

The Bang-Up Party

TELLING HOW OLIVER AND SYLVIA ATE A MOST DELICIOUS
DINNER UNDER MOST UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES

By Louise Redfield Peattie

"A BANG-UP party," announced Oliver Grant impressively, as two master minds bent frowning attention upon him. "Pommery, extra dry—orchids—the fat of the land. I'm dumping every bean I've got into the pot!"

At which the eyes of his friend, Jenks Jellicot, bulged a little more than naturally. The pure American was unintelligible to M. Franchesi, but although he carried his white *chef's* cap on a proud level with crowned heads, even he bowed deferentially to the magnificence here patent.

"Then it is to be *canapé des truffes et des escargots, bisque, le relevé, coquilles St. Jacques, jaisan jarci—alors, la salade?*"

"Artichokes?" Oliver appealed to Jenks.

The authority ran a thoughtful tongue around his lips. Then, folding his hands across a façade which was in itself a voucher for his experience as an epicure, he shook his head decisively.

"Not swanky enough," he declared.

Behind thick shell-rimmed lenses Oliver's anxious brown eyes fastened upon him imploringly.

"Hearts of palm," pronounced the initiated one.

"*Et puis, la bombe glacée,*" breathed Franchesi reverently.

The three stood in a devout silence. Then, with returning briskness, the *chef* inquired:

"And how many covers, *m'sieur?*"

"Two—just two," Oliver's voice trailed dreamily away.

"Golly, she must be some peach," said Jenks, with a glazing eye, "to bring down a feed like that!"

"It isn't half good enough for her," replied Oliver, with simple fervor.

"But it 'll be an awful waste," mourned Jenks. "Girls only peck, and poke at

things with a fork; and you're too far gone to eat at all."

Oliver, his vague eyes visionary, was continuing:

"The center alcove table, of course. Now, how about flowers?"

Franchesi stepped forward, quivering with zeal.

"We have a young lady, *m'sieur*, who is an *artiste* with the flowers. She creates all our finest arrangements. If you will allow me—"

At a snap of the imperial fingers bus boys flew on winged heels. A demure slip of a figure picked its way to them through the maze of bare tables.

"Miss Marietta Maguire," the impresario presented her.

"How do you do?" she said, with a cool, fresh smile at Oliver and a bright eye for the arrested Jenks.

"*M'sieur* gives a dinner—*quelque chose d'exquise*. The flowers must be of the most perfect."

"M-m-m-m!" She cocked her shining black head and half closed her dancing eyes, addressing Oliver. "What kind of a girl is she?"

Oliver swallowed helplessly, struggled to escape from his collar, and ran a despairing hand through his black mop. Then he caught Marietta's gleaming eye, and said with sudden confidence:

"Oh, silvery and slim, like one of those tiptoe flowers, you know. Blue eyes, sort of tendrilly hair—"

He gagged, feeling Jenks's bulging gaze upon him; but the girl nodded competently.

"I get her. How would you like larkspur, lilies, and Cherokee roses in a Sèvres basket? And for the corsage"—she tilted her head again, and Jenks gurgled audibly—"a spray of pale gold orchids?"

Oliver nodded happily, dreamily. Jenks caught him firmly by the arm.

"Come on out of this," he commanded, "before you order blue diamonds for favors and the Prince of Wales for your waiter!"

Once in the open air, on the steps of the temple dedicated to Franchesi's art, Jenks relaxed his prisoning grip to mop his brow.

"Lord, Ollie!" he gasped. "Whoever she is, she'll surely fall for that! You've got the stage set to look like a million. I suppose you'll pull it off after dinner?"

Oliver looked at his friend, and his whimsically crooked mouth straightened into a stern line.

"No," he said. "After that night I'm never going to see her again."

"Wha-at? Then it ain't serious with you?"

"It's serious as hell," replied Oliver grimly. "She's a fairy, brought up in a fairyland of beauty and comfort; and look at me!" He turned to the other man with a savage gesture toward his rangy figure in its baggy clothes. "An ass of an astronomer!" he said bitterly. "Live in a hall bedroom, and press my trousers under the mattress!"

"But if she's got money—" began Jenks, perplexed.

"That's just it," said Oliver briefly.

"I don't see why," objected the inquisitive hedonist.

"Can you see me taking a lovely, delicate, inexperienced girl like that out of the beauty and luxury she's happy in, to my kind of crazy, star-gazing poverty? Forget it, Jenks, old dumb-bell!"

He whacked his friend on the shoulder, and, cheerfully whistling a dirge, stepped forth in descent of the steps.

"All right!" assented Jenks unwillingly; and, balancing his derby on his head and his cane in jaunty fingers, he followed his companion. "What you going to do after dinner?" he wanted to know.

"Drive back to town for the Midnight Frolic. I've sold my soul for center aisle seats; and after that—"

"Yeah?" inquired Jenks, opening the door of his powerful-muzzled red roadster.

"I'm going to Honduras," finished Oliver.

Jenks stopped on the step.

"What the devil—"

"There's an eclipse of the sun coming—it'll be total down there. The observa-

tory's sending a man, and I've wangled the job. It'll be hot as the hinges down there, but it's hell itself to hang around her!"

"But look here—Honduras!" protested his friend. Something grim in Oliver's face made him relapse into silence and relax limply against the car. "Anything I can do to help you get fixed?" he offered wanly.

"Yes," said the other readily. "Lend me the Blunderbuss."

"Delighted," acceded Jenks; "but—not to go to Honduras?"

"No." Oliver grinned. "To take her to the party."

"But if you're going to Honduras," began Jenks, with exasperated emphasis, "why do you blow in all your dough on an affair that's an absolute dud?"

Oliver grew swiftly, wistfully grave.

"Don't you see? I want just once to give her what I'd like to give her all my life. It won't mean much to her, but it'll mean a lot to me—the chance to give her the best I can for one night—just once, and that's the end."

He crammed his broad hat well over his face, jumped into the car, and jammed on the starter. The roar of the Blunderbuss, as it plunged forward, drowned Jenks Jellicot's last feeble protests.

II

THE day appointed for Oliver's party found Jenks, with yearning eye and slightly drooling tongue, roving restlessly from golf course to poker table. The thought of the dinner, even now simmering in Franchesi's imported skillets, a pearl to be cast before Oliver, obsessed him. For distraction and comfort he turned the Blunderbuss toward the marble-pillared abode of Sylvia Larcom.

He found her curled upon a large silk *pouf* in a breezy window seat, and gazing, chin in hands, into the garden. As the butler ushered in what Jenks was beginning to feel must be his emaciated form, she jumped up, thrusting a wad of handkerchief under the *pouf*.

"Jenks, dear lamb, how nice to see you!" cried Miss Larcom, her voice like that of the early robin just after acquiring the worm.

Jenks pressed her hand fervently. He was too much engrossed with inner longings, and too much dazzled by the warm blue light of her eyes, to observe the dew upon their fringing lashes.

"I say, Sylvia, how wonderful you're

looking! May I sit down on that squushy thingummy, too?"

The window seat was comfortably small. Jenks, in an agreeable proximity to that flower-tilted profile, sighed with mingled yearnings.

"I say, Sylvia," he repeated impulsively, "you couldn't change your mind now, and have a go at it with me—getting married, I mean?"

"I'm afraid not, Jenksy, thank you," said Sylvia, with sweet regretfulness. "Awfully dear of you, but I just can't!"

"No, no, I suppose not," agreed Jenks resignedly. "I'm awfully fond of you, you know, Sylvia."

"I do know, old thing," replied Sylvia, squeezing his hand, with a forlorn echo of his sigh.

"I say," said Jenks again, suddenly startling the silence. "Has somebody else got his hooks in—I mean, is there another johnny?"

"No, of course not—oh, no!" denied Sylvia agitatedly.

She turned away, fumbling under the *pouf*. A tear dropped upon its ruffled silk with a small splash.

"Sylvia!" cried Jenks in panic. "Oh, gosh! Don't cry!"

The adoring concern in his small, pale eyes destroyed the last vestiges of her self-control. With a sob, her curly brown head collapsed against the adjacent tweed shoulder, and Jenks mopped distressedly at the deluge.

"I'm an idiot!" she gasped. "He doesn't care at all! I thought he did, at first. He was so—so—oh, you know! And then he got quite different—sort of stiff, and formal, and distant; and now he's going awa-a-ay!"

She subsided miserably, burying a small, cold nose in Jenks Jellicot's collar.

"What an ass! What a brute!" he thundered.

"Oh, no, he's wonderfully kind and gentle!" protested Sylvia, sitting up and pushing the brown tendrils out of her eyes. "Why, the very first time we met, I was too perfectly idiotic and insulting, and he was so dear and forgiving! You see"—she sniffed in unhappy recollection—"after we'd danced awhile, I asked what he did. 'I photograph stars,' he told me; and I said—oh, what a gushy goose he must have thought me!—I said, 'How exciting! Then do you know Pola Negri or Doug

Fairbanks?' And then he explained," she wailed, "that he's an astronomer!"

"An as—" Jenks gagged and goggled.

"Yes," nodded Sylvia. "I've read up the most dreadfully difficult stuff about planets and comets and things, and it's all no use. He's going awa-a-ay!"

"To Honduras," confirmed Jenks, his paralyzed brain beginning to function.

"You know him!" Sylvia's wide eyes dried up in her astonishment.

"Rather!" said Jenks warmly. "We're clubby enough to have been born twins. Look here—you must be the girl who's going to eat that dinner! Why, he's most awfully gone on you!"

"Oh, Jenks!" breathed Sylvia, gazing wonderstruck through wet lashes.

"Dead gone!" repeated Jenks solemnly. "He's ordered stuffed pheasant."

"But if—if he—cares," said Sylvia slowly, "why Honduras?"

"Because he's so frightfully keen on you that he can't stand hanging around," explained Jenks excitedly. "He said the girl had such a ghastly lot of cash—and you have, of course—that he'd sworn never to pop the question. He hasn't got a bent dime, you know."

"I don't care," said Sylvia, her tear-wet face luminous; "but oh, Jenksy, how can I ever make him ask me?"

Jenks rubbed a duplicated chin.

"I should think a poker would unbend after a dinner like to-night's," he suggested hopefully.

"It's my last chance to-night," whispered Sylvia tensely. "Perhaps if there's a moon, and we do something awfully romantic—what's he planning, Jenksy?"

"A bang-up party," Jenks told her impressively. "Dinner at Franchesi's—the center table—and then the snappiest revue in town."

"Oh, no!" wailed Sylvia. "How hopeless! All those lights, and people around—I'll never get anything out of him! Oh, if we could be alone with the stars!"

"There's going to be plovers' eggs," urged Jenks.

"What do I care for mere food," cried Sylvia passionately, jumping up to pace the room, "when he's going to Honduras to-morrow?"

"Say, there's nothing mere about *this* food," protested Jenks warmly.

"Jenksy!" Sylvia turned upon him, prayer in her gentian eyes, supplication in

her outspread hands. "Help me, dear old Jenksy! I want him so, and to-night's my only chance."

In the ringing pause there fell six delicate, chiming strokes from the French clock on the mantel.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Sylvia, suddenly practical. "It 'll take me hours to dress—I've got to be scrumptious. Fly, Jenksy!"

"Dash it!" cried the distracted Jenks, as she pushed him from the room. "What can I do about it, Sylvia? He's a cross between a mule and a clam!"

"Well, wish me luck, anyway," she begged with a tragical smile.

"By George, I do!" vowed Jenks, clutching her hand in both of his. "He's an ass, but he's a prince; and you—oh, Sylvia!"

He lost his voice, and fled.

III

As she sat before her mirror, two hours later, putting on the last eloquent touches, Sylvia stared at the starry image there with a savage intensity. Fiercely she thrust in another hairpin, and pulled out a brown tendril. The effect was already enough to wring pity for Oliver from the stoniest breast, but Sylvia mercilessly added a coronal of silver leaves.

From below came the roaring purr of a car pulling up. She ran to the window to see the big red roadster snuggle against the curb. Then she gathered her cloak and gloves and flew out of the room, her hands pressed to her hot cheeks.

Oliver, waiting in the hall below, saw descending from heaven down the wide stairs a slender, cool goddess, one hand trailing on the rail, the other gathering the blue velvet cloak about her with a queenly gesture. On the last step the remote, ineffable vision gave him her hand with a merry smile.

"How do you do? This is jolly!"

He summoned his reason from behind his masking impassivity, and smiled twistily.

"You're looking very super-extra in that blue affair!"

The big door clanged behind them, and the summer night welcomed them with dark, caressing airs. Sylvia climbed into the roadster and arranged herself.

"He's borrowed Jenks's car—that's good," she said to herself; "but oh, dear, Franchesi's! It's so frightfully gorgeous

and so horribly expensive! Of course the darling oughtn't!"

A motherly distress engulfed her, for Sylvia was no gold-digger.

"Careful, old boy, careful!" Oliver cautioned himself beneath his breath, as he swung in behind the wheel.

He dared not look at her, so that her smile fell upon stony ground. The gulf stretched between them illimitably where they sat side by side, and bleak depression settled upon each as they plunged into the night, chatting gayly.

"I've found out that Jenks Jellicot is a friend of yours," she began.

"Awfully good egg, Jenks!" he said warmly.

She dimpled.

"He's so amiable and eager to please," she remarked, "that he'll propose to any girl after their third dance!"

"Some day he'll find himself married," prophesied Oliver darkly.

"Well, every man ought to get married," said Sylvia reasonably.

The remark hung in the air. Then Oliver gulped, and said firmly:

"Well, I shan't marry."

"Really?"

Sylvia's tone showed impersonal interest.

"My job may take me around the world and up to the moon and back," went on Oliver. "A man must keep free to do his work. He must keep foot-loose—no home ties—free of responsibility—nothing to hold him down."

He enlarged brazenly out of pure bitterness of spirit.

"Do you know, I think you are quite right!"

Sylvia's voice was all confidential sympathy. Through the dark, her smile shone winsomely up from the snowy fur of her cloak. Passing headlights showed Oliver her poised head wreathed with silver leaves, the laurel crowning the head of a young goddess, untouched by mortal cares and sorrows.

Pressing the accelerator, he plunged the Blunderbuss into the night with the sensations of a man who has taken the cowl with irrevocable vows. They rode in silence, but for the dragon purring of the Blunderbuss and the whistling spirits of the air playing about their ears. Sylvia watched her escort's profile etched against flying shadows. He had discarded his hat, and the winds played riot with the curly black

thatch. His jaw, thrust forward, challenged the perils of the road, and his lips were thinned to a crooked line. The light glancing on his glasses struck out a baleful gleam. A profile stern and stubborn—how had she ever let it come to be so incredibly dear to her? She sighed miserably.

Oliver was aware of the sigh, as he was achingly aware with every inch of him of her presence at his side. He read boredom in it, and cursed himself for his stupidity. He knew he should toss off some bright and casual remark, but the flaming declaration that filled his mind held him speechless.

At least, he thought with relief, it wouldn't be so hard to be lightly indifferent across a sparkling dinner table. Lights, music, and surrounding chatter made effective barriers. Once at Franchesi's, he would get safely through the evening.

"There's a short cut here," he said abruptly. "Jenks showed it to me. Not much used, but good going."

She nodded mutely, and they swung off the main pike. Oliver doggedly held his mind to the carefully planned details ahead. If only the champagne was iced enough! Could that minx of a girl be trusted about the flowers?

Beside him, Sylvia clenched her hands and sought despairingly for means to disarm her beloved enemy.

Down the lonely road ahead shone the two blazing eyes of a motor, which, as they approached, appeared to be stationary.

"That fellow must be in trouble," commented Oliver.

"Oh, do let's see if we can help!" cried Sylvia sympathetically.

Oliver slowed down and drew up just short of the other car. The blaze of its headlights cut off all view of its occupants.

"Can I help you out, neighbor?" called Oliver genially.

Silence and the breathing of the Blunderbuss answered.

"Nobody in her. This looks funny!" said Oliver. "Well—"

He opened the door and jumped out.

"Now, then!" barked a hoarse voice. "Put up your hands!"

"I say—" Oliver blinked into the light.

"Stick 'em up!" The voice was rough. "Lady, get out of that car!"

Oliver had instinctively thrust up his hands before the unseen threat, but now he lunged forward.

"You let the lady be!"

A snarl broke out of the dark beyond the light, and Oliver felt a blunt muzzle against his ribs. He staggered back, to see looming upon him a figure in a mackintosh with the collar pulled well about his face.

"It's all right, Sylvia!" he called in a reassuring voice that choked. "Don't be frightened!"

"I'm not!"

She was beside him. His arm went around her, and the revolver covered them both.

"I've got 'em, Hank!" cried their captor, in a voice almost genial with triumph. "You keep mum, and you're safe enough," he informed his prisoners.

Prodding the small of Oliver's back with the revolver, he ushered them toward the car standing silent by the roadside—a mangy flivver, it dimly appeared. Behind them the Blunderbuss began to snort.

"Get in!" urged their captor, with grim pleasantness and a cordial gesture of the gun.

Oliver stood still, and Sylvia paused on the step, as the Blunderbuss came roaring alongside with the shadowy Hank at the wheel. The mackintoshed man turned to spring on the running board, and in that instant Oliver leaped at him and caught his wrist. The revolver went off with a crash. Sylvia screamed and toppled forward into the tonneau. The bandit wrenched himself free and vanished in the roaring car.

"Sylvia!" cried Oliver in an agony of terror, plunging into the tonneau. "My God! Are you killed?" He had her limp body in his arms. "Sylvia, my darling love!" he sobbed against her hair.

She stiffened and moved. A small, quiet, happy voice came from somewhere in the white fox collar:

"I'm not hurt a bit!"

She lifted a dim face to him in the darkness. He turned away and put her down upon the cushions with shaking hands.

"Those brutes! Confound my stupidity! I ought never to have brought you this way! I ought never to have brought you at all! I—"

"Mr. Grant, please!" Sylvia quieted him. "I'm right as a trivet—whatever that is."

Her heart was singing. Oliver mopped his brow.

"Good Lord!" he groaned. "I wouldn't have had this happen for—"

Sylvia interrupted him with a puzzled question.

"But why didn't they rob us?"

"Auto thieves," Oliver told her briefly. "They ran this spavined hearse out here for a dummy, and then lay in wait for some sucker—"

"And we sucked," concluded Sylvia cheerfully.

"Poor Jenks!" reflected Oliver. "I hope he's got her insured, in case we can't trace her. I say"—he turned to Sylvia—"You were a heroine—an angel, and a heroine!"

"I think it was rather fun," she said frankly.

He pressed her hand in wordless admiration, and then dropped it. They sat staring into the cricket-threaded silence of the night. Oliver's cheek remembered the touch of her hair, and his throat ached with all that he had sworn not to say. In her corner Sylvia huddled contentedly.

Hauling himself back from dizzy chasms of imagination, Oliver made himself say briskly:

"Well, let's see how much life there is left in old Dobbin!"

He swung into the front seat and stepped on the self-starter. After a moment's unresponsive and pregnant silence, he abandoned it wordlessly, discovered the crank, and, fitting it in, swung it powerfully and vainly.

"Maybe I can patch her up," he said with wan hope.

She listened to him rattling the hood and whanging at the engine, and held her breath. Presently he reappeared beside her, a vaguely outlined head looking into the tonneau.

"It's no go, I'm afraid," he reported. "The feed pipe's gone, and there's no gas, anyway."

Sylvia gave a giggle of relief, but smothered it. Before Oliver's dazed eyes flashed a vision of the perfectly appointed table, the lights, the flowers, and himself authoritatively beckoning the head waiter. He gave a groan, and disguised it in a hastily improvised cough.

"It's a shame," offered Sylvia sympathetically. "Oooh, isn't it dark?"

Behind the vacant glare of the car lamps, wherein danced hypnotized moths and midges, velvet blackness infolded them. Dimly rose the darker shoulders of bushes and hedgerows along the road. The smell

of hay and dewy grass came to them, and the sharp sweetness of unseen wild roses.

Oliver could hear her soft breath, and could just see her parted lips. He jammed his hands into his pockets and hunched his shoulders into his coat collar.

"Would you be afraid," he asked gently, "if I went off to reconnoiter for help?"

"I love the dark," she declared. "Go along. I wish you luck!"

She snuggled back, uncrossing her fingers as he departed. Here on a dubious side road traversing quite unknown country, stalled in an unidentified car in the midst of dark and loneliness, she felt the greatest happiness and security she had ever known. She tucked her nose contentedly into the white fox. The evening was turning out well, after all!

IV

AFTER some minutes Sylvia heard dust-muffled footsteps.

"Oliver!" she called, softly, daringly, and waited.

A hand, clamped suddenly over her mouth, choked down a scream. She reeled back in the car, her starting eyes fixed upon the dark figure looming over her. There came the rustle of a mackintosh, and then a hissing "Shut up!" in a dearly familiar voice.

"Jenks!"

She clutched the mackintosh.

"For gosh sakes, don't gum the works!" he breathed.

Sylvia was giggling hysterically.

"It was you stole your own car! Oh, Jenksy, you darling duck!"

"Pipe down!" begged a worried whisper. "He may be here any minute. I've got to beat it. I'll give you two hours to do the job in—then you'll find me waiting by the bridge just below here."

He vanished, like a shade returning across the Styx.

In another moment Sylvia heard Oliver's quick footsteps.

"Not a house in sight," he reported, appearing beside the tonneau. "I could just grovel, Miss Larcom, I'm so disgusted with this ghastly flop!"

She slipped a comforting hand up his lapel.

"You mustn't mind." She lifted candid, dancing eyes, faintly luminous. "Honestly, I think it's a great lark!"

He moistened his lips.

"You brick!" he said softly, his eyes shining into hers in the dark.

"Of course," she said, with a quaint mockery of demureness, "it's dreadfully compromising!" With a low, delicious laugh, she added: "Really, Mr. Grant, you ought to marry me and make an honest woman of me!"

The wind tickled his cheek teasingly with a vagrant strand of her hair.

"Damn!" said Oliver under his breath, but nothing more.

Sylvia had the exasperating sensation of jerking up an empty line just after a big nibble.

"Damn!" she agreed softly.

He caught that, and turned quickly.

"What's wrong?" he asked anxiously.

"I'm awfully hungry!" she said with frank fervor.

"Hungry!" Oliver was all contrition. "You poor little—of course you're hungry! What an ass I am! What a brute—"

"How is it that trappers manage to get food in the wilds?" interrupted Sylvia. "We can't set a trap, because we haven't any bait; and you've neglected to bring your shotgun."

"I shall pit my cunning against the brute strength of the wilderness," said Oliver darkly. "Isn't that the proper thing to do out in God's country where a man's a man?"

"The great open spaces," mused Sylvia pensively. "Oh, but I should love some hot coffee!"

"We'll capture some, dead or alive," he promised. "There's bound to be a village in the neighborhood, with an all-night lunch counter in it, and a railway station with a gum machine and penny scales that don't work, and hard slippery benches where we can luxuriate while waiting for a train; but I'll have to find out the direction of that paradise."

"I can hardly wait for the dead old chocolate we'll find in the slot machine," sighed Sylvia.

"Well," Oliver told her encouragingly, "there's something that looks like a railway tank up the road a bit. I'll be back in a shot."

And he was gone. Dewy night scents and the happy beating of her own heart kept her company till Oliver returned.

"It was a tank," he reported joyously; "and the hairy hermit in it says that we're between two main lines, and there isn't a

station for ten miles. This is just a little branch line, but there's a milk train that comes through here about one o'clock, and stops on signal."

"Goodness!" said Sylvia. "When will we ever get home?"

"Oh, some time still within the limits of decency," Oliver assured her. "That is, if they don't stop to milk the cows all along the way."

She giggled happily.

"He had one bad eye and villainous whiskers," said Oliver, "but a heart of gold, had that switchman. Behold!"

With a flourish, he drew from behind him a frying pan and a tin coffeepot.

"Empty!" He shook it regretfully.

"He had no grub, but for lending us these he'll get past St. Peter, whatever he's done."

"Where will you get anything to cook in them?" inquired Sylvia.

"He says there's a farm across the meadow."

Oliver pointed into the shadowy unknown. Sylvia promptly jumped out, thrust an arm through his, and together they set off over the stubble, pot and pan jangling hopefully. To Oliver the hunter, hot upon the trail, Franchesi's art was nothing. Sylvia's silver slippers tripped happily, keeping pace with his masterful stride. From a wide, veiled sky, dim stars looked down like wise old eyes that watched, laughing.

No light shone from the farm, and the white gate was barred. Oliver swung Sylvia lightly over, and then vaulted it with long legs flying. From a ghostly kennel came a rattle of chains. Sylvia screamed faintly as a huge mongrel, shaking himself, rose and rushed toward them. At the length of his tether he stopped, wagging his tail and whining gently.

"Did it was a poor old doggums?"

Oliver caressed the great head and turned back to the palpitating Sylvia; but a plaintive whine followed him, and threatened to rise into a howl.

"Didn't um like to left to ums lone-some?" said Oliver, as he returned and un-snapped the chain.

With their bounding, lumbering escort they picked their way toward the barnyard, led by the smell of cattle and of hay.

"Ah, ha!" whispered Oliver. "That's a hen roost. Wait here, and hold Oscar's paw to keep him happy."

He disappeared into the shadows, and Sylvia held on to the collar of the tugging dog. A cackling and a panicky flutter sounded from uncharted darkness, quickly muffled by a closing door.

"S-s-st!" came Oliver's whisper. "Better make our get-away quick. They may set the dicks on us!"

He appeared beside her in the dim starlight, somewhat ruffled, bearing in his inverted hat four eggs, and led the way around the corner of a shed toward a barn that stood a little way off in the field. In the lee of the barn he stopped.

"Here we are at home," he said. He pulled off the duster that covered his evening clothes, and spread it for her to sit upon. "Hold these!"

He dumped the eggs in her lap, and disappeared. Oscar settled contentedly upon the coat. Sylvia curled up beside him, her feet tucked under her, and waited in serene trust.

It was many minutes before Oliver dropped down beside her. He set the pot down carefully with one hand, and with the other the frying pan, holding a lump of butter and a chunk of bread. Sylvia applauded hungrily. From under his arm Oliver produced a bundle of sticks and a bunch of hay. Moving aside, he laid them quickly and struck a match. The hay flared and the sticks crackled.

"You're better than a jinni out of a pot!" cried Sylvia delightedly.

Oliver had opened a jackknife and attacked the bread.

"Rather hunky slices," he commented, handing her the knife and the butter.

She sat up on her heels and happily decorated the irregular surfaces. The fire crackled, holding at bay the shadows that crowded just outside their tent of light and warmth. The pot was already on the flames, and Oliver disappeared again into the night, murmuring:

"More fuel!"

Sylvia unfolded her handkerchief, spread it on the duster, and tastefully arranged the jackknife beside it. Then she sat back, hugging her knees joyfully, and waited.

"Better than a thousand dinners at Franchesi's," she murmured. "Oh, Oliver, you dear dunce!" She tweaked the ear of the slumbering Oscar, and addressed him severely. "Your master is late again to dinner. You know cook will be cross if the soufflé is spoiled!"

Out of the night Oliver appeared at his fire, and bent to build it up. In the leaping light she watched man at his primitive business, oblivious of unessential woman. He melted the butter in the pan and dexterously broke in the eggs.

"Where did you learn that?" Sylvia admired.

"Frying my breakfast over the gas jet, I guess," he grinned, busy with the sizzling pan.

A gas jet!

"Poor darling!" reflected Sylvia. "But I wouldn't mind even that!"

Oscar rose, and, lumbering to Oliver, rested an inquiring nose upon his shoulder. Reaching with a long arm for the bread, with the other hand Oliver flipped the eggs thereon and clapped the slices together. He hooked the pot on a couple of fingers, and joined Sylvia.

"Fried egg sandwiches," he elucidated, holding one forth upon the palm of his hand as one offers sugar to a horse. "Or call it stuffed pheasant with hearts of palm salad," he added ruefully.

"That couldn't taste like this!" She had taken her share trustingly, and spoke through a large mouthful.

Oliver sighed, and sank upon the duster opposite her. She borrowed the tablecloth to wipe her lips primly.

"And did you have a hard day at the office, dear?" she asked in a sedate voice. "What do we do for cups?" she added *sotto voce*, lifting the coffeepot.

Oliver laughed adoringly.

"I didn't dare try for cups," he told her. "We'll have to share it, like a wassail. There's sugar in it, though."

She sipped a hot draft and passed it across to him. He tossed a scrap to the yearning Oscar.

"Oliver!" she said severely. He jumped. "You know you mustn't feed the dog at the table!"

Oliver tried to look ashamed, but from sheer reckless happiness his histrionic abilities failed in a grin. She held up the pot.

"More coffee, my dear?"

Her tone was the very acme of marital propriety.

"Yes'm. I mean no, thank you—dear!"

She just didn't choke on the last of her sandwich, and hid her dancing eyes in the tilted pot. Then she wiped her fingers, cupped her chin in her hands, and looked across at an enchanted Oliver with his

glasses gleaming and his hair tumbled on a flushed brow.

"How did you do it?" she demanded.

"This?" He waved a hand at the ghost of their supper. "Sneaked in at the pantry window. Nobody ever remembers to lock pantry windows."

"And *stole* it?"

Her voice was awed.

"No," said Oliver doubtfully, "not stole it—I borrowed it. That's more neighborly, don't you think?"

"It sounds better," she said uncertainly.

"I'll tell you—we'll pay for it," declared Oliver. "Now let's see—eggs are how much?"

"Awfully much," Sylvia told him vaguely. "I don't know just what, but they're always going up, I believe."

"What shall we pay for the four we copped?"

"A dollar. They were nice and fresh," she decreed.

He took a pencil and a torn envelope from his dinner jacket, and carefully noted the item.

"Five cents for bread, and say a quarter for the butter," he estimated. She nodded and he put them down. "Was there anything else?"

"The coffee," she reminded him. "Call that ten cents."

Oliver remembered that the dregs left in his wallet after paying Franchesi amounted to three dollars and thirty-nine cents. There was still the fare home on the milk train to be paid, but two dollars would surely cover it. He looked doubtful.

"I don't think we can quite afford ten cents' worth of coffee."

With a worried pucker of her brows she hunched over beside him on the rug, to scan the figures.

"We mustn't be extravagant," she agreed gravely. "Do you think we might pay nine cents?"

He wrote it down and added up the column.

"One dollar and thirty-nine cents," he announced.

She checked it up over his shoulder. They looked at each other and laughed happily.

"Lots of men have bought me dinners," she told him; "but none of them ever cooked me one—much less stole it!"

Her tone was balm, and all forgotten was Franchesi's forsaken masterpiece.

"You may smoke while I wash the dishes," she said demurely; "but don't drop ashes on my carpet."

He lit his pipe, and, lying on his back, with his hands behind his head, watched her through smoke rings that aspired to the stars and vanished, as she wiped the pot and pan clean with wisps of grass.

Oscar snored. Here in the dewy night field was the warm heart of life. Around the magic circle of firelight lay the wide world and all, but the glowing phantom walls held all that two companioned hearts desired.

V

WHEN Oliver's pipe was smoked, he knocked it out and rose with grim determination. He steeled his voice to break the spell.

"Well, the party's over," he said with harsh heartiness. "Now I've got to pay the bill!"

Sylvia nodded, speechless, her eyes suddenly stinging with tears of disappointment and exasperation. Oliver stalked off without a backward look, Oscar gambling beside him. Sylvia's head went down on her knees. She clenched her hands and fought back despair.

"Perhaps he doesn't really care at all," she thought, shivering. "Perhaps Jenks was quite, quite wrong!"

Minutes passed while she sat engulfed in black misery. Hearing his step, she jumped up.

"The fire's gone out," she said in a dead little voice.

They stood apart, staring at the ashes.

"Rather ghostly," remarked Oliver in a voice of hollow cheer. "We've still got some time to wait. Let's try the barn."

She went ahead, and he plowed after her miserably, trailing the duster.

The barn gave forth a gentle welcome as they entered, in the scent of hay, and the warmth and breathing of the animals.

"That's a whale of a loft," commented Oliver, looking up the ladder. He glanced down at her, a drooping little figure infolded limply in the crumpled velvet cloak. "You're tired," he said gently. "I'll spread this coat up in the hay, and you can catch a bit of a nap. I'll keep watch."

She nodded without looking at him.

"Just a jiffy!"

He ran up the ladder, spread the duster, and swung down again. Slowly she pulled

herself up, and sank down in the kind, infolding darkness, in the dusty, sweet smell of the hay. She pillowed her hot cheek in the crook of her arm, and hid her eyes from even the dark.

From the wide barn doorway Oliver watched the stars, those old companions of his loneliness, and hated them. They winked down coldly and mockingly. An eclipse of the sun! He laughed wryly to think how soon and how total, for him, would be the eclipse of his bright sun.

"I'm not asleep," remarked a small voice from the hayloft.

His heart leaped to it, but he kept himself leaning against the door frame.

"Just rest," he soothed her. "It's getting near one o'clock, but I'm keeping my eye on my watch."

There was silence, and in one of the stalls a horse stamped. The hay rustled.

The voice came a little nearer.

"When are you going to come back from Honduras?"

Oliver stifled a groan.

"I'm never going to come back here, Sylvia," he said clearly.

The silence echoed emptily, and then Sylvia swung her feet over the edge of the loft and looked down, her face a dim, pale oval.

"Oliver," she said in a tone to match his own, "why have you decided to go to Honduras?"

He turned and answered her squarely:

"Because I can't have what I want."

"Have you ever tried to get it?" she challenged.

"No, and I never will. I'm too beggarly poor."

She caught her breath in a sob that was also a cry of exasperation.

"I'm not a silly flapper!" she protested passionately. "I could learn things—I *could*!"

They had elided large tracts of argument, yet both knew where they stood. They stared through the dark.

"It's nearly one o'clock," he broke off abruptly. "Time to start for home!"

"I don't want to go home," she said hotly.

"Don't want to go home—"

"No—I want to go to Honduras."

Oliver crumpled against the door frame. To have to fight Sylvia as well as himself was the climax of cruelty ordained by the treacherous stars.

"Come down," he urged, postponing argument in the face of necessity. "It's two minutes to one—we'll have to run!"

"No, Oliver, I won't come down," said Sylvia fiercely.

"Come down, darling! Please come down," he pleaded, with a frantic glance at his watch.

"Did you mean that, Oliver?" she asked implacably.

"What?"

She paused.

"Darling," she brought out.

"My God, yes!" said Oliver forcefully.

"Will you come down?"

"I don't care if I never get home," Sylvia's voice rang. "I won't come down unless you'll take me to Honduras!"

"I won't do that!" His stubbornness was iron. A far-off toot echoed through the still night. "There's the train whistle," said Oliver desperately. "Will you or won't you come down?"

"I won't," answered Sylvia through tight lips. "Not unless you promise to take me to Honduras!"

Through the silence came the long, low rumble of the approaching train. Oliver stepped to the foot of the ladder. Across his mind flashed an irrelevant picture of a bunch of withered orchids lying beside an untouched plate. He laughed a low, triumphant laugh.

"Very well!" He spoke in a voice she had never heard—a voice of steel and fire. "I'll take you to Honduras, and, by Heaven, I'll never let you get away again! Now come down this instant!"

But Sylvia had withdrawn into the darkness, and from the loft came only a rustle, and then, breathlessly:

"I'm afraid to, now!"

"All right!" he said grimly. "I'll come up and carry you down!"

He leaped up the ladder rungs. The drowsing horses heard a faint squeal, and then a long and freighted silence. Suddenly the night was rent with a shriek and a rumbling roar, as the one-o'clock train rushed by.

They found the patient Blunderbuss waiting by the bridge. Its beacon lights were bent staringly upon them as they approached, Sylvia's waist surrounded by a flagrant arm. Out of the car came a feminine squeal and a masculine whoop, and Jenks, a Billiken god out of the machine,

was upon them, pounding Oliver's back and pumping Sylvia's hand.

"Jenks, you old horse thief," gurgled Oliver happily, "you ought to be hanged! You ought to be decorated, too! I'd give you anything in the world, I'm so dog-gone grateful!"

"Ollie," said Jenks solemnly, "there

isn't a thing in life left to wish for—not after that pheasant and those truffles. You see, Marietta and I have been over at Franchesi's, eating up your dinner."

"My stars, *what* a dinner!" called Miss Maguire ecstatically from the car.

"Wasn't it?" echoed Oliver and Sylvia together, lost in each other's eyes.

Sheer Luck

TELLING HOW A MALICIOUS WOMAN FOUND THAT THE MOST
SUBTLE SOCIAL ATTACK MAY RECOIL UPON ITS AUTHOR

By Margaret Busbee Shipp

"MRS. LOCKE, may I introduce Mr. Ayres and leave him with you? I've just had a telephone call, and must dash back to town. I've told him that you are so delightfully determined that everybody shall have a good time that we'd adore you even if you weren't the mother of the belle of our village!"

Two high spots of color burned in Mrs. Locke's cheeks. It was the first Country Club dance of the season, and what she had to do must be begun that night. She needed all her power of concentration, and here was this stranger thrust upon her!

She offered to introduce Ayres to the girls, but he declined, saying that he had wrenched his ankle the day before and was unable to dance. To Mrs. Locke's question as to whether he was making a long stay, he replied that he was going back to California the following day.

Then, for a final probe, Mrs. Locke asked if he was staying at the new hotel. The young man, who had made his answers with characteristic brevity, expanded somewhat. His smile was distinctly attractive as he said:

"Oh, no—Mrs. Middleham would never consent to that!"

Then, gently but inexorably, Mrs. Locke dropped him. True, the stranger continued to occupy a chair at her left, but she managed to convey the impression of the yawning, vacant chair on her right. For Mrs.

Locke knew no Mrs. Middleham, and in a Southern town of twenty thousand inhabitants one knew everybody worth knowing. She could not waste time on a guest of unknown people. She threw him a few words occasionally, and wondered impatiently why he did not go and sit somewhere else.

As a matter of fact, it was when Mrs. Locke ceased talking to Benton Ayres that she began to interest him. The first thing that puzzled him was when she made a beckoning movement with her fan to bring to her side a roly-poly young man with an incessant grin. This youth's nickname, Custard Pie, generally shortened to Cust, had been given him long since because of his resemblance to the innocent bystander in a comic reel who always gets the custard pie in his face.

"Promise me something, Cust! Do ask Anne Meade to the next Country Club dance! It would be a shame if the dear child were not invited, after the lovely debut party to which all you selfish men went."

"Sure!" Cust was distinctly elated at being chosen as squire of dames. "I'll ask her to-night."

"Why not break in on this dance and ask her now?" suggested Mrs. Locke.

Though Mrs. Locke had lowered her voice, she had to speak clearly enough to be heard above the blare of a jazz orchestra, and Ayres's sense of hearing was acute.

He looked to see which girl Cust was