FRANK NORRIS

BLIX

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Содержание

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Chapter I

It had just struck nine from the cuckoo clock that hung over the mantelpiece in the dining-room, when Victorine brought in the halved watermelon and set it in front of Mr. Bessemer's plate. Then she went down to the front door for the damp, twisted roll of the Sunday morning's paper, and came back and rang the breakfast-bell for the second time.

As the family still hesitated to appear, she went to the bay window at the end of the room, and stood there for a moment looking out. The view was wonderful. The Bessemers lived upon the Washington Street hill, almost at its very summit, in a flat in the third story of the building. The contractor had been clever enough to reverse the position of kitchen and dining-room, so that the latter room was at the rear of the house. From its window one could command a sweep of San Francisco Bay and the Contra Costa shore, from Mount Diablo, along past Oakland, Berkeley, Sausalito, and Mount Tamalpais, out to the Golden Gate, the Presidio, the ocean, and even—on very clear days—to the Farrallone islands.

For some time Victorine stood looking down at the great expanse of land and sea, then faced about with an impatient exclamation.

On Sundays all the week-day regime of the family was deranged, and breakfast was a movable feast, to be had any time after seven or before half-past nine. As Victorine was pouring the ice-water, Mr. Bessemer himself came in, and addressed himself at once to his meal, without so much as a thought of waiting for the others.

He was a little round man. He wore a skull-cap to keep his bald spot warm, and read his paper through a reading-glass. The expression of his face, wrinkled and bearded, the eyes shadowed by enormous gray eyebrows, was that of an amiable gorilla.

Bessemer was one of those men who seem entirely disassociated from their families. Only on rare and intense occasions did his paternal spirit or instincts assert themselves. At table he talked but little. Though devotedly fond of his eldest daughter, she was a puzzle and a stranger to him. His interests and hers were absolutely dissimilar. The children he seldom spoke to but to reprove; while Howard, the son, the ten-year-old and terrible infant of the household, he always referred to as "that boy."

He was an abstracted, self-centred old man, with but two hobbies—homoeopathy and the mechanism of clocks. But he had a strange way of talking to himself in a low voice, keeping up a running, half-whispered comment upon his own doings and actions; as, for instance, upon this occasion: "Nine o'clock—the clock's a little fast. I think I'll wind my watch. No, I've forgotten my watch. Watermelon this morning, eh? Where's a knife? I'll have a little salt. Victorine's forgot the spoons—ha, here's a spoon! No, it's a knife I want."

After he had finished his watermelon, and while Victorine was pouring his coffee, the two children came in, scrambling to their places, and drumming on the table with their knife-handles.

The son and heir, Howard, was very much a boy. He played baseball too well to be a very good boy, and for the sake of his own self-respect maintained an attitude of perpetual revolt against his older sister, who, as much as possible, took the place of the mother, long since dead. Under her supervision, Howard blacked his own shoes every morning before breakfast, changed his underclothes twice a week, and was dissuaded from playing with the dentist's son who lived three doors below and who had St. Vitus' dance.

His little sister was much more tractable. She had been christened Alberta, and was called Snooky. She promised to be pretty when she grew up, but was at this time in that distressing transitional stage between twelve and fifteen; was long-legged, and endowed with all the awkwardness of a colt. Her shoes were still innocent of heels; but on those occasions when she was allowed to wear her tiny first pair of corsets she was exalted to an almost celestial pitch of silent ecstasy. The clasp of the miniature stays around her small body was like the embrace of a little lover, and awoke in her ideas that were as vague, as immature and unformed as the straight little figure itself.

When Snooky and Howard had seated themselves, but one chair—at the end of the breakfast-table, opposite Mr. Bessemer—remained vacant.

"Is your sister—is Miss Travis going to have her breakfast now? Is she got up yet?" inquired Victorine of Howard and Snooky, as she pushed the cream pitcher out of Howard's reach. It was significant of Mr. Bessemer's relations with his family that Victorine did not address her question to him.

"Yes, yes, she's coming," said both the children, speaking together; and Howard added: "Here she comes now."

Travis Bessemer came in. Even in San Francisco, where all women are more or less beautiful, Travis passed for a beautiful girl. She was young, but tall as most men, and solidly, almost heavily built. Her shoulders were broad, her chest was deep, her neck round and firm. She radiated health; there were exuberance and vitality in the very touch of her foot upon the carpet, and there was that cleanliness about her, that freshness, that suggested a recent plunge in the surf and a "constitutional" along the beach. One felt that here was stamina, good physical force, and fine animal vigor. Her arms were large, her wrists were large, and her fingers did not taper. Her hair was of a brown so light as to be almost yellow. In fact, it would be safer to call it yellow from the start—not golden nor flaxen, but plain, honest yellow. The skin of her face was clean and white, except where it flushed to a most charming pink upon her smooth, cool cheeks. Her lips were full and red, her chin very round and a little salient. Curiously enough, her eyes were small—small, but of the deepest, deepest brown, and always twinkling and alight, as though she were just ready to smile or had just done smiling, one could not say which. And nothing could have been more delightful than these sloe-brown, glinting little eyes of hers set off by her white skin and yellow hair.

She impressed one as being a very normal girl: nothing morbid about her, nothing nervous or false or overwrought. You did not expect to find her introspective. You felt sure that her mental life was not at all the result of thoughts and reflections germinating from within, but rather of impressions and sensations that came to her from without. There was nothing extraordinary about Travis. She never had her vagaries, was not moody—depressed one day and exalted the next. She was just a good, sweet, natural, healthy-minded, healthy-bodied girl, honest, strong, self-reliant, and good-tempered.

Though she was not yet dressed for church, there was style in her to the pointed tips of her patent-leather slippers. She wore a heavy black overskirt that rustled in delicious fashion over the colored silk skirt beneath, and a white shirt-waist, striped black, and starched to a rattling stiffness. Her neck was swathed tight and high with a broad ribbon of white satin, while around her waist, in place of a belt, she wore the huge dog-collar of a St. Bernard—a chic little idea which was all her own, and of which she was very proud.

She was as trig and trim and crisp as a crack yacht: not a pin was loose, not a seam that did not fall in its precise right line; and with every movement there emanated from her a barely perceptible delicious feminine odor—an odor that was in part perfume, but mostly a subtle, vague smell, charming beyond words, that came from her hair, her neck, her arms—her whole sweet personality. She was nineteen years old.

She sat down to breakfast and ate heartily, though with her attention divided between Howard—who was atrociously bad, as usual of a Sunday morning—and her father's plate. Mr. Bessemer was

as like as not to leave the table without any breakfast at all unless his fruit, chops, and coffee were actually thrust under his nose.

"Papum," she called, speaking clear and distinct, as though to the deaf, "there's your coffee there at your elbow; be careful, you'll tip it over. Victorine, push his cup further on the table. Is it strong enough for you, Papum?"

"Eh? Ah, yes—yes—yes," murmured the old man, looking vaguely about him; "coffee, to be sure"—and he emptied the cup at a single draught, hardly knowing whether it was coffee or tea. "Now I'll take a roll," he continued, in a monotonous murmur. "Where are the rolls? Here they are. Hot rolls are bad for my digestion—I ought to eat bread. I think I eat too much. Where's my place in the paper?—always lose my place in the paper. Clever editorials this fellow Eastman writes, unbiassed by party prejudice—unbiassed—unbiassed." His voice died to a whisper.

The breakfast proceeded, Travis supervising everything that went forward, even giving directions to Victorine as to the hour for serving dinner. It was while she was talking to Victorine as to this matter that Snooky began to whine.

"Stop!"

"And tell Maggie," pursued Travis, "to fricassee her chicken, and not to have it too well done—"

"Sto-o-op!" whined Snooky again.

"And leave the heart out for Papum. He likes the heart—"

"Sto-o-op!"

"Unbiassed by prejudice," murmured Mr. Bessemer, "vigorous and to the point. I'll have another roll."

"Pa, make Howard stop!"

"Howard!" exclaimed Travis; "what is it now?"

"Howard's squirting watermelon-seeds at me," whined Snooky, "and Pa won't make him stop."

"Oh, I didn't so!" vociferated Howard. "I only held one between my fingers, and it just kind of shot out."

"You'll come upstairs with me in just five minutes," announced Travis, "and get ready for Sunday-school."

Howard knew that his older sister's decisions were as the laws of the Persians, and found means to finish his breakfast within the specified time, though not without protest. Once upstairs, however, the usual Sunday morning drama of despatching him to Sunday-school in presentable condition was enacted. At every moment his voice could be heard uplifted in shrill expostulation and debate. No, his hands were clean enough, and he didn't see why he had to wear that little old pink tie; and, oh! his new shoes were too tight and hurt his sore toe; and he wouldn't, he wouldn't—no, not if he were killed for it, change his shirt. Not for a moment did Travis lose her temper with him. But "very well," she declared at length, "the next time she saw that little Miner girl she would tell her that he had said she was his beau-heart. NOW would he hold still while she brushed his hair?"

At a few minutes before eleven Travis and her father went to church. They were Episcopalians, and for time out of mind had rented a half-pew in the church of their denomination on California Street, not far from Chinatown. By noon the family reassembled at dinner-table, where Mr. Bessemer ate his chicken-heart—after Travis had thrice reminded him of it—and expressed himself as to the sermon and the minister's theology: sometimes to his daughter and sometimes to himself.

After dinner Howard and Snooky foregathered in the nursery with their beloved lead soldiers; Travis went to her room to write letters; and Mr. Bessemer sat in the bay window of the dining-room reading the paper from end to end.

At five Travis bestirred herself. It was Victorine's afternoon out. Travis set the table, spreading a cover of blue denim edged with white braid, which showed off the silver and the set of delft—her great and never-ending joy—to great effect. Then she tied her apron about her, and went into the kitchen to make the mayonnaise dressing for the potato salad, to slice the ham, and to help the

cook (a most inefficient Irish person, taken on only for that month during the absence of the family's beloved and venerated Sing Wo) in the matter of preparing the Sunday evening tea.

Tea was had at half-past five. Never in the history of the family had its menu varied: cold ham, potato salad, pork and beans, canned fruit, chocolate, and the inevitable pitcher of ice-water.

In the absence of Victorine, Maggie waited on the table, very uncomfortable in her one good dress and stiff white apron. She stood off from the table, making awkward dabs at it from time to time. In her excess of deference she developed a clumsiness that was beyond all expression. She passed the plates upon the wrong side, and remembered herself with a broken apology at inopportune moments. She dropped a spoon, she spilled the ice-water. She handled the delft cups and platters with an exaggerated solicitude, as though they were glass bombs. She brushed the crumbs into their laps instead of into the crumb-tray, and at last, when she had sat even Travis' placid nerves in a jangle, was dismissed to the kitchen, and retired with a gasp of unspeakable relief.

Suddenly there came a prolonged trilling of the electric bell, and Howard flashed a grin at Travis. Snooky jumped up and pushed back, crying out: "I'll go! I'll go!"

Mr. Bessemer glanced nervously at Travis. "That's Mr. Rivers, isn't it, daughter?" Travis smiled. "Well, I think I'll—I think I'd better—" he began.

"No," said Travis, "I don't want you to, Papum; you sit right where you are. How absurd!"

The old man dropped obediently back into his seat.

"That's all right, Maggie," said Travis as the cook reappeared from the pantry. "Snooky went."

"Huh!" exclaimed Howard, his grin widening. "Huh!"

"And remember one thing, Howard," remarked Travis calmly, "don't you ever again ask Mr. Rivers for a nickel to put in your bank."

Mr. Bessemer roused up. "Did that boy do that?" he inquired sharply of Travis.

"Well, well, he won't do it again," said Travis soothingly. The old man glared for an instant at Howard, who shifted uneasily in his seat. But meanwhile Snooky had clambered down to the outside door, and before anything further could be said young Rivers came into the dining-room.

Chapter II

For some reason, never made sufficiently clear, Rivers' parents had handicapped him from the baptismal font with the prenomen of Conde, which, however, upon Anglo-Saxon tongues, had been promptly modified to Condy, or even, among his familiar and intimate friends, to Conny. Asked as to his birthplace—for no Californian assumes that his neighbor is born in the State—Condy was wont to reply that he was "bawn 'n' rais'" in Chicago; "but," he always added, "I couldn't help that, you know." His people had come West in the early eighties, just in time to bury the father in alien soil. Condy was an only child. He was educated at the State University, had a finishing year at Yale, and a few months after his return home was taken on the staff of the San Francisco "Daily Times" as an associate editor of its Sunday supplement. For Condy had developed a taste and talent in the matter of writing. Short stories were his mania. He had begun by an inoculation of the Kipling virus, had suffered an almost fatal attack of Harding Davis, and had even been affected by Maupassant. He "went in" for accuracy of detail; held that if one wrote a story involving firemen one should have, or seem to have, every detail of the department at his fingers' ends, and should "bring in" to the tale all manner of technical names and cant phrases.

Much of his work on the Sunday supplement of "The Times" was of the hack order—special articles, write-ups, and interviews. About once a month, however, he wrote a short story, and of late, now that he was convalescing from Maupassant and had begun to be somewhat himself, these stories had improved in quality, and one or two had even been copied in the Eastern journals. He earned $100 a month.

When Snooky had let him in, Rivers dashed up the stairs of the Bessemers' flat, two at a time, tossed his stick into a porcelain cane-rack in the hall, wrenched off his overcoat with a single movement, and precipitated himself, panting, into the dining-room, tugging at his gloves.

He was twenty-eight years old—nearly ten years older than Travis; tall and somewhat lean; his face smooth-shaven and pink all over, as if he had just given it a violent rubbing with a crash towel. Unlike most writing folk, he dressed himself according to prevailing custom. But Condy overdid the matter. His scarfs and cravats were too bright, his colored shirt-bosoms were too broadly barred, his waistcoats too extreme. Even Travis, as she rose to his abrupt entrance? told herself that of a Sunday evening a pink shirt and scarlet tie were a combination hardly to be forgiven.

Condy shook her hand in both of his, then rushed over to Mr. Bessemer, exclaiming between breaths: "Don't get up, sir—don't THINK of it! Heavens! I'm disgustingly late. You're all through. My watch—this beastly watch of mine—I can't imagine how I came to be so late. You did quite right not to wait."

Then as his morbidly keen observation caught a certain look of blankness on Travis' face, and his rapid glance noted no vacant chair at table, he gave a quick gasp of dismay.

"Heavens and earth! didn't you EXPECT me?" he cried. "I thought you said—I thought—I must have forgotten—I must have got it mixed up somehow. What a hideous mistake, what a blunder! What a fool I am!"

He dropped into a chair against the wall and mopped his forehead with a blue-bordered handkerchief.

"Well, what difference does it make, Condy?" said Travis quietly. "I'll put another place for you."

"No, no!" he vociferated, jumping up. "I won't hear of it, I won't permit it! You'll think I did it on purpose!"

Travis ignored his interference, and made a place for him opposite the children, and had Maggie make some more chocolate.

Condy meanwhile covered himself with opprobrium.

"And all this trouble—I always make trouble everywhere I go. Always a round man in a square hole, or a square man in a round hole."

He got up and sat down again, crossed and recrossed his legs, picked up little ornaments from the mantelpiece, and replaced them without consciousness of what they were, and finally broke the crystal of his watch as he was resetting it by the cuckoo clock.

"Hello!" he exclaimed suddenly, "where did you get that clock? Where did you get that clock? That's new to me. Where did that come from?"

"That cuckoo clock?" inquired Travis, with a stare. "Condy Rivers, you've been here and in this room at least twice a week for the last year and a half, and that clock, and no other, has always hung there."

But already Condy had forgotten or lost interest in the clock.

"Is that so? is that so?" he murmured absent-mindedly, seating himself at the table.

Mr. Bessemer was murmuring: "That clock's a little fast. I can not make that clock keep time. Victorine has lost the key. I have to wind it with a monkey-wrench. Now I'll try some more beans. Maggie has put in too much pepper. I'll have to have a new key made to-morrow."

"Hey? Yes—yes. Is that so?" answered Condy Rivers, bewildered, wishing to be polite, yet unable to follow the old man's mutterings.

"He's not talking to you," remarked Travis, without lowering her voice. "You know how Papum goes on. He won't hear a word you say. Well, I read your story in this morning's 'Times.'"

A few moments later, while Travers and Condy were still discussing this story, Mr. Bessemer rose. "Well, Mr. Rivers," he announced, "I guess I'll say good-night. Come, Snooky."

"Yes, take her with you, Papum," said Travis. "She'll go to sleep on the lounge here if you don't. Howard, have you got your lessons for to-morrow?"

It appeared that he had not. Snooky whined to stay up a little longer, but at last consented to go with her father. They all bade Condy good-night and took themselves away, Howard lingering a moment in the door in the hope of the nickel he dared not ask for. Maggie reappeared to clear away the table.

"Let's go in the parlor," suggested Travis, rising. "Don't you want to?"

The parlor was the front room overlooking the street, and was reached by the long hall that ran the whole length of the flat, passing by the door of each one of its eight rooms in turn.

Travis preceded Condy, and turned up one of the burners in colored globe of the little brass chandelier.

The parlor was a small affair, peopled by a family of chairs and sofas robed in white drugget. A gold-and-white effect had been striven for throughout the room. The walls had been tinted instead of papered, and bunches of hand-painted pink flowers tied up with blue ribbons straggled from one corner of the ceiling. Across one angle of the room straddled a brass easel upholding a crayon portrait of Travis at the age of nine, "enlarged from a photograph." A yellow drape ornamented one corner of the frame, while another drape of blue depended from one end of the mantelpiece.

The piano, upon which nobody ever played, balanced the easel in an opposite corner. Over the mantelpiece hung in a gilded frame a steel engraving of Priscilla and John Alden; and on the mantel itself two bisque figures of an Italian fisher boy and girl kept company with the clock, a huge timepiece, set in a red plush palette, that never was known to go. But at the right of the fireplace, and balancing the tuft of pampa-grass to the left, was an inverted section of a sewer-pipe painted blue and decorated with daisies. Into it was thrust a sheaf of cat-tails, gilded, and tied with a pink ribbon.

Travis dropped upon the shrouded sofa, and Condy set himself carefully down on one of the frail chairs with its spindling golden legs, and they began to talk.

Condy had taken her to the theatre the Monday night of that week, as had been his custom ever since he had known her well, and there was something left for them to say on that subject. But in ten minutes they had exhausted it. An engagement of a girl known to both of them had just been

announced. Condy brought that up, and kept conversation going for another twenty minutes, and then filled in what threatened to be a gap by telling her stories of the society reporters, and how they got inside news by listening to telephone party wires for days at a time. Travis' condemnation of this occupied another five or ten minutes; and so what with this and with that they reached nine o'clock. Then decidedly the evening began to drag. It was too early to go. Condy could find no good excuse for taking himself away, and, though Travis was good-natured enough, and met him more than half-way, their talk lapsed, and lapsed, and lapsed. The breaks became more numerous and lasted longer. Condy began to wonder if he was boring her. No sooner had the suspicion entered his head than it hardened into a certainty, and at once what little fluency and freshness he yet retained forsook him on the spot. What made matters worse was his recollection of other evenings that of late he had failed in precisely the same manner. Even while he struggled to save the situation Condy was wondering if they two were talked out—if they had lost charm for each other. Did he not know Travis through and through by now—her opinions, her ideas, her convictions? Was there any more freshness in her for him? Was their little flirtation of the last eighteen months, charming as it had been, about to end? Had they played out the play, had they come to the end of each other's resources? He had never considered the possibility of this before, but all at once as he looked at Travis—looked fairly into her little brown-black eyes—it was borne in upon him that she was thinking precisely the same thing.

Condy Rivers had met Travis at a dance a year and a half before this, and, because she was so very pretty, so unaffected, and so good-natured, had found means to see her three or four times a week ever since. They two "went out" not a little in San Francisco society, and had been in a measure identified with what was known as the Younger Set; though Travis was too young to come out, and Rivers too old to feel very much at home with girls of twenty and boys of eighteen.

They had known each other in the conventional way (as conventionality goes in San Francisco); during the season Rivers took her to the theatres Monday nights, and called regularly Wednesdays and Sundays. Then they met at dances, and managed to be invited to the same houses for teas and dinners. They had flirted rather desperately, and at times Condy even told himself that he loved this girl so much younger than he—this girl with the smiling eyes and robust figure and yellow hair, who was so frank, so straightforward, and so wonderfully pretty.

But evidently they had come to the last move in the game, and as Condy reflected that after all he had never known the real Travis, that the girl whom he told himself he knew through and through was only the Travis of dinner parties and afternoon functions, he was suddenly surprised to experience a sudden qualm of deep and genuine regret. He had never been NEAR to her, after all. They were as far apart as when they had first met. And yet he knew enough of her to know that she was "worth while." He had had experience—all the experience he wanted—with other older women and girls of society. They were sophisticated, they were all a little tired, they had run the gamut of amusements—in a word, they were jaded. But Travis, this girl of nineteen, who was not yet even a debutante, had been fresh and unspoiled, had been new and strong and young.

"Of course, you may call it what you like. He was nothing more nor less than intoxicated—yes, drunk."

"Hah! who—what—wh—what are you talking about?" gasped Condy sitting bolt upright.

"Jack Carter," answered Travis. "No," she added, shaking her head at him helplessly, "he hasn't been listening to a word. I'm talking about Jack Carter and the 'Saturday Evening' last night."

"No, no, I haven't heard. Forgive me; I was thinking—thinking of something else. Who was drunk?"

Travis paused a moment, settling her side-combs in her hair; then:

"If you will try to listen, I'll tell it all over again, because it's serious with me, and I'm going to take a very decided stand about it. You know," she went on—"you know what the 'Saturday Evening' is. Plenty of the girls who are not 'out' belong, and a good many of last year's debutantes come, as well as the older girls of three or four seasons' standing. You could call it representative couldn't you?

Well, they always serve punch; and you know yourself that you have seen men there who have taken more than they should."

"Yes, yes," admitted Condy. "I know Carter and the two Catlin boys always do."

"It gets pretty bad sometimes, doesn't it?" she said.

"It does, it does—and it's shameful. But most of the girls—MOST of them don't seem to mind."

Miss Bessemer stiffened a bit. "There are one or two girls that do," she said quietly. "Frank Catlin had the decency to go home last night," she continued; "and his brother wasn't any worse than usual. But Jack Carter must have been drinking before he came. He was very bad indeed—as bad," she said between her teeth, "as he could be and yet walk straight. As you say, most of the girls don't mind. They say, 'It's only Johnnie Carter; what do you expect?' But one of the girls—you know her, Laurie Flagg—cut a dance with him last night and told him exactly why. Of course, Carter was furious. He was sober enough to think he had been insulted; and what do you suppose he did?"

"What? what?" exclaimed Condy, breathless, leaning toward her.

"Went about the halls and dressing-rooms circulating some dirty little lie about Laurie. Actually trying to—to"—Travis hesitated—"to make a scandal about her."

Condy bounded in his seat. "Beast, cad, swine!" he exclaimed.

"I didn't think," said Travis, "that Carter would so much as dare to ask me to dance with him—"

"Did he? did—did—"

"Wait," she interrupted. "So I wasn't at all prepared for what happened. During the german, before I knew it, there he was in front of me. It was a break, and he wanted it. I hadn't time to think. The only idea I had was that if I refused him he might tell some dirty little lie about me. I was all confused—mixed up. I felt just as though it were a snake that I had to humor to get rid of. I gave him the break."

Condy sat speechless. Suddenly he arose.

"Well, now, let's see," he began, speaking rapidly, his hands twisting and untwisting till the knuckles cracked. "Now, let's see. You leave it to me. I know Carter. He's going to be at a stag dinner where I am invited to-morrow night, and I—I—"

"No, you won't, Condy," said Travis placidly. "You'll pay no attention to it, and I'll tell you why. Suppose you should make a scene with Mr. Carter—I don't know how men settle these things. Well, it would be told in all the clubs and in all the newspaper offices that two men had quarreled over a girl; and my name is mentioned, discussed, and handed around from one crowd of men to another, from one club to another; and then, of course, the papers take it up. By that time Mr. Carter will have told his side of the story and invented another dirty little lie, and I'm the one who suffers the most in the end. And remember, Condy, that I haven't any mother in such an affair, not even an older sister. No, we'll just let the matter drop. It would be more dignified, anyhow. Only I have made up my mind what I am going to do."

"What's that?"

"I'm not coming out. If that's the sort of thing one has to put up with in society"—Travis drew a little line on the sofa at her side with her finger-tip—"I am going to—stop—right—there. It's not"—Miss Bessemer stiffened again—"that I'm afraid of Jack Carter and his dirty stories; I simply don't want to know the kind of people who have made Jack Carter possible. The other girls don't mind it, nor many men besides you, Condy; and I'm not going to be associated with people who take it as a joke for a man to come to a function drunk. And as for having a good time, I'll find my amusements somewhere else. I'll ride a wheel, take long walks, study something. But as for leading the life of a society girl—no! And whether I have a good time or not, I'll keep my own self-respect. At least I'll never have to dance with a drunken man. I won't have to humiliate myself like that a second time."

"But I presume you will still continue to go out somewhere," protested Condy Rivers.

She shook her head.

"I have thought it all over, and I've talked about it with Papum. There's no half way about it. The only way to stop is to stop short. Just this afternoon I've regretted three functions for next week, and I shall resign from the 'Saturday Evening.' Oh, it's not the Jack Carter affair alone!" she exclaimed; "the whole thing tires me. Mind, Condy," she exclaimed, "I'm not going to break with it because I have any 'purpose in life,' or that sort of thing. I want to have a good time, and I'm going to see if I can't have it in my own way. If the kind of thing that makes Jack Carter possible is conventionality, then I'm done with conventionality for good. I am going to try, from this time on, to be just as true to myself as I can be. I am going to be sincere, and not pretend to like people and things that I don't like; and I'm going to do the things that I like to do—just so long as they are the things a good girl can do. See, Condy?"

"You're fine," murmured Condy breathless. "You're fine as gold, Travis, and I—I love you all the better for it."

"Ah, NOW!" exclaimed Travis, with a brusque movement, "there's mother thing we must talk about. No more foolishness between us. We've had a jolly little flirtation, I know, and it's been good fun while it lasted. I know you like me, and you know that I like you; but as for loving each other, you know we don't. Yes, you say that you love me and that I'm the only girl. That's part of the game. I can play it"—her little eyes began to dance—"quite as well as you. But it's playing with something that's quite too serious to be played with—after all, isn't it, now? It's insincere, and, as I tell you, from now on I'm going to be as true and as sincere and as honest as I can."

"But I tell you that I DO love you," protested Condy, trying to make the words ring true.

Travis looked about the room an instant as if in deliberation; then abruptly: "Ah! what am I going to DO with such a boy as you are, after all—a great big, overgrown boy? Condy Rivers, look at me straight in the eye. Tell me, do you honestly love me? You know what I mean when I say 'love.' Do you love me?"

"No, I don't!" he exclaimed blankly, as though he had just discovered the fact.

"There!" declared Travis—"and I don't love you." They both began to laugh.

"Now," added Travis, "we don't need to have the burden and trouble of keeping up the pretences any more. We understand each other, don't we?"

"This is queer enough," said Condy drolly.

"But isn't it an improvement?"

Condy scoured his head.

"Tell me the truth," she insisted; "YOU be sincere."

"I do believe it is. Why—why—Travis by Jingo! Travis, I think I'm going to like you better than ever now."

"Never mind. Is it an agreement?"

"What is?"

"That we don't pretend to love each other any more?"

"All right—yes—you're right; because the moment I began to love you I should like you so much less."

She put out her hand. "That's an agreement, then."

Condy took her hand in his. "Yes, it's an agreement." But when, as had been his custom, he made as though to kiss her hand, Travis drew it quickly away.

"No! no!" she said firmly, smiling for all that—"no more foolishness."

"But—but," he protested, "it's not so radical as that, is it? You're not going to overturn such time-worn, time-honored customs as that? Why, this is a regular rebellion."

"No, sire," quoted Travis, trying not to laugh, "it is a revolution."

Chapter III

Although Monday was practically a holiday for the Sunday-supplement staff of "The Times," Condy Rivers made a point to get down to the office betimes the next morning. There were reasons why a certain article descriptive of a great whaleback steamer taking on grain for famine-stricken India should be written that day, and Rivers wanted his afternoon free in order to go to Laurie Flagg's coming-out tea.

But as he came into his room at "The Times" office, which he shared with the exchange and sporting editors, and settled himself at his desk, he suddenly remembered that, under the new order of things, he need not expect to see Travis at the Flaggs'.

"Well," he muttered, "maybe it doesn't make so much difference, after all. She was a corking fine girl, but—might as well admit it—the play is played out. Of course, I don't love her—any more than she loves me. I'll see less and less of her now. It's inevitable, and after a while we'll hardly even meet. In a way, it's a pity; but, of course, one has to be sensible about these things.… Well, this whaleback now."

He rang up the Chamber of Commerce, and found out that the "City of Everett," which was the whaleback's name, was at the Mission Street wharf. This made it possible for him to write the article in two ways. He either could fake his copy from a clipping on the subject which the exchange editor had laid on his desk, or he could go down in person to the wharf, interview the captain, and inspect the craft for himself. The former was the short and easy method. The latter was more troublesome, but would result in a far more interesting article.

Condy debated the subject a few minutes, then decided to go down to the wharf. San Francisco's water-front was always interesting, and he might get hold of a photograph of the whaleback. All at once the "idea" of the article struck him, the certain underlying notion that would give importance and weight to the mere details and descriptions. Condy's enthusiasm flared up in an instant.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed; "by Jove!"

He clapped on his hat wrong side foremost, crammed a sheaf of copy-paper into his pocket, and was on the street again in another moment. Then it occurred to him that he had forgotten to call at his club that morning for his mail, as was his custom, on the way to the office. He looked at his watch. It was early yet, and his club was but two blocks' distance. He decided that he would get his letters at the club, and read them on the way down to the wharf.

For Condy had joined a certain San Francisco club of artists, journalists, musicians, and professional men that is one of the institutions of the city, and, in fact, famous throughout the United States. He was one of the younger members, but was popular and well liked, and on more than one occasion had materially contributed to the fun of the club's "low jinks."

In his box this morning he found one letter that he told himself he must read upon the instant. It bore upon the envelope the name of a New York publishing house to whom Condy had sent a collection of his short stories about a month before. He took the letter into the "round window" of the club, overlooking the street, and tore it open excitedly. The fact that he had received a letter from the firm without the return of his manuscript seemed a good omen. This was what he read:

Conde Rivers, Esq., Bohemian Club, San Francisco, Cal.

DEAR SIR: We return to you by this mail the manuscript of your stories, which we do not consider as available for publication at the present moment. We would say, however, that we find in several of them indications of a quite unusual order of merit. The best-selling book just now is the short novel—say thirty thousand words—of action and adventure. Judging from the stories of your collection, we suspect that your talent lies in this direction, and we would suggest that you write such a novel and submit the same to us.

Very respectfully,
THE CENTENNIAL CO.,
New York.

Condy shoved the letter into his pocket and collapsed limply into his chair.

"What's the good of trying to do anything anyhow!" he muttered, looking gloomily down into the street. "My level is just the hack-work of a local Sunday supplement, and I am a fool to think of anything else."

His enthusiasm in the matter of the "City of Everett" was cold and dead in a moment. He could see no possibilities in the subject whatever. His "idea" of a few minutes previous seemed ridiculous and overwrought. He would go back to the office and grind out his copy from the exchange editor's clipping.

Just then his eye was caught by a familiar figure in trim, well-fitting black halted on the opposite corner waiting for the passage of a cable car. It was Travis Bessemer. No one but she could carry off such rigorous simplicity in the matter of dress so well: black skirt, black Russian blouse, tiny black bonnet and black veil, white kids with black stitching. Simplicity itself. Yet the style of her, as Condy Rivers told himself, flew up and hit you in the face; and her figure—was there anything more perfect? and the soft pretty effect of her yellow hair seen through the veil—could anything be more fetching? and her smart carriage and the fling of her fine broad shoulders, and—no, it was no use; Condy had to run down to speak to her.

"Come, come!" she said as he pretended to jostle against her on the curbstone without noticing her; "you had best go to work. Loafing at ten o'clock on the street corners—the idea!"

"It IS not—it can not be—and yet it is—it is SHE," he burlesqued; "and after all these years!" Then in his natural voice: "Hello T.B."

"Hello, C.R."

"Where are you going?'

"Home. I've just run down for half an hour to have the head of my banjo tightened."

"If I put you on the car, will you expect me to pay your car-fare?"

"Condy Rivers, I've long since got over the idea of ever expecting you to have any change concealed about your person."

"Huh! no, it all goes for theatre tickets, and flowers, and boxes of candy for a certain girl I know. But"—and he glared at her significantly—"no more foolishness."

She laughed. "What are you 'on' this morning, Condy?"

Condy told her as they started to walk toward Kearney Street.

"But why DON'T you go to the dock and see the vessel, if you can make a better article that way?"

"Oh, what's the good! The Centennial people have turned down my stories."

She commiserated him for this; then suddenly exclaimed:

"No, you must go down to the dock! You ought to, Condy. Oh, I tell you, let me go down with you!"

In an instant Condy leaped to the notion. "Splendid! splendid! no reason why you shouldn't!" he exclaimed. And within fifteen minutes the two were treading the wharves and quays of the city's water-front.

Ships innumerable nuzzled at the endless line of docks, mast overspiring mast, and bowsprit overlapping bowsprit, till the eye was bewildered, as if by the confusion of branches in a leafless forest. In the distance the mass of rigging resolved itself into a solid gray blur against the sky. The great hulks, green and black and slate gray, laid themselves along the docks, straining leisurely at their mammoth chains, their flanks opened, their cargoes, as it were their entrails, spewed out in a wild disarray of crate and bale and box. Sailors and stevedores swarmed them like vermin. Trucks rolled along the

wharves like peals of ordnance, the horse-hoofs beating the boards like heavy drum-taps. Chains clanked, a ship's dog barked incessantly from a companionway, ropes creaked in complaining pulleys, blocks rattled, hoisting-engines coughed and strangled, while all the air was redolent of oakum, of pitch, of paint, of spices, of ripe fruit, of clean cool lumber, of coffee, of tar, of bilge, and the brisk, nimble odor of the sea.

Travis was delighted, her little brown eyes snapping, her cheeks flushing, as she drank in the scene.

"To think," she cried, "where all these ships have come from! Look at their names; aren't they perfect? Just the names, see: the 'Mary Baker,' Hull; and the 'Anandale,' Liverpool; and the 'Two Sisters,' Calcutta, and see that one they're calking, the 'Montevideo,' Callao; and there, look! look! the very one you're looking for, the 'City of Everett,' San Francisco."

The whaleback, an immense tube of steel plates, lay at her wharf, sucking in entire harvests of wheat from the San Joaquin valley—harvests that were to feed strangely clad skeletons on the southern slopes of the Himalaya foot-hills. Travis and Condy edged their way among piles of wheat-bags, dodging drays and rumbling trucks, and finally brought up at the after gangplank, where a sailor halted them. Condy exhibited his reporter's badge.

"I represent 'The Times,'" he said, with profound solemnity, "and I want to see the officer in charge."

The sailor fell back upon the instant.

"Power of the press," whispered Condy to Travis as the two gained the deck.

A second sailor directed them to the mate, whom they found in the chart-room, engaged, singularly enough, in trimming the leaves of a scraggly geranium.

Condy explained his mission with flattering allusions to the whaleback and the novelty of the construction. The mate—an old man with a patriarchal beard—softened at once, asked them into his own cabin aft, and even brought out a camp-stool for Travis, brushing it with his sleeve before setting it down.

While Condy was interviewing the old fellow, Travis was examining, with the interest of a child, the details of the cabin: the rack-like bunk, the washstand, ingeniously constructed so as to shut into the bulkhead when not in use, the alarm-clock screwed to the wall, and the array of photographs thrust into the mirror between frame and glass. One, an old daguerreotype, particularly caught her fancy. It was the portrait of a very beautiful girl, wearing the old-fashioned side curls and high comb of a half-century previous. The old mate noticed the attention she paid to it, and, as soon as he had done giving information to Condy, turned and nodded to Travis, and said quietly: "She was pretty, wasn't she?"

"Oh, very!" answered Travis, without looking away.

There was a silence. Then the mate, his eyes wide and thoughtful, said with a long breath:

"And she was just about your age, miss, when I saw her; and you favor her, too."

Condy and Travis held their breaths in attention. There in the cabin of that curious nondescript whaleback they had come suddenly to the edge of a romance—a romance that had been lived through before they were born. Then Travis said in a low voice, and sweetly:

"She died?"

"Before I ever set eyes on her, miss. That is, MAYBE she died. I sometimes think—fact is, I really believe she's alive yet, and waiting for me." He hesitated awkwardly. "I dunno," he said pulling his beard. "I don't usually tell that story to strange folk, but you remind me so of her that I guess I will."

Condy sat down on the edge of the bunk, and the mate seated himself on the plush settle opposite the door, his elbows on his knees, his eyes fixed on a patch of bright sunlight upon the deck outside.

"I began life," he said, "as a deep-sea diver—began pretty young, too. I first put on the armor when I was twenty, nothing but a lad; but I could take the pressure up to seventy pounds even then.

One of my very first dives was off Trincomalee, on the coast of Ceylon. A mail packet had gone down in a squall with all on board. Six of the bodies had come up and had been recovered, but the seventh hadn't. It was the body of the daughter of the governor of the island, a beautiful young girl of nineteen, whom everybody loved. I was sent for to go down and bring the body up. Well, I went down. The packet lay in a hundred feet of water, and that's a wonder deep dive. I had to go down twice. The first time I couldn't find anything, though I went all through the berth-deck. I came up to the wrecking-float and reported that I had seen nothing. There were a lot of men there belonging to the wrecking gang, and some correspondents of London papers. But they would have it that she was below, and had me go down again. I did, and this time I found her."

The mate paused a moment

"I'll have to tell you," he went on, "that when a body don't come to the surface it will stand or sit in a perfectly natural position until a current or movement of the water around touches it. When that happens—well, you'd say the body was alive; and old divers have a superstition—no, it AIN'T just a superstition, I believe it's so—that drowned people really don't die till they come to the surface, and the air touches them. We say that the drowned who don't come up still have some sort of life of their own way down there in all that green water … some kind of life … surely … surely. When I went down the second time, I came across the door of what I thought at first was the linen-closet. But it turned out to be a little stateroom. I opened it. There was the girl. She was sitting on the sofa opposite the door, with a little hat on her head, and holding a satchel in her lap, just as if she was ready to go ashore. Her eyes were wide open, and she was looking right at me and smiling. It didn't seem terrible or ghastly in the least. She seemed very sweet. When I opened the door it set the water in motion, and she got up and dropped the satchel, and came toward me smiling and holding out her arms.

"I stepped back quick and shut the door, and sat down in one of the saloon chairs to fetch my breath, for it had given me a start. The next thing to do was to send her up. But I began to think. She seemed so pretty as she was. What was the use of bringing her up—up there on the wrecking float with that crowd of men—up where the air would get at her, and where they would put her in the ground along o' the worms? If I left her there she'd always be sweet and pretty—always be nineteen; and I remembered what old divers said about drowned people living just so long as they stayed below. You see, I was only a lad then, and things like that impress you when you're young. Well, I signaled to be hauled up. They asked me on the float if I'd seen anything, and I said no. That was all there was to the affair. They never raised the ship, and in a little while it was all forgotten.

"But I never forgot it, and I always remembered her, way down there in all that still green water, waiting there in that little state-room for me to come back and open the door. And I've growed to be an old man remembering her; but she's always stayed just as she was the first day I saw her, when she came toward me smiling and holding out her arms. She's always stayed young and fresh and pretty. I never saw her but that once. Only afterward I got her picture from a native woman of Trincomalee who was house-keeper at the Residency where the governor of the island lived. Somehow I never could care for other women after that, and I ain't never married for that reason."

"No, no, of course not! exclaimed Travis, in a low voice as the old fellow paused.

"Fine, fine; oh, fine as gold!" murmured Condy, under his breath.

"Well," said the mate, getting up and rubbing his knee, "that's the story. Now you know all about that picture. Will you have a glass of Madeira, miss?"

He got out a bottle of wine bearing the genuine Funchal label and filled three tiny glasses. Travis pushed up her veil, and she and Condy rose.

"This is to HER," said Travis gravely.

"Thank you, miss," answered the mate, and the three drank in silence.

As Travis and Condy were going down the gangplank they met the captain of the whaleback coming up.

"I saw you in there talking to old McPherson," he explained. "Did you get what you wanted from him?"

"More, more!" exclaimed Condy.

"My hand in the fire, he told you that yarn about the girl who was drowned off Trincomalee. Of course, I knew it. The old boy's wits are turned on that subject. He WILL have it that the body hasn't decomposed in all this time. Good seaman enough, and a first-class navigator, but he's soft in that one spot."

Chapter IV

"Oh, but the STORY of it!" exclaimed Condy as he and Travis regained the wharf—"the story of it! Isn't it a ripper. Isn't it a corker! His leaving her that way, and never caring for any other girl afterward."

"And so original," she commented, quite as enthusiastic as he.

"Original?—why, it's new as paint! It's—it's—Travis, I'll make a story out of this that will be copied in every paper between the two oceans."

They were so interested in the mate's story that they forgot to take a car, and walked up Clay Street talking it over, suggesting, rearranging, and embellishing; and Condy was astonished and delighted to note that she "caught on" to the idea as quickly as he, and knew the telling points and what details to leave out.

"And I'll make a bang-up article out of the whaleback herself," declared Condy. The "idea" of the article had returned to him, and all his enthusiasm with it.

"And look here," he said, showing her the letter from the Centennial Company. "They turned down my book, but see what they say.

"Quite an unusual order of merit!" cried Travis. "Why, that's fine! Why didn't you show this to me before?—and asking you like this to write them a novel of adventure! What MORE can you want? Oh!" she exclaimed impatiently, "that's so like you; you would tell everybody about your reverses, and carry on about them yourself, but never say a word when you get a little boom. Have you an idea for a thirty-thousand-word novel? Wouldn't that diver's story do?"

"No, there's not enough in that for thirty thousand words. I haven't any idea at all—never wrote a story of adventure—never wrote anything longer than six thousand words. But I'll keep my eye open for something that will do. By the way—by Jove! Travis, where are we?"

They looked briskly around them, and the bustling, breezy waterfront faded from their recollections. They were in a world of narrow streets, of galleries and overhanging balconies. Craziest structures, riddled and honeycombed with stairways and passages, shut out the sky, though here and there rose a building of extraordinary richness and most elaborate ornamentation. Color was everywhere. A thousand little notes of green and yellow, of vermilion and sky blue, assaulted the eye. Here it was a doorway, here a vivid glint of cloth or hanging, here a huge scarlet sign lettered with gold, and here a kaleidoscopic effect in the garments of a passer-by. Directly opposite, and two stories above their heads, a sort of huge "loggia," one blaze of gilding and crude vermilions, opened in the gray cement of a crumbling facade, like a sudden burst of flame. Gigantic pot-bellied lanterns of red and gold swung from its ceiling, while along its railing stood a row of pots—brass, ruddy bronze, and blue porcelain—from which were growing red saffron, purple, pink, and golden tulips without number. The air was vibrant with unfamiliar noises. From one of the balconies near at hand, though unseen, a gong, a pipe, and some kind of stringed instrument wailed and thundered in unison. There was a vast shuffling of padded soles and a continuous interchange of singsong monosyllables, high-pitched and staccato, while from every hand rose the strange aromas of the East—sandalwood, punk, incense, oil, and the smell of mysterious cookery.

"Chinatown!" exclaimed Travis. "I hadn't the faintest idea we had come up so far. Condy Rivers, do you know what time it is?" She pointed a white kid finger through the doorway of a drug-store, where, amid lacquer boxes and bronze urns of herbs and dried seeds, a round Seth Thomas marked half-past two.

"And your lunch?" cried Condy. "Great heavens! I never thought."

"It's too late to get any at home. Never mind; I'll go somewhere and have a cup of tea."

"Why not get a package of Chinese tea, now that you're down here, and take it home with you?"

"Or drink it here."

"Where?"

"In one of the restaurants. There wouldn't be a soul there at this hour. I know they serve tea any time. Condy, let's try it. Wouldn't it be fun?"

Condy smote his thigh. "Fun!" he vociferated; "fun! It is—by Jove—it would be HEAVENLY! Wait a moment. I'll tell you what we will do. Tea won't be enough. We'll go down to Kearney Street, or to the market, and get some crackers to go with it."

They hurried back to the California market, a few blocks distant, and bought some crackers and a wedge of new cheese. On the way back to Chinatown Travis stopped at a music store on Kearney Street to get her banjo, which she had left to have its head tightened; and thus burdened they regained the "town," Condy grieving audibly at having to carry "brown-paper bundles through the street."

"First catch your restaurant," said Travis as they turned into Dupont Street with its thronging coolies and swarming, gayly clad children. But they had not far to seek.

"Here you are!" suddenly exclaimed Condy, halting in front of a wholesale tea-house bearing a sign in Chinese and English. "Come on, Travis!"

They ascended two flights of a broad, brass-bound staircase leading up from the ground floor, and gained the restaurant on the top story of the building. As Travis had foretold, it was deserted. She clasped her gloved hands gayly, crying: "Isn't it delightful! We've the whole place to ourselves."

The restaurant ran the whole depth of the building, and was finished off at either extremity with a gilded balcony, one overlooking Dupont Street and the other the old Plaza. Enormous screens of gilded ebony, intricately carved and set with colored glass panes, divided the room into three, and one of these divisions, in the rear part, from which they could step out upon the balcony that commanded the view of the Plaza, they elected as their own.

It was charming. At their backs they had the huge, fantastic screen, brave and fine with its coat of gold. In front, through the glass-paned valves of a pair of folding doors, they could see the roofs of the houses beyond the Plaza, and beyond these the blue of the bay with its anchored ships, and even beyond this the faint purple of the Oakland shore. On either side of these doors, in deep alcoves, were divans with mattings and head-rests for opium smokers. The walls were painted blue and hung with vertical Cantonese legends in red and silver, while all around the sides of the room small ebony tables alternated with ebony stools, each inlaid with a slab of mottled marble. A chandelier, all a-glitter with tinsel, swung from the centre of the ceiling over a huge round table of mahogany.

And not a soul was there to disturb them. Below them, out there around the old Plaza, the city drummed through its work with a lazy, soothing rumble. Nearer at hand, Chinatown sent up the vague murmur of the life of the Orient. In the direction of the Mexican quarter, the bell of the cathedral knolled at intervals. The sky was without a cloud and the afternoon was warm.

Condy was inarticulate with the joy of what he called their "discovery." He got up and sat down. He went out into the other room and came back again. He dragged up a couple of the marble-seated stools to the table. He took off his hat, lighted a cigarette, let it go out, lighted it again, and burned his fingers. He opened and closed the folding-doors, pushed the table into a better light, and finally brought Travis out upon the balcony to show her the "points of historical interest" in and around the Plaza.

"There's the Stevenson memorial ship in the centre, see; and right there, where the flagstaff is, General Baker made the funeral oration over the body of Terry. Broderick killed him in a duel —or was it Terry killed Broderick? I forget which. Anyhow, right opposite, where that pawnshop is, is where the Overland stages used to start in '49. And every other building that fronts on the Plaza, even this one we're in now, used to be a gambling-house in bonanza times; and, see, over yonder is the Morgue and the City Prison."

They turned back into the room, and a great, fat Chinaman brought them tea on Condy's order. But besides tea, he brought dried almonds, pickled watermelon rinds, candied quince, and "China nuts."

Travis cut the cheese into cubes with Condy's penknife, and arranged the cubes in geometric figures upon the crackers.

"But, Condy," she complained, "why in the world did you get so many crackers? There's hundreds of them here—enough to feed a regiment. Why didn't you ask me?"

"Huh! what? what? I don't know. What's the matter with the crackers? You were dickering with the cheese, and the man said, 'How many crackers?' I didn't know. I said, 'Oh, give me a quarter's worth!'"

"And we couldn't possibly have eaten ten cents' worth! Oh, Condy, you are—you are—But never mind, here's your tea. I wonder if this green, pasty stuff is good."

They found that it was, but so sweet that it made their tea taste bitter. The watermelon rinds were flat to their Western palates, but the dried almonds were a great success. Then Condy promptly got the hiccoughs from drinking his tea too fast, and fretted up and down the room like a chicken with the pip till Travis grew faint and weak with laughter.

"Oh, well," he exclaimed aggrievedly—"laugh, that's right! I don't laugh. It isn't such fun when you've got 'em yoursel'—HULP."

"But sit down, for goodness' sake! You make me so nervous. You can't walk them off. Sit down and hold your breath while you count nine. Condy, I'm going to take off my gloves and veil. What do you think?"

"Sure, of course; and I'll have a cigarette. Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Well, what's that in your hand now?"

"By Jove, I have been smoking! I—I beg your pardon. I'm a regular stable boy. I'll throw it away."

Travis caught his wrist. "What nonsense! I would have told you before if I'd minded."

"But it's gone out!" he exclaimed. "I'll have another."

As he reached into his pocket for his case, his hand encountered a paper-covered volume, and he drew it out in some perplexity.

"Now, how in the wide world did that book come in my pocket?" he muttered, frowning. "What have I been carrying it around for? I've forgotten. I declare I have."

"What book is it?"

"Hey? book?… h'm," he murmured, staring.

Travis pounded on the table. "Wake up, Condy, I'm talking to you," she called.

"It's 'Life's Handicap,'" he answered, with a start; "but why and but why have I—"

"What's it about? I never heard of it," she declared.

"You never heard of 'Life's Handicap'?" he shouted; "you never heard—you never—you mean to say you never heard—but here, this won't do. Sit right still, and I'll read you one of these yarns before you're another minute older. Any one of them—open the book at random. Here we are—'The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes'; and it's a stem-winder, too."

And then for the first time in her life, there in that airy, golden Chinese restaurant, in the city from which he hasted to flee, Travis Bessemer fell under the charm of the little spectacled colonial, to whose song we all must listen and to whose pipe we all must dance.

There was one "point" in the story of Jukes' strange ride that Condy prided himself upon having discovered. So far as he knew, all critics had overlooked it. It is where Jukes is describing the man-trap of the City of the Dead who are alive, and mentions that the slope of the inclosing sandhills was "about forty-five degrees." Jukes was a civil engineer, and Condy held that it was a capital bit of realism on the part of the author to have him speak of the pitch of the hills in just such technical terms. At first he thought he would call Travis' attention to this bit of cleverness; but as he read he abruptly changed his mind. He would see if she would find it out for herself. It would be a test of her quickness, he told himself; almost an unfair test, because the point was extremely subtle and could easily be ignored by the most experienced of fiction readers. He read steadily on, working himself

into a positive excitement as he approached the passage. He came to it and read it through without any emphasis, almost slurring over it in his eagerness to be perfectly fair. But as he began to read the next paragraph, Travis, her little eyes sparkling with interest and attention, exclaimed:

"Just as an engineer would describe it. Isn't that good!"

"Glory hallelujah!" cried Condy, slamming down the book joyfully. "Travis, you are one in a thousand!"

"What—what is it?' she inquired blankly.

"Never mind, never mind; you're a wonder, that's all"—and he finished the tale without further explanation. Then, while he smoked another cigarette and she drank another cup of tea, he read to her "The Return of Imri" and the "Incarnation of Krishna Mulvaney." He found her an easy and enrapt convert to the little Englishman's creed, and for himself tasted the intense delight of revealing to another an appreciation of a literature hitherto ignored.

"Isn't he strong!" cried Travis. "Just a LITTLE better than Marie Corelli and the Duchess!"

"And to think of having all those stories to read! You haven't read any of them yet?"

"Not a one. I've been reading only the novels we take up in the Wednesday class."

"Lord!" muttered Condy.

Condy's spirits had been steadily rising since the incident aboard the whaleback. The exhilaration of the water-front, his delight over the story he was to make out of the old mate's yarn, Chinatown, the charming unconventionality of their lunch in the Chinese restaurant, the sparkling serenity of the afternoon, and the joy of discovering Travis' appreciation of his adored and venerated author, had put him into a mood bordering close upon hilarity.

"The next event upon our interesting programme," he announced, "will be a banjosephine obligato in A-sia minor, by that justly renowned impresario, Signor Conde Tin-pani Rivers, specially engaged for this performance; with a pleasing and pan-hellenic song-and-dance turn by Miss Travis Bessemer, the infant phenomenon, otherwise known as 'Babby Bessie.'"

"You're not going to play that banjo here?" said Travis, as he stripped away the canvas covering.

"Order in the gallery!" cried Condy, beginning to tune up. Then in a rapid, professional monotone: "Ladies-and-gentlemen – with – your – kind – permission – I – will – endeavor – to – give – you – an – imitation – of – a – Carolina – coon – song"—and without more ado, singing the words to a rattling, catchy accompaniment, swung off into—

"F—or MY gal's a high-born leddy,
SHE'S brack, but not too shady."

He did not sing loud, and the clack and snarl of the banjo carried hardly further than the adjoining room; but there was no one to hear, and, as he went along, even Travis began to hum the words, but at that, Condy stopped abruptly, laid the instrument across his knees with exaggerated solicitude, and said deliberately:

"Travis, you are a good, sweet girl, and what you lack in beauty you make up in amiability, and I've no doubt you are kind to your aged father; but you—can—not—sing."

Travis was cross in a moment, all the more so because Condy had spoken the exact truth. It was quite impossible for her to carry a tune half a dozen bars without entangling herself in as many different keys. What voice she had was not absolutely bad; but as she persisted in singing in spite of Condy's guying, he put back his head and began a mournful and lugubrious howling.

"Ho!" she exclaimed, grabbing the banjo from his knees, "if I can't sing, I can play better than some smart people."

"Yes, by note," rallied Condy, as Travis executed a banjo "piece" of no little intricacy. "That's just like a machine—like a hand-piano.

"Order in the gallery!" she retorted, without pausing in her playing. She finished with a great flourish and gazed at him in triumph, only to find him pretending a profound slumber. "O—o—o!" she remarked between her teeth, "I just hate you, Condy Rivers."

"There are others," he returned airily.

"Talk about slang."

"NOW what will we do?" he cried. "Let's DO something. Suppose we break something—just for fun."

Then suddenly the gayety went out of his face, and he started up and clapped his hand to his head with a gasp of dismay. "Great Heavens!" he exclaimed.

"Condy," cried Travis in alarm, "what is it"'

"The Tea!" he vociferated. "Laurie Flagg's Tea. I ought to be there—right this minute."

Travis fetched a sigh of relief. "Is that all?"

"All!" he retorted. "All! Why, it's past four now—and I'd forgotten every last thing." Then suddenly falling calm again, and quietly resuming his seat: "I don't see as it makes any difference. I won't go, that's all. Push those almonds here, will you, Miss Lady?—But we aren't DOING anything," he exclaimed, with a brusque return of exuberance. "Let's do things. What'll we do? Think of something. Is there anything we can break?" Then, without any transition, he vaulted upon the table and began to declaim, with tremendous gestures:

"There once was a beast called an Ounce,
Who went with a spring and a bounce.
His head was as flat
As the head of a cat,
This quadrupetantical Ounce,
—-tical Ounce,
This quadrupetantical Ounce.

"You'd think from his name he was small,
But that was not like him at all.
He weighed, I'll be bound,
Three or four hundred pound,
And he looked most uncommonly tall,
—monly tall,
And he looked most uncommonly tall."

"Bravo! bravo!" cried Travis, pounding on the table. "Hear, hear—none, Brutus, none."

Condy sat down on the table and swung his legs But during the next few moments, while they were eating the last of their cheese, his good spirits fell rapidly away from him. He heaved a sigh, and thrust both hands gloomily into his pockets.

"Cheese, Condy?" asked Travis.

He shook his head with a dark frown, muttering: "No cheese, no cheese."

"What's wrong, Condy—what's the matter?" asked Travis, with concern.

For some time he would not tell her, answering all her inquiries by closing his eyes and putting his chin in the air, nodding his head in knowing fashion.

"But what is it?"

"You don't respect me," he muttered; and for a long time this was all that could be got from him. No, no, she did not respect him; no, she did not take him seriously.

"But of course I do. Why don't I? Condy Rivers, what's got into you NOW?"

"No, no; I know it. I can tell. You don't take me seriously. You don't respect me."

"But why?"

"Make a blooming buffoon of myself," he mumbled tragically.

In great distress Travis labored to contradict him. Why, they had just been having a good time, that was all. Why, she had been just as silly as he. Condy caught at the word.

"Silly! There. I knew it. I told you. I'm silly. I'm a buffoon.—But haven't we had a great afternoon?" he added, with a sudden grin.

"I never remember," announced Travis emphatically, "when I've had a better time than I've had to-day; and I know just why it's been such a success."

"Why, then?"

"Because we've had no foolishness. We've just been ourselves, and haven't pretended we were in love with each other when we are not. Condy, let's do this lots."

"Do what?"

"Go round to queer little, interesting little places. We've had a glorious time to-day, haven't we?—and we haven't been talked out once.

"As we were last night, for instance," he hazarded.

"I THOUGHT you felt it, the same as I did. It WAS a bit awful wasn't it?"

"It was."

"From now on, let's make a resolution. I know you've had a good time to-day. Haven't you had a better time than if you had gone to the Tea?'"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.