

The Room on the Roof



By Will Payne

The Story Thus Far.

Nathaniel Harwood, a handsome lawyer, 43 years old, a widower, has lost most of the big fortune his wife left him and his daughter. To recoup Harwood has practically engaged himself to Letitia Belknap, a widow worth \$10,000,000. To Harwood come Adolph Krom, a sinister looking lens grinder, and a "Professor," Steinman, with an invention to produce motion pictures in natural colors and in relief. This invention they have stolen from Simon Curlin, their employer. The three reach an agreement. Harwood installs the workmen in the room on the roof, a curious retreat he has built himself on top of the Belknap building, an office skyscraper. Steinman fears Curlin's wrath, so Harwood takes him and Krom to Slow River, Mich., and there finds a workshop for them in an old factory. Slow River was Harwood's birthplace. There he meets Elizabeth Malden, Judge Liscomb's secretary, and falls in love with her. He takes her to Chicago as his secretary at \$75 a week. Curlin and his nephew, Robert Whiteside, appear at the Slow River factory and are thrown out. Whiteside, young and fearless, stirs Elizabeth. Exploring the room on the roof, Elizabeth finds Curlin and Whiteside trying to open the safe. Whiteside tells her they are seeking plans and a camera stolen from his uncle, Elizabeth permits them to leave. Harwood's sister, Sarah Otwell, introduces Elizabeth to Chicago society. The expensive gowns Elizabeth now orders tax her salary. Harwood proposes and Elizabeth agrees to marry him. She goes to Slow River to tell her mother. Steinman has disappeared. Elizabeth again meets Robert Whiteside, still hunting the stolen camera. He speaks slightly of Harwood, but apologizes when she tells him she is to marry the lawyer.

FIFTH INSTALLMENT

Elizabeth left Slow River at eight o'clock, reaching Chicago at noon, and went directly to the office. Harwood greeted her loverlike, asked a smiling question about her mother. But it at once appeared that he was much annoyed:

"You didn't see Krom up there?" he asked anxiously.

"No," she replied.

He ran a nervous hand over his sleek mane, and exclaimed irritably: "Doggone the blockhead! Judge Liscomb telephoned about half past nine. Somebody broke into the shop up there last night—rummaged around the office, breaking open some locked drawers and so on. The judge said everybody had cleared out—Krom and Steinman, I mean; Peter Green on a spree. There may have been something important—things connected with this invention, you know; something may have been stolen. I can't find hide or hair of Krom." In his irritation he gave her a confidence: "The fellow drinks—a spree every now and then. Something important may have been stolen. An old curmudgeon named Curlin is after this invention."

His anxious, irritated manner showed how deeply he was disturbed. She listened to him with wide eyes; at once recalling—naturally—the lubberly young man whom she had seen at Slow River. It raised a clear issue of loyalty, and she met it loyally.

"I can tell you something about that, Nat." For she had resolved to call him "Nat." "Mr. Curlin's nephew—a Mr. Whiteside—was at Slow River yesterday."

She told him how, sitting on her mother's porch, she had seen Whiteside across the street and he had come over and talked to her a few minutes.

"I first saw him at Slow River the Saturday before I came here—him and his uncle." She related that episode. "And then I saw them up here in the roof room." She described that also.

"I thought, perhaps, I ought to tell you about that—but it didn't seem necessary. The safe was locked; I felt sure no harm had been done. And he—Mr. Whiteside—said this invention belonged to his uncle and had been stolen from him. He said his uncle had made a camera that contained the ideas for the invention, only not worked out fully, and if they could find the camera they could prove it was his uncle's invention. I knew it wasn't stolen or you wouldn't be handling it. It didn't seem worth while to mention it to you."

"Certainly there was nothing stolen about it," Harwood declared testily. "This old codger Curlin proposed to have Steinman and Krom make a big invention and then take it away from them. He's sore now because they got out of his clutches. With me they're going to get two-thirds of all the royalties. They've no money. I could have held them up myself if I had wanted to, but I didn't want to." Naturally he wouldn't want to! He would want only to treat them honorably and generously! She warned toward him anew. But he was evidently much disturbed—in a more irritated state than she had ever seen him.

A further reason for that state soon transpired. He had an impor-

tant appointment in New York the next day—something in connection with the motion picture merger which he had mentioned to her. He wished very much to keep that appointment; otherwise a fine opportunity might slip by. But here he was all in the dark as to whether or not some disaster to his plans had arisen through the burglary of the factory at Slow River.

"Krom could hardly be such an awful fool as to leave clues to the invention laying around that office, where anybody might break in and steal them," he speculated unhappily. "I warned him about that and he said there was no danger; everything was secure. But the fellow drinks, you see—no telling what a drunkard might do." In exasperation he struck his hand across his mane again.

She had never before seen him like this, but always serene like a player with the game well in his own hands. She sympathized with his distress; she, too, thinking it impossible that Krom could have left his invention laying around where anybody might steal it.

He saw great things in that conference in New York, and his sanguine mind soon ran toward the cheerful view of the situation. Of course, Krom would be turning up; everything would be all right.

During the afternoon, however, Krom did not turn up. It came on toward train time. Prudence, no doubt, would have counseled Harwood to wait. But he couldn't tolerate the idea of a real disaster to his plans; he'd set his heart on the New York conference; he kept arguing himself into the cheerful view, and, after waiting as long as possible, dashed out of the office just in time to catch his train. Elizabeth had the schedule of the train; she was to send him a wire en route, if Krom appeared, or to telephone him at his hotel in New York. As he dashed out of the office she felt herself quite in the thick of the fight, holding an important post.

But it was 11 o'clock next morning before she had any word of Krom. Then he came leisurely into her cabinet, carrying his small black bag. He was freshly barbered and she was quite sure, at a glance, that he was perfectly sober. She lighted up at sight of him. Her voice lifted gaily:

"Oh! We've been looking for you!" Excitement brought a faint tinge of color to her cheeks. She laughed. "We were thinking of advertising in the 'Lost and Found.' Mr. Harwood's gone to New York. She had risen, advancing, eager: "He was anxious Somebody broke into the factory at Slow River night before last—broke open some drawers. Mr. Harwood was afraid something had been stolen."

The burglary appeared to be news to Krom, but he took it calmly, commenting: "Curlin probably."

"Mr. Harwood thought something might have been stolen," she repeated.

Krom gave a gurgling little chuckle: "Swell chance! I knew Curlin was prowling around. Swell chance to steal anything! Mr. Harwood needn't worry about that."

That assurance calmed her. "I'll telephone him," she said and stepped back to her desk.

Standing solidly in the middle of the room, black bag in hand, Krom regarded her as she slipped lithely into the seat by the desk. He pinched his chin between thumb and forefinger and suggested: "Like to see something pretty?"

"Of course!" she replied.

"Come upstairs in 15 minutes," he said, a smile under his mustache. "You don't mean"—she asked breathlessly—"the picture?"

He gave his little chuckle and repeated, "Come upstairs in 15 minutes. Then you'll have some real news to telephone." That must mean the picture! She thought.

She measured off the 15 minutes impatiently by her watch, and once more ran up the mysterious stairs with a high-beating heart. Krom had closed the wooden shutters over the round windows, excluding daylight, and turned on the electric. A white screen stood in the further end of the room, and in the nearer end a motion picture projecting machine on a tripod. She took this in at a glance, and the vacant chair in front of the projecting machine toward which Krom nodded, saying: "That's your place."

The lights went out, except the broadening funnel that shot above her head from projecting machine to screen. An image came upon the screen that made her catch her breath. It was a familiar bend in Slow River, water lily pads in the pool near shore; some wild fleur-de-lis in the marshy ground further back. Krom in a red skiff drifted into the picture, pulled some lily

pads, tossed and caught a coupe of oranges, waved a green scarf. The camera caught a small, leaping fish; the lily pads swayed in a gentle current made by the boat. Then the scene changed to a country road running along a wood—which, also, she could fairly identify. Again Krom came into the picture, walking along the road, plucking red flowers known as Indian paintbrush.

There was a vividness in these pictures such as she had never seen before—not only the natural colors in all their freshness, but a depth in the views, objects in relief, so that it seemed one could walk away back into the picture and fairly look around the trees. The screen became white again. Krom was turning on the electric lights. She was not sure of time, but thought the exhibition could not have lasted over 10 minutes.

"Well, that's all the show for the present," Krom announced, smiling.

"It's very beautiful," she said, "and wonderful." She wished him to know how much she admired it, and him.

So Krom had a sort of attraction for her which she took no pains to conceal. This vulgar man's brain—and funny little Steinman—had thought out this wonder which she had just seen. He'd said "Flat!" and evoked it out of the void. And because he was a beefy, vulgar appearing man one should be more careful than ever to pay him the honor that was his due.

"It's a fine thing to have done that," she said, her eyes more eloquent than the words. "It must have taken endless work."

Krom's hand went up to his big mustache and he replied gravely, "I've had it in mind ten years. It's really all in that lens I showed you. Of course," he added modestly, "Steinman has worked at it even longer."

That reminded her again and she asked, quickly, "Where is Mr. Steinman? You know, I was up at Slow River day before yesterday. Good old Auntie Prothro was all in a flutter about him—suspecting he'd been kidnaped or something had happened to him." She smiled as she said it.

"He's all right," Krom replied. "You know how he is—odd and nervous. He's always been nervous about old man Curlin. Curlin's sore, you know, because we didn't turn this invention over to him. Now that we've got it done, Steinman wanted to get away and rest a while. I told him I wouldn't tell anybody where he'd gone. He's all right."

"I knew he was," she assured him. "It's no trouble to get up a sensation in Slow River!" But he observed that she was not really thinking about Slow River, or Steinman. The last part of her sentence had sort of trailed off, mechanically, as happens when the speaker's attention is diverted. Her attention appeared to have been diverted by the big safe in the corner.

She had, just then, looked around into the corner of the room where the safe stood and noticed—with a little start—that it was wide open. The safe, Robert Whiteside had said, probably contained a stolen camera, which he had sketched for her so that she could hardly fail to recognize it.

"What a big safe," she commented, guilefully, and walked toward it. A few steps took her where she could see the whole interior, which was divided into two compartments by a horizontal shelf, and she could see, indubitably, that it contained no such article as Whiteside had described. In fact, it contained nothing whatever.

"I keep this projecting machine in there," Krom informed her. "The lens is the real thing, but there's a new wrinkle or two in the projecting machine; just as well to keep it locked up. I've got our camera safe, too."

At any rate, Curlin's camera was certainly not there; and, since this safe was the only locked up thing in the room, it couldn't be anywhere in the room. That was a sort of triumph over Robert, to be sure. But she must go down and telephone Harwood, who was anxious for news.

"I'll tell him how wonderful the pictures are," she said. "But he must see them for himself."

"He'll be coming back soon?" Krom inquired.

"Probably Sunday morning," she replied; and shone at him: "The pictures are splendid! I'm proud of you!" With a backward smile she glided to the door and out of view.

With an odd commotion in his breast Krom sat down deliberately to think it over. She was a queen—and then some! She didn't think so badly of him after all; that was evident. She didn't think so badly of Adolph Krom. Well, maybe Adolph Krom wasn't such a bad

looker; and a girl like this Miss Malden probably wouldn't care much for the lap-dog, lady's-man sort.

He wondered how much of a crook Harwood was. Probably as big a crook as anybody; but it was important to know.

Meanwhile Elizabeth was telephoning Harwood that Krom was back; nothing had been stolen at Slow River; she had seen the pictures and they were wonderful! So Harwood pushed on with his ambitious plans.

There was a reason aside from business for Harwood's trip to New York. He left Chicago Wednesday afternoon and Mrs. Belknap arrived Thursday morning. The trip to New York would defer a meeting that was bound to be disagreeable.

Unless, indeed, the situation so amply explained itself to Mrs. Belknap that no face-to-face explanation would be necessary. That was what Harwood hoped. Certainly Letitia Belknap was no fool and no greenhorn. She must have noticed the altered character of his letters of late—when he got around to writing a letter, or mere note. Plenty of other people would be writing her the local gossip, which could hardly fail to hint at Nathaniel Harwood's evident interest in a Miss Malden. So Harwood hoped that Letitia would simply understand the situation; and he usually believed what he hoped.

Breaking faith with a woman was unpleasant, even when the woman was as ripely experienced as Letitia Belknap and as well buttressed against life's little disappointments by ten million dollars and an enviable social position. But Harwood waved that unpleasantness aside. His mind was hot with Bess' enthusiastic reports about the pictures. The negotiations in New York had opened most encouragingly. Above all, there was Bess, the witch, giving him back love and youth. Letitia Belknaps one could, more or less pick up at any time; but this Bess—at every thought of her he was penetrated by a conviction that such a miracle could never possibly happen over again to him. If he missed her he would be an old man on the down hill road thenceforward. He didn't intend to miss Letitia and whatever else was in the path must be swept aside.

He got home Sunday morning; dutifully kissed his sister; told her he'd had a successful trip; a big affair that he was engaged with was coming on capably. He knew better than to tell voluble Andy any secret that he didn't wish their friends to know before the week was out.

Presently she laughed and remarked, "Letitia's been over." The laugh seemed to say there was going to be a row—a prospect which amused Andy, whom Mrs. Belknap had never particularly cultivated.

Harwood still hoped the situation would explain itself. But he was called from the luncheon table to speak with Mrs. Belknap on the telephone. There was a polite greeting, a perfunctory inquiry about the comfort of the journey from New York; then the real message, cool and conclusive.

"Come over in half an hour, Nat. I want a talk with you."

Hanging up the receiver, Harwood reflected, rather dimly, that he might have known letting things explain themselves wouldn't be Letitia's way. Apparently, she meant to have it out with him. Disagreeable, but, after all, he might as well have it out once for all.

Half an hour later, therefore, he left his house—a handsome figure, with an air of alert, competent distinction—and walked briskly up the drive. The scene furnished a background to his thoughts. This house of his was a good one, yet a modest structure in comparison with its neighbors. And Josiah Cutter's money had built it; Nathaniel Harwood had merely inherited it, through a woman. He knew that some men said he had inherited everything—his partnership in the big law firm, his fortune, his house, and his social position—through a woman. That had always been irritating to his pride. He'd been unfortunate in those investments. His present situation in regard to money was galling—pinched, beggarly, hand-to-mouth, the law firm scarcely producing enough to meet his current expenses. But that was only a passing cloud over the sun. There were the pictures, and Bess.

He meant to plant himself here—not necessarily in this particular street, but in the rich, solid environment which this street connoted; plant himself on his own bottom, spaciouly and high. He would have a fine house, all his own, and all that went therewith, and the solid millions to back it—and a beautiful, bewitching young wife!

Such thoughts drifted rapidly in his mind as he walked up the drive. He came to a corner. Ahead, across the intersecting street, loomed a formidable pile of grim and rugged stone, with much plate glass. A woman had said that the architectural style of the building was "bespectacled Norman." At any rate, it represented the late Arthur Belknap's idea of a dwelling—an immovable, impervious mass.

Harwood paused at the door for an affable moment with the butler, and went on, alone, through the familiar rooms.

A woman of ample figure and some threads of gray in her hair as in his own was standing up to receive him. Letitia did not dye her hair or use rouge excessively. The matronly amplitude of her figure was well corrected by stays, except that no stay maker's art could conceal the generous swell of her breast. She must have been a handsome girl. He noted that she stood up to receive him, offering her hands, not her lips; but her face was composed. Pleasantly, or at any rate composedly, she asked him to sit down, and came at once to the point—coolly:

"What are you doing with this girl?"

There were endless opportunities for eluding the point; but he had come there to have it out with her. He took a desperate grip of his resolution, his handsome head turned a bit to one side, and replied with a childlike simplicity:

"I'm going to marry her, Letitia." It was even quite kindly said. Final ballots, printed on postcards.

Mrs. Belknap took a moment to digest that plump statement; her dark eyes, though holding steadily to his, were inscrutable. She replied in an even voice with a faint edge of banter in it:

"Even at that you needn't have treated me so much like a dog. A night telegram would have cost you only half a dollar, you know—or you might even have taken forty-eight hours to come down and tell me. Didn't that occur to you?"

He only smiled a little. For he perceived now how Letitia meant to flay him coolly, deliberately, dextrously, the even, light edged voice lifting a bit of crucible with every sentence.

"Of course, you know perfectly how one learns those things from one's friends," she went on. "So you must know what's been happening to me—everybody that came along tacking a placard on my back: 'Mrs. Belknap will now receive condolences upon having been ditched by Nathaniel Harwood.' I was always fair with you, and I must say this was a dirty trick to play on an old friend—pushing me over the wall to the lions that way, without notice. You might have sent me a wire: 'On second thought have decided to elope with a chorus girl.' Then I could have thrown a rag or two over me before I stepped out in the limelight, simpering."

Her shafts went home, for he knew well what wounds the light words covered in the breast of as proud a woman as ever lived. That they were as good as engaged had been an open secret to many of their friends. Socially at least she was a shining mark. Undoubtedly many little darts had flown at her, many a little claw had come out of a velvet paw to scratch her. He felt contrition. Somehow he ought to have managed it better in regard to Bess; not practically taking her into the family and advertising his attachment to her. Undoubtedly many sharp eyes had watched them.

He leaned toward her, looking her in the face, speaking earnestly, pleadingly: "You're perfectly right, Letitia. It was a dirty trick. I'm tremendously sorry—truly I am. You always were square with me and I never dreamed I'd be anything else with you. All I can say is I didn't do it. It happened itself. I saw her and went off my head about her—knocked into a cocked hat. It just happened."

Mrs. Belknap gave a well-bred but but rather bitter laugh, replying: "And you're the man I picked out exactly because he wouldn't go off his head! You came to me guaranteed—blown in the bottle. 'This man is dependable.' That's what I wanted—a reliable husband—comfortable, no temperamental rows, no foolishness. And here comes my guaranteed article to tell me he's cracked from top to bottom at the first jar! You can't wonder if I'm annoyed."

She contemplated him a moment with a derisive smile and shook her head. "It isn't in character, Nat. Conservatism is stamped all over you. You've jumped the fence after this butterfly now. I suppose you'll have to chase her a while. But you'll soon get sick of it—floundering around in the weeds and nettles. You'll be glad to come back."

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