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[See page 54

They dined quietly and she told him more of her story than she ever breathed to any other living soul.

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THE CRAIG KENNEDY SERIES

CONSTANCE DUNLAP

BY

ARTHUR B. REEVE

WITH FRONTISPIECE

Kaufmaennischer Verein von 1858

HARPER & BROTHERS · PUBLISHERS

NEW YORK AND LONDON

[c1913]

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	The Forgers	1
II	The Embezzlers	37
III	The Gun Runners	64
IV	The Gamblers	92
V	The Eavesdroppers	124
VI	The Clairvoyants	148
VII	The Plungers	176
VIII	The Abductors	204
IX	The Shoplifters	232
X	The Blackmailers	259
XI	The Dope Fiends	287
XII	The Fugitives	315

941

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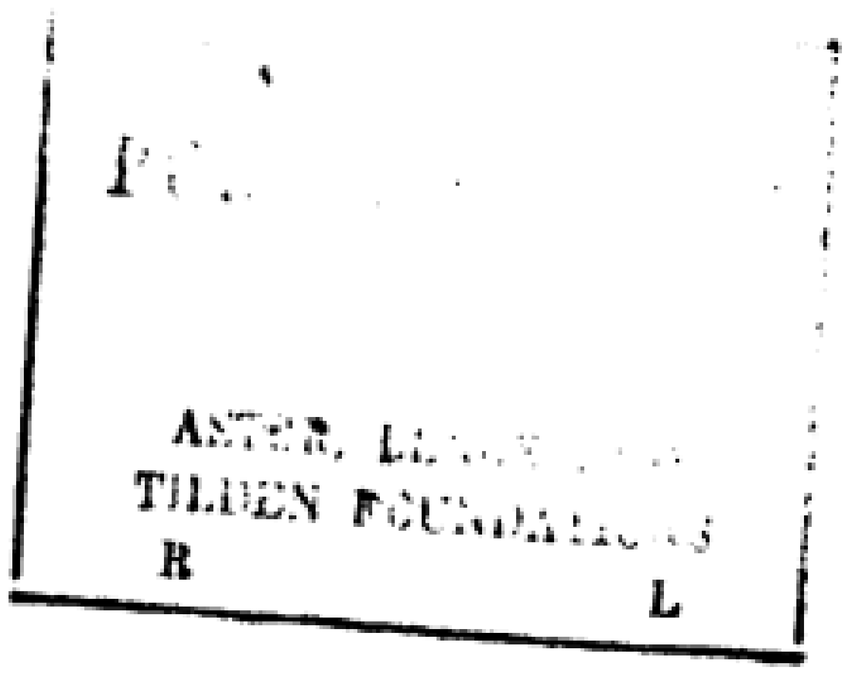

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[See page 54

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	The Forgers	1
II	The Embezzlers	37
III	The Gun Runners	64
IV	The Gamblers	92
V	The Eavesdroppers	124
VI	The Clairvoyants	148
VII	The Plungers	176
VIII	The Abductors	204
IX	The Shoplifters	232
X	The Blackmailers	259
XI	The Dope Fiends	287
XII	The Fugitives	315

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41

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Constance Dunlap

CHAPTER I

THE FORGERS

THERE was something of the look of the hunted animal brought to bay at last in Carlton Dunlap's face as he let himself into his apartment late one night toward the close of the year.

On his breath was the lingering odor of whisky, yet in his eye and hand none of the effects. He entered quietly, although there was no apparent reason for such excessive caution. Then he locked the door with the utmost care, although there was no apparent reason for caution about that, either.

Even when he had thus barricaded himself, he paused to listen with all the elemental fear of the cave man who dreaded the footsteps of his pursuers. In the dim light of the studio apartment he looked anxiously for the figure of his wife. Constance was not there, as she had been on other nights, uneasily awaiting his re-

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turn. What was the matter? His hand shook a trifle now as he turned the knob of the bedroom door and pushed it softly open.

She was asleep. He leaned over, not realizing that her every faculty was keenly alive to his presence, that she was acting a part.

"Throw something around yourself, Constance," he whispered hoarsely into her ear, as she moved with a little well-feigned start at being suddenly wakened, "and come into the studio. There is something I must tell you tonight, my dear."

"My dear!" she exclaimed bitterly, now seeming to rouse herself with an effort and pretending to put back a stray wisp of her dark hair in order to hide from him the tears that still lingered on her flushed cheeks. "You can say that, Carlton, when it has been every night the same old threadbare excuse of working at the office until midnight?"

She set her face in hard lines, but could not catch his eye.

"Carlton Dunlap," she added in a tone that rasped his very soul, "I am nobody's fool. I may not know much about bookkeeping and accounting, but I can add—and two and two, when the same man but different women compose each two, do not make four, according to my arithmetic, but three, from which,"—she

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finished almost hysterically the little speech she had prepared, but it seemed to fall flat before the man's curiously altered manner—"from which *I* shall subtract one."

She burst into tears.

"Listen," he urged, taking her arm gently to lead her to an easy-chair.

"No, no, no!" she cried, now thoroughly aroused, with eyes that again snapped accusation and defiance at him, "don't touch me. Talk to me, if you want to, but don't, don't come near me." She was now facing him, standing in the high-ceilinged "studio," as they called the room where she had kept up in a desultory manner for her own amusement the art studies which had interested her before her marriage. "What is it that you want to say? The other nights you said nothing at all. Have you at last thought up an excuse? I hope it is at least a clever one."

"Constance," he remonstrated, looking fearfully about. Instinctively she felt that her accusation was unjust. Not even that had dulled the hunted look in his face. "Perhaps—perhaps if it were that of which you suspect me, we could patch it up. I don't know. But, Constance, I—I must leave for the west on the first train in the morning." He did not pause to notice her startled look, but raced on. "I

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have worked every night this week trying to straighten out those accounts of mine by the first of the year and—and I can't do it. An expert begins on them in a couple of days. You must call up the office to-morrow and tell them that I am ill, tell them anything. I must get at least a day or two start before they——"

"Carlton," she interrupted, "what is the matter? What have you—"

She checked herself in surprise. He had been fumbling in his pocket and now laid down a pile of green and yellow banknotes on the table.

"I have scraped together every last cent I can spare," he continued, talking jerkily to suppress his emotion. "They cannot take those away from you, Constance. And—when I am settled—in a new life," he swallowed hard and averted his eyes further from her startled gaze, "under a new name, somewhere, if you have just a little spot in your heart that still responds to me, I—I—no, it is too much even to hope. Constance, the accounts will not come out right because I am—I am an embezzler."

He bit off the word viciously and then sank his head into his hands and bowed it to a depth that alone could express his shame.

Why did she not say something, do something? Some women would have fainted. Some would have denounced him. But she

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stood there and he dared not look up to read what was written in her face. He felt alone, all alone, with every man's hand against him, he who had never in all his life felt so or had done anything to make him feel so before. He groaned as the sweat of his mental and physical agony poured coldly out on his forehead. All that he knew was that she was standing there, silent, looking him through and through, as cold as a statue. Was she the personification of justice? Was this but a foretaste of the ostracism of the world?

"When we were first married, Constance," he began sadly, "I was only a clerk for Green & Co., at two thousand a year. We talked it over. I stayed and in time became cashier at five thousand. But you know as well as I that five thousand does not meet the social obligations laid on us by our position in the circle in which we are forced to move."

His voice had become cold and hard, but he did not allow himself to be betrayed into adding, as he might well have done in justice to himself, that to her even a thousand dollars a month would have been only a beginning. It was not that she had been accustomed to so much in the station of life from which he had taken her. The plain fact was that New York had had an over-tonic effect on her.

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"You were not a nagging woman, Constance," he went on in a somewhat softened tone. "In fact you have been a good wife; you have never thrown it up to me that I was unable to make good to the degree of many of our friends in purely commercial lines. All you have ever said is the truth. A banking house pays low for its brains. My God!" he cried stiffening out in the chair and clenching his fists, "it pays low for its temptations, too."

There had been nothing in the world Carlton would not have given to make happy the woman who stood now, leaning on the table in cold silence, with averted head, regarding neither him nor the pile of greenbacks.

"Hundreds of thousands of dollars passed through my hands every week," he resumed. "That business owed me for my care of it. It was taking the best in me and in return was not paying what other businesses paid for the best in other men. When a man gets thinking that way, with a woman whom he loves as I love you—something happens."

He paused in the bitterness of his thoughts. She moved as if to speak. "No, no," he interrupted. "Hear me out first. All I asked was a chance to employ a little of the money that I saw about me—not to take it, but to employ it for a little while, a few days, perhaps only a

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few hours. Money breeds money. Why should I not use some of this idle money to pay me what I ought to have?

"When Mr. Green was away last summer I heard some inside news about a certain stock. So it happened that I began to juggle the accounts. It is too long a story to tell how I did it. Anybody in my position could have done it—for a time. It would not interest you anyhow. But I did it. The first venture was successful. Also the spending of the money was very successful, in its way. That was the money that took us to the fashionable hotel in Atlantic City where we met so many people. Instead of helping me, it got me in deeper.

"When the profit from this first deal was spent there was nothing to do but to repeat what I had done successfully before. I could not quit now. I tried again, a little hypothecation of some bonds. Stocks went down. I had made a bad bet and five thousand dollars was wiped out, a whole year's salary. I tried again, and wiped out five thousand more. I was at my wits' end. I have borrowed under fictitious names, used names of obscure persons as borrowers, have put up dummy security. It was possible because I controlled the audits. But it has done no good. The losses have far out-

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balanced the winnings and to-day I am in for twenty-five thousand dollars.''

She was watching him now with dilating eyes as the horror of the situation was burned into her soul. He raced on, afraid to pause lest she should interrupt him.

'' Mr. Green has been talked into introducing scientific management and a new system into the business by a certified public accountant, an expert in installing systems and discovering irregularities. Here I am, faced by certain exposure,'' he went on, pacing the floor and looking everywhere but at her face. '' What should I do? Borrow? It is useless. I have no security that anyone would accept.

'' There is just one thing left.'' He lowered his voice until it almost sank into a hoarse whisper. '' I must cut loose. I have scraped together what I can and I have borrowed on my life insurance. Here on the table is all that I can spare.

'' To-night, the last night, I have worked frantically in a vain hope that something, some way would at last turn up. It has not. There is no other way out. In despair I have put this off until the last moment. But I have thought of nothing else for a week. Good God, Constance, I have reached the mental state where even intoxicants fail to intoxicate.''

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He dropped back again into the deep chair and sank his head again on his hands. He groaned as he thought of the agony of packing a bag and slinking for the Western express through the crowds at the railroad terminal.

Still Constance was silent. Through her mind was running the single thought that she had misjudged him. There had been no other woman in the case. As he spoke, there came flooding into her heart the sudden realization of the truth. He had done it for her.

It was a rude and bitter awakening after the past months when the increased income, with no questions asked, had made her feel that they were advancing. She passed her hands over her eyes, but there it was still, not a dream but a harsh reality. If she could only have gone back and undone it! But what was done, was done. She was amazed at herself. It was not horror of the deed that sent an icy shudder over her. It was horror of exposure.

He had done it for her. Over and over again that thought raced through her mind. She steeled herself at last to speak. She hardly knew what was in her own mind, what the conflicting, surging emotions of her own heart meant.

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"And so, you are leaving me what is left, leaving me in disgrace, and you are going to do the best you can to get away safely. You want me to tell one last lie for you."

There was an unnatural hollowness in her voice which he did not understand, but which cut him to the quick. He had killed love. He was alone. He knew it. With a final effort he tried to moisten his parched lips to answer. At last, in a husky voice, he managed to say, "Yes."

But with all his power of will he could not look at her.

"Carlton Dunlap," she cried, leaning both hands for support on the table, bending over and at last forcing him to look her in the eyes, "do you know what I think of you? I think you are a damned coward. There!"

Instead of tears and recriminations, instead of the conventional "How could you do it?" instead of burning denunciation of him for ruining her life, he read something else in her face. What was it?

"Coward?" he repeated slowly. "What would you have me do—take you with me?"

She tossed her head contemptuously.

"Stay and face it?" he hazarded again.

"Is there no other way?" she asked, still leaning forward with her eyes fixed on his.

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"Think! Is there no way that you could avoid discovery just for a time? Carlton, you—we are cornered. Is there no desperate chance?"

He shook his head sadly.

Her eyes wandered momentarily about the studio, until they rested on an easel. On it stood a water color on which she had been working, trying to put into it some of the feeling which she would never have put into words for him. On the walls of the apartment were pen and ink sketches, scores of little things which she had done for her own amusement. She bit her lip as an idea flashed through her mind.

He shook his head again mournfully.

"Somewhere," she said slowly, "I have read that clever forgers use water colors and pen and ink like regular artists. Think—think! Is there no way that we—that I could forge a check that would give us breathing space, perhaps rescue us?"

Carlton leaned over the table toward her, fascinated. He placed both his hands on hers. They were icy, but she did not withdraw them.

For an instant they looked into each other's eyes, an instant, and then they understood. They were partners in crime, amateurs perhaps, but partners as they had been in honesty.

It was a new idea that she had suggested to

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him. Why should he not act on it? Why hesitate? Why stop at it? He was already an embezzler. Why not add a new crime to the list? As he looked into her eyes he felt a new strength. Together they could do it. Hers was the brain that had conceived the way out. She had the will, the compelling power to carry the thing through. He would throw himself on her intuition, her brain, her skill, her daring.

On his desk in the corner, where often until far into the night he had worked on the huge ruled sheets of paper covered with figures of the firm's accounts, he saw two goose-necked vials, one of lemon-colored liquid, the other of raspberry color. One was of tartaric acid, the other of chloride of lime. It was an ordinary ink eradicator. Near the bottles lay a rod of glass with a curious tip, an ink eraser made of finely spun glass threads which scraped away the surface of the paper more delicately than any other tool that had been devised. There were the materials for his, their rehabilitation if they were placed in his wife's deft artist fingers. Here was all the chemistry and artistry of forgery at hand.

"Yes," he answered eagerly, "there is a way, Constance. Together we can do it."

There was no time for tenderness between them now. It was cold, hard fact and they

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understood each other too well to stop for endearments.

Far into the night they sat up and discussed the way in which they would go about the crime. They practised with erasers and with brush and water color on the protective coloring tint on some canceled checks of his own. Carlton must get a check of a firm in town, a check that bore a genuine signature. In it they would make such trifling changes in the body as would attract no attention in passing, yet would yield a substantial sum toward wiping out Carlton's unfortunate deficit.

Late as he had worked the night before, nervous and shaky as he felt after the sleepless hours of planning their new life, Carlton was the first at the office in the morning. His hand trembled as he ran through the huge batch of mail already left at the first delivery. He paused as he came to one letter with the name "W. J. REYNOLDS CO." on it.

Here was a check in payment of a small bill, he knew. It was from a firm which habitually kept hundreds of thousands on deposit at the Gorham Bank. It fitted the case admirably. He slit open the letter. There, neatly folded, was the check:

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No. 15711. Dec. 27, 191—.

THE GORHAM NATIONAL BANK

Pay to the order of.....Green & Co.....
Twenty-five 00/100 .....Dollars
$25.00/100

W. J. Reynolds Co.,
per Chas. M. Brown, Treas.

It flashed over him in a moment what to do. Twenty-five thousand would just about cover his shortage. The Reynolds firm was a big one, doing big transactions. He slipped the check into his pocket. The check might have been stolen in the mail. Why not?

The journey uptown was most excruciatingly long, in spite of the fact that he had met no one he knew either at the office or outside. At last he arrived home, to find Constance waiting anxiously.

"Did you get a check?" she asked, hardly waiting for his reply. "Let me see it. Give it to me."

The coolness with which she went about it amazed him. "It has the amount punched on it with a check punch," she observed as she ran her quick eye over it while he explained his

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plan. "We'll have to fill up some of those holes made by the punch."

"I know the kind they used," he answered. "I'll get one and a desk check from the Gorham. You do the artistic work, my dear. My knowledge of check punches, watermarks, and paper will furnsh the rest. I'll be back directly. Don't forget to call up the office a little before the time I usually arrive there and tell them I am ill."

With her light-fingered touch she worked feverishly, partly with the liquid ink eradicator, but mostly with the spun-glass eraser. First she rubbed out the cents after the written figure "Twenty-five." Carefully with a blunt instrument she smoothed down the roughened surface of the paper so that the ink would not run in the fibers and blot. Over and over she practised writing the "Thousand" in a hand like that on the check. She already had the capital "T" in "Twenty" as a guide. During the night in practising she had found that in raising checks only seven capital letters were used—O in one, T in two, three, ten, and thousand, F in four and five, S in six and seven, E in eight, N in nine and H in hundred.

At last even her practice satisfied her. Then with a coolness born only of desperation she wrote in the words, "Thousand 00/100."

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When she had done it she stopped to wonder at herself. She was amazed and perhaps a little frightened at how readily she adapted herself to the crime of forgery. She did not know that it was one of the few crimes in which women had proved themselves most proficient, though she felt her own proficiency and native ability for copying.

Again the eraser came into play to remove the cents after the figure "25." A comma and three zeros following it were inserted, followed by a new "00/100." The signature was left untouched.

Erasing the name of "Green & Co.," presented greater difficulties, but it was accomplished with as little loss of the protective coloring on the surface of the check as possible. Then after the "Pay to the order of" she wrote in, as her husband had directed, "The Carlton Realty Co."

Next came the water color to restore the protective tint where the glass eraser and the acids had removed it. There was much delicate matching of tints and careful painting in with a fine camel's hair brush, until at last the color of those parts where there had been an erasure was apparently as good as any other part.

Of course, under the microscope there could have been seen the angry crisscrossing of the

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fibers of the paper due to the harsh action of the acids and the glass eraser. Still, painting the whole thing over with a little resinous liquid somewhat restored the glaze to the paper, at least sufficiently to satisfy a cursory glance of the naked eye.

There remained the difficulty of the protective punch marks. There they were, a star cut out of the check itself, a dollar sign and 25 followed by another star.

She was still admiring her handiwork, giving it here and there a light little fillip with the brush and comparing this check with some of those which had been practised on last night, to see whether she had made any improvement in her technique of forgery, when Carlton returned with the punch and the blank checks on the Gorham Bank.

From one of the blank checks he punched out a number of little stars until there was one which in watermark and scroll work corresponded precisely with that punched out in the original check.

Constance, whose fingers had long been accustomed to fine work, fitted in the little star after the *$25*, then took it out, moistened the edges ever so lightly with glue, on the end of a toothpick, and pasted it back again. A hot iron

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completed the work of making the edges smooth and unless a rather powerful glass had been used no one could have seen the pasted-in insertion after the *$25.

Careful not to deviate the fraction of a hair's breadth from the alignment Carlton took the punch, added three 0's, and a star after the 25, making it *$25,000*. Finally the whole thing was again ironed to give it the smoothness of an original. Here at last was the completed work, the first product of their combined skill in crime:

No. 15711. Dec. 27, 191—.

THE GORHAM NATIONAL BANK

Pay to the order of...The Carlton Realty Co.
Twenty-five Thousand 00/100.....Dollars
$25,000.00/100

W. J. Reynolds Co.,
per Chas. M. Brown, Treas.

How completely people may change, even within a few hours, was well illustrated as they stood side by side and regarded their work with as much pride as if it had been the result of their honest efforts of years. They were now pen and brush crooks of the first caliber,

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had reduced forgery to a fine art and demonstrated what an amateur might do. For, although they did not know it, nearly half the fifteen millions or so lost by forgeries every year was the work of amateurs such as they.

The next problem was presenting the check for collection. Of course Carlton could not put it through his own bank, unless he wanted to leave a blazed trail straight to himself. Only a colossal bluff would do, and in a city where only colossal bluffs succeed it was not so impossible as might have been first imagined.

Luncheon over, they sauntered casually into a high-class office building on Broadway where there were offices to rent. The agent was duly impressed by the couple who talked of their large real estate dealings. Where he might have been thoroughly suspicious of a man and might have asked many embarrassing but perfectly proper questions, he accepted the woman without a murmur. At her suggestion he even consented to take his new tenants around to the Uptown Bank and introduce them. They made an excellent impression by a first cash deposit of the money Carlton had thrown down on the table the night before. A check for the first month's rent more than mollified the agent and talk of a big deal that was just being signed up to-day duly impressed the bank.

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The next problem was to get the forged check certified. That, also, proved a very simple matter. Any one can walk into a bank and get a check for $25,000 certified, while if he appears, a stranger, before the window of the paying teller to cash a check for twenty-five dollars he would almost be thrown out of the bank. Banks will certify at a glance practically any check that looks right, but they pass on the responsibility of cashing them. Thus before the close of banking hours Dunlap was able to deposit in his new bank the check certified by the Gorham.

Twenty-four hours must elapse before he could draw against the check which he had deposited. He did not propose to waste that time, so that the next day found him at Green & Co.'s, feeling much better. Really he had come prepared now to straighten out the books, knowing that in a few hours he could make good.

The first hesitation due to the newness of the game had worn off by this time. Nothing at all of an alarming nature had happened. The new month had already begun and as most firms have their accounts balanced only once a month, he had, he reasoned, nearly the entire four weeks in which to operate.

Conscience was dulled in Constance, also, and she was now busy with ink eraser, the water

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colors, and other paraphernalia in a wholesale raising of checks, mostly for amounts smaller than that in the first attempt.

"We are taking big chances, anyway," she urged him. "Why quit yet? A few days more and we may land something worth while."

The next day he excused himself from the office for a while and presented himself at his new bank with a sheaf of new checks which she had raised, all certified, and totaling some thousands more.

His own check for twenty-five thousand was now honored. The relief which he felt was tremendous after the weeks of grueling anxiety. At once he hurried to a broker's and placed an order for the stocks he had used on which to borrow. He could now replace everything in the safe, straighten out the books, could make everything look right to the systematizer, could blame any apparent irregularity on his old system. Even ignorance was better than dishonesty.

Constance, meanwhile, had installed herself in the little office they had hired, as stenographer and secretary. Once having embarked on the hazardous enterprise she showed no disposition to give it up yet. An office boy was hired and introduced at the bank.

The mythical realty company prospered, at

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least if prosperity is measured merely by the bank book. In less than a week the skilful pen and brush of Constance had secured them a balance, after straightening out Carlton's debts, that came well up to a hundred thousand dollars, mostly in small checks, some with genuine signatures and amounts altered, others complete forgeries.

As they went deeper and deeper, Constance began to feel the truth of their situation. It was she who was really at the helm in this enterprise. It had been her idea; the execution of it had been mainly her work; Carlton had furnished merely the business knowledge that she did not possess. The more she thought of it during the hours in the little office while he was at work downtown, the more uneasy did she become.

What if he should betray himself in some way? She was sure of herself. But she was almost afraid to let him go out of her sight. She felt a sinking sensation every time he mentioned any of the happenings in the banking house. Could he be trusted alone not to betray himself when the first hint of discovery of something wrong came?

It was now near the middle of the month. It would not pay to wait until the end. Some one

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of the many firms whose checks they had forged might have its book balanced at any time now. From day to day small amounts in cash had already been withdrawn until they were twenty thousand dollars to the good. They planned to draw out thirty thousand now at one time. That would give them fifty thousand, roughly half of their forgeries.

The check was written and the office boy was started to the bank with it. Carlton followed him at a distance, as he had on other occasions, ready to note the first sign of trouble as the boy waited at the teller's window. At last the boy was at the head of the line. He had passed the check in and his satchel was lying open, with voracious maw, on the ledge below the wicket for the greedy feeding of stacks of bills. Why did the teller not raise the wicket and shove out the money in a coveted pile? Carlton seemed to feel that something was wrong. The line lengthened and those at the end of the queue began to grow restive at the delay. One of the bank's officers walked down and spoke to the boy.

Carlton waited no longer. The game was up. He rushed from his coign of observation, out of the bank building, and dashed into a telephone booth.

"Quick, Constance," he shouted over the

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wire, " leave everything. They are holding up our check. They have discovered something. Take a cab and drive slowly around the square. You will find me waiting for you at the north end."

That night the newspapers were full of the story. There was the whole thing, exaggerated, distorted, multiplied, until they had become swindlers of millions instead of thousands. But nevertheless it was their story. There was only one grain of consolation. It was in the last paragraph of the news item, and read: " There seems to be no trace of the man and woman who worked this clever swindle. As if by a telepathic message they have vanished at just the time when their whole house of cards collapsed."

They removed every vestige of their work from the apartment. Everything was destroyed. Constance even began a new water color so that that might suggest that she had not laid aside her painting.

They had played for a big stake and lost. But the twenty thousand dollars was something. Now the great problem was to conceal it and themselves. They had lost, yet if ever before they loved, it was as nothing to what it was now that they had tasted together the bitter and the sweet of their mutual crime.

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Carlton went down to the office the next day, just as before. The anxious hours that his wife had previously spent thinking whether he might betray himself by some slip were comparative safety as contrasted with the uncertainty of the hours now. But the first day after the alarm of the discovery passed off all right. Carlton even discussed the case, his case, with those in the office, commented on it, condemned the swindlers, and carried it off, he felt proud to say, as well as Constance herself might have done had she been in his place.

Another day passed. His account of the first day, reassuring as it had been to her, did not lessen the anxiety. Yet never before had they seemed to be bound together by such ties as knitted their very souls in this crisis. She tried with a devotion that was touching to impart to him some of her own strength to ward off detection.

It was the afternoon of the second day that a man who gave the name of Drummond called and presented a card of the Reynolds Company.

"Have you ever been paid a little bill of twenty-five dollars by our company?" he asked.

Down in his heart Carlton knew that this man was a detective. "I can't say without looking it up," he replied.

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Carlton touched a button and an assistant appeared. Something outside himself seemed to nerve him up, as he asked: "Look up our account with Reynolds, and see if we have been paid—what is it?—a bill for twenty-five dollars. Do you recall it?"

"Yes, I recall it," replied the assistant. "No, Mr. Dunlap, I don't think it has been paid. It is a small matter, but we sent them a duplicate bill yesterday. I thought the original must have gone astray."

Carlton cursed him inwardly for sending the bill. But then, he reasoned, it was only a question of time, after all, when the forgery would be discovered.

Drummond dropped into a half-confidential, half-quizzing tone. "I thought not. Somewhere along the line that check has been stolen and raised to twenty-five thousand dollars," he remarked.

"Is that so?" gasped Carlton, trying hard to show just the right amount of surprise and not too much. "Is that so?"

"No doubt you have read in the papers of this clever realty company swindle? Well, it seems to have been part of that."

"I am sure that we shall be glad to do all in our power to cooperate with Reynolds," put in Dunlap.

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"I thought you would," commented Drummond dryly. "I may as well tell you that I fear some one has been tampering with your mail."

"Tampering with *our* mail?" repeated Dunlap, aghast. "Impossible."

"Nothing is impossible until it is proved so," answered Drummond, looking him straight in the eyes. Carlton did not flinch. He felt a new power within himself, gained during the past few days of new association with Constance. For her he could face anything.

But when Drummond was gone he felt as he had on the night when he had finally realized that he could never cover up the deficit in his books. With an almost superhuman effort he gripped himself. Interminably the hours of the rest of the day dragged on.

That night he sank limp into a chair on his return home. "A man named Drummond was in the office to-day, my dear," he said. "Some one in the office sent Reynolds a duplicate bill, and they know about the check."

"Well?"

"I wonder if they suspect me?"

"If you act like that, they won't suspect. They'll arrest," she commented sarcastically.

He had braced up again into his new self at her words. But there was again that sinking

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sensation in her heart, as she realized that it was, after all, herself on whom he depended, that it was she who had been the will, even though he had been the intellect of their enterprise. She could not overcome the feeling that, if only their positions could be reversed, the thing might even yet be carried through.

Drummond appeared again at the office the next day. There was no concealment about him now. He said frankly that he was from the Burr Detective Agency, whose business it was to guard the banks against forgeries.

"The pen work, or, as we detectives call it, the penning," he remarked, "in the case of that check is especially good. It shows rare skill. But the pitfalls in this forgery game are so many that, in avoiding one, a forger, ever so clever, falls into another."

Carlton felt the polite third degree, as he proceeded: "Nowadays the forger has science to contend with, too. The microscope and camera may come in a little too late to be of practical use in preventing the forger from getting his money at first, but they come in very neatly later in catching him. What the naked eye cannot see in this check they reveal. Besides, a little iodine vapor brings out the original 'Green & Co.' on it.

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"We have found out also that the protective coloring was restored by water color. That was easy. Where the paper was scratched and the sizing taken off, it has been painted with a resinous substance to restore the glaze, to the eye. Well, a little alcohol takes that off, too. Oh, the amateur forger may be the most dangerous kind, because the professional regularly follows the same line, leaves tracks, has associates, but," he concluded impressively, "all are caught sooner or later—sooner or later."

Dunlap managed to maintain his outward composure admirably. Still the little lifting of the curtain on the hidden mysteries of the new detective art produced its effect. They were getting closer, and Dunlap knew it, as Drummond intended he should. And, as in every crisis, he turned naturally to Constance. Never had she meant so much to him as now.

That night as he entered the apartment he happened to glance behind him. In the shadow down the street a man dodged quickly behind a tree. The thing gave him a start. He was being watched.

"There is just one thing left," he cried excitedly as he hurried upstairs with the news. "We must both disappear this time."

Constance took it very calmly. "But we must not go together," she added quickly, her

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fertile mind, as ever, hitting directly on a plan of action. "If we separate, they will be less likely to trace us, for they will never think we would do that."

It was evident that the words were being forced out by the conflict of common sense and deep emotion. "Perhaps it will be best for you to stick to your original idea of going west. I shall go to one of the winter resorts. We shall communicate only through the personal column of the *Star*. Sign yourself Weston. I shall sign Easton."

The words fell on Carlton with his new and deeper love for her like a death sentence. It had never entered his mind that they were to be separated now. Dissolve their partnership in crime? To him it seemed as if they had just begun to live since that night when they had at last understood each other. And it had come to this—separation.

"A man can always shift for himself better if he has no impediments," she said, speaking rapidly as if to bolster up her own resolution. "A woman is always an impediment in a crisis like this."

In her face he saw what he had never seen before. There was love in it that would sacrifice everything. She was sending him away from her, not to save herself but to save him. Vainly,

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he attempted to protest. She placed her finger on his lips. Never before had he felt such overpowering love for her. And yet she held him in check in spite of himself.

"Take enough to last a few months," she added hastily. "Give me the rest. I can hide it and take care of myself. Even if they trace me I can get off. A woman can always do that more easily than a man. Don't worry about me. Go somewhere, start a new life. If it takes years, I will wait. Let me know where you are. We can find some way in which I can come back into your life. No, no,"—Carlton had caught her passionately in his arms—"even that cannot weaken me. The die is cast. We must go."

She tore herself away from him and fled into her room, where, with set face and ashen lips, she stuffed article after article into her grip. With a heavy heart Carlton did the same. The bottom had dropped out of everything, yet try as he would to reason it out, he could find no other solution but hers. To stay was out of the question, if indeed it was not already too late to run. To go together was equally out of the question. Constance had shown that. "Seek the woman," was the first rule of the police.

As they left the apartment they could see a man across the street following them closely.

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They were shadowed. In despair Carlton turned toward his wife. A sudden idea had flashed over her. There were two taxicabs at the station on the corner.

"I will take the first," she whispered. "Take the second and follow me. Then he cannot trace us."

They were off, leaving the baffled shadow only time to take the numbers of the cab. Constance had thought of that. She stopped and Carlton joined her. After a short walk they took another cab.

He looked at her inquiringly, but she said nothing. In her eyes he saw the same fire that blazed when she had asked him if there was no way to avoid discovery and had suggested it herself in the forgery. He reached over and caressed her hand. She did not withdraw it, but her averted eyes told that she could not trust even herself too far.

As they stood before the gateway to the steps that led down into the long under-river tunnel which was to swallow them so soon and project them, each into a new life, hundreds, perhaps thousands of miles apart, Carlton realized as never before what it all had meant. He had loved her through all the years, but never with the wild love of the past two weeks. Now there was nothing but blackness and blankness. He

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felt as though the hand of fate was tearing out his wildly beating heart.

She tried to smile at him bravely. She understood. For a moment she looked at him in the old way and all the pent-up love that would have, that had done and dared everything for him struggled in her rapidly rising and falling breast.

It was now or never. She knew it, the supreme effort. One word or look too many from her and all would be lost. She flung her arms about him and kissed him. "Remember —one week from to-day—a personal—in the *Star*," she panted.

She literally tore herself from his arms, gathered up her grip, and was gone.

A week passed. The quiet little woman at the Oceanview House was still as much a mystery to the other guests as when she arrived, travel-stained and worn with the repressed emotion of her sacrifice. She had appeared to show no interest in anything, to take her meals mechanically, to stay most of the time in her room, never to enter into any of the recreations of the famous winter resort.

Only once a day did she betray the slightest concern about anything around her. That was when the New York papers arrived. Then she

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was always first at the news-stand, and the boy handed out to her, as a matter of habit, the *Star*. Yet no one ever saw her read it. Directly afterward she would retire to her room. There she would pore over the first page, reading and reading every personal in it. Sometimes she would try reading them backward and transposing the words, as if the message they contained might be in the form of a cryptograph.

The strain and the suspense began to show on her. Day after day passed, until it was nearly two weeks since the parting in New York. Day after day she grew more worn by worry and fear. What had happened?

In desperation she herself wired a personal to the paper: "Weston. Write me at the Oceanview. Easton."

For three days she waited for an answer. Then she wired the personal again. Still there was no reply and no hint of reply. Had they captured him? Or was he so closely pursued that he did not dare to reply even in the cryptic manner on which they had agreed?

She took the file of papers which she kept and again ran through the personals, even going back to the very day after they had separated. Perhaps she had missed one, though she knew that she could not have done so, for she had looked at them a hundred times. Where was

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he? Why did he not answer her message in some way? No one had followed her. Were they centering their efforts on capturing him?

She haunted the news-stand in the lobby of the beautifully appointed hotel. Her desire to read newspapers grew. She read everything.

It was just two weeks since they had left New York on their separate journeys when, on the evening of another newsless day, she was passing the news-stand. From force of habit she glanced at an early edition of an evening paper.

The big black type of the heading caught her eye:

NOTED FORGER A SUICIDE

With a little shriek, half-suppressed, she seized the paper. It was Carlton. There was his name. He had shot himself in a room in a hotel in St. Louis. She ran her eye down the column, hardly able to read. In heavier type than the rest was the letter they had found on him:

MY DEAREST CONSTANCE,

When you read this I, who have wronged and deceived you beyond words, will be where I can no longer hurt you. Forgive me, for by this act I am a confessed embezzler and forger. I could

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not face you and tell you of the double life I was leading. So I have sent you away and have gone away myself—and may the Lord have mercy on the soul of

Your devoted husband,

CARLTON DUNLAP.

Over and over again she read the words, as she clutched at the edge of the news-stand to keep from fainting—"wronged and deceived you," "the double life I was leading." What did he mean? Had he, after all, been concealing something else from her? Had there really been another woman?

Suddenly the truth flashed over her. Tracked and almost overtaken, lacking her hand which had guided him, he had seen no other way out. And in his last act he had shouldered it all on himself, had shielded her nobly from the penalty, had opened wide for her the only door of escape.

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CHAPTER II

THE EMBEZZLERS

"I CAME here to hide, to vanish forever from those who know me."

The young man paused a moment to watch the effect of his revelation of himself to Constance Dunlap. There was a certain cynical bitterness in his tone which made her shudder.

"If you were to be discovered—what then?" she hazarded.

Murray Dodge looked at her significantly, but said nothing. Instead, he turned and gazed silently at the ruffled waters of Woodlake. There was no mistaking the utter hopelessness and grim determination of the man.

"Why—why have you told so much to me, an absolute stranger?" she asked, searching his face. "Might I not hand you over to the detectives who, you say, will soon be looking for you?"

"You might," he answered quickly, "but you won't."

There was a note of appeal in his voice as he pursued slowly, not as if seeking protection, but

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as if hungry for friendship and most of all her friendship, " Mrs. Dunlap, I have heard what the people at the hotel say is your story. I think I understand, as much as a man can. Anyhow, I know that you can understand. I have reached a point where I must tell some one or go insane. It is only a question of time before I shall be caught. We are all caught. Tell me," he asked eagerly, bending down closer to her with an almost breathless intensity in his face as though he would read her thoughts, " am I right? The story of you which I have heard since I came here is not the truth, the whole truth. It is only half the truth—is it not? "

Constance felt that this man was dangerously near understanding her, as no one yet had seemed to be. It set her heart beating wildly to know that he did. And yet she was not afraid. Somehow, although she did not betray the answer by a word or a look, she felt that she could trust him.

Through the door of escape from the penalty of her forgeries, which Carlton Dunlap had thrown open for her by the manner of his death, Constance had passed unsuspected. To return to New York, however, had become out of the question. She had plenty of money for her present needs, although she thought it best to

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say nothing about it lest some one might wonder and stumble on the truth.

She had closed up the little studio apartment, and had gone to a quiet resort in the pines. Here, at least, she thought she might live unobserved until she could plan out the tangled future of her life.

There had seemed to be no need to conceal her identity, and she had felt it better not to do so. She knew that her story would follow her, and it had. She was prepared for that. She was prepared for the pity and condescension of the gossips and had made up her mind to stand aloof.

Then came a day when a stranger had registered at the hotel. She had not noticed him especially, but it was not long before she realized that he was noticing her. Was he a detective? Had he found out the truth in some uncanny way? She felt sure that the name on the hotel register, Malcolm Dodd, was not his real name.

Constance had not been surprised when the head waiter had seated the young man at her table. No doubt he had manœuvred it so. Nor did she avoid the guarded acquaintance that resulted in the natural course of events.

One afternoon, shortly after his arrival, she

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had encountered him unexpectedly on a walk through the pines. He appeared surprised to meet her, yet she knew intuitively that he had been following her. Still, it was so different now to have any one seek her company that, in spite of her uncertainty of him, she almost welcomed his speaking.

There was a certain deference in his manner, too, which did not accord with Constance's ideas of a detective. Yet he did know something of her. How much? Was it merely what the rest of the world knew? She could not help seeing that the man was studying her, while she studied him. There was a fascination about it, a fascination that the human mystery always possesses for a woman. On his part, he showed keenly his interest in her.

Constance had met him with more frankness as she encountered him often during the days that followed. She had even tried to draw him out to talk of himself.

"I came here," he had said one day when they were passing the spot where he had overtaken her first, "without knowing a soul, not expecting to meet any one I should care for, indeed hoping to meet no one."

Constance had said nothing, but she felt that at last he was going to crash down the barrier of reserve. He continued earnestly, "Some-

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how or other I have come to enjoy these little walks."

"So have I," she admitted, facing him; "but, do you know, sometimes I have thought that Malcolm Dodd is not your real name?"

"Not my real name?" he repeated.

"And that you are here for some other purpose than—just to rest. You know, you might be a detective."

He had looked at her searchingly. Then in a burst of confidence, he had replied, "No, my name is not Dodd, as you guessed. But I am not a detective, as you suspected at first. I have been watching you because, ever since I heard your story here, I have been—well, not suspicious, but—attracted. You seem to me to have faced a great problem. I, too, have come to the parting of the ways. Shall I run or shall I fight?"

He had handed her a card without hesitation. It bore the name, "Murray Dodge, Treasurer, Globe Importing Company."

"What do you mean?" she had asked quickly, hardly expecting an answer. "What have you done?"

"Oh, it is the usual trouble, I suppose," he had replied wearily, much to her surprise. "I began as a boy in the company and ultimately worked myself up as it grew, until I became

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treasurer. To cut it short, I have used funds belonging to the company, lost them. I don't need to tell you how a treasurer or a cashier can do that."

Constance was actually startled. Was he what he represented himself to be? Or was he leading her on in this way to a confession of her own part, which she had covered so well, in the forgeries of her dead husband?

"How did you begin?" she asked tentatively.

"A few years ago," he answered with a disconcerting lack of reserve, "the company found that we could beat our competitors by a very simple means. The largest stockholder, Mr. Dumont, was friendly with some of the customs officials and—well, we undervalued our goods. It was easy. The only thing necessary was to bribe some of the officials. The president of the company, Walton Beverley, put the dirty work on me as treasurer. Now you can imagine what that meant."

He had fallen into a cynical tone again.

"It meant that I soon found, or, rather, thought I found, that every man has his price—some higher, some lower, but a price, nevertheless. It was my business to find it, to keep it as low as I could with safety. So it went, from one crooked thing to another. I knew I was

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crooked, but not as bad, I think, as the rest who put the actual work on me. I was unfortunate, weak perhaps. That is all. I tried to get mine, too. I lost what I meant to put back after I had used it. They are after me now, or soon will be —the crooks! And here I am, momentarily expecting some one to walk up quietly behind me, tap me on the shoulder and whisper, 'You're wanted.'"

Time had not softened the bitterness of Constance's feelings. Somehow she felt that the world, or at least society owed her for taking away her husband. The world must pay. She sympathized with the young man who was appealing to her for friendship. Why not help him?

"Do you really, really want to know what I think?" asked Constance after he had at last told her his wretched story. It was the first time that she had looked at him since she realized that he was unburdening the truth to her.

"Yes," he answered eagerly, catching her eye. "Yes," he urged.

"I think," she said slowly, "that you are running away from a fight that has not yet begun."

It thrilled her to be talking so. Once before she had tasted the sweetness and the bitterness

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of crime. She did not stop to think about right or wrong. If she had done so her ethics would have been strangely illogical. It was enough that, short as their acquaintance had been, she felt unconsciously that there was something latent in the spirit of this man akin to her own.

Murray also felt rather than understood the bond that had been growing so rapidly between them. His was the temperament that immediately translates feeling into action. He reached into his breast pocket. There was the blue-black glint of a cold steel automatic. A moment he balanced it in his hand. Then with a rapid and decisive motion of the arm he flung it far from him. As it struck the water with a sound horribly suggestive of the death gurgle of a lost man, he turned and faced her.

"There," he exclaimed with a new light in the defiant, desperate smile that she had observed many times before, "there. The curtain rises —instead of falls."

Neither spoke for a few moments. At last he added, "What shall I do next?"

"Do?" she repeated. She felt now the weight of responsibility for interfering with his desperate plans, but it did not oppress her. On the contrary, it was a pleasant burden. "According to your own story," she went on, "they know nothing yet, as far as you can see. You

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would have forestalled them by taking this little vacation during which you could disappear while they would discover the shortage. Do? Go back."

"And when they discover it?" he asked evidently prepared for the answer she had given and eager to know what she would propose next.

Constance had been thinking rapidly.

"Listen," she cried, throwing aside restraint now. "No one in New York outside my former little circle knows me. I can live there in another circle unobserved. For weeks I have been amusing myself by the study of shorthand. I have picked up enough to be able to carry the thing off. Discharge your secretary. Put an advertisement in the newspapers. I will answer it. Then I will be able to help you. I cannot say at a distance what you should do next. There, perhaps, I can tell you."

What was it that had impelled her to say it? She could not have told. Murray looked at her. Her very presence seemed to infuse new determination into him.

It was strange about this woman, what a wonderful effect she had on him.

A few days before he would have laughed at any one who had suggested that any woman might have aroused in him the passions that were now surging through his heart. Ten

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thousand years ago, perhaps, he would have seized her and carried her off in triumph to his clan or tribe. To-day he must, he would win her by more subtle means.

His mind was made up. She had pointed the way. That night Dodge left Woodlake hastily for New York.

To Constance a new purpose seemed to have entered into a barren life. She was almost gay as she packed her trunks and grips and quietly slipped into the city a few hours later and registered at a quiet hotel for business women.

Sure enough in the *Star* the next morning was the advertisement. She wrote in a formal way, giving her telephone number. That afternoon, apparently as soon as the letter had been delivered, a call came. The following morning she was the private secretary of Murray Dodge, sitting unobtrusively before a typewriter desk in a sort of little anteroom that guarded the door to his office.

She took pains to act the part of private secretary and no more. As appeared natural to the rest of the office force at first she was much with Murray, who made the most elaborate explanations of the detail of the business.

"Do they suspect anything?" she asked anxiously as soon as they were absolutely alone.

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"I think so," he replied. "They said nothing except that they had not expected me back so soon. I think the 'so soon' was an afterthought. They didn't expect me back at all. For," he added significantly, "I've been in fear and trembling until I could get you. They already have asked the regular audit company to go over the books in advance of the time when we usually employ them. I didn't ask why. I merely accepted it with a nod. It might have meant bringing matters to a crisis now."

He felt safer with Constance installed as his private secretary. True, Beverley and Dumont had viewed her from the start with suspicion.

Constance had been thinking hard out in her little office since she had begun to understand how matters stood. "Well?" she demanded. "What of it? Don't try to conceal it. Let them discover it. Go further. Dare them. Court exposure."

It was bold and ingenious. What a woman she was for meeting emergencies. Murray, who had a will that had been accustomed to bend others to his purposes except in the instance where they had bent him and nearly broken him, recognized the masterful mind of Constance. He was willing to allow her to play the game.

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Thus Constance began collecting the very data that would have sent Murray to jail for bribery. Day by day as she worked on, the situation became more and more delicate. They found themselves alone much of the time now. Beverley was, or pretended to be, busy on other matters and avoided Dodge as much as possible. Only the regular routine affairs passed through his hands, but he said nothing. It gave him more time with her. Dumont came in as rarely as it was possible.

And as they worked along gathering the data Constance came to admire Murray more than ever. She worked patiently over the big books, taking only those on which the accountant was not engaged at such times as she could get them without exciting suspicion. Together they dug out the extent of the frauds that had been practiced on the Government for years back. From the letter files they rescued notes and orders and letters, pieced them together into as near a continuous record as they could make. With his own knowledge of the books Dodge could count on making better progress on the essential things than the regular accountant of the audit company. He felt sure that they would finish sooner and that they would have a closer report of the frauds of all kinds than could be uncovered by the man who had been set on the

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trail of Dodge to discover just how much of the illicit gains he had taken for himself.

Constance became aware soon that whenever she left the office at night she was being followed. She had at first studiously repelled the offers of Murray to see her home. It was not that he had taken advantage of the situation into which she had put herself. He would never have done that. Still, she wished a little more time to analyze her own conflicting feelings toward him. Then, too, several times in the crowded subway cars she had noticed a face that was familiar. It was Drummond, never looking directly at her, always engrossed in something else, yet never failing to note where she was going. That must be, she reasoned, some of the work of Beverley and Dumont.

Murray was now working feverishly. As he worked he found himself feeling differently toward the whole affair. He actually came to enjoy it with all its risks and uncertainty, to enjoy gathering the data which, he should have said, ought really to be destroyed. Often he caught himself wishing that everything had come out all right in the end and that Constance really was his private secretary.

Every moment with her seemed now to pass so quickly that he would willingly have smashed

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all the clocks and destroyed all the calendars. Association with other women had been tame beside his new friendship with her. She had suffered, felt, lived. She fascinated him, as often over the books they would stop to talk, talk of things the most irrelevant, yet to him the most interesting, until she would bring him back inevitably to the point of their work and start him again with a new power and incentive toward the purpose she had in mind.

To Constance he seemed to fill a blank spot in her empty life. If she had been bitter toward the world for what had happened to her, the pleasure of helping another to beat that harsh world seemed an unspeakably sweet compensation.

At last even Constance herself began to realize it. It was not, after all, merely the bitterness toward society, that lured her on. She was not a woman carved out of a block of stone. There was a sweetness about this association that carried her along as if in a dream. She was actually falling in love with him.

One day she had been working later than usual. The accountant had shown signs of approaching the end of his task sooner than they had expected. Murray was waiting, as was his custom, for her to finish before he left.

There was no sound in the almost deserted

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office building save the banging of a door echoing now and then, or an insistent ring of the elevator bell as an anxious office boy or stenographer sought to escape after an extra period of work.

Murray stood looking at her admiringly as she deftly shoved the pins into her hat. Then he held her coat, which brought them close together.

"It will soon be time for the final scene," he remarked. His manner was different as he looked down at her. "We must succeed, Constance," he went on slowly. "Of course, after it is over, it will be impossible for me to remain here with this company. I have been looking around. I must—we must clear ourselves. I already have an offer to go with another company, much better than this position in every way—honest, square, with no dirty work, such as I have had here."

It was a moment that Constance had foreseen, without planning what she would do. She moved to the door as if to go.

"Take dinner with me to-night at the River-side," he went on, mentioning the name of a beautifully situated inn uptown overlooking the lights of the Hudson and thronged by gay parties of pleasure seekers.

Before she could say no, even though she

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would have said it, he had linked his arm in hers, banged shut the door and they were being whisked to the street in the elevator.

This time, as they were about to go out of the building, she noticed Drummond standing in the shadow of a corner back of the cigar counter on the first floor. She told Murray of the times she had seen Drummond following her. Murray ground his teeth.

"He'll have to hustle this time," he muttered, handing her quickly into a cab that was waiting for a fare.

Before he could give the order where to drive she had leaned out of the window, "To the ferry," she cried.

Murray looked at her inquiringly. Then he understood. "Not to the Riverside—yet," she whispered. "That man has just summoned a cab that was passing."

In her eyes Murray saw the same fire that had blazed when she had told him he was running away from a fight that had not yet begun. As the cab whirled through the now nearly deserted downtown streets, he reached over in sheer admiration and caressed her hand. She did not withdraw it, but her averted eyes and quick breath told that a thousand thoughts were hurrying through her mind, divided between

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the man in the cab beside her and the man in the cab following perhaps half a block behind.

At the ferry they halted and pretended to be examining a time table, though they bought only ferry tickets. Drummond did the same, and sauntered leisurely within easy distance of the gate. Nothing seemed to escape him, and yet never did he seem to be watching them."

The gateman shouted "All aboard!"

The door began to close.

"Come," she tugged at his sleeve.

They dodged in just in time. Drummond followed. They started across the wagonway to the opposite side of the slip. He kept on the near side. Constance swerved back again to the near side. Drummond had been opposite them and they had now fallen in behind him. He was now ahead, but going slowly. Murray felt her pulling back on his arm. With a little exclamation she dropped her purse, which contained a few coins. She had contrived to open it, and the coins ran in every possible direction. Drummond was now on the boat.

"All aboard," growled the guard surlily. "All aboard."

"Go ahead, go ahead," shouted Murray, trying to pick up the scattered change and scattering it the more. At last he understood.

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"Go ahead. We'll take the next boat. Can't you see the lady has dropped her purse?"

The gates closed. The warning whistle blew, and the ferryboat departed, bearing off Drummond alone.

Another cab took them to the Riverside. A new bond of experience had been established between them. They dined quietly and as the lights grew mellow she told him more of her story than she had ever breathed to any other living soul.

As Murray listened he looked his admiration for the daring of the little woman opposite him at the table.

They drifted. . . .

It was the day of the threatened exposure. Curiously enough, Dodge felt no nervousness. The understanding which he had reached or felt that he had reached with Constance made him rather eager than otherwise to have the whole affair over with at once.

Drummond had been shut up for some time in the office of Beverley with Dumont, going over the report which the accountant had prepared and other matters. He had come in without seeing either Constance or Murray, though they knew he must be nursing his chagrin over the episode of the night before.

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"They are waiting to see you," reported Constance to Dodge, half an hour later, after one of the office boys had been sent over as a formal messenger to their office.

"We are ready for them?" he asked, smiling at her.

Constance nodded.

"Then I shall go in. Wait a moment. When they have hurled their worst at me I shall call on you. Have the stuff ready."

There was no hesitation, no misgiving on the part of either, as he strode into Beverley's office. Constance had prepared the record which they had been working on, and for days had been momentarily expecting this crisis. She felt that she was ready.

An ominous silence greeted Dodge as he entered.

"We have had experts on your books, Dodge," began Beverley, clearing his throat, as Murray seated himself, waiting for them to speak first.

"I have seen that," he replied dryly.

"They are fifty thousand dollars short," shot out Dumont.

"Indeed?"

Dumont gasped at the coolness of the man. "Wh–what? You have nothing to say? Why, sir," he added, raising his voice, "you have actually made no effort to conceal it!"

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Dodge smiled cynically. "A consultation will rectify it," was all he said. "A conference will show you that it is all right."

"A consultation?" broke in Beverley in rage. "A consultation in jail!"

Still Dodge merely smiled.

"Then you consider yourself trapped. You admit it," ground out Dumont.

"Anything you please," repeated Dodge. "I am perfectly willing——"

"Let us end this farce—now," cried Beverley hotly. "Drummond!"

The detective had been doing some rapid thinking. "Just a moment," he interrupted. "Don't be too precipitate. Hear his side, if he has any. I can manage him. Besides, I have something else to say about another person that will interest us all."

"Then you are willing to have the consultation?"

Drummond nodded.

"Miss Dunlap," called Murray, taking the words almost from the detective's lips, as he opened the door and held it for her to enter.

"No—no. Alone," almost shouted Beverley.

The detective signaled to him and he subsided, muttering.

As she entered Drummond looked hard at her. Constance met him without wavering an instant.

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"I think I've seen you before, *Mrs.* Dunlap," insinuated the detective.

"Perhaps," replied Constance, still meeting his sharp ferret eye squarely, which increased his animosity.

"Your husband was Carlton Dunlap, cashier of Green & Company, was he not?"

She bit her lip. The manner of his raking up of old scores, though she had expected it, was cruel. It would have been cruel in court, if she had had a lawyer to protect her rights. It was doubly cruel, merciless, here. Before Dodge could interrupt, the detective added, "Who committed suicide after forging checks to meet his——"

Murray was at Drummond like a hound. "Another word from you and I'll throttle you," he blurted out.

"No, Murray, no. Don't," pleaded Constance. She was burning with indignation, but it was not by violence that she expected to prevail. "Let him say what he has to say."

Drummond smiled. He had no scruples about a "third degree" of this kind, and besides there were three of them to Dodge.

"You were—both of you—at Woodlake not long ago, were you not?" he asked calmly.

There was no escaping the implication of the tone. Still Drummond was taking no chances

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of being misunderstood. "There was one man," he went on, "who embezzled for you. Here is another who has embezzled. How will that look when it goes before a jury?" he concluded.

The fight had shifted before it had well begun. Instead of being between Dodge on one side and Beverley and Dumont on the other, it now seemed to be a clash between a cool detective and a clever woman.

"Mrs. Dunlap," interrupted Murray, with a mocking smile at the detective, "will you tell us what you have found out since you have been my private secretary?"

Constance had not lost control of herself for a moment.

"I have been looking over the books a little bit myself," she began slowly, with all eyes riveted on her. "I find, for instance, that your company has been undervaluing its imported goods. Undervaluing merchandise is considered, I believe, one of the meanest forms of smuggling. The undervaluer has frequently to make a tool of a man in his employ. Then that tool must play on the frailties of an unfortunate or weak examiner at the Public Stores where all invoices and merchandise from foreign countries are examined."

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Drummond had been trying to interrupt, but she had ignored him, and was speaking rapidly so that he could get no chance.

"You have cheated the Government of hundreds of thousands dollars," she hurried on, facing Beverley and Dumont. "It would make a splendid newspaper story."

Dumont moved uneasily. Drummond was now staring. It was a new phase of the matter to him. He had not counted on handling a woman like Constance, who knew how to take advantage of every weak spot in the armor.

"We are wasting time," he interrupted brusquely. "Get back to the original subject. There is a fifty thousand-dollar shortage on these books."

The attempt clumsily to shift the case away again from Constance to Dodge was apparent.

"Mrs. Dunlap's past troubles," Dodge asserted vigorously, "have nothing to do with the case. It was cowardly to drag that in. But the other matter of which she speaks has much to do with it."

"One moment, Murray," cried Constance. "Let me finish what I began. This is my fight, too, now."

She was talking with blazing eyes and in quick, cutting tone.

"For three years he did your dirty work,"

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she flashed. "He did the bribing—and you saved half a million dollars."

"He has stolen fifty thousand," put in Beverley, white with anger.

"I have kept an account of everything," pursued Constance, without pausing. "I have pieced the record together so that he can now connect the men higher up with the actual acts he had to do. He can gain immunity by turning state's evidence. I am not sure but that he might be able to obtain his moiety of what the Government recovers if the matter were brought to suit and won on the information he can furnish."

She paused. No one seemed to breathe.

"Now," she added impressively, "at ten per cent. commission the half million that he saved for you yields fifty thousand dollars. That, gentlemen, is the amount of the shortage—an offset."

"The deuce it is!" exclaimed Beverley.

Constance reached for a telephone on the desk near her.

"Get me the Law Division at the Customs House," she asked simply.

Dumont was pale and almost speechless. Beverley could ill suppress his smothered rage. What could they do? The tables had been turned. If they objected to the amazing pro-

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posal Constance had made they might all go to jail. Dodge even might go free, rich. They looked at Dodge and Mrs. Dumlap. There was no weakening. They were as relentless as their opponents had been before.

Dumont literally tore the telephone from her. "Never mind about that number, central," he muttered.

Then he started as if toward the door. The rest followed. Outside the accountant had been waiting patiently, perhaps expecting Drummond to call on him to corroborate the report. He had been listening. There was no sound of high voices, as he had expected. What did it mean?

The door opened. Beverley was pale and haggard, Dumont worn and silent. He could scarcely talk. Dodge again held the door for Constance as she swept past the amazed accountant.

All eyes were now fixed on Dumont as chief spokesman.

"He has made a satisfactory explanation," was all he said.

"I would lock all that stuff up in the strongest safe deposit vault in New York," remarked Constance, laying the evidence that involved them all on Murray's desk. "It is your only safeguard."

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"Constance," he burst forth suddenly, "you were superb."

The crisis was past now and she felt the nervous reaction.

"There is one thing more I want to say," he added in a low tone.

He had crossed to where she was standing by the window, and bent over, speaking with great emotion.

"Since that afternoon at Woodlake when you turned me back again from the foolish and ruinous course on which I had decided you—you have been more to me than life. Constance, I have never loved until now. Nothing has ever mattered except money. I never had any one else to think of, care for, except myself. You have changed everything."

She was gazing out of the window at the tall buildings. There, in a myriad of offices, lay wealth untold, opportunity as yet untasted to seize that wealth. Only for an instant she turned and looked at him, then dropped her eyes. What lay that way?

"You are clear now, respected, respectable," she said simply.

"Yes, thank God. Clear and with a new ambition, thanks to you."

She had been expecting this ever since that last night. The relief of Murray to feel that

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the old score that would have ruined him was now wiped off the slate was precisely what she had anticipated.

Yet, somehow, it disappointed her. She felt instinctively that her triumph was burning fast to ashes.

"Keep clear," she faltered.

"Constance," he urged, approaching closer and taking her cold hand.

Was she to be the one to hold him back in any way from the new life that was now before him? What if Drummond, in his animosity, ever got the truth? She gently unclasped her hand from his. No, that happiness was not for her.

"I am afraid I am a crook at heart, Murray," she said sadly. "I have gone too far to turn back. The brand is on me. But I am not altogether bad—yet. Think of me always with charity. Yes," she cried wildly, "I must return to my loneliness. No, do not try to stop me, you have no right," she added bitterly as the reality of her situation burned itself into her heart.

She broke away from him wildly, but with set purpose. The world had taken away her husband; now it was a lover; the world must pay.

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CHAPTER III

THE GUN RUNNERS

"WE'LL land here, Mrs. Dunlap."

Ramon Santos, terror of the Washington State Department and of a half dozen consulates in New York, stuck a pin in a map of Central America spread out on a table before Constance.

"Insurrectos will meet us," he pursued, then added, "but we must have money, first, my dear Senora, plenty of money."

Dark of eye and skin, with black imperial and mustache, tall, straight as an arrow, Santos had risen and was now gazing down with rapt attention, not at the map, but at Constance herself.

Every curve of her face and wave of her hair, every line of her trim figure which her filmy gown seemed to accentuate rather than conceal added fire to his ardent glances.

He touched lightly another pin sticking in a little, almost microscopic island of the Caribbean.

"Our plan, it is simple," he continued with

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animation in spite of his foreign accent. "On this island a plant to print paper money, to coin silver. With that we shall land, pay our men as they flock to us, collect forces, seize cities, appropriate the customs. Once we start, it is easy."

Constance looked up quickly. "But that is counterfeiting," she exclaimed.

"No," rejoined Santos, "it is a war measure. We—the provisional government—merely coin our own money. Besides, it will not be done in this country. It will not come under your laws."

There was a magnetism about the man that fascinated her, as he stood watching the effect of his words. Instinctively she knew that it was not alone enthusiasm over his scheme that inspired his confidences.

"Though we are not counterfeiters," he went on, "we do not know what moment our opponents may set your Secret Service to destroy all our hopes. Besides, we must have money—now—to buy machinery, arms, ammunition. We must find some one," he lowered his voice, "who can persuade American bankers and merchants to take risks to gain valuable concessions in the new state."

Santos was talking rapidly and earnestly, urging his case on her.

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"We are prepared," he hurried on confidentially, "to give you, Senora, half the money that you can raise for these purposes."

He paused and stood before her. He was certainly a handsome figure, this soldier of fortune, and he was at his best now.

Constance looked out of the window of her sitting room. This was a business proposition, not to be influenced by any sentiment.

She watched the lights moving up and down the river and bay. There were craft from the ends of the earth. She speculated on the romantic secrets hidden in liner and tramp. Surely they could scarcely be more romantic than the appeal Santos was making.

"Will you help us?" urged Santos, leaning further over the map to read her averted face.

In her loneliness after she had given up Murray Dodge, life in New York had seemed even more bitter to Constance than before. Yet the great city cast a spell over her, with its countless opportunities for adventure. She could not leave it, but had taken a suite in a quiet boarding house overlooking the bay from the Heights in Brooklyn.

One guest in particular had interested her. He was a Latin American, Ramon Santos.

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She noticed that he seldom appeared at breakfast or luncheon. But at dinner he often ordered much as if it were seven o'clock in the morning instead of the evening. He was a mystery and mysteries interested her. Did he work all night and sleep all day? What was he doing?

She was astonished a few nights after her arrival to receive a call from the mysterious evening breakfaster.

"Pardon—I intrude," he began gracefully, presenting his card. "But I have heard how clever you are, Senora Dunlap. A friend, in an importing firm, has told me of you, a Mr. Dodge."

Constance was startled at the name. Murray had indeed written a little note expressing his entire confidence in Mr. Santos. Formal as it was, Constance thought she could read between the lines the same feeling toward her that he had expressed at their parting.

Santos gave her no time to live over the past.

"You see, Mrs. Dunlap," he explained, as he led up to the object of his visit, "the time has come to overthrow the régime in Central America—for a revolution which will bring together all the countries in a union like the old United States of Central America."

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He had spread out the map on the table.

"Only," he added, "we would call the new state, Vespuccia."

"We?" queried Constance.

"Yes—my—colleagues—you call it in English? We have already a Junta with headquarters in an old loft on South Street, in New York."

Santos indicated the plan of campaign on the map.

"We shall strike a blow," he cried, bringing his fist down on the table as if the blow had already fallen, "that will paralyze the enemy at the very start!"

He paused.

"Will you help us raise the money?" he repeated earnestly.

Constance had been inactive long enough. The appeal was romantic, almost irresistible. Besides—no, at the outset she put out of consideration any thought of the fascinating young soldier of fortune himself.

The spirit of defiance of law and custom was strong upon her. That was all.

"Yes," she replied, "I will help you."

Santos leaned over, and with a graceful gesture that she could not resent, raised her finger tips gallantly to his lips.

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"Thank you," he said with a courtly smile. "We have already won!"

The next day Ramon introduced her to the other members of the Junta. It was evident that he was in fact as well as name their leader, but they were not like the usual oily plotters of revolution who congregate about the round tables in dingy back rooms of South Street cafés, apportioning the gold lace, the offices, and the revenues among themselves. There was an "air" about them that was different.

"Let me present Captain Lee Gordon of the *Arroyo*," remarked Santos, coming to a stockily-built, sun-burned man with the unmistable look of the Anglo-Saxon who has spent much time in the neighborhood of the tropical sun. "The *Arroyo* is the ship that is to carry the arms and the plant to the island—from Brooklyn. We choose Brooklyn because it is quieter over there—fewer people late at night on the streets."

Captain Gordon bowed, without taking his eyes off Constance.

"I am, like yourself, Mrs. Dunlap, a recent recruit," he explained. "It is a wonderful plan," he added enthusiastically. "We shall sweep the country with it."

He flicked off the ash of his inevitable cig-

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arette, much as if it were the opposition of the governments they were to encounter.

It was evident that the Captain was much impressed by Constance. Yet she instinctively disliked the man. His cameraderie had something offensive about it, as contrasted with the deferential friendship of Santos.

With all her energy, however, Constance plunged directly into her work. Indeed, even at the start she was amazed to find that money for a revolution could be raised at all. She soon found that it could be done more easily in New York than anywhere else in the world.

There seemed to be something about her that apparently appealed to those whom she went to see. She began to realize what a tremendous advantage a woman of the world had in presenting the case and convincing a speculator of the rich returns if the revolution should prove successful. More than that, she quickly learned that it was best to go alone, that it was she, quite as much as the promised concessions for tobacco, salt, telegraph, telephone monopolies, that loosed the purse strings.

Her first week's report of pledges ran into the thousands with a substantial immediate payment of real dollars.

"How did you do it?" asked Santos in un-

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disguised admiration, as she was telling him one night of her success, in the dusty, cob-webbed little ship chandlery on South Street where the Junta headquarters had been established.

"Dollar diplomacy," she laughed, not displeased at his admiration. "We shall soon convert American dollars into Vespuccian bullets."

They were alone, and a week had made much difference in the fascinating friendship to Constance.

"Let me show you what I have done," Ramon confided. "Already, I have started together the 'counterfeiting plant,' as you call it."

Piece by piece, as he had been able to afford them, he had been ordering the presses, the stamping machine, and a little "reeding" or milling machine for the edges of the coins.

"The paper, the ink, and the bullion, we shall order now as we can," he explained, resting his head on his elbow at the table beside her. "Everything will be secured from firms which make mint supplies for foreign governments. A photo-engraver is now engaged on the work of copying the notes. He is making the plates by the photo-etching process—the same as that by which the real money plates are made. Then, too, there will be dies for the coins.

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Coined silver will be worth twice the cost of the bullion to us. Why," he added eagerly, " a few more successful days, Senora, and we shall have even arms and ammunition."

A key turned in the door. Santos sprang to his feet. It was Gordon.

" Ah, good evening," the Captain greeted them. The fact that they had been talking so earnestly alone was not lost on him. " May I join the conspiracy? " he smiled. " What luck to-day? By the way, I have just heard of a consignment of a thousand rifles as good as new that can be bought for a song."

Santos, elated at the progress so far, told hastily of Constance's success. " Let us get an option on them for a few days," he cried.

" Good," agreed Gordon, " only," he added, shaking his finger playfully at Constance, as the three left the headquarters, " don't let the commander-in-chief monopolize *all* your time, Remember, we all need you now. Santos, that was an inspiration to get Mrs. Dunlap on our side."

Somehow she felt uncomfortable. She half imagined that a frown had flitted over Santos' face.

" Are you going to Brooklyn? " she asked him.

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"No, we shall be working at the Junta late to-night," he replied, as they parted at the subway, he and Gordon to secure the option on the guns, she to plan for the morrow.

"I have made a good beginning," she congratulated herself, when, later in her rooms, she was going over the list of names of commission merchants who handled produce of South American countries.

There was a tap on the door.

Quickly, she shoved the list into the drawer of the table.

"A gentleman to see you, downstairs, ma'am," announced the maid.

As she pushed aside the portières, her heart gave a leap—it was Drummond.

"Mrs. Dunlap," began the wily detective, seeming to observe everything with eyes that seldom had the appearance of looking at anything, "I think you will recall that we have met before."

Constance bit her lip. "And why again?" she queried curtly.

"I am informed," he went on coolly ignoring her curtness, "that there is a guest in this house named Santos—Ramon Santos."

He said it in a half insinuating, half questioning tone.

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"You might inquire of the landlady," replied Constance, now perfectly composed.

"Mrs. Dunlap," he burst forth, exasperated, "what is the use of beating about? Do you know the real character of this Santos?"

"It is a matter of perfect indifference," she returned.

"Then you do not think a warning from me worth troubling about?" demanded the detective.

Constance continued to stand as if to terminate the interview.

"I came here," continued the detective showing no evidence of taking the hint, "to make a proposition to you. Mrs. Dunlap, you are in bad again. But this time there is a chance for you to get out without risk. I—I think I may talk plainly? We understand each other?"

His manner had changed. Constance could not have described to herself the loathing she felt for the man as it suddenly flashed over her what he was after. If she had resented his familiarity before, it brought the stinging blood to her cheeks now to realize that he was actually seeking to persuade her to betray her friends.

"Do you want to know what I think?" she

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scorned, then without waiting added, "I think you are a crook—a blackmailer,—that's what I think of a private detective like you."

The defiance of the little woman amazed even Drummond. Instead of fear as of the pursued, Constance Dunlap showed all the boldness of the pursuer.

"You have got to stop this swindling," the detective raged, taking a step closer to her. "I know the bankers you have fooled. I know how much you have worked them for."

"Swindling?" she repeated coolly, in assumed surprise. "Who says I am swindling?"

"You know well enough what I mean—this revolution that is being planned to bring about the new state of Vespuccia, as your friends Santos and Gordon call it."

"Vespuccia—Santos—Gordon?"

"Yes," he shouted, "Vespuccia—Santos—Gordon. And I'll go further. I'll tell you something you may not care to hear."

Drummond leaned over closer to her in his favorite bulldozing manner when he dealt with a woman. All the malevolence of the human bloodhound seemed concentrated in his look.

"Who forged those Carlton Realty checks?" he hissed. "Who played off the weakness of Dumont and Beverley against the clever

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thefts of Murray Dodge? Who is using a counterfeiter and a soldier of fortune and swindling honest American bankers and business men as no man crook—you seem to like that word—crook—could ever do?"

Constance met him calmly. "Oh," she laughed airily, "I suppose you mean to imply that it is I."

"I don't imply," he ground out, "I assert —accuse."

Constance shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"I want to tell you that I am employed by the Central American consulates in this city," blustered Drummond. "And I am waiting only for one thing. The moment an order is given for the withdrawal of that stuff from the little shop in South Street—you know what I mean—I am ready. I shall not be alone, then. You will have the power of the United States Secret Service to deal with, this time, my clever lady."

"Well, what of that?"

"There is this much of it. I warn you now against working with this Santos. He—you—can make no move that we do not know."

Why had Drummond come to see her? Constance was asking herself. The very insolence of the man seemed to arouse all the combativeness of her nature. The detective had thought

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to " throw a scare into " her. She turned suddenly and swept out of the room.

" I thank you for your kindness," she said icily. " It is unnecessary. Good-night."

In her own room she paced the floor nervously, now that the strain was off. Should she desert Santos and save herself? He had more need of her help now than ever before. She did not stop to analyze her own feelings. She knew he had been making love to her during the past week as only a Spaniard could. It fascinated her without blinding her. Yes, she would match her wits against this detective, clever though she knew he was. But Santos must be warned.

Santos and Gordon were alone when she burst in on them, breathlessly, an hour later at the Junta.

" What is the matter? " inquired Ramon quickly, placing a chair for her.

Gordon looked his admiration for the little woman, though he did not speak it. She saw him cast a sidewise glance at Santos and herself.

Though the three were friends, it was evident to her that Gordon did not trust Santos any further than the suspicious Anglo-Saxon trusts a foreigner usually when there is a woman in the case.

" The Secret Service! " exclaimed Con-

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stance. "I have just had a visit from a private detective employed by one of the consulates. They know too much. He has threatened to tell all to the Secret Service, has even had the effrontery to ask me to betray you."

"The scoundrel," burst out Santos impulsively.

"You are not frightened?" Gordon asked quickly.

"On the contrary, I expected something of the sort soon, but not from this man. I can meet him!"

"Good," exclaimed the Captain.

There was that in his voice that caused her to look at him quickly. Santos had noticed it, too, and a sullen scowl spread over his face.

Intuitively Constance read the two men before her. She had fled from one problem to a greater. Both Santos and Gordon were in love with her.

In the whirl of this new discovery, two things alone crowded all else from her mind. She must contrive to hold off Drummond until that part of the expedition which was ready could be got off. And she must play the jealous rivals against each other with such finesse as to keep them separated.

Far into the night after she had left the

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Junta she debated the question with herself. She could not turn back now. The attentions of Gordon were offensive. Yet she could have given no other reason than that she liked Santos the better. Yet what was Santos to her, after all? Once she had let herself go too far. She must be careful in this case. She must not allow this to be other than a business proposition.

The crisis for her came sooner than she had anticipated. It was the day after the visit of Drummond. She was waiting at the Junta alone for Santos when Gordon entered. She had dreaded just that. There was no mistaking the man.

"Mrs. Dunlap," began Gordon bending down close over her.

She was almost trembling with emotion, and he saw it.

"You can read me like a book," he hurried on, mistaking her feelings. "I can see that you know how much I think of you—how much I—"

"No, no," she implored. "Don't talk to me that way. Remember—there is work to do. After it is over—then—"

"Work!" he scorned. "What is the whole of Central America to me compared to you?"

"Captain Gordon!" she stood facing him.

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"You must not. Listen to me. You do not know—I—please, please leave me. Let me think."

She did not dare accept him; she could not reject him. It seemed that with an almost superhuman effort Gordon gripped himself. But he did not go.

Constance was distracted, what if Santos with his fiery nature should find Gordon talking to her alone? She must temporize.

"One week," she murmured. "When the *Arroyo* sails—that night—I shall give you my answer."

Gordon shot a peculiar glance at her—half doubt, half surprise. But she was gone. As she hurried unexpectedly out of the Junta she fancied she caught a glimpse of a familiar figure. It must have been Drummond. Every move at the Junta was being watched.

At the boarding house all night she waited. She must see Santos. Plan after plan whirled through her brain as the hours dragged.

It was not until almost morning that, seeing a light, he tapped cautiously at her door.

"You were not at the Junta to-night," he remarked.

There was something of jealousy in the tone.

"No. There is something I wanted to say to

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you where we should not be interrupted," she answered as he sat down.

A fold of her filmy house dress fluttered near him. Involuntarily he moved closer. His eyes met hers. She could feel the passions surging in the man beside her.

"I saw Drummond again, to-day," she began. "Captain Gordon—"

The intense look of hatred that blazed in the eyes of Santos frightened her. What might have happened if he instead of Gordon had met her at the Junta she could not have said. But now she must guard against it. If flashed over her that there was only one thing to be done.

She rose and laid her hand on his arm. As quickly the look changed. There was only one way to do it; she must make this man think they understood each other without saying so.

"You must get the counterfeiting plant down on the island—immediately—alone. Don't tell any of the others until it is there safely. You were going to send it down on the *Arroyo* next week. It must not go from New York at all. It must be shipped by rail, and then from New Orleans. You must—"

"But—Gordon?" His voice was hoarse.

She looked at Santos long and earnestly. "I will take care of him," she said in a tone that Santos could not mistake. "No—Ramon, no.

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After the revolution—perhaps—who shall say? But now—to work! ”

It was with a sigh of relief that she sank to rest at last when he had gone. For the moment she had won.

Piece by piece, Santos and she secretly carried out the goods that had already been collected at the Junta, during the next few days. Without a word to a soul they were shipped south. The boxes and barrels remained in the musty shop, apparently undisturbed.

Next the order for the arms and ammunition was quietly diverted so that they, too, were on their way to New Orleans. Instead, cases resembling them were sent to the Junta headquarters. Drummond, least of all, must be allowed to think that there was any change in their plans.

While Santos was at work gathering the parts, the stamping machine, the press, the dies, the plates, and the rest of the counterfeiting plant which had not yet been delivered, Constance, during the hours that she was not collecting money from the concession-grabbers, haunted the Junta. There was every evidence of activity there as the week advanced.

She was between two fires, yet never had she enjoyed the tang of adventure more than now.

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It was a keen pleasure to feel that she was outwitting Drummond when, as some apparently insurmountable difficulty arose, she would overcome it. More delicate was it, however, to preserve the balance between Santos and Gordon. In fact it seemed that the more she sought to avoid Gordon, the more jealously did he pursue her. It was a tangled skein of romance and intrigue that Constance was weaving.

At last all was ready. It was the night before the departure of Santos for the south. Constance had decided on the last interview in her own rooms where the first had been.

"I shall go ahead preparing as if to ship the things on the *Arroyo*," she said. "Let me know by the code the moment you are ready."

Santos was looking at her, oblivious of everything else.

He reached over and took her hand. She knew this was the moment against which she had steeled herself.

"Come with me," he asked suddenly.

She could feel his breath, hotly, on her cheek.

It was the final struggle. If she let go of herself, all would be lost.

"No, Ramon," she said softly, but without withdrawing her hand. "It can never be—listen."

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It was terrific, to hold in check a nature such as his.

"I went into this scheme for—for money. I have it. We have raised nearly forty thousand dollars. Twenty thousand you have given me as my share."

She paused. He was paying no attention to her words. His whole self was centered on her face.

"With me," she continued, half wearily withdrawing her hand as she assumed the part she had decided on for herself, "with me, Ramon, love is dead—dead. I have seen too much of the world. Nothing has any fascination for me now except excitement, money—"

He gently leaned over and recovered the hand that she had withdrawn. Quickly he raised it to his lips as he had done that first night.

"You are mine," he whispered, "not his."

She did not withdraw the hand this time.

"No—not his—nobody's."

For a moment the adventurers understood each other.

"Not his," he muttered fiercely as he threw his arms about her wildly, passionately.

"Nobody's," she panted as she gave one answering caress, then struggled from him.

She had conquered not only Ramon Santos but Constance Dunlap.

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Early the next morning he was speeding southward over the clicking rails.

Every energy must be bent toward keeping the new scheme secret until it was carried out successfully. Not a hint must get to Drummond that there was any change in the activities of the Junta. As for the Junta itself, there was no one of those who believed implicitly in Santos whom Constance need fear, except Gordon. Gordon was the *bête noire.*

Two days passed and she was able to guard the secret, as well as to act as though nothing had happened. Santos had left a short note for the Junta telling them that he would be away for a short time putting the finishing touches on the purchase of the arms. The arrival of a cart-load of cases at the Junta, which Constance arranged for herself, bore out the letter. Still, she waited anxiously for word from him.

The day set for the sailing of the *Arroyo* arrived and with it at last a telegram: "Buy corn, oats, wheat. Sell cotton."

It was the code, telling of the safe arrival of the rifles, cartridges and the counterfeiting plant in New Orleans, a little late, but safe. "Sell cotton," meant "I sail to-night."

On the way over to the Junta, she had noticed one of Drummond's shadows dogging her. She

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must do anything to keep the secret until that night.

She hurried into the dusty ship chandlery. There was Gordon.

"Good morning, Mrs. Dunlap," he cried. "You are just the person I am looking for. Where is Santos? Has the plan been changed?"

Constance thought she detected a shade of jealousy in the tone. At any rate, Gordon was more attentive than ever.

"I think he is in Bridgeport," she replied as casually as she could. "Your ship, you know, sails to-night. He has sent word to me to give orders that all the goods here at the Junta be ready to cart over by truck to Brooklyn. There has been no change. The papers are to be signed during the day and she is to be scheduled to sail late in the afternoon with the tide. Only, as you know, some pretext must delay you. You will hold her at the pier for us. He trusts all that to you as a master hand at framing such excuses that seem plausible."

Gordon leaned over closer to her. He was positively revolting to her in the rôle of admirer. But she must not offend him—yet.

"And my answer?" he asked.

There was something about him that made Constance almost draw away involuntarily.

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"To-night—at the pier," she murmured forcing a smile.

Shortly after dark the teams started their lumbering way across the city and the bridge. Messengers, stationed on the way, were to report the safe progress of the trucks to Brooklyn.

Constance slipped away from the boarding-house, down through the deserted streets to the waterfront, leaving word at home that any message was to be sent by a trusty boy to the pier.

It was a foggy and misty night on the water, an ideal night for the gun-runner. She was relieved to learn that there had been not a hitch so far. Still, she reasoned, that was natural. Drummond, even if he had not been outwitted, would scarcely have spoiled the game until the last moment.

On the *Arroyo* every one was chafing. Below decks, the engineer and his assistants were seeing that the machinery was in perfect order. Men in the streets were posted to give Gordon warning of any danger.

In the river a tug was watching for a possible police boat. On the wharf the only footfalls were those of Gordon himself and an assistant from the Junta. It was dreary waiting,

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and Constance drew her coat more closely around her, as she shivered in the night wind and tried to brace herself against the unexpected.

At last the welcome muffled rumble of heavily laden carts disturbed the midnight silence of the street leading to the river.

At once a score of men sprang from the hold of the ship, as if by magic. One by one the cases were loaded. The men were working feverishly by the light of battle lanterns—big lamps with reflectors so placed as to throw the light exactly where it was needed and nowhere else. They were taking aboard the *Arroyo* dozens of coffin-like wooden cases, and bags and boxes, smaller and even heavier. Silently and swiftly they toiled.

It was risky work, too, at night and in the tense haste. There was a muttered exclamation—a heavy case had dropped! a man had gone down with a broken leg.

It was a common thing with the gun-runners. The crew of the *Arroyo* had expected it. The victim of such an accident could not be sent to a hospital ashore. He was carried, as gently as the rough hands could carry anything, to one side, where he lay silently waiting for the ship's surgeon who had been engaged for just such an

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emergency. Constance bent over and made the poor fellow as comfortable as she could. There was never a whimper from him, but he looked his gratitude.

Scarcely a fraction of a minute had been lost. The last cases were now being loaded. The tug crawled up and made fast. Already the empty trucks were vanishing in the misty darkness, one by one, as muffled as they came.

Suddenly lights flashed through the fog on the river.

There was a hurried tread of feet on the land from around the corner of a bleak, forbidding black warehouse.

They were surrounded. On one side was the police boat *Patrol*. On the other was Drummond. With both was the Secret Service. The surprise was complete.

Constance turned to Gordon. He was gone.

Before she could move, some one seized her.

"Where's Santos?" demanded a hoarse voice in her ear. She looked up to see Drummond.

She shut her lips tightly, secure in the secret that Ramon was at the moment or soon would be on the Gulf, out of reach.

Across in the fog she strained her eyes. Was that the familiar figure of Gordon moving in the dim light?

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There he was, now,—with Drummond, the police, and the Secret Service. It was exactly as she had suspected to herself, and a smile played over her face.

All was excitement, shouts, muttered imprecations. Constance was the calmest in the crowd—deaf to even Drummond's "third degree."

They had begun to break open the boxes marked "salt" and "corn."

A loud exclamation above the sharp crunching of the axes escaped Gordon. "Damn them! They've put one across on us!"

The boxes of "salt" and "corn" contained —salt and corn.

Not a stock of a rifle, not a barrel, not a cartridge was in any of them as the axes crashed in one case after another.

A boy with a telegram emerged indiscreetly from the misty shadows. Drummond seized it, tore it open, and read, "Buy cotton."

It was the code: "I am off safely."

The double cross had worked. Constance was thinking, as she smiled to herself, of the money, her share, which she had hidden. There was not a scrap of tangible evidence against her, except what Santos had carried with him in the filibustering expedition already off from New Orleans. Her word would stand against that of

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all of the victims combined before any jury that could be empaneled.

"You thought I needed a warning," she cried, facing Drummond with eyes that flashed scorn at the skulking figure of Gordon behind him. "But the next time you employ a stool-pigeon to make love," she added, "reckon in that thing you detectives scorn—a woman's intuition."

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CHAPTER IV

THE GAMBLERS

"Won't you come over to see me to-night? Just a friendly little game, my dear—our own crowd, you know."

There was something in the purring tone of the invitation of the woman across the hall from Constance Dunlap's apartment that aroused her curiosity.

"Thank you. I believe I will," answered Constance. "It's lonely in a big city without friends."

"Indeed it is," agreed Bella LeMar. "I've been watching you for some time and wondering how you stand it. Now be sure to come, won't you?"

"I shall be glad to do so," assured Constance, as they reached their floor and parted at the elevator door.

She had been watching the other woman, too, although she had said nothing about it.

"A friendly little game," repeated Constance to herself. "That sounds as if it had the tang of an adventure in it. I'll go."

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The Mayfair Arms, in which she had taken a modest suite of rooms, was a rather recherche apartment, and one of her chief delights since she had been there had been in watching the other occupants.

There had been much to interest her in the menage across the hall. Mrs. Bella LeMar, as she called herself, was of a type rather common in the city, an attractive widow on the safe side of forty, well-groomed, often daringly gowned. Her brown eyes snapped vivacity, and the pert little nose and racy expression of the mouth confirmed the general impression that Mrs. LeMar liked the good things of life.

Quite naturally, Constance observed, her neighbor had hosts of friends who often came early and stayed late, friends who seemed to exude, as it were, an air of prosperity and high living. Clearly, she was a woman to cultivate. Constance felt even more interest in her, now that Mrs. LeMar had pursued a bowing acquaintance to the point of an unsolicited invitation.

"A friendly little game," she speculated. "What *is* the game?"

That night found Constance at the buzzer beside the heavy mahogany door across the hall.

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She wore a new evening gown of warm red. Her face glowed with heightened color, and her nerves were on the *qui vive* for the unlocking at last of the mystery of the fascinating Mrs. Le-Mar.

"So glad to see you, my dear," smiled Bella, holding out her hand engagingly. "You are just in time."

Already several of the guests had arrived. There was an air of bonhomie as Bella presented them to Constance—a stocky, red-faced man with a wide chest and narrow waist, Ross Watson; a tall, sloping-shouldered man who inclined his head forward earnestly when he talked to a lady and spoke with animation, Haddon Halsey; and a fair-haired, baby-blue eyed little woman gowned in becoming pink, Mrs. Lansing Noble.

"Now we're all here—just enough for a game," remarked Bella in a business-like tone. "Oh, I beg pardon—you play, Mrs. Dunlap?" she added to Constance.

"Oh, yes," Constance replied. "Almost anything—a little bit."

She had already noted that the chief object in the room, after all, appeared to be a round table. About it the guests seemed naturally to take their places.

"What shall it be to-night—bridge?" asked

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Watson, nonchalantly fingering a little pack of gilt-edged cards which Bella had produced.

"Oh, no," cried Mrs. Noble. "Bridge is such a bore."

"Rum?"

"No—no. The regular game—poker."

"A dollar limit?"

"Oh, make it five," drawled Halsey impatiently.

Watson said nothing, but Bella patted Halsey's hand in approval, as if all were on very good terms indeed. "I think that will make a nice little game," she cut in, opening a drawer from which she took out a box of blue, red and white chips of real ivory. Watson seemed naturally to assume the rôle of banker.

"Aren't you going to join us?" asked Constance.

"Oh, I seldom play. You know, I'm too busy entertaining you people," excused Bella, as she bustled out of the room, reappearing a few minutes later with the maid and a tray of slender hollow-stemmed glasses with a bottle wrapped in a white napkin in a pail of ice.

Mrs. Noble shuffled the cards with practiced hand and Watson kept a calculating eye on every face. Luck was not with Constance on the first deal and she dropped out.

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Mrs. Noble and Halsey were betting eagerly. Watson was coolly following along until the show-down—which he won.

"Of all things," exclaimed the little woman in pink, plainly betraying her vexation at losing. "Will luck never turn?"

Halsey said nothing.

Constance watched in amazement. This was no "friendly little game." The faces were too tense, too hectic. The play was too high, and the desire to win too great. Mrs. LeMar was something more than a gracious hostess in her solicitude for her guests.

All the time the pile of chips in front of Watson kept building up. At each new deal a white chip was placed in a little box—the kitty—for the "cards and refreshments."

It was in reality one of the new style gambling joints for men and women.

The gay parties of callers on Mrs. LeMar were nothing other than gamblers. The old gambling dens of the icebox doors and steel gratings, of white-coated servants and free food and drink, had passed away with "reform." Here was a remarkable new phase of sporting life which had gradually taken its place.

Constance had been looking about curiously in the meantime. On a table she saw copies of the newspapers which published full accounts of

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the races, something that looked like a racing sheet, and a telephone conveniently located near writing materials. It was a poolroom, too, then, in the daytime, she reasoned.

Surely, in the next room, when the light was on, she saw what looked like a miniature roulette wheel, not one of the elaborate affairs of bright metal and ebony, but one of those that can almost be packed into a suitcase and carried about easily.

That was the secret of the flashily dressed men and women who called on Bella LeMar. They were risking everything, perhaps even honor itself, on a turn of a wheel, the fall of a card, a guess on a horse.

Why had Bella LeMar invited her here? she asked herself.

At first Constance was a little bit afraid that she might have plunged into too deep water. She made up her mind to quit when her losses reached a certain nominal point. But they did not reach it. Perhaps the gamblers were too clever. But Constance seemed always to keep just a little bit ahead of the game.

One person in particular in the group interested her as she endeavored intuitively to take their measure. It was Haddon Halsey, immaculately garbed, with all those little touches of smartness which women like to see.

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