

The Big Knight

A SPARKLING COMEDY OF MODERN LIFE

By Edgar Franklin

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JAMES BARR, salesman of motor trucks, comes to a modest seaside inn at Ponsett Village to spend his three weeks' holiday, in company with his friend, Dan Finch. A physical Hercules, he attracts the notice of Lydia Alford, heiress to millions. Lydia, an orphan, is in charge of her aunt, Mrs. Lane, and of T. Wynne Pruden, trustee under her father's will, and the impressionable girl's erratic fancies have already caused much anxiety to her guardians.

Lydia ventures into the surf on a rough afternoon, screams for help, and—as she had planned—is rescued by the stalwart James. Mrs. Lane sends Deever, her butler, to Barr's hotel, to offer him a money payment—a suggestion which he indignantly rejects. On the following evening Lydia, pretending a headache, declines to go out to dinner with her aunt, and telephones to James, asking him to come over at once to Mrs. Lane's ornate cottage in Ponsett Beach.

VIII

WITH her pretty left hand, Miss Alford prepared to return the receiver to its hook. With her equally pretty right hand, she reached out and rang for her little maid.

Thus we are in a position to grasp more intelligently the phenomenon of Lydia so lately stricken with headache, as she descends to the darkened veranda in an evening gown so striking, and still so simple, that Deever, sighting her from afar, went off into a private flutter. After all, it appeared, she was attending one of the social affairs of Ponsett Beach this evening, whereas Wallace, the chauffeur, after due consultation, had concluded that it would be quite safe to pause at the movies, and even at this moment eight thousand dollars' worth of Lydia-owned automobile was parked outside the theater.

Still, many minutes passed, and Deever was not summoned. Eventually, in his pudgy and noiseless way, he drifted toward the front of the house on a discreet tour of investigation.

He paused at the inner doorway of the drawing-room, and squinted. With the light shining into his eyes, the view from just that point was not of the clearest; but it seemed to Deever that Miss Alford was greeting some one out there—some one un-

usually large, distinctly resembling the person at McGlown's who had given Deever quite a turn by his violence, only the evening before.

The butler was correct. It was indeed the person from McGlown's.

At this moment the person was gaining his very first taste of high life, and was finding himself both amazed and delighted. They greeted one differently in these upper circles. They held out both hands, and took both one's hands; and in his intelligent way James Barr adapted himself swiftly to the pretty custom. He gripped both Lydia's hands and squeezed.

Nothing happened—that is to say, nothing of an unpleasant nature happened. Lydia's glorious eyes turned upward.

"I'm so glad to see you again!" she said simply.

"Well—" essayed James Barr, and shuddered with pure joy. "Well—"

"And to thank you!"

"Don't—thank me!" James managed, with a hazy notion that it was rather a flat response.

Yet it did not seem so to impress Miss Alford. Those hypnotic eyes were smiling at him. James, usually so self-possessed, so jaunty, in the presence of young women, found himself turning slightly dizzy before this particular young woman.

Somehow, she had taken his arm.

"Let's go down to the beach," she suggested. "It's such a lovely night!"

James awoke and glanced at her—and coughed and glanced away again.

"You'll be cold," he said in his simple way. "Better get a coat."

"Oh, I don't need a coat," Lydia told him, and led him down the steps.

Strange, indeed, when one considers that these two had met but once before, and then for such a very brief space—yet they seemed already so well acquainted that the need for conversation had ceased to be. Such, at least, was James's impression. It may have been due, in part, to the weird consciousness that he could not think of a solitary thing to say. His slightly foggy brain raced up and down the list of platitudes suited to such a situation; but intuition advised him that, for present purposes, they were one and all stone dead. His brain searched on, looking for something sprightly and original that might be said. There was nothing—absolutely nothing at all.

The girl was leaning on his arm as they walked down the sands, as if needing his support. Instinctively James Barr's arm muscles tightened their grip on the little hand; and when James Barr's muscles shifted, there was a considerable movement.

Also, he glanced down, just as Miss Alford glanced up. She was smiling at him again, and he smiled at her. Of course, he had meant this glance for a glance and nothing more; but he discovered that he could not drag his eyes from the surpassing beauty of her face. He tried to do so, with that great honesty of purpose which was his in most things, but it was no use at all. He merely looked and looked and looked; and the longer he looked, the less able was he to cease looking.

Indeed, so far as any guidance of James's was concerned, they might have walked straight into the ocean, and on and on indefinitely; but Miss Alford deftly turned their steps in a northerly direction along the beach. They went on until they came to a certain high dune, behind which they were hidden from all the world that did not happen to be afloat on that section of the Atlantic and equipped with a powerful searchlight.

"We'll sit here," she said softly.

They sat there, on a little mound of sand—a very pleasant little mound, James discovered, since its limitations compelled

Lydia to sit rather close to him. Nor did she seem to object to this. Indeed, if it had not been so absurd, James would have fancied that the deliriously lovely young person was leaning deliberately, delicately, against his mighty arm.

"Isn't it wonderful—the moon?" said Lydia's hushed, timid little voice.

"I never saw it just—just like that before!" James submitted.

Together they gazed at the moon, well risen now, beaming down upon them, engulfing them in its mystic flood. Lydia sighed lightly. James also sighed, not lightly, but with a strange catchy, strangling sound. Then he shook himself oddly, and turned to Lydia Alford with a strained little grin.

"That—moon!" he said brilliantly.

"Yes!" whispered Lydia.

She looked up at him and seemed to understand.

"I mean—anything could happen with—with a moon like that shining like that," James informed her.

"Couldn't it?" whispered Lydia.

She was looking up at him again, smiling up at him again. Once more James endeavored to drag away his eyes and resume the watching of the moon, which seemed to be the business of the moment; and once more he failed completely.

For of what earthly avail to look at anything else while Lydia was there to be viewed? This great thought surged crashingly through Mr. Barr's cranium, causing it to spin internally. In sooth, there was no sense at all in looking at anything or anybody else in the world, in doing anything but just look at Lydia, from that moment to the very end of time! None! None!

She was coming nearer—or else he was bending nearer—and—

"Oh, my Lord!" James exploded. "I—I—I love you! Lydia, dearest, I love you!"

This time, incontestably, she did sway toward him. She swayed, in fact, with the very nicest sense of direction, immediately into Mr. Barr's waiting arms.

"Jim!" choked Lydia. "Jim!"

"I love you! I love you!" James insisted, possibly under the impression that she had not heard the first time.

Oh, yes, his arms were about her now—very much about Lydia; and for that matter Lydia's two arms were about James's

neck, and this glorious, glorified young woman was whispering:

"Oh, why didn't you come to me last night and tell me that?"

"Huh?" James said thickly, dazedly almost, and held her closer. "Lydia, I—I—there wasn't anything in the world I wanted to do last night so bad as to come over here and—and tell you that I loved you! I would have, only I thought you'd think I was crazy! I thought you'd yell for the police and—"

At this point—it is mentioned only to keep the record complete and accurate—they kissed.

IX

IN such a moment as this there can be no measuring of time. It may have been minutes, it may have been ages, before James Barr, his fevered brain inconveniently invaded by some cool little trickle of sanity, drew back, perhaps two inches, and said hoarsely:

"We—we're crazy!"

"Are we?" Lydia breathed up at him. "Why are we?"

"Because we—are, I guess."

"Then I think it's rather nice to be crazy," remarked Miss Alford, and rested her cheek contentedly against him. "Don't you?"

Oh, no, James did not release her. James did not free himself after a dreadful struggle, mental and physical, and then walk the adjacent beach, wringing his hands and going through a lot of similar noble, conscious-prompted gymnastics. Nothing like that happened; but James did manage to draw back a trifle, so that he could face Lydia.

"What I mean, this—well, things like this don't happen, you know. On the level, I mean; and—and I'm on the level."

"Yes, I know you are," breathed Lydia; "but this happened!"

"And so—why, kid, we don't even *know* each other!" James gasped.

"Don't we—now?" asked Lydia, with a tiny, tinkling laugh.

"Well, it—it looks as if we were on speaking terms," James conceded, with a bewildered grin; "but—Lydia, it's not possible that you actually love me?"

This time Lydia drew back a little.

"Jim, do you think—" she began.

"No, I don't—I don't; that's just it! That's what I can't get, yet!" Mr. Barr in-

terrupted agonizedly, and recaptured her. "Lydia, if it's really so, tell me!" he implored desperately.

The lady in his arms sighed long and quiveringly, and looked into James's very soul.

"Oh, Jim—Jim!" she said, and she really seemed to mean just what she said. "I never knew what love was until I saw you yesterday!"

Again—there can be no attempt here at statistics—they kissed. Let it suffice to say that they kissed repeatedly this time. Then Miss Alford's head nestled securely upon Mr. Barr's bosom, and Mr. Barr himself gazed fixedly at the moon. His expression was strange, too. It was just as if James struggled vainly, hopelessly, to regain some nameless quantity that he had lost forever. It was if, somehow, he blamed the moon for this loss.

"Well—" he began, and ceased. "Well—" he tried again; and then, suddenly, with a great, joyful cry: "Oh, I can't understand it—and I don't care a hoot! It doesn't matter; it's so—that's all. We've never even been introduced, and now we're going to be married!"

"Are we?"

"Aren't we?" James gasped.

"I don't know. You haven't asked me," said Lydia, smiling.

One vast, deep breath James took. He was much more himself after that breath. Seizing her by her peerless shoulders, he held Lydia off a little distance and took his own turn at soul-gazing.

"Well, I'm asking you now, kid!" said he. "Will you?"

"Oh, *Jim!*" cried Lydia, and the little distance between them became no distance at all.

In its usual languid fashion, the moon continued to rise. This was rather foolish, if the moon had business elsewhere. It might just as well have finished its climbing at one wild leap, and attained the western horizon with another wild swoop. Its job in that particular quarter was finished.

"Lydia!"

"Yes, Jim!"

"How—how did this happen?" James inquired, with more than a little awe in his tone. "Do you know how it happened?"

Lydia's great, innocent eyes searched his own.

"How should I know, Jim?" she whispered artlessly. She was, of course, hardly

more than a child. "But—but doesn't it always happen in some such way as this? I mean, aren't there always, in the whole world, just one man and one woman made for each other? And don't they, somehow, always find each other, Jim?"

"Well, I never thought of it just like that before," said James, and gazed downward his unbounded admiration; "but I guess probably you're right, at that!"

There was another long, blissful pause.

"Maybe we'd better—sort of get acquainted," James suggested awkwardly.

"Do you feel that?" Lydia asked, with a touch of disappointment. "Don't we know everything about each other now?"

"Why, practically everything—yes, certainly," James agreed. "That is, everything but the details."

"As if there could be details!" wafted softly from Lydia's soul, borne on the wings of the lightest, happiest little laugh.

"Why, sure there could!" said James, in astonishment. "Everything's made up of details, isn't it? What I mean, don't you want to know something about me?"

"I want to know everything! I want to know every thought in your head! They all belong to me!" said Lydia, who was not particularly consistent.

"I haven't so many," James confessed modestly; "but—say, will you excuse me for asking one thing?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, aren't you rich?"

"Now that I have you—yes!"

"Yes, but kidding aside," James persisted seriously, "aren't you?"

"I have a little money. Why?"

"Well, that's just what I thought, from the—the way you dress and the way you act," James said, with a small and rather bitter smile. "I knew there was a catch in this somewhere, and that's it. I haven't any!"

"Money, you mean?"

"No, because—"

"Well, but what in the world has that to do with us?" inquired Lydia, dimpling wonderingly.

"It seems to me as if it might have a whole lot to do with us," James responded, and frowned his very genuine perplexity. "You see, I've just got my salary—salary and commission, that is."

After this, he waited for some sort of manifestation. It did not come. Lydia was once more exploring his soul, and she

seemed to be finding it just the sort of soul she had been seeking.

"You're not going to ruin a night like this by talking business?" she asked.

"I—well, the way I've always understood, when—when people are going to get married—well, what I mean—" James essayed. Then he stopped, and drew himself up resolutely. "No!" he assured her. "No, I'm not!"

"No!" echoed little Lydia.

There was another long, long pause, while the waves lapped dreamily and the moon beamed down upon one of its most astonishing bits of work. This interval was not filled with mere saccharine sentiment. Something like normal balance was working its way, slowly and with whatever difficulty, back into James Barr. Hitherto he had been a strange, delightfully stunned creature, looking about with clouded eyes, in which a certain fear of sudden awakening was not lacking. Now that fear was vanishing rapidly. More of it departed each time he looked down upon Lydia. His old self-confidence, plus—aye, infinitely plus!—was returning by leaps and bounds. His chest expanded. His hold on Lydia tightened.

"Are you satisfied to have me for a husband?" he demanded bluntly.

"Well, do I seem dissatisfied?" Lydia dimpled.

"Say it!"

"Oh, Jim—yes!"

"Well, then, you're dead right about the rest of it, kid!" James said, quite thickly. "Nothing else matters—nothing! Lots of times I've felt that there was something I didn't have. Well, now I know what it was—it was *you*!"

"Have you really felt that?"

"I just said so." James beamed downward in his glorified way. "Now I've really got you, I can go out and lick the whole world, barehanded! I can mop up anything that gets in my way! I can make a million dollars!"

Was it crude? Perhaps it was. Perhaps we are all crude; perhaps little Lydia, at heart, was utterly crude. In any case, this simple statement of belief and intention seemed to make a great appeal to hear. She snuggled closer to James, looking up at him.

"I know you can, my knight!" said she.

"Your what?"

"My knight!" whispered Lydia.

"Ho, ho!" laughed James.

Again there was a pause.

"When are we going to be married, kid?" James purred.

"Whenever you like."

"Next week?"

At this even Lydia drew back and stared her mild astonishment.

"Next week?" she cried. "But isn't that—"

"Too sudden? Is it? I don't know. I've never been married before," Mr. Barr said, with all his characteristic briskness. "Well, how about week after next, then?"

"Well, even week after next—"

"That's not too soon, is it?" James demanded, and laughed quite impatiently. "Or is it? It wouldn't be for me, you know. That's the way I do everything—quick, fast! Never could spend a lot of time fiddling with a proposition, the way some people can, you know. I have to grab it off and finish it." His voice dropped and grew wonderfully tender. "Maybe I'm scaring you, Lydia? Maybe you're not used to fast work, eh?"

"No, maybe not," Lydia breathed. If, quite involuntarily, there crept into these three words a queer little shading that was almost derision, it was not sensed by James Barr. "Oh—whenever you like, Jim!" she sighed, and relaxed.

"Next week it is! What day?"

"Wednesday?"

"Why not Monday?"

"Monday, if you like!" said Lydia.

James sighed and held her closer.

"Of course, *this* is only Monday," he mused. "I suppose it would be rushing things too much to get married this week—maybe Friday or Saturday?"

"Well, yes. I'd—I'd like to have a real wedding."

"With music, and a ton of flowers, and a raft of bridesmaids, and all that?" James asked, quite darkly.

"I think I'm civilized enough to want bridesmaids—yes," Lydia confessed.

"Well, all right, if you can get 'em together in time, kid," James conceded. "I'd be the last one to deny you anything you wanted that I could get you. Only, personally, it's always seemed to me that the snappiest way to do this stuff was just—oh, jump into a taxi, you know, and get the minister's wife and daughter for witnesses, and—zip! Take this man to be

your wedded husband—take this woman to be your wedded wife—blah, blah, blah—I now pronounce you man and wife. Like that!"

"But—"

"Wait! I'm not insisting, Lydia. We'll get it all fixed up just the way you want it fixed, so long as it's soon!"

Lydia's arm slipped about his neck once more.

"Isn't it *wonderful*?" she asked, reasonably enough.

"Wonderful?" said James, and the dazed light flitted back to his eyes for a moment.

"I can't understand it—that's all."

"How we found each other?"

"Not that so much as why you ever looked at me a second time, kid. Not that I'm not all right. I *am* all right, but—"

"Oh, you're very much all right!"

"Sure! But a girl like you, with probably thousands and thousands of dollars—and educated—and probably with a lot of swell friends—" James said, and there he gave it up entirely and laughed mightily and drew the unresisting maiden to him again. "However, let it go at that!" he cried. "We should worry!"

Is it too much to say that there was still another pause, wherein nothing at all was said—or, at any rate, nothing sufficiently coherent, of sufficient consequence to be set down? There was. Time was passing, too. In some way the moon had climbed high in the summer sky in an amazingly brief interval; yet in this interval some suggestion of the practical Lydia had crept back.

"Dearest!" she whispered.

"Honey?" whispered James.

"There's one thing."

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"My guardian."

"Guardian? I didn't know you had a guardian."

"Well, you know now."

"How old are you?"

"Nearly twenty-two."

"It isn't legal," said James, with a shrug. "What about him?"

"You'll have to ask him."

"If I can marry you?"

"Yes."

"Ha!" laughed Mr. Barr, with scorn beyond description. "With you twenty-two years old, kid? Watch me ask him! We'll send him a wedding announcement and call it a day!"

"No, but really you will have to!"

"Why?"

"Well, he's father's executor and—and all that, and he has charge of what money was left me, Jim; and there was some provision father made about getting his consent when I married."

"Well, I don't think it's legal," James said.

"Legal or not, you will, won't you?"

"Ask him? Certainly I will, if it 'll make you the least bit happier, Lydia. Who is he?"

"He's my Uncle Wynne. He's not really my uncle, but I've always called him that."

"What's his other name?"

"Pruden—T. Wynne Pruden."

"Aha! Some name!" James grinned. "All right! I'll break the news to him, honey, some time between now and next Monday. Is he living with you?"

"No, he lives in New York. I think you'd better see him at his office."

"I'll see him in the subway, or on a ferryboat, or on top of the Woolworth Building, just so long as it's what you want me to do, kid!"

"And soon!"

"Why?"

"Oh, because—because sometimes he's a little bit peculiar, and he may need some persuading," Lydia sighed.

"Is—that—so?" asked Mr. Barr, with a slight asperity, which, however, was in no sense directed toward the lady in his arms. "Meaning I might not be good enough to marry you, kid? Well, I'm not; but that's confidential. That's between you and me. That's none of his business."

"I know, but—"

"Oh, I'll see him!" James chuckled.

"You leave the rest of it to me! I take that goofy kind and eat 'em alive. That's part of my regular day's work. You really think I'd better look the old boy up before Saturday?"

"Oh, if you can, I'd go back to the city to-morrow and see him."

"Done!" said James.

Yet even as the words left his lips, he was smitten by a dread thought, as by a club. He started. Then, as on several other occasions, he drew Lydia closer to him.

"Well, say! I'm going to miss you pretty bad, if I do that!" he stated.

"Why, no, you're not!" Lydia corrected sweetly. "We live just off Central Park."

"When you're home—yes; but you're here!"

"But I shan't be here after to-day, Jimmy. I'm going home to-morrow." Lydia smiled gloriously at him. "You know, there are some few little things a girl has to attend to before she's married, even to a cyclonic person like you!"

"Well, come up with me on the eight o'clock train."

"Why—why, I'll have to drive home—with aunt, you know. She's my official chaperon, and she's a dear, Jimmy. You can ride with us."

"Aunt?" murmured James. "Oh, that's the lady I met yesterday."

"Of course! She *didn't* mean to be offensive when she sent that beastly check, Jim. She—"

"I wasn't thinking about that; but I guess I'll go up on the train," replied Mr. Barr. "I've got a lot of bags and stuff."

"Will you phone me to-morrow afternoon, then?"

"To find out when you're home? I'll say I will! You're not doing anything to-morrow night?"

"I shall be waiting for you, I think. You'll come for dinner?"

"I'll be up after dinner," James said.

"I wish—"

"No, we'd better make it after dinner, Lydia."

"Well—and we'll make an appointment with Uncle Wynne, and you can run down town and see him the next morning," Lydia asked anxiously.

Queerly enough, this little note of anxiety seemed to stab hard into Mr. Barr. Without any suggestion of effort, he lifted Miss Alford about, holding her so that she faced him squarely. Sheer strength, mental, moral, and physical, fairly bristled from him. His eye was compelling.

"Now listen, kid!" he said sternly. "You're worried about this bird—I can see that. Drop it! You don't know me yet. Probably you think this is a lot of hot air; but you take it straight from me, Lydia, that if you had fifty guardians, and each one of 'em had a machine gun battalion behind him, the whole bunch couldn't any more take you away from me than a fly could push a motor truck down the street!"

Did the gently bred Lydia shrink back at this rather colloquial expression of the thought? No, strange to say, the gently bred Lydia did not. Casting aside the rough shell, she drank in those golden drops which were the sentiment itself. She laid her head upon James's bosom.

"My knight!" she breathed again.

X

By common consent, the social affairs of Ponsett Beach end at rather an early hour. It still lacked some twenty minutes of one o'clock when Mrs. Lane returned to the gray cottage.

Very, very carefully, she tiptoed to Lydia's room.

Responsibility ever rested heavily upon Mrs. Lane, and she wished to make quite sure that her suffering niece was safely asleep. She found Lydia wide awake, healthfully aglow, sitting at her little desk and jotting down items on a list.

"But, my child!" Mrs. Lane cried, and held up both hands.

"Oh, hello, Aunt Mary!" Lydia said, carelessly and jovially.

"You—you're better, dear?"

"Better? Why, I never—oh, yes, my head, of course! Yes, dear, that's quite all right now."

Mrs. Lane sighed. Lydia, you see, had had a headache. In the nature of things she should still have a headache. Presently, of course, it would become clear to Mrs. Lane that Lydia no longer had a headache; but for the moment she was much troubled.

"I think you ought to be abed," she said.

"I don't," Lydia responded. "I'll go presently, of course, but—Aunt Mary, I've something to tell you," Lydia concluded, and her voice trembled oddly.

"Yes, dear? Something—oh, is it—is it something that has made you very happy?" her aunt inquired, as Lydia faced her.

"Yes, very happy. I'm going to be married!"

"Oh, my dear!" gasped Mrs. Lane.

"Yes, aunt—really, this time!"

For ten rather terrific seconds, Mrs. Lane merely quivered where she stood. Then she hurried forward and threw both arms about Lydia.

"My darling! My darling! I'm so pleased!" she cried.

"Yes, aunt!" said Lydia, with the suggestion of a sniff.

"I'm so happy! I—I've been so worried, Lydia!" the lady choked.

"About me?"

"Yes, dear! Because, you see, you *might* have—oh, but it's all right now! I'm so glad!"

"So am I, aunt. I never knew—"

"And the *dear* boy! The dear, dear boy!" Mrs. Lane gushed on. Fairly radiating, she fumbled a little chair to Lydia's side, and, beaming, cried: "Oh, Lydia, dearest, you *must* tell me! How ever did Harold—"

Lydia looked puzzled, as if trying to recall something in the very far distant past.

"Harold?" said she. "What has Harold to do with this?"

"What, to be sure?" Mrs. Lane demanded, with a hysterical little laugh. "When you're about to marry him, my child?"

"*Harold?*" repeated Lydia, amazedly. "Why, I'd no more think of marrying that—that poor shrimp than—"

"That *what*, Lydia?" faltered from her aunt.

"Well, it may not be the nicest thing to call him, but that's what he is! Heavens, no! I've no idea of marrying Harold!"

"But you said—just now, dear, you *said*—"

"I said nothing about Harold," Miss Alford insisted, and shook her head very decidedly. "I'm going to marry Jim."

"J-jim?" Mrs. Lane said numbly. "Jim? Jim?"

"Yes, Jim—Jim Barr, the man who saved my life yesterday!"

"The—*what* did you say, Lydia?"

"Well, auntie, even you can't have forgotten him?"

"But I—why, I"—Mrs. Lane was speaking with the greatest effort—"it isn't possible that you—you mean the person in the striped shirt?"

"Why isn't it possible?" Lydia snapped. "Of course it's possible! We're engaged!"

This time a full half minute was devoted to gazing at Lydia, who had flushed. Then Mrs. Lane managed to reply.

"You're joking, of course," she said, smiling very faintly. "I think it wretched taste, Lydia!"

"I'm not joking."

"You're not in earnest?" her aunt cried shrilly. "*That* man?"

"That man," Lydia began hotly, "is the biggest and finest—"

"Lydia!" Mrs. Lane wailed. "You're

demented! Yes, you are! That's absurd! You don't even know the creature! You never even saw him before yesterday! You can't possibly contemplate—"

"Auntie, please don't call him a creature, and please don't be ridiculous. Of course, I knew you would object. You always object; but now that I've told you, can't we just accept the fact and consider it settled?"

This, even among the emphatic Lydias that Mrs. Lane knew so well, was decidedly a new Lydia. Mrs. Lane stared at her and gasped—and stared again and gasped again, and passed a plump white hand across her brow.

"I think I shall faint!" she said weakly.

"I wouldn't," Lydia advised, almost brutally. "What's the use? It's sudden and unexpected and all that, of course; but it's just what I've always known was bound to happen when my real knight came along. Now it has happened, and we're to be married next Monday."

"One week from to-day?" Mrs. Lane screamed.

"Just!"

"But—but, Lydia, he's not a proper person for you to marry!" the unfortunate lady insisted rather wildly. "No, really, he isn't, my child! He's—what shall I say?—quite splendid in his way, of course, but never, never, never the sort of man to make my little girl a husband! He's coarse, Lydia! He's—why, I'm quite sure he's somebody's chauffeur, and—"

"He's not!"

"What is he?"

"I didn't ask him," replied Lydia, so crisply that Mrs. Lane's jaw dropped. "And now, auntie, just let me speak for a moment. I'm sorry that you don't approve, although I hadn't dared hope you would. I'm sorry that I've bothered you, other times, about men I thought I wanted to marry. I'm glad, now, that you drove them off; but so far as marrying Jim goes, I'm just going to do it, and that's the end of it. We needn't do any fainting over that?"

"We—no!" said Mrs. Lane, with a sickly attempt at stiffness.

"And in the morning, early, we're going back to the city. I've so much to do, you know. Oh, yes, I've told Wallace, and we'll take Deever and the cook. Now, wouldn't it be a good idea to go to bed, so that we'll be fresh?"

Now and then it almost seemed that Mrs. Lane was slightly lacking in that quick in-

telligence which handles big things properly. In this moment, however, she came near to doing the right thing. She arose and prepared to leave.

"You are quite determined on this insane thing?" she asked.

"Quite!"

"Very well, Lydia," said her aunt. "Good night!"

The outrageous character of the whole affair carried her out of the room with a certain dignity; but that dignity vanished when once Mrs. Lane's own door had closed behind her. The distressed lady devoted some thirty seconds to wringing her hands, much after the fashion of the mid-Victorian *tragédienne*. Then she caressed her forehead and considered fainting—which, in turn, she forgot as her glazing eyes alighted upon the extension telephone in the corner.

These last ten years, which had been those of his widowhood, T. Wynne Pruden had maintained solitary and rather elaborate quarters in the Colling Arms apartment house, than which there could be nothing more exalted. The girl at the switchboard downstairs had standing orders never to ring Mr. Pruden's rooms after midnight, unless the calling individual took oath that it was a matter of life or death; but on this particular night a new girl was on duty.

So at half past one o'clock T. Wynne Pruden staggered to the phone in his silken pyjamas, straining angrily at muscles which would scarcely raise his heavy eyelids, and learned that long distance desired him.

"Oh, Wynne! This—this is Mary!" presently reached his ear.

"Yes? Yes? Yes?" barked Mr. Pruden, at once visualizing the gray cottage in flames, a smallpox epidemic sweeping through Ponsett Beach, and his really beloved ward crushed beneath a falling pier.

"Wynne! Lydia has told me that she's going to be married!"

"Well, good Lord Almighty!" cried Mr. Pruden. "You haven't called me out of bed at this hour of the morning to tell me that, have you? You told me that day before yesterday!"

"I didn't! I didn't! I mean, Wynne, she's not going to marry Harold!"

"Oh!" T. Wynne grunted disgustedly.

"Who's she going to marry now?"

"A chauffeur!"

"Hers?"

"No, a *strange* chauffeur!" Mrs. Lane

cried. "Oh, Wynne, you can't even picture him—a great, hulking brute—a—a thug, I think! Wynne, he's the most unspeakable beast! He's the most offensive creature—"

"Well, he's coming to me to get my consent, isn't he?"

"I suppose so. I don't know."

"All right! Dismiss the matter from your mind, Mary. I'll settle him. Do you want me to come down there?"

"Here? No! Good gracious, no, Wynne—don't think of doing that. You see, we're driving back to town early in the morning. Yes, fancy that, just when we were so nicely settled, and everything going so beautifully!" Mrs. Lane relaxed for a long, detailed recital of the tragedy. "It came like a bolt from the blue, Wynne—like a bolt from the blue! I thought I should faint when the poor, insane child told me that this—this chauffeur—"

"What does he say about it?"

"I haven't seen him, Wynne. Lydia told me not ten minutes ago."

"Aha! Well, you get Lydia back here and send the chauffeur to *see me!*" Lydia's guardian snapped. "I'll finish him off in five minutes. Is there anything else you want to talk to me about, Mary?"

"I—why, no, Wynne. I'm so glad I've told you, though. I feel better for having told you. Yes, I *am* glad that—"

"So am I—delighted!" Mr. Pruden said sourly. "Good night, Mary!"

XI

THE news of an engagement is not spread by the prospective bride alone. James Barr, having creaked up the stairs of the silent Seaside Inn, opened the door of his room and stalked in. He grinned almost literally from ear to ear, shuddered delightedly, and beamed upon everything in sight. Finally, after a long, chuckling stare at Daniel Finch—who slumbered like a little child, with one hand thrown back—he stalked over and jabbed one great forefinger into the sleeper's ribs.

Daniel came up with a shriek that would have roused the inn, but that James deftly caught it with a great palm over his friend's lips.

"What the—what the—" Daniel sputtered, in substance, behind the palm.

"Wake up!" commanded James.

"Wake up and hear the news!"

"News?"

"I'm going to marry her!" thrilled from Mr. Barr.

"Huh?" grunted Daniel, forcing open his eyes.

"Can you beat it? *I'm going to marry her, kid!* A week from to-day!"

"Who—who's this you're going to marry?"

"Lydia, you poor fathead!" bubbled joyfully from James's great throat.

"Well, all right, but who the—who is Lydia? I don't know any Lydia!"

"You will soon. I suppose I've got to ask you to be best man!" Mr. Barr chuckled, and slapped the shoulder of his old friend so energetically that the old friend tottered as he sat, and gasped.

But the blow jarred the last wisp of slumber from Daniel's brain. He surveyed James with eyes that were wide open and quite intelligent.

"That's what was biting you yesterday, was it, and to-day? You'd fallen in love with some skirt, sudden?"

"I'll say it was sudden, feller! I'll say it was!"

"I'll say it was more than that," Daniel reflected, and it seemed that he received the news with no great joy. "The way you've been acting I thought you were getting ready for the nut factory. Well, spill it, Jimmy. I suppose you've got to before I can sleep. Who is she? Where does she work?"

"Where—what?" James said sharply, and ceased smiling. "She doesn't! She doesn't have to!"

"Ah! The village belle, maybe? What's her other name?"

James flushed slightly, but his self-control was admirable.

"Listen, Dan," he said soberly, and laid a hand upon his friend. "Maybe this sounds kind of funny and formal, coming from me to you, but it's the goods—you got to be a little more respectful when you speak about Lydia. Nothing quite as fine as her ever lived before, and—and—well, coming right down to cases, Dan, you're sort of rough stuff!"

"Well, what do you know about that?" Daniel Finch demanded, and stared blankly. "And that from *you!* Say, listen—"

"All right, Dan, only you know what I mean," James insisted, just as soberly. "When you're introduced to Miss Alford, I don't want her to think I run around with a lot of bums, and if ever—"

"Alford?" Daniel repeated, his eyes opening still wider. "Is that her name—Lydia Alford?"

"Certainly."

"Is she a rich girl?" Mr. Finch asked excitedly.

"She may have a little money—not much, I guess. She lives with her aunt."

And now Daniel's excitement grew, radiating from him. His pyjama-clad legs swung out of bed. His countenance was contorted.

"Listen! Is she an awful pretty girl—pretty enough to drive you crazy? Is she sort of fine and square-shouldered, with great big eyes and thick black hair?"

"Say, where did *you* meet her?" James demanded.

Despite the hour, a hoarse burst of laughter came from Daniel Finch. He slapped his thighs and rocked forward and then back. He laid a kindly hand on James Barr's shoulder, and spoke more kindly.

"Jimmy," he said, "if you'd look at the slippery sheets in the Sunday papers, you'd be educated, like me. This Lydia Alford's had her picture in 'em every two weeks for the last year—yes, on the level, Jim. Somebody's been kidding you, old man. This girl you're talking about is worth millions and millions of dollars. She wouldn't any more look at you than she would at me. She—say, maybe *she's* been kidding you! Maybe that's the way she gets her fun when she's tired of her own crowd!"

"What's that?" James choked.

"Wait!" said Daniel. "I don't make it yet. It must have been somebody else, putting one over on you, of course, and—"

James Barr's breath came in ominous whistles.

"This wasn't anybody putting anything over on me—not this girl that I'm talking about, and that I'm going to marry a week from to-day. This was Lydia Alford, and Lydia wasn't kidding me, boy. I don't stand for that stuff!"

Certainly his manner carried conviction. His big chest heaved. It seemed that he would have spoken further in this strain but that Daniel's eye kindled with a new light.

"Say! That's right—she's down here! Her picture was in last Sunday!" he muttered, and his eye grew very keen as he surveyed James. "And you're a handsome devil; skirts always get a little bit foolish over you. Only," added Daniel, with ex-

treme candor and overwhelming wonder, "will you tell me, where did you ever get the nerve to pull your caveman stuff on a girl like that?"

"I didn't pull any caveman stuff, you ass!" James replied savagely.

"No—sure not; only you know what I mean," said Mr. Finch. "Will you tell me about this?"

"No!" said James, who was easily ruffled these days.

Daniel considered for a little while. His voice grew gentle, almost pitying.

"Jimmy, on the dead level, you don't think you're going to marry this millionaire baby?"

"I am!"

"Well, you're not. Those things don't happen outside of books, Jim. This girl's a millionairess a dozen times over, and—well, Jimmy, for the love of Mike, use a little common sense! She's got folks. They'll never let her marry *you*!"

"No? What's the matter with me?"

"Nothing. They don't make 'em any better than you are, Jim; but you're different, and—now, wait! Don't start shouting. Just try to get this, old man. I'm not asking questions about how you met her, or how it happened, or anything like that. I don't just get the thing, Jim, but something of the kind must have happened, and—well, let it go at that. What I'm trying to say is that you're a proud guy, and I hate to see your feelings hurt. If this kid finishes playing with you, and gives you the horselaugh, and—"

"I want you to cut that out!" James said dangerously.

"What I meant, if her folks get her off to Hongkong or some such place, and you never see her again, you're going to throw some fits," Daniel amended. "Jimmy, this is too much like so many other things you try. You're so big, and so sure of yourself, you never know when you've taken on too much; but you have here. Jimmy, lay off it! You're heading straight for trouble."

"Aha?" smiled James.

"Just as sure as you're standing there, old man!"

"Bunk!"

James rose, slowly, impressively, and stretched and smiled again. Viewing this smile, Daniel knew that his words had made as much impression upon Mr. Barr as a split pea might make upon the side of a battleship.

Yet, as he gazed at his friend, his color rose slowly and his own eyes began to sparkle oddly. In this moment, something or other was actually radiating from James—something which roused sheer admiration of the unquestioning kind, and stirred insane confidence in the big man's ability to do the impossible. As he stood there, Lydia's knight gave one a weird impression that he was quite capable of reaching forth, snatching the whole world to himself, choking it into submission, and naming it his own personal property.

"Is this going through, Jim?" said Daniel throatily.

"You stick around till Monday," James advised serenely.

"Well, then, with—with all her money, you could get anywhere! Listen, Jim! We've been friends a long time, and we can speak frank without any hard feelings."

"Why not?"

"No reason—that's what I'm saying!" Daniel rushed on excitedly. "Jim, if we're going to put this thing over, we don't want any slips. You're great, that's admitted; but you're longer on muscles than you are on brains."

"Is that so?" James said unsmilingly.

"Now, wait! That's not what I meant to say, either; only I think a lot quicker than you do. You've said that yourself a dozen times."

"As a matter of fact," James conceded, "probably you do. What of it?"

"Well, there'll be emergencies before you get this ring on her finger. I've got a hunch about that. You're crazy about her, and a guy in that state isn't sane. You're likely to get rattled and bust the whole works wide open. Let me be the little general manager! Let me run the show!"

James scowled. Then he chuckled. Finally he laughed, making a big sound that was all amusement. In this great moment he could well afford to be generous.

"Danny, believe me, I don't need any manager," said he. "There's nothing ahead that I can't handle. At that, I don't want to hurt your feelings. Call yourself manager, if you want to. You're pretty slick. Or wait—I'm going back to New York on the early train. I have to see her guardian and get his consent, and—"

"I'll go with you!"

James, frowning for an instant, merely shrugged. Although Daniel Finch could not possibly realize it, he had become a

quantity so insignificant that one could not argue with him.

"All right!" said James. "Going to congratulate me, by the way?"

"Huh? What? Say, kid, I *do* congratulate you! You bet your life I congratulate you!" Daniel cried fervently, and thrust out his hand.

So, in the solemn silence of McGlown's blowzy room, at one o'clock in the morning, they shook hands. It was a pretty way of ending an interview which might easily have opened a breach in their friendship.

XII

It was not in New York. It was hot and dusty in Lydia's big house. Several warm and evidently discontented servants, and one widowed aunt whose mild, fluttering hysteria seemed to have become chronic, altogether failed to make the setting of perfect happiness that should be the part of every prospective bride.

Yet Lydia sang that late afternoon, and sang and sang and sang. She had a splendid voice, and never descended below selections of the semiclassical variety, but there were times when Mrs. Lane, in the intervals of going into secluded corners and dabbing her eyes, wondered and wondered why she had not cast her lot with the invalid niece who lived in California.

As soon as the capable little maid had dusted the mirror of Lydia's dressing table, she examined her charming self, and then sang still more blithely; for she was, as she knew perfectly well, flawless.

James Barr telephoned a little after six o'clock. He had arrived in the city. He had also, as he stated, washed up, and he felt better now. He thought he would call about eight o'clock. Lydia, after one more futile attempt to lure him to dinner, assented; so a few minutes before eight James arrived. A rather dour Deever admitted him and abandoned him among countless slip covers and things in ghostly shrouds.

The meeting of the affianced pair was really quite dramatic. For one long second they stood and stared at each other. James grew dizzy, and was about to stretch; but, dizzy as he was, he hearkened to some mysterious inner voice and did not stretch. Lydia, gazing at her knight, knew that whatever the extraneous details, this was indeed her man!

Such, at least, was Lydia's honest conviction in this interesting moment, which

terminated in a rather sudden joint rush and an embrace of considerable vigor and enthusiasm. Eventually, James held her off a little and looked down upon her.

"Lydia, is it true that you've got ten or twelve million dollars?"

"What?" Lydia asked annoyedly. "No, it is not!"

"I know, but this is something I have to ask you, or I can't be comfortable," James explained. "How many millions have you?"

"Well, six or seven, if you insist on knowing."

"Well, does that make any difference—between you and me, I mean?"

"Oh, Jim!" cried the affectionate young girl.

Mr. Barr, having examined her glowing eyes for another fifteen seconds, allowed himself one great sigh of relief, and, as upon other occasions, held her closer.

"I guess you've said it all, kid!" he breathed happily. "What 'll we do with the evening?"

"Shall we stay here?"

"It's kind of hot," said James.

"Isn't it? Shall we drive out of town somewhere? I suppose Wallace—our chauffeur, of course—will sulk after driving in from Ponsett, but—"

"Let him sulk! Driving's too crowded, anyway."

"For you, dear, yes. You belong to the big, open spaces, don't you?" Lydia murmured raptly; and then, playing with the buttonhole of James's left lapel, she smiled up entrancingly. "Jim, dearest, if—if I were some other girl, what would you do with this particular evening?"

James thought for a moment.

"Well, you couldn't be," he babbled; "but I get what you mean. If you were—well, probably on a night like this I'd go over and sit in Central Park for a couple of hours."

"Let's go sit in Central Park," Lydia said readily. "That's something I've never done before—at night, I mean."

An instant, utter blankness was in the gaze which Mr. Barr trained upon her. Then his ample countenance shone.

"You haven't?" he cried, and captured her willing hand. "Well, say, kid! *Come with me!*"

After nine o'clock, T. Wynne Pruden reached the hot and dusty mansion. Some

time after ten—it was almost eleven, in fact—he had gathered from Mrs. Lane that Lydia, obviously gone mad, had become engaged to a chauffeur of such physical vastness, such social vileness, and still of such damnable fascination for Lydia, that no mere words could paint the picture. More than this T. Wynne had not gleaned, although he had listened to a recital of endless mental and nervous reactions which had taken place, and were taking place, in Mrs. Lane.

Mr. Pruden had dealt with these performances of Lydia's before that very hot night. He remained quite unperturbed, and became, as always in these crises, rather taciturn. His smile was bored and infinitesimal as Mrs. Lane at last threw out her hands with—

"Wynne, what *shall* we do?"

"You'll do nothing. I'll do it all. Where's Lydia?"

"In Central Park, Wynne, with him! Fancy—in Central Park! Yes! I discovered it just five minutes before you came, and—"

"Very well. She's returning shortly, at least?"

"Dear Heaven knows I hope so!" Mrs. Lane shuddered.

"I'll wait for her. And, Mary, one thing—let me do the talking, please, now and hereafter. Let me manage it!"

"Yes, Wynne," Mrs. Lane dutifully promised. "Tell him flatly, as soon as he comes into the house, if he does, that—"

"I don't want to see him to-night. I want to see him at the office to-morrow, Mary."

The lady sighed heavily.

"Oh, Wynne, you *can* prevent this awful disaster?"

"Eh?" Mr. Pruden smiled complacently. "You forget that I have nursed our Lydia through several of these attacks."

"But this one is different!"

"Oh, no, it isn't," Mr. Pruden said, shading a yawn. "Lydia's technique doesn't vary. For herself, of course—the nicest tact."

"Yes, but this Barr creature—"

"Oh, Mary, Mary!" T. Wynne said impatiently. "Will you not accept my simple assurance that the chauffeur doesn't live whom I cannot squelch within four or five minutes?"

Perhaps she did accept this. She seemed somewhat comforted as she rang for Deever

—to discover that her niece had not yet returned.

Lydia returned, in point of fact, just a few minutes before midnight. She entered alone. On seeing Mr. Pruden, she started. While she had been smiling an instant before, she seemed to freeze.

Although he had been drowsing a moment before, T. Wynne roused, stared at the frozen effect, and then greeted her with the blandest of smiles. Lydia, too, smiled faintly.

"Oh, dear!" said she. "Has it become a state affair so soon? Am I to be saved from myself all over again?"

"Possibly, my child!" replied T. Wynne, and laughed delightedly as he settled beside Lydia. "Although I rather suspect that it's not necessary, eh? Come, my dear! Confess! You're merely amusing yourself?"

"With Jim, do you mean?"

"Is that his name? I do, then," said T. Wynne, beaming indulgently.

"That's a low thing to say!" flashed from Miss Alford. "No, I am not amusing myself. I mean to marry him!"

"Ah—of course! But—"

"And Uncle Wynne, please, just a moment, before we go through the regular routine of saving me from myself," Lydia pursued, with a businesslike briskness that caused Mr. Pruden to sit up. "I've thought I wanted to marry before this, of course; but I had never met a man like Jim, and I simply didn't know. This time it's in earnest." Her eye had a peculiar, rocklike steadiness, which Mr. Pruden did not like at all. "So can't we dispense with all the perfectly sane reasons why I shouldn't marry him?"

"Um! I don't know, Lydia. This fortunate person—who is he, as to family?"

"Nobody at all, I presume," Lydia smiled. "I haven't asked him. And—oh, uncle, I can't make you understand at all, can I?"

"You haven't tried."

"No, and I think I don't mean to try, because you would make me angry, and I'm too happy to be angry. Uncle, whatever he is—and he's the biggest and best thing in the world—Jim's just *my man*!"

"Yes, but—confound it! What leads you to think so?" Mr. Pruden demanded, as his temper slipped a notch.

"One doesn't think about these things. One just knows!" Lydia said raptly.

"Yes, but one might possibly make a mistake. I take it that you mean to live with this individual for perhaps fifty or sixty years. What if, on longer acquaintance, you should find him a trifle crude?"

"Aunt's been giving you her version? Well, he's not crude—oh, in speech, perhaps, just a little bit. He's elemental and honest, and too big for pretty manners. If they're ever really necessary, he can learn them in a week; but I'm not at all sure I want him to learn. I love him best just as he is!"

T. Wynne sighed. The girl was altogether too much like her father just now.

"And even so—I say, Lydia, I wish you'd sit still for a moment."

"Uncle, I'm so sleepy that I can't keep my eyes open another minute," said Lydia, and did not resume her seat. "You want to see him to give your formal consent?"

"At least I want to see him."

"At your office, to-morrow?"

"Yes—about two o'clock."

"I'll phone him in the morning," said Lydia. "Good night!"

XIII

IN New York, home for Daniel Finch was a dreary boarding house on a dreary street. As a rule, he left the place as early and often as possible; but to-day he slept late, and it was nearly noon when he reached the very modest one-room-and-bath apartment where James Barr abode.

James concocted his own breakfasts. When in the neighborhood he got his dinners at a little restaurant around the corner. This morning, carefully shaved, he was selecting a necktie.

"Makes a difference now, eh?" Daniel observed. "See her last night?"

"Yes."

"All bets still hold?"

"Yes."

"Can you beat that?" breathed Daniel. "Going to see her now?"

"No."

"Going out, aren't you?"

Darkly, James turned and regarded his friend.

"Yes!" he snapped. "I'm seeing her guardian at two o'clock, to get his consent."

"Oho!" said Daniel, and grew instantly animated. "We'd better start soon."

"We don't start. I go alone!"

"Now, listen!" said Mr. Finch, hurrying to his side. "There's a break, right there!"

This is going to be hard stuff to pull right. You're great, Jimmy—you can lick the world; but listen to reason. If this guy gets you into a tight corner, you're going to need some extra brains, and—"

"He's not going to get me into any corner. If he does, I don't need your damned extra brains to get out of it!" James said savagely.

"Sure, that's what you think; but you might be wrong, Jim!" his friend urged. "Jimmy, muscles ain't everything. It's brains that count in a case like this, and, Jimmy, I tell you, I'm the little white-haired boy that can deliver 'em!"

"Deliver 'em to somebody that needs 'em!" James said shortly. "I'm going alone."

Having gazed at his intractable friend for a full ten seconds, Daniel sighed and shrugged.

"Well, you'll be sorry if you don't let me go along and manage this for you," he said. "Not that I want to butt in, you understand. I'm just trying to help you. You're going to be sorry!"

This time James did not even reply. He was brushing off the blue suit with the hair stripe. Mentally, and without a tremor, he was already well on his way to the office of the Alford estate.

This, perchance, was because he knew nothing at all of that particular and peculiar office. It was in an old, old house, just a few steps off Fifth Avenue, on a block that had long since been given over to business of the more dignified sort. Once upon a time it had been a modest ballroom; and if grass had grown above its dancers for many years, much of their rarefied and aristocratic atmosphere lingered strangely behind.

Its windows were very high, rather narrow, and soberly, chastely curtained. Its polished floor was strewn with Eastern carpets of such quality as to be rather strikingly impressive in themselves; but strongest of all was the impression of spaciousness and stillness.

T. Wynne Pruden's plain, gigantic desk of mahogany stood toward the windowed end of the room, so that one made quite an excursion over the soundless rugs before reaching it from the door. There were half a dozen huge old chairs, done in dusky leather. At the side was a smaller room, wherein, when the connecting door happened to stand open, one sensed filing cabi-

nets and an old safe. That was all—and of these few details the mighty stillness was perhaps the most oppressive.

There was an anteroom, too, which one entered just after leaving the street, and which in its own way was quite as staggering as the spacious apartment beyond. Here, at a desk of his own, sat Henry B. Thorne. At first glance, with his little gray side whiskers, his forged steel eye, and his rusty frock coat, one would have mistaken Mr. Thorne for the president of some unusually solid and conservative bank; but it so happened that he was T. Wynne Pruden's private secretary, clerk, and watchdog, and probably the only other man alive who knew all the ins and outs of the William Alford estate, which did so prettily these days for Lydia, three sisters of her late father, and a number of more distant relatives.

Not the least astute person alive, T. Wynne knew quite well the potentialities of his office in the way of subduing persons inclined to be self-assured, light-minded, or obdurate. He had also the true stage manager's gift for arranging the performance to fit individual requirements; and while he had never laid eyes upon James Barr, he flattered himself that everything was about ready for the would-be bridegroom's reception.

Thus may the curtain rise upon James, standing before the desk of Henry B. Thorne. James's hat was on the back of his head. His hands were in his trousers pockets. He was casting a critical, almost an amused, eye about the anteroom, as he inquired:

"Mr. Pruden in?"

Mr. Thorne's grave, unfriendly stare lasted just twelve seconds.

"You have an appointment with Mr. Pruden?"

"I certainly have, brother!" said James. "For two o'clock."

"Your name, please?"

"Barr—Barr!" James said impatiently.

Very slowly, very deliberately, Mr. Thorne selected a black-bound leather book from several before him. He glanced at the calendar. He slowly opened this book. He cleared his throat and moved on, also slowly, to a certain page.

"James Barr?" he inquired, one minute later.

"What? Certainly!" James replied impatiently, and, as the secretary's eyes re-

turned to the book, he added: "Say, excuse me, but can you make it a little snappy?"

James was pretty bright, you see, and he had sensed the atmosphere quite accurately. One didn't awe James with this stuff. Mr. Thorne glanced at him, seemed slightly sickened, ignored him by turning away, and rose.

"Mr. Pruden may be ready to receive you," he said frigidly. "I will see."

Two more minutes passed. James smiled, jeeringly, triumphantly, as he stood alone. It was his first visit to this private morgue—yes, and you could take it from James that it was also his last! If this Pruden bird really had anything to do with managing Lydia's affairs, while he might not yet realize the fact, after next Monday he was going to be presented with what is known as the raspberry. Any guy that would dig up King Tut and hire him for an office boy was too far out of date to handle any real money.

In the vast room, Mr. Pruden and Mr. Thorne were smiling grimly at each other. Mr. Thorne understood, of course; he understood everything, anyway, and several interviews similar to this impending one had already taken place in that office. Mr. Pruden glanced at the shades. They were drawn to just the proper point. He ceased smiling grimly and sat more erect.

"All right, Thorne," he said cheerfully. "Open the door and drive it in. I am ready for the slaughter!"

XIV

It may have occurred to you to wonder whether James Barr was capable of a proper approach at this important moment. Wonder no longer—he was! The reason for this will presently become apparent.

As Mr. Thorne held open the door, James nodded nonchalantly, and advanced. His hat was still on the back of his head. He had not removed his hands from his pockets. He glanced very briefly about the magnificently appalling room without the slightest sign of emotion, much as if he himself was accustomed to something better, but this would probably do.

Without haste, without loitering, he came nearer to T. Wynne Pruden, who sat back and regarded him with a stony stare. Ten feet from the desk, he removed his hands, tossed his hat carelessly upon the desk itself, and held out one great, hearty paw.

"Mr. Pruden?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir," said a still, ominous voice.

"M' name's Barr," said James. He sat down with a smile, and crossed his legs. "You've heard about me, of course."

"I know that—"

"Well, sir, I've come to you to-day with a little proposition that interests both of us. My time's valuable, and I suppose yours is, too; so the best thing I can do is to get down to business, eh?" the caller pursued, briskly, breezily. "Mr. Pruden, I'm going to marry Miss Alford, your ward, and I understand from her that she'd like me to get your consent. That's what I came to get."

"I—see!" said T. Wynne.

Then he began to smile a smile that should have told James Barr his fate at once—a smile that might have told him much, save that he was again addressing Mr. Pruden.

"You want to know about me—that's the idea, eh?" said James, still more breezily. "Well, there's nothing to tell you. I can't give myself a much cleaner bill than that, can I? And it's on the level. I'm sound and healthy; never went to see a doctor in my life, or had one come to see me. I'm young. I've got no past of any kind. I'm crazy about Lydia, and I'll make her as good a husband as any girl ever had. Do I have to say any more?"

"Perhaps—"

"But I don't!" said James, smiling blandly. "Now, as to this consent. It's just a form, of course, but Lydia seems to want it. I think she'd feel better if it was in writing—no, she didn't say that, of course; that's my idea. So if you'll just give me a slip of paper I can show her—"

"Mr. Barr!" cried T. Wynne Pruden, and now there was quite an outraged note in his voice. "You take much for granted!"

"That's the way to get the goods, brother!" returned Mr. Barr.

"Far too much for granted!" T. Wynne repeated, and James noted with just a hint of confusion that he seemed not to have been swept quite off his feet, even yet. "You seem to assume, sir, that my consent has been given."

"Well? Why not? What's the matter with me?" James asked.

"Let us try to determine that," Mr. Pruden said grimly. "You will be so good as to answer a question or two?"

"Are they necessary?"

"Decidedly."

"Shoot!" James said resignedly.

"Your age, Mr. Barr?" T. Wynne hurled at him, and even that question seemed an accusation.

"Twenty-six."

"You are a chauffeur, I believe?"

"A what? No, I'm no chauffeur," said James, and stared, and then laughed loudly. "I get it—how you got it tangled up, I mean. No, I'm not a chauffeur; I'm a salesman. I sell motor trucks. That's how you got it twisted."

Now, of course, you see why James knew so perfectly how to make his approach.

"Ah?" said Lydia's guardian. "And you make—"

"Good money, brother!"

"Be a little more specific, please. Your weekly income?"

"Oh, from eighty to a hundred and fifty a week, probably. More sometimes."

Mr. Pruden stared long and effectively.

"And on that—*that* income, sir," said his dumfounded voice, "you propose to marry Miss Alford?"

"Why not?"

"True enough—why not?" Mr. Pruden murmured, and shook his head. "You're a New Yorker?"

"No, I come from out in Pennsylvania," James said, and it was clear that he was growing restless.

"Then your—ah—your social connections in town here—what are they?"

"They're not! What do I want with social connections?"

Mr. Pruden shook his head again.

"Education, Mr. Barr?"

"Plenty for all I need—and let it go at that. Now listen!" said Mr. Barr. "I didn't come here to get cross-examined. I came here for your consent, and I only did that to please Lydia; so now I'll get down from the stand, if you don't mind, and take that consent and beat it. O. K.?"

With a loud bang, T. Wynne's neat little fist came down on his desk. With a snap, T. Wynne rose. He was about to deliver himself!

"No, sir! It is not O. K.!" cried he. "You have had the utter effrontery to come here on a preposterous errand. You are virtually penniless, sir, and I'm bound to say that, as regards intelligence, there is no apparent promise of your ever attaining any other condition. You are without

family. You are without education. You are without social standing. You—"

"Yes, go on!" James said rather dangerously. "What else am I without?"

"Absolutely everything! You lack every possible qualification that even a lenient and conscienceless man in my position might require. You, sir," said T. Wynne Pruden, pointing a daring finger at James, "are the very cheapest type of fortune hunter it has been my lot to meet!"

He held the pose a moment. Then he sat down.

"We understand each other," he said.

"Good day, Mr. Barr!"

He even went so far as to reach for his papers. Then some intuition caused him to glance annoyedly upward. He found James wearing an interesting pallor. More, James was breathing quite heavily.

"Listen!" he commanded.

Mr. Pruden faced him slowly, with a certain frigid majesty which he had been saving for this moment—a majesty which had worked well in several other cases.

"I do not choose to listen. The interview is ended," he stated, drilling through James. "Save to add, perhaps, that should you further annoy my ward, I shall turn you over to the police."

"You *listen*!" James repeated. "You're an old man!" This, too, on a day when T. Wynne had been fondly fancying that he looked a scant forty-five! "If you weren't an old man, I'd hand you a bust in the jaw you'd be telling your family about ten years from now. I'd learn you manners, good and plenty!" panted James, seeming less elegant under the stress of his emotion.

"Sir, if—"

"Tie a can to that stuff!" Mr. Barr shouted, for the moment quite losing himself. "We're through talking. What the idea of getting *your* consent was I don't know, but—"

"The provisions of—"

"I came down here to please the kid, and that's out of the way. Pruden, this is a free country, and Lydia's twenty-two years old. You got no more to say about her than the guy that makes change in the subway. I don't know where you get this guardian stuff, and I'm no lawyer, but I know it's not legal—see? So *that* for your consent!" said Mr. Barr, snapping his fingers under Mr. Pruden's nose. "And *that* for you!" he added, snapping them again.

Mr. Pruden involuntarily started back and threw up two small, defensive hands. Mr. Barr laughed most unpleasantly.

"And the next time a clean white man comes in here to talk over a proposition with you, keep that in mind, and watch your step!" he said in conclusion, as he turned away. "He might not be like me. He might forget you were a hundred years old!"

Henry B. Thorne always opened the door for departing callers. He heard approaching footfalls and rose, smiling contemptuously. Then, chattering, gasping, he was flattened against the wall, as the door of T. Wynne Pruden's office was hurled open. Be it said to James's credit, though, that he never even knew Mr. Thorne was there.

As concerned James, the whole world had become a bright red place. Even at the corner, all things were tinged with this hue, and—

James stopped short, just as Daniel Finch stopped short, and stared at his old friend. It is a question which of these two gentlemen was the more surprised at the meeting; but there can be no question at all as to which was less pleased. As Daniel smiled, expectantly, Mr. Barr rapped out sharply:

"Well? What the hell are you doing? Trailing me?"

"Trailing you?" Daniel echoed. "How could I be trailing you, when you didn't even tell me where this place was you were going to?" he demanded, with sufficient logic. "No, I'm taking a walk. So *that's* how it ended, eh?"

"What?"

"Jimmy, didn't I say as much before you started? Didn't I tell you you'd spill the beans if you tried to handle this alone? Didn't I beg you to let me go along and do the fine, fancy brain work and—"

"*You!*" wheezed James Barr, and stalked on alone.

It was no proper treatment for a friend who had merely chanced that way, and who had ever had James's best interests at heart. Gazing after Mr. Barr, shaking his head, Daniel seemed hurt.

"That's the way they get when a skirt drops the hooks into 'em!" he soliloquized. "Can you beat it? Just for want of a little brains, he's chucking a chance like that, too!"

He gazed on and on after James, as the latter strode up the block, paused, and

hesitated with bowed head, a giant figure around whom people had to walk.

"Well, what is it *now*?" Daniel inquired of nobody in particular. "Is he going in there to buy poison?"

This, of course, was brought forth by James's turning suddenly and disappearing into a corner drug store. Daniel was entirely wrong about his friend's motive, though. James had merely stepped in to use the public telephone.

ALONE, T. Wynne Pruden grew redder and redder. He tapped upon his desk; he muttered certain personal observations which it was really well that James Barr was not there to hear. Presently, he shrugged and attempted to resume work at his papers. Ten minutes, and, finding the effort entirely fruitless, he resumed his tapping.

In plain truth, the recent interview had not gone at all as T. Wynne had planned. In the first place, James should have been impressed by his surroundings, and he had not been impressed. If decent, he should have been crushed by the recital of his obvious inadequacies. If not decent, he should have been confused at the accusation of fortune hunting; and he had been neither.

Why? His several predecessors had collapsed in just the proper way at just the proper moment, and—well, confound them! At least they had had some conception of what constitutes a gentleman; whereas this preposterous clod was too dense, too egotistical, even to know that he was being insulted. Yes, by gad, that was it!

Possibly, again, the fatal thing had been the strange way in which T. Wynne himself had lost his temper. He could not say why he had done that. He had never done it before in similar circumstances. He had been perplexed, of course, at the lack of any proper reaction on Barr's part, and—well, well, he had regained his temper now! He muttered several more rather vivid things, by way of proving to himself that it had been recovered. He even mentioned Lydia Alford herself in slightly unflattering terms, as being the primary cause of the fizzle.

Yes, that was the only term—fizzle! Mr. Pruden gazed blackly across the room. The sole result of all the devilish gabbling had been that James Barr had snapped his fin-

gers directly under the austere nose of T. Wynne Pruden, on two separate counts. The man had been jarred, of course, and made to understand what was what, but that was of minor consequence, one way or the other. The great and distressing certainty remained that James evidently had not slunk out with his mind purged of all notion of marrying Lydia.

Precisely what he meant to do next, T. Wynne could not have told; but deep within him stirred a mean and cowardly craving to abuse something weak and helpless. What more natural, then, than that he should bounce irascibly out of his chair, after another feverish half hour, and make for the dusty mansion uptown?

He yearned to address Lydia and her aunt—together, if possible—at some length and with some force. He discovered that only Mrs. Lane was at home. She came down glowing her confidence in T. Wynne Pruden.

"It's over!" she cried.

"What? The interview? Yes!"

"And you've driven that awful person away, permanently?"

"I'm—ah—not quite sure. I—"

"Oh, but Wynne! You said you would, in five minutes!" the lady cried.

"I recall saying that," Mr. Pruden admitted tartly; "but—hang it, why on earth didn't you give me some idea of what the brute was like?"

"But I—I had met him only once, Wynne, and—"

"Well, he hasn't the most elementary instinct of a gentleman, he hasn't the brain of a low type of monkey, and he has an amount of egotism that no emperor could carry with decency!"

"Really, Wynne!"

"Where did she meet this man?" banded from Mr. Pruden.

"I—he saved her life, I think."

"She'd never met him before that?"

"No."

Mr. Pruden glanced furiously at Lydia's aunt.

"It occurs to me that it might have been well for *you* to keep a sharp enough eye on Lydia to see that she didn't need to be rescued by—by any loafer who happened to be passing!"

Not without some justice, the lady's eyes grew round and moist and outraged.

"But, Wynne, how could I *possibly* prevent—"

"All right! Don't sniff like that, Mary! I loathe sniffing! What the devil's the matter with Lydia, anyhow?"

Mrs. Lane merely dabbed her eyes and shook her head.

"I knew she was an ultramodern product, oversexed, as impulsive as sin, and as stubborn as a mule," submitted Mr. Pruden; "but I didn't know she was a blithering idiot!"

"Oh, she's not, Wynne!"

"She's not? I tell you, if she really contemplates marrying that lout, she *is*! She's a fit subject for examination by a commission of alienists, and—and, by gad, I believe I'll ask to have one appointed!"

"No! No!" Mrs. Lane protested, quite agonizedly. "It—well, you see, perhaps a woman understands these things better. I mean, he's—he's tall, and strong, and rather handsome in his crude way—I suppose we must admit that; and Lydia is susceptible."

"She is, indeed! But why in the name of Heaven isn't she susceptible to a man we can marry her to decently, and have done with it?"

"I don't know about that; but with this man, she—probably she thinks she'll marry him and reform him, or make him like the other men she's always known, or—you know what I mean!"

"I haven't the slightest idea what you mean," Mr. Pruden said pleasantly. "Where's Lydia?"

"I don't know, Wynne. I—wait! Wait! I'll ask Deever."

So she rang for Deever and asked him. The butler looked slightly distressed.

"I—I couldn't say—not for certain, that is, Mrs. Lane," Deever reported.

"What do you mean by that?" T. Wynne demanded sharply.

"A—a gentleman called up, and Miss Lydia left immediately after, sir."

"Who was he?"

"Well, as to that, sir, I'm not sure. He gave no name; but the voice sounded like the gentleman who rescued Miss Lydia, and who—"

T. Wynne sat bolt upright.

"What did he say to her, Deever?" he cried.

"Well, begging pardon, sir, I—I don't try to listen to telephone conversations," said the butler, with a certain stiffness; "but I couldn't help gathering that he—er—wished her to meet him at the corner."

"Oh, no, Deeever! No!" gasped Mrs. Lane.

"Very likely not, ma'am," the butler said gravely; "but that's what I gathered while going downstairs after I summoned Miss Lydia."

Mrs. Lane was gazing wide-eyed at Mr. Pruden. He, by the way, was gazing in rather similar fashion at Mrs. Lane. He waved Deeever away impatiently.

"Meeting him—*on the corner!*" Lydia's aunt faltered.

"Most natural thing in the world for that clod to ask of her!" rasped swiftly from Mr. Pruden; "but why did he do that? Why didn't he come here? He's not bashful, Heaven knows! There was a reason for that. It isn't possible—"

"It—it might be!" came from Mrs. Lane's ashen lips. "One never knows what Lydia will do, Wynne! You may have driven him to desperation, you know. You've a violent temper. Did he threaten to—to marry her despite you?"

"Not in so many words—of course not. He—oh, see here, Mary!" said Mr. Pruden, and forced out a small, hollow laugh. "We're both a little bit jumpy this afternoon. We're imaginative, and all that sort of thing. Of course they're not eloping; and they can't possibly get married without obtaining a license, you know. It might be as well to find out about that!"

"How, Wynne?" Mrs. Lane trembled.

"Simplest thing in the world," said Mr. Pruden, and started for the telephone in the library. "Carter, my lawyer—his secretary has a cousin in the license bureau. Sit still and don't fuss, Mary. Nothing of that sort's afoot, but it 'll ease our minds to make sure."

He hurried away. Mrs. Lane remained as she was for fully five minutes, twisting her handkerchief, vaguely wiping her dry eyes, occasionally sighing. Then she could no longer stand the terrific strain. She drifted after T. Wynne Pruden.

He was sitting before the instrument, waiting, and incidentally biting his nails and muttering. He nodded grimly to Mrs. Lane, as the lady perched on the edge of the chair beside him. Then, together, they waited. They waited and waited, until it seemed that months had passed, although the clock, which Deeever had set going, insisted that it had been barely ten minutes ago that Mr. Pruden entered the library. All this long time they were silent.

Then, suddenly, the bell beside Mr. Pruden rang sharply.

"Ah!" they gasped, as one.

Not too steadily, T. Wynne took down the receiver. He listened with a countenance which he did his level best to render inscrutable.

"Hey?" he said presently. "Yes—James Barr—yes—Lydia B. Alford and—*what?*"

One minute more he listened. Then he choked:

"Thank—thank you very much for getting me the information. Good-by!"

He turned upon Mrs. Lane, his face not at all inscrutable.

"Well, they've got their license, fast enough!" he said, and his voice cracked. "They got it more than half an hour ago!"

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Lane. "Oh! Why—why, by this time—"

"Exactly, Mary!" said T. Wynne Pruden. "By this time they probably are!"

"Wynne!" shuddered from Mrs. Lane.

Mr. Pruden—characteristically, perhaps—paid her not the slightest heed in this dreadful moment. His patrician cheeks flushed darkly. His eyes blazed. His nostrils grew wide and emotional. Also, he clenched his fists.

"So they defied me, did they?" he wheezed. "That infernal, defective girl and that—that damned truck driver! They—"

"But, Wynne—"

"I'll find a way to undo that marriage, Mary!" Mr. Pruden stormed. "I gave Bill Alford my word. My personal satisfaction will have something to do with it, too. I'll undo that marriage, if I have to carry it to the Supreme Court of the United States! I'll teach—"

"But, Wynne! Wynne! Please, Wynne!"

"*What?*" roared Mr. Pruden.

"Perhaps they're not really married yet! Perhaps—"

"Oh, yes, they are, Mary!" Mr. Pruden said, with a great and terrible laugh. "In their present mental condition they would be married by some judge or alderman ten minutes after they got their clutches on the license. Probably they're halfway to Niagara Falls by this time! That's the sort of honeymoon he'd demand, and she—pah—*she*—"

"But, Wynne, I—I don't think so!" the lady wailed.

"Really?" Mr. Pruden sneered savagely.

"No, because Lydia has always insisted that nobody but Dr. Kilman ever should marry her. Yes, she really has, Wynne, always. It's an idea she formed as a child, and it has become absolutely fixed. Yes, really, Wynne! She has mentioned it a dozen times, even this last year, and—"

"Has she? Well, a forlorn hope's better than none," Lydia's guardian said swiftly. "What's Kilman's telephone number?"

He lunged at the little directory beside the telephone. Breathing hard, he gave his number and waited.

"I want to speak to Dr. Kilman in person!" he barked, when he got the clergyman's house. "Say that this is Mr. Pruden, and it's urgent."

"Will you call again about fifteen minutes, please?" asked a woman's voice.

"I will not!" said Mr. Pruden. "I wish to talk to him now, and—"

"I'm sorry, but that's impossible," the voice said, not so sweetly. "The doctor is performing a marriage ceremony, sir, and I have the strictest orders never to disturb him—"

More than this the speaker may have said, but not to Mr. Pruden. Even then, he was out of his chair and throwing his hands aloft.

"*They're at it now!*" he shouted. "Good-by!"

A bound, and he was racing down the corridor. A slam, and he was leaping down the steps to his waiting taxi. An explosion of sounds, and he had given the driver the Rev. Dr. Kilman's address, and was banging the door after himself as he added:

"It's only five blocks, and if you're fined a thousand dollars for speeding, that's immaterial. *Get there!*"

The exhaust roared out; gears ground; a firm little chassis shuddered under Mr. Pruden. Then they were off! Yes, decidedly, they were off!

They skimmed so close to the Merrivale car, standing two doors beyond, that a rear

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

mud guard clanged and turned blithely skyward. They whirled to the corner, the horn going steadily. They missed a huge truck by a margin so narrow that even Mr. Pruden, a rather hardened motorist, shrieked faintly and cowered down.

But they were past that now. They had turned on two wheels, and they were heading north.

There was a surface car, from which an elderly lady descended with all the care-free air of one who has not yet learned that automobiles have been invented. Just why the taxi did not strike her and hurl her hundreds of feet into the air, T. Wynne Pruden failed to understand; but it did not.

There was a colored man on a bicycle, who, though untouched by a full one-fiftieth of an inch, crashed, shouting, from his bicycle. He gathered himself and raced away down the side street.

There was a corner, with children, and—but they turned this corner, too, with never a scream from an injured child; and here was Dr. Kilman's home.

T. Wynne Pruden tried the door. It opened. He stalked in—almost into the arms of the housekeeper who had so recently answered his telephone call.

"Where's the doctor?" he panted.

"The doctor—"

"Out of my way! I know!" cried Lydia's guardian.

He dashed past the housekeeper and on to the clergyman's study. The door was closed. He jerked the knob and hurtled through.

Dr. Kilman was there, with his wife, and with an aged man who looked as if he might be Dr. Kilman's father. More than all, Lydia was there, with her giant, standing before the doctor; and the words that died upon the clergyman's lips at the sight of Mr. Pruden were:

"Speak now or forever—"

"Well, I speak now!" cried T. Wynne Pruden.

MY SUNSHINE

THE low-hanging clouds have closed all around me,
Save one tiny rift where the sun's shining through;
But I pilot my bark with a hand that's more steady,
For that bit of sunshine is you!

Mildred Homer Buelduc