

September

by

**Leslie Gordon
Barnard**

Illustrated by

**Ralph Pallen
Coleman**

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September

If he only dared . . . take a poke at Life . . . poke Life once, good and plenty!

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

Illustrated by RALPH FALLEN COLEMAN

As Publius Marsh himself said afterwards, for, despite his innate timidity, he was not without a certain sense of humor: “There it was staring you in the face like a museum mummy, beyond life or hope!” All wrapped up, as you might say, and nowhere to go. Except jail! It might come to that. Queer things happened nowadays: a man never knew. Publius rarely opened his newspaper without a certain sense of cringing. These screaming headlines—really they oughtn’t to be allowed. Wars and rumors of wars; strikes, lockouts, earthquakes—‘the act of God, the King’s enemies’, as Publius used to read on the bills of lading he had, as a boy, filed in the dusty archives of Juniper, Harrow and Boscombe, Shipping and Insurance Brokers, Montreal and Branches . . .

So there it was—a nice financial mess, a nice week-end prospect! Publius ordinarily—from the cessation of his duties on Saturday noon, until their resumption on Monday morning—asked nothing better than to retire into his shell and have life touch him as little as possible. For fifteen out of his twenty years of service with the firm he had been attached to the expanding Insurance Department. His title was Chief Clerk, but he was really the office encyclopedia and the office drudge. Others rose up under him, and laughed their way past him into the remunerative selling game, or higher executive positions. Life really passed him by, but—save for a few stirrings easily stilled—he was content it should be so.

And here at last was life following him, raging at him like—like a wild beast ready to pounce. Sitting at his rickety table in his St. Catherine West boarding house room, he went over the thing again. It all came, of course, from his losing his savings pass-book, and feeling timid about asking a rather supercilious ledger-keeper for another. They always looked at one—you know . . . And then made up a new book from a given date, and threw it down with a slam on the glass slab, and you reached up for it, and crawled out through the door like a worm. So Publius, intending to remedy the matter and always leaving it until ‘next time’, fell back upon the stubs in his little blue, folded cheque book. This dependence upon his own ‘carried forward’ figures for his balance was responsible for the fatality.

He had issued a cheque for which there were no funds! Publius’ salary was one of those static ones that never rise much above the actual cost of

living. Once he had timidly approached Mr. Juniper about it. He would never forget the interview.

“Don’t you know,” roared Juniper, “that you’re a liability—not an asset? Who else in this office has been here any length of time without bringing in business—eh? Even young Cronk signed up his father for a life policy! Haven’t you any ambition? Haven’t you any friends? Haven’t you any sense of the fitness of things?”

So his salary just ‘did’ for him, and the balance in the bank admitted of no tricks of miscalculation. Publius having an utter horror of financial four-flushing would have been sufficiently disturbed in any case; that the cheque thus dishonored should be drawn in favor of Winkle and Wadsworth was tragedy.

Winkle and Wadsworth marked one of those places in his career where life had leaped at him like the wild beast it could be. Sickness, doctors’ bills, hospital bills, financial flurry—and a quiet little advertisement in the columns of the paper they brought to his bed. ‘Temporary Financial Embarrassment need not bother you. We bear the load; you pay us modest interest. No security required. A quiet, easy way of solving your difficulties. Pay us back when able. Winkle and Wadsworth, Financial Agents to Gentlemen, 1097 The Chambers, St. James Street.’

Delightful people to deal with, Publius had found, once his timid spirit had come to the point of approaching. Delightful until they had you ‘roped and tied’—then, look out!

As now—

Mr. Winkle was not only surprised but pained. He was ‘informed this cheque had been twice presented with the same result.’ Personally he would be disposed towards leniency, and a generous interpretation of the unfortunate matter, but ‘under the rigid bylaws of our firm, necessary you will understand, to the safeguarding of our clientele as a whole, I am compelled to advise you that if funds to cover, plus interest and charges, are not in our hands by nine o’clock Monday morning next, action will be taken to recover—whether criminal or civil will be determined by our attorneys—and notice will be at once forwarded to your employers, Messrs. Juniper, Boscombe and Dawes.’ Mr. Winkle further added that he had the honor to be Publius’ obedient servant . . .

Publius read it again. A shiver passed down his spine, more chilling than any he had known in his years with Juniper, Boscombe and Dawes.

You have noticed the change in name? Juniper and Boscombe coupled up, and Dawes hitched on the end. Harrow left on a siding, like a battered old freight car. Publius Marsh could tell you about Harrow. A terrible affair, poor fellow! Stock gambling, you know . . . always running down to a St. Francois Xavier Street House, near the Exchange, feverishly watching the ticker and the quotation board, eventually *using company funds*! Should have seen Juniper's face when the thing came out! Publius remembered it.

"Marsh!" he had bellowed afterwards—not that Publius mattered but he must have an audience—"Marsh! I am a tolerant man. I am, I trust, a righteous man. But there is one thing I will not stand, and that is any departure from strict rectitude in money matters. I care not who the man is, partner or office boy, at that point we part company for good! Tut! Tut! My! My! Company funds . . . Harrow . . . ask Mr. Dawes to step in here!"

Publius remembered the incident now, sitting there in his boarding house room, with the rumble of Saturday afternoon traffic flowing down St. Catherine Street in his ears. 'I care not who the man is, partner or office boy, at that point we part company.' . . . 'if funds to cover . . . are not in our hands by nine o'clock on Monday . . . notice at once forwarded to your employers, Messrs. Juniper—'

Putting his head down on the uncertain pillow of his arms, Publius groaned aloud. There was no one to whom he could go. If you refused to poke Life, you must expect a lack of those resources of friendship that might avail in time of need. He went and stood at the window, by the frowsy curtains, watching the flowing Saturday afternoon stream below, staring wistfully, and yet almost fiercely, at Life passing by, and wishing that he dared poke it one—good and plenty—before it leaped and devoured him!

You have seen, perhaps, a heavy, watersoaked log—caught in a backwash—thrust out a little by the waters, sucked back again, twirled around and around in a limited and monotonous circle, joining the main movement of the logs only on the outskirts and for a brief part of its cycle. That was Publius Marsh on his week-ends. Outside, in the brilliant autumn sunshine, the stream of pedestrians and vehicular traffic, flowed and hummed; occasionally he would venture out around the block or to buy the late edition whose headlines he deprecated, and whose colored comics he read soberly. But, for the most part, he sat and watched the thing from his window. Sunday morning he would sleep late, eat his lonely midday meal,

doze again, walk a little, perhaps sit on a park bench, and in the evening attend some church service with punctilious regularity. This was his round.

So it was, too, in the humdrum round of his life. Once, in the lane back of Juniper, Boscombe and Dawes', rather than suffer jibes and laughter, he had submitted to a lesson in the driving of young Dawes' car. Young Dawes was a bit of a clip, and staged the thing as a joke for the girls in the office. Nobody ever knew what Publius suffered before he found himself at the end of the lane, and the dull, smoke-blackened brick walls on either side of him still as intact as himself . . . Afterwards, he had watched young Dawes, cigarette in lip, nonchalantly, and with one hand on the wheel, manoeuvre the thing back through a gateway, and run up the lane again with a dexterity that secretly thrilled Publius. He listened avidly enough while young Dawes went over the elementary steps again, gas, clutch, gears, brake . . . and surprised the boarding house table that night with a '—was driving young Dawes' car for him to-day—quite a nice little bus, and—' something like that, a flash in the pan, a gesture, a poke at Life, if you will, that alarmed him as much as it amazed his listeners. It had not happened again. The log, leaping out once into mild white water, retreated into its backwash.

To-day, nursing his misery, he forgot the open window. A soft south wind billowed the curtain gently, and he became conscious of a tang in his nostrils. These things were in the breeze; autumn mold, leaves, gasoline, smoke from the factory stacks down over the hill where the crowded district lay, faint train smoke, tar, city pavements, people—but cutting through all the pungent smell of burning leaves in the high-walled grounds of the Grey Nunnery not far away.

September! Autumn! A faint nostalgia crept over him, growing into a sudden fierce, intolerable desire. Monday might bring disgrace, discharge, might throw him on the street! In all his timid life no such crisis had ever loomed. He remembered vaguely having read of soldiers in the Great War doing extravagant, impossible, often tragic things, with the thought that life might end to-morrow. Like that—something like that came to him now. Let Monday come; there remained most of his week-end! For those few hours he would live. He would poke Life—good and plenty—for once! Exactly how he did not know. He counted his available cash. It amounted to seven dollars and a little silver.

He thought of his watch, and the pawnshops of Craig Street. No, not that; he could not face the Jews down there. But he must do something quickly, something deadly, rash, terrible—commit himself to adventure, cast the die, or the faint torch of courage would flicker out. He had it!

Tremblingly he made out a cheque on the fatal and inadequate account, put his hat on, and went downstairs.

“Mrs. McGifferty!” he called.

A basement door opened, letting up the odor of stale and fresh stews, and a voice:

“You callin’, Mr. Marsh?”

“Could you cash me a cheque, Mrs. McGifferty?” He knew many paid their weekly dole in cash at noon on Saturdays.

“Why sure, Mr. Marsh. Anything for you! How much?”

“Fifty dollars.”

“Uh? Why-uh, yes, if you need it bad, Mr. Marsh!”

She came up, the money in her hand.

“I—I know its against your rules, Mrs. McGifferty—”

“Oh, lor, Mr. Marsh—not for *you!*”

He felt his legs weaken, his conscience prick, but he took the money, thrust it into his pocket, said: “I’m called away. Be back on Monday, Mrs. McGifferty!”

Well, so he was. Called away. Called by the stir of life. Until Monday. Monday? Never mind Monday; this was his week-end. He clapped his hat more firmly on, and went out, a gaily fearful atom with the other bits of human dust.

He went up an elm-shaded side street to the thoroughfare of Sherbrooke. People sometimes called Sherbrooke the Fifth Avenue of Montreal. But it did not pattern itself after the larger metropolis. Great residences, stone faced blocks, up-to-the minute apartments lifting themselves against the autumn tinges of Mount Royal; branch banks, sedately housed in one-time residences, to pass which gave Publius a return of qualm; commerce creeping in, creeping in; motors in flood-tide, but also horse-drawn equipages on the broad pavement, just as, in the midst of modern hotel and apartment life were mellowed houses set in grounds, fast being snapped up by canny real-estate investors, and high stone walls, enclosing martello towers, and high grey edifices of religious orders, surmounted by the cross, and, through gateways, the sight of robed priests,

of hooded nuns . . . the old world, the new world . . . and all of it, grey or colored, flooded with sunshine, and permeated with the smell of burning leaves.

Of all this Publius was vividly aware until suddenly it became a background for a single figure. Pausing for a moment on the steps of the Art Gallery, to regard—with a little shrinking sense of alarm—the magenta, salmon and peacock-blue poster announcing the Fall Exhibit within, he saw her. She came hastily from the doors of the building and stood poised, as if for flight, on the topmost of the broad steps of the approach. Her costume, in the sunshine there, was like the flash of a bluebird's wing. Her face, lost to him as she bent down to glance at her wrist watch, was youth incarnate, radiant with life; and yet, as he afterwards confirmed, it was matured youth, purged of the instabilities of flapperhood. An unsuspected chord of poetry within Publius responded to the thought that, poising here atop this spreading flight of steps, she was the spirit not of April but of September, gay month of new beginnings, reviewing the September flood that swept below her.

Not ordinarily aware of such things in his life, it is to be regretted that Publius forgot himself and stared quite rudely. Instantly, the bluebird, taking flight, swooped down beside him.



"So you've come!" she breathed, a little faster than was necessary. "Y-yes," stammered Publius, in utter stupidity, "I'm here!"

"So you've come!" she breathed, a little faster than necessary for such a short flight.

"Y-yes," stammered Publius, in utter stupidity, "I'm here!"

Now what made him say that?

"You're right on time," she said.

"Am I?" returned Publius, his heart beating suffocatingly.

“You know,” she said, “you look just about as I expected!”

“Do I?” said Publius.

She caught his arm with one of her quick movements.

“Where shall we have tea? I’m famished for a cup. You don’t mind, do you?”

He told himself he must stop this right away. That he did not was through no confirmation of his desire to poke Life once—good and plenty—nothing like that; it was simply that he had no breath and courage left to stem this gay current that was bearing him away.

“Of course, if you have any other plans—”

“Oh, no, no!” he insisted.

“Well, where shall we tea then?”

He was at a loss. Tea, for Publius, was invariably the evening meal—often he had envied secretly those who went, in comradely couples, into the tea rooms for the afternoon light refreshment, partaken *à deux*, under shaded lights. But he had never dared to himself . . . and he knew not where the best places were. And then his eyes ranging the street despairingly, saw a high, thin building . . .

“Where?” she asked again with a comradely tug at his arm. “You know the places.”

“The Ritz!” he said, and waved a hand with a feeble attempt at lightness. “I’m spending the week-end there.”

Well, no lie about that! So he was—though the decision antedated his statement by a matter of a second or two. Singularly, as soon as he had plunged this way, he felt better. The week-end! His week-end! Let Monday bring its awful aftermath if it would! Let the mistake of this bright creature be discovered! Let the floods cover his head! He had poked Life, and it was a gay, happy creature for the time; let it devour him later if it willed! This was his week-end! He found himself quite jauntily treading the pavement of Sherbrooke Street, in the September sunshine, beside a girl costumed like the flash of a bluebird’s wing.

The commissionaire outside the place frightened him terribly, but, with sudden hospitality, the revolving door whisked the blue girl in, and whisked him after.

“Shall you go to your room?” she asked.

“N-no, oh, no!” cried Publius.

“Aren’t you going to leave your coat and hat?”—for he was drifting helplessly with her towards a great room buzzing with people’s voices—a murmuring, terrifying sea. He was at a loss. Leave his hat and coat? Where? But he moved obediently towards an open doorway to find himself in a room with female creatures, presided over by a trim one of that sex, who said abruptly: “Gentlemen’s coat room just opposite the bookstall, sir.” He retreated redly; the bookstall rose before him, a place of confused oblongs in color that were magazines; washing up against it, the backwash of confusion carried him into the desired haven. A flunkey in curious breeched uniform relieved him of hat and coat, gave Publius a cardboard check with a number, and restored equanimity by his polite: “Yes, sir!” Publius wondered if he should pay anything, and deciding against it, crept away with an awful fear lest the flunkey become suddenly a roaring voice, demanding payment for services performed.

The girl in blue was waiting for him, the slightest pressure of her hand on his arm was necessary to set him again in motion towards that awful roomful of voices . . . voices . . . eyes, eyes . . . faces, tables, feet, waiters, menus, palms, pillars, an orchestra, lights, trays poised aloft on dexterous hands, cigarette smoke, food . . . voices, eyes, eyes . . . he was terribly conscious of his bargain-sale suit, under this battery of eyes. His head swam; every table seemed filled, the floor space was crowded, some dancers bumped him . . . “Here we are,” said a voice quietly. A table, two seats, off in a discreet corner . . . he was seated . . . a hovering waiter . . .

“Scones, tea and cake for me!” said the quiet voice.

“Uh—huh!” gurgled Publius. “And for me”—though he never drank tea, and wasn’t sure what a scone was.

“And an ice!”

“And an ice!” echoed Publius.

If only he were home in his St. Catherine boarding house room; there hidden from this mad, swirling world, these voices, these eyes.

“Isn’t this fun?”

She was leaning towards him. He saw now that her eyes were blue, too—not that baby blue of a placid summer sky, but the gay, brilliant blue of September.

“Fun!” he found his voice. “Oh, I should say. Rather!”

“I love hotels, don’t you?”

Publius rose to a tremendous height. He gestured airily. Funny!—when you looked into those eyes, the gay spirit of September moved you to heights. He gulped once, and took the leap like a timid salmon attempting its first up-river fall.

“Nice for a change,” he agreed, largely. “But one grows tired of them—as—a—a—steady diet!”

The waiter brought a menacing tray of china and of silver. Publius took fright again. But it all resolved itself into food—dainty food. And the waiter drifted away, and left them alone. And the confusion fell away and became a sea on whose pleasant strand there were only he and she. Publius Marsh, *habitué* of a chief clerk’s modest desk in a drab office and of a second-rate boarding house, here, in the soft aura of a shaded lamp, with mellow gleaming silver, rich, delicate food, and the blue September girl leaning forward a little to smile at him in comradeship!

Life was worth poking. Life was worth poking once, good and plenty!

As their ices began to dwindle under the silver shovels of their spoons, a new alarm fastened itself upon him. What came next? Must this blue and gold dream end? There she was, glancing at her watch. Perhaps she was going. Perhaps he would never, never see her again. Perhaps he would have to explain . . .



"You'll forgive my hurrying, won't you? But you understand, don't you—I simply have to see him before six!" Him! . . . Him! . . . Him! . . . Him! . . . Him! . . . Him! . . . Publius unglued his lips to protest: "Oh, you had better stay!"

"You'll forgive my hurrying, won't you? But you understand, don't you—I simply have to see him before six!"

Him! . . . Him! . . . Him?

He unglued his lips, to protest: "Oh, you had better stay!"

She shook her head. The troubled depths were moist, a blue mist: "Oh, if you only knew what you've done for me—how much it's meant to have you like this. I feel as if I could count on you—for anything—anything!"

"For anything!" agreed Publius.

He rose with her; moved out, as she moved—breasting the sea and oblivious to it, now—out the door. A waiter hurried humbly after . . . "Your check, sir?" . . . Publius drew out a five dollar bill. "Keep the change!" he

said, and left a staggered flunkey. It was not a magnificent gesture, it was born of shame, confusion, any emotion but generosity—but it did a queer thing for him. The man’s obsequious thanks rang in his ears. He felt the largeness of the moment. He had done the thing in a big way. By gad, he could carry things off if he once let himself go! By gad, he would!

“You must call on me for anything!” he said urgently.

“You’re too good,” she told him. “There’s just one thing—if you could meet me with your car—”

“My car,” murmured Publius. “Ah, yes, my car!”

“Outside the Windsor Station at six-thirty. At the St. Antoine entrance would be best—it’s quiet there!”

“I’ll be there!” declared Publius, computing the cost of taxi fare, and determining on the biggest limousine he could procure in the city.

“Have you a chauffeur—or do you drive yourself?”

He floundered. He thought of Dawes’ car, and stammered out: “Myself.”

“Oh—that’s so much nicer, isn’t it? At six-thirty then.”

What had he done? Nodded affirmatively? Not really—it was merely a gape of utter stupefaction. And she had taken it for agreement. “And you’ll drive yourself?” Good gosh!

Publius tottered feebly to the nearest lobby seat, and sank into it weakly. As for the girl, there was the flash of the bluebird’s wing in the late light, and she was gone.

Two men, approaching from opposite ends of the lobby, met in front of Publius. One was a podgy, overfleshed fellow, with a quick, shifty eye, and a nasty watery way of chewing over his cigar. The other was his direct antithesis. Middle height, late middle life, grizzled in a spruce, well-barbered way, pink-shaven, bow-tie, silk shirt, plus-fours, with hosiery just in that happy middle distance between an inconsequential background and a jazzy foreground.

These two were thrust before the weak eyes of Publius, and forced upon his staggering vision, by one of those stage-managing tricks that Fate at times achieves.

“Hullo, George!” said the dapper man.

“Why, William! Thought you was down in California.”

The dapper man produced a cigar, clipped it expertly, and lit it in a well-bred way that fascinated Publius.

“Was, my dear fellow! Was! Motored up. Stopped off to see the wife’s people in Indiana. Great crops out there! They say our own West is good. Shouldn’t be surprised if we were in for a prosperous wave! . . .”

The podgy man laughed.

The dapper man said abruptly: “Still with the same concern, George?”

“Sure. They offered me a junior partnership.” He winked. “The old man eats out of my hand. Run his car when he’s away week-ends. Look here, I’m off up the lakeshore. Better come along.”

They passed out through the revolving door. Publius forgot everything in fascinated contemplation of the brisk gentleman in his plus-fours, and green-hued golf stockings. His genial self-complacency, his utter assurance, his atmosphere of prosperity, of well-bred opulence, of one who if he had poked Life, had also tamed it to his uses, for the moment occupied Publius’ mind, to the exclusion of all else.

“Now how,” communed Publius, “how does he get that way? That fellow owns Life!”

Just how it happened, what quirk of psychology was involved, must be left to the psychologist. The fact is this. Before Publius Marsh’s vision floated certain emblems, which he, rightly or wrongly, translated into emblems of success—of open doors—of Life tamed and harnessed. Plus-fours, silk shirt, bow-tie, green-hued golf stockings, shining tan Oxfords. If one had these, one could do anything. Doors would open, hitherto sealed. Then the thing vanished, swept away by a bluebird’s wing. The girl! Good gad! And he had promised to meet her at six. Driving his own car!

It was at this moment that the podgy man drifted across his mental vision again . . . “Run his car when he’s away week-ends!” . . . Huh! Young Dawes, of Juniper, Boscombe and Dawes, had said (after insisting on Publius driving him home one night since that awful first lesson, through traffic, mark you, but fortunately after the streets were quite dead with night—an experience so terrible Publius had cast it from his mental shelves) . . . young Dawes had said, half jokingly; “Any time you want to use the old bus when I’m away, help yourself, Pubby! You have the key!” Publius was one of those kind of people you left keys with, in case of fire, or police necessity . . . a hat-rack, key-ring kind of a steady-going fellow.

Publius, sitting on a Ritz chair, could feel the bulge of his key-ring against his hip . . . “Help yourself, Pubby!” . . . Did he dare? His heart beat suffocatingly. It wouldn’t be far to the station, down side streets, through small traffic, and the blue girl there waiting . . . little bluebird, grown grayer in the dusk! He rose from the chair, and crept out into the mellow September street, almost mad with fear at the insistent little devil of temptation, lodged, it seemed, sometimes under his watch pocket, sometimes dancing devilishly up in his throat, and sometimes thudding down into the basement of his inner man.

He decided he’d just open the garage—not far from his own modest quarters—and see if the car was there. His hand shook as he unlocked the place. There she was, glittering with allure, and terrible! Could he back her out into this narrow lane? He’d just start her and see.

The roaring of the engine in the sheet-metal place added to his terror. Hitherto he had had young Dawes at his elbow, and there had been the seclusion of the brick-walled lane or the darkness of late evening. The idea of being alone in this terrible machine appalled him. Vaporous clouds wreathed upwards; he remembered suddenly horrific pictures, issued by insurance companies his firm represented, depicting the dangers of asphyxiation . . . Immediately he imagined his head was going dizzy. He put in the clutch, set her in reverse and stepped warily on the gas. A slight scraping of fenders and he was out, his heart beating terribly. Instantly the air revived him: he was granted sense. He would put the infernal thing back, and flee to his boarding house. His week-end should end here and now.

“Hey there, you!”

He looked behind. The sad, intelligent eyes of a delivery-wagon horse met his pathetically through the rear window. Publius looked around the side of the car.

“Goin’ or comin’, boss?” grinned a delivery boy. “I’m kinda in a hurry!”

That confounded grin! Heroically, Publius changed his gear, and started forward; at the last, finding his nerve baulking at the sharp turn necessary to get into the garage again, he went on down the narrow lane, out into the street, a nightmare sense of being impelled against his will into disaster, upon him . . .

Luck favored him. He was in St. Catherine Street now, and the traffic was happily—though momentarily—thinned. Ahead of him was a big car; Publius decided that if he followed closely his traffic problems would be

solved for him. When the car ahead slowed, he slowed, when it moved, he moved, when it turned, he turned, until the thing became a terrible and fascinating game. And when it finally slid into the curb, and stopped, Publius was so disconcerted he followed suit. And there he was in a quiet backwash, with the tide in full flood outside again, and his nerve quite, quite gone. Sooner would he stay here and rot, than again put to sea.

It was then, to his horror, that he found he was outside a large entranceway, with prohibitive parking signs, and a commissionaire in a rear-admiral's outfit opening the door to him, and saying: "If you'll park a little further up, sir! Where that other car has gone!" Sure enough, the wretched pilot car had slid away up the curb, having disgorged its female occupants to enter the store. Panic seized Publius. He looked at his clutch, at his gear shift; they swam before him. He knew he would mess it up before this august creature. And then, unbelievably almost, he saw them in the window: a background of men's toggery, silk shirts, sport and plain, a golf bag or two . . . and a lifelike figure, immaculate in plus-fours and green-hued stockings.

Publius felt a funny feeling come over him. He put his hand in his pocket, drew out a dollar bill, handed it to the man, said incisively: "I'm in a hurry. Just park the car for me, like a good fellow!"—and vanished into the store.

The grandness of the gesture carried Publius upon its pinnacle into the men's furnishings, procured him instant attention, and did not subside until he found himself, in a tiny cubicle, in whose mirrors at many angles, he saw himself, denuded of his outer garments, and presented to himself manifolded a score of times. If he could have fled, thus garbed, it is likely he would have done so. As it was, fate had him cornered again, holding him long enough until he was able, in those same most faithful mirrors, to see a score of Publius Marshes, attired trimly in silk shirt, bow-tie, plus-fours, and green-hued golf stockings.

"By gad! By the great gad!" said Publius, breathlessly. He went out. For an awful moment the old panic took root again, the fear of being conspicuous. But the eyes of the attendants were almost reverent.

"I'll take the outfit!" he said. "You might charge them. Marsh, you know, Publius Marsh."

Undoubtedly the clerk did not know, but he tried to look as if he did. At the same time there was a marked hesitancy. In another moment he might have asked: "Have you an account here, sir?"—but Publius caught him at the "Have—"

“Care of Juniper, Boscombe and Dawes. Send the account there.”

The hesitancy diminished.

“I’ll take my old things with me, or you may send them—just as you like. I have my car outside.”

“Yes, sir,” said the clerk meekly.

Publius nodded once to his figure in the outside mirror, once to the clerk, once to the floor manager, who obsequiously acknowledged it, and strode from the place.

By gad, there was the secret! Plus fours, green-hued golf stockings . . .

She stood in that lesser lobby, that exit and entrance, to which travelers to and from the lower parts of the city drop or from which they ascend in a great human cage which, moving with ponderous majesty, connects the human pools above and below.

“You’re right on time,” she breathed.

“I have the car outside,” admitted Publius.

The revolving door thrust them softly forth into the crisp evening.

“I—I hardly dared expect you,” she whispered.

He helped her into the car. If for an instant again there rose fear of the mechanical creature that he must now kick into whirring fury, and then control, he dismissed it. Let her go! Before this blue girl he must be masterful. He was pleased at the admiration and surprise in her eyes at his change of costume. Not for worlds would he have remarked on it, lest it betray his unaccustomed condition.

He started the motor.

“Where to?” he asked.

“Anywhere,” she said, almost wildly.

He glanced at her, awed.

“You—saw—him?”

She nodded, biting her lips.

“Don’t let’s talk about him.”

He was moved.

“Poor child! Poor child! . . . Then you want to just ride and forget.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t—I shouldn’t, but I do!”

The car took the hill nobly, emerging on to the open square above, where a few loungers still used the benches, their feet outthrust into the curl of dried leaves where the trees were palely glowing with autumn and the afterglow; where hurrying folk moved about, the slack water of the evening meal-hour already beginning to turn into the flood-tide of Saturday night gaiety. Presently the traffic became heavier as they rolled slowly up; before them Mount Royal began to loom darkly, and above it, in a mother-of-pearl sky, a star hung pendant. Something moved up inside of Publius and caught at his throat. This Saturday night, crisp, autumnal! This girl at his side! He had read of such things, never had he known them. His eyes began almost to fill with tears, at the sudden beauty of life. A moment later that something retreated from his throat to his heart with a clutch of pain. Who was—he? What if this girl were already married?

Publius swung the car around by the end of the square, dodged down two side streets, turned along a thoroughfare less terrifyingly full, and eventually drew up behind a brick building, where other cars were parked.

“We’re going to a show,” he told the girl. “It’ll help you forget—him!”

They sat in the semi-darkness, her arm companionably against his. Very occasionally he had come, but not cared for the place particularly. Now the dim lighting, the strumming of the orchestra, the flickering adventures of an impossible heroine—all these took on a new cast to Publius. When the lights came on at intervals between features, he devoutly wished that the blue girl would remove her left glove, that he might see if she wore any rings; when it was dark, he wished her left hand was next him that he might inadvertently as it were, brush her hand with his, and feel if it were so . . .

In the end he could not stand it.

“I wish you would tell me,” he said thickly, “about—him—how you got on with—him, and all!”

He felt her draw away from him.

“Aren’t you going to—to trust me?”

No answer. Good gosh, the girl was sobbing, there, ever so quietly, in her seat. His arm slipped suddenly around her; he prayed the picture might not end and the lights come up. She shrank from him, then sank into his

embrace with a queer, almost happy little sigh. For Publius the picture ceased to exist, the lights swam in a blue and rose rain of warm happiness.

“We’ll go,” he said, at last.

The traffic was thinner now, if one avoided the main thoroughfares; they drove in silence. The girl neither moved nor spoke.

They gained the country, leaving the lights behind, exchanging them for the powdering silver of the stars above.

I say!” said Publius, in desperation at last, “this won’t do, you know. You’ve got to tell me everything.”

There she was, with the city growing nearer now, a little blue bundle, still tearful beside him.

She put a hand on his arm.

“You’ve been—such a good sport,” she said. “It’s been a wonderful afternoon and evening. I—I can’t thank you enough.”

“You can,” retorted Publius, with a persistency and courage that amazed him. “You can tell me—about yourself—who you are!”

She said, after a time: “A—little—fraud! No, you must let me tell you it all now. I’ve often wondered, you know, what a person would do—a man—if someone—I, for instance—came up the way I did to you, and took you apparently for someone else, and wouldn’t let you explain the mistake. Someone who was looking for—for adventure, too! It was awful of me, wasn’t it? But a—a September afternoon—I couldn’t stick it—I had to do something desperate. I chose the Art Gallery because you always see interesting people there. But there was no one who looked right, so I told myself I’d go out, and the first man I saw who looked as if he was in need of companionship—I’d—I’d . . . anyway I went out and there you were!”

Young Dawes’ car started to climb a grassy embankment. Publius saved it from an attendant post by an inch, and jerked the thing safely to a standstill by the curb.

“Tell me the rest,” he said, “I can’t drive and listen. But—but—him—the one you went to see at the station? You mean—there wasn’t anyone—?”

“Oh, but there was. I didn’t—lie—like that!”

Her voice was hurt.

“Well, who—?”

“My old employer. I had to take him some letters; he goes to the country for the week-end. He—he was hateful to me. I can’t tell you. But I’m through. I—I hate him! He said—said even now he’d give me no recommendation. I believe he means to hound me yet—the—the beast!”

A fire burned in Publius. He felt suddenly brave and strong as even his plus-fours had failed to make him. He started the car again.

“Have no fear!” said Publius firmly. “He shall be put in his place. As for a job—we must find room for you somehow. I—er—matter of fact, I require a stenographer myself—if you would care—to try it out.”

“Oh, I should be so grateful!” She broke off. “My boarding house is right nearby, if you will stop just here, Mr.—Mr.—”

“Marsh,” said Publius. “Sorry I have not a personal card. But it’s Juniper, Boscombe and Dawes—and ask for Mr. Marsh—Insurance Department.”

“Oh, how can I ever thank you—?”

He could not speak. He was on the heights, dizzy and exalted. He hardly knew what he was doing . . . and only presently what he had been saying dawned fully upon him. Publius for the moment was living in some seventh heaven, but like the great apostle, he hardly knew if he was in the body or out of it.

The flash of a bluebird silvered by moonlight, recalled him.

“I’m all right now, thank you,” she said. “It’s just a door or two away. And you?”

“I shall return to the Ritz,” he said, largely.

To change the metaphor a bit, Publius Marsh had blown his bubble almost too large. A beautiful bubble it was, iridescent, a thousand little glints of color in it, and most of all the gold and red of autumn and the blue of a bluebird’s wing. An amazing bubble. And then, not a quarter mile away from where he had left her, a traffic cop halted Publius just too late, and Publius, with a squeak of brakes and a wild scramble of feet and hands, cannoned gently into the fellow, who, jumping, escaped all but the mudguard. Cold merciless words dripped from the officer’s mouth, far, far more terrible than any hot rage. “I’ve a notion,” said the cop, “to run you in.

Like enough you've got no license—they're not supposed to issue 'em to morons!" He stepped closer, and Publius broke out into a cold sweat. "We're getting after that kind of thing hot just now." Publius began, mechanically, to rummage in his pockets for what he knew was not there, could by no chance be there, had never existed . . . a sheer delaying of the final blow. "Now get on!" bellowed the officer in his ear. "Get on, and don't let it happen again!"

He was free. With a screeching of gears he vanished up the side street.

But his bubble was pricked.

What if he had killed that traffic cop? . . . What if the cop had insisted upon seeing the license? They might have locked him up. His vague ideas of the law expanded in terrible imagination. And now a curious intuition came to him. He was not far from Sherbrooke Street. There he must turn on to the thoroughfare, go west, turn again right across the street and slip in, facing east, to the door of the hotel. The intuition was that the thing could not be done, would not be done without misadventure. But some inexorable urge sent him forward to this doom.

He made his turn on to Sherbrooke Street; he went by the lights of the Ritz to the end of the block, thrust out his hand, and swung the car around. He was surprised that the street seemed deserted, that no car came charging down upon him. And then he saw it, plunging up at him from the side street, right on his beam. Expecting it as he did, he made no attempt to escape it. He even shut off the power, and with a queer, awful tranquillity awaited the blow. The car, plunging up from the side street, and expecting naturally that Publius would continue at advanced speed, tried to swerve, tried to put on brakes, loomed up terribly in the night, and slid with a rending crash into the side of Publius' waiting car.

A rumble of voices came menacingly to Publius' ears—as from a great distance:

“—driving without a permit, too!”

A sweat broke out on Publius, adding to a general sense of discomfort.

“And under the influence of liquor—”

That brought Publius around quickly. He tried his best to force the words through swollen lips that he had not been drunk, but only inarticulated sounds came.

“Lucky there was no policeman about. It’d make a nasty business if it got to a courtroom!”

Publius groaned feebly. He had a vague idea that the man who was speaking was tremendously worked up and angry; and rather than face this anger and try to explain he would lie here forever simulating unconsciousness. True, he was not drunk—but how had they found out that he had no license to drive? And who were ‘they’? And where was he? Curiosity forced open his lids ever so little. He knew at once he was lying on a couch in a luxurious hotel room. Two men were in the room. One was sitting in a chair, slumped up, nursing a bleeding forehead; the other—in plus-fours—was pacing the room, like a caged animal. The plus-fours man! And the man in the chair was the podgy friend to whom he had spoken in the lobby with whom he had gone driving. A queer little pulse throbbed out a message to Publius.

“I was a fool to go with you!”

That was the plus-fours man speaking. The plus-fours man was haranguing his podgy friend. Publius coughed slightly. Both men stared at him. And he was confirmed in his opinion instantly; they were afraid of him—of him, Publius! Never in his life could he remember such an experience. Power surged through him. He sat up with difficulty. He was bruised and shaken, but that did not matter.

“My car?” he asked.

“We sent it to a garage,” said the man whose wife came from Indiana.

“How did I get here?”

“We brought you. It seemed—er—better than sending for an ambulance or anything.”

They were afraid—afraid of him!

“You understand,” said Publius, almost terrified at his own audacity, “you are responsible. Very serious—driving without permit—and in—in such a condition!” He glanced at the podgy man. He waved his hand. “Damages. The car. Myself!”

The men glanced at each other; the plus-fours man shrugged his shoulders and turned to Publius.

“Might as well make a clean breast of it,” he said briskly. “My friend here was driving—when he shouldn’t have been. I should have known better. Nasty business!” He drew a card from a case. “My card, sir.”

Publius read: ‘Thomas J. Smith’, and in one corner, ‘President, Citizens’ Protective League.’

So this was the man who had been the terror of motorists, demanding summary punishment for just such things as this.

“Every man,” said Thomas J. Smith, “plays the fool at some time or other. I slipped up this time. Hadn’t seen my friend here for years and let friendship get ahead of common sense. Frankly, it would mean ruin for me to have this come out just now. My enemies would shout their fool heads off. And there are special reasons why I ask your consideration. Anything in reason I will do, Mr.—Mr.—”

“Marsh,” said Publius, half vacantly, frantically searching his brain for the connecting links of a chain of thought the name had induced. Thomas J. Smith? . . . of course, of course—old Juniper had been raising Cain over that very name. One of his salesmen had fallen down on Smith as a prospect. Thomas J. Smith—the man who was starting that new Taxi Company: ‘The Citizens’ Protective Taxi Company.—Our slogan—safety for passengers and public!’ It was in all the papers. Whew! If this got out . . . Juniper had wanted that insurance badly; a big contract for the whole new fleet, a big thing—

“Mr. Smith,” said Publius, with a sense of stepping on the gas himself, “I am willing to say nothing about this—on certain conditions.”

Monday was always a bad day at the office. But to-day was worse than usual. Old Juniper, of Juniper, Boscombe and Dawes, was—to use the expression of the office boy—in a fearful wax. Where was Marsh this morning?

The buzzer sounded again. The boy went in.

“Who,” demanded Juniper. “Who’s that—that girl sitting out by Marsh’s desk?”

The boy swallowed.

“She—she says she’s his new stenographer, sir.”

“His—what?”

“S-stenographer.”

Juniper was purple. One fat hand having, during this passage, been held over the mouthpiece of the desk ’phone, he removed it and shouted in:

“No—he’s not in yet. How much do you say he owes? . . . And his cheque was dishonored? Three times? I’ll attend to that!”

Juniper hung up, and sat back, waving his glasses by their black thread and trying to get back his breath. Monday morning being always a bad time with him he usually found some object on which to vent his wrath. Ten o’clock and Marsh not in! And this Winkle and Wadsworth business; all his self-righteousness swelled up like a fat bud on an ugly tree. And a—a stenographer! Dashed pretty girl. He went to the door of the office where he could see better than through the glassed partition. And at that moment an apparition appeared in the outer office, and approached.

Publius in plus-fours! Publius Marsh!

For a moment, entering, Publius felt panic sweep him. The battery of eyes was terrible. Then he saw the girl smiling at him. And Juniper, purple with wrath and surprise, in the doorway of the office. And his new courage leaped. Nodding to the girl, and then to Juniper, he entered the office of the Senior Partner. Publius closed the door, and stood with his back against it, as if afraid he might be tempted to retreat yet.

“You will e-excuse the clothes,” said Publius, gathering strength again, “but with your permission, I thought I would take a day off. I had rather a—a busy week-end.”

Juniper stared speechless; then he found his voice: “You!—You—” He gulped and tried again: “Winkle and Wadsworth—”

“Will be paid. I was too busy to bother with them. They are crooks. They should be exposed and put in jail!”

Juniper blinked.

“Too busy,” repeated Publius, with that sense of power sweeping him again. “As a matter of fact, Mr. Juniper, I am dissatisfied with the rut in which I have been these past years. I should like to get into the selling game—either with you or—with some other firm—”

Juniper grimaced scornfully.

“With some other then, I think,” he said, sarcastically.

“Very good!” agreed Publius Marsh. “But I felt I should like to offer you the business first—as a matter of principle—It is left with me where I shall place it. If you do not care, of course—”

From his pocket Publius drew a letter, signed by Thomas J. Smith . . .

“You—you got this—how?”

“Matter of fact,” said Publius, “I had to spend part of my week-end at the Ritz. Do you—wish the business, sir?”

An avaricious gleam lighted Juniper’s eyes.

“At the usual commission, sir?” added Publius, holding tight to his courage.

“What? That’s as much as you’d make in months on salary!”

“Exactly, sir. Just the point! Of course, I could take it elsewhere—”

“No, confound you, I’ll take it!”

“And I was thinking, sir—if I had a stenographer, I could give more time to the selling end.”

Juniper flared up in refusal, but the flare died before Publius’ steady gaze. He nodded, rose, and then put his hand suddenly on Publius’ shoulder.

“What’s come over you, Marsh?” he asked, incredulously. “For twenty years you’ve been an office drudge. For twenty years you’ve never looked me in the eye as you have this morning. For twenty years you’ve never done anything approaching—this.” He tapped the letter from Thomas J. Smith. “What’s come over you?”

For a moment Publius was at a loss. His eyes flashed to where on the Senior Partner’s desk pad a memo said Winkle and Wadsworth; it traveled on to the girl by his desk like a bluebird in the pool of September sunshine; it fell upon the clothes in which he had again dared to dress himself; it rested on the letter from Smith promising him the business. And something almost brilliant was released from the depths of Publius Marsh.

“I think, sir,” said Publius Marsh, “the machinery was there all the time—only I was afraid of it! Winkle and Wadsworth pushed the button and the cogs began to work and the belts to take hold!”

He paused. His eyes shifted to the girl waiting outside; then to the Senior Partner. He wanted to add something but it stuck in his throat. He tried again, but all that reached Juniper’s ears was one word—“September.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

Page numbers have been removed due to a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *September* by Leslie Gordon Barnard]