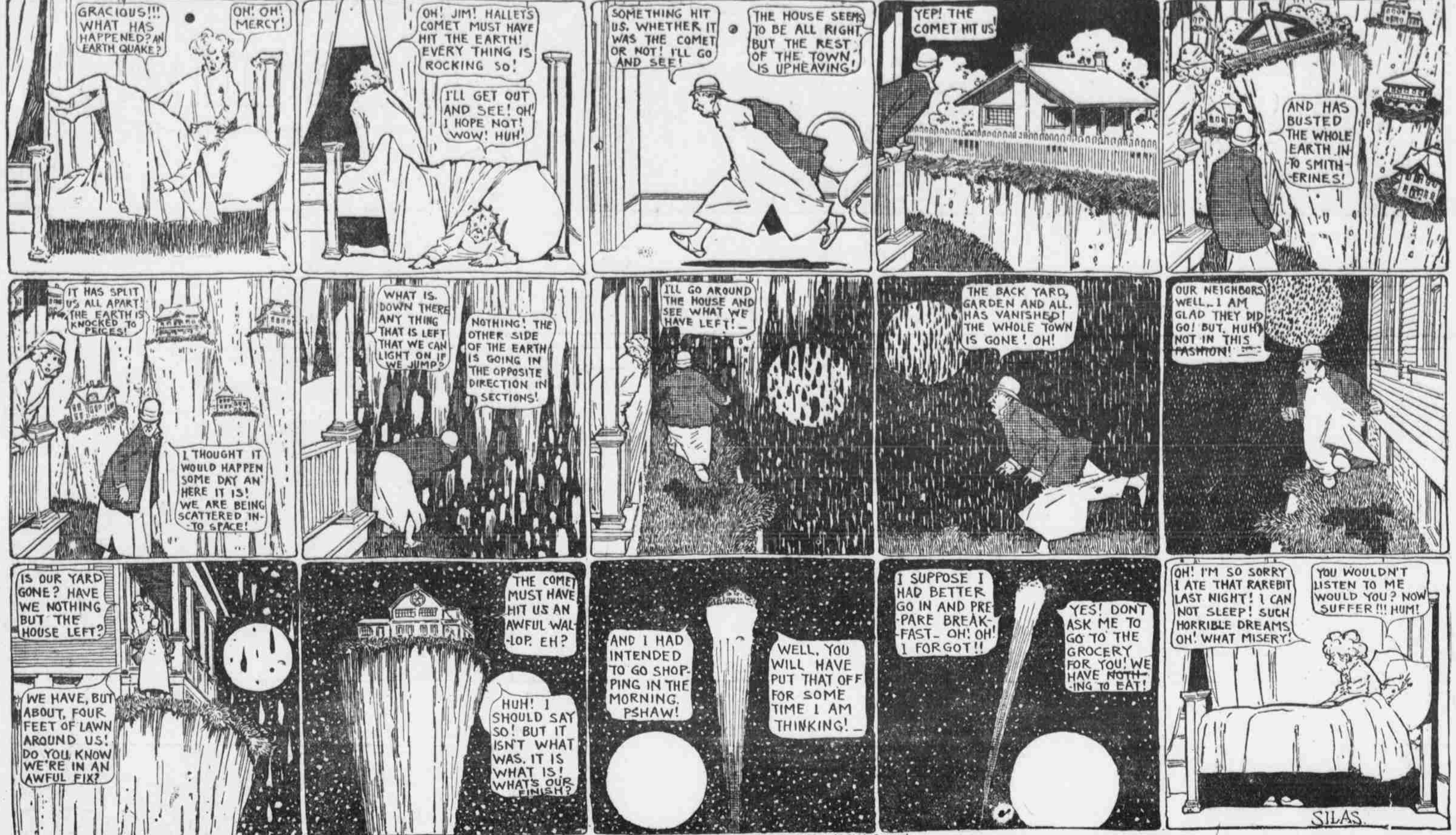


# DREAM OF THE RABBIT FIEND



Copyright, 1910, by the New York Evening Telegram (New York Herald Co.). All Rights Reserved.

## THE MAN IN THE LOWER TOWER

The Great Mystery Story TO TEN

by MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

Author of "The Circular Staircase"

(Copyright, 1910, by Bobbe-Merrill Co.) CHAPTER XXVI—Continued.

He roused at that to feeble interest. "I—oh, of course not, if you still care to have me. I—I was wondering about—the man who just went out, Stuart, you say? I—told his landlady tonight that he wouldn't need the room again. I hope she hasn't rented it to somebody else."

"We cheered him as best we could, and I suggested that we go to Baltimore the next day and try to find the real Sullivan through his wife. He left some time after midnight, and Richey and I were alone. He drew a chair near the lamp and lighted a cigarette, and for a time we were silent. I was in the shadow, and I sat back and watched him. It was not, really, I thought, that she cared for him; women had always loved him, perhaps because he always loved them. There was no disloyalty in the thought; it was the lad's nature to give and crave affection. Only I was different. I had never really cared about a girl before, and my life had been singularly loveless. I had fought a lonely battle always. Once before, in college, we had both laid ourselves and our callow devotions at the feet of the same girl. Her name was Dorothy—I had forgotten the rest—but I remembered the sequel. In a spirit of quibbling youth I had relinquished my claim in favor of Richey and had gone cheerfully on my way, elevated by my heroic self-sacrifice to a somber, white-hot martyrdom. As is often the case, McKnight's first words showed our parallel lines of thought.

"I say, Lollie," he asked, "do you remember Dorothy Browne?" Browne, that was it.

"Dorothy Browne?" I repeated. "Oh—why yes, I recall her now. Why?"

"Nothing," he said. "I was thinking about her. That's all. You remember you were crazy about her, and dropped back because she preferred me?"

"I got out," I said with dignity, "because you declared you would shoot yourself if she didn't go with you to something or other."

"Oh, why yes, I recall now," he murmured. He tossed his cigarette in the general direction of the hearth and got up. We were both a little conscious, and he stood with his back to me, fingering a book on the mantel.

"I was thinking," he began, turning the vase around, "that, if you feel pretty well again, and—ready to take hold, that I should like to go away for a week or so. Things are fairly well cleaned up at the office."

"Do you mean—you are going to Richmond?" I asked, after a scarcely perceptible pause. He turned and faced me with his hands thrust in his pockets.

"No. That's off. Lollie. The Selberts are going for a week's cruise along the coast. I—the hot weather has played havoc with the bridge."

"I had a cigarette and offered him the box, but he refused. He was looking hag-

gard and suddenly tired. I could not think of anything to say, and neither could he, evidently. The matter between us lay too deep for speech.

"How's Candida?" he asked.

"Martin says a month, and she will be all right," I returned, in the same tone he picked up his hat, but he had something more to say. He blurted out, finally, half that blue-eyed and dark brown hair, hair that could—had I not seen it—hang loose in bewitching tangles or be twisted into little coils of delight.

"The Selberts are not going for a couple of days," he said, "and if you want a day or so off to go down to Richmond yourself—"

"Perhaps I shall," I returned, as indifferently as I could. "Not going yet, are you?"

"Yes. It is late." He drew in his breath as if he had something more to say, but the impulse passed. "Well, good night," he said, from the doorway.

"Good night, old man."

The next moment the outer door slammed and I heard the engine of the Cannonball throbbing in the street. Then the quiet settled down around me again, and there in the lamplight I dreamed dreams. I was suddenly the idea of being shut away, even temporarily, from so great and wonderful a world became intolerable. The possibility of arrest before I could get to Richmond was hideous, the night without end.

I made my escape the next morning through the stable back of the house, and then, by devious dark and winding ways, to the office. There, after a conference with Blobs, whose features fairly jerked with excitement, I double locked the door of my private office and finished off some imperative work. By 10 o'clock I was free, and for the twentieth time I consulted my train schedule. At five minutes after 10 with McKnight not yet in sight, Blobs knocked at the door, the double rap we had agreed upon, and on being admitted slipped in and quietly closed the door behind him. His eyes were glistening with excitement, and a purple dab of typewriter ink gave him a peculiarly villainous and stealthy expression.

"They're here," he said, "two of 'em, and that crazy Stuart wasn't on, and you were somewhere in the building."

A door slammed outside, followed by steps on the uncarpeted outer office.

"This way," said Blobs, in a husky undertone, and darting into a lavatory, threw open a door that I had always supposed locked. Thence into a back hall piled high with boxes and past the presses of a book bindery to the freight elevator.

Greatly to Blobs' disappointment, there was no pursuit. I was exhilarated but out of breath when we emerged into an alleyway, and the sharp daylight shone on Blobs' excited face.

"Great sport, isn't it?" I panted, dropping a dollar into his palm, inked to correspond with his face. "Regular walk-away in the hundred-yard dash."

"Gimme 10 more and I'll drop 'em down the elevator shaft," he suggested fervently. I left him there with his blood-thirsty schemes, and started for the sta-

tion. I had a tendency to look behind me now and then, but I reached the station unnoticed. The afternoon was hot, the train rolled slowly along, stopping to pant at sweltering stations, from whose roofs the heat rose in waves. But I noticed these things objectively, not subjectively, for at the end of the journey was a girl with blue eyes and dark brown hair, hair that could—had I not seen it—hang loose in bewitching tangles or be twisted into little coils of delight.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SEA, THE SAND, THE STARS.

I telephoned as soon as I reached my hotel, and I had not known how much I had hoped from seeing her until I learned that she was out of town. I hung up the receiver almost dizzy with disappointment, and it was fully five minutes before I thought of calling up again and asking if she was within telephone reach. It seemed she was down on the bay staying with the Samuel Forbeses.

Sanny Forbes! It was a name to conjure with just then. In the old days at college I had rather flouted him, but now I was ready to take him to my heart. I remembered that he had always meant well, anyhow, and that he was explosively generous. I called him up.

"By the fumes of gasoline," he said, when I told him who I was. "Blakeley, the Fount of Wisdom against Woe! Blakeley, the Great Unkissed! Welcome to our city!"

Whereupon he proceeded to urge me to come down into the Shack, and to say that I was an agreeable surprise, because four times in two hours youths had called up to ask if Alison West was stopping with him, and to suggest they had a vacant day or two.

"Oh—Miss West!" I shouted politely. There was a buzzing on the line. "Is she there?"

Sam had no suspicions. Was not I in his mind always the Great Unkissed—which sounds like the Great Unwashed and is even more of a reproach. He asked me down promptly, as I had hoped, and thrust aside my objections.

"Bring yourself. The lady that keeps my boarding house is calling to me to insist. You remember Dorothy, don't you, Dorothy Browne? She says unless you have lost your figure you can wear my clothes all right. All you need here is a bathing suit for daytime and a dinner coat for evening."

"It sounds cool," I temporized. "If you are sure I won't put you out—very well, Sam, since you and your wife are good enough to have a couple of days free, give my love to Dorothy until I can do it myself."

Sam met me himself and drove me out to the Shack, which proved to be a substantial house overlooking the water. On the way he confided to me that lots of married men thought they were contented when they were merely resigned, but that it was the only life, and that Sam, Jr., could swim like a duck. Incidentally, he said that Alison was his wife's cousin,

man—and saying she was disappointed not to have had Alison there, that she had promised them a two weeks' visit! What do you make of that? And that isn't the worst. Allie herself wasn't in the room, but there were eight other women, and because Dolly had put her hands in her eyes the night before to see how she would look, and as a result couldn't see anything nearer than across the room, some one read the letter aloud to her, and the whole story is out. One of the cats told Granger and the boy proposed to Allie today, to show her that he didn't care a tinker's dam where she had been."

"Good boy!" I said, with enthusiasm. "Did the Granger fellow—since he was out of the running. But Sam was looking at me with suspicion."

"Blake," he said, "if I didn't know you for what you are, I'd say you were interested there yourself."

Being so near her, under the same roof, with even the tie of a dubious secret between us, was making me heady. I pushed Forbes toward the door.

"I interested!" I retorted, holding him by the shoulders. "There isn't a word in your vocabulary to fit my condition. I am an island in a sunlit sea of emotion, Sam, an empty place surrounded by longings—"

"An empty place surrounded by longings!" he retorted. "You want your dinner, that's what's the matter with you—"

I shut the door on him then. He seemed suddenly sordid. Dinner, I thought! Although, as a matter of fact, I made a very fair meal when Granger's suit case failed, not having gone, in his boat and some other man's trousers, I was finally fit for the amenities. Alison did not come down to dinner, so it was clear she would not go over to the club house dance. I pled my injured arm, and a fictitious, vaguely located sprain from the wreck, as an excuse for remaining at home. Sam regaled the table with accounts of my distrust of women, my one love affair—with Dorothy; to which I responded, as was expected, that only my failure there had kept me single all these years, and that if Sam should be mysteriously missing during the bathing hour tomorrow, and so on, and when the endless meal was over, and yards of white veils had been tied over pounds of hair—or is it, too, thought by the yard?—and some eight ensembles with my brief compliments had been packed into three automobiles and a trap, I drew a long breath and faced about. I had just then only one object in life—to find Alison, to assure her of my absolute faith and confidence in her, and to offer my help and my poor self, if she would let me, in her service.

She was not easy to find. I searched the lower floor, the verandas and the grounds, circumspectly. Then I ran into a little English girl who turned out to be her maid, and who also was searching. She was concerned because her mistress had had no dinner, and because the tray of food she carried would soon be cold. I took the tray from her, on the glimpse of something white on the shore, and that was how I met the girl again.

She was sitting on an overturned boat, her chin in her hands, staring out to sea. The soft tids of the bay lapped almost at her feet, and the draperies of her white gown rustled lazily into the sands. She looked like a wraith, a dependent phantom of the sea, although the adjective is redundant. Nobody ever thinks of a cheerful phantom. Strangely enough, considering her evident sadness, she was whistling softly to herself, over and over, some dreary little minor air that sounded like a Bohemian dirge. She glanced up quickly when I made a mistake and my dishes tingled. All considered, the tray was out of the picture; the sea, the misty straight of the girl, and her beauty—even the sad little whistle that stopped now and then to go bravely on again, as though it fought against the odds of a trembling lip. And then I came, accompanied by a tray of little silver dishes that tingled and an unmistakable odor of broiled chicken!

"Oh!" she said quickly; and then, "Oh! I thought you were Jenkins."

"Timco Danos—what's the rest of it?"

I asked, tendering my offering. "You didn't have any dinner, you know." I sat down beside her. "See, I'll be the table. What was the old fairy tale? 'Little goat, bleat: little goat appear!' I'm perfectly willing to be the goat, too."

She was laughing rather tremulously, cause about the other fellow's clothes."

"We never do meet like other people, do we?" she asked. "We really ought to shake hands and say how are you?"

"I don't want to meet you like other people, and I suppose you always think of me as wearing the other fellow's clothes."

I returned meekly. "I'm doing it again; I don't seem to be able to help it. These are Granger's that I have on now."

She threw back her head and laughed again, joyously, this time.

"Oh, it's so ridiculous," she said, "and you have never seen me when I was not eating! It's too prosaic!"

"Which reminds me that the chicken is getting cold, and the ice warm," I suggested. "At the time, I thought there could be no place better than the farm house kitchen—but this is. I ordered all this for something I want to say to you—the sea, the sand, the stars."

"How alliterative you are!" she said, trying to be flippant. "You are not to say anything until I have had my supper. Look how the things are spilled around!"

But she ate nothing, after all, and pretty soon I put the tray down in the sand. I said little; there was no hurry. We were together, and time meant nothing against the age-long wash of the sea. The air blew her hair in small damp curls against her face, and little by little the tide retreated, leaving our boat an oasis in a waste of gray sand.

"If seven maids with seven mops sweep it for half a year,"

Do you suppose," she murmured, that they threw at me once when she must have known I was going to speak. I held her hand, and as long as I merely held it she let it lie warm in mine. But when I raised it to my lips, and kissed the soft, open palm, she drew it away without displeasure.

"Not that, please," she protested, and fell to whistling softly again, her chin in her hands. "I can't sing," she said, to break an awkward pause, "and so, when I'm fidgety, or have something on my mind, I whistle. I hope you don't dislike it?"

"I love it," I asserted warmly. I did; when she pursed her lips like that I was mad to kiss them.

"I saw you—at the station," she said suddenly. "You—you were in a hurry to go. I did not say anything, and after a pause she drew a long breath. "Men are queer, aren't they?" she said, and fell to whistling again.

After a while she sat up as if she had made a resolution. "I am going to confess something," she announced suddenly. "You said, you know, that you had ordered all this for something—you wanted to say 'The sea, the sand, the stars.'"

She came here, I mean, because—I knew you would come, and I had something to tell you. It was such a miserable thing I had to do, and I was so ashamed of myself, I didn't want to hear anything that distresses you to tell," I assured her. "I didn't come here to force your confidence, Alison. I came because I couldn't help it. She did not object to the use of her name. "Have you found the—your papers?" she asked, looking directly at me for almost the first time.

"Not yet. We hope to."

"The police have not interfered with you?"

"They haven't had any opportunity," I equivocated. "You needn't distress yourself about that, anyhow."

"But I do. I wonder why you still believe in me? Nobody else does."

"I wonder," I repeated, "why I do!"

"If you produce Harry Sullivan," she was saying, partly to herself, "and if you could consent him with—Mr. Bronson, and Virginia Hot Springs. And we met them there, the brother, too, this time. His name was Sullivan, Harry Pinckney Sullivan."

"I know. Go on."

(To Be Continued.)

slon. I was stricken with the old cowardice. I did not want to know what she might tell me. The yellow line on the horizon, where the moon was coming up, was a broken bit of golden chain; my heel in the sand was again pressed on a woman's yielding fingers; I pulled myself together with a jerk.

"In order that what you tell me may help me, if it will," I said constrainedly, "it would be necessary, perhaps, that you tell it to the police. Since they have found the end of the necklace—"

"The end of the necklace?" she repeated slowly. "What about the end of the necklace?"

I stared at her. "Don't you remember—I leaned forward—the end of the cameo necklace, the part that was broken off, and was found in the black seatkin bag, stained with—with blood?"

"Blood," she said loudly. "You mean that you found the broken end? And then—you had my gold pocketbook, and you saw the necklace in it, and you—must have thought—"

"I didn't think anything," I hastened to assure her. "I tell you, Alison, I never thought of anything but that you were unhappy, and that I had no right to help you. God knows, I thought you didn't want me to help you."

She held out her hand to me and I took it between both of mine. No word of love had passed between us, but I felt that she knew and understood. It was one of the moments that come seldom in a lifetime, and then only in great crises, a moment of perfect understanding and trust.

Then she drew her hand away, and sat, erect and determined, her fingers laced in her lap. As she talked the moon came up slowly and threw its bright pathway across the water. Back of us, in the trees beyond the sea wall, a sleepy bird chirruped drowsily, and a wave, larger and bolder than its brothers, sped up the sand, bringing the moon's silver to our very feet. I bent toward the girl.

"I am going to ask just one question."

"Anything you like." Her voice was almost dreamy.

"Was it—because of anything you are going to tell me that you refused Richey?" She drew in her breath sharply.

"No," she said, without looking at me. "No. That was not the reason."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ALISON'S STORY.

She told her story evenly, with her eyes on the water, only now and then, when I sat, sat looking seaward, I thought she glanced at me furtively. And once, in the middle of it, she stopped altogether.

"You don't realize it, probably," she protested, "but you look like a—a war god. Your face is horrible!"

"I will turn my back, if it will help any," I said sternly, "but, if you expect me to look anything but murderous, why, you said, you know, that you had ordered all this for something—you wanted to say 'The sea, the sand, the stars.'"

The story of her meeting with the Curtis woman was brief enough. They had met in Rome first, where Alison and her mother had taken a villa for a year. Mrs. Curtis had hovered on the ragged edges of society there, pleading the poverty of the south since the war as a reason for not going out more. There was talk of a brother, but Alison had not seen him, and after a scandal which implicated Mrs. Curtis and a young attaché of the Austrian embassy, Alison had been forbidden to see the woman.

"The women had never liked her, anyhow," she said. "She did unconventional things, and they were very conventional there. And they said she did not always say her—her gambling debts. I didn't like them. I thought they didn't like her because she was poor—and popular. Then—she came home, and I almost forgot her, but last spring, when mother was not well—she had taken grandfather to the Riviera, and it always uses her up—we went to the Hot Springs. And we met them there, the brother, too, this time. His name was Sullivan, Harry Pinckney Sullivan."

"I know. Go on."

(To Be Continued.)