

The SPERRING CHANCE

By George Barr McCutcheon

Things Were Bound to Change For the Better Because They Couldn't Get Any Worse.

MR. CRUMLEY had been married just one week, and he was looking down into the dark waters of the river that slid quietly under the bridge on which he was standing. He had crossed that bridge a thousand times, by day and by night; he had stopped a hundred times to lean upon the iron rail and had gazed into the depths of the river as he gazed down upon the river 40 feet below—a gliding, unchecked current working its inevitable way to the ocean, never, never to come back again to the land of its birth.

But never before had he thought of jumping off the bridge.

Perhaps one of the reasons why he never had thought of it before was that he couldn't swim a stroke, and, as the center of the middle span of the long steel structure was some three hundred feet from the nearest bank and the water 10 or 12 feet deep, it was something he couldn't think about. Now he was thinking about it.

He was arguing with himself that it would not be quite so terrifying to do it at night, especially on a night like this, when there was no moon and the sky was without a single star. To do it in broad daylight, when it was possible to calculate not only the distance one would have to fall but with considerable accuracy the exact spot where one would disappear, was unpleasantly dreadful. In turning the matter over in his mind another objection to doing it in the daytime presented itself, this, namely, that it would be witnessed by a number of people, some of whom undoubtedly would yell out just as he was about to spring from the railing—"Hey! You damn fool!" or "Grab him, the crazy fool!"

And somehow it seemed frightfully undignified to go down to death with people looking on and calling you a damn fool.

By doing it at night one could be reasonably certain of avoiding anything so unpleasant as that—besides if no one saw him do it, his wife—or, more strictly speaking, his widow—might go on for months wondering what had become of him, and there was a whole lot of satisfaction to be got out of that.

He found himself rather grimly enjoying the hope that his body might not be recovered for months, and then in such a state that identification would be impossible (he recalled that he had no gold fillings in his teeth, no moles or birthmarks, and no tattooed ballet-dancer on his forearm), in which case Mrs. Crumley would be cheated out of the pleasure of being pitted by all the rest of the boarders at Mrs. Smith's, to say nothing of the rather enviable prospect to be derived from the headlines and conjectures of the two local newspapers. Something told him she would enjoy the greatness thus thrust upon her, and in his present frame of mind he couldn't see himself voluntarily thrusting anything upon her but misery.

He tenderly caressed the painful and substantial lump behind his left ear and gritted his teeth determinedly. An hour earlier that lump was not there. Moreover, it was considerably larger now that it was when he felt it 10 minutes ago. He removed his fingers hastily. There was something positively awesome in the thought that if he kept them on the protuberance he might actually feel it grow.

If this could happen to him after one short week of married life, what—O what was in store for him at the end of a year? If he could do this with a whisk broom, what was he likely to do with a full-sized broom handle, or a bedstead, or, if such a thing happened to be handy, a base ball bat?

Mr. Crumley hadn't really wanted to get married. He was 33 and a little over, and so far as he knew, no one had ever wanted to marry him before. Up to a week ago he had been a happy, contented bachelor without a care in the world. Circumstances which he had no control over made a married man of him so suddenly, so abruptly, that he didn't quite realize what had happened until his abominable stepchildren began to call him papa and ask him for money to go to the movies with.

In view of the possibility that it may be difficult to identify him to any degree of certainty later on, it is only fair to establish his identity while he is still with us. He is a smallish man with eyeglasses, a blue serge suit, russet shoes, gray socks, and a flowing black bow tie. He is quite bald. He has the face and figure of a student—and the complexion and complexion of a student. He has been the instructor in mathematics in the public schools of the town he is about to leave. He is a Baptist, sings tenor in the church choir, surreptitiously votes the republican ticket, has something like \$3,000 in the savings bank, and is a perennial judge of hemstitching and embroidery exhibited at the county fair.

Altogether he is—of more strictly speaking, was—a man of consequence.

His Christian name was William. As a school-boy in his native town he was called Willie. As a matter of fact, he was the sort of William you would never dream of calling Bill. It remains to be said that he went through the grade schools, the high school, and four full years at a freshwater college without once sustaining a blow of my description. It was not until after he had been married almost a week—in fact, it lacked just two hours of being a week—that he experienced the sensation of being roughly thumped—and then by a woman smaller than himself and at least 10 years older.

In all fairness to Mr. Crumley it must be stated that he had not known she was older than himself. He could see that she was smaller, but he had absolutely no means of seeing that she was older. He worked it out mathematically after hearing the sensation of being roughly thumped—and then by a woman smaller than himself and at least 10 years older.

"How old were you, darling, when you were married?" he asked her, shortly after hearing about the manure.

"I told you I was 26," she replied sharply. "How many times have I got to tell you?"

"I mean the first time you were married."

"Oh! Well, I was 21—My Lord, I wish you could have seen my first husband. He was a man, he was. If you could have seen what sort of a man my husband was you'd curl up and die of mortification, that's what you'd do. He was the handsomest fellow in—"

"I know. I understand that perfectly. They always are."

"What do you mean by that? Something nasty, eh? Well, let me give you a bit of advice, professor—don't you cast any aspersions on my husband. He—"

"Am I not your husband, dear?"

"You're my second husband, that's what you are. My God, you don't think I'd ever have picked you for my first, do you? Why, when I stop to think what my husband would be if he knew that I'd married a schoolma'am, I get the cold shivers all over me. You—wait a second! Where are you going? Can't you see I'm talking to you? Here we've been married four days and you have the face to turn your back on me—the nerve to try to walk out on me—while I'm speaking to you. Come back here! Now, you listen to what I've got to say!"

Mr. Crumley took counsel with himself and forbore asking any questions regarding the 24-year-old manure. Something seemed to tell him that it wasn't any of his business. But 22—(he allowed her a year's grace)—and 26 make 45, any way you go about it.

Now, for six years Mr. Crumley had been the star boarder at Mrs. Smith's washtooker upon a saturday. He paid his board promptly, never complained about the food or service, and

represented society in its smartest aspect—for while he was not what might be classed an ornament to the strictest sense of the term, he was, when all is said, a necessity. A shocking paucity of unattached young men, or even middle-aged ones, exists in virtually all towns the size of Whippley.

Mr. Crumley, being a peculiarly irreproachable bachelor, played—quite unconscious—a dual role in society; he was, generally speaking, both a "desirable" and an "undesirable." Evidently was not precisely what society in Whippley wanted, but it was bound to be several men short unless it took in a few of the Mr. Crumleys.

Force of circumstance, it will be seen, made Mr. Crumley a society man, and as such he was quite a personage at Mrs. Smith's select boarding house. For five or six years he had looked upon as a social oracle—a fashion barometer, so to speak. He was the only one of Mrs. Smith's boarders who went "out in society." He rather enjoyed the distinction. He rather liked coming down to dinner in his tuxedo, because everyone knew on the instant that he was going out to "something or other"—and while he was conscious that three or four gentlemen in fill-repined business suits looked at him with disdain, he was also very happily aware of the fact that his wealthy wife gazed at him with admiration in his place. He rather liked stifling a yawn when some one asked him at breakfast what sort of an affair Mrs. So-and-So's party was the night before, and he liked to shrug his shoulders nonchalantly when some one of the men invariably remarked that "didn't see how the dickens he could be fit for a day's work after being up till all hours of the night, like this."

And now that peaceful, pleasant feeling of superiority was gone—gone forever. He was married. Society wouldn't even dream of taking the wife of his bosom to its bosom, and no longer did the boarders at Mrs. Smith's envy him. On the contrary, they pitied him. He had cooked his own goose—and he would have to eat it.

Two months prior to the fatal night on which we join him in his reflections on the bridge, a Mrs. Elvira Kingsbury came to Mrs. Smith's to board. She took two rooms on the same floor with Mr. Crumley. One of them—next door to Mr. Crumley and between him and the stairway—she occupied with her daughter, Claire; her son Harold, aged 15, took up his abode in the small room on the other side of him. He was, so to speak, hemmed in by Kingsbury.

They shared the same bathroom at the end of the hall—that is to say, they shared it if he was spry enough to pop into it when the Kingsburys were out of it. He had to crawl out of bed half an hour earlier than was his custom in order to get his morning tub, and even then he went about it with considerable furtiveness because of his growing dread of bumping into Mrs. Kingsbury or Claire as he sneaked stealthily back to his room.

After several weeks of this sort of thing it dawned upon him that perhaps Mrs. Kingsbury was proud of the fluffy blue and white pelisour in which she went to the bath—always very shyly and shrimkingly—and he became so familiar with it that he recognized it every time he encountered Claire on her way to the bath. He began to experience a strange conviction that he was unnecessarily modest.

Mrs. Kingsbury was a lively, sharp-eyed little woman, and quite spry. There was no denying the fact that she was quite pretty. However, a more worldly and experienced man than Mr. Crumley would have remarked at a glance that her face was hard, her eyes calculating, her lips a trifle thin, and her tongue—though invisible—exceedingly sharp. She was from Chicago. She had the big city woman's opinion of the small town, and while she was, for business purposes, more or less polite in her expressions, but half an eye was required to see that she was entirely lacking in compassion for the poor wretches who had lived all their lives in Whippley.

She was not so diplomatic. They were lofty. They had a great deal to say about Whippley, and still more to say about Chicago. Mrs. Smith's boarders were patient. But the day that Harold got fresh with the boy who delivered the evening newspapers at the boarding house, one Harvey Leonard, there was heard rejoicing among them. Harold sustained a cracked lip, a bloody nose and a pair of incredibly black eyes, to say nothing of a bruised kneecap, which he got while trying to fly up the front steps instead of mounting them in the usual way.

Mrs. Kingsbury had bought out the millinery business of Etta Hanks on Fourth street. This is how she happened to become an inhabitant of Whippley and an inmate of Mrs. Smith's select boarding house.

She had not been in the place two days before she had met four persons, all women, had informed her that Mr. Crumley was one of the richest bachelors in town, one of the most popular society men, and absolutely womanproof. So she went after Mr. Crumley as a cat goes after a mouse. This was at first, toward the end she was after him as a tiger goes after a rat.

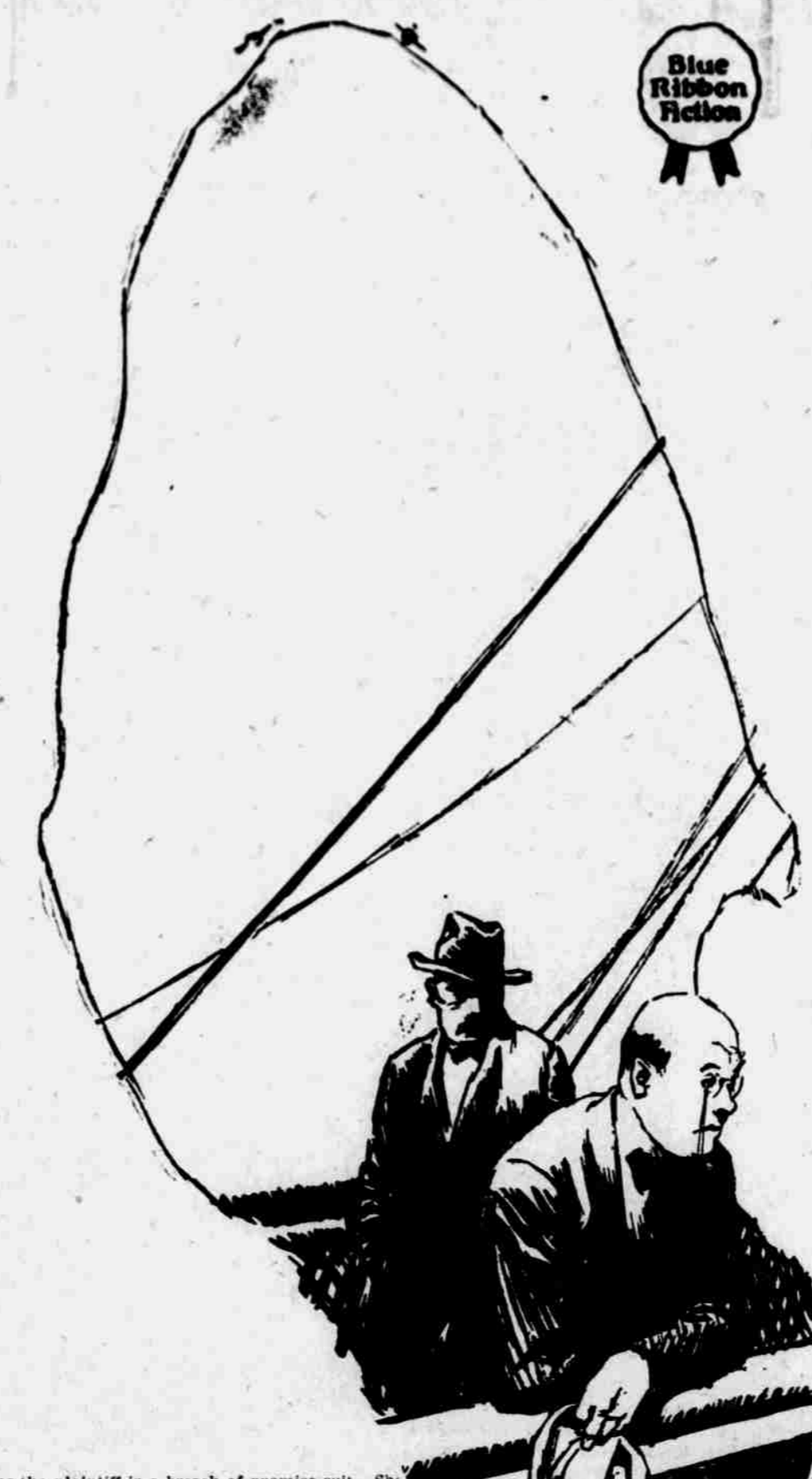
He could not avoid her. She had her seat changed to his table in the dining room; she made "fudge" for him; she begged him to sing for her; she went to him almost daily with mathematical angles, confessing to a dreadful stupidity about figures; she asked him for advice about everything; she went to the Baptist church twice on Sundays, just to hear him sing, although she professed to be an Episcopalian; she walked to church with him—and to save his life he couldn't think of a way to escape him walking home with her; she told him how unhappy she was about the sensation of being roughly thumped, and then by a woman smaller than herself and she would never marry again—never.

Now, Mr. Crumley hadn't the faintest desire to marry her. He was not above admiring her in a passing sort of way when she slid by him pompously that that fetching pelisour—was she succeeding in her well-meant efforts to hide her bare ankles—but as for marrying her or any one else—well, it simply never entered his head. It was not until Harold tackled him for the loan of a dollar one evening that he awoke to his danger. Harold promised to repay him as soon as he could get a job. Mr. Crumley mildly observed that that was likely to be some time off, in view of the fact that he was still in school and—Harold brought him up with a jerk by announcing that as soon as "you and mamma are married I'm going to cut loose for myself. I believe me."

That was the beginning of the end. Things happened with a rush from that time on. Much to Mr. Crumley's consternation, people began to ask him when it was to take place, and other questions of a similarly irritating nature. And then Mrs. Kingsbury, profoundly agitated, informed him one evening—in the darkest corner of the porch—that she had changed her mind about never marrying again. She admitted that her change in heart was due in a great measure to the fact that she considered herself more or less compromised, that everybody in the house was talking about her and him—and, besides, the children liked him tremendously, and so did she, for that matter. In fact, she went even farther and said that she was just breaking her heart over him.

He didn't sleep a wink that night, and all the next day his mind was not concerned with mathematics. While he couldn't, for the life of him, see how he had compromised her, still he knew enough about small town gossip to appreciate its horrors. So he made up his mind to play fair with the innocent lady; he would change boarding places and thus put a stop to all the—but when he proposed that same evening to make this gentlemanly sacrifice he discovered to his dismay, that it was not her idea of what a gentleman should do in the circumstances.

She declared that, next to being mentioned as a co-respondent in a divorce case, the most awful thing that could happen to a moral, self-respecting woman was to be dragged into court



as the plaintiff in a breach of promise suit. She thought it was so low and vulgar and—well, sort of grasping. Mr. Crumley felt the cold perspiration breaking out all over him. Something came up in his throat and stayed there, depriving him of the power of speech.

On the other hand, she moaned, it seemed dreadful to think that the only alternative was suicide. The only consolation to be had out of such a case was the knowledge that I can be so calm, so—so peaceful about it? Goodbye, dear Harold—goodbye."

He sat perfectly still for many minutes after she had passed out of sight, walking briskly in the direction of Main street. He seemed petrified. Suddenly a full sense of understanding came over him. He looked about him wildly, opened his lips to shout after her, and then plunged blindly down the steps. Two minutes later he dashed into Weaver's drug store. She was not there.

"Have you—has Mrs. Kingsbury been in here?" he demanded of the boy at the soda-fountain. Ah, how many times had he sat happily on one of the tall stools with some bright-faced, charming girl beside him, chatting blithely.

"Yes, she bought some note paper a couple of minutes ago, professor. She—"

"Anything else? Anything else?"

"Nope. I heard her ask Mr. Weaver if he thought 10 grains of strychnine would kill a dog, and he said it would kill an elephant."

"Yes, yes—yes, what? What—what then?"

"Well—that was about all. Oh, yes, she did say something about not having any elephant at present, and—what? Why, she went up street, towards her store, I guess."

Five minutes later she opened her shop-door a couple of inches and peered out.

"Go away!" she cried to the man outside. "Leave me alone."

He pushed his way in. The store was dark. "I've—been to two drug stores—you didn't buy it in either one of them. My God, woman, what a scare you've given me. Now, come on home—there's a good girl. Have a good sleep—you'll feel different in the morning."

"You bet I'll feel different in the morning," she said, ominously. "I've got enough poison back there in my desk to kill an elephant. I always keep it on hand."

"I—must call a policeman. I—I—"

"Go ahead! He will be too late, darling. It only takes half a second to swallow—"

"My God—you wouldn't—you—"

"I'd like to have a few minutes to finish writing the notes, that's all."

The town clock was striking 10 when County Clerk Binn opened his front door and beheld Mr. Crumley. At the bottom of the steps stood a lady—a tall, resolute little figure that seemed for all the world like a soldier on guard. Mr. Crumley, dazed and shaken, implored Mr. Binn to come down to the court house at once and issue a marriage license.

"Won't tomorrow morning do, professor?" inquired the clerk.

Mr. Crumley hesitated. A significant, horrifying sound—barely audible to Mr. Binn but as plain as day to the man who was standing by the mathematician—came up from the bottom of the steps. It was the warning of the deadly rattlesnake. Although there was nothing written on the little pastebored pill box in Mrs. Kingsbury's hand to indicate that it should be well shaken before taken, nevertheless the lady shook it.

"No—no, it's got to be tonight, Mr. Binn," said Mr. Crumley, wincing.

It was a quarter of 11 when Justice of the Peace Roubidoux was routed out of bed to perform a marriage ceremony. Mr. Crumley had been very carefully shanghaied for a cruise around the world.

The next day Mrs. Crumley began to talk

about an eight-room apartment in the new building that was being erected on Scott street. It was then that she discovered the truth about Mr. Crumley's finances. She confided her discovery to Harold and Claire and began shrilling to talk about strychnine again. Mr. Crumley, badgered by all three of them, rose temporarily to surprising heights. He said he didn't give a damn how soon she swallowed the poison, but as she had on hand a supply sufficient to kill an elephant he thought she ought to include Claire and Harold and make a good clean job of it. It was his first and last note of defiance.

Now we come back to him on the bridge. He had taken two of his wife's tablets the night before, considerably leaving eight of them behind in case she needed them, only to find that they tasted amazingly like potato, and failed to have any effect whatsoever. He had stood in front of the mirror on his bureau waiting for the hideous risis sardonius to imprint itself upon his stiffening lips. Consultation of a treatise on poison had provided him with all the definite symptoms of approaching dissolution in a case of strychnine poisoning. Failing to observe anything like the "sardonic grin" on his pallid features, he went over and laid down on the bed prepared to endure, and even to assist, the "opisthotonos." He fixed his heels firmly against the foot board, and, lying flat on his back without a pillow under his head, waited for the inevitable convulsion that would end with his head and heels alone resting on the mattress, the remainder of his rigid body being bowed upward with quite a space between it and the bed. Nothing happened.

The next morning she rapped him over the head with a heavy end of a whisk-broom. It was then that he went down to the river.

Pondering he continued to stare at the black, almost invisible water. At last, with a long sigh he pulled his hat down tight upon his head, placed one foot on the lower rail, gripped the upper rail with his hands, and prepared to vault over into the unknown.

A hand fell upon his shoulder. His knees gave way beneath him, he sagged limply against the rail. Caught!

"What's the trouble, stranger?" inquired a voice, a low masculine voice.

"Where—where did you come from?" chattered Mr. Crumley. "I didn't hear you."

"I've been standing here behind you for 10 or 15 minutes. I've been thinking about you, too, all that time. You've been figuring on jumping over there into the river, eh? Is it so bad as that?"

"I can't discuss it with you," said Mr. Crumley, resigning some of his dignity. "This is a purely personal affair. Please go away."

"I don't know what the trouble is, stranger," said the man in the darkness, "but it seems to me you ought to give yourself a sporting chance. How far is it down to the water?"

"About 40 feet. Have you never been on this bridge before?"

"Never. Forty feet, eh? Water pretty deep?"

"It's a matter I do not feel inclined to—"

"Don't get huffy, pardner. Now, it strikes me that you are not giving fate much of a chance to prove to you that you are wrong in taking this step. Sometimes things turn out better than you think. Take me, for instance. I've been on the point of blowing my brains out half a dozen times. I didn't do it, and here I am alive and well and as happy as a clam. I haven't a worry in the world. The only thing that troubles me is the occasional pinch of poverty—and that reminds me. You won't need any money, or watch, or anything like that in the place where you are going, so please hand 'em over to me. I don't know as I've ever known anything to work out so satisfactorily as this. Usually it's a gun against a man's ribs to get him to loosen, or to crack him one on the bean, but here's an ideal situation, I find a man getting ready to—"

"Do you mean to say you are going to rob me?" demanded Mr. Crumley. For the first time he turned to peer over his shoulder at the shadowy figure.

"Well, now, that's a matter I am not inclined to discuss. Put up your hands—it won't take me a second to frisk you. Then we will discuss the future. I've got a suggestion to make to you—a good sporting proposition."

Mr. Crumley had an inspiration. "By Jove, suppose—suppose I refuse to put up my hands—what then? Would you shoot me?"

"Not so's you'd notice it. I'd simply nab you and turn you over to the police as an attempted suicide. Oh, you needn't think I couldn't do it. I'm as big as an elephant. You wouldn't—"

"My God, don't speak to me about elephants!" groaned Mr. Crumley.

"Been seeing 'em?" inquired the stranger, sympathetically. "Think twice, old scout, before you take any chances with me. Put 'em up!"

"I don't in the least mind allowing you to rob me," said Mr. Crumley, holding up his hands. "You will not find anything about me except a little loose change in my pants pocket—\$1.50, perhaps. As for my watch—well, I was very careful to leave everything at home that might serve to identify my body when it is found."

"Well, there's no sense in taking even \$1.50 when you then pop over into the river, is there? Better keep it in circulation, I'd say. Quarters and dimes, I can tell by the feel of 'em." The coins jingled as they dropped into the stranger's coat pocket. "Now, let's discuss your case. What's the trouble with you? Money matters? Ill health? Disappointment in love?"

"Neither of these," said Mr. Crumley.

"You may put your hands down now. I'm through. Are you a married man?"

"Yes—in a way."

"LONG?"

"I can't remember when I was single," groaned Mr. Crumley.

"Ah, now we have it," cried the stranger, a note of satisfaction in his voice. "I feel for you, old man. Nothing—nothing in the world—is so conducive to suicide as a hopeless state of matrimony. But why kill yourself? Why not pick up and light out—beat it. Leave her high and dry. That's what I do regularly. What do you gain by destroying yourself? You don't hurt her any by doing it, my friend. The chances are she'll be the happiest woman alive."

"Ah, but I gain my freedom—my freedom forever," cried Mr. Crumley, looking over the rail once more.

"Well, so does she," protested the other. "The only difference is that you'll be dead while she'll still be alive. I don't call that a very fair distribution of freedom, do you?"

"You don't understand. There is only one course open to me. Now, if you will please go away, I'll—"

"Just a second, my friend. I'm not the kind to interfere with a man when he is in such distress as you appear to be. If you feel that the only way out of your troubles is to jump into the river, why—that's all there is to it, so far as I am concerned. All I've got to say is that you ought to take a sporting chance. I've done it several times myself. Once I was on the point of shooting myself. Conubial affliction, by the way—sort of chronic case with me. Well, says I, why not give yourself a sporting chance, old boy? Go out and stick some one up right in front of a police station and then hang around long enough to let the cops find out there's been a holdup. Pull your gun and open fire on your pursuers. See what I mean? I was giving myself a sporting chance. If I got away without a scratch, that was to be a sure sign that my luck had changed, and I'd be thankful I hadn't shot myself."

"How did it turn out?" asked Mr. Crumley, interested in spite of himself.

"Just as I thought it would. They fired a couple of dozen shots at me—and I got away. Now, you are contemplating suicide. You want to jump into the river. Why do that? It occurred to me while I was standing back here watching you—knowing all the time what was in your mind—that you ought to give yourself a chance. Why not take a sport? Why not take a gambler's risk? The idea came to me like a flash, and I'm going to put it up to you as one sport to another. Suicide is an ugly word. It's the same thing as cowardice. Are you listening?"

"Yes—but it's no use. I am deterred to end it all."

"All right. I agree to that," said the other, cheerfully. "But let's do it like a gentleman. Let's do it like a sport. Here's the idea. See this top rail? It's round and four inches in diameter. Any school boy could walk it if it was laid on the ground. Now, suppose you take off your shoes and get up there on the rail—I'll help you up and see if you can't walk to—"

"My God!" gasped Mr. Crumley, drawing away from the railing with a shudder. "I—I couldn't do that. I'd lose my balance before I'd taken—"

"That's just the point I make. Supposing you do lose your balance. Ain't you just as likely to fall as you are?"

"But—but I'd be sure to fall outward. I—I—good heaven, man, I can't bear to think of it!"

"But you're thinking of jumping in, aren't you?"

"That's different. It's all over in a second's time."

"So would this be, if you fell in that direction. It's all the same in the long run, isn't it? Take off your shoes. Be a sport. Don't jump into the river, my friend. Fall in—that's the way a sport would do it. Take a chance on falling this way instead of that."

"That wouldn't help matters," exclaimed Mr. Crumley bitterly. "In any event, he went on, "it is so dark I couldn't see the rail. I can't walk a thing like this without seeing it, can you?"

"On the other hand, you can't see the water, and you won't get dizzy."

They argued for 10 minutes. Finally Mr. Crumley sat down and began to remove his shoes.

"It takes a brave man to do a thing like this," he said to the tall stranger who hovered over him. "It takes a perfect daredevil."

"How far is it to the end of the bridge?"

"It's about 100 feet from here to the end of the span. I can't go any farther than that on account of the structural work."

"Well, that's far enough," said the other. "If you go that far, we'll call it a day's work. By the way, I forgot to ask you; would you like me to drop your wife a line and tell her how brave you were and that you died like a hero?"

"I don't want her to know a damn thing about me," said Mr. Crumley strongly.

"That's the right spirit," said the stranger, approvingly. "Now, you're beginning to talk like a man that ought to live. Are you ready?"

"Yes," said Mr. Crumley, arising. "Do you know, I—I'm beginning to take a lot of interest in this undertaking. It is rather an exciting thing to do, isn't it? Kind of like a game. Of course, I shall fall off the instant I stand up, but it won't be quite the same as just deliberately jumping off."

"I'll steady you till you get your footing," said the other reassuringly.

"You see," confided Mr. Crumley, "I've only been married a week."

"Well," mused his companion, "that's long enough sometimes."

"I didn't intend to be married," went on the doomed man plaintively. "I was sort of rushed into it, you know."

"I know—I know. What shall I do with these shoes?"

"Are they too small for you to wear?"

"I should say so. I've got a foot like an elephant."

"Confound you, why will you keep on talking about elephants? Say, do you know that it takes ten grains of strychnine to kill an elephant?"

"Now you're beginning to get morbid,"

groined the robber. "Before you get up there on that rail I want to explain something to you. By rights I ought to do my level best to prevent you from committing suicide. But what would be the use? If I saved you from yourself tonight you'd be going at it again inside of a week. I believe in letting a fellow set a thing out of his system once, and for all. Besides, if I let you home to your wife, you'd probably curse me to your dying day. I'm not heartless, old man. It isn't that I want to see you die. I want you to understand that. What I'm trying to do is to give you a sporting chance. It's the only way. Every time you contemplate committing suicide—that is, in case you don't meet with an accident tonight—I want you to promise me you'll give yourself a chance. Don't shoot yourself. Just skirrnish around and do something that will give some one else a chance to take a shot at you. Don't take poison deliberately." Go get a box of candy and then slip a little dose of poison into one of the encochetes, shake 'em all up well so you won't know which is which, and then leave the box around where both you and your wife can have the same chance at it. If ever you think of hanging yourself, commit some sort of an outrage and take a chance on the mob lynching you. Always—always give yourself a sporting chance. Just as you're going tonight, that's my idea of playing the game. Now, if you fall off that rail and go keerslap down into the river—all well and good. You've done your best to upset the dope. I hope you understand?"

"I do," said Mr. Crumley, passing his hand over his brow. "I can't help saying, however, that it's horrible to think of standing up on that rail all alone, in the dark, with nothing to grab at in case I—but, come on, let's get it over with. I wish, however, you would let me tell you all that has happened to me in the past week."

"No!" said the other firmly. "I don't want to hear anything that might resurrect my own married life. I've told you twice now to take your troubles with you. Don't leave 'em with me. Now, step on this lower rail first; put your hands on my shoulders. That's the stuff. Now, up to the next rail. Now, wait a second. Let me think. What is the safest way for you to get up on the top rail without making a mess of it? Give me time to figure it out."

"It seems darker up here where I am," mentioned Mr. Crumley.

"I have it," said the stranger, relieved. "Keep your hands on my shoulders and put one foot after the other on each rail, bracing yourself against me. Then I'll stoop down till my shoulder is level with the rail. You put one foot on my shoulder and then stand up straight. That will get you into an erect position without a chance of falling overboard. Slowly I will shift my shoulder over quite close to the rail, and then you step off onto it. But for God's sake don't let your foot slip."

"I should say not!" gasped Mr. Crumley. "I think I'd better shut my eyes. It will seem simpler with my eyes shut. I—I wish you'd walk along close beside me—in case I should fall."

"I thought that was just what you wanted to do."

"I mean in case I should fall inward instead of outward. I'd probably break an arm or something if I landed on that concrete walk. It would be just like me to strike my sore head against—Whoa! Steady! Steady-d-y!"

"Say when," commanded from the obliging stranger.

Mr. Crumley took his foot from the sturdy shoulder and started off briskly along the rail. He had recalled the experience of youth—the balmy, carefree days when he used to walk the rails of the good old Lake Erie and Western. He remembered that it was much easier to stick to the rail if you walked rapidly—it was fatal to take it slowly. So he started off briskly, his eyes shut, his arms outstretched, his bare feet coming down firmly upon the cold, curving steel.

The stranger strode along beside him, amazingly filling his frightened soul. Mr. Crumley began to rant.

"Well—I'll be damned!" gasped the footpad, breaking into trot.

Suddenly Mr. Crumley missed; his foot failed to hit the rail.

The stranger pulled him to his feet. He was blubbering.

"O my God—my God! I've smashed my knee cap! O! O! O-o-o!"

"Smashed nothing!" roared the other. "You're all right! Stand up! Hey! You're not going to faint on me, are you? Buck up! Be a man. Which knee is it? The knee in it? Rub it. Lean up against this girder. That's the stuff. But for God's sake stop howling!"

Presently Mr. Crumley opened his eyes and put his hand to his heart.

"Well, I—I guess I'll have to go home, after all," he groaned.

"Leg feel better?"

Mr. Crumley jiggled his knee cautiously. "I guess it's all right. More scared than hurt. Confound you, you said you'd be there to catch me if I fell. Where the hell were you?"

"How the devil was I to know that you could sprit like that? I couldn't keep up with you. And, say, it's lucky you fell off when you did. That's my knee in it. Let me know where they're putting you. That support at the end of the span, and—"

"I want to tell you one thing," broke in Mr. Crumley, the ring of conviction in his voice. "I'll never try to commit suicide like that again. It's too risky a game."

"You did the last twenty yards in record time," said the footpad. "There isn't a circus performer in the world who could have done that trick. I didn't believe you could stick on for two feet, and here you—"

"I used to be pretty fair in the hundred yard dash," said Mr. Crumley, not without a note of pride in his voice. "Where are my shoes?"

While he was putting on his shoes, the stranger leaned reflectively upon the rail, regarding the shadowy form hunched up on the walk at his feet.

"It seems a crime for a plucky chap like you to have to go back and start all over again, knowing there isn't a chance in a million that she'll make life any easier for you. Been married a week, you say?"

"Yep," grunted Mr. Crumley.

"Well, it certainly didn't take you long to wake up."

"We've got two children," said the professor, "a boy and a girl."

"I mean step-children," corrected Mr. Crumley, hastily. "By the way, stranger, it occurs to me that you use extremely good English for a highwayman. You speak like an educated man. I thought about it before, but neglected to mention it."

"I felt the same way about you."

"Am I a professor of mathematics," exclaimed Mr. Crumley, arising.

"And I used to be a riding master. By the way, are you practically well acquainted in this town?"

"I know practically everybody in it."

"Then it is more than likely you know my wife. She lives here, I understand."

"You understand? Don't you know where your wife lives?"

"Well, you see, it's this way. I've been living in Joliet for three years. You know where Joliet is, don't you? And what's located there?"

"A—penitentiary," gasped Mr. Crumley.

"Correct. That may explain my apparent ignorance—you might say indifference—concerning the present whereabouts of my wife. I don't mind explaining that she probably feels fairly confident that I have taken up a permanent residence in Joliet, so she's going to be most tremendously surprised when I walk in on her. Mind you, it isn't because I love her, or want to go back to live with her—"

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