ДЖЕК ЛОНДОН

MOON-FACE, AND OTHER STORIES

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Moon-Face, and Other Stories

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Содержание

Jack London
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MOON-FACE

John Claverhouse was a moon-faced man. You know the kind, cheek-bones wide apart, chin and forehead melting into the cheeks to complete the perfect round, and the nose, broad and pudgy, equidistant from the circumference, flattened against the very centre of the face like a dough-ball upon the ceiling. Perhaps that is why I hated him, for truly he had become an offense to my eyes, and I believed the earth to be cumbered with his presence. Perhaps my mother may have been superstitious of the moon and looked upon it over the wrong shoulder at the wrong time.

Be that as it may, I hated John Claverhouse. Not that he had done me what society would consider a wrong or an ill turn. Far from it. The evil was of a deeper, subtler sort; so elusive, so intangible, as to defy clear, definite analysis in words. We all experience such things at some period in our lives. For the first time we see a certain individual, one who the very instant before we did not dream existed; and yet, at the first moment of meeting, we say: "I do not like that man." Why do we not like him? Ah, we do not know why; we know only that we do not. We have taken a dislike, that is all. And so I with John Claverhouse.

What right had such a man to be happy? Yet he was an optimist. He was always gleeful and laughing. All things were always all right, curse him! Ah I how it grated on my soul that he should be so happy! Other men could laugh, and it did not bother me. I even used to laugh myself – before I met John Claverhouse.

But his laugh! It irritated me, maddened me, as nothing else under the sun could irritate or madden me. It haunted me, gripped hold of me, and would not let me go. It was a huge, Gargantuan laugh. Waking or sleeping it was always with me, whirring and jarring across my heart-strings like an enormous rasp. At break of day it came whooping across the fields to spoil my pleasant morning revery. Under the aching noonday glare, when the green things drooped and the birds withdrew to the depths of the forest, and all nature drowsed, his great "Ha! ha!" and "Ho! ho!" rose up to the sky and challenged the sun. And at black midnight, from the lonely cross-roads where he turned from town into his own place, came his plaguey cachinnations to rouse me from my sleep and make me writhe and clench my nails into my palms.

I went forth privily in the night-time, and turned his cattle into his fields, and in the morning heard his whooping laugh as he drove them out again. "It is nothing," he said; "the poor, dumb beasties are not to be blamed for straying into fatter pastures."

He had a dog he called "Mars," a big, splendid brute, part deer-hound and part blood-hound, and resembling both. Mars was a great delight to him, and they were always together. But I bided my time, and one day, when opportunity was ripe, lured the animal away and settled for him with strychnine and beefsteak. It made positively no impression on John Claverhouse. His laugh was as hearty and frequent as ever, and his face as much like the full moon as it always had been.

Then I set fire to his haystacks and his barn. But the next morning, being Sunday, he went forth blithe and cheerful.

"Where are you going?" I asked him, as he went by the cross-roads.

"Trout," he said, and his face beamed like a full moon. "I just dote on trout."

Was there ever such an impossible man! His whole harvest had gone up in his haystacks and barn. It was uninsured, I knew. And yet, in the face of famine and the rigorous winter, he went out gayly in quest of a mess of trout, forsooth, because he "doted" on them! Had gloom but rested, no matter how lightly, on his brow, or had his bovine countenance grown long and serious and less like

the moon, or had he removed that smile but once from off his face, I am sure I could have forgiven him for existing. But no, he grew only more cheerful under misfortune.

I insulted him. He looked at me in slow and smiling surprise.

"I fight you? Why?" he asked slowly. And then he laughed. "You are so funny! Ho! ho! You'll be the death of me! He! he! he! Oh! Ho! ho! ho!"

What would you? It was past endurance. By the blood of Judas, how I hated him! Then there was that name – Claverhouse! What a name! Wasn't it absurd? Claverhouse! Merciful heaven, WHY Claverhouse? Again and again I asked myself that question. I should not have minded Smith, or Brown, or Jones – but CLAVERHOUSE! I leave it to you. Repeat it to yourself – Claverhouse. Just listen to the ridiculous sound of it – Claverhouse! Should a man live with such a name? I ask of you. "No," you say. And "No" said I.

But I bethought me of his mortgage. What of his crops and barn destroyed, I knew he would be unable to meet it. So I got a shrewd, close-mouthed, tight-fisted money-lender to get the mortgage transferred to him. I did not appear but through this agent I forced the foreclosure, and but few days (no more, believe me, than the law allowed) were given John Claverhouse to remove his goods and chattels from the premises. Then I strolled down to see how he took it, for he had lived there upward of twenty years. But he met me with his saucer-eyes twinkling, and the light glowing and spreading in his face till it was as a full-risen moon.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed. "The funniest tike, that youngster of mine! Did you ever hear the like? Let me tell you. He was down playing by the edge of the river when a piece of the bank caved in and splashed him. 'O papa!' he cried; 'a great big puddle flewed up and hit me.'"

He stopped and waited for me to join him in his infernal glee.

"I don't see any laugh in it," I said shortly, and I know my face went sour.

He regarded me with wonderment, and then came the damnable light, glowing and spreading, as I have described it, till his face shone soft and warm, like the summer moon, and then the laugh – "Ha! ha! That's funny! You don't see it, eh? He! he! Ho! ho! ho! He doesn't see it! Why, look here. You know a puddle – "

But I turned on my heel and left him. That was the last. I could stand it no longer. The thing must end right there, I thought, curse him! The earth should be quit of him. And as I went over the hill, I could hear his monstrous laugh reverberating against the sky.

Now, I pride myself on doing things neatly, and when I resolved to kill John Claverhouse I had it in mind to do so in such fashion that I should not look back upon it and feel ashamed. I hate bungling, and I hate brutality. To me there is something repugnant in merely striking a man with one's naked fist – faugh! it is sickening! So, to shoot, or stab, or club John Claverhouse (oh, that name!) did not appeal to me. And not only was I impelled to do it neatly and artistically, but also in such manner that not the slightest possible suspicion could be directed against me.

To this end I bent my intellect, and, after a week of profound incubation, I hatched the scheme. Then I set to work. I bought a water spaniel bitch, five months old, and devoted my whole attention to her training. Had any one spied upon me, they would have remarked that this training consisted entirely of one thing – RETRIEVING. I taught the dog, which I called "Bellona," to fetch sticks I threw into the water, and not only to fetch, but to fetch at once, without mouthing or playing with them. The point was that she was to stop for nothing, but to deliver the stick in all haste. I made a practice of running away and leaving her to chase me, with the stick in her mouth, till she caught me. She was a bright animal, and took to the game with such eagerness that I was soon content.

After that, at the first casual opportunity, I presented Bellona to John Claverhouse. I knew what I was about, for I was aware of a little weakness of his, and of a little private sinning of which he was regularly and inveterately guilty.

"No," he said, when I placed the end of the rope in his hand. "No, you don't mean it." And his mouth opened wide and he grinned all over his damnable moon-face.

"I – I kind of thought, somehow, you didn't like me," he explained. "Wasn't it funny for me to make such a mistake?" And at the thought he held his sides with laughter.

"What is her name?" he managed to ask between paroxysms.

"Bellona," I said.

"He! he!" he tittered. "What a funny name."

I gritted my teeth, for his mirth put them on edge, and snapped out between them, "She was the wife of Mars, you know."

Then the light of the full moon began to suffuse his face, until he exploded with: "That was my other dog. Well, I guess she's a widow now. Oh! Ho! ho! E! he! he! Ho!" he whooped after me, and I turned and fled swiftly over the hill.

The week passed by, and on Saturday evening I said to him, "You go away Monday, don't you?"

He nodded his head and grinned.

"Then you won't have another chance to get a mess of those trout you just 'dote' on."

But he did not notice the sneer. "Oh, I don't know," he chuckled. "I'm going up to-morrow to try pretty hard."

Thus was assurance made doubly sure, and I went back to my house hugging myself with rapture.

Early next morning I saw him go by with a dip-net and gunnysack, and Bellona trotting at his heels. I knew where he was bound, and cut out by the back pasture and climbed through the underbrush to the top of the mountain. Keeping carefully out of sight, I followed the crest along for a couple of miles to a natural amphitheatre in the hills, where the little river raced down out of a gorge and stopped for breath in a large and placid rock-bound pool. That was the spot! I sat down on the croup of the mountain, where I could see all that occurred, and lighted my pipe.

Ere many minutes had passed, John Claverhouse came plodding up the bed of the stream. Bellona was ambling about him, and they were in high feather, her short, snappy barks mingling with his deeper chest-notes. Arrived at the pool, he threw down the dip-net and sack, and drew from his hip-pocket what looked like a large, fat candle. But I knew it to be a stick of "giant"; for such was his method of catching trout. He dynamited them. He attached the fuse by wrapping the "giant" tightly in a piece of cotton. Then he ignited the fuse and tossed the explosive into the pool.

Like a flash, Bellona was into the pool after it. I could have shrieked aloud for joy. Claverhouse yelled at her, but without avail. He pelted her with clods and rocks, but she swam steadily on till she got the stick of "giant" in her mouth, when she whirled about and headed for shore. Then, for the first time, he realized his danger, and started to run. As foreseen and planned by me, she made the bank and took out after him. Oh, I tell you, it was great! As I have said, the pool lay in a sort of amphitheatre. Above and below, the stream could be crossed on stepping-stones. And around and around, up and down and across the stones, raced Claverhouse and Bellona. I could never have believed that such an ungainly man could run so fast. But run he did, Bellona hot-footed after him, and gaining. And then, just as she caught up, he in full stride, and she leaping with nose at his knee, there was a sudden flash, a burst of smoke, a terrific detonation, and where man and dog had been the instant before there was naught to be seen but a big hole in the ground.

"Death from accident while engaged in illegal fishing." That was the verdict of the coroner's jury; and that is why I pride myself on the neat and artistic way in which I finished off John Claverhouse. There was no bungling, no brutality; nothing of which to be ashamed in the whole transaction, as I am sure you will agree. No more does his infernal laugh go echoing among the hills, and no more does his fat moon-face rise up to vex me. My days are peaceful now, and my night's sleep deep.

THE LEOPARD MAN'S STORY

He had a dreamy, far-away look in his eyes, and his sad, insistent voice, gentle-spoken as a maid's, seemed the placid embodiment of some deep-seated melancholy. He was the Leopard Man, but he did not look it. His business in life, whereby he lived, was to appear in a cage of performing leopards before vast audiences, and to thrill those audiences by certain exhibitions of nerve for which his employers rewarded him on a scale commensurate with the thrills he produced.

As I say, he did not look it. He was narrow-hipped, narrow-shouldered, and anaemic, while he seemed not so much oppressed by gloom as by a sweet and gentle sadness, the weight of which was as sweetly and gently borne. For an hour I had been trying to get a story out of him, but he appeared to lack imagination. To him there was no romance in his gorgeous career, no deeds of daring, no thrills – nothing but a gray sameness and infinite boredom.

Lions? Oh, yes! he had fought with them. It was nothing. All you had to do was to stay sober. Anybody could whip a lion to a standstill with an ordinary stick. He had fought one for half an hour once. Just hit him on the nose every time he rushed, and when he got artful and rushed with his head down, why, the thing to do was to stick out your leg. When he grabbed at the leg you drew it back and hit hint on the nose again. That was all.

With the far-away look in his eyes and his soft flow of words he showed me his scars. There were many of them, and one recent one where a tigress had reached for his shoulder and gone down to the bone. I could see the neatly mended rents in the coat he had on. His right arm, from the elbow down, looked as though it had gone through a threshing machine, what of the ravage wrought by claws and fangs. But it was nothing, he said, only the old wounds bothered him somewhat when rainy weather came on.

Suddenly his face brightened with a recollection, for he was really as anxious to give me a story as I was to get it.

"I suppose you've heard of the lion-tamer who was hated by another man?" he asked.

He paused and looked pensively at a sick lion in the cage opposite.

"Got the toothache," he explained. "Well, the lion-tamer's big play to the audience was putting his head in a lion's mouth. The man who hated him attended every performance in the hope sometime of seeing that lion crunch down. He followed the show about all over the country. The years went by and he grew old, and the lion-tamer grew old, and the lion grew old. And at last one day, sitting in a front seat, he saw what he had waited for. The lion crunched down, and there wasn't any need to call a doctor."

The Leopard Man glanced casually over his finger nails in a manner which would have been critical had it not been so sad.

"Now, that's what I call patience," he continued, "and it's my style. But it was not the style of a fellow I knew. He was a little, thin, sawed-off, sword-swallowing and juggling Frenchman. De Ville, he called himself, and he had a nice wife. She did trapeze work and used to dive from under the roof into a net, turning over once on the way as nice as you please.

"De Ville had a quick temper, as quick as his hand, and his hand was as quick as the paw of a tiger. One day, because the ring-master called him a frog-eater, or something like that and maybe a little worse, he shoved him against the soft pine background he used in his knife-throwing act, so quick the ring-master didn't have time to think, and there, before the audience, De Ville kept the air on fire with his knives, sinking them into the wood all around the ring-master so close that they passed through his clothes and most of them bit into his skin.

"The clowns had to pull the knives out to get him loose, for he was pinned fast. So the word went around to watch out for De Ville, and no one dared be more than barely civil to his wife. And she was a sly bit of baggage, too, only all hands were afraid of De Ville.

"But there was one man, Wallace, who was afraid of nothing. He was the lion-tamer, and he had the self-same trick of putting his head into the lion's mouth. He'd put it into the mouths of any of them, though he preferred Augustus, a big, good-natured beast who could always be depended upon.

"As I was saying, Wallace – 'King' Wallace we called him – was afraid of nothing alive or dead. He was a king and no mistake. I've seen him drunk, and on a wager go into the cage of a lion that'd turned nasty, and without a stick beat him to a finish. Just did it with his fist on the nose.

"Madame de Ville – "

At an uproar behind us the Leopard Man turned quietly around. It was a divided cage, and a monkey, poking through the bars and around the partition, had had its paw seized by a big gray wolf who was trying to pull it off by main strength. The arm seemed stretching out longer end longer like a thick elastic, and the unfortunate monkey's mates were raising a terrible din. No keeper was at hand, so the Leopard Man stepped over a couple of paces, dealt the wolf a sharp blow on the nose with the light cane he carried, and returned with a sadly apologetic smile to take up his unfinished sentence as though there had been no interruption.

" – looked at King Wallace and King Wallace looked at her, while De Ville looked black. We warned Wallace, but it was no use. He laughed at us, as he laughed at De Ville one day when he shoved De Ville's head into a bucket of paste because he wanted to fight.

"De Ville was in a pretty mess – I helped to scrape him off; but he was cool as a cucumber and made no threats at all. But I saw a glitter in his eyes which I had seen often in the eyes of wild beasts, and I went out of my way to give Wallace a final warning. He laughed, but he did not look so much in Madame de Ville's direction after that.

"Several months passed by. Nothing had happened and I was beginning to think it all a scare over nothing. We were West by that time, showing in 'Frisco. It was during the afternoon performance, and the big tent was filled with women and children, when I went looking for Red Denny, the head canvas-man, who had walked off with my pocket-knife.

"Passing by one of the dressing tents I glanced in through a hole in the canvas to see if I could locate him. He wasn't there, but directly in front of me was King Wallace, in tights, waiting for his turn to go on with his cage of performing lions. He was watching with much amusement a quarrel between a couple of trapeze artists. All the rest of the people in the dressing tent were watching the same thing, with the exception of De Ville whom I noticed staring at Wallace with undisguised hatred. Wallace and the rest were all too busy following the quarrel to notice this or what followed.

"But I saw it through the hole in the canvas. De Ville drew his handkerchief from his pocket, made as though to mop the sweat from his face with it (it was a hot day), and at the same time walked past Wallace's back. The look troubled me at the time, for not only did I see hatred in it, but I saw triumph as well.

"'De Ville will bear watching,' I said to myself, and I really breathed easier when I saw him go out the entrance to the circus grounds and board an electric car for down town. A few minutes later I was in the big tent, where I had overhauled Red Denny. King Wallace was doing his turn and holding the audience spellbound. He was in a particularly vicious mood, and he kept the lions stirred up till they were all snarling, that is, all of them except old Augustus, and he was just too fat and lazy and old to get stirred up over anything.

"Finally Wallace cracked the old lion's knees with his whip and got him into position. Old Augustus, blinking good-naturedly, opened his mouth and in popped Wallace's head. Then the jaws came together, CRUNCH, just like that."

The Leopard Man smiled in a sweetly wistful fashion, and the far-away look came into his eyes.

"And that was the end of King Wallace," he went on in his sad, low voice. "After the excitement cooled down I watched my chance and bent over and smelled Wallace's head. Then I sneezed."

"It… it was…?" I queried with halting eagerness.

“Snuff – that De Ville dropped on his hair in the dressing tent. Old Augustus never meant to do it. He only sneezed.”

LOCAL COLOR

"I do not see why you should not turn this immense amount of unusual information to account," I told him. "Unlike most men equipped with similar knowledge, YOU have expression. Your style is – "

"Is sufficiently – er – journalese?" he interrupted suavely.

"Precisely! You could turn a pretty penny."

But he interlocked his fingers meditatively, shrugged his shoulders, and dismissed the subject.

"I have tried it. It does not pay."

"It was paid for and published," he added, after a pause. "And I was also honored with sixty days in the Hobo."

"The Hobo?" I ventured.

"The Hobo – " He fixed his eyes on my Spencer and ran along the titles while he cast his definition. "The Hobo, my dear fellow, is the name for that particular place of detention in city and county jails wherein are assembled tramps, drunks, beggars, and the riff-raff of petty offenders. The word itself is a pretty one, and it has a history. Hautbois – there's the French of it. Haut, meaning high, and bois, wood. In English it becomes hautboy, a wooden musical instrument of two-foot tone, I believe, played with a double reed, an oboe, in fact. You remember in 'Henry IV' —

"'The case of a treble hautboy
Was a mansion for him, a court.'

"From this to ho-boy is but a step, and for that matter the English used the terms interchangeably. But – and mark you, the leap paralyzes one – crossing the Western Ocean, in New York City, hautboy, or ho-boy, becomes the name by which the night-scavenger is known. In a way one understands its being born of the contempt for wandering players and musical fellows. But see the beauty of it! the burn and the brand! The night-scavenger, the pariah, the miserable, the despised, the man without caste! And in its next incarnation, consistently and logically, it attaches itself to the American outcast, namely, the tramp. Then, as others have mutilated its sense, the tramp mutilates its form, and ho-boy becomes exultantly hobo. Wherefore, the large stone and brick cells, lined with double and triple-tiered bunks, in which the Law is wont to incarcerate him, he calls the Hobo. Interesting, isn't it?"

And I sat back and marvelled secretly at this encyclopaedic-minded man, this Leith Clay-Randolph, this common tramp who made himself at home in my den, charmed such friends as gathered at my small table, outshone me with his brilliance and his manners, spent my spending money, smoked my best cigars, and selected from my ties and studs with a cultivated and discriminating eye.

He absently walked over to the shelves and looked into Loria's "Economic Foundation of Society."

"I like to talk with you," he remarked. "You are not indifferently schooled. You've read the books, and your economic interpretation of history, as you choose to call it" (this with a sneer), "eminently fits you for an intellectual outlook on life. But your sociologic judgments are vitiated by your lack of practical knowledge. Now I, who know the books, pardon me, somewhat better than you, know life, too. I have lived it, naked, taken it up in both my hands and looked at it, and tasted it, the flesh and the blood of it, and, being purely an intellectual, I have been biased by neither passion nor prejudice. All of which is necessary for clear concepts, and all of which you lack. Ah! a really clever passage. Listen!"

And he read aloud to me in his remarkable style, paralleling the text with a running criticism and commentary, lucidly wording involved and lumbering periods, casting side and cross lights upon the subject, introducing points the author had blundered past and objections he had ignored, catching up lost ends, flinging a contrast into a paradox and reducing it to a coherent and succinctly stated truth – in short, flashing his luminous genius in a blaze of fire over pages erstwhile dull and heavy and lifeless.

It is long since that Leith Clay-Randolph (note the hyphenated surname) knocked at the back door of Idlewild and melted the heart of Gunda. Now Gunda was cold as her Norway hills, though in her least frigid moods she was capable of permitting especially nice-looking tramps to sit on the back stoop and devour lone crusts and forlorn and forsaken chops. But that a tatterdemalion out of the night should invade the sanctity of her kitchen-kingdom and delay dinner while she set a place for him in the warmest corner, was a matter of such moment that the Sunflower went to see. Ah, the Sunflower, of the soft heart and swift sympathy! Leith Clay-Randolph threw his glamour over her for fifteen long minutes, whilst I brooded with my cigar, and then she fluttered back with vague words and the suggestion of a cast-off suit I would never miss.

"Surely I shall never miss it," I said, and I had in mind the dark gray suit with the pockets draggled from the freightage of many books – books that had spoiled more than one day's fishing sport.

"I should advise you, however," I added, "to mend the pockets first."

But the Sunflower's face clouded. "N – o," she said, "the black one."

"The black one!" This explosively, incredulously. "I wear it quite often. I – I intended wearing it to-night."

"You have two better ones, and you know I never liked it, dear," the Sunflower hurried on. "Besides, it's shiny – "

"Shiny!"

"It – it soon will be, which is just the same, and the man is really estimable. He is nice and refined, and I am sure he – "

"Has seen better days."

"Yes, and the weather is raw and beastly, and his clothes are threadbare. And you have many suits – "

"Five," I corrected, "counting in the dark gray fishing outfit with the draggled pockets."

"And he has none, no home, nothing – "

"Not even a Sunflower," – putting my arm around her, – "wherefore he is deserving of all things. Give him the black suit, dear – nay, the best one, the very best one. Under high heaven for such lack there must be compensation!"

"You ARE a dear!" And the Sunflower moved to the door and looked back alluringly. "You are a PERFECT dear."

And this after seven years, I marvelled, till she was back again, timid and apologetic.

"I – I gave him one of your white shirts. He wore a cheap horrid cotton thing, and I knew it would look ridiculous. And then his shoes were so slipshod, I let him have a pair of yours, the old ones with the narrow caps – "

"Old ones!"

"Well, they pinched horribly, and you know they did."

It was ever thus the Sunflower vindicated things.

And so Leith Clay-Randolph came to Idlewild to stay, how long I did not dream. Nor did I dream how often he was to come, for he was like an erratic comet. Fresh he would arrive, and cleanly clad, from grand folk who were his friends as I was his friend, and again, weary and worn, he would creep up the brier-rose path from the Montanas or Mexico. And without a word, when his wanderlust gripped him, he was off and away into that great mysterious underworld he called "The Road."

"I could not bring myself to leave until I had thanked you, you of the open hand and heart," he said, on the night he donned my good black suit.

And I confess I was startled when I glanced over the top of my paper and saw a lofty-browed and eminently respectable-looking gentleman, boldly and carelessly at ease. The Sunflower was right. He must have known better days for the black suit and white shirt to have effected such a transformation. Involuntarily I rose to my feet, prompted to meet him on equal ground. And then it was that the Clay-Randolph glamour descended upon me. He slept at Idlewild that night, and the next night, and for many nights. And he was a man to love. The Son of Anak, otherwise Rufus the Blue-Eyed, and also plebeianly known as Tots, rioted with him from brier-rose path to farthest orchard, scalped him in the haymow with barbaric yells, and once, with pharisaic zeal, was near to crucifying him under the attic roof beams. The Sunflower would have loved him for the Son of Anak's sake, had she not loved him for his own. As for myself, let the Sunflower tell, in the times he elected to be gone, of how often I wondered when Leith would come back again, Leith the Lovable. Yet he was a man of whom we knew nothing. Beyond the fact that he was Kentucky-born, his past was a blank. He never spoke of it. And he was a man who prided himself upon his utter divorce of reason from emotion. To him the world spelled itself out in problems. I charged him once with being guilty of emotion when roaring round the den with the Son of Anak pickaback. Not so, he held. Could he not cuddle a sense-delight for the problem's sake?

He was elusive. A man who intermingled nameless argot with polysyllabic and technical terms, he would seem sometimes the veriest criminal, in speech, face, expression, everything; at other times the cultured and polished gentleman, and again, the philosopher and scientist. But there was something glimmering; there which I never caught – flashes of sincerity, of real feeling, I imagined, which were sped ere I could grasp; echoes of the man he once was, possibly, or hints of the man behind the mask. But the mask he never lifted, and the real man we never knew.

"But the sixty days with which you were rewarded for your journalism?" I asked. "Never mind Loria. Tell me."

"Well, if I must." He flung one knee over the other with a short laugh.

"In a town that shall be nameless," he began, "in fact, a city of fifty thousand, a fair and beautiful city wherein men slave for dollars and women for dress, an idea came to me. My front was prepossessing, as fronts go, and my pockets empty. I had in recollection a thought I once entertained of writing a reconciliation of Kant and Spencer. Not that they are reconcilable, of course, but the room offered for scientific satire – "

I waved my hand impatiently, and he broke off.

"I was just tracing my mental states for you, in order to show the genesis of the action," he explained. "However, the idea came. What was the matter with a tramp sketch for the daily press? The Irreconcilability of the Constable and the Tramp, for instance? So I hit the drag (the drag, my dear fellow, is merely the street), or the high places, if you will, for a newspaper office. The elevator whisked me into the sky, and Cerberus, in the guise of an anaemic office boy, guarded the door. Consumption, one could see it at a glance; nerve, Irish, colossal; tenacity, undoubted; dead inside the year.

"'Pale youth,' quoth I, 'I pray thee the way to the sanctum-sanctorum, to the Most High Cock-a-lorum.'

"He deigned to look at me, scornfully, with infinite weariness.

"'G'wan an' see the janitor. I don't know nothin' about the gas.'

"'Nay, my lily-white, the editor.'

"'Wich editor?' he snapped like a young bullterrier. 'Dramatic? Sportin'? Society? Sunday? Weekly? Daily? Telegraph? Local? News? Editorial? Wich?'

"Which, I did not know. 'THE Editor,' I proclaimed stoutly. 'The ONLY Editor.'

"'Aw, Spargo!' he sniffed.

"'Of course, Spargo,' I answered. 'Who else?'

"'Gimme yer card,' says he.

"'My what?'

"'Yer card – Say! Wot's yer business, anyway?'

"And the anaemic Cerberus sized me up with so insolent an eye that I reached over and took him out of his chair. I knocked on his meagre chest with my fore knuckle, and fetched forth a weak, gaspy cough; but he looked at me unflinchingly, much like a defiant sparrow held in the hand.

"'I am the census-taker Time,' I boomed in sepulchral tones. 'Beware lest I knock too loud.'

"'Oh, I don't know,' he sneered.

"Whereupon I rapped him smartly, and he choked and turned purplish.

"'Well, whatcher want?' he wheezed with returning breath.

"'I want Spargo, the only Spargo.'

"'Then leave go, an' I'll glide an' see.'

"'No you don't, my lily-white.' And I took a tighter grip on his collar. 'No bouncers in mine, understand! I'll go along.'"

Leith dreamily surveyed the long ash of his cigar and turned to me. "Do you know, Anak, you can't appreciate the joy of being the buffoon, playing the clown. You couldn't do it if you wished. Your pitiful little conventions and smug assumptions of decency would prevent. But simply to turn loose your soul to every whimsicality, to play the fool unafraid of any possible result, why, that requires a man other than a householder and law-respecting citizen.

"However, as I was saying, I saw the only Spargo. He was a big, beefy, red-faced personage, full-jowled and double-chinned, sweating at his desk in his shirt-sleeves. It was August, you know. He was talking into a telephone when I entered, or swearing rather, I should say, and the while studying me with his eyes. When he hung up, he turned to me expectantly.

"'You are a very busy man,' I said.

"He jerked a nod with his head, and waited.

"'And after all, is it worth it?' I went on. 'What does life mean that it should make you sweat? What justification do you find in sweat? Now look at me. I toil not, neither do I spin – '

"'Who are you? What are you?' he bellowed with a suddenness that was, well, rude, tearing the words out as a dog does a bone.

"'A very pertinent question, sir,' I acknowledged. 'First, I am a man; next, a down-trodden American citizen. I am cursed with neither profession, trade, nor expectations. Like Esau, I am pottageless. My residence is everywhere; the sky is my coverlet. I am one of the dispossessed, a sansculotte, a proletarian, or, in simpler phraseology addressed to your understanding, a tramp.'

"'What the hell – ?'

"'Nay, fair sir, a tramp, a man of devious ways and strange lodgements and multifarious – '

"'Quit it!' he shouted. 'What do you want?'

"'I want money.'

"He started and half reached for an open drawer where must have reposed a revolver, then bethought himself and growled, 'This is no bank.'

"'Nor have I checks to cash. But I have, sir, an idea, which, by your leave and kind assistance, I shall transmute into cash. In short, how does a tramp sketch, done by a tramp to the life, strike you? Are you open to it? Do your readers hunger for it? Do they crave after it? Can they be happy without it?'

"I thought for a moment that he would have apoplexy, but he quelled the unruly blood and said he liked my nerve. I thanked him and assured him I liked it myself. Then he offered me a cigar and said he thought he'd do business with me.

"'But mind you,' he said, when he had jabbed a bunch of copy paper into my hand and given me a pencil from his vest pocket, 'mind you, I won't stand for the high and flighty philosophical, and

I perceive you have a tendency that way. Throw in the local color, wads of it, and a bit of sentiment perhaps, but no slumgullion about political economy nor social strata or such stuff. Make it concrete, to the point, with snap and go and life, crisp and crackling and interesting – tumble?'

"And I tumbled and borrowed a dollar.

"'Don't forget the local color!' he shouted after me through the door.

"And, Anak, it was the local color that did for me.

"The anaemic Cerberus grinned when I took the elevator. 'Got the bounce, eh?'

"'Nay, pale youth, so lily-white,' I chortled, waving the copy paper; 'not the bounce, but a detail. I'll be City Editor in three months, and then I'll make you jump.'

"And as the elevator stopped at the next floor down to take on a pair of maids, he strolled over to the shaft, and without frills or verbiage consigned me and my detail to perdition. But I liked him. He had pluck and was unafraid, and he knew, as well as I, that death clutched him close."

"But how could you, Leith," I cried, the picture of the consumptive lad strong before me, "how could you treat him so barbarously?"

Leith laughed dryly. "My dear fellow, how often must I explain to you your confusions? Orthodox sentiment and stereotyped emotion master you. And then your temperament! You are really incapable of rational judgments. Cerberus? Pshaw! A flash expiring, a mote of fading sparkle, a dim-pulsing and dying organism – pouf! a snap of the fingers, a puff of breath, what would you? A pawn in the game of life. Not even a problem. There is no problem in a stillborn babe, nor in a dead child. They never arrived. Nor did Cerberus. Now for a really pretty problem – "

"But the local color?" I prodded him.

"That's right," he replied. "Keep me in the running. Well, I took my handful of copy paper down to the railroad yards (for local color), dangled my legs from a side-door Pullman, which is another name for a box-car, and ran off the stuff. Of course I made it clever and brilliant and all that, with my little unanswerable slings at the state and my social paradoxes, and withal made it concrete enough to dissatisfy the average citizen.

"From the tramp standpoint, the constabulary of the township was particularly rotten, and I proceeded to open the eyes of the good people. It is a proposition, mathematically demonstrable, that it costs the community more to arrest, convict, and confine its tramps in jail, than to send them as guests, for like periods of time, to the best hotel. And this I developed, giving the facts and figures, the constable fees and the mileage, and the court and jail expenses. Oh, it was convincing, and it was true; and I did it in a lightly humorous fashion which fetched the laugh and left the sting. The main objection to the system, I contended, was the defraudment and robbery of the tramp. The good money which the community paid out for him should enable him to riot in luxury instead of rotting in dungeons. I even drew the figures so fine as to permit him not only to live in the best hotel but to smoke two twenty-five-cent cigars and indulge in a ten-cent shine each day, and still not cost the taxpayers so much as they were accustomed to pay for his conviction and jail entertainment. And, as subsequent events proved, it made the taxpayers wince.

"One of the constables I drew to the life; nor did I forget a certain Sol Glenhart, as rotten a police judge as was to be found between the seas. And this I say out of a vast experience. While he was notorious in local trampdom, his civic sins were not only not unknown but a crying reproach to the townspeople. Of course I refrained from mentioning name or habitat, drawing the picture in an impersonal, composite sort of way, which none the less blinded no one to the faithfulness of the local color.

"Naturally, myself a tramp, the tenor of the article was a protest against the maltreatment of the tramp. Cutting the taxpayers to the pits of their purses threw them open to sentiment, and then in I tossed the sentiment, lumps and chunks of it. Trust me, it was excellently done, and the rhetoric – say! Just listen to the tail of my peroration:

"'So, as we go mooching along the drag, with a sharp lamp out for John Law, we cannot help remembering that we are beyond the pale; that our ways are not their ways; and that the ways of John Law with us are different from his ways with other men. Poor lost souls, wailing for a crust in the dark, we know full well our helplessness and ignominy. And well may we repeat after a stricken brother over-seas: "Our pride it is to know no spur of pride." Man has forgotten us; God has forgotten us; only are we remembered by the harpies of justice, who prey upon our distress and coin our sighs and tears into bright shining dollars.'

"Incidentally, my picture of Sol Glenhart, the police judge, was good. A striking likeness, and unmistakable, with phrases tripping along like this: 'This crook-nosed, gross-bodied harpy'; 'this civic sinner, this judicial highwayman'; 'possessing the morals of the Tenderloin and an honor which thieves' honor puts to shame'; 'who compounds criminality with shyster-sharks, and in atonement railroads the unfortunate and impecunious to rotting cells,' – and so forth and so forth, style sophomoric and devoid of the dignity and tone one would employ in a dissertation on 'Surplus Value,' or 'The Fallacies of Marxism,' but just the stuff the dear public likes.

"'Humph!' grunted Spargo when I put the copy in his fist. 'Swift gait you strike, my man.'

"I fixed a hypnotic eye on his vest pocket, and he passed out one of his superior cigars, which I burned while he ran through the stuff. Twice or thrice he looked over the top of the paper at me, searchingly, but said nothing till he had finished.

"'Where'd you work, you pencil-pusher?' he asked.

"'My maiden effort,' I simpered modestly, scraping one foot and faintly simulating embarrassment.

"'Maiden hell! What salary do you want?'

"'Nay, nay,' I answered. 'No salary in mine, thank you most to death. I am a free down-trodden American citizen, and no man shall say my time is his.'

"'Save John Law,' he chuckled.

"'Save John Law,' said I.

"'How did you know I was bucking the police department?' he demanded abruptly.

"'I didn't know, but I knew you were in training,' I answered. 'Yesterday morning a charitably inclined female presented me with three biscuits, a piece of cheese, and a funereal slab of chocolate cake, all wrapped in the current Clarion, wherein I noted an unholy glee because the Cowbell's candidate for chief of police had been turned down. Likewise I learned the municipal election was at hand, and put two and two together. Another mayor, and the right kind, means new police commissioners; new police commissioners means new chief of police; new chief of police means Cowbell's candidate; ergo, your turn to play.'

"He stood up, shook my hand, and emptied his plethoric vest pocket. I put them away and puffed on the old one.

"'You'll do,' he jubilated. 'This stuff' (patting my copy) 'is the first gun of the campaign. You'll touch off many another before we're done. I've been looking for you for years. Come on in on the editorial.'

"But I shook my head.

"'Come, now!' he admonished sharply. 'No shenanagan! The Cowbell must have you. It hungers for you, craves after you, won't be happy till it gets you. What say?'

"In short, he wrestled with me, but I was bricks, and at the end of half an hour the only Spargo gave it up.

"'Remember,' he said, 'any time you reconsider, I'm open. No matter where you are, wire me and I'll send the ducats to come on at once.'

"I thanked him, and asked the pay for my copy – dope, he called it.

"'Oh, regular routine,' he said. 'Get it the first Thursday after publication.'

"'Then I'll have to trouble you for a few scad until – '

"He looked at me and smiled. 'Better cough up, eh?'

"'Sure,' I said. 'Nobody to identify me, so make it cash.'

"And cash it was made, thirty plunks (a plunk is a dollar, my dear Anak), and I pulled my freight… eh? – oh, departed.

"'Pale youth,' I said to Cerberus, 'I am bounced.' (He grinned with pallid joy.) 'And in token of the sincere esteem I bear you, receive this little – ' (His eyes flushed and he threw up one hand, swiftly, to guard his head from the expected blow) – 'this little memento.'

"I had intended to slip a fiver into his hand, but for all his surprise, he was too quick for me.

"'Aw, keep yer dirt,' he snarled.

"'I like you still better,' I said, adding a second fiver. 'You grow perfect. But you must take it.'

"He backed away growling, but I caught him round the neck, roughed what little wind he had out of him, and left him doubled up with the two fives in his pocket. But hardly had the elevator started, when the two coins tinkled on the roof and fell down between the car and the shaft. As luck had it, the door was not closed, and I put out my hand and caught them. The elevator boy's eyes bulged.

"'It's a way I have,' I said, pocketing them.

"'Some bloke's dropped 'em down the shaft,' he whispered, awed by the circumstance.

"'It stands to reason,' said I.

"'I'll take charge of 'em,' he volunteered.

"'Nonsense!'

"'You'd better turn 'em over,' he threatened, 'or I stop the works.'

"'Pshaw!'

"And stop he did, between floors.

"'Young man,' I said, 'have you a mother?' (He looked serious, as though regretting his act! and further to impress him I rolled up my right sleeve with greatest care.) 'Are you prepared to die?' (I got a stealthy crouch on, and put a cat-foot forward.) 'But a minute, a brief minute, stands between you and eternity.' (Here I crooked my right hand into a claw and slid the other foot up.) 'Young man, young man,' I trumpeted, 'in thirty seconds I shall tear your heart dripping from your bosom and stoop to hear you shriek in hell.'

"It fetched him. He gave one whoop, the car shot down, and I was on the drag. You see, Anak, it's a habit I can't shake off of leaving vivid memories behind. No one ever forgets me.

"I had not got to the corner when I heard a familiar voice at my shoulder:

"'Hello, Cinders! Which way?'

"It was Chi Slim, who had been with me once when I was thrown off a freight in Jacksonville. 'Couldn't see 'em fer cinders,' he described it, and the monica stuck by me… Monica? From monos. The tramp nickname.

"'Bound south,' I answered. 'And how's Slim?'

"'Bum. Bulls is horstile.'

"'Where's the push?'

"'At the hang-out. I'll put you wise.'

"'Who's the main guy?'

"'Me, and don't yer ferget it.'"

The lingo was rippling from Leith's lips, but perforce I stopped him. "Pray translate. Remember, I am a foreigner."

"Certainly," he answered cheerfully. "Slim is in poor luck. Bull means policeman. He tells me the bulls are hostile. I ask where the push is, the gang he travels with. By putting me wise he will direct me to where the gang is hanging out. The main guy is the leader. Slim claims that distinction.

"Slim and I hiked out to a neck of woods just beyond town, and there was the push, a score of husky hobos, charmingly located on the bank of a little purling stream.

"'Come on, you mugs!' Slim addressed them. 'Throw yer feet! Here's Cinders, an' we must do 'em proud.'

"All of which signifies that the hobos had better strike out and do some lively begging in order to get the wherewithal to celebrate my return to the fold after a year's separation. But I flashed my dough and Slim sent several of the younger men off to buy the booze. Take my word for it, Anak, it was a blow-out memorable in Trampdom to this day. It's amazing the quantity of booze thirty plunks will buy, and it is equally amazing the quantity of booze outside of which twenty stiffs will get. Beer and cheap wine made up the card, with alcohol thrown in for the blowd-in-the-glass stiffs. It was great – an orgy under the sky, a contest of beaker-men, a study in primitive beastliness. To me there is something fascinating in a drunken man, and were I a college president I should institute P.G. psychology courses in practical drunkenness. It would beat the books and compete with the laboratory.

"All of which is neither here nor there, for after sixteen hours of it, early next morning, the whole push was copped by an overwhelming array of constables and carted off to jail. After breakfast, about ten o'clock, we were lined upstairs into court, limp and spiritless, the twenty of us. And there, under his purple panoply, nose crooked like a Napoleonic eagle and eyes glittering and beady, sat Sol Glenhart.

"'John Ambrose!' the clerk called out, and Chi Slim, with the ease of long practice, stood up.

"'Vagrant, your Honor,' the bailiff volunteered, and his Honor, not deigning to look at the prisoner, snapped, 'Ten days,' and Chi Slim sat down.

"And so it went, with the monotony of clockwork, fifteen seconds to the man, four men to the minute, the mugs bobbing up and down in turn like marionettes. The clerk called the name, the bailiff the offence, the judge the sentence, and the man sat down. That was all. Simple, eh? Superb!

"Chi Slim nudged me. 'Give'm a spiel, Cinders. You kin do it.'

"I shook my head.

"'G'wan,' he urged. 'Give 'm a ghost story The mugs'll take it all right. And you kin throw yer feet fer tobacco for us till we get out.'

"'L. C. Randolph!' the clerk called.

"I stood up, but a hitch came in the proceedings. The clerk whispered to the judge, and the bailiff smiled.

"'You are a newspaper man, I understand, Mr. Randolph?' his Honor remarked sweetly.

"It took me by surprise, for I had forgotten the Cowbell in the excitement of succeeding events, and I now saw myself on the edge of the pit I had digged.

"'That's yer graft. Work it,' Slim prompted.

"'It's all over but the shouting,' I groaned back, but Slim, unaware of the article, was puzzled.

"'Your Honor,' I answered, 'when I can get work, that is my occupation.'

"'You take quite an interest in local affairs, I see.' (Here his Honor took up the morning's Cowbell and ran his eye up and down a column I knew was mine.) 'Color is good,' he commented, an appreciative twinkle in his eyes; 'pictures excellent, characterized by broad, Sargent-like effects. Now this…t his judge you have depicted… you, ah, draw from life, I presume?'

"'Rarely, your I Honor,' I answered. 'Composites, ideals, rather … er, types, I may say.'

"'But you have color, sir, unmistakable color,' he continued.

"'That is splashed on afterward,' I explained.

"'This judge, then, is not modelled from life, as one might be led to believe?'

"'No, your Honor.'

"'Ah, I see, merely a type of judicial wickedness?'

"'Nay, more, your Honor,' I said boldly, 'an ideal.'

"'Splashed with local color afterward? Ha! Good! And may I venture to ask how much you received for this bit of work?'

"'Thirty dollars, your Honor.'

"'Hum, good!' And his tone abruptly changed. 'Young man, local color is a bad thing. I find you guilty of it and sentence you to thirty days' imprisonment, or, at your pleasure, impose a fine of thirty dollars.'

"'Alas!' said I, 'I spent the thirty dollars in riotous living.'

"'And thirty days more for wasting your substance.'

"'Next case!' said his Honor to the clerk.

"Slim was stunned. 'Gee!' he whispered. 'Gee the push gets ten days and you get sixty. Gee!'"

Leith struck a match, lighted his dead cigar, and opened the book on his knees. "Returning to the original conversation, don't you find, Anak, that though Loria handles the bipartition of the revenues with scrupulous care, he yet omits one important factor, namely – "

"Yes," I said absently; "yes."

AMATEUR NIGHT

The elevator boy smiled knowingly to himself. When he took her up, he had noted the sparkle in her eyes, the color in her cheeks. His little cage had quite warmed with the glow of her repressed eagerness. And now, on the down trip, it was glacier-like. The sparkle and the color were gone. She was frowning, and what little he could see of her eyes was cold and steel-gray. Oh, he knew the symptoms, he did. He was an observer, and he knew it, too, and some day, when he was big enough, he was going to be a reporter, sure. And in the meantime he studied the procession of life as it streamed up and down eighteen sky-scraper floors in his elevator car. He slid the door open for her sympathetically and watched her trip determinedly out into the street.

There was a robustness in her carriage which came of the soil rather than of the city pavement. But it was a robustness in a finer than the wonted sense, a vigorous daintiness, it might be called, which gave an impression of virility with none of the womanly left out. It told of a heredity of seekers and fighters, of people that worked stoutly with head and hand, of ghosts that reached down out of the misty past and moulded and made her to be a doer of things.

But she was a little angry, and a great deal hurt. “I can guess what you would tell me,” the editor had kindly but firmly interrupted her lengthy preamble in the long-looked-forward-to interview just ended. “And you have told me enough,” he had gone on (heartlessly, she was sure, as she went over the conversation in its freshness). “You have done no newspaper work. You are undrilled, undisciplined, unhammered into shape. You have received a high-school education, and possibly topped it off with normal school or college. You have stood well in English. Your friends have all told you how cleverly you write, and how beautifully, and so forth and so forth. You think you can do newspaper work, and you want me to put you on. Well, I am sorry, but there are no openings. If you knew how crowded – ”

“But if there are no openings,” she had interrupted, in turn, “how did those who are in, get in? How am I to show that I am eligible to get in?”

“They made themselves indispensable,” was the terse response. “Make yourself indispensable.”

“But how can I, if I do not get the chance?”

“Make your chance.”

“But how?” she had insisted, at the same time privately deeming him a most unreasonable man.

“How? That is your business, not mine,” he said conclusively, rising in token that the interview was at an end. “I must inform you, my dear young lady, that there have been at least eighteen other aspiring young ladies here this week, and that I have not the time to tell each and every one of them how. The function I perform on this paper is hardly that of instructor in a school of journalism.”

She caught an outbound car, and ere she descended from it she had conned the conversation over and over again. “But how?” she repeated to herself, as she climbed the three flights of stairs to the rooms where she and her sister “bach’ed.” “But how?” And so she continued to put the interrogation, for the stubborn Scotch blood, though many times removed from Scottish soil, was still strong in her. And, further, there was need that she should learn how. Her sister Letty and she had come up from an interior town to the city to make their way in the world. John Wyman was land-poor. Disastrous business enterprises had burdened his acres and forced his two girls, Edna and Letty, into doing something for themselves. A year of school-teaching and of night-study of shorthand and typewriting had capitalized their city project and fitted them for the venture, which same venture was turning out anything but successful. The city seemed crowded with inexperienced stenographers and typewriters, and they had nothing but their own inexperience to offer. Edna’s secret ambition had been journalism; but she had planned a clerical position first, so that she might have time and space in which to determine where and on what line of journalism she would embark. But the clerical position had not been forthcoming, either for Letty or her, and day by day their little hoard dwindled, though

the room rent remained normal and the stove consumed coal with undiminished voracity. And it was a slim little hoard by now.

"There's Max Irwin," Letty said, talking it over. "He's a journalist with a national reputation. Go and see him, Ed. He knows how, and he should be able to tell you how."

"But I don't know him," Edna objected.

"No more than you knew the editor you saw to-day."

"Y-e-s," (long and judicially), "but that's different."

"Not a bit different from the strange men and women you'll interview when you've learned how," Letty encouraged.

"I hadn't looked at it in that light," Edna conceded. "After all, where's the difference between interviewing Mr. Max Irwin for some paper, or interviewing Mr. Max Irwin for myself? It will be practice, too. I'll go and look him up in the directory."

"Letty, I know I can write if I get the chance," she announced decisively a moment later. "I just FEEL that I have the feel of it, if you know what I mean."

And Letty knew and nodded. "I wonder what he is like?" she asked softly.

"I'll make it my business to find out," Edna assured her; "and I'll let you know inside forty-eight hours."

Letty clapped her hands. "Good! That's the newspaper spirit! Make it twenty-four hours and you are perfect!"

* * *

" – and I am very sorry to trouble you," she concluded the statement of her case to Max Irwin, famous war correspondent and veteran journalist.

"Not at all," he answered, with a deprecatory wave of the hand. "If you don't do your own talking, who's to do it for you? Now I understand your predicament precisely. You want to get on the Intelligencer, you want to get in at once, and you have had no previous experience. In the first place, then, have you any pull? There are a dozen men in the city, a line from whom would be an open-sesame. After that you would stand or fall by your own ability. There's Senator Longbridge, for instance, and Claus Inskeep the street-car magnate, and Lane, and McChesney – " He paused, with voice suspended.

"I am sure I know none of them," she answered despondently.

"It's not necessary. Do you know any one that knows them? or any one that knows any one else that knows them?"

Edna shook her head.

"Then we must think of something else," he went on, cheerfully. "You'll have to do something yourself. Let me see."

He stopped and thought for a moment, with closed eyes and wrinkled forehead. She was watching him, studying him intently, when his blue eyes opened with a snap and his face suddenly brightened.

"I have it! But no, wait a minute."

And for a minute it was his turn to study her. And study her he did, till she could feel her cheeks flushing under his gaze.

"You'll do, I think, though it remains to be seen," he said enigmatically. "It will show the stuff that's in you, besides, and it will be a better claim upon the Intelligencer people than all the lines from all the senators and magnates in the world. The thing for you is to do Amateur Night at the Loops."

"I – I hardly understand," Edna said, for his suggestion conveyed no meaning to her. "What are the 'Loops'? and what is 'Amateur Night'?"

"I forgot you said you were from the interior. But so much the better, if you've only got the journalistic grip. It will be a first impression, and first impressions are always unbiased, unprejudiced, fresh, vivid. The Loops are out on the rim of the city, near the Park, – a place of diversion. There's a scenic railway, a water toboggan slide, a concert band, a theatre, wild animals, moving pictures, and so forth and so forth. The common people go there to look at the animals and enjoy themselves, and the other people go there to enjoy themselves by watching the common people enjoy themselves. A democratic, fresh-air-breathing, frolicking affair, that's what the Loops are.

"But the theatre is what concerns you. It's vaudeville. One turn follows another – jugglers, acrobats, rubber-jointed wonders, fire-dancers, coon-song artists, singers, players, female impersonators, sentimental soloists, and so forth and so forth. These people are professional vaudevillists. They make their living that way. Many are excellently paid. Some are free rovers, doing a turn wherever they can get an opening, at the Obermann, the Orpheus, the Alcatraz, the Louvre, and so forth and so forth. Others cover circuit pretty well all over the country. An interesting phase of life, and the pay is big enough to attract many aspirants.

"Now the management of the Loops, in its bid for popularity, instituted what is called 'Amateur Night'; that is to say, twice a week, after the professionals have done their turns, the stage is given over to the aspiring amateurs. The audience remains to criticise. The populace becomes the arbiter of art – or it thinks it does, which is the same thing; and it pays its money and is well pleased with itself, and Amateur Night is a paying proposition to the management.

"But the point of Amateur Night, and it is well to note it, is that these amateurs are not really amateurs. They are paid for doing their turn. At the best, they may be termed 'professional amateurs.' It stands to reason that the management could not get people to face a rampant audience for nothing, and on such occasions the audience certainly goes mad. It's great fun – for the audience. But the thing for you to do, and it requires nerve, I assure you, is to go out, make arrangements for two turns, (Wednesday and Saturday nights, I believe), do your two turns, and write it up for the Sunday Intelligencer."

"But – but," she quavered, "I – I – " and there was a suggestion of disappointment and tears in her voice.

"I see," he said kindly. "You were expecting something else, something different, something better. We all do at first. But remember the admiral of the Queen's Na-vee, who swept the floor and polished up the handle of the big front door. You must face the drudgery of apprenticeship or quit right now. What do you say?"

The abruptness with which he demanded her decision startled her. As she faltered, she could see a shade of disappointment beginning to darken his face.

"In a way it must be considered a test," he added encouragingly. "A severe one, but so much the better. Now is the time. Are you game?"

"I'll try," she said faintly, at the same time making a note of the directness, abruptness, and haste of these city men with whom she was coming in contact.

"Good! Why, when I started in, I had the dreariest, deadliest details imaginable. And after that, for a weary time, I did the police and divorce courts. But it all came well in the end and did me good. You are luckier in making your start with Sunday work. It's not particularly great. What of it? Do it. Show the stuff you're made of, and you'll get a call for better work – better class and better pay. Now you go out this afternoon to the Loops, and engage to do two turns."

"But what kind of turns can I do?" Edna asked dubiously.

"Do? That's easy. Can you sing? Never mind, don't need to sing. Screech, do anything – that's what you're paid for, to afford amusement, to give bad art for the populace to howl down. And when you do your turn, take some one along for chaperon. Be afraid of no one. Talk up. Move about among the amateurs waiting their turn, pump them, study them, photograph them in your brain. Get the atmosphere, the color, strong color, lots of it. Dig right in with both hands, and get the essence of it,

the spirit, the significance. What does it mean? Find out what it means. That's what you're there for. That's what the readers of the Sunday Intelligencer want to know.

"Be terse in style, vigorous of phrase, apt, concretely apt, in similitude. Avoid platitudes and commonplaces. Exercise selection. Seize upon things salient, eliminate the rest, and you have pictures. Paint those pictures in words and the Intelligencer will have you. Get hold of a few back numbers, and study the Sunday Intelligencer feature story. Tell it all in the opening paragraph as advertisement of contents, and in the contents tell it all over again. Then put a snapper at the end, so if they're crowded for space they can cut off your contents anywhere, reattach the snapper, and the story will still retain form. There, that's enough. Study the rest out for yourself."

They both rose to their feet, Edna quite carried away by his enthusiasm and his quick, jerky sentences, bristling with the things she wanted to know.

"And remember, Miss Wyman, if you're ambitious, that the aim and end of journalism is not the feature article. Avoid the rut. The feature is a trick. Master it, but don't let it master you. But master it you must; for if you can't learn to do a feature well, you can never expect to do anything better. In short, put your whole self into it, and yet, outside of it, above it, remain yourself, if you follow me. And now good luck to you."

They had reached the door and were shaking hands.

"And one thing more," he interrupted her thanks, "let me see your copy before you turn it in. I may be able to put you straight here and there."

Edna found the manager of the Loops a full-fleshed, heavy-jowled man, bushy of eyebrow and generally belligerent of aspect, with an absent-minded scowl on his face and a black cigar stuck in the midst thereof. Symes was his name, she had learned, Ernst Symes.

"Whatcher turn?" he demanded, ere half her brief application had left her lips.

"Sentimental soloist, soprano," she answered promptly, remembering Irwin's advice to talk up.

"Whatcher name?" Mr. Symes asked, scarcely deigning to glance at her.

She hesitated. So rapidly had she been rushed into the adventure that she had not considered the question of a name at all.

"Any name? Stage name?" he bellowed impatiently.

"Nan Bellayne," she invented on the spur of the moment. "B-e-l-l-a-y-n-e. Yes, that's it."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.