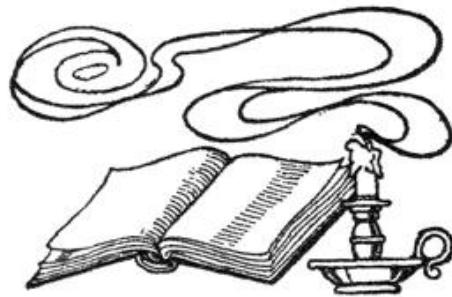


# THE POSSUM HUNTERS

A Story of the Tobacco War  
in Kentucky

By  
J. W. SLADE



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## CHAPTER I.

### **"They Play the Game."**

Ever since the day when he had learned to know the fickle exultation from his associate's acclaim, "handsome ugly," Hughes Randall had delighted in being a social economist, a builder of schemes, a promoter of ideas, an organizer. While in common-school he had organized the "Undefeated Shinny Players," the "Base Ball Terrors," and the "Foot Ball Challengers," leading each organization through a series of glorious victories and unlamented defeats until "Cap" came to supersede the less gracious nickname "pug ugly." During one vacation he had organized the "Swimming-Pool Electors," one law of which required each "Elector" to devote one hour to cleaning and repairing the pool for the hour spent in the water; and the farmer on whose land the pool was located, was so pleased at having the stock pond put in repair that he presented the "Electors" with a year old pig. This acquisition gave rise to the organization of "The Perpetual Pig Club," a commercial scheme which was to reap glorious returns from the stock in control; no doubt the idea of the organizer would have been accomplished but for two more dominant factors, one being the necessary upkeep of said pig, the other being a circus which came to the city when the "Perpetuals" were short of finance.

But even their supplications to dispose of the stock was not without reward; the plea and argument was addressed to Hughes Randall as their leader; he was the central figure in the organization, their "President."

The growing years did not diminish his stock of magnetism. His semesters in college were filled with due recognition of his ability to lead, to promote, to organize. He had rejuvenated the debating society, was a charter member of the first Greek letter fraternity among the student body, was most active in all matters pertaining to athletic sports, and instituted the "Semi Weekly Dance Club." But with all his activities in the social life of the college there was one noteworthy fault, failure, virtue, or indiscretion: Hughes Randall never was known to claim such an article as a sweetheart.

His post-graduate course at the university which gave him his degree in law was not dull and drab because of unpleasing acclaim. Although his degree prevented an active participation in athletics, although the social life of the institution was in control of the students who had matriculated as freshmen, although he entered the university an unknown "post grad," he left a memory carved in the hearts and affections of the student body, and a "dramatic" club as the result of his ability to organize. Also he left the same exception to his college years; he was courteous and affable to the charming young womanhood of his association, he would escort them to theatres, parties and dances, but not one of them could say what his eyes would look like as they told the world old story.

A lawyer, scholar, gentleman, and organizer, he returned to his natal heath to practice in his chosen profession and to promote, foster and encourage schemes of social and politic economy to



the upbuilding of the moral and commercial welfare of the state. He dabbled in politics to the extent of being elected representative from his district, and while serving in this capacity he saw the opportunity to organize a society the magnitude of which only gave zest to this born "organizer."

He would give battle to the "Tobacco Trust." He would form the tobacco farmers into a "fool-proof, bomb-proof, wear-proof combine." He would turn timid fear into bold shoutings. He would turn their prejudices into a marketable asset. Glory be, here was a man's size job, a task which none but an optimist would tackle; just his size, just his spirit. Eagerly, painstakingly he studied conditions, found out why other efforts along this line had failed, and built the foundation plan for a tremendous following.

He built, untiringly he schemed and planned and talked, argued, reasoned and explained. Until the future began to promise the fulfillment of his dreams of yesterday, the day was filled with the glad joy of efficiency, and victory seemed to smile on him as he was busily sorting the written evidence of his accomplishment. 'Twas a joy-giving day just on the edge of spring, a day such as Nature fashions for lovers, dreamers and organizers. Possibly he was a "lover" without his knowing the fact, no other than a "dreamer" could have begun the engineering of his scheme, certainly his record as an "organizer" prepared "handsome ugly" Hughes Randall for the vast amount of intricate detail work necessary for success. These papers permitted him to "feel" success; he smiled on each signature as though here was something he would never forget; he called off the number of acres listed in the "Contract-Bond," or agreement between member and the society, and waited for his secretary to "check"

the entry; he told his secretary how eagerly one man had "signed up," or the extra amount of argument which was required before another would join in the "pool." His secretary gave pleased attention, she listens with that grace which induces full recital, she understands because she loves the organization and the organizer. Her eyes say this fact and she believes his smile answers full. She listens, he talks, and they are so interested in one of his recitals—and in looking into eyes, that neither of them hear the approach of a visitor through the outer room of the suite until Durbin Ellis, nervous and irritable, stood in the doorway—Ellis, with his annoying habit of constantly flipping the ash from his cigar by tapping it with his second finger.

The visitor and client stood tapping his cigar as though he was displeased over seeing other folks happy while he was miserable.

"Hello, Hughes." His greeting was a surly demand for the lawyer's attention. He asks, "Are you busy?"

"Always busy since the day the returns commenced to come in," was the jovial reply, as he waved the handful of papers in a salutation to his friend and kinsman, who merited additional consideration since he was one of the most extensive tobacco growers in the county. He welcomed his visitor, then told him: "Sit down for a moment and wait until we finish listing these new members, please, old fellow, and it will be an introduction to some few of the men who are already in the society I intend to ask you to join." He explained his delay in not asking him ere this: "I have been anxiously waiting your return from gay Palm Beach for the past thirty days, and Miss Beatrice has been placing your name at the very top of our 'prospect' list each time it was revised. You remember Miss Herron, do you

not? Miss Beatrice Herron, daughter of 'Old Ironsides'?"

Two of them laughed over the appellation, the other one seemed to be struggling to be less of a grouch in the presence of beauty and wit. Miss Herron appreciated the effort, she understood that something gross was troubling the visitor, with a woman's intuition, and remembering much gossip which had been running around loose of late, she correctly guessed the cause, therefore, she was more than gracious and tried to detract him from ugly memories. She advanced arguments why he should become one of their members, and did not wait for him to give assent or denial to her statements. Logically she quoted facts and figures as though this was the sole subject of her thoughts and the one which she would recommend to him as of greater importance than all things else. She saw that logic and reason were not impressing her audience, so changed her tactics; she began teasing him for being "the last big farmer of Fayette County to join." She was enthused by her arguments and efforts, and might have won her "prospect" to her way of thinking had she been given a few more minutes, but when the last contract-bond had been recorded and filed she turned to her typewriter desk as she admonished him to "let Mister Randall tell you all about it."

"Durbin," Hughes began; "you know that I am trying to perfect this Society of Equity, which is the one great hope of the farmer, and to make it a more powerful body than the 'Trust' we are fighting. Certainly you must realize that without a union of farmers who demand a living wage for the product of their labor, the combination of manufacturers and middle-man, who gain greater and greater control each day, will forever hold the "tiller of the soil" in the thrall of slavery.

Tobacco is the principal product through this section of Kentucky, many of your neighbors depend on their tobacco crop to give them the wherewith to live, and you know that the combination of buyers have held the price down to a mere pittance. I am going to break that combination. I am going to dictate the price to the buyer. I am going to organize a shell-proof, bomb-proof and fool-proof organization. When organized, we will hold out for our price, we will dictate instead of being robbed, and if necessary we will manufacture our tobacco and put it on the market. But that will not be necessary; the Crosby Tobacco Company can be brought to reason, they are human just like you and your other tobacco growers. Will you come in with us? Will you help?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I refuse to tickle myself with pretty words when there isn't a God's blessed chance of success."

"You are the first man who ever told me that God was fighting on the side of the 'Trust,'" Hughes laughingly admonished; then seriously: "Why do you think our hope is so vain?"

"Because this same scheme has been tried three different times, and was a complete and miserable failure each time."

"I grant that, but why was it a failure?"

"Simply because the 'Trust' could buy their tobacco from the men who didn't join in the move, and the poor fools who formed the 'pool' were laughed at as they were told to count their creditors while the other farmers counted their dollars. Your scheme will pan out just the same way, even though you've got it hedged up in better language than the others were. But you can't fool Durbin Ellis; because he was fool enough to join two of the other 'pools.' Just re-

member this as long as you live: The farmer will always play a losing game when he attempts to buck against 'big money.' "

"Why?" eagerly insisted Hughes Randall, and Durbin Ellis said words which afterwards were to be turned into an Equity slogan:

"Because those men know how to play the game."

"That's it. That's the one and only answer. That's the only point for us to remember. You have pointed to the hunch for success or failure in this deal. The 'Trust knows how to play the game.' They play the man, not the cards. They urge you on to sentimental haste while they play a watchful-waiting game. They have made boobs, whiners and quitters of the men who produce the tobacco, simply because the farmer was so impatient to see the color of the dollar he couldn't wait and watch and 'play the game.' Those three efforts failed because they started out to bluff the 'Trust' into paying a better price, they failed because money cannot be bluffed, they failed because the dollar has no sentiment, they failed because the pool was constructed of a magnificent wish-bone where there should have been a backbone. Were there any 'every-day' reasons? Yes, two. First, the promoters controlled less than half the tobacco grown; second, they demanded more money than the product was justly worth. That is history which no sane man can deny. The plan which we are working on now will not fail, simply because we have learned 'to play the game,' the same game which the 'Trust' learned long ago. Before we go into permanent organization we will fix a reasonable price, a living wage, and a fair profit; thereby eliminating all speculation from our scheme. We then will go into the 'watchful-waiting' game, and stand fixed to our principles; and we'll win, or put the 'Trust'

out of the tobacco business."

"Aw, hell," the farmer exclaimed in disgust. His little stock of patience was completely exhausted; he had not come to the lawyer's office to discuss the products of man, he was here to talk over the products of the devil. He told his cousin so: "I don't want to talk tobacco, or anything else except *that*," and he threw an envelope onto the desk in front of Hughes.

The lawyer correctly guessed what the envelope would contain even before he lifted it from the desk. He had feared this epoch in the domestic affairs of his kinsman and friend; feared it as only a man of staunch principles and unsullied life can fear the insidious evil of slanderous court proceedings. He read the letter which was in the envelope, read it in sympathetic silence. He pitied the man, pitied the woman who was deserting the man and leaving only this note to tell of her intention to return to her people. He wished that he could help them, he would have done anything in his power to draw them together again that they might live as their marriage vows had sworn them to live. He was sorry that he could not help, sorry that he was unable to assist in annulling the marriage by court proceeding, but such assistance would be contrary to one of the fixed principles of the law firm Randall, Clay & Randall.

The farmer bluntly demanded: "I want you to get me a divorce; get it as quickly and as quietly as possible, but get it. I'm worth about sixty thousand dollars outside of those five hundred acres that are entailed; if I should die she would be given about twenty thousand dollars, or one-third of my fee simple property; I'm the same as dead to her now so give her that amount; but hurry up and get the divorce. I want to be free." He arose and would hurry from the office,

but the lawyer called to him:

"Wait, Durbin." He regretted saying that which he would be forced to tell his kinsman and friend, but an absolute rule of the law firm demanded that no one of the members should accept a case in divorce. "Come back and sit down," he asked, and when the farmer returned he began telling him how impossible it was for him to handle this class of practice, but that he would go with him to a law firm skilled in "Domestic Relations" practice.

This refusal dazed the farmer. He was unable to comprehend the ethics which seemed so clear to his kinsman. He had suffered inordinate worry over the affair, and had believed it only necessary for him to come to Randall, Clay & Randall, state his demand, give them the evidence, and secure relief. With a hazy, unbelieving, dull stare he sat looking at the lawyer. He fumbled in his pocket, found a fresh cigar, tried to light it from the long since dead cigar which he had all but pounded to pieces with incessant tapping, got a match out of his pocket, struck it against the desk, and as the match flared up, so did he.

"You mean—you mean you are not going to handle this suit?"

"I do," though he qualified the statement by, "It is not I who refuse the practice, it is the firm, though God knows each and every one of us have personal reasons for not practicing in that branch."

"You, hell." Durbin was suddenly furious. "You are refusing to help me simply because I won't join your damned society."

"You can at least remember that a woman is present." He towered over the enraged man as a school master over a refractory pupil.

"Woman" was the cause of all the hell he had

suffered since the note had been found on his "whisky cabinet," "woman" was the word which now tormented him. Jumping to his feet he shook his fist in the face of his kinsman and raved:

"Woman, hell, no I don't forget her, and if she knew one-half as much about my affairs as she does about your fake tobacco scheme she would argue you into helping me out. No I don't forget her, and I won't forget you, either." He rushed to the door, turned and flung: "You are going to live to be sorry for your straight-laced practice and your petticoated ideas of divorce, and by God I'm going to try and make you sorry. Yes, I refuse to sign up with your farmer's trust, and I'll do everything in my power to break it up. You're only starting it as a boost to some political scheme of yours, and you're trying to tie the farmer to you to make him the goat. But I'm not going to be one of your damned boobs, and I'm going to take care to see that nobody I have any influence with is fooled by your smooth talk and high-toned wind-jamming." Angrily slamming the door after him he rushed into the hall.

The lawyer sprang after him, his Southern blood was up, he would give the whipping which was invited, he——

"Hughes!"

The cool warning in the tone drew the son to his composure, turning, he saw his father and Mr. Clay standing in the doorway leading from his office into that of William Randall's. The elderly members of the firm had heard the hot ranting of Durbin Ellis, and had hastened to prevent a possible encounter. Well did they know that their arrival had been most opportune, for the glint of his eyes and the paleness of his face eloquently told of the waging battle between anger and discretion in the heart and brain of



Hughes Randall. They inquired into the cause, accepted the explanation of Hughes and Miss Beatrice, lamented the fact that an old client had become offended, regretted that he was swearing vengeance, though classified the occurrence as "an unavoidable accident." The even tenor of a well-regulated law office was soon restored, and Randall, Clay & Randall "were playing the game" with every card in the deck. They did not attempt to depreciate the influence of their new antagonist, they knew Durbin Ellis to be a man who would wage a most bitter fight, they realized that the five tobacco barns on his two farms would form a weighty argument for the "non-pool" factions, and William Randall was fearful lest the venom in the unchecked hate of the farmer would incite some of the Equity supporters to do physical damage.

"'Forewarned is forearmed,' they say, so today will be the best time to begin intensive solicitation in Durbin's district." Hughes asserted, and he was making preparation to go on that task when his father asked:

"Will you help Mr. Clay and myself 'pick a jury' before you go?" They were all three soon busied over the task of "picking a jury."

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER 2.

### **"The Secret Committee."**

The law firm of Randall, Clay & Randall was elite from the professional, political and social viewpoint, and very sound financially. They were "corporate counsel" for one of the "trunk line" railroads, and "attorneys in pleading" for many firms of major magnitude. They were proud but not boastful, diplomatic but not arrogant, and attributed a great amount of their success to an adherence to two rules:

"Safe and sane briefs.

"Safe and sane jurors."

A large and well-selected library of law books made possible their adherence to the first maxim, and a certain system which Hughes had jokingly labeled "The Mental Pedigree" was invaluable assistance to the second. This "Mental Pedigree" consisted of a complete record of every juror who had served during the past ten years in cases involving corporation law or circumstantial evidence. Citations were condensed and methodical, slight research was involved to determine the suitability of a prospective juror. It was a clever scheme, skillfully devised and ably employed, and was of supreme value to the firm. It had been invented by Mr. Clay, and perfected by Hughes, but William Randall to this day fought its use and required his partners to maintain a fearful secrecy as to its existence. He would have de-

stroyed it rather than permit a copy of it to be made, and often designated it as "a most dangerous instrument in the hands of fools." All of them were destined to remember this warning long afterwards when its adoption in a commercial enterprise would result in the formation of the Kuklux of tobacco.

The partners themselves were essentially "safe and sane." William H. Randall, the senior member, was a typical Kentuckian—not that he always wore a long frock coat, black string tie, broad-brimmed hat, or had an innate proclivity for the mint bedecked julep. He and his friends did not know the picturesque and bombastic Colonel, who boasts a julep appetite and "would have you to know, suh, that I am a Kentuckian, suh." Mr. Randall was of the Kentucky of culture and democracy, the aristocracy of achievement, and the nobility of honest intentions.

Gregory C. Clay, second member of the firm, was a careful, dogmatic individual, one of the recognized scholars of the state. He loved all books, but law was his passion. His patience was the marvel of all who knew him, nothing pleased him more than a knotty problem of intricate detail, and with the assistance of Miss Herron he had devised a system of filing the equity pledges which was a wonder in its completeness.

Hughes Randall, third member of the firm, ex-representative, and organizer of the Society of Equity, was only a few months past his thirtieth year and joyously proud of his youth. He had the rugged features, "the attractive ugliness" which, with some wonderful power, bewitches women sooner and more often than the blandishments of the "handsome" men. He was put together in the mold of an athlete, and "could whip his weight in wildcats, with or without." His

quick smile was an instant invitation to friendship, while his clear blue eyes held many warnings against enmity. He had never had a love affair; some day he would meet the woman his soul cried out to, and when he did so he could say "Thou art my first, my only love." He believed he would recognize that one; she would not be fitted to a selfish pattern, but would be so altogether lovely and overpowering as to make her every word the foundation upon which "home" is builded. Should he have been told that he had met that one, should the Gods have let him know that his love was so much a part of his very life as not to be separated and distinguished by a special name; should he have even guessed the truth, he would have been wonderously happy, gladly mystified. But it is not given one man to see too many secrets of "organization," so he must devote more skill to the formation of the "house of Equity" than to "the house of Randall." Just at this moment he was so intensely interested in the formation of the society of tobacco growers that he was more attentive to the maneuvers of Albert J. Andrews, state purchasing agent for the Crosby Tobacco Company, or "Trust," than in the marksmanship of one "Dan Cupid," the recognized Comptroller of love: A condition which was greatly to the advantage of a scheme which was being perfected by Mrs. Anna B. Easson and her daughter, Miss Caroline, though distressful to Miss Beatrice Herron.

\* \* \* \* \*

The successful lawyer is not the one who devotes his time to building elaborate bouquets of beautiful words to be gracefully and eloquently presented to judge and jury; he is the one who most skilfully bends law and physical conditions to support his case. Hughes Randall had been

asked to assist in the selection of the most likely candidates in the panel of jurymen, because the case which his father and Mr. Clay would defend in court on the morrow was one of great local interest. Durbin Ellis did not have time to saturate his anger in a dozen highballs before that number of jurors had been chosen from the first half of the list, and the three lawyers were intently busy in their discussion of the faults, failings, pro and anti beliefs of the remaining number.

Suddenly Hughes paused in his task; there was something which was rankling in his brain, something which he had been silently fighting ever since the moment his cousin left the office; with force he hammered his fist on the table in front of him as he vehemently declared: "I do not believe that Durbin Ellis or any other man for whom I have the least grain of respect or affection would betray friends and fellow land owners, deliberately hurl himself and his neighbors into a more absolute slavery, tear hope from the heart and fling all prospects of embetterment into the slough of despair, by contracting to deliver his future production and all he can buy or control, over to the enemy while others are struggling to form and hold together a pool."

"Nor I," chimed Mr. Clay.

"That is your personal belief, mine also," William Randall would caution; "but we have his own words and the evidence of his past conduct to support his stand as a rebel. He was largely instrumental in breaking up the last effort at pooling the crop; the agreement between the farmers was 'not to sell the tobacco to manufacturers or storage warehouses', he bought thousands of pounds from those who were in the pool and sold it to the 'trust'. He can rally to his support all of the farmers who are opposed to our plan, and

there will be many of them despite our greatest effort; certainly he can control the product of his own tenants and those who rent ground from him; if he makes the effort to do so he can influence the policy of the bank of which he is a director; he might even be shrewd enough to advance money on the tobacco in pool, taking first mortgage on the crop, and endeavor to force it out of the Equity's control by a suit in court."

"Thank you for that technical possibility," the organizer accepted, then prophesied: "I shall make a powerful effort to have the assembly enact special laws to give us protection." Afterwards he was successful in his attempt to secure state protection to the Equity's "Sale-Bond" contract.

The more experienced lawyers would advise him against the possibility of "class legislation"; they argued the subject pro and con, Mr. Clay finally agreeing to "take the matter up and see if such a law could be framed to hold water," he believed the idea could be formed into one of their most powerful weapons.

"The law is a most powerful weapon but it can be turned into a most miserable curse," William Randall philosophized.

Hughes was quick to answer; "Law is the weapon by which men force support to their claim, and those who do not know how to handle 'law' are the only ones who bring the 'curse.' There is no 'law' to prohibit or permit our use of this 'mental pedigree,' yet the opposing counsel would envy us its use, and doubtless try to prohibit us its use did they discover its existence. They must be puzzled to know why we so quickly reject some men who appear to be rational human beings, they must wonder why we readily accept men who are as rigid in their dealings as 'Old Ironsides' Herron, they do not know we do so because we have the record showing where those men were

influenced by fixed personal faith and beliefs. I want to be prepared to fight the quitter the same as you will be prepared to fight the opposing counsel by the use of this 'mental pedigree.' When you go into court tomorrow you will know more about some of those men, their real opinions and inclinations, than they know or acknowledge to themselves; and your knowledge was gleaned from the use of a weapon which could be made 'lawful' did you but ask the assembly to recognize it as such. We know to a certainty what banker will have influence over a certain land owner, because that bank holds a 'blanket' over the farm; we know the political faith and creed of the individual; we know whether he is a radical 'union' supporter, or a man of unfixed principles; we know if he is antagonistic to corporate interests, whether he favors a body of men or the individual; we—" His voice caught on that word and held in a creative silence; praise of the "mental pedigree" and its valued services had developed an idea, a scheme, more bold, more daring, more powerful in its possibilities, than any he had heretofore developed. The scheme was quickly taking definite form in his active brain, rapidly he began to speak as he outlined the idea to Mr. Clay and his father; he was the dreamer, organizer, creator; his eyes sparkled with the glory of genius;

"Why not adapt this 'mental pedigree' plan of securing information to the organization of the society? Why not have a carefully chosen committee in each and every county to unearth the secret connections of the obstinate tobacco farmer? We could operate with the same secrecy we employ in our selection of a jury, and there is no reason why the scheme would be less successful in commerce than it is in law. Let the committee secretly work to secure inside information on an unconvinced grower; let them learn his private

affairs, his banker, his creditors, his friends and enemies, his affiliations of every class and character, and the society can bring to bear a pressure which cannot be resisted."

Mr. Clay caught the spirit of the idea, quickly he was aglow with the same enthusiasm as the younger man, he elaborated on the scheme and drew it into many ramifications, he was delighted to lend his invention to the commercial enterprise. But the more cautious William Randall looked very dubious as he listened to the eager discussion, years had been required to win him over to the free use of the "mental pedigree," he had pronounced it "a dangerous weapon in the hands of fools", he was not willing to believe "cautious" men could be selected by the hundreds. Hughes noted his silence; asked:

"Don't you believe it will work? Do you catch our idea, Dad?" He was anxious that his father should agree with them, tho he feared otherwise.

"You would have a most dangerous organization, my boy, it would be next to impossible to select that number of men in each county without finding a large percentum who would turn the idea into a curse. You had best forget the idea; it is dangerous."

"Where do you find proof for your statement, William?" Mr. Clay inquired. "The law of averages will not sustain you."

Hughes placed the same question in more direct form by demanding: "Are we dangerous because we are able to predict, almost to a certainty, the decisions of a man? Are we dangerous merely because we have learned to know the men of the jury?"

"No," Mr. Randall admitted with a humorous chuckle. Immediately he became serious, and continued: "But what permits you to believe these various committees will be as 'safe and sane' as



the firm of Randall, Clay and Randall? Such a number of committees will necessarily be composed of many sorts and conditions of men, various codes of honor will be represented, their conception of law will be tangled and jumbled. You, and your local secretary, could not pick five men in your home county who would be 'safe and sane' when given such unlimited power as you propose to bestow; if you cannot do so at home then how in the name of all that's holy do you hope to succeed in the counties where you have to be introduced to the lay members? Permit those committees to go unbridled and their legitimate activities will degenerate into spoliations which will bring disgrace on the Equity."

"I do not agree with you. There is nothing war-like in our society, nothing which will appeal to rowdiness, nothing which would encourage men to destroy; we are a commercial organization, banded together to sell. We do not aim to exert a physical force over the non-pool farmer, and the 'Secret Committee' will only be the detective force of the combine and will draw men into the pool rather than force them to come in. This 'Secret Committee' will spread the propaganda of our society, they will teach the sentiments which make possible our existence; our greatest capital is mutual protection, and we must avail ourselves of every possible advantage of protection. Give me a committee of five men, honest men, influential men, in each county, let them operate in secret, and I will compel every farmer in each county to respect the power and aims of the Equity, even if he does not join. Give me such a committee, and every county may produce a Durbin Ellis without endangering the welfare of the society. Hurry, and let's finish this jury, I want to drive out and ask Tom Quinn what he thinks of the idea."

Soon he was making preparations to leave the office for the day; gladly he accepted the defiant challenge which had been issued him by Durbin Ellis; the speech of the farmer was almost a welcome variation from the phlegmatic indifference which was offered by all who had sulkily refused to "sign up." Here, at least, was a tangible thing to fight, here was something which seemed to answer him; the pulse of battle was strong in the veins of the future president of the Society as he drew on a heavy coat and buckskin gloves to protect him from the chill winds of the new spring day.

In those days the automobile had not usurped the position of the horse as monarch of the Mac Addam realm; and Hughes Randall drove along the good roads, winding between fertile fields and woodland, behind one of the prize roadsters of the county. He would have preferred the swifter going car, he would have bought one of the "one lungers", but for one all powerful reason: The farmers as a class, were bitterly opposed to this "devil car" innovation, and he was organizing a society of farmers. The song of the fight was coursing thru his veins as he drove along, he would open the campaign of "intensive solicitation" on the day a challenge was issued him. He would carry the fight into the enemies' territory, he would not give that one a single hour the advantage.

This was the first of many, many trips thru the tobacco district, sometimes with a lieutenant, often alone, always fighting, fighting with a determination which would recognize only success. He redoubled his efforts to get in touch with every tobacco grower in the blue grass, and few would be the days from now on when his presence would gladden the heart of his stenographer

or lighten the business burdens of his law partners.

Tom Quinn was over-joyed in seeing his friend; jovial, good-natured, happy-go-lucky, Tom; Tom who refused to take life seriously, and whose motto was "Smile, you fish, smile." For the most excellent reason that he had sold the animal, he recognized the horse when Hughes turned into the gate, and followed by a goodly "pack" of his fox, coon, and o'possum dogs he walked down the front drive-way to meet him. Mr. Quinn had been of the most valued assistance in helping to convince the farmers of his section of the advantages in union against the "Trust," few were the farmers he approached who refused to give him their signature to the "Sale-Bond" contract of membership. With a shout of joy, he approved the idea of the "Secret Committee", his eyes danced with a happiness unrestrained as he listened to the scheme, he grasped it as a wonderful invention, he saw something in the plan which could be improved on, expanded, and broadened, he begged that he be permitted to go to work at once on the forming of the local committee, nor was he satisfied until given this permission.

The "Secret Committee" agreed on, Tom referred to a matter which had been giving him no little worry ever since some days ago when he saw a certain happening on the streets of the city.

"Say," he abruptly asked; "how about that stenographer of yours, Miss Herron, you know."

"Well?" Hughes inquired in a puzzle; Beatrice, least of all his employees, was a source of slight worry.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to raise her salary, or give her a commission on the memberships she secures, or give her some official title in the society, or something like that?"

"Why, certainly, we will after our organization; we will give her some special department when we organize; but there is no cause to worry over that now."

"Maybe," was the non-committal, non-assenting reply.

Searchingly Hughes examined the countenance of his staunch supporter, he was anxious to learn just why this sudden interest in the affairs of Miss Herron should develop. He asked: "Has Miss Herron complained to you of a lack of appreciation on our part?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that; she doesn't even suspect that I have been thinking about her. But I saw her, saw her with my own eyes, saw her walking on the streets with Albert Andrews, the 'trust' agent, and it kinder struck me that he was trying to get her away from us. See what I mean? He might offer her a helluv a salary, give her enough to help her forget us, and tickle her woman's vanity with a high-fullutin title; see?"

Not only did the "organizer" "see," but he thanked his informant and assured him that Miss Herron's salary would be suitably advanced and a "title" conferred. On his return to the office he caused the young lady many a glowing smile and pretty blush as he told her of the great value she had been to all members of the Society, himself in particular; and if she took the major portion of this praise in a most personal nature, he was unconscious of that fact. Their chumship was so natural, so much a part of themselves that it had not yet been separated from their life and given an especial name.

She tried to deny that her work had been anything out of the ordinary, she assured him that any other stenographer would have done just as capable work. Her denials of any great service

to the cause drew the elder Mr. Randall from his office to earnestly and honestly inform Hughes of the many, many after work-day hours and extra duties assumed by Miss Herron while the "organizer" was away from the office; and the usually taciturn and unsentimental Mr. Clay came in to add his modicum of praise and to assure them that the stenographer had only this day improved the filing system which all of them had believed to be perfect. This last acclaim was too much for Beatrice, she was fairly swamped in the warmth of appreciation, she could not refuse their recognition, so she agreed to accept the salary named by Hughes, with the condition that she be given full charge of the "Percentum Ledger"—a volume which if properly posted would at all times show the condition and strength of the Equity.

To Hughes Randall this was only a duty well done, a just recognition of loyalty and faithfulness, perhaps, a precaution taken against the machinations of the "Trust" agent, but above all, a substantial way of saying his gladness over finding a companion spirit in "organization"; but the happiness of that half hour was an aurora to Beatrice Herron for days and days to come, its glow was reflected in the joyous smile of her greeting to each member of the firm, a joyousness too genuine to attract notice, too complete to be questioned of ulterior motive. She re-doubled her efforts to further the designs of the society, and who shall say that among her motives for industry, loyalty to the Equity was second to the unworded, unuttered, undemonstrated, bond between herself and the organizer.

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER NO. 3.

### **"Scandal Is the Police Court of Society."**

The "Secret Committee" was quickly and very effectively started in every county wherein the Equity interests were active, that is to say in every county of the State where Burley tobacco was produced. The scheme acted on the lethargic growth of the society with amazing results, it was as oil which was thrown over and into a smoldering, latent, inactive fire. Its effect was almost instantaneous, "Contract Bonds" with signatures attached began to pour into headquarters in a veritable flood, keen interest in the plan pressed forward by leaps and bounds, men who had hooted at and discouraged the pool of growers, now became ardent supporters and advertisers.

The stimulus of this rapid growth was as strong wine to the untiring efforts of the organizer, often he wished that he might be able to split himself into many parts and send each division into a different county to assist in the perfecting of the combine. From county seat to county seat he traveled as rapidly as the slow-going trains would carry him, he gave instructions, cautioned to accuracy, addressed enthusiastic gatherings, and urged them on to still greater percentum of averages. He was the dynamic force around which a powerful body was assembling, he was the or-

ganizer, the leader of men. And if he never wasted a precious moment in worrying over conditions at headquarters, the proper filing of records, the accuracy of the reports compiled from the "Perentum Ledger," that confidence and urbanity was due to his unexpressed, unquestioned, and implicit faith in the capabilities of his private secretary. Her fidelity was as unquestioned as the law of gravity, his trust in her was as absolute as his faith in the justness of the Equity bond, her identity, her very sex, was lost in the beautiful bond which drew them, held them inseparably together. Yes. Those beings which the eye might designate as "Hughes Randall and Beatrice Herron" could be separated by miles of space, and yet—

Miss Beatrice Shelby Herron, youngest daughter of "Old Ironsides" Herron—an allegation conferred because of his staunch and unswerving fidelity to the Baptist creed,—was a most unexceptional young woman. She was beautiful in that magical wonder of lustrous brown hair, compelling brown eyes, olive complexion, and charming personality. Gracefully moulded of fair height, she would be instantly separated from the throng as one who "belonged" in the aristocracy of accomplishment. Early in life she had developed a keen interest in politic, commercial, and economic laws, and while her sisters were busy in the schemes of social pleasure she would delve into deeper diplomacy. Not that she was lax in personal appearance or the charm of "style," she could allow her sisters forty minutes in the hour for toilet, and emerge the "queen," the only one to adorn the cloth and garb she wore.

Her college degree had been augmented by a course in the school of stenography and shorthand, much to the disgust of her more frivolous sisters, though highly gratifying to "Old Iron-

sides." She had held only one position, for William Randall and Gregory Clay had been quick to recognize her ability, to instruct her in the "reading of law," and were most generous in her salary. When Hughes Randall began the organization of the Equity, she had thrown her ability and rapid craftsmanship behind the venture, and had performed the vast amount of office work with skill, deftness, and neatness. Now she was being rewarded with trust and authority; she could answer queries, give directions, and wade through the labyrinth of intricate detail with a sureness unequaled by anyone connected with the Equity. Visitors to headquarters were coming to know and appreciate her; the local secretaries of the counties forming the "pool" would oftentimes forget that she was only an assistant and ask her for permission to infringe some minor law; always she was attentive to the best interests of the society; never for one instant did she permit anyone to usurp the right, title, and interest which belonged to the organizer.

Today she was keenly busy over the percentum report when interrupted by a farmer who had made repeated visits to the office without being able to find Hughes Randall in. "No," she told that one; "Mister Randall will not be in the office today; he is at home only on Tuesdays and Fridays of each week, and sometimes only a few hours on those days." She explained: "He is giving practically all of his time to organizing the field units of the society; yesterday he was in Richmond, today, Cynthiana, but tomorrow he will be home."

The smile which accompanied the last clause of her information had no significance for the disgruntled caller, who had a commendable disregard for the affairs of others; he was visibly annoyed over not finding the Equity head in the office,



something big had put him terribly out of humor with everybody, he grumbled and criticised the management which "left a woman in the office to 'tend to business."

Good humoredly she smiled and asked him to state his demand so that she could make a note of it and have Mr. Randall attend to it on his home-coming.

"I want to know if it's true that you people ain't going to let anybody deliver their tobacco to the Crosby Tobacco Company if they raise it and sell it?" He was wroth.

Miss Herron started to laugh, then quickly checked herself; she saw the temper of her visitor, and knew that he was in deadly earnestness. She asked, "How did you arrive at such an opinion of us? Why do you ask that question?"

"Simply because I've been told as much."

"By whom?"

"By a gang of men who went riding through my farm one night last week, and claimed to be hunting o'possums."

After close questioning she learned that a goodly number of men on horse-back, claiming to be hunting for o'possums, had ridden through this man's farm, had stopped near his house when he called to them, and had told him his tobacco would be destroyed if he did not sign the Equity pledge. Miss Herron endeavored to pacify him. Instantly he grew argumentative, expostulative, and combative. She changed her tactics; she asked him what he had said to the men to draw such a threat from them. His reply was sufficient to show that he had made drastic prophesies on the outcome of the "pool," and that he had said "no man has the right to dictate how I shall sell my tobacco." She asked if he had been talking anti-pool doctrine.

"Yes I've been a'talking it; I've told everybody

it wasn't nothing but a political move of Mister Randall's." He could not have selected words better calculated to anger Beatrice Herron.

She denounced the statement in no uncertain language, told him that no man who appreciated the truth would give voice to such a saying, that only ignorance permitted such a claim, and that only a coward would make use of it to oppose the Equity plan. She was bitter, scathing, and dynamic; she did not mince her words.

The farmer would not have been more astonished should a tiger have sprung at him from one of the law books on the desk. He could only sit, meek and docile, while he received the most severe lecture of his freckled career. He heard more unvarnished truth about himself than he had ever before suspected. He was mopping his forehead when Miss Herron paused for breath. Meekly he asked:

"Have you one of them thar contracts handy?"

His tone astonished her as fully as the question. She managed to answer a subdued "Yes, sir."

"Well, hand 'er here; I'm going to sign up to keep you quiet."

She was still smiling over the complete change of front in a now staunch supporter, when Tom Quinn blustered into the office with his usual cheerful greeting.

"Hello, there, Miss Herron; how goes it? Your smile just about says you're satisfied with yourself and everything in life; anything up?"

On hearing the account of the visit from the irate farmer and his complete capitulation, Tom Quinn laughed immoderately, more so since this particular specimen of grouch had been as active as Durbin Ellis in opposing the Equity. He laughed over the prospects of amusing his friends with an account of the incident, required her to

repeat the speeches so that he should not lose their strength. He was one of those fortunate individuals who find laughter where others do not see a smile, contending that his laugh had won more arguments than all of the logic he had absorbed in schools. He had laughed his way through four years of college, and merrily admitted that an excellent memory "was all that saved his hide" when it came to examinations. He would paraphrase, parody, and burlesque all serious thought in prospect of a laugh, and with this object in view he had delved into the classics far deeper than many of his more serious minded associates of equal birth. He loved his pipe, his dogs, and his horses, with equal ardor, and when he could combine the three in chasing foxes, coons, or the fat o'possum, he was boisterously happy. The story of "Old Grouch" absorbed, he inquired of Miss Herron:

"Have you'all heard that Andrews is offering twelve cents for tobacco?" "Andrews" being the "trust" agent.

She told him they had, also gave the reason which was assigned to this offer by Hughes Randall.

"So that's it, is it? They think they'll force us to put our price up to meet theirs, eh, and be as foolish as those other efforts were; I see." He pondered the information, evidently he was striving to find a remedy for this condition, some remedy which had not been calculated by the organizer, a powerful, potent, remedy. He mused aloud: "I wonder if the "Possum Hunters" couldn't be of some assistance in a case like this?"

"The who?" She was keenly, searchingly attentive. Rumors were beginning to be noised about, stories were coming into headquarters, gossip which was not idle was being repeated, scandal was coming to them; and rumors, stories, gossip,

and scandal all dealt with the activities of bands of men who rode forth at night seeking to intimidate opposition to the Equity. She repeated her query, "The who?"

"'THE POSSUM HUNTERS,'" he laughingly told her; "the same men who irritated 'Old Grouch,' the men who are responsible for the sudden growth of interest in the society, the 'Secret Committee' established by Hughes Randall, the clique which are sometimes called 'Night Riders'; Miss Beatrice Herron, permit me to introduce to you the 'Possum Hunters,' and believe me, you are going to hear a lot more about 'em before we are through fighting 'Old Money Bags,' the 'Trust'; ha, ha, ha"; merrily, loudly, he laughed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following morning, true to his schedule, Hughes was early in his office and giving attention to certain matters which came to his desk. Only a few hours of sleep had been permitted him during the night just passed, since he had been one of the merry throng to make the "Cotillion Club" dance a brilliant success, but loss of sleep troubled him not at all, and he dived into the work with precision and despatch. In the beginning of his new project, he had insisted on "holding up my end of the string" in the law business; and although the "pool" affairs were requiring more and more of his attention, he yet attended to a goodly share of the law practice. When his father arrived, Hughes handed that one a goodly sheaf of papers as he said;

"Here is the demurrer in the McCullough case, and the cross-petition in the Simms case; I don't believe I can improve on your construction and Mister Clay's law, but I made pencil notation of several facts which, if presented to the jury, will have their weight."

They discussed these items of interest, then

the father went on; "What do you think of my settlement in Mrs. Easson's back tax suit?" Mrs. Anna B. Easson was one of their most insistent clients. She was a most charming widow, possessing literary attainments and ability, a beautiful daughter, and a badly entangled and encumbered estate. Judging from the frequency of her consultations during the past six months, she was greatly annoyed by the complex system of the law. Of late she was limiting her visits to the law offices to Tuesdays and Fridays, and not on those days if the "organizer's" schedule went amiss. Always there was something which had been omitted from the last "consultation," but there was one most pleasing subject ever present, that one being Miss Caroline Easson, a charming excuse for delay and entanglement. The father emphasized; "I secured a most liberal compromise."

"I think so," the son agreed; then teased, "Don't be frightened by 'a vidder,' dad, in all probability Mrs. Easson has some design on our esteemed friend and partner, Mister Clay." Heartily he laughed over his pleasantry, and his father chuckled over the thought as he arose and walked toward his own office. At the door he turned, lowered his head until he peered over the rims of his spectacles, and dryly amended;

"Doubtless there are some lawyers who attempt to prepare briefs for the Common Pleas and Dan Cupid's court at one and the same time, but I don't think my old friend Clay is among them."

Without heeding the confusion which was occasioned by his speech, he walked into his own office, while Miss Herron blushed deeply and rattled her machine furiously in an attempt to show that she had no earthly interest in the conversation, or objection to the "vidder's" visits. Hughes, on the contrary, smiled as he remembered a bold

though pretty compliment which Miss Easson had paid him at the dance last evening, and in a moment had lost all thought of the episode as he gave undivided attention to the work before him. He was so absorbed that he did not heed the rapidly passing moments until he was interrupted by Miss Caroline Easson calling to him from the doorway of his office;

"Good morning, Mister Farmers' Trust; are you so awfully, awfully busy with your old tobacco that you haven't time to say 'hello' to somebody else?"

"Hello, hello, hello," he merrily greeted. "Does that sound as though I were exclusive?"

"Yes, it does," she fenced. "It sounds just exactly like you greedy old men: Trying to corner all the 'hello's' just like you do the votes."

Miss Herron joined in the laughter which followed, but that was the extent of her participation in the fun of the next half hour. With a woman's instinct she saw through the scheme which Mrs. Easson so adroitly and skillfully was planning. Jealously she knew the "why" these frequent visits were made. She knew Hughes Randall to be in love with herself, drawn to her by an honest, clean, pure affection; but she also knew that that love had never been put in words, admitted, or recognized as such. She saw that Caroline Easson was a most charming, beautiful, and fascinating young person. She knew Mrs. Easson to be versed in the art of plot and counter-plot. They were prepared to grasp any unfair advantage discovered: their visits to the office during business hours clearly proved this belief. She was troubled, fearful, and felt strangely alone.

Miss Easson's conversation was as gay and spirited as that young lady herself, she appeared to be deeply interested in the intricacies of law, though had not the time nor patience to listen

to tedious explanations. She interrupted Hughes in his answer to one of her questions by exclaiming;

"Oh, listen, I just heard the most stunning piece of gossip over to the tea-room,—want to hear it?"

Laughingly he told her that he was not one of the very great majority of people who found delightful amusement in the greatest of all indoors sport—"gossip."

"Now don't get yourself all het up and ready to read me a lecture on 'Gossip From a He-Man's Viewpoint'; I absolutely refuse to be reformed; gossip is the detective force, and scandal is the police court of Society."

Their merriment was interrupted by Mrs. Easson calling:

"Come, daughter; we must not take up too much of a busy man's time, or he will give me the material for our story on 'tobacco'." Playfully she looked at him a moment, then pled: "When are you coming to see us?" She had not been hurried, nor careless, nor frivolous, nor bold; her manner was that of one chiding an old friend for inattention.

"Tonight, if I may," was the charming, graceful reply.

No one of the three save Mrs. Easson saw the involuntary, startled gesture of the "private secretary"; no one else was conscious that Miss Heron sat as though turned into an icy image, sat staring at, though not seeing, the letters which spelled "hate."

Mrs. Easson had noted the play of involuntary emotion; she was a most competent general, and in searching the field for a possible contender had discovered the adoring smile with which "the stenographer" greeted her employer's graciousness. She was determined that here was one

“stumbling-block” which must be removed. Even at this moment she was wondering how that purpose should be accomplished. Wishing to call attention to the young lady’s idleness, she chirped:

“Come, Caroline, we are not only holding Hughes from his work, but our chatter is interfering with the office help.” To detract his interest from “the office help,” she begged; “Get your hat and go with us for a glass of soda-water.”

Gaily they chatted on their way. Mrs. Easson was greatly elated over the belief that her scheme, so skillfully devised and so painstakingly carried out, was going to bring a desired result. She was making capital of the fact that her daughter’s vivacious temperament and ready wit made her one of the most fascinating and sought-after members of Lexington’s younger set; she had toiled, faithfully, zealously, she had toiled to preserve the natural grace and beauty of Caroline, and at great personal sacrifices had given her an education to fit her for a high place in society as the wife of a wealthy man.

Mrs. Easson had been a widow since Caroline’s seventh year, when a railway accident had cost her a husband who left a considerable estate. Through mismanagement and her craving for the luxuriant and splendid, this had dwindled to a scant competency, and she found it necessary to engage in some work if their wishes were to remain on the same high plane. She attempted literature, and “found herself” in magazine work; her ability brought many assignments and satisfactory returns. In searching for a husband for Caroline, Hughes Randall, because of his family, finances, and ability, became her first choice; and, with this object in view, she began her campaign within a month after her location in the city and introduction into society.

\* \* \* \* \*



## CHAPTER NO. 4.

### **"It's Going To Be SOME Crop."**

Durbin Ellis did not analyze the causes, whys, or wherefores of his anger against the Randalls, he believed they had insulted him, and was determined to avenge that offense. He nursed his passion in sullen silence and unworded complaint; it thrived and grew, it came to be the biggest thing in his thoughts, it burst the bounds of silence, it searched for new words in the dictionary of hate, it demanded active, vigorous effort in his threat to undo the work of Hughes Randall and lieutenants in the Society of Equity. He was making all preparations to raise a much larger crop of tobacco than usual, advising his friends and neighbors to do likewise, offering to buy the un-grown crop in the field, and preaching "anti-pool" doctrines in the guardedly confidential manner, which, on the part of a landed proprietor, appeals to the farmer of small acreage. As he argued the question to his whisky-bottle in the stillness of his desolate home, or to the fleet-footed horse as he returned from the city after a night at the card table, he reasoned that a full acreage of non-pool tobacco would offer a greater opposition to the Equity than anything else. Bleary eyed and sullen he made his rounds among the growers, he lost no excuse or opportunity to malign his cousin, designating him "a two-for-a-nickel politician," and asserting that he was guilty of

selfish and political motives in uniting the farmers. He found many discontented farmers who swore that they were in accord with his views, was annoyed at finding such a vast number who were noncommittal, undecided, or sullen in their refusal to discuss the question on its merits, and was greatly chagrined to find many staunch adherents of the Randalls who openly worked for the society's interests.

He saw that Tom Quinn was meeting with a more hearty welcome than was he; even in his own neighborhood, where men had known the Ellis family for generations, this man Quinn was on more familiar terms with the plow-man than Durbin could ever hope to be. He grew to be cunning as he delved for information which would reveal the position which was assumed by a grower in secret thought, and found much to displease him, though an acceptable amount to urge him on to more determined effort. One night, while returning from a trip to the remote confines of his county, he came upon three of his "converts" who were riding horse-back; this was not an exceptional method of travel, not an unlawful aggregation, not an unusual sight to behold; but, the evident wish of the men that he pass without recognizing them, their averted faces and subdued voices, their pressing to the extreme edge of the road, aroused in Durbin a surprise and wonder why this should be. All but instantly he pounced upon the correct solution, venomously he hated these men for traitors; he guessed that they were on their way to join other men a'horse-back, other men who were cunning and ashamed to be seen, other men who used the cover of night to hide their doings, other men who, as he phrased it, "were trying to intimidate the tobacco growers, by 'old maid' bickerings,

and childish bluffs; those sulking, cowardly, boasting 'Possum Hunters'."

For weeks he had known that such a band was operating; he had seen the results of their work; he had tried to learn more of them, but his effort had been rewarded not at all, he knew absolutely no certain fact regarding their personnel. He cursed this band of "Night Riders" for robbing him of those three "converts," he cursed them for frightening his neighbor, a man locally known as "Old Grouch," and compelling that one to "sign up." Disgruntled and feeling as though he was "playing a losing game," he determined to "knock off work" and "rest up" for a spell, so the next day he drove to the city instead of out among the small farmers as had been his habit of late. Arriving at an hour when his more congenial friends were busied with office work or other business affairs, he loafed in front of a hostelry which is more than locally known as "The Horseman's Headquarters," until Albert J. Andrews, purchasing agent for the Crosby Tobacco Company, or the "trust," hailed him as he drew up to the curb in an automobile:

"Hello, Durbin, you look just like a man ought to look before I'd insist on his taking a drink with me."

"Hell, do I look that bad?"

"Almost," Andrews laughed; "but there's still hope for the weary; come on." Linking his arm with that of the farmer he turned toward the hotel entrance, telling him on the way: "I just came back from Scott county where I put in three days buying future deliveries." He believed in advertising his business, but in a diplomatic manner; instantly he shifted the personal, by inquiring: "What's your 'excuse' for being in town today?"

"Had to see a lawyer." He gulped his drink,

then grumbled: "Darned old skin-flint; charged as much for half an hour's conversation as Randall used to charge for a month's work." Which was hardly correct, as the short conversation detailed more actual work than Randall, Clay and Randall had ever done for Durbin Ellis.

"Randall is your lawyer?" questioned Andrews, who understood the statement perfectly, but thought he saw a glimmering of the solution to a problem which had puzzled him for several weeks; he knew that Ellis was buying all the tobacco he could find, but the farmer's heretofore loyalty to the Randalls, his kinship to them, and his reported conversation during the weeks just passed, was at variance; therefore, caution was necessary.

Durbin was endeavoring to flip the cash from a dead cigar as he disgustedly answered: "Hell, no; it's too live a case for those moss-backed old fogies and two-for-a-nickel politicians." Finality in tone and manner was designed to forbid further conversation on the subject; his pride and aristocracy would not permit him to discuss personal affairs with a mere acquaintance.

During the short silence which followed, Andrews was considering the question of proposing an alliance with Durbin; considering it with grave caution, as he was not yet sure of the gravity of the disagreement between the cousins. His sagacity and close observation of conditions created by the activities of the Equity agents in the last four weeks told him that the plan of the society to wrest from the "trust" the control of the market was taking strong hold on the mind of the farmers, and that every move of his company and its representatives in the district must be carefully planned and skillfully executed. Andrews drew his salary largely because of his tact in dealing with men, and had no intention of los-

ing prestige by a boorish, bungling, amateurish proposal. Casually he asked:

"How many acres of tobacco will you plant this year?"

"Fifty-eight," was the boastful reply, and he found great satisfaction in adding, "And I'll control twice that much before the year's over."

"Trying to corner the market, eh?" Andrews laughed; then bantered: "Better go slow, they'll be calling you a 'trust.'"

"Trust, hell," Durbin thundered; "I ain't after the 'trust,' I'm after Randall's society."

"Ah!" There was an ocean of relief in that little word; all fear was allayed, all necessity for caution was swept away. He began bargaining for the tobacco, boldly offering twelve cents for the pound.

"You mean to offer twelve cents for all tobacco I deliver to you, no matter whether I raise it or buy it? You will ask me no questions where I got it, simply weigh it in and pay the bill?"

"Yes."

"Come on, let's take a drink to celebrate, for you've bought my tobacco, and it's going to be **SOME** crop, a helluv a crop."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Andrews considered his "deal" with Durbin Ellis to be a distinct achievement, certainly it was worthy of more than passing note since it was by far the largest single consignment of "the weed" to be controlled by one farmer. In a letter to his chief, Mr. J. C. Crosby, president of the Crosby Tobacco Company, he boasted of the influential assistant that day discovered, recounted the causes which had produced this result, and philosophized on the provincialisms of the Kentucky people. Both Hughes Randall and Durbin Ellis would have been surprised to read the fol-

lowing paragraph in the letter of the Yankee agent:

"These Kentuckians are queer folks; they believe and proudly contend that they are democratic, yet in their relationships with each other and everybody else they are most violently opposed to an infringement on the unwritten laws of aristocracy. They cry in their political speeches, teach in their schools, and advertise by their conversation that all men are equal, while actually clinging to class distinction and family pride only a little less than the Hindu and the blue-blooded Virginian. Politics and kinship figure in every social, commercial, or economic undertaking, class, place, and race pride is supreme in their potent sway, and the outsider cannot establish a bond of more than surface value. But let one of these clansmen have a grievance against another, let him believe that a wrong has been committed, and that vengeance is required by the code of reprisal, and he will 'go the limit,' all the time being too proud to admit that a family feud is on. That is why we have such a valuable lieutenant in Ellis, we must play him for all he is worth and always remember that the dollar is the last thing he is considering in the fight."

In a second letter of same date—Mr. Crosby at all times insisting that "no one letter should treat on two subjects"—Mr. Andrews wrote:

"Regarding your instruction that I endeavor to secure the services of Miss Beatrice Herron:

"I will make the effort to employ her at a very early date. I think with you that she would be a most valuable addition to our office. Her influence in the policy of organizing the Equity is second only to that of Mr. Randall's. She is efficient, capable, and an industrious aide; I do not suppose the society is paying her anything near the salary you direct me to offer her, so see no

reason why she should not be in our employ by the first of next month."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tom Quinn had lost no time in the organization of the Fayette County "Secret Committee," but the gathering together of that body was not along the line delineated by Hughes Randall. Mr. Quinn believed that four men could do two men's work with greater speed, ease, and sureness than the aforesaid two; so if five men could get the result figured on by Hughes, he believed that ten, a dozen, or many more could get quicker, swifter, and better action. Action was what he wanted, action was what he would try for, action was what he got.

The afternoon he received instructions from the "organizer," he telephoned to four of his cronies and told them to meet him at "Bill's," after supper. "Bill" being the owner and sole clerk in the "one hoss" road-side country store where the "Big Six" were in the habit of meeting on rainy days, or after supper, or at such time as the spirit of "loafing" moved them to congregate. Several appellations had been given this clique of men, they were known through the country side as "The Big Six," "The Sanhedrin of Fat-heads," "Bill's Loafers," or "Those Lazy Loafers at the Grocery," but no one had ever been so rash to deny their power in formulating and guiding the opinions, beliefs, and policies of the community. The "Big Six" had been largely instrumental in demanding the resignation of a certain preacher who they found to be guilty of undignified conduct; a wife-beater in the community had been severely dealt with, and for one solid year not one harsh word was said against the "lazy loafers at the grocery," when the housewives and gossips were gathered in sewing-circles and the like; the Fiscal Court had declined

to repair the principal roadway leading from the heart of the community to the city. "The Big Six" engineered a campaign which sent some resident of the district to "see" the County Judge and the Magistrates each hour of the day, and they maintained this program until the Fiscal Court voted immediate repairs. They might be criticised, ridiculed and nicknamed, but they obtained results, or as Tom Quinn says:

"We deliver the goods and bring home the bacon."

Tom was the recognized, acknowledged, and unchallenged leader; his education and natural ability prompted this acclaim, his family connections thrust him forward, and, as "Bill" said, "his cussedness and time to think out devilment" thoroughly established him as "boss." He was ably assisted by "Bill" Sullivan, "chief cook and bottle-washer of this joint," or proprietor of the store. The four other members being "Jake" Hughes, owner of three hundred acres of, as he said, "the cream of the blue grass"; Richard Spurr, a "two hundred acre" farmer; Dave Horine, who rented "the Prewett farm," and had produced some noteworthy results from his training stable; and Sim Estell, a "tobacco tenant."

At the initial meeting of the "Secret Committee," Tom had stated the aim, object, and intent of the body, how it was supposed to assist in the organization of the Equity, and outlined the plan of procedure. But his instructions to his fellow committeemen were not limited to the exact phraseology employed by Hughes Randall; he placed fewer limitations on the authority of "the detective force" of the pool; he outlined a plan which was broad enough to be stated in the simple words of "Jake" Hughes:—"We've gotter wake up the farmers that 'er trying to play possum"; he simplified their code until all "possums"



could be recognized as coming under one of the three classes specified by "Bill":—"Some men think more of their pocket-book than they do of their eternal salvation, and some think their hide is more valuable than God Almighty, while others would vote against Jesus Christ if they thought it was popular." Coercion was to be the mildest form in which their arguments were to be placed; at the terminus of their line of milder reasons would be found the whipping-post; to create bodily fear among the "possums" would be one of their cardinal virtues. They started out to get results; their sole aim was to get results; they brought in what they started after; they returned "results." But of all their manipulations there was not one which failed to present a ludicrous phase; they would turn the most serious escapade into a burlesque and farce; laughter was their favorite war-cry; and, not infrequently, the "victim" would join in the merriment and become anxious to find some other "possum" who could be "turned into the goat."

Evil travels much more rapidly than good, and laughter will win an audience all but instantly; so the Fayette County "Secret Committee" was quickly made the pattern after which all other like bodies were modeled. If the copiests lost much of mirth evoking intent, if they failed to make humor their slogan, if they ignored the good-will of the "victim," such was not the fault of Tom Quinn. He told them, showed them how he maneuvered, how he got results. The copiests were much impressed, they carried to their associates the principal detail of the "stage" setting, the whipping-post was always remembered, fear was the most potent ally they had seen. But these copiests also returned results. Their efforts were no less lucrative to Equity membership than was the work of the "Tom Quinn Com-

mittee." The "Possum Hunters" were swelling the ranks of the pool supporters, they were "formulating opinions," and "establishing unity and equity."

"The Big Six" were hearing flattering reports of the maneuvers of the Kuklux Klan of the tobacco growers, each day would bring letters to tell of "results"; many such reports contained cause for mirth, some of them were most grave. Tom Quinn one day conceived the idea of uniting all branches of the "Possum Hunters" into a secret society having a ritual, oath, pass-word, grip, and signs. He sold his idea to his henchmen, and they were eager to put the plan into effect. His delving into the classics, his ability to depict a mirth-envoking situation, were of great assistance to him in the project; soon he had the draft ready to be typed. During the same hour Durbin Ellis closed the contract to deliver his tobacco to the "trust," Tom Quinn made his final corrections in the ritual of the "Possum Hunters." That same evening he read it to the "Big Six."

"Say, man, that's great," "Best play I ever heard." "It's more fun than any initiation I ever heard of," etc.; such was the praise given his work. Tom was elated.

"Now when I get it typewritten and fixed up in good shape I'll be satisfied," he declared.

"Who you going to get to do the typewriting?" Bill asked.

"There's only one person in the world I'd trust this with, only one woman I know of that's got enough sense to keep it secret; and that's Miss Herron, Hughes Randall's private secretary."

"Good Lord," Bill objected; "you ain't going to let Hughes Randall know about it, are you?"

Tom's answer ignored the organizer; "Say, you don't know Miss Herron very well; do you? If she promises to keep the secret, she'll keep it

safer'n any of us could." So it was decided to entrust Beatrice Herron with a knowledge of the most secret rites of the "Possum Hunters"; an acquisition which was destined to be of supreme value to her many months later.

The question of the ritual disposed of, the "Night Riders" gave attention to other affairs. Tom asked Richard Spurr:

"Did you send that note to Durbin Ellis?"

"You bet I did."

"Did you put it to him good and strong?"

"Stronger'n concentrated lye."

"Alright. Now let's get on our horses and go pay Dud Holly a little visit, he's needing a little of our persuasion." As they were going out of the store, Tom said to Sim Estell, "Get the black-snake whip."

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## CHAPTER NO. 5.

### **“A Man in Love Is Just Like a Kid.”**

Hughes Randall, in his own mind, called his visit to the home of Miss Caroline Easson the fulfillment of a pleasing social obligation; he told himself that she was the season's most charming debutante in his own and his mother's social set, and that he should have called on her long ago. He knew there was an individuality of charm in her sprightly, witty, up-to-the-minute slang; and even though some of her sayings were the antithesis to the beliefs and dogma of his up-bringing, he had always welcomed her visits to the law office as a delighting shift from the droll and common-place. Her chatter of the gay festivities of which her life had been a part, held a peculiar fascination for this man who had always supervised the building of structural society and disregarded the butterfly life. Her recitals of life in "Bohemia," made the parties, dances, and gaieties of his home city sound childish and dull. She amused him, she made him forget the anxieties, struggles, fierce encounters, and drab affairs of the Equity, his visit would be a recreation which would prepare him for more spirited fighting among the men of daily life, therefore he would be amused.

Mrs. Easson's carefully unaffected sangfroid in greeting him was in delightful harmony with the daughter's accounts of life in "Bohemia," and

Mr. Randall at once fell under the spell of pleasures as exotic to all other social calls he had made as was the burning incense in a carved censer different from all other heavy perfumes he had ever sensed. Miss Caroline's bold cordialities and clever flippancies gave him a peculiar feeling of pulsing happiness; the dull, delightful glow from the saffron shades was restful and alluring; he knew he would spend a most delightful evening.

He was apologizing for having so long neglected calling on them, and was dully conscious of a dreamy languor which was encouraged by the oriental perfume, the soft saffron glow, and the emotional little nothing which Caroline was playing on the piano, playing with a touch of sadness which was at variance with her disposition as he had known it up to that moment. He did not ask himself why she had left him to go to the piano almost on the instant she had welcomed him, he did not care to know why; he did know it to be altogether bewitching, enticing, and enchanting. His words ran on into a silence heavy with idle emotions.

A silence which Mrs. Easson skillfully clipped without shattering, cut without injuring its memory, disturbed without seeming to use the silence as one of her tools. She gracefully reminded him of a promise he had given to furnish authentic data for a "feature" story on "Tobacco in Kentucky"; he assured her he was quite as anxious to furnish the information as she to write the "story." She wondered if it would be an imposition on her part to ask that he turn a social call into a literary interview; he assured Mrs. Easson that her wish in the matter would be his unbounded pleasure. She, as though inspired to immediate effort, left the room to secure notebook and pen that she might prepare her outline.

Mr. Randall asked Miss Easson to again play "that dreamy little piece."

"Oh, listen," she intervened; "here is the very latest." And she began playing a popular song which was alleged to be a melody.

Mrs. Easson, returning at that moment, began humming the words to the selection. "Isn't it catchy?" she asked. Notebook in hand, she waved tempo to the music. As she was doing so, an unmounted kodak print fell to the floor from the book.

Mr. Randall sprang forward to secure and return the print.

"We are quite expert with our picture machine," she explained; "and if you look at the walls and on the table you will agree that we must find a great deal of amusement in 'snapping everything in sight.'" She pointed to several photo-binders on the table, telling him, "We have a picture-history of our life in every place we have ever called 'home,' and you have no idea what a value the pictures are to pleasing memories." She called attention to many daintily arranged groups of prints which adorned the wall; truly the place was full of pictures, in frames, trays, albums, and loose between the leaves of books and magazines. She told him: "Some other time I will show you how complete a history can be told by the kodak." He assured her he would look forward to that moment as one to be prized. He could not know how greatly it would be "prized"—by others.

With pen poised above the blank page whereon she would jot down the facts, figures, and data which he would tell her, Mrs. Easson announced that she was "ready to begin the story"; but at that information, Miss Caroline deserted the piano, wheeled toward them and flippantly announced:

"Indeed, you'll do nothing of the sort; if you

two think that I'm going to let you spoil a perfectly good evening by talking tobacco, 'trusts,' farmers, 'Possum Hunters,' and Equity, you have just one more guess coming. So close up your book and quit trying to think, for you're going to take Caroline to the skating-rink." Gaily she laughed, and the two, more prosaic ones could not resist the irresponsible mirth. Certainly Mrs. Easson pretended disappointment over this pert demand of her daughter, she endeavored to debate the question, and was hushed by the young lady declaring:

"If Mister Hughes Randall wants to have his 'farmers' trust' write up in the magazine, he can come here tomorrow night, or the next night, or some other time when I don't feel like whirling around on the rollers." She forced their acceptance.

At that time roller-skating was in the zenith of its popularity; perhaps it was given more favor in the smaller, more inland cities than in the metropoli of the nation, certainly it was the fad which had been taken up by the fashionable of Lexington. The trio found many friends and acquaintances gliding around the gaily lighted rink to the wheezy, penetrating strains of waltz music from the hurdy-gurdy. They laughed at the beginners, who with panicky, frightened expression clutched the arm of an assistant, or the railing at the side of the rink, or quite often the empty air as they went tumbling to the floor in ludicrous postures. They encored the graceful experts who exhibited delighting skill. They grew hoarse while trying to pitch their conversation loud enough to be heard above the roaring, deafening, incessant grind of metal rollers on the polished hard-wood floor.

All of them thoroughly enjoyed the frolic of the evening, and Hughes Randall quickly saw that

he had been the escort of the "Queen of the rink"; he felt a secret pride over this knowledge, and was courteously gracious to Mrs. Mary Louise Kemp, a society matron who was giving a "skating party" that evening, and who at once began to patronize Miss Caroline Easson. But the Equity organizer could not know that Miss Easson deliberately snubbed several worthy young men as she hastily excused herself from them, and with outstretched arms, skated to her escort whenever he was seen resting at the rink side. Nor could he know that Mrs. Kemp's sudden interest in the young lady of his "party" was due to a seemingly careless speech which Mrs. Easson had made to the society matron.

The violent exercise somewhat wearied Miss Caroline, and she was content to permit her mother to converse with Mr. Randall on the short walk to their home. "Tobacco and Equity" were the principal topics of conversation. The dynamic organizer was "full" of both subjects, and was delighted over finding a woman who understood intricate detail without an elaborate explanation. He agreed to call the following evening so that the "feature article" might begin to assume shape. He told them that he had determined to devote more time to his home county, "bringing it up to one hundred percent Equity," and spoke of the driving through the country which this work necessitated; he was interrupted by Miss Caroline begging:

"Please take me with you sometimes, I love to go driving, and will be ever so good and hold the horse while you are argufying."

A beseechment which led to many, many drives together during the following months, chuck full of gaiety and nonsensical utterances, drives which fitted into the scheme planned by Mrs. Easson, as a silver spoon fits into a bowl of honey, drives



which would accomplish her purpose; for one of those drives would be fashioned to her wishes.

The data for the tobacco article was not gathered with any satisfying degree of speed. True, the author would eagerly mention the subject on the occasion of his frequent calls, but so many other topics came into the conversation before she had her notebook and pen ready, that tobacco and the problems arising from its culture were far from the minds of the man and the girl when she attempted to curtail chatter. Whenever she and Hughes were fairly launched on the subject, Caroline was sure to have a new book, song, dance step, or theory to distract their attention, and at the end of one month the article was no nearer completion than it was on the second night of his calls. The subject grew to be their most laughable joke; Caroline would banter them unmercifully, for preferring "business talk" to jolly little nothings; she came near to over-playing the part assigned to her, and grew restless and irritable whenever the subject was brought up.

Skillfully Mrs. Easson played a most clever game. She maneuvered man and maid as they have been managed by designing matrons ever since society grew to be more than a gross barter and sale. She guided them as surely as a chess-player will move his "men," and was equally as careful of protecting her "King and Queen" from "enemy" influences and dangerous perspectives. She was determined to rid his office of the presence of Miss Beatrice Herron, for that "person" was entirely too charming, capable, and cultured to be allowed to remain. Besides, she has surprised an adoring smile in the eyes of "the stenographer" more than once, and had seen an alarmingly answering gladness form in the expression of the lawyer. She knew that Hughes Randall was in love with Miss Herron, but had every rea-

son in the world to know that he had not discovered that fact. It was her intention of supplanting this love with a bold counterfeit before it should be discovered and spoken. She wondered if her daughter had realized this danger; one day she asked:

"Caroline, do you know that Hughes and his stenographer, secretary, or whatever she calls herself, are dangerously near to being in love?"

"Why certainly I know it, and anybody but a blind man could see that she worships him like he was a little tin Jesus, and if he ever finds it out before he finds himself in love with me—" her expression was exasperating as she announced, "then good night, little Caroline's cake is all dough. But that's not going to happen, for I'm going to marry Hughes Randall if I have to hypnotize him; he's in love with WOMAN without giving a name to the specific woman, and a man in love is just like a kid; all he wants is a toy to play with; and I intend to see that Hughes Randall's toy is named Mrs. Caroline Easson Randall."

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One may well wonder that a love so pure, so clean, so free from worldly purpose, and so gentle as to have stolen unawares upon a man of the calibre of Hughes Randall could be lost as subtly and easily as Mrs. Easson was planning it should be lost. What charm did Caroline Easson exert to overcome the silent, peaceful influence of the first and truer love without his knowing of the usurpation? If he had ever acknowledged the existence of an affection for Miss Herron no human power could have swerved that love from its mate. His gentle nature would have recognized the sentiment in its true beauty, had not something of tremendous influence, some device of clever scheming, been forced upon him, forced

with a skill which gave his heart a substitute for his idol, his brain a being to drape his love about, and kept his nobler being in ignorance of the change. What could have been the nature of the conspiracy which would lead a man, a man's man, to accept without question a counterfeit which was thrust into his dreaming to replace an image of true worth? He was a strong man, young, clean, and true; his honor was unimpeachable, no one would dare to call it into question unless he despised life; his integrity made him one of the most respected citizens of his community, and his fellows were now honoring him by admitting him their leader in the great struggle of the Equity. Could such a man be transformed into a veritable babe, a love-lorn lunatic, obedient, fawning, literally led by a pert, insipid, chit of a girl?

Yes, he fell as did the great Roman, through allurements as cunning, and appeals as devilish as those of the serpent of the Nile. The snare which was cast about him was at once the most artistic, the coarsest, the most divinely beautiful, the most immorally crude, the most enticing, the most licentious used by the siren to bring about their purpose.

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To all appearances Hughes Randall was the seeker, not the sought. He seemed to be unable to get enough hours of Miss Easson's society to satisfy the unnatural, unhealthy languor into which her acquaintanceship had hurled him. No room satisfied him so deeply as the saffron lighted, incense laden sitting-room of the Easson flat. No music appealed to him so fully as the little sentimental nothing which she would play for him only once during each visit. Where he would have visited three, four, and sometimes five "prospects" when alone, he was satisfied with

one visit when Caroline accompanied him. Tuesdays and Fridays always were "home" days now, but the Equity must be content with only a few hours of those days. If he had not been so ably assisted by Miss Beatrice Herron, the result of this neglect might have awakened him to the truth. But when she carried the burden of organization, he had time to devote to his phantasmagoria.

She saw, and understood the cause, but was saddened by this change so magically wrought. She knew that her idol was not made of dross, knew that there could be no lasting bond between Miss Easson and Hughes; nevertheless, he was hurrying on at a pace which was maddening, and she submerged herself in work while praying for the day when he should awaken and return to his former self. She was carrying the great load of the Equity work; rushing from the breakfast table to the office, often compelling herself to be satisfied with a cold lunch in the middle of the day, hurrying to her boarding house for dinner, then back for work at night; Sundays, which had formerly been her own to devote to her actual home, now were given entirely to the office. Never once did she complain, never did she call for help.

But if she did not call for help, there were others watching her who would not be so modest and gentle. Messrs. Randall and Clay, and especially Mr. Clay, who would religiously return to the offices on the nights when she was working overtime so that she should have a suitable escort to the boarding house, were emphatic in their assertion that the time had arrived when she must be given at least two assistants; and Tom Quinn, while in a remote county of the tobacco district instituting a "lodge" of "Possum Hunters," met with Hughes and accused that one of "tying our deputy organizer to the whipping-

post and lambasting her with three people's work." These complaints at least awakened Hughes to know the enormous amount of clerical work which his private secretary was handling. He found that she was swamped in work, two days behind in posting and acknowledging reports, though proud and eager over the wonderful success of the venture.

He canceled two days' engagements in his speech-making and intensive solicitation itinerary, and, almost with a return of his old time ardor, plunged into the mountain of work. The accumulation was cleared, "sleeping" letters were answered, for the first time in months his desk was cleared of its disorder. He directed Miss Herron to at once employ three assistants, and install them in a suite of offices next to the Randall, Clay and Randall rooms, assuring her that he would close the deal for the rooms while on his way to lunch.

For the first time in many weeks his entrance into their suite of offices was heralded by his jolly laugh as he left the elevator on his return from luncheon. Beatrice at her desk smiled a sad sweet smile as though that laugh was crowding memories on her with a swift insistency. She hoped, Oh God, how she hoped, and wished, and prayed that he would conquer the insidious languor which was depressing his jovial nature. Her eyes must have told him somewhat of her thoughts, for he answered her smile of greeting with one in which the Hughes Randall of her love was not a prisoner to deception. Boyishly he laughed as he threw himself into his chair, tossed his hat to the flat top of the desk, and reached for his old cob pipe, the black, carbon encrusted pipe which he had discarded because Miss Eason objected to its flavor in his kisses. Puffing away at the pipe, he tilted himself back in the

chair and was most comfortably lazying. He laughed over the amused expression on the young lady's comely features, laughed and jovially informed her:

"I'm going to be absolutely, teetotally, and completely lazy until my pipe goes out."

"It's great to rest ever now and again; isn't it?" she sanctioned; her smile belying the weariness she was so bravely trying to hide.

"It's great to be young and happy enough to enjoy a rest; don't you think that's the real secret of contentment?"

"I really can't say," she frowned ever so slightly as she recognized a returning to the Easson cloud; "I shall be compelled to accept your testimony."

"But you are ready to acknowledge that it's great to be young and beautiful, aren't you, Miss Suffragette?" He would often—in days gone by—tease her over her pronounced views regarding woman's suffrage.

"Even less than I am sure that it's 'great to be young and happy.'"

"Eh?" was his question of disavowal. With zeal in his compliment, he told her: "If every mirror that reflects one-half of your good looks doesn't tell you that you are one of the most beautiful women in this city of beauty, I'll smash the mirror for its libel. Why, Bee, good Lord, if you knew how good looking you were you'd ——" his words trailed into silence when an Easson precept confronted him.

"Well? What would I do?" No woman, however weary, is averse to compliments from the man she loves.

"Nothing," he weakened, for certain sayings of Mrs. Easson as she would gossip on the maneuvers of "good looking stenographers" were crushing the freedom from his happiness. He remem-

bered that Caroline had told him she would call by the office for him that afternoon and take him to a "movie" picture theatre, knocking the burning tobacco from the pipe, he placed one friend away as he told the other one:

"Take this letter and we'll be through work for today." And during the moment she was hunting for a blank page in the notebook, then fussing over the pencil point while hiding her sorrow and blinking away rebellious tears, he told her: "Send a copy to each County Chairman, addressing the letter to him in person; take copy."

"My Dear Co-Worker:

"Sixty days from this day the grand rally of Burley tobacco growers will be held in Lexington. On that day we go into permanent being, we will cease to be a prospect and become a wonderfully glorious fact, provided you and your county do your part in the scheme of organization. In after years it will be easier to say, 'we knew how to play the game' than to hunt for excuses for our failure.

"After this week you will receive a daily bulletin showing the acreage of tobacco grown in each county, and the percentum of the crop pledged to us. Watch that percentage grow, cheer as it rises, tell your members how it mounts, get under it and push it up, call to all to joyously help. We have forty-three percent today, but will have eighty-five to guarantee success. The farmers are willing; they only need to be shown the practical side of the plan and the results we will certainly attain. Perfect the organization of your field workers, encourage them to do their best, see that each prospect is visited twice, three times, yes a dozen times if that number is necessary to win him over, but caution your 'Secret Committee' to be less vindictive; we do not want it said of us that we only won through fear and

a compelled coercion. Be sure that the 'Possum Hunters,' or 'Night Riders' are guilty of no act in which you would not engage; our 'pool' must not be an idle gathering-together that we may sing peaceful melody, neither must it be the playground of violence.

"Yours for a happy victory."

"Now, Bee, let that letter get out the first thing tomorrow, sign my name as you have to all official business, and instruct one of your assistants in attending to the report referred to in the letter. By the by, have you any idea who you will engage?"

She reminded him that he had only told her a few hours ago that such a plan was to be carried out, though told him of two capable young women who had agreed to report for work on the following morning, and that she would see and engage the third one that evening. She asked him:

"Have you rented the rooms for our headquarters?"

He told her they would be open for her when she arrived in the morning, he having bargained for all of the office furnishings in the suite.

"Type machines?" she asked.

He told her to purchase the number, make, and style of machine preferred by her or the typists, and for her to use her own judgment in all other questions which might arise while he was away from the office. He was preparing to go, hat in hand, he stood looking at her for a moment as though he wished to say a truth which was struggling to hear itself in words. Truth won; with rising, growing, living feeling he told her:

"Bee, I know that I don't appreciate you enough; somehow I feel as though something were pulling, tugging, drawing me away from a pal-ship with you which was one of my dearest,



fondest associations. In a thousand years I could not have found another assistant who would have been to me what you have been. You are patient, gentle, loyal, modest, dear, everything which I approve, and yet somehow we are not the same as we were a month ago. Why is it, Bee? What is the cause?"

Appealingly he held his hands to her. She? Her eyes were glorious to behold, the glad love of her wonderful self transformed her from a tired stenographer into a goddess. She seemed to float to him, to be borne to him upon the full strength of a perfect affection, her voice was just a whisper as she asked:

"Must I say it?"

"Please." He dropped his hat, caught her hands in his and bowing, pressed them to his lips; then was startled as she jerked her hands away and flew to her desk. He did not know that she had heard someone walking in the reception room, he had heard nothing, was dazed, and stood looking at her blankly, his lips parted in astonishment.

In these attitudes they were discovered by Mrs. Easson, who had entered almost noiselessly, if indeed she had not been there some moments before her alarm, and she greeted Hughes as though unaware of his awkward and tell-tale posture, though her indignant eyes flashed venom for the blushing stenographer.

Hughes mumbled a welcome which was quite brusque, for it required a struggle to appear entirely at his ease; he felt as ill at ease as he had been wont to feel when a youngster in the presence of a vindictive, sarcastic, maiden aunt.

"Are you all ready to go with me, Hughes?" she bubbled; then told him, "I left Caroline talking to Mary Louise Kemp and Mister Andrews, who drove up to the curb just as we reached the building. Do pick up your hat and come on, for I

wouldn't have you miss seeing this picture for the world." At the door she turned and advised, "The stenographer"; "By all means, Miss Herring, or Herron, I can never tell just which it is, don't fail to see the picture at the Messa, it might be of some assistance to you, its title is 'The Adventuress.'"

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## CHAPTER NO. 6.

### “‘Business’ Is Unsentimental.”

Tom Quinn's idea of uniting the various and varying bands of "Night Riders," or "Possum Hunters," into a "secret order having grip, passwords, and signs," quickly became as popular as a circus parade passing a school-lot during recess. He was besieged by letter, telephone message, and personal visit, until he began to feel that Fayette County had produced two "organizers." On the afternoon he received the corrected manuscript from Miss Herron, after a lengthy argument with her in the effort to allay her fear that this was not a worthy project, and after they had laughed heartily over some of the ludicrous situations in which the "candidate" would find himself, he carried the neatly typed pages to a trustworthy printshop and ordered one hundred copies of the document printed. It is well that he did so, else he would never have been able to supply the demands for copy. He allotted five copies to each of the twenty principal "chapters," and when the supply was exhausted, he referred the applicant to the closest "lodge" for enlightenment.

"The Big Six" were individually jubilant and enthusiastic over the prospect of a new brand of fun. They rehearsed the cabalism of the ritual until they were letter perfect, and then began to initiate all followers who had ever ridden with them on their dubious missions. They invited

other members of the Equity to become members of the "Possum Hunters"; and because of the fun and mystery which were deftly entwined in the ceremony, there were few to refuse the invitation. They even invited Hughes Randall to become one of them, but were not greatly disappointed when he ignored the notice sent him.

But this leaning toward a "new fun," did not swerve them from the aim, object, and intent of their original purpose. Still they "induced" obstinate growers to "listen to reason," and "persuaded" objectors to join the pool. Whenever they rode forth at night—which they did on an average of once a week—they returned to their homes with the satisfying knowledge that another name would on the morrow be added to the rapidly growing list of members in the Equity. "The Big Six" held the conferences which would result in the escapades of the "Night Riders"; their word was not to be questioned; and Tom Quinn was always "Boss" of the "Possum Hunters" who resided in his home county. Tonight while they sat on the edge-whittled porch of the grocery, and discussed lodge matters, Tom told them:

"Say, boys, I saw Hughes Randall in town today, he was just going into a picture show as I was coming out; some picture, too, it was called 'The Adventuress,' but I wouldn't call her by such a high-sounding name, I'd call her a plain hell-cat. He left his friends long enough to tell me that he was anxious to 'talk to me,' so I told him to come out to my house some day for dinner and we would 'talk' till he was tired. You'all know what he wants to 'talk' about, just as well as I do; he wants to say that we've gotter cut out some of our hoss-play and 'terrorism,' but you also know that he hasn't got a chance in a hundred years of making us quit so long as there are

people like Durbin Ellis and Sid Thompson and old man Underwood working against us."

His speech was acknowledged to be the doctrine of the "Possum Hunters," and "Bill" Sullivan wanted to know:

"What about Durbin Ellis, anyway, ain't it about time we were kinder calling a halt to his blackguard talk?"

"You let that whisky soaked grouch alone for a while," the "Boss" asserted: "he's not doing very much harm to anybody but himself, and we'll handle him good and proper if he ever gets rambunctious; Lord only knows he's got something to worry him, so let him use the Equity as a safety-valve until he gets to abusing the privilege."

General laughter accepted the idea, then one of the number asked: "What about Albert Andrews?"

"Say," Tom flared, with one of those rare bursts of anger which was more compelling than his good humor; "I've told you to let the 'Trust' alone; we're not trying to scare them into doing anything; the 'farmer' is what we are 'playing the game' with, and if the 'trust' can beat us to him, let him go to it. The only thing we want out of the Crosby Tobacco Company is more money for the 'weed' we produce, but we're not going to make fools out of ourselves trying to scare them into paying us our price. We do say that the farmers should stick together, and by hell we're going to see that they do it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Andrews was exerting every effort known to "Big Business" to circumvent the plans of the opposing "Little Fellows." He was in constant and exhaustive communication with his "chief," J. C. Crosby, president of the Crosby Tobacco Company, the "trust," and felt secure in his

knowledge of full co-operation of the chief executive of his company. One day he was over-joyed to read in the daily letter from Mr. Crosby:

"The Equity is growing to be a most formidable organization, the farmers have at last awakened to the knowledge that the majority vote of democracy is the most tremendous force of brute strength. We must fight them more vigorously, we must aim at the heart of the opposing body; that heart is Hughes Randall, and we must see that his efforts are definitely crippled. The surer way to accomplish that intent would be to have him join forces with us; therefore, I am going to offer him a 'high position' with us at a most attractive 'salary.' You will from this day take the utmost pains to secure all available information as to his habits, morals, prejudices, and associations, and forward the data to me as soon as possible. I must know the 'man' beyond the peradventure of a doubt before I decide how to approach him and strike his vulnerable points.

"As to his assistant, Miss Herron, if possible secure her services. You have my authority to go as high as one hundred and twenty-five dollars a month; if she will not accept that she is not to be reasoned with. Her 'title' will be Assistant Manager of Purchase. If you fail with her I shall send to your city a most capable stenographer, whose mission it will be to gain employment in Randall's office. We must have a copy of those records. But first exhaust your efforts with Miss Herron."

\* \* \* \* \*

In order that she might avoid an eight mile drive to and from her home on work days, Miss Herron had secured board and lodging at the boarding-house which was being conducted by Mrs. Roberta Lee Morgan. Her choice had been advised by "Old Ironsides" Herron, her father,

and he had been guided in this selection because of the unanswerable Southern argument that "her husband was one of our bravest Confederate soldiers." Perhaps Beatrice would have made the same choice if left to her unguided wish, for this domicile was recognized as one of the most elite and dignified places in the city where caste was of value. In this house she would be associated with at least four staunch advocates of "votes for women," three widowed ladies and one spinster, who were denied the more intimate worries of annoying male members of personal homes, so must find other subjects to give their time and attention to governing. Miss Herron may have heard, but she did not seriously object to, the criticism of those who know and appreciate the unwritten history of their home community, that this boarding-house was known as "The Gossip House." But she will always have cause to be thankful that these women were generally among the first ones to hear those "side line" conversations usually termed, "gossip," and that they, trusting her, loving her, and protecting her, came to her with the story, and so furiously pounced upon the author of the "gossip," that it was hushed before any material damage was done.

On the morning which followed her receipt of the information that "those upstart Eassons, who are trying to marry Hughes Randall, are saying some ugly things about you," she was late to breakfast. She was visibly worried; through sleepless hours of the night she had fought against a craving to go directly to Mrs. Easson and say the truth which her friends were vehemently telling. Above everything else in her world, she wanted vengeance on those who were stealing away the man she loved and meanly attempting to besmirch her name. In the wee small hours of the night there came to her the memory

of a scene from childhood days: Again she saw the little kitten, crippled, lying helplessly at her feet; she knew once more the angry, just passion against the culprit who had inflicted the wrong; then her father had stayed her, his face set with the grimness of strength held in leash, his voice crisp with God's promise: "Vengeance is mine, and I will repay." She had yielded to his wishes then, she would now be governed by the advice she knew "Old Ironsides" would command; her craving was conquered, but she was almost as grim as her parent. On her way to the breakfast room she met her fellow boarder, Albert J. Andrews, and was almost brusque in her greeting.

Mr. Andrews had idled over his breakfast, then sauntered into the hall and engaged in a lengthy account of a problem play which had been presented at the theatre the evening before and which was of great interest to his audience of three widowed ladies and one spinster. But this seeming disregard for time was not contrary to the instructions from his chief, he was obeying orders, business affairs would require his absence from Lexington for two weeks, and he was determined to walk "to town" with Miss Herron this morning and state a certain proposition for her acceptance or refusal.

Dazed and troubled, Beatrice Herron came away from a breakfast which had not appealed to her, and almost collided with Mr. Andrews who was standing by the newel post apparently reading a letter. He had so timed his maneuvers as to be at that spot and unaccompanied when she should return.

"Now that's perfectly alright," he told her when she began to apologize for her seeming rudeness; "I was violating the laws of traffic, and was obstructing the passway." She was compelled to



smile over his good humor; he told her, "I've just received a very sweet letter from my mother," he sighed heavily; "honestly, it has made me homesick for Lil' ol' New York."

With perfect understanding she answered his smile, for homesickness is loneliness, and she knew the full horror of both; knew them with the added torment of a love despised. Her heart told her that Hughes Randall was purposely avoiding any conversation with her save that which was required by his business; she began to suspect that he was staying away from the office to avoid meeting with her, for during the past ten days he had only been at his desk two hours while she was present and had come to attend to his correspondence when he knew that she was not there. Should she remain in his employ, and by doing so submit to such slightings and the indignity of having such women as Mrs. Easson spread lies about her? Was the Equity society a sufficient bond between them? She was a woman, a proud woman; and such a being will not easily surrender; they fight, fight to the death, fight on the narrow ledge which our present day enlightenment gives to the woman.

She and Mr. Andrews were walking toward the center of the city, she had been talking to her companion, though could not for the life of her have said just what they had been talking on. She saw that he was waiting for her to agree or disagree with something he had said, and hastened to beg,

"Please say that again, I didn't quite catch."

"I said that business is unsentimental and should always be impersonal. Do you agree?"

"I do not." His word "impersonal" had been ill-chosen; to her, business was—He interrupted her thought.

"But my dear Miss Beatrice, you would not

base finance on sentiment, and commerce on emotion; would you?"

"They would be better there than on trickery and under-hand dealings. The very foundation of our civilization is self-protection and 'home,' our love and self-sacrifice is rewarded by chattels, those chattels we afterwards barter and sell; should sentiment be lost on our trip from the home to the store?"

"Then you have changed your views on 'suppression'."

"Please, Mister Andrews, don't argue with me this morning."

He laughed good naturedly: "You are out of sorts with the world, you need a change, you have had too much Equity."

"But I believe in their aim; you know that, you and I have discussed the question until there is little left for argument."

"But do they give like for like? You are giving yourself to their cause; what are they giving in return? A good salary? Peace of mind? Fair and gentle treatment to all? No, Miss Beatrice, your love is decidedly one sided." He was startled by her paleness.

"My—my love is not under discussion, Mister Andrews," she realized her enormous error; hastily changed the sense. "It cannot be since you claim business to be unsentimental."

"Then I am glad to hear you admit that business should be so, for I have a proposition which I hope will please you."

Her thoughts went racing as a dove caught in a gale, racing with the speed of vengeance, racing to the same result which had been advised to her by three widowed ladies and a spinster. Here was the opportunity to avenge a hurt, here was a golden chance to repay all harm. "Quit working at that office," she had been advised by the

star circle of "The Gossip House"; "the longer you stay there, the more chance you give that woman to talk about you." Would not this be justice? Could she accept an offer to work for the enemy to the Equity? With woman's intuition she had correctly guessed what the "proposition" would be, she had been told by Tom Quinn that such an offer would some day be made to her. She had laughed at the idea at all other times than now, never until this moment had she seriously considered such a change. Now?

With violent emotions battling in heart and brain she heard the "Trust" representative say:

"I have been empowered to offer you the position of Assistant Manager of Purchase for the Crosby Tobacco Company in the Burley district; your duties will be quite similar to the requirements of your present office; your salary to be one hundred dollars per month."

She was tempted, tempted as the world's mother was tempted by the sinuous strength of a false power. She was a woman, she had felt the thrill which only the exercise of personal authority can give, she was proud, she despised being a brunt for Mrs. Easson's scandal. Her eyes sparkled bright as a new hope was born; wouldn't this be a jolt which would awaken Hughes to his nobler self? Would her going from his office show him the ugly truth as others saw it?

The fire died from her smile, and the glint of steel was left. Women such as Beatrice Herron do not know what surrender means, and they are too noble, too worthy, too pure, to turn their love into a strategy. She had conquered her desire for vengeance, she stilled the unhappy wish to barter and trade for love.

"No, Mister Andrews, I thank you ever so kindly for your interest in me, I appreciate your gener-

ous offer, but I would feel as though I were a traitor to our cause if I should accept."

"Would a hundred and twenty-five tempt you?"

For a moment she was thoughtful. She was only human, and this extra money would permit many comforts and luxuries added to her life. Then she smiled with the grimness of "Old Ironsides", her worthy parent; she was not craving comforts, she was not working to gain luxuries, she only wanted the necessities, the necessities to happiness.

"No." She crossed her Rubicon: "I shall stay where I am until they 'fire' me."

"Then you'll stay there until the 'reformer' legislates tobacco from the use of mankind," laughingly he exaggerated, and the subject was dismissed. Pleasingly he chatted on light nothings until they arrived at the corner which held the building in which the Equity headquarters was officed. He bade her adieu, and was on his way to the nearby street-car line to go to the "Trust" warehouse when he came upon Tim Quinn hurrying out of a grocery with an arm load of packages.

"Hell, Andrews, been up trying to join the Equity?" He rarely owned a serious thought.

"No, but I've been doing honor to the cause."

"Say on, gay Romeo," and with an uncanny directness he bantered, "I'll bet a pound of good smoking-tobacco I could guess what it was."

"Then you would win, for I've just escorted your deputy organizer to headquarters."

They discussed the topics of the day somewhat lightly, as was the way of Tom Quinn, when that one jumped into his buggy as he said:

"Gotter hustle home with these groceries, Hughes Randall and Miss Easson are coming out to dinner today, and the boss of my shack made me drive to town for some 'extras'; say, ain't women curious, always wanting to doll up like a

peach tree in spring." He caught up the reins, and would have driven away had not Mr. Andrews detained him.

"By the way, Quinn, I bought a crop of tobacco from your tenant, Lowery, and now he tells me that you are forcing him to cancel the agreement by ordering him off the farm if he refuses. Is that fair?"

"You just bet it is," was the heated answer; "that tobacco was raised on my land, with my money, and is going to be stored in my barns. And when it is sold you can lay a thousand to one bet that it will be sold in my name. Now I don't mean to be personal or ugly or offensive or foolishly crude, but I do mean that no farmer under my control is going to work against my interests. And let me say this right now while the subject is hot. You are working for the trust; you are the trust so far as we growers are concerned. Now listen, for the 'Trust', there's a way to teach reason and moderation to power; it's not a pretty way; perhaps you've heard something about the lessons we've been teaching in our night school; it means force and physical law; it means something we don't want to do unless we're forced to it. Get me?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Miss Herron did not permit herself to exult over the offer of the trust; but she did let the memory of it serve as a buoy for depressing thoughts, and there was a dignified pride in her smile as she greeted the office force. She was surprised at finding Hughes Randall in the office, and was hurt by the coolness in his slight nod to her greeting; there was something antagonistic in his attitude, he seemed fearful of her, as though he was striving to ward her off, to thrust her from his presence. Sadly she smiled and won-

dered if he was a meek and willing prisoner or was struggling to free himself.

He was. But it was that unequal struggle in which man has been bested ever since his senses led him. He was struggling to calm himself, but his struggling carried him around and around in a very circle of thought. Life, to him, had suddenly become complex; he was being instructed in the necessity of guarding his thoughts, and suppressing his words to fit another's creed; he could not be free to do as he liked, such freedom was forbidden by every convention; he dare not confuse the freedom of business relations with social rights; he must guard against the snares of entanglement, and remember that the "Adventur-ess" was always trying to ensnare men of his position; he must protect himself for Caroline, he was told this requirement by her mother. He could never get any further in his self-analysis; there was always Caroline; he might begin a reverie with Bee, but always it ended with Caroline. There was no solution, it seemed, and he could not find peace anywhere other than in the presence of Caroline. The eternal question without answer buzzed in his head this morning and prevented concentration to Equity thoughts, he wondered if he would feel as he did unless he was trying to oppose an evident wish of Mrs. Easson. Must he——

Angrily he arose and walked into his father's room and told that one that he was "going out to see Tom Quinn and require him to hold the 'Possum Hunters' in better control."

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER 7.

### **“Will You Read This Story?”**

“Oh, Hughesey-ughsey, this is going to be the bestes picnic we ever have had,” Caroline enthused as she settled herself in the buggy by the side of Hughes Randall; “just think, we only have one weeney-teeney little business call to make, and then the day is ours and a real old fashioned country dinner handed us in the bargain.” Merrily she laughed and chided him. “Smile one of your pretty old smiles for Caroline, and she’ll give you a big, big kiss when we get out in the country; that is if you want one and will promise not to muss my pretty little yoke—do you want Caroline to kiss oo’s?” She perched her pretty head to one side and looked at him with the babyish expression which would always instantly win him.

She was the perfect dear of a doll, dainty, chic, charming, anl altogether fascinating. Her dress was frills, lace, and “peek-a-boo,” fitting wonderfully to her beautiful charm; it seemed to be a confection rather than a serviceable garb, and suited her as the halo to her divinity. Surely no prettier companion could have been selected to waste hours away, her very being seemed as ethereal as the golden summer sunshine, and she was as gay as the song birds which each leafy tree along the way gave nesting. She chirped and chattered away as tho this day “knee deep in June,” with its sunshine, birds, and balmy air,

had been ordered for her especial benefit—as it was.

The business call which Miss Easson referred to was one which Hughes had long been neglecting to make. One reason or another had always interfered with his finding this man, and he had been fearful lest the "Possum Hunters" would give some offense to an old-time friend. He was a farmer of large acreage and good associations, though one who was stubbornly selfish in his way of thinking; Hughes felt reasonably sure of persuading him to be one of the pool, but was satisfied that sound reasoning would have more weight than a fear of the whipping-post.

He and Caroline were courteously welcomed by the farmer's wife, and while Hughes walked out to the nearby field to meet his man, his charming companion was entertained, or rather, as she later expressed it, bored by the wife and her several sprightly children, who took quite a fancy to this "big, bu'ful doll" as the baby called her. That hour and a half, during which the tobacco argument lasted, was one of the most trying and vexatious periods of her life; it was almost impossible to keep the children from petting and fussing over her, and a certain scheme demanded that she should be the initiative of attraction for hours yet to come.

"Hello, Mister Weathers," Hughes greeted the farmer; "I want first to apologize for not having come to you among the first of our society, but, as you know, I have really made five calls in my effort to find you. Now, Mister Weathers, you were the founder of the 'Perpetual Pig Raisers,' when you gave us boys the pig for cleaning out your pond, and I want you to come into the 'pool' with us now and help clean out the damage which the 'trust' has done."

"Wal, now, I don't know so much about that,



Hughes; seems to me like you've already stirred 'em up considerably; Mister Andrews was out this way one day 'bout two weeks ago, and he was offering twelve cents for this year's crop as against the eight cents he paid last year."

"Did you sell?"

"No. I 'lowed I'd see you'all 'fore I closed the deal. If we've got 'em up to twelve we maught push 'em up a little more."

The farmer, who was really an intelligent man, was won over by the recital of the perpetual benefit to be derived from the society, and insisted on walking to the house and signing the "Contract-Bond" which had been mailed to him many weeks ago—no other copy would serve the purpose. After signing the document, he assured the friend:

"I'm powerful glad to be one of the Equities now, Hughes; I've allus said to Mariah I'd join if I could see where it'ud help any. But them other fellows that's been coming out here couldn't jest exactly tell me why I had to sign up for two years when I only grew one crop a year." He dismissed the business, and was the hospitable host. "Say, now, Hughes, can't you and your young lady stay and take dinner with us? We'd be powerful glad to have you."

"Thanks, old fellow," Hughes gracefully declined as though he regretted doing so, while Miss Easson smiled somewhat disdainfully, "but I have already promised Tom Quinn that we would be there to dinner today, and I'm afraid if we don't hurry on Mrs. Quinn will be vexed."

As they drove away, Hughes was exulting in his victory over the "trust," but Miss Easson was pouting over the long delay at the farm house. Seeing that her companion was not paying the slightest heed to her grievance, she soon began to entertain him with a lively account of

the farmer's children and their antics, and both were laughing merrily as they drove up to the gate of the Quinn yard.

"Hello, folks," Tom called boisterously as he came forward to meet them, the inevitable pack of dogs yapping, frisking, and barking in his wake. "Say, Miss Easson, I'll trade compliments with you," and when she nodded her head, "I just said to myself as I saw you sitting up there with the prettiest landscape in the world for a background, and the smiling blue heavens for a parasol, and the golden sunshine just a'worshiping you, that you were one of the prettiest pictures I've ever seen." She would protest this exaggerated flattery, but he declared further: "You know, Miss Easson, you're the life and soul, and walking image of a little actress I saw in a moving-picture play the last time I was in the picture theatre; let's see, what was the name of that film?"

"Oh, I know," Caroline hastened to intercede. Her mother had noted the striking resemblance, but it was the effort of mother and daughter to fasten the "life and soul" of that particular picture onto another. "I know. It was 'The Rose of the Garden,' wasn't it?"

"Possibly it was," he accepted, "but she wasn't 'a rose of the tobacco-patch' compared to you."

All accepted this as a prolongation of his compliment; all with the possible exceptions of Miss Easson and Tom Quinn, she read into the saying a double meaning and straightway determined to prejudice Hughes against friendship with this man; while Tom's laughter was a befitting disguise for truth. He told them:

"Hurry up and get out of that rig, so the stable boys can give this city-fed horse an honest-to-goodness feed; and you two better hurry into the house 'fore the boss of this farm comes

to the conclusion you have lost your appetites." Mrs. Quinn, at that moment, came on to the front porch and waved them a jolly welcome.

"If I had your gift of gab I'd run for President," Hughes interposed; but the farmer turned this into a witticism by retorting:

"One man's already tried that, and had to resign."

Nothing but laughter and merriment was permitted in the Quinn home; "the boss of the farm" often said that she would "send for the doctor if Tom ever came into the house fussing." With such a hostess and host, a crust of bread and a sup of water would have been a feast; and the good, old-fashioned country dinner which was spread before the guests was the quintessence of the epicurean's dream. Every delicacy of the season and state were placed before them by Mrs. Quinn's well-trained servants, and they were loath to refuse the good things when presented with the hearty insistency of genuine bonhomie. After some pertinent remarks about indigestion and fond regrets, while she was being tempted by a third variety of pie, Caroline impishly ripped out:

"If you people don't stop asking me to take a bite of this, and try a piece of that, and have a taste of something else, I'm going to blurt out the honest and inelegant truth, and tell you that I'm full, too full for utterance."

After dinner the organizer of the Equity and the organizer of the "Possum Hunters" settled themselves in comfortable chairs on the broad front porch, and smoked contentedly, while Mrs. Quinn and Miss Easson became deeply engrossed in a lengthy dissertation on the ramifications of "style."

"Tom?" Hughes drew more particular attention to what he was about to say. "You and

the 'Secret Committee,' 'Possum Hunters,' or 'Night Riders' will have to curtail your operations. You are beginning to draw the attention of the newspapers of the state to your exploits, already several regrettable occurrences have happened in this and other counties; we must have 'Public Opinion' on our side if we hope to win and we cannot have that factor if lawlessness and rowdyism debauch our plan."

"Now hold on there, Hughes," was the protest; "who says we are lawless and rowdies?"

"I do," was the calm answer. Then he told his lieutenant: "I will not permit myself to be prejudiced in your favor by the crude fact that you are rapidly swelling our membership. I have not openly denounced the maraudings of the 'Possum Hunters,' or disclaimed them as a factor in our scheme, because I am first going to appeal to the members of the clan; but if I am unable to induce you to limit your operations to the plan originally devised, you will force me, as the Equity head, to decry, denounce, and refute, all connection."

"All of which is just like it ought to be," Tom astonished him by saying; "you keep up telling the dear public that we are not a part of the 'pool,' and let us operate in more secrecy, and we'll make the 'anti' farmer our goat."

Vigorously Hughes denounced such an idea; he was honest in his effort to stop the "whipping-post" argument; he would have no connection with rowdyism, brigandage, coercion, and lawlessness. He told Tom so, and his information was laughed at. He refused to permit the least semblance of justification, and Tom Quinn was equally firm in upholding the "law of might" which the "Possum Hunters" stood for.

"Say, Hughes, do you remember when you made the abstract for the title to this farm?"

The lawyer admitted the knowledge; was told, "Well, you'all told me I had 'a perfect title,' but I haven't any such a thing; I'm only a squatter, holding possession by the law of might. When this place was a wilderness, just like God made it, the animals must've fought for it as the choice bit of land on 'God's foot-stool.' Then the animals were driven away by the Indians, and it became 'the happy hunting-ground' of the Redman, a place which was contended for by battles for possession by right of might. The early settlers scared the Indians away, and the land was theirs because the Redman couldn't drive 'em off. The Puritan squatters, with hymn-book and a book which had some printed laws in it, drove the settlers further west; and thar the squatter squats. We're here because nobody has driven us away; we hold possession by the law of might; the only title we have is our word, and the brute force of our democracy is still our most powerful argument. Now our society, the Equity, is a squatter in the tobacco question; we've said that the brute force of a democratic combination was the most powerful weapon we can use against the 'Trust'; and the 'Possum Hunter' is the squatter in the Equity idea, and we're going to see that the brute force of the majority is properly administered. So quit your kidding me with your pretty phrases and logical arguments. So long as Mister Farmer carries his democracy to the nth degree and joins the pool of the 'overwhelming majority,' we have nothing to say; but when a sore-head, bone-head, or just plain grouch, tries to wreck a law-abiding institution, it's high time that a little common sense was poured into him." And no amount of reasoning would soften his declaration.

So intent had the two become in the argument they had not noticed the low-swinging clouds now

darkening the sky which had promised so much in the earlier hours of the day. Rain began falling, and they were forced to move back from the edge of the porch; but they continued their arguing over "right" and "might." Neither relented, each stood firm to his original declaration; they were interrupted by Miss Caroline coming onto the porch, her lips puckered in pretended distress, her eyes saddened over the loss of a pretty day, petulently she fretted:

"Look, Hugheseey, it's raining, and now our pretty picnic day is all spoiled." The men folks tried to laugh the discomfit away. She told them: "Oh, we've been out inspecting the chickens, turkeys, gese, ducks, guineas, and all other domesticated things in the noise and disorder league."

All business discussion was dropped. Tom told them that he was sorry it was now raining since he had wanted to show them his horses, admonishing Hughes not to forget to have a bet placed on "Red Fire" before that wonderful horse started in the Derby. "Hoss talk" now held the audience, Mrs. Quinn displaying a knowledge and an interest in her husband's affairs which greatly amused Miss Easson. They gossiped and chatted until Hughes affirmed that it was time they should be on their road home, explaining that Miss Caroline should have a few hours to rest up before the dance they were to attend that evening. A statement which drew forth from Mrs. Quinn:

"I wish I could go."

"Then go get your duds on," her husband told her; "we haven't been to a youngster's frolic for six months, and there's no use sitting out here wishing, when you can have what you want by simply going after it. We're not going to argue about it now, if you don't dance more than you have in the last year you will get fat." The

same being an unanswerable argument with women.

When Hughes and Caroline were ready to go, Mrs. Quinn insisted that her fair visitor should accept a basket well filled with fresh eggs.

"I'm not too proud to eat," Miss Easson gaily accepted, and she asked Hughes to take charge of the present. She told Mrs. Quinn that she would look for her at the dance, and agreed to dance "one and a half dances" with Tom. Promising to "repeat the dose" at an early date, they drove away. The buggy top had been hoisted, the side curtains fastened in place, and the storm apron adjusted to protect them from the drizzling rain.

"This is something I have always enjoyed," Hughes declared as they drove along to the pitter-patter of the horse's hoofs splashing through the little puddles of water which had gathered in the road's uneven surface.

"Heavens! This sticky, gummy, mushy weather!"

"Since I was a little boy I have loved to hear the horse splashing through the mud puddles and hear the rain singing to one as it pattered against the curtains; it is music to me."

"Well, it's hardly my idea of music, but it is snugified and cuddly." She removed her hat, cradled her head against his shoulder, and admonished him, "You may kiss me, when you get tired of making love to the horrid old weather."

After a mile of love-making, he begged: "Please sing something, something that will go with the day, something soft and low and sweet and dear."

Secretly amused over his childishness, and wishing that she could laugh over his melodramatic sentimentality, she began to hum and softly sing a quaint old love song of a rainy day. She was singing when suddenly she remembered an in-

struction given her by her mother. "The first rainy day," her mother had said. Today was "rainy"; would her mother be at home, and prepared? She snuggled closer to Hughes, she put every tremor of emotion she could muster into her songs, she risked the danger of a husky voice for the dance that night, she would make far greater risk, she was playing a desperate game, she was playing to win or lose, today was "rainy," she would play well her part and leave the balance to her mother; she sang, her voice vibrating as with passion beyond control. She filled him full of the heart-throb melodies, and ever now and again would turn her lips to him and beg a kiss. With a sigh which told him that she was sorry, though which was one of great relief on her part, she sat upright and replaced the hat on her head as they drew near to the city. She was silent during the drive through the city's streets, so was he; but his was an emotional silence, hers was a precaution against sore-throat.

It was still raining when they reached the Easson apartments, and she called to the janitor, asking him to bring out an umbrella. That liveried functionary brought with the umbrella a message from Mrs. Easson to the effect that Mr. Randall was to come into the house. Tossing a quarter to the grinning negro, Hughes directed that his horse be securely hitched, and that the basket of eggs be carried up to the Easson servant. Then he assisted Caroline to alight and laughed over her helpless little giggle as she stepped into a shallow little puddle of water where the cement pavement was in disrepair.

Mrs. Easson, in the doorway of the saffron lighted room, welcomed him in that degree of solicitude which he was coming to expect in her;



she bade him come into the snug room and rest, cautioning him:

"You are working entirely too hard, Hughes; you must take more care of yourself; if you were taken sick it would just tear us all to pieces." She fussed over him, took his hat and gloves, and insisted: "I am going to get you some of Kentucky's famous remedy for bad colds; now you sit there and let Caroline play your favorite piece of music." A command which the daughter would most certainly obey, since she knew that the game was well under way.

Mrs. Easson quickly returned with a steaming "hot toddy," insisting that he drink it to ward off the ill-effects of the damp; he was near protesting at the strength of the beverage, for the decoction was unusually strong, but her kindness and evident wish to make him comfortable forbade his doing so; he drained the glass, and thanked her for her thoughtfulness. At the piano Caroline seemed intent on trying to play the music to the songs she had so softly and so feelingly sung to him as they had driven home, she would drift into a slumberous melody, run the voluptuous strains of some opera she fancied, then back to the love songs of the drive.

"Hughes," Mrs. Easson murmured the summons as though it were a caress instead of a sentence, "there is only one volume of our kodak prints which we have neglected showing you; it is one which we consider to be our masterpiece because of its simple beauty and graceful poses; come over to the window so you may see the pictures by daylight."

Ashamed of his drowsy and too comfortable attitude, he immediately sat up and offered excuse for his seeming laziness; he moved to the seat indicated by Mrs. Easson, and accepted the album while she was busily adjusting her nose-

glasses, and fussing about the rain which would prevent a full attendance at the dance for this evening. Hughes endeavored to persuade her that the inclement weather would not hold the Southern girls away from a dance, but his argument lost force; he could not vouch for a full attendance, since he had already heard of several society leaders who would be "disinclined." He opened the album that he might begin the study of this "masterpiece of the kodak"; he would urge his hostess away from the discussion of a light attendance to the forthcoming dance; but he did not know that Mrs. Easson intended only to employ the cotillion as a means to an end, nor was he aware that she was signalling a scarcely perceptible wig-wag to Caroline that the music was to grow more bold, a little louder, a little less vague, and more virile.

"You know, Hughes," Mrs. Easson informed him, "this is the first winter since Caroline was old enough to appreciate a bathing suit that we have failed to spend at least two weeks at one of the Southern resorts, always we go to some good beach for at least one month during the summer, and this year we are looking forward to having you as one of our party." She began turning the leaves of the album, and adroitly directing his attention to this picture, that pose, here a "stunning" garb, there a fascinating group; his amazement grew, he was looking at more "magazine pictures" than he had ever before seen assembled under the caption of modesty, he was seeing a catalogue of beauty, beauty with few trimmings. This collection of prints seemed to be the fruit of many seasons on the bathing beaches of Palm Beach, Atlantic City, Cedar Point, Tampa Bay, and other popular resorts where beauty capers, and frolics, and rivals the mermaids. The postures had evidently been

taken in different years, as every mode and style of beach costumes in vogue during the past six years was featured, wonderful poses, daring graces, and every "study" held as its central feature the well-moulded, all but perfect form of Caroline Easson, who saucily flaunted her knack of wearing gracefully the most daring creations of the modiste.

Each picture would be told off by some pleasing little incident, clever witticism, or charming little story by Mrs. Easson, and an hour passed as though it had been electrified. Her guest sat fluttering the leaves of the album as helplessly as a bird under the charm of a snake, and as fascinated. With a sigh he closed the volume and gave it into Mrs. Easson's attentive keeping. She was watching him with a scrutiny which would read his slightest published thought; eagerly she besought:

"Will you be one of our party at the seashore this year, dear?"

"I most certainly will; that is if Caroline will permit me."

"Oh, Hughesey," Caroline enthused, and running to him threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

He was a trifle embarrassed by this affection, the first which the young lady had ever displayed in so public a manner, but she did not linger in the embrace long enough for it to seem other than the natural impulse of a fond love. She ran back to the piano stool, and saucily reminded him that it was time for him to be going to his home so that he might have dinner, and dress for the evening. As he caught up his hat and gloves, Mrs. Easson begged:

"Oh, Hughes, I have a story which I wish you would take along with you and read before you come for us tonight; I have the sequel ready to

mail to the publishers, though want your opinion before I send it away." She had frequently flattered him by having him criticise her work, and he always as now courteously responded to the request.

The author began a hurried search for the particular magazine which contained the story referred to, but it seemed that the volume had been misplaced; table, mantle, piano top were hastily searched as she advertised a "Bohemian" disregard for the staid and orderly laws of the housewife; finally the book was uncovered in exactly the spot she knew it to be, under a newspaper on a chair by the door.

"Here it is," she called; she flipped the corner of the leaves while holding the magazine with a firm grip to prevent a loose leaf or other loose object in the volume from falling out. "Yes, this is it, the story is dog-eared."

He thrust the book into his coat pocket, bade them a reluctant adieu, and promised to return at nine o'clock. He hurried away in an atmosphere which was as heavy in damp, as humid and as foggy as were his emotions; he did not feel the coil of the serpent as it entwined around his fancied ideals, nor could he know that he held the virus of the strike in the innocent appearing magazine curling in his pocket.

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER 8.

### "The Side-line Social Touts."

As the door closed behind Hughes Randall, Mrs. Easson sank wearily into a chair, and Caroline slumped her shoulders with a gesture which was intended to picture a relapse from a mental strain.

"Lord, mumsie, I certainly know what the actors mean by the 'artistic strain,' I've been on pins and needles ever since we drove away from that 'rough-neck' Tom Quinn's home; I remembered what you said about the atmosphere having a control over the magnetic dispositions such as Hughes' and played every card in the deck just trusting that you would be here waiting for us."

"Did I over-play my part?" Mrs. Easson eagerly, hastily asked. "Was I entirely natural while hunting for that magazine which has our 'joker' in it? Was I too 'matter-of-fact' while leading him up to an unconventional disclosure?"

"You were surely just exactly, entirely, and absolutely right; I almost fell for your acting myself, even when I knew what was coming, and if this scheme falls through I move that we go on the stage."

"It will not 'fall through' if you are as careful tonight as you have been all afternoon. Come, we must have dinner and then rest for an hour or so for the dance."

"Do you believe what those horrid old women from 'The Gossip House' tried to insinuate when they 'called to correct a wrong impression which you have regarding one of our estimable young women'? Do you believe 'only a few of our more prominent young society girls are to attend the cotillion'? as they also said. Do you, mumsie? Do you believe they will be that bold in trying to 'cut' me?"

"I don't know, Caroline. They are certainly dissatisfied over having you selected to 'lead'; but that must be the least of our worries; you will find that they will rapidly change their opinions and conduct after our 'announcement dinner.' Now come and let's forget everything except how to be pretty."

"I wonder what Hughesie-ughsie is doing?" was the gay flippancy as the servant announced dinner.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hughes drove by the headquarters of the Equity to assure himself that everything was going forward with the usual precision of efficiency. He found the doors locked and the desks closed, since the work-a-day hours were past. Hastily glancing through some letters which had been placed on his desk, he made notations on them which would indicate the disposition he desired, and then hurried on his way to prepare for the gay hours to come.

After a hearty meal with his parents, during which his mother questioned whether over-work was responsible for the languor into which he was accustomed to lapse, he went to his room to read the story which he was to criticise before making his toilet for the evening. A kodak picture of him and Caroline had been pasted on the magazine cover; he smiled as he recognized it to be one which had been taken just as they had

been starting on one of their many drives through the country. He turned to the story written by Mrs. Easson, and was prepared to spend an enjoyable half hour, as he honestly liked her writings.

He read the first paragraph, re-read it, looked up at the title of the story and the name of the author, and was surprised to note that her initials instead of Mrs. Easson's full name was in the caption. Vaguely he understood why this should be. He knew this story to be different from anything of her writing he had ever read. He was partly prepared for what was to follow in the body and climax of that story. He was partially prepared; but knowing the woman as he did, knowing her temperament and intensity, he could not fail to see as she had seen while she was writing; he caught the spirit, soul, and fire of the passionate wordings. His attention was held, drawn, and centered as it would not have been possible for him to be captivated by a similar story from an unknown writer. That wild, fierce, and intensely passionate love story held his keen sympathy as with sentimental kin-ship; he read on and on with quickening interest, and as he turned the last page of the story, as he came to the thrilling climax of a love description which seemed to reach from the printed page and caress him, he realized that a loose kodak picture had become disengaged from the magazine and fallen to the floor, he realized the carelessness which permitted this to happen, but gave no heed to the loose print until he had finished the story. Absently, his mind still controlled by the passionate writing, he leaned over to pick the photo from the floor, the figure in the dark background of the deep red carpet, caused him to gasp in astonishment. He leaned closer and stared at it in blank amazement, wonder, then in adoration as

he gently picked it up and sat gazing on it, transfixed. Here was a picture which should have been most jealously guarded, a picture which in fact should never have been made. He sat looking at, adoring, worshiping, an art study which portrayed Caroline Easson in the pose and garb, or lack of garb of "The Roman Bather."

\* \* \* \* \*

The dance was just the success which Mrs. Easson had hoped, wished and striven for. She did not care for the number of couples engaged in dancing; she did not care to know that this inter-season affair was given because Hughes Randall, as the retiring president of the cotillion club, had induced the members to consent to it so that he might honor Miss Caroline Easson by asking her to "lead" the numbers with him as partner; she was more interested in one being than in the club, city, county, state. Secretly she exulted in the fact that Hughes Randall seemed to enter into the spirit of the fun as he had never done since she had known him. Tonight he was transformed into a different being from that of the afternoon, of the past month, of the past three months; he seemed to have entirely forgotten the business cares which usually distracted his attention for short intervals even in the midst of gaiety. Tonight he was the most carefree, highspirited man on the floor, the figures through which he led the dancers were encoored time and again; the orchestra, responding to his urging—and a most generous tip—was throwing expression and verve into the music; only his effort, energy and spirit prevented the dance from being as "sticky," drab and uncharming as the damp, foggy atmosphere through which the club members and their partners had come. Mrs. Easson believed that a certain end had been attained—or nearly so; she clearly saw that he



was acting as though under the influence of a spell, a drug, a bewitchment; but the state of being, or the methods employed that he should be in that frame of mind, were of no consequence to her plan; she had most carefully analyzed his disposition and temperament, and believed that when once he should say certain words he would force each act of his life to sustain the meaning of those words. She was staking everything on having him to declare himself, to ask for a betrothal, to bond himself by words; and when that moment should be past, she would trust his natal and inborn gentility to sustain all deficits.

Caroline, in her gayest, most irresponsible, most fascinating mood, found him to be altogether charming. She required but little prompting from her watchful mother to see that no opportunity was lost to assist in making this a memorable occasion. She caught the initiative of her partner for the evening, and saucily proclaimed that there should be "no wall-flowers at the dance." Recklessly she transformed Mrs. Quinn and several "old married folks" into "jolly dancing partners." She found Tom Quinn the center of a laughingly interested group, narrating the escapades of the "Possum Hunters," and flip-pantly informed him that "business comes before pleasure, but everybody's business tonight is to dance and be merry." She assumed a proprietary right to the attention of Hughes Randall, which, to the on-looker, bore no evidence of maneuvering. Clearly she was the most beautiful, doll-like, charming, and humanly-alive of all the "fairer sex" in attendance; and her escort found no flaw in the divinity of grace or the perfection of charm.

They danced far into the morning hours, and when at last Hughes and his charges reached the Easson apartments, Mrs. Easson hurried to her

room at once on the plea of excessive weariness. She left Caroline and Mr. Randall in the dimly lighted hall to bid their escort "good night for both of us."

"This has been the most wonderful night of my life, Hughes," she softly murmured, laying her hand lightly on his arm, and raising her heavily-lidded eyes in a look of shy gratitude, unusual, but not unbecoming to her, and altogether enticing.

He smiled on her with the most wonderful expression she had ever seen in his eyes; a look which awed her and shamed her from seeing into the depths of his soul. The almost interrupted day with her, the rich food and boasted happiness of the Quinn home, the entrancing contents of the kodak album, the wild, fascinating and compelling love story in the magazine, the wonderful, well developed picture—now in his pocket, the witching music of the dance, the intimate pressure of body against body, the priority right which she had flaunted—all worked together cunningly to ensnare the man who was but human. He caught her madly to him, straining her to his being as though he would crush her into his heart, passionately he muttered words of love, wildly he begged her to say that she would be his wife. And now that the moment of her triumph was here, she was strangely silent; she could not smile in triumph over such a love; she was frightened, and rushed away from him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning Caroline and her mother sat long in their bed-room discussing the engagement, the dance, and the incidents connected with the courtship of Hughes. Both were jubilant over the success which was theirs, the mother no less than the daughter, who boastfully claimed:

"Gee, but won't the moth-ball aristocracy, the

side-line society touts, and the moss-backed snobs be furious after our 'announcement dinner,'" gaily she laughed. "Now those gossipy old hens at 'The Gossip House' will have something to talk about; and that Herring, or Herron, won't bother our thoughts any longer."

"Don't be too sure of that," the mother cautioned. "We have won him, but you are going to find it no little job to hold him always in love with you."

"Oh, rats," was the inelegant retort. "That will be as easy as feeding candy to a baby. The blindest person in the world is the man who is teetotally in love, and if you had seen that look in his eyes last night you would have had material enough to writ an encyclopedia on 'Love Lorn Lunatics'; honestly, I was so frightened I had to run before I had said 'yes'; and holding him right at that stage is going to be easy."

"Then you think it best to quit our denunciation of 'The Adventuress,' and permit Miss Heron to remain in the office?"

"Lord, mumsie, let that woman alone; she can't hurt us now, and it only gives the gossips something to talk about; wait until I am married and I'll make it so hot in the house that he will have to fire her out of the office."

"Be careful, daughter, about making it 'hot in the house,' for Hughes is not a man to be bulldozed."

"Think not?" Caroline required. "Think he won't stand for being led? Then just stop and think awhile. Do you happen to remember of ever hearing his views on 'divorce'? Have you never heard him say how he detested and despised the very word 'divorce'? Do you think such a man can't be led?" merrily she laughed. "Why, mumsie, if he doesn't like the way Caro-

line treats him, he at least can treat her to a big, fat alimony."

\* \* \* \* \*

From a troubled sleep Hughes Randall awakened with a startle. The moment was the usual time for him to arise, yet he lay abed thinking over the happenings of yesterday and the declaration which he had made not so many hours ago. His spoken words of love had cleared his thinking of the lethargy which had held him dormant, that one word, "love," had tossed languor from him; he was purposeful, dynamic, and awakened to a sense of the duty he owed to his honor. From the viewpoint of honor, he analyzed the situation in which he found himself, and decided that there was but one course open to him. He dressed and sat down to the writing desk in his room prepared to put his thoughts into a letter which would fully, explicitly and definitely state his decision. When he had completed the letter, and was in the act of placing a stamp thereon, he tore open the envelope, filled out a check for a neat sum, addressed a second envelope and sat deeply engrossed in thought. Equity affairs would require that he be away from the city today, but he could in person deliver the letter on the morrow; such a plan was preferable, so he thrust the sealed envelope into his pocket and hastened to breakfast.

\* \* \* \* \*

Durbin Ellis had not abated his effort to "bust the Randall political balloon"; his dogged enthusiasm was only increased when he would meet with small encouragement from the tenant farmers, for his was the stubborn nature which thrives on opposition, and his varying success in drawing anti-pool workers to his standard made him more energetic, more determined, more bitter. His enthusiasm was coming to demand frequent liba-

tions from the cup "that chases trouble into the rat-hole of tomorrow." When he came to be lonesome on the farm, and to wish that he had been less dictatorial with the wife who was fighting his plea for divorce, he would drive into the city hoping that he might find a congenial friend, and secretly wishing that he might happen on someone who knew Mrs. Ellis sufficiently well to say whether she was happy and well. On many of these visits to the city he would meet with Albert J. Andrews, and he would encourage the "Trust" representative even though he had little of substantial success to offer.

"What are you doing in town today?" he asked Mr. Andrews one afternoon. "I thought you were to be in Mercer County all this week," the county named being one of the principal ones in the Burley district.

Mr. Andrews explained that he had come home for the dance "night before last and just decided to rest the balance of the week."

"They tell me there weren't very many people up there," Durbin sneered. "I wouldn't let sis go." He would have said more, but he remembered that Andrews was not "of the people."

The Easterner had heard small gossip on this subject. He endeavored to find a logical reason. "Why not?" he questioned.

"Oh, because we don't know very much about the people who led the affair," Durbin rushed on as he endeavored to extricate himself from a tactical error; "we can't understand why Hughes Randall is giving her the rush when we all know that he is very much infatuated with Beatrice Herron and she with him."

"Ah! then that explains it all," Andrews was greatly relieved over something which had puzzled him.

"Explains what?"

"Nothing, much," he did not wish that his aide should know how badly he had failed to attract Miss Herron into the employ of the "Trust." Suddenly he remembered something which he had been told no later than an hour ago, he caught the farmer by the arm. "But, I say, Durbin, that can't be so."

"What can't?"

"That Herron-Randall affair."

"Why the hell can't it be? I married her first cousin, and I know her people are as good as any Randall on earth."

"No, no, you don't understand; listen, Miss Easson, not an hour ago, told me she was engaged to Randall; she was joking about it but I believe she was telling the truth."

Ellis stared at him in bewilderment—"You mean?"

"I mean just what I said."

Still the farmer could not grasp the full significance of the information; he hated Hughes with a bitter hate, but he was defending the family name as he protested.

"Hell, there's something—" he said no more.

\* \* \* \* \*

Just twenty-four hours later, Mrs. Easson and her daughter Miss Caroline were culling the list of the social eligibles as they selected the names of those who were to be invited to the "announcement dinner," quite carelessly they passed over many who would have been catered to this time a month ago. Elaborate preparations were in discussion, dresses were to be ordered without regard to cost or serviceability, they would not stint themselves now when they were coming to be classed with "the top notchers," as Miss Caroline so feelingly expressed it.

"It will take the greater portion of all we have left of your father's estate." Mrs. Easson mildly

protested when the trousseau was being talked over.

"Oh, well, mumsie, what if it does. We are fixed for life, so why worry."

The telephone bell began ringing. Caroline leaped to answer it. "I'll go. I'm waiting for Mrs. Kemp to call me to help with the list for our dinner."

Mrs. Easson turned to her paper littered desk intending to work up some notes she had neglected during the excitement of the past three days. But if either of them had known what was in store for them, or the import of the telephone message, the Easson flat would have witnessed a vastly different scene that morning. It was not Mrs. Kemp who called, nor a care-free, jolly Caroline who returned to the room with a message to repeat to her mother.

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## CHAPTER 9.

### “Five Hundred Dollars.”

There was little in Mr. Clay's life other than his law practice; a deep read student, he had preferred books rather than people as boon companions, and now in old age, when Time and economic erosions had stripped from his home all else save its founder, he was oftentimes lonesome, and because of the lean hours spent elsewhere than in the offices of the firm, he had come to spend the greater number of his hours there. He was usually the first one to arrive in the morning, the last to leave in the afternoons, and not infrequently would return after dark to continue his study or reading. Although he had chided Beatrice Herron for over-taxing her energy, when the press of Equity affairs had required her returning to the office after work hours, and had demanded of his partners that assistance be given to her and at once, nevertheless, her presence at the office during that month had given him something other than business to think of and his fatherly interest in her welfare had been a most welcome innovation. This fatherly interest had awakened in the student a wish that some of his children should return to their natal city and permit him to be more than a letter-father to them. He wrote to his two sons and one daughter, suggesting such a



move; but the replies had all been urging, pleading, begging entreaties that he come and share the home which was well established in the several cities of their adoption. His oldest son, who was a lawyer of more than passing note, on his last visit to the Blue Grass had tried to persuade him to give up his law practice in Lexington and "come to Denver and teach me the law." A suggestion which was now being pressed with an insistency which was about to over-throw the habits of a lifetime's forming; he wanted to hear John's three children calling him "grandad."

Because of his early arrival, he had taken the sorting of the mail as one of his obligations, and he attended to it punctiliously and regularly; custom and age had given him a precision and dignity in performing small tasks which might have been amusing in lighter minded folk, but those in the office loved him, and his queer ways and quaint manners ever endeared him to them the more. This morning he slowly and studiously unlocked the door into the reception room, gently pushed it open lest a rude move might rumple a letter in the pile of mail which he knew would be on the floor, propped the door open with a chair, and stooped to pick up the scattered mail; then he straightened his frame with a dignified grunt, and stifled a groan at the twinge in his back—he never admitted rheumatism or any other ailment or complaint. Ceremoniously he deposited the mail on a table, replaced the chair in the exact spot from which he had taken it, closed the door, walked to a coat-tree in the corner, hung up hat and coat, and, ready for the day's work, he announced that fact by a trumpet challenge of preparedness, for his "Ahem!" was clear and distinctly militant.

Sorting the mail with a precision which would take into account the number and nature of the

pieces, he delivered to Hughes Randall's desk that mail intended for the Equity or his individual address, and placed the assortment for his senior partner in a wire basket intended for that purpose. He then began to open the firm's correspondence and that which bore his personal address. A letter from his daughter, and one from his son, John, he carefully thrust into an inner pocket; they could be more thoroughly enjoyed after business hours, and, besides, Gregory Clay did not believe in bringing social affairs into the business world.

He found only one letter which could be answered without reference or conference, and as this one was from a client who asked certain information concerning the Equity, he penciled a notation at the bottom, and carried it into Hughes Randall's room intending to place it on the desk used by Miss Herron. He was in the act of placing his communication on her desk, when his attention was arrested, held, and compelled to study, an envelope which had been carefully placed in the forward center of the polished oak. He halted his movements and stood as rigidly erect as though he had heard a signalled warning. His eyes glistened, but not with vulgar curiosity; there was stealth in his gesture as he bent forward, but it was not the snooping of the curious, it was the steel of the soldier as he leans forward on guard against danger. He re-read the address on the envelope; it was bold, clear cut, and undisguised:

"MISS BEATRICE HERRON,  
Office."

Unwilling to believe a careless survey, the old gentleman removed his spectacles, carefully rubbed the lenses with an immaculate handkerchief, precisely readjusted them, and studied the ill-fated missive. He tried to believe that there

was a mistake, he wanted to disbelieve what he saw. He wished that he might question his knowledge of handwriting. No use; the characters were too plainly writ. He knew that he was looking on the penmanship of Hughes Randall. Well did he know that letter had not been written during business hours—the creamy vellum spoke too plainly of social affairs. Aghast, he stood as he asked himself if it was possible for his young partner to be toying with his stenographer's affections, even while gadding about with Miss Easson. He had followed this man's career from the cradle to now; there was not one blotch on his character. He had known "Old Ironsides" Herron since the day that one settled in Fayette County after the surrender of Lee; that man's daughter would not enter into an office intrigue. But what, what was the meaning of this letter? Business affairs were disparaged. He tossed his own contribution onto her desk, threw this letter from Hughes on top of it, and sullenly walked from the office of the Equity organizer.

He was nursing the worry as he paced the floor, back and forth, back and forth, from his own office through the reception room, into Hughes Randall's room to look at the offending letter, then wheel and resume his stride; he was disturbed, and grossly worried; he was too annoyed to more than nod his response to Miss Herron's cheery greeting when she came in from the hall.

Noting his clearly advertised worry, she paused for a bright remark on the beauty of the day, but when she received only a grunt of approval, she entered her own room, musing.

"Poor, dear, old Mister Clay must be fighting an attack of rheumatism, which he tries so hard to deny. I wish I could do something to make

the old fellow smile; ever since the 'Secret Committee' which he advised the formation of, turned out to be 'Possum Hunters,' or 'Night Riders,' he's been as blue as—as blue as I feel."

She removed her hat, gloves, and street jacket, then unlocking the door between the Equity headquarters and the Randall, Clay and Randall suite, she went into the society rooms and for some minutes was busily directing the work for the day. Satisfied over her assistants' efforts, she returned to her room, closed the door, and was walking towards Hughes Randall's desk to get the mail and open it, when she saw the letter addressed in his familiar handwriting on her desk. She had never received a note from him before this one; this was the first time she had ever seen her name penned by his hand; her heart seemed to pause, to skip a beat, then it pounded on in fear, in dread, in hope; she seized the missive, tore it open and drew the folded paper from the envelope. Her fingers trembled as she unfolded the paper—she knew not why, but a sudden horror seized her, was crushing her, torturing her. She saw a smaller piece of paper drop to the floor, but she could not pause to pick it up, for she was reading, reading as she never before had read; those words stamped themselves on her heart, her brain, her soul, they sprang at her, leered at her, jeered at her. Dumbly she held it before her after reading it once, twice; she was as though paralyzed. It fell from her hand and fluttered to the floor. She saw three pieces of paper lying on the carpet: envelope, letter. She picked them up, then reached for the third, opened it and read it, she opened the letter to read again:

"MISS BEATRICE HERRON:

"I sincerely and humbly ask that you forgive me for leading you to believe that I loved you, if indeed I ever did. I have been

told that my conduct has been very improper, and in apologizing, I assume all blame for whatever has happened.

"Under the circumstances I feel sure that you will be kind enough to leave our employ from today, as your presence is torture to the love I know for my future wife.

"I am enclosing a check which I hope you will accept to tide you over until you secure another position.

"With every good wish, and assuring you that I am prompted by the best interests of all concerned, I am,

HUGHES RANDALL."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Clay did not believe himself spying on the affairs of others; he looked upon this letter-writing as a breach in the good behavior of the law firm, the possible result of this affair might harm his partner in law, and therefore be of injury to him; so he restlessly paced the floor of the reception room, waiting he knew not for what, but waiting, watching, and hoping that his fears were the unwarranted gossips of a suspicion run rampant. With glad surprise he saw Beatrice put her hat and coat away and at once go into the Equity headquarters; he nodded his head with distinct approval, for such an act proved to him that this was an unusual occurrence, and that an exchange of letters did not constitute a part of her life with the firm. On her return to the office he noted her halted step when first she saw the missive. He could not help noting the rapid, full and wonderful changes in her expressive features; no staged tragedy he had ever witnessed was equal to that which he was seeing; here was life, full, glowing, beautiful life, face to face with a crushing, damning, sneering disaster. He was fascinated with the study, power-

less to turn away, sympathetic, yet keenly analytical; and when the young woman crumpled into the chair, threw her arms onto the polished oak, and bowed her head before the onrush of the great sorrow, he shook his gray head in silent anger for the offending one.

He wished to give assistance. He would do all in his power to lessen the crushing sorrow, but first he must assist her to regain control. Knowing her to possess a remarkable personage, he deliberately studied the words he would use, and while outlining his method of procedure he went into Hughes Randall's office, carefully closed the door, and brusquely said:

"Come, come, Miss Beatrice, this will never do. You are a twentieth century woman, not a babbling babe. You have told me that the modern woman will not give way to her emotions, and is therefore prepared to stand the buffets of life; is this the way you prove your statement? Come, come, you have said the suffragettes do not cry."

"Oh, I ca-can't, I can't," she gasped, ending in a fresh burst of hysterical sobbing.

Knowing that he must do something to prevent hysteria, and that his words must be brutal in their force if he successfully brushed her powerful emotion away, he thrust all the sarcasm of his nature into the gruff, surly demand:

"How long has this intrigue been going on? Since when did you turn adventuress, and he become a masher?"

Instantly she was enraged, she raised her head and glared at him. She was the wounded tigress unafraid of past, present, or future. With vibrating voice she told him, "That is a lie."

With a loving smile the old man welcomed this anathema. It told him that he could still love Hughes Randall as a son, and protect Beatrice

Herron as a daughter. Also, it told him that hysteria was conquered, and that emotions from now would be under the control of reason. Gently he asked her, "How long have you cared for him?"

Truthfully, with steady gaze, she answered, "Almost since the first day of my being with you."

"Did he lead you to believe he returned your affection?"

"No. He has never wakened to the knowledge that he loved me; only a surface, mushroom love springs quickly into recognition; ours is the love which is so clean, and sweet, and pure, and dear, as to seem a part of life itself; it will not boldly and arrogantly intrude itself, but must be discovered as the vein of gold which makes life more than a sham and pretense; but it will live, live when all other and less noble ties are found to be counterfeit. No. He did not mislead me. He is being misled. Some subtle, cunning, mystic spell has been cast over him. He seems powerless to break the coils which have drawn another into my place. Those women have been talking about me. I have heard some of their ugly gossip, and with a soul as black as their lies, they have torn my image from his heart and given him a snake to fondle."

"And Hughes? You do not blame him?"

"How can I blame a man for being blind?"

He pitied her, he pitied Hughes and wished that he could say something to arouse him from the danger he was in. She sensed his thoughts, and was embittered as she told him:

"You can do nothing; I can do nothing, with him. He is a man and will protect the image of his love against all opposition, and anything we might say would only the more firmly establish his belief that he was in love with her. Leave

him alone. The man is never the debtor in love; he only credits. It is the woman who pays—always she pays, and I shall go to her with the truth.”

He did not attempt to argue the question. He was only a lawyer—not a judge in the court of love. He did ask:

“May I see his letter?”

“Certainly.” Then with bitter sarcasm, “And the check also.”

“Check?”

“Five hundred dollars.”

This attempt at purchase angered him. He walked to the window and stood looking out while gathering his thoughts in control. He was assisted by her quietly saying:

“Of course, I shall return the money. My estimate of him is not a chattel to be bartered and sold; but I shall leave here, and at once.”

He came to her side and counseled: “Miss Beatrice, I shall not discuss the conditions which have brought your first great trouble; my concern is only with the influence it may have upon your life. You have my deepest sympathy, and you shall have my best service and complete assistance in whatever you decide to do. I think you know that out of my regard for you and your family I have your best interest at heart, and would advise you as I would a daughter.” The word of kinship must have given him a new-born idea, eagerly he proposed:

“Why not go West? Why not go to Denver and go into my son John’s office? You remember him? You certainly remember how he and his wife tried to induce you to come to their city, office, home and assist Mrs. Clay in her work with the women whose progressive ideas you share?” Simply and earnestly he spoke to her as he would have reasoned with a kinswoman.



In the bitterness of her sorrow she accepted this proffered friendship as a haven of refuge, and the suffrage idea as an interest which would in some fashion take the place of her work for the Equity cause.

When Mr. Clay left the room, Beatrice, now quite calm, had told him she would at once go to Denver provided he would promise to go to "Old Ironsides" Herron and secure her father's forgiveness for deserting the cause of the farmers. Rapidly she began to collect her few belongings, and make preparations to forever leave the office which had meant all of life and love to her for months; she forgot her own grief in many angry resolutions to make the other woman suffer many times over the soul-wrenching agony which had been hers. Against Hughes there was no wish for vengeance, but for the woman who was to become his wife she bitterly, cunningly, womanly schemed and plotted a denunciation. Her brain seethed with lust for vengeance, and near mad with passion, she left off further preparations for departure to brood over plans for accomplishing her purpose.

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## CHAPTER 10.

### "I Will Not Defend Myself.

Mr. Clay was more troubled over the threat of Beatrice Herron to "make the other woman pay" than over the conduct of Hughes Randall. He did not know what a brainy, healthy, clean-minded woman, stirred to anger by the loss of an ideal love, might do to avenge herself that loss. Fearfully he repeated to himself his paraphrase of a family proverb, "The arch-deaconess of Hell is a woman scorned." He was doubly glad that circumstances in the control of her friends permitted Beatrice a change of work and new environment. He was sure that his son and daughter-in-law would do all in their power to help their charming assistant forget the unpretty hurt. He believed matters would soon readjust themselves, and, from his viewpoint, his younger partner was by far the severest loser; love at that age is only an exaggerated friendship until marriage hallows the bond, but business is becoming a more complex tangle with each passing year. He did not like the way Hughes was handling the affair, could not appreciate his choice of women, had no toleration for the attempt at bribery, and most certainly did not see the fairness in dealing a blow and running. Such conduct was unsportsmanlike, it was—

The outer door opened, and whistling one of Miss Easson's favorite tunes, Hughes came

briskly in. This was his second trip to the office this morning, and he was returning from an errand which had required more time than he believed would be necessary, for the young man whom he went to employ had detained him while closing the agreement to accept the offer. He was in buoyant spirits, satisfied with himself and the world, and looking forward to a more glorious tomorrow, week, month, year, life. There was no cringing apology in his manner, he did not offer excuses for living, being, doing; he was proud, honest, without fear in consequence of any act; he was glowing with genuine pride in the success of his plan for the tobacco society; and supremely happy in the belief that love was leading him into an ideal marriage with "the most beautiful woman in the world." He realized he was losing a most valued assistant; but under the Easson tutelage he was coming to learn that business was a science of figures and cold laws, but the social affairs of one's life were complex and the real cause for existence. He had never until most recently appreciated the "standing" of his family, the "prestige" of his firm, his own "position" in society; but the author woman had shown him many things which he had taken for granted, and most earnestly had cautioned him against the wiles of women. She had shown him where he had come very near to "being roped in," as Mrs. Easson expressed it, and had forced him to admit that he had been "holding hands" when she came upon them. But all trouble was now behind him, he would direct the formation of the tobacco farmer's pool, suppress the growing danger of the "Possum Hunters" hurting the scheme, and rid the office of "The Adventuress." Cheerfully he called:

"Good morning, Mister Clay; did you read the newspaper's overdrawn account of the 'Night

Riders' brawl?" On receiving an affirmative answer, he told the man who had concurred with him in the idea of forming the "Secret Committee" that he had called the secretary of the county in which the outrage was supposed to have happened and had been informed over the 'phone that "this old fellow owns about five hundred acres of land which he rents to eight tenants, and the tenants had signed the tobacco over to the Equity. But the landowner objected to the pool, and was attempting to drive the tenants off of the farm; then the 'Possum Hunters' took a hand in the game, and tying him to a tree had threatened to 'cowhide' him unless his objections were withdrawn."

"And the secretary justified the act?" Mr. Clay asked.

"Not only justified it, but seems to think I am exceeding my authority when I demand that he disband the 'Secret Committee' and learn the names of those who were implicated in this rowdism. But I told him, as I tell all men, we are organizing a society for protection, not one for destruction." He looked into his father's office, and seeing the desk unopened, merrily informed Mr. Clay: "Dad had a very urgent call from his old friend and fellow-scrapper, Mrs. Grundy, this morning, just as we were at breakfast; she was in her carriage, and insisted that he go with her then and there." He was walking toward his own office, had reached the door, and was about to enter when Mr. Clay stopped him.

"Oh, Hughes."

"Yes?" He turned as he deferentially answered.

"I would not go in, if I were you, at least not just yet."

No explanation was required or given. But even after he had been advised, Hughes saw no

reason why he should fear man or woman; he believed an unpleasant scene to be inevitable, that was the reason he had waited to deliver the note on a day when he would be present at its reception, or very shortly thereafter. Intoxicated with bliss at prospect of his marriage, he gave little serious thought to the possible complications which might arise; he came nearer to being a snob on this day than ever before or after in his life.

Mr. Clay believed he had a right to some explanation why so drastic a move should be made; originally the young lady had been in the employ of the firm, and because she had been drafted into the society headquarters was not sufficient reason why his young partner should exercise the power of an autocrat. He remembered the caution given by Beatrice, and for this reason must refrain from seeming antagonistic or critical; so adopting a worried expression he entreated:

"Hughes, how in the world did such a mistake ever happen?"

Hughes looked at his partner in law and advisor in Equity affairs, and seemed on the eve of taking the elderly gentleman into full confidence, changed his mind, and walking to that one, placed his hand on his shoulder as he told him:

"Mister Clay, I do not want to seem rude, or bombastic, or to assume more authority than properly belongs to me, but I am going to ask you to leave this matter entirely in my hands and to have faith in my assurance that I am acting under good advice."

"Who's advice?"

"Is it necessary that I divulge that fact?"

"Yes."

"Then under pressure I admit the name of my advisor to be my future mother-in-law, Mrs.

Easson."

"But think of Miss Beatrice; she—" He was interrupted.

"Just a moment, please, Mister Clay, I have asked that you leave the matter in my hands, I must now assure you that I will decline to discuss the situation in any of its phases. If you care to, you may go to Miss Herron and question her, but while doing so, remember, whatever she says must be accepted as final, unquestioned, and undisputed; I will not defend myself against any charge or liability to censure from her, and my name shall be tarnished or unsullied at her dictation."

The answer which Mr. Clay would have given to this chivalrous speech will never be known, for, before he could reply, the door from the hall was flung open, and William Randall rushed into the room, his hat awry, his coat held by one button—that one in the wrong button-hole, his bearing and manner giving every evidence of great irritation and combativeness. When he spoke, there was no further doubt as to his state of mind; he was in one of his famous fighting moods, where something, or somebody, must give way before his onslaught or pay a heavy damage. He threw his hat to the table, and ordered Hughes—ordered is the only descriptive:

"Get me the 'Goodloe' file; that pig-headed engineer has run the storm-water sewer across two of her lots in the subdivision instead of on the lot line as he agreed to do, and as I drew the deed permitting the right of way." He was wroth, and angrily told them of the damage which had been done the new subdivision belonging to his client; he was justly irritated because the client had directed the law firm to assume charge of the matter during her absence from the city, and it had been neglected during the crowded

moments caused by the firm's interest on the Equity and the "Possum Hunters." He showed them the printed plat of the subdivision, and pointed out the line of infringement; he tried to get in telephonic communication with "City Hall" so as to make an appointment with the offending engineer; he was fussing and fuming over a constantly interrupted telephone service, when one of the young lady stenographers from the offices of the Equity called to Hughes from the hall doorway:

"Mister Randall, Richmond is calling you on the 'phone, they are holding the line for you."

Hughes hastened to answer the call, which proved to be from the local secretary in Richmond, whose message was to the effect that Madison County—adjoining the County of Fayette—had that day and hour reached the eighty-five per cent mark in tobacco acreage pledged to the pool. This was the minimum amount of interest said by Hughes and the advisory committee to be necessary to justify the permanent organization of the society, and the glorious news that one of the larger and more important counties in the Burley district was the first county to reach the mark was exultantly spread among all the office force and three field-workers who came trooping in just at that moment. No one was so enthusiastic as the "acting president," all personal embarrassment and legal tangles were forgotten in this great moment of attained success; he praised the three field-workers for their efforts, assured them that their own county would be "next in line," and hurried them on the way to make that prediction good; he walked from desk to desk among his assistants, he endeavored to impress on them the meaning of the Madison County news, he thought them to be lax in their interest in Equity welfare, he thought them

strangely silent, but failed to notice their red-eyed sorrow because they averted their face whenever he looked at them. The office was throbbing with activity; typists were noisily busy over the letters and reports in their machines; others were checking long lists of names and figures; one girl was impressively busy over the "Percentum Ledger"; the Fayette County secretary, who was claiming desk room in headquarters, was entertaining two farmers who had "dropped in" to see how things were going, and were now eager to get away that they might herald the news that Madison County "knew how to play the game." He thought the young woman whose typewriter desk was closest the door leading to his private office gave him a queer look as his hand was on the door-knob, but he was so keenly joyous over the great news that he did not give a meaning to her glance until he had closed the door behind him, and then it was too late, for he stood facing Beatrice Herron as she was tugging at her gloves.

Miss Herron had made haste in her preparation for departure, but there were many matters to be attended to, and the lamentations of her assistants did not facilitate speed; she gave them the best instructions possible under the demand for haste, and cautioned them against inaccuracy. The time passed cruelly swift while she was attending to her assumed duties, and it seemed to her that she was breaking her heart into little bits and leaving those pieces in the custody of these inexperienced young women; so dear was the welfare of the society to her that she could not disregard anything which would make the work of her successor more effective. Everything had been done, and she was now ready to go; as Hughes entered the room she was in the act of placing an envelope on his desk; it con-



tained her adieu to him, yet he was never to read it. At sight of him she had no longer the courage to have him read the bitter message; here was not a Hughes to be scolded, here was one to be pitied. The apologetic pleading so instantly, so plainly written on his features compelled her to relent, she snatched the envelope from his desk and crumpled it into the pocket of her coat, as she looked at him and struggled to rekindle her anger and scorn.

"I—I beg your pardon, Bee," he stammered.

The words angered her more than a denunciation would have done. She came near to hating him because his bearing indicated a knowledge on his part that he was guilty of a wrong. She felt as though she could speak her bitter message. Slowly, precisely she spoke:

"You beg my pardon? Why?" Each word was weighted with excess sarcasm, and her cumulative scorn found a most delightful vengeance as she smilingly repeated: "Why?"

Her attitude embarrassed him more than he had believed it possible for her to affect him, this was not the ranting which he had half expected from the trapped "adventuress"; here was a situation, a demeanor he had not prepared for. He fenced for time:

"Oh, come now, you know, surely you understand?"

"Perhaps I know and understand many things which have been stricken from your knowledge and understanding by the forked tongue of a serpent. Perhaps I understand things which are invisible to you because of the fact that you view them through brass instead of through crystal truth. I have learned to 'know' one thing within the past few hours which I cannot understand. Would you care to know what it is?"

Anticipating an answer which would make him

even more uncomfortable, yet not foreseeing the charge she would make, he made no answer to her insinuating query. She was expecting just that silence; knowing him better than he knew himself, she would play with his pride as though it were a toy balloon; pointedly she continued:

"I have learned that Kipling knew the cunning and insidious attraction in 'a rag, and a bone, and a hank of hair'; I have learned to know that only the worst women can make fools out of the best of men, for only the good will fail to see the evil. I have learned to—but why carry the farce further?" She repeated his words last spoken, "You know, surely you understand?"

His uneasiness was changed to anger, threatening he demanded: "You refer to my—"

She interrupted: "I refer to you."

"Then Mrs. Easson was right, after all."

"Right in what? Right in a brutal presumption? Right in a cunning trick? Right in a fiendish deception? Right in a snakish scheme to prove that I honored you with a regard of which you were not worthy?"

"No, she was right in cautioning me to beware of you."

She disregarded the bold statement; she was more interested in telling him: "So that was her plan, that old trick of the mesmerist was her blind, she held me up to your contempt while lulling you to a fitful sleep."

"Please speak of her with the respect she deserves."

"Since when has the daughter of a village constable, who married a derrick hand of the Pennsylvania oil fields, been deserving of greater respect than the truth gives her?"

"Do you lay that libel against my wife's family?"

"I am telling you the history of Mrs. Anna B.

Easson."

"I will ask you not to repeat the gleanings from 'The Gossip House'."

"That information did not come from your aunt's boarding house; it came from one of the most reliable detective agencies in the country, and it cost me two hundred and fifty dollars to find it out."

"And you consider your money well spent? You consider the object a worthy one? You feel satisfied with the returns from your two hundred and fifty dollars?"

"Yes. For every dollar of my money was clean as it bargained. Can you say the same of a certain five hundred dollars of yours? Can you prove that you have not been a vandal as you sought to barter and trade in honest affections? Do you think money can be clean when it covers clean love with foul memory? Are you satisfied with the returns from your five hundred dollars?"

"I can answer that better after you have gone, and if you go quickly and quietly I will add another hundred; do you think that will be enough?"

"Enough?" she flung at him vindictively. She snatched the envelope from her pocket, tore the end away, deftly inserted her fingers and drew the check therefrom. "Here is your dirty money." She held it so that he could see that it was the check he had written, then tearing it into small bits she hurled at him the anathema: "That may be the price of a love such as you are seeking, but I had rather beg from door to door than bow my head in shame at selling the memory of my love—although it has now turned to hate."

"I think you are very wrong, Bee, in throwing away that money, and especially so since you

tell me that you spent a half of that sum in an investigation of Mrs. Easson's trying experiences." There was no trace of the anger of a few moments ago. He went on: "And I want you to know it is at your service whenever you require it; if I blundered in making the offer it was due to—" He faltered at betraying a woman's confidence to another woman.

"To what?" she demanded with superb sarcasm.

"To associate influences." He would not lie, he would not betray.

Her sarcastic smile forced him to look another way, and then she told him: "Hughes, at one time, not so long ago, you asked me why our 'pal-like' associations were not so dear as they used to be; if you will recall the moment of your question, you will remember that we were interrupted by the intrusion of a third party, and my answer was never given you. But conditions gave you the answer which I did not, the disturbing factor to our conversation was the disturbing influence in our friendship. That woman saw something which you failed to grasp, she realized that to succeed in her compelling your attention she must be rid of me." Sadly she smiled as she admitted: "She has been more successful than I believed it possible for her to be."

"Pardon, Bee, but Mrs. Easson advised me in certain matters for my own good."

"For your own good," she laughed with a sneer; "for your own good."

"Yes, and your conduct is proving it."

"My conduct is proving it. What do you mean? Is an assertion of clean innocence a proof to foul guilt? Is a statement of white truth, to be read as an advertisement of black lies? Do you so far forget the duty you owe the womanhood of your home, as to accept as absolute truth the

promptings of an adventuress?"

Boldly he came out with the statement: "That is the title she confers on you."

Astonishment, rage, hate, were crowding for place in her features; she was breathing hard as she fought for control. "An adventuress. My God, an adventuress. An adventuress who never said one word to you on other affairs than those of the office. An adventuress who never touched your hand save that one moment when you held them to her and pleadingly asked to be told a truth which every one of your associates is ridiculing. An adventuress who was prompted by thoughts as clean, as righteous, as just, as worthy, as your mother thinks. An *adventuress* whose aim has always been to build instead of destroying your faith, and trust, and honor, in womanhood. Is that the type individual you label '*an adventuress*'?"

He was silent; perhaps she was compelling him to see the truth. She did not correctly translate that silence; venomously she threatened:

"Do you think for one moment that I am a weak, meek, docile woman, who will see the love of her heart trampled on, despised, ridiculed, and turned into a weapon against her, without raising her hand to strike back? Do you believe that I will patiently stand by and see another woman usurp my place and gloat because she drove me as a dog, away? Do you think I will despise to make use of the same weapons she employed against me? If you do, then I am going to correct that impression and enlighten you." Her eyes were blazing with the fire of battle, her words were molten steel as she raced on: "Hughes Randall, you do not know the Kentucky people, if you are expecting to bring into their midst and have her accepted unless she has been tried in the ways of gentility. No. Don't at-

tempt to stop my telling you some unpretty truth; I am paying five hundred dollars for that privilege, and that is the largest fee you ever received for not over an hour's conversation." Spitefully she went on: "I am going to see to it that the Easson history is made known to the Lexington people; I am going to do everything in my power to hasten the inevitable result; we are a provincial people, and I was never so proud of that provincialism as now. As for your happiness?—that is nil, that is a negligible quantity, they are not considering it, so why should I? All I shall do will be aimed at my purpose of hurrying forward the day when you will see who is '*the adventuress*'; and when that day comes!" She shrugged her shoulders, and with a sad little protest, "Well, I am only a woman, and I suppose I would be as big a fool as all others." Retrospection past, she hurried on: "I shall not be the coward your preceptor was. I shall go to her and warn her that I am in action. I shall say to her the things I am telling you, and many others of more significant import. And when I have told them the plain, unvarnished truth, do you believe for one moment they would laughingly tell you what I say, or will they try to hide it as a truth which will not bear investigation? Wait and see. You will have plenty of time. And when they hurry to you for your protection, in that moment begin to question the truth; but until then, read the world's the provincial Kentuckian's, your friend's verdict in a scarcely perceptible shrug of the shoulder, an averted glance, a slighting disregard, a cool and formal reception."

She walked to the door, turning to him a face that had aged ten years in half as many hours, whose sadly changed beauty awakened sympathy rather than admiration. Her voice freighted with

unshed tears, she framed all animosity:

"I am going now. I have but a few words more to say, and it will be long ere you see or hear from me again, for that which will be done and said will be the result of only a few hours' conversation among the provincial people. While you are suffering an awakening to truth, you are going to recall with bitter regret the scene of this morning; many, many times you will yearn for a 'pal-like' associate; you shall drink to the dregs, the bitter dregs, the drink of deceit and mockery. The love you gave me, all unconscious of its depths and purity, was the first love you ever knew. Out of the texture of the unworded dreams of that love you have woven a mantle and draped it about a voluptuous thought. You have undervalued your own better nature as you have depreciated mine. You are yet ignorant of true love; you know nothing of the joy which passeth all understanding in the love of a good woman. Your 'Bohemian' friends have cut you off from that knowledge. If you were searching for honest, pure, noble, true love, you would not choose Caroline Easson for a bride." Her beautiful eyes were saddened by the duty of renunciation, but she could no more have remained silent than she could have denied her love for the man she now turned away from. But as she turned to go, she met the puzzled stare of William Randall, who, unheard, had opened the door between his office and that of his son's, and had surely heard her denunciation of Miss Easson. Momentarily frightened by the cold and aristocratic stare from the venerable old gentleman, and running away from another unpleasant and unprofitable scene, she hurried from them, leaving Mr. Randell rigid in astonishment and silent accusation as he faced a disgusted and uncomfortable son.

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## CHAPTER 11.

### **“Was It Blackmail?”**

A more profane man than Hughes Randall might, perhaps, have done justice to the situation, provided his vocabulary had been inexhaustible and his vocal chords remained intact. But for once in his life the Equity organizer was face to face with a seemingly inexcusable and compromising situation, without being able to offer an acceptable analysis of conditions. Torn by emotions, and at a loss for words, the orator and leader of men stood stupidly before his father, as he had often faced him in his youth when some mischief had been discovered. He had been disturbed at the uncompromising though silent attitude of Mr. Clay, angered by the bitter denouement and just contempt of Beatrice Herron; but the supreme height of his humiliation came with the unexpected appearance of his father and the realization that some of her charges must have been overheard. Her angry imprecations had made not the least impression on his self-respect; he was secure in the consciousness of an honorable life; but her slighting references, the bold charges against his fiancée, had aroused his instinct to protect his own, and he was more worried over the effect of these words on his father than over his own status.

The position of William Randall was tragic; face to face with evidence of the dishonor of his



son, unable to fathom the hidden meaning of all he had heard, his unbounded faith in the nobility of the beautiful young woman, rudely bombed, and trying to find some simple and harmless explanation of the scene, he stood dejectedly just inside the door. He had always had implicit faith in the son, who had seemed to exemplify the ideals of manhood dear to generations of Randalls; the young woman had been revered with the esteem which he could only give to unsullied womanhood. Surely the scene he had just witnessed was a farce, a mad comedy, a well-staged piece of play-acting, and not a heart-rending actuality; the well-balanced, respectful, kindly-disposed secretary would return on the instant and laughingly resume her duties. But, no, the attitude of his son told him that the thing was not to be so lightly dismissed; here was the sequel to some story he had never heard; he had stumbled on something which was meant to be hidden from him. Quaveringly he asked:

"Come, son, what is the meaning of this?"

"Miss Herron and I have had a misunderstanding, sir, and she is leaving our employ."

"Was it necessary that she should hinge her conversation upon the qualifications of the daughter of one of my clients?"

"She seemed to deem that point essential to our disagreement."

"Is the misunderstanding deep-seated, or is it a sudden rage over imagined wrongs?"

Truthfully Hughes answered: "This is the first time I ever saw Bee lose her temper to the degree of damaging statements."

"She was undoubtedly angry, but what reason or excuse has she? No woman, whatever degree of temper she has, flames into such a mad fury of anger as that without having an acceptable and just cause, and Beatrice is not the sort to

nurse a fancied grievance until it grows to be as real as life itself. Come, sir, what cause has she to say words which apparently indicate a situation which no Randall will tolerate or proudly defend?"

"I believe you overheard some of the spoken reasons she gave for leaving us."

"I overheard some of her slander, yes, but I am not asking for gossip; I am asking for reasons."

"Then since all of her reasons are hinged upon gossip and slander I shall be compelled to refer you to her."

"I wish to hear them from you."

"And I insist that I remain silent."

The father recoiled as from a blow; never before had his frank, open-hearted, loyal son refused a confidence. "Were her accusations against you true?"

"From her viewpoint, yes."

"And from yours?"

"Absolutely false."

"In such a case, you still think it right to me and fair to our name that you keep your own counsel?"

"I do, and shall insist on so doing. Whatever I should say would only tend to belittle one of us in your mind, while it would seem a babyish plea from the other. Again, it would appear to be a defense of my position, which I claim needs no defense. Lastly, it would seem to place Miss Herron in a silly and imbecile position, and you can see the ridiculousness and falsity of such an effort. Neither of us requires assistance, guidance, or protection; we are rational beings of unquestioned honor; and if Bee and I have quarreled because of our personal efforts, that is a matter which we can adjust between ourselves, in fact one which we have already adjusted."

"One other question, sir; was it blackmail?"

"No. She refused to accept money."

"Why the money? Were you attempting to purchase her silence on her discoveries of the Easson history?"

Hughes knew he could not give his father the explanation he had accepted himself—it savored too much of the Easson tutelage, and required a saffron-lighted, perfume-incensed room as a stage setting to truth. While in their presence and under their domination, he had been persuaded that he had had an escapade with an adventuress; that he was the victim of schemes so cunningly contrived that he did not realize his danger until the coming of his true love. He had become accustomed to hearing such sentences as "The adventuress of today secures a position as stenographer"; "Stenographers get a hold on their employer's affection by clandestine love"; "The society girls of today are at a great disadvantage because of a man's office help," etc., ad lib, until he had come to be persuaded that his relations with Beatrice Herron were of the insincere sort common to "the tired business man" and his designing "help." But when in the shadow of her denunciation and confronting his father, such ideas dissolved as tallow in an acetylene flame. Almost he had forgotten the original cause of "misunderstanding," slowly he was coming to view her flaunted discoveries on Mrs. Easson's history as the real cause of their quarrel, so he told his father:

"Her anger concerns only herself, and some back-stair gossip which is not to be repeated with credence. She has been apprehended before she could make a demand for an impossible recognition. Her attitude and requirements are impossible, and should be quickly forgotten by her as well as by us, for the good of all concerned. So

please let us end the discussion here, now, and forever."

"Have you thought of a substitute, you know she was a wonderful little worker?"

"I have already employed a young man, who will please all parties, my mother-in-law included."

"Eh! Your what?" He had not heard the news which by this time was pretty generally noised about.

Jovially the son laughed as he repeated: "My mother-in-law, dad, for Miss Caroline Easson has promised to be the future Mrs. Hughes Randall, though she begged me not to tell anyone until after her 'announcement dinner' one day next week."

"Congratulations, sir, and I am not the least surprised. Your mother and I have observed matters for some time. I can assure you we shall be happy to welcome Caroline as a daughter, and her mother as one of us."

With equal gladness Hughes accepted the warm hand-clasp and well-wishes of his father, and launched into a glowing description of his fiancee's many entertaining qualifications and society graces, concluding with the assertion:

"You and mother will love her as dearly as I, but please promise not to make her the 'baby' of the family, for she is just the loving, affectionate, trusting, and doll-like disposition which tempts one to spoil her, and pet her, and place her as the little queen lady over your thoughts."

With a nod of good will and perfect understanding, the father accepted this caution, and motioning his son to be seated, took the chair by the end of the desk as he required:

"And now that I know all of my future daughter's perfections and pretty ways, tell me something of her history before we came to know her."

With a slight shrug of impatience over these practical affairs while one so beautiful and altogether charming was under discussion, Hughes reconciled: "You and mater must know as much about that as I do, for you have always been able to tell me more about my companions and friends than I ever bothered over knowing; you are the attorney for Mrs. Easson, and should know all about it."

"Not necessarily; an attorney rarely troubles himself to become acquainted with the intimate details of one's family history which a prospective husband should be thoroughly familiar with. Our law firm only guarantees the title of her real estate, the legality of her contracts, and the solidity of her investments, but we have no information in our possession which would prove her to be 'Mrs. Anna Easson.' I am quite sure you have learned something of her private history before entering into a contract for marriage; for instance, who was Mrs. Easson before her marriage?"

"Now, dad, don't be provincial, snobbish, and persist in foisting those old-world ideas onto the present-day freedom of our democracy; the aristocratic exclusiveness of the past generations of culture and refinement, but in this day and generation lack of fitness and the essential requirements is the exception rather than the rule, so cease being cross, and accept those who are introduced into our class, even when we do not know whether their grandfather's dog chased our great aunt's cat through Cousin Eugenie's primrose garden. You and mother always ask, 'Is she related to thus and so?' or 'Is he connected to our family of the same name?' before you have learned whether they can smile over a pleantry or frown at lawlessness."

"We are not so boorish as that, I hope," was

the dignified reply, "but we know that family traits last through many generations, and that manners can be instilled, but that only gentility can distill the blood. If you know the parent, we know much about the child. I have often held the pedigree of a man to be as valuable as a skillful analysis of his character. Blood will tell, you know. Family pride is more of a recommendation than a pleasing mannerism or beauty. Of the three prides, 'face, grace, and race,' 'race pride' is the most acceptable, permissible, and enduring, because of the fact that it is founded on history and not framed about the 'ego'."

"All of which would sound better if it was not a lecture delivered because I had neglected to ask, 'Who's your kin; where've you been; tell me, dear child, have you very much tin?'" Gaily he laughed in an effort to appease his "class-bound" parent. An idea came to him; he would banter his father; merrily he teased: "I'll tell you what to do, dad; you ask Bee for the Easson history; she seems to have been making some inquiry along that line."

The dignified old Southerner arose, looked at his son with mingled regret, toleration, and pity, as he told him: "Beatrice Herron is one of us; she understands and appreciates the fundamental laws of society and a happy home, and the investigation which was made, and which no doubt she told you of, had my full sanction, and I would have paid the charges for the investigation had she permitted my doing so."

"Come, dad, you mean—" He was interrupted.

"I mean, sir, that the past, my preferences, my knowledge of conditions and circumstances shall remain as a closed book until you shall prove that you are as well acquainted with character reading as I am with eugenics. I mean, sir, that your choice of a bride shall be my choice, and I

shall welcome Miss Easson as my daughter when you so present her."

\* \* \* \* \*

If the maelstrom of emotions which had played around and about the Equity organizer since his arrival at the offices this morning had left any burden upon him no one knew it, for he was as unperturbed as the Colossus, and equally staunch. An abiding faith in his personal honor and moral fitness, a firm belief in his ability to handle any and all situations on the merits involved, left him with no perceptible burden, no stinging memories, no yapping, barking, tantalizing regrets. He was successful in his endeavor to thrust all thought of Miss Herron from his mind; in fact it was an hour after her departure and his conversation with his father before he gave one single thought to the one who had been of such assistance to him in the Equity affairs. At that moment Mr. Willows, local secretary of the Equity, came hurriedly into the office, halted just inside of the doorway, seemed undetermined whether to explain his intrusion or to withdraw before he should say that he wished an official ruling on the question involved in the document which he clutched in his hand. Hughes looked up from the letter he was reading, nodded his permission to be disturbed, and was good-naturedly smiling over the secretary's perplexity. Mr. Willows peevishly demanded:

"Where on earth is Miss Beatrice?"

"Miss Herron is not with us," the acting president told him, adding, "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, nothing that big. There's no use worrying you with it; I'm afraid you wouldn't understand it anyway, without a long-winded explanation; Miss Beatrice has always had charge of the department, and she'd be able to—"

The organizer colored over the insinuation that

his private secretary had completely taken "charge" over some one department, but made no attempt to deny it; he waved his subordinate to a chair in a businesslike manner, saying:

"Then it is high time you and I became acquainted with all of the society's affairs; what is your question?" He extended his hand to receive the paper.

Mr. Willows handed him the document, but he couldn't understand this sudden shift in the management. With a puzzle growing in his expression he asked:

"Won't Miss Beatrice be back at all?"

"No. Miss Herron has left our employ."

"Left our employ?" incredulously Mr. Willows repeated the information; he did not see, or if he saw he did not heed, the forbidding look which was springing into the expression of his chief. He intended no disrespect or curiosity; but he was aghast at this disturbing bit of news; he could not understand it; sudden consternation over the helplessness of the other employes trying to carry forward the office work, seized him and wrung the wailing complaint: "But, great Scott, man, she can't do that—she mustn't; she—why, Mister Randall, she is the only person in the world who is perfectly familiar with all the detail of our work; she knows it from the beginning up to the minute, and can answer a question without having to look it up; she was the only person who actually gave all her time to the Equity; why, Mister Randall, if all of us had worked as hard as she has we'd be—" He halted his words as some new and brilliant idea seemed to pop into his brain; rapidly he went on: "Listen, can't we get her back for more money? I'll help you get the advisory committee to agree to pay her a salary that's big enough for her. Can't we do it?"



His ardor was dampened by the ice-cold answer: "No, Henry, that will be quite impossible."

"But, listen, she was the—" He was interrupted.

"Just a moment, Henry; I understand the young lady's qualifications fully as well as you or anyone else, so we shall pass that phase of the matter; if you will remember, your mother no doubt taught you that there was 'no use crying over spilled milk,' so we will cease our crying; Miss Herron has definitely severed her connection with the firm and the society, and we shall be compelled to find a substitute." He turned back to his desk.

The secretary was neither a philosopher nor a diplomat; he thought he detected undue heat in the advice given, and his eyes narrowed with his thoughts as he mused aloud:

"I see. Then it's true, after all."

Hughes caught the words, and quickly wheeled, demanding:

"What is that which is so 'true, after all'?"

Startled, the confused man unthoughtedly mumbled:

"The office gossip 'bout you throwing her—" Again he was interrupted, this time by a man enraged:

"Hush. That is quite enough, Henry. You nor no one else shall repeat such slander in my presence. Miss Herron left us because of a private difference over a matter which in no way concerns any other than ourselves. If you wish to find out more, go to her; and if she says one word of hurt or scandal, come back and repeat that saying to your heart's content; but until you hear words of slander do not attempt to say unworthy, hurtful things and back-stair gossip." He wheeled about to his desk, leaving the discomfited secretary to stammer:

"I—why of course I beg your pardon, Mister Randall. I—I don't see why I said what I did. I think the world and all of both you and Miss Beatrice, and I guess I must have been hurt by your seeming to undervalue her services and—" He saw his second blunder, flustered and petulently cried, "Oh, damn it, I don't see through it." Slamming the door behind him, he angrily left headquarters and did not return for two days.

It was only a few minutes after Mr. Willows left the private office when the stenographer who was employed to do the typing for the firm came in to have Miss Herron assist her in transcribing the notes on a very difficult and intricate brief which Mr. Clay had dictated. She was surprised, hurt, and became overinquisitive on learning that her friend would be there no more, and will never know how near she came to being discharged for impertinence; for the conversation with Mr. Willows, so quickly followed by these pertinent inquiries, did not tend to sooth the nerves of her employer.

Shortly afterwards, the acting president received a visit from the committee on arrangements for the barbecue to be spread on the day when the growers should assemble to go into permanent organization. The private secretary knew more about the arrangements than did all the committeemen combined; she had kept the only record on prices, quantities, and assortment of foodstuffs; their work would have to be done over again unless they found the notebook in which she kept the record. They did not know that the assistant on the "Percentum Ledger" had this valuable notebook safely put away, and when they had met the disgruntled Mr. Willows and been told of Miss Herrons going away, they came rushing in to Hughes Randall:

"Where did Miss Beatrice go?"

Really, gentlemen, I do not know. She left our employ this morning without saying where she would go."

"You mean she's gone?"

"Yes."

"For good?"

"Yes." Ironically he added: "She left for better or worse."

"But where is she going?"

"Really, I did not quizz the young lady as to her prospects."

The sarcasm was lost on the troubled committeemen, who were bent on learning the detail of the disaster which had overtaken them.

"But it ain't her prospects we're troubled over; it's our'n; she's got all our records and writings," one of them blurted; and the chairman caused all of them to think with afright as he bellowed:

"'Taint our committee, it's the Equity as is going to suffer. She's the only living soul outside of the lodge members as knows the oath of the 'Possum Hunter'; she knows the county secretaries and how many acres each county represents; she knows everything about us, and, gosh, do you think for one second the Crosby Tobacco Company aint going to try to get her?"

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER 12.

### **"I Am Angry, But Not With You."**

In less than twenty-four hours after Beatrice Herron walked out of the offices of the law firm and away from the society which had grown so wonderfully during her assistant management, the dynamic organizer had gathered together the reins of power and was driving the office force with skill and deftness. The young man who was selected to be private secretary to him was apt and efficient, and had "taken hold" of the work with a keen interest and a determination to make the Equity the powerful organization which was predicted by the acting president. He confessed an honest gladness on learning that the Equity was disowning the acts of the "Possum Hunters," then he alarmed Mr. Randall by telling him how the people generally believed the bodies to be the same, how the populace refused to separate the "Night Riders" from the "pool" farmers. From that conversation was born the famous letter to the "Possum Hunters," published in every newspaper in the Burley district, and denouncing the Klan in the most bitter language. He told the "Night Riders" how they were tearing down the society of their fellow growers, and making the very name "Equity" a curse instead of a benefit, he shamed them from spreading terror where confidence was required, and proclaimed them "rowdies and usurpers." He wrote from the con-

viction that these depredations, if continued, would surely ruin his superb effort.

But that was not the only letter he wrote on that day. He penned another, a more personal one, an epistle which was destined to bring calumny to hurt one dear to him.

Aristocracy is a wonderful institution, tried and perfected by ages of thinking men and queenly women, until it has come to be the earthly reward for "hitching your wagon to a star." The American idea of aristocracy is the most feasible, practical, and powerful of all cults; it is the most modern, therefore the most enduring and synthetic; it is the democratization of an autocratic idea, and is a reward for attainments, rather than an inherited right, title, and interest. Hughes Randall was a member of the Kentucky aristocracy, had been trained in a home where the honor of the family and the duty of each member of that family to sustain that honor unsullied, unstained, and unquestioned, had been almost daily subjects of conversation. Also, he was madly, passionately, and desperately enamored by Caroline Easson; he gave to her the fealty which only a great heart can give; unconsciously he was bending and twisting the tenets of class to support and sustain the attachment of crass; he protected the idol of his mad love with every atom of his idealism, fancy, thought, ability, and power; but the high ideals of conduct, honor, and integrity, and the precepts which he had received from mother, father, and kinsmen, did not dovetail with the "bohemian" ideas of the Easson cult; and strange, Gargantuan, Frankenstein, results came of his results to reason out his difficulties.

He was sitting alone by the front window of his office, work-a-day hours were passed, everyone else had gone, and he was lingering in the

quiet room that he might try to piece together the events of the past two days and by one adroit, telling blow put an end to the cause for his chief worry. He drew from his pocket a letter which had come to him during the earlier hours of the day; he had hastily read it when it came to him, and had thrust it into his pocket with a jesture of annoyance, intending to take it up for deliberate consideration when his mind should be clear of Equity detail. He was determined that his love should be protected and unquestioned; but that love, as he, must be able to stand before the blows of all antagonists, and he would not stoop to lies, misstatements, or false recognitions, while protecting himself or his love. He was denying and disowning the acts of the "Possum Hunters" as a lawful adjunct to the society proper—no matter what their benefit should be in swelling the list of membership; and he would be just as staunch in declining to permit trickery of words to combat an issue in his love affairs. Unfolding the letter, he read:

"Dear Hughes:

"I wish I could control words which would tell you what I suffer, how I have suffered since I realized that my love had been suddenly turned into a plague spot, for, could I do so, those words could be used by you as a chart through the same agony when you are set adrift.

"I do not ask for your sympathy or your pity; I only ask that you speak the truth. I do not ask that you fawn or misrepresent, I do not ask that you come to me, for there is no ground on which we can honorably meet, but I do ask that you write words which will be truthful to the months and months when we were 'pals.' Please forget the tragic scene of yesterday, and write me

a friendly adieu. I should like to have one last kindly word from you before I go, one word from the 'pal' of yestermoments.

"Do you think I will let that pal-ship, that love, be sacrificed so mercilessly? Do you believe me a woman to passively see her ideal destroyed by another? I am angry, not at you, but at the one who is struggling to rob you of your happiness. My honest love makes me angry; I am no hypocrite, and I retract nothing. My memory of you shall be of the 'pal' I knew in those happy days, rather than the angry man who denounced me yesterday. I know that the change in you is the fault of others, and not of yourself. Therefore, I retract my threat to denounce Mrs. Easson and her daughter to the people of a provincial Kentucky, I withdraw my ugly threat to spread gossipy truths which would soon turn into hateful slanders against them, but I do not withdraw my threat to go to them and personally tell them what I told you and more. If you decline to recognize the 'pal-ship' then——

"Please write to,

"BEE."

As he finished reading the plaintive appeal, he tore the letter into bits, and dropped them into the waste-basket; they fell as snow-flakes, and his thoughts were as cold as the frosty air through which the snow flakes fall. He came near to going to Mrs. Easson for advice; and had he done so she might have succeeded in twisting his intent to be less unswerving, and thereby avoid much of the anguish which was to follow; but he stubbornly determined to keep the matter to himself, to rigidly follow his brave policy, and to defy all compromise. From the Easson viewpoint, he began to compare the merits of several plans to

snuff out the "adventuress," and when he had selected the one which appeared to be the most feasible, he flashed on the desk-light, and wrote hurriedly before he could lose his resolution.

"To Whom It May Concern:

"This will introduce Miss Beatrice Herron, who for eighteen months has been employed as stenographer and private secretary in our offices. Miss Herron honestly and efficiently attended to her duties, and we heartily commend her to you.

"RANDALL, CLAY AND RANDALL,  
"THE SOCIETY OF EQUITY,  
PER H. R."

He addressed an envelope, inclosed the recommendation, and telephoned for a messenger. While waiting for the boy, he sat engrossed in thought, devising words which would defend his act, and planning a defense against her possible attack. Suddenly he straightened himself, and sat rigidly erect, his eyes narrowed in determination.

"By George, I'll do it," and as he reached for the phone to put this new determination into effect, he told himself: "I'd be a poor 'head of the house' not to protect Caroline and her mother from blackmail." Impatiently he called for a number, and in answer to his message he was in consultation with Chief Malcum, chief of the city's detective force, only a few minutes after his missive to Miss Herron was on its way.

Chief Malcum gave flattering attention to the requirements from the Equity organizer, the rising young lawyer, the influential politician, and this man of prestige and wealth; together they perfected the plan which Hughes carefully outlined, until it seemed an utter impossibility for Miss Herron to reach the Eason apartments either in person or by letter. Chief Malcum was familiar with the methods of the criminal and



the blackmailer, and Hughes Randall was in possession of a threat from a determined, clever woman; so together they wove a web of the law's protection about the Eassons, one which they figured would be impossible for the stenographer to break through.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning he plunged into the mountain of Equity work with that joyous ardor which compelled the office assistants to forget all things else save the tobacco society and to do their share of work that they might win his praise. The task of checking and compiling reports, contracts, and certificates, had increased with each dawning day; and now that the convention for permanent organization was so near at hand, neither the president nor any of the increased office force could escape from drudgery and long hours. The turmoil and care was a balm to the anxiety of the organizer; he was the cool, careful man of business, and decision after decision would be made with that sureness and dispatch which had made him the leader among men.

What proved to be the most important conference or affair of the day was a visit from the "Possum Hunters." And the result of this visit was destined to have a tremendous effect on the maneuvers of the "Night Riders"; they were forced to be more secret in their transactions, and to openly oppose the wish and judgment of the society's organizer.

Tom Quinn and the "Big Six" had read the "Letter to the 'Possum Hunters.'" They were highly indignant, wordily argumentative, and tactically combative; in other words, they were wroth, "het up," and "ready for a scrap" with its author. They came pouring into the private office, ready to prove that they were not "all the hard names you've called us."

"Listen here," Tom said to Hughes; "we've done more real work to bring members into the pool than any other body, set, or character of men. You said that we were the 'detective' force of the society, but we're a blame sight more than that; we're the whole standing army, the fighting arm, the warriors. War is a necessary adjunct to revolution in politics, a nation's diplomacy, or economic principles. Without war, no nation or body of men can establish their independence; and the more drastic the war aims, the quicker the decision. Now, Hughes, we are carrying on the war of the Equity, we are fighting only for our rights, we have already become 'the vast majority,' and according to all rules of democracy, we are only exercising the 'right of the many.' You, and everybody else, are compelled to admit that without us you would have had a hard struggle to organize."

"Did I believe so, I would be ashamed of the part I have taken in the tobacco growers' society," was the hot retort of the acting president; "if for one second I should even suspect that the success of this venture depended on the whipping-post and even worse tactics, I would sever my relations with it, and bow my head in shame because I was one of a state of weaklings."

"Alright, Hughes, then listen; you keep on denying that we are a part of the Equity, but hush your calling us names and quit fighting us so openly."

"You mean that I shall act and say a lie?"

"Well I wouldn't call it just exactly that," was the disgusted retort. He would have said more had not Hughes flared:

"By what other name could it be called?"

"Aw, Hughes, there's no use getting mad just because there's a difference in opinions."

"I am not quarreling with your opinions, I am

abusing you because you blacken the name of our society with your ugly deeds, I am displeased with you because you practice coercion, I am angry at you because you humiliate our citizens, I am ashamed of you because you bring that shame onto yourselves."

"Well don't say anything more about us until after the day of the mass meeting," Tom offered to compromise.

"Why should I agree to remain silent until then?"

"If you do, I'll see that the 'Possum Hunters' behave."

"That is all I am asking; but do not for one second think that I am selling my silence at the price of fear, if I believed that my sanction of your past record would give absolute success of the Equity future, I would refuse to remain silent. Unless we can win by clean methods and honorable fighting, I do not care to win."

They argued the question pro and con, and Tom finally agreed to exert his influence to stay the depredations of the Kukluk Klan of the tobacco grower's society. The "Secret Committee" was on the eve of departure when Hughes Randall was called to the telephone. The message was from Chief Malcum, he said:

"Say, Mister Randall, that party, you know, she tried to see the lady but I blocked her game for fair, and she's hep to the dope that we're watching her. She told me that she's going to leave town this afternoon, and I warned her not to start anything else before she made her getaway or she might be detained for a visit to the workhouse. I'm going to stay right on the job till she's gone, for she certainly looked dangerous when she found out what was up. We've got a Secret Service man watching things at the Post Office, and I've got one of my men on duty at the

apartment house, so it don't look as though she could beat us old timers. Bye bye, I'll let you know if anything else turns up."

As Hughes Randall hung the receiver onto the hook, he was very near as cock-sure, rim-fire certain, and bombastically confident as was the detective, but neither he nor the chief fully appreciated the perseverance of a brainy, clever, and determined woman seeking vengeance.

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## CHAPTER 13.

### “Mr. Crosby, President.”

Hughes Randall had always had a permissible and honest pride; not a bombastic, egocentric vanity, but a good, clean, wholesome self-respect. Not until very recently had this pride begun to gyrate, fluctuate, or suffer sudden contortions; always it had ridden serenely as a well-balanced buffer against criticisms and differences in opinions. But within seventy-two hours after he discharged Beatrice Herron from his office, the standard of his pride was lowered before the “breath of scandal,” raised aloft because of an unexpected recognition from a potentate in the commercial world, and furled in humiliation when he was forced to know that an act of his had precipitated calumny and hurt to his future wife.

The first was an event in the history of the firm, the announcement of a decision which was to bring about the ultimate dissolution of the triangular partnership. It was neither sensational nor precocious, for it hinged upon the action of one of the senior members, who was superior to unbecoming conduct; but so quickly following the departure of Miss Herron, as it did, there will always be a suspicion in the minds of some, that scandal precipitated the severance of relations.

The second event was a proposal from the president of the Crosby Tobacco Company, the “Trust,” that the Equity organizer should sever

his relations with the "pool," and, at a very substantial salary, accept a position with the commercial army which he was fighting. The offer was a very flattering one to the young attorney and economist; and coming as it did from the dignitary of the tremendous corporation against which he was waging the tobacco fight, it proved to him that the Equity scheme was meeting with an admitted recognition from the "trust," and encouraged him to become a more active mediator between the grower and the manufacturer.

The third was a telephonic communication, short, terse, and to the point, yet freighted with a caressing emotion which even the metallic transmitter of the telephone could not nullify, or screen, or hide. Instantly he recognized the voice which told him the message, and the sudden intake of breath, the quick beating of his heart, which he read as anxiety, was his subconscious being calling, calling to this one who was now placing him on the defensive, thrusting him into an awkward position, compelling the chivalry of his being to bow in contrition before the demands of the woman he wronged—his future wife.

\* \* \* \* \*

William Randall had always fought against the formation of the "Secret Committee"; he had pled that untried men be not given the cunning and insidious power which such a scheme would empower them with. But Mr. Clay had accepted the idea as an "innovation in business methods, which would bring speedy results," and had encouraged and assisted Hughes in perfecting the plan. Late developments were proving the truth of the senior partner's fear; the scurrilous, mean, and prowling methods of the "Possum Hunters" were evidence that only "tried, true, and trusty" men should be placed in possession of unpublished facts, or be introduced to methods where influ-

ence, "wire-pulling," or fear is made superior to logical argument. He now saw no remedy to existing conditions save the absolute abandonment of the plan, and a return to safer, saner practices. After Tom Quinn and the other members of the "Big Six" had left the offices, he called his son into his office, and was endeavoring to persuade him to at once issue the order which would do away with the "Secret Committee." The organizer was not obdurate, he admitted the wisdom of his father's advice, he did not debate the unlovely influence of the "Night Riders"; but with Tom Quinn's promise to reform, still ringing in his ears, and with his own firm belief that "former law-abiding citizens can be dissuaded from mob-spirit and lawlessness," he would argue the prudence of discontinuing the entire effort of these ardent supporters of Equity. They argued long on the question.

"Come, son, you must admit that the craving for a fight is stronger in the heart of man than is the wish to hear a conclusive argument. This Equity plan is only placing a 'chip on the shoulder' of the tobacco grower, and your 'Secret Committee,' as a body, believes the non-pool grower has knocked the chip to the ground; the most natural result in the world is their answering the craving for a fight. You must fight an idea with an idea, force with force, and not encourage force to thrust home an idea. You would not encourage a bull dog to bring chickens to roost, so do not permit these 'Night Riders' to scare the non-pool farmer into seeing our benefits. It is quite possible that, through their efforts, many men will join the society, but they have done so through fear rather than a hearty co-operation, and they will become just as frightened with the long, hard pull in front of you lessens their hope and spreads consternation in the ranks. Those men, who are

frightened into the society, will become the quitters and slackers, and will endeavor to tear the organization to pieces that they might reap the benefit which the 'trust' will offer as a premium for non-pool tobacco. We must ——"

He was interrupted in his argument by the entrance of Mr. Clay, who came in without his usual dignity, haltingly came to the side of the table in front of Mr. Randall's desk, and began to speak without having removed his hat. Such unusual demeanor on his part would have attracted the attention of his partners, even had he not spoken in a voice which told of excessive emotion.

"Well," he began, and the muscles of his throat contracted as though they would crush back the words. He swallowed hard, and brushed a half formed tear from his eye as he told on: "I have decided to accede to the wish of my son that I make my home with him in Colorado. You know, William, that as the silent years ruthlessly steal from us the objects which are dear to us and leave only memory in their place, as the friends we once knew are resting beneath the shade of the past, as history takes the place of hope, when our yesterdays are brighter than our tomorrows; there is a lull in the song of life, and more sweetness in that one word, 'Grandad,' than in the acclaim of nations. Memories are all that I have now in Lexington; and in the winter years of my life those memories would seem brighter if burnished by the home-fires of loving care. My home is no longer all that the word implies, it is only a house, a tomb for memories; and the heart which is not furrowed by living associations, will grow fallow, and stale, and weed-infested.—So, —I am going."

Father and son were deeply shocked and affected by this information so feelingly imparted; brusquely the older man inquired:



"You have quite made up your mind, Gregory?"

"Yes." And silence told these old men far more than words would ever have said.

Hughes knew what a blow this would be to him, for Mr. Clay was his walking encyclopedia, his animated reference-book on law; he tried to say what the loss would be to him:

"We shall miss you greatly, Mister Clay. The society is now near to the goal, and only those of us who are acquainted with the inside facts, know what a wonderful help you have been to the cause."

"Thank you, Hughes, I shall miss the excitement of political campaigning, but I shall have one compensation."

"You mean?" he faltered and hushed, for he straightway guessed the truth.

"Miss Beatrice has accepted a position as stenographer in my son's office, and it will seem quite natural to be giving dictation to one who is so capable and superior." His inscrutable eyes were saying far more. Some of which was understood, all of which was passed. "Of course," he went on; "I shall have much to attend to before the day of my departure, and the most important of my duties will be to assist in making the mass-meeting of tobacco growers on Wednesday pan out to be the glorious success which we all hope to see it. And, Hughes, let me now take sides with your father in the matter of the 'Secret Committee'; I believe it best that they be disbanded as soon after the organization as is possible to attend to that detail. You cannot afford to vouch for their acts and depredations, and I would see to it that no division, body, or set of men in the line of march of our parade were designated as 'Possum Hunters' or 'Night Riders.'"

His opinion was unanimously adopted, and other plans pertaining to the mass-meeting were

discussed and passed on. They were still in conference when one of the assistants from the Equity headquarters came in to announce two visiting gentlemen. These visitors when ushered in proved to be Albert J. Andrews, and a stately, dignified companion, whom Hughes was not slow in identifying. The affable Mr. Andrews seemed greatly delighted at the situation, and made the introductions with that degree of satisfaction which relishes each uttered syllable:

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,—permit me to introduce Mister Crosby,—Mister Clay, Mister Randall, and Mister Hughes Randall.”

The visitors were welcomed and invited to chairs; the two older partners were cordial and courteous; Hughes, almost overpowered by his elation at the import of this visit, came near to over-playing the part of host. He was accustomed to meeting personages of equal or more importance generally than the tobacco man, but the circumstances which led Mr. Crosby to his office were momentous. This interview, no matter the outcome, was a recognition of the Equity by the “Trust.” Today would mark——

Thoughts were interrupted by Mr. Andrews inquiring: “Where is the other and most charming member of the firm?” And failing to note all signs which advertised for silence and a change of subject, he blundered on: “You know, I consider Miss Herron your one ‘best bet,’ and decidedly the greatest asset of the pool. I have the good fortune to board at the ‘Gossip House’ with her, and all we fellow boarders have come to know her wonderful abilities and delightful charm.” Surprised at the awkward silence which followed his remark, he gazed from one to the other of his hearers, realized that in some manner he had made a break. Suddenly he remembered his conversation with Durbin Ellis; he recalled an

evasive, indefinite remark which one of the widowed boarders had made about "Miss Beatrice going to make a change"; feeling like a yokel, he reddened.

Mr. Crosby detected an error in the proceedings, he attributed it to the fact of the lawyers having discovered the efforts of the "Trust" to secure the young woman's services; he hastened to say:

"A capable stenographer is a great help to any business, and I should judge means everything to a lawyer. I always remember with pleasure a young Kentucky girl whom I had in my office for several years; she was a daughter of General Hale—perhaps you know the family; of Frankfort, I believe."

He could have chosen no remark to have restored the normal atmosphere so quickly. Kentucky, as any other state, is proud of natal sons, and the mention of an honored one is at once a bond between foreigner and native. The General Hale mentioned, had been a member of the same command as Messrs. Randall and Clay during the war of the states, and the bare fact that Mr. Crosby had been kind to a member of the comrade's family admitted him to a friendly intercourse from which even his wealth and position might have barred him. The senior members of the firm pleasingly recalled several anecdotes at the mention of the General, and Mr. Crosby proved a jovial and appreciative listener. He was a diplomat, and soon charmed the "Old Rebs" by his receptive mood and delightful respect for southern institutions and provincial customs; while he compelled the respect and admiration of the younger lawyer, and his quick, virile, "Yankee" poise and bearing.

"I believe, gentlemen," pleasingly he said during the lull in the conversation, "that you know

me to be the president of the Crosby Tobacco Company, the manufacturing enterprise which has been, and is, designated as the 'Trust,' merely because we have developed the manufacturing of plug, twist and flake tobaccos to be more than a 'side-line' industry. You are aware that we have a tremendous interest in the localities which produce the raw material which we turn into a finished article, and the fact that this section of your state produces all of the White Burley grown, is sufficient guarantee of our keen interest in your welfare. We have in the past, and hope in the future to continue buying some of your tobacco for our plug, twist, and smoking tobaccos."

"Quite a good sized 'some,' is it not, Mister Crosby?" the Equity organizer smilingly questioned.

"Yes," and he proved himself to be perfectly familiar with the "pool" propaganda, when he admitted: "We—as you set forth in our open letter to the grower—consume very close to eighty per cent of the crop. But you must remember——" There followed between the two a technical conversation dealing with quantity, weight, grade, storage, aging, and the minutia of the tobacco business, with which one seemed to be as familiar as the other. The "Trust" magnate marveled at the vast fund of "inside" information which the young Kentuckian had acquired, and was ready to admit that his assistant, Mr. Andrews, had not told him all there was to know about their opponent. Quickly he realized that it would be folly for him to attempt to conceal his need for the "Burley crop," or to minimize its importance in his factories. He made not the slightest effort to belittle the importance of the efforts being made to wrest the control of prices from his mammoth corporation, but vaguely hinted at

a "more amicable, and less expensive method of adjustment." Hughes Randall had said of this man: "He knows how to play the game," and, in the vernacular of the poker player, Mr. Crosby "laid his hand on the table"; he outlined his plans for the coming year, the needs to carry them through, his plan of enlarging two of the factories, and his hope that "the farmers and the Crosby Tobacco Company will be on more friendly terms before the time for the delivering of their tobacco."

That was a puzzling statement; Hughes leaned forward in his chair as he tried to penetrate its meaning, why it had been made, and if it in any way dealt with the effort of the Equity.

The magnate noted the desired effect on his audience, and told them: "We have for some time been seeking a man who would be in every way capable of taking the buying department of Kentucky tobacco away from the general purchasing department and make of it a more important factor in our plant. The need of such a change is imperative; yet we have hesitated until we should find the man who would be fitted to such a position rather than have the position trimmed down to his abilities. We must have a man at once, a man above all who is able to get and keep the confidence of the grower, a man to whom honesty is a principle rather than a price, a man who understands the psychology of leadership." He paused that his hearers might get the full weight of his words; also, that the "psychology of leadership" of which he told them, should begin to lead. When he continued, he addressed his remarks to Hughes, who by this time had correctly guessed the hidden meaning.

"We believe, Mister Randall, that you understand the farmer's side of the question better than any other man in Kentucky; and we are

confident that you are capable of taking care of our interests to the advantage and satisfaction of everyone concerned. We believe that you are peculiarly adapted to the political and economical requirements of the position. We are, therefore, ready, anxious, and willing that the farmer should thus be protected, and now offer you a five year contract, at five thousand dollars a year."

The organizer did not attempt to deny the glow of satisfaction which this rich offer sent through every fibre of his being; here was an undeniable recognition from the "Trust," here was a stable acknowledgement that his effort with the Equity was being appreciated. Judiciously he inquired:

"In exactly what capacity would I serve?"

"That of legal representative and adviser during the months of purchase."

"And the duties of such a position?"

"To more closely cement the bond of friendship between grower and manufacturer, and to dissuade the farmer against attempting to settle a commercial question by mob-violence—such as the Possum Hunters' are now proposing."

Hughes colored at this reference to his misguided associates in the Equity attempt; but he passed that phase to ask: "Am I to fix the price of the tobacco I am to purchase?"

"No, Mister Randall," the president of the "Trust" corrected; "that is a question which must be decided by the auditing of figures of supply and demand."

The acting president of the tobacco growers' society wanted to discuss this bold statement, but he crushed the wish that he might suavely ask: "But what step should I take if the farmers began to curtail production, refused to grow the tobacco at the price offered, and did not plant

the crop?"

"In such a case we would trust to your ability to lead them away from the mob-spirit which was represented by the boycott of a farm product. You must understand, Mister Randall, that such a move would be led by the sentiment behind it, and sentiment has never successfully controlled judgment. Such a strike on the part of the growers would indeed be disastrous both to our factories and to the farmers, and, knowing human nature as I do, I would dread to see such a step taken, because it could not be successfully carried out unless attended by more serious depredations than the 'Possum Hunters' have been guilty of." A statement which the events of after months recall time and again to both of them.

"But in such an event the under supply would increase the price on the over demand?" The organizer was pressing the issue.

"Possibly," was the bland admission of the magnate, who saw the trend of the conversation, but was unable to check it.

"Or a better plan would be to pool the tobacco which is produced, sell what is actually needed and hold the remainder as a surplus; such is the plan of the organization I am perfecting, and it must be the correct method since you are offering to buy my services for twenty-five thousand dollars for three months' work during a period of five years, or fifteen months."

Mr. Crosby did not debate the plain statement; he had been expecting it. Suavely, blandly he asked:

"How long do you think you can hold the farmers together, Mister Randall? Are you taking into consideration the fact that the principal asset of your pool is hope? Are you remembering that the members of your corporation are being led by the mob-spirit of commerce—a strike?"

Have you calculated on the inevitable result of hope dying, and the mob-spirit wearing itself out, when pitted against the frigid cold of finance? You are placing sentiment to battle against our dollar, and money is as cold as frozen steel. You are drawing your followers to you by their sympathy, and with that burden of sentiment hope to deal with a corporation, without pausing to remember that a corporation has no heart save the dividend-grasping stockholder. Already your effort is being blackened by the inevitable result of labor revolution—the acts of the ‘Night Riders’; they are drunk with the brutal force of numbers, they are discarding one-half of the power of law—protection, they attempt to justify their position by that misnomer—democracy, they attempt to build by tearing down, they would wreck themselves and our corporation but what they accomplished their purpose.”

“And what is that purpose? What is the hope of the Equity? What is our aim? Why do we band together to fight this heartless corporation, this frozen steel, this frigid cold of finance?” the champion of the grower demanded. “Do you stop to remember that it is a living wage we are asking for? Are you prepared to hear that we are only asking that the ‘Trust’ shall cease making slaves of the man who produces the raw product you turn into a finished article? Will you concede that every man is entitled to God-given freedom of uniting with his fellow man to oppose tyranny?—Wait and see what the future holds in store for you, the ‘Trust,’ as opposed to the Equity. I am leading those farmers in a fight which you, I, and all of us know will be a long fight, a fight to absolute victory, or utter defeat—there will be no compromise. We are working together; those farmers and their organizer; they trust me, and I shall be worthy of that trust.



So I decline your flattering offer, as I refuse to sell myself to your company to defeat the society which will go into permanent organization next week. And if I have the ability which attracts your attention and induces you to offer me twenty-five thousand dollars for fifteen months' work, then I shall exert that ability to force the 'Trust' to pay a living wage to the farmers of Kentucky for the tobacco they produce."

Graciously the magnate accepted defeat, diplomatically he assured the young Kentuckian: "I congratulate you on having a goodly following of tobacco growers in your pool; and I congratulate those farmers in having so staunch a champion. With the greatest interest I shall watch each move in this 'tobacco war,' and, whatever happens, I wish to retain your friendship."

The business which brought him to Lexington being concluded Mr. Crosby showed no haste in leaving the Randall office. He had found his antagonist a man of honor, a foeman worthy of his steel, shrewd, and well informed. He enjoyed conversation with such a man, and they kept up a spirited conversation on shifting subjects until Hughes was called to the telephone.

Instantly he recognized the voice of Beatrice Herron. He frowned; but that frown did not stop her from saying to him:

"Hughes, I just wanted to tell you that I have delivered to Miss Easson a letter which will tell her more truth than she has ever heard at one time. I also want to say to you that when you see me again you will say that I was right. You will also tell me something I shall be waiting to hear. Good bye, Hughes."

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER 14.

### Why This Insult?"

Beatrice Herron went away from the office where she had learned to love, and then to hate that love, dazed by the knowledge that the king of her dream world had suddenly been changed into a scorning, jeering traitor to himself. But with all her mad thinking, wishing, scheming for vengeance, there was not one single thought which would do harm to Hughes Randall; she would waken him, yes, but she would not destroy him; she would rather protect him until he should come out from the spell which was over him. As for the woman who was responsible for this metamorphosis—no fiend of the nether world had ever been more zealously despised, or contemptuously hated.

She had entered the offices of Randall, Clay and Randall a raw recruit from a business college; when she left those rooms she was a graduate of the "school of scandal." During those happiest eighteen months of her life, she had quickened to the comradeship with a man of exceptional personality, had tried to be pleasing in his sight, until the divine tremor of love had electrified every thought of her life. She met her employers as her equals, and honored them because of their ability and sterling worth. She sought the friendship of every one in the office, from the humblest charwoman to Mr. Clay, and knowing the position of her people in the social

fabric of the community she gave a proper value to each associate. She loved Hughes Randall, and knew beyond all question of a doubt that he loved her; she was now frenzied in her struggle to awaken him from the trance into which he had been hurled, and reclaim the love which had been buried beneath an ugly cloud. She had denounced him only because he had belittled that love with an offer to purchase friendship; and emptied the vials of her scorn because he had acknowledged the fact that he was being led by another woman. Too angry to weep, too honest to pretend an indifference she did not feel, too young to forget even for a moment, she hurried to her room in the boarding house, brushed past the three widowed ladies and an insistant spinster, refused to admit to them that she had done as they had advised her and "quit working at that office," she hurried from their crushing sympathy, flung herself on the bed, and gazed at the ceiling with eyes that saw not. The hours were long that she lay there motionless, her mind filled with ugly thoughts that had never before found a place there; at last sheer fatigue drew her into a fitful and merciful sleep. While lying there immersed in vengeful thoughts, she heard the door to her room stealthily opened after she had failed to answer to a gentle alarm against the door-panel; she closed her eyes, for she knew this intrusion to be due to a kindly interest from some of her fellow boarders, but she did not wish to be disturbed. Hearing told her the visitors to be one of the widowed ladies and the solicitous spinster; she knew they came to the side of the bed and stood looking at her; knew that one of them put a motherly hand to her forehead to see if illness was the cause of this lassitude; knew that they held a whispered conversation as to whether it would be best to disturb her; knew that one of them was giving

proper care to the hat which had been tossed onto the dresser when anger compelled a disregard for wearing apparel; knew they were tidying the disarranged dresser top; but she did not know that one of them, seeing the "official" sized envelope which had been thrown onto the dresser top, had read the name of a famous detective agency as printed for a "return address," and believing this to be a cause for distress had had no compunction of conscience in a further investigation.

This envelope, which contained the full report of the agency's report on the history of Mrs. Anna B. Easson, was carried from the room of Miss Herron, its contents thoroughly digested and excitedly discussed, and some time during the night, it was returned to its place. Because of which discovery, the resolve of Miss Beatrice not to divulge her secret information, would be rendered of slight value; the information had already begun to spread.

Force of habit caused Miss Herron to rise early the next morning; it was not for some minutes that the full sorrow returned to her and she knew that she no longer held position with her beloved society of tobacco growers. Fresh from a night's rest which had robbed the sting from sorrow, she determined to write a note to Hughes Randall, give him an opportunity to vindicate himself, and tell him of her resolve not to publish the ungentle facts pertaining to the assumption of an aristocracy which was not the rightful title of the Eassons. To make this good resolve absolute, she tore the agency's report to bits and carried them to the kitchen fire that she might destroy them beyond repair. Conquering her emotions, suppressing her sorrow, she admitted to her keenly solicitous friends that she was no longer with the Equity, but declined to

give reasons or discuss the situation. She chatted with them, laughed over their witticisms, and persuaded two of them to go with her on a shopping walk down town. Returning, she packed her trunk and made ready for her departure on the morrow, but she refused to tell anyone where she was going.

The answer to her note destroyed every hope she had permitted to grow; the gentility which had always been hers fell from her as a mantle, leaving a primitive woman, furious to claim her own, mad in her desire and purpose to crush any and all obstacles which were thrusting him beyond her reach, and infuriated in her contempt for those unworthy women who had enticed him by their unholy wiles. The bitterness of loneliness made her crudeness and brutality seem but natural to her, and she exulted in her determination to force Caroline Easson to hear the truth. Since woman won man from the love of angels, since through the tree of knowledge she made him of the earth, earthy, since she learned to hold him by a subtlety as graceful as the coils of her original accomplice, the snake, she has regarded him as the plunder of her war with other women. So was Hughes Randall now being regarded.

Miss Herron was at dinner when the note was delivered by the messenger from Mr. Randall; straightway she lost all appetite for other food and would satiate herself in vengeance; she flew to her room, threw a hat on her head, and called a taxi to race to the Easson apartments. But as the vehicle in which she was riding passed under the arch at the approach to the court in which the Eassons resided, she saw Mrs. Easson and Caroline getting into an automobile, and knew that she must wait until the morning.

After breakfast she made ready for the street;

the consciousness of a sweet revenge flushed her cheeks and brightened her eyes. Knowing that a brisk walk would steady rather than weary, she decided not to call the taxi of the night before, and set out on her way to the Easson apartments. As she walked along, she gleefully went over every word of her denouncement, taking pains not to omit any point which would gall the woman, women, she hated so heartily. By the time she had outlined this speech she was in sight of her destination.

This apartment house was situated in one of the courts, or blind streets, of the exclusive residence portion of the city. The entrance to the court was indicated by an elaborate archway of graceful construction and imposing design, there being a wide arch entrance for vehicular traffic and a lesser one over each sidewalk for the pedestrians; set back a hundred feet from the main thoroughfare, this pretentious gateway was a charming pretense of seclusion. But neither the beauty nor the nominal purpose of this structure was given place in the thought of the rapidly walking Miss Herron; lost in vengeance, her eyes sparkling with hate, she would have passed under the balustrades without noticing them, had not the burly form of an interfering man barred the way. Glancing up quickly, she recognized the chief of detectives, whom she had become acquainted with when that one had done some "special" work in a case which Mr. Randall had been defending.

"Good morning, Miss Herron, you don't recognize me, do you?"

"Yes, Mister Malcum, good morning, sir." She tried to brush past him; but he extended his arm, saying:

"Just a moment, my fine lady."

Not at that moment did she believe this man

had anything to do with her errand, and her eyes blazed disgust over his seeming offensive conduct. "What do you mean by this insult?"

"Just come down off'uv your high horse and I'll tell you."

"Let go of my arm, or I will report you."

"Report and be——;" he caught the word before it was said, for there was something about this woman which placed her far above the criminal class to which he was accustomed. He went on: "Now see here, Miss, I don't care how much you report me while I'm attending to duty, that ain't the kind of 'reports' that hurt, and besides all that, the man who sent me out here has more influence in a minute than you'd have in a week. So you might as well quit squirming and trying to get loose, for you ain't going anywhere that I tell you not to."

"Will you let go of my arm?"

"Yes, just as soon as you promise me not to try to run away."

"Run? Run away? Why should I try to run away from YOU?"

"That's just exactly the point; there's no use of your trying it, for I've never let a prisoner get away from me yet."

"Prisoner? I?" Amazement was fast taking the place of anger. Stultified, she begged; "Please tell me what you mean, or what I have done to be your 'prisoner.'"

"'T'aint so much what you have done, as what you're trying to do, but ain't going to get a chance to do." He leered at her as he impudently demanded: "Where're you going?"

She had nothing to conceal, so answered: "To call on Mrs. Anna B. Easson."

"Oh, no, you're not," was the sarcastic, jeering refute.

"Why?" At that instant the truth began to

dawn, she saw that this man was stationed there to prevent her from gaining an audience with the Eassons. "Why?" she repeated; "Why should you try to prevent me?"

Throwing back the lapel of his coat, he pointed to the badge of office, as he told her: "See that? That's the big reason, that and Mister Randall's request that we stop you." When he saw the impression he was making, he told on: "You know just as well as anybody else that it's against the law to blackmail people, and if I'd arrest you for trying to do what you want to do, your old man would raise forty-'leven kinds of old Harry, for the world knows there ain't a straighter man living than "Old Ironsides" Herron."

Just for one moment Miss Beatrice was frightened over the consequence of her act; she revered her puritannical, law-abiding, honored parent, and shrank more at the mention of his name than at the threat of imprisonment. But today the woman instinct and its demand was stronger than any obligation she owed for life, and the fear was quickly gone. With rising spirits she told the detective;

"I understand why you are here, I understand the 'pull' of the politician who directs you, I know the ways of our people, and will not argue nor plead with you. But remember this, Mister Malcum, I shall communicate with Miss Caroline Easson before I leave the city, and my train goes from the Union Station at four-fifteen." She turned to go, but was halted by his calling;

"Wait a minute, Miss Herron," when she turned toward him; "Now you take my advice and go on home and cool off and quit trying to get even just because this big guy Randall give you the mit for a society dame. Just simply forget it; and when you cool off you will thank me for



putting you wise. See?—Wait a minute, I ain't through, I'm going to tell you something you don't know—We've got a government man at the post office watching that no letters get through, and I've got a bull at the door of the apartment house and another one in the back yard and I'm out here watching the street, so if you think you can make a get-away with that bunch watching you, just get busy; but remember, the lock-up has invited you to be 'among those present.' G'bye, if you're gone."

The brutal warning, sarcastic taunt, and crude familiarity were as hateful lashes from the whip of vengeance. She knew that Hughes Randall had not employed this man to insult her, but the bare fact that he had done so only intensified her thirst for a complete revenge. Burning with hate, she hastened home that she might put her threat into deed; she had little time in which to carry out her purpose, but she did not doubt for one instant that her will would more than overbalance the superior numbers pitted against her.

On arriving at her room, at once she began the task of writing the fateful letter. It was no easy thing to do; there was much to say, much which must be left to inference, she must give a comprehensive sketch of the provincialisms of her own people as compared with the crudities of certain other classes; and the entire must not be bulky. Her first, second, and third attempt she discarded after a careful reading; she flung them from her as unworthy her purpose, they told too little of the fate which a vengeful people held in store for the usurper of caste. Anger and hate would ferment as she put the words to print. Then, as she put her pen to paper for the fourth attempt, her brain seemed to clear, facts stood forth as a well-drilled army, ideas seemed to say themselves. Her lips curled in a sneer as she pictured how

Caroline Easson would feel the latent venom; and a laugh, bitter yet sad, escaped her as she folded the document into an envelope and thrust it into a pocket of her coat until she should again require it.

The letter had acted as a sedative to her anger, and she began scheming, planning devising some method to out-manuever the watch-dogs in the path to the Easson apartments. Surely there was some way in which it could be done; she would find that way, she would deliver that letter even though more brainy men than Mr. Malcum would try to prevent her. She cudged her brain, discarded plan after plan which would be too elaborate and unpractical, she thought deep and cunning schemes, and at the end of an hour had evolved a plan which she considered ingenious enough to checkmate the boastful, conceited detective. Carefully she examined the plan for flaws, and satisfied with its cleverness, she penned another note which was a part of the dodge.

Her mind at rest, now that she was sure of success in her undertaking, she began final preparations for her long trip to the West. Hot applications to her aching head, a steaming bath, a light lunch, the cheering good-wishes of her fellow boarders, their jocular teasing in the vain effort to find out her destination, the lament of the servants, made the tonic which her depression needed. Only a few moments at the telephone sufficed to arrange that a ticket and pullman reservation would be ready for her call at the ticket window of the station, she ordered the transfer of her baggage; these matters attended to, she gave full thought to her plan for vengeance.

Going to the offices of the Western Union Telegraph Company, she asked for the services of a messenger, giving the name of a sharp, young Irish lad who had often taken messages

for the several members of the law firm, especially Hughes Randall. Unfortunately, the aide she had counted on helping her was out; but on being told that he would very shortly return, and fearing to risk an untried wit, she decided to wait until Tim should report in. She stood near the door, gazing somewhat sorrowfully at the familiar sights she was soon to leave behind; she saw Durbin Ellis in excited conversation with a farmer whom she knew to be a staunch supporter of the Equity, and was glad when the rough-clad Equity enthusiast boisterously railed at his temper and walked away; ever since a child she had been deeply interested in people and their ways, so she found much to hold her attention as she watched the kaleidoscopic shiftings of traffic, she was startled at hearing her name. She turned to find her freckled-faced, rollicking friend, Tim, at her side. He followed her to a corner, behind the door, where they were in close conversation for twenty tense, eager minutes as Tim was being thoroughly coached in his part.

"Sure, I've got yer; you want me to—" In the vernacular of the streets he repeated the maneuvers, and his eagerness to outwit "the bull" permitted no error. "Come on, les go."

"Not yet, Tim; I am to telephone from here."

"Come on, here's the talk-box." He hurried her to telephone booth, and she was soon in communication with her party.

"Hello, Miss Easson—this is Miss Herron. I have a very important package which must be delivered into your own hands or not at all, and as I am in somewhat of a hurry, I shall ask that you be standing at the street door of your apartment in exactly fifteen minutes. It is all that important, and more; so please be at the door in exactly fifteen minutes. Thank you for 'not keeping the messenger waiting.' Possibly he will call

you later; he has a lot of extra work, as you know the mass meeting is only a few days off. Good bye, Miss Easson." She and her young aide left the building; she got into the cab which Tim had at the curb for her; the cab went swiftly away with the messenger boy on his bicycle racing after. They halted at a street corner a block away from the entrance of the court; she rehearsed Tim's duties; he had forgotten nothing.

"Gimme the dope."

She offered the shorter note from her pen.

"Aw, gimme the big one first." Eagerly he siezed the missive which was intended for Miss Easson, jerked the cap from his head, placed the precious document inside, and pulled the cap down to his ears, as he told the arch-conspirator: "Now you stand out here where his nibs can get a good squint at you, see?"

The boy wheeled into the entrance of the court, and was instantly observed by the detective, who came toward him threateningly and imperiously.

"Here, kid, where you going?"

"Right here. Got any objections."

"None of your impudence, you freckled-face mick; who're you looking for in here?"

"A big duffer by the name of o' Malcum; ain't you it?"

"What'er you want with me?"

"Got a note from yer gal. Here, take it; I ain't got all day to waste on one run." With hit foot on the curb to balance him, he stood with his wheel pointing toward the street, having turned with that object in view. As Mr. Malcum accepted the note he was saucily informed: "Say, bo, she's some peach, too." Impishly he winked at the detective, who was gingerly handling the note and wondering what "girl" of his could be sending messages to him—he being a man of family, and bashful in all affairs save business. Tim

must have read the thought, for he teased the "bull." "Better hurry up and read it and tear it up so your old woman won't find it on you."

"Shut up, kid." Nevertheless he was absorbed in reading:

"MY DEAR MR. MALCUM:

"As you seem to suspect that my presence in the court you are guarding is unlawful and objectionable, I am going to ask that you come to the corner to talk with me for a very few moments. I am going from the city in a very little while, and do not care that you should retain a wrong impression of

"BEATRICE HERRON."

Puzzled, but at all times anxious to show that his interpretation of "the law" was justice with the blindfold removed, Chief Malcum readjusted his hat to a less "Sherlock" angle, fingered his tie, smoothed the wrinkles from his coat, and twisted his mustache into a more bewitching curve.

"Aw, cut out the jelly roll," Tim flippantly "sassed" as he wheeled away; though when he had reached the street, he rode round in a circle until the detective was on the pavement of the main thoroughfare. "There she is," he pointed to the corner.

"Quit your pointing, kid; don't you know that ain't no way to treat a lady? Here, take this jit and go to the movie when you're off watch." Tossing a coin to the boy, he walked to where Miss Herron stood waiting.

"You wished to talk to me, Miss Herron?" He seemed to have left his officiousness at his post of duty, he was respectful, almost contrite in her presence.

"Yes," she answered slowly, fighting to conquer the excitement which was about to unnerve her now that victory was so near.

Mr. Malcum misinterpreted her emotion, he thought she was embarrassed, and straightway became fatherly in his attitude. "Come, come, Miss Herron, all of us make mistakes, we can't keep our foot from slipping all the time."

High-strung and nervous she came near laughing at him; she looked at the ground, at the driver in the cab waiting for her, at the houses—everywhere but at the detective.

"Come, come, Miss Herron, I want to help you; I've got a daughter, and when she grows up I want her to be just the lady you are; if I can do anything for you without hurting my record, just you name it and we'll see about it."

At last she found voice: "Thank you, but you are helping me far more than you realize. I believe you told me that I was not to communicate with Miss Easson?"

"They're my orders."

"You honestly believe you can prevent me?"

"Why—er—yes, I think I can."

"Well, I rather doubt it."

"You—er—doubt it?" He saw that she was laughing, and demanded: "What's the joke?"

"Look at Tim." She nodded in the direction of the court entrance, and waved a reply to the wig-wag of the messenger, as she told the gasping minion of the law: "A letter from me is now in the hands of Miss Easson. I moved you people as though you were checkers on the board, I got her past the man at the front door of the apartment, and sent my messenger past you." Gaily she laughed as she rode away.

She was carried back to the telegraph office, where she met freckled-faced, grinning Tim, and liberally rewarded him for "making a fish out of a bull." She walked to the Union Station and completed arrangements for her departure. She sat in the main room of the station watching the

clock as it told off the last minutes of her stay in Lexington, and, obeying an irresistible impulse, went to the telephone that she might again hear the voice which had sung love into her life.

Trembling she emerged from the booth, to be brusquely greeted by Tom Quinn, who was waiting for his wife to come in on the train which would carry Beatrice away.

"Hello, there, Miss Beatrice, where are you going?"

"Oh, just for a little visit," she managed to say.

"Going to be here for the meeting?"

"I'm afraid not." She was glad to hear the announcer calling her train. She mustered spirit enough to say: "Anyway, the parade won't be near so interesting now that the 'Possum Hunters' are barred from line."

"Yes, but we'll be there all right," he boasted, "we'll be there and everywhere else till we whip the 'Trust'."

She knew that he spoke the truth, and as the fast express bore her away she let her thoughts dwell on the hard fight ahead of Hughes Randall as he contended with the "Trust," the non-pool farmer, the quitter, the "Possum Hunters," and, and—yes, she said it—and "home."

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER 15.

### **"You Do Not Love Hughes Randall."**

When Miss Caroline Easson returned from the phone, she told her mother: "It was that 'Herring' down to the office, she's going to bring something to me and wants me to be at the door to receive it. I'll just bet she wants to go on an errand of her own while out delivering this one from Hughes, and wants me to be waiting for her so she will have that much extra time without telling him, the cat."

The mother was more practical. "I wonder what it is?" The same thought sprang to the mind of mother and daughter. "La, la, I bet I can guess; it's a ring."

"Oh, I just bet it is." She was now all eagerness for the arrival of the messenger. With time to spare she gaily tripped to the front stone entrance porch and stood sunning herself in the warm, glorious rays. She saw the messenger come hastily to the front of the apartment house, and was wondering if she had misunderstood Miss Herron, for this was a boy who most frequently delivered messages from Mr. Randall. She had noticed that a strange white man was taking the place of the colored janitor, she saw him as he stood at the door peering out, she saw him start forward as the messenger made for the door. She checked him by saying:

"Don't be officious." To Tim she questioned:



"Did Mister Randall send you?"

"No'm, Miss Herron."

"Oh, well, it's the same thing," though before she accepted the missive which the energetic Tim was hastily securing from his hat, she told the "officious" doorman, "Your place is on the inside, and not out here with your mouth hanging open like you were catching flies."

"But, miss, that's against my orders."

"What is?"

"That you should receive that letter."

"Who in the name of common sense gave you such an order?"

"Chief Malcum."

"Aw, dat bird's up to something crooked, miss," was the spirited advice from Tim as he tried to thrust the letter into her hand.

Miss Caroline accepted advice and letter, and told the baffled guard, "You go tell 'Chief Malcum' that I do not care for any of his orders or slovenly men around this house. Now get back in the hall where you belong."

"Gee, miss, dat's it, give it to him." The sprightly messenger made a face at the disgruntled "bull." But he was forgetting the order for haste, so he jerkily called, "There ain't no answer," as he made a dash for his wheel.

Miss Easson enjoyed a show of spirit much more than the languid, lagging, drab, drag of humdrum method and decorum; she could not endure "the same old seven and six" of every day life; she required a sprightly, animated, vivacious existence, so she smiled with favor on the freckled faced Tim and frowned on the bulky exponent of protection. With a sarcastic question in her scathing glance she brushed past the policeman who was filling the servile position of janitor, and that she might further ignore him she began to walk up the stairs instead of riding in the slow

elevator which he would have to drive. Not until that moment did she give attention to the letter in her hand. She saw that it was not from Hughes, that it was not on the office stationary and that it was clearly from the pen of some woman.

"I wonder who is sending me so many words without music?" Pertly she paraphrased, "And who in Sam Hill is 'Chief Malcum'? And why should he be trying to interfere with Hughes' business? If I hadn't recognized that 'Herring's' voice it would sound real spookey. But she couldn't get into any devilment if she tried to, for any woman who for one whole year works in the office with a man who is trying to fall in love with her, and then let's him get away, hasn't gumption enough to plant trouble and watch it grow."

Mrs. Eason was exemplifying that curiosity with which women have been maligned ever since that famous trial of Mrs. Eve vs. the serpent. As her daughter came into the room she impatiently inquired:

"From Hughes?"

"No, mumsie, it's from a woman." Her voice held a note of disappointment which would not have existed had the missive been from a man, whether her fiance or any other. Woman, as a rule, wrote "such infernally stupid letters" that they were "not worth a yawn"; fact is, she had an exceedingly biased, limited and caustic opinion regarding her sex and rarely attempted to guard that view. She was closing the door by backing against it—a childish trick of which her mother had never been able to correct her. Intently studying the handwriting on the envelope, she observed: "Well, I've never seen my name writ in such a bold scribble; it looks almost exactly like that 'Ideal' woman's handwriting in that

do-funny book of yours which tries to tell one how to 'read character by the penmanship.' I wonder who wrote it? I didn't think there was an 'Ideal' woman in Lexington."

"I have met some very superior women here," the mother corrected, "And shall certainly be glad that you are going to grow to be one of them."

"Provincialisms and all the trimmings," teased Caroline. Ripping the envelope open, she went on, "Gee, but won't I make some of these cousin-worshippers, aunt-and-uncle-boasters and kinship-advertisers dance to the strains of Yankee Democracy when I'm 'Mrs. Caroline Easson Randall, a society leader of the Blue Grass Aristocracy'? I'll have——"

"Don't do that," Mrs. Easson hastily interrupted. She was referring to the destruction of the envelope, not to social ambitions. "Give me the address so I may study the character while you are reading the letter." Chirography was a diversion in which the writer woman found much to amuse and instruct her. She boasted a goodly collection of envelopes bearing her own and daughter's address, with her study of 'character' noted on the margin of the book in which they were filed, but here was one specimen of penmanship which would never be given a place in the collection. "Hand it here and quit your playing."

Her forecast of her future life as Mrs. Randall had put Miss Easson in a gay humor; with the letter in her left hand, she was flipping the torn envelope against it as though to attract the attention of an imaginary audience, she mounted a foot-stool, and burlesqued the "barker" for a side show, as she flippantly shouted:

"Step right this way, ladies and gentlemen, and give close attention to our free exhibition. The world's renowned Mrs. Anna B. Easson, of Lexington, Kentucky, the home of ponies, booze,

and skirts, will now draw a picture of the author of this letter. You will please be so kind as to note that this greatest soothsayer of all ages makes use of only the faculties God gave her, and the mystic knowledge which was acquired by years of study at the feet of Kokumlambogo, the Hindoo sage and mystic. When we have concluded with this marvelous performance, we invite you to avail yourself of this rare opportunity and have your fortune told for the small sum of twenty-five cents; or special, select, exclusive readings, one dollar. Step right into line; your past sense, present cents, and future hence will be told while you wait."

"You may laugh as much as you please, and make fun of the science, but chiromancy reveals character."

"All right, Mrs. Sherlock Holmes, see if you can tell the religion, morals, and complexion of the writer quicker than I can by reading the—" She never completed the sentence, for her eyes had caught the opening lines of the letter, and she stood rigid in astonishment. An unknown fear suddenly grappled with her boasted plan, hot anger surged through her, and pride was ripped to shreds; she was reading:

"MISS EASSON:

"An alien enemy is without recognition in the courts of a nation at war, therefore I give no excuse for this letter. I have reasons, many, the principal one being that I wish to protect Hughes Randall from a fate which I would not wish to befall my worst enemy. Another one is that I wish to give you an idea of the esteem in which you are held.

"I have already told Mr. Randall what I shall write you; so do not believe that I am mad with jealousy or unrequited love. Whether I love him or not, or have loved

him, is of less importance than whether you love him. Do you? If so, then at once destroy this letter, and accept my apologies; if not, read on.

"So. You are reading beyond that line.

"Do you begin to understand the intent of this letter?

"No?

"It has several objects in view; the first one is to tell you in plain English that you do not love Hughes Randall. If you read one word beyond that sentence your doing so is an admission of the truth. You are marrying him for his money and his social position.

"What do you give in return?

"Family connections? Culture? Wealth? Unquestioned social position? Marvelous attainments?

"No.

"You give nothing. Not even the pure, clean, honest love of a gentle heart.

"Are you so blind as to imagine that all will be well when you have spoken the marriage vow at the altar? Have you learned so little of the ways of the Kentucky people as to think that the changing of your name will usher you into the hearts of our people? Can you be so careless as not to read the mistrust with which you are being received? Do you imagine these provincial people will quickly forgive and forget certain truth when they find out that you have sold your soul and your doll-like beauty in bondage?

"There are some who would glory in your conquest, and excuse the methods you employed; they are the ones who ridicule class, and sneer at the dignity of birth. There are

fools who believe that your marriage will lift up your subconscious being even as you are elevated in the social sphere; they are the ones who do not know the philosophy of life, and make sport of gentility.

"Do you begin to grasp the truth? Are you beginning to see how impossible this marriage is? Can you not feel the quakings of a usurper's heart? Will you go blindly on, defying the laws of love, betraying the hospitality of a friendly people, stealing the love of one of God's noblemen, and ridiculing the customs of a provincial people?"

"Suppose my method is ugly. Is that excuse for yours? Is that reason why you are this minute protected by police, one of whom was stationed at your front door to prevent the delivery of this letter? Does my telling you these things make truth less true, honesty less honest, falsity less false, or lying less of a lie?"

"Will you be less of a slave when you have sold yourself to his bondage?"

"Will the marriage vow purify your intentions or his love?"

"Will the changing of your name give you a pure heart and clean mind?"

"Within one year he will ——"

Caroline Easson read nothing beyond that line. On those words her emotions caught as the grappling anchor catches hold of the snarled reef and jerks the boat to a trembling halt. She had felt the accusing sentences tugging at her, drawing her down, down from the speed of her racing thoughts, but the current of hate had been too swift, madly she had rushed on until—

Strength failed her, with a faint though horror-laden:

"Oh, Hughes, Mumsie, Hughes, I'm not that

bad, I'm not that bad." She sank in a limp heap on the floor, and was shaken by the release of pent-up anger, chagrin, and fright.

\* \* \* \* \*

While her daughter was reading the momentous letter, Mrs. Easson had been anxiously and carefully studying the handwriting on the envelope. She scrutinized each letter with quizzical and exact care, each hastening second conscious of an undefined warning of an impending disaster. That writing was too bold and honest to admit of cheap excuses or deceit.

Her first feeling was one of dislike and mistrust for the writer. On closer study she found that her dislike was because here was an author who would not stoop to subterfuge, and her mistrust was based on the knowledge that this writer would not tolerate the "white lies" so essential to social popularity. She remembered a certain visit which had been made her by three widowed ladies and a spinster from "The Gossip House," the deep interest in the welfare and protection of Miss Herron, and their sincere intimation that it would not be well for anyone to start a rumor unless their statements were possible of proof. Could it be possible that this letter was from the same source? Had Caroline disobeyed her and been careless in conversation?

Mrs. Easson was on the point of demanding the letter for inspection when she was startled by the sound of her daughter's agonized cry and saw her fall as she so often had fallen when a child in a tantrum. Quickly she ran to her side and attempted to pet her into hushing the hysterical sobbing which was fast sapping her strength and would make her jaded and faded for the little party they were to give this evening. Her entreaties and earnest solicitations were soon rewarded by a whimpering composure

on the part of her daughter, and on that instant Mrs. Easson began an investigation of the contents of this letter which had brought about such a serious and unexpected result. She read, then reread this letter of hate. She searched for its weak points, and found its strength to be its weakest point. She grappled with the ideas involved, and quickly discovered that her safest plan would be to stay where the ideas hurled them and sneer at the author rather than attempt to disprove her assertions. Again she read the letter, and knowing that Caroline had not read the entire message, she rendered such impossible by tearing it into shreds and crumpling the bits into the envelope and carrying them into the kitchen that she might destroy them in the range fire.

When she returned she persuaded Caroline to hurry and bathe her eyes and face lest they should be swollen and unpretty for the evening. This done, and the powder and paint again in their proper place, she skillfully began to reason out the mental wrinkles. She had never told her daughter that money and position were the crux of her marriage state; she had preferred to permit her to think it a whim and fancy without the sordidness of a conspiracy. True, they had discussed the plans together, but the daughter had been held by the wild, fascinating game of conquest rather than the ugly truth. Under her mother's tutelage, Caroline had come to reason that she really and truly cared for Hughes Randall the man, rather than the name which indicated a personage of wealth and influence. The romances of art, literature, and music had been made the ideals to which she should design her own history, and the mother now realized that she must hold the mirror of truth in such a man-



ner as to examine their desired result rather than their intent.

She began her argument with that forcefulness which characterized all her efforts, and colored her speeches with that purple of life which had won her such marked success in the world of fiction. She spoke bitterly of blackmail, slander, and trickery, of the punishment which was always given such offenders, and of the vast amount of trouble she could cause "that adventuress," if she but stooped to that level. But she argued against any such procedure, claiming it to be unlady-like and unrefined. She stubbornly defended Hughes Randall, calling him "a true gentleman, who loves virtue, but toys with petty vices." The reference of Beatrice Herron to the mercenary motives in pursuing Hughes seemed to envoke her greatest fury, but she countered this ugly claim by the assertion that she (Beatrice Herron) and not they should be censored for such a motive. She overlooked the fact that not later than that morning they had decided to spend the proceeds from their property in lavish entertainment "and a scrumptious trousseau"; that was excusable and entirely beyond the question.

"As for that woman's over-drawn picture of the provincialisms and customs of the Kentucky people," Mrs. Easson told her daughter; "there is nothing in her argument which is worth a very deep study. We have been here long enough to become acquainted with the peculiarities of the folk, and I am certain I never met a more charming and friendly people in any other city of our travels. They may be snobbish and distant when the visitor is not properly introduced, but coming as we did, with those warm letters of introduction from our 'Kentucky Colonel' who was so awfully anxious to marry me when he believed I

was wealthy, a more hospitable set could not be desired. Beside all that, you will soon be one of them; so her thinly veiled reference to our former position in society, was very uncalled for and unfair. I am very certain that you are as pretty as any of the women I have seen in Kentucky, and your training has surely prepared you to grace the home of the most fastidious. I realize what this blow means to your dear love for Hughes, how deeply you must feel the hurt to your pride in a wonderful affection, and just how hopeless and dark the future must seem to you now; but you must not cry over it, as it will do no good and will ruin your beauty; you must not worry over it, as to do so will dull your smile and slow down your wit. The best thing you can do is to forget it. To admit shame and humiliation, would be to acknowledge the truth in her claims; you cannot hold to the pure and innocent idea of love and attempt to prove that affection by a violent anger when it is questioned."

"Yes, mumsie, and that love I took such pains and trouble to build up and make perfect can no longer be given to the ideal I have pictured Hughes, for this has shot my ideal from my heart forever; from now on my love must be given to a mere man."

Mrs. Easson smiled at the last sentence which embodied her fondest wish. "That is the most practical kind of relationship between man and wife, dear, and I sincerely trust you will quickly let your romance be the song of your life instead of the chart by which you guide. This is a practical age, a materialistic era, a class period; the individual is lost sight of, idealism is rather a term for class than the individual, and the heroes of today are the ones who accomplish stupendous feats rather than the one who makes pretty speeches and rides away to wage battle against

an imaginary dragon. A love which is nourished by a good beefsteak will outlast the love which is only nourished on kisses; and the affection which can find joy in the practical things of life is more secure than the one which can only smile in party dress."

"Oh, mumsie, mumsie, you are cruel to talk about practical love; there's no such thing; love can't be practical, it is either laughter or tears, but never practical; it is either a beautiful, serene diplomacy, or a wild, crushing passion."

"Then you must train your love to be that 'beautiful, serene diplomacy' you speak of, cultivate the laughter, and leave the tears to the unbeautiful, and the 'wild, crushing passion' to the canaille."

Caroline got up and went to the piano to play the sentimental little nothing which was Hughes Randall's favorite. At the last note she buried her head on her arms and wailed: "Oh, Hughes, I wanted you to be the dignified, aristocratic, perfect idol of my heart; and here I find that you can't be trusted any more than the rest of the men."

"Hush, daughter, you must not be so tragic; you must trust all men in a way, but not too far away."

The daughter straightened and spitefully flung: "Then a woman can't trust anything in this world excepting herself."

Mrs. Easson smiled her most engaging smile, she saw that "misery" had entirely disappeared, and that Caroline was struggling to forget. "You must trust men if you wish to have them trust you; but you must always remember that man is as inconstant as woman is fickle."

"Humph." Her fingers began to idly toy with the keys of the piano, firmer grew the touch,

more distinct the music—the rollicking chords of the “latest” rag-time.

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The “party” of the evening was to be a dainty little affair given by Mrs. Mary Louise Kemp, and the list of guests would include two society matrons who had not yet replied to the Easson invitation to the announcement-dinner—Mrs. Kemp intended to maneuver affairs so as to force an acceptance. Mr. Randall was to escort the Eassons to the party, and, as usual, he arrived at the apartment house in ample time to have a cozy little chat with his dearly beloved before he must share her wit and gaiety with the other less favored.

He brought with him a beautiful diamond engagement ring, and had he given it to her at once he never would have discovered that she was less ardent than at former meetings. But he had intended to play a boyish trick and slip it on her finger without warning her of what was to be, and in the time between his arrival and the moment when he finally placed the ring, he discovered a cool lassitude. He realized that something serious was affecting her usually plastic temper. Her greeting left nothing to be desired in politeness, formality, or kisses; yet it was off key, unnatural, and amateurish. Her conversation was as free and easy as usual, yet the spirit, the verve, was not the daring one which had captivated him; there was nothing said or done to indicate any constraint; but her averted glance or lack of fervor was a forceful reminder that all was not well.

Hughes, of course, knew the reason for her attitude, or rather failure of attitude, as he had had an account of Beatrice’s cleverness from the raging Malcum, and a verbal proof that the fateful letter had been delivered. He had not known

what to expect from Caroline, yet he had prepared himself for what he believed to be an honorable result. He had never seen her save in a jolly, happy, carefree mood; he knew her happy-go-lucky temperament, yet he did not dare think she would calmly overlook such a letter as he well knew Beatrice would write, having the information she had told him of. He was too honest to want her to overlook it; he wanted a merciless publicity, let guilt fall where it belonged. He was honest in his belief that he had done no harm or wrong, was not a condemned sinner in spite of anything she should say, did not look upon them as such; yet he knew that things could never be right between himself and Caroline, as man and wife, until this letter business was perfectly cleared up.

Although he felt no guilt, and placed no blame on his future wife, nevertheless he was angry with himself for an indiscretion which made him less pure than his love, and troubled because she did not show that confidence which would tell the truth under any and all circumstances. He called himself a fool to allow this thing to come into their life just when they had begun to know each other so well and dearly, and tried to build reasons which would permit her silence. He was anxious to have the explanation over with, so that things would again be normal; but not knowing how Caroline and her mother had accepted the letter, he could not open the subject for explanation or discussion. Impatient and uneasy, he cautiously watched his conversation in order to make no chance remark on her unusual attitude and its cause. A chagrin which he could not conceal made it impossible for him to be affable and natural; he was strained and uninteresting, and the conversation dragged in a manner most embarrassing to him, if not to his companion.

While he was in an agony of nervousness and suspense, the young lady silently gloated over his uncomfortable position, and made no effort to relieve him. She was hugely enjoying his discomfort, and took ironic pleasure in prolonging and increasing it. Her mother had repeatedly cautioned her not to say anything about the letter; she was obeying her mother to the letter, and was not particular whether she "said anything about anything."

These two were not really congenial, and had not had any mutual interest other than love as a mushy affliction rather than a divine affection. Soft caresses and confection words had been the only subjects they had ever found interest in, and when those topics were bared by limitations prescribed by Beatrice Herron's expose there was very little to say.

In desperation he caught her hand and thrust the ring to place. Instantly everything was changed; here was something she could understand; here was something pretty. Wildly she praised the beauty of the gem; rapt she gazed into the depth of this sparkling bit of carbon; she chortled, laughed, and kissed him passionately.

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Certainly no one at Mrs. Kemp's party was so dense as to be ignorant of the fact that Caroline Easson and Hughes Randall were affianced, yet they had each received the information as "a secret" so no one must say anything about it—to Mr. Randall. The negligent society matrons, who had failed to send their acceptances to Mrs. Easson, were quick to ask forgiveness and plead acceptable excuses. True, these women were amused over the unprotected gratitude of Mrs. Easson when they finally accepted the invitation, but they realized they could not offend the Randalls by an open slight to his future bride. The

men were open and ardent in their admiration and attention to Miss Easson, they rivaled one another in winning smiles from the young lady, and showered her with unrestrained compliments.

Hughes was happy in seeing his future wife so flatteringly received, and was glad that each one of her moments should be happily spent. The gay spirit of the party quickly became his, and he was easily the most interesting and entertaining one of the gathering. He cordially invited each and everyone present to be the guests of "the organizer" at the mass meeting, and was glad when they so heartily accepted and promised to be in the line of the parade and attend the barbecue. He struggled to forget the ugly facts pertaining to a certain letter and its reception, he could not understand how it could be passed without a word of rebuttal, but he determined to bravely wait in the hope that everything would be properly adjusted. Her people should be his people, her views should be protected.

Not until they had returned from the party was anything said which could be attributed to the missive. He was startled by the demand made upon him, yet he shouldered the new burden and in giving protection gave nearer to pure love than he had ever given Caroline.

They were in the saffron lighted room; Mrs. Easson had gone to her room.

"Hughes?" she pled from the depths of her embrace.

"Yes, dear."

"I am not going to marry you until spring."

Astonished and hurt, yet without argument, he answered:

"Very well, sweetheart, I want you to be happy now, then, and all the coming years of our life." After a second's pause, he quietly asked: "Are

you right sure there is nothing you want to talk to me about before I go?"

"Yes, there is," and he heaved a great sigh of relief, which was cut short by the query: "What did your married sister mean tonight, when she said that you had never had a sweetheart?"

Feebly he answered: "She meant until I found you."

Which was accepted with a yawn, as she dismissed him.

From that evening there was a marked difference in their relations. He was admittedly on the defensive in every question that came between them, and yielded meekly to her every whim and caprice. Neither the mother nor daughter ever said one word about the letter from Beatrice Herron; he ceased to marvel over it, and gave a protection they did not ask for; and that very protection and his self-acknowledged indiscretion gave Miss Easson the hold which she had never dreamed it possible for her to secure.

Caroline enjoyed the situation and determined that she would turn every phase of it to her advantage; she would by innuendo and cleverly disguised intent, force him to understand that it was due to his "flirtation with that adventuress" that sadness had been brought to the Easson home. Her mother did not dissuade her from this effort, rather she encouraged the play, well knowing that such behavior would detract thoughts from the main question at issue and force on him a worry which would center his thoughts on protection instead of an analysis of conditions. By the skillful maneuvering of Beatrice Herron, Caroline Easson was given the whip hand, and she would drive with spirit and deviltry—just as Beatrice had known she would do.

"You are going to pay darn high for that



woman's letter and the things that led up to it, Hughesie-ughsie," Caroline would confide to her mirror when she saw the full strength of her hold on the organizer of the Equity. "You are going to pay in the coin of the devil's own realm, and you're going to find the play coming so fast that you won't have time to ask whether the account is paid to date. You and mumsie might be able to tear down my ideal love and put an imitation clay model in its place, but that substitute is certainly going to find that Cupid doesn't employ a road-engineer to level out the rough spots on the road to love. I'm not a darn bit afraid of losing you, because I'm going to make you think that your affair with that 'Herring' came near driving me away from you. When once I do get you as my hubby-ubby, you are going to be pretty well trained to dance to my music; and if you discover the error of your young life, after the preacher has said 'them fateful words,' it will be lots too late to make a change, for I know how you despise divorce. So lead on, Caroline, we're going to teach this leader of men how to play the game of life, and we'll organize a clique of society 'Possum Hunters,' who will teach these backwoodsie, slow-poky, provincial Kentuckians how to translate the Declaration of Independence and how to be human beings instead of snobs and snobettes."

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Caroline Easson was not the only person who was conspiring against the peace and happiness of Hughes Randall, and the organized, law-abiding community. On the evening of Mrs. Kemp's party, other and more potent influences were at work to deprive him of leadership.

On the rough board porch of Bill's road-side grocery store were gathered the original membership of the "Secret Committee." Tom Quinn and

the other members of the "Big Six" were here discussing the ruling that no section of the parade on the day of mass meeting should be given over to the "Possum Hunters." They were wroth, but saw no way to successfully combat the order; viciously they whittled on sticks, or the porch floor, or the rickety chairs propped against the white-washed, weather-beaten wall. Their black, carbon-stained pipes were fragrant as the perfume from the trailing arbutus as compared to the delicacy of their language. This ruling on their status had called forth every epithet in their vocabulary; they had vented their spleen against the tobacco situation, the "trust," the Equity, the non-pool grower, Hughes Randall, and everything else which opposed this strange new force which was beginning to loom so ugly and fierce against the horizon.

Tom had told them again of his last visit to headquarters and the promise which the acting president had exacted of him. This information was disconcerting to their purposes and plans, they must scheme some way to make their power greater than it had been in the past, some way to force the respect rather than the denunciation of the organizer of the tobacco society.

"So he told you we had been bad children, did he?" Jake ridiculed. "Said we ought to be nice, good little boys and not hurt anybody. Haw, haw, haw. Ain't you'all 'shamed of yourselves for puttin' the fear o' God in the heart of these scurvy rats who would sell their souls for a dollar and a chew of tobacco?"

The others joined in the sneering laugh, and the idea was tossed from one to the other as they singed it and pounded it and pummelled it with rough words.

"Yes," Bill chimed in; "and just because we ain't said our lesson in parlor language, we can't

ride in the parade with our heads held high and our fingers pointing to our warning."

"We'll be there," Tom hotly told him; "we'll be there and everywhere else where tobacco men are meeting, until the 'Trust' is whipped. We might not be in line with banners advertising the fact that we are 'Possum Hunters,' or 'Night Riders,' or the 'Kuklux Klan' of the tobacco society, but we'll be there and everybody that knows anything will know who we are, what we are doing, and what we are going to do unless we win. There'll be men who will start riding two days ahead of time so as to be in the line of march on horseback. Every one of the lodges has sent word that they will have 'A good showing in line.' Do you think that Mister Hughes Randall, or any other Mister who knows what 'determination' means, will fail to read the lesson in our tracks or the warning of our hoof beats?"

The general chorus certainly told of their faith in the brute force of numbers; Robt. Spurr even suggesting that they should disregard the order of Hughes, and come boldly out "into the open."

"No, we don't," Tom objected. "We are going to go at it in a different way. We are going to be even more secret than we have been in the past; we are going to quit these noisy and hip-hurrah meetings; we are not going to have a regular meeting-night, for the high sheriff to catch on to; we are going to be more careful in the selection of a place to meet, and always go to some out-of-the-way place, and finally, we are not going to make any more 'visits' unless we are wearing the official disguise."

Opinions which every other member present heartily agreed to; they saw the wisdom for a stricter secrecy, especially, since the acting president was on the eve of launching an effort to crush the "Possum Hunters." Plans were dis-

cussed to make detection all but impossible; "Secrecy" was from now on their watch-word.

An hour later the group had grown to fifteen in number, for a "visit" had been planned for this evening. The late arrivals had been told of the determination to be more secret in future conduct, and those who had left their "official disguise" at home were supplied with this head-gear from the stock which Bill always kept on hand.

"What're we going to do when the tobacco is ready to deliver and these non-pool growers still refuse to join us?" one of the enthusiastic younger members, a cousin of Beatrice Herron, asked: "Are we going to sit still and let them ruin us? Or what?"

An ominous silence fell upon the noisy Klan. That was one question which they did not like to ponder or even think lightly on. They grew sullen whenever they approached the thought, sullen and menacing in silence. What would they do when tobacco was ready to deliver and the non-pool grower insisted on selling to the "trust"?

"Well, Buddie," Tom Quinn finally gave answer, but in the cryptic language of illusion; "that is a horse of a different complexion; he's a free gaited animal and's as mean as hell; he's out of a Flame, by a Torch; and all you have to do to know where to find him is to remember your oath."

The youth was pale and trembling. "You mean?" he faltered.

"Shut up," Bill growled, and the restlessness of all other "Possum Hunters" present showed their determination not to discuss this question—in public.

"Come on, here the others come," Tom broke the spell. Against the pale background of mottled moonlight, a group of horsemen were advancing around a bend in the road.

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER 16.

### **“Yes We’ll Win, for We Can’t Lose.”**

William Randall found much happiness in closely following the brilliant maneuvers of his son during the formative period of the tobacco society; always his advice was timely and skillfully given; never did he burden Hughes with elaborate discussion over detail; ever he was ready with cheering sanction or well reasoned objection; sometimes he would voice one of the platitudes which age delights in bestowing on youth, but on such an occasion the remark was so pertinent to the subject under voice that it was more a word of wisdom than a trite saying. At breakfast this morning they had been discussing the glowing prospects of a majority attendance of all tobacco raisers in the mass meeting today. Today would for always decide the success or failure of the scheme. Today would mark the rise or fall of Hughes Randall’s greatness.

Hughes was nervously expectant; “If only I could tell all of them what I see and know will happen if the plan falls through” he cried; “if only I could call some great man to help me tell them the loss which will be theirs if they fail.”

“A man is as great as environment permits,” came the crisp injunction, then, as an afterthought, he pondered, “and as good as his enemies will swear him.” And he sipped the savory

coffee unmindful of the consternation which was caused by his truism.

Startled by the poignant sting thrust by the platitude, Hughes Randall sat staring at his father. "A man is as good as his enemies will swear him." The words rang through his thinking as an accusing jibe, nor would they free themselves until he had reviewed certain memories.

Hughes Randall most assuredly was a man of super capabilities, but, just as surely, he was a novice in the fine art of love's diplomacy. He was possessed of a wonderful memory for faces and names, and his broad acquaintance was that of the politician born to the call, among his wide circle of friends were those who had won fame, those deserving of fame, and those whose beauty entitled them to magazine cover recognition, but he had lived his life until this year without having known the delightful worry of a sweetheart. He was not boorish, he was ever ready with friendship to both sexes, and the failure to find a heart mate until this late moment was one of those strange and unaccountable accidents of human affairs. His heart clinging to Caroline Easson with the fervency which only an intense nature may know was demanding that his life should be as ideal as his love; and now even his father seemed to accuse him of wrong doing while couching that accusation in subtle wordings.

"A man is as good as his enemies will swear him." Could it be possible that his conduct with Beatrice Herron was to become the one misunderstood chapter in his life? Were those moments over which his reasoning had held no control to be the dominant factors in his claim to happiness? Already Caroline was placing him on the defensive in question of personal conduct, in more than one sentence spoken by his bride-to-be he had discovered words which caused him to anger over

memory of his stenographer. Was his father to be one of his tormentors and thrust him with clever wordings lest he forget?

But William Randall had not made the remark as one which would depreciate, he intended it to be a compliment rather than a scourge. He did not think it possible that any thought other than the tobacco society was giving worry to his son. Certainly he would have been startled in knowing the reasoning which was now tormenting the "Organizer." He became conscious of the silence, of the rigid pose of his son, of the staring and unseeing gaze. He rattled his cup as he placed it in the saucer. He pushed his chair away from the table as though preparing to go. Hughes still engrossed in thought sat silent and self-debative.

"Dreaming?" queried the father, unable to know the meaning in this sudden depression.

"No, —er," He struggled for greater control, offered a pretext for absorption, "I wonder how many Durbin Ellises we will find as the result of today's meeting?"

"Have no idea," was the crisp reply; then he plunged into the caustic tirade which was due to be launched whenever the subject of unloyal tobacco farmers was begun. He was more caustic than usual this morning, he gave voice to remarks which seemed to be in keeping with the actions of certain committeemen of the society who were coming to be known as "Night Riders." He purpled over the crude strength of his voicings. And this show of anger on the part of his father was the very tonic which Hughes was most in need of, this unmerciful slander was bracing, also it helped him to forget.

"Come on, Dad," jovially he called as he arose, "come on and say just one-half of that speech to our farmers and you will cause more fear and trembling than 'The Possum Hunters'." He



laughed over his simile, and while on the way to the office of the society the "Secret Committee" was the principle topic of conversation.

The offices of Randall, Clay and Randall and the suite of rooms adjoining which were the "General Offices" of the Society, had maintained one of the busiest clerical forces in central Kentucky during the fortnight before the ultimate formation of the Society. Circular letters, bulletins, answers to inquiries, blank petitions to membership, forms for committee reports, pamphlets issued by the National Agricultural Department, had been sent from headquarters in a veritable flood. The strain, hurry and care was tremendous and momentous. The anxious tension of all who were a living part of scheme, that fourth dimension of all organizations, was felt on all sides by the visitor to headquarters, it surged around and about one, it demanded more than recognition, it fostered, augmented and propelled support of "Equity" principles, it was the herald which proclaimed Hughes Randall, guide, leader, chief among men.

When the scheme had been in its infancy, and was an idea outlined only in worthy intentions, it had been difficult to arouse the phlegmatic farmer to a display of enthusiasm or to give expression to more than a wish that such and so should be the result of endeavors; but as the day of parade, barbecue and public demonstration drew near, every farmer who had "signed up" was eager to be of some assistance to the General Committee and thereby share credit with those who had unceasingly toiled. The mass meeting of thousands of farmers would be tangible evidence of greatness, the barbecue was something which could be well understood in their idea of political strength, the hullabaloo of a parade was of superior weight to a long list of signatures pledging thousands of

acres to the "pool," here was something which could be seen and its significance grasped, here was undeniable evidence of concerted purposes; so each and every one clamored for a little badge of ribbon on which was printed words telling all who read that here was one of a committee in the vast network of organization. Hughes Randall would select committeemen, sub-committeemen and sub-sub-committeemen of various and varying unimportance until the organization grew to be a vast network of red tape and auxiliaries. But there was "method in madness," for each applicant to this show of authority was staunchly designating Hughes Randall to be the unquestioned leader and chief of the Equity. So, as the dominant spirit in this complex scheme of organization, he accepted or rejected proposals and ideas, gave advice and orders, always sure of his position, always confident of success even though he was not yet awakened to the menace which hourly was growing from the work of the "Secret Committee."

"Advertise," enthusiastically he admonished; "advertise as the business men do, as J. C. Crosby, the 'Trust,' will do, as I am going to compel the Equity to do. Advertisement is only the spreading of the propaganda which justifies and legalizes your right to be and do. Our publicity department must fight the 'Trust,' the non-pool farmer, also, we must discourage, deny, and crush the unlawful and insidious band of hoodlums who call themselves 'Possum Hunters' and attempt to compel support by coercion. Unmerciful publicity is our most powerful weapon to combat this scandalous wrong, so, we must 'play the game'."

Pity is that he had not attempted "unmerciful publicity" in affairs of private life when those most interested were calling and crying for "unmerciful publicity"; a dual pity that those most

interested in the affairs of the "Possum Hunters" were to render advertisement of slight value because of a most rigid, cunning and devilish secrecy.

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Hughes Randall had been more than anxious that Miss Caroline Easson would appreciate the significance of the popular movement and accept a place in the body of the parade along with his mother and the mothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts of the members of the Equity. Mrs. Randall would be one of the goodly number of women supporters of the pool who would patronize the assemblage, and had invited Mrs. Easson and Miss Caroline to be her guests in the Randall carriage.

But this prosaic formality did not meet with the approbation of the charming young woman. She was more "up to date" and did not appreciate the display of provincialism, she demanded more excitement than the amount which would be furnished by the ride "with two old women" through a "line of gaping school kids and loafers, like circus people"; therefore, she declined the proposal:

"Yes, of course, I'll be down town to see the parade, and go out to get some of the burgoo and roast pig and get all gaumed up with the mess, but don't think for one minute that I'm going to waste my time by riding in a carriage as slow as those clod-hoppers are going to walk; you see, Hughes, I'm going to be in the automobile with Mr. and Mrs. Kemp and Mr. Andrews, and it wouldn't look quite right for Mr. Andrews to be in the parade; do you think so?" He was forced to agree that it would be inappropriate for the "Trust" representative to be in line of a parade which aimed at the overthrow of the "Trust."

"But don't you think it would look better for you to align yourself with our faction in public?"

"Lord, Hughes, if my being engaged to you isn't 'aligning' myself with you then I miss my guess, and the people know that just the same as they know everything else about us." She paused for a moment that the inference to scandal should lodge in his thinking, then gaily bantered; "Gee, Hughes, I want to stand off and see you in all your glory as you come riding by as the big cheese in the shindig, don't you want me to worship you?"

He admitted that her worship would be most acceptable, but the subconscious man was wounded by this the only negative action to the success and popularity of the "Organizer" on the day of the Society's formation.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here they come," gaily shouted Miss Caroline to her host and hostess, and Mr. Andrews and the group of admirers who were clustered about the Kemp automobile where it was drawn to a prominent place by the curblin on the line of march. Jealously she gloried in the deference and attention she greedily received as the affianced bride of Hughes Randall; southern friendship and hospitality which was beginning to unfold towards her, to receive her as one of its own, was recognized not as a delicate perfume but the strong fragrance from attar. Petulantly she complained to her mother that aristocracy "was beginning to find that we belong." Saucily she accepted the court of the gentry, her wit and repartee though unfinished and wild was nevertheless pleasing to a certain sense of humor.

"Here they come," she repeated, and everyone sought positions from which they best could view the parade.

"Look at 'the city's finest'," impishly she ridiculed as a battalion of police headed the procession; "That's more walking than the cops have

done in a month of Sundays." Her remark was overheard by at least one man in line, and this guardian of the law who at one time had been thrust from his duty by her impudence, flushed with the anger of the commoner.

"Ooo, look at his majesty in the carriage with all the other big bugs." Jumping to her feet she waved a wild hurrah to Hughes Randall who in the first carriage in line was riding with the Governor of the State, the County Judge of Fayette County, and the Mayor of the City of Lexington. Her greeting was jovially returned by the occupants of the vehicle, and the numerous petty officials of State, County and Municipality following the lead of the honor carriage saluted Miss Easson as they passed.

"Play something lively," she called to the leader of the band as it was passing the automobile; instantly the bandmaster gave an order and not more than a dozen steps away the strains of "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" caused a group of horsemen astride superb horses to wildly cheer, for Durbin Ellis was the Marshal of the Cavalry and prominent in line was a banner which read "The Night Riders Will Get You If You Don't Watch Out."

"Ha, Ha, that's a good one." Caroline flip-pantly appreciated the section which followed the horsemen, "The fire department is here to put out the fires of the 'Possum Hunters'."

"Hep, hep, hep, one, two, three, four, three, two, one, four," Miss Easson marked time for the soldiers who were passing, and more than one guardsman and cadet violated the rule "Eyes ten paces to the front." But she was a law unto herself, and the battalion of State Guards followed by the battalion of cadets from the University of Kentucky accepted her flippancy as only soldiers may.

Followed a series of floats depicting the "trials and tribulations of the tobacco raisers," but only one of the displays won favor in the comment of Miss Caroline.

"Now, that's real clever," and she read the placard on the float: "We Know How To Play The Game."

A substantial truck had been draped with loose tobacco in "hand," or tobacco leaves tied together by a leaf of tobacco twisted around the stalk end of the leaves, and a table, also decorated with tobacco, had been placed in the center of the truck bed to accommodate the group of players in "the game." On one side of this table was a man dressed in the garb so ridiculed in the cartoons representing big industries or trusts, his diamonds and gold adornments were gaudy and pretentious. Opposite him was a man in the conventional garb of the farm-laborer, his clothes were worn and shabby, though clean. When the parade had started to move, these two men began to deal cards from a deck, to intently study the faces of their cards and then place wagers on the table raising or calling the bet. "Big Business" constantly lost and paid his losings from an ever diminishing stack of money bags filled with paper which had been stacked behind him when play began. So, before the parade had reached its terminus "Mr. Farmer" was in possession of all "money" and would gleefully point to the legend: "We Know How To Play The Game."

Miss Easson had some witty or sarcastic comment for each advertising or allegoric float in line and thoroughly enjoyed the passing review.

"Look at old whiskers on the fiery steed." The marshal of the second and larger section of mounted farmers was an elderly gentleman, and his horse truly was a "fiery steed"; but anyone of the five hundred horses in line could have been

so designated, farmers rival their neighbors in the beauty of their mounts.

Walking in line were the various county units which could be distinguished by placards or banners borne by a member in the front rank of the section, and these banners were accompanied by other placards bearing legends or pithy sayings relative to the aims of the society. Some of the sayings were witty, others boastful, while many urged lagging neighbors to join the "Society."

"Ladies and gentlemen, we shall now review the latest styles from Squashtown," ironically announced Miss Easson as she waved toward the carriages which were coming into view. These carriages and ever now and again an automobile, contained the mothers, wives and sweethearts of the "Society, last but not least of the parade."

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Enthusiasm was rampant and uncontrolled, and as is the general rule, this enthusiasm was the capital on which the "Society" would pay the largest dividend. Signatures may be gleaned, subscriptions may be garnered, collections taken, but unless the political spirit of glad unity, the morale, is true, then is the organization only a lifeless thing of paper and ink and vague law. But today everybody who was in sympathy with the scheme boldly advertised their hearty gladness which welcomed the moment of the "Abolition Of The Tobacco Growers," while those who opposed the issue could not fail to recognize the stubborn determination of purpose behind the "Declaration Of The Farmers Liberty." Democratic comradeship was generous and staunch, there could be no question in the unity of intention, fearlessly the aims of the society were set forth in unmistakable words and the non-pool farmer who failed to discern cunning force hidden beneath rough, impudent gibes indeed was dense.

"Will we win?" one farmer would shout to a friend or neighbor or possibly a group of whose number he knew not one.

"Yes, we'll win, for we can't lose," would be the inevitable reply, and the boisterous, grim determination which forced the expression would give assurance to all within earshot or cause the slacker to quake.

About the tables whereon the barbecue was served they stood and ate, laughed and talked, and ate more, disturbed only by the negro waiters passing through the grass covered aisles between the food laden tables, calling:

"Burgoo? Here's your burgoo, white folks, right out'v the big kittle. Look out, men, she's steaming hot an'll burn' fore you know it. Burgoo? Who's the next gen'man? Here you are, boss. Who's gwine call for more? Burgoo?" There was a genuine note of invitation in the negroes' call to the bowl, and the aroma from the well cooked, savory soup was most appetizing.

The picnickers were joyous and seemingly carefree, but only seemingly so, for beneath the attitude of frivolity was a spirit of determination which argued ill for the man or set of men who antagonized "Society" principles.

"The Senator from your district ain't so al-fired liberal in his views, is he?" one farmer would ask of another.

"No, but he will be 'fore election," was the answer where the Senator was not friendly, or, "You bet he is, he's here today and wants to get a chance to make a speech."

Politicians who could analyze the trend of public opinion, who could "read the writing on the wall," already were supporters of the "Equity" in all public utterances.

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As tremendously busy as Hughes Randall needs



must be during these the crucial moments of organization, he was not neglectful of the duty which a host owes to an invited guest, he courteously went to the automobile which held Miss Easson and her friends to show his solicitude over their entertainment. He ordered the negro driver from his mother's carriage to attend to the serving of the burgoo and barbecue viands to the occupants of the Kemp automobile, though advised them;

"You are missing half the fun by not getting in line as other folks are doing."

"Thanks," Miss Easson ridiculed, "we are rather high pedigreed pigs and so will take our mess at individual pens." She laughed to soften her gibe; "Now run along to your farmers, Mister President, and don't think we mean anything personal by not showing as much interest in this shooting match as you would expect your stenographer to show." Recklessly she laughed in an effort to make the words into a carelessly chosen simile, but at least one of her hearers read a dual meaning to the voicing, and understanding, he was hurt. He obeyed the injunction and returned to the farmers.

He plunged into the work at hand with a feverish abandon, mercilessly he flayed opposition, brilliantly and logically he presented each phase of the organization's plan, his speech held many phrases which were later to become as dogma to the creed of the Society. Excepting for a few minor alterations his ideas were incorporated into the fundamental laws of the "Society Of Equity," the "contract bond" was accepted as he had designed it, his rhetorical phrases completely won his audience, and he bound the enthusiastic assemblage into a powerful body of commercial importance. He was chosen to be permanent president at a salary which seemed to be out of pro-

portion to his experience, yet this wage was double the salary offered to him by the Crosby Tobacco Co. But if in that moment of his elation he could have looked into the future and foreshadowed the Society's tyranny, if he could have known of the havoc to be wrought, had he even dreamed of the blood-shed, ill-feeling and lawlessness, had Hughes Randall known of one-half of the deeds which were to be perpetrated in the name of "The Equity," he would have been dumb with fear and trembled as he refused to be leader to "The Possum Hunters." For while the "Secret Committee" pretended to make full reports to the headquarters, although they had agreed to be less dictatorial in their endeavors, yet they slowly were developing into a law within themselves and were responsible for an intermittent fever of evil influences. Their subtle power was beginning to be damnable because of the very secrecy which originally had been advised by Hughes Randall. Public sentiment was being aroused to combat this evil, and men who had suffered as Durbin Ellis lately had suffered were denouncing society principles and the "Farmer Czar."

## CHAPTER 17.

### "The Farmer Czar."

Opposition to the "Society Of Equity" if not totally destroyed was all but crushed to nothingness after the wonderfully enthusiastic mass meeting from which the Society dated its legal birth. Public opinion was swayed by the overwhelming mass of constituents who were enrolled as members in the pool, no reason for non-support was accepted as valid, the citizens of the affected counties of the State smilingly refused to accept as serious the charges that coercion was being practiced in the name of the Equity by a band of terrorists operating under the name of "Night Riders," or "Possum Hunters." A shrug of a shoulder, a sarcastic injunction to "get in line," a slur denouncing the "quitter," utter disregard was the payment meted the individual who would offer complaint against the methods employed. Certain of these claims were well founded and just, all of them could have demanded legal protection, each one of them was living within the statutory right to "be and do," even though each claimant based his prerogative on a desire to profit by the trade conditions which were fostered by the pool. True, there were a few exceptions to the mercenary clan: Durbin Ellis, a kinsman of Hughes Randall, a farmer possessing vast acreage of land, one who was skilled in the production

of noteworthy yield, stubbornly refused to join with the Society interests.

Durbin Ellis had hotly denounced his kinsman and the project when Randall, Clay & Randall declined to accept for trial the divorce case which he was to institute. The refusal rankled in his brain until he looked upon it as a personal affront, and prompted by charging more than personal profit he closed a contract with the local representative of the Crosby Tobacco Co. to sell all of the tobacco he could raise or buy to the "Trust." Having entered into this agreement he "saddled the argument" and attempted to prove himself justified in his position. He boldly persisted in his opposition and gave determined battle against the Society of Equity.

He developed into a self-appointed leader of the "anti" forces, his name was sure to be mentioned in discussions of the society's right, progress and justice; he was caustically denounced and openly hated by the Society clansmen who declined to regard caution in their utterances. But this crude display of dislike only urged him to renewed effort, with a sneer of contempt for his neighbors regard he freely gave time and verbal force to the spreading of sentiment which would be hurtful to the best interests of the organization, always he was ready to make outlay of money to bring about the Society's overthrow. The five tobacco barns on his farm had been augmented by two additional structures, each of twelve acre capacity, thus giving him housing room for seventy acres.

"It's going to be some crop," he had boastfully informed Mr. Andrews, and he was straining his every effort to make good that boast. His barns had been filled to capacity, bombastically he gloated over his success. He had doggedly and persistently kept his tenants "on the job" by

heated words or open pocketbook, and had hauled many odd lots of the weed which had been grown by truck gardeners in his employ. This tobacco was duly housed and evinced the certainty of a banner yield, the farmer-speculator was confident of substantial reward for his exertion, so he jeered at the cause he was fighting, and tauntingly hurled stinging epithets at the Equity members:

"So you are going to organize a farmer's trust, are you? Going to run the farm on the profit-sharing plan and tell every farmer just how much tobacco he will be allowed to raise. Wow, that's a great idea, it must have been thought out by some shrewd lawyer who had a finger in the pie." And he laughed with the full weight of his sarcasm.

"So you think you and 'The Farmer Czar' are going to put up a nice little corner on the tobacco market and make 'Old Money Bags' come across with just what you think you ought to have for the sweat of your brow and the jig of your brain. Ha, Ha, Ha, that's a knock-down and drag-out joke." Contemptuously he would go away without caring for an answer.

"Think I haven't got the right to plant what I want to when I want to, eh? Think I oughtn't to have a right to work my own land and raise a good, big crop just because you all are trying to put over a stiff bluff? Well, well, well, that's rich." And he would laugh loud and long, for in the noise of his own merriment he found justification and full answer for his questions. He was aggressive, he pressed the fight, he was ill-satisfied to remain passive and on the defensive, his very laugh grew to be a slur to the Equity followers who were ceasing to argue with him and began to treat his raillery with cold silence; he grew more offensive and laughed the louder.

There came a time when his laugh was sobered ; a time when he ceased his raillery, and learned to know the hell of war.

Following the usual practice his house boy brought the mail to him one morning ; but the servant did not know that one of the letters which he had taken from the mail box on its pedestal by the roadside gate did not bear the required stamp of postal service, the plain white envelope without water-mark or tracing of identification had been so usual in its appearance as not to attract notice.

But the master quickly detected the colossal simplicity of this envelope and its stenciled address. Possibly he had been looking for some such missive, no doubt the exaggerated reports which were beginning to be noised about concerning the doings of "The Possum Hunters" in other counties had caused him to wonder if he was secure from their insidious bluffing, at any other time he would have reasoned that some neighbor had placed a message in the R. F. D. box, but his keenly alive suspicions forbade him that guess while the rigid "business like" appearance of the envelope seemed the prelude for vandal cunning.

He held the envelope before him and eyed it askance. "Now that's infernally strange ; a letter addressed with my R. F. D. route, in with my other mail, and not a sign of a stamp or 'postage due' stamp anywhere on it." He was battling with an unworded, almost unpermitted thought ; "It's written out in typewriter letters, just like it was to be sent by mail, but it is in my box just like some neighbor put it there, and there isn't a single one of my neighbors owns a typewriter of the neuter gender."

His course just pleased him and quieted whatever of uneasiness this unusual missive had engendered, smiling, he tore open the envelope and

extracting the folded page, ceased to smile. He had read:

"Mr. Durbin Ellis is hereby warned to be less active in his boastful effort to defeat the Equity's plan." "The Secret Committee."

He read and reread the written words. He pronounced aloud the set formulae which went to make the warning from the "Possum Hunters." In unchecked hate he stared at this message until each word became a separate torch to fire his indignation and inflame his purpose. He railed, he ranted, he cursed, he swore; his every utterance was an anathema against the Equity with Hughes Randall as its chief official:

"I'd kill the man who dared speak the words in that letter. You sneak, you coward, you stick me in the back with this dirty little knife, then run like a yapping fiest. Bah! I would no more fear you than I would a yellow cur, for no man who knows the meaning of bravery would be guilty of this underhand bluff. 'Secret Committee,' Bah! 'Less active,' ha, ha, ha, I was beginning to get a little tired fighting when nobody seemed to be fighting back, but now? By hell I'll go to the end of the lane and back again just looking for trouble. 'Less active'? Say, they're going to think that I've just begun."

And he made good the intention of his words. He increased the price he was offering per pound, he flaunted his purpose, he boasted of his effort, with renewed vigor he struggled to purchase all unpledged crops and succeeded in buying eleven acres, five at a lump sum and six "over the scales."

"Less active," became his battle cry, and instead of the warning having the effect sought for by the committee it produced the opposite result; Durbin Ellis became more active, more vindictive.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here's a letter, Mister Dubin, white man tole me to be shore and give it to you soon's you come in, so thare it is, and he said there warnt no answer but for me not to ferget to 'liver it." And "Aunt Fannie" the "old time" negro cook, she who had been a member of the Ellis retinue since long before Durbin became lord and master, believed that she had performed an important trust.

Letters delivered to the house were quite in the ordinary run of affairs, it was quite customary for some tenant to leave a written request with the house servants, so Durbin gave slight attention to the procedure; "Alright, Aunt Fannie, hurry up with your supper, I want to go to town." As the servant was still holding the letter in her hand as she waited for him to finish with the removal of his overcoat and hat, he inquired; "Who's this important letter from?"

"Don't know Mister Dubin, it 'uz left here this afternoon whilst youall was over to tother place, but the white man 'structed me to be shore to 'liver it."

"What did he look like?" And Durbin smiled for he always enjoyed the vague, conglomerate mixture of "Aunt Fannie's" descriptions.

"He's pretty nigh tall, leastwise he'd be as tall as you if you warnt stoop-shouldered, an he had on a dark pull-down hat that'z pretty nigh faded til it warnt black no more, and his overcoat warnt no overcoat a'tall it 'uz just a rain-coat, and he'z smoking a cawn cob pipe that warnt lighted."

He thoroughly enjoyed the unique description, though he did not laugh, instead, he solemnly said; "Alright, Aunt Fannie, that's incriminating evidence."

"Suh?"

"I mean you have furnished excellent Bertillion measurements."



"Yessur, leastwise they's the 'tillion he give me."

But Durbin Ellis did, not hear the negro's reply, or if he had heard, the words left no tracing in his rapidly leaping thoughts, here was that in his hand which drove all other thoughts from his brain; for the plain, white envelope with its typewritten address was unmistakably from the same source as another which he had received weeks ago. Instantly his anger was awake, hate began to surge through his being as the electric current through the wires as the dynamo revolves, the very fact that he was struggling to offend others gave strength to his suspecting that here was that which was meant to offend him.

He opened and read:

"Mr. Durbin Ellis:

"You have been officially warned by us to stop your slander of the Equity, our purpose and officials.

"Instead of obeying our advice you have grown bold and ugly.

"Do you despise us to the extent of thinking that we are bluffing and will not make good our demands?

"Do you imagine we are doing this for your amusement and our idle pleasure?

"You have the 'right' to do as you want with what belongs to you, but our plan and our name is not your property.

"Savvy?

"If you do you will keep a civil tongue in your head, keep your money in the bank where it ain't in danger of turning to smoke.

"We smoke the Possums out,

"The Possum Hunters."

As he finished with reading this abusive and threatening message the crisp paper fell from his

trembling hands; and as it lit on the floor it partly folded as though it wished to hide the secret of its curse from all other eyes. Purpled in rage he stood staring at the senseless paper. He was too angry to follow a clear sequence of thought. He was too infuriated to speak the curses he wished. He stood dumb, foolishly staring at the offending page. He reached down to pick it up, and as he touched the paper the tension of his passion broke, he laughed; coarse, cruel, cutting, he laughed in glee and hate.

“‘Quit,’ do you say? Ha, ha, ha. Why, you fools, this is Durbin Ellis; you are not dealing with some poor, half-witted tobacco tenant who will cringe when a man looks at him sharply, you are dealing with a man, a man, ha, ha, ha, a man who is not afraid of any yellow cur alive, ha, ha, ha.”

“Were you calling me, Mister Dubin?” Aunt Fannie heard the wild voicing and hastily returned, wondering if her master was “on a spree.” “Did you want something, Mister Dubin?”

“Yes, bring me my whiskey but never mind the water.” And he laughed, for well did he know that someone’s bluff would be called.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the morrow he awakened with the full determination that this bold, ugly threat should be given the widest possible publicity. Whatever these men who bound themselves together by the cabalism of secrecy should be guilty of in future dealings with him that act would be published as their most unlawful devisement, for he was determined to place the matter in the hands of the county officials and receive their sanction of his behavior. He hastened to the County Judge and mastering his passion as best he could, stated the case as he saw it. He emphasized his right to legal protection, he elaborated on the gossip

which was being freely handed around relative to the dealings of the "Possum Hunters," he told of how "innocent farmers" had been "brow-beaten and whipped by these ruffians," how those men who had opposed the wishes of the Equity had been threatened with "disgraceful indignities" unless they "joined the Society." And he warned to his subject and heaped proof after proof onto the pile of evidence. But instead of the judge's dignified composure having a salutary effect on the temper of the irritated man it produced the opposite result. Angrily he demanded to know if protection was to be given him, and couched in his demand was a slurring intimation that the politician was in league with the "Night Riders."

"Really, Mister Ellis, I think you are needlessly aroused over the effort of your neighbors to induce you to join with them in the effort to produce beneficial results for the State at large. As I see the matter this is a case for some detective since no act has been committed. Have you, er, talked with the postal authorities?"

"No." Was the indignant retort; "Why should I go to them? The dirty letters were not sent by mail, they were only placed in the mail box, and the box is my property located on the county highway."

"Well, er, it seems to me this is nothing more than a hoax, a canard, a prankish joke, or else the scheme of some man or set of men with whom you have had some quarrel, some fuss."

"Quarrel, fuss, I don't fuss, I fight." He was ugly in the declaration.

"Then you had better find these men and fight with them for having made a fool out of you."

The quietly worded injunction had at least one result; it acted as a dash of cold water; Durbin Ellis all but gasped and stood foolishly staring at the suave official. For a moment thus they

stood, and during that spell a truth dawned on Durbin Ellis where before only suspicion had rested; he awakened to the full and complete understanding that the civil authorities were in warm if not expressed sympathy with the "Possum Hunters."

Furious over the full awakening he rushed from the Court House over to the Equity headquarters and demanded to see Hughes Randall:

"Look what your hellions have dared send to me," he flared as he threw the letter onto the desk of the Society's President.

"I am sorry, Durbin," a real hurt crept into his voice. "In the name of the Society Of Equity I apologize to you for this act of lawlessness committed by irresponsible parties who refuse to be guided by me. I have tried in every way I know to suppress this evil in the outlying counties and had hoped that it would not be visited on my home county, but this proves otherwise."

"Well what are you going to do about it?"

"I shall do everything in my power to break up the 'Possum Hunters,' I shall spare no effort to apprehend them. Great God, man, can't you see that they are doing the Equity more harm than any other faction at work?" The thought oppressed him, but he fought that idea with the full strength of his being; he leaped from his chair and stood towering above the outraged farmer as brain over matter. "Do you dare insinuate that I encourage or protect these ruffians."

"I insinuate nothing," was the snarl, "I only warn you that I shall hold you personally accountable for the acts of your puppets." And before an answer could be hurled he was gone.

He continued his lavish outlay of words denouncing the Equity and all that it stood for. He broadened his efforts to other counties and purchased two lots of tobacco in barns. He advised

the non-pool farmers to sell where they could get cash on delivery. He boasted that he would make delivery of his crop with a long procession of farm wagons loaded with tobacco and head the procession with a brass band. He bragged of the damage he was doing, —

On a moonlit night in cold December, Durbin Ellis was returning from Athens, a small township which was a few rods less than two miles distant from his farm. He had spent a pleasant and convivial evening flaunting his prowess before the hearing of less fortunate men who had nothing at stake in the controversy since they were farm hands paid by the month. The drive in the bracing air awakened and enlivened his thoughts, he chuckled as he saw the faint outlines of the two tobacco barns on the hill to the East of his house;

“Yes, and I’ve got three more on the back part of the farm, and the tobacco in ’em will be ready to deliver in just about three weeks and then I can commence working on those big babies.”

He drew reign and jumped from the buggy to unfasten the gate, but found the latch on the swinging framework fastened to the staple by a twist of wire, and in the coil of the twist was a crumpled paper.

Instantly the significance was forced onto him; “Some more of that cowardly ‘Secret Committee’s’ letter writing,” he snarled, and roughly cursed them in no uncertain language; “Why don’t you come out in the open like men and stop this acting like sneaking, yellow dogs?” Ranting and cursing he thrust the missive into his pocket and drove on to the house.

“Damn’em,” he muttered as he drew chair before the open fire-place, poured out a “stiff drink of liquor” and sat down with the crumpled letter in his hand; “Let’s see what you’ve got to say

now." Rudely tearing open the envelope he unfolded the paper and read:

"Durbin Ellis,

"Sir:

"You are making preparations to move your tobacco while you are cursing us and ours and boasting what you will and will not do. You have begged the County Judge to help you without stopping to think that he is powerless to assist. You impudently demanded that the President of the Equity should come to your aid without knowing that he is trying every way he can to stop us. You have forced us to tell you what you will and will not do.

"You will not haul your tobacco to town either in a circus parade or any other way.

"You will not be permitted to coin money from our suffering.

"You are going to keep a civil tongue in your head.

"If you do and do not do as we say we will pay you a visit.

"Woe unto the man we visit, for lo, he shall not forget us for the balance of his days.

"The Secret Committee."

"Sometimes called 'Night Riders,'

"or 'Possum Hunters.'"

He talked to the insensate piece of paper as he would have spoken to the author:

"So that's what I am and am not to do, is it? Well, well, I'm glad you've told me, I couldn't have guessed it from your other letters. You filthy carrion, why don't you come out into the open instead of sending notes and hiding out in the dark? And say, lads, whenever you come you'll find me ready for you, waiting for you, praying that you show your dirty hides, for I'm carrying a first-class forty-five calibre automatic

pistol just to talk to you with; and I'm a first rate talker with the little old girl, so come on."

They came.

Twelve days later he was returning from the city after having made arrangements with Mr. Andrews for the delivery of the first lot of the tobacco the following week. Dark had enveloped the earth for several hours, an ominous dark, an insidious dark, a devilish dark which seemed to find a mystic companionship in the howling, gusty wind and stinging, spitting snow. His horse was skittish and had nearly jerked him from the buggy when it shied and wheeled from the road as a fragment of paper had come hurling from a pocket of the gale. He swore at the animal and was wishing that he had remained in the city over night to enjoy the comfort of steam-heated rooms and the pleasant tinkle of high-ball glasses and poker chips; but, no, his presence was demanded on the coming day, and he was not a shirker.

"Whoa, old hoss; I guess you're glad to get back home, even if I'm not?" And he drew up at the gate and went forward to open it. The horse snorted a warning as it tried to back away from the entrance.

"What's the matter, you crazy fool, whoa, you act like you smelled a snake." He grabbed the bridle near the bit and tried to pull the animal forward. The animal stood firm and snorted; "Well stay there, you crazy fool." Sure of his own safety and prowess he advanced to the stone gate post and thrust forward his hand to unlatch the gate as he cursed the horse; "You're as big a fool as these 'Possum ——"

His hand had reached the cold steel clasp and his fingers were beginning to throw the catch, when—with the speed of a serpent's strike—a horny and powerful hand shot forward and

caught his wrist with a grip which would have held a more powerful man than the enraged farmer, though before he had had time to even speculate on an attempt to free himself his arm was jerked through the open panel of the gate, the gate with his body attached was jerked open and three ruffians had leaped from hiding behind the stone fence to rush forward and imprison him.

"You damned cowards," he cried.

But there was no answer from his captors, they were busy with the work which had been planned. Swiftly they acted and well. His arms were pinioned to his side by ropes securely tied, a rude head dress of black cloth was thrown over his head and fastened in place, his feet were trussed and he was a helpless prisoner. So swiftly was the scene enacted that Durbin could not afterwards tell even the height or build of any of his assailants, though he did remember that each one of them wore a black head-dress which entirely protected their features and outline. A garb which further prevented recognition by muffling the voices when speech was necessary.

"Whistle for 'em to come on with the horses," and after a shrill summons was sounded he heard the further command, "Now put him in the buggy, and one of you get in and drive over to the clump of trees and we'll give the blackguard the whipping he deserves."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a week before Durbin Ellis was able to leave the drug saturated bed of cotton padding; yet swathed in bandages and reeking with the pungent odor of soothing liniments he still furthered his preparations to move his crops of tobacco.

He had loudly refused to permit Hughes



Randall to enter the sick room when that one hastened to the bedside on the instant he heard of the indignity.

"No, damn him; tell him no he can't come in here; I don't want to see him or any of his yellow dog followers unless I know they're on their road to hell."

\* \* \* \* \*

The night was cold and dark, too dark to clearly discern the swiftly moving figures scurrying through the underbrush which grew along the fence lines of the Ellis farm. There were twelve figures, yet no sound emanated from the group other than that of hobnailed leather striking the frozen ground. On they slunk, cowering in the dark as though fearful lest some brave man of the night should see them in their hellish work. They came to a division fence, four moved straight ahead, four to the left, four to the right, and on they hurried into the shadowing night gleeful on their fiendish errand.

On the pike in front of the Ellis homestead a lone horseman paces back and forth, back and forth, as though on some sentry duty. Anon he halts, and by the aid of a hastily extinguished match looked at his watch, put the watch back into his pocket, rode the length of the pike fence of the Ellis farm, returns to his post near the farm gate, again looks at his watch, thrust it into his pocket, drew a pistol from his hip pocket;

"Bang! bang! bang! Three shots stung the stillness; then all is silence save for the clatter of the horses hoofs as swiftly the horsemen fades into the dark and is gone.

All is silence, a silence which broods ill, a silence which fittingly ushers three dull red

splotches in yonder sky to the rear, to the East, and to the West of the Ellis homestead. Brighter and brighter the dull red grows until three brilliant splashes of fire tell the story of three barns fired by "Possum Hunters."

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER 18.

### “Are You a ‘Possum Hunter’?”

“Great God, isn’t there something we can do to stop the ‘Possum Hunter’ and his damning work, something to stop him before he wrecks the Society he foolishly thinks he benefits, something to stop their outrage on decency, their slur against our civilization, their shame against the good intentions of our society; yes, more, their shame against the very name of Kentucky?” Hughes Randall was speaking, and pronounced his anathema with honest and clean anger.

Seven months have elapsed since the eventful formation of The Society of Equity. Seven months filled with the most strenuous demands on the mental capabilities of the society’s president. But during those months not one word of complaint had escaped the lips of the one man whose effort was the key-stone in the arch of endeavor. Never did he rant and rave when the office force made errors in the handling of the mass of detail. Always he was ready with those crisp spoken orders which signal efficiency. Many changes had been made in the office force, many changes made in the work, but there was one plan which was never altered, one method of filing which was never changed; and that was the index of membership instituted by Beatrice Herron. Yet if Hughes Randall ever thought of the discharged stenographer that thought was

fleeting and never placed in words during business hours and certainly not mentioned during the rapidly shifting scenes of pleasure permitted him by Miss Caroline Easson.

The tobacco which represented the acreage of the "pool" had been "cut," or harvested from the field; then "housed," or hung loose on the framework in the barns so that it might dry, or cure; then "stripped," or the leaves pulled from the stalk and sorted into the various grades defined by color, length and quality; then "redried," either by nature's process or at the various plants which are established for that purpose; and, finally, pressed into hogsheads to be stored in warehouses as the property of The Society of Equity. The executive department must account for every pound of this vast bulk; must see to the payment of insurance and warehouse charges; must debit and credit a myriad items of expense to their proper accounts; and must needs issue each and every order required to move and handle the millions of pounds of tobacco in the "pool," and the prorate of maintenance expense must be justly divided whether farmer Jones has pooled a two acre crop or farmer Doey pooled one hundred acres. All of that vast work had been attended by Hughes Randall cheerfully and painstakingly, his scheme was well started onto the road to success when now the "Night Riders," or "Possum Hunters," were about to destroy the project by bringing public disfavor onto the parent scheme. He had bitterly and bravely fought them, yes, but when two groups of people aim at the overthrow of a third group, the uninitiated public will insist on designating the two as allies. What could he do to disprove the alliance when some of the men in the Equity were "Possum Hunter" a member of the Equity? But fight them he did. Tonight as always.

"True, they have done very nearly all commercial damage they can do until another crop is planted, since there are only three non-pool barns of tobacco not delivered, and those barns are under constant guard by men in the employ of The Society of Equity." He did not smile over the incongruity which was presented when the "pool" was standing guard over the tobacco which was intended for delivery to the "trust." The situation was too serious to permit of the slightest levity. The brute force of mob law which was carrying the unreasoning members of the Society on the frenzy of its crest was also sweeping public opinion beyond the grasp of the Equity, and Hughes Randall was thoroughly aware of the damage which was being done to the organization he labored for. Perfectly he understood that the affairs of yesterday sway the sentiments of today with a relentless force. "But what of the crops which many of the non-pool farmers will insist on planting when we declare the Equity for a "no crop year"? We cannot even hope to guard each and every tobacco bed from destruction, it is beyond our means to have each field under guard, it would require a division of soldiers to patrol the highways. What is the solution to the "Possum Hunters" muddle? With an entreaty in voice, posture and words he turned to his counselor, partner, father.

"Truly it is a perplexing situation," his father admitted. Did he say, "I told you so"? Did he remind the younger man of warnings and pleadings not to establish the "Secret Committee"? He could have, since that was his position when the scheme was new. No. The morale of the Equity forces was keenly alive to the fight for tomorrow. He continued: "The public will not stop to think. The people as a mass will not pause to reason. In the newspaper they read

that a band of masked men appeared before the house of a non-sympathizer, threatened his life, or whipped him, and, yelling to drown the plea for mercy, set fire to his tobacco barn and rode away shouting curses. That account will be read, and straightway the public will censure the Equity because we are the parent body and should control our offspring. For us to admit our inability to cope with the 'Possum Hunters' would place the buffoon's cap of ridicule on the Society's chief. I fear that we are soon to read accounts of the salting of tobacco beds, or the plowing under of the young plants, the destruction of efforts to produce a crop; and when such accounts appear we shall again receive the censure."

"Can you suggest any plan, any method of fighting them? We know who they are; but cannot prove our belief. I have seen and talked to every man in our county, and those who are not flatly indignant over my questioning are evasive or mushy in sentimentality. Tom Quinn, who was chairman of our 'Secret Committee' before I issued orders disbanding the body, looks at me with the innocent smile of a babe and tells me that he 'might be able to find out who was in the crowd when Durbin Ellis was whipped, provided he was shown that such knowledge would assist the cause,' but he denounces my intimation that men of this county had anything to do with the setting fire to the Ellis barns. Not a single, lone man in our county admits membership with the 'Possum Hunters,' they deny affiliation stubbornly and persistently and in the very next breath will say that 'all members of the Equity should protect the Society's best interests.' Our detectives can find out nothing of value, so it's up to us."

Could Hughes Randall and the Society of Equity win in their fight against the manufac-

turers combine? Could he win in this demand for a better wage to the farmer when the non-pool producers were assisting the cause of "big business?" Could he hold together the members he already had as a unit while public opinion was so delicately poised as first to swing to one side of the controversy then sway to the opposition? Could the "eternal" hope for success be fostered and enlivened in the hearts of the Equity members while the "Possum Hunters" were tearing at the very vitals of democratic principles? Did he "know how to play the game?"

"I believe," his father told him, "a plan has been suggested to me which might produce most excellent results, but," there was mystery in his pause, "I am not yet ready to divulge its nature or its author."

The loud and persistent ringing of the telephone bell cut through their discussion. The "call" was from Miss Caroline Easson who told Hughes Randall to "hurry on over." As he left the room he urged:

"Accept the aid no matter how mysterious its origin or how much secrecy its author demands."

\* \* \* \* \*

When he left his parental home and once was in the Easson flat, he forgot all harrowing thoughts of the business world, laid aside the vestments of Equity president, and did not own to have one single thought which was not centered on Caroline Easson. His beauty loving nature drank deep of the pictured display of charms, for as the young lady sat leaning forward in her chair, her left elbow on her knee and her chin cradled in the palm of her hand, indeed, she was a most charming study of beauty pensive in thoughts of love.

Their greeting had been everything which his clean, warm, enduring passion could wish; now,

properly welcomed to the sweet bondage of love, he was held a most willing captive. The old fashioned grate-fire was not a necessity to their steam heated apartments, yet this "homey" play was one of the most successful of the young woman's plans. Silently she posed that he might worship more, she reveled in the glow from the glowing embers, full well knowing the value of light tones to the settings for romance. Patiently she waited until no other thought than love was possible.

"Hughes?" The plea for her lover's attention was in perfect tone to the setting, she would require his thought but that thought must be surcharged and bonded to love. She had a proposal to make which would require every device of her persuasion to win him to her way of thinking.

"Yes?" was the pleased, though softly spoken reply, for he was unwilling to break the charm which held him.

"Hughes, dear, why can't we postpone our wedding until fall?"

The instant answer from her captivated prisoner was a guttural growl without form of words; not rude, but purely, strictly, and entirely human. The veneer of civilization is no veneer at all; it is only a cloak or mantle which is painfully harnessed on when effete mentality holds sway and gleefully cast aside when man has lost his angelic semblance and is reduced to the plane of human thinking. When an ardent lover is met with some proposal which would rob him of love's cherished dream he grows as angry as the prehistoric cave-man and equally blood-hungry, the red blood of his being surges at fever tide through each fibre of his being as he hurls from him the cloak of civilization and culture that nothing shall interfere with brute strength in his battle for the right to own and dominate. So, the



growl, almost inarticulate, was evidence that Hughes was human.

"Why, Caroline," he was virile, "whatever can you mean? Already you have held the engagement for eight months. The announcement has been made, the date set, and I have been of the belief that you were as anxious as I for the wedding. Why do you ask for this relapse? Is it because——" an unknown fear which had several times gripped at his heart was about to be voiced.

"No it is not," she vehemently declared, "you know it is not because of any such silly reason, you know I love you." She was startled by the new look of mastery in his gaze, instantly she knew that her greed for bachelor gaieties would cost her dear.

He studied her for a moment and caressingly smiled as he quietly asked: "Then why?" And the ensign of his pride was shaken free from the bond of humility in which he had encased it months ago.

She sensed the change from abject slave to master reason, and almost timidly defended: "You know I am all but a stranger to Kentucky society and am not acquainted with all of the customs of you southern people; so I'm not onto the curves well enough to boss my own home; then, too, we're having such a jolly good time that it's a shame to just get married to stop it all."

In his gentle and good humored way Hughes laughed at her slang even as he refused to recognize her selfishness. He assured her that hospitality would continue after they were married, that she would have ample time to make an exhaustive study of the faults, failures, virtues and customs of Kentucky people at close range, that each one of their meals should be a party, and that they would no more be vagabonds in the

social world because they could then repay favor with favor.

"Now kiss me, and forget how to worry," he pled.

She accepted the caress and seemingly returned the thought, though in that intense moment she was wondering over this sudden and complete change in his demeanor. She could not understand how he had so easily conquered her spell. This was the first request he had ever denied her. She was deeply annoyed, and puzzled her brain to find a reason why, and woman like she struggled to put that reason in petticoat. Could it be that Herron person? Was the warning and advice she constantly received from Mrs. Kemp more than empty words? Did the "stenographer" still hold some sway over this man? With a determination born of jealous fear she resolved to at once begin some manner of investigation. She would——

"What are you thinking over?" Hughes questioned.

"I—I was wondering whether I ought to ask you something."

"Shoot."

"Are you, are you a 'Possum Hunter?'"

Boyishly he laughed and long, then sobered over the thought that one so close to him should ask the question. Even for the small fraction of a second if she thought him to be one of that band of men what would it be possible for the world at last to believe. He assured her of his honesty in denouncing the marauders, he launched into a careful outline of his fight against the "Night Riders" and explained that his closest affiliation with them had been an invitation to "join." "I believe the invitation was sent to me more as an audacious joke than for any other reason," he explained, "and ex-

cepting for my father you are the only other person who knows of my having received it.

"Oh, wasn't that funny," she laughed.

"I will show you the invitation and its accompanying reminder some time when you are at the office."

"Alright, but, listen, what horses are we going to bet on tomorrow?" Conversation quickly turned to "favorite," and other details of a race meeting, for Caroline had become an enthusiastic fancier of the "ponies" now in contests at the spring meeting on the Lexington track. But when Hughes bade her adieu until the morrow, Caroline reverted to her belief that Beatrice Heron was exerting some influence over Hughes Randall, and she was "determined to find out something about it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Almost at the same moment as Hughes Randall was explaining to Miss Easson his antagonism to the "Possum Hunters," and striving to find an acceptable excuse for their having sent to him an invitation to join the clan, a called meeting of the leading spirits of the "Night Riders" was in session; but it was not intended that he should know of this meeting until a later date when the order from high authority would be duly given him.

Six men were gathered about the stove in the space between the counters of a roadside store. The furniture and fixtures of the store were crude, battered and ill-kept. The stock nondescript, dusty, fly-specked and arranged in no care to order or display. The storekeeper was fat, good humored, and as careless of his personal appearance as he was of his goods for sale. The stove and stove-pipe were rusty and time worn, the fire bowl cracked and held together by a band of iron bolted to place, but the warmth from the

stove was inviting and the "big six" enjoyed nothing so much as an evening in "Bill's" store.

The meeting was democratic if nothing else; one "farm hand," two "tenants," and three land owners; all roughly the warmly clad in clothes which were designed for "every day," hard usage. The cob pipe was the most formidable weapon displayed by anyone present though one of the number was smoking a cigarette.

"Say, Tom," one of the number addressed the recognized "leader" of the assemblage, "hain't it about time we'uz having another meeting and kinder getting the boys in line?"

"Don't you know, I was just thinking that my own self," another one of the "the six" vouched, "there's going to be a passel of work to be done around here." His "Haw, haw, haw" was chorused by the other five and "Bill."

"Yes, boys, I guess we might as well begin getting busy," Tom decided. "There's old Bob Simms to be argued with on the true principles of democracy, there's Ben Histle has to be whispered to when there ain't a soul closer than the owl to hear what's said, there's Jake Howe who seems to be calling for a dose of medicine out of the Durbin Ellis bottle, and we've got just about one hundred members of the Equity who haven't taken the oath of the 'Possum Hunters,' so it's about time we were flitting around the country holding sessions of initiation."

"Oh, boy, let's get busy with the fun," Bill, the store keep chuckled, and laughter was boisterous.

"Don't let's forget Hughes Randall," one of the "six" menacingly cried. "And, say, let's put him through the initiation, no matter whether he wants to join or whether he kicks like a steer."

All excepting Tom and Bill were boisterously eager to accept the suggestion as a definite plan, Tom cautioning: "That might be great sport,

and, again, it mightn't, for you don't want to forget that Hughes Randall is **SOME** man."

"Some hell, we can handle the biggest man God ever built."

General laughter, then a noisy discussion during which it was decided that Mr. Randall should be "called to the altar."

"That's settled, now when'll we meet?" Bill inquired.

"'Bout a week or ten days," Tom advised; "Just as soon as I can get things in shape and notify Hughes."

Roars of laughter, and one of them said:

"Say, man, that's going to be the greatest initiation the Committee ever held." A prophecy which was true in every detail.

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER 19.

### **"I Will Try to Advise You."**

Miss Caroline Easson did not try to conquer the hurtful suspicion which was rapidly forming in her thought; indeed, she bent and twisted every saying of Hughes Randall until it fitted around the standard of deception. She was annoyed and resentful because he had declined to permit a postponement of the date set for their wedding. This was the first request he had ever refused her. She did not reason over the refusal from any other viewpoint than her own wishes; she had wished it, that was sufficient cause why he should have consented to the proposal. Vague though her reasonings were, they were beginning to assume proportions which permitted her to believe that her fiance still was under the influence of Beatrice Herron. She determined on a most rigid analysis of the situation. She knew the tremendous value Miss Herron had been to the Equity. She realized that the Society was passing through a crucial stage during which Miss Herron's assistance would be of the greatest value. She was determined that the "stenographer" must not be thrown in close contact with Hughes Randall. Did the Society intend to return Miss Herron to its employ? Had Hughes determined on this procedure, and fearing to trust himself to the wiles of the adventuress, wish the marriage to take place almost at once? Around

and around the standard of deception she saddled and rode suspicion after suspicion until she was most miserable. She wished for the morrow with its round of pleasures to come and assist her to re-establish her firm control over the conduct of Hughes. She would try to forget all harrowing thoughts while placing reckless wagers on the "ponies" at the track. A long telephonic conversation with her friend and counselor, Mrs. Kemp, failed to satisfy. She wished Mrs. Kemp would be more exact in her statements. She wished——

The telephone bell rang with spiteful clatter. Surely this was Hughes to arrange the day's program.

It was. And after he had "jollied her up," he told her:

"Caroline, it is absolutely necessary that I go to the Capitol today, to arrange with the Governor to have State police assist in the protection against the 'Possum Hunters'; two tobacco beds were destroyed in Christian county last night and I shall demand that the authorities help me. You are not angry because I break my appointment with you, are you?"

Oh no, she was not "angry," she was furious. This was the first appointment he had ever broken. This was the first time he had ever failed to amuse her, no matter the cost. She was sure, now, that her suspicions were well founded. Something must be done.

Her words and voice were pleasing to the ear of Hughes as she wished him success on his trip to the capitol, but her thoughts were contrarywise and racing at damaging speed.

"Darn it all, is he actually going to see the Governor, or is he going somewhere to see that sardine, or herring, or whatever her name is. Why couldn't he have told me sooner so that I could have gone to the country with Mary Kemp. Now,

everything is in a muddle now, nowhere to go." She reasoned that her afternoon was "ruined," since she had devised no secondary pleasure while the race meeting was in progress. What was she to do to "kill time" until the essential Mrs. Kemp returned from the country? Nothing pleased her, everything irritated her. Sarcastically she declined her mother's suggestion that she go, with her, to a meeting of the "Drama Club."

"Yes, and listen to a lot of second-hand talk from dames who don't know whether Ibsen wrote 'Rip Van Winkle' or 'The House that Jack Built,' nothing doing."

She telephoned to several friends in an effort to "scare up a date"; but everybody had something else to do. In the early afternoon she left home intending to walk "downtown." "I'll find someone who's not busy, and who doesn't want to talk literature as she is spoke."

But her plans were "gang alee," "everybody seems to be with somebody else 'cept poor little me," and she was almost decided on solo amusement and was nearing one of the "picture shows" with this object in view, when she "met with good luck in a bunch"; for as she drew near to the entrance to the theater she met with a group of young society girls, and soon became the center of an admiring and animated assemblage; for she was the bride-to-be in the most notable wedding on the social calander.

Soon she was giving in elaborate detail the description of a "perfect dream of chiffon and lace," to a chorus of "Oh, isn't that just too lovely for words," "Too perfectly divine to think of," etc., and she was launching on further chatter of trousseau when her attention was diverted by a voice calling:

"Oh, Miss 'Carline.'" Full well knowing who it was to thus address her, she turned to greet Mr.



Albert J. Andrews, local purchasing agent for the Crosby Tobacco Co. Mr. Andrews had driven to the curb in a new "Roadster," and was jovially motioning for her to come closer to the automobile.

"Do you know this 'loafer' beside me?" Mr. Andrews inquired as he indicated a gentleman on the seat of the car; seeing she did not: "This is Miss Easson, soon to be Mrs. Equity, Mister Ellis."

Durbin Ellis smiled his pleasure at knowing her, though his voice was devoid of happiness as he chided:

"I am more than glad to know Miss Easson, but I can't say that I admire the title which the 'Trust' gives her."

"Then this is *the* Mister Ellis."

Her eyes flamed over hateful memories as he admitted: "The 'Possum Hunters' burned three of my tobacco barns last winter." Even the fleeting silence grew oppressive till he dismissed it by: "But let's talk about something pleasant, what do you think of 'Andy's' new car?"

At that time the automobile industry was in its infancy, the one cylinder car was reckoned a luxury while only an expert dared to venture forth in a four cylinder machine, so each new car was a subject of envy and delight. Miss Easson gave due attention and praise to the roadster, and was wildly delighted over the proposal:

"Let's take a spin out to the Country Club."

"Anyone out there?"

"I'll find out." He left her to chat with Durbin Ellis while attending the errand and soon returned with the information: "Mrs. Kemp and husband are out there, they stopped in on their way back to town, and said for me to bring lunch and come out for a party; shall we go?"

Caroline was further pleased when Mr. Ellis, pleading a business engagement, begged to be

excused, and she and Mr. Andrews soon were in the company of "Mrs. Kemp and husband." After a round of golf, Mrs. Kemp left the bride-elect to entertain the men while she prepared the lunch—the club was not formally opened for the season. But Mr. Kemp wishing to repair a golf club which had come to grief during their game, excused himself and went to the locker-room.

"You know," Miss Easson informed Mr. Andrews when they were alone, "I told Hughes that I wanted him to ask you to be our best man at my wedding." She imparted the information with the same indifference she would have displayed while selecting a bottle of shoe polish. The approaching event was not momentous in her estimation, it was only a vehicle which was to convey her to more solid social ground. The formalities were of slight consequence, certainly there was nothing so personal in the affair as to cause one to get excited, assuredly there was no one to please if she was satisfied, she did not "care a fig what people said or thought." No one had dared question any motive or plan since the morning when "that stenographer" had written her "insulting letter"; so, her selection of groomsman was to be purely a matter of whether Mr. Andrews would be of benefit socially. She believed he would be, in fact, she was positive that he was the choice of all who might aspire to the honor; he would help socially, and—as Mrs. Kemp had told her during the game of golf—he would be of assistance in "locating that Herron person."

Mr. Andrews was perplexed over the information and the manner in which it had been imparted. Certainly he was accustomed to the ways of society, gladly he joined in the spirit of social affairs, but here was one demand on his attention which puzzled him. He and Mr. Randall

were friendly and courteous towards one another but their opposition in the bitter tobacco fight had placed a slight restraint between them. He could not fathom the reason why the request was made. Closely he studied the features of the "Picture girl," wondering if some shadow in her features would indicate a victory over Randall's wish as to groomsman; and if there had been the slightest show of triumph in her features he would have instantly declined the honor. But there was no trace of controversy, only a doll-like selfishness, and he intended no disrespect, but at that moment he was wondering why a man of Hughes Randall's capabilities would choose this girl instead of——; he recalled his errant fancy.

"I shall be more than delighted to act as groomsman during the approaching festival."

The dignity of words and expression compelled her attention; she studied him a moment, then impulsively demanded: "Now just why did you say your little speech with such pomposity?" She was perplexed, yes annoyed; could he suspect her of motives?

He did not at once reply, for the situation was new and without precedent in his life. He smiled as a foil to her impetuosity, and with a wish to play for time in which to worm some diplomatic reason for the severity of dignity, chided: "You know, Miss Easson, it's a pity you never owned a brother, there is so much that a brother can do to help out in personal affairs, don't you know."

The shift of subject was so unexpected, so sudden, yet so thoroughly in line with an object which she had in view that it permitted her a wild idea that he was proposing the protection of a "brother." She determined to encourage the thought that she required guidance, instantly

her expression and manner became meek and child-like, her posture was that of a little sister asking the protection of a big brother, her every thought was centered on a confidence she wished to make, she lisped, "Oh, 'Happy Andy,' I have always wanted a big brother."

Mr. Andrews was clearly disturbed. The conversation was swift hinging about sentimentality and must be carried to more conventional grounds. Always he had found spirited diversion from business worries in the impersonal social chatter of the fascinating Miss Easson and gladly welcomed her among his most intimate friends. Her faults, failures and vanities were not to be discovered in the gay indifference of social festivities, and the strictly personal had never been broached between them. He accredited her slight interest in the fight between the Equity and his Company to her general disregard for economic questions, and on more than one occasion had recklessly laughed when she gave caustic expression to freedom of beliefs. He was a man of affairs, courteous and affable, he knew that this situation required adroit handling, therefore, he bowed with charming grace and volunteered:

"If you ever require my assistance, I will try to advise you."

"That's perfectly dear of you."

Clearly the situation was getting beyond his control. He must find some topic of conversation which would remove that from the sentimental. He searched his mind for that subject and pounced upon a business scheme, one which, no doubt, she might assist him in solving, one which required certain information which Mr. Crosby, the president of his Company, had directed him to secure.

"By the way, Miss 'Carline,' do you chance to know what became of Miss Herron, or where she

is located at present?" He would have offered a feasible excuse for asking the query had he not been startled by the intensity of her expression.

She leaned forward in her chair, her eyes hungrily beseeching. "Why? Why did you ask me that? Why do you care to know where that person is? Why?" And her demand broke with the intensity of her feeling as she pled, "Do you intend taking the 'brother's' part by demanding an apology from her?"

He was silent. Instantly he understood that some crude expose was on the verge of voice. He wished he might check the flow of words, he did not sanction the confidence, but it came so unexpected, so brusque, so effectively natural, that he was powerless. He was aware that this was the sequel to a discovery which he and Durbin Ellis had made months ago. He was hearing the true reason why Miss Herron left Lexington. But would it be of benefit to his scheme? Could he make use of this information as an added inducement in his plan to secure the services of the competent young woman? Silently he gave ear to the gossip, but her words left only one imprint on his memory; that one was a belief that Miss Herron would violate no personal trust by coming into the employ of The Crosby Tobacco Company. His only comment was given when he advised her to go to the local secretary for her information, and then advise him as to Miss Herron's residence. He experienced a deep feeling of relief when Mrs. Kemp came to announce lunch, and when the moment for their return to the city arrived he was overwhelmed with chagrin while voicing voluble apologies because his car refused to budge. A discomfiture which was only remedied by Mrs. Kemp agreeing to carry Miss Easson to the city while he waited for the expert machinist to come from the garage.

## CHAPTER 20.

### “One Woman in a Million.”

Albert J. Andrews, Kentucky representative of the Crosby Tobacco Company, had but slight difficulty in locating Miss Beatrice Herron in her position of trust in Denver, Colorado. By a most careful and judicious inquiry he learned that she was confidential secretary to John R. Clay, the most prominent lawyer in the state of Colorado, and that she was gaining local renown as a leader in the Suffrage politics. But once in possession of these facts he did not at once hasten in quest of her; he was envoy extraordinary, so must be diplomatic; he was a pupil of J. C. Crosby, a prince in the commercial world, and had learned that “an important interview is of superior value when it appears casual and informal.” By an adroit conversation with a reporter for the “Western Appeal” he secured “space” in the local sheet in “An Interview on Tobacco,” and he enlarged “the sorrow he felt for the lamentable conduct of the ‘Possum Hunters,’” he intimated that it was quite possible for the manufacturers to deal with a society of law abiding citizens but impossible for that same corporation to “connive with felons.” Then, quite confident the article would come to the notice of Miss Beatrice Herron and thereby center her interest on certain homespun facts when an interview should become “formal,” he left the city on an excursion into the moun-

tains and reveled in the grandeur of nature's craft, he basked in rugged grandeur.

Miss Herron saw the article which was featured in the evening paper, and eagerly read every word in the story, then hungrily reread to make certain that no paragraph, sentence, word, had escaped her gleaning. She struggled to center her mind on the work which had engaged her before the paper had been tossed into the office by the carrier, but, again she picked up the paper to debate the conditions which existed in her natal home. All news from Kentucky which had as its theme the fight between the farmer and the "trust," especially the depressing history of the "Night Riders," seemed to hold a personal message for her, a clearly defined message which called to her.

She wished that Mr. Andrews had known of her residence in Denver and had paid her the compliment of calling on her, there was so much which the paper left unsaid which he could say in so few words. She was quite certain that he would have been willing and delighted to give her the "inside" detail of the fight and tell her the story which the public could not understand and would never hear. He could talk to her in the technique of the game and tell her more in ten minutes than the public would know in that number of years. She called a young law student who was studying at the office, and asked him to go in quest of Mr. Andrews——

But Mr. Albert J. Andrews, diplomat, had left the city.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the afternoon of his return from the pleasure trip, Mr. Andrews, jaunty and care free, the impersonation of "casual and informal," ostensibly called at the office of John R. Clay to pay his respects to a former Lexingtonian, but in

reality he was on a more serious mission and was obeying an order from his chief, J. C. Crosby, president of the Crosby Tobacco Company.

At the moment of his arriving at the office, Miss Herron was deeply engrossed in typing a document of quite serious import, and she was so completely absorbed in the process of her work that she failed to hear the slight noise he made while opening the hall door and advancing through the reception room to her office. And because of this absorption her visitor stood for a moment at the threshold of the inner office in open admiration of her majestic beauty. At that instant he thought of the girl whom Hughes Randall was to marry, and was unable to resist a mental comparison between her and the woman before him. He intended no disrespect for the one by an involuntary clenching of his jaw, nor a compliment to the other one when he determined to concentrate every iota of his ability in securing an affirmative answer to his commission.

"Hello, there, Miss Lexington," was his jovial greeting, with the trick of pronunciation on "Hello" which makes from the word a bond of fellowship.

"Why, Mister Andrews," was the glad reply. Instantly ceasing her work she arose to greet her guest with a hand-clasp firm and fervent and a radiant smile. "I am awfully, awfully glad you remembered one of your old boarding-house pals while on your trip to the 'Golden West' spreading 'Trust' propaganda," merrily she laughed. "I read every word of your interview on the tobacco situation and there are just about one thousand and one questions that I want to ask you."

"Good," was the enthusiastic challenge. "Then I may visit with you and not be ordered out of the



office as a lazy vagabond interfering with your work?"

"We declare half holiday in your honor," was her laughing extravagance.

"Then I may smoke and make myself otherwise at home?"

"Please do." She indicated the most comfortable chair in the reception room, saw that an ash tray was on the table near to his hand, and, her guest comfortable, eagerly requested:

"Now please begin at the beginning and tell me every thing that has happened in the tobacco war during the past ten months."

"You read my article?"

"Yes; but asking me to be satisfied with that is like asking grown-ups to be satisfied with mush and milk." They laughed over the simile; then she told him, "I want to hear the 'inside why.' I want the reasons, not the gossip. I want words from your brain, not sentences from your fingertips. You represent 'the enemy,' so I will accept your statements with a grain of salt," she smiled; then grew serious, "you know, I have more than a kindly interest in the tobacco growers."

And the man whom Miss Caroline Easson had commissioned to humiliate this woman, accepted her statement with the kindest of understanding, bowed to her as one worthy of regard, and at once launched into a detailed account of the situation. He talked from his brain and his heart, he gave a more complete account than he had ever given to his chief, he was careful, explicit and precise though thorough, for if there is ever one time in a man's life when he can actually "talk," it is when he is telling the business history of his personal conduct to an attractive, responsive beautiful woman. Quoting statistics and forecasts, he gave the total number of pounds of tobacco which had been bought from nonsympa-

thizers and other sources; he assured her that this amount when added to the vast quantity in the "trust" warehouses would suffice to run the factories at full capacity for fourteen months, and before that time had lapsed the farmers of other states than Kentucky would be producing this premier "weed" of commerce.

"But," she protested with the manner of an expert, "they haven't the 'limestone' soil which the tobacco requires."

"Science is preparing fertilizers."

"They haven't the barns."

"We are building them."

"They do not know how to plant, cultivate and handle tobacco."

"Brains can be rented at so much per month."

"Granting all of that, they still will not be able to produce a plant having the body and flavor of the Burley."

"Already we have overcome that objection by a secret process."

She laughed in mild ridicule, "yes, and with no better results than you have had while trying to manufacture 'Havana' cigars from Connecticut fillers."

Wisely he dismissed the issue with a smile and carried the narrative to less debatable grounds. He laughed into a vivid account of the "Night Riders."

"Tell me, honestly," she pled, unwilling to believe the newspaper stories of the misbehavior of her former friends; "how much damage have the 'Possum Hunters' actually done?"

"They have destroyed not less than fifty barns of tobacco; many of them already contracted for by our company, such as was the case in the Durbin Ellis affair. They murdered two growers who attempted to interfere with their plans and prevent destruction. They brutally whipped and

scourged from the community, farmers who were brave enough to denounce them for the reign of terror which they attempted to produce. They have sent hundreds of threatening letters to farmers, tenants, buyers, and in fact every one remotely connected with the tobacco industry. They are waging their war against the non-pool farmer by destroying, or 'salting,' tobacco beds so as to prevent the growing of a crop. And, Miss Herron, they have hurt the Society of Equity far more than they have hurt the 'trust'; for while their aim has been to spread fear among the farmers who were not in sympathy with the plan, they at the same time have created a public opinion which at any moment may turn to open disapproval."

"But who are the 'Night Riders?' Who controls the conduct of the 'Possum Hunters?' Who is responsible for their misdeeds? Who protects them?"

"The members of the Society you helped to organize, and some of the people who you would protect with every word of your vocabulary are the responsible parties. No, please do not interrupt me"; for she was on the verge of stubborn denial. "Let me give my reasons for that statement: If the Society is not responsible, then who in God's name is? They are the only ones who would be benefited by a unanimous alliance. Every threat given to one of their victims is to "pool" their tobacco, or to cease adverse criticism, and once a man becomes a member of the Society, from that instant he is immune from the indignities of the miscreants. And—I know you will attempt to refute the claim—the Klan was organized by an order from the headquarters of the Equity."

"Do you mean by that statement that the officers of my Society are members of this band

of marauders, rowdies and murderers?" was her indignant, impulsive demand as she leaned forward, all intense.

"Such is the claim of public opinion, such is the only conclusion to be drawn under the circumstances; history proves the assertion, scandal verifies it, and gossip has begun to assert that even Hughes Randall is one of them."

She drew away from him as though he had struck her a blow, she was pale and trembling from the strength of sudden passion, her voice vibrated with the strength of unfathomable love as she hurled: "Then you can deny that as a base, ignoble lie." If Beatrice Herron had only been ordinary looking before that supreme moment, she was gloriously beautiful as she defended the name and honor of the man who had hurt her.

"Wait," Mr. Andrews vehemently pled, "I do not believe the rumor; knowing the man as I do, it would be impossible for me to accept it as truth. I am only reciting gossip, and showing you the trend of public opinion. But this much I do know and can vouch for as truth: Unless something is done to check the raids, to stop this reign of terror, to disband the 'Possum Hunters,' then the Society is doomed to an ignoble defeat. If it is not done, then the farmers who constitute the 'pool' will be the lifelong losers, for, in protecting our own interests, my company would refuse to deal with them in future years." He elaborated on the stand which his company was taking, and skillfully worded his declaration in an effort to compel her sympathy for the farmers. Beatrice almost believed that the Society had lost the fight and that those farmers who had been induced to pledge their tobacco now had no friend in the offices of the "Trust."

At that instant the representative from the Crosby Tobacco Company ceased his plea for sympathy to the farmer, and seemed to awaken to some new idea: "Miss Herron," his voice held hope and promise, "how would you like to return to Lexington and accept a position where you might be of assistance to your former friends? Will you consider a very substantial offer?"

As the smoke from a lighted cigarette, which is resting on the table's edge, will rapidly rise in a direct line and then of a sudden break into myriad curves and clouds with joyous eagerness to be free and to drift willy nilly where its elements belong, so did fancy and longing leap and bound in the thought of Beatrice Herron as she heard this offer to take her back to Lexington. Her heart became enmeshed in the web of home; her brain hurled her to the assistance of the cause she loved. No one who has not known a great, a noble love, could understand the battle waged in thought.

It was an unfair fight with tremendous odds against her. When she left Kentucky she had lost both love and home, and it seemed to her that now each friendship, each tie and association, her childhood memories, girlhood fancies, were all, each and every one, the silken strands of a mighty cable which tugged and pulled and strove to draw her back to Lexington. A weaker personality would have long since have given up the fight and returned to seek employment, she had waited, and now the position sought her.

"I am authorized," Mr. Andrews explained, "to offer you the position of manager of our publicity department at a salary of two thousand dollars a year."

Two thousand dollars. More than twice the amount she now received. Could she withstand

this added influence? Would she continue to give battle to the thoughts which had fought to conquer her determination since the day she had left Kentucky? She had each day hushed the folkcall with less hurt than its yester urgings. But this note of gold was now added to all other claims. Gold? No, she detected the tone of brass, and on closer searching found the peuter.

"And fight against the cause I love? Give you an honest effort in trying to break down the very defenses I helped to build?"

"That is a question of sentiment, not one of business. Think well over the offer, Miss Heron, before you give a final answer. Your definite answer is not required today. If you desire time to weigh your best interests against sentiment I will leave the question open to your debate and accept your answer by letter." He repeated the most flattering offer and tried to reason with her that she would be of value to her friends while in the employ of his company. He had been instructed by J. C. Crosby, prince in the commercial world, just how the plea should be made; closely he followed his instructions, vividly he remembered his chief telling him: "We must be in possession of every possible advantage we can secure if we win in this fight with Randall, for he is making good his boast; he 'knows how to play the game'." So did J. C. Crosby know how to play the game, so did Albert J. Andrews, so did an honest, noble, wondrous love know how to play the game called life.

"No," she firmly said, "I decline your wonderful offer." Then her lips slightly quivered as she begged: "Now I—please go, for I—I want to be alone."

Albert A. Andrews, gentleman, arose, took his hat from the table, then going to her, silently

held her hand in a firm and friendly clasp as he murmured:

“Good-bye, you are one woman in millions.”

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## CHAPTER 21.

### **"I Am Fighting in the Open."**

Mr. Andrews reported the result of his interview with Miss Beatrice Herron to two people, Miss Caroline Easson and J. C. Crosby. The latter report was by far the easier of the two for him to render, even though it was an admission of complete failure on a diplomatic errand and included in its scope the discussion of corporate technique which was weighty. He did not exaggerate the value of the young woman to the project in hand and the great worth she would be to the Crosby Tobacco Company should he be able yet to induce her to change her mind, nor did he attempt to minimize the assistance she could render the Society of Equity should they be able to secure her services; he did hazard a belief that she would not listen to an offer of employment by the Society should that offer be made by Hughes Randall.

Said Mr. Crosby: "I am not surprised at the young woman refusing to accept our proposal; from what you tell me of her, she must be an exceptional woman and one worthy of the highest regard. Her value would have been the greater to us since she assisted in the formative period of the 'pool,' and no one can destroy a combine as effectually as the builder. We will keep her in mind, and at some later date renew our offer at an advanced figure, when the



Equity's chances are less bright than now, perhaps she will then reconsider and accept." He dismissed that subject and invited: "You may now report in detail the existing conditions in Kentucky."

Since the day on which Mr. Crosby made his visit to Kentucky and endeavored to frustrate the Society's plan by securing Hughes Randall as an employe of the "Trust," the magnate had personally supervised the management of the "Burley" situation. Instantly he had recognized the ability of his antagonist and did not feel content to permit a subordinate to measure swords with the young Kentuckian. He was thoroughly conversant with the percentum of "pooled" tobacco in each county of the State, recognized by name the leaders of the anti-pool faction, and could readily name the plague spots in the Commonwealth where the vandalism of the "Night Riders" would be most liable to emanate. A knowledge of detail which had not been entirely acquired by written communication, for each month he required a personal interview with the State's representative, Albert J. Andrews.

The gigantic corporation which is the ruling factor in any field of commercial activity, and most certainly an organization which wielded the vast influence and power dominated by the Crosby Tobacco Company, must needs be a magnificent engine of industry, which is fearfully and wonderfully made. Thousands of day laborers will be given work which requires much manual exertion and little thinking, for their wage is balanced by "the sweat of the brow." These men are under the supervision of a foreman, a petty official who is but little removed from manual toil, a fledgling in the "brain world." The foreman reports to a superintendent, the superintendent is amenable to some minor official; and

so, on and up the ladder of power until a department head is created. Each department is ruled over by a most capable general, the one and only man who is held responsible for the result which is obtained in his branch, and this result is to be reported only in the specie of the realm: Dollars and cents. Above those department head giants of brain-power is found the super man, a prince of the commercial world, the man who dictates and dominates the policy, diplomacy, law by which this vast organization shall be governed; this chief will calculate his man power in units of a thousand, he must be able to understand the alchemy of a million dollars, he will generalize by states and understand the legislation of nations. Such a man was J. C. Crosby, president of the "Trust," the man against whom Hughes Randall was "playing the game."

Mr. Crosby gave careful attention to the minute report from his subordinate, not knowing that the fullness of detail could be traceable to its rehearsal before a charmingly attentive young woman. He did not offer advice or give instruction until Mr. Andrews had reported in full, then, speaking in the rapid cadence of the efficient general well in command, he said:

"Be most careful in your published statements on the subject of 'Night Riders,' or 'Possum Hunters'; they are the most powerful force at work to tear down the superb effort of Mister Randall, therefore they are unintentionally assisting us. In their insidious warfare against the non-pool farmer they are creating a contempt for the Society itself, that contempt is fast forming in the mind of the public at large, and that 'public' is the only customer our company caters to. Ninety per centum of the tobacco growers in the state of Kentucky are members of the Equity, to maintain our factories at full capacity we require

eighty percentum of all 'Burley' produced, it is therefore imperative that we secure a portion of that ninety percentum for our factories. I do not believe it possible for Mister Randall to win in his fight against existing conditions. He is confronted by our silent, watchful, waiting policy, by a stubborn opposition from the anti-pool farmers, by the destructive influence of the 'Possum Hunters,' by a fickle public, last but not least, he will very shortly be confronted by the growing menace of the whining quitters on the inside whining to get out of the combine and sell their tobacco to pay their debts. But he is a man who may win over every opponent and perform the seemingly impossible, it is therefore necessary for us to be wide awake and take advantage of every scheme possible, so you will exert your every effort in the endeavor to induce Equity members to demand their tobacco from the Equity. We could meet their price and force the consumer to pay more for their tobacco, I could permit sentiment to govern my action and close the contract with the Equity tomorrow morning, but by doing so we would be forced to increase our working capital six millions of dollars and a working deposit of that proportion cannot be floated on sentiment. If he succeeds in holding the pool together and forces us to meet his demands after this year's crop has been bought up, he at that moment crushes all of our opposition; for on the day we agree to his scale of prices and guides, we, in that contract, will purchase his entire holding and force our competitors to buy their raw stock from us. Be careful what you say and how you say it. At all times support the honest citizen in their upholding the physical law, and give financial assistance to the poor devils who suffer from the ravages of the Kuklux Klan; for while we could have made a profit by turn-

ing their tobacco into a manufactured article, yet the smoke from their burned tobacco barn turns public sentiment in our favor."

\* \* \* \* \*

During the central hour of Mr. Andrews' conference with his chief, another "chief" was in confab with his men. The subject was the same, though viewed from a different angle. The "Possum Hunter" instead of being censured and maligned, was boastfully glorified until he compelled attention.

This second conference occurred way back "in old Kentucky." Spring rains had rendered the soil unfit for tilling, and the farmers were idle. The old saw which claims that "an idle brain is the devil's work-shop" was holding good, for surely it was the will of his satanic majesty which was prompting the thought of these farmers. Three members of "the big six" were lolling on the porch of "Bill's" road-side grocery. Two of them were ensconced on the rough pine board seat against the wall and close to the door, the third member had tilted a dilapidated, wire bound chair against the wall on the other side of the door and was idly whittling on a piece of white pine.

"Say, Bill," the whittler inquired of the store keep who stood leaning against the door jam, puffing at a foul-smelling, carbon-stained cob pipe, "somebody was telling me that old man Simms was agoing to put in a whale of a tobacco bed."

"Taint so," Bill informed him in a lazy drawl. "He was going to, but," his three "customers" looked at him to hear the information, "somebody went up there and put about a ton of salt on the 'bed' just after it was set out, and the only thing that ground will raise this year will be a passel o' salt crystals."

General laughter evinced the degree of sym-

pathy which was felt for Mr. Simms, and the loafer who sat nearest the door began fumbling in his pocket in search for some crumbs of "long green" to chew, as he declared:

"Serves the old codger right, he's been going to church for the last fifty years and has never had the fear of God put in his dollar-bound heart."

"Haw, haw, haw," was the loud guffaw from the whittler. He had been intently studying a buggy which was coming down the pike in the direction from the city, now he informed his associates: "Here comes Tom; said he was going into headquarters today." A repetition of his coarse laughter told his hearers that some importance was to be attached to this visit "to headquarters."

"Guess he saw Randall?" Bill asked.

Instantly the four men were keenly alive to the topic of conversation. The chair was jerked forward, the pine stick hurled at a chicken scratching in the grass by the roadside and the knife folded shut and thrust into the trousers pocket. Impelled by the same thought the two who had been sitting on the bench arose and moved toward the steps leading from porch to ground anxious to hear the news at the first possible minute.

"Say," Tom howled when he was yards away, and his "whoop" was merrily boisterous. "Gosh, but you ought to've seen him." Loudly he laughed; drew the horse to a stand-still; told them: "I delivered the third, final, and last invitation to Hughes Randall this morning, and it informed him that nothing but his presence was wanted and that we weren't going to take any excuse for his not joining the 'Possum Hunters,' so everybody wants to be out to the meeting place next Thursday night."

\* \* \* \* \*

The second report which Mr. Andrews made in reference to his interview with Miss Beatrice Herron, was one which he would have given much to be relieved from making. He had hardly taken his place at his desk in the office of the Crosby Tobacco Company's warehouse before one of his assistants called him to the telephone.

The "call" was from Miss Caroline Easson. She told him she was "just dying to hear all about it," could not wait "another single solitary day," and that she would expect him to come to Mrs. Kemp's that afternoon at four o'clock. Nothing else would suffice, so he agreed to keep the appointment.

Mrs. Mary Louise Kemp was the only "society" woman in the city of Lexington with whom Miss Easson had become more than socially intimate. An ill-advised intimacy over which Caroline's mother could not exert a wise protest. Miss Easson refused to listen to adverse criticisms from her mother, she believed in Mary Louise, confided in her, and was advised along certain lines which would be socially advantageous—to Mary Louise Kemp. No matter what criticism Mrs. Easson made on the subject, Miss Caroline would always have an audacious reply. She refused to listen to her mother's theory that Mrs. Kemp was chaperoning only because this act would establish the matron in homes where before she had slight recognition. She declined to see anything unfair in Mrs. Kemp's treatment of the Equity question; did not believe that Mrs. Kemp should be held morally censured because she insisted that her signing over her two hundred acres in Scott County, affected in no way one hundred and ten acres in Fayette County; and Miss Caroline stoutly argued that Mrs. Kemp had "every right in the world" to raise tobacco on her Fayette County farm even though her

Scott County farm was "signed with the Equity."

When told that "Happy Andy is going to Denver to solve the mystery," Mrs. Kemp accepted the information but did not give voice to her secret belief that Mr. Andrews was misleading the young woman as to the exact nature of his errand. She did not for a certainty know the true reason for his going, she surmised many causes, even the true one, but never for an instant did she believe Mr. Andrews would be guilty of "mixing in scandalous gossip to such a depth." Her criticisms of Miss Caroline's belief were mild.

"How in the world do you suppose 'Happy Andy' is to approach that Herron person?"

"Simply by asking questions," was the fretful retort.

This was incredulous. The matron gasped from sheer surprise. "But, my dear child, you surely do not expect him to be that crude, do you? Can't you see what an awkward position you are placing him in? Don't you know that people do not talk about such affairs the same as they would a grocer's bill?"

"Cut out the old style stuff," Caroline advised, with an impudent shake of her head. "That may have been good reasoning in your day and generation, but it don't go now; people say what they want to say, in this day and time, and when words fail they have a moving picture made."

Mary Louise Kemp realized that silence is the key-stone in the arch of deception, therefore she was silent. She gossiped and chattered on less weighty subjects, and arranged parties and dinners for the amusement of her ward—and the furtherance of Mrs. Kemp's climb on the social ladder.

Came the afternoon when Mr. Andrews returned from Denver. Mrs. Kemp was informed

of the arrangement made by Miss Caroline, and straightway shifted the hour to five thirty and a dinner engagement. She so informed Mr. Andrews, and was only mildly disappointed when she was told by Miss Caroline that it would be impossible for her to be one of the guests owing to a previous engagement with Hughes Randall. She was gushingly sorry, but as the others had gladly accepted the invitation she was reasonably certain of a successful dinner party, so spent the hour and a half amusing the young woman who had made possible the social claim. When Mr. Andrews arrived, she graciously excused herself to rearrange her toilet.

"What did you find out?" was the impatient query from Miss Easson on the moment Mrs. Kemp was out of the room.

"Just as I expected," was the fearless reply. "Miss Caroline, you are entirely mistaken about Miss Herron and all unlovely conduct. I have never met a more modest, more genuine woman than she. She impressed me more than formerly with the wonder of woman's sweetness and ——"

But further eulogy of Miss Herron was not permitted by the victim of her pen. Such praise was not to be tolerated or accepted; she had sent this messenger forward to further scandal, not to render gossip absurd; she was anxious to know whether "that stenographer" was thinking of returning to Lexington; she knew the woman's qualifications better than a "mere man"; the reasoning which prompted her was founded on months and months of worry, confab and searing thoughts; she was impatient, yes angry, when this supposed friend presumed to boldly correct her surmise and scandal; she ridiculed him in mocking laughter, taunted him by her impudent smile, jeered at him in hurtful sarcasms.

"Ha, ha, ha, surely that woman must be a



wonder. First, she had Hughes Randall so infatuated with her that he lauded her work to the skies, and told everybody what a competent assistant she was when any ten dollar a week typist would have done just as much as she was doing, even if she couldn't have made love as expertly; she actually had him so thoroughly in her power that when he fired her because I knew of their doings she wrote me an insulting letter, told him she intended writing it, and he has never said one word about it, or apologized for the conduct of his hired help. Then, she breaks up the firm of Randall, Clay and Randall, and persuades old man Clay to take her with him out to Denver, and actually has the nerve and wheedling ability to go into young Clay's home and live like respectable folk. Good Lord, what a woman. If I had her ability to fool people I wouldn't be satisfied to lead the Suff' party, I would force my way into the good old Democratic band-wagon and swing the leader's baton. Ha, ha, ha; now, she's mesmerized you. You went to Denver to demand an apology and find out what she was up to; you come back singing her praises, intimate that I'm 'in bad' and she is a perfect little tin angel. Bah! you men are all 'Possum Hunters' at heart when a good-looking woman permits allegiance, you swear your own liberty away and try to force everybody else to see things from your viewpoint. Ha, ha, ha." Merrily she laughed in bold sarcasm.

Albert J. Andrews had been perplexed to know just how he was to come clear of this tangle in scandal and retain the friendship of Miss Easson and her "set." He appreciated a bit of gossip when bantered about in that delightful, impersonal manner of chatter, but this subject had been carried far and away beyond his depth. In Lexington, he appreciated the society gulf which

existed between Miss Easson and Beatrice Herron, whatever his personal opinion as to the justness and sanity of that distinction was not under discussion; certainly the crass and clanship existed, and was not to be bridged or obliterated by an adverse, or favorable opinion. A hasty and impulsive appeal to thought from the commercial world had hurled him into this "mess," the same source would now be called on for relief; therefore, he determined to compel the Crosby Tobacco Company to stand sponsor to Miss Herron; he would make a simple statement of the truth, let the result be what it would. With pleasing suavity he informed his criterion:

"Miss Caroline, I'm going to tell you the truth and you will see that I am not so much to be censured after all: When I told Mr. Crosby that I was going out to Colorado to interview Miss Herron, he at once instructed me to try to employ her to work with us in our tobacco fight. Following his order I offered her the salary of two thousand dollars a year to come to Lexington."

"Then she's coming back here?" was her startled query.

"No," truthfully he answered. "She refused to accept our proposition and preferred to remain with her friends."

For a full minute Miss Easson sat engrossed in thought. She could not understand why "that person" would refuse so excellent an offer, especially when her accepting the place would give opportunity to revenge her pride. Why that refusal? Had the Equity already made a more flattering offer? Had "that stenographer" told her plans to "Happy Andy" and—

She was angered at her thinking so pleasantly of the one who only moments ago had disappointed her. Spitefully she decided that she had been too often in his company of late, and saw no

reason for present or future sociability. She arose, and told him;

"Tell Mary Louise that I could not wait for her."

Hastily he sprang to his feet, gently apologetic. "Aren't you to be one of the dinner party?"

"No." She found some revenge to telling him. "I have an engagement with Mister Randall."

"Then permit me to take you to him; my car is at the door."

"Very well." She tried to show him the new status under which they were to associate, or not to associate in the future; but his affability was irresistible, and before they arrived at their destination they were gaily chatting on careless nothings.

Mr. Randall was waiting for her. He stood on the pavement by the side of "The Derby" car, the automobile he had purchased with the result of his happy wager in the "Derby."

"Here is the future Mrs. Equity," "Happy Andy" gaily called.

"That is one 'trust' you show good taste in associating with." Mr. Randall answered by adopting similar metaphor. No one to see those two men jovially animated in pleasing interchange of conversation would guess them to be leaders in the terrific tobacco fight which had produced the "Possum Hunters."

\* \* \* \* \*

Hughes Randall and Miss Caroline Easson had returned from their drive over the beautiful "pikes" which surround Lexington, and were lingering in varied converse over their coffee. They were at the hotel, since Miss Easson always insisted that he take her "where nobody will interfere in what we're talking about." Caroline had tried to force Hughes to assign a reason why he had halted the "Derby Car" on the roadside

opposite a mile-post five miles out on the Tates Creek Pike, why he had smiled with sudden furious gladness on coming to the exact spot; but his replies were evasive and not satisfying, she knew he was hiding something. What? Did he have an engagement to meet some one out there? Could it be—

"Why the pretty little frown?" Hughes interrupted her thinking.

"I, I was just thinking about you and Mister Andrews and your rivalry over that Herron person."

The best way to kill scandal is with "merciless publicity." That publicity had been denied him at one time, he had suffered because he had not demanded it, now he would make that demand.

"What about Miss Herron?"

"Albert, I mean Mister Andrews, returned from Denver last night after having gone there to offer her two thousand dollars a year to come and help him fight you and your 'Possum Hunters.'"

"How do you know?" He was alarmed over the possibility of Beatrice coming to assist the "Trust."

"Because he told me." She wanted to hush the matter right where it was, but he refused to let her.

"He told you that?" Emphasis on "that" told that he was incredulous.

"Certainly." She saw that he was worried and determined to let him worry.

He was worried; there was ample cause for him to be fearful lest the "trust" come into possession of secrets which Beatrice had been entrusted with. But why had he been warned of that effort? Why should Mr. Andrews trust the secret to Caroline Easson? Why? And his abstraction became so noticeable that Miss Easson warned:

"Come out of it. Come out of business muddles

while you are in the presence of 'the future Mrs. Equity,' she absolutely refuses to divide time even with the 'Possum Hunters'."

With a hearty laugh he "came out of it," and was all attention to Miss Easson and her charming vagaries. He strove to adapt himself to each passing whim of the young lady's conversation, all save one: He would not tell her why he had halted the automobile on the road opposite the five mile post on the Tates Creek pike. During the short drive after supper she teased him to find out the "why." He laughingly gave many reasons, never the correct one. He drove to the sidewalk in front of her home; she delayed getting out of the car while fencing with his determination not to tell her the reason for "that stop." Petulantly she demanded to know "why," as they stood for a moment on the front porch of the apartment house.

"Tell me this much, Hughes, are you going back out there?"

"Yes!" He answered with more temper than she had ever seen him display. "I am accepting an invitation to fight the 'Possum Hunters' in the open."

She was startled by his manner; she was not even hurt over their blunt leavetaking. Here was a Hughes Randall she had never met. Here was a man magnificently rough in sheer bravery.

## CHAPTER 22.

### **"We Are Hunting Out the Possums."**

The "Secret Committee" might have established itself as a powerful body in its action and scope if it had pursued only the purpose of its organizer and thus remained "the detective force" of the Equity. Hughes Randall had advised that all of its actions should be subtle and guarded by the most rigid secrecy, he advised that its strength should be exerted in securing concessions through unpublished sources. But the committee did not long stay upon the high plane of thought and action devised by its founder, and the evolutions of its rapid fall into the realm of anarchy had closely followed the lines indicated by William Randall in his warning. It had become a gigantic monster of hideous proportions.

The plan of organization had required five men in each county. The duty of these men was to "secure information regarding the financial standing of anti-pool farmers, ascertain the dominant bonds of their friendships and associations, and gather all other data which might in any way influence or attract their attention." This data when gathered was to have been the sacred trust of the committee, and from its knowledge they were to devise methods which would compel the individual to support "society" principles.

But the machine was too intricate; its manipulation too delicate, to be understood and, there-

fore, feared by the untrained politicians. They saw a sure and positive result obtained by the exercise of their power. They became intemperate in their desire to hasten results; they were intoxicated by insidious cunning, and the more venturesome of the farmers who had grasped the opportunity to assist in the scheme, threw secrecy to the winds, came forward with bold and ugly threats, until they turned the idea into a curse. The original number of committeemen long since had doubled, multiplied and expanded as rapidly as its methods had become dubious. Boastfulness was reckoned a virtue, rowdyism an accomplishment by the men who sought to enhance the Equity power. Everywhere the transition was complete; in some counties it had been rapid and wild, producing vandalisms and felonies; in others, gradual and better under control, limited to bombastic utterances and corporal chastisings.

Hughes Randall had been quick to note this digression from the scheme as he had devised it, and with every atom of his ability fought the disgraceful idea. But this awakening came too late to be effectual, and he was forced to realize that do what he might to oppose this element of evil he was unable to check their downward trend; slowly but surely the "Secret Committee" was growing to be a blasphemy against the cause of the Equity and the name of Kentucky. As president of the society, he issued orders annulling the committee, in scathing words he publically repudiated all bond, connection or influence, direct or indirect, between the Society of Equity and the Kuklux Klan which had become known as "Possum Hunters," or "Night Riders." Boldly he disregarded the fact that his censure would be most apt to swing public opinion firmly against the Society proper. He stigmatized the acts of the marauders, revolutionists and felons with

every invective at his command; the "Possum Hunters" only reply was a determined effort to compel every member of the Equity to take their "oath." He gave every assistance in his power to aid the authorities of the law to suppress the Klan; was startled to find the secret understanding which seemed to exist between the officials and the "Night Riders." He employed detectives to gather evidence which he would present to grand juries; without exception the men so employed beat a hasty retreat from the point of observations and reported to Mr. Randall: "Secrecy is impossible, they knew we were coming and met us at the train; they followed our every move and wherever we went we had laughing but insistent guards." He went to the scenes of deprecations, determined to gather evidence against the men he felt reasonably certain were the ring-leaders; and then the very secrecy which he had advised, turned to protect the perpetrators and prevent a legal detection, for their identity had become most severely guarded.

With that unreasoning fervor which controls the mob, the "Possum Hunters" were bending every effort to compel each and every member of the Equity to take the oath of allegiance to their Klan, that they might thereby place an embargo on detection and censure. This plan of enforced membership had rapidly increased their number until the ranks of the "Possum Hunters" all but outnumbered the list of membership in the present body. Stubborn opposition to their methods was met by counter claims couched in words which had been voiced by Mr. Randall in his address on the day of organization, for, said they, "law is only law when the strong uphold the weak." They grew cunning, and sought to justify their doings by the law of numbers. "We first abhor, then endure and then embrace," has never



been more clearly demonstrated than in the history of the "Night Riders." Theirs was the position of justice and right; whatever penalty was meted to offenders such as Durbin Ellis, was, in their reasoning, as lawful as though ordered by judge and jury. The more determined Hughes Randall grew in his efforts to force their dissolution, the more insistent they grew that he should become one of them.

This intention to require him to take the "oath" was first made known to him in a short note of invitation; when he ignored the opportunity thus offered, a more definitely worded summons was sent him, and this writing had been accompanied by a silent though effective reminder of a consequence for failure; when he continued with utter contempt to disregard their intention they mysteriously conveyed to him their bold demand that he, at once, attend a stated meeting of "The Committee."

The first note of invitation, typewritten on a square piece of bond paper bearing no "water mark," had read:

"Mr. Hughes Randall,

"Has been duly elected to membership in the secret committee of tobacco growers, and if he will be on the Bryan Station bridge tonight at nine o'clock he will be conducted to a lodge for initiation.

"The Committee."

As he folded this note and replaced it in its envelope, Hughes Randall smiled at the bold yet simple effrontery of "The Committee," which only the week before had been ordered to report to headquarters that he should lecture them on their misdeeds. Secretly he wondered if an acceptance of the invitation would not put him in possession of data which could not be secured in any other way; but he dismissed the thought as unworthy

of following, and continued the vigorous protests against their methods.

Their second communication closely followed his order dissolving the committee. How it came to his office, who placed it on his desk, at what time it was delivered, will always remain a mystery; no one connected with the office remembered seeing the messenger, who must have left the ugly warning; his private secretary was positive no one other than trusted members of the Society had been near the desk. All of which failed to enlighten. There, on his desk, in plain view, lay the mute, unsightly warning and the note from the "Possum Hunters." He saw it on the instant he returned from the "long distance" telephone booth, it lashed him to open anger toward the Klan, for the words which he had just listened to over the telephone told him that the third tobacco barn had been destroyed in a western county of the State.

What could he do other than he already was doing? What untried method should he adopt? Must he throw himself into the very jaws of hell, become one of this band in the hope of guiding them to the right, the honorable way?

"No," he fairly shouted the thought. Trembling over the force of his passion, he snatched the "persuader" from his desk and rushed into his father's office.

"Read this insult, Dad," his voice was guttural in its intensity, "it came to me by some underhand channel; and this came with it." He held forward a bundle of some twenty or more twigs, of switches, cut from a hickory sapling, bound by a knotted cord.

"My God, Hughes, what does this tomfoolery mean?" His fingers trembled as he tried to replace the paper in its envelope.

"No." Hughes halted the intention, "Don't

hide it, read it again; read it aloud, for I would like to hear what it would sound like if spoken by a man who understands the meaning of 'honor.' "

William Randall read aloud:

" 'Mr. Hughes Randall:

" 'Some months ago an invitation was extended you to become one of the 'Secret Committee.'

" 'Why did you decline the offer?

" 'This opportunity is not given to everybody, and when once given it is not safe to ignore it.

" 'We will hold another meeting tonight for the purpose of initiating those who could not be attended to at our last session; so we advise you to be on the road in front of 'The Bell School-house' tonight at nine o'clock.' "

" 'Come alone, and unarmed.

" 'The Committee.' "

"Bah!" was the disgusted and vehement explosion from William Randall, "why the poor, misguided fools." Overpowered by his anger he stood with clenched fists shaking at the bundle of switches.

The undignified display of anger from his father caused Hughes to smile, since one of his parent's lectures was on dignity and poise.

"That's about what I said, Dad, though I did not use the forbidden word. They are poor; poor in patience, fortitude and endurance. They have been misguided by weaklings inflated and pompous in new grown power. And the man guilty of sending such a note to a fellow being brands himself a fool. I disregarded their first note, scarcely gave it one serious thought, and my open contempt seems to have lashed them to more open insult. I shall disregard this one, even though every atom of my being urges me to go to them,

that I might have the joy of telling them of the contempt I hold them in. But if ever they are unwise enough to repeat this insult I shall answer it in person, even though it proves to me that every man in this country is one of the Klan; and when I am before them I shall curse them in language of single meaning and burning poison. No. Do not raise an objection; it would be useless." His father had struggled to dignity. Hughes further told him: "I have given a soft answer, I have turned the other cheek, I have maintained a dignified silence; I am through with dove-like antics, I shall fight the devil with fire, not with oily waste. Instead of the 'Possum Hunters' treeing a Possum, they have found a wildcat. 'Night Riders.' Bah! They are cringing cowards of darkness." Cloaked in his anger he strode from the room.

But the opposition of William Randall was not so stubborn as the younger Kentuckian had believed. The father had ridden in Morgan's Command, and he was neither too proud nor too cultured to fight.

The fight grew in intensity and might, each recurring day brought some new act to force Hughes Randall to greater hate for the "Possum Hunters." His anger because of personal insult was lost sight of as the more weighty affair of the society's protection claimed his every thought. Almost he came to dread answering the telephone, fearful lest the message given him would tell of another barn of tobacco gone up in smoke. At times he was almost forced to see that he was making a losing fight, and on the night when Durbin Ellis' barn was destroyed he chartered a powerful automobile and drove to the scene of destruction, hoping to find some clue which would assist him in apprehending the felons. In this he was unsuccessful, but his scathing tirade against

"the sleeping officials" had the effect of lessening criticisms against the Equity. Glad he was when the last pound of non-pool tobacco was delivered and temptation removed from the path of the "Possum Hunters'" torch. During the winter he was free from the worry of "Night Riders," and could spend his every moment devising means to hold the farmers in solid formation; not a small task since there were many growers seeking to force a dissolution of the combine.

Came Spring and with it a new plague of the Kuklux Klan: They were destroying tobacco beds. Also, they were compelling complete membership. Hughes Randall was so notified. The third note was delivered to him, and it called for him to either backstep or make good his boast and go into the enemy's camp.

This demand, as the second warning, had been placed on his desk by some mysterious and almost uncanny maneuver. He had opened his desk, read the letters in the morning mail, placed the correspondence in a heap on the desk blotter, and left the room to carry a document to the Society's office, had remained in consultation with the local Secretary less than two minutes, and when he returned to his desk found the "gentle reminder" and its note lying on top of the mail he had just read.

Instantly he was alert and in fighting humor, with the hope of intercepting the messenger he ran to the door leading out of the reception room into the hall, there he stood puzzling. Not another being was in the hallway, and the only moving object which met his vision as he came to the door had been the elevator car sinking into the shaft. Had the elevator man been in the conspiracy and held the car in waiting? Unwilling to believe this simple solution, he hastened into his father's room, then into the one which had

been occupied by Mr. Clay, and now used by a young law student in their employ; but the only person he encountered in his search was a young woman stenographer. Vexed over the seeming mystery, he was about to return to his desk, that he might examine his gift, when he suddenly remembered having seen Tom Quinn in the Society's office. He hastened to see if Tom was still in the office. Tom was in the company of the secretary, laughing and chatting away in idle gossip, and Hughes returned to his desk angry and baffled.

The message was accompanied by a bundle of switches, but there was one marked difference between the token now before Hughes Randall and the one which had accompanied note number two. The switches of the present mute warning had been beaten against a tree or post until the ends were flayed and ragged, and these ends had been liberally sprinkled with red paint, or ink, and was quite gruesome.

"Quite melodramatic, a most picturesque expression of your reasoning abilities, you blackguards." He lifted the scourge from the desk that he might better inspect it. He was glad that his private secretary had not been present at the moment of discovery. Somehow he wished to keep the affair a secret, a solemn secret between the "Possum Hunters" and himself. He could talk to the Klan, he would tell them: "You have made your last play from the cover of secrecy, for I am going to drag you into the open and make you fight like men, you are going to be told many unpleasant things, I shall break you, or this shall be my funeral wreath from you." Smiling over his grim joke, he carefully hid the bundle from view, opened the note, read:

"Mr. Hughes Randall:

"Sir:—This is the third and last time we

shall warn you to become a member of our Committee.

"Our enemies have sold one crop of tobacco and are planting another one. Are we to patiently sit by and see them, yes, help them reap the reward of our combine?"

"'Law is for everybody, but everybody is not for the law,' is one of the tenets of our Committee. We stand for self-protection, and that is the first law of nature. Our protection demands that we shall smoke out the possums who would grow fat while feeding from that which they steal from us.

"First we invited you, then we advised you, now we demand that you become one of us; so do not fail to be at the five-mile post on the Tates Creek pike, tonight at nine o'clock.

"The Committee."

For many moments after he had read this insulting note he sat close in thought. He recalled the bitter struggles through which he had passed, he knew there were many, many more struggles before him. Was the game worth the play? Could he play the game?

"Yes," he called aloud, and laughed over all depressing thought. He could "play the game," and would play it to the last inning and the score would be in his favor. He began making preparations for the possible outcome of his visit to the "five mile post."

He called Miss Caroline Easson over the phone and made an engagement for an automobile ride through the country, and dinner at the hotel on their return.

Seemingly he had been carefree and idly joyous while fulfilling the early part of this delightful engagement, he was unusually gay and chatty, boyishly he laughed over one of Miss Easson's sayings as he drew the car to a stand-

still in front of a mile post clearly defined against the landscape, he stilled the throbbing motor and closely examined the view, then turned to smile on his fair companion.

"What's the cause of the delay, Mister Chauffeur?" Miss Caroline impishly demanded.

"The car absolutely refuses to go another turn until all passengers have kissed the driver."

They did not halt over-long, since the passengers accepted the terms of the bandit, but knowing him as she did, Caroline realized that something other than a lovers' frolic had prompted the delay. She had persisted in the effort to discover the why, she stood watching Hughes Randall as he leaped into the car after viciously cranking the engine, never before had she seen the man aroused.

The engine responded to his cranking, the motor raced in loud exhausts, this pleased him, he laughed in unison with the angry puffings, he turned to wave to Caroline, leaped into the car, and was away racing into the night to find the "Possum Hunters." Anger passed and he was merry on his errand, the engine began singing a song, a love song, it told him that in two weeks he would be married "to the dearest little woman in the world."

\* \* \* \* \*



## CHAPTER 23.

### **"You Sent for Me; I Am Here."**

The president of the Equity did not dispute the time proven adage: "Man is only an over-grown boy and must have something to play with." But he did not intend that those farmers who had "played at building house" while organizing the Society, should now engage in the ancient and fascinating sport of "playing pirate" and tear down the nearly completed structure. If the members of the "pool" had wished to form the scheme into a secret society and remain within the law while so doing, he would gladly have given them every support in his ability and assisted in the frolic. But frolic and felony while beginning with the same letter, wound up at widely different points; it was their felonies which he opposed.

As president of the parent body and constantly associating with members of the "Possum Hunters"—even though they stoutly denied the allegation and in the next breath divulged a neatly hidden secret—he had heard many laughable accounts of "initiations." Many times he had laughed over the mental picture of a candidate, impressed by a solemn charge, conducted to a supposed seat "on the throne between death and destruction," only to find to his discomfit that the "seat" was a cloth covering over a tub of water. He did not attempt to resist laughing

over a vivid recital of a grave candidate, listening to a pompous "charge," walking up to a skeleton to "shake hands with eternity," and receiving a severe slap on the jaw delivered by the disengaged hand of "the skeleton." All of which would have been acceptable sport provided the "Possum Hunters" had confined their "flame and smoke" to the stage settings for "initiations."

Tonight, on his way to keep an appointment to be present at an initiation, he was recalling those various stories of "horse play." The night was ideal for a purpose such as a meeting of the Kuklux Klan. There was only a sufficient dull light to permit one to vaguely discern an individual tree, post, or object as it assumed character against the gray blending of shadowland, and a clump, cluster, or mass formation of such objects made a blot, a blur, black, sinister and uninviting. A moving thing of dull color could not quickly be distinguished, it would leap and bound from the mysterious "there," only to hurl and tumble into the vague shadows of "where." The air was cool and humid, laden with that blanket of spring which is either languidly delighting or insidiously intrusive; an atmosphere which will induce sleep when the mind is well poised, or intensify an uncanny fear of the occult when "nerves" are present. Just the night for ghost stories and legends of "will-o-the-wisp." If Hughes Randall had been at all susceptible to the quakings of the timid he would have found many moments for the exercising of "goose quills" during his experiences on this memorable evening.

The dim glow from the kerosene lamps with which his automobile was equipped did not encourage a rapid pace. Jerkily, with the "chug chug" exhaust which characterized the travel of the earlier models in automobiles, he bowled

along behind the yellow flare from the headlights which could only discover fifty feet of roadway and the dim outline of fences to either side. Yet, at that moment, it is doubtful whether he would have been glad to exchange this "one-lunger," dim lamp vehicle for a more powerful car with glaring head-light ;for the "Derby car" was singing to him a most pleasing refrain, the melody would intersperse his thoughts of the mundane world as a cello obligato, the chorus told him of a conquest, the words were his own, the music that of the automobile's exhaust, and each hill in the grade of the road would draw forth a clearer, more definite tone to the chug, chug chorus:—"Two weeks, two weeks, two weeks."

Suddenly and with a sharp return to the affair at hand, the jingle of romance was stilled, with a rush, all that he had heard of the cunning devices of the "Possum Hunters" to prevent detection came crowding pell-mell into his thinking; he was drawing close to the "five mile post," it was just within, now past the dim light from his lamps, he thought, but was not certain, that he had distinguished a blot, a blur, a crouching form behind the post, a something which had not been there when he made his inspection earlier in the evening. The chug, chug of the engine died into the stillness of the night, the car now stood opposite the post, he had filled the appointment, alert, observant, prepared, he sat looking at the mile-post slow forming trembly outlines after having plunged into darkness from the light of his car. Suddenly the mile-post seemed to take on life, to waver against the dull gray background, it stretched itself and grew tall as thought it would leave the ground and mark this spot as one of greater importance than less favored mile points it left the spot where for years it had nestled by the side of the fence,

slowly it moved forward as though imbued with a wish to better observe this traveler of the night who so impudently halted in its domain; on the edge of the road bed, it halted to more closely study this night rider who had been so noisy and was now so quiet; then stealthily crept forward.

With a hearty laugh over this grotesque performance, Hughes hailed the outpost of the "Secret Committee," who had hidden behind the milepost until satisfied that the "candidate" was unattended by a representative of the law. His jovial, "Hello, 'Possum Hunter,'" was to let the guard understand that further inspection was unnecessary. He had been studying the guard as closely as that one had been searching him, he had been trying to note some feature or contour of form which would permit him to recognize his challenger. He shook his head, as though unwilling to believe that which he saw, for there was not a sharp, distinct or clear line to the figure; no definite detail, no demarkation of hat brim, no shoulder line, nothing to distinguish this thing which he believed to be a man. He was amused over this fantastic trick, this revision of the legends of the will-o-the-wisp to aid marauding "Night Riders," this veiling which turned man into a phantasmagoria. He laughed aloud as the reason for this puzzle was made clear. He remembered the stories told of the disguises worn by the "Possum Hunters"; this was one of them. He studied the "make-up."

The features and entire upper portion of the guard's body was concealed and completely covered by a loosely fitting cowl, or sack, the cloth of which was gathered in a comical knot on top of the head and without restraining bond or fastening fell in symmetrical folds to the knees. As minutely as he might do so in the uncertain light,

Hughes studied this garb and wondered if it was as troublesome to the wearer as it was to the ease and comfort of the observer, he puzzled to know how the one wearing it could see to move about with precision. He was amused by this departure from the disguise which had been adopted by the Kuklux Klan of Southern history, though readily acknowledged the superiority of this garb over the one used by the historic Klan. Here was a guise which all but instantly could be discarded should occasion demand its concealment, and the black cloth used in its construction would greatly enhance the difficulty of detection in the dark.

"What's the occasion for the big disguise?" was his jovial demand.

The sentry did not at once reply. He stood by the side of the car, peering into the face of the "candidate" as though he wished to hypnotize that one into submission. As though he would instill into this neophyte some of the bodily fear which the Klan would inoculate. As though he wished some sign from the "candidate" would show an agitation equal to his own.

"Are you Hughes Randall?" came a gruff, guttural and plainly disguised voice.

"I am Hughes Randall," was the amused reply.

Stealthily and rapidly the guard moved around the automobile to the vacant seat and leaped into the car; his posture was menacing, his conduct offensive; he rudely thrust his right hand forward in the direction of the "candidate's" heart, as he curtly ordered:

"Now drive to the open gate on top of the second hill and turn into the open field, then follow the beaten path over to the tobacco barn; hurry, they're—oh—"

Hughes Randall had distinctly heard the roughly worded command. It is quite possible

he would have followed the instructions but for a certain something which rendered that course impossible. The crude mannerisms of the guard displeased and annoyed this man who was all but exasperated by the behavior of the "Possum Hunters," and when he found that the conductor was menacing him with a pistol, he discarded "play." In an instant the animal ferocity of his being rudely awakened and sprang into expression; with an ugly growl scarcely audible, though deep enough to electrify every fibre of his being, he hunched forward his shoulders to make sure his coat would not bind his movements, and for one tense second poised for the spring. Like the bursting of a shell his anger broke, his right hand shot forward, grasped the barrel of the pistol and pointed it upward while his left hand closed like the grip of steel tongs on the forearm of the "Possum Hunter," and with vicious force, again and again, he struck the wrist and hand which offended him against the steering wheel of the car.

"Oh! Stop; please, sir, stop. Please, Mister Randall, I'll give you the gun." But the agreement to part with his weapon came much later than his act of doing so. The "candidate" was holding the pistol in his clenched fist, and breathing hard in his struggle to conquer his passion.

"You hurt my hand, you big stiff," the "Night Rider" complained. "You had no business gettin' rough, damn you."

"Shall we step into the road and settle that question once and for all time, or do you prefer to apologize?"

"Please, sir, don't get mad at me, Mister Randall; I didn't mean no harm; I apologize."

Hughes looked at the would-be "bad man" and neither ridiculed nor despised him. He recognized the individual as belonging to the class of

men who espouse, but who have not the brain power to originate a scheme, a class which will follow the example set them by the man "higher up," and who ape the vices though ridicule the virtues of his superior neighbors. This man had been told what to do and how to do it. This copyist had been directed by some master brain. This guard was only a watch-dog for the lodge of "Possum Hunters" which was presided over by the chief offender. So why harm the dog and let the master go unscathed?

With no show of anger, though with determination which was not to be checked, he threw the pistol into the field on his side of the road as far as his strength would carry it, turned and said:

"You may search for your gun tomorrow if you wish to do so; it is safer where it is for tonight. And now since we understand one another better, you may get out and crank up the car so we can go over to the barn."

The guard hastened to obey; but his disguise interfered with his manipulation of the crank. Hughes suggested that he remove the "sack."

"Oh! No, sir, Mister Hughes, I couldn't do that; Mister Tom gets mad every time we take it off when we're close to the lodge room."

The Equity president smiled over this unconscious disclosure of a vital secret; true, the candidate would soon be one of "the lodge" and thereby know his fellow members; nevertheless, one of the most rigid laws of the Klan was violated when the name of "the chief" was divulged. Hughes smiled because his deep-seated suspicion was verified as correct. Tom Quinn continued to be leader of the "Possum Hunters," notwithstanding his vociferous and flamboyant denials. Tom, the "dare-devil" of school days, the "hail fellow, well met," irresponsible Tom, was chief

among the "Night Riders." But who else save one of his ability and educational advantages could devise such entertaining "tomfoolery" as the ritual of the "Possum Hunters" abounded in? Who but a reader, student, and lax moralist, could devise a picturesque cabalism for a Kuklux Klan?

"Mister Randall, when do you think we'll sell our tobacco?" They were on their way to the barn, and the guard was asking the one question which all of his associates discussed over and over each and every day.

"I am looking for an offer from the 'Trust' most any day," the "candidate" answered, and gave facts which permitted his belief.

Through the gate they passed, the light from the headlights was able to show the way through the path, they were making good speed, when of a sudden the conductor warned:

"Don't go so fast, we'll run into—" His warning was too late.

"Halt!" came the command from a behooded figure which sprang from behind a clump of bushes and pointed a shotgun at them.

"Look out, you idiot!" Hughes yelled as he wrenched the steering wheel, killed the engine and set the brakes in an effort to prevent running the man down; but too late, man and gun were bowled to the ground amid cries of astonishment and pain.

Before the car had stopped, Hughes sprang out and ran back to where the challenger lay moaning. Found him to be a cousin of Beatrice Heron, a lad only a few years removed from his "teens," a raw recruit into the ranks of the "Possum Hunters," though one who had been selected as sentry because of his enthusiastic ardor in the cult of the Klan. Examination disclosed that the youth was suffering from nothing worse than



a sprained ankle; so Mr. Randall began questioning his two "Society" members on more important matters.

He was convinced that it was impractical to attempt to go to the barn unless he was disguised and informed as to the method of gaining admission by password. He closely questioned the now docile "Night Riders," and learned the number present in the barn, that an "initiation" was in progress, and that the noise from a discharge from the shotgun was the signal of his arrival.

He secured the gun, unbreeched it and threw first the barrel, then the stock far into the field, turned and told the "bad men":

"Now listen, you two, I will permit no "ifs or ands," "whys or wherefores," one of you two will give me the head-dress which is the insignia of the "Possum Hunters," and the other one will conduct me into the lodge."

Young Herron was assisted to a seat in the automobile, and his head-dress confiscated; the other one was told to "lead the way."

There was a momentary halt at the door of the barn while the klansman was giving the required formula for admission, though he was interrupted by the inner guard gruffly saying:

"Aw, cut out the guff and hurry on in if you want to hear the duffer take his oath; they ain't going to give him the full 'nitiation' 'cause we're saving that for Hughes Randall."

One of his hearers smiled, though not from a petty cause. Hughes Randall was glad that he was popular enough, and close enough to the heart of his Equity members to remain "Hughes." Craftily and stooping low to prevent his superior height from disclosing his identity he followed his guide into the barn. Once inside, he saw his error in not securely grasping the arm of his guide, for the nervous traitor had quickly lost

himself to identification by mingling with a nearby group.

Deserted, and uninitiated in the cabalism of the Klan, Hughes stood rigidly still for a second, wondering whether some sign from the "Possum Hunter" would warn the others of his presence. He was thankful to see no move made in his direction, and after intense scrutiny and rapid thought was convinced that the universal garb and dim light prevented detection. Cautiously he moved to one side of the hallway, he was alert and observant, careful not to jostle any of the others, intently he studied the form and semblance of the lodge arrangement.

The "lodge room," although meagerly furnished, was set and decorated in a manner which was calculated to inspire a fear for the occult in the heart of the timid and uninitiated. And no condidate other than an intrepid partisan would unflinchingly look upon the gruesome and diabolic arrangement. Under brilliant lighting it would have been awful enough, but its aspect was intensified by the dull, insidious red glow which issued from chemical torches which hissed and sputtered. Even the fearless would be anxious to hasten his oath of allegiance that he might be part of this mystic assemblage.

The tobacco barn is so constructed as to maintain an open hallway, lengthwise and in the center of the building. This hall is confined on either side and overhead by rows of uprights and cross scantlings which are used as framework to support the tobacco while it is in "curing." This forest of hewn timber, extending as far as the dim light permitted the vision to reach, was now a dismal unexplored region wherein superstitions chased each gaunt shadow.

Streamers of black, dull red, with here and there a splash of brilliant carmine, cloth had been

festooned to the overhead framework of the hall, thus forming a billowy ceiling which was set in motion by each puff of wind. Beneath this canopy, and in the center of the barn, occupying a floor space of about twelve by twenty feet, the lodge was in session.

On either side, and at each end of the rectangle, the members of the Klan were ranged in irregular rows or assisted in the ceremony. Some were silently shifting their positions, all were graceless, ill-shaped automatons in pantomime.

At the upper end center of the rectangle, on a raised platform, or throne, sat the master of ceremonies clad in his diabolic garb. The effect was startling, the illusion complete, the lesson weird and compelling. From the center of the throne, tufted bunting in black and varying shades of red and crimson typified a column of smoke and flame, leaping, coiling, bounding into space. From the very heart of this conflagration emerged the chief clad in a robe quite similar in structure to that of the lay members, save that his garment touched the ground, fitted closer, and on its smooth front was the crude penciling of a human skeleton.

The "sacred altar," the keystone to the "Possum Hunters'" devotional ceremonies, the supreme tenure of their cult, was a coffin. A plain wooden coffin, with gruesome outlines and solemn import. And this "altar" was adorned with two "hands" of loose tobacco, a blacksnake whip, and a faggot, or torch, which exuded the odor of kerosene.

At either end of the "altar," held in urns which had been rudely fashioned into the semblance of the human skull, was a pot of some chemical solution, which while burning emitted a vicious red flare and an abundance of pugnacious, stifling

smoke. An ominous pall, a hellish glare, a befitting device.

As Hughes entered the barn the chief was in the act of orating the "charge" to the candidate who was kneeling before the altar, and the sepulchral intonation was no more fearful than his spoken word. Instantly Hughes had recognized the voice of Tom Quinn, through his brain there flashed the solution how the notes from the Klan had been delivered, indignation swiftly changed to contempt as he listened to the words:

"My friend, you now find yourself prostrate before the altar of freedom's cause, about to assume your obligation to give battle to oppression. This is a war which has waged since the world began, always right has been victorious. We shall win this fight even though that victory shall cost us some of our parlor etiquette and lady finger palaver.

"Law is for everybody, but everybody is not for the law, therefore, the law which is written in ink is not so strong as the law which is written in blood. So when thy neighbor offends the code of the majority chastise that one lest he repeats the offense.

"The coffin is the only home a man may call his own. So as you approach it do not permit avarice to strip your soul to the skeleton of selfishness."

The chief stepped from the throne, came to the altar, lifted the torch and thrust it into one of the pots of flame till it blazed forth. Pointing this to the candidate, he cried:

"Let thy light so burn that others may see the way to a concerted crop."

He fastened the torch in the side of the altar, advised:

"You will place one hand on the tobacco which is before you on the altar, grasp the whip, and

repeat after me the oath of the 'Possum Hunters':

"I, your name, do hereby and hereon, in the presence of my fellow liberators, and before the living law, most solemnly swear that I will uphold the cause of this order even to the coffin.

"I do furthermore swear that I will obtain any information which is required of me.

"I do furthermore swear that I will deny the existence of this Committee and suppress all information which might in any way lead to its detection."

The Chief held forward a cowl.

"My friend I now bestow upon you the cloak of concealment; do not disgrace it."

The Chief returned to his throne, several members near the newly made "brother" assisted that one to rise and clothe himself, the Chief called for order, and gaily ranted:

"We were expecting the pleasure of having Hughes Randall as one of our candidates to-night, but it seems that he is trying to find out whether we are bluffing. Are we? A loud guffaw was signal for derisive laughter from the assemblage.

While this laughter was at its height, and some of the men were roaring ponderous, "No," "By hell, no," etc., the ones standing near the altar were surprised to see one of their number step to the center of the lodge and lean forward to liberate himself from the "cloak of concealment." The cowl was removed, the man stood boldly forth, some were amazed, others stunned to silence, all instantly recognized Hughes Randall, indignant and defiant. There was no need to call for silence, the pall of death fell on the lodge, they were fascinated by his daring, they were charmed by his hate, they feared him because they knew him.

The Equity President snatched the whip and

tobacco from the "altar" and hurled them at the Chief, he hurled the coffin to one side, straightened to his magnificent height and cried:

"You sent for me; I am here."

No one seemed glad to see him in this guise, no one was prepared to receive him as he stood; silence answered him; he said on:

"I am here as president of the Society you strive to crush by the curse of your insidious methods; president of the Society created for brotherly protection but turned into a devils' curse by your deeds. I have toiled; God, how I have toiled and worked and thought and pled for you, and you, and you, yes, every one of you. Is this my pay? Is this the reward you mete to me? Is this your coin to pay me for weary toiling and incessant work? Tell me, is it just? Is it decent? Is it honorable? Is it fair? Fair to your county, to your State, to your sons and daughters, to your little babe at mother's knee, to your gray haired mother bowing over her open Bible in a silent prayer, to your wife with aching heart and silent weeping for the disgrace you shame on her. Tell me, tell me, is this Justice? Is this the fruit of Democracy? If so then Liberty is the consort of the Devil, and Honor is forged and welded in Hell."

For a moment he paused, steadily searching the behooded figures around him; searching them with a gaze which was impelling, defiant, pleading. Never had he addressed such an audience, never had he pled with human beings who were cloaked to dummies; there was something unnatural, uncanny, unreal, in this addressing an audience before him, around him, close to him, yet he was unable to look into their eyes and see responsive flashings of intellect. He talked, he pled, he reasoned, he pictured the struggles through which the society had passed, told its

present tremendous strength and prospect for success, if law was upheld, if "time was permitted to pass undefiled by hours of shame wallowing in the slime of disgrace." For an hour he held his audience by the magic of his eloquence and logic, pouring the intensity of his soul into the fevered voicings of the president of the Equity pleading that the Society be spared from foul murder.

The speaker can "feel" his audience, the orator always knows when he strikes a responsive chord, the actor is aware of failure to "put it over"; Hughes Randall felt, knew, was aware that his audience was opposing him in thought. Suddenly he ceased speaking; turned completely around so that every one present should be in the sweep of his gaze; raised his arms in eloquent appeal, and cried:

"What is it you want?"

From somewhere in the assemblage there came the guttural reply:

"We want money for our tobacco."

"Then stop this lawless brigandage, cease your felonies, protect Liberty and Justice, and the people who are learning to despise you will protect and support you."

Tom Quinn spoke: "Mister Randall, you are presuming over much; you cannot place the identity of anyone present, so ——" He was interrupted by Hughes:

"Can I not, Tom Quinn, and Jake Helm, and Bill Sugden, and Earnest Marr," he named twenty of those present.

There was not one denial as a name was called, nor was there acknowledgment; only an awkward silence answered the roll-call. The accusing spell was broken by the Chief asking:

"Why did you come here tonight, if you were so sure who we were?"

"I came to ask that you disband the 'Possum Hunters,' and help the Equity instead of the 'trust.'"

A growl of angry disapproval greeted this request; a growl low, intense, menacing. Suddenly one of the lay members placed the disapproval to words:

"No! By God, no!"

Others caught the phrase, hurled their negatives into the foul smelling air. "No. No." A bedlam of "No's." The Chief called for order, he gave a secret though well understood signal to his Klan, he held Hughes Randall's attention by telling him:

"When you have sold our tobacco we will disband; until that moment you will find us chastising our enemies and protecting our rights. You have only your suspicion to prove who was present at this meeting tonight; every one you name will be able to establish an alibi; so do not foolishly attempt to rush into the courthouse and have a grand jury indict us, for it would be a useless waste of time. If you will now look around you will find that we are the only persons in the barn, the others have fled." A truth which Hughes Randall verified by a hasty searching glance, and when he again looked toward the throne it was vacated by the Chief.

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## CHAPTER 24.

### "The Mysterious Agent."

The provincial hospitality which had been formally extended to Miss Caroline Easson while she was the bride-elect of one of Kentucky's sons, had been different from her formal acceptance while she was unattached. On her return to Lexington as Mrs. Caroline E. Randall, wife of the scion of the Randall family, a nucleus of the body politic, that same hospitality became royal in its welcome. Her marriage had induced a bond of intimacy where only social toleration had been permitted, the families who had known the Randalls for three generations were anxious to accord the clan's adopted daughter full companionship of kith and kin, her reception was full and honest.

The bride had noted the transition from cool toleration, through cordial friendship, on to fervent companionship; the varying degrees of acceptance were too clearly shown not to be detected; but she did not attribute the growth to the Randall influence, she was egocentric and accepted conditions as a reward for her personal charm. She made the error of believing the new born tie sprang from the recognition of her personality, and her effort to return in full measure the multitude of favors became the absorbing interest of her life. But she quickly exhausted her resources of entertainment and hospitality,

the democracy of gentility soon became a theme which needed retouching and revision, and the daily routine of pleasures became a business in which she discovered many technical errors.

"Hughes," she complained one day, "I think the Kentucky people are the queerest I ever met with; I have been married only two months and they have quit treating me with any dignity or consideration at all and are losing all respect for me."

"For goodness sake, Caroline, what has happened?" he was troubled even though he was beginning to discover her.

"Well," she explained, "before we were married, and I called on these people, they would at least show some respect for me and come to the reception room, or as they say 'parlor,' but now they do not take the trouble to powder their shiny noses and yell at me: 'Come on up to my room, dear, I am going to make home folks of you,' and—you need not laugh, I'm serious."

The husband intended no lack of sympathy by laughing, but could not resist doing so. He hastened to explain that the present reception was more of an honor than social formality could ever express. He told her that friendship where it was "formal" was not worthy of the name. He tried to show her that Kentuckians were the same as all other people, and that their democracy of reception was their pledge of comradeship.

But his teachings were styled "provincial and old fashioned," and he was informed that his wife and Mrs. Kemp were determined to "establish formality."

Mr. and Mrs. Randall resided in one of the charming and well designed new subdivisions of the city; the location being Caroline's choice. Their home was a "modern," two story contriv-

ance of brick and mortar, shingles and stucco, hurled together after the fancy of an architect's nightmare; but as Caroline pronounced it "superb," Hughes refrained from comment. He tried to accept her ideas of what a home should be even though he did not follow in her "style." He was hurt and annoyed because his wife was not on more friendly terms with the neighbors, and could not know that this defect was due to the neighbors' "strictly formal" treatment of all snobs.

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The months passed with the speed of a "local freight." Each day seemed to bring with it some new tangle or stubborn snarl in the affairs of the Society of Equity. The "Possum Hunters" continued in their insidious warfare and damning propaganda; by an enforced membership they had swelled their ranks until their number was all but equal to that of the parent body. The "Night Riders" had destroyed a great number of tobacco beds, but a survey of the State revealed the fact that a twelve per centum of normal crop would be grown. Whether this tobacco could be safely housed and handled was a question which only time and the "Possum Hunters" would decide. Secrecy had become the cardinal virtue of the Klan, a guarded secrecy which held all information from the president of the Equity; whatever he learned of their doings, that fact was only to be had from the daily papers, the same as all other private citizens. Hughes Randall was in bad standing with the Kuklux Klan of the Equity, he heard no more of their wild initiations, they did not even trouble to assure him that certain depredations were perpetrated by "Night Riders" from other counties, even the local secretaries of the Equity were terse and limited in their communications to the President. The

"quitter" was crying poverty, and from more than one source had come the information that a determined effort was about to be made to dissolve the pool. The Crosby Tobacco Company had maintained their silent policy of "watchful waiting," and calmly exhausted the supply of tobacco in their warehouses. Hope, "the eternal hope," was all that was left to sustain Hughes Randall, president of the Society of Equity.

Yesterday that hope had been given new life. Yesterday a telegram had come from J. C. Crosby, president of the Crosby Tobacco Company. The message had requested that a specific hour be set for an interview. Swiftly an answer had been sent, an answer which appointed today at three o'clock as the hour. Almost impatiently the Equity president was waiting for the moment of interview.

"I wonder," Hughes questioned his father, "whether he will offer us a draught from the intoxicating phial of success, or embitter our days with the wormwood of doubt?"

"That will depend upon the glass you set forward," the philosopher answered, adopting similar metaphor: "And even should he offer 'success' you must not be over hasty in draining the cup, be careful and cautious, for, remember, 'There's many a slip 'twix cup and lip.'" His metaphor was ill-chosen, it recalled other affairs. Personal affairs, domestic affairs; the marriage vow was recalled to the son by the jingle of words chanted by his father.

Hughes was nervous because of the tension to which hope and worry strung him. At any other moment, and before another audience he would have controlled his sentiment with caution; but he knew that his father realized conditions, knew that "the family skeleton" was no hidden secret; therefore, he was not careful of his words. "Oh,

hell," he cried with no little show of passion. "Your poet was ranting over a broken betrothal; and in a great many cases it would be better for the cup to have been dashed to the floor before the lips could touch it." The vicious charge was filled with brutal truth.

"Come, son, you must not cast disparagement so generally. There may be failures and disappointments, many errors may be made in mating, but such a fact must not allow you to speak slightly of the marriage state."

"I beg your pardon, sir, I spoke hastily." The silence which ensued was a beautiful though mute testimony to complete understanding.

Mr. and Mrs. William Randall had been quick to realize that domestic discord had come to rest as an ugly cloud over the new household of Randall. Whatever blame or censure this condition awakened, that blame or censure was crushed to silence by the tremendous love in their hearts for the young couple. They had made repeated efforts to palliate the error by an attempt to establish the most intimate relationship between the two households; their kindly effort had been discouraged by Caroline; she answered them with petulant disregard and sarcastic criticisms, until they were forced to permit social intercourse to be "formal."

This condition in the more intimate and personal affairs, had slowly though surely forced father and son to have little or nothing to discuss on "home" topics. They needs must find some other subject as a theme for the interchange of pleasantries. As though by mutual consent they adopted the "Equity" affairs as that theme, and only upon the rarest occasions diverged from the subject. The father now attempted to shunt thought and words into that channel by impulsively asking:

“Do you believe it possible for the Crosby Tobacco Company to be responsible for the operations of the ‘Mysterious Agent?’ ” He knew otherwise, since no one other than he could better answer for the responsibility of the ‘Mysterious Agent.’ His assumption of ignorance as to the identity of the agent was forced on him by his agreement to protect that one from being discovered by Hughes Randall. Skillfully he had maneuvered the working agreement between the agent and himself until the “Mysterious Agent” had been lost to identity. He elaborated his query: “Do you believe they are fearful of worse conditions arising this year than last, and have sent a secret messenger into the field to discourage the ‘Possum Hunters?’ ”

It was almost pathetic to note the eagerness with which the Equity President pounced on the idea and feverishly analyzed it.

“I do not know, I am at a loss in placing the allegiance of the ‘Mysterious Agent,’ though I would honestly be glad to know that he in some way was identified with our opponent. When we have eliminated them from our surmise over the identification of the agent, to whom else shall we attribute responsibility? If they are not his employers and we have not employed him, then who under heavens has put him to work on the mission of mercy?” His vast interest in the successful work of the “Mysterious Agent” had quickly absorbed his every thought; disconsolate memories of love and home were thrust from him until some future moment.

“Certainly the ‘Mysterious Agent’ is in possession of most intimate facts and Equity secrets,” William Randall at all times avoided the pronoun in speaking of the agent.

Hughes analyzed: “The ‘Night Riders’ were playing havoc with our Society, they were swiftly

and surely changing a sympathetic public into a howling mob demanding our dissolution, and if the reign of terror had continued one month longer, no power under heaven would have held the Equity together. I was fortunate enough to be able to give the local lodge a scare on the night of my visit to their lodge, but my plan could not be followed in other counties where more secrecy is practiced. My visit to the lodge seems to have thrown a greater secrecy around their moves, they do not so openly boast, they are more cunning and subtle, they are less bold though more devilish, and, I am sorry to say, even the secretaries of local chapters of the Equity strive to withhold helpful information; they tell me nothing of the 'Mysterious Agent' except a bare word of his success. Notwithstanding all their devilish effort at secrecy, this wonderful agent has gone into their midst and touched the very heart of their secret, he has been of more value to us than militia and sheriffs, and is a law within himself. Beyond all question of a doubt he is in possession of the most secret plan of our organization, is personally acquainted with many, if not all, of our local secretaries and a majority of the lay members. Who is this 'Mysterious Agent'? Where does he get his authority? Who is responsible for his work? To whom does he report? I did not appoint him, even though I should love to claim that honor. You act at some moments as though you are in perfect sympathy with each and every move of the agent, and at other times refuse to assist in an investigation which would disclose his identity. Who is the 'Mysterious Agent?' If he is not from this office, then why should all of the secretaries who mention him in their reports serenely refer to him as 'your private secretary.' He is not employed by me, yet I am forced to acknowledge his

wonderful work even though he assumes the appointment as my 'private secretary.' To deny him would place a handicap on his efforts."

"You cannot deny him," William Randall hastened to say.

"So I realize," Hughes admitted with a wry smile, "to do so would place me on a par with the greedy Mister Inquisitiveness who killed the goose which laid the golden egg. I dare not deny, and must blindly affirm all acts of the 'Mysterious Agent'; but I am not going to let my secretiveness prevent my inquiring of Mister Crosby whether his company is in some way responsible for the acts of the agent."

They continued their absorbing discussion of the mystery with which some mercifully inclined individual was operating among the "Possum Hunters." One of them could have disclosed the identity of the agent, both would have instantly understood why that one had required absolute secrecy as to individuality. Hughes was trying to persuade his father to assist in some adroit method of detection, and had just agreed to "leave the matter entirely" in the hands of his parent, when Mr. Crosby was announced.

"Good afternoon, Mister Randall, and Mister Randall," was the affable and friendly greeting from the "Trust" official on coming into their presence. He was confident of his individual worth, and was equally sure of the integrity of the gentlemen he greeted. He was proud, though not haughty; bold, but not bombastic; he was merciful and kind, yet regarded business affairs from the unsentimental viewpoint of the dollar; he met his opponent as a man, then fenced with ideas devoid of passion.

But the bearing and personality of the magnate was no whit superior to the individuality and deportment of the men who now answered his sa-



lute. They would repay cordiality with hospitality, honor with honor, and answer claim with counter-claim.

Only the little man has little ways, and greatness will instantly recognize the strength of another's position and diplomatically meet advances. So there was no preliminary feint and parry, thrust and counter-thrust, barter and trade, between these two giants of commerce when they met. The question at issue was too momentous not to have received a vast amount of forethought and preparation, so there would be no quibbling in the "a, b, c" of negotiation. These men unconsciously paid each other the compliment of an acknowledged preparation and fitness.

The tobacco situation was discussed with the thoroughness which would only be possible where experts were met. Grade, weight, color, strength, flavor, were handled as deftly as the rainbow throws its arch. Percentums were clicked off as easily as the ash from their cigars. With equal fervor "Trust" and "Equity" presidents denounced the "Possum Hunters," or "Night Riders"; they recognized the damage the Kuklux Klan had done the pool, and did not attempt concealment.

"Mister Crosby," Hughes Randall asked, "will you permit me to ask you a rather direct question, one which my father and myself were discussing just before you came into the office?"

"Certainly."

"Thank you. Is the Crosby Tobacco Company in any way responsible for the magnificent and merciful conduct of a certain 'Mysterious Agent' who is assisting in suppressing the 'Possum Hunters?'"

Mr. Crosby neither libeled nor betrayed the policy of the "Trust" when he replied:

"No, Mister Randall, we have had as little as

possible to do with the perplexing question of the 'Night Riders'; we believed that all such matters could best be handled by your most capable office. At one time we were considering the advisability of creating a publicity bureau through which we would attempt to lead the individual farmer, but after failure in our two attempts to secure the services of your former private secretary, Miss Beatrice Herron, we abandoned the idea."

"Two attempts?" Hughes unintentionally quizzed; he had heard of only one.

"Yes," came the instant and honest acknowledgment; "we made two efforts to secure the young lady's assistance." Graciously he explained: "One while she was employed by Mister Clay, in Denver, Colorado, and again when we attempted to locate her after she had left there 'for parts unknown.'"

William Randall made no effort to suppress an intense interest in this disclosure; but he was leaning forward that no word should escape him; he shot a quick, searching glance to the features of his son; returned his gaze to hunt for truth in the smile of Mr. Crosby. "You," he asked that one, "you found her?"

"No. She is totally lost."

An admission which pleased William Randall even as it hurt his son. Hurt with a sting of conscience, hurt as a dull, aching pain, hurt with a throb which was destined to grow incessant.

On more than one occasion of late her image had come to him as a fleeting fancy of dreams which were proving to be unreal. She first came to him as he was analyzing his home life in the effort to find out where love had flown:—Again he saw her as she had stood in the doorway of his office and told him the ugly truth about Caroline Easson. He had despised her then; he could

not find even a trace of that sentiment now. Pity, pity swayed him now. Pity for her; pity for another; and only distrust over his reasoning. He wondered if in any way he was responsible for her departure "for parts unknown"; as a "close up" of a movie film, he nursed her image and pled with her not to desert her friends, but to wait, wait until the weave of destiny was knit. He was beginning to understand the bond between Beatrice Herron and himself; but not fully, only dimly, vaguely, as an imperfectly developed film, a movie film whereon the actors are distorted into a hazy blur, a film which would require retouching by the master-hand of time.

He was conscious that his father and Mr. Crosby still were discussing the "tobacco situation in Kentucky"; Mr. Crosby had asked for more information on the work of the "Mysterious Agent," and the young Kentuckian marveled that his father was so perfectly informed on the minute detail of the agent's splendid career. He heard another dull, droning hum of voices; the sound issued from the reception room; he arose and excused himself for a few moments, for he knew the undertone was caused by the suppressed conversation of a number of farmers who, having heard of the proposed visit of the "Trust President," were over-anxious to know the result. He begged these men to wait for him in the Society headquarters, and returning to his office, closed the door.

Mr. Crosby turned to address him as soon as he had resumed his chair.

"Mister Randall, I am here today to purchase the holding of the Society of Equity at the price and grade standards offered to our Mister Andrews in your communication of August the fifteenth." He voiced this thunderbolt of information with no show of the dramatic, yet each of

the three men in conference knew, and was well aware the others knew, that this was the great moment of the society. The only tribute paid to the history-making epoch was a silence during which each of the three mentally pictured the glorious future of a united farmers' and manufacturers' society.

"I am more than glad, Mister Crosby, to close a deal with you wherein you contract for your prorate of our tobacco." Hughes was more than happy; but, he was cautious.

"Prorate?" instantly Mr. Crosby bridled.

"Certainly," was the explanation of why the word had been used; "you have on repeated occasions claimed that your factories require eighty per centum of all of the Burley tobacco grown in Kentucky, your purchases during the year have amounted to fifteen per centum, we, therefore, have protected you in your requirements and have made reservations for your demands." But in that instant he knew the "reservations" were not to be delivered.

Sat these men looking into the eye of the giant will opposing him. That intense telepathic display which surcharges each word and act with a tremendous meaning when giant intellects are at battle, played around and about these representatives as freely as did the light of day. The "Trust" magnate had said he would demand the entire holding of the Equity, he had given Mr. Andrews his reasons why this course would be followed; but when he made his calculations he had failed to measure Hughes Randall by the standard which he applied to his own ability.

"You must understand, Mister Randall," vigorously he protested; "it is the intention of the Crosby Tobacco Company to purchase the entire holding of your pool."

"And it is the Equity's intention to protect

the small manufacturers from extermination," Hughes suavely answered. Then he told the "Trust": "For three months the small factories over the country have vied with one another in flaunting the boast that they were using 'Equity Tobacco'; they have given us their unqualified support; they look to us as to a protector, a supply house in time of need. Shall I renounce them? Sell them out? Make slaves of them, just because my doing so would permit me to win this fight? If you should control the entire crop of Burley tobacco for two years' plantings you could throttle competition as surely as I throttle the draught in this cigar, you could break them as easily as I break it, you could hurl them into the scrap-heap as lawfully as I throw the cigar into the waste basket. No, Mister Crosby, neither time, nor the 'Possum Hunters,' nor the 'quitters,' nor fear of a dismal failure, can force me to sell you more than your prorate of our holdings."

Upon that battle-ground of thought they fought with facts and figures in claim and counter-claim while time passed into the history of a "Failure." Neither of them gave ground to his opponent; this was the vital point in the reasoning of each strategist. Mr. Crosby's final statement was:

"I will take the matter up with our board of directors, Mister Randall, though I am all but positive they will decline to accept your terms. Good day, gentlemen."

As a lion shakes his mane, so did Hughes Randall shake his "handsomely ugly" head as his guest was departing. He knew he was in the right; knew that every principle of justice was on his side; knew that he was opposing the tyranny of monopoly; the hell of the "Possum Hunters" war; also, he knew that this failure to sell would give a fresh impetus to the whine

of the "quitter." But he did not hesitate in the will of his doing; as an emissary bearing a message of encouragement, he went into the headquarters to tell the story of the visit "from the Trust," and to plead with them to exercise more patience.

## CHAPTER 25.

### **"To Me? Yes; To You? No."**

As an ugly, nerve-racking nightmare of hideous proportions, November has passed and December is all but spent. The "non-pool" tobacco has cured and is being stripped in preparation for the market. The Anti-Equity farmer is gloating over the advance in price which is being paid him in the market. They are bringing the tobacco to market as fast as it is ready for sale, and defying opposition. Loudly they laugh over the discomfiture of the Equity members who have their tobacco in "pool" and cannot reap a portion of the harvest.

Not one word has been heard from the "Trust" regarding the proposition which was left open to them. They had again returned to their policy of "watchful waiting." They did not deny any claim made by Mr. Randall when he attempted to prove that they would be forced to close their factories unless they accepted the Equity terms. They merely continued to manufacture and sell.

Conditions were serious in the affairs of the Equity. Its very life was in jeopardy. The "quitter" was beginning to clamber for its dissolution, they were holding open meetings to protest against a "hopeless fight." But these meetings were not given official recognition simply because no notice had been served on the Equity president.

The "Possum Hunters" were superactive in the spreading of their damning propaganda. Threatening letters and visits from the behooded Klan were a nightly, almost hourly, occurrence. Militiamen patrolled the county roads and byways, a rapid fire gun was placed in the city street at a point which controlled ingress and egress to the "market," and a squad of soldiers guarded each sales warehouse. The public had finally awakened to the curse of the Kuklux and one more barn destroyed would mean such a wave of censure as not even a Hughes Randall could oppose. That last barn was what kept Hughes and his unknown assistant, the "Mysterious Agent," strung to the highest pitch of suspense. Could they control the "Night Riders"? Could they prevent that "last barn" from going up in smoke? Would their united efforts be strong enough to stay the mob when such men as Durbin Ellis taunted them to fury by defiant boastings?

\* \* \* \* \*

On Christmas morning Hughes Randall awakened early and was in the act of dressing before he suddenly remembered today to be a holiday. Wearily he smiled over the error, uncertain whether he would enjoy the day of leisure more than he would have been pleased to forward the commercial fight. He tried to awaken himself to the spirit of the day over the boyish gladness that the ground was covered with a deep blanket of glistening snow. He determined to hurry and clean the snow from the pavement before the house-boy arrived, and had half finished the self-imposed task before that functionary begged him:

"Gimme the scoop, Mister Hughes, fore Miss Caroline gets after me fer letting you clean the pavement like poor white trash."

With a cheerful "Alright, Henry," he relin-



quished the scoop and went indoors. Leisurely he walked through the hall, reception room, and dining room inspecting the decorations of mistletoe and holly which he had bribed the housemaid to put up. Satisfied with the "Christmas dress" he secured the morning paper and sat before the cheering wood fire in the open fire-place, to read.

He was glad to find no printed account of felonies committed by the "Possum Hunters," though was sorry to read the story of "another whipping party." He had finished with reading the paper and was perusing an article in a magazine when his wife "formally" presented herself.

Mrs. Caroline Randall was not possessed of the spirit of the day. She had devoted Christmas eve's day to delivering her numerous remembrances, and had been annoyed by an hour's wait in the "long distance" telephone exchange while the exchange made connection with Atlanta, Georgia, so that Caroline might wish her mother the greetings of the season.

"Your green stuff makes the house look stuffy," she complained as she walked into the room.

"Merry Christmas, old lazy bones," gaily he teased. "I saw old Kriss a long time before you did." He was walking toward her while voicing his good will.

Mrs. Randall divined his intent, carelessly she elevated her lips, satisfied with the effect.

"I say, Caroline," pled, "you could put just a little more ginger in your kiss without spoiling the flavor of it."

A yawn displayed her interest in affection. Languidly she approached the table on which the Christmas presents were displayed.

"How do you like the necktie I gave you?"

she asked; though before he could answer she whined, "Is this all of my presents?"

"Why you little pig," he chided; "there are oceans of presents for you, and only ——" he caught the complaint of neglect and offered excuse for the oversight, "but 'Old Santa' is going to remember me later." Among the wealth of boxes on the table there was only one bearing his name, that box held a necktie. He was glad when the house maid appeared in the doorway with merry greetings:

"Christmas giff, Miss Caroline; Christmas giff, Mister Hughes."

"Hello, Mary," Hughes acknowledged the greeting. "Here," he handed her a small envelope containing a remembrance.

Mrs. Randall was less frivolous. "Mary," she demanded, "what did you do with those packages for Mister Randall?"

"Why, why, I hid 'em so he wouldn't find 'em till today."

"Well for goodness sake go get them quick and bring them to him, he is getting jealous of my popularity."

"Oh, I say, Caroline, that's not fair; I ——"

"No cause to worry, Mary will return quickly."

There was an unbroken silence while Mary was away. Hughes walked to the window, and tried to find happiness because the day looked like Christmas.

The servant returned with a basket filled to overflowing with packages, and boxes, and bundles which could not disguise the fact that they held good old Christmas cheer.

"Thanks, Mary," Hughes effused, "I couldn't think that all of my friends had forgotten me. I'll unwrap them and you may have the ribbon and Christmasy paper; but no hurry, you may assist Mrs. Randall."

Mary hastened to the more attractive display. "Oh, Miss Caroline, ain't they the most gorgeous set of furs; ain't that dog collar magnificent; and oh, that beautiful wrist-watch"; etc., on through the list until her mistress ordered:

"Mary, take that bunch of hideous ribbon away from here before it gives me a headache, and hurry away with that paper and those boxes." Servant disposed of, she turned to address her husband: "Really, Hughes, I think you overdo everything you attempt; the furs are pretty, but I'm afraid Mrs. Kemp will think that I got them just because she has a set of minx; the dog-collar I'll just simply have to exchange, because I do not intend to wear anything but pearls; and as for that wrist-watch, I'll send it to mamma, because it's vulgar to pay attention to time." She caught up a book from the array of presents. "Isn't this a cunning little book from Mister Andrews?" She read the title: "'Love Lyrics of a Lonely Loon,' I wonder if the verse is as clever as the title?" She sat down to read, and was absorbed in the volume until breakfast.

They were at breakfast only a few minutes when the door-bell announced a Christmas visitor. When Mary opened the door Mr. William Randall and wife came gaily into the front hall.

"Christmas gift, Mary; there I beat you to it and you will have to be awfully good before you see what old Santa Claus brought you." William Randall was as joyous as a boy in the spirit of the day. "Where are the folks? Ah, there they are, I see them." The house was so constructed that one could see beyond the sitting room into the dining room. "You lazy sleepy heads," upbraided the father; "here it's after nine o'clock and you youngsters are still at breakfast. Hughes, that was a jolly old Santa Claus you sent up my way, I came very near putting on the

smoking jacket, sampling the 'old Pough,' lighting one of the cigars and acting lazy."

"You talk like you had sampled the bottle," Hughes laughed. "Mother, I'll kiss you when I come in. Have a piece of Casaba?"

"No, thanks, Hughes; too many pretty things to look at to think about eating." Woman-like, Mrs. Margaret Randall made for the display of Christmas presents.

"Oh, isn't this beautiful. Look, William, isn't this dainty? Isn't this the dearest little—Caroline, you are the luckiest daughter I have. Hurry through your breakfast so you can—"

To all of which Caroline made no reply, calmly and spitefully she ordered Mary to place a screen between the rooms.

On hearing this order, Hughes looked at his wife in amazement, for such an act was no less than an insult. Hastily he arose, and hastened to his parents, typifying a joy he did not feel.

William Randall noticed Caroline's act; it had been too gross not to be seen. He saw the struggle his son was making to offset the deliberate hurt. He would make an effort "to lift Hughes out of himself," to divert thought into more pleasing channel. There was one subject which would instantly do this very thing. He pounced onto that idea, and did not let his son get well into the room before he called with reckless abandon:

"Say, Hughes, I've a surprise bit of information—something I give as a bit of joy"—he emphasized each word—"the 'Mysterious Agent' has called for our assistance."

"Good," was the hearty, glad response. "Did you send him the assistance? What was it, and all about it? Please hurry with your story, for I'm as anxious to hear this mystery unraveled as I was to hear of 'Brer Rabbit' and 'Brer Fox' in childhood days." He had hastened to his mother's

side. Now holding her in fond embrace, he questioned: "Mumsy, old pal, may we talk shop, on Christmas day, in your presence?"

"Certainly, Hughsey, I am more interested in the wonderful work of this missionary than I am in our foreign missionaries." At all times she was a peacemaker. Now she asked: "Where is Caroline?"

"She is suffering from a severe headache, but will be here in a very few moments." Turning to his father, "Come, Dad, tell us your story."

"Yesterday afternoon," husband and father narrated, "I received a call over the long distance telephone and was overjoyed while recognizing the voice of the 'Mysterious Agent.' After a pleasing exchange of the greetings of the season, she told me that her finances—"

"She? Her?" Hughes questioned in an instant, amaze. "She? 'The Mysterious Agent' is a woman?" The idea was too startling to find instant lodgement in his reasoning.

"Exactly," William Randall corroborated. "She is a woman—a most wonderful woman. I have known that fact for several months, though for reasons which are her own, I have withheld the information from you." He did not demand any credit for his part in the scheme, did not place himself in the lime-light of this wonderful flare, did not say that his money had financed the effort; instead, he gave every atom of credit to this noble woman. He told his audience: "Yesterday she informed me that her finances were at an exceeding low ebb; that she must have assistance from us if she was to continue in her work, and asked that we advance the necessary money."

"Good Lord. What did you say?"

"I asked her to have the telephone call 'reversed,' told her I would forward a check for one hundred dollars by the first mail, and for her to

draw on me for any requested amount in the future."

"A woman." Hughes murmured half aloud, wholly absorbed. "The 'Mysterious Agent' a woman." He would induce his mother and father to fully understand this most wonderful discovery. He would hold their attention centered until they should know as much of the truth as he was awakening to. He did not see—if he had he would not then have understood—the protecting smile with which both mother and father were approving his interest in this unheralded "Mysterious Agent." He believed he was calling his parents' attention to a discovery, but in reality he was totally absorbed in knitting history and sentiment into a tapestry of love's awakening. He murmured softly, fondly, "A woman."

"Yes," William Randall told him, "a woman whom your mother and I love and honor."

"But who is she? Why this mystery? Why should so noble a woman seek to efface herself by this secrecy? Who is this 'Mysterious Agent'?" He wanted someone to speak a name which was pounding in his brain and pressing at his heart. He was impatient that another should say her name. "Who is she? Will she say her name?"

William Randall wished that his son might be permitted to share in the full knowledge of this woman's self-denial and glorious achievements. Such was not to be. He shook his head; his word had been given that he would protect her secret from all men, certainly from Hughes; slowly, respectfully, he answered:

"To me? Yes. To you? No."

But his refusal to divulge her name was as a goad to fancy's weave. Unerringly love was divining a truth which speech was denying. Dumb and dreaming, he stood closely wrapped in thought, and heeded not the gush and libeled

gaiety with which his wife was greeting his parents.

\* \* \* \* \*

For two weeks the nerve strain was all but unbearable. Every "non-pool" farmer seemed over-anxious to get his tobacco to market before the threatening cloud of the "Possum Hunters'" anger should break beyond the militia, sheriffs, the Equity president's, and the "Mysterious Agent's" control. The city streets in front of and in the vicinity of the sales warehouses were congested with the hundreds of farm wagons piled high with tobacco. Prices were way beyond the figure set by the Equity, and to meet this condition, the executive committee of the Society was in daily session, revising their price list to that of the market. Hughes Randall was urging all "Anti-Equity" growers to hasten their product to market; but he asked them, pled with them, as a favor to humanity to hush their gibes, cease their taunts, still their slander.

Hughes was fearful of the tension snapping. He wrote a very personal letter to Durbin Ellis asking that he give assistance to upholding the law, rather than encouragement to lawlessness and rowdyism. He knew this nerve-racking strain could not hold if such men as Durbin Ellis persisted in jeering, taunting, slandering the men who made possible the advance in prices for tobacco. He dreaded a return of terrorism. He worked, begged and prayed that it should not occur; but he feared it, and well he might, for the cloud burst.

Tried to the limit of human endurance in the affairs of the commercial world, he also realized that the conditions which existed between Caroline and himself were hourly drawing to an open breach of toleration. This must not be permitted. Something must be done while yet there was time

to correct a fault. He resolved to induce his wife to quietly reason over the situation.

His initial efforts were rewarded by rebuffs and indignant retaliations until he protested:

"Caroline, it is not the great quarrels of life which crush us and rob our existence of hope; supreme issues stimulate rather than hurt. But these petty chaffings without just grounds for complaint are crushing and disheartening. Where do I fail? What can I do to make this house a home? Will you discuss the situation as though it were a story plot and tell me your ideas?"

She would not answer. Calmly she secured a magazine and began turning the pages.

"You must understand, Caroline, that I cannot permit such conduct as your present behavior. You are treating me in disgust, while I entreat you to civility. You are beautiful and attractive, accomplished and intelligent, you still retain my respect and consideration. It is not too late for you to rekindle the love which your past conduct has all but killed."

"Since I am becoming so distasteful to you, perhaps it is time for me to find out who you are trying to put in my place. But I'll give you fair warning that you can't get rid of me as easily as you did that stenographer person."

He flushed scarlet over this shameless thrust, though quietly protested: "You have no grounds for such an accusation. I am trying to win you, not another love, girlie; I want you."

"Well, you've got me and don't seem to be satisfied."

He was determined not to display anger, determined to lead rather than force. He did not believe he was too gentle with her, refused even an illusion to brute force.

"Caroline, you are reading a magazine which



I have read. Would it be possible for us to converse on any topic or story which is in that issue?"

"It would not," was the spirited reply; "my mother contributes stories and articles to the publishers, and has prompted me in my criticisms; and, besides, you do not understand the present day philosophy of life."

"Very well, Caroline," he agreed; "but as you have mentioned the subject, do you defend your conduct with Mr. Andrews as being in accord with the 'philosophy of life'?"

"Yes," Caroline angrily flared; "that not only is in accord with my philosophy but also with my wishes; and it is my own personal and private affair, just the same as your behavior with that Herron person was yours; so you remain as silent in your criticisms as I was in mine." Looking at him malignantly, she continued: "You might be my husband, but I am my own boss; so you mind your own business, for I am amply able to take care of myself." She arose and haughtily walked to the doorway, turned, and ridiculed: "I am going to visit Mamma for a month or so, and let you see how lonesome this place will be without me. Perhaps you will then be willing to let me alone, and not bother me with such needless and foolish talk. I am perfectly contented just the way I am, so I see no reason why you should begin to complain. I intend to be just as I am, and treat you for what you are, not for what you want to be. You're not going to change me, so please stop trying. And if you think you are going to bluff me into being a finicky, nimby-pimby of a lovey, dovey wife, it's a sign of your old age. So ring off, the line's busy." She was audacious enough to wave him adieu as she wheeled toward the stairs.

"You," his voice rang with the intensity and agony of the torture; then was hushed in a composure which was an anathema. A composure which told the death of love for this woman. As one who awakens from deep sleep, he sat and vainly tried to grasp a truthful realism from out of the tangled, twisted thoughts which had seemed real while he dreamed. He thought deep thoughts and sought to find the truth. He plumbed his heart, and wondered at the lightness of his sorrow. He wondered if the house of "Equity" would come tumbling down as rapidly as the house of Randall was falling. He wondered if the "Possum Hunters" would—

His thought was answered by the ringing of the telephone bell. The angry jingle pleased him; its insistent clatter lulled rather than irritated him. He laughed—and soon he ceased to laugh.

"Hello," he answered.

He was told that "long distance" wanted Hughes Randall. He waited for the connection to be made. He heard a voice, a woman's voice, a voice which sang as "the lost chord" in the anthem of his life, a voice which told him why his sorrow was not keen, a voice which called to him to make haste to save the house of Equity.

"This is the 'Mysterious Agent,' Hu—, Mr. Randall." There was ever so slight pause between this announcement and the information she was to impart, yet slight as it was, it carried him through a veritable whirlpool of emotions. Madly his heart was pounding as though it would beat down the distance between them; as though it would leap back over the months during which he had been buried in his dream. What cared he if the voice urged him to a fight? Fight he would. Gladly. As she wanted him to fight. The voice said on: "The 'Night Riders' are preparing to make a raid on Durbin Ellis' tobacco

barn tonight. They have already left Richmond, and nothing is in the way to stop them. I cannot get the militia there in time to save it; I cannot get the sheriff's office, so I'm calling you. Please help; but you must hurry, hurry, hurry." With an intake of breath which came over the wire as a sob, she disconnected the phone.

But Hughes Randall could not have said reply if such had been permitted. He stood as though suddenly turned into a graven image, a smile of wondrous beauty overspreading his "handsomely ugly" features. That instant, fleeting and intense, quickly passing by the gauge we designate as "time," was a life-time long in thought. It pictured the joy of "what might have been"; it told in no uncertain words the error in his life; he saw the tracings of the hand of fate, relentless in the crudity of truth; he read the message from life's code of "home," written by the pulsings of his heart. He knew; God, what he knew of the meaning of love. He understood of the meaning of forgiveness. For that voice which called to him from the realm of a forgotten happiness, had said far more than a worded message; it had re-strung his heart-chorus to the choral life and drawn from them by master touch the harmony of love, and life, and joy. For the voice which called to him, the woman's voice, the call of the "Mysterious Agent," was Beatrice Herron.

With a joyous laugh, he sprang to action. This was no time to stand idly dreaming. She had said for him to go. Go he would, even to the verge of death in answer to her call, and further did she call to him. Rapidly he planned his course of action. He called up a public garage.

"Have you a powerful car in your service, one which can be relied on?—Have you a driver who is not afraid to drive?—Send them to me at once; a dollar for every minute less than ten between

now and his arrival." He gave his address; heard the garage owner yell an order as the receiver was thrown to the hook.

Rushing into the hall, he hastily threw about him a fur-lined great coat, drew on his cap and gloves of fur, and was prepared. He stepped to the door and was about to open it when caution warned him to arm himself. This was not the time for pretty words, empty phrases and meaningless gestures; now that a moment when death was a handmaid to liberty. Running to his room he thrust an "Army Automatic" into his pocket, then hurried to the pavement in front of his home to wait impatiently for the automobile.

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER 26.

### **"Sixteen and One-Half Minutes."**

Exactly eight minutes after Hughes Randall ordered a "car which could be depended on" and a chauffeur who was "not afraid to drive," he saw the powerful, lumbering touring car of tremendous build come rushing toward him with a roar of noise and burst of speed which was as music and grace to his impatience. At that time the city ordinances had not been framed to dictate the exact amount of noise, light, or speed, which should be permitted to each automobile. Had they been in effect, this car never would have reached its destination, for the chauffeur who was "not afraid to drive" was a glutton for noise, light, and speed. Hughes first had heard the roar from the powerful engine when it was yet blocks away and around a corner, then the brilliant glare from the ponderous headlights had turned the chill blackness of the night into drab day as it forced him to shield his eyes with his hand, while he smiled in satisfaction over the speed which was in perfect harmony with the noise and light.

Evidently the chauffeur "had spotted his man," for he merely threw out the clutch and permitted the engine to run, as he dashed to the curb and applied his breaks with a deafening shriek. "Mr. Randall?" he yelled through the noise, and his

engine seemed to be yelping and barking at the man to hurry.

Mr. Randall did not wait for the automobile to come to a standstill, but had rushed forward to meet this kindred spirit, jerked open the door, flung himself into the seat beside the driver as he yelled: "Drive on; turn first corner to left."

He drove. He had been instructed to "burn the wind." He was in his delight, and was more than anxious to show this speed-frantic layman just what motions went to make that word "speed." He threw in the clutch and fed a charge of gas which made the car leap from the ground as a greyhound to the chase. He did not care where the trip would land him, his only wish was that it should be over a good road-bed. He was joyous when he heard the command: "Richmond Pike," for on that road he had made "a record." He rounded the corners at dangerous speed, the very engine seemed to choke in anger when the rough surface of the city's street placed a demand on caution.

"How fast have you covered ten miles by pike?" Mr. Randall asked.

"Fifteen minutes flat," was the prideful boast from this mechanic whose chief delight was speed.

They were rapidly approaching the corner where a turn to the right would pass the "city limits" and place them on a "speedway" with a straightaway stretch of three miles. Both men were peering into the shaft of light cast by their machine, fearful lest some pedestrian or vehicle should place a momentary halt on them; grimly they smiled to see how everything scurried from their path. The Equity president drew his watch so that he might note the time when they passed beneath the arc light at the corner, he intended to offer a bonus for speed, he told the driver:

"I am going to give you a dollar bill for every minute you clip away from thirty minutes on this ten-mile trip. Now drive."

He had reckoned the time which would be required for the "Possum Hunters" to make the trip from Richmond to the Ellis barn, had deducted what time must have been wasted as Beatrice Herron was vainly trying to find assistance, had subtracted the moments he had used up, and there was a scant thirty minutes left. He intended to make the best use of those thirty minutes, so ordered the chauffeur to drive.

"Drive?" That man did. With a laugh the engine answered to his demand for speed by giving speed and calling to him in the purring song which only steel, fine tempered steel, knows how to sing. In maddening pace, with deafening roar they rushed to the brow of each hill, only to plunge the decline which waited them, and dash the level stretch that they might find another hill to climb. Speed, speed, they gormandized in speed; while the ground rushed at them, flew at them, hurled itself before them, only to magically part, to level itself that this speed maniac might pass without doing the very road-bed some hurt or harm.

The traffic on a night like this was light, few people were abroad, no fear from that interference; the road was perfect, a very invitation to wild speed; no railroad crossings, but three road intersections—they well defined; both men knew the charted path as though it were a city street. So Hughes, flushed with a craving for speed, yelled:

"Faster."

The chauffeur laughed in glee, laughed as he recognized a kindred spirit, laughed as only man can laugh when opposing force is in control. On each side of them the silvery shimmer of lake

Ellerslie was placid, still, a sheen of dull gray light, a striking contrast to this speeding demon, this roaring avenger of the night. The driver laughed when he replied:

"I can't Mr. Randall; she's wide open." Contentedly he laughed as he added this man to an especial list of friends; he laughed as he saw two frightened, cringing pedestrians rush to one side of the right of way that this sprite of the night should not harm them; he laughed as he saw the wild-eyed man and woman in the only buggy they passed, for he knew these two would not be more terrified at death.

It was such a night as villainy would cherish for the perpetration of a foul and unholy deed. The raw, cold, humid air penetrated to the very marrow, bit and stung the flesh, and made the wind a misery and a curse. It was an atmosphere such as anyone would be glad to avoid; moisture hung in a murky haze, and rain, or snow, or sleet were too proud to fall through such a muddy air.

Both men were keenly aware of the frightful danger in such a terrific pace. The driver did not dare to take one particle of his time or thought from the manipulation of his car, his eyes frantically searched the road, his feet and hands were constantly on the move as he touched throttle, brake, wheel, clutch, and siren; his was the brain which must control this machine of speed. Yet of the two, driver and patron, Hughes held the index mind, forestalled each move, prompted speed. "Steady," he would warn; and the mechanic would throttle down until the counter-signal, "now"; and then the thunder from the open exhaust would grumble over the fraction of a second which had been lost.

Thus they rode at frantic pace; wild driver, equally wild passenger; one a speed-lover, the



other a peace-lover on his way to single-handed battle with a band of thugs, marauders, "Night Riders." Nervy men, both; each ready to give his life to his love; yet one knelt only to justice and honor, while the other worshiped the auto devil, speed.

Why should Hughes Randall be so willing, so ready to risk his very life in a ride which would spell death should a tire burst, a bolt loosen, or a faulty move hurl them from the road? Was anger over his wife's conduct driving him to careless risk of life? Did he seek to forget her venom by flying to danger at such terrific speed? Had the voice of Beatrice Herron set in motion a wish for a swift freedom?

No. He was too proud to be fettered by such meager, little, puny thoughts. He had forgotten self as though no such a one existed. He had become the soul of a great cause. The honor of the Equity, the very life of the Society was at stake while he "played the game." Public opinion was so delicately poised that one more tobacco barn sent up in smoke, one more depredation committed by the "Night Riders" would mean the dissolution of the "pool." That barn would not burn tonight if he could prevent it. The "Mysterious Agent" had done her part, he would do his. He called for speed and yet more speed.

"First gate on the right, just over the crest of the hill; slow down," was the order as they came near to the stone entrance to the Ellis farm. The fear that he would see a dull glow from the tobacco barn, a leaping flame which would tell him that he was too late, jerked his body forward as though he would send himself to the barn with the speed of thought. With a sigh of relief he eased back to the seat; there was no glare, no light, no evidence of life around or near the loca-

tion of the barn, naught save a misty, cold and uninviting grayness.

"Thanks to your skill we are ahead of them," Hughes told the driver.

"Ahead of who?" He did not know he had been in a race.

"The 'Night Riders'," was the quiet response. Yet it was information which caused the chauffeur an involuntary tingling in every nerve. He had often heard of the "Possum Hunters." Every one in Kentucky had heard of and dreaded this bank of Ku-kluk. He had talked to men who had been injured by the Klan. He knew they were a dangerous lot of men to oppose. He marveled that he was so unafraid of this newfound danger while in the presence of his passenger. He did not inquire, he did not care, whether this man was a member of the "Possum Hunters" or here to oppose them. But this much he did know—he was aquiver with the spirit of fight which so enveloped Hughes Randall as to compel respect for the cause he represented, and he would have followed this leadership without question or compensation, though he had known the man scarce an hour.

"Are you a man?" Hughes abruptly asked.

"I try to be," was the simple answer.

"Good. No one but a man could answer as you do. Do you see that tobacco barn on the crest of the hill, about five hundred yards from the road, and to the right of a clump of trees? No? It's there, and possibly I see it because I know its exact location. See it now? Good. That barn is our object. We reach it by turning in at the main entrance, follow the drive until nearly opposite the barn, then go through the field. There is the gate. Pull in." He jumped out of the car, drew his watch, held it before the light of the headlight, and announced, "Sixteen and one-half min-

utes," opened the gate, closed it after the car, jumped to the seat, and directed, "Close your muffler, make as little noise as possible, for the man who owns this farm has done everything but threaten my life. When we reach the barn, turn and back your car against the door of the barn, then throw your blankets over the head-lights so as not to allow a single ray of light to escape. Any damage done the blankets will be paid for; but you shut off their light and stand so that you can jerk them away at an instant signal." On the road to the barn the plan was perfected.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beatrice Herron could not resist the call which emanated from one of those wonderful loves which entitles woman to reverence and which lifts mankind beyond the human pall unto a plane where he is but little lower than the angels. She forgot the awful hurt; forgot the horrid breath of scandal; brushed aside the petty, human objections; unterrified by hazards, without hope or care for reward, she endured the hardships and discomforts of winter travel on foot, in rough horse-drawn vehicles, by slow and smelly accommodation trains, and fought in the trenches for the cause of the man she loved, even though he was the husband of another.

Her results had been marvelous and speedy, and the more wonderful since the work was all her own. Knowing the local secretaries as well as she did, she could secure a private interview, bluff and beg information which he would not dare to write, and thus be able to warn the authorities and the "non-pool" farmer and prevent the harm which had been planned.

Following a warning that a "lodge" of "Possum Hunters" was showing signs of ill omen, she had journeyed to Richmond to learn their secrets if possible. From the local secretary she

secured a list of those who "most likely would be members" and went to their homes that she might dissuade them from their attempted violence. The men pretended to be won by her arguments, she believed her work well done and was preparing to go elsewhere when rudely awakened to their duplicity, for just thirty minutes prior to her conversation with Hughes Randall, one of the farmers came to her and told the startling story that thirty men, armed and determined, had already passed through Richmond on their way to destroy Durbin Ellis' tobacco barn.

She was horrified at this, the greatest of her failures. She realized it would be futile to call the militia, since they were divided into squads stationed at widely various points. She knew the Madison County sheriff could not overtake the band of hard riding men. She tried to warn the Fayette County office. No answer. Haste was required, imperative haste, yet where, oh, where, could she find assistance? She was in despair. Failure, utter, bleak failure taunted her. There was but one hope left. She seized that one. She telephoned to Hughes Randall.

That call required more courage, more sheer bravery, more self-denial, more sacrifice of pride, than could possibly be shown by the mere physical daring of her champion.

Having won the battle with her emotions. Having sent him on a dangerous mission. She then tried to give assistance to the man she loved. She telephoned to Durbin Ellis and warned him to get assistance and get it quick, though failed to say that Hughes Randall was on his way to the barn.

\* \* \* \* \*

Durbin Ellis had frantically called the sheriff's office, could get no reply, called the high official at his residence, and was told that a squad

of deputies would be rushed to the barn as quickly as possible, but for him to ask some of his neighbors to come to his assistance. This order was more easily given than executed, since only three houses could be reached by telephone; but these calls netted him five men who came hurrying across fields, armed with shotguns and rifles.

But what could six men do in battle with an angry mob? Durbin Ellis asked himself, fearful of the consequences. He had suffered from their deviltry. He knew the temper of that mob. He would as soon believe that an angry bull, a mad dog, a venomous serpent, could be stopped by words, as to think that plea, or threat, or argument would win over their brutal determination. He raved and swore; then remembered his friends in the settlement of Athens, and telephoned to the store where he "loafed."

By lucky chance a lodge of Free Masons were in session in the hall over the store. The storekeeper, without waste of words, rushed to the hall and spread the alarm. No Masonic lodge was ever "closed" more quickly than was that Athens lodge; door and "lights" remained open until their return, and the members rushed to nearby homes and stores in search for firearms. Thus twenty men, armed with shotguns, rifles, and pistols, were racing on horseback, in buggies or wagons, to assist in the slaughter of the mob, and they started from Athens only a few minutes after Hughes Randall left Lexington. Having not quite two miles to travel, they were at stations in the barn only time enough "to catch their breath," when the automobile turned in at the front gate.

Every man of the twenty-six saw the ray of light cast by the powerful headlight, watched it as it silently crept up the front driveway, then turned into the field and threw its beam on the

barn as a fiend of the night coming to a feast of flame. Guns were thrust through impoverished port-holes even as they questioned one another whether this was friend or foe. Some of them were ready to swear they heard the dull thud of horses' hoofs coming behind the car, all were suspicious of the silent stealth so evident.

"Everybody keep quiet," Durbin ordered. "If that's the sheriff he'll make some kind of noise to locate me 'fore he comes over to the barn; if it ain't him they'll come straight to the barn to set 'er on fire whether there's one or a hundred of 'em." He was careless of his English, he had cause to be; he was a brave man, brave enough to admit he was frightened. He was trembling in his excitement as he told his men: "Wait till they get out uv the car and come running toward the barn, then let 'em have all you've got; shoot to kill."

"Funny they're riding in a automobile," one of the farmers speculated. "I 'lowed they allus rid a'horseback."

"S-h-h-h, not so loud," Durbin warned as the automobile drew near, swerved to one side, halted; the dull roar of the engine made but little more noise than Durbin Ellis believed his heart was pounding forth. He, and all his followers, saw a lone man step to the ground, saw the car as it came chugging back toward the barn door, saw and instantly recognized the solitary figure now revealed by the glare of the headlights.

"Hughes Randall," Durbin hissed through his chattering teeth. "Dirty dog; and all this boasted virtue 'bout his trying to stop these things is a lie; he's the leader. Don't shoot; we'll capture him red-handed. Hell; they're backing the car against the door. Listen, he's saying something."

"That's it," Hughes was telling the chauffeur

in an easy tone marked by neither hurry nor excitement; "now cover the lights with the blankets, and at the signal, jerk away the covering and blind the hellions and their horses."

Twenty-five of the twenty-six men in the barn came very near cheering the superb bravery of this lone champion of right, twenty-five were not sure whether they were more relieved of suspense than glad to know that Hughes Randall still was worthy of their honor; the twenty-sixth man was secretly glad, glad, then dumb with boundless admiration for a kinsman who would so fearlessly wage battle with enraged "Possum Hunters." Trembling in a new-born excitement, he whispered directions to his men, and silently they began to feel their way to the other end of the barn.

Neither Mr. Randall nor the driver realized that friend or foe was so close at hand; the noise from their car drowned the slight stir of the farmers, and when the engine was stilled, they could only hear the sudden squeal and grunting of hogs which had been sleeping in the barn and had doubtless been wakened by the noise from the automobile. Silently they waited. Nor had they long to wait before they heard the rhythmic hoof-beat of the company of horses galloping down the pike. Louder, louder grew the sound of iron shoes pounding the macadam; the sharp metallic note dulled by the blanket of foggy cold. Silence. They knew the "Night Riders" had left the pike and were riding over the tufted grass as they headed for the barn which was in their determination doomed.

The Equity president did not pity these men as he had the behooded players in the lodge room; he loathed them as vultures foul with carrion, putrid in stench; he despised these advancing "Night Riders" more than he would have believed

it possible for him to hate a fellow man; happily, gladly, shouting, he could plunge into their midst and beat, throttle, rend and hurl them into death, laughing the while at their whines and yelpings. "Cowards," he muttered; "cowards, every man of them, yet not a man among them."

Every nerve high-strung and taut, each faculty alert and strained, his fingers precisely laced about the handle and trigger of the army automatic, crouching low against the earth that his figure might be mistaken for some sleeping beast of the field, he waited these felons, bitter his thoughts, his pity as cold as the shades of the night. Dimly he could discern the moving figures as they swiftly hurled their ranks toward the barn. He could see that they were rapidly advancing in the form of a crude V, or wedge, grim, and damning, and silent save for the labored breathing of their horses. On they came, and on, then when the apex of the line was within thirty yards of him, Hughes leaped and yelled:

"Halt." And almost on the instant he was surrounded by the bright glare from the head-lights as the brilliant flare changed night to day, for the driver played well his part, and had removed the blankets when Hughes Randall leaped.

They looked, they saw, and one of them unto his dying day will not forget the what he saw. The chauffeur gazed in unbelieving amaze, the sight caused this uninitiated man to gasp and startle as though unwilling to trust his eyes. For there, beyond Mr. Randall, was a disordered array of horses, steaming, sweating horses, some rearing in a plunge, all wild-eyed, snorting, frightened by this blinding light, and on their backs sat draped figures, figures draped in flowing black, figures without a head. For one wild second he gasped, he could not understand, and understanding he would not believe.



The line, if line the "Night Riders" had attempted to preserve in formation, was broken and confused; the light of itself would have halted the horses had the drivers failed to jerk them to a stand. Confused, startled, this motley crew, each man a Cain, each man a felon in his heart, each man guilty of arson in his intent, sat leaning forward in their saddles, blinded by the light, trying to determine the source and strength of this resistance.

But they did not have long to wait before they should learn the source of the resistance, and the curses flung at them were strong enough to burn even their callous souls.

"You dirty curs," Hughes hurled in bitter hate; "you cowardly vermin, you disgrace to the name of man; do you know me? Have your befuddled brains cleared sufficiently to permit you to recognize me? This is the president of the society you curse by your damnable deeds. The society you have all but crushed by your dirty, sniveling cowardice. You cringing whelps. You things, unworthy of a name. If one of you moves forward but one foot from where you stand cringing in your sickening shame, or dare to lift so much as a whimper or a finger in my direction I'll shoot you down as I would a skunk. Back, back from where you stand; back, I say." The band obeyed as one man. He ordered them: "Now turn, turn like the cowards you are, turn and slink into the night as the vile and unholy things you are."

While he had been telling the "Possum Hunters" his curses, Hughes realized that someone had come to stand beside him, dimly he wondered why one man should cast so dense a shadow; he looked to the ground, the shadow was on both sides, he heard the deep breathing as of many men, hastily he glanced to either side and saw the line of men,

with shotguns, rifles, and pistols level on the hastily retreating "Night Riders." Not one word was spoken until the hoof-beats on the pike told of the vanquished raid.

Hughes had intended saying something to his fellow guards, the "Possum Hunters" were no more than half way to the front gate when he turned to see if he could recognize the man on his right; but the light had been shut off, the driver was a strategist and had covered the lights to lessen the invitation for a cowardly shot. He waited, and was not surprised at hearing Durbin Ellis call:

"Hughes?"

"Yes, Durbin."

"Here; give me your hand." The clasp complete he passionately said, "Hughes Randall, that barn, the tobacco and everything in it is yours to do with as you damn please and if you want to set fire to it I'll furnish the match." He meant exactly what he said.

"Thanks, Durbin, I always have wanted you to be one of our members; you can come in tomorrow and sign the contract." And with those words he closed his comment on an affair the discussion of which was to form the principle topic of conversation for the twenty-five guards for days to come; while the chauffeur in recounting the detail of the "scrap" to all who gave attention, would glorify the Equity president until that one was pictured as a being whose breakfast-food was lion hearts and tiger blood.

"Has anybody in the crowd got a bottle in his pocket?" Hughes Randall inquired.

"Here," was the answer from five.

"Thanks," he accepted the nearest one and drained it.

\* \* \* \* \*

On returning to the city, Hughes directed the

driver to take him to the police station; a certain affair would require the services of a capable detective. On learning that Mr. Malcom was in his office preparing a monthly report, he paid the chauffeur, giving him a most liberal bonus, and was soon in consultation with his friend.

"I came to you," he told Mr. Malcom on his departure; "because you know her. Find her, go to her at any cost, and say to Miss Herron that the president of the tobacco society desires to thank her if she will permit him to do so personally."

Even the mushy, wet and rotten snow which was fast covering the streets with slush as he walked home, could not dampen the ardor of the song which chimed through every fibre of his being.

\* \* \* \* \*

Miss Herron gave attention to Mr. Malcom, heard his statement in full, proudly, calmly told him:

"I will make report when my task is done." Though in the still of the night she communed with her heart and wept.

When her answer was returned to Hughes Randall he smiled in full sympathy, for only the brave can fully understand the heart and soul of companion nobility.

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## CHAPTER 27.

### "I am not a quitter."

Mrs. Caroline Easson Randall was neither dismayed nor displeased over the cool, diplomatic courtesy with which her husband greeted her at the noon lunch following his successful encounter with the "Possum Hunters." She was delighted. His behavior thoroughly conformed with her idea of what constituted "social formality"; such was the mannerism she always had wanted him to adopt toward her. This deference and unsentimental politeness was the apex of her social cult. She accepted the display as a tribute to her generalship—this was an acknowledgment of her ability to lead; this was most suitable reward for "the dressing-down" which she had administered last night. She would now be able to go where she pleased and do as she wished, without so much explaining.

"You said last evening, Mrs. Randall, that you wished to go for a visit to your mother. You remain of the same desire this morning, no doubt?"

Caroline was in ecstasy. She much preferred being addressed as "Mrs. Randall" than "Caroline." This condition was ideal, almost she regretted to go away and leave "this new found freedom." She hesitated in answering.

There was no hesitation on the part of her

husband. He told her, "I shall arrange for your transportation and reserve sleeping-car accommodation so that you may leave Lexington tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock."

She was forced to answer, "Alright, I'll be ready." She could not have done otherwise. She would not hold an undignified debate, while he was so pleasingly formal. She could not remember her exact words telling her intention to go. "I'll ask you to please wire mamma of my intention, and to excuse my hasty departure from the table. I must telephone Mary Kemp to cut out her dinner party for tomorrow night."

Since her daughter's marriage, Mrs. Anna Easson had devoted her entire time to the literary profession. She had contributed several articles of importance to the magazines, and her stories on tobacco and the farmer's pooling of his products were "featured" in many periodicals. At this moment she was located in Richmond, Virginia, where she was editing data for an article on "The Cigarette Tobaccos of Virginia." If aware of the unhappy conditions which existed in her daughter's household, that knowledge was discredited by her faith in Hughes Randall's gentleness and a firm belief in Caroline's ability to "manage men." She was not surprised to receive a wire stating that her daughter would soon be with her to visit. The visit fulfilled her urgent and oft repeated invitation. Caroline's glowing account of her husband's "wonderful new attitude" allayed all fear, and she planned many excursions and parties for the beautiful Mrs. Randall, without even a suspicion that the young married woman was hourly planning a scheme which would "firmly and for all time establish formality."

Hughes accompanied his wife to the depot, saw that she was comfortably located in the choice

seat of the car, liberally "tipped" the porter, so that she should have all possible attention, and bade her a delightfully formal though unaffectionate adieu. Which had pleased the young matron as greatly as it saddened the husband, but neither of them placed to words the sentiment they felt. He left the car when he heard the "All-aboard" of the conductor, and when the train pulled away he hastily walked to his office.

He plunged into the absorbing detail of the Equity Society. He continued to strike telling blows on the receding terror of the "Possum Hunters." Gladly he welcomed the few new members who were being "signed up" by Durbin Ellis. He revised the price list to conform to the high figure being paid "on the breaks," or sales warehouse floors, and vehemently assailed the efforts of the "quitter" as enemy propaganda.

Fate has ordained that a man's greatness shall be determined by his ability to combat trials and tribulations. Unto the small, small troubles shall be great; unto the worthy great troubles shall be small. Likewise was issued the decree, suffering shall be dull or sharp according to the wit of the individual. Within twenty-four hours after the departure of Mrs. Randall a new worry assailed the Equity president, a worry which tore at the structure of "the house of Equity," even as Caroline's behavior tore at the essentials for happiness in "the house of Randall"; a worry which he met with the superb formality of generalship, though was less considerate of diplomatic conduct than he had been with Mrs. Randall.

The long fight of the tobacco growing farmers against the "Trust" was beginning to dissipate the fortitude of the individual members of the Equity. They saw the "non-pool" farmers haul their tobacco to market and sell it for unprecedented prices. They were told that other states

were producing an acceptable "weed." They had ample reasons to know that not one factory in the United States had curtailed production. They had borrowed money on their warehouse receipts and were forced to renew their notes. They were paying interest and taxes on the stored tobacco. Their only reward was hope. Hope which was beginning to wane. The majority membership of the Equity was restless, and showing their loss of confidence in the pool by openly demanding its dissolution.

Hughes Randall had heard of this dissension. On more than one occasion he had been warned of the revolutionary effort and assured of its growing strength. But he had not given official recognition to the idea simply because he did not think the moment opportune to teach them their lesson. He waited, waited until they should come to him with some document in print.

The requisition was presented by a committee of seven county secretaries. Men who had been bold in their own territory, but were suddenly grown less sure of their faith, discretion, and ability to lead, now when they were in the presence of the Equity chief. They stated the object of their visit, though words were far less glibly said than they had been at the rehearsal. They presented a legal-looking document which had been signed by several hundred members of the Society—a petition badly worn from much handling.

Hughes had courteously welcomed his co-workers; he was friendly and affable, and did everything in his power to lessen the tension to which the work in hand had strung the secretaries. Smilingly he accepted the petition, and jokingly told them they should have exercised greater care in handling the paper since now it could be easily torn. Carefully he read the text of the document,

and tried to fix its authorship, glanced through the list of names and seemed to be checking them off from well-tabulated memories. He finished with reading the petition, held it in his hand while looking at it with a superb contempt, caught hold of it with each of his powerful hands on opposite sides of the central crease and deliberately tore it through, then tossed the jagged edged sheets into the waste paper basket.

The committee was literally and honestly dumfounded. Sheepishly they glanced from one to the other of their number, afraid to look at their president. They struggled to find words in which they could frame an indignant protest against such illegal proceeding. They had flushed, then paled, then sputtered as they groped for words in a vocabulary which was sadly deficient to frame the present affair. Finally the most bold of the five, the one who had acted as spokesman in presenting their address, bounded to his feet and managed to protest:

“Bu-but, Mr. Randall, you must not do that, honestly you mustn’t. You had ought’r listen to the cry of the poor devils who sent us. Listen, Mr. Randall, they are demanding this dissolution. It ain’t us, it’s them. They are determined; they are mad; they are going to pull out, and if you refuse to call a meeting of the Society for the purpose of discussing this subject, you will only force us, as their representatives, to take the legal steps to force you. Honestly, Mr. Randall, you don’t know conditions; you don’t hear ’em talk like we do; our members are poverty stricken; they are calling for money, for food and clothes; money to pay rent, taxes, storage, interest, and insurance; they are blaming us, Mr. Randall; they blame the Equity because they can’t sell their tobacco like the non-pool farmers have done; like



we can do if you let us out. Let us dissolve. Let's call the thing off. Let's quit. We can't force the 'Trust' to buy from us if they don't want to. They can beat us playing the game 'cause they've got all the money. Let's dissolve." He was sweating as though the room was over-heated.

Hughes arose, calmly walked to a water-cooler in one corner of the room, drew a glass of the water and handed this to the committeeman. "Sit down and cool off, Mr. Simpson."

He returned to his chair, sat down, then compassionately looked from one to the other of the committee. Slowly he questioned, "What was it you gentlemen wished?"

"We want to dissolve the Equity," three of them managed to blurt.

"So does the 'Trust,' the Crosby Tobacco Company, Mr. J. C. Crosby, Albert J. Andrews, and every paid employe of the enemy; but there is this difference between you and them—they play to win, you whine and beg to be allowed to lose. They are watchfully waiting; anxious, glad for this moment to come; this is the last trump in their hand, and should it fail to turn the trick, they lose. Do you believe this idea to be yours? Are you so blind as not to see this petition to be a scheme of the enemy? Do you for one moment imagine that you have been acting as free agents? Would you be surprised to know that at this very instant a telegram is on the wire telling J. C. Crosby of this meeting? How do I know? I know the man. I give him credit for watching the Equity as closely as I have been watching the factories of the 'Trust.' He will secure, has secured, a line on your plans, even as I have kept tab on the stock-rooms and warehouses of his organization."

For a moment he paused that he might allow

these thoughts to sink deep into the reasoning of the slowly awakening committee. He saw them to be grasping for the truth as drowning men frantically seize hold of their rescuer. He was strong enough to carry a much greater load. He waited. When each man looked at him in pleading that he say more, he told them, "Gentlemen, if the Crosby Tobacco Company does not secure a supply of tobacco within sixty days from today, they will on that day close the doors, kill the organization of their factories, cease manufacturing, and remain idle until they purchase the raw stock to work. Do you think for the small fraction of one second that I am willing to ignobly surrender, lay down like a dog, quit like a coward, whine like a weakling, when our fight is so near won? No; I tell you. No, is the only possible answer. No, is your answer to that same question, or will be when you know the truth. For when you leave this room you will go away gladdened by a new hope. You will join forces with me, or force me to whip you as I am going to whip the 'Trust,' as the 'Mysterious Agent' and I have whipped the 'Possum Hunters,' as I will whip the Society itself before a surrender." His smile was winning, even though his words were drastic.

The committeemen were looking at him with earnest pleading in their wrapt gaze. They were too intent to smile; they were fascinated by the magic strength of 'their president'; they were begging for more. He told them:

"The sale bond, or agreement, which you and every other member signed and acknowledged before a notary, before he or she was permitted to become a pro bono factor of the Equity, was a legal transfer of the 'right, title and interest' in their tobacco for a period of two years. It was

binding, valid and legal because of the certificates of stock given in lieu of the raw stock. Do you fail to remember the clause: 'And said tobacco is to be and remain the fee simple property, holding and stock of the Society for and during a period of two years from the date of organization unless disposed of by sale before that day and date'? You remember it now, though you forgot it while you were presenting your petition. Why do you think that clause was inserted? To lend a legal aspect to the document? To give a tangible property to the Equity? No, gentlemen, that clause was written for this occasion. It was printed for this very day. It was placed in the contract to give a back-bone when our wish-bone turned to jelly. It was framed to prevent the welchers, quitters, and pikers from breaking up the game." His words were impelling, his manner superb in exquisite simplicity.

The committeemen had taken heart; they had rekindled their all but extinguished flame of hope; they were renewing an exhausted courage; they bowed in quick, eager jerking of their head while they heard:

"You are going to listen to reason now that your sentimental duty to your petitioners has been done, and when you return to those who sent you, the white feather of their choosing will no longer be your emblem. When you leave this room the joy of victory will be tingling through every fibre of your being. You are going to return to your homes with the pride of conquerors—not the cringing fear of quitters flowing through your thoughts. Here is why," and he cited facts, figures and reasons why the Equity was so near to a glorious victory. He read to them report after report to prove his statements. He showed to them how it would be impossible for the "Trust"

to continue manufacturing tobacco unless they were supplied with the raw product. He reasoned, talked and argued until the committee who had presented the petition asking for the dissolution of the Equity left his office fully confident of success. They had forgotten their fear, and were trying to shift the blame and censure of "quitter" on to another man. This other man would try to shunt the blame and censure on to some other one, and so the slogan, "I am not a quitter," came to be their battle cry.

\* \* \* \* \*

Whatever reason Mrs. Caroline Easson Randall would have assigned for the defense of her conduct, that reason would have been egocentric and faulty. Certainly she knew the deep antipathy which Hughes Randall at all times expressed for divorce. She did not believe it possible for him to change his views. She would play upon and around this moral standard as a mountain which was not to be moved. She felt her position as "wife" to be safe, no matter what should happen. She would remain "Mrs. Caroline E. Randall," when love and sympathy and interest should be no more.

She was only three days from home when she edited a letter to her husband, in which she emotionally accused him of ugly conduct; stating that she "had proof which could not be doubted," and that she was "hurt beyond conception." In her characteristic manner she deplored this condition, and told of the loneliness she felt because of his "desertion."

He was indignant and honestly hurt, branded the story as a canard unworthy of denial, requested her to refrain from writing such absurd falsehoods. Carefully he penned the letter, his skill in handling words was never more clearly displayed; he would anger her to the point of

betraying her intentions, though not sufficiently to force her to give up the effort as ridiculous.

Her answer was naught but a reiteration of her belief in the story, couched in sentimental language plainly showing her erratic temperament. "Where, where is that stenographer? If she is not in Denver, then where is she? Do you know? If you are as innocent as you would have me believe, you could not understand all I say."

Hughes demanded an explanation. He was exceedingly careful in the selection of his words. He warned her that this was neither the time nor subject for a waste of meaningless words.

Among other statements, her letter contained the following:

"All I have to say about my proof is this: A man told me everything. He did not spare his grammar, and what I wrote is what he told me—not what I say.

"If you are anxious to prove your innocence you will speak to the man; he is not in Lexington, never even been there, so don't go shooting somebody who is not to blame," etc.

Mr. Randall was justified in believing that his wife's writings revealed a deep-laid plan to vilify him. He was fearful that libelous statements were soon to be produced. He knew that all such matter would be perjury of criminal nature, but he also knew the ways of gossip, and he feared the result of a beautiful woman's slander. Such were the findings of his imagination and research that he was forced to believe his wife was attempting to ruin him. Hastily, carefully he penned a letter which would lead her to reveal her aim and intent.

Divested of her silly and meaningless sentimentality, her letter contained a startling revelation. This was:

"Wednesday morning I went to a celebrated

medium, Professor Robin, I went there because I wanted to find out whether you were the little tin Jesus you have been posing as. He told me everything. He told me things about myself that no one else ever knew, so there can be no question as to his saying the truth about you.

"If you want to find out what I actually think about you, go to our home and look in the top bureau dresser drawer for a little green backed note book, and read to your heart's content.

"When I return I intend to live in the house you insist on calling 'our home'; you are to live with your parents. I have asked Mrs. Kemp to live with me, so when she asks you for the key give it to her."

Hughes laughed as he read the ridiculous letter, not boisterously, softly, the laugh of a man who is successfully playing a delicate game. This "diary" might reveal many truths, perhaps it would furnish the key to the entire situation, perhaps it would more than counterbalance her ugly, false, and intangible claims. He made arrangements to spend the night at his "home"—he had been staying with his parents since his wife's departure—and gave a desire to "rearrange some furniture" as his reason.

On entering the "home," he vacantly stared at familiar objects in the hall and let his gaze wander into the other rooms as far as rays of light permitted him to see. But there was little comfort in this searching, everywhere he looked a sad yet mocking gloom shrouded the inanimate; each picture, chair, and article of furniture brought memories of Caroline. He brushed this depression from him and went to her room, to the bureau drawer told of in his letter.

Ribbons, gloves, collars, adornments for woman's person had been thrown into the drawer helter-skelter, topsy-turvey and with no attempt

at order, until the entire was a feminine tangle of incongruity. But he at once recognized this disorder to be characteristic of Caroline by compassionately disregarding the lack of care. He found the sought-for book, and went to the dining room that he might light the gas stove and be comfortable while reading. Many, many moments he sat staring into the blue-gold flame, thinking, thinking, thinking of Caroline and love, love which had been turned into her play-thing, love which in the future world—

He stilled his thoughts, though not before his heart was pounding rapidly. He took the "green-backed diary" from his pocket and opened it to read. As he did so an oblong envelope fell from the opened book to the floor; on picking this up he noted it to be a letter addressed to "Mrs. Caroline E. Randall, Lock Box No. 2538, City." He puzzled over this mystifying address and was on the eve of examining the contents of the envelope when he reasoned that the diary would explain it all, and thrusting the letter into his coat pocket he gave attention to the intimate writings.

When the devils to whom is prescribed the task of inflicting tortures on their earthly wards had been ordered to report to Mephistopheles that one should be designated to cunningly supervise the breaking of Hughes Randall, a Prince of the royal house of devils, a demon well versed in the ethics of hell was selected as the most likely one. This fiend had not neglected his commission; he had inflicted worry, heart-aches, loneliness, and ugly scandal as his torture. But the masterpiece of his work, the only one which caused his ward to pale and all but cry for mercy, was this diary which Caroline had written. Numbed, stricken, he sat and pondered and slowly understood.

The reading of this little book had settled for

all time his desire to instruct his wife in her duty. His reading of this evidence plainly told him that such was impossible.

With a sudden intake of breath which could be either a sob of happiness or suffering, he thrust the book into his pocket and arose. He walked to the sideboard, unlocked a private compartment and secured a bottle of Rye, the only glasses in sight were some tumblers on the table, he gasped one of these and half filled it, drained the fiery liquid without removing the glass from his lips. And as he replaced the glass on the table he laughed, laughed as a thirst-crazed wanderer in the desert would laugh as he drew near to a life giving spring, laughed as a ship-wrecked sailor would laugh as the rescue ship answers his signal of distress, laughed as man should laugh when he awakens and finds life sweeter than the distorted vagaries of an hallucination.

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## CHAPTER 28.

### “Begin Shipment at Once.”

When the lawyer-husband left the house he was master of the situation. He carried with him the incontrovertible evidence of his wife's misconduct. Evidence which was of sufficient weight to at once force complete separation. Evidence which would require few words to his plea, should he be so determined. But even this weight of evidence did not satisfy. It would be ample to sway the opinion of the most austere judge, it would force an appellate court to sanction the sentence of divorce, it would grant immunity in any gossip circle. But with all its legal weight it was not sufficient to unbalance this man's deep seated aversion for divorce.

He wanted freedom. Above all things else he wished to rid himself of this tie which bound, and chafed, and galled. Caroline had given him the cudgel which he could swing and produce that freedom. He had but to institute a suit and in a few weeks be free. Still he hesitated. Even when he pictured another tie which mayhaps might be his, he hesitated.

Was this the self-opinioned, impulsive, quick acting Hughes Randall? Was this the man who by his sheer personality had welded the tobacco raisers into a powerful body? Was this the man who as president of that society fought the majority members of the organization when they

banded together as Kuklux? Was this the man who stole into the lodge room of "Possum Hunters," openly defied them, and forced them to run from him? Was this the same man who alone would curse and give battle to the raging "Night Riders?"

Yes. And he still was fighting to maintain the foundation principles of his claim to honor. Domestic Relations was the one court wherein he had refused to practice law. He would not begin, even when he should be the plaintiff. There was a longer, a more tedious route for law to take, a safer way, one along which no one would be hurt by slander.

He breakfasted at a down town restaurant, and more than once his chain of thought was interrupted by a query from some inquiring citizen; always it was the same question: "Have you whipped the 'Trust' yet, Mister Randall?" Patiently he answered; as patiently he returned to the subject of his more intimate worry. He was glad when he was within the secrecy of his private office; now he could place his determination to words, and tell his wife the road by which she was to go.

He lifted pen to begin the letter, he was on the eve of indicting drastic words, when caution stayed his hand and commanded him to let his father sit in judgment on his case before a conclusive decision had been reached. He went to that one, with but slight preface he told the existing relations between himself and wife, her several letters were read and his answers recited from a vivid memory, the "green backed" diary was read without comment. Having concluded his story, he asked for advice.

William Randall sat holding the diary in his hand as though he would weigh it against his opinion, as though he could scarcely believe that

one so beautiful as Caroline could be guilty of writing such venom, as though the very word which would form his decision would hurt him in its utterance. Gently he folded in place one corner of the green cover which had become "dog-eared" from much handling, he pressed the binding in place, he smoothed the cover as though he was placing a shroud over the memories of his "daughter." He handed the book to Hughes and quietly said:

"Divorce."

As though he would argue with his conscience, he told his son:

"'Life is what you make it,' but marriage is what it is made for you; for the reward of marriage is wholly at the mercy of the mate.

"Divorce is now more honorable than a continuance of the marriage state, for in your present state you are each day breaking five of the Ten Commandments given us by Holy Writ, and no mandate of man can justify such sacrilege.

"The Bible says:

"'Thou shalt not lie.'

"'Thou shalt not steal.'

"'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'

"'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife.'

"'Thou shalt not bear false witness.'

"Each day a married couple live in mesalliance they break these commandments, yet do so with man's simpering sanction.

"Her diary is an admission that the marriage vow was a sham; your very posture, your words, your silent admissions, shout to the high heavens that you two are living a lie. Yet you forget the greater life which God would have you lead, as you stumble on along the path indexed by man.

"While you and Caroline are living this life together, you are stealing each other's happiness; and no thief can be so base as the one who poisons

life that he or she might steal a sham dignity.

"No greater crime can be committed against virtue, against chastity or purity, no offense can be so adulterous and debasing, as that one which is committed by man and woman when the clay is in bondage while the heart and mind remain elsewhere. The Church will say: 'No, they are married, we place over them the cloak of sanctification and pass them in our search for sin'; yet every time the preacher says, 'thou art man and wife,' and does not believe the bond to be the result of reason and love, he sanctions open adultery and cheapens the price of virtue.

"Should you at this moment look out of that window, and see a happily married couple, you would say, perhaps unconsciously, perhaps with full faculties, 'I wish Caroline were like Mrs. to that man'; and you would at that moment sin, for no covetousness can be more bold.

"The very smile which would cloak your features as you greeted a visitor at your home, your charming hospitality as you strove to make them believe your lot a happy one, each time you call her wife, or she speaks of you as husband, your every smile before the public bears 'false witness'; you are not happy, you live in false witness to the marriage state." When he ceased speaking, he turned toward his desk as though he would close the interview, and Hughes returned to his office to write a final letter to his wife.

He determined to file her letters and diary for future reference, and was engaged in the task of binding them in a bundle when he remembered the mysteriously addressed letter which had fallen from the book as he was first looking at it. He searched his pockets, found the letter, and on opening it, read:

"My Dear Mrs. Randall:—

"Your letter of yesterday came to me as

a complete surprise and is a subject of grief to me.

"I do not understand how you could possibly find proof for your belief that I am in love with you and am only fearful of saying my affection because of your unhappy marriage.

"I have always looked on our friendship as a jolly old Plato, and did not think that harm could result from an exceedingly mild flirtation.

"I am leaving Lexington tomorrow to attend a wedding where I shall claim as my bride one of the sweetest little brown eyed fairies in 'Lil' ol' New York,' which, though a surprise to you, will be a most wonderful reality to,

"Albert."

Hastily inserting this self-explanatory letter in its envelope, he placed it in with the other material and binding the package, sealed it and placed it in a private compartment of the safe. He wrote:

"Mrs. Caroline E. Randall,

"Dear Caroline:—

"I have carefully read and reread your letters, the 'green backed diary,' and the letter from Mr. Andrews; these documents will be handed to you when they shall have served their lawful purpose.

"I shall at once engage an attorney, and advise you to do likewise, for I shall decline to hold personal communication with you from this day and date; it will therefore be useless for you to expect to find our home remaining intact.

"I forgive you your every hasty act, each harsh word, your unloyalty, all things are forgiven; for as I close this chapter of my

life no harrowing memories shall be the opening line of a transition. I wish you God speed in a true happiness.

“Hughes Randall.”

He prepared the letter for posting, thrust it into his pocket, and after giving orders for the business of the day, left his office to go to the room of his “attorney.” After a consultation with his lawyer friend, he visited first a storage warehouse and then a real estate firm and then he went in search of Mary, the house maid.

It was not yet dark when the storage warehouseman inquired:

“That all, Mister Randall?”

“Yes,” was the quiet answer as he surveyed the bare room in which they were standing; then he asked: “Have you seen Mary during the last few moments?” He explained: “Mary thought a great deal of Mrs. Randall, and regrets seeing us break up housekeeping.”

They found Mary crouching at the foot of the back stairs; she was sobbing as though her heart was torn in anguish. Hughes pacified the negro, and liberally rewarded her for her most excellent services. All of them left the house and hastened on their respective ways, though Hughes was the only one of them to turn and look at the now deserted home which was placarded by a small square sign in one of the front windows.

The most perfect sculptured “happiness” is carved from a block of “sorrow,” and the picture of “full happiness” stands out from the background of sad memories. Hughes Randall had now paid the debt which he had made so long ago, his debt to one “Daniel Cupid”; the account was now balanced, the debit and the credit columns in the ledger of love’s accounting now totaled heart for heart; the day of reckoning, perhaps, would be delayed as human folks count time, but

the little God of love smiled approvingly on the image which was being carved from this lawyer's sorrow, and joyously recognized the picture of full happiness which was beginning to assume form against the sad memories of the man.

"Unsuccessful in love, successful at cards"; so says an old adage. So if this man was unsuccessful in his avowed love for woman, if he was a complete failure in his effort to establish a home, then destiny must decree that he should be a winner in the more drab affairs of life. His only boast had been that he "knew how to play the game" of commerce, he had not reckoned marriage as a "game." Would he make good that boast? Would he some moment awaken to a glad surprise? Had he been accurate in his calculation which gave the Crosby Tobacco Company only twenty working days to operate before they closed their factories? Was he to fail with the Equity? Was his fight with the non-pool farmers, the "Trust," the "Possum Hunters," the "Night Riders," the quitter, and a fickle public opinion, to be worse than useless?

He was hurrying in his return to the office. The "derby car" had answered to the first turn of the crank, as though it was eager to be away from the house of sorrow and mingle the noise of its exhaust with the glad shoutings of victory. He turned into the doorway of the public garage that he should order certain repairs made on the car between now and the time when he would drive home with his father, and as he was leaving the garage he was hailed by Mrs. Mary Louise Kemp. He answered her effluvial greeting though declined her more than urgent invitation to a dinner-party for the following evening. She was so insistent that he was forced to agree on a date one week hence, though at parting neither one

seemed surprised that the other did not mention a certain name. He hastened on his way.

He could hear the newsboys in the streets calling: "Extra; all about the victory"; though did not bother to purchase a paper, since there would be one at the office for him. He did not even ask himself what manner of victory was being heralded; Mary Louise Kemp had recalled him to certain memories, and he was mulling them as he walked along the crowded pavement.

He noted the many groups of men gathered in doorways and on the street, eagerly reading and discussing some article which was told of in the paper. Vaguely he surmised this discussion to arise from the "victory," but the physical and economic battles of his fellow man held no interest for the Equity president until he should have conquered his more intimate worry. He hastened on in the gait of the man who is unafraid of his neighbors' criticism.

He became conscious of the fact that some of the men in the clusters of interested citizens would nudge their neighbors and motion toward him as he was passing, but the fading light of the day was not sufficient for him to read their expressions of approval. He decided that the "victory" was another conquest made by the "Mysterious Agent," perhaps the newspapers had discovered her identity and were playing the story as a "feature." He smiled over the thought, the recollections which had been given him by Mrs. Kemp were vanishing into the discard, here was a most pleasing, worthy, loyal subject. Proudly he advanced through the approving multitude.

Dimly he wondered why the greetings and spoken pleasantries from the friends who hailed him should be so jovial and unreserved, or did they only seem so to him because he was only now returning from a home-wrecking tour. He



frowned over the thought, and at that moment a newsboy, who knew him, called: "Paper, Mister Randall? Paper, all 'bout the vict'ry?" He smiled as he declined the paper; smiled because he had today won a victory over his prejudice against divorce. His answers to the greetings were all that could be hoped for by the citizens who hailed this leader of men, even though he was not accepting them as an acclaim to greatness. He hastened on; all signs unheeded by the one who was the central figure in success.

Scores of Equity supporters were standing on the sidewalk in front of his office building; he feared these men had come in numbers to demand the dissolution of the Society; he would refuse to argue with them on the public sidewalk. Other Equity members were clustered in groups in the doorway and hall of the building; he believed it best to hurry past them lest they draw him into an argument within the hearing of the public. He did not notice how these men deferentially drew to either side of his path and formed an all but shouting aisle of victory. The elevator was at the ground floor as though waiting for him. He darted in. The elevator man threw the door shut and jerked the car to motion. They were hushing upward. The operator beamed on him as he said:

"Gee, Mister Randall, but I'm glad you've won."

At that instant the truth began to dawn. "Victory"; what other victory would have caused all men to greet him as a conquering hero? What other victory would bring the Equity members to the society headquarters?

The elevator was at his floor. It was stopped. He tore the pocket of his coat when it hung on the elevator door catch as he rushed from the car. "Victory."

The hall, reception room and offices of Randall

and Randall, and the adjoining rooms which were the headquarters of the Society of Equity, were filled with loudly talking, laughing and gesticulating farmers, business men, newspaper reporters, and well-wishing friends, who were gathered that they might discuss, glorify, and prove beyond all question of doubt the wonderful news which had been heralded by the "Extra." These assembled men were quick to notice his presence; repeatedly they had called for him, only to be assured that he would be with them soon; here he was; loudly they began to greet him with the unrestrained acclaim of victory.

"Here he is," "He did it," "He whipped old money bags," "He knew 'how to play the game,'" etc., etc., a bedlam of ovation; each and every man trying to talk at one and the same second, every one of them vying with his neighbor in an effort to display the greatest honor to Hughes.

Elation surged through and tingled each fibre of his being. He tasted "Victory" and liked it. He wished to know the full flavor of the mead. What was the hour of surrender? What method had been employed? He became the noisiest of the noisy. He pushed and elbowed his way through the jolly throng, always in one direction, always toward his father who stood waving a telegram. He caught the yellow papered message in his eager hand, rapturously he said:

"Mr. Hughes Randall,

"President Equity Society:—

"Please consider deal closed as per your price list of this day and date. We accept your terms, grades and percentums. Please begin shipment of assorted grades at once. Letter follows this telegram. Please accept my personal congratulations.

"J. C. Crosby, Pres.

"Crosby Tobacco Company."

## CHAPTER 29.

### **"I Love Love, I Love Honor More."**

The life of the butterfly is gay and superb in its carelessness; today it emerges from the silken cushion which made life possible, and gracefully unfolding its beautiful wings in the riot of colors, daintily seeks only flowers on which to dance and play. Life? The butterfly cares naught for sordid life. Time passes too gaily to be reckoned on. There are few flowers in this field, yet there are many fields. So dance on the golden sunbeams, live on only the sweets, flitting here and there to daintily touch only the flowers, tomorrow?

To say that Mrs. Caroline Easson Randall and her mother were surprised when they alighted from a cab in front of Caroline's former home and stood looking, staring at the house would be the mildest form in which their emotions could be stated. Many of her former neighbors who were now peering at her from behind carefully drawn window blinds would declare that the two appeared to be dumbfounded in their sudden amazement. This house which had boasted of the most beautiful silk and lace curtains at its many plate glass windows, now mocked at them, jeered at them, laughed at them, howled at them from stark naked windows, windows not even shielded by the inner shutters, since they had been thrown wide open while the house was being dismantled.

The blow fell with a suddenness which was cruel, with a finality which was absolute in the impression made, with a thoroughness to detail which only honesty can portray.

Mrs. Easson saw, but she could not comprehend the full meaning of this drastic change; the sight was too terrible to be understood so quickly. She had been led to believe that Hughes was "peevish because dress bills were big," and "put out because I make him take me somewhere every single solitary night," but nothing that Caroline said would lead her mother to suspect one-half truth. This was incredible, unbelievable; she was honestly amazed.

Mrs. Randall was mortified, angered and indignant. Instantly she knew this to be the greatest insult she would ever, or had ever, received from her husband. Enroute from the station to her "home" she had seen Mary, the house maid, and had told the servant to come at once to the house; she wondered at the time why the maid rushed away crying, now she knew. She had wondered why Mary Louise Kemp had not been at the station to meet her, she had telegraphed her, now she realized why. But she could not find words to say her feelings in, she could only stare at the erstwhile "home" and sound her heart for hate, malice, and a wish to revenge the "insult." Slowly the awfulness, the full horror of the thing began to leer at her from the bare windows; in trepidation she read a sign in one of them which announced the house "For Sale."

Strange as it may seem, this erratic young woman had almost totally disregarded the beautiful clearness of Hughes Randall's last letter to her; she accepted his warning to engage a lawyer as an acceptance of her plan to live apart; she had construed his paragraph which told her the uselessness of coming to Lexington, since she

would not find the "house intact," to mean that he was moving his belongings away; his renunciation she regarded as belonging to the same spiteful class of literature she had written to him; she gave little heed to any of his words save those wherein he forgave her "everything, and wanted to turn over a new leaf." But, now, when she saw her "home" deserted and advertised for sale, when she realized that "some of those cheap neighbors" were peering at her from behind protecting window blinds, the truth rushed at her in its full ugliness and she was unable to prevent a display of emotions. Furiously she ran up the front walk, up the steps, across the bare porch floor, inserted her latch-key in the door lock and threw the door open; on the threshold she stood for a breathless second, then the horrid truth broke in its hurricane. Echoes, dull mocking echoes, vaulty echoes as from the tomb, resounded through the deserted home; desertion was written bold and gaunt; dust had settled as a pall, a shroud; snarls of carpet yarn, torn bits of paper, broken and discarded bits of worthless trinkets littered the floor; naught save desolation.

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Mrs. Easson was not slow in realizing that this desertion was the result of some terrible tragedy the action of which she had been kept in ignorance of. Surely her daughter had developed a most erratic disposition since marriage, for Hughes Randall was not the type of man to grossly chastise an innocent wife. This was the result of a carefully thought out plan, a plan which he could defend in a court of law, a plan of which Caroline, no doubt, had been warned. She was terribly grieved that such scandal should occur, but she was too thoroughly a "worldly wise" woman to waste her moments in weeping. So she entreated her daughter to cease her idle la-

mentations, and go to the husband for a complete explanation of the abandonment.

Caroline was equally anxious to arrange such a meeting. She felt quite confident she could convince her husband of his error in such hasty action, she was equally sure of a perfect control over him; always she had led him as she wished, surely he would not be so rude as to defend his act while facing her. She made the best preparation to toilet which was possible under the circumstances, and she and her mother were leaving the house just as the baggage wagon drew up in front of the house to deliver their trunks. They ordered the trunks held at the station until further directions should be given, and hastened from the scene without once turning to look at the completely abandoned home.

The meeting occurred in Hughes Randall's private office where he had been deeply engrossed in checking the deliveries which has been made to the Crosby Tobacco Company during the week just past. In perfect control of his emotion, courteously poised as a gentleman should be, though a veritable iceberg of dignified formality, he arose and bowed to the ladies as they were ushered in.

With that perfect control of which the born actress is capable, Caroline demeaned herself in an attitude of injured innocence, she stepped forward to make a pleading supplication, but on the instant her features were perfectly adjusted to a babyish expression she saw something which chilled her hope far more than her husband's masterly poise; she had hastily searched the room to know whether other ears than Hughes Randall's would hear her entreaties, she had noted that the door between the offices of father and son was open, she could see into William Randall's office, she saw a woman sitting near the

desk of the elderly lawyer, a woman who was smiling at William Randall as he stood hat in hand evidently preparing to go from the office; but only an instant did Caroline falter, her voice rang clear as she begged:

"Hughes, dear, what does this mean? I am sure ——"

But she was not permitted to say more of her intended speech; with commanding chill, by the raising of his hand, he had silenced her.

"One moment, please," he requested. "I have asked that you convey whatever you save to say to me through your attorney; I must insist on your doing so."

When confronted by the result of their failure, women are more easily silenced than men; they are deficient in that brute instinct of self defense which prompts man to give blow for blow and force the opponent from offensive to defensive. This notwithstanding the time worn claim that woman will always "have the last word." Caroline was silenced, she was on the eve of turning from her husband, she wanted to go away, though was prevented by her mother saying:

"But Hughes, Caroline is your wife, and as such, is entitled to speech with you. Come, be rational, and I am quite certain you will feel better no matter what the result of this conversation."

He acknowledged the claim for reason. Intently he searched the features of his mother-in-law to find how many of the true facts she was in possession of. Slowly and with a deadly precision of tone and words, he told her:

"She has been my wife, but is so no more." He corrected the statement with the passionate declaration: "No, I retract that admission. As I understand the word, she never was my wife; for her wifeship was as the flash from a falling

star, it flared for a moment, then faded to eternal darkness."

Mrs. Easson understood the finality; Caroline did not, the words had been pretty, she loved pretty words, she pled:

"But, Hughes, I tried to be good to you, even when you were horrid to me; I was not bad, yet you treat me as though I was even before you have heard me say anything. Won't you believe me? Won't you, won't you ——" She struggled to find words but could find only guilty silence compelled by his steady gaze.

"Perhaps you have not been 'bad,' Caroline; it is quite possible that you have been only guilty of the sins of omission, I fervently hope so for your own peace of mind; but of whatever you are guilty, your own writings will convict you, and words from your own pen have compelled our separation."

With the full strength of her dramatic nature she emotionally pleaded:

"But, but haven't I always been good to you?"

"Good to me? For God's sake what do you call goodness?"

"What noble attribute of woman have you exemplified? What fineness, undeveloped before our union, did you nourish into warmth giving when marriage made us man and wife?"

"The very tendrils of love which spring into life from my heart and sought perfection in growth while in the wonder of your love, tendrils which clung to you even when you despised them, crushed them, flung them from you in contempt, have withered now, and are dead, tangled, snarled, vines of hope hideous in the grave yard of yesterdays.

"Between you and me there is an impassable gulf; and gloom, black as death unhallowed by



the hope of resurrection, is the shadow into which you have hurled the love so recklessly killed.

"No tolling bells marked the funeral cortege of our happiness as they did our wedding day, but our marriage is buried, and its requiem sung by fleeting memories.

"I bought the license, paid the preacher, and placed the ring upon your finger; but our wedding march was a funeral dirge, for at that service love was expiated.

"There is no bond between us; there never has been any save a legal permit; there cannot be a true marriage, and the only reason the preacher pronounced us 'man and wife' was because of the license in his hand and the fee he was to receive.

"I do not care to ever see you again. Your voice, your form, your every feature, I wish to erase from my memory. To me you are as dead, yes more than dead, for the dead leave a hallowed memory.

"If I seem venomous to you it is because of the poison you have injected into my life. If I appear vindictive it is because I plainly and simply say my thoughts. I have no apologies to make; no amends to ask; no further words to speak regarding our marriage."

"But, is, is this all? Is this, is this the end?" she asked.

Hughes looked at her whom he had so dearly loved, and a great pity surged through him. He knew she was suffering now, and even in his acumen wished it otherwise. Slowly he turned to her, and for a moment looked down to his desk. Quick he turned, steeled to intensive action by bitter memories, almost fiercely he said:

"No, it is not all, nor is it the end. Money you married, and you shall not be divorced from that money. The furniture, your jewelry, your dresses, your personal belongings and everything

which was in our home, including the furniture, is in storage subject to your demand; I only retain my wearing apparel. You have only to send directions to the warehouse and the lot will be shipped to you by prepaid freight. The house will be sold and the entire proceeds handed over to you. When you have that money you will receive every dollar I am worth as an individual; you could ask for no more.

"As for you? You are to leave Lexington at once, and remain away for one year; at the end of the year you are to secure complete divorce for desertion. For no other cause will I permit a divorce; and your letters, your diary, and ——" Unwilling to compromise his wife before her mother, he referred to damaging testimony as "other documents, give me the right to dictate terms. That is all; and now," he walked to the door, opened it into the reception room; "I bid you good day."

Caroline looked neither to the right nor the left as she haughtily walked from his presence. Mrs. Easson though dazed by the upbraiding of her daughter, extended her hand as she told him:

"Whatever I think of you and Caroline, whether I believe that you misunderstand her or that she is totally wrong, is not for me to say at this time. I only know that I love her and respect you. Good-bye, Hughes."

When his wife and her mother had passed into the world beyond, Hughes Randall closed the door and stood with his head bowed down as though stricken with the nausea of loneliness.

Success, a wonderful, a glorious success, was the unstinted reward which had crowned his determined efforts in the world of commerce; failure, a bleak, a dismal failure, was the total result of his effort to create a home. The poignant sting of failure hurt beyond the gladness of suc-

cess. Gladly he would exchange all of the personal gain, the esteem of those he had led to victory, the acclaim which was given for success, all, he would exchange it gladly, could he but establish the condition of his desire in the loss—his home.

But what were those conditions of his desire? His conscience asked as mentor. What individual characters did his brain flash on the screen of truth when his pictured "home" was drawn from fancy? Whose face smiled up to him in the leading role? Was it Caroline's? No. Truthfully he answered. Then who?

He was a just man, an honorable man; so he accepted this reverse as a just and honorable reward of fate. He had paid the price; he would not complain. He had not heeded the warning, the warning given by Beatrice Herron. He could remember her very words, "within one year"; yet for that very forecast he had ordered her from him: "within one year."

God, how swift is justice.

What of the future? Would he find ways to make amends for his blind ruling? Would the years yet to come bring opportunity to pray forgiveness?

Yes. By the Eternal God of light and life; yes. He would search for that one, he would go to her about whom his dreams were built, he would find her, and with a life long gladness win the heart, and hand, and brain, and soul of ———

He heard a noise, a movement of someone in the doorway leading to his father's room, he remembered that his father had asked him to leave the door open, he had wondered why at the moment though had quickly forgotten it; could his father have heard all he said to Caroline? He turned, he startled, he was surprised, though

wondrously glad as he met the sad sweet smile of Beatrice Herron.

She came forward and offered her hand as she said: "I am sorry, Hughes"; she explained her presence. "I was waiting in your father's office while he went to the bank; I could not help but overhear. I am sorry."

"Thank you, Bee," was the simple acceptance of understanding. The affections, sorrows and daily life of the mediocre are subjects for elaborate discourse, but the one worth while will say but few and simple words on personal affairs. He told her, "Life would indeed be a severe task if we were not permitted to correct our errors." He closed the chapter marked "Caroline vs. Beatrice" when he said: "I was blind, but now I see." Quickly he changed the subject. "Will you accept my sincere thanks for the wonderful help you gave the society in your work with the "Possum Hunters?"

"Certainly. But it was so very simple when once I started in the work, that I deserve very little praise."

"Wonderful woman," Hughes said fondly, quite too fondly for a formal gratitude; the tone held such a weighty caress that Beatrice crimsoned in joy and gladness, love and simplicity. He hastened to speak of business affairs. "Do you know why Dad went to the bank?"

"No. May I ask?"

"He went to get five one thousand dollar bonds to give you as part payment for your services."

"But," she faltered, amazed over this information. "I, why I can't think of accepting them. I, why,——"

Her excuses were interrupted when she was told:

"You will accept them."

There was a ring to his voice which she always

loved to hear, she had longer to hear that tone, it was the very orchestration of the superb will in man. She could not do other than accept whatever he offered when he spoke like that.

"Thanks; shall I thank you or your father?" She teased him now that the tension was broken.

"Neither," he answered with a smile; then loved to hear, she had longed to hear that tone, you do it? "Why did you return to Kentucky to fight the "Night Riders?" "

With a smile which answered everything, yet asked no reward other than its life, she answered: "If you do not know it would be useless for me to tell you, for you could not understand."

He started toward her as though he would take her in his arms, for his heart was calling to him with joyous abandon, calling with an insistency which would not be crushed by pride. She? She craved just one caress more than five thousand thousand dollar bonds, just one kiss would be a more ample reward than she had hoped to receive. But no. He held himself in pride; and she turned away.

"Hughes?" Beatrice asked as she stood by the window; "may I bring my old typewriter desk back to this corner?"

"No."

"No?" she asked in frenzied alarm.

"No," he repeated, and added: "You are to return to Denver."

Instantly she was the woman fighting for her love, she rushed at him, caught him to her, pressed him, pleading, begging, crying: "Oh, Hughes, don't, don't send me away again. Hughes, Hughes, for God's sake don't say that; please, please take it back. Say that I can be with you and love you, love you, love you." Kisses hot as her words were pressed to brow, and eyes, and lips in a storm of love.

He held her, loved her, pitied her, worshipped her, and returned her kisses one to one, each a sweeter token than its mate.

"Sweetheart, now listen to reason," and he stood away from her. "Your honor is my honor, your name is given me to protect and it shall be protected. You are to return to Denver and in the proper time I shall say words which if I should speak now would desecrate the marriage vows. If you should remain here scandal would come to hurt."

"But Hughes, why? Why? " She did not know whether to cry from sorrow or happiness, both or neither; gladness was shutting all reason from her brain; she turned to call to her protector, William Randall, who stood in the doorway: "Why, Mister Randall, why should I go away?"

The father could see the tempest of emotions raging, holding his arms to her he begged: "Come, daughter."

Beatrice not knowing which emotion to weep for, claimed the woman's prerogative of weeping for all as she rushed into the arms of her protector, and their father closed the door.

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