

Broken to the Plow

Charles Caldwell Dobie

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BROKEN TO THE PLOW

A Novel by

CHARLES CALDWELL DOBIE

Author of "THE BLOOD RED DAWN"

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TO MY BROTHER

Who Helped Make My Literary Career Possible.

BROKEN TO THE PLOW

CHAPTER I

Toward four o'clock in the afternoon Fred Starratt remembered that he had been commissioned by his wife to bring home oyster cocktails for dinner. Of course, it went without saying that he was expected to attend to the cigars. That meant he must touch old Wetherbee for money. Five dollars would do the trick, but, while he was about it, he decided that he might as well ask for twenty-five. There were bound to be other demands before the first of the month, and the hard-fisted cashier of Ford, Wetherbee & Co. seemed to grow more and more crusty over drafts against the salary account. If one caught him in a good humor it was all right. Usually a _risque_ story was the safest road to geniality. Starratt raked his brains for a new one, to no purpose. Every moment of delay added greater certainty to the conviction that he was in for a disagreeable encounter. At four o'clock Wetherbee always began to balance his cash for the day and he was particularly vicious at any interruptions during this precise performance. What in the world had possessed Helen to give this absurd dinner party to two people Starratt had never met? At least she might have put the thing off until pay day, when money was more plentiful.

How did others manage? Starratt asked himself. Because there was a small minority in the office who received their full month's salary without a break during the entire year. Take young Brauer, for instance. He got a little over a hundred a month and yet he never seemed short. He dressed well, too--or neatly, to be nearer the truth; there was no great style to his make-up. Of course, Brauer was not married, but Starratt could never remember a time, even before he took the plunge into matrimony, when he was not going through the motions of smoothing old Wetherbee into a good-humored acceptance of an IOU tag. Starratt did not think himself extravagant, and it always had puzzled him to observe how free some of his salaried friends were with their coin. Only that morning his wife had reflected his own mood with exaggerated petulance when she had said:

"I'm sure I don't know where all the money goes! We don't spend it on cafes, and we haven't a car, and goodness knows I only buy what I have to when it comes down to clothes."

What she _had_ to! He thought over the phrase not with any desire to put Helen in the pillory, but merely to uncover, if possible, the source of their economic ills.

In days gone by, when his mother was alive, he had heard almost the same remark leveled at his father:

"Well, I suppose _some_ people could save on our income. But we've got to be decent--we can't go about in rags!"

He knew from long experience just the sort his mother had meant by the term "some people." Brauer was a case in point. Mrs. Starratt always spoke of such as he with lofty tolerance.

"Oh, of course, _foreigners_ always get on! They're accustomed to live that way!"

Fred Starratt had not altogether accepted his mother's philosophy that everybody lacking the grace of an Anglo-Saxon or Scotch name was a foreigner. There were times when he was given to wonder vaguely why the gift of "getting on" had been given to "foreigners" and denied him. Once in a while he rebelled against the implied gentility which had been wished on him. Were rags necessary to achieve economy? Granting the premises, in moments of rare revolt he became hospitable to any contingency that would free him from the ever-present humiliation of an empty purse.

He soon had learned that the term "rags" was a mere figure of speech, which stood for every pretense offered up as a sacrifice upon the altar of appearances. His mother had never been a spendthrift and certainly one could not convict Helen on such a charge. But they both had one thing in common--they "had to have things" for almost any and every occasion. If a trip were planned or a dancing party arranged or a tea projected--well, one simply couldn't go looking like a fright, and that was all there was to it. His father never thought to argue such a question. Women folks had to have clothes, and so he accepted the situation with the philosophy born of bowing gracefully to the inevitable. But Starratt himself occasionally voiced a protest.

"Nothing to wear?" he would echo, incredulously. "Why, how about that pink dress? That hasn't worn out yet."

"No, that's just it! It simply won't! I'm sick and tired of putting it on. Everybody knows it down to the last hook and eye... Oh, well, I'll stay home. It isn't a matter of life and death. I've given things up before."

When a woman took that tone of martyrdom there really was nothing to do but acknowledge defeat. Other men were able to provide frocks for their wives and he supposed he ought to be willing to do the same thing. There was an element of stung pride in his surrender. He had the ingrained Californian's distaste for admitting, even to himself, that there was anything he could not afford. And in the end it was this feeling rising above the surface of his irritation which made him a bit ashamed of his attitude toward Helen's dinner party. After all, it would be the same a thousand years from now. A man couldn't have his cake and eat it, and a man like Brauer must live a dull sort of life. What could be the use of saving money if one forgot how to spend it in the drab process? As a matter of fact, old Wetherbee wouldn't gobble him. He'd grunt or grumble or even rave a bit, but in the end he would yield up the money. He always did. And suddenly, while his courage had been so adroitly screwed to the sticking point, he went over to old Wetherbee's desk without further ado.

The cashier was absorbed in adding several columns of figures and he

let Starratt wait. This was not a reassuring sign. Finally, when he condescended to acknowledge the younger man's presence he did it with the merest uplift of the eyebrows. Starratt decided at once against pleasantries. Instead, he matched Wetherbee's quizzical pantomime by throwing the carefully written IOU tag down on the desk.

Wetherbee tossed the tag aside. "You got twenty-five dollars a couple of days ago!" he bawled out suddenly.

Starratt was surprised into silence. Old Wetherbee was sometimes given to half-audible and impersonal grumblings, but this was the first time he had ever gone so far as to voice a specific objection to an appeal for funds.

"What do you think this is?" Wetherbee went on in a tone loud enough to be heard by all the office force. "The Bank of England?... I've got something else to do besides advance money every other day to a bunch of joy-riding spendthrifts. In my day a young man ordered his expenditures to suit his pocketbook. We got our salary once a month and we saw to it that it lasted... What's the matter--somebody sick at home?"

Starratt could easily have lied and closed the incident quickly, but an illogical pride stirred him to the truth.

"No," he returned, quietly, "I'm simply short. We're having some company in for dinner and there are a few things to get--cigars and--well, you know what."

Wetherbee threw him a lip-curling glance. "Cigars? Well, twopenny clerks do keep up a pretty scratch and no mistake. In my day--"

Starratt cut him short with an impatient gesture.

"Times have changed, Mr. Wetherbee."

"Yes, I should say they have," the elder man sneered, as he reached for the key to the cash drawer.

For a moment Starratt felt an enormous relief at the old man's significant movement. He was to get the money, after all! But almost at once he was moved to sudden resentment. What right had Wetherbee to humiliate him before everybody within earshot? He knew that the eyes of the entire force were being leveled at him, and he felt a surge of satisfaction as he said, very distinctly:

"Don't bother, Mr. Wetherbee... It really doesn't make the slightest difference. I'll manage somehow."

Old Wetherbee shrugged and went on adding figures. Starratt felt confused. The whole scene had fallen flat. His suave heroics had not even made Wetherbee feel cheap. He went back to his desk.

Presently a hand rested upon his shoulder. He knew Brauer's fawning, almost apologetic, touch. He turned.

"If you're short--" Brauer was whispering.

Starratt hesitated. Deep down he never had liked Brauer; in fact, he

always had just missed snubbing him. Still it was decent of Brauer to...

"That's very kind, I'm sure. Could you give me--say, five dollars?"

Brauer thrust two lean, bloodless fingers into his vest pocket and drew out a crisp note.

"Thanks, awfully," Starratt said, quickly, as he reached for the money.

Brauer's face lit up with a swift glow of satisfaction. Starratt almost shrank back. He felt a clammy hand pressing the bill against his palm.

"Thanks, awfully," he murmured again.

Brauer dropped his eyes with a suggestion of unpleasant humility.

"I wish," flashed through Starratt's mind, "that I had asked for ten dollars."

* * * * *

As Fred Starratt came down the steps leading from the California Market with a bottle of oyster cocktails held gingerly before him he never remembered when he had been less in the mood for guests. A passing friend invited him to drop down for a drink at Collins & Wheeland's, but the state of his finances urged a speedy flight home instead. At this hour the California Street cars were crowded, but he managed to squeeze into a place on the running board. He always enjoyed the glide of this old-fashioned cable car up the stone-paved slope of Nob Hill, and even the discomfort of a huddled foothold was more than discounted by the ability to catch backward glimpses of city and bay falling away in the slanting gold of an early spring twilight like some enchanted and fabulous capital.

At Hyde Street he changed cars, continuing his homeward flight in the direction of Russian Hill. He prided himself on the fact that he still clung to one of the old quarters of the town, scorning the outlying districts with all the disdain of a San Franciscan born and bred of pioneer stock. He liked to be within easy walking distance of work, and only a trifle over fifteen minutes from the shops and cafes and theaters. And his present quarters in a comparatively new apartment house just below the topmost height of Green Street answered these wishes in every particular.

On the Hyde Street car he found a seat, and, without the distraction of maintaining his foothold or the diversion of an unfolding panorama, his thoughts turned naturally on his immediate problems. The five dollars had gone a ridiculously small way. Four oyster cocktails came to a dollar and a quarter, and he had to have at least six cigars at twenty-five cents apiece. This left him somewhat short of the maid's wage of three dollars for cooking and serving dinner and washing up the dishes. If Helen had engaged Mrs. Finn, everything would be all right. She knew them and she would wait. Still, he didn't like putting anybody off--he was neither quite too poor nor quite too affluent to be nonchalant in his postponement of obligations.

When he arrived home he found that Helen had been having her troubles, too. Mrs. Finn had disappointed her and sent a frowsy female, who exuded vile whisky and the unpleasant odors of a slattern.

"I think she's half drunk," Helen had confessed, brutally. "You can't depend on anyone these days. Servants are getting so independent!"

The roast had been delivered late, too, and when Helen had called up the shop to protest she had been met with cool insolence.

"I told the boy who talked to me that I'd report him to the boss. And what do you suppose he said? 'Go as far as you like! We're all going out on a strike next week, so we should worry!' Fancy a butcher talking like that to me! I don't know what things are coming to."

Frankly, neither did Fred Starratt, but he held his peace. He was thinking just where he would gather enough money together to pay Mrs. Finn's questionable substitute.

The guests arrived shortly and there were the usual stiff, bromidic greetings. Mrs. Hilmer had been presented to Fred first ... a little, spotless, homey Scandinavian type, who radiated competent housekeeping and flawless cooking. The Starratts had once had just such a shining-faced body for a neighbor--a woman who ran up the back stairs during the dinner hour with a bit of roasted chicken or a pan of featherweight pop-overs or a dish of crumbly cookies for the children. Mrs. Starratt, senior, had acknowledged her neighbor's culinary merits ungrudgingly, tempering her enthusiasm, however, with a swift dab of criticism directed at the lady's personality.

"My, but isn't she Dutch, though!" frequently had escaped her.

Somehow the characterization had struck Fred Starratt as very apt even in his younger days. And as he shook hands with Mrs. Hilmer these same words came to mind.

Hilmer disturbed him. He was a huge man with a rather well-chiseled face, considering his thickness of limb, and his blond hair fell in an untidy shower about his prominent and throbbing temples. Fred felt him to be a man without any inherited social graces, yet he contrived to appear at ease. Was it because he was disposed to let the women chatter? No, that could not account for his acquired suavity, for silence is very often much more awkward than even clumsy attempts at speech.

As the dinner progressed, Fred Starratt began to wonder just what had tempted Helen to arrange this little dinner party for the Hilmers. When she had broached the matter, her words had scarcely conveyed their type. A woman who had helped his wife out at the Red Cross Center during the influenza epidemic could be of almost any pattern. But immediately he had gauged her as one of his wife's own kind. Helen and her women friends were not incompetent housewives, but their efforts leaned rather to an escape from domestic drudgery than to a patient yielding to its yoke. If they discussed housekeeping at all, it was with reference to some new labor-saving device flashing across the culinary horizon. But Mrs. Hilmer's conversation thrilled with the pride of her gastronomic achievements without any reference to the labor involved. She invested her estate as housekeeper for her husband with a commendable dignity. It appeared that she took an enormous

amount of pains with the simplest dishes. It was incredible, for instance, how much thought and care and time went into a custard which she described at great length for Helen's benefit.

"But that takes hours and _hours_!" Helen protested.

"But it's a real custard," Hilmer put in, dryly.

Fred Starratt felt himself flushing. Hilmer's scant speech had the double-edged quality of most short weapons. Could it be that his guest was sneering by implication at the fare that Helen had provided? No, that was hardly it, because Helen had provided good fare, even if she had prepared most of it vicariously. Hilmer's covert disdain was more impersonal, yet it remained every whit as irritating, for all that. Perhaps a bit more so, since Fred Starratt found it hard to put a finger on its precise quality. He had another taste of it later when the inevitable strike gossip intruded itself. It was Helen who opened up, repeating her verbal passage with the butcher.

"They want eight hours a day and forty-five dollars a week," she finished. "I call that ridiculous!"

"Why?" asked Hilmer, abruptly.

"For a butcher?" Helen countered, with pained incredulity.

"How long does your husband work?" Hilmer went on, calmly.

"I'm sure I don't know. How long do you work, Fred?"

Starratt hesitated. "Let me see ... nine to twelve is three hours ... one to five is four hours--seven in all."

Hilmer smiled with cryptic irritation. "There you have it!... What's wrong with a butcher wanting eight hours?"

Helen shrugged. "Well, a butcher doesn't have to use his brains very much!" she threw out, triumphantly.

"And your husband does. I see!"

Starratt winced. He felt his wife's eye turned expectantly upon him. "Seven hours is a normal day's work," he put in, deciding to ignore Hilmer's insolence, "but as an employer of an office force you must know how much overtime the average clerk puts in. We're not afraid to work a little bit more than we're paid for. We're thinking of something else besides money."

Hilmer buttered a roll. "What, for instance?"

"Why, the firm's interest ... our own advancement, of course ... the enlarged capacity that comes with greater skill and knowledge." He leaned back in his seat with a self-satisfied smile.

Hilmer laid down his butter knife very deliberately. "That's very well put," he said; "very well put, indeed! And would you mind telling me just what your duties are in the office where you work?"

"I'm in the insurance business ... fire. We have a general agency here

for the Pacific coast. That means that all the subagents in the smaller towns report the risks they have insured to us. I'm what they call a map clerk. I enter the details of every risk on bound maps of the larger towns which every insurance company is provided with. In this way we know just how much we have at risk in any building, block, or section of any city. And we are able to keep our liability within proper limits."

"You do this same thing ... for seven hours every day ... not to speak of overtime?"

"Yes."

"And how long have you been doing this?"

"About five years."

"And how long will you continue to do it?"

"God knows!"

Hilmer rested both hands on the white cloth. They were shapely hands in spite of their size, with healthy pink nails, except on a thumb and forefinger, which had been badly mangled. "For five years you have worked seven hours every day on this routine ... and in order to enlarge your capacity and skill and knowledge you have worked many hours overtime on this same routine, I suppose without any extra pay... It seems to me that a man who only gets a chance to exercise with dumb-bells might keep in condition, but he'd hardly grow more skillful... Of course, that still leaves two theories intact--working for your own advancement ... and the interest of your firm. I suppose the advancement _has_ come, I suppose you've been paid for your overtime ... in increased salary."

Helen made a scornful movement. "If you call an increase of ten dollars a month in two years an advancement," she ventured, bitterly.

Starratt flushed.

"That leaves only one excuse for overtime. And that excuse is usually a lie. Why should you have the interest of your firm at heart when it does nothing for you beyond what it is forced to do?"

Fred Starratt bared his teeth in sudden snapping anger. "Well, and what do _you_ do, Mr. Hilmer, for your clerks?"

"Nothing ... absolutely nothing ... unless they demand it. And even then it's only the exceptional man who can force me into a corner. The average clerk in any country is like a gelded horse. He's been robbed of his power by education ... of a sort. He's a reasonable, rational, considerate beast that can be broken to any harness."

"What do you want us to do? Go on a strike and heave bricks into your plate-glass window?... What would you do in our place?"

"I wouldn't be there, to begin with. I've heaved bricks in my day." He leaned forward, exhibiting his smashed thumb and forefinger. "I killed the man who did that to me. I was born in a Norwegian fishing village and after a while I followed the sea. That's a good school for action."

And what education you get is thrashed into you. The little that sticks doesn't do much more than toughen you. And if you don't want any more it does well enough. Later on, if you have a thirst for knowledge, you drink the brand you pick yourself and it doesn't go to your head. Now with you ... you didn't have any choice. You drank up what they handed out and, at the age when you could have made a selection, your taste was formed ... by _others_... I don't mind people kicking at the man who works with his hands if they know what they're talking about. But most of them don't. They get the thing second hand. They're chock full of loyalty to superiors and systems and governments, just from habit... I've worked with my hands, and I've fought for a half loaf of bread with a dirk knife, and I know all the dirty, rotten things of life by direct contact. So when I disagree with the demands of the men who build my vessels I know why I'm disagreeing. And I usually do disagree ... because if they've got guts enough in them they'll fight. And I like a good fight. That's why potting clerks is such a tame business. It's almost as sickening as a rabbit drive."

He finished with a gesture of contempt and reached for his goblet of water.

Starratt decided not to dodge the issue; if Hilmer wished to throw any further mud he was perfectly ready to stand up and be the target.

"Well, and what's the remedy for stiffening the backbone of my sort?" he asked, with polite insolence.

"Stiffening the backbone of the middle class is next to impossible. They've been bowing and scraping until there's a permanent kink in their backs!"

"The 'middle class'?" Helen echoed, incredulously.

Hilmer was smiling widely. There was a strange, embarrassed silence. Starratt was the first to recover himself. "Why, of course!... Why not? You didn't think we belonged to any other class, did you?"

It was Mrs. Hilmer who changed the subject. "What nice corn pudding this is, Mrs. Starratt! Would you mind telling me how you made it?"

Hostilities ceased with the black coffee, and in the tiny living room Hilmer grew almost genial. His life had been varied and he was rather proud of it--that is, he was proud of the more sordid details, which he recounted with an air of satisfaction. He liked to dwell on his poverty, his lack of opportunity, his scant education. He had the pride of his achievements, and he was always eager to throw them into sharper relief by dwelling upon the depths from which he had sprung. He had his vulgarities, of course, but it was amazing how well selected they were--the vulgarities of simplicity rather than of coarseness. And while he talked he moved his hands unusually for a man of northern blood, revealing the sinister thumb and forefinger, which to Fred Starratt grew to be a symbol of his guest's rough-hewn power. Hilmer was full of raw-boned stories of the sea and he had the seafarer's trick of vivid speech. Even Helen Starratt was absorbed ... a thing unusual for her. At least in her husband's hearing she always disclaimed any interest in the brutalities. She never read about murders or the sweaty stories in the human-interest columns of the paper or the unpleasant fictioning of realists. Her excuse was the

threadbare one that a trivial environment always calls forth, "There are enough unpleasant things in life without reading about them!"

The unpleasant things in Helen Starratt's life didn't go very far beyond half-tipsy maids and impertinent butcher boys.

Hilmer's experiences were not quite in the line of drawing-room anecdotes, and Starratt had seen the time when his wife would have recoiled from them with the disdainful grace of a feline shaking unwelcome moisture from its paws. But to-night she drew her dark eyebrows together tensely and let her thin, vivid lips part with frank eagerness. Her interest flamed her with a new quality. Fred Starratt had always known that his wife was attractive; he would not have married her otherwise; but, as she leaned forward upon the arm of her chair, resting her elbows upon an orange satin pillow, he saw that she was handsome. And, somehow, the realization vaguely disturbed him.

Hilmer's stories of prosperity were not so moving. From a penniless emigrant in New York until he had achieved the distinction of being one of the leading shipbuilders of the Pacific coast, his narrative steadily dwindled in power, the stream of his life choked with stagnant scum of good fortune. Indeed, he grew so dull that Helen Starratt, stifling a yawn, said:

"If it's not too personal ... won't you please tell us ... about ... about the man you killed for smashing your thumb?"

He laughed with charming naivete, and began at once. But it was all disappointingly simple. It had happened aboard ship. A hulking Finn, one of the crew's bullies, had accused Hilmer of stealing his tobacco. A scuffle followed, blows, blood drawn. Upon the slippery deck Hilmer had fallen prone in an attempt to place a swinging blow. The Finn had seized this opportunity and flung a bit of pig iron upon Hilmer's sprawling right hand. Hilmer had leaped to his feet at once and, seizing the bar of iron in his dripping fingers, had crushed the bully's head with one sure, swift blow.

"He fell face downward ... his head split open like a rotten melon."

Helen Starratt shuddered. "How ... how perfectly fascinating!" escaped her.

Starratt stared. He had never seen his wife so kindled with morbid excitement.

"I ... I thought you didn't like to hear unpleasant stories," he threw at her, disagreeably.

She tossed the flaming cushion, upon which she had been leaning, into a corner, a certain insolence in her quick gesture.

"I don't like to read about them," she retorted, and she turned a wanton smile in the direction of Hilmer.

At this juncture the maid opened the folding doors between the dining room and the living room. She had on her hat and coat, and, as she retreated to the kitchen, Helen Starratt flashed a significant look at her husband.

He followed the woman reluctantly. When he entered the kitchen she was leaning against the sink, smoothing on a pair of faded silk gloves.

"I'm sorry," he began, awkwardly, "but I forgot to cash a check to-day. How much do you charge?"

The woman's hands flew instinctively to her hips as she braced herself into an attitude of defiance.

"Three dollars!" she snapped. "And my car fare."

He searched his pockets and held out a palm filled with silver for her inspection. "I've just got two forty," he announced, apologetically. "You see, we usually have Mrs. Finn. She knows us and I felt sure she'd wait until next time. If you give me your address I can send you the difference to-morrow."

She tossed back her head. "Nothing doing!" she retorted. "I don't give a damn what you thought. I want my money now or, by Gawd, I'll start something!"

Her voice had risen sharply. Starratt was sure that everybody could hear.

"I haven't got three dollars," he insisted, in a low voice. "Can't you see that I haven't?"

"Ask your wife, then."

"She hasn't a cent... I should have cashed a check to-day, but I forgot... You forget things sometimes, don't you?"

He was conscious that his voice had drawn out in a snuffling appeal, but he simply had to placate this female ogress in some way.

"Ask your swell friends, then."

"Why, I can't do that... I don't know them well enough. This is the first time--"

She cut him short with a snap of her fingers. "You don't know me, either ... and I don't know you. That's the gist of the whole thing. If you can ask a strange woman who's done an honest night's work to wait for her money, you can ask a strange man to lend you sixty cents... And, what's more, I'll wait right here until you do!"

"Well, wait then!" he flung out, suddenly, as he pocketed the silver.

He kicked open the swinging door and gained the dining room. She followed close upon his heels.

"Oh, I know your kind!" he heard her spitting out at him. "You're a cheap skate trying to put up a front! But you won't get by with me, not if I know it!... You come through with three dollars or I'll wreck this joint!"

A crash followed her harangue. Starratt turned. A tray of Haviland cups and saucers lay in a shattered heap upon the floor.

He raised a threatening finger at her. "Will you be good enough to leave this house!" he commanded.

She thrust a red-knuckled fist into his face. "Not much I won't!" she defied him, swinging her head back and forth.

He fell back sharply. What was he to do? He couldn't kick her out... He heard a chair scraped back noisily upon the hardwood floor of the living room. Presently Hilmer stood at his side.

"Let me handle her!" Hilmer said, quietly.

Starratt gave a gesture of assent.

His guest took one stride toward the obstreperous female. "Get out! Understand?"

She stopped the defiant seesawing of her head.

"Wot in hell..." she was beginning, but her voice suddenly broke into tearful blubbing. "I'm a poor, lone widder woman--"

He took her arm and gave her a significant shove.

"Get out!" he repeated, with brief emphasis.

She cast a look at him, half despair and half admiration. He pointed to the door. She went.

Hilmer laughed and regained the living room. Starratt hesitated.

"I guess I'd better pick up the mess," he said, with an attempt at nonchalance.

Nobody made any reply. He bent over the litter. Above the faint tinkle of shattered porcelain dropping upon the lacquered tray he heard his wife's voice cloying the air with unpleasant sweetness as she said:

"Oh yes, Mr. Hilmer, you were telling us about the time you fought a man with a dirk knife ... for a half loaf of bread."

CHAPTER II

When the Hilmers left, about half past eleven, Starratt went down to the curb with them, on the pretext of looking at Hilmer's new car. It proved to be a very late and very luxurious model.

"Is it insured?" asked Starratt, as he lifted Mrs. Hilmer in.

"What a hungry bunch you insurance men are!" Hilmer returned. "You're the fiftieth man that's asked me that."

Starratt flushed. The business end of his suggestion had been the last thing in his mind. He managed to voice a commonplace protest, and Hilmer, taking his place at the wheel, said:

"Come in and talk it over sometime... Perhaps you can persuade me."

Starratt smiled pallidly and the car shot forward. He watched it out of sight. Instead of going back into the house he walked aimlessly down the block. He had no objective beyond a desire to kill the time and give Helen a chance to retire before he returned. He wasn't in a mood for talking.

It was not an unusual thing for him to take a stroll before turning in, and habit led him along a beaten path. He always found it fascinating to dip down the Hyde Street hill toward Lombard Street, where he could glimpse both the bay and the opposite shore. Then, he liked to pass the old-fashioned gardens spilling the mingled scent of heliotrope and crimson sage into the lap of night. There was something fascinating and melancholy about this venerable quarter that had been spared the ravages of fire ... overlooked, as it were, by the relentless flames, either in pity or contempt. There had been marvelous tales concerning this section's escape from the holocaust of 1906, when San Francisco had been shaken by earthquake and shriveled by flames. One house had been saved by a crimson flood of wine siphoned from its fragrant cellar, another by pluck and a garden hose, a third by quickly hewn branches of eucalyptus and cypress piled against the outside walls as a screen to the blistering heat. Trees and hedges and climbing honeysuckle had contributed, no doubt, to the defense of these relics of a more genial day, but the dogged determination of their owners to save their old homes at any cost must have been the determining factor, Starratt had often thought, as he lingered before the old picket fences, in an attempt to revive his memories of other days. He could not remember, of course, quite back to the time when the Hyde Street hill had been in an opulent heyday, but the flavor of its quality had trickled through to his generation. This was the section where his mother had languished in the prim gloom of her lamp-shaded parlor before his father's discreet advances. The house was gone ... replaced by a bay-windowed, jig-sawed horror of the '80s, but the garden still smiled, its quaint fragrance reenforced at the proper season by the belated blossoms of a homesick and wind-bitten magnolia. He was sure, judged by present-day standards, that his mother's old home must have been a very modest, genial sort of place ... without doubt a clapboard, two-storied affair with a single wide gable and a porch running the full length of the front. But, in a day when young and pretty women were at a premium, one did not have to live in a mansion to attract desirable suitors, and Fred Starratt had often heard his mother remind his father without bitterness of the catches that had been thrown her way. Not that Starratt, senior, had been a bad prospect matrimonially. Quite the contrary. He had come from Boston in the early '70s, of good substantial family, and with fair looks and a capacity for getting on. Likewise, a chance for inside tips on the stock market, since he had elected to go in with a brokerage firm. And so they were married, with all of conservative San Francisco at the First Unitarian Church to see the wedding, leavened by a sprinkling of the very rich and a dash of the ultrafashionable. Unfortunately, the inside tips didn't pan out

... absurd and dazzling fortune was succeeded by appalling and irretrievable failure. Starratt, senior, was too young a man to succumb to the scurvy trick of fate, but he never quite recovered. Gradually the Starratt family fell back a pace. To the last there were certain of the old guard who still remembered them with bits of

coveted pasteboard for receptions or marriages or anniversary celebrations ... but the Starratts became more and more a memory revived by sentiment and less and less a vital reality.

Fred Starratt used to speculate, during his nocturnal wandering among the shadows of his parents' youthful haunts, just what his position would have been had these stock-market tips proved gilt edged. He tried to imagine himself the master of a splendid estate down the peninsula--preferably at Hillsboro--possessed of high-power cars and a string of polo ponies ... perhaps even a steam yacht... But these dazzling visions were not always in the ascendant. There were times when a philanthropic dream moved him more completely and he had naive and varied speculations concerning the help that he could have placed in the way of the less fortunate had he been possessed of unlimited means. Or, again, his hypothetical wealth put him in the way of the education that placed him easily at the top of a stirring profession.

"If I'd only had half a chance!" would escape him.

This was a phrase borrowed unconsciously from his mother. She was never bitter nor resentful at their profitless tilt with fortune except as it had reacted on her son.

"You should have gone to college," she used to insist, regretfully, summing up by implication his lack of advancement. At first he took a measure of comfort in her excuse; later he came to be irritated by it. And in moments of truant self-candor he admitted he could have made the grade with concessions to pride. There were plenty of youths who worked their way through. But he always had moved close to the edge of affluent circles, where he had caught the cold but disturbing glow of their standards. He left high school with pallid ideals of gentility, ideals that expressed themselves in his reasons for deciding to enter an insurance office. Insurance, he argued, was a nice business, one met nice people, one had nice hours, one was placed in nice surroundings. He had discovered later that one drew a nice salary, too. Well, at least, he had had the virtue of choosing without a very keen eye for the financial returns.

Ten years of being married to a woman who demanded a nice home and nice clothes and a circle of nice friends had done a great deal toward making him a little skeptical about the soundness of his standards. But his moments of uncertainty were few and fleeting, called into life by such uncomfortable circumstances as touching old Wetherbee for money or putting his tailor off when the date for his monthly dole fell due. He had never been introspective enough to quite place himself in the social scale, but when, in his thought or conversation, he referred to people of the better class he unconsciously included himself. He was not a drunken, disorderly, or radical member of society, and he didn't black boots, or man a ship, or sell people groceries, or do any of the things that were done in overalls and a soft shirt, therefore it went without saying that he belonged to the better class. That was synonymous with admitting that one kept one's ringer nails clean and used a pocket handkerchief.

Suddenly, with the force of a surprise slap in the face, it had been borne in upon him that he was not any of the fine things he imagined. He was sure that his insolent guest, Hilmer, had not meant to be disagreeable at the moment when he had said:

"Stiffening the backbone of the _middle class_ is next to impossible!"

"The middle class"! The phrase had brought up even Helen Starratt with a round turn. One might have called them both peasants with equal temerity. No, Hilmer had not made _that_ point consciously, and

therein lay its sting.

To-night, as he accomplished his accustomed pilgrimage to the tangible shrine of his ancestors, and stood leaning against the gate which opened upon the garden that had smiled upon his mother's wooing, he determined once and for all to establish his position in life... _Did_ he belong to the middle class, and, granting the premises, was it a condition from which one could escape or a fixed heritage that could neither be abandoned nor denied? In a country that made flamboyant motions toward democracy, he knew that the term was used in contempt, if not reproach. Had the class itself brought on this disesteem? Did it really exist and what defined it? Was it a matter of scant worldly possessions, or commonplace brain force, or breeding, or just an attitude of mind? Was it a term invented by the crafty to dash cold water upon the potential unity of a scattered force? Was it a scarecrow for frightening greedy and resourceful flocks from a concerted assault upon the golden harvests of privilege?... The questions submerged him in a swift flood. He did not know ... he could not tell. Unaccustomed as he was to thinking in the terms of group consciousness, he fell back, naturally, upon the personal aspects of the case. He was sure of one thing--Hilmer's contempt and scorn. In what class did Hilmer place himself? Above or below?... But the answer came almost before it was framed--Hilmer looked _down_ upon him. That almost told the story, but not quite. Had Hilmer climbed personally to upper circles or had the strata in which he found himself embedded been pushed up by the slow process of time? Had the term "middle class" become a misnomer? Was it really on the lowest level now? Perhaps it was ... perhaps it always had been... But so was the foundation of any structure. Foundation?... The thought intrigued him, but only momentarily. Who wanted to bear the crushing weight of arrogant and far-flung battlements?

He retraced his steps, his thoughts still busy with Hilmer. Here was a typical case of what America could yield to the nature that had the insolence to ravish her. America was still the tawny, primitive, elemental jade who gave herself more readily to a rough embrace than a soft caress. She reserved her favors for those who wrested them from her...she had no patience with the soft delights of persuasion. It was strange how much rough-hewn vitality had poured into her embrace from the moth-eaten civilization of the Old World. Starratt was only a generation removed from a people who had subdued a wilderness ... he was not many generations removed from a people who wrestled naked with God for a whole continent--that is, they had begun to wrestle; the years that had succeeded found them still eager and shut-lipped for the conflict. They had abandoned the struggle only when they had found their victory complete. Naturally, soft days had followed. Was eternal conflict the price of strength? Starratt found himself wondering. And was he a product of these soft days, the rushing whirlwinds of Heaven stilled, the land drowsy with the humid heat of a slothful noonday? He had never thought of these things before. Even when he had thrilled to the vision of line upon line of his comrades marching away to the blood-soaked fields of France he had surrendered to a primitive emotion untouched by the poetry of deep understanding. He thrilled not

because he knew that these people were doing the magnificent, the decent thing ... but because he merely felt it. He had his faiths, but he had not troubled to prove them ... he had not troubled even to _doubt_ them.

His disquiet sharpened all of his perceptions. He never remembered a time when the cool fragrance of the night had fallen upon his senses with such a personal caress. He had come out into its starlit presence flushed with narrow, sordid indignation ... smarting under the trivial lashes which insolence and circumstance had rained upon his vanity. His walk in the dusky silence had not stilled his restlessness, but it had given his impatience a larger scope ... and as he stood for one last backward glimpse at the twinkling magnificence of this February night he felt stirred by almost heroic rancors. The city lay before him in crouched somnolence, ready to leap into life at the first flush of dawn, and, in the chilly breath of virgin spring, little truant warmths and provocative perfumes stirred the night with subtle prophecies of summer.

His exaltation persisted even after he had turned the key in his own door to find the light still blazing, betraying the fact of Helen's wakeful presence. He dallied over the triviality of hanging up his hat.

She was reading when he gained the threshold of the tiny living room. At the sound of his footsteps she flung aside the magazine in her hand. Her thick brows were drawn together in insolent impatience.

"Oh," he exclaimed, inadequately, "I thought you'd be asleep!"

"Asleep?" she queried, in a voice that cut him with its swift stroke. "You didn't fancy that I could compose myself that quickly ... after everything that's happened to-night ... did you? I've been humiliated more than once in my life, but never quite so badly. Uncalled for, too ... that's the silly part of it."

He stood motionless in the doorway. "I'm sorry I forgot the money," he returned, dully. "But it's all past and gone now. And I think the Hilmers understood."

"Yes ... they understood. That's another humiliating thing." She laughed tonelessly. "It must be amusing to watch people like us attempting to be somebody and do something on an income that can't be stretched far enough to pay a sloppy maid her wages."

It was not so much what she said, but her manner that chilled him to sudden cold anger. "Well ... you know our income, down to the last penny... You know just how much I've overdrawn this month, too. Why do you invite strangers to dinner under such conditions?"

She rose, drawing herself up to an arrogant height. "I invite them for _your_ sake," she said, with slow emphasis. "If you played your cards well you might get in right with Hilmer. He's a big man."

"Yes," he flung back, dryly, "and a damned insolent one, too."

"He has his faults," she defended. "He's not polished, but he's forceful." She turned a malevolent smile upon her husband. "When he told that drunken servant girl to go, she went!"

Starratt could feel the rush of blood dyeing his temples. "That's just in his line!" he sneered. "He's taken degrading orders, and so he knows how to give them... He may have money now, but he hasn't always been so fortunate. I've been short of funds in my day, but I never fought with a dirk for a half loaf of bread... You've heard the story of his life... What has he got to make him proud?"

"Just that ... he's pulled himself out of it. While we... Tell me, where are we? Where will we be ten years from now?... Twenty? Why aren't you doing something?... Everybody else is."

He folded his arms and leaned against the doorway. "Perhaps I am," he said, quietly. "You don't know everything."

She made a movement toward him. He stepped aside to let her pass.

"What can you do?" she taunted as she swept out of the room.

He stood for a moment dazed at the sudden and unexpected budding of her scorn. He heard her slam the door of the bedroom. He went over to the chair from which she had risen and dropped into it, shading his eyes.

The clock in the hallway was chiming two when the bedroom door opened again.

"Aren't you coming to bed?" he heard his wife's voice call with sharp irritation.

"No," he answered.

CHAPTER III

It was extraordinary how wide awake Fred Starratt felt next morning. He was full of tingling reactions to the sharp chill of disillusionment. At the breakfast table he met his wife's advances with an air of tolerant aloofness. In the past, the first moves toward adjusting a misunderstanding had come usually from him. He had an aptitude for kindling the fires of domestic harmony, but he had discovered overnight the futility of fanning a hearthstone blaze when the flue was choked so completely. Before him lay the task of first correcting the draught. Temporary genialities had no place in his sudden, bleak speculations. Helen shirred his eggs to a turn, pressed the second cup of coffee on him, browned him a fresh slice of toast ... he suffered her favors, but he was unmoved by them. They did not even annoy him. When he kissed her good-by he felt the relaxation of her body against his, as she stood for a moment languishing in provocative surrender. He put her aside sharply. Her caress had a new quality which irritated him.

Outside, the morning spread its blue-gold tail in wanton splendor. February in San Francisco! Fred Starratt drew in a deep breath and wondered where else in the whole world one could have bettered that morning at any season of the year. Like most San Franciscans, he had

never flown very far afield, but he was passionate in his belief that his native city "had it on any of them," to use his precise term. And he was resentful to a degree at any who dared in his presence to establish other claims or to even suggest another preference. He looked forward to New York as an experience, but never as a goal. No, San Francisco was good enough for him!

He felt the same conviction this morning, but a vague gypsying stirred his blood also, and a wayfaring urge swept him. The sky was indescribably blue, washed clean by a moist January that had drenched the hills to lush-green life. The bay lay in a sapphire drowse, flecked by idle-winged argosies, unfolding their storm-soaked sails to the caressing sunlight. Soaring high above the placid gulls, an airplane circled and dipped like a huge dragon fly in nuptial flight. Through the Golden Gate, shrouded in the delicate mists evoked by the cool night, an ocean liner glided with arrogant assurance.

From the last vantage point, before he slipped townward to his monotonous duties, Starratt stood, shading his eyes, watching the stately exit of this maritime giant. This was a morning for starting adventure...for setting out upon a quest!... He had been stirred before to such Homeric longings ... spring sunshine could always prick his blood with sharp-pointed desire. But to-day there was a poignant melancholy in his flair for a wider horizon. He was touched by weariness as well as longing. He was like a pocket hunter whose previous borrowings had beguiled him with flashing grains that proved valueless. He would not abandon his search, but he must pack up and move on to new, uncertain, unproved ground. And he felt all the weight of hidden and heartbreaking perils with which his spiritual faring forth must of necessity be hedged.

At the corner of California and Montgomery streets he met the tide of nine-o'clock commuters surging toward the insurance offices and banks. His widened vision suddenly contracted. Middle class! The phrase leaped forward from the flock mind which this standardized concourse diffused. In many of the faces he read the potentialities of infinite variety, smothered by a dull mask of conformity. What a relief if but one in that vast flood would go suddenly mad! He tried fantastically to picture the effect upon the others--the momentary cowardice and braveries that such an event would call into life. For a few brief moments certain personalities and acts would stand out sharply glorified, like grains of dust dancing in the slanting rays of the sun. Then, the angle of yellow light restored to white normality, the whirling particles would drift back into their colorless oblivion.

For a moment he had a taste of desire for unspringing power. If he could but be the wind to shake these dry reeds of custom into a semblance of life!... One by one they passed him with an air of growing preoccupation ... each step was carrying them nearer to the day's pallid slavery, and an unconscious sense of their genteel serfdom seemed gradually to settle on them. There were no bent nor broken nor careworn toilers among this drab mass...the stamp of long service here was a withered, soul-quenched gentility that came of accepting life instead of struggling against it.

Gradually the temper of the crowd communicated itself to him. It was time to descend from his speculative heights and face the problems of his workday world. He turned sharply toward his office. Young Brauer was just mounting the steps.

"Well, what's new?" Brauer threw out, genially.

"Not a thing in the world!" escaped Starratt.

They went into the office together.

Old Wetherbee was carrying his cash book out of the safe. The old man smiled. He was usually in good humor early in the morning.

"Well, what's new?" he inquired, gayly.

"Not a thing in the world!" they chimed, almost in chorus.

At the rear of the office they slipped on their office coats. Brauer took a comb from his pocket and began carefully to define the part in his already slick hair. Starratt went forward.

In the center of the room the chief stenographer stood, putting her formidable array of pencils through the sharpener. She glanced up at Starratt with a complacent smile.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Starratt!" she purred, archly. "What's new with you?"

"Not a thing in the world," he answered, ironically, and he began to arrange some memoranda in one of the wire baskets on his desk... At nine thirty the boy brought him his share of the mail from the back office, and in ten minutes he was deeply absorbed in sorting the "daily reports" from the various agencies. He worked steadily, interrupted by an occasional phone call, an order from the chief clerk, the arrival and departure of business associates and clients. Above the hum of subdued office conversation the click of typewriting machines and the incessant buzzing of the desk telephones, he was conscious of hearing the same question repeated with monotonous fidelity:

"Hello! What's new with you?"

And as surely, either through his own lips or the lips of another, the identical reply always came:

"Not a thing in the world!"

At half past eleven he stopped deliberately and stood for a moment, nervously fingering his tie. He was thinking about the course of action that he had decided upon in that long, unusual vigil of the night before. His uncertainty lasted until the remembrance of his wife's scornful question swept over him:

"Why aren't you doing something?... Everybody else is!"

But it was the answer he had made that committed him irrevocably to his future course:

"Perhaps I am. You don't know everything."

He had felt a sense of fatality bound up in these words of defiant pretense, once they had escaped him...a fatality which the blazing

contempt of his wife's retort had emphasized. Even now his cheeks burned with the memory of that unleashed insult:

"What can _you_ do?"

No, there was no turning back now. His own self-esteem could not deny so clear-cut a challenge.

He called his assistant. "I wish you'd go into the private office and see if Mr. Ford is at leisure," he ordered. "I want to have a talk with him."

The youth came back promptly. "He says for you to come," was his brief announcement.

Fred Starratt stared a moment and, recovering himself, walked swiftly in upon his employer. Mr. Ford was signing insurance policies.

"Well, Starratt," he said, looking up smilingly, "what's the good word?... What's new with you?"

Starratt squared himself desperately. "Nothing...except I find it impossible to live upon my salary."

Mr. Ford laid aside his pen. "Oh, that's unfortunate!... Suppose you sit down and we'll talk it over."

Starratt dropped into the nearest seat.

Mr. Ford let his eyeglasses dangle from their cord. He was not in the least disturbed. Indeed, he seemed to be approaching the issue with unqualified pleasure.

"Now, Starratt, let's get at the root of the trouble... Of course you're a reasonable man otherwise..."

Starratt smiled ironically. A vivid remembrance of Hilmer's words flashed over him. His lip-curling disdain must have communicated itself to Mr. Ford, because that gentleman hesitated, cleared his throat, and began all over again.

"You're a reasonable man, Starratt, and I know that you have the interest of the firm at heart."

Starratt leaned back in his seat and listened, but he might have spared himself the pains. Somehow he anticipated every word, every argument, before Mr. Ford had a chance to voice them. Business conditions were uncertain, overhead charges extraordinarily increased, the loss ratio large and bidding fair to cut their bonus down to nothing. Therefore ... well, of course, next year things might be different. The firm was hoping that by next year they would be in a position to deal handsomely with those of their force who had been patient... Mr. Ford did not stop there, he did not expect Starratt to take his word for anything. He reached for a pencil and pad and he went into a mathematic demonstration to show just how near the edge of financial disaster the firm of Ford, Wetherbee & Co. had been pushed. Starratt could not doubt the figures, and yet his eyes traveled instinctively to the bag of golf sticks in a convenient corner. Somehow, nothing in either Ford's argument or his sleek presence

irritated Starratt so much as these golf sticks. For, in this particular instance, they became the symbol of a self-sufficient prosperity whose first moves toward economy were directed at those who serve... If all this were so, why didn't Ford begin by cutting down his own allowance, by trimming his own expenses to the bone? Golf, as Mr. Ford played it, was an expensive luxury. No doubt the exercise was beneficial, but puttering about a garden would have done equally. Starratt might have let all this pass. He was by heart and nature and training a conservative and he had sympathy for the genial vanities of life. It was Ford's final summary, the unconscious patronage, the quiet, assured insolence of his words, which gave Starratt his irrevocable cue.

"We rather look to men like you, Starratt," Mr. Ford was saying, his voice suave to the point of insincerity, "to tide us over a crisis. Just now, when the laboring element is running amuck, it's good to feel that the country has a large percentage of people who can be reasonable and understand another viewpoint except their own... After everything is said and done, in business a man's first loyalty is to the firm he works for."

"Why?" Starratt threw out sharply.

Ford's pallid eyes widened briefly. "I think the answer is obvious, Starratt. Don't you? The hand that feeds a man is..."

"_Feeds?_ That may work both ways."

"I don't quite understand."

Starratt's glance traveled toward the golf sticks. "Well, it seems to me it's a case of one man cutting down on necessities to provide another with luxuries." He hated himself once he had said it. It outraged his own sense of breeding.

Mr. Ford shoved the pencil and pad to one side. "A parlor radical, eh?... Well, this from _you_ is surprising!... If there was one man in my employ whom I counted on, it was you. You've been with me over fifteen years ... began as office boy, as I remember. And in all that time you've never even asked for a privilege... I'm sorry to see such a fine record broken!"

Yesterday Starratt would have agreed with him, but now he felt moved to indignation and shame at Ford's summary of his negative virtues. He had been born with a voice and he had never lifted it to ask for his rights, much less a favor. No wonder Hilmer could sneer and Helen Starratt cut him with the fine knife of her scorn! The words began to tumble to his lips. They came in swirling flood. He lost count of what he was saying, but the angry white face of his employer foreshadowed the inevitable end of this interview. He gave his rancor its full scope ... protests, defiance, insults, even, heaping up in a formidable pile.

"You ask me to be patient," he flared, "because you think I'm a reasonable, rational, considerate beast that can be broken to any harness!" He recognized Hilmer's words, but he swept on. "If you were in a real flesh-and-blood business you'd have felt the force of things ... you'd have had men with guts to deal with ... you'd have had a brick or two heaved into your plate-glass window. A friend of mine

said last night that potting clerks was as sickening as a rabbit drive. He was right, it is sickening!"

Mr. Ford raised his hand. Starratt obeyed with silence.

"I'm sorry, Starratt, to see you bitten with this radical disease... Of course, you can't stay on here, after this. Your confidence in us seems to have been destroyed and it goes without saying that my confidence in you has been seriously undermined. We'll give you a good recommendation and a month's salary... But you had better leave at once. A man in your frame of mind isn't a good investment for Ford, Wetherbee & Co."

Starratt was still quivering with unleashed heroics. "The recommendation is coming to me," he returned, coldly. "The month's salary isn't. I'll take what I've earned and not a penny more."

"Very well; suit yourself there."

Mr. Ford reached for his pen and began where he had left off at Starratt's entrance ... signing insurance policies... Starratt rose and left without a word. The interview was over.

Already, in that mysterious way with which secrets flash through an office with lightninglike rapidity, a hint of Starratt's brush with Ford was illuminating the dull routine.

"I think he's going into business for himself, or something," Starratt heard the chief stenographer say in a stage whisper to her assistant, as he passed.

And at his desk he found Brauer waiting to waylay him with a bid for lunch, his little ferret eyes attempting to confirm the general gossip flying about.

Starratt had an impulse to refuse, but instead he said, as evenly as he could:

"All right ... sure! Let's go now!"

Brauer felt like eating oysters, so they decided to go up to one of the stalls in the California Market for lunch. He was in an expansive mood.

"Let's have beer, too," he insisted, as they seated themselves. "After the first of July they'll slap on war-time prohibition and it won't be so easy."

Starratt acquiesced. He usually didn't drink anything stronger than tea with the noonday meal, because anything even mildly alcoholic made him loggy and unfit for work, but the thought that to-day he was free intrigued him.

The waiter brought the usual plate of shrimps that it was customary to serve with an oyster order, and Starratt and Brauer fell to. A glass of beer foamed with enticing amber coolness before each plate. Brauer reached over and lifted his glass.

"Well, here's success to crime!" he said, with pointed facetiousness.

Starratt ignored the lead. He had never liked Brauer and he did not find this sharp-nosed inquisitiveness to his taste. He began to wonder why he had come with him. Lunching with Brauer had never been a habit. Occasionally, quite by accident, they managed to achieve the same restaurant and the same table, but it was not a matter of prearrangement. Indeed, Starratt had always prided himself at his ability to keep Brauer at arm's length. A subtle change had occurred. Was it possible that a borrowed five-dollar bill could so reshape a relationship? Well, he would pay him back once he received his monthly salary, and get over with the obligation. His monthly salary?... Suddenly it broke over him that he had received the last full month's salary that he would ever get from Ford, Wetherbee & Co. It was the 20th of February, which meant, roughly, that about two thirds of his one hundred and fifty dollars would be coming to him if he still held to his haughty resolve to take no more than he had earned. Two thirds of one hundred and fifty, less sixty-odd dollars overdrawn... He was recalled from his occupation by Brauer's voice rising above the clatter of carelessly flung crockery and tableware.

"Is it true you're leaving the first of the month?"

He liked Brauer better for this direct question, although the man's presumption still rankled.

"I'm leaving to-day," he announced, dryly, not without a feeling of pride.

"What are you going to do?"

"I haven't decided... Perhaps...I don't know ... I _may_ become an insurance broker."

Brauer picked through the mess in his plate for an unshelled shrimp. "That takes money," he ventured, dubiously.

"Oh, not a great deal," Starratt returned, ruffling a trifle. "Office rent for two or three months before the premiums begin to come in ... a little capital to furnish up a room. I might even get some one to give me a desk in his office until I got started. It's done, you know."

Brauer neatly extracted a succulent morsel from its scaly sheath. "Don't you think it's better to put up a front?" he inquired. "If you've got a decent office and your own phone and a good stenographer it makes an impression when you're going after business... Why don't you go in with somebody?... There ought to be plenty of fellows ready to put up their money against your time."

"Who, for instance?" escaped Starratt, involuntarily.

Brauer shoved his plate of husked shrimps to one side. "Take me. I've saved up quite a bit, and..."

The waiter broke in upon them with the oysters.

Starratt knitted his brows. "Well, why not?" was his mental calculation.

Brauer ordered two more pints of beer.

Starratt had leaned at first toward keeping his business venture a secret from Helen. But in the end a boyish eagerness to sun himself in the warmth of her surprise unlocked his reserve.

"I've quit Ford-Wetherbee," he said, quietly, that night, as she was seating herself after bringing on the dessert.

He had never seen such a startled look flash across her face.

"What! Did you have trouble?"

He decided swiftly not to give her the details. He didn't want her to think that any outside influence had pushed him into action.

"Oh no!..." he drawled, lightly. "I've been thinking of leaving for some time. Working for another person doesn't get you anywhere."

He could see that she was puzzled, perhaps a little annoyed. Last night in a malicious moment she had been quite ready to sneer at her husband's inactivity, but now, with the situation a matter of practice rather than theory, Starratt felt that she was having her misgivings. A suggestion of a frown hovered above her black eyebrows.

"You can't mean that you're going into business!" she returned, as she passed him a dish of steaming pudding.

There was a suggestion of last night's scorn in her incredulity.

"No?... And why not?"

She cast a sidelong glance at him. "That takes money," she objected.

He knew now, from her tone, what was behind the veil of her intimations and he found a curious new pleasure in watching her squirm.

"Oh, well," he half mused, "I guess we'll struggle through somehow. We've always managed to."

She leaned one elbow heavily on the table. "_More_ economies, I suppose!"

He had trapped her too easily! It was his turn to be cutting. "Don't worry!... I sha'n't ask you to do without any more than you've done without so far. If you can stand it as it is awhile longer, why ..."
He broke off with a shrug.

Her eyes swam in a sudden mist. "You're not fair!" she sniffed. "I'm thinking as much of you as I am of myself. Going into business isn't only a question of money. There are anxieties and worry ... and ... and ..." She recovered herself swiftly and looked at him with clear, though reproachful, eyes. "I'm always willing to help ... you know that!"

He melted at once. There was a moment of silence, and then he told her everything ... about Brauer, and what they purposed.

"He's to keep on at Ford-Wetherbee's until things are running smoothly. Of course, I'd rather not have it that way, but he holds the purse strings, so I've got to make concessions. We can get an office for twenty-five a month. It will be the salary of the stenographer that will count up."

"When do you start?"

"To-morrow. And do you know who I'm going after first thing?... Hilmer. He told me last night to come around and talk over insuring that car of his... I don't know that I'll land that. But I might line him up for something else. He must have a lot of insurance to place one way or another."

She smiled dubiously. "Well, I wouldn't count too much upon Hilmer," she said, with a superior air.

"I'm not counting on anything or anybody," he returned, easily. "Hilmer isn't the only fish in the sea."

CHAPTER IV

It was noon before Helen Starratt finished her housework next morning—an unusually late hour for her, but she had been preoccupied, and her movements slow in consequence. A four-room apartment, with hardwood floors and a vacuum cleaner, was hardly a serious task for a full-grown woman, childless, and with a vigor that reacted perfectly to an ice-cold shower at 7 A.M. She used to look back occasionally at the contrast her mother's life had presented. Even with a servant, a three-storied, bay-windowed house had not given Mrs. Somers much leisure for women's clubs. The Ladies Aid Society and a Christmas festival in the church parlors were about as far along the road of alleged social service as the woman of the last generation had traveled. There was marketing to do, and sewing continually on hand, and house-cleaning at stated intervals. In Helen Somers's old home the daily routine had been as inflexible as its ancestor's original Calvinistic creed—Monday, washing; Tuesday, ironing; Wednesday, cleaning the silver; Thursday, at home to visitors; Friday, sweeping; Saturday, baking; and Sunday, the hardest day of all. For, withal, the Puritan sense of observance, that had not been utterly swamped by the blue and enticing skies of California, Sunday was a feast day, not in a lightsome sense, but in a dull, heavy, gastronomic way, unleavened by either wine or passable wit. On Sunday the men of the family returned home from church and gorged. If the day were fine, perhaps everybody save mother took a cable-car ride, or a walk, or something equally exciting. The sparkle of environment had won these people away from tombstone reading and family prayers as a Sabbath diversion, but even California could not be expected to make over a bluestocking in an eye's twinkling. Mother, of course, stayed home on Sunday to "pick up" and get ready for supper in the absence of the servant girl. A later generation had the grace to elevate these slatternly drudges to the title of maid, but a sterner ancestry found it expedient to be more practical and less pretentious in its terms. On these drab Sundays Helen Somers had passionately envied the children of foreign breed, who seemed less hedged about by sabbatical restrictions. Not

that she wished her family to _be_ of the questionable sort that went to El Campo or Shell Mound Park for Sunday picnics and returned in quarrelsome state at a late hour smelling of bad whisky and worse gin. Nor did she aspire to have sprung from the Teutonic stock that perpetrated more respectable but equally noisy outings in the vicinity of Woodward's Gardens. But she had a furtive and sly desire to float oil-like upon the surface of this turbid sea, touching it at certain points, yet scarcely mixing with it. Indeed, this inclination to taste the core of life without committing herself the further indiscretion of swallowing it grew to such proportions that at the age of fifteen she almost succumbed to its allurements. Even at this late date she could recall every detail of a seemingly casual conversation which she had held with the stalwart butcher boy who came daily to the kitchen door to deliver meat. The first day she merely had broached the subject of Sunday picnics; the second she had intrigued him into giving her one or two fleeting details; the third day she held him captive a full ten minutes while he enlarged upon his subject. And so on, until one morning he said, quite directly:

"Would you like to go to one?... If you do, I'll take you."

She had drawn back at first from this frontal attack, but in the end she decided to chance the experience. She pretended to her mother that she was going to see a girl friend who was sick. She met her crude cavalier at the ferry. She even boarded the boat with him. At first he had been a bit constrained and shy, but soon she felt the warm, moist pressure of his thick-fingered hands against hers. And presently his arm encircled her waist. With curious intuition she realized the futility of struggling against him... She had to admit, in the end, that she found his physical nearness pleasurable... She often had wondered, looking back on that day, what might have happened if she had gone through with this truant indiscretion. But halfway on the journey her escort had deserted her momentarily to buy a cigar. Left alone upon the upper deck of a ferryboat, crowded with a strident and raucous company, she had felt herself suddenly grow cold, not with fear, but with a certain haughty and disdainful anger. These people were not her kind! She had risen swiftly from her seat and hidden discreetly in the ladies' washroom until after the boat had landed and was on its way back to the city. When she got home she found the house in confusion. Her father had been taken suddenly ill.

"I came very near sending to Nellie's for you," her mother had said.

The incident had taught her a lesson, but there were times when she regretted its termination--when she was stirred to a certain morbid and profitless speculation as to what might have been.

Shortly after this a reaction began to set in against the dullness which certain people found desirable in the observation of what they were pleased to call with questionable humility the Lord's Day, and by the time Helen had budded to womanhood this new tide was at its flood. People, even piously inclined, were taking houses across the bay, at Belvedere or Sausalito or Mill Valley, for the summer. Somehow, one didn't go to church during this holiday. Friends came over for Saturday and Sunday to visit, and the term "week-end" became intelligible and acquired significance. The Somerses took a cottage for three successive seasons in Belvedere--that is, they spoke of it as a cottage. In reality, it was the abandoned hulk of a ferryboat that had been converted into rather uncomfortable quarters and set up

on the slimy beach. The effect of this unconventional habitation slowly undermined the pale ghost of the Somers' family tradition. They became bohemian. Instead of the lugubrious Sunday feast of thick joints and heavy puddings, they began to make the acquaintance of the can opener. And from can opener to corkscrew it was only a brief step... It was at this point that Helen met Fred Starratt. Quite naturally the inevitable happened. Moonlight rowing in the cove at Belvedere, set to the tune of mandolins, was always providing a job for the parson, and, if the truth were told, for the divorce courts as well. It all had been pleasant enough, and normal enough, and the expected thing. That's what young people always did if the proper setting were provided, especially when the moon kept on the job.

Helen Starratt had read about the thrills that the heroines of novels received from the mating fever, but she had to confess that she had not experienced anything as exciting as a thrill during the entire period of her husband's wooing. She had felt satisfaction, a mild triumph, a gratified vanity, if you will, but that was as far as her emotional experience had gone. After all, her career had been marriage, and she had taken the most likely situation that had been offered. She presumed it was the same when one graduated from business college. You were expected to land a job and you did. Sometimes it was a good one, and then again it wasn't. Looking back, she conceded that her choice had been fair. Fred Starratt didn't drink to excess, he didn't beat or swear at her, he didn't make sarcastic remarks about her relations, or do any of the things which anyone who reads the daily papers discovers so many men do under provocation or otherwise. But, on the other hand, he hadn't made a fortune or bought a car or given her any reason for feeling compensated for the lack of marital excitement. His friends called him a nice fellow--in some ways as damning a thing as one could say about anybody--and let it go at that. However, Helen Starratt's vocabulary was just as limited when it came to characterizing her conventional aims and ambitions. If, occasionally, her speculations stirred the muddy reaches of certain furtive desires, she took care that they did not become articulate. This term "nice" included every desirable virtue. One married nice men, and one lived in a nice neighborhood, and one made nice acquaintances. In her mother's day she had heard people say:

"I believe in having the young folks identified with church work--they meet such nice people."

And years later a friend, attempting to interest her in the activities of a local orphan asylum, had clinched every other argument by stating, blandly:

"You really ought to go in for it, Helen--you've no idea what nice people you meet."

When America's entry into the war brought up the question of Red Cross endeavor, her first thought had been:

"I really ought to do something, I suppose. And, besides, I'll meet lots of nice people."

Well, she had met a lot of nice people, but the only fruitful yield socially had been Mrs. Hilmer. And somehow it never occurred to Helen to apply such a discriminating term as nice to her latest acquisition. Mrs. Hilmer was wholesome and good hearted and a dear, and no doubt

she was nice in a negative way, but one never thought about saying so. And Hilmer...? No, he was not what one would call a nice man, but he was tremendously interesting and in the hands of the right woman... You see, Mrs. Hilmer was a good soul, but, of course, she didn't quite ... that is, she was a bit old fashioned and ... well, she didn't know how, poor dear!

Thus it was that over her household tasks on this particular February morning Helen Starratt dawdled as her mind played with the fiction of what Hilmer might become under the proper influence. Now, if _she_ had married him!...

It was all very well for Mrs. Hilmer to see that her lord and master was fed properly, but why did she waste hours over a custard when she had money enough to hire it done? That course didn't get either of them anywhere--Hilmer remained at a level of torpid content, and naturally he looked down on his wife as a sort of sublimated servant girl who wasn't always preparing to leave and demanding higher wages... No, most men fell too easily in the trap of their personal comforts. Even Fred had become self-satisfied. Beyond his dinner and paper and an occasional sober flight at the movies or bridge with old friends he didn't seem to have any stirring ambitions. That was where a wife came in. Hadn't she been casting around for bait that would make Fred rise to something new? Hadn't she invited the Hilmers to dinner in the hope that the two men would hit it off? The very first time she had met Hilmer she had thought, "There's a man that Fred ought to know."

She was perfectly willing to concede certain virtues to her husband, and she flattered herself that with the materials at her command she had managed to keep Fred pretty well up to the scratch. The only thing that had been lacking was plenty of money. If she had had one quarter of Hilmer's income she would have evolved a husband that any woman could have been proud of, instead of one that most women would have found merely satisfactory... This was the way she had argued before her absurd dinner party. She had to admit, after it was all over, that her husband had managed to make her thoroughly ashamed of him. It was better to have an outrageous husband than a ridiculous one. And she fancied that Hilmer could be outrageous if he chose... But she was sure of one thing ... if Hilmer came home and announced that he had given up his position and had decided to plunge in boldly for himself, his wife would scarcely give the matter a second thought. Hilmer would carry the thing through ... _some way_. A man who could brain an assailant and fight for a mouthful of bread would put things over by hook or crook. There wasn't much chance for failure there. But Fred Starratt ... well, he was apt to have some ridiculous scruple or too keen a sense of business courtesy or a sensitiveness to rebuffs. Take his passage at arms with the drunken maid ... if he had thrown her out promptly, or come in and frankly borrowed the money from Hilmer, it would have at least shown decision.

Of course she couldn't do anything, now that he was committed to this new business venture. It was all very well for him to snarl: "Don't worry... I sha'n't ask you to do without any more than you've done without so far."

That was the lofty way most men theorized when their vanity was wounded. But she knew enough to realize that if he failed she would have to share that failure. Of course, if Fred could interest

Hilmer... Perhaps she could help things along in some way ... with a chance remark to Mrs. Hilmer. Would it be better to cast the seed more directly?... If she could only manage to run across Hilmer--she wouldn't want to seem to be putting in her oar... Would it be very dreadful if she were to think up some excuse and go beard the lion in his den?

She was still interested in her orphan asylum. Why not go ask him for a subscription? She wondered if he would be very brusque; insulting, even. The possibilities fascinated her. She felt that she would like a passage at arms with him. He was a man worth worsting. Under such circumstances Fred Starratt would be either liberal beyond his means or profusely apologetic. Not by any chance would he give a prompt and emphatic refusal... The more she thought about it the more enticing the prospect became. She felt sure that if Hilmer didn't approve of her charity he would say so frankly, perhaps disagreeably. And if he didn't think much of her husband's venture he would be equally direct. She rather wanted to know what he did think about Fred Starratt. She ended by coming to an emphatic decision. She would not only go, but she would go that very afternoon. If there were any chance for her to prepare an easy road for Fred's advance it lay in speedy action.

When she finished dressing for the encounter and stood surveying herself in the long mirror set into the closet door of her bedroom she had to admit that she had missed none of her points. Most women at her age would have been sagging a bit, the cords of youth slackened by the weight of maternity or the continual pull against ill health and genteel poverty. Or they would have been smothered in the plump content of Mrs. Hilmer. Helen Starratt's slenderness had still a virginal quality and she knew every artifice that heightened this effect. To-day she was a trifle startled at quite the lengths she had gone to strike a note of sophisticated youth. She had long since ceased dressing consciously for her husband, and dressing for other women was more a matter of perfect detail than attempted beguilement. She was curious, she told herself, to see whether a man like Hilmer would be impressed by feminine artifice... Did a black silk gown, with spotless lace at wrist and throat, spell the acme of Hilmer's ideal of womanhood? Was woman to him something durable and utilitarian or did his fancy sometimes carry him to more decorative ideals?

She did not go directly to his office; instead, she dawdled a bit over the shop windows. Things were appallingly high, she noted with growing dismay, especially the evening gowns. On the shrugging, simpering French wax figures they were at once very scant and very vivid ... strung with beads and shot through with gold thread or spangled with flashing sequins. She tried to imagine Mrs. Hilmer in one of these gaudy confections. Almost any of them would have looked well on Helen herself. But any woman who went in for dressing at all would need a trunkload, she concluded, if one were to decently last out a season. She found herself speculating on just what class of people would invest in these hectic flesh coverings. Certainly not the enormously rich ... they didn't buy their provocative draperies from show windows. And even the comfortably off might pause, she thought, before throwing a couple of hundred dollars into a wisp of veiling that didn't reach much below the knees and would look like a weather-beaten cobweb after the second wearing. With all this talk about profiteering and economy and the high cost of living, even Helen Starratt had to admit that one could go without an evening gown at two hundred dollars. But, judging from the shoppers on the street, there didn't

seem to be many who intended to do without them. She began to wonder what her chances were for at least a spring tailor-made. She supposed now, with Fred going into business, she would be expected to make her old one do. Well, she decided she wouldn't make it do if she had to beg on the street corner. She'd had it a year and a half, and during war times that was quite all right. The best people had played frumpish parts then. But now everybody was perking up. As for an evening gown ... well, she simply couldn't conceive where even a hundred dollars would be available for one of these spangled harem veils that was passing muster as a full-grown dress... If she had possessed untold wealth, all this flimsiness, this stylistic froth, would have appealed to her; as it was, she was irritated by it. What were things coming to? she demanded. Just when you thought you were up to the minute, the styles changed overnight. It was the same with household furniture. Ten years ago, when she and Fred had set up housekeeping, everybody had exclaimed over her quaint bits of mahogany, her neutral window drapes, even at her wonderful porcelain gas range. Now, everything, from bed to dining-room table, was painted in dull colors pricked by gorgeous designs; the hangings at the windows screamed with color; electric stoves were coming in. The day of polished surfaces and shining brass was over--antiques were no longer the rage.

Her dissatisfaction finally drove her toward Hilmer's office. She stopped at one of the flower stands on Grant Avenue and bought a half dozen daffodils. She begrudged the price she had to give for them, but they did set off the dull raisin shade of her dress with a proper flare of color. She concluded she would play up the yellow note in her costuming oftener. Somehow it kindled her. She wondered for the first time in her life what gypsy strain had flooded her with such dark beauty. She stopped before a millinery shop and peered critically at her reflection in a window mirror. Yes, the yellow note was a good one, but she was still a trifle cold. If her lips had been a little fuller... Strange she had never thought about that before. Well, next time she would touch them ever so deftly into a suggestion of ripe opulence. She sauntered slowly down Post Street, turned into Montgomery. There were scarcely any women on the street and the men who passed were, for the most part, in preoccupied flight. Yet she saw more than one pair of eyes widen with brief appraisal as she went by. Hilmer's offices were in the Merchants' Exchange Building. Helen decided to slip in through the Montgomery Street entrance. She felt that there might be a chance of running into Fred on California Street and she didn't want to do that.

As she shot up toward the eleventh story in the elevator she rehearsed her opening scene with Hilmer. She decided to take her cue flippantly. She would banter him at first and gradually veer to more serious topics... But once she stood in his rather austere inner shrine of business, she decided against subterfuges. He had stepped into the main office, the boy who showed her in explained. Would she have a seat? She dropped into a chair, taking in her background with feminine swiftness. A barometer, a map, two stiffly painted pictures exhibiting as many sailing vessels in full flight, a calendar bearing the advertisement of a ship-chandlery firm--this was the extent of the wall decoration. The office furniture was golden oak, the rugs of indifferent neutrality. On his desk he had a picture of Mrs. Hilmer, taken in a bygone day, very plump and blond and youthful in a soft, tranquil way. And by its side, in a little ridiculously-blue glass vase, some spring wild flowers languished, pallidly white and withered

by the heat of captivity. She checked an impulse to rise when he came in. For a moment his virility had overwhelmed her into a feeling of deference, but she recovered herself sufficiently to droop nonchalantly into her seat as he gave her his hand. He was not in the least put out of countenance by her unexpected presence, and she felt a fleeting sense of disappointment, almost of pique.

"I suppose you're wondering why I'm here," she began, tritely.

He swung his swivel chair toward her and sat down. "Yes, naturally," he returned, with disconcerting candor.

She touched the petals of her daffodils with a pensive finger. "Well, really, you know, I'd quite made up my mind to pretend at first... Women never like to come directly to the point. I thought up a silly excuse--begging for an orphan asylum, to be exact. But I can see that wouldn't go here... And I don't believe you're the least bit interested in orphans."

"Why should I be?" he asked, bluntly.

She had a dozen arguments that might have won the ordinary man, but she knew it would take more than stock phrases to convince him, so she ignored the challenge. "You see, my husband has decided to go into business ... and ... well, I thought perhaps if you had any insurance ... a stray bit, don't you know, that isn't pledged or spoken for ... it would all be _so_ encouraging!"

He smoothed his cheek with an appraising gesture. Against the blond freshness of his skin his mangled thumb stood out vividly.

"Why doesn't your husband come to see me himself?"

She drew back a trifle, but her recovery was swift. "Oh, he intends to, naturally. I'm just preparing the way... Fred's a perfect dear and all that, but he is a little bit reserved about some things... It would be so much easier for him to ask a favor for some one else... Of course, he'd be perfectly furious if he knew that I had come here. But you understand, Mr. Hilmer, I want to do all I can... I'd make _any_ sacrifice for Fred."

She paused to give him a chance to put in a word, but he sat silent. It was plain that he didn't intend to help out her growing embarrassment.

"It's all come out of a clear sky," she went on, trailing the fringe of her beaded hand bag across her shoe tops. "He only told me last night... There isn't any use pretending ... he hasn't any capital to work on. And until the premiums begin to come in there'll be office rent and a stenographer's salary piling up ... and our living expenses in the bargain... A friend of his is putting up some money, but I can't imagine it's a whole lot... I'm a little bit upset about it, of course. I wish I could really do something to help him."

She knew from his look that he intended to hurl another disconcerting question at her.

"Well, if you want to help him, why don't you?" he quizzed.

"Why, I ... why, I'm not fit for anything, really," she tried to throw back.

"My wife said you were pretty efficient at the Red Cross."

"Oh, but that was different!"

"Why?"

"Well, I can't just explain, but it's easy to do something you ... you..."

"Feel you don't have to," he finished for her, ironically.

She shrugged petulantly. "What do you want me to do? Solicit insurance?"

He smiled. "That's what you're doing now, isn't it?"

"Mr. _Hilmer_!" She rose majestically in her seat.

He continued to sit, but she was conscious that his eyes were sweeping her from head to foot with frank appraisal.

"A pretty woman has a good chance to get by with almost anything she sets her mind on," he said, finally.

She drew in a barely perceptible breath. The blunt tip of his shoe was jammed squarely against her toe. She withdrew her foot, but she sat down again.

"I really ought to be angry with you, Mr. Hilmer," she purred at him, archly. "It's very nice of you to attempt to be so gallant, but, after all, talk _is_ pretty cheap, isn't it?... So far I don't seem to be making good as a solicitor. So what else is there left?"

"How about being your husband's stenographer?" he asked, without a trace of banter.

She forgot to be amazed. "I don't know anything about shorthand," she replied, simply.

"Well, you could soon learn to run a typewriter," he insisted. "I have a young woman in my office who takes my letters direct on the machine as I dictate them. She's as good as, if not better than, my chief stenographer. That would save your husband at least seventy-five dollars a month."

She had an impulse to rise and sweep haughtily out of the room. What right had this man to tell her what she could or could not do? The impudence of him! But she didn't want to appear absurd. She leaned back and looked at him through her half-closed eyelids as she said, with a slight drawl:

"Would my presence in the office be a bid for your support, Mr. Hilmer?"

"It might," he said, looking at her keenly.

She did not flinch, but his steady gaze cut her composure like a knife. She got to her feet again.

"What silly little flowers!" escaped her, as she took a step near his desk and pulled a faded blossom from the blue vase.

He left his seat and stood beside her. "I got them down by St. Francis Wood last Sunday," he admitted. "They reminded me of the early spring blossoms in the old country ... the sort that shoot up almost at the melting snow bank's edge... The flowers here are very gorgeous, but somehow they never seem as sweet."

She looked at him curiously, almost with the expectation of finding that he was jesting. This flowering of sentiment was unexpected. It had come, as he had described his native spring blooms, almost at the snow bank's edge. She reached out, gathered up the faded blossoms ruthlessly, and dropped them into a convenient waste basket.

"Do you mind?" she asked, lifting her eyes heavily.

He did not answer.

Slowly she unpinned the flaming daffodils from her side and slipped them into the empty vase. She stepped back to survey their sunlit brilliance, resting a gloved hand upon the chair she had deserted. She was conscious that another hand was bearing down heavily upon her slender fingers. The weight crushed and pained her, yet she felt no desire to withdraw...

The office boy came in. She moved forward quickly.

"There's a gentleman named Starratt waiting to see you," he announced.

She threw back her head defensively.

"This way!" Hilmer said, as he opened a private exit for her.

She found herself in the marble-flanked hallway and presently she gained the sun-flooded street. The blood was pounding at her temples and its throb hurt.

She walked home rapidly, swept by half-formulated impulses that stirred her to almost adolescent self-revelations, yet when she reached her apartment she was quite calm, almost too calm, and outwardly cold.

That night over the black coffee Fred Starratt said to his wife, with an air of restrained triumph:

"Well, I landed the insurance on Hilmer's car to-day."

She flashed him, an enigmatical smile. "Oh, lovely!"...

He sipped his coffee with preening satisfaction.

"Everything is going beautifully," he continued. "I hired an office and began to connect up with two or three firms. That preliminary from Hilmer was a great boost... A man named Kendrick handles all his business, so I've sort of got the street guessing. They can't figure

how I could even get a look in... Of course I'm convinced that Kendrick shares his commissions with Hilmer, which is against the rules of the Broker's Exchange. But he didn't ask for any shakedown... Brauer and I ordered some office furniture, and to-morrow I'll advertise for a girl."

"I've got one for you already," she said, deliberately.

"Who?"

She reached across the shallow length of the table and touched his arm significantly.

"I've decided to do it myself," she purred.

He patted her hand as an incredulous stare escaped him. "You!" he laughed.

She suffered his indulgent and mildly contemptuous caress. "Don't laugh, sonny," she drawled, almost disagreeably. "Your wife may prove a lot more clever than she seems."

CHAPTER V

After the first two weeks Fred Starratt's business venture went forward amazingly. His application for membership in the Insurance Broker's Exchange was rushed through by influential friends and he became, through this action, a full-fledged fire insurance broker. He did not need this formality, however, to qualify him as a solicitor in other insurance lines. There was a long list of free lances, where the only seal of approval was an ability to get the business. Automobile liability, personal accident, marine, life--underwriters representing such insurances shared commissions with any and all who had a reasonable claim to prospective success. Therefore, while he was waiting for his final confirmation from fire-insurance circles he took a flyer at these more liberal forms. There seemed no end to this miscellaneous business which, he came to the conclusion, could be had almost for the asking. And all the time he had fancied that the field was overworked! He mentioned this one day to a seasoned veteran in the brokerage world.

"Writing up policies is one thing," this friend had assured him, emphatically; "collecting the premiums is another matter... If your fire-insurance premiums aren't paid up inside of two months, the policies are canceled. But they let the others drag on until the cows come home. There's nothing so intangible in this world as insurance. And people hate to pay for intangibilities."

Starratt refused to be forewarned. The people he went after were personal friends or guilt-edged business men. _They_ wouldn't deny their obligations when the premiums fell due.

But the greatest rallying point for his business enthusiasm proved to be Hilmer. It seemed that scarcely a day went by that Hilmer did not drop a new piece of business Fred's way. Returning to the office at

four o'clock on almost any afternoon, he grew to feel almost sure that he would find Hilmer there, bending over Helen's shoulder as he pointed out some vital point in the contract they were both examining. He was a trifle uneasy at first--dreading the day when Hilmer would approach him on the matter of sharing commissions. It was a generally assumed fact that Kendrick, the man who handled practically all of Hilmer's business, was a notorious rebater--that he divided commissions with his clients in the face of his sworn agreement with the Broker's Exchange not to indulge in such a practice. Obviously, then, Hilmer would not be a man to throw away chances to turn such an easy trick.

Starratt voiced these fears to Brauer.

"Sure he expects a rake-off," Starratt's silent partner had said. "Everybody gets it ... if they've got business enough to make it worth while."

"Well, he won't get it from me," Fred returned, decisively. "I've signed my name to an agreement and that agreement will stick if I starve doing it!"

Brauer, disconcerted by his friend's vehemence, merely had shrugged, but at another time he said, craftily:

"If Hilmer wants to break even on the fire business he gives us, why can't we make it up some other way?... There's nothing against giving him all the commissions on that automobile liability policy we placed the other day. We can do what we please with that profit."

Starratt flushed. "Can't you see, Brauer, that the principle is the same?"

"Principle! Oh, shoot!... We're out to make money, not to reform business methods."

Starratt made no further reply, but Brauer's attitude rankled. He began to wish that he hadn't allowed Brauer to go in on his venture. 'But it had taken money ... more than he had imagined. They had to put a good deposit down on the office furniture, and the rent was, of course, payable in advance. Then came the fee for joining the Broker's Exchange, and he had to borrow money for his personal expenses in the face of his diminished salary check from Ford, Wetherbee & Co. He realized, too, that the difficulties would scarcely decrease, even in the face of brisk business. The office furnishings would one day have to be met in full, the typewriting machine paid for, the stationery and printing bills settled. During all this time he and Helen would have to live and keep up a decent, not to say prosperous, appearance. Yes, even with Helen saving the price of a stenographer, the problem would not be easy. A day would come finally when he would feel compelled to provide Helen with a fair salary. A man couldn't expect even his own wife to go on pounding a typewriting machine for nothing. What he really hoped was that when things began to run smoothly Helen would retire... He had heard her in the old days voice her scorn of the married woman who went out to earn a salary.

"I wouldn't marry a man who couldn't support me!" she used to blaze.

As a matter of fact, he had felt the same way about it--he felt that

way still. It hurt him to think that Helen should be wearing the badge of his inefficiency. And then, deep down, he had a masculine distaste for sharing his workday world with a woman. He liked to preserve the mystery of those hours spent in the fight for existence, because he knew instinctively that battle grounds lost their glamour at close range. His Californian inheritance had fostered the mining-camp attitude toward females--they were one of two things: men's moral equals or men's moral superiors. It was well enough to meet an equal on common ground, but one felt in duty bound to enshrine a superior being in reasonable seclusion.

At first he had been doubtful of Helen's ability to adapt herself to such a radical change. Her performance soon set his mind at rest on that score, but he still could not recover quite from the surprise of her unexpected decision. Indifference, amazement, opposition--nothing seemed able to sway her from her purpose. In the end he had been too touched by her attitude to put his foot down firmly against the move... She got on well with Hilmer, too, he noticed. Usually at the end of one of these late afternoon conferences with their chief patron Fred and Hilmer ended up by shaking for an early evening cocktail at Collins & Wheeland's, just around the corner. Hilmer always saw to it that Fred returned to the office with something for Helen--a handful of ginger-snaps from the free-lunch counter, a ham sandwich, or a paper of ripe olives. Once he stopped in a candy shop on Leidesdorff Street and bought two ice-cream cornucopias. Fred used to shake a puzzled head as he deposited these gastronomic trifles upon Helen's desk as he said:

"I don't get this man Hilmer... One minute he insults you and the next minute he's as considerate as a canteen worker... What's he throwing business my way for?"

Helen, munching a gingersnap, would go on with her laborious typewriting, and return:

"Why look a gift horse in the mouth, Freddie?... Women aren't the only riddles in the world."

"I think he comes to see you," he used to throw out in obvious jest. "That's the only way I can figure it."

"He's like every man ... he wants an audience... I guess Mother Hilmer is tired of hearing him rave."

And so the banter would go on until Fred would pull up with a round turn, realizing quite suddenly that he was talking to his wife and not just to his stenographer.

"He'll be at me one of these days on that commission question, you mark my words," he would venture.

"And what are you going to do?"

"Why, refuse, of course, and lose the business."

"Well, don't cross the bridge till you come to it."

She puzzled him more and more. She seemed disturbed at nothing, and yet she glowed with a leashed restlessness that he could not define.

"It's the strain," he would conclude. "She's putting more into this venture of mine than she's willing to admit... After all, women are amazing... They pull and cling at you and drag you back ... and then, all of a sudden, they take the bit in their teeth and you can't hold them in... Who would have thought that Helen..."

And here he would halt, overcome with the soft wonder of it.

Business began to pour in from Brauer and, frankly, Fred was disturbed. He wasn't sure of Brauer's business scruples.

"I wonder if he's promising these people rebates," he said to Helen one day, following an avalanche of new risks.

"Well, you'll know soon enough when he begins to collect the premiums," she replied, indifferently.

"But I don't want to wait until then... They tell me this man Kendrick is getting awfully sore at losing so much of Hilmer's business. He'd like nothing better than to hop on to some irregularity in my methods and get me fired from the Exchange... It takes a thief to catch one, you know."

"Oh, why worry?" Helen almost snapped at him. "If Brauer gets us into a mess we can always throw him out."

Starratt's eyes widened. Where did Helen get this ruthless philosophy? Had it always lain dormant in her, or was this business life already putting a ragged edge upon her finer perceptions? But he made no answer. He had never admitted to Helen that Brauer had insisted upon drawing up a hard-and-fast partnership agreement, and taking his note for half of the money advanced in the bargain. It was one of the business secrets which he decided he would not share with anybody--he had a childish wish to preserve some mystery in connection with his venture against the soft and dubious encroachments of his wife.

"Anyway," Helen went on, "as soon as we get running smoothly we can split. No doubt _he'll_ want to pull out when he sees that he can get along without us... Just now he isn't taking any chances. He's holding down his own job and letting us do all the work and the worrying... Oh, he's German, all right, from the ground up."

Fred had often shared this same hope, although he had never voiced it. When the time came, no doubt Brauer would eliminate himself--for a consideration--and set up his own office. But it amazed him to find how swiftly and completely Helen had figured all these things out. Had her mind always worked so coldly and logically under her rather indifferent surface? He still wondered, too, at her efficiency. Was this a product of her social service with the Red Cross during war times?... Being a man, he couldn't concede that a proper domestic training was a pretty good schooling in any direction. He didn't see any relationship between a perfectly baked apple pie and a neatly kept cash book. He had expected his wife to fall down on the mechanical aspects of typewriting, but he forgot that she had been running a sewing machine since she was fifteen years old. And even in his wife's early childhood people were still using lamps for soft effects and intensive reading. Any woman who knew the art of keeping a kerosene lamp in shape must of necessity find the oiling and cleaning of a

typewriting machine mere child's play. He didn't realize the affinities of training. It would never have occurred to him to fancy that because he kept his office desk in perfect order he was qualified to do the same thing with a kitchen stove, or that the method he had acquired as office boy, copying letters in the letterpress, would have stood him in good stead if he suddenly had been called upon to make up his own bed. What he did realize was that the leveling process which goes hand in hand with the mingling of sexes in a workday world was setting in. And he resented it. He wanted to coddle illusion ... he had no wish for a world practical to the point of bleakness.

One afternoon Hilmer came in at the usual time with a handful of memoranda. It was a violently rainy day--an early March day, to be exact--the sort that refused to be softened even by the beguilements of California. The rain wind, generally warm and humid, had been chilled in its flight over the snow-piled Sierras, and it had pelted down in a wintry flood, banking up piles of stinging hail between warmer showerings. Fred had decided to forgo his soliciting and stay indoors instead. Hilmer greeted him with biting raillery.

"Well, I should think this was a good day to bag a prospective customer," he flung out as he laid his umbrella aside. "Or is business swamping you?"

Fred tossed back a trite rejoinder. Helen went on pounding her machine ... she did not even lift her eyes.

"I've got something for you to-day," Hilmer went on, as he unbound the bundle of papers and sat down beside Fred.

Starratt saw the edge of a blue print in Hilmer's hand. This spelled all manner of possibilities, but he checked a surge of illogical hope. "That's fine," he answered, heartily. "But why didn't you send for me? I could have come over. It's bad enough to take your business without letting you bring it in on a day like this..."

Hilmer made a contemptuous gesture. "Wind and weather never made any difference to me... I've traveled twenty miles in a blizzard to court a girl."

"Oh, when a woman's involved, that's different," Fred laughed back. "There's nothing as alluring here."

"Well, Mrs. Starratt, what do you say?" Hilmer called out to her. "Your husband doesn't seem to count you in at all."

Helen was erasing a misspelled word. "Married women are used to that," she retorted, flippantly. "Sometimes it's just as well that they overlook us. We get a chance to play our own hand once in a while."

Everybody laughed, including Fred, but the effort hurt him. There was a suggestion of unpleasant mockery in Helen's tone. She seemed to be hiding her contempt behind a thin veil of acrid humor. And somehow this revelation in the presence of Hilmer stung him.

"I'll bet you can't guess what I've got here," Hilmer began again, tapping the bundle of papers with his ringer.

Starratt shook his head and Hilmer tossed him the blue print.

"Not the insurance on your shipbuilding plant?" escaped Fred, incredulously.

Hilmer crossed his legs and settled back in his chair.

"You said it!" he announced. "And it's all going to you after we've settled one question... I've been bringing you in little odds and ends as I've had them ... not enough to matter much one way or another ... so I haven't bothered to really get down and talk business. This is a half-million-dollar line and a little bit different. It means about fifteen thousand dollars in premiums, to be exact. You can figure what your commission will be at fifteen per cent, to say nothing of how solid this will make you with the street... Later on there 'll be workmen's compensation, boiler insurance, public liability. It's a pretty nice little plum, if I do say so."

Helen stopped her typing. Fred could feel his lips drying with mingled anticipation and apprehension. He knew just what demand Hilmer intended making.

"The question is," Hilmer continued, "how much of the commission are you going to split up with me?"

Fred shrugged. "You know the rules of the Broker's Exchange as well as I do, Hilmer. I've pledged myself not to do any rebating."

Hilmer did not betray the slightest surprise at Starratt's reply. Evidently he had heard something of the same argument before.

"Everybody does it," was his calmly brief rejoinder.

"You mean Kendrick, to be exact... I'm sorry, but I don't see it that way."

"Do you mean that you would rather pass up a half-million-dollar line than share the spoils?"

"It isn't a question of choice, Hilmer. You must know I don't want to lose five cents' worth of business. But there are some things a gentleman doesn't do."

He was sorry once the last remark had escaped him, but Hilmer didn't seem disconcerted by the covert inference.

"Scruples are like laws," Hilmer returned, affably. "I never saw one yet that couldn't be gotten round legitimately."

"Oh yes, you can subscribe to any one of the Ten Commandments with your fingers crossed, if you like that kind of a game. But I don't."

Hilmer moved in his seat with an implication of leave-taking. "Well, every man to his own taste," he said, as he reached for the blue print and proceeded to fold it up.

Starratt leaned toward him. His attitude was strangely earnest.

"Do you really like to participate in a game you know to be unfair, Hilmer?--dishonest, in fact?"

"Participating? I haven't signed any Broker's Exchange agreement. I'm not breaking any pledge when I accept a share of insurance commission. That's up to the other fellow."

"Ah, but you know that he is breaking faith... And a man that will double cross his associates will double cross you if the opportunity presents itself... Would you put a man in charge of your cash drawer when you knew that he had looted some one else's safe?"

"That's not the same thing," Hilmer sneered. "That is, it's only the same in theory. Practically, an insurance broker couldn't double cross me if he wanted to... I wouldn't put a thief in charge of my cash drawer, but I might make him a night watchman. He'd know all the tricks of the trade."

"Including the secret entrances that those on the outside wouldn't know... A crook wouldn't stay all his life on the night-watchman's job, believe me."

He noticed that Helen was regarding him keenly and her glance registered indulgent surprise rather than disapproval. Hilmer, too, had grown a bit more tolerant. He felt a measure of pride in the realization that he could make his points so calmly and dispassionately, putting this rough-hewn man before him on the defensive. But Hilmer's wavering was only momentary; he was not a man to waste time in argument when he discovered that such a weapon was futile.

"Then I understand you don't want the business?"

"Not on those terms."

Hilmer shrugged.

Helen leaned forward and put out a hand. "Let's see!" she half commanded.

Hilmer gave her the blue print and the package of memoranda. She began to unfold one of the insurance forms, bending over it curiously. Fred was puzzled. He knew that Helen was too unacquainted with insurance matters to have any knowledge of the printed schedule she was studying, yet he had to concede that she was giving a splendid imitation of an experienced hand. Her acting annoyed him. He turned toward Hilmer with an indifferent comment on the weather and the talk veered to inconsequential subjects. Helen continued her scrutiny of the forms.

Finally Hilmer rose to go. Helen made no move to return the memoranda. Fred cleared his throat and even coughed significantly, but Helen was oblivious. Presently Starratt went up to his wife and said, deliberately:

"Hilmer is going ... you better give him back his papers."

She turned a glance of startled innocence upon them both. "Oh!" she exclaimed, petulantly. "How disappointing...and just as I was becoming interested... Why don't you men go have your usual drink? I'll be through with them then."

Hilmer gave a silent assent and Fred followed him. There didn't seem to be anything else to do. On the way out they met Hilmer's office boy in the corridor. Hilmer was wanted on a matter of importance at the office. He waved a brief farewell to Fred and left.

Fred went back to his wife. She had abandoned the forms and was lolling in her chair, sucking at an orange.

"Hilmer's been called suddenly to his office on business," he said, brusquely. She turned and faced him. "You'd better put those papers in the safe. I'll take them back myself to-morrow. I can't see what possessed you to insist on looking them over, anyway."

She squeezed the orange in her hand. "Well, when we get ready to handle the business I want to know something about it."

He stared. "Handle the business? You heard what I said, didn't you?"

"Yes, I heard," she said, wearily, and she went on with her orange.

He did not say anything further, but the next morning a telephone message put to rout his resolve to return Hilmer's insurance forms in person.

"I've got to go up Market Street to see a man about some workmen's compensation," he explained to Helen. "You'd better put on your hat and take those things to Hilmer yourself."

She did not answer...

He returned at three o'clock. Helen was very busy pounding away at the typewriter.

"Well, what's all the rush?" he asked.

"I'm getting out the forms on Hilmer's shipping plant," she returned, nonchalantly.

"What do you mean?... Didn't you..."

"No ... he's decided to let us handle the business."

"Why ... on what grounds?"

She waved a bit of carbon paper in the air. "How should I know? I didn't ask him!"

Her contemptuous indifference irritated him. "You ought to have waited until I got back... You've probably got everything mixed up... It takes experience to map out a big schedule like that."

"Hilmer showed me what to do," she retorted, calmly.

"Then he's been over here?"

"Yes ... all morning."

He narrowed his eyes. She went on with her typewriting.

"Well, I'll be damned!" escaped him.

His wife replied with a tripping laugh.

At that moment Brauer came in. "I hear you've got the Hilmer line," he broke out, excitedly. "They say Kendrick is wild... How much did you have to split?"

"Nothing," Starratt said, coldly.

"Nothing?" Brauer's gaze swept from Starratt to Helen and back again. "How did you land it, then?"

Helen stood up, thrusting a pencil into her hair.

"I landed it, Mr. Brauer," she said, sweetly, tossing her husband a commiserating smile.

Brauer's thin lips parted unpleasantly. "I told you at the start, Starratt, that a good stenographer would work wonders."

Fred forced a sickly laugh. He wished that Helen Starratt had stayed at home where she belonged.

It had been a long time since the insurance world on California Street had been given such a chance for gossip as the shifting of the Hilmer insurance provided. Naturally, business changes took place every day, but it was unusual to have such a rank beginner at the brokerage game put over so neat a trick. Speculation was rife. Some said that Hilmer was backing the entire Starratt venture, that he, in fact, was Starratt & Co., with Fred merely a salaried man, allowing his name to be used. Others conceded a partnership arrangement. But Kendrick announced in a loud tone up and down the street:

"Partnership nothing! I know Hilmer. He's got too many irons in the fire now. He wouldn't be annoyed with the insurance game. This fellow Starratt is rebating--that's what he is!"

Of course the street laughed. Kendrick's indignation was quite too comic, considering his own reputation. To this argument, those who held to the proprietor and partnership theories replied:

"That may all be, but he wastes an awful lot of time in Starratt's office for a fellow who's so rushed with his other ventures."

It was at this point that a few people raised their eyebrows significantly as they said:

"Well, the old boy always did have a pretty keen eye for a skirt."

It was impossible for Fred Starratt to move anywhere without hearing fragments of all this gossip. During the noon hour particularly it filtered through the midday tattle of business, pleasure, and obscenity--at the Market, at Collins & Wheeland's, at Hjul's coffee house, at Grover's Lunchroom--everywhere that clerks forgathered to appease their hunger and indulge in idle speculations. Sometimes he got these things indirectly through chance slips in talks with his friends, again scraps of overheard conversation reached his ears.

Quite frequently a frank or a coarse acquaintance, without embarrassment or reserve, would tell him what had been said. He soon got over protesting. If he convinced anybody that he was getting Hilmer's business without financial concessions, he had to take the nasty alternative which the smirks of his audience betrayed... It would not have been so bad if he could have explained the situation to himself, but any attempt to solve the riddle moved in a vicious circle. He used to long for a simplicity that would make him accept Hilmer's favors on their face value. Why couldn't one believe in friendship and disinterestedness? Perhaps it would have been easier if he had lacked any knowledge of Hilmer's philosophy of life. Starratt couldn't remember anything in the recital of Hilmer's past performance or his present attitude that dovetailed with benevolence... He retreated, baffled from these speculative tilts, to the refuge of a comforting conviction that fortunately no man was thoroughly consistent. Perhaps therein lay the secret of Hilmer's puzzling prodigality--because, boiled down to hard facts, it was apparent that Hilmer was making Starratt & Co. a present of several hundred dollars a year. Sometimes, in a wild flight of conjecture, he used to wonder how far his argument with Hilmer regarding the ethics of being a negative party to another man's dishonesty had been borne home? It seemed almost too fantastic to fancy that he could have put over his rather finely spun business morality in such a brief flash, if at all.

At first he had plunged in too speedily to his venture to formulate many ideals of business conduct, but as he had progressed he found his standards springing to life full grown.

He had been long enough in the insurance business to realize the estimate that average clients had of an insurance broker--they looked upon him as a struggling friend or a poor relation or an agreeable, persuasive grafter, whose only work consisted in talking them into indifferent acceptance of an insurance policy and then pestering them into a reluctant payment of the premium. Of course big business firms recognized a broker's expertness or lack of it, though, quite frequently, as in Hilmer's case, they were more snared by a share in the profits than by the claims of efficiency. But Starratt wanted to succeed merely on his merit. He wanted to teach people to say of him:

"I go to Fred Starratt because he's the keenest, the most reliable man in the field. And for no other reason."

In short, he wished to earn his commission, and not to share it. He wanted to prove to people that an insurance broker was neither a barbered mendicant nor a genial incompetent. Had he known that a conviction of his ability lay at the bottom of Hilmer's sudden change in business tactics he would have been content. As it was, in spite of the impetus this sudden push gave his career he had moments when he would have felt happier without such dubious patronage. As a matter of fact, Hilmer rather ignored him. He brought in his business usually during Fred's absence from the office, and Helen, under his guidance, had everything ready before her husband had time to suggest any line of action. Forms, apportionments, applications--there did not seem to be a detail that Hilmer had overlooked or Helen had failed to execute. Starratt tried not to appear irritated. He didn't like to admit even to himself that he could be small enough to resent his wife's curious efficiency. But he wished she weren't there. One day he said to her, as inconsequentially as he could:

"I really think, my dear, that I ought to be planning to get a woman here in your place... Now that Hilmer's business is reasonably assured, I can afford it... It's too much to ask of you--keeping up your house and doing this, too."

"Well," she shrugged, "we can board if it gets too much for me."

"You know I detest boarding."

"I can hire help, then. Mrs. Finn would come in by the day. But, as a matter of fact, this isn't any more strenuous than my year of the Red Cross work. I managed then; I guess I can manage now."

"But I thought you didn't like business life."

"I'm not crazy about it ... but I want to get you started right. Suppose you got a girl in here who didn't know how to manage Hilmer?"

He checked the retort that rose to his lips... He couldn't help getting the nasty inferences that people on the street threw at him unconsciously or maliciously, but he could help voicing them or admitting them even to himself.

"Is ... is Hilmer so hard to manage?" he found himself inquiring.

Helen looked up sharply. "No harder than most men," she answered, slipping easily from the traces of his cross-examination.

His rancor outran his reserve. "I guess I'm vain," he threw out bitterly, "but I'd like to feel that I could land one piece of business without anybody's help."

She laughed indulgently. "Why, Freddie, that isn't nice! You landed Hilmer at the start... Don't you remember that very first line? On his automobile?"

There was something insincere in her tone, in the lift of her eyes, in her cryptic smile. But he smothered such unworthy promptings. It was fresh proof of his own unreasonable conceit. He turned away from his wife in silence, but he was sure that his face betrayed his feelings.

Presently he felt her standing very close to him. He turned about sharply, almost in irritation. Her mouth was raised temptingly. He bent over and kissed her, but he withdrew as swiftly. Her lips left a bitter taste that he could not define.

CHAPTER VI

March passed in a blur of wind and cold, penetrating rains. Except for the placing of the insurance on the Hilmer shipbuilding plant, business was dull. Fred began to make moves toward getting in money. But it was heartbreaking work. The people who had yielded up their consent so smilingly to Fred for personal accident policies, or automobile insurance, passed him furtively on the street or sent word out to him when he called at their offices that they were busy or

broke or leaving town. He did not attempt to do much toward collecting the fire-insurance premiums. Most people with fire policies knew their rights and stood by them. The premiums on March business were not due until the end of May and it was useless to make the rounds much before the middle of that month.

The whisperings on the street continued, and a few surly growls from Kendrick reached Fred's ears. One day a close friend of Fred, who knew something of Insurance Exchange matters, said to him:

"There's something going on inside, but I can't quite get the dope... I hope you're not giving Kendrick the chance to have you called for rebating... He's an ugly customer when he gets in action."

Fred was annoyed. "I've told you again and again," he retorted, "that I'm not yielding a cent on the Hilmer business."

"It isn't that," was the reply. "Kendrick knows better than to stir up a situation he's helped to befoul himself... No, it's another matter."

Fred shrugged and changed the subject, but his thoughts flew at once to Brauer. He decided not to say anything to his partner until he made a move toward investigating, himself.

The next morning he took a half dozen names of Brauer's customers at random from the ledger and he made out bills for their premiums. Practically all of Brauer's business was fire insurance, so Fred had typical cases for his test. The first man he called on produced a receipt from Brauer for the premium paid on the very day the policy was issued. The second man protested that he had paid Brauer only the day before. The third man stated brusquely that he had placed his business through Brauer and he was the man he intended to settle with. The fourth was noncommittal, but it was the fifth client who produced the straw that betrayed the direction of the wind.

"I want to see Brauer," the man said. "He promised to do something for me."

The sixth customer was even more direct.

"There's something to come off the premium," he said. "Brauer knows."

Fred did not wait for Brauer to come into the office—he went and took him to lunch instead, where he could prod him away from Helen's sight and hearing.

"I'm surprised at you, Brauer," Starratt broke out suddenly, once they were seated at Grover's and had given the girl their order.

"Over what?" Brauer's face clouded craftily.

"Why do you go about collecting premiums and holding them back from the office?... That isn't sound business tactics."

Brauer's sharp teeth glistened savagely in spite of his weak and bloodless mouth. "What have you been doing ... bothering my people? I'll trouble you to let me attend to my own clients in future. Those premiums aren't due for a good six weeks yet. When they are I'll turn them in."

Fred cooled a little in the face of Brauer's vehemence. "Oh, come now, what's the use of talking like that? I'm not intending to bother your customers, but there are some things due me... My name is on every one of those policies. Therefore I ought to know when they are paid and anything else about the business that concerns me. You know as well as I do what is reasonable and just. Suppose you were taken ill. It doesn't look right for a firm to go about making attempts to collect premiums that have been paid."

"Well ... you're pretty previous, Starratt, dogging folks in March for money that isn't due until May," Brauer grumbled back. "What's the idea, anyway?"

Starratt leaned forward. "Just this, Brauer. I heard some ugly gossip yesterday, and I wanted to find out if it had any justification. It seems Kendrick is after us. He's going to try and get us on a rebating charge. I saw six of your people ... and I'm reasonably sure that two out of that six have been promised a rake-off... Do you call that fair to me?"

"That's a lie!" Brauer broke out, too emphatically.

"I doubt it!" Starratt replied, coldly. "But that's neither here nor there. What's done is done. But I don't want any more of it. I'm playing a square game. I was ready to throw Hilmer overboard rather than compromise, and I'll--"

"Do the same thing to me, I suppose!" Brauer challenged.

Fred looked at him steadily. "Precisely," he answered.

The waitress arrived with their orders and Starratt changed the subject... Brauer recovered his civility, but hardly his good temper. At the close of the meal they parted politely. Fred could see that Brauer was bursting with spite. For himself, he decided then and there to eliminate Brauer at the first opportunity.

A few days later Brauer came into the office with an order to place a workmen's compensation policy. It covered the entire force of a canning concern, and the premium was based upon a large pay roll.

"I've had to split the commission with them," Brauer announced, defiantly. "That's legitimate enough with this sort of business, isn't it?"

Starratt nodded. "It's done, but I'm not keen for it. However, there isn't any law against it."

The policy was made out and delivered to Brauer, and almost immediately he came back with a check for the premium. "They paid me at once," he exulted.

Starratt refused to express any enthusiasm. Brauer sat down at a desk and drew out his check book. "I guess I might as well settle up for the other premiums I've collected," he said, "while I'm about it."

He made out a long list of fire premiums and drew his check for their full amount, plus the workmen's compensation premium in his

possession. But he took 5 per cent off the latter item.

Starratt made no comment. But he was willing to stake his life that the check from the canning company to Brauer was for a full premium without any 5-per-cent reduction, and that Brauer, himself, was withholding this alleged rebate and applying it to making up the deficits on the fire premiums he had discounted.

The next day Fred's friend said again: "Kendrick's doing some gum-shoe work, Starratt... You'd better go awful slow."

With the coming of May other anxieties claimed Starratt's attention. Bills that he had forgotten or neglected began to pour in. There was his tailor bill, long overdue, and two accounts with dry-goods stores that Helen had run up in the days when the certainty of a fixed salary income had seemed sure. A dentist bill for work done in December made its appearance and, of course, the usual household expenditures went merrily on. The rent of their apartment was raised. Collections were slow. In March the commissions on collected premiums had just about paid the office rent and the telephone... April showed up better, but May, of course, held great promise. At the end of May the Hilmer premiums would be due and the firm of Starratt & Co. on its feet, with over two thousand dollars in commissions actually in hand. On the strength of these prospects Helen began to order a new outfit. Fred Starratt did not have the heart to complain. Helen had earned every stitch of clothing that she was buying--there was no doubt about that; still, he would have liked to be less hasty in her expenditures. He had been too long in business to count much on prospects. He disliked borrowing more money from Brauer, but there was no alternative. Brauer fell to grumbling quite audibly over these advances, and he saw to it that Fred's notes for the amounts always were forthcoming. Hilmer did not come in quite so often to the office; a rush of shipbuilding construction took him over to his yards in Oakland nearly every day. But Mrs. Hilmer was in evidence a good deal. Helen was constantly calling her up and asking her to drop downtown for luncheon or for a bit of noonday shopping uptown or just for a talk.

"She's a dear!" Helen used to say to Fred. "And I just love her to death..."

Fred could not fathom Helen. A year ago he felt sure that Mrs. Hilmer was the last woman in the world that Helen would have found bearable, much less attractive... He concluded that Helen was enjoying the novelty of watching Mrs. Hilmer nibble at a discreet feminine frivolity to which she was unaccustomed. After a while he looked for outward changes in Mrs. Hilmer's make-up. He figured that the shopping tours with Helen might be reflected in a sprightlier bonnet or a narrower skirt or a higher heel on her shoe. But no such transformation took place. Indeed, her costuming seemed to grow more and more uncompromising--more Dutch, to use the time-worn phrase, made significant to Fred Starratt by his mother. But Helen always made a point to compliment her on her appearance.

"You look too sweet for anything!" Helen would exclaim, rushing upon her new friend with an eager kiss.

At this Mrs. Hilmer always dimpled with wholesome pleasure. Well, she did look sweet, in a motherly, bovine way, Fred admitted, when the note of insincerity in his wife's voice jarred him.

One day Mrs. Hilmer brought down a hat the two had picked out and which had been altered at Helen's suggestion. She tried it on for Helen's approval, and Fred stood back in a corner while Helen went into ecstasies over it. Even a man could not escape the fact that it was unbecoming. Somehow, in a subtle way, it seemed to accent all of Mrs. Hilmer's unprepossessing features. When she left the office Fred said to Helen, casually:

"I don't think much of your taste, old girl. That hat was awful!"

Helen laughed maliciously. "Of course it was!" she flung back.

Starratt shrugged and said no more. There was kindness back of many deceits, but he knew now that Helen's insincerities with Mrs. Hilmer were not justified by even so dubious virtue.

At the moment when the Hilmer shipyard insurance had been turned over to Fred Starratt he had at once made a move toward a reduction in the rate. Having gone over the schedule at the Board of Fire Underwriters, he had discovered that they had failed to give Hilmer credit in the rating for certain fire protection. On the strength of Starratt's application for a change a new rate was published about the middle of May. Starratt was jubilant. Here was proof for Hilmer that his interests were being guarded and that it paid to employ an efficient broker. He flew at once to Hilmer's office.

"Let me have your policies," he burst out.

"I've secured a new rate for you and I want the reduction indorsed."

Hilmer did not appear to be moved by the announcement.

"Better cancel and rewrite the bunch," he replied, briefly.

Fred gasped. This meant that only about a sixth of the premium on the present policies would be due and payable at the end of the month and the prospects of a big clean-up on commissions delayed until July.

"Oh, that won't be necessary," he tried to say, calmly. "This reduction applies from the original date of the policies. It's just as if they had been written up at the new rate."

Hilmer ripped open a letter that he had been toying with. "Better cancel," he announced, dryly. "It's a good excuse, and I'm a little pressed for money. It will delay a big expenditure."

There was no room for further argument. Fred left, crestfallen. Was Hilmer making sport of him, he wondered. He must wait then until July for an easy financial road. And would July see him? out of the woods? Suppose Hilmer were to conjure up another excuse for canceling and reissuing just as the second batch of premiums fell due?

He voiced his fears and anxieties to Helen. She shrugged indifferently.

"You told me when you went into business that you weren't counting on Hilmer," she observed, with a suggestion of a sneer.

So he had thought or, at least, so he had pretended. What colossal

braveries he had assumed in his attempts to play a swaggering role! He had started in with the determination to set a new standard in the insurance world. _He_ was going to show people that a young man could begin with nothing but honesty and merit and walk away with the biggest kind of business. He knew that his hands were clean, but he realized that not one in ten believed it. He had to confess that appearances were against him. Scarcely anyone believed the Hilmer myth. And underneath the surface was Brauer. Fred felt sure that Brauer's ethical lapses were still in progress. At intervals Brauer always contrived to place an insurance line other than fire and insist that he was compelled to grant a discount. These premiums were always settled promptly and, in their wake, a list of fire premiums paid in full were turned in by Brauer. It was plain that Peter was being robbed to pay Paul. Starratt even grew to fancy that there was a substantial balance left over from these alleged discounts to clients, which Brauer pocketed himself. But he had to smile and pretend that he did not suspect. Were his hands clean, after all? Well, just as soon as it was possible he intended to rid himself of Brauer. But how soon _would_ that be possible? And meanwhile Kendrick was sniffing out disquieting odors.

He rallied from his first depression with a tight-lipped determination. He was not trying out a business venture so much as he was trying out himself. Previously he had always figured success and failure as his performance reacted on his audience. He was learning that one could impress a stupendous crowd and really fail, or strut upon the boards of an empty playhouse and still succeed. He began to realize just what was meant by the term self-esteem--how hard and uncompromising and exacting it was. To disappoint another was a humiliation; to disappoint oneself was a tragedy. And the tragedy became deep in proportion to the ability to be self-searching. There were moments when he closed his eyes to self-analysis...when it seemed better to press on without disturbing glimpses either backward or forward. He was eager to gain an economic foothold first--there would be time later for recapitulations and readjustments to his widening vision.

The two months following were rough and uneven. He had to borrow continually from Brauer, meet Hilmer with a bland smile, suffer the covert sarcasms of his wife. Some money came in, but it barely kept things moving. His broker friend had been right--the payment of any premiums but fire premiums dragged on "till the cows came home." Many of the policies that had seemed so easy to write up came back for total cancellation. This man had buried a father, another had married a wife, a third had bought a piece of ground--the excuses were all valid, and they came from friends, so there was nothing to do but smile and assure them that it didn't matter.

But somehow Starratt weathered the storm and the day came when the Hilmer insurance fell due. Fred found Hilmer absent from his desk, but the cashier received him blandly. Yes, they were ready to pay, in fact the check was drawn and only awaited Hilmer's signature. To-morrow, at the latest, it would be forthcoming. Fred drew a long sigh of relief. He went back to his office whistling.

In the hallway he met Brauer.

"I want to have a talk with you," Brauer began, almost apologetically.

Fred waved him in and Brauer came direct to the point. He was dissatisfied with the present arrangement and he was ready to pull out if Fred were in a position to square things. His demands were extraordinarily fair--he asked to have the notes for any advances met, plus 50 per cent of the profit on any business he had turned in. He claimed no share of the profits on Fred's business.

"I suppose you've collected the Hilmer premiums," he threw out, significantly.

Fred nodded and began a rapid calculation. It turned out that he had borrowed about \$500 from his partner and that 50 per cent of the commissions on the Brauer business came to a scant \$125. Well, his profits on the Hilmer insurance would be in the neighborhood of \$1,900 under the new rate. To-morrow he would be in possession of this sum. It was too easy! He drew out his check book, deciding to close the deal before Brauer had a chance to change his mind. Brauer received the check with a bland smile and surrendered the notes and the partnership agreement.

At the door they shook hands heartily. Brauer said at parting:

"Well, good luck, old man... I hope you aren't sore."

Fred tried to suppress his delight. "Oh no, nothing like that! If it _had_ to come I'm glad to see everything end pleasantly."

And as Brauer drifted down the hall Starratt called out, suddenly:

"I say, Brauer, don't put that check through the bank until day after to-morrow, will you?"

Brauer nodded a swift acquiescence and disappeared into a waiting elevator.

Fred retreated to his desk. "Well," he said to Helen, as he let out a deep sigh, "that's what I call easy!"

She looked up from her work. "Almost too easy," she answered. He made no reply and presently she said: "You didn't tell me how tightly you let him sew us up. With signed notes and that agreement he could have been nasty... It's strange he didn't wait a day or two and then claim half of the Hilmer commissions... I wonder why he was in such a rush?"

Fred shrugged. Helen's shrewdness annoyed him.

That evening just as Helen and he were getting ready to leave, a messenger from the Broker's Exchange handed him a note. He broke the seal and read a summons to appear before the executive committee on the following morning. His face must have betrayed him, for Helen halted the adjustment of her veil as she inquired:

"What's wrong? Any trouble?"

He recovered himself swiftly. "Oh no ... just a meeting at the Exchange to-morrow."

But as he folded up the letter and slipped it into his coat pocket he began to have a suspicion as to the reason for Brauer's haste.

CHAPTER VII

The next morning Fred Starratt went down to the office alone. Mrs. Hilmer had telephoned the night before an invitation for Helen to join them in a motor trip down the Ocean Shore Boulevard to Half moon Bay and home by way of San Mateo. Hilmer was entertaining a party of Norse visitors. Helen demurred at first, but Fred interrupted the conversation to insist:

"Go on ... by all means! The change will be good for you. I can run the office for a day."

Secretly he was glad to be rid of his wife's presence. He didn't know what trouble might be impending and he wanted to face the music without the irritation of a prying audience.

His fears were confirmed. He had been brought before the executive committee on a charge of rebating preferred by Kendrick. The evidence was complete in at least three cases and they all involved Brauer's clients. In short, Kendrick had sworn affidavits from three people to the effect that a representative of Starratt & Co. had granted a discount on fire-insurance business. Obviously all three cases had been planted by Kendrick, and Brauer had walked into the trap with both feet. There was nothing for Fred to do but to explain the whole situation--who Brauer was and why he had an interest in the firm. He found the committee reasonably sympathetic, but they still had their suspicions. Fred could see that even the sudden withdrawal of Brauer from partnership with him had its questionable side. It looked a bit like clever connivance. However, his inquisitors promised to look fairly into the question before presenting an ultimatum.

Fred went back to his office reassured. He had a feeling that in the end the committee would purge him or at least give him another chance. It was inconceivable that they would pronounce the penalty of expulsion, although they might impose a fine. He was so glad to be rid of Brauer, though, that he counted the whole circumstance as little short of providential.

He found a large mail at the office and quite a few remittances, but the Hilmer check was not in evidence. He remembered now, with chagrin, that Hilmer was away for the day. Still, there was a possibility that he had signed the check late last night. He called up Hilmer's office. No, the check had not been signed. Fred reminded the cashier that this was the last day to get the money into the companies. But the watchdog of the Hilmer treasury had been through too many financial pressures to be disturbed.

"They'll have to give us the usual five-day cancellation notice," he returned, blandly. "And payment will be made before the five days lapse."

Fred hung up the phone and cursed audibly. Of course a day or two or three wouldn't have made any difference ordinarily. But there was that damn check out to Brauer. Well, he had told Brauer to hold it until

Friday. There was still another day. He hated to go around and ask any further favors of his contemptible ex-partner, and he hoped he wouldn't have to request another postponement to the formality of putting the Brauer check through. Of course he had had no business making out a check for funds not in hand. But under the circumstances... What in hell was he worrying for? Everything would come out all right. What could Brauer do about it, anyway? As a matter of fact, he figured that under the circumstances he had a perfect right to stop payment on that Brauer check if he had been so disposed. For a moment the thought allured him. But his surrender to such a petty retaliation, passed swiftly. No, he wouldn't tar himself with any such defiling brush. He'd simply wipe Brauer from the slate and begin fresh.

He kept to his office all day. He didn't want to run afoul of either Kendrick or Brauer on the street, and, besides, with Helen away, it was a good day to clean up a lot of odds and ends that had been neglected during the pressure of soliciting business. It was six o'clock when he slammed down his roll-top desk and prepared to leave. He had planned to meet Helen for dinner at Felix's. He found himself a bit fagged and he grew irritated at the thought that prohibition had robbed him of his right of easy access to a reviving cocktail. He knew many places where he could buy bad drinks furtively, but he resented both the method and the vileness of the mixtures. He was putting on his coat when he heard a rap at the door. He crossed over and turned the knob, admitting a man standing upon the threshold.

"Is this Mr. Starratt?" the stranger began.

Fred nodded.

"Well, I'm sorry to bring bad news, but there's been a nasty accident. Mr. Hilmer's car went over a bank near Montara this afternoon... Mrs. Hilmer was hurt pretty badly, but everybody else is fairly well off... Your wife asked me to drop in and see you. I drove the car that helped rescue them... Don't be alarmed; Mrs. Starratt isn't hurt beyond a tough shaking up. But she feels she ought to stay with Mrs. Hilmer--under the circumstances."

Fred tried to appear calm. "Oh yes, of course ... naturally... And how about Hilmer himself?"

The man shrugged. "He's pretty fair. So far a broken arm is all they've found wrong with him."

"His right arm, I suppose?" Fred suggested, with an air of resignation. He was wondering whether anybody at Hilmer's office had authority to sign checks.

"Yes," the visitor assented, briefly.

Fred Starratt had a hasty meal and then he took a direct car line for the Hilmers'. He had never been to their house, but he found just about what he had expected--a two-story hand-me-down dwelling in the Richmond district, a bit more pretentious and boasting greater garden space than most of the homes in the block. Helen answered his ring. She had her wrist in a tight bandage.

"Just a sprain," she explained, rather loftily. "The doctor says it

will be all right in a day or two."

Fred sat down in an easy-chair and glanced up and down the living room. It was scrupulously neat, reflecting a neutral taste. The furniture was a mixture of golden and fumed oak done in heavy mission style and the pictures on the wall consisted of dubious oil paintings and enlarged photographs. A victrola stood in a corner, and the upright piano near the center of the room formed a background for a precisely draped, imitation mandarin skirt and a convenient shelf for family photographs and hand-painted vases. On the mantel an elaborate onyx-and-bronze clock ticked inaudibly.

Helen sat apart, almost with the detachment of a hostess receiving a casual acquaintance, as she recounted the incidents of the disastrous ride. Hilmer had been driving fairly carefully, but in swerving to avoid running down a cow that suddenly had made its appearance in the road the machine had skidded and gone over a steep bank. Mrs. Hilmer's condition was really quite serious. The doctor had intimated that even if she pulled through she might never walk again. They had a nurse, of course--two, in fact--but some one had to be there to look after things. The servant girl was just a raw Swede who did the heavy work--Mrs. Hilmer always had done most of the cooking herself.

Fred inquired for Hilmer. He had a broken wrist and several bad sprains and bruises, but he was resting easily.

"I didn't get that check for the premiums to-day," Fred said.

Helen rose from her seat. "I'll speak to him about it to-morrow," she returned, lightly.

Her movement implied dismissal. Fred left his seat and stood for a moment, awkwardly fingering his hat.

"I suppose," he faltered, "you don't know just how long you'll be needed here."

"That depends," she answered, shrugging.

"Then I'd better get some one in temporarily at the office."

She nodded.

"Well, good night," he said.

She kissed him perfunctorily and presently he found himself in the street again, bound for home.

A low fog was whitening the air and the breeze blowing in fresh from the ocean was sharp of tooth. Fred shivered slightly and buttoned his overcoat.

"I guess she's still kind of dazed," he muttered to himself. But above his perplexity soared a fresh determination. He would get a woman in his wife's place in the office and he would keep her there. It was time Helen stayed home where she belonged.

The next morning he went early to Hilmer's office. The cashier took him aside.

"Hilmer has authorized me to sign checks," he explained. "But I understand you're in wrong with the Exchange... I think I'll make out checks direct to the different companies. That's always the safest thing to do in a jam."

Fred was too furious even to protest. "I don't quite get the idea," he returned. "But that's up to you. If you want to write thirty-odd checks instead of one, that's your business, I suppose."

"Oh, that isn't any trouble," returned the man, complacently.

Fred swung back to his office. Kendrick must have been gossiping with a vengeance! What would the insurance offices on the street think when they received their checks direct from the Hilmer company? It was insulting! And now he would have to trail about collecting his commissions instead of merely withholding them from the remittance that should have been put in his hand. Still, on second thought, he did feel relieved to know that the matter wouldn't drag on any longer--that he wouldn't have to ask Brauer to hold off with his bank deposit another moment. He waited until after the noon hour to begin the collection of his commissions. Hilmer's cashier had promised to send his messenger around to the different companies before eleven o'clock.

He went into the first office with an assumption of buoyance. The cashier looked down at him through quizzical spectacles. Yes, the Hilmer premium was in, but he was very sorry--he couldn't pay Starratt & Co. anything.

"Why?" Fred demanded, hotly.

Because the Insurance Broker's Exchange had sent out a circular asking the companies to withhold any commissions due that firm until certain charges of rebating were investigated further and disproved.

Fred fled to the Exchange. The secretary was out, but his stenographer confirmed the circular. Fred went back to his office to think things over. Again he was tempted to repudiate the Brauer check at the bank and let Brauer do his worst. But he drew back from such a course with his usual repugnance. He saw now that all his high-flown theory about standing on his own feet was the merest sophistry. So far, he was nothing but the product of Hilmer's puzzling benevolence. One jam in the wheel and everything halted. He thought the whole matter out. He was still what Hilmer had intimated on the night of that disturbing dinner party--a creature with a back bent by continual bowing and scraping--a full-grown man with standards inherited instead of acquired. Why didn't he go around to the office of Ford, Wetherbee & Co. and beat up his nasty little ex-partner? Why didn't he meet Kendrick's gumshoe activities with equal stealth? It should have been possible to snare Kendrick if one had the guts. And why accept a gratuity from Hilmer in the shape of two thousand dollars more or less for commissions on business that one never really had earned the right to? He began to suspect that Hilmer had instructed his cashier to pay the companies direct. It was probably his patron's way of forcing home the idea that the commissions were a gratuity. No doubt even now he was chuckling at the spectacle of Starratt running about the street picking up the doles. He decided, once and for all, that he wouldn't go on being an object of satirical charity. He wouldn't refuse the

Hilmer business, but he would put it on the proper basis. He would put a proposition squarely up to Hilmer whereby Hilmer would become a definite partner in the firm--Hilmer, Starratt & Co., to be exact. This would mean not only an opportunity to handle all the Hilmer business itself, but to control other insurance that Hilmer had his finger in. There would be no silent partners, no gratuitous assistance from either clients or wife, no evasions. From this moment on everything was to be upon a frank and open basis.

He went out at once to see Hilmer. His wife answered the door as she had done previously and he sat in the same seat he had occupied the night before. He had a sense of intrusion--he felt that he was being tolerated. Helen had removed the bandage from her wrist and she looked very handsome in the half-light of a screened electric bulb. He noticed that flowers had been placed in one of the vases on the mantelshelf and that the mandarin skirt clung a trifle less precisely to the polished surface of the oak piano. A magazine sprawled face downward on the floor. Already the impress of Mrs. Hilmer on the surroundings was becoming a trifle blurred.

He came at once to the point--he had a business proposition to make to Hilmer and he wished to see him.

But Helen was not to be excluded from the secret of his mission that easily. The doctor had denied anybody access to Hilmer; therefore, unless it was very urgent...

"I want to see about a partnership arrangement," Fred explained, finally.

Helen stirred in her seat. "You mean that you want him to go in with us?... What's the reason? He's satisfied."

Fred drew himself up. "But I'm not!" he answered, decidedly.

She shrugged. "We've had one experience...we'd better think twice before we make another break."

"_I've_ thought it all over," he replied, pointedly.

She colored and flashed a sharp glance at him. "I spoke to him about the premiums this morning... He tells me he ordered them paid." "Yes ... direct to the companies... That's one of the reasons that made me decide to get things on a better working basis... I'm tired of being an object of charity."

She smiled coldly. Well, Hilmer simply wouldn't receive anyone now, and she herself didn't see the reason for haste. He ended by telling her the reason ... there was no other way out of the situation.

"Oh," she drawled, when he had finished, "so getting rid of Brauer was too easy, after all!" She made no other comment, but he read her scornful glance. "Any fool would have guessed that!" was what it implied.

Still, even with the fact of Brauer's craftiness exposed, she could not be persuaded that the proposition was quite that urgent.

"You don't?" he inquired, with growing irritation. "Well, you've

forgotten that check for some six hundred-odd dollars I wrote for Brauer the other day... I presume you know it's a felony to give out checks when there aren't sufficient funds on deposit."

She stared at him. "That's absurd!" she exclaimed. "Brauer wouldn't go that far!"

He quite agreed there, but he didn't say so. Instead, he insisted that anything was possible. They argued the matter scornfully. In the end he won.

"Well, I'll try," she announced, coldly. "I'll do my best... But I'm sure he won't see you."

She left the room with an indefinable air of boredom. He rose from his seat and began to pace up and down. The whole situation had a suggestion of unreality. In pleading with Helen for a chance to talk to Hilmer he had a sense of crossing swords with some intangible and sinister shadow; his wife seemed suddenly to have arrived at a state toward which she had been traveling all these last uncertain weeks ... fading, fading from the frame of his existence. Was he growing hypersensitive or merely unreasonable?

Fifteen minutes passed ... a half hour...an hour. Starratt stopped his restless movements and picked up the sprawling magazine... Presently Helen came into the room. He rose.

Her thin-lipped smile shaped itself with a tolerant geniality as she came toward him with complacent triumph.

"Well," she began, easily, "I got a thousand dollars out of him."

He went up close to her. "A thousand... I don't quite understand."

She flourished a check in his face. "Oh, he can sign checks with his left hand," she threw back, gayly.

"You mean you've spoken to him about the partnership and..."

"Of course not ... he wasn't in any humor for that."

"Well, then, what is this check for?"

She drew back a little. "Why, it's to help you out, of course. Don't you want it?"

He felt himself grow suddenly cold as he stood and watched her recoil momentarily from his two-edged glance. "No!" he retorted.

She continued to back away from him. He followed her retreat.

"I don't think you quite get me, Helen," he heard himself say, with icy sharpness. "I wanted to see Hilmer _myself! I had a business proposition to put up to him. I want co-operation--not questionable charity!"

She flung back her head, but her voice lacked defiance as she said:

"Was that meant as an insult?"

"No," he returned, quietly, "as a warning."

She stood silent, facing him with that clear, disarming gaze that she knew how to achieve so perfectly. He felt a great yearning overwhelm him ... a desire to meet her halfway ... a vagrant displeasure at his ill-natured irritation.

"How is Mrs. Hilmer?" he asked, suddenly, as he reached for his hat.

She shrugged. "There isn't any change," she replied, almost inaudibly.

"Shall I bring you anything from the apartment?"

"No... I'll go myself this afternoon and get some things together... I need a little air, anyway." She followed him to the door. "Then I understand you don't want this?" she inquired, indicating the check in her hand.

His only answer was an incredulous stare.

"What excuse shall I make him?"

He put on his hat. The flame of his displeasure had cooled, but he was still inflexible. "None, so far as I am concerned."

A retort died on her lips. He could see that she was puzzled.

"Well, so long," he ventured.

She drew herself up with the swift movement of one parrying a blow.

"So long!" she echoed, and the door closed sharply.

He went down the steps. There was an air of finality in his retreat... At the office he found a note from Brauer.

Your check has been returned to me... I shall put it through the bank again to-morrow.

He crumpled the sheet of paper and dropped it into the waste basket. How much would Brauer dare? he wondered.

That night the friend who had first warned him against Kendrick met him on California Street.

"I see my prophecy came true, Fred," he hazarded. "Why didn't you tell me that Brauer was your partner?... By the way, I saw Kendrick and him going to lunch together to-day. What's the idea?"

Fred lifted his eyebrows and laughed a toneless reply. What _was_ the idea? He wished he knew.

CHAPTER VIII

The next day passed in complete inaction. Frankly, Starratt did not know what move to make. He felt that he should have been trying to square matters, but to raise offhand six hundred-odd dollars was a feat too impossible to even attempt. He had few relations, and these few were remote and penniless, and his friends were equally lacking in financial resource. He was confident that he could convince Hilmer of the soundness of his new plan once he achieved an interview. But all his pride rose up to combat the suggestion that he present himself before Helen and plead for an audience. Once he had an impulse to go to the president of the bank and ask for an advance at the proper rate of interest. He knew scores of cases where banks loaned money on personality; he had heard many a bank official express himself to the effect that a poor man with a vision and integrity was a better chance any day than a millionaire lacking a goal or scruples. But in the end he was swung from any initiative by a passive desire to even his score with Brauer. After all, it was diverting to wait for his ex-partner's next move. Brauer had had no compunctions in tricking him. Why, then, should he worry? No, it would be fun just to let Brauer stew in a sample of his own Teutonic duplicity.

He felt a relief at Helen's absence from the office. He had never wanted her there and he was determined not to have her back. Last night she had entirely misread the reason back of his desire for an interview with Hilmer, and he had been moved to a nasty rancor. But now he felt tolerant, rather than displeased. Women were often like that, a bit unethical regarding money. In wheedling a check out of Hilmer she had used the easiest weapons a woman possessed. She had meant well, Fred concluded, using that time-worn excuse which has served nearly every questionable act since the world began. And in the final analysis, he really blamed himself. Such humiliation was usually the price a man paid when he let the women of his household share in the financial responsibility. He should have hoed his own row and wiped the sweat of his labors upon his own coat sleeve. Well, Hilmer would be about in a few days and meanwhile Brauer would have some uncomfortable hours. In the end, no doubt, after Brauer had collected his six hundred dollars, he would go into a partnership with Kendrick. That explained the mystery of these two linen-collared crooks lunching together... After all, there was an element of humor in the whole situation.

On Saturday morning Starratt overslept and he did not get down to the office until nearly ten o'clock. He was picking up the mail that had been dropped through the door when the janitor came close to him. Fred gave a sharp glance and the man said:

"There's been a guy waiting around since eight o'clock, watching your door... I think he must have a paper or something to serve on you... Matter of fact, he looked like a fly cop to me... I asked him what he wanted and he just smiled..."

Fred laughed a careless rejoinder and the janitor went down the hall, brushing the marble dado with his bedraggled feather duster.

Fred Starratt closed the door softly and sat down at his desk, trying to concentrate on his mail. He felt a sudden chill. But he managed, after a fashion, to fix his mind upon immediate problems. Twice during the morning he made a move toward leaving to do some soliciting, but almost at once he invented an excuse which dissuaded him.

When he went out to lunch he passed a man loitering in the hall. A crowded elevator shot past. Fred decided to walk down the stairs ... the man followed at a nonchalant and discreet distance. Starratt lingered in the marble-flanked doorway... The man crossed the street and stood on the corner.

Fred decided to lunch at Hjul's. During the short walk to his destination he dismissed everything from his mind except the anticipation of food. He discovered he was very hungry and it struck him that he had forgotten to breakfast. He had come away from the house with the idea of getting a cup of coffee in a waffle kitchen on Kearny Street and his preoccupation had routed this vague plan. He was chuckling over his lapse when he swung into Hjul's and took a seat near the window. He ordered a hot roast-beef sandwich and coffee as he shared his joke with the waitress. She brushed some crumbs from the table with a napkin, laughed, and went scampering for the order. Fred's eyes followed her retreat and fell sharply upon the line of men drifting in the narrow entrance. At the far end loomed the figure of the man who had followed him down the stairs from his office. Fred picked up a newspaper. The man sat down at a table in a far corner. Over the edge of the newspaper Fred stole a furtive glance. The man was of slippery slenderness, with a rather round, expressionless face. His eyes were beady and shifting, and his lips thin and pale and cruel. The waitress came tripping back with Starratt's order. Fred fell to.

Presently Fred finished. He rose deliberately, taking time to brush every crumb from his lap. At the door he reached for a whisk broom and wielded it conspicuously. He could not have said whether bravado or contempt was moving him to such flamboyant dawdling. Or was he merely trying to persuade himself that he had nothing to fear in any case? He stepped out into a shower of noonday sunshine flooding through a rift in the high fog of a July morning in San Francisco. A delicious thrill from open spaces communicated itself to him. No, he would not go back to the office--it was Saturday, anyway, and, besides, he felt a vague desire for freedom and the tang of wind-clean air. He would ride out to Golden Gate Park and stroll leisurely through its length to the ocean... He walked briskly down Montgomery Street to Market, waited a few seconds at a safety station, and finally swung on a car... He was standing before a tiny lake at the Haight Street entrance to the Park, watching a black swan ruffling its feathers, when he felt a presence near him. He did not lift his eyes for some moments, but when he did look up it was to see his shifty friend of the morning pretending to be amused at a group of noisy sparrows quarreling over a windfall of crumbs... Fred Starratt moved on.

All afternoon Fred Starratt wandered about--sometimes dawdling defiantly, sometimes dropping into a brisk pace, but at every turn his new-found shadow followed at an inconspicuous distance. The afternoon sun was gracious, tinged with a pleasant coolness, and far to the west a blue-gray fog bank waited for evening to let down the day's warm barriers. Fred Starratt's thoughts were abrupt and purposeless, like the unsustained flights of wing-clipped birds. He knew that he was being followed, and he had a confused sense of something impending, and yet he was unable or unwilling to face the issue honestly. There were moments when he glimpsed the truth, but he seemed unmoved by these truant realizations. Was he too tired to care? He used to wonder, when he read in the newspapers of some man overtaken by an overwhelming disgrace, how it was possible to go on living under such

circumstances. Was his indifference of this afternoon the preliminary move in a long series of heartbreaking compromises and retreats? he asked himself. But he did not attempt to answer any of these darting questions. After all, the sun was shining and about him the world seemed to be swinging on with disarming normality. Upon the trimmed lawns peacocks strutted and shrieked and from remoter distances the soft call of the quail echoed caressingly. It was good to be alive, with one's feet firmly planted on the earth. To be alive and _free_!

He passed the conservatory and the sunken gardens, flamboyant with purple-and-gold pansies; he dawdled over the aviary and the bear cages. He even stopped for tea at the Japanese garden, throwing bits of sweetened rice-flour cakes to the goldfishes in their chocolate-colored pond near the tea pavilion. He found himself later skirting Stow Lake, pursued by flocks of ubiquitous coots, bent upon any stray crumbs flung in their direction. Finally he dipped suddenly down into the wilder reaches of the Park, taking aimless trails that wandered off into sandy wastes or fetched up quite suddenly upon the trimly bordered main driveway. He always had preferred the untamed stretches that lay beyond Stow Lake. Here, as a young boy, he had organized scouting parties when it was still a remote, almost an unforested sand pile. Later, when the trees had conquered its bleakness, Helen and he had spent many a Saturday afternoon tramping briskly through the pines to the ocean. How long ago that seemed, and yet how very near! Not long in point of time, somehow, but long in point of accessibility. He seemed to be standing, as it were, upon the threshold of a past that he could glimpse, but not re-enter. Even Helen seemed remote--a part of the background that had been, instead of an equal spectator with him in a review of these dead events.

It was nearly five o'clock when he drew near the first wind-stunted pine trees heralding the ocean. He quickened his step. Already the breeze was tearing across the unscreened spaces and carrying damp wisps of fog with it. As he found his steps swinging into the ocean highway he turned and looked back. His discreet pursuer had disappeared. There was not a soul in sight!

His heart gave a sudden leap. He hurried forward. A street car was rounding the terminal loop on its return to town. He clattered aboard. He felt suddenly free and light hearted, almost gay. What would he do now? Look up Helen at Hilmer's and persuade her to dine with him somewhere downtown?... He remembered that he had not even telephoned her for two days. The conviction that had settled upon him during his walk through the Park woods descended again. Helen seemed impersonal and unapproachable... He felt a desire for noise and conviviality and laughter. He decided to look in at the St. Francis bar and see if he could chance upon a hilarious friend or two.

Starratt had overlooked the fact of war-time prohibition when he picked the St. Francis bar as a place of genial fellowship. The memory of its old-time six-o'clock gayety was still fresh enough to trick him. He swung into its screened entrance to find it practically deserted. The old bustle and hoarse conversation and hearty laughter were replaced by dreary silence. The provocative rattle of ice in the highball glass, the appetizing smell of baked ham from the free-lunch counter, the thick, pungent clouds of tobacco smoke--all had been routed by chill, hypocritical virtue. One or two of the tables were surrounded by solemn circles of males getting speedily drunk in an effort to finish up the melancholy remains filched from some private

stock, but their attempts at light-heartedness were very sad and maudlin. Fred was moving away when he heard his name called. He turned to find a group of business associates from California Street sitting before two bottles of Scotch, which were ministering to their rather dour conviviality. Starratt started to wave a mingled greeting and farewell when his raised hand fell heavily against his side--in the polished depths of the bar's flawless mirror loomed the unwelcome figure that had pursued him all day!... He went over and joined his friends.

He had one drink ... two ... another. Then he lost count ... but the supply seemed inexhaustible. A sudden rush of high spirits keyed him tensely. He talked and laughed and waved his arms about, calling upon everybody to witness his light-heartedness. Through the confused blur of faces surrounding him he caught an occasional glimpse of the thin, cruel lips and the shifting, beady eyes of his pursuer sitting over a flat drink which he left untouched.

Presently somebody in the party suggested a round of the bohemian joints. The motion was noisily seconded... Fred staggered to his feet. They began with the uptown tenderloin, drifting in due time through the Greek cafes on Third Street. Finally they crossed Market Street and began to chatter into the tawdry dance halls of upper Kearny. Everywhere the drinks flowed in covert streams, growing viler and more nauseous as the pilgrimage advanced. Near Jackson Street they came upon a bedraggled pavilion of dubious gayety which lured them downstairs with its ear-splitting jazz orchestra. A horde of rapacious females descended upon them like starving locusts. Suddenly everybody in the party seemed moved with a desire for dancing--except Fred. While the others whirled away he sank into a seat, staring vacantly ahead. He had reached the extreme point of his drunkenness and he was pulling toward sobriety again... He came out of his tentative stupor with the realization that a woman was seating herself opposite him.

"What's your name?" he demanded, thickly.

"Ginger," she replied.

He took a sharper look. A pale, somewhat freckled face, topped by a glory of fading red hair, thrust itself rather wistfully forward for his inspection.

"Go 'way!" he waved, disconsolately. "Go 'way. I don't wanna dance!"

She smiled with the passive resistance of her kind. "Neither do I," she assented. "Let's just sit here and talk."

"Don't wanna talk!" he threw back, sullenly.

"All right," she agreed; "anything you say... Got a cigarette?"

He drew out a box and she selected one. The waiter hovered about significantly. Fred ordered coffee ... Ginger took Whiterock. They were silent. The music crashed and banged and whinnied, and the air grew thick with the mingled odors of smoke and stale drinks and sex.

Finally Fred leaned forward and said in a whisper, "Tell me--has a snaky-looking dub come into this joint?"

Ginger swept the room with her glance. "In a gray derby and a green tie?"

"Yes."

"He's over in the corner--talking to a couple of fly cops."

He reached for a cigarette himself. His voice was becoming steadier. "What do you think his game is?"

She pursed her lips. "Oh, I guess he's a private detective," she appraised, shrewdly. "He isn't quite heavy enough for a real bull."

He struck a match. "He's been following me all day," he admitted.

"Somebody's keeping tab, eh?... Is friend wife on the trail?"

He laughed tonelessly and cast the match aside. The sharp little face opposite was quickening with interest.

"No ... I let a bad check get out... _You_ know--no funds."

"Whew!" escaped her. "That isn't pretty!"

"You're damned right it isn't!" he echoed, emphatically.

She clutched at his wrist. "Say, the whole three are coming this way... I guess they've got a warrant... Don't fight back, whatever you do!"

Her words sobered him. She was right--three men were coming toward his table. He rose with a flourish of dignity.

"Looking for me?" he asked.

"If your name is Starratt, we are," one of the men said, moving up closely.

"What's the idea?"

The spokesman of the group flashed his star. "You're wanted on a bad-check charge."

Fred reached for his hat. "All right... Let's get out quietly."

His brain was perfectly clear, but he staggered a trifle as he followed the men along the edge of the dancing space to the stairway. The music crashed furiously. Fred's associates were giving all their attention to treading the uncertain steps of their tawdry bacchanal, so they missed his exit.

Halfway up the stair leading to the sidewalk Fred was halted by a touch upon his arm. He had forgotten Ginger, but there she stood with that childish, almost wistful, look on her face.

"Say," she demanded, "can I do anything? I've got a pull if I want to use it."

The other three men turned about and waited. The snaky one laughed.

Fred looked at her curiously.

"You might phone my wife," he returned. "But don't say anything to the boys!"

"Where does she live?... I'll go now and see her. That is--if--"

For a moment Fred Starratt hesitated. Would it be quite the thing to let a woman like this... But as quickly a sense of his ingratitude swept him. Whether it was the thing or not, it was impossible to wound the one person who stood so ready to serve him. A great compassion seemed suddenly to flood him--for a moment he forgot his own plight.

"I don't remember the number of the house ... she's with friends. You'll find the name in the telephone book... Hilmer--Fourteenth Avenue. Ask for Mrs. Starratt."

"Axel Hilmer ... the man who--"

"He's a shipbuilder. Do you know him?"

She smiled wanly. "Yes ... I know lots of people."

Fred felt his arm jerked roughly, and the next thing he found himself half flung, half dragged toward the curb. Instinctively he shook himself free.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

The ringleader of the group reached forward and grabbed him roughly.

"D'yer think we've got all night to stand around here while you turn on sob stuff with a dance-hall tart? You shut up and come with us!"

"I'm coming as quickly as I can," Starratt retorted.

He was answered by a hard-fisted blow in the pit of the stomach. He doubled up with a gasping groan. A crowd began to gather. Presently he recovered his breath. The blow had completely sobered and calmed him. He felt that he could face anything now. The jail was just across the street, so they walked, pursued by a knot of curious idlers.

They went through a narrow passageway, separating the Hall of Justice from the jails, and rang a bell for the elevator. In stepping into the cage Fred Starratt tripped and lurched forward. He was rewarded by a stinging slap upon the face. He drew himself up, clenching his fists. He had often wondered how it felt to be seized with a desire to shoot a man down in cold blood. Now he knew.

CHAPTER IX

The men at the booking desk treated Fred Starratt with a rough courtesy. They did not make the required search of his person unduly humiliating, and, when they were through, one of the men said, not unkindly:

"We can ring for a messenger if you want to send word to your folks; ... it's against the rules to telephone."

"I've notified them," Fred returned, crisply. It was curious to discover that he had no doubts concerning Ginger's delivery of his message.

"Is there a chance for you to get bailed out to-night?" the same man inquired.

Fred hesitated. "There may be," he said, finally.

They put him in a temporary cell with three others--two white men and a Chinese, who had been arrested for smuggling opium. The floor was of thick boards sloping toward the center, and in a corner was a washbasin. There were no seats. One of the white men was pacing up and down with the aimless ferocity of an animal freshly caged. At Fred's entrance the younger and quieter of these two looked up and said, eagerly:

"Got a smoke?"

Fred drew out a box of cigarettes and tossed it to him. The other white man came forward; even the Chinese was moved to interest.

Fred saw the box passed from one to the other. There did not seem to be any color line drawn about this transient solace. Fred took a smoke himself.

"What are you up for?" the younger man inquired.

Fred experienced a shock. "Oh ... you see ... I just got caught in a jam. It will come out all right."

It sounded ridiculous--this feeble attempt at pride, and Fred regretted it, once it escaped him. But his questioner was not put out of countenance.

"Well, if you've got a pull, it's easy; otherwise--" He finished with a shrug and went on smoking.

Fred looked at him intently. He was a lad not much over twenty, with thick black hair and very deep-blue eyes and an indefinable quality which made his rather irregular features seem much more delicate than they really were.

"What's your trouble?" Fred asked, suddenly.

The boy grinned. "I rolled a guy for twenty dollars in Portsmouth Square... He was drunk, at that," he finished, as if in justification.

At this moment the door of the cell was opened. The three white men started forward expectantly. But it was the Chinese who was wanted. A group of his countrymen had come to bail him out.

The man who had been silent suddenly spoke to the policeman as he was closing the door again.

"You might as well lock me up proper for the night," he flung out, bitterly. "I guess they're not coming to get me now."

The policeman led him away, in the wake of the disappearing Chinese. The youth turned to Starratt with a chuckle:

"The old boy's kinda peeved, ain't he? Well, he'll get over that after a while... The first time they jugged me I thought--"

"Then you've been up before?"

"Before?... Say, do I look like a dead one? This isn't a bad habit after you get used to it... So far I've only made the county jails. Some day I suppose I'll graduate... But I'm pretty wise--vagrancy is about all they've ever pinned on me."

Fred looked at his new friend curiously. There didn't seem to be anything particularly vicious about the youth. He merely had learned how to get his hands on easy money and jails were an incident in his career. Without being asked, he described his first tilt with the law. He had come, a youth of seventeen, from a country town up North. He had run away from home, to be exact; there was a stepmother or some equally ancient and honorable excuse. He had arrived in San Francisco in January without money or friends or any great moral equipment, and after a week of purposeless bumming he had been picked up by a policeman and charged with vagrancy. The obliging judge who heard his case gave him twenty-four hours to leave town. He went, in company with a professional tramp, upon the brake beams of a freight train that pulled out for Stockton that very night. But at Stockton the train was overhauled by policemen in wait for just these unwelcome strangers from a rival town, and the two were told to go back promptly where they came from. They got into San Francisco more dead than alive, and then the inevitable happened. They were haled before the selfsame judge who had given the youth such an amazing chance to get started right. He treated them both to thirty days in the county jail, and the youth emerged a wiser but by no means a sadder man. He had learned, among other things, that if one were to be jailed one might just as well be jailed for cause. The charge of vagrancy was very inclusive, and a man could skirt very near the edge of felony and still manage to achieve a nominal punishment. He told all this simply, naturally, naively--as if he were entertaining an acquaintance with a drawing-room anecdote. When he finished, Fred inquired:

"And how about bail to-night?"

The youth shrugged. "Well, I dunno. I sent word to a girl who--"

At that moment the attendant appeared again. He had come after the youth--evidently the girl had proved herself.

"So long," the boy said to Fred, as he went through the door. "If you've got a dame stuck on you there's always a chance."

Fred went over and leaned against the washbasin. His companions had been diverting. In their company he had ceased to think very definitely about his own plight. Now he was alone. He wondered what Helen would do... He put his hand to his cheek--it was still smarting from the blow that had waked his primitive hatred...

He was standing in this same position before the washbasin, smoking furiously, when the attendant came for him.

"It's past midnight," the man said. "I guess your folks ain't coming."

Fred stirred. "No, I guess not," he echoed, with resignation.

The officer took his arm. "Well, we'll have to get fixed up for the night," he announced.

Fred threw his cigarette butt on the floor and stepped on it.

* * * *

The next morning at eleven o'clock Fred Starratt heard his name bawled through the corridors and he was led out to the room where prisoners were allowed to receive their lawyers or converse with relatives and friends through the barred and screened opening.

A man was exchanging tearful confidences with his wife and baby as he clung to the bars. The woman was sending a brave smile across, but the wire mesh between gave her face the same unreality that a gauze drop in a play gives to the figures on the other side. A strange man was ushered in.

"Mr. Starratt?" he inquired.

Fred inclined his head.

"My name is Watson--from the firm of Kimball & Devine. We're attorneys for Mr. Hilmer. He asked me to run in and see you this morning. Just what _did_ happen?"

Fred recited the events briefly. When he had finished, the attorney said:

"Everything depends on this man Brauer. I'll have to get in touch with him to-day. Hilmer told me to use my own judgment about bail... I guess it's all right."

A hot flush overspread Fred's face, but it died quickly. He could stand any insult now. All night he had been brooding on that slap upon the cheek. A clenched fist had an element of fairness in it, but the bare palm was always the mark of a petty tyrant. It was thus that a woman struck ... or a piddling official ... or a mob bent on humiliation. They smote Christ in the same way--_with their hands_. He remembered the phrase perfectly and the circumstance that had impressed it so indelibly on his mind. His people had seen to it that he had attended Sabbath school, but he was well past ten before they had taken him to church. And, out of the hazy impression of the first sermon he had fidgeted through, he remembered the picture of Christ which the good man in the pulpit had drawn, sitting in a mockery of purple, receiving the open-palmed blows of cowards. In his extremity the story recurred with sharp insistence and all night he had been haunted by this thorn-crowned remembrance.

Hilmer's messenger was waiting for him to speak. He gave a shrug.

"It really doesn't matter," he said.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Starratt," Watson broke in, reprovingly. "That isn't any way to talk. You've got to keep your spirits up. Things might be worse. It's lucky you've got a friend like Hilmer. He's a man that can do things for you, if anyone can."

Fred smiled wanly. "I don't suppose you saw my wife, by any chance," he ventured.

"No... Fact is, she's in bed... Hilmer said the news completely bowled her over... That's another reason you've got to buck up--for _her_ sake, you know!"

It ended in Watson putting up the bail money and their departing in a yellow taxicab for an obscure hotel in Ellis Street.

"This is the best arrangement, under the circumstances," Watson explained. "You'll want to be quiet and lie low."

Fred assented indifferently. He was very tired and all he longed for was a chance to sleep.

In less than fifteen minutes after his release Fred Starratt found himself alone in the narrow impersonal room where Hilmer's emissary had installed him. He did not wait to undress--he threw himself upon the bed and slept until midnight.

* * * * *

He awoke startled and unrefreshed. A newsboy just under his window was calling the morning papers with monotonous stridency. Fred jumped to his feet and peered out. People drifted by on the homeward stretch in little pattering groups--actors, chorus girls, waiters, and melancholy bartenders. The usual night wind had died ... it had grown warmer. He turned toward his bed again. The walls of the room seemed suddenly to contract. He had a desire to get out into the open... He freshened up and felt better.

He did not wait for the elevator, but walked down the dim stairway to the narrow hotel lobby, flooded by a white, searching light. For a moment he stood in curious confusion at the foot of the stairs that had so suddenly spewed him from half-light to glare, his eyes blinking aimlessly. At that moment he saw a familiar figure rising from one of the morris chairs near the plate-glass window. He stared--it was the private detective who had hounded him all day Saturday. Slowly he retraced his steps and found his way back to his room again... No doubt Brauer, fearful lest his victim would escape before he arranged the proper warrants for arrest, had been responsible for this man's presence in the first instance, but who was hiring him now?... Hilmer?... Well, why not? Surely a man who risked bail money was justified in seeing that the object of his charity kept faith... Fred Starratt sat down and laughed unpleasantly. What a contempt everybody must have for him! What a contempt he had for himself! He threw himself sprawling his full length upon the rumped bed. But this time it was not to sleep. Instead, he stared up at the ceiling and puffed cigarette after cigarette until morning flooded the room... At eight o'clock he phoned down to have his breakfast sent up.

* * * * *

Toward noon Watson came in. "I saw Brauer yesterday and again this morning... What did you do to make him so sore?"

Fred shrugged. "I guess I took a superior air... A man who plays up his honesty is always nasty... I meant well--most fools do!"

Watson stared uncomprehendingly. "The best thing I can get this man Brauer to agree to is a compromise... He's eager for his pound of flesh."

"What do you mean?"

"He wants to punish you ... even the score some way... After I saw him yesterday I went out and talked to Hilmer... We outlined a plan that Brauer is willing to accept. Hilmer has a pull, you know ... and if the scheme goes through there'll be no trial, no notoriety, nothing disagreeable... We'll make it plain to the authorities that you gave out this check when you were drunk. Habitual intemperance ... that's to be our plea... It means a few months for you at the state's Home for Inebriates ... a bit of a rest, really... I'd say you were extremely lucky."

Fred was beyond so futile an emotion as anger. Somehow he was not even surprised, but he had energy enough left for sarcasm. He looked squarely at Watson as he said:

"Why not tell the truth? If any judge is willing to convict me on my intentions I'll go to jail gladly. It seems to me that it ought to be easy enough to prove that I gave that check to Brauer with every prospect in the world that I could cover it. He tricked me, really."

"Yes, but how can you prove it?"

"Why, there's my wife. She heard every bit of the--"

"My dear man, you're not going to drag her into this mess, I hope. What we're trying to do is to hush this thing up, so that in due time you can come back and take your place in society again without scandal."

"How are you going to stop Brauer's tongue?"

"Oh, we'll see that he keeps his counsel... Hilmer will throw him a sop... He's going in with this man Kendrick, you know."

Fred rose and went over to the washbasin and drew himself a drink. Finally he spoke. "It's a damned lie--the whole thing. That is enough to queer it with me. I'm not a common drunkard, and you know it."

"You were drunk when they arrested you."

"Well ... yes."

"And that's what gives us such a good chance... Now look here, Starratt, you can take a tip from me or leave it, just as you see fit. A trial for a charge such as you're up against is a damned nasty business. You get publicity that you never live down. And just now there's a big sentiment developing against letting people off easily

once the thing is made public. The judges are soaking people hard... You might get off, and then again you _might not_. Would you like to put your wife in the position of having a convict for a husband? ... Think it over."

Fred sat down. He was not beaten yet. After all, what did Helen think about this arrangement? Had they spoken to her? Some of her methods in the past had not been to his taste, but they were the best means to an end that she knew. And she always had been loyal. Ah yes, in a scratch women did rise to the occasion! For an instant he remembered the parting comment of his cell companion of Saturday night:

"If you've got a dame stuck on you there's always a chance."

He turned to Watson with a smile of triumph.

"I'll leave the thing to Mrs. Starratt," he said, confidently. "I think I can depend upon her to stand by me, whatever happens..."

Watson reached into his inner coat pocket.

"I've a note from her here," he said, handing Starratt a square envelope.

Fred broke the seal and unfolded the contents deliberately. He read very slowly... When he had finished he read it through again. He sat for some moments on the edge of the bed, tapping his lips with a tentative finger. Finally he rose.

"Well, Mr. Watson," he said, bitterly, "I said I'd stand by Mrs. Starratt's decision. And I'm a man of my word."

Watson rose also. "You won't regret this, I'm sure," he ventured, heartily. "Meanwhile I'll get busy pulling wires at once. It won't do to let this thing get cold. I'll go right out and see Hilmer now... Any message you'd like to give your wife?"

Fred looked at the man before him searchingly. "No ... none!"

Watson bowed himself out... Fred Starratt put both hands to his temples.

CHAPTER X

The days that followed passed in a blur. Fred Starratt went through the motions of living, but they were only motions. Between the intervals of legal adjustments, court examinations, and formal red tape he would lie upon his narrow bed at the hotel reading his wife's message--that sharp-edged message which had shorn him of his strength--as if to dull further his blunted sensibilities. In all this time he saw only Watson. He did not ask for Hilmer or Helen. But one day the attorney said to him:

"Your wife is still ill, otherwise--" "Yes, yes ... of course," Fred assented, dismissing the subject with an impatient shrug.

Finally, on a certain afternoon at about two o'clock, Watson came in quite unexpectedly.

"I think by to-night everything will be settled. ... What can I do for you? ... Perhaps you would like to go to your apartment and get some things together... Or see a friend... Just say the word." Fred roused himself. A fleeting rebellion flickered and died. He wanted nothing ... least of all to so much as see his former dwelling place. He made only one request.

"If you're passing that dance hall where they arrested me--you know, near Jackson Street--drop in and ask for a girl called Ginger. I'd like to see her."

Watson smiled widely...

The girl Ginger came that very afternoon. She was dressed very quietly in black, with only a faint trace of make-up on her cheeks. Almost anyone would have mistaken her for a drab little shopgirl. Fred felt awkward in her presence.

"I'm going away to-night--for some time," he said, when she had seated herself. "And I wanted to thank you for your interest when--"

She shook her head. "That wasn't anything," she answered.

He wondered what next to say. It was she who spoke finally.

"I suppose you got out of your mess all right," she half queried.

He opened his cigarette case and offered her a smoke. She declined.

"Well, not altogether... My friend Hilmer worked a compromise... I'm going to a place to sober up." He laughed bitterly.

She folded her hands. "One of those private sanitariums, I suppose, where rich guys bluff it out until everything blows over."

"No, you're wrong again... I'm going summering in a state hospital."

Her hands, suddenly unclasped, lifted and fell in startled flight. "An insane asylum?" she gasped. He leaned forward. "Why do you say that?"

"Because it's the only place in this state where they send drunks... I know plenty who've been through that game... You can't tell me anything about that."

He stared at her in silence and presently she said:

"What are they doing to you, anyway? Railroading you? I don't believe you know where you _are_ going."

He shrugged wearily. "No; you're right. And I don't much care."

"Why didn't you send for me?" she demanded. "That night when they got you I told you I had a pull... I'm not a Hilmer, but I can work a few people myself... I haven't always been a cheap skate. There was a time when I had them fighting over me. And that wasn't so long ago,

either... I'm still young--younger than a lot that get by. But, anyway, I've got a lot of old-memory stuff up my sleeve that can make some people step about pretty lively... There's more than one man in this town who would just as soon I kept my mouth shut... I could even run Hilmer around the ring once or twice if I wanted to."

He felt a bit tremulous, but he put a tight rein upon his emotions.

"It's very good of you," he said, "but, really, I couldn't quite have that, you know... I don't mean to be ungrateful or unkind, but there are some things that--"

She laughed. "Oh yes, I know... You feel that way now, of course... You're a gentleman; I understand that... And I haven't run up against many gentlemen in my day... Oh, there were a lot who had plenty of money and they were polite enough when it didn't matter ... but ... Well, I know the real thing when I see it... You're going to that hell hole, too, just for that very reason... Because you haven't got the face to be nasty..."

He crumpled the unlighted cigarette in his hand and flung it from him.

"What do you know about me?" he asked.

"Women aren't fools!" she retorted. "And least of all women like me! ... I wish to God I'd known you sooner!"

He watched the quivering revelations run in startled flight across her face, hiding themselves as swiftly behind the dull shadows of indifference. For a moment the room seemed flooded in a truant flash of sunshine. She seemed at once incredibly old and as incredibly touched with a vagrant youth. How eagerly she must have given herself! How eagerly she could give herself again!

He rose in his seat, confused. She seemed to have taken it for a sign of dismissal, for she followed his example.

"Maybe it isn't too late," she faltered. "Maybe I could work that pull I've got ... if you want me to."

He shook his head. "It's out of my hands," he answered. She moved to the door, as if to place a proper distance between them.

"What does your wife think about it?"

He shrugged.

"You won't like what I'm going to say," she flung out, defiantly. "But that night when I saw your wife _I_ knew."

"Knew what?"

"That she wasn't playing fair..." Her face was lighted with a primitive malevolence. "She isn't straight!"

He tried to pull himself up in prideful refutation, but the effort failed. He was turning away defeated when a knock sounded on the door. Watson entered. Ginger drew herself flatly against the wall. The attorney gave a significant glance in her direction as he said to

Starratt:

"Your wife is waiting in the hall ... just around the corner. I thought it best to ..."

Ginger came forward quickly. "Good-by!" she said, hurriedly.

He put out a hand to her. She moved a little nearer and, suddenly, quite suddenly, she kissed him. He drew back a little, and presently she was gone...

He looked up to find Helen standing before him. She was a little pale and her lips more scarlet than ever, and her thick, black eyebrows sharply defined. He had never seen her look so disagreeably handsome.

"That woman who just went out," she began, coolly, "she's the same one who--"

"Yes," he interrupted, crisply.

"Who is she?"

He looked at her steadily; she did not flinch. "A friend of mine."

Her lip curled disdainfully. "Oh!" she said, and she sat down.

* * * * *

Toward evening they came for him, or rather Watson did, with a taxicab.

"Everything has gone nicely," Watson explained, pridefully. "You certainly were lucky in having Hilmer for a friend ... no humiliation, no publicity."

Fred, standing before the bureau mirror, brushed his hair. "Where are you taking me now?" he inquired.

"To the detention hospital... You'll stay there a week or so for observation... It's a mere form."

"And from there?"

"To the state hospital at Fairview."

Fred Starratt flung down the brush. "Why don't you call it by its right name? ... I'm told it's an insane asylum."

Watson stared and then came forward with a little threatening gesture. "You better not start any rough-house, Starratt--at the eleventh hour!" he admonished, with a significant warmth.

Fred turned slowly, breaking into a laugh. "Rough-house?" he echoed. "Don't be afraid. ... I've got to the curious stage now. I want to see the whole picture." He reached for his hat. "I'm ready ... let's go."

A half hour later Fred Starratt was booked at the detention hospital. They took away his clothes and gave him a towel and a nightgown and led him to a bathroom... Presently he was shown to his cell-like room.

Overhead the fading day filtered in ghostly fashion through a skylight; an iron bed stood against the wall. There was not another stick of furniture in sight.

He crawled into his bed and the attendant left him, switching on an electric light from the outside. A nurse with supper followed shortly--a bowl of thin soup and two slices of dry bread. Fred Starratt lifted the bowl to his lips and drank a few mouthfuls. The stuff was without flavor, but it quenched his burning thirst... After a while he broke the bread into small bits--not only because he was hungry, but because he was determined to eat this bitter meal to the last crumb. When he had finished he felt mysteriously sealed to indifference.

The nurse came in for the tray and he asked her to switch off the light. He lay for hours, open-eyed, in the gloom, while wraithlike memories materialized and vanished as mysteriously. Somehow the incidents of his life nearest in point of time seemed the remotest. Only his youth lay within easy reach, and his childhood nearest of all. He was traveling back ... back ... perhaps in the end

oblivion would wrap him in its healing mantle and he would wait to be made perfect and whole again in the flaming crucible of a new birth... Gradually the mists of remembrance faded, lost their outline ... became confused, and he slept.

He awoke with a shiver. A piercing scream was curdling the silence. From the other side of the thin partition came shrieks, curses, mad laughter. He heard the heavy tramp of attendants in the hallway ... doors quickly opened and slammed shut. ... There followed the sounds of scuffling, the reeling impact of several bodies against the wall ... then blows of shuddering softness, one last shriek ... dead silence!

He sat up in bed--alive and quivering. Was this the rebirth that the swooning hours had held in store for him? ... Quickly life came flooding back. Indifference fell from him. In one blinding flash his new condition was revealed. His life had been a futile compromise. He had sowed passivity and he had reaped a barren harvest of negative virtues. He would compromise again, and he would be passive again, and he would bow his neck to authority ... but from this moment on he would wither the cold fruits of such enforced planting in a steadily rising flame of understanding. He knew now the meaning of the word "revelation."

CHAPTER XI

They kept Fred Starratt in bed for two weeks, and one morning when the sun was flooding through the skylight with soul-warming radiance they brought him his clothes and he knew that the prologue to the drama of his humiliation was over. He crawled to his feet and looked down upon his body wasted by days of enforced idleness and fasting. He dropped back upon the bed, exhausted. The sun, striking him squarely, gradually flamed him with feeble energy. He straightened himself and

dressed slowly.

When he had finished the sun still poured its golden shower into the room. He rose to his feet and lifted his chilled hands high to receive its blessing. He felt the blood tingle through his transparent fingers.

In the next room he heard the tramping of feet and a feeble curse or two. He dropped his hands and sat down again. The nurse came in with his breakfast.

"The man next door?" he asked. "Is he leaving to-day, too?"

"Yes."

"Where does he go?"

"To Fairview."

A memory of that first night with its piercing terror sent a shiver through him.

"They brought him in the same day I came," he ventured, half musingly. "At the beginning he made a lot of noise, but lately..."

She set the tray down upon the bed. "They had to put him in a strait-jacket," she said, significantly. "He's quite hopeless. He tried to kill his wife and his child ... and he set fire to the home. He's an Italian."

"Yes ... so I was told."

The nurse departed and he drank the cup of muddy coffee on the tray. He laid the cup down and sat staring at the square cut in the center of the thick oak door leading into the corridor. Presently he heard the swish of a woman's skirt passing the opening, followed by the pattering footsteps of childhood. There came the sound of soft weeping ... the swishing skirt passed again, and the pattering footsteps died away. The nurse returned.

"The Italian's wife and child have just been here," she said. "They let the woman look for the last time at her husband through the hole in the door."

Fred put his head between his hands. "He tried to murder her and yet she came to see him," he muttered, almost inaudibly. "I dare say he abused her in his day, too."

The woman gave him a sharp glance. "You're married, aren't you?"

He looked up suddenly, reading the inference in her question. "Yes ... but my wife won't come..."

The nurse left the room and he put his face in his hands again. The sun was traveling swiftly. He shifted his position so that he could get the full benefit of its warmth. He thought that he had banished the memory of Helen Starratt forever, but he found his mind re-creating that final scene with her in all its relentless bitterness... She had come that day to save her conscience ... to pay

her title to form and respectability ... perhaps moved to fleeting pity. He had seen through every word, every gesture, every glance. Her transparency was loathsome. Why did he read her so perfectly now? Was it because she felt herself too secure for further veilings, or had his eyes been suddenly opened?

She was not flaming nor reckless nor consumed utterly; instead, there was a complacent coolness about her, as if passion had drawn every warmth within her for its own consummation. She had still her instincts in the leash of calculation, going through the motions of conventionality. The lifted eyebrows and curling lip which she had directed at Ginger's departing figure were not inconsistent. Dissimulation was such an art with her that it was unconscious.

He had asked her only one question:

"And how is Mrs. Hilmer?"

Even now he shuddered at the completeness with which her words betrayed her.

"There is no change ... we are simply waiting."

He had turned away from this crowning disclosure. _Waiting_? No wonder she could veil her desire in such disarming patience! He had intended asking her plans. Now it was unnecessary. And he had thought at once of that last night when he had called at Hilmer's, remembering the sprawling magazine on the floor, the bowl of wanton flowers upon the mantelshelf, the debonairly flung mandarin skirt clinging to the piano--these had been the first marks of conquest.

As she was leaving she had said, "I shall see you again, of course."

In spite of its inconsistency he had sensed a certain habitual tenderness in her voice, as if custom were demanding its due. And, for a moment, the old bond between them touched him with its false warmth. But a swift revulsion swept him.

"Why bother?" he had thrown back at her.

"You mean you don't want me to come?"

"Yes, just that!"

He had taken her breath away, perhaps even wounded her, momentarily, but she had recovered herself quickly. Her smile had been full of the smug satisfaction of one who has washed his hands in public self-justification.

She had left soon after that passage at arms, achieving the grace to dispense with the empty formality of either a kiss or a farewell embrace... He remembered how he had flung up the window as if to clear the room of her poisonous presence...

To-day, sitting upon his narrow bed, instinctively following the patch of yellow sunlight as it gilded the gloom, he felt that the maniac next door had the better part. Of what use was reason when it ceased to function except in terms of withering unbelief?

He sat motionless for hours, waiting patiently for them to come and release him to sharper sorrows. He had a passive eagerness to taste bitterness to the lees... When he heard the door open finally he did not rise. He kept his face buried. A light footstep came nearer and he was conscious of the pressure of icy fingers upon his hands. He looked up. Ginger stood before him.

"I brought you some smokes," she said, simply, "but they wouldn't let me bring them in."

He tried to speak, but suddenly great sobs shook him.

She put her fingers in his hair, drawing him to his feet, and presently he felt her own tears splashing his cheek.

He was smiling when they finally came for him. But he felt weaker than ever, and as they walked out into the glare of the street he was glad to lean upon Ginger's arm. The sheriff's van was drawn up to the curb. Two deputies helped him in. He turned for a last look at Ginger. Her pale little face was twisted, but she waved a gay farewell. In a far corner of the lumbering machine Fred could see two catlike eyes glimmering. Slowly his gaze penetrated the gloom, and the figure of a battered man shaped itself, his two hands strapped to his sides. The deputies got in, the door was shut sharply, and the van shot forward.

In less than fifteen minutes they had reached the ferry.

The train was late, and it was long after nine o'clock when it pulled into the Fairview station. The day had been hot, and the breath of evening was bringing out grateful and cooling odors from the sunburnt stubble of the hillside as Fred Starratt and his keeper stepped upon the station platform. The insane Italian followed between two guards. An automobile swung toward them. They got in and rode through the thickening gloom for about three miles... Presently one of the deputies leaned toward Fred, pointing a finger in the direction of a cluster of lights, as he said:

"There's your future home, old man. Keep a stiff upper lip. You'll need all your grit."

CHAPTER XII

Fred Starratt rested surprisingly well that first night. But two weeks in the detention hospital had taken the sting out of institutional preliminaries. The officials at Fairview put him through precisely the same paces, except upon a somewhat larger scale. There was the selfsame questioning, the same yielding up of personal effects, the same inevitable bath. And almost the same solitary room, except that this one peered out upon the free world through a heavily barred window instead of through a skylight, and boasted a kitchen chair. He was to be alone then!... He thanked God for this solitude and slept.

He awoke at six o'clock to the clipped shriek of a whistle. Shortly after, a key turned in his door. There followed the sound of scores of bare feet pattering up and down the hall. Was it imagination or did

these muffled footfalls have an inhuman softness?... Suddenly his door flew open. He shrank beneath the bedclothes, peering out with one unscreened eye.

A knot of gesticulating and innocent madmen were gazing at him with all the simplicity of children. After a few moments, their curiosity satisfied, they pattered on their ghostly way again.

This, he afterward learned, was the daily morning inspection of newcomers.

Presently the whistle blew again and a bell sounded through the corridors. A rush of answering feet swept past; a great silence fell.

A half hour later a monstrous man with glittering eyes and clawlike fingers came in, carrying breakfast--a large dishpan filled with a slimy mush, two slices of dry bread, and a mound of greasy hash. Fred turned away with a movement of supreme disgust. The gigantic attendant laughed.

There came a call of, "All outside!" echoing through the halls; a rush of feet again, a hushed succeeding silence. The half-mad ogre went to the window and slyly beckoned Fred to follow. He crawled out of bed and took his place before the iron bars. The man pointed a skinny finger; Fred's gaze followed. He found himself looking down upon a stone-paved yard filled with loathsome human wreckage--gibbering cripples, drooling monsters, vacant-eyed corpses with only the motions of life. Some had their hands strapped to their sides, others were almost naked. They sang, shouted, and laughed, prayed or were silent, according to their mental infirmities. It was an inferno all the more horrible because of its reality, a relentless nightmare from which there was no awakening.

Fred heard the man at his side chuckling ferociously.

His tormentor was laughing with insane cruelty. "The bull pen! Ha, ha, ha!"

Fred made his way back to his bed. Midway he stopped.

"Does everybody ..." he began to stammer--"does everybody ... or only those who ..."

He broke off in despair. What could this mad giant tell him? But almost before the thought had escaped him his companion read his thought with uncanny precision.

"You think I don't know!" the man said, tapping his head significantly. "But everybody ... they all ask me the same question. Yes ... you'll take your turn, my friend. Don't be afraid. They'll give you the air in the bull pen, all right! Ha, ha, ha!" And with that he picked up the dishpan of untasted breakfast and hurried from the room.

Fred Starratt sank down upon the bed. His temples were throbbing and his body wet with an icy sweat.

* * * * *

He was roused by a vigorous but not ungentle tap upon the shoulder. He stumbled to his feet, shaking himself into a semblance of courage. But instead of the malevolent giant of the breakfast hour, a genial man of imposing bulk stood before him. "My name is Harrison," his visitor began, kindly; "I'm an assistant to the superintendent... Perhaps you'd like to tell me something about yourself?"

Fred drew back a trifle. "Must I?..."

Harrison smiled as he seated himself in the chair.

"No ... but they usually do ... after the first night... It helps, sometimes, to talk."

"I am afraid there's nothing to tell... I'm here, and I'll make the best of it..."

Fred wiped the clammy sweat from his forehead with a gesture of despair.

Harrison leaned forward. "Don't you feel well?" he inquired.

"It's nothing... I looked out into the yard this morning... I dare say one gets used to it--but for the moment... You have other yards, I suppose... That is, I sha'n't have to take the air there ... shall I ... in the bull pen?"

"It's usual ... for the first day or two. But perhaps in your case--" Harrison broke off. "However, I can't promise anything... If you'll come to the office I'll give you back your clothes."

They went into the office together and Fred received his clothing duly marked with his name and ward. But his shoes were withheld and in their place he was given a pair of mismatched slippers which proved too large. Harrison handed him two rag strips with which he tied them on. Looking down at the shapeless, flapping footgear, Fred Starratt felt his humiliation to be complete. He walked slowly back to his room.

The noise from the bull pen was deafening. He went to the window and steeled himself against the sight below... At first he shuddered, but gradually his hands became clenched, in answer to a rising determination. Why should he flinch from anything God himself could look upon?... He was still standing by the window when the gong for the midday meal sounded. The bull pen had long since been deserted and, with the foreground swept clean of its human excrescence, his purposeless gaze had wandered instinctively toward the promise of the forest-green hills in the distance.

He heard the familiar rush of feet toward the dining room and he was vaguely conscious that some one had halted before his door. He turned about. A young man, not over twenty-five, with a delicately chiseled face, was stepping into the room. As he drew closer Fred received the wistful impression of changing-blue eyes and a skin clear to the point of transparency. Fred met his visitor halfway.

"You came last night, didn't you?" the youth began, offering a shy hand. "I saw you this morning. I was in the crowd that looked you over just before breakfast... What are you here for?"

Fred lifted his hand and let it fall again. "I made a mess of things... And you?"

"Booze," the other replied, laconically. "I've been in three times... Let's go down to lunch." He slipped a friendly arm into Fred's and together they walked with the rushing throng into the dining room.

It was a small room, everything considered, with tables built around the four walls and one large table in the center that seated about twenty-five people. Starratt and his new-found friend discovered two vacant seats upon the rude bench in front of the center table and sat down. They were each given a plate upon which was a potato and a small piece of cold beef and the inevitable hunk of dry bread. A large pitcher of tea stood within reach. There was neither milk nor sugar nor butter in evidence. A tablespoon and a tin cup were next handed them. Fred felt a sudden nausea. He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he looked up his plate had been swept clean of food.

"You've got to watch sharp," the youth was saying. "They steal everything in sight if you let them... Here, have some of mine."

Fred made a gesture of refusal. "It doesn't matter," he explained. "I'm not hungry."

"You'd better eat something... Have some hot tea!"

It was a black, hair-raising brew, but Fred managed to force down a draught of it. About him on all sides men were tearing their meat with clawlike hands, digging their fangs into it in wolfish ferocity... A dishpan of rice was circulated. Fred took a few spoonfuls. Within fifteen minutes the meal was over and the dishpan, emptied of its rice, was passed again. Fred saw his companions flinging their spoons into it. He did likewise.

The youth arose. "Let's get out of this and have a smoke... I've got the makings."

A great surge of relief swept over Fred. A smoke! Somehow, he had forgotten that such a solace existed in this new world of terror and pain.

It appeared that the only place indoors where smoking was permitted was the lavatory, but when they reached the corridor they found a line forming ready to march out to take the air. They decided to wait and have their smoke in the open. Fred and his companion exchanged names. The youth was Felix Monet.

"I'm not sure whether you go out with us," Monet admitted, as they swung into place. "This crowd is bound for the front parade ground. It's not usual for newcomers to have that privilege."

Fred made no reply. The line of men shuffled forward.

"We go downstairs first for our shoes," the youth finished.

Presently they found themselves upon the ground floor, in a small room where an attendant distributed shoes and hats. It appeared that Fred's shoes were there, duly labeled. The man in charge made no objection to yielding them up.

"You must have a pull," Monet remarked, as Fred sat down upon a stool to draw on his shoes.

Fred shook his head in silence. Evidently the assistant superintendent had said a word for him. ... He was not to be put to the torture of the bull pen, then!

Outside, the air was warm and the sunlight dazzling. Fred felt a surge of red-blooded life sweep him as his quivering nostrils drank in the pungent odors from the midsummer foliage. Waves of heat floated wraithlike from the yellow stubble, bathing the distant hills in an arid-blue haze. At convenient intervals clumps of dark-green trees threw contrasting patches of shade upon the tawny, sun-bleached sod. But Fred ignored their cool invitation. He always had hated hot weather with all his coast-bred soul, but to-day a hunger for warmth possessed him completely.

Monet and he took a broad path which circled for about a quarter of a mile about the grounds. As they progressed, several joined them. Fred was introduced to each in turn, but he responded listlessly. Almost at once the newcomers hurled questions at him... Why was he there? ... How long was he in for? ... What did he think were the chances of escape? Inevitably, every conversation turned upon this last absorbing topic. These men seemed eager for confidences, they wanted to share their experiences, their grievances, their hopes. But Fred Starratt recoiled. He had not yet reached the stage when a thin trickle of words fell gratefully upon his ears. He had no desire to either hear or speak. All he craved was the healing silence of open spaces. But he was soon to learn that this new life held no such soul-cleansing solace. Gradually he fell a bit apart from his chattering comrades.

They passed an ill-kept croquet ground and some patches of garden where those who were so disposed could raise vegetables or flowers. There was something pathetic about the figures bending with childlike faith over their labor--attempting to make nature smile upon them. Without the vision of the bull pen Fred Starratt would have found much that afternoon that was revolting. But one glimpse into the horrible inferno of the morning had made him less sensitive to milder impressions.

After a while Monet detached himself from the rest of the walking throng and fell back with Starratt. He seemed to have an instinctive gift for sensing moods, and Fred was grateful for his silence.

They were passing by a two-story concrete building in the Colonial style when Monet touched Fred's arm.

"That's the famous Ward Six," Monet explained, softly. "You'll get there finally if you work it right... It's not heaven ... but alongside the other wards it comes pretty near being."

They turned about shortly after this and began to retrace their steps. Presently a man came in sight, pulling a cardboard box mounted upon four spools.

"An inventor," Monet said, as Fred threw out a questioning glance. "He has an idea that he's perfected a wonderful automobile... You'll get used to them after a while."

A little farther on they met a haughty-looking Japanese coming toward them. Monet plucked at Fred's sleeve. "Better step to one side," he cautioned; "that fellow thinks he is the Emperor of Japan!"

Fred did as he was bidden and the Japanese swept past gloomily.

"Well, at least he's happy, in his own way!" Monet commented, with a tinge of irony.

Soon after that another man passed, weeping bitterly.

"They call him the Weeping Willow," Monet explained. "He weeps because he can find no one who will kill him."

Fred shuddered.

By this time they had reached their starting point. Fred felt suddenly tired. "Let's rest a bit under the trees," he proposed.

Monet assented, and the two threw themselves into the first shade. Fred closed his eyes. He had a sense that he was dreaming--that all the scenes that he had witnessed these many days were unreal. Presently he would wake up to the old familiar ring of his alarm clock, and gradually all the outlines of his bedroom would shape themselves to his recovered senses... There would stand Helen by her dressing table, stooping down to the mirror's level as she popped her thick braids under her pink boudoir cap... In a few minutes the first whiffs of coffee would come floating in from the kitchenette. Then he would crawl slowly out from the warm bedclothes and stretch himself comfortably and give a sudden dash for the bathroom and his cold plunge. There would follow breakfast and the walk over the hill down to the office of Ford, Wetherbee & Co. in a mist-golden morning. And he would hear again the exchange of greetings, and find himself replying to the inevitable question:

"Well, what's new?"

With the equally inevitable answer:

"Not a thing in the world!"

Some one was shaking him. He gave a quick gasp that ended in a groan as he opened his eyes. Monet was bending over him.

"You've been asleep," his companion said. "Come, it's time to go in... The bell for supper has rung... And you were dreaming, too ... I knew that because you smiled!"

Fred Starratt grasped Monet's hand fervently.

"It was good of you to keep watch," he murmured.

Monet answered with a warm pressure. And at that moment something deep and indefinable passed between them ... a silent covenant too precious for words.

Fred Starratt rose to his feet.

"Let us go in!" he said.

* * * * *

At supper Fred Starratt nibbled at some dry bread and drank another strong draught of tea. But he had to force himself to even this scant compromise with expediency. There followed smoking in the lavatory and at seven o'clock the call to turn in. Fred scurried confidently to his cell-like room ... he was quite ready for solitude.

An attendant was moving about. "You sleep in the first dormitory to-night," he explained to Fred. "It's at the end of the hall."

Fred turned away in fresh despair.

Before the door of the first dormitory a number of men were undressing. Monet was in the group and a newspaper man named Clancy that Fred had met that afternoon. Fred stood a moment in indecision.

"You'll have to strip out here," Monet said, in a matter-of-fact tone. "Just leave your clothes in a pile close against the wall."

Fred obeyed. The rest of the company regarded him with sinister curiosity. Except for Monet and Clancy all seemed obviously insane. One by one they filed into the room. Fred followed. Twelve spotlessly clean cots gleamed in the twilight.

The twelve men crawled into bed; the door was shut with a bang. Fred heard a key turn... They were locked in!

The ghostly day faded and night settled in. Fitful snorings and groans and incoherent mutterings broke the stillness. At intervals a man near the door would jump to his feet, proclaiming the end of the world. Sometimes his paroxysm was brief, but again he would keep up his leaping and solemn chanting until he fell to the floor in sheer exhaustion... Gradually even he became quiet, and nothing was audible except heavy breathing and the sound of the watchman in the corridor as he passed by regularly, flashing his light into the room through the slits in the door.

Fred Starratt did not close his eyes.

CHAPTER XIII

The first week passed in an inferno of idleness. Fred Starratt grew to envy even the wretches who were permitted to carry swill to the pigs. There once had been a time in his life when ambition had pricked him with a desire for affluent ease... He had been grounded in the religious conviction that work had been wished upon a defenseless humanity as a curse. He still remembered his Sabbath-school stories, particularly the scornful text with which the Lord had banished those two erring souls from Eden. Henceforth they were to work! To earn their bread by the sweat of their brows! He had a feeling now that either God had been tricked into granting a boon or else the scowl

which had accompanied the tirade had been the scowl that a genial Father threw at his children merely for the sake of seeming impressive. At heart the good Lord must have had only admiration for these two souls who refused to be beguiled by all the slothful ease of Eden, preferring to take their chances in a world of their own making... And he began to question, too, either the beauty or contentment of the heaven which offered the vacuous delights of idleness. It seemed, perhaps, that the theologians had mixed their revelations, and that the paradise they offered so glibly was really a sinister hell in disguise.

After the first day the sights which had sent shudders through him gradually began to assume the inevitability of custom. Even the vision of the Weeping Willow, sorrowing at death withheld, failed to shake him. The third night he slept undisturbed in the lap of frenzy and madness. There was something at once pathetic and sublime in his adaptability to the broken suits of fortune. He was learning what every man learns sooner or later--to play the hand that is dealt, even in the face of a losing game.

Deep within him he found two opposing currents struggling for mastery--one an overwhelming tide of disillusionment, the other a faith in things hitherto withheld. Against the uncloaked figures of Helen Starratt and Hilmer loomed Ginger and Monet. Did life always yield compensations, if one had the wit to discern them? In the still watches of the night, when some fleeting sound had waked him, he used to think of Ginger as he had thought when a child of some intangible and remote vision that he could sense, but not define. Would he ever see her again? Suddenly, one night, he realized that he did not even know her name... And Monet, who slept so quietly upon the cot next to him--what would he have done without his companionship? He used to raise himself on his elbow at times and look in the ghostly light of morning at Monet's face, white and immobile, the thin and shapely lips parted ever so slightly, and marvel at the bland and childlike faith that was the basis of this almost breathless and inaudible sleep. Fred had made friendships in his life, warm, hand-clasping, shoulder-thumping friendships, but they had been of gradual unfolding. Never before had anyone walked full-grown into his affections.

On the third afternoon, sitting in the thick shade of a gracious tree, Monet had told Fred something of his story. He was of mixed breed--French and Italian, with a bit of Irish that had made him blue-eyed, and traces of English and some Dutch. A brood of races that were forever at war within him. And he had been a musician in the bargain, and this in the face of an implacable father who dealt in hides and tallow. There had been all the weakness and flaming and _naivete_ of a potential artist ground under the heel of a relentless sire. His mother was long since dead. The father had attempted to force the stream of desire from music to business. He had succeeded, after a fashion, but the youth had learned to escape from the dull pain of his slavery into a rosy and wine-red Eden. ... Three times he had been sent to Fairview "to kick the nonsense out of him!" to use his father's words. He was not embittered nor overwhelmed, but he was passive, stubbornly passive, as if he had all a lifetime to cross words with Monet, senior. It was inevitable that he would win in the end. He was a child ... he always would be one ... and childhood might be cowed, but it was never really conquered. He was gentle, too, like a child, and sensitive. Yet the horrors which surrounded him seemed to leave him untroubled. It could not be that he was insensible to

ugliness, but he rose above it on the wings of some inner beauty... Once Fred Starratt would have felt some of the father's scorn for Felix Monet--the patronizing scorn most men bring to an estimate of the incomprehensible. What could one expect of a fiddler? Yes, he would have felt something worse than scorn--he would have been moved to tolerance.

The only other man in Ward 1 who was sane was Clancy, the newspaper reporter. But in the afternoons the knot of rational inmates from the famous Ward 6 herded together and exchanged griefs. Fred Starratt sat and listened, but he felt apart. Somehow, most of the stories did not ring quite true. He never had realized before how eager human beings were to deny all blame. To hear them one would fancy that the busy world had paused merely to single them out as targets for misfortune. And the more he listened to their doleful whines the more he turned the searching light of inquiry upon his own case. In the end, there was something beyond reserve and arrogance in the reply he would make to their direct inquiries:

"What brought me here? ... Myself!"

But his attitude singled him out for distrust. He was incomprehensible to these burden shifters, these men who had been trained to cast their load upon the nearest object and, failing everything else, upon the Lord... They were all either drug users or victims of drink. And, to a man, they were furiously in favor of prohibition with all the strength of their weak, dog-in-the-manger souls. Like every human being, they hated what they abused. They wanted to play the game of life with failure eliminated, and the god that they fashioned was a venerable old man who had the skill to worst them, but who genially let them walk away with victory.

As Fred Starratt listened day after day to their chatter he withdrew more and more from any mental contact with them. And yet there were times when he felt a longing to pour out his grief into the ears of understanding... He knew that Monet was waiting for his story, but pride still held him in its grip... After all, there was a ridiculous side to his plight. When a man permitted himself to be blindfolded he could not quarrel at being pushed and shoved and buffeted... How absurd he must have seemed to Watson on that day when he had announced so dramatically:

"I said I'd stand by Mrs. Starratt's decision. And I'm a man of my word!"

How much a man would endure simply for the sake of making a fine flourish! He had thought himself heroic at that moment, poor, empty fool that he was, when he really had been the victim of cowardice. A brave man would have cried:

"I said I'd stand by Mrs. Starratt's decision, but I'm not quite an idiot!"

One other topic flamed these poor souls, seeking to kindle a warmth of sympathy for their failures. When the lamentations ceased, they talked of flight. Fred Starratt sat mentally apart and listened. Everybody had a plan. They discussed prospects, previous attempts, chances for failure. Fred learned, among other things, that the search for escaped nationals did not extend much beyond the environs of Fairview. If a

man from Ward 6 made a good get-away he held his freedom, unless his kinsfolk constituted themselves a pack of moral bloodhounds. He realized now that there was nothing as relentless as family pride. It was not so much the alcoholic excess that was resented, but the fact that it led to unkept linen and dirty finger nails and, by the same token, to neighborhood scorn. Concern for a man's soul did not send him to Fairview... But was anybody really concerned for a man's soul? ... Why should they be? ... He ended by quarreling only with the pretense.

Escape! Escape! To get back to the world that they were forever reviling! Like men in the grip of some wanton mistress who could bring them neither happiness nor heroics, either in her company or away from her. Take Fordham, for instance, a lean, purple-faced clerk, who had been sent up for the third time by his wife after two sensational escapes. He hadn't disturbed her, looked her up, gone near her, in fact. But he had laid up alongside an amber-filled bottle in a moldy wine shop somewhere near the Barbary coast. Yes, he had achieved it even in the face of prohibition. And she had got wind of it. Folks had seen him, red-eyed and greasy-coated and bilious-hued, emerging from his haunt in some harsh noon that set him blinking, like a startled owl. Well, she couldn't quite have that, you know! She couldn't have her husband making a spectacle of himself, sinking lower and lower in the hell of his own choosing. No! Far better to pick out a hell for him ... a hell removed discreetly from the gaze of the scornful. ... And there was Wainright, who, like Monet, had a father. He had married a Runway Girl of the Bearcat Follies ... the sort that patters down from the stage to imprint carmine kisses and embarrassment upon the shining pate of the first old rounder that has an aisle seat. Well, father could not have that, either. He was impatient with the whole performance. Indeed, a less impatient man would have waited and watched Wainright, junior, wind himself in the net which his own hands had set. Instead, he went to the trouble of digging a pit for his son which hastened the inevitable, but did not cure the folly... Wainright had escaped, too, quite casually, one fine spring day when he had been sent out to the barn to help milk the cows. The Runway Girl, in need of publicity, had telegraphed the details to her press agent, following receipt of her husband's letter telling of his exploit. A Runway Girl whose husband-lover broke jail, so to speak, for her, had professional assets that could not be gainsaid.

And so the story was flashed on the front page of every newspaper in the country, with the result that father dug another pit.

And so tale succeeded tale. Fred grew to accept most of them with large dashes of salt. Not that he doubted the broader strokes with which the effects were achieved, but he mistrusted that many of the finer shadings had been discreetly painted out. He was learning that there was nothing so essentially untruthful as a studied veracity... Had not he tricked himself with just such carefully heightened details? What he had mistaken for a background of solid truth had proved nothing but pasteboard scenery flooded with a semblance of reality achieved by skillful manipulation of spotlights. He had been satisfied with the illusion because he had wished for nothing better. And at this moment he was more desolate than any in this sad company, because he seemed the only one who had lost the art of escaping into a world of lies. He had no more spotlights to manipulate. He sat in a gloomy playhouse and he heard only confused voices coming from the stage. He was not even sorry for himself. Whether he was sorry for

others he could not yet determine.

One afternoon at the close of the first week, as he was walking back to Ward 1 with Monet, following one of these inevitable experience meetings, he turned to the youth and said:

"You have been here three times now. Have you never thought of escape?"

Monet shrugged. "Yes ... in a way. But I'm no great hand at doing things alone."

They walked on in silence. Finally Fred spoke.

"Suppose you and I try it sometime? ... It will give us something to think about... But we'll go slow. It will just be a game, you understand."

Monet's eyes lit up and his breath came quickly between his parted lips. "You're splendid to me!" he cried. "But the others--you seem to hate them. Why?"

Fred kicked a fallen branch out of his path. "They whine too much!" he muttered.

The boy was right, he did hate them!

At the office he found that a package had come for him in the mail, and a letter. Both had been opened by the authorities. He read the letter first. It was from Helen. She had heard that cigarettes were a great solace to men in his situation, and so she had sent him a large carton of them. She expressed the hope that everything was going well, and she filled the rest of her letter with gossip of the Hilmer's. Mrs. Hilmer was a little better and she was wheeling her out on fine days just in front of the house. The nurse had gone and she was doing everything. But these people had been so good to her! What else was there left to do? She ended with a restrained dignity. She offered neither sympathy nor reproaches. Fred had to concede that it was a master stroke of implied martyrdom. He flung the letter into the nearest wastebasket. He had an impulse to do the same thing with the cigarettes, but the thought of Monet's pleasure in them restrained him. He took the package to the dormitory. Monet had gone up before him.

Fred threw his burden on Monet's bed. The youth gave a low whistle of delight.

"Pall Malls!" he cried, incredulously. "Where did you get them?"

"They came from my wife."

"Oh! ... Don't you want any of them?"

"No."

At the smoking hour Fred saw Monet take out his pitiful little bag of cheap tobacco and roll the usual cigarette.

"What? ... Aren't you smoking Pall Malls?" he asked, with a shade of

banter in his voice.

Monet shook his head. "I don't want them, either... What shall we do? Give them to the others?"

Fred stared through a sudden mist. "Why--yes. Just whatever you like."

That night, when everyone else was asleep, Fred Starratt told Felix Monet his story...

CHAPTER XIV

One morning, at the beginning of the second week of Fred Starratt's stay at Fairview, as he and Monet were swinging back to lunch after a brisk walk, they received orders to fall in line with the inmates of Ward 6.

"Things will be better now," Monet said, with his usual air of quiet reassurance.

And so it proved.

Fred's first introduction was to the dining room. It was not an extraordinary place, and yet Fred gave a little gasp as he entered it and stood staring almost foolishly at the tables set with clean linen. Three of its sides were made up almost entirely of windows, before which the shades were drawn to shut out the hot noonday sun, and its floor of polished hardwood glistened even in the subdued light. They sat down in the first seats that came to hand, and it was not until some cold meat was passed that Fred discovered a knife and fork at his place. The meat was neither choice nor dainty, but somehow just the fact of this knife and fork gave it extraordinary zest. Later on, small pats of butter were circulated and a spoonful of sugar apiece for the tea. And once again he listened to people talk while they ate ... heard a subdued, but sane, laugh or two... There was a smoking room also, not overlarge, but adequate.

The inmates of Ward 6, from whom Fred had stood aloof, welcomed him warmly. He was at a loss to know why until Monet explained.

"It's the cigarettes."

"Ah, then you distributed them here? I thought they went to the other poor devils."

The youth turned a wistful glance toward him. "I knew you'd get over to this place finally ... and I wanted them to like you..."

Fred fell silent over the implied rebuke.

The dormitories were large and light and airy and scrupulously clean, but the usual institutional chill pervaded everything... Yet, for a season, Fred Starratt found all discrimination smothered in his reaction to normal sights and sounds. But, after a day or two, the same human adaptability that had made him accept the life in Ward 1 as

a matter of course rose to the new environment and occasion. Presently his critical faculty flooded back again--almost for the first time since his arrest. And he knew instinctively that he was standing again on surer ground. He began to wonder, for instance, just what the commonwealth was doing for these human derelicts which it shed such facile tears over... He knew, of course, what it had done in his case. It had given him three indifferent meals, vaccinated him, put him through a few stereotyped quizzes to assure itself that he was neither insane nor criminal, and finally moved him on to a less trying but an equally vacuous existence. He used to wonder just what tortures the others had endured during that week of probation in Ward 1, which, in nearly every case, so far as he could learn, included the experience of the bull pen. For, after all, these other men were physically shaken from excess--weak, spent, tremulous. He had been through mental tortures, but, at least, his body and soul had had some fitness for the strain upon him. How close did the winds of madness come to snapping clean these empty reeds ... how many were broken utterly? He asked Monet.

"Lots of them go under," Felix Monet had returned. "I think I came very near it myself... I remember that first night I spent alone in Ward One... I'd been three weeks without a drop of anything to drink. Cut off, suddenly, like that!" He made a swift gesture. "And all at once I found myself in a madhouse. I actually knocked my head against the wall that night... And, in the morning, came the bull pen... They knew I wasn't insane. My record--everything--proved that! ... When I protested, their excuse was that everyone was equal here ... there were no favorites. ... More lies in the name of equality! The thing doesn't exist--it never has existed. Nothing is equal, and trying to make it so produces hell. They're always trying to level ... level. They want to strip you of everything but your flock mind. Ah yes, timid sheep make easy herding!"

For the first time Fred Starratt saw Monet quivering with unleashed conviction, and he glimpsed the hidden turbulence of spirit which churned under the placid surface.

"After a while," Monet went on, "when I got almost to the snapping point, they sent me to Ward Six. You know how it is--like a clear, cold plunge ... it wakes you up... There's a method in it all. They know that after a week in hell you find even purgatory desirable."

"And yet, once you got away, you traveled the same road that had brought you here in the first place... Was the game worth the candle?"

"It was an escape while it lasted, even though it did lead me to prison again... But isn't that where escape always leads? The world is a good deal like Fairview--a rule-ridden institution on a larger scale... We escape for a time in our work, in our play, in our loves, but the tether's pretty short. ... And finally, one day, death swings the door open and we go farther afield."

"To another institution with a little more garden space?" Fred queried, pensively.

Monet shrugged. "Perhaps... Who knows?"

* * * * *

There followed another week of idleness, and one day, as Fred Starratt was dawdling in the sun, Harrison came up to him and said:

"The head waiter in the dining room at Ward Six goes out to-morrow. Would you like his job?"

"Like it?" Fred found himself echoing, incredulously. "Can I begin at once ... now?"

Harrison chuckled with rare good nature. "Well, to-morrow, anyway. Just report in the kitchen after breakfast."

He could hardly wait for the next morning to come. He bungled things horribly at first. It looked easy enough from the side lines--bringing in the plates of steaming food, doling out sugar for the tea, passing the dishpan about at the end of the meal for the inmates to yield up their knives and forks. But after the first day Fred was swept with a healing humility. It was necessary for even the humblest occupation to be lighted with flickerings of skill.

He liked setting the table best, especially in the morning after the breakfast crowd had gone. Then the sun was not yet too hot for comfort and the long dining room was bathed in a golden mist. In a corner near one of the windows a canary hopped blithely about its bobbing cage and released its soul in a flood of song. He would begin by laying the plates first, inverted, in long, precise rows. Then carefully he would group the knives and forks about them. Not only carefully, but slowly, so that the task might not be accomplished too readily. And all the time his thoughts would be flying back and forth ... back and forth, like a weaver's shuttle. At first these thoughts would pound harshly; but gradually, under the spell of his busy hands, he would find his mental process growing less and less painful, until he would wake up suddenly and find that he had been day dreaming, escaping for a time into a heaven of forgetfulness.

Toward the end of the month a crew was picked among the inmates of Ward 6 to man a construction camp a few miles to the north where the state was building a dam. Clancy was among the number, and Fordham and Wainright, junior. Monet was offered the choice of assisting Fred Starratt in the dining room or going out with the kitchen staff to camp. He chose the dining-room job.

The only personal news from the outside world came to Fred in a weekly letter from Helen, which arrived every Saturday night. He used to tear the envelopes open viciously and read every word with cold disdain. He never thought of answering one ... indeed, many a time he had an impulse to send them back unopened. But curiosity always got the better hand. Not that he found her news of such moment, but her dissimulation fascinated him. She never chided him for not replying ... she never complained ... but every line was flavored with the self-justification of all essential falseness. She was playing a game with herself as completely as if she had written the letters and then scribbled her own name upon the envelope. She was looking forward to the day when she could say:

"I did my duty ... I helped start him in business ... I saved him from jail ... I wrote him a letter every week, in spite of the fact that he never answered me... What more would you have a woman do?"

What more, indeed? How completely he read her now! Yes, even between the lines of her nonchalant gossipings he could glimpse her soul in all its intricate completeness. Her letters were salt on his deadened wound. Perhaps that was why he did not return them unopened. He felt vaguely that it would be a shameful thing to be ultimately sealed to indifference.

But one Saturday night two letters were put into his hand. He read the strange one first.

I have not written you before because I had no news for you. Yesterday I passed Hilmer's house and saw your wife wheeling Mrs. Hilmer up and down the sidewalk. Some day when I get a chance I shall speak to Mrs. Hilmer.

I am living in a lodging house on Turk Street. My name is Sylvia Molineaux. You will find my address below. Write and tell me what you want. And always remember that I am here watching.

GINGER.

CHAPTER XV

Toward the middle of the following week Fred answered Ginger's letter. But his phrases were guarded and his description of life at the hospital full of studied distortion. He knew quite well that every letter which left the institution was opened and censored, but, with certain plans lying fallow in his brain, he had a method back of the exaggerated contentment he pictured. He had a feeling that Ginger would not be misled altogether. She knew the deceitful bravado of life too well and, according to her own report, something of the existence he was leading in the bargain. He found himself curiously willing to take anything from her hand that was in her power to supply. He felt no sense of awkwardness, no arrogant pride, no irritating obligation. She had become for him one of the definite, though unexplainable, facts of existence which he accepted with all the simplicity of a child of misfortune.

She answered promptly, sending cigarettes and tobacco and a pipe. But her letter was devoid of news---except that she had passed Hilmer's again and found Helen wheeling Mrs. Hilmer back and forth in the sunshine at the appointed hour. But, as time wore on, it transpired that this seemingly innocent passing and repassing of the Hilmer house carried unmistakable point. Presently, to Mrs. Hilmer, basking in the sun and deserted for a moment, Ginger had nodded a brief good-morning. There followed other opportunities for even more prolonged greetings until the moment when Ginger had boldly carried on a short conversation in the coldly calm presence of Helen Starratt. Helen must have known Ginger. It was inconceivable that any woman, under the circumstances, could have forgotten. But either indecision or a veiled purpose made her assume indifference, and Ginger's progress was registered in a short sentence at the end of a brief scrawl which said:

To-day I took a book out and read to Mrs. Hilmer for an hour in the sunshine.

And later another statement forwarded this curious drama with pregnant swiftness:

Yesterday, I told Mrs. Hilmer about you.

Fred read this sentence over and over again. To what purpose did Ginger discuss him with Mrs. Hilmer? ... Surely not altogether in the name of entertainment.

Meanwhile, summer died, hot and palpitant and arid to the end. And autumn came gently with cool, foggy mornings and days of sunshine mellowed like old gold. Fred Starratt rose in rapid succession to the position of pantryman, head waiter to the attendants, assistant bookkeeper in the office. He was given more and more freedom. Indeed, between the working intervals, undisturbed by even a formal surveillance, he and Monet fell to taking walks far afield. He found the shorter days more tolerable. With dusk coming on rapidly, it was easier to accept the inflexible rule that required everyone to be in bed and locked up by seven o'clock.

New faces made their appearance in Ward 6, old ones vanished. Clancy made a get-away sometime in September just before the construction camp broke up. Fordham tried also, but was unsuccessful, and got a month in the bull pen for his pains. These adventures stirred everyone to vague restlessness. Fred began to speculate on chances, talking them over with Monet. But the boy seemed listless and depressed, without enthusiasm for anything. He brooded a great deal apart. Finally one day Fred asked him what was troubling him.

"I miss my music," he said, briefly.

Fred prodded further. His need was, of course, for a violin.

"We'll write Ginger," Fred decided at once.

It had seemed quite a matter of course until he sat down with pen in hand and then he had a feeling that this last demand was excessive. He fancied she would achieve it somehow, and he was not mistaken. The violin came and, everything considered, it was not a bad one. Monet's joy was pathetic. Fred wrote back their thanks. "How did you manage it?" he asked.

Her reply was brief and significant: "You forget I know all kinds of people."

From the moment the violin arrived Monet was a changed man. Suddenly he became full of nervous reactions to everything about him. He lost all his sluggish indifference, he talked of flight now with fascinating ardor.

"When shall it be? Let us get out quickly. We can make our way easily with this!" he would cry, tapping the violin lovingly. "While I play on street corners you can collect the dimes and nickels."

Monet had meant to be absurd, of course, but Fred was finding nothing absurd or impossible these days. The youth's laughing suggestions

flamed him with a sudden yearning for vagabondage. He wanted, himself, to be up and off. But by this time October was upon them, ushered in by extraordinary rainfall. The coming rain gave him pause. He used to look searchingly at Monet's delicate face, and finally one day, in answer to the oft-repeated question, Fred replied:

"I think we'll have to stand it until spring... If we want to go east, over the mountains--this is no time."

They had often speculated as to a route. Most runaways took the road toward the coast and achieved capture even in the face of comparative indifference. The trails to the east led into the heart of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. With the first breath of autumn these byways, difficult of achievement in any case, became more and more impassable. And, while flight toward the west might be successful, it was too charged with a suggestion of failure to be tempting.

"We don't just want to _attempt_ to escape," Starratt used to explain. "We want to _do_ it!"

"But, spring!" Monet would echo. "That means May at the earliest. The mountain passes will be impossible even in April. Let's try!"

"Come, come! Why this sudden restlessness? I thought your music would be a solace. But it seems to have made you dissatisfied. I can't understand it."

"We live by desire! I am happy only when I am burning! When the flame is out there are only ashes."

Fred yielded finally to the extent of starting plans. Food was the first consideration. Monet was still in the dining room at Ward 6. About the first of November he began hoarding sugar and rice. A hollow tree in an obscure corner of the grounds back of the barns was the hiding place. Everyday a little more was added to the store. The process communicated a feeling of extraordinary interest to them both. Around this almost trivial circumstance whirled the shadows of infinite romance. Escape! At last these two men had a goal ... they were no longer drifting.

Once a week Fred continued to receive two letters--one from his wife and one from Ginger. It was curious to compare them--reading an ironical comedy between the lines ... creating the scenes that were being enacted by the triangle of women in front of the Hilmer dwelling every day in the early morning sunshine. For, as time went on, it appeared that Ginger walked through her inscrutable part with irritating fidelity--that is, irritating to Helen Starratt. It could not be otherwise, Fred decided, remembering the look of cool contempt which his wife had thrown at Ginger's departing figure on the day of their last interview. He saw Mrs. Hilmer only vaguely, in a half-light, and yet out of the fragmentary sentences he got a sense of something patient and brooding and terrible waiting an appointed season. She seemed to be sitting back like some veiled and mystic chorus, watching the duel of the other two and somehow shaping it to her passive purpose.

And where was Hilmer in it all? Somehow, in spite of his masculine virility, he seemed to have no place nor footing upon the narrow ledge of feminine subtleties. No doubt, as usual, he was proceeding in his

direct and complacent line, unaware of anything save the brutally obvious... Perhaps only the brutally obvious had any existence, perhaps Fred Starratt was spinning fantasies out of threads which came to his hand. He did not know, he could not say, but in the still watches of the night the figures of these three women circled round and round the seething caldron of the future like skinny witches upon a blasted heath.

Meanwhile, rain succeeded rain. Fred Starratt knew that escape was impossible under these conditions, but he let Monet chatter away and continue his hoarding. Thus they passed Thanksgiving, and suddenly Fred felt that Christmas would soon be upon them, with all its heartbreaking melancholy.

As Christmas drew near a bitter restlessness began to pervade Ward 6. The rain fell in torrents for days. There was little chance for fresh air or exercise except in the bull pen, which was provided with a shed that ran the length of the wall. Into this dismal and jail-like yard poured the entire human wreckage of Fairview. Fred and Monet went with the others for one or two days, but finally Monet said:

"Let's walk in the rain ... anything would be better than this."

And so the next day, waiting until a pelting shower had merged gradually into a faint mist, the two took a quick-step run about the parade ground. They came back splashed with mud and dripping wet, but their cheeks glowed and their hearts beat quickly. After that, no matter how violent the downpour, they managed to take a turn in the open. Sometimes they circled the grounds repeatedly. Again, if the rain proved too drenching, one short run was all they could achieve.

At the end of a week of such heroic exercising Monet said, significantly:

"You see how well I am standing this! Every day toughens us up... We ought to be leaving soon."

"After Christmas," Fred conceded, briefly.

There followed a brief respite of clear, crisp days, warming to mellowness at noon. After the midday meal everyone crawled out into the sunlight, standing in little shivering groups, while Monet played upon his violin. The cracked inventor, pulling his cardboard box on its ridiculous spools, stopped to listen; Weeping Willow forgot his grief and almost achieved a smile. Only the Emperor of Japan continued his pacing back and forth, his royal gloom untouched by any responsive chord.

But the reaction from this sedative of music was in every case violent. The remainder of the afternoon passed in tragic unquiet. One day Harrison called Fred aside. The assistant superintendent was daily yielding more and more to Fred's judgment.

"What do you think about a Christmas tree for Ward Six?"

For a moment Fred was uncertain. He knew the poignance of disturbing memories. But, in the end, he felt that perhaps the floodgate of grief had best be lifted. He knew by this time the cleansing solace of tears.

"We've never done it before," Harrison went on.

"There has been a prejudice against bringing old days back too clearly to these wretches... But Monet's been playing his music and they seem to like that."

It ended by Fred going out with Monet and one of the attendants into the hills and bringing back a beautiful fir tree. They set it up in a corner of the dining room and its bruised fragrance filled the entire building... There followed the problem of its trimming. At first some one suggested that it was more beautiful untricked with gauds, but to Fred, unlighted by any human touch its loveliness seemed too cold and impersonal and cruelly pagan. Presently the long afternoons were rilled with a pathetic bustle. Everyone became interested. They popped corn and strung it in snow-white garlands and some one from the kitchen sent in a bowl of cranberries which were woven into a blood-red necklace for the central branches. Harrison brought round a sack of walnuts and some liquid gilt and two brushes. Men began to quarrel good-naturedly for a chance at the gilding. A woman attendant, hearing about the tree, rode, herself, into the village and bought candles... Finally it was finished, and it stood in the early twilight of a dripping Christmas Eve, a fantastic captive from the hills, suffering its severe dignity to be melted in a cheap, but human, splendor... They had a late dinner by way of marking the event, and the usual turn of keys in the locks at seven o'clock was missing. At the close of the meal as they were bringing on plum pudding Fred rose from his place to light the candles... A little tremor ran through the room; Monet started to play... He played all the heartbreaking melodies--"Noel" and "Nazareth" and "Adeste Fideles." Slowly the tears began to trickle, but they fell silently, welling up from mysterious reaches too deep for shallow murmurings. Suddenly a thin, quavering voice started a song.

"God rest you, merry gentlemen!"

The first line rang out in all its tremulous bravery.

"_Merry_ gentlemen!" flashed through Fred's mind. "What mockery!"

But a swelling chorus took it up and in the next instant they were men again. They sang it all--every word to the last line ... repeating each stanza after the little man who had begun it and who had risen and taken his place beside Monet.

"Now to the Lord sing praises,
All you within this place,
And with true love and brotherhood
Each other now embrace,
This holy tide of Christmas
All other doth deface."

Only Fred remained silent. He could not sing, the bravery of it all smote him too deeply.

"This holy tide of Christmas
All other doth deface."

They were singing the last words over again.

Fred Starratt bowed his head. For the first and only time in his life he felt Christ very near. But the Presence passed as quickly. When he looked up the singing had ceased and the candles upon the tree were guttering to a pallid end. Monet laid down his violin and blew out the dying flames; his face was ashen and as he grasped the branches of the tree his hand shook. A man in front rose to his feet. Flockwise the others followed his lead. Christmas was over!... Fred Starratt had a sense that it had died still-born.

The next morning came wrapped in a dreadful silence. Men stood about in huddling groups and whispered. The exaltation of the night before had been too violent. A great dreariness oppressed Fred Starratt. He felt the inevitable sadness of a man who had met unveiled Beauty face to face and as speedily found the vision dissolved. The tree still swept the rooms and corridors with its fragrance, but in the harsh daylight its cheap trappings gave it a wanton look. Somehow, it mocked him, filled him with a sense of the vanity of life and all its fleeting impressions. The rain came down in a tremulous flood, investing everything with its colorless tears. The trees, the buildings, the very earth itself seemed to be melting away in silvery-gray grief.

Just before noon it lightened up a trifle and the rain stopped.

"Let's get out of this!" Monet said, sweeping the frozen assembly in the smoking room with an almost scornful glance.

They found their hats and without further ado they started on a swing about the grounds. It grew lighter and lighter ... it seemed for a moment as if the sun would presently peep out from the clouds. They achieved the full length of the parade ground and stopped, panting for breath. Fred wiped his forehead with a huge handkerchief.

"Shall we keep going?" he asked.

Monet nodded. They swung into a wolfish trot again, across a stretch of green turf, avoiding the clogging mud of the beaten trails. They said nothing. Presently their rhythmic flight settled down to a pleasurable monotony. They lost all sense of time and space.

Gradually their speed slackened, and they were conscious that they were winding up ... up... It was Monet who halted first. They were on a flat surface again, coming out of a thicket suddenly. There was a level sweep of ground, ending abruptly in space.

"We're on Squaw Rock!" Fred Starratt exclaimed.

The two went forward to the edge of a precipice. The embryo plain leaped violently down a sheer three hundred feet directly into the lap of a foaming river pool. Fred peered over.

"There's the usual Indian legend, isn't there," he asked Monet, "connected with this place?"

Monet moved back with a little shudder. "Yes ... I believe there is... The inevitable lovelorn maiden and the leap to death... Well, it's a good plunging place."

They both fell back a trifle, letting their gaze sweep the landscape below, which was unfolding in theatrical unreality. At that moment the sun came out, flooding the countryside with a flash of truant splendor. To the south nestled the cluster of hospital buildings, each sending out thin gray lines of smoke. Moving up the valley, hugging the sinuous banks of the river, a train nosed its impudent way.

"When shall we be leaving for good?" Monet asked, suddenly.

Fred let out a deep breath. "The first time it really clears!"

Monet rested his hand upon Fred's shoulder. "If we go east we'll have to cross the river."

"We'll follow the railroad track north for a mile or two. There's a crossing near Pritchard's. I saw it on the day we went after the tree."

The train pulled into the station and was whistling on its way again. The hospital automobile swung toward the grounds. Suddenly the sun was snuffed out again; it grew dark and lowering.

"We had better be on our way," Fred said, warningly. "It's going to pour in less than no time."

For a moment a silence fell between them, succeeded by an outburst from Monet.

"Let's keep on!" he cried, harshly. "Let's keep right on going! I don't want to go back. I won't, I tell you! I won't!"

Fred took him by the shoulders ... he was trembling violently. "Come ... come! We can't do that, you know!... We haven't provisions or proper clothing. And the rain, my boy! We'd die of exposure ... or ... worse!"

"I don't care!" Monet flung out, passionately. "I'm not afraid to die ... not in the open."

"And you haven't your violin," Fred put in, gently.

"I never want to play again--after last night. ... It was horrible ... horrible... '_God rest you, merry gentlemen_'!" What could have possessed them?"

"Come, now!... You'll feel better to-morrow... And I promise you on the first clear day we'll make it... The first morning we wake up and find a cloudless sky."

Fred moved forward, urging Monet to follow. The youth gave a little shiver and suffered Fred's guidance.

"If I go back now," he said, sadly, "it will be forever. I shall never leave."

Fred turned about and gave him a slight shake. "Nonsense! Last night made you morbid. Harrison ought to have known better. This is no place for Christmas! One day should be always like another."

Monet shook his head. "While they were sing ... something passed ... I can't describe it. But I grew cold all over ... I knew at once that... Oh, well! what's the use? You do not understand!"

He flung his hands up in a gesture of despair.

Fred looked up at the sky. It had grown ominously black. "We'd better speed up," he said, significantly.

Monet squared himself doggedly. "You run if you want to... It doesn't matter to me one way or another ... I feel tired."

The rain began to fall in great garrulous drops. Fred took Monet's sleeve between his fingers; slowly they retraced their steps. For a few yards the youth surrendered passively, but as Fred neared the thicket again he felt the sharp release of Monet's coat sleeve. He continued on his way... Suddenly he heard a noise of swift feet stirring up the rain-soaked leaves. He turned abruptly. Monet was running in the other direction--toward the precipice. A dreadful chill swept him. He tried to call, to run, but a great weakness transfixed him. The startled air made a foolish whistling sound. Monet's figure flew on in silence, gave a quick leaping movement, and was lost!

Fred Starratt crawled back toward the precipice. The rain descended in torrents and a wind rose to meet its violence. He looked down. The pool below was churning to whitecapped fury, releasing a flood of greedy and ferocious gurglings. Gradually a bitter silence fell and a gloom gathered. Everything went black as midnight...

He felt a cold blast playing through his hair. Instinctively he put his hand to his head. His hat was gone.

Suddenly it came to him that he would have to go back to Fairview ...
alone.

He rose to his feet. "North ... a mile or two!" he muttered. "If I can once cross the bridge!"

CHAPTER XVI

On a certain evening in February Fred Starratt, from the upper deck of a ferryboat, again saw the dusky outlines of San Francisco stretch themselves in faint allurements pricked with glittering splendor. It was a mild night--the skies clear, the air tinged with pleasant chill, the bay stilled to nocturnal quiet.

He had come out upon the upper deck to be alone. He wanted to approach the city of his birth in decent solitude, to feel the thrill of home-coming in all its poignant melancholy. He had expected the event to assume a special significance, to be fraught with hidden meaning, to set his pulses leaping. But he had to confess that neither the beauty of the night nor the uncommon quality of the event moved him. Had he been wrung dry of all emotional reaction? It was not until a woman came from the stuffy cabin and took a seat in a sheltered corner outside that he had the slightest realization of the nearness of his

old environment. As she passed close to his pacing form a sickly sweet odor enveloped him. He looked after her retreating figure. She was carrying a yellow armful of blossoming acacia. The perfume evoked a sad memory of virginal springs innumerable ... springs that seemed to go back wistfully beyond his own existence ... springs long dead and never to be revived. Dead? No, perhaps not quite that, but springs never to be again his portion. This perfume of the blossoming acacia ... how in the old days it had always brought home a sense of awakening, a sense of renewal to a land burned and seared and ravished in the hot and tearless passion of summer! Following the first rains would come the faint flush of green upon the hillsides, growing a little deeper as the healing floods released themselves, and then, one day, suddenly, almost overnight, the acacia would bend beneath a yellow burden, sending a swooning fragrance out to match the yellow sunlight of February. From that moment on the pageant was continuous, bud and blossom and virginal leaf succeeding one another in showering abundance. But nothing that followed quite matched the heavy beauty of these first golden boughs, nothing that could evoke quite the same infinite yearning for hidden and heroic destinies. He defined the spell of the perfume again, but he did not feel it. It shook his memory to its foundations, but it left his senses cold. And the city before him was as sharply revealed and as cruelly unmoving.

Suddenly he was done with a desire for solitude and he went below. A half score of men were idling upon the lower deck. He began his restless paces again, stroking his faded beard with a strangely white hand. Finally he stopped, gazing wistfully at the dark beauty of the ferry tower, sending its winsome shaft up into the quivering night. A man at his elbow began to speak in the characteristically Californian fashion about the weather.

"Yes," Fred assented, briefly, "it _is_ a fine night."

"Too fine," the stranger returned. "We need rain."

"Haven't you had much down this way, either?" Fred found himself inquiring, glad of a chance to escape for the moment into the commonplace.

"At the beginning of the season it came on a bit, but since Christmas there has been scarcely a drop. How does the country look?"

Fred leaned against a water barrel and continued to stroke his beard.

"Pretty well burned up. But the fruit trees will soon be blossoming in spite of everything... The worst of it is there isn't any snow in the mountains."

"Ah, then you've been up into the Sierras."

"Yes, since December... I had to make my way through the northern passes just after Christmas. Folks told me it couldn't be done... I guess it would have been almost impossible in a wet season. But things were the same way up north. No end of rain in the fall and none to speak of since the holidays. But at that I've been through some tough times... How are things in town?"

The stranger unbuttoned his shabby overcoat and took out a bag of tobacco. His indifferent suit and thick blue-flannel shirt, which

ordinarily would have stamped him as an artisan, was belied by the quality of his speech.

"Things are rotten. Everybody is striking. You can't get work anywhere except you want to scab... You'd better have stayed where you came from."

There was a tentative quality in this observation that roused in Fred a vague speculation. He had a feeling that the stranger was leading up cautiously to some subject. He looked again, this time sharply, at his companion of the moment. There was nothing extraordinary in the face except the eyes burning fitfully under the gloom of incredibly thick, coarse, reddish eyebrows. His mouth was a curious mixture of softness and cruelty, and his hands were broad, but not ungraceful.

"Well, if a man is starving he'll do almost anything, I guess," Fred returned, significantly.

"Do you mean that you would--if you were starving?"

"I'm starving now!" escaped Fred Starratt, almost involuntarily.

"I thought so," said the other, quietly.

"Why?"

"I've seen plenty of starving men in my day. I know the look. And you're suffering in the bargain. Not physically. But you've been through a hell of some kind. Am I right?"

"Yes ... you're quite right."

The boat was swinging into the slip. Already a crowd was moving down upon them.

"That's why I spoke to you. A man who's been through hell is like a field freshly broken to the plow. He's ready for seed."

Fred cast an ironical glance at the man before him. "And you, I suppose, are the sower," he said, mockingly. "A parson?"

The other laughed, disclosing greenish teeth. "Of a sort... Perhaps high priest would be nearer the truth. There's a certain purposeful cruelty about that term which appeals to me. I'm a bit of a fanatic, you know... But I like to get my recruits when they're bleeding raw. I like them when the salt of truth can sting deep... Wounds heal so quickly ... so disgustingly quickly."

He spat contemptuously and began to cram a blackened pipe to overflowing. The boat had landed and already the crowd was moving up the apron. Fred and his companion felt themselves urged forward by the pressure of this human tide.

"Come and have some coffee with me," Fred heard the man at his side say in a half-commanding tone. "My name is Storch. What shall I call you?"

"Anything you like!" Fred snapped, viciously.

The other laughed. "You're in capital form! Upon my word we'll get on famously together." And he spat again, this time with satisfaction and rare good humor.

Fred Starratt looked up. They had emerged suddenly from the uncertain twilight of a stone-flanked corridor into a harsh blue-white flood of electricity. A confused babble of noises fell upon his ears. He put out his hand instinctively and clutched the arm of the man at his side.

"Yes ... yes..." the voice of his companion broke in, reassuringly. "You're all right. In a moment ... after you've had coffee things will..."

He clutched again and presently, like a drowning man borne upon the waves by a superior force, he felt himself guided through a maze of confusing details, into swift and certain safety.

* * * * *

The coffee house into which Fred Starratt had been led by Storch was choked with men and the thick odor of coffee and fried ham. To a man who had eaten sparingly for days the smell of food was nauseating. Storch ordered coffee for himself and a bowl of soup for Fred. This last was a good choice in spite of the fact that for a moment Fred felt instinctive rebellion. These pale, watery messes were too suggestive of Fairview. But in the end the warm fluid dissipated his weakness and he began to experience a normal hunger.

Storch finished his cup of coffee and wiped a dark-brown ooze from his upper lip with a paper napkin.

"Better take a slice of bread or two," he advised Fred, "and then call it quits. You'll feel better in the long run. A starved stomach shouldn't be surprised with too much food."

Fred obeyed. He could see that this man understood many things.

Gradually the crowd thinned. Soon only Fred and Storch were left at the particular table that they had chosen. Stragglers came and went, but still Storch made no move to go, and Fred was equally inactive. He felt warm and comfortably drowsy and, on the whole, quite content. The waiter cleared away the empty dishes and then discreetly ignored them. Fred fell to studying his reflection in the polished mirror running the length of the room. He had to acknowledge that he looked savage, with his hair long and untidy and a bristling, sunburnt beard smothering his features. And suddenly, in the intensity of his concentration, he felt a swooning sense of nonexistence, as if his inner consciousness had detached itself somehow from the egotism of the flesh and stood apart, watching... He was recalled by Storch's voice. He shuddered slightly and turned his face toward his questioner.

"I didn't hear what you said," escaped him.

Storch leaned forward. "I was asking what you were doing ... up north in the mountains during December. Only a desperate man or a fool would take a chance like that... And I can see you're not a fool... There aren't any prisons up that way that I know of."

"_Prisons_! What do you mean?"

"You've escaped from somewhere."

"How do you know?"

"You're still furtive in spite of your pretended calm. I know the look. I know the feeling. I've seen scores of men who have been through the mill. I've been through the mill myself. Not once, but several times. I've been in nearly every jail in the country worth putting up at... Even the Federal prisons haven't been proof against me. I've beat them all. It's a game I like to play. Just as one man plunges into stocks, or another breaks strikes, or another leads a howling mob to victory... Every man has his game. What's yours?"

Fred shrugged. "Why are you telling me all this?" he countered. "You don't know me."

Storch laughed, showing his greenish teeth again. "What difference does that make?... I'm a pretty good judge of character, and I think I've got you right. You might play a rough game, but it would be square--according to your standards... I question most standards, but that is neither here nor there. They shackle some people extraordinarily. Just now you're drifting about without any. But you'll tie to some sort of anchor pretty soon... That's why you interest me. I want to get you while you're still drifting."

Fred felt a sudden chill. He was suspicious of this ironically genial man opposite him who bought him food and then prodded for his secret. There was something diabolical about the way he calmly admitted an impersonal but curiously definite interest.

"What is your business, anyway?" Fred shot out, suddenly.

"I'm a fisher for men," he replied, cryptically. "Some people build up ... others destroy. There must be always those who clear the ground--the wreckers, in other words... There's too much attention paid to building. Folks are in such a hurry they go about rearing all kinds of crazy structures on rotten foundations... I'm looking for some human dynamite to make a good job."

Fred drew back. "You've got me wrong," he said. "I'm not a radical."

"Not yet, of course. Your kind take a lot of punishment before they see the light. But you're a good prospect--a damned good prospect. You're a good deal like a young fellow I met last fall when I was working over in the shipyards in Oakland. He--"

"Shipyards?" interrupted Fred. "Not Hilmer's shipyards, by any chance?"

Storch leaned forward, drawing his shaggy eyebrows together. "Why?"

"I know Hilmer, that's all."

Storch continued his searching scrutiny. Fred felt uneasy--it seemed as if this man opposite him was drawing the innermost secret of his soul to the surface. Finally Storch rubbed his hands together with an

air of satisfaction as he said:

"So you know Hilmer!... That makes you all the more interesting... Well, well, let's be moving. I'll put you up for the night. I've got a shelter, such as it is."

Fred rose. He had an impulse to refuse. There was something uncanny about the power of Storch. He was at once fascinating and repulsive. But, on second thought, any shelter was better than a night spent on the streets. He had had two months of buffeting and he was ready for even an indifferent comfort.

He ended by going with his new-found friend. They trotted south along the Embarcadero, hugging the shadows close. This street, once noisy with a coarse, guzzling gayety, was silent. A few disconsolate men hung about the emasculated bars trying to rouse their sluggish spirits on colicky draughts of near beer and grape juice, but the effect was dismal and forbidding. Fred felt a great depression overwhelm him.

He had grown accustomed to the silence of the open spaces, but this silence of the city had a portentous quality which frightened him. It reminded him of that ominous quiet that had settled down on Fairview after that heartbreaking celebration on Christmas Eve. What were men doing with their idle moments? How were they escaping from the drab to-day? Did the crowded lobbies of the sailors' lodging houses spell the final word in the bleak entertainment that intolerance had left them? Upon one of the street corners a Salvation Army lassie harangued an indifferent handful. But there seemed nothing now from which to save these men except monotony, and religion of the fife-and-drum order was offering only a very dreary escape. Did the moral values of negative virtue make men any more admirable? he found himself wondering.

Storch led the way in silence. Finally they turned up toward the slopes of Rincon Hill. A cluster of shacks, clinging crazily to the tawny banks, loomed ahead in the darkness. Storch clambered along a beaten trail and presently he leaped toward the broader confines of a street which opened its arms abruptly to receive them. Fred followed. The thoroughfare upon which he found himself standing was little more than a lane, hedged on either side by crazy structures that nearly all had sprung to rambling life from one-roomed refugee shacks which had dotted the city after the fire and earthquake. Most of them were vine clad and brightened with beds of scarlet geraniums, but the house before which Storch halted rose uncompromisingly from the sun-baked ground without the charity of a covering. Storch turned the key and threw the door open, motioning Fred to enter. Fred did as he was bidden and found himself in a cluttered room, showing harshly in the light streaming in from a near-by street lamp. The air was foul with stale tobacco, refuse, and imprisoned odors of innumerable greasy meals and the sweaty apparel of men who work with their hands.

Storch lighted a lamp. A tumble-down couch stood against the wall, and in an opposite corner a heap of tattered quilts had been flung disdainfully. Tables and chairs and even the floor were piled with papers and cheaply covered books and tattered magazines.

Storch pointed to the couch. "You sleep there to-night. I'll roll up on the floor."

It never occurred to Fred to protest. The two began to shed their outer garments. Fred crawled in between the musty quilts. Storch blew out the lamp, and Fred saw him move toward the quilts in the corner. Without bothering to straighten them out he flung himself down and pulled a covering over him. The light from the street lamp continued to flood the room. Presently Fred heard Storch chuckling.

"So you know Hilmer!" he was repeating again, making a sound of satisfaction, as one does over a succulent morsel. "Well ... well ... fancy how things turn out!"

Fred made no reply, and after a time a gentle snoring told that Storch had fallen asleep.

Fred tossed about, oppressed by the close air. But, in the end, even he fell into a series of fitful dozes. He dreamed the room in which he was sleeping was suddenly transformed into a huge spider web from which there was no escape. And he caught glimpses of Storch himself hanging spider-wise from a gossamer thread, spinning dizzily in midair... He awoke repeatedly, returning as often to the same dream. Toward morning he heard a faint stirring about. But he lay huddled in a pretense of sleep... Finally the door banged and he knew that Storch had left... He let out a profound sigh and turned his face from the light...

CHAPTER XVII

When Fred Starratt awoke a noonday sun was flooding in at the single window. Consciousness brought no confusion ... he was beginning to grow accustomed to sudden shifts in fortune and strange environments had long since ceased to be a waking novelty. Outside he could hear the genial noises of a thickly populated lane--shrilly cried bits of neighborhood gossip bandied from doorstep to doorstep ... the laughter of children ... the call of a junkman ... even a smothered cackling from some captive hen fulfilling its joyful function in spite of restraint. He did not rise at once, but he lay there thinking, trying to force the realization that he was again in San Francisco... He wondered dimly at the power of the homing instinct that had driven him back. It was plain to him now that almost any other environment would have been materially better. He had had the whole state of California to choose from, indeed he might have flown even farther afield. But from the very beginning his feet had turned homeward with uncanny precision. On those first days and nights when he had lain huddled in any uncertain shelter that came to hand the one thought that had goaded him on was the promise of this return.

And those first hours of freedom had been at once the sweetest and the bitterest. Wet to the skin, starved, furtive, like a lean, dog-harried coyote he had achieved the mountains and safety more dead than alive. Looking back, he could see that only the sheerest madness had tempted him to flight in the first place. Without an ounce of provisions, without blankets, at the start lacking even a hat, he had defied the elements and won. God was indeed tender with all fools and madmen!

He knew now that under ordinary circumstances he must have perished in

the mountain passes. But the weather had been warm there all during December and more rain than snow had fallen, keeping the beaten paths reasonably open... He had thought always of these snow-pent places as quite devoid of any life at the winter season, and he was amazed to find how many human beings burrowed in and hibernated during the storm-bound months. Elsewhere, the skulking traveler received a chary welcome, but in the silent fastness of the hills latchstring and hearthstone and tobacco store were for genial sharing. In almost any one of these log shelters that he chanced upon he might have settled himself in content and found an indefinite welcome, but the urge to be up and on sent him forward to the next rude threshold. Thus mountain cabin succeeded mountain cabin until, presently, one day Fred Starratt found himself swinging down to the plains again--to the broad-bosomed valleys lying parched and expectant under the cruel spell of drought. Now people regarded him suspiciously, dogs snapped at his heels, and farmers' women thrust him doles of food through half-opened kitchen doors. Here and there he picked up a stray job or two. But he was plainly inefficient for most tasks assigned him... In the small towns there were not enough jobs to go round ... young men were returning from overseas and dislodging the incompetents who had achieved prosperity because of the labor shortage. The inland cities were in the grip of strikes ... there were plenty of jobs, but few with the temerity to attempt to fill them. And, besides, what had Fred Starratt to offer in the way either of skill or brawn?... He grew to know the meaning of impotence. No, he was a creature of the paved streets, and to the paved streets he returned as swiftly as his feet and his indifferent fortune could carry him. Besides, he had grown hungry for familiar sights and faces, and perhaps, down deep, curiosity had been the mainspring of his return. Even bitter ties have a pull that cannot always be denied. At Fairview the presence of Monet had held him almost a willing captive. There was something about the flame burning in that almost frail body that had lighted even the ugliness of Fairview with a strange beauty. He could not think of him as dead. That last moment had been too tinged with the haunting poetry of life. How often he had reconstructed that scene--the gray, sullen rain pattering on the spent leaves, the quick-rushing sound of a body in flight, the sudden leap of a soul toward greater freedom! And then the vision of the churning pool below closing in triumphantly as it might have done upon some reclaimed pagan creature that had tasted the bitter wine of exile and returned in leaping joy to its chosen element! It was not the shock and sadness of death that had sent Fred Starratt for a moment stark mad into the storm and freedom, but rather an ecstasy of loneliness ... a yearning to match daring with daring.

And now he was home again, in his own gray-green city, lying beneath tattered quilts in a hovel, with the selfsame February sun that had once pricked him to a spiritual adventure flooding in upon him! He rose and threw open the door. The soft noontide air floated in, displacing the fetid atmosphere. He looked about the room searchingly. In the daylight it seemed even more unkempt, but less forbidding. A two-burner kerosene stove stood upon an empty box just under the window. On another upturned box at its side lay a few odds and ends of cooking utensils, shriveling bits of food, a plate or two. He found a loaf of dry bread and cut a slice from it. This, together with a glass of water, completed his breakfast.

He tried to brush his weather-beaten clothes into decency with a stump of a whisk broom and to wipe the dust of the highroad from his almost spent shoes. But, somehow, these feeble attempts at gentility seemed

to increase his forlorn appearance.

He went over and straightened out the bedcoverings. At least he would leave the couch in some semblance of order. What did Storch expect him to do? Come back again for shelter? He had no plans, but as he went out, banging the door, he felt no wish to return.

His first thought now was to see Ginger. He went to the Turk Street address. He found a huge frame mansion of the 'eighties converted into cheap lodgings. The landlady, wearing large jet and gold ornaments, eyed him suspiciously. Miss Molineaux no longer lived there. Her present address? She had left none. Thus dismissed, he turned his steps toward the Hilmer's'.

He had expected to come upon the vision of his wife wheeling Mrs. Hilmer up and down the sidewalk, and yet, when these expectations were realized, he experienced a shock. There she was, Helen Starratt, in a black dress and a black hat, pacing with drab patience the full length of the block and back again. He could not get a good view of her face because her hat shaded her eyes. Mrs. Hilmer's figure, equally indistinct, was a shapeless mass of humanity. A child, coming out of a nearby house with a pair of roller skates in her hand, stood off and answered his questions, at first reluctantly, but finally with the importance of encouraged childhood... Who was the lady in the wheeled chair? Mrs. Hilmer. And the other one in black? Her name was Starratt. No, she didn't know her very well. But people said she was very sad. She dressed in black and looked unhappy. Why? Because her husband was dead. No, there was no mistake--she had heard her mother say so many times--Mrs. Starratt's husband was dead, quite dead!...

He turned back toward town. _Dead, quite dead_! Well, the child had reckoned better than she knew!

He retraced his steps slowly, resting upon many hospitable doorsteps that afternoon. The noise of the city confused him, the stone pavements hurt his ankles, he was hungry and faint. He did not know what to do or where to go. Only one shelter lay open to him. Should he go back to Storch?

Finally, toward five o'clock, he found himself standing upon the corner of California and Montgomery streets, watching the tide of office workers flooding homeward. A truant animation was flaming them briefly. Familiar face after familiar face passed, lighted with the joy of sudden release from servitude. Fred Starratt was curiously unmoved. He had fancied that he would feel a great yearning toward all this well-ordered sanity. He had fancied that he would be overwhelmed with memories, with regrets, with futile tears. But he knew now that even if it were possible to re-enter the world in which he had once moved he would refuse scornfully. Was it always so with those who achieved death? Ah yes, death was the great progression, one never re-entered the circle of life one quitted. Dead, quite dead! Or, as Storch put it, "A field freshly broken to the plow!" A field awaiting the eternal upspringing and the inevitable harvest... And so on, again and again, to the end of time!

He came out of his musings with a renewed sense of faintness and the realization that the street was rapidly being emptied of its throng. A few stragglers hurried toward the ferry. He roused himself. A green-gold light was enlivening the west and giving a ghostly

unreality to the street lamps twinkling in a premature blossoming.

He was turning to go when he saw a familiar figure coming up the street. He looked twice to assure himself that he was not mistaken. It was Brauer!

He stood a moment longer, roused to indifferent curiosity, but, as Brauer brushed close, a sudden malevolent hatred shook him. He squared himself and said in a hoarse tone:

"I'm starving... I want money ... to eat!" Brauer turned a face of amazed and insolent incredulity toward Fred.

"Well, you won't get it from me!" he flung back.

Fred Starratt grasped Brauer's puny wrist in a ferocious grip.

"Oh yes, I will... Do you know who I am?"

"You? ... No... Let me go; you're hurting me!"

"Look at me closely!"

"I tell you I don't know you. Are you crazy?"

"Perhaps... I've been in an insane asylum... Now do you know who I am?"

Brauer fell back. "No," he breathed: "it can't be possible! Fred Starratt is dead."

Fred began to laugh. "You're right. But I want something to eat just the same. You're going to take me into Hjul's ... and buy me a meal. ... And after I've eaten perhaps you'll hear how I died and who killed me."

He could feel Brauer trembling in his grasp. A rising cruelty overwhelmed him. He flung Brauer from him with a gesture of contempt.

"Are we going to eat?" he asked, coldly.

"Yes ... whatever you say."

Fred nodded and together the two drifted down Montgomery Street.

Sitting over a generous platter of pot roast and spaghetti at Hjul's, with Brauer's pallid face staring up at him, Fred Starratt had the realization that there was at least one mouselike human to whom he could play the role of cat.

Brauer did not need to be prodded to speech. He told everything with the eagerness of a child caught in a fault and seeking to curry the favor of his questioner. He and Kendricks were placing all the Hilmer insurance. Yes, they were rebating--that went without saying. And what else lay at the bottom of Hilmer's generosity? Fred Starratt put the question insinuatingly. Ah yes, the little matter of standing by when Starratt had been sent to Fairview. No, Hilmer had made no demand, but he had advised Brauer to be firm--through his lawyer, of course ... a hint, nothing more--that some sort of example should be made of men

who...

Yes, that was just as it had happened.

"And you knew where they were sending me?" Fred was moved to demand, harshly.

"Well ... yes... But Hilmer's lawyer put it so convincingly... Everything was to be for the best."

"Including your share in the Hilmer business?"

Brauer had the grace to wince. "Well, there was nothing said absolutely."

"And what did you figure was Hilmer's reason for ... well, wanting me to summer at Fairview?"

Brauer toyed with a spoon. "There could only be one reason."

"Don't be afraid. You mean that my wife..."

"Yes ... just that!"

Fred Starratt had a sense that he should have been stirred to anger, but instead a great pity swept him, pity for a human being who could sell another so shamelessly and not have the grace to deny it. Yes, he realized now that there were times when a lie was the most self-respecting and admirable thing in the world.

"It appears that I am dead also. I saw my wife to-day mourning for me in the most respectable of weeds."

"Your hat, you see--it was found in the water ... not far from the dead body of your friend... Naturally..."

"Yes, naturally, the wish was father to the thought. Just so!"

And with that Fred Starratt laughed so unpleasantly that Brauer shivered and his face reddened.

By this time Fred Starratt had finished eating. Brauer paid the check and the two departed. At the first street corner Brauer attempted to slip a five-dollar bill into Starratt's hand. He refused scornfully.

"Money? I don't want your money. There is only one thing that will buy my good will--_your silence_. Do you understand what I mean? ... I'm not the same man you tricked last July. Then I thought I had everything to lose. Now I know that no one ever loses anything... You don't understand me, do you? ... Oh, well, it doesn't matter."

Brauer's frightened lips scarcely moved as he asked:

"Where are you staying?"

"Anywhere I can find a shelter... Last night I spent with an anarchist... I think he'd blow up almost anyone for just the sheer joy of it."

Brauer shuddered. "Where will you spend to-night?"

"I think I'll go back to the same place... This morning I was undecided. But I've heard a lot of things since then... I'm taking an interest in life again... By the way, the man I'm staying with knows Hilmer... And I don't think he likes him, either... I'll give you one tip, Brauer. Never get an anarchist sore at you... _They_ haven't anything to lose, either."

He had never seen such pallor as that which shook the color from Brauer's face. He decided not to torment him further.

He had established a sense of the unfathomable for the present and future terror of his trembling little ex-partner. His revenge, so far as Brauer was concerned, was complete. He had not the slightest wish to see Brauer again.

He let his hands close once more tightly about Brauer's puny wrists.

"Remember ... you have not seen me. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Not a living soul ... you are not to even suggest that ... otherwise ... well, I am living with an anarchist, and a word to the wise ..."

He turned abruptly and left his companion standing on the street corner, staring vacantly after him.

Instinctively his footsteps found their way to Storch's shack. A light was glimmering inside. Fred beat upon the door. It swung open quickly, revealing Storch's greenish teeth bared in a wide smile of satisfaction.

"Come in ... come in!" Storch cried out gayly. "Have a good day?"

"Excellent!" Fred snapped back, venomously. "I learned, among other things, that I am legally dead."

Storch rubbed his hands together in satisfaction. "A clean slate! Do you realize how wonderful it is, my man, to start fresh?"

Fred threw himself into a chair. He felt tired. Sharp, darting pains were stabbing his eyes. "I think I'm going to be ill!" he said, with sudden irrelevance.

Storch lighted the oil stove. "Crawl into bed and I'll get you something hot to drink!"

Storch's tone was kind to a point of softness, and yet, later, when he bent over the couch with a steaming glass in his hand Fred experienced a sharp revulsion.

"I dreamed all last night," Fred said, almost defiantly, "that this room was a cobweb and that you were a huge spider, dangling on a thread."

"And you were the fly, I suppose," Storch replied, sneeringly.

The next instant he had touched Fred's forehead gently, almost

tenderly, but his eyes glittered beneath their shaggy brows with an insane ferocity... Fred took the glass. He was too ill to care much one way or the other.

CHAPTER XVIII

Next morning Fred Starratt knew that he was too ill to rise. Then everything became hazy. He had moments of consciousness when he sensed Storch's figure moving in a sort of mist, flashing a green smile through the gloom. He saw other figures, too---Helen Starratt, swathed in clinging black; Hilmer, displaying his mangled thumb; Monet with eyes of gentle reproach; and Ginger, very vague and very wistful. There were times when the room seemed crowded with strange people who came and went and gesticulated, people gathering close to the dim lamp which Storch lighted at nightfall.

The visions of Monet were a curious mixture of shadow and reality. Sometimes he seemed very elusive, but, again, his face would grow clear to the point of dazzling brightness. At such moments Fred would screen his eyes and turn away, only in the end to catch a melting glimpse of Monet fading gradually with a gesture of resignation and regret. But slowly the outlines of Monet grew less and less tangible and the personality of Storch more and more shot through with warm-breathed vitality, and the strange company that gathered at dusk about the lamp became living things instead of shadows. Yet it took him some time to realize that these nightly gatherings at Storch's were composed of real flesh and blood.

At first he was content to lie in a drowse and listen to the incoherent babblings of these nocturnal visitors, but, as he grew stronger, detached bits of conversation began to impress themselves upon him. These people had each some pet grievance and it remained for Storch to pick upon the strings of their discontents with unerring accuracy. At about eight o'clock every night the first stragglers would drift in, reinforced by a steady stream, until midnight saw a room stuffed with sweating humanity releasing their emotions in a biting flood of protests. They protested at everything under the sun--at custom, at order, at work, at play, at love, at life itself. And Storch, for the most part silent, would sit with folded arms, puffing at his pipe, a suggestion of genial malice on his face, throwing out a phrase here and there that set the pack about him leaping like hungry dogs to the lure of food. In confused moments Fred Starratt fell to wondering whether he really had escaped from Fairview, whether the forms about him were not the same motley assembly that used to gather in the open and exchange whines. The wails now seemed keyed to howls of defiance, but the source was essentially the same.

Fred wondered how he lived through these dreadful evenings with the air thick to choking. Indeed, he used to wonder what had saved him from death at any stage of the game. Storch had permitted him the use of a maggoty couch, had shared scraps of indifferent food at irregular intervals, and set a cracked pitcher of water within reach. But beyond that, he had been ignored. The nightly assembly did not even cast their glances his way.

During the day Fred was left alone for the most part, and he felt a certain luxury in this personal solitude after the months at Fairview with its unescapable human contacts. He would lie there, his ears still ringing with the echoes from the nightly gathering of malcontents, trying to reconstruct his own quarrel with life. He had a feeling that he would remain a silent onlooker only until Storch decreed otherwise. If he stayed long enough the night would come when Storch would call upon him for a testimonial of hatred. He knew that deep down somewhere within him rancors were stirring to sinister life. He had experienced the first glimmerings of cruelty in that moment when he had felt Brauer tremble under his grasp. What would have been his reaction to physical fear on Helen Starratt's part? Suppose on that afternoon when he had watched her wheeling Mrs. Hilmer up and down with deceitful patience he had gone over and struck her the blow which was primitively her portion? Would the sight of her whimpering fear have stirred him to further elemental cruelties? Would he have ended by killing her? ... Physically weak as he was, he could still feel the thrill of cruelty that had shaken him at the realization of Brauer's dismay. As a child, when a truant gust of devilry had swept him, he had felt the same satisfaction in pummeling a comrade who backed away from friendly cuffs turned instantly to blows of malice. Even now he had occasionally a desire to seek out Brauer again and worry him further. He was fearing indifference. What if, after all that he had suffered at the hands of others, he should find himself in the pale clutch of an impotent indifference? He felt a certain shame back of the possibility, and at such moments the words of Storch used to ring in his ears:

"Wounds heal so quickly ... so disgustingly quickly!"

And again, watching Storch at night, touching the quivering cords which might otherwise have rusted in inactive silence, he remembered further the introduction to this contemptuous phrase:

"I like to get my recruits when they're bleeding raw. I like them when the salt of truth can sting deep..."

How Storch lived Fred could only guess. But he managed always to jingle a silver coin or two and keep a crust of bread in the house. His fare was frugal to the point of being ascetic. Once or twice, as if moved by Fred's physical weakness, he brought some scraps of beef home and brewed a few cups of steaming bouillon, and again, one Sunday morning he went out and bought a half dozen eggs which he converted into an impossibly tough omelet. But for the most part he lived on coffee and fresh French bread and cheese. It was on this incredible fare that Fred Starratt won back his strength. His exhaustion was an exhaustion of the spirit, and food seemed to have little part in either his disorder or his recovery.

Whatever Storch's specific grievance with life, he never voiced it and in this he won Fred's admiration. He liked to jangle the discordant passions of others, but his own he muffled into complete silence. He had worked at almost every known calling. It seemed that he came and disappeared always as suddenly and in his wake a furrow of men harrowed to supreme unrest yielded up a harvest sown of dragon's teeth. He was an idea made flesh, patient, relentless, almost intangible. He flashed upon new horizons like a cloud from the south and he vanished as completely once he had revived hatred with his

insinuating showers. He was, as he had said on that first meeting with Fred, a fanatic, a high priest. He called many, but he chose few.

One night after the others had left Fred said to him:

"Do you realize what you are doing? ... You are working up these men to a frenzy. Some morning we shall wake to find murder done."

"How quickly you are learning," Storch answered, flinging his coat aside.

"Are you fair?" Fred went on, passionately. "If you have your convictions, why not risk your own hide to prove them? Why make cats'-paws of the others?"

Storch took out his pipe and lighted it deliberately. "Prospective martyrs are as plentiful as fish in a net," he answered. "Of what good is the sea's yield without fishermen? ... I sacrifice myself and who takes my place? Will you?"

Fred turned on him suddenly. "You are not training me to be your successor, I hope," he said, with a slight sneer. "Because I lie here without protest is no reason that I approve. Indeed, I wonder sometimes if I do quite right to permit all this... There are authorities, you know."

Storch looked at him steadily. "The door is open, my friend."

Fred gave a little gesture of resignation.

"You know perfectly well that I'm not built to betray the man who gives me shelter."

"Oh, I'm not sheltering you for love!"

"You have some purpose, of course. I understand that. But you're wasting time."

"Well, I'll risk it... I know well enough you're not a man easily won to an abstract hatred... But a personal hatred very often serves as good a turn... Everything is grist to my mill."

"A personal hatred?" echoed Fred.

Storch blew out the light.

"You're duller than I thought," he called through the gloom.

Fred turned his face away and tried to sleep.

The next day he decided to crawl out of bed and begin to win back his strength. He couldn't lie there forever sharing Storch's roof and crust. But the effort left him exhausted and he was soon glad to fling himself back upon the couch.

Each succeeding day he felt a little stronger, until the time came when he was able to drag himself to the open door and sit in the sunshine. He had never thought much about sunshine in the old days. A fine day had been something to be remarked, but scarcely hoarded. With

the steam radiator working, it had not mattered so much whether the sun shone or not... He remembered the first time that a real sense of the sun's beauty had struck him--on that morning which now seemed so remote--when he had risen weakly from his cot at the detention hospital and made ready for exile at Fairview. Less than a year ago! How many things had assumed new values since then! Now, he could exploit every sunbeam to its minutest warmth, he could wring sustenance from a handful of crumbs, he knew what a cup of cold water meant. He was on speaking terms with hunger, he had been comrade to madness, he had looked upon sudden death, he was an outcast and, in a sense, a criminal. He felt that he could almost say with Hilmer:

"I know all the dirty, rotten things of life by direct contact."

All but murder--yet it had brushed close to him. Even now he could evoke the choking rage that had engulfed him on that night of his arrest when his defenseless cheek had reddened to the blow of humiliation. This had been, however, a flash of passion. But once, meeting a man who blocked his path in the first upper reaches of the hills, beyond Fairview, he had felt the even more primitive itch of self-preservation urging him to the ultimate crime. Would he end by going a step farther and planning the destruction of life in cold blood?

It was curious how constant association with a sensational idea dulled the edge of its novelty. The first time he had heard deliberate and passionless murder all but plotted in Storch's huddled room he had felt a quick heartbeat of instinctive protest. Had he been stronger at that moment he would have leaped to his feet in opposition. But the moment passed and when he heard the subject broached again he listened curiously. Finally he ceased to feel the slightest tremor of revolt. Was indifference always the first step toward surrender?

Finally Fred grew strong enough to desert his couch at evening. Up to this point he had been ignored by the nightly visitors, but now they made a place for him in the circle about the sputtering lamp. It seemed, also, that, with his active presence, the talk began to assume general point and direction. Storch had been giving them plenty of tether, but now he was beginning to pull up sharply, putting their windy theories to the test. They were for clearing the ground, were they? Well, so far so good. But generalities led nowhere. Why not something specific? Wasn't the time ripe for action--thousands of men, walking the streets, locked out because they dared to demand a decent and even break? And this in the face of all the altruistic rumble-bumble which war had evoked? He played this theme over and over again, and finally one night with an almost casual air he said:

"Take the shipyards, for instance ... forty-odd thousand men locked out while the owners lay plans to shackle them further. Now is the chance. Quit talking and get busy!"

It ended in a list being made of the chief offenders--owners, managers, irascible foremen. Fred Starratt listened like a man in a dream. When Hilmer was named he found himself shivering. These people were plotting murder now--cool, calm, passionless murder! There was something fascinating in the very nonchalance of it.

Storch's eyes glittered more and more savagely. He drew up plans, arranged incredible details, delivered specific offenders into the

hands of certain of his henchmen.

"You are responsible for this man, now," he used to fling at the chosen one. "How or where or when does not interest me--but get him, you understand, _get him_!"

One night a member said, significantly:

"Everybody's been picked but Hilmer... What's the matter, Storch, are you saving that plum for yourself?"

Storch rubbed his hands together, flashing a look at Fred.

"No... There's an option on Hilmer!" he cried, gleefully.

Fred tried to ignore the implication, but all night the suggestion burned itself into his brain. So some one was to get Hilmer, after all! Well, why not? Hilmer liked men with guts enough to fight--rabbit drives were not to his taste... Among all the names brought up and discussed at these sinister gatherings about Storch's round table Hilmer's stood out as the ultimate prize. No one spoke a good word for him and yet Fred had to admit that the revilings were flavored with a certain grudging respect. He was an open and consistent tyrant, at any rate.

An option on Hilmer! What a trick Storch had for illuminating phrases! ... And his divinations were uncanny. Why should he assume that Hilmer was in any way bound up in Fred Starratt's life?

The next morning Fred decided to chance a walk in the open. He had a vague wish to try his wings again, now that he had grown stronger. The situation reminded him remotely of Fairview on those first days when Monet and he had attempted to harden their muscles against the day of escape. But this time he was struggling to free himself from a personality, from an idea. He must leave Storch and his motley brood as soon as possible; somehow the acid of their ruthless philosophy was eating away the remnants of any inner beauty which had been left him. At first he had been all revolt, but now there were swift moments in which he asked himself what quarrel he could have with any blows struck at authority. What had established order done for him? Acted as a screen for villainy and inconstancy for the most part.

He turned all this over in his mind as he slunk furtively along the water front, trying vaguely to shape a plan of action. He felt himself to be a very unusual and almost terrible figure, and yet no one paid any heed to him. His beard had lost its sunburned character and grown jet black, his face, and particularly his hands, were pale to transporence, his eyes burned too brightly in their sunken sockets. He was not even a ghost of his former self, but rather a sinister reincarnation. He felt that he was even more forbidding than on that night when he had sent Brauer shivering from his presence. He doubted whether Brauer would recognize him again, so subtle and marked was the change. He hardly recognized himself, and the transformation was not solely a matter of physical degeneration. No, there was something indefinable in the quality of his decline.

He fluttered about the town, at first aimlessly, like a defenseless fledgling thrust before its time from the nest. He was weak and tremulous and utterly miserable. Yet he felt compelled to go forward.

He must escape from Storch! _He must_!

The docks, usually full of bustle, were silent and almost deserted. Fred questioned a man loafing upon a pile of lumber. It appeared that a strike of stevedores was the cause of this outward sign of inactivity. Boats were being loaded quietly, but the process was furtive and sullen. Occasionally, out of the wide expanse of brooding indolence a knot of men would gather flockwise, and melt as quickly. There was an ominous quality in the swiftness with which these cloudlike groups congealed and disintegrated. The sinister blight of repression was over everything--repressed desires, repressed joys, repressed hatreds. It was almost as sad as the noonday silence of Fairview.

Fred slunk along in deep dejection. He wanted the color and life and bustle of accomplishment. A slight activity before one of the docks beguiled him from his depression. A passenger steamer was preparing for its appointed flight south and a knot of blue-coated policemen maintained a safe path from curb to dock entrance. Here was a touch of liveliness and gayety--the released laughter of people bent on a holiday, hopeful farewells called out heartily, taxicabs dashing up with exaggerated haste. He was warming himself at the flame of this genial pageant, when an opulent machine came rolling up to the curb. A sudden surge of arrivals had pressed into service every available porter, and the alighting occupants, a man and a woman, stood waiting for some one to help them with their luggage. Fred stared with impersonal curiosity. Then, as instinctively, he fell back. The man was Axel Hilmer and the woman was Helen Starratt! His shrinking movement must have singled him out for attention, because a policeman began to hustle him on, and the next instant he was conscious that Hilmer was calling in his voice of assured authority:

"Here, there, don't send that man away! I need some one to help me with these grips. This lady has got to catch the boat!"

The officer touched his hat respectfully and Fred felt himself gently impelled toward Helen Starratt. He did not have time to protest nor shape any plan of action. Instead, he answered Hilmer's imperious pantomime by grasping a suitcase in one hand and a valise in the other and staggering after them toward the waiting vessel.

They had arrived not a moment too soon; already the steamer was preparing to cast off. In the confusion which followed, Fred had very little sense of what was happening. He knew that a porter had relieved him of his burden and that Helen Starratt had pressed a silver coin into his hand. There was a scramble up the gangplank, a warning whistle, a chorus of farewell, and then silence... He had a realization that he had all but fainted--he looked up to find Hilmer at his side.

"What's the matter?" Hilmer was asking, brusquely. "Are you sick?"

He roused himself with a mighty effort.

"Yes."

"You look half starved, too... Why don't you go to work? Or are you one of those damned strikers?"

"No," he heard himself answer. "I'm just a man who's ... who's up against it."

Hilmer took out a card and scribbled on it.

"Here, look up my superintendent at the yard to-morrow. He'll give you a job. There's plenty of work for those who want it. But don't lose that card ... otherwise they won't let you see him."

Fred took the proffered pasteboard and as he did so his fingers closed over Hilmer's mangled thumb. He could feel himself trembling from head to foot... He waited until Hilmer was gone. Then he crawled slowly in the direction of the street again. Midway he felt some force impelling him to a backward glance. He turned about--a green smile betrayed Storch's sinister presence; Fred felt him swing close and whisper, triumphantly:

"That was your wife, wasn't it?"

"How do you know?"

"Never mind. Answer me--it was your wife?"

"Yes."

"How much did she give you?"

Fred looked down at the coin in his hand.

"Fifty cents."

"Fifty cents ... for carrying two grips a hundred yards... Well, she must have money... And she's taking a little trip south--for her health, I suppose!... I wonder when friend Hilmer will follow?"

Fred tried to draw away, but Storch's insinuating clutch was too firm.

"Let me go!" he half begged and half commanded. "What business is all this of yours?... Who has told you all this about me?"

Storch continued to hang upon Fred's arm. "You told me yourself."

"I told you? When?"

"You were delirious for a good week... Don't you suppose you babbled then?"

"How much do you know?"

"Nearly everything, _Fred Starratt_! Nearly everything."

"Even my name!"

"Yes, even that."

Fred stood still for a moment and he closed both his eyes.

"Let's go home!" he said, hopelessly.

He heard Storch's malevolent chuckle answering him.

When they arrived at Storch's shack Fred was exhausted. He threw himself at once upon the couch, drawing the tattered quilts over his head, and thus he lay all night in a semistupor. He heard the nightly gathering drift in, and there were times when its babble reached him in vague faraway echoes. He sensed its departure, too, and the fact that Storch was flinging himself upon the pile of rags which served as his bed. His sleep was broken by a harried idea that he was attempting to catch a steamer which forever eluded him, trotting aimlessly up and down a gangplank which led nowhere, picking up a litter that spilled continually from a suitcase in his hand. It was not a dreaming state, but the projection of the main events of the preceding day distorted by fancy.

Toward morning he fell into a heavy sleep. He did not hear Storch leave. He woke at intervals during the day and relapsed into delicious dozes. It was evening when he finally roused himself. He rose. He felt extraordinarily refreshed, stronger, in fact, than he had been for weeks. Storch came in shortly after. He had his inevitable loaf of crisp French bread and a slice of cheese and in his hip pocket he had smuggled a pint bottle of thin red wine.

Fred laid the table with the simple utensils that such a meal required and the two sat down. Storch poured out two glasses of wine.

"I have had great fun to-day!" Storch said, gulping his claret with a flourish. "They're on my track again. You should have seen how easily I gave them the slip! As a matter of fact there is nothing duller than a detective. He usually has learned every formula laid down for the conduct of criminals and if you don't run true to form he gets sore."

"You mean you're being watched--shadowed?"

"Just that."

"What do you intend to do?"

Storch shrugged. "Being arrested and jailed is losing its novelty. I'll stick around awhile longer until a pet job or two is accomplished... I'm particularly anxious to see Hilmer winged... What's your plan?"

"Plan?... I have no plan. I can't imagine what you're talking about. I know one thing, though ... I'm going to leave this place at once."

Storch smiled evilly. "Going to start plunging on that capital your wife threw your way yesterday?... Well, well, you've got more initiative than I thought... But, one piece of advice, my friend--the easiest way to walk into a trap is to suddenly try to change your habits ... to rush headlong in an opposite direction. You'd better stay here awhile and bluff it out. They'd gobble you in one mouthful."

Fred made no reply. Indeed, the meal was finished in silence.

Presently Storch's disciples began to drift in. The meeting lasted almost until midnight. They were all at fever heat, strung tensely by Storch's unerring pressure. At the last moment the man who had previously put the question concerning Hilmer prodded Storch again.

Storch fixed Fred suddenly with a gaze that pierced him through. A silence fell upon the room. Fred could feel every eye turned his way. He rose with a curious fluttering movement of escape.

"There's one man in this room who has earned the honor of getting Hilmer, if any man has," Storch said, finally, in an extraordinarily cool and biting voice. "Losing a wife isn't of any great moment ... but to be laughed at--that's another matter."

The silence continued. Fred Starratt sat down again... Shortly after this the gathering broke up. Storch went to sleep immediately. Fred blew out the light. But he did not throw himself upon his couch this time. Instead he opened the door softly and crept out.

A bright moon was riding high in the sky. He went swiftly down the lane and stood for a moment upon the edge of the cliff which plunged down toward the docks. The city seemed like a frozen bit of loveliness, waiting to be melted to fluid beauty by the fires of morning. He must leave Storch at once, forever! He turned for a backward glimpse of the house that had sheltered and almost entrapped him. A figure darted in front of the lone street lamp and retreated instantly. _Shadowed!_ Storch was right!

Suddenly Fred began to whistle--gayly, loudly, with unquestionable defiance. Then slowly, very slowly, he went back into the house and closed the door... Storch was snoring contentedly.

CHAPTER XIX

The next afternoon Fred Starratt took the fifty-cent piece that he had earned as flunky to his wife and spent every penny of it in a cheap barber shop on the Embarcadero. He emerged with an indifferently trimmed beard and his hair clipped into a semblance of neatness. He felt better, in spite of his tattered suit and gaping footgear. Hilmer's card was still in his pocket.

His plans were hazy, nebulous, in fact. He was not quite sure as to his next move. It seemed useless to attempt to flee from Storch's shelter. He had no money and scarcely strength enough to tackle any job that would be open to him. Even if he elected to become a strike breaker he would have to qualify at least with brawn. The prospect of snaring a berth from Hilmer had a certain fascination. It would be interesting to stare defiantly at his enemy at close range, to speak with him again man to man, to lure him into further bravados. And then, if Storch's plans for Hilmer had any merits... He stopped short, a bit frightened at the realization that the idea had presented itself to him with such directness... He had a sudden yearning to talk to some human being who would understand. If he could only see Ginger!

He had a feeling that somehow she must have experienced every exaltation and every degradation in the calendar. Tenderness and passion and the gift of murder itself were ever the mixed language of the street. He remembered the gesture he first had made to her almost timid advances toward helping him. He had been outwardly polite, but

inwardly how scornful of her suggestions! And once he even had hesitated to let her carry a message to his wife! Now he was ready to stand or fall upon the bitter fruits of her experience. He felt, curiously, on common ground with her. And yet there were certain intangibilities he had never attempted to make positive. Somehow the mere fact of her existence had enveloped him like warm currents of air which he could feel, but not visualize. But at this moment he felt the need of a contact more personal. Suddenly, out of a clear sky, it came to him that Mrs. Hilmer could tell him something of Ginger's whereabouts. Mrs. Hilmer? Well, why not? The more he thought the idea over the more it appealed to him. He ended by turning his steps in the direction of the Hilmer home.

The maid who opened the door eyed him with more curiosity than caution, and her protests that Mrs. Hilmer could see no one seemed rather tentative and perfunctory. Fred had a curious feeling that she was demanding a more or less conventional excuse for admitting him, and in the end he flung out as a chance:

"Tell Mrs. Hilmer I have a message from Sylvia Molineaux."

The girl's pale-blue eyes sparkled with a curious glint of humor, and without further protest she went away, and came back as swiftly with an invitation for him to step inside. There was something inexplicable about this maid who veiled her eagerness to admit him with such transparencies. Even a fool would scarcely have left so forbidding a character to dawdle about the living room while she went to fetch her mistress.

He had expected to find this room changed, and yet he was not prepared for quite the quality of familiarity which it possessed. Most of the old Hilmer knickknacks had been swept aside, their places taken by bits that had once enlivened the Starratt household. Here was a silver vase that he had bought Helen for an anniversary present, and there a Whistler etching that had been their wedding portion. His easy-chair was in a corner, and Helen's music rack filled with all the things she used to play for his delight. And on the mantel, in a silver frame, his picture, with a little bowl of fading flowers before it... He went over and picked it up. Instinctively he glanced in the mirror just in front of him... Dead ... quite dead! No wonder his wife put flowers before this photographic shrine... For a moment he had a swooning hope that he had misjudged her ... that he had misread everybody ... that they had done everything for him that they thought was best. But he emerged from this brief deception with a shuddering laugh... He would not have cared so much if his wife had swept him from her life completely ... but to trample on him and still use his shadow as a screen--this was too much! What really pallid creatures these women of convention were! How little they were prepared to risk anything! He could almost hear the comments that Helen inspired:

"Poor Helen Starratt! She has had an awful time!... I don't know what she would have done without the Hilmers... She's so devoted to Mrs. Hilmer... I do think it's lovely that they can be together."

He felt that he could have admired a Helen Starratt with the courage of her primitive instincts. As it was, he was ashamed to own that he experienced even rancor at her pretenses.

He heard the sound of a wheeled chair coming toward the living room

and he made a pretense of staring aimlessly into the street. Presently a sepulchral voice broke the silence. He turned--Mrs. Hilmer was leaning forward in her chair, regarding him attentively, while the maid stood a little to one side. He had expected to come upon a huddle of blond plumpness, an inanimate mass of forceless flesh robbed of its bovine suavity by inactivity. What he saw was a body thin to emaciation and a face drawn into a tight-lipped discontent. The old curves of flesh had melted, displaying the heaviness of the framework which had supported them. The eyes were restless and glittering, the once-plump hands shrunken into claws.

"You ... you have a message from Sylvia Molineaux?"

She tossed the question toward him with biting directness. Could it be possible that this was the same woman who had purred so contentedly over a receipt for corn pudding somewhat over a year ago?

He moved a step nearer. "Yes ... but it is private."

The maid made a slight grimace and put her hand protectingly upon Mrs. Hilmer's chair. Mrs. Hilmer shifted about impatiently.

"Never mind, Hilda," she snapped out. "I am not afraid."

The maid shrugged and departed.

"I have wanted to see her," Mrs. Hilmer went on, coldly. "But who could I send? ... Few people understand her life."

"Ah, then you have guessed?"

"Guessed? ... She has told me everything."

A shade of bitter malice crept into her face--the malice of a woman who has learned truths and is no longer shocked by them. Fred Starratt put his hat aside and he went up close to her.

"I lied to get in here," he said, quickly. "I am looking for Sylvia Molineaux myself."

"Why don't you try the streets, then?" she flung out, venomously.

He felt almost as if an insult had been hurled at him. He searched Mrs. Hilmer's face. Something more than physical pain had harrowed the woman before him to such deliberate mockery.

"You, too!" he cried. "How you must have suffered!"

She gave a little cackling laugh that made him shudder. "What about yourself?" she queried. "You do not look like a happy man."

"Would you be ... if ... Look at me closely, Mrs. Hilmer! Have you ever seen me before?"

He bent toward her. She took his face between her two clawlike fingers. Her eyes were points of greedy flame.

When she finally spoke her voice had almost a pensive quality to it.

"You might have been Fred Starratt, _once_," she said, evenly.

He rose to his feet.

"I knew you were not dead," he heard her saying. "And I don't think she felt sure, either... Ah, how I have worried her since that day! Every morning I used to say: 'I dreamed of your husband last night. He was swimming out of a black pool ... a very black pool.'"

She chuckled at the memory of her sinister banter. So Helen Starratt did not have everything her own way! There were weapons which even weakness could flourish.

"Where has she gone?" he asked, suddenly.

"South, for a change... I've worried her sick with my black pool. Whenever the doorbell would ring I would say as sweetly as I could, 'What if that should be your husband?' I drove her out with just that... You've come just the right time to help. It couldn't have been planned any better."

She might have been Storch, masquerading in skirts, as she sat there casting significantly narrow glances at him. He wondered why he had come. He felt like a fly struggling from the moist depths of a cream jug only to be thrust continually back by a ruthless force. Was everybody bent on plunging him into the ultimate despair? He moved back with a poignant gesture of escape.

"You mustn't count on me, Mrs. Hilmer!" he cried, desperately. "I'm nothing but a poor, spent man. I've lost the capacity for revenge."

She smiled maliciously. "You see me here--helpless. And yet, in all these months I've prayed for only one thing--to have strength enough one day to rise in this chair and throw myself upon them both... Oh, but I should like to kill them!... You talk about suffering ... but do you know what it is to feel the caress of hands that are waiting to lay hold of everything that was once yours?... I have six months more to live. The doctor told me yesterday... Six months more, getting weaker every day, until at last--"

She brought her hands up in a vigorous flourish, which died pitifully. He felt a contempt for his impotence. He dropped into a seat opposite her.

"Tell me about it ... all ... from the beginning," he begged.

She opened the floodgates cautiously at first ... going back to the day when it had come upon her that she was a stranger in her own house. ... Hilmer's moral lapses had never affronted her. She knew men--or her father, to be exact, and his father before him. They were as God made them, no better and no worse. Perhaps she had never admitted it, but she would no doubt have felt a contempt for a man without the capacity for truant inconstancies. But she had her place from which it was inconceivable that she could be dislodged. ... On that day when she had realized that this position was threatened she had been put to one of two alternatives--open revolt or deceitful acceptance. She had chosen the latter. In the end her choice was justified, for she had begun to undermine Helen Starratt's content

with subtle purring which dripped a steady pool of disquiet.

"She hasn't abandoned herself yet," she said, moving her claws restlessly. "She's too clever for that... She wants _my_ place. Hilmer's like all men--he won't have a mistress for a wife... And she never would be any man's mistress while she saw a chance for the other thing ... she's too--"

She broke off suddenly, unable to find a word inclusive enough for all the contempt she wished to crowd into it. He was learning things. She could have ignored a frank courtesan with disdainful aloofness, but discreetly veiled wantonness made her articulate. When she mentioned Ginger her voice took a soft pity, mixed with certain condescension. She was sympathetic, but there were still many things she could not understand.

"She used to come and pass me every morning," Mrs. Hilmer explained, "and your wife would look at her from head to foot. One day I said, 'Who is that woman?' ... 'How should I know?' she answered me. And I knew from her manner that she was lying. The next day I spoke deliberately. After that it was easy... She is a strange girl. She would come and read me such beautiful things and then go away to _that_! ... 'How is it possible for one woman to be so good and so bad?' I asked her once. And all she said was, 'How would you have us--all devil or all saint?' ... During all this your wife said nothing. When she _would_ see Sylvia Molineaux coming down the street she would wheel my chair into a quiet corner and walk calmly into the house... One day Sylvia Molineaux spoke of you. She told me the whole story and in the end she said: 'I don't come here altogether to be kind to you ... I come here to worry her. You cannot imagine how I hate her!' The next morning I said to Helen Starratt, 'Did you know that Sylvia Molineaux was a friend of your husband?' She had to answer me civilly. There was no other way out. But after that I said, whenever I could, 'Sylvia Molineaux tells me this,' or, 'Sylvia Molineaux tells me that.' And I would give her the tattle of Fairview... I know she could have strangled me, because she smiled too sweetly. But she made no protest, no comment. She merely walked into the house whenever Sylvia Molineaux appeared. But it worried her--yes, almost as much as that black pool from which I had you swimming every morning... And so it went on until the day after word had come that you had been drowned. I had not seen Sylvia for some days. She came down the street at the usual time. Helen was still up in her room ... the maid had wheeled me out. She said nothing about what had happened. But she looked very pale as she opened her book to read to me. In the midst of all this your wife came out and stood for a moment upon the landing. We looked up. She was in black. I gave one glance at Sylvia. She closed her book with a bang and suddenly she was on her feet. 'Black! _Black_!' she cried out in a loud voice. 'How _can_ you!' Your wife grew pale and walked quickly back into the house. Sylvia's face was dreadful. 'I can't trust myself to come here again!' she said, turning on me fiercely. 'Fancy, _she_ can wear black. The hussy ... the...' No, I shall not repeat what else she said... But when she had finished I caught her hand and I said: 'Come back and kill her! Come back and kill her, Sylvia Molineaux!' She gave a cry and left me. I have not seen her since."

He sat staring at the wasted figure before him. Who would have thought, seeing her in a happier day, that she could quiver with such red-fanged energy! After all, she was more primitive even than Ginger.

She was like some limpid, prattling stream swollen to sudden fury by a cloudburst of bitterness.

He was recalled from his scrutiny of the terrible figure before him by the sound of her voice, this time dropping into a monologue which held a half-musing quality. Hilmer was puzzling her a bit. She could not quite understand why a man accustomed to hew his way without restraint should be possessing his soul in such patience before Helen Starratt's provocative advances and discreet retreats. Either she was unable or unwilling to fathom the fascination which a subtle game sometimes held for a man schooled only in elemental approaches toward his goal. Was he enthralled or confused or merely curious? And how long would he continue to give his sufferance scope? How long would he pretend to play the moth to Helen Starratt's fitful flamings? Mrs. Hilmer, raising the question, answered it tentatively by a statement that held a curious mixture of hope and fear.

"Hilmer's going south himself next week... On business, he _says_." She laughed harshly. "I wonder if they both think me quite a fool! ... If he succeeds this time she's done for!"

Fred Starratt stirred in his seat.

"Don't deceive yourself," he found himself saying, coldly; "whatever else my wife is, she's no fool... Remember, she wrote me a letter every week. She looks over her cards before she plays them...A few months more or less don't--"

He broke off, suddenly amazed at his cruelty. Mrs. Hilmer's expression changed from arrested exultation to fretful appeal.

"I have only six months to live," she wailed. "If I could walk just for a day...an hour...five minutes!"

She covered her face in her hands.

"What do you expect _me_ to do?" he asked, helplessly, with a certain air of resignation.

She took her fingers from her eyes. A crafty smile illumined her features. "How should I know? ...What do men do in such cases?...She will be gone two weeks. I pray God she may never enter this house again. But that is in your hands."

He felt suddenly cold all over, as if she had delivered an enemy into his keeping. She still loved Axel Hilmer...loved him to the point of hatred. What she wished for was his head upon a charger. With other backgrounds and other circumstances crowding her to fury she would have danced for her boon like the daughter of Herodias. As it was, she sat like some pagan goddess, full of sinister silences, impotent, yet unconquered.

And again Storch's prophetic words swept him:

"Like a field broken to the plow!"

There was a terrible beauty in the phrase. Was sorrow the only plowshare that turned the quiescent soul to bountiful harvest? Was it better to reap a whirlwind than to see a shallow yield of unbroken

content wither to its sterile end?

* * * * *

He found Ginger's lodgings that night, in a questionable quarter of the town, but she did not respond to his knock upon the door.

"Why don't you try the streets, then?" Mrs. Hilmer's sneer recurred with all its covert bitterness.

The suggestion made him sick. And he had fancied all along that ugliness had lost the power to move him ... that he was prepared for the harsh facts of existence!

He waited an hour upon the street corner, and when she came along finally she was in the company of a man... He grew suddenly cold all over. When they passed him he could almost hear his teeth chattering. They disappeared, swallowed up in the sinister light of a beguiling doorway. He stared for a moment stupidly, then turned and fled, looking neither to the right nor to the left. He realized now that he had reached the heights of bitterest ecstasy and the depths of profound humiliation.

Storch was alone, bending close to the lamp, reading, when Fred Starratt broke in upon him. He did not lift his head.

Fred went softly into a corner and sat down... Finally, after a while, Storch laid his book aside. He gave one searching look at Fred's face.

"Well, have you decided?" he asked, with calm directness.

Fred's hands gave a flourish of resignation. "Yes... I'll do it!" he answered in a whisper.

Storch picked up his book again and went on reading. Presently he lifted his eyes from the printed page as he said:

"We won't have any more meetings here... Things are getting a little too dangerous... How soon will the job be finished?"

Fred rose, shaking himself. "Within two weeks, if it is finished at all!"

He went close to Storch and put a hand upon his shoulder. "You know every bitter thing ... tell me, why does a man love?"

Storch laughed unpleasantly. "To breed hatred!"

Fred Starratt sat down again with a gesture of despair.

CHAPTER XX

From this moment on Fred Starratt's existence had the elements of a sleepwalking dream. He felt himself going through motions which he was powerless to direct. Already Storch and his associates were allowing

him a certain aloofness--letting him set himself apart with the melancholy arrogance of one who had been chosen for a fanatical sacrifice.

Replying to Storch's question regarding his plans, he said, decidedly:

"I leave all that to you... Give me instructions and I'll act. But I want to know nothing until the end."

"Within two weeks... Is there a special reason why ..."

"Yes ... a very special reason."

Storch turned away. But the next day he said, "Have you that card that Hilmer gave you?"

Fred yielded it up.

Storch smiled his wide, green smile. Fred asked no questions, but he guessed the plans. A spy was to be worked in upon Hilmer.

Every morning now Fred Starratt found a silver dollar upon the cluttered table at Storch's. He smiled grimly as he pocketed the money. He was to have not a care in the world. Like a perfect youth of the ancients marked for a sweet-scented offering to the gods, he was to go his way in perfect freedom until his appointed time. There was an element of grotesqueness in it all that dulled the edge of horror which he should have felt.

Sometimes he would sally forth in a noonday sun, intent on solitude, but usually he craved life and bustle and the squalor of cluttered foregrounds. With his daily dole of silver jingling in his pocket he went from coffeehouse to coffeehouse or drowsed an hour or two in a crowded square or stood with his foot upon the rail of some emasculated saloon, listening to the malcontents muttering over their draughts of watery beer.

"Ah yes," he would hear these last grumble, "the rich can have their grog... But the poor man--he can get it only when he is dying ... providing he has the price."

And here would follow the inevitable reply, sharpened by bitter sarcasm:

"But all this is for the poor man's good ... you understand. Men work better when they do not indulge in follies... They will stop dancing next. Girls in factories should not come to work all tired out on Monday morning. They would find it much more restful to spend the time upon their knees."

It was not what they said, but the tone of it, that made Fred Starratt shudder. Their laughter was the terrible laughter of sober men without either the wit or circumstance to escape into a temperate gayety of spirit. He still sat apart, as he had done at Fairview and again at Storch's gatherings. He had not been crushed sufficiently, even yet, to mingle either harsh mirth or scalding tears with theirs. But he was feeling a passion for ugliness ... he wanted to drain the bitter circumstance of life to the lees. He was seeking to harden himself to his task past all hope of reconsideration.

He liked especially to talk to the cripples of industry. Here was a man who had been blinded by a hot iron bolt flung wide of its mark, and another with his hand gnawed clean by some gangrenous product of flesh made raw by the vibrations of a riveting machine. And there were the men deafened by the incessant pounding of boiler shops, and one poor, silly, lone creature whose teeth had been slowly eaten away by the excessive sugar floating in the air of a candy factory. Somehow this last man was the most pathetic of all. In the final analysis, his calling seemed so trivial, and he a sacrifice upon the altar of a petty vanity. Once he met a man weakened into consumption by the deadly heat of a bakeshop. These men did not whine, but they exhibited their distortions with the malicious pride of beggars. They demanded sympathy, and somehow their insistence had a humiliating quality. He used to wonder, in rare moments of reflection, how long it would take for all this foul seepage to undermine the foundations of life. Or would it merely corrode everything it came in contact with, very much as it had corroded him? Only occasionally did he have an impulse to escape from the terrible estate to which his rancor had called him. At such intervals he would turn his feet toward the old quarter of the town and stand before the garden that had once smiled upon his mother's wooing, seeking to warm himself once again in the sunlight of traditions. The fence, that had screened the garden from the nipping wind which swept in every afternoon from the bay, was rotting to a sure decline, disclosing great gaps, and the magnolia tree struggling bravely against odds to its appointed blossoming. But it was growing blackened and distorted. Some day, he thought, it would wither utterly... He always turned away from this familiar scene with the profound melancholy springing from the realization that the past was a pale corpse lighted by the tapers of feeble memory.

One afternoon, accomplishing again this vain pilgrimage, he found the tree snapped to an untimely end. It had gone down ingloriously in a twisting gale that had swept the garden the night before.

In answer to his question, the man intent on clearing away the wreckage said:

"The wind just caught it right... It was dying, anyway."

Fred Starratt retraced his steps. It was as if the old tree had stood as a symbol of his own life.

He never went back to view the old garden again, but, instead, he stood at midnight upon the corner past which Ginger walked with such monotonous and terrible fidelity. He would stand off in the shadows and see her go by, sometimes alone, but more often in obscene company. And in those moments he tasted the concentrated bitterness of life. Was this really a malicious jest or a test of his endurance? To what black purpose had belated love sprung up in his heart for this woman of the streets? And to think that once he had fancied that so withering a passion was as much a matter of good form as of cosmic urging! There had been conventions in love--and styles and seasons! One loved purity and youth and freshness. Yes, it had been as easy as that for him. Just as it had been as easy for him to choose a nice and pallid calling for expressing his work-day joy. He could have understood a feeling of sinister passion for Sylvia Molineaux and likewise he could have indulged it. But the snare was more subtle and cruel than that. He was fated to feel the awe and mystery and beauty

of a rose-white love which he saw hourly trampled in the grime of the streets. He had fancied once that love was a matter of give and take ... he knew now that it was essentially an outpouring ... that to love was sufficient to itself ... that it could be without reward, or wage, or even hope. He knew now that it could spring up without sowing, endure without rain, come to its blossoming in utter darkness. And yet he did not have the courage of these revelations. He felt their beauty, but it was the beauty of nakedness, and he had no skill to weave a philosophy with which to clothe them. If it had been possible a year ago for him to have admitted so cruel a love he knew what he would have done. He would have waited for her upon this selfsame street corner and shot her down, turning the weapon upon himself. Yes, he would have been full of just such empty heroics. Thus would he have expressed his contempt and scorn of the circumstance which had tricked him. But now he was beyond so conventional a settlement.

The huddled meetings about Storch's shattered lamp were no more, but in small groups the scattered malcontents exchanged whispered confidences in any gathering place they chanced upon. Fred Starratt listened to the furtive reports of their activities with morbid interest. But he had to confess that, so far, they were proving empty windbags. The promised reign of terror seemed still a long way off. There were moments even when he would speculate whether or not he was being tricked into unsupported crime. But he raised the question merely out of curiosity... Word seemed to have been passed that he was disdainful of all plans for setting the trap which he was to spring. But one day, coming upon a group unawares in a Greek coffeehouse on Folsom Street, he caught a whispered reference to Hilmer. Upon the marble-topped table was spread a newspaper--Hilmer's picture smiled insolently from the printed page. The gathering broke up in quick confusion on finding him a silent auditor. When they were gone he reached for the newspaper. A record-breaking launching was to be achieved at Hilmer's shipyard within the week. The article ended with a boastful fling from Hilmer to the effect that his plant was running to full capacity in spite of strikes and lockouts. Fred threw the paper to the floor. A chill enveloped him. He had caught only the merest fragments of conversation which had fallen from the lips of the group he had surprised, but his intuitions had been sharpened by months of misfortune. He knew at once what date had been set for the consummation of Storch's sinister plot. He rose to his feet, shivering until his teeth chattered. He felt like a man invested with all the horrid solemnity of the death watch.

CHAPTER XXI

That night Storch confirmed Fred's intuitions. He said, pausing a moment over gulping his inevitable bread and cheese:

"I have planned everything for Saturday."

Fred cut himself a slice of bread. "So I understand," he said, coldly.

"Who told you?"

"Your companions are great gossips ... and I have ears."

The insolence in Fred's tone made Storch knit his brows.

"Well, knowing so much, you must be ready for details now," he flung out.

Fred nodded.

Storch lighted his pipe and glowered. "The launching is to take place at noon. Hilmer has planned to arrive at the yards promptly at eleven forty-five at the north gate. Everything is ready, down to the last detail."

"Including the bomb?" Fred snapped, suddenly.

"Including the bomb," Storch repeated, malevolently, caressing the phrase with a note of rare affection. "It is the most skillful arrangement I have seen in a long time ... in a kodak case. By the way ... are you accurate at heaving things?... You are to stand upon the roof of a row of one-story stores quite near the entrance and promptly at the precise minute--"

"Ah, a time bomb!"

"Naturally."

"And if Hilmer should be late?"

"He is always on time... And, besides, there is a special reason. He wants the launching accomplished on the stroke of noon."

"And if he comes too early?"

"Impossible. He went south last week ... you knew that, of course. And he doesn't get into San Francisco until late that morning. He is to be met at Third and Townsend streets and go at once to Oakland in his machine... There will be four in the party ... perhaps six."

Fred Starratt stood up slowly, repressing a desire to leap suddenly to his feet. He walked up and down the cluttered room twice. Storch watched him narrowly.

"Six in the party?" Fred echoed. "Any women?"

Storch rubbed his palms together. "There may be two ... providing your wife comes back with him... Mrs. Hilmer sent for her."

"Mrs. Hilmer!"

Storch smiled his usual broad smile, exhibiting his green teeth.

"She developed a whim to attend the launching... Naturally she wished her _dearest_ friend with her."

Fred Starratt sat down. He was trembling inwardly, but he knew instinctively that he must appear nonchalant and calm. He guessed at once that it would not do for him to betray the fact that suddenly he realized how completely he had been snared. Yet his trepidation must have communicated itself, for Storch leaned forward with the

diabolical air of an inquisitor and said:

"Does it matter in the least whether there is one victim or six?"

Fred managed to reply, coolly, "Not the slightest ... but I have been thinking in terms of one."

Storch smiled evilly. "That would have been absurd in any case. There are always a score or so of bystanders who ..."

"Yes, of course, of course. Just so!" Fred interrupted.

Storch laid his pipe aside and drained a half-filled glass of red wine standing beside his plate.

"I think I've turned a very neat trick," he said, smacking his lips in satisfaction. "It's almost like a Greek tragedy--Hilmer, his wife, and yours in one fell swoop, and at your hand. There is an artistic unity about this affair that has been lacking in some of my other triumphs."

Fred rose again, and this time he turned squarely on Storch as he asked:

"How long have you and Mrs. Hilmer been plotting this together?"

Storch's eyes widened in surprise. "You're getting keener every moment... Well, you've asked a fair question. I planted that maid in the house soon after I knew the story."

"After the fever set me to prattling?"

"Precisely."

Fred Starratt stood motionless for a moment, but presently he began to laugh.

Storch looked annoyed, then rather puzzled. Fred took the hint and fell silent. For the first time since his escape from Fairview he was experiencing the joy of alert and sharpened senses. He had ceased to drift. From this moment on he would be struggling. And a scarcely repressed joy rose within him.

That night Fred Starratt did not sleep. His mind was too clear, his senses too alert. He was like a man coming suddenly out of a mist into the blinding sunshine of some valley sheltered from the sea.

"Does it matter in the least whether there is one victim or six?"

He repeated Storch's question over and over again. Yes, it did matter--why, he could not have said. But even in a vague way there had been a certain point in winging Hilmer. Hilmer had grown to be more and more an impersonal effigy upon which one could spew forth malice and be forever at peace. He had fancied, too, that Hilmer was his enemy. Yet, Hilmer had done nothing more than harry him. It was Storch who had captured him completely.

It was not that Storch was unable to discover a score of men ready and willing to murder Hilmer, but he was finding an ironic diversion in shoving a weary soul to the brink. He liked to confirm his faith in

the power of sorrow and misery and bitterness ... he liked to triumph over that healing curse of indifference which time accomplished with such subtlety. He took a delight in cutting the heart and soul out of his victims and reducing them to puppets stuffed with sawdust, answering the slightest pressure of his hands. How completely Fred Starratt understood all this now! And in the blinding flash of this realization he saw also the hidden spring that had answered Storch's pressure. Storch may have been prodding for rancor, but he really had touched the mainspring of all false and empty achievement--vanity.

"Losing a wife isn't of such moment ... but to be laughed at--that is another matter!"

The words with which Storch had held him up to the scorn of the crowd swept him now with their real significance. He had been afraid to seem uncourageous.

Thus also had Mrs. Hilmer prodded him with her sly "What do men do in such cases?"

Thus, also, had the terrible realization of his love for Sylvia Molineaux been turned to false account with a wish to still the stinging wounds of pride forever.

He had made just such empty gestures when he had battled for an increase in salary, using Hilmer's weapons instead of his own, and again when he had committed himself to Fairview with such a theatrical flourish. He had performed then, he was performing now, with an eye to his audience. And his audience had done then, and was doing now, what it always did--treated him with the scorn men feel for any and all who play down to them.

Already Storch was sneering with the contempt of a man too sure of his power. He would not have risked the details of his plan otherwise. And deep down Fred Starratt knew that the first duty to his soul was to be rid of Storch at any cost--after that, perhaps, it would not matter whether he had one or six or a hundred victims marked for destruction. He was afraid of Storch and he had now to prove his courage to himself.

It was at the blackest hour before dawn that this realization grew to full stature. He raised himself upon his elbow, listening to the heavy breathing of Storch. He rose cautiously. Now was his chance. He would escape while his conviction was still glistening with the freshness of crystallization. Moving with a catlike tread toward the door, he put his hand upon the knob. It turned noisily. He heard Storch leap to his feet. He stood quite still until Storch came up to him.

"Go back to bed ... where you belong!" Storch was commanding, coolly, with a shade of menace in his voice.

He shuffled back to his couch. He was no longer afraid of Storch, but a certain craftiness suddenly possessed him.

Presently he heard a key turn and he felt himself to be completely in the hands of his jailer. Yet the locked door became at once the symbol of both Storch's strength and weakness. Storch was determined to have either his body or his soul. And, at that moment, Fred Starratt made his choice.

Next morning Storch was up early and bustling about with unusual clatter.

"Get up!" he cried, gayly, to Fred. "Do you realize this is Friday?... There are a thousand details to attend to."

Fred pretended to find Storch's manner infectious. He had never seen anyone so eager, so thrilling with anticipation.

"I've got to buy you a new outfit complete," Storch went on, filling the coffeepot with water. "And you must be shaved and shorn and made human-looking again. Rags are well enough to wrap discontent in ... but one should have a different make-up for achievement... What was the matter last night?"

"Oh, a bit of panic, I guess," Fred returned, nonchalantly. "But I'm all right this morning."

Storch rubbed his hands in satisfaction, and he smiled continually.

They went out shortly after nine o'clock and in San Francisco's embryo ghetto at McAllister and Fillmore streets they bought a decent-looking misfit suit and a pair of second-hand shoes, to say nothing of a bargain in shirts. A visit to a neighboring barber followed. Storch permitted Fred to enter the shop alone, but he stood upon the corner and waited.

When the barber finished, Fred was startled. Standing before the mirror he gazed at his smooth-shaven cheek again and trembled. It was like a resurrection. Even Storch was startled. Fred caught a suggestion of doubt in the gaze his jailer threw at him. It was almost as if Storch said:

"You are not the man I thought you."

After that Fred had a sense that Storch watched him more narrowly. Impulses toward forcing the issue at once assailed Fred, but he was too uncertain as to the outcome. He decided that the safest thing was to wait until the very last moment, trying to prolong the issue until it would be too late for Storch to lay other plans.

They went back to the shack for a bite of lunch. After they had eaten, Fred put on his new clothes. He felt now completely cut off from the cankerous life which had been so deliberately eating its way into his philosophy. Could it be possible that clothes did in some mysterious way make the man? Would his unkempt beard and gaping shoes and tattered clothing have kept him nearer the path of violence?

A little after three o'clock in the afternoon a man came to the door and handed Storch a carefully wrapped package. They did not exchange a word. Storch took the package and stowed it away in a corner, covering it with a ragged quilt.

"That is the bomb!" flashed through Fred's mind.

From that moment on this suggestive corner of the room was filled with a mysterious fascination. It was like living on the edge of a volcano.

Later in the day he said to Storch:

"Are you sure the maker of that bomb was skillful?"

Storch bared his green teeth.

"One is sure of nothing!" he snapped back.

Fred tried to appear nonchalant. "Aren't you rather bold, having this thing delivered in broad daylight?"

"What have we to fear?"

"I thought we were being watched."

Storch threw back his head and roared with laughter. "_You_ have been watched ... if that's what you mean. I never believe in taking any unnecessary chances."

Fred made no reply. But a certain contempt for Storch that hitherto had been lacking rose within him. He had always fancied certain elements of bigness in this man in spite of his fanaticism. Suddenly he was conscious that his silence had evoked a subtle uneasiness in Storch. At this moment he laughed heartily himself as he rose from his seat, slapping Storch violently on the back as he cried:

"Upon my word, Storch, you're a master hand! No matter what happens now, at least I'll have the satisfaction of knowing that I was perfectly stage-managed."

They kept close to the house until nearly midnight. At a few moments to twelve Storch drew a flask of smuggled brandy from his hip pocket.

"Here, take a good drink!" he said, passing the bottle to Fred.

Fred did as he was bidden. Storch followed suit.

"Would you like a turn in the open?" Storch inquired, not unkindly.

"Yes," Fred assented.

They put on their hats. When they were outside Storch made a little gesture of surrender. "You lead ... I'll follow," he said, indulgently.

The night was breathless--still touched with the vagrant warmth of an opulent April day. The spring of blossoming acacias was over, but an even fuller harvest of seasonal unfolding was sweeping the town. A fragrant east wind was flooding in from the blossom-starred valleys, and vacant lots yielded up a scent of cool, green grass. A soul-healing quality released itself from the heavily scented air--hidden and mysterious beauties of both body and spirit that sent little thrills through Fred Starratt. He had never been wrapped in a more exquisite melancholy--not even during the rain-raked days at Fairview. He knew that Storch was by his side, but, for the moment, this sinister personality seemed to lose its power and he felt Monet near him. It was as it had been during those days upon Storch's couch with death beckoning--the nearer he approached the dead line, the more distinctly he saw Monet. To-night his vision was clouded, but a keener

intuition gave him the sense of Monet's presence. He knew that he was standing close to another brink.

For a time he surrendered completely to this luxury of feeling, as if it strengthened him to find stark reality threaded with so much haunting beauty. But he discovered himself suddenly yearning for the poetry of life rather than the poetry of death. He wanted to live, realizing completely that to-morrow might seal everything. He was not afraid, but he was alive, very much alive--so alive that he found himself rising triumphant from sorrow and shame and disillusionment.

He came out of his musings with a realization that Storch was regarding him with that puzzled air which his moods were beginning to evoke. And almost at the same time he was conscious that their feet were planted upon that selfsame corner past which Ginger walked at midnight. He put a hand on Storch's shoulder.

"Let us wait here a few moments," he said. "I am feeling a little tired."

A newsboy bellowing the latest edition of the paper broke an unusual and almost profound stillness.

"There doesn't seem to be many people about to-night," Fred observed, casually.

Storch sneered. "To-day is Good Friday, I believe... Everyone has grown suddenly pious."

Fred turned his attention to the windows of a tawdry candy shop, filled with unhealthy-looking chocolates and chromatic sweets. He was wondering whether Ginger would pass again to-night. His musings were answered by the suggestive pressure of Storch's hand on his.

"There's a skirt on the Rialto, anyway," Storch was saying, with disdain.

Fred kept his gaze fixed upon the candy-shop window. He was afraid to look up. Could it be that Ginger was passing before him, perhaps for the last time? He caught the vague reflection of a feminine form in the plate-glass window. A surge of relief swept him--at least she was alone!

"She's looking back!" Storch volunteered.

Fred turned. The woman had gained the doorway of the place where she lodged and she was standing with an air of inconsequence as if she had nothing of any purpose on her mind except an appreciation of the night's dark beauty. He looked at her steadily ... It was Ginger!

She continued to stand, immobile, wrapped in the sinister patience of her calling. Fred could not take his eyes from her.

"She's waiting for you," Storch said.

Fred smiled wanly.

"Do you want to go? ... If you do I'll wait--here!"

Fred tried to conceal his conflicting emotions. He did not want to betray his surprise at Storch's sudden and irrational indiscretion.

"Well, if you don't mind," he began to flounder, "I'll--"

Storch gave him a contemptuous shove. "Go on ... go on!" he cried, almost impatiently, and the next moment Fred Starratt found himself at Ginger's side... For an instant she stood transfixed as she lifted her eyes to his.

"Don't scream!" he commanded between his locked lips. "I don't want that man to know that--"

She released her breath sharply. "Shall we go in?" she whispered.

He nodded. Storch was pretending to be otherwise absorbed, but Fred knew that he had been intent on their pantomime.

Her room was bare, pitifully bare, swept clean of all the tawdry fripperies that one might expect from such an environment and circumstance. She motioned him wearily to an uncompromising chair, standing herself with an air of profound resignation as she leaned against the cheaply varnished bureau.

"Is this the first time--" she began, and stopped short.

"No ... I've watched you every night for nearly two weeks."

"What was the idea?" she threw out, with an air of banter.

He stood up suddenly. "I wanted to see how much I could stand," he answered.

She closed her eyes for a moment ... her immobility was full of tremulous fear and hope.

"Ah!" she said, finally. "So you did care, after all!"

"Yes ... when it was too late."

She crossed over to him, putting one wan finger on his trembling lips in protest. She did not speak, but he read the thrilling simplicity of her silence completely. "Love is never too late!" was what her eloquent gesture implied.

He thrust her forward at arm's length, searching her eyes. "You are right," he said, slowly. "And yet it can be bitter!"

She released herself gently. "You shouldn't have watched me like that ... it wasn't fair."

"I didn't think you would ever know... And that first night I didn't intend to watch ... not really. After that it got to be habit... You've no idea the capacity for suffering an unhappy man can acquire."

She took off her hat and flung it on the bed. "What made you follow me to-night?"

"You came out of a clear sky ... when I needed you most ... as you

have always done... I didn't think I could ever escape that man waiting for me below--not even for an instant... To-morrow, at this time, I may be dead ... or worse."

"Dead?"

"To-morrow, at noon, I'm scheduled to blow up Axel Hilmer... There will be five others in the party ... my wife and his among them."

Her body was rigid ... only her lips moved. "You are going to do it?"

"No."

She passed a fluttering hand over her forehead. "But you spoke of death..."

He smiled bitterly. "Either I shall be dead--or the man waiting for me on the street corner... I shall not tell him my decision until the last moment. I don't want to give him the chance to work in an understudy or complete the job himself... Will you go to Hilmer to-morrow and warn him?... He arrives from the south at the Third and Townsend depot somewhere around eleven o'clock. Advise him to postpone the launching. And have the approaches to the shipyards combed for radicals... Let them watch particularly for a man with a kodak on the roof of the stores opposite the north gate."

She picked up her hat quickly. "I'll go out now and warn the police ... indirectly. I have ways, you know."

He put out a restraining hand. "No ... that's risky. My friend Storch has spies everywhere. He's giving me a little rope here ... he may be waiting just to see how foolishly I use it. If you lie low until to-morrow there will be less of a chance of things going wrong... Besides, I owe this man something. He's fed and sheltered me. I'm going to give him an even break. You would do that much, I'm sure."

She threw her arms suddenly about him. "Let me go down to him," she whispered. "Perhaps I can persuade him. Maybe he'll go away, then, and leave you in peace."

He stroked her hair. "No, I can't escape him now. Sooner or later he would get me. You don't understand his power. All my life I've dodged issues. But now I've run up against a stone wall. Either I scale it or I break my neck in the attempt."

She shivered as if his touch filled her with an exquisite fear as she drew away.

"I'm wondering if you are quite real," she said, wistfully. "Sometimes I've thought of you as dead, and, again, it didn't seem possible... Always at night upon the street I've really looked for you. In every face that stared at me I had a hope that your eyes would answer mine... I think I've looked for you all my life... It isn't always necessity that drives a woman to the streets... Sometimes it is the search for happiness... I suppose you can't understand that..."

"I understand anything you tell me _now_!"

She went over to him again and took his hand. "You _are_ real, aren't

you?... Because I couldn't bear it ... if I were to wake up and find this all a dream... Nothing else matters ... nothing in my whole life ... but this moment. And when it is over nothing will ever matter ... again."

He sat there stroking her hand foolishly. There were no words with which to answer her... Presently she put her lips close to his and he kissed her, and he knew then that only a woman who had tasted the bitter wormwood of infamy could put such purity into a kiss. How many times she must have hungered for this moment! How many times must she have felt her soul rising to her lips only to find it betrayed!

He loved her for her words and he loved her for her silence. Once he would have sat waiting passionately for her to defend herself. He would have been tricked into believing that any course of action could be justified. But she brought no charges, she placed no blame, she offered no excuse. "It isn't always necessity that drives a woman to the streets!" It took a great soul to be that honest. She might have reproached him, too, for his neglect of her--for his fear to take his happiness on any terms. But all she had said was, "You shouldn't have watched me like that ... it wasn't fair."

He rose, finally, shaking himself into the world of reality again.

"I must be going now," he said, quietly. "Storch will begin to be impatient."

She picked a gilt hairpin from the floor. "Let me see if I've got everything straight. To-morrow at eleven o'clock I am to see Hilmer and tell him to postpone the launching. And to watch at the north gate for a man with a kodak... And then?"

He reached for his hat. "If you do not hear from me you might come and look me up. I'll be at Storch cottage on Rincon Hill ... at the foot of Second Street. Anyone about can tell you which house is his."

Her lips were an ashen gray. "You mean you'll be there ... dead?"

"If you are afraid ..."

"Afraid!" She drew herself up proudly.

"Well ... there is danger for you, too... I should have thought of that!"

"You do not understand even now." She went and stood close to him. "I love you ... can't you realize that?"

He felt suddenly abashed, as if he stood convicted of being a cup too shallow to hold her outpouring.

"Good-by," he whispered.

She closed her eyes, lifting her brow for his waiting kiss. The heavy perfume of her hair seemed to draw his soul to a prodigal outpouring. He found her lips again, clasping her close.

"Good-by," he heard her answer.

And at that moment he felt the mysterious Presence that had swept so close to him on that heartbreaking Christmas Eve at Fairview.

CHAPTER XXII

Storch was standing at the lodging-house door when Fred stepped into the street.

"Well, what now?" Storch inquired, with mock politeness.

"Let's go home!" Fred returned, emphatically.

Almost as soon as the phrase had escaped him he had a sense of its grotesqueness. Home! Yes, he had to admit that he felt a certain affection for that huddled room which had witnessed so much spiritual travail. Somehow its dusty rafters seemed saturated with a human quality, as if they had imprisoned all the perverse longings and bitter griefs of the company that once sat in the dim lamplight and chanted their litany of hate. He never really had been a part of this company ... he never really had been a part of any company. At the office of Ford, Wetherbee & Co., at Fairview, at Storch's gatherings, he had mingled with his fellow-men amiably or tolerantly or contemptuously, as the case might be, but never with sympathy or understanding. He knew now the reason--he always had judged them, even to the last moment, using the uncompromising foot rule of prejudice, inherent or acquired. In the old days he had thought of these prejudices as standards, mistaking aversions for principles. He had tricked his loves, his hates, his preferences in a masquerade of pretenses ... he had labels for everybody and he pigeonholed them with the utmost promptitude. A man was a murderer or a saint or a bricklayer, and he was nothing else. But at this moment, standing in the light-flooded entrance to Ginger's lodgings, waiting for Storch to lead him back to his figurative cell, he knew that a man could be a murderer and a saint and a bricklayer and a thousand other things besides. And if he were to sit again about that round table of violence and despair he felt that, while he might find much to stir hatred, he would never again give scope to contempt.

"You want to go home, eh?" Storch was repeating, almost with a note of obscene mirth. "Well, our walk has been quieting, at all events."

Fred Starratt said nothing. He was not in a mood for talk. But when they were inside the house again, with the cracked lamp shade spilling a tempered light about the room, he turned to Storch and said, quietly:

"I sha'n't go to sleep to-night, Storch... You throw yourself on the couch; I've kept you from it long enough."

Storch made a movement toward the door.

"Don't bother to lock it ... I'm not going to run away. I'm not quite a fool! I know that if I did try anything like that I wouldn't get farther than the edge of the cliff."

Storch gave him a puzzled glance. Fred could see that he was uncertain, baffled... But in the end he turned away from the unlocked door with a shrug.

Fred Starratt smiled with inner satisfaction. He was glad that he had come back to give Storch that "even break." It was something of an achievement to have compelled Storch's faith in so slight a thing as a literal honesty.

But Storch didn't take the couch. He threw his coat aside and crept into his wretched pile of quilts on the floor, as he said:

"You may want to snatch forty winks or so before the night is over."

There was a warm note in his voice, a bit of truant fatherliness that added an element of grotesqueness to the situation. He might have used the same words and tone to a son about to take the highroad to fortune on the morrow. Or to a lad determined to start upon a sunrise fishing trip, and impatient of the first flush of dawn. After all, it took great simplicity to approach the calamitous moments of life through the channels of the commonplace.

Presently Storch was snoring with the zest which he always brought to sleep. The night air had chilled the room past the point of comfort and the lamp seemed to make little headway with its thin volume of ascending warmth. Fred wrapped himself in a blanket and sat half shivering in the gloom. At first, detached and unrelated thoughts ran through his brain, but gradually his musing assumed a coherence. To-morrow, at this time, he might be either a hunted murderer or a victim himself of Storch's desperation. In any case, he would be furnishing the text for many a newspaper sermon. How eagerly they would trace his downfall, sniffing out the salacious bits for the furtive enjoyment of the chemically pure! For there would be salacious bits. Had he not spent the preceding night in the company of a fallen woman? One by one the facts would be brought out, added to and subtracted from, until the whole affair was a triumph of the transient story-teller art, unrelieved by the remotest flash of understanding. They would interview his former employers first. Mr. Ford would say:

"A steady, conscientious, faithful employee until he became bitten with parlor radicalism."

And Brauer, rather frightened, yet garrulous, would add, for want of anything better:

"An honest partner until he began hitting the booze."

There would be his wife, too. "I did all I could. Stood by him to the last ... even when I discovered that there was another woman."

The authorities at Fairview would doubtless add their note to the general chorus:

"An exceptional patient. He seemed to have planned deliberately to get our confidence and then betray it... He was directly responsible for Felix Monet's death. Without his influence Monet would never have thought of escape."

And in summing up, the police would declare:

"A bad actor from the word go. One of the sort who reach a certain point in respectability and then run amuck. A danger to the community because of his brains."

But what of Hilmer? Fred Starratt had a feeling that Hilmer would be discreet to a point of silence.

He could see every printed phrase as plainly as if he were reading it all himself. How many times in the old days had he not perused some such story over his morning coffee, thanking himself unconsciously that he was not as other men! How perfectly and smugly he had played the Pharisee for his own delight and satisfaction! He had not bothered then to cry his virtues aloud in the market place or to thank God publicly for his salvation. No, he was too self-sufficient to take the trouble to advertise his worthiness.

To-night he was on the brink of disaster, and yet he found himself shuddering at the colorless fate to which his complacency might have condemned him. To have gone on forever in a state of drowsy contentment ... to have been surrounded on all sides by the thunderous cataracts of life and caught only the pretty significance of rainbows through the spray ... to have remained untouched by any and every primitive impulse and feeling--he could not now imagine anything more tragic. And yet, to-morrow, people would hold up the desirability of his former estate, pointing to him in warning for the soft-armed profit of an oncoming generation. He saw himself as he might have been, going on to the end of time in the service of Ford, Wetherbee & Co., rising from map clerk to counter man, to special agent, perhaps even to a managership, writing sharp or conciliatory letters to agents according to their importance, trimming office expense and shaving salaries, heckling green office boys, and, his workday ended, going home to _The Literary Digest_ and Helen, fresh from the triumphs of the golf links or the card table. Yes, no doubt Helen would have matched his own rise in fortune with equal gentility. Perhaps he might have taken an hour between office closing and dinner to wield a golf club himself ... bringing back a desirable guest to dinner or proposing through the telephone to Helen that they dine at the Palace or St. Francis... Yes, even at best his imagination could not do more with the material in hand. Indeed, he knew that he had crowded the very most that was possible on so small a canvas.

This, then, had been his unconscious life plan, his unvoiced fate. Thus had he sketched it hazily, as a teller of tales sketches the plot of a story, such and such a sum being the total of all the characters and circumstances. But as he had gone on developing it, suddenly a new character had appeared to change the final figures--a wrench thrown into the wheel of continuity ... a wrench that bore the name of Axel Hilmer... He felt no bitterness now for the man. Had he ever felt it?

Axel Hilmer had long ceased to be a living personality to Fred Starratt. Instead, he had taken on almost the significance of a strange divinity ... an eternal questioner. At their very first meeting he had started the ferment in Fred Starratt's soul with the directness of his interrogations. He was not a man who declared his own faiths ... he merely asked you to prove yours. The questions he had asked Fred Starratt on that first night had been insignificant in themselves. Why was it ridiculous for a butcher to want an eight-hour day? Why should one have the firm's interest at heart? And yet the

sparks from such verbal flint stones had kindled a revolt that had wrecked Fred Starratt's complacency.

One's sight becomes strengthened to destructive ideas by gradual perception. And ideas of any kind are destructive flashed on consciousness unawares. Fred had thought at first that Hilmer had but opened his eyes to things standing in his range of vision, when, as a matter of fact, Hilmer had merely loaned him his spectacles. Everything he had seen from that first moment had been through Hilmer's medium. A wise man would have proceeded slowly, building himself up for the struggle. But Fred Starratt had had all the wistful enthusiasm of a fool seeking to achieve power overnight. Yes, only a fool could have been ashamed of his heritage. And when Hilmer had placed him calmly in the ranks of the middle class the wine of content had turned suddenly sour. A year ago his efforts were being directed at escape from so contemptuous a characterization; to-night he was content to acknowledge the impeachment and find a pride in the circumstance. And, as he sat there shivering in the gloom of Storch's cracked lamp, he had a vision of this scorned company to which he unquestionably belonged, sterile and barren in the glare of accepted standards, broken gradually by the plowshare of disillusionment and harrowed to great potentialities by a deeper sense of their faiths and needs. Yes, he had a conviction that what could take place in one soul could take place in the soul of the mass ... he had not changed his standards so much as he had proved them. The shape and color and perfume of love and loyalty and faith had not been altered for him, but he could discover their blossoming among the shadowy places.

At a black hour, before the first greenish glow was quickening the east, he tiptoed and stood gazing down at Storch. He had never seen a face more placid and untroubled. He felt that any man must have an extraordinary sense of self-righteousness to yield so completely to serenity in the face of deliberate crime. But Storch was of the stuff of which all fanatics were made. Ends to him always justified means. Of such were the Inquisitors of Spain, the Puritans of the Reformation, the radicals of to-day. They had neither doubts nor fears nor pity, and the helmets of their faith were a screen behind which they hid their overweening egotism. They were ever seeking to entrap humanity and humanity was forever in the end eluding them. And if Hilmer were the eternal questioner made flesh, the gamekeeper beating the furtive birds from the brush, this man Storch was the eternal hunter, at once patient and relentless for his quarry.

And now the hunter slept with a smile on his lips. Of what could he be dreaming? Was it possible to dream of smile-fashioning themes with potential destruction within a stone's throw? In a corner of this room, in a well-packed square case, reposed the force that, once set in motion at the proper or miscalculated moment, could hurl both Storch and Fred Starratt to eternity, and yet Storch slept undisturbed. Well, was not the broader canvas of life full of just such profound faith or profound indifference? Did not society itself sleep with the repressed hatreds of the submerged waiting their appointed season? And while new worlds flew flaming from the wheel of creation, and old ones died in an eye's twinkling, did not the race dream on contemptuous of the changes which lurked in the restless heavens? Yes, the meanest coward in existence had his innate courage and there was a note of bravery in life on any terms.

Fred stood before Storch's sleeping form a long time, and all manner

of impulses stirred him. There was even a moment when it came to him that he might fall upon his gaoler while he slept and achieve a swift freedom. And every ignoble murder of legend or history beckoned him with the hands of red expediency. He ended by going to the door and opening it cautiously as he had done the night before. But this time the operation was more skillful and no warning click disturbed the slumberer. He crept out into the night, down the cliff's edge, looking back for the betraying shadow of a hidden spy. But there seemed to be nothing to block his freedom. A virginal moon was languishing upon the western rim of hills...a solitary cock crew lustily...occasional footfalls floated up from the paved streets below...a cart rumbled in the gloom. All these noises of the night were extraordinarily friendly...like the smothered murmurings of a youth escaping from the chains of sleep in pleasant dreaming.

A swarm of platitudes surging through his brain urged him to flight. But in the end self-esteem gave him his final cue, and he knew in a flash how futile would be any truce with cowardice. A locked door would have justified escape, but in the face of an unlatched threshold there was only one course conceivable.

Fred Starratt went back and wrapped himself in his blanket. Toward daylight Storch arose and filled a pot with coffee. But neither spoke a word.

CHAPTER XXIII

As Storch cleared away the primitive evidences of the morning meal and stood before the sink letting a thin trickle of cold water wash clean the cups he said:

"If we get the ten-o'clock boat to Oakland we will be in plenty of time."

Starratt rolled a cigarette. "Ah, then you are going, too!"

"Naturally," Storch replied, as he turned off the water.

Fred began to dress himself carefully. Storch loaned him an indifferent razor. The shaving process was slow but in the end it was accomplished. Fred was amazed at the freshness of his appearance. Only once before in his life had he deliberately sat up all night without either the desire or determination to sleep, and that was on that night which now seemed so remote when he had felt the first budding of Helen's scorn. He recalled that he had been just as alert and clear-minded on the following morning as he was now. And just as uncertain as to what the future held in store.

Storch also made a careful toilet--for him. He rummaged for a clean flannel shirt, combed his reddish beard, dusted off his clumsy boots. But they were ready much too soon, like a couple of children promptly dressed for an excursion, impatiently awaiting the hour of departure. Of the two, Storch evinced the more nervousness. He poked into nooks and corners of the room upon all sorts of pretended orderliness. Fred sat and eyed him calmly--smoking cigarette after cigarette. Finally,

Storch lifted the kodak case from its hiding place and set it on the center table. Cautiously he pried loose the false top and peered into its depths. There followed a tense moment during which he bent in a close inspection over its fascinating depths. Presently Fred caught a distinct ticking sound, and he knew that Storch had set in motion the clock upon which depended the bomb's explosion at the appointed hour. But withal he remained curiously unmoved.

The cry of a belated newsboy floated through the open front door. Storch went out and bought a paper, flinging a section of it at Fred. A thickly headlined account of the launching at the Hilmer yards occupied chief place on the first page of the local news section. There was a picture of the hull that had been put through on schedule time in spite of strikes and lockouts, and another one of Hilmer, and a second photograph of a woman. Fred looked twice before he realized that the face of his wife was staring up at him from the printed sheet. Helen Starratt was to be the ship's sponsor and there was a pretty and touching story in this connection. It had always been Mrs. Hilmer's ambition to christen a seagoing giant, and she had been chosen to act as godmother to a huge oil-tanker only a year before, but a serious accident had laid her low. Now, though she was unable to perform the rite herself, she had intrusted her part to her faithful friend, Mrs. Starratt. It was to be done by proxy, as it were, with Mrs. Hilmer carried to the grand stand, where she was to repeat the mystic formula, giving the ship a name at the moment when Helen Starratt brought the foaming bottle of champagne crashing against the vessel's side. The whole article, even down to this obvious dash of "sob stuff," was at once Hilmer's challenge to the strikers and his appeal to the gallery. There was a certain irony in realizing that all these carefully planned effects had been seized upon for Hilmer's own undoing. He was working in the dark, very much as Fred Starratt had worked during those heartbreaking months when he had battled for place in the business world. Then Hilmer had held him in the palm of his hand. Now the situation was reversed—he held Axel Hilmer's fate in his own keeping, and it was his finger that would spin the wheel of destiny. Any fool could demand an eye for an eye; so much for so much was the cut-and-dried morality of the market place. It took a poet to bestow a wage out of all proportion to the workday, to turn the cheek of humility to the blows of arrogance, to commend the extravagant gift of the magdalene. And it was the poetry of life, after all, which counted. Fred Starratt knew that now. A year ago he had thought of poetry as strings of high-sounding words which produced a pleasant mental reaction, something abstract and exotic. He had never fancied that poetry was a thing to be seen and understood and lived, and that such common things as bread and wine and love and hatred were shot through with the pure gold of mystery. Once, if he had been moved to magnanimity it would have been through an impulse of weak and bloodless sentimentality ... now he had risen to generosity on the wings of a supreme indifference, a magnificent contempt for unessentials, a full-blooded understanding. Not that he had achieved a cold and pallid philosophy ... a system of lukewarm expedencies. He could still be swept by gusts of feeling ... he could even risk his life to preserve it.

He turned the pages of the newspaper over mechanically, reading word upon word which held not the slightest meaning. He felt Storch's eyes upon him, drawn, no doubt, by a mixture of subtle doubts and vague appraisals. His thoughts flew to Ginger. What was she doing at this moment? Was there any chance of her failure? For answer another

question shaped itself: Had she _ever_ failed? Yet, this time she was beset with dangers. And in his imagination he saw her treading the thin ice of destiny with the same glorified contempt which lured him to the poetical depths of life... And again Monet was at his side... vague, mysterious, impalpable, the essence of things unseen but hoped for, the solved riddle made spirit, the vast patience of eternity realized. And still Storch's restless eyes were fixed upon him.

Presently he heard Storch's voice coming to his ears out of a friendly dusk:

"It's nine-thirty...I guess we had better be moving."

He did not stir at first...he merely sat staring at Storch, very much as a man waking suddenly and not yet alive to the precise details of his environment. "Moving...where?" he finally inquired.

Storch crumpled the newspaper in his hand viciously. "Come...you've been dreaming!" he flung out. "That's dangerous!"

Fred braced himself in his chair. "I'm not going," he said, quietly. "I've changed my mind!"

Storch's mouth widened, not in a smile this time, but in a vicious snarl. He took out a cheap watch from his pocket, glanced at it, and put it back.

"It's just twenty-five minutes to ten," he said, quietly. "I'll give you five more minutes."

Fred put both his arms upon the cluttered table, leaning forward, as he answered:

"Nothing can alter my decision now, Storch... You should have known better than to have counted on one of my sort...In the end, you see, my standards _have_ shackled me."

"Counted on your sort!" Storch laughed back, sarcastically. "Do you suppose for one moment that I ever count on anyone?... I like a game of chance ... that's why I chose you. I like to triumph in spite of a poor hand ... and you have been in some ways the poorest deal I've ever risked a play on. But if I'd gotten you I'd have chuckled to my dying day ... even in spite of the fact that it would have shattered all my theories. I catch my fish upon the lowest and highest tides ... slack water never yields much."

He was rising to his feet. His face was a placid mask, but his voice dripped venom. Fred matched his movements with equal quiet.

"Still you did have hopes for me," Fred threw at him in grim raillery. "I may have been the poorest prospect, but I have been the most uncertain also... You might just as well admit that."

He saw Storch's eyes widen at the arrogance of this unexpected thrust.

"Slack water is always uncertain," Storch replied, "unless you know which turn in the tide is to follow."

They stood gazing at each other for a fraction of time, which seemed

eternity. And in that swift and yet prolonged exchange of glances Fred Starratt read Storch's purpose completely...

There followed a moment of swift action in which Storch made a clipt movement toward his hip pocket, and in a trice Fred Starratt felt himself bear quickly down upon the shattered lamp, grasp it firmly in his two hands, and bring it crashing against Storch's upflung forehead.

He was not conscious of seeing Storch crumple over, but he felt a thud shake the cluttered room to its foundations... He went over quietly and closed the open door. Then he put on his hat. Storch lay quite still and an ugly red pool was already luring flies to a crimson feast. The floor was covered with bits of shattered glass glistening in the sun.

Presently he opened the door again. A child had crept up to the doorstep and sat prattling to her tattered doll. He stepped aside so as not to disturb her, shut the door with a sharp bang, and walked swiftly to the edge of the cliff. But this time he plunged down. He looked back once. Not a soul followed him.

CHAPTER XXIV

He was sitting on a pile of lumber when, an hour later, his thoughts began to run in rational channels again. Before him lay a patch of gray-green bay, flanked on either side by wharves upon which two black-hulled lumber schooners were disgorging their resinous cargo. The strike of the longshoremen was still in progress and the Embarcadero as good as deserted. Armed guards paraded before the entrance to the docks and only occasional idlers sunned themselves and viewed the silent and furtive loading of restive craft straining at their moorings.

He began to wonder dimly whether he had left Storch dead or merely stunned, and, granting either alternative, how definitely this circumstance would halt the plot against Hilmer's life. It was conceivable to him now that Storch might have provided against the possibility of failure, given the role of assassin into the hands of an understudy, to be exact. Suppose Ginger should fail in her warning? Not that he doubted her, but there was a chance that she had been hedged about with all manner of difficulties--perhaps even death. Suddenly with an arresting irrelevance he thought of the child upon Storch's doorstep, hugging her doll close, and as swiftly he remembered the black kodak case upon the center table. He wondered if the child were still sitting there ... Perhaps, by this time, a swarm of children were tumbling about the weather-beaten steps. He asked a passer-by the hour. Eleven-thirty! In fifteen more minutes, if the ticking clock within that sinister case performed its function, Storch's dwelling would be tumbling in upon his prostrate body. And, in the face of this, children might be prattling before the threshold. He must go back again!

He jumped to his feet and began to run. In an instant a conflagration of potential disasters leaped up from the spark of the immediate

danger. He flew along faster, colliding with irate pedestrians, escaping the wheels of skimming automobiles ... Presently the familiar cliff and the tawny path scaling it loomed ahead. He began to climb upward, almost on all-fours, digging his finger nails into the yellow clay in an instinctive effort to pull himself forward. Finally he gained the top ... The street, somnolent with approaching noon, was deserted--the child had disappeared. He recovered his whirling senses and looked again. This time he saw that the door of the shack stood open. He took a step forward. A figure loomed in the doorway. He shaded his eyes from the sun's glare and narrowed his lids. It was a woman!

The unexpectedness of this presence overwhelmed him as completely as if he had seen an apparition. For an instant he did not grasp its significance.

Then, in another moment, understanding began to flood in upon him. He felt a great weakness ... but he managed to make a trumpet with his hands, calling in a voice that sounded remote:

"Come out! For God's sake, come out!"

He saw the woman start back in a movement of quick confusion, and heard himself call again, this time with muffled agony:

"Ginger!"

There was a tremendous roar ... he felt a shower of stones hitting him sharply in the face ... He pressed forward ... sheets of flame were leaping greedily toward the sky and a string of people poured out into the sun-baked street.

At midnight Fred Starratt, making his way from the outlying districts toward the center of the town, came out of a mental turmoil that had flung him about all day in a series of blind impulses. The air was raucous with the shrill cry of newsboys announcing the details of the morning's sensation. He knew how the journalistic tale would run without bothering to glimpse the headlines. At this time it would be made up for the most part of vague speculations as to who was the prime mover of the enterprise.

The moments following the disaster were now fathomless, but he fancied that he had been outwardly cool, chilled into subconscious calculation by the very violence of the shock ... The frenzy had come later when he found himself aboard a ferryboat bound for Oakland. He could not disentangle the mixed impulses which had sent him upon this irrational errand, but he remembered now that a consuming desire to see Hilmer had possessed him. Perhaps an itching for revenge again had sprung into life, perhaps a fury to release a measure of his scorn and contempt, perhaps a mere curiosity to glimpse once more this man whose armor of arrogance remained unpierced ... Whatever the urge, it had keyed him to a quivering determination. He had wondered what stupidity possessed him to send Ginger in warning to a man like Hilmer. ... With almost psychic power he had created for himself the scene at the depot with Ginger pouring her tremulous message into contemptuous ears. For it was certain that Hilmer had been contemptuous. ... Afterward, standing before the north gate of Hilmer's shipyards, a man at his side confirmed his intuitions between irritating puffs from a blackened pipe:

"Nobody can double-cross Hilmer ... and they'd better give up trying ... He said a launching at noon and it _was_ at noon, you can bet your life on that! ... They say a woman tried to scare the old man this morning ... He just laughed in her face and came on over."

Almost as the man had finished speaking the crowd surged forward. And in a twinkling Hilmer's machine had swept past, leaving Fred, trembling from head to foot, staring stupidly into a cloud of dust ... He had not even glimpsed the occupants! But his failure to achieve whatever vague plan was buffeting him about drove him back to San Francisco. His confused mind had worked with the rational capacity for details which characterizes madness. He knew that Hilmer must wait for the automobile ferry...that the regular passenger boat would reach the other side at least a half hour in advance.

He had been prepared this time for the appearance of Hilmer's car. It came off the boat preceded by a thin line of automobiles, moving slowly. ... For a moment he wondered how he would achieve his purpose, and the next thing he knew he had leaped aboard the running board... He remembered long after that his wife had given a cry, that Mrs. Hilmer had stirred ever so slightly, that Hilmer's eyes had widened. Then out of a tense moment of suppressed confusion he had heard his wife's voice floating toward him as she said:

"Ah, then you were not drowned, after all!"

With amazing effrontery he threw open the door and pressed down the emergency seat opposite her.

"No... I swam out of that black pool!"

A slight tremor ran through her. Mrs. Hilmer smiled.

Recalling the scene, he remembered how outwardly commonplace were the moments which followed. Even Hilmer had been surprised into banalities. Fred Starratt might have parted with them but yesterday, for any indications to the contrary, and for an instant he had found all sense of tragedy swallowed up in amazement at the passive tenacity of the conventions.

But sitting there, facing this trio, each busy with his own swift thought, it gradually dawned upon Fred Starratt that now they were afraid of him. Like a captured and blinded Samson he was in a position to bring the temple walls crashing down upon them all. _They_ might elect to be silent, but what a voice _he_ could raise!... He had come out of a chuckling silence to hear Hilmer saying between almost shut teeth:

"I suppose you'll be needing money now, Starratt... Railroad rates have all been raised."

He felt at that moment the same triumph as when Storch had turned the key in its lock... Hilmer always did walk directly to his objective ... but there were times when subtleties had more power. He remembered the quiet thrust of his own voice measuring his adversary's expectancy:

"A man in my situation needs nothing, Hilmer ... least of all
money!"

He never forgot the look of contempt which Hilmer threw at him ... but this time it had been a contempt for the unfathomable. Helen's face was white; only Mrs. Hilmer had continued to smile ... a set, ghastly, cruel smile of complete satisfaction. And, in the silence which followed, it was Mrs. Hilmer's voice that brought them all back with a start as she said:

"Well, here we are ... home again!"

It was the same voice that had broken in upon another tense situation months before with:

"What nice corn pudding this is, Mrs. Starratt...Would you mind telling me how you made it?"

Had they been moving in a circle since that fatal evening, Fred had found himself wondering...or had he merely been dreaming?

The scene which followed had been unforgettable--the chauffeur and Hilmer lifting Mrs. Hilmer into her wheeled chair; Helen Starratt coming forward considerately with a steamer rug for the invalid's comfort; Fred, standing outside the pale of all this activity like a dreamer constructing stage directions for the puppets of his imagination. And out of the almost placid atmosphere of domestic bustle the voice of Mrs. Hilmer again breaking the stillness, this time with a cool and knifelike precision as she said, turning her pale, icy eyes on Helen Starratt:

"My dear, your nurse-girl days are over...We've had you a long time and we can't be too selfish--now that your husband is back!"

Could Fred ever wipe from his memory the startled look which had swept Helen's face as she released her hold on the wheeled chair? Or the diabolical content with which Mrs. Hilmer settled back as she went on slowly, clearly, as if the steady drip of her words fascinated her:

"You wouldn't want to stay here...this is no place for lovers...And, besides, there isn't room for _two_!"

Helen's hands had fallen inertly at her sides as she stood facing Hilmer, as if waiting for his decision. But he had made no move, he merely had returned her gaze in equal silence. At that moment Mrs. Hilmer's clawlike fingers closed over her husband's mangled thumb with a clutch of triumph and she had turned with a painful twist to dart her venomous scorn at Helen. A fortnight ago the doctors had given Mrs. Hilmer a scant six months of life. But now Fred Starratt knew that she would live as long as her spirits had vengeance to feed upon.

Thus had the door closed upon Hilmer and his crippled gaoler. Already Helen Starratt had gained the street corner. Fred was seized with an impulse to overtake her, but it had died as quickly. There was nothing he could offer ... not even a lodging for the night. Instead he had turned and walked briskly in an opposite direction.

* * * * *

As he drew nearer town the cries of the newsboys grew more insistent ... so insistent that Fred bought a paper. By this time they had cleared away the charred wreckage of Storch's shack, discovering the secret which its ruins had concealed. He found himself wondering how soon they would link him with the still-born plot which had achieved so much tragedy in spite of its miscarriage. Of Ginger there was little trace. She had been caught up in a winding sheet of flame, a chariot of fire which had swept clean her pitiful and outraged body... Again he saw her face, wistful in the glare of that portentous noon, framed by the outline of Storch's doorway, heard himself call her name in agony, and woke to find only a memory answering him. And there came to him a realization of the terrible beauty of that moment which had released her spirit in white-heated transfiguration.

A sudden pity for the living began to well up within him ... for Hilmer in the relentless grip of the harpy who would tear at his content with her scrawny fingers ... for Mrs. Hilmer, condemned to feed to the end upon the bitter fruits of hatred ... for his wife, drifting to a pallid fate made up of petty adjustments and compromises. Yes ... he found himself pitying Helen Starratt most of all. Because he had a feeling that she would go on to the end cloaking her primitive impulses in a curious covering of self-deception. She would never understand ... never! She would always be restless, straining at the conventions, but unable or unwilling to pay the price of full freedom. And her remaining days would be spent in a futile pulling at the chains which her own cowardice had forged. She would not even have the memory of bitter-sweet delights.

He came from these musings to discover that his feet had strayed instinctively to the old garden which provoked the memory of his father and mother. But he found it destroyed utterly ... its prim beds swept aside to make way for a huge apartment house. The last intangible link which had bound him to his old life had been destroyed.

He turned away, almost with a feeling of relief--the past was forever dead, burying itself in its own tragic oblivion. He climbed higher, to the topmost point of the Hyde Street Hill, up the steps leading to the reservoir. It was another night of provocative perfumes and promissory warmth. He skirted the sun-baked slopes, sown with blossoming alfalfa, and came upon a clump of wind-tortured acacia bushes facing the west. He threw himself down and lay in a sweet physical truce, gazing up at the twinkling sky. He was alone with the night, he had not even a disciple to betray him.

He knew that if he willed it so he could be up and off, forever eluding, forever flaunting the law's ubiquitous presence. The sharp urge for subtle revenge which had come with realization of his power had passed, but he was done with any and all compromises, he had no heart for the decaying fruits of deception.

Would they find him here wrapped in the cool fragrance of the night, or must he go down to them, yielding himself up silently and without bitterness? He had touched life at every point. He could say, now, with Hilmer:

"I know all the dirty, rotten things of life by direct contact!"

Yes, even to murder.

And with Storch he could repeat:

"A man who's been through hell is like a field broken to the plow.
He's ready for seed."

He was ready for seed, so freshly and deeply broken that he had a passion to lie fallow against a worthy sowing.

Presently, enveloped in the perfect and childlike faith which follows revelation, he slept, with his face turned toward the stars. And as he stirred ever so slightly he felt the nearness of two souls. Clearly and more clearly they defined themselves until he knew them for those two erring companions of his misery who had been made suddenly perfect in the crucible of sorrow and sacrifice. They came toward him in a white, silent beauty, until on one side stood Felix Monet and on the other Sylvia Molineaux.

And before him in review passed a motley company of every tragic group that he had ever known--business associates, jailbirds, the inmates of Fairview, Storch's terrible companions. He recognized each group in its turn by their outer trappings. But suddenly their clothes melted and even their flesh dissolved, and he saw nothing but a company of skeletons stripped of all unessentials, and he could no longer mark them apart. And, in a flash, even these unmarked figures crumbled to dust, spreading out like a sunlit plain at noonday. And he saw clouds gather and rain fall and green blades spring up miraculously and blossom succeed blossom. And through it all Felix Monet stood on one side and Sylvia Molineaux on the other.

He awoke to the vigorous prod of a contemptuous boot. A policeman stood over him.

"What are you doing here?" the officer bellowed down at him.

He rose quickly. The sun was bathing the rejuvenated city in a flood of wonderful gold.

"My name is Fred Starratt," he said, quietly. "And I'm wanted for murder ... and some other things. You'd better take me down."

The policeman grasped his arm and together they made their way down to the level stretches of the paved street.

They stood for a moment to let a street car swing past. It was crowded with clerks, standing on the running board. Above the warning clang of the bell a voice came ringing out with a note of surprised recognition:

"Hello, Fred Starratt! What's new?"

He made a trumpet with his hands.

"Everything!" he cried back, loudly. "Everything in the world!"

THE END

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