CHAPTER I.

The First Wayfarer and the Second Wayfarer Meet and Part on the Highway.

A solitary figure trudged along the narrow road that wound its serpentinous way through the dismal, forbidding depths of the forest—a man who, though weary and footsore, lagged not in his swift, resolute advance. Night was coming on, and with it the no uncertain prospects of a storm.

He came to the "pike" and there was a signpost. A huge, crudely painted hand pointed to the left, and on what was intended to be the sleeve of a very stiff and unflinching arm these words were printed in scaly white: "Hart's Tavern. Food for Man and Beast. Also Gasoline. Established 1798. 1 Mile."

On the opposite side of the "pike," in the angle formed by a junction with the narrow mountain road, stood an humbler signpost, lettered so indistinctly that it deserved the compassion of all observers because of its humility. Swerving in his hurried passage, the tall stranger drew near this shrinking friend to the uncertain traveler, and was suddenly aware of another presence in the roadway.

A woman appeared, as if from nowhere, almost at his side. He drew back to let her pass. She stopped before the little signpost, and together they made out the faint directions.

To the right and up the mountain road Frogg's Corner lay four miles and a half away; Pitcairn was six miles back over the road which the man had traveled. Two miles and a half down the turnpike was Spanish Falls, a railway station, and four miles above the crossroads where the man and women stood peering through the darkness at the laconic signpost reposed the village of St. Elizabeth. Hart's Tavern was on the road to St. Elizabeth, and the man, with barely a glance at his fellow traveler, started briskly off in that direction.

He knew that these wild mountain storms moved swiftly; his chance of reaching the tavern ahead of the deluge was exceedingly slim. His long, powerful legs had carried him twenty or thirty paces before he came to a sudden halt.

What of this lone woman who traversed the highway? His first glimpse of her had been extremely casual—indeed, he had paid no attention to her at all, so eager was he to read the directions and be on his way.

She was standing quite still in front of the signpost, peering up the road toward Frogg's Corner—confronted by a steep climb that led into black and sinister timberlands above the narrow strip of pasture bordering the pike.

The fierce wind pinned her skirts to her slender body as she leaned against the gale, gripping her hat tightly with one hand and straining under the weight of the bag in the other. The ends of a veil whipped furiously about her head, and, even in the gathering darkness, he could see a strand or two of hair keeping them company.

Retracing his steps, he called out to her above the gale:

"Can I be of any assistance to you?"

She turned quickly. He saw that the veil was drawn tightly over her face.

"No, thank you," she replied. Her voice, despite a certain nervous note, was soft and clear and gentle—the voice and speech of a well-bred person who was young and resolute.

"Pardon me, but have you much farther to go? The storm will soon be upon us, and—surely you will not consider me presumptuous—I don't like the idea of your being caught out in—"

"What is to be done about it?" she inquired, resignedly. "I must go on. I can't wait here, you know, to be washed back to the place I started from."

He smiled. She had wit as well as determination.

"If I can be of the least assistance to you pray don't hesitate to command me. I am a sort of tramp, you might say, and I travel as well by night as I do by day—so don't feel that you are putting me to any inconvenience. Are you by any chance bound for Hart's Tavern? If so, I will be glad to lag behind and carry your bag."

"You are very good, but I am not bound for Hart's Tavern, wherever that may be. Thank you, just the same. You appear to be an uncommonly genteel tramp, and it isn't because I am afraid you might make off with my belongings." She added the last by way of apology.

He smiled—and then frowned as he cast an uneasy look at the black clouds now rolling ominously up over the mountain ridge.

"By Jove, we're going to catch it good and hard," he exclaimed. "Better take my advice. These storms are terrible. I know, for I've encountered half a dozen of them in the past week. They fairly tear one to pieces. You are a stranger in these parts?"

"Yes. The railway station is a few miles below here. I have walked all the way. There was no one to meet me. You are a stranger also, so it is useless to inquire if you know whether this road leads to Green Fancy."

"Green Fancy? Sounds attractive. I'm sorry I can't enlighten you." He

He Drew a Small Electric Torch From His Pocket and Directed Its Slender Ray Upon the Sign Post.

drew a small electric torch from his pocket and directed its slender ray upon the signpost.

"It is on the road to Frogg's Corner," she explained nervously. "A mile and a half, so I am told. It isn't on the signpost. It is a house, not a village. Thank you for your kindness. And I am not at all frightened," she added, raising her voice slightly.

"But you are," he cried. "You're scared half out of your wits. You can't fool me. I'd be scared myself at the thought of venturing into those woods up yonder."

"Well, then, I am frightened," she confessed plaintively. "Almost out of my boots."

"That settles it," he said flatly. "You shall not undertake it."

"Oh, but I must. I am expected. It is import—"

"If you are expected why didn't someone meet you at the station? Seems to me—"

"Hark! Do you hear—doesn't that sound like an automobile—ah!" The hoarse honk of an automobile horn rose above the howling wind, and an instant later two faint lights came rushing toward them around a bend in the mountain road. "Better late than never," she cried, her voice vibrant once more.

He grasped her arm and jerked her out of the path of the oncoming machine, whose driver was sending it along at a mad rate, regardless of ruts and stones and curves. The car careened as it swung into the pike, skidded alarmingly, and then the brakes were jammed down. Attended by a vast grinding of gears and wheels, the rattling old car came to a stop fifty feet or more beyond them.

"I'd sooner walk than take my chances in an antediluvian rattletrap like that," said the tall wayfarer, bending quite close to her ear. "It will fall to pieces before you—"

But she was running down the road toward the car, calling out sharply to the driver. He stooped over and took up the traveling bag she had dropped in her haste and excitement. It was heavy, amazingly heavy.

"I shouldn't like to carry that a mile and a half," he said to himself.

The voice of the belated driver came to his ears on the swift wind. It was high-pitched and unmistakably apologetic. He could not hear what she was saying to him, but there wasn't much doubt as to the nature of her remarks. She was roundly upbraiding him.

Urged to action by thoughts of his own plight he hurried to her side and said:

"Excuse me, please. You dropped something. Shall I put it up in front or in the tonneau?"

The whimsical note in his voice brought a quick, responsive laugh from her lips.

"Thank you so much. I am frightfully careless with my valuables. Would you mind putting it in behind? Thanks!" Her tone altered completely as she ordered the man to turn the car around—"And be quick about it," she added.

The first drops of rain pelted down from the now thoroughly black dome above them, striking in the road with the sharpness of pebbles.

"Lucky it's a limousine," said the tall traveler. "Better hop in. We'll be getting it hard in a second or two."

"You must let me take you on to the Tavern in the car," she said. "Turn about is fair play. I cannot allow you to—"

"Never mind about me," he broke in cheerily. He had been wondering if she would make the offer, and he felt better now that she had done so. "I'm accustomed to roughing it. I don't mind a soaking. I've had hundred of 'em."

"Just the same you shall not have one tonight," she announced firmly. "Get in behind. I shall sit with the driver."

If anyone had told him that this rattling, dilapidated automobile—ten years old, at the very least, he would have sworn—was capable of covering the mile in less than two minutes he would have laughed in his face. Almost before he realized that they were on the way up the straight, dark road the lights in the windows of Hart's Tavern came into view. Once more the bounding, swaying car came to a stop under brakes, and he was relaxing after the strain of the most hair-raising ride he had ever experienced.

Not a word had been spoken during the trip. The front windows were lowered. The driver—an old, hatchet-faced man—had uttered a single word just before throwing in the clutch at the crossroads in response to the young woman's crisp command to drive to Hart's Tavern. That word was uttered under his breath and it is not necessary to repeat it here.

The wayfarer lost no time in climbing out of the car. As he leaped to the ground and raised his green hat he took a second look at the automobile—a look of mingled wonder and respect. It was an old-fashioned, high-powered car, capable, despite its antiquity, of astonishing speed in any sort of going.

"For heaven's sake," he began, shouting to her above the roar of the wind and rain, "don't let him drive like that over those—"

"You're getting wet," she cried out, a thrill in her voice. "Good night—and thank you!"

"Look out!" rasped the unpleasant driver, and in went the clutch. The man in the road jumped hastily to one side as the car shot backward with a jerk, curved sharply, stopped for the fraction of a second, and then bounded forward again, headed for the crossroads.

"Thanks!" shouted the late passenger after the receding tail light, and dashed up the steps to the porch that ran the full length of Hart's Tavern.

A huge old-fashioned lantern hung above the portal, creaking and straining in the wind, dragging at its stout supports and threatening every instant to break loose and go frolicking away with the storm.

He lifted the latch and, being a tall man, involuntarily stooped as he passed through the door, a needless precaution, for gaunt, gigantic mountaineers had entered there before him and without bending their arrogant heads.

CHAPTER II.

The First Wayfarer Lays His Pack Aside and Falls in With Friends

The little hall in which he found himself was the "office" through which all men must pass who come as guests to Hart's Tavern. A steep, angular staircase took up one end of the room. Set in beneath its upper turn was the counter over which the business of the house was transacted, and behind this a man was engaged in the peaceful occupation of smoking a corncob pipe.

An open door to the right of the stairway gave entrance to a room from which came the sound of a deep, sonorous voice employed in what turned out to be a conversational solo. To the left another door led to what was evidently the dining room. The glance that the stranger sent in that direction revealed two or three tables covered with white cloths.

"Can you put me up for the night?" he inquired, advancing to the counter.

"You look like a feller who'd want a room with bath," drawled the man behind the counter, surveying the applicant from head to foot. "Which we ain't got," he added.

"I'll be satisfied to have a room with a bed," said the other.

"Sign here," was the laconic response.

"Can I have supper?"

"Food for man and beast," said the other patiently. He slapped his palm upon a cracked call bell and then looked at the fresh name on the page. "Thomas K. Barnes, New York," he read aloud. He eyed the newcomer once more. "My name is Jones—Putnam Jones. I run this place. My father an' grandfather run it before me. Glad to meet you, Mr. Barnes. We used to have a hostler here named Barnes. What's your idear fer footin' it this time o' the year?"

"I do something like this every spring. A month or six weeks of it puts me in fine shape for a vacation later on," supplied Mr. Barnes whimsically.

Mr. Jones allowed a grin to stea' over his seamed face. He reinserted the corncob pipe and took a couple of pulls at it.

"I never been to New York, but it must be a heavenly place for a vacation, if a feller c'n judge by what some of my present boarders have to say about it. It's a sort of play actor's paradise, ain't it?"

"Hello, Rushcroft," he greeted, as if meeting an old-time and greatly beloved friend. "This is good. 'Pon my soul you are like a thriving date palm in the middle of an endless desert. How are you?"

They shook hands warmly. Mr. Dillingford slapped the newcomer on the shoulder affectionately, familiarly, and shouted:

"Who would have dreamed we'd run across good old Barnesy up here? By Jove, it's marvelous!"

"Friends, countrymen," boomed Mr. Rushcroft, "this is Mr. Barnes of New York. Not the man the book was written about but one of the best fellows God ever put into this little world of ours. I do not recall your names, gentlemen, or I would introduce each of you separately and divisibly."

Lyndon Rushcroft was a tall, saggy man of fifty. Despite his determined erectness he was inclined to sag from the shoulders down. His head, huge and gray, appeared to be much too ponderous for his yielding body, and yet he carried it manfully, even theatrically. The lines in his dark, seasoned face were like furrows; his nose was large and somewhat bulbous, his mouth wide and grim. Thick, black eyebrows shaded a pair of eyes in which white was no longer apparent—it had given way to a permanent red. A two-days' stubble covered his chin and cheeks. Altogether he was a singular exemplification of one's idea of the old-time actor.

Passing through the office, his arm linked in one of Barnes', Mr. Rushcroft hesitated long enough to impress upon Landlord Jones the importance of providing his "distinguished friend, Robert W. Barnes," with the very best that the establishment afforded. Putnam Jones blinked slightly and his eyes sought the register as if to accuse or justify his memory. Then he spat copiously into the corner, a necessary preliminary to a grin. He hadn't much use for the great Lyndon Rushcroft. His grin was sardonic. Something told him that Mr. Rushcroft was about to be liberally fed.

CHAPTER III.

Mr. Rushcroft Dissolves, Mr. Jones Intervenes, and Two Men Ride Away.

Mr. Rushcroft explained that he had had his supper. In fact, he went on to confess, he had been compelled, like the dog, to "speak" for it. What could be more disgusting, more degrading, he mourned, than the spectacle of a man who had appeared in all of the principal theaters of the land as star and leading support to stars, settling for his supper by telling stories and reciting poetry in the taproom of a tavern?

"Still," he consented, when Mr. Barnes insisted that it would be a kindness to him, "since you put it that way, I dare say I could do with a little snack, as you so aptly put it. Just a bite or two. What have you ready, Miss Tilly?"

Miss Tilly was a buxom female of forty or thereabouts, with spectacles. She was one of a pair of sedentary waitresses who had been so long in the employ of Mr. Janes that he hated the sight of them.

Mr. Rushcroft's conception of a bite or two may have staggered Barnes but it did not bewilder Miss Tilly. He had four eggs with his ham, and other things in proportion. He talked a great deal, proving in that way that it was a supper well worth speaking for. Among other things he dilated at great length upon his reasons for not being a member of the Players or the Lambs in New York city. It seems that he had promised his dear, devoted wife that he would never join a club of any description. Dear old girl, he would as soon have cut off his right hand as to break any promise made to her. He brushed something away from his eyes, and his chin, contracting, trembled slightly. "What is it, Mr. Bacon? Any word from New York?"

Mr. Bacon hovered near, perhaps hungrily.

"Our genial host has instructed me to say to his latest guest that the rates are two dollars a day, in advance, all dining-room checks payable on presentation," said Mr. Bacon, apologetically.

Rushcroft exploded. "O scurvy insult," he boomed. "Confound his—"

The new guest was amiable. He interrupted the outraged star. "Tell Mr. Jones that I shall settle promptly," he said with a smile.

"It has just entered his bean that you may be an actor, Mr. Banes," said Bacon.

Miss Tilly, overhearing, drew a step or two nearer. A sudden interest in Mr. Barnes developed. She had not noticed before that he was an uncommonly good-looking fellow. She always had said that she adored strong, "athaletic" faces.

Later on she felt inspired to jot down, for use no doubt in some future literary production, a concise, though general, description of the magnificent Mr. Barnes. She utilized the back of the bill of fare and she wrote with the feverish ardor of one who dreads the loss of a first impression. I herewith append her visual estimate of the hero of this story:

"He was a tall, shapely specimen of mankind, "wrote Miss Tilly. "Broad-shouldered. Smooth-shaved face. Penetrating gray eyes. Short, curly hair about the color of mine. Strong hands of good shape. Face tanned considerable. Heavy dark eyebrows. Good teeth, very white. Square chin. Lovely smile that seemed to light up the room for everybody within hearing. Nose ideal. Mouth same. Voice aristocratic and reverberating with education. Age about thirty or thirty-one. Rich as Croesus. Well-turned legs. Would make a good nobleman."

All this would appear to be reasonably definite were it not for the note regarding the color of his hair. It leaves to me the simple task of completing the very admirable description of Mr. Barnes by announcing that Miss Tilly's hair was an extremely dark brown.

Also it is advisable to append the following biographical information: Thomas Kingsbury Barnes, engineer, born in Montclair, N. J., September 26, 1885. Cornell and Beaux Arts, Paris. Son of the late Stephen S. Barnes, engineer, and Edith (Valentine) Barnes. Office, Metropolitan building, New York city. Residence, Amsterdam mansion. Clubs: (Lack of space prevents listing them here). Recreations, golf, tennis and horseback riding. Fellow of the Royal Geographical society. Member of the Loyal Legion and the Sons of the American Revolution.

Added to this, the mere announcement that he was in a position to indulge a fancy for long and perhaps aimless walking tours through more or less out-of-the-way sections of his own country, to say nothing of excursions in Europe.

He was rich. Perhaps not as riches are measured in these Midas-like days, but rich beyond the demands of avarice. His legacy had been an ample one. The fact that he worked hard at his profession from one year's end to the other—not excluding the six devoted to mentally productive jaunts—is proof sufficient that he was not content to subsist on the fruits of another man's enterprise. He was a worker.

The first fortnight of a proposed six weeks' jaunt through upper New England terminated when he laid aside his heavy pack in the little bedroom at Hart's Tavern. Cockcrow would find him ready and eager to begin his third week. At least so he thought. But, truth is, he had come to his journey's end; he was not to sling his pack for many a day to come.

After setting the mind of the landlord at rest Barnes declined Mr. Rushcroft's invitation to "quaff" a cordial with him in the taproom, explaining that he was exceedingly tired and intended to retire early.

Instead of going up to his room immediately, however, he decided to have a look at the weather. His uneasiness concerning the young woman of the crossroads increased as he peered at the wall of blackness looming up beyond the circle of light. She was somwhere outside that sinister black wall and in the smothering grasp of those invisible hills, but was she living or dead? Had she reached her journey's end safely? He tried to extract comfort from the confidence she had expressed in the ability and integrity of the old man who drove with far greater recklessness than one would have looked for in a wild and irresponsible youngster.

He recalled with a thrill the imperious manner in which she gave directions to the man, and his surprising servility. It suddenly occurred to him that she was no ordinary person; he was rather amazed that he had not thought of it before.

Moreover, now that he thought of it, there was, even in the agreeable rejoinders she had made to his offerings, the faint suggestion of an accent that should have struck him at the time but did not for the obvious reason that he was then not at all interested in her. Her English was so perfect that he had failed to detect the almost imperceptible foreign flavor that now took definite form in his reflections. He tried to place this accent. Was it French or Italian or Spanish? Certainly it was not German.

He took a few turns up and down the long porch, stopping finally at the upper end. The clear, inspiring clang

Some One Spoke Suddenly at His Elbow.

of a hammer on an anvil fell suddenly upon his ears. He looked at his watch. The hour was nine, certainly an unusual time for men to be at work in a forge. He remembered two men in the taproom who were bare-armed and wore the shapeless leather aprons of the smithy.

He had been standing there not more than half a minute peering in the direction from whence came the rhythmic bang of the anvil—at no great distance, he was convinced—when some one spoke suddenly at his elbow. He whirled and found himself facing the gaunt landlord.

"Good Lord! You startled me," he exclaimed. His gaze traveled past the tall figure of Putnam Jones and rested on that of a second man, who leaned, with legs crossed and arms folded, against the porch post directly in front of the entrance to the house, his features almost wholly concealed by the broad-brimmed slouch hat that came far down over his eyes. He, too, it seemed to Barnes, had sprung from nowhere.

"Fierce night," said Putnam Jones, removing the corncob pipe from his lips. Then, as an afterthought, "Where'd you walk from today?"

"I slept in a farmhouse last night, about fifteen miles south of this place, I should say."

"That'd be a little ways out of East Cobb," speculated Mr. Jones.

"Five or six miles."

"Goin' over into Canada?"

"No. I shall turn west, I think, and strike for the Lake Champlain country."

"I suppose you've traveled right smart in Europe?"

"Quite a bit, Mr. Jones."

"Any partic'lar part?"

"No," said Barnes, suddenly divining that he was being "pumped." "One end to the other, you might say."

"What about them countries down around Bulgaria and Roumania? I've been considerable interested in what's going to become of them if Germany gets licked. What do they get out of it, either way?"

Barnes spent the next ten minutes expatiating upon the future of the Balkan states. Jones had little to say. He was interested, and drank in all the information that Barnes had to impart. He puffed at his pipe, nodded his head from time to time, and occasionally put a leading question. And quite as abruptly as he introduced the topic he changed it.

"Not many automobiles up here this time o' the year," he said. "I was a little surprised when you said a feller had given you a lift. Where from?"

"The crossroads a mile down. He came from the direction of Frogg's Corner and was on his way to meet someone at Spanish Falls. It appears that there was a misunderstanding. The driver didn't meet the train, so the person he was going after walked all the way to the forks. We happened upon each other there, Mr. Jones, and we studied the signpost together. She was bound for a place called Green Fancy."

"Did you say she?"

"Yes. I was proposing to help her out of her predicament when the belated motor came racing down the slope."

"What for sort of looking lady was she?"

"She wore a veil," said Barnes succinctly.

"Young?"

"I had that impression. By the way, Mr. Jones, what and where is Green Fancy?"

"Well," began the landlord, lowering his voice, "it's about two mile and a half from here, up the mountain. It's a house and people live in it, same as any other house. That's about all there is to say about it."

"Why is it called Green Fancy?"

"Because it's a green house," replied Jones succinctly. "Green as a gourd. A man named Curtis built it a couple o' years ago and he had a fool idee about paintin' it green. Might ha' been a little crazy, for all I know. Anyhow, after he got it finished he settled down to live in it, and from that day to this he's never been off'n the place."

"Isn't it possible that he isn't there at all?"

"He's there, all right. Every now and then he has visitors—just like this woman today—and sometimes they come down here for supper. They don't hesitate to speak of him, so he must be there. Miss Tilly has got the idee that he is a recluse, if you know what that is."

Further conversation was interrupted by the irregular clatter of horses' hoofs on the macadam. Off to the left a dull red glow of light spread across the roadway and a man's voice called out, "Whoa, dang ye!"

The door of the smithy had been thrown open and someone was leading forth freshly shod horses.

A moment later the horses—prancing, high-spirited animals — their bridle bits held by a strapping blacksmith, came into view. Barnes looked in the direction of the steps. The two men had disappeared. Instead of stopping directly in front of the steps the smith led his charges quite a distance beyond and into the darkness.

Putnam Jones abruptly changed his position. He insinuated his long body between Barnes and the doorway, at the same time rather loudly proclaiming that the rain appeared to be over.

"Yes, sir," he repeated, "she seems to have let up altogether. Ought to have a nice day tomorrow, Mr. Barnes—nice, cool day for walkin'."

Voices came up from the darkness. Jones had not been able to cover them with his own. Barnes caught two or three sharp commands, rising above the pawing of horses' hoofs, and then a great clatter as the mounted horsemen rode off in the direction of the crossroads.

Barnes waited until they were muffled by distance and then turned to Jones with the laconic remark:

"They seem to be foreigners, Mr. Jones."

Jones' manner became natural once more. He leaned against one of the posts and, striking a match on his leg, relighted his pipe.

(Continued Next Week)