

# Country Love\*

A STAGE GIRL'S STRUGGLE AGAINST FAME AND FORTUNE

By Hulbert Footner

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ILLUSTRATED BY W. K. STARRETT

WHEN Eve Allinson learns that her rise to stardom in musical comedy is due to Brutus Tawney's financial power, and that she is generally considered to be the mistress of her plutocratic admirer—whom she has regarded as her "guardian"—her horror is so great that she resolves to quit New York. Under the assumed name of Merridy Lee, she answers an advertisement and is engaged by a kindly old gentleman named Jolley for his floating theater, which plays small towns and villages along Chesapeake Bay and the rivers thereabouts.

Tawney is enraged on finding that Eve has disappeared, and believes that she has fled with a young man named Clough, who was dancing with her the night before. He orders Taylor, his financial agent, and Gibbon, manager of his theatrical interests, to trace her, and engages McVeagh, a famous detective, to direct the search.

In Travis County, Maryland—an isolated district almost cut off from the mainland by the Chesapeake and its wide estuaries—a young man named Page Brookins, a scion of an old Southern family once possessed of a large estate, is making valiant efforts to improve his remaining acres and to restore the fallen fortunes of his house. He attends a performance of Mr. Jolley's company at Absolom's Island, hears Merridy sing, and falls head over ears in love with her.

Meanwhile Tawney, still furious that the girl has escaped his net, is sparing no expense in his search for her—but thus far without result.

## VI

PAGE was up at four o'clock, so that he might get all his chores done before breakfast. These included feeding and watering the stock, milking, and splitting enough wood to serve the kitchen stove all day. At the breakfast-table he was collected and wary. His greatest dread was that the kind eyes of Miss Molly might spy out his secret.

"How was the show?" she asked.

"So-so," said Page offhand. "Just about what you'd expect."

"What was the story?"

"Don't ask me. I swear it was so noisy and mixed up I couldn't tell you. Something about an actress who befriended an orphan, and a fellow called Jeff who was always Johnny-on-the-spot, and a mean guy who had it in for the bunch. Say, he was common!"

"How did it turn out?"

"Oh, I reckon the mean guy got his in the end, but I didn't wait. I got sleepy."

"Was the actress pretty?"

"Oh, she was all right," said Page. "Looked something like Cousin Ella Smallwood when she's fixed up."

"Oh!" said Miss Molly, disappointed. "Fat!"

After a while Page said very casually:

"Reckon I'll take a day off to-day."

Though she had recommended him to let up a bit, this was so surprising an announcement that Miss Molly was startled and apprehensive; but she kept still and waited to hear more.

Page's father did not scruple to express himself on the subject.

"A day off! In working weather like this! You must be crazy! You and me was going to pull weeds in the tobacco-bed to-day. The young plants is near choked out."

"I'll stop by and get one of Briggs Heber's boys to take my place," said Page. "He'll be all right so long as you work alongside him."

"Oh, sure!" grumbled Mr. Jimmy.

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"The old man don't get no days off. You know darn well the boy won't come. You can't get a nigger to work right off the bat like that. You got to give him a couple of days to prepare his mind for it gradual. Damned if I won't take a day off myself and go fishing!"

A cloud descended on Page's face. Seeing it, Miss Molly said quickly:

"Go along with you, Jimmy! After I've washed up I'll go up to the bed and pull weeds with you. That's child's play!"

She saw the light spring up again in Page's eyes, and wondered with loving jealousy what was afoot. She waited for it to come out of itself, but was finally forced to ask with a careless air:

"How do you calculate spending the day, Page?"

Page lied smoothly.

"There's a fellow over at Little Bay Point has some pure-bred Tamworths for sale. Reckon I'll drive over and take a look at them."

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"That won't take you all day," grumbled Mr. Jimmy.

"Well, so long as I was on the road," said Page, "I thought I'd go on to the island and get Joe McCrory to help me with my car. He's a first-rate mechanic, and he's got some of the parts I need. If I don't put in a new front spring she'll ditch me."

The old man submitted, still grumbling.



a definite plan of action. He intended simply to hang around the island until *she* came off the boat. She must come off some time. When she came off—at this point his heart began to beat—well, he'd just have to blunder through somehow.

After breakfast a great difficulty faced him. If he put on his best clothes, how could he expect Miss Molly to be deceived

"THEY ARE NONE OF MY LOT," PAGE SAID. "I HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THEM"

After all, the youngster was the real head of the family; he had earned the place.

Page had not yet been able to decide on

by the tale of the Tamworth pigs and Joe McCrory? On the other hand, it was intolerable to think of showing himself to the



girl of girls for the first time not looking his best.

In the end he compromised. He put on his good suit, but eschewed the stiff collar in favor of a clean working shirt. In so doing he served himself better than he knew, for the soft collar gave a touch of grace to the young head that would have been lacking in the choker.

It is hardly necessary to state that Miss Molly was not in the least deceived by this transparent maneuver. Not for nothing had he taken almost an hour to dress himself; not for pigs nor automobile repairs was that bright and dreamy light in his eyes. She continued to wonder jealously, and to keep her mouth shut.

Page was so long in getting ready that his father and mother departed for the tobacco-bed in the woods while he was still working over Madeleine. Left alone around the place, he hastened to carry out something he had thought of but could not have brought himself to put into effect under the eyes of his family. Rummaging around the house, he lifted a little fancy basket of Miss Molly's and a clean napkin without a qualm.

"Living on a boat like that," he thought, "I bet they don't get proper food—nothing but canned stuff from the store."

Carrying the basket out to the strawberry patch, he lined it with leaves, and filled it with the biggest, reddest berries the rows afforded. Then he wrapped it in the napkin and stowed it in his car.

As he went out through the front gate for the last time, Page looked back at the house and stopped short. A scowl corrugated his forehead. As with all youngsters, his home was so familiar to him that he couldn't see it; this was actually the first time it took shape before his eyes. It was not an inspiring sight. Though the little house was no more than twenty-five years old, it already looked ruinous. It had never been painted; it had not even been whitewashed for several years. One of the chimneys had been partly demolished in a squall, and the porch was rotting away from the front wall.

"What a hell of a looking shanty!" thought Page in dismay. "How can I ask her up? Nice idea she'd form of me from the look of my house. By George, I'll get a barrel of lime from Cousin Tom Sutor tomorrow, and start a parcel of nigger kids whitewashing; and if Cousin Tom will

come and fix the chimney, I'll return it by helping him plant out his tobacco. I've a good mind to tear the old porch right down. It'll take me all summer to put up a new one with all I have to do, but it would be a start; she could see that I wasn't just letting things slide. Wonder, if I had her up to supper, could I bribe pap to cut out chewing while she's here? Anyhow, mother's all right. If I had mother waiting out in front in her gray dress to receive her, maybe she wouldn't take notice of the rotten old porch."

The idlers spread along the bench in front of Mattison's store on Absolom's Island watched Page Brookins drive up without enthusiasm. Page was not popular with that crowd. They considered that he held himself too high. Who was Page Brookins, anyhow, but the son of old Jimmy Brookins, who hadn't two cents to rub together, and whom anybody was privileged to clap on the back?

Moreover, there was feeling between the islanders and the up-county people, dating from away back when the fathers and grandfathers of the present islanders had been imported for the oyster industry. They were not natives of Travis, you see. Page had no more use for them than others of his class; nevertheless he sat down on the end of the bench with a propitiatory air, and took out his pipe.

There were half a dozen men there, young and youngish. Oystering being over for the season, they considered that they had earned their ease. Good fellows among themselves, and with no particular harm in any of them, they were nevertheless cut on a different pattern from Page. They lacked background. They would never be able to understand Page, nor Page them.

Chief among them was Ralph Horry, not an oysterman himself, but the son of a retired factor, the great man of the island. Ralph was Page's particular detestation. He had the frame of a young Hercules and a bold red face. He was rather a splendid young animal, in fact, and frankly animal. Page held Ralph in contempt because of the reputation he enjoyed as a conqueror of the fair—a contempt not unmixed with envy, perhaps, for Page was human.

With Page's coming, conversation on the bench languished, for the oysterman did not know how to talk to him, and he put a damper on their free exchange of ideas

among themselves. Page made attempts to start something, but without success.

At the best of times Page had not the art of idling gracefully, and now, with his brain burning up, it was a torment to sit there and make conversation. Nevertheless he stuck it out. The reason was very simple—the store bench commanded a clear view of the Thespis moored alongside the tomato wharf, but was sufficiently far away to keep anybody from suspecting Page's real motive in sitting there.

From time to time different figures appeared on the forward or after deck of the floating theater and went in again, but not any that caused Page's heart to accelerate its beating. On a low mound of oyster-shells just above the wharf some of the smaller fry of the island, unhampered by any feelings of delicacy, were sitting watching all that went on aboard the romantic craft. One of them was engaged to carry fresh water aboard to fill a tank. Page envied him absurdly.

Two of the men of the company came ashore and strolled off toward the bay front of the island. Page considered following them and trying to scrape acquaintance, but was afraid of missing a better chance if he forsook his point of vantage.

In the end he saw two feminine figures come ashore, and his heart rose slowly in his throat. He recognized them instantly as the roly-poly girl and *the* girl. What was more, from the direction they took over the low mounds of shells that lined the creek shore, they were coming to the store, or would pass it.

A sort of panic seized Page. What a fool he had been to line himself up with the village loafers! She would naturally take him for one of them. He couldn't escape now without giving himself away. The approaching girls had been remarked with interest by the others on the bench.

"Yonder comes two skirts off the shanty-boat," said one.

"Comin' ashore to give us the wunst over," said another.

"One of them's the girl that sang last night."

"Huh! She weren't no good! No bounce, no ginger. She's too high-toned for my taste."

"That's all right," pronounced Ralph Horry, the connoisseur. "She has the scenery. There ain't nothing on the island, nor up county, neither, to touch her."

"You ought to know, Ralph," said one, amid laughter.

"I've picked her to take to the dance at the hall on Thursday night," said Ralph.

A dull, suffocating anger was smoldering in Page's breast.

"What? Got a date already?" asked the admiring satellite. "That's going some!"

"Not yet," admitted Ralph; "but leave that to me. Watch me brace her now!"

Page's anger blazed up like a flame in gunpowder; but by a sort of miracle he kept his self-possession. An instinct told him he could better serve the girl and better further his own cause by holding himself in and putting his wits to work. Suppose he did knock Ralph Horry down, the girl would not know what had led up to it, and would dismiss them both as a pair of village brawlers.

So Page kept his eyes straight ahead and controlled his breathing. Fortunately he had not a face that easily betrayed his feelings. Moreover, the others were all looking at Horry with expectant grins. Page was watching him, too, out of the sides of his eyes.

At the moment when Horry's legs gave their first preliminary twitch, Page quickly rose and strode stiffly toward the approaching girls. All the others were so astonished by this unexpected move that they could only sit and stare. Ralph Horry did not even get up.

Page raised his cap. Such was the tumult of his feelings that the two girls appeared only as a blur before his eyes; but he had his little speech all pat.

"I beg your pardon for addressing you, but I have a particular reason. If you'll allow me to walk with you a little way, I'll explain. Then I'll leave you."

Now Eve was used to being accosted by village youths, for of course she had to come ashore from the Thespis for exercise, and she had learned how to protect herself with dignity and good humor. But this youth was different. She was much struck by his eyes, which dragged themselves up to hers with a kind of a plucky agony, and hung on there. Furthermore, the style of his address was, to say the least, unusual. Her curiosity was stimulated; and had she not the roly-poly Luella at her side to play propriety? So Eve smiled and said:

"Why, yes. What is the matter?"

That smile overwhelmed Page. Having

way, a tremendous horse laugh broke out on the bench. The girl colored hotly. Page's dreadful thought was that she would suppose they had put him up to speaking to her. It broke the bonds on his tongue.

"They are none of my lot," he said quickly. "I have nothing to do with them."

"What are they laughing at?" she murmured.

delivered himself of his little set speech, he found only a horrible vacuum inside him. He could not answer Eve's question at once, but he fell in stiffly beside the two girls.

They walked past the store. Though it was such agony to meet *her* eyes, Page was not afraid of the red-faced crew on the bench, and his eyes searched them like rapier points. They looked down at their boots and up at the porch roof.

When the three had passed on a little

SHE LET LUELLA GO, AND PAGE REJOICED; BUT HE COULD NOT BE SURE HOW MUCH HE MIGHT BANK ON THIS

"They are laughing at one of themselves," said Page. "That was what I had to tell you. He was boasting that he would speak to you when you came up. It was



to save you from that insult that I ventured to—to—”

His tongue became mired again.

“Oh!” said the girl.

She looked at him oddly. Her charming eyes were full of laughter, but Page could stand that because there was something else there, too. On the other hand, Luella snickered outright. Page was prepared to detest that little female.

“But you spoke to me yourself,” said the girl, her voice quivering with laughter like a singing bird’s.

“That was only to save you from worse,” said Page stiffly.

“Oh!” she said again.

“I will leave you now if you so desire,” he added.

Eve was struggling to iron the dimples out of her cheeks.

“I don’t insist,” she murmured.

Luella let out a little hysterical whoop and stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth. Page glared at her; but suddenly a new thought drove Luella clean out of his head.

“I’ve done it! I’ve done it without knowing it! Here I am walking beside her!”

Let the Luellas laugh!

Eve began to talk to let the situation down comfortably.

“We are looking for the post-office,” she said. “Somebody told us the mail came in at eleven.”

As a matter of fact the mail was not due until noon, but Page did not feel called upon to mention that.

“If I can detain her for an hour!” he thought. “The post-office is just at the top of that little rise ahead,” he said aloud.

“Luella expects a letter,” said Eve teasingly.

“Oh, I do not!” said that young lady, bridleing.

A lot Page cared for Luella’s letters; but he thought with a sharp pain in his breast:

“And you, too! Of course, you have a lover who writes to you. How could it be otherwise?”

His pain was too much for his good manners. It forced him to say, with a would-be facetious air that did not sit well on his serious young self:

“How about you?”

“Oh, I never get letters,” she answered lightly.

“She’s lying,” Page thought wretchedly. “She has a right to, of course. It’s none of my business.”

But the girl added—could it have been out of kindness of heart?—

“Do I, Luella?”

“That’s because you don’t write any,” Luella answered.

Relief unspeakable flooded Page’s breast. His dark eyes beamed.

Absolom’s Island is a long, narrow piece of land joined to the mainland at one end by a causeway. At the seagoing end it bulges out like a tadpole, or, more exactly, like the bowl of a brier pipe with a curved stem. It is completely covered with its village, except for a field of buttercups and daisies which forms about half of the broad part—a field bordered on two sides by a beach of snowy sand. This is called “the point” by the islanders, and is used by everybody in common. The village cows graze there, fishermen spread their nets in the grass to dry, and at night lovers sit on the edge of the low bank, with their feet in the sand, and spoon.

Mattison’s store is at the top of the bowl of the pipe. It looks out across the maze of deep creeks which, behind the island, stretch inland like the fingers of a hand. There is another short causeway which carries the road straight back from the top of the bowl to the stem. Returning over this causeway from Mattison’s store, you pass between Joe McCrory’s little machine-shop and the barber’s, mount a little crooked rise, and find yourself looking out over the broad bosom of the Pocohannock.

The post-office stands here. A former postmaster, to while away the long hours between mails, built a little rustic seat looking out over the river, and put a roof over it. It was a great convenience to the public.

Page, Eve, and Luella sat upon this bench now—Eve in the middle, Luella clinging to her arm and peering around her at Page. Luella was the fly in Page’s amber. Her titters and squawks were fatal to rational conversation. In spite of his best efforts, the talk drifted into the backwaters of banal questions, monosyllabic answers, and ghastly silences.

Page raged at his own lack of wit, but what could a man do? The other girl could have got rid of Luella had she wished, but she didn’t seem to mind the giggler. Her charming face was inscrut-

able and bland. If Luella had been a year or two younger, Page could have given her a nickel, he thought, and sent her to the store for candy.

Candy! It might work even yet.

"Been up to the end of the island?" he asked.

"No," said Eve—or Merridy, as they called her. "What's there?"

"Oh, nothing much, of course," said Page. "There's an ice-cream parlor."

Luella rose to it instantly.

"Come on, Merridy," she said. "I'll treat."

Page hung in suspense.

"No, thanks," said the other girl. "It's too early in the day."

"Well, I can't eat ice-cream by myself," grumbled Luella, sitting down again.

"It's the only place you can buy decent candy," Page went on carelessly. These diffident youths are perfectly capable of dissimulation at need. "They get it fresh by the bus every day."

"Candy?" cried Luella. "Oh, come on, Merridy, I absolutely must have some candy!"

"I'm too comfortable here," said the other lazily. "You run and get what you want. I'll wait for you."

She let Luella go, and Page rejoiced; but he could not be sure how much he might bank on this. The fact that she didn't want candy was no guaranty that she wanted *him*. At any rate the pest was gone—with backward giggles over her shoulder.

"What's the matter with her?" said Page viciously.

"Oh, she's just at the age," said Merridy indulgently.

"Seems like an idiot to me!"

"All girls have to go through that stage."

"I'm sure you were never like that."

Merridy shrugged.

"No, I wasn't like that," she said. "I had worse faults."

"What were they?" asked Page, smiling.

"I was a perfect little liar," said Merridy. "I could look people straight in the eye and lie."

Page's smile broadened.

"Expect me to believe *that*?" he said.

"Your eyes are perfect wells of truth," *his* eyes added, but he did not dare voice that.

Everybody who turned the corner stared at them, of course, and within the post-

office the postmaster was taking a lively interest in their conversation. Page was hampered by self-consciousness, and conversation still languished. Finally he plucked up the courage to say:

"Let's go down and sit on the point. The view out to the bay is wonderful in weather like this."

"But we said we'd wait here for Luella," objected Merridy.

"I didn't," said Page dryly. "She can see us," he added. "It's just down there."

Eve's curiosity was more and more piqued by this young man. His deficiency in conversation did not matter much—not with those speaking eyes. The eyes suggested a young man who was neither selfish nor a fool, and this was somewhat in the nature of a phenomenon to Eve. She apprehended the fire in him—the very quality which had been denied her in her young men hitherto, and the lack of which she had resented. Finally she told herself, with perfect inconsistency, that she was quite safe, for was she not through with that sort of thing forever?

They went down the narrow wagon-track along the edge of the river bank, past some crooked little whitewashed tenements, the last one frankly sliding down-hill. This was the residence of the boat-mender, who had his work scattered widely and comfortably in the clean grass of the common. The buttercups and daisies kissed Merridy's pretty feet.

Page craftily led the way over a slight rise in the grass; on the other side they were hidden from a possible searching Luella. Merridy never thought of looking behind them. They sat down in the edge of the grass with their feet in the sand, like so many couples before them. The tide was out, and a graceful little crescent of sand ended off the point with a flourish.

"It is lovely!" breathed the girl. "It is so clean! Sky, water, and land look as if they had been swept!"

"All the ugly things are behind us," said Page darkly. He felt freer now; the stricture on his tongue was loosed; he dared to look at her. "I'm wondering when I'll wake up," he continued dreamily.

"You appear perfectly wide awake to me," she retorted.

"Yesterday I didn't know such a person as you existed," he said.

"And next week you will have forgotten that I ever existed."



"No," he said, "I am not like that. I wish you'd tell me something about yourself, so that I can feel that I know you a little."

"There's nothing to tell."

"How did you come to be with this crowd?"

"Why shouldn't I be with them?" she asked quickly.

"You don't seem like their sort."

"They are the kindest, nicest people in the world!"

"I don't doubt it," he

"Have you been on the stage in New York, too?"

She told him her usual story about two years in the chorus.



YOU THINK YOU'VE  
CUT ME OUT, DON'T  
YOU?" SNEERED  
HORRY. "YOU THINK  
YOU'VE PUT THE  
KIBOSH ON ME, EH?"

said carelessly. "That isn't what I meant. Is Merridy Lee your real name?"

"Yes," she said, thinking nothing of the lie then.

"You don't look like a New York girl, either," he said.

Merridy bubbled over again.

"What do you know about New York girls?"

He reddened.

"Oh, I'm not altogether a hick, if I do live thirty miles from a railroad," he said sorely. "I have a friend in New York—

Howe Snedecor, a boy from the county here, who is now secretary to a big man in New York. He writes me all about the life there."

"New York spoils young men," said Merridy somberly.

This was a new thought to Page. He considered it.

"Well, I suppose it does, in a way." He smiled boyishly. "Just the same, I'd like to give it a chance at me!"

"You don't know when you're well off," she said. "New York is just—just dust and ashes."

"Oh, I mean just for a trip," said Page. "I've got my regular job cut out for me down here, all right."

"What's that?" she asked.

"Old worn-out farm to pull up by its boot-straps."

"Tell me about it."

"It's a story in one word," said Page; "work, work, and more work!"

"But it's something *real*," she told him.

"My work is as unreal as—as *charlotte russe*. I wasn't cut out for an actress. I like real things."

A flame leaped up in his eyes.

"Do you?" he cried.

Merridy was a little dismayed. She had not meant to convey just that. However, he quickly lowered his eyes again.

"Not a run-down farm, I guess," he said a little bitterly. "That's *too* real."

To save herself she could not help trying to cheer him.

"I'd like to know about it," she murmured.

His hungry glance fastened itself upon her again. She noticed that he was breathing quickly.

"I say!" he blurted out. "Let me show it to you. Come up to my house to supper before you leave here."

"Oh, I couldn't," said Merridy.

"Don't think I'm out of my mind," he pleaded, "shooting an invitation at you like this; but the time is so short—only five days! Then you'll be gone. Come tomorrow night. I'll have you back here in plenty of time for the performance."

"Oh! I—I—oh, it wouldn't be right!" stammered Merridy, wholly confused now, and despising herself for her own unreadiness. What was happening to her, anyhow?

"Why wouldn't it?" demanded Page, scowling.

She saw that she had only made matters worse.

"I don't mean that," she murmured. "Don't misunderstand me. I am glad when people wish to be kind. There is no reason on my side; but—but how do I know— Who keeps your house?" she finally asked, in desperation.

"My mother," said Page.

"Are you sure she would care to have me?" murmured Merridy.

Page's pride took offense.

"She would be honored," he replied stiffly.

"I'd rather you asked her first."

A dark flush crept up from Page's neck.

"What is making him so angry?" Merridy thought, wondering. "Perhaps your mother has a prejudice against actresses," she said.

"Why do you treat me like a school-boy?" Page burst out. "Do you think I have no standing in my own house? Do you think my mother has no respect for my judgment?"

Merridy, startled by this explosion, didn't know exactly what to say, and said nothing.

"What a funny mixture—proud, shy boy!" she thought.

She was not at all sure that his mother "respected his judgment"; probably not, where women were concerned.

"But I'm nice," thought Merridy. "Why shouldn't she like me?"

She desired to accept the invitation—and was afraid. What would happen to her later if she couldn't keep him in hand the first time they met? She glanced at him sidewise through her lashes. Of what might not such a young man be capable, once he were really roused? She burned with curiosity to find out.

"Well, that's settled, then," said Page.

"But I didn't say I'd come," Merridy protested.

"You didn't give any reason for not coming," he retorted. "I'll call for you at four to-morrow, so we'll have time to look around a bit."

She gave in, accusing herself of weakness. She felt that she must assert herself somehow, or the ascendancy would forever pass to him; so she stood up.

The move tamed the masterful young man surprisingly.

"Oh, don't go, *don't!*" he implored almost abjectly. "We have just come."

His distress gave Merridy a sweet little sense of triumph.

"I'm not altogether helpless against him," she thought. "I will punish him a little now."

When she stood up, she could see Luella wandering disconsolately in the back field. She hailed her.

"Oh, damn!" muttered Page to the sand.

When Luella came up, Merridy linked arms with her affectionately. Page, quite unused to the ways of girls, was cast flat.

"Wants me to understand that she isn't going to be separated from her again," he thought. "But she needn't think I'm going to cart that little ninny along to-morrow," he added viciously in his mind. "I'll be damned if I will!"

It appeared Luella had learned that the mail bus had met with an accident up the road, and was not expected until mid-afternoon. The girls said they must go back to the boat. They walked arm in arm, Luella giving Merridy a detailed and uncomplimentary report of the candy offered by the ice-cream parlor.

"Fresh every day!" she cried, with an accusatory glance at Page. "Why, the boxes have fly-specks on them from last summer!"

Page walked beside them in silence, turning over schemes in his head whereby he might get hold of Merridy for the afternoon. When they paused at the gangway to the Thespiis, he said offhand and pointedly to Merridy:

"Will you be ashore again after dinner, Miss Lee?"

She shook her head.

"We have to rehearse all afternoon."

Luella giggled, and Page instantly inferred from that that there was no rehearsal that day.

"Only trying to get rid of me," he thought, and tasted despair.

But the tender-hearted Merridy was already beginning to repent of the punishment she was inflicting.

"We are rehearsing a new play," she said. "It is called 'The Crimson Cross.' I am to have my first speaking part in it."

Page was reassured by these details. He suddenly recollected something he had to do before he parted from them.

"Wait here a moment, please," he said, "until I get my car."

He ran off toward the store without

waiting for an answer. Of course, they waited, wondering what the latest move of this unexpected young man portended.

"Is he going to take us for a ride, think you?" suggested Luella.

"Oh, we won't go," replied Merridy quickly.

"Don't you like him?" said Luella innocently. "I thought you did."

Merridy covered a little yawn.

"Mercy! I neither like him nor dislike him," she said casually. "He's an amusing child!"

"Well, if you ask me, I think he's got a screw loose," said Luella, popping a chocolate cream into her ever-ready mouth.

"Don't be so silly, Luella!" said Merridy with a sharpness that surprised them both.

Luella's mouth suddenly dropped open, revealing the chocolate cream in process of disintegration.

"But you said—you didn't care," she stammered.

"I don't!" said Merridy, with unnecessary emphasis. "Not the least little bit!"

Page drove up in the rakish Madeleine. Painfully conscious of her lack of style, he nevertheless turned her smartly with a great whirring of gears, and, jumping out, fumbled in the rear compartment, red to his ears. He lifted the basket out of its wrappings, and brought it to her, still blushing agonizingly, but with his eyes firmly lifted to hers. He presented his gift with a bow. Nobody had ever taught Page to bow. It must have been in his blood.

"With the compliments of Brookins Hill," he said.

"*Strawberries!*" squealed Luella, and her hand made as if to shoot out, but was arrested by a fiery glance from Page.

"Not for you, you little pig!" that glance said.

Merridy, meanwhile, was getting pink all over. In her confusion she said exactly the wrong thing.

"I am depriving somebody else," she murmured. "These were not intended for me!"

Page stiffened.

"Who should they be intended for?" he asked.

"But how did you know you were going to meet me?"

This was rather a poser, but Page quickly recovered himself.

"If I had not been fortunate enough to



meet you, I should just have left them for you," he said.

Merridy's natural simplicity came to her aid.

"I love freshly gathered strawberries better than anything else to eat in the world," she said, and forthwith popped the largest berry between lips that were no less red.

Page beamed and watched the operation, fascinated. He lingered simply because he had not the strength to tear himself away. He was hoping against hope for an hour after rehearsal, but no word was forthcoming. They bade him good-by and disappeared inside the boat.

He turned with a sigh, to discover that Madeleine was getting hot. Jumping in, he drove off in a perfect whirlwind of emotions—elation, despair, fury at what he considered his own clumsiness, softness, suspicion, jealousy, adoration.

He stopped at the store for gasoline. As he was preparing to start again, Ralph Horry appeared around the corner of the building. The red face was a shade redder than usual.

"Just a minute, Brookins," he said.

Page looked him over coolly, wondering if he had a fight on his hands. It would be a rotten mess, there on the island, but of course he couldn't sidestep it.

"You think you've cut me out, don't you?" sneered Horry. "You think you've put the kibosh on me, eh?"

"I don't think about you at all," said Page.

"Well, you will, before I'm done with you," retorted the other. "Unless you take warning. I'm giving you warning now. You keep off the island. We don't want you county gentlemen that think so much of yourselves mixing in our affairs, and we've got the power to stop you, see? You stay up the road where you belong, if you know what's good for you."

"Much obliged for the warning," drawled Page.

His tone exasperated the other beyond bearing.

"Much obliged! Much obliged! I don't want your much obliged!" he snarled. "If you show your face down here at our dance Friday night, you'll get it smashed, that's all. You'll wish you was dead before you get home!"

"Reckon it's a public dance," said Page coolly.

"'Tain't public enough for the likes of you!" retorted Horry.

"I'm not stuck on your dances," said Page. "Never had the inclination to come before; but if I feel like coming this time, reckon I'll see you there."

## VII

PAGE went back to the island that night to see the show, but did not tell his people where he was going. There was no telephone at Brookins Hill, and Miss Molly was not *en rapport* with the county gossip. She lacked a clue to that which was so obviously preying on Page's mind.

However, at the breakfast-table the following morning her experienced eyes perceived that an announcement of some kind was coming as soon as the old man was out of the way. Page saw that she knew it was coming, and both of them became as nervous as cats. It is sometimes uncomfortable to live with a person to whom you are united by such a sympathetic bond.

As soon as they were alone it came out plumply.

"Mother, there's a very nice girl in that company that's playing down at the island—a Miss Merridy Lee."

It was like the crack of doom to Miss Molly.

"Oh, my boy, my boy! An actress!" her heart cried; but she merely cast down her eyes and said:

"Yes, dear," and waited for more.

"Not at all like an actress," Page said.

"Just a simple, nice girl."

Miss Molly could not, like other mothers, dismiss it with the comfortable thought that it would blow over, for she had long been telling herself that when Page's time came, he would take it hard. And now an actress! Like all mothers, she was inclined to overrate her son's innocence and underrate his common sense. It seemed to her that of all youths he was the most likely to fall victim to a designing woman; but, unlike many mothers, she had the wit to say nothing of her fears.

"That's nice," she murmured.

"I've asked her up to supper to-night," said Page.

This announcement was too much for Miss Molly's self-control.

"Oh, Page!" she cried.

The overstrained youth flared up.

"Why shouldn't I ask her? I told you she was nice."



NOBODY  
SYMPATHIZES  
WITH THE  
FEELINGS OF  
A MOTHER  
WHEN HER  
SON BRINGS  
GIRL HOME

"Oh, it's not that!" said the poor woman. "I was thinking about us — the house in such condition — inside and out. I haven't enough dishes of one kind to set out a proper table. And I have nothing fit to receive her in, Page."

"Yes, the house is pretty bad," said Page

gloomily. "I blame myself for that. I should have started to work on it long ago."

She thought of all he *had* done, and her eyelids began to prickle. He hated tears. To conceal the threatening shower, she jumped up and, passing around the table, gave his shoulders a little squeeze from behind.

"What's that for?" asked Page rather ungraciously.

"Oh, just because—I'm crazy about you," she said, laughing shakily.

"You're foolish," said Page. He resumed his original line of thought. "I got a barrel of lime and brushes from Cousin Tom Sutor yesterday afternoon. I'll round up a gang of nigger kids this morning, and set them to work whitewashing. We ought to get three sides done, anyway. She won't see the back. And if I take down the clematis vine from the side of the house, and train it over the porch roof, it'll hide the rotten place."

"Oh, my boy! My boy!" Miss Molly's foolish heart continued to cry.

"As for you," Page went on, "I'm not worrying. Your gray dress may not be in the latest style, but nobody could mistake you for anything but a lady in it."

Behind his back she wiped away the tears that would flow. That gray dress had been an object of pride to her children for she had forgotten how many years.

"But how about pap?" asked Page anxiously. "Reckon you could persuade him to shave in the middle of the week, and put on a white collar, and stop chawing while she's here?"

"He won't chaw if you let him smoke."

"Oh, smoking's no harm."

"Don't you worry about your pap. He always shows his best face to company, and everybody likes him."

"That's so," said Page. "Well, I must get busy."

If he had only kissed her, or given her a little hug, how it would have eased her sore heart! But of course he marched out of the room without a backward glance, wholly intent upon whitewashing. Miss Molly's tears flowed freely then, but she never ceased flying about; and while the tears fell, she was counting over in her mind the scores of things that must be done.

As soon as the dishes were carried out into the kitchen, without stopping to wash them, she seized a basket and set out to

walk to Ella Smallwood's. She desired to borrow some of Cousin Ella's best china, and incidentally to learn anything she could of this actress. Ella Smallwood went everywhere and heard everything. Miss Molly had to hurry in order to be back before Page returned, for if that ridiculous boy discovered that they were eating off borrowed dishes, he might smash them, or goodness knows what.

She already felt better when she got to the Smallwood farm. Her grand common sense had asserted itself.

"After all," she told herself, "his first impulse was to bring her to me. If she was the wrong kind, he'd scarcely do that; for even when boys deceive themselves, they have a wholesome regard of their mother's verdict. I shall see her for myself. If she's not all right, I'll know, and I'll show her up to him by being particularly nice to her. She needn't think she can pull any wool over *my* eyes!"

Carefully concealing her hand, Miss Molly made inquiries of Cousin Ella. The latter lady had been to the theater, but her report of Miss Merridy Lee was vague. However, there was nothing alarming in it.

"I scarcely noticed her," said Cousin Ella. "A simple little thing—not much of an actress. Why do you ask, Molly?"

Miss Molly reflected that the news could not be hidden, anyway, and she might as well have the fun of announcing it.

"Page has asked her up to supper," she said casually, and beat a hasty retreat, leaving the portly Cousin Ella speechless on a chair.

Never were such preparations made to receive a supper guest. Page, horribly afraid of making himself ridiculous in the eyes of his parents, nevertheless grimly marshaled his gang, and worked like a Trojan himself. Mr. Jimmy was complaisant, and made and repaired ladders for the whitewashers, and put in the palings missing from the fence. Soon after dinner three sides of the house were limed, and the rotten place in the porch roof hidden under a luxuriant creeper. Page then put a couple of piccaninnies at whitewashing the fence, and hastened away to dress.

Miss Mollie's job inside was harder, for no amount of rearranging could hide the pitiful meagerness of her parlor furnishings. During the last year or two the household had not been so terribly pinched,



but the farm had cried out insistently for fertilizers, implements, and stock, and there had been nothing to spare for the house.

In the end Miss Molly had an inspiration. As fast as the little black whitewashers were laid off, she sent them into the woods for "ivory." When the little parlor bloomed in every corner with masses of the pinky white blossoms amid their rich green leaves, and when she put a great bowl of roses on the dining-table, she told herself with a sigh of relief that it looked like a white woman's house, after all.

She had the eatables on her mind, too, of course; but at any rate there was plenty of food—and such food! Fried chicken, fried soft crabs, old country ham, coleslaw, potato salad, hot rolls such as no woman but Miss Molly could make; strawberries and cream! Miss Molly knew where she could lay her hands on a good waitress, too. Aunt Lou Lize was old, but her dignity had waxed with the years. Aunt Lou Lize was ragged, but she was magnificent. A voluminous snowy apron hid most of the rags.

"If only they don't look at your feet!" said Miss Molly.

"Honey, Ah'll keep my feet real close!" said Aunt Lou Lize.

On his way to the island, Page considered without alarm what he should do about the dance on Friday night. Page was no fire-eater, not at all that type of young man who, when he is in love, is simply spoiling for a fight. He was fastidious, and the idea of mixing it up with Ralph Horry disgusted him. Rapiers, had they still been in fashion, would have been more to Page's taste. However, if a vulgar set-to was not to be avoided with honor, he was prepared for one.

If Merridy did not go to the dance there was no occasion for him to go, he decided. He considered whether he should warn her against going, but dismissed that idea, for fear it might look as if he were afraid for himself instead of for her. There was really nothing to do but to wait and see how things shaped themselves.

As Page neared the island, a sickening doubt attacked him. Merridy had not explicitly promised to come to Brookins Hill. Suppose she refused, after all; how could he bear the disappointment? And what could he tell them at home? This fear tor-

mented him to such a degree that he could scarcely bring himself to drive down to the tomato wharf.

But Madeleine had no sooner pirouetted around in front of the wharf and come to a stop than Merridy appeared out on deck, alone. It was evident, too, that she had dressed for the occasion. In Page's eyes she was as fragile and lovely as a fairy princess. He tasted perfect bliss.

There had been doubts on board the Thespis, too.

"A fella asked Merridy up the country to supper," Luella had announced.

"My child! What a barbarous form of speech!" cried Mrs. Jolley.

"Well, he did!"

Mrs. Jolley looked at Merridy.

"A quiet, well-behaved young man," said Merridy. "Since he asked me to meet his people, it seemed all right."

"Of course!" said Mrs. Jolley. "You are the sole judge of that. As an artist, there is no reason why you should not accept proper hospitality."

"I don't suppose he'll come, anyway," said Merridy carelessly. "He has probably forgotten all about it."

"You're all dressed up," said Luella.

"Not at all. I just happened to have a dress freshly ironed."

Just then the voice of Madeleine was heard outside.

"Here he is in the pill-box!" cried Luella, jumping up.

"Luella, you remain here," said Mrs. Jolley.

"Aw, ma! I just want to see if he's got a sunflower in his buttonhole!"

"Stay here."

Madeleine had had a wash in preparation for this trip, though it must be confessed that the settled ashy pallor of her complexion was not appreciably benefited thereby. Her bonnet had been let down and inconspicuously tied, and a duster was neatly spread over her dilapidated upholstery.

Page, speechless with bliss, handed Merridy in, and they started. Passing Mattison's store, Page observed that Ralph Horry and some of his friends were on the bench. Being human, he could not but take a certain satisfaction in that fact.

Merridy had started out with a firm resolve not to let things get away from her to-day. With a view to keeping the conversation in a safe channel, she said:

"I hear there's going to be a dance on the island on Friday night."

"Why, yes," said Page very casually. "Are you going?"

"I expect so," she said. "The committee sent a special invitation to the company, and we younger ones will probably go for a little while. Of course, it will be late before we get there. I don't suppose I'll dance, but I thought it would be fun to look on."

"Why doesn't he ask me to go with him?" Merridy thought; but Page remained silent. It was present in his mind that instead of being a protection to the girl, on this occasion his escort might be a source of danger.

"Will you dance if you are asked?" he finally said in his abrupt way.

"I might," she said, smiling.

"Would you dance with anybody who asked you?"

"Why not? Some of the boys may be a little unpolished, but that won't hurt me. Besides, I'm a democrat. I'm fed up with exclusiveness."

She was sorry as soon as she had said it, and hoped he had not noticed it. As a matter of fact, he tormented himself days and nights speculating on that remark. He was horribly jealous of all that part of her life that was hidden from him, yet nothing could have induced him to ask her questions about it.

"Won't you be there?" she said, to break the uncomfortable silence.

"I will be there," he said, with a grimness that in turn made her wonder. Turning his dark eyes on her, he suddenly added:

"Dance all the dances with me the little while you are there."

Merridy was not so much put about by this proposal as she appeared to be.

"Certainly not!" she said. "How would that look?"

Page flushed.

"You misunderstand me," he said stiffly.

"I would never presume to ask so great a favor for myself if there were others worthy of sharing it. I was thinking of you. I'm afraid—well, I'd hate to see you dancing with any of that gang on the island. I'd hate it!"

This speech, which began so elegantly, ended with Page grinding his teeth. Merridy looked down in her lap, and a dimple showed in the boundary of her cheek.

"Oh, I guess that wouldn't hurt me," she said.

"You don't know that gang!"

"Girls are not so defenseless as you think."

Page refused to be diverted.

"There are two young fellows aboard the boat, aren't there?"

"Yes—Rollo and George."

"They'll be going to the dance?"

"I suppose so."

"Dance with the three of us in order," said Page, "and nobody else."

"Maybe Rollo and George won't ask me," she said teasingly.

"I guess there'll be no difficulty about that," said Page. At the same time he made a mental note to see Rollo and George the next day, and have the matter understood. "Promise me you won't dance with anybody but those two fellows and me," he urged.

"But it would look so discourteous, after the committee has invited us, to go there with all my dances given in advance."

"You don't need to trouble yourself about that," said Page. "Those ignorant boys don't know anything about engaging dances in advance. When the music starts up, there's a grand free-for-all for the girls. All you've got to do is to say that that dance is taken. Promise me you will!"

A queer quality of earnestness in his voice persuaded her. She promised. Page relaxed.

Meanwhile Miss Molly was waiting for her son and his guest in a state of ever-increasing perturbation. "Actress" still rankled in her mind.

"Twice his age, I suppose!" she thought bitterly. "And a simpering creature, no doubt. Oh, why couldn't it have been one of our nice county girls? There isn't one of them but would have jumped at him!"

The road into Brookins Hill issues out of the woods at the north side of the house, and the stable is on that side. It was customary to leave the car at the stable door and walk around outside the palings to the front gate. Miss Molly, waiting on the porch, could not see them drive up, but she heard them, and instantly darted inside and turned her back to the windows. She burned to see, and she could not bring herself to look. Nobody sympathizes with the feelings of a mother when her son brings a girl home; she is considered merely absurd.

Not until Miss Molly heard them step on the porch would she open the door.

She saw a graceful young girl in a lavender dress of a cheap cotton voile, but as fresh as flower petals. Merridy wore a broad-brimmed hat covered with the same material, through which the light filtered with exquisite softness on her vivid, wistful face.

"Why, she's lovely, she's lovely!" thought Miss Molly, and swiftly changed her mind about all sorts of things.

Merridy saw a stout, middle-aged lady in an old-fashioned gray dress with a fichu crossed on her bosom. Mrs. Brookins had gray-blond hair severely brushed back, and big, work-roughened hands; but she also had a pair of wonderful gray eyes—eyes that seemed to embrace the whole world in their wise kindness.

The young lady and the old lady each said, "Oh!" in precisely the same tone, meaning: "How much nicer you are than I expected!" Then each, perfectly understanding the other's inflection, laughed and chattered a little to cover her embarrassment, and neither heard a word.

Page stood looking from one to the other, swelling with pride—pride in both of them. Finally he said:

"I want Miss Lee to see the view from the edge of the hill. Will you come out with us, mother?"

"Run along," said Miss Molly. "I have things to do in the house."

Page picked up a chair cushion, and led Merridy back through the yard and out of the gate. Miss Molly looked after them with her anxieties running pell-mell in the opposite direction now.

"A girl as beautiful as that has only to choose. Would she ever be satisfied to take a simple country lad like my boy? Scarcely! She's already seen a bit of the world. How could we expect to content her here? It isn't reasonable! My poor lad is due to get his heart broken anyway, I'm afraid!"

The house at Brookins Hill is built a couple of hundred yards back from the brow, in order to escape the shrewdest blasts of the winter winds. The view from the edge of the hill is unforgettable. At one's feet are the fat bottom-lands in their rich dress of green, with the silvery creeks winding inland, bordered with old trees. Beyond stretches the broad band of the river, mirroring the sky, and on the distant

shore the higher ground of Princess Mary County is veiled in a dreamy haze.

This haze is the loveliest and most distinctive feature of the Chesapeake country. There are only a few days in the year when the landscape is painted in pure color; on all the other days the scene, like a lovely woman, withdraws itself behind a succession of webby veils, or comes forth from them smiling; but never on two successive days are the veils quite the same.

"All the land down there, and more than you can see from here, once belonged to my family," said Page, without bitterness; "but now we have only the four fields nearest us, this raw hillside, and the scrubby woods behind us."

Page put down the cushion for Merridy, and they sat at the edge of the hill. They remained sitting there for an hour on end without once looking behind them. Miss Molly, coming often to the door to glance with soft eyes at their two backs, wondered mightily what they were talking about. She might have been disappointed could she have heard, for it was not very romantic. Page was far too deeply in love to "make love."

"This hillside looks pretty bad, but I've had to leave that until last. Nothing but pure gravel, you see. I've filled all the gulleys with brush, and it's not washing any more. Some day I'll set out peach-trees here. Peaches will do all right in this gravel, if you keep cover crops growing between the trees, and turn them under; but so far all my work has had to go down in the flat."

Finally Miss Molly called them in. The meal that followed was a distinguished success. Merridy was hungry and made no scruples about it. Never, at one of Brutus Tawney's parties or anywhere else, had she tasted better food.

The head of the family, with his chin freshly scraped and a clean collar on, did Page credit, too. He was not at all abashed by their visitor. For that matter, nothing could abash Mr. Jimmy. He supplied most of the table talk.

"Miss Lee, you remind me of Miss Alice Buhannon. You know, Molly—her that's married to Stocker Brierly, who keeps the lighthouse at Wintergreen Point. You wouldn't think so to see her now, but when I was a lad Miss Alice was the prettiest girl in the whole of Travis County. Why she ever married that long-chinned, slack-



twisted Stock Brierly nobody could figger out. Just the way of the sect, I reckon. Why, she could have had me!"

Miss Molly watched the plates, and smiled at every one.

"Ah, how lovely she is!" she pondered. "No wonder my black-haired lad is walking in a dream! If I could only help him to get her! I'd work in the mines if I could get him some money by it!"

As for Page himself,

pressed to the pavement; to have lifted his eyes would have been sacrilege.

### VIII

ON Friday night, before starting for the island to see the show, Page went up to his



"HE DAREN'T SHOOT!" CRIED HORRY. "HE HASN'T GOT THE NERVE! COME ON, FELLOWS—RUSH—

though everything was going so well, he was perfectly wretched. His mother saw that he ate scarcely anything. He was just one great ache within. Why? He never could have told, but it was a natural enough state for passionate, virgin youth.

The girl hurt him with her sweetness. Her terrible desirability beat him down; he dared not aspire to it. It was the frame of mind of the devotee with forehead

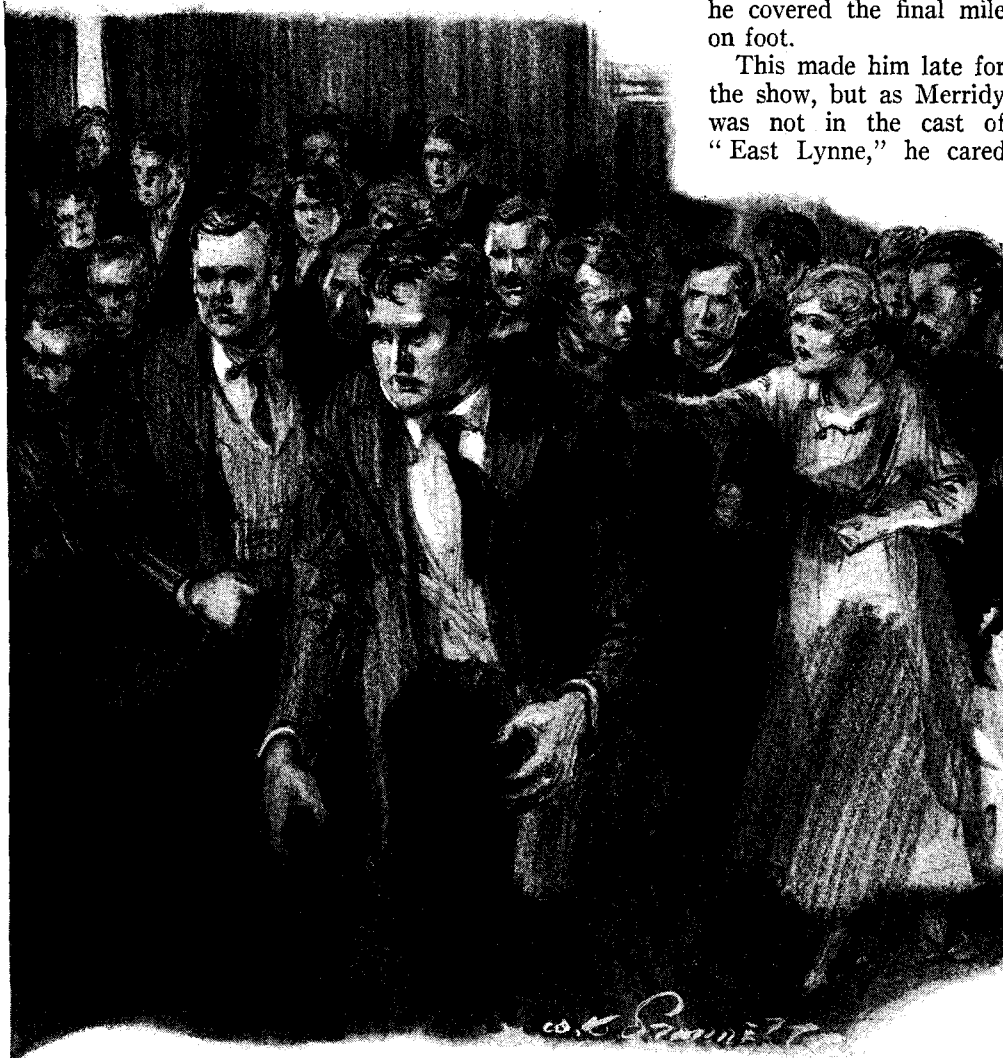
room, and, as coolly as if he were taking a clean pocket-handkerchief, slipped a loaded revolver into his hip-pocket.

A gun was part of the Brookins tradition; since babyhood Page had been familiar with stories of the guns and the gun-play of his ancestors. True, to tote one had ceased to be the fashion these many years; but the idea was only sleeping, and at the first hint of trouble Page's hand went to the drawer instinctively.

Some of the family stories revolved about this very gun. It had been the property of a former Page Brookins, uncle to the present Page. He had been a rover, and was killed in Mexico with this same weapon smoking in his hand. His dying

own skin. According to the way he read the island crowd, it would be like them to take out their spite by cutting his tires or smashing his coil-boxes; so he did not drive on to the island, but, leaving his car at the house of Brinsley Stocker, the last good county man on the road, he covered the final mile on foot.

This made him late for the show, but as Merridy was not in the cast of "East Lynne," he cared



—HIM!" BUT THEY LOOKED INTO PAGE'S RESOLUTE EYES AND DECIDED THAT HE HAD PLENTY OF NERVE

words to his partner had been a request that the gun, his sole fortune, be sent to his namesake, then a baby, with the injunction, when he grew up, to keep it well-greased and handy.

Page used it on moonlight nights to shoot at muskrats in the creeks. He had become rather a remarkable shot.

Approaching Absolom's Island that night, Page was really more concerned about Madeleine than for the safety of his

nothing for that. He was in time for her first turn.

He was no longer indifferent to Merridy's performance on the stage, but eagerly drank in every note, every gesture. His passion for her endowed him with a certain clairvoyance. The country lad, who knew nothing about acting, nevertheless instinctively perceived that the girl's natural charm was obscured by the false ideal which had been imposed on her. He also

saw, with better instinctive judgment than Mrs. Jolley's, that in her natural self she would make a greater success on Absolom's Island, or in any other place. For people are much the same everywhere; they may have their silly, preconceived ideas about things, but they cannot hold out against the real.

The enamored Page saw in Merridy a great artist. Unable in his modesty to conceive of possessing the marvel for himself, he dreamed of helping her to become famous. Absurd, impracticable, boyish, and quixotic as it was, all his passion had gone into that dream. Though it removed her from his ken forever, he was bent on making her a great artist.

As a first step, without telling Merridy, he had written to his friend, Howe Snedecor, in New York, for a better selection of songs for her. He had other plans in the back of his head.

After she had sung for the last time, Page went ashore to the tomato wharf to smoke and dream. "East Lynne" bored him.

When the floating theater let out its audience, a proportion of the younger element wended its way toward the dance in the parish hall. This building stood on the bay front of the island, not far away. Page followed in their train, watching out warily.

The parish hall, a gift from a wealthy city church to the little island congregation that worshiped under the patronage of the same saint, was of two stories, the lower divided into a library and pool-room, the hall proper overhead. The hall served as a gymnasium at ordinary times, and there was also a little stage within it. The building was lighted with electricity, and there was a light over the entrance door.

Approaching over the low mounds of oyster-shells, while he was still a hundred yards off, Page distinguished Ralph Horry and half a dozen of his cronies lined up at both sides of the entrance, scanning all who entered. Page smiled and hung back in the shadows, while he debated a course of action. The smile was caused by the number of men they thought necessary to put out to receive him.

Page's fingers itched for his gun; he had only to pull that, and they'd scatter quickly enough. But he hesitated. He foresaw what a sensation the weapon would create. It might possibly turn out to his disadvantage. In other words, somebody might run

for the constable. Better save the gun for his exit. Anyway, it would be more fun to get into the hall by guile, if it could be managed.

Page made a detour in the thick darkness. The yard of the parsonage adjoined the parish hall on the south. He gained the yard by vaulting over the fence. It was absolutely deserted on this side of the building, and black as soot. Two windows—open, like all the windows—looked down from the hall. Page knew that these windows were at the back of the stage. The orchestra was playing in front of them; very likely the piano shut off the view of one window from the hall.

Page longed for wings, or for a ladder. Well, a ladder was not beyond human attainment. There was probably one somewhere about the hall or the parsonage. It was not long since repairs to the buildings had been made.

Ladders are never locked up. They are generally left lying on the ground alongside a fence or a wall. Feeling a good deal like a burglar, Page conducted a quiet search of the premises. In the end he was rewarded by finding what he sought between the parsonage chicken-house and the back fence.

He dragged it across the yard with infinite care, and placed it under the right-hand window. Waiting until the music started to play, he went up and peeped over the sill. His calculations proved to be correct. The piano *was* placed squarely in front of one of the windows, but it was the other window.

He slipped down and changed the ladder. He went over the sill of the second window without the slightest danger of being seen from the hall, and crouched for a moment behind the piano, while he reconnoitered for his next move.

There were three other musicians in addition to the pianist, and all had their backs to the windows, of course. On either side of the stage there was a little dressing-room; but as luck would have it, the one beside Page was being used, on this occasion, as a ladies' cloak-room. He could hear their voices through the curtained doorway that gave on the stage. The men were using the room across the stage; Page got an oblique view of them passing in and out from the hall. He had the choice of stepping boldly down from the stage, or of trying to gain the men's dressing-room.



He chose the latter. The musicians, with their music-stands and instruments, made such good cover that had he dropped to all fours he could have gained the dressing-room unseen; but his pride balked at so abject a style of entrance. Choosing a moment when the dance was at its height, he flitted across the stage and gained the curtained opening. It was doubtful if a single soul in the hall saw him.

There was nobody in the dressing-room but a young boy or two, to whom Page meant nothing. Page remained there, coolly smoking a cigarette, until the music stopped. Then he walked out on the floor.

His entrance caused no visible sensation. It was probable that Ralph Horry had not taken the company generally into his confidence. Very likely all who were in the secret were down at the door with their leader.

Page walked the length of the room with an inscrutable face and inward laughter. Many a girl's eye followed him with an odd expression, half wistful, half resentful; a young man really had no business to be so good-looking as Page was at that moment.

Old Peter Corkran was sitting at a little table at the head of the stairs, taking the money.

"I got by you without paying," said Page, extending a dollar.

"You sure did!" said Peter, innocently taking the bill. "Ain't seen you before to-night."

No alarm had yet been given of Page's arrival. He took up his stand, leaning negligently against the parallel bars, which had been pushed down to the end of the room. He surveyed the scene.

At these dances, as soon as the music stops, boys and girls separate like oil and vinegar. Inter-sex conversation is unknown. The boys were now pressed together in a mob near the head of the stairs, while as many of the girls as could squeeze in had retired to the little dressing-room, to make repairs. Down the two long sides of the hall sat the spectators, consisting mostly of the island mothers—solid ladies past the age of dancing, who were accompanied by their younger offspring, a squad to each.

There was always somebody coming or going on the stairs, and it was not long before the news of Page's arrival was carried down in this manner. He heard a heavy, quick foot mounting, and Ralph Horry

looked over the top of the trunk. When he caught sight of Page, his red face presented a comical study in chagrin.

That was Page's moment of triumph. He smiled pleasantly.

Horry disappeared, and for a few moments Page heard nothing more.

"They are making a circuit of the building," he told himself.

Finally Horry came stamping back upstairs, accompanied by all his friends. They turned a volley of scowling glances in Page's direction. Page continued to smile.

The half-dozen threaded among the crowd of young men, whispering in their ears and indicating Page. All turned lowering eyes toward the county man. Page knew he had not a friend in the hall. He touched the gun in his pocket, just to reassure himself.

Just the same, he felt sure that he was safe for the time being. They would hardly care to attack him in the sight of their mothers. The mothers would go home early, and then, if he had not already made his getaway, it would be time for him to watch himself. But Page was not worrying about that. He had got there—that was sufficient; and Merridy was presently to be expected.

The music started up again, and the young man trailed past him.

"Just you wait!" Horry whispered out of the side of his mouth.

"Any time you like," said Page.

All the young men did not dance. There was always a group left around the top of the stairs, cutting off any retreat in that direction.

The little party from the floating theater arrived, and all the company stared and whispered. Page joined them quickly, and for the moment nobody else ventured to do so.

Merridy was wearing one of the simple evening dresses she used on the stage, but she had done her hair with a touch of worldliness that was both alluring and intimidating. The others of her party differed in no essential respect from the rest of the company, except that Emily's strange blond hair was in a wilder snarl than ever. In manner, Emily was younger than Luella; all her oglings and bridlings were for Page's benefit. She could not help it, though she knew very well he was Merridy's property.

When the music started for the next dance, Ralph Horry approached Merridy—in defiance of Page, who stood beside her. Page's eyes blazed on him, but the island boy, strong in the assurance that he had the whole room with him, supported it coolly. He was more afraid of Merridy than of Page.

"Can I have this dance?" he mumbled.

"I'm sorry, it's taken," said Merridy politely.

"The next?"

"I've given that, too."

This was as far as Horry's resolution would carry him. He retired in anger and confusion.

"Do I get this?" murmured Page.

She shook her head.

"I must dance with George and Rollo first," she said deprecatingly, "because they brought me."

Such was her innocent revenge. Poor Page couldn't explain, of course.

He was obliged to take the detested Luella. Though he lacked the best masters, Page could dance. He had his own style—a very energetic style. He charged in and out among the couples, avoiding collisions by a hairbreadth, but always avoiding them. It wasn't very finished, but girls rather liked it. Luella confided to Merridy that he was "great."

Merridy, while dancing with George, had been making her own observations. There was something about the pale and watchful Page to-night that strangely disturbed her breast.

"Perhaps he will kiss me on the way home," she thought thrillingly.

Alas, when these two finally came together in the dance, the mutually longed-for moment resulted in a flat disappointment for both. Page's arm trembled when he put it around her, and all his sureness deserted him. He collided with other couples, he lost the step, he trod on her toes.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," he murmured wretchedly.

"Let's sit it out and talk," suggested Merridy.

"No!" said Page, stung to the quick.

"I can dance sometimes."

So they stuck it out to the bitter end. Had they been more experienced, they would have known that one can never dance with one's true love at first. It is a kind of torture.

After the first two or three numbers the island boys ceased to ask Merridy to dance. Ralph Horry never came again. Horry was the center of several whispered conferences at the head of the stairs, of which Page was acutely aware, though his pride disdained to watch them.

When Page's turn came to dance with Merridy again, they got along together a little better, though it was still far from rapturous. After this dance Emily Russell rounded up her little party.

"We must go," she said to Page. "Rosa made us promise we'd be back at one o'clock. Two performances to-morrow, you know."

"Well—good night," said Page to Merridy.

It affected her like a little stab. Her reproachful eyes flew to his.

"Oh!" she said.

Page avoided her look, but not for the reason she thought.

"I can't go just yet," he said.

In spite of herself, Merridy couldn't help sweeping her eyes around the walls, to see what girl was keeping him. She got no clue, of course.

"Good night," she said coldly, and they parted with sore hearts.

Merridy's was the sorest, for Page could console himself by thinking:

"Anyhow, she'll know to-morrow why I couldn't go."

By this time the crowd in the hall was much thinned out. The mothers had taken their young children home, and only the inveterate dancers remained. Page gathered from certain electrical intimations in the atmosphere that trouble would not be postponed much longer. He went into the men's dressing-room and stuffed his cap in his pocket.

"No use losing a perfectly good cap," he said to himself prudently.

From the dressing-room he stepped out on the stage, and glanced out of the window behind the piano. As he expected, the ladder was gone. Certain of the fellows who were watching him laughed derisively. Page coolly returned through the dressing-room and stood in the corner of the hall, watching the dance.

Suddenly a couple left the turning throng and went out of their way to bump roughly into Page. The man was Jed Newson, Ralph Horry's cousin; the girl Lena Stivers, a red-cheeked minx who was

accustomed to ogle Page boldly on his visits to the island.

"He insulted me!" she cried shrilly. "Page Brookins put his hand on me!"

Instantly the room was in an uproar. The orchestra played a few bars, then wavered and stopped. The players came to the edge of the stage, and leaned over to see what was happening in the corner of the hall. All the dancers crowded up.

Page eyed them warily. He knew that to attempt to defend himself against the preposterous charge would only result in the loss of his dignity. He kept his mouth shut.

"He insulted me! He insulted me!" Lena Stivers was still crying shrilly.

Ralph Horry and his particular friends came pushing through the crowd. Sure of his revenge, the former's eyes were glittering with malicious triumph.

"Get back!" he cried officiously. "Get back, you girls! Give us room. We'll take care of him!"

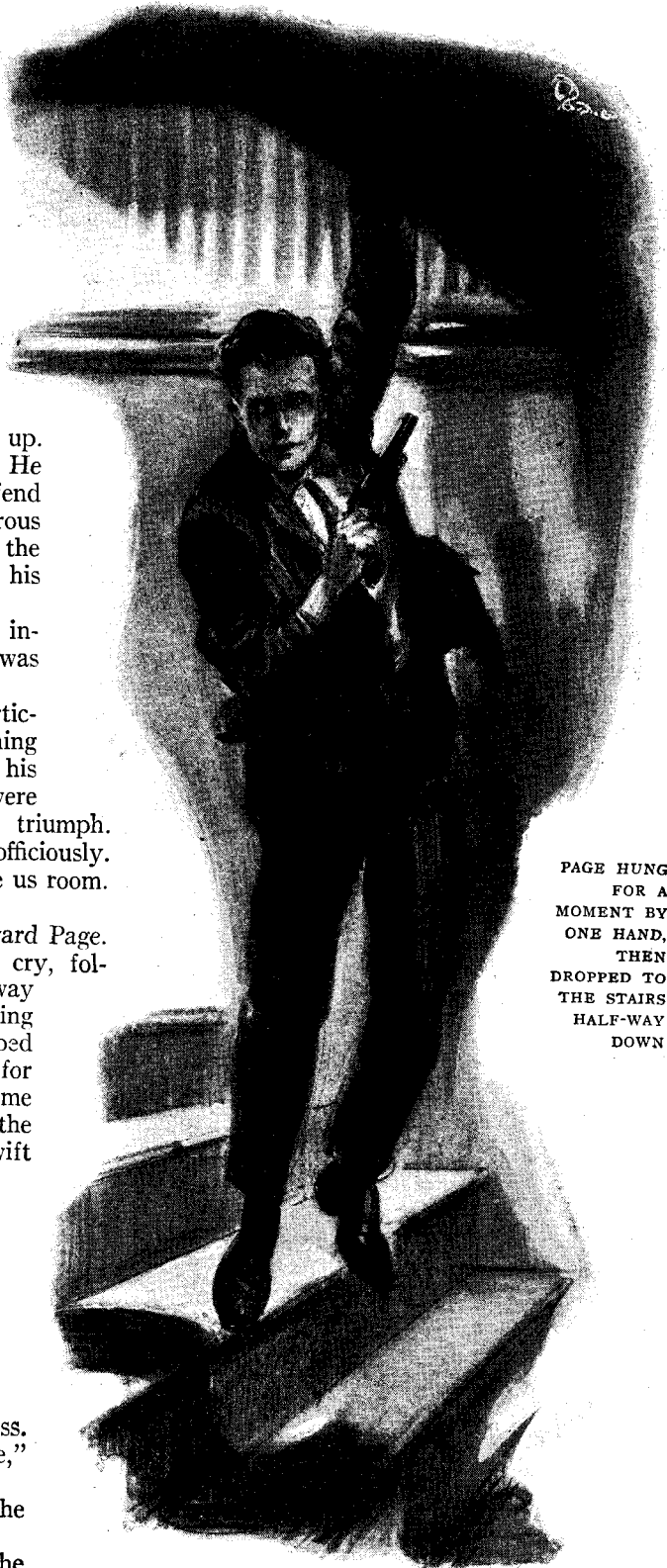
He turned to advance toward Page. Suddenly there was a loud cry, followed by a combined rush away from Page, Horry retreating with the others. Some jumped up on the stage, some ran for the girls' dressing-room, some cast themselves flat on the floor; for Page, with a swift movement, had drawn a wicked-looking gun.

Page was one of those natural shots who shoot from the hip. There was no melodramatic pointing of the weapon; held close to his body and low down, it had an infinitely more telling effect of deadliness.

"Nobody shall touch me," he said quietly.

It was the only time he spoke.

A blank silence succeeded the



PAGE HUNG  
FOR A  
MOMENT BY  
ONE HAND,  
THEN  
DROPPED TO  
THE STAIRS  
HALF-WAY  
DOWN

rush for safety. Since Page did not immediately shoot, the extreme panic presently subsided. Girls peeped timorously out of the dressing-room; boys who had started for the stairs huddled in a group at the top, watching.

Ralph Horry had thrown himself down in the center of the room. He got up shamed and furious. Gradually his principal friends gathered behind him.

"He daren't shoot!" cried Horry. "He hasn't got the nerve! Come on, fellows—rush him!"

But they looked into Page's resolute eyes and decided that he had plenty of nerve. They glanced at one another, and urged one another forward, but none went—not even Horry, for all his fury.

Page began to edge slowly around the wall toward the stair-head. The silence in the room was breathless. It was broken by a hysterical cry from Lena Stivers, over by the dressing-room door.

"Page Brookins, I lied! It was Jed Newson bumped me into you on purpose. It was a put-up job. Let him be, you cowards! He's the best man here, and you know it!"

The boys' faces turned ugly with rage, and one of them made a violent gesture in Lena's direction. She ran into the dressing-room and slammed the door. Her tardy repentance and confession did not help Page, for his enemies still snarled furiously at him.

He continued to edge around the wall. Ralph and his friends exchanged significant glances. If the fellows at the head of the stairs held their ground, they would presently have Page pinched between the two parties.

Page did not fail to comprehend the significance of those glances. He was worried about the group at the head of the stairs. He did not want to be obliged to use his gun.

Suddenly, in edging around, he bumped into the foot of the trunk around the stairs opening. That gave him an idea.

Before they realized what he was up to, he climbed over the rail, and, letting himself down, hung for a moment by one hand, then dropped to the stairs half-way down. They rushed him then, but too late. In three springs he was outside the door. He slammed it shut.

In so doing, he saw by the light overhead the key in the outside of the door—just

where it had been left by the man who opened up the hall for the dance. With a shout of joy Page turned it in the lock, and, pulling it out, tossed it far away into the darkness.

By this time heads were sticking out of the windows above, and Page's act was seen. Cries of rage both hoarse and shrill came down. Some of the imprisoned islanders were vainly beating on the inside of the locked door.

Page paused and lit a cigarette with a steady hand.

"Good night all!" he said with a wave of the hand. "Had a peach of a time!"

## IX

BRUTUS TAWNEY was pacing up and down his office and sitting-room in the Hotel Vandermeer. It was here that he transacted the more intimate part of his business—that is to say, such affairs as he did not care to have pass through the channels of his banking-house, where nothing could be hidden. His down-town office had seen him less frequently of late.

The past month had produced a noticeable change in the man. At moments like this, when he was alone, he showed his age. He showed, too, a sullen pain in his eyes that would have astonished the world, which was accustomed to look on him as a sort of impassive idol.

One has to pay for one's power. As with every potentate, there were times when Brutus Tawney wondered bitterly if it were worth the price. True, he had power such as he had not dreamed of in his ambitious youth—power an emperor might have envied him, for it entailed no such responsibilities as those that fall on the head of a state. It is doubtful if there was a man in the world more nearly his own master than Brutus Tawney; and yet what was the good of it all? The one thing that he most strongly desired was denied to him. A penniless beggar could have been no worse off.

On the other hand, beggars were free to consort happily with other beggars, whereas he was alone. His unique position cut him off from his kind. Even his children could not be natural with him. He had not a friend in the world except his poor wife, and he could not confide in her. By the very nature of the case, he was obliged to keep the only one who wished to be his friend at arm's length.



Nor could all his power and wealth safeguard him from the pain that is the common lot of man. God, how he had suffered this past month! And he had suffered in silence; he was denied even the poor relief of speaking of it. To have betrayed it would only have been to put a weapon in the hands of those who were always watching, watching to see what they could get out of him.

Even so, he had not been able to hide it altogether; he knew that by the soft way his employees stepped around him, and by their apprehensive glances.

In the midst of these bitter reflections Mr. McVeagh was announced over the telephone. Tawney ordered him to be shown up.

McVeagh was a big man in his own line, and he stood less in awe of Tawney than were most of those who came in contact with the overbearing millionaire. For this reason, however he might storm at him, Tawney trusted McVeagh more than any of the others.

As the detective opened the door, Tawney barked at him:

"Well?"

McVeagh did not quail.

"Nothing to report," he said, spreading out his hands.

"Same old story!" snarled Tawney. "What the hell's the matter with you, McVeagh? Can a man of your reputation afford to let a simple case like this stump you?"

"I can do only what a man can," said McVeagh calmly. "I am not one of these story-book detectives who appear to be in personal touch with a higher power. I have only the usual five senses. You must remember, Mr. Tawney, that I had not a clue to begin with. When Miss Allinson walked out of this hotel, she was swallowed up complete."

"There was Clough," said Tawney.

"Nothing in it. Clough has been under surveillance practically every minute during the last month. He's working for a Wall Street broker for twenty-five dollars a week, and living on it."

"He may have outside means."

"His father died a bankrupt. Clough is living in a cheap boarding-house. Besides, he's neither seen the girl, nor written to her, nor heard from her. We watch his mail, of course. Moreover, one of my men is in his confidence; the boy has not had a

thought that isn't known to us. You must give up that idea."

"What else have you been doing?" inquired Tawney.

"Well, it is supposed that Miss Allinson went away without any money. Of course, she might have borrowed some—"

"Not without its coming to my ears," said Tawney. "I chose her friends. I carefully protected her against all outside influences."

"You will pardon me," said McVeagh, "but I must doubt the possibility of establishing a complete control over any young person. It just makes them secretive; they find their own ways of establishing communications."

"Eve was not secretive!" cried Tawney. "Open as the day! A glance as clear as spring water!"

"That may be," said McVeagh, sticking to his point; "but in the young that open look may be deceptive. Young people are perfectly capable of using their freshness and innocence as a cover."

"She was not unhappy!" cried Tawney, and there was almost a break in the harsh voice. "She had everything the heart of a girl could desire!"

"But yet she ran away," murmured McVeagh.

Tawney was silent.

"Let us leave that point for the present," McVeagh went on. "If she had no money, her first step would naturally be to find work; and she would naturally look for work of the only kind she had ever done—singing or dancing on the stage. Well, with Mr. Gibbon's and Mr. Taylor's assistance, and with the half-dozen men on whom I could depend, we have about completed the search of every musical comedy company now performing in this country, with a particular eye to the chorus. It has not been such a big job as it sounds, for such companies as a rule stick to certain routes, and by following up these routes we have overtaken them one after another. We also visited the vaudeville houses in each city, of course; and, first and foremost, all dramatic agencies have been watched. The result has been absolutely negative. Nothing doing along any of these lines."

Tawney had no comment to make.

"A bigger job remains to be done," McVeagh went on. "That is to round up the burlesque companies of every degree. The

best ones, which move over regular circuits, or "wheels," as they call them, we've already looked over; but there are innumerable little fly-by-night companies hard to put your hand on, because they are very often disbanded almost as soon as formed. After that, there are the hundreds of little street-carnival companies and summer shows of all kinds."

"This will run into years!" growled Tawney.

"Well, I hardly expect to find Miss Allinson in a place like that," said McVeagh; "but I don't want to neglect anything. As a matter of fact, my own opinion is that she has not gone on the stage at all. Supposing she does not wish to be found, she'd be afraid to go out and exhibit herself to hundreds of people nightly. She'd be afraid to apply at the agencies, for fear of being recognized."

"What do you think, then?" said Tawney.

"A girl like Miss Allinson could get a job at almost anything, anywhere. There are not enough of her sort to go around. Cloaks and suits, millinery, cashier, artists' model—anywhere where good looks would be an asset. This is a long job for me, but I have my lines out, and I am doing what I can."

A spasm of pain passed over Tawney's face.

"She might have met with an accident," he said gruffly. "Have you taken that into account?"

"Certainly," said McVeagh. "That came first. That's about the easiest line of all to run down. I can assure you positively that Miss Allinson has not met with an accident."

"I don't mean break her leg or get run over," growled Tawney. "There are other things can happen to a pretty girl. Some man—"

"That scarcely seems likely," said McVeagh diplomatically, "if I rightly understand what she thought she was running away from."

Tawney winced.

"She might have been deceived," he said.

"Possible," said McVeagh guardedly; "but I don't think so."

"Damn it, McVeagh, can't you speak plainly?"

"Certainly, sir, I will," said McVeagh

coolly. "At the moment that Miss Allinson was running away from one man she'd hardly be likely to be taken in by another, would she?"

"Ha!" said Tawney.

There was a silence. Presently Tawney resumed:

"But she was not a strong character. She was soft, affectionate, easily imposed upon."

"She must have had her own kind of strength," insisted McVeagh. "It required pluck to get up and get out like that. It is these very soft and tender characters that surprise you sometimes."

"Do you think you know her better than I do?" stormed Tawney.

McVeagh spread out his hands deprecatingly.

"Don't know her at all, sir. I'm only using what powers of deduction have been given me."

Tawney was silent again.

"There's another thing," said McVeagh finally. "I call it to your attention every time I see you. I am tied hand and foot by the secrecy you have imposed on me. I can only use half a dozen operatives in the search, because those are all I have that I can depend on not to sell the story to the newspapers. I don't want to spend your money for nothing. I tell you frankly that I see very little hope of recovering the girl without the aid of publicity. You have your own reasons for keeping Miss Allinson's disappearance a secret, of course, but on the other hand you're anxious about her fate. Why don't you let me give out the story for publication, with pictures of the girl? Your name would not be mentioned, of course. She couldn't remain a week in hiding after that—not with her looks."

"No! No!" cried Tawney violently. "How many times have I got to tell you that?"

McVeagh bowed, and rose to go. Tawney, the stone man, actually showed irresolution.

"I can't stand this much longer!" his eyes cried out. Aloud he said, in a tone for him almost apologetic: "Keep going as you are for another week, McVeagh. Spend whatever you require. Try everything. If at the end of that time nothing has turned up—damn it, give the story out!"

*(To be continued in the October number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)*

# An Impending Crisis

BY EMMET F. HARTE

Illustrated by R. L. Lambdin

**B**EING a barterer by nature, Addison Tuthill was moved one day to disinter his ancient high wheel from the barn loft, where it had lain for more than two decades, and trade it for a double-barreled shotgun.

Sometimes a chain of events, like an avalanche or a prairie fire, needs only to be started to make rapid progress. Within a week, Ad had exchanged the shotgun for an automatic pistol and a casting-rod. He readily traded the automatic for a set of Bulwer Lytton's novels, a sixty-pound pig, and a croquet outfit. He then sold the pig for seven dollars in real money.

The reader is asked to remember that these things occurred in a small town where trifles light as air are apt to loom large by reason of shortened perspectives. Within a few days Ad unloaded his croquet set on an even dicker by which he acquired two razors and an unabridged dictionary bound in library sheep. He next bartered the fly-rod and the two razors for a pair of Indian game chickens, a B-flat cornet, and two dollars in cash. Let it be noted that he at once invested the two dollars in an electric lantern, a contrivance which he had fancied for some time.

At last Ad was in a position to swap Doc Killam out of the thing he had in mind from the first—a decrepit but serviceable typewriting-machine. By dint of due bargaining and squabbling between the two, a deal was presently consummated. Ad became the owner of the typewriter, while Doc became seized of a set of Bulwer Lytton's novels, an unabridged dictionary, a cornet, and a pair of game chickens. For a while it seemed inevitable that Ad would have to part company with his flash-light lantern, but in the end he saved it from Doc's clutches; also the seven dollars received for the pig, which he had already spent for a pair of shoes.

Having obtained the typewriter, Ad temporarily retired from the field of barter and trade. He spent long hours of practise at the keyboard in intense mental and digital concentration. In time he became tolerably proficient at the operation of the machine, in an erratic, hit-or-miss, one-fingered fashion.

Whereupon he looked about him for new worlds to conquer.

Ad did not get much mail. It was a rare event when he even received an excerpt from the *Congressional Record*—something which most people concede to be the nearest thing to no mail at all that a person is likely to receive. Notwithstanding this, Ad would wait until all the letters and papers were distributed in their proper places by Postmaster Hinton and his daughter Gladys. After which he would stand in line to inquire at the general delivery window for—well, for any mail that might have come for him, of course. Why not? A lot of others who came regularly twice a day never got any mail, either.

One day, while spending an otherwise unoccupied hour before the afternoon mail was due by reading the stray magazines and newspapers in Gus Wiggins's one-chair barber shop, Ad ran across an advertisement extolling the peerless merits of a special brand of carbon paper for typewriters. He wrote a letter on his machine, asking for a sample, and in a few days received a personal note acknowledging the pleasure his inquiry had given the firm. In a second envelope came a booklet of testimonials and price schedules, and in a third packet were samples of the carbon paper.

An idea was born in Ad's brain at that instant. If mail was so easy to get, why should he continue to make a bootless pilgrimage to the post-office twice a day? At the trifling outlay of a two-cent stamp, or