

***EDWIN
LEFEVRE***



***THE LAST
PENNY***

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Edwin Lefevre

The Last Penny

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CHAPTER I

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THOMAS LEIGH, ex-boy, considered the dozen neckties before him a long time, and finally decided to wait until after breakfast.

It was his second day at home and his third day out of college. Already his undergraduate life seemed far away. His triumphs—of personality rather than of scholarship—lingered as a luminous mist that softened the sterner realities and mellowed them goldenly. When one is young reminiscences of one's youth are apt to take on a tinge of melancholy, but Tommy, not having breakfasted, shook off the mood determinedly. He was two hundred and fifty-five months old; therefore, he decided that no great man ever crosses a bridge until he comes to it. Tommy's bridge was still one long joy-ride ahead. The sign, "Slow down to four miles an hour!" was not yet in sight. The selection of the necktie was a serious matter because he was to lunch at Sherry's with the one sister and the younger of the two cousins of Rivington Willetts.

In the mean time he had an invitation to spend the first half of July with Bull Wilson's folks at Gloucester, a week with "Van" Van Schaick for the cruise at Newport, as long as he wished with Jimmy Maitland at Mr. Maitland's camp in the Adirondacks, and he had given a half promise to accompany Ellis Gladwin to Labrador for big game in the fall.

He suddenly remembered that he was at his last ten-spot. There was the Old Man to touch for fifty bucks. And also—sometime—he must have a heart-to-heart talk of a

business nature about his allowance. He and his friends desired to take a post-graduate course. They proposed to specialize on New York.

Mr. Leigh always called him Thomas. This had saved Mr. Leigh at least one thousand dollars a year during Tommy's four at college, by making Tommy realize that he had no doting father. At times the boy had sent his requests for an extra fifty with some misgivings—by reason of the impelling cause of the request—but Mr. Leigh always sent the check for the exact amount by return mail, and made no direct reference to it. Instead he permitted himself an irrelevant phrase or two, like, “Remember, Thomas, that you must have no conditions at the end of the term.”

Possibly because of a desire to play fair with a parent who had no sense of humor, or perhaps it was because he was level-headed enough not to overwork a good thing, at all events Tommy managed, sometimes pretty narrowly, to escape the conditions. And being very popular, and knowing that quotable wisdom was expected of him, he was rather careful of what he said and did.

He knew nothing about his father's business affairs, excepting that Mr. Leigh was connected with the Metropolitan National Bank, which was a very rich bank, and that he continued to live in the little house on West Twelfth Street, because it was in that house that Mrs. Leigh had lived her seventeen months of married life—it was where Tommy was born and where she died. The furniture was chiefly old family pieces which, without his being aware of it, had made Tommy feel at home in the houses of the very wealthy friends he had made at college. It is something to

have been American for two hundred years. Family furniture reminds you of it every day.

Tommy wondered, curiously rather than anxiously, how much his father would allow him, and whether it would be wiser to argue like a man against its inadequacy or to plead like a boy for an increase; then whether he ought to get it in cash Saturday mornings or to have a checking account at his father's bank. But one thing was certain—he would not be led into reckless check-signing habits. His boy-financier days were over. Those of his friends who had multi-millionaire fathers were always complaining of being hard up. It was, therefore, not an unfashionable thing to be. He surmised that his father was not really rich, because he kept no motor, had no expensive personal habits, belonged to no clubs, and never sent to Tommy at college more money than Tommy asked for, and, moreover, sent it only when Tommy asked. Since his Prep-school days Tommy had spent most of his vacations at boys' houses. Mr. Leigh at times was invited to join him, or to become acquainted with the families of Tommy's friends, but he never accepted.

Tommy, having definitely decided not to make any plans until after his first grown-up business talk with his father, looked at himself in the mirror and put on his best serious look. He was satisfied with it. He had successfully used it on mature business men when soliciting advertisements for the college paper.

He then decided to breakfast with his father, who had the eccentric habit of leaving the house at exactly eight-forty a.m.

It was actually only eight-eight when Tommy entered the dining-room. Maggie, the elderly chambermaid and waitress, in her twenty-second consecutive year of service, whom he always remembered as the only woman who could be as taciturn as his father, looked surprised, but served him oatmeal. It was a warm day in June, but this household ran in ruts.

Mr. Leigh looked up from his newspaper. "Good morning, Thomas," he said. Then he resumed his *Tribune*.

"Good morning, father," said Tommy, and had a sense of having left his salutation unfinished. He breakfasted in a sober, business-like way, feeling age creeping upon him. Nevertheless, when he had finished he hesitated to light a cigarette. He never had done it in the house, for his father had expressed the wish that his son should not smoke until he was of age. Tommy's twenty-first birthday had come off at college.

Well, he was of age now.

The smell of the vile thing made Mr. Leigh look at his son, frowning. Then he ceased to frown. "Ah yes," he observed, meditatively, "you are of age. You are a man now."

"I suspect I am, father," said Thomas, pleasantly. "In fact, I—"

"Then it is time you heard man's talk!"

Mr. Leigh took out his watch, looked at it, and put it back in his pocket with a methodical leisureliness that made Tommy realize that Mr. Leigh was a very old man, though he could not be more than fifty. Tommy was silent, and was made subtly conscious that in not speaking he was somehow playing safe.

“Thomas, I have treated you as a boy during twenty-one years.” Mr. Leigh paused just long enough for Tommy to wonder why he had not added “and three months.” Mr. Leigh went on, with that same uncomfortable, senile precision: “Your mother would have wished it. You are a man now and—”

He closed his lips abruptly, but without any suggestion of temper or of making a sudden decision, and rose, a bit stiffly. His face took on a look of grim resolution that filled Tommy with that curious form of indeterminate remorse with which we anticipate abstract accusations against which there is no concrete defense. It seemed to make an utter stranger of Mr. Leigh. Tommy saw before him a life with which his own did not merge. He would have preferred a scolding as being more paternal, more humanly flesh-and-blood. He was not frightened.

He never had been wild; at the worst he had been a complacent shirker of future responsibilities, with that more or less adventurous desire to float on the tide that comes to American boys whose financial necessities do not compel them to fix their anchorage definitely. At college such boys are active citizens in their community, concerned with sports and class politics, and the development of their immemorial strategy against existing institutions. And for the same sad reason of youth Tommy could not possibly know that he was now standing, not on a rug in his father's dining-room, but on the top of life's first hill, with a pleasant valley below him—and one steep mountain beyond. All that his quick self-scrutinizing could do was to end in wondering which particular exploit, thitherto deemed unknown to his

father, was to be the key-note of the impending speech. And for the life of him, without seeking self-extenuation, he could not think of any serious enough to bring so grimly determined a look on his father's face.

Mr. Leigh folded the newspaper, and, without looking at his son, said, harshly, "Come with me into the library."

Tommy followed his father into the particularly gloomy room at the back of the second floor, where all the chairs were too uncomfortable for any one to wish to read any book there. On the small black-walnut table were the family Bible, an ivory paper-cutter, and a silver frame in which was a fading photograph of his mother.

"Sit down!" commanded the old man. There was a new note in the voice.

Tommy sat down, the vague disquietude within him for the first time rising to alarm. He wondered if his father's mind was sound, and instantly dismissed the suspicion. It was too unpleasant to consider, and, moreover, it seemed disloyal. Tommy was very strong on loyalty. His college life had given it to him.

Mr. Leigh looked, not at his son but at the photograph of his son's mother, a long time it seemed to Tommy. At length he raised his head and stared at his son.

Tommy saw that the grimness had gone. There remained only calm resolve. Knowing that the speech was about to begin, Tommy squared his shoulders. He would answer "Yes" or "No" truthfully. He wasn't afraid now.

"Thomas, the sacrifices I have made for you I do not begrudge," said Mr. Leigh, in a voice that did not tremble because an iron will would not let it. "But it is well that you

should know once for all that you can never repay me in full. You are my only son. But—you cost me your mother!”

Tommy knew that his mother had paid for his life with her own—knew it from Maggie, not from his father. To Tommy love and loyalty were among the undoubted pleasures of life. Recriminations he looked upon as evidences of a shabby soul. He repressed the desire to defend himself against injustice and loyally said, “Yes, sir!”

His father went on, “I have kept also an accurate account of what you have cost me in cash.”

Mr. Leigh went to his desk and took from a drawer a small book bound in morocco. He came back to the table, sat down, motioned Tommy to a chair beside him, opened the book at the first page, and showed Tommy:

Thomas Francis Leigh, In acct. with William R. Leigh, Dr.

Tommy felt that he was at the funeral services of some one he knew. His father seemed to hesitate, then handed the little book to Tommy. The morocco cover was black—the color of mourning.

Mr. Leigh went on in the voice a man will use when he is staring not through space, but across time: “Before you were born we were sure you would be a boy. She formed great plans for you. It is just as well that she did; it gave her the only happiness she ever got from you.” He raised his eyes to Tommy's, and with a half frown that was not of anger, said: “She was very extravagant in her gifts to you. She spent money lavishly, months before you were born, on what she thought you would love to have—large sums, all on paper, for we were very poor and had no money whatever to put aside for the day when you should need it.

She told me many times that she did not wish you to have brothers or sisters, because she already loved you so much that she felt she could never love the others, and it would not be fair.” The old, old man paused. Then he added, softly, “She had her wish, my son!”

Tommy felt very uncomfortable. His mother was coming to life in his heart. What for years had been a faint convention was now dramatizing in blood and tears before his very eyes. He felt more like a son than ever before, and—this was curious!—more like a son to his own father. And his own father continued in a monotone:

“But being a bookkeeper at a bank and being very, very poor, the only inexpensive recreation I could think of was to keep your books for you. So I debited you with every penny I spent for you. You will find that the first item in that book was a lace cap which she bought for you at a special sale, for \$2.69. I didn't scold her for extravagance. Instead, I gave up smoking. And—I have kept the cap, my son!”

Tommy looked down, that he might not see his father's face. He read the first item. The ink was pale, but the writing was legible. It was as his father had said. And there were other items, all for baby clothes. He read them one after another, dully, until he came to:

Doctor Wyman.....\$218.50

Funeral expenses in full.....\$191.15

The old man seemed to know, in some mysterious way, which particular item Tommy was reading, for he said, suddenly, with a subtle note of apology in his voice:

“I loved her, my son! I loved her! You cost me her life! You did not do it intentionally. But—but I felt you owed me

something, and so I—charged you with the expense incurred. She would have—fought for you; but I held it against you and I wrote it down. And I wrote it down, in black and white, that in my grief I might have an added grief, my son!”

Tommy looked up suddenly, and saw that his father was nodding toward the photograph on the table, nodding again and again. And Tommy felt himself becoming more and more a son—to both! He did not think concretely of any one thing, but he felt that he was enveloped by a life that does not die. That, after all, is the function of death.

Presently Mr. Leigh ceased to nod at the photograph and looked at Tommy. And in the same dispirited monotone, as though his very soul had kept books for an eternity, said:

“We talked over your life, my son. Months before you came she picked out your schools and your college. It is to those that you have gone. She had no social ambitions for herself. They were all for you. She wanted you to be the intimate of those whom we called the best people in those days. They are your friends to-day. I promised her that I would do as she wished.” The old man looked at Tommy straight in the eyes. “You have had everything you wished—at least, everything you ever asked me for. I have kept my promise to her. And, my son, I do not begrudge the cost!”

The way he looked when he said this made Tommy exceedingly uncomfortable. It was plain that Mr. Leigh was much poorer than Tommy had feared. In some way not quite fully grasped, Tommy Leigh realized that all his plans—the plans he really had not formed!—were brought to naught. And when his father spoke again Tommy listened with as

poignant an interest as before, but with distinctly less curiosity.

“Her plans for you all were for your boyhood. After your graduation from college I was to take charge of your business career, provide or suggest or approve of your life's occupation. The day is here. I owe you an explanation, that you may be helped to a decision following your understanding of your position—and of mine!” He ceased to speak, rose, took from the table the photograph of his wife, looked at it, and muttered, “It is now between us men!”

He carried the photograph to his bedroom. He returned presently and, looking at Tommy full in the face, said with a touch of sternness that had been absent from his voice while the photograph was on the table:

“My son, when we married I was getting exactly eighteen dollars a week. Your grandmother lived with us and paid the rent of this house, in return for which she had her meals with us. When you were born I was getting one thousand and forty dollars a year. This house—the only house in which she lived with me—I kept after she died and after your grandmother went away. I do not own it. It is too big for my needs—and too small for my regrets. But I could not live anywhere else. And so I have kept it all these years. My salary at the bank was raised to fifteen hundred dollars when you were four years old, and later to eighteen hundred dollars. For the last fourteen years my salary from the bank has been twenty-five hundred dollars a year.”

Tommy felt as if something as heavy as molten lead and as cold as frozen air had been force-pumped into his heart and had filled it to bursting.

“You have cost me, up to this day, a trifle over seventeen thousand dollars. At school you cost me a little less than my salary. At college you spent one thousand eight hundred and seventy-eight dollars for your Freshman, two thousand and twelve dollars for your Sophomore, two thousand one hundred and forty-six dollars for your Junior, and two thousand three hundred and ninety-one dollars for your Senior year. Your summer vacation expenses have added an average of four hundred dollars a year to what you cost me since you were sixteen. But I have kept my promise to her. I do not begrudge the cost!”

There was a subtle defiance' in the old man's voice, and also a subtle accusation. To Tommy his father's arithmetic had in it something not only incomprehensible, but uncanny. The old man looked as if he expected speech from his son, so Tommy stammered uncomfortably:

“I—I suppose—your s-savings—”

The grim lines came back to the old man's mouth. “I had the house rent to pay, and my salary was what I have told you.”

“I don't quite understand—” floundered Tommy.

“You have had the college and the friends she wished you to have. When you asked for money I always sent it to you. I asked no questions and urged no economies.”

“I had no idea—” began Tommy, and suddenly ceased to talk. There came a question into his eyes. The past was over and done with. There remained the future. What was expected of him? What was he to do?

But the old man missed the question. All he saw was an interrogation, and he said, “You wish to know how I did it?”

This was not at all what Tommy really wished to know, but he nodded, for, after all, his father's answer would be one of the many answers to one of the many questions he had to ask.

“My son”—Mr. Leigh spoke in a low voice, but looked unflinchingly at his son—“I ask you, as a grown man, what does an old and trusted bank employee always do who spends much more than his salary?”

Tommy's soul became a frozen mass, numb, immobile. Then a flame smote him full in the face, so intense that he put up his hands to protect it. He stared unseeingly at his father. There flashed before him ten thousand cinematograph nightmares that fled by before he could grasp the details. He felt a slight nausea. He feared to breathe, because he was afraid to find himself alive.

“Father!” he gasped.

Mr. Leigh's face was livid. He said, sternly, “I have kept my promise to her!”

“But why did you—why did you—keep me at college? Why didn't you tell me you had no money?”

“I did as she wished me to do. Believe me, my son, I am not sorry. But it need not go on.”

“No!” shouted Tommy. “No!” Then he added, feverishly: “Certainly not! Certainly not!” He shook his head furiously. His brain was filled with fragments of thoughts, shreds of fears, syncopated emotions that did not quite crystallize, but were replaced by others again and again. But uppermost in the boy's mind, not because he was selfish but because he was young and, therefore, without the defensive

weapons that experience supplies, was this: I am the son of a thief!

Then came the poignant realization that all that he had got from life had been obtained under false pretenses. The systematic stealing for years had gone to pay for his friendships and his good times. The tradesmen's bills had been settled with other people's money. He was innocent of any crime, but he had been the beneficiary of one. And the boy for whom a father had done this asked himself why his father had done it. And his only answer was that he now was the son of a thief.

As the confusion in his mind grew less explosive, fear entered Tommy's soul—the oldest of all civilized fears, the fear of discovery! He began to read the newspaper headlines of the inevitable to-morrow. He found himself looking into the horror-stricken faces of those whom he loved best, the warm-hearted companions of his later life, whose opinions became more awful than the wrath of his Maker and more desirable than His mercy.

He would give his life, everything, if only discovery were averted until he could return the money. If fate only waited! Where could he get the money? Where was the source of money?

His father was the natural person from whom to ask, from whom the answer would come, and the habit of a lifetime could not be shaken off in an instant. It was exquisite agony to be deprived abruptly of what had become almost an instinct.

And Tommy was not thinking of his father, not even to blame him, not even to forgive him. He thought of himself,

of his own life, of the dreadful future that settled itself into the words: "If it were known!"

"What shall I do?" he muttered, brokenly, gazing at his father with eyes that did not see one face, but many—the faces of friends!

"At your age I went to work," said Mr. Leigh. The voice was neither accusing nor sympathetic. It sounded very, very weary.

"I want to! I want to! Right away!" cried Tommy, loudly.

"I looked," pursued Mr. Leigh, monotonously, "in the *Herald* for 'Help Wanted—Male.' I got my position with the bank that way, and I've been there ever since."

"I will! Where is the *Herald*?" said Tommy, without looking at his father. He was afraid to see and to be seen.

"I'll send in one from the corner. I must go now, Thomas."

The fear of being left alone, with his problems unsolved, with his fears uncalmed, alone with the consciousness of utter helplessness, made Tommy say, wildly:

"But, father, I—You—I—" He ceased to flounder. It was not pleasant to look upon his young face, pallid, drawn, with the nostrils pinched as with physical pain, and fear made visible, almost palpable, in ten thousand ways.

"I must go! I must be in the bank—before the cashier. I—I—I have done it since—since you went to Prep.-School." The old man nodded his head with a pitiful weariness.

"But, father—" cried Tommy.

"I must go!" There was a pause. Then in a firmer voice: "Don't lose your grip, my son. I alone am responsible for my actions. I have done my duty by her. From now on you must fight your own fights. I'll send in the *Herald*. And, my son—"

“Yes?” said Tommy, eagerly. What he prayed for was a miracle. He wished to hear that there was no immediate danger.

“You will need some pocket mo—”

“No! No!” shrieked Tommy Leigh. His voice was shrill as a little boy's.

Mr. Leigh's fists, unseen by Tommy, clenched tightly. But his voice had an apologetic note. “Very well, my son. I—I must be in the bank before—You must be a man. Good-by, my son!”

Without another look at his only son Mr. Leigh walked out of the room, his face grim, his lips pressed tightly together, his fists clenching and unclenching.



CHAPTER II

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MAGGIE brought the *Herald* to Tommy. He had remained in the library, trying to think. When he discovered that he couldn't he rose and walked about the gloomy little room, angry with himself because his emotions prevented the cogs of his mind-machine from falling into their appointed places. He decided that he must face his problem squarely, systematically, calmly, efficiently.

The first thing to do was not to walk about the library like a wild beast in a menagerie cage. He lit a cigarette and resolutely sat down.

He smoked away, and compelled himself to understand that his problem consisted in evolving a plan or a set of plans having for an object the accumulation of money. The amount was seventeen thousand dollars, since that was what he had cost his father. It was there in black and white, to the last penny, in the little book bound in mourning morocco.

He stretched his hand toward the little book on the table, but drew it back, empty. He would not read the items. It didn't matter how the money had been spent. It was enough to know that all of it must be paid back.

Seventeen thousand dollars! It did not mean any more to Tommy than five thousand dollars or ten thousand dollars or any other number of dollars.

He lit another cigarette. Presently the fear came upon him that it might take a long time to earn the money, to

earn any money. Discovery, the discovery he so dreaded, had fleet feet. He must do something—and do it at once.

He took up the Herald and read the “Help Wanted—Male” column. He began at the first line, and as he read on he was filled with surprise at the number of men wanted by employers. He marked two private secretaryships and a dozen selling agencies, which divulged no details, but promised great and quick wealth to the right man. He knew that he would work like a cyclone. He, therefore, must be the right man. In fact, he knew he was! And then he came upon this:

Wanted—A College Man. No high-brow, no football hero, no Happy Jack, no erudite scholar, but a Man recently graduated from College, whose feet are on *terra firma* and the head not more than six feet one inch above same. If he is a Man to-day we shall make him into The Man We Want to-morrow. Apply X-Y-Z, P. O. Box 777, Dayton, Ohio.

Thomas Leigh thrilled. It was a wonderful message. He clenched his own fist to prove to himself that he himself was a man. He was willing to do anything, therefore it did not matter what “X-Y-Z” wanted him to do. And also this was in Dayton, Ohio. Whatever he did must be done far away from New York. He hated New York because all the people he loved lived there.

He was about to light another cigarette when the thought came to him that smoking was one of the habits he must give up as entailing unnecessary expense. Unnecessary expenses meant delay in the full settlement of the debt he had taken upon himself to pay. He threw the unlighted

cigarette on the table vindictively. He would work at anything, night and day, like a madman!

Thrilled by the intensity of his own resolve, his mind began to work feverishly. He was no longer Tommy Leigh, but a man who did his thinking in staccato exclamations. He sat down at his father's desk and wrote what he could not have written the day before to save his life, for he now saw himself as the man in Dayton evidently saw him.

X-Y-Z, Dayton, Ohio:

Sir,—I graduated from college last week. I am a twenty-one-year-old man now. I will be Man until I shall be my own Man—and then perhaps yours also. Ego plus Knowledge equals Xnth. Thomas Leigh,

West Twelfth Street,
New York City.

He addressed the envelope, stamped it, and went out to drop it at the corner letter-box. He did not intend to lose time. He realized, as firmly as if he had been writing business aphorisms for a living, that time was money. And he needed both.

As soon as the letter was in the box he felt that his life's work had begun. This lifted a great weight from his chest. He now could breathe deeply. He did so. The oxygen filled his lungs. That brought back composure—he was doing all he could. The consciousness of this gave him courage.

Courage has an inveterate habit of growing. By feeding on itself it waxes greater, and thus its food-supply is never endangered. By the time Tommy Leigh returned to his house, once the abode of fear, he was so brave that he

could think calmly. Thinking calmly is always conducive to thinking forgivingly, and forgiveness strengthens love.

“Poor old dad!” he said, and thought of how his father had loved his mother and what he had done for his only son. He would stick to his father through thick and thin.

That much settled, Tommy thought of himself. That made him think of the luncheon at Sherry's with Rivington Willetts. Marion Willetts would be there. For a moment he thought he must beg off. It was like going to a cabaret in deep mourning. But he reasoned that since he was going to Dayton, this would be his social swansong, the leave-taking of his old life, his final farewell to boyhood and Dame Pleasure.

He was glad he had told his father he would not accept any more money. He counted his cash. He had eleven dollars and seventy cents. He was glad he had so little. It cheered him so that he was able to dress with great care; but before he did so he answered some of the other advertisements.

At the luncheon he was a pleasant-faced chap, well set-up, with an air of youth rather than of juvenility, as though he were a young business man. If he had not come naturally by it this impression of business manhood might have degenerated into one of those unfortunate assumptions of superiority that so irritate in the young because the old know that age is nothing to be proud of, age with its implied wisdom being the most exasperating of all fallacies.

With Tommy the impression of grown manhood imparted to his chatter a quality of good fellowship deliberately put on out of admirable sympathy for young people who very

properly did not desire to be bored. A nice chap, who could be trusted to be a staunch friend in comedy or tragedy! The girls even thought he was interesting!

He heard his chum Willetts gaily discuss plans for the summer, all of which necessitated Mr. Thomas Leigh's presence at certain friendly houses. But he said nothing until after the luncheon was over and the talk had begun to drag desultorily, as it does when guests feel "good-by" before they say it.

"Well," said Tommy, smiling pleasantly after the pause that followed Marion's beginning to button a glove, "you might as well hear it now as later. It will save postage. I am not going to see you after to-day!"

"What!" cried Rivington.

"That!" said Tommy. "My father told me this morning that there was nothing doing for me in finance."

"Oh, they always tell you business is rotten," said Rivington, reassuringly. His own father, with hundreds of tenanted houses, always talked that way.

"Yes, but this time it's so."

"Oh!" exclaimed Marion, in distress, "did you talk back to —"

"My child, no harsh words passed my lips nor his. I received honey with quinine from old Doctor Fate. The father of your dear friend is down to cases. The stuff simply isn't there; so it's me for commerce and industry."

"What the heavens are you shooting at, Tommy?"

"In plain English, it means that I've got to go to work, earn my own cigarette money, cut my fastidious appetite in

two, and hustle like a squirrel in a peanut warehouse. I'm going to Dayton, Ohio."

"Oh, Tommy!" said Marion. She had ceased to fumble with her gloves, and was looking at young Mr. Leigh with deep sympathy and a subtle admiration.

Tommy was made aware of both by the relatively simple expedient of looking into her eyes. The conviction came upon him like a tidal wave that this was the finest girl in the world. He shared his great trouble with her, and that made her his as it had made him hers.

She was overpoweringly beautiful!

Then came the reaction. It could never be! Calmly stated, she knew that he was going to do a man's work. But she did not know why, nor why he must leave New York. He turned on her a pair of startled, fear-filled eyes.

She became serious as by magic. "What is it?" she whispered.

The low tones brought her very close to him. Tommy wished to have no secrets from her, but he could not tell her. She read his unwillingness with the amazing intuition of women. Their relations subtly changed with that exchange of glances.

"I—I can't tell you—all the—the reasons," he stammered, feeling himself helpless against the drive of something within him that insisted on talking. "I can't!" He paused, and then he whispered, pleadingly, "And you mustn't ask me!"

If she insisted he would confess, and he mustn't.

"I wish I had the nerve," broke in Rivington, his voice dripping admiration and regret. "Tommy, you are some person, believe me!"