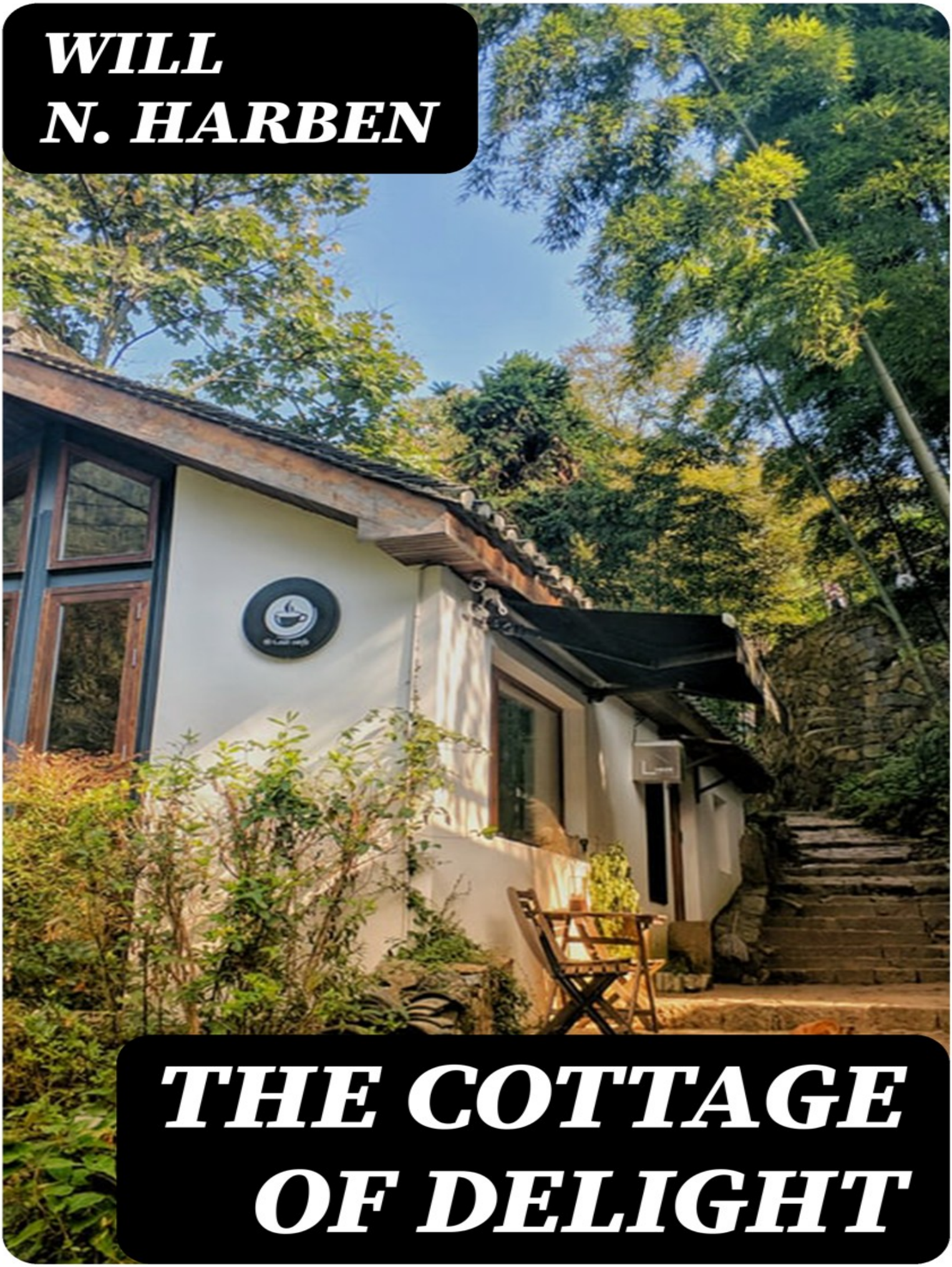
WILL N. HARBEN



THE COTTAGE OF DELIGHT

Will N. Harben

The Cottage of Delight

A Novel

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CHAPTER I

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John Trott waked that morning at five o'clock. Whether it was due to the mere habit of a working-man or the blowing of the hoarse and mellow whistle at the great cotton-mills beyond the low, undulating hills half a mile away he did not know, but for several years the whistle had been his summons from a state of dead slumber to a day of toil. The morning was cloudy and dark, so he lighted a dingy oil-lamp with a cracked and smoked chimney, and in its dim glow drew on his coarse lime-and-mortar-splotched shirt and overalls. The cheap cotton socks he put on had holes at the heels and toes; his leather belt had broken and was tied with a piece of twine; his shoes were quite new and furnished an odd contrast to the rest of his attire.

He was young, under twenty, and rather tall. He was slender, but his frame was sinewy. He had no beard as yet, and his tanned face was covered with down. His hair was coarse and had a tendency to stand erect and awry. He had blue eyes, a mouth inclined to harshness, a manner somewhat brusk and impatient. To many he appeared absent-minded.

Suddenly, as he sat tying his shoes, he heard a clatter of pans in the kitchen down-stairs, and he paused to listen. "I wonder," he thought, "if that brat is cooking breakfast again. She must be, for neither one of those women would be out of bed as early as this. It was three o'clock when they came in."

Blowing out his light, he groped from the room into the dark passage outside, and descended the old creaking stairs to the hall below. The front door was open, and he sniffed angrily. "They didn't even lock it. They must have been drunk again. Well, that's their business, not mine."

The kitchen was at the far end of the hall and he turned into it. It was almost filled with smoke. A little girl stood at the old-fashioned range, putting sticks of wood in at the door. She was about nine years of age, wore a cast-off dress, woman's size, and was barefooted. She had good features, her eyes were blue, her hair abundant and golden, her hands, now splotched with smut, were small and slender. She was not a relative of John's, being the orphaned niece of Miss Jane Holder, who shared the house with John's mother, who was a widow.

The child's name was Dora Boyles, and she smiled in chagrin as he stared down on her in the lamplight and demanded:

"Say, say, what's this—trying to smoke us to death?"

"I made a mistake," the child faltered. "The damper in the pipe was turned wrong, and while I was on the back porch, mixing the biscuit-dough, it smoked before I knew it. It will stop now. You see it is drawing all right."

With an impatient snort, he threw open the two windows in the room and opened the outer door, standing aside and watching the blue smoke trail out, cross the porch floor, and dissolve in the grayish light of dawn.

"The biscuits are about done," Dora said. "The coffee water has boiled and I'm going to fry the eggs and meat. The pan is hot and it won't take long."

"I was going to get a bite at the restaurant," he answered, in a mollified tone.

"But you said the coffee was bad down there and the bread stale," Dora argued, as she dropped some slices of bacon into the pan. "And once you said the place was not open and you went to work without anything. I might as well do this. I can't sleep after the whistle blows. Your ma and Aunt Jane waked me when they came in. They were awfully lively. The fellows were singing and cursing and throwing bottles across the street. Aunt Jane could hardly get up the stairs and had one of her laughing spells. I think your ma was sober, for I could hear her talking steady and scolding Aunt Jane about taking a dance from her with some man or other. Did you see the men? They were the same two that had 'em out last Friday night, the big one your ma likes and the one Aunt Jane says is hers. I heard your ma say they were horse-traders from Kentucky, and have lots and lots of money to spend. That jewelry drummer—do you remember, that gave me the red pin?—he sent them with a note of introduction. The pin was no good. The shine is already off of it—wasn't even washed with gold."

John was scarcely heeding what she said. He had taken a piece of paper from his pocket, and with a brick-layer's flat pencil was making some calculations in regard to a wall he was building. The light was insufficient at the door and he was now bending over the table near the lamp.

"Do you want me to make you some flour-and-cream gravy?" she asked, ignorant of his desire to be undisturbed. "The milk looks good and rich this morning."

"No, no!" And he swore under his breath. "Don't you see I'm figuring? Now I'll have to add up again."

She made the gravy, anyway. She took out the fried bacon, sprinkled flour in the brown grease, stirred the mixture vigorously, and then there was a great sizzling as she added a cup of milk, and, in a cloud of fragrant steam, still stood stirring. "There," she said, more to herself than to him. "I'm going to pour it over the bacon. It is better that way."

He had finished his figuring and now turned to her. "Are your biscuits done?" he asked. "I think I smell them."

"Just about," she answered, and she threw open the door of the oven, and, holding the hot pan with the long skirt of her dress, she drew it out. "Good! Just right!" she chuckled. "Now, where do you want to eat—here or in the dining-room? The table is set in there. Come on. You bring the coffee-pot."

Still absently, for his thoughts were on his figures, he followed her into the adjoining room. It was a bare-looking place, in the dim light of the lamp which she placed in the center of the small, square table with its red cloth, for there was no furniture but three or four chairs, a tattered strip of carpeting, and an old-fashioned safe with perforated tin panels. Two windows with torn Holland shades and dirty cotton curtains looked out on the side yard. Beneath the shades the yellowing glow of approaching sunlight appeared; a sort of fog hovered over everything outside and its dampness had crept within, moistening the table-cloth and chairs. John poured his own coffee while standing, and Dora went to bring the other things. His mind was busy over

the work he was to do. Certain stone sills must be placed exactly right in the brickwork, a new scaffold had to be erected, and he wondered if the necessary timbers had arrived from the sawmill which his employer, Cavanaugh, had promised to have delivered the night before in order that the work might not be delayed. John sat down. He burnt his lips with the hot coffee, and then pouring some of it into his saucer, he drank it in that awkward fashion.

"How is it?" Dora inquired. "Is it strong enough?" She was putting down a dish containing the fried things and eyed his face anxiously.

"Yes, it is all right," he said. "Hurry, will you? Give me something to eat. I can't stay here all day." He took a hot biscuit and buttered it and began to eat it like a sandwich. She pushed the dish toward him and sat down, her hands in her lap, watching his movements with the stare of a faithful dog.

"Your ma and Aunt Jane almost had a fist-fight yesterday while they was dressing to go out," she said, as he helped himself to the eggs and bacon and began to eat voraciously. "Aunt Jane said she used too much paint and that she was getting fat. Your ma rushed at her with a big hair-brush in her hand. She called her a spindle-shanked old hag and said she was going to tell the men about her false teeth. It would really have been another case in court if the two horse-men hadn't come just then. They quieted 'em down and made 'em both take a drink together. Then they all laughed and cut up."

"Dry up, will you?" John commanded. "I don't want to hear about them. Can't you talk about something else?"

"I don't mean no harm, brother John." She sometimes used that term in addressing him. "I wasn't thinking."

"Well, I don't want to hear anything about them or their doings," he retorted, sullenly. "By some hook or crook they manage to get about all I make—I know that well enough—and half the time they keep me awake at night when I'm tired out."

She remained silent while he was finishing eating, and when he had clattered out through the hall and slammed the gate after him she began to partake daintily of the food he had left. "He's awfully touchy," she mused; "don't think of nothing but his work. Bother him while he is at it, and you have a fight on your hands."

Her breakfast eaten, Dora went to the kitchen to heat some water for dish-washing. She had filled a great pan at the well in the back yard and was standing by the range when she heard some one descending the stairs. It was Mrs. Trott, wearing a bedraggled red wrapper, her stockingless feet in ragged slippers, her carelessly coiled hair falling down her fat neck. She was about forty years of age, showed traces of former beauty, notwithstanding the fact that the sockets of her gray eyes were now puffy, her cheeks swollen and sallow.

"Is there any hot coffee?" she asked, with a weary sigh. "My head is fairly splitting. I was just dozing off when I heard you and John making a clatter down here. I smelled smoke, too. I was half asleep and dreamed that the house was burning down and I couldn't stir—a sort of nightmare. Say, after we all left yesterday didn't Jim Darnell come to see me?"

"No, not him," Dora replied, wrinkling her brow, "but another fellow did. A little man with a checked gray suit on. He said he had a date with you and looked sorter mad. He asked me if I was your child and I told him it was none of his business."

"That was Pete Seltzwick," Mrs. Trott said, as she filled a cup with coffee from the pot on the stove and began to cool it with breath from her rather pretty, puckered and painted lips. "You didn't tell him who we went off with, did you?"

"No, I didn't," the child replied, then added, "Do you reckon Aunt Jane would like some coffee before she gets up?"

"No. She's sound asleep, and will get mad if you wake her. Oh, my head! My head! And the trouble is I can't sleep! If I could sleep the pain would go away. Did John leave any money for me? He didn't give me any last week."

"No," Dora answered, "he said the hands hadn't been paid off yet. You know he doesn't talk much."

Mrs. Trott seemed not to hear. Groaning again, she turned toward the stairway and went up to her room.

CHAPTER II

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John had passed out at the scarred and battered front door, crossed the floor of the veranda, and reached the almost houseless street, for he lived on the outskirts of the town, which was called Ridgeville. On the hillside to the right was the town cemetery. The fog, shot through with golden gleams of sunlight, was rising above the white granite and marble slabs and shafts. Ahead of him and on the right, a mile away, could be seen the mist-draped steeples of churches, the high roof and cupola of the county court-house. He heard the distant rumble of a coming street-car and quickened his step to reach it at the terminus of the line near by before it started back to the Square. The car was a toylike affair, drawn by a single horse and in charge of a negro who was both conductor and driver.

"Got a ride out er you dis time, boss," the negro said, with a smile, as John came up. "Met some o' yo' hands goin' in. Want any mo' help ter tote mortar en' bricks? 'Kase if you do, I'll th'o' up dis job. De headman said maybe I was stealin' nickels 'kase de traffic is so low dis spring, en' I didn't turn in much. If you got any room fer—"

"You'll have to see Sam Cavanaugh," John answered, gruffly. "If you climb a scaffold as slow as you drive a car you wouldn't suit our job."

"Huh! dat ain't me; it's dis ol' poky hoss. I'm des hired to bresh de flies offen his back."

The negro gave a loud guffaw over his own wit and proceeded to unhitch the trace-chains and drive the horse

around to the opposite end of the car. John entered and took a seat. He drew from the pocket of his short coat a blue, white-inked drawing and several pages of figures which Cavanaugh had asked him to look over. A rather pretentious court-house was to be built in a Tennessee village. Bids on the work had been invited from contractors in all directions and John's employer had made an estimate of his own of the cost of the work and had asked John's opinion of it. John was deeply submerged in the details of the estimate when the car suddenly started with a jerk. He swore impatiently, and looked up and scowled, but the slouching back of the driver was turned to him and the negro was quite unconscious of the wrath he had stirred. For the first half-mile John was the only passenger; then a woman and a child got aboard. The car jerked again and trundled onward. The woman knew who John was and he had seen her before, for he had worked on a chimney Cavanaugh had built for her, but she did not speak to him nor he to her. That he had no acquaintances among the women of the town and few among the men outside of laborers had never struck John as odd. There were gaudily dressed women who came from neighboring cities and visited his mother and Jane Holder now and then, but he did not like their looks, and so he never spoke to them nor encouraged their addressing him. A psychologist would have classified John as a sort of genius in his way, for his whole thought and powers of observation pertained to the kind of work in which he was engaged. Cavanaugh half jestingly called him a "lightning calculator," and turned to him for advice on all occasions.

Reaching the Square, John sprang from the car and, with the papers in his hand and the pencil racked above his ear, he hurried into a hardware-store and approached a clerk who was sweeping the floor.

"We need those nails and bolts this morning," he said, gruffly. "You were to send them around yesterday."

"They are in the depot, but the agent hasn't sent 'em up yet," the clerk answered. "We'll get them around to you by ten o'clock sharp."

"That won't do." John frowned. "We could have got them direct from the wholesale house, and have had them long ago, but Sam would deal with you. He is too good-natured and you fellers all impose on him."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do," the clerk proposed. "I'll send a dray for them this minute and you'll have them on the ground in a half-hour."

"All right," John said, coldly, and turned away.

The building on which he was at work was a brick residence in a side-street near by which was being erected for a wealthy banker of Ridgeville, and as John approached it he saw a group of negro laborers seated on a pile of lumber at the side of the half-finished house.

"Here comes John now," one of them said, and it was significant that his given name was used, for it was a fact that a white man in John's position would, as a rule, be spoken of in a more formal manner, but to whites and blacks alike he was simply "John" or "John Trott." This was partly due, perhaps, to his youth, but there was no doubt that John's lack of social standing had something to do with it. He had been nothing but a dirty, neglected street urchin, a

playmate of blacks and the lowest whites, till Cavanaugh had put him to work and had discovered in him a veritable dynamo of physical and mental energy.

"Good morning," several of the negroes said, cordially, but John barely nodded. It was his way, and they thought nothing of it.

"Has Sam got here yet?" he inquired of a stalwart mortar-mixer called Tobe.

"No, suh, boss, he 'ain't," said the negro. "I was gwine ter see 'im. I'm out o' sand—not mo' 'n enough ter las' twell—"

"Four loads will be dumped here in half an hour," John broke in. "Did you patch that hose? Don't let the damn thing leak like it did yesterday."

"It's all right, boss. She won't bust erg'in." The negro smiled. Evidently he had not washed his face that day, for splotches of whitewash with globules of dry mortar were on his black cheeks and the backs of his hands.

The whistle at a shingle-factory blew. It was eight o'clock, the hour for work to begin.

"Mort'!" John's command was directed to two mortar-carriers, who promptly grasped their padded wooden hods and made for the mortar-bed where Tobe was already shoving and pulling the grayish mass to and fro with a hoe.

John hung up his coat on the trunk of an apple-tree into which some nails had been driven, and took his trowel and other tools from a long wooden box with a sloping water-proof lid. He was about to ascend the scaffold when he saw Cavanaugh approaching and signaling to him to wait.

The contractor was a man of sixty years, whose beard and hair were quite gray. He was short and stocky, slow of

movement, and gentle and genial in his manner. He had been a contractor for fifteen years, and had accumulated nothing, which his friends said was owing to his good nature in not insisting on his rights when it came to charges and settlements. Widows and frugal maiden ladies would have no one else to build for them, for Sam Cavanaugh was noted for his honesty and liberality, and he was never known to use faulty material.

"Mort' there! Get a move on you, boys!" John was eying his employer with impatience as he approached. "Fill all four boards and scrape the dry off clean!"

"Wait a minute, John!" Cavanaugh said, almost pleadingly. "I want to see you about the court-house bid. I want to mail it this morning."

"What! And hold up this whole gang?" John snorted, impatiently.

"Oh, let 'em wait—let 'em wait this time," Cavanaugh said. "Where are the papers?"

With a suppressed oath, John went to his coat and got them. "I haven't time to go over all that, Sam," he answered. "Wait till dinner-time."

"But I thought you was going to look it over at home," the contractor said, crestfallen, as he took the papers into his fat hands.

"Oh, I've looked them over, all right," John replied, "and that's the trouble—that's why it will take time to talk it over."

"You mean— I see." Cavanaugh pulled at his short, stiff beard nervously. "I'm too high, and you are afraid I'll lose the job."

"Too high nothing!" John sniffed, with a harsh smile. "You are so damned low that they will make you give double security to keep you from falling down on it. Say, Sam, you told me you was in need of money and want to make something out of this job. Well, if you do, and want me to go up there in charge of the brickwork, you will have to make out another bid. I'm done with seeing you come out by the skin of your teeth in nearly every job you bid on. When a county builds a court-house like that they expect to pay for it."

"Why, I thought— I thought—" Cavanaugh began.

But John broke in: "You thought a thousand dollars would cover the ironwork. It will take two. The market reports show that steel beams have gone out of sight. Nails are up, too, and bolts, screws, locks, and all lines of plumbing material."

"Why, John, I thought—"

"You don't keep posted." John glanced up at the scaffold as if anxious to get to work. "Then look at your estimate of sash, doors, blinds, and glass. You are under the cost by seven hundred at least. And where in God's world could you get slate at your figure? And the clock and bell according to the requisition? Sam, you made those figures when you were asleep."

"Then you think I could afford— I want the job bad, my boy—do you reckon I could land it if I raised my offer, say by fifteen hundred?"

"You will have to raise it four thousand," John said, thoughtfully. "Think of the risk you would be running. If the slightest thing goes crooked the official inspectors will make you tear it down and do it over. Look at your estimate on

painting," pointing with the tip of his trowel at a line on the quivering manuscript which the contractor held before his spectacled eyes. "You are away under on it. White lead is booming, and oil and varnish, and you have left out stacks of small items—sash cords, sash weights, and putty."

"Then you think this won't do?" Cavanaugh's face was turning red.

"Do? It will do if you want to present several thousand dollars to one of the richest counties in Tennessee. Why, one of those big farmers up there could build that house and give it to the state without hurting himself, while you hardly own a roof over your head."

"You may be right about my figures," Cavanaugh muttered. "Say, John, I want to get this bid off. Leave the bricklaying to Pete Long and come over to the hotel and write it out for me."

"And let him ruin my wall?" John snorted. "Not on your life! His mortar joints are as thick as the mud in the cracks of a log cabin. I'll do it to-night after I go home, but not before. I don't believe any man ought to let one job stand idle in order to try to hook another. To-morrow is Saturday. They couldn't get the bid anyway till Monday. There will be plenty of time."

As John finished he was turning to the scaffold. "Well, all right," Cavanaugh called after him. "That will have to do."

CHAPTER III

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When the steam-whistles of the shops and mills of Ridgeville blew that afternoon at dusk John descended from the scaffold and put his tools away. He was the last of the workers on the spot, and when he had put on his coat he went around to the side of the building and with a critical eye scanned the wall he had worked on that day.

"It will look all right when it is washed down with acid," he mused. "That will straighten the lines and tone it up."

He was too late for the car and walked home. He found Jane Holder in the kitchen, preparing supper. She was a slight woman of thirty-five, dark, erect, with brown, twinkling eyes and short chestnut hair which had not regained its normal length since it was cut during a spell of fever the preceding winter. Touches of paint showed on her yellowish cheeks, and her false teeth gave to her thin-lipped mouth a rather too full, harsh expression.

"Oh, here you are!" She smiled. "I know you are hungry as a bear, but I had my hands full with all sorts of things. I was sewing on my new organdie and got the waist plumb out of joint. Your ma promised to help fit it on me, but Harrington, one of those horse-dealers, come by in a hurry to drive her to Rome behind two brag blacks, and she dropped me and my work to get ready. She is always doing me that way. She makes a cat's-paw of me. May Tomlin is going to have a dance at her house to-night and wrote Harrington to bring her. She left me clean out, though when May stayed here that time I was nice to her and introduced

her to all my friends. Your ma didn't care a rap about me. She was going, and that was enough for her."

John simply grunted and turned away. He had not heard half she said. On the back porch was a tin wash-basin and a cedar pail. He wanted to bathe his face and hands, for his skin was clammy and coated with sand and brick-dust, but the pail was empty, so he took it to the well close by and filled it. He was about to return to the porch when he saw Dora, the woman's skirt pinned up about her slight waist, coming from the cow-lot with a tin pail half filled with milk.

"I had trouble with the cow," she said, wistfully, in her quaint, half-querulous voice. "While I was milking, she turned around to see her calf and mashed me against the fence. I pushed and pushed, but I couldn't move her. Once I thought my breath was gone entirely. The calf run along the fence, and she went after it, and that let me loose. I lost nearly half the milk, and Aunt Jane will give me the very devil about it. Well, Liz— I mean your mother's gone for the night, and we won't need quite so much. She's been drinking it for her complexion. Some woman told her—"

"Oh, cut it out!" John cried, with a suppressed oath. "You chatter like a feed-cutting machine."

He took the water to the porch, filled the basin, and washed his face, hands, and neck. He was just finishing when Dora came to him with a tattered cotton towel. "It is damp," she explained, apologetically. "I ironed them in a hurry when they were too wet. They ought to have been hung out in the sun longer, but the sun was low when I got through washing, and so I brought some of them in too

soon. Your ma and Aunt Jane use the best ones in their rooms, and leave the ragged ones for us."

"You forgot something you promised to do, brother John," she added, timidly, as he stood vigorously wiping his face and neck.

"What was that?" he mumbled in the towel.

"Why, you promised to send a nigger to cut me some stove-wood and kindling. I tried to cut some myself to-day, but the ax is dull and I had trouble getting enough wood for to-night and in the morning. Will you send him to-morrow?"

"Yes," he nodded. "I'll make one of the boys come over and cut it and store it under the shed. There is a lot of pine scraps at the building. I'll send a load of them over, too."

After supper, which he had with Jane Holder and her niece in the dimly lighted dining-room, he went up to his room and prepared to work on the estimates for Cavanaugh. He was very tired, and yet the calculations interested him and drove away the tendency to sleep. Down-stairs he heard Jane laughing and talking to some masculine visitor. He had a vague impression that he knew the man, a young lawyer who was a candidate for the Legislature. John had been approached by the man, who had asked for his vote, but John was not of age and, moreover, he had no interest in politics. In fact, he scarcely knew the meaning of the word. Politics and religion were mysteries for which he had little but contempt. He used to say that politicians were grafters and preachers fakers, though he did believe that Cavanaugh, who was a devout Methodist, was, while deluded, decidedly sincere. He heard Dora's voice down-stairs as she timidly asked her aunt if she might go to bed.

"Have you washed the dishes and put them up?" Jane asked.

"Yes, 'm," the child said, and John heard her ascending the stairs to her room back of his. She used no light, and he heard her bare feet softly treading the floor as she undressed in the dark. Soon all was quiet in her room, and he plunged again into his work.

Finally it was concluded, and he folded the sheets on which he had written so clearly and so accurately and went to bed. It was an hour before he went to sleep. He could still hear the low mumbling, broken by laughter, below, but that did not disturb him. It was his figures and estimates squirming like living things in his brain that kept him awake till near midnight.

The next morning he decided to walk to the Square, that he might stop at Cavanaugh's cottage and hand him the papers.

The little house of only six rooms stood in another part of the town's edge. Close behind it was a swamp filled with willow-trees and bracken, and farther beyond lay a strip of woodland that sloped down from a rugged mountain range. There was a white paling fence in front, a few fruit-trees at the sides, and a grape-arbor and vegetable-garden behind. Mrs. Cavanaugh, a portly woman near her husband's age, was on the tiny porch, sweeping, and she looked up and smiled as John entered the gate.

"Sam's just gone down to the swamp to see what's become of our two hens," she said. "He'll be back in a few minutes. He'd like to see you. He thinks a lot of you, John."

"I haven't time to wait," John explained, taking the papers from his pocket and handing them to her. "Give these to him. He will know all about them."

"I know— I understand. They are the bid on that court-house." She smiled broadly. "Sam was awfully set back. He told me all about it last night. He admits he was hasty, but, la me! he is so anxious to land that contract that he can hardly sleep. You see, he thinks maybe it is our one chance to lay by a little. You see, Sam hasn't the heart to charge stiff prices here among Ridgeville folks, but he feels like he's got a right to make something out of a public building like that one. He says you insisted on a bigger bid and he is between two fires. He wants to abide by your judgment and still he is afraid you may have your sights too high. You see, he says some of the biggest contractors will send in bids and that they will cut under him because they are bigger buyers of material."

"Sam's off there," John said, thoughtfully. "He can borrow all the money he needs for a job like that and he can get material as cheap as any of them. The main item is brick, and that is made right here in town, and the stone is got out and cut here, too."

"You may be right," the woman said. "But to tell you the truth, John, Sam is afraid you are too young to decide on a matter as big as this deal. Several men he knows have advised him to make as low a bid as possible."

"Well, if he cuts under the estimates I've made in those papers," John returned, "he'll lose money or barely get out whole. I want to see him make something in his old age. I'm tired of seeing folks ride a free horse to death. He may be

underbid on this, and if he loses the job he'll curse me out, but I'm willing to risk it." John turned away. "Just hand 'em to him," he said, from the little sagging gate, "and tell him that is my final estimate. If he wants to change it he may do so. I'm acting on my best judgment."

Half an hour later, as John was on the scaffold at work, Cavanaugh crossed the street and slowly ascended the ladders and runways till he stood on the narrow platform at the young mason's side. He held a long envelop which had been stamped and addressed in his fat hand. John saw him, but, being busy cutting a brick with his trowel and fitting into a mortar-filled niche a bat of exactly the right size, he did not pause or speak. It was his way, and had so long been his way that Cavanaugh had become used to it.

"Hey, hey! Get a move on you down there!" John shouted. "This mort' is getting dry!"

"Hold up a minute, John!" the contractor said. "My wife handed me the papers. I wrote the letter and stamped it and put in the bid exactly as you had it and was on the way to the post-office with it when I met Renfro going in the bank by the side door. You know he expects to lend me the money if it goes through—my bid, I mean—and he asked me what I was going to do. I told him, and he wanted to look over the bid. I let him, and he looked serious. He said he thought you was too steep, and if I wanted to get the job, why, I'd better—"

"I know," John sneered. "He thinks he knows something about building, but he is as green as a gourd. I've given you my judgment—take it or not, Sam, as you think fit. As big as