

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

P. G. WODEHOUSE

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

Table of Contents

<u>THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)</u>	1
<u>P. G. WODEHOUSE</u>	1

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

P. G. WODEHOUSE

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

Etext provided by Dagny
and the Blandings Group

On the cheek of the stout man who reclined in the barber's chair there still lingered a small patch of unreclaimed jungle. Lancelot Purvis removed this with his gleaming razor, and, stepping back, surveyed his handiwork with silent satisfaction; for he was a conscientious barber and took a pleasure in making a good job of it. He now produced a steaming towel from nowhere, dumped it on the stout man's face, kneaded it awhile, whisked it off, applied witch-hazel, and finally dabbed the face once or twice with a second towel.

"Face massage, sir?"

"No!"

"Hair a little long at the ends. Trim it, sir?"

"No!"

"Anything on the head, sir?"

"No!"

"Shine the hair, sir?"

"No!"

Lancelot had no more suggestions to make. The stout man heaved himself up from the chair, breathed a little stertorously, put on his collar, tipped Lancelot, and walked out. The episode was ended.

The advantage of being a really great writer, one of the big-browed lads who make every stroke tell and all that sort of thing, is that you save so much time. Take myself for instance. I don't want to boast about it, you understand: I quite realise that it is simply a gift, coming who shall say whence; I merely wish to point out as a matter of artistic interest that in this single short scene my wonderful skill in character-delineation has enabled you to visualize Lancelot Purvis as clearly as though you had known him for years. With a few subtle touches I have made you recognise his shrinking nature, his mildness, his sensitiveness, his diffidence. What? You didn't? You didn't gather the fact that Lancelot was a mild, diffident young man? Well then, all *I* can say is that something must have gone wrong with the works, and I suppose I shall have to approach the thing all over again from another angle. But, really, when I showed the customer snapping out 'No!' to everything Lancelot suggested and Lancelot taking it quite meekly and not even having the nerve to try to sell him a hair-wash, I did think I could leave the rest to the intelligence of the reader.

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

There are some men who in the battle of life seem consistently to get the loser's end, and this after a time tends to remove the steel from their character. Lancelot Purvis was one of these. All through his early boyhood he had had much to suffer from the juvenile population of his native town, on whose immature minds the name Lancelot had had the worst effects. When he was thirteen, he caught measles and shot up five or six inches, attaining a height which intimidated his peers into leaving him alone. But by that time the mischief was done, and Lancelot was a hopelessly mild boy. And, when he reached the early twenties and might shortly have become normal again, the War broke out and the Army got him. And that started the trouble all over again.

He never succeeded in getting to the Front. Chaperoned by a sergeant, he looked after horses in the rear of the lines; and several months of this undid Lancelot completely. There were, no doubt, in the American expeditionary force sergeants of the most winning amiability; but Lancelot's was rather a violent and hasty sort of man, full of strange oaths and reluctant to make allowances. It was a physically tough but spiritually battered barber who, about a year later, returned to the Hotel Cosmopolis.

Safe back beside his chair in the Cosmopolis shaving-parlour, Lancelot was happy again. Barbering was in his blood. His father had been a barber. His earliest memories were of the clinging scent of hair-washes, and he had cut his teeth on an old shaving brush. There was, moreover, a marked artistic strain in him, which found expression in the exercise of his trade. After all, to the thoughtful man, being a barber is much the same as being a sculptor. The sculptor takes a shapeless block of marble and chips off all that is unnecessary and superfluous. What else does a barber do? There were times, after he had seen a customer come in with a scrub of beard and a mop of hair falling over his collar and, after chipping away all that was superfluous, had watched him walk out, dapper and trim and a pleasure to look at, when Lancelot felt the glow of the creator.

Such, then, was Lancelot Purvis on the morning of the seventh of April, the date on which for the first time in his life he set eyes on May Gleason.

Once or twice in the day of a New York barber there arrives the Star Customer, the man of comprehensive outlook and unbounded ambition, who wishes to make himself one hundred per cent. perfect not only as regards his hair and face but in all the outlying portions of him. One of this species came to Lancelot's chair on the morning of the seventh of April and just lay back and said yes to everything. He wanted a haircut, a twice-over shave, face massage, a singe, a dry shampoo, and something for the scalp. He wanted his shoes shined and he wanted a manicure. It must have been his birthday or something.

It was at this point that May Gleason stepped daintily into Lancelot's life.

The manicure girls at the Cosmopolis as a rule meant little to Lancelot. He hardly noticed them. They were just there. Yet somehow the very first glimpse of May Gleason set his heart jumping so quickly that he found it difficult to keep his mind on his job. Fortunately, by years of practice he had got his scissors so trained that they worked almost of their own volition. All he had to do was to loose them into the undergrowth, and they did the rest. Consequently, he was enabled to look a good deal at this remarkable girl, as she bent demurely over the customer's fingers. He could only catch an occasional glimpse of her face. But that did not worry him, for what he wanted to look at was her hair.

If there was one thing in the world that had the power to stir Lancelot to the depths, it was beautiful hair. And this girl's was the most beautiful he had ever seen. It was dark hair. Dark! The word is feeble. It was like a great rolling black wave. It was like a soft, brooding cloud. It was like a moonless night. It was like water under the stars. It appealed with terrific force not only to Lancelot, the expert in hair, but to Lancelot the artist.

He looked down at her. And as he did so, she happened to look up. She smiled. And the subjugation of Lancelot, was complete.

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

Cupid gives quick service. That very evening Lancelot found an opportunity of speaking to her. It was raining when he came out into the world at the end of his day's labours, and he was just opening his umbrella—it was typical of Lancelot that he had an umbrella—when out stepped this girl. Like the feather-brained little thing she was, she had omitted to provide herself with any protection whatsoever against the elements. She wore a thin dress and a fragile looking hat, and she stood peering out at the downpour with some alarm.

"Oh, hooray!" she said, spying Lancelot, who was wavering between chivalry and shyness. "You've got an umbrella. Would you mind seeing me as far as the subway?"

Lancelot gulped. He would have liked to say "Delighted!" or "Charmed!" or one of the things that would have come to the heroes of the novels he read, whose quickness off the mark in their relations with the other sex had always been a source of envy to him. But he shoved the umbrella over her, and they set off.

"I met you this morning, didn't I?" said the girl. "Did you notice that fellow slip me a fifty-cent tip? Some class to him! I wish there were more like that running around. My name's May Gleason. Yours is Purvis, isn't it? The cashier told me it was."

A thrill ran through Lancelot. So she been sufficiently interested in him to inquire his name. He contrived speech.

"You're new, aren't you?" he said.

"At the Cosmopolis? Yes. I was working in a hotel in Jersey City up to last month. Gee! I was glad to get out of there. I hate the Middle West. New York's the only place in the world, isn't it."

Lancelot considered the point.

"Well yes and no," he said weightily. He was amazed to find himself talking with increasing ease. There was a perky friendliness about this girl which melted his shyness. "I like New York, but it's kind of noisy, don't you think?"

"Noisy? That's why I like it. They can't make too much noise for me. I lived all my life up to last year in a small town."

"I like small towns."

"Well, you can have 'em. I don't want 'em."

Lancelot was getting more at his ease every moment. Indeed, he felt so at home by now that he was able to reveal his hidden ambitions. And these were sacred. Never had he spoken of them to a living soul.

"What I want to do," he said, "is to put away a bit of money and go back and start a real up-to-date barber-shop in my home town."

"Yes?"

"I was getting on fine for a while, but of course the War set me back quite a lot. You see, all the time I was in the army I didn't save a cent."

"Were you in the Army?" Her voice had taken on a respectful note, and she looked up at him with admiring eyes. "I suppose you had an awful time?"

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

"Pretty tough," said Lancelot.

"I'll bet you! I think you soldiers were simply great!"

"Oh, no," said Lancelot modestly.

"Were you in Belleu Wood?"

"Belleu Wood? Well, no. Not actually *in* Belleu Wood."

"But I suppose you were in all sorts of dangerous places?"

"Yes." Lancelot had not forgotten the day when one of the new horses nearly got him in the seat of the trousers as he stooped to recover a dropped curry-comb. "Yes, pretty dangerous."

"And now you want to go back to the old home-town! Gee, I should have thought you'd have found it kinda slow. Still, I don't see where I get any licence to knock your hometown when I don't even know what it is. For all I know, it may be a live spot. I kinda judge all hometowns by the burg I came from."

"Was it very quiet?"

"Quiet? It was unconscious! It was a little place out in Ohio, called Ostromia."

Lancelot started violently so violently that the umbrella rocked in his grip, permitting several large drops to descend on his companion.

"Have a heart!" she begged. "Can't you wait till you get home to start shimmying? This is a new lid I've got on."

"It made me jump," explained Lancelot apologetically. "I come from Ostromia, too!"

"Yes?" she seemed unimpressed by the coincidence. "That so?"

"But don't you think," said Lancelot, rather damped, "that it's an extraordinary thing that we should both have come from Ostromia?"

"Oh, I don't know. I can't imagine anyone who was ever in Ostromia not coming from it. It's about the best little burg to get out of that I ever struck."

"But but but " A belated spasm of shyness caused Lancelot to stammer. "But I mean it makes a sort of bond between us."

"Does it? All right. Have it your own way." She looked at him with frank surprise. "Do you really want to go back there?"

"As soon as I can put by enough money. I haven't been there for ten years. I suppose the place is quite changed now?"

"You bet! You know the Garfield House?"

"On Main Street, on the left as you go up from the station!"

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

"Yes. Well, it used to be red, and a couple of years ago they painted it green. There's always something doing in Ostorla. Moving all the time! Well, here we are." They stopped at the entrance of the subway. "Thanks for the umbrella."

"You're welcome," said Lancelot. "I wonder I wonder "

"Yes?"

"Well, couldn't I couldn't we ?"

"I'll bet we could. Couldn't we what?"

"May I come and see you some evening?"

"Sure!" said the girl heartily. "Come any old evening you like and take me to the movies. Well, good-bye. Be good, and don't take any wooden nickels."

She dived into the flood of humanity that poured through the subway entrance, and was swept away. Lancelot remained where he stood. People in a hurry buffeted him hither and thither, but he paid no attention to them. His body was blocking the pavement, but his spirit was soaring aloft on a rosy cloud.

On the following Sunday, dressed in his most telling clothes, Lancelot called at the little flat where she lived with the blonde lady-cashier of the Cosmopolis barber-shop. Lancelot was not aware, until he climbed up four flights of stairs and was admitted into the pill-box sitting-room of the flat, that this partnership had been formed: and he surveyed the cashier, as she rose hospitably from her chair to greet him, with mixed feelings. In a way, her presence was embarrassing. There had been a time, when he had the chair next to the cashier's desk, when they had become rather intimate. Indeed, at the crisis of this period he had been on the verge of a warmer feeling than mere friendship, and had only been deterred from going further into the matter by the fact that the cashier's hair was so manifestly peroxidized. And Lancelot loathed peroxide. For many reasons he would have preferred her absence on this occasion to her company. But there was one reason why he was distinctly glad that she was there. After a promising start, he had begun to feel abominably shy once more, and he welcomed anything at this juncture that would prevent a *tete-a-tete* with May. What Lancelot felt, as regarded May, was that for the moment he would like just to be with her and to look at her, without the necessity of talking too much; and the cashier, who was a great conversationalist, was a useful person to have along with you when you felt like that. He took them both to the movies, and sat between them.

Taking them to the movies and sitting between them became a habit. At first he did it every Sunday; then, growing bolder, he did it once in the middle of the week. After a while he was always dropping in and taking them to the movies.

Whatever may be said against the motion-pictures from an artistic point of view and candour compels one to admit that in the main they are pretty fierce there is one thing in their favour as far as the shy and diffident man is concerned. They are a great aid to courtship. In the dim light, with soft music going all the time, Lancelot found that he could let himself go in a manner quite beyond him under other conditions. At the end of the second week, taking advantage of a peculiarly glutinous moment in the affairs of a female star and her support, who, after a whole lot of misunderstanding, were coming together through the healing influence of a little child (Spoken Title: 'Mummie, won't 'oo kiss dadda?') he ventured to clasp May's hand in his and was electrified to find that she showed no resentment. He squeezed her hand through two entire reels.

This was the evening when he felt for the first time that the lady cashier was superfluous.

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

Two days later, having climbed the stairs, he found May alone in the sitting-room. He was conscious of a flutter of hope, but he did not allow it to flutter too much. Probably, he felt, the cashier was merely in the bedroom, dressing up for the evening's outing.

"Where's Miss Bagster?" he asked.

The girl looked at him in what seemed to be a rather odd way. He was a sensitive young man, and he fancied that there was a certain chill in the atmosphere. He could not account for this.

"She's gone out. She had an appointment."

"Oh!" said Lancelot.

In the effort to keep the joy out of his voice, he did perhaps affect a regret which was a trifle exaggerated. Indeed, as a matter of fact, he spoke rather as if he had just heard the news of the death of a dear friend. A faint pink flush came into May's face, and she bit her lip.

"Yes, I suppose you are disappointed," she said frostily.

This monstrous accusation completely deprived Lancelot of speech, and May went on with her remarks.

"It's too bad, isn't it? I told her you would be all broken up, but she would go."

"But " Lancelot tried to find words to refute the charge. "But "

He could get no further. The girl's manner chilled him. There was an awkward silence. May fiddled with a magazine.

"Then," said Lancelot, "then shall we go out?"

"No. I don't want to go out."

"There's a good picture at the Bijou Dream," persevered the poor fish. "Cuthbert Erickson in 'Why Men Go Wrong!'" There was more silence. "Wouldn't you like to see it?" he asked.

"No!" The magazine fell to the floor. May was looking away from him and speaking rapidly. "I don't ever want to go to the movies with you again! I'm sick of being third party! If you want to take Ellabelle" this was the lady cashier's revolting name "take her. I don't care! But don't keep up all this silly nonsense of wanting me along. I'm sick of it! Life's too short!"

"What what what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean! Ellabelle told me you were her beau."

"What!"

"She said you've always been crazy about her."

Lancelot rallied himself. There are moments in the life of even the most diffident man when circumstances force him into a display of vigour and decision. For an instant he felt strong and commanding. He grabbed at May's hand. She shook him off. He seized her by the shoulders.

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

"I wasn't! I'm not! I love *you!*"

"You don't!"

"Yes, I do!"

"No, you don't!"

"Yes, I do!"

"You don't, either!"

"I do! I do!"

"Suppose Ellabelle came in now and heard you?"

"I wouldn't care!"

"Ellabelle "

"Oh, darn Ellabelle!"

"You don't really love me."

"Yes, I do!"

"No, you don't!"

"Yes, I do!"

"You don't!"

"I do!"

"You don't, either!"

"Yes, I do! I do! I do!"

"Honest?"

"Honest!"

"I don't believe you do!"

"Yes, I do!"

"You don't, either!"

"Yes, I do!"

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

It is all very well to expect story-writers to be realistic, but with white paper at its present price one simply must abbreviate the modern love scene. Suffice it to say that, by the time the scorecard showed May with twenty-four "No, you don't's" while crediting Lancelot with twenty-five "Yes, I do's," they were sitting side by side on the sofa, and Lancelot was stroking her wonderful hair, an engaged man.

The first jarring note was struck by May.

"Darling!"

"Yes, darling?"

"I won't live in Ostoria."

"Oh, precious!"

"Well, I won't! Sitting all day on the porch watching the farmers whizz by in their hay-wagons, isn't my idea of a large existence. I'm going to live in New York."

"But, honey! I've been saving up for years "

"I don't care! If you want me, you'll have to stay in New York."

"But, precious!"

"If you really loved me, you would do as I ask you."

"Of course, but "

"But I don't believe you really do love me."

"I do."

"No, you don't!"

"Yes, I do!"

"You don't, either!"

"I do!"

"Well, if you did, you would do as I asked you."

Lancelot yielded. He gave in. Her glorious hair was tickling the tip of his nose and he succumbed. He abandoned the dream of ten years. He had a momentary vision of that little up-to-date barber-shop; and it seemed to gaze reproachfully at him. Then it was shut out by the spectacle of that wonderful cloud of dusky hair.

"All right!" he said.

"You'll live in New York?"

"Yes."

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

"You're a darling," said May, and kissed him.

There are all kinds of kisses. May's was like the one she might have given a pet dog for doing its trick nicely. Lancelot was too happy to notice it, but in a corner of the room the spectre of Trouble stood, grinning maliciously.

One result of their new relationship was that Lancelot now found himself regarding with jealousy the customers who came to May's table to have their nails manicured. It was useless for him to argue with himself that business was business, and that, when May smiled, chaffed, and chatted with these persons, she did so in a purely professional capacity. Lancelot knew this perfectly well, but the knowledge brought no balm. He hated these blighters. The younger and the more presentable they were, the more he feared and loathed them. It may have been the sub-conscious realisation that May's smiles and badinage were not after all so purely professional that disturbed his soul. They had been engaged now for some weeks, and intimacy had revealed her character to him. May was as good as gold, but she did like attention, she did like flattery, she did enjoy the companionship of others beside her mate.

Gradually, Lancelot began to classify these customers of May's in a sort of Dante-esque series of hells. In the lowest and innermost hell of all he placed all by himself an aggressive young man with an impudent, good-looking face and a taste for fancy waistcoats who was the most regular of all the attendants at May's table. This excrescence came in every other day, and Lancelot had a curious feeling, a sort of instinctive fear, that sooner or later his happiness was to be affected by him. Who the man was, and what he might he expected to do, Lancelot could not have said. He was merely vaguely apprehensive.

It is a truism that the things we worry about seldom happen: but they sometimes do, and they did in this case. Walking home after the movies one night, Lancelot perceived that there was something on May's mind. She had been strangely silent all the evening. When she reached her door, she spoke.

"Larry."

At an early stage in their engagement she had declined emphatically and once and for all to call him Lancelot. The more attractive substitute had been her own invention.

"Yes?" said Lancelot.

He was conscious of a foreboding.

"Larry," said May again, looking down the street and avoiding his eye.

"Yes, honey?"

"There's a fellow who comes to my table pretty often. I don't know if you've noticed him. He dresses kind of bright."

"I've noticed him," said Lancelot grimly.

"He's the press-agent for one of the new shows. He wants me to go on the stage!"

"What!"

"Well, why shouldn't I?" said May, flaring up. She felt more at her ease now that it was possible to carry the thing through with spirit and fire. "Don't you think I get sick of sitting all day in a stuffy shaving parlour, fooling about with men's fingers? I've gotta right to have a little pleasure, haven't I? I think you're awful mean!"

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

Then, swiftly abandoning the attitude militant she melted into sobs. Intimacy had revealed Lancelot's character to her, as it had revealed hers to Lancelot.

She had gauged him correctly. His rigidity softened in a flash. He put his arms around her and petted her. Presently the sobs stopped. She dabbed her eyes with a tiny handkerchief.

"If I'd known you would be horrid and bully me, I'd never have told you," she moaned brokenly.

"Honey!" protested Lancelot.

"Well, you were horrid!"

"I didn't mean to be."

"Well, you were!"

"I didn't mean to be!"

"But you were!"

"I didn't mean to be. But, girlie! The stage!"

"Well, what's wrong with the stage?"

"Nothing, but "

"I know what it is! You don't love me!"

"Yes, I do!"

"No, you don't!"

"Yes, I do!"

"No you don't! If you did, you wouldn't mind my having a little fun."

A policeman passed slowly, casting an appraising glance at them as he went by. The policeman was a man of the world, a man of experience.

"She's working the poor chap for something," said the policeman to himself. "And she's got him going! Girls!" said the policeman with a large, tolerant amusement. And passed on.

He was perfectly right. In another minute Lancelot had capitulated.

"I only want you to be happy, darling," he said weakly.

"You *are* a dear!" said May.

She kissed him.

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

"The rehearsals are starting right away," said May, speaking rapidly. "This fellow says he's sure he can get me a job in the chorus. Only it isn't really the chorus, you know, because they're going to have eight special girls, and this fellow says he can fix it so that I'm one of them. It's going to be a dandy show, this fellow says. Its called 'Oh, Mabel!' or something. He says it's going to be a dandy show. Goodnight, dear!"

She vanished abruptly, leaving Lancelot with a dim feeling that he had been outwitted. He was three streets away before he had detected the exact point in the conversation at which he should have put his foot down, asserted himself, and generally behaved like a cave-man.

In the days before he had met May, Lancelot had frequently been lonely; but it had been a vague loneliness, hardly to be recognised for what it was. It had never brought with it that aching sense of loss and desolation which haunted him during the working day after she had left the Cosmopolis and her table was occupied by an inferior girl with henna-red hair and a giggle. And presently even the consolation of seeing her in the evenings was taken from him, for the chorus of her musical comedy began to rehearse at night.

Sometimes he was able to meet her after these night rehearsals and, when he did, he noticed that already a subtle change had begun in her. She had not precisely toughened, but she had certainly taken on some of the distinguishing marks of her new profession. She spoke familiarly, as one who had seen them close to of prominent performers whom Lancelot had only encountered through the medium of the upper balcony. She was full of stories of the other girls. Somebody had given Tot a *sunburst*; Pickles had had an awful call-down from the stage director; Babe was having the nerve to say that she had been mistaken on the street for Peggy Hopkins. The net result of all of which was to give Lancelot the sensation of being out of it, of having lost touch with her. A sullen resentment began to grow in him against the press-agent his name was Harry Fletcher who had come butting in and started all this.

When the show opened on the road and she left town altogether, Lancelot plumbed the depths. His faithful scissors still worked on automatically, but his thoughts were far away. Once a customer tipped him a cent by mistake, and he never even noticed it.

"She's All Right" for that was now the title of the piece *vice* "Oh, Mabel!" and six other titles superseded had opened in Detroit and was working its way east in one week jumps. Lancelot ticked off the days on a special route-sheet of his own which he had pinned up over his bed. Toronto Cleveland Buffalo Washington New York. He held out up to the Washington week, and then he obtained special leave of absence to attend the funeral of a relative and rushed to the Pennsylvania Station. All the way down in the train his heart was singing within him at the prospect of meeting her.

The trouble about hearts is that they sing too soon. They take too much for granted. It is painful to have to record it, but from Lancelot's point of view the meeting was an even worse frost than 'She's All Right' was when, a week later, it opened in New York.

He met her at the stage door: and one may charitably attribute his subsequent weakness, if one wishes to find excuses for him to the fact that she was one of the last of the company to come out. For an appreciable space of time Lancelot stood in a narrow alley-way while girls of all sizes brushed past him. They all stared at him and they all giggled. It was Lancelot's first experience of this sort of thing, and it reduced his sensibilities to a fizzle. By the time May finally emerged, looking trim and neat in blue serge with a small hat on top of her beautiful hair, he was perfectly limp.

She was humming a tune as she came out, and when she saw him she stopped dead.

"Larry!"

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

Lancelot was too far gone by this time to appreciate subtle voice–inflections, or he would have noted that she spoke more with surprise than pleasure. He might even have detected annoyance mingled with the surprise.

"Whatever are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," said Lancelot.

"But Well, why didn't you send me a wire? Then I wouldn't have made an appointment."

Lancelot's heart, the same heart that had done all that singing on the train, grew leaden.

"Have you got an appointment?" he said dully. The disappointment was numbing. Washington is an attractive city, but he had not made a four–hour journey just to inspect its interesting public buildings.

"Well, you ought to have wired," said May defensively. "How was I to know? Mr. Fletcher asked me to go out to supper, so of course I said I would."

"Fletcher!"

May seemed to find something critical and disapproving in his repetition of the name.

"Why not?" she said a little shrilly. "Why shouldn't I go out to supper with Mr. Fletcher? He's the press–agent of the show, and he can do me a lot of good. I want to get on, don't I?" Something in the blank unhappiness of Lancelot's face made her change her tone. "You mustn't be silly, Larry dear," she said more gently. "It doesn't amount to anything. Mr. Fletcher's a perfect gentleman. But I must go out with him when he asks me, mustn't I, if he can do me a lot of good?"

There was a silence.

"Well, I mustn't be late," said May at length.

"No," said Lancelot.

"I'm very sorry."

"It's all right."

"Well, good night."

"Good night."

Their ways parted at the entrance of the alley. Lancelot walked listlessly off. There was an accusing voice within him which told him that once again he had failed to play a heroic part. It pointed out, what dimly he knew already, that May was not the sort of girl a man could hold by tactics like his. She needed a firm and resolute hand. In a moment of clear vision he saw that sooner or later, behaving in this limp way, he must lose her. She would grow to despise him. What girl, demanded the inner voice, could help despising a man who let another man walk off with her under his very nose and did not even utter a protest? Girls liked a strong man. For an instant a flicker of the right spirit burned in Lancelot's mild soul. He stopped. He would follow her and find her and snatch her from the society of this darned press–agent and The flicker died away. How could he find her? This was his first visit to Washington. He did not know where she was supping. He couldn't go round dragging all the restaurants in the city.

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

He ended his evening by taking a solitary coffee and wheat-cakes at an all-night lunch-counter. Then he went back to the station and had to wait two hours for a train.

The week dragged its weary length along. Saturday came at last, and Lancelot went to bed with the first gleam of happiness that had illuminated his grey existence since the Monday. About now such was his last waking thought the "She's All Right" company would be getting on the train to New York, and to-morrow he would see May once more in her own little flat where he had never felt anything but at home.

Voices came to him through the front door, as he stood there next day, breathing with anticipation mingled with the effort of running up four flights of stairs. They had the effect of causing an immediate depression of his exalted mood. He had counted on May being alone. His mood changed to an unwonted irritation. Were these meetings always to go wrong?

And then the door opened. It was opened by Mr. Fletcher.

"Hullo!" said Mr. Fletcher.

The press-agent was a man of commanding appearance. He was broad and heavily built and he stood four inches above Lancelot. But what dominated Lancelot was the man's self-satisfaction, his air of being entirely certain of himself. It seemed to expand him. Lancelot, as he gazed upon him, felt obscure and insignificant.

"Is Miss Gleason in?" he asked.

"Yes. Want to see her?"

What Lancelot would have liked to reply was "Of course I want to see her, damn your eyes, and what the devil are you doing here anyway?" But the magnetism of the other was upon him like a spell.

"Yes," he said.

"Come in."

Lancelot followed him humbly into the sitting-room.

"Someone to see you, May," said the press-agent.

Beyond his intervening bulk Lancelot could perceive a blue serge dress. His heart was beating wildly. He squeezed past Mr. Fletcher.

And then he stopped dead.

"Hello, Larry!"

Lancelot did not speak. A helpless, nightmare feeling had overcome him. The voice was the voice of May. The face was May's face. But the hair

Gone was the great rolling black wave. Gone was the soft brooding cloud. Gone was the moonless night, the water under the stars. Piled in an affected mass upon her head, gleaming and bright and golden, her hair smote upon his vision and froze him in his tracks. She had dyed it yellow.

May smiled a little nervously.

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

"How do you like it?" she said.

Lancelot found no words.

"It was Mr. Fletcher's idea," went on May. "He said managers would always rather engage blonde girls."

Mr. Fletcher surveyed his handiwork with complacency.

"Sure," he said. "Black hair don't get you anywhere. Blondes are all the thing these days." He stepped back abruptly. "Say! What the hell!"

Lancelot had cracked. Push a rabbit too far and he will turn on a bull-dog. Persecute a sheep beyond the limit to which nature has set for its endurance and it will attack a lion. All his life Lancelot had bowed meekly before the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune; all his life he had accepted affronts as his birthright, the birthright of a mild man. But now the breaking-point had been reached. He was looking on the world, and particularly Mr. Fletcher through a mist of red. That wonderful hair of May's had held him a slave to her every whim. But now He uttered a sound that was half sob, half snarl, and flung himself on the press-agent.

"What the hell!" said Mr. Fletcher. Not without reason.

Mr. Fletcher was no poltroon. He was a man who kept up his end in the world. But hitherto he had never been called upon to do it physically, and he had permitted himself to become a trifle soft. He reeled before Lancelot's onslaught, tripped over a stool, and collapsed on the sofa.

"Get up!" said Lancelot through his teeth; and stood breathing heavily.

The press-agent got up. The first shock of surprise over, he was prepared to enter more fully into this matter. The unexpectedness of Lancelot's attack had put him at a disadvantage in the opening stages of the campaign, but he had now adjusted his mind to the business in hand. His blood was up. He had no notion why he was being assaulted by a perfect stranger, but his forehead was tingling where Lancelot had struck it and his favourite tie, torn from its moorings by Lancelot's clutching hand was practically a total loss, and he was in the mood to seek reparation for these outrages.

May stood rigid, a pasp; "No," said Lancelot.

"I'm very sorry."

"It's all right."

"Well, good night."

"Good night."

Their ways parted at the entrance of the alley. Lancelot walked listlessly off. There was an accusing voice within him which told him that once again he had failed to play a heroic part. It pointed out, what dimly he knew already, that May was not the sort of girl a man could hold by tactics like his. She needed a firm and resolute hand. In a moment of clear vision he saw that sooner or later, behaving in this limp way, he must lose her. She would grow to despise him. What girl, demanded the inner voice, could help despising a man who let another man walk off with her under his very nose and did not even utter a protest? Girls liked a strong man. For an instant a flicker of the right spirit burned in Lancelot's mild soul. He stopped. He would follow her and find her and snatch her from the society of this darned press-agent and — The flicker died away. How could he find her? This was his first visit to Washington. He did not know where she was supping. He couldn't go round dragging all the restaurants in the city.

He ended his evening by taking a solitary coffee and wheat-cakes at an all-night lunch-counter. Then he

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

went back to the station and had to wait two hours for a train.

The week dragged its weary length along. Saturday came at last, and Lancelot went to bed with the first gleam of happiness that had illuminated his grey existence since the Monday. About now — such was his last waking thought — the "She's All Right" company would be getting on the train to New York, and to-morrow he would see May once more in her own little flat where he had never felt anything but at home.

Voices came to him through the front door, as he stood there next day, breathing with anticipation mingled with the effort of running up four flights of stairs. They had the effect of causing an immediate depression of his exalted mood. He had counted on May being alone. His mood changed to an unwonted irritation. Were these meetings always to go wrong?

And then the door opened. It was opened by Mr. Fletcher.

"Hullo!" said Mr. Fletcher.

The press-agent was a man of commanding appearance. He was broad and heavily built and he stood four inches above Lancelot. But what dominated Lancelot was the man's self-satisfaction, his air of being entirely certain of himself. It seemed to expand him. Lancelot, as he gazed upon him, felt obscure and insignificant.

"Is — Is Miss Gleason in?" he asked.

"Yes. Want to see her?"

What Lancelot would have liked to reply was "Of course I want to see her, damn your eyes, and what the devil are you doing here anyway?" But the magnetism of the other was upon him like a spell.

"Yes," he said.

"Come in."

Lancelot followed him humbly into the sitting-room.

"Someone to see you, May," said the press-agent.

Beyond his intervening bulk Lancelot could perceive a blue serge dress. His heart was beating wildly. He squeezed past Mr. Fletcher.

And then he stopped dead.

"Hello, Larry!"

Lancelot did not speak. A helpless, nightmare feeling had overcome him. The voice was the voice of May. The face was May's face. But the hair —

Gone was the great rolling black wave. Gone was the soft brooding cloud. Gone was the moonless night, the water under the stars. Piled in an affected mass upon her head, gleaming and bright and golden, her hair smote upon his vision and froze him in his tracks. She had dyed it yellow.

May smiled a little nervously.

"How do you like it?" she said.

Lancelot found no words.

"It was Mr. Fletcher's idea," went on May. "He said managers would always rather engage blonde girls."

Mr. Fletcher surveyed his handiwork with complacency.

"Sure," he said. "Black hair don't get you anywhere. Blondes are all the thing these days." He stepped back abruptly. "Say! What the hell!"

Lancelot had cracked. Push a rabbit too far and he will turn on a bull-dog. Persecute a sheep beyond the limit to which nature has set for its endurance and it will attack a lion. All his life Lancelot had bowed meekly before the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune; all his life he had accepted affronts as his birthright, the birthright of a mild man. But now the breaking-point had been reached. He was looking on the world, and particularly Mr. Fletcher — through a mist of red. That wonderful hair of May's had held him a slave to her every whim. But now — He uttered a sound that was half sob, half snarl, and flung himself on the press-agent.

"What the hell!" said Mr. Fletcher. Not without reason.

Mr. Fletcher was no poltroon. He was a man who kept up his end in the world. But hitherto he had never been called upon to do it physically, and he had permitted himself to become a trifle soft. He reeled before Lancelot's onslaught, tripped over a stool, and collapsed on the sofa.

"Get up!" said Lancelot through his teeth; and stood breathing heavily.

The press-agent got up. The first shock of surprise over, he was prepared to enter more fully into this matter. The unexpectedness of Lancelot's attack had put him at a disadvantage in the opening stages of the campaign, but

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

he had now adjusted his mind to the business in hand. His blood was up. He had no notion why he was being assaulted by a perfect stranger, but his forehead was tingling where Lancelot had struck it and his favourite tie, torn from its moorings by Lancelot's clutching hand was practically a total loss, and he was in the mood to seek reparation for these outrages.

May stood rigid, a paralysed spectator of the proceedings. At the beginning she had started forward and laid a hand on Lancelot's arm, but he had shaken it off with an energy so savage and unexpected in one of his established placidity that she had shrunk back, terrified, against the wall; and she remained there now because it seemed the only place in the room which was not in the track of the storm.

Meanwhile Lancelot and Mr. Fletcher fought spacioously all over the place.

There are few things which your red-blooded writer enjoys describing more than a fight. But it has to be the right sort of fight, with seconds and rounds and may-the-best-man-win and all that sort of thing. An untidy brawl like this gives him no chance. There is no finesse about it. As far as Lancelot and Mr. Fletcher were concerned, the Queensberry Rules might never have been written. Mr. Fletcher tore Lancelot's collar off, and Lancelot hit Mr. Fletcher with a volume of love poetry which was lying convenient to his hand on a small table. Mr. Fletcher knocked Lancelot against the small table, and Lancelot grabbed the small table and hit Mr. Fletcher with that. In fact, to avoid going into wearisome detail, he hit Mr. Fletcher with practically everything in the room except May, who dodged, the sofa, which was too heavy to lift, the book-case, which was fastened to the wall, and the picture of September Morn, which hung too high to be reached. It was a well directed blow with a bronze flower-bowl containing a wilted geranium which settled the issue. It took Mr. Fletcher squarely on the head, and he subsided on the floor.

"Have you had enough?" demanded Lancelot fiercely.

Mr. Fletcher did not reply, for his interest in the proceedings had evaporated entirely. He sat on the floor and panted.

Lancelot surveyed May grimly. He was a repellent object. One of his eyes was closed, the other stared horribly. His lip was cut and the blood dripped slowly down his chin. He had the foundations of a cauliflower ear. Yet, awful as was his aspect, May gazed upon him with a devotion which his normal appearance had never aroused in her. The centuries had slipped away from these simple people, and they were back in the Stone Age. Emotions which civilisation had done its best to crush out of them were alive again, raw and tingling.

"Larry!" cried May.

So might a proud young wife have spoken to her mate as he emerged triumphant from a brisk three rounds with a sabre-toothed tiger or a lively turn-up with the local mammoth.

"Larry!"

Lancelot spoke no word. His thoughts at the moment were vague and chaotic, but he realised dimly that she had passed from his life. He licked his lip. He felt tenderly the shapeless swelling which in some way or other had contrived to attach itself to the side of his head, where his left ear had been. He massaged his closed eye. Then he walked quickly out of the room.

"Larry!"

Mr. Fletcher looked up from the floor. The mists were beginning to clear. His thoughts, also, were chaotic, but he had collected them sufficiently to enable him to remember that he had been attacked by a mob of assassins and had put up a great battle.

"Did I win?" he inquired.

He found himself addressing emptiness. May had gone. She had caught Lancelot up on the first landing, and was babbling in his arms.

If you go up the main street of Orestia, Ohio, you will see on the left a smart, new building — it is not new really, but an old and decayed one renovated and painted — which bears over its door a gold sign,

BARBER SHOP

And underneath,

L. PURVIS, Prop.

As you have probably just come from the station after a gritty train-journey, you sure do need a shave and a general brush-up, so you will enter. But you will have to wait a moment for your turn, for the proprietor is occupied with another customer. The young woman at the cashier's desk soothes you by telling you that Mr.

THE COLOUR LINE (THE GOLDEN FLAW)

Purvis will be through in a moment. She is small and pretty, but the thing about her which you are sure to notice particularly is her hair. It is dark hair. And yet dark is such a feeble word. It like a great rolling black wave. It is like a soft brooding cloud. If you are poetical you will probably compare it in your mind to a moonless night or water under the stars. It was cut quite short, like a boy's, when the Purvises arrived here after the honeymoon, for, as everybody knows, Mrs. Purvis had a fever or something of that sort and had to have it clipped. But it has regained all its old length and luxuriance now.

L. Purvis, Propr., is finishing with his customer. With his gleaming razor he removes a patch of unreclaimed jungle which still lingers on his left cheek, and, stepping back, surveys his handiwork with silent satisfaction. He now produces a steaming towel from nowhere and dumps it on the customer's face, kneads it for awhile, whisks it off, applies witch-hazel, and finally jabs the face with a second towel.

"Face massage, sir?"

"No!"

"Better have a face massage, sir?"

"No!"

"Very good for the skin. Prevents it getting wrinkled."

"That so?"

"When I was at the Hotel Cosmopolis in New York, all the gentlemen used to take a face massage."

"That *so*?"

"Very restful and soothing, sir."

"Yes? Well, all right. Gimme a face massage."

The woman with the wonderful hair turns to you apologetically.

"I'm afraid you will have to wait just a *little* longer, sir. Both the assistants are out at their lunch."

You settle down to your newspaper. It is not unpleasant to wait, for there is an atmosphere of homely contentment about this barber-shop. Moreover, the proprietor has impressed you. He knows his job, and he is so obviously a man of determination and character.