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tender, light-hearted, and uncalculating. Either, it seemed, she must have succeeded in saturating the old couple with some of her own effervescent spirit, or they must finally have crushed it out of her. Not so; they all went their own paths and confounded the critics.

Early in the morning, especially in the fresh, cool spring, the women that lived on the outskirts of Bostox saw her galloping down the road on the little bay mare that Ezra, in some moment of exhilaration, had given her on her sixteenth birthday.

"There goes the Searles girl," they would remark. "The way she acts, you'd never think she lived with the meanest man in Bostox. There's something mighty strange about that business. There's something Ezra Mudge wouldn't want to have known, or I miss my guess."

Ezra Mudge's house was about half a mile from the post-office. Once a day, unfailingly, he went down to the village. He stopped at the box factory and cast a few shrewd glances at the workers and the work. Then he went for his mail.

Everybody greeted him with deference and respect; nobody greeted him with warmth—a fact which did not seem to affect the aged financier's tranquillity. When he went into the post-office, loafers began to disperse. If you had asked them whether they were afraid of Ezra Mudge, they would have profanely denied it; but, somehow, they drifted away when he arrived.

If you needed money and had property, you might summon courage enough to go to Ezra with the proposition of a mortgage. You would then discover that you did not know all there was to be known about your own property. You would hear one of two decrees, which were final—so final that no man in sound mind had ever been known to add a word to them: "I guess I can" or "I guess not."

You knew, when you got the money, that you would be treated with appalling justness. If you met your payment, you looked Ezra in the eye and said, "I've come to take up that mortgage, Mr. Mudge," and you said to yourself, "You haven't caught me this time, you old weasel." Equally, in case of default, you knew what to expect. In that case you went with bitterness in your heart over to the blacksmith shop, the clearing-house of Bostox's troubles, and wretchedly placed your name upon the roster of the Anti-Mudge Club. This entitled you to the free use of the expression, "meanest man in Bostox."

JOEL TIBB'S sententious warning, "When you go up to see Ezra—that'll be the second part," had left a sinister impression on Walter Eadbrook's mind. And yet, who was Ezra Mudge, that he should frighten a decent young man who had a good business and owed not a dollar to any man?

These matters were in Walter Eadbrook's mind as he left Henry in charge of the store the following afternoon and walked slowly up the road toward the Mudge mansion.

The big stone house was situated on a little knoll overlooking the river. Along the base of the hill, on the roadside, was a four-foot stone wall made of hewn stone. Surmounting it was a hedge of evergreen, closely knit. It was kept nicely trimmed at no expense to Ezra. He did it himself.

When he arrived at the near end of the hedge, the young man stopped and looked up at the house. It certainly appeared cold and uninviting. A curl of blue-white smoke coming from the big central chimney said that it was inhabited; otherwise it looked deserted.

A sleigh came singing along the hard snow toward him. When it came near enough, the occupant proved to be Joel Tibb. They recognized each other simultaneously, and Joel cried, "Jump in!"

Eadbrook looked up at the stone house once more; then he jumped into the sleigh. In another moment he was speeding back to the village.

"Seen him?" asked Joel.
"No," replied Eadbrook, reddening. "I was just on my way—"

Joel stopped the horse with a jerk. "Oh! why didn't you say so? I thought you'd probably just come out. I'll turn round and take you back—"

"No, never mind, Joel; I guess I'll go down with you," replied the young man.

Nothing more was said till they stopped in front of the Popular Cash Grocery. Then Joel remarked:

"I don't want to interfere with your business, Walter. But if I could make any suggestion, it would be this: don't be in a hurry. When Mr. Starr gets here, things will be different. Once we start things to moving, Mudge'll fall in line. When he sees his land going up in value, and business booming, he'll sing a different tune. If there's any good nature in him, it'll come out then. That'll be your chance, don't you think?"

"By George, I believe you're right," replied the young man, with a sigh of relief.

WHEN the three forty-one pulled into Bostox station next afternoon, a number of people got off. But it seemed as if only one man was getting off, and that man was J. Bradlee Starr. The conductor shook hands with him and bade him good-by. The brakeman called, "Good luck, Mr. Starr!" Numerous faces at the windows expressed a genuine feeling of loss. Then the train itself drew reluctantly out of the station, and a committee of three took charge of Bostox's visitor.

Joel Tibb, Walter Eadbrook, and Henry Treadway surrounded Mr. Starr, shook his hand fervently, and moved with him toward a waiting carriage.

"Well, I'm here!" cried Mr. Starr. "Ye gods, what a beautiful country! This beats anything I ever saw!"

Messrs. Tibb, Eadbrook, and Treadway looked around at the surrounding landscape with palpable astonishment.

"Perhaps you'd like to go right to the hotel?" suggested Joel Tibb.

"I should say not," was the reply. "I want to see this town before dark. Introduce me to everybody—man, woman, and child. Ye gods! What hills! What a view from the station here! But the railroad's got to build a decent station."

"We've tried to get them to build a new one," replied Henry Treadway. "But they won't do it."

"Won't they? Just wait till we get at them," was the confident rejoinder.

"Isn't he a wonder?" whispered Tibb to Eadbrook. "Was I right or not?"

Then they drove along. Mr. Starr fired question after question: "Who owns that land there?"

"Ezra Mudge."

"Nice-looking property over here. Whose is it?"

"Ezra Mudge's."

"That's the box factory over yonder," volunteered Mr. Eadbrook. "A good paying property."

"Who owns it?"

"Ezra Mudge."

Mr. Starr turned swiftly upon the committee of three.

"This man Mudge," he said, "is our man. Looks like he comes pretty near owning everything in sight. I can see Mr. Mudge and myself having a little talk right away quick. He must be rich."

"Rich as Cræsus," said Joel Tibb. "And meaner than all get-out."

Mr. Starr sat back luxuriously. "The meaner the better," he philosophized. "We don't want him to hold hands with us; we want him to help boost Bostox. The meaner he is, the more money he'll crave. When we show him how to get it—why, it's a cinch! Gentlemen, out West I've been making something out of nothing. But this is different. You've got a town all ready-made, with real people in it. All it needs is oxygen. Why, I can see it grow—I can feel it grow! Who lives in that stone house up there on the hill?"

"Ezra Mudge."

"Mudge," repeated Mr. Starr. "Mudge again. I begin to like the name. It sounds like buried money. Introduce me to Mudge."

"Seen him?" asked Joel.

"No," replied Eadbrook, reddening. "I was just on my way—"

The committee had bespoken supper at the Commercial Hotel. The four men



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