The Room on the Roof

(Continued From Page Three.)

By Will Payne

the invention, you see; and I just set it down as a bit of impudent lying. He said that he quarreled with Steinman the last day Steinman was here. Krom had been drinking a great deal. He said he killed him and buried him in the cellar."

The lawyer tipped his handsome head a bit to one side, thoughtfully, an absent little smile on his lips.

"Odd, you know. If you have a preconceived theory you're apt to brush aside things that don't agree with it—simply disregard them. And Krom was an abandoned liar. Seems odd when I look back at it now; but I simply brushed it aside at the time—just laughed at it and paid no attention. But all this afternoon and evening it's been coming up—and now it seems much more probable. Krom might do anything when he was drunk—a drunkard, a row, a crack on the head with a bottle. It seems so much more probable to me now. In spite of what the police think, Krom may have committed suicide. When I heard that note about a trunk in the coal bin—it really gave me a start. Krom said, 'Buried him in the cellar.'" Harwood surveyed the trunk and thrust out his lower lip. "Steinman's body may be in that trunk."

She listened to him quite witlessly, in sheer amazement; and her staring eyes turned to the old trunk with a prickle of horror. Then she remembered how it felt when she had turned it over.

"Why, there's no body in that trunk, Nat!" she exclaimed, incredulously. "It's not heavy enough."

Harwood gave her an intimate sort of little nod and replied, "Part of a body!" He laid his free hand on her arm again. "You run upstairs, Bessie, till I see. If there's nothing I'll call you." The gentle pull of his hand was directing her toward the stairs.

She felt a sudden, bewildered helplessness. She was no match for him; it was useless to contend with him unless she descended to a knock down and drag out. "I will not! You shall not!" On any ground he would best her and have his way. And there was a little prickle of horror as she stared at the trunk. "You call me," she said helplessly, and obeyed the gentle pull of his arm toward the stairs. He gave her an affirmative little nod and led her to the foot of the stairs. She went up without looking back. What was the use? And again, up in the dark factory, her nerves thrilled. Could it be Steinman's body?

Faint sounds from the basement reached her—thumping, striking. He was breaking open the trunk. Then complete silence for a minute or more. He was not calling her. Had he found a body, then? The silence continued. Again there were sounds—a stir among the broken boards and empty crates down there. Silence for a moment. Then the basement door opened and Harwood called: "Bess!"

"Yes," she answreed from the dark, not far away, moving toward him.

"Come look at the mare's nest," he said, lightly.

She followed him downstairs. The trunk was broken open. A quantity of excelsior lay about it, with more of the same material inside the trunk, where, also, lay two cement building blocks. Pointing to them, Harwood laughed.

Bess also laughed, quite heartily—more loudly, in fact, than was necessary. "Is that all?" she cried gayly.

"That's all," said Harwood, smiling and nodding affirmatively at her. "One of Krom's tricks. Lord knows what he was up to! We may as well leave it as it is." He took out a handkerchief and wiped his hands, adding, "I'll turn out these lights."

She was still smiling. Any one who had seen her at the moment would have said that she was still enjoying the joke. Leaving him to turn out the lights, she went upstairs. But any one who had seen her in the dark factory would not have thought she was enjoying a joke. A spasm drew her face; her voice caught at the base of her throat in a sob; there was a salt smart of tears in her eyes. For she felt a sudden and great despair.

A minute or so before Sergeant Samuels came in she had made a little excursion through the belittered basement, turning on the electric lights as she went, her purpose being to find the iron bar that Whiteside had flung away. One electric light dangled under the head of the stairs. Turning it on, she happened to notice two cement building blocks, left over from the basement wall, lying in the dirt. A piece as big as her two fists had been broken from the corner of one of them. Those were the two blocks which Harwood had just shown her in the old trunk.

She was no match for him. If one lie didn't answer he would think up another. She never could trust him again or look up to him. Her role would be to help him out in his lies—as when she had laughed loudly at seeing the cement blocks in the trunk. And there was something poignantly pathetic about it—a sort of childlike ingenuousness about the lies, like a greedy little boy stealing the jam and telling some cock and bull story about it. Not tragic, but pathetic! She went on through the office, out of doors. The cool, vast dark, in which nothing was clearly distinguishable, seemed friendly to her.

But Nat was tarrying in the basement as minute after minute passed. She was sure he had taken something out of the trunk and was hiding it more securely now; perhaps burying it. But she had given up; she was no match for him. She could only help him hide his stolen jam!

Two great shafts of light flashed through the dark. Here was the car coming back. And here was Harwood, calling to her from the office door—handsome, pleasant, and so considerate! He waved her protests aside and superintended while the expert chauffeur arranged the cushions and robes in the body of the car so that she could lie down. They had a five-hour drive ahead; she must get some sleep if she could. In that little matter also she let him have his away—even let him brush aside her objections when he proposed to sit up in front with the chauffeur, so she could have the body of the car to herself. Fresh air would do him some good, he said, brightly; he couldn't sleep anyway, but she could, if left to herself. He saw that she was as comfortably disposed as possible, tucked a robe around her, patted her cheek. Who could be kinder than Nat?

"Clasped like a missal." That line came into her head as she lay curled on the soft cushion, her feet on a forward seat, robes piled under her knees, a robe over her, while the big machine rolled swiftly and smoothly through the night. A flash of lights now and then as they went through a town—or, even more, the unbroken flow of darkness past the windows—gave her an odd sense of power. Rushing through the dark in this costly cage, on, on—surely this was the magic carpet of the Arabian nights with modern improvements. It was exactly the magic wand over which her heart had fluttered—and the kingdoms of the earth.. . .

That story about Steinman's body. O, Nat! Nat! Just like a lying little boy who's stolen the jam!

The night was passing. Half past ten would bring the inquest—then a verdict. They had broken their parole; that would count against them; and already they were "in bad," as he had said. Finally, she had failed in her trust, too—that unworded pledge which her eyes had given in the basement. She hadn't been able to keep that, either. Whatever the trunk contained was lost to the suspects. Sad and strange, too, because of an unaccountable feeling that Robert Whiteside would understand it. In that subtle freemasonry of youth he would listen, his round, grayblue eyes soberly regarding her, and nod and say, "O, sure! I see just how it happened. Naturally, you couldn't have done anything else." He would be saying that to her long afterward, when she was Mrs. Nathaniel Harwood. Her eyes snapped wide open, with a cold thrill and a little moan, for she had just seen him saying that in convict's stripes. She put her fingers up to her lips. The night was passing—an inquest—a verdict. She dozed again.

A steady play of lights wakened her and she sat up. This must be Chicago, for only in the city would there be so many street lamps. Yes, it was Michigan boulevard—and here was the river. The car was rolling to the curb in front of the Deermoore hotel. Certainly she'd been a pig to keep Nat out there in front all the way from Slow River; he must be half frozen. She had the door open before the chauffeur could come around to it and was out on the sidewalk.

She went on to the office and opened the outer door. The cool, clean night air came to her cheeks and lungs, after that close, moldy smell of the basement—a tonic that helped to clear her mind. The story about Steinman now seemed grotesque. The police were sure Krom hadn't committed suicide or written that remarkable note. She went back into the dark factory, but the door at the head of the basement stairs was shut. Nat must have followed her up and closed the door behind her.

"Are you cold," she was asking Harwood, looking up at him from the walk. "I meant to get you inside, but I fell asleep."

"I'm tiptop," he assured her; "snoozed a little myself. It's only half-past 5. We'll both get some sleep before breakfast. Don't come to the office till 10; we'll go to the inquest together." Always considerate!

Upstairs she lay down without completely undressing—to think rather than to sleep. Yet, what was there to think about? Only a cage to run round and round in, it seemed. But, after all, here was a door to her cage—a door that brought her up with a great shock and set her blood singing in her ears, as though that suddenly discovered aperture led straight into a lion's den.

She knew that Nat had Krom's black bag. Suppose, now, it all went against the suspects at the inquest? Suppose the verdict bound them over to answer for murder? Should she then declare that Nat had the black bag—tell where it was concealed?

As she sat up, the blood singing in her ears, it seemed quite marvelous that she hadn't really thought of so obvious a dilemma before. Some way—she could hardly explain it now—she had taken it for granted that she was not to tell what she had seen when she stepped into her cabinet. Some way she had taken it for granted that her testimony about Whiteside's going up in the elevator only a minute before her would be sufficient. Some way she had felt it was impossible that Nat had really shot Krom. There had been such a rush of things since the murder. This dilemma had never really looked her straight in the face until now. What must she do about it?

Certainly that black bag was an important piece of evidence, telling heavily in favor of the suspects. She bathed her hands and face again, and went over by the window, rolling up the shade to let in the dawn. Here, vitally and imperatively, was something to think about!

She should go to Nat; tell him she knew about the black bag; show him that he must confess it, if that seemed necessary to save Curlin and Whiteside. It came to her that Nat would think up some expedient to meet the situation—saving the suspects, yet not giving himself away too much. But there was the tragedy again—as though Nat were a cloud, a shadow that one could not lay hands upon and compel to this course or that. She was no match for him. Finally he'd fool her even about that bag if he wished to. It occurred to her that perhaps the bag which she had seen in the bottom drawer of his desk was already disposed of. She could fairly see him smiling as he opened the drawer to show her that it contained no such article, and explaining to her that what she had seen was some other bag, which he would produce from the coat closet and exhibit. That magic wand of his was a peculiar instrument.

Of course, she could go to Capt. West and tell him. Then she thought of going to the office early and seeing whether or not the bag was still there. Theoretically she could do either of those things, but actually—someway—she could do neither. Nat was still her man; there was an inhibition which she could not break. Impossible to deliver such an attack upon him. Finally, she could only wait for the inquest. Then, if the verdict went against the suspects—then—then—she had to leave it at that.

Day was coming on. Presently she felt a sad resignation, as though she were bound hand and foot. And a sort of trust, a sort of faith for which there was no reason. She pulled down the window shade; went over and lay on the bed again, lax, resigned to wait. In time she dozed again.

She was in no hurry over bathing and dressing. It was 8:40 when she went down to breakfast; but she was in no hurry over that. Until the inquest, she had simply given up. She didn't even wish to think any more. She was loitering in the small and cozy lobby, when the brass buttoned boy told her there was a telephone call. She was thinking of Nat when she stepped into the booth and took up the receiver; but it was a strange, masculine voice:

"Miss Malden? Capt. West wishes to see you. Can you be at his office in half an hour?"

Looking at the clock as she came out of the booth, she saw that half an hour would be 9:40. She decided to walk, and went upstairs for her hat and coat, alert now and moving quickly, for she had something definite to do. And what could Capt. West want? Moving quickly, she left the hotel and started down the steps that led from entrance to sidewalk—and caught her breath, her cheeks coloring.

For there was Robert Whiteside, his arm in a sling, coming across the street. Certainly he'd been waiting on the opposite side. She thought, "He's going to ask about the trunk." That thought brought the color to her cheeks. She waited at the foot of the steps. He smiled and spoke cheerfully, but like one in haste.

"I'm on parole again. I had a few minutes, and I thought—possibly—I might catch you here. May I walk with you?" Apparently he had spent his precious few minutes standing in front of the hotel, hoping to see her.

"Yes," she said. "They let you go again?" She wanted to talk about anything rather than trunks.

Falling in step beside her, he lowered and softened his voice: "You see, my uncle had a breakdown—a stroke. It happened on the train coming in. They took him to a hospital. Of course, I'd tried to explain how the parole came to be broken—he really irresponsible, and I following him. They chucked me in a cell. Then, about half an hour ago, they let me out—saying I could go on parole till 10 o'clock. I don't know why. Of course, I hope something favorable has turned up. They didn't say why, but simply that I could go until 10 o'clock. I telephoned the hospital; but there seemed nothing I could do there, so I came up on the chance of getting a word with you."

That was all for the moment, as he walked along beside her, his arm in a sling. But she hadn't a doubt that he wanted to ask her about the trunk.

"I see," she murmured. "I'm sorry about your uncle." But certainly it wasn't sympathy for his uncle that he had come up there for.

They stepped along in silence for a moment. "It may go hard with him—physically," he said, his eyes on the sidewalk. "But, after all, I feel a satisfaction. That may sound odd to you." He glanced around at her. "My uncle was afflicted with an awful temper. Sometimes, lately, I'm sure he was irresponsible. There was something sad about it, for he was kind and just, too. He took my mother and me in when we were helpless—always kind to us, in his way. My mother is an affectionate woman. Her affection went to him, you see.

"When I came back here last spring and saw the state he was in, about this infernal invention I thought the big thing was to keep him from getting himself into some awful mess. An old man, you see—it would have been miserable if he had wound up in some awful mess. My mother had a kind of terror of it. So I'll always be mighty grateful that I went up to the roof room with him yesterday. Except for that, you know—his mind being so unbalanced—I couldn't have been sure myself just what had happened up there. In a fit, I mean, he might have shot. I know he didn't shoot now, for I was with him. So, if he should go out—from this stroke—I'm awfully grateful that I was with him and know he didn't shoot—go out with clean hands, you understand. I'm sure there's nothing in the world—unless it might be something connected with me—that my mother would prize above knowing that. And so, as I said, there's a satisfaction—although it may sound odd to you."

She gently bit a corner of her lip and, after a moment, murmured, "No, it doesn't sound odd to me. It's a fine gift you can make your mother." Then, for a minute, they tramped on in silence.

(Copyright, 1922.)

(To Be Continued.)

The Bottom of the Barrel

(Continued From Page Two.)

By Richard Washburn Child

the festooned vines and filled the porch with rich fragrance.

"There is something revolting in the idea," Edith said.

Mary said nothing.

Miss Barston began, in a timid, halting, frightened voice, "He might make love to you."

"It is possible. But it is a pretty, fine instinct—love. There is no reason why you should feel revulsion—unless, of course, he has promised fidelity to you—as he did to me—that is to say, told you he would refrain from kissing his wife."

Edith leaped up. Her lean fists were clenched.

"Shall we install a dictaphonic instrument?" asked Mary savagely.

The other hesitated, and then, as if she had thought of it herself, she said, "I suspect that Billy, in spite of his good looks and his charm and his high purposes, may be a little—a little contentious."

"He is even profane," said Mary. "He is always sorry afterward. The truth is that he is very human."

"I cannot bear unrestraint!" the other young woman asserted. "I think self-control is everything!"

"Yes? I am not so sure but I wish you could listen to—" She stopped. "O, well, I sometimes laugh myself."

"Yet, if he is like that, how can you—"

"Love him?" asked Mary. "I'll tell you. It is partly the illusion that I do. To me, it is the dearest illusion in the world. As people go, we have made a useful team. And, in the main, when brought down to earth Billy is a loveable, loyal player of the game. Together we have a host of memories, mostly of victories—not all, but mostly. And our intentions toward living are better together than our intentions separately. Love, I think, is not a spirit; love is a long, hard pull. It means, for instance, that this moment I must admit that you are neither bad at heart nor far different from the rest of us."

"Mary Elbridge," said Edith, with tears welling up, "I never knew you—"

"Well, you don't know me yet," said the other. "I'd like to pull your damned hair out by the roots."

Miss Barston gave a frightened look and ran down the steps. The sun was shining very bright at high noon, and the daisies in the breeze nodded their bright faces to the sun.

Mary heard the screen door, and came out of her room irritated, because behind her the papers on her desk, finding themselves free, were blowing skitterwise into all corners.

When she saw that Edith Barston had come back after three days, she said hello, and sat down on the top step of the landing.

"Well," said Edith, breathing fast, and a little adamantine in her manner, "I came over to say goodby."

"Goodby?"

"Yes. Aunty and I are going to Europe."

"Billy didn't tell me," said Mary.

"He couldn't. I haven't seen him to tell him. It was a recent decision."

"Well, I'm sorry—sorry you're going," Mary Said. "Perhaps you'll write us?"

Edith leaned her folded arms against the natural wood newel post, knocked off a little red tin pail, which jangled around on the floor, and when it was quiet she said, "Did you tell Billy about our talk?"

"No," said Mary, "What was the use."

Edith persisted, "Did you suggest that I might have a bottom to my barrel?"

"Yes, I mentioned the distophonic experiment to Billy. Of course in your case it wasn't practical. I mean there'd be no way to put one in unless you knew it."

"I wish I knew what you suggested might be disclosed of me to Billy."

"O, well, I'll tell you that, too. He was fascinated by your idea of releasing him from dominating influences—you know, hampering personalities—yourself to play the part of sunlight and fresh air to make Billy grow as he listeth. I assume you told him that every being had the right to be free, not to be bullied. That was it. And then I thought Billy might be interested to know how you practiced that philosophy on your aunt. I suppose he'd never remembered your aunt—she is so thoroughly wiped out."

Edith coughed. "You are wholly unjust," she said.

"You are not leaving on our account?" asked Mary, as if suddenly filled with polite alarm. "Because Billy is leaving. He says we must all go, too. He says he thinks the mountains will be nicer. He says he thinks he can begin his summer's work in the mountains. He went away yesterday to pick out a place for us."

The other woman went toward the screen door wearily.

"Goodby."

"Goodby."

Mary returned to her work. It appeared to her suddenly unworthy and trivial, built on nothing. What difference did it make? All pride in it had leaked away. It had lost association with Billy and the children. Blast him! It was his selfishness and jack-assery that was to blame; his desire to always take the top of the barrel and leave the bottom. How could anything be the same again? Clean again? With

(Continued on Page Eight)