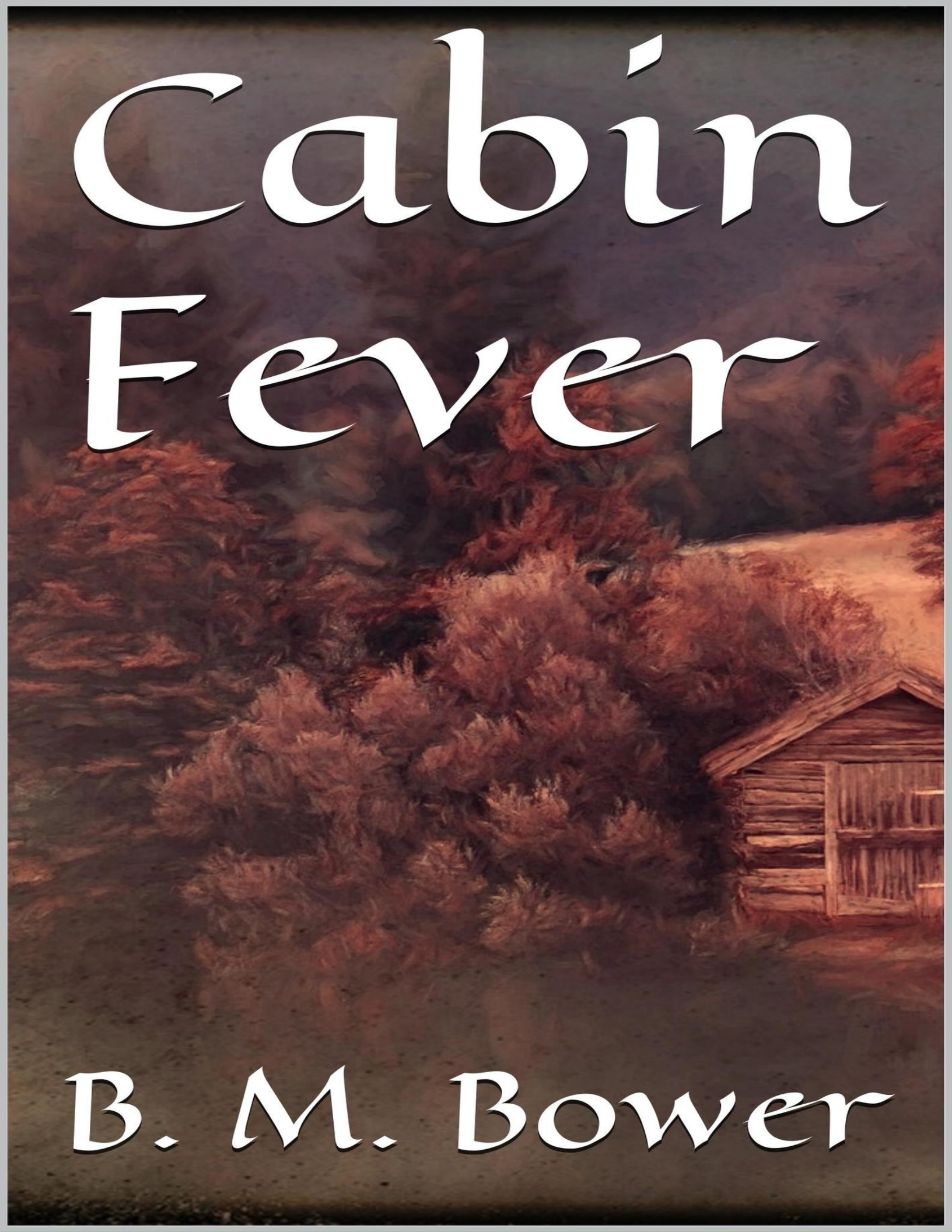
Cabin Fever



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CHAPTER ONE. THE FEVER MANIFESTS ITSELF

There is a certain malady of the mind induced by too much of one thing. Just as the body fed too long upon meat becomes a prey to that horrid disease called scurvy, so the mind fed too long upon monotony succumbs to the insidious mental ailment which the West calls "cabin fever." True, it parades under different names, according to circumstances and caste. You may be afflicted in a palace and call it ennui, and it may drive you to commit peccadillos and indiscretions of various sorts. You may be attacked in a middle-class apartment house, and call it various names, and it may drive you to cafe life and affinities and alimony. You may have it wherever you are shunted into a backwater of life, and lose the sense of being borne along in the full current of progress. Be sure that it will make you abnormally sensitive to little things; irritable where once you were amiable; glum where once you went whistling about your work and your play. It is the crystallizer of character, the acid test of friendship, the final seal set upon enmity. It will betray your little, hidden weaknesses, cut and polish your undiscovered virtues, reveal you in all your glory or your vileness to your companions in exile--if so be you have any.

If you would test the soul of a friend, take him into the wilderness and rub elbows with him for five months! One of three things will surely happen: You will hate each other afterward with that enlightened hatred which is seasoned with contempt; you will emerge with the contempt tinged with a pitying toleration, or you will be close, unquestioning friends to the last six feet of earth--and beyond. All these things will cabin fever do, and more. It

has committed murder, many's the time. It has driven men crazy. It has warped and distorted character out of all semblance to its former self. It has sweetened love and killed love. There is an antidote--but I am going to let you find the antidote somewhere in the story.

Bud Moore, ex-cow-puncher and now owner of an auto stage that did not run in the winter, was touched with cabin fever and did not know what ailed him. His stage line ran from San Jose up through Los Gatos and over the Bear Creek road across the summit of the Santa Cruz Mountains and down to the State Park, which is locally called Big Basin. For something over fifty miles of wonderful scenic travel he charged six dollars, and usually his big car was loaded to the running boards. Bud was a good driver, and he had a friendly pair of eyes--dark blue and with a humorous little twinkle deep down in them somewhere--and a human little smiley quirk at the corners of his lips. He did not know it, but these things helped to fill his car.

Until gasoline married into the skylark family, Bud did well enough to keep him contented out of a stock saddle. (You may not know it, but it is harder for an old cow-puncher to find content, now that the free range is gone into history, than it is for a labor agitator to be happy in a municipal boarding house.)

Bud did well enough, which was very well indeed. Before the second season closed with the first fall rains, he had paid for his big car and got the insurance policy transferred to his name. He walked up First Street with his hat pushed back and a cigarette dangling from the quirkiest corner of his mouth, and his hands in his pockets. The glow of prosperity warmed his manner toward the world. He had a little money in the bank, he had his big car, he had the good will of a smiling world. He could not walk half a block in any one of three or four towns but he was hailed with a "Hello, Bud!" in a welcoming tone. More people knew him than Bud remembered well enough to call by name--which

is the final proof of popularity the world over.
In that glowing mood he had met and married a girl who went into Big Basin with her mother and camped for three weeks. The girl had taken frequent trips to Boulder Creek, and twice had gone on to San Jose, and she had made it a point to ride with the driver because she was crazy about cars. So she said. Marie had all the effect of being a pretty girl. She habitually wore white middies with blue collar and tie, which went well with her clear, pink skin and her hair that just escaped being red. She knew how to tilt her "beach" hat at the most provocative angle, and she knew just when to let Bud catch a slow, sidelong glance--of the kind that is supposed to set a man's heart to syncopatic behavior. She did not do it too often. She did not powder too much, and she had the latest slang at her pink tongue's tip and was yet moderate in her use of it.
Bud did not notice Marie much on the first trip. She was demure, and Bud had a girl in San Jose who had brought him to that interesting stage of dalliance where he wondered if he dared kiss her good night the next time he called. He was preoccupiedly reviewing the she-said-and-then-I-said, and trying to make up his mind whether he should kiss her and take a chance on her displeasure, or whether he had better wait. To him Marie appeared hazily as another camper who helped fill the car--and his pocket--and was not at all hard to look at. It was not until the third trip that Bud thought her beautiful, and was secretly glad that he had not kissed that San Jose girl.
You know how these romances develop. Every summer is saturated with them the world over. But Bud happened to be a simple-souled fellow, and there was something about Marie--He didn't know what it was. Men never do know, until it is all over. He only knew that the drive through the shady stretches of woodland grew suddenly to seem like little journeys into paradise. Sentiment lurked behind every great, mossy tree bole. New beauties unfolded in the

winding drive up over the mountain crests. Bud was terribly in love with the world in those days.

There were the evenings he spent in the Basin, sitting beside Marie in the huge campfire circle, made wonderful by the shadowy giants, the redwoods; talking foolishness in undertones while the crowd sang snatches of songs which no one knew from beginning to end, and that went very lumpy in the verses and very much out of harmony in the choruses. Sometimes they would stroll down toward that sweeter music the creek made, and stand beside one of the enormous trees and watch the glow of the fire, and the silhouettes of the people gathered around it.

In a week they were surreptitiously holding hands. In two weeks they could scarcely endure the partings when Bud must start back to San Jose, and were taxing their ingenuity to invent new reasons why Marie must go along. In three weeks they were married, and Marie's mother--a shrewd, shrewish widow--was trying to decide whether she should wash her hands of Marie, or whether it might be well to accept the situation and hope that Bud would prove himself a rising young man.

But that was a year in the past. Bud had cabin fever now and did not know what ailed him, though cause might have been summed up in two meaty phrases: too much idleness, and too much mother- in-law. Also, not enough comfort and not enough love.

In the kitchen of the little green cottage on North Sixth Street where Bud had built the home nest with much nearly-Mission furniture and a piano, Bud was frying his own hotcakes for his ten o'clock breakfast, and was scowling over the task. He did not mind the hour so much, but he did mortally hate to cook his own breakfast--or any other meal, for that matter. In the next room a rocking chair was rocking with a rhythmic squeak, and a baby was squalling with that sustained volume of sound which never fails to fill the adult listener with amazement. It affected

Bud unpleasantly, just as the incessant bawling of a band of weaning calves used to do. He could not bear the thought of young things going hungry.

"For the love of Mike, Marie! Why don't you feed that kid, or do something to shut him up?" he exploded suddenly, dribbling pancake batter over the untidy range.

The squeak, squawk of the rocker ceased abruptly. "'Cause it isn't time yet to feed him--that's why. What's burning out there? I'll bet you've got the stove all over dough again--"

The chair resumed its squeaking, the baby continued uninterrupted its wah-h-hah! wah-h-hah, as though it was a phonograph that had been wound up with that record on, and no one around to stop it

Bud turned his hotcakes with a vicious flop that spattered more batter on the stove. He had been a father only a month or so, but that was long enough to learn many things about babies which he had never known before. He knew, for instance, that the baby wanted its bottle, and that Marie was going to make him wait till feeding time by the clock.

"By heck, I wonder what would happen if that darn clock was to stop!" he exclaimed savagely, when his nerves would bear no more. "You'd let the kid starve to death before you'd let your own brains tell you what to do! Husky youngster like that--feeding 'im four ounces every four days--or some simp rule like that--" He lifted the cakes on to a plate that held two messy-looking fried eggs whose yolks had broken, set the plate on the cluttered table and slid petulantly into a chair and began to eat. The squeaking chair and the crying baby continued to torment him. Furthermore, the cakes were doughy in the middle.

"For gosh sake, Marie, give that kid his bottle!" Bud exploded again. "Use the brains God gave yuh--such as they are! By heck, I'll stick that darn book in the stove. Ain't yuh got any feelings at all? Why, I wouldn't let a dog go hungry like that! Don't yuh reckon the kid knows when he's hungry? Why, good Lord! I'll take and feed him myself, if

you don't. I'll burn that book--so help me!"
"Yes, you will--not!" Marie's voice rose shrewishly, riding the high waves of the baby's incessant outcry against the restrictions upon appetite imposed by enlightened motherhood. "You do, and see what'll happen! You'd have him howling with colic, that's what you'd do."
"Well, I'll tell the world he wouldn't holler for grub! You'd go by the book if it told yuh to stand 'im on his head in the ice chest! By heck, between a woman and a hen turkey, give me the turkey when it comes to sense. They do take care of their young ones--"
"Aw, forget that! When it comes to sense---"
Oh, well, why go into details? You all know how these domestic storms arise, and how love washes overboard when the matrimonial ship begins to wallow in the seas of recrimination.
Bud lost his temper and said a good many things should not have said. Marie flung back angry retorts and reminded Bud of all his sins and slights and shortcomings, and told him many of mamma's pessimistic prophecies concerning him, most of which seemed likely to be fulfilled. Bud fought back, telling Marie how much of a snap she had had since she married him, and how he must have looked like ready money to her, and added that now, by heck, he even had to do his own cooking, as well as listen to her whining and nagging, and that there wasn't clean corner in the house, and she'd rather let her own baby go hungry than break a simp rule in a darn book got up by a bunch of boobs that didn't know anything about kids. Surely to goodness, he finished his heated paragraph, it wouldn't break any woman's back to pour a little warm water on a little malted milk, and shake it up.
He told Marie other things, and in return, Marie informed him that he was just a big-mouthed, lazy brute, and she could curse the day she ever met him. That was going pretty far. Bud reminded her that she had not done any

cursing at the time, being in his opinion too busy roping him in to support her.
By that time he had gulped down his coffee, and was into his coat, and looking for his hat. Marie, crying and scolding and rocking the vociferous infant, interrupted herself to tell him that she wanted a ten-cent roll of cotton from the drug store, and added that she hoped she would not have to wait until next Christmas for it, either. Which bit of sarcasm so inflamed Bud's rage that he swore every step of the way to Santa Clara Avenue, and only stopped then because he happened to meet a friend who was going down town, and they walked together.
At the drug store on the corner of Second Street Bud stopped and bought the cotton, feeling remorseful for some of the things he had said to Marie, but not enough so to send him back home to tell her he was sorry. He went on, and met another friend before he had taken twenty steps. This friend was thinking of buying a certain second-hand automobile that was offered at a very low price, and he wanted Bud to go with him and look her over. Bud went, glad of the excuse to kill the rest of the forenoon.
They took the car out and drove to Schutzen Park and back. Bud opined that she didn't bark to suit him, and she had a knock in her cylinders that shouted of carbon. They ran her into the garage shop and went deep into her vitals, and because she jerked when Bud threw her into second, Bud suspected that her bevel gears had lost a tooth or two, and was eager to find out for sure.
Bill looked at his watch and suggested that they eat first before they got all over grease by monkeying with the rear end. So they went to the nearest restaurant and had smothered beefsteak and mashed potato and coffee and pie, and while they ate they talked of gears and carburetors and transmission and ignition troubles, all of which alleviated temporarily Bud's case of cabin fever and caused him to forget that he was married and had quarreled with

his wife and had heard a good many unkind things which his mother-in-law had said about him.

By the time they were back in the garage and had the grease cleaned out of the rear gears so that they could see whether they were really burred or broken, as Bud had suspected, the twinkle was back in his eyes, and the smiley quirk stayed at the corners of his mouth, and when he was not talking mechanics with Bill he was whistling. He found much lost motion and four broken teeth, and he was grease to his eyebrows--in other words, he was happy.

When he and Bill finally shed their borrowed overalls and caps, the garage lights were on, and the lot behind the shop was dusky. Bud sat down on the running board and began to figure what the actual cost of the bargain would be when Bill had put it into good mechanical condition. New bearings, new bevel gear, new brake, lining, rebored cylinders--they totalled a sum that made Bill gasp.

By the time Bud had proved each item an absolute necessity, and had reached the final ejaculation: "Aw, forget it, Bill, and buy yuh a Ford!" it was so late that he knew Marie must have given up looking for him home to supper. She would have taken it for granted that he had eaten down town. So, not to disappoint her, Bud did eat down town. Then Bill wanted him to go to a movie, and after a praiseworthy hesitation Bud yielded to temptation and went. No use going home now, just when Marie would be rocking the kid to sleep and wouldn't let him speak above a whisper, he told his conscience. Might as well wait till they settled down for the night.

CHAPTER TWO. TWO MAKE A QUARREL

At nine o'clock Bud went home. He was feeling very well satisfied with himself for some reason which he did not try to analyze, but which was undoubtedly his sense of having saved Bill from throwing away six hundred dollars on a bum car; and the weight in his coat pocket of a box of chocolates that he had bought for Marie. Poor girl, it was kinda tough on her, all right, being tied to the house now with the kid. Next spring when he started his run to Big Basin again, he would get a little camp in there by the Inn, and take her along with him when the travel wasn't too heavy. She could stay at either end of the run, just as she took a notion. Wouldn't hurt the kid a bit--he'd be bigger then, and the outdoors would make him grow like a pig. Thinking of these things, Bud walked briskly, whistling as he neared the little green house, so that Marie would know who it was, and would not be afraid when he stepped up on the front porch.

He stopped whistling rather abruptly when he reached the house, for it was dark. He tried the door and found it locked. The key was not in the letter box where they always kept it for the convenience of the first one who returned, so Bud went around to the back and climbed through the pantry window. He fell over a chair, bumped into the table, and damned a few things. The electric light was hung in the center of the room by a cord that kept him groping and clutching in the dark before he finally touched the elusive bulb with his fingers and switched on the light.

The table was set for a meal--but whether it was dinner or supper Bud could not determine. He went into the little sleeping room and turned on the light there, looked around

the empty room, grunted, and tiptoed into the bedroom. (In the last month he had learned to enter on his toes, lest he waken the baby.) He might have saved himself the bother, for the baby was not there in its new gocart. The gocart was not there, Marie was not there--one after another these facts impressed themselves upon Bud's mind, even before he found the letter propped against the clock in the orthodox manner of announcing unexpected departures. Bud read the letter, crumpled it in his fist, and threw it toward the little heating stove. "If that's the way yuh feel about it, I'll tell the world you can go and be darned!" he snorted, and tried to let that end the matter so far as he was concerned. But he could not shake off the sense of having been badly used. He did not stop to consider that while he was working off his anger, that day, Marie had been rocking back and forth, crying and magnifying the quarrel as she dwelt upon it, and putting a new and sinister meaning into Bud's ill-considered utterances. By the time Bud was thinking only of the bargain car's hidden faults, Marie had reached the white heat of resentment that demanded vigorous action. Marie was packing a suitcase and meditating upon the scorching letter she meant to write.

Judging from the effect which the letter had upon Bud, it must have been a masterpiece of its kind. He threw the box of chocolates into the wood-box, crawled out of the window by which he had entered, and went down town to a hotel. If the house wasn't good enough for Marie, let her go. He could go just as fast and as far as she could. And if she thought he was going to hot-foot it over to her mother's and whine around and beg her to come home, she had another think coming.

He wouldn't go near the darn place again, except to get his clothes. He'd bust up the joint, by thunder. He'd sell off the furniture and turn the house over to the agent again, and Marie could whistle for a home. She had been darn glad to

get into that house, he remembered, and away from that old cat of a mother. Let her stay there now till she was darn good and sick of it. He'd just keep her guessing for awhile; a week or so would do her good. Well, he wouldn't sell the furniture--he'd just move it into another house, and give her a darn good scare. He'd get a better one, that had a porcelain bathtub instead of a zinc one, and a better porch, where the kid could be out in the sun. Yes, sir, he'd just do that little thing, and lay low and see what Marie did about that. Keep her guessing--that was the play to make.
Unfortunately for his domestic happiness, Bud failed to take into account two very important factors in the quarrel. The first and most important one was Marie's mother, who, having been a widow for fifteen years and therefore having acquired a habit of managing affairs that even remotely concerned her, assumed that Marie's affairs must be managed also. The other factor was Marie's craving to be coaxed back to smiles by the man who drove her to tears. Marie wanted Bud to come and say he was sorry, and had been a brute and so forth. She wanted to hear him tell how empty the house had seemed when he returned and found her gone. She wanted him to be good and scared with that letter. She stayed awake until after midnight, listening for his anxious footsteps; after midnight she stayed awake to cry over the inhuman way he was treating her, and to wish she was dead, and so forth; also because the baby woke and wanted his bottle, and she was teaching him to sleep all night without it, and because the baby had a temper just like his father.
His father's temper would have yielded a point or two, the next day, had it been given the least encouragement. For instance, he might have gone over to see Marie before he moved the furniture out of the house, had he not discovered an express wagon standing in front of the door when he went home about noon to see if Marie had come back. Before he had recovered to the point of profane

speech, the express man appeared, coming out of the house, bent nearly double under the weight of Marie's trunk. Behind him in the doorway Bud got a glimpse of Marie's mother.

That settled it. Bud turned around and hurried to the nearest drayage company, and ordered a domestic wrecking crew to the scene; in other words, a packer and two draymen and a dray. He'd show 'em. Marie and her mother couldn't put anything over on him --he'd stand over that furniture with a sheriff first.

He went back and found Marie's mother still there, packing dishes and doilies and the like. They had a terrible row, and all the nearest neighbors inclined ears to doors ajar--getting an earful, as Bud contemptuously put it. He finally led Marie's mother to the front door and set her firmly outside. Told her that Marie had come to him with no more than the clothes she had, and that his money had bought every teaspoon and every towel and every stick of furniture in the darned place, and he'd be everlastingly thus-and-so if they were going to strong-arm the stuff off him now. If Marie was too good to live with him, why, his stuff was too good for her to have.

Oh, yes, the neighbors certainly got an earful, as the town gossips proved when the divorce suit seeped into the papers. Bud refused to answer the proceedings, and was therefore ordered to pay twice as much alimony as he could afford to pay; more, in fact, than all his domestic expense had amounted to in the fourteen months that he had been married. Also Marie was awarded the custody of the child and, because Marie's mother had represented Bud to be a violent man who was a menace to her daughter's safety--and proved it by the neighbors who had seen and heard so much--Bud was served with a legal paper that wordily enjoined him from annoying Marie with his presence.

That unnecessary insult snapped the last thread of Bud's regret for what had happened. He sold the furniture and

the automobile, took the money to the judge that had tried the case, told the judge a few wholesome truths, and laid the pile of money on the desk.

"That cleans me out, Judge," he said stolidly. "I wasn't such a bad husband, at that. I got sore--but I'll bet you get sore yourself and tell your wife what-for, now and then. I didn't get a square deal, but that's all right. I'm giving a better deal than I got. Now you can keep that money and pay it out to Marie as she needs it, for herself and the kid. But for the Lord's sake, Judge, don't let that wildcat of a mother of hers get her fingers into the pile! She framed this deal, thinking she'd get a haul outa me this way. I'm asking you to block that little game. I've held out ten dollars, to eat on till I strike something. I'm clean; they've licked the platter and broke the dish. So don't never ask me to dig up any more, because I won't--not for you nor no other darn man. Get that."

This, you must know, was not in the courtroom, so Bud was not fined for contempt. The judge was a married man himself, and he may have had a sympathetic understanding of Bud's position. At any rate he listened unofficially, and helped Bud out with the legal part of it, so that Bud walked out of the judge's office financially free, even though he had a suspicion that his freedom would not bear the test of prosperity, and that Marie's mother would let him alone only so long as he and prosperity were strangers.

CHAPTER THREE. TEN DOLLARS AND A JOB FOB BUD

To withhold for his own start in life only one ten-dollar bill from fifteen hundred dollars was spectacular enough to soothe even so bruised an ego as Bud Moore carried into the judge's office. There is an anger which carries a person to the extreme of self-sacrifice, in the subconscious hope of exciting pity for one so hardly used. Bud was boiling with such an anger, and it demanded that he should all but give Marie the shirt off his back, since she had demanded so much--and for so slight a cause.

Bud could not see for the life of him why Marie should have quit for that little ruction. It was not their first quarrel, nor their worst; certainly he had not expected it to be their last. Why, he asked the high heavens, had she told him to bring home a roll of cotton, if she was going to leave him? Why had she turned her back on that little home, that had seemed to mean as much to her as it had to him?

Being kin to primitive man, Bud could only bellow rage when he should have analyzed calmly the situation. He should have seen that Marie too had cabin fever, induced by changing too suddenly from carefree girlhood to the ills and irks of wifehood and motherhood. He should have known that she had been for two months wholly dedicated to the small physical wants of their baby, and that if his nerves were fraying with watching that incessant servitude, her own must be close to the snapping point; had snapped, when dusk did not bring him home repentant.

But he did not know, and so he blamed Marie bitterly for the wreck of their home, and he flung down all his worldly goods before her, and marched off feeling self-consciously proud of his martyrdom. It soothed him paradoxically to tell