

"There isn't any Walton in Massachusetts!"

"Are you sure Kitty?"

"Sure—of course I am sure! I looked it up in two different atlases. There are fifteen Waltons, but none of them in Massachusetts, and it was written quite plain—M-a-s-s."

"By George," I exclaimed, "it does look black, does n't it?"

"It could n't be worse, Hartley—it simply could n't."

"It was foolish of you not to have had it out with Viola—not to have nipped it in the bud the moment you suspected this fellow."

KITTY is a soft, round, helpless little person, and she looked softer, rounder and more helpless than ever as I reproached her.

"I—I tried to," she quavered.

"Yet you allowed this man to come up with you on the train?"

"I—I could n't help that," she whimpered, with suffusing eyes. "I could n't stop him buying a ticket, could I?"

"You ought to have asserted yourself. Any woman—any mother—with the slightest sense and knowledge of the world, would have asserted herself."

"I—I tried to," she wailed.

"Even a chicken will fight for its young," I went on angrily. "Even a worm will fight for its wormlets; yet you meekly tolerated this scamp, this valet may-be, this possible bigamist and scoundrel, and could n't think of doing anything more than wringing your hands."

"I—I was afraid of Viola," she gasped out through her sobs. "She acts as though she were engaged to him and does n't allow me to open my mouth. It's all very well to talk about c-c-chickens, but what could I do?"

I thought for a while in silence, puffing hard at my cigar.

"He is at the Fourth Avenue Hotel," I said at last. "I'll drop in on Mr. Cobb tomorrow and then we'll see what he has to say to the man of the family."

Kitty looked up gratefully.

"Oh, what a comfort you are, Hartley," she exclaimed. "I was trying to nerve myself all the time

to send for you, but I just could n't. Yes, that's the best thing—for you to see him, and take that attitude—the man of the family and all that. I can't help thinking he is some dreadful kind of impostor."

"I'll know for sure tomorrow," I said. "I'll know tomorrow if I have to stand him on his head."

I judged it wiser not to telephone beforehand. Forewarning such an ambiguous young man might result in his keeping out of my way. I got to the hotel a little after midday, and made up my mind to remain there until I had cornered Mr. Cobb. On going to the desk to inquire for the number of his room the clerk stopped me smilingly before I was half through.

"Oh, if it's Mr. Cobb you want," he said, "he is right over there in that chair."

Sure enough there was my man, with his long legs stretched out, and a neglected morning paper in his lap. Even in his careless attitude he looked a very presentable young fellow, and I noticed the excellent cut of his clothes, as well as his pleasant, unconcerned expression. I had a sudden misgiving that I might be making a fool of myself, and rapidly edited the remarks with which I had intended opening the engagement. But before going over to him, I asked to have a glance at the register, and suddenly bristled with renewed suspicion as I read the entry: *Montgomery J. Cobb, Walton, Mass.* I had already confirmed the fact that there was no Walton, Mass.

"I beg your pardon," I began, as suavely as I was able, "I am Mr. Hartley Williams—Mrs. Trudell's brother—whom perhaps you will recall meeting last night."

MR. COBB sprang up and shook hands with the most unruffled assurance. Indeed, assurance was evidently this young man's long suit. It was only in his eyes—those blue, rather protuberant eyes—that I could detect the least hint of discomposure.

"I am a business man," I said, "and you will excuse me if I come to the point without any preambles or beating about the bush?"

He nodded amiably.

"Circumstances demand that I should know something about you," I continued. "A frank understanding between us would help materially."

"Help what?" he inquired.

The subdued impertinence of the remark nettled me, but I managed to restrain my temper.

"You have been paying very pronounced attention to my niece," I said. "As her uncle and guardian,—and as much as I dislike this unpleasant task—it is my duty to learn something about you."

"Miss Trudell is a most charming young lady," he observed, "and while it is true I admire her I scarcely think you are justified in calling my attentions pronounced."

"I have it from her mother," I said.

"Mrs. Trudell is a most charming lady," he went on with the same exasperating blandness. "I would not for anything in the world cast the slightest reflection on Mrs. Trudell, whom I admire and respect; but in holding me up in this fashion she—"

"Nobody is holding you up," I

interrupted warmly. "I simply mean that a continued acquaintance is impossible unless you inform us who you are and where you come from. If you are a gentleman you can have no possible reason for withholding such information, which you ought not to put us in the position of insisting upon."

"The word insist is a very disagreeable one," he said, as imperturbably as ever, shaking the ash from his cigarette.

"So is the word adventurer," I retorted, now quite angry. "A man whose only address is a non-existent town in Massachusetts has only himself to thank if he inspires a certain suspicion."

"I am forced to agree with you," he remarked, with an air of sharing my point of view, and looking long and earnestly at his brilliantly polished shoes. "I am forced to agree with you; I admit it frankly."

"And is this how the matter is going to rest?" I demanded, after a considerable pause.

"It can rest any way it pleases," he replied, awakening from a sort of brown study. "My private affairs are my own business, and if you can not bring yourself to take me on trust I am afraid our brief acquaintance will have to end."

"All our acquaintance will have to end," I said, with a marked stress on the first word. "Even my niece, I think, will appreciate the need of that."

I THOUGHT his smile wavered for a moment as his shoes again engrossed his entire attention; he was plainly less easy than he would have me believe.

"It's too bad," he remarked finally in an aggrieved voice. "If I could explain I would—only the truth is I can't."

"Then you will kindly keep away from my family until you can," I said. "A man can do without a toothbrush, and he can do without socks, but he has to have antecedents."

"Well, I'll agree to one thing," he said, recovering his smiling effrontery. "I'll agree to keep away from you all you like."

I swallowed the insult in silence, though inwardly I was boiling. Then I rose quietly, and without raising my voice or departing from an ordinary conversational tone, said: "You have told me very little, but I have learned all I want to know. You are evidently a sharper and a rascal, and if you continue this impudent courtship of my niece, I shall take some very effectual means to squeeze you. Good day, sir, good day!"

With that I turned on my heel and left him, with a disconcerting sense of having got the worst of it.

That feeling increased during the next few days when I heard he was a constant caller at Kitty's apartment, and that Viola and he were going out together almost every afternoon or evening. Protesting to Kitty seemed absolutely useless; she would agree to everything I said, and then do nothing; I would put words into her mouth to say to Mr. Cobb, and then, when he came, she dared not say them. I gathered, however, that she had had some violent passages with Viola in private, with no results save sullenness and resentment.

Viola, who knew mighty well what I thought about it all, showed a remarkable adroitness in eluding me. She was always just going out, or having a letter to write, or a pressing engagement with Isobel Latimer whenever I tried to pin her down for that lecture she was so plainly dreading. One day, after a week had gone by in this manner, I lost all patience with her. As she was about to flutter away in a whirlwind of animation and excuses, I put my back to the door and smilingly held her prisoner.

"We have to have a talk about Mr. Cobb," I said, "and we are going to have it right now."

"Oh, but Uncle Hartley," she pleaded, "I can't, I can't! I haven't a moment to spare—truly I have n't. I have a dress-fitting at Estelle's, and I am already ten minutes late."

"I am a week late," I said. "A week late trying to see you, and always getting put off. For once your engagements will have to give way to the claims of a wild and woolly uncle. I've got a lot to say, and you've got a lot to hear."

APPRECIATING that I was in earnest, she sat down, but with a flash of her eyes and a mutinous tightening of her lips that boded ill for my long-deferred interview. She was a pretty girl in her way, with masses of fair hair and a trim, nice figure; I had always credited her with an affectionate disposition as well until I ventured to lay hands on Mr. Cobb.

"Let's get it over with," she said, fidgeting in her seat. "As my uncle (Continued on Page 8)



I saw Viola coming toward me ahead of the stream of passengers