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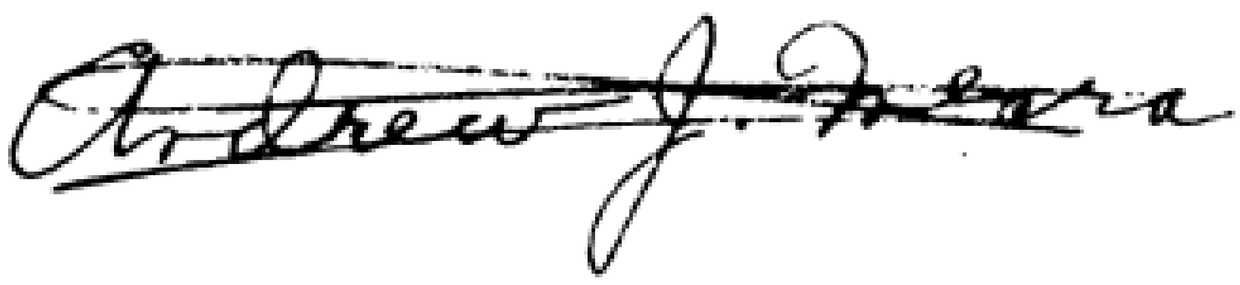

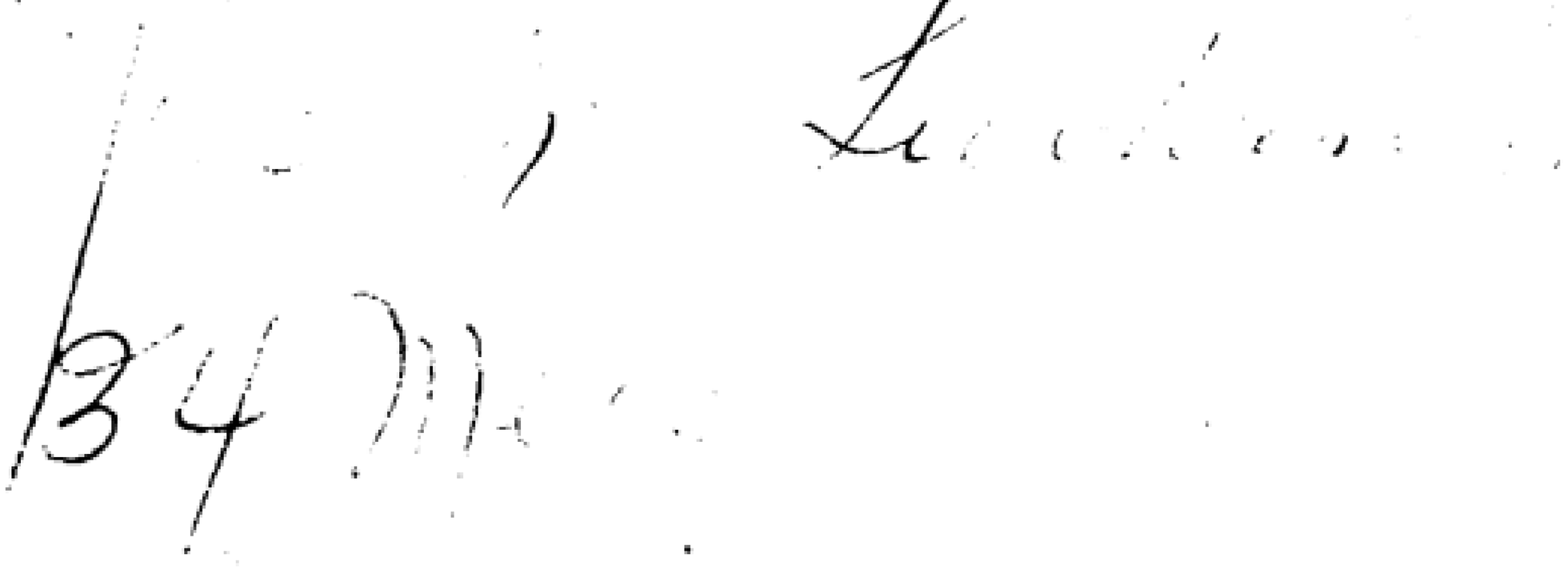

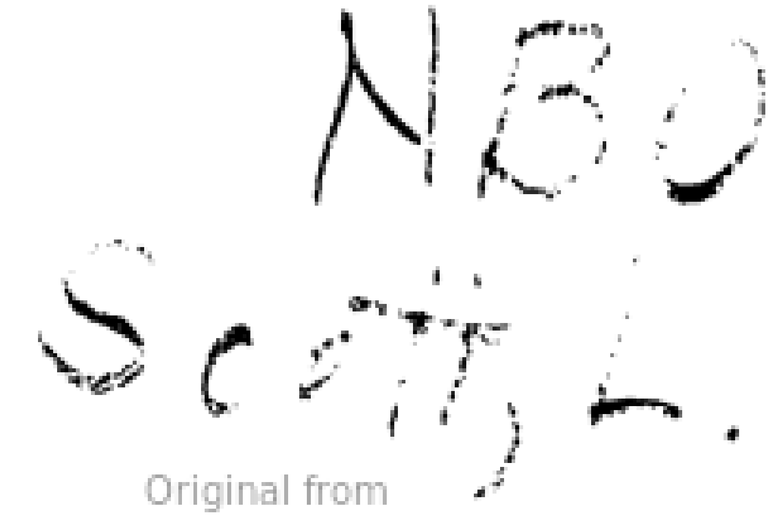

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Mary Regan

BY LEROY SCOTT

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MARY REGAN

CHAPTER I

THE WORLD SITS DOWN TOGETHER

It was opening night of the new bill at the Grand Alcazar; and Clifford, as he waited alone at a little table for his host, almost unconsciously searched through the great restaurant of black-and-gold for Mary Regan — just as, almost unconsciously, he had been seeking her wherever he had been during the six months of agreed-upon silence since they had parted. He did not expect to see her here, hence felt no disappointment when his roving eyes did not come upon her. She had said she would write when she had thought it all out, and when she was ready to see him. Six months was a long time, but he believed in her word — and still waited, not once having sought to penetrate that utter privacy which she had asserted to be for her, at that time, life's prime essential. But though keeping his word, he had often been impatient, and had often wondered.

Meditatively Clifford glanced over this great crowd of well-dressed diners. For him they were a vivid concentration, a cross-section, of life: of life as he, in his philosophy, and in the pursuit of his

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profession, had come to see it. Here were millionaires, many of them having made their easeful fortunes by dubious operations which shrewd counsel had steered just within the law; here were young men of moderate means, spending recklessly; here were society women of the younger and smarter set, with their escorts, sowing the seeds, though they dreamed it not, of possible scandal and possible blackmail; here were members of that breed of humans who are known as "sporting men"; here were the most finished types of professional crooks, many accompanied by the finished women of their own kind, but here and there with them a girl who had no idea of the manner of man with whom she ate and drank, and no idea of the end of this her pleasant adventure; and here were respectable mothers and their daughters, who were innocent of what sat at the next table; and here were out-of-town visitors who were visibly excited and exalted by the thought that they were seeing life — New York! — the real New York!

Clifford smiled sadly, rather grimly, to himself. These conglomerate guests were proof of what he had long held: that there was no distinct underworld, no distinct upperworld; that in ideas and personalities the two were always merging. This scene summarized what experience had made the basic idea of Clifford's working philosophy: the great interrelation, the great interdependence, the great *oneness* of all humanity.

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Looking over this mixture of all sorts, in which acquaintance was so easy to make, Clifford thought of the strange dramas that had their beginnings in the Grand Alcazar and establishments of its kind. Thus much had the dancing craze, though now receded from its earliest frenzy, and the practice of dining and eating midnight suppers in the showy restaurants, achieved: it had brought all sorts of persons, so long as they were well dressed, under the same roof and had set them down at the same or adjoining tables. Hardly since time began had that important requisite of great drama been so nearly perfect as in these restaurants — for people of different ideas and interests and moral standards to meet naturally upon a common ground. . . .

A little man, swart of face, his mustache tightly waxed, and in the smartest evening dress that convention permits the male, paused and spoke to Clifford — a gentleman whom most of the patrons of the place knew, if they knew him at all, as Monsieur Le Bain. Though the master of this ornate pleasure palace, he spoke obsequiously.

Clifford liked to see the great little man squirm. "Police trouble you much here?" he asked.

"No, Bob, — I never see a policeman here, except when a captain or an inspector comes in to eat," the great restaurateur said nervously.

"Not like the old days downtown — with their raids — eh, Joe?"

"Nothing of that sort — ever!" And with a quick

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look around that showed he feared some one might have overheard these sentences and guessed what lay behind them, he said something about being needed on his ballroom floor and hurried away.

Clifford watched the famous restaurateur, again smiling grimly. If these people here — the respectable ones at least — knew the record of Joe Gordon (which again was not the name given him at birth), knew from what places and occupations he had made his way to his eminence of foremost host and impresario of prandial entertainment — what a panic there would be! (Or would there be a panic?) Life was certainly strange! — with its emergencies, its juxtapositions, its crossing of threads —strange at least to him who was always seeing behind the scenes. Yes, life was certainly strange! . . .

Clifford's meditations were interrupted by a hearty, "Hello, Bob," and by a large hand gripping one of his.

"Hello, Uncle George. I'd begun to think —"

"Hold on, son," and Clifford's host halted the talk by raising one hand like a traffic policeman and with the other reaching for the dinner card. While the long order was being dictated, Clifford gazed impatiently across at his companion, wondering what this appointment was about. His host was a large man who once might have been bulbous, but who now had deflated little balloons of skin hanging beneath eyes and chin and jaws. His few short gray hairs were divided into two precisely equal por-

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tions; his eyebrows were entirely gone, and of eyelashes he had almost none; his eyes were smallish, gray, cunning, genial. He made Clifford fancy, with those eyes of his so good-naturedly cynical, and with his large, outstanding ears, that here might be a satyr who had forsaken gay forests for city and had at length grown into grandfatherly days.

"Well, now, Uncle George — what's all this about?" Clifford demanded when the order was in.

"Not so fast, son, — not so fast," slowly remonstrated Uncle George, who, as far as Broadway's knowledge went, was no one's Uncle George, but who was known by no other name. "Let's wait until we've packed away some of the freight that waiter's going to bring us." He blinked his lashless lids, and drawled on. "It's been a long time since I've seen you — six months. I just wanted to give you the once over, and ask you how was trade."

"Trade's good — considering."

The old head nodded. "Yes, considering that you're a detective who's on the square. There's not much chance for that sort, son, — not in this here widely advertised Christian civilization of ours. At least, not much chance to make a large private collection of coin."

"I'm not in this primarily to make money. I thought you understood that."

"You sure are a queer guy, son," pronounced the old man. "I've heard you spiel off your ideas — you're not primarily a thief-taker — you're in this

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to help people out of the trouble. A hell of an idea for a detective!"

"You know as well as I do, Uncle George, that most of the people that get into trouble, or seem to be bad — well, they personally are not so much to blame. They've been born and raised in bad conditions — they've never had a chance — have never really been able to tell what was right or wrong, and have never had a chance to choose the right —"

"Come up for air, son, — come up for air," cut in the old man. "Son, that's nice music, but it's all bunk. You're an awful example of what a college education can do to a man. Now you just listen to your Uncle George. You know me — everybody knows me. I've been in about every crooked game known to the human race and the higher animals, including managing shows — and I've never been pinched because I was too clever for the coppers, and the coppers know it, too. I tell you I know life up and down and across the middle — and I tell you that we've all got a streak of crookedness — every damned one of us!"

"If that's so," smiled Clifford, "then why are you always helping crooks?"

"That's just my human cussedness. I've retired from business — I'm one of these gentlemen farmers that have located on Broadway; but I don't like to see any earnest young crook get a raw deal from the coppers, who are the rawest crooks of all." The old man waved his left hand as though brushing such

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conversation aside. "But let's get down to brass tacks — which means you and me. You and Bradley as great friends as ever?"

Despite himself Clifford flushed with chagrin. "Don't try to be funny!"

"And, son, don't be too sore. Bradley was one hell of a guy. He was the cleverest chief of detectives the Police Department ever had."

"And the crookedest!"

"Sure, son, — did n't I tell you us humans were all crooks!" the old man said appeasingly. "But, sure, there never was a crookeder chief of detectives than Bradley. You certainly showed nerve when you started out to get him — and you certainly showed your class when you finally trapped him, publicly, with the goods on. Only —"

"That's it — *only!*" Clifford exclaimed sourly. "It's quite some little word, that *only*."

"Sure — *only*. Son," — and the old man spoke gravely, — "I'm twice as old as you are, but you should know as well as I know that *you really can't get* a copper. I mean a clever copper. Count the big coppers that have really been sent away — the smart boys, I mean — and you'll see you have several fingers left to check up your laundry on. That was grand business you pulled on Bradley, and it showed all New York he was a crook. It was worth doing — God, yes! But I said to myself, as soon as I heard of the swell arrest you had made of him, that a classy guy like Bradley would have himself covered

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and would beat the case when it came to trial. And he sure did beat it!"

"On a technicality!" Clifford was still bitter at the manner in which his old enemy and old superior officer had slipped from what had seemed the sure clutches of the law.

"A technicality, sure. But it got him off, and what more does a crook ever ask for?"

"But he got reinstated in the Police Department!"

"But did n't he retire right afterwards, claiming broken health? And don't you and I know his real reason was that his old game was done for and that the public was wise to him? The big trouble with you, son," the old man declared severely, "is that you want a one hundred per cent victory. The best you can hope for with a guy like Bradley is to split the thing fifty-fifty."

"You seem to admire Bradley a lot!" half growled Clifford.

"I do. I hand it to the guy with brains wherever I meet him."

"I don't see how you can be friends with me, then!"

"You're clever, too, son. You're the only one I've ever figured might beat Bradley in a finish fight. And then you're a queer party, Bob, — you're square," he drawled. "I've traveled up and down this world of he-and-she grafters, shoplifters, safeblowers, and sure-thing business men, and after it all you know it's right pleasant to sit down in the shade of a square guy. And besides, son," he added, "I said I ad-

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mired Bradley because he was clever; I did n't say I liked him as a friend. Now, you, Bob, somehow I like you."

"Thanks, Uncle George." There was a moment's silence. "But that's not what you got me here to tell me."

"Perhaps not, son. But what's the hurry? Queer, ain't it," he meditated, "how all the big cops, when they leave the Police Department, open a private detective agency? I hear Bradley's doing great business since he started out as a private detective."

"Licensed blackmailer — that's what he is!"

"Sure, son, that's what they all are. A client tells a private sleuth secrets, and retains him to get information about some other party — and is held up for a big fee. The sleuth gets the information, and then makes the second party pay by threatening to expose him — second hold-up; and then makes the first client pay again by threatening to expose the original secret — third hold-up. Oh, it's a rich game Bradley's switched into!"

"Once more, Uncle George — that's not what you got me here to tell me."

"Perhaps it's not really so much I've got to tell you. Mebbe it's occurred to you" — meditatively, slowly — "that since the big upset you gave him, Bradley is n't exactly what you might call in love with you."

"Not exactly."

"Well, I heard it from a friend who's got a friend

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who's got a mother-in-law who listens to little birds — and the dope runs that Bradley is out to square matters with you."

Clifford nodded. He had expected something of the sort.

"Did this little bird relay any information as to just what Bradley was going to do?"

"None that got to me. But, son, I'd keep my eyes pointed in all directions, and be careful of the friends I made, and be careful of the cases I got drawn into. It may be a long time coming, and God only knows in what direction it'll come from. Bradley knows how to handle people so they never know they're being handled — and he's likely to hit you through almost any one. Look out, son. This is serious. There'll be big doings."

Clifford gazed steadily at the old worldling. Indeed, there must be something — and big! — or else Uncle George, whose general attitude in matters of morals, police, and criminals was one of genial *laissez-faire*, would not have brought him this warning. He knew from experience the craft and power of Bradley — his subtle patience in working out his designs, his patience in waiting apparently quiescent for the ripe moment — the swiftness and might with which he struck when the instant came to strike.

Automatically, swiftly, Clifford's mind flashed forward in search of possible weapons, of direct and devious schemes, that the fertile-brained Bradley might be contriving against him.

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CHAPTER II

THE RETURN OF MARY REGAN

SUDDENLY all conjectures concerning Bradley were swept utterly from his mind. Down the gilded red-carpeted stairway that led from what the Grand Alcazar termed its "ballroom de luxe," there came — though this was not the figure Clifford first noted — a short, full-bodied, ornately dressed man, with a bald crown and a smile of engaging amiability. Beside him, and a half-head taller, — and this is what Clifford first saw, — walked a slender young woman, in an evening coat of rose velvet, her rounded throat gleaming a dusky marble from the soft shadows of the furred collar. Her face was the rose-tan of early autumn leaves, and her dark eyes gazed straight before her with a composure so complete that it seemed to announce a haughty indifference to all the world.

"Mary Regan!" ejaculated Clifford, stupefied.

Uncle George seemed not the least startled by Clifford's exclamation. He turned — and then there was surprise enough in his voice: —

"Hello — Peter Loveman with her!"

Clifford, recovered from his brief paralysis, arose and hurried between the tables. But the pair had already turned into the entrance and did not note

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him. As Clifford came into the gilded and bepalmed lobby, he saw her, aided by four eager Grand Alcazar flunkeys and by Loveman, looking a grotesquely small grand opera impresario in his silk hat and fur coat, stepping into a closed car. By running Clifford could have caught her, or by calling he could have gained her attention. But at that instant he remembered the essence of their bargain, that he should make no attempt to seek her out until she sent for him. That remembrance checked him; the door closed upon the rose-velvet figure, the car slid off through Broadway's incandescent brilliance, and she was gone.

Foregetful of where he was, Clifford stood bareheaded and stockstill in the lobby. Mary Regan's sudden reappearance out of the silence, the vacancy, of six months' absence, sent his mind flashing over the past, the present, the future, touching in chaotic wonderment the high spots of his strange relationship with her. . . . Daughter of that one-time famous cynic and famous master criminal, "Gentleman Jim" Regan, dead these five years, she had passed her girlhood in the cynical philosophy of the little court surrounding her father, — had made that philosophy her own, — and, grown into young womanhood, she had joined that great crime *entrepreneur*, her Uncle Joe Russell, in many of his more subtle enterprises. It was at the beginning of this career that Clifford's life had come into contact with hers. Police Commissioner Thorne had ordered him

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to "cover" the pair. From the first Clifford had conceived the idea that her criminal point of view was not an expression of her true nature, but was a habit of mind developed in her by association: and he had proceeded upon the theory that a bigger rôle, than merely to make arrests, would be to arouse the real Mary Regan to her true self. . . . The conflicts between the two! — her hostility to him! — his ultimate success, or seeming success, when he had broken through her shell of defensive cynicism — and last of all, that parting scene down in Washington Square in the dusk of the on-coming dawn! . . .

He lived through that scene for a briefest moment — he was always living over that scene. He had told her that he loved her; and she, admitting that she loved him, had said, "But that does n't mean I can marry you." "Then, what does it mean?" he had demanded. A look of decision had come into her face — how vividly he recalled every minutia of their one love-scene! — and she had said: —

"Before we can talk definitely about such things, I want to go off somewhere, alone, and think over what you have said about me. If I am not what I used to be — if I am really that different person you say I am, I want to get acquainted with myself. I seem so strange to myself, it all seems so strange. I hope you are right — but I must be sure — very sure — and so I am going away."

"But when you come back?" he had cried.

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"A lot may happen before that," she had answered gravely. "A lot to you, and a lot to me."

"But when you come back?" he had insisted.

"When I come back," she had breathed quaveringly, "if you still think the same way about my being that sort of person — and if I find that it's really true —"

And then his arms had closed about her and he had kissed her. But even as she had let him, she had murmured almost fearfully: "Remember — a lot — may happen — before then . . ."

Clifford's mind leaped forward from that long-gone night to the present. And now she was back — back out of the unknown into which she had disappeared — and back without having sent him a word of any kind! What did it mean, this unannounced return? And what did it mean, her being in company with dapper little Peter Loveman? — man-about-town, and carrying behind that round, amiable smile the shrewdest legal brain of its variety in New York.

Clifford had in reality been standing in the gilded lobby for no more than a minute, though his mind had traversed so wide a space, when a gray-and-black town-car, with a long hood that suggested power ample for a racer, slowed down at the curb and a young man stepped out and hurried into the Grand Alcazar. Fifth Avenue tailors and hatters and haberdashers had equipped him with their best and costliest.

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"Sink my ship if it's not old Bob Clifford!" he cried, giving Clifford a slender, soft hand. "How's the old boy?"

"Same as always. And how's Jackie Morton? You've been missing for months."

"I've a wonderful tale to unfold — but no time to unfold it now."

There was that about him which begot an instant liking, though his face was not as strong as it might have been.

"Say — you won't believe it — but listen. I've been on the wagon for seventeen weeks!"

"No!"

"Give you my word! Not a drop in seventeen ages! Had to, you know. My old man — say, he's one old battleship! — steamed into New York and shut off supplies, and said unless I cut it all out and took a brace, there'd be no more shipments of munitions. Get the situation, don't you? — case of a sixteen-inch gun shoved into my face and bein' told it would go off if I did n't reform. So look and behold and observe what's happened — I'm reformed! Been off where milk 's all they shove 'cross the bar — isolated, and all that kind of thing — and been behavin' in a way to make the Ten Commandments jealous. Honest to God, Clifford —"

Abruptly he checked this effervescence. "Say, seen Peter Loveman about here?"

"He's just gone."

"Alone?"

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"I believe there was a young lady with him," Clifford replied discreetly — wondering a little what young Morton's business, if any, could be with the pair that had left.

Morton hesitated; then again was effervescent. "Was to have met him here — but there's no tellin' where he is. Come on — let's have a drink."

"But you are on the wagon."

"I am. But I want to give you the grand sight of watchin' me fall off."

"You sit tight right where you are," advised Clifford.

"Now, come on, don't block traffic with a funeral," pleaded the young fellow, slipping an arm through Clifford's. "Just one drink!" Clifford shook his head; and Morton tried to draw him into the restaurant. "Just one little drink, Clifford, — one little drink after a Sahara of milk!"

"Mr. Morton!" a deep, brusque voice called from behind them.

They turned. A man, square of shoulders and deep of chest and with square, forceful face, was advancing toward them.

"Hello, Clifford," he said.

"Hello, Bradley," Clifford returned, trying to speak calmly — and for the briefest space these old enemies, who had so often been at grips, stared at each other, with hard, masked gazes.

Bradley turned to Clifford's companion. "So you tried to give me the slip, Mr. Morton. I heard

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what you suggested to Clifford. But I guess you are keeping off the booze to-night."

"Just look this large person over, Clifford," mourned the young fellow; "and honest, ain't it hell, my father wishing a party like Bradley on me for a nurse!"

"You need one all right!" Bradley said grimly.

"But even babies get let alone for an hour now and then," protested the other.

"You forget that the size of my check from your father depends upon my keeping you and booze apart."

Morton sighed. "You 're a sordid person, Bradley."

"I might mention incidentally," continued Bradley, "that your father has just come to town."

"The devil!" Morton's face filled with dismay. "I guess, then, it really is good-night, Clifford." He took Bradley's arm. "Come on, nursie; let's hail the captain of my perambulator."

Clifford watched the two go out, and again he had the sense that he was glimpsing into the complicated maze behind the brilliant surface of Big Pleasure. The relationship between that pair might be strange for any other period in the world's history, but it was a definite, though small, phase of this great pleasure life — a gay young spender bridled and the reins put in the hands of a private officer. Clifford felt a moment's uneasiness for young Morton: in what ways could Bradley not twist his client

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and protégé into predicaments that would bring him profit?

When Clifford regained his table, Uncle George regarded him with amazement. "I thought you had gone!"

"Gone where?"

"With or after Miss Regan."

"Why?"

"I thought you were — well, I guess you get me. That being the case, I did n't think you'd pass up the chance to be with her."

Clifford hesitated, then spoke the truth: "The last time I saw Mary Regan, I promised not to speak to her until she sent for me."

"And it was your promise that stopped you?" Uncle George asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"You poor simp! I suppose you thought she'd be thinking of you, only you, with you out of her sight for six months — and that then there'd come a sweet little message like them they flash on the movie screens!"

Clifford did not reply. Uncle George had very nearly expressed his thought.

"No woman ever lived that could keep thinking of one man for six months, and him away!" Uncle George leaned closer, and spoke in a low voice. "See here, son, — while you've been keeping your promise and remaining strictly off the premises, what do you think the other people have been doing?"

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"What other people?" cried Clifford, in quick alarm.

Uncle George ignored the question. "You think you've been an influence upon her. Mebbe so, son. Mebbe so. But she was twenty, and two or three more, before you ever saw her. Don't you think those twenty years might have some influence with her, too?"

"What other people?" repeated Clifford.

Again Uncle George ignored the question. He looked at Clifford keenly, and spoke slowly.

"'While ago you asked me why I wanted to meet you here. Well, son, my chief reason was because I knew Mary Regan was going to be here — and because I thought, on seeing her, you'd wade right into the situation."

"See here, George, what do you know?" Clifford cried sharply.

"Mighty little that's definite, — and telling you that would be giving people away, and that's against my principles, — and, besides, the little I know might only be misleading. But, son," — the old man's voice was grave, — "if you're at all interested in that girl, you sure ought to be busy. And that's all I can say."

Abruptly Clifford stood up. "Thanks, Uncle George, — good-bye —" And he was gone.

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CHAPTER III

PETER LOVEMAN

CLIFFORD'S first business was to make up for the opportunity he had just let slip, and find Mary Regan. At once he decided that his best source of information was her brother, "Slant-Face," once a pickpocket of amazing skill, now the manager of a little motion-picture house. He turned uptown to Slant-Face's theater.

On the way he was feverishly alive with questions. Clifford's thoughts had really not been off Mary Regan from the moment he had seen her come down the stairway; and now Uncle George's vague warning — he knew Uncle George would not have spoken even so indefinitely unless there existed a very real situation — banished all else from his mind. Why had n't Mary Regan sent him word? What was behind her return in such a manner? What decision had she come to in regard to herself during these months? What decision in regard to him?

And this danger that Uncle George had hinted at — did it rise chiefly from the plans and influence of other persons? And who might these other persons be? And what might be the danger? Or might the danger rise partly out of the complexities, the contradictions, of her own nature? — that nature which had

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always so baffled and eluded him. But the doubt which lay behind this last question seemed disloyal, and he forcibly drove it from his mind. Mary Regan, he emphatically told himself, was the woman he had believed her to be! She could explain everything. Whatever might be wrong was due to the unknown other persons.

Slant-Face's theater, though the hour was only ten, was dark. He hurried to Slant-Face's apartment; but Slant-Face was not there, and his wife knew nothing of his whereabouts. Downtown again, Clifford began a tour of Slant-Face's hang-outs; and at length he found him standing alone at the end of the Knickerbocker bar, before him a glass of butter-milk — a slender, smartly dressed person, whose immobile, lean face was given a saturnine cast by the downward slant of the left corner of his mouth.

"I saw your theater was closed, Slant-Face," said Clifford. "What's the matter?"

"Bradley."

"Bradley! How could he have anything to do with closing your theater?"

"Bradley has n't forgot my little part in your stunt that got him out of the Department. He just waited — and laid his plans. While films were being run off and the house was dark, he had pockets picked in my place, or had people say their pockets were picked — pulled this three times. What with my reputation, this was enough for the Commissioner of Licenses, and he closed my joint."

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"That's pretty rank. Bradley certainly does have a long memory — and a long arm!"

"This is a five-reel picture, and it's not all been run off yet," half growled Slant-Face through his thin lips. "In the last reel, some one is going to get him!" He sipped his buttermilk, then abruptly: "Clifford, because of what you've done for me, I've played it straight for a year. The straight game don't pay — not for me. So I'm through. I guess you understand what comes next."

"See here, Slant-Face, don't be —"

"I'm through!" There was the snap of absolute finality in the low, quiet voice.

Clifford knew that mere words could not change the decision made behind that lean, grim visage; so he turned to the matter that had brought him there.

"Have you seen your sister to-day?"

"Have n't seen Mary in six months."

"You mean you don't know where she's staying?" exclaimed Clifford.

"Down South in the woods somewhere, — God knows why, — doing a stretch of self-imposed solitary."

The obviously honest answer sharpened Clifford's already poignant uneasiness. "Slant-Face, I saw her an hour ago."

"In New York?"

"At the Grand Alcazar." And then he added: "She was with Peter Loveman."

Even the stoic Slant-Face started. "With Peter

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Loveman! — the lawyer that beat Bradley's case for him! What the devil does that mean?"

"Just what I'm wondering myself."

"You mean you did n't ask her anything — did n't speak to her?"

"No."

Slant-Face looked his bewilderment. He had had his own private guess at what had been the situation between Clifford and his sister. But he did not ask the "why" of this to him strange behaviour on Clifford's part.

"Mary with Peter Loveman!" he repeated. "Either Mary is trying to put something across — in the old way, you understand; or else she's — well, it looks like queer doings to me!"

"That's why I looked you up. Some one should step in, and stop what's under way. I supposed you knew where she was."

"I'm going to begin to try to find out," said Slant-Face. "And you?"

"Same here. By the way, would your Uncle Joe know anything?"

"Did n't you know? He's sold out everything here and bought himself a fruit farm in California."

"Then there's just one man we're certain does know. That's Loveman, and I'm going after Loveman. Let me know if you get next to anything, Slant-Face. So-long."

Clifford and the once master pickpocket clasped hands.

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"And Slant-Face," Clifford added, "about that other matter — getting money in the old way. Don't do it."

"I'm not promising," said Slant-Face quietly.

Clifford privately asked Police Commissioner Thorne to help in locating Mary Regan. Also he hunted up little Lieutenant Jimmie Kelly, one hundred and twenty pounds of grit and daring, head of the Tenderloin Squad that free-lanced through the hotels, restaurants, and resorts of Broadway, and of Jimmie he asked the same help. He himself, for two days and nights, now and then seeing Uncle George and Slant-Face, trailed Peter Loveman from office to courts and back again — and particularly about the restaurants and theaters and after-theater theaters, which comprised Loveman's especial habitat.

But not again did Clifford see Loveman with Mary Regan. The second night, however, he did see Loveman with young Morton, and with the two a middle-aged man with a masterful face. Morton's father, Clifford guessed.

And yet, though he saw nothing, all his senses assured him with growing insistence that great forces were at their hidden work — those subtle, complex forces that operate indirectly, patiently, with infinite cunning, behind the alluring and often innocent visage of brilliant Big Pleasure. And also he had a growing sense that this was not primarily a detective's puzzle; but primarily a matter of the eternal human mystery of how human beings react, and

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how they may be artfully stimulated. He felt himself just a human being in the midst of a human problem whose outlines he could not yet discern.

On the third day of failure it came to Clifford that there was a chance — a bare chance — that Loveman had no design involving Mary Regan, and he decided to go openly to him. At Loveman's lavish downtown offices he was told Loveman had telephoned he would not appear that morning. Twenty minutes later Clifford, after having sent in his card by the Japanese butler-valet, was in Loveman's study. The room, the studio of an apartment designed for an artist, was furnished with a disordered luxury and culture which Clifford knew to be a genuine characteristic of the strange little notable on whom he waited. Here were rows and rows of first editions; old Dutch etchings, among them several original Rembrandts; a helter-skelter gallery of autographed photographs of favorite actresses. For a score of years, as Clifford knew, Loveman had not missed an important first night.

Whatever might be the outcome of this interview, Clifford knew that sometime, somehow, between him and Loveman there would be a conflict of wits. So he looked swiftly and curiously around the room, for concerning this room there were current many fables. This study, and not the downtown office, was said to be Loveman's real workshop. Here were created those astute plans, in which the influence of Loveman was never traceable, that brought to his

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downtown office those big-fee'd domestic cases, to be fought brilliantly and sensationally in the courts or to be settled discreetly in private. He was New York's ablest representative of a type of lawyer that modern social conditions have produced: a specialist in domestic affairs — and one, when profitable dissension or threatening scandal did not exist, who knew how to create such. It was gossiped that he kept a careful record of all tangled relations among the rich, of the details of every delicate situation, and watched and bided his time until at length the affair threatened to explode into a scandal — and then he acted. In this study there was a huge "Scandal File," so gossip had it; but Clifford, looking about, saw no such fabled article of furniture.

At that moment Loveman entered, his tonsured head and rope-girdled dressing-gown giving him the appearance of a somewhat jolly and rakish monk.

"Good-morning, Clifford," he exclaimed, cordially holding out his hand. "Mightily like a Christian of you, looking an old tramp up."

"They told me at your office that you were sick."

Loveman waved Clifford into a chair, took one himself and crossed his small, exquisitely slippered feet. "That's what I told the office, but I did n't tell 'em what sort of sickness it was. My boy," — with a frank, engaging grin, which was one of the many qualities that made this strange man so popular, — "do you perceive any adequate excuse for a man of

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my supposedly sensible years starting in at 11.30 P.M. on a mixed-drink Marathon?"

"I can't say," smiled Clifford, "without a knowledge of the prior —"

"Don't be legally cautious with an incautious lawyer. There was no excuse." Loveman shook his round head solemnly. "There was provocation, though. You bet there was provocation. Were you at the opening last night of 'Orange Blossoms'?"

"No."

"Congratulations. It's a dam' rotten show! And Nina Cordova — she's all there off the stage, pretty, and clever, and one wise little girl, don't you forget it! — but a dam' rotten star and the voice of a guinea-hen that's got the quinsy. And it cost sixty thousand dollars to get the curtain up last night, and I put up twenty thousand dollars of that boodle. Tell me, oh, why" — with a quaver of mock self-sympathy — "am I always going out of my own line and letting myself be played as a sucker by some manager or actress that wants extra backing? Twenty thousand honest-to-God dollars! I kissed 'em good-bye the very minute Nina first opened that dam' pretty mouth, and her first note rasped across the footlights! Ain't I the boob!"

Clifford smiled at the grotesquely disconsolate figure, but did not answer; he knew no answer was expected. But while he smiled, waiting, part of his brain was remarking that these seemingly reckless ventures of Loveman were in truth sound invest-

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ments on which, by the devious methods of his art, he later realized sumptuously. That twenty thousand, which would make the vain Nina regard him as her disinterested friend and adviser, was n't money thrown away — not in view of the whispered affair between the voiceless prima donna, and —

"Why should I be blowing my roll," continued Loveman, "on these dam' musical comedies — *musical*, say there's some irony for you! — when what I 'd have liked would have been to help back a show like 'Justice.' Or the Russian ballet. Nijinsky — there's some artist for you!" His last words were vividly sincere; there was nothing more sincere about the little man than his admiration for the highest endeavors in art. "And yet my coin goes into 'Orange Blossoms'! Is there an artistic Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? — there is, and I'm the party — and that's why my stomach, esophagus, palate, tongue, mouth, and all appertaining thereunto, are this A.M. composed of a faded and dusty Brussels carpet. But, my boy, you did n't come here to listen to my woes. What can I do for you?"

His humorously bewailing manner had suddenly dropped from him; he was brisk and alert, and his over-large eyes were fixed upon Clifford keenly. Clifford knew that there was little chance of deceiving this holder of the threads of destiny in a direct encounter.

"I came here, Loveman, to ask you for the address of Mary Regan."

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Loveman looked puzzled. "Mary Regan — do I know her?"

Was there something behind this evasion? "You remember her if you remember getting Bradley off. She was in that case."

"Oh, yes, I remember: slender — dark — handsome. But I have n't seen her since the trial."

"I don't mean to call you anything, Loveman, — but I was told you were recently seen with her in public."

"Where?"

"At the Grand Alcazar — for dinner — three nights ago."

Loveman smiled. "You've caught me. I own up. But my fib was a gentleman's lie."

"How so?"

"She did n't want it known that she was in New York."

"Why not?"

"Search me. Perhaps just a girl's whim."

"Do you know where I can find her?"

"Have n't the slightest idea. I was with her more or less by accident. I was taking care of her merely for a couple of hours — substituting for a friend of hers."

Clifford felt sure the little man was lying; but he also felt sure he could get out of Loveman nothing Loveman preferred not to tell. All the brains of the Bar Association had not been able to do this when Loveman had been before that body on charges of unprofessional conduct.

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"By the by, Clifford, what's your interest in the young lady?"

"Her family heard she was back, and engaged me to locate her."

Loveman, looking keenly at Clifford, did not betray whether or not he recognized this as prevarication. Clifford stood up.

"Well, as you were my only clue, I might as well give the matter up. Sorry to have bothered you. Good-morning."

"Oh, you'll find her — you have the reputation of doing whatever you start out to do. Don't hurry away. I've got some new first editions I want to show you. But pardon me for just a moment." He scratched a line upon a sheet of paper, rang, and handed the folded sheet to the Japanese butler, who silently withdrew. "Now!" he cried briskly, and began to talk enthusiastically over half a dozen stained and musty volumes.

Half an hour later the noiseless butler appeared, bearing a card. Loveman begged Clifford to excuse him, and withdrew — to reënter in five minutes.

"Something rather curious has just happened,Clifford. A gentleman with whom I've had some dealings just called — I had an inspiration — I made a suggestion, and — Well, let him speak for himself. Come right in!"

At this, through the door Loveman had left open, stepped the square, solid figure of Bradley.

"I believe you two are acquainted with each

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other," remarked Loveman with his amiable briskness.

The two men nodded, and for a moment stood silent. Clifford tried to read Bradley's purpose, but Bradley's powerful face, with its small, brilliant eyes, was as controlled and reticent as in the days, now over a year gone, when Bradley used to give him orders at Police Headquarters.

"H'are you, Clifford." The voice was the same even, heavy bass.

"First-class, Bradley."

"Chairs, gentlemen," put in Loveman; and when they were seated: "Shall I say it, Bradley, or will you?"

"I'll say it." Without preface, or reference to the past, Bradley was in the midst of things. "I'm building up a big business, Clifford. Another year or so, and it'll be the biggest private detective agency in the country. It's already getting too big for one man to manage; besides, there are certain kinds of cases that another man can handle better than I can. I've been looking over the field for the right man. Clifford, I've decided you're this right man, and I want to ask you if you'd be willing to go into partnership."

"Don't speak yet — think it over for a minute," put in Loveman. "You two have had your little differences, but it ought to be plain to both of you that there's more in it for you two working together than fighting each other."

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Clifford managed to maintain a composed exterior, but within he was bewilderment. Certainly Bradley was a most amazing man!

Clifford thought swiftly, if somewhat dazedly. Was this a trap? It might be — probably was, in view of what had previously passed between them.

But then again — it might not be a trap. Bradley's offer, on the face of it, was a good business proposition, advantageous to both parties. It was a commonplace of business and politics and police affairs, that competitors and even deadly enemies may scratch the past off the books and combine in a common effort when they vision a profit sufficiently large in such a procedure.

And profit there certainly would be in Bradley's proposition — big profit. First, would be the original profit of the large fees which clients would pay to have information secured for them. And second, — if the agency were to be run as most other private detective agencies, and on this Bradley would doubtless insist, — there would be the usual large profits secured through the pleasant and easy device of blackmailing clients by threatening to reveal to the public the scandals they had been paid privately to uncover and corroborate. Beyond a doubt, tremendous profits!

Yes, it might not be a trap. It might be just a a plain business proposition. It might be —

Another thought: It might be a bribe!

Yes, whatever else it might be, it also was cer-

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tainly a bribe. But to buy him away from what? . . . From what? . . .

"It's a good proposition—yes?" prompted Loveman.

Though Clifford had taken time to think, his decision had been made the very moment he had understood Bradley's proposition.

"As you say, Bradley, there's big money in it, and it's a great chance for the right party. I want to thank you for considering me and offering me the chance. But I never expect to build up a big business, and such cases as I do take on I want to handle personally and in my own way."

Bradley's square face showed not the slightest change. "That's your privilege, to do things the way you like. Glad I spoke to you about it, though."

"That's another good inspiration I had that's gone on the rocks," humorously complained Loveman—"as bum a guesser here as when I backed Nina Cordova in 'Orange Blossoms.'" He followed Clifford to the door, a hand upon his arm. "Anyhow, I may want to be shoving some business your way."

"Thanks." Clifford nodded to Bradley, and Bradley nodded back, his face the same grim mask as ever.

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CHAPTER IV

AS MARY SEES HERSELF

As Clifford went out it seemed to him, for the moment, that his efforts thus far had resulted only in bringing him into contact with affairs far removed from his main business. But the next moment experience reminded him that nothing in life was irrelevant. Might not these seemingly unrelated fragments be revealed as closely articulated parts of a great drama of life whose working-out lay in the unvisioned future?

Anyhow, he had new questions to put to himself. What was behind Loveman's suave statement that he knew nothing of Mary Regan? And what behind Bradley's offer of partnership? They meant something: and the more Clifford thought, the more was he convinced that Loveman was in whatever business might be brewing; and since Loveman was in it, it was safely and adroitly based upon the weakness, vanity, or ambition of our common human nature.

The sense, though he had little definite basis for it, that Mary was vitally concerned in this impenetrable business, that she was perhaps the chief victim of its hidden workings and of its dangers, grew in Clifford with every moment. He simply had to find her!

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Hoping against hope, Clifford daily expected a note from Mary Regan — for he could not wholly discount her promise — but no note came. And though Uncle George, Slant-Face, and Lieutenant Jimmie Kelly, in their divers manners, were all looking for Mary, none during the next four days reported a trace of her. Nor did Commissioner Thorne, with his larger resources, turn up a single clue. She seemed to have vanished utterly.

All these days Clifford himself kept doggedly to the tedious routine of centering his personal endeavors upon Peter Loveman — following that dapper gentleman from home to office, to court-rooms, to restaurants on Broadway or the Avenue for his substitute for afternoon tea, to his home again to dress, then to the long evening's schedule of pleasures — taking rest only during the periods when Loveman was held in court, or during the five hours between three and 8 A.M. that Loveman allowed himself for sleep.

On the seventh afternoon, while Loveman was tied up in court, and while Clifford was spending an hour at home, a note was delivered him by messenger. It read: —

See me at headquarters at your earliest convenience.
THORNE.

Clifford considered. Then he sent back the message, "Will try to come at five." It was now three o'clock; Loveman would be out of court at half-

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past three or four. He had decided that the best procedure was to follow Loveman from court to club or restaurant, and then if the lawyer seemed settled, as usually was the case, he could safely slip down to Police Headquarters.

At four o'clock Clifford saw Loveman leave the Criminal Courts Building and step into the closed car he had seen Loveman and Mary Regan enter seven nights earlier in front of the Grand Alcazar. Clifford, at a discreet distance, followed in a taxi. The big car, after twisting about through the region of clubs and restaurants, deposited Loveman before a great hotel on Fifth Avenue, The Grantham. Clifford, following him in, saw Loveman address the perfect young blonde who sat at a switchboard within a grilled enclosure, wait while the blonde announced his name through the telephone, then saw him make for the elevators.

Clifford waited several minutes, then himself approached the deity of the switchboard. "I want to get in touch with Mr. Loveman at once, and I believe he's calling here."

"Yes, on Mrs. Gardner — twelfth floor, Apartment M. Shall I 'phone up you're here?"

"I guess I'll not interrupt him. I'll catch him when he comes down." The blonde, Clifford had at once divined, was the sort not averse to talk. "I wonder if this is the Mrs. Gardner I know," he said easily. "What's she like?"

"Never really seen her," returned the blonde.

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"Has all her meals in her suite. Goes out only at night — about nine, when everything's dead here — just for an hour's motor ride. She's always in black, and veiled. Guess she's a widow."

A little more chat and Clifford drifted into the hotel bar, from which he could watch the elevators. He sipped his Vichy with a casual, lounging air that required his best acting. Could that Mrs. Gardner be Mary Regan? And if she was Mary Regan, was she also truly Mrs. Gardner?

Half an hour passed; then Loveman came out of one of the elevators. Clifford had a moment's fear that the blonde would tell him that a caller had made inquiry for him; but the blonde was answering the questions of a guest and did not see Loveman go out. Clifford allowed a few more minutes to pass, then he approached the blonde's cage with a brisk air.

"There's something Mr. Loveman forgot to say to Mrs. Gardner, and he asked me to come back and tell her. Just say it's Mr. Loveman calling again."

The girl spoke through the telephone as directed; then, "You're to go right up."

Tingling with suspense, Clifford shot up to the twelfth floor and rang the bell of Apartment M. The door was promptly opened, and without waiting for the maid to cry a warning because of this suddenly altered Mr. Loveman, Clifford walked quickly past her through a little hallway into a sitting-room. At a window, looking down into the Avenue stood a

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slender figure in a gown of gold-brown chiffon velvet, softly touched with fur. She was Mary Regan.

"Sit down, Mr. Loveman," she said, not turning. And then after a pause she added a bit impatiently, but in that distant, composed tone she had so often used toward him in other days: "Well, what else is there? Have n't I already promised to follow your instructions in every detail?"

Clifford did not reply, and his silence caused her to turn. At sight of him the tint of autumn rose left her dark face.

"Mr. Clifford!" she breathed.

"Good-afternoon—" He hesitated; the last time he had spoken to her, six months before, he had called her Mary. "Good-afternoon, Miss Regan."

And then the fear that was in him caused him quickly to add, "Or should I say Mrs. Gardner?"

"I am still Mary Regan." She moved nearer. "You here! The name you sent up was Mr. Loveman."

"I used Mr. Loveman's name because I thought if I sent my own you would refuse to see me."

"Why?"

He had searched her out primarily to learn the danger she was in and to save her from it, but here he was in the first moment speaking of himself. "I reasoned that you did not want to see me from the fact that you have been in town a week and have sent me no word. And I thought, after your promise —"

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He could not finish. She motioned him to be seated, herself took a chair, and there was a moment's pause. Pale, a strained composure in her face, she was wondrously striking in the gold-brown velvet with its margin of fur; she seemed to have matured, yet to have grown no older; and never before had she seemed more poignantly desirable to him. The old questions that had haunted him for six months, surged up and he was almost choked with the immanence of the answer to them. Had there come the change that they had talked about? Had she reached the decision that he had so long been waiting for?

At length she spoke, and the contralto warmth and color of her voice were subdued to a neutral monotone. "I could have sent you word," she said. "But I have no excuse to offer, and prefer not to explain."

"You know what I've been hoping for — and waiting for," he said with difficulty. "You have not forgotten that last night in Washington Square?"

"No. And you have not forgotten the point I then insisted upon — that I wanted to go off, alone, to examine myself and try to learn whether I was really the sort of woman you declared me to be."

"I remember. And now that you have been away, and come back?"

Her voice was steady. "I have learned I am not that kind of woman."

"No?"

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"I have learned that I do not look upon life — that is life for myself — in the way you thought I would."

"Just what do you mean?"

"I know now that I am by nature more worldly than you believed me."

He grew suddenly sick at her even words. "I was hoping that you would have decided that you cared for me."

"I am and always shall be grateful to you for the things you did for me, and I shall always appreciate your high opinion of the qualities you believed to exist in me. You were kind and generous — and I shall never forget."

"But you have no other feeling — toward me?"

She shook her head.

"Then this is final — as far as my hopes are concerned," he whispered dryly. He was dazed; too dazed to note that she had grown even more pale than a few moments before and that her hands were gripping folds of the velvet gown.

Presently he tried to pull himself together. He remembered the main purpose of his presence here.

"But at least you will let me help you?"

"Certainly — if I need you."

He leaned closer. "You never needed me more than now!"

"For what reason?"

"You are in danger — great danger!"

She started, and gazed at him with a sharp pene-

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tration which even at that moment struck him as peculiar. "In what danger?"

Her question took him back. In his intensity he had forgotten that he knew so little that was definite.

"I thought you would know," he confessed. And then, with a ring of certainty, "If you do not know yourself to be in danger, then why are you in hiding?"

She ignored his last sentence. "I am in no danger of which I am conscious."

He seized upon the one point he was certain of. "But you have been seeing Peter Loveman. I hope you are not letting him get control of your affairs."

"Mr. Loveman has merely been giving me some friendly advice. He is a very able lawyer."

"There is no abler lawyer in New York than Peter Loveman. But Peter Loveman cannot be trusted."

"I am not trusting him — very far." She spoke with that supreme self-confidence that had always characterized her. "And I believe I can take care of myself." This last she added coldly, yet not unkindly.

Clifford felt himself baffled. And then, suddenly, he remembered another possible source of danger to her — or at least of danger to that Mary Regan he had believed her to be. Could she, as the worldly-wise old Uncle George had suggested, have felt the pull of old associations, old points of view, and have reverted —

But even as he was thinking of this, she with her remarkable keenness had read his mind. "Don't

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worry about that. I have no intention of going back to the sort of things I once tried to do, and you stopped me from doing."

"I'm glad of that," he said simply. And then he added, "But still I feel you are in some great vague danger."

"What?" she queried as before. "I am here of my own choice. I go and come as I please. Whatever I may now be doing I do of my own free will."

"Then you have a plan?"

She was silent a long moment, all the while gazing at him steadily. Then she replied, "I have."

"May I ask what it is?"

"You have earned the right. As Robert Clifford, the man, you might not approve of it. As Robert Clifford, detective, you can find nothing wrong. Beyond this I can tell you nothing — now."

He felt shut out — placed at a far distance — and felt the dizzy sickness once more come on him. He had met her again, after long waiting, after long search — and this was the poor ending of it all!

He saw her glance furtively at a gilded clock. Awkwardly he arose.

"I've kept you too long," he mumbled.

She made no polite denial, but also stood up. He started out — and found he could not go.

He turned. "Please tell me two other things. First, why are you in hiding?"

"That I must be excused from answering."

"Is it part of your plan?"

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She hesitated, then nodded.

"And your calling yourself Mrs. Gardner — is that, too, a part of your plan?"

"Yes — to the extent that I am temporarily using it to hide behind. Now you must go — please!"

"Good-bye — I won't bother you any further."

Sick, bewildered, and with as great a fear as when he entered, Clifford started out. But at that moment there was a ring at the doorbell.

"Why did n't you go before!" cried Mary; and then, seizing his arm, "Wait, you must n't go now!"

"Why?"

"It would be misunderstood."

"Then you know who that is?"

"Yes."

"Is it Peter Loveman?"

"No." Her dark eyes gazed at him very straight; she spoke rapidly. "You are an old acquaintance — you met me in Paris before the war broke out — that's all you really know about me. Except that my name is Mary Regan."

"I'll play the part," said Clifford.

"Sit there by the window."

Clifford obeyed, more dazed than ever, and wonderingly watched Mary. She stood in the middle of the room, tensely composed. The maid had answered the bell, and Clifford now heard a man's voice in the hall — a familiar voice. The next moment the visitor was through the doorway, and Clifford beheld that likable young man-about-town, Jack Morton.

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But Jack Morton saw only Mary, and his face flushed with delight. "Mary!" he cried and crossed to her with open arms. Without hesitation she stepped forward and her lips met his.

Clifford experienced such a swift onrush of dizziness and sickness that he barely kept his seat.

After a moment Mary drew away from Morton. "Jack, I want to introduce an old acquaintance to you — Mr. Clifford."

"Bob Clifford — you here!" cried Morton. "You know Miss Regan?"

Clifford remembered his lines. "I met Miss Regan in Paris before the outbreak of the war."

Mary held her pale face steadily upon Clifford. "I suppose, Jack, Mr. Clifford might as well know the truth."

"After what he's seen I guess he knows it." Young Morton, a glowing smile on his pleasant face, held out his hand. "Congratulate me, Bob!"

Clifford took the hand. "You—you are married?"

"We are going to be — as soon as it's safe."

"Safe?"

"You see my —"

"Mr. Clifford does not need to know that," Mary quickly interrupted.

"Why —" Clifford stared; gulped. "I did not even know you were acquainted."

"We were not, till three months ago." Morton grinned happily. He slipped his arm about Mary and Mary allowed it to remain. "Remember my

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telling you the other night about my being away, far from the madding crowd? — in a place where they don't raise a thing but isolation? Well, that's where I met Mary — at Pine Mountain Lodge. Was n't that some coincidence, Bob?"

Clifford agreed that it was. He looked searchingly at Mary; but her pale, proud face met his eyes with a steadfast gaze that was blank of any offer to apologize or explain.

"Here's wishing you luck, Morton," Clifford said with a control that surprised himself. He gave Mary Regan a look that was quite as composed as her own. "And you, Miss Regan, I hope that all your best dreams come true."

He maintained his control until he had managed a very decent exit. But out in the corridor, he leaned against the wall, a very sick man, with ejaculations and questions stabbing him through and through. This, then, was what his long waiting had come to, his hopes and his dreams of a different Mary Regan! This affair with Jack Morton, a good enough fellow of his sort, that was her plan! . . . Yes, but what lay behind that plan? . . . And did she care for Morton? . . . And why had she not frankly written him of her purpose? . . . And Peter Loveman, where did Love-man come in? . . . And Bradley, guide and protector of young Morton, what might be Bradley's part? . . . And what kind of person, after these months, was really behind that exterior which Mary Regan had presented him? . . .

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In bitter revulsion Clifford straightened up and walked away. What she was, and what she was doing, and what she had got herself in for, these matters were now none of his affairs. For him Mary Regan was a closed incident.

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CHAPTER V

CLIFFORD HAS A NEW PURPOSE

HALF an hour later Clifford entered the octagonal reception room at Police Headquarters and sent his name in to Commissioner Thorne. Word came back that Thorne was engaged and would be so for half an hour; but in the meantime would n't Clifford visit about the building.

Clifford descended to the great corridor on the main floor. Here he met captains and lieutenants and first-grade detectives — old friends, with whom, until the events that had sent him out of the Department, he had worked for close upon a decade. They treated him with a respect that, coming after his scene with Mary Regan, was soothing to his rasped spirit. The very surroundings, too, affected him — begot in him a formless longing; in a way it was like coming back to one's home town.

Here, too, he ran into little Jimmie Kelly. With Jimmie he descended to the pistol range in the subcellar, and for half an hour they practiced with the regulation police revolvers, which recoil like ancient shotguns — their targets those little posters seen everywhere, headed "Wanted for Murder," over the heart of the pictured fugitive an inch circle of white paper to serve as bull's-eye. And then

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they practiced with Jimmie's pistol, a .25 automatic so tiny that it could lie in a closed hand and not be seen.

"Wish you were back here with us, Bob," remarked Jimmie when Clifford announced that he was due up in the Chief's office. "It would be great stuff — working with you again!"

There was hearty sincerity in Jimmie's voice; and the vague longing begot by it was still upon Clifford when at length he was seated beside Commissioner Thorne's desk.

"Clifford," said the Commissioner briskly, his lean, Scotch-Irish face alive with purpose, "I'm going to lay all my cards, face up, on the table. I asked you to meet me down here, instead of up town, for the sake of the effect on you. That's why I made you wait, and asked you to visit about. I wanted you to feel the old tug of Headquarters."

"I guess I've felt it all right, Chief."

"That's good. Clifford, six months ago I asked you to become Second Deputy Commissioner. For your own reasons you refused. I hope you've changed your mind, for I'm now again asking you to take the place."

To be Second Deputy Chief of New York's Detective Bureau! — Clifford felt a leaping thrill — a swift reaction from the heaviness and bitterness which had been upon him since his scene with Mary Regan. He considered for a moment. The controlling reason for his previous declination, his knowledge

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that Mary Regan would refuse him if he continued official police work because she believed she would interfere with his career — this reason Mary Regan herself had just wiped out. He had lost enough because of her. Here was big work to do. Here was a big career.

Clifford looked up. "I accept, Chief," he said with an energy almost fierce. "And I'm glad and proud to accept. And I'll give the job the best that's in me."

"Bully for you!" cried Thorne, seizing his hand.

There was a minute's further exchange of thanks and congratulations. Then Thorne continued:

"There's a particular situation I want you to take care of. I believe in the need of pleasure as much as any man. But the providing of pleasure in this city has become a vast business. I'm not referring to the theaters; I'm thinking of the restaurants, roof-gardens, dancing places, things like that—high and low. And I'm thinking especially of the swellest places, and of some of the presumably most respectable places. These establishments have bred a new variety of specialists, astute men, astute women, who entangle and victimize the pleasure-seekers. Especially since women began to go about so freely to the dancing places, and it became so easy to make acquaintances, there have developed such opportunities — God, if the public only guessed a tenth of what is dribbling in to us! —and even we never get rumors of a tenth of what actually

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happens. But you know this situation better than I do."

"I've had to learn something about it," said Clifford.

"I want the facts. I want the situation cleaned out. You've got a free hand — use as many men as you like — follow your own plans."

"I'll be on the job at once," said Clifford.

"Good stuff!" cried Thorne enthusiastically. "And if you succeed — and I know you will — it will be a big thing for the Department, a big thing for me, and we'll try to make it a big thing for you!"

This new interest so promptly and exactly fitted the sudden emptiness in Clifford's life that almost without thinking he was impelled to ask, "Has anything happened, Chief, to cause you to make me this offer just now?"

Thorne regarded Clifford with a curious, thoughtful air. "I wonder if I should tell you," he said slowly; and then: "Well, the fact is, Clifford, I have been holding a little something back from you."

"Something about what, Chief?"

"About you — and a woman."

"Yes — go on!"

"Six months ago a young woman called on me at my hotel, and asked me if I had offered you the position of Chief of the Detective Bureau. I said that I had, and that you had declined. She then asked me if I still wanted you. I said yes, if I could

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get you. That was all that passed between us. She thanked me and went away."

"She was Mary Regan," said Clifford.

"She was."

"And is that all that has happened?"

"To-day I had a note from her, without date or address, advising me to offer you the position again, and to keep on offering it to you until you accepted."

Something was happening within Clifford, though he did not know what it was — something that set brain whirling and heart beating at a swifter tempo. "I just left her," he said with mechanical calm. "She's going to marry a man named Jack Morton."

"So I have just learned."

"How?"

"Some of my men have been covering Bradley and Loveman. Loveman's house telephone is tapped, and a few threads have been picked up. Miss Regan believes she is doing what she is doing because she wants to, and from her own motives. But Bradley and Loveman are behind it."

"In what way?" cried Clifford.

"Bradley, as you know, is a sort of private watchman over young Morton. Loveman has handled a lot of delicate matters for the father. The elder Morton is a ruthless egoist, an able man of big affairs, but remarkable for neither business nor personal morality. The son you are acquainted with. You can see the opportunities here for such a combination as Bradley and Loveman."

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"Yes. But where does Mary Regan come in?"

"Bradley and Loveman are using her now, and expect to use her in the future."

"Does she know she is being used?"

"I'm certain she does not even guess it."

"Then how did they ever get her into it this far?"

"I do not know."

"But surely," cried Clifford, "You must have some idea of what their plan is?"

"Only that I surmise that it is one individual case of the general situation concerning which I just spoke to you — about how very clever persons have made a subtle business out of the manner in which the city's Big Pleasure reacts upon human ambitions and human frailties. Any information more definite than this it will be part of your job to get."

Abruptly Clifford stood up and strode to a window and stood gazing vacantly at a huge candy factory across Broome Street — his whole being now wildly athrob, his brain working swiftly though incoherently. What might it not mean, Mary Regan's showing this concern to see that he accepted the position he had once refused because of her? . . . And how much did she really care for Morton? . . . And might there not be motives, deeper and other than he had guessed, that had caused her to treat him so cavalierly? . . . And the menace of Loveman and of Bradley —

Abruptly Clifford turned about on Thorne.

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"Chief, I'm sorry to take back my word — but I cannot accept that job as Chief of Detectives."

"Why not?" cried the astounded Thorne.

"That I can't explain just now. But though I can't take the job, I'll do all I can in a personal way to help handle that condition you were speaking about. You'll excuse me, Chief, but I've got to do a lot of quick thinking."

Leaving Thorne fairly gasping at this swift transition, Clifford strode out of the office and out of Police Headquarters. Two minutes later he was in a telephone booth in a saloon across the way and was asking the Grantham Hotel, in which he had left Mary Regan an hour before, for "Mrs. Gardner." Soon Mary's cool, even voice sounded over the wire.

"This is Robert Clifford," he said. "May I see you again — for just a few minutes?"

There was a long silence; then the cool voice queried: "Alone?"

"If you please."

Another silence. He was beginning to fear that she had hung up, when the cool voice spoke again.

"Very well" — and this time he heard the receiver click upon its hook.

He hurried for the Subway. He was athrill with a grim elation. He felt that all that had thus far passed between him and Mary Regan was no more than a prelude — a long prelude, to be sure — and that the big action of their drama lay still before

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them. He would fight on, still, for Mary Regan — to save her from herself, to protect her from others!

But in this, his high moment, he had no prevision of the vagaries of a woman's nature he was to encounter — of a willful, many-elemented woman who had not yet found herself, and who had a long road yet to travel before she reached that self-knowledge; and he had no prevision of the strange places behind the scenes of pleasure that his new purpose was to cause him to penetrate, and no prevision of the strange motives, the strange mixtures of human nature, that he was to meet.

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CHAPTER VI

MARY SHOWS HER HAND

MARY REGAN stood in the dusk of her sitting-room, holding apart the velvet hangings of a window, and gazing far down at the quadruple line of motor-cars which at this twilight winter hour moves in slow lockstep between Thirty-third and Fifty-ninth Streets; and as she vacantly gazed upon the world's greatest parade of pleasure vehicles, part of her mind was wondering about her approaching interview with Clifford — and part of her mind, in subconscious preparation for this meeting, was automatically reviewing, and checking-up, and re-swearing allegiance to some of the decisions she had reached concerning herself and the course she had chosen. She was somewhat excited; but she felt sure of herself — very sure!

During the six months she had been away, she had studied, or believed she had, her own nature most carefully, and also her immediate interests, and also the bolder reachings of her ambition. She had considered these matters, not sentimentally, — she hated sentiment, she told herself, — but with cool brain, and with no fear to admit the truth. To be sure there had been a swift seizure and possession of her by emotion when she and Clifford had kissed that

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summer dawn long ago in Washington Square; and now and again this emotional element had arisen in her with appealing energy, but her cool intelligence had always controlled such impulses. What did life offer with a police official who was on the square? Nothing! At least nothing that she cared for or dreamed of. Honest police officials never got anywhere. And as for Clifford, marriage with him would ruin such career for him as might be possible. It would never do — not for either of them.

What she wanted was altogether different. She *knew*, for she had analyzed herself with the apartness of a scientist. Her former attitude toward crime, acquired through a girlhood spent with those cynical gentlemen of the world, her father and her Uncle Joe, — that attitude to be sure was now changed; at least such intentions as formerly she had had she now knew to be quiescent; Clifford had influenced her to this extent. But though the criminal impulses given her by her training were gone, the worldly attitude and instincts begotten by that training still remained. She believed herself a worldling; and more, she believed herself a competent worldling. She believed she had no illusions about herself. The things in life that were worth while — so in her confident youthfulness she decided — were luxury, admiration, the pleasures that money could buy. And these things she believed she could win.

This much, in her retreat, she had already decided before Jack Morton had appeared in the quiet coun-

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tryside. The coming of Jack, with the opportunities represented by his amiable person, had made her even more decided.

And so, as she now gazed down through the winter dusk upon the shifting motor-tops, she was very certain of herself despite her palpitant expectation over Clifford's coming — very confident of herself, and what she was, and what she was going to do, and what she was going to be: just as many another young woman, of a perhaps more careful rearing, was preeningly confident of herself, in those limousines far below her. For this was the time of all times, and the place of all places, that young women were trained to dream of themselves; and here, also, often the dreams came gorgeously true — for a time! . . .

The ring of her apartment bell brought Mary sharply from her thoughts. Switching on the lights, she opened the door and admitted Clifford into her sitting-room. She spoke first, with a formality that held him at a distance.

"I consented to see you because an hour or two ago you discovered a private matter of mine, and I neglected to ask you to keep it silent."

"You refer to your engagement to Jack Morton?"

"I do. Of course you will say nothing about it."

"That you must leave to my discretion."

"You mean you are going to tell?" she demanded.

He tried to keep his business here to the front of his mind, but now, as he sat face to face with her,

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the old question recurred for which he seemed able to reach no final answer: what was she really like beneath this exterior she showed him? — what might she be beneath and within the self she supposed herself to be?

"I mean that I am reserving the right to do exactly what I please," he replied, looking at her squarely. "This business of your secret engagement is also what made me want to see you — but it is only one of many things. I have done a lot of thinking since I left you two hours ago. Also I have just seen Police Commissioner Thorne."

"Yes?"

"Mr. Thorne honored me by offering me the position of Chief of the Detective Bureau. I accepted the position —"

"Then I suppose I should address you as — By the way, just how should one address you?"

"But I immediately withdrew my acceptance," he continued, ignoring the cool irony which seemed to come automatically into her voice whenever they met. "I refused because of certain things I learned from Thorne about you."

"About me? What are they?"

"That's what I want to learn more about — and from you."

"Ah — then you still are a detective?"

"I suppose I am," still ignoring the irony of her tone. "But just now I primarily am a person who is interested in his own affairs as a man."

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"Your affairs?" she questioned.

"Just now your affairs have become my affairs. And I'm hoping that you'll help me by frankly answering my questions."

"Questions about what?"

"About yourself."

"Such as?"

"Instead of leaving it for me to discover by accident, why did you not frankly tell me of your intention to marry some one else? — when you knew what for six months I had been hoping for. How much do you care for Jack Morton?"

His determined face, and the flashing memories of what he had tried to do for her, checked the sharp replies that instinctively started for her lips. The steady gaze of his intense eyes sent a warm tremor through her, gave her a swift, tingling pleasure. But that very pleasure was a warning to her: such feeling in her was only aberration — the life signs of some of her less important elements, which she had adjudged to be a menace to her success and which she must therefore suppress. The next moment she had full control of herself — and she had decided on what should be her course with him.

"You seem to regard me as a mystery," she remarked with tantalizing coolness.

"You are one — in a degree. And I want it solved."

"There is nothing in the least mysterious about me," she said in her even tone. "I'll tell you all you

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need to know. You may be seated if you like." And after they were both in chairs: "First about Mr. Morton. He is a pleasant, agreeable gentleman. He has money and position."

"You love him?"

"I like him."

"You are marrying him, then, because it is a good business proposition — to put it brutally."

She met his flushed face calmly. "That is not putting it brutally. Rather, it is merely putting it honestly." This she had decided must be made the final interview between them. "I told you, when you were here two hours ago, that I had discovered that I am not at all the woman you believed lay undeveloped in me. You may call me worldly — selfish — ambitious. And you will be tremendously right."

He looked at her hard, and was silent a moment. "But that is n't answering my first question and all it implied: why did n't you write me before you returned to New York? Why did n't you frankly tell me of your intended marriage?"

She lifted her shoulders ever so slightly. "It must have been because I never thought of it."

He flushed, but she met his look with unabashed composure. She had lied, but she had lied easily, for the lie had been carefully premeditated. When, during her absence, her mind's decision had gone against Clifford, she had considered what would be the most effective method of giving undebatable

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conclusion to the affair; and had decided upon this course that she had followed. No need for letters — no chance for sentimental pleading to alter her mind; it would be all over, and ended, before he knew a thing. Further, since the break had to come, it appealed to her pride to seem superior and indifferent.

Clifford was angry, but he contained himself. "To go on: was your meeting with Mr. Morton in that out-of-the-way spot, Pine Mountain Lodge, pure coincidence as he said? — or did cunning brains bring it about?"

"You mean, my cunning brains?" Two spots of conscious color appeared in her cheeks.

"I do not mean you. Did some one else, perhaps without your knowledge at the time, plan that you should meet?"

"What are you driving at?" she demanded sharply.

"I don't know myself yet — exactly."

"Who could have planned our meeting? As you know, I went to Pine Mountain Lodge to be alone. Mr. Morton, not knowing of my presence there or even of my existence, came to Pine Mountain to rest up. We could n't help meeting, since the lodge is the only place at which one can stay. That's all there is to this amazing mystery."

"Undoubtedly all you see. But the coincidence explanation does n't explain everything. Some one may have been behind Jack Morton's going."

"Who? In what way? And for what reason?"

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"Those are things to be found out." He looked at her steadily for a moment. "I asked you this before, but I am going to ask it again: why are you here in hiding?"

"After all, I guess I don't mind telling you in the least," she returned coolly, with a sudden perverse gratification in revealing what she knew he could not like in her. Also she felt that here was another detail by which she could make Clifford feel the utter finality of the break between them. "Jack and I came to New York intending to be married the next day. But the very evening of the day we arrived, Jack's father unexpectedly came to town and appeared at the Biltmore where Jack is staying."

"Was that before or after the evening I saw you at the Grand Alcazar with Mr. Loveman?"

"You saw me there the evening of the day of my return. Jack was to have had dinner with me that night," she added, "and had reserved the table and had asked his friend, Mr. Loveman, and then he got tangled up with a friend and could not come. It was that same evening that his father arrived in town. I believe this is simple and clear."

"As far as it goes. But why did you go into hiding?"

"Is n't that rather obvious?" she returned with her cool frankness. "Jack and I were going to keep our marriage secret — perhaps for a long time. The appearance of his father, with the announcement that he was going to stay with Jack, naturally de-

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layed our marriage. I insisted that it be postponed until his father was away and there was no danger of immediate discovery."

"And Jack?"

"Jack was reckless. He was all for getting married right away. But I refused to take the risk. Also, under the circumstances, it did n't seem particularly wise to give the father a chance to find out about me by our appearing openly together."

"But you yourself could have gone out openly alone, or with friends."

"Oh, of course," she said dryly — "and have run the risk of Jack and his father seeing me in public, and learning all about me. No, thank you —the only way for me has been to keep under cover for the present."

Clifford had felt a great start, but he had suppressed it; and he managed to say quite casually: "Of course Jack Morton does n't know who you really are?"

"Of course not. Oh, I don't mind so much what he might learn about me," she added, a bit defiantly. "You police have nothing on me — not in the way of a conviction, anyhow. But it would not help particularly if he learned who my father had been, and that Joe Russell is my uncle, and that my brother is Slant-Face Regan."

"But he'll be sure to learn some day."

"By that time he'll have become so attached to me that it'll not make much difference."

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"But there's his father. What about what'll happen when he finds out? All Jack's money comes through his father."

"Oh, his father will come around in the end. You see he's not to know till we get ready."

Clifford looked at her for a long moment of silence.

"I know what you're thinking; you're thinking I'm just another adventuress," she said with a shrug. "But what of that? Every woman is an adventuress who is trying to better her position and who is using her head to do it. And that's just what every woman is doing!"

"I was not thinking chiefly of that; I was thinking of Peter Loveman. Did he suggest that you go into hiding?"

"When Jack told him of our engagement, he said he did n't want to know anything about it, he wanted to keep out of any such affair. But when he learned Jack's father was in town, he telephoned me to keep out of the way."

"You've known Loveman some time?"

"Since I came back to America. He's been Uncle Joe's lawyer; and naturally they're friends."

"And he could have known you were in Pine Mountain Lodge?"

"Of course Uncle Joe might have told him."

Clifford considered a moment. "Tell me, just what has Mr. Loveman had to do with this affair?"

"I have already told you everything I know."

Clifford was convinced that in this she was telling

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him the truth. But all his senses informed him that somewhere, working in some manner, behind this affair was Peter Loveman, playing with his master's subtlety upon human frailties, passions, and ambitions. Undoubtedly Mary Regan was being used. Undoubtedly also Commissioner Thorne had been right when he had declared that Mary Regan had no suspicion that she was being used, that she believed that whatever she was doing she was doing of her own free will.

He had put to her all the questions he had intended; and as for a moment he sat gazing at her — so composed, so worldly-looking, and so very young to be saying such things as she had just said — the more personal questions, which had shaken him so often, throbbed through him like so many gigantic and fiery pulse-beats: Was she through and through and unchangeably this worldly, calculating Mary Regan that she had so carefully depicted for him — or was it all just a pose? Or might she believe herself sincere in this sophistication — and yet deep down in her might there be the living essence of a very different Mary Regan that she tried to deny and ignore? He could not forget that moment in Washington Square when her soul had seemed unlocked; he could not forget her kiss . . .

Clifford stood up as though his intention was to leave. She also rose. His trifling strategy achieved its end — physical proximity and the chance which sitting at formal distance in chairs did not permit.

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Suddenly he gripped her two shoulders; and the energy and purpose and feeling which he had kept in restraint during the past minutes now burst forth.

"Listen to me, Mary Regan," he declared tensely. "You are not going to marry Jack Morton! You hear me!"

She was so startled at the change in him that she was hardly aware of the hands clutching her shoulders. "Why not?"

His words rushed out. "I'm not going to say anything about it's not being square. He's not good enough for you! Oh, I don't mean to run down a man I've called my friend. Jack Morton is pleasant enough in his way. And you've seen him at his best — away from the lights and Big Pleasure, when he was on his good behavior — and there are few men who can be more agreeable than Jack Morton. But Broadway is likely to get hold of him again! And girls! — no girl is pretty to him for more than six months, and every pretty girl is prettier than the last pretty girl! It's just the way Jack is made — or the way this town has made him. I tell you it's an awful mistake!"

"It's my own mistake I'm making!" Her dark eyes flashed at him. "Take off your hands!"

Instead he clutched her all the tighter. "There's a bigger reason than the mistake. Mary, you love me!"

"Love you!" she ejaculated.

"Yes, you love me, and you know you love me!"

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he declared masterfully. The impulse was upon him to sweep her from her announced determination by dominating her with a swift power comprised of his own longing for her and her reawakened liking for him. "You know you love me, or why did you see Commissioner Thorne about me six months ago, and why did you to-day suggest to him that he again offer me the place of Chief of the Detective Bureau? You love me, and you thought your marriage to me might injure my public career. You don't care how much marriage to Jack Morton may injure him. Don't you think I see through you? Don't you think I understand? You're not going to marry Jack Morton! You're going to marry me!"

She had paled — and her dark eyes, of a brown that was almost a black, were fixed upon him widely, in what might have been fear, or bewilderment, or fascination, or all of these — and he felt a trembling go through her body. For a long moment they stood tensely thus: he hoping that he had carried the day — and at the same time poignantly wondering what she was about to say or do.

"You are going to marry me! You are going to marry me!" he repeated after the manner of those who seek to work miracles by the power of a force-fully iterated idea.

He felt her body grow taut; and the startled look of her face gave place to composed decision. That moment he knew that he had lost — for this day at least.

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"Please remove your hands!" she commanded in a quiet, edged voice.

He did not at once obey; his faculties were still so engaged with his struggle to turn her aside, and with his failure, that he scarcely heard her.

"Please remove your hands!" she repeated, her voice not going up by so much as a semi-tone.

His hands fell to his sides.

"Despite what you say, Mr. Clifford," she continued in the same even voice of calm decision, "I am not going to marry you, and I am going to marry Mr. Morton."

He was composed again. "Perhaps you may never marry me," he returned grimly. "But you certainly will never marry Jack Morton."

"And why not?"

"Because I shall prevent it."

"How?"

"By any and whatever means seem most effective."

Her gaze sharpened. Then the red of anger faintly tinted the tawny satin of her cheek.

"You mean to say you would be low enough to tell Jack or his father about me and my family?"

He looked her straight in the face. "You have admitted that that procedure might be effective."

"You would n't dare do that!" And she seized his arm with a grasp no less intense than his of a minute before, and glared at him.

"I'll do exactly what may be necessary, Miss Regan."

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"You — you —" she gasped. "You have no right to interfere in my affairs!"

"There is far more to this affair than just *You*, Miss Regan." With an almost impersonal movement he removed her hand from his arm and let it fall. "I must be going. But do not forget for a moment that I am going to prevent your marriage, and prevent it in whatever way will be most effective."

He bowed slightly. Standing just where he had left her, she watched him go out, within her a dazed commotion of surprise, consternation, suspense — and, strangely, not quite so high an anger toward Clifford as she had felt two moments before.

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CHAPTER VII

NINA CORDOVA

YES, he must prevent this marriage, he must block Loveman, he must find out Loveman's plan, and he must do all quickly — but how? To warn the Mortons would achieve some of these ends; but he had a strong repugnance to this procedure. He would only play this as his last card.

Clifford thought of Slant-Face; but he realized that Slant-Face would probably have no influence with his sister, and possibly the ex-pickpocket might even regard the affair from Mary's viewpoint. Also he thought of her Uncle Joe; but the same objection held true regarding him, and also the width of the continent made him unavailable. As for Commissioner Thorne, he could not be of service in the present stage of affairs. And then Clifford thought of Uncle George. Uncle George might possibly give suggestions, for Uncle George knew as much about the pleasure life (and what lay beneath it) of Broadway and of Broadway's closest territorial relative, Fifth Avenue between the Waldorf and St. Patrick's Cathedral, as any other hundred men in New York put together.

An hour after leaving Mary, Clifford sat in the Grand Alcazar restaurant, looking into the bland,

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genial, cunning, loose-skinned old face. He had just finished telling Uncle George of his discovery of the whereabouts of Mary Regan and the other events of the day.

The old man regarded Clifford with meditative, puckered gaze — a gaze of somewhat peculiar effect, begotten by his lack of eyebrows and eyelashes. "Son," he began slowly, "the thing that stands out in this chunk of *vers libre* you've been handing me, is the fact that you're so stuck on that little dame Mary Regan —"

"Let's leave me, and what I may think of her, out of it," put in Clifford.

"Don't interrupt, son. You ask me a thing and you've got to let me spiel along in my own way" — which, indeed, was one of the difficulties not to be avoided in consulting Uncle George. "Now, you listen to me, son, and you'll hear something out of the original book out of which old Solomon and those other wise guys that have been playing big time steady for three or four thousand years swiped all their good gags. Son, you're too damned monogamous! You're insulting God: what the hell d' you suppose he made so many pretty girls for? — and let the others get wise on how to make themselves pretty? Now, I like Mary Regan as well as any male person can who's not her relative and who's not trying to be — but if she tried any of that beautiful female cussedness on me, I'd throw her one smiling kiss, mail her a picture post-card of the jumping-off

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place, and proceed to admire some of the other works of God."

Uncle George nodded, and started to sip his white wine thinned with sparkling water.

"Thanks, Uncle George. But let's get back —"

"Hold on, son. That was just my first sentence. Supposing Mary Regan is trying to put something across by holding back a little of the truth — sort of saving it up for a rainy day. Well, what of that? Ain't we all liars? You take it from your Uncle George, a superannuated old burglar, president emeritus of that grand old *alma mater*, the University of Broadway, who's played every kind of game with every kind of male and female now decorating this earth — take it from me, son, I've never seen the strait and narrow road of truth congested with the traffic. That's one road you can speed on, and not even see a cop. So, son, if Mary Regan has been like the rest of us, don't hold it especially against her. And her marrying Jack Morton by holding back a bit of the evidence, it's not going to hurt him such a lot."

"I'm thinking of what it may do to her."

"Why, now, son, a marriage now and then seems to improve a lot of women. And the only time a few marriages seem to be a handicap to some women is when they undertake to sign their names in full."

"You're in very good voice this evening, Uncle George. But, if you don't mind, let's talk about how to stop that marriage, and how to find out Loveman's game."

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"All right — all right. Now, let's see. You know Nina Cordova, star of that new musical show that's a sure-fire frost — what is it?"

"'Orange Blossoms.' Yes, I know of her."

"Then you'll remember that in young Morton's previous Broadway incarnation he had an affair with her — which little Nina broke off sharp and sudden when she got the chance a year ago at the star's part in 'The Bridal Wreath'? She's a live proposition: why not inject her into the affair?"

"I've thought of that," said Clifford.

"H'm. Well, then," Uncle George meditated, "you remember how Jack Morton, when he was along here before, used to like his little quart or two or three of champagne?—and how he behaved when he was all lit up? Why not kidnap him from Bradley, give him a chance to be his real self again, and then ship him to Mary? This different Jack Morton might make her stop and think. Or send him along to his old man — and when his old man saw how the kid had broken training he might do what he's threatened, stop Jack's dough; and this might be enough of a jolt to make Mary call the thing off."

"I've thought of those things, too."

"You seem to have thought of everything," half grumbled Uncle George. "Well, what's the matter with these ways?"

"For one thing, it would take time to put them across. I've got to act quickly, for there's no telling

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what she'll do. Besides, before I take any action, I'd like to learn how she got into this matter; I'd like to learn just what Loveman's and Bradley's part in the game has been, just what they plan to make of it in the future."

"I get you," nodded Uncle George. "So that you can plan your action accordingly. But that's some job, son, — getting in on the inside of the game of such a pair as Bradley and Loveman."

"I know it. It can only be done indirectly." Clifford regarded Uncle George thoughtfully for a moment, then suddenly asked: "Do you know Jack Morton's father?"

"I've met him."

"Know him well enough to get into a friendly talk with him?"

"Son," demanded Uncle George in an aggrieved tone, "you mean to insult me by asking if I need even to have seen a man before to be his best friend inside of thirty minutes — me that could go out now and sell old Andy Carnegie's pig-iron billets back to him as gold-bricks!" Uncle George looked at his watch. "Father Morton is staying at the Biltmore. It's now six-twenty. I've noticed that he leads himself into the smoking-room at six-thirty for a cocktail. I feel a craving for a Biltmore cocktail. Son, just where is that building lot in North River located that you want me to sell him?"

"Could you steer the talk around to his son — make him doubt Bradley a bit — say something

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good about me — and implant in him the idea that he ought to consult me?"

"Could I? Why don't you write me an act that'd bring out my talents? It's already done — what you going to do next?"

"That depends on whether Mr. Morton comes to see me, and whether I get anything out of him."

Uncle George heaved himself to his feet. "Come on, son, see me safe aboard a taxi." Outside, in the cab, he reached forth and laid a hand on Clifford's shoulder. "Remember, son, there's just as good mermaids in the sea as have ever been caught."

"*Bon voyage*," said Clifford as the car started.

The old man, winking a genial, satyr-like wink, blew Clifford a kiss through the open window.

At half-past ten that night Clifford sat at a little table in the Gold Room at the Grantham. There had come a message from Uncle George that he should be in this room at this hour. Beyond this the message had said nothing.

Clifford had wandered through the score of big public rooms that comprised the first two floors of the Grantham — the lounges, the parlors, the half-dozen restaurants — with the feverish hope that he might glimpse Mary Regan (so little effect had Uncle George's wisdom had upon him!), but with no idea of what he should do or say should he see her. He had had an impulse to call again at her suite, but had restrained himself from that folly. He now glanced through the slowly filling Gold

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Room, but he did not sight her. He wondered just where she was — what she was thinking of — what she was planning. Should he, if all other methods failed, block her worldly plans and the as yet unpenetrated scheme of Loveman and Bradley by telling the Mortons who she was? He felt himself a cad whenever he thought of it; but, yes, if he had to, he would do it! . . .

A hand fell upon his shoulder. "Wake up there, you old crystal-gazer!" called a cheerful voice.

Clifford looked up. Smiling down on him was a cherubic face: a somewhat elderly cherub, to be sure, since where usually there is the adornment of divine curls there was the glaze of baldness.

"Sit down, Loveman, and join me in a drink."

"I'm afraid of you, my boy," answered the famous little lawyer. "You might put poison in my cup."

"Why?"

"Because I lied to you — you see, I'm not waiting to be accused," the other smiled affably. "I told you I did n't know where Mary Regan was, and after that you followed me and I led you right to her. She telephoned me about your finding her. You sure caught me dead to rights."

"I'm afraid I can't do anything with you, Loveman, — though that was the second fib you told me about her."

"Both gentleman's lies — told for a lady's sake," amiably explained Loveman. "She did n't want her

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whereabouts known. But now that you've found her, what're you going to do?"

"I don't know that I can do anything." And then Clifford chanced a shot. "You see, I learned that she is secretly engaged to Jack Morton."

"You don't say!" exclaimed the little man. "That is astounding! Well, well — I'll have a look into that and see what's to be done."

He rubbed his shining crown in bewildered thoughtfulness, — Clifford had to admire his art as an actor, — then again was smiling.

"Wish you'd join me after a while at supper, Clifford. Little party I'm giving Nina Cordova — got to cheer her up a bit, you understand You know 'Orange Blossoms' is one God-awful flivver, and Nina, poor orphan-child, don't know what to do. Gee, but it's a rotten show, and what it did n't do to kill itself Nina did for it: she sure is one musical-comedy prima donna that ought to be seen and not heard! And even at that, seen too oft, familiar with her face — oh, go ask the box-office man to finish the quotation. So I'm giving her this little party to boost her spirits — though why should n't somebody be giving me a party to cheer me up for the twenty thousand United States of America dollars that dropped through the bottom of that show?" He gave a moan of mock self-sympathy. "Well, you'll join us when the crowd blows in?"

"Thanks, but I'm waiting for a friend."

"Break away if you can; be glad to have you."

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Clifford watched the strange little notable, behind whose light chatter he knew to be the cleverest legal brain of its sort in New York, cross to a small corner table, which was reserved for him every night and was known to the waiters here as "Mr. Loveman's table." He saw Loveman converse in turn with various people, and in a general way he understood; for at this table, during the play hours of the night, Loveman transacted many of the affairs too delicate to be brought to his office or his apartment. And he saw Loveman, while he chatted, gaze about upon those gathering for supper and dancing. There were people here whose family names were daily in the society and Wall Street columns — most of them here with no intent more reprehensible than the restless search for pleasure, which in this our present day has become public pleasure. Loveman smiled on them most kindly: as why should n't he, thought Clifford, since many of them were working for him, though they guessed it not?

Loveman's party now arrived and were seating themselves at a large table directly beside the dancing-floor. There were Jack Morton, his father, Nina Cordova, two other actresses, and half a dozen men and women of the smart young society set. Loveman was at his best, keeping his party in highest spirits: no man in New York was his superior as midnight host.

As Clifford watched the gay supper progress, he wondered what other of these guests the gay Love-

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man might be deftly drawing into some distant entanglement.

Presently some one took the chair opposite Clifford. It was Uncle George; and Uncle George gave him a slight wink of a lashless eye.

"While we're on the subject, son," the old man began, "I might remark that I put a bee in little Nina's bonnet."

"Just what have you got me here for?" demanded Clifford.

"It's always worth while, son, to watch Loveman improve each midnight hour. See how he smiles and talks — and yet, God, how he's working! But you're here, son, because of Father Morton; and also, perhaps, to see if Nina's bee buzzes. How about splitting fifty-fifty on a ham sandwich?"

As the two ate the best supper Uncle George could order, Clifford kept his eyes on Loveman's party. They were now leaving the table in couples to dance. Nina Cordova, a slender blonde with a soft, appealing face and quick, bright eye, was with Jack Morton; dancing was something they both did well; and it was easy to see that the slender prima donna had more than a dancing interest in her partner. Then Loveman danced with her; and in the middle of the dance they halted beside Clifford's table.

"Finish this with me, Uncle George," coaxed the little star.

"My dear child," returned the old man, "if

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you'd spoken to me a little earlier, say bout 1871, I'd have danced with you till that orchestra dropped dead. But now, why, I'd just fall apart on the floor. Ask Clifford there."

She smiled at Clifford and the next moment he was fox-trotting with her. She was certainly a marvel of a dancer; also, beneath her *ingénue* surface, she had a keen brain of her own sort; and in her light chatter as they swung about he sensed that she was trying to search his mind — and he sensed also that she was doing this at the instigation of Loveman. But he parried so well that he believed she did not even know he was fencing.

"Clever girl, Uncle George," he said when he was back at his table.

"Son, you said something then," affirmed the old man. "Unless my hunch works wrong you'll some day find her mixed up in this affair; and when you do meet up with her, son, you'd better forget that, according to the date written down in her press-agent's Bible, that dear little child is only twenty-one."

Clifford looked over at her thoughtfully. She danced half a dozen dances with Jack Morton; and Clifford, watching everything, guessed that the elder Morton was none too pleased. And then she danced again with Loveman; and he saw that she was talking imperiously to the little lawyer; and if only he could have overheard he might have given more weight to Uncle George's prediction that Nina

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Cordova was to play some considerable part before the final curtain fell.

"Peter," she was saying, "since 'Orange Blossoms' is such a fizzle, I'm going to quit the show business, and marry some nice young man."

"But, my child, your art!" protested Loveman.

"My art be damned!" replied the pretty one. "And, Peter, I've decided that the nice young man will be Jack Morton."

Loveman gave her a sharp look. But if he felt any alarm, his voice gave no evidence of it.

"Better think again, dearie. He'll not have forgotten the way you threw him down."

"Give me a week and I'll make him forget it," she returned confidently.

"If you are set on getting married, Nina dear, I'll help you find another candidate," said Loveman in his soft, advisory tone. "This town's full of rich young fellows. Just look 'em over, make your choice, and I'll help you out with the rest."

"I don't want any other!"

"I don't think Jack Morton will do, my dear."

"Why not?"

"I think, dearie, that there are other arrangements —"

"You mean that you have other arrangements!" she said sharply.

"There now, dearie, don't get excited. This town's full of nice men —"

"You can't bluff me, Peter! I see through you —

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you don't want me to marry Jack." The little *ingénue* was suddenly a little fury — but a composed fury. "Peter, I know a lot," she said quietly, "and unless you behave about the way I want you to, I may do something that won't make you awfully happy."

There was no mistaking the threat in that voice, and that threat was not to be underrated. Loveman had no intention of yielding; the situation required careful handling and perhaps quick action elsewhere; in the meantime the thing to do was to temporize.

"All right, dearie, — we'll fix it up," he said soothingly. "There's Jack Morton waiting for us; I'll turn you right over to him."

As Clifford saw Nina and young Morton begin a fox-trot, a passing waiter handed Clifford a card. On it was engraved, "*Mr. James Morton*," and around the name was scribbled, "Wait for me in the lounge just off the bar."

Clifford descended to the Grantham's lounge, which was fitted in the manner of the smartest and most exclusive of men's clubs. Five minutes later Mr. Morton entered and came straight to him. Clifford had already made his private estimate of this man with the graying hair and distinguished face: a man whose habit it was to buy men, — and women, too, — use them, and when finished with them, throw them aside without a thought and go on his way.

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"I've heard of you, Mr. Clifford," he began, when they were seated in deep chairs beside a little table. "They say you are a detective who's absolutely on the square."

"Thank you," said Clifford.

"I did n't call you down to pay you compliments," the other said incisively, eyeing him keenly, "so I'll go right to the point. You know my son?"

"Yes."

"It's about Jack I want to see you." Mr. Morton spoke in the compact sentences of a master of affairs. "I guess you know he's been some trouble. I'm certain something's in the air now. I don't know whether it's that Miss Cordova or something else. I can't get anything out of Jack. I've been having him looked over by a private detective; you know him — Bradley; but Bradley does n't seem to be able to learn anything either. I'm not one hundred per cent trustful of Bradley: set a detective to catch a detective — that might prove a good idea. Will you undertake the job? — finding out about Bradley, and finding out about my son?"

"I can't say until I know the situation." Here was opening before him the chance he had been working for, but Clifford managed to speak composedly. "If you don't mind telling me, just how do things stand?"

"If you know Jack, you know what his idea of living in New York was a year or six months ago. I could n't leave my affairs and come here to look

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after him. I ordered my lawyer, Mr. Loveman, to take whatever steps were necessary. It was absolutely essential that Jack should take a brace —"

"Pardon me. Aside from the moral reasons, were there any other reasons for your wanting Jack to change his habits?"

"There was, and still is, an engagement with a young woman back in Chicago. Not exactly an engagement, rather an understanding between the families. The match could not be more desirable; the young lady has everything."

"Pardon me—do I know the young lady you refer to?"

"You may have heard of her. Her father is Sherwood Jones. She is Miss Maisie Jones."

"I have seen her picture in the illustrated Sunday supplements—among prominent young society girls."

"Then you can partially understand why I consider the match so desirable. But the family at that time objected, and still objects — until Jack proves that he has settled down. Three months ago I came East and delivered an ultimatum."

"In the presence of Jack alone?" Clifford put in gently.

"No. Mr. Loveman had been doing his best to control the boy. Naturally he was present."

"And the ultimatum?"

"I said that he either had to take a brace or I was through with him."

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"Let's see whether I get the general idea." Clifford was moving forward carefully. "If Jack did n't brace up, he'd have to earn his own money. On the other hand, if he did brace up, the idea was that he was to quit New York and marry the young lady you have referred to."

"That's it exactly."

"Did you suggest any particular plan for his bracing up?"

"I said he had to spend a period at some quiet place far away from New York."

"And what did Mr. Loveman think of this idea?"

"He thought it was just the plan. In fact he said he knew the very place for Jack to go to — Pine Mountain Lodge."

"Then he suggested Pine Mountain Lodge?"

"Yes."

Clifford was silent a moment.

"You have told Mr. Loveman and Mr. Bradley of your intention to consult me?"

"No."

"I suggest that you do not. Is there any other information you can give me?"

"Nothing else that's definite. But I suspect a lot, and I want to find out what's doing. Will you take the case?"

Clifford spoke guardedly, masking his dislike for the ruthless man before him. "I prefer not to consider myself retained by you until I am certain I can

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serve you. I'll have to think the situation over, and let you know later."

It was little that Mr. Morton had told Clifford, yet, after Morton had left him, that little set Clifford's mind going like a racer. He sat thinking — thinking; and after a time he began to perceive dim outlines of what Loveman's plan might be. And as with growing excitement he began to see, he began also to consider what his own course should be. . . .

He looked at his watch. It was half-past three. He started back for the Gold Room, but on the way up he saw Loveman and his party leaving. He quickly secured his coat and hat and followed them out just in time to see Loveman go off in a taxi with Nina Cordova. He was after them in another taxi, a discreet block behind. Five minutes later Loveman set Miss Cordova down at her hotel, and went on to his own home.

Clifford dismissed his taxi, waited ten minutes, then crossed and entered Loveman's apartment house.

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CHAPTER VIII

IN LOVEMAN'S LIBRARY

THE drowsy elevator boy carried Clifford to the eleventh floor, and Clifford rang Loveman's bell. After a moment the door was opened by Loveman's Japanese butler, to whom Clifford, after stepping in, gave his card. The little Oriental, showing no slightest surprise at a call at such an hour, disappeared noiselessly through a door; and reappeared after a brief delay and held the door open as a sign that Clifford was to enter.

Clifford stepped through the doorway and found himself in the large richly furnished library of Peter Loveman. Loveman, in a rope-girdled dressing-gown and with his tonsured head looking very much a jolly little monk, crossed the room with smiling hospitality. In a deep, tapestried chair, wearing a dinner jacket, sat the square figure of Bradley.

"This is a surprise, Clifford!" cried Loveman, taking his hand. "And a pleasure, too, — also a relief: dropping in on a pair of grouches, just as they were getting ready to murder each other to drive dull care away. You there, you other grouch," — to Bradley, — "say good-evening to our relief expedition."

Bradley, without rising, nodded curtly. Clifford gave back a similar greeting.

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"Off with your overcoat, Clifford," the little man said briskly, "and make yourself comfortable."

"I'll keep it on, Loveman. I can only stay a few minutes."

"Well, anyhow, sit down," and Loveman pushed him into a chair and gestured toward a little table on which stood bottles and glasses and siphons. "All the ingredients here of the Fountain of Perpetual Youth: what'll you have — high-ball, cocktail, liqueur — or shall I have Oni bring you a split of champagne?"

"Thanks, I'm not drinking to-night."

"Smoke, then?" offering cigars and cigarettes.

"No, thank you."

"Say, you're making a host look dam' inhospitable," humorously complained the little man. "How about a little whist? I'll run the dummy. Bradley there loves it: he's acting vice-chairman of the Daughters of Brooklyn Memorial and Bridge Associ—"

"Cut it out!" growled Bradley. "Ask him what he wants."

"Pardon him, Clifford: Bradley's a gentleman of no social parts. But since he has mentioned the point — is there anything special you came for?"

"I came to talk," said Clifford.

"Talk — good! Talking's my trade!" Loveman drew up a chair, so that the three of them formed a square, the table of bottles filling the fourth side. "Let 'er go — guest has the opening speech."

"I suppose, Clifford, that this is where you'd like

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to have me make a quick exit," said Bradley — and he crossed his legs, folded his arms, bit upon his invariable big cigar, and gave Clifford a challenging look.

"On the other hand, Bradley," Clifford returned, "I count it luck that I found you here, and I beg you as a favor to remain. Bradley, Loveman," he said sharply, "I've come here for a showdown — to tell you that I'm on to your little game!"

"Our game?" queried Loveman, with puzzled blandness.

"Your game with Mary Regan and the Mortons."

"Indeed!" Loveman said softly. "Now, I wonder if you'd mind giving a little information to an ignorant man?"

Bradley's face had suddenly become hard; his little eyes were gleaming. But though Loveman's manner was blandly puzzled, Clifford knew the little lawyer was as alertly watchful of him as was Bradley — and was as much to be watched.

"I'll put all my cards on the table, Loveman," he said with deliberation. "I'll tell you exactly what I know — which is also exactly what you know. There's nothing at all extraordinary about it; it's just the sort of thing that with a few variations you're doing over and over."

"Oh, I say, am I really so monotonous!" protested Loveman.

"You said you were going to put your cards on the table," cut in Bradley. "Come on, let's see your two-spots."

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"We'll go back a bit, Loveman," said Clifford. "Morton, senior, had entrusted you with the legal end of some of his New York affairs; and when Jack Morton came to New York, and began to get himself tangled up through having too much money, the father put it up to you to extricate his son. Good profit in handling such affairs, Loveman: nice fee for legal services rendered; a private split of the sums for which the matters were settled; and an unobtrusive arrangement whereby the son could be drawn into further profitable predicaments. A big-paying business, Loveman."

"Go on," said the little lawyer pleasantly.

"Three or four months ago the father descended upon New York in a fury. He declared he was through settling for Jack's troubles. He was going to send Jack somewhere far away from New York — and Jack had to take a brace, or the father would drop him. Also there was a marriage with a rich girl that the father wanted to put across — and there'd be nothing doing unless Jack straightened up. So Jack simply had to be braced up. Right there, Loveman, was where you saw yourself losing a big piece of your income. But you did some quick thinking, and you fell in with the father's idea that Jack should be sent into retirement to reform. In fact, you knew the very place, Pine Mountain Lodge. And on your suggestion Jack was sent there."

"And if I did mention Pine Mountain Lodge, what of that?" Loveman mildly inquired.

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"You knew Mary Regan was there, and knew she was the only attractive woman staying at the hotel. And you knew that Jack Morton fell for about every pretty woman that he met. Thrown together in that isolation, you had n't a doubt of what he would do. It was only a chance — but it was *your only chance;* and if it worked out the way you thought it might, there would be rich possibilities in the situation for you — without your seeming to have been mixed in the affair. Well, it worked out just as you thought it might — and the possibilities lie ready to your hand."

"In case I'm overlooking anything good," Loveman remarked in the same gentle voice, "would you mind telling me just what these possibilities are?"

"Of course the marriage had to be secret; otherwise the possibilities would have been cut down by two thirds. First item, after the marriage had taken place, there was the possibility of getting hush money out of Mary Regan by threatening to expose her. You would never have appeared in this; Bradley would have attended to this detail — perhaps through one of his men. Second, after you had exhausted the possibilities of blackmail, the next step would have been to inform the father that you suspected something was wrong with Jack. The father would order the matter looked into; you would engage Bradley for the job, and after a lengthy examination Bradley would report a secret marriage — a big bill for detective services. Third, you would then

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be retained to annul the marriage — and a big fee there. Well, Loveman, Bradley," he ended grimly, "I believe that's just about the outline of this particular sweet little game!"

Bradley was glaring at him, his square jaws clamped upon his cigar. Little Loveman, still with his affable look, was twirling the tasseled end of his girdle around a chubby forefinger.

"You're very ingenious, very imaginative, Clifford. But granting for the moment that you are correct, what next?"

Clifford leaned sharply forward. "You are not going through with it! I'm going to stop you!"

Clifford gazed tensely at the two men. A slight quivering ran through Bradley's frame; his cigar fell, bitten through; his small, brilliant eyes were points of vicious flame. Loveman still twirled the end of his girdle, but now a bit more slowly. And thus the three sat for several moments.

Then suddenly, without warning of word, seemingly without any preliminary motion, Bradley's powerful body launched itself from a sitting posture straight at Clifford. Clifford started to rise, and instinctively threw up his arms; but to no avail, for Bradley's big hands broke past his weak defense and gripped his throat. His chair went toppling over, the table with its cargo of liquors went crashing to the floor, and Clifford was carried resistlessly backward by the force of Bradley's lunge, until he came up against the great library table. Over this he toppled,

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his spine against the table's edge, and Bradley drove his head down upon the wood with a terrific thump.

"You'll stop nothing!" grated Bradley. "You've butted into my affairs for the last time!"

Clifford tried to struggle free, but he was caught at too hopeless a disadvantage — his spine upon the edge of the table, Bradley's weight crushing upon him, and that pair of hands clutching his throat. He could move only his arms, and those to no purpose; he could not cry out; he could not breathe. As his chest heaved for lack of air, he read his doom in the deadly fury of Bradley's face. And he realized, even could he call for help, the futility of such an outcry in this apartment at the top of a lofty building, at this heavily slumbrous hour of four.

He had been faintly conscious of hurried fumblings about the desk — of the snap of a lock — of the whine of a sliding drawer. Now, suddenly, as his wide eyes were growing bleared, he saw a dark something appear between his face and the face of Bradley a bare two feet away. And then he saw the something was a short, black pistol, and that the pistol was flush against Bradley's jaw, and that the pistol was gripped in a soft, round hand that was indubitably Loveman's. And he heard Loverman's voice, no longer velvety, snap out: —

"Damn you, Bradley, — that rough stuff don't go with me! Let loose of him, or, by God, I'll blow your dam' face off!"

Clifford saw Bradley's flaming little eyes shift

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toward the speaker. Then he saw the monk-like figure shift the pistol from jaw to Bradley's shoulder.

"No, I'll not kill you; I'll splinter your dam' bones," the sharp voice cried with fierce decision. "Get off that man before I count three, or your left arm'll be the first bone to go. One — two —"

The hands left Clifford's throat, and the heavy figure lifted itself from his body; and, thus freed, Clifford slumped to the floor where he sat limply, pantingly, against the table. Loveman had stepped around the table, and Clifford now saw that he was looking up at Bradley, and he saw that the cherubic, large-eyed face of the lawyer was grim with an awful wrath.

"You dam' big boob!" cried the little man. "You'd let yourself — and me! — in for a criminal charge! And people have always said you have a brain!"

"I've taken all I can from him!" Bradley said thickly.

"Either you control your temper and cut out the rough stuff," snapped Loveman, "or you and I are through!"

The pair gazed fixedly at each other. Neither spoke. While they stood silent, Clifford became aware of the Japanese butler, his back toward the three of them and seemingly unaware of their doings, on his knees picking up bottles and broken glass and toweling up the spilled liquor from the rug.

Without replying, Bradley put his hands in his

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trousers' pockets, resumed his chair, and crossed his legs. With an easy motion Loveman dropped the pistol into a pocket of his dressing-gown, and stepped to Clifford's side. He was again the agreeable man-about-town that Broadway liked so well.

"Too bad — but natural — the way men will lose their tempers," he said, as he helped Clifford to his feet and into a chair. "How're you feeling?"

"I'll be all right in a breath or two."

"Better let me give you a brandy?"

"No, thanks."

"Aw, it's nothing!" cut in Bradley. "Let him finish saying how he was going to stop us!"

"Do you feel like that — yet?" Loveman queried solicitously.

Clifford was still dazed, but he was no less set in his purpose. "Bradley's right — a little scuffle like that is nothing."

"Good; a great thing to be in training!" Loveman sank into his chair, smiling urbanely. "We've forgotten what's happened"; and he brushed the matter into oblivion with a pleasant wave of the hand that two minutes before had gripped the pistol. "As I was about to remark — granting that you are right, how are you going to stop it?"

"Of course I could stop it," said Clifford, "by telling Jack and Mr. Morton about Mary Regan and her father and her uncle and her brother. At any rate, that would smash your game."

"As you say, provided, of course, there is a con-

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templated marriage, that would stop it," Loveman agreed pleasantly. "Why don't you do that?"

"Considering the character of the Mortons and the fact that she's more worth while than they are, telling on her seems to me a pretty raw deal to give Mary Regan: to show her up to them, and give the father, who's as sympathetic as a shark, a chance to take the lead, break it off, make a scandal out of it, and to humiliate her in public."

"That's dam' delicate of you, Clifford," said Loveman, "and I approve of your sentiments as a gentleman. But if you don't do that, how else are you going to stop it?"

Clifford spoke calmly. "I'm going to stop it through you."

"Through me! Well, well! Do you mind telling me, Clifford, just how I am going to do it?"

"You have some influence over Mary Regan; I don't pretend to know what it is. You go to her to-morrow and you tell her, saying whatever is necessary to bring her around, that she can't go through with the marriage. Then she breaks it off — and not the Mortons, and they'll not be any the wiser about her."

"Well, well, you certainly do seem to think I have a very strong influence with the ladies," Loveman said blandly. "Very flattering, I assure you. But supposing — all we've been talking about is mere supposition, you know — supposing I have a mild disinclination to do what you propose?"

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"Supposing that," Clifford returned grimly, "then I go to Mr. Morton, tell him about Mary Regan, and tell him the whole thing was your plan. And he'll believe what I say about you, Loveman; I've merely got to remind him that you suggested Pine Mountain Lodge, prove to him that you knew Mary Regan was there, prove to him that you've been seeing Mary Regan in New York, and he'll swallow everything else. Result, the present scheme of you and Bradley goes smash, and, further, you lose all future business with your best-paying client."

"Supposing, on the other hand," Loveman remarked in his same bland voice, "that I have no disinclination to do what you suggest?"

"In that case, you only lose out on your present plan. I'm not interested in Morton. You keep his business. You see, Loveman, I've got you: and what I'm offering is the best proposition for you."

Loveman gently stroked his crown. "Clifford, do you believe in fairies?"

"Where does that come in?"

"You ought to believe in fairies, Clifford. You really ought. With that imagination of yours, you'd coin money, writing fairy-stories for children —simply coin money." He turned to Bradley. "What do you say to Clifford's proposition?"

"Tell him to go to hell!" said Bradley, his old hatred flaring out.

"You'll excuse Fido's behavior, Clifford," Love-

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man said apologetically. "He has n't had a biscuit all day."

"The real question is," returned Clifford, "what does Peter Loveman say to the proposition?"

"What do I say? Well, now, well," Loveman said pleasantly, "you know I never did believe in fairies and so I can't be expected to gulp down this remarkable little story you've told me. But since you are interested in Miss Regan, and are concerned that nothing goes wrong with her — why, for your sake, of course I'll do it — I'll do anything you say."

Clifford stared penetratingly at the round face, which never before looked more like the face of an amiable monk. Behind that amiable face was a swift thought that, after all, he might slip Nina Cordova into this situation and that he'd square matters with Nina the first thing in the morning.

"You'll do it to-morrow?" demanded Clifford.

"To-morrow — sometime before noon." And as Clifford continued his keen glance: "You doubt me? All right." He walked to a section of his bookshelves and came back with a large, dingy volume. "Here's a Bible — a Gutenberg, 1455. There can't be a holier Bible than this; just think, man, what it cost. Go ahead — swear me."

"I guess you'll do it," said Clifford. He rose. "I believe that's all, gentlemen. Good-night."

As he started away Bradley glowered at him; but Loveman, slipping an arm through his, escorted him to the door. There Loveman held him for a moment.

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"That was one grand fairy-tale, Clifford, you dreamed about me," he said with a smile through which (perhaps purposely) there glinted ever so little of mockery. "But supposing I do have any little plan under way, I wonder how close you've come to guessing it? Now, I wonder?"

Down in the quiet street, Clifford found himself wondering too.

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CHAPTER IX

THE TEST OF LIFE

Now that he had won, now that the marriage and Loveman's plans were potentially blocked, there should have been a let-down from Clifford's long strain. But there was not. The settling of this affair seemed only to give mind-room to other concerns. He tossed about restlessly during the few hours that remained of the night; and he realized that his restlessness was not due wholly to the suspense of waiting for the finality that would come with Loveman's completed promise.

In the slow hours before the coming of the slate-colored dawn a vague, disturbing doubt crept in upon him. He had interfered with events, he had tried to shape life upon his ideas: was his course right? — that seemed to be something of the impalpable substance of his doubt. But what this new doubt was, strive as he would he could not evoke it from its vagueness into definite shape.

He had breakfast; and then, obeying an impulse which seemed to emerge from this new, obscure maze of his mind, he suddenly decided to see Mary Regan again — for what purpose he had no idea. Arrived at the Grantham he had his name 'phoned up to "Mrs. Gardner," and was informed that Mrs. Gardner would see him.

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Mary herself admitted him, and, not even replying to his "good-morning," she led him into the sitting-room. There she faced him, proud and coldly defiant.

"I suppose you have come to inform me you have told the Mortons all about me?"

"No," he replied.

"Then, to threaten me again that you will tell?"

"No."

"Then, what have you come for?"

He knew now — at least partly. During the moment he had been in the room and had gazed upon her, there had emerged from the maze of his thoughts and feelings, a sharply defined repugnance to what within the next hour or two was to happen between her and Loveman: a repugnance, felt in her behalf, that she should be made to yield to whatever influences that cunning little lawyer would be able to exert.

"I have come to ask you," he said, trying to speak composedly, but with all his being vibrant beneath that composure, "to break off this affair with Jack Morton of your own free will. You know you don't care for him. You know what you are planning to do is n't square. Why don't you be true to the best self that is in you and end it all yourself? — and end it now? There's the telephone," he urged — remembering that Loveman might any moment appear — "call Jack Morton up and tell him you've decided not to do it!"

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As he spoke, her face had grown sharp with decision. "Mr. Clifford," she exclaimed in a low, cutting voice, "I'm tired of your presumption, your interference! I'm tired of your trying to make me be what you think I ought to be! As if it mattered to me what you thought!"

She took a step nearer, her straight, young figure stiffened, and her dark eyes flashed at him. "Understand this, Mr. Clifford, — I've made up my mind, and made it up definitely, finally. I am going to do exactly what I want to do, and it is not in your power to stop me or divert me. You may tell either of the Mortons if you like — my real course will not be changed — that will merely mean that I'll do what I want to do in some other way!"

Clifford did not attempt to answer. Her defiant words, her young figure so rigid with its determined spirit of worldliness, had set some strange force working in him; a vague power seemed to be at conflict with the purpose he had held to for so long; a strange revulsion seized him, a revolution was under way which was compelling in its sweeping drive, but whose intent and direction for a moment he could not perceive.

He stood still, and stared at her. And then out of the inner turmoil came a clear, bright order; and then he realized that the restlessness, the formless doubts of the night before, had been the first faint stirrings of this which was grown and clarified into a new purpose and a new vision — a purpose and vision that

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astonished him. For they had come at the very time when his old purpose was the same as achieved.

She could but notice the remarkable change in his appearance. "Well, what is it now?" she demanded.

He drew a deep, quivering breath. A recklessness, a defiance — but behind which his new purpose remained cool — now possessed him. He was aware that he had to act quickly, for any instant Peter Loveman might be here.

"What is it now?" he repeated, with a provoking smile. If he did not have power to stir her to love, he knew that he had the power to stir her to anger. "I was just recalling what you said a moment ago: to the effect that you were going to do what you pleased and do it when you pleased. Pardon me for smiling — but when a woman boasts, it sometimes is amusing and a bit absurd."

"What do you mean?" she said sharply.

"Oh, I'm smiling at myself, too, for I've just realized what a fool I've made of myself in trying to stop you — an entirely unnecessary effort. What I mean, Miss Regan, is that I do not believe you could do it."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I suppose you'd go through with your part of it. But if put to the test of marrying at once, Jack Morton would never go through with his part. He may be a bit infatuated; but he's too wise to marry a woman without money — without knowing more about who she is — and without his father's ap-

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proval. No wonder Jack has been putting this off!"

She flushed hotly. "I have been the one to put it off!" she cried.

"Indeed," he exclaimed with unbelief none too polite. "From the way he was dancing last night with Miss Cordova — you know, that pretty musical-comedy star — I have an idea she's had a lot to do with the delay. And I imagine she'll have a lot more to do with further delay. Why, you poor thing," — he smiled irritatingly, — "to think you could hold a man like Jack Morton — you having to remain inactive, under cover — he free to roam about with all sorts of charming women — particularly with Miss Cordova!"

She did not speak for a moment. She was choked with that anger on which he had so carefully counted: no person, he knew, would be so likely to act upon impulse as a proud and angered woman, before the man who has insulted her.

"So you think I can't do it!" she exclaimed. "So he's the one who is holding back! Well, I'll just show you! Anyhow, this thing might as well come to a head right now. And I'll give you your chance to tell all you know about me."

She turned and took up the telephone from the writing-desk and asked for the Biltmore. Fortune favored her purpose, for in a minute she had Jack Morton on the wire.

"Can you come right over, Jack, — with your

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car? . . . No, don't bring your chauffeur; drive yourself. . . . Why? I'll tell you that when you come — only bring plenty of wraps. . . . All right, I'll be ready; come right up."

"He'll be over in fifteen minutes," she said to Clifford. "You may wait if you like. But you'll excuse me."

She passed into her bedroom. Clifford sank rather limply into a chair. He had come to what just then seemed the supreme crisis of his life, and he was still dazed at the way he had willed that crisis to eventuate. He sat thinking — thinking; the minutes she was out were long minutes to him.

Presently she reëntered. She had changed to a black velvet suit trimmed with black fur; a small fur hat sat snugly down upon her thick, dark hair; and she carried a fur motor-coat. She was an unforgettable picture for him: the high color of her dark face against the background of soft and sheeny blacks.

She did not address Clifford; but there was little time for their silence to become awkward, for almost at once the bell of the suite rang. Mary went to the door, and admitted Jack Morton. The pleasant-faced young fellow looked most comfortably handsome in his great motoring-coat of raccoon.

"I say, Mary, this is certainly fine!" he cried, after he had kissed her. "And, hello — there's Bob Clifford. How's the old boy?" He shook Clifford's hand warmly. "But say, Mary, what's doing?"

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Mary looked at Morton when she replied, but her voice was directed at Clifford: "I've decided, Jack, to give in to you. I'm ready to be married at once — to-day."

"Hurrah!" cried young Morton, seizing both her hands. "But we'll have to keep it quiet — same as we planned. You're ready now?"

She did not answer. Clifford noted that her body tautened and her breath was held — as one who waits for a blow; and he understood that she was waiting for, and expecting him to speak the truth about her.

She slowly turned and looked at Clifford. Surprise that he had said nothing was in her face. Then she turned back to Morton.

"I'm all ready," she said distinctly, so that Clifford might not miss a word. "We'll do as you suggested: motor away back into the country to some small place — get married — and a little money spent judiciously there will keep our marriage quiet as long as we like." She turned again to Clifford. "I'm sure we have the best wishes of Mr. Clifford."

He knew that her words, and her straight look, were not now so much challenge or defiance as the bold offering him a second time the chance to speak, and to speak at the most effective moment imaginable. She might be perverse — but of a certainty she had nerve!

"You surely have my wishes that it will all turn

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out for the very best," said Clifford; and again he saw surprise in her gaze.

He rode down the elevator with them and walked out to the curb where stood Morton's machine, a black, closed car with a long hood that bespoke the engine-power of a racer. Morton was swinging open the door when Clifford, trying to keep down the choke that sought to rise in his throat, remarked with attempted good-fellowship: —

"If you don't mind, Morton, I wish you'd wire me as soon as it's over. Here at the Grantham."

"Sure, old man. Step in, Mary."

Mary started to obey, then checked herself. "May I speak to you a moment, Mr. Clifford?"

They moved a few paces away. She looked at him penetratingly.

"Why have you done this?" she abruptly whispered.

"Done what?" he parried.

"Don't you think that I see now that you have forced my hand? That I am down here now, about to do this, because you wanted me to do it? Why are you doing it — when you could stop everything, this moment, with just a few words?"

He gave her back a straight look and spoke deliberately. "I have tried for a long time to do with you what I saw as best — to pull the strings — and I have failed, over and over. When you declared a little while ago that I or nothing else could change your purpose, I suddenly had a new vision. I realized

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that if you were poor material I could not save you, and that you would not be worth saving. And I realized that if you were good material, only some way that I had not tried could affect you; and it came to me," he went on grimly, "that bitter experience might do for you what I had not done. And it also came to me that if anything could arouse you to the human realities, no experiences might be so effective as what might lie before you in this very marriage you had planned."

"And that is why you said nothing?" she breathed.

He nodded. "I have taken my hands off, to give life its chance to pull the strings."

She gazed at him a moment longer. Then she returned to the car. But as she stepped in, she paused and glanced back once more. Her face was very pale and dazed — it held the look of one who wondered, but could not understand.

Restlessly, but with a heavy heart within him, Clifford wandered about the great lobby of the Grantham. A slow hour passed — then another. Then he saw Peter Loveman, on his plump face an expression which for Loveman was very serious, come up the broad stairway and go straight for the desk at which visitors sent up their names to guests of the house. Loveman spoke to the blonde within the grilled enclosure — waited — then walked away with a sober, puzzled look. He sighted Clifford in a deep lounging-chair, and his face on the instant

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grown genial, he crossed and dropped into a chair beside him.

"Need n't explain, Clifford," he said pleasantly, offering a cigarette from a lacquered case which Clifford refused. "Sure, I understand what you showed up here for: to see if I went through with what I promised. Well, I just asked for her, and was told she'd gone out. I'm going to wait for her — and I suppose you'll wait too."

Clifford nodded.

Loveman tried to draw Clifford into conversation, but his light remarks failing to evoke a response, he looked through first the "Wall Street Journal," and then the "Morning Telegraph," that organ of the theater and the other diversions close to Broadway's life. Thus the two sat for over an hour, neither speaking; then a page came by, calling in the impersonal voice of hotel pages, "Telegram Mr. Clifford — Telegram Mr. Clifford."

Clifford took the yellow missive with a hand that he tried to keep from shaking. He was quite certain what was in it — the end of things, just as he had suddenly planned them in his new vision of some three or four hours earlier. Yet, none the less, he had a moment of supreme and sickening suspense as he opened the envelope.

Yes, it was just what he had expected. He gazed fixedly at the typewritten lines before him — lines which were like heavy doors swinging to and locked between him and that of which he had dreamed.

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Then he became conscious that the big round eyes of little Peter Loveman were gazing at him curiously. Silently he handed the telegram to the lawyer.

Loveman glanced the telegram through. "The devil!" he cried. Then he read it again, this time aloud:—

Married quiet place ten miles from here. Everybody will keep it secret Happy you bet.

J.

Loveman stared at Clifford. "And it's addressed to you!" he exclaimed. "Say, this means you've crossed yourself! What the devil are you up to?"

Clifford did not answer.

There was a moment of silence, then Loveman whispered to himself: "And I just promised Nina Cordova!"

Again Clifford did not answer; he did not hear Loveman. Such of his senses as were not numbed by the finality of which that telegram was the token were directed into that unfinal future which human vision could not penetrate. How was it all going to work out for Mary Regan? Was experience going to do for her what he had failed to do, or was experience going to stimulate to complete and final dominance her worldliness? And had he played into Peter Loveman's hands? And what would Loveman do?

But these were questions only Life could answer. He had stepped aside to give Life full play, to let human impulses move unhindered by him toward

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their destiny; and he must wait until Life was ready to speak.

He was subconsciously aware that Loveman's round eyes were fixed upon him sharply, and he was subconsciously aware that the keen brain behind that round face was working swiftly, ranging in every direction. But without looking at Loveman again, or speaking to him, he rose heavily and went down the broad marble stairway, muted with rugs, out into the winter twilight. These questions that engaged his mind were none of his affair. Mary Regan, as far as she touched his personal life, was now become an episode that was closed. He had other affairs to fill his life; he must turn himself to them.

And yet, as he walked away . . . he wondered . .

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CHAPTER X

THE GOLDEN DOORS

THE hour was eleven-thirty of that same night. Clifford sat in the Gold Room at the Grantham, and kept a careful eye upon the proceedings across the great room at the little corner table known among the waiters as "Mr. Loveman's table."

Clifford watched many persons speak briefly to Loveman. He tried to guess what the shrewd little lawyer might now be up to. Among those who came to Loveman's table he particularly noted a dark, perfectly tailored young man, of perhaps thirty, with the lithe slenderness of the expert dancing male. Clifford knew him by name and reputation, and already he had set him down as one he must watch, together with Loveman and Bradley.

But for all his efforts to concentrate upon his present business, Clifford's mind kept shifting back to Mary Regan. It was a most difficult situation which she had taken upon herself: the daughter of one famous criminal, the niece of another, the sister of another, and herself a former participant in criminal acts — secretly married to a rich young man who knew nothing of her past, and who was dependent upon the approval of an autocratic fa-

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ther. To succeed in the soaring worldly plans she had admitted to him with such cold frankness would require marvelous skill, marvelous daring, marvelous self-control. Well — skill, daring, control, she had them!

But there was Loveman to be considered. Clifford asked himself if he had deduced aright Loveman's plans concerning her? Loveman's words, spoken in the early hours of that morning, and spoken with mockery glinting through his habitual amiability of manner, came back to him: "Just supposing I do have any little plan under way, Clifford, I wonder how close you've come to guessing it? Now, I wonder?"

Looking over at the cherubic face of the shrewd little lawyer, Clifford felt for the moment all the doubt that these words had been intended to arouse. Had he, perhaps, guessed only a part of Loveman's plan? — or was he altogether wrong?

And Clifford's restless mind flashed to his last act in the destiny of Mary Regan: the extreme measure he had resorted to in taunting her into that impulsive marriage with Jack Morton; and then his telling her with almost brutal directness, during the brief moment just before she and Jack had motored off, that he had come to realize that only going her own worldly way, only the experience of life, could avail to awaken the real woman that was in her.

He wondered. But only time, as it unrolled its

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film of unborn events, could answer these questions. He could now do no more than hope the best results for Mary Regan — wherever she might be.

With an effort Clifford brought himself back to his present business, and again gave sharp attention to that darkly handsome figure of the dancing man. And then — his heart skipped a beat or two. Across the line of his vision, coming from the main entrance of the Gold Room, and convoyed by a suave captain of waiters, walked Mary Regan and Jack Morton. They were ushered to a side table, and at once fell into intimate talk.

Clifford, after his first surprise, watched them closely; and he quickly perceived that, though she smiled and chatted, not more than the surface of Mary's attention was given to her husband of a dozen hours. He tried to look beneath, to what was going on in the hidden deeps of her mind. . . .

That mind was teeming. For her this was a moment of triumph, of exultation. As she had told Clifford, with her cool directness, she had analyzed herself, and had decided that she was a worldling, and, moreover, she knew herself a competent worldling. The things in life that to her were worth while were luxury, admiration, the pleasures that money could buy. She had dreamed this dream — and here was her dream come true!

Her quickened eyes, with a new sense, swiftly took in this great room, decorated in gold and black and with hangings of a kingly blue brocade, and

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with smartly dressed people at the tables or swinging in alluring rhythm in the latest dances. After the studied maneuvers, and sometimes necessary seclusion of life with her uncle, all this gayety, and richness, and freedom, warmed the heart of her desire. All this was now hers! — hers whenever she wished it!

It was as if golden doors had swung open. From her subconscious mind these two magic words had emerged to the very forefront of her thought, had become a mental figure of speech which she concretely visualized as a glorious structure which almost existed — Golden Doors! . . .

Clifford, watching that rapt face, hardly noted that Jack had sighted him and was bearing down upon him until Jack seized him by the shoulder and dragged him over to where Mary sat.

"Look who's here, Mary, — almost my bridesmaid!" Jack cried gayly. "Sit down, Clifford," pressing Clifford into a chair and reseating himself. "Now, come across with congratulations!"

Clifford tried to restrain all personal feeling from his tone, and to speak lightly. "I can't do better than to say what's always said — that I hope marriage is going to make a real man out of you."

"Oh, you do! And I suppose" — with joyous acerbity — "that that's what you're wishing for Mary — that it'll make a real woman out of her!"

Clifford still tried to speak easily. "Honestly, now, could one make a better wish for a woman

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than that she should never be anybody else but her best self?"

Mary met his gaze steadily. On his side he tried to look, and feel, the part of one who is no more than a casual friend — but, despite his effort at this detached rôle, he could not help guessing at just what was going on behind that calm face.

"You've got a thought on your chest," remarked Jack. "Better cough it up."

"I am merely feeling a bit surprised at seeing you back again."

"Surprised? Why?"

"I imagined you'd stay away for a while."

"I've had enough of the St. Helena life — and so has Mary. New York's the only place!"

"Where are you going to live?"

"Right here at the Grantham. That is, till we like something better."

"Then you are registered here?" pursued Clifford.

"Not I. Mary is, since she's been living here. I was just going to have my things sent over from the Biltmore, and then register with the special hotel pen, which has two ink drops that flow as one."

Clifford was silent for a moment. He had noted that Peter Loveman was watching them from his corner, and that the lithe, dark gentleman he had been closely observing during the evening — his name was Hilton — was now seated at the table adjoining them and was covertly watching Mary.

"Don't register here together," he said abruptly.

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"Why not?" exclaimed Jack.

"Would you mind explaining?" Mary asked quietly.

Clifford remembered himself. Only that very morning he had told Mary that he would no longer try to help shape the course of her life — that he would keep his hands off — that hereafter he would let Life pull the strings of her destiny. And here he was interfering again.

"I guess I was n't thinking," he said, trying to be casual. "Anyhow, it's really none of my business."

Mary gazed at him sharply. She surmised that some idea had been behind his remark; but she did not speak. Jack, whose gaze had wandered, gave a start and cried out: —

"Hello, there's dad! And he's spotted us — look, he's coming this way!"

Clifford glanced at Jack's father, an erect man of fifty, with unchallengeable dominance in his manner which the lordship of large affairs had developed from his native self-confidence. Then quickly Clifford glanced back, and managed to comprehend with his gaze both Mary and the dark man at the next table. Mary, grown tense as crisis approached in the form of the elder Morton, said quickly to Jack in a low voice: —

"Introduce me by another name: Gilmore — anything!"

At the same moment Clifford saw her hands be-

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neath the table swiftly remove engagement and wedding rings and thrust them into a white glove which lay in her lap. Also he noted that the dark gentleman had caught this action; and he noted that the black eyes glinted with a sudden light.

The next moment he heard Mary being introduced as Miss Gilmore. Clifford watched the meeting keenly.

"I'm very glad to meet Miss Gilmore," the elder Morton said, bowing over her hand and taking her in with a swift, appraising eye. He had a reputation of a sort as a connoisseur of femininity, and what he saw was evidently pleasing to him.

"And I am glad to meet you," Mary returned.

Clifford knew her self-control, but he was freshly amazed at the composed agreeability with which she met her unsuspecting father-in-law.

"Of course, you know Mr. Clifford," Jack went on nervously. "Sit down, dad. We were just finishing a little supper. Can't I order something for you?"

"Nothing for me, son. But I'll sit with Miss Gilmore and you for a minute."

He took a chair, and fixed his gray eyes, trained to penetrate and read what others would hide from him, upon Mary. Clifford tautened with suspense as these two sat face to face. And out of the tail of his eye he saw that the dark man was covertly watching and listening.

"I don't get to New York very often, Miss Gil-

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more," Mr. Morton continued, "but this time I'm making it an old man's business and pleasure to try to recapture some of my own youth by getting acquainted with Jack's friends. I suppose he's known you a long time?"

"On the other hand, we first met quite recently."

"If I knew how to be gallant in your Eastern fashion, I might remark that Jack has lost a lot, then. I wonder if you're one of our leading actresses? Jack seems to know so many stage people."

"I'm not even the greatest motion-picture star yet discovered; and you know there are thousands of her. I'm just ordinary woman."

"Not ordinary!" protested Mr. Morton. "I suppose — But, of course, this curiosity of a provincial must be offensive to you?"

"I did not know that a Chicagoan ever admitted himself a provincial."

"Call it the prying curiosity of an old father. That's just as bad."

"A father should be curious," Mary said evenly.

"I was about to say that I suppose you are a native New Yorker?"

"Not in the sense that you probably mean — that I am of an old family here, and have a lot of relations."

"But you are a New Yorker?"

"I was born here. But a large part of my life I spent in France — where," she added, "both my parents died."

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"An orphan — and no relations! Perhaps you are one of those independent New York bachelor girls we read about?"

"I live with an aunt. We have an apartment — just a little box of a thing."

"Indeed. Would it be presuming too much on Jack's friendship if I might call upon you and your aunt?"

"Aunt Isabel and I will be pleased to have you," she returned evenly.

"Thank you. If you will find out just when it will be most convenient for her, and let me know through Jack, I'll be there."

Clifford had to admire the composure with which she carried herself through this polite but dangerous inquisition — every instant of which, he saw, was an almost unbearable strain upon the suspense-ridden Jack. But by her invention of an aunt, which had opened the way for a proposal to call, he felt that she might have made a fatal slip. But there was no telling: it looked bad, yes, — but she had a faculty, a gift, for smoothly extricating herself from the worst of situations.

Before this cross-examination could proceed further, little Peter Loveman appeared at the table. Clifford instantly surmised the shrewd little lawyer's motive: he had witnessed the scene, and, knowing its dangers to himself, sought to intervene before there could be exposure and explosion.

"Pardon me for breaking in on your party, Mr.

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Morton," he said, with his glib amiability. "But some facts just came to my knowledge which, as your lawyer, I feel you ought to know at once."

"All right; I was just leaving, anyhow. Jack, I've been wanting to see you all day — it's really very important. I wonder if Miss Gilmore would forgive you, and us, if we left her with Mr. Clifford?"

It had been a scene that had almost crumpled Jack. Mary saved the situation for him by speaking promptly but with composure.

"It will be quite all right, Mr. Morton."

"To pay the check with," Jack mumbled huskily, pushing a bank-note beside Clifford's plate.

The next moment Clifford and Mary were alone. She gazed across at him very steadily, not speaking. Her breath came with a slight, fluttering irregularity, and her face had taken on a slight pallor; he could guess how much the stress of the last few minutes had taxed her. She glanced about the tables for a brief space, then her eyes came back to him.

"I'd like to go up to my apartment," she said quietly.

Clifford paid the bill and escorted her out of the great, glittering room. Near the row of elevators she halted and faced him.

"What was in your mind a while ago when you started to tell Jack and me not to register here together?"

He tried to speak coldly. "Please overlook that.

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I forgot for the moment that I had promised you I would not again interfere in your affairs."

"Please tell me what was in your mind," she quietly insisted.

"First of all, I was surprised that you and Jack should return to New York — so soon."

"Why?"

"Something similar to what has just happened was bound to happen if you appeared in New York openly together — only it might have been a great deal worse. And that worse thing would inevitably have happened if you two had registered. I thought you would have considered this danger."

"I had thought of it, yes, — that is, before to-day. But to-day so much was happening to me — it was all so sudden — that all day I was thinking of other things."

He looked at her sharply, a sudden leaping at his heart. Was he in any way concerned in those other things? But he put the question from him.

Abruptly he obeyed an impulse that had been growing in him. "May I break my promise to the extent of telling you of a few matters?"

"Please do."

"You have chosen your own way," he said, in even tones, looking very straight into her dark eyes, "but — well, after all, I want you to make the best of it for yourself. These few facts — perhaps you know them already — may help you. First, and I say this without any personal prejudice to Jack,

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Jack has the reputation of caring for many women often rather than for one woman long. Second, largely for business reasons, Mr. Morton desires to have Jack marry a girl from Chicago. Third, this girl's parents will not consider such a marriage until Jack has proved that he has settled down; therefore, it naturally is Mr. Morton's dominating desire at present that Jack should become a steady business man. He'd like to have Jack enter the New York offices of his firm. That is all. If you think these matters over, perhaps you will see a way in which they may serve you."

"Perhaps I shall. Thank you." She moved to the elevators, and stood silent until a car opened. "Good-night," she said, and stepped inside.

"Good-night," he returned.

He stood an instant after her car had shot upward. She had chosen her own course. And this was only the beginning of the consequences. What might the ending be?

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CHAPTER XI

MARY PLANS ANEW

THE following morning Clifford called at the Grantham and asked if Mrs. Morton was in.

The clerk examined the hotel's file of guests. "There is no Mrs. Morton staying here."

So, after all, they had not registered. He recalled that Mary had formerly been known here as Mrs. Gardner.

"May I see Mrs. Gardner, then?" he asked.

"Mrs. Gardner moved from the Grantham early this morning," replied the clerk. "I'd just come on duty when she left."

"Was there a — was her brother with her?"

"She was alone."

"If you will kindly give me her new address—"

"She left no address."

Clifford walked out of the Grantham in deep thought. Mary had realized her situation, she had acted promptly. But what was her plan? — for undoubtedly she had evolved a plan during the night. And where had she gone?

And how was it all going to work out? To be sure, the penetration of the designs of Loveman and Bradley was his real business; but he could not help himself, he was vastly more interested in

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what Mary might be doing, and in what was to be the end of it all for her. He called on Slant-Face; but her brother still had not seen or heard from her directly since her return to New York. He kept Loveman under surveillance, and also Bradley; the maneuvers of either might lead him to her. And also he kept watch upon Hilton, whose eyes had suddenly lighted when he had seen Mary quickly thrust her rings into her gloves. But he picked up nothing.

Clifford might have been greatly helped in his search for Mary by Commissioner Thorne: a general alarm might quickly have located her. But he did not want Mary brought before the general attention of the police. However questionable the ethics of the course her ambition had planned, there was in it nothing that was legally criminal.

For a week he kept close surveillance upon Loveman, Bradley, and the dark young man; and learned not a thing about Mary and not a thing about the plans of the others. Then one day he ran across the elder Morton, who had just returned to the city after a trip to Chicago.

"You won't believe it when I tell you," said the older man, "but Jack's gone to work."

"Where?"

"In my New York offices. Been working there a week — and they tell me he's been as regular as a clock. Remarkable change!" His voice lowered. "But here's a point that seems odd: though he's

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kept his rooms at the Biltmore, the people there have hardly seen him."

The finding of Mary now seemed simple enough. But Clifford realized that mere knowledge of her whereabouts would not satisfy him. Clifford considered rapidly how he might achieve a private meeting with her. Half an hour later he was sitting with Uncle George in Monsieur Le Bain's Grand Alcazar, and was telling this wise old man of Broadway all that had happened.

"Certainly some little situation for Mary Regan!" Uncle George looked at Clifford with his shrewd old lashless eyes. "But, son, I hope your motor's not missing fire over her — and her a married woman?"

"I'm concerned because I'm certain Loveman is planning to use her. I can protect her better, and I stand a better chance to land Loveman, if I know where she is."

"H'm. And is that the three-mile limit of your interest?"

"I'm human enough to want to know what she's done and how she's planned to meet the future. Knowing that will help me against Loveman."

"Well, son, be sure you're not passing phony money off on yourself — which is what the average citizen does when he thinks he has one of these here righteous thoughts. I suppose you've got me fitted into some nice little idea?"

"You're going to help me meet her."

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"Oh, that's all, is it!" the old man said dryly. "All I've got to do is to step out on Broadway, touch her on the sleeve, and say, 'Good-afternoon, Mary; Bob Clifford wants to one-step with you to a bit of nice chin-music' — and in she'll come wearing a smile on all four sides, you being so popular with her!"

"All you've got to do, Uncle George, is something else. Jack likes you; Mary considers you one of her best friends. You go into that telephone booth, call up Jack at his father's office, and learn where she is — and after you've learned that we'll dope out the rest."

" I did n't think that in my old age I'd sink to be a stool for a copper," sighed Uncle George, with mock mournfulness.

He heaved his big body up and crossed to a booth. Five minutes later he swayed back to Clifford's side.

"I got a line on her. But it's up to me to do some of this here super-delicate detective work. Sit where you are — though it's an awful risk to leave you alone and unprotected right over a wine cellar. I may be back in an hour. So-long."

He was back in half an hour. "She's having tea over at the Ritz. Come on. I got a taxi waiting outside."

He led the way out and across the sidewalk, bulking large before Clifford. "May God pity an old sinner for what'll be comin' to him for this!" he

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murmured. At the door of the taxi he stepped aside. "Get in first," he said to Clifford; and, as Clifford obeyed, he smartly closed the door on Clifford's back. "All right," he called to the chauffeur.

As the taxi moved away, a startled voice within the car exclaimed: "You!"

Clifford then saw that he was sitting beside Mary. "Miss Regan!" he ejaculated, forgetting her new name.

"Uncle George told me we were to pick up Jack."

"I hope you'll forgive the deception. Don't blame Uncle George. Blame me."

"What does this mean?" she demanded.

"I felt I had to see you at once."

"Why?"

"You see, I could hardly help wanting to know what you had done."

He had thought it more than likely that she would be angry. Her dark eyes did flash at him; but when she spoke she spoke very calmly.

"There's no reason why you should not know; and I have no objections to telling you everything. What do you wish to know first?"

"What you did first."

She considered, then spoke with a cold frankness that was in keeping with her recent attitude toward him — to show him her calculating worldliness, stark, unexcused.

"I thought I had passed through the Golden

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Doors, — that's a phrase of mine, — but after that night at the Grantham when I saw you, I realized that I still stood far without them. I saw that I had either to vanish — or be willing to wait my time, perhaps a long time, if I would see it through. I decided on the latter."

"Yes," Clifford prompted.

"That meant," the unsparing voice went on, "that for a long time Jack and I would hardly dare be seen openly together, that we had to live in seclusion. I made Jack see things as I saw them, so we sublet an apartment on Riverside Drive, and we're known there as Mr. and Mrs. Grayson."

"And what about Jack's going to work?"

"I thought that if through my influence Jack should settle down, it would help when his father finds out."

"I see."

"I realize perfectly," the cold voice continued, "another problem that I have to face. Jack likes gay company; further, you said it is not his nature to care for one woman long. Well, I must make Jack like me for a long time, and make him like me despite the solitude. I shall do it." She paused, then added: "I believe that is everything."

They rode on in silence, Clifford covertly eyeing the erect, contained figure beside him — guessing at what it must have cost her to give up her dreamed-of pleasure, to be forced into seclusion, to be forced to undertake the responsibility of sobering down a

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joyous spendthrift. Life certainly had not given her what she had expected in her bargain.

Again the question rose: how was it all coming out?

The next afternoon Clifford, following Hilton, saw his quarry enter the Mordona, the great apartment house on the Drive before which he had left Mary the night before. He followed into the lobby just as his man disappeared into an elevator. He had no doubt on whom the dark gentleman was calling, or for what reason he called.

Opening into the elaborate lobby, for whose gilded ostentation the tenants were assessed a goodly portion of their rent, was a florist's shop. Into the comparative privacy of this Clifford stepped to wait until his man came down: a move that was just in time, for from a descended elevator, which must have passed the one bearing Hilton aloft, stepped the square, solid figure of Bradley. Again Clifford had no doubt on whom the call had been made, or why.

At last he had picked up a warm and very busy trail. Under pretense of an indecision over the flowers he should purchase, he waited for his man to come down, trying to reproduce the scene that was now going on in the "Graysons'" apartment, and the scene prior to it in which Bradley had figured. A quarter of an hour passed, then the debonair Hilton emerged from an elevator and strode out with a jaunty, smiling air.

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The next moment Clifford was in an elevator, shooting upward, and two minutes later Mary's maid was bearing his card through a curtained doorway. He caught Mary's voice sounding as though it were two rooms away, finishing what was obviously a telephone conversation: "You'll come as soon as you can get here? That's most kind of you. Good-bye."

There was a delay; he guessed that Mary was surprised at this third successive call; then he was shown through the curtained doorway into the drawing-room. His swift impression of the room was that it was large for a New York apartment, and that its prodigal furnishings bespoke wealth rather than taste on the part of its absent lessee. The next moment Mary came in through a door which he judged led from the library. There was now in her bearing nothing of the cold frankness which she had shown him the day before. She was taut with controlled excitement, which he knew to be the product of the so recent interviews. Her manner was challenging.

"What do *you* want?"

He tried to speak in a steady, impersonal tone. "Mr. Bradley was here a few minutes ago. I'd be obliged if you'd tell me what he came for."

"Pardon me for not obliging you — but that is my own affair. Is this all?"

"Another gentleman just called on you. Would you tell me what he wanted?"

"That also is my own affair."

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"It might help me greatly if I knew exactly what he asked for," Clifford urged.

"Perhaps. But that cannot concern me."

"Then you will not tell?"

"No."

"Are you aware who this man is?"

"He's a friend of Jack's."

"Not much of a friend, I hope." Clifford still spoke in his steady, impersonal tone. "Mr. Hilton is one of several men that I am after — and he's one of the cleverest and most dangerous of the lot. It is the easiest thing in the world for a crook who is well-dressed, well-mannered, and who can dance, to make acquaintances wherever he likes. The regular game of these crooks is to pick out a woman with money, or who can get money, make her acquaintance, gain her confidence and some of her secrets, and then lead her into a situation where she must pay or be exposed. This is your last visitor's special line. You might help me a lot if you would tell me what Mr. Hilton wanted from you."

"He came to see me about a personal matter of no importance," she replied.

"Pardon me if I do not believe you," he said.

She made no response.

"You will not tell?" he demanded.

"I have nothing to tell," was her steady answer.

"I might force you to tell —" he snapped at her, but instantly cut himself off.

"Since you won't tell me," he said, stepping more

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squarely before her, "then I'll tell you. Bradley came here to blackmail you; blackmail is one of Bradley's big side-lines just now. Hilton was a follow-up man on the same business. If he was n't in this particular game before, he got next the other night at the Grantham. He saw you slip off your rings and hide them when Jack's father was coming to your table. He guessed what that action meant, and it was easy for him to dig up the rest."

Clifford paused. "I'm right so far, yes?" he demanded.

But she did not speak.

"And I can tell you just what he said," Clifford continued, "and how he said it — for he's a most gentle-spoken party. It would cause him very great regret to have to tell Mr. Morton that his son had contracted a secret marriage, and it would cause him even greater regret to have to tell both the Mortons just who Mary Regan has been and just who are the members of her family. The only way he can be saved from inflicting upon himself this regret is for you to come across with a large sum of money. Well, is n't that about it? Now will you help me out?"

"I can say no more than I have said," she replied.

"Then I shall have to get him alone," Clifford said, with grim quiet. "Him and the others."

He left her with no further word. On the way down in the elevator he recalled the fragment he had heard over the telephone; and again he stepped

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into the convenient privacy of the florist's shop. Not more than two minutes had passed when he saw Peter Loveman enter one of the elevators. So it was Loveman she had been telephoning to. She had doubtless sent for the little lawyer to ask his advice — the irony of it!

Clifford waited for Loveman to descend. Fifteen minutes passed — it was now getting on toward six; then into the lobby, walking eagerly, came Jack Morton. And then in the entrance, watching but discreetly unobtrusive, appeared Jack's father. Jack's elevator had made its trip up and had just descended, when the elder Morton crossed the lobby and addressed the elevator-man. The florist's door stood open, so Clifford heard every word.

"By the way," said Mr. Morton, "what is the name of the gentleman, your only passenger, that you just took up? I thought I recognized him as an acquaintance."

"Mr. Grayson, sir."

"He lives here?"

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose he has one of your bachelor apartments?"

"No, sir. He lives here with Mrs. Grayson."

"To be sure. I did n't know Mrs. Grayson's health had permitted her to come back from California. Please don't mention my having been here; they might feel hurt at my not having come up."

He slipped the man a bill and went out. Clifford

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realized that Mr. Morton had been engaged upon a bit of private sleuthing on his own account: which might lead to — what?

Clifford thought a moment. Then he sought out the superintendent of the building, and after some very confidential talk, and a showing of credentials, which the superintendent verified by calling up Police Headquarters, he departed, bearing with him a pass-key to all the apartments of the Mordona.

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CHAPTER XII

A GENTLEMAN OF PLEASURE

THERE were at least four persons that Clifford knew it was desirable to keep under surveillance — Bradley, Peter Loveman, Mr. Morton, and Hilton; but the professional ladies' man he regarded as the best clue to the immediate situation. "Yes, you stick to Hilton," Uncle George agreed decisively that evening at dinner. "When it comes to twisting women, that dear limber guy is a better committee on ways and means than any charmer that ever adorned himself in a smile, pumps, and a dress suit."

That night Clifford trailed Hilton from restaurant to theater, and then to three of the smartest hotel ballrooms, and then, toward three in the morning, saw him to his hotel. He picked Hilton up at noon the next morning; lunched (it was Hilton's breakfast) at a table near him at the Ritz Carlton; followed him to a few restaurants where afternoon dancing was under way; and at exactly half-past five he followed him into the Mordona.

He gave Hilton a minute's start, then rode up to the "Graysons'" apartment. Hilton had evidently been admitted, for the corridor was empty. Muffling the lock with a handkerchief, Clifford slipped

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in the pass-key, and swiftly, but with velvet caution, he opened the door. Inside, he closed the door with as great care, and stood, unbreathing, listening kitchenward for the maid — fingers on lips and a bill held out to check immediately any words should that young lady appear: a needless stratagem, since Mary had given her maid that afternoon out. Hearing nothing, he moved softly to the curtained doorway of the drawing-room, and glanced in. Apparently Mary had planned to go out to an early dinner, for she wore an evening gown. She was standing erect in the middle of the room, gazing with level eyes at the immaculate Mr. Hilton.

"I am here at five-thirty, as I said I'd be," Hilton was saying, smiling pleasantly. "I hope you have seen the wisdom of my remarks and have reconsidered your defiant attitude of yesterday. You undoubtedly have a very good plan, and it would be most unfortunate" — his voice was soothingly argumentative — "if you compelled me to tell Mr. Morton about the marriage, and tell them both who your relatives are, and just who is Mary Regan. Most unfortunate, I assure you."

"You need not squander your emotion. I have the money."

"I approve your good sense! You have the full amount?"

"You may count it for yourself." She held out a little roll.

"Ten five-hundred-dollar bills. Correct. Though

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it pinches me that you could not make it the ten thousand I asked for. However! I suppose" — in high good humor — "you'd like a receipt for this. It might help you in court if you ever decided to bring action against me."

"Your jocularity is not greatly appreciated. Now that you have the money, I suggest that you go."

"As pleases you." Drawing back the lapel of his slender afternoon coat — it had been a warm afternoon, and he had worn no outer coat — he slipped the bank-notes into the top pocket of his vest. "In leaving you, Mrs. — ah — Grayson, let me wish your little enterprise the most complete success. Good-afternoon."

Clifford was on the point of springing into the room, when, to his amazement, from the door which opened into the library, there emerged the plump figure of Peter Loveman. On the face of the shrewd little lawyer was a bewildered, almost sickly look, the like of which Clifford had never beheld on that usually amiable and ruddy countenance.

"Just a minute!" said Loveman.

Hilton whirled about. "Oh, it's Loveman! Hello, Loveman."

Loveman crossed toward the other. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Just making a little afternoon call. Will you return the courtesy and tell me how you come to be here?"

"I was here when you came, and was waiting

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