemed so beautiful—or so utterly beyond his reach.

"I think," she returned steadily, "that you are the one to tell me that."

The man turned suddenly white and drew his breath sharply. In a second every feature seemed to have become tense and hard and clean-cut as if fashioned from marble. When he spoke his voice was low and clear, but there was a faint, throbbing undercurrent which showed plainly how difficult it was for him to keep it so.

"It isn't possible that you believe me responsible for this?" he said.

For an instant the girl did not answer. Her lips were quivering unmistakably now; her self-control was plainly strained almost to the breaking point.

"How do I know what to believe?" she cried suddenly. "How do I know whom to trust?" A sob arose in her throat, and she fumbled in her sleeve for a tiny handkerchief. "Oh, why did you try to keep it from me?" she went on despairingly. "Why didn't you tell me at first, and then we should never have——"

She could not finish, and the swift glimpse Barry had of those dark eyes, swimming with tears, before she hid them with her handkerchief, almost drove him mad.

"Tell you what?" he demanded dazedly. "For Heaven's sake what is it you think I've kept from you? Surely you don't mean that trouble at the bank? You must have known that I never——"

She silenced him with a gesture and dropped both hands straight by her sides. There was a glint of tears still in her dark eyes, but she had recovered her composure with remarkable rapidity.

"It isn't that," she said wearily. "It's far more important than any bank. I know—everything. You understand? And it—hurts desperately to think that I had to hear from—-a stranger—that you——"

She stopped abruptly as a brisk knock sounded at the door. Before either of them could speak it swung open, and two men entered quietly, closing it behind them.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE MAN IN THE MIRROR.

The foremost of the intruders was the dapper detective, Brennen, and, as he recognized him, Barry scowled.

"So it's you, is it?" he said shortly.

The fellow grinned. "It sure is!" he chuckled. "Mighty nice of you to trot down here and save me the trouble of hunting you up."

Lawrence stared at him blankly. "What the mischief do you mean?" he demanded. "You don't mean to say you wanted me here?"

Brennen nodded blithely. "Of course. Aren't you on yet? That's what we've been after right along. That's why we had to put the lady here to a little inconvenience. Hated to do it, of course, but were afraid you——"

His companion, the tall, dark, urbane person Barry had passed in the hall below, plucked Brennen by the arm and whispered a few words in his ear.

"What's the odds?" the detective returned briskly. "The big fellow's due any minute, and then it'll all come out. You see," he went on, turning again to Lawrence, "it looked to us like you'd get wise and might make a sneak any minute. We couldn't allow that, of course, so we took the only way which was left us, and, by a polite little fiction, induced your wife——"

"That'll do!" cried Barry, his eyes flashing. "I don't understand a word you're saying; but I know this much: if you can't keep this lady out of the conversation, I'll take great pleasure in silencing you. She is not my wife, and your behavior in dragging her into this affair has been simply despicable."

The detective shrugged his shoulders incredulously. "Suit yourself," he returned blandly. He hesitated a moment, and then went on, with twinkling eyes: "Hope your friend don't get tired hunting a cop."

Barry gasped, but recovered himself swiftly. "What do you know about my friends?" he demanded.

"Know!" Brennen repeated amusedly. "Say, that's good! Do I look like a boob? You don't suppose for a minute, do you, that I wasn't wise to that little pewee who trailed me down here from Forty-fourth Street? Ha, ha! Why, I wanted him to follow me, and made things so easy that he couldn't fall down. What's more, I turned about and went after him the minute he started back. Followed him to the club, and got after the three of you when you came this way again. I couldn't take any chances, you see, with his nibs due to-night and expecting to see you here."

If Lawrence had never felt chagrin before, he felt it now. The realization that they all simply had been playing into this fellow's hands was maddening, and it was with the utmost difficulty that he refrained from showing his feelings. To gain time, he slipped out of his overcoat, which had been decidedly too warm, and flung it over a chair. Then he turned back to the irritating detective.

"Since you're so clever," he remarked sarcastically, "I suppose you haven't

lost sight of the fact that there's a station house within five minutes' walk, and that when I came in here my friend was headed straight in that direction."

Brennen laughed. "Bless you, no!" he exclaimed jovially. "That was one of the first things I took care of, and, short as the distance is, I shouldn't be at all surprised if he got sidetracked, somehow, on the way."

He paused a moment, his keen eyes fixed intently on Barry's face. "I s'pose you've sized me up from the muss I made of things the other night," he went on; "and I can't say I blame you much. That was one of the worst fall-downs I ever had; and the trouble was my hands were tied. Instead of putting the matter up to me and letting me work it my own way, they had to go and plan it all out, and then tell me to do thus and so, as if I was one of these cheap guys with solid-ivory domes. Why, hang it all! I didn't even know what you were then. I took you for some cheap sport who'd got into trouble on the other side and slipped over here to get away from it. If I'd had the least idea what was what, you can bet your last cent you wouldn't have made that get-away as easy as you did."

As he listened to the fellow's incomprehensible words, Lawrence felt as if his brain were whirling round and round. And then, like a flash, his self-control snapped.

"Who the mischief do you take me for?" he burst out frantically. "Tell me that! Tell me his name! Tell me what I'm supposed to have done. Out with it now, unless you're afraid."

An expression of admiration came into Brennen's face. "Clever!" he murmured to himself. "Mighty clever! I never saw anything better done on the stage. What a pity——"

He broke off abruptly as the purring of a motor car became audible in the room, and turned swiftly to his companion.

"That must be him, Jack," he said tersely. "He's overdue now. Listen!"

An instant later, as the car stopped outside, with a grinding of brakes, he went on swiftly: "Better slip down and make sure about it. Hager's there, but we don't want anything to go wrong. I'll take a peep out of the window."

The tall fellow hastily left the room, while Brennen stepped quickly to one of the windows and drew up a corner of the shade. Lawrence, his brain whirling and every nerve tense, stood dazedly for a second, then began to walk nervously up and down the floor. In a few moments he would know. Unless he was very much mistaken, the whole baffling mystery would swiftly be revealed to him, and he could scarcely restrain his impatience.

The closing of a door downstairs made him turn hastily in that direction; then his glance trailed back to the long mirror placed in the middle of the wall opposite the windows. Even in his perturbed state of mind, he noticed how like the black walnut frame was, in shape and size, to a doorway, and wondered why,

with all the other looking-glasses about the room, another had been inserted here.

Of course it was a mirror, for, dim as the light was at this distance from the shaded lamp, he could see his own figure outlined in the glass, and even make out every detail of his face and clothes.

Then suddenly a puzzled wrinkle came into his forehead. There was something odd about the reflection. The background was dark, and showed no sign of the lamp on the marble-topped table. Curious, Barry took a single step forward to discover what was the matter, then stopped still as if turned to stone.

The reflection in the glass had smiled.

For the fraction of a second Lawrence felt that he was going mad. Then, in a flash, he realized the truth. It was not a mirror at all, but a doorway, in which stood a man who looked at him out of his own eyes, smiled at him with his own smile; whose face and figure, down to the smallest detail, could not have been more like Barry's if the two had been bronze statues cast from the same mold. Even their clothes were of strikingly similar style.

CHAPTER XLIII.

HIS SECOND HALF.

The rattle of the window shade and the tramping of a number of feet on the stairs brought Barry to himself with a start just as the unknown put his finger to his lips and stepped noiselessly back into the shadow.

"Face round, but stand where you are," breathed the unknown.

Lawrence obeyed instinctively, and the next instant the hall door opened to admit several men. The first was well on in years, with a tall, splendid figure and a noble, distinguished face. He seemed in the grip of some great, though partially suppressed, emotion; and, as he caught sight of Barry, he sprang hastily toward him, both hands outstretched.

"Oscar!" he cried, in a deep, vibrating voice which held a distinctly foreign intonation. "My dear boy! I——"

The words died in a queer, gurgling sound. One of the men by the door cried out sharply; another drew his breath through his teeth with an odd, whistling noise. Then silence—tense, vibrating silence—fell upon the room as out of the shadows appeared the other man and moved noiselessly forward to Barry's side.

He did not speak or stir after he had taken up his position there. The two men, so absolutely, unbelievably alike, stood shoulder to shoulder, motionless as statues, while the seconds ticked away and those who witnessed the amazing spectacle stared and stared with dazed faces, unable to credit the evidence of their senses.

Once only did Barry's gaze waver from the stunned countenance of the older man to the other end of the room, where Shirley Rives stood bending far over the table, her face absolutely white, and her wide, dark eyes staring at him as if she were looking at a ghost.

At last a laugh, clear, hearty, and full of mirth, came from the man at his side, and broke the spell.

"Rather good, don't you think, uncle?" the newcomer chuckled, stepping forward a little.

"*Gott in Himmel!*" breathed the older man. "You are——"

"Of course. Don't you know me? I never supposed that you would be deceived."

With a swift motion, the other caught his hands and drew him over to the light.

"Let me look at you!" he exclaimed, speaking German in his agitation. "I cannot tell! I do not know! I feel as if the whole world had been turned topsy-turvy."

For a long minute he gazed searchingly into the young man's face, while the others moved unconsciously closer to the two, Barry quite as dazed and bewildered as any of them. Suddenly he threw back his gray head and flung one arm impulsively around the young fellow's shoulder.

"You *are* Oscar!" he exclaimed. "I know it!"

For a second he was silent. Then he turned swiftly toward the group of men who had entered with him, and singled out one with his flashing eyes.

"What does this mean, Baron Hager?" he demanded imperiously. "How dare you play such a trick upon me? It is infamous!"

It was the man with the beard who stepped forward; and Barry saw that he was trembling in every limb, while beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"Your highness!" he gasped. "I—I—— It is not a trick. I—have never seen—this man before."

"Never seen him! Nonsense! I'm not a child. How did he get here? What is he doing in this house? Who is he?"

Hager stared helplessly at Lawrence, and then his bewildered eyes wandered dazedly to the smiling double. His emotion was so great, however, that he did not speak, and it was Brennen who answered.

”I can tell you that,” he said shortly. ”He’s the man we’ve been trailing all over New York, thinking he was your nephew. He’s the man we decoyed here to-night for you to meet. If he ain’t the right one, we’re a lot of suckers, that’s all.”

”He’s my second half, uncle,” interposed the young man, smiling. ”It isn’t everybody who can have such a good time, you know.”

”Is that the truth, Oscar?” demanded the older man. ”Has he been passing himself off for you all this time?”

”Exactly, and he did it wonderfully well, too. I owe him an everlasting debt——”

The sentence was never finished. As he stood there, unable to make head or tail of what was being said, Barry had a horrible conviction that somehow his curiosity was never going to be gratified. He had come as close as this several times before to learning the name of the man he so resembled, and he was determined to take no more chances.

”My dear fellow,” he burst out, unable longer to contain himself, ”if you owe me anything at all, for Heaven’s sake pay me now by telling me who on earth you are.”

”You mean to say you do not know!” exclaimed the older man incredulously. ”Why, such a thing is preposterous.”

The laughter vanished suddenly from the nephew’s face, and, stepping swiftly forward, he caught Barry’s hand in a firm grip.

”I beg your pardon, Mr. Lawrence,” he said contritely. ”I’ve been fearfully discourteous. Please forgive me, and do not think me ungrateful for what you have done. I am Prince Oscar, of Ostrau, and this is my uncle, the Grand Duke Frederick.”

CHAPTER XLIV.
THE RIDDLE SOLVED.

In the brief silence which followed there came to Barry’s ears the sound of a quick gasp, followed by a strangled sob, from the girl at the table. And in that second, as he stood holding his own hand, as it were, and gazing into his own eyes, he realized with a rush of joy that this was what had troubled Shirley. They had told her that he was the crown prince of an Old World kingdom, and it was

small wonder she had been dismayed.

"I am more than happy at meeting your highness at last," he went on the next instant, gazing into the pleasant face of the young foreigner. Then his lips twitched and curved into an involuntary smile. "It seems as if I had known you all my life instead of a scant ten minutes."

The prince laughed delightedly. From the very beginning he had apparently enjoyed the situation to the full, and there was a total lack of royal dignity and stiffness about him which was refreshing.

"It's the greatest lark I ever had," he chuckled. "Haven't you begun to see the fun of it yet, uncle?"

The grand duke sighed. "Are you never going to be serious?" he asked sadly. "Do you mean to go through life taking everything as a jest, content to remain an irresponsible boy always?"

The prince straightened suddenly, and there came into his handsome face an expression which was very far from boyish. His jaw squared, and he pressed his lips firmly together as he stood regarding his uncle out of clear, level, uncompromising eyes.

"It isn't any use, uncle," he said abruptly. "My mind is made up, and nothing you can say will induce me to change."

The grand duke's lips parted as if he meant to speak, but closed swiftly again, and he darted a significant glance at the man with the beard.

"Be so good as to leave us, baron," he said curtly.

Baron Hager gave a start and turned hastily toward the door, followed closely by his two compatriots and the American detectives. Brennen brought up the rear, moving with evident reluctance, as if there were numberless points about the affair he was pining to have cleared up.

"By the way, Mr. Brennen," Lawrence called after him, struck by a sudden thought, "whatever you've done to my two friends, I'd be obliged if you would undo it at once."

The detective nodded sourly and closed the door behind him. As he disappeared, Barry realized that it would be more graceful for him also to leave the room; but, when he made a move to do so, the crown prince caught him by the arm.

"Please stay," he said quietly. "Mr. Lawrence is my friend, uncle. Whatever you say before him will go no farther."

"As you will," returned the grand duke indifferently. He hesitated an instant, his eyes fixed pleadingly upon his nephew's face. "Oscar," he went on swiftly, "your father, the king, has sent me to beg of you to come home to your family, your people, your country. He wants you. He needs you. You cannot realize the nature of the step you have taken. You acted hastily—heedlessly. For

the honor of the throne, Oscar, I beg of you—I beseech you—to give up your harebrained scheme and resume again the place in life to which you were born."

There was no gleam of mirth in the face of the crown prince now. It was firm and serious and a little white; his eyes were fixed unfalteringly on his uncle's face.

"And what of my wife?" he asked quietly. A flicker of pain flashed into the grand duke's face and was gone.

"There are ways——" he began hesitatingly.

"Ways!" broke in the prince swiftly. "What ways? You mean a morganatic marriage, I suppose. You know that is impossible, even if I would consider it. She is an American girl."

Lawrence, standing a little behind the duke, listening with an interest he made no attempt to conceal, noticed how the faint, foreign intonation—it could hardly be called an accent—in the young man's voice was intensified in a moment of excitement.

The grand duke did not answer at once, and, when finally he spoke, there was a hopeless undercurrent in his voice which showed clearly that he had little hope of his argument meeting with success.

"Under the laws of Ostrau," he said in a low tone, "a woman without royal or noble blood cannot marry into the reigning family. She, therefore, has no standing as your wife. In Ostrau the bond does not exist, and you would be free to marry your father's choice, Princess Olga, of Gratz."

The young man's lips curled and his eyes narrowed. "Never!" he exclaimed impulsively. "She's ten years too old and a thousand times impossible. Luckily," he went on more composedly, "we're in America, not Ostrau, and I propose to stay here. I'm beastly sorry, uncle, for your sake. We've always been great pals, and ever since I was a kid I've loved you more than my august father. I'd do anything else for you gladly, but this is impossible. I'll renounce my rights to the succession for myself and my heirs forever. Let Maurice be crown prince, can't you? He'll make a lot better king than I ever could. All I want is to be let alone; to be free to live my own life and be happy in my own way. Ostrau stifles me with its foolish, cramping etiquette and narrow bigotry. It's ruined your life, and I'll take precious good care——"

He broke off abruptly as the grand duke groaned and covered his face with one hand.

"Forgive me, uncle!" the prince begged. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I forgot

myself. But you understand," he went on softly, "because you, too, have suffered."

CHAPTER XLV.
THE GIFT OF THE RING.

The older man did not answer at once, and Lawrence, feeling as if he had no right to listen, moved slowly backward till he touched the table. Then he turned suddenly and looked down quizzically into Shirley's eyes.

"You—understand?" he whispered gently.

She nodded swiftly. "What must you think of me?" she murmured a little unsteadily. "I didn't believe it at first, but they swore it—was true; and, somehow, things fitted in, and—and—— Do you think you'll ever forgive me?"

One hand stole across the table, and the strong brown fingers closed over the tiny gloved ones.

"Did you really think I wouldn't?" he questioned softly, gazing into her wonderful eyes with an expression in his own which swiftly brought her long lashes sweeping down on crimsoning cheek.

"Well?" he queried as she made no answer.

"I—I hoped," she faltered.

It was the voice of the grand duke, weary, sorrowful, but full of an unmistakable resignation, which broke the silence.

"I cannot blame you, Oscar," he was saying quietly. "I have clung to the old traditions because there seemed no other way—perhaps I lacked the courage to do what you have done—and my life turned to dust and ashes. I love you too well ever to wish to see that happen to you. Have you any—plans?"

"Heaps of them, uncle," the prince answered jauntily. "I'm going to become an American citizen. I think I'll buy a big place in the South and turn farmer. I've money enough."

The two at the table saw the old man wince slightly, but in an instant he had recovered his composure.

"What a thoroughbred he is!" Barry whispered admiringly. He had apparently forgotten to release Shirley's hand, but she seemed too absorbed to notice the lapse.

"There will be no difficulty on that score," the duke remarked. "Your estates belong to you personally, and their sale should net a million or more."

Suddenly he gave a start and arose swiftly to his feet.

"I beg your pardon, Oscar," he ejaculated, in chagrin. "My preoccupation has made me forget entirely my desire to meet your—wife. This lady is——"

He glanced at Shirley with a courtly inclination, just in time to see her snatch her hand from Barry's grasp and spring to her feet with blazing cheeks. The prince saw it, too, and his eyes twinkled.

"I have not the honor," he said quietly. "My wife is just recovering from an illness which has been the cause of most of these complications. Mr. Lawrence, will you be so good as to present us?"

With swiftly recovered composure, Shirley acknowledged the introduction with a naïve dignity; and, when they had all seated themselves again, the prince begged for a recital of Barry's adventures.

"Extraordinary and most diverting," he said when the tale had been told. "Perhaps a little more amusing in retrospect. My dear Mr. Lawrence, I feel more than ever indebted to you for what you have done. When I started the ball rolling last Monday morning I had no conception of the strenuous experiences I was bringing upon you. You see, I had left Ostrau secretly with only Watkins, my American secretary, who has been with me for years, but I was almost certain of being followed. I hoped, however, that we should succeed in losing ourselves somewhere in the South or West before our trail was picked up. I should explain, perhaps, that my wife and I were married in Paris, where she was spending the winter. She was Miss Isabel Patterson, of Baltimore. We sailed under assumed names; or, rather, under a name I used in England during our exile——"

"I beg your pardon," Lawrence put in, "but was it Nordstrom?"

"Why, yes. How did you know?"

"I met a friend of yours who had known you at Cambridge. He was an Englishman named Brandon."

"John Brandon!" exclaimed the prince. "Of course! We were great friends during my university days, but I haven't seen him in years. You see, Mr. Lawrence, our family was exiled from Ostrau until the timely revolution three years ago which restored my father to power. I was brought up in England, and, as we were very poor, indeed, I went through Rugby and Cambridge under the name of Nordstrom, which is one of our family names. It would have been absurd for a poverty-stricken individual to be strutting about as a prince. What times we had!" he sighed. "I think they were the happiest days of my life—until now. But I am digressing. Unfortunately for our plans, my wife was taken ill just as we were on the point of leaving New York. I knew that the pursuit would be keen, and, unless attention was diverted from us to another quarter, we would be hunted out, no matter how carefully we hid ourselves in New York. Considering my wife's health, I was most anxious to avoid anything of that sort until she was

recovered.

”I was at my wits’ end,” he continued, ”and could think of nothing until one day, while waiting with Watkins in the Pennsylvania Station for a physician from Philadelphia, whom I knew well, and who had promised to come on, I suddenly caught sight of you. I was simply stumped, of course; then, like a flash, I realized that here was the way out, which I had hitherto been searching for in vain. It took but a moment for me to outline a plan to Watkins, arrange my bill case, and place the ring in it. You see, that had been given me by the Rajah of Sind when I toured India two years ago, and I had scarcely had it off my finger since then. If an added mark of identification were needed, that would amply suffice.

”The plan worked to a charm. When Hager, my father’s chief of police, arrived, he was completely taken in. He kept on your trail day and night, and my purpose was accomplished. We had taken rooms in what I considered the most out-of-the-way locality in New York. When I went out it was always after dark and wearing a semidisguise. In spite of every care, however, fate seemed to be against me, and caused Hager to choose this very house for the culmination of his little drama. My rooms are just back of this. Through the door I heard all that passed; and, when I found that my uncle was expected, I realized that the better way would be to end everything at once and be free from further persecution. I can only close, Mr. Lawrence, by offering my most sincere apologies for the annoyance to which you have been subjected.”

”There is not the slightest need of that, your highness,” Barry returned hastily. ”I am more grateful to you than I can say, for without your aid I should probably have missed—the greatest happiness of my life.”

”You are good to say that,” the prince said simply. ”I am very happy.”

”Aren’t you forgetting something?” Lawrence asked as they arose.

The crown prince looked slightly puzzled. ”I’m afraid I do not understand.”

”This,” explained Lawrence, drawing the emerald ring from his finger and holding it out. ”It belongs to you, you know.”

”Not at all. That is yours. It is part of the bargain, and I am sure you have earned it.”

”But it’s worth a king’s ransom,” Barry protested. ”I really can’t take it. You have given me more than enough without that. Besides, it is much too rare a jewel for me to be wearing.”

The prince darted a mischievous glance at Shirley Rives.

”Perhaps there is some one else who might be willing to relieve you of its care,” he murmured, his fine eyes twinkling.

There was no mistaking his meaning, and the girl dropped her lids, while a rush of color crimsoned her lovely face. The next instant, however, she lifted them again and looked bravely into Barry’s questioning eyes.

”Perhaps—some day,” she murmured.

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