

His Job

By Grace Sartwell Mason

From Scribner's Magazine

Against an autumn sunset the steel skeleton of a twenty-story office building in process of construction stood out black and bizarre. It flung up its beams and girders like stern and yet airy music, orderly, miraculously strong, and delicately powerful. From the lower stories, where masons made their music of trowel and hammer, to the top, where steam-riveters rapped out their chorus like giant locusts in a summer field, the great building lived and breathed as if all those human energies that went to its making flowed warm through its steel veins.

In the west window of a womans' club next door one of the members stood looking out at this building. Behind her at a tea-table three other women sat talking. For some moments their conversation had had a plaintive if not an actually rebellious tone. They were discussing the relative advantages of a man's work and a woman's, and they had arrived at the conclusion that a man has much the best of it when it comes to a matter of the day's work.

"Take a man's work," said Mrs. Van Vechten, pouring herself a second cup of tea. "He chooses it; then he is allowed to go at it with absolute freedom. He isn't hampered by the dull, petty details of life that hamper us. He----"

"Details! My dear, there you are right," broke in Mrs. Bullen. Two men, first Mrs. Bullen's father and then her husband, had seen to it that neither the biting wind of adversity nor the bracing air of experience should ever touch her. "Details! Sometimes I feel as if I were smothered by them. Servants, and the house, and now these relief societies----"

She was in her turn interrupted by Cornelia Blair. Cornelia was a spinster with more freedom than most human beings ever attain, her father having worked himself to death to leave her well provided for. "The whole fault is the social system," she declared. "Because of it men have been able to take the really interesting work of the world for themselves. They've pushed the dull jobs off onto us."

"You're right, Cornelia," cried Mrs. Bullen. She really had nothing to say, but she hated not saying it. "I've always thought," she went on pensively, "that it would be so much easier just to go to an office in the morning and have nothing but business to think of. Don't you feel that way sometimes, Mrs. Trask?"

The woman in the west window turned. There was a quizzical gleam in her eyes as she looked at the other three. "The trouble with us women is we're blind and deaf," she said slowly. "We talk a lot about men's work and how they have the best of things in power and freedom, but does it occur to one of us that a man pays for power and freedom? Sometimes I think that not one of the women of our comfortable class would be willing to pay what our men pay for the power and freedom they get."

"What do they pay?" asked Mrs. Van Vechten, her lip curling.

Mrs. Trask turned back to the window. "There's something rather wonderful going on out here," she called. "I wish you'd all come and look."

Just outside the club window the steel-workers pursued their dangerous task with leisurely and indifferent competence, while over their head a great derrick served their needs with uncanny intelligence. It dropped its chain and picked a girder from the floor. As it rose into space two figures sprang astride either end of it. The long arm swung up and out; the two "bronco-busters of the sky" were

black against the flame of the sunset. Some one shouted; the signalman pulled at his rope; the derrick-arm swung in a little with the girder teetering at the end of the chain. The most interesting moment of the steel-man's job had come, when a girder was to be jockeyed into place. The iron arm swung the girder above two upright columns, lowered it, and the girder began to groove into place. It wedged a little. One of the men inched along, leaned against space, and wielded his bar. The women stared, for the moment taken out of themselves. Then, as the girder settled into place and the two men slid down the column to the floor, the spectators turned back to their tea-table.

"Very interesting," murmured Mrs. Van Vechten; "but I hardly see how it concerns us."

A flame leaped in Mary Trask's face. "It's what we've just been talking about, one of men's jobs. I tell you, men are working miracles all the time that women never see. We envy them their power and freedom, but we seldom open our eyes to see what they pay for them. Look here, I'd like to tell you about an ordinary man and one of his jobs." She stopped and looked from Mrs. Bullen's perplexity to Cornelia Blair's superior smile, and her eyes came last to Sally Van Vechten's rebellious frown. "I'm going to bore you, maybe," she laughed grimly. "But it will do you good to listen once in a while to something real."

She sat down and leaned her elbows on the table. "I said that he is an ordinary man," she began; "what I meant is that he started in like the average, without any great amount of special training, without money, and without pull of any kind. He had good health, good stock back of him, an attractive personality, and two years at a technical school--those were his total assets. He was twenty when he came to New York to make a place for himself, and he had already got himself engaged to a girl back home. He had enough money to keep him for about three weeks, if he lived very economically. But that didn't prevent his feeling a heady exhilaration that day when he walked up Fifth Avenue for the first time and looked over his battle-field. He has told me

often, with a chuckle at the audacity of it, how he picked out his employer. All day he walked about with his eyes open for contractors' signs. Whenever he came upon a building in the process of construction he looked it over critically, and if he liked the look of the job he made a note of the contractor's name and address in a little green book. For he was to be a builder--of big buildings, of course! And that night, when he turned out of the avenue to go to the cheap boarding-house where he had sent his trunk, he told himself that he'd give himself five years to set up an office of his own within a block of Fifth Avenue.

"Next day he walked into the offices of Weil & Street--the first that headed the list in the little green book--asked to see Mr. Weil, and, strangely enough, got him, too. Even in those raw days Robert had a cheerful assurance tempered with rather a nice deference that often got him what he wanted from older men. When he left the offices of Weil & Street he had been given a job in the estimating-room, at a salary that would just keep him from starving. He grew lean and lost his country color that winter, but he was learning, learning all the time, not only in the office of Weil & Street, but at night school, where he studied architecture. When he decided he had got all he could get out of the estimating and drawing rooms he asked to be transferred to one of the jobs. They gave him the position of timekeeper on one of the contracts, at a slight advance in salary.

"A man can get as much or as little out of being timekeeper as he chooses. Robert got a lot out of it. He formulated that summer a working theory of the length of time it should take to finish every detail of a building. He talked with bricklayers, he timed them and watched them, until he knew how many bricks could be laid in an hour; and it was the same way with carpenters, fireproofers, painters, plasterers. He soaked in a thousand practical details of building: he picked out the best workman in each gang, watched him, talked with him, learned all he could of that man's particular trick; and it all went down in the little green book. For at the back of his head was always

the thought of the time when he should use all this knowledge in his own business. Then one day when he had learned all he could learn from being timekeeper, he walked into Weil's office again and proposed that they make him one of the firm's superintendents of construction.

"Old Weil fairly stuttered with the surprise of this audacious proposition. He demanded to know what qualifications the young man could show for so important a position, and Robert told him about the year he had had with the country builder and the three summer vacations with the country surveyor--which made no impression whatever on Mr. Weil until Robert produced the little green book. Mr. Weil glanced at some of the figures in the book, snorted, looked hard at his ambitious timekeeper, who looked back at him with his keen young eyes and waited. When he left the office he had been promised a tryout on a small job near the offices, where, as old Weil said, they could keep an eye on him. That night he wrote to the girl back home that she must get ready to marry him at a moment's notice."

Mrs. Trask leaned back in her chair and smiled with a touch of sadness. "The wonder of youth! I can see him writing that letter, exuberant, ambitious, his brain full of dreams and plans--and a very inadequate supper in his stomach. The place where he lived--he pointed it out to me once--was awful. No girl of Rob's class--back home his folks were 'nice'--would have stood that lodging-house for a night, would have eaten the food he did, or gone without the pleasures of life as he had gone without them for two years. But there, right at the beginning, is the difference between what a boy is willing to go through to get what he wants and what a girl would or could put up with. And along with a better position came a man's responsibility, which he shouldered alone.

"'I was horribly afraid I'd fall down on the job,' he told me long afterward. 'And there wasn't a living soul I could turn to for help. The thing was up to me alone!'"

Mrs. Trask looked from Mrs. Bullen to Mrs. Van Vechten. "Mostly they fight alone," she said, as if she thought aloud. "That's one thing about men we don't always grasp--the business of existence is up to the average man alone. If he fails or gets into a tight place he has no one to fall back on, as a woman almost always has. Our men have a prejudice against taking their business difficulties home with them. I've a suspicion it's because we're so ignorant they'd have to do too much explaining! So in most cases they haven't even a sympathetic understanding to help them over the bad places. It was so with Robert even after he had married the girl back home and brought her to the city. His idea was to keep her from all worry and anxiety, and so, when he came home at night and she asked him if he had had a good day, or if the work had gone well, he always replied cheerfully that things had gone about the same as usual, even though the day had been a particularly bad one. This was only at first, however. The girl happened to be the kind that likes to know things. One night, when she wakened to find him staring sleepless at the ceiling, the thought struck her that, after all, she knew nothing of his particular problems, and if they were partners in the business of living why shouldn't she be an intelligent member of the firm, even if only a silent one?

"So she began to read everything she could lay her hands on about the business of building construction, and very soon when she asked a question it was a fairly intelligent one, because it had some knowledge back of it. She didn't make the mistake of pestering him with questions before she had any groundwork of technical knowledge to build on, and I'm not sure that he ever guessed what she was up to, but I do know that gradually, as he found that he did not, for instance, have to draw a diagram and explain laboriously what a caisson was because she already knew a good deal about caissons, he fell into the habit of talking out to her a great many of the situations he would have to meet next day. Not that she offered her advice nor that he wanted it, but what helped was the fact of her sympathy--I should say her intelligent sympathy, for that is the only kind that can really help.

"So when his big chance came along she was ready to meet it with him. If he succeeded she would be all the better able to appreciate his success; and if he failed she would never blame him from ignorance. You must understand that his advance was no meteoric thing. He somehow, by dint of sitting up nights poring over blueprints and text-books and by day using his wits and his eyes and his native shrewdness, managed to pull off with fair success his first job as superintendent; was given other contracts to oversee; and gradually, through three years of hard work, learning, learning all the time, worked up to superintending some of the firm's important jobs. Then he struck out for himself."

Mrs. Trask turned to look out of the west window. "It sounds so easy," she mused. "'Struck out for himself.' But I think only a man can quite appreciate how much courage that takes. Probably, if the girl had not understood where he was trying to get to, he would have hesitated longer to give up his good, safe salary; but they talked it over, she understood the hazards of the game, and she was willing to take a chance. They had saved a tiny capital, and only a little over five years from the day he had come to New York he opened an office within a block of Fifth Avenue.

"I won't bore you with the details of the next two years, when he was getting together his organization, teaching himself the details of office work, stalking architects and owners for contracts. He acquired a slight stoop to his shoulders in those two years and there were days when there was nothing left of his boyishness but the inextinguishable twinkle in his hazel eyes. There were times when it seemed to him as if he had put to sea in a rowboat; as if he could never make port; but after a while small contracts began to come in, and then came along the big opportunity. Up in a New England city a large bank building was to be built; one of the directors was a friend of Rob's father, and Rob was given a chance to put in an estimate. It meant so much to him that he would not let himself count on getting the contract; he did not

even tell the partner at home that he had been asked to put in an estimate until one day he came tearing in to tell her that he had been given the job. It seemed too wonderful to be true. The future looked so dazzling that they were almost afraid to contemplate it. Only something wildly extravagant would express their emotion, so they chartered a hansom cab and went gayly sailing up-town on the late afternoon tide of Fifth Avenue; and as they passed the building on which Robert had got his job as timekeeper he took off his hat to it, and she blew a kiss to it, and a dreary old clubman in a window next door brightened visibly!"

Mrs. Trask turned her face toward the steel skeleton springing up across the way like the magic beanstalk in the fairy-tale. "The things men have taught themselves to do!" she cried. "The endurance and skill, the inventiveness, the precision of science, the daring of human wits, the poetry and fire that go into the making of great buildings! We women walk in and out of them day after day, blindly--and this indifference is symbolical, I think, of the way we walk in and out of our men's lives.... I wish I could make you see that job of young Robert's so that you would feel in it what I do--the patience of men, the strain of the responsibility they carry night and day, the things life puts up to them, which they have to meet alone, the dogged endurance of them...."

Mrs. Trask leaned forward and traced a complicated diagram on the table-cloth with the point of a fork. "It was his first big job, you understand, and he had got it in competition with several older builders. From the first they were all watching him, and he knew it, which put a fine edge to his determination to put the job through with credit. To be sure, he was handicapped by lack of capital, but his past record had established his credit, and when the foundation work was begun it was a very hopeful young man that watched the first shovelful of earth taken out. But when they had gone down about twelve feet, with a trench for a retaining-wall, they discovered that the owners' boring plan was not a trustworthy representation of

conditions; the job was going to be a soft-ground proposition. Where, according to the owners' preliminary borings, he should have found firm sand with a normal amount of moisture, Rob discovered sand that was like saturated oatmeal, and beyond that quicksand and water. Water! Why, it was like a subterranean lake fed by a young river! With the pulsometer pumps working night and day they couldn't keep the water out of the test pier he had sunk. It bubbled in as cheerfully as if it had eternal springs behind it, and drove the men out of the pier in spite of every effort. Rob knew then what he was up against. But he still hoped that he could sink the foundations without compressed air, which would be an immense expense he had not figured on in his estimate, of course. So he devised a certain kind of concrete crib, the first one was driven--and when they got it down beneath quicksand and water about twenty-five feet, it hung up on a boulder! You see, below the stratum of sand like saturated oatmeal, below the water and quicksand, they had come upon something like a New England pasture, as thick with big boulders as a bun with currants! If he had spent weeks hunting for trouble he couldn't have found more than was offered him right there. It was at this point that he went out and wired a big New York engineer, who happened to be a friend of his, to come up. In a day or two the engineer arrived, took a look at the job, and then advised Rob to quit.

"It's a nasty job,' he told him. 'It will swallow every penny of your profits and probably set you back a few thousands. It's one of the worst soft-ground propositions I ever looked over.'

"Well that night young Robert went home with a sleep-walking expression in his eyes. He and the partner at home had moved up to Rockford to be near the job while the foundation work was going on, so the girl saw exactly what he was up against and what he had to decide between.

"I could quit,' he said that night, after the engineer had taken his train back to New York, 'throw up the job, and the owners couldn't hold me

because of their defective boring plans. But if I quit there'll be twenty competitors to say I've bit off more than I can chew. And if I go on I lose money; probably go into the hole so deep I'll be a long time getting out.'

"You see, where his estimates had covered only the expense of normal foundation work he now found himself up against the most difficult conditions a builder can face. When the girl asked him if the owners would not make up the additional cost he grinned ruefully. The owners were going to hold him to his original estimate; they knew that with his name to make he would hate to give up; and they were inclined to be almost as nasty as the job.

"Then you'll have all this work and difficulty for nothing?' the girl asked. 'You may actually lose money on the job?'

"Looks that way,' he admitted.

"Then why do you go on?' she cried.

"His answer taught the girl a lot about the way a man looks at his job. 'If I take up the cards I can't be a quitter,' he said. 'It would hurt my record. And my record is the equivalent of credit and capital. I can't afford to have any weak spots in it. I'll take the gaff rather than have it said about me that I've lain down on a job. I'm going on with this thing to the end.'"

Little shrewd, reminiscent lines gathered about Mrs. Trask's eyes. "There's something exhilarating about a good fight. I've always thought that if I couldn't be a gunner I could get a lot of thrills out of just handing up the ammunition.... Well, Rob went on with the contract. With the first crib hung up on a boulder and the water coming in so fast they couldn't pump it out fast enough to dynamite, he was driven to use compressed air, and that meant the hiring of a compressor, locks, shafting--a terribly costly business--as well as

bringing up to the job a gang of the high-priced labor that works under air. But this was done, and the first crib for the foundation piers went down slowly, with the sand-hogs--men that work in the caissons--drilling and blasting their way week after week through that underground New England pasture. Then, below this boulder-strewn stratum, instead of the ledge they expected they struck four feet of rotten rock, so porous that when air was put on it to force the water back great air bubbles blew up all through the lot, forcing the men out of the other caissons and trenches. But this was a mere dull detail, to be met by care and ingenuity like the others. And at last, forty feet below street level, they reached bed-rock. Forty-six piers had to be driven to this ledge.

"Rob knew now exactly what kind of a job was cut out for him. He knew he had not only the natural difficulties to overcome, but he was going to have to fight the owners for additional compensation. So one day he went into Boston and interviewed a famous old lawyer.

"'Would you object,' he asked the lawyer, 'to taking a case against personal friends of yours, the owners of the Rockford bank building?'

"'Not at all--and if you're right, I'll lick 'em! What's your case?'

"Rob told him the whole story. When he finished the famous man refused to commit himself one way or the other; but he said that he would be in Rockford in a few days, and perhaps he'd look at Robert's little job. So one day, unannounced, the lawyer appeared. The compressor plant was hard at work forcing the water back in the caissons, the pulsometer pumps were sucking up streams of water that flowed without ceasing into the settling tank and off into the city sewers, the men in the caissons were sending up buckets full of silt-like gruel. The lawyer watched operations for a few minutes, then he asked for the owners' boring plan. When he had examined this he grunted twice, twitched his lower lip humorously, and said: 'I'll put

you out of this. If the owners wanted a deep-water lighthouse they should have specified one--not a bank building.'

"So the battle of legal wits began. Before the building was done Joshua Kent had succeeded in making the owners meet part of the additional cost of the foundation, and Robert had developed an acumen that stood by him the rest of his life. But there was something for him in this job bigger than financial gain or loss. Week after week, as he overcame one difficulty after another, he was learning, learning, just as he had done at Weil & Street's. His hazel eyes grew keener, his face thinner. For the job began to develop every freak and whimsey possible to a growing building. The owner of the department store next door refused to permit access through his basement, and that added many hundred dollars to the cost of building the party wall; the fire and telephone companies were continually fussing around and demanding indemnity because their poles and hydrants got knocked out of plumb; the thousands of gallons of dirty water pumped from the job into the city sewers clogged them up, and the city sued for several thousand dollars' damages; one day the car-tracks in front of the lot settled and valuable time was lost while the men shored them up; now and then the pulsometer engines broke down; the sand-hogs all got drunk and lost much time; an untimely frost spoiled a thousand dollars' worth of concrete one night. But the detail that required the most handling was the psychological effect on Rob's subcontractors. These men, observing the expensive preliminary operations, and knowing that Rob was losing money every day the foundation work lasted, began to ask one another if the young boss would be able to put the job through. If he failed, of course they who had signed up with him for various stages of the work would lose heavily. Panic began to spread among all the little army that goes to the making of a big building. The terra-cotta-floor men, the steel men, electricians and painters began to hang about the job with gloom in their eyes; they wore a path to the architect's door, and he, never having quite approved of so young a man being given the contract, did little to allay their apprehensions. Rob knew that if this kept up they'd hurt his

credit, so he promptly served notice on the architect that if his credit was impaired by false rumors he'd hold him responsible; and he gave each subcontractor five minutes in which to make up his mind whether he wanted to quit or look cheerful. To a man they chose to stick by the job; so that detail was disposed of. In the meantime the sinking of piers for one of the retaining-walls was giving trouble. One morning at daylight Rob's superintendent telephoned him to announce that the street was caving in and the buildings across the way were cracking. When Rob got there he found the men standing about scared and helpless, while the plate-glass windows of the store opposite were cracking like pistons and the building settled. It appeared that when the trench for the south wall had gone down a certain distance water began to rush in under the sheeting as if from an underground river, and, of course, undermined the street and the store opposite. The pumps were started like mad, two gangs were put at work, with the superintendent swearing, threatening, and pleading to make them dig faster, and at last concrete was poured and the water stopped. That day Rob and his superintendent had neither breakfast nor lunch; but they had scarcely finished shoring up the threatened store when the owner of the store notified Rob that he would sue for damages, and the secretary of the Y. W. C. A. next door attempted to have the superintendent arrested for profanity. Rob said that when this happened he and his superintendent solemnly debated whether they should go and get drunk or start a fight with the sand-hogs; it did seem as if they were entitled to some emotional outlet, all the circumstances considered!

"So after months of difficulties the foundation work was at last finished. I've forgotten to mention that there was some little difficulty with the eccentricities of the sub-basement floor. The wet clay ruined the first concrete poured, and little springs had a way of gushing up in the boiler-room. Also, one night a concrete shell for the elevator pit completely disappeared--sank out of sight in the soft bottom. But by digging the trench again and jacking down the bottom and putting hay under the concrete, the floor was finished; and that detail was settled.

"The remainder of the job was by comparison uneventful. The things that happened were all more or less in the day's work, such as a carload of stone for the fourth story arriving when what the masons desperately needed was the carload for the second, and the carload for the third getting lost and being discovered after three days' search among the cripples in a Buffalo freight-yard. And there was a strike of structural-steel work workers which snarled up everything for a while; and always, of course, there were the small obstacles and differences owners and architects are in the habit of hatching up to keep a builder from getting indifferent. But these things were what every builder encounters and expects. What Rob's wife could not reconcile herself to was the fact that all those days of hard work, all those days and nights of strain and responsibility, were all for nothing. Profits had long since been drowned in the foundation work; Robert would actually have to pay several thousand dollars for the privilege of putting up that building! When the girl could not keep back one wail over this detail her husband looked at her in genuine surprise.

"'Why, it's been worth the money to me, what I've learned,' he said. 'I've got an education out of that old hoodoo that some men go through Tech and work twenty years without getting; I've learned a new wrinkle in every one of the building trades; I've learned men and I've learned law, and I've delivered the goods. It's been hell, but I wouldn't have missed it!'"

Mrs. Trask looked eagerly and a little wistfully at the three faces in front of her. Her own face was alight. "Don't you see--that's the way a real man looks at his work; but that man's wife would never have understood it if she hadn't been interested enough to watch his job. She saw him grow older and harder under that job; she saw him often haggard from the strain and sleepless because of a dozen intricate problems; but she never heard him complain and she never saw him any way but courageous and often boyishly gay when he'd got the best of some difficulty. And furthermore, she knew that if she had been the

kind of a woman who is not interested in her husband's work he would have kept it to himself, as most American husbands do. If he had, she would have missed a chance to learn a lot of things that winter, and she probably wouldn't have known anything about the final chapter in the history of the job that the two of them had fallen into the habit of referring to as the White Elephant. They had moved back to New York then, and the Rockford bank building was within two weeks of its completion, when at seven o'clock one morning their telephone rang. Rob answered it and his wife heard him say sharply: 'Well, what are you doing about it?' And then: 'Keep it up. I'll catch the next train.'

"What is it?" she asked, as he turned away from the telephone and she saw his face.

"The department store next to the Elephant is burning,' he told her. 'Fireproof? Well, I'm supposed to have built a fireproof building--but you never can tell.'

"His wife's next thought was of insurance, for she knew that Robert had to insure the building himself up to the time he turned it over to the owners. 'The insurance is all right?' she asked him.

"But she knew by the way he turned away from her that the worst of all their bad luck with the Elephant had happened, and she made him tell her. The insurance had lapsed about a week before. Rob had not renewed the policy because its renewal would have meant adding several hundreds to his already serious deficit, and, as he put it, it seemed to him that everything that could happen to that job had already happened. But now the last stupendous, malicious catastrophe threatened him. Both of them knew when he said good-bye that morning and hurried out to catch his train that he was facing ruin. His wife begged him to let her go with him; at least she would be some one to talk to on that interminable journey; but he said that was absurd; and, anyway, he had a lot of thinking to do. So he started off alone.

"At the station before he left he tried to get the Rockford bank building on the telephone. He got Rockford and tried for five minutes to make a connection with his superintendent's telephone in the bank building, until the operator's voice came to him over the wire: 'I tell you, you can't get that building, mister. It's burning down!'

"How do you know?' he besought her.

"I just went past there and I seen it,' her voice came back at him.

"He got on the train. At first he felt nothing but a queer dizzy vacuum where his brain should have been; the landscape outside the windows jumbled together like a nightmare landscape thrown up on a moving-picture screen. For fifty miles he merely sat rigidly still, but in reality he was plunging down like a drowning man to the very bottom of despair. And then, like the drowning man, he began to come up to the surface again. The instinct for self-preservation stirred in him and broke the grip of that hypnotizing despair. At first slowly and painfully, but at last with quickening facility, he began to think, to plan. Stations went past; a man he knew spoke to him and then walked on, staring; but he was deaf and blind. He was planning for the future. Already he had plumbed, measured, and put behind him the fact of the fire; what he occupied himself with now was what he could save from the ashes to make a new start with. And he told me afterwards that actually, at the end of two hours of the liveliest thinking he had ever done in his life, he began to enjoy himself! His fighting blood began to tingle; his head steadied and grew cool; his mind reached out and examined every aspect of his stupendous failure, not to indulge himself in the weakness of regret, but to find out the surest and quickest way to get on his feet again. Figuring on the margins of timetables, going over the contracts he had in hand, weighing every asset he possessed in the world, he worked out in minute detail a plan to save his credit and his future. When he got off the train at Boston he was a man that had already begun life over again; he was a general

that was about to make the first move in a long campaign, every move and counter-move of which he carried in his brain. Even as he crossed the station he was rehearsing the speech he was going to make at the meeting of his creditors he intended to hold that afternoon. Then, as he hastened toward a telephone-booth, he ran into a newsboy. A headline caught his eye. He snatched at the paper, read the headlines, standing there in the middle of the room. And then he suddenly sat down on the nearest bench, weak and shaking.

"On the front page of the paper was a half-page picture of the Rockford bank building with the flames curling up against its west wall, and underneath it a caption that he read over and over before he could grasp what it meant to him. The White Elephant had not burned; in fact, at the last it had turned into a good elephant, for it had not only not burned but it had stopped the progress of what threatened to be a very disastrous conflagration, according to a jubilant despatch from Rockford. And Robert, reading these lines over and over, felt an amazing sort of indignant disappointment to think that now he would not have a chance to put to the test those plans he had so minutely worked out. He was in the position of a man that has gone through the painful process of readjusting his whole life; who has mentally met and conquered a catastrophe that fails to come off. He felt quite angry and cheated for a few minutes, until he regained his mental balance and saw how absurd he was, and then, feeling rather foolish and more than a little shaky, he caught a train and went up to Rockford.

"There he found out that the report had been right; beyond a few cracked wire-glass windows--for which, as one last painful detail, he had to pay--and a blackened side wall, the Elephant was unharmed. The men putting the finishing touches to the inside had not lost an hour's work. All that dreadful journey up from New York had been merely one last turn of the screw.

"Two weeks later he turned the Elephant over to the owners, finished, a good, workmanlike job from roof to foundation-piers. He had lost

money on it; for months he had worked overtime his courage, his ingenuity, his nerve, and his strength. But that did not matter. He had delivered the goods. I believe he treated himself to an afternoon off and went to a ball-game; but that was all, for by this time other jobs were under way, a whole batch of new problems were waiting to be solved; in a week the Elephant was forgotten."

Mrs. Trask pushed back her chair and walked to the west window. A strange quiet had fallen upon the sky-scraper now; the workmen had gone down the ladders, the steam-riveters had ceased their tapping. Mrs. Trask opened the window and leaned out a little.

Behind her the three women at the tea-table gathered up their furs in silence. Cornelia Blair looked relieved and prepared to go on to dinner at another club, Mrs. Bullen avoided Mrs. Van Vechten's eye. In her rosy face faint lines had traced themselves, as if vaguely some new perceptiveness troubled her. She looked at her wristwatch and rose from the table hastily.

"I must run along," she said. "I like to get home before John does. You going my way, Sally?"

Mrs. Van Vechten shook her head absently. There was a frown between her dark brows; but as she stood fastening her furs her eyes went to the west window, with an expression in them that was almost wistful. For an instant she looked as if she were going over to the window beside Mary Trask; then she gathered up her gloves and muff and went out without a word.

Mary Trask was unaware of her going. She had forgotten the room behind her and her friends at the tea-table, as well as the other women drifting in from the adjoining room. She was contemplating, with her little, absent-minded smile, her husband's name on the builder's sign halfway up the unfinished sky-scraper opposite.

"Good work, old Rob," she murmured. Then her hand went up in a quaint gesture that was like a salute. "To all good jobs and the men behind them!" she added.

FOOTNOTE:

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