The River

When the Colorado Burst Its Banks and Flooded the Imperial Valley of California

By EDNAH AIKEN

Molly Silent had seen her husband's train pull in. She watched for it to go out again. The whistle blew twice. Something was wrong. She left her place in time to see Silent, his face shining ghastly pale under the soot, pull himself up from the "battleship" where he had been leaning. Estrada, sent by Rickard to find out why the train did not pull out, saw him the same instant as did Molly. Silent swayed, waving them back unseeingly, like a man who is drunk.

"God, Man, You Can't Go Like That!"

"God, man, you can't go like that!" cried Estrada.

"Who's going?" demanded Silent, his tongue thick with thirst and exhaustion. The whistle blew again.

"I will!" The train moved out on the trestle, as the whistle blew angrily twice. Only Molly and Silent saw Estrada go. Silent staggered unseeingly up the bank toward the camp, Molly following.

The river was humping out yonder; the rolling mass came roaring, flanking, against the dam.

"Quick, for God's sake, quick!" yelled Rickard. His signals sounded short and sharp. "Dump it on, throw the cars in!" Marshall was dancing, his mouth full of oaths, on the bank edge. Breathlessly all watched the rushing water fling itself over the dam. For several hushed seconds the structure could not be seen. When the foam fell a cheer went up. The dam was standing. Silent, it was supposed, was bringing in his train.

Above the distant jagged line of mountains rose a red ball. A new day began. And again the Dragon rose; a mountain of water came rolling damward.

Three trains ran steaming on the rails.

"Don't stop now to blast the big ones. Pour 'em on!" ordered Rickard.

There was a long wait before any rock fell. Marshall and Rickard waited for the pour. The whistles blew again. Then they saw what was wrong. The morning light showed a rock weighing several tons which was resisting the efforts of the pressing crew. Out of the gloom sprang other figures with crowbars. The rock tottered, fell. The river tossed it as though it were a tennis ball, sent it hurtling down the lower face of the dam.

Things began to go wild. The men were growing reckless. They were nagging toward exhaustion; mistakes were made. Another rock, as heavy as the last, was worked toward the edge. Men were thick about it with crowbars. They hurried. One concerted effort, drawing back as the rock toppled over the edge. One man was too slow, or too tired. He slipped. The watchers on the bank saw a flash of waving arms, heard a cry; they had a glimpse of a blackened face as the foam caught it. The waters closed over him.

There was a hush of horror; a halt.

"God himself couldn't save that poor devil," cried Marshall. "Have the work go on!"

Pour rocks on that wretch down there? Pin him down? Never had it seemed more like war! "A man down? Ride over him! to victory!" Soberly Rickard signaled for the work to go on.

The rock-pour stuttered as if in horror. The women turned sick with fear. No one knew who it was. Some poor Mexican, probably.

"Who was it?" demanded Rickard, running down to the track.

"The young Mexican, Hestrada. 'E tried to 'elp. 'e wasn't ill."

"Who was it?" Marshall had run down to see why the work paused.

Rickard turned shocked eyes on his chief. "Estrada!" The beautiful mournful eyes of Eduardo were on him, not Marshall's, horrified. Now he knew why Estrada had said, "I can't see it finished."

"Rickard!" The engineer did not recognize the quenched voice. "The work has got to go on."

It came to Rickard as he gave the orders that Eduardo was closer to Marshall than to him. "As near a son as he'll ever have." He turned a minute later to see his chief standing bareheaded. His own cap came off.

"We're burying the lad," said Marshall.

The minute of funeral had to be pushed aside. The river would not wait. Train after train was rushed on to the trestles; wave after wave hit them. But perceptibly the dam was steadying. The rapid fire of rock was telling.

Another ridge of yellow waters rose. The roll of water came slowly, dwindling as it came; it broke against the trestle weakly. For the first time the trestle never shuddered. Workers and watchers breathed as a unit the first deep breath that night. There was a change. Every eye was on the river where it touched the rim of the dam. Suddenly a chorused cry rose. The river had stopped rising. The whistles screamed themselves hoarse.

And then a girl, sitting on the bank, saw two men grab each other by the hand. She was too far away to hear their voices, but the sun, rising red through the banks of smoke, fell on the blackened faces of her brother and Rickard. She did not care who saw her crying.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A Desertion.

When the afternoon waned and Godfrey did not call on her Gerty was roused to uneasiness. Had she angered him by refusing to make the definite promise? Could it be love, the sort of love she wanted, if he could stay away like this when they could have the camp to themselves, every one down at the break, no Hardins running in every minute? Their first chance and Godfrey slighting it!

He would surely come that evening, knowing that she would be alone! The little watch Tom had given her for an almost forgotten birthday set the pace for her resentment. Nine, ten, eleven! How dared he treat her so? She blew out the lamps when she found that she was shaking with anger and undressed in the dark. She could not see him, if he came now, her self-control all gone! But she could not go to bed. She stood in her darkened tent, shaken by her angry passions.

Suppose that he were only trifling with her? What was that paper he had thrust in her hand? With a candle she found the yellow paper. It was a copy of a telegram to Godfrey's lawyer. "Start divorce proceedings at once. Any grounds possible. Back soon. Godfrey."

The frightened blood resumed its normal flow. If he had done this for her then she had not lost him. An apparent elopement, why had she never thought of that before? That would cement their bond. Her scruples could grow on the road. Oh, she could manage Godfrey! She would go with him. She remembered that she must go to bed if she were to have any looks in the morning.

When Godfrey came to her next afternoon, penitent, refreshed after a long morning's sleep, he found a charming hostess. She was shy about his telegram. Enchantingly distant when he tried to reach her hand!

"I can't go without you," he cried. He had discovered her interpretation of his telegram and it delighted him; he began to believe in his own intention. "I know. You shrink from it all. You dread the steps that will free you. You need me beside you to help you. Let's cut the knot. Tonight!"

"Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow," whispered Gerty, and then she managed a few tears and he was allowed to kiss her. It was all arranged before he left the ramada. They were to leave together the next day. Her object would be accomplished by their leaving together. He would feel that he owed her his name.

Of course Gerty must do it in the conventional way! She would have used rope ladders had they been needed. The conventional note was pinned to her bureau scarf.

Innes was with Tom when he found it. They came in together from the river. Neither had noticed the odd looks from the men as they passed through the encampment. A dozen men had seen Hardin's wife leave for the North with Godfrey.

Gerty's letter told Tom that it was all over. She had tried to stand it, to be true even through his cruelty, but a feeling stronger than she was made her true to herself, and so true at last to him!

Innes' revulsion lacked speech. The common blatter sickened her. She could offer no comfort. His eyes told her it was worse than death.

He struck off her hand when it touched his shoulder. Gerty's hand had coerced him that way. He was done with softness.

His silence oppressed her. This was a man she did not know; inarticulate, smitten. She told herself that even a sister was an intruder—but she was afraid to leave him alone. She took a station by her own tent door. She would not go down to dinner. For hours she watched his tent. When it grew dark she could no longer endure it. She found him where she had left him. She forced herself toward the volcano's edge; and the swift eruption scorched her. It was the pitiable wreck of dignity, of pride. His words were incoherent; his wrath involved his sister, crouching in tears. Innes shrank from him, the man she did not know. The coarse streak was uncovered in all its repulsiveness. He turned on Innes suddenly. She was crying, a huddled heap on the couch.

"I've had enough crying—between you and Gerty. Will you get out? I've got to have some sleep."

Through her sobs he could make out that she was afraid to leave him.

"Well, then, I'll go. I'm used to having to leave my own tent. A dog's life." He flung out into the night.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A Corner of His Heart.

The second evening after the closure Rickard was dining with the Marshalls in their car. The Palmyra was to pull out the next day. Hardin's name was brought up by Tod Marshall. "She was light potatoes," he dismissed the woman. "But she's broken the man's spirit."

Rickard, it was discovered, had nothing to say on the subject of the elopement.

"I'm sorry his sister is not here tonight," began Marshall mischievously.

"I did ask her, Tod" Claudia hastened to interrupt her lord. "But she would not leave her brother her last evening."

"Her last evening?" exclaimed Rickard. "Is she going away?"

Marshall subdued his twinkle. "We are carrying her off. She is to visit Mrs. Marshall while I am on the road."

Rickard gulped down his coffee, boiling. "Mrs. Marshall, will you let me run away early?" Why should he give any excuse? They knew what he was running away for!

He made his way to the little white tent on the far side of the trapezium. Innes, by the door, was bidding goodby to Senora Maldonado.

He forgot to greet the Mexican. She stood waiting; her eyes full of him. Surely, the kind senor had something to say to her? He had taken the white girl's hand. He was staring into the white girl's eyes. Something came to her, a memory like forgotten music. Silently, she slipped away into the night.

Rickard would not release Innes' hand; her eyes could not meet the look in his.

"Come out and have a walk with me! You were not going to tell me you were going. You were running away from me?"

"You know that I love you! I have been waiting for this minute, this woman, all these lonely years."

Her head she kept turned from him. He could not see the little maternal smile that ran around the curves of her mouth. Those years, filled to the brim with stern work, had not been lonely. Lonely moments he had had, that was all.

"Nothing for me?" He stopped, and made her face him, by taking both of her hands in his.

She would not look at him yet, would not meet the look which always compelled her will, stultified her speech. She had something to say first.

She Would Not Look at Him Yet.

"We don't know each other; that is, you don't know me!"

"Is that all?" There was relief in his voice. "I don't know you? Haven't I seen you day by day? Haven't I seen your self-control tried, proved—haven't I seen your justice, when you could not understand— Look at me!"

She shook her head, her eyes on the sand under her feet. He could scarcely catch her words. They did not know each other. He did not know her!

"Dear! I don't know whether you love red or blue, that's a fact; Ibsen or Rostand; heat or cold. Does that matter? I know you!"

An upward glance had caught him smiling. Her speech was routed. "I'm—the—only girl here!"

"Do you think that's why I love you?"

"Ah, but you loved Gerty!" That slipped from her. She had not meant to say that!

"Does that hurt?" Abashed by her own daring, yet she was glad she had dared. She wanted him to deny it. For he would deny it? She wondered if he were angry, but she could not look at him.

The minutes, dragging like weighted hours, told her that he was not going to answer her. It came to her then that she would never know whether Gerty's story were wholly false, or partly true. She knew, then, that no wheedling, wife's or sweetheart's, would tease that story from him. It did not belong to him.

His silence frightened her into articulateness. He must not think that she was foolish! It was not that, in itself, she meant. The words jostled one another in their soft swift rush. He—he had made a mistake once before. He had liked the sort of woman he had thought Gerty was. She herself was not like the real Gerty any more than she was like the other, the woman that did not exist. He would find that they did not think alike, believe alike, that there were differences—

"Aren't you making something out of nothing, Innes?"

That voice could always chide her into silence! Her speech lay cluttered in ruins, her words like useless broken bricks falling from the wall she was building.

He took her hand and led her to a pile of rock the river had not eaten. He pulled her down beside him.

"Isn't it true, with us?"

"It is, with me," breathed Innes. Their voices were low as though they were in church.

"And you think is isn't, with me!" Rickard stood before her. "Is it because I trust you, I wonder? That I, loving you, love to have the others love you, too? Don't you suppose I know how it is with the rest, MacLean; how it was with Estrada? Should I be jealous? Why, I'm not. I'm proud! Isn't that because I know you, know the fine steady heart of you? You hated me at first—and I am proud of that. I don't love you enough?" He knelt at her feet, not listening to her pleading. He bent down and kissed one foot; then the other. "I love them!" The face he raised to her Innes had never seen before. He pressed a kiss against her knee. "That, too! It's mine. I've not said my prayers since I was a boy. I shall say them again, here, you teaching me." His kisses ran up her arm, from the tips of her limp fingers. His mouth, close to hers, stopped there. He whispered:

"You—kiss me, my girl!"

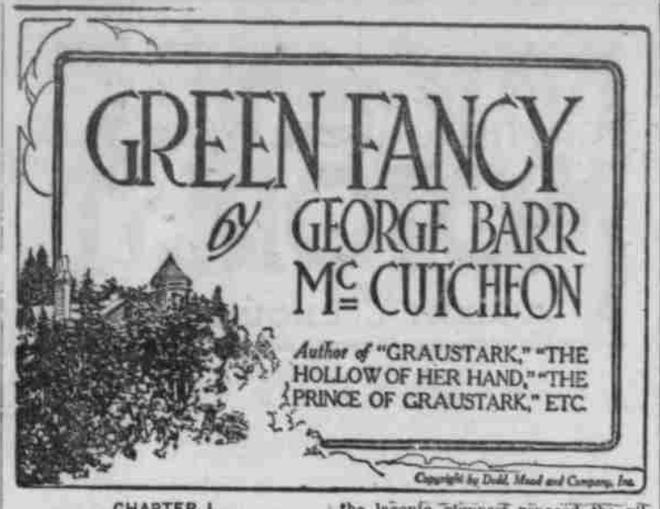
Slowly, unseeingly, as though drawn by an external will, her face raised to his; slowly, their lips met. His arms were around her; the world was blotted out.

Innes, minutes later, put her mouth against his ear. It was the Innes he did not know, that he had seen with others, mischievous, whimsical, romping as a young boy.

"I love—red," she whispered. "And heat and sunshine. But I love blue, on you; and cold, if it were with you—and the rest of the differences—"

He caught her to him. "There are not going to be any differences!"

(THE END.)



GREEN FANCY

by GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

Author of "GRAUSTARK," "THE HOLLOW OF HER HAND," "THE PRINCE OF GRAUSTARK," ETC.

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

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

"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 steal over his seamed face. He reinserted the corncob pipe and took a couple of puffs 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?"

"It is paradise to every actor who happens to be on the road, Mr. Jones," said Barnes, slipping his big pack from his shoulders and letting it slide to the floor.

"Hear that feller in the taproom talkin'? Well, he is one of the leading actors in New York—in the world, for that matter. He's been talkin' about Broadway for nearly a week now, steady."

"May I inquire what he is doing up here in the wilds?"

"At present he ain't doing anything except talk. Last week he was treddin' the boards, as he puts it himself. Busted. Up the flue. Showed last Saturday night in Hornville, eighteen mile north of here, and immegiately after the performance him and his whole troupe started to walk back to New York, a good four hundred mile. They started out the back way of the opery house and nobody missed 'em till next mornin' except the sheriff, and he didn't miss 'em till they'd got over the county line into our bailiwick. Four of 'em are still stoppin' here just because I ain't got the heart to turn 'em out ner the spare money to buy 'em tickets to New York. Here comes one of 'em now. Mr. Dillingford, will you show this gentleman to room eleven and carry his baggage up fer him? And maybe he'll want a pitcher of warm water to wash and shave in." He turned to the new guest and smiled apologetically. "We're a little short o' help just now, Mr. Barnes, and Mr. Dillingford has kindly consented to—"

"My word!" gasped Mr. Dillingford, staring at the register. "Someone from little old New York? My word, sir, you— Won't you have a—er—little something to drink with me before you—"

"He wants something to eat," interrupted Mr. Jones sharply. "Tell Mr. Bacon to step up to his room and take the order."

"All right, old chap—nothing easier," said Mr. Dillingford genially. "Just climb up the elevator, Mr. Barnes. We do this to get up an appetite. When did you leave New York?"

Taking up a lighted kerosene lamp and the heavy pack, Mr. Clarence Dillingford led the way up the stairs. He was a chubby individual of indefinite age. At a glance you would have said he was under twenty-one; a second look would have convinced you that he was nearer forty-one.

Depositing Barnes' pack on a chair in the little bedroom at the end of the hall upstairs he favored the guest with a perfectly unabashed grin.

(Continued next Saturday)