

The Room on the Roof



By Will Payne

WHAT HAS HAPPENED THUS FAR:
NATHANIEL HARWOOD, a handsome lawyer of 43, has dissipated most of his fortune left him and his daughter by the late Mrs. Letitia Belknap, a widow worth ten millions. Then Adolph Krom and a "Professor" Steinman interest Harwood in an invention to produce motion pictures in natural colors, and in relief. This invention they have stolen from their former employer, Simon Curlin. Harwood installs the new room on the roof, a curious retreat above his offices in a Chicago skyscraper. Later he takes the workmen to Slove River, Mich., his home town, and establishes their plant in an old factory.

In Slove River he meets young Elizabeth Bess and falls in love with her. Elizabeth sees Simon Curlin and his nephews, Robert Whiteside, ejected from the Slove River factory. Whiteside interests her. After the battle Elizabeth finds a revolver dropped by Curlin. She leaves it in a desk in the shop.

Elizabeth goes to Chicago as Harwood's secretary. His sister, Sarah Oswald, introduces Elizabeth to safety, and finally Harwood proposes and Elizabeth accepts him. Mrs. Belknap, angered, summons Harwood and shows him she knows his financial difficulties.

Exploring the room on the roof, Elizabeth and Curlin and Whiteside try to break into the safe. Elizabeth tells her they are seeking a camera and plans stolen from his uncle by Krom and Steinman. Elizabeth permits them to depart. Steinman disappears. Krom reappears in Chicago and shows the new pictures for Harwood. He demands the lawyer buy his invention at once, for \$250,000 cash. Krom relents that in a moment of frenzy he killed Steinman and buried the body in the Slove River factory.

Harwood pays Krom \$30,000 on account. The lenses are intrusted to Elizabeth, who is to hold them from both Harwood and Krom until the patents are secured. Fearless Krom goes on a spree. Elizabeth permits him to take her to the theater and to supper.

EIGHTH INSTALLMENT.

Plots and Counterplots.

They discussed that a few moments and Krom went out, the check in his pocket, oddly divided between wrath and satisfaction. Mentally he cursed Harwood for his suspicious and parsimonious holding of the money, and even then not handing over the check until he'd asked his questions about Curlin. On the other hand, he hadn't had the least expectation of getting a quarter of a million today, and turning the money over to Elizabeth Maiden as trustee in time to find out how he stood with her. Except for the amount of money, he hadn't played it so badly! But he hated Harwood. And Harwood also was divided between resentment and satisfaction. An impudent, rickety blackguard! But finally, with the lack of any other \$30,000, he'd got those lenses in his hands—practically.

Meanwhile Elizabeth was going out on a Salls street with a pastebord box tight under her arm, immensely proud. She was full of the wonderful invention; the beautiful lenses were under her arm. The two men left it all to her. Curiously, she saw her sword of her honor and stood at salute. There was a safe deposit vault in the basement of the Belknap building, but she didn't propose to go to that obvious place. It satisfied her dramatic sense better to go up the street to another one. She went back to the safe deposit vault, presently she was aware of the flat, shiny box in her hand, and she went to her room, as though a glow proceeded from it.

She had been in the office only a few minutes when a telephone call came: "Miss Maiden? Whiteside speaking." "Will you go to lunch with me to-day?" "There's something I'd like to tell you."

Luncheon with Robert Whiteside at the club and the Cherub had been coming to her mind. There was something about it that obviously didn't belong in the office which she had chosen for herself. So she very coolly, she answered, "No, thank you. The voice came again, insistently, because she could hang up the receiver: "Please! Just a minute! If you'll not go to lunch with me, can't you speak to me a minute on your way to lunch? I'll wait for you outside the building." He spoke quite cheerfully, digesting her snub as though it were a young man like that? Refusing even to speak to him on the street seemed like slapping a child.

"Why—I'll be going to lunch in about half an hour," she replied, with reluctance. "Thanks; I'll be waiting for you," he answered.

A young man, it seemed, whom one could not snub, yet not so much merely cheeky as a fellow lodger of a fellow lodger.

Stepping through the granite arch to the law office, she saw him, she saw him once again, walking. She fairly had to let him walk away from the crowded entrance with her. Then she halted, looking at him. She was not going to luncheon with him this time, or he with her; what he had to say could be said there. The way she halted, looking at him, implied that. So she spoke, very slowly, eyes on him: "I realize that I'm sunk without a trace, you know—torpedoed—blown up. If I didn't know that I wouldn't be saying this to you, but I made up my mind that I was shot to pieces with you, and if I could do anything to help you I was going to do it. It's about your uncle, you know. I was jealous or had some other thought in my mind about it. But as you read the report I said, 'I'm sunk

anyhow. The kid is getting herself into a mess. I'm going to call her up and tell her. Krom's a greasy sort of brute—a blockhead, too, for all his smarts. My sister, if I had one, couldn't go round the corner with him—because he might get her into any kind of an awkward situation. You oughtn't to go with him. I made up my mind to tell you."

He spoke with earnestness, but in an even voice, his round blue-gray eyes looking straight into hers. She realized that this young man, who had seemed so easy to manage, might have much stubbornness in him. There had been some hint of that before, in his letting his own affairs go and sticking around to see that his uncle didn't get into jail.

"Is that all?" she asked, with a sarcastic little smile.

"That's all," he replied.

"Good day," she said, and walked away. She didn't really wish to be walking away from him; there was a good deal to be said. It seemed, although she had no idea what it was, she was confusedly ashamed of that sarcastic little smile—cheer! Yet he was cheerful. She'd made up her mind to cast him out, and, although something inside her kept confusedly protesting about it, she walked wearily away.

This was Thursday. Wednesday evening

engaging way, smiling—as though they both must see the joke of a tricky fellow like Krom.

"You see, I've got something over seven hundred thousand dollars in this picture business first and last. I've bought a great deal of stock in picture concerns."

It wasn't necessary to tell her the history of that unlucky Silver Crown Amusement's investment; but at the great sum he mentioned her eyes grew round with surprise.

"What's more," he went on amiably, "I've got options on some more stock. As I told you, this is really a very big thing, as many millions as you care to count up; but it takes a lot of money to swing it. I'm due to put in a lot more money on account of those options. You can see how important it is to me to know just where I stand and whether or not I'm justified in putting in more money."

Certainly she could see that, so she replied quickly, "O, yes!"

"And Krom's such a rascal, you see—I can't take his word for anything. I've got to know whether he's dealing straight or up to a trick. I'm perfectly helpless on the technical side of this photography business. So I've been looking around—inquiring among my friends in the university faculty. I find that Prof. Kersten knows as much about

see; don't dare go out. I was wondering if maybe you'd do a little errand for me. It won't take you long and I don't know anybody else to ask."

"Why, surely I will! Of course!" her voice came back in eager affirmation.

"Well, you know that black bag of mine," Krom went on. She understood now that his voice mumbled that way because he was in pain. Little, she remembered, was an acute inflammation of the iris and monstrously painful. "I'd like awful well to have it here. It's in the safe upstairs. I'll give you the combination. It's 26, 19, 7, 42. Got that?" he repeated the numbers. "Probably you know how to open a combination lock—turn four times—"

"Yes, I know," she interrupted.

"Well, now, if you'd be good enough to go up there and open the safe and get out my black bag—and if you could bring it down to me here when you leave the office, you know. It's the Ellenborough hotel on Wabash avenue. Well, that'll be a big help to me, and I'll surely be much obliged to you. My room is 412, on the fourth floor. You can take the elevator and come right up, if you will. I mean, you see, that I'd sort of hate to have the hotel people or anybody to anybody else—the hotel people or anybody.

as though it were a kind of practical joke on him.

"If I only had something or other to do. But I can't ever, smoke. Funny about that. I'd heard it said before that smoking was no good unless you could see the smoke. That's a fact. I've tried it three, four times, but you no good at all. But I was thinking of no keeping you on your feet, if you wouldn't mind coming in. 'Fraid it's kind of mused up in here. I've got the hang of the room pretty well now—can find my way around all mixed up even in a small room like this with your eyes shut. There must be a chair right over there."

He had made way for her to enter the room. There was an instant of embarrassment about the door. But light was bad for his eyes. Resolutely she shut it behind her. He was aware of that, and moved hastily, holding out one hand to feel the way; the other with the bag in it, fending for furniture. There was an odd clumminess in his groping haste. She saw, in a moment, that his objective was a small writing desk in the corner, with a hooded electric lamp on it. He fumbled for the metal chain, pulled it, and so turned on the light.

"Guess that'll give you light enough to see," he said, "and not enough to hurt me if I turn my head." There was considerable atonement in that. He groped over to the Morris chair, got his hand on its back, and lowered himself into it, holding the bag in his lap. "Did you find a comfortable chair?" he asked.

Her heart was constricted and her throat dry over the helplessness of that big, groping, blind Samson! And she had stolen the lenses that he had intrusted to her!

"You see, I was thinking," he resumed cheerfully; "but if it don't suit you, you must say so. This blamed trouble with my eyes lays me up just when Mr. Harwood is mighty anxious to get the job finished—the applications for patent, you know. I've got it pretty straight in my head, but I can't make anything that if you could come down here an hour or two Monday and an hour or two Tuesday and let me dictate to you, why we could just about get the technical part of those applications finished up. Of course, I wouldn't want to dictate it to an outsider. But if you could come down—"

"Mr. Harwood was willing—why, we could get it finished in an hour or three days. I may be laid up this way a couple of weeks."

"Why, yes, I'll be glad to do it," she said.

"Well, I was thinking that would help the business along," he replied. He ran a hand through his rumpled hair and laughed lustily. "And, you bet, it'd be a big boost for me. 'Just keep quiet,' that doctor said. I wonder if it's ever tried it." He laughed again. "But I've walked a hundred miles around this room already, and knocked my shin on everything in it. 'Just keep quiet.' Why, I'd sit and dictate 'Mary had a little lamb' all afternoon just for something to do. So it would be a regular godsend for me, you see." He explained, "you could sit at the little desk. There'd be light enough for you to write at, and I'd turn my back. That couldn't hurt me."

She agreed again. She would be down Monday, say at four o'clock. Then: "I'm going to send down for an evening paper and read it to you."

That seemed to surprise him, but he only mumbled thanks while she turned to the telephone, called the office, and asked that an evening paper be sent up. For nearly an hour she sat reading it to him.

Monday at four o'clock then," she said quite gravely at last.

She went away baffled—glad that she had gone into his room and read the newspaper to him; glad that she was going back Monday in a generous satisfaction of pity over that part of it. But there was another part of it—the big, sightless, groping figure; blind Samson! He had stolen his lenses; and even now he had trusted her with the combination of the safe and his black bag!

Meanwhile Krom, intrusted for several minutes to make sure she had gone. To make doubly sure he stepped over and shot the bolt on the door. It was not until several minutes after that he pulled the uncomfortable black bandage off his eyes, and still later before he rolled up one of the window shades a foot. In the bathroom he washed and drank half of it with the glass at his elbow and a cigar lighted he examined the black bag carefully and unlocked it. The threads were unbroken; so he was quite sure she hadn't tampered with it.

He rather wondered why she had stayed on to read him the newspaper. But women were like that—striving him along! He could fairly see her lithe figure over there by the desk, reading in low, clear tones. But much more vividly he could see her kissing Harwood, his arm on her waist. Stringing him along! Well, he was going to show her something!

On Sunday afternoon Elizabeth found it necessary to solve a little problem of her own, which she did by saying, in a tone that she tried to make sound casual, "I heard from Krom yesterday after you left. He called up."

Then she gave Harwood an outline of what had happened. The problem had been whether or not to tell him about it. He had said over, or through her trusteeship of the lenses so lightly and smoothly; he had been so far from understanding how she felt about it that she would rather not have told him the episode of Saturday afternoon. But her loyalty was really due to him, and not to tell him wouldn't be exactly loyal under the circumstances.

So she told him as briefly as possible, with only a hint at her reactions to blind Samson; merely: "Of course, I felt sorry for him. It's painful, I suppose."

But Harwood took it brightly and lightly: "Rits, eh? That sounds serious. But you never can tell with Krom." He smiled around at her generally. "He may be lying about that. Did he give you the name of his doctor?"

"He mentioned it," she replied, looking ahead—for they had left the house for a walk after luncheon. "She felt a repugnance against his way of taking it, as though Krom were only a dog, a stranger's dog! Harwood was considering."

"Probably it will make little difference," he announced, optimistically. "I'll get Kersten at those lenses Tuesday and we'll soon know what we've got." Hardly so much consideration for Krom as for a dog, it seemed!

"I'm going down to his hotel again Monday," she remarked, as one speaks of a matter that is quiet settled. Then she told him of Krom's plan to dictate the technical descriptions to her.

"Decent sort of place, I suppose?" said Harwood.

"Yes," she replied. He was taking it so lightly, so cheerfully!

He was, in fact, considering. He didn't much like the idea of her going down there, even in broad daylight, but she'd been one—evidently intended going again. And after all, if Krom dictated the technical descriptions to her that would be another string to his bow. He supposed it would be done in the hotel parlor or writing room. Usually, they went to the theater, this made no pronounced impression on him. He was really thinking of something quite aside from her going to the hotel.

They were walking up the drive to Lincoln park in crisp fall air that made exercise delightful. Bess had a special sort of awareness of the house they were passing—a formidable pile of dun stone with a good deal of plate glass in it. She knew that Mrs. Letitia Belknap lived there, and she had received various more or less subtle intimations concerning Mrs. Belknap and Nathaniel Harwood. These intimations amounted to an impression that she had, perhaps, supplanted Mrs. Belknap in Harwood's regard—at least that some friends of Harwood and Mrs. Belknap had entertained romantic expectations regarding them. It was something that Bess had never met Mrs. Belknap, but had seen her twice, examining her appearance with a curiosity which was quite natural under the circumstances. Probably the net impression of all this upon her mind was that if she had finally chosen her and nothing as against Mrs. Belknap and ten millions his sincerity could not be questioned. She looked at the house with a special sort of awareness as they walked past it. Naturally Harwood had his own awareness of it.

But he was really thinking of something else—which he brought into action after luncheon on Monday, brightly and pleasantly, as he had brought up the subject of the lenses.

"I'm going to make a clean sweep of this now, Bessie," he said; "find out exactly where I stand and what Krom's up to. I want to get as much material as possible for Prof. Kersten to work on, you see, so he'll be able to give me a sound opinion on what I've got. Let's see what's in that safe upstairs. I mean to have an expert come over and open it, but if you've got the combination there's no use in that."

He was so bright and amiable about it, taking it so much as a matter of course! She felt the same confusion as in the case of the lenses, only even more sharply. Krom was blind; he'd given her the combination of the safe in his helplessness—in trust! Surely Nat must see that! She wished to say, "O, Nat, I can't! That would be shameful!" Yet the words wouldn't come—telling him to his face that he was shameful.

"We may as well make a clean sweep of it," Harwood repeated—so pleasantly and lightly as though nothing else were to be thought of, handsomely smiling at her! "Of course," he added, quite generally, "if the rascal is going straight with me, it can do him no harm." He was on his feet, ready to go upstairs, in that manner of brisk, engaging competence. Confusedly she was following him upstairs.

The roof room seemed to bring Krom closer—blind Samson!

"I don't know whether I can remember it," she murmured, as she stooped to the safe. She did, however, remember the numbers perfectly: 26, 19, 7, 42.

Turning the nickel plated disc of the lock, while he stood over her watching, she had a sense of shame as though he were making her do something that outraged her modesty. She turned the disc to 27, 19, 7, then to 24, instead of 42. The lock refused to release. She tried it over again. Her face was red, her eyes downcast.

"I'm afraid I've forgotten it," she said apologetically. "It doesn't unlock." She went through the numbers of the combination again, ending with 24 instead of 42. "No, I can't work it—sorry," she announced, in embarrassment.

"O, well, don't bother any more," said Harwood cheerfully. "It doesn't matter; let it go." Kind, considerate, as always. "I'll have an expert come over and open it in the morning," he added.

She went downstairs, with downcast eyes, and was much relieved when he went on to his room, leaving her alone in the cabinet. This was one of the worst moments she had yet experienced. "Why did he do it?" she kept thinking. "And why did I do that?" for she knew well enough that the last number of the combination was 42, not 24. "I lied to him! This is shameful!" Presently a question obscurely occurred to her: The lenses—this business of the combination—decidedly—lying—why hadn't she protested? Was it, possibly, because of a feeling that she had sold out to Harwood?

A little before four, with notebook and pencils in her handbag, she started for the Ellenborough hotel to take Krom's dictation. She was ashamed to meet him even though his eyes were blindfolded.

Krom met her at the door as before, with bandaged eyes, but he had already turned on the hooded lamp at the little writing desk in the corner. He told her at considerable length, quite cheerfully, that he'd managed to get some sleep. The doctor had given him something to take.

"I don't like taking dope much," he confessed, smiling below the black band. "I got other things in that line to worry me, without getting a dope habit. But sometimes you can't stand it. The pain ain't much worse than just having nothing to do anyhow. You wouldn't think, now, that a man would want to be hurt," he went on cheerfully. "But being hurt kind of takes up your mind. I make a kind of game of it—seeing how long I can wait before I take anything."

He laughed over that, as pitiful a sound, she thought, as she had ever heard. "You really shouldn't stay here!" she protested. "You ought to go into a hospital where you can have proper attention!" She had a poignant sense of the big, blind fellow shut up in his hole all day, with nothing to do but play that dismal game, and seeing how much pain he could stand. "The doctor oughtn't to leave you here!" she added indignantly. If she had any place to take him, at the moment, she would have ordered a cab and carried him off.

"Well, the doctor did want me to go to a hospital," he replied soberly. "But I was in a hospital once with typhoid. I hate 'em. I told him I'd rather stick it out here. They send up my meals all right; that's about all anybody can do, I guess. Just a case of grin and bear it, you see."

"They got down to work presently, but the dictation was slow. His technical jargon was all Greek to her; most of it she had to write out in longhand as he spelled the words. They worked more than an hour.

(To be continued.)

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Then the door swung open and her heart was constricted.

she had been to dinner and the theater with Krom, declining an invitation to the theater on Saturday—but so graciously that Krom took no hint from it. The next step, he decided, would be an automobile ride Sunday afternoon and evening; by no means in the cheap little machine that he'd go Harwood to buy for him to Slove River, but in a tip-top hired car, with a smart chauffeur. Krom felt himself equal to almost anything in that line now, with thirty thousand dollars cash in the bank. He'd soon find out how he stood with her, yet he was awkward and embarrassed about it—a game he wasn't used to.

The trick would be to catch her in her cabinet about five o'clock, or a little later, just after Harwood had left for the day. Then he'd have a chance to talk to her alone about the automobile ride. He felt an odd embarrassment, like a boy making his first advances to a girl. But when he came back to the office, two or three minutes before five, Bess and Harwood had already left for the day, so he waited for better luck on Friday.

About ten minutes to five on Friday, in that odd embarrassment, he went down from the roof room to the safe deposit vault. A moment at the door to Bess' cabinet, but could catch no sound. Silently he opened the door. She was not in the cabinet. The door to Harwood's room stood ajar, however, and he caught a sound in there—the murmur of a voice. Reconsidering, he tiptoed to the crack in the door and peered.

Elizabeth and Harwood were standing by the lawyer's desk, close together. His arm was round her waist; her hand was on his shoulder; she was faintly smiling into his face; he was kissing her lips.

Krom drew back from the crack with a thrill along his nerves, as though he had stepped on a snake. In a kind of panic he gnashed the stairway room, noiselessly closing the door behind him. He gaped at the wall. He had not once dreamed of anything like that.

So that was it! That was it! His wife was coming back to him in a fiery rush. So she'd just been stringing him along—making a monkey of him. She had his lenses! He stole upstairs, started at the floor, sat down. So that was it! She'd just been making a monkey of him—getting his lenses.

It was the most brutal feeling that had ever shaken him. He wanted to hurt her, to see her shrink and tremble and turn pale, to hear her cry out. He sat thinking about it for a long while, giving himself up to it. What could he do for her? He meant to show her—but what could he do?

In motion pictures, now, a man got a girl somewhere alone—and threw a mighty scare into her at any rate. That appealed to him; but motion pictures were not real. He was perfectly well aware that handling a young woman motion picture-wise in real life would be difficult, probably attended by highly painful consequences. But he wanted to hurt her. He meant to show her. He sat thinking about it till long after dark.

Harwood alas had a problem of some difficulty to think about. He did not even hint it to Bess on Friday; but Saturday forenoon he called her into his room and asked her, in his pleasantest manner, to close the door as she came in. He had never looked pleasant, or handsome, or given a clearer impression of that bright, engaging competence which she so much liked. He was smiling as he spoke to her.

"Krom's a great rascal, Bessie. I've known all along that he was grafting here and there on the materials he bought, and so on. Telling the truth or not just depends on how he happens to feel about it. I haven't a doubt that he's got this big invention; we've both seen the pictures, you know. But Krom's got sort of a monkey mind—full of tricks." He was explaining it to her in the most

photography as anybody. I had a little talk with him over the telephone last evening. He's a perfectly trustworthy man. I want him to look over those lenses, you see, and give me an expert opinion. I don't even know that those pieces of glass Krom turned over Thursday were anything more than plain window panes."

She wished to protest. "But Krom offered to let you see them through a magnifying glass." The wish, however, was only an ineffectual stir in her mind.

At his pleasantest Harwood concluded: "So you fetch the lenses up here. Kersten may require a day or two. Of course he'll take good care of them. Best do it now, so I can get Kersten started."

It was an interesting case to an employer, and he so obviously took it all for granted that Bess couldn't find a word to say. She got her hat and coat, took the flat, shiny little safe deposit key out of the secret place in her desk, and put it in her handbag. She went down in an elevator, out on La Salle street, up the street to the safe deposit vault. All with a queer, dumb, divided sort of feeling, as though some-body else were doing it. Entering the safe deposit vault, she thought, "Why didn't I tell him I couldn't do it?" But that thought was outside the field of her actions. She got the pastebord box with the lenses in it, tucking it under her arm, and went back along La Salle street with a hedged feeling—uncomfortably exposed sort of feeling, as though she were not decently covered with clothes. She was breaking her pledge to Krom.

She put the pastebord box on Harwood's desk and found him quite annoyed. He had been telephoning to Bess was gone. Prof. Kersten had not supposed there was any urgency in the case that Mr. Harwood had spoken to him about over the telephone the evening before, so he had gone out of town this morning for the week-end and would not be back until some time Monday night. The lawyer was annoyed at the delay.

"Well, nothing to do but wait until he comes back, I suppose," he said to Bess. "I'll lock these things up in our vault here." He dropped the pastebord box into a drawer in his desk—disposing of it so easily, in a perfectly matter of course way.

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