



I

THE second hour after night is a queerish time. It really doesn't seem to be a time of itself at all, but just a cross between has-been and will-be—a time which things elect, when they want to happen outside the sense of the world's schedule hours. And it looks even more of a rusty time than it is, from the cold iron bench of a park in November. The nothingness of it trickles with awful coldness down a spine, and, if pockets are empty, it trickles even more coldly through them and on down a pant leg—and it makes cold feet—it makes cold feet!

Such an hour—entertaining such a spirit in his back and through his pockets, did Darby—find his feet cold.

The rear of the park gave into a high wall, beyond which lay tracks, freight-cars, wharves, boatmen's shanties, and a sullen river. The river was black and ugly, but life is sometimes black and ugly too, and Darby felt that of two ugly things, the river—in which it took the least effort to be carried, was quite the choice.

But as his leg swung to take itself over the wall riverward. it was frantically clutched—his balance undone to the park side again, and a near-three-hundred-pound woman with a shapeless hand at her panting throat,

and her fat sides heaving, met his startled gaze.

Sullenly straightening his hat, brushing his clothes, and shifting his twisted coat-shoulders, he sat down on the iron bench again.

"I thot I'd never get clost enough to stop you!" she panted—righting her sad little turban and drawing her scraggy black shawl closer about her throat. "Darby it's—it's against the law!"

"Law nothin'!" replied Darby disgustedly. "Law can't keep nobody from goin' to hell when he's ready. Next time, you keep your hands off me."

"Mr. Michael Darby," Amy Shores informed him—her returning breath permitting a try at dignity. "Hell means nothin' to me, when you're owin' me eleven dollars board-bill. You can clean the lady on the top floor's entire rugs to-morrow, and so on. When you get me paid up—do as you like—but it's against the law, plum against the law, Darby," she finished in the tone of one objecting to oysters in June, and seated herself beside him.

Darby sniffed disgustedly. "Everything you ever set your eyes on is against the law," he said, "and incidently, I ain't cleanin' rugs for nobody. I see plenty o' men have money without cleanin' rugs for it, and I've got as

good a right to have it as see it.”

The chill gray park, with the November moan through its gaunt trees, hung around them so sepulchrally that, after the moment of silence which Amy's still struggling breath demanded—neither found voice to speak again. They were very much alone.

Far down a dead-leaf path, one pale street light made cold thin shadows. The bare ground, the bare sky, the dank, raw air—made hopelessness out of everything, and presently Amy began to feel cold feet, too. She spread one hand over her eyes and nose and began to snivel softly into it. Behind the wall the river breathed coldly against the wharf posts. Coldly, yes, but after all.

Amy's snivel grew into a little wail, but Darby, slouching heedlessly beside her, paid no attention.

“D-D-Darby,” her choking voice came at last, “I—I—guess you're right. Hell's the easiest. Let's you and me just— You think it *would* be hell?” she interrupted herself a bit anxiously.

“Speakin' for me—yes,” he answered shortly.

“Well,” she took up again in a hopeless tone, “we reapeth as we soweth. and I don't deserve no better 'n others—but the stewing veal on the cheapest corner of the market was twenty-two cents to-day, and four rooms empty, winter comin' on—and me takin' on more size constant. I wouldn't never have the heart by myself—but with a strong man at my side—”

But the thought proved greater than the spirit, and with the sudden coming of a raw wind from the river. Amy broke—her chin dropped itself on her heaving bosom, and her shoulders shook with sobs.

Darby shivered, put his raw-boned hands in his pockets, and absent-mindedly framed the picture of his bony lankiness, and Amy's short bulkiness going down together.

The picture provoked a mental parade of the entire event till, in backward sequence, he visioned its beginning, and then—then he laughed!

Amy's mightiest sob held itself on the rise. Her chin came up—and her lips tightened, as she faced him.

“You—you poor Scandinavian,” she blubbered. “You—you poor I mean Irishman. Are you laughing at me? You—you—”

Something in her manner entirely changed the spirit of the scene for Darby, and inspired a new pep in him, somehow, that brought his shoulders up smartly as he met her indignant gaze.

“I was thinking of you getting over the wall,” he said.

For a moment she looked at him with scorn. Then out on the river a wailing two-toned boat whistle began to mourn. Simultaneously, a sad little drizzle added itself to the dismal scene, and line by line—the haughteur of Amy's face fell into tragedy—the sobs began again—and heaving to her feet, she turned her face skyward. Her shapeless straw turban slipped as far as her rear belt buckle where it clung by a leaf—her dull old skirt moved forlornly in the raw wind, and the black shawl pitifully scant, pinned close to her neck, made her face seem very white—very living-and-dying white.

“Oh, death,” she cried, her voice sharp with despair that had long struggled against itself. “You can't sting me no worse than life. I guess I choose you after all.”

Her face brought Darby to his feet—brought him where he could see beyond the dead November park—to the living light at the gate of it—made him feel a thing he had long forgotten—that he was a living man in a living world—as big a man as ever made a million—a man bigger than any circumstance that ever dared construct itself!

And then over that feeling—flooded another. A strange one, to him. One no less human, but

quite unprecedented. A tender, gentle surging thought for the tear-stained white face before him. A forgetfulness of Amy Shores's superfluous bulk—in remembrance of her fingers once upon a time bandaging his broken wrist—of her voice singing the neighbor's baby to sleep—her care with the darn on his coat-sleeve—his warm coat and her thin one—her thin skirt—her poor hat—her ragged shawl—panting, achingly, out in the night to save him.

And he'd laughed at her! He'd laughed! What, for a yellow dog was he anyway! What did he have for a soul in his worthless skin!

But when he'd got all hold of himself, again, and his human eyes came back to where Amy's white face had been—she wasn't there! With the determination born of anguish—she'd reached up on the bench—and up on the wall—and down on a truck and all alone—quite without the “strong man beside,” she'd got to the ground on the other side, and she'd gone through the freights—and across the tracks, and, when Darby, with an exclamation of alarm, sprang over the wall after her—she was past the shanties, and at the water's edge!

“Amy!” he cried sharply. “Wait! What you doin'! Wait!”

But she waited for nothing! Up on the wharf she climbed, and without a backward glance—hurried down the water-washed length of it.

“Amy!” begged Darby frantically—as he plunged after her. “Wait!”

But his cry, unanswered, echoed mockingly along the cold shore, while Amy, well out now, planned calmly enough that she wouldn't jump—she'd just slip in “easy.”

So when she came to the end, she sat down on the wharf's edge—a little side-wise, so that one foot dangled in—and a pleasantly gentle wave folded over it.

Darby leaped up the wharf steps—but

just too late to see her! She was gone! Kind, sweet, Amy! The only soul on earth who'd ever cared whether his head ached and his stomach went empty or not. And he'd laughed at her! Laughed at her!

“Amy—” he cried brokenly. “Forgive me, Amy. I can't get along without you—”

The river wind shoved him against the rail, and he clung there like a rag in a storm—staring down the black wharf. After a while a stern hand touched his shoulder.

“Come along,” came an officer's voice. “No loafing here. Come along with me—so I can be sure you keep moving.”

So Michael Darby went back through the park, and past the light and into the town again, but all the while he kept thinking how pretty and pink Amy's cheeks had looked on her birthday, when the ice-man had dared him to kiss her.

II.

The next morning was the beginning of the third half of Michael Darby's life. The first half had been the years from nothing to twenty-four—when nobody could say for a fact that Darby would never amount to anything. The second half—the years from twenty-four to thirty-five, when everybody knew—and so did Darby, that he was worthless, which two halves ended in his decision for hell on the certain gray night in November.

Then began the third half—which did as a third half of anything would be bound to do—disproved everybody's conjectures—even Michael Darby's.

His bed in the station served him acceptably. Since he knew he really hadn't done himself to it—it was a kindness of the state *to* him, rather than a safeguard *against* him—and in a big new spirit of going to live and do and be, he knew that such a care for such a man as himself was quite due, and so,

whereas the night before it would have stung him as making him a man cursed with a keeper—it now warmed him, as making him a man blessed with a host.

In the morning his straight shoulders, keen eyes, and quiet manner, offset his rumpled clothes to such an extent that his man's apology to the judge for having had to take advantage of a public shelter, was received with a man's reassurance—and Michael Darby went out into the good air, and saw the world before him.

And Amy? He couldn't sense her—gone. He sensed just that the new man he was, was her doing—not his. It seemed as though this new determination was a trust to her—an answering act to her anxiety for him of the night before.

She'd saved him, and now he must prove to her that her effort had been worth while!

Then came thoughts that she'd lost her *self* for *him*. Lost *her* courage to *his* account. Came thoughts that through the dark halls of the old brick boarding-house, her voice wouldn't be singing: "Just a Song at Twilight" any more—that all the dirty little children cramming around the big old wicker chair for an evening story—would just wait, and wait. But somehow—that couldn't seem to be. It didn't seem that, that chilly, gray, wailing hour could have *been* at all—coming like that, and taking Amy away with it, and leaving such a new Michael Darby behind it!

Well—he'd buy a paper, and see. But at the news-stand, he remembered his pockets and so turned, instead, to a high tin street-box, which every morning found full of discarded news sheets. He selected one—and opened it, but from all over the page Amy's visioned face looked at him—and he couldn't read a thing. Hastily he turned it over, blinked the thoughts out of his eyes until he could see again, and then hunted for "job ads."

It seemed right and proper that the first

he saw should be for a man to beat rugs—and right and proper, as a crowning of his new spirit, that he should hurry to the address, really hoping for the privilege.

And all day long, Michael Darby beat rugs. But he wasn't Darby beating rugs at all. He was a man making good. A man exchanging ability for capital. A man who was going to pay for his dinner, and have his shoes shined, and hunt up a room to own, and never take a newspaper out of a street-box again as long as he lived!

III.

AND all those things he did—and then, in the quiet of the bare little room, came Amy's voice—shone her laughing eyes—soothed her gentle fingers—blushed her cheeks at mention of the ice-man, and over Darby surged such a wish that it were true—that he had to leave the house and go for a walk to try and put his thoughts behind him.

Still, through it all, she seemed more to have come, than gone. When he finally went back to bed, it was with tender care that he hung his coat over the chair. Amy's darn was in the sleeve of it! With smooth precision, he put his tie in the top drawer. She had pressed it! And when he took a hot bath, and got between the two sheets he had paid for—he found a humble satisfaction in being sure that somehow she knew what this twenty-four hours had done for him.

For a week Darby beat rugs. For three weeks he loaded sawdust. For a month he moved freight, and then he took the night-watchman's place in "The Harding Lithograph Company." where posters were supplied for bill-boards all over the world.

So Darby passed into a salary. He had thirty dollars a week. But he had more money than he wanted—more than was comfortable. And the reason thirty dollars a week was more than was comfortable, was because every cent

of it stung him with a memory of Amy as he had seen her last—her thin shawl—her poor shirt—her white face—giving up the sunshine of the world because stewing veal was twenty-two cents—and because Darby wouldn't lift a hand to pay her eleven dollars board—and he'd laughed at her!

That was *one* thought of Amy and the thirty dollars a week, but always hand in hand with that, was another. The thought of Amy, as pretty and fresh and sweet as any lady in the land, waiting with a smile for his home-coming—minding his little needs with tenderness—and then, after a while he was bound to understand that he'd loved Amy Shores better than any of the world, or all of it—that the world, in fact, was merely a working machine without her—that the manhood suddenly sprung up within him, had been just an intuition to do for Amy, and be for Amy—that it was love for her that had come when she had gone, and had made her seem so close to him then.

On that same birthday, that same iceman had taken a snap-shot of her in her sunny back door. Darby had it in his pocket, and one Saturday night, at the desk in his little office, he found courage to take it out and look at it.

There had been a time when Darby had been so little of a man—that he'd let tears come to his eyes once, about something—but he had the mind to be ashamed, and get them out. Now he was so much of a man—that tears came, and came and ran all down his rough cheeks, and down his chin—and made little water blisters all over the picture in his hand—and he didn't even know them for tears. He knew them just as love for the truest, best, most courageous heart he had ever known. He thought of those tears as the best of his man's estate.

The corners of the picture were getting ragged. It wanted a case. So he went to the jeweler and bought a fifty-dollar watch—and

cut out Amy's dimpling face, and framed it—haloed it—in gold.

The next day, the janitor, cleaning up, carried the rest of the picture out in his waste-basket, and the next night, as Darby sat cleaning his light—came a rap at his office door.

Surprised, he opened, to a jauntily-dressed gentleman with a blond mustache, plaid socks, and a walking stick—who promptly came in past Darby, took the only chair—and made himself at home.

Then from his pocket he produced the lower half of the snap-shot of Amy—of which Darby promptly relieved him. The man laughed.

"Touchy, eh!" he remarked. "Well, I just thought you might know the lady."

Darby's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing, and the man, flecking patent toe, with mahogany stick, went on.

"My name's Chapin," he announced. "I've been connected with this paper firm, buying bill-posters for ten years, and I called around to-day to stock for the new season, and the janitor—friend of mine who knows where my interests are—saved me this half of a scene from your waste-basket, thinking you'd know the lady's address, and for a reasonable price would put me hip. Needn't get mad, Pard. All fair and honest you know. Just helping a man find somebody he's looking for!"

Darby, having nothing to say, did the unusual thing under those circumstances—said nothing, and presently the man put his question again.

"Know her?" he asked pointedly.

"Yes," said Darby. He couldn't trust himself to say more.

"Good!" exclaimed the other. "Fine! I'll pay you a hundred dollars for her address!"

Darby didn't know what the game was—but he didn't want to discuss Amy.

"She's—dead," he said almost under his breath. And, picking up his light, went into the main building, and locked the heavy doors behind him, leaving his guest the choice of the little outer office, or the street.

When he returned two hours later, Chapin was gone, and on the desk was a scrawled note. It read:

Sorry, but I don't believe you. I don't think your lady friend is dead, and I'm going to find her. Her picture and a detective can get her for me as quick as you could, and save me the hundred besides. Thanks.

When Darby made ready to go home, he found that, not only the lower scrap of the snap-shot was missing—but in his watch, which had been left as usual in his street-coat, the place where her face had been was empty.

Two or three days went by, and Darby missed the picture much. It had come to mean a lot to him—that face. He missed it so much that he forgot to wonder why Chapin had wanted it—why he had wanted *her*—and finally he took a day to hunt up the ice-man and ask for another.

He went to the ice-office and got the route and, at the hour which brought the wagon farthest from the brick boarding-house. Darby came up beside and waited till Jim and his iron hook, came clinking around from the nearest back door.

He hadn't seen Jim since Amy's birthday. It took all the courage he had to see him now. Apparently it took all Jim's courage too—for a foot from Darby's trim straight figure, he stopped and stared utterly speechless.

"Great Gizzards!" he cried at last. "It's Michael Darby!" and slamming his hook over the hedge—he seized Darby's hand with a grip like the end of the world.

"Hello, Jim," said Darby at last. "Been quite a while, ain't it? You look just the same though."

"Yes, *me*," laughed Jim, "but not *you*, old top. Gizzards, but you're slicked up some. Though you'd forgot your old friends! Looks like the world's doin' good by *you* all right."

"Yes," Darby smiled. "I'm gettin' on good. Looked you up to ask"—he hesitated for a minute, swallowed, then met Jim's eye squarely to make himself be calm "to ask for one of them little picture you took of—Amy."

"Sure thing," answered Jim heartily. "I keep all my filums. Make you one tonight. Say"—pulling his watch from his damp overall pocket—"it's ten to eleven. I'll hurry up and do the block and meet you at Martie's for lunch at twelve, and we'll print one this noon!"

"All right," Darby nodded, "twelve o'clock it is. Here's your machinery." And exchanging Jim's hand-shake for the iron hook, as the ice-man mounted the dripping rear step, and shucked his horses on. Darby turned up the street. But twenty feet away Jim hailed him.

"Just happened to think," he called "I took that filum over to Amy yesterday. But we can get it off her after we eat. So-long."

IV.

THE ice-wagon lumbered on, Michael Darby staring after it. Amy! Yesterday! Pink and white and words and smiles and sun and grass and eyes and lips came in a crazy kaleidoscope of sound and scene to his breathless senses. The day—the day—the ice-man had dared him—and he'd kissed her—and her voice singing—the neighbor's baby to sleep—her fingers on his broken wrist—and then—and then—the night and her thin skirt, and her white face and maybe—maybe after all he could tell her—maybe he could tell her—show her—find her—give her.

His next conscious moment was in her kitchen, his head on her kitchen table, and once more he knew tears, not as tears, but just

as love for the truest, best, most courageous heart he had ever known.

Gently Amy smoothed his hair, and patted his shoulder—and by and by, he felt other tears than his own—hot drops flooding the back of his neck where he knew *his* happiness couldn't have spilled them—and he reached for the hand on his arm—and—and in the door of Martie's, Jim looked up the street and down the street, and at two o'clock, he swore from the bottom of his heart and went back to the ice-wagon in an unnecessary clean collar!

"Say but you're fine, Darby." Amy beamed, when the end of the afternoon had them fairly calm again. "Just be taking the peeling of banana for your lunch off, so I won't have to let you out of my sight a minute! Such head aches I've give myself for you—and—and heart aches too," she added softly. "But I knew you'd come. I knew you'd come. When I heard you that night sayin' you couldn't get along without me—I was so happy I could 'a' gone on dyin' 'thout knowin' it at all. Even if I was sittin' down, and in the shadows so you couldn't see me—you could 'a' heard all of me beatin' for joy."

And that night—when Darby turned smiling, at the corner, to wave answer to Amy's radiant farewell—that night began the fourth half of Michael Darby's life.

V.

NEAR noon the next day, after Darby, in his once cherished room, had tried in vain to sleep—he rose, dressed carefully, and hurried like a boy on the top of the world—back to the glory of Amy's smile. He found her, much agitated, sitting as stiffly as was possible for *her*—on the red velvet settee in her parlor—and in her best spring rocker—sat a hawk-nosed gentleman with dark-rimmed glasses, and impatient fingers—tapping the chair arms.

Amy rose nervously to meet Darby,

and with her hands managed to motion the introduction her lips failed in making.

"Mr. Biswell is a detective," she added, trying to smile, "he got me off Jim's snapshot picture from—from your wastebasket. He—came to—to see me."

Her face was a queer mixture of emotion, and Darby, facing Mr. Biswell, remembered for the first time to wonder about the meaning of that call from Chapin! And there flashed, too, a thought of the terror Amy had always had for things "again the law." But quicker than both thoughts, was one of thanks that, whatever the trouble, he could have come back in time.

"What is it, Amy." he said gently—reaching for her hand. "Tell me all about it—won't you?"

"Darby," she faltered, "if you—if just it don't lose me you—it's all right. I'll tell you all the paper of the man with the big spectacle says—if you promise to stick by me—no matter what, Darby."

"Why sure, you bet, Amy," he assured her. "There ain't nothing can take us apart now."

Amy searched his face with anxious eyes.

"Promise?" she persisted. "You'll sure stick by me, Darby?"

Darby nodded solemnly—and glanced at the now impatient Mr. Biswell.

"Well then," began Amy, drawing a long, legal-looking document from her pocket, and unfolding it slowly. "It's—here's what it says—Darby."

And Darby—as he drew his chair close to hers, and patted one of her hands reassuringly, saw the faces of the neighbor's children mashed excitedly against the window—looking for what the police" was going to do to Amy Shores!

VI.

THROUGH the sweet wide country of summer time in Iowa—a special train took its way one late afternoon, some four weeks later, and in a special car—a car with wide windows, a fresh green rug, and a vase of flowers on its table, sat Michael Darby in white ducks and canvas shoes, a panama pushed back on his head, busily checking in a small note-book.

Across from his wicker chair, was another—a specially made one—in which Amy, in a cool, blue silk, coming from the rear platform, presently seated herself.

In her hands was a bit of white sewing—a dainty curtain for one of the car windows—but she put it aside now, to lean back in her chair—and study a brightly lettered three-sheet, pinned across the opposite side of the car.

Darby, smiling fondly at her, shoved back his hat, and let his eyes follow hers.

“Funny, ain’t it?” he chuckled. “The world do move fast. You—you like it all right, do you, honey?” he asked anxiously. “It—it doesn’t tire you?”

Amy laughed a gay answer: “I’m crazy about it.” she said. “I never knew such excitement! I was crazy about it right from the start—right from when the detective that followed up my picture for Mr. Crispin first told me, but I was afraid you wouldn’t feel so

free for me if I took to gettin’ five hundred dollars a week salary. But you’ll have me beat out pretty soon,” she dimpled. “Mr. Chapin says you’re the best manager on the show!”

Darby smiled his appreciation and went on sizing up the poster critically.

“Them’s nice fancy letters on the second line, ain’t they,” he remarked. “Beginnin’ with the ‘Princess Amy, have you seen her. She tips the scale at five hundred and thirty-seven pounds, measures five feet nine and a half inches around the waist and—’ Amy, now, ain’t you afraid such overfed statements are against the law?”

But Amy—was too busy fitting the new-curtain to the back window to mind. When it was done, she stood looking out across the moving country, over which the warm twilight was folding caressingly. Darby, joining her, had to pinch her cheek and then kiss it soundly to bring back her wandering attention.

“Mrs. Darby,” he demanded. “what you thinkin’ about?”

“I was thinkin’,” she smiled, taking his hand in both hers. “I was thinkin’ of that night by the river—and where you was goin’ so fast when I stopped you—and I was thinkin’” — she said tenderly—“I was thinkin’ that by quite considerable—this beats hell!”