to humanity than the woman who had forgotten how to cry.

But into the turmoil of thoughts half indignant, half self-compassionate, came reproach and a great wave of tenderness filial. She saw, as with a sudden gift of retrospection, her mother's long battle with inadequacy, and how it aged her; saw, too, that the battle had been fought unselfishly, since she knew her mother's declaration that she could contentedly "go back to nothing" was no mere petulant boast. It was for her daughters that she had grown thin and haggard and irritable under the persistent reverses of fortune; it was for them that she was sinking the Grimkie independence in the match-making mother.

The tears in Elinor's eyes were not altogether of self-pity when she put her back to the window. Ormsby was coming up the curved driveway in his automobile, and she had seen him but dimly through the rising mist of emotion.

"Have you set your heart upon this thing, mother?—but I know you have. And I—I have tried as I could to be just and reasonable; to you and Penelope, and to Brookes Ormsby. He is nobleness itself; it is a shame to give him the shadow when he so richly deserves the substance."

She spoke rapidly, almost incoherently; and the mother-love in the woman who was careful and troubled about the things that perish put the matchmaker to the wall. It was almost terrifying to see Elinor, the strong-hearted, the self-contained, breaking down like other mothers' daughters. So it was the mother who held out her arms, and the daughter ran to go down on her knees at the chair-side, burying her face in the lap of comforting.

"There, there, Ellie, child; don't cry. It's terrible to hear you sob like that," she protested, her own voice shaking in sympathy. "I have been thinking only of you and your future, and fearing weakly that you couldn't bear the hard things. But we'll bear them together—we three; and I'll never say another word about Brookes Ormsby and what might have been."

"O mother! you are making it harder than ever, now," was the tearful rejoinder. "I—there is no reason why I should be so obstinate. I haven't even the one poor excuse you are making for me down deep in your heart."

"David Kent?" said the mother.

The bowed head nodded a wordless assent.

"I shan't say that I haven't suspected him all along, dear. I am afraid I have. I have nothing against him. But he is a poor man, Elinor; and we are poor, too. You'd be miserably unhappy."

"If he stays poor, it is I who am to blame"—this most contritely. "He had a future before him; the open door was his winning in the railroad fight, and I closed it against him."

"You?" said the mother, astonished.

"Yes. I told him he couldn't go on in the way he meant to. I made it a matter of conscience; and he—he has turned back when he might have fought it out and made a name for himself, and saved us all. And it was such a hair-splitting thing! All the world would have applauded him if he had gone on; and there was only one woman in all the world to pry into the secret places of his soul and stir up the sleeping doubt!"

Now, if all the thrifty gear-getting "faculty" of the dead and gone Grimkies had become thin and diluted and inefficient in this Mrs. Hepzibah, last of the name, the strong wine and iron of the blood of righteousness had come down to her unstrained.

"Tell me all about it, daughter," she adjured; and when the tale was told, she patted the bowed head tenderly and spoke the words of healing.

"You did altogether right, Ellie, dear; I—I am proud of you, daughter. And if, as you say, you were the only one to do it, that doesn't matter; it was all the more necessary. Are you sure he gave it up?"

Elinor rose and stood with clasped hands beside her mother's chair; a very pitiful and stricken half-sister of the self-reliant, dependable young woman who had boasted herself the head of the household.

"I have no means of knowing what he has done," she said slowly. "But I know the man. He has turned back."

There was a tap at the door and a servant was come to say that Mr. Brookes Ormsby was waiting with his auto-car. Was Miss Brentwood nearly ready?

Elinor said ,"In a minute," and when the door closed she made a confidante of her mother for the first time since her childhood days.

"I know what you have suspected ever since that summer in New Hampshire, and it is true," she confessed. "I do love him—as much as I dare to without knowing whether he cares for me. Must I—may I—say yes to Brookes Ormsby without telling him the whole truth?"

"Oh, my dear! You couldn't do that!" was the quick reply.

"You mean that I am not strong enough? But I am, and Mr. Ormsby is manly enough and generous enough to meet me half-way. Is there any other honest thing to do, mother?"

Mrs. Hepzibah shook her head deliberately and determinedly, though she knew she was shaking the Ormsby millions into the abyss of the unattainable.

"No; it is his just due. But I can't help being sorry for him, Ellie. What will you do if he says it doesn't make any difference?"

The blue-gray eyes were downcast.

"I don't know. Having asked so much and accepted so much from him—it shall be as he says, mother."

The afternoon had been all that a summer afternoon on the brown highlands can be, and the powerful touring car had swept them from mile to mile over the dun hills like an earth-skimming dragon whose wing-beat was the muffled, explosive thud of the motor.

Through most of the miles Elinor had given herself up to silent enjoyment of the rapture of swift motion, and Ormsby had respected her mood, as he always did. But when they were on the high hills beyond the mining camp of Megilp and he had thrown the engines out of gear to brake the car gently down the long inclines, there was room for speech.

"This is out last spin together on the high plains, I suppose," he said. "Your mother has fixed upon to-morrow for our return to town, hasn't she?"

Elinor confirmed it half absently. She had been keyed up to face the inevitable in this drive with Ormsby, and she was afraid now that he was going to break her resolution by a dip into the commonplaces.

"Are you glad or sorry?" he asked.

Her reply was evasive.

"I have enjoyed the thin, clean air and the freedom of the wide horizons. Who could help it?"

"But you have not been entirely happy?"

It was on her lips to say some conventional thing about the constant jarring note in all human happiness, but she changed it to a simple "No."

"May I try if I can give the reason?"

She made a reluctant little gesture of assent; some such signal of acquiescence as Marie Antoinette may have given the waiting headsman.

"You have been afraid every day lest I should begin a second time to press you for an answer, haven't you?"

She could not thrust and parry with him. They were past all that.

"Yes," she admitted briefly.

"You break my heart, Elinor," he said, after a long pause. "But"—with a sudden tightening of the lips—"I'm not going to break yours."

She understood him, and her eyes filled quickly with the swift shock of gratitude.

"If you had made a study of womankind through ten lifetimes instead of a part of one, you could not know when and how to strike truer and deeper," she said; and then, softly: "Why can't you make me love you, Brookes?"

He took his foot from the brake-pedal, and for ten seconds the released car shot down the slope unhindered. Then he checked the speed and answered her.

"A little while ago I should have said I didn't know; but now I do know. It is because you love David Kent: you loved him before I had my chance."

She did not deny the principal fact, but she gave him his opportunity to set it aside if he could—and would.

"Call it foolish, romantic sentiment, if you like. Is there no way to shame me out of it?"

He shook his head slowly.

"You don't mean that."

"But if I say that I do; if I insist that I am willing to be shamed out of it."

His smile was that of a brother who remembers tardily to be loving-kind.

"I shall leave that task for some one who cares less for you and for your true happiness than I do, or ever shall. And it will be a mighty thankless service that that 'some one' will render you."

"But I ought to be whipped and sent to bed," she protested, almost tearfully. "Do you know what I have done?—how I have—"

She could not quite put it in words, even for him, and he helped her generously, as before.

"I know what Kent hasn't done; which is more to the point. But he will do it fast enough if you will give him half a chance."

"No," she said definitively.

"I say yes. One thing, and one thing only, has kept him from telling you any time since last autumn: that is a sort of finical loyalty to me. I saw how matters stood when he came aboard of our train at Gaston—I am asking you to believe that I didn't know it before—and I saw then that my only hope was to make a handfast friend of him. And I did it."

"I believe you can do anything you try to do," she said warmly.

This time his smile was a mere grimace.

"You will have to make one exception after this,-and so shall I. And since it is the first of any consequence in all my mounting years, it grinds. I can't throw another man out of the window and take his place."

"If you were anything but what you are, you would have thrown him out of the window another way," she rejoined.

"That would have a dago's trick; not a white man's," he asserted. "I suppose I might have got in his way and played the dog in the manger generally, and you would have stuck to your promise and married me, but I am not looking for that kind of a winning. I don't mind confessing that I played my last card when I released you from your engagement. I said to myself: If that doesn't break down the barriers nothing will."

She looked up quickly.

"You will never know how near it came to doing it, Brookes."

"But it didn't quite?"

"No, it didn't quite."

The brother-smile came again.

"Let's paste that leaf down and turn the other; the one that has David Kent's name written at the top. He is going to succeed all around, Elinor, and I am going to help him—for his sake as well as yours."

"No," she dissented. "He is going to fail; and I am to blame for it."

He looked at her sidewise.

"So you were at the bottom of that, were you? I thought as much, and tried to make him admit it, but he wouldn't. What was your reason?"

"I gave it to him; I can't give it to you."

"I guess not," he laughed. "I was not born on the right side of the Berkshire Hills to appreciate it. But really, you mustn't interfere. As I say, we are going to make something out of David; and a little conscience—of the right old Pilgrim Fathers' brand—goes a long ways in politics."

"But you promised me you were not going to spoil him—only it doesn't matter; you can't."

Ormsby chuckled openly, and when she questioned "What?" he said:

"I was just wondering what you would say if you knew what he is into now; if you could guess, for instance, that his backers have put up a cool hundred thousand to be used as he sees fit?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed; and there was dismay and sharp disappointment in her voice. "You don't mean that he is going to bribe these men?"

"No," he said, relenting. "As a matter of fact, I don't know precisely what he is doing with the money, but I guess it is finding its way into legitimate channels. I'll make him give me an itemized expense account for your benefit when it's all over, if you like."

"It would be kinder to tell me more about it now," she pleaded.

"No; I'll let him have that pleasure, after the fact—if we can get him pardoned out before you go back East."

She was silent so long that he stole another sidewise look between his snubbings of the brake-pedal. Her face was white and still, like the face of one suddenly frost-smitten, and he was instantly self-reproachful.

"Don't look that way," he begged. "It hurts me; makes me feel how heavy my hand is when I'm doing my best to make it light. He is trying a rather desperate experiment, to be sure, but he is in no immediate personal danger. I believe it or I shouldn't be here; I should be with him."

She asked no more questions, being unwilling to tempt him to break confidence with Kent. But she was thinking of all the desperate things a determined man with temperamental unbalancings might do when the touring car rolled noiselessly down the final hill into the single street of Megilp.

There was but one vehicle in the street at the moment; a freighter's ore-wagon drawn by a team of mules, meekest and most shambling-prosaic of their tribe. The motor-car was running on the spent velocity of the descent, and Ormsby thought to edge past without stopping. But at the critical instant the mules gave way to terror, snatched the heavy wagon into the opposite plank walk, and tried to climb a near-by telephone pole. Ormsby put his foot on the brake and something snapped under the car.

"What was that?" Elinor asked; and Ormsby got down to investigate.

"It is our brake connection," he announced, after a brief inspection. "And we are five good miles from Hudgins and his repair kit."

A ring of town idiers was beginning to form about them. An automobile was still enough of a rarity in the mining-camp to draw a crowd.

"Busted?" inquired one of the onlookers.

Ormsby nodded, and asked if there were a machinist in the camp.

"Yep," said the spokesman; "up at the Blue Jay mine."

"Somebody go after him," suggested Ormsby, flipping a coin, and a boy started on a run.

The waiting was a little awkward. The ringing riders were good-natured, but curious. Ormsby stood by and answered questions multiform, diverting curiosity from the lady to the machine. Presently the spokesman said:

"Is this here the steam buggy that helped a crowd of you fellers to get away from Jud Byers and his posse one day a spell back?"

"No," said Ormsby. Then he remembered the evening of the small surprises—the racing tally-ho with the Inn auto-car to help, and, more pointedly now, the singular mirage effect in the lengthening perspective as the eastbound train shot away from Agua Caliente.

"What was the trouble that day?" he asked, putting in a question on his side.

"A little ruction up at the Twin Sisters. There was a fuss, an' a gun went off, accidently on purpose killin' Jim Harkins," was the reply.

The machinist was come from the Blue Jay and Ormsby helped Elinor out of her seat while the repairs were making. The town office of the Blue Jay was just across the street, and he took her there and begged house-room and a chair for her, making an excuse that he must go and see to the brake-mending.

But once outside he promptly stultified himself, letting the repairs take care of themselves while he went in search of one Jud Byers. The deputy sheriff was not hard to find. Normally and in private life he was the weigher for the Blue Jay; and Ormsby was directed to the scale shanty which served as the weigher's office.

The interview was brief and conclusive; was little more than a rapid fire of question and answer; and for the greater part the sheriff's affirmatives were heartily eager. Yes, certainly; if the thing could be brought to pass, he, Byers, would surely do his part. All he asked was an hour or two in which to prepare.

"You shall have all the time there is," was the reply. "Have you a Western Union wire here?"

"No; nothing but the railroad office."

"That won't do; they'd stop the message. How about the Inn?"

"Breezeland has a Western Union all right; wire your notice there, and I'll fix to have it 'phoned over. I don't believe it can be worked, htough," added the deputy, doubtfully.

"We can't tell till we try," said Ormsby; and he hurried back to his car to egg on the machinist with golden promises contigent upon haste.

Miss Brentwood found her companion singularly silent on the five-mile race to Breezeland; but the lightning speed at which he drove the car put conversation out of the question. At the hotel he saw her into the lift with decent deliberation; but the moment she was off his hands he fairly ran to the telegrapher's alcove in the main hall.

"Have you a Western Union wire to the capital direct?" he inquired.

The young man snapped his key and said he had.

"It has no connection with the Transwestern railroad offices?"

"None whatever."

Ormsby dashed off a brief message to Kent, giving three or four addresses at which he might be found.

"Send that, and have them try the Union station train platform first. Don't let them spare expense at the other end, and if you can bring proof of delivery to room 261 within half an hour it means a month's pay to you individually. Can you do it?"

But the operator was already claiming the wire, writing "deth," "deth," "deth," as rapidly as his fingers could shake off the dots and dashes.

CHAPTER XXVII.

By Order of the Court.

Between the hours of 8:30 and 10 p. m. the Union passenger station at the capital presents a moving and spirited spectacle. Within the hour and a half, four through and three local trains are due to leave, and the space within the iron grille that fences off the track platforms from the public part of the station is filled with hurrying throngs of train-takers.

Down at the outer end of the train-shed the stuttering pop-valves of the locomotives, the thunderous trundling of the heavy baggage trucks, and the shrill, monotonous chant of the express messengers checking in their cargoes lift a din harmonious to the seasoned traveler; a medley softened and distance-diminished for those that crowd upon the gate-keepers at the iron grille.

It was the evening of the last day in the month; the day when the Federative Council of Railway Workers had sent its ultimatum to Receiver Guilford. The reduction in wages was to go into effect at midnight; if, by midnight, the order had not been rescinded, and the way opened for a joint conference touching the removal of certain obnoxious officials, a general strike and tie-up would be ordered. Trains in transit carrying passengers or United States mail would be run to their respective destinations; trains carrying perishable freight would be run to division stations; with these exceptions all labor would cease promptly on the stroke of 12.

Such was the text of the ultimatum, a certified copy of which Engineer Scott had delivered in person into the hands of the receiver at noon.

It was now 8:45 p. m. The eastbound night express was ready for the run to A. & T. Junction; the fast mail, one hour and thirty-five minutes late from the east, was backing in on track nine to take on the city mail. On track eight, pulled down so that the smoke from the engine should not foul the air of the train-shed, the receiver's private car, with the 1010 for motive power and "Red" Callahan in the cab, had been waiting since 7 o'clock for the order to run special to Gaston. And as yet the headquarters office had made no sign; sent no word of reply to the strike notice.

"NO, I DIDN'T, JUDGE MARSTON. I WANT MY RAILROAD"

Griggs was on for the night run eastward with the express; and "Dutch" Tischer had found himself slated to take the fast mail west. The change of engines on the mail had been effected at the shops; and when Tischer backed his train in on track nine his berth was beside the 1010. Callahan swung down from his cab and climbed quickly to that of the mail engine.

"Annything new at the shops, Dutchy?" he inquired.

"I was not somet'ings gehearing, nein. You was dot Arkoos newspaper dis evening sehen? He says nodings too, alretty, about dot strike."

"Divil a worrd. Ye might think Scotty'd handed the major a bit av blank paper f'r all the notice he's taking. More thin that, he's lavin' town, wid me to pull him. The naught-seven's to run special to Gaston—bad cess to ut!"

"Vell, I can'd hellup id," said the phlegmatic Bavarian. "I haf the mail and egspress got, and I go mit dem t'rough to Pighorn. You haf der brivate car got, and you go mit dem t'rough to Gaston. Den ve qvits, ain'd it?"

Callahan nodded and dropped to the platform. But before he could mount to the footboard of the 1010, M'Tosh collared him.

"Patsy, I have your orders, at last. Your passengers will be down in a few minutes, and you are to pull out ahead of the express."

"Is it to Gaston I'm goin', Misther M'Tosh?"

The fireman was standing by with the oil can and torch ready to Callahan's hand, and the train-master drew the engineer aside.

"Shovel needn't hear," he said in explanation. And then: "Are you willing to stand with us, Patsy? You've had time enough to think it over."

Callahan stood with his arms folded and his cap drawn down over his eyes.

"'Tis not f'r meself I'm thingin', Misther M'Tosh, as ye well know. But I'm a widdy man; an' there's the bit colleen in the convint."

"She'll be well cared for, whatever happens to you," was the quick reply.

"Thin I'm yer man," said Callahan; and when the train-master was gone, he ordered Shovel to oil around while he did two or three things which, to an initiated onlooker, might have seemed fairly inexplicable. First he disconnected the airhose between the car and the engine, tying the ends up with a stout cord so that the connection would not seem to be broken. Next he crawled under the naught-seven and deliberately bled the air tank, setting the cock open a mere hair's-breadth so that it would leak slowly but surely until the pressure was entirely gone.

Then he got a hammer and sledge out of the engine tool box, and after hooking up the safety chain couplings between the private car and the 1010, he crippled the points of the hooks with the hammer so that they could not be disengaged without the use of force and the proper tools.

"There ye are, ye ould divil's bandwagon," he said, apostrophizing the private car when his work was done. 'Ye'll ride this night where Patsy Callahan dhrives, an' be dommed to ye."

Meanwhile the train-master had reached the iron grille at the other end of the long track platform. At a small wicket used by the station employes and trainmen, Kent was waiting for him.

"Is it all right, M'Tosh? Will he do it?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, Patsy's game for it; I knew he would be. He'd put his neck in a rope to spite the major. But it's a crazy thing, Mr. Kent."

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"Is it all right, M'Tosh? Will he do it?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, Patsy's game for it; I knew he would be. He'd put his neck in a rope to spite the major. But it's a crazy thing, Mr. Kent."

"I know it; but if it will give me twenty-four hours—"

"It won't. They can't get home on our line because we'll be tied up. But they can get the naught-seven put on the overland limited at A. & T. Junction, and that will put them back here before you've had time to turn around twice. Have they come down yet?"

"No," said Kent; and just then he saw Loring coming in from the street entrance and went to meet him.

"I have the final word from Boston," said the ex-manager, when he had walked Kent out of earshot of the train takers. "Your terms are accepted—with all sorts of safeguards thrown about the 'no cure, no pay' proviso; also with a distinct repudiation of you and your scheme if there is anything unlawful afoot. Do you still think it best to keep me in the dark as to what you are doing?"

"Yes; there are enough of us involved, as it stands. You couldn't help; and you might hinder. Besides, if the mine should happen to explode in our direction it'll be a comfort to have a foot-loose friend or two on the outside to pick up the pieces of us."

Loring was polishing his eye-glasses with uncommon vigor.

"I wish you'd drop it, David, if it isn't too late. I can't help feeling as if I had prodded you into it, whatever it is."

Kent linked arms with him and led him back to the street entrance.

"Go away, Grantham, and don't come back again," he commanded. "Then you can swear truthfully that you didn't know anything about it. It is too late to interfere, and you are not responsible for me. Go up to see Portia; she'll keep you interested while you wait."

When Loring was gone, Kent went back to the wicket in the grille; but M'Tosh, who was always a busy man at train time, had disappeared again.

It was a standing mystery to the train-master, and to the rank and file, why Receiver Guilford had elected to ignore the fact that he was within three hours of a strike which promised to include at least four-fifths of his operatives; had taken no steps for defense, and had not confided, as it appeared, in the members of his own official staff.

But Kent was at no loss to account for the official silence. If the secret could be kept for a few hours longer, the junta would unload the Transwestern, strike, tie-up and general demoralization, upon an unsuspecting Overland management.

None the less, there were other things unexplainable even to Kent; for one, this night flitting to Gaston to put the finishing touches on an edifice of fraud which had been builded shamelessly in the light of day.

Kent had not the key to unlock this door of mystery; but here the master spirit of the junta was doing, not what he would, but what he could. The negotiations for the lease had consumed much time at a crisis when time was precious. Judge MacFarlane had to be recalled and once more bullied into subjection; and Falkland, acting for the Plantagould interest, had insisted upon some formal compliance with the letter of the law.

Bucks had striven masterfully to drive and not be driven; but the delays were inexorable, and the impending strike threatened to turn the orderly charge into a rout. The Governor had postponed the coup from day to day, waiting upon the leisurely movements of Falkland; and at the end of the ends there remained but three hours of the final day of grace when the telegram came from Falkland with the welcome news that the Overland officials were on their way from Midland City to keep the appointment in Gaston.

Of all this Kent knew nothing, and was anxious in just proportion as the minutes elapsed and the time for the departure of the east-bound express drew near. For the success of the desperate venture turned upon this: that the receiver's special must leave ahead of the passenger train. With the express blocking the way the difficulties became insurmountable.

Kent was still standing at the trainmen's wicket when Callahan sent the private car gently up to the trackhead of track eight. M'Tosh had been telephoning again, and the receiver and his party were on the way to the station.

"I was afraid you'd have to let the express go first," said Kent, when the train-master came his way again. "How much time have we?"

"Five minutes more; and they are on the way down—there they come."

Kent looked and saw a group of six men making for the nearest exit in the grille. Then he smote his fist into his palm.

"Damn!" he muttered; "they've got the vice president of the Overland with them! That's bad."

"It's bad for Mr. Callafield," growled M'Tosh. "We're in too deep now to back down on his account."

Kent moved nearer and stood in the shadow of the gate-keeper's box, leaving M'Tosh, who was on the track platform, free to show himself. From his new point of espial Kent checked off the members of the party. When Major Guilford left it to come back for a word with M'Tosh, there were five others; the Governor, his private secretary, Hawk, Halkett, the general superintendent, and the Overland's vice president.

"All ready, M'Tosh?" said the receiver.

"Ready and waiting, Major," was the bland reply.

"Who is our engineer?"

"Patrick Callahan."

"That wild Irishman? The Governor says he'd as soon ride behind the devil."

"Callahan will get you there," said the train-master, with deliberate emphasis. Then he asked a question of his own. "Is Mr. Callafield going with you?"

"No. He came down to see us off. How is the fast mail to-night?"

"She's just in— an hour and thirty-five minutes late."

The major swore pathetically. He was of the generation of railway officials, happily fast passing, which cursed and swore itself into authority.

"That's another $500 forfeit to the Postoffice Department! Who's taking it west?"

"Tischer."

"Give him orders to cut out all the stops. If he is more than fifty-five minutes late at Bighorn he can come in and get his time."

Tischer had just got the word to go, and was pulling out on the yard main line.

"I'll catch him with the wire at yard limits," said M'Tosh. Then: "Would you mind hurrying your people a little, major? The express is due to leave."

Guilford was a heavy man for his weight, and he waddled back to the others, waving his arms as a signal for them to board the car.

Kent saw the vice president of the Overland Short Line shake hands with Bucks and take his leave, and was so intent upon watching the tableau of departure that he failed to notice the small boy in Western Union blue who was trying to thrust a telegram, damp from the copying rolls, into his hand.

"It's a rush, sir," said the boy, panting from his quick dash across the track platforms.

It was Ormsby's message from Breezeland; and while Kent was trying to grasp the tremendous import of it, M'Tosh was giving Callahan the signal to go. Kent sprang past the gate-keeper and gave the square of damp paper to the train-master.

"My God! read that!" he gasped, with a dry sob of excitement. "It was our chance—one chance in a million—and we've lost it!"

M'Tosh was a man for a crisis. The red tail lights of the private car special were yet within a sprinter's dash of the trackhead, but the train-master lost no time chasing a ten-wheel flyer with "Red" Callahan at the throttle.

"Up to my office!" he shouted; and ten seconds later Kent was leaning breathless over the desk in the despatcher's room while M'Tosh called Durgan over the yard limits telephone.

"Is that you, Durgan?" he asked, when the reply came. Then: "Drop the board on the mail, quick! and send somebody to tell Tischer to side track, leaving the main line Western Division clear. Got that?"

The answer was evidently prompt and satisfactory, since he began again almost in the same breath.

"Now go out yourself and flag Callahan before he reaches the limits. Tell him the time card's changed and he is to run west with the special to Megilp as first section of the mail—no stops, or Tischer will run him down. Leg it! He's half way down the yard now!"

The train-master dropped the earpiece of the telephone and crossed quickly to the despatcher's table.

"Orders for the Western Division, Donohue," he said curtly, "and don't let the grass grow. 'Receiver's car, Callahan, engineer, runs to Megilp as first section of fast mail. Fast mail—Hunt, conductor; Tischer, engineer—runs to the end of the division without stop, making up all time possible.' Add to that last, 'By order of the receiver.'"

The orders were sent as swiftly as the despatcher could rattle them off on his key; and then followed an interval of waiting more terrible than a battle. Kent tried to speak, but his lips were parched and his tongue was like a dry stick between his teeth. What was doing in the lower yard? Would Durgan fail at the pinch and mismanage it so as to give the alarm? The minutes dragged leaden-winged, and even the sounders on the despatcher's table were silent.

Suddenly the clicking began again. The operator at "yard limits" was sending the O. K. to the two train orders. So far, so good. Now if Callahan could get safely out on the Western Division.

But there was a hitch in the lower yard. Durgan had obeyed his orders promptly and precisely, and had succeeded in stopping Callahan at the street crossing where Engineer Dixon had killed the farmer. Durgan climbed to the cab of the 1010 and the changed plan was explained in a dozen words. But now came the crux.

"If I stand here till you'd be bringin' me my orders, I'll have the whole kit av thim buzzin' round to know fwhat's the matther," said Callahan; but there was no other thing to do, and Durgan hurried back to the telegraph office to play the messenger.

He was too long about it. Before he got back Halkett was under the cab window of the 1010, demanding to know—with many objurgations—why Callahan had stopped in the middle of the yards.

"Get a move on you!" he shouted. "The express is right behind us, and it'll run us down, you damned bog-trotter!"

Callahan's gauntleted hand shot up to the throttle bar.

"I'm lavin', Misther Halkett," he said mildly. "Will yez go back to the car or ride wit' me?"

The general superintendent took no chance of catching the naught-seven's hand rails in the darkness, and he whipped up into the cab at the first sharp cough of the exhaust.

"I'll go back when you stop for your orders," he said; but a shadowy figure had leaped upon the engine step a scant half-second behind him, and Callahan was stuffing the crumpled copy of the order into the sweat-band of his cap. The next instant the big 1010 leaped forward like a blooded horse under an unmerited cut of the whip, slid past the yard limits telegraph office and shot out upon the main line of the western division.

"Sit down, Misther Halkett, an' make yerself aisy!" yelled Callahan across the cab. "'Tis small use Jimmy Shovel'll have for his box this night."

"Shut off, you Irish madman!" was the shouted command. "Don't you see you're on the wrong division?"

Callahan gave the throttle-bar another outward hitch, tipped his seat and took a hammer from the tool box.

"I know where I'm goin', an' that's more thin you know, ye blandhandering divil! Up on that box wit' you, an' kape out av Jimmy Shovel's road, or I'll be the death av yez! Climb, now!"

It was at this moment that the tense strain of suspense was broken in the despatcher's room on the second floor of the Union station. The telephone skirled joyously, and the train-master snatched up the ear piece.

"What does he say?" asked Kent.

"It's all right. He says Callahan is out on the western division, with Tischer chasing him according to programme. Halkett's in the cab of the 1010 with Patsy and—hold on— By George! he says one of them jumped the car as it was passing the limits station!"

"Which one was it?" asked Kent; and he had to wait till the reply came from Durgan.

"It was Hawk, the right-of-way man. He broke and ran for the nearest electric car line the minute he hit the ground, Durgan says. Does he count?"

"No," said Kent; but it is always a mistake to underrate an enemy's caliber—even that of his small arms.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The Night of Alarms.

If Editor Hildreth had said nothing in his evening edition about the impending strike on the Transwestern, it was not because public interest was waning. For a fortnight the newspapers in the territory tributary to the road had been full of strike talk, and Hillreth had said his say, deprecating the threatened appeal to force as fearlessly as he condemned the mismanagement which was provoking it.

But it was Kent who was responsible for the dearth of news on the eve of the event. Early in the morning of the last day of the month he had sought out the editor and begged him to close the columns of the Evening Argus to strike news, no matter what should come in during the course of the day.

"I can't go into the reasons as deeply now as I hope to a little later," he had said, his secretive habit holding good to the final fathom of the slipping hawser of events, "But you must bear with me once more, and whatever you hear between now and the time you go to press don't comment on it. I have one more chance to win out, and it hangs in a balance that a feather's weight might tip the wrong way. I'll be with you between 10 and 12 to-night, and you can safely save two columns of the morning paper for the sensation I'm going to give you."

It was in fulfillment of this promise that Kent bestirred himself after he had sent a wire to Ormsby, and M'Tosh had settled down to the task of smoothing Callahan's way westward over a division already twitching in the preliminary rigor of the strike convulsion.

"I am going to set the fuse for the newspaper explosion," he said to his ally. "Barring accidents, there is no reason why we shouldn't begin to figure definitely upon the result, is there?"

M'Tosh was leaning over Despatcher Donohue's shoulder. He had slipped Donohue's fingers aside from the key to cut in with a peremptory "G. S." order suspending, in favor of the fast mail, the rule which requires a station operator to drop his board on a following section that is less than ten minutes behind its file leader.

"The fun is beginning," said the train-master. "Tischer has his tip from Durgan to keep Callahan's taillights in sight. With the mail treading on their heels the gentlemen in the naught-seven will be chary about pulling Patsy down too suddenly in mid career. They have just passed Morning Dew, and the operator reports Tischer for disregarding his slow signal."

"Can't you fix that?" asked Kent.

"Oh, yes; that is one of the things I can fix. But there are going to be plenty of others."

"Still we must take something for granted, Mr. M'Tosh. What I have to do uptown won't wait until Callahan has finished his run. I thought the main difficulty was safely overcome."

"Umph!" said the train-master; "the troubles are barely getting themselves born. You must remember that we swapped horses at the last minute. We were ready for the race to the east. Everybody on the prairie division had been notified that a special was to go through to-night without stop from Lesterville to A. & T. Junction."

"Well?"

"Now we have it all to straighten out by wire on another division; meeting points to make, slow trains to side-track, fool operators to hold down; all on the dizzy edge of a strike that is making every man on the line lose his balance. But you go ahead with your newspaper business. I'll do what a man can here. And if you come across that right-of-way agent, I wish you'd make it a case of assault and battery and get him locked up. I'm leery about him."

Kent went his way dubiously reflective. In the moment of triumph, when Durgan had announced the success of the bold change in the programme, he had made light of Hawk's escape. But now he saw possibilities. True, the junta was leaderless for the moment, and Bucks had no very able lieutenants. But Hawk would give the alarm; and there was the rank and file of the machine to reckon with. And