

THE PRICE

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CHAPTER I.

It was at Chaudiere's that Griswold had eaten his first breakfast in the Crescent city, and it was at Chaudiere's again that he was sharing a farewell supper with Bainbridge of the Louisiana. Six weeks lay between that and this; forty-odd days of discouragement and failure superadded upon other similar days and weeks and months.

Without meaning to, Bainbridge had been strewing the path with fresh thorns for the defeated one. He had just been billeted to write up the banana trade for his paper. Boyishly jubilant over the assignment, he had dragged the New Yorker around to Chaudiere's to a small parting feast. Not that it had required much persuasion. Griswold had fasted for 24 hours, and if Bainbridge were not a friend in a purist's definition of the term, he was at least a friendly acquaintance.

The burden of the table talk fell upon Bainbridge, and it occurred to the host that his guest was less than usually responsive, a fault not to be lightly condoned under the joyous circumstances. Wherefore he protested.

"What's the matter with you tonight, Kenneth, old man? You're more than commonly grumpy, it seems to me; and that's needless."

Griswold looked up with a smile that was almost ill-natured, and quoted cynically: "Unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not, shall be taken away even that which he hath."

Bainbridge's laugh was tolerant enough to take the edge from his retort.

"That's a pretty thing to fling at a man who never knifed you or pistolled you or tried to poison you! An innocent bystander might say you envied me."

"I do," rejoined Griswold gravely. "I envy any man who can earn enough money to pay for three meals a day and a place to sleep in."

"Oh, cat's foot!—anybody can do that," asserted Bainbridge, with the air of one to whom the struggle for existence has been a mere athlete's practice run.

"I know; that is your theory. But the facts disprove it, I can't for one."

Griswold was a fair man, with reddish hair and beard and the quick and sensitive skin of the type. A red flush of anger crept up under the closely cropped beard, and his eyes were bright.

Bainbridge scoffed openly; but he was good-natured enough to make amends when he saw that Griswold was moved.

"I take it all back," he said. "I suppose the book-chicken has come home again to roost, and a returned manuscript accounts for anything. But, seriously, Kenneth, you ought to get down to bed-rock facts. Nobody but a crazy phenomenon can find a publisher for his first book, nowadays, unless he has had some sort of an introduction in the magazines or the newspapers. You haven't had that; so far as I know, you haven't tried it."

"Oh, yes, I have—tried and failed. It isn't in me to do the salable thing, and there isn't a magazine editor in the country who doesn't know it by this time. I tell you, Bainbridge, the conditions are all wrong when a man with a vital message to his kind can't get to deliver it to the people who want to hear it."

Bainbridge ordered the small coffee and found his cigar case.

"That is about what I suspected," he commented impatiently. "You couldn't keep your peculiar views muzzled even when you were writing a bit of a pot boiler on sugar planting. You drop your foot socialist fad and write a book that a reputable publisher can bring out without committing commercial suicide, and you'll stand some show."

"Call it what you please; names don't change facts. Listen"—Griswold leaned upon the table; his eyes grew hard and the blue in them became metallic—"For more than a month I have tramped the streets of this cursed city begging—yes, that is the word—begging for work of any kind that would suffice to keep body and soul together, and for more than half of that time I have lived on one meal a day. That is what we have come to; we of the submerged majority. And that isn't all. The wage worker himself, when he is fortunate enough to find a chance to earn his crust, is but a serf; a chattel among the other possessions of some fellow man who has acquired him in the plutocratic redistribution of the earth and the fullness thereof."

Bainbridge glanced at his watch.

"I must be going," he said. "The Adelantado drops down the river at eleven. How are you fixed for the present, and what are you going to do for the future?"

Griswold's smile was not pleasant to look at.

"I am 'fixed' to run twenty-four

hours longer, thanks to your hospitality. For that length of time I presume I shall continue to conform to what we have been taught to believe in the immutable order of things. After that—"

He paused, and Bainbridge put the question. "Well, after that; what then?"

"Then, if the chance to earn is still denied me, and I am sufficiently hungry, I shall stretch forth my hand and take what I need."

Bainbridge fished in his pocket and took out a ten-dollar banknote. "Do that first," he said, offering Griswold the money.

The proletarian smiled and shook his head.

The fruit steamer Adelantado, outward bound, was shuddering to the first slow revolutions of her propeller when Bainbridge turned the key in the door of the stuffy little stateroom to which he had been directed, and went on deck.

"Why, hello, Broffin! How are you, old man? Where the dickens did you drop from?"

It was the inevitable steamer acquaintance who is always at hand to prove the trite narrowness of the



"You Couldn't Keep Your Peculiar Views Muzzled."

world, and Bainbridge kicked a chair into comradely place for him.

Broffin, heavy browed and clean shaven save for a thick mustache that hid the hard-bitted mouth, replaced the chair to suit himself and sat down. In appearance he was a cross between a steamboat captain on a vacation and an up-river plantation overseer recovering from his annual pleasure trip to the city. But his reply to Bainbridge's query proved that he was neither.

"I didn't drop; I walked. More than that, I kept step with you all the way from Chaudiere's to the levee. You'd be dead easy game for an amateur."

"You'll get yourself disliked, the first thing you know," said Bainbridge, laughing. "Can't you ever forget that you are in the man-hunting business? Where are you headed for, Broffin?"

The man who might have passed for a steamboat captain or a plantation overseer, and was neither, chuckled dryly.

"You don't expect me to give it away to you, and you a newspaper man, do you? But I will—seeing you can't get it on the wires. I'm going down to Guatemala after Mortsen."

"The Crescent bank defaulter? By Jove! you've found him at last, have you?"

The detective nodded. "I've been two years, off and on, trying to locate Mortsen; and now that I've found him, he is where he can't be extradited. All the same, I'll bet you five to one he goes back with me in the next steamer—what?"

CHAPTER II.

The Right of Might.

Two days after the supper at Chaudiere's the unimpetuous routine of the business quarter of New Orleans was rudely disturbed by the shock of a genuine sensation.

To shatter at a single blow the most venerable of the routine precedents, the sensational thing chose for its colliding point with orderly system one of the oldest and most conservative of the city's banks—the Bayou State Security. At ten o'clock, following the precise habit of half a lifetime, Mr. Andrew Galbraith, president of the Bayou State, entered his private room in the rear of the main banking apartment, opened his desk, and addressed himself to the business of the day. At half-past the hour the president was left alone to read his correspondence.

Being a man whose mental pro-

cesses were all serious, and whose hobby was method, Mr. Galbraith had established a custom of giving himself a quiet half-hour of inviolable seclusion in which to read and consider his mail. During this sacred interval the stenographer, standing guard in the outer office, had instructions to deny his chief to callers of any and every degree. Wherefore, when, at 20 minutes to 11, the door of the private office opened to admit a stranger, the president was justly annoyed.

"Well, sir; what now?" he demanded, impatiently, taking the intruder's measure in a swift glance shot from beneath his bushy white eyebrows.

The unannounced visitor was a young man of rather prepossessing appearance, a trifle tall for his breadth of shoulder, fair, with blue eyes and a curling, reddish beard and mustache, the former trimmed to a point. So much the president was able to note in the appraisive glance—and to remember afterward.

The caller made no reply to the curt question. He had turned and was closing the door. There was a quiet insistence in the act that was like the flick of a whip to Mr. Galbraith's irritation.

"If you have business with me, you'll have to excuse me for a few minutes," he protested, still more impatiently. "Be good enough to take a seat in the anteroom until I ring. MacFarland should have told you."

The young man drew up a chair and sat down, ignoring the request as if he had failed to hear it. Ordinarily Mr. Andrew Galbraith's temper was equable enough; the age-cooled temper of a methodical gentleman whose long upper lip was in itself an advertisement of self-control. But such a deliberate infraction of his rules, coupled with the stony impudence of the visitor, made him spring up angrily to ring for the watchman.

The intruder was too quick for him. When his hand sought the bell push he found himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver, and so was fain to fall back into his chair, gasping.

"Ah-h-h!" he stammered. And when the words could be managed: "So that's it, is it?—you're a robber!"

"No," said the invader of the presidential privacy calmly, speaking for the first time since his incoming. "I am not a robber, save in your own very limited definition of the word. I am merely a poor man, Mr. Galbraith—one of the uncounted thousands—and I want money. If you call for help, I shall shoot you. It is merely a question of money, and if you are amenable to reason—"

"If I'm—but I'm not amenable to your reasons!" blustered the president, recovering a little from the first shock of terrified astonishment. "I refuse to listen to them. I'll not have anything to do with you. Go away!"

The young man's smile showed his teeth, but it also proved that he was not wholly devoid of the sense of humor.

"Keep your temper, Mr. Galbraith," he advised coolly. "The moment is mine, and I say you shall listen first and obey afterward. Otherwise you die. Which is it to be? Choose quickly—time is precious."

The president yielded the first point, that of the receptive ear; but grudgingly and as one under strict compulsion.

"Well, well, then; out with it. What have you to say for yourself?"

"This: You are rich; you represent the existing order of things. I am poor, and I stand for my necessity, which is higher than any man-made law or custom. You have more money than you can possibly use, in any legitimate personal channels; I have not the price of the next meal, already twenty-four hours overdue. I came here this morning with my life in my hand to invite you to share with me a portion of that which is yours chiefly by the right of possession. If you do it, well and good; if not, there will be a new president of the Bayou State Security. Do I make myself sufficiently explicit?"

Andrew Galbraith glanced furtively at the paper-weight clock on his desk. It was nearly eleven, and MacFarland would surely come in on the stroke of the hour. If he could only fend off the catastrophe for a few minutes, until help should come. He searched in his pockets and drew forth a handful of coins.

The invader of privacies glanced at the clock in his turn and shook his head.

"You are merely trying to gain time, and you know it, Mr. Galbraith. My stake in this game is much more than a handful of charity silver; and I don't do you the injustice to believe that you hold your life so cheaply; you who have so much money and, at best, so few years to live."

The president put the little heap of coins on the desk, but he did not abandon the struggle for delay.

"What's your price, then?" he demanded, as one who may possibly consider a compromise.

"One hundred thousand dollars—in cash."

"But man! you're clean daft! Do you think I have—"

In the midst of his vehement protests the stranger sprang out of his chair, stepped back a pace and raised his weapon.

"Mr. Galbraith, you are juggling with your life! Write a check while there is yet time!"

The hammer of the leveled pistol clicked. Andrew Galbraith shut his eyes and made a blind grasp for pen and checkbook. His hands were shaking as with a palsy, but the fear of death steadied them suddenly when he came to write.

"Indorse it!" was the next command. The voices had ceased beyond the partition, and the dead silence was relieved only by the labored strokes of the president's pen and the tap-tap of the typewriter in the adjacent anteroom.

The check was written and indorsed, and under the menace of the revolver Andrew Galbraith was trying to give it to the robber. But the robber would not take it.

"No, I don't want your paper; come with me to your paying teller and get me the money. Make what explanation you see fit; but remember—if he hesitates, you die."

They left the private office together, the younger man a short half-step in the rear, with his pistol-bearing hand thrust under his coat. The president did not despair. In the public lobby there would be eyes to see, and perhaps some that would understand. Mr. Galbraith took a firmer hold upon his self-possession and trusted that some happy chance might yet intervene to save him.

But chance did not intervene. There was a goodly number of customers in the public space, but not one of the half-dozen or more who nodded to the president or passed the time of day with him saw the eye-appeal which was the only one he dared to make. On the short walk around to the paying teller's window, the robber kept even step with his victim, and try as he would, Andrew Galbraith could not summon the courage to forget the pistol muzzle menacing him in its coat-covered ambush.

At the paying wicket there was only one customer, instead of the group the president had hoped to find; a sweet-faced young woman in a modest traveling hat and a gray coat. She was getting a draft cashed, and when she saw them she would have stood aside. It was the robber who anticipated her intention and forbade it with a courteous gesture; whereat she turned again to the window to conclude her small transaction with the teller.

The few moments which followed were terribly trying ones for the gray-haired president of the Bayou State Security. None the less, his brain was busy with the chance possibilities. Falling all else, he was determined to give the teller a warning signal, come what might. It was a duty owed to society no less than to the bank and to himself. But on the



The Hammer of the Leveled Pistol Clicked.

pinnacle of resolution, at the instant when, with the robber at his elbow, he stepped to the window and presented the check, Andrew Galbraith felt the gentle pressure of the pistol muzzle against his side; nay, more—he fancied he could feel the cold chill of the metal strike through and through him.

So it came about that the fine resolution had quite evaporated when he said, with what composure there was in him: "You'll please give me currency for that, Johnson."

The teller glanced at the check and then at his superior; not too inquisitively, since it was not his business to question the president's commands.

"How will you have it?" he asked; and it was the stranger at Mr. Galbraith's elbow who answered.

"One thousand in fives, tens and twenties, loose, if you please; the remainder in the largest denominations, put up in a package."

The teller counted out the one thousand in small notes quickly; but he had to leave the cage and go to the vault for the huge remainder. This was the crucial moment of peril for the robber, and the president, stealing a glance at the face of his persecutor, saw the blue eyes blazing with excitement.

"It is your time to pray, Mr. Galbraith," said the spoiler in low tones. "If you have given your man the signal—"

But the signal had not been given. The teller was re-entering the cage with a bulky packet of money paper.

"You needn't open it," said the young man at the president's elbow. "The bank's count is good enough for me." And when the window wicket had been unlatched and the money passed out, he stuffed the loose bills carelessly into his pocket, put the package containing the ninety-nine thousand dollars under his arm, nodded to the president, backed swiftly to the street door and vanished.

Then it was that Mr. Andrew Galbraith suddenly found speech, opening his thin lips and pouring forth a torrent of incoherence which presently got itself translated into a vengeful hue and cry; and New Orleans the unimpetuous had its sensation ready-made.

CHAPTER III.

Io Triumphe!

Once safely in the street, Kenneth Griswold, with a thousand dollars in his pocket and the packet of banknotes under his arm, was seized by an impulse to do some extravagant thing to celebrate his success. It had proved to be such a simple matter, after all—one bold stroke; a tussle, happily bloodless, with the plutocratic dragon whose hold upon his treasure was so easily broken; and presto! the hungry proletarian had become himself a power in the world, strong to do good or evil, as the gods might direct.

This was the prompting to exultation as it might have been set in words; but in Griswold's thought it was but a swift suggestion, followed instantly by another which was much more to the immediate purpose. He was hungry; there was a restaurant next door to the bank. Without thinking overmuch of the risk he ran, and perhaps not at all of the audacious subtlety of such an expedient at such a critical moment, he went in, sat down at one of the small marble-topped tables, and calmly ordered breakfast.

Since hunger is a lusty special pleader, making itself heard above any pulpit drum of the higher faculties, it is quite probable that Griswold dwelt less upon what he had done than upon what he was about to eat, until the hue and cry in the street reminded him that the chase was begun. But at this, not to appear suspiciously inquisitive, he put on the mask of indifferent interest and asked the waiter concerning the uproar.

The serving man did not know what had happened, but he would go and find out if M'sieu' so desired. "M'sieu'" said breakfast first, by all means, and information afterward. Both came in due season, and the hungry one ate while he listened.

Transmuted into the broken English of the Gascon serving man, the story of the robbery lost nothing in its sensational features.

It was very evident that the plutocratic dragon did not intend to accept defeat without a struggle, and Griswold set his wits at work upon the problem of escape.

"It's a little queer that I hadn't thought of that part of it before," he mused, sipping his coffee as one who need not hasten until the race is actually begun. "I suppose the other fellow, the real robber, would have figured himself safely out of it—or would have thought he had—before he made the break. Since I did not, I've got to do it now, and there isn't much time to throw away. Let me see—" he shut his eyes and went into the inventive trance of the literary craftsman—"the keynote must be originality; I must do that which the other fellow would never think of doing."

On the strength of that decision he ventured to order a third cup of coffee, and before it had cooled he had outlined a plan, basing it upon a cross-questioning of the Gascon waiter. There had been but one man concerned in the robbery, and the sidewalk gossip was beginning to describe him with discomforting accuracy.

Griswold paid his score and went out boldly and with studied nonchalance. He reasoned that, notwithstanding the growing accuracy of the street report, he was still in no immediate danger so long as he remained in such close proximity to the bank. It was safe to assume that this was one of the things the professional "strong-arm man" would not do. But it was also evident that he must speedily lose his identity if he hoped to escape; and the lost identity must leave no clue to itself.

Griswold smiled when he remembered how, in fiction of the felon-catching sort, and in real life, for that matter, the law-breaker always did leave a clue for the pursuers. Thereupon arose a determination to demonstrate practically that it was quite as possible to create an inerrant fugitive as to conceive an infallible detective. Joining the passers-by on the sidewalk, he made his way leisurely to Canal street, and thence diagonally

through the old French quarter toward the French market. In a narrow alley giving upon the levee he finally found what he was looking for; a dingy sailors' barber's shop. The barber was a negro, fat, unctuous and sleepy looking, and he was alone.

"Yes, sah; shave, boss?" asked the negro, bowing and scraping a foot when Griswold entered.

"No; a hair cut." The customer produced a silver half-dollar. "Go somewhere and get me a cigar to smoke while you are doing it. Get a good one, if you have to go to Canal street," he added, climbing into the rickety chair.

The fat negro shuffled out, scenting tips. The moment he was out of sight Griswold took up the scissors and began to hack awkwardly at his beard and mustache; awkwardly, but swiftly and with well-considered purpose. The result was a fairly complete metamorphosis easily wrought. In place of the trim beard and curling mustache there was a rough stubble, stiff and uneven, like that on the face of a man who had neglected to shave for a week or two.

"There, I think that will answer," he told himself, standing back before the cracked looking-glass to get the general effect. "And it is decently original. The professional cracksmen would probably have shaved, whereupon the first amateur detective he



Griswold Went Out Smiling Between His Teeth.

met would reconstruct the beard on the sunburned lines. Now for a pawnbroker; and the more avaricious he happens to be, the better he will serve the purpose."

He went to the door and looked up and down the alley. The negro was not yet in sight, and Griswold walked rapidly away in the direction opposite to that taken by the obliging barber.

A pawnbroker's shop of the kind required was not far to seek in that locality, and when it was found, Griswold drove a hard bargain with the Portuguese Jew behind the counter. The pledge he offered was the suit he was wearing, and the bargaining concluded in an exchange of the still serviceable business suit for a pair of boot-ternut trousers, a second-hand coat too short in the sleeves, a flannel shirt, a cap, and a red handkerchief; these and a sum of ready money, the smallness of which he deplored pitceously before he would consent to accept it.

The effect of the haggling was exactly what Griswold had prefigured. The Portuguese, most suspicious of his tribe, suspecting everything but the truth, flatly accused his customer of having stolen the pledge. And when Griswold departed without denying the charge, suspicion became conviction, and the pledged clothing, which might otherwise have given the police the needed clue, was carefully hidden away against a time when the Jew's apprehensions should be quieted.

Having thus disguised himself, Griswold made the transformation artistically complete by walking a few squares in the dust of a loaded cotton float on the levee. Then he made a tramp's bundle of the manuscript of the moribund book, the pistol, and the money in the red handkerchief; and having surveyed himself with some satisfaction in the bar mirror of a riverside pot-house, a daring impulse to test his disguise by going back to the restaurant where he had breakfasted seized and bore him up town.

The experiment was an unqualified success. The proprietor of the bank-neighborhood cafe not only failed to recognize him; he was driven forth with revellings in idiomatic French and broken English.

"Bete! Go back on da levee w'ere you belong to go. I'll be kipping dia cafe for zentlemen! Scelerati! Go!"

Griswold went out, smiling between his teeth.

"That settles the question of identification and present safety," he assured himself exultantly. Then: "I believe I could walk into the Bayou State Security and not be recognized."

As before, the daring impulse was irresistible, and he gave place to it on the spur of the moment. Foully a five-dollar bill in the mud of the gutter, he went boldly into the bank and asked the paying teller to give him silver for it. The teller sniffed at the money, scowled at the man, and turned back to his cash book without a word. Griswold's smile grew to an inward laugh when he reached the street.

(TO BE CONTINUED)