

The Left-Handed Marriage

BY FRANK R. ADAMS

Illustrated by W. K. Starrett

THAT which is woman's whole existence may be of man's life a thing apart, but Robin Mackinstry wished that he might have some confirmation of the poet's theory. He was first assistant engineer in the McKey-Hartwell automobile factory, which is a whale of a good job for a man under thirty, as you know if you happen to be familiar with jobs in the manufacturing city of Roebuck, Michigan. But the mere fact that he received a lot of money for his time, and would not have done any other kind of work at twice the salary, did not loom very large on Robin's consciousness as he slipped into his work clothes in the office.

It looked like a bad night. He had to be on duty until seven the next morning, with nothing much to do but think of what had happened that day. There was a lot of food for thought in the events of the last twenty-four hours.

The night before, he, Robin Mackinstry, had been engaged to Laura Kemp. To-night he didn't believe he was—not if the fact that she had been married to some one else could be construed as a breach of contract. His own wedding to Laura had been set for the following month, or as soon as she had passed her twenty-first birthday. Laura would inherit a considerable sum of money—several hundred thousand dollars—if she were not married before she was twenty-one. Neither of them had set money above their happiness, but it had seemed wise not to throw away a competence which might be a mainstay for her if anything happened to him. They had discussed it quite frankly, and had arrived at the sensible conclusion together.

Laura had never intimated that there was any one else in her life. Robin had not been conscious of a rival. But then, he reflected bitterly, he had been working nights ever since he had known her, and

he could not tell how or with whom she spent the evenings. He had certainly never thought to spy upon her. That she had been carried away by a whirlwind of passion for some other man seemed incredible, but no alternative explanation accounted for the facts.

He had to face his own knowledge of Laura—which was that she was a rather timid sort of a girl, easily swayed by a person whom she loved. Her very childishness had doubly endeared her to him. Her dependence had fostered a tenderness in his heart that he could never feel toward any other woman.

Even now he kept thinking of her as a poor, helpless baby at the mercy of the complexities of the world. It seemed likely that she had been unable to tell him that she cared for some one else. Probably she would have gone on and married him anyway, rather than make the break, if some stronger will had not swept her off her feet.

Pitying her, however, did not make any less poignant his sense of loss. Laura was the heart of him, and the fact that he would never even see her again took the whole future tense out of his life.

As he went through the shops on his first tour of inspection, men whom he knew nodded to him without receiving his customary greeting in return. Lathes turned, drill-presses whirled and crashed, belts and pulleys clicked smoothly overhead, and conveyer trucks rattled on their endless way from department to department without registering anything but a subconscious background on Robin Mackinstry's mind.

If anything had been radically wrong he would doubtless have noticed, but the ordinary hum of a machine-shop was the major theme of his life melody, and he paid no attention to it. He did not even acknowledge its soothing influence; but as a matter of fact, if he had ever stopped to analyze

it, he always thought better and more clearly within sound of machinery. The distracting clatter only stimulated him to concentration.

But to-night even the power-plant, with its friendly hiss of steam, the click and tap of well-oiled valves, and the throb of swift-moving pistons, failed of its customary solace. Robin was alone with an unpleasant nightmare of thoughts. He rehearsed again and again the scene at Laura's home that day—his customary afternoon call to take her for a walk, the message delivered by the maid at the door, who did not invite him in, to the effect that Laura was not at home, and had left on her honeymoon that morning, and his dazed departure without even inquiring the name of the man she had married.

After that he had gone somewhere, he couldn't remember where, wandering the streets aimlessly, until habit and duty had finally led him supperless to the factory and the routine of responsibility.

II

THE evening went by somehow. Murray, the policeman on duty near the plant, dropped into the engine-room for his customary chat, but found Mackinstry singularly uncommunicative. Robin could not talk about anything but Laura, and to mention her under the circumstances would seem like a breach of good taste, as if he were complaining of his fate, welshing on the adverse decision of the gods.

So Murray smoked in silence. Men usually respect one another's moods. He had nothing to do until eleven o'clock, and it lacked half an hour of that time. He was still there when a messenger from the guarded gate of the factory grounds brought word that a lady wished to see Mr. Mackinstry.

Robin could not leave his post just then, so, in spite of the fact that he did not ordinarily receive visitors in the engine-room, he wonderingly directed that the lady should be brought in.

"I'll be going," suggested Murray, abandoning the comfortable burlaped seat that he had preempted.

"Not at all," Mackinstry objected. "I don't know who she is. I'm not expecting any one, and I'd rather have you stay."

Robin certainly was not expecting Laura, but his bruised heart gave a throb of recognition when she was ushered in.

How small she looked there in that gargantuan fabric of moving machinery, how frail by comparison with the ribbed steel, how powerless and defenseless in the presence of the benevolent giant, Steam, purring now in lazy contentment behind closed safety-valves!

"Laura!" he said, and she came toward him with a look of glad relief in her eyes.

"Take care of me," was all she said. She leaned against his arm as he reached out to support her. "There wasn't anybody in all the world I could come to but you."

"But you're married," Robin offered stupidly. "I have no right to—"

"But you must," she insisted. "I've reached the end of my strength. I don't understand anything. I can't find any familiar place to stand on. It's all dark, and I groped my way to you."

"You *are* married, aren't you?"

"I'm not sure. Uncle George says so."

"Great Scott, don't you know?" Robin demanded almost impatiently.

Officer Murray, thinking to slip out unobserved, had left his chair once more and was tiptoeing toward the door.

"Wait a minute, Bill," admonished Robin. "You're going to help me with this. Now, Laura, sit down in this chair which Mr. Murray so kindly offers you, and tell us what you mean by saying that you don't know whether you are married."

Glad to be bullied, Laura Kemp allowed herself to be forced into the comfortable chair. It was built for a man broad of beam like Murray, and she occupied only about one-third of it; but she leaned back against its padded back and stretched her tan-clad feet luxuriously before her. The rest of her was tan, too—coat, skirt, and hat, all of one tone, just a little lighter than her hair. She was an elf of the wood who had strayed into the stronghold of modern machinery.

"Begin at the beginning," commanded Mackinstry, standing in front of her, a towering giant. "How did it happen?"

III

"WELL, in the first place, you know you were never very popular with my Uncle George."

"I know," Robin admitted. "Uncle George is her guardian," he added in explanation to Officer Murray. "She lives with him."



"WHILE HE TURNED TO GIVE DIRECTIONS AND TIP THE PORTER, I OPENED THE DOOR AND STEPPED OUT ON THE FAR SIDE"

"I guess he didn't like you much because I found you myself. I think he would much rather have picked out a husband for me. I believe I told you that he wanted me to marry a protégé of his, Ralph Mallory, over a year ago; but I didn't like Ralph."

"Neither did I. You know Mallory, the lawyer?" Robin inquired of Murray.

"Yes, and he's a smart one," was Officer Murray's comment.

"Smart and unscrupulous," Mackinstry added. "Are you Mrs. Mallory now?" he demanded of Laura.

She nodded.

"Damn! Go on. How did it happen?"

"Mr. Mallory called last night after dinner. I had a headache, and didn't want to see him; but my uncle insisted. He had the maid bring me a powder for my head, and begged me to come down, if only for a few moments. I did, because I felt that I had to, although I knew in advance what he would have to say to me. Mr. Mallory has been proposing about once a month ever since I first met him.

Just as I had suspected, it was the same story all over again. I only laughed at him. It seemed sort of funny. I felt strange, anyway—light-headed and silly. I know I didn't talk intelligently, because I felt awfully tired, and wanted to get away and go to bed; but he kept on just the same, and after a while I did not seem to have strength enough to combat him. The last thing I remember he was still talking, telling me what a glorious time we would have on our honeymoon."

"The last thing you remember?" Robin echoed, picking on the most incomprehensible point in her story. "Why don't you remember any more?"

"I don't know. I just don't, that's all. It seems as if I fell asleep, but I'm not sure. Anyway, there's a part in there I don't remember at all, and then after that I recollect very clearly again. The way it seems to me is like this—Mr. Mallory was

talking, talking, talking, just as I said. Then something seemed to click in my brain, and I didn't notice him for a little while. Then I did notice him again, for I was in his arms and he was kissing me. I pushed him away, and cried with rage. I asked him what he meant by such conduct. He appeared to be bewildered, and my uncle, who was in the room, said quite casually:

"Why shouldn't your husband kiss you?"

"My husband?" I repeated.

"Yes. You were married an hour ago, weren't you?"

"I swore that I wasn't, but they seemed to think I had suddenly gone crazy, and they were apparently trying to be very patient with me. Mr. Mallory, when he saw that it was distasteful to me, released me from his arms, and has not attempted to touch me since. My uncle, just as kind, showed me what I suppose is a marriage certificate, all made out with my name and signed by a minister. He explained that I had decided to marry Mr. Mallory earlier in the evening, and that, in order to simplify matters, a minister had been invited in and the ceremony performed then and there. He seemed to think that it had all been in accordance with my wishes, and was terribly hurt because I was not pleased with it. That's all."

"That's enough!" growled Robin.

"Humph!" grunted Officer Murray, and added significantly: "Doped!"

"Of course," assented Robin. "In the headache medicine. But that would be hard to prove."

"What would be the idea in marrying the girl against her wishes?" debated the policeman.

"She has some money coming to her," Robin explained.

"And they say Mallory will do anything for money," Murray concurred.

"But I lose most of my inheritance by marrying before I'm twenty-one," Laura pointed out.

"You lose it," Mackinstry admitted, "but who gets it?"

"My uncle."

"There's your answer! He's a smooth fox, your uncle, and I never would have suspected him of it, but I'll bet he's been caught short on the market somewhere and simply has to have a couple of hundred thousand. What would be simpler than to

frame up this marriage on you with some unscrupulous chap like Mallory and divide up the proceeds? He probably hated to have to share with Mallory, but it was better than nothing. No doubt this has been in your uncle's mind ever since he first introduced Mallory to you. No wonder he hated me, especially when he found out we were going to wait until you were twenty-one before getting married!" He knit his brows thoughtfully. "But how did you manage to get away to come here?"

"We were on our way to the railroad-station. We had been at the Hotel Statler all day—Mr. Mallory and my uncle and I. They were quite kind, and reasoned with me patiently, trying to make me see that everything was all right. Finally—along about ten o'clock, I think—the porter called for our baggage, and Mr. Mallory took me down to the entrance. There was an automobile there, and he put me into it. While he turned to give directions and tip the porter, I opened the other door and stepped out on the far side. It was the first chance I'd had. It was dark, there was a traffic jam in the street, and I managed to get away; but I didn't have any place to go. You can see that home was impossible, and I haven't any friends whom I could ask to protect me from the man who is legally my husband. I don't know what you can do, Robin, but I had to see you—just had to, that's all there is about it!"

She paused for a moment to see how he was taking it.

"You'll take care of me, won't you?" pleaded Laura with childlike trust, mingled with the doubts and fears born of her recent experience.

"You don't love this—this husband of yours?" Robin countered.

"No."

"And you do love me?"

"Robin!" Her looks were his answer.

Officer Murray coughed his embarrassment, but nobody paid any attention to him, so he stepped outside—unnoticed this time.

The mere fact that Laura was presumably married to some one else made no difference in the thrill which the young engineer received at finding her in his arms once more. His arms! And he had been telling himself that it could never happen again!



"IF SHE WANTS TO RETURN,
I'LL TAKE HER MYSELF," SAID ROBIN

"I'll take care of you till hell freezes!" he vowed, forcefully if inelegantly. "You belong to me no matter what—"

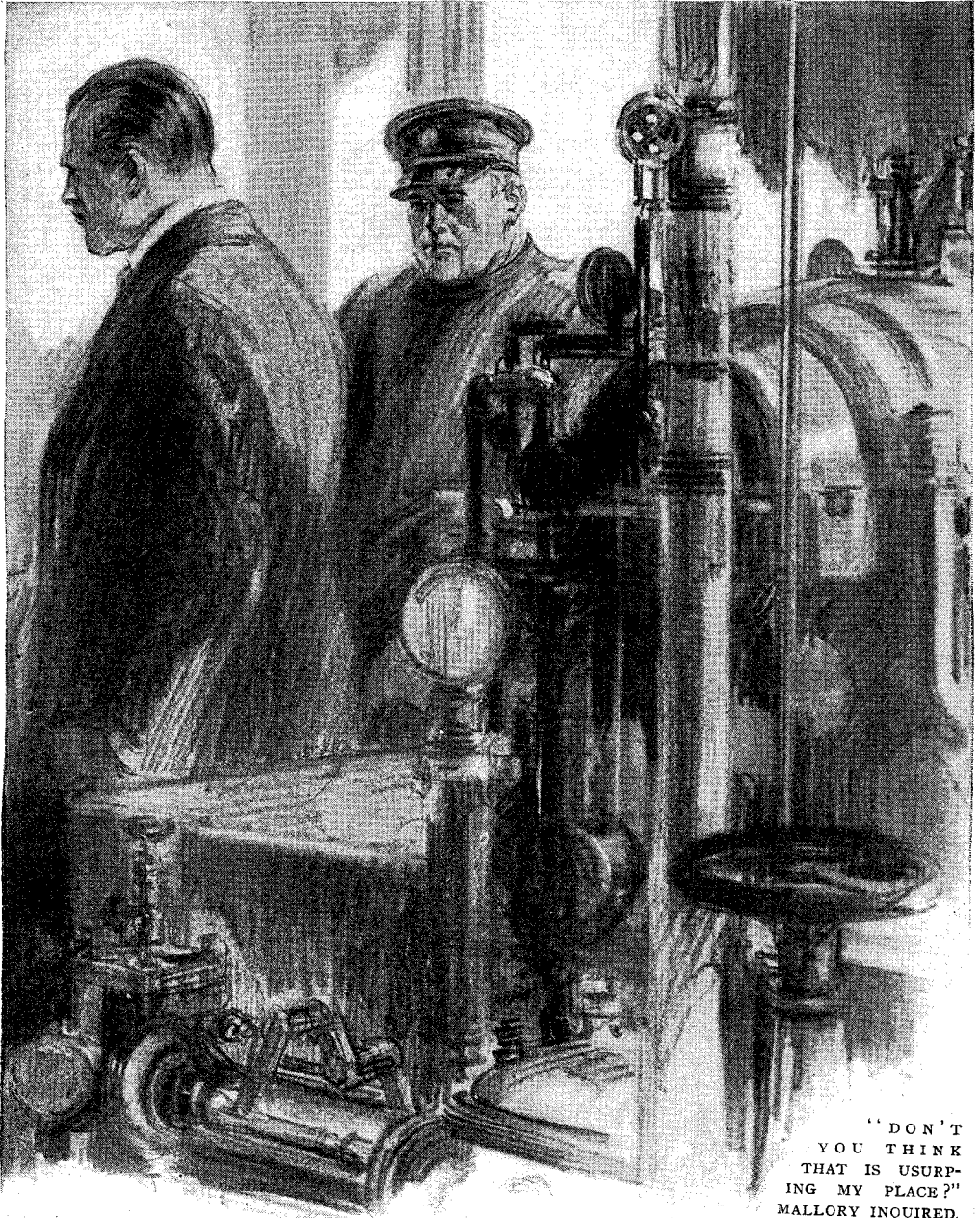
"A gentleman to see you, Mac." The policeman stood at the door again. "He

was going to bust right in, but I stopped him."

"Who is it?"

"Mallory, I think."

Mackinstry reflected a moment.



"DON'T
YOU THINK
THAT IS USURP-
ING MY PLACE?"
MALLORY INQUIRED.
"AFTER ALL, I AM HER
HUSBAND, YOU KNOW"

"You'll have to let him in, I guess."
"Just as you say"—opening the door.
"Mr. Mackinstry says to come in."

IV

A TALL and rather thick-set young man stepped into the engine-room. He was a smooth-shaven individual, and when he removed his hat it was evident that his black hair was waging a losing fight with his

forehead, resisting rather stubbornly in the center, but falling back on both flanks.

"I hoped I might find you here, Laura," he said pleasantly. "Won't you introduce me to your friend?"

"I'll introduce myself, Mr. Mallory," declared Robin, somewhat roughly. "I'm Mackinstry."

"I've heard of you."

"I thought so."

The two men eyed each other warily. The newcomer was inclined to be good-humored about it, if possible, but Mackinstry was quite determined that it wasn't possible. He was still sore from yesterday's blow to his pride and self-esteem.

"If you have finished your chat, Laura, I'll take you back to the hotel," suggested the new husband amiably.

"She hadn't thought of going back," Robin answered for her, putting himself in front of Laura in a belligerent attitude. "If she wants to return, I'll take her myself."

"Don't you think that is usurping my place a little too much?" Mallory inquired, still mildly. "After all, I am her husband, you know."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"You are of a suspicious nature—too suspicious for your own good, I rather fancy. I do not happen to have our marriage certificate with me, but I will be very glad to show it to you any time you have any legal right to see it. Now I suggest that we terminate this interview, as it is rather late. If Mrs. Mallory will be so kind as to come with me—"

"She will not!"

Mackinstry took a step toward the attorney, as if he expected his statement to be the signal for a blow; but Mallory only laughed. He still had the mastery of his temper.

"She can't stay here all night," he pointed out, shrugging his shoulders. "Even you can see what a terrible scandal that would cause. Surely you would not want to ruin Mrs. Mallory's reputation by such a piece of folly!"

Robin had not thought of that. Mallory saw his indecision.

"She must go somewhere."

"I'll take her somewhere myself," growled Robin.

"Where?"

"Where she'll be safe and no one can talk. Is that satisfactory to you, Laura?"

"Yes," she faltered, trying to hold Robin's eyes with her own and gather strength from him. He could see that she was frightened half to death. His resolution—never to let her go back to this man—was strengthened to tensile steel.

"That's all there is to it," he declared to Mallory, with finality. "I will take care of her. Very probably she will serve you with suit for divorce or annulment in

a day or so, and thus relieve you from the sense of responsibility which at present seems to rest so heavily on your shoulders. Murray, show the gentleman out; and see if there is a taxicab waiting around anywhere near the gate, will you? If there is, it will save me a lot of time."

The attorney started to say something, but thought better of it. He laughed shortly, and left the power-house, escorted menacingly by the special policeman.

The girl was shivering like a leaf.

"Don't be frightened, kid," Robin told her.

"But he is my husband, and if he ever gets me back now he will punish me for running away! He keeps his temper beautifully, but oh, Robin, if he ever lets go, it will be terrible. He's cruel, really—can't you see that? His smile is only a mask, and I'm afraid I'll see him some day when he tears it off."

"There, there!" Robin had his arm around her and was patting her on the back. "There aren't any bears in the dark closet. There has been an awful mistake somewhere, but we'll straighten it all out. We've won the first round, anyway. He didn't take you away with him!"

He was still engaged in heartening her with soothing words when the telephone rang. It was an inter-department instrument, and the call proved to be from the office.

"Mr. Mackinstry," said the manager—a young man no older than Robin himself, but the son-in-law of the president of the McKey-Hartwell Company—"I understand that there is a woman in the power-house there with you. Is that so?"

"It is, sir."

"You realize, don't you, that such a thing is contrary to the rules of the company, and that unless you eject her immediately—"

"Wait a minute, sir!" Mackinstry was beginning to boil with rage, but he hung onto his temper for a minute longer. "I was just about to ask your permission to take her away. She is a very delicate girl, and she is already frightened."

The manager laughed.

"She's a married woman, Mackinstry. She's fooling you. Her husband is right here now."

"I don't give a damn who is there or what he says," Robin shot back. "Will you let me go or not?"

"I will not."

"Why? You know my assistant can take my place for an hour or so, don't you?"

"I could run your job myself, if I had to. There isn't anybody in this factory who can't be spared."

The manager was voicing a theory which he had absorbed from an efficiency magazine. Whether it was true or not he had no means of knowing, never having tried it out in practise.

"Then you can get along without me, but won't let me go?"

"Not for the reason you mention. This company does not countenance immoral conduct on the part—"

"Hell!" Robin cut in with disgust. "I herewith tender my resignation. You can accept it or not, just as you like. I'll be out of here in ten minutes, anyway, so you'd better have some one in to take my place. Good night!"

He hung up, minus his job, but feeling somewhat better for having blown off a little steam at somebody.

V

"Now, young lady, this is where we beat it out to my sister's house. I haven't any more job than a rabbit, myself, so I'll have plenty of time to look after you. You needn't be frightened any more, for your personal body-guard—that's me—will be underfoot all the time from now on until you're free from the persistent barnacle that seems to think he's your husband. Come on!"

Laura was visibly heartened by his confident manner, and managed to smile at his banter.

"But I wish I were married to you, Robin," she confessed shyly.

"You're apt to get your wish if you don't quit vamping me with your eyes like that."

Robin called his assistant in from the back room and gave him a few general instructions. Then he led the way through the shop to the engineer's office, where he got into his street clothes.

"All set!" he declared, and drew Laura's arm through his own.

They left the building and traversed the open space between the office and the gate. At the entrance to the works there was a crowd of men gathered, mostly in overalls, but even in the spattering light of the arc-

lamp directly over the gate, Mackinstry thought they did not look like employees of the factory.

"What's all this gang?" he asked of Niblo, the pensioned gate-keeper.

"Don't know, sir. They say they come from Chicago, from an employment agency that Mr. Hartwell sent to for extra hands. I didn't let 'em in, but sent a messenger over to the office."

"Quite right," commended Mackinstry, forgetting that it was no longer in his province to praise or blame. "Come on, Laura! There's a car waiting for us across the street."

He began to lead the way through the knot of men who were clustered about the gate. Quite unexpectedly, when they got about half-way through, he met with resistance. The men just in front of him did not give way. Robin used his elbow.

"Who you shovin'?" demanded some one truculently.

"Stand aside and let the lady pass," commanded Robin.

"What if we won't?" the man in front of him asked.

"Then I'll make you," Robin suggested pleasantly.

"You will?"

The question was the last thing Robin heard. Stars clustered round his brain in distracting constellations. Finally they ceased shooting, and absolute darkness settled in.

He came out of it with his head on Officer Murray's knee, and Niblo, the gate-keeper, sprinkling water on his face. There was no one else there.

"Where's Laura? Where's the girl?" Robin managed to ask faintly.

"Gone."

"Of course!" Impatience speeded returning consciousness. "Where? With whom?"

"With Mallory, in an automobile. Happened along just after you were knocked out by his gang." Officer Murray furnished the particulars.

"And you didn't stop him?"

"How could I? I didn't get to you until it was all over."

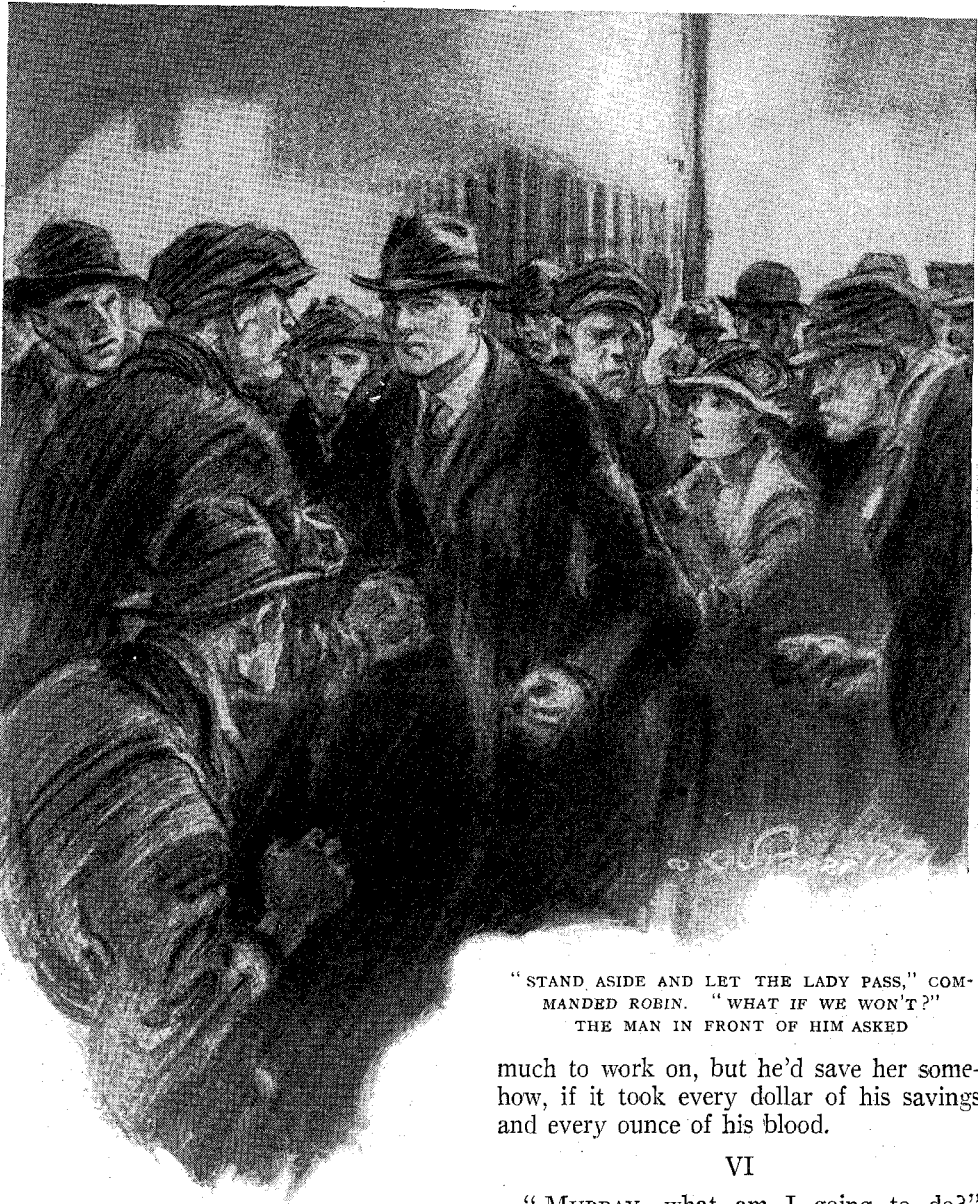
Robin sat up and rubbed his bruised head ruefully.

"Clever of him, wasn't it? First he made it impossible for Laura to stay in the factory, and then he laid for me outside. I ought to have thought of that!"

He was mad clear through, but, more than that, he was worried; for he knew that the girl he loved was in a desperate plight. She would not get another chance to escape, that was certain. So long as she had been free and able to appear in

And he knew that Laura was frightened. She had had one hope—himself—and he had failed to save her. By now she must be in the depths of despair.

Well, he wasn't dead yet, and until he was he wouldn't give up. There was not



"STAND ASIDE AND LET THE LADY PASS," COMMANDED ROBIN. "WHAT IF WE WON'T?"
THE MAN IN FRONT OF HIM ASKED

much to work on, but he'd save her somehow, if it took every dollar of his savings and every ounce of his blood.

VI

"MURRAY, what am I going to do?" Robin asked.

"I don't know, sir. Shall we take you back to the office?"

"No, I'm not going back there. I'll walk with you on your beat a while, if you don't mind. The air will do me good. I've got to think fast."

court it had seemed easy enough to start divorce or annulment proceedings; but he, Robin Mackinstry, by himself, would have no legal standing in the matter. Any judge would laugh at him as soon as he admitted that he was the defeated suitor.

"You ought to lie down for a bit," protested Niblo, solicitously. Every one around the factory liked the former assistant engineer.

"Couldn't do it—thanks!" Robin returned abstractedly. "Must keep going. Come on, Murray!"

He was a little unsteady on his feet for a few minutes, but that wore away, and left nothing to remind him of his knock-out except a throbbing in the machinery with which he was trying to think.

"The worst of it is they'll be leaving town by the first train, and if I lose track of her I can't help. If he can keep her prisoner long enough, he can frighten her into acknowledging the marriage and living with him. If I could only stop 'em, or at least trail 'em! When's the next train out of here for Chicago or New York?"

"Gee, I don't know. You could telephone the station."

"Sure! Here's a drug-store still open. I'll bet Mallory will go to one city or the other, and I've got to be on the same train."

Mackinstry, thinking out loud, dragged his official friend in with him while he telephoned the railway ticket-office. He found there that the first through train out of that station was bound for Chicago, and left in fifteen minutes.

"He'll take that train," decided Robin, emerging from the booth. "Where can I get a taxi?"

"I don't know. There's no stand around here."

"How far is it to the station?"

"About a mile and a half."

"I can't walk it. Where's the nearest fire department station?"

"What for?"

"Where is it? Don't waste time."

"In the next block," Murray pointed.

"Good! Wait a second."

Mackinstry dashed into the telephone-booth once more, and gave the number of fire department headquarters. According to regulation, the operator made the connection without delay and without asking for a nickel.

"Hello!" he called. "Fire department? Big fire at the Union Station. Coal-cars and oil-tankers burning to beat hell. Send help, quick!"

Robin hung up and looked at his watch nervously, a grim smile on his lips. He led the way to the street.

"I think I can make it. So-long, Murray! Thanks for helping."

Mackinstry was off at a lope in the opposite direction to that which he should have taken to go to the station.

"Hey!" shouted Murray. "You're going the wrong way!"

Robin appeared not to hear him. Probably the police officer's advice was drowned in the sound of clanging gongs which suddenly ripped open the evening quiet. The doors of the fire-house in the next block yawned, and a motor hook-and-ladder truck slipped down the runway and swung into the street with rapidly gathering momentum.

As it went by, Officer Murray was surprised to see his friend, Robin Mackinstry, hanging on underneath an extension ladder, and gradually working himself into a tenable position, while the truck careened in frenzied and noisy flight.

"Well, I'm damned!" thought Murray. "The nerve of him—calling out the fire department to help him catch a train!"

Then he chuckled. The idea of getting half a dozen fire companies out of bed rather pleased him. He had a cousin in the department who lorded it over him at times.

Robin Mackinstry swung from the truck as it passed the Union Station, and dashed through the doors. He had two minutes to spare.

He had one bit of good luck. His quarry was there—and late, too. As Mackinstry came in sight of the doors leading to the subway trottoir to all tracks, he saw Mallory standing in animated discussion with a woman.

The woman was not Laura—Robin was sure of that. She was about the same size, but the man who loved Laura was aware instantly that this was not the one woman.

Instinct, something, halted him far enough back in the hurrying crowd so as not to be easily seen.

The woman seemed to be clinging to Mallory, trying to detain him, and he was expostulating with her. Inside the doors, with a red-capped porter, was Laura, waiting, looking very forlorn and helpless. Robin wanted to dash to her side, but he restrained himself, fearing lest he should lose everything by betraying his presence at that moment.

Finally Mallory, looking at his watch,

terminated the interview by pushing the woman roughly aside and running down the incline. That was Mackinstry's cue for action, and he broke into a run himself.

But God denied to most railway officials a proper sense of romance. The gateman held him up by force.

"Where's your ticket?"

"Haven't got one, but I must catch that Chicago train!"

"Not without a ticket, young fellow. Sorry. Stand aside and let these passengers through."

VII

ARGUMENT was of no avail. The gatekeeper called the special policeman, and Mackinstry had to give up. He was brushed into a little eddy just on the wrong side of the doors. Several other people were there—among them the girl who had been talking to Mallory. She was crying, now, and mumbling incoherent phrases to a woman companion older than herself. Robin caught one or two fragments.

"He told me yesterday it was only a joke," was one of them. "He promised me he wasn't going to live with her," was another. "I could kill him!"

Robin, not being a fool, recognized that he was in the presence of a woman who was jealous of Mallory. That, of course, might not help him any. She probably would not know where Mallory had gone, but she might have information about him that would make it easier to trail him, or, later, to land him in the grasp of the law.

After brief deliberation, Robin addressed her.

"Pardon me, miss, but can I do anything to help you?"

She ceased crying and looked around at him wonderingly.

"Who are you?" she asked, frowning at first, but changing to an April smile when she had decided that he was good-looking.

Her eyes were a little hard—not crafty exactly, but suspicious. Perhaps her experience of life had not tended to soften her outlook. Mackinstry noted that they were dark blue, that her hair was chestnut, and that she was quite pretty.

His first impulse was to reply to her question as to his identity with a statement of the truth. Then a certain wariness born of the hardness in her eyes, and her evident appraisal of his own appearance, induced him to dissemble.

"I'm a stranger in Roebuck," he offered. "I came here to see a man, and found that he was leaving on the midnight train for Chicago. I came down to the station to meet him, but just missed him. He's a chap called Mallory."

Robin thought the girl started at the mention of the man with whom she had been talking a few minutes before, but she gave no formal sign of recognizing the name.

"I suppose Mallory couldn't be expected to have any time for my troubles tonight, though," he went on. "He has just been married, I understand, to a very wealthy young lady who is also one of the most beautiful girls in town."

"Huh!" the girl half sneered. "She ain't any whirlwind for looks, not if I'm a judge!"

"You know her?"

"I've seen her."

The engineer wondered under what circumstances two girls of such widely different types could have come into contact, but he forbore to question further, realizing intuitively that the girl to whom he was speaking had not intended to admit that she knew anybody.

"Well, Mallory is a fine fellow. No girl could be too beautiful for him. He knows how to pick 'em, too. I remember at school—but you're not interested unless you know him. I'll be going along—that is, unless I can have the pleasure of seeing you ladies home first."

"That will scarcely be necessary," the girl replied; "but if you're in town tomorrow evening, why—"

"Great!" Mackinstry embraced with open arms the opportunity of keeping an eye on her. "How can I find you?"

"My name is Cora Calvert," she told him, and gave him a street and number.

"Wait a minute till I get that down."

He took a note-book and pencil from his pocket, and entered the address. She watched him curiously.

"South-paw, aren't you?" she observed. "So am I. I've trained my right hand to do almost everything just as well as my left, though—all but writing. I can't do much with my right when there's a pen in it."

Robin put the two women on a street-car, having confessed to himself that he had not accomplished much. For some reason or other the younger girl did not

want to talk about Mallory, and was apparently trying to shield him. Why?

VIII

ROBIN could not spend much time puzzling out Miss Calvert's mental processes, however, because the problem of action which lay before him required too much attention. The facts in the case were that the girl he loved was being hurried away from him on a train bound for a great city. Once she arrived in Chicago, it would be easy for Mallory to hide her where it would be practically impossible to find her. For a few hours longer—until about nine o'clock the next

Of course, the best solution would be to arrive in Chicago first, meet them at the station, see where they went, and then, at the first opportunity, kidnap Laura. He considered the advisability of hiring some one to take him to Chicago in a fast air-



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morning, to be exact—Robin would know approximately where she was. After that it would be like searching for a needle in a bachelor's handy repair-kit.

What could he do before Mallory's train reached Chicago? His mind searched frantically for an expedient.

plane; but he discarded that idea when he realized that he knew no one connected with the business of flying in Roebuck, and that by the time he found any one at that time of night it would doubtless be too late, even if an aviator could be induced to attempt a flight before daylight.

There was a possibility of aid from the police. A telegram from the police de-

partment of Roebuck to the police department of Chicago would detain Mallory under surveillance until Mackinstry could get there; but there would have to be a pretty strong case against the man in order to get the police to interfere.

It seemed ridiculous and unreal amid the safeguards and refinements of civilization, but it was obvious that whoever actually had possession of the girl was in a position to dictate terms. That Mallory knew this was proved by the fact that when Laura was under the physical protection of Mackinstry, he had not hesitated to use violence to shift the advantage to himself.

If Laura left Mallory now, an annulment on the grounds of fraud could be secured, and the marriage would have no force as a legal contract. If she remained with Mallory she could hope for nothing better than a divorce, and her marriage would stand even after that as something which had existed. Incidentally, she would lose her inheritance, or part of it.

Therefore, whatever was done must be accomplished before morning; and the only thing that would be of any use would be to secure the assistance of the police. To do that required that a criminal charge should be filed against Mallory.

Mackinstry had no evidence—nothing but the unsupported word of Laura herself to the effect that she remembered nothing of her marriage ceremony. Robin felt reasonably sure that she had been drugged; but how could he prove it with Laura going farther and farther away every minute?

Who else would know anything about it? Laura's uncle, probably; but as he was undoubtedly concerned in the plot, he would refuse to help. He was the one who had most to gain by the girl's marriage before her twenty-first birthday. Who, then, besides the bride and groom and her uncle?

Another witness and the minister. By the process of elimination, the choice narrowed down to those two. Robin also discarded the other witness as too difficult to find, and as a probable accomplice in the fraud. That left the officiating clergyman.

Mackinstry believed that the minister, if it was a real one who performed the ceremony, had acted in good faith. If he had, and was an honest man, he would have noticed that the bride was not in a normal condition. It was worth while to try to find out.

It was not an easy thing to do at that time of night, but the engineer set about it doggedly. The telephone company had a classified list of subscribers. Robin went directly to its office and laid his case briefly before the night manager. The latter, entering into the spirit of the game, put an operator at the young man's disposal, and Robin went at his task of calling up every clergyman in town, praying for luck.

Ministers are professionally cheerful and long-suffering. That is the only thing that saved Mackinstry from hearing their real opinion of him when they got up out of their comfortable beds to answer his question as to whether they had performed a marriage ceremony for Mr. Ralph Mallory and Miss Laura Kemp on the evening before. Even at that, he was able to gather from the tones of their voices that he would never win a popularity contest if he depended upon the ecclesiastical vote.

The twenty-seventh divine recognized the names, Mallory and Kemp, and admitted that he had tied the knot.

"Then I must see you at once," declared Mackinstry, his courage mounting at this slight evidence of fortune's favor. "I will be at your house in fifteen minutes."

He paid his telephone-bill and called a taxi. The Rev. Dr. Holben was dressed and ready for him when he arrived. He seemed to be a regular fellow, and Robin told him the story straight.

"I sympathize with you greatly," Dr. Holben told his visitor; "but I don't see how I can help you. Everything seemed perfectly regular. The girl did not, in my opinion, appear in the least to be under the influence of a drug. I am sure I would have noticed it if her replies had been uncertain or unwilling."

This was a staggering blow. Robin had been sure that the minister would be his principal witness in proving a fraud. Now that hope was shot to bits.

"I even have a record of the marriage, signed by both parties," the minister offered. "You may look at it, if you wish, and see if the signature is all right."

He produced the paper. There were the two names, and Laura's signature was her own, just as Robin knew it, with a funny little slant forward for the capitals and backward for the small letters.

"Can't you think of anything at all that struck you as peculiar in this affair?" Robin implored as he rose to go.



"YOU WILL REPEAT WHAT YOU HAVE TOLD ME IN COURT, IF NECESSARY?" ROBIN ASKED

"I honestly can't," Dr. Holben told him, after futilely racking his brain. "The girl seemed perfectly normal."

"Could you describe her?"

"Not very definitely. She was pretty, about medium size or rather below it, I should say, and moderately dark as to hair and eyes. She wore"—the clergyman paused with an effort at recollection—"I believe she wore a brownish suit."

The description, vague though it was,

tallied pretty closely with Laura as Robin had last seen her, even as to clothes.

"She seemed very fond of her husband," Dr. Holben went on. "A minister can tell. Her affection was unmistakable."

"You're quite sure on that point?" Robin questioned.

"Yes, I remember remarking it at the time. I told them always to remember how happy they were then, and advised them to think of that moment if there

should ever be any occasion to doubt each other."

"H-m!" Robin pondered this statement warily. It did not sound right. "Let me see that signature again," he requested.

The minister handed him the record. The engineer examined it carefully.

"Did she hesitate at all in writing this?"

"Perhaps. Really, I did not notice. The only thing I remarked at the time was that she was left-handed."

"Left-handed?"

"Yes. It always looks awkward for a person to write with the left hand. I spoke about it, and she laughed and said that she could do almost everything equally well with either hand, except write."

Robin looked at his watch. It was half past one o'clock.

"You will repeat what you have told me in court, if necessary?" he asked.

"Why, certainly; but I didn't notice anything peculiar or—"

"I'll explain later. Have to hurry now. But thanks awfully!"

The bewildered minister saw his visitor to the door and bade him good night.

IX

MACKINSTRY spent the next hour in argument with the acting chief of police, who took that length of time to become thoroughly waked up and interested in his business—which, he maintained, ought to be confined to daylight hours. Finally, however, the young man convinced him that youth and romance must be served even by the grizzled minions of the law.

The acting chief called up the prosecuting attorney and started the machinery which, at eight o'clock the next morning, resulted in an order for the arrest and return to Roebuck of Ralph Mallory and the woman accompanying him. Robin winced at this description of Laura, but it seemed the only way to get her back.

This order sizzled over a special police wire to Chicago, and two plain-clothes men were at the LaSalle Street station when the Michigan Central express pulled in.

It was the morning of the next day when all the *dramatis personæ* of Robin Mackinstry's love melodrama were assembled in and about the prosecuting attorney's office for an informal inquiry.

There was no one in the office proper except the attorney, his clerk, and Robin, when Mallory and Laura were brought in.

The man seemed amused, and the girl very forlorn. Her expression changed to hopeful surprise, however, when she saw Robin, and she would have gone to him at once had not the police officer restrained her.

"So it's you, as I suspected, who are responsible for this outrage!" said Mallory quietly. "Well, see if it gets you anything except a suit for false arrest!"

"Do you think you have been falsely arrested?" inquired the prosecutor.

"I certainly do. I had nothing whatever to do with the assault on this gentleman. I saw it happen, but I did not get to his assistance in time to save him."

"Were you assaulted, Mr. Mackinstry?" the prosecutor asked, in mild surprise.

Robin nodded.

"This is the first I had heard of it," the official continued. "No, Mr. Mallory, the charge against you is not assault."

"What is it, then?"

"Violation of the Mann Act, by taking this lady from one State to another."

"Mann Act, my eye! How can a man violate the Mann Act with his own wife?"

"He can't; but Mr. Mackinstry claims that the lady is not your wife."

Mallory snapped his fingers derisively.

"He'd have a fat chance proving that! However, to end this nonsense, will you telephone my office and ask Miss Calvert, my assistant, to bring over my marriage certificate, which is in the safe?"

"That will not be necessary," the prosecutor replied. "Miss Calvert is here, and has your marriage certificate with her."

Mallory seemed surprised and puzzled at this information, but suppressed the question which rose to his lips. There was something here that he did not understand and was not prepared for.

"Ask Miss Calvert to step in," the official told his clerk.

Miss Calvert was accordingly ushered into the private office. Like Mallory, she guessed that something was up, but, not knowing exactly what, she was not asking any questions.

"Mr. Mallory wants his marriage certificate," the prosecutor stated pleasantly. "I asked you to bring it over."

Miss Calvert produced a document from a leather portfolio which she had with her, and handed it to her employer, who, in turn, laid it on the attorney's desk.

"That is perfectly regular, I believe," he said triumphantly.

"It is," the attorney admitted casually, and then produced another paper, which he laid beside the certificate. "Miss Kemp, please see if this is your signature."

He pointed to her name as it appeared on the minister's record. She looked at it.

"It looks like it," she said, puzzled.

"So it does. Suppose you write your name here on a piece of paper for purposes of comparison."

Wondering, Laura did as requested.

"Now do it again with your left hand."

She could only make an illegible scrawl.

"I can't write with my left hand," she confessed finally.

"But this record was signed with the left hand of the woman whom Mr. Mallory married," he insisted blandly. "The minister states so most positively. If you can't write with your left hand, this signature must be a forgery. Evidently you were not there at all when the ceremony happened, but some one else took your place while you were sleeping soundly under the influence of a hypnotic drug—some other woman who does write with her left hand." He turned to Mallory. "You're an attorney yourself, Mr. Mallory. You can see that my reasoning is sound. Do you care to have me go further with the investigation, or would you prefer to admit the facts?"

X

MALLORY studied the floor. All his smooth suavity and assertive calm seemed to have deserted him. For a moment he was thinking wildly, hunting like a cornered rat for a hole through which to escape. At last he looked up, and his eyes were clear.

"If I take my medicine fair and without a whimper, will you let the girl in the case go, and not attempt to establish her identity?" he asked.

"Ralph!" cried Miss Calvert.

"Wait a minute, Cora," he halted her, and went on with his plea. "You may know already who she is, but she did it because she loved me, and the least I can do is to take her share of the punishment."

The prosecutor smiled.

"That would hardly be regular."

"I know," pleaded Mallory; "but you haven't established her identity yet, and I ask that you will not try to for at least twenty-four hours. At the end of that period I will confess the whole story. All

I ask now is that I may be permitted to give Miss Calvert a check for my rather inadequate bank balance, and to ask her to see that the girl in the case gets it to help keep her until I come out of the pen. Surely that isn't much!"

"Please let him," urged Laura, her ready woman's sympathy moved to participation in the plea of the man who had planned to wreck her life.

"What do you say, Mr. Mackinstry?" asked the prosecutor.

"Sure—let the girl go!"

"All right," sighed the attorney. "Write out your check, Mallory."

For a moment there was silence in the office, while the prospective prisoner made out a check, which he extended to Cora.

"Tell her," he said gently, "that she loves a very unworthy man. That's all, except to say good-by."

He did not offer Cora his hand, even when she took a step toward him. She bit her lip, and then, with eyes which for the first time appeared not to be hard and suspicious, questioned the attorney.

"There's nothing further," he told her. "You may go."

When the door had closed behind her, he cleared his throat and began to search on his desk for some papers.

"That's all for twenty-four hours, I guess," he declared. "Officer, bring your prisoner here at this time to-morrow. Mr. Mackinstry, I shall expect you to bring yours. Will you do it?"

"Depend on me. I'll scarcely let her out of my sight!"

Robin kissed his prisoner in the corridor outside the attorney's office.

"Let's go flat-hunting, Laura," he suggested. "We may not find anything we like, but it will be fun spending imaginary money furnishing our little home."

"It's much more important, I should think, that we should go job-hunting, and find something for you to do besides making love to nearly another man's wife," she suggested practically.

"But I've got a job. Forgot to tell you—old man Hartwell hunted me up yesterday and offered me my old position back. Raised my salary, too, and made the night manager apologize. Virtue triumphs in the last reel, the fellow gets the girl, and the final close-up shows them in a clinch—like this. Do your part—that's it! And the picture fades away."

Barber John's Boy*

A NEW HARDISTON NOVEL

By Ben Ames Williams

Author of "The Great Accident," "The Sea Bride," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY LEE CONREY

AFTER eighteen years spent in prison for a crime committed under terrible provocation—a murderous assault upon a drunken doctor whose gross carelessness caused the death of the prisoner's passionately loved wife—John Bolton returns to the town of Hardiston and takes up his old trade as a barber. He is welcomed by all his relatives and friends, with the sole exception of his son, John Carmichael Bolton, who has grown up to be a bank clerk and is engaged to Emily Yates, the daughter of the bank president. Young Mike, as he is commonly called, is frankly ashamed of his father. He wishes to resign his position and leave town, but is urged to remain by both his fiancée and his employer.

Barber John, in a wistful tone, makes excuses for the unfilial conduct of his son, but his brother, Cal Bolton, a prosperous liveryman and horse-trader, says:

"He'd best take care he doesn't make you ashamed of him!"

V

IN New York, or in Boston, or in any city you may choose to mention, Sunday is chiefly notable as the day on which a man may lie abed; but it is not altogether so in Hardiston. The people of a small town, take them by and large, adhere to the old maxim that advises early bed and early rising. Whether they are healthier, wealthier, or wiser than those of other habits may be disputed, but the fact of the habit remains.

Thus, in Hardiston, most people rise as early on Sunday as on other days. At nine o'clock, or a little after, a fair proportion go to Sunday-school with their children; and they are home from church in time for midday dinner. By that time the Sunday papers have come from the cities, and they settle down to read.

If the day is fair, Cal Bolton's livery-stable does good business in rented carriages and buggies. Almost every one goes driving who can manage it. And in mid afternoon the men are apt to drift about, dropping in to smoke with one another for a while, and turning homeward when the sun begins to slide down the western sky.

On this Sunday more than one man

dropped in to see Barber John. They found him with Cal at the livery-stable. Cal liked to sit there, in the wide doorway, his chair tilted back against the wall, his nostrils filled with the smell of the horses and the rich fragrance of the barn. Those who came for teams stopped for a word with Cal and his brother; others came with no purpose save to greet Barber John.

The big man with the crooked back took their hands, smiled with pleasure at their having come, and told Cal, when the brothers were alone, that it was worth eighteen years of stone walls to come home to friends like these. Every one in Hardiston seemed to be glad to see him—that is to say, every one save Michael.

Michael had resolved to stick by his father; he intended to do so. Not by word or act would he be false to the big man; but his thoughts were beyond his control. He could not conquer the repugnance that possessed him; and this shrinking distaste was accentuated by what his father had told them at breakfast.

"What will you do with yourself, John?" Cal had asked. "No need to do anything but live here with me."

John had looked toward Michael.

"I couldn't manage that," he said,

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