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The Thirteenth Floor
A Case Where the Number Thirteen Makes Good Its Reputation
By CLARISSA MACKIE
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As the office door closed behind the retreating form of Homer Dickson the stout stenographer sighed relievedly and drew a magazine from her desk. "I thought he'd never go," she said. The dapper bookkeeper took a silver quarter from his pocket and flipped it toward the office boy. "Peanuts," he said succinctly as he spread the morning paper over his ledger and turned to the market report. "I saw Homer beatin' it for the ferry," remarked Jimmy when he returned with the peanuts and they had been divided into three portions. "I guess he's good for the day." "So he said," agreed the bookkeeper, cracking shells and tossing them over his shoulder into the waste paper basket with admirable dexterity. "If you want the afternoon off, Miss Porter, you can have it," he said, with a smile. The stenographer smiled lazily as she reached for another peanut. "This suits me," she murmured, turning the pages of her magazine. Suddenly the outer door opened and precipitated confusion upon the trio. A tall man, middle aged, with a strong, clean cut face and piercing dark eyes glanced from one to the other. "Mr. Dickson in?" he asked sharply. "Out," said the bookkeeper curtly, thrusting the newspaper into a drawer and dipping pen into the ink well. "When will he return?" asked the stranger quietly. "He didn't say. I think he's gone for the day," replied the clerk ungraciously as he bent above his ledger. "I'll wait awhile," remarked the visitor, settling himself in a chair and opening a notebook. Bray, the bookkeeper, shrugged his narrow shoulders and applied himself to his neglected work. Miss Porter laid aside her magazine and thumped noisily upon the typewriter, while Jimmy swept up the accumulation of peanut shells and filed letters with brisk attention. The stranger sat absorbed in his notebook, making calculations with a stubby lead pencil. "Nice weather for crops," remarked Bray, with a slight wink toward the stenographer. Miss Porter ruffled her faxen pompadour and giggled. "We got our hay all in," said Jimmy unsmiling, as he scuttled past the stranger on business intent. "You recollect our old black hen?" went on Bray facetiously. "Waal, by gum, she laid a egg yesterday most as big as a grapefruit. I reckon on sending it to the county fair." "Did Mr. Dickson mention having an appointment with Mr. Penworth this morning?" asked the rustic. A leaden silence settled on the office. Bray broke it at last. "Penworth?" he gasped, with a sickly smile. "J. Augustus Penworth?" The stranger nodded impatiently and glanced at his watch. "Did Mr. Dickson mention having an engagement with me?" "No, sir," returned the bookkeeper respectfully. "I think he must be detained somewhere. I'll try to trace him by phone. Jimmy, give Mr. Penworth a seat in Mr. Dickson's office." Bray disappeared within the telephone booth, with agitated countenance. "Tell that idiot to keep away from the telephone. I'll wait till Mr. Dickson comes in," growled the visitor so savagely that Jimmy skipped to obey. The brutal message, conveyed verbally, Mr. Bray emerged from the booth with a very red face and returned to his ledger, while Mr. Penworth accepted a comfortable Turkish rocker in the private office and lighted a long black cigar. "J. Augustus Penworth, Multinational and King of Finance." So the special article in Bray's Sunday newspaper had capitalized him. His name was as well known as that of the president of the republic, and the entire office force had laughed openly at him. Bray writhed on his high stool as he looked at the back of the millionaire's gray head, and he cursed his own bad manners in ridiculing the stranger. Bray was ambitious, and Penworth was known to be especially interested in young men and if he knew them to be capable and willing to work could always find places for them in his numerous industrial plants. The bookkeeper had read the article in the Sunday paper, and his imagination had been fired with the possibilities that would open out if he should ever cross the path of the great man. Here he was—J. Augustus Penworth, and Bray had ridiculed him! It was too much to bear calmly, yet the bookkeeper solaced himself with the thought that perhaps the millionaire had been too much absorbed in his notebook to heed the idle chattering of the office force. Bray's usual alert manner and his courteous, almost servile demeanor toward his employer's customers would ordinarily attract the attention of a business man. He welcomed a sudden acceleration of business now. He transacted trivial matters with a crispness and courtesy that made Miss Porter and Jimmy open their innocent eyes. He darted from telephone to ledger and from

ledger to vault and spoke with an air of authority. Altogether he showed himself to be a man of considerable affairs. All the time he was pleasantly aware that the great financier had wheeled his chair about and was watching with curious intentness. After awhile when business had quieted down the financier beckoned the bookkeeper into the private office, and as the gratified Bray paused to force him Penworth asked: "How long have you been with Mr. Dickson?" "Ten years," stammered Bray excitedly. "And I suppose you are satisfied with your position?" "Well—not exactly, sir. You see, there is no chance for advancement." "I'm—I can imagine not—here!" "How much is Dickson paying you now?" demanded J. Augustus Penworth. "Fifteen hundred, sir." "I'll give you three thousand," snapped out Penworth. "I like your job, and you're just the sort of chap I'd like to have around—young, active and businesslike. What do you say?" Bray gasped. "Why, yes, sir—thank you, sir! I shall be delighted," he stammered. "Can you come to me tomorrow?" asked Penworth. The bookkeeper hesitated a brief instant, then: "Yes, sir, I will come tomorrow. Of course Mr. Dickson could not expect to refuse such an excellent offer," he said reflectively. "Of course not—even if you have been with him ten years," rejoined Penworth grimly. "Now, Mr.—" "Bray—Harry Bray, sir." "Mr. Bray suppose you sit right down and pen a letter of resignation to Mr. Dickson. I like to have these matters cleared up as I go along, otherwise I'm apt to forget them. If you resign now I can put you right into our main office here to fill an important vacancy. There are writing materials here on this small table." The bookkeeper sat down and nervously indited a brief epistle to his employer, in which he formally resigned his position, stating his reasons for doing so and generously waiving all salary due him in lieu of longer notice. This he closed in an envelope which he sealed and addressed. Mr. Penworth held out his hand for it and regarded the envelope with a thoughtful smile. "Now that's settled," he said, "I suppose you'll want to settle up your books, Mr. Bray. I'm rather impressed with the rapidity with which that young woman out there operates her machine. Now, I'm in need of just such an expert stenographer, and while I suppose it doesn't look exactly square to take Dickson's help away from him—it's all in the business and I pay my people well. Send her to me, will you?" Miss Porter was flattered and charmed to accept a position in the luxurious apartments of Penworth & Co. at double her present salary. Sooner or later ability will meet with its proper reward, she told herself, while she was writing her letter of instant resignation at Penworth's dictation. He held the two letters in his hand and regarded them thoughtfully. Jimmy dropped facefully when he heard the whispered confidences of the other. He had not read "From Office Boy to Millionaire" for nothing, and here was his chance to rise. J. Augustus Penworth was pushing people along on the upward path. Why could not honest Jimmy Lee be among the risers? That was how it happened that he approached the great man and respectfully asked for a job as office boy, and he got it. Twice the salary he had been receiving caused his eyes to sparkle joyously. Mr. Penworth had just told him that he could write a letter of resignation when there was the sound of rapid footsteps in the corridor outside. Instantly the millionaire leaped to his feet, and Bray and Miss Porter, who were in the line of vision, saw him drop their letters of resignation through the letter slot into Dickson's closed and locked desk, and they exchanged glances of satisfaction. The outer door opened, and there was the sound of footfalls. J. Augustus Penworth thrust aside the startled Jimmy and darted behind the tall desk, where he crouched as if in fear. "J. Augustus Penworth? Let's have a look at him," said a gruff voice, and two dark forms filled the doorway of the private office before they discovered the millionaire and pounced upon him just in time to wrest a revolver from his hand. "No, you don't, Mr. Mike Hennessey, alias The Farmer, wanted for forgery and so forth! We tracked you to this building, and we've raked every office with a fine toothed comb till we come to the thirteenth floor. Say, Mike, this number thirteen 's an unlucky number for you all right." The detectives laughed as they handcuffed their prisoner, and the other asked, with a humorous wink: "J. Augustus Penworth, are you moving in high financial circles, eh? What kind of business you been transacting here?" The prisoner stared impudently at the horrified faces of the bookkeeper and the stenographer and winked toward the locked desk where their resignations waited Homer Dickson's return. "I been studying human nature some and playing schoolteacher by learning these folks some lessons," he said, with an affected nasal drawl. Then they led him away. It was Jimmy, the office boy, who broke the ghastly silence that followed his withdrawal. "I guess I better dust up Mr. Dickson's office," he said virtuously. "He'll be pretty busy the next few days, and somebody's got to be on to the job!"

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