The Man on the Box

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[Illustration: Henry E. Dixey in "The Man on the Box."]

THE MAN ON THE BOX

by

HAROLD MACGRATH

Author of
The Grey Cloak, The Puppet Crown

Illustrated by scenes from Walter N. Lawrence's beautiful production of the play as seen for 123 nights at the Madison Square Theatre, New York

To Miss Louise Everts

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_He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who dares not put it to the touch
To win or lose it all._

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Miss Betty Annesley His daughter

Lieutenant Robert Warburton Lately resigned

Mr. John Warburton His elder brother, of the War Department

Mrs. John Warburton The elder brother's wife

Miss Nancy Warburton The lieutenant's sister

Mr. Charles Henderson Her fiance

Count Karloff An unattached diplomat

Colonel Frank Raleigh The Lieutenant's Regimental Colonel

Mrs. Chadwick A product of Washington life

Monsieur Pierre A chef

Mademoiselle Celeste A lady's maid

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The Hopeful A baby

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Fashionable People Necessary for a dinner party

Celebrities Also necessary for a dinner party

Unfashionables Police, cabbies, grooms, clerks, etc.

TIME--Within the past ten years.

SCENE--Washington, D.C., and its environs.

I

INTRODUCES MY HERO

If you will carefully observe any map of the world that is divided into inches at so many miles to the inch, you will be surprised as you calculate the distance between that enchanting Paris of France and the third-precinct police-station of Washington, D. C, which is not enchanting. It is several thousand miles. Again, if you will take the pains to run your glance, no doubt discerning, over the police-blotter at the court (and frankly, I refuse to tell you the exact date of this whimsical adventure), you will note with even greater surprise that all this hubbub was caused by no crime against the commonwealth of the Republic or against the person of any of its conglomerate people. The blotter reads, in heavy simple fist, "disorderly conduct," a phrase which is almost as embracing as the word diplomacy, or society, or respectability.

So far as my knowledge goes, there is no such a person as James Osborne. If, by any unhappy chance, he _does_ exist, I trust that he will pardon the civil law of Washington, my own measure of familiarity, and the questionable taste on the part of my hero--hero, because, from the rise to the fall of the curtain, he occupies the center of the stage in this little comedy-drama, and because authors have yet to find a happy synonym for the word. The name James Osborne was given for the simple reason that it was the first that occurred to the culprit's mind, so desperate an effort did he make to hide his identity. Supposing, for the sake of an argument in his favor, supposing he had said John Smith or William Jones or John Brown? To this very day he would have been hiring lawyers to extricate him from libel and false-representation suits. Besides, had he given any of these names, would not that hound-like scent of the ever suspicious police have been aroused?

To move round and round in the circle of commonplace, and then to pop

out of it like a tailed comet! Such is the history of many a man's life. I have a near friend who went away from town one fall, happy and contented with his lot. And what do you suppose he found when he returned home? He had been nominated for alderman. It is too early to predict the fate of this unhappy man. And what tools Fate uses with which to carve out her devious peculiar patterns! An Apache Indian, besmeared with brilliant greases and smelling of the water that never freezes, an understudy to Cupid? Fudge! you will say, or Pshaw! or whatever slang phrase is handy and, prevalent at the moment you read and run.

I personally warn you that this is a really-truly story, though I do not undertake to force you to believe it; neither do I purvey many grains of salt. If Truth went about her affairs laughing, how many more persons would turn and listen! For my part, I believe it all nonsense the way artists have pictured Truth. The idea is pretty enough, but so far as hitting things, it recalls the woman, the stone, and the hen. I am convinced that Truth goes about dressed in the dowdiest of clothes, with black-lisle gloves worn at the fingers, and shoes run down in the heels, an exact portrait of one of Phil May's lydies. Thus it is that we pass her by, for the artistic sense in every being is repelled at the sight of a dowdy with weeping eyes and a nose that has been rubbed till it is as red as a winter apple. Anyhow, if she _does_ go about in beautiful nudity, she ought at least to clothe herself with smiles and laughter. There are sorry enough things in the world as it is, without a lachrymal, hypochondriacal Truth poking her face in everywhere.

Not many months ago, while seated on the stone veranda in the rear of the Metropolitan Club in Washington (I believe we were discussing the merits of some very old product), I recounted some of the lighter chapters of this adventure.

"Eempossible!" murmured the Russian attache, just as if the matter had not come under his notice semi-officially.

I presume that this exclamation disclosed another side to diplomacy, which, stripped of its fine clothes, means dexterity in hiding secrets and in negotiating lies. When one diplomat believes what another says, it is time for the former's government to send him packing. However, the Englishman at my right gazed smiling into his partly emptied glass and gently stirred the ice. I admire the English diplomat; he never wastes a lie. He is frugal and saving.

"But the newspapers!" cried the journalist. "They never ran a line; and an exploit like this would scarce have escaped them."

"If I remember rightly, it was reported in the regular police items of the day," said I.

"Strange that the boys didn't look behind the scenes."

"Oh, I don't know," remarked the congressman; "lots of things happen of which you are all ignorant. The public mustn't know everything."

"But what's the hero's name?" asked the journalist.

"That's a secret," I answered. "Besides, when it comes to the bottom of the matter, I had something to do with the suppressing of the

police news. In a case like this, suppression becomes a law not excelled by that which governs self-preservation. My friend has a brother in the War Department; and together we worked wonders."

"It's a jolly droll story, however you look at it," the Englishman admitted.

"Nevertheless, it had its tragic side; but that is even more than ever a secret."

The Englishman looked at me sharply, even gravely; but the veranda is only dimly illuminated at night, and his scrutiny went unrewarded.

"Eh, well!" said the Russian; "your philosopher has observed that all mankind loves a lover."

"As all womankind loves a love-story," the Englishman added. "You ought to be very successful with the ladies,"--turning to me.

"Not inordinately; but I shall not fail to repeat your epigram,"--and I rose.

My watch told me that it was half after eight; and one does not receive every day an invitation to a dinner-dance at the Chevy Chase Club.

I dislike exceedingly to intrude my own personality into this narrative, but as I was passively concerned, I do not see how I can avoid it. Besides, being a public man, I am not wholly averse to publicity; first person, singular, perpendicular, as Thackeray had it, in type looks rather agreeable to the eye. And I rather believe that I have a moral to point out and a parable to expound.

My appointment in Washington at that time was extraordinary; that is to say, I was a member of one of those committees that are born frequently and suddenly in Washington, and which almost immediately after registration in the vital statistics of national politics. I had been sent to Congress, a dazzling halo over my head, the pride and hope of my little country town; I had been defeated for second term; had been recommended to serve on the committee aforesaid; served with honor, got my name in the great newspapers, and was sent back to Congress, where I am still to-day, waiting patiently for a discerning president and a vacancy in the legal department of the cabinet. That's about all I am willing to say about myself.

As for this hero of mine, he was the handsomest, liveliest rascal you would expect to meet in a day's ride. By handsome I do not mean perfect features, red cheeks, Byronic eyes, and so forth. That style of beauty belongs to the department of lady novelists. I mean that peculiar manly beauty which attracts men almost as powerfully as it does women. For the sake of a name I shall call him Warburton. His given name in actual life is Robert. But I am afraid that nobody but his mother and one other woman ever called him Robert. The world at large dubbed him Bob, and such he will remain up to that day (and may it be many years hence!) when recourse will be had to Robert, because "Bob" would certainly look very silly on a marble shaft.

What a friendly sign is a nickname! It is always a good fellow who is called Bob or Bill, Jack or Jim, Tom, Dick or Harry. Even out of

Theodore there comes a Teddy. I know in my own case the boys used to call me Chuck, simply because I was named Charles. (I haven't the slightest doubt that I was named Charles because my good mother thought I looked something like Vandyke's _Charles I_, though at the time of my baptism I wore no beard whatever.) And how I hated a boy with a high-sounding, unnicknamable given name!--with his round white collar and his long glossy curls! I dare say he hated the name, the collar, and the curls even more than I did. Whenever you run across a name carded in this stilted fashion, "A. Thingumy Soandso", you may make up your mind at once that the owner is ashamed of his first name and is trying manfully to live it down and eventually forgive his parents.

Warburton was graduated from West Point, ticketed to a desolate frontier post, and would have worn out his existence there but for his guiding star, which was always making frantic efforts to bolt its established orbit. One day he was doing scout duty, perhaps half a mile in advance of the pay-train, as they called the picturesque caravan which, consisting of a canopied wagon and a small troop of cavalry in dingy blue, made progress across the desert-like plains of Arizona. The troop was some ten miles from the post, and as there had been no sign of Red Eagle all that day, they concluded that the rumor of his being on a drunken rampage with half a dozen braves was only a rumor. Warburton had just passed over a roll of earth, and for a moment the pay-train had dropped out of sight. It was twilight; opalescent waves of heat rolled above the blistered sands. A pale yellow sky, like an inverted bowl rimmed with delicate blue and crimson hues, encompassed the world. The bliss of solitude fell on him, and, being something of a poet, he rose to the stars. The smoke of his corncob pipe trailed lazily behind him. The horse under him was loping along easily. Suddenly the animal lifted his head, and his brown ears went forward.

At Warburton's left, some hundred yards distant, was a clump of osage brush. Even as he looked, there came a puff of smoke, followed by the evil song of a bullet. My hero's hat was carried away. He wheeled, dug his heels into his horse, and cut back over the trail. There came a second flash, a shock, and then a terrible pain in the calf of his left leg. He fell over the neck of his horse to escape the third bullet. He could see the Apache as he stood out from behind the bush. Warburton yanked out his Colt and let fly. He heard a yell. It was very comforting. That was all he remembered of the skirmish.

For five weeks he languished in the hospital. During that time he came to the conclusion that he had had enough of military life in the West. He applied for his discharge, as the compulsory term of service was at an end. When his papers came he was able to get about with the aid of a crutch. One morning his colonel entered his subaltern's bachelor quarters.

"Wouldn't you rather have a year's leave of absence, than quit altogether, Warburton?"

"A year's leave of absence?" cried the invalid, "I am likely to get that, I am."

"If you held a responsible position I dare say it would be difficult. As it is, I may say that I can obtain it for you. It will be months before you can ride a horse with that leg."

"I thank you, Colonel Raleigh, but I think I'll resign. In fact, I have resigned."

"We can withdraw that, if you but say the word. I don't want to lose you, lad. You're the only man around here who likes a joke as well as I do. And you will have a company if you'll only stick to it a little longer."

"I have decided, Colonel. I'm sorry you feel like this about it. You see, I have something like twenty-five thousand laid away. I want to see at least five thousand dollars' worth of new scenery before I shuffle off this mortal coil. The scenery around here palls on me. My throat and eyes are always full of sand. I am off to Europe. Some day, perhaps, the bee will buzz again; and when it does, I'll have you go personally to the president."

"As you please, Warburton."

"Besides, Colonel, I have been reading Treasure Island again, and I've got the fever in my veins to hunt for adventure, even a treasure. It's in my blood to wander and do strange things, and here I've been hampered all these years with routine. I shouldn't care if we had a good fight once in a while. My poor old dad traveled around the world three times, and I haven't seen anything of it but the maps."

"Go ahead, then. Only, talking about Treasure Island, don't you and your twenty-five thousand run into some old Long John Silver."

"I'll take care."

And Mr. Robert packed up his kit and sailed away. Not many months passed ere he met his colonel again, and under rather embarrassing circumstances.

II

INTRODUCES MY HEROINE

Let me begin at the beginning. The boat had been two days out of Southampton before the fog cleared away. On the afternoon of the third day, Warburton curled up in his steamer-chair and lazily viewed the blue October seas as they met and merged with the blue October skies. I do not recollect the popular novel of that summer, but at any rate it lay flapping at the side of his chair, forgotten. It never entered my hero's mind that some poor devil of an author had sweated and labored with infinite pains over every line, and paragraph, and page-labored with all the care and love his heart and mind were capable of, to produce this finished child of fancy; or that this same author, even at this very moment, might be seated on the veranda of his beautiful summer villa, figuring out royalties on the backs of stray envelopes. No, he never thought of these things.

What with the wind and the soft, ceaseless jar of the throbbing

engines, half a dream hovered above his head, and touched him with a gentle, insistent caress. If you had passed by him this afternoon, and had been anything of a mathematician who could straighten out geometrical angles, you would have come close to his height had you stopped at five feet nine. Indeed, had you clipped off the heels of his low shoes, you would have been exact. But all your nice calculations would not have solved his weight. He was slender, but he was hard and compact. These hard, slender fellows sometimes weigh more than your men of greater bulk. He tipped the scales at one hundred sixty-two, and he looked twenty pounds less. He was twenty-eight; a casual glance at him, and you would have been willing to wager that the joy of casting his first vote was yet to be his.

The princess commands that I describe in detail the charms of this Army Adonis. Far be it that I should disobey so august a command, being, as I am, the prime minister in this her principality of Domestic Felicity. Her brother has never ceased to be among the first in her dear regard. He possessed the merriest black eyes: his mother's eyes, as I, a boy, remember them. No matter how immobile his features might be, these eyes of his were ever ready for laughter. His nose was clean-cut and shapely. A phrenologist would have said that his head did not lack the bump of caution; but I know better. At present he wore a beard; so this is as large an inventory of his personal attractions as I am able to give. When he shaves off his beard, I shall be pleased to add further particulars. I often marvel that the women did not turn his head. They were always sending him notes and invitations and cutting dances for him. Perhaps his devil-may-care air had something to do with the enchantment. I have yet to see his equal as a horseman. He would have made it interesting for that pair of milk-whites which our old friend, Ulysses (or was it Diomedes?) had such ado about.

Every man has some vice or other, even if it is only being good. Warburton had perhaps two: poker and tobacco. He would get out of bed at any hour if some congenial spirit knocked at the door and whispered that a little game was in progress, and that his money was needed to keep it going. I dare say that you know all about these little games. But what would you? What is a man to do in a country where you may buy a whole village for ten dollars? Warburton seldom drank, and, like the author of this precious volume, only special vintages.

At this particular moment this hero of mine was going over the monotony of the old days in Arizona, the sand-deserts, the unlovely landscapes, the dull routine, the indifferent skirmishes with cattle-men and Indians; the pagan bullet which had plowed through his leg. And now it was all over; he had surrendered his straps; he was a private citizen, with an income sufficient for his needs. It will go a long way, forty-five hundred a year, if one does not attempt to cover the distance in a five-thousand motor-car; and he hated all locomotion that was not horse-flesh.

For nine months he had been wandering over Europe, if not happy, at least in a satisfied frame of mind. Four of these months had been delightfully passed in Paris; and, as his nomad excursions had invariably terminated in that queen of cities, I make Paris the starting point of his somewhat remarkable adventures. Besides, it was in Paris that he first saw Her. And now, here he was at last, homeward-bound. That phrase had a mighty pleasant sound; it was to

the ear what honey is to the tongue. Still, he might yet have been in Paris but for one thing: She was on board this very boat.

Suddenly his eyes opened full wide, bright with eagerness.

"It is She!" he murmured. He closed his eyes again, the hypocrite!

Permit me to introduce you to my heroine. Mind you, she is not _my_ creation; only Heaven may produce her like, and but once. She is well worth turning around to gaze at. Indeed I know more than one fine gentleman who forgot the time of day, the important engagement, or the trend of his thought, when she passed by.

She was coming forward, leaning against the wind and inclining to the uncertain roll of the ship. A gray raincoat fitted snugly the youthful rounded figure. Her hands were plunged into the pockets. You may be sure that Mr. Robert noted through his half-closed eyelids these inconsequent details. A tourist hat sat jauntily on the fine light brown hair, that color which has no appropriate metaphor. (At least, I have never found one, and I am _not_ in love with her and _never_ was.) Warburton has described to me her eyes, so I am positive that they were as heavenly blue as a rajah's sapphire. Her height is of no moment. What man ever troubled himself about the height of a woman, so long as he wasn't undersized himself? What pleased Warburton was the exquisite skin. He was always happy with his comparisons, and particularly when he likened her skin to the bloomy olive pallor of a young peach. The independent stride was distinguishingly American. Ah, the charm of these women who are my countrywomen! They come, they go, alone, unattended, courageous without being bold, self-reliant without being rude; inimitable. In what an amiable frame of mind Nature must have been on the day she cast these molds! But I proceed. The young woman's chin was tilted, and Warburton could tell by the dilated nostrils that she was breathing in the gale with all the joy of living, filling her healthy lungs with it as that rare daughter of the Cyprian Isle might have done as she sprang that morn from the jeweled Mediterranean spray, that beggar's brooch of Neptune's.

Warburton's heart hadn't thrilled so since the day when he first donned cadet gray. There was scarce any room for her to pass between his chair and the rail; and this knowledge filled the rascal with exultation. Nearer and nearer she came. He drew in his breath sharply as the corner of his foot-rest (aided by the sly wind) caught her raincoat.

"I beg your pardon!" he said, sitting up.

She quickly released her coat, smiled faintly, and passed on.

Sometimes the most lasting impressions are those which are printed most lightly on the memory. Mr. Robert says that he never will forget that first smile. And he didn't even know her name then.

I was about to engage your attention with a description of the villain, but on second thought I have decided that it would be rather unfair. For at that moment he was at a disadvantage. Nature was punishing him for a few shortcomings. The steward that night informed Warburton, in answer to his inquiries, that he, the villain, was dreadfully seasick, and was begging him, the steward, to scuttle the

ship and have done with it. I have my doubts regarding this. Mr. Robert is inclined to flippancy at times. It wasn't seasickness; and after all is said and done, it is putting it harshly to call this man a villain. I recant. True villainy is always based upon selfishness. Remember this, my wise ones.

Warburton was somewhat subdued when he learned that the suffering gentleman was _her_ father.

"What did you say the name was?" he asked innocently. Until now he hadn't had the courage to put the question to any one, or to prowl around the purser's books.

"Annesley; Colonel Annesley and daughter," answered the unsuspecting steward.

Warburton knew nothing then of the mental tragedy going on behind the colonel's state-room door. How should he have known? On the contrary, he believed that the father of such a girl must be a most knightly and courtly gentleman. He _was_, in all outward appearance. There had been a time, not long since, when he had been knightly and courtly in all things.

Surrounding every upright man there is a mire, and if he step not wisely, he is lost. There is no coming back; step by step he must go on and on, till he vanishes and a bubble rises over where he but lately stood. That he misstepped innocently does not matter; mire and evil have neither pity nor reason. To spend what is not ours and then to try to recover it, to hide the guilty step: this is futility. From the alpha men have made this step; to the omega they will make it, with the same unchanging futility. After all, it _is_ money. Money _is_ the root of all evil; let him laugh who will, in his heart of hearts he knows it.

Money! Have you never heard that siren call to you, call seductively from her ragged isle, where lurk the reefs of greed and selfishness? Money! What has this siren not to offer? Power, ease, glory, luxury; aye, I had almost said love! But, no; love is the gift of God, money is the invention of man: all the good, all the evil, in the heart of this great humanity.

III

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

It was only when the ship was less than a day's journey off Sandy Hook that the colonel came on deck, once more to resume his interest in human affairs. How the girl hovered about him! She tucked the shawl more snugly around his feet; she arranged and rearranged the pillows back of his head; she fed him from a bowl of soup; she read from some favorite book; she smoothed the furrowed brow; she stilled the long, white, nervous fingers with her own small, firm, brown ones; she was mother and daughter in one. Wherever she moved, the parent eye followed her, and there lay in its deeps a strange mixture of fear, and trouble, and questioning love. All the while he drummed

ceaselessly on the arms of his chair.

And Mr. Robert, watching all these things from afar, Mr. Robert sighed dolorously. The residue air in his lungs was renewed more frequently than nature originally intended it should be. Love has its beneficences as well as its pangs, only they are not wholly appreciable by the recipient. For what is better than a good pair of lungs constantly filled and refilled with pure air? Mr. Robert even felt a twinge of remorse besides. He was brother to a girl almost as beautiful as yonder one (to my mind far more beautiful!) and he recalled that in two years he had not seen her nor made strenuous efforts to keep up the correspondence. Another good point added to the score of love! And, alas! he might never see this charming girl again, this daughter so full of filial love and care. He had sought the captain, but that hale and hearty old sea-dog had politely rebuffed him.

"My dear young man," he said, "I do all I possibly can for the entertainment and comfort of my passengers, but in this case I must refuse your request."

"And pray, why, sir?" demanded Mr. Robert, with dignity.

"For the one and simple reason that Colonel Annesley expressed the desire to be the recipient of no ship introductions."

"What the deuce is he, a billionaire?"

"You have me there, sir. I confess that I know nothing whatever about him. This is the first time he has ever sailed on my deck."

All of which perfectly accounts for Mr. Robert's sighs in what musicians call the _doloroso_. If only he knew some one who knew the colonel! How simple it would be! Certainly, a West Point graduate would find some consideration. But the colonel spoke to no one save his daughter, and his daughter to none but her parent, her maid, and the stewardess. Would they remain in New York, or would they seek their far-off southern home? Oh, the thousands of questions which surged through his brain! From time to time he glanced sympathetically at the colonel, whose fingers drummed and drummed and drummed.

"Poor wretch! his stomach must be in bad shape. Or maybe he has the palsy." Warburton mused upon the curious incertitude of the human anatomy.

But Colonel Annesley did not have the palsy. What he had is at once the greatest blessing and the greatest curse of God--remembrance, or conscience, if you will.

What a beautiful color her hair was, dappled with sunshine and shadow! ... Pshaw! Mr. Robert threw aside his shawl and book (it is of no real importance, but I may as well add that he never completed the reading of that summer's most popular novel) and sought the smoking-room, where, with the aid of a fat perfecto and a liberal stack of blues, he proceeded to divert himself till the boat reached quarantine. I shall not say that he left any of his patrimony at the mahogany table with its green-baize covering and its little brass disks for cigar ashes, but I am certain that he did not make one of those stupendous winnings we often read about and never witness. This

much, however: he made the acquaintance of a very important personage, who was presently to add no insignificant weight on the scales of Mr. Robert's destiny.

He was a Russian, young, handsome, suave, of what the newspapers insist on calling distinguished bearing. He spoke English pleasantly but imperfectly. He possessed a capital fund of anecdote, and Warburton, being an Army man, loved a good droll story. It was a revelation to see the way he dipped the end of his cigar into his coffee, a stimulant which he drank with Balzacian frequency and relish. Besides these accomplishments, he played a very smooth hand at the great American game. While Mr. Robert's admiration was not aroused, it was surely awakened.

My hero had no trouble with the customs officials. A brace of old French dueling pistols and a Turkish simitar were the only articles which might possibly have been dutiable. The inspector looked hard, but he was finally convinced that Mr. Robert was _not_ a professional curio-collector. Warburton, never having returned from abroad before, found a deal of amusement and food for thought in the ensuing scenes. There was one man, a prim, irascible old fellow, who was not allowed to pass in two dozen fine German razors. There was a time of it, angry words, threats, protestations. The inspector stood firm. The old gentleman, in a fine burst of passion, tossed the razors into the water. Then they were going to arrest him for smuggling. A friend extricated him. The old gentleman went away, saying something about the tariff and an unreasonably warm place which has as many synonyms as an octopus has tentacles.

Another man, his mouth covered by an enormous black mustache which must have received a bath every morning in coffee or something stronger, came forward pompously. I don't know to this day what magic word he said, but the inspectors took never a peep into his belongings. Doubtless they knew him, and that his word was as good as his bond.

Here a woman wept because the necklace she brought trustingly from Rotterdam must be paid for once again; and here another, who clenched her fists (do women have fists?) and if looks could have killed there would have been a vacancy in customs forthwith. All her choicest linen strewn about on the dirty boards, all soiled and rumpled and useless!

When the colonel's turn came, Warburton moved within hearing distance. How glorious she looked in that smart gray traveling habit! With what well-bred indifference she gazed upon the scene! Calmly her glance passed among the circles of strange faces, and ever and anon returned to the great ship which had safely brought her back to her native land. There were other women who were just as well-bred and indifferent, only Warburton had but one pair of eyes. Sighs in the _doloroso_ again. Ha! if only one of these meddling jackasses would show her some disrespect and give him the opportunity of avenging the affront!

(Come, now; let me be your confessor. Have you never thought and acted like this hero of mine? Haven't you been just as melodramatic and ridiculous? It is nothing to be ashamed of. For my part, I should confess to it with the same equanimity as I should to the mumps or the measles. It comes with, and is part and parcel of, all that

strange medley we find in the Pandora box of life. Love has no diagnosis, so the doctors say. 'Tis all in the angle of vision.)

But nothing happened. Colonel Annesley and his daughter were old hands; they had gone through all this before. Scarce an article in their trunks was disturbed. There was a slight duty of some twelve dollars (Warburton's memory is marvelous), and their luggage was free. But alas, for the perspicacity of the inspectors! I can very well imagine the god of irony in no better or more fitting place than in the United States Customs House.

Once outside, the colonel caught the eye of a cabby, and he and his daughter stepped in.

"Holland House, sir, did you say?" asked the cabby.

The colonel nodded. The cabby cracked his whip, and away they rolled over the pavement.

Warburton's heart gave a great bound. She had actually leaned out of the cab, and for one brief moment their glances had met. Scarce knowing what he did, he jumped into another cab and went pounding after. It was easily ten blocks from the pier when the cabby raised the lid and peered down at his fare.

"Do you want t' folly them ahead?" he cried.

"No, no!" Warburton was startled out of his wild dream. "Drive to the Holland House--no--to the Waldorf. Yes, the Waldorf; and keep your nag going."

"Waldorf it is, sir!" The lid above closed.

Clouds had gathered in the heavens. It was beginning to rain. But Warburton neither saw the clouds nor felt the first few drops of rain. All the way up-town he planned and planned--as many plans as there were drops of rain; the rain wet him, but the plans drowned him--he became submerged. If I were an expert at analysis, which I am not, I should say that Mr. Robert was not violently in love; rather I should observe that he was fascinated with the first really fine face he had seen in several years. Let him never see Miss Annesley again, and in two weeks he would entirely forget her. I know enough of the race to be able to put forward this statement. Of course, it is understood that he would have to mingle for the time among other handsome women. Now, strive as he would, he could not think out a feasible plan. One plan might have given him light, but the thousand that came to him simply overwhelmed him fathoms deep. If he could find some one he knew at the Holland House, some one who would strike up a smoking-room acquaintance with the colonel, the rest would be simple enough. Annesley--Annesley; he couldn't place the name. Was he a regular, retired, or a veteran of the Civil War? And yet, the name was not totally unfamiliar. Certainly, he was a fine-looking old fellow, with his white hair and Alexandrian nose. And here he was, he, Robert Warburton, in New York, simply because he happened to be in the booking office of the _Gare du Nord_ one morning and overheard a very beautiful girl say: "Then we shall sail from Southampton day after to-morrow." Of a truth, it is the infinitesimal things that count heaviest.

So deep was he in the maze of his tentative romance that when the cab finally stopped abruptly, he was totally unaware of the transition from activity to passivity.

"Hotel, sir!"

"Ah, yes!" Warburton leaped out, fumbled in his pocket, and brought forth a five-dollar note, which he gave to the cabby. He did not realize it, but this was the only piece of American money he had on his person. Nor did he wait for the change. Mr. Robert was exceedingly careless with his money at this stage of his infatuation; being a soldier, he never knew the real value of legal tender. I know that _I_ should never have been guilty of such liberality, not even if Mister Cabby had bowled me from Harlem to Brooklyn. And you may take my word for it, the gentleman in the ancient plug-hat did not wait to see if his fare had made a mistake, but trotted away good and hearty. The cab system is one of the most pleasing and amiable phases of metropolitan life.

Warburton rushed into the noisy, gorgeous lobby, and wandered about till he espied the desk. Here he turned over his luggage checks to the clerk and said that these accessories of travel must be in his room before eight o'clock that night, or there would be trouble. It was now half after five. The clerk eagerly scanned the register. Warburton, Robert Warburton; it was not a name with which _he_ was familiar. A thin film of icy hauteur spread over his face.

"Very well, sir. Do you wish a bath with your room?"

"Certainly." Warburton glanced at his watch again.

"The price--"

"Hang the price! A room, a room with a bath--that's what I want. Have you got it?" This was said with a deal of real impatience and a hauteur that overtopped the clerk's.

The film of ice melted into a gracious smile. Some new millionaire from Pittsburg, thought the clerk. He swung the book around.

"You have forgotten your place of residence, sir," he said.

"Place of residence!"

Warburton looked at the clerk in blank astonishment. Place of residence? Why, heaven help him, he had none, none! For the first time since he left the Army the knowledge came home to him, and it struck rather deep. He caught up the pen, poised it an indecisive moment, then hastily scribbled Paris: as well Paris as anywhere. Then he took out his wallet, comfortably packed with English and French bank-notes, and a second wave of astonishment rolled over him. Altogether, it was a rare good chance that he ever came to the surface again. No plan, no place of residence, no American money!

"Good Lord! I forgot all about exchanging it on shipboard!" he exclaimed.

"Don't let that trouble you, sir," said the clerk, with real affability. "Our own bank will exchange your money in the morning."

"But I haven't a penny of American money on my person!"

"How much will you need for the evening, sir?"

"Not more than fifty."

The clerk brought forth a slip of paper, wrote something on it, and handed it to Warburton.

"Sign here," he said, indicating a blank space.

And presently Mr. Robert, having deposited his foreign money in the safe, pocketed the receipt for its deposit along with five crisp American notes. There is nothing lacking in these modern hostelries, excepting it be a church.

Our homeless young gentleman lighted a cigar and went out under the portico. An early darkness had settled over the city, and a heavy steady rain was falling. The asphalt pavements glistened and twinkled as far as the eye's range could reach. A thousand lights gleamed down on him, and he seemed to be standing in a canon dappled with fireflies. Place of residence! Neither the fig-tree nor the vine! Did he lose his money to-morrow, the source of his small income, he would be without a roof over his head. True, his brother's roof would always welcome him: but a roof-tree of his own! And he could lay claim to no city, either, having had the good fortune to be born in a healthy country town. Place of residence! Truly he had none; a melancholy fact which he had not appreciated till now. And all this had slipped his mind because of a pair of eyes as heavenly blue as a rajah's sapphire!

Hang it, what should he do, now that he was no longer traveling, now that his time was no longer Uncle Sam's? He had never till now known idleness, and the thought of it did not run smoothly with the grain. He was essentially a man of action. There might be some good sport for a soldier in Venezuela, but that was far away and uncertain. It was quite possible Jack, his brother, might find him a post as military attache, perhaps in France, perhaps in Belgium, perhaps in Vienna. That was the goal of more than one subaltern. The English novelist is to be blamed for this ambition. But Warburton could speak French with a certain fluency, and his German was good enough to swear by; so it will be seen that he had some ground upon which to build this ambition.

Heigho! The old homestead was gone; his sister dwelt under the elder brother's roof; the prodigal was alone.

"But there's always a fatted calf waiting in Washington," he laughed aloud. "Once a soldier, always a soldier. I suppose I'll be begging the colonel to have a chat with the president. There doesn't seem to be any way of getting out of it. I'll have to don the old togs again. I ought to write a letter to Nancy, but it will be finer to drop in on 'em unexpectedly. Bless her heart! (So say I!) And Jack's, too, and his little wife's! And I haven't written a line in eight weeks. But I'll make it all up in ten minutes. And if I haven't a roof-tree, at least I've got the ready cash and can buy one any day." All of which proves that Mr. Robert possessed a buoyant spirit, and refused to be downcast for more than one minute at a time.

He threw away his cigar and reentered the hotel, and threaded his way through the appalling labyrinths of corridors till he found some one to guide him to the barber shop, where he could have his hair cut and his beard trimmed in the good old American way, money no object. For a plan had at last come to him; and it wasn't at all bad. He determined to dine at the Holland House at eight-thirty. It was quite possible that he would see Her.

My only wish is that, when I put on evening clothes (in my humble opinion, the homeliest and most uncomfortable garb that man ever invented!) I might look one-quarter as handsome and elegant as Mr. Robert looked, as he came down stairs at eight-ten that night. He wasn't to be blamed if the women glanced in his direction, and then whispered and whispered, and nodded and nodded. Ordinarily he would have observed these signs of feminine approval, for there was warm blood in his veins, and it is proverbial that the Army man is gallant. But to-night Diana and her white huntresses might have passed him by and not aroused even a flicker of interest or surprise on his face. There was only one pair of eyes, one face, and to see these he would have gladly gone to the ends of the earth, travel-weary though he was.

He smoked feverishly, and was somewhat troubled to find that he hadn't quite got his land legs, as they say. The floor swayed at intervals, and the throbbing of the engines came back. He left the hotel, hailed a cab, and was driven down Fifth Avenue. He stopped before the fortress of privileges. From the cab it looked very formidable. Worldly as he was, he was somewhat innocent. He did not know that New York hotels are formidable only when your money gives out. To get past all these brass-buttoned lackeys and to go on as though he really had business within took no small quantity of nerve. However, he slipped by the outpost without any challenge and boldly approached the desk. A quick glance at the register told him that they had indeed put up at this hotel. He could not explain why he felt so happy over his discovery. There are certain exultations which are inexplicable. As he turned away from the desk, he bumped into a gentleman almost as elegantly attired as himself.

"I beg your pardon!" he cried, stepping aside.

"What? Mr. _Warrr_burton?"

Mr. Robert, greatly surprised and confused, found himself shaking hands with his ship acquaintance, the Russian.

"I am very glad to see you again, Count," said Warburton, recovering.

"A great pleasure! It is wonderful how small a city is. I had never expect' to see you again. Are you stopping here?" I had intended to try to reproduce the Russian's dialect, but one dialect in a book is enough; and we haven't reached the period of its activity.

"No, I am at the Waldorf."

"Eh? I have heard all about you millionaires."

"Oh, we are not all of us millionaires who stop there," laughed Warburton. "There are some of us who try to make others believe that

we are." Then, dropping into passable French, he added: "I came here to-night with the purpose of dining. Will you do me the honor of sharing my table?"

"You speak French?"--delighted. "It is wonderful. This English has so many words that mean so many things, that of all languages I speak it with the least fluency. But it is my deep regret, Monsieur, to refuse your kind invitation. I am dining with friends."

"Well, then, breakfast to-morrow at eleven," Warburton urged, for he had taken a fancy to this affable Russian.

"Alas! See how I am placed. I am forced to leave for Washington early in the morning. We poor diplomats, we earn our honors. But my business is purely personal in this case, neither political nor diplomatic." The count drew his gloves thoughtfully through his fingers. "I shall of course pay my respects to my ambassador. Do I recollect your saying that you belonged to the United States Army?"

"I recently resigned. My post was in a wild country, with little or nothing to do; monotony and routine."

"You limp slightly?"

"A trifling mishap,"--modestly.

"Eh, you do wrong. You may soon be at war with England, and having resigned your commission, you would lose all you had waited these years for."

Warburton smiled. "We shall not go to war with England."

"This Army of yours is small."

"Well, yes; but made of pretty good material--fighting machines with brains."

"Ha!" The count laughed softly. "Bah! how I detest all these cars and ships! Will you believe me, I had rather my little chateau, my vineyard, and my wheat fields, than all the orders.... Eh, well, _my country_: there must be some magic in that phrase. Of all loves, that of country is the most lasting. Is that Balzac? I do not recall. Only once in a century do we find a man who is willing to betray his country, and even then he may have for his purpose neither hate, revenge, nor love of power." A peculiar gravity sat on his mobile face, caused, perhaps, by some disagreeable inward thought.

"How long shall you be in Washington?" asked Warburton.

The count shrugged. "Who can say?"

"I go to Washington myself within a few days."

"Till we meet again, then, Monsieur."

The count lifted his hat, a courtesy which was gracefully acknowledged by the American; while the clerks at the desk eyed with tolerant amusement these polite but rather unfamiliar ceremonies of departure. These foreigners were odd duffers.

"A very decent chap," mused Warburton, "and a mighty shrewd hand at poker--for a foreigner. He is going to Washington: we shall meet again. I wonder if she's in the restaurant now."

Meet again? Decidedly; and had clairvoyance shown my hero that night how he and the count were to meet again, certainly he would have laughed.

If I dared, I should like to say a good deal more about this Russian. But I have no desire to lose my head, politically or physically. Even the newsboys are familiar with this great young man's name; and if I should disclose it, you would learn a great many things which I have no desire that you should. One day he is in Paris, another in Berlin, then off to Vienna, to Belgrade, or St. Petersburg, or Washington, or London, or Rome. A few months ago, previous to this writing, he was in Manchuria; and to this very day England and Japan are wondering how it happened; not his being there, mind you, but the result. Rich, that is to say independent; unmarried, that is to say unattached; free to come and go, he stood high up in that great army of the czar's, which I call the uncredited diplomatic corps, because the phrase "secret service" always puts into my mind a picture of the wild-eyed, bearded anarchist, whom I most heartily detest.

What this remarkable diplomatic free-lance did in Washington was honestly done in the interests of his country. A Russ understands honor in the rough, but he lacks all those delicate shadings which make the word honor the highest of all words in the vocabularies of the Gaul and the Saxon. And while I do not uphold him in what he did, I can not place much blame at the count's door. Doubtless, in his place, and given his cast of mind, I might have done exactly as he did. Russia never asks how a thing is done, but why it is _not_ done. Ah, these Aspasias, these Circes, these Calypsos, these Cleopatras, with their blue, their gray, their amber eyes! I have my doubts concerning Jonah, but, being a man, I am fully convinced as to the history of Eve. And yet, the woman in this case was absolutely innocent of any guile, unless, a pair of eyes as heavenly blue as a rajah's sapphire may be called guile.

Pardon me this long parenthesis. By this time, no doubt, Mr. Robert has entered the restaurant We shall follow him rather than this aimless train of thought.

Mr. Robert's appetite, for a healthy young man, was strangely incurious. He searched the menu from top to bottom, and then from bottom to top; nothing excited his palate. Whenever persons entered, he would glance up eagerly, only to feel his heart sink lower and lower. I don't know how many times he was disappointed. The waiter ahemmed politely. Warburton, in order to have an excuse to remain, at length hit upon a partridge and a pint of Chablis.

Nine o'clock. Was it possible that the colonel and his daughter were dining in their rooms? Perish the possibility! And he looked in vain for the count. A quarter-past nine. Mr. Robert's anxiety was becoming almost unendurable. Nine-thirty. He was about to surrender in despair. His partridge lay smoking on his plate, and he was on the point of demolishing it, when, behold! they came. The colonel entered first, then his daughter, her hand--on--the--arm--of--the--count! Warburton never fully described to me his feelings at that moment;

but, knowing him as I do, I can put together a very, respectable picture of the chagrin and consternation that sat on his countenance.

"To think of being nearly six days aboard," Mr. Robert once bawled at me, wrathfully, "and not to know that that Russian chap knew her!" It _was_ almost incredible that such a thing should happen.

The three sat down at a table seven times removed from Warburton's. He could see only an adorable profile and the colonel's handsome but care-worn face. The count sat with his back turned. In that black evening gown she was simply beyond the power of adjectives. What shoulders, what an incomparable throat! Mr. Robert's bird grew cold; the bouquet from his glass fainted and died away. How her face lighted when she laughed, and she laughed frequently! What a delicious curve ran from her lips to her young bosom! But never once did she look in his direction. Who invented mirrors, the Egyptians? I can not say. There were mirrors in the room, but Mr. Robert did not realize it. He has since confessed to me that he hadn't the slightest idea how much his bird and bottle cost. Of such is love's young dream! (Do I worry you with all these repetitious details? I am sorry.)

At ten o'clock Miss Annesley rose, and the count escorted her to the elevator, returning almost immediately. He and the colonel drew their heads together. From time to time the count shrugged, or the colonel shook his head. Again and again the Russian dipped the end of his cigar into his coffee-cup, which he frequently replenished.

But for Mr. Robert the gold had turned to gilt, the gorgeous to the gaudy. She was gone. The imagination moves as swiftly as light, leaping from one castle in air to another, and still another. Mr. Robert was the architect of some fine ones, I may safely assure you. And he didn't mind in the least that they tumbled down as rapidly as they builded: only, the incentive was gone. What the colonel had to say to the count, or the count to the colonel, was of no interest to him; so he made an orderly retreat.

I am not so old as not to appreciate his sleeplessness that night. Some beds are hard, even when made of the softest down.

In the morning he telephoned to the Holland House. The Annesleys, he was informed, had departed for parts unknown. The count had left directions to forward any possible mail to the Russian Embassy, Washington. Sighs in the _doloroso_; the morning papers and numerous cigars; a whisky and soda; a game of indifferent billiards with an affable stranger; another whisky and soda; and a gradual reclamation of Mr. Robert's interest in worldly affairs.

She was gone.

IV

A FAMILY REUNION

Warburton had not been in the city of Washington within twelve

years. In the past his furloughs had been spent at his brother's country home in Larchmont, out of New York City. Thus, when he left the train at the Baltimore and Potomac station, he hadn't the slightest idea where Scott Circle was. He looked around in vain for the smart cab of the northern metropolis. All he saw was a line of omnibuses and a few ramshackle vehicles that twenty years back might very well have passed for victorias. A grizzled old negro, in command of one of these sea-going conveyances, caught Warburton's eye and hailed jovially. Our hero (as the good novelists of the past

generation would say, taking their readers into their innermost confidences) handed him his traveling case and stepped in.

"Whar to, suh?" asked the commodore.

"Scott Circle, and don't pommel that old nag's bones in trying to get there. I've plenty of time."

"I reckon I won't pommel him, suh. Skt! skt!" And the vehicle rattled out into broad Pennsylvania Avenue, but for the confusion and absurdity of its architectural structures, the handsomest thoroughfare in America. (Some day I am going to carry a bill into Congress and read it, and become famous as having been the means of making Pennsylvania Avenue the handsomest highway in the world.)

Warburton leaned back luxuriously against the faded horse-hair cushion and lighted a cigar, which he smoked with relish, having had a hearty breakfast on the train. It was not quite nine o'clock, and a warm October haze lay on the peaceful city. Here were people who did not rush madly about in the pursuit of riches. Rather they proceeded along soberly, even leisurely, as if they knew what the day's work was and the rewards attendant, and were content. Trucks, those formidable engines of commerce, neither rumbled nor thundered along the pavements, nor congested the thoroughfares. Nobody hurried into the shops, nobody hurried out. There were no scampering, yelling newsboys. Instead, along the curbs of the market, sat barelegged negro boys, some of them selling papers to those who wanted them, and some sandwiched in between baskets of popcorn and peanuts. There was a marked scarcity of the progressive, intrusive white boy. Old negro mammies passed to and fro with the day's provisions.

Glancing over his shoulder, Warburton saw the Capitol, shining in the sun like some enchanted palace out of Wonderland. He touched his cap, conscious of a thrill in his spine. And there, far to his left, loomed the Washington monument, glittering like a shaft of opals. Some orderlies dashed by on handsome bays. How splendid they looked, with their blue trousers and broad yellow stripes! This was before the Army adopted the comfortable but shabby brown duck. How he longed to throw a leg over the back of a good horse and gallop away into the great green country beyond!

In every extraordinary looking gentleman he saw some famed senator or congressman or diplomat. He was almost positive that he saw the secretary of war drive by in a neat brougham. The only things which moved with the hustling spirit of the times were the cables, and doubtless these would have gone slower but for the invisible and immutable power which propelled them. On arriving in New York, one's first thought is of riches; in Washington, of glory. What a difference between this capital and those he had seen abroad! There

was no militarism here, no conscription, no governmental oppression, no signs of discontent, no officers treading on the rights and the toes of civilians.

But now he was passing the huge and dingy magic Treasury Building, round past the Executive Mansion with its spotless white stone, its stately portico and its plush lawns.

"Go slow, uncle; I haven't seen this place since I was a boy."

"Yes, suh. How d' y' like it? Wouldn' y' like t' live in dat house, suh?"--the commodore grinned.

"One can't stay there long enough to please me, uncle. It takes four years to get used to it; and then, when you begin to like it, you have to pack up and clear out."

"It's de way dey goes, suh. We go eroun' Lafayette, er do yuh want t' see de Wa' Depa'tment, suh?"

"Never mind now, uncle; Scott Circle."

"Scott Circle she am, suh."

The old ark wheeled round Lafayette Square and finally rolled into Sixteenth Street. When at length it came to a stand in front of a beautiful house, Warburton evinced his surprise openly. He knew that his brother's wife had plenty of money, but not such a plenty as to afford a house like this.

"Are you sure, uncle, that this is the place?"

"Dere's de Circle, suh, an' yuh can see de numbuh fo' y'se'f, suh."

"How much do I owe you?"

"I reckon 'bout fifty cents 'll make it, suh."

Warburton gave him a dollar, marveling at the difference between the cab hire here and in New York. He grasped his case and leaped up the steps two at a bound, and pressed the bell A prim little maid answered the call.

"Does Mr. John Warburton live here?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes, sir."

"Fortunate John!" he cried, pushing past the maid and standing in the hall of his brother's household, unheralded and unannounced. "Jack!" he bawled.

The maid eyed the handsome intruder, her face expressing the utmost astonishment. She touched his arm.

"Sir!--" she began.

"It's all right, my dear," he interrupted.

She stepped back, wondering whether to scream or run.

"Hi, Jack! I say, you old henpecked, where are you?"

The dining-room door slid back and a tall, studious-looking gentleman, rather plain than otherwise, stood on the threshold.

"Jane, what is all this--Why, Bob, you scalawag!"--and in a moment they were pumping hands at a great rate. The little maid leaned weakly against the balustrade.

"Kit, Kit! I say, Kit, come and see who's here!" cried John.

An extraordinarily pretty little woman, whose pallor any woman would have understood, but no man on earth, and who was dressed in a charming pink negligee morning-gown, hurried into the hall.

"Why, it's Bob!" She flung her arms around the prodigal and kissed him heartily, held him away at arm's length, and hugged and kissed him again. I'm not sure that Mr. Robert didn't like it.

Suddenly there was a swish of starched skirts on the stairs, and the most beautiful woman in all the world (and I am always ready to back this statement with abundant proofs!) rushed down and literally threw herself into Mr. Robert's eager, outstretched arms.

"Nancy!"

"Bob! Bob! you wicked boy! You almost break our hearts. Not a line in two months!--How could you!--You might have been dead and we not know it!"--and she cried on his shoulder.

"Come now, Nancy; nonsense! You'll start the color running out of this tie of mine!" But for all his jesting tone, Mr. Robert felt an embarrassing lump wriggle up and down in his throat.

"Had your breakfast?" asked the humane and practical brother.

"Yep. But I shouldn't mind another cup of coffee."

And thereupon he was hustled into the dining-room and pushed into the best chair. How the clear women fussed over him, pressed this upon him and that; fondled and caressed him, just as if the beggar was worth all this trouble and love and affection!

"Hang it, girls, it's worth being an outlaw to come to this," he cried. He reached over and patted Nancy on the cheek, and pressed the young wife's hand, and smiled pleasantly at his brother. "Jack, you lucky pup, you!"

"Two years," murmured Nancy; "and we haven't had a glimpse of you in two long years."

"Only in photograph," said the homeless one, putting three lumps of sugar into his coffee because he was so happy he didn't know what he was about.

"And you have turned twenty-eight," said Kit, counting on her fingers.

"That makes you twenty-four, Nan," Jack laughed.

"And much I care!" replied Nancy, shaking her head defiantly. I've a sneaking idea that she was thinking of me when she made this declaration. For if _I_ didn't care, why should she?

"A handsome, stunning girl like you, Nan, ought to be getting married," observed the prodigal. "What's the matter with all these dukes and lords and princes, anyhow?"

An embarrassed smile ran around the table, but Mr. Robert missed it by some several inches.

Jack threw a cigar across the table. "Now," said he, "where the deuce did you come from?"

"Indirectly from Arizona, which is a synonym, once removed, for war."

Jack looked at his plate and laughed; but Mrs. Jack wanted to know what Bob meant by that.

"It's a word used instead of war, as applied by the late General Sherman," Jack replied. "And I am surprised that a brother-in-law of yours should so far forget himself as to hint it, even."

Knowing that she could put him through the inquisition later, she asked my hero how his leg was.

"It aches a little when it rains; that's about all."

"And you never let us know anything about it till the thing was all over," was Nancy's reproach.

"What's the use of scaring you women?" Robert demanded. "You would have had hysterics and all that."

"We heard of it quick enough through the newspapers," said Jack. "Come, give us your own version of the rumpus."

"Well, the truth is,"--and the prodigal told them his tale.

"Why, you are a hero!" cried Mrs. Jack, clasping her hands.

"Hero nothing," sniffed the elder brother. "He was probably star-gazing or he wouldn't have poked his nose into an ambush."

"Right you are, brother John," Robert acknowledged, laughing.

"And how handsome he has grown, Nancy," Mrs. Jack added, with an oblique glance at her husband.

"He does look 'distangy'," that individual admitted. A handsome face always went through John's cuirass. It was all nonsense, for his wife could not have adored him more openly had he been the twin to Adonis. But, there you are; a man always wants something he can not have. John wasn't satisfied to be one of the most brilliant young men in Washington; he also wanted to be classed among the handsomest.

"By the way, Jack," said my hero, lighting the cigar and blowing the

first puff toward the ceiling, his face admirably set with nonchalance, "do you know of a family named Annesley--Colonel Annesley?" I knew it would take only a certain length of time for this question to arrive.

"Colonel Annesley? Why, yes. He was in the War Department until a year or so ago. A fine strategist; knows every in and out of the coast defenses, and is something of an inventor; lots of money, too. Tall, handsome old fellow?"

"That's the man. A war volunteer?"

"No, a regular. Crippled his gun-fingers in some petty Indian war, and was transferred to the Department. He was a widower, if my recollection of him is correct; and had a lovely daughter."

"Ah!" There was great satisfaction evident in this syllable. "Do you know where the colonel is now?"

"Not the faintest idea. He lived somewhere in Virginia. But he's been on the travel for several years."

Robert stirred his coffee and took a spoonful--and dropped the spoon. "Pah! I must have put in a quart of sugar. Can you spare me another cup?"

"Annesley?" Nancy's face brightened. "Colonel Annesley? Why, I know Betty Annesley. She was my room-mate at Smith one year. She was in my graduating class. I'll show you her picture later. She was the dearest girl! How she loved horses! But why are you so interested?"--slyly.

"I ran across them coming home."

"Then you met Betty! Isn't she just the loveliest girl you ever saw?"

"I'm for her, one and indivisible. But hang my luck, I never came within a mile of an introduction."

"What? You, and on shipboard where she couldn't get away?" John threw up his hands as a sign that this information had overcome him.

"Even the captain shied when I approached him," said Robert, gloomily.

"I begin to see," said the brother.

"See what?"

"Have a match; your cigar has gone out."

Robert relighted his cigar and puffed like a threshing-machine engine.

John leaned toward Nancy. "Shall I tell him, Nan?"

Nancy blushed. "I suppose he'll have to know sooner or later."

"Know what?" asked the third person singular

"Your charming sister is about to bring you a brother-in-law."

"What?" You could have heard this across the street.

"Yes, Bobby dear. And don't look so hurt. You don't want me to become an old maid, do you?"

"When did it happen?"--helplessly. How the thought of his sister's marrying horrifies a brother! I believe I can tell you why. Every brother knows that no man is good enough for a good woman. "When did it happen?" Mr. Robert repeated, with a look at his brother, which said that _he_ should be held responsible.

"Last week."

Robert took in a long breath, as one does who expects to receive a blow of some sort which can not be warded off, and asked: "Who is it?" Nancy married? What was the world coming to, anyhow?

"Charlie Henderson,"--timidly.

Then Robert, who had been expecting nothing less than an English duke, let loose the flaming ions of his righteous wrath.

"Chuck Henderson?--that duffer?" (Oh, Mr. Robert, Mr. Robert; and after all I've done for you!)

"He's not a duffer!" remonstrated Nancy, with a flare in her mild eyes. (How I wish I might have seen her as she defended me!) "He's the dearest fellow in the world, and I love him with all my heart!" (How do you like that, Mr. Robert? Bravo, Nancy! I may be a duffer, true enough, but I rather object to its being called out from the housetops.) And Nancy added: "I want you to understand distinctly, Robert, that in my selection of a husband you are not to be consulted."

This was moving him around some.

"Hold on, Nan! Drat it, don't look like that! I meant nothing, dearie; only I'm a heap surprised. Chuck _is_ a good fellow, I'll admit; but I've been dreaming of your marrying a prince or an ambassador, and Henderson comes like a jolt. Besides, Chuck will never be anything but a first-rate politician. You'll have to get used to cheap cigars and four-ply whisky. When is it going to happen?"

"In June. I have always loved him, Bob. And he wants you to be his best man."

Robert appeared a bit mollified at this knowledge. "But what shall I do after that?" he wailed. "You're the only person I can order about, and now you're going the other side of the range."

"Bob, why don't you get married yourself?" asked Mrs. Warburton. "With your looks you won't have to go far nor begging for a wife."

"There's the rub, sister mine by law and the admirable foresight of my only brother. What am I good for but ordering rookies about? I've

no business head. And it's my belief that an Army man ought never to wed."

"Marry, my boy, and I'll see what can be done for you in the diplomatic way. The new administration will doubtless be Republican, and my influence will have some weight,"--and John smiled affectionately across the table. He loved this gay lad opposite, loved him for his own self and because he could always see the mother's eyes and lips. "You have reached the age of discretion. You are now traveled and a fairly good linguist. You've an income of forty-five hundred, and to this I may be able to add a berth worth two or three thousand. Find the girl, lad; find the girl."

"Honestly, I'll think it over, Jack."

"Oh!"

Three of the quartet turned wonderingly toward Mrs. Jack.

"What's the matter?" asked Jack.

"We have forgotten to show Bob the baby!"

"Merciful heavens!" bawled Robert. "A baby? This is the first time I've heard anything about a baby,"--looking with renewed interest at the young mother.

"Do you mean to tell me, John Warburton, that you failed to mention the fact in any of your letters?" indignantly demanded Mrs. John.

"Why--er--didn't I mention it?" asked the perturbed father.

"Nary a word, nary a word!" Robert got up. "Now, where is this wonderful he?--or is it a she?"

"Boy, Bob; greatest kid ever."

And they all trooped up the stairs to the nursery, where Mr. Robert was forced to admit that, as regarded a three-months-old, this was the handsomest little colt he had ever laid eyes on! Mr. Robert even ventured to take the boy up in his arms.

"How d'ye hold him?" he asked.

Mrs. John took the smiling cherub, and the manner in which she folded that infant across her young breast was a true revelation to the prodigal, who felt his loneliness more than ever. He was a rank outsider.

"Jack, you get me that diplomatic post, and I'll see to it that the only bachelor in the Warburton family shall sleep in yonder cradle."

"Done!"

"How long is your furlough?" asked Nancy.

"Whom do you think the baby resembles?" asked the mother.

"One at a time, one at a time! The baby at present doesn't resemble

any one."

"There's your diplomat!" cried John, with a laugh.

"And my furlough is for several years, if not longer."

"What?" This query was general and simultaneous.

"Yes, I've disbanded. The Army will now go to rack and ruin. I am a plain citizen of the United States. I expect to spend the winter in Washington."

"The winter!" echoed Jack, mockingly dejected.

"John!" said his wife. John assumed a meek expression; and Mrs. John, putting the baby in the cradle, turned to her brother-in-law. "I thought the Army was a hobby with you."

"It was. I've saved up quite a sum, and I'm going to see a lot of fine scenery if my leg doesn't give out."

"Or your bank account," supplemented John.

"Well, or my bank account."

"Draw on me whenever you want passage out West," went on the statesman in chrysalis.

Whereupon they all laughed; not because John had said anything particularly funny, but because there was a good and generous measure of happiness in each heart.

"Bob, there's a ball at the British embassy tonight. You must go with us."

"Impossible!" said Robert. "Remember my leg."

"That will not matter," said Mrs. John; "you need not dance."

"What, not dance? I should die of intermittent fever. And if I did dance, my leg might give out."

"You can ride a horse all right," said John, in the way of argument.

"I can do that easily with my knees. But I can't dance with my knees. No, I shall stay at home. I couldn't stand it to see all those famous beauties, and with me posing as a wall-flower."

"But what will you do here all alone?"

"Play with the kid, smoke and read; make myself at home. You still smoke that Louisiana, Jack?"

"Yes,"--dubiously.

"So. Now, don't let me interfere with your plans for tonight. I haven't been in a home in so long that it will take more than one night for the novelty to wear off. Besides, that nurse of yours, Kit, is good to look at,"--a bit of the rogue in his eye.

"Bob!"--from both women.

"I promise not to look at her; I promise."

"Well, I must be off," said John. "I'm late now. I've a dozen plans for coast defenses to go over with an inventor of a new carriage-gun. Will you go with me, while I put you up at the Metropolitan, or will you take a shopping trip with the women?"

"I'll take the shopping trip. It will be a sensation. Have you any horses?"

"Six."

"Six! You _are_ a lucky pup: a handsome wife, a bouncing boy, and six horses! Where's the stable?"

"In the rear. I keep only two stablemen; one to take care of the horses and one to act as groom. I'm off. I've a cracking good hunter, if you'd like a leg up. We'll all ride out to Chevy Chase Sunday. By-by, till lunch."

Mr. Robert immediately betook himself to the stables, where he soon became intimately acquainted with the English groom. He fussed about the harness-room, deplored the lack of a McClelland saddle, admired the English curbs, and complimented the men on the cleanliness of the stables. The men exchanged sly smiles at first, but these smiles soon turned into grins of admiration. Here was a man who knew a horse from his oiled hoofs to his curried forelock.

"This fellow ought to jump well," he said, patting the sleek neck of the hunter.

"He does that, sir," replied the groom. "He has never taken less than a red ribbon. Only one horse beat him at the bars last winter in New York. It was Mr. Warburton's fault that he did not take first prize. He rode him in the park the day before the contest, and the animal caught a bad cold, sir."

And then it was that this hero of mine conceived his great (not to say young and salad) idea. It appealed to him as being so rich an idea that the stables rang with his laughter.

"Sir?" politely inquired the groom.

"I'm not laughing at your statement, my good fellow; rather at an idea which just occurred to me. In fact, I believe that I shall need your assistance."

"In what way, sir?"

"Come with me."

The groom followed Warburton into the yard, A conversation began in low tones.

"It's as much as my place is worth, sir. I couldn't do it, sir," declared the groom, shaking his head negatively.

"I'll guarantee that you will not suffer in the least. My brother will not discharge you. He likes a joke as well as I do. You are not handed twenty dollars every day for a simple thing like this."

"Very well, sir. I dare say that no harm will come of it. But I am an inch or two shorter than you."

"We'll tide that over."

"I am at your orders, sir." But the groom returned to the stables, shaking his head dubiously. He was not thoroughly convinced.

During the morning ride down-town the two women were vastly puzzled over their brother's frequent and inexplicable peals of laughter.

"For mercy's sake, what do you see that is so funny?" asked Nancy.

"I'm thinking, my dears; only thinking."

"Tell us, that we may laugh, too. I'll wager that you are up to some mischief, Master Robert. Please tell," Nancy urged.

"Later, later; at present you would fail to appreciate the joke. In fact, you might make it miscarry; and that wouldn't do at all. Have a little patience. It's a good joke, and you'll be in it when the time comes."

And nothing more could they worm out of him.

I shall be pleased to recount to you the quality of this joke, this madcap idea. You will find it lacking neither amusement nor denouement. Already I have put forth the casual observation that from Paris to the third-precinct police-station in Washington is several thousand miles.

V

THE PLOT THICKENS

At dinner that night I met my hero face to face for the first time in eight years, and for all his calling me a duffer (I learned of this only recently), he was mighty glad to see me, slapped me on the back and threw his arm across my shoulder. And why shouldn't he have been glad? We had been boys together, played hooky many a school-time afternoon, gone over the same fishing grounds, plunged into the same swimming-holes, and smoked our first cigar in the rear of my father's barn; and it is the recollection of such things that cements all the more strongly friendship in man and man. We recalled a thousand episodes and escapades, the lickings we got, and the lickings others got in our stead, the pretty school-teacher whom we swore to wed when we grew up. Nobody else had a chance to get a word in edgewise. But Nancy laughed aloud at times. She had been a witness to many of these long-ago pranks.

"What! you are not going to the ball?" I asked, observing that he wore only a dinner-coat and a pair of morocco slippers.

"No ball for me. Just as soon as you people hie forth, off comes this b'iled shirt, and I shall probably meander around the house in my new silk pajamas. I shall read a little from Homer--Jack, let me have the key to that locked case; I've an idea that there must be some robust old, merry old tales hidden there--and smoke a few pipes."

"But you are not going to leave Mrs. Warburton and your sister to come home without escort?" I expostulated.

"Where the deuce are you two men going?" Robert asked, surprised. Somehow, I seemed to catch a joyful rather than a sorrowful note in his tones.

"An important conference at midnight, and heaven only knows how long it may last," said Jack. "I wish you would go along, Bob."

"He can't go now, anyhow," said the pretty little wife. "He has got to stay now, whether he will or no. William will see to it that we women get home all right,"--and she busied herself with the salad dishes.

Suddenly I caught Robert's eye, and we stared hard at each other.

"Chuck, you old pirate," he said presently, "what do you mean by coming around and making love to my sister, and getting her to promise to marry you? You know you aren't good enough for her."

I confess to no small embarrassment. "I--I know it!"

"What do you mean by it, then?"

"Why--er--that is--Confound you, Bob, _I_ couldn't help it, and besides, I didn't _want_ to help it! And if you want to have it out--"

"Oh, pshaw! You know just as well as I do that it is against the law to hit a man that wears glasses. We'll call it quits if you'll promise that in the days to come you'll let me hang around your hymeneal shack once in a while."

"Why, if you put it that way!"--and we were laughing and shaking hands again across the table, much to the relief of all concerned.

Dear Nan! I'm not afraid to let the whole world see how much I love you. For where exists man's strength if not in the pride of his love?

"What time does the kid get to sleep?" asked Robert.

"He ought to be asleep now," said Mrs. W. "We shall not reach the embassy until after ten. We have a reception first, and we must leave cards there. Won't you be lonesome here, Bobby?"

"Not the least in the world;"--and Bobby began to laugh.

"What's the joke?" I asked.

He looked at me sharply, then shook his head. "I'll tell you all about it to-morrow, Chuck. It's the kind of joke that has to boil a long time before it gets tender enough to serve."

"I'd give a good deal to know what is going on behind those eyes of yours, Bob." Nancy's eyes searched him ruthlessly, but she might just as well have tried to pierce a stone wall. "You have been laughing all day about something, and I'd like to know what about. It's mischief. I haven't known you all these years for nothing. Now, don't do anything silly, Bob."

"Nancy,"--reproachfully--"I am a man almost thirty; I have passed the Rubicon of cutting up tricks. Go to the ball, you beauty, dance and revel to your heart's content; your brother Robert will manage to pass away the evening. Don't forget the key to that private case, Jack,"--as the women left the table to put the finishing touches to their toilets.

"Here you are," said Jack. "But mind, you must put those books back just as you found them, and lock the case. They are rare editions."

"With the accent on the _rare_, no doubt."

"I am a student, pure and simple," said Jack, lowering his eyes.

"I wouldn't swear to those adjectives," returned the scalawag. "If I remember, you had the reputation of being a high-jinks man in your class at Princeton."

"Sh! Don't you dare to drag forth any of those fool corpses of college, or out you go, bag and baggage." Jack glanced nervously around the room and toward the hall.

"My dear fellow, your wife wouldn't believe me, no matter what I said against your character. Isn't that right, Chuck? Jack, you are a lucky dog, if there ever was one. A handsome wife who loves you, a kid, a fine home, and plenty of horses. I wonder if you married her for her money?"

Jack's eyes narrowed. He seemed to muse. "Yes, I believe I can do it as easily as I did fifteen years ago."

"Do what?" I asked.

"Wallop that kid brother of mine. Bob, I hope you'll fall desperately in love some day, and that you will have a devil of a time winning the girl. You need something to stir up your vitals. By George! and I hope she won't have a cent of money."

"Lovable brother, that!" Bob knocked the ash from his cigar and essayed at laughter which wasn't particularly felicitous. "Supposing I was in love, new, and that the girl had heaps of money, and all that?"

"_And all that_," mimicked the elder brother. "What does 'and all that' mean?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Well, I hope you _are_ in love. It serves you right. You've made more than one girl's heart ache, you good-looking ruffian!"

Then we switched over to politics, and Robert became an interested listener. Quarter of an hour later the women returned, and certainly they made a picture which was most satisfactory to the masculine eye. Ah, thou eager-fingered Time, that shall, in days to come, wither the roses in my beauty's cheeks, dim the fire in my beauty's eyes, draw my beauty's bow-lips inward, tarnish the golden hair, and gnarl the slender, shapely fingers, little shall I heed you in your passing if you but leave the heart untouched!

Bob jumped to his feet and kissed them both, a thing I lacked the courage to do. How pleased they looked! How a woman loves flattery from those she loves!

Well, William is in front with the carriage; the women are putting on their cloaks, and I am admiring the luxurious crimson fur-lined garment which brother Robert had sent to Nancy from Paris. You will see by this that he was not altogether a thoughtless lad. Good-by, Mr. Robert; I leave you and your guiding-star to bolt the established orbit; for after this night the world will never be the same careless, happy-go-lucky world. The farce has its tragedy, and what tragedy is free of the ludificatory? Youth must run its course, even as the gay, wild brook must riot on its way to join the sober river.

I dare say that we hadn't been gone twenty minutes before Robert stole out to the stables, only to return immediately with a bundle under his arm and a white felt hat perched rakishly on his head. He was chuckling audibly to himself.

"It will frighten the girls half to death. A gray horse and a bay; oh, I won't make any mistake. Let me see; I'll start about twelve o'clock. That'll get me on the spot just as the boys leave. This is the richest yet. I'll wager that there will be some tall screaming." He continued chuckling as he helped himself to his brother's perfectos and fine old Scotch. I don't know what book he found in the private case; some old rascal's merry tales, no doubt; for my hero's face was never in repose.

We had left Mrs. Secretary-of-the-Interior's and were entering the red brick mansion on Connecticut Avenue. Carriages lined both sides of the street, and mounted police patrolled up and down.

"I do hope Bob will not wake up the baby," said Mrs. W.

"Probably he won't even take the trouble to look at him," replied Jack; "not if he gets into that private case of mine."

"I can't understand what you men see in those horrid chronicles," Nancy declared.

"My dear girl," said Jack, "in those days there were no historians; they were simply story-tellers, and we get our history from these tales. The tales themselves are not very lofty, I am willing to admit; but they give us a general idea of the times in which the characters lived. This is called literature by the wise critics."

"Critics!" said I; "humph! Criticism is always a lazy man's job. When

no two critics think alike, of what use is criticism?"

"Ah, yes; I forgot. That book of essays you wrote got several sound drubbings. Nevertheless," continued Jack, "what you offer is in the main true. Time alone is the true critic. Let him put his mark of approval on your work, and not all the critical words can bury it or hinder its light. But Time does not pass his opinion till long after one is dead. The first waltz, dearest, if you think you can stand it. You mustn't get tired, little mother."

"I am wonderfully strong to-night," said the little mother. "How beautifully it is arranged!"

"What?" we men asked, looking over the rooms.

"The figures on Mrs. Secretary-of-State's gown. The lace is beautiful. Your brother. Nan, has very good taste for a man. That cloak of yours is by far the handsomest thing I have seen to-night; and that bit of scarf he sent me isn't to be matched."

"Poor boy!" sighed Nancy. "I wonder if he'll be lonely. It's a shame to leave him home the very first night."

"Why didn't he come, then?" Mrs. W. shrugged her polished shoulders.

"Oh, my cigars and Scotch are fairly comforting," put in Jack, complacently. "Besides, Jane Isn't at all bad looking,"--winking at me. "What do you say, Charlie?"

But Charlie had no time to answer. The gray-haired, gray-whiskered ambassador was bowing pleasantly to us. A dozen notable military and naval attaches nodded; and we passed on to the ball-room, where the orchestra was playing _A Summer Night in Munich_. In a moment Jack and his wife were lost in the maze of gleaming shoulders and white linen. It was a picture such as few men, once having witnessed it, can forget. Here were the great men in the great world: this man was an old rear-admiral, destined to become the nation's hero soon; there, a famous general, of long and splendid service; celebrated statesmen, diplomats, financiers; a noted English duke; a scion of the Hapsburg family; an intimate of the German kaiser; a swart Jap; a Chinaman with his peacock feather; tens of men whose lightest word was listened to by the four ends of the world; representatives of all the great kingdoms and states. The President and his handsome wife had just left as we came, so we missed that formality, which detracts from the pleasures of the ball-room.

"Who is that handsome young fellow over there, standing at the side of the Russian ambassador's wife?" asked Nancy, pressing my arm.

"Where? Oh, he's Count Karloff (or something which sounds like it), a wealthy Russian, in some way connected with the Russian government; a diplomat and a capital fellow, they say. I have never met him. ... Hello! there's a stunning girl right next to him that I haven't seen before. ... Where are you going?"

Nancy had dropped my arm and was gliding kitty-corner fashion, across the floor. Presently she and the stunning girl had saluted each other after the impulsive fashion of American girls, and were playing cat-in-the-cradle, to the amusement of those foreigners nearest. A nod,

and I was threading my way to Nancy's side.

"Isn't it glorious?" she began. "This is Miss Annesley, Charlie; Betty, Mr. Henderson." Miss Annesley looked mildly curious at Nan, who suddenly flushed. "We are to be married in the spring," she explained shyly; and I dare say that there was a diffident expression on my own face.

Miss Annesley gave me her hand, smiling. "You are a very fortunate man, Mr. Henderson."

"Not the shadow of a doubt!" Miss Annesley, I frankly admitted on the spot, was, next to Nancy, the handsomest girl I ever saw; and as I thought of Mr. Robert in his den at home, I sincerely pitied him. I was willing to advance the statement that had he known, a pair of crutches would not have kept him away from No. 1300 Connecticut Avenue.

I found three chairs, and we sat down. There was, for me, very little opportunity to talk. Women always have so much to say to each other, even when they haven't seen each other within twenty-four hours. From time to time Miss Annesley glanced at me, and I am positive that Nancy was extolling my charms. It was rather embarrassing, and I was balling my gloves up in a most dreadful fashion. As they seldom addressed a word to me, I soon became absorbed in the passing scene. I was presently aroused, however.

"Mr. Henderson, Count Karloff," Miss Annesley was saying. (Karloff is a name of my own choosing. I haven't the remotest idea if it means anything in the Russian language. I hope not.)

"Charmed!" The count's r's were very pleasantly rolled. I could see by the way his gaze roved from Miss Annesley to Nancy that he was puzzled to decide which came the nearer to his ideal of womanhood.

I found him a most engaging fellow, surprisingly well-informed on American topics. I credit myself with being a fairly good reader of faces, and, reading his as he bent it in Miss Annesley's direction, I began to worry about Mr. Robert's course of true love. Here was a man who possessed a title, was handsome, rich, and of assured social position: it would take an extraordinary American girl to look coldly upon his attentions. By and by the two left us, Miss Annesley promising to call on Nancy.

"And where are you staying, Betty?"

"Father and I have taken Senator Blank's house in Chevy Chase for the winter. My horses are already in the stables. Do you ride?"

"I do."

"Then we shall have some great times together."

"Be sure to call. I want you to meet my brother."

"I believe I have," replied Miss Annesley.

"I

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