

office anyway?" "Rola," he reproached her stiffly. "Taylor, Blair, Stone, Johnston & Jardin is the biggest and best law firm in town."

"Yes, and you think it's something awfully big to be the youngest partner there! I must say that I don't know why anybody like you, telling such romantic lies, should be a humdrum lawyer."

"It's the only work worth doing, Rola!" he told her indignantly. "The law is a tangled thing, and always will be, because it's a human growth. It's the most complex, contradictory thing in the world—except a woman," he added brightly. "And that's what makes it interesting."

"O, I know you love the law. But that's what puzzles me. You're normal in every way, and getting a reputation for brilliancy—"

"Thanks." "And so I can't see why you should let this one eccentricity run away with you. It's utterly foolish and serves no purpose. If you have a natural talent for that sort of thing, why don't you make some use of it? Why don't you write novels?"

"I can't, Rola. I don't know why, except that I'm naturally the opposite of Archie Fellows—I told you about him—man I knew in London during the war. He can't tell the simplest story to save his life; but he's a wizard at writing. Now, I can't do a thing with paper and pen. It's only in the middle of a conversation that a chance word strikes a spark in me—and I have to create."

"Well, if you have to—"

He was aware of a new determined glint in her eyes. Abruptly she announced: "I haven't told dad or mother yet."

He jumped up. "You haven't! Why not? I thought you were going to do it today?"

"I was going to tell them today, and have them announce it in about a week. But your—your lies made me uneasy. I decided to wait."

"O, now, Rola!" he pleaded. "And I may never tell them. I will simply call it off—unless you stick to the truth."

He stared at her defiant eyes and firm set mouth.

"How can I, Rola? I slip into a story almost without knowing it. It isn't like other habits. I pour my drink and I light my cigar, but one of my stories just pops out. Now, can I help that?" His tone was aggrieved.

"Of course you can help it! If you can control the habit at the office, you can control it elsewhere. How often do you—create?"

"O—about twice a week." She pondered.

"Then I'll put you on a truth diet for a month. That ought to cure you."

"A month! Rola, who ever told the truth for a month?"

"O, ordinary lies are all right. You know—lies with a purpose. Everybody tells that kind. A nice little lie in time doesn't hurt anybody and keeps away a dozen foolish questions. But your little lies, good for nothing, but to soothe your vanity—I should think you'd be ashamed of them!" she said with scorn.

But his mind was still intent on her terrible verdict.

"A month!" he repeated dully.

"Yes. This is the 29th. If you stick to the truth until midnight of the 29th of next month, I'll tell dad and mother and have them announce our engagement. And if you—create—before then, you must come and tell me. Word of honor. And that will be the end—of everything."

His voice had a ring of pain. "O, now, Rola! You wouldn't break it off for a little thing like that?"

"Yes! I would!" Her face was white, and she nodded implacably.

For a moment he forgot the ordeal he faced, and thought only of hers.

"You're a brave little fighter, Rola," he said softly. "All right, it's up to me. Thirty days."

He held open the door. As she passed through, she paused.

"Thirty days!" she said, and suddenly kissed him.

Thirty days!

In anticipation it had seemed terrible enough, but the reality was worse. Like a man beginning a fast, who immediately conjures up a vision of thick, tender steaks, Bennett found himself dwelling on the delights of creation.

Sitting at his desk, trying to concentrate on briefs and demurrers and cross bills, he saw himself in fancy telling some thumping story to a circle of fascinated auditors—a heart quivering climax, and a swift, declamatory end. He saw himself elaborating the fiction with his convincing matter of fact air.

And when he found himself in company with others—at a luncheon with a co-worker, at a dinner, at an office conference, he had to clench his teeth to keep from breaking forth when some chance word kindled his imagination with the beginning of a superb narrative.

Abruptly he realized that his salvation lay in solitude. So he canceled all the engagements he could, and even did his best to avoid new ones with Rola. For even under her keen eyes, he found, he could scarcely resist the tales that tickled his tongue for freedom.

Never would she know how hard he found his new procedure. Never would she know how Taylor, the revered senior member of the firm, eyed him when Bennett pleaded a throbbing headache to avoid accepting one of Taylor's infrequent and cherished dinner invitations. Nor would she ever know the degree of Bennett's temptation when, shutting himself up in his room at the Drake, and staring moodily out of the window, he let his eyes travel up the Lake Shore drive, and rest on Jimmy Tree's imposing gray house.

A poker game was on there, and Jimmy had asked him.

Abruptly turning from the window, Bennett seized his hat and bolted out. But not to Jimmy Tree's. No. Seeking a change of scene, he struck westward, making the quick transition from the Gold Coast to the boarding house district, and thence into the Clark street badlands, and into a dingy residence section that was still more remote. After he had walked himself weary in a Chicago he had never seen before, he tax-cabbed back to The Drake, and went to bed. There he tossed.

On a Sunday, when 10 days had passed of the terrible 30, Jimmy Tree met him on the drive and conscripted him for some tennis at the Casino. It was there that Bennett nearly rendered unnecessary the remaining 20 days of his ordeal.

Between sets, while several of them were watching some other at the nets, Russ Muir remarked on the force of Jimmy's serve. "Remarkable," Bennett agreed. Suddenly his clear blue eyes glowed, and he added:

"But what would you say to a man who served hand grenades in the same way?"

"Hand grenades?" Muir echoed in amazement.

"O, you mean war bombs?" demanded Alice Pankin.

"Yes," Bennett insisted. "What would you say to a man who used a solid piece of wood, shaped like a racquet, to serve hand grenades into the enemy's trench with as much speed as Jimmy puts on a tennis ball?"

"Great Scott!" said Muir in awe. For although he had not been in the infantry he could appreciate the miracle that Bennett was describing. "I once knew a doughboy—"

Bennett began; and stopped, going cold as he realized how nearly he had done it. It was not too late, though; so far he had merely asked a question.

"I'd better not talk about that," he said abruptly, and walked away.

Alice Pankin looked after him indignantly.

"What in the world's the matter with him?" she demanded.

Russ Muir leaned toward her. "He didn't want to give it away," he whispered. "I'll bet they're saving it for the next war."

Less than a week later Bennett again found himself with one leg over the brink.

Because Rola insisted, he took her to a dinner dance of the Friends of Opera. It was the gayest thing he had attended for weeks, and he breathed happily, forgetting his predicament.

Some vague thing of color in the affair delighted him. Pondering this, he decided that it was the presence of a number of opera stars. One of these, Fania Kazaroff, was at the table with him and Rola and Jimmy Tree, who had brought her.

Bennett liked the occasional company of opera singers. Usually foreign, they carefully cultivated their natural exoticism. He liked their mobile faces, their thick hair and big eyes, the insignificance of the things they said.

Here was Madame Kazaroff, now, talking about her jewels. He couldn't quite make out whether she considered them too glittering or not glittering enough. It didn't matter. He was watching the way her nimble hands opened fanwise when she smiled, and curled up into fists when, as now, her smile curled up into seriousness.

She was saying she had lost a ring.

"I lose it two days now. The police—stupid! Cannot find."

"The police are stupid everywhere," put in Jimmy Tree sententiously. "That's their reputation. Look at Scotland Yard," he ended, going a few thousand miles for an example.

"Scotland Yard?" echoed Bennett, his blue eyes suddenly luminous.

"You think Scotland Yard men are fools?"

"In the detective stories they are," Jimmy argued.

"Perhaps," replied Bennett. "But if you had been in England during the war, in an air squadron, and an emergency had come up, and you had taken off with a Scotland Yard man as your only passenger in a case where your passenger had to have saving and brains—"

He was galloping into it. But out of the corner of his eyes he suddenly saw Rola. He had forgotten her! He had forgotten the 30 days! He broke off.

"Perhaps," he resumed, "perhaps I had better not say any more. There has been a lot of talking in England, you know—Repington's journal and Margot's diary. But perhaps, after all, some things had better remain unsaid."

And now that he had saved himself, he turned to face Rola. The color was returning to her frightened cheeks.

"I'm sure your're quite right, Gregory," she told him, with a trembling little smile.

"So you know some secrets, do you?" asked Jimmy. "Do you mind saying if it's anything that would help us out in the next war?"

Thus beset with dreadful temptation every hour, Bennett lived through the black days of the longest month he had ever known.

As the month dwindled away toward the 29th, his agonizing impatience increased. Again and again he counted the days that he must endure: five days, four days, three days—two days.

"Thirty-three hours," he told himself at 3 p. m. of the 28th—a Sunday—as he started for one of his time-killing walks.

Stepping from the elevator into the hotel lobby, he found himself facing a slender young man of about his own height, with similarly light hair and eyes. The young man returned his amazed stare.

"Archie!"

"Bennett!"

The young man had the accent of Piccadilly.

"What on earth brings you here?" Bennett asked his boon companion of the war days in London.

Archie Fellows sighed. "Lecturing. I'm one of the great authors imported from the other side to give a living example of an Englishman's vitality. Jove, I don't know how the others stuck it. Never a minute's peace."

"Lecturing here—in town? How long have you been here?"

"Just arrived. They give me a rest today. Tomorrow night I deliver my message, and then I'm sped away—I forgot just where. Iowa—or is it Ohio? I say, let's totter up to my room. I rather need a brace. I'm expecting my manager up there, too."

The drink disposed of, Archie continued:

"I've given orders I'm not here to anyone except my manager. No telephone calls. The usual thing is for an army of reporters and book reviewers and club women to come rushing in, asking first how I like the states. Rather ghastly!"

"But isn't there some slight compensating advantage?" Bennett smiled.

"Rather. It's the money I get for the lectures. And the sales of my books are increased. O, if it were merely the lectures, it would be rather right enough. But being exhibited like a circus monstrosity and what not! I've just come from Waukesha—was the guest of a woman there in a frightfully big house, and seemed sorry I had never been wounded. She seems to have the exclusive privilege of entertaining all the English lecturers. Chattered a goodish bit about 'em all. She was angling for Wells, and was awfully ratty because he didn't come west. Seemed to think he wronged her."

There was a rap at the door.

"Come in!" called Archie nervously.

A brisk apple-cheeked man entered.

"Everything comfortable?" he asked cheerily.

"Afraid it was some one else," said Archie with relief, introducing Bennett to Mr. Harris, his manager.

"Yes, I'm all right if they let me alone."

"But the publicity!" objected Mr. Harris, frowning in an earnest effort to frown.

"Publicity be damned! You can get enough publicity without their seeing me. Tell 'em I'm rather busy at a novel I'm just beginning; that I'm going to write it in two days on a bet. Tell 'em anything."

"Well, I guess we're all right anyhow," Mr. Harris conceded. "They're nearly sold out at Province hall in advance, and we're only booked here once. I'm going down to the hall again."

He was gone.

"Amiable rabbit," commented Archie. "It's frightfully jolly to be managed by a man without a bit of nerve."

Bennett told him, "Archie, there's a girl I want you to meet."

"A girl!" cried Archie rebelliously. "Likes literature, does she? You respect her judgment highly, eh? We'll have a little debauch—yes, no? O, Bennett!" he ended reproachfully.

"Nothing of the kind!" Bennett insisted. "She's not literary, and she's never read one of your books, any more than I have. But I've told her a bit about you, and I just want you to meet her. She's all right."

In the end Archie yielded, man-

festly out of a devout friendship, and Bennett telephoned Rola.

"We'll run over for tea," he told Archie. "She's alone. Name's Murdoch."

"I've got some Scottish friends who are Murdochs. The name is rather common, though."

"Her father's isn't. He's A. A. A. Murdoch."

"A. A. A.," repeated Archie. "Sounds awfully like a wireless signal."

It turned out that Archie liked Rola after all.

"I'm usually expected to be brilliant," he confided to her in relief, after a few minutes. "It happens that I can never think of an epigram except when I'm alone, and I'm a rotten raconteur and all that, you know. Not like Bennett here."

He eyed her questioningly. She and Bennett laughed.

"Rola is on to me," Bennett informed him.

"You and Gregory resemble each other in appearance, anyway," Rola observed.

"We look alike, and that's all," replied Archie. "It's a wonderful gift he has. He spoofed me at first when I met. They'd sent me home for three months, and he hadn't got to France yet, so we had a goodish bit of time together. I remember how he used to sit, cool as a bottle in a bucket of ice, and improvise a shilling shocker that convinced everybody."

"But his romancing doesn't do him any good," countered the practical Rola. "His stories serve no purpose. They don't mean anything."

"It's a gift," insisted Archie, "and every gift serves a purpose. I'd like to be there when Bennett tells a story that comes in the jolly old nick of time to save somebody's life and so forth. Eh?"

The twenty-ninth.

"The battle will be over at midnight," Bennett told himself exultantly at 10 in the morning, as he looked at his watch for the 15th time that day.

His schedule for the remaining 14 hours seemed to assure safety. All day at the office. Lunch alone. A tight curb on his imagination when he dined with Archie. Taking Rola to Archie's lecture. Taking her home. Midnight. Victory!

If only the time wouldn't pass so fearfully slow!

He wondered what Archie was doing. At breakfast Archie had confided that it was time he began gathering material for a novel of American life. It ought to go well, his publishers had told him.

Archie was intelligent. He knew well his limitations. He knew that he had not yet seen all of American life, in his dotted line from lecture hall to lecture hall. All in all, Archie considered that two weeks wouldn't be too much for him to devote to a first hand, unchaperoned study of American commercial and industrial life, of the conflict between town and country, of the domestic problems of the natives of all classes, of the war between capital and labor, of the bombings and the husband murders, and of the operations of the great melting pot.

"Two weeks wouldn't be too much," Archie declared positively.

"Not every hour of two weeks, of course," Archie modified. "But certainly my unoccupied hours for two weeks. I'll start today."

That evening, as Bennett strode into the Drake lobby, a brisk, apple-cheeked man hurried up to him.

"Have you seen Fellows?" asked Mr. Harris anxiously.

"Not since breakfast. Anything the matter?"

"I can't find him," Mr. Harris whispered. "He's never wandered around before without my knowing where he went; he hasn't even seemed to think there's anything worth seeing."

"Don't worry. He changed his mind, that's all; told me this morning he was going on an observation trip to study American life."

"But he was to meet me here at 4," Mr. Harris insisted. "And here it's 5:30."

"Well, the lecture isn't till 8:30."

"Yes, but he was to meet me at 4."

Bennett shrugged and passed on. At 7 Archie was still missing; and Bennett dined alone. To his surprise his appetite was poor. Something of the apple-cheeked man's anxiety had infected him.

Dinner over, he found Harris awaiting him. The man's voice shook and his rosy cheeks were turning ashen.

"Only 40 minutes left," he whispered. "If he doesn't show up it may ruin the tour."

"Come up to my room," Bennett ordered.

He pushed Harris into a chair, poured him a drink, and demanded: "What's this about ruining the tour?"

"The house is sold out, and my office always raises trouble if a lecturer falls down on a date, especially to a big audience. It means refunds to everybody, and we have to pay the hall rent anyway. In addition, Fellows has been on thin ice. He hasn't been exactly diplomatic with the influential women in the small towns who are her best

supporters. And all it needs is for him to miss this date and my office will probably kill the tour—and we haven't gone half way through it yet. It means a black eye for me, too."

Bennett listened grimly. He knew the importance of the tour to Archie. With the money he would be at ease, with leisure to write his best—a best that would assuredly yield him a sufficient income as long as he wrote. Without the lecture money there would be years of novel writing with one hand, and of Fleet Street hack writing with the other. For only with his recent American popularity had Archie begun to lift his head above water. And that popularity was as yet not widespread; nor had it reached a stable basis.

"Whom does Archie 'know in town?' ask Bennett.

"He told me he didn't know a soul here," Harris answered hopelessly. "If he had any friends I'd inquire among them. He didn't even know you lived here until he ran into you. Maybe he's met with an accident—or is incapacitated for some other reason," he added meaningfully. "That's why I'm afraid to go to the police. It might mean unpleasant publicity."

"Knows nobody," repeated Bennett, with knitted brows.

Suddenly his face lighted.

"Did you send out pictures of him in advance?"

"His photograph is on the circulars of our complete lecture course and on the advance matter we sent to the newspapers," Harris dragged some papers from a pocket. "Only one photograph."

Bennett studied it; a slim, fair young man, clean shaven.

With the papers in his hand, Bennett turned to the window, gazing in the direction of Rola's home, a few blocks northwest. He should be there now. For he was taking Rola to the lecture, and it was to begin in a half hour.

Eight o'clock now. For more hours and his ordeal would be over. He had suffered 29 days and 20 hours for nothing?

Archie's happiness depended on it? Well, how about his own happiness?

It was the small, cold voice of reason trying to debate with him, but, after all, it had no chance. He smiled grimly, remembering Lovelace going to the wars and the old, beautiful, hackneyed lines:

I could not love thee, dear, so much,  
Loved I not honor more.

Abruptly turning to the telephone, he gave a number.

"Rola, something important has come up and I can't take you to the lecture. . . . No, I'm sorry—I can't tell you what it is. . . . Yes, I realized you'd want to go anyhow—but I have this request to make: Please go alone. . . . I can't tell you why I ask it, but it's imperative. I'll leave the ticket for you at the box office. Goodbye, Rola."

He turned back to Harris and poured him another drink.

"Listen to me. You're Archie's manager and this tour means something to you. I know a way to go through with this lecture, even if Archie doesn't show up."

Harris lowered his glass and stared.

"A perfectly safe way," Bennett swept on. "I'll be Archie."

"You?"

Yes. Nobody in town knows him. I look as much like this half-tone as he does. This advance press matter gives a synopsis of various parts of his lecture that I can learn in two minutes—what he thinks about American humor, and so forth."

"But the English accent?"

"Leave it to me," Bennett assured him loftily. "I was in England quite a while during the war. I know England. I know Archie. I know an American audience. Come on; you're supposed to be down at the hall now, aren't you? Let's get there. We'll delay the start till 8:45, and if Archie doesn't show up by then I'll go on. But I suppose I can't wear a dinner coat? How about a cutaway?"

Five minutes after Bennett had rushed Harris out the telephone jangled insistently. Two minutes later there was a similar alarm in Harris' room. Another minute and in Archie Fellows' room the telephone pleaded unheard.

As the clock galloped toward 8:45, Bennett paced the office of the manager of Province hall. The ashes fell unheeded from the cigar between his teeth. Harris was downstairs, taking a look at the audience and arranging the final preliminaries—ice water and so forth, thought Bennett vaguely.

If only he could have kept Rola away! For his word of honor did not cover this contingency. This that he was about to tell was an honorable lie, serving a purpose—meaning something in Rola's words: it was not a mere expression of the creative impulse within him. His word of honor did not require him to tell her this.

If only he could have kept her away! But it would have been futile to try. She had met Archie,