

## **THE OTHER WOMAN**





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**“Janice!” he cried desperately. “Give over this terrible misunderstanding, and let me talk to you”**

# THE OTHER WOMAN

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BY  
OCTAVUS ROY COHEN  
AND

J. U. GIESY  
AUTHORS OF "THE RECKLESS AGE," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY  
ALBERT MATZKE

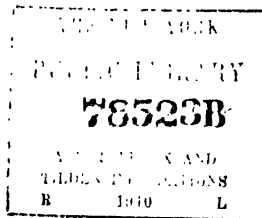
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# THE OTHER WOMAN

## I

### THE OTHER WOMAN ARRIVES

THE battered bus clattered down the street and pulled up sharply before the hotel. The glare of an arc-light illumined the gilt inscription, "Gilmer Hotel," which decorated the side of the vehicle.

A bell-hop was roused from delightful slumber by the arrival, and shambled lazily toward the door. Walt Simmons, night-clerk, raised his eyes languidly from the pages of the register to make a preliminary inspection of the unfortunates who were destined to become the hotel's guests, even for a short time.

The bus swung and then backed with dangerous speed toward the curb. Uncle Zack, the antiquated driver, leaped from his seat with suspicious alacrity, and reached the rear door ahead of the bell-hop. With a grin decorating his ebony

face, he swung open the portals and bowed low.

"Here y'are, missy!"

The one passenger alighted. Walt Simmons straightened himself suddenly and fumbled nervously at his tie. The half-dozen loafers who occupied chairs before the hotel coughed insinuatingly and prodded one another in the ribs.

The rather flamboyant woman acknowledged Uncle Zack's curtsy with a quarter, and then nodded with queenly grandeur to the flustered bell-hop. He was galvanized to obsequious action, and seized her two heavy suit-cases, while one of the loafers hastened to open the hotel door.

"Some chicken!"

That was Walt Simmons's hasty appraisal. It was evident that the others agreed with his verdict. And, to use the vernacular, "some chicken" she was, with her bell-effect dress of ultra-fashion, her jauntily-perched black hat, her parasol, her striped stockings showing abundantly above the painfully stylish shoes.

She swept regally across the dingy lobby and scrawled her name upon the register. Walt Simmons recovered himself just in time to whirl the

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big book, inspect the name—"Maude Leveridge"—which leaped at him from the hitherto blank page, and take the pen from her very positive hand. Their eyes met, and the woman spoke, her voice sharp and incisive.

"You can give me your best room."

"Huh?" Simmons queried inanely. His patrons were usually less concise in expressing their desires.

"You can give me your best room!" Her voice was extremely sharp as she spoke a second time.

"That'll be the bridal suite," said the clerk, pulling himself together; then he paused suddenly, feeling his gaze impelled by her slightly narrowed eyes—eyes of so light a brown as to border on yellowness.

"Young feller," advised Maude Leveridge, "I wouldn't get fresh, if I was you!"

"Fresh!" Simmons slowly reddened behind the ears; then the flush spread until it suffused his cheeks. "Honest, I didn't mean to be fresh."

"And," haughtily from her, "you may send the porter up to unstrap my trunks. I ordered them sent right up."

Simmons, who prided himself on his cosmopolitanism, perceived that he had made a bad impression. He felt that a wonderful opportunity was slipping through his fingers, for women of Maude Leveridge's type were a rarity in Caldwell.

That staid little municipality was one of a hundred or two sister cities which are hopefully battling to attain the twenty-thousand mark in the decennial count of the government. It contained one first-class hotel—first-class, at any rate, by comparison with the others, for there were no others; one really creditable department-store; one tolerable café; one combination lunch-room and ice-cream parlor, which boasted a blatant orchestra; one morning newspaper and one evening daily, neither of which was published on Sunday.

Miss Leveridge was strangely out of the sedate picture. Her dress was of a loudness which, to Walt's provincial mind, denoted wealth, and of an extreme style which appealed to him as Parisian. She carried herself with an air of self-reliance, and walked with perhaps a little too much of a swing. All in all she seemed the epitome of experience, a deity worshiped by Simmons.

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She was not bad-looking in a rather coarse way. Her face was oval and well shaped, despite a certain broadness across the lower segment. Her nose was straight, her hair inclined to glisten with strands of deep-brown gold, and he had noticed as she spoke that her teeth were good.

Walt banged authoritatively on the tin-toned gong of the Gilmer Hotel's desk and summoned the page—the same individual who also constituted the bell-hop corps of the hostelry.

"Parlor A!" he ordered grandiloquently. "And then take ice-water up there."

He handed the key to the boy, and the woman followed her guide to the sluggish elevator-cage. The door was slammed, the cage crawled upward, and Walt Simmons, leaning across the desk, staring at the shaft, heaved a tremendous sigh.

"Whe-e-e-e-w!" he whistled softly.

Benny Gordon, city editor, sporting editor, and star reporter for the *Caldwell Messenger*, sidled to the desk.

"Some dame!" he observed with assumed indifference.

"Some dame!" echoed Walt, appalled at the



inadequacy of Benny's appraisalment. "Some dame! Well, I reckon. Man, there's *class* to that chicken. Real, 'sure-'nuff class. She's got the big burg wrote all over her, if you ask me."

"Her name?" queried Benny in his most professional manner. "And where's she from?"

"Name's Maude Leveridge. She's from"—he inspected the scrawly chirography—"Chicago."

"Humph!" sniffed Benny. "Wonder what she hit this burg for!"

"I—I—didn't ask her."

"Careless of you, my boy, very careless," said the reporter patronizingly.

The bell-hop sped down the stairway behind the elevator-shaft, his face beaming delightedly.

"Gosh!" he enthused. "I unstrapped her trunks and she slipped me four bits! Some class, eh?"

Walt nodded.

"Some class, all right, all right. It's funny, but it kind of seems like I've seen her face before."

Benny eyed him with some interest.

"No? Maybe she's an actress. Off on a vacation at this time of year, if they ain't playing stock. Notice the duds? Goldberg just got in a

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dress like that one she has on. Ike'll be dead sore when he sees her sporting it on the street. He planned a sensation for his opening. I got a story about their ready-to-wear display in to-morrow morning's paper. He's up-to-date, all right. This burg is hustling right along!"

"Uhuh!" assented Simmons, plainly without much interest in Benny Gordon's observations.

Walt was lost in a maze of thought. Somewhere, some time, he had seen that boldly handsome face, or a picture of it; but where? The house phone tinkled sharply and interrupted his retrospection rather suddenly.

"Office!" he barked.

It was the bridal suite, and Walt gave close attention. Benny edged closer as he saw the rapidly shifting expression of the night-clerk.

"I'll 'tend to it right now, ma'am," said Simmons. He clicked the receiver on the hook and swung around to the page, who still gloatingly eyed his half-dollar. "Tommy," he snapped, "run down and get a caviar sandwich, a dill pickle, an' a claret lemonade. Hop to it now, kid!"

"What?" asked Benny Gordon. "She ordered *that?*"

"Yep—pickled fish-eggs, a pickle, an' a claret lemonade."

"I knew it!" said Benny. "That's the kind of dame, and her order's the kind of diet, that you see in the swell hash-houses of Chi and New York. I spotted her type first crack. On a job like mine you get so you can size 'em up from the word 'Go!'"

"That's right," retorted Walt. "I got her number, too. Work like yours and mine broadens a fellow."

"Right you are!"

Once again the house phone commanded Walt's attention.

"Yes'm," he said ingratiatingly, after a moment's listening. "Sure there's a Mr. John Caldwell in this town. The town's named after his grandfather. No'm, I don't know as you could reach him personally to-night, unless you want to telephone. Want his residence number? Yes'm, he's one of the richest men in town. You're quite welcome, I'm sure. Yes'm, the boy's hustlin' your

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lunch. Ought to be right back any minute now."

The eyes of the two young men met as Simmons once more placed the receiver on the hook. Their eyebrows went up meaningly.

"What she ask?" interrogated Benny.

"To know," sibilated Walt, "if there was a duck in this town named *John Caldwell!*"

"Honest?"

"Straight! And she wanted to know if she could get in touch with him to-night."

"Listens interesting," commented Benny.

"Interesting? Well, I rather reckon it does!"

"I'd almost bet a million to one I got the dope," said the sagacious journalist. "There ain't no saying that Caldwell wasn't a speedy guy before he got married; and this female ain't a bad looker. I'm laying odds that him and her knew each other before Caldwell got a wife!"

"But he's married."

"S'pose," suggested Benny, lowering his voice under the weight of a startling idea, "s'pose she don't know he's married?"

Their gazes met in a mutual and heart-felt "Gee!"

"When Caldwell was single, and rooming at this hotel, he used to run around with nearly every girl in town, and they say he was engaged to 'most every one in his set. It's only natural to think he did the same in other towns. He was away a heap, y'know."

"Yes," affirmed Walt reminiscently. "He had a room here, all right! Him and Joe Franklin had two rooms and bath, and they had some high old times, I'm here to tell you. Joe's here yet, but he ain't been the same since Caldwell got hitched."

"Maybe," interpolated Benny, "this dame is one of his far-away acquaintances who's followed him up."

"Bunk! Caldwell's been married 'most a year. No woman would have waited that long."

Benny looked wise. "Son," he said, "don't tell me nothin' about women, 'cause none of us men know anything about 'em. And that's straight!"

"Humph! Maybe so, and maybe not. She mightn't be nothing but a business woman. She sure looks like one—free and easy, and able to take care of herself."

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"Too blamed free and easy!" snapped Benny, with the perception of the true newspaperman. He extracted a package of cigarettes, and handed them to Walt. "Have one? Real Turkish. No, I don't reckon there's much news in her—yet. If anything turns up, Walt, slip me the tip, eh?" He winked portentously. "I'll be getting along. Ta-ta!"

Walt Simmons, for once, was glad to be rid of his newspaper friend. He plunged back into the labyrinth of doubt which had assailed his subconscious self at sight of Maude Leveridge. He searched diligently for the end of that elusive thread of recollection which would lead him to recall when and where he had seen her face.

Surely she was not a woman that one would readily forget. She was none of your namby-pamby, simpering, blushing, flirting, small-town girls; but a woman of the world who swapped look for look and told you straight out what she wanted—and got it, even to caviar sandwiches and claret lemonade at ten o'clock at night!

Walt yawned, and seated himself in his battered swivel chair. After a few minutes he extracted

a small mirror from his pocket, and nursed the faint beginnings of a mustache which he fondly believed lent manliness to his appearance. He pondered as to whether Miss Leveridge preferred mustaches. He had been troubled by rumors that mustaches had gone out of vogue. Anyway, it wouldn't be *much* sacrifice to shave clean.

In the bridal suite Miss Leveridge, having doffed her traveling-dress in favor of a giddy kimono, on which purple butterflies chased one another madly across green backgrounds, nibbled contentedly at her caviar sandwich and sipped her claret lemonade.

"Bridal soot!" she communed purringly. "Say, wouldn't that get you?" She sipped more lemonade. "Now, if I believed in signs, I might think that runt down in the office was a prophet. Never can tell, though."

She rose and languidly crossed the room to turn down the bed-covers.

"These jay towns are sure the limit," she soliloquized disapprovingly. "You take what you can get and make the best of it. And Caldwell's called Caldwell after Caldwell's grandpa, eh? Sounds

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like I was pulling comedy stuff. Not a bad-looking guy, he isn't. Wonder what he'll do and say when he lumps me!"

She raised herself and stared at her mirrored self.

"Even if he ain't pleased to see me, I got the dead-wood on him. The letter—he'll have to come across for it, or because of it; and I needed a vacation anyway."

She snapped out the light and crawled into bed, pounding the pillow into shape beneath her head.

"Maudie's first night in the bridal chamber," she grinned into the darkness. "Here's hoping—"



## II

### A MATRIMONIAL PROBLEM

FATE is whimsical at times in the arrangement of stage and characters for the human dramas in which she so delights.

Even before she sent Maude Leveridge through the doors of the Gilmer Hotel, thereby arousing curiosity, ambition, and a hazy recollection in the mind of Walt Simmons, she had been at work in various quarters, although the characters cast in the other rôles had, as yet, no hint of their casting.

For instance, she decreed that Joe Franklin should be at the corner of Main and Gallatin Streets at the exact instant when John Caldwell sped along in his high-powered roadster after an arduous day in the office of the Caldwell Machinery Company—John Caldwell, president. And she ordained, further, that Caldwell should see his chum and roommate of the glad days and gladder nights when he was anything under thirty-

four, and that, being in a sociable mood, he should slow down invitingly and urge a dinner invitation on Joe Franklin.

Joe accepted with alacrity, and they drove off.

"Yes," reiterated Franklin. "I'll be mighty glad to come to dinner, but I'll have to break away right afterward. The fact is—well, it's an engagement for the evening."

Caldwell grinned cheerfully as he turned to survey his friend. The two men were strikingly similar in appearance. Both were tall, well-built, brown-haired, brown-eyed, straight-nosed, and square-jawed. Caldwell was a year or two older, and since his marriage a benevolent maturity seemed to have settled upon him like a mantle. One might easily have mistaken them for brothers.

Manlike, John worried little over the fact that his guest would be unexpected, and therefore likely to cause a fluttering of Janice Caldwell's domestic heart. If he thought of it at all it was only with a sense of pride in the abilities of his little wife, and her knack of rising to every emergency, household or otherwise. And then, too, Joe was

"family"—had always been, and would always be.

John let in his gears, advanced the spark, and the big car sped another block down Main Street. Then it turned sharply to the right and glided smoothly down a tree-lined thoroughfare where tall elms and maples framed a delightful prospect. Behind the trees could be seen cool, velvety lawns and cozy bungalows, with here and there the more pretentious residence of some man blessed with a larger share of this world's goods—porches where light gowns shimmered in the early evening shadows, and where immaculate children romped and played.

Caldwell, like most American communities of its type, was a city of homes. Its business district was tiny, its Chamber of Commerce as yet a novelty, its social life intimate and gossipy. It had not yet reached the stage where the individual is swallowed in a conglomerate mass of people. It was precisely the type of town from which so many of our stanchest and ablest citizens have sprung.

And John Caldwell knew it, and now that he

had settled down and married, and was generally regarded as a leading citizen, he was awakening to a sense of love for the little town which, in his wild-oats days, he had often scorned as hopelessly dull and provincial.

It was a fact, as Walt Simmons had informed the lady of the bridal suite, that his grandfather had given the place its name and its existence. It was the present John Caldwell's heritage of prestige, deep-grained in the minds of all the inhabitants of Caldwell, which had enabled him to maintain his social position in the past, when his escapades had furnished the choicest morsels of gossip.

There had been many women in John's life before he had taken unto himself a wife. He had been engaged to many of the local beauties—though never for long. None found herself able to hold him against the allurements of the next siren to beckon, and he had come to be regarded as a masculine flirt, a *Lothario*.

Something of the significance of it all, past, present, and future, flitted through his mind. He turned to the man at his side.

"Pretty place, eh, Joe?"

"Best little burg in the world!" Franklin replied enthusiastically.

Caldwell smiled inscrutably.

"Yes?"

"What do you mean?" Joe challenged sharply.

"Nothing in particular—if you don't mean anything." A pause, and then John went on: "We always used to be pretty good pals, Joe."

Franklin flushed painfully.

"We are yet, John; but—hang it, a man gets lonesome. You've been married for a year, and I've been alone."

Caldwell's eyes narrowed.

"Look here, Joe, you've always been an impulsive fool. Where are you off to to-night?"

"Calling."

"On whom?"

"The best little girl in this town." Franklin's attitude grew bashfully defiant. "Now, you suspicious fellow, chew on that! Oh, I know we used to cut loose in the old days, and laugh at benedicks; but you took the plunge first, and you've been happy—"

"You bet I have!" said Caldwell fervently.

"Well, I'm entitled to some of the same. All I needed was the right girl, and I've found her."

"Bully!" Caldwell took one hand from the wheel, and the two men gripped. "Tell it to Janice. She'll be delighted. And who's the future Mrs. Franklin—gad, that sounds funny!"

"Eunice Maybank."

"Eunice—what?"

Franklin chuckled.

"I don't blame you. I know you were engaged to her once—before she developed her present good sense."

"Humph! Neither of us was overburdened with gray matter in those days." John's face sobered. "So you're really going to be married?"

"Yes. And why not? Why are you so funereal?"

"Oh, I was just thinking."

"Thinking what?"

"Nothing—that is, it's none of my business."

"Say, John, that isn't like you. Get it off your chest!"

Caldwell eyed his companion speculatively.

"Don't answer if you don't want to, Joe, but—

well, have you told Eunice anything about—well, those trips to other places, and things like that?”

“Eh?” Franklin frowned. “Lord, no! You can’t talk to a girl about things like that.”

“Wrong! Dead wrong! Janice knew all about my former affairs before we were married. I did the square thing and told her everything, from first to last. It hurt to do it—you haven’t an idea how it scourged me, but it pays. ‘Nothing but the truth’—that’s the only motto for husband and wife. *We’ve* never had even a misunderstanding.”

“You mean you told her—*everything*?”

“Yes.”

“And what did she do?”

Caldwell’s eyes softened.

“What any good woman who really loves a man would do—wept a little, asked me if I was sure I really loved her—then kissed me, and it was all forgiven and forgotten.”

“Humph!” said Franklin skeptically. “I’ll bet she’s wept a blamed sight more over it since then, without your arms around her; and it comes back to her every time you and she have a little

domestic tiff, and every time you're late from the office, or stay at a club-meeting. Not for little Joe! I don't want to make Eunice unhappy."

"Janice knows I love her," reiterated Caldwell simply.

"Does she? How do you know? You can talk as you like; I'm betting dollars to doughnuts those 'others' are never very far from her mind—a series of specters which haunt her all the time. Man, she can't help grieving over it, if she loves you. She'll never—"

"Listen here, Joe!" Caldwell's face was deadly serious. "Are you serious, or joking? You always were such a fool joker—you lived on practical jokes. This isn't a subject to joke about, and suppose we drop it. Janice and I are happy; I hope you and Eunice get along half as well."

"Thanks!" said Franklin dryly. "I'm sure we shall."

"You're formally engaged?"

"Not announced yet, but I'm accepted."

"Congratulations again. Well"—as the car purred to a halt before a large, rambling, two-story house of colonial design which nestled on a per-



fect lawn behind a leafy screen of old trees—"here we are. You trot in and tell Janice about it, while I run the car into the garage."

Franklin nodded, leaped from the car, and swung up the walk that led to the spacious veranda. Janice Caldwell, who was sitting there, rose to greet him. Joe bowed low.

"Janice," he announced, "I've come to dinner."

She smiled and extended her hand. She was a small woman, petite and attractive, but not pretty by the canons of art, although she radiated a subtle magnetism which more than offset a somewhat irregular face.

"You'll have to take pot-luck, Joe. Why didn't John telephone that he was bringing you?"

Franklin seated himself on the steps and circled a knee with locked hands.

"Didn't know it. He picked me up at the corner of Gallatin Street, dropped me here at the gate, and told me to tell you something."

"What?" Janice smiled at the flush which mantled his face.

"It's confidential, as yet, between you and John

and me; but—well, I'm going to have a home of my own pretty soon."

Janice leaned forward eagerly.

"Joe! You're going to be married?"

"Guilty—Eunice Maybank."

"Splendid! A magnificent girl, Joe! Oh, just wait until I see her! I can let her know that I know, can't I? I know you'll be awfully happy—oh, almost as happy as John and I—"

"You two *are* happy, aren't you, Janice?"

"Of course! What ever—"

"Nothing. And I know it. I've envied you two since you did the parade up to the hymeneal altar. I think that's what has induced me to go and do likewise. And say, Janice—don't you ever let anything spoil your happiness. John thinks all the world of you, and"—he laughed lightly—"next to Eunice, so do I."

Caldwell entered the veranda through the swinging door.

"Told her?"

Joe nodded.

"I'm confessed and shriven."

"Good! And now, Janice, what about dinner?"

Joe has to get to the hotel in time to doll up for Eunice."

As if in answer to his query, there appeared behind them a short, white-clad figure of yellowish complexion and almond eyes. The little man spoke in a soft, lisping voice.

"Excoose, pleas'—dinnair served."

John slipped an arm about his wife's waist, and the trio made their way to the cool dining-room. Kamura—Japanese by birth, and by profession butler, house-servant, chauffeur, and valet to Caldwell—had swiftly placed a third cover for the unexpected guest.

The quiet homeliness of it all reached out and gripped Franklin by the throat. It was *right*, a life like this! It was the natural life, the ordained of nature for man and woman—home, love, content—a haven where the best of human nature might find sanctuary from the storms of life. Yet once again he frowned slightly, as if wincing with a sudden pain.

Caldwell lifted his glass.

"Here's to the prospective bride and groom—long life and perfect happiness! I can wish them

no better fortune than Janice and I have had."

As they drank the toast, the eyes of John and Janice met in a glance of mutual affection and understanding. Hers sparkled with a woman's naïve delight at a compliment from her husband.

The meal finished, the two men went to the veranda for after-dinner cigars. Janice remained inside to superintend the arranging of the dining-room for breakfast; then she snapped on the electrician and seated herself in an easy chair, to finish reading a story in one of the magazines.

John strolled to the gate with his chum, bade him good night, and then stood staring up the darkening vista of trees long after Franklin had passed from view. His thoughts were of Janice, of Joe Franklin and Eunice Maybank, and of his talk with Joe in the automobile.

Somewhere John had read that every cause produces an effect, and that a man's acts return to the actor as a boomerang to the hand of an Australian.

He was happy with Janice; happier, far happier, than he had ever been in the wild days of youthful revelry; happy in a calm, lasting, sub-

stantial way. He loved her devotedly, and trusted her—with the truth! He had been truthful from the start, and she knew it. Mutual truth was the secret of his enveloping, contenting, normal happiness—the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And yet—as must come to every man who does that which society tolerantly terms “sowing wild oats”—there came to John Caldwell to-night a wonder, a doubt, as to the far-reaching tentacles of the spectral past. He turned toward the house and sighed.

“If only a man knew—if only a man *could* know,” he mused, “what an arrant fool he is at the time he begins to fancy himself rather wise!”

He glanced through the window and saw Janice bowed over the printed pages, her face thrown into relief by the soft light. A slow smile of ineffable happiness widened the firm lines of his lips. He turned and walked toward the house—toward the woman who was his.

### III

#### THE STORM GATHERS

JOHN CALDWELL seated himself in an easy chair and rested his eyes on the pleasant figure of his wife. She flung down her magazine.

"Good story?" he asked casually.

"Wretched! Eternal triangle in the eternal form. Married couple—apparently happy—then another woman. John, do *all* men have pasts and presents and futures?"

"Most of them have pasts," he answered seriously, wondering at the telepathy which thus attuned their moods. "Few have a present as perfect as mine. And as to futures—well, it mostly depends on the man himself."

"Eunice is pretty, isn't she?" asked Janice abruptly.

"Very."

"And I'm not?"

"Janice!" Caldwell sensed, rather than ana-

lyzed, the resentful timbre of her voice. He seated himself on the arm of her chair and rested his hand on her shoulder. "What's the matter?"

She smiled. Her hand reached to her shoulder and stroked his.

"Dear old John! A second George Washington, aren't you? Not even to flatter your wife will you tell anything like an untruth."

"When we were engaged, dear," said the man gently, "I promised you nothing but the truth, and I've stuck to my agreement. Perhaps you're not classically beautiful, but you're sweeter than all the other women in the world put in one. Beauty is like cloth—it fades. Sweetness is perpetual, and you are the sweetest, loveliest thing in my life!"

She rested her cheek on his hand, but shook her head.

"You gave me three very excellent mirrors on my dressing-table, John. Like you, they tell nothing but the truth." Again she abruptly shifted the topic of conversation. "Does Eunice Maybank know as much about Joe Franklin as you told me of yourself?"

"Not yet, Janice. However, I advised him to tell her. He said that it would make her unhappy."

"And—" his wife prompted.

"I told him that I had told you, and that after my full confession we had been perfectly happy."

"What did he say to that?"

"A lot of tommyrot to the effect that no matter how completely you had forgiven me you must be more or less unhappy over the past."

Janice's face clouded slightly.

"In a way," she said softly, "Joe is right."

"Janice! You mean that you don't trust me implicitly?"

She shook her head.

"Not that. I *do* trust you—really and truly I do. I know that you are everything you should be—that your past is really a past, that it is dead. But I am a woman, and, as you admit, a plain woman—physically, of course," she hastened to amend as he attempted an interruption. "Sometimes, John, I can't help brooding over—regretting, if you will—those ghosts of the past."

"Janice! I tell you that to me, you—"



"Don't!" she interrupted. "I don't need reassurance." She rose suddenly, the victim of a woman's primitive emotion. "But if I should ever cease to know it—if you gave me food for thought, and that thought conjured up the past—if I should ever find you growing cold—I should leave you! I—I should *hate* you!"

"Janice!"

John Caldwell reached out his arms to grasp her passion-ridden, quivering figure. Her lithe body whirled, avoiding his embrace, and she suddenly sped from the room and up the steps.

A crash of thunder from a clear winter sky could not have more astounded the man. A year of married life had not schooled him to such thoroughly feminine moods as this.

He made no effort to follow, but sank into a chair and sat there with bowed head. He saw that Janice was but a woman after all, and that her very love for him had prompted this outburst. He saw, too, that it had been no affair of the moment, but a giving way to pent-up emotions, a sheer inability to hold in check the thoughts and fears which had been clamoring for utterance since the



**John Caldwell reached out his arms to grasp her  
passion-ridden, quivering figure**

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memorable evening on which he had made his confession to her. Perhaps Joe Franklin was right!

A soft step roused him, and he knew that Kamura was in the hall.

"Sueki," he called, giving the man his individual title, "bring me a brandy-and-soda."

"Yessir, Misser Caldwell."

The little man padded off on his errand. He returned with a glass, which Caldwell drained at a gulp. Kamura watched closely from his beady black eyes, which seemed to hold a glance akin to disapproval. Caldwell drank but seldom, and a man does not sit with bowed head and drawn face for nothing. Nor does that man's wife mount the stairs to her own apartments, her shoulders shaken with sobs, unless there has been trouble between them. Sueki Kamura, like the majority of his race, was quick-witted and observant. He admired both Caldwell and his wife, and the idea of domestic discord made him miserable.

The Japanese left the room, and Caldwell swiftly crossed to the telephone. He called a number, and then asked to have Joe Franklin summoned to the phone for a moment.

"Joe, have you taken my advice? Have you told Eunice anything about—the old days?"

"No. And I don't see—"

"Well, don't do it! My advice was wrong. Good-by!"

"Say, hold on," came his friend's protest. "What's happened?"

Quite distinctly Joe heard the distant receiver snap back on the hook. He frowned and gave vent to a soft, long-drawn-out whistle.

"What the deuce?" he muttered, and, still frowning, retraced his steps to the dark veranda and Eunice Maybank. "It was Caldwell," he announced.

Eunice laughed an entrancing, throaty laugh.

"Your chum, and an old flame of mine," she bubbled. "Did you know that I was once engaged to him?"

"Knew it at the time," answered Joe comfortably. "He was quite wild about you."

"We both got over it. He and Janice seem perfectly, blissfully happy."

"She's a fine woman," declared Joe non-committally.

"And fearfully jealous of her husband," finished the girl.

"Jealous!" Franklin straightened with sudden, tense interest. The subject of marital jealousy was cropping up everywhere, it seemed. "Do you mean that she doubts him?"

"I wouldn't put it as strongly as that," returned the girl. "Of course, you know that while she's sweet and charming to a degree, she isn't pretty, and she knows it. She knows, too, what is common property in Caldwell, that John was a sort of *Don Juan* person before he married her, and I imagine—of course I don't *know*—that she's a bit afraid that his rose-and-rapture period won't always last. Close friends as she and I have always been, I've even noticed a coolness in her attitude to me at times. I hope and believe that it will pass off when you and I are married."

"Yes, I hope so," assented Franklin.

His thoughts were with the Caldwells. So Janice was jealous! And what had occurred at their home after his departure? Why had John phoned in that peculiar manner?

"Knowing that she wasn't John's first love

makes Janice unhappy," pursued Eunice, ignoring Joe's preoccupation. "I don't blame her, because I can't imagine a woman being happy if she knows her husband to be less perfect than she wants him to be. It—it's sort of having to take a second choice at life's bargain-counter, I should say."

"You know, Eunice, I ran about a bit myself," plunged Joe, going as near the truth as he dared.

Eunice laid her hand gently on his arm.

"Yes, I know you were John's chum. I suppose that you were more or less under his influence, and that he led you into things; but I have never heard of your being engaged to every eligible girl in town!"

"I wasn't. And I never wanted to be engaged to any—until now."

The hand on his arm crept down and imprisoned his fingers.

"But you are glad—now?"

"Glad? Yes, at being engaged; but I'm not satisfied—"

"Joe!"

"I want to be married."

"Oh!" His arm crept about her, and her head

snuggled against his breast. "But it's so nice—just being engaged!"

And then, perhaps, Fate giggled—or at least grinned behind the mask of the future. It is hard to imagine so inexorable a divinity as Fate indulging in more than a grin, or a grim smile; but she had set her stage quite cleverly, the prologue was complete, and she was ready to ring up the curtain upon the first act. It was a drama of actors who did not know what parts they were to play, of lines without cues, of spectators who had no idea that any such spectacle was awaiting them.

The closest approach to any real knowledge of the coming developments was held by Walt Simmons, night-clerk of the Gilmer Hotel.

For an hour he had been sitting in silent meditation behind the desk. He had tried to read the thumbed pages of a battered magazine, abandoned by some traveling salesman, but his thoughts could not be held by mere fiction when such a being as she of the bridal suite was directly over his head.

Even while Simmons yawned, Joe Franklin bade his sweetheart a lingering good night and swung toward the hotel. He entered the lobby



just before midnight, nodded to Walt, and walked up the stairway to his rooms.

Simmons let his chair down from two legs to four. His mouth fell open. For a moment or two he held it so, and then closed it gently and with great care. Then, quite as slowly and twice as impressively, he nodded thrice.

"Well, what do you know about that?" he asked of nobody in particular. "Say, if that ain't just a regular *scream!*"

## IV

### A SPECTER FROM THE PAST

MISS LEVERIDGE opened her eyes on a world of golden sunshine, which filtered through the curtains of the bridal chamber. She stretched her body luxuriously, and blinked her yellowish-brown eyes in feline enjoyment. A slow smile, part retrospection, part introspection, crossed her lips. She stretched her arms, yawned, and propped herself on one elbow.

"Well," she informed herself, "I'm betting this is Maudie's big day!"

Having risen and bathed, she prepared herself for the coming campaign. She coiled her heavy hair, to which she added additional weighty masses, to the latest shriek of fashion. She clothed her body in a gown of many ruffles and flounces and fancy buttons, constructed with a deep and seductive "V" at the neck. She liberally reënforced her complexion and carefully penciled her

eyebrows. Finally, she took up her gloves and her long-handled parasol of the most exaggerated bell shape.

It was evident that she intended impressing some one. She took a final critical survey in the mirror, and greeted the reflection with a nod of complete approval.

"You ain't such a lemon on looks, after all," she informed the reflection.

After which she opened the door, sought the elevator-shaft, and punched the button. The bell tinkled somewhere beneath her; the cage rumbled up, bumped to a jerky stop, and dropped her hitchingly back to the first-floor level. She swept regally toward the desk.

To say that she created a sensation is expressing it mildly. Heads turned, necks craned, and the day-clerk—Walt Simmons was then sleeping the sleep of the just—leaned out as if to award her the honor of his immediate presence. He had spotted her as the cage stopped, and had hitched his belt one hole tighter and straightened his tie with the dexterity of a master of legerdemain. True, one or two traveling men gave her but a

cursory glance, but to the natives of Caldwell she was epoch-making, and they stared with bald frankness.

If Miss Leveridge noted, she gave no indication. She advanced to the desk, her head up, her body swinging from the hips, and handed the key to the clerk. Then—she smiled.

"Can you tell me where to find the best café in town? I want breakfast."

"Mmmmm!" from the man behind the desk. "I—er—hardly think you'll find a better place'n ours. Right through that door yonder."

"Thank you—*so* much. Your dining-room was not open last night when I arrived, and I kinder thought maybe you didn't serve nothing but lunch and dinner—like some of the swell places do now." She turned away from the desk, frowned slightly, then swung back. "Oh, yes, I 'most forgot—could you tell me where Mr. John Caldwell lives?"

"Yes'm. No. 763 Elm Street. Anybody will show you." Then, his curiosity uppermost, he ventured to add: "Friend of Mr. Caldwell's?"

Miss Leveridge's penciled eyebrows arched in disapproval.

"I can't see what business that is of yours," she snapped.

She turned and swept into the dining-room, leaving a very much startled clerk trying madly to gather his thoughts.

In the dining-room, the subject of obsequious attention, Miss Leveridge indulged in the best breakfast offered by the limited menu. Then she made her way through the lobby and down the street toward the flaming yellow front of the Owl Drug Company. She glided into the store, causing an adolescent soda-manipulator to press a squirt of spearmint into a chocolate ice-cream soda, and inquired the direction to Elm Street.

Once on the street again, secretly conscious of the buzz which followed her exit, she smiled softly.

"Now," she grinned, "to round up Johnny!"

She opened her vividly purple parasol, set it across her shoulders at a carefully studied angle of jauntiness, and swayed toward Elm Street. She reached the corner, scanned the number, chose the right turning, and strolled in the general direction of No. 763.

"Looks like a mighty nice place to live," she mused approvingly. She was counting the numbers with increasing interest, wondering at the persistent way in which they skipped. "Seven fifty-one—fifty-five—fifty-nine—here we are!"

She paused before the big house which stood well back from the street, with its well-kept lawn, its fine old trees, its neat flower-beds, its comfortable, vine-covered porch. She reinspected the number, which was half-hidden by the shade of the leaves, before starting up the walk toward the front door.

While she made her inspection, a white-clad Japanese came out and began to sweep the veranda. That settled it! Everything to denote wealth—even to a Japanese servant!

Miss Leveridge walked determinedly up the walk and accosted Kamura.

"You savvy English?" she queried pointedly.

Kamura leaned on his broom and inspected the newcomer.

"Intelligible quantity, maybe, pleas'."

"H-m! That oughta be enough. Does Mr. John Caldwell live here?"

Kamura flicked idly at a stray leaf and spun it from the porch.

"Thees hees residence," he admitted after careful thought.

"Well"—sharply—"is he home?"

"Not at presently," returned Kamura. "Misser Caldwell have go to factory where business are conduc'. Missee Caldwell you want see, maybe, yes?"

"Oh! At business, eh? And Miss Caldwell is at home? I reckon I might as well meet her and have it over with." She opened her purse and produced a coin and a card, both of which she handed to Kamura. "Take my card to Miss Caldwell, and ask her to see me," she commanded.

Kamura took the card, inspected its engraved surface, and painstakingly set his broom against the wall of the house.

"You come in? Sit down? I tell Missee Caldwell."

He opened the screen-door invitingly. The caller followed him, glancing approvingly at the evidences of luxurious comfort which greeted her on every side. He directed her to a deeply-uphol-

stered easy chair, and departed. Miss Leveridge fluffed her dress that it might show to best advantage.

Meanwhile Kamura was climbing the stairway to the second floor—not, however, with any evidence of haste. One might have guessed that he was of two minds about Janice's visitor, but his face was inscrutable. He tapped on Mrs. Caldwell's door.

Janice had not gone down to breakfast that morning. The unpleasantness of the previous night had broken her, especially as she realized her unreasonableness and tactless abandon to passion. So she had breakfasted tearfully alone, waiting vainly for a good-by kiss from her husband. Because he had not made the overtures which she knew were not her due, her thoughts had again returned to dwell on their conversation—a topic which seemed to lie at the very foundations of her marital happiness.

Janice loved Caldwell—worshiped him with all the love of her high-strung, passionate being. It was as Eunice had told Joe Franklin the evening before—she was jealous with a jealousy which



at times was nothing less than agonizing. Her jealousy, too, was of the worst and most dangerous kind—it was a jealousy of the fantom past, with nothing tangible, nothing material to combat.

She was not pretty, and she knew it. Because John had confessed to a past, she feared the future—and the beautiful faces which might come into his life.

When Kamura's tap sounded, she was seated in negligee on a low chair before her dressing-table. Her long hair fell over her shoulders, framing her face in a cloudy background. She stared at her reflection with slightly misted eyes; and as she stared her bosom swelled deeply under the thin silk of the robe she wore.

"If I were only beautiful—if I were only more like those others must have been! Oh!"—she clenched her hands—"I *hate* them!"

She turned at Kamura's knock, and called an acknowledgment.

"Excoose, pleas', Missee Caldwell, but lady are below stair desiring to have interview if so can."

"A lady? Who is she? Did she give you her card?"

"Card, pleas'," came the muffled answer.

"Bring it in."

Kamura entered and extended the card. She read the name curiously.

"Maude Leveridge? I don't know anybody of that name. What sort of a woman is she, Kamura? An agent?"

"Not think am agent. She much dressed lady with cat eyes."

"Cat eyes?" Janice frowned—not at the servant's frank appraisal of a visitor, but at the responsive chord it touched.

"Yellow," explained the Jap with a faraway stare.

Janice stared undecidedly at the bit of pasteboard, and tapped the floor with a tiny satin mule. She did not feel inclined to see any one. And so early——

"She say," put in Kamura as an afterthought, "she come see Misser Caldwell."

Janice's finger contracted sharply, unconsciously crumpling the card.

"She came to see *Mr.* Caldwell?" she parroted sharply.

"Yes, pleas'."

"Tell her I will see her in a few minutes," snapped the wife, spurred by an inexplicable desire to meet this mysterious, much-dressed, cat-eyed stranger who wished to see Mr. Caldwell.

She waited until Kamura had closed the door, and then started a rapid dressing of her hair. That finished, she slipped on a pair of low pumps and a neat house-dress, and emerged into the hallway. She made no noise in descending the steps, but paused at the parlor door, where she found her caller inspecting a photograph.

Miss Leveridge seemed to have sensed Mrs. Caldwell's presence even before a word was spoken. Whirling about, she crossed the floor to the woman who stood in the doorway, thrusting both hands forward as she came.

"My dear," she gushed, "I'm delighted to meet you! And we're to be sisters! I suppose you *are* John's sister? You look perfectly charming. I'm just a bug on this domestic stuff, so *there!*"—and she planted a resounding smack on Mrs. Caldwell's lips.

Janice passed one hand across her forehead in bewilderment. Was this a crazy woman?

Numbly she allowed the caller to pump a limp hand. During the process, Janice eyed her with as near an approach to self-possession as she could maintain. She gazed into the yellow-brown eyes, the eyes that Kamura had likened to the orbs of cats. Kamura was right—they were cat eyes. This woman who used John's name so freely looked like a cat, purred like a cat, walked like a cat—and appeared as if she would scratch like a cat.

“You—you—are Miss Leveridge?” Janice found herself asking inanely.

The other nodded brightly.

“That’s me—little Maudie! I know this is sudden, and I oughta have written, but I’m a funny person, as you’ll find out. When I get a hunch to do something, I’m on the job right off. Never was much on waiting; so I just packed up and came on, ready to get married as soon as John says the word!”

## V

### THE SHADOW OF DOUBT

To Janice Caldwell it seemed as if some giant hand had lifted the house, spun it in a dizzying circle, and then set it down with a sickening bump. Fighting for self-control, she faced Miss Leveridge, who was regarding her with a beaming smile of conciliation.

"Hit you hard?" suggested the woman from the city.

Janice tried to speak, but could not. Finally, after a struggle, three words forced themselves through her white lips.

"Married—to—John!"

"Sure pop!" came back the cheerful answer. "Reckon it is a mite sudden; but what's the use of waiting when your mind is made up? None whatever, that's what I say. Long engagements never get you nowhere, do they?"

Janice fought to marshal her mental powers

for the terrible task that faced her. Fate, at least, had been kind in leading her assailant into the misapprehension of believing John's wife to be his sister. The stranger's ignorance of the true situation gave Janice a strategic advantage, an opportunity to rally her forces.

What did it all mean—what *could* it mean? Had John tired of her diminutive plainness, and turned to this large, coarse, flamboyant creature before her? The very comparison was an added hurt.

"When—did you meet him?" gasped Janice.

"Meet John?" The woman grinned. "Say, you don't seem to get me at all. Ain't John wised you up to me? I'm Maude Leveridge."

Janice shook her head in slow negation. Gradually she was feeling ground under her feet, and her sense of outraged womanhood was aiding her.

"I have never heard your name before to-day."

"Gee!" Miss Leveridge shrugged her shoulders indulgently. "Kin yuh beat it? Why, from the way John wrote——"

"Wrote?" It was more a cry than a question.

"You—you mean—he's been corresponding with you?"

"Well, I reckon that's what you would call it when a feller writes to a girl. Let's sit down." Miss Leveridge occupied an easy chair, and Janice perched herself on the edge of a neighboring seat. "Y'see," went on Maude, "it ain't been more'n two weeks since he wised me up to the fact that I was just the kid he was looking for to team up with."

Two weeks! Once again Janice's heart seemed to stop briefly, then to race fiercely on again, pounding, pounding. Two weeks before, John had left the city—on a business trip, he said. And he had gone to see this flashy woman!

Was she one of that army of rivals from the past? Or was she a new one, come to rob Janice Caldwell's life of all that was worth living for? John's wife clenched her hands until the nails dug deep into the pink flesh of her palms.

"He has said nothing to me about it. When—do you expect to—marry—Mr. Caldwell?"

"Oh," simpered Miss Leveridge coyly, "that's for John to decide; but as I'm here and ready,

I don't reckon we need take long. Marriage is marriage, that's what I say—and the sooner it's over with the better. To be puffedly honest, he didn't know I was coming. I just thought I'd spring a s'prise, see?"

"And—and—you haven't seen him yet?"

"Nope. Thought I'd catch him here, but that man of yours said something about his being at work. That's why I thought this was as good a time as the next to meet you. I don't hardly blame you for not cottonin' to me at first sight, 'cause John should have wised you up to what was comin', and then I wouldn't have floored you like I done; but time 'll make us great pals, I'm sure. I don't always make much of a hit on first meetings. But deary me, there's lots that don't, ain't there?"

"Yes," Janice agreed.

"I'm just a bit rough. I've had to take off the gloves and go at it bare-fist in my time; and that takes the fluffy-ruffles out of a girl, don't it?"

Worse and worse! Perhaps she was some girl who had been working, making an honest living,



and—but Janice repelled the idea as unthinkable. Not John, of all men!

She found her rôle one of increasing difficulty. She longed to shriek her outraged dignity and virtue. Still—she knew that she must learn all that she could, and she answered with a faint:

“Yes—I suppose so.”

The woman was rising and smoothing out her dress.

“I reckon I’d better trot along, deary. I’m sorry I handed you one, but you mustn’t take it too hard. These here things all come in a lifetime. We’re just gonna get along fine, and pull the reg’lar happy-family stuff. And, of course, you’ll keep on living with us and bein’ the housekeeper, if you care to. I ain’t much on a kitchen specialty. I’m a bird of a manicure, though!”

“Yes?”

The monosyllable meant nothing, but it served to keep the visitor’s mouth going as she moved toward the door.

“You got a perfectly dandy place, but when I’m settled here I believe I’d rather not have that Jap around. Break it soft to John, dear, about my

bein' here, and wisin' you up before he done it. When I got anything to do, I pitch in and do it—that's me!"

"It—it's just—a bit of a shock."

"Sure—I savvy. Ta-ta! See you some more."

She swept toward Janice and once again planted a swift kiss on the passive, set face of John's wife. Then, with never a backward glance, she swept through the door, across the veranda, down the steps, and into Elm Street.

Janice rose dizzily, swaying and clutching a chair for support. Her hand came up and touched the burning spot where Miss Leveridge's lips had lain against her flesh.

"She—she—kissed me," she cried in sick realization. "She—kissed me. That—that—*thing!*"

She crossed the room with a vicious rush to stare after the retreating form of the woman who had invaded and ruined the sanctity of her home, who had wrecked and despoiled her very soul. Through hot eyes she saw the creature swaying off toward the business center of the town. She saw the postman pause to stare with brutally open admiration, and she imagined that Maude

Leveridge swayed even more for his edification.

Common! Common as dirt! The purple parasol slanted saucily over one of the thinly clad shoulders. The woman was the female symbol of Babylon with her blatant purple tints.

Janice whirled in the grip of a sudden emotion, and fairly ran back through the house, calling the Jap in a voice of hysteria. The call reached Kamura's ears and brought him quickly to her, where she stood leaning against the hall door, panting like a spent runner, a hand at her breast, her great, dark eyes burning with the light of insanity.

"Kamura," she gasped, "she—she's gone. After her, Kamura! See where she goes; then come back and tell me about it—all about it. The truth, Kamura—the truth!"

The Oriental gave her a swift, appraising glance and untied the strings of his apron. There was neither surprise nor question in his beady, almond eyes.

"I go."

He thus briefly accepted his commission, and darted to his own quarters for coat and hat. In a

jiffy he returned, to find Janice where he had left her, as immobile as a statue, and as pale.

"I come back as soon can be," he said, to reassure his mistress, as he padded by her rigid form and fled down the steps, turning instinctively in the direction the woman had taken.

Presently Janice began to pace the length of the hall, like a caged tigress in torment. Every now and again she lifted tightly balled fists and beat them frantically, impotently, against her breasts, until they ached from her own bruising—a dull reminder of the fact that her body, at least, still lived.

How long had it been going on—how short a time—this liaison between the man she loved and this terrible creature who talked in the patois of the streets? Was she a personification of his forgotten past? Or was she the "business" which, since his marriage, had occasionally called John from the city?

Janice seated herself with sudden tragedy on the bottom step, and her eyes widened with unutterable sadness. What a time he had chosen—Fate had chosen—for the dénouement! Of course,

John didn't know. She had meant to keep it to herself a while longer—to hide it in her breast and brood over it for a week or two longer. Then she had intended to show him what she was preparing, and to gloat over the look which would come to his face when he learned her secret. And now—this!

She sprang up the stairway, a dark shadow of grief and horror, and fled to her room. Unlocking her shirt-waist box, she drew from it a basket of filmy pink, sheer and soft. The woman groaned with the physical pain of it.

She lifted a tiny garment and laid it gently on her knee. She sat dully staring at it, brooding over it, her thoughts so chaotic as to be blank; a woman with brain numbed by shock, a woman whose universe had toppled in a second.

An hour passed, two hours—and still Kamura had not returned.

The sepulchral quiet of the dead—dead hopes, dead love—was about her.

Gradually there came to her the impulse of the primitive. John Caldwell was hers, she told herself fiercely, and hers he should remain! Fate had

played into her hands, and she meant to fight, fight—to carry the battle to the enemy.

Her eyes fell on the extension telephone which rested on a mahogany tabouret. She would call the factory and hear John's voice. Perhaps she would gain from his manner some slight intimation as to whether the woman had gone from his home to him. Kamura had not returned. Janice knew nothing, save that she was desperate.

She called the factory number and waited an age-long minute until the receiver clicked up at the other end and a voice said:

"Hello!"

"I wish to speak to Mr. Caldwell," she demanded.

"One moment, please," came back from the switchboard girl at the factory. Then, after a pause: "Mr. Caldwell went out some time ago, and has not returned to the office. Will you leave your number? Hello! Hello!"

Without a word or sound Janice Caldwell slipped from her chair to the floor. The receiver clattered to the table and lay beside the telephone.

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## VI

### U KAMURA TAKES A HAND

SUEKI KAMURA was a little man and a wise one. As he padded down the street after Miss Leveridge's purple parasol, he pondered deeply on the import of his errand.

Between the parlor and the dining-room of the Caldwell home was a pair of massive sliding doors. On the parlor side of the doors hung heavy tapestries. Therefore, by a deft moving of the big doors and the application of a receptive ear, Sueki was enabled to hear anything that was said in the parlor.

He had listened eagerly, his little eyes glittered combatively, during the interview between Janice Caldwell and Maude Leveridge. If he pondered at all on the morals of his eavesdropping he satisfied his conscience by maintaining that he must know the family secrets in order to assist the Caldwell household in times of stress. This day his

eternal vigilance—or curiosity, call it what you will—had been rewarded.

It took Sueki just about a split second to locate a bobbing purple parasol far down the street. He settled down into a space-eating yet seemingly indifferent walk; content for the time merely to trail along, far enough in the rear to be unobserved, yet close enough to see which way the parasol might turn.

It soon became evident that Maude Leveridge was headed for the civic center of Caldwell. She reached the intersection of Elm and Main streets, and turned down Main. Sueki quickened his pace, and swung into Main Street just in time to see the woman disappear into the Owl Drug Company's emporium.

He slackened his speed again and drifted idly along, finally pausing outside the plate-glass window of the store.

With a curiosity shared by many others in the vicinity, he stared at the stranger as she thumbed the pages of a big book which he correctly guessed to be the city directory. He saw her close the volume determinedly, smile at the clerk, speak



with him, order a mint limade at the counter, and sip it idly through a straw.

He was still lounging by the corner when she left the store and came to a halt beside him, as if waiting for a car on the single trolley-line which the town boasted. Sueki discreetly edged behind a telephone-post. Although he did not alter his expression by so much as the deepening of a facial line, he was intensely surprised when she spoke.

"Well, what are *you* doing here?"

He blinked blandly, sleepily, as he turned the placid mask of his face in her direction.

"I stand here, lady, excoose, pleas'," he replied softly.

Maude Leveridge eyed him closely, and her rather large and somewhat thick-lipped mouth set itself into purposeful lines.

"So I see," she snapped dryly. "Ain't you that Jap I seen up at Caldwell's a little while ago?"

Sueki shook his head slowly.

"Caldwell? Pleas', lady, I not know such person. I run honorable shoe-shine business." He glanced speculatively at the tips of her boots.

"I give you good shine, maybe yes?"

"No!" Maude was both annoyed and puzzled.

"Excoose, pleas'."

Sueki left his post to fade off down the street. He knew that he had blundered in risking discovery, but he had gained one great advantage—he had been enabled to gage the astuteness of the cat-eyed woman whom he trailed. He strode on to the next corner, looking neither to right nor left; but on the corner he paused and came to a dead halt.

As for Maude Leveridge, she stared after the retreating back of the Oriental undecidedly.

"The trouble with them there chinks," she remarked to herself, "is that they look too much alike. I'd have sworn he was that snippy little mutt from Caldwell's. It would have been just like that sly puss up yonder to have shot him after me to do a Pinkerton specialty. That dame didn't take no shine to me whatever. I've always heard that relatives play the mischief in a home. I'll have to get rid of her when I've landed John!"

A trolley-car of battered ocher bowled along. Maude gathered her flounces about her, closed her

parasol, and signaled the motorman to halt. It was the car which the drug clerk had told her would carry her to the door of the Caldwell factory.

She swayed up the aisle and seated herself near the front, planning, as the vehicle gathered speed, her interview with the man whom she expected to marry. As if seeking reassurance, she drew from the bosom of her dress a letter signed, in a boldly flowing hand, with the name "John Caldwell." It was a very, very personal letter. So engrossed did she become that she failed to notice the stopping of the car at the very next cross street; nor did she observe a short, lightly built Japanese, who swung unobtrusively aboard and took his seat in a rear corner.

That was Kamura. From his vantage point, a block farther up the street, he had seen the vivid splash of color made by the purple parasol as Maude snapped it shut preparatory to boarding the car; then he, too, climbed aboard. He sat staring idly from the window, yet managing to keep a speculative eye on the woman.

Kamura, who was sincerely fond of the Cald-

wells, felt that they were threatened by some unknown and mysterious danger. He had heard every word of the interview between Mrs. Caldwell and Miss Leveridge, and had been much distressed by the look of tragic passion in Janice's eyes as he darted down the front steps to trail the stranger. He knew that the woman was headed straight for an interview with John Caldwell.

He frowned under the weight of responsibility which had thus been thrust upon him. He was fully determined that if he could prevent it, the lives of husband and wife should not be wrecked by this unwelcome intruder.

The car approached the chimney-topped machinery plant. Sueki Kamura crouched down in his seat, pulling his hat far down over his eyes, that he might escape detection should the enemy's glance chance to light on him.

Miss Leveridge, having read the letter once more, placed it again in its inner sanctuary and, planning her campaign for the thousandth time, turned her thoughts to the little Jap.

"If that wasn't the Caldwell chink, I'm a liar," she mused. "Set him to follow me, did she?"

Well, I guess little Maudie threw a jolt into him. And he faded mighty sudden, too—now why, that's what I'm askin'—why did he vamoose, if he was really a bootblack?"

One block from the factory Kamura swung from the rear end of the car. He remained motionless until the car again stopped at the plant, the woman alighted, snapped open her purple parasol, and disappeared into the building. Then he crossed the street and took his post under a clump of maples which afforded shelter from casual glances. There he waited, for all the world like a small brown terrier awaiting the inevitable descent of a treed cat.

Within five minutes the woman emerged and strolled toward the trolley again, her face plainly expressing extreme dissatisfaction—at which Kamura smiled. It was clear that for some reason her mysterious mission had been unsuccessful. Perhaps Caldwell had taken no more kindly to her matrimonial plans than had Caldwell's wife. Kamura's even, white teeth were bared in a happy smile.

"Kitty no catch canary dees time," he mut-

tered, as he watched Miss Leveridge board a city-bound trolley.

The purr of a motor arrested his attention, and a light auto-truck belonging to the factory whirled into view from between two long warehouses. Kamura signaled the driver to halt, spoke with him for a few seconds, and then mounted the seat. There he settled himself comfortably as the motor-truck sped forward and eventually passed the lumbering trolley.

On reaching the center of the town Kamura thanked the driver and leaped to the ground. He took his stand before a barber-shop, where he waited for the car containing the lady of the purple parasol to pass. After a few minutes it hove into view, but went past the near-by corner without stopping.

Kamura noticed that the woman was still aboard the car, and he padded anxiously after it, fearing that he was about to be thrown from the scent. At the Gilmer Hotel corner it jerked to a protesting halt, and he saw her alight and start toward the hotel entrance. He also saw a young man lift his hat grandly as she approached.

The little sleuth stopped short. It would never do, he cogitated, to spoil things by being recognized now. He did not know that the courteous young man was no greater dignitary than Walt Simmons, night-clerk at the Gilmer, or that Walt had planned this crushing campaign through a night of vivid dreams, through a midday breakfast, through the ordeal of purchasing a flaming silk shirt with bow-tie to match, and through two hours of waiting for the lady from Chicago to return from her expedition.

"How do you do, Miss Leveridge?" Walter said, with a sweeping salute, as she approached.

The woman's figure stiffened, and an expression akin to fear flashed into her yellow-brown eyes as she turned them on the young man. It was only for a second, but Walt noticed it. Then she recognized him, and laughed with an almost hysterical laugh.

"Oh!" she fluttered. "It's *you*? How do you do, Mr. Clerk?"

"Simmons," proffered Walt. "Walter Simmons. Did you succeed in finding Mr. Caldwell?"

Once again that flashing look of startled inquiry, then another swift recovery of self-possession.

"Nothing doing. Tried house and office, and he wasn't at neither place. I left a note for him at the factory, as they said they didn't know when he'd be back; so if he calls for me at the hotel any time this evening, I wish you'd hold him until you can grab me."

Simmons nodded. He looked down the street, up the street, across the street—and then he looked once again into the yellow-brown eyes. She was certainly a swell dresser, he decided again. Quite a feather in his cap, could he be seen on the street with her!

He flushed with embarrassment, and took a fresh hold on his fast-ebbing courage.

"Then—you ain't got anything to do for the rest of the afternoon?" he blurted.

"What is there to do in a burg like this?" the woman returned.

"Well—" hesitated Walt, and then plunged desperately: "There's a ball-game. Caldwell's stacked up against Cedar Hill this afternoon. Game starts in about an hour. If you care any-



thing for baseball, I'd be mighty glad to take you over. Pretty good ball for a bush league. We beat lots of major league clubs in spring training." His eyes fell on a dilapidated touring-car at the curb. It was one of a tribe which served as taxicabs for Caldwell's élite. "We—we—might ride around a bit before the game."

Miss Leveridge appraised Walt deliberately. She gazed at the car. Then she shifted her gaze to the distant line of smoke that rose from the Caldwell Machinery Company's plant.

All told, it had not been the big day she had anticipated. In fact, it had merely been a series of disappointments. She furled the purple parasol and turned toward the decrepit conveyance.

"Oh, well!" she remarked. "If you want to!"

Elated by his good fortune, Walt sprang to open the door of the car, and ordered the yawning and youthful driver to commence the arduous task of cranking the uncertain motor. With the air of a cavalier he assisted Miss Leveridge to her seat, smiling superciliously at the envious mob gathered before the Gilmer Hotel. Then he seated

himself beside her—very close beside her—and the car jerked forward and rolled off.

Sueki Kamura detached himself from that particular portion of the pavement on which he had been standing. This certainly was something unexpected, but his orders had been clear and concise. "Follow her, Kamura"—and follow he certainly would.

His eyes descried a second automobile with a tin "for hire" sign dangling at its side. He awakened the driver, pressed a bill into his hand, motioned toward the car containing the joy-riding couple, and sped in swift pursuit.

The chase led over a maze of turns and twists through Caldwell's prettiest streets, and eventually they brought up at the ball-park, where Sueki saw the man and woman descend and enter the grounds.

He was satisfied at last, for he knew enough of the great national game to believe that the couple were safe for at least an hour and a half. It now devolved upon him to hurry back to Janice and try to take the sad expression from her big, brown eyes. He spoke to the driver once again,

and the car plunged down the street toward the Caldwell home. Sueki Kamura smiled with the knowledge of hard work well done.

## VII

### THE BAROMETER DROPS

DAVID PEARSON, president of the Pearson Contracting and Building Company, shoved the mass of blue-prints and specifications across to John Caldwell's eager fingers.

"I think you understand just what we want?" he asked.

Caldwell nodded as he gathered the papers and placed them in a compact bundle. David Pearson and John had been closeted in the former's office, going over the details of the biggest order in the history of the Caldwell Machinery Company.

"Yes, I have a clear understanding of what you wish, and I'll strain every nerve to see that we turn out first-rate work."

The older man smiled the least bit.

"I know you will, Caldwell." He paused briefly, and then went on: "I don't often do this, John, but I'll make an exception this time. The

size of the matter is that—well, your bid was not by any means the lowest we received; but we know you people, we dealt for years with your father, and we decided that your bid meant better service and closer adherence to specifications. Besides, you are a local firm. This is the first big job we've turned your way since your father's death, and I, for one, hope that there will be many to follow. Whether there will or not depends on you, personally."

"I'll do my very best," mumbled Caldwell, surprised and somewhat embarrassed by the feeling so unexpectedly shown by this man of ice. "My very best!"

"That's what we're counting on. And now—you have it all straight?"

"Perfectly. We'll begin deliveries next week, and rush the work along as fast as we can."

"Good!" Pearson glanced at his watch. "Past two o'clock," he said. "I must go and take a look at that new building of ours on Jackson Street."

The men rose, and Caldwell drove Pearson to Jackson Street, where the builder alighted. Alone in his roadster, John felt buoyant. His work had

inspired Pearson's confidence, and that meant success.

Then his thoughts turned to Janice, and he frowned rather unhappily. She hadn't come down for breakfast that morning, and he, still smarting under the injustice of her temper of the previous night, had left the house without offering overtures for a reconciliation. He had been minded to mount to her room and straighten things out, but self-respect—or was it foolish pride?—had prevented.

His faith in Janice had been shaken. She had dropped from the height of superwoman to the level of woman. She wanted to be petted and flattered and told that she was pretty. She wasn't satisfied to be the chum he desired. He was hurt to the quick, and magnified the importance of the little squabble.

So it was that he had left the house that morning without telling her either of his good fortune or of his plans for the day; and business had prevented his driving home for luncheon. He had been busy at David Pearson's office, and had lunched with the builder at the Commercial Club.

After the hasty meal, the two men had resumed their discussion of the contract they were closing, and in the rush of achievement John had temporarily forgotten Janice and home.

And now, although he was intensely sorry that his wife felt as she did, that her heretofore hidden jealousy should at length have reached the point of an open outbreak, he could not forget his elation at his business victory. After years of work, which he had commenced on a reputation composed of nothing more stable than a bed of wild oats, his foot was now solidly planted on the ladder of success.

His elation demanded expression; he wanted to do something by way of total relaxation. As he let in the gears and rolled forward, he remembered that Caldwell was to meet Cedar Hill at the ball-park, and that a good game was almost a certainty, as the two little cities were ancient baseball rivals. He hadn't seen a ball-game that season, and he decided to force Joe Franklin to accompany him to the park.

He swung his car down Main Street, and a few minutes later applied the brakes before a tiny

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office where a neat, gilt sign announced the name and occupation of his chum:

JOSEPH E. FRANKLIN  
DENTIST

He honked three times, then paused and honked twice. Instantly the door opened, and Joe, clad in the conventional white jacket, emerged.

"Busy?" queried Caldwell.

"No, unfortunately. If I don't get some cavities to fill, I'll have one in my bank-roll!"

"Forget work, and come to the ball-game. Your assistant can attend to any transient business. Cedar Hill's playing here, and Buck Rear-don is pitching for us. I've just made a killing, and I want to celebrate. Hike!"

Franklin sped inside, changed coats, donned his hat, and was back in a jiffy. Caldwell eyed the light checked suit, and smiled.

"New duds, eh?"

"Uhuh! How you like 'em?"

"Very much. They show good taste. They're exactly like my latest. I haven't worn mine yet."



"They ought to be like yours," grinned Franklin. "Jepson cut it from the same bolt."

Caldwell laughed lightly.

"Like old times, eh, Joe? We've been taken for one another many's the time, eh?"

"We sure have. That's why they used to call us the twins—always dressing alike. But seriously, the reason I selected this was because it was the prettiest piece of goods Jepson had."

"No apologies necessary! I'm complimented."

The car rolled off down the street. Franklin's mind reverted to the previous night and the mysterious telephone-message from Caldwell.

"How's Janice?" he inquired.

"Haven't seen her to-day. Who's going to pitch for Cedar Hill, do you know?"

It was a palpable evasion, but Franklin was not to be put off the track thus easily. He attacked direct.

"Why did you phone me last night?"

"I found out that you were right and I was wrong," said John bluntly. "And I wanted to keep you from making the blunder that I did. Janice is jealous, and she does brood over what

I told her before we married. I guess there's a heap of truth in the saying that what you don't know won't hurt you."

"Eunice thinks," smiled Franklin, trying to lighten the sudden tension, "that it was you that led me into all my youthful indiscretions."

"Let her. She'll think you're the injured party, and will love you the more because of it. Men are fools—at that age. I can't say that I blame Janice. I'm the one to blame, right from beginning to end."

"Humph! You must have been hit hard last night. Janice fly at you?"

"Shut up, for goodness' sake! Here we are at the gate."

They entered together, parked their automobile, and seated themselves in the smokers' section of the grandstand. They received and returned many nods of friendly greeting from friends among the spectators.

Walt Simmons, puffed with the importance of escorting Miss Leveridge in public, and eager to divert her, turned smilingly:

"No wonder no one at Caldwell's joint knew

when he'd get back! He's playing hooky. See him yonder?"

Maude bent forward, and her eyes snapped. "Where?"

"In the gray suit, with his Panama pulled down over the back of his head."

"Mmmmmmm!" mused the woman. "Yes, so it is!"

The gong sounded, and the preliminary practice ended. The umpire announced the batteries amid wild applause, the Caldwell team trotted to the field, and the game started.

It was a slam-bang, hit-and-run game from the very first inning, with first one team ahead and then the other, and the fans in a veritable frenzy of excitement. Maude Leveridge had no eyes for the dramatic scene on the ball-field. She was watching Joe Franklin, the man in the checked suit, who had been pointed out to her as John Caldwell.

At the distance she could not distinguish his features. She could only see that he was a large man, and well dressed. She formed and abandoned a plan to go over and speak to him then

and there. After all, he had not known that she was coming, and she trusted that the note she had left at his office would bring him to her as soon as he received it.

Gradually a little of the excitement which pervaded the crowd communicated itself to her, and she became interested in the game. She joined in the wild cheering when a sharp single scored two men in the ninth with the tying and winning tallies. And when the uproar died down she noted that the man in the checked suit and his companion had disappeared.

She wondered whether Caldwell would visit his office again before going home for the evening; and then she smiled at thought of Janice. Whichever he did, it was a safe bet that he would hear of her arrival in town. So she decided upon a quick trip to the hotel, there to await developments.

What Caldwell did was to hurry Franklin back to his office, drop him, and speed away to the factory. He stopped the car before the office, entered, and addressed his private stenographer.

"Anything special?" he inquired,

The girl shook her head.

"No, sir. That insurance man came back, and a lady came in to see you. She wouldn't state her business, but left a note."

She took a sealed envelope from her desk and handed it to Caldwell.

Women visitors were few and far between at the factory. For a moment John was sickened by the thought that Janice might have called; then he eyed the handwriting, and sighed with relief. The chirography was not at all like his wife's. Hers was neat and small and regular; this was scratchy and scrawling.

He took a paper-knife and slit the thing open. Drawing out a folded sheet of the company's letter-head, he smoothed it out and read the boldly written lines:

DEAREST JOHN:

I come down here to see you, and they said you was out. I'm up at the Gilmer, and I guess you better had come to see me. I'm in the bridal suit. Ain't that a scream?

Devotedly,

MAUDE.

P. S.—I guess you know all right who Maude is, don't you?

Quite slowly John Caldwell stiffened. The hand which held the sheet of paper clenched until the letter-head was crumpled and torn in the iron grip. An odd expression was born in his eyes, and became a fixed stare. He was not staring at the thing in his hand, but at the nebulous past, at a ghost which was gradually taking shape.

Maude! Did he know who she was? Did he? But—he had thought the woman understood—that they were quits. It had been a long time ago. And she was here in town, and had sought him at his very office!

Then, displacing the face that memory had conjured from the past, there swam before him a vision of Janice's brunette sweetness. He straightened, thrust the note back into the envelope, and strode swiftly to his car.

## VIII

### THE STORM BREAKS

AFTER what seemed an age, Janice Caldwell sat up dizzily. A strange, buzzing sound filled the room, and presently her consciousness was penetrated by the fact that it came from the telephone receiver, which lay upon the table. Rising painfully, she replaced it on the hook, and thus stopped the screech of the "squawker" which Central had turned on for just that purpose.

The simple action brought poignantly back to her all that had gone before. Fact stumbled over fact, conjecture over conjecture, whirling through her mind, in mad, fierce array. She pressed her icy hands to a throbbing forehead.

They had said at the office that John was out. That meant, of course, that the woman had visited him, and that he had left with her. Where was Kamura, and why did he not come back to tell her—even the worst?

As if in answer to the thought, she was numbly conscious of the chugging stop of an automobile before the house, and then to her ears came the suave voice of her servant:

"Missee Caldwell! Excoose, pleas'—but are needing money to pay man in auto for hauling to door."

She leaped eagerly to her feet and jerked open the front door. Sueki had just stepped on the veranda.

"Sueki!" she cried. "Tell me—quickly—what did you find out? Where did she go? Where did Mr. Caldwell take her? Tell me, Sueki—quick!"

The face of the Japanese was inscrutable. He refused to depart from his racial tendency to finish one task before taking up another.

"Pleas', Missee Caldwell, first to pay man for auto. No having money, not can do. You pay."

"Ooh!" Janice was eaten with impatience. "Here," she finished sharply, realizing the shortest way out of the matter, as she seized her purse and handed him a crumpled bill. "Quickly!"

Kamura clasped it in his hand and darted to



the curb. When he returned, she was waiting for him just inside the front door.

"And now tell me," she said, speaking calmly by dint of a desperate mental effort, "where did Mr. Caldwell go with that woman?"

Kamura eyed her carefully before answering. The effects of the day's tragedy were written plainly on her features.

"You set down," he suggested mildly. "I tell you. Then you not fall down, maybe."

If he feared that she would fall, then must the news he brought be dire! By an effort she dragged herself to a hall-seat and let herself down upon it, leaning her dark head against the wall.

"Go on," she choked from between dry lips. "Where did he take her?"

Kamura blinked. He was glad of her question, glad that it afforded him chance for a truthful answer.

"Misser John not go!" he announced triumphantly. "He stay in office. Cat woman go 'way."

Janice leaned forward tensely and peered into

the expressionless eyes. It was the last thing she had expected to hear, and it came to her suddenly that Kamura's statements did not at all dovetail with what she had been told at the office. The man was lying, lying brazenly to shield John!

"Sueki," she cried in sick protest, "why do you say that? Don't you know it is not the truth? And I told you to come back and tell me the truth—and nothing *but* the truth! I want it—want the *truth*, Sueki!"

She sat there in silence, staring pleadingly into the eyes of the man before her. He was smiling—she imagined a trace of embarrassment in his manner, as if a lie lay uneasily on his stocky shoulders.

"What I say are truth, Missee Caldwell," he insisted. "I go after cat woman. I see where she go. I see her come out factory. I look at watch while she inside. Maybe five minute. She come out alone. She get on car and go back to hotel you call Gilmer; then"—his smile broadened as he reached his climax—"then, she go to ball-game in automobile!"

"What?" Janice was bewildered by all these

loose ends, which she could not gather, try as she might. "Went to—to—the ball-game?"

"Baseball," explained Kamura. "She take man, get in auto, ride away. I take auto, go follow. She go in ball-play fence. I come home."

"Who went with her?" Janice snapped the question sharply, her eyes had narrowed craftily. "Kamura! The truth! Who was the man?"

Sueki shook his head in disclaimer.

"I not know. Young man near Gilmer. He raise hat for howdy-do, when cat woman get off street-car after come from factory."

What was Kamura trying to do—tell half-truths? Had he seen John and received instructions? Frankly, Janice did not believe that Miss Leveridge had gone to the ball-game with a "young man near Gilmer."

"Sueki, stop lying to me! It was Mr. Caldwell who took her to the ball-game. The truth now—wasn't it?"

But Kamura only eyed her calmly. If he was surprised at the extent of her knowledge, he concealed the fact behind his masklike face.

"No, Missee Caldwell," he averred. "Misser

John not go to ball-game. I not see him go. I tell you truth. Nossing else but truth."

"I don't believe you!" the woman cried fiercely. "You are a man, and, like all the rest, you shield another man; but you haven't fooled me! I know he wasn't at the office this afternoon. I telephoned there shortly after two o'clock, and they told me. He was off with that woman—making a spectacle of himself—in public! He—" She brought herself up with a jerk, as her pride warned her that she was speaking too freely before a servant, no matter what confidential status that servant might hold. "You had best go about your work," she ordered briefly, and turned toward the stairway leading to the upper floor.

Her mind was seething with all the wild unreason that jealousy can produce. On one thing she had determined—she would try to verify or disprove Kamura's story as far as she could. To that end she seated herself at the up-stairs telephone and called the factory, which notified her that John was still absent. Next she telephoned the Gilmer Hotel, and Miss Leveridge was reported "out."

What could she try next? Impulsively she called Joe Franklin's office, and was answered by his assistant, who informed her that Joe was not in. She was growing coldly angry by this time. She had hoped that her husband might have taken Franklin, his companion in the wild follies of the bygone days, into his confidence concerning the Leveridge creature; and she had planned to trick an admission from Joe. But the dead-line of absence had blocked that endeavor at the very start.

The thought of Joe Franklin, however, suggested what he had told her the previous night. Her mind, groping desperately, turned to Eunice Maybank. She called the number, and Eunice answered in person.

"Oh, Eunice," said Janice as casually as she could, "where is Joe?"

"Joe? Why, he's down at his office, I suppose."

"But he isn't. His assistant told me he was out. John's not at the factory, either. I called Joe because I thought he might know where John is. They've always been together so much."

"Janice!" Eunice's voice was one of startled

inquiry. "What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

"I—I—don't know," sobbed Janice.

"There must be—else you wouldn't be calling John all over town at five o'clock in the afternoon."

"Eunice," plunged Janice impulsively, "what would you do if you thought Joe Franklin was off somewhere with another woman?"

To her ears came the sound of a long-drawn gasp.

"Wh—what?" Then, sharply: "Janice, don't be a fool! *Joe* wouldn't do anything like that. I—I'm—not jealous like you are. Joe and I were discussing it only last night. I told him that I knew you were foolishly jealous of John Caldwell. Your husband isn't a child, Janice. You can't keep him tied to a phone, to answer whenever you call. He's probably gone out on business."

Janice bared her teeth. Eunice presuming to advise her—the wife of a year! *She* was sure of Joe—not jealous—not a bit! And boasting of the fact!

"I wouldn't be too sure what I would feel until I had the chance," she flung back, as Eunice paused. "You know as well as I do that Joe hasn't been a saint. John told me of the other women in his life. I dare say Joe has not had sufficient confidence to tell you."

It was cattish—terribly cattish; but a woman in such a frame of mind is not responsible. Less overwrought than she was, her gentle nature would have shrunk from such a cruel stab. It was the reaction of a bruised heart and a shaken mind, resentful of the other's assurance.

"We were discussing that last night," returned Eunice slowly, weighing every word. "And I rather think Mr. Caldwell led Joe into most of the scrapes. Joe is younger. He was—"

"John *led* him!" Janice's voice rose in a shrill crescendo of shocked defiance.

"Yes."

"Did Joe Franklin say that?"

"Oh, no, indeed; but he laughed when I said it. Of course, he wouldn't be small enough to say anything that would be an accusation against his friend."

"He laughed at you for believing it, most likely," returned Janice, snapping her receiver on the hook. Her lips were tight set and her eyes flashing. She had, at least, given Eunice something to think over. It might shake her superior poise. Little fool! *She* didn't know men.

Janice dragged herself miserably to the little work-basket, caressingly lifted a tiny pink-embroidered nightingale, folded it carefully, and then, with sudden determination, thrust it into her loose house-dress. When John came home she would exhibit it to him, and call upon him by all it represented to tell her the whole truth. Then, if she saw that he was tired of her, she would leave him.

Her tight lips quivered, her eyes slowly filled with scalding tears, her slender shoulders shook; she was very unhappy, very lonely. Even Eunice, whom she had thought a friend, seemed to have turned against her. She was alone, deserted, utterly surrounded by people whom she could not believe and circumstances which she could not understand.

While she sat there lost in the meshes of self-



pity, the man of her thoughts was driving a high-powered roadster toward her as swiftly as he dared in the face of stringent city ordinances—which he himself had helped to draft during his aldermanic term. He had left the factory with a lurch as the clutch caught, and his foot carefully nursed the throttle as he sped toward his home. Janice's face seemed to beckon, to call to him.

The note in John Caldwell's pocket seared through to his heart. Maude! He wanted to be alone with Janice, to reassure himself of her love for him and trust in him. Then he knew, with her at his side, shoulder to shoulder, he would fight for the happiness which was is due, and force the resurrected past back into the limbo of forgotten things.

His eyes hardened as he fled homeward. What did Maude expect? Why had she come? For blackmail, in all likelihood. In any case he would see Janice first, and then face the woman. He pressed the throttle a little more, and the car leaped faster.

Taking a sharp turn at the big gate of his resi-

dence, he shot the car up the driveway and under the porte-cochère, where he left it without taking it to the garage. Kamura could attend to that.

He stepped into the house, and felt the intense, sepulchral quiet. There was no sound, no sign of life. Of course, it was likely that Kamura was somewhere at the back; but where was Janice? Was it possible that she was ill?

He mounted the stairs three at a time, his sinewy leg-muscles lending wings to his feet. He went straight to his wife's room, and paused at sight of the ominously closed door. He stood for a moment irresolutely, and then tapped.

"Janice!" he called softly.

"Well?"

It was her voice, yet it was not her voice. It was a voice that he had never before heard.

"May I come in?"

"I suppose so."

He turned the knob and entered, closing the door behind him. His wife was seated on the edge of a leather chair. She did not even look up, nor did her eyes turn as he crossed the floor to her side. He was oppressed with a sense of

disaster—something which he could not fathom. He paused by the side of her chair, yearning to take her in his arms, yet afraid—of something.

He summoned his courage, and spoke softly:

“Janice—something is—wrong. What is it?”

She looked up, apathetically at first, and later with a flash of fire in her fine eyes—a fire that consumed and accused. Her answer came in an odd manner and in strange tones.

“I—have had a caller to-day!”

“A caller?” John echoed the words as if they were utterly meaningless, though he sensed that they contained a tragedy. “A caller?” he repeated.

Janice’s lips twisted as he had never seen the lips of a human being twist. There were agony, heartbreak, and a tinge of contempt in that terribly expressive twist of the lips.

“Yes!” She met his eyes squarely. “The lady who has come to take my place as your wife!”

## IX

### AN OPEN RUPTURE

CALDWELL straightened sharply, as if under the upper-cutting impact of some invisible fist. His eyes popped and his jaw dropped in startled surprise.

"Here? She—that woman—came here?" he gasped, scarcely knowing what he was saying.

Janice's heart died within her, became as a piece of lead. Before the form of his question, indicative as it was of damning knowledge, what tiny ray of hope she might have maintained as to her husband's fidelity wholly disappeared.

"Yes," she said coldly, gathering courage from her sense of outraged womanhood, betrayed wifehood. "Maude!"

The name, as she pronounced it, was an anathema.

"Maude!" echoed Caldwell inanely. His knees felt strangely shaky; a cold, clammy perspiration

broke out on his skin. He sought a chair, and sank weakly into its comforting depths. "She—she told you her name?"

His wife smiled. Her smile was one that chilled.

"She told me quite a bit, John. You see, she came to see you, and met Kamura. He told her that you were out, but that 'Misse' Caldwell was in; you know how he pronounces 'Mrs.' She thought I was Miss Caldwell, your sister, and came in to make my acquaintance."

Caldwell fought for stable ground on the reeling world about him. He spoke—because she waited for him to speak, because he *had* to speak.

"It's all a miserable mistake," he said desperately; "a horrible, miserable mistake. It—it was just a bit of young man's thoughtless folly, Janice—just a young man's folly. She—she's one of the women I have told you of—an actress—do you remember?"

Janice had the upper hand, and she knew it. And she used it with a woman's *finesse*. Far be it from her to show her husband how deeply she was stabbed!

"Grease-paint and make-up do coarsen the skin," she mused conversationally. "Her skin is coarse, very coarse. And she has muddy, gold hair and yellowish eyes. Kamura likened them to a cat's. But you were hardly a young man, a prey to youthful impulses, so recently as two weeks ago."

"Two weeks?" Caldwell's body stiffened slightly.

"You took a trip then, if you remember—a *business* trip. She said it had been two weeks since you last told her that she was the kind of wife you wanted."

Caldwell's fists clenched. He rose from his chair, his face livid.

"Good Heavens! You mean to tell me that you believe I went to see her on that trip? You—you think I've been keeping in touch with her—on my trips—"

"And by writing. She said you wrote to her."

Janice was watching carefully, missing no look or movement that betrayed a guilty soul. She wished to learn all she could of her husband's treachery. But John surprised her. He leaned

forward while she spoke, and when she finished he gripped the chair in an iron grasp.

"That's an infernal lie!" he shouted. His jaw projected at a new angle. "I don't deny the things of which I am guilty," he went on more calmly, "but I won't stand for other things being tacked on. I don't deny acquaintance with this woman. I told you about her. Your description fits her only too well, and her name—hasn't been changed; but I haven't seen her, or heard of her, or from her, or written to her, in more than two years. I promised you that I would tell you the truth, and so I have—do you hear?"

Janice's lips curled into a cold sneer.

"Not even seen her or heard from her to-day?"

"No, not even to-day!"

"Kamura said you did."

"Kamura? What has that Jap to do with this?"

"I set him to follow her when she left here. He tells me that she went straight to your office, remained there about five minutes, and then left."

"At what time?"

Caldwell asked the question sharply. He, too, was in the grip of passion—of furious rage against this interloper, not against his wife.

“At about half-past one.”

“At that time I was with David Pearson, the big contractor, in his office. I can prove it. But she did go to the factory. She left a note saying that she was at the Gilmer Hotel.”

“I thought”—icily—“that you said a second ago you had not heard from her to-day. Are you only going to admit facts which I already know? Indeed, John, you are not clever!”

He was flustered.

“I—I—” he stammered, but she cut him short.

“And I suppose you chased her to the Gilmer?”

“I did nothing of the kind. I went to the ball-game with Joe Franklin. You can prove that by him.”

She smiled patronizingly.

“I don’t doubt it in the least. Mr. Franklin is your chum, and you two have always stood by each other. Of course he’ll back you up! You said last night that he wasn’t man enough to confess his evil deeds to his affianced wife. But let



us stay on the track. I know that this woman attended the ball-game, too. I know several things, in fact."

"This afternoon?" John inquired weakly.

"Certainly." Then something broke down a bit of the barrier which Janice had so carefully builded, and she shook her head pitifully.

"Oh, John, why try to carry your deception further? Can't you see that it only makes things worse, and harder to forgive—if there is any such thing as forgiveness? Of course, I don't suppose you knew that that woman was coming here to-day. She informed me that it would be a delightful surprise to you—or words to that effect; but she has no doubt of the greeting in store for her. And, of course, she doesn't know you are married. Didn't you ever tell her *that*, John?"

"Tell her? Good Lord, no! I tell you I haven't even seen her in more than two years!"

His voice was a shout of negation. Janice frowned.

"Noise never converted a lie into the truth, John."

"I'm not trying to convert anything," he protested desperately. "I'm telling the truth, and nothing but the truth. I don't understand this thing any more than you do. I—"

"But I do understand, and there is no need for further subterfuge on your part. I told you last night that I feared it, that it hung over my head like a sword of Damocles. It was probably a woman's sixth sense—intuition. Had I been more sensible at first, it would not have occurred, because I would not have married you. You have always had a penchant for pretty faces, and mine is not, never has been, and never will be pretty. Nor would you flatter me; the best you would ever say was that I was sweet or attractive. I was damned with faint praise, as it were. Besides, sweetness"—her voice rose to a sort of hysterical quaver, and she laughed mirthlessly—"sweetness cloy after a time, doesn't it, John?"

Caldwell was by her side in an instant, and his big hands seized her by the shoulders.

"Janice!" he cried hoarsely. "Janice, stop that! Stop that infernal laughter! No matter what you hear, or what happens, or what you be-

lieve, I am still your husband, and I've a right to speak in my own defense. No, don't nod your head! Even a confessed murderer may take the stand and tell of mitigating circumstances. I have told you nothing that was not true—I swear that!"

"You said you had not heard from her to-day."

"Stop!" The veins stood out on his forehead, and he leaned forward fiercely. "Let's quit this quibbling. The note, for the moment, slipped my mind. I did go to the ball-game, and I went with Joe. At that time I had not received the note from her, and did not even know that she was in the city. And what did I do when I received the note? Go to her? No—I jumped into my car and drove here to you as fast as it would speed. I want to see her—after I see you. I came here first for help, counsel, an expression of affectionate trust. It was you to whom I first turned when trouble loomed on the horizon. If you will stand by me, Janice, and fight with me, we'll win out and be the happier for this fire-test of our love. Remember just one thing, Janice. In the eyes of God and man, you are my

wife; and nothing can—or ever will—alter that fact!"

He paused and stared into her pain-filled eyes. She stared back from under lowering brows. Her laughter had fled before his almost convincing vehemence. For the barest fraction of an instant he harbored a wild hope that he had carried conviction to her by the sheer passionate force and unanswerable emphasis of his words. Then he gave up the thought, for she laughed again, slowly, deliberately, as she had laughed before.

"Yes, John, you are my husband. I suppose the courts may take some time to change that status; but we shall see before very long!"

His fingers contracted until she winced at the sheer physical pain of it.

"Janice! What do you mean? Do you think I would—"

"Seek a divorce? And why not? How else could you go to this—this—woman?"

"But I don't want to go to this miserable woman!" John Caldwell stormed sickly. "Won't you listen to me with an open mind? Is there

nothing I can say which will convince you that I am telling you the truth?"

"No," she replied wearily. "You see, you tell me too much that I know is *not* the truth—that doesn't jibe with the facts in my possession. You deny; but you don't prove."

"I've had no opportunity to prove things yet. It—it's all come upon me like a lightning bolt from a cloudless sky. It—it—staggeres me. Give me a little time, Janice. Give me time to—to——"

"To match your proof with my facts?"

"To do whatever I can do to straighten out the situation."

"I don't know. I guess, John, that it's not such a very unusual situation. But—but—there must be no divorce *now!*" She paused on the last word, and he raised his head, sensing a hidden meaning. "Later, if you wish your freedom, you shall have it. I will give you grounds—desertion, incompatibility, anything you wish. But if you sue for divorce now, I shall fight it, because"—despite her iron resolve, her voice broke pitifully—"I—I don't want my baby—to be born,

after its father has gone off with—another woman!”

She swayed and almost fell. The cry of a man in torment burst from Caldwell’s lips as he leaped closer and clasped her in the strong haven of his arms.

“Janice! Janice—girl! Do you know what you’re saying, Janice. Your baby! You mean—”

“This!” She thrust a hand into the bosom of her dress, and drew forth the filmy pink nightingale which she had placed there an hour before. “It—it means that you—you have chosen a poor time—to make known your plans. But—you didn’t choose it, did you? I forgot. This is so different from the manner of telling that I had planned!”

The man’s big body was shaken.

“Janice!” he cried desperately. “Give over this terrible misunderstanding, and let me talk to you—as I have always wanted to—as I have always done. You hadn’t told me—why, *why*, for Heaven’s sake, had you never told me of—this?”

“Would it have made any difference?” she

asked dully, with all her first passion of resistance dying down, now that her secret was his. "Would you have acted differently if you had known we were to have a child?"

"No!" The word was a vocal explosion. "I would have acted precisely as I have done. That's what you can't understand—I've done nothing to be ashamed of—not a thing. I've told you the truth, and I'm telling it to you now. Let's get away from this misunderstanding, Janice—can't you see the truth in my eyes? Talk to me—let me explain—help me to meet this thing which has come into my life—this woman from the past. We've got to meet it. We should have had to face it anyway, but now—with a child—it will be more imperative than ever. We can win if we fight together, shoulder to shoulder."

"I couldn't!" she shuddered, momentarily carried away by unreasoning jealousy begotten of the familiar way in which he spoke of this strange woman. "I—I—should go mad. I can't stay here any longer. I'm not strong enough, John. My heart is broken." She sobbed softly.

"Then what will you do, dear?"

"I'll—I'll go home. They—they'll give me shelter until after—the baby is born. Then I'll find something to do to support it, and you can go to this woman you—want."

She sobbed aloud now with a new grief. Before John came to her, Janice's terror had been that she had lost him. Now that he stood before her, pleading, begging for her help, she rebuffed him with all the inconsistency of a woman's overwrought emotion, precipitating the very disaster which she had feared most.

"You mean," asked Caldwell, speaking very slowly, "that you'd leave me—with this matter still unsettled?"

"Yes. I couldn't stay under the same roof with you now, John. It wouldn't be—right. I'll go—home."

Caldwell's jaw set until the muscles stood out in ugly ridges. The lines about his forehead and eyes registered the deepest hurt of his life.

"There will be no need of that," he said quietly, and with great dignity. "This is your home—first and before all others. If one of us must leave it, I shall do it. I will get a room at the



Commercial Club. You will remain here, please, with Kamura and the cook. You must stay here until the present clouds have cleared. Do you understand that, Janice? I say you *must*! You are not capable of judging things calmly just now. For that matter, neither am I. Take your time, dear; think things over for a day or two, at least. Don't create a public scandal before there is any need."

"How do you expect to settle things without a scandal?"

Caldwell shook his head in bewilderment.

"I don't know—now; but I'll do my best. Will you—would it be asking too much—to get you to promise to stay here, and give me a fighting chance?"

"You'll go to the Commercial Club?"

"Yes."

Janice leaned back in her chair with her eyes closed. Her temples were throbbing painfully.

"I'll wait here to-night, I think. Perhaps you are right in saying that I'm not capable at present of deciding what is best. It was all so sudden, so dreadful—it has shocked me so! Think

of it—to have her come here and tell me that she had come to marry the man who is my husband! To see the sort of woman that you prefer! I could never be as she is, John. I've thought and thought and thought all day, and now I can't think any more. I'm too tired. Won't you go—please?"

Caldwell opened his mouth to reply, then closed it abruptly. For a minute he stood looking down into her troubled, weary face, with its half-closed lids, its drooping lips, its utter, hopeless depression; and he held his feelings of that moment locked in his heart. But the entire expression of his face had altered; it had grown tender and yearning. He could forgive very much, palliate very much, for this woman. Happiness must be hers, at any cost. His wife—and the mother of his child! He spoke at length, softly, gently:

"Good-by, Janice. I am going now."

"Good-by," she answered, without meeting his eyes.

Caldwell left the room and descended the stairs in search of Kamura. He found the Japanese setting the dinner-table, and ordered him to pack

a suit-case with his immediate belongings and to take it to the Commercial Club that night.

As he spoke, Kamura eyed him peculiarly. He, too, half opened his mouth in speech, then closed it. Somehow, Caldwell's expression was not one which invited comment.

"After leaving my suit-case," finished Caldwell, "come back here and look out for Mrs. Caldwell. If anything should happen, or if you should need the slightest thing for her, be sure to let me know at once."

Then, without a backward look, he left the house, stepped into his car, and drove rapidly off.

## X

### ALLIES

IF Caldwell's mind had been in a turmoil while driving from factory to home after the startling receipt of Maude Leveridge's note, it was a seething caldron of horror as he shot his car toward the Commercial Club.

An hour before he had flinched at facing a very unpleasant situation, but now that situation had expanded with potentialities and realities of which he had not dreamed. His wife's stand, her instant condemnation of him, her unrelenting, unjudicial attitude, rankled and burned. Yet almost greater than all else was the significance of the little pink garment she had dangled before his eyes—a taunt at his failure—the golden apple of life's attainment just out of his reach!

This sudden lightning-stroke had come out of a clear sky, threatening him with loss of home, of wife, of the child who was not yet. He set

his teeth and drove on, every second of the dragging hour accentuating his agony.

Not the least of his pain was in the knowledge that it was his own folly which had arisen to blast his happiness, and to wreck his life and the lives of those dependent on him. Folly—that was it—mad, youthful, unreckoning folly, the folly which ever dogs one's footsteps, arising at the most unexpected times and in the most unexpected manner to hound and scourge.

Caldwell writhed in sheer anguish as he drove through the quiet streets, cursing the note in his pocket, cursing the woman who had written it. His anger against her grew apace, till it almost crushed down his grief, till it began to foster murderous thoughts.

He ground the car to a stop before the gray, stone portals of the Commercial Club, applying the brakes with such viciousness that they screamed with a cry like that of his own torn spirit. He mounted the steps, handed his hat to the check-room boy, and passed into the parlors, his head bent, his thoughts chaotic. He hoped to find seclusion somewhere, where he might thrash

the whole terrible thing out, plan to dispose of the woman, and scheme to once more win back his wife, his home—and his child.

“John!”

A voice at his ear. A hand on his arm. He whirled to stare into the eyes of Joe Franklin.

“Why, man, what’s the matter? You look as if you had seen a ghost.”

Caldwell nodded slowly and spoke impulsively.

“I have. Yes, I’ve seen a ghost!”

He was glad that Joe was there. He felt the need of speech to one whom he could trust, speech with his lifelong chum, the sharer of so many of his joys and sorrows. He knew that Joe would understand; possibly he might render aid, might suggest something that Caldwell could not think of.

“Come over in the corner, Joe, behind those potted palms. I’m in serious trouble, and I want to talk to some one—to you—about it.”

The two men crossed the room and sank into easy chairs. Then Franklin turned to his friend.

“Now, for Heaven’s sake, tell me what is wrong,” he urged.

Caldwell turned to him, his eyes showing an anguish which made Franklin wince.

"Joe," he said, "do you remember Maude Menton?"

Franklin frowned thoughtfully.

"Menton? Menton? Wasn't she—I've got it! She was that blond thing you met when that burlesque crowd got stranded here, wasn't she?"

"Yes. I met her afterward, too, old man."

"Yes?"

"In Philadelphia, a bit more than two years ago," pursued Caldwell. "You may remember that jaunt I took. I said I was going to the baseball-games—the world's series. She was playing there, and my visit lasted—about three weeks. You understand?"

"I understand. She—she wasn't exactly an angel when she was here," Franklin remarked.

"I know that."

"But what has she to do with this knocked-down-and-dragged-out look of yours?"

Caldwell held his gaze steadily.

"Joe," he said slowly, "Maude Menton is over

at the Gilmer—right now—waiting to see me. I haven't seen her yet."

Franklin whistled.

"Good Lord! How do you know?"

"She called at the factory and left a note for me. I found it after the ball-game when I went back there."

Caldwell produced the note. Franklin read it and frowned.

"And that isn't the worst," John continued. "She went to the house this morning and saw Janice; and she told her—that she had come here to *marry me!* It seems she thought Janice was my sister. And—well, Janice is up in the air. She refuses to stay under the same roof with me, and so I've left the house."

For a moment Franklin was silent; then, impulsively, his hand went out and rested in frank camaraderie on John's knee.

"You mean—she's going to leave you?"

Caldwell winced. "Yes. That's what she says."

"But see here, John, that's all tommyrot! This Menton woman can't get anything that way. You're married. She can't have the marriage an-



nulled. You didn't go any further than being merely foolish two years ago, did you?"

"No, Joe. I'll explain."

Caldwell plunged into a story of the day's happenings. Franklin listened carefully, and at the conclusion shot a logical question at his companion.

"And Janice won't believe you?"

"No."

"But you can't let things run on like this. Janice has a head on her shoulders, and she'll come around after a while. You've got to jump in and tie a can to this Menton person. Isn't that what you're going to do?"

"I'm not decided. Of course, I'm going to *try* what you suggest—get Maude Menton out of the way somehow; but it's a question of how to do it. It strikes me that her game must be a pretty deep one, else she wouldn't have gone to the house. I thought you might suggest a plan of campaign."

"You bet I'll do anything in my power!" There was no hesitancy in Franklin's hearty answer. "But I'll be hanged if I can give you a tip

right out of hand. I'm all jolted up over it, too. It's a shame, that's what! If young men could only know in time what infernal asses they make of themselves when they imagine that they are 'seeing life'!"

Caldwell nodded, but did not answer. His eyes were fixed searchingly on the man beside him. An idea struck him.

"Joe," he said in sudden excitement, "I don't care what lies this woman tells about seeing me, or my writing to her, two weeks ago; it's more than two years since she saw me. That's on the level. I have an idea. It struck me when I noticed that we're dressed just alike. It's asking a heap, but—well, see here, would you be willing to go down to the Gilmer and see that woman for me?"

"Pass myself off as John Caldwell?" asked Franklin quickly.

"No, no! I don't mean that. Go down and see her, and find out what she wants. If she takes you for me, try to ascertain where I stand. Then tell her you are *not* John Caldwell. Tell her I'm married—tell her the whole works. Janice is

sure that she thinks I'm not married. Show her what she's up against, and find out what she'll take to call the thing off."

"Money? That's blackmail, John."

"I don't care a whoop what it is, if it gets her away from here forever," the other growled. "What's money compared to wife, child, and home?"

"It's a lever to get more money, for one thing. Do you imagine it would help things with Janice if she should ever discover that you bought this Menton woman off?"

"I guess you're right, Joe," Caldwell assented wearily. "But, you see, I don't know what I'm up against. I wish you'd see her and find out what she wants."

Joe considered.

"Right now?"

"Yes."

"I would do it, old man, but—hang it!—I promised to go up to the Orpheus Club rehearsal about nine-thirty and take Eunice and her mother home."

Caldwell's face fell, then brightened.

"Why can't I do that?" he suggested quickly. "I've got my car here, and I could explain that you were unavoidably detained. It's a heap to ask, Joe, but just think what it means to me! It's a bigger thing than my life. And I can't turn to any one else."

"You're right, John—I'll do it. Tell Eunice that I had to meet some one from out of town. That's the straight truth, too. I'll see this woman, and call you up here at the club after my little interview, to give you an idea where you stand. I'll do my best for you."

Caldwell sighed with relief. His hand went out and gripped the other's.

"Good old Joe!" he said simply.

The two men gazed into each other's eyes and understood. Franklin broke the silence when it had reached embarrassing proportions.

"I'm here for dinner, old man. Had yours?"

Caldwell's lips twisted. He tried to smile.

"No—hardly. I—well, I don't feel hungry. But don't let me keep you from yours."

"I won't," grinned Joe, rising from his chair. "And you come along. You can get through this

a heap better if you have a bit of food under your belt."

He thrust his hands under the other man's arms, and half dragged him to his feet. Together they made their way to the grill and found seats at a table for two. Thereafter they spent the time in a low-toned conversation bearing mainly on Franklin's mission.

Joe ate heartily, but forced the choicest viands upon his friend's plate. The meal over, they went back to the lounge, and Joe produced his watch, glancing hurriedly at the enameled dial.

"Eight-five! I may as well get it over, I suppose. By the way, was Maude Menton this dame's real name, or her stage name?"

"I don't know. It's almost too alliterative to be real."

Franklin grinned.

"That's why I ask. I want to know whom to ask for down at the Gilmer. Let me see—Walt Simmons goes on the desk at six, and I can find out from him in case her name doesn't appear on the register as Maude Menton. Now buck up, old man—I'm off to apply that can!"

"You're the best old pal a man ever had, Joe!" Caldwell said earnestly, moving beside Franklin as they made their way toward the check-room.

"You'd do as much for me," Joe replied. "The fact is, I'm trusting you with a pretty delicate mission. Don't forget to meet Eunice at nine-thirty, and explain things to her so that she won't be put out."

"I understand. I'll be there on the minute."

"Good! So-long—I'll report later."

Joe clapped his hat on his shaggy head and sped down the steps to the street. The distance from the club to the Gilmer Hotel was not great, and he traversed it in great, space-eating strides, while he turned over and over in his mind various possible methods of attacking the enemy whom he was to meet.

Had the whole thing been less serious, the chances are that Joe would have undertaken the mission laughingly; for, as Caldwell knew, Franklin had an irrepressible, irresponsible sense of humor. He was the type of man who faces the world with a smile of the lips, a twinkle of the eyes, and a mind forever planning practical jokes.

But the ruin that had come to his friend's home killed all thought of merriment, and he faced his task with a frown. He knew that for once in his easy-going life he faced tragedy incarnate.

He entered the hotel and crossed directly to the desk, behind which Walt Simmons presided.

"Where's Maude Menton rooming?" he demanded without parley or delay.

Simmons shook his head.

"No such party here, Mr. Franklin. You must have the wrong name."

"Is that so? Well, that's the name she went by when I last heard of her; and I know she's stopping at this hotel."

"Then she didn't sign that name, sir." There seeped into Walt's head a glimmer of understanding. "The only Maude in the hotel now is Miss Maude Leveridge, of Chicago."

Simmons uttered the name very slowly, and eyed Franklin carefully as he spoke. A close observer might have detected a hidden meaning in the way the guest's name was pronounced.

"*What?*"

Joe Franklin's eyes popped open and his jaw

dropped. He raised a limp hand to mop his forehead. Then, turning abruptly, he crossed the lobby and flopped into a chair.

"Good Lord!" he muttered tensely.

Walt Simmons turned his back, and across his lips there played a smile of sardonic amusement.



## XI

### ON THE ALTAR OF FRIENDSHIP

FOR two or three minutes Joe Franklin sat there in frozen horror, while surprise, amazement, consternation, and terror chased one another across his face. Slowly his head bent downward until he was staring with unseeing eyes at the floor.

Walt Simmons watched over his shoulder until Franklin's head came up with a jerk. The dentist's jaw was set as he rose to his feet, and there was a determined glitter in his eyes. He strode back to the desk, leaned across, and hissed a demand for information.

"What room is that woman in?"

Walt, rather abashed by Franklin's dominating manner, found himself stammering.

"She—she's in the bridal suite," he stammered.

His words had a surprising effect. The grim set of Joe's lips gave way to a slow grin.



The door swung open, and Maude Leveridge stood  
framed in the brilliant light



## ON THE ALTAR OF FRIENDSHIP 135

"The bridal suite!" he exclaimed. "Well, upon my soul!"

Franklin turned on his heel and strode up the steps, taking them two at a time, and completely ignoring the waiting elevator. Reaching the floor above, he walked down the hallway toward the corner facing the two streets on which the hotel fronted. He knew very well indeed where the single *de luxe* suite of the Gilmer was located, and he lifted his hand to the door panel with a sharply determined knock.

Almost instantly he detected footsteps from the other side. The door swung open, and Maude Leveridge stood framed in the brilliant light.

Joe sensed her briefly—her high color, her cheaply elaborate raiment of ultra-modern cut. Then, without warning he found himself seized and dragged into the room, circled around the neck by a pair of arms anything but slender, and clasped to a bosom more or less strikingly perfumed.

It was, to say the least, bewildering, and he was too much startled to struggle.

"John!" came in a gurgle from the hugging,

demonstrative stranger. "I—I—was getting to be scared that you weren't going to show up!"

For a moment Joe Franklin was passive. This, certainly, was not what he had expected on his way from the club to the hotel. The trouble with all his preliminary plans was that he had lacked some very vital information.

So she took him for John Caldwell! He did not think at the moment of the deadly parallel of his clothes with John's. Nor did he know that he had been pointed out to her that afternoon at the ball-game by Walt Simmons, who, with his interest focused upon the diamond, had not taken the pains to designate his man more exactly.

Scarcely knowing what to do, he lifted an arm and patted the woman's back.

"I—er—came as quickly as I could," he found himself stammering.

Maude Leveridge released him slowly.

"Oh, that's all right—now you're here," she simpered. She stepped back and stood erect before his gaze. "Well?" she demanded with a note of pride in her tones. "How do I size up, John? Am I all you was led to expect?"

## ON THE ALTAR OF FRIENDSHIP 137

Some fiend of perversity seized upon Joe Franklin, and inspired a wild desire to laugh in the face of this large-boned woman who sought to pose alluringly before him. Ugly as it was, the situation made an untimely appeal to his irrepressible sense of humor.

"You're a lot more than I did expect!" he said.

"John!" A second whirling avalanche of feminine arms, face, clothes, and perfume fell upon him smotheringly. He found himself half strangled. "Oh, John! You great, big dear!"

"Wait a minute!" he finally managed to gasp. "This is all very nice—and all that—but—er—don't you think you'd better look me over?"

He became conscious of a pair of palpably reddened lips tilted toward his, of a pair of yellowish-brown eyes which mooned at him, of a none too sylphlike figure leaning against his until he was forced to brace himself in support of it.

"Kiss me, and I will," promised Miss Leveridge amorously. "Yes, indeed, I will, jes' as soon as you kiss your baby!"

Joe Franklin hesitated and was lost, as so many

better men have been before him. His main idea was to induce this ardent individual to release her clutch, so that explanation and reasoning might follow sanely. He lowered his face and sampled the lasting quality of the carmine on her mouth.

She sighed and let go, stepping back to sweep him with her eyes.

"John!" She clasped her hands under her chin and twisted her head to a coquettish angle. "You're even better-looking than the picture you sent with your letter. Kid, I could just love you to death!"

Once more she appeared to be on the verge of a demonstration, but Franklin adroitly side-stepped and managed to interpose a chair.

"So you—er—think the picture looked very much like me?" he inquired, with a meaning which Miss Leveridge appeared to miss.

"Not such an awful lot," she admitted candidly; "but them kodaks never was satisfactory, was they? When we're married, we'll have a picture took that'll show you like you really do look. You're a real handsome feller, I think. But I

ain't sayin' you're such a very swift lover. What's the matter? Ain't you tickled I come?"

"Why—er—you see, when I wrote, I didn't expect you quite so soon."

Franklin found himself becoming more acutely embarrassed, but making no other perceptible progress. What could a man do with a woman who misinterpreted every word he uttered?

"No, I reckon you didn't expect me this soon," she answered promptly. "And you never even mentioned me to your sister. I went out there this morning and she was all upset, poor kid! You like to got me in Dutch by that. And now you act like you was a bit groggy yourself. Maybe I oughter wised you up that I was comin', but I couldn't see the need for that after what you wrote. I reckon you're one of them quiet fellers, ain't you, John?"

Of only one fact was Franklin certain—that this was the identical woman who had played hob with John Caldwell's family affairs. He had hoped to find that there had been some mistake, but her words had settled that beyond the peradventure of a doubt. Then he became aware that



she was waiting, and none too patiently, for an answer.

"Yes—er—I'm rather quiet. You got that—letter—I wrote?"

It occurred to him that he would like to see the letter and the picture of which she had spoken. That thought fathered another, and rapidly developed into a plan of action.

It was plain that she had mistaken him for Caldwell. He could readily prove his real identity—by the testimony of Walt Simmons, if necessary; but suppose he allowed her to believe that he was John, and thus managed to have her produce the letter and the picture? Once he had them in his possession—well, they were probably all the tangible evidence she had against his friend; and once her claws were drawn, the real danger would be past.

"Yes," returned Maude, "I got the letter. I carry it with me all the time—that and the picture. They're here in my bag." She lifted an ornamental purse of gold-trimmed leather and held it caressingly in her hand. "It's awful romantic how we come together, don't you think?"

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she purred. "I always doted on romance. I always said I was gonna marry for love. I've read them sort of stories ever since I was a kid—Laura Jean, and th' Duchess, and them writers. I love good literachure, don't you?"

"Yes. Couldn't you see that in my letter? Gèt it out and I'll show you what I mean."

Joe knew it was crude, but he was ready to go as far as strong-arm tactics. Anything to gain possession of that letter!

Miss Leveridge nodded and smiled suavely, but she made no move to produce the document.

"Oh, I don't need nothing to remind me, John. I know it by heart, 'specially that grand place where you spoke about the divine influence of the right woman on a man's life—and then where you wrote about a wife bein' the guide who holds the flaming torch of devotion to light her husband's steps on the steep and rugged path of ambition. It's just grand, that's what it is! I'm awful glad we got kindred tastes and ideas."

Franklin nodded wearily. "Yes—that's great."

His first attempt had failed, and he cast about desperately for another idea.

"Funny about my having took the bridal chamber, ain't it?" Miss Leveridge ran on.

"A scream," admitted Joe.

"You got my note?"

"Yes."

Miss Leveridge laughed merrily.

"Honest, you're as hard to catch as a flea. I chase you all day. But say, lessen you want to do something else, let's sit down and be sociable like."

Franklin utilized the chair beside which he stood.

"I went to the ball-game this afternoon," he remarked.

"So did I—right after I left the note for you. That little taffy-haired night-clerk dared me to go with him, and I wanted to kill time."

So *that* was the man Kamura hadn't recognized—Walt Simmons! And that was the reason for Walt's infernal grinning! He, too, had been squiring the woman.

"Janice was just about hysterical," said Franklin suddenly, taking a new tack.

"That's too bad; but don't you worry, kid. I'll

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be real good to her, even though I do think she sicked that little Jap of yourn onto my trail to-day. He's an impident little cuss."

"Kamura?"

"I don't know his name."

"He's mighty faithful—would go almost any length for Janice."

Maude twisted in her chair. The topic was plainly without interest to her.

"Ain't there nothing to do in this burg at night?" she inquired.

"Not much. There's a couple of movies running until eleven, but nothing else."

"And no café open?"

"There's one that runs till midnight, but it isn't much. Caldwell is mighty quiet, you know."

Miss Leveridge twisted again.

"Well," she suggested, "let's make the best of it, and take in a movie. Then we'll have a bite of supper—just to celebrate my coming, eh?"

Scarcely knowing what he did, and, in truth, finding no other course open, Joe assented. His scheme for obtaining the letter had been a flat fizzle. If he went out with her, he might make

her drop the bag, or might carry it for her, and thus find an opportunity to get at its invaluable contents. So he rose and laughed the laugh of the old days, the laugh that women liked.

"Sure!" he said lightly. "Pin on your hat, and let's trot along. It's us for a good time! After the movie we might corral a couple of hot birds and a cold bottle."

The familiar ring of the words fairly electrified Miss Leveridge. She rose with alacrity, donned her wide-brimmed hat, looped the handle of her bag over her arm, and turned to Franklin.

"You sure are talkin'!" she piped. "C'm'on, kid, and we'll go to it!"

She strutted beside Joe to the nearest motion-picture establishment, and clutched his arm as he bought the tickets. After they found seats, she laid her purse under the hat, which she placed in her capacious lap, and slid one good-sized hand over until it covered her companion's fingers. Then she turned her attention to the screen, where a sentimental comedy drama was being flashed.

"Gee!" she whispered in the semi-darkness. "Ain't this the real thing? Don't it sort of get

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you with the home-sweet-home stuff? Don't it, kid?"

"Uhuh," growled Joe.

Miss Leveridge giggled.

"Love's a funny thing, anyway—ain't it, John?"

Because he deemed it politic, and likely to disarm suspicion, Joe squeezed the fingers within his own. His eyes pierced through the gloom to the gaudy hat in her lap. If only he could make her drop the purse! But she was holding his hand, the house was only part filled, and there was no one to push by them to other seats.

The program was completed, and Franklin was no nearer success. He had one more hope—the café. Again he led Maude Leveridge down the street by the arm—or, rather, on his arm, since she held it tightly, leaning upon him with an attitude which she fondly believed just the thing for a bride-to-be. He slunk into the café with her, thanking his stars that he met none of his more intimate friends, and ordered two squabs and a bottle of champagne. When she took her seat, she immediately covered her purse with a

napkin, and, unlike most women, dropped neither during the meal.

But Joe stoutly maintained his good humor. That was part of his game. He played his part, amusing her, entertaining her, flattering her—waiting for the opportunity which seemingly would never present itself.

In the end he fared forth again, she on his arm and the hand-bag on hers. Once he made a tentative offer to put it into his pocket, and thus relieve her of the burden; but she refused the proffered service rather shortly, as he thought. Finally they again reached the hotel, mounted to the second floor, and he was standing with her on the outside of the bridal-parlor door.

"I hope you enjoyed it," he said lamely. "I did the best I could."

"Oh, I ain't raising no howl," she proclaimed with arched eyebrows. "Say, John, when are we gonna get hitched?"

"Hitched?"

She giggled.

"Married!"

"I—I'll see about that to-morrow," he floun-

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dered. "I haven't been able to get things arranged as I want them. There was no opportunity to-night. And you're sure you want to marry—"

"It's a dead cert'. And I'll see you to-morrow?"

"You will," said Joe, and then added, in perfect truth: "If I don't die."

He knew that he *had* to see her; but it must be a final interview. The thing must be stopped where it was. Complications of which he had never dreamed were arising with every word spoken.

Maude turned her head and smiled up into his face. Once more she assumed a coquetry which nature had denied her.

"Ooo! 'Oo mustn't die, an' leave 'oor baby!"

For the second time her lips were presented for the conventional salutation. Joe plunged through the ordeal, and then swung round.

"Good *night!*" he said with particular emphasis, as he strode down the corridor toward the stairway.



## XII

### LITTLE BROTHER PLAYS SLEUTH

CALDWELL watched Joe's figure swing down the street toward the Gilmer Hotel, and idly returned to the club lounge, where he found a seat, casually picked up an evening newspaper, and glanced at the head-lines.

He had no interest in the news of the day. His mind was too full of his own troubles. He reflected bitterly upon the cruel fate that dealt him such terrible blows at precisely the wrong time. His wife would be gone just when he most wanted her and she most needed him. He would never experience the true joys of parenthood; and business success would probably be snatched from him at the very moment when it would have meant most.

"Wife sues for divorce"—the printed words leaped at him from the newspaper, and Caldwell wondered sickeningly whether his own case would receive the same hideous publicity.

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He did not know just how long he sat in silent reverie before the fireless grate at the club, but at length he bethought himself of his promise to escort Eunice Maybank to her home, and he glanced at his watch. Then he climbed slowly to his feet, as if the movement cost him great physical effort.

He felt old and tired. He would have given worlds to be rid of the engagement, so that he might sit alone and thrash out his vital problem; but he had promised Joe—and so he passed through the lounge, nodding to one or two casual acquaintances, took his hat at the check-room, and went down to his car. He slumped into the driver's seat, thrust the self-starter with his foot, released the emergency brake, let in the gears, and rolled off toward the clubhouse of the Ladies' Literary Society, where the Orpheus Club was rehearsing for a concert.

The rehearsal was still in progress on his arrival, and he made his way to the rear of the auditorium to await the readiness of Eunice and her mother. At last they started together for the door, and Caldwell, summoning a conventional

smile, accosted them. Mrs. Maybank turned smilingly.

"Oh, how do you do, Mr. Caldwell?" she said. "I'm delighted to see you here. Did Janice come with you?"

Caldwell winced slightly as he slowly shook his head.

"No, not to-night. The fact of it is that I came for you and Eunice. Joe found out at the eleventh hour that he had to meet a patient from out of town—emergency case, you know—and he begged me to understudy his delightful part as escort."

Eunice smiled, but she seemed puzzled.

"Joe sent you?" she inquired with peculiar emphasis.

"Well," smiled Caldwell, making a herculean effort at pleasantry, "I should hardly say 'sent.' He told me of his predicament, and I was only too glad to take his place. My car is at the curb, and I'll be delighted to drive you home."

They got into Caldwell's roadster, and in a few seconds they were running through the streets toward the Maybank house. For some time silence

## LITTLE BROTHER PLAYS SLEUTH 151

held sway, and then Eunice turned impulsively to the man at her side.

"Did Janice know you were coming for me?"

"Did Janice know? Why, what a peculiar question."

Eunice laughed softly.

"Not so very. She and I had a miserable little tiff when she was phoning around town for you this afternoon. Did she eventually find you?"

"Not until I went home. I went to the ball-game with Joe this afternoon—took a half-holiday."

"Oh, I see! I couldn't understand what was the matter with Janice. I was afraid at first that there might be something wrong at the house. She is usually so sweet-tempered, but this afternoon—well, she *was* short with me. She even said that I erred in not keeping as close a watch on Joe as she keeps on you."

"What?"

"I apologize. Perhaps that was a cattish thing to say. But I've got to let off steam to some one; and I'd like you to patch up our little difference. Believe me, I'm awfully sorry it occurred, and

I really wasn't to blame at all; though I shouldn't have said, as I did, that I believe you led Joe into most of his foolish youthful scrapes. And"—smilingly—"you see now that I was right, after all. Didn't you kidnap him and take him off to the ball-game this afternoon?"

Eunice's remarks were ill-timed. Caldwell turned to her sharply.

"You told Janice that?"

"Yes; but she provoked me first."

Caldwell spoke on impulse: "Joe told me this afternoon about your belief that I had corrupted his morals. We had a laugh over it."

"I don't see anything funny about that," Eunice replied coldly.

"Why couldn't it be that Joe led me astray?" suggested Caldwell.

"You are older than he."

"Yes—so I am."

"Where is Joe to-night?" asked Eunice suddenly.

"Either at his office or at the Gilmer, probably the latter. He was to meet his patient at the hotel."

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"A matter of business?"

"Yes—important business."

"Joe said that?"

"Yes."

"That will do, Eunice," interrupted the hitherto silently observant Mrs. Maybank, who sensed breakers ahead and wished to put an end to the catechism to which Caldwell was being subjected. "I understand that you are disappointed that Joe could not come, but I, for one, think it exceedingly kind of Mr. Caldwell to take his place."

Caldwell welcomed the relief. He had been greatly irritated at Eunice's persistence. He realized poignantly that he must weigh every word carefully unless he was to do Franklin an irreparable injury.

He felt that for some reason his explanation of Joe's absence, simple as it was, had not satisfied the girl at his side.

"Of course I didn't mean to be unappreciative or snippy," protested Eunice warmly, "and it is good of John to see us safely home—since Joe wouldn't come."

"A pleasure, I assure you," murmured Caldwell.

"When did you see him last?"

Back to the dangerous topic once more!

"We had dinner together at the Commercial Club," John said.

"Dinner at the club! I thought you were too much the model husband to dine out—and leave Janice."

"Eunice!" cautioned her mother once more.

With a sigh of relief at the nearness of the journey's end, Caldwell swung the car into a side street, obsessed by a single desire—that of leaving the loquacious Miss Maybank and fleeing beyond reach of her sharply prying tongue.

The street, similar to that on which his own home was located, lay darkly shaded, with little illumination between the flaming arc-lamps at the corners. Caldwell knew the Maybank home very well; time had been when his visits there had been nightly affairs.

He choked the car down in front of the big stone gateway just as a figure turned into it from the pavement.

## LITTLE BROTHER PLAYS SLEUTH 155

At sound of the motor this individual paused and turned curiously.

"Hello!" he remarked, and Caldwell recognized Eunice's young brother.

"That you, Harold?" questioned Mrs. Maybank.

"Sure it's me!"

"Where have you been?" questioned the parent sharply, as Caldwell leaped to the ground to assist the two ladies to alight.

Harold came closer to the car, plainly anxious for an invitation to ride.

"Oh, just down to the movies. Didn't have any lessons to study, and—say, I thought that was funny. This is Mr. Caldwell. I knew Joe Franklin didn't have a car, and I was wondering who brought you home in such grand style. You said Joe was going to bring you home."

"He couldn't," explained the sister gently. "He had business with a gentleman from out of town, and Mr. Caldwell took his place."

"He had what?" demanded Harold.

"Harold!" This from the mother. "That's no way to speak."



"Well, maybe it ain't, and maybe it is. What I'm gettin' at is—did Joe Franklin tell you he had to meet a gentleman from out of town, on business?"

"Certainly. Mr. Caldwell explained all that, but—"

John Caldwell was shaking with a premonition which would not down. He wanted to interrupt, yet dared not speak. Like a cat with a mouse, the boy whirled to him.

"Say," he demanded, "did Joe Franklin tell *you* that, too?"

"Why, certainly. He told me—"

The boy drew a long, deep breath. He assumed a Napoleonic pose, and then said, slowly and impressively:

"Well, the darned skunk!"

"Harold!" This in feminine chorus.

The lad chuckled with a supreme sense of his own importance. Caldwell would have given worlds to have throttled the impudent youngster.

"Maybe he did hand it to you straight—half-way. *She* was never raised in Caldwell, all right, all right!"

## LITTLE BROTHER PLAYS SLEUTH 157

"She!" cried Eunice. "What are you talking about?"

"That skirt Joe Franklin was leading around town to-night. Listen. I went down to the Alcazar to see Mary Pickford in 'Rags.' I was sitting there when in walks Joe with a girl—and some chicken she was, too!—all dolled up fit to kill. I noticed 'specially, 'cause, as I had it, Joe was due to be dragging you back from that song-fest up yonder. So I kept one lamp on the screen and one on Joseph and his girl. They were sitting right in front of me. When the run was over, they beat it, and I did a bloodhound right after. They hustled down to Martin's, and the last thing I saw they were chewing away on a couple of birds and splitting a bottle of fizzy stuff between them. She was from out of town, all right!"

A dizziness seized upon Caldwell, and he clutched the fender of his car for support. What had Joe done? What wild madness had seized upon him, to be seen in public with that woman?

From Eunice and her mother came sharp gasps. There was no disbelieving the boy's words; they

were too manifestly fraught with triumphant knowledge.

Slowly and coldly Eunice Maybank turned to Caldwell.

"You *knew* it was a woman!" she said accusingly. "Don't try to deny it!"

"Joe said it was some one from out of town. I—I thought, of course, he meant a man."

John knew that his tone carried no conviction. He was totally shaken and unnerved by this example of Joe's colossal folly. Eunice laughed harshly.

"You knew it all the time! You helped Joe Franklin to deceive the woman to whom he is engaged, while your own wife stays at home alone, no doubt wondering where her husband is. Come, mother! Come, Harold!"

She turned abruptly and swept up the walk toward the veranda. With head bowed and spirit crushed, John Caldwell climbed heavily back into his machine. He slid in the gears, and the car rolled ahead.

"It's just one thing after another!" he groaned bitterly. "Just one thing after another!"

## XIII

### CALDWELL GETS A SURPRISE

FOR some moments after her husband left the house to seek lodging at the Commercial Club, Janice Caldwell sat as in a trance, her eyes closed, her breathing slow and laborious. She was exhausted by the terrible conflict of emotions which she had undergone during the fearsome day. She had reached that low ebb of sensation which induces a numbing lassitude rather than any specific feeling.

From it she was aroused by the thrum of John's departing motor. She sprang to the window to watch the car whirl into the street and head downtown.

He was gone—lost to her! The thought raised its cobralike hooded head before her frenzied mind. She had driven him away when he had come in search of help and counsel. Had she been mad?

He had relied upon her, his wife, and she had refused her aid.

Kamura mounted the stairway, tapped on her door, and announced dinner. The thought of food was revolting, and she sent him away. She choked at the very thought of sitting alone in the big dining-room, with John's chair opposite to stare accusingly at her with its very vacancy.

John was at the club—but was he? Jealousy, not yet stilled, rose once more in her mind to prompt the poisonous query. Did he really intend to go to the club, or was he going to the hotel—to the other woman?

Joe Franklin still had his rooms at the hotel, the very suite which had been occupied by himself and John Caldwell in the olden days. Joe would take him in, and be glad of the chance. And then John would be under the very same roof with that creature!

Janice clenched her tiny fists, and her teeth bared at the very thought. She understood for the first time a bit of criminal psychology. She felt that life could give her no greater joy than to strangle with her own hands the tawny-haired

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woman who had come to steal her husband, her child, her happiness!

The sound of padding footsteps came to her ears through the closed door, and she decided that it was Kamura on his way to John's room. Why?

She stole to the door and opened it softly. Kamura was nowhere to be seen, but a light streamed from her husband's apartment. She slipped silently along the hall and peered within.

She saw Kamura bending over an open suitcase, which lay on the bed, and she saw that he was carefully packing shirts, a suit, and other intimate articles of her husband's.

"Sueki, what are you doing?" she asked.

Kamura neither started nor gave the slightest outward sign of surprise at the question hurled at him from the apparently empty hallway. Janice stepped into the frame of the door and questioned with her eyes.

"I pack clothes for Misser Caldwell," he remarked suavely. "He tell me pack bag and bring club for him."

"Oh!" Janice caught her breath, and then,

very gently, she said: "Be sure to put Mr. Caldwell's new safety razor in the grip, Sueki."

"Razor you give for birthday, maybe?"

"That's it, Sueki."

"Yes'm. Have got." He closed the top of the case, snapped the catches, and commenced buckling the straps. "I carry bag. I come back then, take care of you. I hurry."

He lifted the bag from the bed. Janice drew back. Kamura snapped off the lights in the room, passed her with eyes straight to the front, and disappeared down the front stairs.

Her heart sank to the depths as she watched him go. This, then, was the end of happiness, love, trust, confidence, comradeship, hope—such as she had known during the past year!

She walked back to her room and moved slowly about it, aimlessly inspecting the many luxuries it contained—each a gift of John. Each bit of furniture, each trinket, even to the quaint little Kewpie that grinned slyly at her from the mantel, spoke to her accusingly of John's absence. Her hands clutched her breast. If only he had not lived a double life; if only this woman was

## CALDWELL GETS A SURPRISE 163

really of the past; if only he had not maintained his intrigue with her after his marriage—then forgiveness would not be so hard. What hypocrites men were!

Men! Eunice had grown angry at the very suggestion that Joe was, or had ever been, anything that he should not be. Women were made that way—to believe, trust, and love. She recalled the lines:

Man's love is of man's life a thing apart;  
'Tis woman's whole existence.

Eunice trusted Joe. Well, she, Janice, had trusted her husband. And then rage reawakened in her heart. By what right did this bold, brazen, flamboyant, flashily dressed, painted and powdered creature step in to rob her baby of its home, its father, its every chance in the world?

Some of the heavy dullness in her eyes was displaced by the flash of battle. The tigress will willingly sacrifice her life in defense of her whelp; the law of nature has decreed that maternity shall rally to the defense of its young. The sight of the little basket with its wealth of filmy dainti-



ness acted as a spiritual goad upon the woman who had been ready to retreat before the interloper.

Surrender? She had been mad! Surrender must be the last word in her lexicon. Her lips set firmly and her head came up. She had determined to give battle to this creature who threatened the destiny of her unborn babe.

Not only would she fight, but she would carry the fight to the other woman. She would go to her—meet her face to face—not in terror, as she had done this morning, while smarting under the shock, but with all the dignity of the lawful wife in the presence of a lawless rival. She would discover and reveal the woman's past record, even if she had to stoop to employing detectives.

The strange woman had mistaken her for John's sister. Could it be that she didn't even suspect that John was a married man? If that were the case, then it might be possible to drive her away by awakening her to the injustice he had done his wife, the injustice he had done to the other woman in promising marriage.

Janice's eyes lighted with the mirroring of bud-

## CALDWELL GETS A SURPRISE 165

ding hope. She would go to the woman, would explain to her the folly of fighting for such a man.

The thought was father to the deed. She tore off her house dress. She would go—yes, and—she paused, and her lips parted at the thought. First she would seek Eunice Maybank, tell her everything, and take her to witness the interview. One might need a friendly witness on such an occasion!

She began a hurried dressing. It was already several minutes after nine o'clock, and Janice knew that there was not much time to be wasted. Her fingers seemed all thumbs, so great was her haste, but she struggled until every catch was fastened in place.

As she put on her hat she bethought herself of the necessity for inquiring whether the woman was at the hotel. It would be foolish to go there to find that she was out, or had never been there. Kamura had seen her get out in front of the hotel, but that proved nothing.

Janice hurried to the telephone and called the Gilmer. A masculine voice answered her almost

instantly. She asked for Miss Maude Leveridge, enunciating the name distinctly. And her answer came promptly:

"Sorry, ma'am; Miss Leveridge is out."

She jammed the receiver on the hook without the formality of thanking the unseen informant. She sat in thin-lipped meditation, one foot tapping an irregular tattoo on the floor. With whom had the woman gone out? She had written John a note, she had asked him to see her, he had said he intended going—and what better opportunity than this? He had ordered Kamura to take his bag to the Commercial Club, but he had probably gone to the Gilmer.

Janice's senses whirled at the mere suggestion. She was but dimly aware that her hands were cold with an icy chill. She knew that she had blundered. With her own lips she had driven her husband to the side of this woman, had voluntarily removed the fetters of domesticity. He had begged to be allowed to remain and talk it over, to explain—and she, fool that she was, had refused, because of her sickening resentment and humiliation!

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She realized that she had believed the blatant words of the flashy woman, and had disbelieved her husband, who, so far as she knew, had never yet told her an untruth. .

Tremblingly, Janice once more lifted the telephone. Controlling her voice with an effort, she rang the Commercial Club and asked for John Caldwell.

She heard the command to "page Mr. Caldwell," and to her ears came the strident voice of the negro attendant who undertook the errand. At length came the answer.

"The boy in the check-room says that Mr. Caldwell left shortly after nine o'clock to meet a lady. Do you wish to leave your number?"

*"No!"*

Janice fairly screamed the negative into the instrument as she crashed the receiver back on the hook. The insult of it! She fancied that she had detected a sneer in the voice of the man who told her that John had gone to meet a lady. And the check-room boy had known! She could not guess that the boy had gathered the information merely by hearing a bit of the conversation be-

tween John Caldwell and Joe Franklin, or that the lady he had gone to meet was Eunice Maybank.

She seized her purse and gloves as she sprang to her feet in a sudden frenzy of determination. It was evident that Kamura had not returned. She left the room, descended the steps, and made her way swiftly to the street, where she set off with the swinging, athletic stride so often a source of compliment from her husband, in the direction of the Maybank home. Part of the way she walked and part of the way she ran.

A few minutes later Kamura returned to find the house open and empty, with no sign of the mistress. The Japanese was worried. Ever since the appearance of the cat-eyed woman, things had been going to all the devils. His master had not been at the club when he arrived there, and he had been forced to leave the bag with an attendant. Now the wife was gone—the woman who had been entrusted to his care. How could he care for a woman who had gone? He shook his head in bewilderment. These Americans made such a fuss over a woman or two!

## CALDWELL GETS A SURPRISE 169

The telephone rang sharply, and he sped to listen. It was Caldwell, calling from the club for information regarding Janice. Kamura cursed the fiends of his own belief before he answered.

"I not know, Misser Caldwell," he answered at length. "I take bag to club and you not there. I leave bag. Then I come back home. Missee Caldwell not here."

"Not there?" Consternation rang in Caldwell's words. "For Heaven's sake, where did she go?"

"I not know, sir. I look over house. I find nossing. She gone away, I guess."

At the other end of the phone John Caldwell gave vent to a smothered oath, clapped his hat on his head, and rushed frantically to the street. Hurling himself into his car, he sent it tearing through the night. His one object was to reach the house in search of a clew to Janice's whereabouts.

He felt a sick presentiment, not unnatural under the circumstances, that harm might have come to her. His brain seethed with fear and conjecture as he drove, defying all speed ordinances,

turning corners on two wheels, ignoring a patrolman who shouted a warning.

He stopped the car before the house, leaped to the ground, and sped to the veranda. The house lay dark and seemingly deserted. He switched on the hall lights and called for Sueki Kamura; but there was no answer.

Again and again he called, eliciting no response other than the haunting echo. He searched the house, but it availed him nothing.

Kamura, too, had disappeared!

## XIV

### KAMURA ENLISTS

FRANKLIN unlocked the door of the corner room on the third floor of the Gilmer and let himself in. He was a thoroughly disgusted man, furious at himself for failing in his mission, and deadly serious, for once in his somewhat irresponsible life.

"I'm a bird, I am!" he raged. "A driveling idiot, a pitiful chump! I need a nurse!"

He slammed his hat viciously across the room to land where it might, lifted a battered brier from the table, and tamped it full of tobacco. With the masculine solace once burning in the bowl, he seated himself for a review of the night's proceedings. A deep, vertical frown creased his forehead.

"What I want to know," he interrogated himself, "is where *I* get off?"

The question was asked easily enough, but there



was no Delphic oracle at hand to answer it. Joe's face was troubled behind the blue haze of smoke. He took the stem from between his teeth and eyed the warm bowl.

"What an extraordinary creature!" he meditated. "Imagine getting a letter, and thereupon hiking straight off to annex a man! Who on earth would have looked for a woman to do a thing like that? Any one would have thought that she'd write first. It was the only thing to expect. If I could get my paws on that letter I could talk turkey to her. But—well, I wonder what a judge would think it was worth toward starting a bank-roll for damaged affections—or if he'd think it was worth anything at all! That's the trump card, all right—the letter!"

He rose to his feet, and, without any particular purpose, crossed to a window and stood looking out at the street-lights, which twinkled off into the darkness in wide-spaced rows. The letter, the letter! How was he to get it? He set a rather hot forehead against the window-pane as he stared down into the street. His gaze slanted past the sill and noted the radiance which

streamed from the windows beneath him, making a dull glow in the night. For an instant he stood motionless, and then a sudden stiffness of attention crept into his pose.

Placing his hands on the window-sill, he leaned out and peered downward.

"And I'm betting he'd do it, too!" he muttered, as he drew back into the room. "I'll bet he would!"

His eyes swept the apartment with a speculative glance, and finally settled on the heavy library table that stood in the center of the floor.

"He doesn't weigh much," soliloquized Joe, "and we could fasten it to that. It wouldn't take five minutes, and then I'd have the letter; after which I could go down and say good-by to Maudie."

He closed the window, being careful to make no sound that would be audible in the room below.

"John wouldn't approve of it, but he doesn't have to know until it's all over. I suppose he's wondering what I'm doing. Well, I'll get the letter, and then I shall have something to report!

I'm glad she was kind enough to tell me where she kept the blamed thing."

Joe went to the private phone in his room, got connection with Walt Simmons in the office, and asked for Caldwell's home number.

"The little beggar's fond of both John and Janice," he mused as he waited impatiently.

He was answered by the very man whom he sought.

"Hello! That you, Kamura? How's Mrs. Caldwell to-night?"

"She not here," came back the soft-toned answer.

Joe's fingers tightened about the receiver as the import of the tidings flashed across his brain. Janice wasn't there! Where could she be? John Caldwell had told him that she had promised to remain at home during the night. Where was this thing going to end?

"Listen, Kamura," he began, speaking swiftly. "This is Mr. Franklin talking—Mr. Caldwell's friend."

"Yessir, I know."

"Well, listen. You'd do a heap to help Mr.

and Mrs. Caldwell out of trouble, wouldn't you, Kamura? Sure you would—good boy! Now listen, Kamura. Can you come down here to the hotel? I'm in room No. 310—get it?—that's right. You come down here, and I'll tell you how you can help Mr. Caldwell to end all this trouble. You will? Fine! And say, Kamura, were you ever an acrobat, or anything like that? Can you climb a tree pretty well? You can? Good! When you come down here, bring a long piece of heavy rope. Yes, that's what I said—a long piece of heavy rope. Oh, heavy enough to hold a man—good-by!"

He heard Kamura's receiver hang up, and then he, too, broke connection. At last he was working toward a well-defined end. He carefully dragged the library table toward the window, forcing it firmly against the sill, but making no unnecessary sound. That task completed, he seated himself once more to await Kamura's arrival.

He felt much more cheerful now. In fact, he was so much elated that he decided to call up the Commercial Club and reassure John as to the prog-

ress he was making. He could be rather general in his statements, using telephone speech as an excuse for his discretion; but he thought it would be safe to say that he was going to bring things to a head in the morning by a second interview with Maude. Yes, he would say that much—it would make John's mind so much easier.

He called the Commercial Club, and asked for Mr. Caldwell. His face drew once more into a frown of vexation.

"Mr. Caldwell is out," came the answer from the club switchboard.

He put down the phone and stared at its black, uncommunicative mouthpiece. It was strange that Caldwell should still be out. He had had plenty of time to get Eunice and her mother home and make it back to the club.

Joe glanced at his watch. Half past ten! Could anything have happened? John was a fairly careful driver, but accidents——

It was barely possible that Eunice had invited John to come into the house, and that he, lonely soul, had accepted the invitation. But would Caldwell be likely to sit there discussing trivial

matters when Franklin had said that he would call the club to report? Well, it wouldn't do any harm to find out. Joe again drew the phone toward him and called the Maybank house.

There was no answer for some time, and then it was Harold Maybank's voice that came to him over the wire.

"Hello!" he cried. "Say, Harold, is Eunice home?"

"Sure she's home," growled young Maybank, with a ponderous assumption of protective manishness. "What's it to you?"

"Why—er—I just wanted to know. I wanted to know if she got home safely. Mr. Caldwell isn't there, is he?"

"No. We ain't runnin' a boardin'-house."

"Say, you——" flashed Joe, annoyed at the youngster's insolence; but he checked himself. "Let me speak to Eunice a minute, please."

"I'll do nothing of the kind."

"What do you mean?"

"What did you do with that chicken after you left Martin's, eh?" snapped the boy, making the most of his opportunity. "I don't believe you

can talk to Eunice. I think you're a dirty skunk, and I don't think she oughter talk to you!"

It was the last straw. Joe sank limply into a chair. Evidently Harold had seen him with Maude Leveridge. It was madness, of course, to have risked being seen with her on the streets; but his mind had been so intent on securing the letter that she carried in her purse that he had not stopped to count the possible cost.

While he ransacked his addled brain for a defense to the totally unexpected arraignment, he heard the boy's voice calling at the other end:

"Here! Hey, sis, cut it out. I'm not going to have you talking to——"

Then came a low buzz of voices, the words indistinguishable, the tone undeniably argumentative; and finally the chilly voice of Eunice herself.

"Mr. Franklin?"

Joe groaned softly. The cold formality of it, the deadly level intonation!

"Yes! Yes! This is Joe. Please, Eunice——"

"That will do," the girl interrupted icily. "In

future you will not address me by that name or any other. You will not know me—as I shall not know you. I consider myself lucky in finding out in time. I will not meet the fate of poor little Mrs. Caldwell. Oh, *Joe!*”

And then the telephone went dead!

Joe Franklin sat alone once more, and once more stared at the round, black mouthpiece until it seemed to grow and grow and become so large that it blotted out everything, leaving only blank darkness before him. Presently, out of the darkness, there came an insistent ringing, and he realized that he was being called. He growled his “Hello!” in no suave tone.

It was Harold Maybank who spoke.

“Eunice will send back your diamond to-morrow,” the young cub announced with gusto. “You won’t be out anything on the deal. You might pass it on to the chicken!”

*Click!* Harold had hung up. Joe raved and swore, consigning to perdition the diamond, Harold Maybank, John Caldwell and his troubles, and Maude Leveridge and hers. To perdition with the whole mess of them! He realized painfully



that he had developed a sizable crop of troubles which were his own individual property.

In the midst of an aura of sulphurous language a light tap sounded on the door. Franklin stepped across the room and flung it open. A little figure stood outside. Joe reached out, grabbed it by the shoulder, and pulled it into the room, quickly closing the door behind it.

Without a word it unbuttoned its coat and began uncoiling a rope that was wound about his body. When the coil was completely unwound, Kamura smiled quizzically as he pointed to it.

"What for?" he inquired.

"To help Mr. Caldwell," snapped Franklin.

"You want to do that?"

Kamura's smile broadened into a grin.

"Want do."

"Good! Come over here."

Franklin led the way to the window, bent down, and knotted one end of the rope about the leg of the library table. Then he noiselessly raised the lower sash, clutched Kamura's arm, and pointed down to the glow of light which came from Maude Leveridge's room.

"You saw that woman who visited Mrs. Caldwell this morning, Kamura?"

Sueki nodded.

"She's making trouble for Mr. Caldwell," pursued Joe.

"Missee Caldwell also trouble got. I know."

"Well, listen. She's got a letter in a black bag, one of these hand-bags that women carry on their arms—black leather with gold on it. If she keeps that paper she'll make big trouble. If we get it, she can't do anything at all. I tried to-night to get the letter, but I couldn't. My room is right over hers, you see. I thought of you—I knew you Japs can climb like cats, and what I want you to do is to go down this rope, get into her room, find that bag of hers, get the letter, and come back here. Can you do that?"

Kamura carefully studied the problem as he leaned from the window and glanced speculatively at the sheer wall of the hotel. Presently he drew back.

"After she sleep and lights go out, then can do."

"Kamura," declared Joe Franklin, "you're a dead game sport. Shake!"

They shook hands. Then the Japanese seated himself for a period of stolid waiting, while Franklin posted himself at the window, and sat watching the orange glow of light from the room below, waiting for it to be extinguished.

## XV

### THE FEMININE ALLIANCE

JANICE CALDWELL, intent on her new purpose, reached the Maybank house within fifteen minutes of her husband's parting with the Maybank trio. She swung up to the veranda, mounted the steps, and rang the bell with impatient strength. Then she fretted and fumed until Mrs. Maybank herself swung open the door, to step back in amazement at sight of her visitor.

Janice did not notice the other woman's amazement, so distraught was she with her own affairs.

"Where's Eunice?" she inquired eagerly

Mrs. Maybank blocked any possible entrance.

"She is not feeling well, Mrs. Caldwell. I hardly think she can see you."

"But I must see her," panted Janice. "She is—there is—danger!" The speaker's voice was raised to a quavery pitch of nervousness.

"Mother," called Eunice from the library, "is that Janice? If so, let her come in. I wish to speak with her."

Mrs. Maybank drew back and Janice fairly rushed into the house, making straight for the library. She was sobbing with hysteria as she burst into the tearful presence of her friend. Eunice rose, and, quite as a matter of course, the two miserable women found comfort in each other's arms, their telephone tiff forgotten. It was Janice who broke the sobby silence.

"Oh, Eunice, I'm *so* unhappy! My—my life's a wreck—a ruin—and I have come to warn you. My dear, you must never, never come to the plight that I am in to-day!"

Eunice stroked her shoulder gently.

"I know, dear, I know," she choked. "Never you mind! I never shall, I never shall!"

"Wh-what do you—mean?" sobbed Janice.

"About Joe. You—you—came to warn me about him, didn't you? I—I've—discovered his perfidy. He—he—was out with a—a—woman—all evening—O-o-h!" She burst into a fresh paroxysm of tears. "He broke his engagement

with me, and—went out with her. They were drinking in a café—at Martin's. I'm sorry I grew angry at you this afternoon. You know more than I do, Janice, and I see now that you were right!"

The two women seated themselves on the davenport, Janice's arms about the shaking shoulders of the younger woman. Mrs. Caldwell did not understand what Eunice had said, and desired to know more.

"Tell me all about it," she prompted.

So Eunice started at the very beginning and explained through to the very end.

"The woman's stopping at the Gilmer," she finished. "Harold says she has yellow hair, and dresses flashily, and is a painted *hussy*! And Joe sent your husband to bring me home, and to tell me that he had an engagement with some one from out of town! *O-o-o-o-h!*"

Janice stiffened slightly.

"John brought you home?"

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"A few minutes after half past nine."

And then Janice did a very peculiar thing. She

threw her arms about Eunice's neck and cried; but there was a different note in her grief now. When she had cried for a time, she drew back and stared the other woman straight in the eyes.

"Listen, Eunice," she started, and plunged straight into a recountal of the day's terrors. "And then," she finished, "when I thought I should go mad, I called the club about half past nine, and they told me that John had left to keep an appointment with a lady. I thought it was that—*person*; but now I'm so glad to know it was you and your mother! But it doesn't give me a bit clearer understanding."

"Nor me."

"Judging by Harold's description of the woman, it sounds like the very creature who came to my house this morning. Surely there are not two such women in the world! But if she is the same one, then the situation is more complex than ever. I just can't grasp it. The two men seem to be——"

"Nor can I understand. Everything I learn seems to leave me farther from a solution. We shall just have to stand together, Janice. We've

'both been deceived—you after marriage, and I before it. I suppose I'm lucky——"

"And I've determined——"

"So have I. I'm going to send Joe's ring back to-morrow."

"And I'm going down to the hotel to see that hussy. She's roused me too far. She shall never marry him. I won't give him a divorce; and I'll tell her as much. I'm desperate!" Her voice trailed off pitifully. "Of course, I can't ever live with him again—not after this; but she shan't!"

The two women had risen in speechless amazement, and were staring wide-eyed at the wrought-up wife.

"To-night!" gasped Eunice.

"Yes, to-night. And you're going with me. I want a witness!"

"What? Me?" Eunice drew back a step in horror. "Why, Janice, I—I—couldn't!"

"Oh, yes, you can. We must stand together; you said so yourself. I must have a witness with me, and there's no one else to whom I can turn. It's just you, Eunice, or—well," she concluded hopelessly, "I'm afraid my battle will be a lost



one, and it means more than my own life. You'll understand some day!"

Eunice's arms were about her friend once more, and once more the two women cried softly

"You—you'll just—talk to her, won't you, Janice?"

"I'd like to scratch her yellow eyes out, but I won't. She was under a misapprehension this morning; she thought I was John's sister. Evidently she doesn't know that he is married. Well, I'm going to have the satisfaction of telling her. Then I'll find out a few things for myself!"

Eunice, fired with sudden willingness, turned to her mother, who had heard what the younger woman said.

"You've heard, mother. May I go with Janice?"

Mrs. Maybank surprised them both by the calm certainty of her answer.

"I think you might go," she said calmly. "I give my permission because I suspect that this whole thing is some unfortunate mistake, which can be cleared up, and the sooner the better. I cannot believe Mr. Caldwell or Joe would be

guilty of such things, without strongly extenuating circumstances. Of course, I know both you girls will do everything in your power to avoid unpleasant notoriety; so I'll get Harold to drive you down in the coupé and wait to bring you back."

"But there's no mistake about the woman being here," said Janice. "I saw her and spoke to her. She told me that she had come to marry my husband, and that he had been writing to her!"

"And Harold knows Joe," added Eunice, "and there was no mistake about his being in Martin's with this woman, or another of the same type."

"It looks bad," admitted Mrs. Maybank, "and it may be as bad as it looks; but I feel sure that there is an explanation. I've lived a good deal longer than you girls, and I've learned that one should not judge by first appearances, or condemn on circumstantial evidence. I think Janice has been both hasty and unwise in not talking things over with her husband; and I think, as I was telling you when she came, that you probably are too severe with Joe. You are not even offering him an opportunity to defend himself. You are just

two hot-headed young people—impulsive, and eager to leap at conclusions.”

The telephone rang sharply, and a half-startled silence fell on the trio. Then they heard Harold answer the call; and a few seconds later he mentioned the name of Joe Franklin.

Eunice sprang up and dashed to the phone, and there ensued the struggle for the receiver which Joe had heard over the wire. Then, at Mrs. Maybank's command, Harold relinquished the receiver, and Eunice spoke to Joe. She turned away, sobbing.

“Tell him I'll send his ring back to-morrow,” she told Harold, as she threw herself into her mother's arms, crying as if her heart were breaking.

“Mother dear, I just couldn't help it!” she cried. “He—he—didn't even deny it. He just seemed surprised that I had found out. I didn't mean to be so short with him, but I couldn't help it, mother—I just couldn't help it!”

Mrs. Maybank gently stroked her daughter's shoulder.

“There, there, deary, don't carry on so. I still

believe that it will all come right in the end. You've been a little too hasty, but I suppose that's natural to youth. You——"

"I'm going with Janice!" asserted Eunice spiritedly.

"Very well," agreed her mother.

Mrs. Maybank called Harold and sent him for the coupé. Then she turned to Janice.

"I'm going to let Eunice go with you, my dear," she said gently. "No doubt I am foolish—or some people would say that I am foolish—but I'm acting on intuition this time. I believe it will help Eunice to think of your troubles as well as her own, and her presence might inspire discretion with you. Remember, both of you, whatever this woman may prove to be—you are both ladies!"

Eunice sped to her room and donned a hat, and less than fifteen minutes later the two women alighted before the door of the Gilmer Hotel. Both were white-faced and nervous, yet too much in the grip of tense excitement to give room to sane thought. Janice Caldwell, leading the way, marched straight across the lobby, to confront the suave night-clerk. Walt Simmons raised his eyes

to the somewhat martial figure, and he felt a vague creeping of the flesh at sight of her narrowed eyes and straight lips.

Then he recognized the two women, and he arose with alacrity. Simmons was many, many degrees removed from a fool, and he had been not a little puzzled by the events of the past twenty-four hours. This appeared as a climax—this visit of John Caldwell's wife and Joe Franklin's *fiancée*. He immediately suspected that their visit was connected with his baseball companion of the afternoon, and was in no whit taken unawares when Janice, without preface, demanded the number of Maude Leveridge's room.

"She's in, Mrs. Caldwell," he admitted, "but it's pretty late, and I shouldn't wonder if she was in bed."

"You might telephone up and find out," suggested Janice. "But wait!" She knit her brows and then nodded. "Never mind that. Give me a sheet of paper, an envelope, and pen and ink."

Walt hastened to provide the necessary articles. He concluded that Mrs. Caldwell intended to write a note and then depart. If so, there wouldn't

be any trouble in the hotel—for which he was truly grateful, as he had felt forebodings at sight of her belligerent stride and on hearing her incisive speech.

He watched Janice from the corners of his eyes as her pen scratched determinedly across the paper. Then he received another surprise, for she turned to Miss Maybank and said, loudly enough for Walt's wide-open ears to catch the words:

"I've merely written 'Must see you immediately,' and signed it 'J. C.' My initials are the same as John's, and I think that will fetch her." She turned to Walt. "Have your porter take this up to Miss Leveridge at once. I will wait."

"Yes'm," answered Walt meekly.

He called Tommy and dispatched him on the errand. The youth ran upstairs and was back in a jiffy, to request that the writer of the note would come up "right away."

Simmons told Tommy to show the ladies to the bridal suite, watched them disappear in the sluggish elevator-cage, and then gave himself over to rather uncomfortable meditation. It was beyond him! Joe Franklin had been thunderstruck, to

all appearances, on learning that Maude Leveridge was in the hotel; then he had gone out, and had returned looking glum. Now Caldwell's wife and the girl who was Joe's *fiancée*, if rumor spoke true, had come to the Gilmer, and were even then at the door of the strange woman's room. What did it mean?

Meanwhile Tommy had escorted the two ladies to the door of the bridal suite, where he knocked and waited.

Instantly there was a sound of footsteps from inside, and the door was swung open by Miss Leveridge in person. ' For a moment she stepped back in startled surprise. Then she spoke breezily:

"Guess you ladies have made a mistake, ain't you? Well, I'll be blessed if it ain't little sister! Say, deary, what brings you here?"

"I came to see you," answered Janice with apparent calm. "And I brought a friend of mine with me. It was I who sent the note. Allow me to introduce Miss Eunice Maybank."

"Well, well—come in," suggested the surprised occupant of the rooms. "It was real good of you to call!"

She held the door wide, and the two visitors passed inside. The door closed, and then John Caldwell's wife turned to the other woman, speaking with a voice which showed her feelings despite all efforts at control.

"I did not come here to make a social visit. I came, for one thing, to let you know that I am not your 'little sister,' as you were pleased to call me before the page. I must tell you that I am John Caldwell's wife!"

Maude Leveridge stared. Her yellowish eyes popped open and her upholstered figure stiffened.

"You're his—*what?*" she gasped.

"His wife."

The eyes of the two women met and held their gaze for a tense moment. Then Miss Leveridge dropped the door-knob and let her hand fall limply to her side. She turned from Janice to Eunice.

"Say," she asked weakly, "is that—on the level?"

Eunice bowed affirmatively in dignified silence.

Maude Leveridge read truth in the faces of both her visitors. She crossed the room and sank into a chair, too much overcome to speak.



## XVI

### A BATTLE AND A TRUCE

THE two visitors stared at the flashy woman who sat limply in her chair. Presently Miss Leveridge pulled herself together and resumed the strange conversation.

"Then—then you was stringin' me this mornin', eh? That Jap said 'Miss' Caldwell was at home, and I——"

"Kamura said 'Misse' Caldwell was at home," amended Janice. "That is his pronunciation of my name. If you misunderstood him——"

"Why didn't you put me wise?"

"Would you have done so, had you been in my place? If some adventuress came to you and announced that she was here to steal your husband——"

Miss Leveridge rose to her feet, her face flaming.

"Here, here! Can the rough stuff! Go slow

on that adventuress business. I don't like it a little bit. Since we're gettin' right personal, lemme say that I ain't nothing of the kind. I'm as straight as you are, and for the last four years I've been earning a decent living as service captain on the tenth floor of the La Salle Hotel in Chicago. While I may be hep to a heap of things that you dames probably don't know 'cept by reading the newspapers, my foot ain't slipped—and it ain't likely to. Get that? I'm straight, I tell you; so kindly lay off on that line of gab."

Janice was nonplused.

"My assumption was natural enough," she asserted weakly.

"So was mine that you was Caldwell's sister, when the Jap called you 'miss.' "

Once more three pairs of eyes crossed glances.

"May I ask," said Janice stiffly, "where my husband is?"

Miss Leveridge seemed lost in thought.

"Wait a minute," she replied at length. "Set down, and 'scuse me for not askin' you before; but I've been kinder knocked cold by this line of stuff you been handin' me. Now s'pose we get

together and peddle the truth a while, 'stead of talking about 'sumptions. First off—are you here to talk war 'medicine, or to fix things up quiet like?"

"That depends entirely on you," returned Janice stiffly, as she seated herself. "You still haven't answered my question."

Maude shook her head.

"Blamed if I know where he is. He came here about eight o'clock, and trotted me out to a dinky movie and a dinkier café. Then he 'brought me back here and left me."

"John did?" asked Janice, utterly bewildered.

"If it wasn't him, then I'm up a tree. He sure answered to the name when called."

"But——" Janice paused, and then went on with a rush. "My husband was with Miss Maybank and her mother at half past nine. You weren't back by that time, were you?"

"Nope. Not us," asserted Miss Leveridge.

"I wonder"—Eunice was taking part in the conversation for the first time—"I wonder if you'd be kind enough to describe the man who took you out?"

"Sure pop, when you talk decent like that. It ain't no secret. He was about five eleven tall, wore a checked suit, had brown hair and eyes——"

"Dark or light brown?"

"Dark. Very dark."

"You're *sure* of that?"

"Sure pop! I reckon I know dark brown when I see it. Almost black his eyes are."

Eunice gazed at Janice and Janice gazed at Eunice.

"Joe!" gasped Eunice.

"Joe!" echoed Janice.

"Joe?" chimed Maude Leveridge. "Say, if I ain't impertinent, I wonder if I mightn't butt in on this deal, seein' as I look like the goat! Joe who?"

"Joe Franklin," burst out Eunice. "He's my *fiancé*."

Maude shook her head in bewilderment.

"I don't get it at all, at all! This gink come right up smilin' to the name of John. The wires are crossed somewhere."

"He told you his name was John?" demanded Janice,

"No, now that I think it over. He popped into the room, and I called him John and gave him a kiss, and——"

Miss Maybank gasped painfully.

"What's eatin' you now?" queried Maude solicitously.

"That—that—wretch kissed you?"

Maude nodded.

"Guilty! Y'see, I thought he was the guy I'd come to marry, and I couldn't nowise see no harm in just kissin'."

"But—but he was my *fiancé*!" Eunice explained.

"You mean this Joe person? Or John?"

"Joe. It was Joe. My brother said he saw Joe Franklin and a woman at a movie to-night, and at Martin's, eating squabs and drinking champagne; and his description fits you."

Maude Leveridge eyed the excited girl.

"Listen, kid—one of us is bughouse, and me, I'm feeling all O. K. in the head just at present. I don't know this Franklin. Never heard of him in my life before you sprung him on me. I did eat birds and champagne with a guy, but the

only guy I'm interested in in this burg, and the one I thought I was with to-night, is the feller this here friend of yours says is her husband. He's the guy who told me I was the sort of a partner he wanted."

"Oh!" gasped Janice. "I suppose it was in the La Salle Hotel that you met my husband?"

Miss Leveridge smiled.

"I never met your husband before I come to this burg; but I know his looks. I got his picture, see; and the man I was with to-night matches up all right."

"Wait!" Janice half rose, and then sank back weakly. "You say you've never met him, and yet this morning you said—you said——"

"Well, what did I say?" Maude's tawny eyes snapped. "Whatever it was I handed it to you straight—thinkin', as I did, that you was goin' to be my sister!"

"Why, you said—that is, I thought you said you saw him two weeks ago. You said it was then he told you that you were the sort of woman——"

"Nix! And likewise not! But I gotcha—I gotcha all right. I said it was two weeks since

he wised me up to that gladsome fact; but I didn't see him—he just wrote me that I was up to specifications, see?"

"And you came here on the strength of that, to marry a man you'd never met?"

To Janice Caldwell such an act appeared beyond the pale of belief.

"It's—it's unheard of!" said Eunice weakly.

Maude shrugged.

"Oh, I dunno! You're hearing of it now, ain't you? And I had him looked up in Dun's and Bradstreet's, which is the references that count. Now, you kids, listen, and I'll tell you a few things. For years I've been working, just grindin' along, watchin' the highbrows and the high-flyers coppin' all the good times there was to have, till I got plumb tired wastin' my life answerin' calls for service. Then I makes up my mind to get a little action on my own. I commenced practicin' the ways of them folks. I can talk real good when I try, an' act like a reg'lar lady; and I can be as rude as a born society leader when I wanna put up a front. I learned all that. Then I sticks an ad in a matrimonial paper for a man

who wants a stylish wife—a man with money; and I get a heap of answers, some of which oughta have been suppressed, but this Caldwell man's suited me the best. It would suit you, too, if you'd seen the things he'd wrote, but"—she paused, and turned to Janice—"I reckon, if you're his wife, you've heard the same line of con!"

Janice groped wildly for her bearings. This information was no less startling than the other developments had been.

"You—you say John Caldwell answered your advertisement in one of the matrimonial papers? He—he couldn't have——"

"He did."

"But—but that isn't like John!"

"Well," sighed Miss Leveridge, evidently weary of the dispute, "I got a letter signed by him what says he did. An' I got his photo."

"Are you *sure*?"

"Sure? Say, you're a suspicious little minx, ain't you? I hadn't no reason to doubt it, anyway. I guess you can judge, can't you? Let's see who's right!"

Maude crossed to the dresser, to return with



the gold-trimmed bag. Reseating herself, she drew forth an unmounted photographic print, plainly a kodak snap-shot, glanced at it briefly, and passed it across to Mrs. Caldwell.

Janice stiffened as she eyed it. There could be no doubt about it. She remembered the circumstances under which it was taken. It showed John Caldwell in laced boots and khaki, with a gun in one hand and a string of ducks in the other.

The photograph, snapped by Joe Franklin after a day's hunting, was not especially good. John's face had been shaded by his hat, so that while the portrait was recognizable to one who knew him, his features were not at all distinct. But Janice could not mistake the identity of her husband; nor could Eunice Maybank. The two friends gazed at each other in silence.

Maude nodded.

"Judging by the way you two dames look, there ain't much doubt about that bein' Mr. John Caldwell!"

"No," returned Janice simply. "This is certainly a picture of Mr. Caldwell. It was taken

last autumn. And you say he sent it to you——”

“A bit over two weeks ago.”

“Then——”

“That’s all, ’cept that I liked his looks. He looked like a man’s sort of man, and I’m strong for that kind. I’ve seen too many of your willie-boys in the hotel business. So I just says that I’ll pack up, s’prise John, and be married if I suit.”

“And did you suit?” Janice’s lips curled scornfully.

“Well,” replied Miss Leveridge contentedly, “he said he’d fix things for the marriage to-morrow.”

“Joe said that?” snapped Eunice Maybank excitedly.

“Say!” Miss Leveridge exhibited some impatience. “I wish you’d can that Joe stuff! I ain’t chasing *your* property.”

“But you said his eyes were *dark* brown!”

“And Mr. Caldwell’s eyes are as close to gray as light brown can be,” added Janice. “And certainly he couldn’t marry you to-morrow. There’s a law in this State against things like that. Bigamy, they call it!”

Maude Leveridge frowned doubtfully. Her ground was shaky. At first she had suspected a trick on Janice's part to rescue a brother from her toils; but the evident sincerity of the two women, and the perfect dovetailing of their stories under all circumstances, was having a disquieting effect.

"Mebbe you're right. If you are, it begins to look like I was *it*! Somebody's handed me a lemon, and if I can find him, I don't give a whoop if his eyes are brown or gray to start with—when I get done with the little joker, I'm betting they'll be a beautiful shiny black!"

Janice perceived that her enemy was retreating; slowly, but nevertheless surely. She decided to press her strategic advantage.

"I suppose you will admit that as I know the color of my husband's eyes, I might also know his writing? You say you have a letter. Will you allow me to see it?"

Again Maude frowned.

"You could do that if you was his sister, I guess. Say, on the level, are you his wife, or are you just stringin' me to kill off a happy home for yours truly?"

Janice gazed at her squarely, and saw a way to convince the woman on common ground—the ground of sisterhood in all women.

"I am so much his wife," she answered simply, impressively, "that some time this winter my first baby—his child—will be born."

The other woman sat stiffly erect, staring, not at Janice, but beyond her, into the infinite. Her lips snapped together determinedly, and she nodded.

"That settles it!" she announced. "You ring true, and I believe you. Whether Caldwell wrote this letter or not, I don't give a hoot. I'm done! And I guess I'm done good and plenty—and lucky at that. Lucky to be put wise in time. If that's the sort of jasper he is, he ain't the man I'm hunting, an'—an'—even if he was, and I loved him clean down to his dirty heels, I wouldn't snatch no dad from an unborn kid. I ain't that kind, Mrs. Caldwell. You win. No weddin'-bells for mine!"

Janice rose to face her.

"You mean that?"

"On the dead!"

Maude Leveridge covertly wiped away tear-traces from her yellowish eyes—cat eyes no longer.

“You—you mean that you’ll go away and leave him for me and the baby?”

“Sure as shooting! Say, what you think I got, anyway—a stone heart?”

“No, a real heart—a woman’s heart! Oh, you’re good, good—and you’ve been cruelly wronged!”

Impulsively Janice crossed to her, placed her arms about the larger woman, and pressed a kiss on her carmined lips. Maude Leveridge laughed a choky little laugh, then began brokenly:

“Well, life’s just one blamed thing after another—and I’m the other, this time. Serves me right, anyway, for trying to catch just any man ’cause I was tired of the grind. Well, I had a three-day vacation, and a heap of excitement—who’d ’a’ thought it of a rube town, too? Tomorrow it’s me for Chicago and a still hunt for a new job. What I told the La Salle boss when I quit cuts me out of going back there.”

“Your old job is gone?”

“Surest thing you know,” grinned Maude rue-

fully. "I was sorter sleepin' on my back—thinkin' I was a married woman. And now that we're gettin' things straightened, I'd like to know just how much of a goat I am. I think I'll show you that letter."

Thrusting her hand into the purse, she produced an envelope. She drew out a typewritten page and flipped it open, then extended it toward Janice.

"Lamp it, and tell me whether he signed it."

Janice Caldwell glanced at it briefly, then sighed with infinite relief.

"He did not!" she asserted with positive conviction.

The sound of a sob arrested her. The two women turned to see Eunice Maybank standing with clenched fists and heaving bosom.

"What—what is it?" gasped Janice.

"That writing!" groaned Eunice. "It's some terrible, terrible conspiracy. That writing, Janice, is *Joe's*!"

## XVII

### KAMURA IN THE BREACH

EUNICE's assertion was positive; and to add conviction—she fainted.

Immediately there was hurrying and scurrying on the part of Maude Leveridge and Janice Caldwell. Smelling-salts were produced, seemingly from the atmosphere, and eventually Eunice came to, a bit weak and white-faced, and very round-eyed.

The two women walked with her to the elevator, summoned the cage, dropped a floor, and emerged into the lobby. Walt Simmons stared.

"For the love o' Mike!" he gasped, while they were still at a little distance. "It's the Mavbank chicken that's got hers!"

He hustled forward solicitously to proffer his services.

"Miss Maybank is not feeling well," Janice explained gently.

The rather vague explanation seemed to satisfy Walt Simmons, who loaned a rather well-muscled shoulder to the task of getting Eunice to the waiting coupé.

Janice was sorry for Eunice, very sorry; but her own heart was singing wonderfully. She felt as if the weight of the universe had been lifted from her shoulders. She had won—won! And by the most unexpected means—by a simple appeal to the dormant motherhood of the other woman.

The two friends gained the haven of the car, and Janice snapped directions to the boyish chauffeur.

"Eunice is not well. Drive home as quickly as you can!"

The car leaped away. For possibly a minute and a half Maude Leveridge and Walt Simmons stood shoulder to shoulder, staring at the retreating motor until it whirled about a corner in a cloud of dust. Then, without a word, they turned and reëntered the Gilmer. In her hand Maude held the damning letter which she had shown to the two women.



The letter had suddenly assumed double importance to Miss Leveridge. It was undoubtedly the best clew to a solution of the entire tangle in which she found herself involved. She believed the women, yet she felt that she had been tricked into something—just what, or how, or why, she knew not. But certainly there was some reason why Franklin was Caldwell, and why Caldwell's eyes were a certain shade of brown, and why Franklin signed Caldwell's letters, and why Caldwell, if indeed he was the culprit—and Maude was by no means entirely reassured on that point—had imitated Franklin's handwriting in affixing his own name.

In any case the letter might prove valuable. She had very little hope that it would gain her a husband; but that it might pay the expenses of her little trip, and finance her through the threatened out-of-a-job period, seemed thoroughly just and equitable. So she handed the paper to Walt as he stepped behind the desk.

"Stick that in your strong-box until I ask for it, will you?" she urged. "And be careful of it."

"Sure," grinned Walt affirmatively. "I'll see that it don't run away, Miss Maude."

Maude Leveridge eyed him askance.

"Humph! You're a pretty quick acquaintance, ain't you? My name's Leveridge, you know."

Walt met stare for stare.

"I sorter like Maude better," he asserted calmly. "I like Maude right down to the ground. And say—do you prefer a mustache, or not?"

"Well," Miss Leveridge said, as she turned airily away, "I ain't got no objections to a *mustache*, but I never was strong on them imitation things!"

Her retirement was effected at the psychological moment for Walt's complete discomfiture. As she swept up the stairway, he was very red in the face, and raised tentative fingers to the cherished adornment of his upper lip.

Once again in her rooms, Maude donned the green-and-purple kimono and eyed herself in the mirror. "Done!" she soliloquized. "Done good and brown—and then turned over and done on the other side. And stuck up in the bridal chamber—bah!"

She snapped off the light and seated herself in the big leather rocker for a siege of thinking; but her mind was in an utter turmoil.

"Maybe," she mused, "if I lay down I can think better."

She crossed the dark room and stretched out on the bed, there to give herself over to cogitation on the rapid developments of the past twenty-four—nay, eighteen hours.

One floor upstairs, Joe Franklin turned from his vigil at the window.

"Come on, Kamura!" he whispered. "She has had her light out for ten minutes."

Kamura made no move to comply. Instead, he shook his head positively.

"Not enough long time. Wait fifteen minute more, maybe."

"Very well!"

Joe crossed to the table, picked up his pipe, then reconsidered and laid it down again, this time to look at his watch. The long waiting had strained his nerves, though it did not seem to have affected Kamura, who was to commit the burglary which the two men had in contemplation.

Presently the Japanese removed his shoes, doffed his coat, tightened the belt around his waist by one hole, and stood ready for the venture in trousers, shirt, and stockinged feet. He padded to the window, and a faint nod of satisfaction was vouchsafed as he saw that the hotel was dark, and that all the street-lights had been extinguished save the big corner arcs; and the lamp on that particular corner was screened from the hotel front by two huge trees.

"You put out light, excoose, pleas'," suggested Kamura.

Joe snapped the switch, throwing the room in total darkness. Then, without another word, Kamura mounted the sill and slid backward to the edge, holding the rope with both hands.

"Now, you understand what you're going after," reminded Franklin, his doubts dispelled by the matter-of-fact attitude of the amateur burglar. "It's a letter and a picture—a kodak picture. She's got it in one of these leather bags that women carry, and the bag is trimmed with something that is gold, or looks like gold. The last I saw of it, it was on her dresser, but she may

have moved it. It's the bag you've got to look for, understand?"

"Yessir."

Kamura extended a deft leg, caught the rope, and in a trice had it twisted about his calf and thigh.

"And for Heaven's sake don't get caught, Kamura! This is a risky business, and if they got us we'd go to jail."

Kamura grinned to himself in the darkness. That he was undertaking a dangerous mission was no news to him—but, having undertaken it, he couldn't see the need for discussion.

"No get caught, Misser Franklin. No make no more noise as a kitty."

He swung completely over the sill, and went silently down the rope, hand under hand.

His progress was slow, but very careful. He bore the weight of his body on his sinewy biceps, keeping the rope wrapped around his right leg, so that he might rest occasionally; and with his left foot he fended his swaying body off from the hotel side as he slipped gradually downward.

Presently his groping feet touched the sill of

the window toward which he had been dropping. His toes flexed quickly and caught, almost like the fingers of a third hand. He swung himself slowly in to a firm foothold, stood briefly on the outer frame of the window, and sank swiftly down, to crouch tensely beneath the open sash.

He might have been a mere shadow crouching in the gloom of the night. The curtains behind him bellied into the room gently before the pervasive night breeze, but of the occupant of the room Kamura heard not a sound. Slowly and carefully he thrust a foot, and then a leg, feeling every inch of the way, and making unbelievably slow progress, until at length he lowered himself noiselessly over the sill to the floor inside

With equal deliberation, and just as uncanny noiselessness, he stood erect, and as the curtains billowed apart he slipped through like a specter. For perhaps two minutes he waited, motionless, still without a sign from the other occupant of the room; then he took his first tentative, groping step toward the corner where he imagined the dresser to be.

Step by step, with pause after pause, taking not

a chance of running into anything, or even overturning an ornament, he advanced, reconnoitering with his stockinged feet as he slid them over the floor. At length he reached the wall, and then turned to his right, groping silently.

His sharp eyes were becoming more accustomed to the gloom. He discerned the nebulous outlines of the dresser, and made his way there more swiftly, but none the less carefully. He passed his fingers swiftly over the top.

Disappointment! The bag was not there.

The table, then! That would be somewhere near the center of the room. Kamura cast off from the guidance of the wall and essayed the uncharted sea of the floor. He progressed with infinite care, and at length brought up against an island of wood—the table.

Once again a minute search for the bag, and once again a failure to find it. He found other things, however, including a newspaper, which rustled alarmingly under his touch.

He felt that his mission would fail if he could have no light. He must see!

It was not Kamura's way to figure too long.

He reached into his trouser-pocket, produced a match, and deliberately raked its sulphur head with a thumb-nail. It flared weirdly in the inkiness of the room, setting weird silhouettes abob on the walls of the room. And it showed Kamura two things. The first was the purse, lying right before him on the table, where he had missed it completely in his search. The other was the figure of a pop-eyed woman, clad in a gaudy kimono, sitting upright on the bed, staring straight into the glare of the match. Then darkness!

In his native tongue Kamura swore. This was not at all according to calculations. He had fancied that the woman was in the room, true; but he had supposed that she was asleep.

Had she been sleeping, the flare of the match would at most have awakened her, and she would have screamed, but too late to catch him as he scuttled up the rope and into the sanctuary of Joe Franklin's room. As a matter of fact, Maude had not been more than half asleep, and the slight rustling of the newspaper on the table had roused her to the startling, fearsome knowledge that she was not alone.



Terrified, she had raised herself to a sitting posture just as the match flared.

Of that Sueki Kamura knew nothing. What he did know, however, was that the woman was awake, and that the purse lay there within easy reach. He decided instantly to snatch the purse and make away with it. There was no time for deliberate searching for letter or picture.

It had all taken but a split second. His hand crushed the flame of the match, as his other hand reached out and closed about the purse. With the agility of a cat he spun sure-footedly, and then——

*"Bur-r-glars!"*

It was a shriek from the woman on the bed.

Kamura's mind worked like lightning. The rope would hardly do. By the time he could reach it, she would have the neighborhood aroused, and his climb up the rope, with the purse in his hand, would be a slow affair. He made for the door of the suite, reached it in a bound, ripped it open, and raced toward the stairs leading to the floor above. And he made no noise as he ran; /

his stockinged flight was silent as the passage of a ghost.

As he mounted the stairs two at a time, he heard the feminine crescendo from the bridal suite, heralding woes to all the world:

*"Bur-r-glars! Thieves! Murd'ers!"*

## XVIII

### "BURGLARS!"

BENNY GORDON breezed into the lobby of the Gilmer Hotel, pussy-footed to the desk, and then stood a while, smiling gleefully.

"Oh, don't torture the little thing," he said at length.

Walt Simmons jerked his hand away from his hint of a mustache and whirled somewhat angrily.

"You're real smart, ain't you, Benny?"

"Sometimes. But say"—Benny leaned confidentially across the desk and lowered his voice—"there's something a heap funnier going on in this burg!"

"Yes? What, for instance?"

"Blessed if I know—yet; but I'm trying to find out. I'm hot on the trail of some corking news stuff, I am! Now tell me this much—did you know that John Caldwell had left his home, bag and baggage, and taken a room at the Com-

mercial Club, and that his wife has disappeared?"

Walt yawned.

"Maybe," he drawled, hiding his keen interest.

"Now, when I went to school," pursued Gordon, "I learned that when you take one two and add another two to it you get four, see? Which leads me to think that maybe our flashy friend upstairs may be in on this little deal."

"Uhuh!"

Save for a decided stiffening of Walt's figure and a narrowing of the eyes, he betrayed no emotion.

"She here yet?"

"Yes, she's still here." Walt affected another yawn. "She's in her room. Gone to bed, I guess. So—er—Mrs. Caldwell has gone away?"

"Uhuh! Skedaddled. And the funny part of it is that nobody seems to know anything about it—when, where, or even why."

Walt smiled. "Oh, I reckon she's not gone very far," he suggested.

It had occurred to him that he didn't care to have the little reporter prying too deeply into the personal affairs of the woman in the bridal

suite. Simmons had found her a very engaging companion that afternoon at the ball-game, and she was much in his mind.

Men have done more than sacrificing cherished mustaches—first-born mustaches—for a woman. She was an upstanding woman and a woman of the world. She knew what was what. Moreover, a mustache always grew more rapidly for having been shaved.

"You get any more dope on that woman?" Benny inquired confidentially.

"Dope? Oh, sure." Walt exhibited no particular interest. "When her and I was at the ball-game this afternoon she told me she used to manage service on one floor of the La Salle Hotel in Chicago."

"The ball-game! You and her!" He clapped Walt on the shoulder in overt admiration. "You blamed old sport! Say, what's she like?"

"She's a fine woman," declared Walt promptly. "One in a million—the kind a man who knows a thing or two could appreciate pretty steady."

"Did she see Caldwell to-day?"

"Nope, I'm sure not."

"She—that is, she didn't wise you up to what she wanted with him, did she?"

"Nary a wise. You see, Benny, I'll be frank with you—I didn't ask her. Her and me discussed things which you might say was more personal."

But Benny was not to be dazzled from the track. The reportorial instinct was his.

"It was her askin' for him like she did that made me think she must be mixed up in this funny stuff at Caldwell's house. I always thought him and his wife was strong on the newly-wed lovey-dovey stuff. But there's something big happened at that happy home, Walt. First off, I get the tip that Caldwell's at the Commercial Club. I beat it up there to nose around a while, but he's out, see? Then I phoned his house, and not a soul answered; but I lucked on a page who told me he heard Caldwell gassing with Franklin, and heard John say he had a split-up with his wife about a woman. He used to be a gay one, and maybe—well, I was just thinkin' it most likely that this dame upstairs—well, you heard her yourself when she come in last night."

"Listen here, Benny!" snapped the night-clerk. "I'm telling you now that a man who suspicions a woman when he don't know nothing for sure about her—he ain't no kind of a man, that's what!"

Benny drew back.

"Cut that, Walt! I don't see why *you* have to get peeved about it, anyway. Caldwell and his wife wouldn't have split if there wasn't something pretty fierce around their wood-pile. If I could get a story like that—well, I'll bet I'd get a raise; and believe me, Walt, a raise would mean a heap to me now. You know me and Mabel Stevens——"

"That's it, eh? Benny Gordon, I'm plumb ashamed of you. You oughter be workin' on one of them yellor rags in New York. The idea of wantin' to win a home by slingin' mud at Caldwell and his wife, and at this here girl up-stairs! Benny, the trouble with you reporters is that there ain't one of you that's got a soul."

"Well, of course," defended Gordon, "all I want is the truth. I wouldn't go manufacturing a story. But if there's anything to it, it's news,

and the people have a right to know it. They pay for their papers——"

"And you've been bent on making something grow on this girl ever since you lamped her last night, haven't you?"

"Why, no, it ain't that, Walt. I just thought——"

"I don't believe it. Anyway, she was with me all afternoon, and she couldn't be raisin' sand with the Caldwells if she was with me, could she?"

"But I heard she was with Joe Franklin in Martin's to-night. At least I hear Joe was with a swell baby-doll guzzling fizz and carving a couple of birds, and I thought——"

"You think a heap, you do! She did go out with Joe Franklin to-night; but what has that to do with a Caldwell family row?"

"H-m!" Benny turned the information over in his mind, groping for its meaning. "Joe did have her out to-night, eh?"

"Uhuh. That's what I said."

"And Joe is Caldwell's chum. Maybe he was handing her a steer."



"What?" Walt leaned across the counter. "Say, Benny, if you was to work as hard trying to find the real truth as you do to make facts fit your fool notions, you might be a reporter some day—if you lived long enough."

But Walt was worried. He saw that Benny had marshaled sufficient facts to put him hot on the trail, and he feared that the reporter might unearth some juicy morsel of scandal. He sought diversion by mopping his forehead with a silk handkerchief of brilliant hue.

"Hot, ain't it?" he remarked.

Benny grinned.

"Yes, it's hot," he admitted, and then, still grinning diabolically, he went on: "But it ain't half as hot as Caldwell was when I finally rounded him up and asked him if it was true he had left his wife, and asked him to state his side of the case."

Walt gasped.

"What? You—you—asked him *that*?"

"Uhuh!"

"Gee, but you *have* got a nerve! And what did he say?"

"Not much. He told me to go to thunder."

"Serves you right!"

"It was like this." Benny crossed one leg over, produced a cigarette, lighted it, and leaned heavily against the counter. "I told you about browsing around the club and finding the page who'd heard Caldwell and Franklin talking about Caldwell splitting up with his wife about a woman. Well, I quizzed him for a while, and he said that Caldwell looked all cut up, and that he had his Jap servant bring his bag to the club, and that he'd engaged a room. I knew I was on the trail of something. Then, as I told you, I phoned his house, but there wasn't a thing stirring. So I figures the best way I can do is to stick around the club until he shows up. I grabbed a magazine and read a while, and he didn't come. Then I gets up and rambles out in front, where it's cooler, and in less than five minutes up comes Caldwell in his car, scorching at a great rate. Says I to myself:

"'Benny, here's your chance!"

"So—and remember, us reporters has to take risks all the time—I toddles to him and says off-

hand, like I'd been wise to the whole thing from the jump:

" 'Mr. Caldwell, I'm representing the morning paper. We'd like to get a little more specific information about your wife's leaving home. You see,' I goes on, although I'll admit I was a bit shaky at the look he give me, 'we wanna be perfectly impartial and give both sides of the case, yours and hers.'

" 'Well, to be honest, that was about as far as I got, because by that time he jerked me round right up in front of him—and Walt, believe me, that man's stronger'n Samson!

" 'If you run either side of the story, you little shrimp,' he hisses, 'I'll break every bone in your body, and—yes, I'll wreck your confounded plant! And that's all the statement I got to make, except to tell you to go to thunder!'

" 'Then he gives me a shove that slams me against the post, and goes into the club. Now, I'm asking you, Walt, fair and square, if I should want to be easy on a man who does me like that when I ain't doin' nothin' but my duty?'

Walt had been listening to the narrative with

but half an ear. He was disturbed by the information contained in it. It appeared that Mrs. Caldwell had not returned home—but then she wouldn't have done that. Miss Maybank was ill, and Janice would have returned with her. But her husband evidently didn't know it. According to Benny's story, John Caldwell had been at the club, and his wife had left home without his knowledge.

"I wouldn't be too quick to make a man like Caldwell angry," he advised Benny knowingly. "He's a big man in this burg, and maybe, when he finished with you, there wouldn't be much left for Mabel Stevens to tie up to. Suppose you wait till you know things for sure before you get yourself in hot water."

"But that's what I'm trying to do—to get things straight," sulked Benny. "I reckon you could help me if you would, too. Why, do you know, I've got half a notion that you're stuck on this Leveridge girl yourself, and that's why you won't——"

"Help you sling mud on the clean skirts of a defenseless woman, eh?" rasped Walt angrily.

"This is a blamed swell town, ain't it, where a decent girl can't stop at a first-class hotel without some cub reporter trying to make out there's something wrong with her just because she don't trot up and give her Bertillon as soon as she's signed the register! Benny, you're off your nut, that's what's the matter with you. I tell you, straight, she's a hard-working girl when she's home. She works in the La Salle in Chicago."

Benny's face lighted with a sudden idea. He was plainly not to be side-tracked.

"Maybe that's where she met Caldwell," he suggested.

Walt banged the desk with his fist. "She ain't *never* met Caldwell, that I know of!" he roared.

"What? How do you know?"

"Well——" Walt was nonplused. "Well, to tell the truth, Benny, I don't know; but I don't think she has."

"Aha!" Benny straightened his index-finger until it pointed to the third button of Walt's vest. "Now I gotcha! I thought you was holding out on me, and now I'm dead certain of it."

Walt, driven to a corner, covered gamely.

"Honest, Benny, I don't know a thing worth printing."

"How do you know? You ain't a newspaper man, and you ain't fit to judge what the public likes. Man, this is the sort of stuff they eat alive. Tell me what you know, Walt, and then I'll hunt Mrs. Caldwell, and try to get her side of the story. After which I may have something that'll make that Caldwell highbrow wish he hadn't talked to me the way he did!"

Once again fate intervened, this time in the guise of Tommy, the eternal page, who had been edging closer to take in the conversation.

"Say, Mr. Simmons," he piped, "wasn't that Mrs. Caldwell that I took up to see Miss Leveridge to-night?"

Benny whirled and clutched the page by both shoulders, as if he contemplated wringing the news from him.

"What's that? Caldwell's wife was here to see that woman?" He faced Walt, his eyes glittering determinedly. "Listen here, Walt—you've been kiddin' me along. You'd better come across, heap quick. Get that?"

"I get it all right, you blamed bulldog!" growled Walt. "As for you, Tommy, you beat it, and—well, you'll get yours. Now, Benny, come on around behind the counter, and I'll do what I can to help you get things straight."

Benny circled the desk eagerly, and dropped into a chair, while Walt plunged into a recital of the day's events. He talked swiftly, becoming more and more worked up as he got deeper and deeper into the tale.

"And then she says to me——"

On the still night air came a shrill shriek of terror—a woman's shriek. The young men stiffened and looked at each other.

"*Bur-r-glars!*" came the shriek.

"Burglars!" rasped Walt.

"News!" gurgled Benny.

Walt hurled himself from behind the counter toward the stairs, his heart battering like a trip-hammer, for he fancied that the scream had come in Miss Leveridge's voice and from the bridal suite. He shot up the stairway, three steps at a bound, with that and other screams ringing in his ears.

At the top of the stairs he narrowly avoided a collision with Maude Leveridge, who, with purple-and-green kimono flapping, was racing wildly down the hall. Very promptly and forcefully, Walt Simmons seized the hysterical woman by the shoulder. His voice was suddenly very gruff and his attitude commanding.

"Here, you! Stop that! Stop it, and tell me what's the matter. Quick, now! What's wrong?"

The calm mastery of his manner had a wonderfully soothing effect on the excited woman. She answered with a semblance of sanity.

"There—was—a burglar in my room!" she stammered, just as Benny Gordon pounded up the stairs on the trail of the new excitement.

Down the corridor doors were opened carefully, and pajamaed traveling men eyed the group curiously.

"A burglar?" snapped Walt. "What did he do? What did he take?"

"I don't know," panted the woman. "I was dozing, and I woke up. I knew some one was in the room. Then all of a sudden he struck a



match—right out bold like that—and saw me. He dashed out the door and down the hall.”

“In the hall?”

Walt’s eyes darted up and down the corridor.

“Yes and I jumped out o’ bed and began to yell.”

“There’s one sure thing,” proclaimed Walt, loudly enough for the staring men along the corridor to hear, “he didn’t go down stairs. I’d have seen him if he’d come down the steps, and the elevator ain’t runnin’.” He raised his voice still more loudly. “Miss Leveridge here says that a burglar was in her room, but he’s gone now. You folks can go back to bed. There’s no danger.” He whirled to Benny. “Gordon, you stay here and watch while I go with Miss Leveridge and see what that feller took. Don’t let nobody go out without you call me, see? Later I’ll call the cops.”

The Napoleonic night-clerk laid his hand on Maude’s arm and led her back to the bridal suite.

Inside he snapped on the lights and faced her.

“Now, Miss Maude, look around and see what’s missing.”

Of course, the first thing Maude looked for was her purse. She uttered a smothered shriek.

"My bag! It's gone! It was there on the table, by that newspaper. It's gone! And all my money—over a hundred and twenty dollars—*o-o-o-h!*"

"Keep quiet!" snapped Walt sharply. "How did he get in? Did you lock your door?"

"I—I—don't know. I usually do."

Simmons frowned and commenced an inspection of the room.

"Then it's likely you did. If so, how did he get in?"

In due time he circled the room to the windows. Pushing between the curtains, he leaned on the sill. Something long and slender and swaying attracted his attention. He put out a hand and found that it was a rope.

For a long minute Walt stared at it. He pulled—and then put his weight on it. It gave very slightly. He leaned out still farther and followed it with his eyes. It ran but one floor up.

A peculiar expression—a very peculiar expression—came into the night-clerk's eyes. He re-

leased his grasp of the rope and turned back into the room.

"You sit down," he advised Maude Leveridge, "and keep right quiet. There ain't a thing to worry about."

"But—but I——

"I said not to worry!"

"But my bag! It's gone, and it had every cent I own in the world—over a hundred and twenty dollars!"

The woman was perilously close to a nervous breakdown. Walt crossed to her chair and patted her very gently on the shoulder.

"You buck up for just a minute, Miss Maude. I'll be back in a jiffy."

"But——"

"I have a notion," he finished simply, "that I'll have your bag for you in a very few minutes."

Without a word he turned and left the room.

## XIX

WALT SIMMONS, ADJUSTER

ON emerging from Miss Leveridge's room, Walt found Benny discoursing to a group of excited and more or less unclothed men in the hallway; but he ignored their queries and continued to the end of the hall, where he mounted the stairway to the third floor. Once safe from their gaze, he allowed himself the luxury of a broad grin.

The rope running from the window of the burglarized room to that of Joe Franklin above had told him many, many things. Without the slightest hesitation he marched to the door of Franklin's suite, where he crouched with his ear to the keyhole.

Instantly there came to his ears the excited hum of subdued voices. One he recognized as Franklin's; the other had a distinctly lisping, foreign accent. He had noticed Kamura's silent entrance some time previously, and had not understood.

But now—well, many things were plain to him; not quite as many as he would like, but a good many.

He rapped sharply on the door. Instantly the voices ceased, and then, in Joe Franklin's voice, came the question.

"Who's there?"

"Simmons," was the peremptory reply; "Walt Simmons. You may as well open up, Mr. Franklin. I know you ain't in bed, and I know there's some one in there. I want to have a talk with you."

"Wait!" There was a sound of hurried movement, and then Joe Franklin opened the door. "Come on in, Simmons," he invited with simulated cordiality. "If you think I've got a visitor here, take a look' around."

Simmons stepped into the room and closed the door. He glanced about curiously. Save for Franklin, there was no one in sight.

For the vaguest fraction of a second Walt experienced a distinct sense of disappointed surprise. Then his quick eye lighted on the table jammed against the window-ledge, and he noted with a

bare flicker of the eyelids that a rope was tied about one of the massive legs. He also noticed that the rope was taut, as if supporting a weight.

"What's the matter?" queried Joe innocently, after a short period of silence. "What was all that yelling about?"

"About—well, about your copping Miss Leveridge's bag," returned Walt, eying the other man keenly.

"About *what?*" blustered Joe. "Look here, Walt Simmons, are you entirely crazy? What do you mean by that accusation? Explain yourself! Are you—you drunk?"

"No, Mr. Franklin, I believe I'm sober—sober enough, anyhow, to notice a rope hanging down to Miss Leveridge's window. You see, Mr. Franklin, you forgot to pull it up. I'm thinkin' you'd better do it now, or that Jap will get plumb tired hangin' on there. He might fall down an' bust himself all to smash!"

Franklin eyed the other keenly, and then he sighed.

"You win! Honest, Walt, I didn't think you had it in you." He crossed to the window and

called into the blackness below: "Come on up again, Kamura; the jig's up!"

The impassive countenance of the Oriental appeared above the sill, then his lithe body, and finally he hopped catlike into the room. He stood motionless, blinking his small eyes.

"And now," continued Walt, "suppose you haul up the rope and snake the table back to where it belongs! There ain't no need of this thing going any further, I reckon. I sort of have a hunch I know what you was after, and"—he grinned—"it wasn't in the bag, after all, was it, Mr. Franklin?"

"Huh?" said Joe in surprise. "What in thunder do you know about it? You got mighty wise all of a sudden!"

"You didn't find it, did you?"

"No, confound it, I didn't."

"Humph! All I got to say is that if you'd asked me, I might have saved you a heap of excitement. You see, the thing you was after is in the hotel safe down in the office. That's what you was after—the letter—wasn't it, Mr. Franklin?"

Once more the eyes of the two men met, and combativeness was supplanted by a mutual twinkle of amused understanding.

"Walt Simmons," volunteered the elder man, "you're a long way from a fool. I don't know how much you know, but I do know you are on to a heap; and I'm not even asking how you found out. I was after that letter. I didn't intend to take the bag from the room, but in a hurry—well, it's grab, grab, and the devil catch the hindmost. I wanted that letter to straighten out a bit of trouble in which John Caldwell is mixed up. That was why I got his servant, Sueki Kamura, here to help me by swiping the bag. She told me this evening she had the letter there."

"She gave me that letter after Mrs. Caldwell and Miss Maybank left her to-night," vouchsafed Walt, narrowing his eyes slightly.

The effect was instantaneous. Franklin's eyes popped, and his jaw fell.

"Miss Maybank!" he gasped. "Mrs. Caldwell! Here? To-night? To—to see *her*? When, Walt—when?"

Once more Walt Simmons grinned.



"Oh, a little while after you brought her back from down-town. Say, Mr. Franklin, give me that bag. It's got a hundred and twenty bucks of that girl's money in it, and as it leaves her stone broke she's throwing a young duck-fit about it. She's a good girl, and ain't a bit to blame for what's happened. I ain't on to all the facts, maybe, but I'm sure of that much. And I've played mighty fair with you, too—too darned fair, I'm thinking. I haven't let on to a soul about who swiped the dough. I just told her that I'd get the bag back for her."

"But how——"

"How did I know it was you? Well, I saw Sooswisky, or whatever his name is, come in; and later, when the row broke, and I saw the rope leading from her window straight up to yours, why, it was a cinch. Now, suppose you come across with the bag. She's waiting downstairs, worrying about it. How about it?"

Franklin nodded to Kamura, who had been impassively coiling the rope, and without a word the Japanese produced the missing purse from between the mattress and the springs of the bed.

"Punk hiding-place," commented Joe grimly, "but you played *Sherlock* so blamed quick that we didn't have time to think of a better one. Now I'll tell you what I'll do." Joe had the grace to smile. "I'll trade you the purse for the letter."

Walt also smiled.

"No, I don't hardly guess you will. I don't have to trade with you—I've got the goods on you, see? Now listen here, Mr. Franklin—you and me don't run with the same bunch, but I like you for all that. Suppose you leave this whole muddle to me, and let me handle it. I'm ready to do my best for you, and Lord knows I want to help out that poor girl down-stairs. She ain't been handled square, and you know it. Let's make a deal—and you turn the affair over to me. Hey?"

For the third time the eyes of the two men met and held. Then, without a word, Franklin tossed the bag across to Walt Simmons.

"Go to it, Walt," he remarked simply.

Walt thrust it under his coat and moved toward the door.

"I'll do my best. She—she's a blamed nice girl."

Then the door closed behind him.

Franklin sank into a chair. His brain was in a whirling muddle. In the first place the attempt to get the letter had proved a pitiful failure, even though, through some freak of fate, it had not resulted in the disaster which had been so imminent. Only because of Walt's common sense, or good nature, or whatever it might be called, he and Kamura found themselves free from the fangs of the law.

He turned his eyes slowly to the inscrutable Kamura, who was seated calmly on one end of the center table smoking a cigarette. He had once more coiled the rope about his waist and donned his coat over it.

"You go home, Kamura," directed Franklin, "and thank your stars you're not in jail. You're a great little scout, and it wasn't your fault that we didn't pull the deal. I was a chump not to haul up the rope, but I was so blamed excited, with the yelling and all that, that I forgot it. As things turned out, it was better this way, because otherwise that wise night-clerk would have warned the police, and then we would have been

in a pretty pickle. Run along now—and if we ever get this rotten tangle straightened out, I'll wise Caldwell up to what you did for him."

Kamura slipped to the floor and clapped his hat on his head.

"Yessir, Misser Franklin. I go. Good night!"

And then he, too, was gone, and Joe Franklin was once more alone. He had his thoughts for company, but they proved pretty poor entertainment. They were rather like a ball of ravelings with which a frisky kitten has played. Every once in a while an end of yarn—then another end, and then another; none coming from anywhere, none leading anywhere.

Joe felt that he had contributed several of the biggest pieces of yarn to the kitten's ball. His pipe sizzled and squirted a dart of nicotin into his mouth. He swore and slammed it down on the table viciously, shattering the amber stem. Even his pipe had gone back on him!

Somehow his thoughts reverted to Walt Simmons, the young night-clerk, who held a hand of trumps and was playing them for all they were worth. Walt was a smart boy. He had said a

heap more with his eyes than he had with his tongue. What would his next move be?

As if in answer to his thoughts there came another tap on the door, and Walt Simmons let himself into the room. He seemed exhilarated. His eyes were dancing, and the lips under his downy mustache were fighting to conceal a smile of elation. With no circumlocution he started:

"I went down yonder and handed her the purse, Mr. Franklin, and believe me, she was the happiest kid I ever lamped in my career! Then I sat down and had a long talk with her about the whole mess. Honest, she's a girl in a million, the way she took it. She sure has had one rough bump handed out to her, as you may know—being fooled clear from Chicago to marry a man who already has as much wife as he can handle. And on top of that she was so certain that before she left home she flung up her job and told her boss a few things about himself which didn't leave him loving her none whatever."

"Oh, the deuce!" Franklin said dismally. "But I might have known that nothing was going to be *right!*"

Walt nodded.

"Uhuh! That's what I said when she told me. But she's game—game to the core. A real upstanding woman she is. Yessir, a real dyed-in-the-wool, yard-wide, warranted-not-to-shrink sort of a girl. She's sorry she's made so much trouble, and she's ready to do the right thing all round."

"She is?" Joe leaped to his feet. "You mean that?"

"Surest thing you know! What she wants to do is to get hold of you and Mr. Caldwell and Miss Maybank and Mrs. Caldwell, and pile you all into the room together. Then there'll be a general explanation, and things can be put back just where they started off. She says there's been a heap of misunderstanding and nothing 'll do but to get you all in a bunch, where things can be really thrashed out."

Franklin shook his head.

"I'm game, goodness knows! We could call Miss Maybank and Mrs. Caldwell, and get 'em to come, maybe; but I've no idea where Caldwell is. He wasn't in the last time I phoned the Commercial Club."

•

Rapid steps in the hall, a positive bang on the door, and the man in question burst into the room. His face was dark, despite the beads of perspiration with which it was studded; his collar was a withered wreck, and his clothes were dirtied and without a semblance of crease. His burning eyes swept the two men, and he rushed into speech.

"I don't know how many different kinds of a blamed fool you've been making of yourself tonight, Franklin," he rasped; "because everywhere I turn I hear of something superfine that you've done. But one thing I do know—and that is that my wife came to this hotel. I want to know where she is, and what you've done with her."

Joe stared at his friend without an immediate answer. He seemed temporarily bereft of speech. The muscles of his throat were contracted.

"She—Janice—isn't at home?"

"She's gone, I told you. She was seen to come here."

"I—I—didn't see her. Honest, I don't know where——"

Walt Simmons thrust his way into the conversation.

"But I do, Mr. Caldwell," he announced. "I took the trouble to find out before I came up here. Your wife is spending the night with Miss Maybank, over on Chestnut Street."

Caldwell whirled, his face livid.

"What in thunder do *you* know about this business, young man? Is everybody taking part in my affairs?"

Walt's eyes twinkled merrily.

"I know quite a bit about it," he grinned.

Franklin nodded affirmation.

"You bet your life he does!" he sighed wearily.

"He knows a blamed sight more than I do!"



## XX

### UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

It seemed that Caldwell noticed Walt's presence for the first time. He stared in surprise at Joe Franklin, and then with something akin to panicky bewilderment at the night-clerk.

"You—you do?" he asked inanely.

"Yes, sir. You see, we've had a bit of excitement here in the hotel—Mr. Franklin may explain later—and I had a long talk with Miss Leveridge, and she told me everything."

"Miss Leveridge?" interrogated Caldwell. He paused suddenly and glanced at Joe.

Franklin nodded.

"That's the correct name, John—not Menton. They're not sisters—not even relations. That'll be explained in due time—I hope. Simmons, here, has edged his way to the inner circle, and he just came across with a bird of a suggestion when you stampeded into the room. His idea is to get the

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pair of us, and Janice and Eunice, here in one big confab; the others being Maude Leveridge and himself."

Caldwell's mind was busy in other channels.

"How do you know," he demanded of Walt Simmons, "that my wife is over at the Maybanks'?"

"I was talking to her over the phone."

"Talking to *her*?"

"Yes, I called up to ask about the young lady who was sick when they left here to-night."

"Eunice was upset," explained Joe.

"And it was your idea, Simmons, to bring us all together?"

"Yes, sir. It's Miss Leveridge's idea, too; and it seems that she's the one who has the final answer to all this muddle. She herself doesn't understand it all yet, and we agreed that the only way to sift it out was to get all in a bunch and let each one have his say."

"But I—I don't understand," said Caldwell.

"Neither does any one else," interposed Joe.

"But I imagine you will later. I think the idea's a corker."

"And what's your notion of going about it?" his friend inquired.

"Call up the girls and ask them to come down here, on the promise that everything will be explained. You can drive over for them in your car. You have it here, haven't you?"

"Yes, I've had it all over town. But do you think they'll come? Janice——"

"I hope they will," Franklin replied. "Suppose you call them up and find out. That's all I can suggest. I'm tired of suggesting."

Caldwell turned to the desk telephone and called the Maybanks' number, Tommy working the switchboard in the down-stairs office, and Walt tactfully leaving the room. At length Mrs. Maybank answered, and left to call Janice. And then Joe knew by the expression on Caldwell's face that his wife had answered.

"Janice," said Caldwell softly, "listen, dear—I am down at the Gilmer Hotel—in Joe's room. I've been hunting you all over town—everywhere—worried to death about you. And, Janice, there is a man here—Walter Simmons, the night-clerk—who says he can explain this terrible muddle

if you and Eunice will come down right now to meet him and me and Miss Leveridge and Joe. Yes, Janice—to-night—now. I beg you to come, Janice! It is all a terrible misunderstanding. Give me a chance, won't you? No, I don't understand it myself yet, but they promise that everything will be explained. You *will*? God bless you, sweetheart! I'll drive right over there for you."

John Caldwell crashed the receiver on the hook and whirled to face Joe Franklin. He had undergone a metamorphosis, and his face beamed with delight.

"She's coming, Joe! She's coming! I don't know what the answer is to all this mess, but she says she'll come down—and I'm going over after her, Joe!"

"*She's* coming?" queried Joe with the accent on the singular number.

"She? They!" bubbled Caldwell.

He sped from the room, and down the steps. He passed Walt and Benny Gordon in the lobby, dashed through the front door, and sent his car off with a roar of freedom.

Gordon nodded toward the departing figure of

his militant acquaintance of the Commercial Club.

"Don't tell me, Walt, that there's nothing doing," he insisted. "That man's attitude! Man, there's a story here."

"Story nothing!"

"Well, what about that burglary? Lemme write that up, won't you?"

"No," growled Walt. "You know what I was telling you when that burglary occurred? Well, it was straight—every word of it. You don't want to spill all the beans, do you, you chump?"

"Well, then, tell me this one thing—where was Caldwell beating it to in such a hurry just now?"

Walt gazed at him steadily.

"To meet his wife!"

"Straight goods?"

"Cross my heart! I wouldn't lie to you, Benny."

The reporter sighed with disappointment.

"That let's me out, I guess. I couldn't hardly print what I know. Gee, this newspaper life is just one blamed thing after another. I'll drop in later, Walt; and if there ain't nothing further,

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I reckon you can count on my keeping it out of the paper. G'night!"

"Good night, Benny! You're a good sport, if you are a reporter!"

Benny walked dejectedly into the night, while Walt Simmons relieved Tommy at the service telephone in order to confirm his statement to Benny regarding Caldwell's mission. Franklin gave him the desired information. Then Walt called the bridal chamber, and told Maude Leveridge that she would have company after a bit; and then he chuckled once more as he sat down to wait for the party to arrive.

"It's a scream!" he commented, to no one in particular. "Yes, sir—a regular howling scream!"

A motor throbbed to a standstill outside the door, and the sound of voices came to Walt's alert ears. Then Caldwell entered the lobby with his wife on one arm and Eunice Maybank on the other. Simmons crossed to meet them, and operated the elevator to the second floor. He conducted them to Maude's room, waved them an invitation to enter, and sped away after Joe Franklin.

Franklin was ready and eager, and as the twain walked down-stairs toward the scene of the dénouement, Walt Simmons made a strange request.

"Mr. Franklin," he said, "suppose you let *me* handle this little thing?"

Franklin nodded.

"I'd let anybody handle anything," he assented, "provided I could get out of it. Walt, you're a life-saver!"

They reached Maude's room and entered. Joe felt Miss Leveridge's yellowish eyes fixed upon him in keen scrutiny, and he flushed redly. Suddenly she smiled and nodded to him.

"Sit down, Mr. Franklin—if that's your name," she said, waving him to a chair. "I dope it out that you know all these other folks."

Franklin gazed sheepishly at the floor, and raised his eyes only to steal a covert glance at Eunice Maybank. He saw that she was looking through him instead of at him, and he once again grew crimson about the ears.

"Uhuh!" he grunted. "I know 'em."

Walt Simmons cleared his throat impressively. He alone, of those in the room, was standing, a

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master of ceremonies, as it were, for this Gilmer gathering in the wee, sma' hours. He seemed strangely buoyant and decidedly self-satisfied.

"It seems to have been agreed," he started, "that I should set the ball a-rolling, seeing that I'm wise to some information which you others haven't got. So that we won't be chasing one another around in circles, I may as well explain at the beginning that this whole thing has been a joke."

He paused, his eyes twinkling. There followed a scraping of chairs and an audible indrawing of breaths.

"A joke!" chorused the others.

"A joke," reiterated Walt.

"But," Eunice Maybank said in a very trembly voice, "I—I don't see anything funny in the heart-ache and suffering which has been caused by this—this joke! Somebody with a distorted sense of humor——"

She choked and paused abruptly. Walt rested his eyes upon her.

"Well, that's right, too, Miss Maybank, but then things sometimes carry farther than people



intend; and sometimes it all turns out for the best. I guess I didn't express it just right, either. I guess I should have said that it all *started* as a joke. Of course, I know, and we all know, that it ain't been in the joke class for the past twenty-four hours. Things do get serious that way, sometimes. If you folks was in the hotel business, you'd know it. Now, if you will just listen a bit, I'll start at the beginning and go plumb through to the end, omitting only the details that I don't know."

He drew a long breath, and continued his speech.

"About three weeks ago, for reasons of her own, Miss Maude Leveridge put an ad in a matrimonial paper, along with a description and her photo. She said she wanted to meet a man with money who was looking for a stylish wife. Mr. Franklin here got hold of a copy of that paper—somebody had left it in the lobby—and he and I had quite a laugh over some of the ads. There were bunches of pictures in it, including that of Miss Maude, and that's why, when she came in and registered last night, I was sure I had saw her somewhere

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before. I had seen her face in that paper, but to save my life I couldn't place it. But when Mr. Franklin came in I remembered about it; and I grinned, because I thought I was hep to his game. I began to think that perhaps he had answered that ad for himself.

"Now I'm drawing a conclusion here, and if I'm wrong I want to be corrected. It strikes me that Mr. Franklin—being of a joking nature, as I know, for he's turned this hotel upside down a few times—probably thought it would be a peach of a joke to answer that ad in Mr. Caldwell's name, and——"

Caldwell rose to his feet, his face flaming.

"Joe! Are you the cause of all this miserable mess?"

Franklin nodded without looking up.

"I'm it," he admitted in a half groan. "And there's no use rubbing it in, either. What's done is done. You were right when you said I was a fool about a joke. But look at my side of it. I thought she'd write you, and you'd be puzzled and then come to me, and I'd have the ha-ha on you. I never dreamed that she'd come on here. When

• you told me about it to-day, I—why, it never entered my head that she was the woman whose advertisement I'd answered."

"Wait a minute," cut in Walt quickly. "Maybe I'm butting in, but Mr. Franklin said I could handle this thing, and I'd like to finish my story.

"Mr. Franklin typewrote a letter, signed Mr. Caldwell's name at the bottom, and sent it to Miss Leveridge with an old kodak picture of Mr. Caldwell that he happened to have; and we didn't hear anything more until she turned up last night. She wouldn't have done that, of course, if she'd known Mr. Caldwell was married. She didn't even know him by sight except by that picture—and that wasn't much good. And that explains why she thought Mr. Franklin was Mr. Caldwell when he went to her room to-night; and I guess that's why he went, too. I saw that he was knocked all of a heap when he found out who she was, and that it was his letter had made her come. Then, when he saw that she thought he was Mr. Caldwell he let her go on thinking so, hoping to straighten things out——"

• "But that's what I don't understand," inter-

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rupted John. "Why didn't you explain then, and settle the thing?"

"That's simple as A B C," answered Walt. "He didn't know what kind of a woman Miss Maude was, and he knew that he had to get that letter. If she was minded to make trouble, she could have turned it over to the postal authorities, and they'd have landed Mr. Franklin behind the bars for using the mails to defraud, or whatever you call it. So although I expect he started to help Mr. Caldwell out, he wound up by fighting to save his own bacon."

"And so it was the letter you was after, eh, Mr. Franklin?" interrupted Maude. "Walt and I was trying to dope that part of it out."

Joe nodded guiltily.

"Yes, I was after that letter. I was scared of it. I went out with you this evening thinking maybe you'd let me carry the bag for you, so that I could get my hands on it."

Miss Leveridge giggled.

"I see now! It's plain as day."

"And there you are," added Walt. "It all happened as the result of an innocent joke. Of

course, it's no joking matter to trifle with a woman's affections, but Miss Maude was no more to Mr. Franklin than just a picture in a paper—not a real flesh-and-blood woman. Then, as I understand it, Miss Maude came to Caldwell, and went to see the man she thought she was going to marry, providing she liked his looks; but instead of seeing him she saw Mrs. Caldwell, and thought she was Mr. Caldwell's sister, because of the Jap's way of talking American. And then I reckon Mrs. Caldwell thought all sorts of things—judging by what Miss Maude tells me—and that caused more trouble. So, you see, there's nothing to it at all; and it seems to me that this is the time for a grand getting together. That's my advice, anyway."

Caldwell turned to his wife.

"Shall we take that advice, Janice?" he asked simply. "Simmons has told the truth, so far as I know it. As for Miss Leveridge, I have never known her, or seen her, or heard of her, before a few minutes ago, when I entered this room. Shall we take Simmons' advice, Janice? What do you say?"

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The eyes of husband and wife met, and she nodded.

"Yes, John—we—we'll take it," she said simply.

Then Eunice spoke, and there was a strange tremor in her voice.

"But, Joe, how could you have done it? Think what might have happened if things hadn't been explained—or if Miss Leveridge hadn't turned out the good-hearted woman she is."

Franklin nodded like a youngster caught in mischief.

"I know it. Blame me all you like for the beginning of the mess, but not for the end. Walt has hit the nail on the head. When John came to me I thought he was in trouble, and, of course, being his friend, I was willing to do anything in the world to help him out. Then I found that I was the one who was in danger, and I just simply had to fight as hard as I could to save myself. And—and say, you won't send me—that thing—to-morrow, will you, Eunice? What you told Harold to tell me you were going to return? Please!" His eyes pleaded mutely,

"If you'll promise that such a thing will never happen again," she answered, her eyes softening.

Franklin raised his right hand toward the ceiling in a solemn avowal. "Never again!" he promised. "Now am I forgiven?"

Her bright smile answered him.

"And now," broke in John Caldwell, "it seems that there is something due Miss Leveridge——"

"That's my business!" cut in Walt briefly.

"Your business?"

"Yes," said Walt decisively. He crossed one leg over the other and leaned against the table, allowing his eyes to rest affectionately on the cause of all the trouble. "Miss Leveridge came here after a husband, and she's sort of decided that she likes Caldwell—the *town*, I mean," he amended hastily. "So she—well, she and I—you know—we——"

He flushed redly. The others noticed that Miss Leveridge's eyes were focused on the carpet and that she, too, was blushing.

"What?" gasped Joe. "You and Miss Leveridge are to——"

"To be married!" flashed Walt proudly.

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"No?"

"Yes—on the condition"—his eyes twinkled —"that I shave my mustache. You see, she's experienced in hotel work, and I have a couple of thousand saved; and the other day Gilmer was telling me that he'd like me to buy in a partnership with him on the hotel. So—well, there y'are!"

"It—it's *splendid!*" said Janice, with genuine sympathy.

Miss Leveridge rose and straightened the runner on the dresser beside which she had been sitting.

"Yep—it's pretty good. You know last night, when Walt sticks me up here in the bridal chamber, I says to myself that if I ever got hold of a place like this I'd make a heap of changes. And you can just bet I will!"

Benny Gordon lounged into the Gilmer lobby and eyed Walt Simmons, who was smoking serenely behind the desk.

"Any news?" he asked perfunctorily. "We go to press in an hour and a half."



"The Caldwell affair is all straightened up. Nothing to write on that. Everybody happy."

"Just my luck," said Gordon gloomily. "Thought I was gonna get a real story. Nothing else stirring, is there?"

"No," Walt yawned; "but say, Benny, if you're real hard up for news, you might announce that Miss Maude Leveridge is to marry me to-morrow."

*"Wha-a-at?"*

"Straight. And that I am to buy a partnership in the Gilmer, and that it will be made the most up-to-date hotel in the State. Get that?"

"Get it?" Benny was staring open-mouthed. "Get it? Well, I should say I do. I sure do get it, you old son of a gun! Congratulations!"

THE END

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