

Bargain Day At Tutt House

By George Randolph Chester (1869-)

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I

Just as the stage rumbled over the rickety old bridge, creaking and groaning, the sun came from behind the clouds that had frowned all the way, and the passengers cheered up a bit. The two richly dressed matrons who had been so utterly and unnecessarily oblivious to the presence of each other now suspended hostilities for the moment by mutual and unspoken consent, and viewed with relief the little, golden-tinted valley and the tree-clad road just beyond. The respective husbands of these two ladies exchanged a mere glance, no more, of comfort. They, too, were relieved, though more by the momentary truce than by anything else. They regretted very much to be compelled to hate each other, for each had reckoned up his vis-à-vis as a rather proper sort of fellow, probably a man of some achievement, used to good living and good company.

Extreme iciness was unavoidable between them, however. When one stranger has a splendidly preserved blonde wife and the other a splendidly preserved brunette wife, both of whom have won social prominence by years of hard fighting and aloofness, there remains nothing for the two men but to follow the lead, especially when directly under the eyes of the leaders.

The son of the blonde matron smiled cheerfully as the welcome light flooded the coach.

He was a nice-looking young man, of about twenty-two, one might judge, and he did his smiling, though in a perfectly impersonal and

correct sort of manner, at the pretty daughter of the brunette matron. The pretty daughter also smiled, but her smile was demurely directed at the trees outside, clad as they were in all the flaming glory of their autumn tints, glistening with the recent rain and dripping with gems that sparkled and flashed in the noonday sun as they fell.

It is marvelous how much one can see out of the corner of the eye, while seeming to view mere scenery.

The driver looked down, as he drove safely off the bridge, and shook his head at the swirl of water that rushed and eddied, dark and muddy, close up under the rotten planking; then he cracked his whip, and the horses sturdily attacked the little hill.

Thick, overhanging trees on either side now dimmed the light again, and the two plump matrons once more glared past the opposite shoulders, profoundly unaware of each other. The husbands took on the politely surly look required of them. The blonde son's eyes still sought the brunette daughter, but it was furtively done and quite unsuccessfully, for the daughter was now doing a little glaring on her own account. The blonde matron had just swept her eyes across the daughter's skirt, estimating the fit and material of it with contempt so artistically veiled that it could almost be understood in the dark.

II

The big bays swung to the brow of the hill with ease, and dashed into a small circular clearing, where a quaint little two-story building, with a mossy watering-trough out in front, nestled under the shade of majestic old trees that reared their brown and scarlet crowns proudly into the sky. A long, low porch ran across the front of the structure, and a complaining sign hung out announcing, in dim, weather-flecked letters on a cracked board, that this was the "Tutt House." A gray-

headed man, in brown overalls and faded blue jumper, stood on the porch and shook his fist at the stage as it whirled by.

"What a delightfully old-fashioned inn!" exclaimed the pretty daughter. "How I should like to stop there over night!"

"You would probably wish yourself away before morning, Evelyn," replied her mother indifferently. "No doubt it would be a mere siege of discomfort."

The blonde matron turned to her husband. The pretty daughter had been looking at the picturesque "inn" between the heads of this lady and her son.

"Edward, please pull down the shade behind me," she directed. "There is quite a draught from that broken window."

The pretty daughter bit her lip. The brunette matron continued to stare at the shade in the exact spot upon which her gaze had been before directed, and she never quivered an eyelash. The young man seemed very uncomfortable, and he tried to look his apologies to the pretty daughter, but she could not see him now, not even if her eyes had been all corners.

They were bowling along through another avenue of trees when the driver suddenly shouted, "Whoa there!"

The horses were brought up with a jerk that was well nigh fatal to the assortment of dignity inside the coach. A loud roaring could be heard, both ahead and in the rear, a sharp splitting like a fusillade of pistol shots, then a creaking and tearing of timbers. The driver bent suddenly forward.

"Gid ap!" he cried, and the horses sprang forward with a lurch. He swung them around a sharp bend with a skillful hand and poised his

weight above the brake as they plunged at terrific speed down a steep grade. The roaring was louder than ever now, and it became deafening as they suddenly emerged from the thick underbrush at the bottom of the declivity.

"Caught, by gravy!" ejaculated the driver, and, for the second time, he brought the coach to an abrupt stop.

"Do see what is the matter, Ralph," said the blonde matron impatiently.

Thus commanded, the young man swung out and asked the driver about it.

"Paintsville dam's busted," he was informed. "I been a-lookin' fer it this many a year, an' this here freshet done it. You see the holler there? Well, they's ten foot o' water in it, an' it had ort to be stone dry. The bridge is tore out behind us, an' we're stuck here till that water runs out. We can't git away till to-morry, anyways."

He pointed out the peculiar topography of the place, and Ralph got back in the coach.

"We're practically on a flood-made island," he exclaimed, with one eye on the pretty daughter, "and we shall have to stop over night at that quaint, old-fashioned inn we passed a few moments ago."

The pretty daughter's eyes twinkled, and he thought he caught a swift, direct gleam from under the long lashes--but he was not sure.

"Dear me, how annoying," said the blonde matron, but the brunette matron still stared, without the slightest trace of interest in anything else, at the infinitesimal spot she had selected on the affronting window-shade.

The two men gave sighs of resignation, and cast carefully concealed glances at each other, speculating on the possibility of a cigar and a glass, and maybe a good story or two, or possibly even a game of poker after the evening meal. Who could tell what might or might not happen?

III

When the stage drew up in front of the little hotel, it found Uncle Billy Tutt prepared for his revenge. In former days the stage had always stopped at the Tutt House for the noonday meal. Since the new railway was built through the adjoining county, however, the stage trip became a mere twelve-mile, cross-country transfer from one railroad to another, and the stage made a later trip, allowing the passengers plenty of time for "dinner" before they started. Day after day, as the coach flashed by with its money-laden passengers, Uncle Billy had hoped that it would break down. But this was better, much better. The coach might be quickly mended, but not the flood.

"I'm a-goin' t' charge 'em till they squeal," he declared to the timidly protesting Aunt Margaret, "an' then I'm goin' t' charge 'em a least mite more, drat 'em!"

He retreated behind the rough wooden counter that did duty as a desk, slammed open the flimsy, paper-bound "cash book" that served as a register, and planted his elbows uncompromisingly on either side of it.

"Let 'em bring in their own traps," he commented, and Aunt Margaret fled, ashamed and conscience-smitten, to the kitchen. It seemed awful.

The first one out of the coach was the husband of the brunette matron, and, proceeding under instructions, he waited neither for luggage nor women folk, but hurried straight into the Tutt House. The other man

would have been neck and neck with him in the race, if it had not been that he paused to seize two suitcases and had the misfortune to drop one, which burst open and scattered a choice assortment of lingerie from one end of the dingy coach to the other.

In the confusion of rescuing the fluffery, the owner of the suitcase had to sacrifice her hauteur and help her husband and son block up the aisle, while the other matron had the ineffable satisfaction of being *kept waiting*, at last being enabled to say, sweetly and with the most polite consideration:

"Will you kindly allow me to pass?"

The blonde matron raised up and swept her skirts back perfectly flat. She was pale but collected. Her husband was pink but collected. Her son was crimson and uncollected. The brunette daughter could not have found an eye anywhere in his countenance as she rustled out after her mother.

"I do hope that Belmont has been able to secure choice quarters," the triumphing matron remarked as her daughter joined her on the ground. "This place looked so very small that there can scarcely be more than one comfortable suite in it."

It was a vital thrust. Only a splendidly cultivated self-control prevented the blonde matron from retaliating upon the unfortunate who had muddled things. Even so, her eyes spoke whole shelves of volumes.

The man who first reached the register wrote, in a straight black scrawl, "J. Belmont Van Kamp, wife, and daughter." There being no space left for his address, he put none down.

"I want three adjoining rooms, en suite if possible," he demanded.

"Three!" exclaimed Uncle Billy, scratching his head. "Won't two do ye? I ain't got but six bedrooms in th' house. Me an' Marg't sleeps in one, an' we're a-gittin' too old fer a shake-down on th' floor. I'll have t' save one room fer th' driver, an' that leaves four. You take two now---"

Mr. Van Kamp cast a hasty glance out of the window, The other man was getting out of the coach. His own wife was stepping on the porch.

"What do you ask for meals and lodging until this time to-morrow?" he interrupted.

The decisive moment had arrived. Uncle Billy drew a deep breath.

"Two dollars a head!" he defiantly announced. There! It was out! He wished Margaret had stayed to hear him say it.

The guest did not seem to be seriously shocked, and Uncle Billy was beginning to be sorry he had not said three dollars, when Mr. Van Kamp stopped the landlord's own breath.

"I'll give you fifteen dollars for the three best rooms in the house," he calmly said, and Landlord Tutt gasped as the money fluttered down under his nose.

"Jis' take yore folks right on up, Mr. Kamp," said Uncle Billy, pouncing on the money. "Th' rooms is th' three right along th' hull front o' th' house. I'll be up and make on a fire in a minute. Jis' take th' *Jonesville Banner* an' th' *Uticky Clarion* along with ye."

As the swish of skirts marked the passage of the Van Kamps up the wide hall stairway, the other party swept into the room.

The man wrote, in a round flourish, "Edward Eastman Ellsworth, wife, and son."

"I'd like three choice rooms, en suite," he said.

"Gosh!" said Uncle Billy, regretfully. "That's what Mr. Kamp wanted, fust off, an' he got it. They hain't but th' little room over th' kitchen left. I'll have to put you an' your wife in that, an' let your boy sleep with th' driver."

The consternation in the Ellsworth party was past calculating by any known standards of measurement. The thing was an outrage! It was not to be borne! They would not submit to it!

Uncle Billy, however, secure in his mastery of the situation, calmly quartered them as he had said. "An' let 'em splutter all they want to," he commented comfortably to himself.

IV

The Ellsworths were holding a family indignation meeting on the broad porch when the Van Ramps came contentedly down for a walk, and brushed by them with unseeing eyes.

"It makes a perfectly fascinating suite," observed Mrs. Van Kamp, in a pleasantly conversational tone that could be easily overheard by anyone impolite enough to listen. "That delightful old-fashioned fireplace in the middle apartment makes it an ideal sitting-room, and the beds are so roomy and comfortable."

"I just knew it would be like this!" chirruped Miss Evelyn. "I remarked as we passed the place, if you will remember, how charming it would be to stop in this dear, quaint old inn over night. All my wishes seem to come true this year."

These simple and, of course, entirely unpremeditated remarks were as vinegar and wormwood to Mrs. Ellsworth, and she gazed after the retreating Van Kamps with a glint in her eye that would make one understand Lucretia Borgia at last.

Her son also gazed after the retreating Van Kamp. She had an exquisite figure, and she carried herself with a most delectable grace. As the party drew away from the inn she dropped behind the elders and wandered off into a side path to gather autumn leaves.

Ralph, too, started off for a walk, but naturally not in the same direction.

"Edward!" suddenly said Mrs. Ellsworth. "I want you to turn those people out of that suite before night!"

"Very well," he replied with a sigh, and got up to do it. He had wrecked a railroad and made one, and had operated successful corners in nutmegs and chicory. No task seemed impossible. He walked in to see the landlord.

"What are the Van Kamps paying you for those three rooms?" he asked.

"Fifteen dollars," Uncle Billy informed him, smoking one of Mr. Van Kamp's good cigars and twiddling his thumbs in huge content.

"I'll give you thirty for them. Just set their baggage outside and tell them the rooms are occupied."

"No sir-ree!" rejoined Uncle Billy. "A bargain's a bargain, an' I allus stick to one I make."

Mr. Ellsworth withdrew, but not defeated. He had never supposed that such an absurd proposition would be accepted. It was only a feeler,

and he had noticed a wince of regret in his landlord. He sat down on the porch and lit a strong cigar. His wife did not bother him. She gazed complacently at the flaming foliage opposite, and allowed him to think. Getting impossible things was his business in life, and she had confidence in him.

"I want to rent your entire house for a week," he announced to Uncle Billy a few minutes later. It had occurred to him that the flood might last longer than they anticipated.

Uncle Billy's eyes twinkled.

"I reckon it kin be did," he allowed. "I reckon a *ho-tel* man's got a right to rent his hull house ary minute."

"Of course he has. How much do you want?"

Uncle Billy had made one mistake in not asking this sort of folks enough, and he reflected in perplexity.

"Make me a offer," he proposed. "Ef it hain't enough I'll tell ye. You want to rent th' hull place, back lot an' all?"

"No, just the mere house. That will be enough," answered the other with a smile. He was on the point of offering a hundred dollars, when he saw the little wrinkles about Mr. Tutt's eyes, and he said seventy-five.

"Sho, ye're jokin'!" retorted Uncle Billy. He had been considered a fine horse-trader in that part of the country. "Make it a hundred and twenty-five, an' I'll go ye."

Mr. Ellsworth counted out some bills.

"Here's a hundred," he said. "That ought to be about right."

"Fifteen more," insisted Uncle Billy.

With a little frown of impatience the other counted off the extra money and handed it over. Uncle Billy gravely handed it back.

"Them's the fifteen dollars Mr. Kamp give me," he explained. "You've got the hull house fer a week, an' o' course all th' money that's tooken in is your'n. You kin do as ye please about rentin' out rooms to other folks, I reckon. A bargain's a bargain, an' I allus stick to one I make."

V

Ralph Ellsworth stalked among the trees, feverishly searching for squirrels, scarlet leaves, and the glint of a brown walking-dress, this last not being so easy to locate in sunlit autumn woods. Time after time he quickened his pace, only to find that he had been fooled by a patch of dogwood, a clump of haw bushes or even a leaf-strewn knoll, but at last he unmistakably saw the dress, and then he slowed down to a careless saunter.

She was reaching up for some brilliantly colored maple leaves, and was entirely unconscious of his presence, especially after she had seen him. Her pose showed her pretty figure to advantage, but, of course, she did not know that. How should she?

Ralph admired the picture very much. The hat, the hair, the gown, the dainty shoes, even the narrow strip of silken hose that was revealed as she stood a-uptoe, were all of a deep, rich brown that proved an exquisite foil for the pink and cream of her cheeks. He remembered that her eyes were almost the same shade, and wondered how it was that women-folk happened on combinations in dress that so well set off their natural charms. The fool!

He was about three trees away, now, and a panic akin to that which hunters describe as "buck ague" seized him. He decided that he really had no excuse for coming any nearer. It would not do, either, to be seen staring at her if she should happen to turn her head, so he veered off, intending to regain the road. It would be impossible to do this without passing directly in her range of vision, and he did not intend to try to avoid it. He had a fine, manly figure of his own.

He had just passed the nearest radius to her circle and was proceeding along the tangent that he had laid out for himself, when the unwitting maid looked carefully down and saw a tangle of roots at her very feet. She was so unfortunate, a second later, as to slip her foot in this very tangle and give her ankle ever so slight a twist.

"Oh!" cried Miss Van Kamp, and Ralph Ellsworth flew to the rescue. He had not been noticing her at all, and yet he had started to her side before she had even cried out, which was strange. She had a very attractive voice.

"May I be of assistance?" he anxiously inquired.

"I think not, thank you," she replied, compressing her lips to keep back the intolerable pain, and half-closing her eyes to show the fine lashes. Declining the proffered help, she extricated her foot, picked up her autumn branches, and turned away. She was intensely averse to anything that could be construed as a flirtation, even of the mildest, he could certainly see that. She took a step, swayed slightly, dropped the leaves, and clutched out her hand to him.

"It is nothing," she assured him in a moment, withdrawing the hand after he had held it quite long enough. "Nothing whatever. I gave my foot a slight wrench, and turned the least bit faint for a moment."

"You must permit me to walk back, at least to the road, with you," he insisted, gathering up her armload of branches. "I couldn't think of leaving you here alone."

As he stooped to raise the gay woodland treasures he smiled to himself, ever so slightly. This was not *his* first season out, either.

"Delightful spot, isn't it?" he observed as they regained the road and sauntered in the direction of the Tutt House.

"Quite so," she reservedly answered. She had noticed that smile as he stooped. He must be snubbed a little. It would be so good for him.

"You don't happen to know Billy Evans, of Boston, do you?" he asked.

"I think not. I am but very little acquainted in Boston."

"Too bad," he went on. "I was rather in hopes you knew Billy. All sorts of a splendid fellow, and knows everybody."

"Not quite, it seems," she reminded him, and he winced at the error. In spite of the sly smile that he had permitted to himself, he was unusually interested.

He tried the weather, the flood, the accident, golf, books and three good, substantial, warranted jokes, but the conversation lagged in spite of him. Miss Van Kamp would not for the world have it understood that this unconventional meeting, made allowable by her wrenched ankle, could possibly fulfill the functions of a formal introduction.

"What a ripping, queer old building that is!" he exclaimed, making one more brave effort as they came in sight of the hotel.

"It is, rather," she assented. "The rooms in it are as quaint and delightful as the exterior, too."

She looked as harmless and innocent as a basket of peaches as she said it, and never the suspicion of a smile deepened the dimple in the cheek toward him. The smile was glowing cheerfully away inside, though. He could feel it, if he could not see it, and he laughed aloud.

"Your crowd rather got the better of us there," he admitted with the keen appreciation of one still quite close to college days.

"Of course, the mater is furious, but I rather look on it as a lark."

She thawed like an April icicle.

"It's perfectly jolly," she laughed with him. "Awfully selfish of us, too, I know, but such loads of fun."

They were close to the Tutt House now, and her limp, that had entirely disappeared as they emerged from the woods, now became quite perceptible. There might be people looking out of the windows, though it is hard to see why that should affect a limp.

Ralph was delighted to find that a thaw had set in, and he made one more attempt to establish at least a proxy acquaintance.

"You don't happen to know Peyson Kingsley, of Philadelphia, do you?"

"I'm afraid I don't," she replied. "I know so few Philadelphia people, you see." She was rather regretful about it this time. He really was a clever sort of a fellow, in spite of that smile.

The center window in the second floor of the Tutt House swung open, its little squares of glass flashing jubilantly in the sunlight. Mrs.

Ellsworth leaned out over the sill, from the quaint old sitting-room of the *Van Kamp apartments!*

"Oh, Ralph!" she called in her most dulcet tones. "Kindly excuse yourself and come right on up to our suite for a few moments!"

VI

It is not nearly so easy to take a practical joke as to perpetrate one. Evelyn was sitting thoughtfully on the porch when her father and mother returned. Mrs. Ellsworth was sitting at the center window above, placidly looking out. Her eyes swept carelessly over the Van Kamps, and unconcernedly passed on to the rest of the landscape.

Mrs. Van Kamp gasped and clutched the arm of her husband. There was no need. He, too, had seen the apparition. Evelyn now, for the first time, saw the real humor of the situation. She smiled as she thought of Ralph. She owed him one, but she never worried about her debts. She always managed to get them paid, principal and interest.

Mr. Van Kamp suddenly glowered and strode into the Tutt House. Uncle Billy met him at the door, reflectively chewing a straw, and handed him an envelope. Mr. Van Kamp tore it open and drew out a note. Three five-dollar bills came out with it and fluttered to the porch floor. This missive confronted him:

MR. J. BELMONT VAN KAMP,

DEAR SIR: This is to notify you that I have rented the entire Tutt House for the ensuing week, and am compelled to assume possession of the three second-floor front rooms. Herewith I am enclosing the fifteen dollars you paid to secure the suite. You are quite welcome to make use, as my guest, of the small room over the kitchen. You will

find your luggage in that room. Regretting any inconvenience that this transaction may cause you, I am,

Yours respectfully, EDWARD EASTMAN ELLSWORTH.

Mr. Van Kamp passed the note to his wife and sat down on a large chair. He was glad that the chair was comfortable and roomy. Evelyn picked up the bills and tucked them into her waist. She never overlooked any of her perquisites. Mrs. Van Kamp read the note, and the tip of her nose became white. She also sat down, but she was the first to find her voice.

"Atrocious!" she exclaimed. "Atrocious! Simply atrocious, Belmont. This is a house of public entertainment. They *can't* turn us out in this high-minded manner! Isn't there a law or something to that effect?"

"It wouldn't matter if there was," he thoughtfully replied. "This fellow Ellsworth would be too clever to be caught by it. He would say that the house was not a hotel but a private residence during the period for which he has rented it."

Personally, he rather admired Ellsworth. Seemed to be a resourceful sort of chap who knew how to make money behave itself, and do its little tricks without balking in the harness.

"Then you can make him take down the sign!" his wife declared.

He shook his head decidedly.

"It wouldn't do, Belle," he replied. "It would be spite, not retaliation, and not at all sportsmanlike. The course you suggest would belittle us more than it would annoy them. There must be some other way."

He went in to talk with Uncle Billy.

"I want to buy this place," he stated. "Is it for sale?"

"It sartin is!" replied Uncle Billy. He did not merely twinkle this time. He grinned.

"How much?"

"Three thousand dollars." Mr. Tutt was used to charging by this time, and he betrayed no hesitation.

"I'll write you out a check at once," and Mr. Van Kamp reached in his pocket with the reflection that the spot, after all, was an ideal one for a quiet summer retreat.

"Air you a-goin' t' scribble that there three thou-san' on a piece o' paper?" inquired Uncle Billy, sitting bolt upright. "Ef you air a-figgerin' on that, Mr. Kamp, jis' you save yore time. I give a man four dollars fer one o' them check things oncet, an' I owe myself them four dollars yit."

Mr. Van Kamp retired in disorder, but the thought of his wife and daughter waiting confidently on the porch stopped him. Moreover, the thing had resolved itself rather into a contest between Ellsworth and himself, and he had done a little making and breaking of men and things in his own time. He did some gatling-gun thinking out by the newel-post, and presently rejoined Uncle Billy.

"Mr. Tutt, tell me just exactly what Mr. Ellsworth rented, please," he requested.

"Th' hull house," replied Billy, and then he somewhat sternly added: "Paid me spot cash fer it, too."

Mr. Van Kamp took a wad of loose bills from his trousers pocket, straightened them out leisurely, and placed them in his bill book,

along with some smooth yellowbacks of eye-bulging denominations. Uncle Billy sat up and stopped twiddling his thumbs.

"Nothing was said about the furniture, was there?" suavely inquired Van Kamp.

Uncle Billy leaned blankly back in his chair. Little by little the light dawned on the ex-horse-trader. The crow's feet reappeared about his eyes, his mouth twitched, he smiled, he grinned, then he slapped his thigh and haw-hawed.

"No!" roared Uncle Billy. "No, there wasn't, by gum!"

"Nothing but the house?"

"His very own words!" chuckled Uncle Billy. "'Jis' th' mere house,' says he, an' he gits it. A bargain's a bargain, an' I allus stick to one I make."

"How much for the furniture for the week?"

"Fifty dollars!" Mr. Tutt knew how to do business with this kind of people now, you bet.

Mr. Van Kamp promptly counted out the money.

"Drat it!" commented Uncle Billy to himself. "I could 'a' got more!"

"Now where can we make ourselves comfortable with this furniture?"

Uncle Billy chirked up. All was not yet lost.

"Waal," he reflectively drawled, "there's th' new barn. It hain't been used for nothin' yit, sence I built it two years ago. I jis' hadn't th' heart t' put th' critters in it as long as th' ole one stood up."

The other smiled at this flashlight on Uncle Billy's character, and they went out to look at the barn.

VII

Uncle Billy came back from the "Tutt House Annex," as Mr. Van Kamp dubbed the barn, with enough more money to make him love all the world until he got used to having it. Uncle Billy belongs to a large family.

Mr. Van Kamp joined the women on the porch, and explained the attractively novel situation to them. They were chatting gaily when the Ellsworths came down the stairs. Mr. Ellsworth paused for a moment to exchange a word with Uncle Billy.

"Mr. Tutt," said he, laughing, "if we go for a bit of exercise will you guarantee us the possession of our rooms when we come back?"

"Yes sir-ree!" Uncle Billy assured him. "They shan't nobody take them rooms away from you fer money, marbles, ner chalk. A bargain's a bargain, an' I allus stick to one I make," and he virtuously took a chew of tobacco while he inspected the afternoon sky with a clear conscience.

"I want to get some of those splendid autumn leaves to decorate our cozy apartments," Mrs. Ellsworth told her husband as they passed in hearing of the Van Kamps. "Do you know those oldtime rag rugs are the most oddly decorative effects that I have ever seen. They are so rich in color and so exquisitely blended."

There were reasons why this poisoned arrow failed to rankle, but the Van Kamps did not trouble to explain. They were waiting for Ralph to

come out and join his parents. Ralph, it seemed, however, had decided not to take a walk. He had already fatigued himself, he had explained, and his mother had favored him with a significant look. She could readily believe him, she had assured him, and had then left him in scorn.

The Van Kamps went out to consider the arrangement of the barn. Evelyn returned first and came out on the porch to find a handkerchief. It was not there, but Ralph was. She was very much surprised to see him, and she intimated as much.

"It's dreadfully damp in the woods," he explained. "By the way, you don't happen to know the Whitleys, of Washington, do you? Most excellent people."

"I'm quite sorry that I do not," she replied. "But you will have to excuse me. We shall be kept very busy with arranging our apartments."

Ralph sprang to his feet with a ludicrous expression.

"Not the second floor front suite!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, no! Not at all," she reassured him.

He laughed lightly.

"Honors are about even in that game," he said.

"Evelyn," called her mother from the hall. "Please come and take those front suite curtains down to the barn."

"Pardon me while we take the next trick," remarked Evelyn with a laugh quite as light and gleeful as his own, and disappeared into the hall.

He followed her slowly, and was met at the door by her father.

"You are the younger Mr. Ellsworth, I believe," politely said Mr. Van Kamp.

"Ralph Ellsworth. Yes, sir."

"Here is a note for your father. It is unsealed. You are quite at liberty to read it."

Mr. Van Kamp bowed himself away, and Ralph opened the note, which read:

EDWARD EASTMAN ELLSWORTH, ESQ.,

Dear Sir: This is to notify you that I have rented the entire furniture of the Tutt House for the ensuing week, and am compelled to assume possession of that in the three second floor front rooms, as well as all the balance not in actual use by Mr. and Mrs. Tutt and the driver of the stage. You are quite welcome, however, to make use of the furnishings in the small room over the kitchen. Your luggage you will find undisturbed. Regretting any inconvenience that this transaction may cause you, I remain,

Yours respectfully,

J. BELMONT VAN KAMP.

Ralph scratched his head in amused perplexity. It devolved upon him to even up the affair a little before his mother came back. He must support the family reputation for resourcefulness, but it took quite a bit of scalp irritation before he aggravated the right idea into being. As soon as the idea came, he went in and made a hide-bound bargain with

Uncle Billy, then he went out into the hall and waited until Evelyn came down with a huge armload of window curtains.

"Honors are still even," he remarked. "I have just bought all the edibles about the place, whether in the cellar, the house or any of the surrounding structures, in the ground, above the ground, dead or alive, and a bargain's a bargain as between man and man."

"Clever of you, I'm sure," commented Miss Van Kamp, reflectively. Suddenly her lips parted with a smile that revealed a double row of most beautiful teeth. He meditatively watched the curve of her lips.

"Isn't that rather a heavy load?" he suggested. "I'd be delighted to help you move the things, don't you know."

"It is quite kind of you, and what the men would call 'game,' I believe, under the circumstances," she answered, "but really it will not be necessary. We have hired Mr. Tutt and the driver to do the heavier part of the work, and the rest of it will be really a pleasant diversion."

"No doubt," agreed Ralph, with an appreciative grin. "By the way, you don't happen to know Maud and Dorothy Partridge, of Baltimore, do you? Stunning pretty girls, both of them, and no end of swells."

"I know so very few people in Baltimore," she murmured, and tripped on down to the barn.

Ralph went out on the porch and smoked. There was nothing else that he could do.

VIII

It was growing dusk when the elder Ellsworths returned, almost hidden by great masses of autumn boughs.

"You should have been with us, Ralph," enthusiastically said his mother. "I never saw such gorgeous tints in all my life. We have brought nearly the entire woods with us."

"It was a good idea," said Ralph. "A stunning good idea. They may come in handy to sleep on."

Mrs. Ellsworth turned cold.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"Ralph," sternly demanded his father, "you don't mean to tell us that you let the Van Kamps jockey us out of those rooms after all?"

"Indeed, no," he airily responded. "Just come right on up and see."

He led the way into the suite and struck a match. One solitary candle had been left upon the mantel shelf. Ralph thought that this had been overlooked, but his mother afterwards set him right about that. Mrs. Van Kamp had cleverly left it so that the Ellsworths could see how dreadfully bare the place was. One candle in three rooms is drearier than darkness anyhow.

Mrs. Ellsworth took in all the desolation, the dismal expanse of the now enormous apartments, the shabby walls, the hideous bright spots where pictures had hung, the splintered flooring, the great, gaunt windows--and she gave in. She had met with snub after snub, and cut after cut, in her social climb, she had had the cook quit in the middle of an important dinner, she had had every disconcerting thing possible happen to her, but this--this was the last *bale* of straw. She sat down on a suitcase, in the middle of the biggest room, and cried!

Ralph, having waited for this, now told about the food transaction, and she hastily pushed the last-coming tear back into her eye.

"Good!" she cried. "They will be up here soon. They will be compelled to compromise, and they must not find me with red eyes."

She cast a hasty glance around the room, then, in a sudden panic, seized the candle and explored the other two. She went wildly out into the hall, back into the little room over the kitchen, downstairs, everywhere, and returned in consternation.

"There's not a single mirror left in the house!" she moaned.

Ralph heartlessly grinned. He could appreciate that this was a characteristic woman trick, and wondered admiringly whether Evelyn or her mother had thought of it. However, this was a time for action.

"I'll get you some water to bathe your eyes," he offered, and ran into the little room over the kitchen to get a pitcher. A cracked shaving-mug was the only vessel that had been left, but he hurried down into the yard with it. This was no time for fastidiousness.

He had barely creaked the pump handle when Mr. Van Kamp hurried up from the barn.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Mr. Van Kamp, "but this water belongs to us. My daughter bought it, all that is in the ground, above the ground, or that may fall from the sky upon these premises."

IX

The mutual siege lasted until after seven o'clock, but it was rather one-sided. The Van Kamps could drink all the water they liked, it made

them no hungrier. If the Ellsworths ate anything, however, they grew thirstier, and, moreover, water was necessary if anything worth while was to be cooked. They knew all this, and resisted until Mrs. Ellsworth was tempted and fell. She ate a sandwich and choked. It was heartbreaking, but Ralph had to be sent down with a plate of sandwiches and an offer to trade them for water.

Halfway between the pump and the house he met Evelyn coming with a small pail of the precious fluid. They both stopped stock still; then, seeing that it was too late to retreat, both laughed and advanced.

"Who wins now?" bantered Ralph as they made the exchange.

"It looks to me like a misdeal," she gaily replied, and was moving away when he called her back.

"You don't happen to know the Gately's, of New York, do you?" he was quite anxious to know.

"I am truly sorry, but I am acquainted with so few people in New York. We are from Chicago, you know."

"Oh," said he blankly, and took the water up to the Ellsworth suite.

Mrs. Ellsworth cheered up considerably when she heard that Ralph had been met halfway, but her eyes snapped when he confessed that it was Miss Van Kamp who had met him.

"I hope you are not going to carry on a flirtation with that overdressed creature," she blazed.

"Why mother," exclaimed Ralph, shocked beyond measure. "What right have you to accuse either this young lady or myself of flirting? Flirting!"

Mrs. Ellsworth suddenly attacked the fire with quite unnecessary energy.

X

Down at the barn, the wide threshing floor had been covered with gay rag-rugs, and strewn with tables, couches, and chairs in picturesque profusion. Roomy box-stalls had been carpeted deep with clean straw, curtained off with gaudy bed-quilts, and converted into cozy sleeping apartments. The mow and the stalls had been screened off with lace curtains and blazing counterpanes, and the whole effect was one of Oriental luxury and splendor. Alas, it was only an "effect"! The red-hot parlor stove smoked abominably, the pipe carried other smoke out through the hawmow window, only to let it blow back again. Chill cross-draughts whistled in from cracks too numerous to be stopped up, and the miserable Van Kamps could only cough and shiver, and envy the Tutts and the driver, non-combatants who had been fed two hours before.

Up in the second floor suite there was a roaring fire in the big fireplace, but there was a chill in the room that no mere fire could drive away--the chill of absolute emptiness.

A man can outlive hardships that would kill a woman, but a woman can endure discomforts that would drive a man crazy.

Mr. Ellsworth went out to hunt up Uncle Billy, with an especial solace in mind. The landlord was not in the house, but the yellow gleam of a lantern revealed his presence in the woodshed, and Mr. Ellsworth stepped in upon him just as he was pouring something yellow and clear into a tumbler from a big jug that he had just taken from under the flooring.

"How much do you want for that jug and its contents?" he asked, with a sigh of gratitude that this supply had been overlooked.

Before Mr. Tutt could answer, Mr. Van Kamp hurried in at the door.

"Wait a moment!" he cried. "I want to bid on that!"

"This here jug hain't fer sale at no price," Uncle Billy emphatically announced, nipping all negotiations right in the bud. "It's too pesky hard to sneak this here licker in past Marge't, but I reckon it's my treat, gents. Ye kin have all ye want."

One minute later Mr. Van Kamp and Mr. Ellsworth were seated, one on a sawbuck and the other on a nail-keg, comfortably eyeing each other across the work bench, and each was holding up a tumbler one-third filled with the golden yellow liquid.

"Your health, sir," courteously proposed Mr. Ellsworth.

"And to you, sir," gravely replied Mr. Van Kamp.

XI

Ralph and Evelyn happened to meet at the pump, quite accidentally, after the former had made half a dozen five-minute-apart trips for a drink. It was Miss Van Kamp, this time, who had been studying on the mutual acquaintance problem.

"You don't happen to know the Tylers, of Parkersburg, do you?" she asked.

"The Tylers! I should say I do!" was the unexpected and enthusiastic reply. "Why, we are on our way now to Miss Georgiana Tyler's wedding to my friend Jimmy Carston. I'm to be best man."

"How delightful!" she exclaimed. "We are on the way there, too. Georgiana was my dearest chum at school, and I am to be her 'best girl.'"

"Let's go around on the porch and sit down," said Ralph.

XII

Mr. Van Kamp, back in the woodshed, looked about him with an eye of content.

"Rather cozy for a woodshed," he observed. "I wonder if we couldn't scare up a little session of dollar limit?"

Both Uncle Billy and Mr. Ellsworth were willing. Death and poker level all Americans. A fourth hand was needed, however. The stage driver was in bed and asleep, and Mr. Ellsworth volunteered to find the extra player.

"I'll get Ralph," he said. "He plays a fairly stiff game." He finally found his son on the porch, apparently alone, and stated his errand.

"Thank you, but I don't believe I care to play this evening," was the astounding reply, and Mr. Ellsworth looked closer. He made out, then, a dim figure on the other side of Ralph.

"Oh! Of course not!" he blundered, and went back to the woodshed.

Three-handed poker is a miserable game, and it seldom lasts long. It did not in this case. After Uncle Billy had won the only jack-pot

deserving of the name, he was allowed to go blissfully to sleep with his hand on the handle of the big jug.

After poker there is only one other always available amusement for men, and that is business. The two travelers were quite well acquainted when Ralph put his head in at the door.

"Thought I'd find you here," he explained. "It just occurred to me to wonder whether you gentlemen had discovered, as yet, that we are all to be house guests at the Carston-Tyler wedding."

"Why, no!" exclaimed his father in pleased surprise. "It is a most agreeable coincidence. Mr. Van Kamp, allow me to introduce my son, Ralph. Mr. Van Kamp and myself, Ralph, have found out that we shall be considerably thrown together in a business way from now on. He has just purchased control of the Metropolitan and Western string of interurbans."

"Delighted, I'm sure," murmured Ralph, shaking hands, and then he slipped out as quickly as possible. Some one seemed to be waiting for him.

Perhaps another twenty minutes had passed, when one of the men had an illuminating idea that resulted, later on, in pleasant relations for all of them. It was about time, for Mrs. Ellsworth, up in the bare suite, and Mrs. Van Kamp, down in the draughty barn, both wrapped up to the chin and both still chilly, had about reached the limit of patience and endurance.

"Why can't we make things a little more comfortable for all concerned?" suggested Mr. Van Kamp. "Suppose, as a starter, that we have Mrs. Van Kamp give a shiver party down in the barn?"

"Good idea," agreed Mr. Ellsworth. "A little diplomacy will do it. Each one of us will have to tell his wife that the other fellow made the first abject overtures."

Mr. Van Kamp grinned understandingly, and agreed to the infamous ruse.

"By the way," continued Mr. Ellsworth, with a still happier thought, "you must allow Mrs. Ellsworth to furnish the dinner for Mrs. Van Kamp's shiver party."

"Dinner!" gasped Mr. Van Kamp. "By all means!"

Both men felt an anxious yawning in the region of the appetite, and a yearning moisture wetted their tongues. They looked at the slumbering Uncle Billy and decided to see Mrs. Tutt themselves about a good, hot dinner for six.

"Law me!" exclaimed Aunt Margaret when they appeared at the kitchen door. "I swan I thought you folks 'u'd never come to yore senses. Here I've had a big pot o' stewed chicken ready on the stove fer two mortal hours. I kin give ye that, an' smashed taters an' chicken gravy, an' dried corn, an' hot corn-pone, an' currant jell, an' strawberry preserves, an' my own cannin' o' peaches, an' pumpkin-pie an' coffee. Will that do ye?" Would it *do!* *Would* it do!!

As Aunt Margaret talked, the kitchen door swung wide, and the two men were stricken speechless with astonishment. There, across from each other at the kitchen table, sat the utterly selfish and traitorous younger members of the rival houses of Ellsworth and Van Kamp, deep in the joys of chicken, and mashed potatoes, and gravy, and hot corn-pone, and all the other "fixings," laughing and chatting gaily like chums of years' standing. They had seemingly just come to an agreement about something or other, for Evelyn, waving the shorter end of a broken wishbone, was vivaciously saying to Ralph:

"A bargain's a bargain, and I always stick to one I make."