THE MISSING MAN

By MARY R. P. HATCH, Author of "The Bank Tragedy."

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CHAPTER XII.

Confronted by a Monument.

EIGHT months had slipped away since the mysterious disappearance of Vane Hamilton, and in all that time not one word of tidings as to his whereabouts had been received. All trace seemed to be swallowed up or enveloped in the obscurity surrounding the bank defaulter, Ashley. Grovedale, meanwhile, was busying itself, as small active villages are apt to do, over a scandal of its own. And Constance was the subject of it. Strange that the high-bred, reserved woman should give cause of it; but she did. For her infatuation for the illiterate workman, known as Primus Edes, was only too evident to any one who chose to investigate the matter.

Not that it was considered that she had been guilty of the least imprudent or reprehensible conduct. Even her worst detractors did not say that. But for a cultured, beautiful woman in the higher walks of life, whose husband was not known to be dead, even tho she had ordered a monument to be erected to his memory, who had seemed to love that husband deeply—for such a woman to care for such a man as Primus Edes, of doubtful origin, if not of doubtful character, illiterate to a degree, and not particularly good-looking, was quite enough to set the feminine tongues of Grovedale running, to say nothing of masculine gossips, quite as nimble in the social conclaves about the blacksmith's forge or the grocery stores. The object is always the last to be informed, but Constance was quite unhappy enough without this knowledge. It was mortifying, humiliating, to her proud heart to feel it struggling in fetters she despised, or ought to despise.

She had not meant to succumb to the strange fascination that Primus Edes from the first seemed to impress upon her faculties by his fancied resemblance to her husband. It had grown insensibly, and after he brought her boy back to her and tenderly carried him home, she felt that gratitude could not be withheld any longer. She had been kind to him, and he, knowing her gift of the dressing gown, at least, ventured to show how deeply he appreciated it.

He was never intrusive; indeed, it was Constance herself who talked most, who was most to blame, it was said. Singularly silent and retiring, he said very little; but that little was freighted with passionate devotion, as she could see. Unwittingly, perhaps, he had taken the very means necessary to win her thoughts. She was of a romantic, poetical temperament, and a respectful, silent devotion was not displeasing in one who looked so like her husband. His intense gaze in church, his solitary watch of her house, his search for her child, and his thoughtfulness in relieving her of his burden when not even her uncle had thought of it, charged her heart with many thoughts—thoughts which would have flown instantly had his manner been intrusive.

He seemed rather to avoid her, she thought, and she reasoned it would do no harm to be kind to him. So whenever she went to Mrs. Fry's, or chanced to encounter him elsewhere, she would invariably say a few words in a gentle, gracious way that to him seemed divine.

She was a musician of more than ordinary gifts, and when she chanced to hear him playing one evening in his room while she sat talking below with Mrs. Fry, she was charmed into forgetfulness of her errand by the rare melody.

"Why, I did not know he could play like that," she said, as the wonderful strains ceased—strains which seemed to be drawn from the intense passionate nature of the performer, rather than the violin itself; for it was as an interpreter of soul-wrought emotions, of an enwrapt mood, that he played, rather than set music or acknneyed chords.

"Yes, an' it's only lately he's took it up," said Mrs. Fry; "so he says."

"Is it possible!" said Constance.

As she took her way homeward over the crisp snow, for it was winter now, the passionate strains followed her until she reached her own door, and she knew that he must have opened his window so that she might hear him.

Strange, inexplicable man! Would he have left her as Vane did with those mysterious journeys all unexplained? Ah! but to doubt her husband now with the clods of suspicion weighting him down, with speculation clouding his sainted memory! She, his wife; and to give her thoughts, any of them, to another man,—she, Constance Hamilton, hitherto proud of her own virtue and rectitude, and, like one of Tennyson's fair women, proud of her pride!

Down on her knees went Constance at the thought, and she prayed fervently to be set right, to have taken from her all that interfered with her husband's memory! But even while she prayed, sweet strains seemed to importune her to listen, and the sad, haunting eyes of Primus Edes to be looking into her very soul.

So matters progressed; but no word was spoken between them that the world might not have heard, tho the undercurrent of intense feeling ran as wildly as ever beneath the gentle manner of Constance and the reserve of Mrs. Fry's boarder, who went daily to the mill and fulfilled his allotted task of manual labor with scrupulous fidelity.

The facts of Mrs. Hamilton's presents to him had just become known in the neighborhood, and even reached to the ears of Rev. Arthur Hammerly, who had lately been venturing to speculate how soon he might approach Mrs. Hamilton with some little attention whose gentle office it might be to fix her regard upon himself.

From his window he could look into the marble yard where a monument was being finished; and once, with a satisfaction of which he was ashamed, he had taken a field glass and read the inscription growing on the marble under the workman's chisel, Vane Ha—. So far it had progressed.

The wife believed him dead. Why, then, might not he indulge a hope? And that day the minister plunged into study with a vigor that surprised himself. His sermon next Sabbath must be of exceptional fervor and depth. She should feel this new hope in his breast, lifting it to new heights and aspirations of heavenly bliss. Those uplifted orbs of hers were ever before him that day.

But the next day he heard of the strange infatuation said to exist in the mind of Mrs. Hamilton for a humble workman at her uncle's mill. Mr. Hammerly remembered him. A dark, sallow-faced man with brown hair and beard of reddish-brown, but with eyes of a strange brilliance and beauty. Evidently a man of downcast, brooding habit, quiet and orderly of demeanor, but with nothing, it would seem, to attract the regard of a woman like Constance Hamilton.

Stay! Did he not resemble her husband slightly? Certainly he did. Mr. Hammerly could see it if nobody else did. There was certainly a resemblance in this dark-haired, stooping, sallow-faced workman to the handsome, upright, light-haired mill-owner and cashier. Striking, tho slight! If Mrs. Hamilton noticed him in any way it was because of this.

Mr. Hammerly called to see her that day, and left her with a warmer pressure of the hand than usual. But her thoughts were otherwise occupied and she did not notice it.

In another part of the country Bruce was struggling with a disease which had lately crossed the ocean, and Swan, coaxed into an alliance with Bruce's plans and theories, was in his turn struggling with certain written disclosures and directions far from plain or reasonable, because set down when Bruce was ill and his mind unsettled by the vagaries of illness. These causes combined to prolong a matter which but for this might have earlier found the light, perhaps. At all events, Bruce was sure that he was on the right track now, and sought to make it known to Swan, who, however, was doubtful.

Thus matters stood. Constance swayed by a strong emotion; two men, by dreams of love and its fulfillment; a towering monument sometimes glistening 'neath the grudging winter sunlight, but oftener merely gleaming purely, frostily white, with its full inscription now, Vane Hamilton, and ready for the cemetery when spring should open; a carping, prosaic village, with buying and selling and eating and sleeping going on as it will to the end, while just outside its limits and that of the present an astounding event was walking straight toward it in the person of a tall, handsome, light-haired man who alighted, unnoticed, from the train one afternoon in February.

He was passing by the marble establishment of Lisle & Allen when Mr. Allen was in the act of courteously opening the door for a lady to pass out, and saying:

"I am glad it pleases you, Mrs. Hamilton."

"Yes, it pleases me very well," said the lady, in a sweetly modulated voice.

The gentleman in the street had stopped and was staring past them both at the gleaming marble at which they were looking. A curious, slightly humorous glance, followed by a graver one, came into his face as he noticed the black-clad woman. A slight hesitation was manifest in his manner. He took a step forward and then halted. The marble cutter was looking at him now curiously, and the lady's glance followed his for an instant. Then a shriek was wrung from her white lips and her voice rang out in the wold cry: "Vane Hamilton, my husband!" and she fell, or would have done so if Mr. Allen had not caught her and placed her in a large arm-chair. And still he stood there, tho terribly moved, as could be plainly seen, until Mr. Allen, whose mind grasped the situation, said as quietly as he could, "Your wife has fainted, Mr. Hamilton, for I presume you are that gentleman."

"I am"; but his eyes turnedtoward the name on the monument rather than to his wife's face.

"Your wife thought by your long absence that you were dead, and this was to have been erected in the spring," explained Mr. Allen.

"Yes, I suppose so. My absence was unavoidable," replied Mr. Hamilton, briefly, and then he looked fully at his wife for the first time since entering. But he did not now approach her. Instead, he suffered his gaze to rest on the beautifully chiselled face as white as his own monument, the gracious curves of her tall, slender form, the white hand fallen to the floor, until it traveled the whole distance of womanly charms. It was an intent, intense, adoring gaze, like that of a lover rather than the masterful one of a husband.

The man looking at him wondered; but he did not know Mr. Hamilton, so he wondered less. Presently, however, as a quiver went thru her eyelids, her husband dropped on his knees beside her and clasped her hand in one of his, but timidly, the watcher thought, and said in a low, hesitating voice:

"Constance, my wife!"

And she opened her eyes and looked at him, vaguely at first, then with a questioning, half-frightened manner.

The man gazed into her face as if he would drink his fill of its sweet lineaments. There was no doubt of his feelings for her, thought the man who stood watching him, and yet, he recollected, he had thought the husband's manner colder at the outset than the wife's. Now it was the reverse. The eager gaze did not seem to please her, and she drew away her hand.

"There is much to explain," she said gravely, for she was now quite recovered.

"You are right, Constance, and this is not the place for you now," and he glanced at the monument.

Casual as was the look, it brought the color to her face, and she arose and drew down her veil.

"My wife was premature," he said to Mr. Allen. "We will make it right with you."

"Oh, yes, certainly. Glad to know there is no use for it."

Mr. Hamilton and his wife passed out together up the street to their home, both silent, both evidently constrained by deep emotions of which they did not speak the one to the other till they reached the Hamilton grounds.

Mr. Hamilton held open the gate for his wife to enter, and it reacted with a bang that made her heart start nervously.

"You are not well," said her husband, "and no wonder."

"No, I am not well, and, as you say, it is no wonder."

They were soon at the door, and they entered the house together, but Constance with a hesitating step. Finally, as they stood side by side in the sitting-room, she whirled suddenly about and cried hysterically:

"Why did you leave me? Why did you leave me?"

She looked lovelier than ever in her abandonment, and he took a step nearer, as if he would have taken her into his arms. But he refrained, whether from something he saw in her face, or other cause, was not apparent. Instead, he took her hand and carried it to his lips, as he said:

"Constance, can you believe I would leave you willingly? By heavens! you are the most beautiful woman I ever saw," walking away from her in great agitation. "But you are tired. Your uncle will be here to-night. I will explain all then. Meanwhile you must rest. Go to your room and I will sit here."

She looked at him gratefully. Then as if a sudden recollection seized her, she murmured something about the children.

"Yes, they will be home from school soon, I suppose. I must wait. They will find I have not forgotten their commissions, he said, smiling.

Constance stood watching him while he talked, and then, with a dazed, questioning look in her eyes, walked toward the door. "I will do as you say," she said, "for I am very tired."

His look followed her from the room. Then, as the swish of her long, silken gown died away and the door closed behind her, he turned his face away and struck his breast with his clenched hand, but no word broke the stillness.

Perfectly immovable and rigid, he stood in the middle of the room for several minutes. Then he walked about examining the pictures, books, and the view from the window, as is the way with one who has been long absent.

And upstairs in her own room, with her door locked, Constance lay on her bed, with wide-open eyes gazing at the ceiling and thinking, studying. And still on her face was the dazed, half-frightened expression she had worn down stairs, indeed, since she recovered her consciousness in the office of the marble-cutting establishment.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Cashier's Return.

At tea time Mr. Carter arrived. Strangely enough no tidings of Mr. Hamilton's return had reached him, and it was, therefore, a positive shock to see him sitting there with Perley in his arms and Clare beside him, while Constance, with grave, preoccupied gaze, was busy about some trifling household matter.

"Bless my soul, Vane!" he cried, and stopped, gasping. Vane grasped him heartily by his hand and said:

"You hadn't heard of my arrival, then?"

"Not a word, not one word. Well, I am glad, more than glad, to see you back, hey, Constance?" vaguely uneasy at his niece's stillness.,

"Yes, uncle; but he has not explained why he was gone so long."

"Oh, well, that will come in good time. Wonder what the bank directors will say now?" rubbing his hands delightedly at the prospect.

"Papa didn't forget my gold ring, for all he was gone so long," said Clare.

"Nor my writing book," said Perley.

"Did you think I would?"

"No, for you always remember," said Clare, standing beside him, and resting one hand on his knee, as if to further claim his attention, while he put his arm about her. Then Perley began in a shrill, high treble to say something, till their mother's voice stilled them.

"Be quiet, children, and let him talk. He will tell us why he stayed, and, perhaps, why he went away."

"Yes, I will tell you why I stayed so long when I meant to have returned in two weeks. You will wonder greatly when I tell you that I lost all knowledge of my own identity, my very name, even, soon after I left Grovedale. My memory was gone totally, absolutely. What I did, or saw, or where I went then, I know no more than you do. It was as if I had sunk into a dreamless sleep after I left you. That, Constance, is the reason I did not return."

Constance did not speak, and he continued:

"My mind was blank for many weeks, or, perhaps, I should say, my past was a blank, for I somehow managed to support myself, thru manual labor, perhaps, for when I regained my consciousness I was at work with a gang of men in Seattle, Washington."

"Bless my soul, Vane! Whoever heard the like of that? Did you, Constance?"

"Never," but looking at her husband a little more kindly.

"When," she asked, "did this loss of memory come to you?"

"I think about the time I reached Portland, for I recollect some incidents of the journey there in a vague way, but nothing clearly."

"Do you recollect a woman's speaking to you on the street before you took the care at Grovedale? She came out of the Essex house."

"Yes, I recollect that perfectly."

"Who was it?"

"She was a stranger, a very pretty woman with curiously tinted hair, almost green, or am I mistaken?" he asked, with a puzzled look.

"No; they said she had green hair," said Mr. Carter. "She ought to have traveled with Barnum. Well, what did she want of you?"

"She thought she knew me at first; but I assured her of her mistake."

"But did she not go on the train with you to Portland, or part of the way?" asked Constance.

"Not that I remember, and yet—stay! That is one of the vague recollections I alluded to. It seems sometimes as if I did see and talk with her on the train."

"You certainly did, Vane; the conductor says so; but she did not go as far as Portland."

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. That is about the only thing I recollect distinctly."

"Yes; Mr. Libby, the conductor, said he saw you there."

"Well, I knew nothing afterwards. I think I must have overtaxed my brain by too much work, too many cares. That is all the way I can account for it."

"Yes, you looked bad when you went away; lost twenty pounds, you recollect, or maybe you don't recollect."

"Yes; I remember now nearly everything that happened previous to the middle of May. Occasionally I find myself at loss regarding some incident that occurred before that time, but, doubtless, my mind will recover its tone after a while. But the time intervening between May 15 and about two weeks ago is a total blank to me. I cannot tell of a single incident occurring all that time."

"Vane," said his uncle, suddenly, "do you suppose any of your actions were questionable—I mean unlawful?"

"I hope not," said Vane, looking startled; "still I don't know. As I said, I know no more than you do what happened to me in the interval referred to. I know I was doing good honest work in Seattle when I came to myself. Any one can be assured of that by writing to Barnacle & Co., Seattle, Wash."

"But before you went there, Vane?"

"I don't know. There is something back of your questioning, uncle. What is it?"

"Vane, you are looked upon as a defaulter here in Grovedale."

"A defaulter! Why, I did not take one penny of the bank funds when I went away. I remember that perfectly. The notes and some other deposits were put in the vault in Boston, but it was done before I went away—a week before, if I recall the time perfectly."

"Yes, about a week it was; but Tony Osborn declares you came to the bank on the 22d, at about 7 o'clock in the evening."

"He must have been mistaken."

"No, he is positive; and besides, there is proof of it."

"What proof?"

"You spoke to him. 'Hullo,' says Tony; you said the same, and that he probably didn't expect to see you so soon. He said he didn't, and passed on. You opened the door with your own key and passed in."

"Strange! What does it mean? Did I come here?"

"No, you evidently came as far as the river bank, and there all trace seemed swallowed up. We thought you might have been drowned. A man was found in the river—his remains, I mean—and Constance had them buried at her expense."

"That accounts for the monument?"

"Yes."

"But how do you know I came to the river?"

"Your traveling cap and one of your shirt studs were found there, the last by an Italian employed on the railroad, the first by Tony Osborn. Another shirt stud was found on the desk at the bank the morning after you entered it."

"Who says so?"

"Tony."

"Does Tony think me a defaulter?"

"No, he does not. He and Constance—and—and—myself were the only ones who believed you innocent. Henderson, too, thought as I did; but, of course, we were obliged to settle the bonds."

"Bonds? Did it go so far as that? Then something was taken from the bank. It must have been a burglar who entered and deceived Tony somehow."

"No, not that. Nothing was actually missing, and the passbooks were all right. The bank commissioner looked into the matter. The loss, if any, was debatable—a matter of balance, easily rectified by you; some erasures, also debatable, but not of consequence except in the light of your absence. But it was the notes, one of Bowles & Estes, the other of C. B. Cotton."

"What of them?"

"Simon Low declares you presented those very notes, I mean Bowles & Estes, which he deposited in the National bank, and he says that he paid you five thousand dollars for it on the spot as collateral. The note was but five hundred dollars originally, until the amount was altered."

"Simon Low says I took it there?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe I ever took an altered note to Low and got it cashed. I will never believe that I lost my identity to the degree of making myself a scoundrel."

He got up and walked the room in great agitation.

"What about the other note?"

"That was presented in the same way, the face altered to read four thousand dollars instead of four hundred dollars. The cashier could not swear it was you, but he supposed everything to be all right. Low declares he could not have been mistaken, for he knows you as well as I do."

THE MANIACS WERE YELLING "YIP! YIP! YIP!" AND SHOOTING AT HIM.

"Yes, Low knows, me but I believe he has been deceived. I will see him and talk with him. Nine thousand dollars? Is that the sum?"

"Yes."

"And my bondsmen had to pay it?"

"Yes."

"Well, it shall be paid back, every cent of it, if it can be really proved that it was I who took it. But as the matter now stands, it looks to me like a foul conspiracy to rob me of my good name. Tho why any one should want to do it I can't conceive. Tony must have been mistaken. It must have been a burglar."

"So we thought until we heard from Low."

Mr. Carter had not heard of the hypnotic theory raised by Tony Osborn, and Mrs. Hamilton did not speak of it. Indeed, she looked bewildered, as if torn by many a contending emotion, keeping apart from her husband, and only looking at him furtively now and then.

"Have you had detectives at work?" asked Mr. Hamilton, after a period of deep thought.

"Yes, two of them: Private Detective Bruce, and Swan of the police headquarters in Boston."

"What have they discovered?"

"Swan followed the river affair. You were thought to have been drowned or murdered. And Bruce looked up the defaulting matter. He fancied at one time that he got on the trail of you, or some one that looked like you, in the west, and named Ashley."

"What sort of a man was Ashley?"

"Bad sort; a bank swindler. Bruce saw his photograph; looked like you. Bless my soul! who knows but he was the man Low saw."

"I thought of that; but it seems too unlikely for belief."

"Ashley had a wife named Lenora," said Mrs. Hamilton.

"Lenora?" he answered, as if the name brought no recollections to his mind.

"Yes. Is the name new to you?" she asked, keenly.

"It is. I never remember to have heard it."

"And yet you said in your dreams the night before you went away, 'Lenora—Nora—a pretty name.'"

He looked at her in amazement.

(To Be Continued To-morrow.)

A HUSBAND'S MISTAKE.

New Yorker.

Witherby—I made the mistake of my life this morning. I told my wife I didn't like her new gown.

Plankington—What, was she angry?

Witherby—Oh, no, it wasn't that; but she wants another.

THE SAVING GRACE

BY STEWART EDWARD WHITE

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ONCE upon a time there was an editor of a magazine who had certain ideas concerning short stories. "Let us have things as they are!" he was accustomed to cry to his best friend, or the printer's devil, or the office cat, whichever happened to be handiest. "Life is great enough to say things for itself, without having to be helped out by the mawkish sentimentality of an idiot! Permit us to see actual people, living actual lives, in actual houses, and I should hope we have common sense." This editor liked short, crisp sentences. He wanted his adjectives served hot. He despised poetic connotation.

Now, one day, it happened that there appeared before this editor, Brown, a young man bearing a roll of manuscript. How he had gotten by the office boy Brown could not conceive, and rolled manuscript usually gave him spasms. The youth, however, presented a letter of introduction from Brown's best friend. He said he had a story to submit, and he said it with a certain appearance of breathlessness, at the end of the sentence, which showed Brown that it was his first story. Brown frowned inwardly, and smiled outwardly. He begged the youth to take a seat. As all the seats were filled with unopened papers and unbound books, the youth said he preferred to stand.

Brown asked the youth questions in perfunctory manner, not because he cared to know anything about him, but because he liked the man who had written the letter. The youth's name proved to be Severne and he was the most serious-minded youth who had ever stepped from college into writing. He spoke of ideals. Brown concluded that the youth's story probably dealt with the time of the Chaldean astronomers and contained a deep symbolical truth, couched in language of the school of Bulwer Lytton or Marie Corelli. So, after the youth had gone, he seized the roll of manuscript, for the purpose of glancing thru it. If he had imagined the story of any merit, he would not have been in such haste; but as his best friend had introduced the writer, he thought he would like to get a disagreeable task over at once.

He glanced the story thru. Then he read it carefully. Then he slammed it down hard on his desk—to the vast confusion of some hundreds of loose memoranda, which didn't matter much, anyway—and uttered a big bad word. The sentences in the story were short and crisp. The adjectives were served very hot indeed. There was not a single bit of poetic connotation. It described life as it really was.

Brown, the editor, published the story and paid a good price for it. Severne, the author, wrote more stories and sold them to Brown. The two men got to be very good friends and Severne heard exactly how Brown liked short stories and why, and how his, Severne's stories, were just the kind.

All this would have been quite an ideal condition of affairs, and an object lesson to a harsh world and other editors were it not that Severne was serious-minded. He had absolutely no sense of humor. Perspectives there were none for him, and due proportions did not exist. He took life hard. The immediate consequence was that, having achieved his success thru realism, he placed realism on a pedestal and worshiped it as the only true (literary) god. Severne became a realist of realities. He ran it into the ground. He would not describe a single incident that he had not viewed from start to finish with his own eyes.

This was ridiculous enough, but it would hardly have affected any one but crusty old cranks who delight in talking about "young fools," were it not for the fact that Severne was in love. And that brings us to the point of our story.

Of course, he was in love in a most serious-minded fashion. He did not get much fun out of it. He brooded much of the time over lovers' duties to each other and mankind. He had likewise an exalted conception of the sacred, holy and lofty character of love itself. This is commendable, but handicaps a man seriously. Girls do not care for that kind of love as a steady thing. Far be it from me to insinuate that those quite angelic creatures ever actually want to be kissed; but if, by any purely accidental chance, circumstances bring it about that, without their consent or suspicion, a brute of a man might surprise them awfully—well, said brute does not gain much by not springing the surprise. Being adored on a pedestal is nice—in public. So you must see that Severne's status under ordinary circumstances would be precarious. Conceive his fearful despair at finding his heart irrevocably committed to a young woman as serious-minded as himself, equally lacking in humor, and devoted mind and soul to the romantic or idealistic school of fiction! They often discussed the point seriously and heartedly. Each tried conscientiously to convert the other. As usual, the attempt, after a dozen protracted interviews, ended in the girl's losing her temper. This made Severne angry. Girls are so unreasonable!

"What do you suppose I care how your foolish imaginary people brush their teeth and button their suspenders and black their boots? I know now old man Smith opposite does, and that is more than enough for me!" she cried.

"The insight into human nature expresses itself thus," he argued gloomily.

"Rubbish!" she rejoined. "The idea of a man's wasting the talents heaven has given him in describing as minutely and accurately as he can all the nasty, little, petty occurrences of every-day life! It is sordid!"

"The beautiful shines thru the drariness as it does in the real life people live," he objected stubbornly.

"The beautiful is in the imagination," she cried with some heat, "and the imagination is God given; it is the only direct manifestation of the divine on earth. Without imagination no writing can have life."

As this bordered on sentiment, abhorred of realism, Severne muttered something that sounded like "fiddlesticks." They discussed the relation of imagination of literature on this latter basis. At the conclusion of the discussion, Miss Melville, for that was her name, delivered the following ultimatum:

"Well, I tell you right now, Robert Severne, that I'll never marry a man who has not more soul in him than that. I am very much disappointed in you. I had thought you possessed of more nobility of character!"

"Don't say that, Lucy," he begged, in genuine alarm. Serious-minded youths never know enough not to believe what a girl says.

"I will say that, and I mean it! I never want to see you again!"

"Does that mean that our engagement is broken?" he stammered, not daring to believe his ears.

"I should think, sir, that a stronger hint would be unnecessary."

He bowed his head miserably. "Isn't there anything I can do, Lucy? I don't want to be sent off like this. I do love you!"

She considered. "Yes, there is," she said after a moment. "You can write a romantic story and publish it in a magazine. Then, and not until then, will I forgive you."

She turned coldly and began to examine a photograph on the mantlepiece. After an apparently interminable period, receiving no reply, she turned sharply.

"Well!" she demanded.

Now, in the interval, Severne had been engaged in building a hasty but interesting mental pose. He had recalled to mind numerous historical and fictitious instances in which the man had been tempted by the woman to depart from his heaven-born principles. In some of these instances, when the woman had tempted successfully, the man had dwelt thenceforth in misery and died in torment, amid the execrations of mankind. In others, having resisted the siren, he had glowed with a high and exalted happiness, and finally had ascended to upper regions between applauding ranks of angels—which was not realism in the least. Art, said Severne to himself, is an enduring truth. Human passions are misleading. Self-sacrifice is noble. He resolved on the spot to become a martyr to his art.

"I will never do it," he answered and skulked majestically from the room.

Severne took his trouble henceforward in a becomingly serious-minded manner. For many years he was about to lie shrouded in gloom—a gloom in whose twilight could be dimly discerned the shattered wreck of his life. After a long period, from the debris of said wreck, he would build a structure of a great literary work of art, which all mankind would look upon with awe, but which he, standing apart, would eye with indifference, all joy being stricken dead by his memories of the past. But that was in the future. Just now he was in the gloom business. So, being a wealthy youth, he decided to go far, far away. This was necessary in order that he might bury his grief.

He rather fancied battlefields and carnage, but there were no wars. It would add to the picture if he could return bronzed and battle-scarred, but as that was impossible, he resolved to return bronzed, at any rate. So he bought a ticket to a small town in Wyoming. There he and his steamer trunk boarded Thompson's stage, and journeyed to Placer Creek, where the two of them, he and the trunk, took up their quarters in a little board-ceiled room in the Prairie Dog hotel.

The place was admirably adapted for glooming. It was a little ramshackle affair of four streets and sixteen saloons. Some of the houses and all of the saloons had once been painted. In front were hitching-rails. To the hitching-rails, at all times of the day, were tied ponies patiently turning their tails to the Wyoming breezes. Wyoming breezes are always going somewhere at the rate of from thirty to sixty miles an hour. Beyond the town, in one direction, were some low mountains, well supplied with dark gorges, narrow canyons, murmuring waterfalls, dashing brooks and precipitous descents. Beyond the town, in the other direction, lay a broad, rolling country, on which cattle and cowboys dwelt amid profanity and dust. Severne arose in a cold room, washed his face in hard water and descended to breakfast. The breakfast could not have been better adapted to beginning a day of gloom. It started out with sticky oatmeal and ended with clammy cakes, between which was much horror. After breakfast he wandered in the dark gorges, narrow canyons, et cetera, and contemplated with melancholy but approving interest his noble sacrifice and the wreck of his life. Thence he returned to town.

After some days his literary instincts perforce awoke. In spite of his gloom, he caught himself sifting and assorting and placing things in their relative values. In fine, he began to conceive a western story. Shortly after he cleaned his fountain pen by inserting a thin card between the gold and the rubber feeder, and sat down to write. As he wrote he grew more and more pleased with the result. The sentences became crisper and crisper. The adjectives fairly sizzled. Poetic connotation faded as a mountain mist. And he remembered and described just how Alkali Ike spit thru his mustache—which was disgusting, but real. It was his masterpiece. He wrote on excitedly. Never was such a short story!

But then there came a pause. He had successfully mounted his hero, and started him in full flight down the dark gorge or narrow canyon—I forget which—pursued by the avenging band. There interposed here a frightful difficulty. He did not know how a man felt when pursued by an avenging band. He had never been pursued by an avenging band himself. What was he to do? To be sure, he could imagine with tolerable distinctness the sensations to be experienced in such a crisis. He could have put them on paper with every appearance of realism. But he had no touchstone by which to test their truth. He might be unconsciously false to his art, to which he had vowed allegiance at such cost! It would never do.

So naturally he did the obvious thing—that is to say, the obvious thing to a serious-minded writer with no sense of humor. He went forth and sought an acquaintance named Colorado Jim, and made to him a proposition. It took Severne just two hours and six drinks to persuade Colorado Jim. At the end of that time Colorado Jim went forth, shaking his head doubtfully, and emitting from time to time cavernous chuckles which bubbled up from his interior after the well known manner of the "Old Faithful" geyser. He hunted out six partners of his own—"pards," he called them—to whom he spoke at length. They stared at Colorado Jim in silence for some time. Then the seven went into a committee of the whole. The decision of the committee was that the tenderfoot was undoubtedly crazy, harmless, and to be humored—at a price. Beside, the humoring would be fun. After a number of drinks, Colorado Jim and the pards concluded that it would be lots of fun!

Early the next morning they rode out of town in the direction of the hills. At the entrance to the dark gorge—or deep canyon—they met Severne, also mounted. After greetings the latter distributed certain small articles.

"Now," said he most gravely. "I will ride ahead about as far as that rock there, and when I get ready to start I will wave my hand. You're to chase me just as you'd chase a real horse thief, and I'll try to keep ahead of you. You keep shooting with the blank cartridges as fast as you can. Understand?"

They said they did. They did not. But it was fun.

Severne rode to the bowlder in the dark gorge—I am sure it was the dark gorge—and turned. The pards were lined up in eagerness for the start. They had made side bets as to who would get there first. He waved his hand and struck spurs to his horse. The pursuit began.

The horse on which Severne was mounted was a good one. The way he climbed up thru that dark gorge was a caution to thorobreds. Behind whooped the joyous seven, and the cracking pistols was a delight to the ear. The outfit swept up the gulch like a whirlwind.

Severne became quite excited. The swift motion was exhilarating. He mentally noted at least a hundred and ten most realistic minor details. He felt that his money had not been wasted. And then he noticed that he was gradually drawing ahead of his pursuit. Better and better! He would not only experience pursuit, but he would achieve in his own person a genuine escape, for he knew that, whatever the mythical character of the bullets, the westerners had a real enough intention of racing each other and him to the top of the ridge. He plied his quirt and looked back. The pursuers were actually dropping behind. Even to his inexperienced eye their animals showed signs of distress.

At this place the narrow gulch divided. Severne turned to the left, as being more nearly level. Down from the right hand bisection came the boys of the Triangle X outfit.

To the boys of the Triangle X outfit but one course was open. Here were Colorado Jim and the pards on foundered horses, pursuing a rapid individual who was escaping only too

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