

## CAUGHT

BY MR. AND MRS. HALDEMAN-JULIUS

### I

To understand why Gordon Hamilton, half-baked author of still unwritten masterpieces, youngster of twenty-five, who knew a little about everything and a great deal about little—to understand why Gordon decided to shake the star-dust from his soul and leave his world of phrases, poems, and pigments for near-visioned, close-fisted Kansas, to be a Pagan in the mazes of Presbyterianism, romanticist in a world of realism, blower of bubbles in a stone-quarry—to understand this, one must give heed to Sylvia.

Sylvia's soft golden hair was bobbed; her laughter had a merry lilt; the round, child-like violet eyes were fringed with heavy, curling lashes, and in the soft fabrics dyed by her own rosy fingers into rare, intoxicating colors, she seemed like some dainty creature who had strayed from fairyland. Her brilliant loveliness completely captured the sensitive, beauty-worshipping youth. And when, just as everyone thought he had nearly won her, she suddenly veered to his own chum and shack-mate, Oliver Mercer, who dabbled in oils and played the piano, Radnor-by-the-Sea became impossible for Gordon. He felt that he must go away from California, far away from Sylvia and Oliver and from the colony of friends who knew of his bitter disappointment.

His first thought was of Radnor-by-the-Sea's great-aunt, Greenwich Village; but in Fallon, Kansas, a job was waiting for him on the Middle West's

most popular weekly. In fact, between unfinished novels, Gordon had made his living for several years by writing many of this paper's editorials, for which he received five dollars a column (set in eight-point solid, eighteen ems wide), and frequent invitations to come to Fallon for steady work at thirty dollars a week, with—important item—traveling expenses included. Radnor-by-the-Sea, with its vaulting ambitions, self-consumed with talk, was caviar and pretzels; the *Midland Weekly*, with its large circulation and medical ads, was a thick slice of bread and butter. Heavy of heart and weary of spirit, Gordon purchased his ticket.

'But what on earth will you do in Fallon?' demanded Oliver, stirred into making an unwelcome call.

'Work,' Gordon answered stiffly.

'I certainly can't imagine one doing anything else in Kansas. You know, of course, that a wretch found with a bottle of beer may receive a more severe sentence than that given to the gentleman who kills his neighbor.'

'It'll be the same here soon enough.'

'But Kansas is so prosperous and completely populated by tax-payers and auto-owners,' Oliver persisted.

Gordon was in no mood for humor.

'I hope the environment *will* be uncongenial,' he returned savagely. 'Then I'll be driven to finish some of my stories and plays.'

'Don't think it!' warned Oliver soberly. 'I was born and raised in one of these small Middle Western towns, and I know them. It'll get you, sure. There's

something in their atmosphere that's deadening to certain kinds of impulse. Before you know it, you'll be joining the No-Tobacco League, receiving honors in lodges, going to funerals, and becoming an all-round useful member of society.'

Gordon smiled at the suggested incongruity, but there was no mistaking the real earnestness in Oliver's voice as he added awkwardly, 'I know how you feel toward me, just now, and I can't say much; but you're too big to be lost. Don't do it. I swear to you, you're making the mistake of your life.'

'I shan't stay over a year, at most,' Gordon assured him, hastily, more moved than he cared to admit by the sincerity of Oliver's protest. 'Even a drop of the real thing ought to survive that long.'

'Well, whatever you do,' laughed Oliver, 'don't take to marching in parades and wearing badges.'

Radnor-by-the-Sea was not more than a day's ride behind him when Sylvia began to seem ever so slightly remote, and Oliver more forgivable than Gordon could have conceived possible a week earlier. 'Old Man Travel is getting in his licks on Old Man Time,' he commented inwardly. 'Funny how objectively one can see the whole world and himself through a Pullman window. Here's a young fellow,' his thoughts ran on, 'with splendid health and fairly good looks. No serious vices. Has an enormous capacity for work, too, but uses up all his energy with facile space-writing, leaving none for the sustained, concentrated effort necessary for creative work. Favorite sport: none. Feels best when doing nothing violent. Indifferent to business, probably because he has not been associated with it. Finds he avoids anything he does n't understand; typical American in this. Equally indifferent to God.

May give Him more thought when older. Not an educated person at all; has no particular reverence for facts. Prefers a good book to anyone's companionship, but usually gets on well with men, and is quite popular with women. Does n't sound like such a bad inventory; but just the same, his life so far is a failure — financially and artistically.'

Unconsciously dropping into the first person, he went on with, 'Well, what of it? The world needs divine bums. As soon as I get a couple of hundred dollars ahead in Fallon, I'll go straight to Paris, where poverty is beautiful, to my own kind of people: cynical French skeptics; morose, pessimistic Russians; melancholy Roumanians; wine-drinking old priests who live in untidy rooms and know how to laugh; atheists; polite, gorgeously dressed Turks; Chinamen; magnificent failures in art, letters, and love; women who are not too particular, and pickpockets off duty. What difference does it make if I spend my last quarter once a month? But I'll keep a grip on myself and buckle down to real work.'

With this resolve in his heart, Gordon was not disconcerted when, descending from the train, he was obliged to look twice to find in which direction Fallon lay. The little town of thirty-five hundred much preferred to welcome newcomers at about three o'clock of a sunshiny Saturday afternoon. At that hour, with the Square swarming with farmers, a hundred or more rigs tied to the iron rail surrounding the courthouse yard, and all makes of cars parked at the curbing, it seemed to warrant the boosters' proud phrase of 'City of the Second Class.' On Saturdays, too, Rimpkey's redecorated restaurant overflowed; children flocked in and out of the two movie-houses; a lively crowd gathered around Tawley-the-real-estate-man's weekly demonstration of the Lally farm-lighting sys-

tem, — a good show in itself, — and Recker of the Kandy Kitchen was obliged to hire extra help to dish up the ice-cream sodas for the countrywomen enjoying their favorite dissipation. Decidedly, on Saturday one could not but be impressed with the bustle and activity. But Gordon came on a Tuesday morning, at an early hour, when even Kansas City is quiet. To his unprejudiced eye, Fallon appeared as three homes, a barn, and a chicken-house.

'Fine,' he grunted as he passed Canton's lumberyard. 'Just what I wanted — a deserted village. All the more reason why I'll duck out as soon as I get a reasonable reserve.'

To his amusement, it was necessary to ring a gong to waken the owner of the shabby little hotel.

## II

Getting into the swing of his work next morning was a simple matter for Gordon. After a hearty reception by Mr. Rhodes, the publisher, who made no effort to conceal his satisfaction over his arrival, he was given a pleasant corner and told to 'go to it.' By noon he was turning out editorials and articles, thoroughly at home in the two-story, box-like building.

After dinner, Mr. Rhodes brought to Gordon's desk a short, fat man whom he introduced as Professor Tomlin McPherson, one of the *Midland's* regular advertisers.

'I sell a peach of an article,' the professor explained, with enthusiasm. 'It's called Itch-O and there's no salve can beat it. The fact is' — he dropped his voice confidentially — 'it's made from one of my grandmother's recipes. I did humanity a service when I put it on the market. I have testimonials from every state in the Union,' he ended, with unmistakable pride.

'I'll keep Itch-O in mind if I develop

symptoms,' Gordon promised gravely.

'Everything's in the advertising,' declared the professor. 'Frank Rhodes has told me about you, and I thought you might look over this circular letter I've written. It ain't up to snuff when it comes to grammar. If you'll put it in good shape, I'll pay you five beans.'

Gordon took the much-edited sheet, and, as he read, discovered possibilities of many times five dollars.

'Is this all you send to a person who inquires about Itch-O?' he demanded. 'My dear sir, I'm afraid you don't understand the advertising game.'

'What d'ye mean?' questioned the Professor. 'My stuff pulls fine, once I get it fixed up.'

Gordon's answer was a wise, incredulous smile.

'I've increased my business by half in three years,' insisted the professor.

'Which only proves what you could have done,' returned Gordon. 'You don't seem to realize,' he continued, 'that when one has an ailment, he is intensely interested in it. He is ready to read a library about it. He wants to know the cause of it, its nature, and its characteristics. This circular takes it for granted that the inquirer merely wants Itch-O. He wants more. He wants information.'

'Say,' exclaimed the professor, impressed, 'I believe you've got the right dope. Can you turn it out?'

'Yes, I can let you have a well-written dissertation that will cover thirty-two pages in agate.'

'I'll give you a hundred dollars for it.'

'Make it two and it'll be in your hands to-night.'

'All right,' agreed the professor, heavily. 'It's a bargain.'

Gordon accepted the assignment and went to the *Britannica*, from which he emerged, saturated with scientific lore. Never had Itch-O's praises been sung

so well, never had its virtues been described so rapturously. The phrases of eulogy galloped from his Underwood. Itch-O became literature.

The professor was delighted, and that very evening, as he wrote the promised check, he added that he would appreciate more such suggestions and work.

On his way to a night lunch-counter for a belated meal, Gordon remembered nervously that he had covenanted with himself to stay merely long enough to save a couple of hundred dollars for the great journey. But how could he have dreamed that the entire fortune would be acquired the first day? Really, in all decency, he owed it to Mr. Rhodes to remain at least a few weeks. He would leave, of course, and that shortly, but there was no reason why he should break his streak of luck when it had only begun. Never before had he earned so much at one time.

The next day, taking the advice of Mr. Rhodes, he dropped into the First State Bank to deposit his check. Mrs. Graham, the friendly little vice-president, waited on him and introduced him to the president, James Osborne, who had already heard of him.

'You'll get good service here,' said the gruff, dignified man. 'Fallon is always glad to welcome hustling young folks.'

It was a new experience for Gordon to receive such cordiality from a bank president. The thrill was indescribable.

When he strolled about after supper, he noticed the trim post-office with its well-kept lawn, the imposing high-school building and the neat churches. It was n't such a bad little town, after all, he reflected. To be sure, the general impression was that of unutterable commonplaceness, and there was a pitiful lack of understanding of beauty, either of line or of color. The most pretentious house was, architecturally,

quite the most terrible. But the people seemed unusually sensible and kindly. The whole world could n't be artists.

'It's that money-in-the-bank-feeling working,' he murmured in droll dismay. 'Would n't Oliver be triumphant if he knew I was actually beginning to apologize for Fallon.'

His meditations were interrupted by a tall, spare man and the professor, who explained, with an air of proud proprietorship, 'This is the young chap I was telling you about. Mr. Hamilton, meet Mr. Burns, the next state senator from this district.'

Ten minutes later, Gordon was richer by fifty dollars. Mr. Burns was, indeed, running for office, and it was Gordon's new job to pen his advertisement, his letters of acceptance, his statements to the county press, and other literature intended to turn an apparently honest man into a senator.

At the end of the tenth perfect day, Gordon, smiling to himself, checked over his accounts. He realized that he had a corner on writing in Fallon, and felt an amused worry over the monster of the income-tax which, at this rate, would soon menace him. Immediately, he decided to conceal the visitations of Madam Money. Certainly, he would not leave, not for the present. He would stay in Fallon until he had cleaned up a couple of thousand. Paris could wait a few months. Paris, like Radnor-by-the-Sea, began to seem remote.

As the new consciousness of his own market value began to sink deeper, his courage and initiative grew. Before many weeks had passed, he decided to enlarge his scale of activities. Going into Mr. Rhodes's office, he announced suddenly that he intended to resign.

The publisher was more than surprised. As Gordon had expected, he was worried.

'Why, my dear fellow, you are scarcely settled down,' he temporized.

'I've been here long enough to know it's no place for me,' Gordon answered firmly.

'May I ask why?'

'It's simply this, Mr. Rhodes: you brought me here at a measly thirty-dollar salary and you've loaded me with the work of two men. If I'm to do two men's work, I must have two men's pay.'

'It's true you have made yourself worth more to me than thirty a week,' Mr. Rhodes admitted graciously. 'I don't mind telling you that I am considering giving you a raise.'

'Then, now is the time,' returned Gordon. 'It is n't only the money I'm concerned over,' he continued sharply. 'I don't like the way a lot of things are handled in this office. The paper has a large circulation, but it could have twice as many subscribers if it had more pep and we employed more efficient methods. If I'm to stay, I'll have to be given more authority. I must be managing editor with a salary of seventy-five a week and the understanding that, as soon as I put on a hundred thousand more readers, that amount will be doubled.'

There was a long discussion. Mr. Rhodes was not the sort of a man to be easily bullied, but he had become convinced of Gordon's unusual abilities. The *Midland Weekly* had, for the past year, been losing ground, and he had learned from bitter experience that Fallon was not an alluring point for brilliant young men. The matter ended with Gordon issuing forth a full-fledged managing editor at the demanded salary. The inspired gambler had placed everything on a small pair and had come off victorious.

### III.

Before the year passed, he played for even greater stakes, risking all his chips in the supreme hazard of matrimony,

and, true to his streak, won, not only genuine happiness, but greater prosperity. It was Mr. Rhodes who was first impressed with the desirability of marriage for Gordon. For, after the momentous interview which more than doubled that young man's salary, he threw up his hands and muttered words to the effect that one could never be sure of single men. If only this positive-minded person were married, — with, perchance, a family, — ah, then he, Frank Rhodes, could use very different tactics. At which point he made a quick census of the town and instantly thought of Ruth Sterling.

If Ruth could be interested! All Fallon stood a little in awe of her. She had been reared so differently from the rest of the small-townners. She had come to her parents late in their lives, and her mother dying while she was a baby, her father had brought her up himself. She had been sent to a convent school, then to Paris, and had flitted back and forth with him between the little town and the East until his death, when she was eighteen. People had wondered what she would 'do'; but, alone as she was, she had clung passionately to the place where he had spent his life; and during the two years that had passed she had learned, under Janet Graham's wise guidance, to enjoy managing the conservative investments left to her. These were all in Kansas, and Mr. Rhodes shrewdly guessed that it would be no easy task to persuade her to leave Fallon.

Gordon was drawn to her the first time they met. He liked the sweet tranquillity of her fresh, young face, the well-groomed, carefully netted dark hair, her trim figure, perfect poise, and unmistakable good breeding. Mr. Rhodes and his wife had invited them for a Sunday afternoon auto trip, and during the whole ride Gordon and Ruth talked together in the tonneau. It seemed to



them scarcely less than a miracle that they had read the same books, liked the same plays, had so many valuations in common, could laugh with the same tender amusement at Fallon's limitations, and sigh the same sigh for interesting places and people.

Gordon told her of the changes he had already effected in the *Midland Weekly*, of his big plans for its future, of his need for utterance, and even outlined in detail some of his unfinished writings. As Ruth listened intently, she became more and more aware of the dynamic possibilities of this dark, charming youth, more and more intrigued by his winning personality, so baffling in its mixture of commercial practicality and inspired idealism. Never, it seemed to Gordon, had he known anyone with such understanding. He felt doubly sure of himself, baptized with a reborn confidence in his artistic future. By the time they reached home, their friendship was established.

Marriage, after a few months of companionship, was the logical, natural step for both. Gordon's yearning for sparkling, restless little Sylvia had been a disturbing, disintegrating force. In his love for Ruth was a rare quality of trust and comradeship. How he adored the hominess of her! He knew instinctively that children would bring to her the same deep joy which he realized with a new thrill would be his if he were to be a father. Together, he felt, they would find life a long adventure, always rich in new emotions, new thoughts, and new experiences. Each day would be full of growth and achievement. It was all so simple, too, for Ruth still lived in the old family homestead. There was no initial outlay necessary, no assuming of serious responsibilities. It seemed a part of Gordon's streak to marry thus.

This faculty of being successful continued to develop with Midas-like rapidity. Literally, whatever he touched

turned into dollars. It became an accepted conclusion in Fallon that anything he might do would be profitable. He traded some unimproved land for a modern, well-equipped farm, which he ran on shares, going in for thoroughbred Poland Chinas. Through his skillful advertising, the Hamilton Hog Sales became famous in three states and brought prices that made Fallon gasp. He organized a cooperative elevator with the farmers' money and his own luck. It was a go from the start. At his direction, Itch-O's capitalization was increased by two hundred per cent, the stock was sold, a liberal block transferred as commission to himself, and the entire business put completely under his capable management. From the day he leased the *Midland Weekly* its profits steadily increased.

He was the most listened-to man at the town's Commercial Club. His say-so was final, because his promises were golden and certain to actualize. The County Fair Association, which he started, and to which he sold some of his wife's land for the grounds, drew thirty thousand people the first season, and Gordon rightly was given the credit. He was looked up to as a pillar of boost, a man who was putting Fallon on the map, a genius at organization.

He raised ten thousand dollars and placed a corporation in control of the town's best drug-store, with himself as president. It occurred to him that Fallon's volume of trade would grow immeasurably if it were more available by car-line to the miners of the near-by camps; and, getting together sixty-five thousand dollars of the necessary funds in the county, he secured the balance in Kansas City. He was elected president of the new road. As one out of every six persons in the surrounding country owned a car, he decided that it would be an excellent thing to give the town a twenty-five-thousand-dollar garage,

properly incorporated, with a vague system of profit rebates to the stockholders, of whom there were many. Again he was elected president. He went into coal-mining and helped to open up the yet unexploited local oil-fields, and every venture with which he was connected was a success. Always serene, always at leisure, always ready to organize an enterprise and assume its presidency, his word, spoken with delightful courtesy, was law. In less than seven years, he was the wealthiest man in the county. Southeastern Kansas had never known anyone like Gordon Hamilton. He was something new.

He had long since observed that, while for a few the church was a sincere expression of their religious faith, for the majority of the people of Fallon it was more in the nature of a club, and one of the obvious stepping-stones toward dignity and prominence. Without hypocrisy, professing nothing, he began to attend Presbyterian services and functions with consistent regularity. When a vacancy occurred on the Board of Trustees, he was unanimously elected to fill it. Followed thereupon the swift placing of the church on a sound business basis and the remodeling of the nondescript building into a stately gothic edifice. It was not large, but in drab little Fallon it stood, with its pure lines and glowing windows, challenging in its beauty, a pearl set in lead. As Gordon sat, on Sundays, in the family pew, with Ruth and their children, he knew that all the town thought him a paragon of respectability; and although he could not explain why, he felt that he thoroughly deserved this reputation — that, at bottom, he always had been solid.

Ruth was quietly proud of him, and their emotional life flowed smoothly, but she was often deeply troubled because of the scarcity of money. They were worth many times what she had

been when they were married, but there was always a flock of outstanding notes which, with their interest, had to be met. It was Gordon's method. If he wished to invest in a project, he borrowed, sometimes using Ruth's splendid securities as collateral. The debt paid, it meant that they had accumulated just that much more principal. This knowledge recompensed Gordon for all the necessary sacrifices and economies. There came a day, however, when Ruth rebelled.

'Why do you want to go into any more things?' she asked him desperately, when he brought her a note to sign with him for ten thousand dollars, that they might purchase an interest in a steam-coal-shovel company.

'For the fun of making more and the satisfaction of having it, dear heart,' was the prompt answer.

'Do you know, Gordon,' she asked slowly, her gray eyes strangely calm, 'do you know that in order to make life livable and happy for us all, I have been obliged to borrow at the First State Bank for the last two years?'

'What?' Gordon was genuinely shocked.

'I owe a thousand dollars there.'

'A thousand dollars!' echoed Gordon. 'This is terrible.'

'I used to think so,' Ruth smiled bravely, 'until Janet Graham made me see that it was merely absurd. She says there are half a dozen other women — wives of progressive Fallon men — doing the same ridiculous thing for lack of proper spunk.'

'But I don't understand,' groped Gordon in real perplexity; 'what have you borrowed it for?'

'Mostly for little things, dear; for the extras — the things that take the edges off everyday living and put charm and distinction into it; for household necessities; for the new sheets and counterpanes when you insisted we wait

another year — though you would buy the eighty acres that joined the farm; for the kitchen stove when you thought we should get along with the old one which was wearing out Sally's nerves; for the new lawn-mower; for the extra wages I pay — one could n't keep a superior maid for what you stipulate, Gordon; for the new privet hedge — it cost twice what you think — and the lovely climbing roses; for little charities; for gifts from the children and myself at the graceful moment. It's a long list. Shall I go on?'

'But why did n't you tell me?'

'I did, dear, each time,' Ruth answered quietly. 'And each time you were so final, you delivered such an ultimatum, that I could n't bear to argue with you. I feel as you do about people who wrangle. Perhaps it was n't quite frank, but you see, I could usually understand that you honestly, often just because you were a man, could n't comprehend the reasonableness of what I asked. If we had been seriously involved, I should n't have let a penny slip, but it suddenly dawned on me that there was absolutely no need for this petty scrimping and saving.'

'Why, Gordon,' she hurried on, 'father and I used to take wonderful trips, we collected rare books, I bought the smartest of clothes, and yet there was always plenty. Now we can't afford a single luxury. We've never been away together since we were married — I have n't been East for five years, and I dress like a frump.'

'Ruth, what nonsense!' Gordon interrupted brusquely. 'You know you get your frocks in Kansas City and always look remarkably well.'

'I pass, but that's all,' she corrected. 'And I should n't do that if I did n't get what I felt I must from the bank. Oh, my dear,' she pleaded, 'do see the humorous side of it! It is n't as if you were naturally stingy, and I should n't

care if there were any *use* in it; but we have enough — so much more than enough. Yet here we are, so strapped that I must borrow for what I consider essentials. Actually, Gordon, it seems more of a problem when I want a new hat than when we need a new silo.'

Gordon came over to her and put his arms round her tenderly.

'I see your point, dear heart. You make me feel like a brute, but you know I've never gone into anything to which you have n't agreed. As soon as we swing this steam-shovel deal we will stop. It shall be the end. I will give myself to writing. You know that is what I have always planned.'

'You must square me up at the bank, first,' persisted Ruth.

'Renew the note.'

'No. Janet does n't want me to.'

'Do you mean to say she won't?' Gordon demanded, incredulously.

'She did n't say she would n't, and she made it very clear they would lend *us* any amount we wanted; but you know she's been like an elder sister to me, and she made me feel that I was being awfully foolish in not having a talk with you and putting a stop to this way of doing. I am going to pay it, Gordon. I shall sell one of my mortgages.'

'Cash in capital? I won't consent to it.'

'I can't see what's to be gained by paying interest when I have the money.'

'But, my dear child, then the capital will be gone. Renew the note, and the next dividend from the *Midland* shall go toward it.'

'No,' Ruth resisted with gentle stubbornness. 'I need that to take the children East to the Montessori school, so they can have a month of it and I can get a better idea of the method.'

'Ruth, we simply cannot afford that this year.' Gordon was earnest. 'You've been such a splendid pal — we've



made so much together. I've always felt you were with me. I can't understand what's come over you.'

'I've told you, dear. I've recovered my sense of proportion and I mean to keep it. I won't be poor any longer, merely to make more when we have enough now to live beautifully. There's neither rhyme nor reason in it. It's changing you, too, Gordon.'

'I guess I have changed,' he laughed easily. 'I was a queer dub lolling around waiting for something real to show up. I remember I wanted a couple of hundred dollars for Paris — to be a boulevardier — to meet strange failures. But, instead, I became a success. Are you sorry?'

'Not if you are sure you are n't,' Ruth answered soberly. Then, after a moment, she added, very low, 'Only sometimes — forgive me if I hurt you, darling — I'm afraid you will feel, too late, that your life has been a failure.'

#### IV

It was so unlike Ruth to be anything but sympathetic that her words left a profound impression. After supper, as he listened to her moving about, putting the little folks to bed, he went over their conversation. Was he, after all, a fool to have left the adventures of the soul for the game of piling dollar on dollar for the sheer sport of piling? Made restless by his thoughts, he put on his hat for a walk down-town. As he strolled, he became more serious. Was it true, he asked himself, that he was being caught in the meshes of his own success? Was it really a misfortune that his luck had been so unfailing? And had it been luck, or ability? A toss-up, he concluded.

'Surely,' he argued, 'a man ought to be able to establish two distinct selves — one, the money-maker for so many hours a day; the other, a dweller in the

halls of art. I must take time to write. But is n't it rather inane to say everlastingly, "I must write," as though the world needed more books? Rather childish, that.'

At least, he decided, he could start off with one story — a story of his own soul on its pilgrimage to Parnassus, halting a moment in the temple of the money-changers and remaining there.

'That ought to make a good theme,' he murmured. 'A man ever so rich who is ever so poor, bound by the chains of property, while his soul suffocates as surely as those stifled by lack of means.'

But was n't it possible, he wondered, to have just enough property to ensure comfort, and just enough soul to enjoy it to the full? That was what Ruth wanted. She was right, too; but hang it all, he had the habit of seeing opportunities. He had n't even tapped the ones offered in this little town. And what a future he could give his children!

Suppose he *had* written a novel — half a dozen? Would it really have counted for more in the world than what he had actually accomplished? Would he have created any more, truly? The *Midland Weekly's* circulation was doubled. Itch-O was a useful and favorite national commodity. Hundreds of grateful letters poured into his office every day. Ruth was still in love with him. He cherished her and their two sturdy boys and beautiful baby daughter. The town and county looked up to him. What if he had never had all this joy, success, and power? But he did have them and now he would not, could not, be without them. His old world — Sylvia, Radnor-by-the-Sea with its temperament and poverty, New York, Paris — not even in his mind. Then why this pricking of conscience, this conviction that, in spite of his logic, he had allowed himself and his standards to be subtly, irrevocably cheapened?

His eye was attracted by the glaring red of a poster in front of the town's best movie-house, and he stopped to look. It was a picturization of Pierrot and the Moon Maiden. But before he could examine the lithograph with any care, he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard an excited voice exclaim, —

'If it is n't Gordon! Gordon Hamilton, the long-lost, the plutocratic, small-town Cræsus!'

'Oliver!' returned Gordon, 'Radnor-by-the-Sea's old thumper of the Steinway! What are you doing here in Fallon, Kansas?'

'On a mission of art and beauty — See there.' Oliver indicated the poster. 'It cannot be shown to jazz; it needs the interpretative music which I have composed myself.'

'Do you track a picture and play the piano in movie-houses like this?'

'Preaching the doctrine of the sublime.'

Gordon laughed lightly at the intended exaggeration.

'But seriously,' Oliver continued, 'the world does need ambassadors of the muse —'

'Pioneers of æstheticism, torch-bearers of the over-man, advance agents of the super-soul and —'

'Stop!' commanded Oliver.

'And Sylvia — she is here with you spreading the gospel of beauty?'

'Oh, Sylvia!' Oliver shrugged his shoulders in an expressive gesture. 'She is out of my life. You escaped because you could not win her; I escaped because I did.'

Gordon shuddered as he reflected on Oliver's fleeing to this soiled goal, banging out incidental melodies to a five-reel film. And yet, was it so different from his own effort to earn a couple of hundred for possibly as futile a journey to Paris?

'I've heard about you, Gordon,' said Oliver: 'how you married and set-

tled down to peace, prosperity, and Philistinism, as you may happen to remember, I once prophesied you would.'

'I'm not peaceful, though I am prosperous, and, I suppose, a thoroughgoing Philistine.'

'You, with your long drawn-out theories of literary expression, with your everlasting talk about what you were to write, with your real gift — you in this little town, just making money. It's a shame.'

'Oh, I don't know,' fenced Gordon; 'I'm still young enough, and only this evening I outlined a story which I shall work on to-night.'

'You won't write it,' declared Oliver flatly. 'I can see that.'

'You think I am quite hopeless?'

'Absolutely. One must be ready to make great sacrifices. Take myself. I might be a money-maker, too, but see what I do. I get only my expenses and twenty-five dollars a week, but I am happy, because every evening and sometimes twice a day I give to this little gem of fantasy a background of music.'

'You really are happy?'

'I am that. Next season I am to go out with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Only an artist can comprehend the joy I have in creating my own compositions. I could draw on a rich repertoire, but I prefer to dip into my own well.'

Gordon noticed the burning, far-seeing eyes, the pale skin, the deep lines from nostrils to the sensitive mouth, the nervous movements of the thin lips. And his clothes — how cheap!

'If this is his happiness,' thought Gordon, as both entered the crude little house for the first show, 'thank Heaven, I am not of it!'

Oliver went to the piano with the air of a Carnegie Hall soloist. Gordon wondered whether this might be because of a lack of humor or of an overabundance of it. Or was the man able to persuade himself that he was before

an audience thirsting for his art? His gestures were most profound. The piano, alas! was no instrument for this throbbing soul. Gordon saw very little of the picture, though what he watched was exquisite. The musician held him. Oliver had spoken the truth. It was plain that, as he played, he was lifted up into a world of poetry and ecstasy. Sincerity and happiness shone from his face. He did not seem to realize, as did Gordon, that he was pouring his music into stone ears. None of his efforts would make the slightest elevation of tone in Fallon. A thousand such ambassadors would leave it untouched.

During the wait between the first and second shows, Oliver seated himself by Gordon, who could not help hearing the little rustlings and whisperings as the townsfolk noticed their financier associating with this odd, minstrel-like stranger. It irritated Gordon to find that he felt conspicuous and uncomfortable.

'You did well,' he said kindly.

Oliver ate up this thin slice of praise. 'It's nothing compared to the things I am doing for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I've been thinking,' he went on impetuously, 'that since you are so well off, you might do something for a poor artist. You cannot help yourself, why not help me?'

'How?'

'By lending me enough to lease out-right one set of reels. I'll pay you back some day, if I can; and if I can't, you will, at least, have rendered some service to art.'

'How much will you want?'

'I don't know. I'll write you. I may need five or six hundred, and I may need more. It ought to be a good investment. Instead of getting only twenty-five a week, I'll often clear twenty-five a night when I play to my own show.'

'You have the right idea —'

'I know so many movie-owners; I can arrange more dates than I can handle.'

'I'll do it,' promised Gordon grimly; 'not to help art, but to show you what I have been up against. You will make money, and being cautious, you will save. You will lease a few more pictures, square yourself up with me, and go into the business on a larger scale. You will understand what has kept me from writing. You will become too occupied to compose.'

'No danger of that,' laughed Oliver confidently. 'You will really help me? I hate to ask it of you, but — you understand.'

'I understand you better than you think. I am going to undo this sordid little world of yours and send you on the road to peace, prosperity, and Philistinism. My dear fellow, you are soon to realize that this art for art's sake, this will to suffer, this sacrifice — is all bluff, except in youth — a pose! You may think you look down on me as a defaulter, but you envy me my success.'

'Not at the price you've paid for it.'

'Wait and see,' was Gordon's cryptic answer.

## V

As he made his way home, late that evening, after saying good-bye to his old friend, his mind was full. He was sure Oliver's was no standard, and yet he could not deny that at one time it had been his own.

'I must merely make a slight change in my life,' he told himself. 'I must buy and sell, handle my business transactions, edit the *Weekly*, and boost Itch-O; but I must remember, as Ruth does, that these things are a means, not an end. I'll put all these thoughts and emotions into a story, and if, when it's finished, it's no good, I'll be able to live my regular life without further qualms.'

Athrob with this urge for expression, his imagination began to picture situations and characters, and he was already making mental notes of sentences, when he was stopped by the professor, now only a minority stock-holder and assistant manager in the temple that issued such enormous quantities of salve for the anointing of the trusting.

'I say, Mr. Hamilton; just a minute.'

Gordon paused, impatient.

'You know we have n't had a new piece of literature in a dog's age.'

'Well, what of it?' Gordon asked sharply. 'The receipts seem to be coming in right along.'

'Just the same we ought to get out something new and classy — something catchy.'

'Get it done. For heaven's sake, are you helpless? Must I write every word?'

'There's no one can do it as well.'

'Perfect nonsense! We'll have to employ some live wire who can attend to the detail work. I'm getting sick and tired of it. I must have time to live, to think, to create.'

This was a new Gordon. Confused, the professor found an excuse to go.

'Always Itch-O, Itch-O!' thought Gordon disgustedly. 'It's high time I came to myself.'

He reached home a few minutes later and hurried to the library. There he found Ruth lying on the couch reading.

'Hello, dear,' she smiled pleasantly, noting the look of suppressed excitement in his eyes. 'What have you been made president of to-night?'

'President of my own soul. I've come home to work.'

'A set of by-laws for a new corporation?'

'No. I've had enough of this endless money-grubbing.'

Ruth's eyebrows arched slightly, but her tone was warm as she exclaimed, —

'You don't mean —?'

'That I've come home full of inspiration. I'm going to work on a story.'

She rose quickly. 'The library is yours, old dear. I'll make some coffee.'

Alone, Gordon sat down before his Corona and typed, 'The Seeker.' Then he thought hard. He wrote a while, hurriedly; tore out the sheet. Before he adjusted another, he recalled his recent meeting with the professor and cursed him roundly. In his own journey to Parnassus, this fat little man had stopped him with a fat little temptation, and since then he had been bowing before the god of Itch-O.

He searched for his pipe and lost himself in a whirlwind of chaotic reflections. One thought, however, dominated — that of the necessity for a new booklet — a clever one. Oh, the professor's evil spirit! How it persisted!

'I know why I can't write to-night,' Gordon grumbled. 'It's this wretched pamphlet. It has to be done. When I get it out of the way, I'll be free to go ahead with a clear mind.'

From then on, the typewriter clicked without a halt. Again did the praises of Itch-O rise in symphonic volume, with the glorious climax that 'the trial treatment is free.'

When, hours later, Ruth, heeding a sudden silence, came in with a dainty tray, Gordon lay back in his chair, exhausted. A lump swelled in his throat as his tired mind admitted that once more he had been caught.

'You've been working hard,' Ruth said tenderly. 'You look worn out. Will you show me what you have written?'

Embarrassed, he turned down the pages.

'I was n't in the mood, precious, I —, 'But what have you been doing?'

'Nothing, nothing; just a little matter that's been hanging over me. I'll tackle the story to-morrow evening. Well, shall we get to sleep?'

# OPEN THE GATES

BY MARGARET PRESCOTT MONTAGUE

OPEN the gates of your heart and let her go.  
The gates are high and the lock is hard, I know,  
And, wistful, the anchors of home would faithfully hold  
Her fast — her bag, her shawl with its empty fold.  
All day the robin has pled from the locust tree,  
And the lambs she loved gone wistful across the lea;  
Dark rain on the mountain, and tears on your cheek, but she  
Heeds them not now. She is busy, with deep-drawn breath  
On breath, greeting her tall strange visitor Death.  
He has wrapt her about in his mantle of wisdom away  
From your touch; your tears, your kisses are naught to-day.  
In vain the larkspurs bloom in the garden bed,  
And the gossamer's jeweled gift on the grass is spread;  
In vain the poppies, in vain your grief, and so  
You must open the gates of your heart and let her go.

And now there are folk by her side you never knew,  
They are only faded daguerreotypes to you;  
Quaint people in stocks and pantalettes, kept there  
With the little brown curl she tenderly marked 'Mother's hair.'  
Nothing but names to you, they were dead so long,  
But now — ah, strange! She is yours no more, 't is their strong  
Hidden arms that receive, their love that has bade her depart,  
And their cold, cold fingers that are breaking the lock of your heart.  
— Ah, wistful robin, and lambs you call, but no,  
We must open the difficult gates and let her go.