

snatched his hat and rushed into the ball. The elevator had just passed his landing, going down, and he waited, fuming, while the boy took on and delivered passengers at three lower and two upper floors; rushing from the building at last, to find that the girl and her companion had passed out of sight. His rapid walk to the next corner discovered no trace of them and he could only conclude that their sudden disappearance must be due to their having taken a car. As four lines crossed each other at this especial spot, he could but admit that his defeat was absolute. He spent a gloomy afternoon and sleepless night, fretting over his lost chance, and trying to devise some new way for finding her. No feasible plan presented itself, and after spending two weeks more in a vain effort to obtain a clue, he went back—to take up, with listless zeal, the routine of business at the Bluebird. He had put what little data he had in the hands of a private detective, and at the end of three months the latter had learned that the John Conroy—alias the assumed prison name—had been released from durance and was supposed to have joined his daughter in California—though the strictest search had failed to discover their whereabouts. The approaching holiday season brought an urgent invitation from Dartley to spend the Christmas and New Year's with him in Chicago—but it found Macy in one of his most saturnine moods, and was declined. Bluebirdville with all its winter dreariness seemed more congenial to his mood; but as the time of cheer drew nigh, the feeling of homesickness that comes to all lonely beings at that date, if at no other, overwhelmed him, finally deciding him to spend the season in San Francisco, where he would have at least the sight and sound of the city's holiday cheer to alleviate his loneliness.

He had no intimate friends, and few acquaintances in the place, and on Christmas eve he left the hotel to assuage a growing sense of loneliness by a sight of the city's holiday bravery. The business streets were ablaze with glittering lights and gorgeous window dressings, and throngs crowded the sidewalks, smiling, eager, jostling each other with good-natured unconcern. The sight of them, with their arms loaded with holiday bundles carrying their suggestions the cherry hearthstones and home ties, deepened that sense of desolation which had brought an unusual tightening to his heartstrings, and after pushing his way along the principal thoroughfares for a time, he found it a relief to turn into the quieter streets. His aloofness from the aims and feelings of the happy, animated throngs, made him feel alien and out-of-place there.

He had spent other holiday seasons in strange cities, when it had not brought a tittle of the sensitiveness he felt now; and he knew that the unusual stress was due to the fond dreams he had lately pictured of a new life, which was to have brought to him the blessed gifts of love and home-happiness. It made him doubly bitter, as he thought of the ill-chance that had taken from him the cup of happiness that seemed at his very lips. For the case seemed hopeless, now, with every clue destroyed, and the girl's own determination to avoid him, hung in the balance of odds. "Lucky Milton Macy" the newspaper had called him in the personal that had heralded his arrival, telling of the good fortune that had made a millionaire of the needy civil engineer in the space of a year. Lucky! As if anything counted now in life—if he were to see no more the blue eyes that had shed the first warm ray of actual happiness into his life. He had grown more morose as he

walked on, thinking it over, and turned with an impatient scowl as some one jostled against him suddenly on the narrow sidewalk.

It was a man carrying a parcel in his arms, but though Macy had moved aside, he did not pass, but continued to walk along closely at his side.

There were people passing on the sidewalk, but not enough to excuse the man's keeping at his elbow; and Macy had just concluded that the individual had indulged in a strong form of Christmas cheer, when the man, turning suddenly toward him, spoke:

"Do you see this parcel across my arm?" he said in an easy, confidential tone, such as a friend might have used in discussing the holiday sights, or any other common theme. "It is a pistol, and my hand is on the trigger. If you cry out, or attempt to move away from me, I will kill you. Go on!" he hissed, as Macy half halted. "I am on the verge of hell, if you do not save me—and if you fail me—you shall die with me as surely as there is a heaven on high!" He turned his haggard face and burning eyes full upon Macy as he spoke, and the latter, with a vague idea that lunacy was pictured in them, and the certain one that however it might be, the man was in a deadly mood—walked on beside him.

Instinctively he glanced at the parcel the man carried. It lay across the arm nearest him, and through the broken edges of the paper he saw the end of a pistol, with the muzzle pointed within six inches of his heart. Macy glanced around. The street though quiet, was far from being deserted, and Macy knew that he had but to cry out, to bring a half dozen to his assistance—but before they would be able to realize sufficiently to reach and aid him—the man would have ample time to send a bullet through his heart. To attempt to grapple with him seemed equally hazardous, as his assistant had evidently counted all costs, and would act upon the turn of a finger.

Walking leisurely along with his head turned in seeming carelessness toward Macy, the man was watching him as alertly and cautiously as a cat. Despite the seeming absurdity and hazard of the situation, the stranger, so far, had the upper hand; and Macy found himself conscious of half curious interest and zest in the adventure—as he waited to see how it all might end. While he was undoubtedly at a disadvantage himself—yet he was so far, not more so than the other, as any attempt to carry out a plan of violent robbery in sight of the passers-by would, by calling their attention to his desperate purpose frustrate his own ends. The problem was, what scheme had he resolved upon to carry out his ends? The man did not leave him long in doubt.

"I will give you instructions as what I wish you to do," he said, "and you will carry them out, without giving me trouble, or suffer what I have threatened. I will tell you once more not to delude yourself with the thought that I don't mean to carry out my purpose. I have been planning this for a sufficient time to count all the odds and the costs of failure; and that I have attempted this in the face of them, should convince you that I will make you suffer first, if the end is to be failure."

"You say you have planned this some time ahead," said Macy. "Does that mean that you know me?"

"I saw in the paper when you arrived, and have been watching you ever since for this chance. I selected you, because you are rich, because you have no family to suffer for your loss if I am obliged to kill you—because I knew that with a stranger I had the chance of finding you alone, and therefore able to take you off guard, as I have to-night. When you left your hotel this

evening I was behind you, and I have been at your elbow ever since."

"What do you propose doing?" asked Macy with increased curiosity.

"I am going to take what money you have with you, and if it is not sufficient for my needs, I shall exact a pledge from you to supply me with more."

Macy smiled. Lunacy, without a shadow of doubt, was responsible for his unique adventure.

"Don't think that I am insane—or joking," said the other, as if reaching his thought; "I mean simply that I am going to try the experiment of taking your word, if you give it, and if you fail to keep it to show you that I can keep mine. Turn here," he said, as they reached the corner; "turn and go north till I tell you to stop." Macy obeyed. He was in fact experiencing a certain kind of enjoyment in the adventure. It offered a change at least, from the lonely room at the hotel to which he dreaded to return, and the worse loneliness of the streets, which he had been glad to shun.

As they walked on, the man talked, cool and threateningly at first, but gradually falling into a nervously desperate tone in which Macy fancied he could detect a note of sincere misery and shame.

The story into whose recital he had gradually drifted, was a trite one—of poverty in its direct straits—of want that had driven him to crime, of new hope and energy and moral determination that had upheld him after the long prison term was ended—and of the weary bitter struggle whose vainness had brought him once more into the shadow of sin. Macy listened carelessly at first, classing it simply as the old original instinct which prompts the criminal, natural or otherwise, to attempt to palliate his sins in others' eyes; but as he went on, there was something personally familiar in the ring of the story, that made Macy's heart beat with a wild hope.

When he had at last finished—Macy spoke quietly—with an effort keeping the eagerness out of his tone.

"What you have told me sounds well enough. If it is true you might certainly stand free from condemnation for this or any other means you might use save murder, of alleviating such suffering. I don't need to tell you, though, how completely used up your material is, the starving wife, the sick child, and all the rest of the business you have put in your story."

"Wait," he went on as the man was about to interrupt bitterly, "Wait. I have not said that I do not believe it. I simply suggest to your intelligence that in order to be able to fully believe I should have some more positive proof of its truth than your word. Now I am going to give you a chance. If you can produce the fireless home, and sick and starving child as per your assertions, I pledge you that from to-night if you do not have an opportunity to make a man of yourself, it will be your own fault."

The man gave a half-sob. "You want me to take you to see it with your own eyes," he said. "Well, you shall come."

Macy did not know how far, nor hardly in what direction they went before his companion told him to stop. He had seen the lights of the city thinning gradually out to the suburbs, and heard the waters of the bay lapping the lonely beach whose edge they neared, without a sense of fear, and hardly of misgiving. Since the man's involuntary display of conscience, he had a sense of absolute security as far as personal violence was concerned, and as to robbery, the worst the man might do could not matter materially in view of his great fortune.

It was with absolute fearlessness, then, that he stopped before the lonely hotel-like house, at whose door the