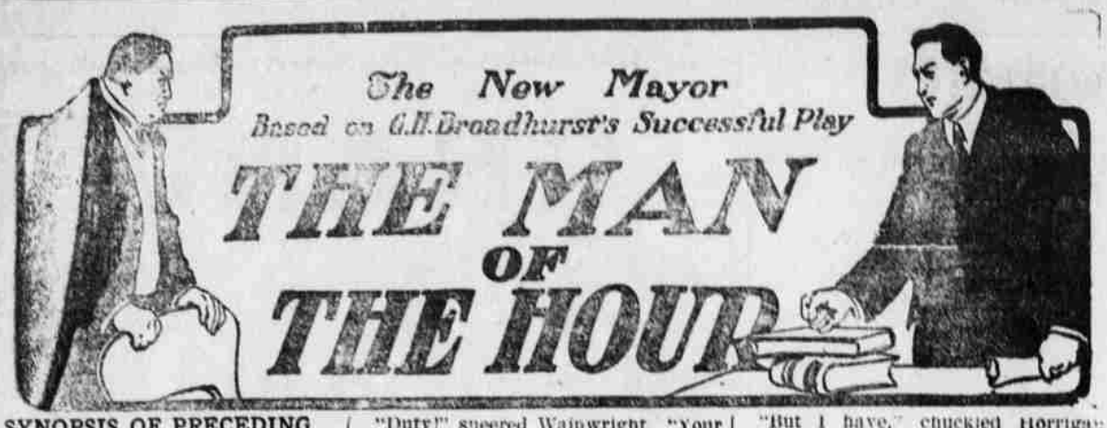

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Chapter I—At the suburban home of Charles Wainwright, "high financier," he and his broker, Scott Gibbs, hatch up a scheme to corner Borough street railway stock. They rely upon the support of Dick Horrigan, boss of the neighboring city, who is coming to discuss matters. Alderman Phelan, the thorn in Horrigan's side, whom Wainwright is anxious to conciliate, is also coming. Among the members of Wainwright's household are his niece and nephew, Dallas and Perry Wainwright, and his secretary, Thompson, a secretive young man in whom the financier has implicit confidence. Judge Newman, a neighbor of Wainwright, whose continuance in office depends upon Horrigan's favor, requests Wainwright's intervention with the boss. Another visitor to the Winwrights' is Alwyn Bennett, in loe with Dallas, who is calling to ask her about her rumored engagement to Gibbs. Perry is in love with Synthia Garrison, also a neighbor. II—Cynthia is the daughter of a bank president who nine years before the opening of the story was ruined by the dealings of an unnamed dishonest financier and shot himself. His son thereupon disappeared. Mrs. Bennett congratulates herself upon the immaculate record of her son's defeased father. Dallas refuses to marry Alwyn unless he does something worthy of his family and education. Phelan and Horrigan face each other. III.—Phelan defies Horrigan. Judge Newman is turned down by the boss, but at Wainwright's request Horrigan becomes suspicious of Thompson, but Wainwright scoffs at the idea. Horrigan and Wainwright makes a corrupt deal whereby the former, for a big consideation, is to procure from the board of aldermen a perpetual franchise for the Borough street railway. The boss is worried by the reform movement threatening his power at the coming election and is casting about for a candidate for mayor with a clean record. He hits upon Bennett, who has had some slight political experience. The latter accepts, but warns Horigan that, if elected, he will be absolutely honest and independent.

IV.—Bennett is elected and appoints Cynthia his private secretary. Phelan tells him that the financier who caused the ruin of the Garrisons was Wainwright, who is also the power behind the crooked Borough franchise bills, with Horrigan and Gibbs. Dallas and Mrs. Bennett visit the city hall.

V—Gibbs tries to induce Bennett to sign the bill. The mayor's talk with Dallas is interrupted by Horrigan.

VI—Bennett refuses to be bulldozed by Horrigan into signing the bill. The boss lacks one vote in the board of aldermen of the fourteen needed to pass the bill without the mayor's assent. Despite the fact that defeating the bill means impoverishing Dallas and Perry, whose fortune Wainwright has invested in Borough stock, Bennett vetoes the measure. VII—Bennett's plan to save Dallas and Perry is to have Perry sell Borough stock short. The mayor's opposition causes Horrigan and Wainwright to amend the bill, retaining however, some of the most objectionable features. VIII—Alwyn's lovemaking to Dallas at the Mayor's ball is interrupted by Harrigan. IX—Gibbs secretly plays false to Wainwright and Horrigan by buying Borough stock on his own account. Horrigan "fixes" Alderman Roberts, a wavering member of his "solid thirteen." X—Bennett warns Roberts against voting for the bill. In the presence of Cynthia, who is engaged to Perry, Phelan exposes Thompson as her brother, the long missing Harry Garrison, whereupon sister and brother embrace. Perry entering suddenly, is astonished at the sight. XI—Cynthia explains to Perry. Dallas is convinced by Wainwright that Bennett by vetoing the bill is trying to wreck her fortune. Thereupon Dallas proposes to marry Gibbs.

CHAPTER XI CONTINUED.

Her voice was almost tremulous in its eager, confident appeal, but Bennett forced himself to answer:

"Yes; it is true, and I knew it."

The eager glow died from her eyes, leaving a look of dawning horror.

"And, knowing this—knowing Perry and I shall be made paupers by your action—you still insist on"—

"On opposing the bill? Yes. I am sorry, but it is my duty."

"Duty!" sneered Wainwright. "Your 'duty' was done when you vetoed the bill. That act made your position clear and showed the public how you regarded the measure, so why go on fighting it after"—

"I won't discuss this with you, Mr. Wainwright," interrupted Bennett. "We already understand one another, you and I."

"My uncle says," pursued Dallas, "that you made your broker secretly sell Borough stock short, knowing the deal would enrich you. Won't you even deny this?"

"No."

"You realize what all this foolish stubbornness must mean to me—to all of us," continued Dallas, "and you still persist in your opposition?"

"I must," said Bennett. "I can't turn back. Oh, Dallas," he added, dropping his voice till none but she could hear, "can't you trust me—only till Friday? I'll come to you on Saturday morning and tell you the whole miserable story. I only ask you to wait until then. Please"—

"I see no need of waiting for an explanation," retorted Dallas aloud. "I understand everything."

"But you don't understand!" insisted Alwyn. "I"—

"I understand only too well," repeated Dallas. Checking his reply and ignoring the anguished appeal in his eyes, she turned to Gibbs.

"I have kept you waiting long for your answer, Mr. Gibbs," she said, speaking in a level, firm, emotionless voice. "I am prepared to give it to you now—publicly. You have often asked me if I would be your wife. My reply is, 'Yes.'"

"Dallas!" gasped Bennett in horrified surprise.

CHAPTER XII.

ALWYN BENNETT sat in his own study at home in the big Bennett house that remained as almost the last landmark of that solid middle nineteenth century wealth and fashion which had once dominated a neighborhood now given over to office buildings and apartment houses.

The hour was late. An hour and more had passed since the young mayor and his mother had returned from the administration ball. The house was silent, and even the usually busy streets outside were wrapped in the hush that never falls until after midnight and is dispersed by the gray of dawn. Late as it was Alwyn had made no move to discard his evening clothes. Alone he sat, his head resting between his crossed arms on the desk before him.

Motionless, inert, hopeless, he had remained there ever since his arrival from the ball. But if his body was moveless, his brain was awhirl. Try as he would he could see no light in the tangle of events into which his own sense of right had plunged him. He saw the future stretching out before him dreary and barren as a rainy sea.

Through all of his months of battling he had ever struggled forward through increasing difficulties toward one bright goal—Dallas' love. And now that love was snatched from his grasp, through no fault of his own, and bestowed on a man unworthy to kiss the hem of her garment.

At each step in the long climb Alwyn had asked himself, "Would she approve?" And now through trying to be worthy that approval he had forever lost it. for Dallas, he knew, had not only rejected him and engaged herself to Gibbs, but had done so with the belief that Bennett was a heartless, unscrupulous intriguer, undeserving of a good woman's regard.

A rap at the door aroused Bennett from his bitter thoughts. He lifted his head wearily and gave word to enter. A drowsy servant came in with a card.

"He says it's important business, sir," said the footman. "And he wishes to see you at once, if possible."

"Show him up," answered Bennett, dropping his voice so as not to disturb his mother, who slept on the same floor. "I will see him here."

A minute later Horrigan's bulky form blocked the threshold.

"Queer time of night for a call," he observed casually, as he entered uninvited, closed the door behind him and took a chair, "but my business wouldn't wait."

"Then state it as briefly as you can," directed Bennett, making no move to rise or welcome his unbidden guest. "It is very late, and I am tired."

"I've come to see you about our Borough bill."

"So I supposed."

"You won't call off your fight against us?"

"That question is hardly worth answering. No."

"I thought not. Well, Mr. Alwyn Bennett, I've got you! I've got you! Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly. Is that all?"

"No, it ain't all," mimicked the boss. "And I'm in earnest. I've got you where I want you."

"That doesn't interest me. If you've nothing else to say"—

"But I have," chuckled Horrigan. "When it came to a showdown between us two I put a staff of men to looking up your record."

"You found nothing you could use. Is that"—

"No; it isn't even the beginning. Then I remembered about your father."

"About my father?"

It grated on Bennett that his dead father's honored name should be spoken by this low politician, but before he could protest more forcibly Horrigan went on:

"What d'you think if I said your father was a grafter—one of the worst of his time?"

"I'd say you lied," answered Bennett calmly, "and I'd drive the foul lie down your throat with my fist. You'll have to think of some better scheme than that."

"Do you think I'd be idiot enough to come here with the story if I didn't have full proof of it?" asked Horrigan in contempt.

And, despite himself, Alwyn saw the man was speaking what he believed to be the truth. He paused in his impulsive forward move, reseated himself and asked coldly:

"What so called 'proofs' have you been fooled by your heelers into thinking"—

"Don't believe me, hey? Well, you will fast enough before I'm done. Unless you're afraid of what I've got to say."

"I'm not afraid of anything you can say. The highest tribute to my father's memory is the fact that a cur like you cannot defile it. Go on. I'll listen to you."

"Very good," said Horrigan, quite unmoved. "I'll make it as short as I can. I remembered your father got rich pretty quick. He was a member of the organization, and his firm got the jobs of building the aqueduct and the new library. That gave me my clew. I looked up the specifications for both jobs, and I turned them over to the old engineering firm of Morris & Cherrington. You know the firm, perhaps. If you don't, you can look them up. They don't belong to the organization; they're the best experts in their line, and they can't be juggled with."

"I know them. Go on."

"I paid them a fancy sum to go over those specifications and then examine the library and the aqueduct and see if they were up to the mark or if the city 'd been cheated by the Bennett Contracting company. I had a strong idea I was right, but I wouldn't speak till I had the proof. When I got home after the ball tonight I found the Morris & Cherrington report waiting for me. I brought a copy of it along with me."

"Well," asked Bennett indifferently, "what then?"

"Here's the copy of the report. Look it over for yourself. The crookedest job ever pulled off in this city! Third rate material, when the material called for in the specifications was used at all. Granite shell filled with mortar instead of solid granite; foundations barely half the depth called for; inferior tiles in place of fireproof ones; cheap, crumbly iron and steel instead of first quality—oh, there's fifty such substitutions and frauds! It's the rawest, bummest job I ever heard of. If any of the organization tried it nowadays the men who did it would be wearing stripes in a week. Graft, hey? Why, your father was the boss grafter of the century, the star graft getter of the bunch! He"—

"Hush! For God's sake, hush!" pouted Alwyn. "My mother sleeps only a few rooms beyond. I"—

"What do I care?" roared Horrigan in triumph. "Let everybody hear! The whole world is going to hear it unless that Borough franchise bill goes through. Beat that bill and every paper in the country will have that report to publish. Stop your fight against us and the report is buried. That goes! See? Now, do as you please about the bill. You're a fine man to preach about graft, you are! The very roof over your head, the clothes on your back, were bought with graft money!"

"The clothes on your back were bought with graft money!"

Bennett scarcely heeded the coarse insult, nor did he note Horrigan's grunt of good-by and the clump of his departing feet on the stairs. The young man sat, lost, hopeless, horror gripped, his eyes running mechanically over the closely typewritten pages of the engineer's report. Outsider as he was in matters of practical business, Alwyn could see that Horrigan had in no way exaggerated the document's contents. He knew, too, that the firm of engineers who had drawn up the report were the foremost of their sort and above all shadow of suspicion.

Little by little the numbness lifted from his brain, and in its place crept a horrible conviction of the truth. His father—the gallant young soldier who had won a nation's applause in the civil war—the man who, poor and unaided, had built up a fortune against keenest competition and had earned a repute for sterling probity which had ever been the delight and model of his son—this was the man whom a low blackguard like Horrigan now had the right to revile—a man apparently no better than the boss himself—than any dishonest heeler in the organization!

And, as if it were not enough that the idol of a lifetime were hurled, crushed and defiled, from its bright pedestal, the family name must next be dragged through the mire of political filth and ill repute and the dead man's memory forever blasted. Either that or his son must withdraw from the gallant fight he was waging against civic corruption, for that Horrigan would carry out his threat and blazon forth to the world the story and proofs of the elder Bennett's shame Alwyn had no doubt. With all his faults the boss was a man of his word.

"Stop your fight against us," Horrigan had said, "and the report is burned."

Yes, the boss was a man of his word. Even Bennett admitted that. He would fulfill his promise in either event.

Listlessly Alwyn began to review the case. On the one side a perhaps Quixotic fight for an abstract principle—a fight whose reward was political death, loss of the woman he adored, family shame that might crush his fragile old mother to the very grave. On the other wealth, honor, love, the governorship, a future happy and glorious.

Was he not a fool to hesitate? Had he not salved his conscience sufficiently by vetoing the Borough franchise bill? Had he the right to bring this new shame upon his mother's gray head? Where lay his highest duty?

The soft rustling of silk and a hand laid in light caress upon his head aroused the miserable man from his reflections.

Bennett looked up to see his mother standing beside him. She had thrown on a wrapper and in slippered feet had stolen noiselessly into the study.

"I was awakened by voices," she explained. "I thought I heard some one talking excitedly in here. Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing dear," he answered gently, drawing the little old lady affectionately down to a seat on his knee and smiling manfully into her sleep flushed face; "nothing is the matter. Only a business call."

"A business call at 2 o'clock in the morning!" she exclaimed. "Dear boy, you are working too hard. Your father never brought his business worries and work home. He always left them at the office. Can't you do the same? You'll wear yourself out."

"My father"— began Bennett, but the name choked him.

"You are growing to be so much like him," went on Mrs. Bennett fondly. "And it makes me so happy that you are. Your splendid fight against that infamous Borough bill, for instance. How proud he would have been of that! It is just the sort of thing he himself would have done in your place. He was surrounded with wicked and dishonest men just as you are. But through it all he remained true, honorable, incorruptible. What a grand heritage for my son! He— Alwyn!" she broke off, alarmed, "why do you look at me that way? I never saw such a look in your eyes before. Are you ill? Has something happened that you are keeping from me?"

"No, no," evaded Bennett. "I only"—

"You had a caller here before I came in," pursued the mother, refusing to abandon the clew to which her womanly intuition had led her. "He brought you bad news? Tell me, dear! I'm your mother, and I love you."

"You are making my course more difficult for me by asking such questions, mother," he answered wretchedly, "and I"—

"I only want to help you, Alwyn. I can't bear to see you miserable. A woman's wit and a mother's love are often a combination that can solve problems beyond even the wisest man's powers of logic. Let me help you."

"I was trying to make up my mind," vaguely replied Bennett, sorely distressed by her pleading, "whether a man ought to follow his conscience, even if it leads to heartbreak for those he loves, or whether he ought to let conscience go by the board for once and protect the happiness of his loved ones."

"Alwyn! How can you hesitate a second over such a question. One must do right, no matter what the consequence."

"I don't know about that," he said moodily.

"You know it perfectly well. It is what your father would have advised and— But, Alwyn, you surely are not making yourself unhappy over a mere supposititious case?"

"Well," he continued, "let us take a 'mere supposititious case' if you like. Suppose, for instance, that a man holding a position of trust had had a father whose memory he honored and revered as I do my own father's"—

"Yes?" prompted Mrs. Bennett as he paused.

"Suppose some one tempts him to betray his position of trust, even as I have lately been tempted, and threatens in case of his refusal to make public certain facts which would prove his dead father to have been a scoundrel. Now, what should the man do? Should he let his father's sacred memory be trampled in the mud, let his duty go by default and save"—

"It would be an awful responsibility to decide such a question," said Mrs. Bennett, with a little shudder, "but there could be only one reply."

"And that is?"

"He must do his duty, be the results what they may."

"You really think so?"

"There can be no doubt. Right is right and"—

"It shall be as you say," groaned Alwyn.

"What?" queried Mrs. Bennett, startled at the despair in his voice. "Do you mean it is an actual case? Some friend of yours, perhaps?"

Bennett nodded.

"Oh, the poor, poor fellow!" she sympathized. "What a terrible position for him! It was he, perhaps, that I heard talking to you in here just now. No wonder he seemed excited! The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children even unto the"—

"It is something less hard on the children than on the wives," mused Bennett, half to himself.

"The wives? Your friend has a mother living? That makes it doubly hard. Oh, my son, every day I thank God in all humility that my husband lived so blameless a life and left so honored a name! How grateful you and I both ought to be for"—

"It is easy enough to decide for some one you have never seen," retorted Bennett almost rudely, "but suppose the dishonest man in my story had been father and"—

"I refuse to suppose anything of the sort!" interrupted his mother indignantly, rising to her feet. "I wonder that you can speak so! How can you suggest so horrible a thing?"

"Just a thoughtless, tactless speech of mine. That's all," lied Alwyn. "It's very late. You'll have a headache, I'm afraid. Won't you go to bed?"

"Yes. It is late, and I'm keeping you up. Good night, dear. I wish your friend"—

She checked herself suddenly, with a little gasp. Bennett, glancing up to her, saw that her eyes were riveted on a bit of pasteboard lying on the corner of his desk directly beneath the reading lamp.

Cynthia Garrison.

It was Horrigan's card.

Slowly the mother's gaze shifted from the card to her son. From her face the color had been crushed by some swift emotion that left it very old, pale and sunken.

"Mr. Horrigan!" she murmured. "It was he who was your visitor tonight? Surely he isn't the sort of a man to care about his father's reputation for honesty. He"—

"You're tired, mother," interrupted Bennett in haste. "Won't you"—

"Wait!" she panted. "His visit here—Alwyn!" her voice rising to a wail of panic stricken appeal. "Did—did that man dare to hint anything against your father? Tell me the truth! I have a right to know. Did he?"

Alwyn bowed his head in silence.

"Tell me what he said!"

"He said," muttered Bennett, almost incoherently, "he said my father made his fortune—by—graft!"

"And you thrashed him and threw him out of the house?" she cried, her old eyes ablaze.

"No."

"Alwyn!"

"He—he proved what he said!"

"It is a lie! A wicked, abominable lie!"

"It is the truth, mother. Would I have told you such a thing—would Horrigan have left this room alive—if it were not true?"

A silence—dreadful in its intensity—fell over the room. Alwyn dared not look at his mother. At last she spoke:

"I must know more. I refuse to believe one word. You spoke of proofs. What are they?"

Without a word, Bennett handed her the report left by Horrigan. For a time silence brooded over the study, broken only by the occasional turning of a page of the report. Then, after what seemed to Alwyn an eternity of waiting, the document slid to the floor. Bennett glanced at his mother. She was standing rigid, her face cold and hard as granite.

"I do not advise, I command. Do right!"

"Horrigan has ferreted this out," he said, not daring to draw nearer or proffer comfort to the woman whom the boss' disclosure had turned to stone. "He has secured the proofs and says he will publish them broadcast unless I withdraw my opposition in the Borough franchise matter. If I let that bill pass, Friday he will burn the report, and"—

"There is only one thing to do," interposed the mother, speaking with slow decision, her voice as cold and colorless as her face. "Right must prevail, no matter what"—

"Mother!" cried Alwyn, trembling. "You advise me to— You advise me"—

"I do not advise, I command. Do right!"

(To be continued).