

*Two alluring girls
tug at Chic Cotton's heart-
strings—one has dignity and
culture, the other is a queen
of the show world*

Coney Island

A new novel by Homer Croy

Author of "West of the Water Tower," "They Had to See Paris," etc.

THE THREAD OF THE STORY

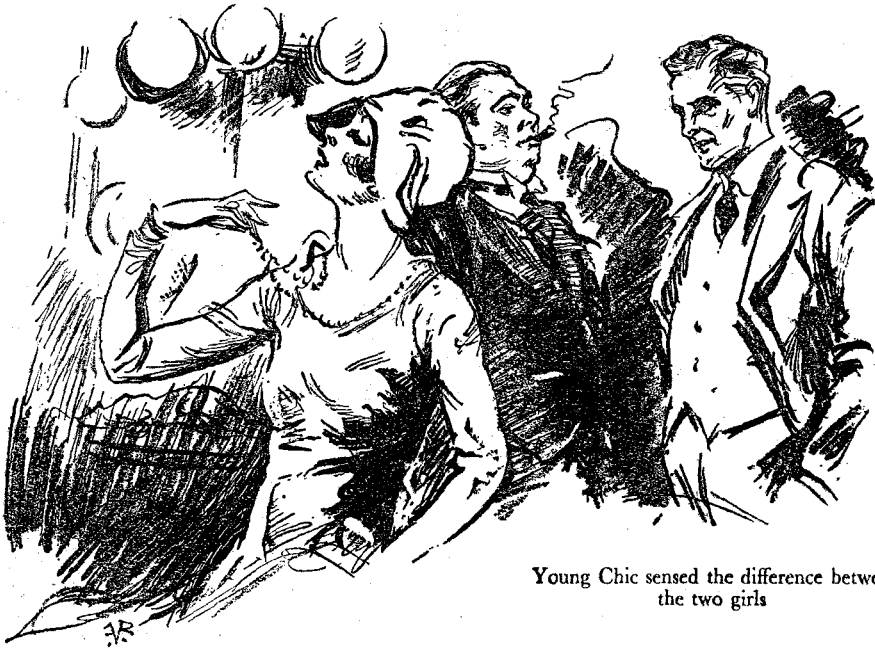


CHIC COTTON, an unsophisticated inventor of twenty-two, set forth from his home town in the mid-west to conquer the great city of New York. He had bright dreams of fame and fortune.

He did not know—how could he know?—that an æsthetic dancing class for girls would be located on the ground floor of his boarding house;

that he would peep at the enticing nymphs from the fire escape, and that he would develop a growing fondness for one of those nymphs that would eventually—but that is going ahead of the story.

When Chic was nineteen, three years before he left Junction City, a girlhood friend of his mother's visited the house, bringing an altogether lovely daughter, Charmian De Ford, who was cultured, winsome and beautiful.



Young Chic sensed the difference between
the two girls

She stayed there only a few days; long enough for Chic and Charmian to form an idealistic friendship, which gradually faded into vague memories after the girl had returned to her wealthy home on Long Island.

But now that Chic was living within an hour's ride of Floral Gardens, he determined to renew the friendship. Calling on Charmian, he found her more sweetly dignified than before, and slightly aloof, but apparently still fond of him.

Then came one of those minor tragedies which seems like the end of the world at the time it occurs. Chic accidentally bumped into and shattered a miniature Swiss chalet, delicately built out of ice as a surprise in honor of Mr. De Ford's election as president of a golf club.

Humiliated, he left Charmian early that evening, and, upon returning to his boarding house, saw through a crack in a door the rhythmic flash of twenty bare legs, so he scurried out to

the fire escape to observe the display of femininity more closely. He picked out the girl whom he regarded as most shapely and vivacious, introduced himself, and took her to a night club.

She proved to be Queenie Johnson, a tight-rope walker, advertised far and wide as "Coney Island's Sweetheart."

Later he visited Coney Island, viewed her act with unbounded admiration, and became acquainted with her friends, the various freaks, performers and concessionaires at Coney, discovering the human side of their private life. The novelty and glamour of it all fascinated him.

While living at Junction City, Chic had originated a device from which he hoped to become wealthy—a Giant Top, with little cars shuttling in and out, for use in amusement parks.

And now that he had been presented to the Coney Island set by Queenie, he visualized the construction of that top by Joel Zimmerman, known as the "King of Coney Island," promoter of

amusement parks, builder of rides—a crude, rough-and-ready but powerful figure.

Queenie, a protégée of Zimmerman's, agreed to help him to get this invention developed. Chic visited the girl often at her dressing room over the "World in Wax," and gradually fell in love with her, an affection which she shared in her own slangy, superficial but tremendously warm-hearted way.

Meanwhile he had found employment in a radio factory. Thoughts of Queenie brightened his outlook considerably; particularly the evening he first realized that love had actually come into his life.

CHAPTER XV

A FAVORITE OF THE GODS



THAT evening Chic Cotton walked up the soggy, slightly smelly stairs to his room, made the turns, ran his fingers along the winding banisters—what a long way it was to-night. What a tremendous love had come into his soul since last he had been in the room!

Sometimes life just seemed to creep along; nothing happened; everybody else in the world seemed to be doing interesting things and having wonderful adventures and making lots of money, and nothing—absolutely nothing—happened to him, and then all of a sudden came a revelation bigger than anything that had ever occurred to anybody before.

He thought of the jumble of people plowing their way along the streets. Nothing like that had ever come into their lives; they might have held a girl in their arms and kissed her, but never in the deep emotional way he had.

His mother's picture was looking at him when he came into the room, and a desire came over him to write her. He had neglected her, he decided. There was her last letter on the bureau, the torn, lacerated ends, where he had ragged it open with his fingers, were staring at him. He had glanced through it and carelessly had tossed it on his bureau. So many other things to think of. When he had first come to New York he had read every line, over and over.

He got out his fountain pen, made a couple of preliminary scratches on the corner of his envelope box, and then started it. "Dear Mother," it began.

(When Mrs. Cotton received it she was very proud of it, indeed, for it was warm and glowingly alive. "He's such a dear, manly son," she thought, as she read the letter. Now that old Aunt Lavinia's money would soon be hers, she could do something for him. Possibly, when things got straightened around, she could go to New York to see him. She had the sense of a sun-beam dancing through her soul.)

Now Chic had finished the letter; time to go to bed. He paused a moment in front of his bureau. The Sweetheart picture smiled at him. He stood looking at it longingly. But he must do what was right. Wetting a corner of the towel he scrubbed off the picture.

And then he turned off the light.

A week passed, and now Chic stood before the little steel locker at the radio factory, changing from his jumpers into the best suit he had, for to-day was the big day. To-day was the day he was to see Mr. Zimmerman, and Mr. Zimmerman would say "Yes." There was no doubt about it.

Chic had fastened a mirror to the steel door of his locker, and now he stood peering at himself and arranging every hair as Nature intended it should be.

He picked up the precious canvas bag, which he had recovered from the grease joint. What if there should be a wreck on the subway and the top should be smashed, or what if he should lose it? He had heard of such things. A slight shiver passed over him. No, nothing like that would happen to it, and he would be there at exactly five o'clock, the hour set by Mr. Zimmerman.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN OF DESTINY



A VISITOR going through Coney Island doesn't observe very much. He sees merely a forest of steel trees with a flock of roller coasters chasing each other in and out like monkeys; he sees a constantly changing kaleidoscope of circle swings, merry-go-rounds, dips, chutes, sky chasers; a woman sitting on an orange crate nursing a child; a blind man in the midst of the revelry playing mournfully on an accordion; a couple of thousand men selling hot corn on the cob, and a few million electric lights. That's all. He doesn't discover what makes the wheels go round.

It's like a person going to an electric power station and seeing the walls of the building and the pretty pictures in the manager's office and going away without having viewed the dynamos.

One of these dynamos was Joel Zimmerman. A silent, steadily turning, never diverted dynamo. He had raised himself from nothing to the most powerful man in Coney Island,

and he had done it in a silent, almost wordless way—a method almost unknown among amusement park men. They are talkers, voluble men, storytellers, yarn spinners, entertainers, the life of the club car, are these big showmen of the amusement parks. But not Zimmerman. He was a rare man—he used words only to convey thought.

As a boy, Joel had labored in his father's blacksmith shop, heating bars to a glowing yellowish-red, and making them into strange and fanciful designs which, to his father, was damned foolishness, and a waste of good coal. A streak of the artistic had always been in young Zimmerman, and he had not been content to pump the bellows.

"I'm going to be an architect," he had said, and had begun going to a night school. During the day he toiled in an architect's office in the little town on Long Island where he was born. While working there the town had voted to have an exposition in memory of its founding, and to offer a prize for the best design for a midway plan and a court of honor.

"I'm going to get that," Zimmerman had said, and when the judges had made their decision he had won the prize of two thousand dollars.

Most boys of his age—he was still nineteen—would have taken the money and put it on display, but not Zimmerman. Already concessionaires had come looking for places to operate at the Long Island exposition. One of them had a scenic railway, or, as it was known in the amusement park world, a "gravity ride," and was looking for a partner. Young Zimmerman studied the ride, suggested a few simple improvements, and put in his money. When the exposition was over he was a comparatively rich man. He had over four thousand dollars.

"What are you going to do with all your money?" people asked.

"I'm going to get out of this," he said. "There's no real money in merely operating a ride."

It was the first time he was called crazy, and they were partially right, for no normal man in full possession of his faculties would become an amusement park builder and promoter. It is a small graveyard, but it's a crowded one, and many creative geniuses sleep within its green folds. One is Frederic Thompson, who built Luna Park and the New York Hippodrome before he was thirty, and whom at forty-six kindly friends chipped in and buried.

"It gets them all, sooner or later," is an expression in the world of amusement parks. "All they have to do is to stick at it long enough."

A man will conceive an idea for an amusement device, or a park, or the promotion of a new beach, and will throw himself into it. He rises to the top, he swims. "I'm a pretty clever man," he says, and ventures out a little farther from shore. The funeral is short but impressive.

Thus, by all tokens, it should have been with Zimmerman. He should have had two or three successes, and thus encouraged, should have made a mighty splurge, and then the auctioneer should have come with his red flag. Many a man more capable, and with better financial backing than Zimmerman, had tried just such schemes, and had spent his declining days on the charity of relatives.

But Zimmerman wasn't that kind. "There's money in the park business, and I'm going to get it out." And he did.

He had, in the terms of the amusement park world, "followed the

fairs." The first was the Jamestown Exposition at Norfolk, Virginia. As soon as the concessions were let, and the construction of the devices began, young Zimmerman showed up with a set of blue prints which gave the old heads a hearty laugh. "The Honeymoon Trail," he called his device.

The other rides were constructed on the principle of speed and thrills. The public must be jostled and bumped about, "the lady must squeal."

Young Zimmerman turned up with his slow, poky "Honeymoon Trail." Instead of being rushed through thrills and perils at terrific speed, the young lovers went drifting gently and smoothly along as if in a dream; no sudden winds struck them, no skeletons leaped out at them, no horrible noises pursued them. Pleasant scenes met their eyes, colored lights changed slowly and enchantingly; there were dark, lovely passages, with a sound of rippling waters.

"You won't last two weeks," predicted the old showmen, who knew all about the public. "You haven't got a thrill in it."

"Go on and do it your own way," Zimmerman answered as he opened his ride, and it was the sweet dream of all showmen—"a repeat ride."

When the exposition was over and the gates were closed, Zimmerman was one of the few who had made money out of that burying ground.

From there he went other places, trying this, trying that, especially attempting things which other showmen said couldn't be done.

"Where you men lay down is where I begin," he retorted.

And then he opened at Coney Island, which had been his goal from the day he put his first money into a gravity ride. He now had more ground leases

and owned more concessions than any other individual on the Island.

No one on the Island was so relentless in pursuit of money as Zimmerman was, nor so cold and calculating and heartless in his revenge, once he had turned against a person.

There was the way he had dealt with Mike Galotti. Mike was one of Zimmerman's concessionaires, the operator of a rabbit race. He was one of the best and most honest of the Coney concessionaires, but "the breaks" had been against him. There had been two seasons of rain, ground rent was going up, radio was cutting the crowds, and Mike had been tempted to "gaff" his device. He had loosened a board in the floor, out of sight of the public, and by lightly pressing the board he could control the rabbit which won.

One day Zimmerman passed as the people were lined up in front of the game, working the little handles which sent the mechanical rabbits skipping across their clover patch. Mike, in his shirt sleeves, stood adding to the excitement of the race by clanging the finish bell.

Mike was more than the operator of a rabbit race; in other parts of the Island he had a candy pull, two weighing chairs, and a mechanical palm reader and fortune teller. But these were small and unimportant concessions in comparison with his rabbit race.

As he passed, Zimmerman's quick eye read the irregularity in the rabbits. Without a word he wormed his way through the fringe of people and leaned over the counter. Mike's foot was on the loose board. Zimmerman waited a moment, unseen by Mike, until the race was over and the bell no longer clanged.

"I want to see you to-night, after the gate," Zimmerman spoke so quietly that hardly any one noticed.

"I guess you know what I want," he said later. "What you got to say for yourself?"

Mike tried to appeal to the cold, silent man sitting at his desk. The weather had been rotten, he explained, no crowds; he had just put on the gaff that day. Of course he shouldn't have done so, but he hadn't been making expenses, and the simple device added to the interest of the race.

"I'm going to give you just three days to get it out of my park. That's all," said Zimmerman, turning back to his work.

It was a severe blow to Mike Galotti, but, according to the lease he had signed, it could be done. The season was half over, the news would fly around the tight little amusement park world. Mike tried to appeal to him—there were other concessions in Coney which gaffed their appliances. It was easy to put in a tiny slug, or to have a screw head which, when pressed down, made a contact.

"Won't you let me stay, Mr. Zimmerman?"

The wordless, silent, slow-moving boss did not look up from his desk.

"I guess you didn't understand. I said three days. I ought to made it two."

Mike had gone. It meant that he must play country fairs, a disastrous comedown to a man who had had a forty-foot park concession at Coney Island.


And now, as Chic walked along the street of Coney Island, carrying his canvas bag, Zimmerman sat in his office, waiting. On his desk calendar he had made a note of the engagement. He had not scrawled it hastily and

carelessly, as many another man might have done, but instead had printed it neatly and in the regular letters which, as an architect, he had learned to make. This was what it said:

"Cotton, see model, 5."

CHAPTER XVII

ZIMMERMAN MAKES AN OFFER

 HERE was a slight tap at the door and Mr. Zimmerman's secretary entered. "A young man by the name of Mr. Cotton is here, says he has an engagement with you."

"Send him in."

As Chic entered he had the sense of being in a studio rather than in an office. On the walls were half-completed sketches of roller coasters, circle swings, over-the-falls; other and more elaborate sketches were labeled "A Trip to the Moon" "Life in a Submarine," and "The Treasure Room of the Incas."

On the desk in front of Zimmerman sprawled a *papier-mâché* dragon, its head completed and gayly colored, but with bits of canvas patched along an unfinished spidery skeleton. About the place were samples of canvas, samples of carnival suits and highly colored beach umbrellas left by ambitious salesmen.

On the wall was a cluster of half-deflated balloons, with advertising matter printed on their wrinkled sides. When the door swung to behind Chic they bobbed violently, tugging at their strings.

As Chic's eyes leaped about the room, he saw among the pictures and photographs on the walls the brilliant red splash of the original drawing of the Sweetheart picture.

He experienced a moment's uneasiness, and then the feeling passed away; it was only natural that Mr. Zimmerman would have a picture of Queenie in his office. Wasn't he the one who had hired her? Didn't he pay her salary? Why, of course, it was all right.

Chic advanced with a quick, businesslike step. That was the way to walk—show Mr. Zimmerman that he was an up-and-comer. People who made great successes had pep and zip and go.

"How' do, Mr. Zimmerman. How're you to-day?" he said briskly.

Zimmerman's thick, hard lips opened.

"What do you want to see me about?"

It was one of Zimmerman's tricks. He used it even when he had sent for people. Immediately it gave him the advantage, for it was then the other person who sought the favor.

"About my invention, Mr. Zimmerman. I—I think I've got something pretty good."

His hand made an eager motion toward the brown bag.

"What about it?"

"I want to show it to you. I think you're going to like it," he repeated. He waited a moment, privately struggling with a strange dryness in his throat. "You've got nice offices here," he began again. "Is this where you do your work?"

But Zimmerman had no intention of talking about himself.

Chic tried again, made several little attempts; big crowd out to-day; that was fine, because the weather had been running pretty bad lately, especially Sundays . . . all the while he felt Zimmerman silently weighing him.

"I'm glad to meet you personally,

Mr. Zimmerman. I knew who you were before I left my home in the Middle West to come to New York."

Zimmerman made a slight move and Chic felt himself hastily picking up his bag.

"Would you like me to tell you how I got the idea for it, Mr. Zimmerman?" he appealed. "You know, that first flash?"

"No."

Still watching him, Zimmerman opened a desk drawer, put his hand into a box of cigars, and, without looking at it, chose one, bit off the end and inserted it in his mouth. Then he applied a gold lighter.

"How long have you known Miss Johnson?"

For a moment, in his confused state, the name was a blank to Chic, so firmly had the name "Queenie" become fixed in his mind.

"Oh, Miss Queenie Johnson?" Now he would show him how well he knew her; that would bring him and Mr. Zimmerman together. "I haven't known her so long, but—well, it seems like a long time. Some people are that way, aren't they? You can know them for years and you don't know them any better than when you started. In actual time," he concluded, "it's been about three months, I reckon."

"Nice girl, isn't she?"

Chic moved closer with a sudden friendly feeling.

"She sure is," he enthused. "I think you've got an awfully big find in her, Mr. Zimmerman, really I do. Just look at all the crowds that pour out to see her. And you've handled her well, too—I mean the way you've advertised her and so on." His eyes fastened on the Sweetheart drawing. "That's a fine idea, too," he declared. "Did you think of it yourself?"

"I did."

"Oh, did you? It strikes you right in the eye; you can't forget it, either."

But he mustn't continue to talk; he must show the model while Mr. Zimmerman was in the right mood. He pulled off the cover.

"There it is, Mr. Zimmerman. Excuse me and I'll attach it in the light socket and you can see how it works."

Zimmerman made a gesture with a short, stubby, hair-rimmed hand.

"The important thing is the blue prints. Did you bring them?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let's see them."

A chill came over Chic as he sat there, while Zimmerman laid the blue prints on the desk. Faintly in the distance came the dull roar of a roller coaster, the park band was now drumming up a crowd for the late afternoon performance; and faintly, as if through a poor telephone connection, was the cry of the barkers for the side shows, while suddenly, almost under the window, rose the quick, piercing sound of a reed playing a wild Egyptian piece for the Streets of Cairo.

Then, unaccountably, as Chic looked at Zimmerman, there rose before him the scene that night at the Dog Wagon when Zimmerman had reached out and patted Queenie's hand.

In the midst of the confusing thoughts and sounds pouring through his mind, he saw Zimmerman look up. Now he must answer him, make a good impressive reply.

But Zimmerman did not ask that kind of question.

"Has Miss Johnson seen your model?"

"Yes, I showed it to her."

"Did she like it?"

"Yes, sir, she thought it was fine. Said she thought people'd be sure to

like it." Chic smiled and in his voice there was a tone of friendly intimacy. "But, of course, her opinion wouldn't be professional, like yours."

Zimmerman's hand made a gesture toward the box.

"Smoke?"

Chic had no liking for cigars, but now he put one into his mouth and leaned forward to the flame as if it were the one unmixed joy of his life.

"You know Miss Johnson pretty well, don't you?"

Chic gave a friendly, eager smile. "Oh, yes, quite well," he was about to answer, when something in Zimmerman's voice made him hesitate. Was it possible that the big fellow was interested personally in Queenie? No, that couldn't be—he was too old, nearly forty, maybe. But what did that tone mean, and that long unwavering look which Zimmerman leveled at him? The smile died away on Chic's face, his fingers made a little nervous movement.

"No, sir, not very well," he answered.

The immovable Zimmerman gazed in silence a moment. As he studied the blue prints he asked questions, now and then glancing up at Chic. Had Chic intended it to be of dome truss construction? Was there any method of safety underfriction? How were the loading platforms to be arranged?

At last, Zimmerman swung slowly around in his chair. Chic's heart gave a leap. The big moment had come!

"There is" — Zimmerman paused; an agonizing delay; a puff of smoke shot out—"an idea in it."

But that didn't necessarily mean it would be a success. With the great weight supported on one axis it might go wrong—his hand paused in the air and Chic understood what it meant if

an amusement device, freighted with human beings, suddenly crashed.

"He's going to accept it, he is, he is!" the youth said to himself, feeling a great exaltation.

"Of course," continued Zimmerman, now leaning across the desk, "you know it's going to cost a lot of money to build this and give it a try out, and even then I don't know whether the public will want it or not. I've seen too many flops to make any statement about that."

The sweet little song in Chic now became a paean. "I know he's going to accept it, I know he is." All at once he felt a warm friendliness for the man. "I could almost throw my arms around him and kiss him," he thought ecstatically.

Zimmerman was still speaking. "I'll take it on and make one full size, practical, working structure and put it in my park and give it a try out."

"Thank God! Thank God!" a voice shouted in the inventor's heart, prematurely.

"But," continued Zimmerman, pausing and looking at Chic carefully, "it will cost more than I ever put into a ride. If you'll raise and invest four thousand dollars yourself, I'll take it on."

For a second Chic had the curious feeling that he had not heard correctly, and yet he knew that he had. Four thousand dollars. A fortune! Why, if he worked and saved for years he would not be able to collect that much money.

"What?" he asked automatically.

"I said I'd take it on if you'll raise four thousand dollars yourself."

Now he'd had a moment to collect his wits. He mustn't let a big man like Zimmerman think he was a piker. Just shake his head and say it was a

lot of money; it 'd save his face; maybe he could get somebody else to build it. But who?

At last he rose, now very business-like again.

"Is that your best proposition, Mr. Zimmerman?"

"It is."

The interview was now over, and Chic opened the door.

"Good day, Mr. Zimmerman. I'll have to think it over."

The door swung shut, the cluster of wrinkled balloons bobbed and Chic, carrying his little brown bag, started down the street.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SEVENTH HEAVEN



RS. COTTON, Chic's mother, glanced at the clock on the little oak sideboard in her home in Junction City. Surely she would get a letter from Chic. Usually he wrote twice a week, but for almost a week now she hadn't heard from him.

Often she wondered what kind of life he was living in New York. Would he be tempted—show the weakness his father had shown? But no, she answered herself, there was no danger of that. Other boys might go to a big city and do unworthy things, but *her* son wouldn't.

One thing which pleased her was Chic's acquaintance with Charmian. How nice and splendid that was, his mother thought. And in his letters she had followed the progress of Chic's growing friendship with the daughter of her girlhood friend.

But one thing she did *not* know. She was not aware that such a sprightly person as Miss Queenie Johnson ex-

isted in all the world.

The mail man, with the leather bag over his shoulders and bent slightly forward as he walked, was cutting across her yard from the house he had just left.

"Good morning, Mrs. Cotton. I guess you get a letter from Chic all right to-day. Here it is. A fat one this time. Hot, isn't it?" continued the purveyor of news, as he took off his cap and mopped his brow.

But Mrs. Cotton wasn't interested in the weather, now that she had Chic's letter. She sat down in her favorite rocking-chair by her south window, and with scissors neatly cut open the envelope. These were to be reckoned as the happiest minutes of her life, these minutes in her rocking-chair by her flower-filled window, reading her son's letters.

This time, after glancing at the inclosures, she sensed a different note in the letter. He had tried to make it bright and casual, but with a mother's understanding she had read between the lines. When she finished she knew all. His top couldn't be made, as the man would undertake it only on the ground that Chic would put in four thousand dollars. Blue prints and estimates were submitted with the personal message.

"That doesn't mean anything," Chic's letter finished bravely. "There are plenty of other ride builders."

But Mrs. Cotton caught the touch of despondency. Still holding the letter in her hand, she bent forward, broke off a dead leaf from one of the flowers and unconsciously rolled it between her fingers.

Four thousand dollars! It would take almost all of old Aunt Lavinia's money—and she had meant to do so much with it, finish paying for her

home, invest the rest, lay something by for a rainy day, and yet—

Slowly she rolled the unnoticed dead leaf between her fingers, the leaf growing smaller and smaller.

Her little brown-haired, blue-eyed boy seemed to be in the room again with her, this room where they had spent so many golden hours together. Again he seemed to be on the footstool looking up into her eyes, her darling boy.

"I'm going to do it," she said to herself. The leaf was now a little dead ball, and, opening the screen, she dropped it outside. "I couldn't do anything else."

And although she would debate it for days, her mind had been made up.

Now she must go on with her housework—cleaning, dusting—but she was doing something for her son, the boy who had been disgraced and deserted by his father.

Mr. De Ford was surprised, later, when he received a letter from Mrs. Cotton, inclosing blue prints and other data, asking him if he would, without saying anything to Chic, investigate a Mr. Zimmerman at Coney Island, and report.

He was surprised in more ways than one. He had heard Chic talk about the invention, and he had seen the curious, gayly colored globe, which to him looked like a child's toy, but he hadn't taken it seriously.

The letter had increased his respect for Chic. A boy that young to be able to work out an invention of such importance! But who was this man at Coney Island who wouldn't go ahead without having four thousand dollars tossed into his lap?

"That doesn't look so good," he muttered. Something queer about it.

But when he had taken the blue prints and specifications around to other builders he found that Zimmerman's offer was a fair one. It was close, it was shrewd, the big man was looking out for number one, but it was a better offer than he could get elsewhere.

Personally Mr. De Ford would rather have had Chic perfect an invention in a more worth-while field—the automatic gasoline station device seemed more sound—but still, people must be amused. Amusement in America was becoming as staple a product as groceries.

What kind of success the top would have after it was finished and offered to the public, no one knew. The opening of a new ride was as big a gamble as the opening of a new play. It might go, might be a great success; and then, on the other hand, the waves of oblivion might quietly close over it.

After he had made his investigations he told Chic, one evening when Chic was at the house, that he wished to talk to him.

"If you're not too busy, I want to read you a letter," he said with genial humor after they had gone into the drawing-room, where the coffee was served. "It's from your mother."

"From my mother?" thought Chic. Why was she writing him?

"It's about your top," continued Mr. De Ford, enjoying the bewilderment on Chic's face. "In fact, she's written me several letters."

But he would not torture the youth any longer.

"It looks favorable, so far," Mr. De Ford finished. "I checked up on Zimmerman pretty carefully. I want to go down there and meet him—ask him some questions—and if he gets by, I think I'll advise going ahead with the proposition."

The room seemed to volatilize and float away. Oh! the thrill, the exquisite pleasure of it! Suddenly Chic felt a very warm, very deep emotion stirring for his mother who would give up most of the money which meant so much to her. Did he have a right to risk it? What if something should go wrong?

But nothing *could* go wrong. He would give Zimmerman the money, the top would be built, it would be a great success, he would be rich, and then—he visualized Charmian sitting in a deep chair. How lovely she was!

CHAPTER XIX

A MOMENTOUS VISIT



HIS is what you would have seen if, a few days later, you had been standing on Surf Avenue, which is the Main Street of Coney Island, at about half past five in the afternoon:

A Chinatown tong war, an opium den with terrible looking wretches lurching off to hell; a beheading in Old China, with the dripping, decapitated head dangling by its pigtail from a bent bamboo pole; and the latest in murders—all in the Chamber of Horrors, of course, at the wax works.

You'd have seen huge barrels turning, with people trying to walk through them, and succeeding only in getting their heads in places usually reserved for feet; you'd have seen the "cooch shows," seen the dancing girls from the harem, heard the piercing, stimulating, haunting music as a swarthy, hatchet-faced man in a fez fingered a wailing lute; seen the snake shows, the pit shows, the carousels, the wax works, the open-faced, walk-in photograph galleries.

You'd have seen all the sights, smelled all the smells, heard all the sounds, and caught the feel and throb of life in that queer, absurd, necessary, blow-off-steam place, Coney Island. And if you had looked at the caravan of cars rolling down the street you'd have seen one with three passengers in it, and a chauffeur. And that is the one we are interested in.

As the car rolled along this is what Mr. De Ford thought:

"Is it possible that this is the place where I used to have such a good time? It must have changed! Of course it has. Well, it isn't what it used to be. Why, it was fascinating then. Now look at the cheap people, and the gaudy jimcracks, and at the hawkers selling them. Look at the people throwing balls at wooden milk bottles. What possible good will it do if they knock them down? When people go out for a holiday, their reason seems to desert them completely."

To Chic he said:

"There's certainly a lot of claptrap here. Pretty cheap place as a whole."

Chic heard him with amazement. How could a person think that? Why, Coney was wonderful, fascinating, amazing! One could never tire of it.

The car is now passing the World in Wax. Chic looks up, his eyes rest on a room at the top, above the exhibition floor, and his heart gives a curious little leap. No one seeing that slight glance, that almost imperceptible lifting of the eyes, would have suspected what was going on in his mind, for we are all secretive creatures.

Chic felt ashamed of himself. When he had first visited that room it had been a tremendous experience; the thrill of it had almost suffocated him, and as he had held Queenie in his arms he kept saying to himself, "I adore

her, I want to marry her. She's the sweetest, loveliest girl in the world."

But now, as he looked into Charmian's eyes, and felt the pure exaltation of her presence, he knew he could never love any one else. Queenie appealed to him deeply, but not in the fine, spiritual way that Charmian did.

This strange, hidden struggle went on when he was with either of the two girls; the fierce, consuming desire he had to take Queenie into his arms, to kiss her, to fondle her, and then, when he next saw Charmian he felt the degrading cheapness of Queenie's appeal.

Other young men seemed to have no qualms over their quests—indeed, they boasted of them—but Chic could not rid himself of the feeling of uneasiness which dogged him. Now and then he felt a vague fear: "What if something should happen?" But he put it aside. No chance of that.

He had promised himself that he would never again go back to the apartment above the wax works; it was not the right and proper thing to do. But he would feel lonesome and again over him would come the yearning to see Queenie.

"I'll just go down and watch her on the wire, and then slip away," he would tell himself.

And there she would be outlined above him, flitting back and forth on the wire, swaying lightly as the band played softly and insinuatingly. The applause of the people would go up; now she was throwing kisses.

"I'll just walk home with her," he would say. And then, side by side, they would walk to her rooms. But that was yesterday, many yesterdays—

Charmian looked up as the car purred past the barnlike wax works.

"What a funny old place that is, with all those weird banners outside.

I didn't know such things existed any more. I'd think the movies would drive them out of business."

It was a shock to Chic to hear Charmian say that. Of course it was cheap looking from the outside, and the banners were weird, but still it was an interesting place. Look at all the people it drew each year. Look at the showmanship back of it.

To Chic, after living in Junction City, Coney Island was fascinating. The thrill of the crowds, the lights, the stir and throb and pulse of life—it never failed to move him. And now, as he contemplated Charmian, he felt a sense of disappointment. After all, she was *blasé*.

The car stopped in front of one of the minarets which help to make Coney Island such a fantastic, Arabian Nights city, and Chic leaped out. Charmian would think better of Coney Island when she saw a little more of it.

A very pleased, excited, walking-on-the-air Chic led the way toward Zimmerman's office. How different it was from what it had been six weeks before when he had come out. He remembered the heartsickness which had swept over him that day. Now he was returning as a conqueror.

A splendid picture, perhaps a mirage, floated before him. It was of a great top, with a flag flying from the peak; crowds of people were getting in, the top started to spin, shouts of laughter went up.

There was a patter of feet behind him, and Chic felt a pulling like a child at his coat tails.

"Say, hello there, can't you see a fella? Do you think you're Mr. Zimmerman himself? I want to ask you something."

It was Half Pint.

As Chic introduced the immaculate

little man to Charmian, Half Pint's heels came together as if he were going to deliver a military salute, the cigar came out of his mouth, and he removed his hat with the air of being presented to the Queen of England and the Empress of India.

"This here is what I want to see you about," said Half Pint when he got Chic aside. "I want to see if you can help me. Mr. Zimmerman's going to be let out of the Hawaiian Show, and I don't know what I'll do."

As Half Pint talked he no longer seemed a tiny, humorous doll. Things had not gone well with the entertainer; he had received "notice."

"I don't want to join a troupe," he declared with feeling. "And that's where he says he's going to send me."

This unexpected turn in Half Pint's life had been caused by Zimmerman, who had decided that Half Pint was no longer young and limber enough for dancing in the Hawaiian Show, and was relegating him to a troupe.

A "troupe" was a collection of half a dozen or more midgets who must hop around and entertain audiences like trained fleas. They were far down the social scale in the park and show world; troupe midgets. Many had misshapen legs and heads—unpleasant creatures to look at. Not the exquisite little dandy that Half Pint was. Sometimes they all appeared on the stage at once, running and scrambling and playing rough jokes like a band of clowns.

"I just can't join a troupe," he insisted earnestly.

It was as if Chic were talking to a child, quietly laughing at it, and then suddenly realized that its feelings and emotions were just as deep and genuine as his own.

"I've always been a single." And

in the midget's voice was a little cry. "I—I thought maybe you could help me out, Mr. Cotton."

Chic felt a liking for the comic, pathetic little creature that nature had played such a low trick on.

"I don't know, Half Pint, whether I can or not," he said. "I'll see."

"Well, so long, Mr. Cotton. Didn't mean to interrupt you."

His hat came off, he made a low bow, the cigar went back into his mouth, and he marched proudly past the crowd which had stopped to stare at him.

Chic experienced a warm glow as he realized how intensely Mr. De Ford had been watching the interruption. It showed what a person of consequence that he, Chic, was getting to be at Coney Island.

"Half Pint's a nice fellow," he declared as they walked on.

"I didn't know you knew so many people down here," said Charmian.

Chic felt a nervous flutter within him.

"Oh, sure," he declared disarmingly. "I met him when I was hanging around here studying my top."

Charmian's eyes went over him again with mild astonishment. Why, he had told her little or nothing about Coney Island. But they had arrived at the Dragon's Gorge, and now Chic was piloting them through the side door.

CHAPTER XX

QUEENIE ARRIVES INOPPORTUNELY



CHIC knew how it would be when they met at Mr. Zimmerman's office for the final decision. Hadn't he gone over it often enough? Sitting before your bench all day,

you've got plenty of time to think.

Mr. Zimmerman would be at his desk in that queer, jumbled, crazy office of his, and then they'd walk in—Mr. De Ford and he. Mr. Zimmerman wouldn't be impressed, and then after they'd got the papers all signed up 'n' everything—signed on the little old dotted line—and it was all over, and they were havin' a chat, like business men do when they've settled some big deal, then Mr. Zimmerman, he'd put his hand on Chic's shoulder and say:

"Well, Cotton, pretty good for you. You stick to me and you'll wear diamonds."

It was a phrase his father, the dreamer and ne'er-do-well, had used, and Chic had always liked it. And now it popped into his head.

"Tell Mr. Zimmerman that Mr. De Ford and Mr. Cotton are waiting to see him," he said to the office girl as John D. Rockefeller might have said in his prime.

"He says you're to come in," she said after a moment's disappearance.

That was it. Big, important people like him and Mr. De Ford wouldn't have to cool their heels in an outer office. Why, it 'd probably been all right if they'd just knocked on the door and walked on in.

"Hello, Mr. Zimmerman," he called genially as the withered balloons bobbed and tugged and whispered at their strings.

But Mr. Zimmerman wasn't at his desk. He was at a long side table on a high stool, with his coat off and sleeves rolled up over his hairy arms.

Chic had the sense of seeing, as his eyes flashed over the table, a miniature village, such as one sees sometimes in a window display about Christmas time. And that, indeed, was what it

was. There it was all complete, with tiny, winding streets, houses no larger than pieces of gingerbread, little fairy trees. A sleigh no larger than a thimble was coming down the street.

On the wall were tacked the blue prints and drawings from which the tiny village had been made. Here and there on the drawings were details enlarged and worked out in flowing pencil sketches, as Zimmerman had matured and enriched his plans.

"Something for an amusement park that he's working on," thought Chic.

"Howdo," greeted Zimmerman briefly. "Have a seat." He waved his hand toward a settlement of chairs. "Be with you in just a minute."

And he bent over some detail. His pencil moved with surprising quickness for such a slow-spoken, deliberate man, and as he bent intently over it there was a slight, almost imperceptible, whistling as his breath came and went.

So far as Mr. Zimmerman was concerned his callers did not exist; the sketch growing under his pencil alone was of interest to him. But it lasted only a few moments, then he turned slowly on the stool, one foot at the end of a short thick leg touching the floor, the heel of the other hooked over a rung.

"I wish to introduce you to my daughter, Charmian," Mr. De Ford said with dignity. "Charmian, this is Mr. Zimmerman."

Zimmerman, in acknowledgment, made no effort to rise, nor did he offer to shake hands.

"Howdo, Miss De Ford. You folks 'll have to excuse me, you caught me up to my neck."

Chic was the only one who knew all of them, and now he felt that he must

give the meeting an air of geniality. He chattered to Mr. De Ford—wasn't it interesting to see behind the scenes? Wasn't it fascinating? His hand swept over the crazy jumble. Well, this was the place where the ideas for the big amusement devices were worked out—right here.

"Look at this," said Chic, turning to the half completed dragon on Mr. Zimmerman's desk. "I expect when this is grown up you'll see it in a park some day."

He gave a little nervous laugh in his eagerness to make the situation go off well.

"You don't have to do that," Zimmerman cut in. His eyes rested on Chic as a cat's might rest on a bird it was silently stalking.

There was a damper on Chic's spirits as he felt the silent, ominous power of the man. But now, at this time, when his whole future was in the balance, he must not show it.

The business talk began. Chic had expected to see Zimmerman impressed by the dignity and position of Mr. De Ford, but there was no such silent flattery on Zimmerman's part. So far as he was concerned, Mr. De Ford might have been a park follower trying to get a huckly-buck concession.

It was as if Mr. Zimmerman had said: "There's my proposition; you can take it or leave it." And in substance, this it was. Mr. De Ford had asked for concessions, for better prices, for more assurance as to when the top would be completed, whether or not Zimmerman would open it at Coney Island, the matter of foreign rights, but now, as the papers were drawn up, the proposition was as Zimmerman had laid it down in the first place. Work was to start at once.

"I don't know when would be the

best time to have an official showing," said Zimmerman. "We don't know what else might be on the market. I've seen a lot of men rush into this here game and wish they hadn't. When we get it built, we'll see about the opening. Do you know what percentage of rides make good? One out of twelve. So I don't want you tryin' to crowd me."

Chic saw the papers put before Zimmerman, saw him spread them out on the rough pine architect's table, saw Zimmerman rest his hairy arms on the table.

"I'll sign."

Chic heard the heavenly words. Zimmerman's fingers went to his vest pocket, out came a big, colored fountain pen, it poised, and then a surprisingly neat signature flowed from it.

Now it was done—the top was an assured thing, with the best man in America behind it!

Chic remembered news reel scenes he had witnessed, when some big contract had been signed and the dignitaries had all smilingly shaken hands.

"Say," he declared with silent jubilation, "don't you think we ought to shake hands on that, like they do in the movies?" and he gave a little laugh.

He made a motion toward Zimmerman, but Zimmerman's hand did not go out to meet his.

"You better wait till the end of the first season," the builder said.

In Zimmerman's vest pocket was a row of cigars, with the hard packed brown ends showing; he took one out and lit it. Then, as if remembering that Mr. De Ford was present, he hauled another of the deadly looking missiles from his pocket and poked it at him.

"Smoke?"

"No, thank you, not now."

Zimmerman turned to Chic.

"You?"

Chic smoked only cigarettes, but here was a chance to draw further into the good graces of the great park man.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Zimmerman, I'd like to."

From Zimmerman's pocket came a gold lighter; he applied the flame and then passed it to Chic.

"May I ask what this is?" Mr. De Ford asked, after the cigars were going, indicating the miniature village spread the length of the table.

A slow smile moved across Zimmerman's face, like the sun breaking faintly through the shadows and creeping over the earth.

"That's a little fling I'm taking at the movies. I've always wanted to try my hand at them, and now I'm going to."

But in the simple words Mr. De Ford caught the eagerness and yearning which had been Zimmerman's for so long to take, as he said, his "fling at the movies." He was the most powerful man at Coney Island, and now the showman of him wanted very much indeed to graze in that rich field.

"I've designed it myself, and I'm going to build it myself."

As Zimmerman talked there was the absolute confidence he had in himself, that iron will which had risen up under endless adverse circumstances, and which knew not failure. He'd made a success of the park business, he'd make a success of the movies.

"How do you like it?" he asked. The hard, unyielding business man was gone; the artist spoke, the artist which never knows complete satisfaction.

"Very good, indeed," Mr. De Ford said sincerely. And in his voice was

the respect he had for the man who could conceive anything so simple and effective.

"I think the perspective is rather good," Zimmerman explained. "There is where I'm going to place the cameras," and he indicated a cross he had marked in the street. "You can see what it gives me?"

The others looked, and now that Zimmerman had pointed it out, observed the strategic effect.

"It took me some little time to work that out." Zimmerman hesitated a moment. "It's for Miss Queenie Johnson, my wire walker. I'm going to put her into the movies."

The room, to Chic, began to spin around. Zimmerman was going to put Queenie in the movies? So that was it! Astonishing, and yet why shouldn't it be? he asked himself at the same instant. The youth was jealous and uneasy.

Those nights in the rooms over the Wax Works—what if Zimmerman should find out about them? For a moment Chic felt a fierce, nervous beating of his heart, then it was gone. There was no danger; Zimmerman would never find out.

"Oh, are you?" he heard himself exclaim, seemingly before the words were out of Zimmerman's mouth. "Well, that's nice."

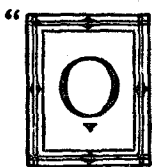
Slowly Zimmerman turned and his eyes moved over the youth. There was a sound of footsteps outside; abruptly the door was thrown open, Queenie was in the room. Chic's heart practically leaped out.

Holy cats! Why in the world did she have to come here! Didn't that beat two roosters fighting! The very thing he had not wanted had happened. He had told himself the two girls must never meet, and now

Queenie had popped up like a cork under water.

CHAPTER XXI

QUEENIE AND CHARMIAN



H!" Queenie exclaimed at sight of the visitors, and turned as if to retreat. And then her eye encompassed Chic.

"Hello, there," she said, now feeling more at ease. "I remember, this is the big day!"

Her hand made a gesture at the model of the top on Zimmerman's desk.

Chic *felt* rather than saw the look that Charmian gave him. Who was this girl that had such an easy, off-hand manner with him? Why had he never spoken of her?

Now Zimmerman was introducing them. And he did it in his own way, without rising from his high stool.

"This is Mr. De Ford," he said with a gesture over his shoulder, "and his daughter—Miss Johnson." His voice softened and he turned to her proudly. "This is the little lady it's all for."

His hand made a short, abrupt gesture at the village on the table.

"Pleased to meet you," said Queenie in a way formal for her.

"How are you?" returned Charmian. "We were just looking at the model for the movie set. I think it's very good, indeed."

"Do you?" and in that instant Queenie flashed appraising eyes over Charmian. Who was this girl? What did she want? "I think it'll work out all right," she finished coolly.

"I do, too," declared Chic, filled with a sudden desire to talk. "Yes, I'm sure it will. Look at that fine per-

spective; that hill effect in the background."

They were the points that Zimmerman had called attention to, but now in the emotion of the moment he seemed to have discovered them for himself.

"I'll bet you you'll get away with pictures, too," Chic continued, addressing Queenie.

He turned to Mr. De Ford and Charmian.

"Miss Johnson is Coney Island's sweetheart, that's what they call her. There she is," and he indicated the poster.

The youth knew he was talking too much, but he could not stop. It was like an experience he had had when he was a boy in Junction City. He had prankishly caught hold of a train pulling out of the depot, and as it gained speed he was afraid to let go and afraid to hold on.

Miss Johnson was fine on the wire, he continued, yes, really wonderful. She'd make good in pictures, too.

"I'm sure she will," said Charmian.

But Chic caught the note of coldness in Charmian's voice.

"Thanks, Miss—I don't believe I quite got the name," Queenie responded.

"De Ford. Miss De Ford."

Chic's eyes flashed over them as they spoke, and now, more plainly than ever, he sensed the difference between them. Charmian—tall, dark, self-possessed; a "stunning girl" would be the accepted phrase to apply to her. In her steady gaze was to be seen a hint of the depth of her character; the advantages she had had in travel and education and world contact.

Queenie, on the other hand, was smaller, a flaxen, doll-like girl, and yet not a doll at all, for she was well mus-

cled, healthy, alive and vital. She was garbed in unusually bright colors, and this was what she liked.

As they stood side by side, and the little group talked during the final signing of the papers, Chic recognized Charmian's superiority over Queenie. He felt in some obscure way that he must bring them together.

"Miss De Ford is a radio singer," he explained eagerly. "Maybe you've heard her?"

But Queenie hadn't.

"I don't think so," she said. "I'm afraid not."

Now that Queenie was in the room, Zimmerman forgot the others.

"Look at this here, Queenie," he said. "Look what I have worked out."

He was bending over the table at Queenie's side and unconsciously he rested his hand on hers.

"Do you like it?" he asked appealingly.

"Sure," said Queenie.

At this moment the door was thrown open and Chic had the sense of seeing a humorous, exaggerated South Sea Islands animated doll rush in.

It was Half Pint, but not the immaculate little dandy he had met outside. The midget was in brown tights. His face had been given a coat of tan, around his ankles were humorous clown cuffs, in his ears dangled huge brass rings, and on his head was a fantastic silk hat.

However extravagant and burlesque might be the midget's dress, he himself was in no burlesque mood. He had gone to do his turn in the Hawaiian Show, but as he had played the ukelele and sung and danced his mimic dance, he had brooded on what Zimmerman had said. To go into a midget troupe—the ignominy of it! There was a saying in the midget world, "Once in

a troupe, always in a troupe"—no, he would not do it.

And now, his turn over, the little excitable man had rushed in, with his make-up still on, to plead with the boss to keep him as a "single."

"Pardon me," he piped. "I want to see you, Mr. Zimmerman. Listen, Mr. Zimmerman, please don't troupe me. That's what I wanted to see you about, Mr. Zimmerman."

In his eagerness the midget's hand, stained to represent a Hawaiian brown, seized Zimmerman's big hairy paw.

"I'm getting more laughs now than I ever did, and I'm dancing better, too. My hula it knocks them every time; you ask any of 'em. You just do that. I'm not getting too old, Mr. Zimmerman."

The absorbed, intense, almost crying little man now seemed to see the others for the first time. He straightened up, a surprising dignity came to his childish figure, his heels came together, off came the silk hat and he bowed low.

"I—I didn't mean to butt in," he repeated. "Please, Mr. Zimmerman, you won't do it, will you?"

Zimmerman's thick, powerful hand moved slightly.

"I don't recall sending for you," he said with slow, ominous calmness. "Maybe I forgot. Did I?"

"N-no, sir."

"Well?"

"I *had* to come, Mr. Zimmerman. I—I just couldn't stand for you to troupe me, Mr. Zimmerman."

But now the little man's self-confidence was gone; he spoke in a broken, heart-sinking tone.

"What are you going to do about it?"

Half Pint's childlike fingers moved

helplessly. "I can't do anything about it. You know that," he appealed.

"I was going to send you in a couple of weeks, wasn't I?"

"Yes, sir," Half Pint returned eagerly, sudden relief in his face.

"Well, I've changed my mind, Half Pint"—there was a grating harshness in his voice—"you're going to-night. Take off that grass and turn in your tights to-night."

The pathetic little figure stood hesitating, his mouth moving silently like a fish too long from water, while his brown fingers, with their white, glistening manicured nails, opened and shut expressively. He started to speak.

"You heard me, didn't you?" Zimmerman demanded, and there was another movement of his powerful hand.

"Yes, sir."

The harshness and cruelty of it stirred Chic.

"That's not fair, Mr. Zimmerman," he protested, "and I don't think you ought to do it."

Slowly Zimmerman wheeled. His eyes moved over Chic with a strange, devastating calmness.

"You don't think so, eh?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"I don't recall asking what you thought on the subject." There was a moment's pause. "Did I?"

Chic moved uneasily. "No, sir."

The two men faced each other, looking silently into each other's eyes. From Zimmerman's mouth a cloud of smoke shot forth, whirling in Chic's face. And then, slowly and calmly, Zimmerman's eyes moved back to Half Pint, who was nervously revolving his hat in his hand.

"Are you planning on staying in here much longer?"

The little figure started slowly toward the door. Then he remembered

the others, his back straightened proudly, the rusty silk hat went back on his head, the door closed, the midget was gone.

Without a word or gesture Zimmerman turned back to the table, and unconcernedly resumed the conversation where it had been broken off. No, he wouldn't make any promises about the top; anybody who did 'd be a fool; in the park business no one ever knew which way the cat would jump.

As they had talked, Chic had taken his cigar out of his mouth and had laid it on the table with the edge projecting safely over, but the cigar had been pushed back, and now a wisp of smoke went curling and twisting up.

Part of the cardboard and paper which went to make up the village had begun to smoke, and as Chic saw it a cold fear seized him—what if the village should catch fire and burn up? And then the office? Fire in the concessions quarters constantly haunted the Coney Island showmen; once or twice it had swept through the wood and plaster buildings and had left havoc behind.

So, his heart threshing within him, Chic leaped at the tiny blaze. Before he could reach it, the usually slow-moving Zimmerman had struck with astonishing rapidity and beaten out the fire with his bare hand.

Now, with the fire out, he paused, glared at Chic, and then back at the cigar. Just as Chic reached for the cigar, Zimmerman's hand went out with a quick, spiteful movement, hurling it to the floor. Then he put his foot on it and ground it to pieces.

Chic, for a moment astonished, was all apologies; he should have been more careful.

"I—I don't know how I came to do it," he stammered.

It was time to go; the papers had been signed. Now they were leaving; there was a chorus of farewells.

"Good-by, Mr. Zimmerman," said Chic.

"G'day."

As they went outside, Chic experienced a sense of floating. He had entered Zimmerman's office in doubt—something might happen, Zimmerman might turn it down, but the man had signed.

Chic took Charmian's arm; the three of them started for the car. The scenes seemed very gay indeed. A boat was coming down the shoot-the-chutes with a shrieking load of human beings; a roller coaster flashed by; the weird, haunting sounds of singing and dancing floated out from the Hawaiian show; a shrill, childish treble rose—Half Pint was singing.

But there was one thing Chic did not see. After they had gone outside, Queenie had followed them to the door and now stood silently watching them.

CHAPTER XXII

BETROTHAL AND PANIC



IGHTY nice when you have a girl you're in love with, and an invention that's going to make you rich. Sit and think about them till they sort of whirl around in your head and you get so happy it just pretty near lifts you off your feet.

Go to the factory, work along, thinking and dreaming, and now it's noon. Go out to armchair lunch, imagine about how it 'll be when you're rich and won't have to sit on packing boxes.

Visit her fine Floral Gardens home. Go out with her in her car, get some nice fashionable golf clothes, play golf

with her, walk along the course with her, with the sun shining overhead and the green grass shimmering before you. Laugh, tell a funny story, look into her eyes, touch her hand, not much, just a little whisk. Most wonderful place in the world, New York is!

But everything wasn't heaven. There was Queenie. She was a nice girl, too; very nice, indeed, but—There was always that "but."

The romance of it held him; a tight-wire walker, advertised everywhere, Coney Island's sweetheart, people cheering her. If only he had known her during his lonesome days in New York, it would have seemed wonderful. Her good looks, her bright, attractive, tantalizing blondness, her perfect figure!

Now and then he felt an almost irresistible desire to go to see her again. Just to talk to her a bit. That was all. But he put it aside; it wouldn't be right.

Mustn't see Queenie again on account of Mr. Zimmerman. Mr. Zimmerman was doing too much for her, spending a ton of money on her putting her into the movies; must be in love with her. But it didn't seem possible—look how old he was! Nearly forty. Still, sometimes old men did queer things. All right; he himself wouldn't see Queenie again, except for a howdy-do, or something. That was all.

He thought of the strange friends he had made at Coney Island, and of the weird, bizarre life they led—Half Pint, Mme. Murta, Elfa, the Natural Albino, Yatsomoto; the barkers, mentalists, dancers, jugglers, scene painters, grifters—what a fascinating crew they were!

Then he thought of Mr. and Mrs.

De Ford—well to do, conservative—and their rich, prosperous friends; their dinners, their bridge clubs, their big cars, their speed boats—what a different world they lived in! It was kind of nice to know two such different worlds.

One day he went to Coney to see Mr. Zimmerman, and just as he was getting on the subway to return, Queenie got off the same train. When the girl spied Chic she ran toward the car as if she wanted to speak to him, but it was too late. The train was gone.

As it sped away, Chic recalled the strange look on her face. What did it mean? Of course it was rough on Queenie, the way he had deserted her, especially after she had introduced him to Mr. Zimmerman and everything—but now that he was in love with Charmian he couldn't do anything else. It wouldn't be fair to Charmian.

Pretty cheap it was, after all, the way he had acted. But he would never do it again. The affair with the wire walker was all over. Queenie would go her way; he would go his. That would end it.

Chic continued to see Charmian, and love ripened. It seemed ages ago that they had met in Junction City, since the day they had gone for a ride into the country in the autumn, when the stiff hulls of the hazelnuts were beginning to turn back; strange he should remember that.

When he thought back on the time since he had arrived in New York, since that first exquisite view of the skyscrapers from the ferry boat, little or nothing seemed to have happened. Why, sometimes it had actually been monotonous; for days and days nothing had happened, not a blessed thing.

And then he would think of things that had taken place and he would realize that life was flowing along.

He visualized the little procession of events. The catastrophe at the golf club dance. The night he had been caught on the fire escape peeking in at the dancing girls; pretty cheap that was; would he do it now? he wondered. His first meeting with Queenie; his taking her to a night club. The freaks' party over the wax works. His meeting with Mr. Zimmerman; the signing of the contract; now the Giant Top was being built.

Maybe that was what life was—just a lot of little things happening; at last you get old and then some day—but he didn't like to think of that.

At this time Charmian was to appear over the radio on her first network. She had been well received in her radio appearances and was to be given this chance. Her songs had made a deep impression on Chic, as he had sat in his lonely room, intent upon the tiny trickle of sound that beat so magically in his ears; and now it had been arranged that he should go to her house, there would be an early dinner, then he would accompany her to the broadcasting studio and wait while she sang.

Never had Charmian seemed so fascinating as when she sat that evening at the table, in the soft, mellow dinner lights, stirred and animated by the fact that she was soon to sing to a million people.

Behind her the butler came and went as quietly as an Indian in the depths of a forest, but Chic was no longer ill at ease as he had been the first time he had dined at the De Ford home.

Chic had a command of himself which he had not had when he first arrived in New York. Not only had he

come to the De Fords', but he had been invited to other homes where luxury and refinement were taken for granted. He was, indeed, mentally growing up; doing what thousands of young men and women do who come each year from the crossroads to New York, and find themselves in a new environment.

An incident happened that evening as they sped along in Charmian's roadster on the way to the broadcasting studio. Just a small thing.

"Chic, I want to ask you something," she said as the road flew under them like a conveyor belt. "It's about that tight-rope walker at Coney Island. When you went to sign the contract that day, and she came into the room, she seemed to know you so well. Does she?"

Suddenly there was a clamor in Chic's heart, and he felt a nervous perspiration.

"Why, I hardly know her at all," he declared, for now, with the car racing so softly along in the glorious twilight, Coney Island seemed a far and remote world.

He felt a moment's contempt with himself for the lie, but so quickly had come the answer that it was almost as if he did not have to think at all. He had simply opened his mouth and the words were there.

"It's just the same as true," he assured himself. "I'll never see her again."

"But she spoke to you so naturally."

"It's the way all that bunch do. It's the way in the theater, too, you know. It's a wonder she didn't call me by my first name."

"You're sure you don't, Chic?"

"Of course I am. I wouldn't tell you a lie, you know that," he heard himself say.

"I knew you wouldn't, Chic," she said, her voice suddenly soft and yearning. "I really knew it all the time, but—I don't know how to explain it—the thought has kept coming back to me ever since that day. I suppose it's feminine nature, or something. I just wanted you to tell me with your own lips, darling."

His heart leaped. Darling! It was the first time she had ever called him that, and he felt an immense, almost overwhelming tenderness toward her. What a sweet, noble girl she was! Queenie seemed cheap and shoddy in comparison.

Queenie was all right; nobody had a better heart, 'd do anything for a person, but her slang, her rough-and-tumble ways; sometimes she chewed gum. And now for a moment, as the car sped down Fifth Avenue, they seemed hardly to belong to the same world.

"Here we are," Charmian said lightly, as she drew the car into a side street. "Last stop, all out that's getting out."

For a moment her hand rested lightly on his, and her smile warmed his heart.

"I knew it all the time," she repeated. "I just wanted you to tell me."

Chic was amazed at the elaborateness of the studios, after they had been delivered from the black and gold elevators, and were on the floor devoted to broadcasting.

He saw the people coming and going, the hustle and air of excitement. A negro in a Mexican general's uniform whisked him out of his coat and then it was checked as if he were going to a Presidential reception. A page appeared in a uniform of at least a colonel, and took a piece of paper,

seemingly about the size of a postage stamp, and carried it off as if it were the pact of Paris.

Other pages appeared, other messengers, haughty lord chamberlains swept through the office on mysterious errands of their own, looking neither to the right nor to the left. He and Charmian might as well have been newsboys looking through the window at some great feast.

Miraculously all was changed. The reception girl had returned. Charmian gave her name in, the girl verified it from a printed list, took up the telephone, spoke in a few soft words; a door opened and a dignitary from the program department swept out, and now Charmian and her guest were great and honored personages. Nothing was too good for them.

Chic began to feel more and more important, and to him Charmian was increasingly wonderful. Here, indeed, she was a person of consequence. As an *artiste* ready to broadcast, she took on a fresh romance and glamour. And to think not ten minutes ago she had called him "darling"! This lovely, exquisite creature!

The announcer, in evening clothes, bore them away as if this were an event he had long looked forward to. He escorted them into a great reception room, with deep, spongy rugs on the floor, impressive oil paintings with little yellow title tags were on the walls, while a loud-speaker seemed to be playing softly and graciously for their own special benefit. Occupying a place by itself was an electric wall clock, plainly put there for this very occasion.

The announcer sat on the great sofa, his long black legs spread out, calmly talking, while the big electric clock on the wall whirred noiselessly on.

Chic felt tense with excitement. What if something should happen and Charmian should fail? Didn't the announcer recognize that in a few minutes, in a few seconds, Charmian would be in front of the microphone and half a million people—a million—might be listening to her? But the announcer sat there as if eternity were before him.

"Ready now," he said.

After all, his eye had been on the clock.

"May I take Mr. Cotton with me?" Charmian asked.

It wasn't usually done, might distract the *artiste*, but he guessed it could be done this time.

Chic caught sight of a glass-covered slot in the wall, behind which a man was sitting before a panel of switches and connections. Beyond him, through an open door, Chic could see rheostats, clock-faced dials, shaded lights, and a cobweb of coils and wires.

How he would like to go in there and examine everything, spend a day, but the announcer was unconcernedly marching on.

Another door opened—the studio itself—and Chic had the feeling of entering a room which was like a stage of a theater and yet which was half auction room. In a corner was a grand piano, funereal chairs were scattered about; there were music racks, instrument cases with their mouths open and yawning, and a blackboard on an easel with a list of rehearsals chalked on it.

And there, standing slenderly and unimportantly in a corner of the room, was the reason for it all—the "mike." Hardly worth noticing, it seemed, in the jumbly hodge-podge around it.

Chic took a seat on one of the funereal chairs, heard the accompanist

giving preparatory twiddles. Charmian was standing in front of the slender microphone. She gave Chic a smile—*click* said a little switch; now the announcer, paper in hand, was reading something or other.

Charmian bends slightly forward, the stubby hands of the accompanist come down, Charmian's voice rises.

Chic sat entranced, marveling at how calm and assured Charmian could be while he seemed to be lifted from vat to vat alternately of cold and hot water.

Through the glass panel he could see shadowy, mysterious figures making dumb signs to the announcer. Yes, she was going over O. K.

Chic's respect for the genius began to go up and up. What in the world did she see in a clodhopper like him?

"I love her, I love her!" a silent, ecstatic refrain kept repeating. And now, as she stood before the slender little bronze pedestal, so serene, so poised, she appeared far, far above him.

At last she finished. The announcer leaped forward.

"You have just been listening to Miss Charmian De Ford—"

And now, with Charmian at his side, Chic floated into the reception room and their feet again trod on the spongy rugs.

"Charmian, I think it was just lovely—yes, it was," he repeated. "You'll get great notices. Listen, darling"—oh, wonderful word!—"I just think an awful lot of you."

Kind of mixed up, not a fine speech at all, but after the first few words had forced their way out, he was able to talk more connectedly. He was a different person from the incoherent gabbler who had first seen her in New York. These months had done much

for him; "better balanced" was one phrase for it.

As Chic and Charmian escaped, the Mexican general produced Chic's coat and helped him on with it. Chic fumbled in his pocket—a quarter—what difference did it make to-night? Oh, sweet, lovely, heavenly night!

The elevator opened, a cap poked itself out; *grrr*, said the doors; they were going down. Now they were out on the sidewalk. And then it was that he asked her to marry him.

"Yes," she replied softly.

For a moment Chic seemed to feel nothing at all. He had heard her, she had said yes, but it was all so simple, so natural, that he hardly realized the tremendous thing which had happened.

The street flowed under them, when they were again in her car; colored lights went on and off, phantom cars approached from side streets, flitted by, disappeared, while before him on the wheel, now and then turning slightly, were Charmian's ivory hands.

And because they were alone together, a sudden shyness came over him. In some way that he could not quite understand, what had happened was too precious for words.

But never had he been so conscious of her presence.

They talked about something or other, kind of hard to remember what.

Once he said: "Look, there's a policeman with a beard."

"So there is."

Now she turned into his street, the car slowed down before the curving stone steps.

"Good night, darling," he said, now suddenly bold.

"Good night, dear."

And then bending forward he kissed her, simply and naturally. Oh, the sweet ecstasy of it! He stood, as the

car rolled down the street, looking after her. He wanted to run after her, to stop her, and to explain over and over again how much he loved her.

He felt disgust for himself. Why had he ridden all the way uptown and said not another word about love? And now that she was gone it was the thing he wished to talk of most of all. Why had he spoken about the policeman with a beard? He had seen him before, directing traffic; it wasn't anything unusual, and yet that was the thing he'd mentioned instead of how much he worshiped her. What an idiot she must think him!

Engaged to lovely Charmian! It was the most perfect and wonderful thing in all the world!

He walked up the wide, curving steps, put his key in the lock, *click* it went, and started up the soggy stairs. But it hardly seemed necessary to walk at all; it was as if he had merely to wish and in some miraculous way he arrived at the place he wished to go. He fished another key from his pocket, and poked it into a dim, grating shadow.

Something touched his foot, or rather his foot touched something, and there, lying on the floor like a white ghostly shadow, was a piece of paper. No, not a piece of paper. An envelope. Why in sam patch should there be a letter under his door at this time of night? Strange.

He turned on the light. Fat little envelope. "For Mr. Cotton," was written on it. Then down in the left-hand corner, "Personal."

Suddenly Chic felt a devastating weakness in his knees. It was from Queenie, *but what could Queenie be writing him about?* And then coming and putting it under the door? His landlady always unlocked the door,

when she delivered a letter, and pitched it on the bureau.

He tore it open, and his eyes flashed to the bottom. Yes, there was Queenie's name.

Standing at the foot of the pock-marked bed, his hat still on, he read it:

CHIC DEAR:

I have been trying to get you on the phone. I must see you at once.

QUEENIE.

Beneath the word "must" were three underlines.

Chic sat down, with the letter in his hand, dumbly staring into space.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE HIBERNATING BEAR



IDN'T that beat cats a fightin'? Dang it, just as everything got to running smoothly this had to go and happen!

"Maybe she wants to see you about some business matter," a nice, friendly little voice suggested.

"You know she doesn't," a mean, disagreeable voice said.

He'd go and see her, but he just couldn't love her any more. There must be some escape without hurting her feelings.

"Of course there is," said the nice, friendly little voice.

Maybe it was something important about the top, something he ought to know.

He'd run out to see Queenie, have a good chin with her, and that 'd end anything personal. He'd tell her about Charmian, show her Charmian's picture and make her understand that it was all over between them. Queenie was a sensible girl. Even though girls *did* act funny sometimes, they had sense. Especially girls like Queenie.

It wasn't as bad as he expected, when he called up over the phone to set a time to go to Coney Island to see her. She didn't seem worried, especially. On the contrary, her voice seemed cheerful. She even laughed once. She'd probably got lonesome, living out there at Coney Island by herself in the winter time, and just wanted to talk to somebody.

But suppose something were wrong about his top? A shudder went over him; he felt a sinking sensation.

The time set to see her was six.

Chic, from the subway train, elevated on its steel stilts as it makes its great loop, looked out across Coney Island. But it was not the same Coney he had seen when he had first visited it, for it was winter. November.

Coney Island is a bear, and once a year it goes into its long hibernation. The wavy, skeletal outlines of the roller coaster were still there, the towers and minarets were there, but now they no longer danced and glittered and glowed; they were merely dull, grotesque absurdities poking at the clouds.

The great windmills no longer turned, the huge, fascinating electric eyes no longer winked, the thunder of the roller coaster was stilled, there was no sharp staccato from the shooting galleries, no candy machines turned endlessly and monotonously.

Where a million lights had glowed there were now a million ugly eyeless sockets, as if the bear had not only gone into hibernation, but had gaping, hollow cups where once bright eyes had danced.

Chic started down Surf Avenue, which in summer had been such a beehive, but now was forlorn and depopulated. A few faithful followers still moved up and down it, but they were

only memories of other days. Here had been the concessions and chance games with their "grift," "slum," "flash"; here had been the "grind stores," the racket game, the nail drives, the cat games, the pitch-till-you-win.

Those dull, gray, wooden shutters had been the gay entrance to a whoop-la game in which pink bisque dolls, celluloid alarm clocks and enormous field glasses were yours if you would merely toss a few rings over a plaster man and lady tangoing.

The great banners inviting the people to come in and see the greatest collection of human freaks in the world, bar none, were now safely rolled up and put away for another season.

Padlocks were on the wax shows. Inside ghostly figures stood about in layers of canvas. Was it possible that this queer, absurd jumble was a beheading in old China? And those innocent looking figures were once the gruesome Hammer Murder?

Here once had been the gilded, clamorous merry-go-round — "a four abreaster," the manager had proudly called it—and his voice and manner had contained nothing but scorn for a carrousel which had only three horses or seats abreast. But now it was a gaunt skeleton; the bright, gay horses with their long wooden flowing manes had been carted away to some unknown stable, and the brass poles which had made them gallop so daringly were covered with coatings of grease, and where the mechanical orchestra had served so well was now a gaping wound.

A watchman with a little brass clock on his hip moves like a wraith through Steeplechase. He pauses, hesitates—does he see something? Maybe he hears the ghost laughter of the once

gay crowds which swarmed in and out. But no, nothing so eerie, for the clock comes off his hip, a key is fitted and away off in some hall of records a little line appears on a revolving paper that society may know that it has been properly served.

Chic paused in front of a dingy old building. Was it possible that this had once been the gay, alluring front of the Little Egypt "cooch show"?

Here he had stood, on his first trip to Coney Island, and stared into the faces of the dancing girls and wondered what they could be like. He could still envision the "talker" out in front, with a huge cowboy hat on his head, urging the people to pack in closer while he told about the marvelous little girls straight from the harem and how they could control every muscle ab-so-lute-ly in their bodies. "It makes young men old and old men young."

Suddenly before him in the street Chic had the sense of seeing a car in a circus parade, so resplendent and glittering was the automobile. With the same instantaneous flash he knew that it was Zimmerman.

It was indeed a showman's car. The chauffeur wore livery with a cap richly laden with gold braid, although chauffeur's caps usually are chosen for their quiet, unobtrusive modesty. But what other people might select for their chauffeurs was of no consequence to Zimmerman. He liked gold braid. He put it on. Plenty of it.

At first glance the turnout was almost regal, but this idea was soon dissipated, for from the radiator cap floated a triangular flag, and as the car rushed along the flag streamed out and said "*Coney Island*."

The colored sun helmet which Zimmerman wore in the summer was gone.

In its place was a velour hat of pronounced color, and on his hands were bright, cream-colored, suède gloves, with the wrist parts turned back over his hands.

Deep in him was the desire to attract attention, to have people talk about him. When he went into a hotel lobby, in his pronounced and exaggerated clothes, he liked to have the loungers look up and wonder who he was; if somebody whispered, "That's Zimmerman, the King of Coney Island," he was happy; but not the slightest hint or suggestion would he give that he had heard.

An older man, more experienced in the ways of the world, would have attached significance to Zimmerman's interest in Queenie. But to Chic it was vague and far away, like a dream; Mr. Zimmerman was her employer, he patted her hand, he was putting her in the movies, but it was to make money out of her. Besides, he was too old for her.

And yet, in a way he could not quite explain, a feeling of self-consciousness came over Chic when he was in the presence of that silent, watchful man.

Strange this was, too, because Zimmerman was the one man in the world that he should be able to talk to freely and easily; Mr. Zimmerman was promoting his invention, he had accepted his money, their fortunes were linked together.

The big boss saw Chic. A hand went out, it picked up the speaking tube, the car drew over to the curbing. The gloved hand moved again, a window came down.

"Hello, how are you, Mr. Zimmerman?" said Chic, wishing to be affable. "Well, this is quite a surprise, isn't it?"

"Were you looking for me?"

Should he tell Mr. Zimmerman that he had come to see Queenie? It would be perfectly all right. Queenie was only his employee, that was all. And yet instinct warned him not to tell.

"No, sir, I just came down to look around, y' know, to see what Coney's like in the winter time. Lots different now, isn't it?"

His hand swept down deserted Surf Avenue.

"It really ought to be developed into a year round place," he continued.

He had heard Zimmerman say this very thing, and now suddenly the idea leaped into his mind.

"Like Atlantic City," Chic went on eagerly. "Look at how they pull them in down there through the winter. If you and some of the other big men here got behind it, I believe you could put it over."

As Chic talked men passing along the street made signs of greeting to Zimmerman, anxious to be recognized by him—concessionaires, ride builders, real estate agents, property owners and others of the winter colony who stayed the year through. But they meant nothing to him. With a slight gesture of his hand he returned their greetings while his eyes rested silently on Chic.

"So you think it would make a good winter resort?"

"I'm sure it would, Mr. Zimmerman."

"You've given a lot of thought to it, have you?"

"What does he mean by that?" thought Chic desperately.

"Y-yes, some. I've heard you mention it, too," he defended.

"Going back to New York? I'll give you a lift."

"No, sir. I thought I'd take a look around first."

Chic stepped back, interview ended.

"Good-by, Mr. Zimmerman."

A cream-colored suède glove lifted slightly.

"Goo' day."

The car gave a little movement, the flag straightened out.

As Chic continued down the street the impression remained with him. Why had the big fellow invited him to ride to New York? Was he really going to New York? Chic had seen the man many times in his car, but never before had he been asked in with him.

Other magnates behind the scenes at Coney Island seemed to have their cars filled with people, laughing and talking, but Zimmerman always rode alone. Sometimes in the summer he would appear in an open car, which made an unusual sight among the uniformity of the other cars, and there he would sit, a stiff, lone, silent figure with his arms folded across his breast, colored straw helmet on his head.

"Maybe it's all right; maybe he's getting more friendly," suggested the little part of Chic's mind which liked to smooth things over.

Chic continued on down the street, again lost in the changed conditions about him. Coney Island had, in its own words, "folded." The little world of performers, grinders, grifters, clowns, barkers and concessionaires had disappeared.

During the summer they had been like leaves on a tree, all together, all one big family, and then winter had come and touched them with its icy hand. A few determined ones had hung on grimly, as if saying, "No, I won't go; this is my home," and then the hand had moved across them again, and one by one they had let loose, some going in one direction, some in another.

Mme. Murta, the Hungarian Bearded Lady, had gone back for a visit in Budapest; the Natural Albino was cleaning windows; Half Pint had had a piece of luck and was now sitting pretty at Huber's Museum off Broadway; the Skeleton Dude had signed with a carnival and was now filling a string of fair dates; Jolly Irma, the Fat Girl, had gone for a try out in a musical comedy, which, if luck was with it, might get to Broadway; Louie Goltz, high stilt walker, was now marching up and down Clark Street, Chicago, in his long-legged policeman's uniform, for a cut rate tire agency; Sammie Blitzer had stored his cat game and was now a pitchman working factories in Detroit; Solly Hoheiser, king of weight guessers, had put his chairs in the express office and was driving down to Florida in his new Chevrolet; Doc Huffman, who had had the first box in the Fun House, had gone to Montreal to try his luck with an ice carnival; Terry, the Tattoo Artist, was now a helper in the Brooklyn Navy Yard; Larry-Laura, the half-man, half-woman, was helping his brother-in-law install a swimming pool in Jacksonville; Pa and Ma Wilkes were raking in the shekels with a Deep Sea Show in Texas.

Yes, Coney Island—that is, the human part—had “folded”—but spring would come again.

Suddenly Chic saw Yatsomato coming toward him along the deserted sidewalk. Yatsomato was the proprietor of a Japanese ball game, and all summer he stood quietly and impassively behind his counter offering the balls to passers-by, but in the winter he worked in a Japanese gift shop in Brooklyn, and saved his money. Some day he would have a gift shop of his own, and if Chic knew anything about

him it would be a very nice and successful one.

“Nice glame. Maybe like try, please,” he would say, and strangely enough more people tried their luck with him than with the shouters and counter pounders.

And now, as Yatsomato saw Chic, a smile lit up his face.

“H’llo,” he said, elaborately tipping his hat. “Nice supplise. Vlery cold now.”

At sight of this friendly soul, so different from the calculating Zimmerman, a rush of words came tumbling from Chic.

Yes, it was sure cold. “How are you, anyway, Yatsomato?”

“Big day to-day,” said Yatsomato. “Everybody come back. Mr. Zlimmerman him just go by in car. Big flur coat.” Now his tone changed. “But him come all time now, see Missie Qlueenie.” His hands, pausing in their rubbing together, gave a little gesture. “Maybe goin’ to marry Missie Qlueenie. Don’t know. Vlery nice glirl. Well, glood-by, Mr. Cheec, go now,” he said, and again his hand went up to his hat.

And turning, the little man started down the street, his hands once more pushed into his overcoat pockets.

So Zimmerman was coming to see Queenie so often that even Yatsomato noticed it? Chic turned toward the Boardwalk. On the bench were the winter bathers, those curious, eccentric human beings who bathe all winter in the surf off Coney Island. Half a dozen of them were noisily playing leapfrog. Now and then they broke away, made brief plunges into the water and came galloping back again.

Nothing seemed to give them quite such a deep and satisfying pleasure as to stand there in their scanty suits

while the occasional paraders on the Boardwalk, wrapped in their furs, stopped to stare at them. And there they would be all winter, these people who in many ways seemed to be sane.

As Chic stood looking over the rail, the picture changed. It was summer time, and he again saw himself in the water with Queenie, when they had played beach ball and gone to Feltman's. How fascinating, how alluring she had been that day!

But no time to day dream. Must step along. Before him on the Boardwalk he could see in the twinkling dusk the outlines of the big, fashionable hotel. What would happen to him before he came out of it again?

CHAPTER XXIV

BREAKING THE NEWS GENTLY



HIC: "I'd like to speak to Miss Queenie Johnson, please."

Hotel clerk: "You can call her up over one of those phones. Room—" and he gave the number.

Chic, at the phone: "Is that you, Queenie? Chic. I'm downstairs. I'll come up right away, if you want me to. How're you, anyway?"

That was the way to talk; don't show her you are worried. Much better than to be nervous about it. But he must be very gentle, very tender with her. She would be upset, naturally; maybe crying a little.

The elevator door opens, the elevator door shuts; *wssssh*, the elevator whistles gently, and a young man walks down the softly carpeted hall as if it were nothing at all.

Brrr, says the little ivory button; the door opens and there she is!

What a fascinating picture Queenie

makes with her bright, blond hair, her big blue eyes and the smile on her lips.

"Hello, kid," she greeted him.

"Hello, Queenie. You're looking good. How're you?"

Should he kiss her? No, that wouldn't be right. Of course not. He hesitated a moment, and then reached out his hand.

"Say, haven't you got something better than that?" she asked.

"I can't do that, because I'm engaged, and it's all over between us," he ought to explain, but he couldn't get the words out. Well, just this one time; the last. Quickly he bent toward her, their lips met—and he felt the pleasant strange stirring he always had for Queenie.

"That's more like old home week," declared Queenie.

Chic smiled weakly. He must not encourage her.

It was the first time he had ever been in her hotel room; its taste and sense of luxury impressed him. There were pleasant, glowing, friendly lights, a *chaise-longue*, deep chairs, a door opened off to a bathroom. But how she must have suffered from loneliness in this room, sitting here thinking, thinking!

"Well, how's the world been using you?" she asked as she extended an ornamental cigarette box. "Give it a push and it'll do the rest."

Chic put his thumb on a plunger and miraculously a cigarette was delivered to him. In a moment they were smoking.

"She doesn't seem to be taking it very hard," he thought. But never had he understood her. What a strange, mysterious girl she was! Always there was about her the feeling that he never knew what to expect.

"Have a cocktail?"

"Sure," returned Chic brightly.

From a neat side table Queenie brought glasses, a tray, bottles and concoctions appeared. And then, when all was prepared, she poured the fruits of her efforts into a silver shaker, and into this she put an electric mixer. She pushed a button; the shaker came to life and began to vibrate. Chic stared at the little demon in amazement, for it was the first he had ever seen.

But now he must talk, must fall in with her light, casual way, and not sit staring about him like a dummy at the wax works. Getting up, he stood before the quivering, humming little contraption, instantly interested in this thing of mechanics.

"Say, that's pretty scrumptious. Where'd you get it?"

"Mr. Zimmerman, he gave it to me."

Oh—ah—

"Here's mud in your eye!" said Queenie, lifting her glass when it was ready to serve.

"Same to you, and many of them."

That was the way to talk, but his heart gave a quick little jump. That was what folks said sometimes when they talked about babies. Keep away from the subject. Say, she had a nice place—a good view of the ocean.

He sat down twirling the delicate stem of the glass between his finger and thumb. How did she like her new movie work?

Oh, it was all right. Kind of interesting in lots of ways. Queenie sighed, a faint dissatisfaction showed in her voice. Yes, it was all right, but—well, she didn't know whether she was cut out for the films or not. Some of the early tests had seemed fairly good. Mr. Zimmerman thought they were wonderful.

"Put another on top of it," said

Queenie, and the silver cocktail shaker lightly kissed the edge of Chic's glass.

In Junction City Chic had rarely had a drink. In New York, now and then, he had imbibed something at parties, and also on the rare occasions when he had ventured into night clubs. Now, as he sat in the deep chair, he felt a pleasing, comfortable glow. The room took on an even more delicate pink, and suddenly he felt talkative.

"How'd you like to sit in front of some food?" asked Queenie.

Go down to the dining room and have dinner with her when he had come here to tell her that she must—No, he wouldn't do that. Any minute, now, Queenie would have to hear the bad news. He shivered slightly. What would she do? Suddenly he felt sorry for her; how little did she suspect!

"We'll slip the ol' feed bag on right here." She picked up the French telephone from its support. "Please send up a card."

A waiter came respectfully with the menu. It would be a great honor, indeed, to serve her, his manner said. And Queenie, in that careless, semi-humorous way of hers, leaned lazily back in the *chaise-longue* and went over the menu. Did the waiter have anything on the bill-of-fare to-day which he could conscientiously recommend?

He had, and he told about it with the enthusiasm of waiters looking to the future.

"Well, I don't think I'll take any of it, then," declared Queenie.

To Chic, now suffused by the rosy glow, it seemed very funny. And Queenie *was* funny, in that rough-and-tumble, devil-may-care way of hers. And yet she always managed to keep about her that air of mystery which Chic found fascinating.

Another waiter appeared, a table was cleared, a cloth was spread, and outside the door more ghostly menials appeared, whispered, consulted, tiptoed away again, and now dinner was served. The waiter bowed from the middle.

Did Miss Johnson like it?

"It looks all right from here," said Miss Johnson. She turned to Chic. "How'd you like to have something to wash it down with?"

"For instance?"

"Something right off the ship—the ship that comes from Brooklyn, New York."

"It sounds all right from here."

That was the way. Right back at her. After all, Queenie was awfully good company.

"Bring the bucket," said Queenie.

The waiter bowed at the belt, disappeared, and came back with a little stand on which a silver pail was mounted. Queenie unlocked a wardrobe trunk, and from its depths brought forth a bottle and handed it to the waiter.

"Put it where it belongs, Louie."

The waiter packed it away tenderly and lovingly, and closed the door as though on a pneumonia crisis. Now they were alone.

Queenie presided at the table; gleaming silver covers were lifted, little clouds of steam floated aloft, there was the soft clink of spoons.

"I won't say a word till we get through eating," he thought. "Then I'll tell her," he added sharply.

And now, as they ate, the room seemed even more charming; Queenie herself had never seemed so alluring. She smiled across at him.

"Do you like it here, kid?" she asked.

"Sure do. Awfully nice place."

She put her jeweled hand on his.

"Is that all that's nice?"

Chic hesitated.

"Well, you're nice, too," he said at last.

"Don't be one of those birds that the only way you can get a compliment out of them is with a can opener," she declared. "If you like people, why not tell them about it—that's what I think."

"Poor little girl!" Chic thought again. "In a few minutes she's got to know."

The waiter came now and lifted the bottle from its cool depth as a mother lifts a firstborn from its cradle, and wrapped it with a napkin. A corkscrew gleamed—*plop!* said the bottle, and then the waiter again crept into oblivion.

"Here's looking at you!" said Queenie, and held up her thin crystal cup.

"Happy days."

"I wish I could think so." Now she was looking into his eyes. "Maybe there will be," she said.

A sudden fear shot through Chic, and his heart went out to her. What an unspeakable, dam' fool he had been. That lovely girl!

But soon the cloud was gone, the look which had filled her eyes disappeared, and Queenie began to tell about her motion picture experiences. In a moment Chic was laughing. His hand reached out and patted hers. The girl grinned invitingly.

"Don't sweep me off my feet."

And now, as she smiled into his eyes, it did seem a feeble gesture.

The pleasant meal continued, the room grew more lovely; how agreeable it was to sit and listen to the nimble-witted Queenie! The waiter came, Houdini made a few motions, the table

disappeared, Queenie signed the check, the waiter stole out, the door closed.

And now, as they stood smoking, Queenie suddenly drew him down.

"Didn't you forget something?"

Then he felt her lips on his. That peculiar, half pleasant, half unpleasant, thrilling sensation passed over him. And in the second or two that he stood there a terrific warfare waged inside him.

What a low-down dog he was to do this—engaged to the sweetest, loveliest girl in the world, and then would come to see another girl, have dinner with her in her room, and now kiss her! If he had heard of some one else doing it he would write him down as a low-lived cad, and yet here he himself was actually doing it. Damned funny thing, life.

As Chic stood with his arms around her, the little doorbell sounded, and Chic's soul became a shriveled peanut.

"Damn it to hell, I'll bet I'm caught!" he said to himself with an instantaneousness that made electricity seem slow and fumbling.

Instantly Queenie was a few feet from him, standing seemingly as calm and poised as the Statue of Liberty.

"Come in."

The knob turned, and Elfa, the Elephant Skinned Girl, stood in the doorway.

Chic felt a trembling—what if it had been Zimmerman? Zimmerman! The name was beginning to come to him more and more. Gradually he felt a sense of guilt.

Behind Elfa was a pretty, brown-

haired girl of nine—her daughter. All the performers and personnel in the tight, gossipy little world behind the scenes at Coney Island knew about Elfa and her daughter, although none of them had ever seen her.



And yet he was engaged to another girl!

Elfa had been born in Iowa, the daughter of a village carpenter, a family respected in the community. At the age of six some strange, gray corrugations had begun to appear on the child. Her parents had taken her to the village doctor. "Maybe she will outgrow it," he had said. But she hadn't outgrown it. Instead, the gray waves had thickened. None, however, had appeared on her face or hands.

A report spread over the village that her mother had been frightened by an elephant before the child was born. The sensitive girl had become an object of curiosity in the village; people

had come to the house, the child must be hauled out and exhibited.

At last, after she was grown, an offer had come for her to go with a "side show." She had been shocked—what a terrible thing!

But it was a chance to help her father and mother, and so the word was given out that she had gone to New York to visit a cousin. And then the sensitive, frightened girl from Iowa had taken her place on the platform with the freaks, a lecturer had stepped up beside her, and the staring people had begun to file by.

After a time Elfa had married the man who ran the lung-testing machine, who, when this meal ticket fell into his lap, lost all interest in the capacity of people's lungs. Elfa had supported him for a while, then he had drifted away. There was to be a child, and sensitive Elfa had suffered agonies—suppose it should be marked, too?

But when the baby had been born it was normal and whole; a deep passion was aroused in Elfa that her child should never suffer the tortures she had gone through. She had decided to give it up and not be known as its mother. She had been able to get it into the Baby Incubator, and each day she had gone to see it lying in its sanitary glass cage. Later she had hired a nurse and had become the child's "aunt."

This was now the absorbing passion of her life—her daughter must never know that her mother was a freak.

To-day was the last time she would have Glenna this winter. After Coney Island had closed, Elfa had gone out to fill fair dates; the fairs were over, she would now return to her old home in Iowa while little Glenna remained in school.

Queenie had invited Elfa to stop by

the hotel and let her see Glenna. When brown-haired little Glenna made a curtsy, as she shook hands, Elfa's heart nearly burst. At this moment Glenna had on a dress which Elfa had painstakingly made as she had sat on the platform.

"Can you sing your little French song for Miss Johnson?" asked Elfa.

She leaned eagerly forward in her chair as Glenna made a bow and her childish treble rose, and as Chic sat there he caught something of what it meant to this sensitive freak from an Iowa village whose little girl could sing with such childish stirringness a French song.

Queenie's impersonal, *blasé* manner slipped from her as she spoke to Glenna. An unexpectedly gentle and appealing note was in her voice.

"That's lovely, Glenna darling, just lovely. I don't think I ever heard a little girl sing a French song before."

But by now Glenna was restless; she must "see the things," and wandered about the room exploring its mysteries, while Elfa sat talking, but her eyes never leaving the child. At last it was time to go.

"Say," said Queenie as they were going, "I want you two to go down to the dining room and eat on me. I got to stay here and talk to Chic, but I want you two to bust yourselves. Sign my name, and don't be no canary birds."

CHAPTER XXV

A PLAYTHING OF FATE



AS Elfa and Glenna went radiantly and happily out, Chic felt a wave of liking for Queenie. Tough? Yes, but how like her it was to make some one happy. What a splen-

did meal it would be for Elfa as she sat in the well-appointed dining room with no thought of expense, and with her daughter across the table from her.

"God! She's sure nuts about that kid," Queenie said as the elevator hummed away with its happy load. "I don't know what she'd do if anything 'd happen to Glenna. Gives me goose flesh to think about it."

Now that Elfa and Glenna were gone, Queenie grew grave and sober. Something was on her mind; Chic felt a strange uneasiness. The time had come.

"I must keep her from saying it," he told himself. "How are you getting along with your work?" he asked aloud.

Oh, she was getting along all right, except—well, for Mr. Zimmerman.

"He thinks he owns me," declared Queenie. "He's the most jealous hombre I ever knew."

"Jealous?" repeated Chic. "What's he jealous about?"

He was jealous on general principles, Queenie said. Curious man, Mr. Zimmerman was. People thought because he was in the show business and dressed sporty that he was a skirt chaser. But he wasn't at all. Lots of men in the park game were; a girl might just as well walk into a tiger cage as to meet up with some of them, but Mr. Zimmerman he wasn't that kind.

And indeed this was true. However "sporty" and out for what he could get Zimmerman might look, with his exaggerated clothes, it was only for the public. It was the showman in him. In reality, night life made no appeal to him, and girls not at all. That is, girls in general. He was, as Queenie said, "a one-woman man."

"Come over here and sit on this do-dad beside me," the girl invited, abruptly changing the subject. "I guess you wondered what the hell when you got my note, didn't you?"

"Naturally."

"Well, say, you don't have to be Marshal Foch stopping the Germans. Listen, kid, I got something to tell you."

He waited tensely.

"Listen, Chic darling," she said, "here's something right out of the Bible. I'm plumb crazy about you, and I have been ever since that night you peeped through the window from the fire escape. God! If that wasn't about the most hey-rube thing I ever saw, I don't what is. That's what I thought at first. But when we went out and danced and you were so simple and honest and boyish—well, it knocked me for a row of tent pegs."

It was pleasant to hear her say these things. As Chic sat in the cozy room, with the effect of the champagne singing in his veins, he began to see Queenie in a rosy light. There flashed before him the picture of her as he had seen her balanced so lightly on the wire, with the band softly playing; the picture faded, he was now dancing with her; he could feel her lithe body swaying under his hands.

"Of course," continued Queenie. "I know a girl is supposed to sit back and pretend she's not interested, and let the man chase her and all that, and I would, too—if it was any other man. But damn it! After all we've been through together, I don't see why I've got to let on that you don't mean any more to me than a throw-away handbill. That's why I sent you the note—I'm crazy about you, and I'm going to tell you so right to your face."

Her voice became soft and wistful.

"When you didn't come to see me any more—well, it knocked me for a loop. I tried not to pay any attention at first, tried to get all het up about this here movie racket, but I couldn't do it. And me—the way I used to be I wouldn't look at P. T. Barnum himself!—here I go gettin' down on my knees to you almost. The 'cold queen,' that's what they used to sometimes call me, and now—well, I don't care. Sometimes I'd lay awake half the night arguing with myself—that part got me a lot more than when I gave myself up to you. Queer, ain't it? But it's the way I'm made. Then Mr. Zimmerman gets to hanging around and spending money on me, and I don't know. Kid, I'm crazy about you—and I want to marry you."

For a moment Chic had the feeling that he had not heard rightly, and yet he knew that he had. Queenie wanted him to marry her! Of course he couldn't; what an absurd idea! Impossible! He had always heard that a girl shouldn't propose, but still it was often done.

"I ought to tell her about Charmian," a voice kept repeating to him. "Tell her. Why, this is terrible!"

But he could not quite bring himself to say it. After all, it was a pretty low thing to have made love to Queenie and then to jilt her. "And now you're trying to sneak out of it without paying," the voice said.

That was what his father had done. Gone off with a Chautauqua entertainer and ruined the life of his mother. And now, as he sat in the rose-hued room he thought: "My first duty is to Queenie. I'm going to do the square thing by her." He would go to Charmian and break off their engagement. Yes, that was it, go to her and break it off.

"Do you like me a little?" asked Queenie.

"Of course I do," he heard himself say. "I love you."

He continued to sit with his arms around her, now and then he kissed her. "What a sweet, darling girl," he thought. But now it was getting late, time to go. A good night kiss, now he was out on the Boardwalk in the sharp, lovely November night.

He paused and looked back at the hotel glowing in the moonlight. Why, up there was her room! Didn't that beat the sam patch? Engaged to two girls at once!

He turned his back and struck off across deserted, ghostly Coney Island in the direction of the subway.

CHAPTER XXVI

CHIC HAS TWO FIANCEES



CHIC was amazed at what had happened. Engaged to two girls! It was hardly believable, and yet there it was, take it or leave it. Now what in the world would he do? A pretty mess he had stepped into.

And yet, in spite of everything, he felt proud of himself. It wasn't everybody who could get himself engaged to two such girls at the same time! Refined, cultivated, well-to-do Charmian, who sang over the radio, and who was studying to be a concert singer. A lovely person, indeed. Pretty, fascinating Queenie, with her lithe, supple, perfect body.

Chic liked to meditate over it all, liked to sit in a restaurant and look at some respectable, middle-aged person and think:

"Wouldn't he be surprised if he knew that I was engaged to two girls at once! He probably imagines I'm

just an ordinary, everyday sort of humdrum person, not different from anybody else. And here I am, quite a fellow!"

To him, with the seriousness with which youth looks at itself, it seemed that no other person in the world had ever become involved in such a tangle. Little did he realize that no doubt it had happened many times to other young men; probably at the moment in New York alone there were hundreds enmeshed in the same romantic net. But even had it occurred to him, it wouldn't have helped solve his own problems.

During this troubled time, if a cross-section of his mind could have been laid bare, it would probably have looked like this:

"Now what the deuce am I going to do? God! What a mess a fella can get himself into. Maybe there's some way to break out of it without hurting their feelings. Of course there is. Wonder why ol' Zimmerman is always looking at me? I'm going to keep on the good side of him, that's one thing sure. He's got all my money, but I'm going to get it back, and a lot more with it. The top's going to make me rich. Queenie's nice. Yeh. Pretty, and got plenty of pep. Awfully nice hair, nice blue eyes, and those red lips. Um! Why, Queenie's a lovely girl! Damned lucky to be engaged to her. Only—"

He'd go to Charmian and break it off. A poignant sorrow shot through him. How could he tell that lovely girl he didn't want to marry her? But he must.

The scene rose before him as it would be when he blundered through the fateful words—the sudden silence which would come to her, her lips slowly compressing and growing thin,

then the proud lift of her head. "Oh, it's quite all right. Quite all right." Then he would go stumbling away in the darkness.

He visited Coney Island a time or two after that to see Queenie; they went to dinner together, they danced together; very nice evenings, indeed. But when he returned to his room a strange restlessness laid hold of him. He couldn't sleep very well.

Too much noise, or something; people under him always throwing parties, then talking their heads off before they finally had sense enough to go to bed. Terrible place to live in. Move. That's what he'd do. Ought to, long before this, anyway.

Now and then he thought about Zimmerman. Strange how Zimmerman affected him. A person would naturally think, when you were practically in business with another man, that he'd kind of shine up to you; at least, talk things over now and then. Maybe ask you out to dinner, but not Zimmerman. Colder than ever. Hardly grunt, sometimes.

But Zimmerman didn't neglect the top. That was one thing. Top was getting along fine. When Chic went to the factory where it was going up, his heart leaped like a thousand daffodils. Fascinating it was to see it grow from an armload of blue prints into a hollow, skeletony, immense contraption. Like going to the movies and seeing one of those scientific pictures of the planting of a cutting and then watching the cutting sprout and turn into a lovely rose.

Chic liked to walk around in the factory where the steel work was being bolted into shape—his, actually his; his brain had conceived it—and watch it bud and blossom.

Only, Zimmerman acted so strange;

never chat, never say a word more than he had to. Sometimes just stand and look as he puffed at his big, black cigar. Then turn and walk away without a word.

But one day at the factory something happened. It was a matter of safety underfriction by which the cars, in event of an accident, could be stopped quickly and expeditiously without tossing the passengers into the surrounding park. The first of the brakes had been put into place, and Zimmerman was not satisfied. The difference was slight; any other builder would have passed it up. It would get by the Safety Code Committee, so why worry?

But in Zimmerman was a deep and profound respect for the Safety Code Committee and its rulings. In fact, he had been the founder of the Safety Code, which was a power in the National Association of Amusement Parks—the NAAP—and now the change must be made.

"We're not going to try to put anything over on the Safety Code Committee," declared Zimmerman. "We've got to build up the confidence of the public in amusement parks—don't take no chances, that's my motto."

For some moments he talked about the tenets of his belief. Many men in the park business cared nothing about the public; get the money, a new set of suckers is born every season; but this was no part of Zimmerman's attitude.

"Don't take no chance on an accident just because it means a little extra work," he said.

As Chic saw this fine trait in Zimmerman's character, he felt a sudden liking for the man. Other builders would have let it slide by—"It 'll probably be all right." Not so with Zimmerman. The mistake was his

own; the redesigning and rebuilding of this part would be out of his own pocket, but there was not a moment's hesitation.

"Redesign that, Schmalze," he said to the foreman. "Then let me see it before you put it through."

That was off his mind, he turned to Chic. He was standing with his foot on one of the steel pieces; his elbow was resting on his thick, fat leg, while in his hand he held his cigar. There was only one expression on that square, iron face, a slight narrowing of the eyes.

"By the way, Cotton, have you seen Queenie lately?"

"No, not recently."

"So you ain't seen her?"

"No, sir; not lately."

The foreman now came up with a question. Zimmerman slowly took his leg from the steel piece and moved away with him. It was the day after Chic had been to Coney Island to see Queenie.

As Chic went away a little argument was set up in his mind, for it must be known that Chic was a very queer person, indeed. If he didn't want to believe a thing, then immediately a shadowy mind of his began to function. This wish mind could think of an amazing number of things to banish the possibility of anything unpleasant happening.

Why, of course, the wish mind said, Zimmerman didn't suspect. There was no way for Zimmerman to find out that he had seen Queenie that evening. Maybe he had just asked the question to make conversation. Why, it was perfectly natural for Zimmerman to ask about Queenie, since they both knew her.

Zimmerman didn't think of anything, that bozo didn't, except building

parks and working out new rides and making money. What if he did suspect? Zimmerman didn't own Queenie. He was just her employer, that was all. There was nothing to get jealous over. Queenie didn't care for him—look how much older he was. Strange about Queenie in that respect. She never talked about Zimmerman, never said anything one way or the other. That showed she wasn't interested. Thus the comforting wish mind continued to smooth out difficulties.

Chic began dillydallying about telling Charmian. He could think of many reasons why he shouldn't inform her; leastways, not yet. Just wait a few days more. Then he'd go to see her and tell her. Yes, he would.

One of the reasons was his mother. From time to time he had written Mrs. Cotton, telling of the progress of his acquaintance with Charmian, and his mother had been delighted.

And then had come Chic's letter telling of his engagement. Mrs. Cotton had been greatly pleased; almost too good to be true, and yet it had happened. How well everything was turning out for Chic. His invention had been accepted, it was now being built, it would be tried out in the spring; engaged to the daughter of Marion De Ford, her old girlhood friend.

What a wise move it was that Chic had gone to New York! Soon she would go to see him and they would have a happy reunion.

In his letters home, Chic had not mentioned Queenie. He knew that she was not the kind of girl his mother would understand. He could imagine his mother's surprise on the receipt of such a letter—her son taking up with a tight-rope walker at Coney Island!

In spite of dillydallying the day came. And that was what it seemed

like, the day. It was marked and set apart from all other days. Charmian was to have a house dance, and had invited Chic. Well, he would go; he would break the news to her then.

What irony it was—to let a girl invite you to a dance and then get her off in the corner and tell her that you didn't love her any more. What a funny thing life is! Fuller of tangles than a piece of thread that a cat has been playing with.

But he wouldn't be quite that bald; wouldn't get her off in the corner between dances, hem and haw and then spill it. No. He'd have more gumption than that. He would wait until the others had gone home, her parents would be upstairs, and then, in the library, he would tell her that he had always admired her, and that he wished to count her as a friend, but that each should be free to do what he or she wanted. They were very young; he had his career yet to make, his circumstances were not what hers were. It would be best, everything considered.

December now, and it was snowing. Like a Christmas movie, he thought as he got off the train at the haughty little station at Floral Gardens. But very lovely, indeed. A host of sleek, magnificent cars stood at the curb, before the station, while in the background the taxis waited as if recognizing that they belonged to a socially inconsequential world. A horn cleared its throat politely, a hand waved, a bright smile flashed, and there she was. Dear Charmian. Who would soon be made to suffer.

"Hello, this is a nice-looking taxi. What's your rate? I think I'll ride with you. Got your name and picture in the car?"

Better talk that way than be long-faced about it.

"I haven't got my name here, because I thought I'd change it."

Um—kind of awkward. Brought him up with a jolt.

The car sped away on its lovely junket through the town; Floral Gardens in winter; snow; the song of the chains; lights in the window; young people enveloped in huge fur coats; laughter; and then the blaze of light which was Charmian's home. A line of cars waited outside, with their headlights extinguished, but with their little, protruding buglike eyes dreamily staring into the night.

"Car barn; all out," announced Charmian.

A pleasant hubbub greeted Chic's ears as the door was opened by the butler. Chic could see young men in evening clothes and young ladies in whatever girls wear, fluttering to and fro with the expectations of a pleasant evening before them.

In the kitchen a caterer was buzzing about, counting, checking, and mapping out his campaign, while the De Ford staff, now suddenly no longer of consequence in the world, looked upon him with silent poison. And outside, in the great hall and reception room, voices rose and laughter tinkled as if all was well with the world.

At sight of Charmian there was a flutter, and an eddy of young humanity swirled around her, laughing, talking, jesting. In the billiard room the orchestra had gathered, and about it was strewn a gaping collection of bags and cases, while the men had their last cigarettes before tiptoeing inconspicuously into the hall between the drawing-room and library.

Chic recalled the time when he had first come into the house and had thought that he had stumbled upon a Grand Duke's Ball, whereas, in reality,

it had been a simple dinner party. He remembered the uncertainty he had suffered in the dining room and how he had done combat with a salad fork; but now he knew no such suffering; the clodhopper feeling was gone. New York had done much for him. He was finding his place in the world. He chatted lightly with Mrs. De Ford, and talked to Mr. De Ford, man to man.

Null and Void was there, talking in that slightly simpering way of his of a world that Chic knew nothing about; but Chic no longer wished politely to crush him. Instead, he gave him a slap on the back.

"How're you, Null, old boy? Glad to see you still alive," he said genially.

The intoxication of the evening stole over him, the music beat in his ears, how sweet and lovely Charmian looked. Charming Charmian, indeed. Now he was dancing with her; her hair brushed his cheek, he looked down into the pools of her eyes.

"I wish I didn't have to tell her to-night," he thought. "But I've got to do it," he added.

Now and then during the course of the evening his eye caught hers; she smiled, an exquisite sense of elation floated over him. And then his mind would flash back to Queenie. Queenie was all right; cute kid; but—

Now the dance was over; the caterer and his staff had gone long ago; the musicians had returned their instruments to their cases and had been swallowed up by the night. The last car of guests had gone, Mr. and Mrs. De Ford had gone upstairs—the moment had come!

"Charmian, there is something I want to say to you. It's about ourselves—our future together—our engagement. I have been thinking it

over, and I believe that we ought to let it rest a while. We are young yet; how my invention and business plans are going I don't know. I respect you highly, but in lieu of everything, I think it best that we consider things a little longer."

That was the way he had planned to say it. There would be tears, of course; she would sob, then slowly grow cold and proud, and then he would shake her hand and steal away into the night like a criminal.

But it didn't work out that way. All during the evening his determination to tell her had been weakening; the music, the soft, captivating movement of the dance, Charmian in his arms, the touch of her hand, her smile.

"I won't say it just now, I'll call her up by telephone and tell her."

Yes, that was the thing to do. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He could explain very calmly then. The idea of coming to her dance and then slapping her in the face with a broken engagement was ridiculous.

"You do like me, don't you, darling?" he heard her say as they sat on a sofa.

"Of course I do, Charmian, you know that," he declared.

"I just wanted you to say it, that's all. Girls are foolish, I suppose, but it's the way God made us."

It was nice foolish talk.

The chime clock in the hall ticked on; the house grew stiller, and more and more they seemed to be part of each other.

"When do you think we ought to get married?"

Chic's heart gave a leap. Now was the time to say it—spit it out—but the thought was devastating.

"I—I don't know."

"Don't you think the spring would

be nice? In June. I know people make fun of June weddings, now, but I don't care if they do. I like them."

Chic heard himself talking, saying words. Yes, spring was a lovely time.

The chime clock played a golden tune. It seemed incredible that it was so late. He must go.

"I'll get out the car and run you down," she said.

The car came out, they got in, sped away; the train came, he mounted the steps.

The run through the crisp night air had cleared his brain, and now, as the train sped away toward New York, he was amazed at himself. He hadn't done anything he had expected to do. Instead of his engagement being broken off, it had been moved up.

He slunk down into the seat. "I'll be damned!"

Whoo-whoo said the train.

CHAPTER XXVII

EXPLAINING CHIC'S GIRL-SHYNESS



MRS. COTTON sitting in her son's room in New York, glanced at the alarm clock ticking away on the bureau. A quarter after five. Chic would be home by half past five or twenty minutes of six, and then they would have another evening together.

This was the second day that Mrs. Cotton had been in New York. The first evening she had been tired, and just to see Chic was enough. How well and strong he looked, handsomer than ever.

The next day she would go to see her old friend, Mrs. De Ford, and then they would all have dinner at the De Ford home. But this evening belonged to her and Chic alone.

Mrs. Cotton looked around the room. It wasn't anything, pretty cheap; poor pictures on the wall, a terrible bed, but Chic had never complained. Instead, he had written humorous, exaggerated descriptions of the bed and the rain-streaked fruit pictures on the wall. Chic's flights of fancy had made her smile, but now the room was no laughing matter. Soon he would give it up for something better.

New York had been very good to him, indeed. He had found work almost immediately; he had had promotions in the radio factory; his invention had been accepted by the great Mr. Zimmerman; and best of all, he had become engaged to Charmian. On the bureau was Charmian's picture, very large and expensive, and at the other end of the bureau was her own.

Rising from her chair, Mrs. Cotton went to the bureau, picked up Charmian's picture and stood holding it tenderly in her hand. It was like all the modern photographs, rather vague and shimmery, with thin, fading edges. She didn't like it as well as the clear, sharp, definite portraits they had made when she was a young lady—many things were not quite so good as "in her day"—but in spite of the new-fangled ways of doing things the picture did reveal what a lovely girl Charmian had grown into.

Mrs. Cotton passed her handkerchief over it, wiping away some lingering dust, and unconsciously, as she looked into the smiling eyes of the picture a smile came into her own face.

A glow of satisfaction rose in her soul. To-morrow she would see Charmian, put her arms around the girl, and tell her—when Chic was not present—what beautiful letters Chic wrote about her.

And now, as she thought of Charmian, she was glad she had kept Chic clean and pure. This passion was deep in her. The reason for it was a bitter and devastating experience which had come into her life.

She had been brought up a "sheltered" child; only the necessary facts of life were imparted to her; and in this idealized state she had met John Cotton. He was a young city engineer, and about him there was a dash and go which had fascinated her. John Cotton had always been a bit "wild," but to her this seemed vague and inconsequential. He loved her, that was all that mattered. Their love, now that they were married, would be untarnished.

But she was to have a shock. Each year Junction City had a Chautauqua, and John Cotton was its local manager. One of the Chautauqua entertainers was a lady elocutionist—a feature now happily out of style. She was pretty, she made people laugh, she made them cry, and when John Cotton presented her to the audiences he gave her the floweriest introduction he had ever bestowed upon anybody.

Later Mr. Cotton took mysterious business trips out of town; he was called to Kansas City, once he had gone to Des Moines, and then had come the great shock. There was a railroad wreck, her husband was killed, and in the sleeper with him was the lady elocutionist!

It was the sensation of the town—the bringing back of his body, the funeral, the whispering. The shock had been a terrific and a stunning one.

And now it seemed to Mrs. Cotton that the cause of it all had been the way that Chic's father had been brought up—"loosely." If his parents should have watched over him more

carefully, her life would not have been wrecked, she thought. And so there formed in her mind the desire to keep her own son pure. He must never do anything cheap; he must cherish an ideal of women. As she talked to Chic she had looked deeply and hypnotically into his eyes, and often it was just before he went to bed at night.

Although Mrs. Cotton had not realized it, the result was to make Chic self-conscious in the presence of girls. "Girl shy," it was called. He had never been through the "experiences" that other young men of his age had had. And thus he had come to New York, and in this state he had remained—always a bit ill at ease in the presence of girls, a bit shy and yet yearning—until he had met Queenie.

CHAPTER XXVIII

QUEENIE STAGES A DÉNOUEMENT



RS. COTTON had taken a room in the same house with Chic, so she could be near him, and now, dressed in clothes of not quite the latest fashion, she sat eagerly awaiting her son.

Each minute in New York must be made to count, and so in her lap was Chic's mending. All her life she had performed these little ministrations, then he had moved away; and now some day Charmian would be doing these things for him.

While she sat there, stiff and upright, as Mrs. Cotton always sat, plying her needle, the years seemed to slip away; it seemed hardly real that her little Chic was now a grown man, living in New York, and some day would be married. As she waited with the roar of the street below, the sense of how quickly life rushed by came to

her. So many things she had wanted to do, so many unfulfilled dreams.

There was a step on the stairway, Chic was coming home, and unconsciously Mrs. Cotton began to roll up her mending. This could be finished to-morrow; now all her time must be Chic's.

The steps came closer they paused, there was a knock at the door. It was strange that Chic should knock, for he usually came bursting in like a school-boy.

Slowly the door opened, and to her amazement she saw a young woman!

Mrs. Cotton gave the pleasant little laugh she had for persons who blundered, and whom she wished to make feel as comfortable as possible.

"I guess you've come to the wrong room, this is my son's."

"This is Chic Cotton's, ain't it?"

"Yes, my son's."

"He's the one I want to see."

Why had this brightly clothed, blond-haired, vermilion-lipped flapper come to his room? Mrs. Cotton experienced fear that the girl might have designs on her son. But aloud she said pleasantly:

"I'm expecting my son home in a few minutes. Do you wish to wait?"

"Why not? I want to see him 'specially."

Mrs. Cotton rose and made a gesture toward a chair. She'd be pleasant, but in a few minutes Chic would return and dispose of the intruder.

"Won't you be seated, Miss—I don't believe I know your name."

"Queenie Johnson."

"Won't you take this chair here? It's more comfortable. I was just doing some mending for my son."

Instinctively Mrs. Cotton felt a resentment against this bright, calm, self-possessed, dazzling girl. What

did she mean by knocking at her son's door? But she mustn't show it. That wouldn't be good manners; besides, it would all be explained when Chic arrived.

Probably the girl lived in the house, but it was strange she should come so unceremoniously to the door. Or maybe it was some one from Chic's office who had come on business.

But Mrs. Cotton said nothing like that; she must be hostess in her son's name. She had traveled to New York to see her son she explained; she had expected the train trip to be tiresome, but it hadn't been. On the contrary, she had found it interesting. It was the first time she had ever been East in her life. It was very different, indeed, from the Middle West, but she thought that it was interesting, too; the thing that had surprised her most of all was not the skyscrapers, but the window displays on Fifth Avenue. They were fascinating.

She paused after this first rush of words. Why didn't this jazzy girl explain who she was? The silence gave her a chance, but Queenie cleared up no mystery.

"He ought to been here before this," the girl said.

"That means she knows a great deal about him," Mrs. Cotton thought instantly.

Now she would draw the girl out.

"Do you work in my son's office?"

"No, I've never been in it."

"I haven't either," returned Mrs. Cotton in the same pleasant voice. "But I expect to be in a day or two. My son's an inventor, you know," she declared proudly.

"Yeh. I know all about the 'Giant Top.'"

"Oh, do you?" exclaimed Mrs. Cotton genially; but a little voice in her

asked: "Who *can* she be? What does she want? How could Chic ever have taken up with her?"

Now she would put a stop to it—

"My son and I are going to dinner together to-night at the Waldorf-Astoria. To-morrow we're going to one of the suburbs to visit an old school-girl friend of mine."

Queenie made a little movement of dismissal.

"We're just chewing the rag. Don't you know me?"

"I don't believe I do."

"Hasn't Chic told you about me?" she asked in astonishment.

"No. I don't believe he has."

"That's funny," Queenie said. "Hasn't he ever told you my name?"

"No."

There was a silence while the two women looked at each other.

"I'm the wire walker down at Coney Island." Queenie gave a proud smile. "Now I guess you know me."

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Ain't he ever told you *anything* about me?"

Mrs. Cotton felt that this in some way reflected on her son. Maybe this strange, bizarre creature was some one at Coney Island who had to do with his top.

"I don't believe he has. He doesn't write very long letters," she explained.

"I mean, since you hit town?"

"I really haven't seen much of him since I arrived in New York," Mrs. Cotton returned with dignity. Such grammar, such slang as the girl used.

Mrs. Cotton had now had time to think it over. "You say you have something to do at Coney Island?"

"I'm the wire walker there."

Mrs. Cotton had never heard the phrase. A wire walker. What did she mean by that? She smiled polite-

ly, as one does who wishes to please, but who has a growing feeling of unplaced resentment.

"I don't believe I know what that is," she said.

"Tight-rope walker, I guess that's what you'd call it."

"Oh, indeed." It was the pleasant, trained part of her speaking. Then, "You mean you walk a tight rope at Coney Island?"

"Yes."

There rose before Mrs. Cotton a vision of the tight-rope walkers and exhibitionists as she had seen them at Junction City street fairs and corn carnivals — cheap, bedraggled creatures, making easy street acquaintances. They would stay a few days at a boarding house, often there was a scandal after they left. So this girl, who was on such friendly terms with her son, was one of them!

"Is that what you do, walk a tight rope?"

Queenie bristled. Was that what she did! she repeated. Queenie was very proud of her position; all the people of her world looked up to her, she was envied, she was a great success. And, indeed, she was "an artist on the wire," as the announcements declared. The best in America, the highest paid; her picture appeared in the papers, posters and placards of her were everywhere; great crowds stood gazing up at her delighted and thrilled — and now this old-fashioned, small-town woman — one of the "monkeys" — looked down on her!

"Yes, that's what I do. You don't think much of it, do you?"

"No, I wouldn't say that," Mrs. Cotton declared. She just didn't know much about it; but Queenie caught all that the tone and manner implied, and now took a cigarette from her case and

calmly lit it as she studied Mrs. Cotton.

"Smoking cigarettes," thought Mrs. Cotton as she watched a cloud which Queenie discharged. Although Mrs. Cotton knew many girls who smoked, she did not approve of it. There was really nothing wrong with the practice, but it was not ladylike. And now it seemed particularly offensive and out of place.

"It's what you'd expect of a tight-rope walker," she mused.

Then Queenie spoke:

"I guess Chic's saving it as the big surprise for you. Him and I are engaged, didn't you know that?"

For a moment Mrs. Cotton thought that she had not heard rightly. Before she seemed to have time to think she said:

"How do you mean? I don't think I understand."

Queenie gave a little laugh, and suddenly felt a keen dislike for this woman.

"Just what I said. We're going to get married."

Mrs. Cotton's hands, which had lain inertly in her lap, began to pull at each other, and suddenly she felt under a terrific strain such as she sometimes had had in a dream — and then had wakened up to find it was not true.

"I think there must be some mistake," she said. "My son is engaged to this young lady here" — indicating the photograph on the bureau — "she's the daughter of my oldest and dearest friend."

"Did he tell you that?"

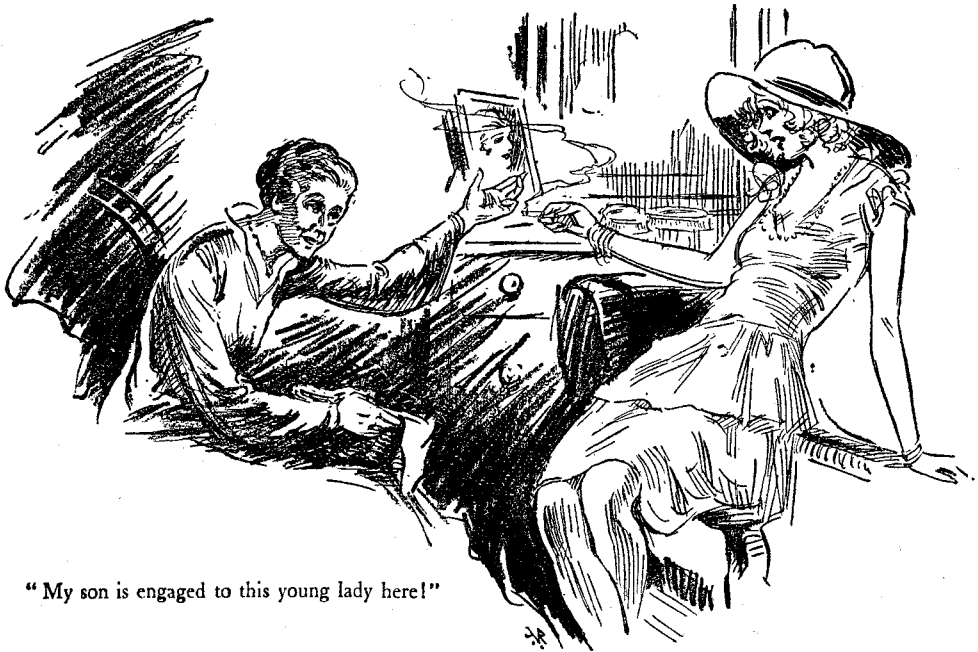
Mrs. Cotton began to rock with quick, nervous movements. "Yes," she declared with dignity. "And it's true, too. I'm going to meet her tomorrow. That's the reason, partly, why I came on to New York."

Out came a cloud of smoke.

"I think you're on the wrong wire, Mrs. Cotton. Chic and I are engaged, and if you think you're going to come on here and bust it you're pretty badly mistaken."

Never had she come to his room except the time she had put the note under the door, and now here she was again.

"Hello," he said in a subdued key, intensely aware of her presence.



"My son is engaged to this young lady here!"

It was all plain, now, what Mrs. Cotton was trying to do—a wire walker wasn't good enough for her darling son. Well, she'd show her.

The two women glared at each other in a silence which was broken by the sound of some one coming lightly up the stairs.

The knob turned, Chic entered.

CHAPTER XXIX

SHATTERED IDEALS



HELLO, mom," Chic called gayly, and then the room seemed to revolve slightly. Queenie! What in the world was she doing here? What an amazing girl Queenie was!

"Hello, kid."

"She calls him 'kid,'" thought Mrs. Cotton. "She's vulgar." But Chic would now send this strange, bizarre girl on her way.

"This young lady came to the door a while ago, and has been waiting for you," Mrs. Cotton explained, and it was as if she had said, "I know it's all a mistake, but I had to let her stay until you came."

Queenie rose.

"Can't you slip us a kiss, 'bo?"

'Bo! Such language! And asking Chic to kiss her. But that was, of course, to have her revenge. It was to be expected of a tight-rope walker.

Chic stood in agony a moment. What should he do? But the question

answered itself, for Queenie suddenly threw her arms around his neck. In her hand, as her arm went around his neck, was the cigarette. A curl of smoke went floating up. And then, before Mrs. Cotton's eyes, she kissed him.

"Who is this young woman? She says she's engaged to you," quavered Mrs. Cotton, stirred with emotion. "That's what she says."

Chic stood hesitating, looking from his mother to Queenie.

"She isn't engaged to you, is she, Chic?" came a pleading voice.

And now, as he stood there between the two women, his brain was reeling. But he must do the right thing by Queenie. That was forever fixed in his mind.

"Yes, mother!"

Mrs. Cotton sat as if stunned; almost as if she had not heard at all.

Queenie spoke:

"I'm going to tell you something, Mrs. Cotton. I suppose I oughtn't to do it, because there ain't any net under me, but I'm going to swing off, anyway. I like Chic the hell of a lot; I'm crazy about him, and always have been, and I think he—well, likes me some. Now I'm getting down to what I was goin' to say. I liked him well enough to give up everything I had to him. So we decided we're goin' to get married."

Mrs. Cotton sat numbly for a moment, and then very carefully picked a raveling from the mending off her dress, slowly rolled it between her thumb and finger, and then dropped it into the wastebasket.

"That's a lie, isn't it, Chic?"

"No, mother, it's not. It's true."

For a moment it seemed as if Mrs. Cotton did not fully realize. No, it couldn't be, after the sheltered way

she had reared her son. Her son! Her darling son. Her son who was engaged to Charmian.

She would break it off. This person was probably a "loose" woman. Naturally a girl at Coney Island would be. What a horrible creature she was! Overpainted, coarse, a tight-rope walker!

Chic must tell her about it; she would see how Queenie had deliberately led her son astray. And as the three sat in the little room, Chic told the story; whatever had happened that caused him to deceive Charmian, he was the one to blame, not Queenie.

As Mrs. Cotton listened her spirits sank lower and lower. Now he had finished, and numbly, almost expressionlessly, she sat looking at the son who had disgraced himself. It was his father's blood. After she had tried so hard all her life to eradicate it!

And at this moment, too, when she had come all the way to New York to see him in triumph, and to give Charmian her blessing, this—this awful thing should happen!

She would send the girl away, and then she would subtly work on Chic; she would drop small insinuations about Queenie and poison Chic's mind. She would break it off, not at once, but gradually; it might take months. She would stay in New York, get a small apartment with her son; she could bring it about.

But no, that would not be right. He could not turn tail and run to Charmian after having deceived her.

Mrs. Cotton bent forward.

"Are you set on marrying her, Chic?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think it could be fixed up some way?"

"I don't want it 'fixed up some

way,' mother. Really, mom," and now Chic's face brightened, "she's a fine girl, and I'm crazy about her," and taking Queenie's bediamonded hand he squeezed it tenderly.

Mrs. Cotton felt a great weariness; it was not all quite clear in her mind, but that fact remained—her son must do what his heart dictated. There was a dash of tears to her eyes. For a moment she wept hysterically.

"My poor little boy," she wailed, seizing his hands; he seemed her little curly-haired child again. Soon the tears were gone, and to her surprise Mrs. Cotton felt refreshed. She glanced at the clock, surprised at how late it was.

"We better go out and eat supper."

The two women paused before the mirror, arranging themselves for going out.

"All right, Chic; all right, Queenie," Mrs. Cotton said in a voice that she strove to make calm and natural. "I'm ready."

And then the three started down the creaking stairs on their way to the dinner that Mrs. Cotton had looked forward to.

CHAPTER XXX

CHIC CROSSES HIS RUBICON



FEW days later Chic went to see Charmian. Never in his life had he disliked so poignantly to do anything as he did this.

If only he could delay a few days; put it off a while. But he could not. He must inform Charmian before his mother visited her old friend. If he waited until his mother saw Mrs. De Ford, and if Mrs. De Ford assumed that the engagement was on, then it would be all the more difficult.

How bitterly he felt the disappointment that was his mother's! She had gone over many times in her mind this reunion when she and her old friend should meet and when their two children would be brought together, and now his mother must go to Mrs. De Ford knowing that the engagement was broken.

Charmian was waiting in the big drawing-room when Chic arrived. It was here that he had first met her father; and it was here that he had burst into the Grand Duke's Ball, but now he no longer felt ill at ease.

There was the awkward matter of why Mrs. Cotton had not yet come to see Charmian's mother, but Chic got over it as best he could. The train trip had been hard, his mother had wanted to buy a few clothes first, she had already talked to Charmian's mother over the telephone; she would call up again to-morrow.

Charmian had never before seemed so sweet and lovely; to-day she was particularly animated. She had just received an offer to appear in her first important concert, and she was full of the subject. Her appearance over the radio had done much for her; her picture had been in the papers many times.

"I wish I didn't have to tell her," a little agonized voice in him cried as he sat across from her. And now for a moment he cast desperately about in his mind to find a way out. Maybe, if he just let things go along, they'd work themselves out. Often he had heard people say that; it was such a pleasant way of evading the unpleasant present. But such evasion was not a part of Chic.

"Now I'm going to do it," he said silently to himself.

"Listen, Charmian," a strange, hollow voice began, "there's something I

want to say to you. It's about our getting married. It's this way—er—don't you think we had better think it over first?"

He saw Charmian look at him in astonishment, saw her stiffen. "Think it over first?" What did he mean by that? Her foot was swinging, but when Chic started to talk it stopped, and she sat so very quietly that she seemed hardly to be hearing at all.

Oh, it was quite all right, she said as he finished. She was glad, indeed, that he had come to her and told her frankly that he had fallen in love with another girl. It was much better than to exchange letters, or to do it over the telephone. She quite understood.

"Is it the girl who was in Mr. Zimmerman's office that day at Coney Island" she asked.

"Yes."

"The one you said that you didn't know very well?"

"Yes."

"But you had known her all the time? You had been seeing her and—making love to her all the time you had been coming to see me?"

"Yes," he managed to say.

"And now you are engaged to her?"

"Yes."

"So you think she's very lovely and you want to marry her?"

"Yes."

At last it was over; he stood up, time to go. Although he had not admitted it to himself, he had expected Charmian to weep and to become emotional, but instead of that she was very calm. Now her foot was swinging again; going to the piano, she played a few bars, she smiled.

"Of course it's a shock to her, but she doesn't really care," thought Chic.

"I can see how it is," said Char-

mian. "She's a tight-rope walker, and interested in Coney Island and in show life, and your top will draw you right into that life. I think you two ought to be very happy together, indeed."

"I think so, too," declared Chic.

Chic was now at the door, and as he stood looking at her there was a peculiar, heavy ache in his heart.

"Good-by," he said.

"Good-by."

And then he turned and walked slowly in the direction of the station without looking back.

CHAPTER XXXI

QUEENIE PAYS HER WAY



CHIC could hardly believe what had happened. He went over in his mind the scene at the house and what he had said to her.

It was very simple, not melodramatic at all. He could see her sitting there, very quietly, her foot swinging. The foot stopped, the smile faded from her face, now and then her fingers moved slightly. That was all.

He saw the startled look come into her face when he told her he had been in love with Queenie all the time that he had been engaged to Charmian. He heard again her questions, heard again those short, formal, icy "Good-bys," saw himself walking out as if it mattered not at all.

And now without her, New York seemed lonely again, like when he had first come. There were just as many people as ever; they crowded and pushed and shoved just as much as ever, only in some curious way they didn't seem so real now. Sort of like faint figures moving in a dream. He took a dislike to them. Nobodies,

most of them; just cluttering up valuable space for nothing.

The days at the workshop seemed longer. Seemed as if noon would never come. During the lunch hour he had always come back quickly and studied his books or performed experiments of his own in the laboratory on different phases of radio; but now he lost all interest in them. The books were dry reading; the experiments didn't amount to anything.

Also he had arranged to work two nights a week in an experimental laboratory which he had rented for the purpose from a man who had a well-equipped place, but now he gave this up. It wasn't getting him anywhere, he decided.

He began to go to the theaters more than ever; mostly musical comedies. He liked to see the girls dancing and singing; it got his mind off things, he thought.

But he had no intention of calling Charmian up, or of seeing her again. That was all settled. He would do the square thing by Queenie. Besides, he told himself, Queenie was a very nice girl, indeed; there were many fine things to be said about her.

The radio in his room got so that it scratched and buzzed and was full of static. Now and then he would turn it on, but it only annoyed him. Finally he gave it to the landlady.

At night he had uneasy dreams. But the strange part of it was that they were not about Charmian at all. Usually they were about himself trying to do something, like walking along a road, or climbing a mountainside and finding trees blown across his path. No sense to the dreams.

He didn't like his room. Never had been very good; too noisy, bed was terrible. Street was much more noisy than it used to be. People in the other rooms didn't do anything except quarrel. Landlady was getting too nosey, too. He would pull up stakes and move.

One day a blow fell. He was idly looking

through the paper when his eyes caught a line. It was about the sailings of the steamships: Charmian and her mother were going abroad. Abroad! Going to Italy. Why, she was on the ocean now, at this minute. Chic had a curious, terrified feeling.

Further along in the list of passengers he had found Null and Void. That ol' idiot. Just like him. He'd get her over there and marry her, that's what he'd do.

But, of course, that would be all right, Chic tried to assure himself. She had a perfect right to marry that bespectacled nincompoop, if she wanted to. Of course, she could; he himself was going to marry Queenie. Charmian had a right to marry any-



body she wanted to. It wasn't any concern of his.

But it wasn't all gloom. Wasn't all depression. After the first shock was over, Chic began to think of reasons why he was *glad* that it had happened.

Charmian was richer than he was; he might always be embarrassed by that fact. It had been inconvenient to go to Floral Gardens; late at night the train service was bad. Now he would not have to run around with a lot of her friends that he didn't like. Some of them were pretty weak sisters. Why, after all, it wasn't as bad as he had thought.

On top of it other strange thoughts came tumbling. If Charmian and ol' Null and Void did get married, he probably wouldn't treat her right. That idiot couldn't. And then Charmian would be sorry that she had married him. Maybe ol' Null and Void would die, or she'd divorce him, or something. He himself would meet her on the street, he would see the agony and suffering in her face. But, still, he didn't really want her to suffer.

What a strange confusion his thoughts led him into. Like one of the mystic mazes at Coney Island. Only Coney Island wasn't as interesting and fascinating as it used to be. Pretty cheap in lots of ways.

Other strange things occurred. Mrs. Cotton didn't like New York so well.

The noise got on her nerves. People pushed her on the streets and shoved her in the subway. After you have seen the Fifth Avenue shop windows once there isn't anything new, she said.

The hotels and restaurants had such high prices. She couldn't sleep well at night. People were so impolite.

She would go for walks in Central Park, but they tired her. Afternoons she went to the museums and art galleries; they tired her feet and made her back ache.

In the evenings Chic said he was worn out and would not take her to the places she wanted to go. They began to get on each other's nerves. Now and

then Chic wished she hadn't come to New York at all; his own mother!

At last, Mrs. Cotton decided to go home earlier than she had expected. There were many things at home which needed to be looked after, she said.

Chic and Queenie put her on the train. At last it pulled out. Mrs. Cotton heaved a little sigh and sat looking straight ahead of her as the train rushed through the suburbs which had been so fascinating as she had come into New York.

There were no such moods and depressions for Queenie. A great and wonderful piece of good luck had happened to her; fate had been very kind indeed. And, like all the others among the amusement park people, she be-



lieved in a mysterious and unseen power which exercised force over human beings. Sometimes this power was whimsical and played cruel pranks, sometimes it was beneficent and handed out rich rewards. But always, whatever its mood, it must be placated.

She had strange ideas about good luck and bad luck signs. One of them was to keep an old shoe so that it could always be seen from some place in her room. Another was to have something setting on top of her trunks.

"They're my good luck signs," she would say. And although she took them lightly, and would herself laugh at them, she could not be persuaded to give any of them up.

"You can laugh if you want to," she said to him at another time, "but the week before I met you I went to a mitt reader and she said that inside of a week I was going to meet a light complected man who was going to mean a change in my life, and on the seventh day after that I met you. Laugh that off if you can."

Queenie began to take possession of her man. Here was a handsome young fellow, rather dashing in some ways, and it had been set down by fate that he was going to mean a great change in her life. He was better educated than the young men of the circus and amusement park world. He had been two years at a college, and to Queenie this was greatly impressive. He was going to be a great inventor; if things went right he would have a "ride" in Coney Island, and if it were a success in Coney Island it would go to the amusement parks and summer resorts all over the country.

She began to show him off. Almost at any hour she would call up, and Chic would go down to the wall coin telephone at the bottom of the stair-

way of his rooming house and talk to her.

"Hello, kid," she would say. "How'd you like to go out this evening and step? The Coney Elks are throwing a ball, and I've got a couple of pasteboards. Get into your jewelry and we'll show 'em who's in town."

Chic had to keep a watchful eye on money. He hated to let Queenie know how closely he had to count his pennies, but soon she suspected and very adroitly began to pay the larger expenses.

"Now don't be silly about it," she said practically. "I'm a movie star, I am, and it ain't going to break me up to turn loose some of it. When you get the top going, and the money is coming up and puttin' its head on your shoulder, then it'll be different. I'll act like a lady then, but just now you let me have my way. It's either that or sit at home alone, and you know I ain't strong on lonesome stuff."

Chic protested; it was a man's place to pay the expenses, but it was as she had said; they would have to miss many things all on account of an old-fashioned idea. Whatever Queenie's faults, stinginess was not one of them. She was in love with Chic, he was the finest young man she had ever met; they were going to get married, she had the money, why shouldn't she stand the greater part of the expense?

Chic met her friends oftener and peered more deeply into the life she led. Her friends were "show people"—"performers" they called themselves—and belonged to the world of amusement parks, circuses and carnivals. Their attitude toward the public was a curious one of half disdain and half eagerness to please. The people were "monkeys" and "towners" and "gawks," but at the same time it

amazed him how hard they would work, and to what infinite pains they would go to please this disdained public.

One of her friends was Frozo; it was the only name Chic ever knew him by. Frozo had once been an important person in his little world. He had worked up a ballyhoo in which he took the part of a mechanical doll for a "grind show" at Coney Island.

In front of the show was a platform, screened by a curtain, and when the curtain was drawn aside, Frozo, with the immovable face, would be before the people who were to be "turned" into the show. The barker would deliver his talk, put his hand under Frozo's coat, wind him up, and then Frozo would begin to move his hands and legs with the jerky motions of a mechanical doll while the monkeys tried to decide whether he was real or wax.

Frozo had had many imitators, but none had been so successful as Frozo. Even the best of them could not "turn" the crowds as he could. But those days were over. The mechanical doll game, as Frozo put it, was dead. A new "bally" could last only a certain length of time, when everybody would begin to copy it, and then it would have to be shelved.

Things had not gone well lately with Frozo. Not an amusement park in the country wanted a mechanical doll bally, even by the king of them all, and Frozo had bumped around from one thing to another. He had been an outside talker, an inside lecturer, a clown; he had gone out for a while as an escape artist, but it had been hard sledding.

One day Queenie took Chic to see Frozo. Frozo by this time had moved to a performers' rooming house in the

Forties, near Eighth Avenue, where the strange people on the fringe of the show racket hang out.

"I guess you can hear him all right," the landlady said after they had rung the bell, for the musty hall was filled with weird wailings.

Queenie knocked at the door where the moanings were coming from. There, sitting on the bed, in a frayed and dilapidated bathrobe, was Frozo, practicing on a saxophone.

Say, this was quite a surprise. Set down. Well, he was just learning how to push wind into a sax. Was going to get a good job, too. Big demand for saxophone players.

Tied to the chipped iron grille work of his bed was a book of instructions which he had bought from goodness knows where, and Frozo, who had once been the sensational bally of Coney Island, was now tooting painfully away, trying to master it.

While Queenie and Frozo were talking, Chic took the book which made such golden promises and looked through the table of contents. The book promised to produce the laugh, cry, moan, sneeze, bark, yelp, roar, smear, meow, caw, autohorn, and to perform the "novel effects, tricks and stunts" used by world famous saxophone artists.

Chic marveled at it. What in the world did a smear sound like when produced on a saxophone? What was a caw?

He spoke to Queenie about it, but in it Queenie saw nothing astonishing or amazing. To her it was simply lessons on the saxophone, and "saxes" now were all the go.

"S' long," said Frozo, as Chic and Queenie were leaving. He sat down on the unmade bed again, the little leather strap went over his head, and

as Chic and Queenie started down the hall the saxophone began to cry and moan.

Chic went with her to see other of her friends; they were all of the same kind, although some were more prosperous than others.

Queenie became more and more interested in Chic. It was hard for her to believe that such a simpleton as he had seemed at first, peeking through a window at a dancing class, could really be such a trustworthy and high-minded young man.

There were lots of fakers and gyps and come-on artists in her world, and at first she had watched him critically. Queenie had few illusions about the monkeys who wanted to start an acquaintance with her, but here was a good-looking fellow from some hick town in Missouri or Iowa, or somewhere out there, who didn't pretend anything. Green as grass in lots of ways, sure didn't know anything about girls, but in Queenie's eyes he was a polished gentleman, and she became, as she said, "goofy" about him.

But now as she began earnestly to love him, the wire walker assumed an entirely different attitude. When they had first become acquainted she had kissed him lightly and casually, for kissing meant little in Queenie's life, but gradually her kisses became warm and filled with the quick, deep tenseness of her nature.

Whenever a girl of her type goes into a thing whole-heartedly, a change sweeps over her life.

"According to my way of thinking," Queenie said, "why shouldn't a girl play around a little if she wants to, especially when she knows she's not going to get snagged? But when a girl slips the ring, and says 'I do,' then that's an automobile of a differ-

ent color. She's promised to play fair with her husband as long as he plays fair with her, she ought to do it, and that's what I would do, too. If I got married, and John Gilbert even so much as winked at me, I'd hang one on him."

Then she threw her arms around her man and kissed him with the deep, moving passion which was hers.

At such moments Chic was deeply moved. The thrill of holding her in his arms; the smell of her hair, the faint perfume, the soft ivory whiteness of her skin, the unexpected and astonishing strength which she had for a girl so dainty and shapely.

"I do love her," he would declare to himself. "She's the finest girl in the world!"

But away down at the bottom of some mysterious and uncovered depths of his nature he was not satisfied. She was nice, yes; absolutely fair and square, after one knew her code; warm, generous, affectionate, sometimes witty—"awfully good company," he thought of her as being—and yet he wished she were different. Just how, he hardly knew. Well, more like Charmian. Lovely, cultured, spiritual, high-minded Charmian—

But still that was all over. She'd gone to Europe with ol' Null and Void, probably sittin' around some Italian villa now, and he would be making love to her. *Ugh!* Sickening. That damn fool!

Chic could hardly put his finger on it, this difference between Charmian and Queenie. Of course, Charmian was well educated, could rattle off two or three languages, and had traveled abroad, and was a musician and knew important people. No, it wasn't that. Queenie had her points, too. Big, strong, admirable points. The words

were hard to find, but Charmian had such a—a fine spiritual quality.

CHAPTER XXXII

A MYSTERIOUS INVITATION



OW and then Queenie was in moods. This was strange, too, Chic thought, when everything was coming her way. He and she were to be married, her motion picture was almost finished, she had more money than she had ever had before in all her life, and yet sometimes Queenie appeared troubled.

"What's the matter, dear?" he would ask.

"Oh, nothing. Just fussing about the picture, that's all."

It was in regard to Zimmerman. At first she had been mildly in love with this silent, wordless, dominant showman. He was the most powerful man in the little world she moved in. His name was constantly on the lips of the people she knew. He could lift a person from obscurity to the mountain peaks of success, and if he turned against a person he could break him.

There was glamour in his money and power. His big cars, the "loud" clothes he wore, his ostentation.

To Queenie it was an enviable thing to be able to go into a hotel or a restaurant with a man whose appearance caused a ripple, and whose money could send the bell boys and hotel help scurrying in an effort to please.

At first she had been greatly flattered by his attentions. She was a lucky girl, indeed, every one told her; the great Zimmerman didn't pick up with just everything that came along.

Her rise had been due to him. She had been playing at Meyer's Lake Park, Canton, Ohio, when he had seen

her wire act. His showman's eyes quickly detected the act's possibilities; it needed dressing up; it needed more color, better music, and spot lights instead of floods—it was Coney Island material.

From second and third rate parks to Coney Island had been a tremendous jump for Miss Johnson.

At first Zimmerman had shown no personal interest in her; she was merely an "act"; she entertained the crowds, she made money for him, that was all he asked.

"Girl acts" were everywhere: high divers, the loop-the-loops, the hippodrome riders, the motor cycle girls, the contortionists, snake handlers, dancers, illusion girls, cabaret girls, exhibition swimmers, rodeo riders, mentalists; but he had no interest in them. They had set their caps in vain.

If they made money, all well and good. If they didn't, word would come to them to "drop into the office."

They knew what that meant. Zimmerman would sit at his big, littered desk, his foot usually propped up on one of the open drawers. Or sometimes he would be at the long architect's drawing table covered with blue prints and sketches, perched on a high stool, his heels hooked over the rungs, a thick, deadly looking cigar gripped in the corner of his mouth.

He would look up, study the girl silently a moment, *puff* would come a cloud of smoke.

"I sent for you because I've changed my plans. See Abie Katz about your pay check."

And then his thick, hairy hand would make a slight gesture toward his combined assistant, detail man and general office roustabout.

Many girls had tried their blandishments on the silent, disagreeable, emo-

tionless park king, but they hadn't got far. Sometimes they deliberately tried to trap him, but Zimmerman knew his way about. None of that for him.

"When I go out for a night, I don't mix up no business with it," he would say.

And then he chose for his companions people who knew nothing about him, who had never heard his name, and they would never get it from him, either. He would spend his time, and then would come back to business again—that episode in his life over and forgotten.

Zimmerman had never married. He had never had many "affairs," which was strange in a man so painfully masculine as he was. Now and then, once or twice a year, possibly, he would disappear for a few days.

And then, sitting down at his desk, when he returned, he would begin at the top of the stack of letters and telegrams which his stenographer had neatly arranged for him, ragging open with his fingers the ones he wanted to read, and carelessly tossing aside those of lesser interest. At last he would be at the bottom.

"Greenberg," he would call to the girl stenographer—work had begun again.

Down deep in Zimmerman was a feeling of reverence and respect for what might be called "the one woman." Not that he ever phrased it that way. He either liked a person or he didn't; a person either made money for him or didn't: the decision was simple. But due to some finer streak of his nature, or possibly to some early quirk in his impressionable years, he had a deep and abiding respect for an ideal which lived in a secret nook in his heart.

Sometimes he surprised Miss Green-

berg by pausing, as he shouldered his way through the Coney crowds, to fondle a child that had caught his attention. He would play with it a few minutes, shaking his thick finger at it and making queer sounds, push some passes into the hands of the mother, and then hurry on through the crowds as if to make up for lost time.

Miss Greenberg could never quite understand it. He was just naturally queer, she said.

At first Zimmerman had paid no attention to the new "wire act"; that is, except as to whether or not Queenie was a good show. Did the people like her? That was the important thing. Did it hold them late into the evening? Did she get a good hand? Did she appeal to the women? How about the kids?

Kids were becoming an increasingly important factor at summer parks. In fact, the "kiddie parks" and ride devices were, on their investments, now paying as well as the swimming pools.

Now and then he sent for Queenie Johnson and suggested changes in her act. Instead of dropping her bespangled dressing gown to the floor of the platform at the end of the act, a rack should be put up and she should throw it against that—it would give some color before she made her exit. Keep the spot light on her until she disappeared through the trapdoor, then black out.

Zimmerman began to fall in love with her slowly, that is, if one falls slowly. He was not one to look at a woman once and then become slightly mentally deranged. Too many girls had paraded their charms before the boss for him to be swept from his feet.

Most of the girls who had worked for him, or who wished to catch his eye, had gone out of their way to make

themselves agreeable to him, but Queenie hadn't. About her was a fiery spirit of independence. He could jump into the river, so far as she was concerned.

Probably this was what first attracted him to her. Here was one of the few girls who must be pursued. The others were deer who had come up and sniffed at his gun.

Something new for Zimmerman. And bit by bit he began to pay her attention. The impersonal way she treated him appealed.

Zimmerman wasn't a man to let loose of money easily. Tight as the bark on a tree, except in some ways. These were the ways that made a big display—brightly and highly colored cars, a chauffeur with enough gold braid for a Mexican brigadier general; loud clothes for himself, diamonds, extravagant hats, a bizarre walking stick—show stuff.

But when it came to a business deal he fought and bled and died over a penny. Abie Katz marveled at him, and in comparison looked upon himself as a spendthrift.

And then would come along a proposition to erect a new ride, put up a new Fun House, or a Noah's Ark, and Zimmerman would shock the sensitive Abie by the way he put his hand into the bag.

As Zimmerman's interest in Queenie ripened, he began to spend money needlessly on the act, so Abie thought. He dressed it up, brought out the full band to play for her, put her name in electric lights over the entrance to the park; a bright advertising man was called in and Queenie blossomed out on the billboards, telephone poles, and building lots as "Coney Island's Sweetheart."

At first the only impression it made

on Queenie was that the act was going well; the biggest free outdoor one-person act ever put on at Coney. And then, bit by bit, she began to take an interest in Zimmerman.

Really had a big heart, or had he? She often wondered. Sometimes he did things which shocked her; his cruelty toward any one who opposed him, or blocked his way. Some of the stories that came to her ears were not very pleasant. She did not like to think of them. And then he would do something strangely and unexpectedly fine, and her heart would go out to him.

One thing she liked was that he had never tried to get fresh, as Queenie put it. This was, indeed, a welcome relief after the way most men looked upon a wire walker—open season for them, but Queenie could take care of herself.

It was nice to hop into his car, to give word to the chauffeur, and to be whisked wherever one wished to go. The people of her world treated her with increased respect. "She had Zimmerman shining up to her. Lucky girl!"

He had never learned to dance—never had had time, he said—but now he took it up and applied himself with the relentless determination with which he undertook everything.

"It's more fun than I thought it was going to be," he said to Queenie one evening as he moved across the floor with her in his arms.

The more he saw of Queenie the more devoted he became. That vague secret ideal which he carried in his heart had now found a living counterpart.

As his love had ripened a faint shadow had floated over it. It was hardly worth noticing at first, and then it had grown bigger and blacker. It

was this rube from the sticks who didn't know a tilt-a-whirl from a scooter.

At first he had paid no attention to Chic. Queenie would send him away. But she hadn't. Instead she had grown more interested in this upstart. But Zimmerman said nothing; silently he began to watch and piece together. This gawk was stealing his girl!

Chic knew nothing of what was going on. Mr. Zimmerman was only Queenie's boss, that was all. He knew that Zimmerman acted queer, but Mr. Zimmerman was always kind of queer. Hard to get a line on. Seemed grouchy sometimes. Made him feel uneasy and guilty to talk to him. But he was pushing the top along, so everything must be all right.

Then one day the telephone rang, and the landlady shouted up the stair-

way as if trying to communicate with some one on a Zeppelin, but when Chic went down it wasn't Queenie at all. Instead it was Abie Katz.

"The chief wants you to come out to the plant to-morrow; something special, he says."

What did this mean? "The plant" was the factory where the top was being built, a short distance outside of New York. But why did Mr. Zimmerman want to see him at the plant? Never before had Zimmerman encouraged him to visit the factory; now and then Zimmerman invited the inventor to his New York office, only a step from Broadway, but here was a special message to go to the factory.

"Maybe he wants to make some change in the top," thought Chic. Of course, that was it, he decided.

Well, to-morrow he'd go.

THE CLOSING INSTALLMENT OF "CONEY ISLAND," IN MUNSEY'S NEXT MONTH, WILL WEAVE THE THREADS OF LOVE AND TRAGEDY INTO A BEAUTIFUL PATTERN THAT WILL "MAKE YOU LAUGH, MAKE YOU CRY"



WHEN AUTUMN COMES

ALWAYS when autumn comes—'tis here to-day,
The moaning tree-tops rocking like a sea,
Leaves in full flight—I hide with you away
Over the fire: such is my fantasy,
Feigning you here, and take you on my knee
And kiss your eyelids as I used to do,
And marvel that so fair a thing can be—
Thus every autumn I come back to you.

Richard Le Gallienne



THE LAST ROSE

A VALIANT rose defies the autumn blight
In frail apparel of unsullied white,
Blooming benignly at the tangled edge
Of leaf and brier in the ancient hedge;
Beauty that lingers through the frosty morn
Above the keen stilettos of the thorn.

William Hamilton Hayne