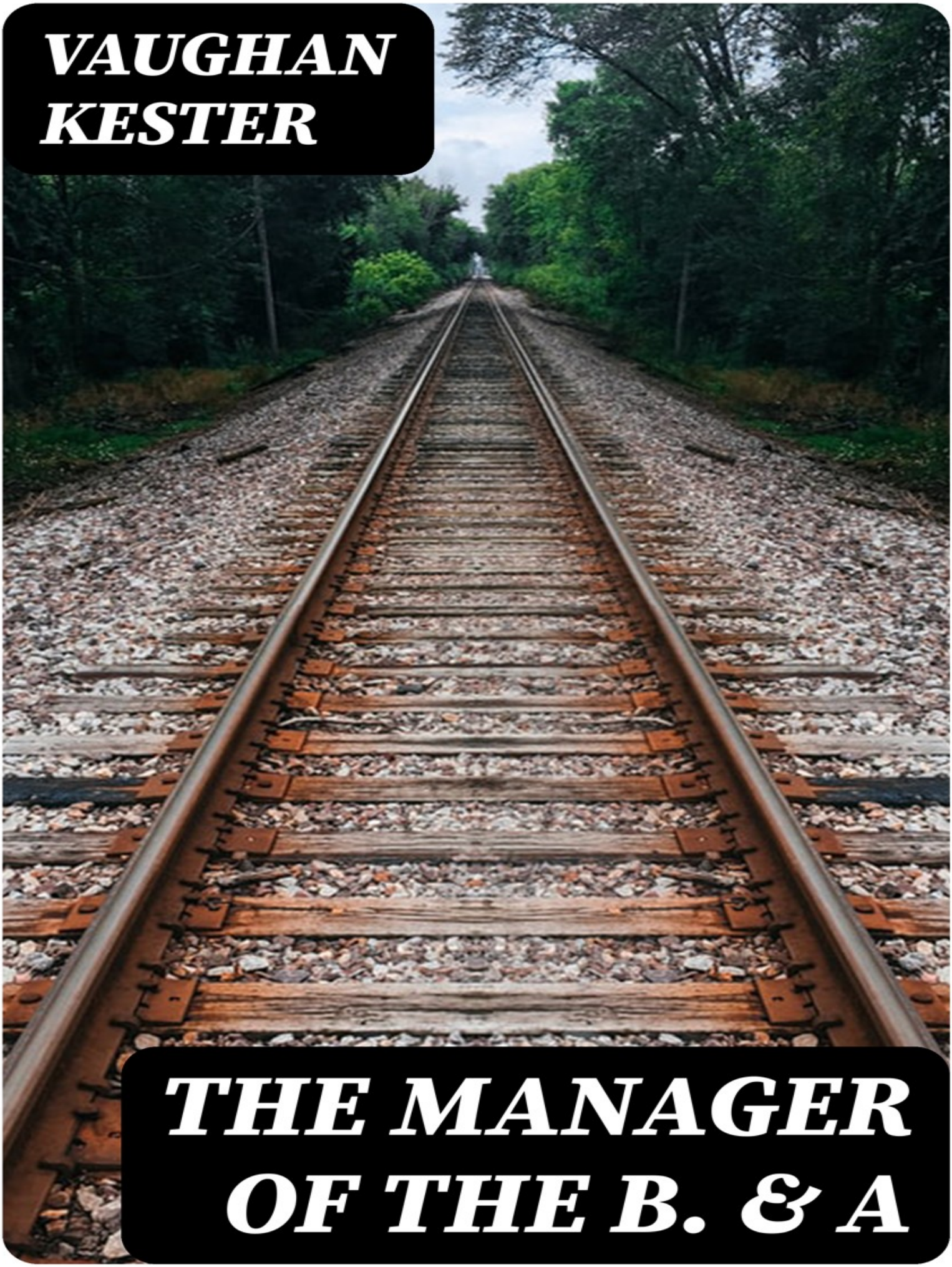
VAUGHAN KESTER



THE MANAGER OF THE B. & A

Vaughan Kester

The Manager of the B. & A

A Novel

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THE END

CHAPTER I

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OAKLEY was alone in the bare general offices of the Huckleberry line-as the Buckhom and Antioch Railroad was commonly called by the public, which it betrayed in the matter of meals and connections. He was lolling lazily over his desk with a copy of the local paper before him, and the stem of a disreputable cob pipe between his teeth.

The business of the day was done, and the noise and hurry attending its doing had given way to a sudden hush. Other sounds than those that had filled the ear since morning grew out of the stillness. Big drops of rain driven by the wind splashed softly against the unpainted pine door which led into the yards, or fell with a gay patter on the corrugated tin roof overhead. No. 7, due at 5.40, had just pulled out with twenty minutes to make up between Antioch and Harrison, the western terminus of the line. The six-o'clock whistle had blown, and the men from the car shops, a dingy, one-story building that joined the general offices on the east, were straggling off home. Across the tracks at the ugly little depot the ticket-agent and telegraph-operator had locked up and hurried away under one umbrella the moment No. 7 was clear of the platform. From the yards every one was gone but Milton McClintock, the master mechanic, and Dutch Pete, the yard buss. Protected by dripping yellow oil-skins, they were busy repairing a wheezy switch engine that had been incontinently backed into a siding and the caboose of a freight.

Oakley was waiting the return of Clarence, the office-boy, whom he had sent up-town to the post-office. Having read the two columns of local and personal gossip arranged under the heading “People You Know,” he swept his newspaper into the wastebasket and pushed back his chair. The window nearest his desk overlooked the yards and a long line of shabby day coaches and battered freight cars on one of the sidings. They were there to be rebuilt or repaired. This meant a new lease of life to the shops, which had never proved profitable.

Oakley had been with the Huckleberry two months. The first intimation the office force received that the new man whom they had been expecting for over a week had arrived in Antioch, and was prepared to take hold, was when he walked into the office and quietly introduced himself to Kerr and Holt. Former general managers had arrived by special after much preliminary wiring. The manner of their going had been less spectacular. They one and all failed, and General Cornish cut short the days of their pride and display.

Naturally the office had been the least bit skeptical concerning Oakley and his capabilities, but within a week a change was patent to every one connected with the road: the trains began to regard their schedules, and the slackness and unthrift in the yards gave place to an ordered prosperity. Without any apparent effort he found work for the shops, a few extra men even were taken on, and there was no hint as yet of half-time for the summer months.

He was a broad-shouldered, long-limbed, energetic young fellow, with frank blue eyes that looked one squarely in the face. Men liked him because he was straightforward,

alert, and able, with an indefinite personal charm that lifted him out of the ordinary. These were the qualities Cornish had recognized when he put him in control of his interests at Antioch, and Oakley, who enjoyed hard work, had earned his salary several times over and was really doing wonders.

He put down his pipe, which was smoked out, and glanced at the clock. “What's the matter with that boy?” he muttered.

The matter was that Clarence had concluded to take a brief vacation. After leaving the post-office he skirted a vacant lot and retired behind his father's red barn, where he applied himself diligently to the fragment of a cigarette that earlier in the day McClintock, to his great scandal, had discovered him smoking in the solitude of an empty box-car in the yards. The master mechanic, who had boys of his own, had called him a runty little cuss, and had sent him flying up the tracks with a volley of bad words ringing in his ears.

When the cigarette was finished, the urchin bethought him of the purpose of his errand. This so worked upon his fears that he bolted for the office with all the speed of his short legs. As he ran he promised himself, emotionally, that “the boss” was likely to “skin” him. But whatever his fears, he dashed into Oakley's presence, panting and in hot haste. “Just two letters for you, Mr. Oakley!” he gasped. “That was all there was!”

He went over to the superintendent and handed him the letters. Oakley observed him critically and with a dry smile. For an instant the boy hung his head sheepishly, then his face brightened.

“It's an awfully wet day; it's just sopping!”

Oakley waived this bit of gratuitous information.

“Did you run all the way?”

“Yep, every step,” with the impudent mendacity that comes of long practice.

“It's rather curious you didn't get back sooner.”

Clarence looked at the clock.

“Was I gone long? It didn't seem long to me,” he added, with a candor he intended should disarm criticism.

“Only a little over half an hour, Clarence.”

The superintendent sniffed suspiciously.

“McClintock says he caught you smoking a cigarette to-day—how about it?”

“Cubebs,” in a faint voice.

The superintendent sniffed again and scrutinized the boy's hands, which rested on the corner of his desk.

“What's that on your fingers?”

Clarence considered.

“That? Why, that must be walnut-stains from last year. Didn't you ever get walnut-stains on your hands when you was a boy, Mr. Oakley?”

“I suppose so, but I don't remember that they lasted all winter.”

Clarence was discreetly silent. He felt that the chief executive of the Huckleberry took too great an interest in his personal habits. Besides, it was positively painful to have to tell lies that went so wide of the mark as his had gone.

“I guess you may as well go home now. But I wouldn't smoke any more cigarettes, if I were you,” gathering up his letters.

“Good-night, Mr. Oakley,” with happy alacrity.

“Good-night, Clarence.”

The door into the yards closed with a bang, and Clarence, gleefully skipping the mud-puddles which lay in his path, hurried his small person off through the rain and mist.

Oakley glanced at his letters. One he saw was from General Cornish. It proved to be a brief note, scribbled in pencil on the back of a telegram blank. The general would arrive in Antioch that night on the late train. He wished Oakley to meet him.

The other letter was in an unfamiliar hand. Oakley opened it. Like the first, it was brief and to the point, but he did not at once grasp its meaning. This is what he read:

“DEAR Sir,—I enclose two newspaper clippings which fully explain themselves. Your father is much interested in knowing your whereabouts. I have not furnished him with any definite information on this point, as I have not felt at liberty to do so. However, I was able to tell him I believed you were doing well. Should you desire to write him, I will gladly undertake to see that any communication you may send care of this office will reach him.

“*Very sincerely yours,*

“Ezra Hart.”

It was like a bolt from a clear sky. He drew a deep, quick breath. Then he took up the newspaper clippings. One was a florid column-and-a-half account of a fire in the hospital ward of the Massachusetts State prison, and dealt particularly with the heroism of Roger Oakley, a life prisoner, in leading a rescue. The other clipping, merely a

paragraph, was of more recent date. It announced that Roger Oakley had been pardoned.

Oakley had scarcely thought of his father in years. The man and his concerns—his crime and his tragic atonement—had passed completely out of his life, but now he was free, if he chose, to enter it again. There was such suddenness in the thought that he turned sick on the moment; a great wave of self-pity enveloped him, the recollection of his struggles and his shame—the bitter, helpless shame of a child—returned. He felt only resentment towards this man whose crime had blasted his youth, robbing him of every ordinary advantage, and clearly the end was not yet.

True, by degrees, he had grown away from the memory of it all. He had long since freed himself of the fear that his secret might be discovered. With success, he had even acquired a certain complacency. Without knowing his history, the good or the bad of it, his world had accepted him for what he was really worth. He was neither cowardly nor selfish. It was not alone the memory of his own hardships that embittered him and turned his heart against his father. His mother's face, with its hunted, fugitive look, rose up before him in protest. He recalled their wanderings in search of some place where their story was not known and where they could begin life anew, their return to Burton, and then her death.

For years it had been like a dream, and now he saw only the slouching figure of the old convict, which seemed to menace him, and remembered only the evil consequent upon his crime.

Next he fell to wondering what sort of a man this Roger Oakley was who had seemed so curiously remote, who had been as a shadow in his way preceding the presence, and suddenly he found his heart softening towards him. It was infinitely pathetic to the young man, with his abundant strength and splendid energy; this imprisonment that had endured for almost a quarter of a century. He fancied his father as broken and friendless, as dazed and confused by his unexpected freedom, with his place in the world forever lost. After all, he could not sit in judgment, or avenge.

So far as he knew he had never seen his father but once. First there had been a hot, dusty journey by stage, then he had gone through a massive iron gate and down a narrow passage, where he had trotted by his mother's side, holding fast to her hand.

All this came back in a jerky, disconnected fashion, with wide gaps and lapses he could not fill, but the impression made upon his mind by his father had been lasting and vivid. He still saw him as he was then, with the chalky prison pallor on his haggard face. A clumsily made man of tremendous bone and muscle, who had spoken with them through the bars of his cell-door, while his mother cried softly behind her shawl. The boy had thought of him as a man in a cage.

He wondered who Ezra Hart was, for the name seemed familiar. At length he placed him. He was the lawyer who had defended his father. He was puzzled that Hart knew where he was; he had hoped the little New England village had lost all track of him, but the fact that Hart did know convinced him it would be quite useless to try to keep his

whereabouts a secret from his father, even if he wished to. Since Hart knew, there must be others, also, who knew.

He took up the newspaper clippings again. By an odd coincidence they had reached him on the very day the Governor of Massachusetts had set apart for his father's release.

Outside, in the yards, on the drenched town, and in the sweating fields beyond, the warm spring rain fell and splashed.

It was a fit time for Roger Oakley to leave the gray walls, and the gray garb he had worn so long, and to re-enter the world of living things and the life of the one person in all that world who had reason to remember him.

CHAPTER II

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OAKLEY drew down the top of his desk and left the office. Before locking the door, on which some predecessor had caused the words, “Department of Transportation and Maintenance. No admittance, except on business,” to be stencilled in black letters, he called to McClintock, who, with Dutch Pete, was still fussing over the wheezy switch-engine.

“Will you want in the office for anything, Milt?” The master-mechanic, who had been swearing at a rusted nut, got up from his knees and, dangling a big wrench in one hand, bawled back: “No, I guess not.”

“How's the job coming on?”

“About finished. Damn that fool Bennett, anyhow! Next time he runs this old bird-cage into a freight, he'll catch hell from me!”

After turning the key on the Department of Transportation and Maintenance, Oakley crossed the tracks to the station and made briskly off up-town, with the wind and rain blowing in his face.

He lived at the American House, the best hotel the place could boast. It overlooked the public square, a barren waste an acre or more in extent, built about with stores and offices; where, on hot summer Saturdays, farmers who had come to town to trade, hitched their teams in the deep shade of the great maples that grew close to the curb. Here, on Decoration Day and the Fourth of July, the eloquence of the county assembled and commuted its proverbial peck of

dirt in favor of very fine dust. Here, too, the noisiest of brass-bands made hideous hash of patriotic airs, and the forty odd youths constituting the local militia trampled the shine from each other's shoes, while their captain, who had been a sutler's clerk in the Civil War, cursed them for a lot of lunkheads. And at least once in the course of each summer's droning flight the spot was abandoned to the purely carnal delights of some wandering road circus.

In short, Antioch had its own life and interests, after the manner of every other human ant-hill; and the Honorable Jeb Barrow's latest public utterance, Dippy Ellsworth's skill on the snare-drum, or “Cap” Roberts's military genius, and whether or not the Civil War would really have ended at Don-elson if Grant had only been smart enough to take his advice, were all matters of prime importance and occupied just as much time to weigh properly and consider as men's interests do anywhere.

In Antioch, Oakley was something of a figure. He was the first manager of the road to make the town his permanent headquarters, and the town was grateful. It would have swamped him with kindly attention, but he had studiously ignored all advances, preferring not to make friends. In this he had not entirely succeeded. The richest man in the county, Dr. Emory, who was a good deal of a patrician, had taken a fancy to him, and had insisted upon entertaining him at a formal dinner, at which there were present the Methodist minister, the editor of the local paper, the principal merchant, a judge, and an ex-Congressman, who went to sleep with the soup and only wakened in season for the ice-cream. It was the most impressive function Oakley

had ever attended, and even to think of it still sent the cold chills coursing down his spine.

That morning he had chanced to meet Dr. Emory on the street, and the doctor, who could always be trusted to say exactly what he thought, had taken him to task for not calling. There was a reason why Oakley had not done so. The doctor's daughter had just returned from the East, and vague rumors were current concerning her beauty and elegance. Now, women were altogether beyond Oakley's ken. However, since some responsive courtesy was evidently expected of him, he determined to have it over with at once. Imbued with this idea, he went to his room after supper to dress. As he arrayed himself for the ordeal, he sought to recall a past experience in line with the present. Barring the recent dinner, his most ambitious social experiment had been a brakesmen's ball in Denver, years before, when he was conductor on a freight. He laughed softly as he fastened his tie.

“I wonder what Dr. Emory would think if I told him I'd punched a fellow at a dance once because he wanted to take my girl away from me.” He recalled, as pointing his innate conservatism, that he had decided not to repeat the experiment until he achieved a position where a glittering social success was not contingent upon his ability to punch heads.

It was still raining, a discouragingly persistent drizzle, when Oakley left his hotel and turned from the public square into Main Street. This Main Street was never an imposing thoroughfare, and a week of steady downpour made it from curb to curb a river of quaking mud. It was lit at long

intervals by flickering gas-lamps that glowed like corpulent fireflies in the misty darkness beneath the dripping maple-boughs. As in the case of most Western towns, Antioch had known dreams of greatness, dreams which had not been realized. It stood stockstill, in all its raw, ugly youth, with the rigid angularity its founders had imposed upon it when they hacked and hewed a spot for it in the pine-woods, whose stunted second growth encircled it on every side.

The Emory home had once been a farm-house of the better class; various additions and improvements gave it an air of solid and substantial comfort unusual in a community where the prevailing style of architecture was a square wooden box, built close to the street end of a narrow lot.

The doctor himself answered Oakley's ring, and led the way into the parlor, after relieving him of his hat and umbrella.

“My wife you know, Mr. Oakley. This is my daughter.”

Constance Emory rose from her seat before the wood fire that smoldered on the wide, old-fashioned hearth, and gave Oakley her hand. He saw a stately, fair-haired girl, trimly gowned in an evening dress that to his unsophisticated gaze seemed astonishingly elaborate. But he could not have imagined anything more becoming. He decided that she was very pretty. Later he changed his mind. She was more than pretty.

For her part, Miss Emory saw merely a tall young fellow, rather good-looking than otherwise, who was feeling nervously for his cuffs. Beyond this there was not much to be said in his favor, but she was willing to be amused.

She had been absent from Antioch four years. These years had been spent in the East, and in travel abroad with a widowed and childless sister of her father's. She was, on the whole, glad to be home again. As yet she was not disturbed by any thoughts of the future. She looked on the world with serene eyes. They were a limpid blue, and veiled by long, dark lashes. She possessed the poise and unshaken self-confidence that comes of position and experience. Her father and mother were not so well satisfied with the situation; they already recognized that it held the elements of a tragedy. In their desire to give her every opportunity they had overreached themselves. She had outgrown Antioch as surely as she had outgrown her childhood, and it was as impossible to take her back to the one as to the other.

The doctor patted Oakley on the shoulder.

“I am glad you've dropped in. I hope, now you have made a beginning, we shall see more of you.”

He was a portly man of fifty, with kindly eyes and an easy, gracious manner. Mrs. Emory was sedate and placid, a handsome, well-kept woman, who administered her husband's affairs with a steadiness and economy that had made it possible for him to amass a comfortable fortune from his straggling country practice.

Constance soon decided that Oakley was not at all like the young men of Antioch as she recalled them, nor was he like the men she had known while under her aunt's tutelage —the leisurely idlers who drifted with the social tide, apparently without responsibility or care.

He proved hopelessly dense on those matters with which they had been perfectly familiar. It seemed to her that pleasure and accomplishment, as she understood them, had found no place in his life. The practical quality in his mind showed at every turn of the conversation. He appeared to hunger after hard facts, and the harder these facts were the better he liked them. But he offended in more glaring ways. He was too intense, and his speech too careful and precise, as if he were uncertain as to his grammar, as, indeed, he was.

Poor Oakley was vaguely aware that he was not getting on, and the strain told. It slowly dawned upon him that he was not her sort, that where he was concerned, she was quite alien, quite foreign, with interests he could not comprehend, but which gave him a rankling sense of inferiority.

He had been moderately well satisfied with himself, as indeed he had good reason to be, but her manner was calculated to rob him of undue pride; he was not accustomed to being treated with mixed indifference and patronage. He asked himself resentfully how it happened that he had never before met such a girl. She fascinated him. The charm of her presence seemed to suddenly create and satisfy a love for the beautiful. With generous enthusiasm he set to work to be entertaining. Then a realization of the awful mental poverty in which he dwelt burst upon him for the first time. He longed for some light and graceful talent with which to bridge the wide gaps between the stubborn heights of his professional erudition.

He was profoundly versed on rates, grades, ballast, motive power, and rolling stock, but this solid information was of no avail He could on occasion talk to a swearing section-boss with a grievance and a brogue in a way to make that man his friend for life; he also possessed the happy gift of inspiring his subordinates with a zealous sense of duty, but his social responsibilities numbed his faculties and left him a bankrupt for words.

The others gave him no assistance. Mrs. Emory, smiling and good-humored, but silent, bent above her sewing. She was not an acute person, and the situation was lost upon her, while the doctor took only the most casual part in the conversation.

Oakley was wondering how he could make his escape, when the door-bell rang. The doctor slipped from the parlor. When he returned he was not alone. He was preceded by a dark young man of one or two and thirty. This was Griffith Ryder, the owner of the Antioch *Herald*.

“My dear,” said he, “Mr. Ryder.” Ryder shook hands with the two ladies, and nodded carelessly to Oakley; then, with an easy, graceful compliment, he lounged down in a chair at Miss Emory's side.

Constance had turned from the strenuous Oakley to the new-comer with a sense of unmistakable relief. Her mother, too, brightened visibly. She did not entirely approve of Ryder, but he was always entertaining in a lazy, indifferent fashion of his own.

“I see, Griff,” the doctor said, “that you are going to support Kenyon. I declare it shakes my confidence in you,” And he drew forward his chair. Like most Americans, the

physician was something of a politician, and, as is also true of most Americans, not professionally concerned in the hunt for office, this interest fluctuated between the two extremes of party enthusiasm before and non-partisan disgust after elections.

Ryder smiled faintly. “Yes, we know just how much of a rascal Kenyon is, and we know nothing at all about the other fellow, except that he wants the nomination, which is a bad sign. Suppose he should turn out a greater scamp! Really it's too much of a risk.” he drawled, with an affectation of contempt.

“Your politics always were a shock to your friends, but this serves to explain them,” remarked the doctor, with latent combativeness. But Ryder was not to be beguiled into argument. He turned again to Miss Emory.

“Your father is not a practical politician, or he would realize that it is only common thrift to send Kenyon back, for I take it he has served his country not without profit to himself; besides, he is clamorous and persistent, and there seems no other way to dispose of him. It's either that or the penitentiary.”

Constance laughed softly. “And so you think he can afford to be honest now? What shocking ethics!”

“That is my theory. Anyhow, I don't see why your father should wish me to forego the mild excitement of assisting to re-elect my more or less disreputable friend. Antioch has had very little to offer one until you came,” he added, with gentle deference. Miss Emory accepted the compliment with the utmost composure. Once she had been rather flattered by his attentions, but four years make a great difference.

Either he had lost in cleverness, or she had gained in knowledge.

He was a very tired young man. At one time he had possessed some expectations and numerous pretensions. The expectation had faded out of his life, but the pretence remained in the absence of any vital achievement. He was college-bred, and had gone in for literature. From literature he had drifted into journalism, and had ended in Antioch as proprietor of the local paper, which he contrived to edit with a lively irresponsibility that won him few friends, though it did gain him some small reputation as a humorist.

His original idea had been that the management of a country weekly would afford him opportunity for the serious work which he believed he could do, but he had not done this serious work, and was not likely to do it. He derived a fair income from the *Herald*, and he allowed his ambitions to sink into abeyance, in spite of his cherished conviction that he was cut out for bigger things. Perhaps he had wisely decided that his pretensions were much safer than accomplishment, since the importance of what a man actually does can generally be measured, while what he might do admits of exaggerated claims.

Oakley had known Ryder only since the occasion of the doctor's dinner, and felt that he could never be more than an acquired taste, if at all.

The editor took the floor, figuratively speaking, for Miss Emory's presence made the effort seem worth his while. He promptly relieved Oakley of the necessity to do more than listen, an act of charity for which the latter was hardly as grateful as he should have been. He was no fool, but there

were wide realms of enlightenment where he was an absolute stranger, so, when Constance and Ryder came to talk of books and music, as they did finally, his only refuge was in silence, and he went into a sort of intellectual quarantine. His reading had been strictly limited to scientific works, and to the half-dozen trade and technical journals to which he subscribed, and from which he drew the larger part of his mental sustenance. As for music, he was familiar with the airs from the latest popular operas, but the masterpieces were utterly unknown, except such as had been brought to his notice by having sleeping-cars named in their honor, a practice he considered very complimentary, and possessing value as a strong commercial endorsement.

He amused himself trying to recall whether it was the “Tannhauser” or the “Lohengrin” he had ridden on the last time he was East. He was distinctly shocked, however, by “Gôtterdammerung,” which was wholly unexpected. It suggested such hard swearing, or Dutch Pete's untrammelled observations in the yards when he had caught an urchin stealing scrap-iron—a recognized source of revenue to the youth of Antioch. But he felt more and more aloof as the evening wore on. It was something of the same feeling he had known as a boy, after his mother's death, when, homeless and friendless at night, he had paused to glance in through uncurtained windows, with a dumb, wordless longing for the warmth and comfort he saw there.

It was a relief when the doctor took him into the library to examine specimens of iron-ore he had picked up west of Antioch, where there were undeveloped mineral lands for which he was trying to secure capital. This was a matter

Oakley was interested in, since it might mean business for the road. He promptly forgot about Miss Emory and the objectionable Ryder, and in ten minutes gave the doctor a better comprehension of the mode of procedure necessary to success than that gentleman had been able to learn in ten years of unfruitful attempting. He also supplied him with a few definite facts and figures in lieu of the multitude of glittering generalities on which he had been pinning his faith as a means of getting money into the scheme.

When, at last, they returned to the parlor, they found another caller had arrived during their absence, a small, shabbily dressed man, with a high, bald head and weak, near-sighted eyes. It was Turner Joyce. Oakley knew him just as he was beginning to know every other man, woman, and child in the town.

Joyce rose hastily, or rather stumbled to his feet, as the doctor and Oakley entered the room.

“I told you I was coming up, doctor,” he said, apologetically. “Miss Constance has been very kind. She has been telling me of the galleries and studios. What a glorious experience!”

A cynical smile parted Ryder's thin lips.

“Mr. Joyce feels the isolation of his art here.” The little man blinked doubtfully at the speaker, and then said, with a gentle, deprecatory gesture, “I don't call it art.”

“You are far too modest. I have heard my foreman speak in the most complimentary terms of the portrait you did of his wife. He was especially pleased with the frame. You must know. Miss Constance, that Mr. Joyce usually furnishes the

frames, and his pictures go home ready to the wire to hang on the wall.”

Mr. Joyce continued to blink doubtfully at Ryder. He scarcely knew how to take the allusion to the frames. It was a sore point with him.

Constance turned with a displeased air from Ryder to the little artist. There was a faint, wistful smile on her lips. He was a rather pathetic figure to her, and she could not understand how Ryder dared or had the heart to make fun.

“I shall enjoy seeing all that you have done, Mr. Joyce; and of course I wish to see Ruth. Why didn't she come with you to-night?”

“Her cousin, Lou Bentick's wife, is dead, and she has been over at his house all day. She was quite worn out, but she sent you her love.”

Ryder glanced again at Miss Emory, and said, with hard cynicism: “The notice will appear in Saturday's *Herald*, with a tribute from her pastor. I never refuse his verse. It invariably contains some scathing comment on the uncertainty of the Baptist faith as a means of salvation.”

But this was wasted on Joyce. Ryder rose with a sigh.

“Well, we toilers must think of the morrow.”

Oakley accepted this as a sign that it was time to go. Joyce, too, stumbled across the room to the door, and the three men took their leave together. As they stood on the steps, the doctor said, cordially, “I hope you will both come again soon; and you, too, Turner,” he added, kindly.

Ryder moved off quickly with Oakley. Joyce would have dropped behind, but the latter made room for him at his side. No one spoke until Ryder, halting on a street corner,

said, “Sorry, but it's out of my way to go any farther unless you'll play a game of billiards with me at the hotel, Oakley.”

“Thanks,” curtly. “I don't play billiards.”

“No? Well, they are a waste of time, I suppose. Good-night.” And he turned down the side street, whistling softly.

“A very extraordinary young man,” murmured Joyce, rubbing the tip of his nose meditatively with a painty forefinger. “And with quite an extraordinary opinion of himself.”

A sudden feeling of friendliness prompted Oakley to tuck his hand through the little artist's arm. “How is Bentick bearing the loss of his wife?” he asked. “You said she was your cousin.”

“No, not mine. My wife's. Poor fellow! he feels it keenly. They had not been married long, you know.”

The rain was falling in a steady downpour. They had reached Turner Joyce's gate, and paused.

“Won't you come in and wait until it moderates, Mr. Oakley?”

Oakley yielded an assent, and followed him through the gate and around the house.

CHAPTER III

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THERE were three people in the kitchen, the principal living room of the Joyce home—Christopher Berry, the undertaker; Jeffy, the local outcast, a wretched ruin of a man; and Turner Joyce's wife, Ruth.

Jeffy was seated at a table, eating. He was a cousin of the Benticks, and Mrs. Joyce had furnished him with a complete outfit from her husband's slender wardrobe for the funeral on the morrow.

Oakley had never known him to be so well or so wonderfully dressed, and he had seen him in a number of surprising costumes. His black trousers barely reached the tops of his shoes, while the sleeves of his shiny Prince Albert stopped an inch or more above his wrists; he furthermore appeared to be in imminent danger of strangulation, such was the height and tightness of his collar. The thumb and forefinger of his right hand were gone, the result of an accident at a Fourth of July celebration, where, at the instigation of Mr. Gid Runyon—a gentleman possessing a lively turn of mind and gifted with a keen sense of humor—he had undertaken to hold a giant fire-cracker while it exploded, the inducement being a quart of whiskey, generously donated for the occasion by Mr. Runyon himself.

Mrs. Joyce had charged herself with Jeffy's care. She was fearful that he might escape and sell his clothes before the funeral. She knew they would go immediately after, but then he would no longer be in demand as a mourner.