THE MAN HIGHER UP

By HENRY RUSSELL MILLER

"MacPherson"—Bob pointed to the crowded gallery—"you see that crowd

"GET OUT OF THIS CHAMBER!"

If I were to give the word they would tear you to pieces. That crowd means business. I won't give them the word, but unless you go, and now, I'll throw you out. I won't answer for what happens after that."

MacPherson began what was meant to be a defiant reply. "You dare lay one finger on me"—

He got no further. He saw Bob's big hand shoot out toward him, felt a grip like a steel vise clutch his shoulder.

MacPherson turned tail and ran, slinking out of the hall amid unbroken silence.

Bob turned to the councilmen.

"Now, then, beat that ordinance," he said quietly.

So the ordinance was defeated. Some days later a new ordinance, drawn up under Bob's direction, was introduced. In due time it passed, was signed and accepted by the gas company.

The night after Bob's victory 50,000 of the Steel City's best citizens paraded before his home and cheered him as the next governor.

The cheering thousands marched on, leaving the quiet street to return to its wonted dingy calm. Kathleen, proud and rejoicing, sought Bob in his library. The man in whose honor a great city had made holiday sat before the fire in an attitude of complete dejection.

"Bob," she cried tremulously, "what is it?"

"Nothing, Kathleen," he said in a tired voice—"nothing that matters much. I haven't meant to trouble you with my moods."

"And tonight, with all these people showing you their love and pride in you—when you have deserved it so well—when you should be only proud and happy—I find you here—so?" Her voice almost broke.

"Don't!" He shrank from her praise as he never shrank from a physical blow. "That's what hurts tonight. I have not deserved their kindness. I have done so little—nothing!"

"Nothing! It means nothing to you to have stood between nearly a million people and injustice?"

"But I didn't do that," he insisted, with weary patience. "What has been done the people did themselves. All I did was to veto a bill any clever politician would have vetoed as a matter of policy and to pull off a shallow, theatrical trick that, after all, probably wasn't necessary. They forget all the evil and remember only the little good. But I can't. And tonight they have made me feel small and mean."

"Small and mean! Bob, will you never learn to know yourself? I"—her voice broke in a little laugh that was near to tears—"I'd like to shake you!"

He smiled. "I wish you would, Kathleen. That's the only way I can learn, it seems, by having the truth shaken, pounded, into me."

Tears came to her eyes. "Ah, don't think I don't know what this long year has been to you!" she said pityingly. "You were always cruel to yourself, driving yourself mercilessly. Haven't I seen your heartache? I know how you have counted on finding Paul and remaking his life and how bitter the disappointment has been. And," she rushed on, though she knew his soul was writhing at being thus laid bare, "I know about her. Bob, give over your self inflicted punishment. Go to her and take happiness—for both of you."

"Not that," he said sternly. She knew that the sternness was for the hope within him that would not die. "That can never be."

"But it can be. She loves you."

"Do you suppose I could seek happiness while Paul Remington's life is spoiled because I drove him into temptations he couldn't resist? I might have made him strong, a good man, but never by word or act did I teach him anything but selfishness and hypocrisy. If I were to shirk my punishment I'd be a contemptible coward. My punishment is just—exactly the penalty a just God would devise. I'm not whining."

"You poor, elemental child!" she exclaimed pityingly. "What are you—what is any of us—in God's scheme of things that our punishment should be so important?"

Bob looked at her, even in his fanatical self torture startled by the new thought.

She rose to leave him. "Duty ought to mean happiness, and you get nothing but a useless misery out of it. I thought you had found yourself. But you haven't. You have still one lesson to learn—faith. If I had not faith I shouldn't want to live. I couldn't be happy."

"Yes; you are happy. And yet," he said slowly—"and yet I have sometimes fancied that you have had your heartache."

"Yes; I am happy," she said, and her face glowed. "I am happy. I'd hate to be so small as to be unhappy merely because God hasn't arranged everything to my liking."

She left him.

"If only I could find him—if only I could find him!" he cried to himself.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PRODIGAL.

A WESTBOUND express train was rattling down the mountains. It was early spring even among the hills. A man on the train, dividing his attention between the panorama without and the fretful child on his knee, to his surprise discovered in a flickering inward glow a feeble response to the life without. He was going home, with fear and little hope in his heart, yet he caught himself counting the mileposts with growing eagerness as the train swung around the hills.

"The eternal witchery of spring," he murmured to himself, "filling our hearts with life and hope—false hope sometimes."

The train stopped. A newsboy came aboard, crying the evening papers. A passenger who occupied the seat in front of the man with the child bought one.

"I see Murchell's dying," he remarked to his neighbor across the aisle. "A big loss to this state!"

"Not so big as if we didn't have McAdoo," returned the other.

"That's true. They're turning their guns on him already too. Revived that old nomination story. For my part I don't believe it."

"I do believe it, but I don't care. I'd have done the same under the circumstances. A lot of people will care, though. Funny about us Americans—the occasional slip up of a good man cuts a bigger figure with us than the continual crimes of a really dishonest one. He'll be governor, though."

The train started, and the man with the child lost the answer. He shrank back in his chair. "How can I go back? How can they let me? O God, keep my courage alive!"

When the train stopped he alighted, quaking inwardly. He took a cab, fearing the curious eyes of the street car passengers. He need not have feared. The people of that city had long since cast him out of their memories.

They turned into a familiar, quiet street. The prodigal's limbs were shaking so that he could hardly hold the child. His heart beat painfully. Wild thoughts of leaving the baby on the doorstep and fleeing rushed through his brain. The cab stopped. The passenger, shivering, got out.

He walked slowly up the gravel path leading to the porch. He could see into the brightly lighted library. He knew every little detail of that room. He remembered that once in that room he had sworn to be true whatever might come.

To the long French window came a woman, her figure silhouetted against the bright light of the lamps. He recognized Kathleen. She was looking out at him.

She opened the door, gazing gravely at the bearded, sallow faced man who stared at her strangely.

"Do you wish to see Mr. McAdoo? He's out of the city just now."

"Kathleen!" he cried in a strange, croaking voice. "Don't you know me?"

"Paul!" Doubt, amazement, joy, voiced themselves in the word, and welcome shone in her eyes as a harbor light to the storm driven seafarer.

"I bring you a responsibility, Kathleen." He held out the child.

"We welcome responsibilities here," she answered happily. She held out her arms for the baby.

"Wait! She is my sister's child. Her father's name I don't know. She has no right to be in the world. She is cursed from her birth. Will you take her?"

"All the more for that reason!"

She took the child from him, cuddling it close to her heart.

"Come in, Paul! Don't stand there! Don't you know you have come home?"

He followed her into the library. The warm, cozy room seemed to enfold him, to welcome him. He sank into a chair, burying his face in his hands.

"Kathleen, I can't help it. I don't want to leave—to run away out into the loneliness again. Do you think he will let me stay?"

"Have you any doubt?" She faced him proudly. "Then you don't know our Bob!"

"It wasn't easy, Kathleen—I was so ashamed—but it was very lonely."

"But all that is ended, Paul."

Sometimes life throws the prodigal a line. In Paul's case the line was his sister, another astray under the curse of inherited temperament, whom he had found dying and hugging to her heart a child of passion.

"She died. But I made those last weeks easier for her, I think. That should count for something—do you think so, Kathleen?"

"That should count for a great deal, Paul."

"If only I could be of some use to him! I'd like to be." The humility sat strangely on Paul.

"Ah, I see you don't understand. He needs all the help all of us can give. For William Murchell is dying, and Bob must take his place."

"He has risen high. I am glad." And she saw that he was sincere. He sat up suddenly, with a despairing cry:

"Kathleen, it's not possible! I can't stay. I can't help him. I can only hurt him. Don't you see, I'll be a reminder to him and to every one of what must be forgotten—that thing—his shame?"

"But you don't understand," she cried. "What others think doesn't count. He has never denied it, partly, I think, because he wouldn't shame you before the people. As for him, it wasn't his shame. He wasn't guilty."

"He—wasn't—guilty!"

Then to the bewildered Paul she told the story of the convention as she had had it from Haggin.

It was long before he answered. His hands and face twitched continuously. Evidently his nerves were gone. It was not easy, the thing required of him.

At last he opened his eyes. "It's the only thing to do."

She guessed what was in his mind. "He would never ask it, Paul."

"Let us call Haggin and do it. Now—tonight—while my courage lasts."

Carrying the baby, she left him alone in the library. When she returned, after many minutes, she had left the child asleep in the motherly arms of Norah.

Paul was lying in the chair in the same attitude as when she had left him, his eyes closed. He opened his eyes and looked up at her questioningly.

"They are coming now," she answered. Then she added abruptly, almost sharply, "Paul, it's only fair to you to tell you that—that Bob and Mrs. Gilbert"— She stopped as abruptly as she had begun.

He made no answer, and after awhile she continued gently:

"Is there any reason why they shouldn't be happy—as men and women want to be happy, Paul?"

Again it was a long time before he answered in a voice that was very tired: "There is no reason. All that is dead. It has no right to live, Kathleen."

In her heart she was crying jealously to her secret, "It's the last thing I can do for him!" Aloud she said:

"You must tell him that too."

He did not notice that her voice was sharp and constrained. He was watching the fires of a real suffering burning out the last vestige of the self that had been Paul Remington.

When Bob came home the two men met quietly. What was said then need not be set down here, but a new footing was established. Thereafter many things were ignored by them. Paul went on the staff of Bob's newspaper. The Bugle's editorials are often quoted in other newspapers of note.

Many have often tried to imitate them in vain, perhaps because they breathe a spirit that cannot be simulated convincingly. He is no longer a public figure in the Steel City. Few now remember his sensational disavowal of McAdoo, fewer still his equally sensational amende. Sometimes there have been struggles with a burning appetite. At such times he has fled to Kathleen. He tells her it is she who has conquered.

Both Kathleen and Paul are happy. At least they have achieved content.

The train that whirled Paul toward the Steel City was passed by another bearing Mayor McAdoo to the death bed of a man who had come very close to him.

Bob saw much of Murchell during the two years following the Steel City mayoralty election. He came to feel a mighty admiration and affection for the great general who had created a new political era, who had shackled a nation to the service of a vast, voracious system, who had lifted at least one nonentity to the president's chair and who in the last years of his life was struggling to undo the work of his prime.

"When a man reaches his threescore years and ten," Murchell said to him one day, "he has learned that the evil or good a man does concerns himself least of all. The balance must remain heavily against me. I must strive not to atone, but to make the way ready for other men who will undo what I have done."

Murchell's lofty self ignoring gave him an example that he strove to emulate.

Many other things of less abstract kind he learned from the master. Murchell revealed to him the secret intricate inner workings of the vast machine that gripped the state as in a vise. It was not all pretty. More than once he saw rebellious bosses enter the presence of the master to leave shaking, stunned by the knowledge that they were inextricably in the power of a man who seemed to know everything. Many things Murchell and Bob did of which they said naught to the gentle Dunmeade that they might save his heart from burning.

Gradually Bob came to understand, too, why the secrets and sources of Murchell's power were revealed to him. He was being prepared to take [illegible] place. Upon [illegible] Dunmeade, the master's mantle was to fall.

And now Murchell was dying.

Bob knew as the train bore him swiftly to the east that he was going to assume that mantle.

Years before "I will be master of the state before I die!" ambition had cried.

Now he said, "I am not yet forty, and I am master of the state."

Master of the state! He had dreamed of power. Now power, tremendous, far reaching, almost unlimited power, would be his if he could retain what Murchell would very soon place in his hands.

"I can! I will!" His teeth clinched, his muscles tightened in the stress of his determination. "I will be true to my trust. I will use my power for the good of this people. So help me God!"

His words were a prayer, not an oath. There was no exultation in his heart, neither was there humility. Self was forgotten. His task loomed large before him, self obliterating, filling his horizon as he hurried toward the governor's mansion. In the library some one was playing the piano very softly, the gentle, soothing chords lingering in the air. Thither the servant showed Bob.

On the threshold Bob halted sharply. Death, power, battle, were in an instant swept from his mind. His heart leaped convulsively.

The player's back was toward him. She did not notice his entrance. He did not move, lest he might disturb her. Then her voice rose, full and clear and plaintive in a song that not all the street pianos in the world can rob of its appeal. Bob listened in rapt attention. Once before he had heard her sing that song, on the night when, on that very spot, he had dealt her the cruelest blow a man could give a woman.

At the last line her voice shook slightly; once it faltered.

"To kiss the cross, sweetheart—to kiss the cross."

The last long quivering note died away. She turned and arose to face him. For a long minute they regarded each other unwaveringly. It had been two years and more since they had met, these two whose lives had so strangely crossed. They had been constantly in each other's minds, in each other's hearts. Each saw that the years had wrought changes in the other.

Every time he had seen her her beauty had struck him anew. It was so different from that of the few women he knew. But he had loved best to remember her as he had last seen her, when she had come to him in the days of his sickness. How often, during the long months, in the secrecy of his room he had opened the book of his memory to look upon her standing there before him, her startled eyes answering the love in his. Now, in this sudden meeting, the picture he had carried seemed to him woefully inadequate. She was even more slender than before, yet less fragile. Her face

"TO KISS THE CROSS—SWEETHEART, TO KISS THE CROSS!"

was marked by a new gentleness, a new patience and withal a new strength that made her to Bob's eyes beautiful beyond dreams.

She, too, saw a change. He was the same stalwart figure as before, yet a slight stoop had come into the big shoulders. Streaks of gray were in his hair. The thin, strongly marked, ascetic face was the same and yet not the same; the bold arrogance, the look of the all conquering viking, was gone. In its place had come the quiet matured strength of the man who has proved himself and the great kindliness of a strong man who has suffered without hardening.

Under his steady regard she trembled. She tried to take her eyes from his, but could not. She knew that in that moment of silence they were saying what must not be said. She tried to speak, to break the spell.

To be continued.