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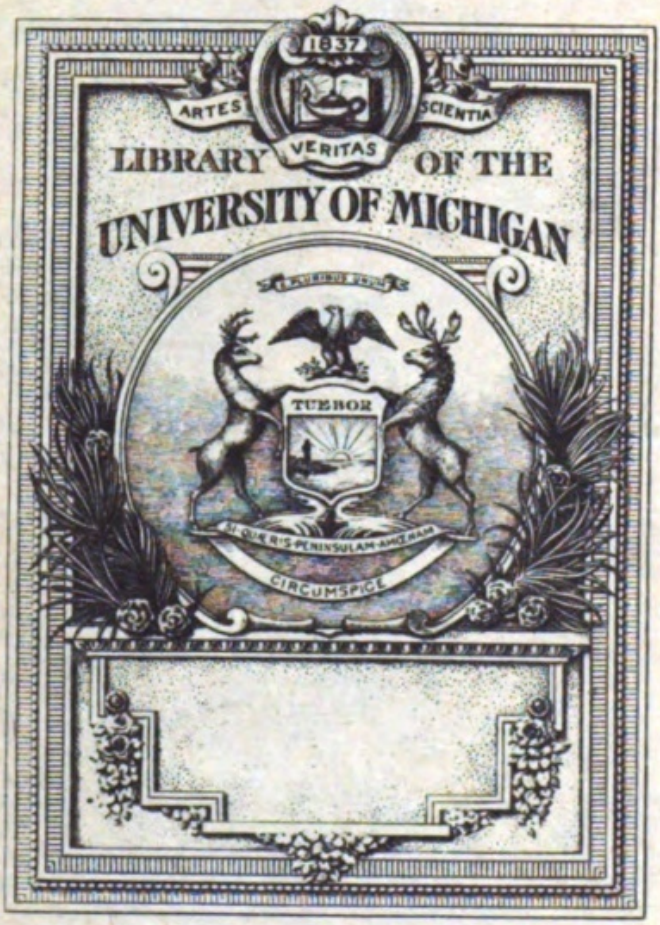

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WALLINGFORD IN HIS PRIME

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WALLINGFORD IN HIS PRIME

By

GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER

AUTHOR OF

Young Wallingford, Five Thousand an Hour
The Jingo, Etc., Etc.

INDIANAPOLIS
THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
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WALLINGFORD IN HIS PRIME

CHAPTER I

THERE'S MONEY IN IT

NUMBER TWENTY-ONE, rounding the curve at Buzzard Bluff, came to such an abrupt stop that the heavy gentleman who was the sole occupant of the parlor-car was jerked to his knees, a position so novel and so out of the range of his experience that he chuckled at himself as soon as he realized it. Being a calloused traveler, he merely rescued his hat from the floor, brushed the lint of the carpet from his carefully creased trousers, rang the bell for the porter, who he knew would not come, and went outside to see what was the matter.

In the private car of President Falls, just behind the parlor-car, there was a trifle more of consternation, for certain hissing glasses upon the whist-table were overturned, completely destroying two decks of cards and one lavender-tinted waistcoat, the latter belonging to young "Benssy" Falls, a tall youth so handsome as to be pretty, who, like the

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well-cultivated gentleman that he was, pushed back his chair, rang for the butler to clear away the mess, and excused himself for long enough to change his waistcoat to another of the same hue, this being his lavender day. Perfect as were his manners, he nevertheless did allow an expression of impatience to escape him.

"How very annoying!" he observed, but his dimples showed immediately that he had regained his usual agreeable spirit.

"Not wishing to criticize your gov'nor's road, Bense, but it's rotten careless of somebody, I should say," drawled Rickey Saunders, a pink young person with a mustache that had been blighted in infancy, with an in curve from his collar-button to his knees, and with a father who had been considerate enough to die before he lost his third fortune.

"Father wouldn't be offended if he heard you, I'm quite sure," responded Benson. "He knows this road to be perfectly inexcusable, but he won't spend any money on improvements just now, because he expects to sell his stock immediately after the next dividends are declared."

The three other whist-players were silent for a moment after this complicated statement, and then the shrill little falsetto beneath the sparsely bristling Kaiser Wilhelm mustache of Buelow von Humperdinck suddenly announced the solution.

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"I see the reason!" it declared excitedly. "By that course the dividends will be larger and he can secure a better price for his stock," and the permanent creases that passed for thought deepened in Von Humperdinck's fragmentary brow.

"I say, that's really clever," lisped Reginald de Puyster Haugh, whose still hateful surname was only one generation removed from Haw, and whose thick lips and broad shiny face still denied all that mere godfathers could do for him. "By the way, Benssy, I wonder what the blooming row's about, anyhow."

"Some one should have a good ragging for it," declared the black-freckled young man with the nose, who had been a mere onlooker at the whist-game. "Absolutely beastly damage has been done. Look at Benssy's model!"

On the floor by a table near one of the broad windows lay a once wonderfully neat, but now pitifully bent and broken pasteboard model of a small house, the work of Benson Falls' own white hands. There was a general chorus of polite dismay upon the discovery of this catastrophe, but young Mr. Falls, whose skill at needlework and crape-paper creations had made him the hit of every charity fair, dismissed the matter lightly, although he heaved the sigh of a distressed artist as he stooped to examine the damage that had been done to his pretty

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handiwork. He had just replaced it upon the table when Shamasuka appeared after the third ring.

"You're an annoying long time in coming, Sammy," protested Mr. Falls.

"I beg your pardon, sir," replied the Jap, "but I thought you might like to know the cause of the delay, and I hurried out to investigate."

"Very well, you may tell us," Mr. Falls graciously consented.

"Thank you, sir," responded Shamasuka. "There is a heavy rock-slide on the track just ahead of us. The engineer made a very good stop, but, unfortunately, snapped a driving-rod in doing so."

The eyes of all four of Mr. Falls' friends turned to him expectantly in this emergency. He was equal to the occasion.

"You will tell the conductor," he directed in the voice of authority, "to repair the driving-rod, clear the track and proceed immediately."

"Yes, sir," said the Jap, in a tone almost of solemn gratitude, but when he reached the platform he grinned.

The heavy gentleman from the parlor-car, who was already excellent friends with the crew, was discussing ways and means with the conductor when Shamasuka came out with the message. The conductor was listening with great respect.

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"I beg your pardon, sir," said Shamasuka to the conductor, "but Mr. Falls directs me to tell you to repair your driving-rod, clear the track and proceed immediately."

The conductor, whose name was O'Connell, turned red in the face. "You tell Mr. Falls that I directed him to go to the devil!" he roared.

"Yes, sir," said the Jap with pleasure, and when he regained the platform he permitted himself another grin.

The heavy gentleman turned to the conductor in perplexity. "You must be tired of your job," he suggested.

"Me? I love it," responded O'Connell, smiling. "But you don't think I'm sending that answer to President Falls, do you? It's his saphead son back there, and he's been giving me fool orders ever since we picked up his souse-car at the junction. If the Jap only carries him my little speech, and the cub only reports it to his old man, I'm in line for promotion."

"I guess you're right," laughed the big fellow. "I know Falls. I wish he were in that car. That's the only diner on this train, and we're likely to be stuck here for three hours."

"Maybe longer," admitted O'Connell with a frown. "It's eight miles back to the nearest telegraph station and ten forward."

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A savage dissertation on the road in general was presently interrupted by the arrival of Benssy Falls, attended by his quartet of friends. The son of the president wasted no time in parley, but stalked straight up to the conductor.

"I demand an apology," he said, his dimples interfering sadly with his severity.

"You get back on your car," ordered O'Connell. "You can do what you please there, but I'm running the rest of the train."

"You will either apologize or I shall be compelled to ask you to fight," declared young Mr. Falls very sternly.

"That's what I call sportin'," announced Rickey Saunders, with such keen delight that his stubble of mustache thinned visibly with the spread of his lip. "Aye, fellows?"

"Magnanimous of Benssy, considering the difference in class," murmured thick-lipped Haugh, once Haw, whose father had been a dry-goods clerk until he married an impressionable rich customer, and developed a genius for being lucky at other stock- and bond-gambling.

O'Connell looked over the shoulders and arms of young Mr. Falls appreciatively, and a twinkle came into his eye. "Far be it from me to commit assault, battery or mayhem upon the son of my bread and butter," he stated; "but even if you were your own

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father, Mr. Falls, I'll bet a month's pay I'd defend myself if struck — *if* struck!"

"As the insulted party I have the right to the first blow, but I waive it," returned Mr. Falls with dignity. "Kindly come into the car. Sammy, get out the gloves. Conductor, you may choose your second."

"I'll go you if I lose," said O'Connell with a grin, "and for my second I'll take Mr. —— What is your name, brother?" and he turned to the heavy passenger with a wink.

"Wallingford," responded the heavy passenger, answering the wink with a chuckle, "J. Rufus Wallingford. I'll accept the office with pleasure."

Upon this Mr. O'Connell introduced Mr. Wallingford to Mr. Falls, who, in turn, introduced him to Mr. Saunders, Mr. Humperdinck, Mr. Haugh, and Mr. Ringgold Cash, the black-freckled young gentleman with the iron-wire hair, who, dropping behind with Rickey Saunders as they proceeded to the car, confided to his friend his fears that Benssy was leading them into a rather questionable set of companions.

"Good sportin' blood, I call it," insisted Rickey. "And why not mix in with a few outsiders? Take this corpulent party, for instance; he may be a bounder and all that, looks like a man in trade, you know, but he can't hurt us any."

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"No," admitted young Cash, whose great-grandfather had been a junk-dealer; "we don't need to know him afterward, of course, but still one can't be too particular. One owes something to one's family."

Benssy Falls emerged from his compartment with his torso stripped to his sleeveless lavender silk undervest, surveying his own velvety biceps with complacent respect, and sat upon the leather-cushion dining-chair placed for him in the corner by Rickey Saunders. Rickey patted him encouraging upon the round shoulders.

"You k'n whip your conductor chap, old top. Don't become fretted about it," he said, and plucked complacently at the pluckless mustache.

Across in the opposite corner, Conductor O'Connell, disdaining to sit in the chair the urbane Wallingford had provided for him, stood without coat or hat, and his blue shirt-sleeves rolled up to his elbows revealed his brawny and hairy forearms. He was grinning sheepishly.

Mr. Haugh presented Wallingford with a pair of gloves. Mr. Cash performed a like service for Mr. Saunders, and the two seconds carefully assisted their principals to tie on their deadly weapons.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" inquired Buelow;

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von Humperdinck, better known in this coterie as Humpsey.

"Just a moment," interrupted Rickey. "Anybody bettin'?"

"I'll go a hundred on my man," offered Wallingford quietly, and he did not make the mistake of making any motion to display the money.

"Done," returned Rickey quickly. "Anybody else?"

The black-freckled young man with the nose critically surveyed the contestants as he rolled a cigarette. "You won't take it as deserting your colors, Benssy, if I book Rickey for his next hundred, will you?" he inquired.

"Certainly not," replied Benson courteously. "Use your own judgment, Ring."

"Jus' sportin', that's all," declared Rickey in further polite consent. "You're on, Ring. Anybody else?"

Reggie Haugh immediately offered Van Humperdinck a bet upon Benson, but the very thoughtful gentleman, finding room, somehow, in his brow for a third crease, immediately declined.

"Referee can't bet," he explained regretfully.

"A hundred to you, Ring," offered Reggie, but Mr. Cash, notoriously cautious with the congenital avarice of his junk-dealing ancestor, shook his head.

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"I'm unlucky when I scatter my bets," he hedged.

"No fair," complained Reggie, pouting his fat pout. "I'll call the police and stop the match if I don't get a bet down."

Wallingford, studying the group with grave interest, hesitated for a decent length of time. "If it would not be considered forward of a stranger, and nobody else cares to accommodate the gentleman, I will," he ventured.

"That's sportin' blood," approved Rickey Saunders, and not only himself, but all his companions, surveyed Wallingford with new interest.

He was a big man and a cheerful man, and his round face bore the color which could only come from years of fastidiously selected food and drink; moreover, his haberdashery, though striking, was correct and up to the minute, and there was no disputing the fact that he employed a tailor who was an artist.

"Thanks, old chap," said Reggie gratefully.

"Ready?" again asked Von Humperdinck.

"Ready," replied Wallingford and Saunders in a breath.

"Shake hands," directed Von Humperdinck, the creases in his forehead tightening until his bristly pompadour seemed to slide over and half-way down his forehead. He felt a not unpardonable pride in having taken charge of the affair.

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The principals performed the evolution to which they had been bidden, young Falls quite gracefully and O'Connell quite clumsily.

"Time!" called Von Humperdinck, snapping his stop-watch.

Of course, after all this elaborate preparation, Benssy Falls, in his lavender silk undervest, Benssy with the dimples, sailed in and "licked" Conductor O'Connell; "licked" him thoroughly and completely, in three fast rounds, in which O'Connell, the victor of a hundred rough-and-tumble fights, slammed and banged and delivered tremendous blows upon thin atmosphere, while Benssy Falls, who once had donned ladies' clothes, rouge, powder and wig, presided at a fancy-work booth, and won the majority of votes in the beauty contest, danced around him and punched him at will, with good swinging right and left blows which had real steam behind them!

"I'm ashamed of myself," acknowledged O'Connell, when the victory went to the young man of the dimples. "I thought boxing was more like fighting. You win, Mr. Falls, and for the rest of this trip you're running the train. I'll repair the driving-rod, clear the track and proceed immediately," and taking his coat upon his arm and his cap in his hand, he bowed awkwardly and started for the door.

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"You'll have a nip of something before you go, won't you?" invited Benssy hospitably.

"No, thanks," replied O'Connell. "I haven't taken a drink in ten years, and I'm in a hurry, anyhow. I want to go out and pick a fight with my brakeman. I can lick him."

"You'll have something, won't you?" asked Benssy of Wallingford, who was producing two crisp hundred-dollar bills from a long red pocket-book.

"With pleasure," replied Wallingford. "Losing a bet is always dry work for me," and he handed a bill each to Rickey Saunders and to Reginald de Puyster Haugh, with smiles that made them vote him a good game loser.

Shamasuka, upon order, replaced the table in the center of the apartment, brought bottles and glasses and six chairs, and the moment came for which Wallingford had longed. His acute nostrils had detected "sportin' money" in this crowd. The first thing to do, of course, was to make himself agreeable, and he did this to such good effect that within fifteen minutes his host had asked him to remain to dinner. He sat among them in smiling ease, a gentleman of experience, a world-traveler, an all-round good fellow, one who knew the vintage of wines by the taste, and told rare stories with rarer discretion. Also he appreciated the pretty little

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pasteboard house when it was accidentally brought to his attention.

"Rippin' fine thing, it is," Rickey Saunders boasted. "Benssy's the architect and builder because he's such a clever chap with his fingers — embroiders the monograms on his own underwear, and all that sort of thing, you know — but we're all in on the inventin'."

"It's a portable house for a fishing trip we contemplate," young Falls modestly explained. "The gov'nor's opening up a strip of land through upper Wisconsin and Michigan which is full of small virgin lakes, and he's given us permission to fish them out before his construction gangs go through."

Wallingford winced. He knew that strip of land quite well. He had once owned it, and its loss to Falls senior was the one big blot upon his own financial escutcheon. Falls had been a bigger thief and had stolen Wallingford's swag; that was the answer. And so E. H. was going to build a road through there, after all! He would make a mental note of that.

"And so you're building a wind-proof, dust-proof, rain-proof and snow-proof portable house?" he suggested.

"Also heat- and cold-proof," added Rickey. "You see, we couldn't find a good portable house, so we invented one on our way back from inspecting

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the happy hunting-grounds. Stunning, the amount of brains we found in the crowd! Benssy invented the hollow walls, air-space and that sort of thing, you know. Reggie figured out how to turn the table and benches into cots with real spring mattresses in them. Reggie's long on eating and sleeping. Humpsey, who is no end of a clever mechanic, devised the simplest sort of a collapsible cook-stove with a telescoping pipe. Cash discovered the method of making the roof ridge water-tight, and I worked out a fancy clamp to bind the corners together; but, after all, the real rippin' brains of the thing is Benssy's. The hollow-wall idea was his. Came to him just in a flash. Never wasted a moment of thought on it."

Bensy colored slightly. "Very ordinary idea, I'm sure," he said with becoming modesty, the dimples appearing for just an instant, then coyly vanishing. "Any one could have thought of it."

"Clever scheme," declared Wallingford, admiring the really good model with the practised eye of a born mechanic, as Benssy deftly took it apart and demonstrated how it was to be packed and shipped and reassembled. "Quite clever, indeed." The opening for which he had been groping came to him, in a flash as inspired as that which had brought to Benssy Falls the stunning device of the hollow walls. "This is more than clever, gentle-

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men," he went on, his tone changing to one of grave earnestness that commanded instant attention. "It is worthy of serious commercial consideration. It would be a pity to allow so perfect an article of manufacture to go to waste."

"Well, of course, you know, none of us is in trade, and we wouldn't care for that sort of thing," announced Reggie Haugh loftily, with a shrinking thought of the original thick-lipped Haw.

"I don't know, old chap," mused Benssy. "Why wouldn't it be a ripping good novelty for us all to go into trade? We've tried everything else."

"That's what I call sportin'," stated Rickey Saunders enthusiastically. "I'm for anything Benssy starts."

The ridged ribbon which did Von Humperdinck service as a brow underwent such a series of contortions that any one who knew him would have known that he was about to think. "The kaiser and the king of England are both in trade," he advised them, "and my cousin, the Baron von Humperdinck, himself owns a brewery."

"We don't need precedent," insisted Benssy patriotically. "We are democratic American citizens, and, as such, have a right to enter trade as our fathers did."

That one speech showed the daring nature of Benssy, it being considered indelicate in this circle

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to mention fathers, and positively indecent to mention grandfathers. A shocked silence followed his anarchism, Reggie Haugh's lips, however, watering profusely in his agitation. It was Rickey Saunders who came loyally to the support of his friend.

"Hear! hear!" he cried.

Ringgold Cash, frowning moodily at the black freckles upon his sallow hands, and regretting for the millionth time their size and construction, which had descended from his push-cart forebears, slowly raised one of them and stroked it down his lean face, letting it close as it slid off his chin, as if his jaw had sported the wiry beard of the original junk-dealing Cash, whose name had been Kashowski. "Do you think there would be a good return for the money invested?" he asked, addressing Wallingford directly, and waiting with quiet eagerness for the answer.

Wallingford turned to him quickly and studied him with great care before he replied. "There's a fortune in it," he declared, with a deliberately rising enthusiasm. "Of course you gentlemen are not commercial. I am. I know a good commercial opening when I see one." And he smiled to himself as he looked into the faces of the eagerly interested group around the table, and studied the good commercial openings he saw before him. "Your marvelous portable house should be your gift to your

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fellow sportsmen at about twenty-five per cent. dividends; and I, who am strictly a business man, am so favorably impressed that I should be delighted to take twenty-five or fifty thousand dollars' worth of the stock myself."

"Thank you," said Benssy gratefully, his cheeks dimpling with pleasure. "I consider that a great compliment, I'm sure."

"Nothing of the sort," returned Wallingford sedately. "It is only my cold business judgment that is speaking, Mr. Falls."

Reggie Haugh had been flapping his thick lower lip with his thick forefinger in jealous thought. A thing like this, don't you know, should be kept more exclusive. This Wallingford person was admittedly a mere tradesman, and probably of no family whatsoever, had no money but that which he made himself, and one *must* be careful of one's associates.

"Only trouble is," he objected, "that all the rest of us have had a share in the inventing, which makes it a sort of family affair, don't you think?"

Wallingford was instantly ready for that emergency. "So far as that is concerned," he observed in smiling confidence, "I invented inventing, though I am far too modest a man so to state," and he laughed jovially, closing his eyes and shaking his big

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shoulders to show them that this was a joke. "Even while we have been talking, I have discovered a radical defect in the construction of your portable cottage, and have invented a way to overcome it. You are making your hollow walls in straight sections which merely abut upon each other. Warpage and shrinkage will draw them crooked and leave wide cracks over which you will be compelled to nail permanent cleats, which is entirely foreign to your idea of portability."

Benssy Falls looked with dismay upon his exquisitely accurate model. "How very annoying!" he murmured.

"What we must do," went on Wallingford easily and confidently, "is to make the hollow sections like this," and he deftly and ruthlessly cut open, upon alternate edges, one of Benssy's beautifully perfect little sections, telescoping the two parts upon each other slightly so as to show the plan of overlapping, and then reversing them to show how much space they saved in nesting for shipment.

There was a general chorus of polite exclamations, which covered unlimited genuine admiration.

"That surely makes Mr. Wallingford one of the family, Reggie," declared Rickey. "I vote him in, fellows. Now! One, two, three —"

"Aye!" gently and courteously shouted his friends in perfect unison with him.

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"I thank you," said Wallingford, rising and bowing gravely. The gentleman's manners were perfect; there was no gainsaying that.

"There's one difficulty of which none of you has thought," declared Mr. Cash, rubbing again, in reflection, the beard of his ancestors in the hollow of his cheeks. "Who's going to run the company? None of us has the time nor the taste for that sort of thing."

"I have," offered Wallingford. "Of course my other interests are so heavy as to prevent my giving my entire time to it, but if my partners will permit me, I shall organize the concern, set it going and see that it is properly conducted without charging a penny for my services."

"That's what I do call sportin'," declared Rickey, rubbing his incipient mustache the wrong way in his enthusiasm.

"It's more generous than fair," objected Benssy. "We'd be delighted, I'm sure, Mr. Wallingford, to have you accept the bothersome management of the thing, but we can't possibly think of it unless you would accept remuneration of some sort."

"Oh, if you insist upon it!" and Wallingford waved his hand easily, as if the question were too trifling to be considered among gentlemen. "I won't accept a salary, but if you want me to have some additional stock for my services to avoid feel-

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ing under obligations, you may make it over to me."

"But, I say," protested Reggie, his fat lips protruding in dissatisfaction; "if we all take the same amount of stock, and we give Mr. Wallingford some extra, he'll have the most, and as this is our joint invention, we must share alike."

"That's true," Wallingford hastily admitted. "We'll just throw that idea aside. We won't need a stock company anyhow, for we shall not want to sell stock or admit any one else into the business. We can make it a simple partnership, putting in just what we need to begin with, and assessing ourselves as much more from time to time as the business actually justifies. We shall not need over fifty thousand dollars to start with."

"Then, fellows, here's the sportin' idea," announced Rickey. "Fifty thousand dollars makes ten thousand for each of us five. Mr. Wallingford's services should be worth at least as much as one-sixth of all our money, and I vote that we admit Mr. Wallingford to an equal partnership with us and not permit him to pay any assessments. Now! One, two, three —"

"Aye!" voted his associates in unison.

"Gentlemen," intoned Wallingford, rising solemnly and smoothing down his broad waistcoat, "I accept your generous offer. If this were brought

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up to me as an ordinary business proposition I should be compelled to decline it instantly, but I have taken quite a fancy to you boys. I have, moreover, become fascinated with the portable house and intend to make it one of my most successful ventures. I shall at once draw up partnership papers, which we shall discuss and sign, right here, while we are waiting. Then we shall select officers, hold a board of directors' meeting, take all our papers to an attorney when we arrive in the city and make our action legally binding. To-morrow I shall have patent papers and drawings prepared, and as soon as they are ready shall call another meeting for us to sign them. In the meantime, I shall see if we can not rent a factory already equipped, shall have working drawings prepared, purchase materials, secure workmen and start upon some sample houses, including the mahogany and the bird's-eye maple one which you are to take upon your fishing trip."

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CHAPTER II

THE GRAND OPENING

STRIKING while the iron was hot being one of Wallingford's specialties, he immediately drew up, on delicately tinted and evasively scented mauve stationery provided him by the fair Benssy, an impressively worded partnership agreement, whereby it was set forth that the six undersigned gentlemen were to be equal sharers in the profits of the Speckled Bass Hollow-Walled Portable Bungalow Company, and that five of the undersigned were to share in all its losses and provide all the money needed, J. Rufus Wallingford being exempt from any share in that end of the business by virtue of his perpetual managership. It was a neat and nifty document, and the boys were justly proud of it, and of themselves as well, as they appended their scrawling signatures to it. It was deuced blooming fun, after all, this thing of going into trade. Quite sportin'!

Their innocent joy over this stage of being in trade was as nothing, however, compared to their dignified gratification, when, with Benssy Falls presiding handsomely, and as rippingly at ease as if

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he were pouring tea, they selected Benssy as president, Reggie Haugh as first vice-president, Von Humperdinck as second vice-president, Rickey Saunders as secretary, and Ringgold Cash as treasurer. In their newly acquired and rapidly growing feeling of fellowship with Wallingford, they were urgently anxious to elect him to a third vice-presidency, but, with becoming modesty, he declined that honor.

"No, gentlemen," he said, first rising and respectfully addressing the chair, as he invariably did when he had anything to say in this meeting, "such honors are not for me. I can not deny that I am heartily pleased that you should offer to make me an equal with you, but, nevertheless, I do not deserve it. The original conception is yours, and to you exclusively should belong the honors and titles of office. Moreover, I am only a plain business man. If you insist upon voting for me, however, you may make my small managership a matter of election and official title."

"That's what I call sportin', eh, fellows!" exclaimed Rickey enthusiastically, and shook hands with him.

So they unanimously elected J. Rufus Wallingford official manager, which, while it did not, of course, give him the importance of a real office in the company, made his mere trifling post at least seem a

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shade less insignificant. He was deeply grateful for it.

A small boy, so thick with freckles that they looked painful, sat in Wallingford's runabout at the station, with both chubby hands firmly upon the big wheel. He straightened up and his face lighted as he saw Mr. Wallingford in the midst of the dispersing board of directors, and with shrewd and twinkling eyes he observed that prince of diplomats bidding adieu to his newly found friends and business associates.

"Hello, boss!" hailed the youngster as Wallingford joined him, and he shook hands with grown-up gravity. "Gee, you made a hit with that bunch of Willies!"

"It's a shame to do it," confessed Wallingford with a grin. "Where's the chauffeur, Toad?"

"He stopped for a stew, and he got it," replied the boy. "But it wasn't the kind that has any oysters in it, so I fired him out of the car and sent him home to sleep it off."

Wallingford laughed as he climbed into the runabout and took the wheel, a proceeding that met with a vigorous protest from the boy.

"Sorry, Toad," insisted Wallingford, "but I'm afraid they'd arrest you if I let you run this car by yourself. How are you getting along with young Jimmy?"

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"Sometimes I don't know," responded Toad with a sigh; "he's a smart kid, and he's got more sand than I thought he had. First I thought I could lick him with both hands tied behind me, but now I guess I'd have to have one loose, anyhow. Yesterday I had to hand him a wallop, and he never cried a mouthful; he just stood still for about a minute, and then he tried to throw the cat through me."

"And how does Mrs. Wallingford take all this?" asked Wallingford, secretly gratified that young Jim showed promise of developing traits that had been a trifle lacking in himself.

"Well," confessed Toad with a slight frown, "of course she's a woman an' don't understand. Tell you what she done; she humped me out to sleep with the stable-hands, an' makes Jim play with the girls in the next house. Say, ain't you goana start a business soon so I k'n have a real job? I don't like to play with kids."

Wallingford sighed. His own opinion was that his son needed the companionship of Toad, even at the expense of an occasional black eye; but, if Fannie was set against it —

"How would you like to wear a brown suit, with red stripes and brass buttons," he suddenly asked, "and serve drinks in a factory?"

"To you an' Blackie? That'd be great!" said

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Toad with vast enthusiasm. "You know Blackie's home, don't you?"

"Is that so!" exclaimed Wallingford, and unconsciously threw more speed on the car. "When did he get in?"

"Yesterday," replied Toad. "I was so glad to see him that I licked the stable-boy twice in an hour; an' he's a tough kid."

Wallingford, remembering well that "tough stable-kid," laughed appreciatively, and he chuckled all the way home. He laughed again when Violet Bonnie Daw kissed him fervently for old sake's sake, and after that operation calmly rerouged her lips. His friend Daw he found supremely happy, for Blackie was now permitted a more liberal pocket allowance than he had enjoyed since his marriage.

"On the level, though, Jim," he explained in the quiet confidence of the study, over the siphon and cigars, "the charming Violet B. Daw is making a mistake when she hands me too much coin. Being barred from wine, women, and song — oh, well, of course, I can have a little wine and all the singing I like — how can I spend it?"

"You ought to know what a cinch that is," laughed Wallingford, pouring and mixing for both. "All you have to do to get rid of it is to buy some of the mining stock you used to sell, or hunt up a

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brace roulette game, or buy a few thousand bushels of margin wheat."

"I wish I could be a sucker," confessed Blackie sadly. "Why, Jimmie, many and many a time I've looked at a gentle come-on being led up to the harpoon and envied him the happiness in his face."

"Never mind, Blackie," soothed Wallingford, "you're not dead yet, and as long as a man's alive he has a chance to be the biggest sucker in the world. By the way, I met the prize lollop club to-day. They threatened to stand off six feet and throw papa's money at me, and I've arranged, no matter how painful to me, to let them do it."

"Will you never quit it, Jimmy!" protested Blackie, really a trifle worried. "You have a good real-estate business that you've picked up since Fannie came home, and with that money we copped off from the Live-forever Sanatorium, you ought to have about a hundred and fifty thousand cash besides this house."

"You've just about guessed it," agreed Wallingford, but with very little enthusiasm. "Everything, property and bonds, is in Fannie's name; and I did intend to stick with the straight game. I'm making money out of it. But do you know who opened his guard to me to-day? Benssy Falls and his delicately scented pals."

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"How careless of Benssy!" commented Blackie. "But I like his flossy name. Who is he?"

"Don't you remember?" indignantly demanded Wallingford.

"Oh, yes, now I know. He must be the son of Old Man Falls."

"Some time, old pal, your frivolous nature will drive me to murder," replied Wallingford with little dents in his nostrils. "This Benssy lollop is the son of E. H. Falls, the railroad king who led me into a genuine ground-floor manipulation, and then pulled the ground from under the floor. He annexed the only half a million dollars I ever had safely banked in my life. Honest money, too!"

"It's funny how easy they take that kind away," mused Blackie with a slow smile. "You were right about every man being a sucker some day."

"I'll get it all back with interest," declared Wallingford savagely; "every cent!"

Blackie threw away Wallingford's heavy cigar, lighted a cigarette, and stroked his perky black mustache in smiling reminiscence. "Poor little Benssy," he said. "Still, I should think you'd rather take it out of the old man direct."

Wallingford squeezed his cigar between his fingers until it broke. "Never mind E. H.," he snapped. "Your part in this is the long-distance expert. You are to be Mr. Bezazzum, of Bezunk,

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Michigan, Mr. Cazizus, of Cazak, Ontario, and Mr. Penawpus, of Penap, Arkansas; to be in all three places at the same time, and answer my letters."

"What I want to know," inquired Blackie after mature reflection, "is whether or not I wear whiskers."

"Three pairs at a time if you have a yen for them," agreed Wallingford, "for nobody cares, except when you get your cue to show up at the factory."

"Aye, aye, sir," consented Blackie with the proper salute, and the matter was settled.

With Violet Bonnie, Wallingford had scarcely more trouble.

"Vi," he began, as they all sat at dinner, "I got you to let me have fifteen thousand dollars to invest for you once in a railroad scheme, and I lost it for you."

"Sure you did," she admitted with a frown; "also I broke my voice in the midst of my greatest success, *The Little Warbler*; but why talk about bad luck? It brings more."

Wallingford shoved his oyster-fork deep into the ice, and braced himself for the shock. "Because I want you to hand me another fifteen thousand," he stated.

Violet Bonnie, with characteristic exaggeration, climbed upon her chair, drew her skirts about her,

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and screamed three consecutive times, to the eternal scandalization of Wallingford's new butler, who gave notice the following morning. "If you tell me you don't mean it, Jimmy, I'll come down and finish my dinner."

"I don't mean it, Vi," declared Wallingford solemnly. "I only want to borrow the money."

"I can listen to that," returned Violet, "because if I *give* it to you I quit worrying about it right then; if I *lend* it to you I only have to worry for fear you'll die before you pay it back; but if you *invest* it for me I'll be tottering around making faces at little children inside of a week."

"All right, Vi, we'll call it a loan," replied Wallingford with a chuckle; "just so I get the fifteen thousand. And, Fannie, I'm going to ask you, one day this week, to make over to me your bonds, and to put as heavy a plaster on the house as it will hold."

Mrs. Wallingford, more beautiful in her matronhood than she had ever been in her girlhood, and more charming in her reserve than she had ever been in her vivacity, turned now with a quick appreshensive glance toward the guests at her table before she turned an imploring one toward her husband.

"Speak right out, Fannie; don't mind us," invited Violet. "If it was Blackie made such a proposition

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he wouldn't have a whisker left in his face. Why, Jim Wallingford, I think you must be crazy! The last time you did that you was worth near half a million, all in Fannie's name. You got her to let go of it, then you tied it up in a nice little bundle and blindfolded old E. H. Falls so he wouldn't know what you was going to do to him, and slipped the pretty little package in his pocket along with my fifteen thousand; then you stepped back and giggled."

Mrs. Wallingford looked at her husband. His lower lip had protruded slightly and was squared. She knew that if he meant to have this thing, no tears or protestations would turn him, and no earthly argument move him.

"I'll go down with you to-morrow, and sign anything you think best, Jim," she said quietly.

Contrition seized him for a moment, and he longed to take her in his arms and reassure her; he would have done so had it not been for the presence of the Daws. Nevertheless, his contrition in no way obstructed his purpose, as his wife, knowing his countenance so well, immediately recognized.

Violet Bonnie, however, insisted upon being the conscience for the party, and now took Mrs. Wallingford severely to task. "Honest, Fannie, you don't know the first principles of training a husband," she charged. "You're too easy."

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"Violet," protested Blackie sternly, "this is none of your funeral."

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" declared that lady, positively aghast at Blackie's temerity. "What did you say?" she demanded, recovering her poise.

"I said that the whole affair was none of your butt-in," announced Blackie firmly, rising and resting his knuckles upon the table, and looking squarely into the blue eyes of his heretofore much better half. For a solid minute and a quarter the blue eyes resisted, then they dropped. Fifteen minutes afterward Violet Bonnie stood contentedly behind the chair of her husband, stroking his hair.

The grand opening of the factory of the Speckled Bass Hollow-Walled Portable Bungalow Company was a function long to be remembered. Fully one-third of the front of the remodeled factory was given over to offices befitting such a distinguished set of officers. Entering a spacious vestibule in Dutch tiling, one saw surrounding him a number of beautiful glass doors, leading into the office of the president, in white and gold; of the vice-president, in mahogany and ebony; of the second vice-president, in rosewood and silver birch; of the secretary, in walnut and cedar; of the treasurer, in redwood and bird's-eye maple; and of the manager, in plain oak. Besides these, there was an arched and groined directors' room, which was a triumph of ceramic

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art; a buffet stocked with more varieties of liquids than a dye-shop; and a small boy, proud in so many gold buttons that in the sunlight he was one solid blaze. Behind all this there was a simple factory, with the shafting carefully gilded and the belting fluttering with kaleidoscopic ribbons; workmen, grinning foolishly when unobserved, in snow-white uniforms; and the very cleanest of clean shavings scattered everywhere. The officers of the company brought hosts, and flocks, and bevies of women, some young and some old, and all so beautiful by art that nature, out of pure spite, had wasted no gifts upon them. These ladies, taught carefully from infancy to be charming, were charmed into ecstasies by everything they saw, without discrimination, unless they discriminated in favor of Wallingford himself, whom they voted to be a most charming manager, as did the board of directors next day at their first regular meeting in the new quarters.

"You see, fellows," declared Rickey Saunders, "it's not only sportin' but rippin' what this chap Wallingford's done. He's made it possible for each fellow to entertain in his own offices with all the resources of a club, and all the privacy of his own quarters; and yet it doesn't need chaperonage, because it's a bloomin' factory office. Wonderful business man, I call him."

"Remarkable," agreed Benssy. "I never saw a

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line of liquors and wines selected with so nice discrimination. Boy, tell Ike to make us another of those absinthe puffs."

"Yes, sir," said Toad Jessop.

"I should say that we should vote to increase our manager's salary," suggested Von Humperdinck, his little pompadour bristling backward with the happy thought.

"Impossible!" declared Ringgold Cash, rubbing his left hand with his right as if he would rub off the black spots. "He has no salary, if you remember, but it would be perfectly proper, I think, to render him a vote of confidence."

This the board of directors did; and Mr. Wallingford, called in to receive it, was gratified almost to death. He was dressed that day with a faultless precision, and his costume bore in it the combined traces of a social favorite, a business magnate and an efficient maître d'hôtel.

"You can not imagine, gentlemen, how proud and pleased I am," he told them, smoothing down his frock coat over his more than well-developed figure, so as to increase the impressive breadth of him. "It has been my ambition to create for you a model factory, one of such appointments that gentlemen of the finer instincts might feel it not only profitable but pleasant to be connected with it; and I think that if the sordid aspects of business were kept a trifle

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more in the background, more of our young men of means might be induced to bring their needed taste and refinement into trade."

"Hear! hear!" interpolated the enthusiastic Rickey, and the others, following his lead, clapped their hands.

"Allow me now to turn to stern business, and to lay before you a synopsis of our progress during the two months and a half since we organized our company. Our factory you have seen. You have, I think, seen the circulars and catalogues mailed you from time to time as they were received from the printers. I now have the pleasure of presenting to you the most promising of the replies I have had from our advertising. The first one of these, requesting us to make a price on three hundred of the portable bungalows, is from a Michigan cranberry monopolist, who expects to house his pickers right where the picking is good. The next one, from Ontario, wishes prices on a hundred and twenty-five, and this one, from Arkansas, asks for a quotation on a hundred of the portable bungalows. You will note, gentlemen, that all these letters speak most enthusiastically of the Speckled Bass Portable Bungalow, and I must confess that if we can book the orders for these five hundred and twenty-five bungalows at a gross return of over two hundred thousand dollars, I shall feel not only encouraged, but flattered."

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"Hear! hear!" shouted Rickey Saunders, and the others clapped their hands.

Wallingford laid down the letters and took up two other packages. "I have furthermore to report," he went on, "that we have received our joint patent from the government at Washington, granting us the exclusive right to manufacture our article in the United States."

He held up the document in question, exhibiting its gaudy ribbon and seal, then produced five more copies and passed them around the table, so that each one of the proud patentees might see his own name upon the grant and have it for keeps.

"Also I have to report," he continued, this time with solemn impressiveness, "the procuring of six patents in my own name for six more or less trivial improvements in portable houses or bungalows. These are, of course, my own invention and my own property; but it is only my decent duty to offer them to the Speckled Bass Portable Bungalow Company at the nominal price of one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, cash! Here are the copies, gentlemen, and I shall retire without recommendation of any sort while you consider them."

A stillness of the weight and inflexibility of a Pullman blanket fell upon the board of directors immediately after the retirement of Mr. Wallingford. Ringgold Cash, being the calmest as well

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as the most deadly about money matters, was the first to recover his nerves.

"Seems to me this Wallingford chap's too good a business man for us. You see, it's like this: to begin with, the fellow has no right to invent portable-house improvements after we had perfected the article."

"That's it! It isn't sportin'!" declared Rickey, much disappointed in Wallingford.

"That's because the fellow's of no family at all," agreed Reggie Haugh, with sorrow so deep that his big lips glistened like glass. "Ring said, the first day we met him, that we owed it to our families to be quite careful."

"We must think," Von Humperdinck reminded them gravely, and immediately bent his creases into waves of intellect, at the same time beckoning to Toad Jessop.

Benssy Falls at this moment proved his generalship by tapping upon the table with the pretty silver inlaid gavel, with which Wallingford had provided him. "No alcohol, gentlemen, please," he protested. "This is too serious a moment. Boy, kindly provide the gentlemen with vichy, or their choice of mild drinks. Now, members of the Speckled Bass Portable Bungalow Company, I beg to remind you that there is no motion before the house," and Benssy Falls stood there in a perfect attitude of

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manly determination, without a single dimple in his cheeks.

"Hear! hear!" exclaimed Rickey. "I move a vote of appreciation for our capable and resourceful president;" and in spite of Benssy's blushing protest, they carried that motion.

It was during the enthusiasm attendant upon this official action that Von Humperdinck proved his right to his kaiser-like mustache and the three creases in his brow by solving the mighty problem offhand. "Mr. President, Mr. First Vice-President, Mr. Secretary, and Mr. Treasurer; Gentlemen of the Board: I move you that we table Official Manager Wallingford's proposition!"

"Rippin'!" shouted Rickey, jumping up. "Three cheers and a tiger for Humpsy! Now, fellows! One, two —"

The gavel of President Falls fell almost rudely. "No indecorum, please, gentlemen," he begged. "There is a motion, and a very important motion, before the house, and I have heard no second to it."

"I beg your pardon, Benssy," apologized Rickey abjectly. "You've got the sportin' idea of bein' a president all right."

"Thank you," returned the president graciously, but still with a trace of sternness; "nevertheless, I have heard no second."

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"Right you are, old top," confessed Rickey still more contritely; "and just to help you out, I second."

"I also second," announced Reggie Haugh, removing his hand from his pendulous lip to do so.

At this juncture Ringgold Cash was delivered of an idea equally as bright as Von Humperdinck's. "Question!" he demanded.

Even the ordinarily self-possessed Benssy was startled by this new manifestation of how much capability and brains they had in their organization.

"Jove!" he exclaimed. "I am proud of you boys. It has been moved by Mr. Second Vice-President von Humperdinck, seconded by Mr. Secretary Richard Saunders and Mr. First Vice-President Reginald de Puyster Haugh, and the question ordered by Mr. Treasurer Ringgold Cash, that we lay upon the table Mr. J. Rufus Wallingford's proposition to buy his patents. All those in favor will please signify by rising." They arose to a man. "Thank you, gentlemen," continued the president; "the motion is carried unanimously, and I propose a toast in vichy, to Second Vice-President von Humperdinck, who was the father of this happy idea."

Standing, they clanked glasses and drank. It was a great day for Toad Jessop.

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CHAPTER III

THE FIRST SUCKER

AN unexpected development was so very grave that the official manager was compelled to call a special meeting of the board of directors, and he made the call so urgent that two of the members of the board were forced to break social engagements of the most imperative nature; one of these engagements, held by Reginald de Puyster Haugh, being with no less a person than the sensational second girl from the end, front row, in the *Follies of Forever* company. Nevertheless they all came, and Wallingford sadly pointed out to them that, while the gentlemen from Michigan, and Ontario, and Arkansas were willing to pay the high price asked for the Speckled Bass Portable Bungalows, the Speckled Bass Portable Bungalows did not seem to offer sufficient quality for the money. Opportunely enough, the gentleman from Bezunk, Michigan, a Mr. Bezazzum, visited the factory while the meeting was in progress. He wore felt boots, corduroy trousers, a canvas coat, a sweater of gorgeous hues and wondrous pattern, and a broad-brimmed

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felt hat. As for his countenance, it was lean and bony, with the most absurdly sprawled black mustache imaginable, and a little tuft of chin-whiskers which began neatly, as if it had intended to be a goatee, and ended in all directions, as if it had suddenly become intoxicated. His eyebrows were equally black, and beneath them glowed a pair of black eyes that alternately twinkled with mischief and flashed with hawk-like intensity.

There was that in his bearing and ease, however, which forbade levity or ridicule, and which made the board of directors, to whom Wallingford introduced him, take him as seriously as he took himself; but Toad Jessop, after one good look at him, went out into the stock-room, where he leaned over a barrel of nails and laughed until he had the stomach-ache.

"Well, yuh see, gents," said Mr. Bezazzum in objection to the company's product, "I'm a-willin' tuh pay thuh top-notch buhdanged price fur thuh very best buhgosh port-table houses what can be coaxed together, and I got thuh buhjing money," and here he slapped his pocket meaningly. "Bu-u-ut I don't notice from your catalogue enough newfangled doodads, dinguses *and* hickeys tuh seem tuh chahm thuh dollahs out'n these corduroys."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Bezazzum," returned Mr. Wallingford, "but I am sure that our catalogues

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do not do full justice to the Speckled Bass Portable Bungalow. You must come out into our factory and inspect one that is complete and ready for shipment."

It was a masterful manner in which to treat such an emergency, and the board of directors were strong in their admiration of it. The board followed into the factory, much interested, to see the demonstration. With all his suavity, Wallingford strove to prove to him the excellence of the Speckled Bass Hollow-Walled Portable Bungalow.

But Mr. Bezazzum was obdurate. While admitting the superiority of the article before him, admitting it in such flattering terms that each and every one of the board of directors was pleased until he writhed, still, the thing would not quite do.

The official manager sighed. The members of the board of directors looked at him anxiously. What would this commercial genius do in such an emergency? He displayed his hand, and in unison they sighed with relief.

"You have not seen the improvements upon the Speckled Bass Bungalow," said Wallingford, holding up his hand impressively, and the mere manner in which he said it, his round pink face graven into solemnity, and his broad chest expanded to its full capacity, was enough to inspire confidence in any man. "Allow me to show you the improved port-

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able-house weather-strip; the improved portable-house lightning-rod; the improved portable-house ventilator; the improved portable-house down-spout; the improved portable-house door-knob; and the improved portable-house burglar-alarm."

Deftly and quickly the official manager displayed these wonderful attachments protected by the six Wallingford patents. Mr. Bezazzum was in ecstasies, nor was his voluble ardor cooled when Mr. Wallingford announced that these improvements would add twenty-five dollars to the cost of each bungalow.

"I wouldn't buhdang miss havin' them improvements if they cost fifty plunks a throw," he declared enthusiastically. "Yuh can jes' book mah ohdeh faw thr-r-ree hundred hollow-walled bungalows with all them there improvements, and I'll slip you ten per cent. of thuh entire bill, in cash, right now. Yo'-all can ship the balance C. O. D., and you can write or telegraph anybody in Bezunk, Michigan, about thuh credit of ole Pete Bezazzum."

He looked so defiant upon this, that Benssy Falls hastened, with all the courtesy of a gentleman to a stranger, to assure him that they had no doubt whatsoever as to his financial standing. Official Manager Wallingford bent upon the luckless president of the company an offended and, at the same time, reproving glare.

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"Of course, Mr. Bezazzum, I shall be compelled to investigate your standing, as a matter of form, but in the meantime I should like, before booking your order, which is rather a large one even for us, to consult with my board of directors. I am only the manager here. Boy, take this gentleman into my office and see if he will not have some refreshments. Mr. Bezazzum, I shall not detain you over two or three minutes. Gentlemen, will you kindly accompany me to the board room?"

With awestricken faces the directors filed in with Wallingford, while Toad Jessop, his lips tightly compressed, his cheeks puffed, and his face so red that his orange freckles were afloat on a sea of maroon, led Mr. Bezazzum into the manager's room and being entirely speechless, made signs for the gentleman to give his order. Mr. Bezazzum, instead of stating his wishes in the liquid line, held up one lean forefinger.

"Toad," said he quietly, "whistle *Hot Time*."

It was then that the explosion came, and Toad was useless for the next half-hour. He laughed until he was faint, and Blackie, throwing him upon a couch, was compelled to apply serious restoratives.

Meanwhile Wallingford discussed grave matters with his board. The directors were all for bargaining with him at once for the complete control of his patents, but, unfortunately, their minds were

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at work upon a suggestion made by Ringgold Cash, to acquire the patents upon a royalty basis, and perceiving the impossibility of setting these particular minds at work upon any two thoughts at one and the same time, Mr. Wallingford led them gently but firmly away from the entire subject.

"We must be cautious," he said. "I would not have you hasty in acquiring these patents, nor in booking the order of Mr. Bezazzum. I shall require a week or ten days in which to look into the gentleman's credentials. In that time I shall discover, with your permission, whether the Wallingford improvements will do anything toward securing the Ontario and Arkansas orders. If they do, of course the company will need, and must have, the Wallingford patents, and in that case, my price will be a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, cash!"

On the day Mr. Wallingford received his one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, he started work upon the three hundred portable houses for Mr. Bezazzum; he also booked the order of the gentleman from Arkansas, and gloated for a moment over the order of the gentleman from Ontario, booked four days previously. This hour's work was all he did in the office that morning, for immediately upon the receipt of his check from the genial secretary, who seemed more concaved than

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ever from collar-button to knees by the unearthly hour of ten A. M., Mr. Wallingford hurried right out to turn that check into cash, and did not return until the next day. From that time on, however, things moved, in that dress-parade factory, with a suddenness and decision which surprised the uniformed rank of the Knights of the Wooden Ribbon until they had washed out every giggle in their systems with honest perspiration; for Wallingford, when he suddenly dropped the mask of the factory dilettante, proved to be what the men within a week declared, a " regular manager ". He seemed to have but one obsession in life — to make portable houses as quickly as they could be made, as cheaply as they could be made, and as good as they could be made; and he knew precisely how to utilize waste material, save labor and keep men good-natured while getting from them the last possible ounce of effective manpower. So forcefully he worked that all three of his big shipments were ready within the time-limit, for a delivery date had been part of the contract with each of the three orders; and the men were cheerful about sending out so much work at once, since they knew of at least one more order for a hundred houses, which Benssy Falls had secured from his father.

Deuced fine thing, the securing of that order, and it revived the interest of the board somewhat, though

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only for a few days. Their interest had flagged woefully of late, for Wallingford had made them feel that life was real, life was earnest. He called a special board meeting on every possible and impossible occasion, and more than that, by the sheer force of his personality he made them attend, until the mere sound of his inexorable voice over the telephone, or the sight of an envelope bearing the neatly embossed factory monogram, was enough to make them all call feebly for their smelling-salts.

Wallingford, with a grim secret humor, kept the board of directors' functions as elaborate as ever, but he allowed, which was entirely foreign to his nature, a sameness to pervade the very elaboration, and a death-like pall crept upon the meetings. In the meantime the work never flagged. The three orders were made ready in record speed, and the three shipments were so timed as to reach their destinations upon the same day, as nearly as possible. Upon the day of the last shipment Wallingford telephoned to a lawyer friend of his, who immediately telephoned the information to a lawyer friend of his own, that the Speckled Bass Portable Bungalow Company was at last engaged in actual business, having made shipments. Upon the next day the lawyer friend of Wallingford's lawyer friend filed a suit against the company in the name of the National Hollow-Walled Portable House Company,

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for infringement of patent and damages, the bill also praying an injunction.

The official manager immediately called a meeting of the board by telephone. He almost called in vain, for only Rickey Saunders, ever loyal, would admit that he was in town. Upon making known the intense gravity of the situation, Wallingford, through Rickey, located the others. They came most painfully, and the official manager allowed the attorney for the opposition to talk them into a sapphire funk. Wallingford, however, masterful, resourceful man that he was, stood firmly as a rock, defying the attorney, who threatened to put them out of business, annex their private fortunes for damages and disgrace them forever.

Wanly, yet professing deep if almost despairing faith, they clung to their friend, J. Rufus, even in the face of the lawyer's departing threat to bring suit at once; but on the fourth day after, there came an agonized telegram from Mr. Bezazzum, that an injunction had been served upon him, forbidding him to pay for and remove the portable bungalows consigned to him.

Wallingford called a board of directors' meeting.

On the following day a similar telegram came from the gentleman in Ontario.

Mr. Wallingford called a board of directors' meeting.

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On the second day after that a similar telegram came from the gentleman in Arkansas.

Mr. Wallingford called a board of directors' meeting.

On the second day after that, again, Mr. Bezazzum himself came into the factory, clad in the most violent silk sweater procurable.

Mr. Wallingford not only called a board of directors' meeting on this special occasion, but he spent an entire day in a taxi and brought them to it, limp and pitiful as they were.

Mr. Bezazzum, more violently inflamed than his unspeakable sweater, was a tornado of righteous wrath, whom Mr. Wallingford endeavored, with no success at all, to placate with soothing words and fond promises.

"No!" shrieked Mr. Bezazzum. "Oi'll have the law on yez, begod. You promised me delivery on a certain date. I have me three hundred min engaged, and no houses to put them in. I could have had the houses elsewhere; but, by cheminy, I blace my confidence een diss skinner concern an' they turn me down! I'm agin you; see? To-morrow, by heck, I'll stack you up in front of a two-hundred-thousand-dollar damage suit, so help me! And that goes!"

Wallingford, in a panic at Blackie's audacity, but appreciating far less than Blackie how much the

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panic of his numbed board of directors could safely be trodden upon, and jerked to bits and gorily juggled with, just did save himself from an attack of heart failure and drew himself together for his cue.

"But, my dear man!" he expostulated. "My dear Mr. Bezazzum! You must realize that, as far as intent goes, we are entirely innocent in this affair. We delivered the goods to you on time, and we can not be held for anything on that score. In a spirit of fairness, however, we will do this much. We will pay the freight both ways, take back the three hundred portable houses, and repay your ten per cent. advance deposit, in cash. Isn't that fair, Mr. Bezazzum?"

"Hear! hear!" cried Rickey Saunders, in a tone which tried to be exhilarating. "That's a sportin' offer, Mr. Bezazzum."

Mr. Bezazzum's answer to that sportin' offer was immediate, picturesque and violent. He had a contract calling for the delivery of the goods to him within a certain specified time, and delivery to a carrying agent from which he could not obtain the goods, upon the proffer of the agreed price for their release, was no delivery to him, in fact, common sense, or law. In the meantime, relying upon this company, he had, in good faith, hired a regiment of men for whose operations, in his behalf, these

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portable houses were necessary; and these men, under contract, looked to him for their pay. He had a good and valid claim for damages, sustainable in any court, for a sum so large that it staggered even Wallingford when Mr. Bezazzum had the careless impudence to mention it. Mr. Bezazzum intended to press his claim in the highest courts in the land, so help him Moses; and there was no possible compromise! Hold on, though! There might — that is, it was just barely possible that there might — be a way out.

Hope, dim, vague, distant, glimmering hope, the barest flicker and spark of hope blushed faintly upon the far-distant horizon for five disconsolate gentlemen in trade. It might be barely possible that, if the Speckled Bass Company, retaining his ten per cent. advance payment, were to relinquish the goods in settlement of Mr. Bezazzum's damage claim — Well, gentlemen, there you were, and what were you going to do about it, or were you going to stand suit, buhgosh!

The dense silence was broken by Von Humperdinck, the three creases in whose brow were now so tightly drawn that they seemed one blurred black line of foundation for his spikes of hair. "Did I understand the gentleman to say that he offered a compromise?" he queried in tones of intense thought.

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Mr. Wallingford, apparently hopeless and despairing, put the compromise into intelligible terms.

"At last there's somethin' fairly sportin'," Rickey plucked up his spirits enough to announce. "Is it correct, gov'nor, that this gentleman will just take the three hundred portable houses and go back home to Bezap, or Bezibber, or wherever it is, and never — er — never molest us again?"

"That's his only term," vociferated Mr. Bezazzum.

"Then it's perfectly easy," declared Rickey, so relieved that he could pluck with interest at the mustache which would not come. "We don't want the bloomin' bungalows, do we, fellows?"

The unanimous assent to this was a closely concerted groan; but the groan was emphatic.

"Then," went on Rickey, still brightening, "I vote, fellows, that we accept the bloomin' compromise and thank the gentleman from Bezam for having made his rippin', good, sportin' offer."

"Just a moment, gentlemen," warned Wallingford solemnly. "We are setting a dangerous precedent. We have customers in Ontario, and in Arkansas, who will be claiming the same terms."

"Move we let 'em all have the terms," returned Rickey promptly. "Move we let 'em all have 'em. That's sportin', eh, fellows? Somebody second the motion."

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A savage second came from Reggie Haugh, who was pouting a pout of record thickness. He had just lost the second girl from the end, first row, because a man who would let business interfere with an engagement with her was a piker.

Even Ringgold Cash, who would just as lief lose money as part with his eyesight, hearing, speech and sense of taste, was frightened enough, and disgusted enough, to help make that motion unanimous; and striking while the iron was hot, Wallingford called in a messenger-boy and immediately wired the gentlemen in Ontario and Arkansas the terms of the compromise.

By some remarkable coincidence, the attorney for the National Company just managed to happen in upon them at this juncture. The attorney for the National Company was very severe. He had just received fresh information regarding an infringement incorporated into the Speckled Bass product, but not mentioned in the Speckled Bass patent, and this infringement gave the National Company an additional crushing legal weapon. The company he represented was not disposed to be harsh, however. It would give the Speckled Bass Company its choice of two courses. It could continue business under a prohibitive royalty, or it could quit business entirely and forever.

It took the board of directors just forty-three sec-

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onds to accept the proposition to go out of business entirely and forever; and immediately thereafter it departed in a body, declining even to take a parting drink in the hideous marts of trade.

"Well, Jimmy," said Blackie, after even the attorney for the opposition had departed, "let's crack a bumper and count the profits. You made a hundred and twenty-five thousand clear on the patents, which coin belongs to you individually, and we have five hundred and twenty-five portable houses, free of all encumbrance, except freightage to points of good sale, and worth two hundred and twelve thousand dollars, which cost us twenty-one thousand two hundred. It was a fine and dandy revenge, Jimmy."

"Revenge!" half shouted Wallingford, leaning over suddenly and pounding upon the table with his big fist. "Would you call this piffling little amusement revenge? You're never serious enough, Blackie, to understand what that word means, but I do! Did you see me call young Benssy back? Well, I sent a message by him that will bring me a revenge worth while, at eleven o'clock to-morrow. What are you laughing about, kid?"

"Never mind," said Toad with a wave of his freckled hand; "I'm on. You two is too slick to rest well nights; but the booger man'll git you sure."

Wallingford looked at him with not at all un-

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friendly eyes. "You've a lot of nerve, talking to us like that," he declared with an assumption of gruffness.

"Oh, I ain't afeared," retorted Toad contemptuously. "You fellows like me, an' I like you fellows, even if you ain't on the square an' the level, as my paw always says. But the booger man'll git you jis' the same."

"The booger man, eh?" repeated Blackie, smiling. "I didn't know you stood for such stuff, Toad."

"Well," replied Toad soberly, "my maw always said that your worst booger man was your own self."

"Holy cripes!" ejaculated Blackie. "Get out of here and bring us that champagne or you'll drive us to drink."

At precisely eleven, Toad Jessop ushered into the office of the official manager a spare, nervous, leather-faced man, whose beard sprang black an hour after a shave. He hung slouchily in his good clothes, and his step had no elasticity, but there was an unquenchable fire in his eyes; and a vast unnumbered army of men, from ditch-diggers to millionaires, would tremble if E. H. Falls were to do so inconceivable a thing as to roar. He shuffled into Wallingford's office and sat quietly in a big chair,

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shrinking into his clothes, almost as if he were in dread of his antagonist — and he waited!

Wallingford proved the weaker man in the start, for he began the struggle.

"Well, I suppose your son has told you of the iniquitous manner in which he was robbed," began Wallingford gloatingly.

"He did nothing of the sort," said Falls. "If he had been robbed, he would have crawled under the porch and licked his own wound until it was well. I never yet heard Benssy whine. Was he robbed?"

"Well, I wouldn't just say robbed," returned Wallingford, with the ugly laugh of a man who sees his moment of revenge on the way and thirsts for it. "I wouldn't say robbed, because that might be taken as a confession. He just proved himself a saphead, that's all."

The shrunken figure in the chair straightened up with surprising elasticity. "You'll kindly drop any mention of Benssy," he said with a snap of his jaws. "I can put Benssy in a turning-lathe, trim off a thousandth of an inch of careless artificiality, split him up and make of him six better men than most of his recent associates. I know what's in the boy, and I am highly pleased to allow him to be utterly care free, and an outward fool if he likes; but if I ever need him, I'll skin him, and have a real man

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standing by the side of me. Now, what did you want to see me about?"

"The Lake Michigan and Pacific," blurted Wallingford surlily, for so far his attack had been a boomerang.

The eyes of Falls lighted with immediate interest. "So you are the one who has the balance of stock hidden away?" he commented.

"You bet I am!" declared Wallingford, leaning forward in sudden anger, and holding his fist tensely upon the edge of the table. From that moment Falls lounged back in his chair, and listened, and never moved. "You bet I am!" repeated Wallingford. "Benssy, your unskinned man, let out to me when I first met him that you are actually going to build the connecting line between the Chicago and Manhattan and the Lake Michigan and Pacific Railroads, and create the new Pacific trunk line upon which you made me lose the only real fortune I ever had." Wallingford's face had reddened, and his voice grew husky with emotion as he went on. "Yes, you did! I came to you with a proposition to sell that connecting strip of land for stock in the two roads, which were bound to advance in value when they were consolidated; and you led me into a wild mess of margin speculation, which cost me half a million dollars, all I had in the world. Now, I'm going to get it all back, with interest. Do you

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hear me? With interest! The minute I found that you were actually going to slip this road through, which you had denied that you would ever build, I mortgaged everything I possessed, borrowed everything I could, raked and scraped together until I had a little over three hundred thousand dollars. With this I quietly bought outright all the loose stock I could find of the Lake Michigan and Pacific, knowing that you were doing the same, that you would not go into the open market for fear of boosting the price, and that you felt your operations to be so secret that you had plenty of time to secure control."

Wallingford mopped his brow. He was hoarse now. Falls sat quietly regarding him, but did nothing so dramatic as even to light a cigar.

"Well, after I had invested all that I could, I showed W. D. Fishbacker your order for one hundred portable houses, and called his attention to the points to which they were to be delivered; and Fishbacker struggled with you for the rest. I notice that you ran up the price quite a bit before all the stock was shaken loose. There isn't a share of it to be had, Mr. Falls, except from Fishbacker or myself, and you know how much chance there is for you ever to do business, on any basis, with Fishbacker." His voice was very hoarse now, but even above the hoarseness it arose to a queer caricature

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of an angry shriek, and his face was purple with passion. "I hold control, which you must have; and you must come to me for it; and you must pay my price!"

There was a moment of silence, in which Wallingford tremblingly reached for a glass of water, and finding the glass empty, set it down; then, still needing a drink, picked it up and held it foolishly. Falls crossed over the other leg.

"It seems that you have me," he pleasantly admitted. "How much do you want for your three hundred thousand dollars' worth of stock?"

"A million and a quarter," snarled Wallingford, leaning forward and looking closely into the eyes of the only man he had ever held as an enemy.

Falls produced a check-book from his pocket, produced a fountain-pen from another, wrote a check and arose. "There's your million and a quarter, Mr. Wallingford," he observed in so quiet and even a tone that there must either be hatred, contempt, or, worse than all, complete indifference behind it. "Deliver your stock to my office before the banks close, and you will find that check perfectly negotiable. When you get your million and a quarter, go out and buy a cigarette with it, and smoke it up, and be broke again, and start back working the county fairs. I know you'll do it, Wallingford, for a piker always finds his level."

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Somehow Falls emerged from Wallingford's office unanswered. The truth seldom meets with an adequate reply, except in its own kind.

Well, Wallingford had the million and a quarter for which he had played; enough to give Fannie back her house upon the avenue; enough to furnish himself with all the luxuries and indulgences that he craved; enough to give back to Violet Bonnie her fifteen thousand dollars, with two or three hundred per cent. interest; but still he was not quite satisfied. Why? Because of one simple word. Falls had called him a piker, and had proved it.

The gleam of a broken pattern of brass buttons, seen through the door as Toad Jessop returned from his obsequious attentions to the departing railroad king, gave Wallingford's thought another tack, and he hung his head. Toad had been right. The booger man had got him.

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CHAPTER IV

A LITTLE BUSINESS TALK

TOAD JESSOP, whose freckles were so strong that they made him look like a man, had tried all the seats on that side of the car except the one occupied by J. Rufus Wallingford, when the wheezing and panting and rheumatic-jointed old accommodation train stopped, with no apparent provocation, and before Toad's very eyes appeared a lineman, descending a telegraph-pole with alternate stabs of his splendidly spiked feet. The lineman, reaching the ground and picking up a few scattered tools, clomped into the car, leaving the scenery absolutely vacant except for some bare rolling hills on his side of the train, and, on the other, some equally bare flat land.

Apparently finding the additional weight of one bony-faced human being too much for its feebleness, the train presently heaved itself rid of some heavy machinery; then it puffed and quivered relievedly away, though not so rapidly but that Wallingford, gazing idly out the window, had ample

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time to read upon the largest machinery-crate: "Dougalbobber Brothers, Dougalville."

In the meantime, Toad Jessop was acquiring information as rapidly as the bony-faced lineman could deliver it to him.

"Say, what was you doin' up on that pole?" demanded Toad, planting himself firmly upon his knees just in front of the seat the pole-climber had taken.

The lineman sorted out Toad's blue eyes from amidst his freckles, and liked them. "I was up there straightening a kink in the wire," he answered.

"Why?" demanded Toad.

"It was gettin' the messages twisted."

"How?"

"Well, you see, the 'o's' and 'a's' and 'e's,' the 'w's' and 'm's' and 'n's' and such letters as that, slide right around a kink, but the 'k's' and 'q's' and 'y's' and 'x's,' especially the capital 'X's,' always stick."

This being a perfectly logical explanation, and one which anybody could understand, Toad pursued that subject no further.

"What's all that machinery for they put off back there?" he next inquired.

"That's a calico mill," the man promptly responded.

Toad flattened his face against the glass in a vain

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attempt to look backward, then he hurried to the rear door. A curve and a hill hid the spot from view. "What kind of a mill?" he asked doubtfully upon his return.

"A calico mill," repeated the lineman. "Didn't you notice the acres and acres of calico grass around there?"

Toad, with another glance at the rear door, shook his head sadly and looked out the window, in the hope that he might see a stray sample of calico grass. He was still at that vain and unprofitable employment when Wallingford walked past on his way to the smoking-compartment.

"Say, boss," he hailed Wallingford, "do you know calico grass when you see it?"

"I'm afraid not, Toad," replied Wallingford, smiling. "Why?"

"There was so much of it back where we stopped," explained Toad with a troubled brow, "and I didn't see it. They put off the machines for a calico mill there, you know."

Wallingford turned with a puzzled expression to the bony-faced passenger, who looked up at him and laughed.

"He's such a smart-lookin' kid I couldn't help tryin' to see how much he'd stand for," the lineman pleasantly observed; and Toad wheeled instantly to bend upon him a clear and indignant glare.

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"Ore-crushing machinery, isn't it?" guessed Wallingford.

"Iron," replied the other with a nod, surveying with interest and approval the important-looking big man, whose round pink face spoke so plainly of cheerfulness and good living.

"Much of a deposit?" inquired Wallingford, with the instant interest of a man commercially inclined.

"They say it's a wonder. The Dougalbobber brothers own it, whoever they are. They're hustlers. Next week a spur-track is to be put in back to the mines." He paused and smiled over the magic of things. "Dougalville! There ain't a livin' soul back there now, but in a month it'll be a good-sized town, out hustlin' for electric lights and trolley-cars."

"Also it will have a real-estate boom and six saloons," agreed Wallingford, and passed on to the smoker.

Toad followed him. "Say," observed Toad in a pained tone, "that man back there," here he pulled down Wallingford's ear and whispered into it, "why, he's a liar!"

J. Rufus Wallingford, respectable and prosperous real-estate dealer, and his messenger-boy, valet, companion and friend, Toad Jessop, finished their business in the Northwest in four days. On the return trip Wallingford had mileage torn off as far as

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bleak barren Dougalville only. He had expected to stop between trains and survey the lonesomeness as mere raw material, but he found there a tiny telegraph station and waiting-room which had been shoved off a freight-car intact, apparently even to the operator, for that functionary was inside; he found a roughly built frame shack labeled "Kimbely Mine — Office"; he found a gang of railroad laborers putting down a half-graded, wobbly spur-track, and up the ravine into which it was headed he saw, against a background of soiled little tents, a swarm of human ants setting machinery in place, and another swarm digging an impressive-looking hole in the ground.

From the same train by which Wallingford had arrived, there descended a drove of clay-festooned laborers, and as these, by common impulse, surged immediately toward the "office", Wallingford watched the accommodation creak upon its jolty way toward the happy land of taxis and bath-tubs and push-buttons. For relief from the intolerable landscape, which would not alter nor decay, but lay in its flat sterility forever and ever, he watched the sifting of the clay-hung laborers, who were admitted into the office one at a time, and came out again with little slips of paper in their hands, to trudge up the ravine toward the Kimbely Mine and more clay.

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When the last one had returned to his native element, Wallingford walked slowly across to the office, but to his surprise, he found it locked. Hearing loud voices, however, he stopped and listened in perplexity. Suddenly, from around the corner of the building, there dashed two of the clay-decorated callers, followed by half a dozen well-muscled gentlemen who looked highly unnatural without striped clothing. These, howling a choice collection of epithets, expletives and blasphemies, and stooping to pick up missiles by the way, were followed by a man with blood-colored hair and big, flat, outstanding ears almost as red, who was so bow-legged that a beer-keg could have been rolled through his wicket. This man was evidently the general of the pursuing army, for he directed it not only with energy, but with rancor.

"Soak 'em!" he cried in a twanging voice. "Soak 'em, can't you! Soak 'em! Soak 'em! Soak 'em! Soak 'em!" and he jumped up and down like a dancing hoop.

The two laborers had struck for the track, and were now headed due southeast, with an apparently steadfast determination to overtake the accommodation, dodging, by mere instinct, the specimens of rock ballast which were hurled after them.

"What's the excitement?" asked Wallingford of the violent-haired one.

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The man turned regretfully from the pleasures of the chase and surveyed Wallingford carefully, from silk hat to polished toes, and from shoe-laces to satin cravat, where, upon the focusing-point of a two-carat diamond, his fish-belly-blue eyes came to a [illegible]anent rest.

"What excitement?" he sullenly inquired.

"The mob scene," returned Wallingford, endeavoring to smile in spite of his growing resentment.

The man considered that for a moment in careful silence. "What do you want?" he finally demanded, his eyes, however, still remaining at the diamond level.

"Civility," snapped Wallingford. "Who's running this mine?"

"The Dougalbobber brothers," was the prompt and rather emphatic response.

"Where will I find one of them?"

This time there was a considerable hesitation before he replied,

"Well, I'm Alec Dougalbobber."

Wallingford inspected his man anew, and in spite of his habitual diplomacy, he grinned. "Why, Alec, I'm ashamed of you," he bluffed, having estimated Dougalbobber to be the arrant coward that he was. "You never should allow such a peevish impulse to get the better of you. You should be cheerful and happy, as I am, and when you are in a pleasanter

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frame of mind, I'd like to talk a little business with you."

"What do you want?" again demanded Alec, but this time in a much milder and more conciliatory tone.

"They tell me you own the land across the track there," and Wallingford waved his arm in the general direction of the flat desolation.

Mr. Dougalbobber, with a nod that tilted his ears upward and forward like the sweep of an aeroplane, admitted that such was the case.

"You expect to have a town over there by and by?"

The aeroplane tilted once more, its thin wafer of a fore rudder cleaving the way.

"The sooner it's there the better it is for your mine?"

Another tilt.

"Well, I own over five hundred brand-new portable houses. If you'll sell me that land at a reasonable figure, I'll cut it up into building-lots, have my five-hundred-odd houses erected within two weeks, help you in your advertising, and there's your town, ready made!" And by way of introduction, he handed Alec his card.

Mr. Dougalbobber dropped his eyes to the card and let them rest there in cautious speculation. "I'll have to see Frank about this," he stated after ma-

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ture thought. "We'd ought to see Ralph, too, but he's in the East," and, turning toward the ravine with a side glance to see that Wallingford was turning with him, he started in the direction of the incipient mine.

"Are you selling any stock?" asked Wallingford.

"A little," admitted Alec. "The proposition is too big for individual capital. That's Ralph's department."

Wallingford glanced at his companion and smiled. "No trouble to find investors, I suppose?" he ventured.

"Not very much," was the slow reply, as Alec shifted his gaze from side to side upon the ground. "You see, the proposition's too good. We got the government geological survey the minute it came out, and bought up the best iron-veins it showed. This is the richest iron-field since the Mesaba Range was opened. Look at this survey," and he produced a pocket-worn, governmental, cross-section map, showing an iron-ore-bearing stratum thick enough to take up half of the drawing.

"Some iron there, I guess," Wallingford admitted, passing back the paper.

"Enough to build all the engines, locomotives, dynamos, battleships and cannons in the world for the next fifty years," asserted Alec, pulling his eyes up to the cravat level again. "Our mining claims

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cover all the thick part of that deposit, and here's the assay we've had made of the ore."

He proffered another folded paper, but Wallingford waved it back.

"I know a man who makes assays," he commented. "I'll feel so much better convinced if I just take your word. Doing any advertising?"

"Quite a bit," replied Alex, with a wince at the cost of that luxury, and just then, rounding the rocky corner of a red-streaked hill, they came face to face with Frank Dougalbobber.

Wallingford would have known him anywhere. With the exception of the hair, which in Frank's case was the color of well-bleached hay, the brothers were so alike — ears, eyes, noses, and mouths — as to be libelous caricatures of each other.

Alec found no difficulty in looking into his brother's eyes with earnest inquiry as he propounded Wallingford's plan.

"Well, I don't know," said Frank uneasily, shifting from one foot to the other. "We always like to get in on all the profits of everything we do."

"I'll make you more profit than you can obtain in any other way," asserted Wallingford confidently. "I'll have a good reporter for a press association come up here the day my portable houses are on the ground. He'll see a blank landscape with a few stakes driven into its expressionless countenance;

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he'll see an army of men juggling the complete walls, floors and roofs of houses then he'll see a finished little city, all ready to cook ham and eggs in five hundred cheerful homes, and preparing to elect a tomato-haired mayor."

Both brothers smiled thinly, and Alec even almost bowed.

"It sounds like good advertising," he agreed.

"Good advertising!" retorted Wallingford. "The best kind known; the kind that can't be bought. Your brother Ralph will have to fight stock-purchasers away from him to get any sleep, and we'll start a boom here that will poke that pale sky so full of spires and domes that it'll look like a boy had cut into it with a Christmas jig-saw."

Neither of the brothers batted a lash.

"And where do we get in on the real-estate end?" insinuated Frank.

"Sell me the center twenty acres over there, solid, at a hundred dollars an acre, and alternate acres surrounding that at the same price," offered Wallingford. "You can figure for yourselves the result of holding those alternate acres until the city grows up around them."

Once more the Dougalbobber brothers then present gazed deeply and earnestly into each other's eyes.

"I guess we'll consult Ralph about this," decided

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Alec. "We never do anything very important without all of us agreeing on it."

"You'll take a chance on Ralph or you won't have any proposition to offer him," declared Wallingford.

"There's an express train thunders through here in about thirty minutes. I'm going to board that train and slam away from this morgue full of dead scenery before it gives me the willies."

The brothers again smiled thinly.

"If we don't stop to consult Ralph," ventured Frank, after a vacillating hesitation, "we'll have to have a better price for that land."

"You'll find me on the station platform waiting for that answer," asserted Wallingford stiffly, and left them alone to think it over. He was disappointed in not finding them more enthusiastic.

At the same moment in which Wallingford strode down the ravine, with Toad Jessop panting at his heels and still watching the marvel of that magic city sprouting its domes and spires against the sky, Blackie Daw, with a cynical smile beneath his inky mustache, sat across the table from Ralph Dougalbobber in a New York hotel bar.

"But you won't even investigate these remarkable mining stocks," Mr. Dougalbobber was expostulating.

"Quite so, my son," returned Blackie, grinning. "I used to sell them."

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Mr. Dougalbobber spread his knees very handily around two legs of the table and arched his feet together, while he scratched one broad, red, outstanding ear in perplexity; then he ran his fingers through his muddy brown hair.

"But you won't even look at this marvelous assay," he again expostulated.

"Quite so, my son," returned Blackie, grinning. "I used to buy them."

"You can get in now at forty-five," offered Dougalbobber enticingly. "Last week it was forty."

"Quite so, my son," returned Blackie, grinning. "I used to tilt them, too."

At about the identical moment in which Blackie lighted a triumphant cigarette, after offering one to the confused and awkward Mr. Dougalbobber, his friend, Wallingford, was still awaiting his answer; but when Number Three actually slowed down, red-haired Alec came running from the office, the cover of which he had gained by making a détour of the hill, and panted up to Wallingford with:

"Yes."

"Thanks," returned Wallingford, and then, as if in afterthought, "I think I'll give a share of your stock with every house."

"We'll make it to you at forty-five," offered Alec promptly.

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"The operating company?" asked Wallingford.

Alec's ears almost perked forward. "How did you know there were two companies?" he demanded in a panic.

"Saw the state records of incorporation," explained Wallingford, and then, in a much smoother tone: "You see, these few shares are to give the townspeople a greater interest in the mine, and for that purpose they should be in the operating company. Do you object to parting with some of them?"

Alec considered the matter doubtfully. The train thundered down to the platform, and stopped to a mere crawl.

"No," he said hesitatingly, and then again, with sudden decision: "No! Make you those at eighty-five."

"Make it eighty, and I'll go you," offered Wallingford.

"Who's taking this train?" asked the conductor roughly.

"I am," answered Wallingford, mounting the lower step. Toad was already on the platform with a bag and suit case. "Eighty?"

Alec still stood in indecision. The conductor, muttering curses, waved his hand and jumped upon the steps of the car ahead. The engine gave an angry puff, and the train, which had not come to

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a complete stop, began to pick up its momentum. Wallingford leaned far out from the steps.

"Make it eighty!" he shouted.

"All right," called Alec weakly, and Wallingford went into the car, chuckling.

The miracle happened — two miracles in fact: one when J. Rufus Wallingford erected his mushroom city in the twinkling of an eye, as it were, from a job lot of portable houses that he and Blackie Daw had obtained at ten cents on the dollar; and the other when he induced a big press association to "fall for" his scheme of gratuitous advertising. Through this publicity, the wonderful Kimbely Mine became a household word overnight, and the astonished Brother Ralph, who had been waging a desperately uneven battle for subscribers in the effete East, suddenly wired frantically to his brothers to increase their capitalization, as he was running out of stock. Immediately after sending this telegram, he placed his derby between his ears and followed the cleavage of his nose into the haunt most infested by Blackie Daw.

"The Kimbely Mine is just doubling its capitalization," he proudly twanged.

"Good work," approved Blackie. "There's no reason why you shouldn't keep right on printing the stock as long as they'll buy it."

"They'll buy it as long as they have such proof

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as we have of a fivefold profit," enthused the Eastern Dougalbobber. "It's worth fifty-five now. Have you seen in the papers how Dougalville was built overnight?"

"I invented that trick myself," stated Blackie complacently. "It's the greatest mine-selling scheme on earth, and I lost a fortune by not patenting it."

Brother Ralph was working no harder than they were in Dougalville, however. Laborers flocked there in shoals and were either put into the mines or chased down the track to the jeers of the rapidly growing populace. Wallingford, for the time being, did nothing but sell houses — for cash when he could, on instalments when he must. For seven hundred dollars he could sell a house and lot that had cost him sixty, and a share of stock that had cost him eighty. He obtained copies of the charter, constitution and by-laws of the Kimbely Mine Company, and every time he read them he frowned over just one puzzling problem; then he went out and mingled anew with his tenantry, for every householder would be a voter in the approaching stockholders' meeting. He got a grocer, a butcher, a baker and other enterprising merchants to buy bungalows and open shops; a lawyer and four doctors — allopath, homeopath, osteopath, and horse — cast their lots with him, and carpenters,

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bricklayers and stonemasons fairly swarmed to the place.

Even in the early days, before the inrush began, Wallingford occupied himself very fully, by spending as much time as possible in and about the mine, although nearly always under the watchful eye of one of the Dougalbobbers. He noted one very peculiar thing: no chemist was employed, and nobody interested seemed at all curious regarding the quality of the ore. When he wanted to take some of it away to show prospective citizens, however, they evinced a sudden jealous regard for it, and positively refused to let him have any. He obtained some, though, through the earnest efforts of Toad Jessop, who brought it away a lump at a time. It looked like any other iron-ore, as far as Wallingford could see, but he was very curious about it.

When the influx began, Wallingford became the patriarch of the town, its founder and father, its chief benefactor and adviser, and in the first two weeks Dougalville would have elected him unanimously to be president of the United States. At the end of two weeks, however, Big Bill Slammet came to town, with one wife, six children, three dogs and seven dollars, and sought opportunities for investment. Big Bill busying himself on the investment proposition, Mrs. Slammet, a woman as

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faded and decrepit as Big Bill was flamboyant and hearty, came to Wallingford and obtained a house on sheer defenselessness. Big Bill, having found the only easily obtainable form of investment in the town to be whisky, invested his seven dollars in that commodity for the use and benefit of himself and various and sundry kindred spirits. Shortly upon the heels of this, he discovered Wallingford and immediately made a speech.

He was from Cinderburg, Big Bill was, and he knew this man Wallingford of old. He was a common grafter, this J. Rufus person, one who robbed widows and orphans and honest laboring men like him out of their hard-earned money. In Cinderburg, Wallingford had organized a concern known as the Bang Sun Engine Company, which company was a fraud and a swindle from beginning to end. Big Bill fairly frothed at the mouth in telling of the iniquities of Wallingford, and as he had a good corner just between the Miners' Club Saloon and the Merchants' Café, he had a rapidly growing and highly gleeful audience.

Wallingford and Toad Jessop, taking an evening constitutional, in the pleasant silence that comes to friends of long standing who have no question of each other, came upon the orator in due time and were just about to join the group when Wallingford heard his own name, and drew Toad

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quickly into the shadow of a high pile of beer-cases at the side of the Merchants' Café, where he listened a moment.

"Where's one of the Dougalbobbers?" inquired Wallingford, turning to Toad with a sudden flush of anger.

"Down at the depot playin' penny-ante, ten chips for a cent, with McCorkle an' young Rickets," immediately responded Toad, who knew the whereabouts, habits and personal history of every living creature in Dougalville.

"Go get one of 'em," directed Wallingford crisply. "I'll be right here."

Toad at once transformed himself into a thin streak, and was there and back before Wallingford had ceased to wonder whether he had quite understood instructions or not.

"They're comin', both of 'em," panted Toad. "They didn't know there was any free doin's or they'd 'a' been here before. Gee, ain't that big husky lickin' it into you! I didn't know you'd been so ornery. Why don't you lick 'im?"

Wallingford dreaded to find a trace of contempt in Toad's tone, but there was none; the boy would not have found it possible to suspect physical cowardice in a friend of his. He only wondered that men so often found reasons for neglecting the first duty and delight of every male human being.

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"A mere licking wouldn't do," Wallingford explained, glad to have a valid excuse. "He's too dangerous for that."

The Dougalbobbers hurried into view just then and stopped at the edge of the crowd to listen. Toad ran out and brought them back to the shadow of the beer-cases.

"You have a bunch of hired wallopers, haven't you?" asked Wallingford.

"Well, we don't call 'em that," returned Frank hesitantly. "They're our watchmen."

"Where are they?"

"Wherever the most excitement is," returned Frank with a grin. "I reckon that's right here. I saw two or three of 'em as we circled the herd."

"I want to borrow them."

"I should say you would," responded Alec, and stepping over to the edge of the crowd, he lifted up his shrill nasal voice with:

"Soak 'im, boys! Soak 'im! Soak 'im! Soak 'im!"

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CHAPTER V

THE GLAD HAND

THE response was instantaneous. A raw potato hit Big Bill Slammet in the teeth. He turned, full of rage, to discover the vandal if he could, when, from the other edge of the group of his beloved hearers, a clod of raw dirt caught him in the ear. Big Bill considered that situation for only one second before he decided to step down from his nail-keg and seek some more secluded spot. As he edged through the crowd somebody poked him in the back of the neck with several hard knuckles. Big Bill started to run, and the nearest open space being the railroad track, he made for that and headed due southeast, followed by six well-muscled experts in the art of personal encounter, who pelted him with rocks at every jump until the darkness swallowed him up forever; whereupon his wife took in washing, and raised her family, and was happy ever after.

Immediately after the exodus of Big Bill, Wallingford's new-found friends, the Dougalbobbers,

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in huge admiration escorted him to his own portable bungalow.

"We didn't know you was a wise William, too," said Alec with a little laugh as Wallingford produced a bottle and glasses and cigars. "If we'd 'a' known that, we'd 'a' had our wallopers, as you call 'em, look out for you, and this never would have happened."

"You have to watch for these red-necks," agreed Frank, smiling and looking Wallingford squarely in the eye for the first time in his life. "Just one of 'em's liable to upset your whole game any minute. You don't want to give 'em a chance to even cough inside your town. Come over to our office to-morrow at train-time, and we'll show you how we handle 'em."

A sudden idea hit Wallingford, and the frowning crease that had been steadily in his brow for two weeks, disappeared, as if by magic. He chuckled, his broad chest heaving and his big shoulders shaking, his eyes closing and his round pink face wreathing itself in a smile, which, as an evidence of friendly understanding, the Dougalbobber brothers saw with delight.

"You must have had a lot of experience," suggested Wallingford, and chuckled again over the splendid solution he had found for his secret problem.

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The brothers exchanged smiles of comradeship.

"We've got it down to a science," boasted Frank. "You see, we've specialized. We do nothing but iron-mines, and we know how. We figure right from the beginning that most likely a mine is no good, but if it isn't, we don't want to know it; so we never fuss around with the ore except to dig it out. When we have nearly all the stock sold we ship some ore to the smelters, and what they tell us after the actual reduction is worth more than all the assays in the world."

"Right you are," agreed Wallingford heartily. "That's one reason you don't employ a chemist."

The brows of both the brothers darkened, and their ears turned redder.

"They're not safe," growled Frank. "They're likely to give you away."

"I see," returned Wallingford, nodding his head and pouring them another drink. "In the beginning you get some good iron-ore from some place or another and have an assay made, merely for the benefit of your brother Ralph, who sells the stock. In the meantime, you incorporate two companies, a largely capitalized mine company and an operating company of small capitalization. You make a contract between the two, which will allow the operating company to reap most of the profits. You sell the mining company stock and

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hold the operating company stock yourselves, so that if you do happen to strike a winner you still have the big end of it."

"That's the trick," admitted Alec, delighted to find some one who appreciated the Dougalbobber cleverness, and both the brothers grinned thinly. "Only we never hit a winner."

"What do you think of the prospects of this mine?" asked Wallingford, bending forward with apparent anxiety.

The brothers glanced at each other quickly.

"The ore looks fine to me," declared Alec.

"I don't think we ever had so good a chance to strike a real one," added Frank.

"You know, I'd like to take a gamble myself," said Wallingford, smiling, his eyes opened to the most innocent roundness of which they were capable. "How much of the operating company stock would you sell?"

The brothers glanced at each other incredulously. Could this be possible?

"Well, of course, we'd never let go of control," asserted Frank with a sober face, and not looking toward Alec lest their eyes sparkle and betray them.

"That means that you'll sell four hundred and ninety-nine shares," Wallingford quickly calculated. "You have in the operating company a thousand shares of a hundred dollars, par value, each. I've

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sold the biggest part of the four hundred and ninety-nine shares for you to my home-buyers, but I think I'll take the balance of it and keep it for myself."

The brothers dared not look anywhere near each other.

"We'll have to charge you par for it," ventured Frank, controlling his voice with an effort, while Alec tapped nervously upon the floor with his toe.

Wallingford only laughed at them and did the honors with such refreshment as he had to offer. "You'll do nothing of the sort," he assured them. "You'll be tickled stiff to sell it to me at seventy. You don't think you have a mine, anyhow."

They wrangled for a half-hour over the price, but they finally compromised at eighty. The Dougalbobber brothers laughed all the way home, while Wallingford chuckled himself to sleep.

The next day, when the train came, Wallingford, who made it a practise to extend the glad hand of fellowship to every possible home-seeker, was called over to the office by Alec.

"There'll be quite a bunch gettin' off o' this train," said the red-topped one, rubbing his hands together in anticipatory glee. "You stay here and watch the fun; it'll be a good tip for you, brother."

Wallingford winced at this fraternal expression, but kept his own counsel, of long habit, and in-

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spected the curious arrangement of the office with interest. The rough board shanty, small as it was, had one narrow room across the front, and in the rear partition of this were two doors, one leading into an enclosure, a mere cell, in fact, which had no other openings, except for one tiny window high up under the eaves. The other door led into a compartment that was barely wide enough to contain a bench at one side of the passage to the rear entrance. In the narrow front room sat a stupendously broad-shouldered and short-necked and wide-jawed man, whom Alec introduced as Mr. McCorkle.

"Mr. Wallingford is anxious to see how we get rid of the trouble-makers, Tim," stated Alec with a grin.

McCorkle's grin in reply was a crevice. "Get your money down on it quick," he said to Wallingford; "it's all over before it starts."

Alec glanced out the window, and hastily dragged Wallingford into the passageway.

"Here they come," he explained.

Through augur-holes bored in the door, Wallingford and Alec watched the proceedings. McCorkle opened to the *hoi polloi*.

"One at a time now," he bellowed, and let in a clay-cluttered digger and delver, after which he bolted the door. "Where'd yuh work last?" he

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demanded, and followed this with a string of usual employment questions, which the man answered quite satisfactorily, though he mumbled at it and twisted his hat. "All right," decided McCorkle, filling out a time-slip. "The boss'll sign this for you, and then you k'n go right to work."

This being Alec's cue, he opened the door and stepped in. Both Dougalbobber and McCorkle watched the man narrowly. Alec, slowly advancing, took the slip, and after another searching look at the man, signed it, glancing up furtively at the fellow as he did so. Alec rejoined Wallingford and closed the door after himself. McCorkle opened the front door, let out his man and admitted another one. Four laborers in succession passed muster in the same way, and then came one who went through swimmingly until Alec Dougalbobber appeared in the doorway, when the applicant's jaw dropped.

"Alec Shellbark!" he exclaimed.

McCorkle arose quietly and opened the door of the room which had no other outlet. "Just wait in there," he directed.

"No, I won't wait," declined the laborer. "I — I don't believe I want a job, anyhow."

"You'll wait in there," declared McCorkle, stepping on the other side of the fellow.

"Not on your life!" refused the man. "Let me

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out o' this. I wouldn't work for that Shellbark outfit —"

Mr. McCorkle put one enormous hairy paw against the man's shoulder, pushed him into the cell with a shove that sent him spinning against the rear wall, closed the door and calmly bolted it. Then he let in the next applicant.

Two more trouble-makers came out of that day's grist, and when all the lucky applicants had plodded off up the ravine, Alec stepped inside with Wallingford, and sent in his six paid gladiators, who had been waiting eagerly in the rear. The "rumpus" began immediately, and it lasted for about five minutes, during which time the little frame office rocked and shivered and resounded to the thumps of heads and heels until it finally gained relief by belching nine superheated men out at the rear door. Three of them ran down the track, headed due southeast, while the other six followed, pelting them with rocks.

McCorkle, who was too blasé and ennui to care to take part in the outdoor portion of the gymnastics, came to the rear door with a slightly bored expression.

"Kind of a tame bunch this morning," he remarked apologetically; "but it's enough to give you a tip on how we handle 'em."

"That's Brother Ralph's idea," said Alec with

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proper family pride. "Simple, isn't it? We never have any trouble around our camp."

What there was about that simple remark to make Wallingford laugh so heartily Alec could not understand.

On that day Ralph Dougalbobber walked in upon Blackie Daw with this startling information: "The price now is sixty per share, Mr. Daw. We have three hundred men upon our pay-roll."

"No wonder you have to sell stock," said Blackie.

In the two trips that he had taken to the city, Wallingford had noted, upon the banks of a cold-looking stream about ten miles down the track, the remains of a mistaken little sawmill, which had long since gone out of business because there was nothing to saw. It had possessed a big, weather-tight tool- and stock-house, however, and in pursuance of the happy idea that the Dougalbobbers had given him, Wallingford bought the place for two hundred and fifty dollars; then, pleased with himself, he hurried away to complete his errand of mercy. About three miles below Dougalville, a forlorn country road crossed the railroad track, and Wallingford made this point shortly after the up-train had passed. He waited patiently. In about an hour, two men came down the track, one limping

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and the other occasionally holding his hand to his jáw, and both cursing.

"Hello, boys!" hailed Wallingford. "Been up to the Dougalville mine hunting a job?"

Both men stopped and glowered savagely at Wallingford, then the man who limped made a fervent speech, while the other one listened in envious admiration. At first the speech consisted of mere disjointed emphasis, but gradually it grew more intelligible, built upon the combined texts of the Dougalbobber brothers, the Kimbely Mine, mines in general, the state, the railroad and the universe, with a few side digressions upon miscellaneous subjects. Even Wallingford, connoisseur as he was of anathema, vituperation and plain "cussing", listened with the respectful attention due to a master.

"Admitting all this," he pleasantly observed, "and agreeing with such of it as I understand, what do you intend to do about it?"

The man promptly gave him chapter two, with scarcely a repetition. It had not quite the vigor of chapter one, but more polish.

"Thanks," said Wallingford, much refreshed. "I'm glad to find you in this reasonable frame of mind. Here's ten dollars for you."

"I k'n lay him all out cussin', but my jaw hurts," insinuated the other man.

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"Here's five for your willing spirit," offered Wallingford with a chuckle. "That's only grub-stakes, boys. You're both hired from this minute, at your usual mine wages. Seven miles farther on there's an old sawmill, an old strawstack and a bunk-house. They're mine. Kick the padlock off the door of the bunk-house and make yourself at home. There's a real town five miles farther on. When you get rested, drill down there and bring back all the provisions you can carry, because there's to be more of you, and I want you all fed on raw meat. What's your name?" he asked of the limping man, a brawny giant who showed all his gums.

"Mike Dimple," replied the man defiantly.

"Well, Mike, you're foreman of the works," announced Wallingford without a grin, for which Mr. Dimple voted him a gentleman. "Your job will be to pick out the best, the bravest and the truest of the yeomen who have hurried away from Dougalville. Hire these until you have twenty. Give the sickly ones a hearty meal and pass them on."

"And what'll I have 'em do?" asked Mike Dimple, puzzled as to his duties.

"Rest," replied Wallingford, his big pink face wreathing itself in a sudden smile of such cheer that both of the men smiled in sheer fellowship. "Just rest and eat and sleep, and take a little healthy exercise and keep in good training. I may

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want you all to come back to Dougalville some day and have your own way."

"Bless the day!" exclaimed Mike Dimple, and forgetting his limp, he jumped up and cracked his heels together. "Bless the day, and thank you, sir! I'll get you the finest bunch of rowdies together that ever tore down a circus tent."

"Don't thank me," said Wallingford with his most benevolent air; "this is purely an errand of mercy," and he drove away, chuckling.

That night Toad Jessop came home with a purple eye.

"I thought I told you not to fight with bigger boys than yourself," chided Wallingford, surveying the wreck with mingled compassion and amusement.

"I wasn't," confessed the defiantly truthful Toad. "He was one size littler than me, but he was some fighter! I guess he could nearly lick a man. He's most licked me."

"What brought on the battle?" asked Wallingford.

"He said you was a crook," explained Toad; and then, with refreshing candor: "Mebbe he was right, but what I licked him for was for sayin' it."

"Who was the boy, and what else did he say?" inquired Wallingford, seriously interested.

"Carrots Saghorn. He's got freckles, too, but they ain't as many as mine, so they have to name

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him after his hair. Gee, he's a good fighter! He won't wash his hands in the winter-time because it cracks his knuckles."

Business being business, Wallingford dismissed with a chuckle the vivid picture of the red streaks cut into the black hands. "What did he say?" he insisted.

"Well, his paw come from Cinderburg, an' Carrots says that his paw says that what Big Bill Slammet said about you was so; an' then Carrots said, his own self, that you was a crook, an' then I smashed him an' he smashed back, an' they made a ring an' hollered; only say! more of 'em hollered, 'Sick 'em, Freckles'— that's me, you know, Freckles, in this town — than hollered, 'Sick 'im, Carrots!'"

"What else did he say?" Wallingford was anxious to discover.

"Nothin'!" declared Toad indignantly. "He didn't have no chance. But gee, that kid's some fighter! Say! He rubs snake-oil on his muscles every mornin' to make 'em limber. Ketches the snakes hisself, an' puts 'em in a bottle, an' sets 'em in the sun. He stands this way, like the picture of the regular champions, you know; but I licked him. I k'n lick any kid that makes faces to scare you when he fights."

Later on, after he had applied a soothing poultice

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to the eye of Toad and had put that earnest champion to bed, Wallingford went up to see Mr. Saghorn, who was a quiet man with short curly whiskers, which looked like a rash, all over the lower part of his face. He sat on the edge of his portable porch with his stockinged feet dangling near the surface of the ground. His open undershirt revealed his highly mattressed breast, and he smoked a short corn-cob pipe that made the very existence of mosquitoes a matter of doubt in the Saghorn family.

"Is this Mr. Steven Saghorn?" asked Wallingford pleasantly.

"Un-hunh," replied the man, looking indifferently at a point about ten feet ahead of his toes.

"I am Mr. Wallingford, Mr. Saghorn. I sold you your house, you know."

"Un-hunh."

Wallingford sighed, but he sat down on the edge of the porch, removed his hat and again smiled pleasantly. "Fine evening, isn't it?" he ventured.

"Un-hunh."

Wallingford handed a good cigar to Mr. Saghorn, who thrust it into his shirt-bosom.

"They tell me you came from Cinderburg," said J. Rufus, trying to give the stubborn conversation another yank.

"Un-hunh."

"I understand there has been some criticism of

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me in that town," he went on desperately, and winced in advance of Saghorn's answer.

"Un-hunh."

"Entirely unjust, I assure you, Mr. Saghorn," explained Wallingford, as suave as a roll of butter, even under these discouraging circumstances. "It is true that I helped Mr. Bang incorporate his Sun Engine Company. I believed in that engine. I thought it the greatest thing in the world. But I am a mere promoter, not an engineer, and it was not my fault that the infernal engine wouldn't work. You see that, don't you, Mr. Saghorn?"

"Un-hunh."

"Thank you," returned Wallingford, delighted with his unexpected success. "I'm glad to find you so reasonable. I was afraid that possibly you might have believed some of the unkind things that I have heard were said about me after I left Cinderburg; and, of course, I am more than delighted to find that you do not. If any one in Dougalville repeats these things in your hearing you will be kind enough to correct them, won't you, Mr. Saghorn?"

"No," announced Mr. Saghorn, and knocking the ashes out of his pipe against a horny palm, he arose and went into his portable house and shut his portable door. Mr. Wallingford went home.

That night he pored over his accounts and did some close figuring. He had disposed of three hun-

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dred and fifty of his five hundred and twenty-five portable houses, over one hundred of them for cash, which cash was safely deposited in his New York bank; the balance he had sold on payments; he had issued three hundred and fifty shares of stock in the Kimbely Mine Operating Company. Once more he took out the charter, and read anew the peculiar constitution and by-laws of that corporation.

A stockholders' meeting was set for only a few days away, and even if everybody in the town voted with him, he could control the voting of only four hundred and ninety-nine out of a thousand shares of stock. This was the dilemma that had confronted Wallingford and put creases in his brow for many days, but now he only chuckled at it.

The next morning he began looking after his personal popularity. He sent to the city for a hundred dollars' worth of books, all in the fifteen-cent, cloth-bound editions; he gave the butcher an order for a cow and two hogs; he gave the baker an order for unlimited bread and cakes; he gave the grocer an order for butter, crackers, cheese and pickles, *ad libitum;* then he invited the entire town to the grand barbecue and Free Public Library opening, which library he was about to present to his beloved fellow townsmen in the until now vacant portable house at number 54 South Main Street.

On the day Wallingford decided upon this, the un-

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tiring Brother Ralph, in New York, sought out Blackie Daw with a newspaper in his hand.

"I suppose you've seen the almost daily reports of the wonderful output of the Kimbely Mine," he suggested.

"Haven't you cleaned up on that yet?" inquired Blackie in surprise.

Mr. Dougalbobber was so shocked and pained that he was nervous. "Look at this article," he begged, pointing to a column-and-a-half "story", telling of a wonderful ore shipment. "The largest shipment ever made in the world," he explained.

"I believe it," replied Blackie courteously, passing back the paper; "but why be so mournful about it? You don't drink enough, Dougalbobber."

"And here," went on Mr. Dougalbobber with dignity, "is the weigher's certificate," and he presented a folded paper.

"I believe that, too," admitted Blackie, passing it back still folded. "Say, I wish you'd go away with your Kimbely Mine and let me sigh in peace. My wife's out of town."

That grand opening was the apex and climax of Dougalville's history. It was a grand and gala occasion, wherein Wallingford shone at his brightest, and Toad Jessop, as master of ceremonies, strutted to his heart's content. Old Pop Meeking, who ran the donkey-engine for the small ore-crusher, owned

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a beautifully mottled yellow and green cornet; Henry Brooger, who eked out a miserable existence mending shoes while he waited, owned an accordion; and Tom Macnish, whose business was to curse a mule, owned a bass viol. Wallingford hired the entire band. He placed that band where it belonged, right out in the middle of the field back of the Free Public Library and in front of the barbecue, and when the time was ripe, which was just when the good smell of well-cooked flesh filled the air, he made a speech. It was a rousing, patriotic, fraternal speech, calculated to warm the cockles of the heart, awaken enthusiasm and increase happiness on every hand. He pointed with pride to the fact that he was the sole parent of this thriving little city, and felt responsible for its welfare and its prosperity. He loved all of them as brothers, he did, and if any of them had individual or private troubles, let them come to him, and their firm and everlasting friend, J. Rufus Wallingford, would see what could be done! The free library that he was presenting them to-day was only the modest beginning of an institution of which he knew Dougalville would one day be justly proud. A schoolhouse would be his next gift to the city, and he was already dickering with the ministers of three denominations to come there and establish churches. In the meantime, the body needed food as much as the

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mind or the soul. That food, he could see by the eye of their expert butcher and chef, was now ready. Let him not keep them from it. Let them all help themselves, and enjoy themselves to the full. Would the boys please strike up *Turkey in the Straw?*

As that and one church hymn were the only two tunes upon which the cornet and the accordion and the bass viol could agree, the boys cheerfully obliged, and the feast began.

Talk about popularity! Dougalville fairly dripped with it, and it was all for Wallingford — Wallingford, the big, the impressive, the pleasant, the magnanimous! How they did love Wallingford that night! Women almost wept about him, children danced around him without throwing things, and strong men, with their mouths full of beef and pork and cheese and pickles, and their hands full of more, went about swearing his praises, between gulps, until they were fairly speechless with admiration and food, and went home to sleep it off. Only one man failed to show any enthusiasm. He ate more than anybody else, but his eye remained cold and clammy, particularly when it rested upon the founder of the feast. That man was Steven Saghorn.

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CHAPTER VI

BLACKIE FALLS

ON the second day after the barbecue, Brother Ralph came to town, as Alec and Frank had foretold, to attend the stockholders' meeting on the day following. Except for wearing a derby hat and the more neatly kept clothes of civilization, and except for having potato-brown hair, Brother Ralph was a carbon copy of the other Dougalbobbers.

Wallingford walked across, as a matter of course, to be introduced to him, and found him to be scarcely a degree more personally engaging than his brothers, and marveled that the man could have sold stock at all with his handicap of natural repulsion. He did not stop to parley long with the "smooth" one from the East, however, for the brothers seemed to desire to be alone; moreover, to-morrow was the day of the stockholders' meeting, and Wallingford himself was very busy.

He passed a long day in particular anxiety about the five-twenty-seven train, but he received a tremendous shock when the first man to step upon the platform was Blackie Daw. Toad Jessop, who

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was homesick but did not know it, was the first to spy Blackie, and executed an Indian war-dance upon the spot, shaking hands with him, and clapping him upon the shoulder, and calling him "ole pardner", and dashing a real tear out of his eye, and thrashing a lumbering big boy who saw it, and darting away to bring Wallingford, all within the space of a minute and a half.

Wallingford greeted his old friend and partner with surprise. "Well, Blackie," he exclaimed, while Toad walked around them both with every manifestation of delight, "what brings you to the end of the world?"

"Business," returned Blackie briskly; "but I didn't expect to find you here. Fannie told me you were out West some place, working a big real-estate deal with those portable houses of ours."

"The West was never anything like this," declared Wallingford sadly; "but this is the place. I don't like your having business here, though. You don't mean to tell me you're tangled up with this Kimbely Mine?"

"I sure am," asserted Blackie valiantly. "I bought ten thousand dollars' worth of the stock. Now giggle."

"Bought it!" ejaculated Wallingford aghast. "Why, you blooming fool, how did you come to fall for it? You used to *sell* mining stock."

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"They say it takes separate educations to be wised up to both ends of any game," responded Blackie dolefully. "I suppose I'm up against it, eh?"

"No, I wouldn't say that," replied Wallingford kindly. "Outside of making a fool investment, I guess your bet's all right."

Blackie took that jolt with scarcely a blink, and was able to smile in another minute. "It's like we always said, Jimmy," he philosophically concluded; "there's only two kinds of us — trimmers and lollops; and when you quit being one kind, you have to be the other. What have you to drink?"

"Almost-whisky and near-beer; but wait a minute and see the fun. Watch the appeal for employment of that bunch of laborers headed for the office."

As he spoke he indicated the rough crowd of men, twenty or more, who, alighting from the smoking-compartment end of the day-coach, had headed straight for the inquisition headquarters of the Kimbely Mine.

"You may have my share of their fun," offered Blackie, "and I'll give you something to boot. They flagged the train at a hobo-camp about ten miles down the track, and I still have my watch hung to my garter and my money in my shoe. They showed the price to the conductor, though, and he

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let 'em on; but if you have a police station here, I'm willing to be locked up until they leave town."

"Oh, hush," said Wallingford gaily. "This is my party."

If this was the case, it was an unusually rough-looking party, each man walking with a swagger, and nearly every one having upon his countenance some disfiguring scar or mark of recent battle. They were remarkably silent, also, though remarkably alert as they hurried, two by two, across to the office, where they found upon the door a brand-new sign that read, "No more laborers wanted." The man at the head of the procession, a brawny giant who perpetually showed his gums, knocked heavily upon the door.

"Whatchyou want?" rumbled the deep voice of Foreman McCorkle.

"Work," replied the big laborer.

"No chance," stated McCorkle from behind the closed door. "All full."

"I want to see Mr. Dougalbobber," insisted Mike Dimple.

"Which one?" demanded McCorkle.

"He ain't here," supplemented a high-pitched nasal voice from within.

"They're both there, boys," announced the giant with a happy grin; and then ensued a startling variation upon the usual evening-train program.

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The score or more of earnest seekers after labor, each of whom had enjoyed the distinction of having been chased away from Dougalville with contumely and rocks, picked that frame office to pieces, plank by plank, and went in to hold an examination of their own. There was a sound as of loud revelry by night; a sound like the splintering of wooden ships; like the dashing and smashing of heavy breakers upon a cliff-bound shore; like the voices from the bottomless pit of the damned and double damned; and then the yawning and jagged black orifice, which had once been the front of the building, spewed out Tim McCorkle with a bloody nose and a piece of plank in each hand! Close behind him came Alec Dougalbobber with a ragged right ear, Ralph Dougalbobber with his Eastern-style derby jammed down over his eyes, and Frank Dougalbobber, who was wildly wondering whether he had his four missing teeth inside or out. With these came the six hired wallopers, each one now a wallopee; and the whole office "force" struck for the railroad track and headed due southeast, followed by about all that was left of the rock-ballasting of that poverty-stricken railroad. Pursued and pursuers alike, the gathering darkness swallowed them up, and Dougalville, quickly apprised of the incident, and all of it lying quite close enough to the railroad track to gather and see poetic justice so

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fully wrought, laughed itself hoarse. It was long since it had been so jolly.

Somebody stopped laughing by and by and began to think, then nudged a neighbor and made him think; and the laugh died down. Was it possible that there was anything the matter with the Kimbely Mine? Had anybody poked a finger into the works and made it cease to tick? Couldn't it ever be wound up and started going again?

Wallingford asked and answered the same questions for the benefit of Blackie, as they walked up to the portable office.

"They're a set of the coarsest grafters I ever saw," Wallingford concluded as he produced a portable bottle in the shelter of his place of business. "It's their very coarseness, I guess, that let's 'em get across. I'm on to their game, though. I'm ashamed of myself, Blackie, but the very rawness of their play got me at first, the same as it got you. They don't care whether there's pay-ore in sight or not. They're playing on the big odds that ninety-five per cent. of all mines are flivvers, anyhow. They incorporate, take up all the stock themselves and start digging at the same time they start selling shares. They get out as big a mountain of ore as possible, so that they can point to an immense output, never stopping to find out whether there's enough iron in the ore to pay for the reduction.

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When the stock's all sold, they move on and dig another hole in the ground and send their saucy Brother Ralph out East to lift the pocket change of green-goods and gold-brick men and wise ginks who used to be in the same business. In the meantime, if a man comes into their camp who was ever in another one of theirs, they 'slug his head off to keep him from making foolish remarks.' If ever I get within gunshot of any mine they've started, and I find it out before they do, I'm going to lose fifteen pounds of embonpoint in the first fifteen miles."

"Fancy and effective," approved Blackie, "but what would they do if they struck a real mine?"

"That's where the brains filter through," replied Wallingford soberly. "They organize two companies, a mine company and an operating company. The operating company is to furnish all the expense of mining. The first seven per cent. of profits, if there are any, goes to the mine company — that's the one you bought stock in, you gink! — the second seven per cent. goes to the operating company; profits above that are divided equally between the two companies, but you can gamble upon it there never would be above fourteen per cent., if they cleaned up a million a minute, because the balance would be eaten up in fancy salaries. They sold me some of the stock in the operating company.

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I control four hundred and ninety-nine shares out of a thousand. I found out something they didn't know. I had quiet assays made by three different chemists, and the field is rich. It's worth millions, I think. I thought I was in good with my own stock until I saw a clause in the contract between the two companies that set me to guessing. The Kimbely Operating Company can sublet its contract at any price it chooses, to whomsoever it chooses. To-morrow is a stockholders' meeting. Any time between now and that meeting they might have received a wire from the smelting company telling them how good a thing they had. In that case, their first action in that meeting, with their five hundred and one shares, would have been to sublet the contract to themselves at a thousand dollars a year; so I arranged for them to be out of town."

"It was the best arranged exit I ever saw," admitted Blackie. "The Hippodrome could do it no better. But what can you do in that meeting? If they have over half the stock they'll have over half the profits, even if they never come back. They can send a messenger-boy for the money."

"They'll get five hundred and one dollars every fourth of July," stated Wallingford savagely; "for in the meeting to-morrow I intend to sublet that contract, at a thousand dollars a year, to J. Rufus Wallingford and Company, the company consisting

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of all the stockholders who are present. I'm glad you're here, Blackie; I shall need you for one of the officers. I'll give you a couple of shares of stock to-night, and —"

The back door flew open, and Toad Jessop bounced in with his eyes stretched to the full capacity of their sockets. "Hike!" he shouted in a tragic whisper. "Beat it! Hit 'er up quick or they'll git you!"

"What's all this about?" inquired Wallingford, but with no levity whatever, for Toad was in such deadly earnest that even his freckles were pale.

"Come away from there!" Toad almost screamed as Blackie started curiously toward the front door. "The whole town's comin' up Main Street, an' they say they're goana hang both of youse on top o' the big derrick."

"But for what? I don't understand," protested Wallingford, snatching up a small traveling-bag and opening his desk.

Toad grabbed him by the coat-tails and tried to drag him toward the back door. "You start runnin'!" he urged, beginning to cry, and falling into a furious anger because he found himself doing so. "If you stop to git anything you're goana stop a long time. Come outside, dang it!"

"Excuse me, I'm going," observed Blackie, slamming on his hat and not waiting to burden himself

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with his suit case. He opened the back door, but closed it immediately. "Too late, Jimmy," he declared; "they're coming up the back way, too. We're caught."

They could hear the mob now. Its advance was like the sullen roar of a distant steamboat whistle, and Wallingford marveled that a mere sound could be so damp and icy.

"Quick, Toad; tell me what it's all about!" begged Wallingford.

"They've found out that these Dougalbobbers is fakes an' frauds all the way through. They never got enough iron out o' all their mines to make a nail. They found out that you an' Blackie is grafters, too; an' they think you're in with this whole Kimbely Mine swindle. I told 'em it wasn't so, but all that got me was a sprint. Gee, you ought to see me comin'! Say! Ole Man Saghorn made a speech, an' it wasn't any drunken speech like Big Bill Slammet made, neither. It was some speech. Say! he called you all the thieves, an' robbers, an'—"

There came a stern knock upon the door, accompanied by the murmur of many voices. Wallingford turned pallid. The knock was repeated, and there were shouts for him to come out. It was Blackie who sprang to the door and opened it. Finding a man there who had it in his eye to lead the

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throng immediately inside, Blackie promptly confused the fellow's purpose by knocking him off the step. He grinned as the man fell, and one member of the mob was kind enough to laugh.

"Hello, boys!" hailed Blackie cheerfully. "Who's the party on?"

"It's on you, I guess," came from the man who had laughed.

"We're a-goana hang you, that's what," was the determined announcement of a man in the very first row.

"Happy thought," returned Blackie. "But you want your money first, don't you? Every man who wants to sell his share of stock in the Kimbely Operating Company hold up his hand."

A hundred hands went up.

"Some of you are sensible, anyhow," commented Blackie. "I refer to the gentlemen who have not yet decided that they want to sell. You've made the biggest mistake of your lives, boys. Mr. Wallingford will explain the situation to you."

Wallingford, emboldened by the fact that they were listening, stepped out upon the porch and confronted an acre of eyeballs.

"I'll buy every share of stock that is offered to me, and for spot cash," he announced.

"Will you buy our houses?" demanded Saghorn.

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"I'll be cheating you if I buy even your stock," returned Wallingford. "Gentlemen, I have glorious news for you. The Kimbely Iron Mine is one of the richest in the country."

"It's a lie!" called a voice from the crowd.

"It was Beef Higgins called you that lie, Mr. Wallingford!" shrilled Toad. "I'll point him out to-morrow so you or Blackie k'n lick 'im!"

There was more than one snicker from the crowd upon this, and Wallingford, thankful to Toad for having turned the tide of that crisis, gained full command of himself and of the crowd. Helming the prow of his much-strained craft head-on against the waves and cutting them smoothly, he took the men, the solid substantial men of Dougalville, right into his confidence! He explained to them exactly how matters stood; how he had known all along that the mine was a good one; how he had thwarted the dishonest Dougalbobbers in their evil intentions and had worked like a Trojan for the benefit of himself and his beloved citizens; and how to-morrow he wanted them to join with him in forming a new company, in which he would give them share for share in exchange for the stock they now held; and they would turn the magnificently rich Kimbely Mine into the foundation of a fortune for every dweller in Dougalville!

The magic of him got upon them. His voice

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soothed them like the odor of poppies. His presence, big, sleek, richly clad and prosperous, held and satisfied their eyes. His words, rounded, well chosen, aptly and cleverly strung together, stole their reason. They answered his smile, they responded to his enthusiasm, they cheered him when he finished, and they gave him until to-morrow to prove what he said!

Flushed and triumphant, Wallingford, having cheerfully waved upon his way the last hand-shaking straggler of his friends and fellow citizens, came in the house, sat down in his chair, and trembled like a leaf.

"Do you know, for just three pins I'd take the first train out of here and let those happy stock holders run their own meeting to-morrow," he declared. "There may be a fortune in that mine across the track, but it's rather lost its charm for me. I don't think I'll ever be able to look up at the big derrick without feeling my spine turning into an icicle."

"I don't intend to go over and look at it at all," returned Blackie. "I'm glad I didn't see it when I got off the train. How did you come out with the houses, Jim?"

"Not so badly," said Wallingford, brightening. "I've collected nearly a hundred thousand dollars on the houses and lots. I imagine I must have

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cleared some forty or fifty thousand dollars on the houses alone, but my share is invested in the instalment-plan mining stock I'm carrying for the mob that just wanted to hang me."

"Let's talk about our families," invited Blackie wearily. "Seems like I don't want to hear about mines any more, at all."

They were in quiet discussion of their respective domestic affairs when once more Toad Jessop burst in upon them.

"Now we do git!" he cried, his fists doubled and his nostrils distended. "There's a freight-train just pullin' in at the depot, an' if we run like Texas down the back way, in the shadow of the houses, we k'n climb her. There ain't a second! Start runnin', I tell you!"

Both men were upon their feet and had grabbed their hats.

"Now what's the matter?" demanded Wallingford.

"Don't ask me no questions," pleaded Toad. "Ole Saghorn is just finishin' a speech up on Red-eye Square, an' he's got 'em all to believin' that you two jes' gave 'em a slick talk to gain time so's youse could sneak out o' town. They'll be down here a-sizzlin' in about three minutes, by the way they was howlin', an' this time there won't be no speeches made. Saghorn, he says —"

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"I don't care what he says," interrupted Blackie. "I have an important engagement, and if you two gentlemen will excuse me, I shall just jog upon my way."

Wallingford marveled at how slowly he ran for so swift a movement of his legs! He noticed that Blackie was several houses in advance of him, and he believed that Toad was darting along somewhere in his neighborhood, but he took no accurate observations; he was paying very strict attention to the stationary headlight of that freight engine, and to the rough ground which he was traversing! It seemed constantly rising up toward him, and if he ever let it come up near enough to hit him in the place which most affected his breathing — well, there was enough money in the bank to make Fannie and little Jimmy comfortable; but he felt that they needed him!

Just before he reached the track, the train began to move. He saw Blackie run down to meet it and clamber upon the first car, and leap over its edge with the jerky motion of a jumping-jack. With a desperate spurt, Wallingford reached the track as that same car came up to him. He made a wild clutch at it, and marveled to find his hand gripped tightly upon the hand-bar and his foot resting firmly in the iron stirrup. For a couple of minutes, which seemed as many ages, he hung there trying to re-

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gain his breath, then, summoning all his strength, he brought up his other foot, stepped to the buffer, crawled up on the edge of the car and fell in! A groan told him that he had fallen upon Blackie, but neither one of them had the energy or the breath to move for some minutes. Blackie was the first to recover, and the car being full of slack coal that pyramided down into the corners, he managed to wriggle himself out from under the heavy body that lay partly upon him, although the effort brought down a rush of the black pebbly powder, that enveloped them both in the stifling inky dust.

The thought that had made Blackie release himself so energetically was with him yet, however, for, as soon as he could free his tongue from its thick coating, he gasped:

"Where's Toad?"

Where was Toad? A quick search around the edges of the car revealed the fact that he was not with them, nor could they see him hanging to the train upon either side. In that heartsick moment, they knew how genuinely fond of the boy they were, and at that moment, also, the train gave a forward lurch as it left the top of the upward pull and started upon the down-grade, and the water-tank that had just been filled slopped part of its contents back upon them, wetting them to the skin. It was a refreshing bath, and it washed off some of the coal-

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dust in streaks, though it made the dust that they acquired in the balance of the ride stick to them better.

It was so that Wallingford left Dougalville, and he gladly saw its lights fading behind him, as they jolted away, due southeast, toward the blessed land of taxis and push-buttons and bath-tubs.

"And I tried to save the burg!" wailed Wallingford, wiping the inky paste out of his eye. "I wish I hadn't played on the level with the citizens of Dougalville; they'd have respected me more."

"Aren't you going back?" demanded Blackie, surprised.

"Back!" howled Wallingford. "Back? Listen to me, Blackie. There isn't a leather chair nor a five-languaged waiter nor a bunch of orchids in the place, and there won't be for ten years. Back? When I can have my luggage carried in an elevator to the eleventh floor of the Dougalville Hotel I might consent to stop there overnight; but not before. Back? Why should I go back?"

"Oh, nothing, only a large fortune and that stockholders' meeting," suggested Blackie.

"Am I of a greedy disposition?" demanded Wallingford, digging lumps of wet coal-dust from between his collar and his neck. "No, Blackie, I gave them a tip, in my speech, on how they could handle their stockholders' meeting without the Dou-

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galbobber brothers, and I guess they can do it without me."

"It's tough on them, old man," responded Blackie, peering anxiously over the edge of the car as the train rounded a curve. "Where's Toad, I wonder?"

They firmly expected to see Toad come clambering down to them over the tops of the box-cars, but fifteen miles of miserable and melancholy riding brought them no Toad. Instead, it brought them to a real town, where, under the full glare of the electric lights, Toad found them drenched and black and cold and hungry, just climbing down from their private car.

"You young devil!" gasped Blackie, angry for having wasted so much sorrow over him. "Where have you been?"

"I rode in the caboose," replied Toad cheerfully. "The conductor's a special friend o' mine. I knowed where you was. I seen you jump 'er. Gee, but you two's a sight!" and Toad was inconsiderate enough to laugh.

Wallingford surveyed himself ruefully. Never, even as a boy, had he looked so disreputable.

"And this," he complained, "is what I get for playing a straight game!"

"No, it ain't," declared Toad, who was at the exact age to spend much time in moralizing. "They

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never would 'a' chased you if you'd always been straight."

Blackie glared at him savagely. "Shut up!" he said. "Lead us to a drink, and some clean clothes and a drink, and something to eat and a drink, and a drink!"

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CHAPTER VII

A GREAT SCHEME

"I WISH I were broke," declared Wallingford, looking gloomily down sunlit Broadway. "I've got back that house on the avenue for Fannie, and laid in a couple of bales of bonds for her and the boy, and I've bought about everything that money will buy for a man who doesn't care to be a senator. The fun's all gone. What can I do with money, anyhow?"

"You can buy me a drink," promptly responded Blackie Daw. "After that, I'll hunt up somebody with money who feels like you do about it, and sick you on to each other."

"I pass!" refused Wallingford emphatically. "You could show me a college professor, a sailor and a crooked bank-cashier, all with money to invest, and my tongue wouldn't even moisten."

"Mine never will if you don't buy me that drink pretty soon," insisted Blackie. "They keep it right in here," and taking Wallingford's arm he whirled him about face and conducted him into the bar of

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the hotel in front of which they had been displaying their premature fall outfits.

They found their favorite corner occupied by a seedy-looking, withered fat man and a dapperly dressed pie-dyspeptic. Blackie, with a careless nod to the ex-fat man, whose clothing hung on him in festoons, was about to lead Wallingford to another padded corner, when the withered one hailed him.

"Hello, Blackie," he called in a voice that rasped with that huskiness that is bottled in bond. "I haven't seen you in a coon's age. Where have you been?"

"Sober, Dan," replied Blackie cheerfully.

"I've made it a business of a lifetime to cure that," asserted Dan. "Come and have something."

"I knew I'd get a drink some place," Blackie observed, stepping over to the table. "Mr. Sickels, meet my friend Jim Wallingford, better known to the police as J. Rufus."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Wallingford," husked Mr. Sickels. "Mr. Wallingford, Mr. Dillon. Mr. Daw, Mr. Dillon. Now, gentlemen, what shall it be?" and he looked from one to the other with the exaggerated cheerfulness of a willing but necessarily infrequent spender.

"Vichy," ordered Blackie, who talked about alcohol much more than he indulged in it.

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"Is this the Mr. Dillon of the Dillon Department Stores Company?" inquired Wallingford pleasantly, after echoing Blackie's order for refreshments.

Mr. Dillon, having also ordered vichy, to the keen regret of Sickels, who saw that he would be compelled to drink his whisky alone, moved his ash-tray to the right of his empty milk-glass, and his milk-glass to the left of his cigarette-box, then carefully closed up the gaps among the three articles before he replied.

"I am that Dillon," he admitted.

"I've been greatly interested in your issue of popular stock in the Dillon Company," pursued Wallingford. "What success are you having with it?"

Mr. Dillon restored his toys to their original position. "Excellent," he replied, passing his long thin fingers over his brow. "The public is taking to it very kindly."

"It's a great scheme," said Wallingford admiringly. "People who buy five shares, or even one share, of the stock are bound to remain steady customers of your store."

Mr. Dillon took a cigarette from his box, lighted a match, laid down the cigarette and blew out the match. "They're earning a profit on their own expenses," he asserted, quoting from his latest advertisements. "The shares are guaranteed to yield a minimum of five per cent. dividends," and he

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thrummed upon the table with the fingers of both hands. "I'm really very proud of the idea. I don't think I slept a wink for two weeks while I was figuring it out. I don't sleep very well anyhow;" and, at last, Wallingford understood the tensely drawn eyebrows and the compressed drooping lips. "The beauty of it is that it adds so many safe credit customers to our books, and, of course, credit purchasers are much more generous buyers than those who pay cash." And with a nervous little laugh he again shifted and rearranged his playthings.

"I see," returned Wallingford, eying the man's nervous movements in fascination. "It is a wonderful scheme. A customer with one share of stock has a hundred dollars monthly credit, and if the bills are not paid, the stock, and I presume the interest, becomes forfeited. In the meantime you can loan out their money for the five per cent. you are bound to pay them."

"Or use it in the extension of the business," amended Dillon, now increasing the tempo of his rearrangements to such a degree that Wallingford found himself jerking his own right heel upon the floor in sheer nervous sympathy, while Blackie Daw was tapping his finger-nail against his teeth. Dan Sickels alone remained placid. He still had left some of his glass of whisky. "The Dillon Stores

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are to have a new home in the near future, the largest concern of the sort in the United States. Do you suppose, Sickels, that I might interest your friends in some preferred bonds of the increased corporation?"

Both Wallingford and Blackie promptly shook their heads.

"Don't let's talk about investments," protested Blackie, glancing over his shoulder in mock fear. "I'm afraid my wife might guess I was thinking about it."

"How about you, Mr. Wallingford?" asked Dillon with a smile.

"I'm all tied up, Mr. Dillon," replied Wallingford suavely. "Even if I were not, I'm tired. I want a vacation. I don't intend to engage in business of any sort for the next six months, at least."

"I'll bet you a pair of pink suspenders that you do," offered Blackie suddenly.

"I'll take you," agreed Wallingford, laughing. "I'll even give you the odds of a pink silk undershirt if you catch me engaged in any money-making occupation during the next six months."

Mr. Dillon looked at his watch and hastily arose. "If you don't mind, I think I'll send you a prospectus of the new Dillon Company," he remarked, beating a tattoo upon the head of his cane with his fingers.

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"Wait just a moment, please," begged Blackie, producing a little red memorandum book and a fountain-pen. "I want witnesses to this. I bet Wallingford a pair of pink suspenders, against the same and a pink silk undershirt, winner's selection, that he does engage in some money-making business within the next six months. You will remember this, gentlemen?"

"I shall," assented Dillon, laughing. "And if you'll come over to the store when the bet is decided I'll be your clerk and let the loser have the goods at cost price."

"Thank you," said Blackie. "I'll just add that to the memorandum of the bet," and he wrote it down.

They all breathed a sigh of relief when Dillon had gone.

"I'd have had the St. Vitus two-step in ten minutes if that man had stayed here," announced Blackie. "He reminds me of one of those quivering-frog toys that you hold in your hands to see if your nerves are steady."

"He'll end in a sanatorium," observed Wallingford. "If he ever succeeds in building his solid-block retail store, he'll make a quicker failure than the full-dress café or the New Theater."

"No! Do you think so?" inquired Sickels eagerly. "He wants to buy my theater. It's the

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only important building in the block he wants to tear down for the site of his new store."

"Mr. Sickels is the owner of the Avon Theater, where Violet Bonnie made her first big hit," explained Blackie.

"The Avon!" returned Wallingford. "I should think you'd be glad to get a good offer for that, Mr. Sickels. It hasn't been doing a paying business for years, has it?"

"I should say not," confessed Sickels. "It was dark all last season. But I don't feel like selling it for two hundred thousand dollars in the stock of a company that's likely to swell up and burst. Ten years ago I was offered four hundred thousand cash, and wouldn't take it. Now it keeps me so broke that I'm a rich man and take a holiday if I have seven dollars in my pocket."

"Why didn't you sell?" was Wallingford's natural inquiry.

"I was making more money and scattering it the full length of the Rue de Mazuma."

"You were wishing, a while ago, that you were broke, Jim," Blackie reminded him. "You ought to try Dan's stunt. He wouldn't sell his house of hits to either the syndicate or the independents, so they made an object-lesson of him with rotten bookings. Would Dan's Irish blood stand for that? No! He leased the house to individual producers,

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and put over eleven straight flivvers. Now it's the Hoodooed Avon, and it can't even put a moving-picture show across."

A boy came through the bar just then, paging Mr. Daw, and that gentleman, after hurrying to the telephone, came back, laughing. "You're to come out to the house for dinner, Jim," he advised Wallingford. "Fannie's there, and Violet won't let her go home."

"Give my regards to Violet Bonnie, won't you?" begged Sickels. "The hit she made in *The Pink Canary* was what put the Avon on its feet; and I never had a star in the house that made so little trouble, or was such an all-round good fellow."

"After you get past the age for mash notes, the mail brings you nothing but trouble," complained Violet Bonnie, as she returned to the library of the new Daw residence, where Mrs. Wallingford wandered idly from case to case, inspecting the shining new backs of standard books which never had been opened and which probably never would be. "Why, Fannie, right after I made my first big hit in *The Pink Canary*, they had to give me six pigeonholes in the stage-entrance mail-box, and I had to hire a secretary to open my mail and send the presents back; now if I get a letter it's either from a dressmaker or an old-time chum who wants me to steer

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her daughter on to the stage or warn her away from it."

Mrs. Wallingford smiled quietly. "I don't see why either class of letters should annoy you," she observed. "You have good dressmakers and you don't object to paying the bills, and I should think it would be a pleasant task to encourage budding genius or to warn weak girls away from the stage."

"I don't know why, in either case, I should nurse and bottle-feed and bring up by hand a grouch against the stage," retorted Violet, massaging her trace of an extra chin. "It brought me some perfectly good husbands besides Blackie. Say, I hate my old chums, anyhow."

"You're making your nose red, Vi," warned Mrs. Wallingford with a laugh.

"Honest, am I?" and Violet hurried to the mirror. "I am too fat to get mad," she confessed; "but it certainly does get my Angora for girls I used to know to write me that they have grown-up daughters. It makes me feel so old, and I won't be old!"

"That's it, is it? Who has been reminding you of your only enemy?"

"Martha Tripp," snapped Violet Bonnie. "Martha was my school-teacher up in Squamosett. She wore corkscrew curls on both sides of her face, but she ought to have worn 'em in front; for she was so ugly that she had to get up in the mid[illegible]

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of the night to rest from it. If I remember her Melissa, she was a gangle-shanked brat with freckles and a snub nose. Melissa is now in the flower of youth, this letter says, and all her mother wants me to do is to show her to a manager. Melissa is supposed to do the rest. The balance of the good news is that Melissa is on her way here, right now. She will be among us 'probably by the time this humble missive intrudes itself upon me.' Martha means by the time I get the letter. Honest, Fannie, I never did a mean thing to any living creature."

"I think you must be lacing too tightly, Vi," remonstrated Fannie mildly; "or else you've had a bad day of it."

"I can put my whole arm down inside any place," defiantly asserted Violet. "I have had a rotten day, though, and it takes just this to finish it off. Your dropping in was the only lucky thing that has happened to me."

"I'm glad I did come over," returned Mrs. Wallingford. "Possibly I can help you with Melissa Tripp. To begin with, why not show her to the managers?"

"I haven't any too many friends among them now," explained Violet. "Gracious heavens, there she is!"

The ring at the bell, however, proved to be only Mr. Daw and Mr. Wallingford.

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"I see you're getting a new maid," observed Blackie, as he inspected the contents of a cellarette that had been ingeniously built in among the book-cases. "I guess I'll have rye, Jim. How about you? We have so many servants now, Vi, that we don't get any service."

"I don't know anything about a new maid," his wife returned. "Blackie, your scheme of having a cellarette in every room in the house was all right, but you'll have to get combination locks. It's no fun to find three servants half soused in different rooms all on the same day. What about this maid?"

"We just passed her coming up the drive," replied Blackie. "Say when, Jim. She had a paper alligator-skin suit case in each hand, and was bringing father along to see that the place is strictly moral."

"I'm afraid my machine splashed a little splushing on father, and maybe on daughter," confessed Wallingford regretfully. "Father was a real nice little man, and I think he apologized, but daughter has a snub nose, and I could see it work."

"Don't drink that, Blackie!" commanded Violet, taking the glass of rye from his hand. "I need it. I know your maid by the snub nose. She's Melissa."

"She looked it, every inch," responded Blackie.

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"If that was Melissa, have another. You'll need two. By the way, who is Melissa?"

"Honest, is she that awful?" wailed Violet.

"She's worse, if anything," answered Wallingford with a chuckle. "She has a round flat wafer of rouge on each cheek-bone, and wears a green hobble-skirt trimmed with yellow beads."

Violet brightened. "I guess I get a laugh anyhow," she decided. "But who's father? Old man Tripp was awful dead when I knew Martha."

From the rear hall there came a faint buzz, and the four of them waited in silence until a glassy-eyed butler appeared, openly grinning, to announce:

"Miss Tripp and Professor Flopsie."

In the front parlor, Melissa Tripp, a buxom young woman who was pinched so much in the middle that she bulged every place else, cast herself bodily upon Violet Bonnie with a gurgling gush.

"I'd have known you anywhere," declared Melissa, standing back to survey her mother's friend. "I've had your lithographs and photographs in my bedroom for years and years and years. It's astonishing how slightly you've changed since I was a little bit of a girl. There is no difference at all that I can see, except that you've put on a lot of flesh."

"Of course, child, you don't mean to be catty," returned Violet resignedly. "I thank you for the

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compliment, but I may as well tell you in the beginning that I'd as lief have firecrackers set off under my chair as to have anybody say years and years and years, or mention fat." Suddenly her brow cleared, and she smiled serenely. "How much you look like your mother," she observed in satisfied retaliation.

Melissa stiffened immediately. "How funny!" she said, and forced a laugh. "You don't remember what mother looks like, I guess."

"I'm not so old that I'm losing my memory, too," retorted Violet, though very cheerfully, as she distinctly recalled the awesome features of Martha Tripp, whose mere appearance in any gathering was a signal for a snicker. "I remember her so perfectly that I can seem to see her standing before me now."

Melissa stiffened still more. "Really, I'm very rude," she confessed, taking refuge in her society manners. "Allow me to introduce my dancing master, Professor Flopsie, Mrs. Daw."

Professor Flopsie, a lean little man with lean little whiskers, mustache and hair, all of them parted exactly in the center, advanced three paces, toeing out nicely and blowing gracefully with each step. Straightening, he threw back his head and shoulders, and elevated his right hand, as one about to take his partner for the cotillion. He seemed al-

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most to be waiting for the music. Not knowing what else to do with the hand, Violet Bonnie wagged it and let go.

"I'm delighted to meet so famous an exponent of the Terpsichorean art," announced the professor in a lean little voice, and wound up that observation with a flourish and a bow.

Violet Bonnie inspected him with frankly amused curiosity. "Thanks," she acknowledged. "That's one they never handed me before, anyhow. Sit down and have something. Oh, John!" and she called the butler who was passing in the hall. "Call for anything you want, Professor. I will say that my husband knows as well how to stock a buffet as any bartender on Broadway."

"If it's not too much trouble, I think I should like a little tea," observed the professor. "We've had a very fatiguing journey."

"I shall take tea, also," declared Miss Tripp, eager to establish her principles at the first opportunity. "Nothing stronger shall ever pass my lips. I have heard about the temptations that assail young girls on the stage."

"Oh, hush," admonished Violet, looking her over anew. "Somebody's been stringing you. If you find any temptations you'll have to overtake them," a conclusion at which Miss Tripp visibly bridled. "John, take Miss Tripp's things to the Looey Cons

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room, and bring some tea and wafers. Where's your luggage, Professor?"

"I regret that I can not remain," responded the professor. "I merely came to see my star pupil launched upon the successful career that I am sure she will attain under your patronage. For three years Miss Tripp has been taking weekly lessons at my academy in stage and society dancing, fancy steps, parlor deportment, conversation and personal charm. 'Lissa!" and he archly held up a warning finger. 'Lissa promptly uncrossed her feet. "To be quite frank with you, Mrs. Daw, it would mean a great deal to me to have a success graduated from my academy. Many young ladies have come out of Squamosett, equipped with all the graces and arts which the Flopsie Academy of Dancing and Deportment could bestow upon them, but none of them, so far, has seemed to possess the force of personal character necessary to create a furore in the dramatic profession, and so render the Flopsie Academy a recognized preparatory school for Thespian laurels," and into the professor's old eyes, which, alas, could not, like his hair and beard, be brilliantined into youthful gloss, there came a wistful look, which Violet Bonnie could interpret much more accurately than she could his speech.

"I get you," she said with a quick sympathy for all the polite little man's weary, plodding, waiting

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years. "If we can make a winner out of Melissa, all the stage-struck Tessies and Mamies in Squamosett County, and as far over the county lines as Hookersville and Snag Bay and Fiddler's Mills, will streak for the Flopsie Academy, and pay fancy prices to be turned into real actresses."

The modest little professor blushed to find his plans stated so crudely, but he did not deny the accuracy of Violet Bonnie's deduction.

"Well, I'm for you," announced Violet heartily. "I'll do the best I can," and she studied Miss Tripp with more sober calculation than she had yet bestowed upon that young woman. "There's one thing in Melissa's favor — she ain't cross-eyed."

"I'm not old," retorted Melissa with a sniff.

"I should like to remain until you have seen Melissa dance," hastily said the professor, his heart sinking against the time when he should leave these two women together with no diplomat between them. "Perhaps Violet Bonnie will be good enough, 'Lissa, to have you shown to your room, and excuse you long enough to put on a dancing-skirt."

"Sure," agreed Violet. "She never could dance in that hobble thing; besides, they've gone out, Melissa."

"I know it takes a certain type of figure to wear them," responded Melissa complacently. "You

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probably wouldn't dare. I can wear almost anything. By the way, I suppose I shall have to wear tights. I am willing."

"You'll have to put shapers under them," stated Violet, not as a retort, but in mere critical judgment. "You've got skinny legs, I can tell from your arms; but don't worry about that, child. If you can get the dance across, we can fix you all up so that from the front you'll look like the First Fairy. I'll tell you what I'll do, Professor. If Melissa can show me anything at all that looks like the goods, I'll make life miserable for the managers in this town till they give her a try-out. Then it's up to her. If she falls down, I'll go on record that I learned to dance in the Flopsie Academy myself; though I really learned to dance by following the hand-organs; and I got the double-shuffle by the throat while I churned eight pounds of butter a day with an old-fashioned dasher churn."

"I wish that were true," sighed the professor. "It would be the making of me to have the impression abroad that Violet Bonnie learned at my humble school."

"We'll have it true, then," declared Violet graciously. "A lie like that won't hurt my conscience three minutes. I guess I've told a million to accommodate my friends, and I still have a hearty appetite."

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"You look hearty," admitted Melissa, who stood waiting in the doorway.

"I got my fingers crossed, kid; let's can the dressing-room asides," laughed Violet, laying away her rancor as suddenly as she had conceived it. "A little spunk's a good thing to have, but, lord, we have to live together a while, so what's the use of being catty? Come on, I'll introduce you and the professor to the jury before you go up to dress. I hope we got some of your music on the pianola, but if not, Blackie can pound the piano till it hollers for mercy. You ought to hear him turn *The Holy City* into rag-time."

Blackie played, Melissa danced, the professor beamed and the jury repressed its emotions; then Violet Bonnie, acknowledging the dances to be a "scream" and burning to shriek, bundled Melissa and the professor off to get ready for dinner, and collected the Wallingfords and the Daws into the comfortable library as quickly as possible.

"Well, you see what I'm up against, don't you?" she demanded, a trifle defiantly.

"It's a joke," declared Wallingford sympathetically. "It seems to me you've over-promised yourself, Vi."

"I know it," she admitted. "I wish these helpless sad-eyed people would stay away from me. They get me going, and the first thing I know I've offered

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to shed sunshine along their pathway forever."

"I don't feel very much of a tug at my heart-strings on account of this Melissa person," remarked Blackie, pulling thoughtfully at his mustache. "Of course, you saw her first, Vi, and she's all yours; but if I owned half of her, I'd go out to a nice circular race-track, and set my half's steering-gear to the correct curve, and give it a shove, and tell it that Sweeney was looking on."

"I'd let my half run for Sweeney, too, if I could," responded his wife; "but I can't do it. This poor little jay-town dancing master has got to my soft spot, darn him! It's on his account I have to do something for Melissa Tripp, and I don't know what it can be unless I give her poison. She can't dance, she can't sing, she has no face nor figure, and she hasn't got that something inside her that wins you. She ain't fit for anything but classic dances."

"Why not classical dances?" Mrs. Wallingford soberly inquired. "We might, if we were clever enough about it, work her into a fad. She's very ugly, but if we were to accentuate that artistically, and give her elaborate stage settings, and some unique advertising—" She paused, finding the astonished eyes of the other three upon her, colored, and was silent.

"Why, look who's here!" exclaimed her hus-

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band, and patted her upon the shoulder. "I think I'll have to take you in with me, Fannie, on my next business stunt."

"I've been keeping bad company for years," Mrs. Wallingford retorted. "Really, though, I'm a good deal like Violet: I seem possessed with a desire to help our forlorn little Professor Flopsie."

"He's a cute-enough little man," agreed Wallingford, "but I don't see a chance for a novelty high-brow dance. They've had freak wrigglers from all over the globe."

"There's one country they haven't come from yet," advised Blackie. "I haven't seen any sacred dancers from Lhasa."

"La who?" demanded Violet Bonnie, slipping from the arm to the seat of her chair and leaning forward with eager interest.

"Lhasa, the big-noise town of Tibet, you know. Mostly religion and dirt, from what I read about it. Lhaa, the sacred dancer from Lhasa. That sounds bad, I guess, eh? There's just two places they'd eat that up: at a Pumpkin Circuit County Fair, or some place near Forty-second Street and the Main Stem."

"Tibet," mused Wallingford. "Seems to me I've heard of that place, but I know I never worked it. Where is it?"

"It's some place on the other map," replied

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Blackie. "Nobody knows anything about it. No white man ever got away from there alive; so we can do whatever we please. They have long-haired goats, I know that much; and the people are so mud-ugly they have to wear blinders to keep from seeing each other."

"What a chance that gives Melissa!" said Violet with earnest enthusiasm. "I'll work up the turns for her myself. The Dance of the Sacred Goat! That ought to be easy for her. She looks the part, and all she'd have to do would be to hop; and she does that swell. We could even buy up a lot of goats and introduce 'em into the scene, with a mob of supers to be the high priests and such things; go to some good costumer and have him work up a lot of correct historical costumes, only fancy, and get a good electrician to figure out a lot of light effects; then get us a good press-agent and we're all to the merry."

Wallingford shook his head. "I'm afraid of it," he objected. "You might fill a few matinées, but there aren't enough freak-hunters, even in New York, to keep her hopping very long. They wouldn't even give her the price in vaudeville, for while vaudeville is full of bunk, they're particular about what kind of bunk it is, and the Monday afternoon try-out would be about all that the Dance of the Sacred Goat would pull."

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"I don't see why I was ever born!" wailed Violet. "I hate trouble; it's such a bother!"

"Then there's only one thing left," asserted Blackie, who was bound to remain cheerful, though the heavens fell. "We'll have to make her the plot of a musical comedy. Lhaa, the sacred dancer of Lhasa, in *The Lama's Goat*. I guess you couldn't burn up the bill-boards with that; and a good nervous press-agent could have the time of his sweet young life."

"Blackie, on the level, you're the only husband I ever really loved!" avowed Violet fondly. "The others only had money; but you've got brains. You've fixed it all up for us. The musical comedy goes. Jimmy, you say you ain't going to do anything for the next six months, and if you don't, it's a cinch that Blackie won't; so you can both just pitch in and impresario Melissa Tripp till you're black in the face. The only trouble I see is in getting a theater for her."

"Why, Vi, you have two theaters," protested Mrs. Wallingford.

"Help!" shouted Violet. "You don't suppose I'd put a hoodoo on one of my own places, do you? They're both doing a good business, and I'm like all the other theater-owners: the more money I'm making the more scared I am."

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"Why not the Hoodooed Avon?" suggested Wallingford to Blackie with a smile.

"The Avon!" exclaimed Violet Bonnie. "Well, here's where good old Dan Sickels gets a fresh start. I'm stout for Dan and for the Avon, and I think it will be a mascot for us. Blackie, you hunt up Dickie Dolger, who wrote the book of *The Pink Canary,* and I'll get him right to work on a libretto for *The Lama's Goat.* Melissa won't have any soubrette part. We'll get a real one for that. Melissa will just come on at ten fifteen and have it over, and go home in her automobile. Then you hunt up Rickets Johnson, who wrote the music for the *Canary* piece, and I'll set him to work on the score. Poor devils! Neither Dickie nor Rickets have ever come back since, and maybe this is their chance!"

"Maybe the picking isn't so good," observed Blackie. "It's a cinch that Dicky Dolger stole *The Pink Canary* from *The Yellow Bird.*"

"He didn't," denied Violet Bonnie instantly. "Dicky was a friend of mine. He only adapted it. If Dicky's anything like he used to be, I can lock him up in a room with a bunch of old librettos and a case of red-eye, and have the book in a week. If we can put detectives after Rickets Johnson to keep anybody from slipping him dope money till

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he's through with this job, I can have the score in a month. Any good music publishing house will hand us a young song-writer to dash off the lyrics. Allow another month for rehearsals, scenery, costumes and props, and there we are. We ought to open at the Avon in two months from to-day!"

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CHAPTER VIII

A THIRTY-DAY OPTION

MELISSA TRIPP marched into the library upon the assembled Wallingfords and Daws two evenings later, with a letter and a small sheaf of newspaper clippings in her hand. "There's one thing we haven't talked about," she said, interrupting the planning of the great dance scene in the temple. "We haven't made any business arrangements."

"Business arrangements?" repeated Violet in surprise. "I don't quite get you, child. It's going to cost us about five thousand dollars, real money, to stage this, and we're responsible for a lot more; but you needn't worry about it."

"You don't understand me," returned Melissa. "You're expecting to build the success of this whole dramatic production upon my talent, and what I want to know is, what do I get?"

"Somebody ought to tell you," observed Blackie.

"That'll be about all, Blackie," admonished Violet Bonnie. "Remember, she's from Squamosett, and she's our guest. At the same time, you might be

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right. Why, Melissa, none of us had figured on anything but to give you the total profits."

"But suppose there shouldn't be any?" queried Melissa calmly.

"Then we all get the hook," laughed Violet. "We get it a little worse than you do, to be sure, but we can stand it."

"I don't know about that," insisted Melissa. "I've been practising for three years, and I'm sure of my art. This musical comedy may fail; it may not be the proper setting for my performance; and if it fails after all my labor, and all my skill, and all my personality, I get nothing. Is this fair?"

Violet Bonnie nearly choked. "No," she confessed. "It looks like a scheme to do you; but, believe me, it shan't be done in this house. I'm going to have an extra lock put on your door so that nobody slips in and steals your art. What do you want, a guarantee?"

"Something like that," agreed Melissa. "I've just had a letter from Professor Flopsie. He's sent me his collection of what he has read in the papers about musical comedies, and he tells me that nineteen in every twenty fail. Now, I'm just beginning my career, and I must watch out for myself. I think I ought to have a certain guaranteed salary; and then, of course, if the profits go over that, so much the better."

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Wallingford and Blackie exchanged glances of keen delight, but Violet Bonnie did not pause to exchange glances with any one.

"When I was a kid," she calmly explained, "we had a tramp come to our house and get a square meal, with hot coffee and hot biscuits and all the trimmings, and then he tried to burn down the house because we had no pie; but he was a piker. About how much salary do you think you want — Caruso's or just Tetrazzini's?"

"Only what I earn," stated Melissa modestly. "Professor Flopsie sent me a clipping showing the salaries of prominent dancers. They range from about two hundred and fifty to a thousand dollars a week; and some, I believe, even larger than that. But I'd be satisfied in the beginning just to take the general average."

Solemnly Blackie opened the door of the cellarette and handed a bottle and a glass to his wife. She waved away those trifles, being in no need of stimulants.

"I get you," she told Melissa. "If I wasn't so crazy about my own scenario, I would introduce you to the managers. But I'll tell you what we'll do with you, Melissa. We'll fix it so that you don't have to gamble at all. We'll finance this thing ourselves; but, win or lose, we'll guarantee you fifty dollars a week and give you a fourth of

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the profits above that. I don't like to fuss with a guest, but those are the terms."

"I suppose that, for this first engagement, I am compelled to take what you offer me," accepted Melissa with the air of a martyr. "I reserve the privilege, however, of leaving your production at any moment that I get a better offer. How long an engagement do you guarantee me?"

"One minute," returned Violet, tearing a piece of insertion out of her gown. "We reserve the right to fire you and get a real dancer any time you don't make good."

"I feel secure in my art," announced Melissa stiffly. "No one can take that from me." And she went to bed.

"If her art was catching, they'd quarantine her!" raged Violet. "Is my nose getting red, Fannie?"

It was fully five minutes before she was able to join the rest of them in the enjoyment of the funny side of it all, and she was through with it quicker.

"Everybody says I have a sweet disposition," she explained, "and I know I have, but, honest to Christmas, folks, this Flopsie Academy graduate has me strangling feather pillows in the night and calling them Melissa! There's one thing sure, though, she's fixed it so I have to make this goat

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piece win or die of apoplexy. Now, we'll all four chip in and become producers in earnest."

"You'll have to count me out," declared Wallingford. "I've just made a bet with Blackie that I won't go into any money-making scheme for six months."

"Maybe this isn't," suggested Mrs. Wallingford with a smile.

"Oh, Fannie!" protested Violet, really hurt. "I didn't think you'd go back on me."

"I haven't," returned Mrs. Wallingford, still smiling. "To prove that, Violet, I suggest that you and I finance this thing ourselves, leaving the men entirely out of it, except as business agents and errand-boys."

"That's the idea," agreed Violet, highly delighted.

That was the idea that remained. Wallingford saw to it that the Avon Theater, sadly run down, was put in proper condition for the play, and he attended to all the necessary business, while Blackie put in his time and ingenuity devising wonderful despatches, from St. Petersburg, concerning the great dancer, Lhaa! She was missing from the temple at Lhasa; the Lama was offering fabulous rewards for her, dead or alive; for she knew all the horrid mysteries of the temple; she was rumored to have been seen in every capital

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of Europe and Asia; she was definitely located in St. Petersburg; the Russian government, captivated by her marvelous beauty, would not turn her over to the Lama to be beheaded, and war was startlingly imminent; she was finally on her way to America! Later; she had been secured by the enterprising managers of *The Lama's Goat,* to dance Lhasa's most jealously guarded sacred ceremonial in that stupendous forthcoming production. It was great "stuff," and the papers printed some of it!

In the meantime, the Daw residence was the scene of at least equal activity. The Wallingfords moved over to the Daw residence, bag and baggage, and took possession of the colonial suite. Dicky Dolger, being found homeless and forlorn by Blackie down on the Bowery, was pushed by the shoulders through a Turkish bath and a barber-shop into some clean linen and a new suit of clothes, trundled out to the house and installed in the "Umpire" room, where the cellarette was most scantily stocked, but replenished at judicious though regular interval. Rickets Johnson went home of nights along in the wee small hours, when he felt like it, and was given the Tudor room because the window mullions and other vertical decorations reminded him of a pipe-organ. The Renaissance music-room, in which a mechanical organ, an elec-

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trical piano, a bird's-eye maple phonograph, and an automatic guitar had been installed, was turned into a rehearsal hall; and here, while Dicky Dolger culled nosegays of wit from vast sheaves of dead and bygone librettos to adorn the plot of *The Lama's Goat,* and Rickets Johnson "adapted" the hit numbers of all the successful musical productions since *Pinafore,* and Blackie and Wallingford, in the Dutch library, concocted weird and still more weird tales concerning the marvelous Lhaa of Lhasa, Violet Bonnie, with the unobtrusive assistance of Mrs. Wallingford, took up Melissa Tripp as a lump of raw material and molded upon her the Dance of the Sacred Goat.

Attired in a short skirt made from an early spring chiffon, which had been ruthlessly cut off at the knees, Violet danced and postured and explained and did it all over again, from mid afternoon to dewy morn, and enjoyed almost killing her constantly complaining pupil, who held that genius should not need to work!

"Honest, Fannie," Violet declared after about two weeks of it, "this has banting, dieting and all the other fat-cures beat to a custard. If Melissa Tripp only lasts till we get through, I'll be able to squeeze back into that year-before-last lavender that I keep to measure myself by."

Members of the "profession" wandered into

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the rehearsals, which soon began at the Avon, and said, "My Gawd, how could they ever cast Tommy Delancy for that part!" or they said it about Willis Lawrence, or Elsie Devoe, or whomever they happened to know best, and went away. Friends of the "profession" came in and listened a while, and yawned, and said: "Delightfully reminiscent. Why in blazes don't somebody spring a new one?" and went away, forgetting that ninety-nine out of every hundred who defy Broadway by "springing a new one" die the recipients of charity. Managers of other houses came in, and yawned and said: "Why, look who's here! Dicky Dolger and Rickets Johnson, the pair that never came back! Well, order the hearse!" and chuckled, and went away.

After all this criticism upon the part of the experts in the game, the piece was bound to be a stupendous success, and Business Manager Wallingford was so certain of it that, during the last week of the rehearsals, he went back into the lonely corner where Dan Sickels always sat in gloomy apathy.

"Well, Dan, what do you think of the piece?" he inquired.

Dan tried to force a smile. "You never can tell. It's all a gamble. Nobody knows," he said.

"You're entitled to a guess," Wallingford in-

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sisted. "Come on, Dan, tell me, honestly, what do you think about it?"

"Well, I don't like to hurt your feelings," Sickels hesitated.

"I haven't any," Wallingford promptly informed him.

"Well, if you leave it to me, I don't think it's any kind of a musical comedy, anyhow. None of the boys thinks so. You see, Wallingford, you got in wrong from the start. You got Dicky Dolger's and Rickets Johnson's names tacked on to the program, and you're unlucky in your cast. Delancy and Lawrence and Devoe are all right, but they haven't had decent parts for three seasons; so what can you expect? Violet Bonnie hasn't been in touch with the game for a long time. Then again, this is the Hoodooed Avon. It looks like you're up against it, Wallingford."

"It isn't my funeral," returned J. Rufus. "I'm not engaging in any business this year, anyhow; but I still have a bet left in me. If *The Lama's Goat* makes a hit, it'll break the hoodoo, and this house will be worth more than it is to-day. At what price will you sell the property, and how much will you take for a thirty-day option on it?".

Dan sank back in his chair like a collapsed puffball. "It's too late," he huskily whispered, then he cleared his throat. "It's too late," he repeated in

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a louder huskiness. "I gave Dillon a thirty-day option day before yesterday."

"The devil you say!" exclaimed Wallingford, deeply disappointed. "Why, the man's as crooked as Tammany and a sure bankrupt if he goes through with this thing. I thought you had decided not to fuss up with him."

"I couldn't help myself," half whined Sickels, in the pitiable weakness of a once strong man. "Wallingford, I've been broke so long that when I see any of my old friends on the street I hunt an alley. I used to be one of the best dressers on Broadway, and now I don't like to go out there in the sunlight; I feel as if everybody that's walking behind me have their eyes focused on the fringe of my pants. I own this property and its eighty-five thousand dollars' worth of mortgages, but there's many a time I've felt like trading it for the price of a new suit of clothes, a dinner with a pretty girl, a skin full of champagne, and a bottle of prussic acid. Well, when I'm feeling about like that, this quivering Dillon comes along and shows me twenty-five greenbacks, each one of them good for twenty dollars at any regularly licensed bar; and I fall. He offers me a hundred thousand dollars cash, and the same amount in stock of the Dillon Stores Company for this place, if he chooses, on or before the day his option expires. But it isn't the figure he

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offers me that gets me; it's that visible five hundred dollars in real money. Say, do you know what I've got on now for the first time in a century or so? Silk socks!"

"I'm sorry you closed with him, Dan," commented Wallingford, too much interested in the business end of it to pay any attention to Dan's joy in the sordid necessities of life. "All you'll get out of this place will be the fifteen thousand dollars difference between the cash you get and the amount of your mortgages," and Wallingford stalked away, steadfastly refusing Sickels's hospitable invitation to go out and take a drink and forget it.

Instead, Wallingford, as was his habit when he had been balked in any of his plans, hunted a quiet corner where nobody could find him. An hour later he hurried down from the lonely balcony box just above the jangling rehearsal, and hunted Sickels, whom he found huddled up in the old watchman's comfortable chair at the stage-entrance, with a foot across his knee, gently stroking a silk sock.

"You might as well have some more haberdashery, Dan," Wallingford observed, laying a hundred-dollar bill across the glistening ankle.

Dan promptly clutched the gaudy trifle in his fingers. "What's it for?" he asked, quite naturally.

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"A second option on this theater and the ground it occupies. Thirty days dating from to-day."

"Same price?" inquired Dan, folding the bill lengthwise and then endwise.

"Better," replied Wallingford. "Two hundred thousand cash."

Dan stuffed the money into his pocket. "Let me get this straight," he said, rising vigorously from his chair. "You're paying me this hundred dollars for what you call a second option. If Dillon don't buy my property in thirty days from last Tuesday, at the price he offered me, you have the right to buy it, at any time in the following two days, for two hundred thousand dollars, cash?"

"That's it," acknowledged Wallingford.

"Let's go and see my lawyer," greedily invited Dan. "I hope Dillon chokes before his thirty days are up."

On the morning of the momentous opening date of *The Lama's Goat,* Melissa Tripp was stricken with her first attack of stage fright, which took the form of nervous chills; Dicky Dolger, his occupation more or less gone, arose at rosy dawn, emptied his own cellarette and those in the Sheraton and Art Nouveau rooms, and fell down-stairs; and Rickets Johnson lost the conductor's score of the music. At the final rehearsal that day, two of the most important chorus girls left a yawning gap in the

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ranks by their failure to appear; Miss Devoe utterly refused to go on that night unless they settled, in her favor, the allotment of the star dressing-room now in dispute between herself and Melissa Tripp; the electrician who had rehearsed all the light effects burned his hand; a new grip-man poked one of the heroic-sized papier-mâché goats through the rear wall of the temple; and the stage-manager had a fight with Willis Lawrence, the big basso.

Through all these trifling incidents Violet Bonnie, though working like a stone-crusher and meeting each death-blow as it came up with a fierce energy that should have belonged only to despair, retained an amazing cheerfulness, which was explained when, over the hasty sandwich that formed her dinner, she observed to the only companion who was unruffled enough of disposition to remain with her through it all:

"Blackie, it's a pipe! Never in the history of the Big Lane was there a production that started off with so many signs of being a winner. If we'd had a smooth rehearsal this morning, and everything else had gone off as gay as an election-bet wine-fest, I'd have been out right now ordering a calla lily Rock of Ages and being measured for my crape."

At seven fifteen, however, she sent a hurry-up call for Blackie, who was already in the lobby with Wallingford, gloating serenely over the advance

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sale. Hastening back, Blackie found Violet Bonnie seated in a lonely state upon the temple steps of the gorgeous first-act set.

"It's all over, Blackie," she said with stiff lips which, somehow, stretched and pulled and numbly hurt as she tried to form the words. "Somebody has sure put a Dutch hex on this show," and she twisted a lace kerchief into a rough little string.

"Cheer up," begged Blackie, responding nobly, though with a sinking heart, to this new demand upon his cheerfulness. "The fatalities may not be so great as at first reported. Who mixed up the switchboard this time?"

"Delancy," she gulped.

"Delancy? What's he kicking about?"

"Cramps!" she wailed. "Cramps, dog-gone him! I just got a note that he's had three doctors, and I guess a plumber, trying to take the kinks out of his stomach; but he can't be repaired in time."

"How inconsiderate of him," mumbled Blackie politely, still trying to be brave. "Why, he's the Grand Lama!" he exclaimed, awaking suddenly to the enormity of the blow. "This show can't go on without a Lama. What are you going to do, girl?"

"Do!" she half shrieked. "I'm going up to Squamosett and strangle Martha Tripp with her own corkscrew curls!" And suddenly, for the first time

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in her life, she gave way to complete despair, and threw her arms around Blackie's neck and sobbed, actually sobbed!

Blackie was scared to a pale Nile green. "Cheer up," he begged with a feeble imitation of his usual flippant heartiness, and patted her automatically upon the shoulder. "Cheer up, Vi. Say! For the love of Mike, cheer up, or I'll go dippy myself!" and he looked about him wildly for some place to sit down, for Violet was no bantam, and she was leaning her full weight against him.

The Lama's Goat might have come to a premature demise, there and then, had not the distracted stage-manager invigorated Violet by bursting upon them at that moment.

"Now the devil is to pay!" he bawled out. "Lawrence's boots for the second act have just come in, and they're an inch too short. What in Texas are we going to do about it?"

"Saw his toes off!" ordered Violet, turning fiercely upon him.

"But —" protested the stage-manager.

"Shut up!" she cried. "I told you what to do; go and do it! And if you bother me any more, I'll drop the asbestos curtain drum on you. I say, get out! Blackie, lick him!"

"Sure," accepted Blackie, glad for any relief from his own surcharged feelings; and he made a dash

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for the stage-manager, who beat him up the stairs by two lengths, and locked himself in Lawrence's dressing-room. Blackie returned apologetically. "He got away from me," he explained in some shame; "but I'll watch at the foot of the stairs till he comes out, if it takes all night."

Violet looked at him and suddenly laughed. "Honest, Blackie, I wouldn't be a widow again for a million dollars alimony," she confessed. "You needn't watch at the foot of the stairs, though, for I've got a better job for you. You've got to go on to-night and play the Lama."

Blackie laughed at her. "Show me my best friend's baby and tell me to murder it, and I'll do it; but I refuse to step into your aeroplane. Where are you taking me?"

"To Delancy's dressing-room," she firmly replied, pushing him ahead of her by one elbow, like a country sheriff taking his first local malefactor to the lock-up; and, as inexorable as unrelenting fate, she pushed him up the stairs and into the star comedian's dressing-room, where the Grand Lama's costumes hung upon their hooks in gaudy array, and Delancy's own mussy assortment of grease paints lay spread out upon a Joseph's coat of chamois skin.

"But look here, Vi," persisted Blackie, genuinely panic-stricken; "you don't know what you're running me up against. I can't —"

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"Take off your coat and vest and collar and tie and shirt, and rub that cold cream all over your face," she ordered. "I'll be back as soon as I've seen whether Melissa Tripp is having fits or only the ague."

"Just one moment," commanded Blackie, holding up a compelling hand. "Are you on the dead level about this?"

"Why, certainly I am! You're exactly Delancy's size. You know all the lines, business and cues, and you know the words and music of every song. You play the Grand Lama to-night!"

"But I sing like a pig under a barbed-wire fence," still objected Blackie, who, however, had already removed his coat and vest, and was now tugging at his collar.

Violet disdained to answer that foolish objection, and started out the door, but Blackie recalled her.

"You win," he gave in; "but I want a case of hundred and ninety proof rye up here in five minutes."

Violet turned and contemplated him thoughtfully. "I believe that is a noble little idea," she agreed. "I'll send for it right away, but you must let me feed it to you. There's nobody in this world, not even you yourself, can tell as good as I can when you've got just the right edge on."

Somebody repeated Blackie's first cue to him three

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times, a little later on, and pushed him on the stage. He uttered the well-remembered first line in a dazed air to no one in particular, and out in front everybody laughed! As one in a dream, Blackie went through the part of the Grand Lama in precisely the manner in which, for a month, he had been urging Delancy to play it. When the curtain rang down on the first act, Miss Devoe hated him for life, for the recalls were all for him! Violet Bonnie threw her arms around him with gurgles of joy.

"This is the proudest minute of my life!" she exclaimed.

"Give me a goblet of rye," begged Blackie huskily.

"Clear!" yelled the stage manager to the pro tem star comedian and his wife.

"Get out of the road, you!" snapped a grip-man, as he slammed past them with a set of marble steps on his shoulder.

The next Blackie remembered was having his costume torn off him in the dressing-room and another one thrust upon him.

"You'd better step out and tell them that Delancy's sick and that an understudy was put on at a moment's notice," he suggested in his only lucid interval.

Somebody laughed at that; it sounded like his

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wife; then he was on the stage again and great peals of laughter were rolling up to him and over him from out that vast yawning pit of dim human mistiness; it followed him wherever he went; it annoyed him whenever he spoke, because he was never allowed to finish what he had to say; but there was something in it that he seemed to like, too; it seemed to liven him up and make him more active.

It was so all through the play. Before the evening was half over the experienced Violet Bonnie went around shaking hands with everybody who would stand still long enough, and with herself when nobody else was handy; for *The Lama's Goat* was "across"! She was the happiest woman in the world, and the proudest, for Blackie had done it all! She told him as much, over and over, until she almost made him believe it after the last act.

"Well," he finally conceded, "I never would have done it if it hadn't been for that souse."

"Souse!" she repeated, laughing. "Why, Blackie, you haven't had a drink to-day," and she pointed to the still uncorked bottle upon his make-up table.

He looked at it, astounded, until he finally believed that, too. "Somebody get me a corkscrew," he directed. "I've got eight drinks coming."

The stage-manager burst into the dressing-room

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just as Blackie, submitting to cocoa-butter, was taking the second of his belated drinks, and all but embraced him.

"Your reputation's made from this minute!" the stage-manager exclaimed.

"That's what I was afraid of before I started," retorted Blackie with rather a sheepish grin.

"You've put over the biggest hit on Broadway. I just got word from Delancy's wife that he can come back to-morrow; but if he does come back, it'll be to carry a spear."

"He'll play the part to-morrow night if he can walk," asserted Blackie determinedly. "I got a nice face and I like it. I wouldn't abuse it this way again for a million dollars!"

"You don't mean you're not going to play any more, Mr. Daw!" exclaimed the stage-manager, turning chalky. "Why, it would be a crime for you to quit!"

"I'm so proud of Blackie that I've got goose-flesh," interposed Violet Bonnie. "But just the same, he quits!"

"Thanks," said Blackie, both relieved and surprised.

"You needn't thank me," retorted his proud wife. "Of course, you don't know it, but you sloshed around among googoo eyes all night; and there's four of the little blond squabs in the chorus that

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go at the end of the week; numbers three, six, seven and thirteen. Give 'em their notices, Ben."

"By the way, how did Melissa go?" asked Blackie earnestly, very happy indeed to change the subject.

"In a taxi," replied the stage-manager. "I think she went away with a dried-up little lollop that hung around on the prompt side all night, apologizing to the scenery."

"That's right; you didn't know about Melissa, did you?" inquired Violet, with a flush of anger which ended in a laugh. "You know, she has two dances; one just before the goat dance. Well, they giggled her off the stage in the first one, and she left for Squamosett, I guess, without even stopping to change her costume."

"I don't see how you cut out the second dance," puzzled Blackie. "I wish I'd have been present at this show. I'd like to have seen how the plot turned out."

"It turned out fine!" Violet assured him with great enthusiasm. "We pulled Dicky Dolger out of his souse in the back part of the right proscenium box, and we fixed up the part in the seven minutes between the two dances. Elsie Devoe was just dressing for her third-act change. We explained it to her, and threw her into Lhaa's second costume, and she came on and did the Dance of the Sacred

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Goat so swell you could almost hear her bleat; knew every step of it just from watching that Tripp joke rehearse. Then she unveiled and Lhaa turned out to be the daughter, and as the sacred dancer, had a right to marry anybody in the kingdom. It made the plot swell. Next to you, Blackie, it was the hit of the show."

"It certainly got 'em," agreed the stage-manager delightedly. "The music helped a lot. You know, there were three managers and a tailor hunting for Dicky Dolger and Rickets Johnson before the last-act curtain wrung up. They've come back, and so has Devoe and everybody else."

"Devoe's a perfect lady, I'll say that for her," asserted Violet warmly. "She's strictly professional. She kept her eyes to herself, and hated Blackie and everybody else that got a hand."

Wallingford and Mrs. Wallingford and Toad Jessop found their happy way back to the star comedian's dressing-room, and added to the general jubilation.

"It's an honor to know you, Blackie," chuckled Wallingford, while the two women embraced each other fervently, and sat on Delancy's battered old trunk, hand in hand, to tell each other all about it in agitated alternate snatches.

"Did you see the show, Jim?" asked Blackie in surprise. "Where did you sit?"

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"In the left stage box," replied Wallingford indignantly. "You looked at us half the time!"

Blackie pondered that marvel in silence a moment. "Have a drink," he finally sighed. "Toad, go scare us up another glass. Jimmy, it's too bad you're not in on the personal triumph of this thing, along with us artists."

"Oh, I'm not dissatisfied," Wallingford informed him with easy nonchalance. "It isn't my game, but still I'll clean up about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars on the side."

"I suppose so," grumbled Blackie. "It's got to be a habit with you. Who suffers this time?"

"Dillon," explained Wallingford, chuckling. "I bought one little hundred-dollar share of stock in his company to-day, and to-morrow I'm going to bring suit, as a stockholder, for dissolution of his company, on the grounds of misrepresentation and misuse of funds. My lawyer demanded to see the books four minutes after I bought my share of stock, and he tells me that I'll have no trouble at all in getting an injunction that will prevent the Dillon Company from taking any steps toward the extension of the business within the next thirty days."

"I've heard of pikers, but holding up a five-million-dollar company to protect a hundred-dollar certificate comes close to the edge of being the limit," judged Blackie after mature deliberation. "Why

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all this grouch against Dillon? And why tie his hands for thirty days — so as to quiet his nerves?"

Wallingford smiled seraphically. "Merely so I can exercise my option on the Avon Theater at two hundred thousand dollars," he replied, striking a match on the big red "No Smoking" sign, and lighting a long black cigar. "The hoodoo is broken, and the house is worth double my option at this very minute. Nasselanger, of the syndicate, was trying to buy it from Sickels to-night, and Sickels is at this moment over at the Breeches Hotel, drowning his sorrows with one hand, and drinking to his luck with the other."

Blackie gazed upon his friend with thoughtful admiration for a while, and then he grinned. "I want you to go over with me and call on Dillon to-morrow, right after you file your suit," he suggested. "I want him to wait on us while I pick out a pink undershirt and a pair of silk suspenders."

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CHAPTER IX

THE USUAL METHOD

THE cab-driver who brought the prosperous big President of the Earth and his prosperous friend to the Hotel de Renaissance received a ten-dollar tip. The bell-boys who carried in their elaborate luggage received ten dollars each. The parlor-floor butler, who presently brought them a drink to the magnificent Venetian suite, received a like amount as a mere introduction. Similar largess was, within the next hour, distributed to a maid, a barber, a bootblack, a porter, a manicurist and a barroom waiter. Before dinner was over the jovially smiling big man was spoken of about the hotel as Spender Wallingford, and the proprietor himself went up to see what was the matter with the thermostat.

"I'll have the head engineer up here in just a few minutes," announced Mr. Blount, who was a bullet-headed man upon whom a dress-suit sat with some shame. "If you want anything in the town, let me know, and I'll get it for you, Mr. Wallingford."

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"I don't think you're going to give me a chance to want anything," returned Wallingford pleasantly. "By the way, though, I'll probably need some information. Do you imagine that it would be difficult to promote a big public-amusement park here?"

Mr. Blount considered that matter gravely, and then shook his head. "I couldn't tell you about that," he admitted. "You see, that's all politics here. The only two amusement parks we have are run by a county commissioner and an alderman of opposite politics, and they're both backed by the traction company, which is all politics. This is the only city in the country that has two healthy political gangs, and nobody knows who's going to lose next time."

"I could give you a guess," interpolated Mr. Wallingford's black-haired and black-mustached and black-frocked friend. "When you hit a town like that the voters lose."

"They lose any place," agreed Blount with a laugh. "They'd ought to lose for standing for what they do. I've no more sympathy for them than I have for a deacon that tries to buy counterfeit money and gets a box of sawdust. It's so especially fierce because these amateur grafters are a lot of rabbits. I have no respect for a hold-up man that will shiver while he's going through your

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pockets. They're planning to steal the court-house right now, but they're so scared I think they sleep with all the lights turned on."

Wallingford chuckled in huge enjoyment. "I've heard of stealing a grindstone and a hot cook-stove," he observed; "but sealing court-houses is a new specialty on me."

"It ought to be easy," asserted Blount, still disdainful of his local ordinance tinkers. "They've just built a profitable new court-house, and the old one, which occupies the finest business situation in town, is to be sold next Saturday. A bunch of these burglars want to buy it in for about half of its value, and open a beer-hall café, but they're afraid to grab it before election for fear it will swamp them at the polls, and they're afraid to wait till after the election for fear they won't get a chance at it. If I were a political yegg, I'd have had that court-house hid down in my cellar six months ago; but these lollops are still wondering if the owners keep a watch-dog. At about the last minute they'll probably try something, and it'll be so coarse that you couldn't sift it through a hoop."

"That sounds interesting, but it makes my scheme look like feeling a rattlesnake's fangs to see if they're sharp. I'd like to meet some people who can tell me exactly how the land lies."

"I'll bring you Charley Jackson," offered Blount.

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"He knows so much about politics that he's changed his party four times, and always landed on the winning side. Nothing else I can do for you, is there?"

When the proprietor had gone, Mr. Wallingford's friend, Daw, came out of his modest retirement, and he came out grinning.

"You've always been a quick producer, Jim," he confessed; "but you dug up that public-amusement park thought so suddenly that it's dizzy yet. Would you run one?"

"I wouldn't run anything unless it went some place in a hurry," asserted Wallingford, laughing. "I had to talk to the man, though, didn't I, and I don't know any more entertaining conversation than a lie."

"That's right," agreed Blackie admiringly. "It's the only thing there's no limit to. This town don't look so bad, Jim."

"It's a pleasant town," approved Wallingford. "It can't have much over a hundred thousand population, yet the churches, hotels and banks look like real money; and we're paupers."

"So you say," puzzled Blackie. "You've explained it to me after every drink, but I don't gather yet why we start out into the cold, cold world with only cigarette-money, when we could be welcome guests in every lobster-joint on Broadway for the

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balance of our lives without overtaking another dollar."

"I told you that Fannie objected to my investing half a million dollars in a railroad scheme to put another little crimp in the bank-roll of E. H. Falls," patiently explained Wallingford, "so I took the five thousand I had already drawn out for us to go on that little hunting trip, turned the balance of the bank-roll over to Fannie, brought you along to complete your education, and now I'm hunting that half-million."

"I got that before," retorted Blackie; "but still I don't see why."

"Why what?"

"Why a lot of things: why you want to risk the old homestead in taking a fall out of Falls, who is more than likely to sink his teeth into your weasand; why you wouldn't let me have any money of my own on this trip, when Violet Bonnie was sobbing to shove some into my pocket, and why you're so infernal stubborn, anyhow."

"I guess that's the answer," laughed Wallingford. "Let's go and show ourselves and throw away some more money. There hasn't a reporter asked about us yet."

Charley Jackson was a man who had but two worries in life: he could not understand why sleep was ever invented, nor why all the places did not

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stay perpetually open. He had laughed so much for voters that the stretch of his wide lips had pushed each cheek into a glistening red roll. Wallingford clasped Charley Jackson by the hearty hand, and he twinkled back into Charley Jackson's twinkling eyes, and he smiled his jovialist in response to Charley Jackson's jovial smile, and he figured Charley Jackson to be about as careless as an old maid eating shad in the dark.

Proprietor Blount, having spent the entire evening in locating the widely ranging Jackson, who was everywhere present, but not all at once, congratulated himself upon having brought these two kindred spirits together, and smiling his gratification, waited for a vote of thanks. It came in the form of an invitation to supper, and when Chef Josef saw that Blount was to be one of those to enjoy his succession of surprises, he hurried back into the kitchen and tore jagged splinters out of his disposition; for he had sworn never to cook again for the proprietor, who was a beast, and an ox, and a swine, and who had once complained of the faint trace of garlic in a fillet which was a marvel of epicurean perfection. Later on, at the waiters' end of the Renaissance bar, he confided his woes to his friend Bert Harvey, of the morning *Record*, who adroitly pumped Josef about the gorgeous spendthrift and the table conversation, and hurried right back to his office; for

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there was still a city edition of next morning's Sunday paper into which good live scandal could be jammed.

Meanwhile Charley Jackson and Spender Wallingford, who had enjoyed each other's society very much until one A. M., had now repaired to the Venetian suite to begin the evening; and Blackie Daw, knowing well when his best services consisted of a prolonged and intense silence, ordered in a selection of refreshments so varied that it required six kinds of glasses, excluded from the room an obsequious butler who had two ears, and took up his favorite rôle of bartender.

"Whatever you do with this amusement-park idea has to be done on the quiet," observed Charley Jackson, with a friendly glance at the buffet which the deft and unobtrusive Blackie was arranging. "You need gum shoes in this town."

"Seems like a lively burg at that," suggested Wallingford. "It has good night action, and that's a sure test. I counted eight silk hats in the lobby of the theater."

"That's all they spend money for," said Jackson with a laugh. "That silk-hat brigade buys its groceries on credit, and uses all its cash for taxis; but it sure does set the pace that keeps the money moving. There isn't a dollar in this town that doesn't pant every time it gets to rest a minute in a

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pocket," and he tested the pale-green contents of a tall glass that he found at his elbow. He looked in grateful surprise at the bartender, who was mixing at the buffet with all the grave care of a chemist; then he took another generous draft.

"That makes a good business town," approved Wallingford with a decisive nod of his head; "that is, until the panic year comes."

"Then they're all broke at once, so it doesn't make any difference," retorted Jackson very hilariously. "How much money did you propose to invest in an amusement park?"

"About two hundred thousand," announced Wallingford carelessly, and stooped forward to pick up an invisible pin from the floor. A heavy red wallet fell from his pocket. He picked that up, too, and it fell open, disclosing a thick wad of bills, mostly of the orange and lemon-yellow colors. He caught the gleam of Mr. Jackson's eye upon those fancy papers, and was satisfied. "Blackie!" he called sharply, and tossed the wallet to his friend. The bartender caught it dexterously, slammed it in a drawer of the buffet and pounded a clear-toned glass sharply. The effect was so startling that the annoyed Wallingford almost expected to see a number pop up, but the bartender went right on mixing.

"The usual rake-off is about twenty per cent.," stated Mr. Jackson thoughtfully.

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"Twenty!" protested Wallingford. "I thought that, with the competition in this town, there ought to be a cut rate."

"Competition in politics boosts the price," insisted Mr. Jackson firmly. "It's so much harder to put anything across."

"Twenty per cent!" mused Wallingford, with the preoccupied air of a good business man. "That would amount to forty thousand dollars' worth of stock in my enterprise. Who gets it?"

"Hush!" laughed Jackson. "Nobody gets it. You just take the subscriptions of some good safe friends of certain parties, and they forget to pay you for the stock. That's all."

"That's the usual method," assented Wallingford. "I suppose it's split equally among the members of the city council."

"Not!" objected Jackson, mechanically quaffing of a coral-pink liquid that his hand had found within range. "Collop runs Lunar Park, and Tunnison is the right-hand party of the county commissioner who runs Pleasure Lake. You'd be wasting your stock on them. You see, we have a campaign coming on," he continued, "and everybody in the game is as nervous as a burglar in a room full of loose boards. They're afraid to make another step, and yet they need the money. The traction company would be glad to have your new park, but

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their franchise ran out three years ago, and now we only renew it a year at a time. You can see yourself how much more revenue that yields in the long run. Now if the traction company encourages you any, they'll have Collop and Tunnison, and all their friends, sore at them, and that may cost them all their profits. On the other hand, Collop and Tunnison are both up for reelection this year, and you can see what a mess that makes."

Wallingford gazed at him in silent contemplation, then he grinned cheerfully.

"I wonder how much the city council would take to let me pay my hotel bill and leave town?" he pondered.

"Tut! tut!" warned Jackson, holding up a chubby forefinger. "It's against the rules to leave town with any money. It isn't so bad as it seems, Wallingford. I know I can fix both the bosses, and if I go to all the members of the council but Collop's and Tunnison's friends, very quietly, I can fix it to run you through a permit."

"That's quite kind of you," returned Wallingford politely. "You're not working for your health, however."

"I got too much of that now," remarked the other with a happy laugh. "Say, Mr. Daw, I'm no prude about my drinks, but I think I'd better stick to just one color from now on," and he surveyed

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doubtfully an amber-colored mixture that Blackie had set before him.

"Leave it to me," begged the bartender with an engaging smile. "I am keeping strict tab on the state of your health, and I guarantee you a safe and pleasant journey. You reach the apex of this with the rainbow bender, which I will presently build for you, but before you begin to babble, I shall commence to let you down with graded fixers. Safe, sane and scientific, and I watch the effect of each drink."

Mr. Jackson laughed long and heartily. "I don't care what happens to me now," he said. "I never had a scientific jag in my life, and I'm willing to try anything once."

"How will you go about it to get my permit?" asked Wallingford, watching Blackie in fascination.

"Well, first, you give me a thousand dollars," announced Mr. Jackson quite calmly.

"That, I suppose, is the simplest step of all," commented Wallingford. "You couldn't spread a thousand very far, though."

"I wouldn't attempt to. I'll just lug that thousand around and show it to the boys, and then they'll think you mean business."

Wallingford chuckled. "What right has a man to be a stranger, anyhow?" he inquired. "Will you excuse me a moment while I step down to the office?"

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"Certainly. You'll have to get Blount if you want to open the safe."

Wallingford was still chuckling when he closed the door after himself, and was still chuckling when, trotting down the main staircase into the lobby, he asked for Blount.

"He has just gone to his apartments," the clerk informed him, "but I can, I think, get him on the wire, if you'll just step into the number one booth."

"This is Mr. Wallingford, Mr. Blount," said J. Rufus presently over the telephone. "Can I trust Charley Jackson with a thousand dollars?"

"Do you expect it back?" asked Blount.

"Well, no."

"Then, yes."

"Will Mr. Jackson do what he promises?"

"Have you any more money?"

"Naturally."

"Then, yes."

"I'm sorry to have bothered you," apologized Wallingford with grinning contrition. "I should have been able to dope all that out myself. Thank you."

"Don't mention it," returned Blount. "If there's anything else I can do for you, don't fail to call on me."

"I never failed yet," laughed Wallingford, and went back up-stairs, where he found Blackie holding

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