

HIS RISE TO POWER

By Henry Russell Miller,

Author of "The Man Higher Up"

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CHAPTER XIX.

The Vulnerable Heel.

JOHN was awakened by the ringing of a church bell. It was a clear morning, the sun shining brilliantly. The peace of the Sabbath lay over all. Along Main street moved, with sedate stride the weekly procession of church-goers. Not even the news which Warren Blake had dropped dead of heart failure grim jests—would disturb their gravity. For the news would be accompanied by assurances from Senator Murchell and Stephen Hampden that the bank would be in no wise affected.

John rose from his seat by the window and, obedient to the command of habit, made his morning toilet. When he was dressed he returned to the window. He was very tired. His will, as though worn out by the scene and struggle of the night, could not shake off the heavy mental and physical lassitude that oppressed him. Once he tried to recall the horror he had seen, but his inert mind balked.

With sluggish curiosity he watched the figure of a woman walking down the street. Not until she turned in at the gate did he recognize her. There was no glad start. On the contrary, a muttered, querulous protest escaped him. He did not wish to see her just then.

Reluctantly he rose and went down to the library. She was standing at a southern window through which the sun poured a golden flood. She heard him enter and turned. He halted just within the door. For a moment, silent, they looked at each other across the sunlit room.

It was she who, with the brave directness that had always been hers, first broke the silence.

"I have heard what—what happened last night. And I have come to ask you to do nothing that will harm my father."

Unconsciously his face darkened. It was not because of her request, but because of the picture she recalled. "I suppose it was for that. You have?" He would have said, "no need to ask." But she misunderstood and interrupted quickly.

"I have no right to ask this—or anything of you? I know that, more clearly than you can tell me. I put you in the way of unhappiness and then chose against you for things—for things of no value. It may give you some satisfaction to know that they are gone—though you can hardly believe that the taste for them went first."

"I—my father and Senator Murchell, the men who will profit by your silence, deserve nothing at your hands, at anybody's. I can't pretend that they would show mercy to you. But my father, at least, is a broken man. Last night took away his courage. He believes that he is responsible for Warren Blake's—"

"No!" She saw him shudder and draw back. "No! I, with my rashness, am to blame for that."

"Ah! you mustn't say that." She took a step forward, eager in his defense. "I know what you've been through and how it must have given you the horrors. But you mustn't say that. Nobody could think it. You only did your duty. But I'm afraid for him. He is half crazed from fear and shock, I think—I couldn't endure many more nights like last night. I'm afraid, if it all comes out, he'll take Warren Blake's way out."

"Don't!" he cried roughly, as if in pain. "I've gone over it all."

"I'm not trying to frighten you. And I didn't want to—come to you." The steadiness was leaving her. She thought she saw in his lack of response a hostile determination. "I have no right to ask a man—such as you are—to sacrifice himself, his conscience for such a man. I can offer no—no adequate return. But he is my father and it is not—it can not be so very wrong to err on the side of mercy. And once you said—you cared—"

"It was true. It has always been true! What I will do will not be because you ask it, but because it is for you. And not for a price. And—you haven't thought it out very clearly, have you?—what you mean is impossible in any case. If I went on with the investigation you couldn't love the man who was prosecuting your father. And, just because you understand what is right in the case and are what you are, you couldn't respect and so couldn't love the man who weakly did what was wrong for him—even for you. And just now—you are very anxious to save your father."

The flood of crimson ebbed. She looked at him strangely. "Do you believe—that?"

"I know it. But you needn't be afraid any longer. Your father is safe so far as I am concerned. That was settled before you came."

She turned from him in an immeasurable relief to look out of the window. The voice of the congregation rose again in the closing hymn, "Onward, Christian Soldiers."

The hymn ended. She raised her head and faced him, unshed tears in her eyes.

"John Dunmeade," she cried, "I don't know yet how much of what you have said is true. And I don't know whether you have been weak or strong. But there are finer things than the strength of heartless justice. One of them is—must be—to be merciful, to want to show mercy where you owe none, where you believe you can gain nothing, as you have done. I can't—I shouldn't try to thank you. But I shall always be praying for you all the good things you have earned as you go—and you will go—onward."

He merely repeated an old saying: "I haven't thought as far ahead as tomorrow. And now you'd better go before church lets out. If people saw you here it might set them thinking."

Warren Blake's body was buried and his tragedy with it. The luck had held to the end. No suspicion of a lurking mystery had been breathed. And William Murchell returned from the funeral to a birth.

His enemies have called him inhuman, lacking in moral sensibility. There are episodes in his career which support the charge. But deep down in him had always laid something that, long pregnating, now fought to win to the light. He was suddenly arraigned before himself, become by the tragedy most pitiless of judges. The vigorous mentality that had hungered and thirsted for action, lusted for sharp combat, sought insatiably for power and ever more power, now turned upon himself, with precise, merciless strokes dissected his life for him, revealed its essential ugliness, disclosed overlooked potentialities.

It was the evening after the funeral. He was alone in his library. But he was not reading. He was angrily watching the gathering of a belated force in his existence.

He frowned when from the hall came the sounds of altercation, heated on one side and coolly confident on the other. Then the door was thrown open, and Haig, followed by the protestant man servant, entered. The novelist briskly crossed the room and planted himself in a chair before Murchell.

The involuntary host greeted him indifferently. "I told Jim I would see nobody tonight. What do you want?"

"You remember, Saturday night I said you and I would have to discuss the matter of payment?" The time has come, the walrus said.

"Well?"

"Senator Murchell, have you a conscience?"

"Are you trying to be impertinent, young man?"

"How impertinent? I'm merely trying to verify an impression. The other night, while you were watching Warren Blake die, I got the notion that you had one. Now Warren Blake is out of the way. Hampden won't be disgraced. There's to be no scandal. Your plans to save the bank are under way. Other plans of yours are no longer in jeopardy. So it's time to think of payment. I have just come from Dunmeade. He isn't a very happy man, Senator Murchell. He's oppressed by the knowledge that he has been weak. He has lost his pride, his belief in himself, his sense of absolute honesty—call it soul for short. The poor fool even thinks he is to blame for Warren Blake's shooting himself. You and I know better. We know who killed Cock Robin." Haig laughed indignantly.

"You have a strange sense of humor. Just what are you trying to insinuate?"

"I mean that we know that the man who killed Warren Blake was the man who killed Creighton, Hawkins, Delehanty, Burns, Schneider, Larkin and Blake. And he's the fellow that created an atmosphere of dishonesty in political banks and public treasuries, made opportunities for thievery, encouraged and profited by speculation—in short, the man who devised and built the machine whose creatures and victims have paid the penalty of their crimes with suicide. Do I make myself clear?"

Murchell sat up angrily. "That isn't true. I'm not responsible if a few weaklings aren't able to resist temptation and take the easiest way out."

"It was Cain, I believe," Haig pursued, "who first pleaded that excuse."

"See here, Haig! If you have anything important to say, say it. Otherwise—"

Haig leaned over, interrupting menacingly, tapping the senator's knee to emphasize his words: "I'd advise you to listen. Will you?"

"Go on."

"That's sensible." Haig resumed his easy attitude. "Let's take up Dunmeade's case. His mouth is closed by his love for Katherine Hampden. The question now is, who will have to pay? His silence and hence will have to pay? It isn't Hampden. I think I understand the political situation pretty well. Just now, when you're trying to scramble back into power and Jerry Brent has taken their convention out of the hands of your friends of the opposition for another bank in which you politicians have had your dirty fingers to fall, with another cashier putting a mossy little hole in his head, would be most inopportune. Also, you've put up money to cover Hampden's shortage. I've never heard you accused of doing anything for anybody without return. And since you've put up a lot of money without security, it must be because silence just now is particularly valuable to you. Now do you get the point? Are you ready to pay?"

"Haven't I paid enough?"

"Can you ever pay enough to balance

what Warren Blake and John Dunmeade have paid?"

"What do you want then?"

"Well, you're trying to get back into power through the convention. The general impression is that you can't beat Sherrod. But I guess differently. You're not the kind of man to go back into the scramble unless the chances for a win are pretty good. Well—nominating John Dunmeade."

"The thing," exclaimed Murchell, and extreme irritation was speaking—"is preposterous!"

"You have thought of it as much as that, then? But why preposterous to nominate a fine, big, honest man? Measure him against Wash Jenkins or any one of your kind you choose; his character is something you haven't been able to go to the people with for many a year in this state. And his nomination would pull the teeth of dangerous Jerry Brent."

"Power," said the senator virtuously, "isn't to be taken lightly. Even if I could do it, which isn't probable, I certainly don't propose to make a joke or a fool of myself before the political public by helping a narrow, pig headed, unpractical romancer to a powerful office."

"Unpractical" and "romancer"—you need a new point of view, senator. John Dunmeade is the most practical man I know, because he sees true, sees evil as evil and good as good. If this state were to follow his ideal of simple, straightforward common sense honesty, political corruption would cease to exist, a vast amount of injustice would be corrected and popular government justified. You'll have to find another excuse, Senator Murchell."

"Well, then," said the senator grimly, "you may put it that I, a seeker after the valueless, don't propose to help a practical man who has rejected my honest offer of friendship and spent six years vilifying me before the people of this state."

"So that's why it's preposterous? That's the measure of your sort, is it? Fighting you, telling the truth about you, are what disqualify a man for public office. You grind everybody, everything—life, death, tragedy, love—in the mills of your greedy ambition and you are willing to pay only the least penny you must. Blake the sul-

those who needed it less than he did. Everybody loved him. He married a widow who had one son. He was a good husband and a perfect father to that boy. I know, because I was the boy. They had a reform wavelet in Clarion and sent Wrenn to the legislature. That was the year you almost failed of re-election to the senate. It cost you a million and a quarter to win, you may remember. There was a point where you needed just one vote, and your decoys got after Wrenn. He held out for awhile, but— Oh, you know how it works. He was poor, there was more money in sight than he had ever heard of, and they found his price—at \$17,000. And he was cheap, too, comparatively. I think he must have been temporarily out of his mind, for he didn't really care for money. He went home a shame broken man. They couldn't prove it on him, but everybody knew he had taken money. They turned against him, his wife died broken hearted, and he had to leave Clarion. The money was soon spent; that kind never lasts. He went down all fast and finally, a miserable, drunken wretch, he put a bullet through his head. I saw him do it—just as Warren Blake did it. So you can cut still another notch in your gun—right on the list now—Creighton!"

"Quit that!"

"Good God," Haig jeered, "I believe he has a conscience, after all! Can you sleep o' nights, Senator Murchell?" Murchell got slowly to his feet, in his eyes a light so terrible that even Haig for a moment was startled.

White heat consumes quickly. The dumb passion soon burned itself out. The rigid pose melted into one of utter weariness.

"He wouldn't take it—at my hands." The arrogant habit of a lifetime had ceased to protect.

"Dunmeade? Oh, that's a problem in psychology. I think he will. In fact I know it, since I came here with full power of attorney from him. With men like Dunmeade the first compromise is the crucial one. As to means, you will find him more tractable, I fancy. My own opinion is he will be a more useful man for it. He won't be very happy at first, though. I'll be saying good night."

He took a few steps toward the door, then stopped, hesitating. He turned back. His insolent, overbearing manner fell from him.

"Senator," he said quietly, "I may have overdone it. Wrenn, Blake, all those fellows aren't worth a quail. Dunmeade is—"

But Murchell was not listening. He had forgotten Haig. He was watching the second birth of a young man who once had been.

Not the next day, nor the next, but on the third, the travail ended. William Murchell emerged from his brief, mysterious retirement to place himself at the head of his clamorous troops. It has been said that the campaign which followed was the most brilliant of his career.



"Nominate John Dunmeade."

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