

HIS IMMORTALITY

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THERE was nobody in the neighborhood that Nance hated quite so much as she hated Big Bill—and Nance was a good hater.

I wish that I could make you know Nance as I knew her in those old days when the lower East Side was her home and mine, and when we used to meet, once in a way, for a late supper at the ——. But no matter; I shall have simply to tell you the bare facts about Nance, and let you judge for yourself. In the one really great event of her life I played no part whatever, unless a phonograph may be said to play a part in the life of the opera-star that sings into it. I was her friend—really her friend, and not at all her friend in the way in which you and most other men employ the term as between one of our sex and one of the other sex—and what I here set down was what she told me not long after Nance made her Great Adventure.

I don't suppose that you would have called Nance a beautiful woman—unless, perhaps, you saw her dressed for work. In spite of the name that we all knew her by, and in spite of her English that seemed native to her, she was a French girl of peasant stock; not the diminutive and perfectly corseted Parisienne, you understand; but a girl from the provinces—from some remote countryside in the provinces—and, although she never told even me much about her origin, I always set her down as a native of the Midi. She was a big, strapping girl, taller than the average man, and splendidly proportioned. If you can imagine Venus de Milo with red cheeks—naturally red cheeks, mind you; the red of good health and leaping vitality—and a mouth that was like a generous rose and black eyes that could snap with mirth and dart the lightnings of anger—you have, physically, something of the Nance that I knew. I have seen her knock down a Broadway masher with the most careless of blows; I have seen her break a beer-bottle over the head of Terry Callahan, who used to be bouncer at Tom Sharkey's; and

I have seen her hold a baby in her arms with all the tenderness and all the love of a mediæval Madonna.

Of course, when she was in what she called her business-clothes, she was stunning. In winter she affected a long fur cloak that came nearly to her ankles—a coat of some black fur, with a *toque* to match—which set off the color in her cheeks and made men gasp when they laid eyes on her; and in summer she donned simple frocks of white, which served her quite as well. But at home, which is to say in her shifting East Side tenements, she was the French peasant girl again, speaking an English that belonged to the Bowery, but dressing and thinking and living her own primitive life. She wasn't neat then and she wasn't refined, and I dare say that you would not have looked twice at her. Besides, she presented a combination that you would have believed a contradiction in terms: Nance was a shop-lifter by profession and, by inclination, what you call a "good" girl.

I do not attempt to explain this. I have met so many similar contradictions among Nance's friends that they have ceased to be contradictions to me; but I know full well how improbable the situation seems to your sophisticated senses; so I merely set down the fact as a fact, and I ask you to accept it from me as from one that knows definitely what he is talking about; with none of the other virtues that make your women-friends ladies, Nance had and held through many a battle that one virtue without which, according to your standard, no woman is a lady.

Perhaps in part because of this, since there is no way so easy and hence so common to catch a criminal as through the person that the criminal loves, Nance remained uncaught. Her police-record, after five years of successful operations in all the worth-while Broadway and Fifth Avenue stores, was absolute zero. Not only had she never been convicted; she had never even been placed under arrest.

Don't ask me how she contrived this. I do not know. I know only that it is true. Everybody is aware, nowadays, that the house-detectives in the big stores make deals with certain favored shop-lifters; but I have every reason to believe that

Nance never entered such a deal. She merely, somehow, managed to remain above suspicion.

Not that sheer utility was her motive for avoiding amorous entanglements. It was not. I remember one evening looking at her strong figure, her glowing cheeks and vital eyes and asking her why she did not "tie up"—that was the East Side phrase for it in my day—with somebody.

I can still see her toss her wonderful head as she answered.

"It'd be hard to put a man wise to that," she said—when at work, she spoke Fifth Avenue; when at rest, East Side. "But it's just because I want to be my own boss. When a fellow gets a girl, he takes; when a girl gets a fellow, she gives. See what I mean?"

I nodded.

"No, you don't," she went on. "No man ever does. It ain't as if I t'ought one thing was crooked an' the other on the level. Not me. I'm my own bale o' goods. I can hand it over or keep it on the shelf. But when it gets across the counter, it belongs to the guy that pays for it, an' as long's it's on the shelf it's mine. I t'ink so little about doin' what people calls wrong that it ain't no temptation to do it. Do you get me now?"

I never inquired of her how she came to be a shop-lifter, and she never told me. There is, in the Jungle, an etiquette quite as exacting as that which obtains in the cities of the plain, and its reticences are binding. From a word or two dropped here and there through our long intimacy, I came to guess that poverty had started her, as poverty sooner or later will start most men and women on whom it fastens its fingers; but directly she never offered any explanation, and in her withholding of all explanation there was a dignity that I honored. It was enough for me to know that she was Nance and that, shop-lifter though she might be, no man had ever won her.

Win her a great many men undoubtedly tried to do. They tried it in the open, frank manner of the criminal classes, and the various methods of their wooing, not to mention the question of their relative chances, was one of the most fruitful sources

of speculative conversation that our little group of intimates possessed.

Now it was Con Davis that seemed to have the lead, and now Baby Hen Schultz was the best bet. There was a time when nearly all of us—although I never really thought so much of it—would have put our money on a pool-room sharp whom we all knew intimately yet named only as “Blondie.” There were wire-tappers and second-story men, gunmen, gangsters, procurers and even one or two members of the gambling fraternity that formed our aristocracy. There were well-dressed men and ill-dressed, men that lavished money and men that threatened blows. But not one of them copped out Nance. They would appear and flutter, and disappear, and Nance would remain. She liked them all and loved not one. It was Big Bill who persisted, and only Big Bill won her hate.

“Sometime,” said Nance, “I’m goin’ t’ get that guy. You take it from me.”

I didn’t blame her: Big Bill possessed about as few of the moral qualities as it is possible for a man to possess and keep alive on. I have a theory that, though good men may, and do, die daily, no man can continue long alive after all the good has gone out of him. It seems to me that a certain modicum of goodness, though it be not always what the world would so describe, is as necessary to the life of the soul as blood is to the life of the body, and that when the soul ceases to make goodness for itself to run on as the body makes blood, the man dies as surely as if he had severed a major artery. Judged in the terms of this theory, Big Bill, the huskiest man of my acquaintance, was, and had long remained, *in extremis*.

He was a wonder. He was six feet three and a half inches high and broad accordingly. He could plait the black hair on his huge chest and tie ribbons on it, and I once saw him win ten dollars by performing in reality a trick that most of us know only as a proverb: he felled a steer with one blow of his sledgehammer fist. His coat-sleeves were continually straining over his biceps, yet he was not muscle-bound. When he was stripped, the muscles of his back crawled like entangled boa-constrictors. He was the strongest man between the East River and Fifth

Avenue, and yet, at thirty-five, he had spent eleven years in jail.

When he was twelve years old, Bill had gone to the New York Juvenile Asylum for breaking his school-teacher's head: "Opened it like an oyster," he used to remark. Released from there, after various rebellions, in one of which he snapped a monitor's arm across his knee, he began a career that led directly from election-rows, where he laid up the men most dangerous to the precinct-boss, to a more or less regular business in high-way robbery. In the Asylum he had wanted to learn the blacksmith's trade, but the authorities put him in the tailor-shop; he hated that work and did not learn it: in his final occupation he was proficient. He could tell at a glance almost to the dime how much money was carried by any passer-by; he selected his prey, followed it into a dark street, knocked it down, robbed it and walked away. When the police caught him anywhere near the scenes of these crimes, his conviction was a foregone conclusion; but they did not often find Big Bill until he had placed a considerable distance between him and his victim and had arranged with a few pals for an alibi.

Bill was not a handsome man. His head was bullet-like, and his neck thick; the black hair, always matted, grew low on his forehead; his mouth and jaw were heavy; his nose was a decided "pug," and his eyes were sullen. Yet he was so nearly perfect physically that he was a splendid example of what the human body can be made. He was not what the few like, but what the many adore: not Apollo, but Hercules. I used to say to myself that he was just the type of man that Nance would end by accepting, and I used to wonder why she seemed to dislike him.

For Bill was set upon conquering Nance's affections from the first time he saw her. That was one evening, a whole year before the end, when he bumped into her as she was returning to her lonely tenement-room with a bucket of beer. Long afterwards, Nance told me what happened, and I merely tell what followed in my own words.

"Look where you're goin'," said Nance, as she with difficulty saved the beer from disaster. "You must t'ink you own the street."

Bill did not look where he was going. There was a lamp-post beside them, and, under its light, he looked steadily at Nance. What he saw pleased him.

"If I owned the street, I'd wrap it up in a bundle an' give it to you for Christmas," he said.

"Aw, go on," said Nance—and oh, Nance, I can see the light in your eyes as you said it!—"You're kind of half-shot, you are."

Bill had guessed her destination, perhaps from some movement on her part. At any rate, he backed against the door that she was making for, and there quietly blocked the way.

"I ain't so lit up but I could help you drink that beer," he said.

"Get out," Nance answered. "I know who you are, all right, all right. Get away now an' lemme in."

"If you give me a drink, maybe I will," said Bill, who doubtless liked to know that his fame had reached this girl with the eyes of a deer and the walk of a panther.

"I will not," Nance vowed. "I'm not runnin' no free-soup kitchen."

Bill put a great fist into his pocket and rattled many coins:

"I can pay for what I get."

"Then go over to Grady's saloon an' buy a glass: these here suds ain't for sale. Go on, now: I'm warnin' you."

Bill took his hand from his pocket. He grinned.

"If you give me a drink," he said, "I'll give you a kiss."

Nance said nothing. She put out her left arm and seized Bill's collar. She meant to swing the giant from his place.

She nearly succeeded, too. Bill was unused to opposition from the inhabitants of the East Side; still less, being the conqueror of a hundred feminine hearts, was he used to opposition from women. Nance was sudden, and Bill swayed aside.

He was a little angry. As she darted by him, he seized her hair in one hand and with the other tilted her chin until their lips almost met.

Then Nance threw the beer in his face.

"There's your drink for you!" she cried, and, under cover

of the ensuing confusion, she ran upstairs and locked herself in her own room.

She was beerless, but unkissed.

II

Nance had gone to her corner with all the noticed points in her favor. She had the better of it for the first round; but what had happened was, and she and all of us knew it, only the first round of what must be a fight to the finish. Neither of these combatants was of the sort that goes in for a half-way contest.

The news of the encounter spread among us with that rapidity with which such news always spreads in such a community, and we all fell to watching its progress, gossiping about its changes and speculating upon its result with the avidity with which a more refined society watches, gossips and speculates when a similar situation arises between two prominent members of its especial circle. It was with us exactly as it is with the rich when the man-hating heiress of the town's biggest millionaire is pursued by the town's best polo-player. In that case, I am informed, women talk it over at teas while their husbands, sons and lovers lay wagers on it in the club-windows. In our society, the wife of Mr. Grady, the saloon-keeper, discussed Big Bill's chances with Mrs. Charley Netter, who said she was the wife of Diamond Charley, our chief gambling-house proprietor, and Mrs. Mol Henry, the question of whose husband it was not polite to raise, but who did a comfortable business as a receiver of stolen goods; while Grady and Diamond Charley and Ikie Bloom, who was on good terms with Mol, made bets in the room at the rear of Grady's place of business.

Bill certainly fought well. He tried every acknowledged mode of attack, and he invented a few new methods.

At the start he merely kept on nagging Nance. The next time he passed her in the street—and he unostentatiously arranged that this should be soon after the affair of the beer-kettle—he stopped in front of her and bowed with an exaggerated leer.

“Doin’ a good business at your bath-house?” he inquired.

Nance glared and stepped around the bulky obstruction that he presented to her progress.

He pursued his line of unappreciated pleasantries for a week or ten days, and when it was forced upon his intelligence that he was working on a false hypothesis, he began to frequent Nance's haunts and offer her his more serious courtesies. He approached her and asked her to supper, and she haughtily refused. Once he mentioned a day at Coney Island, was laughed at for considering her "a perfume-counter skirt"—by which term Nance referred to the young ladies that are employed in certain departments of the large stores—and when Bill hastily substituted Atlantic City for Coney he was warned that he would find no favor even were he to suggest a private yacht to Newport.

"What do you really think of him?" I asked Nance as, one evening, she sat with me in that back room of Grady's place.

She looked at me as we all knew she had been looking at Big Bill for two months past.

"If you can't tell from the way I treats him," said Nance, "you're too big a fool to try to make it plain to."

"But," I protested, "the way that a woman treats a man isn't any sign of what she thinks of him."

"It is with this woman," said Nance. "It's a dead sure sign."

I tried to draw her out.

"I believe you're afraid of him."

"Me? Of that guy? What do you take me for?"

"He can whip any fellow on the avenue. He has whipped most of us." I recalled a little occurrence that does not belong to this story. "As a matter of fact, he whipped me about a week ago."

"Huh!" sniffed Nance. "I could do that myself."

I knew that she could and I knew that, for all her friendly feeling for me, if I annoyed her too much she undoubtedly would. Still I dared a bit longer.

"You are afraid of him," I repeated.

"Not much, I'm not," Nance answered. "If he dared fight square he might do for me. I'd give him a good run for his money even then, but he'd do for me if he dared fight square."

Only he wouldn't dare. He's only a hold-up man, an' he wouldn't dare. He knows it, an' he knows I know it."

"Well, I thought some women liked a man that was weaker—somebody they could mother."

"Gee! T'ink o' me motherin' Big Bill!" The picture amused her, but she took her fine, wild eyes from it. "No," she said, "I do what I got to, but my man, if I ever get one, he's got to be different. I don't like Bill for the same reason I don't like none o' the other fellows round here. You know what I mean: I like 'em all right, but I couldn't like 'em that way—never. I couldn't tie up with no guy that was a brute, or a sneak, or a yellow dog. All our fellows are one or other o' them t'ings, but they don't try to bother me. Well, Big Bill does try to bother me, an' he's all three o' them t'ings I said, an' more o' them t'ings than any other guy in the whole avenue-gang."

As time went on, Bill changed his tactics again and again. He was too proud to enlist any of his friends in his service—he would plead his own cause and win it, or else he would lose it alone—but he would essay every means in his power, and I think he tried them all.

Once, I remember, there had been a particularly ugly hold-up within a block of Diamond Charley's gambling-establishment. The police were annoyed because the victim who had just left Charley's place with ten thousand dollars in his pocket, turned out to be a prominent politician from a remote but powerful West Side ward, very nearly died from the fractured skull received at the butt of his assailant's revolver, and, recovering, had pull enough to make things warm for the police when they could arrest no likely person. Charley was angry because the episode occurred so close to his house that it cast upon him the suspicion of "fixing" anybody that won too heavily there, not to mention the fact that, large as was the sum he regularly paid for police-protection, this particular victim might visit him with vengeance. But, within three days, Big Bill was spreading himself in his favorite haunts dressed in a glory that, even could he have afforded it, not another man of the avenue would have dared assume.

Nobody ventured to criticise. The clothes did not become their wearer—nothing but a tiger-skin over his great shoulders would ever have seemed a fitting drapery for Big Bill—but we were all unwholesomely afraid of his mighty fist. So those of us who were not such liars as to flatter held our peace.

Bill spent right and left the money that he carried in those new clothes. He spent it before Nance's eyes, and he pretended not to see Nance or that she pretended not to see him. He kept this up for some time and then, following her and overtaking her in the street one afternoon, he held out to her a hundred-dollar bill. He held it so that its denomination was obvious.

Nance flushed darkly. I happen to know that she was rather hard up just then, but her arms remained at her sides.

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's yours," said Bill. He looked at her, and his heavy face weakened a little. "If you can use it," he added.

"I can't," said Nance.

Bill tried to laugh.

"I t'ought you might want to build a new wing to your bath-house."

"Not with your money I don't," said Nance. It was enough, but, as she eyed him, instinct told her that she could wound him in another way. "You look like a Dago barber in them clothes," she concluded.

Even after so many rebuffs from her, he had not expected this one. He bit his lip, because he was hurt; and then he squared his jaw, because he was angry.

"All right," he said, "there's lots o' girls that will take it."

He left her, and the next few weeks proved the truth of his prediction. Not that he required money to win women. The list of his conquests was notoriously the largest on the avenue. Big Bill had been loved by scores. Until Nance's path crossed his, it had been accepted as an axiom among us that he need but beckon and they would run to him. We had all believed that he could win whom he chose, and hitherto his choice had been so varied that even the avenue-gang shook their heads at it.

Now, however, he went beyond all this. He was seen in a motor with Mrs. Charley Netter; he stole Cock-eye Cusenier's

sweetheart Alice, and when Cock-eye shot at him, he broke that despairing swain's jaw. There were also other feminine victims to his charms. And he took care to show himself with these in Nance's view.

Then he sought out Nance and said he wanted her to marry him and go to Chicago, where he had the chance of partnership in that city's largest gambling-house; and Nance, of course, refused. Next he tried the effect of absenting himself for two months, presumably at the Chicago Palace of Chance, and, returning, found that the effect was nil. And after that he engaged upon a series of hold-ups so vicious and so daring that we all knew he was due for a trip up the river—which is to say, certain of a term in Sing Sing—within a brief number of weeks. Big Bill didn't care. "Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad": Bill, who rarely drank to excess in the old days, went on a prolonged spree, ran amuck and, one after the other, thrashed, brutally and inhumanly, every one of his friends that he could find.

He wound up with Nance. By this time he was in that terrible stage of cold cruelty which, in some physiqués, mimics sobriety and succeeds the more patent but less dangerous violence of drunkenness. He climbed the dark stairs—for it was evening now—to her door and knocked.

There was no response; but Bill was sure that he heard a board creak inside the room. He knocked again, more loudly now.

"Nance," he said.

No answer.

"Nancy, lemme in."

Still silence. Bill put his mouth to the keyhole.

"Nance," he said in a low, ugly voice, "I want to see you. D'you hear? This is Bill. You know I don't mind a little trouble. If you don't open this door, I'll smash it."

He heard her step now: it crossed the room, lithe and steady.

She flung wide the door and stood there, an Amazonian figure, silhouetted against the light from within.

"This is the limit," she said. Her voice was as low as his had been, but he could see her broad bosom rise and fall under

her thin blouse. "If you don't go, an' go right away, I'll knock you down them stairs."

She meant it. She had opened the door only because she knew how frail it was and how certain he would be to break it. She might have run away by the fire-escape, but she was not yet in a mood to run. She raised a threatening hand.

Bill was too quick for her. He sprang under her arm and into the room. He turned, caught her by the hair, as she, too, turned, dragged her in and slammed the door behind them.

"Now," he swore, "we'll see who's boss."

His eyes were slits of slow fire; his brute-face was chalky white. With one hand twisted in her loosened hair, he put the other to her throat and forced her to her knees before him.

She looked up at him, her face red with futile rage. I know that she must have been more handsome than ever.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

He bent over and tightened his hold.

"You," said Bill.

In the grip of his dreadful hands, she laughed at him.

"Not on your life," she answered.

"It's *your* life," said Bill. It was he who was breathing heavily now: he was breathing heavily from the something so like hate that boiled in his heart and throbbed in his temples. "You know me. I ain't afraid of a killin'. Think it over."

"I don't have to!"

He bent lower. His breath beat on her face.

"It'll be all straight," he said. "You can pick your own preacher. Give me your promise, an' I'll go 'way now an' come for you with the minister to-morrow. T'row me down an'—an' I'll kill you, Nance."

The lamp was on the small centre table. Its light was full upon her, but in her splendid eyes he saw only a fearless defiance.

"Then," said Nance, "you can kill now an' be damned."

He drew back. He could scarcely believe her, and yet he did believe her. He pulled himself together. He choked her suddenly until the red cheeks grew purple.

"Now," he said, and loosened his fingers for her answer.

She spluttered and writhed. She could not speak, but her eyes looked her hatred. She shook her head.

Bill tightened his grip ever so little.

"I love you!" he said.

An attempted smile twisted her swollen lips, a smile of scornful unbelief.

Bill again loosened his fingers.

"Then why—" she gasped.

"*That's* why," said Bill. "I'm killin' you because I love you, an' you won't have me." He paused. "Why won't you have me, Nance?" he asked, but there was no pleading in his tone: his tone was a threat.

She knew this. She knew that here was her chance to temporize. But, among all her faults, Nance had not the vice with which she now fearlessly, looking at her death as it was plainly written in his face, charged Bill.

"Because you're a coward," she said.

"A *what?*"

In his amazement he nearly released her. She might have charged him with every other sin, and he would have gloried in its acknowledgment. But the sin of cowardice——

"Yes, you are," she cried, her voice regained: "A coward—a coward—a *coward!* The worst sort: the brute, sneak, yellow-dog sort. You wouldn't hold up nobody of your own size if he was ready for you. You've licked all the avenue-boys because they was afraid of your loud mouth, an' you wouldn't 'a' dared tackle no one of 'em if you hadn't 'a' knowed they all *was* afraid. You got all these girls runnin' after you because they was afraid of you. An' now you t'ink I'm like the rest, an' you try it on with me. You bully me 's if I was as big a coward as all the boys is—an' you are yourself. An' the first crack out o' the box, you run away when I t'rows a can o' suds at you!"

His back was toward the door. He knew that he had let his right hand fall from her throat. He did not know that his left hand had released her hair and that the rickety door had swung open behind him.

Like the panther that she was, Nance, whose eyes had missed

nothing, and who had gathered herself for the spring, shot to her feet and brought the top of her skull into smashing contact with the point of Bill's jaw. In the same instant, she planted a fist in the pit of his stomach, and under the weight of those twin blows, Bill reeled out of the room and fell in a heap on the landing.

When he came to himself a moment later, the door was locked. When he had broken the door open, the room was empty: Nance, expecting this renewal of attack, had fled for the night by the fire-escape.

That was the night when Diamond Charley Netter was killed. A man goaded by thwarted blood-lust went into Charley's gambling-house. According to next day's newspapers, he taunted the proprietor with Mrs. Netter's escapades and, when ordered away, shouted that he would kill Charley and did so by knocking him down with the handiest chair. The murderer got away before any of the frightened patrons of the place dared to interfere. And the murderer was Big Bill.

III

At ten o'clock the next night Nance was seated in her room, reading the last edition of an evening paper, which, under a headline that spread itself across two columns, declared that, though Big Bill had not yet been captured, the police were sure that he had not left town, that their watchers at stations and ferries now made his departure impossible, and that his arrest was but a question of hours.

"Well," she thought, "it was a low-down job. If they get him it's the chair for Bill, sure—an' I hope they get him."

She heard a light tapping at her window-pane. The window opened on the fire-escape, and the fire-escape led to an alley. She turned.

There was a face at the window—Big Bill's.

Without so much as a start, Nance walked to the window and threw it wide.

"Come in," she said.

He leaped in lightly; leaned out again and scrutinized, to

right and left, the dark alley far below. Then he shut the window and drew the blind.

"Put that there lamp on the floor between us an' the window," he said. "We don't want no shadows givin' us away."

She obeyed him and, as he sat down panting, looked at him with what seemed a mild interest.

If Bill had not appeared handsome at their last encounter, twenty hours of hiding in the best hiding-places of New York's East Side had not improved his appearance. His great bulk seemed to have shrunken; his head, under dampened hair, drooped toward his chest. His mouth lolled like a despairing runner's, and his clothes and face were spattered with mud.

"You need a drink," said Nance coldly.

His heavy lips parted, but a nod was his sole reply.

Nance produced a bottle and a glass. She poured him some whiskey, which his shaking hand nearly spilled.

"Where you been?" she asked.

Bill gulped the liquor.

"Most everywhere. The gang's all down on me now. You seen what happened?"

"Yes."

"Well, the gang was all tied up with Charley, so they're layin' for me as hard as the cops is. I been in that stable"—he jerked his bullet-like head to indicate the direction of the alley—"since seven o'clock."

"You can't clear out o' town?"

"No chance. They got fly-cops everywhere—even the tunnel-stations. I tried some. They 'most spotted me at Cortlandt Street an' at Twenty-third an' Six' Avenue before I spotted them."

Nance planted herself before him and looked down at him, arms akimbo, her fine head tilted back, her nostrils dilated with scorn.

"An' you knowed everyone knowed how I hated you, an' this'd be the last place they'd t'ink you'd be?"

His white face flushed.

"It ain't that—" he began, and stopped short.

"Then what was it? I never liked Charley, but I didn't want to see him croaked. What was it? You've knowed me near a year, Bill, an' you'd ought to know by now what I t'ink of you. I like your nerve. This'd ought to be the worst hang-out you'd dare come to."

His narrow eyes met hers.

"Then why'd you let me in?" he asked.

Yes, that was it! Why had she let him in? It was not because she would have been afraid to deny him: the first glance through the window at Bill's changed face had told her that he was no longer anything to fear. Perhaps she had acted on the impulse that controls so many of the enemies of society: the impulse to aid the flight of whomsoever society pursues. Perhaps it was a development of this— Ah, she had it now! She looked at him with a mixture of dislike and pity.

"I let you in," she said, "because you looked more'n ever what I said you was last night."

His thick lips trembled. His haggard eyes, wide enough now, met hers.

"A coward?" he asked.

"Yep, a coward, Bill."

His expression did not change.

"Well," he said, "that's what I counted on. I doped it out like this: The fellows is sore on me for this here killin', an' if I got any of 'em to hide me it'd be somewheres where the cops'd look for me, an' it'd be trustin' to somebody I couldn't trust a lot; it'd be done for me because the guy was afraid o' me, an' so he'd be lookin' for a chance to give me up. But there was you. You wasn't afraid o' me. Whatever you done you'd do because you was sorry for me now I was in wrong——"

"Well, I ain't sorry you're in wrong."

"I don't mean it that way. I mean I doped it that whatever you'd do for me'd be because you wasn't no coward an' knowed I was a coward, an' not bein' no coward yourself an' knowin' I was, you'd feel better to me than anybody'd feel to me if he was afraid o' me. See what I mean?" He seemed desperately anxious that she should understand. "I counted on this: that nobody can't be kind to somebody they're afraid of,

but everybody's got to be kind to somebody's they've got the better of."

Nance's arms had fallen to her side. What, she wondered, had happened to this man? Could a day's flight and hiding thus change one? This was the bully who had choked her and threatened her life, this almost cringing creature that now talked in sincerity about the impossibility of cruelty on the part of the powerful toward the powerless! Hate as she had hated the brute, she hated more the moral weakling. Her soul revolted at this visualized concept of strength so turned to driveling weakness. She wanted to see the former frightful Bill again. She wanted to lash him into his old self. Her hands clenched. She leaned forward.

"You're a nice one!" she cried. "You're a nice t'ing to look at, you are. You been a fine bluff, ain't you? I was right: I didn't half believe it when I said it last night, but I know it now—you *are* a coward!"

"I *am*!"

The phrase blazed from him suddenly. He jumped to his feet. He stood before her another man—a third Bill, a man that she had never known before. His face worked, his massive chest heaved; a torrent of words rushed from his lips.

"I'm a coward all right, all right!" he said. "But not the kind you t'ink. Not that. I never was an' never could be. I can face any six men an' lick 'em. I can be licked by any dozen an' not play the baby-act. I can fight the cops an' go to the Chair. But I'm a coward all the same—an' that's why I come here. Sit down!"

He pointed to a chair beside the table.

This was indeed a new Bill. Something told her that it was at last the real Bill, and the sheer force of that revelation of a new personality in a familiar body—the sense that she was to see a soul laid bare—conquered her as nothing else in the world could have conquered her. Nance sank into the chair and looked at him open-mouthed.

"Listen here," he said. "I seen two papers, an' I know what they're sayin' about me. But it's a lie. I was alone with Charley in his office next the poker-room—you know. Nobody

heard what we said. I didn't put it up to him about his wife: he put it up to me, because he's stuck on another girl, an' he wanted to get rid of her—I mean his wife—an' wanted me to squeal about her an' me; an' I wouldn't stand for it. I told him he was a liar, an' he pulled a gun on me. I knowed he meant business, and I picked up the chair. Then some nice guy heard us an' must 'a' pulled open the door so's they all seen the finish—all the crowd in the poker-room. Charley'd dropped the gun when he seen the door open, but by then the chair was flyin' at him. It come down; I'd croaked him, an' I made my get-away."

She believed him.

"Self-defence," she said. "Why'd you run?"

"Habit. That was it—except I knowed that gang wouldn't 'a' listened to no argument. Run first an' tell 'em afterwards: that's the only t'ing when you got to do with a mob. But I wasn't afraid. I fought my way out."

Nance's breath came short. Her eyes shone.

"If—if they get you," she asked, "can't you tell 'em in court what you just told me?"

"A swell chance I'd have to be believed," laughed Bill. "You know they all got it in for me. An' nobody saw the start o' the fight or heard it."

"There was the gun on the floor."

"I couldn't prove he drew it first. Not a little bit. My record'll do for anyt'ing I got to say. I fixed my own feet this time—an' it's for keeps, too."

She was leaning across the table, her arms extended, her hands clasped. She forgot the old Bill, she saw only the likelihood of an injustice being done.

"You mean manslaughter?"

Again he laughed. "With all the cops layin' for me for years to get the goods on me, an' all that gang hatin' me an' ready to swear to anyt'ing? I mean the Chair!"

He was right; she knew that he was right. She got up and began to pace the room, a panther caged.

"They won't look here."

"Not right away. Not for a few days, maybe, Nance. But I can't stay shut up here forever."

"An' you can't beat it out o' town?"

"I told you how that was."

"Not if you wait a day or two?"

"They'll keep watchin' for a week."

"Well—a week then?"

"An' then, before they'd quit watchin' the ferries an' the stations, they'd search the rooms of everybody I'd ever talked to—yes, an' this room, too. They'd guess by then that the way you'd hated me might 'a' been a bluff."

A last flame of the old hatred flickered in her face, but she smothered it. He had been right: she was sorry for him because he was the underdog.

"Then can't you get a room somewhere on the West Side? Nobody's on to you in the West Side," she advised.

"My picture's in every paper in town. By to-morrow there'll be a reward out. The only room I can get's in Sing Sing—an' I won't keep that long."

"Don't talk like that!" She stopped and looked across at him.

"It's straight," he said.

She tried to answer, but she knew that there was no answer to be made.

"Listen here," he said calmly: "I ain't t'rough yet. I want to tell you why I don't cut it short by givin' myself up. I want to tell you why I'm a coward." He stooped and rested his hands on the table. "Take a look at me, Nance," he said.

She looked: the hunted expression had passed from his face, but the old look that she had hated was not there; it, too, had passed, had fallen away as a mask might fall, and revealed something else, as the fallen mask reveals the real face. The matted hair hung low over the forehead, the square jaw was still pugnacious, and the misshapen nose was no better than it had been. Yet somehow the mouth drawn tight seemed another mouth to Nance, and in the deep-set eyes a new light burned.

"You know what I am," he said, "an' I guess I look it. I done about half the bad t'ings people says I done—an' most guys that people talk about don't do more'n a quarter. I might 'a' been some use, but I was wasted. I don't blame nobody.

People wanted me to be somethin' I didn't want to be. They wouldn't let me be what I wanted, an' I wouldn't be what they wanted. So here I am. I don't believe I got much more sport out o' holdin' up guys an' knockin' 'em out than the guys had themselves. I sure didn't get rich at it. I been doin' a lot o' t'inkin' to-day. You can t'ink when you run away: if you know your runnin' ain't goin' to get you away, you got to t'ink. An' I doped it all out."

His eyes held hers. He went on:

"Them other girls never counted"—he dismissed their memory with a wave of his head—"nothin' never counted till I got stuck on you. I don't mean gettin' stuck on you made me any better. I was used to bein' what I was, I guess. It didn't make me better a little bit, an' it made me act like a fool to you. So you wouldn't have nothin' to do with me, an' I guess you was right. But somehow it got me t'inkin'. I knowed I'd got to end up like this sometime, all right, an' I wasn't afraid to die, but I didn't want *all* o' me to die. I didn't want to just go out like a match a fellow'd t'row in the gutter when the wind's blowed it out an' he ain't got a light. I got afraid o' that—terrible afraid I wouldn't leave the lighted cigarette behind me. Well, I didn't know quite for sure it was that till to-day; I didn't know it till I knowed for sure the match was certain to be put out an' put out quick."

Nance had no mind for the figurative. Her brows were contracted, yet she was breathing fast.

"What're you gettin' at?" she asked.

He bent nearer.

"This. Oh, I want it to be regular for you; I don't want nobody ever to t'row it up to you or—or it. You can go to City Hall, givin' my real name—the cops don't know that—an' you can get a preacher from the West Side Mission where they don't know me. You can do that to-morrow, an' then t'ree days from now, before they can get you in wrong by findin' me here, out I walks an' gives myself up to the police."

Nance had risen. Her color was high.

"You mean—you mean——"

"I mean you don't owe me nothin', an' so I t'ink you'll give

me everyt'ing." He came around the table and stood close to her, but he did not touch her. "Inside a week I'll be caught, an' inside a couple o' months I'll be dead. I don't kick. It wasn't comin' to me for Charley, an' I ain't sorry for him a little bit, but I guess I deserve it on general principles, an' I won't mind—I wouldn't mind not at all if I t'ought I'd leave some o' my life behind me. I wouldn't mind dyin' if I left a life alive."

Nance had been looking at the table. Now she turned to Bill. Within her broad bosom something—not love for this man, but surely pity for him, and surely a deeper instinct and a greater passion than love—something that had for years fought within her strong body and demanded that body's completion, something that was love not for what was but for what was to be—shone in her face and made her beautiful. She did not open her arms to him; she did not speak; she put out her hand and gripped his.

Is there a chink in the high wall of the future through which men in the shadow of death, and only such men, may peer? Big Bill, at any rate, seems to have had a clearer vision than, had I been asked for an opinion, would at that time have been mine. A hurried City Hall clerk gave Nance a marriage-license in her own name and another name that I shall not reveal. A week later—against what protests and after what struggles I do not care to ask—Big Bill surrendered himself to the police at a station-house in the Bronx. Two months later, with a superb calm, he died in the Chair, and the papers said that he was a hardened criminal to the end.

And Nance? Well, I sha'n't tell you where Nance is living now. I shall tell you only that she has made her Great Adventure, that she has invested her ill-gotten gains in a small shop, is still a widow and is the most conventional and respectable of women. She spoke to me only the other day of her last attempt in her old business:

"The store-detective looked hard at me," she said, "an' no wonder; I had t'ree baby-dresses in my mink muff."

Little William is a sturdy lad and takes prizes at day-school and Sunday-School. I leave the riddle of little William to the Eugenists.

ADVENTURES WHILE PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF BEAUTY

NICHOLAS VACHEL LINDSAY

I

I Start on my Walk

AS some of the readers of this account are aware, I took a walk last summer from my home town, Springfield, Illinois, across Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas, up and down Colorado and into New Mexico. One of the most vivid little episodes of the trip, that came after two months of walking, I would like to tell at this point. It was in Southern Colorado. It was early morning. Around the cliff, with a boom, a rattle and a bang appeared a gypsy wagon. On the front seat was a Roman, himself dressed inconspicuously, but with his woman more bedecked than Carmen. She wore the bangles and spangles of her Hindu progenitors. The woman began to shout at me, I could not distinguish just what. The two seemed to think this was the gayest morning the sun ever shone upon. They came faster and faster, then, suddenly, at the woman's suggestion, pulled up short. And she asked me with a fraternal, confidential air, "What you sellin', what you sellin', boy?"

If we had met on the first of June, when I had just started, she would have pretended to know all about me, she would have asked to tell my fortune. On the first of June I wore about the same costume I wear on the streets of Springfield. I was white as paper from two years of writing poetry indoors. Now, on the first of August I was sunburned a quarter of an inch deep. My costume, once so respectable, I had gradually transformed till it looked like that of a showman. I wore very yellow corduroys, a fancy sombrero and an oriflamme tie. So Mrs. Gypsy hailed me as a brother. She eyed my little worn-out oil-cloth pack. It was a delightful professional mystery to her.

I handed up a sample of what it contained—my *Gospel of*