# Mr. Opp

by Alice Hegan Rice

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MR. OPP ***

[p i] “He read impressively”

## [p ii] MR. OPP

BY ALICE HEGAN RICE

AUTHOR OF “MRS. WIGGS OF THE CABBAGE PATCH,” “LOVEY MARY,” “SANDY,” ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY LEON GUIPON

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## [p3] MR. OPP

### I

“I hope your passenger hasn’t missed his train,” observed the ferryman to Mr. Jimmy Fallows, who sat on the river bank with the painter of his rickety little naphtha launch held loosely in his hand.

“Mr. Opp?” said Jimmy. “I bet he did. If there is one person in the world that’s got a talent for missing things, it’s Mr. Opp. I never seen him that he hadn’t just missed gettin’ a thousand dollar job, or inventin’ a patent, or bein’ hurt when he had took out a accident policy. If he did ketch a train, like enough it was goin’ the wrong way.”

[p4] Jimmy had been waiting since nine in the morning, and it was now well past noon. He was a placid gentleman of curvilinear type, short of limb and large of girth.

His trousers, of that morose hue termed by the country people “plum,” reached to his armpits, and his hat, large and felt and weather-beaten, was only prevented from eclipsing his head by the stubborn resistance of two small, knob-like ears.

“Mr. Opp ain’t been back to the Cove for a long while, has he?” asked the ferryman, whose intellectual life depended solely upon the crumbs of information scattered by chance passers-by.

“Goin’ on two years,” said Mr. Fallows. “Reckon he’s been so busy formin’ trusts and buyin’ out railways and promotin’ things generally that he ain’t had any time to come back home. It’s his step-pa’s funeral that’s bringin’ him now. The only time city folks seem to want to see their kin folks in the country is when they are dead.”

“Ain’t that him a-comin’ down the [p5] bank?” asked the ferryman, shading his eyes with his hands.

Mr. Fallows, with some difficulty, got to his feet.

“Yes, that’s him all right. Hustlin’ to beat the band. Wonder if he takes me for a street car.”

Coming with important stride down the wharf, and whistling as he came, was a small man of about thirty-five. In one hand he carried a large suit-case, and in the other a new and shining grip. On both were painted, in letters designed to be seen, “D. Webster Opp, Kentucky.”

In fact, everything about him was evidently designed to be seen. His new suit of insistent plaid, his magnificent tie sagging with the weight of a colossal scarf-pin, his brown hat, his new tan shoes, all demanded individual and instant attention.

The only insignificant thing about Mr. Opp was himself. His slight, undeveloped body seemed to be in a chronic state of apology for failing properly to set off the glorious raiment wherewith it was [p6] clothed. His pock-marked face, wide at the temples, sloped to a small, pointed chin, which, in turn, sloped precipitously into a long, thin neck. It was Mr. Opp’s eyes, however, that one saw first, for they were

singularly vivid, with an expression that made strangers sometimes pause in the street to ask him if he had spoken to them. Small, pale, and red of rim, they nevertheless held the look of intense hunger—hunger for the hope or the happiness of the passing moment.

As he came bustling down to the water's-edge he held out a friendly hand to Jimmy Fallows.

"How are you, Jimmy?" he said in a voice freighted with importance. "Hope I haven't kept you waiting long. Several matters of business come up at the last and final moment, and I missed the morning train."

Jimmy, who was pouring gasolene into a tank in the launch, treated the ferryman to a prodigious wink.

"Oh, not more'n four or five hour," he said, casting side glances of mingled [p7] scorn and admiration at Mr. Opp's attire. "It is a good thing it was the funeral you was tryin' to get to instid of the death-bed."

"Oh, that reminds me," said Mr. Opp, suddenly exchanging his air of cheerfulness for one of becoming gravity—"what time is the funeral obsequies going to take place?"

"Whenever we git there," said Jimmy, pushing off the launch and waving his hand to the ferryman. "You're one of the chief mourners, and I'm the undertaker; there ain't much danger in us gettin' left."

Mr. Opp deposited his baggage carefully on the seat, and spread his coat across the new grip to keep it from getting splashed.

"How long was Mr. Moore sick?" he asked, fanning himself with his hat.

"Well," said Jimmy, "he was in a dangerous and critical condition for about twenty-one years, accordin' to his own account. I been seein' him durin' that time on a average of four times a [p8] day, and last night when I seen him in his coffin it

was the first time the old gentleman failed to ask me to give him a drink on account of his poor health."

"Is Ben there?" asked Mr. Opp, studying a time-table, and making a note in his memorandum-book.

"Your brother Ben? Yes; he come this mornin' just before I left. He was cussin' considerable because you wasn't there, so's they could go on and git through. He wants to start back to Missouri to-night."

"Is he out at the house?"

"No; he's at Your Hotel."

Mr. Opp looked up in surprise, and Jimmy chuckled.

"That there's the name of my new hotel. Started up sence you went away. Me and old man Tucker been running boardin'-houses side by side all these years. What did he do last summer but go out and git him a sign as big as the side of the house, and git Nick Fenny to paint 'Our Hotel' on it; then he put it up right across the sidewalk, from the [p9] gate clean out to the road. I didn't say nothin', but let the boys keep on a-kiddin' me till the next day; then I got me a sign jus' like his, with 'Your Hotel' on it, and put it up crost my sidewalk. He'd give a pretty if they was both down now; but he won't take his down while mine is up, and I ain't got no notion of taking it down."

"Yes," said Mr. Opp, absently, for his mind was still on the time-table; "I see that there's an accommodation that departs out of Coreyville in the neighborhood of noon to-morrow. It's a little unconvenient, I'm afraid, but do you think you could get me back in time to take it?"

"Why, what's yer hurry?" asked Jimmy, steering for mid-stream. "I thought you'd come to visit a spell, with all them bags and things."

Mr. Opp carelessly tossed back the sleeve of the coat, to display more fully the name

on the suit-case. “Them’s drummers’ samples,” he said almost reverently—“the finest line of shoes that [p10] have ever been put out by any house in the United States, bar none.”

“Why, I thought you was in the insurance business,” said Jimmy.

“Oh, no; that was last year, just previous to my reporting on a newspaper. This”—and Mr. Opp tried to spread out his hands, but was slightly deterred by the size of his cuffs—“this is the chance I been looking for all my life. It takes brains and a’ educated nerve, and a knowledge of the world. I ought to create considerable capital in the next few years. And just as soon as I do”—and Mr. Opp leaned earnestly toward Jimmy, and tapped one finger upon the palm of his other hand—“just as soon as I do, I intend to buy up all the land lying between Turtle Creek and the river. There’s enough oil under that there ground to ca’m the troubled waters of the Pacific Ocean. You remember old Mr. Beeker? Well, he told me, ten years ago, that he bored a well for brine over there, and it got so full of black petroleum he had to abandon it. [p11] Now, I’m calculating on forming a stock company,—you and Mr. Tucker, I and old man Hager, and one or two others,—and buying up that ground. Then we’ll sink a test well, get up a derrick and a’ engine, and have the thing running in no time. The main thing is a competent manager. You know I’m thinking seriously of taking it myself? It’s too big a proposition to run any risks with.”

“Here, say, wait a minute; how long have you had this here shoe job?” Jimmy caught madly at the first fact in sight to keep him from being swept away by the flood of Mr. Opp’s oily possibilities.

“I taken it last week,” said Mr. Opp; “had to go all the way to Chicago to get my instructions, and to get fitted out. My territory is a specially important one; four counties, all round Chicago.”

“I was in Chicago oncet,” said Jimmy, his eyes brightening at the memory. “By

golly! if the world is as big in every direction as it is in that, she's a whopper!"

[p12] The wind, freshening as they got under way, loosened the canvas overhead, and Mr. Opp rose to buckle it into place. As he half knelt in the bow of the boat, he lifted his face to the cool breeze, and took a deep breath of satisfaction. The prosaic river from Coreyville to the Cove was the highway he knew best in the world. Under the summer sunshine the yellow waters lost their sullen hue, and reflected patches of vivid red and white from the cottages and barns that dotted the distant shore.

"I don't consider there's any sceneries in the country that'll even begin to compare with these here," Mr. Opp announced, out of the depths of his wide experience. "Just look at the sunshine pouring forth around the point of the island. It spills through the trees and leaks out over the water just like quicksilver. Now, that's a good thought! It's perfectly astounding, you might say surprising, how easy thoughts come to me. I ought to been a writer; lots of folks have said so. Why, there ain't a [p13] day of my life that I don't get a poem in my head."

"Shucks!" observed Jimmy Fallows. "I'd as lief read figgers on a tow-boat as to read poetry. Old man Gusty used to write poetry, but he couldn't get nobody to print it, so he decided to start a newspaper at the Cove and chuck it full of his own poems. He bought a whole printin' outfit, and set it up in Pete Aker's old carpenter shop out there at the edge of town, opposite his home. But 'fore he got his paper started he up and died. Yes, sir; and the only one of his poems that he ever did git in print was the one his wife had cut on his tombstone."

Mr. Opp was not listening. With his head bared and his lips parted he was indulging in his principal weakness. For Mr. Opp, it must be confessed, was given to violent intoxication, not from an extraneous source, but from too liberal draughts of his own imagination. In extenuation, the claims of genius might be urged, for a genius he unquestionably [p14] was in that he created something out of nothing. Out of an abnormal childhood, a lonely boyhood, and a failure-haunted manhood, he had

managed to achieve an absorbing career. Each successive enterprise had loomed upon his horizon big with possibilities, and before it sank to oblivion, another scheme, portentous, significant, had filled its place. Life was a succession of crises, and through them he saw himself moving, now a shrewd merchant, now a professional man, again an author of note, but oftenest of all a promoter of great enterprises, a financier, and man of affairs.

While he was thus mentally engaged in drilling oil-wells, composing poetry, and selling shoes, Jimmy Fallows was contemplating with fascinated wonder an object that floated from his coat pocket. From a brown-paper parcel, imperfectly wrapped, depended a curl of golden hair, and it bobbed about in the breeze in a manner that reduced Mr. Fallows to a state of abject curiosity.

So intent was Jimmy upon his investigation [p15] that he failed to hold his course, and the launch swung around the end of the island with such a sudden jerk that Mr. Opp took an unexpected seat.

As he did so, his hand touched the paper parcel in his pocket, and realizing that it was untied, he hastily endeavored, by a series of surreptitious manœuvers, to conceal what it contained. Feeling the quizzical eye of his shipmate full upon him, he assumed an air of studied indifference, and stoically ignored the subterranean chuckles and knowing winks in which Mr. Fallows indulged.

Presently, when the situation had become poignant, Mr. Opp observed that he supposed the funeral would take place from the church.

“I reckon so,” said Jimmy, reluctantly answering to the call of the conversational rudder. “I told the boys to have a hack there for you and Mr. Ben and Miss Kippy.”

“I don’t think my sister will be there,” said Mr. Opp, with dignity; “she seldom or never leaves the house.”

[p16] “Reckon Mr. Ben will have to take keer of her now,” said Jimmy; “she surely will miss her pa. He never done a lick of work since I knowed him, but he was a

nice, quiet old fellow, and he certainly was good to pore Miss Kippy."

"Mr. Moore was a gentleman," said Mr. Opp, and he sighed.

"Ain't she got any kin on his side? No folks except you two half-brothers?"

"That's all," said Mr. Opp; "just I and Ben."

"Gee! that's kind of tough on you all, ain't it?"

But the sympathy was untimely, for Mr. Opp's dignity had been touched in a sensitive place.

"Our sister will be well provided for," he said, and the conversation suffered a relapse.

Mr. Opp went back to his time-tables and his new note-book, and for the rest of the trip Jimmy devoted himself to his wheel, with occasional ocular excursions in the direction of Mr. Opp's coat pocket.

## [p17] II

Lying in the crook of the river's elbow, with the nearest railroad eighteen miles away, Cove City, familiarly known as the Cove, rested serenely undisturbed by the progress of the world. Once a day, at any time between sundown and midnight, it was roused from its drowsiness by the arrival of the mail-boat, and, shaking itself into temporary wakefulness, sat up and rubbed its eyes. This animation was, however, of short duration, for before the packet had whistled for the next landing, the Cove had once more settled back into slumber.

Main Street began with a shabby, unpainted school-house, and following dramatic sequence, ended abruptly in the graveyard. Two cross-streets, which had started out with laudable ideas of [p18] independence, lost courage at Main Street and sought strength in union; but the experiment was not successful, and a cow-path was the result. The only semblance of frivolity about the town was a few straggling cottages

on stilts of varying height as they approached the river; for they seemed ever in the act of holding up their skirts preparatory to wading forth into the water.

On this particular summer afternoon Cove City was less out of crimp than usual. The gathering of loafers that generally decorated the empty boxes piled along the sidewalk was missing. The old vehicles and weary-looking mules which ordinarily formed an irregular fringe along the hitching rail were conspicuously absent. A subdued excitement was in the air, and at the slightest noise feminine heads appeared at windows, and masculine figures appeared in doorways, and comments were exchanged in low tones from one side of the street to the other. For the loss of a citizen, even a poor one, disturbs the [p19] surface of affairs, and when the event brings two relatives from a distance, the ripples of excitement increase perceptibly.

Mr. Moore had been a citizen-in-law, as it were, and had never been considered in any other light than poor Mrs. Opp's widower. Mrs. Opp's poor widower might have been a truer way of stating it, but even a town has its parental weaknesses.

For two generations the Opp family had been a source of mystery and romance to the Cove. It stood apart, like the house that held it, poor and shabby, but bearing a baffling atmosphere of gentility, of superiority, and of reserve.

Old women recalled strange tales of the time when Mrs. Opp had come to the Cove as a bride, and how she refused to meet any of the townspeople, and lived alone in the old house on the river-bank, watching from hour to hour for the wild young husband who clerked on one of the river steamers. They told how she grew thin and white with waiting, and how, [p20] when her two boys were small, she made them stand beside her for hours at a time, watching the river and listening for the whistle of his boat. Then the story went that the gay young husband stopped coming altogether, and still she watched and waited, never allowing the boys out of her sight, refusing to send them to school, or to let them play with other children. By and by word was brought that her husband had been killed in a quarrel over cards,

and little Mrs. Opp, having nothing now to watch for and to wait for, suddenly became strangely changed.

Old Aunt Tish, the negro servant, was the only person who ever crossed the threshold, and she told of a strange life that went on behind the closely curtained windows, where the sunlight was never allowed to enter, and lamps burned all day long.

“Yas, ’m,” she used to say in answer to curious questionings; “hit’s jes like play-actin’ all de time. The Missis dress herself up, an’ ’tend like she’s a queen [p21] or a duke or somethin’, an’ dat little D. he jes acts out all dem fool things she tells him to, an’ he ain’t never bein’ hisself at all, but jes somebody big and mighty and grand-like.”

When the boys were half-grown, a stranger appeared in the Cove, a dapper little man of about fifty in a shabby frock-coat and a shabbier high hat, kind of face and gentle of voice, but with the dignity of conscious superiority. The day of his arrival he called upon Mrs. Opp; the second day he took a preacher with him and married her. Whatever old romance had led to this climax could only be dimly guessed at by the curious townspeople.

For two years Mr. Moore fought for the mind of his old sweetheart as he had long ago fought for her heart. He opened the house to the sunshine, and coaxed the little lady back into the world she had forgotten. The boys were sent to school, the old games and fancies were forbidden. Gradually the color returned to her cheeks, and the light to her eyes.

Then little Kippy was born, and [p22] happiness such as seldom comes to one who has tasted the dregs of life came to the frail little woman in the big four-poster bed. For ten days she held the baby fingers to her heart, and watched the little blossom of a maid unfold.

But one black night, when the rain beat against the panes, and the moan of the river

sounded in her ears, she suddenly sat up in bed: she had heard the whistle of his boat! Full of dumb terror she crept to the window, and with her face pressed against the glass she waited and watched. The present was swallowed up in the past. She was once more alone, unloved, afraid. Stealthily snatching a cloak, she crept down into the garden, feeling her way through the sodden grass, and the jimpson weed which the rain had beaten down.

And ever since, when children pass the house on their way to school, they peep through the broken fence rails, and point out to one another, in awed tones, the tree under which Miss Kippy's mother killed herself. Then they look half-fearfully [p23] at the windows in the hope of catching a glimpse of Miss Kippy herself.

For Kippy had had a long illness in her thirteenth year which left her with the face and mind of a little child, and kindly, shabby Mr. Moore, having made the supreme effort of his life, from this time on ceased to struggle against the weakness that for half a lifetime had beset him, and sought oblivion in innocuous but perpetual libations. The one duty which he recognized was the care of his invalid daughter.

As soon as they were old enough, the boys launched their small craft and set forth to seek their fortunes. Ben, with no cargo on board but his own desires, went west and found a snug and comfortable harbor, while D. Webster, the hope of his mother and the pride of the town, was at thirty-five still putting out to sea, with all sail set, only to find himself again and again aground on the sandbars of the old familiar Cove.

## [p24] III

Jimmy Fallows, being the boastful possessor of the fleetest horse in town, was the first to return from the funeral. Extricating himself with some difficulty from the narrow-seated buggy, he held out his hand to Mrs. Fallows. But that imposing lady, evidently offended with her jovial lord, refused his proffered aid, and clambered out over the wheel on the other side.

Mrs. Fallows, whose architectural effects were strictly perpendicular, cast a perpetual shadow of disapproval over the life partner whom it had pleased Providence to bestow upon her. Jimmy was a born satirist; he knew things are not what they seem, and he wickedly rejoiced thereat. To his literal, [p25] pious-minded wife he at times seemed the incarnation of wickedness.

Sweeping with dignity beneath the arching sign of Your Hotel, she took her seat upon the porch, and, disposing her sable robes about her, folded her mitted hands, and waited to see the people return from the funeral.

Jimmy, with the uncertain expression of one who is ready to apologize, but cannot remember the offense, hovered about uneasily, casting tempting bits of conversational bait into the silence, but failing to attract so much as a nibble of attention.

“Miss Jemima Fenny was over to the funeral from Birdtown. Miss Jim is one of ’em, ain’t she?”

There was no response.

“Had her brother Nick with her. He’s just gettin’ over typhoid fever; looks about the size and color of a slate pencil. I bet, in spite of Miss Jim’s fine clothes, they ain’t had a square meal for a month. That’s because she kept him at school so long when he orter been at work. He did [p26] git a job in a newspaper office over at Coreyville not long ’fore he was took sick. They tell me he’s as slick as a onion about newspaper work.”

Continued silence; but Jimmy boldly cast another fly:

“Last funeral we had was Mrs. Tucker’s, wasn’t it? Old man Tucker was there to-day. Crape band on his hat is climbin’ up; it’ll be at high mast ag’in soon.”

Dense, nerve-racking silence; but Jimmy made one more effort:

“The Opps are coming back here tonight to talk things over before Ben goes on to

Missouri. He counts on ketchin' the night boat. It won't give him much time, will it?"

But Mrs. Fallows, unrelaxed, stared fixedly before her; she had taken refuge in that most trying of all rejoinders, silence, and the fallible Jimmy, who waxed strong and prospered upon abuse, drooped and languished under this new and cruel form of punishment.

It was not until a buggy stopped at the [p27] door, and the Opp brothers descended, that the tension was in any way relieved.

Jimmy greeted them with the joy of an Arctic explorer welcoming a relief party.

"Come right on in here, in the office," he cried hospitably; "your talkin' won't bother me a speck."

But Ben abruptly expressed his desire for more private quarters, and led the way up-stairs.

The low-ceiled room into which he ushered D. Webster was of such a depressing drab that even the green and red bed-quilt failed to disperse the gloom. The sole decoration, classic in its severity, was a large advertisement for a business college, whereon an elk's head grew out of a bow of ribbon, the horns branching and rebranching into a forest of curves and flourishes.

The elder Opp took his seat by the window, and drummed with impatient fingers on the sill. He was small, like his brother, but of a compact, sturdy build. His chin, instead of dwindling to a point, was square and stubborn, and his eyes [p28] looked straight ahead at the thing he wanted, and neither saw nor cared for what lay outside. He had been trying ever since leaving the cemetery to bring the conversation down to practical matters, but D. Webster, seizing the first opportunity of impressing himself upon his next of kin, had persisted in indulging in airy and time-destroying flights of fancy.

The truth is that our Mr. Opp was not happy. In his secret heart he felt a bit

apologetic before the material success of his elder brother. Hence it was necessary to talk a great deal and to set forth in detail the very important business enterprises upon which he was about to embark.

Presently Ben Opp looked at his watch.

“See here,” he interrupted, “that boat may be along at any time. We’d better come to some decision about the estate.”

D. Webster ran his fingers through his hair, which stood in valiant defense of the small bald spot behind it.

“Yes, yes,” he said; “business is [p29] business. I’ll have to be off myself the very first thing in the morning. This funeral couldn’t have come at a more unfortunate time for me. You see, my special territory—”

But Ben saw the danger of another bolt, and checked him:

“How much do you think the old house is worth?”

D. Webster drew forth his shiny note-book and pencil and made elaborate calculations.

“I should say,” he said, as one financier to another, “that including of the house and land and contents of same, it would amount to the whole sum total of about two thousand dollars.”

“That is about what I figured,” said Ben; “now, how much money is in the bank?”

D. Webster produced a formidable packet of letters and papers from his inside pocket and, after some searching, succeeded in finding a statement, which set forth the fact that the Ripper County Bank held in trust one thousand dollars, [p30] to be divided between the children of Mary Opp Moore at the death of her husband, Curtis V. Moore.

“One thousand dollars!” said Ben, looking blankly at his brother, “Why, for heaven’s sake, what have Mr. Moore and Kippy been living on all these years?”

D. Webster moved uneasily in his chair. “Oh, they’ve managed to get along first rate,” he said evasively.

His brother looked at him narrowly. “On the interest of a thousand dollars?” He leaned forward, and his face hardened: “See here, have you been putting up cash all this time for that old codger to loaf on? Is that why you have never gotten ahead?”

D. Webster, with hands in his pockets and his feet stretched in front of him, was blinking in furious embarrassment at the large-eyed elk overhead.

“To think,” went on Ben, his slow wrath rising, “of your staying here in Kentucky all these years and handing out what you made to that old sponger. [p31] I cut loose and made a neat little sum, married, and settled down. And what have you done? Where have you gotten? Anybody that would let himself be imposed upon like that deserves to fail. Now what do you propose to do about this money?”

Mr. Opp did not propose to do anything. The affront offered his business sagacity was of such a nature that it demanded all his attention. He composed various denunciatory answers with which to annihilate his brother. He hesitated between two courses, whether he should hurl himself upon him in righteous indignation and demand physical satisfaction, or whether he should rise in a calm and manly attitude and wither him with blighting sarcasm. And while the decision was pending, he still sat with his hands in his pockets, and his feet stretched forth, and blinked indignantly at the ornate elk.

“The estate,” continued Ben, contempt still in his face, “amounts at most to three thousand dollars, after the house [p32] is sold. Part of this, of course, will go to the maintenance of Kippy.”

At mention of her name, Mr. Opp’s gaze dropped abruptly to his brother’s face.

“What about Kippy? She’s going to live with you, ain’t she?” he asked anxiously.

Ben Opp shook his head emphatically. “She certainly is not. I haven’t the slightest idea of burdening myself and family with that feeble-minded girl.”

“But see here,” said Mr. Opp, his anger vanishing in the face of this new complication, “you don’t know Kippy; she’s just similar to a little child, quiet and gentle-like. Never give anybody any trouble in her life. Just plays with her dolls and sings to herself all day.”

“Exactly,” said Ben; “twenty-five years old and still playing with dolls. I saw her yesterday, dressed up in all sorts of foolish toggery, talking to her hands, and laughing. Aunt Tish humors her, and her father humored her, but I’m not going to. I feel sorry for her [p33] all right, but I am not going to take her home with me.”

D. Webster nervously twisted the large seal ring which he wore on his forefinger. “Then what do you mean,” he said hesitatingly—“what do you want to do about it?”

“Why, send her to an asylum, of course. That’s where she ought to have been all these years.”

Mr. Opp, sitting upon the small of his back, with one leg wrapped casually about the leg of the chair, stared at him for a moment in consternation, then, gathering himself together, rose and for the first time since we have met him seemed completely to fill his checked ready-made suit.

“Send Kippy to a lunatic asylum!” he said in tones so indignant that they made his chin tremble. “You will do nothing whatever of the kind! Why, all she’s ever had in the world was her pa and Aunt Tish and her home; now he’s gone, you ain’t wanting to take the others away from her too, are you?”

[p34] “Well, who is going to take care of her?” demanded Ben angrily.

“I am,” announced D. Webster, striking as fine an attitude as ever his illustrious predecessor struck; “you take the money that’s in the bank, and leave me the house and Kippy. That’ll be her share and mine. I can take care of her; I don’t ask favors of nobody. Suppose I do lose my job; I’ll get me another. There’s a dozen ways I can make a living. There ain’t a man in the State that’s got more resources than me. I got plans laid now that’ll revolutionize—”

“Yes,” said Ben, quietly, “you always could do great things.”

D. Webster’s egotism, inflated to the utmost, burst at this prick, and he suddenly collapsed. Dropping limply into the chair by the table, he held his hand over his mouth to hide his agitation.

“There’s—there’s one thing,” he began, swallowing violently, and winking after each word, “that I—I can’t [p35] do—and that’s to leave a—sister—to die—among strangers.”

And then, to his mortification, his head went unexpectedly down upon his arms, and a flood of tears bedimmed the radiance of his twenty-five-cent four-in-hand.

From far down the river came the whistle of the boat, and, in the room below, Jimmy Fallows removed a reluctant ear from the stove-pipe hole.

“Melindy,” he said confidentially, entirely forgetting the late frost, “I never see anybody in the world that stood as good a show of gittin’ the fool prize as that there D. Opp.”

## [p36] IV

The old Opp House stood high on the river-bank and gazed lonesomely out into the summer night. It was a shabby, down-at-heel, dejected-looking place, with one side showing faint lights, above and below, but the other side so nailed up and empty and useless that it gave the place the appearance of being paralyzed down one side and of having scarcely enough vitality left to sustain life in the other.

To make matters worse, an old hound howled dismally on the door-step, only stopping occasionally to paw at the iron latch and to whimper for the master whose unsteady footsteps he had followed for thirteen years.

In the front room a shaded lamp, [p37] turned low, threw a circle of light on the table and floor, leaving the corners full of vague, uncertain shadows. From the wide,

black fireplace a pair of rusty and battered andirons held out empty arms, and on the high stone shelf above the opening, flanked on each side by a stuffed owl, was a tall, square-faced clock, with the hour-hand missing. The minute-hand still went on its useless round, and behind it, on the face of the clock, a tiny schooner with all sail set rocked with the swinging of the pendulum.

The loud ticking of the clock, and the lamentations of the hound without, were not the only sounds that disturbed the night. Before the empty fireplace, in a high-backed, cane-bottomed chair, slept an old negress, with head bowed, moaning and muttering as she slept. She was bent and ashen with age, and her brown skin sagged in long wrinkles from her face and hands. On her forehead, reaching from brow to faded turban, was a hideous testimony to some ancient conflict. A large, irregular hole, over which [p38] the flesh had grown, pulsed as sentiently and imperatively as a naked, living heart.

A shutter slammed sharply somewhere in the house above, and something stirred fearfully in the shadow of the room. It was a small figure that crouched against the wall, listening and watching with the furtive terror of a newly captured coyote—the slight figure of a woman dressed as a child, with short gingham dress, and heelless slippers, and a bright ribbon holding back the limp, flaxen hair from her strange, pinched face.

Again and again her wide, frightened eyes sought the steps leading to the room above, and sometimes she would lean forward and whisper in agonized expectancy, “Daddy?” Then when no answer came, she would shudder back against the wall, cold and shaking and full of dumb terrors.

Suddenly the hound’s howling changed to a sharp bark, and the old negress stirred and stretched herself.

“What ails dat air dog?” she [p39] mumbled, going to the window, and shading her eyes with her hand. “You’d ’low to hear him tell it he done heared old master

coming up de road."

That somebody was coming was evident from the continued excitement of the hound, and when the gate slammed and a man's voice sounded in the darkness, Aunt Tish opened the door, throwing a long, dim patch of light out across the narrow porch and over the big, round stepping-stones beyond.

Into the light came Mr. Opp, staggering under the load of his baggage, his coat over his arm, his collar off, thoroughly spent with the events of the day.

"Lord 'a' mercy!" said Aunt Tish, "if hit ain't Mr. D.! I done give you up long ago. I certainly is glad you come. Miss Kippy's jes carrying on like ever'thing. She ain't been to baid for two nights, an' I can't do nothin' 't all wif her."

Mr. Opp deposited his things in a corner, and, tired as he was, assumed an air of authority. It was evident that a man [p40] was needed, a person of firmness, of decision.

"I'll see that she goes to bed at once," he said resolutely. "Where is she at?"

"She's behind de door," said Aunt Tish; "she's be'n so skeered ever sence her paw died I can't do nothin' wif her."

"Kippy," said Mr. Opp, sternly, "come out here this minute."

But there was no response. Going to the corner where his coat lay, he took from the pocket a brown-paper parcel.

"Say, Kippy," he said in a greatly mollified tone, "I wish you would come on out here and see me. You remember brother D., don't you? You ought to see what I brought you all the way from the city. It's got blue eyes."

At this the small, grotesque figure, distrustful, suspicious, ready to take flight at a word, ventured slowly forth. So slight she was, and so frail, and so softly she moved, it was almost as if the wind blew her toward him. Every thought that came into her brain was instantly reflected in her hypersensitive face, and [p41] as she stood

before him nervously plucking her fingers, fear and joy struggled for supremacy. Suddenly with a low cry she snatched the doll from him and clasped it to her heart.

Meanwhile Aunt Tish had spread a cloth on the table and set forth some cold corn dodger, a pitcher of foaming butter-milk, and a plate of cold corned beef. The milk was in a battered pewter pitcher, but the dish that held the corn bread was of heavy silver, with intricate chasings about the rim.

Mr. Opp, with his head propped on his hand, ate wearily. He had been up since four o'clock that morning, and to-morrow he must be up at daybreak if he was to keep his engagements to supply the dealers with the greatest line of shoes ever put upon the market. Between now and then he must decide many things: Kippy must be planned for, the house gone over, and arrangements made for the future. Being behind the scenes, as it were, and having no spectator to impress, he allowed himself to sink into an [p42] attitude of extreme dejection. And Mr. Opp, shorn of the dignity of his heavily padded coat, and his imposing collar and tie, and with even his pompadour limp upon his forehead, failed entirely to give a good imitation of himself.

As he sat thus, with one hand hanging limply over the back of the chair, he felt something touch it softly, dumbly, as a dog might. Looking down, he discovered Miss Kippy sitting on the floor, close behind him, watching him with furtive eyes. In one arm she cradled the new doll, and in the other she held his coat.

Mr. Opp patted her cheek: "Whatever are you doing with my coat?" he asked.

Miss Kippy held it behind her, and nodded her head wisely: "Keeping it so you can't go away," she whispered. "I'll hold it tight all night. To-morrow I'll hide it."

"But I'm a business man," said Mr. Opp, unconsciously straightening his shoulders. "A great deal of responsibility depends on me. I've got to be off [p43] early in the morning; but I'm coming back to see you real often—every now and then."

Miss Kippy's whole attitude changed. She caught his hand and clung to it, and the

terror came back to her eyes.

“You mustn’t go,” she whispered, her body quivering with excitement. “It’ll get me if you do. Daddy kept It away, and you can keep It away; but Aunt Tish can’t: she’s afraid of It, too! She goes to sleep, and then It reaches at me through the window. It comes down the chimney, there—where you see the brick’s loose. Don’t leave me, D. Hush, don’t you hear It?”

Her voice had risen to hysteria, and she clung to him, cold and shaken by the fear that possessed her.

Mr. Opp put a quieting arm about her. “Why, see here, Kippy,” he said, “didn’t you know It was afraid of me? Look how strong I am! I could kill It with my little finger.”

“Could you?” asked Miss Kippy, fearfully.

[p44] “Yes, indeed,” said Mr. Opp. “Don’t you ever be scared of anything whatsoever when Brother D.’s round. I’m going to take care of you from now on.”

“This me is bad,” announced Miss Kippy; “the other me is good. Her name is Oxety; she has one blue eye and one brown.”

“Well, Oxety must go to bed now,” said Mr. Opp; “it must be getting awful late.”

But Miss Kippy shook her head. “You might go ’way,” she said.

Finding that he could not persuade her, Mr. Opp resorted to strategy: “I’ll tell you what let’s me and you do. Let’s put your slippers on your hands.”

This proposition met with instant approval. It appealed to Miss Kippy as a brilliant suggestion. She assisted in unbuttoning the single straps and watched with glee as they were fastened about her wrists.

[p45] “‘Don’t leave me’”

“Now,” said Mr. Opp, with assumed enthusiasm, “we’ll make the slippers [p47] walk you up-stairs, and after Aunt Tish undresses you, they shall walk you to bed.

Won't that be fun?"

Miss Kippy's fancy was so tickled by this suggestion that she put it into practice at once, and went gaily forth up the steps on all fours. At the turn she stopped, and looked at him wistfully:

"You'll come up before I go to sleep?" she begged; "Daddy did."

Half an hour later Aunt Tish came down the narrow stairway: "She done gone to baid now, laughin' an' happy ag'in," she said; "she never did have dem spells when her paw was round, an' sometimes dat chile jes as clear in her mind as you an' me is."

"What is it she's afraid of?" asked Mr. Opp.

Aunt Tish leaned toward him across the table, and the light of the lamp fell full upon her black, bead-like eyes, and her sunken jaws, and on the great palpitating scar.

"De ghosties," she whispered; "dey been worriting dat chile ever' chance dey [p48] git. I hear 'em! Dey wait till I take a nap of sleep, den dey comes sneakin' in to pester her. She says dey ain't but one, but I hears heaps ob 'em, some ob 'em so little dey kin climb onder de crack in de door."

"Look a-here, Aunt Tish," said Mr. Opp, sternly, "don't you ever talk a word of this foolishness to her again. Not one word, do you hear?"

"Yas, sir; dat's what Mr. Moore allays said, an' I don't talk to her 'bout hit, I don't haf to. She done knows I know. I been livin' heah goin' on forty years, sence 'fore you was borned, an' you can't fool me, chile; no, sir, dat you can't."

"Well, you must go to bed now," said Mr. Opp, looking up at the clock and seeing that it was half-past something though he did not know what.

"I never goes to baid when I stays here," announced Aunt Tish; "I sets up in de kitchen an' sleeps. I's skeered dat chile run away; she 'low she gwine to some day. Her paw ketched her oncet [p49] gittin' in a boat down on de river-bank. She ain't

gwine, while I's here, no sir-ee! I never leaves her in de daytime an' her paw never leaves her at night, dat is, when he's livin'."

After she had gone, Mr. Opp ascended the stairway, and entered the room above. A candle sputtered on the table, and in its light he saw the wide, four-poster bed that had been his mother's, and in it the frail figure of little Miss Kippy. Her hair lay loose upon the pillow, and on her sleeping face, appealing in its helplessness, was a smile of perfect peace. The new doll lay on the table beside the candle, but clasped tightly in her arms was the coat of many checks.

For a moment Mr. Opp stood watching her, then he drew his shirt-sleeve quickly across his eyes. As he turned to descend, his new shoes creaked painfully and, after he had carefully removed them, he tiptoed down, passed through the sitting-room and out upon the porch, where he sank down on the step and dropped his head on his arms.

[p50] The night was very still, save for the croaking of a bullfrog, and the incessant scraping of a cedar-tree against the corner of the roof. From across the river, faint sparks of light shone out from cabin windows, and, below, a moving light now and then told of a passing scow. Once a steamboat slipped weirdly out of the darkness, sparkling with lights, and sending up faint sounds of music; but before the waves from the wheel had ceased to splash on the bank below, she was swallowed up in the darkness, leaving lonesomeness again.

Mr. Opp sat staring out into the night, outwardly calm, but inwardly engaged in a mortal duel. The aggressive Mr. Opp of the gorgeous raiment and the seal ring, the important man of business, the ambitious financier, was in deadly combat with the insignificant Mr. Opp, he of the shirt-sleeves and the wilted pompadour, the delicate, sensitive, futile Mr. Opp who was incapable of everything but the laying down of his life for the sake of another.

[p51] A dull line of light hovered on the horizon, and gradually the woods on the

opposite shore took shape, then the big river itself, gray and shimmering, with streaks on the water where a snag broke the swift current.

“Mr. D.,” he heard Aunt Tish calling up the back stairs, “you better git out of baid; hit’s sun-up.”

He rose stiffly and started back to the kitchen. As he passed through the front room, his eyes fell upon his new suit-case full of the treasured drummers’ samples. Stooping down, he traced the large black letters with his finger and sighed deeply.

Then he got up resolutely and marched to the kitchen door.

“Aunt Tish,” he said with authority, “you needn’t mind about hurrying breakfast. I find there’s very important business will keep me here in the Cove for the present.”

## [p52] V

There were two methods of communication in Cove City, both of which were equally effective. One was the telephone, which from a single, isolated case had developed into an epidemic, and the other, which enjoyed the dignity of precedence and established custom, was to tell Jimmy Fallows.

Both of these currents of information soon overflowed with the news that Mr. D. Webster Opp had given up a good position in the city, and expected to establish himself in business in his native town. The nature of this business was agitating the community at large in only a degree less than it was agitating Mr. Opp himself.

One afternoon Jimmy Fallows stood [p53] with his back to his front gate, suspended by his armpits from the pickets, and conducted business after his usual fashion. As a general retires to a hill-top to organize his forces and issue orders to his subordinates, so Jimmy hung upon his front fence and conducted the affairs of the town. He knew what time each farmer came in, where the “Helping Hands” were going to sew, where the doctor was, and where the services would be held next

Sunday. He was coroner, wharf-master, undertaker, and notary, and the only thing in the heavens above or the earth below concerning which he did not attempt to give information was the arrival of the next steamboat.

As he stood whittling a stick and cheerfully humming a tune of other days, he descried a small, alert figure coming up the road. The pace was so much brisker than the ordinary slow gait of the Cove that he recognized the person at once as Mr. Opp. Whereupon he lifted his voice and hailed a boy who was [p54] just vanishing down the street in the opposite direction:

"Nick!" he called. "Aw, Nick Fenny! Tell Mat Lucas that Mr. Opp's uptown."

Connection being thus made at one end of the line, he turned to effect it at the other. "Howdy, Brother Opp. Kinder dusty on the river, ain't it?"

"Well, we are experiencing considerable of warm weather at this juncture," said Mr. Opp, affably.

"Mat Lucas has been hanging round here all day," said Jimmy. "He wants you to buy out a half-interest in his dry-goods store. What do you think about it?"

"Well," said Mr. Opp, thrusting his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, "I am considering of a great variety of different things. I been in the dry-goods business twice, and I can't say but what it ain't a pretty business. Of course," he added with a twinge, "my specialty are shoes."

"Yes," said Jimmy; "but the folks [p55] here all gets their shoes at the drug store. Mr. Toddlinger's been carrying a line of shoes along with his pills and plasters ever sence he went into business."

Mr. Opp looked up at the large sign overhead. "If you and Mr. Tucker wasn't both in the hotel business, I might be thinking of considering that."

This proposition tickled Jimmy immensely. Chuckles of amusement agitated his rotund figure.

“Why don’t you buy us both out?” he asked. “We could sell out for nothing and make money.”

“Why, there’s three boarders sitting over at Our Hotel now,” said Mr. Opp, who rather fancied himself in the rôle of a genial host.

“Yes,” said Jimmy. “Old man Tucker’s had ’em hanging out on the line all morning. I don’t guess they got strength enough to walk around much after the meals he give ’em.”

“Of course,” said Mr. Opp, wholly absorbed in his own affairs, “this is just [p56] temporarily for the time being, as it were. In a year or so, when my financial condition is sorter more established in a way, I intend to put through that oil-wells proposition. The fact that I am aiming at arriving to is what would you think the Cove was at present most in need of?”

“Elbow-grease,” said Jimmy, promptly. “The only two things that we ain’t got that a city has, is elbow-grease and a newspaper.”

For a moment there was a silence, heavy with significance. Mr. Fallows’s gaze penetrated the earth, while Mr. Opp’s scanned the heavens; then they suddenly looked at each other, and the great idea was born.

An editor! Mr. Opp’s whole being thrilled responsive to the call. The thought of dwelling above the sordid bartering of commercial life, of being in a position to exercise those mental powers with which he felt himself so generously endowed, almost swept him off his feet. He had been a reporter [p57] once; for two golden weeks he had handed in police-court reports that fairly scintillated with verbal gems plucked at random from the dictionary. But the city editor had indicated as kindly as possible that his services were no longer required, vaguely suggesting that it was necessary to reduce the force; and Mr. Opp had assured him that he understood perfectly, and that he was ready to return at any future time. That apprenticeship, brief though it was, served as a foundation upon which Mr. Opp erected a tower of

dazzling possibilities.

“What’s the matter with you takin’ Mr. Gusty’s old printin’-shop and startin’ up business for yourself?” asked Jimmy.

“Do you reckon she’d sell it?” asked Mr. Opp, anxiously.

“Sell it?” said Jimmy. “Why, she’s ’most ready to give it away to keep from having to pay Pete Aker’s rent for the shop. Say—Mr. Gall—up,” he called up the street to a man who was turning the corner, “is Mrs. Gusty at home?”

[p58] The man, thus accosted, turned and came toward them.

“Who is Mr. Gallop?” asked Mr. Opp.

“He’s the new telephone girl,” said Jimmy, with relish; “ain’t been here but a month, and he’s doing the largest and most profitable trade in tending to other folks’s business you ever seen. Soft! Why, he must ’a’ been raised on a pillow—He always puts me in mind of a highly educated pig: it sorter surprises and tickles you to see him walkin’ round on his hind legs and talking like other people. Other day one of the boys, just to devil him, ast him to drive his team out home. I liked to ’a’ died when I seen him tryin’ to turn the corner, pullin’ ‘Gee’ and hollerin’ ‘Haw’ with every breath. Old mules got their legs in a hard knot trying to do both at once, and the boys says when Gallop got out in the country he felt so bad about it he got down and ’pologized to the mules. How ’bout that, Gallop—did you!” he concluded as the subject of the conversation arrived upon the scene.

[p59] The new-comer, a plump, fair young man, who held one hand clasped affectionately in the other, blushed indignantly, but said nothing.

“This here is Mr. Opp,” went on Jimmy; “he wants to see Mrs. Gusty. Do you know whether he will ketch her at home or not?”

Mr. Gallop was by this time paying the tribute of many an admiring glance to every detail of Mr. Opp’s costume, and Mr. Opp, realizing this, assumed an air of

cosmopolitan nonchalance, and toyed indifferently with his large watch-fob.

When Mr. Gallop's admiration and attention had become focused upon Mr. Opp's ring, he suddenly turned on the faucet of his conversation, and allowed such a stream of general information to pour forth that Mr. Opp quite forgot to look imposing.

"Mrs. Gusty telephoned early this morning to Mrs. Dorsey that she would come over and help her make preserves. Mrs. Dorsey got a big load of peaches from her father across the river. He's [p60] been down with the asthma, and had to call up the doctor twice in the night. And the doctor couldn't get the right medicine in town, and had me call up the city. They are going to send it down on the Big Sandy, but she's stuck in the locks, and goodness knows when she'll get here. She's—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Mr. Opp, politely but firmly, "I've got to see Mrs. Gusty on very important business. Have you any idea whatsoever of when she will return back home?"

"Yes," said Mr. Gallop, eager to oblige. "She's about home by this time. Miss Lou Diker is making her a dress, and she telephoned she'd be by to try it on 'bout four o'clock. I'll go up there with you, if you want me to."

"Why don't you drive him!" suggested Jimmy. "You can borrow a pair of mules acrost the street."

"Mr. Opp," said Mr. Gallop, feelingly, as they walked up Main Street, "I wouldn't treat a' insect like he treats me."

[p61] "Oh, you mustn't mind Jimmy," said Mr. Opp, kindly; "he always sort of enjoys a little joke as he goes along. Why, I wouldn't be at all surprised if he even made a joke on me sometime. How long have you been in Cove City?"

"Just a month," said Mr. Gallop. "It must look awful little to you, after all the big cities you been used to."

Mr. Opp lengthened his stride. “Yes,” he said largely; “quite small, quite little, in fact. No place for a business man; but for a professional man, a man that requires leisure to sort of cultivate his brain and that means to be a influence in the community, it’s a good place, a remarkably good place.”

A hint, however vague, dropped into the mind of Mr. Gallop, caused instant fermentation. From long experience he had become an adept at extracting information from all who crossed his path. A preliminary interest, a breath or two of flattery by way of anesthetic, and his victim’s secret was out before he knew it.

“Reckon you are going up to talk [p62] insurance to Mrs. Gusty,” he ventured tentatively.

“No; oh, no,” said Mr. Opp. “I formerly was in the insurance business, some time back. Very little prospects in it for a man of my nature. I have to have a chance to sorter spread out, you know—to use my own particular ideas about working things out.”

“What is your especial line?” asked Mr. Gallop, deferentially.

“Shoe—” Mr. Opp began involuntarily, then checked himself—“journalism,” he said, and the word seemed for the moment completely to fill space.

At Mrs. Gusty’s gate Mr. Gallop stopped.

“I guess I ought to go back now,” he said regretfully; “the telephone and telegraph office is right there in my room, and I never leave them day or night except just this one hour in the afternoon. It’s awful trying. The farmers begin calling each other up at three o’clock in the morning. Say, I wish you’d step in sometime. I’d just [p63] love to have you. But you are so busy and got so many friends, you won’t have much time for me, I guess.”

Mr. Opp thought otherwise. He said that no matter how pressed he was by various important duties, he was never too busy to see a friend. And he said it with the air of one who confers a favor, and Mr. Gallop received it as one who receives a favor,

and they shook hands warmly and parted.

## [p64] VI

Mr. Opp, absorbed in the great scheme which was taking definite form in his mind, did not discover until he reached the steps that some one was lying in a hammock on the porch.

It was a dark-haired girl in a pink dress, with a pink bow in her hair and small bows on the toes of her high-heeled slippers—the very kind of person, in fact, that Mr. Opp was most desirous of avoiding.

Fortunately she was asleep, and Mr. Opp, after listening in vain at the door for sounds of Mrs. Gusty within, tiptoed cautiously to the other end of the porch and took his seat on a straight-backed settee.

Let it not for a moment be supposed [p65] that Mr. Opp was a stranger to the fascinations of femininity. He had been inoculated at a tender age, and it had taken so completely, so tragically, that he had crept back to life with one illusion sadly shattered, and the conviction firm within him that henceforth he was immune. His attitude toward the subject remained, however, interested, but cautious—such as a good little boy might entertain toward a loaded pistol.

As he sat very straight and very still on the green settee, he tried to compose his mind for the coming interview with Mrs. Gusty. Directly across the road was Aker's old carpenter-shop, a small, square, one-story edifice, shabby, and holding out scant promise of journalistic possibilities. Mr. Opp, however, seldom saw things as they were; he saw them as they were going to be. Before five minutes had elapsed he had the shop painted white, with trimmings of red, new panes in the windows, ground glass below and clear above, an imposing sign over the door, and the roadway blocked with [p66] eager subscribers. He would have to have an assistant, of course, some one to attend to the general details; but he would have charge of everything

himself. He would edit a paper, comprehensive in its scope, and liberal in its views. Science, art, religion, society, and politics would all be duly chronicled. Politics! Why, his paper would be an organ—an organ of the Democratic Party!

At the thought of being an organ, Mr. Opp's bosom swelled with such pride that his settee creaked, and he glanced apprehensively toward the other end of the porch.

The young lady was still asleep, with her head resting on her bare arm, and one foot hanging limply below her ruffled petticoat.

Suddenly Mr. Opp leaned forward and viewed her slipper with interest. He had recognized the make! It was xxx-aa. He had carried a sample exactly like it, and had been wont to call enthusiastic attention to the curve of the instep and the set of the heel. He now realized that [p67] the effect depended entirely on the bow, and he seriously considered writing to the firm and suggesting the improvement.

In the midst of his reflections the young lady stirred and then sat up. Her hair was tumbled, and her eyes indicated that she had been indulging in recent tears. Resting her chin on her palms, she gazed gloomily down the road.

Mr. Opp, at the other end of the porch, also gazed gloomily down the road. The fact that he must make his presence known was annihilated by the yet more urgent fact that he could think of nothing to say. A bumblebee wheeled in narrowing circles above his head and finally lighted upon his coat-sleeve. But Mr. Opp remained immovable. He was searching his vocabulary for a word which would gently crack the silence without shattering it to bits.

The bumblebee saved the situation. Detecting some rare viand in a crack of the porch midway between the settee and the hammock, and evidently being a [p68] bibulous bee, it set up such a buzz of excitement that Mr. Opp looked at it, and the young lady looked at it, and their eyes met.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Opp, rather breathlessly; "you was asleep, and I come to see Mrs. Gusty, and—er—the fact is—I'm Mr. Opp."

At this announcement the young lady put her hand to her head, and by a dexterous movement rearranged the brown halo of her hair, and twisted the pink bow into its proper, aggressive position.

“Mother’ll—be back soon,”—she spoke without embarrassment, yet with the hesitation of one who is not in the habit of speaking for herself,—“I—I—didn’t know I was going to sleep.”

“No,” said Mr. Opp; then added politely, “neither did I.” Silence again looming on the horizon, he plunged on: “I think I used to be in the habit of seeing you when you was—er—younger, didn’t I?”

“Up at the store.” She smiled faintly. “You bought me a bag of pop-corn once [p69] with a prize in it. It was a breastpin; I’ve got it yet.”

Mr. Opp scowled slightly as he tried to extract an imaginary splinter from his thumb. “Do you—er—attend school?” he asked, taking refuge in a paternal attitude.

“I’m finished,” she said listlessly. “I’ve been going to the Young Ladies’ Seminary at Coreyville.”

“Didn’t you taken to it?” asked Mr. Opp, wishing fervently that Mrs. Gusty would return.

“Oh, yes,” said his companion, earnestly. “I love it; I was a special. I took music and botany and painting. I was in four concerts last year and played in the double duets at the commencements.” During the pause that followed, Mr. Opp considered various names for his newspaper. “Mother isn’t going to let me go back,” the soft, drawling voice continued; “she says when a girl is nineteen she ought to settle down. She wants me to get married.”

Mr. Opp laid “The Cove Chronicle” [p70] and “The Weekly Bugle” aside for further consideration, and inquired politely if there was any special person whom Mrs. Gusty desired for a son-in-law.

"Oh, no," said the girl, indifferently; "she hasn't thought of anybody. But I don't want to get married—yet. I want to go back to the seminary and be a music teacher. I hate it here, every bit of it. It's so stupid—and lonesome, and—"

A break in her voice caused Mr. Opp to postpone a decision of the day on which his paper was to be published, and to give her his undivided attention. Distress, even in beauty, was not to be withstood, and the fact that she was unusually pretty had been annoying Mr. Opp ever since she had spoken to him. As she turned her head away and wiped her eyes, he rose impulsively and moved toward her:

"Say, look a-here now, you ain't crying, are you?" he asked.

She shook her head in indignant denial.

"Well—er—you don't seem exactly [p71] happy, as you might say," suggested Mr. Opp, boldly.

"I'm not," she confessed, biting her lip. "I oughtn't to talk to you about it, but there isn't anybody here that would understand. They think I'm stuck up when I talk about books and music and—and other kind of people. They just keep on doing the same stupid things till they get old and die. Only mother won't even let me do stupid things; she says I bother her when I try to help around the house."

"Can't you sew or make mottoes or something?" asked Mr. Opp, very vague as to feminine accomplishments.

"What's the use?" asked the girl. "Mother does everything for me. She always says she'd rather do it than teach me how."

"Don't you take to reading?" asked Mr. Opp.

"Oh, yes," she said; "I used to read all the time down at school; but there never is anything to read up here."

The editor-elect peopled the country [p72] with similar cases, and he immediately saw himself as a public benefactor supplying starved subscribers with a bountiful

repast of weekly news.

“Won’t you sit down?” asked the girl, interrupting his reflections. “I don’t know what can be keeping mother.”

Mr. Opp looked about for a chair, but there was none. Then he glanced at his companion, and saw that she was holding aside her pink skirt and evidently offering him a seat beside her in the hammock. He advanced a step, retreated, then weakly capitulated. Sitting very rigid, nursing his hat on his knees, and inserting his forefinger between his neck and his collar as if to breathe better, he remarked that it was getting warmer all the time.

“This isn’t anything to what it will be later,” said the girl; “it keeps on getting hotter and dustier all the time. I don’t believe there’s such a stupid, poky, little old place anywhere else in the world. You ought to be mighty glad you don’t live here.”

[p73] Mr. Opp cleared his throat with some dignity. “I expect to remain here permanent now. I—well—the truth is, I have decided to operate a newspaper here.”

“No!” cried the girl, incredulously. “Not in the Cove!”

“In the Cove,” repeated Mr. Opp, firmly. “There’s great need here for a live, enterprising newspaper. It’s a virgin field, you might say. There never was a place that needed a public voice more. My paper is going to be a voice that hears all sides of a question; it’s going to appeal to the aged and the young and all them that lies between.”

“It will be mighty grand for us!” said his companion, with interest. “When is it going to start?”

Definite plans being decidedly nebulous, Mr. Opp wisely confined himself to generalities. He touched casually on his remarkable fitness for the work, his wide experience, his worldly knowledge. He hinted that in time he expected to venture into even deeper literary waters—poetry, [p74] and a novel, perhaps. As he talked, he realized that for the second time that day he was looked upon with approval.

Being accepted at his own estimate proved a new and exhilarating sensation.

It was pleasant on the wide porch, with the honeysuckle shutting out the sun, and the long, yellow blossoms filling the air with fragrance. It was pleasant to hear the contented chuckle of the hens and the sleepy hum of the bees, and the sound of his own voice; but most of all it was pleasant, albeit disconcerting, to glance sidewise occasionally and find a pair of credulous brown eyes raised to his in frank admiration. What if the swing of the hammock was making him dizzy and one foot had gone to sleep? These were minor considerations unworthy of mention.

“And just to think,” the girl was saying, “that you may be right across the road! I won’t mind staying at home so much if you’ll let me come over and see you make the newspaper.”

[p75] “You might like to assist sometime,” said Mr. Opp, magnanimously, at the same time cautiously removing a fluttering pink ribbon from his knee. “I could let you try your hand on a wedding or a ’bituary, or something along that line.”

“Oh, really?” she cried, her eyes brightening. “I’d just love to. I can write compositions real nice, and you could help me a little.”

“Yes,” agreed Mr. Opp; “I could learn you to do the first draft, and I could put on the extra touches.”

So engrossed did they become in these plans that they did not hear the click of the gate, or see the small, aggressive lady who came up the walk. She moved with the confident air of one who is in the habit of being obeyed. Her skirt gave the appearance of no more daring to hang wrong than her bonnet-strings would have presumed to move from the exact spot where she had tied them under her left ear. Her small, bright eyes, slightly crossed, apparently saw two ways at once, for on her brief journey [p76] from the gate to the porch, she decapitated two withered geraniums on the right, and picked up a stray paper and some dead leaves on the left.

“Guin-never!” she called sharply, not seeing the couple on the porch, “who’s been

tracking mud in on my clean steps?"

The girl rose hastily and came forward. "Mother," she said, "here's Mr. Opp."

Mrs. Gusty glanced up from one to the other, evidently undecided how to meet the situation. But the hesitancy was not for long; Mr. Opp's watch-fob, glittering in the sunlight, symbolized such prosperity that she hastily extended a cordial hand of welcome.

"You don't mean to tell me Guin-never has been keeping you out here on the porch instead of taking you in the parlor? And hasn't she given you a thing to drink? Well, just wait till I get my things off and I'll fix a pitcher of lemonade."

"Let me do it, Mother," said Guinevere, eagerly; "I often do it at school."

[p77] "I'd hate to drink what you make," said Mrs. Gusty, waving her aside. "You show Mr. Opp in the parlor. No; I'll open the shutters: you'd get your hands dirty." She bustled about with that tyrannical capability that reduces every one near it to a state of helpless dependence.

The parlor was cool and dark, and Mr. Opp felt around for a chair while the refractory shutter was being opened. When at last a shaft of light was admitted, it fell full upon a sable frame which hung above the horse-hair sofa, and inclosed a glorified certificate of the births, marriages, and deaths in the house of Gusty. Around these written data was a border realistically depicting the seven ages of man and culminating in a legend of gold which read

From the Cradle to the Grave.

While Mr. Opp was standing before this work of art, apparently deeply interested, he was, in reality, peeping through a crack in the shutter. The [p78] sunlight was still filtering through the honeysuckle vines, making dancing, white patches on the porch, the bees were humming about the blossoms, and Miss Guinevere Gusty was still sitting in the hammock, her chin in her palms, gazing down the road.

When Mrs. Gusty returned, she bore a glass pitcher of lemonade, a plate of crisp gingersnaps, and a tumbler of crushed ice, all of which rested upon a tray which was covered with her strawberry centerpiece, a mark of distinction which, unfortunately, was lost upon her guest.

Mr. Opp, being a man of business, plunged at once into his subject, presenting the matter so eloquently and using so much more persuasion than was necessary that he overshot the mark. Mrs. Gusty was not without business sagacity herself, and when Mr. Opp met a possible objection before it had ever occurred to her, she promptly made use of the suggestion.

"Of course," said Mr. Opp, as a final [p79] inducement, "I'd be glad to run in some of Mr. Gusty's poetical pieces from time to time."

This direct appeal to her sentiment so touched Mrs. Gusty that she suggested they go over to the shop at once and look it over.

For a moment after the door of his future sanctum was thrown open Mr. Opp was disconcerted. The small, dark room, cluttered with all manner of trash, the broken window-panes, the dust, and the cobwebs, presented a prospect that was far from encouraging; but after an examination of the presses, his courage revived.

After a great deal of talk on Mr. Opp's part, and some shrewd bargaining on Mrs. Gusty's, the stupendous transaction was brought to a close, to the eminent satisfaction of both parties.

It was late that night before Mr. Opp retired. He sat in the open window of his bedroom and looked out upon the river. The cool night air and the quiet [p80] light of the stars calmed the turmoil in his brain. Gradually the colossal schemes and the towering ambitions gave way to an emotion to which the editor-elect was by no means a stranger. It was a little white-faced Fear that lurked always in a corner of his heart, and could be kept down only by brave words and aggressive deeds.

He sat with his trembling knees hunched, and his arms awkwardly clasped about

them, an absurd atom in the great cosmic order; yet the soul that looked out of his squinting, wistful eyes held all the potentialities of life, and embodied the eternal sadness and the eternal inspiration of human endeavor.

## [p81] VII

It is no small undertaking to embark in an untried ship, upon unknown waters, in the teeth of opposing gales. But Mr. Opp sailed the sea of life as a valiant mariner should, self-reliant, independent, asking advice of nobody. He steered by the guidance of his own peculiar moral compass, regardless of the rough waters through which it led him.

Having invested the major portion of his savings in the present venture, it was necessary to begin operations at once; but events conspired to prevent him. Miss Kippy made many demands upon his time both by day and night; she had transferred her affection and dependence from her father to him, and he found [p82] himself sorely encumbered by this new responsibility. Moreover, the attitude of the town toward the innovation of a newspaper was one of frank skepticism, and it proved a delicate and arduous task to create the proper public sentiment. In addition to these troubles, Mr. Opp had a yet graver matter to hinder him: with all his valor and energy he was suffering qualms of uncertainty as to the proper method of starting a weekly journal.

To be sure, he had achieved a name for the paper—a name so eminently satisfactory that he had already had it emblazoned upon a ream of office paper. “The Opp Eagle” had sprung full-syllabled from his teeming brain, and had been accepted over a hundred competitors.

But naming the fledgling was an easy matter compared with getting it out of the nest; and it was not until the instalment of his competent staff that Mr. Opp accomplished the task.

This important transaction took place one morning as he sat in his new office [p83] and struggled with his first editorial. The bare room, with the press in the center, served as news-room, press-room, publication office, and editorial sanctum. Mr. Opp sat at a new deal table, with one pen behind his ear, and another in his hand, and gazed for inspiration at the brown wrapping-paper with which he had neatly covered the walls. His mental gymnastics were interrupted by the appearance at the door of Miss Jim Fenton and her brother Nick.

Miss Jim was an anomaly in the community, being by theory a spinster, and by practice a double grass-widow. Capable and self-supporting, she attracted the ne'er-do-wells as a magnet attracts needles, but having been twice induced to forego her freedom and accept the bonds of wedlock, she had twice escaped and reverted to her original type and name. Miss Jim was evidently a victim of one of Nature's most economical moods; she was spare and angular, with a long, wrinkled face surmounted by a scant fluff of pale, frizzled hair. Her mouth [p84] slanted upward at one corner, giving her an expression unjustly attributed to coquetry, when in reality it was due to an innocent and pardonable pride in an all-gold eye-tooth.

But it was her clothes that brought misunderstanding, misfortune, and even matrimony upon Miss Jim. They were sent her by the boxful by a cousin in the city, and the fact was unmistakable that they were clothes with a past. The dresses held an atmosphere of evaporated frivolity; flirtations lingered in every frill, and memories of old larks lurked in every furbelow. The hats had a jaunty list to port, and the colored slippers still held a dance within their soles. One old bird of paradise on Miss Jim's favorite bonnet had a chronic wink for the wickedness he had witnessed.

It was this wink that attracted Mr. Opp as he looked up from his arduous labors. For a disconcerting moment he was uncertain whether it belonged to Miss Jim or to the bird.

"Howdy, Mr. Opp," said the lady in [p85] brisk, businesslike tones. "I was taking a

crayon portrait home to Mrs. Gusty, and I just stopped in to see if I couldn't persuade you to take my brother to help you on the newspaper. You remember Nick, don't you?"

Mr. Opp glanced up. A skeleton of a boy, with a shaven head, was peering eagerly past him into the office, his keen, ferret-like eyes devouring every detail of the printing-presses.

"He knows the business," went on Miss Jim, anxiously pulling at the fingers of her gloves. "He's been in it over a year at Coreyville. He wants to go back; but I ain't willing till he gets stronger. He ain't been up but two weeks."

Mr. Opp turned impressively in his revolving chair, the one luxury which he had deemed indispensable, and doubtfully surveyed the applicant. The mere suggestion of his leaning upon this broken reed seemed ridiculous; yet the boy's thin, sallow face, and Miss Jim's imploring eyes, caused him to hesitate.

[p86] "Well, you see," he said, with thumbs together and his lips pursed, after the manner of the various employers before whom he had stood in the past, "we are just making a preliminary start, and we haven't engaged our staff yet. I am a business man and a careful one. I don't feel justified in going to no extra expense until 'The Opp Eagle' is, in a way, on its feet."

"Oh, that's all right," said the boy; "I'll work a month for nothing. Lots of fellows do that on the big papers."

Miss Jim plucked warningly at his sleeve, and Mr. Opp, seeing that Nick's enthusiasm had led him beyond his depth, went gallantly to the rescue.

"Not at all," he said hastily; "that ain't my policy. I think I might contrive to pay you a small, reasonable sum down, and increase it in ratio as the paper become more prosperous. Don't you think you better sit down?"

"No, sir; I'm all right," said the boy, impatiently. "I can do 'most anything about a paper, setting type, printing, [p87] reporting, collecting, 'most anything you put me

at."

Such timely knowledge, in whatever guise it came, seemed Heaven-sent. Mr. Opp gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"If you feel that you can't do any better than accepting the small sum that just at present I'll have to offer you, why, I think we can come to some arrangement."

"That's mighty nice in you," said Miss Jim, jerking her head forward in order to correct an undue backward gravitation of her bonnet. "If ever you want a crayon portrait, made from life or enlarged from a photograph, I'll make you a special price on it. I'm just taking this here one home to Mrs. Gusty; she had it done for Guin-never's birthday."

Miss Jim removed the wrappings and disclosed a portrait of Miss Guinevere Gusty, very large as to eyes and very small as to mouth. She handed it to Mr. Opp, and called attention to its fine qualities.

[p88] "Just look at the lace on that dress! Mrs. Fallows picked a whole pattern off on her needles from one of my portraits. And did you notice the eyelashes; you can actually count 'em! She had four buttons on her dress, but I didn't get in but three; but I ain't going to mention it to Mrs. Gusty. Don't you think it's pretty?"

Mr. Opp, who had been smiling absently at the portrait, started guiltily. "Yes," he said confusedly; "yes, ma'am, I think she is." Then he felt a curious tingling about his ears and realized, to his consternation, that he was blushing.

"She's too droopin' a type for me," said Miss Jim, removing an ostrich tip from her angle of vision; then she continued in a side whisper: "Say, would you mind making Nick take this bottle of milk at twelve o'clock, and resting a little? He ain't as strong as he lets on, and he has sort of sinking spells 'long about noon."

Receiving the bottle thus surreptitiously [p89] offered, and assisting the lady to gather up her bundles, Mr. Opp bowed her out, and turned to face the embarrassing necessity of giving instructions to his new employee. He was relieved to find,

however, that the young gentleman in question possessed initiative; for Nick had promptly removed his coat, and fallen to work, putting things to rights with an energy and ability that caused Mr. Opp to offer up a prayer of heartfelt gratitude.

All the morning they worked silently, Mr. Opp toiling over his editorial, with constant references to a small dictionary which he concealed in the drawer of the table, and Nick giving the presses a thorough and much-needed overhauling.

At the noon-hour they shared their lunch, and Mr. Opp, firm in the authority invested in him by Miss Jim, demanded that Nick should drink his milk, and recline at length upon the office bench for twenty minutes. It was with great difficulty that Nick was persuaded to submit [p90] to this transferred coddling; but he evidently realized that insubordination at the start of his career would be fatal, and, moreover, his limbs ached and his hands trembled.

It was in the intimacy of this, their first, staff meal, that they discussed the policy of the paper.

“Of course,” said Mr. Opp, “we have got a vast undertaking in front of us. For the next few months we won’t scarcely have time to draw a natural breath. I am going to put every faculty I own on to making ‘The Opp Eagle’ a fine paper. I expect to get here at seven o’clock A.M., and continue to pursue my work as far into the midnight hours as may need be. Nothing in the way of pleasure or anything else is going to pervert my attention. Of course you understand that my mind will be taken up with the larger issues of things, and I’ll have to risk a dependence on you to attend to the smaller details.”

“All right,” said Nick, gratefully; “you won’t be sorry you trusted me, [p91] Mr. Opp. I’ll do my level best. When will we get out the first issue?”

“Well—er—the truth is,” said Mr. Opp, “I haven’t, as you might say, accumulated sufficient of material as yet. You see, I have a great many irons in the fire, and besides opening up this office, I am the president of a company that’s just bought up

twenty acres of ground around here. The biggest oil proposition—”

“Yes, sir,” interrupted Nick; “but don’t you think we could get started in two weeks, with the ads and the contributors’ letters from other counties, and a story or two I could run in, and your editorial page?”

“I’ve got two advertisements,” said Mr. Opp; “but I don’t intend to rest content until every man in the Cove has got a card in. Now, about these contributors from other counties?”

“I can manage that,” said Nick. “I’ll write to some girl or fellow I know in the different towns, and ask them to give me a weekly letter. They sign [p92] themselves ‘Gipsy’ or ‘Fairy’ or ‘Big Injun’ or something like that, and tell what’s doing in their neighborhood. We’ll have to fix the letters up some, but they help fill in like everything.”

Mr. Opp’s spirits rose at this capable coöperation.

“You—er—like the name?” he asked.

“‘The Opp Eagle’?” said Nick. “Bully!”

Such unqualified approval went to Mr. Opp’s head, and he rashly broke through the dignity that should hedge about an editor.

“I don’t mind reading you some of my editorial,” he said urbanely; “it’s the result of considerable labor.”

He opened the drawer and took out some loosely written pages, though he knew each paragraph by heart. Squaring himself in his revolving-chair, and clearing his throat, he addressed himself ostensibly to the cadaverous youth stretched at length before him, but in imagination to all the southern counties of the grand old Commonwealth of Kentucky.

[p93] His various business experiences had stored such an assorted lot of information in his brain that it was not unlike a country store in the diversity of its

contents. His style, like his apparel, was more ornate and pretentious than what lay beneath it. There were many words which he knew by sight, but with which he had no speaking acquaintance. But Mr. Opp had ideals, and this was the first opportunity he had ever had to put them before his fellow-men.

“The great bird of American Liberty,” he read impressively, “has soared and flown over the country and lighted at last in your midst. ‘The Opp Eagle’ appears for the first time to-day. It is no money scheme in which we are indulging; we aim first and foremost to fulfil a much-needed want in the community. ‘The Opp Eagle’ will tell the people what you want to know better and at less expense than any other method. It will aim at bringing the priceless gems of knowledge within the reach of [p94] everybody. For what is bread to the body if you do not also clothe the mind spiritually and mentally?

“We will boom this, our native, city. If possible, I hope to get the streets cleaned up and a railroad, and mayhap in time lamp-posts. This region has ever been known for its great and fine natural resources, but we have been astounded, you might say astonished, in recent visits to see its naked and crude immensities, which far exceeds our most sanguine expectations. So confident are we that a few of our most highly respectable citizens have, at the instigation of the Editor of ‘The Opp Eagle,’ bought up the land lying between Turtle Creek and the river, and as soon as a little more capital has been accumulated, intend to open up a oil proposition that will astonish the eyes of the natives!

“In all candor, we truly believe this favored region of ours to have no equal in underground wealth nowhere upon this terrestrial earth, albeit we are not of globe-trotter stock nor tribe. We will [p95] endeavor to induce the home people to copy after the wise example of a few of our leading citizens and buy up oil rights before the kings of Bonanzas from the Metropolitan cities discover our treasure and wrench it from our grasp. ‘The Opp Eagle’ will, moreover, stand for temperance and

reform. We will hurl grape and cannister into the camps of the saloonatics until they flee the wrath to come. Will also publish a particular statement of all social entertainments, including weddings, parties, church socials, and funerals. In conclusion, would say that we catch this first opportunity to thank you in collective manner herein for the welcome you have ordained 'The Opp Eagle.'"

Mr. Opp came to a close and waited for applause; nor was he disappointed.

"Gee! I wish I could write like that!" said Nick, rising on his elbow. "I can do the printing all right, and hustle around for the news; but I never know how to put on the trimmings."

Mr. Opp laid a hand upon his shoulder; [p96] he was fast developing a fondness for the youth.

"It's a gift," he said sympathetically, "that I am afraid, my boy, nobody can't learn you."

"Can I come in?" said a voice from outside, and Mr. Gallop peeped around the open door.

"Walk in," cried Mr. Opp, while Nick sprang to his feet. "We are just by way of finishing up the work at hand, and have a few minutes of spare leisure."

"I just wanted to know if you'd help us get up a town band," said Mr. Gallop. "I told the boys you'd be too busy, but they made me come. I asked Mr. Fallows if you was musical; but I wouldn't repeat what he said."

"Oh, Jimmy is just naturally humoristic," said Mr. Opp. "Go along and tell me what he remarked."

"Well," said Mr. Gallop, indignantly, "he said you was a expert on the windpipe! Mr. Tucker, I believe it was, thought you used to play the accordion."

[p97] "No," said Mr. Opp; "it was the cornet. I was considerable of a performer at one time."

"Well, we want you for the leader of our band," said Mr. Gallop. "We are going to have blue uniforms and give regular concerts up on Main Street."

Nick Fenny began searching for a pencil.

"You know," went on Mr. Gallop, rapidly, "the last show boat that was here had a calliope, and there's another one coming next week. All I have to do is to hear a tune twice, then I can play it. Miss Guin-never Gusty is going up to Coreyville next week, and she says she'll get us some new pieces. She's going to select a plush self-rocker for the congregation to give the new preacher. They're keeping it awful secret, but I heard 'em mention it over the telephone. The preacher's baby has been mighty sick, and so has his mother, up at the Ridge; but she's got well again. Well, I must go along now. Ain't it warm?"

Before Mr. Opp had ceased showing [p98] Mr. Gallop out, his attention was arrested by the strange conduct of his staff. That indefatigable youth was writing furiously on the new wall-paper, covering the clean brown surface with large, scrawling characters.

Mr. Opp's indignation was checked at its source by the radiant face which Nick turned upon him.

"I've got another column!" he cried; "listen here:

"'A new and handsome Show Boat will tie up at the Cove the early part of next week. A fine calliope will be on board.'

"'Miss Guinevere Gusty will visit friends in Coreyville soon.'

"'The new preacher will be greatly surprised soon by the gift of a fine plush rocking-chair from the ladies of the congregation.'

"'The infant baby of the new preacher has been sick, but is better some.'

"'Jimmy Fallows came near getting an undertaking job at the Ridge last week, but the lady got well.'

[p99] “And that ain’t all,” he continued excitedly; “I’m going out now to get all the particulars about that band, and we’ll have a long story about it.”

Mr. Opp, left alone in his office, made an unsuccessful effort to resume work. The fluttering of the “Eagle’s” wings preparatory to taking flight was not the only thing that interfered with his power of concentration. He did not at all like the way he felt. Peculiar symptoms had developed in the last week, and the quinine which he had taken daily had failed to relieve him. He could not say that he was sick,—in fact, he had never been in better health,—but there was a strange feeling of restlessness, a vague disturbance of his innermost being, that annoyed and puzzled him. Even as he tried to solve the problem, an irresistible impulse brought him to his feet and carried him to the door. Miss Guinevere Gusty was coming out of her gate in a soft, white muslin, and a chip hat laden with pink roses.

“Anything I can do for you up [p100] street?” she called across pleasantly to Mr. Opp.

“Why, thank you—no, the fact is—well, you see, I find it necessary for me to go up myself.” Mr. Opp heard himself saying these words with great surprise, and when he found himself actually walking out of the office, leaving a large amount of unfinished work, his indignation knew no bounds.

“The sun is awful hot. Ain’t you goin’ to wear a hat?” drawled Miss Guinevere.

Mr. Opp put his hand to his head in some embarrassment, and then assured her that he very often went without it.

They sauntered slowly down the dusty road. On one side the trees hedged them in, but on the other stretched wide fields of tasseled corn over which shimmered waves of summer heat. White butterflies fluttered constantly across their path, and overhead, hidden somewhere in the branches, the birds kept up a constant song. The August sun, still high in the heavens, shone fiercely down on [p101] the open road, on the ragweed by the wayside, on the black-eyed Susans nodding at the light; but it

fell most mercilessly of all upon the bald spot on the head of the unconscious Mr. Opp, who was moving, as in an hypnotic state, into the land of romance.

## [p102] VIII

By all the laws of physics, Mr. Opp during the months that ensued, should have stood perfectly still. For if ever two forces pulled with equal strength in opposite directions, love and ambition did in the heart of our friend the editor. But Mr. Opp did not stand still; on the contrary, he seemed to be moving in every direction at once.

In due time “The Opp Eagle” made its initial flight, and received the approbation of the community. The first page was formal, containing the editorial, a list of the subscribers, a notice to tax-payers, and three advertisements, one of which requested “the lady public to please note that the hats put out by Miss Duck Brown do not show the wire composing the frame.”

[p103] But the first page of the “Eagle” was like the front door of a house: when once you got on the other side of it, you were in the family, as it were, formality was dropped, and an easy atmosphere of familiarity prevailed. You read that Uncle Enoch Siller had Sundayed over at the Ridge, or that Aunt Gussy Williams was on the puny list, and frequently there were friendly references to “Ye Editor” or “Ye Quill Driver,” for after soaring to dizzy heights in his editorials, Mr. Opp condescended to come down on the second page and move in and out of the columns, as a host among his guests.

It is painful to reflect what would have been the fate of the infatuated Mr. Opp in these days had it not been for the faithful Nick. Nick’s thirst for work was insatiable; he yearned for responsibility, and was never so happy as when gathering news. He chased an item as a dog might chase a rat, first scenting it, then hunting it down, and after mutilating it a bit, proudly returning it to his master.

[p104] Mr. Opp was enabled, by this competent assistance, to spare many a half-hour in consultation with Miss Guinevere Gusty concerning the reportorial work she was going to do on the paper. The fact that nobody died or got married delayed all actual performance, but in order to be ready for the emergency, frequent calls were deemed expedient.

It became part of the day's program to read her his editorial, or consult her about some social item, or to report a new subscriber, his self-esteem meanwhile putting forth all manner of new shoots and bursting into exotic bloom under the warmth of her approval.

Miss Gusty, on her part, was acquiring a new interest in her surroundings. In addition to the subtle flattery of being consulted, she was the recipient of daily offerings of books, and music, and drugstore candy, and sometimes a handful of flowers, carefully concealed in a newspaper to escape the vigilant eye of Jimmy Fallows.

On several occasions she returned Mr. [p105] Opp's calls, picking her way daintily across the road, and peeping in at the window to make sure he was there.

It was at such times that the staff of "The Opp Eagle" misconducted itself. It objected to a young woman in the press-room; it disapproved of the said person sitting at the deal table in confidential conversation with the editor; it saw no humor in her dipping the pencils into the ink-well, and scrawling names on the new office stationery; and when the point was reached that she moved about the office, asking absurd questions and handling the type, the staff could no longer endure it, but hastened forth to forget its annoyance in the pursuit of business.

Moreover, the conduct of the chief, as Nick was pleased to call Mr. Opp, was becoming more and more peculiar. He would arrive in the morning, his pockets bristling with papers, and his mind with projects. He would attack the work of the day with ferocious intensity, then in the midst of it, without warning, he [p106]

would lapse into an apparent trance, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on the ceiling, and such a smile on his face as one usually reserves for a camera.

Nick did not know that it was the song of the siren that was calling Mr. Opp, who, instead of lashing himself to the mast and steering for the open sea, was letting his little craft drift perilously near the rocky coast.

No feature of the proceedings was lost upon Mrs. Gusty. She applied the same method to her daughter that she did to her vines, tying her firmly to the wall of her own ability, and prescribing the direction and length to which she should grow. The situation would need pruning later, but for the present she studied conditions and bided her time.

Meanwhile the “Eagle” was circling more widely in its flight. Mr. Opp’s persistent and eloquent articles pertaining to the great oil wealth of the region had been reinforced by a favorable report from the laboratory in the city to which he had sent a specimen from the spring [p107] on Turtle Creek. Thus equipped with wings of hope, and a small ballast of fact, the “Eagle” went soaring on its way, and in time attracted the attention of a party of capitalists who were traveling through the State, investigating oil and mineral possibilities.

One epoch-making day, the editor was called up over the long-distance telephone, and, after answering numerous inquiries, was told that the party expected to spend the following night in the Cove.

This important event took place the last of November, and threw the town into great excitement. Mr. Opp received the message early in the morning, and immediately set to work to call a meeting of the Turtle Creek Land Company.

“This here is one of the most critical moments in the history of Cove City,” he announced excitedly to Nick. “It’s a most fortunate thing that they’ve got me here to make the preliminary arrangements, and to sort of get the thing solidified, as you might say. I’ll call a [p108] meeting for eleven o’clock at Your Hotel. You call up

old man Hager and the preacher, and I will undertake to notify Jimmy Fallows and Mr. Tucker."

"The preacher ain't in town; he's out at Smither's Ridge, marrying a couple. I got the whole notice written out beforehand."

"Well, tear it up," said Mr. Opp. "I've engaged a special hand to do all weddings and funerals."

Nick looked hurt; this was the first time his kingdom had been invaded. He kicked the door sullenly.

"I can't get the preacher if he's out at Smither's Ridge."

"Nick," said Mr. Opp, equally hurt, "is that the way for a subordinate reporter to talk to a' editor? You don't seem to realize that this here is a very serious and large transaction. There may be hundreds of dollars involved. It's a' awful weight of responsibility for one man. I'm willing to finance it and conduct the main issues, but I've got to have the backing of all the other [p109] parties. Now it's with you whether the preacher gets there or not."

"Shall I hunt up Mat Lucas, too?" asked Nick as he started forth.

"No; that's my branch of the work: but—say—Nick, your sister will have to be there; she owns some shares."

"All right," said Nick; "her buggy is hitched up in front of Tucker's. I'll tell her to wait till you come."

Mr. Opp was not long in following. He walked down the road with an important stride, his bosom scarcely able to accommodate the feeling of pride and responsibility that swelled it. He was in a position of trust; his fellow-citizens would look to him, a man of larger experience and business ability, to deal with these moneyed strangers. He would be fair, but shrewd. He knew the clever wiles of the capitalists; he would meet them with calm but unyielding dignity.

It was in this mood that he came upon Miss Jim, who was in the act of disentangling a long lace scarf from her buggy whip. Her flushed face and flashing [p110] eyes gave such unmistakable signs of wrath that Mr. Opp glanced apprehensively at the whip in her hand, and then at Jimmy Fallows, who was hitching her horse.

"Howdy, Mr. Opp," she said. "It's a pleasure to meet a gentleman, after what I've seen."

"I hope," said Mr. Opp, "that our friend here ain't been indulging in his customary—"

"It ain't Mr. Fallows," she broke in sharply; "it's Mr. Tucker. He ain't got the feeling of a broomstick."

"Now, Miss Jim," began Jimmy Fallows in a teasing tone; but the lady turned her back upon him and addressed Mr. Opp.

"You see this portrait," she said angrily, pulling it out from under the seat. "It took me four weeks, including two Sunday afternoons, to make it. I begun it the second week after Mrs. Tucker died, when I seen him takin' on so hard at church. He was cryin' so when they took up the collection that he never even [p111] seen the plate pass him. I went right home and set to work on this here portrait, thinking he'd be glad and willing to buy it from me. Wouldn't you, if you was a widower?"

Mr. Opp gazed doubtfully at the picture, which represented Mr. Tucker sitting disconsolately beside a grave, with a black-bordered handkerchief held lightly between his fingers. A weeping-willow drooped above him, and on the tombstone at his side were two angels supporting the initials of the late Mrs. Tucker.

"Why, Miss Jim," insisted Fallows, "you're askin' too much of old man Tucker to expect him to keep on seein' a tombstone when he's got one eye on you and one eye on the Widow Gusty. He ain't got any hair on top of his head to part, but he's took to partin' it down the back, and I seen him Sunday trying to read the hymns without his spectacles. He started up on 'Let a Little Sunshine In' when they was singing

‘Come, ye Disconsolate.’ You rub out the face and [p112] the initials on that there picture and keep it for the nex’ widower. Ketch him when he’s still droopin’. You’ll get your money back. Your mistake was in waiting too long.”

“Speaking of waiting,” said Mr. Opp, impatiently, “there’s a call meeting of the Turtle Creek Land Co. for this morning at eleven at Your Hotel. Hope it’s convenient, Jimmy.”

“Oh, yes,” said Jimmy; “we got more empty chairs at Your Hotel than anything else. What’s the meeting for? Struck gold?”

Mr. Opp imparted the great news.

“Oh, my land!” exclaimed Miss Jim, “will they be here to-day?”

“Not until to-morrow night,” explained Mr. Opp. “This here meeting this morning is for the stock-holders only. We got to kinder outline our policy and arrange a sort of basis of operation.”

“Well,” said Miss Jim, “I’ll take the portrait up to Mrs. Gusty’s and ask her to take care of it for me. I don’t know [p113] as I can do the face over into somebody else’s, but I can’t afford to lose it.”

It was afternoon before the stock-holders could all be brought together. They assembled in the office of Your Hotel in varying states of mind ranging from frank skepticism to intense enthusiasm.

Mr. Tucker represented the conservative element. He was the rich man of the town, with whom economy, at first a necessity, had become a luxury. No greater proof could have been desired of Mr. Opp’s persuasive powers than that Mr. Tucker had invested in a hundred shares of the new stock. He sat on the edge of his chair, wizen, anxious, fidgety, loaded with objections, and ready to go off half-cocked. Old man Hager sat in his shadow, objecting when he objected, voting as he voted, and prepared to loosen or tighten his purse-strings as Mr. Tucker suggested.

Mat Lucas and Miss Jim were independents. They had both had sufficient experience in business to know their own [p114] minds. If there was any money to be made in the Cove or about it, they intended to have a part in it.

Mr. Opp and the preacher constituted the Liberal party. They furnished the enthusiasm that floated the scheme. They were able to project themselves into the future and prophesy dazzling probabilities.

Jimmy Fallows, alone of the group, maintained an artistic attitude toward the situation. He was absolutely detached. He sat with his chair tilted against the door and his thumbs in his armholes, and treated the whole affair as a huge joke.

“The matter up for immediate consideration,” Mr. Opp was saying impressively, “is whether these here gentlemen should want to buy us out, we would sell, or whether we would remain firm in possession, and let them lease our ground and share the profits on the oil.”

“Well, I’m kinder in favor of selling out if we get the chance,” urged Mr. Tucker in a high, querulous voice. “To [p115] sell on a rising market is always a pretty good plan.”

“After we run up ag’in’ them city fellows,” said Mat Lucas, “I’ll be surprised if we git as much out as we put in.”

“Gentlemen,” protested Mr. Opp, “this here ain’t the attitude to assume to the affair. To my profoundest belief there is a fortune in these here lands. The establishment of ‘The Opp Eagle’ has, as you know, been a considerable tax on my finances, but everything else I’ve got has gone into this company. It’s a great and glorious opportunity, one that I been predicting and prophesying for these many years. Are we going to sell out to this party, and let them reap the prize? No; I trust and hope that such is not the case. In order to have more capital to open up the mines, I advocate the taking of them in.”

“I bet they been advocating the taking of us in,” chuckled Jimmy.

“Well, my dear friends, suppose we vote on it,” suggested the preacher.

[p116] “Reach yer hand back there in the press, Mr. Opp, and git the lead-pencil,” said Jimmy, without moving.

“The motion before the house,” said Mr. Opp, “is whether we will sell out or take ’em in. All in favor say ‘Aye.’”

There was a unanimous vote in the affirmative, although each member interpreted the motion in his own way.

“Very well,” said Mr. Opp, briskly; “the motion is carried. Now we got to arrange about entertaining the party.”

Mr. Tucker, whose brain was an accommodation stopping at each station, was still struggling with the recent motion when this new thought about entertainment whizzed past. The instinct of the landlord awoke at the call, and he promptly switched off the main line and went down the side track.

“Gallop was here while ago,” Jimmy was saying, with a satisfied glance at Mr. Tucker; “said they wanted me to take keer of ’em. I’ll ’commodate all but the preachers. If there are any preachers, Mr. Tucker kin have ’em. I [p117] have to draw the line somewheres. I can’t stand ’em ‘Brother-Fallowsing’ me. Last time the old woman corralled one and brought him home, he was as glad to find me to work on as she’d ’a’ be’n to git some fruit to preserve. ‘Brother,’ he says, reaching out for my hand, ‘do you ever think about the awful place you are going to when you die?’ ‘You bet,’ says I; ‘I got more friends there than anywhere.’” And Jimmy’s laugh shook the stove-pipe.

“How many gentlemen are coming to-morrow?” asked Miss Jim, who was sitting in a corner as far as possible from Mr. Tucker.

“Ten,” said Jimmy. “Now, you wouldn’t think it, but this here hotel has got six bedrooms. I’ve tooken care of as many as twenty at a time, easy, but I’ll be hanged if I ever heard of such foolishness as every one of these fellers wantin’ a room to

hisself."

"I've got three rooms empty," said Mr. Tucker.

"Well, that leaves one over," said Mat [p118] Lucas. "I'd take him out home, but we've got company, and are sleeping three in a bed now."

Mr. Opp hesitated; then his hospitality overcame his discretion.

"Just consider him my guest," he said. "I'll be very pleased to provide entertainment for the gentleman in question."

Not until the business of the day was over, and Mr. Opp was starting home, did he realize how tired he was. It was not his duties as an editor, or even as a promoter, that were telling on him; it was his domestic affairs that preyed upon his mind. For Mr. Opp not only led a strenuous life by day, but by night as well. Miss Kippy's day began with his coming home, and ended in the morning when he went away; the rest of the time she waited.

Just now the problem that confronted him was the entertainment of the expected guest. Never, since he could remember, had a stranger invaded that little world where Miss Kippy lived her [p119] unreal life of dreams. What effect would it have upon her? Would it be kinder to hide her away as something he was ashamed of, or to let her appear and run the risk of exposing her deficiency to uncaring eyes? During the months that he had watched her, a fierce tenderness had sprung up in his heart. He had become possessed of the hope that she might be rescued from her condition. Night after night he patiently tried to teach her to read and to write, stopping again and again to humor her whims and indulge her foolish fancies. More than once he had surprised a new look in her eyes, a sudden gleam of sanity, of frightened understanding; and at such times she would cling to him for protection against that strange thing that was herself.

As he trudged along, deep in thought, a white chrysanthemum fell at his feet. Looking up, he discovered Miss Guinevere Gusty, in a red cloak and hat, sitting on

the bank with a band-box in her lap.

His troubles were promptly swallowed [p120] up in the heart-quake which ensued; but his speech was likewise, and he stood foolishly opening and shutting his mouth, unable to effect a sound.

“I am waiting for the packet to go down to Coreyville,” announced Miss Gusty, straightening her plumed hat, and smiling. “Mr. Gallop says it’s an hour late; but I don’t care, it’s such a grand day.”

Mr. Opp removed his eyes long enough to direct an inquiring glance at the heavens and the earth. “Is it?” he asked, finding his voice. “I been so occupied with business that I haven’t scarcely taken occasion to note the weather.”

“Why, it’s all soft and warm, just like spring,” she continued, holding out her arms and looking up at the sky. “I’ve been wishing I had time to walk along the river a piece.”

“I’ll take you,” said Mr. Opp, eagerly. “We can hear the whistle of the boat in amply sufficient time to get back. Besides, it is a hour late.”

[p121] She hesitated. “You’re real sure you can get me back?”

“Perfectly,” he announced. “I might say in all my experience I never have yet got a lady left on a boat.”

Miss Guinevere, used to being guided, handed him her band-box, and followed him up the steep bank.

The path wound in and out among the trees, now losing itself in the woods, now coming out upon the open river. The whole world was a riot of crimson and gold, and it was warm with that soft echo of summer that brings some of its sweetness, and all of its sadness, but none of its mirth.

Mr. Opp walked beside his divinity oblivious to all else. The sunlight fell unnoticed except when it lay upon her face; the only breeze that blew from heaven was the one

that sent a stray curl floating across her cheek. As Mr. Opp walked, he talked, putting forth every effort to please. His burning desire to be worthy of her led him into all manner of verbal extravagances, and the mere [p122] fact that she was taller than he caused him to indulge in more lofty and figurative language. He captured fugitive quotations, evolved strange metaphors, coined words, and poured all in a glittering heap of eloquence before her shrine.

As he talked, his companion moved heedlessly along beside him, stopping now and then to gather a spray of goldenrod, or to gaze absently at the river through some open space in the trees. For Miss Guinevere Gusty lived in a world of her own—a world of vague possibilities, of half-defined longings, and intangible dreams. Love was still an abstract sentiment, something radiant and breathless that might envelop her at any moment and bear her away to Elysium.

As she stooped to free her skirt from a detaining thorn, she pointed down the bank.

“There’s some pretty sweet-gum leaves; I wish they weren’t so far down.”

“Where?” demanded Mr. Opp, rashly eager to prove his gallantry.

[p123] “’Way down over the edge; but you mustn’t go, it’s too steep.”

“Not for me,” said Mr. Opp, plunging boldly through the underbrush.

The tree grew at a sharp angle over the water, and the branches were so far up that it was necessary to climb out a short distance in order to reach them. Mr. Opp’s soul was undoubtedly that of a knight-errant, but his body, alas! was not. When he found himself astride the slender, swaying trunk, with the bank dropping sharply to the river flowing dizzily beneath him, he went suddenly and unexpectedly blind. Between admiration for himself for ever having gotten there, and despair of ever getting back, lay the present necessity of loosening his hold long enough to break off a branch of the crimson leaves. He tried opening one eye, but the effect was so terrifying that he promptly closed it. He pictured himself, a few moments before, strolling gracefully along the road conversing brilliantly upon divers subjects; then

he bitterly considered the [p124] present moment and the effect he must be producing upon the young lady in the red cloak on the path above. He saw himself clinging abjectly to the swaying tree-trunk, only waiting for his strength or the tree to give away, before he should be plunged into the waters below.

“That’s a pretty spray,” called the soft voice from above; “that one above, to the left.”

Mr. Opp, rallying all his courage, reached blindly out in the direction indicated, and as he did so, he realized that annihilation was imminent. Demonstrating a swift geometrical figure in the air, he felt himself hurling through space, coming to an abrupt and awful pause when he struck the earth. Perceiving with a thrill of surprise that he was still alive, he cautiously opened his eyes. To his further amazement he found that he had landed on his feet, unhurt, and that in his left hand he held a long branch of sweet-gum leaves.

“Why, you skinned the cat, didn’t you?” called an admiring voice from [p125] above. “I was just wondering how you was ever going to get down.”

Mr. Opp crawled up the slippery bank, his knees trembling so that he could scarcely stand.

“Yes,” he said, as he handed her the leaves; “those kind of athletic acts seem to just come natural to some people.”

“You must be awful strong,” continued Guinevere, looking at him with approval.

Mr. Opp sank beside her on the bank and gave himself up to the full enjoyment of the moment. Both hands were badly bruised, and he had a dim misgiving that his coat was ripped up the back; but he was happy, with the wild, reckless happiness of one to whom Fate has been unexpectedly kind. Moreover, the goal toward which all his thought had been rushing for the past hour was in sight. He could already catch glimpses of the vision beautiful. He could hear himself storming the citadel with magic words of eloquence. Meanwhile he nursed the band-box and smiled dumbly

into space.

[p126] From far below, the pungent odor of burning leaves floated up, and the air was full of a blue haze that became luminous as the sun transfused it. It enveloped the world in mystery, and threw a glamour over the dying day.

“It’s so pretty it hurts,” said the girl, clasping her hands about her knees. “I love to watch it all, but it makes the shivers go over me—makes me feel sort of lonesome. Don’t it you?”

Mr. Opp shook his head emphatically. It was the one time in years that down in the depths of his soul he had not felt lonesome. For as Indian summer had come back to earth, so youth had come back to Mr. Opp. The flower of his being was waking to bloom, and the spring tides were at flood.

A belated robin overhead, unable longer to contain his rapture, burst into song; but Mr. Opp, equally full of his subject, was unable to utter a syllable. The sparkling eloquence and the fine phrases had evaporated, and only the bare truth was left.

[p127] Guinevere, having become aware of the very ardent looks that were being cast upon her, said she thought the boat must be about due.

“Oh, no,” said Mr. Opp; “that is, I was about to say—why—er—say, Miss Guin-never, do you think you could ever come to keer about me?”

Guinevere, thus brought to bay, took refuge in subterfuge. “Why—Mr. Opp—I’m not old enough for you.”

“Yes, you are,” he burst forth fervently. “You are everything for me: old enough, and beautiful enough, and smart enough, and sweet enough. I never beheld a human creature that could even begin to think about comparing with you.”

Guinevere, in the agitation of the moment, nervously plucked all the leaves from the branch that had been acquired with such effort. It was with difficulty that she finally managed to lift her eyes.

“You’ve been mighty good to me,” she faltered, “and—and made me lots happier; but I—I don’t care in the way you mean.”

[p128] “Is there anybody else?” demanded Mr. Opp, ready to hurl himself to destruction if she answered in the affirmative.

“Oh, no,” she answered him; “there never has been anybody.”

[p129] “‘Why, Mr. Opp, I’m not old enough’”

“Then I’ll take my chance,” said Mr. Opp, expanding his narrow chest. “Whatever I’ve got out of the world I’ve had to fight for. I don’t mind saying to you that I was sorter started out with a handicap. You know my sister—she’s a—well, a’ invalid, you might say, and while her pa was living, my fortunes wasn’t what you might call as favorable as they are at present. I never thought there would be any use in my considering getting married till I met you, then I didn’t seem able somehow to consider nothing else. If you’ll just let me, I’ll wait. I’ll learn you to care. I won’t bother you, but just wait patient as long as you say.” And this from Mr. Opp, whose sands of life were already half-run! “All I ask for,” he went on wistfully, “is a little sign now and then. [p131] You might give me a little look or something just to keep the time from seeming too long.”

It was almost a question, and as he leaned toward her, with the sunlight in his eyes, something of the beauty of the day touched him, too, just as it touched the weed at his feet, making them both for one transcendent moment part of the glory of the world.

Guinevere Gusty, already in love with love, and reaching blindly out for something deeper and finer in her own life, was suddenly engulfed in a wave of sympathy. She involuntarily put out her hand and touched his fingers.

The sun went down behind the distant shore, and the light faded on the river. Mr. Opp was almost afraid to breathe; he sat with his eyes on the far horizon, and that small, slender hand in his, and for the moment the world was fixed in its orbit, and

Time itself stood still.

Suddenly out of the silence came the long, low whistle of the boat. They scrambled to their feet and hurried down [p132] the path, Mr. Opp having some trouble in keeping up with the nimbler pace of the girl.

“I’ll be calculatin’ every minute until the arrival of the boat to-morrow night,” he was gasping as they came within sight of the wharf. “I’ll be envyin’ every—”

“Where’s my band-box?” demanded Guinevere. “Why, Mr. Opp, if you haven’t gone and left it up in the woods!”

Five minutes later, just as the bell was tapping for the boat to start, a flying figure appeared on the wharf. He was hatless and breathless, his coat was ripped from collar to hem, and a large band-box flapped madly against his legs as he ran. He came down the home-stretch at a record-breaking pace, stepped on board as the gang-plank was lifted, deposited his band-box on the deck, then with a running jump cleared the rapidly widening space between the boat and the shore, and dropped upon the wharf.

He continued waving his handkerchief even after the boat had rounded the [p133] curve, then, having edited a paper, promoted a large enterprise, effected a proposal, and performed two remarkable athletic stunts all in the course of a day, Mr. Opp turned his footsteps toward home.

## [p134] IX

The next day dawned wet and chilly. A fine mist hung in the trees, and the leaves and grasses sagged under their burden of moisture. All the crimson and gold had changed to brown and gray, and the birds and crickets had evidently packed away their chirps and retired for the season.

By the light of a flickering candle, Mr. D. Webster Opp partook of a frugal

breakfast. The luxurious habits of the Moore household had made breakfast a movable feast depending upon the time of Aunt Tish's arrival, and in establishing the new régime Mr. Opp had found it necessary to prepare his own breakfast in order to make sure of getting to the office before noon.

As he sipped his warmed-over coffee, [p135] with his elbows on the red table-cloth, and his heels hooked on the rung of the chair, he recited to himself in an undertone from a very large and imposing book which was propped in front of him, the leaves held back on one side by a candlestick and on the other by a salt-cellar. It was a book which Mr. Opp was buying on subscription, and it was called "An Encyclopedia of Wonder, Beauty, and Wisdom." It contained pellets of information on all subjects, and Mr. Opp made it a practice to take several before breakfast, and to repeat the dose at each meal as circumstances permitted. "An editor," he told Nick, "has got to keep himself instructed on all subjects. He has got to read wide and continuous."

As a rule he followed no special line in his pursuit of knowledge, but with true catholicity of taste, took the items as they came, turning from a strenuous round with "Abbeys and Abbots," to enter with fervor into the wilds of "Abyssinia." The straw which served as bookmark pointed to-day to "Ants," and [p136] ordinarily Mr. Opp would have attacked the subject with all the enthusiasm of an entomologist. But even the best regulated minds will at times play truant, and Mr. Opp's had taken a flying leap and skipped six hundred and thirty-two pages, landing recklessly in the middle of "Young Lochinvar." For the encyclopedia, in its laudable endeavor not only to cover all intellectual requirements, but also to add the crowning grace of culture, had appended a collection of poems under the title "Favorites, Old and New."

Mr. Opp, thus a-wing on the winds of poesy, had sipped his tepid coffee and nibbled his burnt toast in fine abstraction until he came upon a selection which his soul

recognized. He had found words to the music that was ringing in his heart. It was then that he propped the book open before him, and determined not to close it until he had made the lines his own.

Later, as he trudged along the road to town, he repeated the verses to himself, [p137] patiently referring again and again to the note-book in which he had copied the first words of each line.

At the office door he regretfully dismounted from Pegasus, and resolutely turned his attention to the business of the day. His desire was to complete the week's work by noon, spend the afternoon at home in necessary preparation for the coming guest, and have the following day, which was Saturday, free to devote to the interest of the oil company.

In order to accomplish this, expedition was necessary, and Mr. Opp, being more bountifully endowed by nature with energy than with any other quality, fell to work with a will. His zeal, however, interfered with his progress, and he found himself in the embarrassing condition of a machine which is geared too high.

He was, moreover, a bit bruised and stiff from the unusual performances of the previous day, and any sudden motion caused him to wince. But the pain brought recollection, and recollection was instant balm.

[p138] It was hardly to be expected that things would deviate from their usual custom of becoming involved at a critical time, so Mr. Opp was not surprised when Nick was late and had to be spoken to, a task which the editor always achieved with great difficulty. Then the printing-press had an acute attack of indigestion, and no sooner was that relieved than the appalling discovery was made that there were no more good "S's" in the type drawer.

"Use dollar-marks for the next issue," directed Mr. Opp, "and I'll wire immediate to the city."

"We're kinder short on 'I's' too," said Nick. "You take so many in your articles."

Mr. Opp looked injured. “I very seldom or never begin on an ‘I,’” he said indignantly.

“You get ’em in somehow,” said Nick. “Why, the editor over at Coreyville even said ‘Our Wife.’”

“Yes,” said Mr. Opp, “I will, too,—that is—er—”

[p139] The telephone-bell covered his retreat.

“Hello!” he answered in a deep, incisive voice to counteract the effect of his recent embarrassment, “Office of ‘The Opp Eagle.’ Mr. Toddlinger? Yes, sir. You say you want your subscription stopped! Well, now, wait a minute—see here, I can explain that—” but the other party had evidently rung off.

Mr. Opp turned with exasperation upon Nick:

“Do you know what you went and did last week?” He rose and, going to the file, consulted the top paper. “There it is,” he said, “just identical with what he asserted.”

Nick followed the accusing finger and read:

“Mr. and Mrs. Toddlinger moved this week into their new horse and lot.”

Before explanations could be entered into, there was a knock at the door. When it was answered, a very small black boy was discovered standing on the step. He wore a red shirt and a pair of ragged trousers, between which strained [p140] relations existed, and on his head was the brim of a hat from which the crown had long since departed. Hanging on a twine string about his neck was a large onion.

He opened negotiations at once.

“Old Miss says fer you-all to stop dat frowin’ papers an’ sech like trash outen de winder; dey blows over in our-all’s yard.”

He delivered the message in the same belligerent spirit with which it had evidently been conveyed to him, and rolled his eyes at Mr. Opp as if the offense had been personal.

Mr. Opp drew him in, and closed the door. “Did—er—did Mrs. Gusty send you over to say that?” he asked anxiously.

“Yas, sir; she done havin’ a mad spell. What’s dat dere machine fer?”

“It’s a printing-press. Do you think Mrs. Gusty is mad at me?”

“Yas, sir,” emphatically; “she’s mad at ever’body. She ’lows she gwine lick me ef I don’t tek keer. She done got de [p141] kitchen so full o’ switches hit looks jes lak outdoors.”

“I don’t think she would really whip you,” said Mr. Opp, already feeling the family responsibility.

“Naw, sir; she jes ’low she gwine to. What’s in dem dere little drawers?”

“Type,” said Mr. Opp. “You go back and tell Mrs. Gusty that Mr. Opp says he’s very sorry to have caused her any inconvenience, and he’ll send over immediate and pick up them papers.”

“You’s kinder skeered of her, too, ain’t you?” grinned the ambassador, holding up one bare, black foot to the stove. “My mammy she sasses back, but I runs.”

“Well, you’d better run now,” said Mr. Opp, who resented such insight; “but, see here, what’s that onion for?”

“To ’sorb disease,” said the youth, with the air of one who is promulgating some advanced theory in therapeutics; “hit ketches it ’stid of you. My pappy weared a’ onion fer put-near a whole year, an’ hit ’sorbed all de diseases whut [p142] was hangin’ round, an’ nary a one never teched him. An’ one day my pappy he got hongry, an’ he et dat dere onion, an’ whut you reckon? He up an’ died!”

“Well, you go ’long now,” said Mr. Opp, “and tell Mrs. Gusty just exactly verbatim what I told you. What did you say was your name?”

“Val,” said the boy.

Mr. Opp managed to slip a nickel into the dirty little hand without Nick’s seeing

him. Nick was rather firm about these things, and disapproved heartily of Mr. Opp's indiscriminate charities.

"Gimme nudder one an' I'll tell you de rest ob it," whispered Val on the door-step.

Mr. Opp complied.

"Valentine Day Johnson," he announced with pride; then pocketing his prize, he vanished around the corner of the house, forgetting his office of plenipotentiary in his sudden accession of wealth.

Once more peace settled on the office, and Mr. Opp was engrossed in an article [p143] on "The Greatest Petroleum Proposition South of the Mason and Dixon Line," when an ominous, wheezing cough announced the arrival of Mr. Tucker. This was an unexpected catastrophe, for Mr. Tucker's day for spending the morning at the office was Saturday, when he came in to pay for his paper. It seemed rather an unkind trick of Fate's that he should have been permitted to arrive a day too soon.

The old gentleman drew up a chair to the stove, then deliberately removed his overcoat and gloves.

It was when he took off his overshoes, however, that Mr. Opp and Nick exchanged looks of despair. They had a signal code which they habitually employed when storms swept the office, but in a calm like this they were powerless.

"Mighty sorry to hear about that uprisin' in Guatemala," said Mr. Tucker, who took a vivid interest in foreign affairs, but remained quite neutral about questions at home.

Mr. Opp moved about the office [p144] restlessly, knowing from experience that to sit down in the presence of Mr. Tucker was fatal. The only chance of escape lay in motion. He sharpened his pencils, straightened his desk, and tied up two bundles of papers while Mr. Tucker's address on the probable future of the Central American republics continued. Then Mr. Opp was driven to extreme measures. He sent himself a telegram. This ruse was occasionally resorted to, to free the office from

unwelcome visitors without offending them, and served incidentally to produce an effect which was not unpleasant to the editor.

Scribbling a message on a telegraph-blank procured for the purpose from Mr. Gallop, Mr. Opp handed it secretly to Nick, who in turn vanished out of the back door only to reappear at the front. Then the editor, with much ostentation, opened the envelop, and, after reading the contents, declared that he had business that would require immediate action. Would Mr. Tucker excuse him? If so, Nick would hold his coat.

[p145] “But,” protested Mr. Tucker, resisting the effort to force him into his overcoat, “I want to talk over this oil business. We don’t want to take any risks with those fellows. As I was a-saying to Mr. Hager—”

“Yes,” said Mr. Opp, taking his own hat from a nail, and apparently in great haste, “I know, of course. You are exactly right about it. We’ll just talk it over as we go up-street,” and linking his arm through Mr. Tucker’s, he steered him up the muddy channel of Main Street, and safely into the harbor of Our Hotel, where he anchored him breathless, but satisfied.

Having thus disposed, to the best of his ability, of his business for the week, Mr. Opp turned his attention to his yet more arduous domestic affairs. The menu for the guest’s dinner had weighed rather heavily upon him all day, for he had never before entertained in his own home. His heart had been set on turkey; but as that was out of the question, he compromised on a goose, [p146] adhering tenaciously to the cranberry sauce.

It was easier to decide on the goose than it was to procure it, and some time was consumed in the search. Mr. Opp brought all his mental powers to bear on the subject, and attacked the problem with a zeal that merited success.

When he reached home at noon with his arm full of bundles, Aunt Tish met him with lamentations.

“Dey ain’t but one clean table-cloth, an’ hit’s got a hole in hit, an’ I can’t find no sheets to put on de company baid, an’ dere ain’t three cups an’ saucers in de house what belongs to theyselves. I shorely doan know what you thinkin’ ’bout, Mr. D., to go an’ ast company fer. We-all never does hab company. An’ Miss Kippy she be’n habin’ a sort er spell, too, cryin’ to herself, an’ won’t tell me whut’s de matter.”

Mr. Opp shook the raindrops from his hat-brim, and laid the goose tenderly on the table; then he stepped inside the dining-room door, and stood watching the [p147] childish figure that sat on the floor before the fire. She was putting artificial flowers on her head, and every time they fell off, she dropped her head on her knees and sobbed softly to herself. Again and again she made the experiment, and again and again the faded roses came tumbling into her lap.

“I’ll fix ’em,” said Mr. Opp, coming up behind her; “don’t you cry about it, Kippy; I can make them stay, easy.” He searched around in the clothes-press until he found a paper box, which he tied securely upon Miss Kippy’s head.

“Now try it,” he cried; “put the flowers on your head; they’ll stay.”

Timidly, as if afraid of another disappointment, she tried, and when the flowers were caught in the box, she gave a sigh of satisfaction and delight.

“Well, sence I j’ined de church!” exclaimed Aunt Tish, who had been watching proceedings from the doorway; then she added, as Mr. Opp came into the hall: “Hit beats my time de way you handles dat pore chile. Sometimes she [p148] got jes good sense as you an’ me has. She ast me t’other day if she wasn’t crazy. I ’lowed no indeedy, dat crazy folks was lock up in a lunatic asylum. An’ she says ‘Where?’ ‘Up at Coreyville,’ I say. She went on playin’ jes as nice and happy. De chile’s all right ef she don’t git a fool notion; den dey ain’t nobody kin make out what she wants inceptin’ you. She been cryin’ over dem flowers ever sence breakfast.”

“Why didn’t you come after me?” demanded Mr. Opp.

“Jes to tie a box on her haid?” asked Aunt Tish. “Lor’, I thought you was busy

makin’ dem newspapers.”

“So I am,” said Mr. Opp, “but whenever Miss Kippy gets to crying, I want you to come direct after me, do you hear? There ain’t anything more important than in keeping her from getting worried. Now, let’s have a look at that there table-cloth.”

All afternoon Mr. Opp encountered difficulties that would have disheartened a less courageous host. With the limited [p149] means at hand it seemed impossible to entertain in a manner befitting the dignity of the editor of “The Opp Eagle.” But Mr. Opp, though sorely perplexed, was not depressed, for beneath the disturbed surface of his thoughts there ran an undercurrent of pure joy. It caused him to make strange, unnatural sounds in his throat which he meant for song; it made him stop every now and then in his work to glance tenderly and reminiscently at the palm of his right hand, once even going so far as to touch it softly with his lips. For since the last sun had set there had been no waking moment but had held for him the image of a golden world inhabited solely by a pair of luminous eyes, one small hand, and, it must be added, a band-box.

Through the busy afternoon Mr. Opp referred constantly to his watch, and in spite of the manifold duties to be performed, longed impatiently for evening to arrive. At five o’clock he had moved the furniture from one bedroom to another, demonstrated beyond a possibility [p150] of doubt that a fire could not be made in the parlor grate without the chimney smoking, mended two chairs, hung a pair of curtains, and made three errands to town. So much accomplished, he turned his attention to the most difficult task of all.

“Kippy,” he said, going to the window where she was gleefully tracing the course of the raindrops as they chased down the pane. “Stop a minute, Kippy. Listen; I want to talk to you.”

Miss Kippy turned obediently, but her lips continued the dumb conversation she was having with the rain.

"How would you like," said Mr. Opp, approaching the subject cautiously, "to play like you was a grown-up lady—just for to-night, you know?"

Miss Kippy looked at him suspiciously, and her lips stopped moving. Heretofore she had resisted all efforts to change her manner of dress.

"There's a gentleman a-coming," continued Mr. Opp, persuasively; "he's going to remain over till to-morrow, and [p151] Aunt Tish is cooking that large goose for him, and I've been fixing up the spare room. We are all endeavoring to give him a nice time. Don't you want to dress up for him?"

"Will it make him glad?" asked Miss Kippy.

Mr. Opp expiated on the enjoyment it would give the unknown guest to see Kippy in the blue merino dress which Aunt Tish had gotten out of Mrs. Opp's old trunk up-stairs.

"And you'll let Aunt Tish arrange your hair up like a lady?" went on Mr. Opp, pushing the point.

"Yes," said Miss Kippy, after a moment, "Oxety will. She will make him glad."

"Good!" said Mr. Opp. "And if you will sit nice and quiet and never say a word all through supper, I'll get you a book with pictures in it, representing flowers and things."

"Roses?" asked Miss Kippy, drawing a quick breath of delight; and when Mr. Opp nodded, she closed her eyes and [p152] smiled as if heaven were within sight. For Miss Kippy was like a harp across which some rough hand had swept, snapping all the strings but two, the high one of ecstasy and the low one of despair.

At six o'clock Mr. Opp went up to make his toilet. The rain, which had been merely rehearsing all day, was now giving a regular performance, and it played upon the windows, and went trilling through the gutters on the roof, while the old cedar-tree scraped an accompaniment on the corner of the porch below. But, nothing daunted,

Mr. Opp donned his bravest attire. Cyclones and tornadoes could not have deterred him from making the most elaborate toilet at his command. To be sure, he turned up the hem of his trousers and tied a piece of oilcloth securely about each leg, and he also spread a handkerchief tenderly over his pink necktie; but these could be easily removed after he heard the boat whistle.

He dressed by the light of a sputtering candle before a small mirror the veracity of which was more than questionable. It [p153] presented him to himself as a person with a broad, flat face, the nose of which appeared directly between his eyes, and the mouth on a line with the top of his ears. But he made allowances for these idiosyncrasies on the part of the mirror; in fact, he made such liberal allowances that he was quite satisfied with the reflection.

“I’ll procure the hack to bring the company back in,” he said to Aunt Tish rather nervously as he passed through the kitchen. “You assist Miss Kippy to get arranged, and I’ll carry up the coal and set the table after I return back home. I can do it while the company is up in his room.”

All the way into town, as he splashed along the muddy road, he was alternately dreading the arrival of one passenger, and anticipating joyfully, the arrival of another. For as the time approached the impending presence of the company began to take ominous form, and Mr. Opp grew apprehensive.

At the landing he found everything [p154] dark and quiet. Evidently the packet was unusually late, and the committee appointed to meet it and conduct the guests to their various destinations was waiting somewhere uptown, probably at Your Hotel. Mr. Opp paused irresolute: his soul yearned for solitude, but the rain-soaked dock offered no shelter except the slight protection afforded by a pile of empty boxes. Selecting the driest and largest of these, he turned it on end, and by an adroit adjustment of his legs, succeeded in getting inside.

Below, the river rolled heavily past in the twilight, sending up tiny juts of water to

meet the pelting rain. A cold, penetrating mist clung to the ground, and the wind carried complaining tales from earth to heaven. Everything breathed discomfort, but Mr. Opp knew it not.

His soul was sailing sunlit seas of bliss, fully embarked at last upon the most magic and immortal of all illusions. Sitting cramped and numb in his narrow quarters, he peered eagerly into the darkness, watching for the first lights of [p155] the Sunny South to twinkle through the gloom. And as he watched he chanted in a sing-song ecstasy:

“She is coming, my own, my sweet;

Were it ever so airy a tread,

My heart would hear her and beat,

Were it earth in an earthy bed;

My dust would hear her and beat,

Had I lain for a century dead;

Would start and tremble under her feet,

And blossom in purple and red.”

## [p156] X

When Miss Guinevere Gusty tripped up the gang-plank of the Sunny South late that afternoon, vainly trying to protect herself from the driving rain, she was met half-way by the gallant old captain.

Tradition had it that the captain had once cast a favorable eye upon her mother; but Mrs. Gusty, being cross-eyed, had looked elsewhere.

“We are a pudding without plums,” he announced gaily, as he held the umbrella at an angle calculated to cause a waterspout in the crown of her hat—“not a lady on board. All we needed was a beautiful young person like you to liven us up. You

haven't forgotten those pretty tunes you played for me last trip, have you?"

[p157] Guinevere laughed, and shook her head. "That was just for you and the girls," she said.

"Well, it'll be for me and the boys this time. I've got a nice lot of gentlemen on board, going down to your place, by the way, to buy up all your oil-lands. Now I know you are going to play for us if I ask you to."

"My goodness! are they on this boat?" asked Guinevere, in a flutter. "I am so glad; I just love to watch city people."

"Yes," said the captain; "that was Mr. Mathews talking to me as you came aboard—the one with the white beard. Everything that man touches turns to money. That glum-looking young fellow over there is his secretary. Hinton is his name; curious sort of chap."

Guinevere followed his glance with eager interest. "The solemn one with the cap pulled over his eyes?" she asked.

The captain nodded. "All the rest are inside playing cards and having a good time; but he's been moping around like [p158] that ever since they got on board. I've got to go below now, but when I come back, you'll play some for me, won't you?"

Guinevere protested violently, but something within her whispered that if the captain was very insistent she would render the selection which had won her a gold medal at the last commencement.

Slipping into the saloon, she dropped quietly into one of the very corpulent chairs which steamboats particularly affect, and, unobserved, proceeded to give herself up to the full enjoyment of the occasion. The journey from Coreyville to the Cove, in the presence of the distinguished strangers, had assumed the nature of an adventure. Giving her imagination free rein, Miss Gusty, without apology, transported the commonplace group of business men at the card-table into the wildest realms of romance. The fact that their language, appearance, and manner spoke of the city,

was for her a sufficient peg upon which to hang innumerable conjectures. So deep [p159] was she in her speculations that she did not hear the captain come up behind her.

"Where have you been hiding?" he asked in stentorian tones. "I was afraid you'd gotten out on deck and the wind had blown you overboard. Don't you think it's about time for that little tune? We are forty minutes late now, and we'll lose another half-hour taking on freight at Smither's Landing. I've been banking on hearing that little dance-piece you played for me before."

"I can't play—before them," said Guinevere, nervously.

The captain laughed. "Yes, you can; they'll like it. Mr. Mathews said something mighty pretty about you when you came on board."

"He didn't—honest?" said Guinevere, blushing. "Oh, truly, Captain, I can't play!" But even as she spoke she unbuttoned her gloves. Her accomplishment was clamoring for an exhibition, and though her spirit failed her, she twirled the piano-stool and took her seat.

[p160] The group of men at the table, heretofore indifferent to proceedings, looked up when a thundering chord broke the stillness. A demure young girl, with gentle, brown eyes, was making a furious and apparently unwarranted attack upon the piano. Her one desire evidently was to get inside of the instrument. With insinuating persistence she essayed an entrance through the treble, and, being unable to effect it, fell upon the bass, and exhausted a couple of rounds of ammunition there. The assault on both flanks being unsuccessful, she resorted to strategy, crossing her hands and assailing each wing of the enemy from an unexpected quarter. When this move failed, she evidently became incensed, and throwing aside diplomacy, rallied all her forces, charging her artillery up to the highest note, then thundering down to the lowest, beating down the keys as fast as they dared to rise. In the midst of the carnage, when the clamor was at its height and victory seemed imminent, she [p161]

suddenly paused, with one hand in air and her head gently inclined, and, tapping out two silvery bugle-notes of truce, raised the siege.

The appalling silence that ensued might have hung above a battle-field of slain and wounded. The captain bit his mustache.

“That wasn’t exactly the one I meant,” he said. “I want that little dance-tune with the jingle to it.”

Miss Gusty, disappointed and surprised at the effect which her masterpiece had failed to produce, was insisting with flushed cheeks that she could play no more, when the gentleman who was called Mr. Mathews rose from the table and came toward her. His hair and pointed beard were white, but his eyes were still young, and he looked at her while he spoke to the captain.

“I beg your pardon, Captain,” he was saying in smooth, even tones, “can’t you persuade the young lady to sing something for us?”

“I never took vocal,” said Guinevere, [p162] looking at him frankly. “I’m making a specialty of instrumental.”

The gentleman looked sidewise at his companions and stroked his beard gravely. “But you do sing?” he persisted.

“Just popular music,” said Guinevere. “I was going to take ‘The Holy City’ and ‘The Rosary’ last year, but the vocal teacher got sick.”

In response to a very urgent invitation, she took her seat again, and this time sang a sentimental ditty concerning the affairs of one “Merry Little Milly in the Month of May.”

This selection met with prompt favor, and the men left their cards, and gathered about the piano, demanding an encore.

Miss Guinevere’s voice was very small, and her accompaniment very loud, but, in her effort to please, she unconsciously became dramatic in her expression, and

frowned and smiled and lifted her brows in sympathy with the emotions of the damsel in the song. And Miss Guinevere's eyes being [p163] expressive and her lips very red, the result proved most satisfactory to the audience.

One stout young man in particular expressed himself in such unrestrained terms of enthusiasm, that Guinevere, after singing several songs, became visibly embarrassed. Upon the plea of being too warm she made her escape, half-promising to return and sing again later on.

Flushed with the compliments and the excitement, and a little uncertain about the propriety of it all, she hurried through the swing-door and, turning suddenly on the deck, stumbled over something in the darkness.

It proved to be a pair of long legs that were stretched out in front of a silent figure, who shot a hand out to restore Miss Gusty to an upright position. But the deck was slippery from the rain, and before he could catch her, she went down on her knees.

"Did it hurt you?" a voice asked anxiously.

[p164] "It don't matter about me," answered Guinevere, "just so it didn't spoil my new dress. I'm afraid there's an awful tear in it."

"I hope not," said the voice. "I'd hate to be guilty of dress slaughter even in the second degree. Sure you are not hurt? Sit down a minute; here's a chair right behind you, out of the wind."

Guinevere groped about for the chair. "Mother can mend it," she went on, voicing her anxiety, "if it isn't too bad."

"And if it is?" asked the voice.

"I'll have to wear it, anyhow. It's brand splinter new, the first one I ever had made by a sure-enough dressmaker."

"My abominable legs!" muttered the voice.

Guinevere laughed, and all at once became curious concerning the person who

belonged to the legs.

He had dropped back into his former position, with feet outstretched, hands in [p165] pockets, and cap pulled over his eyes, and he did not seem inclined to continue the conversation.

She drew in deep breaths of the cool air, and watched the big side-wheel churn the black water into foam, and throw off sprays of white into the darkness. She liked to be out there in the sheltered corner, watching the rain dash past, and to hear the wind whistling up the river. She was glad to be in the dark, too, away from all those gentlemen, so ready with their compliments. But the sudden change from the heated saloon to the cold deck chilled her, and she sneezed.

Her companion stirred. “If you are going to stay out here, you ought to put something around you,” he said irritably.

“I’m not very cold. Besides, I don’t want to go in. I don’t want them to make me sing any more. Mother’ll be awfully provoked if I take cold, though. Do you think it’s too damp?”

“There’s my overcoat,” said the [p166] man, indifferently; “you can put that around you if you want to.”

She struggled into the large sleeves, and he made no effort to help her.

“You don’t like music, do you?” she asked naïvely as she settled back in her chair.

“Well, yes,” he said slowly. “I should say the thing I dislike least in the world is music.”

“Then why didn’t you come in to hear me play?” asked Guinevere, emboldened by the darkness.

“Oh, I could hear it outside,” he assured her; “besides, I have a pair of defective lamps in my head. The electric lights hurt my eyes.”

He struck a match as he spoke to relight his pipe, and by its flare she caught her first

glimpse of his face, a long, slender, sensitive face, brooding and unhappy.

“I guess you are Mr. Hinton,” she said as if to herself.

He turned with the lighted match in his hand. “How did you know that?”

[p167] “The captain told me. He pointed out you and Mr. Mathews, but he didn’t tell me any of the rest.”

“A branch of your education that can afford to remain neglected,” said Mr. Hinton as he puffed at his pipe.

The door of the saloon swung open, and the chubby gentleman appeared in the light, shading his eyes, and calling out that they were all waiting for the little canary-bird.

“I don’t want to go,” whispered Guinevere, shrinking back into the shadow.

The chubby gentleman peered up and down the deck, then, assailed by a gust of wind, beat a hasty retreat.

“I don’t like him,” announced Guinevere, drawing a breath of relief. “It isn’t just because he’s fat and ugly; it’s the silly way he looks at you.”

“What a pity you can’t tell him so!” said her companion, dryly. “Such blasphemy might do him good. He is the scion of a distinguished family made wealthy by the glorious sale of pork.”

[p168] “Are all the gentlemen millionaires?” asked Guinevere in awe.

“Present company excepted,” qualified Hinton.

“It’ll seem awful small to them down in the Cove. Why, we haven’t got room enough at the two hotels to put them all up.”

“Oh, you live there, do you?”

“Yes; I’ve just been up at Coreyville spending the night. I used to hate it down at the Cove, it was so little and stupid; but I like it better now.”

There was a long silence, during which each pursued a widely different line of

thought.

“We have got a newspaper at the Cove now,” announced Guinevere. “It’s an awful nice paper, called ‘The Opp Eagle.’”

“Opp?” repeated Hinton. “Oh, yes, that was the man I telephoned to. What sort of chap is he, anyhow?”

“He’s awfully smart,” said Guinevere, her cheeks tingling. “Not so much [p169] book learning, but a fine brain. The preacher says he’s got a natural gift of language. You ought to see some of his editorials.”

“Hiding his light under a bushel, isn’t he?”

“That’s just it,” said Guinevere, glad to expatiate on the subject. “If Mr. Opp could get in a bigger place and get more chances, he’d have a lot more show. But he won’t leave Miss Kippy. She’s his sister, you know; there is only the two of them, and she’s kind of crazy, and has to have somebody take care of her. Mother thinks it’s just awful he don’t send her to an asylum, but I know how he feels.”

“Is he a young man?” asked Mr. Hinton.

“Well—no, not exactly; he’s just seventeen years and two months older than I am.”

“Oh,” said Hinton, comprehensively.

There was another long pause, during which Guinevere turned things over in [p170] her mind, and Mr. Hinton knocked the ashes from his pipe.

“I think girls seem a good deal older than they are, don’t you?” she asked presently.

“Some girls,” Hinton agreed.

“How old would you take me for?”

“In the dark?”

“Yes.”

“About twelve.”

“Oh, that’s not fair,” said Guinevere. “I’m eighteen, and lots of people take me for twenty.”

“That is when they can see you,” said Hinton.

Guinevere decided that she did not like him. She leaned back in her corner and tried not to talk. But this course had its disadvantage, for when she was silent he seemed to forget she was there.

Once he took a turn up and down the deck, and when he came back, he stood for a long time leaning over the rail and gazing into the water. As he turned to sit down she heard him mutter to himself:

[p171] “… That no life lives forever;

That dead men rise up never;

That even the weariest river

Winds somewhere safe to sea.”

Guinevere repeated the words softly to herself, and wondered what they meant. She was still thinking about them when a dim red light in the distance told her they were approaching the Cove. She slipped off the heavy overcoat and began to put on her gloves.

“Hello! we are getting in, are we?” asked Hinton, shaking himself into an upright position. “Is that Cove City where the big red light bores into the water like a corkscrew?”

They moved to the bow of the boat and watched as it changed its course and made for the opposite shore.

“Did you mean,” said Guinevere, absently, “that you wanted it all to end like that? For us to just go out into nothing, like the river gets lost in the ocean?”

Hinton glanced at her in surprise, and [p172] discovered that there was an unusually thoughtful face under the sweeping brim of the red hat. The fact that she was pretty

was less evident to him than the fact that she was wistful. His mood was sensitive to minor chords.

“I guess you are eighteen,” he said, and he smiled, and Guinevere smiled back, and the chubby gentleman, coming suddenly out upon them, went in again and slammed the door.

The lights on the landing twinkled brighter and brighter, and presently figures could be seen moving here and there. The steamer, grumbling with every chug of the wheel, was brought around, and the roustabouts crowded along the rail, ready to make her fast.

Guinevere and Hinton stood on the upper deck under his umbrella and waited.

Directly below them on the dock a small, fantastic figure made frantic efforts to attract their attention. He stood uncovered, regardless of the rain, madly waving his hat.

[p173] “Is that anybody you know?” asked Hinton.

Guinevere, who was watching the lights on the water, started guiltily.

“Where?” she asked.

“Down to the right—that comical little codger in the checked suit.”

Guinevere looked, then turned upon Hinton eyes that were big with indignation. “Why, of course,” she said; “that’s Mr. Opp.”

## [p174] XI

As Willard Hinton stood on the porch of Your Hotel and waited for his host for the night to call for him, he was in that state of black dejection that comes to a young man when Ambition has proposed to Fortune, and been emphatically rejected. For six years he had worked persistently and ceaselessly toward a given goal, doing clerical work by day and creative work by night, going from shorthand into

longhand, and from numerical figures into figures of speech. For the way that Hinton's soul was traveling was the Inky Way, and at its end lay Authorship.

Hinton had taken himself and his work seriously, and served an apprenticeship of hard study and conscientious [p175] preparation. So zealous was he, in fact, that he had arrived at the second stage of his great enterprise with a teeming brain, a practised hand, and a pair of affected eyes over which the oculists shook their heads and offered little encouragement.

For four months he had implicitly obeyed orders, attending only to his regular work, eating and sleeping with exemplary regularity, and spending all of his spare time in the open air. But the ravages made in the long nights dedicated to the Muses were not to be so easily repaired, and his eyes, instead of improving, were growing rapidly worse. The question of holding his position had slipped from a matter of months into weeks.

As he stood on the porch, he could hear the bustle of entertainment going on within the limited quarters of Your Hotel. Jimmy Fallows was in his element. As bartender, head waiter, and jovial landlord he was playing a triple bill to a crowded house. Occasionally he [p176] opened the door and urged Hinton to come inside.

"Mr. Opp'll be here 'fore long," he would say. "He's expecting you, but he had to stop by to take his girl home. You better step in and get a julep."

But Hinton, wrapped in the gloom of his own thoughts, preferred to remain where he was. Already he seemed to belong to the dark, to be a thing apart from his fellow-men. He shrank from companionship and sympathy as he shrank from the light. He longed to crawl away like a sick animal into some lonely corner and die. Whichever way he turned, the great specter of darkness loomed before him. At first he had fought, then he had philosophically stood still, now he was retreating. Again and again he told himself that he would meet it like a man, and again and again he shrank back, ready to seek escape anywhere, anyhow.

“O God, if I weren’t so damnably young!” he cried to himself, beating his clenched hand against his brow. “More [p177] than half my life yet to live, and in the dark!”

The rattle of wheels and the stopping of a light in front of the hotel made him pull himself together.

The small gentleman in the checked suit whom he had seen on the wharf strode in without seeing him. He paused before he opened the door and smoothed his scanty locks and rearranged his pink necktie. Then he drew in his chin, threw out his chest, and with a carefully prepared smile of welcome entered.

The buzz within increased, and it was some minutes before the door opened again and Jimmy Fallows was heard saying:

“He’s round here some place. Mr. Hinton! Oh, here you are! Let me make you acquainted with Mr. Opp; he’s going to take you out to his house for the night.”

No sooner had Hinton’s hand been released from Mr. Opp’s cordial grasp than he felt that gentleman’s arm thrust [p178] through his, and was aware of being rapidly conducted down the steps and out to the vehicle.

“On no possible account,” Mr. Opp was saying, with Hinton’s grip in one hand and two umbrellas in the other, “would I have allowed myself to be late, except that it was what you might consider absolutely necessary. Now, you get right in; just take all that robe. No, the grip can go right here between my feet. We trust that you will not regard the weather in any ways synonymous with the state of our feelings of welcome.”

Mr. Hinton remarked rather shortly that the weather never mattered to him one way or another.

“That’s precisely like myself,” Mr. Opp went on. “I come of very sturdy, enduring stock. For a man of my size I doubt if you’d find a finer constitution in the country. You wouldn’t particularly think it to look at me, now would you?”

Hinton looked at the small, stooping [p179] figure, and at the peaked, sallow face, and said rather sarcastically that he would not.

“Strong as an ox,” declared Mr. Opp.

Just here the horse stumbled, and they were jerked violently forward.

Mr. Opp apologized. “Just at present we are having a little difficulty with our country roads. We have taken the matter up in ‘The Opp Eagle’ last week. All these things take time to regulate, but we are getting there. This oil boom is going to revolutionize things. It’s my firm and abiding conviction that we are on the eve of a great change. It wouldn’t surprise me in the least if this town grew to be one of the principalest cities on the Ohio River.”

“To be a worthy eyrie for your ‘Eagle’?” suggested Hinton.

“‘The Opp Eagle,’” corrected Mr. Opp. “I don’t know as you know that I am the sole proprietor, as well as being the editor in addition.”

“No,” said Hinton, “I did not know. How does it happen that a man with such [p180] responsibilities can take time to dabble in oil-wells?”

“You don’t know me,” said Mr. Opp, with a paternal smile at his own ability. “Promoting and organizing comes as natural to me as breathing the atmosphere. I am engineering this scheme with one hand, the Town Improvement League with another, and ‘The Opp Eagle’ with another. Then, in a minor kind of way, I am a active Odd Fellow, first cornetist in the Unique Orchestra, and a director in the bank. And beside,” Mr. Opp concluded with some coyness, “there is the natural personal social diversions that most young men indulge in.”

By this time they had reached the gray old house on the river-bank, and Mr. Opp hitched the horse and held the lantern, while Hinton stepped from one stony island to another in the sea of mud.

“Just enter right into the dining-room,” said Mr. Opp, throwing open the door.

“Unfortunately we are having a [p181] temporary difficulty with the parlor heating apparatus. If you’ll just pass right on up-stairs, I’ll show you the guest-chamber. Be careful of your head, please!”

With pomp and dignity Mr. Hinton was conducted to his apartment, and urged to make known any possible want that might occur to him.

“I’ll be obliged to leave you for a spell,” said Mr. Opp, “in order to attend to the proper putting up of the horse. If you’ll just consider everything you see as yours, and make yourself entirely at home, I’ll come up for you in about twenty minutes.”

Left alone, Hinton went to the bureau to pin a paper around the lamp, and as he did so he encountered a smiling face in the mirror. The face was undoubtedly his, but the smile seemed almost to belong to a stranger, so long had it been since he had seen it.

He made a hasty toilet, and sat down with his back to the light to await his summons to dinner. The large room, [p182] poorly and scantily furnished, gave unmistakable evidence of having been arranged especially for his coming. There was no covering on the floor, there were no pictures on the wall; but the wall-paper was of a sufficiently decorative character to warrant the absence of other adornment. It may be said to have been a botanical paper, for roses and lilies and sunflowers and daisies grew in riotous profusion. The man who hung the paper evidently was of a scientific turn, for in matching the strips he had gained some results in cross-grafting that approached the miraculous.

After sufficient time had elapsed to have stabled half a dozen horses, Hinton, whose appetite was becoming ravenous, went into the hall and started down the steps. When half-way down he heard a crash of china, and saw his host, in his shirt-sleeves, staggering under a large tray overcrowded with dishes.

Beating a hasty retreat, he went quietly up the steps again, but not before he heard a querulous voice remonstrate:

[p183] “Now, Mr. D., if you ain’t done busted two plates and a tea-cup!”

Retiring to his room until the trouble should be adjusted, Hinton once more contemplated the floral paper. As he sat there, the door creaked slightly, and looking up, he thought he saw some one peeping at him through the crack. Later he distinctly heard the rustle of garments, a stealthy step, and the closing of the door across the hall.

At last Mr. Opp came somewhat noisily up the steps and, flinging wide the door, invited him to descend. In the dining-room below the scene was nothing short of festal. All the candlesticks were filled with lighted candles, an American flag was draped across the top of the clock, and the little schooner that rocked behind the pendulum seemed fired with the determination to get somewhere to-night if it never did again. Even the owls on each end of the mantel wore a benignant look, and seemed to beam a welcome on the honored guest.

[p184] But it was the dining-table that held the center of the stage, and that held everything else as well. The dinner, through its sequence of soup, meat, salad, and desert, was displayed in lavish hospitality. Cove etiquette evidently demanded that no square inch of the table-cloth should remain unoccupied.

Seated at the table, with hands demurely folded, was the most grotesque figure that Hinton had ever seen. Clad in a queer, old-fashioned garment of faded blue cloth, with very full skirt and flowing sleeves, with her hair gathered into a tight knot at the back of her head, and a necklace of nutshells about her neck, a strange little lady sat and watched him with parted lips and wide, excited eyes.

“If you’ll just sit here opposite my sister,” said Mr. Opp, not attempting an introduction, “I’ll as usual take my customary place at the head of the board.”

It was all done with great éclat, but [p185] from the first there were unmistakable signs of nervousness on the part of the host. He left the table twice before the soup was removed, once to get the napkins which had been overlooked, and once to

persuade his sister not to put the baked potatoes in her lap.

When the critical moment for the trial of strength between him and the goose arrived, he was not in good condition. It was his first wrestling match with a goose, and his technical knowledge of the art consisted in the meager fact that the strategic point was to become master of the opponent's legs. The fowl had, moreover, by nature of its being, the advantage of extreme slipperiness, an expedient recognized and made use of by the gladiators of old.

Mr. Opp, limited as to space, and aware of a critical audience, rose to the occasion, and with jaw set and the light of conquest in his eye entered the fray. He pushed forward, and pulled back, he throttled, he went through facial and bodily contortions. The match was [p186] conducted in "the catch hold, first down to lose style," and the honors seemed equally divided. At last, by the adroit administration of a left-leg stroke, Mr. Opp succeeded in throwing his adversary, but unfortunately he threw it too far.

The victory, though brilliant, was not without its casualties. The goose, in its post-mortem flight, took its revenge, and the overturned cranberries sent a crimson stain across the white cloth, giving a sanguinary aspect to the scene.

When order was restored and Mr. Opp had once more taken his seat, the little lady in the blue dress, who had remained quiet during the recent conflict, suddenly raised her voice in joyous song.

"Now, Kippy," warned Mr. Opp, putting a restraining hand on her arm, and looking at her appealingly. The little lady shrank back in her chair and her eyes filled as she clasped his hand tightly in both of hers.

"As I was remarking," Mr. Opp went steadily on, trying to behave as if it were [p187] quite natural for him to eat with his left hand, "the real value of the underground product in this country has been but fairly made apparent, and now that you capitalists are coming in to take a hold, there's no way of forming a idea of the

ultimate result."

Hinton, upon whom no phase of the situation had been lost, came valiantly to Mr. Opp's rescue. He roused himself to follow his host's lead in the conversation; he was apparently oblivious to the many irregularities of the dinner. In fact, it was one of the rare occasions upon which Hinton took the trouble to exert himself. Something in the dreary old room, with its brave attempt at cheer, in the half-witted little lady who was making such superhuman efforts to be good, and above all in the bombastic, egotistical, ignorant editor who was trying to keep up appearances against such heavy odds, touched the best and deepest that was in Hinton, and lifted him out of himself. Gradually he began to take the lead in the conversation. With great tact [p188] he relieved Mr. Opp of the necessity of entertaining, and gave him a chance to eat his dinner. He told stories so simple that even Miss Kippy loosened her hold on her brother's hand to listen.

When the sunset of the dinner in the form of a pumpkin pie had disappeared, the gentlemen retired to the fire.

"Don't you smoke?" asked Hinton, holding a match to his pipe.

"Why, yes," said Mr. Opp, "I have smoked occasional. It's amazing how it assists you in creating newspaper articles. One of the greatest editorials I ever turned out was when I had a cigar in my mouth."

"Then why don't you smoke?"

Mr. Opp glanced over his shoulders at Aunt Tish, who, with Miss Kippy's doubtful assistance, was clearing the table.

"I don't mind telling you," he said confidentially, "that up to the present time I've experienced a good many business reverses and considerable family responsibility. I hope now in a year or [p189] two to be able to indulge them little extra items. The lack of money," he added somewhat proudly, "is no disgrace; but I can't deny it's what you might call limiting."

Hinton smiled. “I think I’ve got a cigar somewhere about me. Here it is. Will you try it?”

Mr. Opp didn’t care if he did, and from the manner in which he lighted it, and from the way in which he stood, with one elbow on the high mantel-shelf and his feet gracefully crossed, while he blew curling wreaths toward the ceiling, it was not difficult to reckon the extent of his self-denial.

“Do you indulge much in the pleasure of reading?” he asked, looking at Hinton through the cloud of smoke.

“I did,” said Hinton, drawing a deep breath.

“It’s a great pastime,” said Mr. Opp. “I wonder if you are familiar with this here volume.” He took from the shelf “The Encyclopedia of Wonder, Beauty, and Wisdom.”

[p190] “Hardly a thumb-nail edition,” said Hinton, receiving it with both hands.

“Say, it’s a remarkable work,” said Mr. Opp, earnestly; “you ought to get yourself one. Facts in the first part, and the prettiest poetry you ever read in the back: a dollar down and fifty cents a month until paid for. Here, let me show you; read that one.”

“I can’t see it,” said Hinton.

“I’ll get the lamp.”

“Never mind, Opp; it isn’t that. You read it to me.”

Mr. Opp complied with great pleasure, and having once started, he found it difficult to stop. From “Lord Ullin’s Daughter” he passed to “Curfew,” hence to “Barbara Frietchie” and “Young Lochinvar,” and as he read Hinton sat with closed eyes and traveled into the past.

He saw a country school-house, and himself a youngster of eight competing for a prize. He was standing on a platform, and the children were below him, and behind him was a row of visitors. [p191] He was paralyzed with fear, but bursting with

ambition. With one supreme effort he began his speech:

Oh, the young Lochinvar has came out of the west!

He got no further; a shout from the big boys and a word from the teacher, and he burst into tears and fled for refuge to his mother. How the lines brought it all back! He could feel her arms about him now, and her cheek against his, and hear again her words of comfort. In all the years since she had been taken from him he had never wanted her so insistently as during those few moments that Mr. Opp's high voice was doing its worst for the long-suffering Lochinvar.

"Mr. D.," said a complaining voice from the doorway, "Miss Kippy won't lemme tek her dress off to go to baid. She 'low she gwine sleep in hit."

Mr. Opp abruptly descended from his elocutionary flight, and asked to be excused for a few moments.

[p192] "Just a little domestic friction," he assured Hinton; "you can glance over the rest of the poems, and I'll be back soon."

Hinton, left alone, paced restlessly up and down the room. The temporary diversion was over, and he was once more face to face with his problem. He went to the table, and, taking a note from his pocket, bent over the lamp to read it. The lines blurred and ran together, but a word here and there recalled the contents. It was from Mr. Mathews, who preferred writing disagreeable things to saying them. Mr. Mathews, the note said, had been greatly annoyed recently by repeated errors in the reports of his secretary; he was neither as rapid nor as accurate as formerly, and an improvement would have to be made, or a change would be deemed advisable.

"Delicate tact!" sneered Hinton, crushing the paper in his hand. "Courtesy sometimes begets a request, and the shark shrinks from conferring favors. And I've got to stick it out, to go on [p193] accepting condescending disapproval until a 'change is deemed advisable.'"

He dropped his head on his arms, and so deep was he in his bitter thoughts that he

did not hear Mr. Opp come into the room. That gentleman stood for a moment in great embarrassment; then he stepped noiselessly out, and heralded his second coming by rattling the door-knob.

The wind had risen to a gale, and it shrieked about the old house and tugged at the shutters and rattled the panes incessantly.

“You take the big chair,” urged Mr. Opp, who had just put on a fresh log and sent the flames dancing up the chimney; “and here’s a pitcher of hard cider whenever you feel the need of a little refreshment. You ain’t a married man I would judge, Mr. Hinton.”

“Thank the Lord, no!” exclaimed Hinton.

“Well,” said Mr. Opp, pursing his lips and smiling, “you know that’s just where I think us young men are making a mistake.”

[p194] “Matrimony,” said Hinton, “is about the only catastrophe that hasn’t befallen me during my short and rocky career.”

“See here,” said Mr. Opp, “I used to feel that way, too.”

“Before you met her?” suggested Hinton.

Mr. Opp looked pleased but embarrassed. “I can’t deny there is a young lady,” he said; “but she is quite young as yet. In fact, I don’t mind telling you she’s just about half my age.”

Hinton, instead of putting two and two together, added eighteen to eighteen. “And you are about thirty-six?” he asked.

“Exactly,” said Mr. Opp, surprised. “I am most generally considered a long sight younger.”

From matrimony the conversation drifted to oil-wells, then to journalism, and finally to a philosophical discussion of life itself. Mr. Opp got beyond his depth again and again, and at times he became so absorbed that he gave a very poor imitation of

himself, and showed [p195] signs of humility that were rarely if ever visible.

Hinton meantime was taking soundings, and sometimes his plummet stopped where it started, and sometimes it dropped to an unexpected depth.

“Well,” he said at last, rising, “we must go to bed. You’ll go on climbing a ladder in the air, and I’ll go on burrowing like a mole in the ground, and what is the good of it all? What chance have either of us for coming out anywhere? You can fool yourself; I can’t: that’s the difference.”

Mr. Opp’s unusual mental exertions had apparently affected his entire body, his legs were tightly wrapped about each other, his arms were locked, and his features were drawn into an amazing pucker of protest.

“That ain’t it,” he said emphatically, struggling valiantly to express his conviction: “this here life business ain’t run on any such small scale as that. According to my notion, or understanding, it’s—well—what you might call, in military [p196] figures, a fight.” He paused a moment and tied himself if possible even into a tighter knot, then proceeded slowly, groping his way: “Of course there’s some that just remains around in camp, afraid to fight and afraid to desert, just sort of indulging in conversation, you might say, about the rest of the army. Then there is the cowards and deserters. But a decent sort of a individual, or rather soldier, carries his orders around with him, and the chief and principal thing he’s got to do is to follow them. What the fight is concerning, or in what manner the general is a-aiming to bring it all correct in the end, ain’t, according to my conclusion, a particle of our business.”

Having arrived at this point of the discussion in a somewhat heated and indignant state, Mr. Opp suddenly remembered his duties as host. With a lordly wave of the hand he dismissed the subject, and conducted Hinton in state to his bed-chamber, where he insisted upon lighting the fire and arranging the bed.

[p197] “It was Mr. Opp saying his prayers”

[p199] Hinton sat for a long time before undressing, listening to the wind in the

chimney, to the scrape, scrape of the cedar on the roof, and to the yet more dismal sounds that were echoing in his heart. Everything about the old house spoke of degeneration, decay; yet in the midst of it lived a man who asked no odds of life, who took what came, and who lived with a zest, an abandon, a courage that were baffling. Self-deception, egotism, cheap optimism—could they bring a man to this state of mind? Hinton wondered bitterly what Opp would do in his position; suppose his sight was threatened, how far would his foolish self-delusion serve him then?

But he could not imagine Mr. Opp, lame, halt, or blind, giving up the fight. There was that in the man—egotism, courage, whatever it was—that would never recognize defeat, that quality that wins out of a life of losing the final victory.

Before he retired, Hinton found there was no drinking water in his room, and, [p200] remembering a pitcher full in the dining-room, he took the candle and softly opened his door. The sudden cold draft from the hall made the candle flare, but as it steadied, Hinton saw that an old cot had been placed across the door opposite his, as if on guard, and that beside it knelt an ungainly figure in white, with his head clasped in his hands. It was Mr. Opp saying his prayers.

## [p201] XII

The visit of the capitalists marked the beginning of a long and profitable spell of insomnia for the Cove. The little town had gotten a gnat in its eye when Mr. Opp arrived, and now that it had become involved in a speculation that threatened to develop into a boom, it found sleep and tranquillity a thing of the past.

The party of investigators had found such remarkable conditions that they were eager to buy up the ground at once; but they met with unexpected opposition.

At a meeting which will go down to posterity in the annals of Cove City, the Turtle Creek Land Company, piloted by the intrepid Mr. Opp, had held its course [p202] against persuasion, threats, and bribes. There was but one plank in the company’s

platform, and that was a determination not to sell. To this plank they clung through the storm of opposition, through the trying calm of indifference that followed, until a truce was declared.

Finally an agreement was reached by which the Turtle Creek Land Company was to lease its ground to the capitalists, receive a given per cent. of the oil produced, and maintain the right to buy stock up to a large and impossible amount at any time during the ensuing year.

Close upon this contract came men and machinery to open up a test well. For weeks hauling was done up the creek bottom, there being no road leading to the oil spring where the first drilling was to be done.

The town watched the operations with alternate scorn and interest. It was facetious when water and quicksands were encountered, and inclined to be sarcastic when work was suspended on account of [p203] the weather. But one day, after the pipe had been driven to a considerable depth and the rock below had been drilled for six inches, the drill suddenly fell into a crevice, and upon investigation the hole was found to be nearly full of petroleum.

The Cove promptly went into a state of acute hysteria. Speculation spread like the measles, breaking out in all manner of queer and unexpected places. Everybody who could command a dollar promptly converted it into oil stock. Miss Jim Fenton borrowed money from her cousin in the city, and plunged recklessly; the Missionary Band raffled off three quilts and bought a share with the proceeds; Mr. Tucker foreclosed two mortgages on life-long friends in order to raise more money; while the amount of stock purchased by Mr. D. Webster Opp was limited only by his credit at the bank.

The one note of warning that was sounded came from Mrs. Fallows, who sat on the porch of Your Hotel, and, like the Greek Chorus, foretold the disasters [p204] that would befall, and prophesied nothing but evil for the entire enterprise. Even the

urbane Jimmy became ruffled by her insistent iteration, and declared that she "put him in mind of a darned old whip-o'-will."

But Mrs. Fallows's piping note was lost in the gale of enthusiasm. Farmers coming into town on Saturday became infected and carried the fever into the country. The entire community suspended business to discuss the exciting situation.

These were champagne days for Mr. Opp. Life seemed one long, sparkling, tingling draft and he was drinking it to Guinevere. If her eyes drooped and she met his smile with a sigh, he saw it not, for the elixir had gone to his head.

Compelled to find some outlet for his energy, he took advantage of the Cove's unwonted animation and plunged into municipal reform. "The Opp Eagle" demanded streets, it demanded lamp-posts, it demanded temperance. The right of pigs to take their daily siesta in [p205] the middle of Main Street was questioned and fiercely denied. Dry-goods boxes, which for years had been the only visible means of support for divers youths of indolent nature, were held up to such scathing ridicule that the owners were forced to remove them.

The policies suggested by Mr. Opp, the editor, were promptly acted upon by Mr. Opp, the citizen. So indignant did he become when he read his own editorials that nothing short of immediate action was to be considered. He arranged a reform party and appointed himself leader. Mat Lucas, he made Superintendent of Streets; Mr. Gallop, chairman of the Committee on City Lights. In fact, he formed enough committees to manage a Presidential campaign.

The attitude of the town toward him was that of a large lump of dough to a small cake of yeast. It was willing to be raised, but doubtful of the motive power.

"I'd feel surer," said Jimmy Fallows, "if his intellect was the standard [p206] size. It appears so big to him he can't get his language ready-made; he has to have it made to order."

But since the successful management of the oil-wells, Mr. Opp's opinion was more

and more considered. In the course of a short time the office of “The Opp Eagle” became the hub about which the township revolved.

One afternoon in March the editor was sitting before his deal table, apparently in the most violent throes of editorial composition.

Nick, who was impatiently waiting for copy, had not dared to speak for an hour, for fear of slipping a cog in the intricate machinery of creation. The constant struggle to supply “The Opp Eagle” with sufficient material to enable it to fly every Thursday was telling upon the staff; he was becoming irritable.

“Well?” he said impatiently, as Mr. Opp finished the tenth page and gathered the large sheets into his hand.

“Yes, yes, to be sure,” said Mr. Opp, guiltily; “I am at your disposal. Just [p207] finishing a little private correspondence of a personal nature that couldn’t wait over.”

“Ain’t that copy?” demanded Nick, fixing him with an indignant eye.

“Well, no,” said Mr. Opp, uneasily. “The fact is, I haven’t been able to accomplish any regular editorial this week. Unusual pressure of outside business and—er—”

“How long is she going to stay down in Coreyville?” Nick asked, with a contemptuous curl of his lip.

Mr. Opp paused in the act of addressing the envelop, and gave Nick a look that was designed to scorch.

“May I inquire to who you refer?” he asked with dignity.

Nick’s eyes dropped, and he shuffled his feet. “I just wanted to put it in the paper. We got to fill up with something.”

“Well,” said Mr. Opp, slightly conciliated, “you can mention that she has gone back to attend the spring term at the Young Ladies’ Seminary.”

[p208] “Gone back to school again?” exclaimed Nick, unable to control his

curiosity. “What for?”

“To attend the spring term,” repeated Mr. Opp, guardedly. Then he added in a burst of confidence: “Nick, has it ever occurred to you that Mrs. Gusty was what you might term a peculiar woman?”

But Nick was not interested in the psychological idiosyncrasies of the Gusty family. “The Opp Eagle” was crying for food, and Nick would have sacrificed himself and his chief to fill the vacancy.

“See here, Mr. Opp, do you know what day it is? It’s Monday, and we’ve got two columns to fill. New subscriptions are coming in all the time. We’ve got to live up to our reputation.”

“Extremely well put,” agreed Mr. Opp; “the reputation of the paper must be guarded above all things. I like to consider that after my mortal remains has returned to dust, my name will be perpetuated in this paper. That no monument in marble will be necessary, so [p209] long as ‘The Opp Eagle’ continues to circulate from home to home, and to promulgate those—”

“Can’t you write some of it down?” suggested Nick; “it would fill up a couple of paragraphs. Part of it you used before, but we might change it around some.”

“Never,” said Mr. Opp. “On no consideration would I repeat myself in print. I’ll just run through my box here, and see what new material I have. Here’s something; take it down as I dictate.

“‘Pastor Joe Tyler is holding divine service every second Sunday in Cove City. He has had thirty conversions, and on Saturday was presented with a $20.00 suit of clothing from and by this community, and a barrel of flour, which fully attests what a general church awakening will accomplish in the direction of good. No one should think of endeavoring to rear their children or redeem society without the application of the gospel twice per month.’”

[p210] “Now, if you can keep that up,” said Nick, hopefully, “we’ll get through in

no time."

But Mr. Opp had gone back to his letter, and was trying to decide whether it would take one stamp or two. When he felt Nick's reproachful eye upon him, he put the envelop resolutely in his pocket.

"You've already said that work would be resumed at the oil-wells as early as the inclemency of the weather would permit, haven't you?"

"We've had it in every issue since last fall," said Nick.

"Well, now, let's see," said Mr. Opp, diving once more into his reserve box. "Here, take this down: 'Mr. Jet Connor had his house burnt last month, it being the second fire he has had in ten years. Misfortunes never come single.'"

"All right," encouraged Nick. "Now can't you work up that idea about the paper offering a prize?"

Mr. Opp seized his brow firmly between his palms and made an heroic effort [p211] to concentrate his mind upon the business at hand.

"Just wait a minute till I get it arranged. Now write this: '"The Opp Eagle" has organized a club called the B.B.B. Club, meaning the Busy Bottle-Breakers Club. A handsome prize of a valued nature will be awarded the boy or girl which breaks the largest number of whisky and beer bottles before the first of May.' The boats to Coreyville run different on Sunday, don't they, Nick?"

Nick, who had unquestioningly taken the dictation until he reached his own name, glanced up quickly, then threw down his pen and sighed.

"I'm going up to Mr. Gallop's," he said in desperation; "he's got his mind on things here in town. I'll see what he can do for me."

Mr. Opp remorsefully allowed him to depart, and gazed somewhat guiltily at the unaccomplished work before him. But instead of making reparation for recent delinquency, he proceeded to [p212] make even further inroads into the time that

belonged to “The Opp Eagle.”

Moving stealthily to the door, he locked it, then pulled down the shade until only a strip of light fell across his table. These precautions having been observed, he took from his pocket a number of letters, and, separating a large typewritten one from several small blue ones, arranged the latter in a row before him according to their dates, and proceeded, with evident satisfaction, to read them through twice. Then glancing around to make quite sure that no one had crawled through the key-hole, he unlocked a drawer, and took out a key which in turn unlocked a box from which he carefully took a small object, and contemplated it with undisguised admiration.

It was an amethyst ring, and in the center of the stone was set a pearl. He held it in the narrow strip of light, and read the inscription engraved within: “Guinevere forever.”

For Miss Guinevere Gusty, ever plastic [p213] to a stronger will, had succumbed to the potent combination of absence and ardor, and given her half-hearted consent for Mr. Opp to speak to her mother. Upon that lady’s unqualified approval everything would depend.

Mr. Opp had received the letter a week ago, and he had immediately written to the city for a jeweler’s circular, made his selection, and received the ring. He had written eight voluminous and eloquent epistles to Guinevere, but he had not yet found the propitious moment in which to call upon Mrs. Gusty. Every time he started, imperative business called him elsewhere.

As he sat turning the stone in the sunlight and admiring every detail, the conviction oppressed him that he could no longer find any excuse for delay. But even as he made the decision to face the ordeal, his eye involuntarily swept the desk for even a momentary reprieve. The large typewritten letter arrested his attention; he took it up and reread it.

[p214] Dear Opp: Do you know any nice, comfortable place in your neighborhood

for a man to go blind in? I'll be in the hospital for another month, and after that I am to spend the summer out of doors, in joyful anticipation of an operation which I am assured beforehand will probably be unsuccessful. Under the peculiar circumstances I am not particular about the scenery, human or natural; the whole affair resolves itself into a matter of flies and feather-beds. If you know of any place where I can be reasonably comfortable, I wish you'd drop me a line. The ideal place for me would be a neat pine box underground, with a dainty bunch of daisies overhead.

Yours gratefully,

Willard Hinton.

P.S. I sent you a box of my books last week. Chuck out what you don't want. The candy was for your sister.

Mr. Opp, with the letter still in his hand, suddenly saw a way out of his difficulty: he would make Hinton's request an excuse for a call upon Mrs. [p215] Gusty. No surer road to her good graces could he travel than by seeking her advice.

Replacing the ring in the drawer and the letters in his pocket, he buttoned up his coat, and with a stern look of determination went out of the office. At the Gusty gate he encountered Val, who was on all fours by the fence, searching for something.

"What's the matter, Val?" asked Mr. Opp. "Lost something?"

Val raised a pair of mournful eyes. "Yas, sir; you bet I is. Done lost a penny Mr. Jimmy Fallows gimme for puttin' my fisty in my mouf."

"Putting your fist in your mouth!" repeated Mr. Opp, surprised. "Can you perform that act?"

Val promptly demonstrated; but just as he was midway, a peremptory voice called from a rear window:

"Val! You Val! You better answer me this minute!"

Val cowered lower behind the fence, and violently motioned Mr. Opp to go on.

[p216] “Is—er—is Mrs. Gusty feeling well to-day?” asked Mr. Opp, still lingering at the gate.

“Jes tolerable,” said Val, lying flat on his back and speaking in guarded tones. “Whenever she gits to beatin’ de carpets, an’ spankin’ de beds, and shakin’ de curtains, I keeps outen de way.”

“Do you think—er—that—er—I better go in?” asked Mr. Opp, sorely in need of moral support.

“Yas, sir; she’s ’spectin’ yer.”

This surprising announcement nerved Mr. Opp to open the gate.

It is said that the best-drilled soldiers dodge when they first face the firing-line, and if Mr. Opp’s knees smote together and his body became bathed in profuse perspiration, it should not be attributed to lack of manly courage.

In response to his knock, Mrs. Gusty herself opened the door. The signs that she had been interrupted in the midst of her toilet were so unmistakable that Mr. Opp promptly averted his eyes. A shawl had been hastily drawn about her shoulders, [p217] on one cheek a streak of chalk awaited distribution, and a single bristling curl-paper, rising fiercely from the top of her forehead, gave her the appearance of a startled unicorn.

“You’ll have to excuse me, Mr. Opp,” she said firmly, putting the door between them. “I can’t come out, and you can’t come in. Did you want anything?”

“Well, yes,” said Mr. Opp, looking helplessly at the blank door. “You see, there is a matter I have been considering discussing with you for a number of weeks. It’s a—”

“If it’s waited this long, I should think it could wait till to-morrow,” announced the lady with decision.

Mr. Opp felt that his courage could never again stand the strain of the last few moments. He must speak now or never.

“It’s immediate,” he managed to gasp out. “If you could arrange to give me five or ten minutes, I won’t occupy more than that.”

Mrs. Gusty considered. “I am looking [p218] for company myself at five o’clock. That wouldn’t give you much time.”

“Ample,” urged Mr. Opp; “it’s just a little necessary transaction, as it were.”

Mrs. Gusty reluctantly consented.

“You go on in the parlor, then,” she said. “I’ll be in as quick as I can. You won’t more than have time to get started, though.”

Mr. Opp passed into the parlor and hung his hat on the corner of a large, unframed canvas that stood on the floor with its face to the wall. The room had evidently been prepared for a visitor, for a fire was newly kindled and a vase of flowers adorned the table. But Mr. Opp was not making observations. He alternately warmed his cold hands at the fire, and fanned his flushed face with his handkerchief. He was too nervous to sit still, yet his knees trembled when he moved about. It was only when he touched the little packet of letters in his breast pocket that his courage revived.

[p219] At last Mrs. Gusty came in with a rustle of garments suggestive of Sunday. Even in his confusion Mr. Opp was aware that there was something unusual in her appearance. Her hair, ordinarily drawn taut to a prim knot at the rear, had burst forth into curls and puffs of an amazing complexity. Moreover, her change of coiffure had apparently affected her spirits, for she, too, was flurried and self-conscious and glanced continually at the clock on the mantel.

“I’ll endeavor not to intrude long on your time,” began Mr. Opp, politely, when they were seated side by side on the horse-hair sofa. “You—er—can’t be in total ignorance of the subject that—er—I mean to bring forward.” He moistened his lips, and glanced at her for succor, but she was adamant. “I want to speak with you,” he plunged on desperately—“that is, I thought I had better talk with you about Mr. Hinton.”

“Who?” blazed forth Mrs. Gusty in indignant surprise.

“Mr. Hinton,” said Mr. Opp, breathlessly, [p220] “a young friendly acquaintance of mine. Wants to get board for the summer, you know; would like a nice, quiet place and all that, Mrs. Gusty. I thought I’d consult you about it, Mrs. Gusty, if you don’t mind.”

She calmly fixed one eye upon him and one upon the clock while he went into particulars concerning Mr. Hinton. When he paused for breath, she folded her arms and said:

“Mr. Opp, if you want to say what you come to say, you haven’t got but four minutes to do it in.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mr. Opp, gratefully, but helplessly; “I was just coming to that point. It’s a matter—that—er—well you might say it is in a way pertaining—to—”

“Guin-never!” snapped Mrs. Gusty, unable longer to stand his hesitation. “I’d have been a deaf-mute and a fool to boot not to have known it long ago. Not that I’ve been consulted in the matter.” She lifted a stiffened chin, and turned her gaze upward.

[p221] “You have,” declared Mr. Opp, earnestly; “that is, you will be. Everything is pending on you. There has been no steps whatever taken by Miss Guinnever or I—rather I might say by her. I can’t say but what I have made some slight preliminary arrangements.” He paused, then went on anxiously: “I trust there ain’t any personal objections to the case.”

Mrs. Gusty made folds in her black-silk skirt and creased them down with her thumb-nail. “No,” she said shortly; “far as I can see, Guin-never would be doing mighty well to get you. You’d be a long sight safer than a good-looking young fellow. Of course a man being so much older than a girl is apt to leave her a widow. But, for my part, I believe in second marriages.”

Mr. Opp felt as if he had received a hot and cold douche at the same time; but the

result was a glow.

“Then you don’t oppose it, Mrs. Gusty,” he cried eagerly. “You’ll write her you are willing?”

[p222] “Not yet,” said Mrs. Gusty; “there’s a condition.”

“There ain’t any condition in the world I won’t meet to get her,” he exclaimed recklessly, his fervor bursting its bounds. “You don’t know how I feel about that young lady. Why, I’d live on bread and water all the rest of my life if it would make her happy. There hasn’t been a hour since I met her that she hasn’t held my soul—as you might say—in the pa’m of her hand.”

“People don’t often get it so bad at our age,” remarked Mrs. Gusty, sarcastically, and Mr. Opp winced.

“The condition,” went on Mrs. Gusty, “that I spoke about, was your sister. Of course I never would consent to Guin-never living under the same roof with a crazy person.”

The hope which was carrying Mr. Opp to the dizziest heights dropped to earth at this unexpected shaft, and for a moment he was too stunned to speak.

“Kippy?” he began at last, and his voice softened at the name. “Why, you [p223] don’t understand about her. She’s just similar to a little child. I told Miss Guin-never all about her; she never made any objections. You—you—wouldn’t ask me to make any promises along that line?” Abject entreaty shone from Mr. Opp’s eyes; it was a plea for a change of sentence. She had asked of him the only sacrifice in the world at which he would have faltered. “Don’t—don’t put it like that!” he pleaded, laying his hand on her arm in his earnestness. “I’m all she’s got in the world; I’ve kind of become familiar with her ways, you know, and can manage her. She’ll love Miss Guin-never if I tell her to. She shan’t be a bit of care or trouble; I and Aunt Tish will continue on doing everything for her. You won’t refuse your consent on that account, will you? You’ll promise to say yes, now won’t you, Mrs. Gusty?”

A slight and ominous cough in the doorway caused them both to start. Mr. Tucker, in widower's weeds, but with a jonquil jauntily thrust through his buttonhole, [p224] stood with his hand still on the knob, evidently transfixed by the scene he had witnessed.

For a moment the company was enveloped in a fog of such dense embarrassment that all conversation was suspended. Mrs. Gusty was the first to emerge.

"Howdy, Mr. Tucker," she said, rustling forward in welcome. "I didn't think you'd get here before five. Mr. Opp just dropped in to consult me about—about boarding a friend of his. Won't you draw up to the fire?"

Mr. Tucker edged forward with a suspicious eye turned upon Mr. Opp, who was nervously searching about for his hat.

"There it is, by the door," said Mrs. Gusty, eager to speed his departure; and as they both reached for it, the picture upon which it hung toppled forward and fell, face upward, on the floor. It was the portrait of Mr. Tucker mourning under the willow-tree which Miss Jim had left with Mrs. Gusty for safe-keeping.

[p225] Mr. Opp went home across the fields that evening instead of through the town. He was not quite up to any of his rôles—editor, promoter, or reformer. In fact, he felt a desperate need of a brief respite from all histrionic duties. A reaction had set in from the excitement of the past week, and the complication involved in Mrs. Gusty's condition puzzled and distressed him. Of course, he assured himself repeatedly, there was a way out of the difficulty; but he was not able to find it just yet. He had observed that Mrs. Gusty's opinions became fixed convictions under the slightest opposition, whereas Guinevere's firmest decision trembled at a breath of disapproval. He sighed deeply as he meditated upon the vagaries of the feminine mind.

Overhead the bare trees lifted a network of twigs against a dull sky, a cold wind stirred the sedge grass, and fluttered the dry leaves that had lain all winter in the

fence corners. Everything looked old and worn and gray, even Mr. Opp, as he leaned against a gaunt, white [p226] sycamore, his head bent, and his brows drawn, wrestling with his problem.

Suddenly he lifted his head and listened, then he smiled. In the tree above him a soft but animated conversation was in progress. A few daring birds had braved the cold and the wind, and had ventured back to their old trysting-place to wait for the coming of the spring. No hint of green had tinged the earth, but a few, tiny, pink maple-buds had given the secret away, and the birds were cuddled snugly together, planning, in an ecstasy of subdued enthusiasm, for the joyous days to come.

Mr. Opp listened and understood. They were all whispering about one thing, and he wanted to whisper about it, too. It was the simple theme of love without variations—love, minus problems, minus complications, minus consequences. He took out his little packet of letters and read them through; then, unmindful of the chill, he stretched himself under the tree and listened to the birds until the twilight silenced them.

[p227] When he reached home at last, Miss Kippy met him at the door with a happy cry of welcome.

“D.,” she said, with her arm through his, and her cheek rubbing his sleeve, “I’ve been good. I’ve let my hair stay up all day, and Aunt Tish is making me a long dress like a lady.” She looked at him shyly and smiled, then she pulled his head down and whispered, “If I’m very good, when I grow up, can I marry Mr. Hinton?”

Miss Kippy, too, had been listening to the bird-song.

## [p228] XIII

It was May when Willard Hinton arrived at the Cove and took up his abode at Mrs. Gusty’s. For the first week he kept to his bed, but at the end of that time he was able to crawl down to the porch and, under the protection of dark glasses and a heavy

shade, sit for hours at a time in the sunshine. The loss of his accustomed environment, the ennui that ensues from absolute idleness, the consciousness that the light was growing dimmer day by day, combined to plunge him into abysmal gloom.

He shrank from speaking to any one, he scowled at a suggestion of sympathy, he treated Mr. Opp's friendly overtures with open discourtesy. Conceiving himself on the rack of torture, he set his [p229] teeth and determined to submit in silence, but without witnesses.

One endless day dragged in the wake of another, and between them lay the black strips of night that were heavy with the suggestion of another darkness pending. When sleep refused to come, he would go out into the woods and walk for hours, moody, wretched, and sick to his innermost soul with loneliness.

The one thing in the whole dreary round of existence that roused in him a spark of interest was his hostess. She bestowed upon him the same impersonal attention that she gave her fowls. She fed him and cared for him and doctored him as she saw fit, and after these duties were performed, she left him to himself, pursuing her own vigorous routine in her own vigorous way.

Hinton soon discovered that Mrs. Gusty was temperamental. Her intensely energetic nature demanded an emotional as well as a physical outlet. Sometime during the course of each day she indulged in emotional fireworks, [p230] bombs of anger, rockets of indignation, or set pieces of sulks and pouts.

These periodic spells of anger acted upon her like wine: they warmed her vitals and exhilarated her; they made her talk fluently and eloquently. As a toper will accept any beverage that intoxicates, so Mrs. Gusty accepted any cause that would rouse her. At stated intervals her feelings demanded a stimulant, and obeying the call of nature, she went forth and got angry.

Hinton came to consider these outbursts as the one diversion in a succession of

monotonous hours. He tabulated the causes, and made bets with himself as to the strength and duration of each.

Meanwhile the sun and the wind and the silence were working their miracle. Hinton was introduced to nature by a warlike old rooster whose Hellenic cast of countenance had suggested the name of Menelaus. A fierce combat with a brother-fowl had inevitably recalled the great fight with Paris, and upon investigation Hinton found that the speckled [p231] hen was Helen of Troy! This was but the beginning of a series of discoveries, and the result was an animated and piquant version of Greek history, which boldly set aside tradition, and suggested many possibilities heretofore undreamed of.

Early one morning as Hinton was wandering listlessly about the yard he heard the gate click, and, looking up, saw Mr. Opp hurrying up the walk with a large bunch of lilacs in one hand and a cornet in the other.

“Good morning,” said that gentleman, cheerily. “Mighty glad to see you out enjoying the beauties of nature. I haven’t got but a moment in which to stop; appointment at eight-fifteen. We are arranging for a concert soon up in Main Street, going to practise this afternoon. I’ll be glad to call by for you if you feel able to enjoy some remarkable fine selections.”

Hinton accepted the proffered bouquet, but made a wry face at the invitation.

[p232] “None of your concerts for me,” he said brusquely. “It would interfere too seriously with my own musical job of getting in tune with the infinite.”

“Mornin’, Mr. Opp,” said Mrs. Gusty from the dining-room window. “There ain’t many editors has time to stand around and talk this time of day.”

“Just paused a moment in passing,” said Mr. Opp. “Wanted to see if I couldn’t induce our young friend here to give us a’ article for ‘The Opp Eagle.’ Any nature, you know; we are always metropolitan in our taste. Thought maybe he’d tell us some of his first impressions of our city.”

Hinton smiled and shook his head. “You’d better not stir up my impressions about anything these days; I am apt to splash mud.”

“We can stand it,” said Mr. Opp, affably. “If Cove City needs criticism and rebuke, ‘The Opp Eagle’ is the vehicle to administer it. You dictate a few remarks to my reporter, and I’ll feature it on the front editorial column.”

[p233] Hinton’s eyes twinkled wickedly behind his blue glasses. “I’ll give you an article,” he said, “but no name is to be signed.”

Mr. Opp, regretting the stipulation, but pleased with the promise, was turning to depart when Mrs. Gusty appeared once more at the window.

“What’s the matter with the oil-wells?” she demanded, as she dusted off the sill. “Why don’t they open up? You can’t use bad weather for an excuse any longer.”

“It wasn’t the weather,” said Mr. Opp, with the confident and superior manner of one who is conversant with the entire situation. “This here delay has been arranged with a purpose. I and Mr. Mathews has a plan that will eventually yield every stock-holder in the Cove six to one for what he put into it.”

“Intend selling out to a syndicate?” asked Hinton.

Mr. Opp looked at him in surprise.

“Well, yes; I don’t mind telling you two, but it mustn’t go any farther. The [p234] oil prospects in this region are of such a great magnitude that we can’t command sufficient capital to do ’em justice. I and Mr. Mathews are at present negotiating with several large concerns with a view to selling out the entire business at a large profit. You can’t have any conception of the tac’ and patience it takes to manage one of these large deals.”

“Who was that man Clark that was down here last week?” asked Mrs. Gusty, impressed, in spite of herself, at being taken into the confidence of such a man of affairs.

Mr. Opp's face clouded. "Now that was a very unfortunate thing about Clark. He was sent down by the Union Syndicate of New York city to make a report on the region, and he didn't get the correct ideas in the case at all. If they hadn't sent such a poor man, the whole affair might have been settled by now."

"Wasn't his report favorable?" asked Hinton.

[p235] "He hasn't made it yet," said Mr. Opp; "but he let drop sundry casual remarks to me that showed he wasn't a man of fine judgment at all. I went over the ground with him, and pointed out some of the places where we calculated on drilling; but he was so busy making measurements and taking notes that he didn't half hear what I was saying."

"He stayed at Our Hotel," said Mrs. Gusty. "Mr. Tucker said he had as mean a face as ever he looked into."

"Who said so?" asked Hinton.

She tossed her head and flipped her duster at him, but it was evident that she was not displeased.

"By the way, Mr. Opp," she said, "I'm thinking about letting Guin-never come home week after next. Guess you ain't sorry to hear that."

On the contrary, Mr. Opp was overcome with joy. Letters were becoming less and less satisfying, and the problem suggested by Mrs. Gusty was still waiting solution.

[p236] "If you'll just mention the date," he said, trying to keep his countenance from expressing an undue amount of rapture, "I'll make a business trip down to Coreyville on purpose to accompany her back home."

But Mrs. Gusty declined to be explicit. She deemed it unwise to allow a mere man to know as much as she did upon any given subject.

Hinton's editorial appeared in the next issue of "The Opp Eagle." It was a clever and cutting satire on the impressions of a foreigner visiting America for the first time.

Hinton interviewed himself concerning his impressions of the Cove. He approached the subject with great seriousness, handling village trifles as if they were municipal cannon-balls. He juggled with sense and nonsense, with form and substance. The result shot far over the heads of the country subscribers, and hit the bull's-eye of a big city daily.

Mr. Opp's excitement was intense when he found that an editorial from [p237] "The Opp Eagle" had been copied in a New York paper. The fact that it was not his own never for a moment dimmed the glory of the compliment.

"We are getting notorious," he said exultingly to Hinton. "There are few, if any, papers that in less than a year has extended its influence as far as the Atlantic Ocean. Now I am considering if it wouldn't be a wise and judicious thing to get you on the staff permanent—while you are here, that is. Of course you understand I am invested up pretty close; but I'd be willing to let you have a little of my oil stock in payment for services."

Hinton laughingly shook his head. "Whenever you run short of material, you can call on me. The honor of seeing my humble efforts borne aloft on the wings of 'The Opp Eagle' will be sufficient reward."

Having once conceived it as a favor that was in his power to bestow, Mr. Opp lost no opportunity for inviting contributions from the aspiring author.

[p238] As Hinton's strength returned, Mr. Opp adopted him as a protégé, at first patronizing him, then consulting him, and finally frankly appealing to him. For during the long afternoon walks which they got into the habit of taking together, Mr. Opp, in spite of bluster and brag and evasion, found that he was constantly being embarrassed by a question, a reference, a statement from his young friend. It was the first time he had ever experienced any difficulty in keeping his head above the waves of his own ignorance.

"You see," he said one day by way of explanation, "my genius was never properly

tutored in early youth. It's what some might regard as a remarkable brain that could cope with all the different varieties of enterprises that I have engaged in, with no instruction or guidance but just the natural elements that God give it in the beginning."

But in spite of Mr. Opp's lenient attitude toward his intellectual short-comings, it was evident that upon the serene [p239] horizon of his egotism small clouds of humility were threatening to gather.

Hinton, restlessly seeking for something to fill the vacuum of his days, found Mr. Opp and his paper a growing source of diversion. "The Opp Eagle," at first an object of ridicule, gradually became a point of interest in his limited range of vision. Under his suggestions it was enlarged and improved, and induced to publish news not strictly local.

Mr. Opp, meanwhile, was buzzing as persistently and ineffectually as a fly on a window-pane. The night before Guinevere's return, he found that, in order to accomplish all that he was committed to, it would be necessary to spend the night at the office.

The concert for which the Unique Orchestra had been making night hideous for two weeks had just come to a successful close, and the editor found himself at a late hour tramping out the lonely road that led to the office with the prospect of a couple of hours' work to [p240] do before he could seek a well-earned rest upon the office bench.

He was flushed with his double triumph as director and cornet soloist, and still thrilled by the mighty notes he had breathed into his beloved instrument.

The violin sobs, the flute complains, the drum insists, but the cornet brags, and Mr. Opp found it the instrument through which he could best express himself.

It was midnight, and the moon, one moment shining brightly and the next lost behind a flying cloud, sent all sorts of queer shadows scurrying among the trees. Mr.

Opp thought once that he saw the figure of a man appear and disappear in the road before him, but he was so engrossed in joyful anticipation of the morrow that he gave the incident no attention. As he was passing the Gusty house, he was rudely plunged from sentiment into suspicion by the sight of a figure stealthily moving along the wall beneath the front windows.

Mr. Opp crouched behind the fence to [p241] watch him, but the moon took that inopportune moment to sink into a bank of clouds, and the yard was left in darkness. No sound broke the stillness save the far-off bark of a dog or an occasional croak from a bullfrog. Mr. Opp waited and listened in a state of intense suspense. Presently he heard the unmistakable sound of a window being cautiously raised, and then just as cautiously lowered. Summoning all his courage, he skirted the yard and hid in the bushes near the house. Nothing was to be seen or heard. He watched for a light at any of the windows, but none came.

The rash desire to capture the burglar single-handed, and thus distinguish himself in the eyes of Guinevere's mother, caused Mr. Opp to stiffen his knees and assume a fierce and determined expression. But he was armed only with his cornet, which, though often deadly as an instrument of attack, has never been recognized as a weapon of defense. There seemed no alternative but to [p242] waken Hinton and effect a simultaneous attack from within and without.

After throwing a few unsuccessful pebbles at Hinton's window, Mr. Opp remembered a ladder he had seen at the back of the barnyard. Shaking as if with the ague, but breathing dauntless courage, he departed in great excitement to procure it.

Unfortunately another party was in possession. A dozen guinea-fowls were roosting on the rungs, and when he gave them to understand they were to vacate they raised an outcry that would have quelled the ardor of a less valiant knight.

But the romantic nature of the adventure had fired Mr. Opp's imagination. He already saw himself lightly dusting his hands after throttling the intruder, and

smiling away Mrs. Gusty's solicitude for his safety. Meanwhile he staggered back to the house with his burden, dodging fearfully at every shadow, and painfully aware that his heart was beating a tattoo on his ear-drums.

Placing the ladder as quietly as possible [p243] under Hinton's window, he cautiously began the ascent. The sudden outburst of the guineas had set his nerves a-quiver, and what with his breathless condition, and a predisposition to giddiness, he found some difficulty in reaching the sill. When at last he succeeded, he saw, by the light of the now refulgent moon, the figure of Hinton lying across the foot of the bed, dressed, but asleep. The opening not being sufficiently large to admit him, he thrust in his head and whispered hoarsely through his chattering teeth:

"Hinton! I say, Hinton, there's a burglar in the house!"

Hinton started up, and stared dully at the excited apparition.

"Hush!" whispered Mr. Opp, dramatically, lifting a warning hand. "I've been tracking the scoundrel for half an hour. He's in the house now. We'll surround him. We'll bind him hand and foot. You get the front door open, and I'll meet you on the outside. It's all planned; just do as I say."

[p244] Hinton, who was springing for the door, paused with his hand on the knob. "What's that?"

It was Mrs. Gusty's commanding tones from a front window: "He's round at the side of the house. He's been after my guineas! I saw him a minute ago going across the yard with a ladder. Shoot him if you can. Shoot him in the leg, so he can't get away. Quick! Quick!"

Mr. Opp had only time to turn from the window when he felt the ladder seized from below and jerked violently forward. With a terrific crash he came down with it, and found himself locked in a close struggle with the supposed burglar. To his excited imagination his adversary seemed a Titan, with sinews of steel and breath of fire. The combatants rolled upon the ground and fought for possession of each other's

throats. The conflict, while fierce, was brief. As Hinton and Mrs. Gusty rushed around the corner of the house, the fighters shouted in unison, “I’ve got him!” [p245] and Mr. Opp, opening one swollen eye, gazed down into the mild but bloody features of little Mr. Tucker!

With the instinct that always prompted him to apologize when any one bumped into him, he withdrew his hands immediately from Mr. Tucker’s throat and began vehement explanations. But Mr. Tucker still clung to his collar, sputtering wrathful ejaculations. Mrs. Gusty, wrapped in a bed-quilt, and with her unicorn horn at its most ferocious angle, held the lamp on high while Hinton rushed between the belligerents.

Excited and incoherent explanations followed, and it was not until Mr. Opp, who was leaning limply against a tree, regained his breath that the mystery was cleared up.

“If you will just listen here at me a moment,” he implored, holding a handkerchief to his bruised face. “We are one and all laboring under a grave error. It’s my belief that there ain’t any burglar whatsoever here at present. Mr. Hinton forgot his key and had to [p246] climb in the window. I mistaken him for the burglar, and Mrs. Gusty, here, from what she relates, mistaken me for him, and not knowing Mr. Hinton had come in, telephoned our friend Mr. Tucker, and me and Mr. Tucker might be said, in a general way, to have mistaken each other for him.”

“A pretty mess to get us all into!” exclaimed Mrs. Gusty. “A man made his fortune once ’tending to his own business.”

“But, Mrs. Gusty—” began Mr. Opp, indignantly.

Hinton interrupted. “You would better put something on that eye of yours. It will probably resemble a Whistler ‘Nocturne’ by morning. What are you looking for?”

The object lost proved to be Mr. Opp’s cherished cornet, and the party became united in a common cause and joined in the search. Some time elapsed before the

horn was found under the fallen ladder, having sustained internal injuries which subsequently proved fatal.

[p247] When dawn crept into the dingy office of “The Opp Eagle,” the editor was watching for it. He was waiting to welcome the day that would bring back Guinevere. As Hope with blindfold eyes bends over her harp and listens to the faint music of her one unbroken string, so Mr. Opp, with bandaged head, bent over his damaged horn and plaintively evoked the only note that was left therein.

## [p248] XIV

Those who have pursued the coy goddess of happiness through the mazes of the labyrinth of life, know well how she invites her victim on from point to point, only to evade capture at the end. Mr. Opp rose with each summer dawn, radiant, confident, and expectant, and each night he sat in his window with his knees hunched, and his brows drawn, and wrestled with that old white-faced fear.

Two marauders were harassing the editor these days, dogging his footsteps, and snapping at him from ambush. One was the wolf that howls at the door, and the other was the monster whose eyes are green.

[p249] Since the halcyon days that had wafted Miss Guinevere Gusty back to the shore of the Cove, Mr. Opp had not passed a serene hour out of her presence. His disposition, though impervious to the repeated shafts of unkind fortune, was not proof against the corrosive effect of jealousy.

If he could have regarded Willard Hinton in the light of a hated rival, and met him in fair and open fight, the situation would have been simplified. But Hinton was the friend of his bosom, the man who, he had declared to the town, “possessed the grandest intelligence he had ever encountered in a human mind.” He admired him, he respected him, and, in direct contradiction to the emotion that was consuming him, he trusted him.

Concerning Miss Guinevere Gusty's state of mind, Mr. Opp permitted himself only one opinion. He fiercely denied that she was absent-minded and listless when alone with him; he refused to believe his own eyes when he saw a light in her face when she looked at Hinton [p250] that was never there for him. He preferred to exaggerate to himself her sweetness, her gentleness, her loyalty, demanding nothing, and continuing to give all.

His entire future happiness, he assured himself, hung upon the one question of little Miss Kippy. For four months the problem had been a matter for daily, prayerful consideration, but he was still in the dark.

When he was with Guinevere the solution seemed easy. In explaining away the difficulties to her, he explained them away to himself, also. It was only a matter of time, he declared, before the oil-well would yield rich profit. When that time arrived, he would maintain two establishments, the old one for Miss Kippy, and a new and elegant one for themselves. Mr. Opp used the hole in the ground as a telescope through which he viewed the stars of the future.

But when he was alone with Kippy, struggling with her whims, while he tried to puzzle out the oldest and most universal [p251] of conundrums,—that of making ends meet,—the future seemed entirely blotted out by the great blank wall of the present.

The matter was in a way complicated by the change that had come over Miss Kippy herself. Two ideas alternately depressed and elated her. The first was a fixed antipathy to the photograph of Miss Guinevere Gusty which Mr. Opp had incased in a large hand-painted frame and installed upon his dresser. At first she sat before it and cried, and later she hid it and refused for days to tell where it was. The sight of it made her so unhappy that Mr. Opp was obliged to keep it under lock and key. The other idea produced a different effect. It had to do with Hinton. Ever since his visit she had talked of little else. She pretended that he came to see her every day, and she

spread her doll dishes, and repeated scraps of his conversation, and acted over the events of the dinner at which he had been present. The short gingham dresses no longer pleased her; [p252] she wanted long ones, with flowing sleeves like the blue merino. She tied her hair up in all manner of fantastic shapes, and stood before the glass smiling and talking to herself for hours. But there were times when her mind paused for a moment at the normal, and then she would ask frightened, bewildered questions, and only Mr. Opp could soothe and reassure her.

"D.," she said one night suddenly, "how old am I?"

Mr. Opp, whose entire mental and physical powers were concentrated upon an effort to put a new band on his old hat, was taken off his guard. "Twenty-six," he answered absently.

A little cry brought him to her side.

"No," she whispered, shivering away from him, yet clinging to his sleeve, "that's a lady that's grown up! Ladies don't play with dolls. But I want to be grown up, too. D., why am I different? I want to be a lady; show me how to be a lady!"

Mr. Opp gathered her into his arms, [p253] along with his hat, a pair of scissors, and a spool of thread.

"Don't, Kippy!" he begged. "Now, don't cry like that! You are getting on elegant. Hasn't brother D. learned you to read a lot of pieces in your first reader? And ain't we going to begin on handwriting next? Wouldn't you like to have a slate, and a sponge to rub out with?"

In an instant her mood veered.

"And a basket?" she cried eagerly. "The children carry a basket, too. I see them when I peep through the shutters. Can I have a basket, too?"

The network of complexities that was closing in upon Mr. Opp apparently affected his body more than his spirits. He seemed to shrivel and dwindle as the pressure

increased; but the fire in his eyes shone brighter than before.

“None of his folks live long over forty,” said Mrs. Fallows, lugubriously; “they sorter burn themselves out.”

Hinton, meanwhile, utterly unaware of being the partial cause of the seismic [p254] disturbance in the editorial bosom, pursued the monotonous routine of his days. It had taken him only a short time to adapt himself to the changes that the return of the daughter of the house had brought about. He had anticipated her arrival with the dread a nervous invalid always feels toward anything that may jolt him out of his habitual rut. He held a shuddering remembrance of her musical accomplishments, and foresaw with dread the noisy crowd of young people she might bring about the house.

But Guinevere had slipped into her place, an absent-minded, dreamy, detached damsel, asserting nothing, claiming nothing, bending like a flower in the high winds of her mother’s wrath.

Hinton watched the dominating influence nip every bud of individuality that the girl ventured to put forth, and he determined to interfere. During the long months he had spent with Mrs. Gusty he had discovered a way to manage her. The weak spot in her armor was pride of intellect; she acknowledged no man [p255] her superior. By the use of figurative language, and references to esoteric matters, he was always able to baffle and silence her. His joy in handling her in one of her tempers was similar to that of controlling a cat-boat in squally weather. Both experiences redounded to his masculine supremacy.

One hot August day, he and Mrs. Gusty had just had an unusually sharp round, but he had succeeded, by alternate compliment and sarcasm, in reducing her to a very frustrated and baffled condition.

It was Sunday, the day the Cove elected for a spiritual wash-day. In the morning the morals of the community were scrubbed and rinsed in the meeting-house, and in the

afternoon they were hung out on the line to dry. The heads of the families sat in their front yards and dutifully tended the children, while their wives flitted from house to house, visiting the sick and the afflicted, and administering warnings to the delinquent. It was a day in which Mrs. [p256] Gusty's soul reveled, and she demanded that Guinevere's soul should revel likewise.

It was with the determination that Guinevere should occasionally be allowed the privilege of following her own inclinations that Hinton hurled himself into the breach.

"I'll go, Mother," said Guinevere; "but it's so hot. We went to see everybody last Sunday. I thought I'd rather stay home and read, if you didn't mind."

Mrs. Gusty tossed her head in disgust, and turned to Hinton.

"Now, ain't that a Gusty for you! I never saw one that didn't want to set down to the job of living. Always moping around with their nose in a book. I never was a reader, never remember wasting a' hour on a book in my life, and yet I never saw the time that I wasn't able to hold my own with any Gusty living."

"In short," said Hinton, sympathetically, "to quote a noted novelist, you [p257] have never considered it necessary to add the incident of learning to the accident of brains."

Mrs. Gusty tied her bonnet-strings in a firmer knot as she looked at him uncertainly, then, not deigning to cast another glance in the direction of her daughter, who was disappearing up the stairs, swept out of the house.

Hinton looked at his watch; it was not yet two o'clock. The afternoon threatened to be a foretaste of eternity. He went out on the porch and lay in the hammock, with his hands clasped across his eyes. He could no longer see to read or to write. The doctor said the darkness might close in now at any time, after that the experiment of an operation would be made, and there was one chance in a hundred for the partial restoration of the sight.

Having beaten and bruised himself against the bars of Fate, he now lay exhausted and passive in the power of his jailer. He had tried to run his own life in his own way, and the matter had been [p258] taken out of his hands. He must lie still now and wait for orders from headquarters. The words of Mr. Opp, spoken in the low-ceiled, weird old dining-room, came vividly back to him: “What the fight is concerning, or in what manner the general is a-aiming to bring it all correct in the end, ain’t, according to my conclusion, a particle of our business.”

And Hinton, after a year of rebellion and struggle and despair, had at last acknowledged a superior officer and declared himself ready to take whatever orders came.

As he lay in the hammock he turned his head at every noise within the house, and listened. He had become amazingly dependent upon a soft, drawling voice which day after day read to him for hours at a time. At first he had met Guinevere’s offers of help with moody irritability.

“Pray, don’t bother about me,” he had said. “I am quite able to look after myself; besides, I like to be alone.”

But her unobtrusive sympathy and [p259] childish frankness soon conquered his pride. She read to him from books she did not understand, played games with him, and showed him new walks in the woods. And incidentally, she revealed to him her struggling, starving, wistful soul that no one else had ever discovered.

She never talked to him of her love affair, but she dwelt vaguely on the virtues of duty and loyalty and self-sacrifice. The facts in the case were supplied by Mrs. Gusty.

Hinton looked at his watch again, and groaned when he found it was only a quarter past two. Feeling his way cautiously along the porch and down the steps, he moved idly about the yard. He could not distinguish Menelaus from Paris now, and Helen of Troy was no longer to be recognized.

At long intervals a vehicle rattled past, leaving a cloud of dust behind. The air shimmered with the heat, and the low, insistent buzzing of bees beat on his ears mercilessly. He wondered [p260] impatiently why Guinevere did not come down, then checked himself as he remembered the constant demands he made upon her time.

At three o'clock he could stand it no longer. He felt a queer, dull sensation about his head, and he constantly drew his hand across his eyes to dispel the impression of a mist before them.

"Oh, Miss Guinevere!" he called up to her window. "Would you mind coming down just for a little while!"

Guinevere's head appeared so promptly that it was evident it had been lying on the window-sill.

"Is it time for your medicine?" she asked guiltily. "Mother said it didn't come till four."

"Oh, no," said Hinton, with forced cheerfulness; "it isn't that. You remember the old song, don't you, 'When a man's afraid, a beautiful maid is a cheering sight to see'?"

She disappeared from the window, and in a moment joined him behind the screen of honeysuckles on the porch. [p261] The hammock hung, inviting ease, but neither of them took it. She sat primly on the straight-backed, green settee, and he sat on the step at her feet with his hat pulled over his eyes.

"What an infernal nuisance I have been to you!" he said ruefully; "but no more than I have been to myself. The only difference was that I had to stand it, and you stood it out of the goodness of that kind little heart of yours. Well, it's nearly over now; I'm expecting to go to the city any day. I guess you'll not be sorry to get rid of me, will you, Miss Guinevere?"

Instead of answering, she drew a quick breath and turned her head away. When she did speak, it was after a long pause.

“I like the way you say my name. Nobody says it like that down here.”

“Guinevere?” he repeated.

She nodded. “When you say it like that, I feel like I was another person. It makes me think of flowers, and poetry, and the wind in the trees, and all those [p262] things I’ve been reading you out of your books. Guin-never and Guinevere don’t seem the same at all, do they?”

“They aren’t the same,” he said, “and you aren’t the same girl I met on the boat last March. I guess we’ve both grown a bit since then. You know I was rather keen on dying about that time,—‘in love with easeful death,’—well, now I am not keen about anything, but I am willing to play the game out.”

They sat in silence for a while, then he said slowly, without raising his eyes: “I am not much good at telling what I feel, but before I go away I want you to know how much you’ve helped me. You have been the one light that was left to show me the way down into the darkness.”

A soft touch on his shoulder made him lift his head. Guinevere was bending toward him, all restraint banished from her face by the compassion and love that suffused it.

[p263] “‘Oh, my God, it has come’”

Instinctively he swayed toward her, all the need of her crying out suddenly within him, then he pulled himself [p265] sharply together, and, resolutely thrusting his hands in his pockets, rose and took a turn up and down the porch.

“Do you mind reading to me a little?” he asked at length. “There are forty devils in my head to-day, all hammering on the back of my eyeballs. I’ll get my Tennyson; you like him better than you do the others. Wait; I’m going.”

But she was up the steps before him, eager to serve, and determined to spare him every effort.

Through the long afternoon Guinevere read, stumbling over the strange words and

faltering through the difficult passages, but vibrant to the beauty and the pathos of it all. On and on she read, and the sun went down, and the fragrance of dying locust bloom came faintly from the hill, and overhead in the tree-tops the evening breeze murmured its world-old plaint of loneliness and longing.

Suddenly Guinevere's voice faltered, then steadied, then faltered again, then without warning she flung her arms across the back of the bench, and, dropping [p266] her head upon them, burst into passionate sobs.

Hinton, who had been sitting for a long time with his hands pressed over his eyes, sprang up to go to her.

"Guinevere," he said, "what's the matter? Don't cry, dear!" Then, as he stumbled, a look of terror crossed his face and he caught at the railing for support. "Where are you?" he asked sharply. "Speak to me! Give me your hand! I can't see—I can't—oh, my God, it has come!"

## [p267] XV

The warning note sounded by Mrs. Fallows at the beginning of the oil boom was echoed by many before the summer was over. The coldest thing in the world is an exhausted enthusiasm, and when weeks slipped into months, and notes fell due, and the bank became cautious about lending money, a spirit of distrust got abroad, and a financial frost settled upon the community.

Notwithstanding these conditions, "The Opp Eagle" persistently screamed prosperity. It attributed the local depression to the financial disturbance that had agitated the country at large, and assured the readers that the Cove was on the eve of the greatest period in its history.

[p268] "The ascending, soaring bubble of inflated prices cannot last much longer," one editorial said; "the financial flurry in the Wall Streets of the North were pretty well over before we become aware of it, in a major sense. 'The Opp Eagle' has in

the past, present, and future waged noble warfare against the calamity jays. Panic or no panic, Cove City refuses to remain in the backgrounds. There has been a large order for job-work in this office within the past ten days, also several new and important subscribers, all of which does not make much of a showing for hard times, at least not from our point of looking at it."

But in the same issue, in an inconspicuous corner, were a couple of lines to the effect that "the editor would be glad to take a load of wood on subscription."

The truth was that it required all of Mr. Opp's diplomacy to rise to the occasion. The effort to meet his own obligations was becoming daily more [p269] embarrassing, and he was reduced to economies entirely beneath the dignity of the editor of "The Opp Eagle." But while he cheerfully restricted his diet to two meals a day, and wore shirt-fronts in lieu of the genuine article, he was, according to Nick's ideas, rashly extravagant in other ways.

"What did you go and buy Widow Green's oil-shares back for?" Nick demanded upon one of these occasions.

"Well, you see," explained Mr. Opp, "it was purely a business proposition. Any day, now, things may open up in a way that will surprise you. I have good reason to believe that those shares are bound to go up; and besides," he added lamely in an undertone, "I happen to know that that there lady was in immediate need of a little ready money."

"So are we," protested Nick; "we need every cent we can get for the paper. If we don't get ahead some by the first of the year, we are going under, sure as you live."

Mr. Opp laid a hand upon his shoulder [p270] and smiled tolerantly. "Financiers get used to these fluctuations in money circles. Don't you worry, Nick; you leave that to the larger brains in the concern."

But in spite of his superior attitude of confidence, Nick's words rankled in his mind, and the first of the year became a time which he preferred not to consider.

One day in September the mail-packet brought two letters of great importance to Mr. Opp. One was from Willard Hinton, the first since his operation, and the other was from Mr. Mathews, stating that he would arrive at the Cove that day to lay an important matter of business before the stock-holders of the Turtle Creek Land Company.

Mr. Opp rushed across the road, a letter in each hand, to share the news with Guinevere.

"It's as good as settled," he cried, bursting in upon her, where she sat at the side door wrestling with a bit of needlework. "Mr. Mathews will be here to-day. He is either going to open up work or sell out to a syndicate. I'm [p271] going to use all my influence for the latter; it's the surest and safest plan. Miss Guin-never,"—his voice softened,— "this is all I been waiting for to make my last and final arrangement with your mother. It was just yesterday she was asking me what I'd decided to do, and I don't mind telling you, now it's all over, I never went to bed all last night—just sat up trying to figure it out. But this will settle it. I'll be in a position to have a little home of my own and take care of Kippy, too. I don't know as I ever was so happy in all my life put together before." He laughed nervously, but his eyes anxiously studied her averted face.

"Then there's more news," he plunged on, when she did not speak—"a letter from Mr. Hinton. I thought maybe you'd like to hear what he had to say."

Guinevere's scissors dropped with a sharp ring on the stepping-stone below, and as they both stooped to get them, their fingers touched. Mr. Opp ardently [p272] seized her hand in both of his, but unfortunately he seized her needle as well.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" she said. "Wait, let me do it," and with a compassion which he considered nothing short of divine she extricated the needle, and comforted the wounded member. Mr. Opp would have gladly suffered the fate of a St. Sebastian to have elicited such sympathy.

“Is—is Mr. Hinton better?” she asked, still bending over his hand.

“Hinton?” asked Mr. Opp. “Oh, I forgot; yes. I’ll read you what he says. He got his nurse to write this for him.

Dear Opp: The die is cast; I am a has-been. I did not expect anything, so I am not disappointed. The operation was what they called successful. The surgeon, I am told, did a very brilliant stunt; something like taking my eyes out, playing marbles with them, and getting them sewed back again all in three minutes and a half. The result to the patient is of course purely a minor consideration, but it may interest you to know that I can tell a biped from a quadruped, and may [p273] in time, by the aid of powerful glasses, be able to distinguish faces.

With these useful and varied accomplishments I have decided to return to the Cove. My modest ambition now is to get out of the way, and the safest plan is to keep out of the current.

You will probably be a Benedick by the time I return. My heartiest congratulations to you and Miss Guinevere. Words cannot thank either of you for what you have done for me. All I can say is that I have tried to be worthy of your friendship.

What’s left of me is

Yours,

Willard Hinton.”

Mr. Opp avoided looking at her as he folded the sheets and put them back in the envelop. The goal was bright before his eyes, but quicksands dragged at his feet.

“And he will find us married, won’t he, Miss Guin-never? You’ll be ready just as soon as I and your mother come to a understanding, won’t you? Why, it seems more like eleven years than [p274] eleven months since you and me saw that sunset on the river! There hasn’t been a day since, you might say, that hasn’t been occupied with you. All I ask for in the world is just the chance for the rest of my life of trying to

make you happy. You believe that, don't you, Miss Guin-never?"

"Yes," she said miserably, gazing out at the little arbor Hinton had made for her beneath the trees.

"Well, I'll stop by this evening after the meeting, if it ain't too late," said Mr. Opp. "You'll—you'll be—glad if everything culminates satisfactory, won't you?"

"I'm glad of everything good that comes to you," said Guinevere so earnestly that Mr. Opp, who had lived on a diet of crumbs all his life, looked at her gratefully, and went back to the office assuring himself that all would be well.

The visit of Mr. Mathews, while eagerly anticipated, could not have fallen on a less auspicious day. Aunt Tish, the arbiter of the Opp household, had been [p275] planning for weeks to make a visit to Coreyville, and the occasion of an opportune funeral furnished an immediate excuse.

"No, sir, Mr. D., I can't put hit off till to-morrow," she declared in answer to Mr. Opp's request that she stay with Miss Kippy until after the stock-holders' meeting. "I's 'bleeged to go on dat night boat. De funeral teks place at ten o'clock in de mawnin', an' I's gwine be dar ef I has to swim de ribber."

"Was he a particular friend, the one that died?" asked Mr. Opp.

"Friend? Bunk Bivens? Dat onery, good-fer-nothin' ole half-strainer? Naw, sir; he ain't no friend ob mine."

"Well, what makes you so pressing and particular about attending his funeral?" asked Mr. Opp.

"'Ca'se I 'spise him so. I been hating dat nigger fer pretty nigh forty year, an' I ain't gwine lose dis chanst ob seein' him buried."

"But, Aunt Tish," persisted Mr. Opp, impatiently, "I've got a very important [p276] and critical meeting this afternoon. The business under consideration may be wound up in the matter of a few minutes, and then, again, it may prolong itself into several

consecutive hours. You'll have to stay with Kippy till I get home."

The old woman looked at him strangely. "See dis heah hole in my haid, honey? 'Member how you and Ben uster ast Aunt Tish what mek hit? Dat nigger Bunk Bivens mek hit. He was a roustabout on de ribber, an' him an' yer paw fell out, an' one night when you was a baby he follow yer paw up here, an' me an' him had hit out."

"But where was my father?" asked Mr. Opp.

"Dey was 'sputin' right heah in dis heah kitchen where we's standin' at, an' dat mean, bow-laigged nigger didn't have no better manners den to 'spute wif a gentleman dat was full. An' pore Miss she run in so skeered an' white an' she say, 'Aunt Tish, don't let him hurt him; he don't know what he's sayin',' she [p277] baig, an' I tell her to keep yer paw outen de way an' I tek keer ob Bunk."

"And did he fight you?" asked Mr. Opp, indignantly.

"Naw, sir; I fit him. We put nigh tore up de floor ob de kitchen. Den he bust my haid open wif de poker, an' looks lak I been losing my knowledge ever sence. From dat day I 'low I's gwine to git even if it took me till I died, an' now dat spiteful old devil done died fust. But I's gwine see him buried. I want to see 'em nail him up in a box and th'ow dirt on him."

Aunt Tish ended the recital in a sing-song chant, worked up to a state of hysteria by the recital of her ancient wrong.

Mr. Opp sighed both for the past and the present. He saw the futility of arguing the case.

"Well, you'll stay until the boat whistles?" he asked. "Sometimes it is two hours late."

"Yas, sir; but when dat whistle toots I's gwine. Ef you is heah, all right; ef you ain't, all right: I's gwine!"

[p278] As Mr. Opp passed through the hall he saw Miss Kippy slip ahead of him and conceal herself behind the door. She carried something hidden in her apron.

“Have you learned your reading lesson to say to brother D. to-night?” he asked, ignoring her behavior. “You are getting so smart, learning to read handwriting just as good as I can!”

But Miss Kippy only peeped at him through the crack in the door and refused to be friendly. For several days she had been furtive and depressed, and had not spoken to either Aunt Tish or himself.

On the way to his office Mr. Opp was surprised to see Mr. Gallop leaning out of the window of his little room beckoning frantically. It was evident that Mr. Gallop had a secret to divulge, and Mr. Gallop with a secret was as excited as a small bird with a large worm.

“Just come in a minute and sit down,” he fluttered; “you’ll have to excuse the looks of things. Having just this one [p279] room for telegraph office and bedroom and everything crowds me up awful. I’ve been trying to fix my lunch for half an hour, but the telephone just keeps me busy. Then, besides, Mr. Mathews was here; he came down on the launch at twelve o’clock. Now, of course I know it ain’t right to repeat anything I hear over the long-distance wire, but being such a good friend of yours, and you being such a friend of mine—why, Mr. Opp there ain’t anybody in the world I owe more to than I do to you, not only the money you’ve lent me from time to time, but your standing up for me when everybody was down on me—and—”

“Yes; but you was remarking about Mr. Mathews?” Mr. Opp interrupted.

“Yes; and I was saying I never make a practice of repeating what I hear, but he was talking right here in the room, and I was mixing up a little salad dressing I promised Mrs. Fallows for the social,—it’s to be over at Your Hotel this evening—there’s the telephone!”

[p280] Mr. Opp sat on the edge of the sofa, the rest of it being occupied with gaily embroidered sofa pillows, specimens, the town declared, of Mr. Gallop's own handiwork. In fact, the only unoccupied space in the room was on the ceiling, for between his duties as operator and housekeeper Mr. Gallop still found time to cultivate the arts, and the result of his efforts was manifest in every nook and corner.

"It was Mrs. Gusty getting after Mr. Toddlinger for sending vanilla extract instead of lemon," explained Mr. Gallop, who had stopped to hear the discussion.

"Well, as I was saying, Mr. Mathews called up somebody in the city almost as soon as he got here—Now you've got to promise me you won't tell a living soul about this."

Mr. Opp promised.

"He said to telegraph New York party that terms were agreed on, and to mail check at once to Clark, and tell him to keep his mouth shut. Then the other end said something, and Mr. Mathews [p281] said: 'We can't afford to wait. You telegraph at once; I'll manipulate the crowd down here.' They talked a lot more, then he said awful low, but I heard him: 'Well, damn it! they've got to. There's too much at stake.'"

The editor sat with his hat in his hand, and blinked at the operator: "Manipulate," he said in a puzzled tone, "did he use that particular word?"

Mr. Gallop nodded.

"He may have been referring to something else," said Mr. Opp, waiving aside any disagreeable suspicion. "Mr. Mathews is a business gentleman. He's involved in a great many ventures, something like myself. You wouldn't think from what you heard that—er—that he was contemplating not acting exactly—fair with us, would you?"

Mr. Gallop, having delivered himself of his information, did not feel called upon to express a personal opinion.

“If you ever say I told you a word of this, I’ll swear I didn’t,” he said. “It was just because you were such a good [p282] friend, and—there’s that ’phone again!”

During the early hours of the afternoon, Mr. Opp was oppressed with a vague uneasiness. He made several attempts to see Mr. Mathews, but that gentleman was closeted with his stenographer until five o’clock, the hour named for the meeting.

All feeling of distrust was banished, however, when Mr. Mathews made his way through the crowd of stock-holders that filled the office of Your Hotel, and took his stand by the desk. He was so bland and confident, so satisfied with himself and the world and the situation, that, as Jimmy Fallows remarked, “You kinder looked for him to purr when he wasn’t talking.”

He set forth at great length the undoubted oil wealth of the region, he complimented them on their sagacity and foresight in buying up the Turtle Creek ground, he praised the Cove in general and that distinguished citizen, the editor of “The Opp Eagle,” in particular. The [p283] enterprise upon which they had embarked, he said, had grown to such proportions that large capital was required to carry it on. Owing to the recent depression in the money market, the Kentucky company did not feel able properly to back the concern, so it had been agreed that if a good offer was made to buy it, it should be accepted. It was with such an offer, Mr. Mathews said, that he had come to them to-day.

A stir of excitement met this announcement, and Miss Jim Fenton waved her lace scarf in her enthusiasm.

“Some time ago,” went on Mr. Mathews, graciously acknowledging the applause, “the Union Syndicate of New York sent an expert, Mr. Clark, down here to report on the oil conditions in this region.” Mr. Opp’s eyes became fixed on Mr. Mathews’s face, and his lips parted. “The report was so entirely satisfactory,” continued Mr. Mathews, “that the following offer has been made.”

Mr. Opp rose immediately. “Excuse [p284] me, sir, there is—er—rather, there must

be some little mistake just at this juncture."

All eyes were turned upon him, and a murmur of dissent arose at an interruption at such a critical point.

Mr. Mathews gave him permission to proceed.

"You see—I—Mr. Clark, that is,"—Mr. Opp's fingers were working nervously on the back of the chair before him,—"him and myself went over the ground together, and—I—well, I must say I don't consider him a competent judge."

Mr. Mathews smiled. "I am afraid, Mr. Opp, that your opinion is overruled. Mr. Clark is a recognized authority, although," he added significantly, "of course the most expert make mistakes at times."

"That ain't the point," persisted Mr. Opp; "it's the conflicting difference in what he said to me, and what he's reported to them. He told me that he didn't consider our prospects was worth [p285] a picayune, and if the wells were drilled, they probably wouldn't run a year. I didn't believe him then; but you say now that he is a expert and that he knows."

Mr. Mathews's tolerance seemed limitless. He waited patiently for Mr. Opp to finish, then he said smoothly:

"Yes, yes; I understand your point perfectly, Mr. Opp. Mr. Clark's remarks were injudicious, but he was looking at all sides of the question. He saw me after he saw you, you know, and I was able to direct his attention to the more favorable aspects of the case. His report was entirely favorable, and I guess that is all that concerns us, isn't it?" He embraced the room with his smile.

During the next quarter of an hour Mr. Opp sat with his arms folded and his eyes bent on the floor and bit his lips furiously. Something was wrong. Again and again he fought his way back to this conclusion through the enveloping mazes of Mr. Mathews's plausibility. Why [p286] had they waited so long after drilling that first well? Why, after making elaborate plans and buying machinery, had they suddenly

decided to sell? Why had Mr. Clark given such contradictory opinions? What did Mr. Mathews mean by that message from Mr. Gallop's office? Mr. Opp's private affairs, trembling in the balance, were entirely lost sight of in his determination for fair play.

Covering his eyes with his hand, and trying not to hear the flood of argument which Mr. Mathews was bringing to bear upon his already convinced audience, Mr. Opp attempted to recall all that Mr. Gallop had told him.

"He said 'manipulate,'" repeated Mr. Opp to himself. "I remember that, and he said 'telegraph New York party that terms were agreed on.' Then he said 'mail check to Clark; tell him to keep his mouth shut.' What's he paying Clark for? Why—"

"The motion before the house," Mr. Tucker's piping voice broke in upon his agitated reasoning, "is whether the [p287] stock-holders of the Turtle Creek Land Company is willing to sell out at a rate of seven to one to the Union Syndicate."

In the buzz of delight that ensued, Mr. Opp found himself standing on a chair and demanding attention.

"Listen here," he cried, pounding on the wall with his hand, "I've got important information that's got to be told: that man Clark is a rascal. He's—he's deceiving his company. He's been paid to make a good report of our ground. I can't prove it, but I know it. We're taking part in a fraud; we're—we're being manipulated."

Mr. Opp almost shrieked the last word in his agony of earnestness; but before the crowd could fully apprehend his meaning, Mr. Mathews rose and said somewhat sharply:

"What the representative of the Union Syndicate is, or is not, doesn't concern us in the least. I come to you with a gilt-edged proposition; all I ask you is to sit tight, and take my advice, and I guarantee you an immediate [p288] return of seven dollars to every one you put into this concern. Mr. Chairman, will you put it to the vote?"

But Mr. Opp again stopped proceedings. "As a director in this company I won't

stand for what's going on. I'll telegraph the syndicate. I'll advertise the whole matter!"

Mat Lucas pulled at his sleeve, and the preacher put a restraining arm about his shoulder. The amazing rumor had become current that the Cove's stanchest advocate for temperance had been indulging in drink, and there was nothing in the editor's flushed face and excited manner to contradict the impression.

"If by any chance," Mr. Mathews went on in a steady voice, "there should be a stock-holder who is unwilling to take advantage of this magnificent offer, we need hardly say that we are prepared to buy his stock back at the amount he gave for it." He smiled, as if inviting ridicule at the absurdity of the proposition.

"I am unwilling," cried Mr. Opp, [p289] tugging at the restraining hands. "I have never yet in all the length and breadth of my experience been associated with a dishonest act."

"Don't! Mr. Opp, don't!" whispered Mat Lucas. "You're acting like a crazy man. Don't you see you are losing the chance to make three thousand dollars?"

"That hasn't nothing to do with it," cried Mr. Opp, almost beside himself. "I'll not be a party to the sale. I'll—"

Mr. Mathews turned to his secretary. "Just fix up those papers for Mr. Opp, and give him a check for what is coming to him. Now, Mr. Chairman, will you put the matter to the vote?"

Amid the hilarious confusion that succeeded the unanimous vote, and the subsequent adjournment of the meeting, Mr. Opp pushed his way through the crowd that surrounded Mr. Mathews.

"You know what I was alluding at," he shouted through his chattering teeth. "You've carried this through, but I'll blockade you. I am going to tell the truth to the whole community. I am [p290] going to telegraph to the syndicate and stop the sale."

Mr. Mathews lifted his brows and smiled deprecatingly.

“I am sorry you have worked yourself up to such a pitch, my friend,” he said. “Telegraph, by all means if it will ease your mind; but the fact is, the deal was closed at noon to-day.”

The long, low whistle of the packet sounded, but Mr. Opp heeded it not. He was flinging his way across to the telegraph office in a frenzy of Quixotic impatience to right the wrong of which he had refused to be a part.

## [p291] XVI

Half an hour later, Mr. Opp dragged himself up the hill to his home. All the unfairness and injustice of the universe seemed pressing upon his heart. Every muscle in his body quivered in remembrance of what he had been through, and an iron band seemed tightening about his throat. His town had refused to believe his story! It had laughed in his face!

With a sudden mad desire for sympathy and for love, he began calling Kippy. He stumbled across the porch, and, opening the door with his latch-key, stood peering into the gloom of the room.

The draft from an open window blew a curtain toward him, a white spectral, [p292] beckoning thing, but no sound broke the stillness.

“Kippy!” he called again, his voice sharp with anxiety.

From one room to another he ran, searching in nooks and corners, peering under the beds and behind the doors, calling in a voice that was sometimes a command, but oftener a plea: “Kippy! Kippy!”

At last he came back to the dining-room and lighted the lamp with shaking hands. On the hearth were the remains of a small bonfire, with papers scattered about. He dropped on his knees and seized a bit of charred cardboard. It was a corner of the

hand-painted frame that had incased the picture of Guinevere Gusty! Near it lay loose sheets of paper, parts of that treasured package of letters she had written him from Coreyville.

As Mr. Opp gazed helplessly about the room, his eyes fell upon something white pinned to the red table-cloth. He held it to the light. It was a portion of one of [p293] Guinevere's letters, written in the girl's clear, round hand:

Mother says I can never marry you until Miss Kippy goes to the asylum.

Mr. Opp got to his feet. "She's read the letter," he cried wildly; "she's learned out about herself! Maybe she's in the woods now, or down on the bank!" He rushed to the porch. "Kippy!" he shouted. "Don't be afraid! Brother D.'s coming to get you! Don't run away, Kippy! Wait for me! Wait!" and leaving the old house open to the night, he plunged into the darkness, beating through the woods and up and down the road, calling in vain for Kippy, who lay cowering in the bottom of a leaking skiff that was drifting down the river at the mercy of the current.

Two days later, Mr. Opp sat in the office of the Coreyville Asylum for the Insane and heard the story of his sister's wanderings. Her boat had evidently been [p294] washed ashore at a point fifteen miles above the town, for people living along the river had reported a strange little woman, without hat or coat, who came to their doors crying and saying her name was "Oxety," and that she was crazy, and begging them to show her the way to the asylum. On the second day she had been found unconscious on the steps of the institution, and since then, the doctor said, she had been wild and unmanageable.

"Considering all things," he concluded, "it is much wiser for you not to see her. She came of her own accord, evidently felt the attack coming on, and wanted to be taken care of."

He was a large, smooth-faced man, with the conciliatory manner of one who regards all his fellow-men as patients in varying degrees of insanity.

“But I’m in the regular habit of taking care of her,” protested Mr. Opp. “This is just a temporary excitement for the time being that won’t ever, probably, occur again. Why, she’s been [p295] improving all winter; I’ve learnt her to read and write a little, and to pick out a number of cities on the geographical atlas.”

“All wrong,” exclaimed the doctor; “mistaken kindness. She can never be any better, but she may be a great deal worse. Her mind should never be stimulated or excited in any way. Here, of course, we understand all these things and treat the patient accordingly.”

“Then I must just go back to treating her like a child again?” asked Mr. Opp, “not endeavoring to improve her intellect, or help her grow up in any way?”

The doctor laid a kindly hand on his shoulder.

“You leave her to us,” he said. “The State provides this excellent institution for just such cases as hers. You do yourself and your family, if you have one, an injustice by keeping her at home. Let her stay here for six months or so, and you will see what a relief it will be.”

Mr. Opp sat with his elbow on the desk and his head propped in his hand, [p296] and stared miserably at the floor. He had not had his clothes off for two nights, and he had scarcely taken time from his search to eat anything. His face looked old and wizened and haunted from the strain. Yet here and now he was called upon to make his great decision. On the one hand lay the old, helpless life with Kippy, and on the other a future of dazzling possibility with Guinevere. All of his submerged self suddenly rose and demanded happiness. He was ready to snatch it, at any cost, regardless of everything and everybody—of Kippy; of Guinevere, who, he knew, did not love him, but would keep her promise; of Hinton, whose secret he had long ago guessed. And, as a running accompaniment to his thoughts, was the quiet, professional voice of the doctor urging him to the course that his heart prompted. For a moment the personal forces involved trembled in equilibrium.

After a long time he unknotted his fingers, and drew his handkerchief across his brow.

[p297] “I guess I’ll go up and see her now,” he said, with the gasping breath of a man who has been under water.

In vain the doctor protested. Mr. Opp was determined.

As the door to the long ward was being unlocked, he leaned for a moment dizzily against the wall.

“You’d better let me give you a swallow of whisky,” suggested the doctor, who had noted his exhaustion.

Mr. Opp raised his hand deprecatingly, with a touch of his old professional pride. “I don’t know as I’ve had occasion to mention,” he said, “that I am the editor and sole proprietor of ‘The Opp Eagle’; and that bird,” he added, with a forced smile, “is, as everybody knows, a complete teetotaler.”

At the end of the crowded ward, with her face to the wall, was a slight, familiar figure. Mr. Opp started forward; then he turned fiercely upon the attendant.

“Her hands are tied! Who dared to tie her up like that?”

“It’s just a soft handkerchief,” [p298] replied the matronly woman, reassuringly. “We were afraid she would pull her hair out. She wants its fixed a certain way; but she’s afraid for any of us to touch her. She has been crying about it ever since she came.”

In an instant Mr. Opp was on his knees beside her. “Kippy, Kippy darling, here’s brother D.; he’ll fix it for you! You want it parted on the side, don’t you, tied with a bow, and all the rest hanging down? Don’t cry so, Kippy. I’m here now; brother D.’ll take care of you.”

She flung her loosened arms around him and clung to him in a passion of relief. Her sobs shook them both, and his face and neck were wet with her tears.

As soon as they could get her sufficiently quiet, they took her into her little bedroom.

“You let the lady get you ready,” urged Mr. Opp, still holding her hand, “and I’ll take you back home, and Aunt Tish will have a nice, hot supper all waiting for us.”

[p299] But she would let nobody else touch her, and even then she broke forth into piteous sobs and protests. Once she pushed him from her and looked about wildly. “No, no,” she cried, “I mustn’t go; I am crazy!” But he told her about the three little kittens that had been born under the kitchen steps, and in an instant she was all a-tremble with eagerness to go home to see them.

An hour later, Mr. Opp and his charge sat on the river-bank and waited for the little launch that was to take them back to the Cove. A curious crowd had gathered at a short distance, for their story had gone the rounds.

Mr. Opp sat under the fire of curious glances, gazing straight in front of him, and only his flushed face showed what he was suffering. Miss Kippy, in her strange clothes and with her pale hair flying about her shoulders, sat close by him, her hand in his.

“D.,” she said once in a high, insistent voice, “when will I be grown up enough to marry Mr. Hinton?”

[p300] Mr. Opp for a moment forgot the crowd. “Kippy,” he said with all the gentle earnestness that was in him, “you ain’t never going to grow up at all. You are just always going to be brother D.’s little girl. You see, Mr. Hinton’s too old for you, just like—” he paused, then finished it bravely—“just like I am too old for Miss Guin-never. I wouldn’t be surprised if they got married with each other some day. You and me will just have to take care of each other.”

She looked at him with the quick suspicion of the insane, but he was ready for her with a smile.

“Oh, D.,” she cried, in a sudden rapture, “we are glad, ain’t we?”

# [p301] XVII

For the next four weeks there was no issue of “The Opp Eagle.” When it did make its appearance, it contained the following editorial:

Ye editor has for several weeks been the victim of the La Grip which eventuated into a rising in our left ear. Although we are still in severe and continuous pain, we know that behind the clouds of suffering the blue sky of health is still shining, and that a brighter day is coming, as it were.

The night of Mr. Opp’s return from Coreyville, he had written a long letter to Guinevere Gusty telling her of his final decision in regard to Kippy, and releasing her from her promise. This having been accomplished, he ceased to [p302] fight against the cold and exhaustion, and went to bed with a hard chill.

Aunt Tish, all contrition for the disasters she thought she had brought upon the household, served him night and day, and even Miss Kippy, moved by the unusual sight of her brother in bed, made futile efforts to assist in the nursing.

When at last he was able to crawl back to the office, he found startling changes had taken place in the Cove. The prompt payment of the oil stock-holders by the Union Syndicate had brought about such a condition of prosperity and general satisfaction as had never before been known. The civic spirit planted and carefully nourished by “The Opp Eagle” burst into bloom under this sudden and unexpected warmth. Committees, formed the year before, were called upon for reports, and gratifying results were obtained. The Cove awoke to the fact that it had lamp-posts, and side-walks and a post-office, with a possibility, looming large, of a court house.

Nor did this ambition for improvement [p303] stop short with the town: it extended to individuals. Jimmy Fallows was going to build a new hotel; Mr. Tucker was going to convert his hotel into a handsome private residence, for which Mrs. Gusty had been asked to select the wall-paper; Mat Lucas was already planning to build a

large store on Main Street, and had engaged Mr. Gallop to take charge of the dry-goods department. The one person upon whom prosperity had apparently had a blighting effect was Miss Jim Fenton. Soon after the receipt of her check, she had appeared in the Cove in a plain, black tailor suit, and a small, severe felt hat innocent of adornment. The French-heeled slippers had been replaced by heavy walking shoes, and the lace scarf was discarded for a stiff linen collar.

But the state of Miss Jim's mind was not to be judged by the somberness of her raiment. The novelty of selecting her own clothes, of consulting her own taste, of being rid of the entangling dangers of lace ruffles and flying furbelows, [p304] to say nothing of unwelcome suitors, gave her a sense of exhilaration and independence which she had not enjoyed for years.

In the midst of all these tangible evidences of success, Mr. Opp found himself indulging in a hand-to-hand struggle with failure. As a hunter aims at a point well in advance of the flying bird, so he had aimed at possibilities ahead of the facts, and when events took an unexpected turn, he was left stranded, his ammunition gone, his judgment questioned, and his hands empty. He had been conducting his affairs not on the basis of his present income, but in reference to the large sums which he confidently believed would accrue from the oil-wells.

The circulation of "The Opp Eagle" was increasing steadily, but the growing bird must be fed, and the editor, struggling to meet daily pressing obligations, was in no condition to furnish the steady demand for copy.

All unnecessary diversions were [p305] ruthlessly foregone. He resigned with a pang the leadership of the Union Orchestra, he gave up his membership with the Odd Fellows. Even his more important duties, as president of the Town Improvement League, and director in the bank, were relinquished. For, in addition to his editorials, he had undertaken to augment his slender income by selling on subscription the "Encyclopedia of Wonder, Beauty, and Wisdom."

It was at this low ebb of Mr. Opp's fortunes that Willard Hinton returned to the Cove. He was still pale from his long confinement, but there was an unusual touch of animation about him, the half-surprised interest of one who has struck bottom, and found it not so bad as he had expected.

One dark afternoon in November he made his way over to the office of "The Opp Eagle," and stood irresolute in the door.

"That you, Mr. Opp? Or is it Nick?" He blinked uncertainly.

"Why, it is me," said Mr. Opp. [p306] "Come right in. I've been so occupied with engagements that I haven't scarcely had occasion to see anything of you since you come back. You are getting improved all the time, ain't you? I thought I saw you writing on a type-writer when I passed this morning."

"Yes," said Hinton; "it's a little machine I got before I came down, with raised letters on the keyboard. If I progress at the rapid pace I have started, I'll be an expert before long. Mrs. Gusty was able to read five words out of ten this morning!"

"Hope you'll do us an article or two," said Mr. Opp. "I don't mind telling you that things has been what you might name as pressing ever since that trouble about the oil-wells. I'm not regretting any step that I taken, and I am endeavoring not to harbor any feelings against those that went on after I give my word it wasn't a fair transaction. But if what that man Clark said is true, Mr. Hinton, the Union Syndicate will [p307] never open up another well in this community."

"Your conscience proved rather an expensive luxury that time, didn't it, Mr. Opp?" asked Hinton, who had heard as many versions of the affair as there were citizens in the Cove.

Mr. Opp shrugged his shoulders, and pursed his lips. "It's a matter that I cannot yet bring myself to talk about. After a whole year and more of associating with me in business and social ways, to think they wouldn't be willing to take my word for what I said."

“But it wasn’t to their advantage,” said Hinton, smiling. “You forget the amount of money involved.”

“No,” declared Mr. Opp with some heat, “you do those gentlemen a injustice. There ain’t a individual of them that is capable of a dishonest act, any more than you or me. They just lacked the experience in dealing with a man like Mr. Mathews.”

Hinton’s smile broadened; he reached over and grasped Mr. Opp’s hand.

[p308] “Do you know you are a rattling good fellow? I am sorry things have gotten so balled up with you.”

“I’ll pay out,” said the editor. “It’ll take some time, but I’ve got a remarkable ability for work in me. I don’t mind telling you, though I’ll have to ask you not to mention the fact to no one at present, that I am considering inventing a patent. It’s a sort of improved type-setter, one of the most remarkable things you ever witnessed. I never knew till about six months ago what a scientific turn my mind could take. I’ve worked this whole thing out in my brain without the aid of a model of any sort.”

“In the meanwhile,” said Hinton, “I hear you will have to sell your paper.”

Mr. Opp winced, and the lines in his face deepened. “Well, yes,” he said, “I have about decided to sell, provided I keep the editorship, of course. After my patent gets on the market I will soon be in a position to buy it back.”

“Mr. Opp,” said Hinton, “I’ve got a [p309] proposition to make to you. I have a moderate sum of money in bank which I want to invest in business. How would you like to sell out the paper to me, lock, stock, and barrel?”

Mr. Opp, whose eyes had been resting on the bills that strewed his table, looked up eagerly.

“You to own it, and me to run it?” he asked hopefully.

“No,” said Hinton; “you would help me to run it, I hope, but I would be the editor. I have thought the matter over seriously, and I believe, with competent help, I can

make the paper an up-to-date, self-supporting newspaper, in spite of my handicap."

Mr. Opp sat as if stunned by a blow. He had known for some time that he must sell the paper in order to meet his obligations, but the thought of relinquishing his control of it never dawned upon him. It was the pride of his heart, the one tangible achievement in a wilderness of dreams. Life without Guinevere had seemed a desert; life without "The [p310] Opp Eagle" seemed chaos. He looked up bewildered.

"We'd continue on doing business here in the regular way?" he asked.

"No," said Hinton; "I would build a larger office uptown, and put in new presses; we could experiment with your new patent type-setter as soon as you got it ready."

But Mr. Opp was beyond pleasantries. "You'd keep Nick?" he asked. "I wouldn't consider anything that would cut Nick out."

"By all means," said Hinton. "I'm counting on you and Nick to initiate me into the mysteries of the profession. You could be city editor, and Nick—well, we could make him foreman."

One last hope was left to Mr. Opp, and he clung to it desperately, not daring to voice it until the end.

"The name," he said faintly, "would of course remain 'The Opp Eagle'?"

Hinton dropped his eyes; he could not stand the wistful appeal in the drawn face opposite.

[p311] "No," he said shortly; "that's a—little too personal. I think I should call my paper 'The Weekly News.'"

Mr. Opp could never distinctly remember what happened after that. He knew that he had at first declined the offer, that he had been argued with, had reconsidered, and finally accepted a larger sum than he had asked for; but the details of the transaction were like the setting of bones after an accident.

He remembered that he had sat where Hinton left him, staring at the floor until Nick

came to close the office; then he had a vague impression of crossing the fields and standing with his head against the old sycamore-tree where the birds had once whispered of love. After that he knew that he had met Hinton and Guinevere coming up the river road hand in hand, that he had gotten home after supper was over, and had built a bridge of blocks for Miss Kippy.

Then suddenly he had wakened to full consciousness, staggered out of the house to the woodshed, and shivered down into [p312] a miserable heap. There in the darkness he seemed to see things, for the first time in his life, quite as they were. His gaze, accustomed to the glittering promise of the future, peered fearfully into the past, and reviewed the long line of groundless hopes, of empty projects, of self-deceptions. Shorn of its petty shams and deceits, and stripped of its counterfeit armor of conceit, his life lay naked before him, a pitiful, starved, futile thing.

“I’ve just been similar to Kippy,” he sobbed, with his face in his hands, “continually pretending what wasn’t so. I acted like I was young, and good-looking, and—and highly educated; and look at me! Look at me!” he demanded fiercely of the kindling-wood.

Mr. Opp had been fighting a long duel—a duel with Circumstance, and Mr. Opp was vanquished. The acknowledgment of defeat, even to himself, gave it the final stamp of verity. He had fought valiantly, with what poor weapons he had, but the thrusts had been too many [p313] and too sure. He lay clothed in his strange new garment of humility, and wondered why he did not want to die. He did not realize that in losing everything else, he had won the greater stake of character for which he had been unconsciously fighting all along.

The kitchen door opened, and he saw Miss Kippy’s figure silhouetted against the light.

“Brother D.,” she called impatiently, “ain’t you coming back to play with me?”

He scrambled to his feet and made a hasty and somewhat guilty effort to compose

himself.

“Yes, I’m a-coming,” he answered briskly, as he smoothed his scant locks and straightened his tie. “You go on ahead and gather up the blocks; I only stopped playing for a little spell.”

## [p314] XVIII

The marriage of Guinevere Gusty and Willard Hinton took place in mid-winter, and the account of it, published in the last issue of “The Opp Eagle,” proved that the eagle, like the swan, has its death-song.

Like many of the masterpieces of literature, the article had been written in anguish of spirit; but art, like nature, ignores the process, and reckons only the result, and the result, in Mr. Opp’s opinion at least, more than justified the effort.

“In these strenuous, history-making meanderings of the sands of life,” it ran, “we sometimes overlook or neglect particulars in events which prove of larger importance than appears on the surface. The case to which we have [p315] allusion to is the wedding which was solemnized at eventide at the residence of the bride’s mother. The Gustys may be justly considered one of the best-furnished families in the county, and the parlors were only less beautiful than the only daughter there presiding. The collation served therein was of such a liberal nature that every guest, we might venture to say, took dinner enough home for supper. It has seldom been our fate to meet a gentleman of such intelligent attainments as Mr. Hinton, and his entire future existence, be it long or short, cannot fail of being thrice blessed by the companionship of the one who has confided her trust to him,—her choice, world-wide. Although a bachelor ourself, we know what happiness must be theirs, and with all our heart we vouchsafe them a joyful voyage across the uncertain billows of Time until their nuptial or matrimonial bark shall have been safely moored in the haven of everlasting bliss, where the storms of this life spread not

their violence."

[p316] Some men spend their lives in the valley, and some are born and die on the heights; but it was Mr. Opp's fate to climb from the valley to his own little mountain-top of prosperity, only to have to climb down on the other side. It was evidence of his genius that in time he persuaded himself and his fellow-citizens that it was exactly what he wanted to do.

"That there life of managing and promoting was all right in its way," he said one day to a group of men at the post-office, "but a man owes something to himself, don't he? Now that the town has got well started, and Mr. Hinton is going to take main charge of the paper, I'll be freer than I been for years to put some of my ideas into practice."

"We are counting on getting you back in the orchestra," said Mr. Gallop, whose admiration for Mr. Opp retained its pristine bloom.

Mr. Opp shook his head regretfully. "No, I'm going to give all my evenings over to study. This present enterprise I [p317] am engaged on requires a lot of personal application. I sometimes think that I have in the past scattered my forces too much, in a way."

So persistently did Mr. Opp refer to the mysterious work that was engrossing him that he reduced Mr. Gallop's curiosity to the saturation-point.

When he was no longer able to stand it, the telegraph operator determined upon a tour of investigation. The projected presentation of a new cornet by the Unique Orchestra to its erstwhile leader proved a slender excuse for a call, and while he knew that, with the exception of Willard Hinton, no visitor had ever been known to cross the Opp threshold, yet he permitted desire to overrule delicacy.

It was a blustery December night when he climbed the hill, and he had to pause several times during the ascent to gain sufficient breath to proceed. By the time he reached the house he was quite speechless, and he dropped on the steps to rest a

moment before knocking. As he sat [p318] there trying to imagine the flying-machine or torpedo-boat upon which he felt certain Mr. Opp was engaged, he became aware of voices from within, and looking up, he saw the window above him was slightly raised. Overcome by his desire to see his friend at work upon his great invention, he cautiously tiptoed across the porch and peeped in.

The low-ceilinged old room was bright with firelight, and in the center of it, with his knees drawn up, his toes turned in, and his tongue thrust out, sat Mr. Opp, absorbed in an object which he held between his knees. Miss Kippy knelt before him, eagerly watching proceedings.

Mr. Gallop craned his neck to see what it was that held their interest, and at last discovered that they were fitting a dress on a large china doll.

Miss Kippy's voice broke the silence. "You can sew nice," she was saying; "you can sew prettier than Aunt Tish."

[p319] "'Can't nobody beat me making skirts'"

"Can't nobody beat me making skirts," said Mr. Opp, and Mr. Gallop saw him push his needle through a bit of [p321] cloth, with the handle of the shovel; "but sleeves is a more particular proposition. Why, I'd rather thread three needles than to fix in one sleeve! Why don't you make like it's summer-time and let her go without any?"

Miss Kippy's lips trembled. "I want sleeves, D.—two of them, and a lady's hat, with roses on it. We can let her be grown up, can't we, D.?"

Mr. Gallop beat a hasty and shame-faced retreat. Though his idol had fallen from its pedestal, he determined to stand guard over the fragments, and from that night on, he constituted himself Mr. Opp's loyal defender.

And Mr. Gallop was not the only one who came forth boldly in expressions of sympathy and respect for the ex-editor. It was especially easy for those who had prospered by the oil boom to express unbounded admiration for the conscientious stand he had taken in the late transaction. They had done him a grave injustice, they

acknowledged. The wells had been reinvestigated and proved of [p322] small value. The fact that the truth was discovered too late to affect their luck deepened their appreciation of Mr. Opp.

Willard Hinton, seeing what balm these evidences of approval brought to Mr. Opp's wounded spirit, determined to arrange for a banquet to the retiring editor, at which he planned to bring forth as many testimonials of friendship and good-will as was possible.

The affair was to take place New Year's night, in the dining-room of Fallows's new Your Hotel. The entire masculine contingent of the Cove was invited, and the feminine element prepared the supper. There had never been a social event of such an ambitious nature attempted in the Cove before, and each citizen took a personal pride in its success.

For a week in advance the town was in violent throes of speech-writing, cake-baking, salad-mixing, and decorating. Even Mrs. Fallows warmed to the occasion, and crocheted a candlestick, candle, flame, and all, to grace the table.

[p323] When the night arrived, Jimmy Fallows did the honors. He was resplendent in his dress-suit, which consisted of a black sateen shirt and a brown suit of clothes.

When the guests were all seated, Willard Hinton rose, and in a few brief, pointed remarks, called the attention of the town to the changes that had been wrought by the indefatigable efforts of one citizen in particular. He spoke of the debt of gratitude they owed, collectively and individually, to the late editor of "The Opp Eagle," and added that after Mr. Opp's response, the guests desired, each in turn, to voice his sentiments upon the subject.

Mr. Opp then rose amid a thunder of applause, and stood for a moment in pleased but overwhelming embarrassment. Then he put forward one foot inflated his chest, and began:

"Valued brother fellow-beings, I come before you to-night to express that which

there is no words in the English vocabulary to express. Whatever you may [p324] have to say concerning me, or my part in the awakening of this our native city, I shall listen at with a grateful heart. I believe in a great future for Cove City. We may not live to see it, but I believe that the day will arrive when our city shall be the gateway to the South, when the river front will be not dissimilar to Main Street, New York. I predict that it reaches a pivot of prominence of which we wot not of. As for Mr. Hinton, one and all we welcome him amid our mongst. 'The Opp Eagle' strikes palms with 'The Weekly News,' and wishes it a lasting and eternal success."

A burst of applause interrupted the flow of his eloquence, and as he glanced around the room, he saw there was some commotion at the door. A turbaned head caught his eye, then Aunt Tish's beckoning hand.

Hastily excusing himself, he made his way through the crowd, and bent to hear her message.

"Hit's Miss Kippy," she whispered. "I hate to 'sturb you, but she done crack [p325] her doll's head, an' she's takin' on so, I can't do nuffin 't all wif her."

"Couldn't you contrive to get her quiet no way at all?" asked Mr. Opp, anxiously.

"Naw, sir. She mek like dat doll her shore 'nough baby, and she 'low she gwine die, too, furst chanct she gits. I got Val's mother to stay wif her till I git back."

"All right," said Mr. Opp, hastily. "You go right on and tell her I'm coming."

When he reëntered the dining-room, he held his hat in his hand.

"I find a urgent matter of business calls me back home; for only a few moments, I trust," he said apologetically, with bows and smiles. "If the banquet will kindly proceed, I will endeavor to return in ample time for the final speeches."

With the air of a monarch taking temporary leave of his subjects, he turned his back upon the gay, protesting crowd, upon the feast prepared in his honor, [p326] upon the speech-making, so dear to his heart. Tramping through the snow of the deserted

street, through the lonely graveyard, and along the river road, he went to bind up the head of a china doll, and to wipe away the tears of a little half-crazed sister.

He wears the same checked suit as when we saw him first, worn and frayed, to be sure, but carefully pressed for the occasion, the same brave scarf and pin, and watch fob, though the watch is missing.

Passing out of sight with the sleet in his face, and the wind cutting through his finery, he whistles as he goes, such a plucky, sturdy, hopeful whistle as calls to arms the courage that lies slumbering in the hearts of men.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MR. OPP ***

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